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# The violent death of kings and priests in Ireland and Britain. Case study of the Iron Age bog mummies and the motif of the threefold death in the medieval literature of the British Isles

Solen Ruffy

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# The Violent Death of Kings and Priests in Ireland and Britain

*Case study of the Iron Age bog mummies and the motif  
of the threefold death in the medieval literature of the British  
Isles*

Présenté par Solen RUFFY

Sous la direction de Dr. Maxim Fomin, Research director et de Dr. Anne Hellegouarc'h-Bryce, Maître de conférences

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Dr Maxim Fomin

Dr Anne Hellegouarc'h-Bryce

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## **Abstract:**

Ce mémoire s'appuiera sur l'étude de la mort violente des hommes des tourbières de l'âge du fer Lindow Man et Oldcroghan Man, et sur l'étude des textes relevant du corpus de la triple mort, dans le corpus insulaire. Les hommes des tourbières ont longtemps été vus comme des individus d'exception, sacrifiés par leurs prêtres ou druides dans des périodes de guerres ou de famine. Cette étude portera plus particulièrement sur leur statut, qu'il soit de roi, prêtre, ou encore de personne souffrant d'un handicap. Les hypothèses de sacrifice humain et d'exécution seront également revues à travers les données archéologiques des hommes des tourbières, mais également par l'étude géographique du site de dépôt de leurs corps. Le corpus médiéval de la triple mort comprend les contes de la mort des rois Muirchertach mac Erca, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, Suibhne Geilt, Lóegaire mac Néill ; mais également les contes de Lailoken et Merlin. Les textes hagiographiques utilisant le motif de la triple mort, comme la *Vita Columbae* écrite par Adamnán seront également étudiés pour étudier le motif dans son contexte religieux. Le contexte historique et politique de ces textes sera étudié pour relever les possibles influences que l'histoire a pu avoir sur ces textes, mais également l'influence que les scribes voulaient donner à leur contenu. L'évolution du motif et de son utilisation sera aussi vue de manière chronologique pour étudier les changements de relation entre les auteurs et leur motif, et le but de son utilisation. L'étude de ces morts violentes en archéologie et littérature insulaire visera à étudier des exemples de mort violente, et observer leur possible rapport aux croyances et pratiques religieuses des habitants des îles britanniques de l'âge du fer et du moyen âge.

## **Introduction:**

The death of individuals of importance has been the subject of many studies, through the study of unlikely deaths or the analysis of the lives and deaths of important kings and priests. Because of their significance, the violent deaths of important individuals have been the centre of interest of many scholars. The unlikeliness of the death of the Iron Age bog mummies, and of the deaths depicted in the medieval threefold death tales have thus been the source of studies for the interpretation of life and religious beliefs in both chronological periods in the British Isles.

Burials and the rites associated with them can be an insightful source of information on the belief systems of communities throughout history (O'Brien, 2020). The bog mummies have been a thoroughly studied phenomenon from the time of their discovery. Predominantly found in Europe, the remains, mummified by the bog, have been seen as discoveries which “make it possible literally to come face-to-face with a person who lived millennia ago and to view their features” (Kelly, 2013).

Lindow Man certainly is the most famous bog mummy from the British Isles, presented by some scholars as an Irish druid prince who came to Britain to help fight the Romans in Anglesey, and finally being willingly sacrificed in a last resort to fight back the Roman conquest (Ross & Robins, 1989). While this interpretation is now mostly discredited, the violence with which he was killed remains the centre of many studies. By the moment of his deposition in the peat, Lindow Man had suffered several wounds to the neck and chest, a strong blow to the head and a fractured rib. Oldcroghan Man, found in Ireland, is another famous bog mummy which, like Lindow Man, died in the Iron Age, and shows signs of overkill including wounds to the neck and to the chest. In addition to those, his body shows deeply cut nipples and arms pierced by withies made from twisted hazel. Since only his torso remains, it is impossible to say whether his head or legs suffered any additional wounds.

The interpretations of Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man's deaths, and the other bog mummies have certainly evolved from the time of their discovery, but much remains uncertain. The apparent nobility of the bog mummies during their lifetime, and the potential overkilling, once considered almost factual, are now doubted with the supplementary analyses and examinations of their remains (Stewart, 2020). What seems certain is the special treatment given to the bodies. The term ‘bog mummy’ as “referring to individuals (either human or other large mammals) with soft tissue preservation, recovered

from peat” seems indeed to be concerning mostly human remains (Wilkinson, 2006). To discern from bog skeletons which lack soft tissue preservation, this analysis will use the term ‘bog mummy’ to refer to the remains mummified by the peat, while the term ‘bog body’ will be used to describe human remains found in bogs, regardless of soft tissue preservation. The term ‘bog skeleton’ will thus be used to describe human remains found in bogs without soft tissue preservation.

The bog mummies as purposefully being buried in a bog, and kept underneath the surface would seemingly indicate that the person they once had been required special treatment in their death and burial. As mentioned before, an on-going debate is whether the bog mummies were once people of importance, and why they were killed. The description of their manicured nails appears several times in the analyses of the bog mummies to indicate the absence of manual work, thus indicating an apparently superior role in the community. The presence of several wounds to the bodies has also been extensively analysed as a sign of overkill, which some authors have linked to the threefold death motif as found in insular literature (Ross, 1986; Magilton, 1995).

The motif of the threefold death, as found in insular literature is constructed as such:

A prophet foretells that a certain man will die in three different ways (generally including by fire and water). This is thought to be incredible and to prove him no true seer, so that the man feels quite secure. In the sequel the prophecy comes true.

(Jackson, 1940)

The threefold death by weapon, fire and water is described as the most traditional version of the motif, because of the formula “*guin 7 badud 7 loscud*” mentioned in particular in the annals. However, a broader overview of the motif in insular literature also includes deaths by falling, hanging, and stoning (or clubbing) (Radner, 1983). Among the most well-known instances of the threefold death tales are *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* (‘The Death of Muirchertach mac Erca’), and *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* (‘The Violent Death of Diarmait mac Cerbaill’), two Irish kings who died wounded, burnt and drowned simultaneously. However, the motif is always partly different in the various medieval texts in which it appears: while the element of prophecy is absent for the tale of Muirchertach, it is the death by burning which does not appear in the threefold deaths of Aed Dub, Grag, Lailoken, and in Merlin’s prophecy of the threefold death of a boy. The death of Lóegaire

mac Néill and the punishment suffered by Suibhne in *Buile Suibhne* also resembles the threefold death motif, although somewhat different in its *dénouement*. The motif thus changes from one source to the other, but the idea remains the same: the offender dies in three different ways at the same time after a conflict with an ecclesiastical figure.

The bog burial is entirely absent from these narratives, but drowning is the only death common to each threefold death tale. Wet places such as rivers and lakes have long been considered as sacred in belief systems, as a place of the in-between (Magilton, 1995), which is also relevant in insular tales, and what has long been described as ‘Celtic religion’.

The defining of ‘Celtic culture’ and ‘Celtic religion’ is a highly debated subject. The definition of the term ‘Celtic’ is an entire problem in itself. Jane Webster mentions that recent archaeological studies “both in the field and resulting from the embrace of new theoretical and interpretative perspectives – has undermined the belief that Iron Age Britain was populated by a single people with a shared ethnic identity and belief system: the Celts” (Webster, 2015). Less tangible questions of identity, social status and gender have recently become of interest in archaeology. Such questions are worthy of study, “providing that we recognize the limitations of inference of the data, and do not transgress the boundaries of rigorous scholarship into the seductive realms of creative fiction” (Harding, 2016). The definition of ‘Celtic’ being too vague, the bog mummies and the literary sources to be studied will remain defined as ‘insular’.

Medieval insular tales have been considered as a “window on the Iron Age” (Jackson, 1964). More recently, it has been argued that they should be interpreted as “medieval creative constructs that need to be understood in their own – medieval – context” (Karl, 2008), thus making it “difficult to ascertain how, if at all, these accounts might amplify, or indeed qualify, archaeological interpretation of Iron Age sites and finds” (Webster, 2015). These medieval narratives are importantly distant in time from the Iron Age, and they were composed in a Christian context. It thus becomes difficult to argue, as has been done previously that those tales could possibly represent an evolution of the death treatment given to a certain category of people in the Iron Age community, changed and romanticised through time. One could also argue that those narratives should be regarded as cautionary tales for kings and warriors, set in an earlier Christian period, to make them more credible to the insular kings.

What is a threefold death tale, why they were written and for whom, are certainly questions more tangible than their possible relatedness to the bog mummies. Similarly,

who were the bog mummies during their lifetime, how they were killed, and why, are questions that have been thoroughly studied, although some points still remain uncertain. Through the study of both the archaeological finds, and the literary motif, this analysis will see how the violent deaths of important individuals can be interpreted before, and after the coming of Christianity to the British Isles, and to what extent can these violent ends be linked to religious beliefs and sacred landscapes.

Chapter I of this analysis will look at the archaeological data surrounding the insular Iron Age bog mummies in their chronological and geographical context in order to establish their place amongst other archaeological finds of the period, and their relationship to boundaries. This chapter will also look briefly at the supposed identities and injuries of the bog mummies, and the sacrifice theories that emerged from these elements. Chapter II will look at the recent archaeological data available on the bog mummies to establish whether the information upon which relied the sacrificed theories has changed through the emergence of new data. This chapter will also look closer at the identities granted to the bog mummies and the aspects of malformations and boundary burials, before analysing the role of the bog itself as a preserving land and its potential importance to the Iron Age communities. Chapter III will be presenting the threefold death tales in their historical and political context, together with the geographical data available in relationship to the text, and their possible influence on their local communities. Chapter IV will study the influences of Christian writings and hagiography on the threefold death tales, and the tripartite division of the offences committed by the individuals portrayed in the tales. Chapter IV will also study how the use of the threefold death motif has evolved through time in its portraying of sinful individuals.

# **I. The Insular Iron Age Bog Bodies**

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man are two of the most famous bog mummies from the Iron Age in the British Isles. To study those finds, this analysis will start with the context in which they were found, relevant to the bog mummy phenomenon in the European Iron Age, and the burial customs in the British Isles. An overview of the other Iron Age bog mummies from the finds at Lindow Moss and in Ireland also appears of interest in order to study the similarities and possible patterns that appear in their remains. The other Iron Age bog mummies from the rest of Britain will not be studied in this analysis in order to focus on the Lindow Moss burial site.

## **A. The Iron Age and the Insular Bog Bodies**

For this analysis to study the insular Iron Age bog mummies Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man, it seems necessary to start with a wider picture of the bog mummies found in the Iron Age in Europe and with the burial customs during the Iron Age in the British Isles. The article by Roy van Beek *et al.* (2022) analysed the distribution of the bog remains both chronologically and geographically. The burial customs in Iron Age Britain are extensively studied by D.W. Harding (2015), and Elizabeth O'Brien (2020) gives a thorough analysis of the burial customs in Iron Age Ireland.

### **1. Bog bodies from the Iron Age**

The most ancient bog body discovered dates back from the fourth millennium BC and was found in Sweden. The first recorded discovery of a bog body was made in Holstein in 1640, but the first “properly documented account of a bog body” comes to us from County Down in Ireland in 1781 by Lady Moira (Glob, 1969, p.77). The first bog bodies found in England date from the third century BC (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.5). Although bog skeletons can date back to the Early Neolithic period, most of the bog mummies have come to us from the Iron Age and the Roman period (Ravn, 2011, p.84; Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.5; Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.8). Most of the bog bodies were found in the northern regions of Europe “in Ireland, the UK, northern Germany, Denmark, southern Norway and southern Sweden” (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.8), while fewer bodies were found in Poland, Finland and the Baltic States (*ibid.*). Although the discovery of bog bodies, and of bog mummies, is a geographically and chronologically widespread phenomenon, such finds nonetheless remain exceptional (Mulhall, 2019, p.80).

It has been estimated that more than 2,000 bog bodies have been deposited in Europe, although the number may be even higher when counting partial human remains and those that have been lost to discoveries before the 19<sup>th</sup> century and given a Christian burial, or those which “were ground up to make medicines” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.33). Overall, more than 90 bodies have been reportedly found in bogs in Ireland, and over 120 in Britain. Few of them were found in a well-preserved state (Turner & O’Floinn, 1995). Some bodies found in bogs in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries may have been well preserved when first found, but little information remains as they were often reburied or decomposed naturally since they were removed from the bog. According to the study made by Van Beek *et al.* (2022), 147 bog remains were deposited between 1000BC and AD1100 in northern Europe. Among those remains, 71 are bog mummies, and 108 are bog skeletons. The preservation of the remains depends on several factors:

Most bog mummies are found in raised bogs, where the antibiotic properties of sphagnum, an organic component derived from Sphagnum moss, are essential in the bodies’ preservation (Painter 1995). The survival of human tissue also depends on how quickly a body is immersed in water, the temperature and time of year, and the presence of insects and internal micro-organisms.

(Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.3)

The map from the article by Van Beek *et al.* shows nineteen bog remains in the British Isles dated between 1000BC and AD1100. Regarding Ireland, nine bog remains were found, of which three died a violent death, while the cause of death of the other bodies is unknown. Of these three, the first suffered blows to the head, the second shows signs of strangulation, and the third died a violent death with multiple causes. Regarding Britain, ten bog remains are identified for this period, nine of which have an unknown cause of death. The tenth bog body, undoubtedly Lindow Man, died a violent death with multiple causes. Regarding the rest of northern Europe, only four other examples of violent death with multiple causes appear during the period between 1000BC and AD1100. Those are found between the northern part of Germany and the southern region of Sweden, and 13 of the 147 bog remains of this period died a violent death (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.15).

Researchers have mainly focused on the method used when the Iron Age bog victims were originally killed. Mulhall (2019) mentions the “overkill” theories developed

by Van der Sanden (1996) to describe the variety of wounds appearing simultaneously on some of the bog mummies of north-western Europe, including evidence of “strangulation, hanging, decapitation, stabbing, battery with a blunt instrument, pinning down and garrotting” (Mulhall, 2019, p.89). Harding argues that this extreme violence could “reflect communal involvement in the act of execution” (Harding, 2015, p.217).

The reason for the deposition of bodies in bogs has been a widely debated subject. The article of Van Beek *et al.* divides the hypotheses regarding the deposition in mires into five categories:

- 1) the remains of ritualistic sacrifice to supernatural powers, for example for fertility or agricultural success;
  - 2) burials of deceased (and sometimes executed) individuals who had transgressed social conventions and were not allowed burial in a ‘normal’ cemetery;
  - 3) victims of criminal acts;
  - 4) ‘deviant’ burial customs; or
  - 5) accidental deaths in treacherous circumstances (e.g. drowning).
- (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.5)

The debate surrounding the cause of the deposition of human remains in bogs is mostly held between those who see the bog mummies as sacrificial victims and those who see them as executed criminals and offenders (Harding, 2015, p.15). Glob’s study (1969) has been particularly influential in considering the bog mummies as victims of a sacrifice ritual. One of the major arguments to support the sacrificial theories is the lack of clothing of many of the bog mummies found. Harding (2015) mentions the Iron Age bog mummies such as Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, the Weerdinge Men, Lindow Man, Borremose Woman and Kayhausen Boy as examples of naked bog mummies, or mummies “wearing very limited clothing” (Harding, 2015, p.216). As has been pointed out, while bogs efficiently preserve animal skin and leather, vegetable fibres such as linen are unlikely to survive in the mire (Harding, 2015; Van Beek *et al.*, 2022; Van der Sanden, 1996). It would thus be possible for the bog mummies found naked to have been deposited wearing some linen clothing or undergarment. As Harding (2015) mentions, particles of fabric were found on Tollund Man through microscopic analysis.

Depositing a body in a bog does not seem to be a common burial custom in the Iron Age. The definition of normative burial would require abstraction of our modern perception of norms, and the diversity of burial customs would render the task of

determining one custom as more ‘normal’ than the other difficult. It is argued that communities creating a distinctive burial custom “as statements of identity and legitimacy of a ruling lineage [...] were essentially unstable internally or politically insecure, and that this might explain the absence for much of the British Iron Age of distinctive and recurrent forms of burial, if insular communities did not feel such a need” (Harding, 2015, p.11), but the deposition of bodies in bogs does not seem to have been such a distinctive burial custom. A superficial overview of burial customs in the British Isles thus appears interesting to see the extent to which bog burials are exceptional.

## 2. Burial in Iron Age Britain

There does not appear to be a single normative burial custom in Iron Age Britain. Despite the lack of archaeological finds from the Iron Age in some regions of Britain, it is possible to see an important diversity of burial customs:

Despite a significant increase in the data-base for Iron Age burials in recent years, there still remains a profound gulf between those regions in which there was a convention of burial in segregated cemeteries, for however limited a period of time, and the rest of Britain for which the archaeological record of burial is extremely fragmentary.

(Harding, 2015, p.93).

O’Brien establishes a list of British Iron Age burial customs involving depositions of human and animal remains, including:

Urned or un-urned cremation, in urnfield cemeteries sometimes located near or inserted into older Bronze Age barrows, or within small individual barrows; formal, primary whole crouched burial in graves or pits, sometimes within settlements; apparently casual primary burials in field boundaries and defensive ditches; secondary deposition of whole or composite individuals displaying evidence for mummification; excarnation and secondary deposition of incomplete, articulated skeletal remains; excarnation and secondary burial of disarticulated bones, in particular long bones and skulls (‘token’ deposits, some with evidence of use-wear); incorporation of human remains into ‘domestic’ contexts; regional examples of inhumation cemeteries (Arras Culture;

south-western cist burials); the disposal of the dead in watery places and bogs; late pre-Roman Iron Age cremations.

(O'Brien, 2014, p. 26)

Burial in bogs and other bodies of water is thus only a part of the overall burial practices of Iron Age Britain. Interestingly, O'Brien mentions both deposition of human remains in bogs and "secondary deposition of whole or composite individuals displaying evidence for mummification" which would make mummification an important factor for the British Iron Age community in the burial of their dead. Burial practices in the British Iron Age seem to differ from previous and later periods in their number, with fewer buried bodies from this period found by archaeologists. This has been interpreted as evidence for a greater number of depositions in bodies of water (O'Brien, 2014, p.26). The article of Van Beek *et al.* (2022) shows that the bog remains are found in greater number in the northern regions of Germany and southern part of Sweden on the other side of the Baltic Sea. The limited evidence of inhumation, and even scarcer examples of bog remains could show an external influence in Britain from the regions between the north of Germany and the south of Sweden.

Orientation of the grave and of the body within the grave is another interesting criterion, although its interpretation is highly speculative for a period with no written evidence. Buried Iron Age bodies in Britain are commonly found lying on their sides, but no apparent preference discriminated by age, gender, or status seems to be conclusively interpreted (Harding, 2015, p.167). The original orientation of the bog mummies in the bog is unknown in some cases. Indeed, bodies being mostly found in peat cutting operations, they are often removed from their original resting place before being recognised as human remains. A quantitative survey of the position of bog bodies, when this type of data is available, would be of interest.

The violence suffered by the Iron Age bodies has witnessed a shift in its analysis. Indeed, the image of the 'warrior Celts' of the Iron Age has recently come to be considered as an exaggerated view based on biased classical sources, and on medieval Irish literary sources (Harding, 2015, p.189; Webster, 2015). The evidenced violence suffered by the bog remains dating from 1000BC to AD1100 is also exceptional, with only thirteen bog bodies dying a violent death in northern Europe. However, many bog skeletons have not yielded enough information to interpret the circumstances of their death (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.10). As previously mentioned, Lindow Man is the only example of bog mummies

from Britain to have died a violent death in this period, while the cause of death of the other nine bog remains is unknown (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.15).

### 3. Burial in Iron Age Ireland

O’Kelly & O’Kelly qualified the Iron Age in Ireland as “the period in Irish archaeology about which there is least certainty and most speculation” (O’Kelly & O’Kelly, 1989, p.245). O’Kelly described the burial mounds, long stone cists and inhumation burials, but inhumation burials are actually rarely found in Iron Age Ireland. While they are common in the Irish Bronze Age and in the British Iron Age, the Irish Iron Age witnessed an important decrease in the number of inhumations.

By contrast with Britain which shows a great diversity in burial practices, the normative burial rite in Ireland in the Iron Age appears to have been a “continuation of the later Bronze Age practice of cremation” (O’Brien, 2020, p.7). The custom of inhumation decreased in the Later Bronze Age in favour of cremation. The few instances of burial reintroduced into Ireland between the second century BC and the first century AD were not performed by the indigenous populations of Ireland (O’Brien, 2020, p.34).

The newly re-introduced crouched burial rite was limited to a confined geographical area stretching from south of the River Liffey, northward to the River Boyne (Map 3). Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis undertaken on teeth from several of these crouched inhumations indicates that while some of the individuals concerned were local, many originated from north-eastern Britain (Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 2014, 127-49). This conclusion is not unexpected, burial in a crouched position was the common tradition in that region of Britain during this Iron Age period.

(O’Brien, 2020, p.36)

O’Brien goes on by giving the example of the Neolithic passage grave complex at Knowth, Co. Meath, which ceased to be used in the Bronze Age, but was re-used in the Iron Age for burial (*ibid.*). The remains found at this site mainly dated from between the second century BC to the second century AD, and their “strontium and oxygen measurements [established] that they probably originated in the northern part of Britain” (O’Brien, 2020, p.38). Thirty-six Iron Age crouched inhumations were identified in

Ireland, six of which were identified as male, nine were female, four were adults but their sex is unknown, nine were infants and eight were juvenile. A 6-month-old infant was found in “a section of the rock-cut, 3m deep, ditch enclosing the monument known as Ráith na Ríg (the Enclosure of the Kings) at Tara, Co. Meath” (O’Brien, 2020, p.40). Examination and analysis of the remains showed that the infant was born locally, and it is thought that the ditch in which the body was deposited was a sacred boundary and that the infant was possibly killed “as a sacrifice related to the fertility of the land and of the tribe” (O’Brien, 2020, p.41). The diverse examples given by O’Brien seem to indicate that there was an increase in the performance of crouched inhumations in the Iron Age, and these seem to be centred on boundaries. The few discoveries of extended inhumation were found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the information available seems to describe a Roman burial custom (O’Brien, 2020, p.46). O’Brien also gives the example of an anomalous burial with the recovery of partial human remains from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC-1<sup>st</sup> century AD found about the Dún Aonghusa Late Bronze Age stone fort. The remains consisted of “the forearm, wrist and hand bones of an adult, together with a fragment of scapula, and a fragment of jawbone and some teeth found nearby” (O’Brien, 2020, p.47). The reason of the partial deposition is unknown, as it could also have happened after the deposition of the body in an exposed environment. Other dismembered body parts from the Iron Age have been found at Rathdooney, Co. Sligo, but such finds remain uncommon in Iron Age Ireland, contrarily to Iron Age Britain.

While O’Brien (2020) does not include remains deposited in bodies of water in her study, inhumation as a phenomenon foreign to Ireland in the Iron Age is an interesting matter. According to the data from the article of Van Beek *et al.* (2022), Ireland has only produced three bog remains from before 1000BC. It is only after 1000BC that the number of bog bodies increases importantly. Nine bog bodies dating between 1000BC and AD1100 were found, with three dead from violent deaths, while the cause of the death of the six others is unknown. Seventeen bog remains from AD1100 to AD1900 were retrieved, among which four suicides, two violent deaths, the remainder being deaths from unknown causes. It appears that the deposition in bogs and mires was possibly not a custom common to the indigenous people of Ireland before 1000BC. This could mean that the deposition in bogs was an imported custom, possibly from north Germany and southern Sweden, although this custom seems to have become much less frequent between 2800BC and 1000BC, more particularly from 1600BC to 1000BC throughout northern Europe (Van

Beek *et al.*, 2022, pp.11-16). The burial custom of depositing the body in a bog could possibly have been brought to Ireland and Britain from those regions.

## **B. Lindow Commons and the Irish bog mummies**

While the origins of the bog mummies under scrutiny cannot be proved at the moment, the apparent ritual aspect of their death and deposition has been the centre of many studies since their discovery. The ritualization of the bog body archaeological phenomenon is mostly agreed upon because of the repeated use of certain bogs in close proximity, and sometimes less than a century apart, and the expanding geographic distribution “suggests votive deposition, inferring ritualization” (Stewart, 2020).

### 1. The Lindow Moss remains

#### *Lindow Moss*

The bog of Lindow Moss is “located between the parishes of Mobberley and Wilmslow in Cheshire, in the north-west of England” (Giles, 2009, p.82). The 1500 acres of the lowland peat bog of Lindow Moss was formed “in a succession of hollows left by the melting ice on the southern limits of the last glaciation” (Turner, 1995, p.10). Turner (1995) also specifies that Lindow Moss was first documented for peat extraction in 1421, and first described by Samuel Finney, who stipulated in the 1780s that accidents were not uncommon in the bog, and that cow and sheep, and even men, would die in the moss. He also recorded the discovery of a skeleton on the north-western border of the moss (Turner, 1995, p.10). It would seem unlikely that no other bog remains would have been found between the first peat extractions in 1421 and the first bog skeleton to have been documented by Finney in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it is possible that such discoveries have remained undocumented. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Norbury mentions the recovery of a decomposed boar skeleton and a wooden roadway (Turner, 1995, p.10). Since 1988, “a demineralised cattle bone and a piece of naturally tanned cowhide” were found. Since accidents amongst cattle are described to be frequent, the lack of important discovery, or documentation of animal bog remains is also of interest, but this will be talked about later on in this analysis.

Interestingly, all dated remains from Lindow Commons were deposited in the bog in the Iron Age and early Roman period. A coincidence seems unlikely, which does imply an apparent custom or ritualization as a broad term, but which cannot be used as hard

evidence of ritual human sacrifice. The possibility that Lindow IV, Lindow II, and (at least part of) Lindow III came from the same individual brings uncertainty to the number of bodies that were deposited in Lindow Moss, as shall be seen in the following paragraphs.

### *Lindow I or Lindow Woman*

A well-preserved human head known as Lindow I was found on 13 May 1983, and was dated to AD90-440 (Joy, 2009, p.23).<sup>1</sup> These remains consist of “the pliable vault of the skull which retained its outer membrane and some hair [and] contained the decayed brain and part of the left eyeball and optic nerve” (Turner, 1995, p.12). It is believed that some, or the totality of the remains of Lindow III, which were found “about 50m north of the presumed findspot of the Lindow Woman” (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.52) were possibly the rest of Lindow I’s body. This will be discussed in the description of Lindow III.

### *Lindow II or Lindow Man*

Lindow Man, also known as Lindow II, was discovered on August 1, 1984, in the peat, “about 250 metres south-west of the place where the head of Lindow Woman [was found]”, lying on his stomach (Brothwell, 1986, p.14). The well-preserved right foot was found by the same peat workers that had found Lindow I’s skull. Turner was then invited to the site to investigate the peat from which the foot had come, where he found “a flap of skin protruding about 0.7m below the surface” (Turner, 1995, p.13). Lindow Man was found lying face downwards (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.97). The body was then excavated on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August within a block of peat “with its stratigraphy still intact” (Turner, 1995, p.13).

Lindow Man was first dated to around 300BC (Stead *et al.*, 1986). The dating of the body and of the associated peat was done by three different laboratories: the British Museum, the Oxford University laboratory, and the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell (Brothwell, 1986, p.16). But the dating turned out to be problematic, as they produced “a range of date spanning about 900 years” (Brothwell, 1986, p.17), ranging from “early in the Iron Age to the post-Roman period” (Buckland, 1995, p.47). The date range of 2BC-AD129 is more agreed upon for Lindow Man (Joy, 2009, p.23).

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<sup>1</sup> This find is famous for having helped resolve a murder investigation at the time of discovery, but this will not be developed here.

First examination of the body of Lindow Man has led scientists to believe that he had died a violent death, as they found “a narrow opening about 3 centimetres long in the middle part of the right collar bone (clavicle)” which suggested that he had received a stab wound to the upper chest (Brothwell, 1986, p.25). Dr Iain West, however, considered that this injury could have been caused by the decomposition of the body in the bog. Examination of his head and skull showed two injuries, which were supposed to have been caused by a blunt instrument which “had twice split the scalp, broken the bone and driven some fragments inwards” (*ibid.*). On the back of the head was “some zig-zag splitting under the surface of the skin [which] was initially interpreted as *post-mortem* scalp change” although a skull fracture was then “confirmed by xeroradiography (*ibid.*). Evidence of the jaw being broken earlier in life was also found. Examination of the neck area showed that the right side of the throat was slit, either as a *post-mortem* wound, or it was done to bleed the victim (Brothwell, 1986, p.28-9). This injury was found underneath a 1.5 millimetres thick sinew cord tied around Lindow Man’s neck. It was made of “two fibrous strands with twists and some fairly simple knots” (Brothwell, 1986, p.27). Brothwell also indicates that the circumference of the cord, about 315 millimetres, is smaller than “normal modern collar sizes for men”, and that the cord “[bit] deeply into the neck, as if its purpose were to choke or garrotte”. Brothwell goes on by describing the “abnormal angulation of the neck and two broken vertebrae” visible through CT scans, which “could be produced by strangulation or garrotting with a simultaneous heavy blow or forward dragging action to the back of the head” (*ibid.*). This cord drew much attention and, associated with evidence of “overkill”, it led to theorising that Lindow Man had been a victim of ritual sacrifice, but this shall be studied in the next part. Regarding disease, scans of Lindow Man revealed “bubble-like ‘herniations’” (Brothwell, 1986, p.60) in the lower vertebrae of the spine, while only “slight changes” (*ibid.*, p.61) could be seen during the following autopsy.

Lindow Man still had hair, moustache and beard when he was discovered. His ginger hair was cut short and plastered against his skull. A fox-fur armband was also found on the upper part of his left arm. His fingernails were examined and lacked evidence of manual labour. They were compared under microscope to modern specimen for comparison “including nails from a ‘housewife’, a teacher and an agricultural worker, as well as from a medieval Irish bog woman” (Brothwell, 1986, p.38). The fingernails from Lindow Man turned out to be in better state than those of the agricultural worker and of the medieval Irish bog woman (Brothwell, 1986, p.39). Lindow Man also provided evidence for a mild

form of arthritis in his “lower thoracic and lumbar vertebrae” (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.138). Rather than being associated with age, since Lindow II is thought to have been in his twenties, his arthritis is supposed to be caused by mechanical stress.

Thirty teeth were recovered from Lindow II’s mouth, but the hard calcified enamel caps of the teeth had been dissolved by the acidity of the bog. No large caries cavities had penetrated into the dentine, and the “shape and size of the inner dentine and roots were normal” (Brothwell, 1986, p.52). Examination of his teeth allowed an estimation of his age at around 25-30 years old (*ibid.*). Surprisingly, the lower second molar had “a vertical ‘splinter’ of tooth [that] had sheared off and was missing” (*ibid.*).

The blood stains around the fracture of his skull were analysed and showed that he was of type O. This has been used to argue that he was of ‘Celtic’ origin because of the “high O group frequencies in the more ‘Celtic areas’ of Wales and Scotland, [which makes it] likely that this would have been the case also in Celtic times” (Brothwell, 1986, p.55). This argument has been used by Ross and Robins (1989), but it shall not be considered here, since the sole definition of ‘Celtic’ for an Iron Age individual would be problematic.

As far as the examination of his body has shown, Lindow Man was deposited naked except for his fox-fur armband and the cord around his neck. It must be stressed that vegetable fibres are not likely to be preserved by the peat, unlike animal material such as leather or wool.

Lindow Man is an incomplete bog mummy, but part of the remains of Lindow III, “found 15m west of the findspot of Lindow Man” (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.52), are thought to be part of the missing remains from Lindow II. An analysis was done by Pyatt *et al.* (1995) to determine whether the high levels of “aluminium, silica and copper, together with traces of titanium and zinc” were due to the application of mineral-rich pigments to the bodies of Lindow II and Lindow III. The study concluded that the decoration of the Lindow II and Lindow III bodies was a possibility, but not the only solution to their high levels in metal and mineral elements.

### *Lindow III*

On 6 February 1987, “a large lump of skin which later proved to be part of the back” of Lindow III was found (Turner, 1995, p13). The remains were dated to AD30 - 225 (Joy, 2009, p.23). The following investigation of the peat that had been extracted rendered seventy pieces of an adult male. The state of preservation of the remains was similar to

Lindow Man's, except for the bones, which had been more badly affected by the acidity of the bog: "solid bones such as the vertebrae, phalanges and the bones of the wrist were intact, whilst the long bones were soft, like wet paper and under represented" (Turner, 1995, p.14). A hand with several fingernails attached, and a leg were found in the peat (Turner, 1995, p.14). One of the fingernails "revealed a neatly cut and rounded nail end, with no evidence of deep scratching to the nail surface" (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.56) which is used as evidence that, as in the case of Lindow Man, Lindow III was "unlikely to have been involved in rough manual labour to the extent that it would have left evidence in the condition of the nails" (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.56). Other fragments were found in the peat extracted from the supposed area of the findspot during on-going research in the following months.

A congenial anomaly called polydactyly was identified in the analysis of the remains of Lindow III (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.105; Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.56-7). This extra digit, which would have been present on both hands, is argued by Aldhouse-Green (2015) to have singled him out from his community as a person of importance, relating the thumb to the Irish legend of Finn, who obtained wisdom by burning his thumb on roasting salmon (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.156-7). As was the case of Lindow Man, Lindow III's intestines were also infested by whipworm.

One cannot be certain whether the remains of Lindow III were originally part of Lindow I, or Lindow II, or if they represent a third individual. Brothwell and Bourke (1995) argued that "what emerged from a detailed consideration of every fragment and an attempt to piece together as much as possible, is that there are parts of at least two individuals." Brothwell and Bourke produced a "tentative positioning in body diagrams of the human remains from Lindow Moss" which shows that part of the remains from Lindow III would almost complete the remains of Lindow II, but some of the body parts would be duplicated, especially around the torso and arms. There would be no overlap with the remains of Lindow I since no fragment of the head was identified in the remains of Lindow III. Aldhouse-Green (2015) explains that it is "extremely likely that the disembodied head (Lindow I) found in 1983 (and then identified as that of a woman) and this headless corpse (Lindow III) belonged to the same male individual" (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.27). The study of the thumb of the right hand made it possible to estimate his height: Lindow III is thought to have been 176cm tall (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.56), and would thus make him taller than Lindow II, who was estimated to be 168-173.47cm tall (Brothwell, 1986, p.46). Lindow III and Lindow II also appear to have "somewhat different chemical

‘fingerprints’” (Pyatt *et al.*, 1995, p.67). Pyatt *et al.* explained that this could mean different geographical origins, or different diets, or it could be “a result of slightly differing depositional environments within the bog” (Pyatt *et al.*, 1995, p.57).

### *Lindow IV*

The remains of Lindow IV were found in June and September 1988. The “skin of the buttock and part of the left leg” (Turner, 1995, p.18) were found in June, while the “right thigh and the distal and proximal ends of the femur” (Turner, 1995, p.18) were found in September. They were not dated, but they are thought to consist of the left leg, right thigh and buttocks missing from Lindow Man (Joy, 2009, p.23; Turner, 1995, p.18; Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.52). They were found 15m West of where the remains of Lindow Man were found (Turner, 1995, p.18), and they shared his anatomy and showed the same state of preservation (Brothwell & Bourke, 1995, p.52; Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.106).

### *Other discoveries*

One iron pin was found in Lindow Moss. It was an incomplete iron rod which was not dated, and its function remains unknown. It was possibly part of a fibula (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p107). This single find is insufficient to theorise that Lindow Commons was a place used for votive deposition. The recurrent deposition in bogs and moving bodies of water could be primarily linked with boundaries, rather than with water in itself (Kelly, 2006).

## 2. Irish bog mummies and their violent deaths

### *Oldcroghan Man*

Oldcroghan Man was found in 2003 in Clonearl bog, Co. Offaly, by peat workers who were digging the bog “along what is now a townland and parish boundary, which formerly was the boundary between two ancient territories known as Tuath Cruacháin and Tuath na Cille” (Kelly, 2006). He was found in a bog around Croghan Hill, which has been considered an archaeological site of great importance from the prehistoric period onwards:

A diverse range of archaeological sites, including tumuli, burial mounds, a ring barrow, a possible hillfort, a church site and graveyard, holy wells, cultivation ridges and a deserted village, on and around

Croghan Hill demonstrate that it was the repeated focus of human activity since prehistoric times.

(Plunkett *et al.*, 2009, p.266)

Concerning the raised bogs surrounding Croghan Hill, the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit has identified “at least 26 wetland sites and finds of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age date” (Plunkett *et al.*, 2009, p.266).

Oldcroghan Man’s remains consist of “a severed torso that had been decapitated in antiquity” (Kelly, 2012, p.234), with his arms and well-preserved hands still attached. The lack of evidence of manual labour on his hands, and his well-manicured fingernails led researchers to estimate that he was possibly a man of high status. Examination of his bones and soft tissue allowed to estimate that he was “tall and powerfully built” (Kelly, 2012, p.234), about 1.91m (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.30). His internal organs were still “intact” (*ibid.*) and his diet in the few months before his death appears to have been meat-rich, suggesting that he died in winter, although his last meal consisted of cereal and buttermilk (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.74). He was wearing “a plaited leather armband with metal mounts decorated with designs in the Celtic La Tène style” (*ibid.*). Radiocarbon dating of Oldcroghan Man gave a date range of 362–175 BC.

Oldcroghan Man’s death is thought to have occurred as follows:

A stab wound to the chest killed Oldcroghan Man; however a defence-wound on the upper left arm indicates that he tried to fend off the fatal assault. The deceased was then decapitated and his thorax severed from his abdomen.

(Kelly, 2012, p.236)

Additionally, both of his arms were pierced through by a sharp instrument, and withies made of twisted hazel strands were inserted through the cuts (Mulhall, 2019, p.89; Kelly, 2012, p.236-7). Oldcroghan Man’s nipples were also damaged, apparently cut, but it is unknown whether this was done before or after his death (Kelly, 2012, p.236). This has been used as additional evidence of his kingly status. Kelly argued that “the suckling of a king’s nipples was an important gesture of submission by subordinates, and the stylized representation of breasts and nipples on the terminals of gold gorgets indicates that this was a custom that extended as far back as the Late Bronze Age at least” (Kelly, 2012, p.239). As this argument is based on medieval kingship ceremonies, the connection with

this injury is unlikely (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.134). This damage to the nipples was also identified on the remains of Clonycavan Man, found about 35km north of Oldcroghan Man.

### *Clonycavan Man*

Clonycavan Man was found in the spring of 2003, in the bog on the county border between Meath and Westmeath, dividing the ancient territories of Brega and Mide (Kelly, 2006, p.26). Only the upper part of his body was found in the peat, as the peat-cutting machine had apparently destroyed the lower part of his body up to his waist. His hands were also missing. His internal organs were partially preserved, his head and hair was well-preserved. Clonycavan Man is known for the product “made from a blend of animal fat and aromatic pine-resin” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.31) that had been applied to his hair, which is thought to have come from Spain or France (*ibid.*; Kelly, 2012, p.234), which would indicate that he was of a high status. His remains have been dated to 392–201 BC (Kelly, 2012, p.234). Clonycavan Man was “slightly built and about 1.79m tall” and “analysis of his hair revealed that he had a mainly vegetarian diet and certainly his last meal was plant-based” suggesting that he died during summer or in the beginning of autumn (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.74). He is thought to have been between 25 and 40 years old at the time of his death.

His death appears to have been violent with several blows to the head and chest with what appears to be an axe, and a 40 centimetres long cut wound to the abdomen which suggests disembowelment (Kelly, 2012, p.236). This death seems violent but also of multiple causes. It is thus surprising to see that Van Beek *et al.*'s article (2022) register him as a bog body which died a violent death with blows to the head, but not with multiple causes (Van Beek *et al.*, 2022, p.15). Clonycavan Man's nipples were also damaged, apparently cut, but it is unknown whether this was done before or after his death (Kelly, 2012, p.236). As for Oldcroghan Man, this has been used as additional evidence of his high status.

### *Gallagh Man*

Gallagh Man was found in 1821 in the Gallagh, Co Galway, by members of the O'Kelly family who were digging for peat. For the following 8 years, the remains were repeatedly exhumed and buried as part of the tourist attraction that the O'Kelly family

created around their discovery. While the remains were supposedly well-preserved when they were first discovered, this activity deteriorated the corpse. The Royal Irish Academy purchased the corpse in 1829 and preserved it with the technology available to them (Colm, 2015). His remains were radiocarbon dated to 489-167BC (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.58).

The notes made at the time it was discovered describe Gallagher Man as a “young, bearded man with long dark hair, wearing a close-fitting knee-length deerskin tunic” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.29-30). He was apparently found lying on his left side (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.97). Examination of his remains showed that he was a man in his twenties, about 180cm tall. He appears to have been strangled, as a band of woven hazel withies was found around his neck and his grave was marked by two sharp wooden stakes driven into the ground on each side of his body (Zein-eladbin, 2019, p.58; Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.30).

Although the exact finding place of Gallagher Man is unknown, information from the files of the National Museum of Ireland indicates that he had been found close to the townland and parish boundary, which “was once the boundary of the territory of Uí Maine, ruled by the O’Kelly family, who built a castle at Gallagher in the medieval period” (Kelly, 2006, p.2). Kelly also links the withies found around his neck to the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and the notion that withies placed on boundaries would protect borders (*ibid.*, p.4).

### 3. Natural boundaries

Deposition in bodies of water such as rivers and lakes has been viewed as inherent to what has been called “Celtic religion” (Ross 1986; Magilton, 1995). Iron Age depositions in bodies of water are indeed repeatedly found in the British Isles “whether in lakes as at Llyn Fawr, in marshy land as at Llyn Cerrig Bach, or in rivers, as in the case of deposition of parade weaponry and armour in the Thames” (Harding, 2015, p.50). Although the deposition of objects in water seems fairly frequent in the Iron Age, it cannot be directly associated with the deposition of human remains (*ibid.*).

Bogs as boundaries have been a study angle for the study of the bog mummies, especially in Ireland. Kelly (2006) argued that the Irish bog mummies from the Iron Age have been deposited on parish or county boundaries, relating this choice of place to kingship and sacrifice theories. In his article, Kelly (2006) argued that the deposition on the boundary of territories, rather than in bodies of water, seems to be of importance:

Major rivers such as the Shannon, Bann and Boyne form the boundaries of townlands, parishes, baronies and counties, and, in the case of the Shannon, a provincial border as well. In some instances Iron Age finds have been found on the shores of rivers or lakes, perhaps indicating that the boundary, rather than the water, is the crucial element.

(Kelly, 2006, p.28)

Burial locations in the Iron Age do not appear to be linked with certain topographically prominent positions, as was the case in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, making the interpretation of the choice of burial ground more difficult for the Iron Age (Harding, 2015, p.56). More recent studies on the bogs of Lindow Moss have shown that the places of deposition of the bodies were mostly inaccessible without trackways, as it was “extremely waterlogged” (Stewart, 2020, p.40). Zein-Elabdin (2019) argued that the Lindow bodies have been “deposited in the central part of the bog basin furthest away from edges of their contemporary peatland” (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.228). The investigation of Oldcroghan Man’s findspot has provided some information about the context in which he had been killed:

The study had identified from analyses of the pollen record that Oldcroghan Man was placed in the bog around the time when human activity was increasing, it was given a wider landscape and cultural context to his deposition in the bog.

(Plunkett *et al.*, 2009, p.275)

Oldcroghan Man was apparently deposited in a bog on the county boundary (Kelly, 2012), but the same information seems unavailable for Lindow Man. Lindow Moss can be regarded as a natural boundary nonetheless, considered by archaeologists to have represented for the Iron Age community a boundary between the world of the living and the otherworld, or underworld (Ross, 1986; Magilton, 1995). Bogs are also seen as places in-between land and water (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.9). Magilton (1995) used this element to link the bog mummies to the Welsh tale of Llew, who can be killed neither in the day nor at night, neither indoors nor outdoors, neither on foot nor on a horse, neither naked nor clothed, and can only be killed by a special weapon forged for a year at the time of mass. The bog mummies, although from the Iron Age, have been linked to many

medieval written sources, particularly the threefold death tales in insular medieval tradition, which will be studied more extensively in chapters III and IV.

### **C. Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man Remains**

The Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man bog mummies have a number of features in common. As will be seen in the following section, they were close in age and both of them lack traces of manual labour on their hands and nails. The violence with which they were killed brought them to also share the sacrifice theories that were developed to interpret their deaths.

#### **1. Young adults of High status**

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man have both been identified as the remains of men around their twenties. Xeroradiographs showed that Lindow Man's clavicle bone had fused quite recently, which puts his age at about twenty-five years old when he died (Joy, 2009, p.27). Oldcroghan Man was also estimated to have died in their mid-twenties (Mulhall, 2019; Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.30).

Both bodies have been described as the remains of men of a high status. Oldcroghan Man's "carefully manicured fingernails, minimal scarring to the fingertips, and the absence of any wear to the finger pads seem to point to an individual from the higher échelons of society, one unaccustomed to heavy manual labour during his lifetime" (Mulhall, 2019, p.86). The well-manicured fingernails and excellent condition of the teeth of Lindow Man, is also regarded as evidence of his high status (Brunner, 2016, p.86; Connolly, 1985).

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man are both described as well-built individuals. Oldcroghan Man's diet in the few months before his death appears to have been meat-rich, which is thought to corroborate his high status, although his last meal consisted of buttermilk and cereal. Lindow Man's last meal consisted of cereal and weeds, with a form of griddled bread with charred grains, and four grains of mistletoe pollen (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.59).

Both mummies were found naked except for a leather armband. Lindow Man wore a fox-fur armband, and Oldcroghan Man was found wearing a leather armband with decorated copper-alloy fittings "bearing Celtic (so-called La Tène) motifs" (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.31). Lindow Man also had a thin cord around his neck. Lindow Man was

estimated to have been 168cm tall, while Oldcroghan Man was estimated to have been 191cm tall.

## 2. Multiple wounds

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man both provide evidence of a violent death with multiple causes, but in an apparently different context:

Lindow Man from northwest England and Oldcroghan Man from central Ireland each exemplify a concentration of violent injuries that resulted in death. They differ, though, for the violent acts perpetrated on Lindow Man appear to have happened all at once, just before he died, while many of Oldcroghan Man's injuries seem to have been inflicted just after he died and before he was put into the bog.

(Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.131-2)

The circumstances in which these wounds appeared is uncertain and interpretations shall be conducted carefully, which will be the focus of the second chapter. A description of the wounds and injuries visible on the remains will be the first step taken here<sup>2</sup>.

### *Injuries to the head and neck area*

Lindow Man shows evidence of two blows to the top of his head, with swellings on the wound edges of the first wound which would be consistent with a pre-mortem injury. The second and more important wound to the head appears to be the reason for skull fragments to have been found into the brain tissues (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.113). The bones C3/C4 of his cervical vertebrae were fractured into several pieces and dislocated, which appears to be consistent with the twisted cord of sinew found around his neck which has arguably been used as a garrotte (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.113). This neck fracture is also coherent with a blow from a blunt instrument (Connolly, 1985, p.2). Lindow Man's neck also shows a deep incisional wound on the front penetrating the thyroid cartilage, which could have been made with a sharp instrument.

Since Oldcroghan Man was decapitated before his deposition into the mire, it is impossible to know whether he suffered any wounds to the head. That his head was not

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<sup>2</sup> Images available of the bodies and of the wounds described in this analysis are provided in Annexe I for the remains of Lindow Man, and in Annexe II for the remains of Oldcroghan Man.

found in the bog remains of interest, since it could mean that it was taken elsewhere after his decapitation.

### *Injuries to the chest area*

Lindow Man received a stab wound to the chest, and a rib fracture which he supposedly suffered prior to his death (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.114). Apart from those two wounds, his chest does not provide evidence for other injuries. His legs were separated from his torso by the peat cutting machine, and the lower right leg found with his remains did not provide much information.

Oldcroghan Man received a penetrating stab wound to the chest prior to his decapitation (Mulhall, 2019, p.86). Both of his arms were pierced through, and withies made of twisted hazel strands were inserted through the cuts (Mulhall, 2019, p.89; Kelly, 2012, p.236-7). Oldcroghan Man also shows a defence-wound on his upper left arm, inferring that he tried to defend himself and that he was not willing to die. As for Clonycavan Man, Oldcroghan Man's nipples had been partially cut, although it is unknown whether this was done before, or after his death. Finally, Oldcroghan Man's thorax was separated from his abdomen, and his legs were not found in the bog (Kelly, 2012, p.236-7).

The multiple injuries suffered by Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man, as for other bog mummies, have been used as evidence of ritual sacrifice since their discovery. Their deposition in the bog, nakedness, and their supposed status also contributed to the elaboration of the sacrifice theories.

### *Disease*

Examination of the bones of Lindow Man showed that he suffered from "a mild form of arthritis in his lower thoracic and lumbar vertebrae" which can be due to mechanical stress in this case, rather than age (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.138). Lindow II's intestines were also infested by parasitic worms (maw worm and whipworm), with eggs of both species found in his small intestines which "suggests a relatively high level of infestation" (*ibid.*). The examination conducted on the remains of Oldcroghan Man did not provide evidence of disease at the moment.

### 3. Sacrifice theories

In 1969, Glob released one of the major works on the bog bodies from northern Europe, primarily working on the bog bodies from Denmark. His analysis of the bog remains is based on the writings of Tacitus and on the several Iron Age objects found in bogs. According to Glob's book *The Bog People*, the bog bodies were human sacrifices deposited in the bogs as offerings to "the powers that ruled men's destinies" (Glob, 1969, p.22). Glob's studies regarding the bog mummies in Denmark have been the groundwork for the sacrificial theories attached to the bog mummies across northern Europe (Stewart, 2020, p.10). He based his interpretation of the bog bodies as offerings to supernatural beings on the writings of Tacitus who described human sacrifice to Nerthus in the Germani tribes, which will not be studied in this analysis of the insular bog mummies.

Although not focusing on the British Isles, nor on the 'Celtic' people of the Iron Age, Glob's studies became the basis of studies on the bog mummies as willing sacrifices, from an aristocratic status, or even as druids (Ross & Robins, 1989). Magilton (1995) argued that human sacrifices was well-attested by Caesar, Strabo, and Cassius Dio, but those sources cannot be used as reliable evidence since they are without doubt biased in their view of the people of Britain in the Roman Era (Webster, 2015). Moreover, contradiction in written sources about human sacrifice in Britain is not uncommon among classical authors, and they should be used carefully as sources (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.163). Nonetheless, the diversity of authors writing on human sacrifice makes it difficult to claim that sacrifice was absent among the populations of Britain. Ireland, however, does not seem to appear in classical sources discussing human sacrifice. Although the existence of sacrifice in Britain is difficult to deny entirely, its connection to the bog bodies remains debated.

The sacrifice theories are largely based on contemporary but foreign literature, or on insular but later literature such as the threefold death motif found in insular literature (Magilton, 1995, Ross, 1986). The threefold death motif has been used to interpret the bog mummies as "trifunctional sacrifices economically designed to placate three classes of divinities simultaneously" (Magilton, 1995, p.187), but since drowning would be one death too many, Magilton presents the deposition in a bog as a deposition in a sacred place (Magilton, 1995). Ross (1986) based her analysis of the ritual killing of Lindow Man on the medieval literary tradition of the threefold death as well, despite the time gap between the Iron Age bog mummy and the medieval Irish annals:

The method of sacrifice apparently demanded by these major Celtic deities is, in true Celtic trinitarian fashion, reduced to a single sacrifice in the medieval literary tradition, the victims dying by stabbing, by burning and by drowning.

(Ross, 1986, p.162)

In the same line of reasoning, Ross links the tradition of the threefold death motif to the writings of Lucan, who detailed the sacrifices made to the three gods Teutates, Esus and Taranis:

*et quibus immitis placatur sanguine diro  
Teutates horrensque feris altaribus Esus  
et Taranis Scythicae non mitior ara Dianae.*

and you also who propitiate with horrid victims the ruthless Teutates, and Esus whose savage shrines make men shudder, and Taranis, whose altar is not more benign than that of Scythian Diana.

(Green, 1994, p.64)

According to the writings of Lucan, Teutates was associated to death by drowning, Esus to stabbing or hanging, and Taranis to death by burning. Green analysed this extract from Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (1.444-446) of which the comparison between the cruelty of Taranis and Diana appeared surprising. One would expect the classical writer to emphasise on the blood thirst of the Gallic god and present it as greater than the classical god's. Green concluded that, although unconventional, Lucan was criticizing the savagery of his peers:

In the passage in question, then, Lucan intends to savage Roman pride, just as Caesar's Roman soldiers are preparing to savage Rome; he does so through allusion to barbarism in one of its most horrifying and symbolic aspects, human sacrifice. The sacrifices made to Gaulish gods are no kinder, he says, than the sacrifices demanded by the Homeric goddess Artemis/Diana at her temple in Taurica.

(Green, 1994, p.66)

One could thus think that Lucan could have been exaggerating the cruelty of the Gallic gods to emphasise the violence of the Romans savaging Rome. While this is of

interest in regards of the continental history, Lucan was only describing Gallic gods, and not deities from Britain or Ireland. Moreover, the tripartite vision of the Celtic deities and hierarchies is based on the records of classical authors. In his review of *The Druids* by Nora K. Chadwick, Stevens mentions that “Posidonius noted the existence of three intellectual groups as a significant Gallic phenol” (Stevens, 1968, p.108) while Diodorus, Strabo and Ammianus called those groups Bards, Seers and Druids. Presenting the Seers and Druids as active agents of human sacrifice and predictions, the classical authors thus appear to be the sole influence on the tripartite ideology applied to the Gauls and ‘Celtic’ tribes.

Using the idea that Lindow Man was of noble birth, Ross (1986) argued that the death of Lindow Man resembled the prophecy made in the seventh-century Vita of St Columba regarding Aed Dub. This earlier episode of the threefold death motif, which will be studied more extensively in chapter III and IV, shows a version of the motif in which the more traditional “burning episode is replaced by the falling from a tree – clearly referring to some form of hanging or garrotting” (Ross, 1986, p.163). As Lindow Man was “killed by a noose, his throat was cut with a weapon, and he was deposited in a bog” Ross claimed that it would make “the ritual and Celtic nature of his killing unarguable” (*ibid.*). To interpret the ‘overkill’ or ‘triple death’ that Lindow Man is thought to have suffered, Aldhouse-Green (2015) proposed a different analysis according to which Lindow had lived several lives as in “a shaman, or ‘two-spirit’ person, someone who moved between the earth world and spirit world [who] might be killed in multiple ways in order to reflect that multifaceted life” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.132).

One element that has not yet been fully addressed in this analysis is the content of the bog mummies’ last meals. Lindow Man’s digestive system contained what has been regarded as unleavened blackened bread, with some mistletoe pollen. The mistletoe has been regarded as evidence for druidic ritual and the blackened bread has been interpreted as the burnt part of a bannock used to choose randomly the individual to be sacrificed (Ross, 1986; Aldhouse-Green, 2015). The importance of mistletoe for the druids was described by Caesar and Pliny, in a context of colonisation and expansion, and can hardly be considered as reliable (Webster, 2015, p.126). Oldcroghan Man’s last meal consisted of ground cereal and buttermilk, which has been linked to the fertility feast of Lughnasa (Kelly, 2006).

Kelly (2012) argued that the Iron Age bog mummies of Ireland had been killed in the context of a famine or disease:

In an Irish context, the consort of the goddess was the king, and when famine or plague indicated that she had withdrawn her benevolence, it was he who bore the responsibility. The king's failure to ensure the continued goodwill of the goddess meant that he might be obliged to pay the ultimate price.

(Kelly, 2012, p.238)

The wounds and good preservation of the bog mummies would indeed not be consistent with an accidental death, and probably with manslaughter as well (Brothwell, 1986). The participatory evidence suggested by Aldhouse-Green (2015, p.94-6) would explain the multiple wounding observed on the bog mummies. Giles (2009) mentioned a theory developed by Taylor, who argued that crimes against honour “were punished by ritual killing, banishing the individual to an in-between world – ‘neither heaven nor earth’ – a place in which the body would not rot, nor would the soul be released into the ancestral realm, but instead was deliberately trapped in a liminal zone” (Giles, 2009, p.86). Aldhouse-Green (2015) also suggested that Iron Age burial was more commonly conducted by burning or sometimes by inhumation, releasing the soul into the Otherworld. The bog mummies, being interred in a preservative environment, would thus be denied the access to the Otherworld:

The presence of strong preservative material in bogs, particularly the tanning agent within the *Sphagnum* mosses, interrupted the processes of decay, keeping the dead in the land of the living and preventing the freeing of their spirit. So, at one and the same time, the dead person was both preserved but denied resolution. Bog burials were the result of deliberate choice on the part of the disposal teams, mourners and those directing the funeral rites.

(Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.44-5)

This theory is interesting as it lays emphasis on the knowledge that the Iron Age population had of the preserving properties of the bog. The preservation of butter in bogs, known as bog butter, does indicate that “prehistoric communities were fully aware of the special properties of bogs, and utilized them regularly” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.45). The rarity of non-human bog mummies is also evidence that the preservation of the human bog mummies were deliberate and not accidental (Wilkinson, 2006).

Another sacrifice theory regarding the bog mummies is based on evidence of disability and malformation. Aldhouse-Green put forwards evidence that several bog mummies through Europe display evidence of disability or malformation. This could mean that the bog mummies were chosen because of their deformities. Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man do not show evident traces of disability, but this will be developed further in the next chapter.

The Iron Age bog mummies are depicted as of a “more sinister nature” because of the fact that “they represent ritual killings” (Plunkett *et al.*, 2009, p.275). The several pieces of evidence that points to this direction has been subject to more recent analysis, which suggested that the “overkill” and apparent aristocratic status of the bog mummies should be considered more carefully. The preserving properties of the bog may well have been known to the Iron Age population, which would argue in favour of sacrifice theories, but the bog may have had a more important role in the evidence of ritual killing found on the bog mummies.

More recent studies on the bog mummies and on the bog bodies include discussion on the likeliness of sacrifice regarding the death of the bog mummies. Most of the elements that were brought together to develop those theories are being revisited to review the extent to which the sacrifice theories can be validated.

## **II. The Insular Bog Mummies: Sacrificed or Executed?**

Because of the violent deaths that they appear to have suffered and their particular burial ground, the Iron Age bog mummies have been considered as either sacrificed or executed. As has been seen in the previous chapter, the sacrifice theories are numerous, and their arguments vary. But what shifted these studies towards sacrifice rather than execution appears to be the mention of sacrifice by Tacitus and by Caesar, who were not describing the insular population but the Germans and the Gaul, and who can hardly be considered as reliable sources. Thus, the debate remains between sacrifice and execution. As Aldhouse-Green (2015) mentions:

“The evidence is mounting that Iron Age bog people did not die ordinary deaths. The presence of ritualization, of repetitive, formulaic action is inescapable and difficult to explain away in terms of either accident or murder. Execution, however, remains a viable explanation. In many ancient societies, punitive killings are hedged about with ceremony, with ritual that may have absolutely nothing to do with religion, though it may do so.” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.113)

It is the repetitive deposition in bogs that infers ritualization. The different wounds suffered by the insular bog mummies, however, are not likely to have been caused in a ritual manner. It has been argued that the bog itself could have had more influence on some of the elements of the sacrifice theories, namely the multiple wounds and the nakedness of the mummies. Focusing on the mummies of Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man, this chapter will review the different elements of the sacrifice theories through the lens of more recent research and data. The sacrifice elements will be looked at, as well as the supposed high status of the mummies. The bog will also be considered as a preserving environment deliberately chosen as such.

### **A. The Bog Mummies: Kings Victims of Ritual Sacrifice?**

The insular bog mummies Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man have been described by some researchers as kings sacrificed for the wellbeing of their communities (Ross, 1989; Magilton, 1995). The ‘overkill’ they suffered, their nakedness and the last meal they ate led scientists to consider them as victims of sacrifice, more than individuals executed for a crime they could have committed. However, recent research has developed the

hypothesis that some of the wounds observed in the bog mummies and their nakedness could have been the result of bog pressure and decomposition. This part will study the extent to which the bog could have interfered with these elements of the sacrifice theories.

### 1. Multiple wounds or bog pressure?

The multiple wounds described in examination of the bog mummies may not all have been caused by the hand of their Iron Age community. The practice of human sacrifice in the Iron Age is difficult to deny, but its application in the context of the bog mummies remains doubtful (Stewart, 2020, p.7). As Ravn explains: “it is difficult to distinguish between traumas which took place ante mortem, those which were the cause of death and those which occurred post mortem” (Ravn, 2011, p.86). Some of the wounds suffered by Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man could indeed have been produced by the pressure of the bog and because of decomposition.

#### *Lindow Man*

Lindow Man shows evidence of two head injuries. The first one, showing swelling around the fracture of the skull, is coherent with an ante-mortem injury. The second injury, however, “is likely a result of the taphonomic processes from the crushing weight of the bog combined with the pliability of Lindow Man’s bones rather than blunt force trauma” (Stewart, 2020, p.38). As Stewart mentions, contrary to skin, bones are often poorly preserved in the acidic water of the bog. The stab wound to his chest is also argued to have been possibly due to “decomposition and taphonomic effects” (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.46). It is also claimed that the rib fracture could have been caused by bog pressure or when the body was moved (Joy, 2009, p.43).

The cord around Lindow Man’s neck and the neck injuries surrounding it have been subject to much debate. Joy mentions that according to Ian West, the sinew cord was a garrotte used to strangle Lindow Man and “quickened the flow of blood from the neck” (Joy, 2009, p.42). But in Robert Connolly’s opinion, the cord was a necklace which caused “ligature marks around the neck [...] as the body bloated when it was submerged in the pool” with the wound to the right side of the neck as “the result of tearing and stresses caused by the changes to the body after it entered the bog” (Joy, 2009, p.43).

One cannot be certain that the multiple wounds suffered by Lindow Man were the result of sacrifice, since they could have occurred post-mortem. Since the bones become

softer and more fragile because of the acidity of the peat, the fractures and wounds visible on the bones can be reasonably argued to have been caused by the bog itself.

### *Oldcroghan Man*

Oldcroghan Man is a different situation entirely. His decapitation and the separation of his torso from his abdomen both appear to have occurred peri-mortem.

The deeply cut nipples, however, could have been damaged by the peat in the decomposition of his remains. Kelly (2012) had regarded the cutting of the nipples of Oldcroghan Man, and of Clonycavan Man, as peri-mortem based on medieval kingship ceremonies, and based on the need for a man to have a body free from disability or injury to be legitimate to rule as king, as described in Irish mythological lore. However, the damage done to the nipples of the Iron Age individual is unlikely to be related to the medieval texts. Besides, it is likely that the soft tissue of the bog mummy's nipples was damaged by the acidity of the bog. Interestingly, Oldcroghan Man and Clonycavan Man are the only bog mummies reported in the British Isles to show damaged nipples.

The piercing injuries to Oldcroghan Man's arms and the withies of twisted hazel that were passed through them had undoubtedly occurred peri-mortem. The wound observed on his arm also seems to have been inflicted peri-mortem and might correspond to a defence wound.

It would then seem that most of the injuries observed on Oldcroghan Man are likely to have occurred peri-mortem, apart for the damage to his nipples which is considered uncertain. Oldcroghan Man shows no particular bone injuries, which is not surprising as not much remains of his body.

### *Iron Age Overkill*

Van der Sanden defined some of the European Iron Age bog mummies as "overkilled" because of the "inordinate and unnecessary violence" they suffered (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.165). It is important to reconsider the injuries of bog mummies as possibly post-mortem injuries. As Stewart mentions on the sacrifice and 'overkill' theories regarding the bog mummies:

"This is significant in that the dominant human sacrifice narrative, based predominantly on the notion of ritualistic overkill, characterizes the ancient natives as savages and [perpetuates] the

evolutionary myth of an inherently violent past that infers an innately uncivilized indigenous nature by modern standards. The possibility of human sacrifice is not altogether negated as it was undeniably practiced, although it has been unnecessarily exaggerated in scholarship.” (Stewart, 2020, p.7)

The ritualistic elements of the death of the bog mummies have been interpreted as a spectacular event, such as the possible cutting of Lindow Man’s neck while being garrotted, which could “have had the effect of causing a fountain of blood to spurt from the throat wound at high pressure” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.121). Aldhouse-Green argues in favour of the “theatricality of the killing” with an intention to “send a message” to the audience. As mentioned by Stewart (2020), one of the problems with such theories is that it gives a picture of a savage Iron Age community, but one also endowed with “sound anatomical knowledge” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.121). Aldhouse-Green interestingly compares the bog mummies with other examples of violent deaths in the British Iron Age and concludes that “there is a range of evidence for the dismembering and chopping up of people in British Iron Age contexts” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.139). Aldhouse-Green also compares the burial of dismembered bodies to the breaking of weapons and wine-jars in this Iron Age context, although it appears problematic to compare human remains with deposited objects.

## 2. Nakedness or decomposition?

The nakedness of the bog mummies has been viewed as an indicator of human sacrifice. As previously mentioned, clothing made from animal skin and fur, which would have been the main clothing in the Iron Age, would have been preserved by the bog. This has led archaeologists to consider that the bog mummies had been killed and deposited naked in the peat. For example, Aldhouse-Green argues in this manner:

“The act of divesting a chosen victim of their clothes made a deliberate statement both to the living witnesses of the event and to the bog itself, thus forming a direct and intimate connection between the victim, the killer, the spectators, the site of interment and the spirits perhaps perceived as dwelling in the marsh.” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.149)

Aldhouse-Green argues further that the nakedness of the bog mummies made “vulnerable, physically and emotionally fragile” the individual that was about to die (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.151). On a more spiritual level, she also claims that these individuals were possibly thought to hold a “particular power” from their bodies which had to be transferred to the water of the bog (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.151-2). Indeed, if the nakedness of the bog mummies was an ascertained fact, it would infer ritualization, whether it was in the form of a sacrifice or an execution or another ritual ceremony implying the death of an individual.

But as Van der Sanden explains, “garments made of wool, skin and leather are preserved, but clothing made of plant fibres, such as linen, disappears without trace” (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.18). Van der Sanden also points out that clothing may have been overlooked when the bodies were discovered in the peat. It is thus possible that Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man were wearing an undergarment made of vegetable fibres, more probably made of linen, which decomposed in the peat.

Zein-Eladbin mentions the “iron ridged tapering rod 61mm in length” that was found in Lindow Moss, which is thought to have been a “fibula pin to secure a garment” (Zein-Eladbin, 2019, p.69). As Harding explains, it is also possible that the garment potentially worn by the bog mummies were a “form of shroud or specifically funerary attire” (Harding, 2015, p.168) of which would remain only the fibula pin. Brunner also argues that Lindow Man was likely to have worn some form of garment when he died, as he was also wearing a fox-fur armband (Brunner, 2016, p.1). Contrarily to other European bog mummies, no trace of vegetable fibres was found on Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man, although it could have been overlooked during examination of the remains.

The nakedness of the bog mummies can thus not be considered as an established fact, as there is a possibility that the bog mummies were wearing garments, more probably undergarments made of vegetable fibres at the time of their deaths.

### 3. The last meal

The bog mummies’ last meals have been of interest for the development of the sacrifice theories. More precisely, the last meal of Lindow Man containing mistletoe pollen has been put forward as evidence of druidic ritual and sacrifice. The link between mistletoe pollen and the druidic ceremonies has been established on the writings of Pliny, but it was more likely “inadvertently consumed on account of the minute quantity and lack of plant

remains” (Stewart, 2020, p.45). Zein-Elabdin also specifies that “it is difficult to identify aspects of a ritual meal from samples that are centuries old [since] the evidence that relates to ritual may not have survived or is ambiguous” (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.68). The ingestion of mistletoe pollen, if it was intentional, could also have been medicinal for the control of nervous disorders (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.58).

The last meal of Oldcroghan Man consisted of ground cereal and buttermilk and has been interpreted by Kelly as a representation of the marriage between the king and the earth goddess “to ensure the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people, who were dependent for survival on reliable yields of corn, milk and milk products” (Kelly, 2006). Interestingly, the high level of nitrogen in the palaeodietary analysis of the fingernails of Oldcroghan Man revealed that his diet in the months prior to his death consisted mostly of meat, but his last meal does not appear to contain any, leading Aldhouse-Green to view this as a “deliberately ‘low-key’ final meal” prior to his death (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.58).

The lack of meat present in the bog mummies’ last meals is of interest. Van der Sanden explains “the evidence suggests that the diets of the investigated individuals were all more or less completely vegetarian and that is undoubtedly incorrect” (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.117). Indeed, the negative evidence of meat in the last meal of the bog mummies does not proscribe the presence of meat entirely in the dead men’s last meals. Consequently, the lack of meat was often interpreted as their death occurring in the winter, which cannot prove a link with a midwinter festival (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.118).

The bog mummies’ last meals mostly contained vegetable aliments and seeds, with some animal products for Oldcroghan Man. While this can be of interest to understand the plants and vegetables consumed in the Iron Age, one cannot be certain that all remains from the bog mummies’ last meals. Indeed, the remains can be incomplete as they were partially digested when the bodies were excavated. As Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man’s organs were exposed, it is not unlikely that the matter found in their stomach was contaminated by the surrounding peat.

## **B. Men of High Status?**

Oldcroghan Man and Lindow Man have both been described as men of high status due to the lack of evidence of manual labour on their hands and because of their well-manicured nails. According to recent research, it appears that the peat may have had an influence on the current aspect of the bog mummies’ hands. In a similar manner, the

deposition of these individuals in the bog and their preservation by the peat has brought the idea that those individuals were of importance. Aldhouse-Green (2015) has also put forward the deformities observed on several of the bog mummies throughout Europe. The bogs forming a natural boundary in the landscape also pointed towards a political or sacred aspect to the deposition in the bog.

### 1. Chosen aristocrats?

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man are considered to have been individuals of importance, regarded by some scholars as priests, druids or princes. The smoothness of the bog mummies' hands, their well-manicured nails and their deposition in the preserving bog are all elements inferring the aristocratic status of the bog mummies. Aldhouse-Green argues that the bog mummies could have been individuals of importance among their own people, but had possibly been killed as prisoners of war selected for death rituals. In this instance those individuals, although originally of high rank, would then be in an ambiguous position as "non-citizens, foreigners, enemies and often representatives of defeated adversaries" (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.160). Aldhouse-Green also argues that people of low rank, as well as the noble could have been chosen for death rituals in case of misconduct.

The alleged high status of the bog mummies has been based on a variety of elements. The aspect of their hands and nails showing no evidence of manual labour is viewed as evidence of this, inferring that these individuals were not required to do much labour, thus making them individuals of high status. However, the smooth aspect of the bog mummies' hands, in particular the hands of Oldcroghan Man, could have been emphasised by the bog. Stewart indicates that "enzymes in the emerging water causes the epidermal keratin to slough off as the anterior wall is exposed for the longest period, hence the smoothness of their hands. This has been used to suggest an apparent lack of hard labour indicating aristocratic status" (Stewart, 2020, p.5). Moreover, the spine of Lindow Man showed that he suffered of a mild form of arthritis. Although it is not necessarily correlated, it would seem unlikely that he suffered from arthritis without performing manual labour. Considering that the smoothness of the bog mummies' hand could have been a consequence of their preservation by the peat, there is little evidence left to argue in favour of the aristocratic status of the bog mummies. The death of the bog mummies could thus have been punitive in reaction to misconduct, but the malformations and health problems

observed in a variety of bog bodies could lead to another interpretation for their death. Some of the European bog mummies were also children. The killing of children and malformed adults, and young adults in the case of the insular bog mummies, has undermined the theories interpreting the bog mummies as executed for an offence. While the punitive killing for the bog mummies is a suitable explanation for some of the bog mummies in Europe, it cannot be considered as a universal explanation.

## 2. Malformations and Insanity

As Aldhouse-Green puts forward, some of the bog mummies across Europe who suffered from an apparent excessively violent death have shown evidence of malformation:

“But in considering the kind of excessive violence that leads to dismemberment and the other mutilating injuries sustained, it is worth posing the question of whether this specific form of violence had any connection with the natural deformities or other disabilities suffered by a significant number of the Iron Age individuals who ended up being killed and deposited in swamps.” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.135)

Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man at first sight do not appear as disabled or malformed. Their remains are only partial and many parts of their bodies are missing. But concerning the possibility that Lindow III might represent some of the missing parts of the remains of Lindow Man, or of Lindow I, it appears that parts of the remains show malformation. Indeed, the congenital anomaly observed on the hand of Lindow III, which would have been present on both hands is evidence that this bog mummy had a physical anomaly. Lindow Man also had herniations in his lower spine. Oldcroghan Man, by his important stature, would certainly have suffered from back pain as well, and would possibly have been regarded as being somewhat deformed due to his height (Aldhouse-Green, 2015)

It is unsure how malformations or deformity were regarded in the Iron Age. Aldhouse-Green quotes Robert Garland's *The Eye of the Beholder* studying the perception of disability and deformity in Greece and he explains that deformed infants were eliminated, and if their disability only appeared in adolescence, then they were cast out of their homes. Aldhouse-Green applies this reasoning to the bog mummies stating that “babies are rarely represented in bog body deaths but adolescents with obvious physical

differences, particularly those whose mobility had been compromised, are over-represented” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.93). Aldhouse-Green does not focus solely on the insular bog mummies, but this data is worthy of consideration. Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man, although not visibly impaired or disabled, could have been ill whether physically or mentally. The congenital anomaly found among the remains of Lindow III was certainly not impacting the individual’s mobility, but it possible that it made him stand out from the rest of the community. The same logic can be applied to Oldcroghan Man whose height certainly made him stand out from his community.

An element that cannot be attested in the archaeological record of the bog mummies is the possibility of a mental or sensory illness. Lindow Man had ingested mistletoe before his death, although a very small amount, which could have been ingested for its known “calming effects on the brain and nervous system” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.135). However, there were visibly no therapeutic plants found in Oldcroghan Man’s stomach. Deafness, muteness, and blindness are also disabilities that could not be observed on the bog remains.

It is impossible to know how the Iron Age communities from the British Isles reacted to disabilities and deformities. It could be argued that deformities were regarded merely as a difference, without being considered a fault. It is possible to imagine how a malformation or a deformity could have been regarded as a particular feature, making the individual worthy of special tasks, particularly a spiritual role. However, as Aldhouse-Green concludes:

“There is no literary testimony for the attitudes of northern peoples in antiquity, such as Britons, Gauls or Germans, towards bodily difference. However, the repeated occurrence among bog victims of individuals who had survived, or been allowed to survive, to adult or sub-adult age with congenital deformities or differences suggests a somewhat less draconian response to somatic deviance than is evident in the classical world.” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.153)

The insular communities did not leave written testimony on their consideration of disability and deformity, and it is thus impossible to know how such elements were perceived by their Iron Age individuals. Van der Sanden also points out the possibility that “physically imperfect individuals ran a higher risk of being sacrificed, but on the other

hand, individuals with physical defects were also buried in ordinary graves” (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.180). The recurrent deposition of physically disabled individuals in the European Iron Age in the preserving peat thus allows an interesting diverging interpretation from the theories regarding the high rank of the bog mummies.

### 3. Boundary burials

The bog has been considered by some scholars to represent a liminal boundary: a boundary between the world of the dead and the world of the living. In some cases, however, the bog represents a natural political boundary as well. Kelly (2006; 2012) developed the hypothesis that the Irish bog bodies had been deposited on parish boundaries to emphasise the political power of the community upon their territory. Kelly writes about Oldcroghan Man, who was found along what had been “the boundary between two ancient territories known as Tuath Cruachain and Tuath na Cille” (Kelly, 2006). Researching the records of other bog discoveries, Kelly isolated “over 40 locations where bog bodies were found in proximity to important boundaries, mainly barony boundaries” (Kelly, 2006). Most of the bog remains were likely to be from the Iron Age, and Kelly argues that the deposition of partial remains suggest that “some bodies were dismembered for interment at a number of different places along tribal boundaries” (Kelly, 2006). The bog mummies of Ireland thus appear to have been purposefully deposited on political boundaries as well as natural boundaries, with the bog as their final resting place.

It is likely that bogs represented a natural boundary in the landscape and was considered ideal to place a political boundary. The deposition of human remains in bogs would have possibly represented a political decision to ascertain the community’s legitimacy to possess and control the area. Although a much later period, it was common in Anglo-Saxon Britain to choose boundaries as burial grounds. In her article on burials and boundaries in Anglo-Saxon North Wiltshire, Semple argues that “it seems that burials may have been used as territorial markers in large corridors of landscape that were boundary zones or frontiers” (Semple, 2003, p.83). She later explains further:

“It is difficult to ascertain whether such burial groupings were generated purely through a growing need for secularised, political display at the territorial limits or whether 'liminality' or boundary zones were perceived as particularly apt for certain kinds of burials, perhaps ideologically powerful ones.” (Semple, 2003, p.83)

Semple refers to early insular literature which mentions burials on territorial and political boundaries “so that the dead man, who was considered alive and armed, would repel any real or supernatural threat to the kingdom” (Semple, 2003, p.83). This evidence for boundary burial is based on archaeological finds from Anglo-Saxon Britain, about 7 to 11 centuries later than the bog mummies. It is thus difficult to use it as an interpretation for the placement of the bog mummies on territorial boundaries, but it remains of interest, as one could argue that the custom for the Anglo-Saxon boundary burial in Britain could have been based on Iron Age customs. To argue in favour of such a theory would surely imply the need to survey the position of Iron Age burial in comparison to ancient boundary, when such data is available.

Regarding Lindow Man, Zein-Elabdin (2019) points out that there is no evidence to correlate deposition of the bog mummy on tribal boundaries. However, it is striking that Lindow Man, as well as Lindow III, were not deposited at a random place in the bog. Zein-Elabdin studied the placement of Lindow II and Lindow III in their contemporary peatland, revealing that Lindow Man had been deposited “in the centre of the peatland equal distances from the northern and southern dryland edges” (Zein-Elabdin, 2019, p.321). Lindow Man was precisely placed 164m from the northern edge, and 169m from the southern edge of the peatland. Zein-Elabdin thus goes further by explaining that this particular placement would have been challenging to access due to the unpredictability of the bog landscape, and infers that it was a deliberately chosen burial ground and a planned event.

The deposition of the bog mummies into the peat, and their placement in the bog, thus appears to have been a precise and deliberate choice. The bog as a natural boundary for the political territory seems likely for the Irish bog mummies, but evidence is missing to say the same for the bog mummies of Britain. The deposition of bodies on boundaries could represent a form of political emphasis to legitimise the possession of the territory by the community. Whether the bog or the boundary was the primary element for the choice of the placement of the deposition is also of interest. The preservative properties of the bog cannot be overlooked in the decision that was to be made, and appears to be a deliberate and planned placement.

### **C. Bogs as Preserving Land**

The preservative properties of the bog were most certainly known by the Iron Age communities. The bog butter found in several bogs throughout Europe is an example of the

bogs' utility for food conservation. The existence of bog mummies as well as bog skeletons is of importance, as well as the few instances of finds of large mammals preserved by the bog. The preservative properties are known to change through time and within a singular bog, but there appears to be an important human influence in the creation of bog mummies. The few examples of mummified large animals will be seen in regards to the deliberate preservation of the bog mummies. The votive deposition of objects into bogs in the British Isles will also be studied as to interpret the role the bog may have had in the landscape of the Iron Age insular community. Whether the Iron Age communities regarded the bog as a boundary between the spiritual world and the world of the living or as a preserving environment deterring the individual's crossing of this boundary is also to be considered in this part.

### 1. The rarity of animal bog mummies

The preserving properties of the bog are known to be changing from one bog to the other, and within a single bog through time. Van der Sanden described the bog mummies as naturally preserved, and argues that "the sole factor responsible for their preservation is the surrounding peat" (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.18). However, the peat alone does not appear to be enough to produce a bog mummy. Wilkinson *et al.* pointed out the scarcity of large mammal bog mummies. They give the only three instances from the British Isles where animal bog mummies were found, namely in Somerset, in Lindow Moss and Solway Moss (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2006, p.100-1). The bogs are known to have been a danger to large animals, with records of large numbers of cattle disappearing in the peat. Nonetheless, they appear to mostly emerge as bog skeletons, decomposed and not preserved by the bog in the same way as human bog mummies. Contrasting with over 85 human bog mummies found in the British Isles, the rarity of large animals mummified by the peat suggests that human and non-human bog mummies could hardly be accidental, and infer that they are "the product of deliberate human burial activity" (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2006, p.102). They explain further as follows:

"Our interpretation is that the post mortem treatment of the body is important and that it must be either buried in the waterlogged peat or, if placed in a bog pool, prevented from floating to the surface."  
(Wilkinson *et al.*, 2006, p.102)

Without automatically implying that the bog mummies are the result of ritual sacrifice, it suggests that the preservation of the individual was deliberate. To preserve the remains of the deposited individual thus appears to have been a choice made by the Iron Age community, and not an accidental mummification resting solely on the preserving properties of the peat. Besides, only few bog bodies have become bog mummies. Were the bog skeletons supposed to become bog mummies and the peat failed to preserve them, or did they receive an entirely different treatment without aiming for their preservation? Considering the mere 3 instances of mummified mammals<sup>3</sup>, it seems that it was a treatment preferably reserved to human remains. It also appears that mostly men were deposited so as to become bog mummies, although the sex of the remains is not always identifiable.

The reason leading to the Iron Age community deciding to preserve a body in the peat is a mystery of its own. Whether the preservation of the remains by the peat was regarded as punitive in nature or as a privilege is to be considered in a following part. Without written sources from the insular communities, whether the bog was considered a sacred landscape could most likely be observed through the discovery of votive offerings.

## 2. Votive depositions in bogs

Bogs were used in northern Europe as a place for deposition from the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC to the Middle Ages (Van der Sanden, 1996, p.172). The archaeological finds are mostly considered to be votive offerings to supernatural powers. However, how the Iron Age community perceived bogs in their landscape is a mystery due to the lack of written sources describing the bog. Only archaeological finds remain as to provide clues for the Iron Age communities' interactions with bogs. Although the killing of the individual cannot be compared with the deposition of objects into the peat, the deposition of votive offerings in bogs is perhaps the only clue as one has to learn of the role of bogs in the Iron Age landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkinson *et al.* record only three sites where large mammals were found mummified by the bog in Britain. A large number of pigs were found in Somerset, recorded by Rennie in 1810 while digging a pit for a well. The remains of a pig were also found in Lindow Moss, recorded by Norbury in 1884 who described this find as "a decomposed skeleton of a boar". No further information is given, and is thus not used in this analysis. As Wilkinson *et al.* explain, the soft tissue preservation is not discussed, and could be inexistent. Two adult domestic cows, known as the Solway Cow, were found in Solway Moss on the border between England and Scotland. This preservation appears to be the product of human action. The remains of sheep were also found in the site, but do not represent complete bodies, and comprised mostly fleece, a few bones and some skin (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2006, pp.100-101).

Irish bogs have produced several artefacts. Kelly (2006) provided the example of the Lisnacroggher bog at the boundary between two baronies and three townlands where weapons, ornaments, bronze objects and iron tools were found. He also gives the example of Iron Age cauldrons found in Co. Galway at Balleymond, in Drumlane, Co. Cavan and in Urlingford, Co. Kilkenny. Those bogs are also placed on barony boundaries. Aldhouse-Green also mentions the wooden containers filled with butter which were found in peat bogs, which could have been votive offerings or merely put in the bog for conservation. Glob (1969) detailed the numerous depositions of pottery vessels containing food dating to what he calls the 'Celtic Iron Age' which were found in bogs. Glob regarded these objects as offerings by the peasantry to ensure a good harvest, while he considered the bronze and silver objects to have been deposited by the upper classes. In Britain, bronze cauldrons were deposited in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Llyn Fawr in Glamorgan "when they were already a hundred years old, along with other high-status objects" (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.183). Weapons and military gear were also found in rivers and lakes, but apparently not in bogs.

Considering the object deposition together with the burying of human bodies in the bog, a pattern seems to appear. The objects deposited in bogs in Ireland are mostly centred on ancient political boundaries. Kelly interprets these depositions as having a protective function "associated with sacral kingship and kingly inauguration" (Kelly, 2006). In Britain, there appears to be fewer objects deposited in bogs, and evidence is lacking for the bogs to correspond to ancient political boundaries. The deposition of objects and human remains appears to have different motivations in Ireland and in Britain. While in Ireland the territorial boundary seems to be decisive in the deposition of objects, and humans, in the bog, the water appears to be of greater importance in regards to the evidence from Britain.

### 3. Bog as Passage to the Otherworld or Eternal Prison?

The bogs have been regarded by archaeologists and scholars as both a liminal space, a boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and as an eternal prison for the individual buried in it. The preserving properties were certainly of great importance to the Iron Age communities in choosing this particular environment as the resting place of the individual.

The individual himself has been regarded by archaeologists as the decisive element in the choice of the bog as burial ground. While the social status of the bog mummies has

been the main focus of research on the individuals themselves, Ravn (2011) considered that the deposition in the bog could have been the decision of the family or of society because of a particular cause of death. The use of violence appears to have been common to the killing of both bog mummies, but it cannot be considered as a sufficiently particular death for the deposition of these individuals into bogs, as individuals who died violent deaths were obviously not all deposited in bogs. It would be difficult to argue that the bog mummies had died of another cause than the blows that they appear to have suffered perimortem, but as explained in the following part, deformities and disabilities could have been a common trait of the bog mummies. Ravn also points out that bogs and lakes were perceived as possessing healing properties which could have helped the individuals “to arrive healthy in the world of the dead” (Ravn, 2011, p.88). Although Ravn uses this argument for individuals who died of natural causes, which is apparently not the case for the insular bog mummies of this study, this could be of interest for the bog mummies showing evidence of disability and deformity.

The bogs have also been considered by some scholars as an environment of the in-between. Aldhouse-Green (2015) specifies that the preserving properties of the bog could have been chosen for the resting place of the individual so as to prevent decomposition and to prevent the soul from “joining the communities’ ancestors in the Otherworld” (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.83). To prevent the decomposition of the body could be interpreted as both a punishment and a privilege. Was it rather to prevent the individual from accessing an afterlife, or to grant them the preserving properties of the bog and remain almost intact in the peat?

Since some of the bog bodies showed evidence of disability, it would correspond to the idea that the bog was used so as to ‘heal’ the individual for them to arrive healthy in the Otherworld. However, the violence which was used to kill them seems contradictory with the supposed healing properties of the bog. If one considers that the slight deformity of the insular bog mummies is too light to consider them disabled, the violence with which they were killed seems to correspond to a punitive killing. The preservation of their remains as a punishment would then appear to be a fitting interpretation of their preservation.

In his study of the bog bodies, Kelly (2012) studies the *Annals of the Four Masters* which record that Slanoll, King of Tara during the pagan era, was disinterred by his son Oilill forty years after his death and his “body was found to be preserved and free from corruption” (Kelly, 2012, p.239). Kelly thus suggests that Slanoll is likely to have been a bog body. However, the *Annals of the Four Masters* are medieval chronicles ending in the

17<sup>th</sup> century. The bog mummies have often been related to medieval literature by researchers trying to interpret their origins and the circumstances of their deaths. The threefold death motif has been cited earlier in this analysis as proposed by Ross and Magilton as possible contexts for the deaths of the bog mummies, as kings killed in three different manners because of an offence they could have committed. Although the relatedness between the bog bodies and the medieval literary motif is unlikely, it is a subject worthy of interest to observe the scribes' description of ancient communities, kings and priests.

### III. The Threefold Death Motif in Insular Mediaeval Literature

The motif of the threefold death is a literary motif found in medieval literature, in particular in the literature of Ireland and Britain. The threefold death tale is, most of the time, centred on a king and a clerical figure. Jackson (1940) and Radner (1986) described the generic plot of a threefold death tale as such:

A prophet foretells that a certain man will die in three different ways (generally including by fire and water). This is thought to be incredible and to prove him no true seer, so that the man feels quite secure. In the sequel the prophecy comes true.

(Jackson, 1940)

1. The future victim commits an offense.
2. There is immediately a prophecy, almost always delivered by a cleric, that the offender will be punished for his offense by a threefold death.
3. Disbelief in the prophecy is expressed.
4. The events of the story bring about a reversal, and *belief* may be explicitly expressed.
5. The prophecy is fulfilled and the offender/victim is killed.

(Radner, 1986, pp.183-4)

Each step may not be present in every threefold death tale, but these outlines give an overview of the main steps composing a threefold death tale.

The Irish texts containing the motif of the threefold death comprise the death tales of the Irish kings Muirchertach mac Erca, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, and Lóegaire mac Néill. Diarmait's killer Aedh the Black, and the killer of Suibhne Geilt, Grácc, also die of a threefold death. *Buile Suibhne*, focusing on Suibhne Geilt, is also included in studies on the threefold death tales, although his death does not fully fit the motif. On the isle of Britain, Lailoken prophesises his own threefold death, and Merlin predicts the threefold death of a boy (Radner, 1986). This chapter will be describing the instances in which the threefold death is present in insular medieval literature, and it will aim to interpret the effects of such a literary motif on the historical and legendary *personae* present in these tales.

## A. Insular threefold death tales

In Irish medieval literature, in its most traditional form, the threefold death tale describes the death tale of a king who committed an offence, most of the time against a cleric, and is punished by dying a threefold death. In the traditional threefold death tale, this king is prophesied to die of wounding, burning and drowning, using the phrase *guin 7 bádad 7 loscud* which is also found in genealogies to describe kings who did not die of a natural death (Ó Cuív, 1973). Radner defined the threefold death motif as an “explicitly Christian narrative device”, which she describes as a motif which “presents the divinely-sanctioned purgation of sin, through the death of a secular, and often royal, figure” (Radner, 1986, p.17). This first part will look at the principal *personae* of a threefold death tale, namely a sinful king or madman, a cleric and his prophecy, and women who play an important part in most instances towards the *dénouement* of the tale and the offender’s death. It is of interest to note here that each main *persona* is linked to royal lineage, apart from Lailoken who is not described as a king, or descendant of a king, but solely as a warrior.

### 1. Irish kings

Threefold death tales mostly revolve around an Irish king who commits an offence against a cleric. As aforementioned, the cleric makes a prophecy which may be doubted, until the prophecy is fulfilled. The death tales of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, Muirchertach mac Erca and Lóegaire mac Néill will be studied here. Although this part could also include the tale of Suibhne Geilt, *Buile Suibhne* will be presented with the tales of Lailoken and Merlin, as they appear to have a common origin.

#### *Diarmait mac Cerbaill*

*Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* (Recension I) is often qualified, with *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, as the tale most fitting the plot of a threefold death tale. This tale is found in four manuscripts: in the Book of Ui Maine, RIA MS D II 1, from 1349; in the section of the Yellow Book of Lecan, Trinity College MS 1318, from the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century; in the British Library MS Egerton 1782, from 1516-1518, which is based on the lost copy of the Book of Sligo. The death of Diarmait is also mentioned in a shorter version in the Story of Aedh Baclamh, in the Mac Carthy-Riach’s Book, from the 15th century. *Aided*

*Diarmata meic Cerbaill* (Recension II) is found in the Book of Lismore (*Leabhar Leasa Moir*) from the 15th century, but this text will not be studied here.

A translation of the first recension of the tale “as found in the Book of Sligo” was produced by O’Grady in 1892, and will be used as the basis of this analysis. Regarding the dating of the tale, Jackson (1940) argued that it could date from the eleventh century based on the Middle Irish language of the tale.

*Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* tells of the threefold death of the king of Ireland, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, who comes into reign after Tuathal Maelgarb in 544, and dies in 565, or 572 according to the Annals of Ulster. Diarmait is in exile when Tuathal is killed by his foster-brother, and he becomes king of Ireland, as the cleric Kieran had foretold. Diarmait offends Kieran by offering him land on which he ordered the threefold death of Flann son of Dima, one of his enemies, and Kieran foretells Diarmait’s threefold death. Another prophet, Beg mac Dé makes the prophecy that Aedh Dub son of Suibhne king of Dál nAraidi, will kill Diarmait in the house of Banbhan, while he is wearing a shirt made “from a single flax-seed”, a mantle made from a single sheep, while he is drinking “ale brewed from a single grain of corn” and eating “bacon from a pig that never farrowed”, while the main beam of the house falls on his head. Rather than killing him, Diarmait banishes Aedh Dub from Ireland. Diarmait then enters in conflict with a cleric named Ruadhan because he took prisoner Aedh Guaire, who killed one of his men but who was under Ruadhan’s protection. Ruadhan finally predicts that the ridge beam of Diarmait’s house will kill him while he is attacked from over sea, and Diarmait liberates Aedh Guaire. Diarmait foresees the destruction of his kingdom through two dreams. Diarmait fights against Connacht, Columkill and the Northern Uí Néill for the killing of Curnan son of Aedh who had killed one of his men, and Diarmait is defeated. Diarmait is reminded of Beg mac Dé’s prophecy but does not believe it, and Beg mac Dé utters three lies, and dies immediately after, as it had been foretold that he should die after uttering three lies, confirming the truth of his prophecies.<sup>4</sup> To learn of the manner of his death, Diarmait goes to his magicians who answer him in the same manner as Beg mac Dé, but Diarmait doubts the prophecy. While on his regal circuit, Diarmait meets Banbhan who invites him to his house, which Diarmait accepts against his wife’s advice. To upset Diarmait’s wife, Banbhan offers his daughter to Diarmait for the night, which the king accepts. Banbhan’s daughter then successively offers him a shirt from a single flax seed, a mantle from a single sheep, ale brewed from a single grain and bacon from a pig that was never born.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Annals of Ulster, the prophet Beg mac Dé died in 558.

Diarmait learns that Banbhan had built his house under Diarmait's ridge beam which had been found thrown into the sea after Diarmait had heard Ruadhan's prophecy<sup>5</sup>. Diarmait is finally killed by Aedh Dub who wounds him with a spear, then the house goes on fire, and he gets into an ale-vat to protect himself from the flames, and the ridge-beam of the house falls on his head.

The tale is built with great regard to the detail, and one can expect the audience to have to know the tale well, and to have heard it several times to remember the several threats and prophecies uttered by the clerics and magicians. Several versions of the threefold death of Diarmait mac Cerbaill exist in separate tales, such as Aedh Baclamh which retells parts of the tale.

The son of Suibhne king of the Dal nAraidi, Aedh Dub, who kills Diarmait mac Cerbaill, is also depicted dying a threefold death in Adamnán's *Life of St Columba*. It is the earliest instance of a threefold death narrative, dated to the seventh or eighth century. In this narrative, St Columba predicts that Aedh will die from being wounded in the neck with a spear, and he will fall from wood (or a tree, in some translations) into water and drown. Jackson (1940) considered his death to not fully correspond to the prophecy because Aedh falls from a ship into a lake, and not from a tree, but it has been argued that the prophecy could translate as falling from wood into water, rather than from a tree, thus corresponding with the fall from the prow of a ship. Ó Cathasaigh (1994) argued than further than dying a threefold death, Aedh Dub's offences also fit the tripartite division of Dumézil, with him committing regicide against Diarmait and slaughter, being unlawfully ordained as priest, and having a carnal relationship with the priest Findchán. The tripartite division of the sins and offences of the tales will be studied more extensively later in this analysis. It is interesting to note that Aedh Dub is recorded in the genealogies as bishop of Kildare and Leinster in the seventh century (O Croinin, 2016, p.77). His description as an unrightfully appointed priest thus appears to be political, particularly given the chronological closeness of Aedh Dub (d. 638) and Adamnán (d.704).

### *Muirchertach mac Erca*

*Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* is found in the mediaeval manuscripts Dublin Trinity College MS 1298, from the 15th century, and in Dublin Trinity College MS 1318 from the

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<sup>5</sup> It is explained in the Story of Aedh Baclamh translated by O'Grady in the same collection of tales, that Diarmait ordered for the beam of his house to be thrown in the river after Ruadhan's prophecy that the beam of his house was hostile to him, and that Banbhan has found it while fishing and built his house under the beam.

14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century in the section of the Yellow Book of Lecan. It is also found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century MS 1136, but this later example, written by W. M. Hennessy, is incomplete and ‘somewhat incorrect’ and thus will not be studied here. This Late Middle Irish tale will be studied from Ní Dhonnchadha’s translation, which used Whitley Stokes’s translation from 1903, but incorporated the important corrections of Tomás Ó Concheanainn from 1973 regarding the extract of the threefold death of the king. Although the tale survives in manuscripts dated from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century, Herbert describes the tale as a twelfth-century tale, based on its “linguistic profile [which indicates] that it is a homogenous composition datable generally to the twelfth century” (Herbert, 1997, p.28). The tale relates the violent death of the king of Tara who is said to have reigned from 513 to 534, or 536 in the Annals of Ulster.

The beginning of *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* resembles a traditional tale where an Irish king meets with a woman from the Otherworld who wields supernatural powers while he is out hunting. Muirchertach meets Sín, who presents herself as Muirchertach’s wife. Muirchertach falls in love with her and invites her to his house. Sín accepts under the conditions that Muirchertach never pronounces her name, that he banishes his wife and children, as well as clerics from his house. The king accepts, and his banished wife Dúuibsech goes to the bishop Cairnech for help. Cairnech curses the king by digging his grave and foretells of his oncoming death and the destruction of his kingdom. Sín organises a feast during which she creates magical food and water to feed the king and his men, who get intoxicated by her drink. She also creates a magical army against which the king exhausts himself. While fighting, Muirchertach meets three clerics named Masán, Casán and Crídán who bring him back to sanity with the symbol of the cross. Muirchertach helps them dig the marking of their church in Brug, and repents for his mistakes. He goes back to Sín and falls back into madness and intoxication. Muirchertach pronounces Sín’s name when a storm approaches, and meets again with the clerics to whom he admits his weakness and exhaustion. While dreaming, Muirchertach visualises his death by burning and a griffin, symbolising Sín, dies with him. While Muirchertach is sleeping, Sín creates a magical army around the house, sets the house on fire and goes back to bed with the king, who dreams about a host of demons burning his house and slaughtering his people. When he wakes up, Muirchertach follows Sín out of the room but he is wounded by the spear of the magical soldiers, and climbs into a cask of wine and dies wounded, burnt and drowned. His wife and Sín both die of grief and are buried with him. Before she dies, Sín confesses

that Muirchertach had killed her father, mother and sister in the battle of Cerb on Boyne, destroying the “Old Tribes of Tara”, which led her to kill Muirchertach.

*Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* is a somewhat incomplete version of the threefold death motif as previously presented since it does not include a clear prophecy made by a cleric or a druid. The threefold death is hinted at in the triple conditions of Sín, but not as clearly as in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*. The tale is set in a more traditional environment with the presence of a supernatural sovereignty goddess, who shifts to a goddess of death when the king does not respect her conditions on several occasions.

### *Lóegaire mac Néill*

The tale picturing the death of Lóegaire mac Néill, in opposition to the previous examples of threefold death tales, does not focus solely on the death of the Irish king. The tale is entitled *Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* ‘The Conversion of Lóegaire to the Faith and his Violent Death’. As the title says, it describes both the conversion of Lóegaire mac Néill, and his death. It survives in the *Lebor na hUidre* (RIA, MS 23 E 25, ff.117a-118a) from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. The tale is also found in the Dublin Trinity College, MS 1337/13 (pp.358a–359a), from the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, as a pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*. *Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* is also found in the sixteenth-century manuscript Dublin Trinity College, MS 1336 (H 3. 17), section 3. Charles Plummer (1883) based his translation of the tale on the version found in the *Lebor na hUidre*, which will be the basis of this analysis. Another version of the text found in the *Bóroma* from the Book of Lecan and the Book of Leinster was studied by Buttimer (1981) and Ó Donnchú (2022). The *Bóroma* version of the text will be studied in relationship to the version found in the *Lebor na hUidre*, which Ó Donnchú described as an arrangement “unique to that manuscript” (Ó Donnchú, 2022, p.57).

*Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* starts with a dispute regarding the Christian faith between the men of Ireland and Patrick against Lóegaire and his druids. Lóegaire submits to Patrick’s faith and converts to the faith. Lóegaire then invites the men of Ireland and Patrick to discuss problems regarding the faith, especially concerning the rule of forgiveness. It is their understanding that because one is to be forgiven for his sins, then one has no reason to not commit any crime and sin, and that their society will collapse into a murdering chaos. Lóegaire then advises to test Patrick’s faith on the matter of forgiveness by killing one of his men. When Patrick arrives and they kill one of his men,

Patrick creates an earthquake, and grants forgiveness to the apologising men of Ireland. To judge according to the Irishmen's laws, Patrick organises a tripartite team composed of three kings, three clerics, and three poets. In the thirtieth year of his reign, Lóegaire is described going to Leinster to demand the cattle tribute from the Leinstermen. The Leinstermen thus engage in battle against Lóegaire in the battle of Ath Dara, and defeat the Irish king and capture him. Lóegaire pledges over "the sun and the moon, water and air, day and night, sea and land, that he would not demand the Boru during his life". A prophecy is made that Lóegaire will die between Erin and Alba, and the king never takes the sea again. Lóegaire's pledge is broken as he is on his way to demand the cattle tribute from the Leinstermen, and he dies "of the sun and of the wind, and of the other pledges" between two hills called Erin and Alba. Lóegaire is finally buried in armour with his face looking towards Leinster.

This reading from the *Lebor na hUidre* does not contain an explicit threefold death, but it contains some of the most important elements of the motif. Lóegaire appears in conflict with Patrick and the Christian faith, a prophecy is made about his death. Lóegaire believes himself in safety as he never goes at sea between Erin and Alba and thus breaks his pledge to the Leinstermen and dies, accordingly to the prophecy, of the elements on which he had pledged. One can argue that the threefold death is hinted at because of the implication of the sun and of the wind, which could mean by burning and asphyxiation, with the other deaths being omitted, but it does not appear as clearly as in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* and *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*.

The *Bóroma* version does not mention Patrick or the church in regard to Lóegaire's death. The *Bóroma* focuses on the battle over the cattle tribute due by Leinster to Tara because of the treacherous death of Tuathal's two daughters which the king of Tara had given in marriage to the king of Leinster. Thus, Leinster and Tara and their respective allies, pursue their battle through the following years and rulers, with a succession of victories and losses on each side. Lóegaire is first defeated in demanding the cattle-tribute from the Leinstermen, and thus pledges to never demand it from them. When Lóegaire goes to demand the cattle-tribute to the men of Leinster nonetheless, he dies of the elements so that the earth swallowed him, the sun burnt him, and the wind passed away from him.

The death of Lóegaire appears to better correspond to a threefold death narrative in the *Bóroma* version, although the other elements composing the tale are absent from the extract telling of his death. The prophecy and the conflict with the church or with a cleric is

entirely absent from this narrative. Buttimer (1981) considered that foretelling of his death is present in the *Bóroma* as Lóegaire denies the possible consequences that would follow the breaking of his oath, which would represent the denial of the prophecy found in threefold death narratives. Buttimer (1981) argued that the *Bóroma* version was a conscious insertion of the legend of Lóegaire into a threefold death narrative, which would imply that the threefold death motif had an impact on the perception of the *persona* dying a threefold death. In the following parts, this analysis will aim at putting forward the possible interpretations that can be understood from threefold death tales.

## 2. Madmen and prophets

Some instances of the threefold death tales describe a madman in the place of the Irish king. The madman can be the prophet, or the victim of an offence which will be punished by a threefold death, or the victim of the threefold death himself. As will be seen, the offender can also be a commoner, as is the case for Grácc and the boy whose death is predicted by Merlin. The victim of the threefold death can also foretell their own death, as does Lailoken.

### *Suibhne Geilt and St Moling*

The Irish legend of Suibhne Geilt is found in several sources, the earliest of which are from the ninth and tenth centuries (Jackson, 1940). The main sources regarding the tale of Suibhne Geilt are *Buile Suibhne* ‘The Frenzy of Suibhne’ which is found in three manuscripts dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but Jackson (1940), referencing the work of Murphy, considered the language of the text to indicate a late twelfth-century tale. *Buile Suibhne* is found in MS B IV 1a (Royal Irish Academy), or the Book of the Ó Duibhgeannáin, possibly written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is also present in MS 23 K 44 (Royal Irish Academy), from 1721-1722, and in MS 2324-2340 (Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique), from 1629, which contains only the prose except for three stanzas. The translation by O’Keeffe in 1904, available on the Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) website is based on the first manuscript, RIA, B. IV 1a, with readings from the other manuscripts in the footnotes. The legend of Suibhne Geilt is also found in “a collection of poems printed by Stokes in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*” (Jackson, 1940, p536-7), referred to as the *Anecdota* poems. Suibhne is a more obscure *persona* than Diarmait and Muirchertach, as he is not found in the annals and could be a fictive figure inspired from

Diarmait's grandson Suibhne Colmán Mór, although this departs from the narrative presented in *Buile Suibhne* (Rekdal, 2011, p.218). The death of Suibhne Geilt has been introduced as threefold by Jackson in his article "The Motive of the Threefold Death in the Story of Suibhne Geilt" (1940), although it is somewhat debated.

*Buile Suibhne* presents Suibhne as the son of Colmán Cúar, king of Dál nÁraidhe, who offends the cleric Ronan Finn, whose bloodline goes back to Lóegaire mac Néill, by throwing his psalter in a lake and pulling him by the hand out of his church. Ronan curses Suibhne to live wandering the world by flying, naked, and to die by spear point, and promises the destruction of his lineage. Ronan also blesses Suibhne's wife Eorann, who tried to prevent Suibhne from offending Ronan, but only managed to get a grip on his cloak, which made him go naked to expel Ronan from his church. Suibhne is then called on to take part in the battle at Magh Rath between Domnall son of Aodh and Congal Claon son of Scannlan, during which he does not respect Ronan's guarantee to have a time between the battles when no man is to be killed. Suibhne kills Oilil Cedach, king of the Ui Faolain during one of these moments when peace is guaranteed. During the great battle, Suibhne meets Ronan and his psalmists, and kills one of them with his spear, from which the shaft goes up in the air. Suibhne loses his sanity during the battle, and starts to fly like a bird, as Ronan cursed him, and wanders throughout Ireland for years, during which he is chased by his kinsmen, and is tempted several times by clerics' wives and unnamed women, but never gives in to their temptations. Suibhne also goes to Britain where he meets another madman called Ealladhan, until this madman leaves to meet the death that was predicted for him to die cast by the wind into a waterfall to drown. Suibhne finally finds peace when he meets St Moling who offers him protection. St Moling asks Muirghil, the wife of one of his herdsmen named Mongan to feed Suibhne with some of the day's milking. Muirghil gets into a dispute with another woman about her seeing another man than her husband every day for a year. Mongan's sister overhears the conversation and tells her brother, who gets jealous and aims at Suibhne with a spear, without knowing at whom he is aiming. Suibhne is wounded, and Moling is called for and goes to see him. Suibhne explains to Mongan that he never injured him in the way he thinks. Mongan explains that he would not have aimed at Suibhne if he had recognised him, but Moling curses Mongan to have a short life and to be sent to hell after death. Suibhne finally dies and is buried by Moling after confessing his sins and partaking of Christ's body.

As was the case in *Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided*, the threefold death is not present in this narrative, but the other elements of a threefold death narrative are present.

The conflict between Suibhne and Ronan provokes the prophecy of Suibhne's downfall and death, which Suibhne does not appear to believe as he breaks the cleric's guarantees and kills one of his psalmists. The prophecy is finally fulfilled, and he dies as foretold. One can argue that Ronan's prophecy was threefold with Suibhne losing his sanity, dying by spear-point, and the destruction of his lineage, but the threefold death element is here absent. Jackson (1940) explained that the threefold death motif appears in the *Anecdota* poems regarding the death of Suibhne's killer, who is then called Grácc, or Grag.

The *Anecdota* poems are found in the manuscript Brussels 5100-4, written around 1630 (Jackson, 1940, p.537). Jackson argued that the twenty poems translated by Stokes may have been copied from a lost *Life of St Moling*, but because in the manuscript the first five are separated from the last fifteen by three poems attributed to Mael-Ísu, it was unlikely that all twenty of them came from the same source. The Middle Irish language of the *Anecdota* poems, according to Jackson points "strongly to the eleventh century", and cannot be from earlier than 1014 since the first poem cites the death of Brian Boru in that year. The scribe of the manuscript, O'Clery, copied some of his material from the lost copy of the Red Book of Munster which was written down by the fifteenth-century scribe Murchadh Ó Cuinnlis (Jackson, 1940).

The following summaries are made from the information provided by Jackson (1940, pp.539-540). The first five poems depict Suibhne's legend in a similar manner than found in *Buile Suibhne*, although Suibhne's killer is called Grag. Some differences appear from the story of the tale, but they do not differ too extensively.

In the first poem, Moling speaks of himself as a seer and foretells several historical events among which Suibhne the madman who "will not go into the company of demons" (Jackson, 1940, p.539). The second poem is told by Suibhne who praises the beauty and peacefulness of Moling's monastery, and claims that this is where he will be freed from his sins and buried. Moling also foretold that he would come to his monastery. The third poem is similar to the ones found in *Buile Suibhne* praising the beauty and nature of Moling's monastery. The fourth poem is a dialogue between Moling and Suibhne exchanging verses when Suibhne is wounded and goes to Moling's church. Moling curses his herdsman for his deed by dooming him to be eaten by hounds and have a tormented soul. In the fifth poem Moling talks to Grag's wife who complained to her husband that he wounded and killed the son of Eochu because she fed him twice his fill of milk. By doing so she committed a sin and corrupted Suibhne's body which was incapable of sin. Moling buries Suibhne whose blood does not congeal on the flagstone until Grag is dead. Moling curses

Grag, who comes to him three times disguised in different attire to ask how he will die. Moling each time answers him differently that he will die by killing, by burning, and by drowning. Grag feels secure and considers Moling to be no true seer. Eventually, Grag is wounded by a spear while up in an oak tree from which he falls down into a fire and then drowns in a pool. Moling is pleased to hear of Grag's death and does not show remorse for Grag's wife and child, but thanks the person who attacked him. The narrative of the fifth poem is similar to the story of Merlin in the *Vita Merlini* as will be seen.

Similarly to the threefold death of Aedh Dub, the threefold death is here used as a punishment for Suibhne's killing. Accordingly to threefold death narratives, Grag is in conflict with a cleric, and commits an offence against him by killing Suibhne. Moling predicts Grag's threefold death, which Grag does not believe until it is fulfilled. It can be surprising that this is not found in *Buile Suibhne* where the material for a threefold death is present from the beginning of the tale. According to Jackson, the *Anecdota* poems are of an earlier date than *Buile Suibhne*, although it cannot be confirmed. It would be possible that the scribe writing *Buile Suibhne* had access to material similar to the one from which the *Anecdota* poems are copied. The anecdote of Moling and Grag is found in the Book of Leinster from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which shows that the narrative of the conflicting relationship between Moling and Grag dates back to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Another story concerning Grag is found in the Irish Life of St Moling, which Jackson dates to the eleventh or twelfth century (Jackson, 1940, p.541). The tale is centred on four characters: Moling, Gobban who built his oratory and his wife Ruadsech, and Grag who is a thief in this episode. Gobban is paid for his work with two cows by Moling, but Grag steals one. Ruadhsech suspects Moling of having planned the stealing with Grag, even if the cleric offers to pursue him, burn him, and drown him. Ruadhsech doubts the cleric's words. Grag is found by Moling's men while he was cooking the cow in a cauldron on a riverbank. He climbs into a tree and is wounded, falls into the fire, and then in the river. Grag's pregnant wife comes to Moling, but he tells her that her husband deserved to die by wounding, burning and drowning, and to go to hell afterwards, where she would join him. This episode does not contain an obvious prophecy, but Grag's death is foretold through Moling's promise to Ruadsech. This also corresponds to the motif as Grag is in opposition to Moling as he jeopardised his reputation.

Jackson (1940) observed that the tale regarding Grag and Moling can date back to the Old Irish period due to its vocabulary, including the word *file* which is used in some instances. The stories share a similar plot according to which Grag commits an offence

against Moling, who curses him, and sometimes curses his wife as well. Grag dies, and Moling recites verses to his wife and child, claiming that Grag deserved his fate. Grag dying a threefold death outside his connection with Suibhne's death is a fact of interest, as it appears to be centred on the offence committed towards Moling, and not inherently to his killing of Suibhne.

An interesting element of the *Buile Suibhne* narrative is Suibhne's travels to Britain, where he meets with another madman who lived a similar experience to his. Ealladhan was cursed by his people because of a plan he proposed to win the battle opposing his king, Eochaidh Ainces, son of Guaire Mathra, against Cugua, son of Guaire. Ealladhan became a madman and wandered in the woods. Suibhne stays with him for a year before he announces that he needs to go towards his foretold death. He is cast by the wind into a waterfall where he drowns, and is buried by a cleric in a churchyard. Jackson (1940) highlighted that this was an incomplete recalling of threefold death tale symbolising the link between this Irish narrative and the other threefold death tales found in Britain in the tales of Myrddin, Merlin and Lailoken.

### *Merlin*

The *persona* of Merlin has been subject of much research by scholars. The parallels and confusion between Merlin, Myrddin and Lailoken has been the focus of many articles. As Thomas (2000) explains, the multiplicity of Merlin's characters and *personae* was confusing in twelfth-century Wales. Thomas cites the work of Gerald of Wales who mentions two Merlins, Ambrosius and Celidonius, also called Silvester (Thomas, 2000, p.27). Ambrosius was prophet under the reign of Vortigern, and was found in Carmarthen. Ambrosius was the son of an incubus. Celidonius was from the Caledonian Forest in Scotland during the time of Arthur. Celidonius is said to have gone mad during a battle and wandered through the woods as a wild man, giving him the second name of Silvester.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia of the Kings of Britain* appears to be mostly inspired by Ambrosius, renamed Merlinus, in order to integrate a supernatural element to Arthur's conception and childhood (Thomas, 2000, p.27). In the *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey seems to put forward the Celidonius Merlin, which he renames Merlinus and uses to give more background to Merlinus's life. This Merlinus becomes mad during a horrible battle and the death of three brothers, and becomes a wild man wandering the woods. His sister Ganieda sends a minstrel to get him back to her husband Rodarchus's court. Touched by

the minstrel's telling of his sister and wife's suffering, Merlinus comes back to court, but is rejected because of a prophecy he makes, and goes back to his wandering (Thomas, 2000, p.28). Because of the many similarities with the Welsh, Scottish and Irish Wild Man narratives, with the stories of Myrddin, Lailoken and Suibhne, Geoffrey of Monmouth is thought to have taken much of his inspiration from the insular narratives.

The *Vita Merlini* was composed by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in dedication to Robert de Chesney who became Bishop of Lincoln in 1148. The study of this text will be based on the translation of the text by John Jay Parry (1925).

The *Vita Merlini* starts when Merlin was “a king and a prophet” (p.1) making law and prophecies. Merlin downfalls into insanity after the battle between Peredur, king of North Wales and Gwenddoleu, king of Scotland, during which the Scots are vanquished. Merlin's king, Rhydderch king of the Cumbrians tries to console him but to no avail, and Merlin wanders off into the woods. The harshness of winter weakens him as he struggles to find food or shelter. A traveller meets Merlin who flees before him, and word reaches the court of Rhydderch and his wife Ganieda, Merlin's sister, who was grieving her brother's departure. Ganieda's messenger sees Merlin seated on a fountain surrounded with hazel trees on a mountain top, and he sings a song to Merlin about the grief of his wife Guendolonea, and of his sister Ganieda. Merlin is brought back to sanity, and he goes back to his wife and sister at Rhydderch's court. Because of the crowd welcoming him, Merlin goes into madness again and tries to leave, but Rhydderch has him restrained and bound with a chain. The queen and king meet in front of him, and the king takes a leaf out of the queen's hair. As Merlin is laughing, the king asks him to explain his laughter. Merlin accepts to explain if he is let free, which the king accepts. Once free, Merlin explains that the leaf had got into the queen's hair when she was with her lover lying under the bush. The king believes Merlin, but the queen claims that Merlin is not a true prophet. The queen requests for a boy to come and to ask Merlin how he will die. Merlin answers that the boy will die later in life by falling from a rock. The queen asks the boy to leave and change clothes, and to come back. She asks him the same question, to which Merlin answers that the boy will die in a tree. She asks the boy to leave and to disguise himself as a girl, and to come back. Ganieda asks her brother how she (the disguised boy) will die, to which he answers that “girl or not” (p.10) she will die by drowning in the river. Rhydderch now believes that Merlin is a madman and not a trustworthy prophet, and forgives the queen. Merlin goes back to wandering in the woods, despite his sister and wife's begging for him to stay. The story then leaps forward and tells that although Merlin's words were doubted

for the following years, the boy had died later in life while hunting a stag when his horse fell from a high rock in the mountains, so that his foot got caught into a tree and he drowned in the river, thus fulfilling Merlin's prophecy of his threefold death.

Merlin abandoned his wife and permitted her to remarry, on account that he never saw her new husband. He divines that she has found another man by looking at the stars, and goes to her wedding, mounting a stag and shepherding wild animals. When he sees his wife's husband, he kills him and is restrained by order of the king. To please Merlin, Rhydderch asks for him to be taken to the market, where Merlin foresees that a beggar is in fact a wealthy man, who is already dead in a river. Merlin laughs and Rhydderch offers to free him if he explains his laughter. Merlin obliges and his prophecy is verified by the king's men, and he is set free. Despite his sister's begging for him to stay, Merlin leaves, giving her orders to build a house in the woods with servants to prepare him food for the approaching winter. Ganiada obeys and has the house built, where Merlin comes to rest in the winter and makes prophecies, among which the death of Rhydderch and following wars and the coming of Saxons and Danes to conquer Britain, followed by the Normans. Merlin also predicts the downfall of social order with war, treason, adultery and the destruction of the order of the church. The death of Rhydderch occurs and Merlin and Taliesin discuss their prophecies and God creating the earth, heaven, and hell. Merlin finally summarises the stories of his prophecies to Uther, Vortigern, and Arthur. Merlin and Taliesin discuss the many fountains and streams of the world which are capable of healing infertility and insanity, or on the contrary, of making people insane, or barren. Merlin and Taliesin are joined by Ganiada, and by another wild man who was restored to sanity by a drinking from a fountain. Finally, Ganiada appears to have inherited her brother's gift to utter prophecies: "Sister, does the spirit wish you to foretell future things, since he has closed up my mouth and my book? Therefore this task is given to you; rejoice in it, and under my favour devoted to him speak everything" (p.45).

Some elements are indeed similar to the story of St Moling, Suibhne and Lailoken, in the madness of the prophet after battle, the leaf incident which is also found in fragment *b* of Lailoken. The threefold death narrative is different in this instance, as Merlin is the prophet and not the victim. The boy dying the threefold death does not appear as an offender, and the conflict with the church is apparently absent from the narrative. Here, the adultery of the queen is a main element. Contrarily to other threefold death narratives, the adultery is not the triggering element of the threefold death, but of its prophecy. The queen's adultery is still the main element introducing the threefold death into the narrative.

The *Vita Merlini* does not appear as a traditional threefold death narrative, but corresponds in great detail to the tale of the wild man who fell into madness during battle. An interesting question is thus the reason for Geoffrey of Monmouth to fit the threefold death into the narrative of the *Vita Merlini*. Geoffrey of Monmouth also took inspiration from the Myrddin Welsh poems from the twelfth century onwards (Jackson, 1940, p.544) describing Myrddin as a wild man of the woods or a prophet sharing his predictions to his sister. The boy asking three different times in disguise about his death can also appear similar to the *Anecdota* poems in which Moling curses Grag who came similarly to him in three different disguise to learn of his death and prove that the cleric's foretelling cannot be trusted.

### *Lailoken*

The fragments containing Lailoken's threefold death are found in a fragmentary *Life of Saint Kentigern*. The text was translated in 1989 by Winifred and John Macqueen, which they named the *Vita Merlini Silvestris*. Jackson also dates the Lailoken tale back to the middle of the twelfth century (Jackson, 1940, p.546), which features St Kentigern, saint and patron of Glasgow, who is supposed to have died in the seventh century.

In fragment *a*, Lailoken resembles the description attributed to Suibhne in *Buile Suibhne*. Lailoken is described as a "madman, naked and hairy and devoid of all worldly possessions" (Macqueen, 1989, p.83). Lailoken explains to St Kentigern that he went mad during a battle near Liddel and Carwannok, and that he was being punished for having caused a great slaughter during this battle. When he saw unnatural armies and a great brilliance in the sky, Lailoken fell into insanity and lived henceforth with the beasts of the woods. Similarly to Suibhne, Lailoken is described leaping away from the saint into the wilderness. Kentigern feels empathy for the madman, and cries and prays for the madman's misfortunes to "stand as refreshment to his soul in the world to come" (*ibid.*, p.84). Lailoken is described as a prophet whose words are not believed because of their gravity and complexity, but some of his prophecies are written down. During Kentigern's mass, Lailoken demands from afar that he be "fortified with the body and blood of Christ, before he passed over from this world." (*ibid.*, p.84). Kentigern sends a cleric to the madman, and comes back and forth to ask how Lailoken will die. Similarly to Merlin in the *Vita Merlini* or to Moling in the *Life of St Moling*, Lailoken gives three different answers to the cleric's question that he will die "crushed by stones and cudgels", "pierced by a sharp wooden stake" and drown, which make him no true seer. Finally, Lailoken asks to meet the

bishop, and presents himself as the madman he had previously met and prayed for, and he is given the sacrament, before he dies killed by “certain shepherds of king Meldred” in the “river Tweed near the town of Drumelzier” (ibid., p.86).

Fragment *b* resembles the *Vita Merlini* example. Lailoken is imprisoned by King Meldred. When Lailoken sees the king taking out a leaf from the queen’s hair, he laughs. The king demands that Lailoken explain his laughter, which the madman does through riddles, which appear too complicated for the king to solve. Finally, Lailoken agrees to explain the riddles, although he explains that if he speaks clearly to the king, “sadness will be the result for you [the king] and for me death-bearing sorrow” (Macqueen, 1989, p.87). Lailoken divines that he will die a threefold death without foretelling the particular manners implied, and he says to the king that the leaf got caught in the queen’s hair when she was in the garden with her lover. The queen claims that Lailoken is not a trustworthy prophet since he foretold a seemingly impossible death for himself, and thus he cannot be believed for his accusations against her. Despite this, the king believes the prophecy. Some years later, Lailoken is caught by shepherds near Drumelzier castle, and is killed by order of the queen accordingly to his prophecy.

## **B. The place of the tales**

### **1. The tales in their manuscript**

As Rekdal (2011) mentions, the three tales of *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* and *Buile Suibhne* are found in the Yellow Book of Lecan. Interestingly, this composite manuscript also contains the eighth- or ninth-century tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* focusing on the destruction of Da Derga’s hostel, and on the pre-historic king Conaire Mór. The Yellow Book of Lecan is divided into several sections, and consists of a composite manuscript of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. *Togail bruidne Da Derga* is found in section 3, section 6, and section 16 of the manuscript. While section 3 contains only the *Togail bruidne Da Derga*, section 6 also contains *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, and section 16 contains *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*.

*Togail bruidne Da Derga* is often compared to the threefold death motif. The tale starts in a similar manner to *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, with the king of Ireland, Eochaid, who meets with an otherworldly woman of unnatural beauty, who reached him because she loved him from afar. When the king dies, his daughter, named Etain after her mother, is given in marriage to Cormac, king of Ulaid. Etain gives Cormac a daughter, but

unsatisfied, the king asks for the daughter to be killed. Instead, the king's men bring her in fosterage to Etriscél, great-grandson of Iar, king of Tara. The daughter lives in a house with no door by only a window, and when the king learns of her existence, he demands that she be brought to him because his wizard has prophesized that a woman of unknown race would bear him a son. A bird comes to visit the woman, Mess Buachalla, and prophesises that she will be pregnant with a son, who will be called Cónaire son of Mess Buachalla, and must not kill birds. Mess Buachalla asks the king that her son should be in fosterage to different households with her fosters, the Honeyworded Máinès, and with herself, and that the men of Érin should give these households their protection. When the king dies, a feast is gathered, with a prophecy to be uttered from a sleeper's dream, to predict who will be the future king of Ireland. Cónaire leaves and chases after birds until he reaches the sea, and the birds turn against him with weapons, and the king of the birds explains that he is related to the birds and thus should not hurt them. When he comes back to Tara, Conaire is recognised from the prophecy, and becomes king of Ireland. Cónaire is then given eight conditions:

‘Thou shalt not go righthandwise round Tara and lefthandwise round Bregia.’

‘The evil-beasts of Cerna must not be hunted by thee.’

‘And thou shalt not go out every ninth night beyond Tara.’

‘Thou shalt not sleep in a house from which firelight is manifest outside, after sunset, and in which light is manifest from without.’

‘And three Reds shall not go before thee to Red's house.’

‘And no rapine shall be wrought in thy reign.’

‘And after sunset a company of one woman or one man shall not enter the house in which thou art.’

‘And thou shalt not settle(?) the quarrel of thy two thralls.’

(Stokes, 2011 [1910], p.27)

The list of conditions to be respected by the king parallels that of Muirchertach, who receives a list from Sín when he agrees to welcome her in his house. Following the conditions, Cónaire's reign is prosperous until he is led into breaking the conditions imposed onto him. Fleeing the destruction of the country by the elves, Cónaire goes to Da Derga's Hostel, and meets his foster bothers, whom he had previously banished,

accompanied by Ingel, son of the king of Britain, banished from his country. In the hostel, Cónaire meets a woman who predicts that the king will die in the hostel, and asks for his hospitality, which he accepts reluctantly. The woman gives him a list of her names, and Cónaire promises to not utter any of them. This particularly resembles *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, with the different names of Sín that were not to be uttered by Muirchertach. Similarly to Muirchertach and Diarmait, Cónaire has a foretelling dream about his downfall and that of his reign. Not considering his fosterer's advice, Cónaire demands to have a drink, while warriors from Ireland and Alba are surrounding the Hostel to attack them. Mac Cecht eventually agrees to go fetch the king a drink, but all the rivers of Ireland are emptied as he reaches them. He finds water only when he reaches Uaran Garad on Magh Aí, and he goes back to Da Derga's hostels before morning, just as the attackers are decapitating Cónaire, whose head is taken away by one of the warriors. The importance of the drink just before the king's downfall could be paralleled with the intoxicating drink Muirchertach has before dying.

The *Lebor na hUidre* is also of interest. The *Lebor na hUidre* deals mostly with the origins of Ireland, focusing on kings from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and on the conversion of Ireland to Christianity, comprising the origin legends into religious texts such as *Adamnán's Vision*. The *Lebor na hUidre* contains *Comthóth Lógairi co Cretim 7 a Aided*, and several *Aideda*, but not the threefold death tales of Muirchertach and Diarmait. However, it contains *Genemain Áeda Sláne* ('The Conception of Áed Sláine'), son of Diarmait, conceived by Mughain thanks to the consumption of holy water and the blessing by Saint Kieran, who also appears in *Aided Diarmata*. This tale does not refer to the threefold death motif, but it does show the description of polygamy amongst the early Christian kings. In *Genemain Áeda Sláne*, Diarmait is said to have two wives, Mughain and Mairenn, with the former being jealous of the latter. When Mughain offends Mairenn by revealing her baldness to the court, St Kieran comes to Mairenn's help by miraculously making hair grow on her head. Mughain is then cursed, and becomes barren, while the three other wives of Diarmait give him children. Mughain goes to a bishop and cleric for help, and she consumes holy water, which makes her pregnant with a lamb, and then with a salmon. Finally, she is blessed by Finnian and the bishop, and she gives birth to Áed Sláine, who becomes an extraordinary king. Interestingly, this tale does not appear to condemn the polygamy of the king, but it depicts the consequences of Mughain's offence, and Mairenn's curse on her offender, and finally shows the superiority of the cleric and

bishop's blessing on the curse. This appears to be a largely different tradition from the threefold death narrative tradition.

*Cath Maige Rath* is another interesting tale in the study of the manuscript's composition. The battle of Magh Rath is the battle during which Suibhne loses his sanity in *Buile Suibhne*. The tale recounts how Congal declared war on Domhnall because he had lost his eye and because of the dispute about the egg from a red-feathered hen given to Congal instead of one from a white-winged goose. Accompanied by allies from Alba, and Britain, and by Saxons, French and Fins, Congal declared war to Domhnall. Domhnall goes to fight Congal following the counsel of the clerics of Ireland. In a poem composed by the author to record the words of the king to his warriors before battle, Suibhne is mentioned for the first time:

Let them be pressed till there fall  
The two Congals together with Domhnall.  
Domhnall Breac, the son of noble Eochaidh,  
And Congal, son of Scannlan,  
Aedh and Congal, the sons of Eochaidh,  
And Suibhne the just-judging.

(O'Donovan, 1842, p.129)

Suibhne is not mentioned previously in the tale. Although incomplete, a similar pattern to the one found in threefold death tales, and to the curse uttered upon Suibhne is found in the poem:

I will not give thee but spear for spear;  
I will be thy surrounding fire;  
The terrific black javelin shall wound thee;  
'A demon is entitled to no forgiveness.'

(O'Donovan, 1842, p.137)

Muirchertach, believed by O'Donovan to be Muirchertach mac Erca, is also mentioned in a following verse, but no further information is given about him.

The tale introduces the three infernal agents working towards the destruction of Congal: Electo, Megæra and Tesiphone. The tale explains how these three agents influenced Congal through evil suggestions to lead him to commit sinful acts. Electo is

said to act on the heart by “suggesting every evil resolution and pointing out every true evil”, Megæra resides in the mouth “to hurl defiance from the battlements of his tongue, and to threaten with the scourges of his words”, and Tesiphone takes power over his five senses “so that they (the three Furies) were diligent to accomplish every true evil” with the three Furies being the three temptations known as Thought, Word and Deed (O’Donovan, 1842, p.169). The influence of these agents is said to have led Congal into confusion and a sleep of death, too deep and agreeable which represents an omen of death. Congal’s death is foreseen by his druid Dubhdiadh to happen as he is defeated. Suibhne is mentioned again in verses foretelling the outcome of the battle of Magh Rath, and is here said to become “a lunatic [...] acquainted with every fort”, as is told in *Buile Suibhne* when Suibhne is cursed into wandering Ireland for 7 years. Suibhne’s insanity is mentioned in the tale, when the armies come together at Magh Rath. Suibhne is clearly described as king of Dal Araidhe, son of Colman Cuar, son of Cobhthach. He is said to have lost his sanity by seeing the horrors of the battle, and because he had been cursed by Ronan and the clerics of Ireland for disrespecting their peace guarantee, and for killing one of their ecclesiastical students. The tale does not mention his life as a bird, but does compare him to “a salmon in a weir, or to a bird after being caught in the strait prison of a crib” (O’Donovan, 1842, p.233). The tale leaves the narration of *Buile Suibhne* when it describes the death of Suibhne, who dies in bird form on the battle field under a shower of hailstones, described as an omen of death to the men of Ireland. Suibhne’s death thus does not appear to have been predicted by a cleric to happen in vengeance of his actions, only his cursing into the form of a bird and into insanity. One could say that his death was foreseen in the shower of hailstorm, as it is an omen of death, but it does not particularly predict Suibhne’s death in the manner of the cleric’s prophecy in *Buile Suibhne*.

As the battle unfolds, the fierceness of the warriors outshines the predictions of the wise men and philosophers, and their prophecies are doubted. This parallels the third step of the threefold death narratives following Radner’s description of the plot pattern of the threefold death tales. However, the tale here describes an inability on the part of the prophets to predict the outcome of the battle because of the determination of their soldiers, while the doubt expressed in threefold death narratives is unjustified in the sense that the prophecy is eventually fulfilled, but seems unlikely to the protagonist.

The battle of Magh Rath is described through the slaughter of many men, excepted for the descendants of Niall, of which none have been slain during the battle. Congal’s death is said to have been foreshadowed by his wounding by a simple-minded man, by his

sword failing him, and by his hand being cut off. Eventually, Congal is vanquished and his warriors flee the battle.

This tale is found in several manuscripts containing at least one of the threefold death narratives studied here. The second and longer recension of the tale is found in section 6 of the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, just before *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*. This section, as previously said, also contains *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, as well as *Etsecht Bic meic Dé*, a short story which recounts the extract from *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, telling of Becc mac Dé's prophetic gift and the three falsehoods he announces before his death. *Cath Maige Rath* is also found in RIA MS 23 K 44 (58), and in the Book of the Ó Duibhgeannáin, which both contain *Buile Suibhne*. The first and shorter recension of *Cath Maige Rath* is found in Dublin Trinity College MS 1318, the section of the Yellow Book of Lecan which contains *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*. This first recension of the tale does not mention Suibhne, or Muirchertach mac Erca, but focuses in greater detail on the cause of the battle of Magh Rath. Sailer (1997) also compares Suibhne's leaps in *Buile Suibhne* to the leaps of St Moling described in the *Birth and Life of St. Moling* when he was given his name. Sailer explains that the "ling" part of his name means "leap", and that he had defeated an evil spectre by leaping three steps of pilgrimage and three steps of folly, allowing him to disappear from the sight of the spectre. It is when Moling (or Tairchell before he was named Moling) leaps onto the stone-wall of the church that the priest Collanach says of him that his coming had been foretold by the angel Victor, and that he should be called Moling for the leaps he has accomplished (Sailer, 1997, p.202). Sailer thus compares Moling's six leaps to Suibhne's, who takes three leaps of pilgrimage out of battle, and three leaps of folly back into the battle of Magh Rath. Sailer also parallels this to the six leaps, although undivided between the category of "pilgrimage" and "folly", which Christ took in the poem *Christ II* by Cynewulf. Sailer also studies the notion of cursing in the narratives regarding Suibhne, and notices that Suibhne had already been cursed in the tale *The Banquet of Dun Na N-Gedh*, preceding the Battle of Magh Rath, in which Suibhne is cursed by Domhnall's saints for having taken by force the tunic Domhnall had entrusted to St Ronan Finn to give to Congal.

Regarding the tales of Merlin and Lailoken, the *Cotton MS Titus A XIX* contains several texts relating to both *personae*. The manuscript, dating from the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, contains the *Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, followed by account of the meeting of Merlin and St Kentigern, and by the Life of Kentigern, although this last text is incomplete. The second text presents Lailoken, or Merlin, speaking about his loss of sanity

after a great battle, and foretells his own threefold death (Ward, 1893, p.510). Lailoken and Merlin here appear as a single individual, as Ward quotes:

“qui Lailoken vocabatur quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlinum.  
qui erat Britonibus quasi propheta singularis, sed nescitur.”

Ward, 1893, p.512

Ward explains that in the Life of Saint Kentigern, contrary to Merlin in the *Vita Merlini*, Lailoken is portrayed mostly as a madman until the prophecy of his threefold death is fulfilled, possibly to “exalt the dignity of the Saint” (Ward, 1893, p.512).

## 2. Tales and places

### *Places in the tales*

The geographical data available in the tales is, in most cases, neither detailed nor precise. However, some of the tales share information on the geographical environment in which the tales develop.

Muirchertach mac Erca’s house is named Clettech, and described as placed “over the brink of Boyne of the Brug” (Ní Dhonnchadha, 2002, p.213), which the translator notes as the prehistoric necropolis of Newgrange Brug na Bóinne, near the modern boundary between the County of Meath and the County of Louth. It appears interesting that the scribe would choose to place the house of an ancient king on a visible archaeological site, although Mac Erca would have ruled much later than the date of construction of the necropolis, which is considered to date from 3200BC, but the scribe would not have known this chronological difference. The Brug is also mentioned in another tale found in the *Lebor na hUidre* which depicts the sin of adultery, but this will be studied later in this analysis.

When Diarmait is in exile at the beginning of the tale, he is said to be on Loch Ree and on the Shannon, at the crossing of the modern boundaries of the counties of Roscommon, Westmeath and Longford. The river leads to Clonmacnoise, where St Kieran is said to have been when Diarmait met him. When Diarmait holds the congregation of Uisneach, he is said to go on a hill called Cnoc-brecáin. While it is unclear where this hill is placed, the hill of Uisneach is not far from the Shannon and from Clonmacnoise which represents a place of archaeological importance from the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age to the medieval period with "a late prehistoric ceremonial enclosure, an early medieval conjoined ringfort and a field system of possible medieval date” (Schot, 2006, p.1).

According to the Annals of Ulster, the site was under the control of the Uí Néill dynasty from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The site is mentioned in several instances of early literature as a royal meeting place for Beltane, as described in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, but also as the burial ground of the Dagda and Lugh. Diarmait then goes to Tara, which similarly holds traces of monuments and enclosures from prehistoric times, some of which were used and modified until the medieval period (O’Sullivan & Kinsella, 2013, p.323).

*Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* starts in Tara. Lóegaire is predicted to die between two hills called Erin and Alba, which the protagonist mistakes for the name of the countries, and thus never goes to sea henceforth. The place of death of Lóegaire is described as follows: “Grelach da Phil on the side of Casse in the plain of Liffey, between the two knocks which are called Erin and Alba” (Plummer, 1883, p.168), but apart from the River Liffey, little information is available on this geographical placement.

*Buile Suibhne* mentions a variety of places throughout the tale. The battle of Magh Rath which opposes the king of Ireland and the Ulstermen allied with the Irish Scots of the Dal Riada is difficult to place geographically. Suibhne’s kingdom is also uncertain, as his name does not appear in the genealogies of the Dal nAraidhe in Ulster. Based on his reading of the *Anecdota* poems retelling of Suibhne’s story which describe him as a “Scot” and “son of Eochu”, Jackson (1940) proposed that Suibhne was actually the son of Eochaidh Buidhe, of the royal lineage of the Dal Riada. Accordingly, the Brut y Tywysogion<sup>6</sup> reads:

Deg|mlyned a|phetwar|ugein ac (y)thgant. oed. oet. crist.  
pan vu varó subni y doethaf o|r yscotteit ac yna y doeth y|nor+  
manyeit duon eilweith y gastell baldwin.

“In the year of Christ 889, when died Subni the wisest of the Scots and the black Norsemen came back to Castle Baldwin”

This line of the Brut y Tywysgion places a wise man named Subni, or Subin in other instances, as the wisest man of Scots, who dies at the end of the ninth century. It is unlikely that this individual corresponds to Suibhne Geilt, considering that Moling and the Battle of Magh Rath are dated to the seventh century, but the name appears nowhere else in the Welsh manuscripts available.

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6 NLW MS. 3035 (Mostyn 116) – page 143v, ll.14-16  
<<http://www.rhyddiaithganoloesol.caerdydd.ac.uk/en/ms-page.php?ms=NLW3035&page=143v&l=c0115>>  
[accessed 15/07/2023]

Tech Moling, where Suibhne meets the saint and is eventually buried, is situated in modern St. Mullins in the county of Carlow, which was pillaged by a northern warrior in 951 according to the Annals of the Four Masters (Downes, 1843, p.88).

In fragment *a*, Lailoken mentions the battle which rendered him mad, which was fought on the plain between Liddel and Carwannok, which is placed in modern Arthuret, near the Scottish border (Thomas, 2000, p.30). Thomas also specifies that the battle of Arfderydd, which made Merlin mad in the *Vita Merlini*, has been identified with the same town. In both fragments, Lailoken is said to have died near Drumelzier castle (fragment *b*) or in the river Tweed near the town of Drumelzier (fragment *a*). While a cairn was found by the river Tweed near the village, this was only discovered in 1929, apparently undisturbed since the Neolithic period (Craw, 1931). The choice of the village of Drumelzier thus does not appear to be linked with the cairn which was found there. A medieval castle, called Tinnis Castle is thought to have stood in the town, which could be the castle mentioned in the tale.

### *Scribes and local political power*

The production of the tale and the manuscript can be of interest to better understand the reason behind the production of manuscript, and of the texts it contains. Regarding the situation of medieval Ireland, Johnston explains that “ecclesiastical learning was conceptualised as being part of a wider system of knowledge that included elements which might be described as having non-ecclesiastical origins” (Johnston, 2013, p.92). Johnston explains further that by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, clerics had a political role in the judicial decisions of the *tuath*, along with the poet and judge, and monasteries would seek to be associated with such ecclesiastics. Regarding the production of tales criticizing ancient kings, Rekdal (2011) proposed that the learned nobility of poets, judges and clerics could have wished to educate the contemporary kings, but also the society more broadly. Alternatively, Rekdal suggested that through the production of such tales, clerics were able to wield power through their literary skills, which they were able to use through the criticism of problematic kingly conduct, but also through entertainment.

Diarmait mac Cerbaill is also mentioned in the text where he is found in opposition to Colm Cille regarding the possession of a psalter. In his study on the influence of scribes on the Gaelic manuscripts from 1400 to 1700, Gillespie references the battle of Cul Dreimne which would have started by Diarmait’s judgement that Colm Cille had illicitly

copied a psalter owned by St Finian, who thus demanded that the copy be returned to him. Because the judgement was considered unjust by Colm Cille, the battle started. This version of events is found in the *Life of Colm Cille* by Manus O'Donnell in 1532, but not in earlier versions of the saint's life (Gillespie, 2014, p.20-1). Gillespie thus argues that this event was crafted by the scribe as a warning for the learned class regarding the "integrity of the exemplars held by the learned scribes" (Gillespie, 2014, p.21). Harrington similarly presented *Aided Diarmata* as a tale composed in the 12th century in Clonmacnoise following a political strife in the Northern Uí Néill regarding their descent "to the interest of the descendants of their great rival, Brian Bórama" (Harrington, 2018, p.4). Harrington also presented the production of *Aided Diarmata* as a way for Clonmacnoise to preserve the memory of their founder patron and his descendants, the Clan Cholmáin Moir (Harrington, 2018, p.24).

That the threefold death tales were concerned with the reality contemporary to their tradition seems reasonable. In eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland, the Cistercian reform reorganised the appointing of synods to clerics by the political power and kings. The synod of Cashel of 1101, for instance, was under the control of Muirchertach Ua Brian, and focused on the matters of "simony, the freedom of churches from lay interference and exactions, clerical immunity, clerical celibacy, sanctuary and Irish marriage practices" (Candon, 1991, p.8). The influence of lay political rulers was thus of great importance onto synods and councils of the clergy.

England in 1000AD was organised in a kingdom comprising the Danes and the English, divided in shires on which the king ruled through the representation of local sheriffs, with an ealdorman supervising the aristocratic society of several shires. Each shire was also subdivided in hundreds or *wapentakes* for Yorkshire and the north Midland, following the Scandinavian equivalent (Crouch, 2017, p.105). Each hundred or *wapentake* was also divided into communal assemblies administered locally through courts. Law and justice were decided by the king's court, although a judgement could be held locally by the local representatives of the king. From the 11th to the 12th century, a central court of justice began to emerge in England, leading to the production of a handbook of legal procedures (Crouch, 2017, p.111). The bureaucracy of England, and this sense of common law, was extended to Scotland in the end of the twelfth century by the king's brother-in-law, David of Huntingdon, who became king of Scotland in 1124 (*ibid.*, p.112). However, the organisation of the Scottish government did not have the same uniformity as that of England, and "Galloway and the Gaelic mormaerdom of the north and centre of Scotland

remained difficult for the king to influence directly unless they came into his wardship” (Crouch, 2017, p.112-3). In the twelfth century in England and Scotland, some offences such as murder, rape, housebreaking and arson were to be investigated and punished by the king.

As for Wales, the division and shifting powers were incompatible with the creation of common laws in the twelfth and thirteenth century, although there were ambitions towards that goal. However, the archdeacons were appointed by the bishops to oversee the good discipline of the clergy in England and Wales. It appears that with this rise of power, the corruption became greater in the mid twelfth century when the archdeacons were touring the religious communities in order to look out for “evidence of sexual transgressions and other irregularities by their clergy”, but were sometimes bribed by the guilty, or they sometimes blackmailed the innocent (Crouch, 2017, p.146). The reformists in twelfth-century England had been meaning to impose celibacy upon the clergy, and to impose monogamous marriage to the laity (Crouch, 2017, p.146). Adultery became a sin of luxury actionable in church courts covering a large area of sexual misconduct, but which was legally defined in 1190 by canon layers as “sex between a single or married person and someone else’s spouse of the opposite sex” (ibid.). This came in contradiction with the former possibility for clerics to have wives and children, which thus became illegal by the beginning of the thirteenth century in England and was punished by “deprivation and excommunication until proper penance had been performed” (Crouch, 2017, p.147). Similarly, inquisitions were led by bishops and friars to find adulterers and punish them by excommunication and public humiliation “until they had been absolved by the Church” (Crouch, 2017, p.147).

## C. Historical context: Church and State

The threefold death tales presented mostly date back to the twelfth century. For Ireland, the twelfth century is a moment of crisis and change, with the coming of the Normans and of the Cistercians to Ireland, and the uprising of Connacht kings over the High kingship of Ireland (Harbison, 2000, p.1). It is a century also associated with the backward look to the Golden Age of Irish art, three or four centuries previously, leading to a conservationist movement in the production of artistic objects but also manuscripts. That the threefold death emerges and expands in the twelfth century, after first appearing in the seventh-century, is thus not surprising. The Norman invasions in Britain and the continuity of adversity between the different kingdoms of Wales also created a changing and unstable context on the island. The creation of the narrative of Merlin has been the focus of many studies, including the political influence of his prophecies. To better understand the context of the production of the threefold death tales, this part will focus on the historical context of the British Isles around the twelfth century.

### 1. The church and the state

The definition of ‘state’ for Ireland and Britain around 1000AD could be considered controversial, but as Crouch explains about Britain and Alba, both had defined borders, a vernacular language, a single ruler, and a singular judicial system. Only the Welsh kingdoms were shifting and had a “basic level of development” (Crouch, 2017, p.104) according to which the Welsh kings were focused on the levy of their tributary districts to maintain their military force and order.

#### *Church and state in medieval Ireland*

The religious organisation of Ireland was centred mostly on monasteries, which “included bishops, abbots, priest, monks, scholars and lay tenants among their inhabitants” (Johnston, 2013, p.61). Since Ireland had not been urbanised by the Romans, the diocesan organisation found in Britain was not fit for the geographical organisation of Ireland, although the urbanisation of larger monasteries was evolving in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.). Powerful Irish monasteries were “the depositories of aristocratic wealth and they boasted extensive craft workshops” and were “frequented by the nobility and many a king retired,

by choice or by force, to the environs of one of the major churches” (Johnston, 2013, p.62-3). The relationship between the state and the church were thus quite close-knit, especially since the rulers of these churches were often related to royal dynasties. Clerical and secular communities remained separated, but their elites overlapped, and their roles as centres of manufacture and aristocratic activity, and often geographical proximity, reinforced the closeness of their relationship. This organisation changed with the arrival and settlement of the Vikings in Ireland in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and the development of towns and the economic growth that followed. Monasteries then lost their predominant position as centres of exchange, and gained dominance as institutions regarding smaller churches, eventually leading to the emergence of dioceses in Ireland in the eleventh century (Johnston, 2013, p.67).

MacCann explains that when Christianity arrived in Ireland, the relationship between state and church was based on the *sóerad*, the relationship between druids and tribal chieftains. This basis granted the church several privileges, including freedom from the collection of taxes, freedom from secular powers interfering with the “spiritual or earthly concerns of the monastery” (MacCann, 2010, p.163). The church could however receive financial and material support, such as land from the secular power, and could also collect taxes from the public so as to at least partially insure their financial independence from the secular government. The *sóerad* inferred a separation between church and state, but a close relationship between both, as the church should be counsellor of the king, and the king should be chosen by the divine realm, so as to succeed in providing his land and people with abundance, and not deprivation or hardship (MacCann, 2010, p.164). Rekdal explains that the lay nobility and the good governance of society in post-Viking Ireland depended on the learned nobility, including the judges, the poets and the clerics, as the king’s only decision was insufficient to deliver justice (Rekdal, 2011, p212-3).

The twelfth century in Ireland is a time of change and reform, both political and religious. The arrival of the Cistercians and of the Normans in Ireland led to reforms of the church organisation in Ireland. Harbison (2000) explains that the monasteries would have feared the coming of the Cistercians who would possibly not have any particular interest in conserving the Irish traditions of culture and literature that was produced in monasteries. This unstable context led to the production of the *Lebor na hUidre* in 1106 in Clonmacnoise, the Book of Leinster and the Rawlinson B. 502 manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, compiling ancient lore and law (Harbison, 2000, p.3). According to Harbison, the preservation of Irish lore in these three codices was triggered by the reaction

to religious reform movement in Ireland (ibid., p.4). To prevent their dependence on the diocesan system, the Irish monasteries chose pilgrimage as a source of income from the laity, which had been a popular movement in Ireland from the seventh century, and was common practice in Europe. To render their monasteries attractive and lead pilgrims to contribute to their preservation, they created “traditional style reliquaries to house the relics of founding saints” (Harbison, 2000, p.4). As Radner points out, the respect of sanctuary rights was a major concern in Ireland in the eleventh century. That the respect of such rights became a focus in the death tales is thus not surprising, as it is described in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* and *Buile Suibhne*. However, this aspect is not visibly present in *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* and in the *Vita Merlini*, or in the tales recounting the death of Lóegaire mac Néill.

As Rekdal (2011) pointed out, the eleventh century church and state relationship in Ireland was becoming looser due to the church reform, leading to the conclusion that *Aided Diarmata mac Cerbaill* was a warning to kings, describing Diarmait, a king “not yet securely imbedded in Christian tradition and still not quite familiar with Christian ethics and laws demonstrates well the importance of a close alliance of Church and State” (Rekdal, 2011, p.233). Similarly, the second dream of Diarmait, in which he sees the separation of his diadem between a cleric and a layman, symbolising the separation of Church and State in Ireland, can be understood by the targeted audience as a warning, since it is this separation which leads to Diarmait’s downfall, and it is foretold to predict the downfall of society in its whole.

The eleventh- and twelfth-century tales were compiled under the period of church reform which “was boosted and reached its climax under the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the latter half of the twelfth century” (Rekdal, 2011, p.219). The political reforms and the coming of the Normans to Ireland and Britain in the eleventh and twelfth century led to an increase in exchange and travel of the upper classes from Ireland to the continent, mostly to Rome, and between Ireland and Britain (Candon, 1991, p.4).

Monasteries played an important role for the Irish religious, social, and political identity and sense of community, as they had “a pivotal role in the emergence and development of Hiberno-Latin and vernacular writing” (Johnston, 2013, p.59). Johnston explained that the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland saw the emergence of vernacular writing and the production of “pseudo-historical works which were themselves articulations of elite senses of communal identity” (Johnston, 2013, p.59). Indeed, the elaboration of the history and

geography of Ireland contributed to the conceptualisation of the Irish identity, for both the island and the Irish territory in northern Britain.

### *Church and State in medieval Britain*

The relationship between church and state in Britain around 1000AD is different from Alba to Wales, and England. In Wales, the relationship between the shifting kingdoms and their rulers and the clerics of the church was more tense, since the main role of the kings were to protect their people, and it appears to have been done unsuccessfully. Crouch (2017) mentions the situation in eleventh-century Wales with the “infuriated complaints of clerics about the inadequacies of the aggressive, greedy and immoral local rulers who disrupted their lives and communities, rather than protecting them” while the clerics knew of better relationships between state and church in their contemporary England and Carolingian France (Crouch, 2017, p.104). The English church was already well established in the eleventh century, with the established authority of the archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the organisation of Britain in dioceses. Despite the fall of Rome, the bishops of Britain held important power in Britain in the eleventh century, with their former role as “officials linked to the state” reinvented to become “appointed by the king, gathered in councils under his presidency and ruled dioceses whose limits were set by him” (Crouch, 2017, p141). With the Norman Conquest in 1066, the minsters were appropriated to French monastic communities, although minsters were already getting organised by the bishops in the eleventh century because of the rise in clergy numbers.

The division between shires and dioceses were approximately harmonious, with the religious structure based on the minster, the “large central churches serving many dependent settlements, run by communities of clergy” (Crouch, 2017, p.138). Influenced by the missionary Church of Ireland, the minster was the dominant religious form of organisation that was found in Britain, until the second half of the twelfth century. They differ from the Irish monasteries in the sense that they function as a monarchy of their own, with the son succeeding his father at the head of the minster. This type of religious organisation was found throughout Britain, from Wales to the Pictish and Anglian lands. Dominant churches in Wales in the eleventh century were called *clasau*, on which depended large estates. But by the beginning of the thirteenth century, the close relationship between the diocese and the state was established in Britain (Crouch, 2027, p.143).

## 2. Contemporary kings and traditional tales

The killing of kings and monarchs is not an exceptional event in the medieval British Isles. In his article “Patterns of Regicide in Europe, AD 600–1800”, Eisner (2011) considers the evidence of violent deaths of kings and regicide in medieval Europe. Regicide appears to be the main cause of death of kings in the European Middle Ages, and the British Isles are no exception. Eisner (2011) recorded 41 High kings of Ireland dying of regicide between 604 and 1186, 25 in Wales from 825 to 1283, and 41 kings of the Picts or Scots between 843 and 1567. Regicide thus appears to be common in the Middle Ages in the British Isles.

This data is interesting to consider the threefold death tale and its reception by a medieval audience. With regicide being the main cause of a change of monarch, the description of the death of kings was an expected part of a medieval tale telling of the life and of a king. The sagas and lives of saints commonly mention the deaths of kings in their story. The main difference in the threefold death tales is the threefold cursing or foretelling of the death of the king, and its corresponding multiple and violent death. This would imply a conscious attempt to integrate the threefold death motif into the story and history of those kings. A threefold death tale, as has been seen previously, implies several elements among which the conflict between the king and the church, and the prophecy made by the cleric or druids. This conflict appears to be the centre of the narrative. There is thus a possibility that the kings and warriors that have been discussed previously, had committed an offence against the church, or were depicted as such to warn chiefs and kings not to offend clerics and the Christian church.

It appears that *Aided Diarmata* and *Aided Muirchertach* both share a concern with the reality contemporary to their creation. Herbert argued that *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* was possibly influenced by the death of a contemporary king, thus creating a homily for this king. The reason for a scribe to write the threefold death tale of an ancient ruler or Ireland can be a puzzling element. It is worth asking whether it was to discredit the ancient ruler, or to associate their church to them. Herbert (1997) proposed the hypothesis that the scribe was a clerical litterateur, who could have disguised a homily to a contemporary ruler through his writing. Regarding *Aided Muirchertach*, Herbert explained that Cairnech was patron of the monastery of Tuilén (now Dulane, Co. Meath), and that the relic associated to him had been insulted by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn in 1166. A piece of “monastic propaganda” (Herbert, 1997, p.35) found in the monastery claimed that the first corpse to

have been buried by Cairnech on the grounds of the monastery was that of Niall Noígiallach from the Uí Néill dynasty, which was declining in the eleventh century. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, representative of the Uí Néill, had promised freedom to churches from secular imposition, before “breaking a clerically-guaranteed peace settlement, and treacherously blinded the king of the Ulaid” (Herbert, 1997, p.34). This deception on the clerics’ part could have been an element leading to the writing of *Aided Muirchertach* as a depiction of a former king sharing the same first name, repenting for his sins against the church and dying a violent threefold death, but also being mourned by the cleric after his death. However, as the dating of the tale cannot be ascertained, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed and Herbert argues that the tradition regarding Muirchertach could date from the tenth century. Herbert argued that *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* took the shape of hagiography, using the conventions of sixth-century cautionary tales, and used as a “source of guidance for its public” (Herbert, 1997, p.36) purely used to discuss of its contemporary reality. In his analysis of the *Vita Merlini*, Kay (2006) shared a similar hypothesis regarding prophetic narratives, which could have been used to “criticize contemporary rulers without being accused of treason” (Kay, 2006, p.75)

The same reasoning could be applied to *Aided Diarmata*, depicting an exiled king coming back to his kingly status through slaughter of the current king. Diarmait mac Murchada, king of Ireland in the twelfth century, was exiled from Ireland and went to Henry II for help to claim back his title. This eventually led to the coming of the Normans to Ireland, and to changes in the political and religious organisation. It is also noteworthy that the reason for Diarmait mac Cerbaill’s death in the saga was individuals from overseas, as he foresees in his dream. It seems reasonable to think that the scribe writing *Aided Diarmata* could have been inspired from the contemporary events of Diarmait mac Murchada, in a similar manner to *Aided Muirchertach*. Although this arguably applies to *Aided Diarmata* and *Aided Muirchertach*, it does not appear to fit in with the tales of Lóegaire, Suibhne Geilt, Merlin and Lailoken. The inspiration from contemporary rulers cannot be a fitting explanation to all threefold death tales.

*Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* appears as a rewriting of a traditional tale, based on the encounter between the king and an otherworldly woman gifted with supernatural powers, except that in this instance, it is the woman who chooses to stay in the mortal world with the king. In *Aided Diarmata*, the supernatural element appears to be attributed directly to the king, and to his druid, without a female figure capable of miracles. In the cursing fight at Tara, Diarmait is said to be capable of the same, if not better, miracles as

those of the clerics, granting Diarmait a supernatural, if not a saintly, status (Harrington, 2018). In *Buile Suibhne*, a supernatural woman also appears in the tale. She chases after Suibhne leaping throughout Ireland, after she drives him back to insanity. The Lailoken and Merlin narratives do not share this element of a supernatural female figure, as both appear as supernatural beings capable of foreseeing the future. The female figure of both these narratives is mostly centred on the element of adultery, also central to the threefold death narrative.

Rekdal (2011) and Ó Cuív (1973) mention the violent deaths found in the twelfth-century manuscript Rawlinson B.502 which lists the death of 45 kings after the coming of Christianity, among which 25 kings are reported to have died a violent death, “among whom we find Muirchertach mac Erca and Diarmait mac Cerbaill” who are reported as dying from burning, drowning and wounding (Rekdal, 2011, p.230). Rekdal argued that while Adomnán presented the violent death of kings as unworthy to be reported in the annals, this traditional death could have been repurposed by the clerics in a Christian context to show the purgation and martyrdom of these kings.

## IV. The Threefold Death and Clerical Writing

The threefold death tales appear closely linked to Christian writings and hagiography. The opposition of the sagas and hagiographical texts here seems unsuccessful, since the tales share important features of hagiography, which undoubtedly influenced the scribes in their writing (Harrington, 2018). The reason for the inclusion of a particular *persona* in a threefold death tale can also be surprising centuries after their time. The tripartite division of the sins of the offenders, and of their deaths has been analysed by various scholars under the scope of Dumézil's tripartite division of Indo-European societies (Sayers, 1992), which can be viewed through the prism of Christian hagiography. The threefold death motif appears to have changed in its literary use, from its first appearances to its use in twelfth-century tales. The effect of the writing of a threefold death tale, whether it is moral or political, appears to depend on the time of writing, suggesting a shift in the perception and composition of the tales using this literary motif.

### A. Threefold death tales and Hagiography

#### 1. Prophecies and curses

The discrimination between a prophecy and a curse is a fine line. Bitel explained that “Christian clerics taught that saintly syllables of malediction and benediction, deriving force from the incomparable *virtus* of holy men and women, could cast the mightiest king into hell” (Bitel, 2007, p.5). The prophecy is solely the foretelling of the death of the individual, without the cleric triggering the threefold death himself. In the case of a prophecy, the prophet, often a cleric, warns the future victim of their fate, whether they are in opposition to them or not. The saint's curses, on the other hand, can be defined in different ways. The saint can utter the victim's fate, thus destroying the spiritual protection of the protagonist, allowing for hell and devils to end the victim's life. The cleric or saint can also be asking God to intervene, and punish the offender by the fatal curse the saint has pronounced (Harrington, 2017). Herbert described the curses appearing in hagiography from the tenth-century onward by “an insistent proclamation of a saint's ability to call down God's vengeance on kings who transgressed against the church” (Herbert, 1997, p.31). Herbert explained further that because the punishment of kings who were in conflict with the church was so widely depicted in hagiography, it was likely to have been commonplace in the Middle Ages. Focusing on the study of *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, Herbert explained that the scribe's intention of writing on a king seduced into

abandoning the church was certainly political, warning kings and chiefs of the fatal risks of abandoning “ecclesiastically-sanctioned modes of behaviour” (Herbert, 1997, p.31). However, the threefold death of Muirchertach is never clearly prophesised in the tale. While the bishop foretells the king’s downfall and death, and the kin-slaying of his grandfather warned him that he would be burnt alive, the prediction of him drowning and being wounded does not appear in the tale. The prophecy element is thus mostly absent from the tale, although the triple conditions of *Sín* can warn the audience that the punishment will be threefold as well. The curse pronounced by the bishop on the king’s grave he dug in Clettech is revoked at the end of the tale when he blesses his real grave in Tuilén, with an opposition between Clettech as non-sacred ground called a *lecht*, referring traditionally to a cairn, and Tuilén referred to as *fert* used to describe a Christian grave (Rekdal, 2011, p.240).

As can be observed in the threefold death tales, the saint, cleric, or druid uttering the prophecy is never engaging himself in its fulfilment. While they predict the death of the offender, the prophets are never agents of the death of the offender. However, the clerics are also depicted cursing the offenders, which suggest some engagement in the triggering of their death, as they are calling upon their divinity to provoke their deaths. The line can thus be drawn between the prophesised threefold deaths, and the ones caused by a curse.

Although Diarmait’s death appears as the result of a curse, the threefold death element is only presented as prophesised by the druids and prophets. The same goes for Muirchertach mac Erca, whose death appears as the result of the curse of the bishop digging his grave. However, the threefold death element is never clearly prophesised, but it is hinted at in his threefold engagement to *Sín*. In a similar manner, the death of Lóegaire is prophesised, but it does not appear as the result of a curse. The threefold notion of his death is brought by his oath on the elements, and is thus triggered by him making that oath. Suibhne is not the one dying a threefold death in the texts telling his legend, but his death is the result of the cleric’s curse, of which the punishment appears as threefold. Similarly, the threefold death prophesised by St Moling and Merlin are the result of trickery on of Grag and Rhydderch’s queen, but they do not represent a curse uttered by the prophets. Lailoken prophesised his own threefold death, which accordingly does not consist in the result of another individual’s curse, although his death is triggered by external agents.

From this list, one can gather the information that while the death of the offender can appear as the result of a curse, its threefold element is, in most cases, solely the result of a prophecy or of a foretelling. The threefold death appears thus as a concluding element of

the offender's death, but not as a particular punishment demanded by the cursing individual in the tale.

## 2. Saga and Hagiography

In his paper focusing on *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, Harrington (2018) proposed the hypothesis according to which *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* could be read as a hagiographical text taking its inspiration from the religious narrative of David and Solomon. Diarmait and David would live through the same narrative devices of unavoidable sin, conflict with the religious power, and repentance for their sins. Harrington thus argued that *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* could be considered a hagiographical and anti-hagiographical text, in which he is both hero and anti-hero. Herbert also explained that the introduction of a clerical figure in *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* was a "significant departure from the traditional pattern" (Herbert, 1997, p.30), replacing the role of the druid. However, the druidic figure remains present in some of the threefold death tales, but in a rather secondary role. The opposition between Christian and pre-Christian Ireland appears visible through the reluctance of the Irish kings to submit to the Christian cleric, but also in the predominance of the cleric over the druidic figure, which can be expected as the tales were written by scribes and clerics. Rekdal (2011) also argued that the kings' tales resemble hagiography with the only difference that the protagonist is a king and not a cleric, in which the cleric holds the status of judge.

In *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, the opposition between king and cleric is still present, although the clerics are more concerned with saving the king from the grasp of Sín, than to punish him for his sins (Rekdal, 2011, p.235). However, it is the bishop Cairnech called on to by Muirchertach's wife who curses Muirchertach by digging the king's grave. The opposition in this tale is more importantly present between Christian and pagan powers, than between secular and religious power. Where Diarmait is found to be performing miracles by himself, equalling the miracles of the clerics, if not overpowering them, Muirchertach does not appear to be performing any miracles, as it is the character of Sín who creates magical food and drink, and magical armies against which the king exhausts himself.

Sailer (1997) described how Suibhne's madness parallels the early Christian beliefs of Ireland. Sailer cited Chadwick (1942), who compared Suibhne looking up during the battle, and his urge to leave the battle in horror and find a new home, with St Columba's

“spiritual experiences” leading him to leave Ireland. Sailer also drew the parallel between Suibhne’s leaps from one tree top to another, to the notion of ascension of which Cynewulf wrote in the Old English poem *Christ II*, which describes the ascension of God and his description as a bird and the “‘lightening’ of the flesh” (Sailer, 1997, p.198). Although Sailer did not suggest that “members of early Irish Christianity familiar with the Suibhne Geilt material would have considered Suibhne a figure of the Christian soul’s ascent to God” (Sailer, 1997, p.198-9), as seen above, Harrington (2018) described the hagiographical and anti-hagiographical material found in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* as fitting a similar pattern in comparison to hagiographical texts. Indeed, as Sailer (1997) argued, the figure of a sinful king expiating his mortal sin through suffering and death would have been a familiar literary pattern.

The tales *Buile Suibhne*, *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* and *Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* all picture ancient, early Christian kings. As Rekdal said about the tales of Suibhne, Diarmait and Muirchertach, these tales put together early and contemporary elements, with the juxtaposition of “the secular with the Christian king genre in that hagiography and its holy men are brought on stage together with the secular nobility without the narratives being tales about a saint. In earlier king tales, the clergy had been virtually absent” (Rekdal, 2011, p.245). The saga and hagiographical elements appear to be brought together in most of the threefold death tales of this analysis. While this is not surprising as both genres are written by clerics and ecclesiastical figures, the close comparison, and almost correspondence of early kings and madmen with saintly figures and powers appears puzzling, although the association of traditional and Christian motifs was a common feature of medieval texts in Ireland and Britain.

### 3. Tales and history

The notion of historical writing in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland and Britain integrated both hagiography and vernacular sagas. As Harrington explained, the “meaningful distinction between hagiography and historiography” began to emerge in the twelfth century (Harrington, 2017, p.21). As has been noted previously, the threefold death tales are mostly centred on ancient rulers from the sixth and seventh centuries. Muirchertach mac Erca and Diarmait mac Cerbaill both appear in the Irish Annals of Ulster and in the Annals of the Four Masters, as do the clerics Cairnech and Kieran.

Lailoken and Merlin are expectedly both absent from the Irish Annals, but the *persona* of Myrddin is found in a number of Triads and Lives of saints such as the Life of St Kentigern.

Analysing the historical relationships between the tales of Diarmait, Muirchertach and Suibhne, Rekdal (2011) explained the closeness of their history: Muirchertach mac Erca was king until 536, and was succeeded by Tuathal Maelgarb, who thus preceded Diarmait mac Cerbaill. Diarmait was succeeded by his cousins, Muirchertach's two sons named Fergus and Domnall, who defeated Diarmait at the battle of Cul Dreimne. All those individuals are presented at some point in the tales of Diarmait and Muirchertach. If we consider Suibhne, king of the Dal nAraidi, to be the father of Aedh Dub, the killer of Diarmait, then the three tales are linked together. However, it is possible that Suibhne was not king, but had a client-king relationship with Congal Caech, which is hinted at when Suibhne mentions leaving Congal who tries to offer him gift to convince him to stay (Rekdal, 2011, p.248).

Adamnán's *Life of St Columba* featuring the threefold death of Aedh Dub, killer of Diarmait, appears to fit the threefold death tales into a repeating pattern. Aedh Dub, who participates in the threefold death of Diarmait, dies of a similar fate. In *Aided Diarmata*, the reader knows that Diarmait suffers a threefold death because he inflicted the same end to his enemy Flann son of Dima. It is thus not surprising to see Diarmait's predecessor, Muirchertach, dying in a similar manner.

The threefold death tales thus appear on the threshold of the medieval distinction between *fabula* and *historia*, as the scribes appear to be using both supernatural elements and historical sources such as genealogies. To explain the distinction made by medieval scribes between the two terms, one can look at the notes made by the scribes in other tales. O'Rahilly translated the two colophons at the end of the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Recension 2) from the Book of Leinster. The first colophon in Irish blessed future readers of the texts who would study it "faithfully" without altering it, while the second colophon written in Latin states a different opinion on the contents of the text, as the scribe does not "give credence to certain things in this *historia* or rather *fabula*" (Miles, 2011, p.1). The scribe goes on by explaining that certain contents of the tale are "the deceptions of demons; certain things, however, are *figmenta poetica*" (*ibid.*). Miles explained further that the literary terminology used by the scribe descended from Roman rhetoric, and that the term *figmenta poetica*, which Miles translates as "poetic inventions", appears to be used as a

pejorative term in this example, as the Christian scribe writing in Latin appears to have been provoked by the former colophon written in Irish.

The threefold death tales could have been regarded as *historia* for their use of historical material, and the relations made between kings and priests from close chronological periods from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it is likely that it was composed mostly as *fabula*, because of the importance of the supernatural elements, and the intricate construction used to compose the tales. As Herbert (1997) specified, “the tales disclose no pattern of history other than that inherent in the events which they relate” and their “concern is with an imaginatively-accessible past, which, like the present, is a source of events worth recalling in and for themselves” (Herbert, 1997, p.28). The tales do not aim at retelling history in a scientific manner, but are rather using historical events as a material on which the scribe could create a narrative, in which they can embed the supernatural elements of the sagas and the miracles of the hagiographical texts. That the tales are placed in the Golden Age of Irish tradition is also telling of the scribe’s knowledge of literature and history. In their death tales, Muirchertach mac Erca, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, and to some extent Suibhne Geilt, are depicted as king-heroes, or anti-heroes. O’Cathasaigh explained that the role of a king-hero was to “ensure the fertility of land and beast and man by their wise and judicious rule” (O’Cathasaigh, 1978, p.74). As we have seen in the tales, the kings portrayed fail to fulfil such roles by their sinful behaviour. Their narratives, however, are filled with supernatural elements: Sín as an otherworldly goddess in the tale of Muirchertach, the miracles performed by Diarmait at the curse-fight at Tara, and the extraordinary leaps performed by Suibhne throughout Ireland. The places associated with their tales, such as Tara and Brug na Bóinne are also linked to the supernatural, and to the otherworld. It would thus appear that the scribe used history and historical figures, and important topoi in Irish folklore, which he put together with elements of Christian beliefs.

## **B. Tripartite offences**

As Harrington explained, the hagiographer composed a text by reusing pre-existing material, and shaping it to correspond to its audience “in accordance with changing political needs, historical sensibilities, cultural tastes and intellectual fashions” (Harrington, 2017, p.20). The use of the threefold death motif to show the sinful behaviour of kings, reaching redemption in their violent deaths was possibly aimed as a deterrent for the community reading, or hearing the material to behave in a similar manner. As Herbert mentioned, from the tenth century onwards, in vernacular saints’ Lives “the contemporary

enmeshing of church and state in social and political life is reflected in the portrayal of saints who rewarded and punished royal behaviour” (Herbert, 1997, p.28). Sayers (1992) used Dumézil’s tripartite division of Indo-European societies to show the correspondence of the sins portrayed in the tales to the offences against the first function (sovereign and ecclesiastical), the second function (military) and the third function (productivity and fertility). These functions can indeed be paralleled to the main offences portrayed in the tales as violation of sanctuary rights and of sacred land, slaughter and more particularly regicide, and adultery or out-of-marriage relationships. Here, regicide is put under the second category as it corresponds to slaughtering, but it could also be put under the first category of offences. The offences and sins described committed by the kings were certainly of importance for the scribes and their communities at the time of composition of the tale.

### 1. Sanctuary rights and clerics

Diarmait’s first sin in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* is simultaneously slaughter and the disrespect of sanctuary ground. When he kills Flann son of Dima on the land he offers to St Kieran, Diarmait commits an offence against the cleric, as well as murder. The opposition between Diarmait and the cleric continues when he does not respect the sanctuary rights promised to Aed Guaire as he takes him away from the protection of Ruadan, leading to the coercive fasting and the cursing fight of Tara, which also appears in the Life of St Ruadan (Harrington, 2018).

Muirchertach’s offence against the clerics occurs as he banishes them from his house in Clettech following Sín’s conditions. The opposition between Muirchertach and the clerics is of lesser importance in this tale, as the clerics mostly aim at saving the king from the grasp of the otherworldly woman, symbol of pagan Ireland. One could also argue that Muirchertach attacking Sín’s magical army on the land chosen by the clerics to build their church is an offence against their sacred land, as was the killing of Flann by Diarmait on the land he offered to St Kieran. However, since the army is magical and non-human, no blood is spilt on the sacred land of the clerics.

Suibhne’s first offence is against the cleric Ronan Finn, when he throws the cleric’s psalter in the lake and tries to expel him from his sacred grounds. During the battle at Magh Rath, Suibhne kills one of the psalmists of Ronan by spear-point because the psalmist had spilled holy water on him and he took offence. During the battle, Suibhne also

disrespects Ronan's guarantee of peace by killing a man after the beginning, and before the end of the guaranteed protection between every battle. These offences lead to the cursing of Suibhne by Ronan for him to roam the earth naked, jumping as high as the spear-point he used when he killed the psalmist, and leading to his eventual death by spear-point. Interestingly, in the developed description of the battle and Suibhne's loss of sanity in *The Battle of Magh Rath*, Suibhne is precisely cursed by Ronan and the great saints of Ireland because he had killed Ronan's ecclesiastical student over a consecrated trench, which is described as a pure source of water for the chiefs and people of Ireland. This seems to parallel the violation of sacred land which is visible in *Aided Diarmata* in several instances, especially with the killing of Flann on the land he offers to St Kieran.

The tales recounting the legend of Lóegaire do not appear to reference the violation of sacred land, although the killing of one of Patrick's men to test his forgiveness can be read as both a murder and an offence against the saint. The disrespect of the king's oath to not demand the cattle tribute to the Leinstermen as promised on the elements could also be read as an offence against the divine.

No reference is made to the violation of sanctuary rights or to offences against clerics in the *Vita Merlini*. The legend of Lailoken (fragment *a*) could be read as the madman violating the peacefulness of Kentigern's land during mass by shouting and crying. However, the violent, and in most cases bloody, violation of the sacred land of the cleric is not found in the legends surrounding Lailoken.

In the *Life of St Columba*, Aedh Dub is unrightfully appointed priest by the priest Findchán against the advice of the bishop. This leads to the death of the priest, and to the threefold death of Aedh Dub.

The offence against a cleric, or the violation of sacred land or sanctuary rights is thus present in all texts of the corpus, except for the *Vita Merlini* which does not focus on a clerical figure but on the character of Merlin.

## 2. Slaughtering and regicide

The first sin committed by Diarmait mac Cerbaill is the murder of Flann son of Dima in a threefold manner, foretelling the threefold death of the king himself. As Rekdal pointed out, Diarmait's son Aed Slane is warned by Columba in the *Vita Columbae* to avoid kin-slaying so as to not lose his divinely appointed right to the monarchy. In *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, Diarmait's druid Beg mac Dé predicts to Aed Slane that he would

later commit kin-slaying, while he was still in his mother's womb. This leads to the kin-slaying of Suibhne by Aed. Suibhne is then avenged by his son Conall, who kills Aed Slane. Even though these other royal figures are portrayed as guilty of regicide, they are not portrayed as dying a threefold death in the tale, thus implying that regicide alone is not sufficient to provoke a king's threefold death.

In *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca*, Muirchertach mentions that he killed his grandfather King Loarn in Scotland by burning him alive, and that his own death was predicted to be similar. This parallels the killing of Flann by Diarmait, who kills him by a threefold death, and is warned that he should suffer a similar downfall. At the end of the tale, Sín also explains that she killed Muirchertach because he had previously killed her father, mother and sister and destroyed the "Old Tribes" during the battle of Cerb. Although it is not specified, it would imply that Sín was of royal lineage, making Muirchertach guilty of regicide and slaughter.

As Suibhne does not respect Ronan's guarantee of peace in *Buile Suibhne*, he happens to kill Oilil Cedach, king of the Ui Faolain, during the battle of Magh Rath. Suibhne is also committing murder as he continues to kill a man both before and after the appointed time of battle. Moreover, he kills one of Ronan's clerics with a spear as he was sprinkling holy water on him, which determines his death as being pierced by a spear. Suibhne is thus depicted as guilty of slaughter, regicide, and of the murder of a cleric, which could also fit into an offence against the first category.

In *Comthóth Lógairi co Cretim 7 a Aided*, Lógair mac Néill proposes to test St Patrick's forgiveness by killing one of his men before him, making him guilty of slaughter. This could also be counted as an offence against the first function.

During the battle, it is not Merlin's commitment of slaughter which leads to his insanity, but it is the violence of the battle, and more particularly the killing of the three brothers of his prince. However, Merlin does commit slaughter when he kills the new husband of his wife with the antler of the stag he was riding to their wedding. It is when he kills the man that he is captured a second time by the king's men. However, the boy dying the threefold death predicted by Merlin is not described as an offender of any sort.

In fragment *a*, Lailoken admits that it is his mistake, although he does not specify further, which led to the slaughter of the battle on the plain between Liddel and Carwannok, for which he is being punished by his state of madness and by deprivation of his possessions.

In the *Life of St Columba*, Aedh Dub is guilty of the killing of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, and is described as a bloody warrior, making him unfit to be appointed priest by the bishop.

Slaughtering is present in all tales of the corpus, with some of them describing regicide as well. Again, the *Vita Merlini* appears different to the other tales as the threefold death element is not centred on Merlin or the queen, but on an unnamed boy who does not appear to commit slaughter.

### 3. Adultery

The main offence mentioned in *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* is adultery, as Muirchertach agrees to Sín's conditions to banish his wife and children from his house so that she may come in. Rekdal (2011) argued that the opposition between Sín and Dúuibsech symbolised the opposition between pagan and Christian powers which is found throughout the tale. Here, this opposition is depicted through the adultery of the king with a pagan personification, and the banishing of his Christian wife, with the both of them incapable to be living under the same roof. Herbert similarly argued that the portrayal of an "evil-initiating female" suggested the scribe's will to warn against the "the seductive but dangerous appeal of power which lies outside of ecclesiastical sanction" (Herbert, 1997, p.31).

In *Aided Diarmata mac Cerbaill*, the sin of adultery is portrayed in Diarmait's agreement to spend a night with Banbhan's daughter outside of marriage, in order to upset his wife who refused Banbhan's invitation. It is also this woman who brings the foretold elements leading to the king's death.

Adultery is not committed by Suibhne in *Buile Suibhne*, but it is through his interaction with women that his downfall occurs. Suibhne's wife, who first tries to prevent him from offending the priest, finally remarries Congal, although she specifies that it was a forced decision. The hag mill pushes Suibhne back into insanity when he had managed to go back to his senses, which leads to her death when she pursues Suibhne and tries to take a leap too important for her. Finally, it is the supposition of his adultery with Mongan's wife, Muirghil, which leads to Suibhne's wounding and death.

In the *Life of St Columba*, it is not adultery but the carnal relationship between Aedh Dub and the priest Findchán which represents the sinful relationship.

In the *Vita Merlini* and fragment *b* of the legend of Lailoken it is the adultery committed by the queen which finally leads to the threefold death of the prophet (Lailoken) or the disguised boy (Merlin). Merlin's wife also remarries after Merlin agreed so, on the condition that he never meets her new husband. It is when Merlin goes to the ceremony and kills the husband that he is again captured by the king's men. Although this does not result in Merlin's death, it provokes the death of the husband.

The committing of adultery, as has been observed, is common to most of the threefold death tales. However, adultery is generally not punished by death in hagiography: Harrington (2017) mentioned the 'Gesta pontificum Anglorum', which features the noblewoman Ælfhild, who was paralysed because of her adulterous relationship with Olaf II of Norway. This punishment is described as 'merciful' and allowed the noblewoman to repent for her sin, thus making her sin forgivable. The context and interpretation of the adultery vary from one threefold death tale to another, but it is present in all tales but those presenting Lóegaire mac Néill.

As seen previously, sexual deviance among the clergy were a central focus of archdeacons in Wales and England in the twelfth century, who were apparently sometimes blackmailing innocent ecclesiastics with false accusations of adultery. As Crouch (2017) explained, the reformists of twelfth century England extended their moral on marriage and sexual relationship to the laity, with the definition of adultery narrowed by canon lawyers in 1190 as "sex between a single or married person and someone else's spouse of the opposite sex" (Crouch, 2017, p.146).

The three functions described by Dumézil, read through the moral of the Christian texts, thus corresponds to the offences committed by the kings in the threefold death tales. As mentioned, only the tale of Lóegaire does not portray the sin of adultery, and the *Vita Merlini* does not depict the violation of sanctuary rights or an offence against the church. However, the tale of Lóegaire is an early tale featuring a motif similar to the threefold death, and the *Vita Merlini* treats the motif differently as it is not a king, madman or offender who dies the threefold death, but a nameless boy chosen by the queen. Apart from these exceptions, the tripartite offences appear in each of the tales. Surprisingly, the motif appears complete in the earliest version of the motif with the death of Aedh Dub, implying that the motif was already complete in this early hagiographical text.

### C. The threefold death: humiliation or martyrdom?

The moral to be taken from medieval hagiography and vernacular sagas was often not explicitly explained by the author, leaving the audience with the task to interpret the causes and consequences, and the rhetoric and structure of the tale (Harrington, 2017, p.22). The sinful kings portrayed in the tales appear to be both punished for their sins, but also reaching a state of almost sainthood in the examples of Diarmait, Muirchertach, Lailoken and Suibhne. Aedh Dub's spiritual ascension is not described by the author, and Grag, killer of Suibhne, is sent to hell by the curse of St Moling. Whether the tales were aimed as tales warning their audience of the consequences of those sinful behaviours, or of the importance of redemption, appears as a shift in the description of the spiritual end of the offender, rather than his physical demise.

#### 1. Punishment or salvation?

Harrington (2017) explained that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, punitive miracles were amongst the most common type of miracles described in religious texts, following the increase in pilgrimage to churches containing saintly relics. The image of saints defending their community was, at that time, participating in the frequentation of a church.

Regarding *Aided Diarmata*, Harrington (2018) explained that the king was portrayed in a similar manner to King David, living through parallel experiences of conflict with the church and unavoidable sin, eventually repenting for his sins and approaching salvation and sainthood. Rekdal similarly argued that the depiction of the inglorious deaths suffered by Diarmait, Muirchertach, and Suibhne in their tales was possibly "meant to purge them" and that the wish for purgation was possibly "particularly pronounced during the period of Church reform" (Rekdal, 2011, p.217). *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill*, *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* and *Buile Suibhne* can be considered in the same group as they are similarly punished for their transgression of a cleric's sanctuary, describing how the kings are cursed but "redeemed by the interventions of the clerics" making them resemble "royal martyrs" (Rekdal, 2011, p.219). The difference which is visible for these tales in their treating of sinful kings is that they show repentance for their sins. Fragment *a* of the legend of Lailoken seems to use the motif in a similar manner, with the final sacrament of the madman before his death.

Rekdal considered Suibhne to be the closest example to a sinful king achieving sainthood through the life of penance he lived as a hermit. The texts composing the legend of Suibhne and of Moling show different examples of punitive miracles, or cursing. The treatment received by Grag is a satisfying example for the depiction of theft, or of the violation of ecclesiastical land, leading to the death of the transgressor, which can arguably be viewed as a deterrent, showing the saint as a protector of his community. The same can be argued with the violation of the protection granted by the clerics which is presented in *Buile Suibhne*, and *Aided Diarmata mac Cerbaill*. To some extent, this can be found in *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* when Muirchertach fights the magical armies of Sín on the land chosen by the clerics for the building of their church. The punishment of thieves or offenders against the church can be seen as a deterrent and a warning for the scribes' contemporary audiences. Similarly, the sacrilege of saint' feast day and Sabbath-breaking is found in several Lives of saint with death and divine punishment as a consequence. Harrington (2017) gives the example of the Life of Kenelm and the Life of Wulfsgie, which resembles the warning given in *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* about the disrespect of the old feast days. However, the redemption granted to Diarmait, Suibhne, and Muirchertach appears in opposition with this statement, as the offenders are finally forgiven by the clerics and ascend to heaven.

Buttimer argued that the integration of the threefold death motif in the legend of Lóegaire was the result of the scribe's "wish to ascribe to Lóegaire as many nefarious associations as the possibilities for modification within the anecdote will allow" (Buttimer, 1981, p.68). However, as we have seen, the redemptions of the sinful kings in *Aided Diarmata mac Cerbaill* and *Aided Muirchertach mac Erca* seem to suggest that the threefold death, despite being the fatal end of the king, implies the saving of the king's soul to heaven. Buttimer's interpretation of the threefold death motif, however, is consistent with the earlier versions of the motif which is found in the *Life of St Columba* with the death of Aedh Dub, and in the *Anecdota* poems and *Life of St Moling* picturing the threefold death of Grag. In these earlier instances of the motif, the threefold death does not appear as a salvation, as the offenders' souls are not described ascending to heaven. Rather, Grag is sent to hell by St Moling, while the spiritual outcome of the death of Aedh Dub is not mentioned.

## 2. A shifting motif

Rekdal (2011) explained that king tales from before the eleventh century depict clerics as more secondary figures in the tales, while they share an important role in post-Viking king tales, which can be interpreted as clerics having a “subordinate position to the lay nobility” in the pre-Viking period. Focusing on the analysis of the tales of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, Muirchertach mac Erca and Suibhne Geilt, Rekdal suggested that the threefold death certainly had pagan connotations through the deaths invoked by the motif (wounding, burning, and drowning) as these were the most common deaths suffered by warriors and kings by their enemies. Rekdal also specified that while the motif shows pagan connotations, it shows Christian elements as well, as the kings are depicted as Christian kings buried in the grounds of Christian churches, and that their purgation can be paralleled to the death of Christ with the piercing, and thirst on the cross (Rekdal, 2011, p.229). Similarly, Sayers (1992) mentioned the elements portrayed by the Irish poet Blathmac describing the death of Christ as similar to the elements of the threefold death, and more importantly to the elements called upon by Lóegaire mac Néill in his oath to not demand the cattle tribute to the Leinstermen. On the time of Christ’s death, Blathmac reads:

It would have been fitting for God’s elements, the beautiful sea, the blue heaven, the present earth, that they should change their aspect when keening their hero.

(Sayers, 1992, p.71)

The poet appears to be using a similar motif to the threefold death when he describes the Jews:

That the sky did not fall on them, that the great fire did not burn them, that the great ocean did not drown them! Their reproaches (i.e., those of the elements) would not have been light.... That the heavy earth did not swallow them!

(Sayers, 1992, p.71)

From this use of the elements in a similar manner to the death of Lóegaire, and from the similarity of the death of the Jews to the threefold death motif, it appears that, while there is a possibility that the Irish poet used more “native tradition” by his use of a

threefold motif (Sayers, 1992, p.71), the opposite is also possible. That the threefold element was brought into the insular literary tradition by hagiography and Christian writings is likely, as the threefold death motif is solely found in tales based in a Christian context (Radner, 1986), or in the context of the conversion to Christianity in the instance of *Comthóth Lógairi co Cretim 7 a Aided*.

The separation between hagiography and vernacular saga faded from the tenth century onwards, creating narratives in which kings and clerics would share common supernatural features, with the eventual death of the sinful king showing repentance. However, the *dénouement* of the threefold death tale appears in a different light in earlier and later versions of the motif. For example, the threefold death appears to be reserved to unapologetic, non-remorseful *persona* in the earlier threefold death tales as the *Anecdota* poems and the *Life of St Moling* featuring the threefold death of Grag, and the *Life of St Columba* portraying the death of Aedh Dub. Both individuals are portrayed as criminals and sinners, who do not appear to ask for forgiveness, or to try to avoid their sinful behaviours. Grag was a thief and a criminal trying to trick St Moling through his disguises so as to discredit his prophecies, and Aedh Dub was a king slayer, a murdering warrior, and culprit of a lustful relationship with a cleric. Neither shows sign of repentance. Lógairi fits into this category as well, as he breaks his oath since he feels protected from the fate that was predicted for him as long as he does not take sea.

The twelfth-century versions of the threefold death show kings unable to avoid their sins. Diarmait shows sadness and sorrow while he commits his offences against the church, and tries to avoid his threefold death. Muirchertach is deprived of his sanity because of his relationship with Sín, who prevents him from undoing his wrongs. In *Buile Suibhne*, Suibhne repents for his sins through his punishment as a hermit, and tries to go back to his senses despite the mill hag pulling him back into insanity.

The Lailoken and Merlin episodes appear to treat of the threefold death in a different manner. Both use the death as evidence for the prophetic capabilities of the madmen., as both prophets predicting the adultery of the queen are proved right in their predictions through the improbable death of the young boy (Merlin) and the death of the prophet himself (Lailoken fragment *b*). The same logic can be found in the *persona* of Beg mac Dé, who provokes his own death by uttering three lies, which proves the exactitude of his earlier prophecies regarding the foretold death of Diarmait.

The use of the threefold death motif thus appears to have changed through the conclusion of the tales. While Diarmait, Muirchertach and Suibhne reach heaven through

repentance, the earlier versions of the motif show no sign of empathy for the sinful offenders, who are killed through a violent death as a final punishment for their crimes. The threefold death motif present in the legends of Lailoken and Merlin is solely used as evidence of the rightfulness of their prophecies, but do not represent a punishment or a salvation of the individual whose death they foretell. In these narratives, the threefold death is used through the prism of the prophet's virtue, and represents only a means of ascertainment.

## **Conclusion:**

Through the analysis of the bog mummies and of the threefold death motif, this study aimed at observing the use of violence in the killing of important individuals, and its links with religious beliefs and landscapes in the British Isles both before, and after the coming of Christianity. The bog mummies have been studied in their chronological and geographical context, to see the extent of their correspondence with other archaeological finds. The debates concerning their identities and royal status have been addressed to look further into other possibilities leading to their violent ends and purposeful preservation. The notion of overkill has also been studied, as it has been somewhat exaggerated by former studies, thus aggravating the barbarity associated with Iron Age communities (Stewart, 2020). The aspects of boundary, both natural and spiritual, and boundary burials have also been analysed, as both are linked in their definition of a community's territory and political space. The perception of the bog as a natural boundary, and as a land providing preservation has been viewed, especially in its apparent conscious usage by the Iron Age communities in the production of the bog mummies.

The threefold death literary motif has been studied in its medieval context in Ireland and Britain to see the potential influences of political and religious change in the corpus. The place of the tales in the manuscripts and their relationship to the other texts written has been observed to see the links that were visible between the narratives. The link with landscape and places of archaeological importance featured in the tales has also been studied, permitting to observe further links between the threefold death tales and the sagas, through their depiction of locations such as Tara and Brug na Bóinne, which are often associated with the otherworld in the sagas. From these observations, it was possible to see the close relationship between vernacular sagas and Christian texts. The correspondence between the sagas and hagiography has also been addressed, as it showed the influence of the hagiographical organisation of a tale, and the political and moral lessons suggested by the scribes to their audience.

In its analysis of the violent death of important individuals, the study of the bog mummies through the examples of Lindow Man and Oldcroghan Man has highlighted the debates regarding the supposed identities and overkill involved in their deaths. The notion of overkill and the royal status of the bog mummies had certainly been exaggerated in earlier interpretations of the remains, giving the bog mummies even greater uniqueness (Stewart, 2020). However, while the royal or priestly status given to the bog mummies

remains uncertain, their importance has been shown through the scarcity of animal bog mummies, suggesting a conscious decision in the preserving of human remains in the bog (Wilkinson, 2006). Because of the human agency required in the creation of a bog mummy, it is almost certain that the killed individuals, whatever their social status, were designed by their Iron Age communities to be preserved by the bog. While the distinction between sacrifice and execution shall remain a pure speculation, it is difficult to dismiss the religious dimension suggested by the process involved in the production of a bog mummy. While doubt remains regarding the reason for their preservation, the bog appears as a landscape of importance for the insular Iron Age community from the effort they put into preserving some of their dead into the peat.

The study of the threefold death tales in a broader literary overview of the different narratives using the motif has shown a shift in the significance of the threefold death for the scribes using it through time. The landscape and historical context in which these tales were placed appear closely linked to the heroic sagas, embedded with Christian morals. While earlier examples of the motif appear to have used the motif as a solely punitive end, later examples of the threefold death tales put a greater focus on the importance of redemption, portraying the threefold death as a redeeming end and the sinful offenders reaching an almost saintly status. This broader overview of the literary motif has provided elements of the Christian context of its composition (Radner, 1986; Harrington, 2018). The close link between the contemporary concerns of the religious community and the sins portrayed in the tales has also been highlighted, especially through the study of the tripartite division of the offences committed by the kings, madmen and criminals.

Through the study of both case studies, this analysis was able to show the relationship between the violent deaths of individuals of importance and religious beliefs and landscapes in the British Isles. As noted previously, the religious context of the Iron Age is considerably debated, but the notion of religion cannot be dismissed from the study of the bog mummies without great difficulty. The careful deposition of the human remains in the bog appears to demonstrate a religious belief associated with the natural boundary formed by the bog, and to the political boundary of the Iron Age communities. Regarding the threefold death tales, the Christian context in which they were written has shown a different use of the motif from the seventh century, to its more defined use in the twelfth century. Each instance of the motif is different, but all threefold death tales show a similar pattern in the royal status of the offender, his triple death, and his conflict with the church.

Although the bog mummies and the threefold death tales cannot be related because of the chronological gap separating them, the violence used in the death of the bog mummies, and the violent deaths of the kings portrayed in the tales appear similar, and could both be linked to religious beliefs. It appears likely that the threefold death motif was used, in its earlier and later forms, as warning tales for kings and the medieval society. The medieval scribes created fictive narratives in which they depicted the deaths of ancient kings, possibly to portray unwanted behaviours and the importance of redemption. There would be a possibility that the bog mummies were also used as examples for their community. If one interprets their deaths as executions, the violence used in their killing was possibly a warning not to follow such behaviour. But this similarity is limited, as the sacrificial or punitive killing of an individual is entirely different from the composition of a threefold death tale concerned with the death of an ancient king. Both phenomena can thus be linked by the violence of the death of the individual, but not by their social status. Their link to religion is also different. While the threefold death tales are closely linked to hagiographical texts and Christian morals, the bog mummies are not clearly linked to religious beliefs since it remains unclear whether their killing represented a punishment or a sacrifice, or both. However, it seems likely that the intentional preservation of human remains in the peat would be linked to a religious system, and to the bogs being considered as a sacred landscape.

This study has been limited in its analysis of the threefold death tales dependant on translated versions of the tales. The lack of resources on the place of production of the manuscripts where the texts had been recorded also prevented a closer study of the relationship between the geographical data present within the tales, and the geographical and political context in which they were created. Similarly, a study of the toponymy of Lindow and Oldcroghan could have brought additional information on the legends associated with the bog mummies and with their geographical location.

This subject could have been further enriched by a comparative study to include the literature and archaeological finds of northern Europe, in so far as many examples of Iron Age bog mummies had been found in Northern Germany, Denmark and southern Sweden, and the literary evidence that multiple deaths, such as the death of Odin and the violent death of the Danish King Vikar, had been recorded in Norse literature (Eson, 2010). A study of the similarity of these texts with hagiography of Christian writing from their corresponding regions of production would possibly provide complementary information on the creation, or adaptation of a similar motif in Nordic literature. The potential origins

of the bog mummies would also have been an interesting data to study through the analysis of oxygen isotope on their remains, but this data is unfortunately unavailable at the moment.

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## Annexe I: Lindow Man remains



Lindow Man, front view of the upper body. A leg was also found but does not provide much information. A nail was found with the remains, visible on his torso, above his arm. The skin and hair is well preserved, except for his arms which were not as well preserved by the peat. © The Trustees of the British Museum



View of the wounds at the top of the skull, thought to have been inflicted with a blunt instrument or due to bog pressure, although swelling on the edges of the wound makes this unlikely for some of the damage. © The Trustees of the British Museum



The twisted cord of sinew found around Lindow Man's neck. The cord was tied with a triple knotting technique, and is thought to have been used as a garrote. © The Trustees of the British Museum



The wound to the neck of Lindow Man, observed with a mirror so as to not damage the remains. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Closer look at the arm and fox-fur armband. © The Trustees of the British Museum

## Annexe II: Oldcroghan Man remains

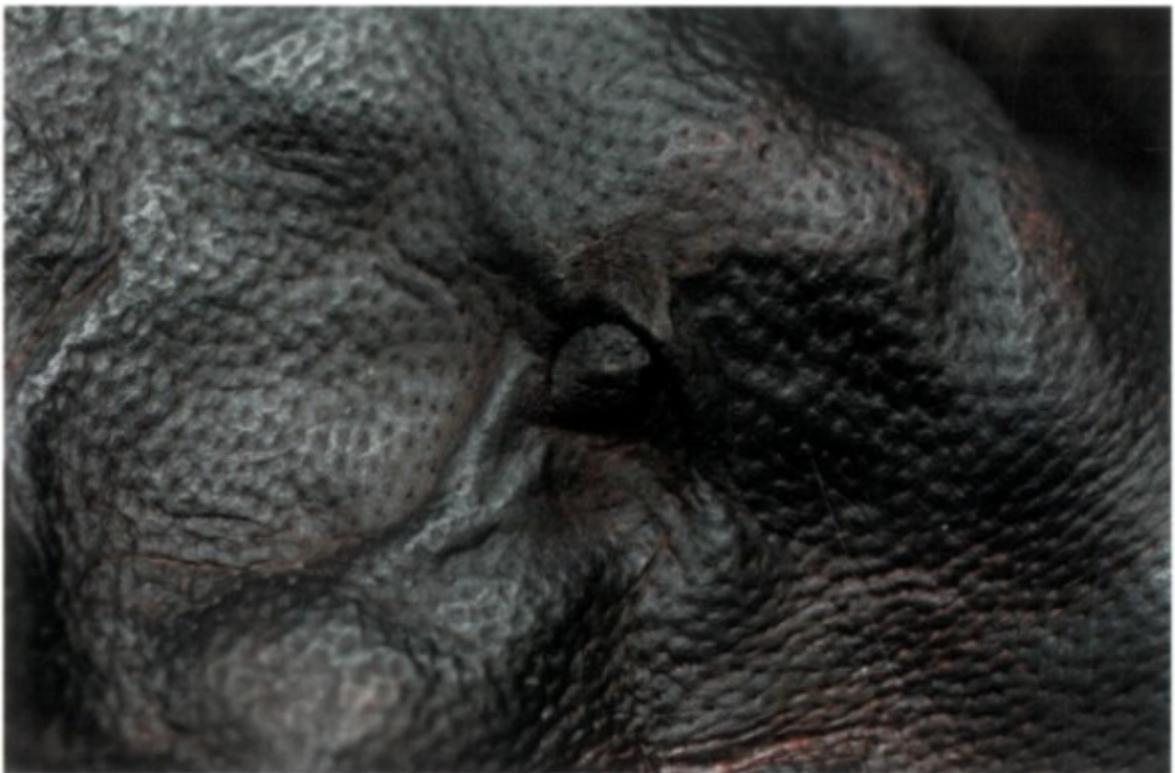
The following images are taken from “Portfolio: Out of the Bog” by Frank Miller (2006).



Oldcroghan Man, front view. His remains consist of his arms and upper body, with a visible wound to the arm. He was decapitated and his upper body was separated from his lower body around the time of death. *Irish Pages* © 2006 Irish Pages LTD



The arm shows a deep cut, through which the twisted hazel withy was passed. *Irish Pages* © 2006 Irish Pages LTD



Oldcroghan Man shows deeply cut nipples, although it is unsure if this was done around the time of death, or if the tissue was damaged by the acidity of the bog. *Irish Pages* © 2006 Irish Pages LTD



Oldcroghan Man's hand shows no sign of manual labour, and appears to have well-manicured nails. It is unsure whether this is evidence for his high status, or if the acidity of the bog could have smoothed the skin of his hand, thus erasing any form of manual labour.

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