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Ernst F. Tonsing
California Lutheran University

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A Celtic Invocation: Cétnad nAíse

Ernst F. Tonsing, California Lutheran University

Abstract

Very little has been written about the baffling text of the Celtic invocation, the *Cétnad nAíse*, for the reason that it is abstruse, and the allusions in it resist sure explication. Despite the obstacles to interpreting the *Cétnad nAíse*, however, a close examination of the poem can yield some clues as to its sources, purpose, and, perhaps, authorship. To do this, the lines of the prayer will be treated in three groups: the four "invocations," the "petitions," and the "I am" sayings. It can be concluded that, contrary to some analysts, the content of the poem is derived mostly from pagan, Irish sources and that the Christian elements in it are sparse.

Keywords

Cétnad nAíse, Celtic Religion, Celtic Invocation, Middle Irish, Celtic Magic, Senach, New Testament Apocrypha

Introduction¹

Not many scholars have undertaken to analyze the perplexing text of the *Cétnad nAíse*: "A Chant of Long Life" (*Admuiniur secht n-ingena trethan*). One such attempt was made by Bernhard Maier (University of Bonn) at the Twenty-sixth Annual Celtic Studies Conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, in March, 2004,² in his paper, "Pagan Spell and Christian Prayer: An Early Irish Case Study,"³ using the edition and translation of John Carey⁴ from the *Mittelirische Verslehren*, edited by R. Thurneysen.⁵ Professor Maier explains the lines of the prayer by comparing them to passages in the Christian Bible and New Testament Apocrypha, for example, the first line:

I invoke the seven daughters of the sea
Who form the threads of the long-lived youths.

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He sees in this a reference to the apocryphal gospel, the *Protevangelium of James*, in which the young Virgin Mary, having been promised to the Lord by her parents, Anna and Joachim, is raised in the Temple in Jerusalem. To occupy her time, seven "pure virgins of the tribe of David" are brought to the Temple to join her in spinning the threads and weaving the "veil" to hang in front of the Holy of Holies.⁶ Similarly, he interprets the twelfth line, "I invoke my silver warrior," in orthodox Christian terms. This, he thinks, is a reference to Christ, whose role as "warrior" becomes especially important after the time of Constantine. Line 34, he describes as an echo from the biblical book of Psalms: "I am an impregnable fortress." Professor Maier here quotes the well-known hymn by the Reformer, Martin Luther, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* (*A mighty Fortress is our God*), and elaborates how the author of the Celtic text adapted Psalm 46 and other, similar biblical passages in this line. The "seven candles" (line 33) he describes as inspired by the seven "golden lampstands" of St. John's *Apocalypse* (Revelation 1:20, etc.). For Dr. Maier, the Celtic text is mostly inspired by biblical and extra-biblical, Christian sources, with some Irish, pagan elements.

Professor Meier proposes that the Christian elements in the *Cétnad nAíse* are primary, but John Carey, another analyst of the poem, is uncertain whether or not to classify it as mostly pagan, despite the lines containing references to the "King of all things," the "Holy Spirit," and a saint Laisrén.⁷ He cites Kuno Meyer's suggestion that, "an ecclesiastic...recast an ancient and probably popular pagan prayer by adding Christian tags to it," but thinks that Calvert Watkins' description of it as "a druid prayer for long life, run through with Indo-European poetic phraseology," is mistaken.⁸

While the *Cétnad nAíse* often is translated, the original is found in only one copy of a Middle Irish metrical treatise.⁹ As a *lorica* (Gaelic, *lúirech*), or "breastplate," invocation, it falls, generally, in the genre of protective prayers like that of the *Faeth Fiada* (the "Deer's Cry"), or "Breastplate of Saint Patrick," attributed to the saint but probably written in the eighth century.¹⁰ This type of prayer calls upon various heavenly powers as a safeguard against physical and spiritual hazards.¹¹ However, while the *Faeth Fiada* includes easily recognized Christian themes such as the "power" of Christ's birth, baptism, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and ascension (lines 7-11), along with the "powers" of cherubim, angels, archangels, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, etc. (lines 13-5, 18-20), these are absent from the *Cétnad nAíse*. The former invokes "the might of God," the "mind of God," the "eye of God," etc. (lines 36-40), but there is no direct

mention of God other than one, ambiguous reference to the "King of all things" (line 29) in the *Cétnad nAíse*. Further, the dangers against which the *Faeth Fiada* guards the invoker are the customary Christian hazards of the "predictions of false prophets," the "black laws of paganism," the "crooked laws of heretics," the "encirclement of idolatry," and the "spells of women and smiths and druids," etc. (lines 53-57).¹² These are missing from the *Cétnad nAíse*.

Very little has been written about the *Cétnad nAíse* because it is abstruse and the allusions in it resist sure explication.¹³ In the examination of the prayer presented here, none of the suggestions can rise above conjecture because of the nature of the text and our distance from the time and culture in which it was written. Despite the obstacles involved in interpreting the *Cétnad nAíse*, however, an examination of the poem can yield some clues as to its sources, purpose, and, perhaps, authorship. To do this, the lines of the prayer will be treated in three groups, the four "invocations," the "petitions," and the "I am" sayings, with the result that it can be concluded that the content of the poem is derived mostly from pagan, Irish sources, and that the Christian elements in it are very sparse.

Group One: The Four Invocations

The framework of the *Cétnad nAíse* is created by four "invocations." These petition the "seven daughters of the sea" (line 1), the "silver warrior" (line 12), "Senach of the seven ages" (line 30), and the last invocation, which summarizes the entreaties to the combined powers of all of the above: "I summon their benefits to me" (line 40). Each of these, except the last, are followed by examples of how the beings called upon may assist the suppliant, introduced by the phrases, "may...", "may I...", or, "may my." Thus, after the first invocation comes the petition, "May three deaths be taken from me...", after the second, "May time be granted me...", and, after the third, "May my seven candles not be quenched." These invocations divide the poem into unequal sections, each with loosely related subjects.

Invocation of the "Seven Daughters of the Sea"

Concerning the first invocation, it is not at all evident that the reference in the initial line is to the Virgin Mary and the seven "pure virgins" recruited to weave the holy Veil, as Professor Maier proposes. It seems odd that seven would be named but not Mary, whose powers to answer prayer would have been considered far more efficacious at the time. To make a convincing

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appeal to the Virgin Mary, the one who wrote the prayer certainly should have included her, or, even named her alone. Furthermore, in the *Protevangelium of James*, these virgins are not "seven daughters of the sea," but seven "pure virgins of the tribe of David," that is, of land-locked Jerusalem,¹⁴ a distinction that would have been very important to the author in directing the prayer precisely to the ones most able to render the consequences sought.

Ireland, of course, was never conquered by Rome, but it is well known that in addition to their Christian faith, the missionaries brought the cultures of the Continental and Mediterranean world with them. The lively curiosity of Irish scholars and even bishops facilitated the blending of Christian and indigenous traditions, producing a remarkable rapprochement whereby the old pagan stories of the gods find a place alongside the Christian and even Graeco-Roman deities.¹⁵ This is evident in many of the early Irish texts, such as the gloss for chapter X of the *Altus Prosator*, supposedly written by Saint Colum Cille (or, Columba) at Iona, in which the history of the world from creation to the Last Judgment is related.¹⁶ In it are found the classical Graeco-Roman legends of the giants below Mount Etna, the rivers in Hades, and the narration of the story of the beloved of Neptune (Poseidon), Scylla, who angers Circe, daughter of the sun god Helios, and is transformed into a sea-monster.¹⁷ Saint Brigit, one of the three most prominent saints of Ireland besides Patrick and Colum Cille, may have been a native deity who was assimilated to the Christian rites. John Carey notes that her cult resembles the Roman goddess of the hearth, Vesta, and that her sacred fire was presided over by an order of nuns at the convent of Kildare into the late twelfth century.¹⁸

Rather than the "daughters" of Jerusalem cited by Bernhard Meier, it is possible that these "seven daughters of the sea" are astronomical beings that would have been immediately identified in the Graeco-Roman culture as the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas and the ocean nymph, Pleione. Either out of grief for the fate of their father or the death of their sisters, they kill themselves and are transformed into the well-known constellation.¹⁹ In the text (line 2), they are identified as those "who form the threads," that is, who spin with a distaff, which is the iconographic indicator of their gender.²⁰ The "long-lived youths" (line 2) may designate their offspring. For example, the oldest and most beautiful daughter, Maia, is the mother of the immortal god Hermes (Mercury) with Zeus,²¹ Electra, another daughter, also by Zeus, gives birth to the ancestor of the kings of Troy,²² etc. From ancient through medieval times, the astrological significance of these stars is that they rise in the middle of May and set at the end of October,

marking the beginning and end of the sailing season,²³ thus, designating the safest time for ocean travelers. That these seven celestial beings are invoked suggests that the one who writes this prayer seeks protection for a dangerous journey (see lines 6, 20, 21, etc.).

Invocation of the "Silver Warrior"

The second invocation, this time to the "silver warrior, who has not died, who will not die" (lines 12-3), normally would not be identified with Christ, contrary to Meier. In Christian literature, Christ is always described as the one "who has died, and who has risen again." The Crucifixion, death, burial and Resurrection is the pivotal sequence of events in Christ's life, and its affirmation is fundamental to Christian theology. It does not seem likely that the author of the prayer would err so fundamentally regarding this essential doctrine of the church.

Also, the color usually assigned to Christ is gold. Late Roman and Byzantine emperors are seated on gold thrones within the Sacred Palace. Not only do they walk on gold pavements, on gold beds and sit under gold canopies,²⁴ their souls are said to be transported to heaven in golden chariots, as depicted on their coins, such as one of Septimus Severus mounting up to the sky on a quadriga.²⁵ In like manner, Christ is often represented in Christian art as seated on a gold, bejeweled throne.²⁶ Also note the awe inspiring mosaic in the grotto below St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican where Christ is depicted ascending into heaven aboard a quadriga. Here, Christ is pictured as the golden sun with cruciform rays extending from his head.²⁷

The reference to the "silver warrior" might also be astrological, referring to the moon that moves dependably and predictably on its rounds night after night. Here, again, a Classical and medieval Mediterranean reference might be intended. As the Roman goddess "Luna" (or "Selene" for the Greeks), the moon's silvery light rules the night. Her passage through the skies is in a chariot pulled by two white horses.²⁸ As Selene, she is also identified with Artemis (Diana), the twin of Apollo, children of Zeus and Leto. She is also armed, like Apollo, with bow and arrows, and fights monsters and giants, sometimes alongside Apollo.²⁹ She is even called "Phoebe," as Apollo is called "Phoebus."³⁰ Just as Apollo is the golden god of the day, she is the silver, "warrior goddess" of the night.³¹ Well-known is the story of Selene's love for a beautiful mortal youth, Endymion, son of Aëthlios, the daughter of Aeolus, king of Elis. Nightly she visits him, from which fifty daughters are produced (possibly the number of lunar months between the

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Olympic games). As a reward for his "services," he is transported to paradise and made eternally youthful and immortal.³²

The syncretistic interaction between Celtic and Roman deities is complex, and any opinion is subject to bias.³³ Yet, the gods and goddesses of a polytheistic culture are inclined to develop universal attributes and take on the character of comparable beings.³⁴ Thus, the fact that Roman deities appear in Irish garb in a Celtic invocation is not entirely out of order.³⁵ For example, while Julius Caesar may not be completely accurate in making correspondences between the Roman and (Continental) Celtic deities in his eagerness to present a systematic discussion in the *Gallic Wars* (6:17), there are certain similarities:

Post hunc Apollinem et Martem et Iovem et Minervam. De his eandem fere, quam reliquae gentes, habent opinionem: Apollinem morbos depellere, Minervam operum atque artificiorum intia tradere, Iovem imperium caelestium tenere, Martem bella regere.

(After [Mercury] they have Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. Of these deities they have almost the same idea as other peoples: Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva teaches the first principles of the arts and crafts, Jupiter rules the heavens, and Mars controls the issue of war.)³⁶

There is archaeological evidence for these similarities on dedication tablets where a Roman or Gaulish name is accompanied by a Celtic epithet. The many statues of Mercury, for example, are as likely to represent the Roman god as the native deity.³⁷

However, with this said, there is still another option: the Celtic god Nuada, called *Argetlam*, that is, "of the silver hand" (or "warrior of the silver arm").³⁸ During the battle at Magtured his hand is cut off and replaced by one of silver. He is regarded as a Celtic "Zeus," a god of light and fertility suffering in conflict with the dark divinities. Like the Welsh *Llúd Llaw Ereint*, or, "silver hand," he protects his tribe from different afflictions.³⁹ John Carey identifies this god with Nodons, who has a temple alongside the Severn in the Roman period.⁴⁰ J. A. MacCulloch has suggested that Nodons' name may be cognate with Gaelic words denoting "growth," "harvest," and "possession," and that "Nudd Hael," or, "the generous," who owns 21,000 milk cows, is "euhemerized" from Nuada.⁴¹ As a god of "light and growth," and protector of people, Nuada, the one "of the silver hand," would be a worthy candidate for the "silver warrior" invoked in the Celtic *Cétnad nAíse* invocation (line 12).

A note of caution, however: the indigenous Irish religious tradition included many gods and goddesses, making it difficult to identify or classify specific deities. Their cults were tribal and local. They were attached to the land as "tutelary deities," promoting fertility and the cycle of seasons.⁴² By virtue of their manifold offices, these local gods and goddesses moved easily into Christianity with some modifications.⁴³ The Christian monks even aided their blending with the biblical stories when recording the mythological and semi-historical Irish traditions beginning in the second half of the sixth century. Of this there are many examples. One has only to recall the remarkable *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of Invasions*) that retells the history of the world from Genesis through the biblical generations, bringing it to "Íth son of Bregon" who "came first to Ireland...."⁴⁴ However, due to the necessity of "baptizing" the narratives, these stories were reinterpreted, altering them to conform to biblical and Christian theological ideas.⁴⁵ Thus, a mixture of Celtic, Roman and Christian themes in the *Cétnad nAíse* is not entirely unexpected.

Invocation of Senach

The third invocation (line 30) is possibly to an historical person, Senach. This might not necessarily be the Christian saint referred to by Professor Meier, an Irish bishop of the late sixth century who is commemorated on August 3rd. Senach is a student of Saint Finian (also spelled Finnian or Finden, 470?-552?), a great wonder-worker⁴⁶ called the "Master of the Saints of Ireland," who instituted a famous school at Cluain-Eraird (Eraird's Meadow), now called Clonard, on the river Boyne. The Benedictine school, which eventually had some three thousand students, was devoted to the exposition of the Bible.⁴⁷

Senach (or Senan),⁴⁸ is esteemed enough to have followed Finian as head of this school.⁴⁹ If the third invocation is to this person and not, perhaps, to some other mythological figure, it is unclear what saintly favors are sought from Senach. As "Senach of the seven ages" ("Senach of the seven lives"),⁵⁰ it is conceivable that this figure's ability to confer a long life is the rationale for the author of the poem to address this petition to him.

It may also be Senach's wisdom and eloquence ("whom fairy women fostered on the breasts of inspiration," lines 31-2) that are so powerful, which is why the author of the poem is confident that an appeal to him can guarantee the requested petitions. The inspiration mentioned in line 32 may also be translated "on the banks of the Bush." John Carey recalls that this is one

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of the rivers traditionally considered a source of supernatural knowledge from the underworld.⁵¹ Yet, the attribute of being reared by fairy women suggests a mythological source, indicating that Senach might be one of the many, old, local, tribal gods prominent in the veneration of the author of the text. This Senach may even be a potent *filí*, that is "seer" or "bard," the professional caste of poets highly esteemed well into the Christian era in Ireland.⁵² However they are interpreted, the attributes of Senach are thought to be ample and accessible by means of this prayer. Evidently, whether Christian saint or some other pagan Irish deity, Senach is regarded as powerful enough that he, alone of all of the many Irish notables, is invoked here, and is the only one who can ensure the success of the invocation.

Summary Invocation

The last invocation (line 40) is brief, and brings together all of the petitions to the various beings appeal to so far. It concentrates the appeals like a lens focuses light: "I summon their benefits to me." The line following (41) asks that the power of the Holy Spirit (*Spirto Noíb*) confer grace upon the petitioner. In the context of this poem, it seems that this line in Gaelic is awkwardly "tacked on," as little before it seems to warrant its inclusion here. This appeal to the Holy Spirit is not further clarified, nor is it followed by any of the specific requests for distinct benefits that are found after the previous three petitions.

Indeed, the original prayer may have ended with line 40, one that summarizes all of the ideas before it. This is where Greene and O'Connor end the document. The translation of John Carey has four additional lines in Latin, two containing three-fold invocations of the "Lord" (*Domini est salus*) and of "Christ" (*Christi est salus*), followed by two of a benediction (lines 42-45): *Super populum tuum, Domine, benedictio tua* (May your blessing, Lord, be upon your people). Carey notes the resemblance between these last two lines and the conclusion of Psalm 3:8b, "thy blessing is on your people," although this may be modeled on some other ecclesiastical benediction.⁵³

The Gaelic *Faeth Fiada* of Saint Patrick (lines 76-78) also ends with Latin invocations, but with two lines of *Domini est salus*, followed by one of *Christi est salus*, without the rubrics to repeat the lines as found in the *Cétnad nAíse*, lines 42 and 43. The last line of both prayers, the *Faeth Fiada* (*salus tua, Domine, sit semper nobiscum*, "may your salvation, Lord, be always with us"),⁵⁴ like the last line of the *Cétnad nAíse*, might reflect the words of Psalm 3:8.

Because the only other Christian reference within the prayer is likely to an obscure saint (and, perhaps, the passing mention of another), and due to the awkward junction of these last lines with the text, it can be presumed that they were not integral to the original. Thus, we have an invocation some forty lines long in which appeals are made to pagan beings, and possibly to one Christian saint, whose "powers" are considered available to be summoned by the author. This places the prayer more clearly in an Irish, pagan context than, as suggested by Bernhard Meier, a Christian one.

Group Two: The Petitions

First Set of Petitions

That the *Cétnad nAíse* should be considered as emerging from native Irish religious traditions can be seen through the examination of the petitions in the prayer. The first three invocations are followed by an unequal number of specific requests. These can be summarized as follows. The "seven daughters" are to grant the petitioner:

- Delay of death (line 3).
- Long life (line 4).
- Abundant luck (line 5).
- Protection from spectres ("ghosts," Greene and O'Connor).⁵⁵
- Eternal fame (line 8).
- Death only in old age (lines 9-11).

The "three deaths" to be displaced by "three life-times" (lines 3-4) do not have any specific referents within the prayer, and the tripling of the items seem to place these beyond the ordinary world. Thus, these lines might infer that the author is fearful of being in jeopardy from death-producing spells, such as the "learned magic" (*druídecht*), hostile spells (*coimlecht*), "blighting" (*admilliud*) and "sucking forth" (*toshúgud*) learned by "the sons," and the "knowledge," "books" (*dúile*) and "witchcraft" (*amaitecht*) learned by "the daughters," listed in *The Death of Cú Chulainn*.⁵⁶ The petitioner prays that the effect of the curse of the "three-deaths" be reversed, that, instead, he may be granted "three life-times."

John Carey suggests that the word appearing in line 7, "Laisrén," might be an adjective for "radiant,"⁵⁷ and David Greene and Frank O'Connor translate it: "in my radiant breastplate."⁵⁸ On the other hand, it could also refer to a person who might be a Christian saint. There are several individuals with this name. However, one notable figure this word might refer to is Saint

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Laisrén, also known as Lamliss or Molaisse, or as Laserian of Leighlin. Born in Ireland, Laisrén is thought to have been at Iona several years before making a pilgrimage to Rome where he was ordained by Pope Gregory I. Returning to Leighlin on the banks of the Barrow, he entered the monastery governed by St. Goban. He argued for the adoption of the Roman calendar for the celebration of Easter at a synod, but, since the controversy could not be resolved, was sent to Rome with a delegation to lay the issue before the pope. While there, he was consecrated bishop by Pope Honorius and appointed papal legate for Ireland. He returned to the island and settled the dispute, at least for southern Ireland. St. Goban retired from governing the Leighlin monastery about two years after the synod, and Laisrén then became abbot until his death on April 18, ca. 639.⁵⁹

There are several reasons why this Laisrén might be the one mentioned here. Like the so-called *Faeth Fiada* ("Patrick's Breastplate," the hymn to protect Patrick and his monks from demonic and human enemies as well as sin),⁶⁰ this line can be a reference to the powers of protection to be derived from a similar, lost prayer attributed to Laisrén (apparently effective without the necessity of quoting it in this text). Another reason might be that the "breastplate" refers to the saint's atoning death, the "merits" of which can be drawn upon to increase the author's protection against disease and danger. Still another view might concern Laisrén's role as a bishop in a particular diocese (for this, see below). Apparently, prayers to this saint could vouchsafe long life and act as a defense against bad luck and ghosts. In any event, whether it is this saint invoked here or some other figure, he is cited merely in passing, and is not crucial to the substance of the petition. Also, there is nothing especially "Christian" in these requests.

Second Set of Petitions

The second group of petitions that follows the invocation of the "silver warrior" contains entreaties for general items, and none of them are specifically Christian. The "silver warrior" is to bestow:

Time to live, with the virtue of *findruine* (line 15).

A shape "to be made golden" (line 16).

Elevation in social rank (line 17).

Greater strength (line 18).

Not to die "upon the road" (line 19), and,

Safe return from a journey (Greene and O'Connor 1967, "my return be ensured to me") (lines 20-21).

Protection from various dangers, specifically, the senseless snake, the grey worm, and the senseless beetle (lines 22-24).

Not to be killed by a thief, a "company of women" or a "company of warriors" (lines 25-27)

Extension of life granted by "the King of all things" (lines 28-29).

The qualities to be conferred by this source of power again have to do with the preservation of one's life, strength and protection from various dangers. Good fortune and the status of nobility are also to be awarded to the one who prays this text. *Findruine*, in line 15, is white bronze, considered of far more value than common bronze. (John Carey notes, however, that the chemical composition of *findruine* is unclear in the Irish sources. He proposes that it is mostly silver, depending upon the word, "white." "White bronze" consisted of less than fifty-five percent bronze and more of zinc. While brittle, it is considerably more resistant to abrasion.⁶¹)

The odd petition of line 16 in the prayer, "May my shape be made golden," could hint of other links to the Graeco-Roman world. Gold is even of more value than bronze or silver. It is beautiful as well as unalterable, maintaining its splendor permanently. Called the "noble metal," it is unaffected by other elements such as acids, and is only purified by fire.

Although it is possible to make too much of a link, to have one's "shape to be made golden" might be a distant echo of ideas found in Hellenistic and medieval alchemy texts. These ideas are based upon Aristotle's premise that there is a "prime matter" from which arise the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, and which combine to produce all of the physical world (an increased presence of earth causes a body to be solid, more water makes fluids or things that can be melted, more air gives rise to spirit or soul, and more fire produces combustion). Bolos Democritos of Mendes (200 B.C.E.?) and the gnostic and mystic, Zosimos of Panopolis in Upper Egypt (end of the third to the beginning of the fourth century C.E.?), author of twenty-eight books on alchemy, refined Aristotle's thesis to declare that it is possible to transmute any substance to any other substance by applying certain techniques.⁶² Thus, as lead can change to gold through the proper methods, so the human soul can grow and change as it passes from death and resurrection to perfection in the afterworld.⁶³ According to Zosimos, the process is akin to Egyptian embalming, where, in a dream, he observes a priest who has operated upon himself by dismembering himself, mashing his flesh and bones and burning them in the "fire of the treatment." Upon conclusion of these rituals, the priest has "completed the descent of the fifteen steps and the ascent of the steps of light," and is embarked upon the last stages of transformation:

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For the priest, the man of copper, when you see seated in the spring and gathering his color, do not regard him as a man of copper; for he has changed the color of his nature and become a man of silver. If you wish, after a little time you will have him as a man of gold.⁶⁴

Thus, the object of this "sacred art" of alchemy is not just to transform base metals into gold, but by ascending a "mystic ladder," to leave behind the confines of this world and climb to heaven above. The aim is to transfigure the performer of the ritual into the "golden man," an eternally youthful, semi-divine being. Within the context of the appeals in the *Cétnad nAíse* that the one who utters this prayer receive the "virtue of *findruine*" (bronze?) (line 15), his "rank be ennobled" (line 17), and his "strength be magnified" (line 18), the entreaty that his "shape be made golden" (line 16) is not distant in spirit from the aspirations of one who conducts alchemical rituals.

The hope that one's "shape to be made golden" also brings to mind the various statues of gods and goddesses that adorn personal or Irish cultic sites, like the *rig-idal h-Erenn*, or "King Idol of Ireland," made of gold,⁶⁵ or the Roman-Celtic bronze statue of a seated god from the third to first centuries B.C.E. found at Bouray, Sein-et-Oise, France.⁶⁶ Perhaps the author is thinking of the highly stylized images of the Celtic gods derived from Hellenistic Greek and Roman prototypes on Celtic gold and copper coins, for example, those minted in Brittany.⁶⁷

Other references for the "golden" shape mentioned in the *Cétnad nAíse* might be the images found in seventh and eighth century, Irish Christian manuscripts. For example, in the *Book of Durrow*, which was copied ca. 680, probably in Ireland, the Evangelist, St. Matthew, is a two-dimensional cube with rounded top, where the head and feet are merely "stuck on," the body divided into red, white, green and gold cubes.⁶⁸ The pattern reminds one of the enamel decorations of Celtic deities found in Viking graves.⁶⁹ St. Mark in the Irish Gospel book of the eighth century of St. Gall has the author surrounded by the symbols of the Four Evangelists and interlace designs. The saint is seated, wearing a golden, highly stylized robe.⁷⁰ Still another manuscript can be recalled, that of the *Echternach Gospels* of the early eighth-century, probably decorated in Northumbria, but associated with the Saxon St. Willibrord's monastery at Echternach in Luxembourg. The prefatory page displays the symbol of St. Matthew, in which the Evangelist is seated on a throne holding his gospel with both hands. His clothing is stylized as great teardrops of purple and gold.⁷¹ Other sources might be the gilded bronze figures attached to

Gospel and ritual book covers, such as the more classical figure of Christ seated, holding a book and raising his right hand in blessing on a book from Wales.⁷²

The remarkable acumen shown by the early Christian monks in their employment of pagan artists to decorate their ritual items (Gospel books, chalices, patens, etc., for example, the Ardagh Chalice in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street) is evident in the spirals, key patterns and interlaced animals, designs that are as much at home in Christian churches as among Celtic chieftains.⁷³ Whether or not the composer of this prayer had seen Christian Gospel book illustrations, he was certainly aware of the great skill of Irish metal workers and possibly their polished bronze or golden images. Perhaps he saw in these objects an apt analogy between their "golden" appearance and his own aspirations for long life when he prayed, "May my shape be made golden." Whether the author of the prayer had these representations in mind cannot be known, of course, but the line in the prayer is evocative of many of these Celtic images.

There are other curious items in the text of the *Cétnad nAíse*, including protection from the "senseless" snake, or, in the version of Greene and O'Connor, the "two-headed serpent" (line 22). Twin-headed animals appear in ancient Irish adornment, such as the penannular brooch from the sixth century, now located at Trinity College, Dublin. Of bronze inlaid with enamel and millefiori glass rods, the terminals are cast into two beasts that turn back to swallow the ring.⁷⁴ Being attacked by unusual beasts is not unknown in early Irish poetry, such as the gryphon "attacking unknown lands" in the *Móen óen*.⁷⁵ The *Dindsenchas* relates that Morrígan's son has three hearts with "shapes of serpents through them," or "with the shapes of serpents' heads." If MacCecht had not killed him, the serpents would have grown and slaughtered all the other animals.⁷⁶ Serpents in various forms, including dragons (*péist* or *béist*),⁷⁷ even ones with horns, appear on Celtic monuments.⁷⁸ John MacCulloch sees evidence of a cult of serpents in Ireland.⁷⁹ Line 22 might be an echo of the tradition of a serpent with two heads, called *amphisbaena* by the Greeks, meaning "goes both ways." Torcs, or neck rings, with a serpent head at each end have been found in Celtic graves.⁸⁰

This same "two-headed serpent" might be the caduceus of Hermes/Mercury that has two snake-like ribbons entwined around the wand,⁸¹ suggesting the god's role as *psychopompos*, that is, leader of souls into Hades, or perhaps it refers to the well-known *anguipede* of ancient mystical, magical and Gnostic traditions. This strange being appears frequently in Pagan, Jewish and Christian amulets of the Roman period as a human body often having the head of a cock,

lion, jackal or man, with a pair of snakes, each with a head at the tip, curling outwards in place of legs.⁸² Its use continues into Medieval Jewish and Christian charms, even being engraved in the ring of Siffred, Bishop of Chichester (died 1150).⁸³

Then again, the reference in line 22 may be just a serpent. It appears along with the "harsh grey worm" (line 23) and the "senseless beetle" (line 24). Since these animals either live underground or emerge from beneath the surface of the earth, it seems likely that the three lines refer to the death so feared by the author of the prayer. They are followed immediately by a plea that the one making the prayer may not be killed by a thief (line 25), a "company of women" (line 26), or a "company of warriors" (line 27).

Considering the Irish setting of the prayer, the "company of women" of line 26 may refer to the traditional story incorporated in *The Book of Invasions*, which has fifty-one women and three men land on the island. Noah had refused admission to them on the ark before the Flood, so, upon the advice of an idol, they sail to Ireland to escape the waters. In this idyllic setting, two of the men die in the midst of sensual excesses, and the third escapes from the "ferocious women lest he, too, by love be rent."⁸⁴ All, however, perish in the Deluge.⁸⁵ Yet, this interpretation also might be pushing the text too far.

The "company of women" has echoes in the words of the *Faeth Fiada* of Saint Patrick, that seeks to interpose various powers of the deity between the author and "the spells of women and smiths and druids" (line 58). The term *brichtu ban*, "spells of women," John Carey finds in a number of sources. He recalls a story about a youth who is seduced by a woman from the "Otherworld" by these "spells."⁸⁶ Another band of women are the "Amazons of the Glen" who shriek at Cú Chulainn, whom he fights until the glen is "filled with their blood" in *Fled Bricrenn* (*Bricriu's Feast*).⁸⁷

That this "company" might be the Roman *Furiae* (similar to the Greek *Erinyes*), the goddesses who avenge wrongs, especially murders, is doubtful.⁸⁸ Better, there might be echoes of the extraordinary black-robed women with disheveled hair encountered by the Roman legionaries on the island of Mona (today, Anglesey) off of Wales, opposite Dublin. Tacitus, in his *Annals* (XIV.30), describes them this way:

*Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, interkursantibus feminis,
[quae] in modum Furiarum veste ferali, crinibus disiectis faces praeferabant;...*

(On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair disheveled, waving brands...)⁸⁹

At first, the Romans are paralyzed by the terrible sight, but, urged on by their general, they cross over to conquer the strange forces. Yet, the reference in the prayer to this feared "company of women" in line 26 may just be a doublet with the "company of warriors" in the following line.

Line 27 is the appeal for help against a "company of warriors." Invasion by hostile troops always is a concern in the dangerous centuries in which this Celtic prayer is written, and memories of the warfare against the Anglo-Saxons are fresh, as revealed in the *Tales of Mongán*, §83, *Compert Mongáin (The Birth of Mongán)*.⁹⁰ Irish heroic poetry abounds in descriptions of historical feuds and conflicts, but no less real are perils from armies of phantoms, such as the ones encountered by Nera in the *Echtrae Nera*,⁹¹ or by Conaire in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga (The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hotel, ¶ 25-6)*.⁹² Phantom or not, an hostile "company of warriors" is a present hazard against which prayers had to be made.

This sequence of thoughts in the *Cétnad nAíse* advances to the conclusion in the petition to delay death, that "an extension of time be granted me" by the "King of all things" (lines 28-9). The long life to be bestowed by the "King of all things" (line 29), might imply a reference to the biblical "King of Kings," but it is peculiar that this "king" is not further identified. The biblical books do use the term "the king of all the earth" for God (Psalm 47:7, etc.), but, usually, in Christian prayers, God is delineated as the "one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:6), the "living God" (Jeremiah 10:10, Hebrews 10:31, etc.), the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Matthew 22.32), or "Lord God Almighty" (Revelation 11:17).

Since there is no further clarification of the "king of all things" in the text of this Celtic prayer, it might allude just as well to Dagda, the all-knowing god of the Celts. He is known as *Eochaid Ollathair* ("father of all") and *Ruad Ro-fhessa* ("lord of perfect knowledge"), and is described as ugly, pot-bellied and rather repulsive. Eight men were needed to lift the club that he carried, which could crush enemies "like hailstones under horses' hooves." Also, with one end of the club he can kill nine men with a single blow, but with the other, return them to life. This "king of all things," therefore, has power over both death and life, and certainly can grant "an extension of time" (line 28) to the one who invokes this deity.⁹³ Thus, the second group of

petitions (lines 11-29) is more consistent with a pagan setting for the *Cétnad nAíse* than a Christian one.

Third Set of Petitions

In the third invocation, a person named Senach is implored. This is followed by a single petition (line 33): "May my seven candles not be quenched." This, too, does not suggest a Christian motivation. John Carey proposes that the number "seven" here is associated with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit the early Church writers derived from Isaiah 11:2.⁹⁴ Professor Meier thinks that this petition may refer to a passage in the *Apocalypse of St. John* in the New Testament: ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσᾶς (Latin, *septem candelabra aurea*, Revelation 1:20). Here, the "lampstands" illuminate the orchestra of the cosmic theater in which God, along with the heavenly hosts, observe the proceedings on earth (Revelation 1:12-13). However, in this chapter, the golden "lampstands" do not represent "gifts of the Spirit," protective angels, nor any other sheltering figure, but, rather, ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν (Latin, *septem Ecclesiae*), the seven churches of western Asia Minor (Revelation 1:20)⁹⁵: "As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." Later, in Revelation 4:5, seven λαμπάδες πυρὸς (Latin, *septem lampades ardentes*), "flaming torches," repeat the image, but not the idea of the first chapter. They illumine the enthroned Deity and represent the imperial guard of God: "Coming from the throne [of God] are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God..."

The line pleading that the "seven candles" not be extinguished in the Celtic prayer is a plea for protection against deadly harm and a request that Senach guarantees the one who offers this prayer a long life. Once again, the petition does not have a specifically Christian content, nor does it refer to the imagery in the Christian book of Revelation. The use of numbers – "three deaths," "three life-times," "Senach of the seven ages," and "seven daughters" – displays a preference for Indo-European Celtic traditions of threes and sevens. The year was divided into three seasons (winter, spring and summer); there were the triple battle goddesses of Macha, Morrigan and Badb,⁹⁶ the goddess Danu (who took the form of maiden, mother and crone), and mythic kings who reigned for three years. More frequently, various events occurred every seven

years or lasted seven years.⁹⁷ Since it is Senach of "the seven ages" invoked here, it seems likely that the author is representing each of these ages by a candle (or lamp), pleading that, like Senach, he might live to a very old age.

Group Three: The "I am..." Phrases

The three groups of petitions ending with the brief appeal to Senach is followed by four "I am..." clauses, each a consequence of the previous invocations: "I am," therefore, "an impregnable fortress," an "immovable rock," a "precious stone," and a "weekly blessing" (Greene and O'Connor, "I am the symbol of seven riches.") (lines 24-27). Where Professor Meier sees in these lines allusions to biblical and extra-biblical Christian literature, there are other possible sources for the references in lines 34-37.

There are echoes of these passages in other Irish poems. For example, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of Invasions*), also breaks out into a series of thirteen "I am..." lines when Amairgen Glúngel, son of Míl, composes a poem as his right foot first steps upon Ireland. For example, from *The Book of Invasions*⁹⁸:

I am a wind in the sea...
I am a stag of seven combats...
I am a tear-drop of the sun...
I am a boar for valour...
I am a lake in a plain...

The "I am..." phrases of the *Cétnad nAíse* are probably located near the end of the prayer in order to fortify the courage of the one who prays it, and to reassure the speaker that the appeals will guarantee the intended results. Following these "I am..." sayings, the author repeats the petition for long life, of 100 times 100 times 100 years (lines 38-39), ending with a bringing together of all of the above petitions with the command: "I summon their benefits to me" (line 40).

First Conclusion: Celtic Magic or Christian Prayer?

Originally, the *Cétnad nAíse* was related to the whole spectrum of human activity in an ancient culture, its art, law, system of values, philosophical ideas, economics, technical industry, social organization, customs, rites and religion. Time, however, has left us only odd bits,

imperfectly related. Whatever is stated about the *Cétnad nAíse* then, must be said with great caution. Yet, certain conclusions may be drawn based on the evidence presented here.

It is evident from the text that the petitioner believes in powerful beings that inhabit the realm between humans and the heavens, from the earthly "fairy women" who schooled Senach (lines 31-2), to helpful astrological beings. Irish Christianity includes the native traditions in "spells" appealing to the old divinities, and even affirms that the pagan laws are inspired by the Holy Spirit.⁹⁹

While this Celtic prayer is not directly related to the vast number of Roman period Jewish, Gnostic or Christian charms, the appeals are in the same genre as the Irish prayer. For example, consider the nature of this portion of a charm from the fourth century in which Jewish and Gnostic elements are combined:¹⁰⁰ "I call upon thee, who sittest upon the abyss, Buthath; I call also upon the one who sittest in the first heaven, Marmar; I call upon thee who sittest in the second heaven, Raphael...." These are followed by the names of four other beings residing in the heavens, plus others that inhabit the snow, sea, dragons, rivers, etc. It continues: "...I adjure you all by the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that you put yourselves completely in my power, each of you hearing me perfectly; that you remain beside me, and give me grace and power and victory and strength over everyone..." The prayer then ends with "...quick, quick, through the power of Iao and the strength of Sabaoth..." Here, the appeal to various heavenly beings for power and victory does not preclude the reference to the "God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." All of them are considered reliable sources of power in combating evil. (The "Iao" in this charm is a headless being, related to Abrasax in magical texts, and also vaguely related to the God of the Hebrew Bible).¹⁰¹

One cannot assume that a text is Christian merely because Christian names or ideas appear in it. For example, a typical charm from Coptic Egypt addresses other beings.¹⁰² Here, various "powers," "names" and "holy potencies" are petitioned, including the "great finger of the father," the "entire body of god," "chariots of the sun," "angels on high," the "seven curtains that are drawn over the face of god," and even the Persian deity, Mithras. Note the liturgical language tacked on at the end, just as in the *Cétnad nAíse*. This selection begins with the utterance of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew 27:46 as an invocation: "I adjure you by the three words that Jesus spoke on the cross, Eloi Eloi Elema Sabakthani, that is, My god, my god, Why have you forsaken me?" Following this is the petition that the text within the amulet accomplishes its duty:

"That you keep any person who may wear this amulet from all [harm] and all evil and all sorcery and all injury induced by the stars and all the demons and all the deeds of the hostile adversary, That you guard the body of Philoxenos son of Euphemia from all these things." Finally, two sets of triple holy words seal the charm: "Holy, holy, holy. Amen, Amen, Amen."¹⁰³

The Celtic *Cétnad nAíse* is like the Coptic prayer in that there are petitions for protection from all sorts of evil things, even ghosts. It is intended to bring about certain specific conditions, and employs the language of charms and spells similar to traditions in other parts of the Western world.¹⁰⁴ By repeating and writing the words of this Celtic supplication, the author expects it to work *ex opere operato*.

Is this "magic" or "religion"? The line between the two is often blurred. "Magic" is frequently described as using physical means to bring about spiritual or material ends, and "religion" as using prayer. Or, again, "magic" uses compulsion, and "religion" uses petition, according to Erwin Goodenough.¹⁰⁵ However, the pursuit of physical security and health is a concern in all religions, and the prayers for "daily bread" (*Panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie*), and "defend us from the Evil One" (*Sed libera nos a malo*), appear even in the Christian *Lord's Prayer*.

Nor is the use of physical means reserved for pagan rituals. Material objects – water in Baptism, holy oil in Unction, and bread and wine in the Eucharist – play an important role in the liturgical life of Christianity. Perhaps the question of whether the prayer is "magic" or "religion" is irrelevant here. Yet, the conclusion that this Celtic prayer was composed to manipulate the heavenly beings, to command them to work the intentions of the petitioner, reveals not only a belief in the efficacy of right formulas, but also a genuine, religious sensibility.

There are several ways in which this Celtic prayer may have been employed. It might have been considered effective by the mere act of composing the text. It may have been recited as an invocation or spell (this is suggested by the rubrics for three-fold repetitions of lines 42-3). It could have been copied on parchment, the act itself being the means by which the powers would grant the scribe's safekeeping. Or, the material upon which it was written may have been folded up and placed within a small container to be worn as an amulet.

One remarkable use of such a text is recorded by the well-known Venerable Bede (A.D. 673-735), author of the *History of the English Church and People*,¹⁰⁶ who relates that a book

once owned by a renowned saint is believed to have miraculous powers. Portions are cut off and rolled up to make amulets, or water is poured over it, washing the ink into water, the drinking of which is considered effective in bringing about healing. Bede also reports that Irish books are particularly desired in England, as scrapings from them provide remedies against snakebites.¹⁰⁷ Some of these might have been the methods applied in the case of the *Cétnad nAíse*, but here we can only speculate.

Second Conclusion: Authorship

The author of the prayer is unknown. Yet, there are some things that can be said about the one who wrote it. The prayer does not imply a church or cultic setting, nor is it communal, to be used by a group in an assembly of some sort. The use of personal pronouns throughout identify it as personal, private, and, perhaps, written for a particular occasion. It plainly seeks empowerment and protection for an individual.

It may have been professionally prepared for a client by someone who was an expert in determining the sources of power to be addressed to obtain the intended results. John Carey suggests that it was written by a "learned cleric," perhaps "Fer Fio the wise, son of the blacksmith, abbot of Comraire in Meath," because of the preamble appearing in the Middle Irish metrical treatise in which it is copied:¹⁰⁸

May Fer Fio's cry protect me upon the road,
As I make my circuit of the Plain of Life.

The casting of spells and divination continues to operate long after the Christian missionaries arrive in Ireland, as the eighth century poem, *Hail Brigit*, praising the saint's presiding at Kildare at an assembly of monks and nuns, reveals:¹⁰⁹

Worship of auguries is not worth listening to, nor of spells and auspices that
betoken death; all is vain when it is probed...

The Christian clergy tried to suppress spells and spell-makers, as shown in the *Cáin Ademnáin*, an *Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnam*:¹¹⁰ "If it be charms from which death ensues that any one give to another, the fines of murder followed by concealment of the corpse (are to be paid) for it." But, sometimes it was the clerics themselves who produced the charms. A *penitential*, or guide for confessors in assigning penance for different sins, brought by St. Columban and other Irish missionaries to the Continent, contains the following passage:¹¹¹

If anyone has destroyed someone by his magic art, let him do penance three years on an allotment of bread and water, and for three other years let him refrain from wine and meat, and then finally in the seventh year let him be restored to communion. But if anyone has used magic to excite love, and has destroyed no one, let him do penance on bread and water for a whole year, if a cleric, for half a year, if a layman, if a deacon for two, if a priest for three; especially if anyone has thus produced aborting in that account let each add on six extra forty-day periods, lest he be guilty of murder.

However, the *Cétnad nAíse* does not seem to be the product of any Christian cleric who certainly would have summoned ready-made phrases from the church's liturgy or the daily monastic offices to apply to the charm. None of the expected expressions, such as *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord have mercy"), *Ave Maria* ("Hail, Mary"), *Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* ("Holy Lord God of Sabaoth"), or phrases from the Lord's Prayer that would be appropriate, appear; neither do prayers from the Requiem Mass, such as, *Liberanos a malo* ("deliver us from evil"), and *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna* ("Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death"). Instead of a "Litany of the Saints," only one name appears, without the usual command to the saints, *orate pro nobis* ("pray for us"). The only ecclesiastical phrases appear at the end of the text after all other means have been exhausted, and these are distinguished by the plural ("people") where the rest of the prayer is in the first person singular (lines 44-45).

If the Senach referred to here is the saint, then the prayer was written sometime after his death when his reputation had gained a sufficient momentum to be considered a source of supernatural might. In that case, the prayer can be dated after end of the sixth century, but should most likely be placed in the eighth, as per John Carey.¹¹² If the prayer includes a petition to Saint Senach, this would indicate that the author was writing in the territory in which the name of the saint was most highly regarded, that is, in central Ireland.

The reference in lines 6-7 to the "breastplate of Laisrén," calls to mind the *Faeth Fiada*,¹¹³ or "Patrick's Breastplate," which invokes the mighty power of the Holy Trinity. Called a *lorica*, or "breastplate" text, referring to the "armor" to be donned by a Christian in I Thessalonians 5:8 (cf. also Ephesians 6:11-17),¹¹⁴ the *Faeth Fiada* invokes not only the Three-in-One (lines 1-6), but the powers of the cherubim, angels, archangels, patriarch, prophets, apostles, confessors, holy virgins and saints (lines 12-23), and even the might of heaven, fire, the air, waters and the earth (24-33). It then enumerates the various dangers against which the prayer is written (46-60). Attributed to Saint Patrick, this popular poem was probably written in

the eighth century.¹¹⁵ While it belongs to a similar genre as the *Cétnad nAíse*, the "spirit" of the latter Celtic prayer is different.

When the author of the *Cétnad nAíse* refers to making the "rounds in the breastplate of Laisrén," this may refer to the protection afforded by a prayer to the saint of this name. If so, this citation, too, may help to place the author geographically. There is some dispute regarding whether Laisrén's consecration as bishop involved oversight over a geographical diocese, and, if so, whether it was that of Leighlin or another geographical see. If of Leighlin, perhaps the intended journey of the author "in the breastplate of Laisrén" (line 7) refers to the saint's diocese, or, at least the area in which the saint's power was felt to be most effective, thus giving another (slight) hint of the locale of the source of the prayer, again, in east, central Ireland.

To sum up, the Celtic prayer is anonymous, and if Christian saints are indeed referred to, it must have been written well after the end of the sixth century when the saints' bones were long at rest but while their reputations were still flourishing. The author was probably active in central Ireland and preferred Gaelic to liturgical Latin. Thus, the origin of the *Cétnad nAíse* is most likely non-Christian and well within the traditions of the native Irish communities. The skill manifested in the creation of the prayer points to a literate pagan who had no knowledge, or, at most, a minimal knowledge of, ecclesiastical language, theology or the Scriptures.

Since the core of the prayer is chiefly non-Christian, with Christian additions at the end, there might have been various paths in its transmission. Could it have begun as a pagan charm, which included, or, at a certain point "borrowed," the name of a Christian saint in order to make it more effective? Could it, at a later time, have been "recycled" in a Christian context for a similar or related intent? This practice certainly is not unknown in the ancient world.¹¹⁶

Third Conclusion: The Purpose of the Celtic Invocation

The Celtic prayer considered here is diverse in its petitions, but nowhere in the text are there attempts to obtain the usual objects of such prayers, for example, success in love, business, satisfaction in a case before a court, maintaining the food supply or prevailing in political endeavors. There is no plea for escape from poverty, starvation, or restoration of status, or even prevention of blindness, paralysis, deafness, or madness. Nor are there requests for healing, success in battle, etc. If there is a central theme that motivates the one offering up the prayer, it might be suggested by the preoccupation with the prevention of injury and early death,

specifically, that death might not "come to me upon the road" (line 20), and that a "journey be confirmed" (line 21, alternate version, that "my return be ensured to me," Greene and O'Connor).

While this complex work may have been produced by a professional "seer" (*filí*), it may not have been created for a master *filí* whose person was sacred and who could travel from tribe to tribe and province to province under protection.¹¹⁷ Rather, it is likely that it was intended for someone whose duties required undertaking a hazardous journey. Note the preamble, which describes the prayer as the "cry of Fer Fio to protect me upon the road..."

In any event, the petitioner seems to reveal great discomfort and anxiety at the prospect of an excursion, akin to the fears of a first-time passenger on an airplane, and calls upon all available potent resources to ensure a safe return home. The divine, seven stars of the Pleiades, whose rising mark the beginning of the safest time to travel, the heavenly night warrior, the efficacious Senach, and, finally, the Holy Spirit, each, in turn, are implored, even commanded, to confer protection. Thus, I suspect that the roots of this Celtic invocation are to be found far deeper within the Irish, pagan soil than in later Christian Mediterranean and Continental transplanted traditions. It seems that not everyone in early Christian Ireland was of that "perfect orthodoxy" of which Saint Columbanus so proudly boasted.¹¹⁸

Endnotes

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² This conference, held March 4-7, 2004, was organized by the UCLA Celtic Colloquium, and co-sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the English Department, the Friends and Alumni of Indo-European Studies, and the Center for the Study of Religion.

³ Privatdozent Dr. Bernhard Maier also delivered this paper entitled, *Das altirische Gedicht 'Admuiniursecht n-ingenatrethan': Heidnischer Zauber oder christliches Gebet?* for the *Sprachwissenschaftliches Kolloquium Wintersemester 2003/04*, in Bonn, Germany, January 15, 2004.

⁴ John Carey, *King of Mysteries. Early Irish Religious Writings* (Portland, Oregon: Four Courts Press, 1998), 136-8. The text translated by John Carey is based upon the critical publication of Kuno Meyer (1914).

⁵ "Mittelirische Verslehren" *Irische Texte*, edited by Rudolf Thurneysen (1891, 53-4), *IT* III, 53 f. The prayer appears only in a section of a Middle Irish metrical treatise.

⁶ "The Protevangelium of James," 10:1-2, Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, English tr. by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), I, 279-80.

⁷ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.* Carey cites the first edition of the prayer by Rudolf Thurneysen ("Mittelirische Verslehren," *Irische Texte*, 1891), and the first critical edition of Kuno Meyer ("An Old Irish prayer for longlife," *A Miscellany Presented to John Macdonald Mackay*, Oliver Elton (ed.), Liverpool and London, University Press and Constable and Co., 1914, pp. 226-232).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹² *Faeth Fiada*, *Ibid.*, 130-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53-7.

¹⁴ "The Protevangelium of James," 10.1, 379-80.

¹⁵ John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), 11.

¹⁶ This paper will not examine the problems of translation, but rather treat the text from an interdisciplinary, history of religions perspective.

¹⁷ *Altus Prosator*, Gloss to Chapter X, in Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹⁹ *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art*, ed. by Oskar Seyffert, rev. and ed. by Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (New York: Gramercy Books, 1955), 494-5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 494.

²² Ibid., 208.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Paolo Verzone, *The Art of Europe: The Dark Ages* (New York: Greystone, 1969), 11.

²⁵ Among many examples, see the image of the sun rising on the back of a bird on a coin of Septimus Severus, figure 283, and, similarly, Septimus Severus mounting up to the sky on a quadriga, figure 284, in, André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Bollingen Series XXXV:10 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 117.

²⁶ Ibid., figures 108-111, 433-4.

²⁷ Ibid., figure 285, p. 117.

²⁸ The animals may also be cows, whose horns resemble the crescent moon. Sometimes they are mules. Ibid., 573.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 71.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Proinsias MacCana, "Celtic Religion," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), III, 51 ff.

³⁴ Ibid., 153.

³⁵ John X. W. P. Corcoran, "Celtic Mythology," *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1968), 229.

³⁶ Caesar, *Gallic War*, VI.17. "After [Mercury] they have Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. Of these deities they have almost the same idea as other peoples: Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva teaches the first principles of the arts and crafts, Jupiter rules the heavens, and Mars controls the issue of war," tr. by H. J. Edwards (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1979), 340.

³⁷ MacCana, "Celtic Religion," 152.

³⁸ Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, 13.

³⁹ J. A. MacCulloch, "Celts," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), III, 284.

⁴⁰ Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13 ff. Euhemerus (third century B.C.E.) proposed that the gods and goddesses were originally human rulers or benefactors, and in gratitude or adoration, their subjects had raised them to a place in heaven.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ MacCana, "Celtic Religion," 156.

⁴⁴ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (First Recension) *The Book of Invasions*, translated by John Carey, in *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, ed. by John T. Koch, with John Carey (Malden, Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1995), 213 ff.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, MacCana, "Celtic Religion," 158.

⁴⁶ For some of these miracles see John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, 8 ff.

⁴⁷ "St. Finnian of Clonard, Bishop," Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, eds., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Complete Edition (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1962), 544-5.

⁴⁸ C. McGrath, "Senan," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1967), XIII, 79-80.

⁴⁹ Gustav Schnürer, *Church and Culture in the Middle Ages*, volume I, tr. by George J. Undreiner (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1956), 292. Katherine I. Rabenstein, "Preliminary Index of Saints" http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=2487. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01632a.htm>. (June 3, 1999).

⁵⁰ David Greene and Frank O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry, A.D. 600-1200* (London: Macmillan, 1967), line 30.

⁵¹ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 138n.

⁵² Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature from its Origins to the Present Day* (Totowa, New Jersey, Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), 11 ff., 39.

⁵³ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁵ Greene and O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury*, lines 6-7.

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- ⁵⁶ *The Death of Cú Chulainn as related in the Book of Leinster*, translated by John Carey, in Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 124.
- ⁵⁷ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 136n.
- ⁵⁸ Greene and O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury*, line 7.
- ⁵⁹ Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, eds., *Butler's Lives of the Saints* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1962), vol. II, pp. 121-2.
- ⁶⁰ *Faeth Fiada: "Patrick's Breastplate,"* in Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 130-35.
- ⁶¹ Carey notes that the composition of *findruine* is unclear in the Irish sources. He proposes that it is mostly silver, depending upon the word, "white." *Ibid.*, 11, n. 10. Seymour Pile and Champion Herbert Mathewson, "Brass," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963), IV, 109.
- ⁶² Allen G. Debus, "Alchemy," *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, 2003), I, 28. Henry and Renée Kahane, "Alchemy: Hellenistic and medieval alchemy". *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 1987, p. 193.
- ⁶³ Henry Marshall Leicester, "Alchemy," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963), I, 535.
- ⁶⁴ Zosimos of Panopolis, in F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists. Founders of Modern Chemistry* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1949), 63.
- ⁶⁵ John Lawrence Gerig, "Images or Idols (Celtic)," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), VII, 129a.
- ⁶⁶ Raymond Lantier, "Celtic Art," *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), fig. 113.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 183-5.
- ⁶⁸ Folio 21 verso, Trinity College Library, Dublin. David Talbot Rice, *A Concise History of Painting from Prehistory to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 106, ill. 90.
- ⁶⁹ See the stylized human figure with large head and feet attached to a cube body, with inlaid squares with enamel in red, green and gold found in a ninth century Viking grave at Micklebostad, western Norway. James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World* (New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1980), 29. See also the gold jewelry from the Sutton Hoo ship burial of the seventh century in the British Museum, London, in, Rupert Leo Scott Bruce-Mitford, "Anglo-Saxon and Irish Art," *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), I, plate 286, and Carl Nordenfalk, "Book Illumination," in, André Grabar, *Early Medieval Painting from the Fourth to the Eleventh Century* (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1957), 111, 114.
- ⁷⁰ Codex 51, Folio 78, Stiftsbibliothek, St. Gall. Nordenfalk, "Book Illumination," 108.
- ⁷¹ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 9389, Bruce-Mitford, "Anglo-Saxon and Irish Art," 454, plate 274.

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- ⁷² The book resides in the National Library of Wales. Juliette Wood, *The Celts: Life, Myth, and Art* (Hammersmith, London, England: Thorsons, 2004), 74.
- ⁷³ For example, the elaborate Irish Ardagh Chalice of the early eighth century, with its microscopic spiral filigree and cloisonné, in Magnus Magnusson, *Vikings!* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980), 156, illustration p. 155. Charles Rufis Morey, *Medieval Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1942), 187 ff.
- ⁷⁴ Polly Cone, *Treasures of Early Irish Art 1500 B.C. to 1500 A.D.* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977), no. 28.
- ⁷⁵ *Móen óen*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, ÄiD ii. ¶ 4, *ibid.*, 46.
- ⁷⁶ J. A. MacCulloch, *Mythology of All Races* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964), III, 132.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 129 ff.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 132.
- ⁷⁹ J. A. MacCulloch, "Serpents," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, ed. (New York: 1961), III, 297a.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, XI, 404b.
- ⁸¹ Hermes' staff possibly originated as a magical wand that had power over life and death, and consisted of three, intertwined shoots, two of these interpreted later as serpents. Oskar Seyffert, "Hermes," *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1995), 288.
- ⁸² Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period: The Archaeological Evidence from the Diaspora*, Bollingen Series XXXVII (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1953), II, 245, III ill. 1088-01, 1094 ff.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, II, 246; *ibid.*, III, ill. 1082.
- ⁸⁴ *The Book of Invasions*, John Montague, ed., *The Book of Irish Verse, An Anthology of Irish Poetry from the Sixth Century to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 41.
- ⁸⁵ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 30 ff., writes of a race that retreated to the top of a mountain during the Flood, thus escaping the destruction, and that Christians identified them as the old Irish gods.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 133, n. 13.
- ⁸⁷ *Fled Bricrenn (Bricriu's Feast)*, ¶ 66-7, tr. by George Henderson (Irish Texts Society, II, 1899), in Koch and Carey, *Celtic Heroic Age*, 84-5.
- ⁸⁸ Herbert Jennings Rose, "Erinyes," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. by N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 406-7.
- ⁸⁹ P. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, "On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair disheveled,

waving brands." Tr. by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodrigg, *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1952), XV, 148-9.

⁹⁰ *Tales of Mongán*, §83, *Compert Mongáin (The Birth of Mongán)*, in Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 204-5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 117-9.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 160-1.

⁹³ Corcoran, "Celtic Mythology," 226-7.

⁹⁴ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 138n.

⁹⁵ Josephine Massynsberde Ford, *Revelation, The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), XXVIII, 384. The seven lamp stands in Revelation evoke the lamps that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem.

⁹⁶ John X. W. P. Corcoran, "Celtic Mythology," *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1959), 229.

⁹⁷ "Calendar (Celtic)," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 80-1. The fair celebrated at Lughnasadh, held every three years, and the feast of Tara, held at Samhain every seven years, should also be noted, as well as the "triskele" figure in Celtic art. Other numbers figure prominently in Celtic sources. Cf. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage. Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 186-204.

⁹⁸ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn (The Book of Invasions)*, in Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ¶ 108, p. 259.

⁹⁹ John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, 11-2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 197-8.

¹⁰¹ Coptic charms also sought to enable the petitioner to accomplish practical tasks, such as to catch a thief in this contemporary prayer: "I call upon thee, Hermes, immortal God, who ploughest a furrow at Olympus, and upon the sacred bark, light-bringing Iao, the Great One with eternal life, terrible to see, terrible to hear: Surrender the thief I am seeking." This is followed by magical formulas, then the instruction: "Say this twice at the purification." Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, II, 275.

¹⁰² *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, ed. by Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith (San Francisco, California: Harper Collins, 1994), 116.

¹⁰³ A sixth century, Coptic spell to protect against evil spirits, again, is in the same spirit as the Celtic prayer: "[Christ! I adjure] you, O lord, almighty, first-begotten, self-begotten, begotten without semen, [...] as well as all-seeing are you, and Yao, Sabao, Brinthao." Then, after this invocation, comes the entreaty: "Keep me as a son, protect me from every evil spirit, and subject to me every spirit of impure, destroying demons—on the earth, under the earth, of the water and of the land—and every phantom. Christ!" *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 129, n. 8. See other examples in Howard Clark Kee, *The Origins of Christianity: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 84-9, especially no. II, pp. 86-7.

¹⁰⁵ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 155.

¹⁰⁶ Donald Attwater, "Bede, The Venerable," *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 61.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister and Anthony Thomas Lucas, "Ireland," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963), XII, 597.

¹⁰⁸ Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 129. Seán MacAirt and Gearóid MacNiocaill, *The Annals of Ulster* (to A.D. 1130) (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), pp. 214-5, 762.6.

¹⁰⁹ *Hail Brigit, an Old Irish Poem on the Hill of Alenn*, tr. by Kuno Meyer (Halle: S. M. Niemeyer, 1912), quoted in J. N. Hillgarth, ed., *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750. The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986), p. 120.

¹¹⁰ *Cáin Ademnáin, an Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnam*, ed. and tr. by Kuno Meyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 130.

¹¹¹ *The Penitential of St. Columbanus*, in (ed. and tr.) L. Bieler *The Irish Penitentials*, Vol. 5 (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), quoted in *ibid.* pp. 133-4.

¹¹² Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 129.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 130-5.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁶ See the many examples in Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, II.

¹¹⁷ McHugh and Harmon, *Anglo-Irish Literature*, 11.

¹¹⁸ Columbanus, theologian and founder of monasteries in France and Italy, died A. D. 615. Gustav Schnürer, *Church and Culture* (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1956), I., 312.

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