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Ancient Ireland

The *Lebor Gabála Erenn*, commonly called *The Book of the Invasions of Ireland*, is a compilation of Irish origin stories, a mixture of legends and oral history from earliest times. The earliest complete surviving text of the *Lebor Gabála Erenn* dates from the twelfth century, but there is abundant evidence that the text was first put down in writing many centuries before that. The surviving version has a Christian gloss, as it synchronizes the myths, legends, early history, and genealogies within the framework of biblical exegesis. It begins Irish history with the biblical flood in the year of the world 1104 *Anno Mundi*, a date hotly argued even by the very early commentators.

Cesair, granddaughter of Noah, and her father, Bith, and her followers are the first to reach Ireland. Then comes Partholón, descendant of the biblical Magog, and his followers. These are clearly additions to Irish legendary origins made after Christianity took hold in the country. Cesair's settlements are quickly destroyed. Nemed and his followers then arrive from the Caspian Sea. They are destroyed by the Fomorii (fo = under and mor = sea, i.e., "dwellers under the sea"). With the appearance of the Fomorii, who are also called the *Tuatha De Domhnan*, we find the first indication of native Celtic deities, but these are the gods and goddesses of evil. They appear in the texts but not as invaders or settlers.

The next group to land in Ireland are the *Fir Bolg*, short, dark people who come to Ireland fleeing oppression. They are said to have eventually been driven to the Aran and Rathlin Islands. Then come the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the Children of Danu, the mother goddess, and it is clear that we have now encountered the pantheon of

Celtic Irish gods and goddesses of light and good, as opposed to their bitter enemies, the Fomorii.

The last invasion of which the Lebor Gabála Erenn speaks is that of the Milesians, named after Míl Easpáin (soldier of Spain), whose real name is Golamh, and he is the progenitor of the Gaels who land in Ireland and establish their dominance. Whether there is any significance in this sequence of mythical invasions is still the subject of scholastic debate.

Nevertheless, the arrival of the Milesians from the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula does fit with what we know of the movements of historic Celts during the first millennium B.C. Some of the Celtic people were settled in the Iberian Peninsula from early times. Greek and Phoenician traders attest to this fact, as do the Romans in the third century B.C. Stories of the Celtic wanderers in Egypt, serving as mercenaries to the pharaohs, are also historically documented. Míl Easpáin's wife is said to be Scota, the daughter of the pharaoh Nectanebus, and there were two pharaohs of that name. She was killed during the invasion of Ireland and is said to be buried in Scota's Glen, 3 miles from Tralee in County Kerry. Moreover, at the time that this invasion is said to take place, circa 1000 B.C., archaeology has noted the introduction of some Hallstatt, early continental Celtic, artifacts. Can these legends of the arrival of the Gaels have a foundation in fact?

The Naming of Ireland

And they, the sons of Míl with the children of the Gael, landed and came thereafter on to Sliabh Mis, where Banba met them with her Druid and her host. Amairgen, son of Míl, asked her: "What is your name?" "Banba," said she, "and from me is this island named." Thereafter they made their way to Sliabh Eibhline where Fotla with her Druid and host met them. Amairgen asked her name. "Fotla," said she, "and from me is this island named." Then they came to Uisnech of Midhe and there found Éire and her Druid and her host. Amairgen asked her name and she told him and said it was from her that the island was named.

But Éire said: "Warriors, welcome to you; long is your coming hither known to my Druid. Yours shall be this island forever, and there shall be no island of like size that shall be better between this and the East of the World. There shall be no people more perfect than your people forever." "That is good," said Amairgen, and thanked her for her courtesy. But Donn, the elder son of Míl, said: "Not to her is it right to give thanks, but to our gods and to our strength of arms." So Éire answered him: "You Donn shall have no profit from this island nor shall your progeny. But a

gift to me, fair minded Amairgen, that my name shall be on this island forever.” “Your name shall be the chief name of the island forever,” promised Amairgen. And he likewise promised Éire’s two sisters, for such were Banba and Fotla, that their names would also be immortalised. Thus it was—Éire is the name of the island but the poets do also recourse to Banba and Fotla when the island’s praises are sung.

Lebor na hUidre (Book of the Dun Cow, also called the Book of Clonmacnoise), written at Clonmacnoise c. A.D. 1100, compiled by Mael Muire Mac Ceileachair (d. A.D. 1106)

Notable Early High Kings

Much has been written on the lives and adventures of the high kings and provincial kings of Ireland from the time of Eremón and Eber Foinn, the two sons of Golamh or Mile Easpain, who brought the Gaels to Ireland. Obviously none of the accounts could be deemed as eyewitness. But the records we have were made by scribes writing down a long, sophisticated tradition of oral historians, and most scholars believe that the basic information is trustworthy.

The earliest written materials concerning the genealogy of Irish kings come from the seventh century A.D. and are the oldest fragments of Irish poetry, known as forsundud, or praise poems. Four such genealogical poems were collected by Professor Kuno Meyer, one of them giving a genealogy of the Munster king Cathal Cú cenmáthair (d. A.D. 641). Professor Myles Dillon has pointed out that the forsundud are, therefore, the oldest surviving form of Irish poetry, and has compared them to other ancient Indo-European poetic forms, such as the Sanskrit Vedic narasamsyah, songs in praise of princes. The forsundud were handed down for a thousand years or so before being committed to writing in the Christian era. Among the ancient Irish kings, the following are notable.

Ollamh Fódhla, whose dates are put at 754–714 B.C. and who was said to have died “a natural death within the ramparts of Tara.” His name means “high poet of Fódhla” (Ireland). Lost sources quoted in the seventeenth century claim he was a man of wisdom who first gathered the ancient laws of the country, the *Laws of the Fénechus*, or free land-tillers, and also organized the Festival of Tara to be held every three years at the feast of Samhain (November 1) to discuss and update the laws and ensure the annals were kept up to date.

Ollamh Fódhla, fierce in valour,
Marked out the Scholar’s Rampart,
The first mighty king with grace
Who convened the Festival of Tara.

Fifty years, it was tuneful fame,
 was he in the High Kingship over Ireland
 so that from him, with fortunate freedom,
 Ulaidh (Ulster) received its name.

He died a natural death within his capital [rampart].

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Macha Mong Ruadh, *Macha of the Red Hair*, is claimed as the only female high king, and the date in which she began her reign was 377 B.C. However, her traditions were mixed with the myths about goddesses of war and sovereignty; in fact, there are at least four Machas appearing in Irish myth, so it is difficult to separate reality from mythology.

Macha Mong Ruadh, daughter of Aodh Ruadh, son of Badharn, son of Airgedmhar, son of Siorlamh, son of Fionn, son of Bratha, son of Labhriadh, son of Cairbe, son of Ollamh Fodhla, held the sovereignty of Ireland seven years. And it was in her time that Ard Mhacha, that is Macha's Height [Armagh] that is named after her, as is Emain Mhacha [Navan].

Dinnseanchas, Rennes Library, ed. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique*, vols. 15 and 16

Bron Bherg [House of Sorrow], haven of the sick, was built by her word.

Banshenchus, ed. M. Dobbs, *Revue Celtique*, 1930, 1931, 1932

Bron Bherg, the first recorded hospital, was destroyed in A.D. 22. Ireland had an ancient and advanced medical system with laws on the running of hospitals, which were available to all who needed treatment irrespective of rank.

Macha, red-hair daughter of Aedh Rúad mac Badarn, was seven years in the kingship of Ireland after Cimbáeth, till she fell by the hand of Rechtaid Ríderg of Munster.

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Tuathal Techtmhair (*Tuathal the Legitimate*), whose reign was given as A.D. 130–160. He is considered important because he decreed that the high king should not have his home in any of the four kingdoms (Ulster, Leinster, Munster, or Connacht), but being king over them all and not favoring one kingdom, he should rule from an independent territory called the middle kingdom or province. He

created this as Midhe (middle) around the palaces of Tara, Teltown, Tlacghtga, and Uisneach. Midhe is modern Meath and Westmeath.

Then Túathal Techtmar fell thereafter in Dál Araide, in Moin in Chatha, the place where are Ollar and Ollarba, at the hands of Mál son of Rochraide, after completing thirty years in the kingship of Ireland, in the reign of Antonius, King of the World. In his time the festival of Casc [Easter] was adopted by Christians, and in his time the Bóroimha [the fine leveled against the kingdom of Leinster] was extorted.

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Cormac Mac Art. *The start of his reign is usually given as c. A.D. 227–266. He was the son of Art the Solitary and grandson of Conn of the Hundred Battles. He was nicknamed Ulfhada (long beard). His bodyguard was the Fianna commanded by Foinn Mac Cumhail (Finn MacCool). The cycle of stories and adventures that grew up around them became highly popular in the medieval period.*

Cormac had thrice fifty stewards. There were fifty warriors standing in the king's presence as he sat at his meal. There were three hundred cup-bearers in the fortress, and thrice fifty goblets of carbuncle, of gold, and of silver. The total of his household amounted to one thousand and fifty men. . . .

Cormac, son of Art the Solitary, was forty years in the kingship of Ireland until he died in Tech Cleitig, after the bone of a salmon stuck in his throat; or it is phantoms that slew him after he had been cursed by Máel-Cenn.

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Niall Naoi-Ghiallach *(of the Nine Hostages). His dates are usually given as A.D. 379–405, although some evidence has put his death as late as A.D. 454. His name comes from Nél (cloud). His role in the political history of early Ireland is a crucial one, and he is the eponymous progenitor of the Uí Néill, descendants of Néill who dominated the high kingship for centuries and also the Irish struggle against England until the mid-seventeenth century. The traditions of his rule abound in stories of the socially weak triumphing over those who think themselves strong and in Niall's raids against other lands.*

Niall went into Alba with a large host to strengthen and to establish the Dál Riada and the Irish people in Alba who were at this time gaining

supremacy over the Cruithin who are called the Picti; and he was the first to give the name Scotia to Alba . . . and it was through veneration for Scota, daughter of the Pharaoh Nectanebus, who was wife of Golamh called Míl Easpain, from whom they themselves sprang.

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On one such raid he was slain by Eochaidh, a son of the Leinster king Éana Cinselach, who was said to have taken refuge among the Saxons. Niall's body was brought back by ship to Ireland and taken to Ochann (Faughan Hill, near Navan, in County Meath) for burial. His court poet was Torna Eigeas (the Learned), of whom three poems are said to have survived.

Saxons with overwhelming cries of war, hosts of
Jutes from the continent
From the hour in which the King fell, Gael and
Picts are in a sore straight

Darling hero of the shinning host, whose tribes
Are vast, a beloved band;
Every man was under his protection when we used to
Go to foregather with him

Torna Eigeas (the Learned), fl. A.D. 400, in *Lebor na hUidre*,
translated in Eugene O'Curry,
Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish vol. 2, Dublin, 1873

Ireland's Early Historians

The first identifiable secular Irish historian was Sinlán mocco Min, abbot of Bangor, who died there in A.D. 607. His annals no longer exist as a separate or distinguishable document. Cenn Faelad (d. A.D. 670), of whose writings only fragments remain, studied at Tuaim Dreacain (Toomregan), which was one of the great universities and medical schools in ancient Ireland. The evidence that we have shows that Irish society already had a literary structure and there was a bardic assembly, which appointed a chief bard. One of the earliest chief bards whom we can identify is Dallán Forgaill of Connacht (b. c. A.D. 540, d. A.D. 596), some of whose poems still survive. He was succeeded in that office by another Connacht poet, Seanchán Torpéist (c. A.D. 570–647), who is said to have saved the epic Táin Bó Cuailgne from oblivion, and this explains the survival of apparently sixth-century verses known as rosc in the otherwise eighth-century verses of the text. Another early historian was

Rumann mac Colmáin (d. A.D. 748 at Tullamore, County Offaly), who was hailed as “the Homer and the Virgil of Ireland.”

The earliest known secular book is Cin Dromma Snechta (Book of Drumsnat). This contained several heroic tales written in the first half of the eighth century. It was known to writers of the medieval period but no longer exists. The eighth century saw the rise of the Golden Age of Irish culture and the expansion of its influence in Europe. Much of this great learning and scholastic endeavor has been lost due to the attempted destruction of Irish cultural achievement during the colonial period.

It is not until the tenth and eleventh centuries that we start to have any surviving extensive historical works. Mael Muru of Fathan (c. A.D. 820–886), Cormac mac Cuileannáin (A.D. 836–908), Eochaidh Ua Flainn (fl. A.D. 950–984), Cenaed Ó hArtagáin (c. A.D. 910–975), Muirchertagh Mac Conchertaigh, Mac Liag (b. c. A.D. 960, d. 1015), Cuán Ó Lothcháim (c. A.D. 970–1024), Flann Mainistreach (b. c. A.D. 1000, d. 1056), and Giolla Caoimhin (fl. A.D. 1025–1072) were the leading historians of this period whose works are known. Mac Liag was actually secretary to High King Brian Bóroimhe (Brian Boru) and wrote Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, about the war against the Danes or Vikings. He was killed with Brian at the battle of Clontarf and his work was finished by Erard Mac Coise (b. c. A.D. 960–1022), who was chief poet to Malsechnaill Mac Domnaill, who resumed the high kingship after Brian’s death and ruled from 1014 to 1027.