CHAPTER FIVE

FROM WINE IN A GOBLET TO MILK IN COWDUNG. THE TRANSFORMATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN KINGS IN THREE POST-VIKING TALES FROM IRELAND

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Is tre fhír flathemon cech comarbe con a chlí ina chainorbu clanda.

Audacht Morainn (‘The Testament of Morann’)

Introduction: Irish medieval king tales

In Irish medieval tales the king is frequently, if not constantly, subject to criticism. Criticism of royal conduct, implicit or explicit, is the theme of most of the king tales. These tales span a long period of time: they were written down from the seventh-eighth century to the twelfth, and the kings described include both pre-historic kings and historic kings down to the tenth century. Yet notwithstanding the inclusion of pre-historic material which may have been transmitted orally, these texts were written well within the Christian period in Ireland, reckoned to start with the fifth century. Tales about pre-historic and historic kings have all been labelled the ‘Historical cycle’ (also called the ‘Cycle of the Kings’).
Two categories

I will for this discussion classify the tales concerning kings into two categories. The first one consists of all king tales written before the eleventh century. In this first group I will also include the group of texts called admonitory texts. Although they are tales belonging to a different genre, they are concerned with the same questions about rulership as the king tales. One might also possibly have used a chronological criterion, putting the tales about the pre-historic/legendary kings into one group and those about the historic kings into another. Such a classification may, however, overshadow the features they share and their common concern for rulership.

In the second group, consisting of tales written in the eleventh and twelfth century, we seem to have fewer king tales. To this group belong the three king tales which will be analysed in this chapter. Although they, or at least two of them, describe early historic kings and are also concerned with rulership they are distinguished from other king tales by their different approach and perspective. The approach and perspective of our tales will be discussed further below. Suffice to say here, that it consists of explicit criticism together with a pronounced aim of saving the king from Hell.

My question in this chapter is why is there so much critique and so little praise in many of the king tales? To discuss this question I have chosen the tales with the harshest, at least the most explicit, critique, the three post-Viking tales about two early historic and one fictional (or partly fictional) king: Diarmait mac Cerbaill (+565), Muirchertach mac Erca (+534) and Suibhne mac Colmáin Chuair. The tales are Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill ("The sudden death of Diarmait mac Cerbaill"), Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca ("The sudden death of Muirchertach mac Erca") and Buile Suibhne ("Suibhne’s vision/frenzy").

One reason for the sheer amount of tales depicting a king critically, may be that the lay nobility, including the king, depended on advice from the learned nobility—which encompassed specialists, such as judges, filid (learned poets) and clerics—to ensure good governance of society. The king’s natural instincts were for example not sufficient

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5 Outstanding example of tales in this group would be Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh and Fled Dúin na nGéd.

6 The learned elite of filid was ranked by seven grades and three sub-grades, exactly like the lay nobility, so a chief poet (ollam) would praise a king, a minor poet a minor king or lord, etc. The Church had a similar hierarchy—from bishop to doorkeeper.