

The Writing of the Takings

A reinterpretation of the Lebor Gabala, the Irish origin story

Compiled by Jamie Madden in Babaq^{wəb}, occupied Duwamish territory, 2023.

Chapters:

1 Whence Come the Irish

2 The Tuatha de Danaan

3 Nemed and the Fir Bolg

4 Partholon

5 Cessair & Fintan's Poem

6 The Milesians

7 Summing it up So

1: Whence Come the Irish?

“So, where do we begin?” asked Clí O’Nemed as each took their places in the hall.

“You mean, where *did* we begin?” chuckled Anrad O’Partholon.

“Yes, yes, of course, that is the task. It is past time we put the origins of the Irish people down in writing,” said the Monk, as he sat at the desk in the hall’s center.

Lannai Mac Leabhar grumbled, “And why should we need your writing? The fili have kept our knowledge since time immemorial. Your books can be burned, or lost, or banned, can they not?”

“Well, and there’s the other thing...” said the Monk.

“Go on,” Tanaide encouraged with mischief in his eye.

The monk stammered. “Well, and first let me express my eternal gratitude to you fili and scholars of Armagh for opening this center of learning to Christian study. The truth of the Bible and eternal life in Jesus Christ could not have taken roots in Ireland without your hospitality...”

Lannai interrupted, “Hospitality is sacred on this island, or do I need to get the fili who is expert in our law texts to expound on...”

The monk barreled on, “... but there’s still this question: the Lord’s people come from Adam and Eve, and after the flood possibly we all come from Noah, but the Bible is silent on your origins. There are no Irish people in the Bible.”

“And?”

“Well, maybe we should begin this history in the beginning, “In principio fecit Deus Cawlum et Terram, God made Heaven and Earth at the first.... But, well, that’s the thing, you see, there’s this concern in some parts... well, some say...” the Monk stammered.

“Get on with it.”

The Monk spat the words out. “You are all soulless demons whose island exists outside the Gospel truth.”

“Beg pardon?”

“That is, more close-minded scholars of the Bible than myself believe that. We know better of course. Of course. And that is why we are here, to preserve your origins and find their place in Biblical truth

and Classical history. So, which of you esteemed fili would like to tell the first story, about the first people of Ireland?”

Lannai Mac Leabhar began, “We men of Erin are the people of the Irish language. The eracicept, the first lessons fili must learn, asks “To what is this a beginning?” and to answer is not hard. Fenius selected the language that became our Gaelic...”

“But there is no mention of Gaelic in the Tower of Babel,” said the Monk.

“Aye there is not indeed, for Fenius made his great invention *after* the coming of the languages from abroad. Fenius gathered every language, and for every obscure sound of every language he found a place in Gaelic. Ours is for this reason more comprehensive than any language.”

“That’s right. Our language is just the best bits of all that fell from the Tower of Babel,” added Anrad.

“It is indeed, for the seventy-two languages are not found otherwise. And, of course, Gaelic is biblical. It is. Fenius came from Scythia, and he spoke Hebrew, Greek, and Latin as well. He put the language together at the Tower of Nimrod together with 72 poets from the 72 races; the Bithynians, Scythians, Scots, Germans, Medes, Sicilians, Hyrcanians, Goths, Pontians, Morini, Lyonese, Cyprians, Gauls, Pamphylians,...

“How long can he go?” whispered the monk to Tanaide.

“... Lydians, óig, Cycladians, Cretans, Corsicans, Sardinians, Sicilians,...

“You already said Sicilians.”

“... Rhetians, Rheginians, Rhodians, Romans, máir, Massilians, Moors, Macedonians, Morcain, náir, náir mais, Narbonians, Noricans, Nubians, brais, Bithynians, Britons, Boeotians, Magogians, Armenians, amuis, gairg, Galatians, Aquitanians, Athenians, ...”

“OK, Lannai Mac Leabhar, we get it. All of them like.”

“...Thessalians, aird, Alanians, Albanians, Hyrcanians, Italians, Spaniards, Goths, Getae, grinn, Saracens, Franks, Frisians, Langobards, Lacedemonians, Elisaeans, Thracians, Trojans, Dardanians, Dalmatians, Dacians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Brahmans, and Indians. Now. Make sure you write it down, Monk.” Lannai said with an edge in his voice.

“I. I got it,” stammered the Monk.

“Every one of those names. Should I recite again?”

“No. No, I’ve got it,” replied the Monk, “but I also have a query. Was Fenius the first to Ireland then? Did he bring the people here from the lands of the Bible?”

“Ah sure, Mac Leabhar there would have you believe it, but my people tell an older story, the story of the Tuath dé Danaan, the first people of Ireland.” And so Tanaide took a mighty mouthful of mead and began his story.

2: The Tuath dé Danaan

“You know those mounds all round the landscape? The Tuath dé Danaan are the people who created those dún, rath, and passage tombs, shaped them from Erin herself and let them blend back into the landscape. Ireland made the Tuath dé a part of herself. Can’t be done the other way round. Your people will come to learn that, Monk.” Tainaide paused before continuing.

“Thousands of years ago, the Tuatha dé Danaan arrived in dark clouds and mist, landing their ships on the mountains of Conmaicne Rein in Connacht. For three days, a darkness covered the sun.”

Lannai interrupted, “Nonsense. Who’s ever heard of ships landing on top of a mountain? No, they arrived by water. They beached their ships, and then they burned them to leave no doubt they were here to stay. The dark clouds and mist were nothing but the smoke rising from their burning fleet.”

Tanaide continued unperturbed, “We may say, the truth was not known beneath the sky of stars, whether they were of heaven or of earth. Either way they made a terrifying landing, and they demanded sovereignty of half of Ireland...

“The Fir Bolg sent their champion, Sreng, towards the dark clouds and smoke to confront the new arrivals. The Tuath dé Danaan saw a huge, solitary, but fearsome man approaching them. And they sent Bres the Beautiful, son of Elatha the Fomorian, to parley with Sreng. The two men drew near to each other until they were within speaking distance. Each looked keenly at the other without a word, astonished at the other’s weapons and appearance. Sreng with his strong hooked reddish-brown shield, his two thick-shafted javelins, his deadly sword, his fine four-cornered helmet, and his heavy iron club; Bres with his shield and his sword, and his two great spears. Sreng rested his shield on the ground before him, so that it protected his face. Bres, too, kept silent and held his shield before him.

‘Remove your shield,’ said Bres, ‘so I may be able to give the Tuath dé Danaan an account of your appearance.’

Astounded to hear this beautiful stranger speak in his own tongue of Gaelic, Sreng said, ‘I will do so, for it was for fear of that sharp spear you carry that I placed my shield between us.’

‘Your spears look strange and venomous themselves,’ said Bres.

‘Take a look yourself,’ offered Sreng; and he unfastened and uncovered his thick-shafted javelins. ‘What do you think of these weapons?’ he said.

‘You have huge weapons, broad-pointed, stout and heavy, mighty and keen-edged. What do you call them?’ said Bres.

‘Battle javelins,’ replied Sreng.

‘They are good weapons,’ said Bres, and then he improvised a verse:

‘bruised bodies they mean,
gushing gore,
broken bones and shattered shields,
sure scars and present plague.’

Then the two made a truce between them, and they walked closer to each other. Bres asked, ‘Where do you sleep, Sreng?’

‘At the hallowed heart of Ireland, Tara, home of the kings and princes of the Fir Bolg, and Eochaid, High-king of Ireland. And you, where do you come from?’

‘From the hill, from the crowded capacious camp yonder on the mountain slope where are the Tuath dé Danaan with Nuada, our king.’

Sreng asked, ‘Nuada? Is he not the Nuada of the Airgetlam? Is that why you speak our language?’

‘That’s your man,’ said Bres, ‘and is Eochaid Ard Rí there the one from Uisneach?’

‘Tis,’ replied Sreng, ‘and how is Nuada’s brother? Your man Dian Cécht?’

‘Would you believe he’s the high surgeon of the Tuatha dé Danaan?’ replied Bres.

‘A doctor is he now? Fair play to him.’”

Lannai interrupted, “Get on with it Tanaide. Everyone knows how Irish people are when they meet.”

“Right.

Well, after discussing their ancestry and their relations, it was then Sreng said, ‘It’s a long way back. Time I should go.’

‘Go then,’ said Bres, ‘and take one of my spears to show your people the weapons of the Tuatha dé.’ And Sreng gave one of his own javelins to Bres as a specimen of Fir Bolg weaponry in exchange.

‘Tell the Fir Bolg,’ said Bres, ‘that they must give my people either battle or half of Ireland.’

‘Myself,’ said Sreng, ‘I would rather give you half of Ireland than to face your weapons.’ The two warriors parted in peace after making a pact of friendship with each other.

But while their warriors called for peace, the king and nobles of the Fir Bolg called for war. They would not allow the Tuatha dé half of the island.”

The monk finally cut in to ask the question burning his tongue. “Hold on. If the Fir Bolg were already here, how can you say the Tuath dé Danaan were the first people of Ireland?”

Tanaide scoffed, “The Fir Bolg? The Men of the Bag? The first people? Ah go on. They wandered around gathering nuts and salmon in their bags, summering on the western coast and wintering along the Boyne. Are they the first *people*? It was the Tuath dé Danaan, the People of Craft who brought civilization to this island. The Tuath dé Danaan are *the* people. They brought skills with cattle, farming, medicine, poetry, smithcraft, carpentry, chess, hurling, horse-racing, and assembling for the Oenach. They knew the incantations of druids, charioteers, trappers, and cupbearers. They could divine the sun and stars. Their satire could topple kings.

“Wait, wait,” said Clí, “People of Craft? I thought they were the People of Danu?”

Anrad spoke over Clí, “Does not Tuath dé Danaan mean the People of Danu?”

“Who!?” asked the monk. “That’s not some pagan god is it?” he added suspiciously.

“Shhh,” Fidelma kicked Anrad under the table and whispered, “not in front of the Críostaí.”

“No, no. No. The Tuath dé Danaan are as much people as you or I. No worries on that count there Monk,” said Tanaide with a warning glance to Clí.

“So anyway, if it were going to be war, the Tuatha dé would bring war upon the Fir Bolg. The Morrigan, Macha, and Badb brought a rain of fire and smoke down upon the Fir Bolg for three days.”

“There!” said the Monk. “Now, *that* is pagan magic. We cannot have that in the Book that will establish the Irish people’s Biblical provenance. This is enough. Absurd. Can someone please tell this history plain?”

“Ach, monk, have you not heard of metaphor? It’s a tale about volcanic activity, an echo of a memory from our ancestors. Get a big enough eruption in Iceland, and it’ll rain burning ash here,” said Lannai, looking down his nose at the religious man.

“Sure, everyone knows that,” added Anrad.

Tanaide continued, “So it were war. Eleven battalions of the Fir Bolg met seven battalions of the Tuath dé Danaan, with the plain of Mag Nia between them. Nuada sent his fili as envoys to the Fir Bolg to ask for a peaceful dividing of the land.

So they set out and came to the tent of Eochaid, where the Fir Bolg offered them great hospitality and presented gifts before asking what the envoys had to say.

‘This is why we are come,’ they said, ‘to request the dividing of the land between us, an equitable halving of Ireland.’

‘Do the nobles of the Fir Bolg hear that?’ said Eochaid. ‘We do,’ they replied, ‘but we shall not grant their request.’

‘So then,’ said the fili of the Tuath dé, ‘when do you mean to give battle?’

‘Some delay is called for,’ said the Fir Bolg nobles, ‘for we shall have to prepare our spears, mend our mail, shape our helmets, sharpen our swords, and sew suitable attire,’

‘We,’ agreed the envoys of the Tuath dé Danaan, ‘shall make you spears like ours, and you must make your javelins for us.’ So they arranged an armistice till the weapons arrived, till their equipment was ready, and they were prepared for battle.

But one day while the smiths and wrights were hard at work, Ruad with twenty-seven other bored warriors of the Fir Bolg offered a game of hurling to the Tuath dé Danaan on the plain of Mag Nia. During the match they dealt many a blow on legs and arms, till their bones were broken and bruised, and they fell on the turf, and the match ended. Barely 21 men walked away alive.

Ruad returned eastward to the Fir Bolg camp, and told his tale to Eochaid. The king was glad of the killing of the Tuath dé Danaan’s young soldiers, and said to Fathach, ‘Go to the west, and ask the nobles of the Tuath dé Danaan how the battle is to be fought tomorrow —whether it is to be for one day or for several.’

The poet went and put the question to the nobles of the Tuath dé Danaan, that is, Nuada, The Dagda, and Bres. ‘What we propose,’ they said, ‘is to fight with equal numbers on both sides each day.’ Fathach went back, and reported to the Fir Bolg the choice of the Tuath dé Danaan. Honor-bound to accept, the Fir Bolg were depressed, realizing they’d carelessly abandoned their advantage in numbers.

Six weeks of the summer, half the quarter, had gone on the appointed day of battle. The hosts rose with the first glimmer of solstice sunlight on that longest day of the year. Brave warriors hoisted their painted, perfectly wrought shields on their backs and grasped tough, seasoned spears and battle javelins in their right hands, together with the bright swords that made the duels dazzle with light as the shining sunbeams shimmered on the swords’ graven groves.

The Fir Bolg poet, Fathach, went ahead of the warriors. In the very middle of the plain of Mag Nia, he raised a pillar of stone and planted it firmly into the ground. From there, he wept floods of fervent, melancholy tears as he chronicled the battle in poetry:

‘With what pomp they advance! On Mag Nia they marshal with dauntless might. ‘Tis the
Tuath dé Danaan that advance, and the Fir Bolg of the decorated blades.

‘The Red Badb will thank them for the battle-combats I look on. Many will be their gashed
bodies in the east after their visit to Mag Tured.

‘...will be the host after parting with the warriors I speak of. Many a head shall be severed
with vigour and with pomp.’

The Tuath dé Danaan were defeated that day and returned to their camp. The Fir Bolg did not pursue them across the battlefield, but returned in good spirits to their own camp. Each

side's physicians then assembled. They crushed and scattered herbs on the surface of the water in their healing wells, so that the precious waters became thick and green. They put their wounded into the well, and immediately they came out whole.

Next morning Eochaid, the High-king of the Fir Bolg, went to the well all alone to wash himself in a stream. As he was doing so, he saw three handsome and haughty armed men arrive above him. They challenged him to combat. 'Give me time,' said the king, 'to go fetch my weapons.'

'No. We fight now,' said one of the three strange men. Oll, Forus, and Fir they were, three physicians, brothers of the Tuatha dé Danaan's top doc, Diancecht. They had come to spy upon the physicians of the Fir Bolg when they happened upon Eochaid alone washing his face.

A young man suddenly appeared between his king and his enemies, and said: 'You shall have combat from me in place of the king.' They raised their hands simultaneously and fought till all four fell together.

More Fir Bolg belatedly arrived, after the struggle was over. They saw the dead men, and the king told them how they had come upon him, and how the solitary champion had fought with them in his stead. The Fir Bolg brought each man a stone to the well for him, and built a great cairn over him. The Champion's Cairn is the name of the cairn, and the hill is called the Hill of the Three.

And as this unfolded, the battalions of the Tuath dé Danaan and Fir Bolg met on the plain. The chiefs who went out in front of the Tuath dé Danaan on that day were Ogma, Midir, Bodb Derg, Diancecht, and Aengaba of Norway. The women, Badb, Macha, Morrigan and Danann offered to accompany them. Against them came of the Fir Bolg, Mella, Ese, Ferb, and Faebur, all sons of Slainge."

"Again with the names," whispered The Monk.

Next day it was the turn of Sreng, Semne, and Sithbrug, along with Cirb, to command the Fir Bolg. They rose early in the morning and advanced in a flashing formation of shields and a thick forest of javelins. The Tuath dé Danaan saw the Fir Bolg approaching them and laughed, 'Look how much fashion and ceremony those battle-props bring onto the plain of battle,' which is how the plain got its name of Mag Tured, the Plain of Props.

The Tuath dé Danaan prevailed that day. They killed Cirb, that passionate warrior of the Fir Bolg, and they drove the survivors back to camp. The Tuath dé Danaan did not pursue them across the battlefield, but they took with them a head and a stone pillar apiece including the head of Cirb, which was buried in the conveniently named Cairn of Cirb's Head.

The Fir Bolg camp fell into silence, neither happy nor cheerful that night. And as for the Tuath dé Danaan, they were sad and dispirited as well. Unable to rid their minds of the day's battle, they got up, armed themselves, and advanced again.

Furies, monsters, and hags of doom cried aloud from the rocks, waterfalls, and hollows of the earth. In the vanguard of the Tuath dé Danaan advanced The Dagda, Ogma, Alla, Bres, and Delbaeth; the five sons of Elatha, together with Bres, grandson of Net, the Fomorian; Aengus, Aed, Cernad the Fair, Midir, Bodb Derg, Sigmall Abartach, Nuada the High-king, Brian, Iuchar and Iucharba, the three sons of Turenn, Bigrenn, Cu, Cian and Cethenn, the three sons of Cainte, Goibnenn the Smith, Lucraidh the Joiner, Credne the Craftsman, Diancecht the Physician, Aengaba of Norway, the three queens, Eriu, Fotla and Banba, and the three sorceresses, Badb, Macha and The Morrigan, with Bechuille and Danann their two foster-mothers.

“Do I *really* need to write all those names?” complained the Monk.

“Is this a history or not?” replied Lannai with consternation.

Anrad teased, “Would it help you, monk, if you wrote some ‘begats’ in between the names?”

Tanaide continued,

“The Tuath dé Danaan fixed pillars in the ground to prevent any one fleeing. Warriors lunged at each other with their keen sharp spears, till the stout shafts were twisted through the quivering of the victims on their tips. The edges of the swords turned on the lime-covered shields. The curved blades were tempered in boiling pools of blood from the thighs of warriors. Loud was the singing of the lances as they cleft the shields, loud the noise and din of the fighters as they battered bodies and broke bones in the rear. Boiling streams of blood took the sight from the grey eyes of resolute warriors.

Later that evening, from his sickbed, a dazed Nuada awoke to ask The Dagda, ‘What happened today?’

The Dagda told him, ‘Bres attacked the ranks of the Fir Bolg, a glorious fight, and killed one hundred and fifty of them. Huge Sreng came and slew three hundred of our host. He dealt nine blows on your own shield, Nuada. You, Nuada, coolly returned Sreng nine mighty blows, but Sreng cut off your right arm, at the shoulder. You raised a loud cry for help, and he of Norway came up. Sreng and Aengaba fought with a will, a well-contested fight of clashing weapons. As Aengaba cried for help, I came up quickly. When I arrived, Sreng refused to fight the two of us, and I carried you back to this sickbed.

‘During the battle, thirst overcame King Eochaid, but he could not find water until he came to the Strand of Eothail. There, the three sons of Nemid overtook him on the silent strand, and there they fought till they all fell together.

‘Lugaid, your son, was slain by Slainge the Fair; and Slainge, though so fierce before, was killed in fighting with the Tuath dé Danaan. Weary were we on either side, and we resolved to separate.’

Even though they delivered tragedy to the Tuath dé Danaan, the Fir Bolg too returned to their camp that night sad and weary, wounded and regretful. Each one buried kinsfolk and relatives,

friends and familiars and foster-brothers; and then they raised mounds over the nobles, and gravestones over the warriors, and tombs over the soldiers, and hills over the heroes.

After that Sreng, Semne and Sithbrug, the sons of Sengann, called a meeting for council and deliberation to which three hundred assembled. They considered what it was in their interest to do, whether they should leave Ireland, continue with these battles, or attempt to share the land with the Tuath dé Danaan.

They chose battle, again. They took up their strong, hooked shields, their venomous spears and their sharp swords with blue blades. Then they made a murderous charge, cutting their way in a flaming fire of fury.

Sreng challenged Nuada to single combat, as they had fought in the previous battle. Nuada faced him bravely and boldly as if he had been whole, and said: 'If you want a fair single, fasten your right hand, as I have lost mine.'

'I severed that hand on fair terms during our first combat. Why should I have to tie my own for you now?' replied Sreng.

Battle-weary themselves, the Tuath dé Danaan took counsel, and their decision was to offer Sreng - King Eochaid having fell, mind you – so they offered Sreng his choice of the provinces of Ireland for the surviving Fir Bolg, and a treaty of peace, goodwill, and friendship between the two peoples. And so they made peace, and Sreng chose the province of Connacht. The Fir Bolg gathered round him from every side, and stubbornly and proudly took possession of the province.

And that is the story of the first battle of Mag Tuired Cunga.”

“The first? How long is this story?” complained Anrad.

“Well, the second is a better story, which is why it might be a bit too much for our Monk’s delicate ears. Suffice to say for now: Nuadu could not continue to serve as king with such a blemish as a missing hand. The Tuath dé Danaan made Bres their king, and he was not at all good at the job. After Dian Cecht replaced Nuada’s missing hand with a silver prosthetic, the Tuath dé Danaan deposed Bres and restored Nuada to kingship. Bres returned for revenge with his father’s people, the Fomorians, to give battle to the Tuath dé Danaan at the second battle of Mag Tuired. The Tuath dé sent The Dagda to win over the Fomorian king’s daughter, and they asked Lugh Lamfadagh to lead them in battle. Balor the Strong of the Fomorians fell at Lugh’s hands, with a stone from his sling, and the Tuath dé triumphed.’

“Like David?” asked the Monk.

“No, not like David. A sling Lugh had, not a slingshot. And Lugh was massive himself.”

Tanaide finished, “The Dagda pursued the fleeing Fomorians and recovered his harp C  ir Cetharchair and that best of all cows, the Glas Ganaich. They returned rightness and fertility to the land, but the Morrigan reminded us that good times come and good times go, as do bad times. Lugh was forty years

in the kingship of Ireland after the second battle of Mag Tuired, and there were twenty-seven years between the battles. Then The Dagda was eighty years in the kingship of Ireland. His three sons were Oengus and Aed and Cermat Coem. And that,” said Tanaide, “is the tale of the coming of the Tuath dé Danaan, the first people of Ireland.”

The other men in the room eyed each other silently, wondering who would say it. Clí O’Nemed spoke up first. “Grand story that, Tanaide, and one of the most important. Let me add a bit, if you will, to explain the origins of the Tuath dé Danaan and the Fir Bolg both. The mystery of how they came to speak the same language is simply that they were once the same people.”

3: Nemed and the Fir Bolg

And so Clí O’Nemed told this story as the Monk scribbled away.

“After the great flood, Nemed and his four sons and their 32 ships wandered the sea for a year and a half and a day. And then, on the five hundred and forty-ninth day at sea, great winds blew and great waves crashed so that the Cliffs of Erin’s west were but gentle beaches. The sea took 31 of Nemed’s 32 ships. The survivors populated this fair isle.

The Nemedians found an empty island, but it was not a discovery, for Erin has always been and always will be. The Fomorians laid claim to her and to the people who lived off her bounty. Nemed won three battles against the Fomora, but then plague came to take him.

After Nemed’s death, his people suffered Fomorian tyranny and oppression for generations. Each year at Samhain, they were to hand over two-thirds each of their children, wheat, and milk as taxes. Fomorian rents took the rest, and famine and pestilence spread amongst the Nemedians, until there was nothing to do but revolt, for they would surely perish laboring to feed the Fomora. The 2,000 Nemedian survivors attacked the Fomorian stronghold on Tory Island. They captured a tower and even killed a king of the Fomora before Fomorian reinforcements arrived from the depths of the sea. Only thirty Nemedians survived the great battle. The survivors fled from Ireland upon wrathful, black seas. Storms and winds divided their boats, so, we must take each group’s story in turn.”

“Must we?” complained Lannaí.

“Fergus Lethderg and his son Britain Máel rowed to Alba, and the whole island was named after Britain O’Nemed. Semeon and his followers fled to Greece, but their descendants would return to Ireland as the Fir Domnann (the creek takes its name from them), the Fir Bolg (they were named from their bags), and the Gailioin (named for the multitude of their javelins).

And another group of the Nemedians led by Iobath Mac Beothach O’Nemed avoided slavery and subjugation by sailing on to the north. They would return to Ireland with skills and knowledge as had never been seen, all the craft of the Tuath dé Danaan.

Returning to the children of Semeon, son of Starn. A storm had driven them from their course till they came to the dry strands of Thrace and the sandy shores of Greece. They made a compact of peace, and the Greeks apportioned them territory... their worst territory. Along the sea-shore by distant borders, on inhospitable heights and in deep ravines, on broken land and ground unfit for cultivation. But the sons of Semeon transported a great quantity of soil to the smooth, bare rocks, and cultivated them into smiling clover-covered plains.

When the Greek chiefs and powerful men saw the now fruitful cultivated land, they evicted these refugees from Ireland to keep it for themselves. In exchange, they gave them other wild, rugged regions, hard stony lands infested with poisonous serpents. They toiled to make these barren lands fruitful as well, like all their land that was taken from them.

Semeon's progeny in Greece increased there till they amounted to thousands of souls. Weary of their servitude they fled back across the sea in curraig boats they made from naught but twigs and canvas and tar..."

"Servitude?" asked the Monk. "Were they slaves in Greece?"

"No," Clí said, "but to work continually cultivating land only to be evicted from it repeatedly, it's much the same."

"Listen, I don't know why Clí has such love for the Fir Bolg..." started Anrad.

"It's because he's from Connacht," Lannai shouted out.

Anrad continued, "but in any case he is telling the story wrong. The sons of Semeon were indeed slaves to the Greeks. They gave them canvas sacks and forced them to carry soil on their backs up and down the mountains and ravines. That is how they improved the land of Greece, and that is how they got their new name, the Fir Bolg, the Men of the Bag. Dirty slaves carrying bags of soil around. And it was those bags they used to skin their curraig to make an escape under cover of darkness and sail back to Erin."

"No," said Clí, "the Fir Bolg weren't the Men of the Bag because of slave sacks, such a silly story. To answer Anrad, they were the men of the bag because no man of the Fir Bolg would be seen about without his gathering bag. For Erin provided endless salmon and oysters, berries and apples. There they had no need of farming or the crafts it demands, and so the Tuath dé Danaan, the People of Craft referred to these returned Nemedians as Fir Bolg." Clí glared at Tanaide before continuing on. "They came to Ireland from the south, as God saw fitting.

"Five thousand strong they came again into Ireland, their land of origin, two hundred and thirty years after their ancestors' exile. It was on Saturday, the first day of August, that Slaine and his thousand put into Inber Slaine; while Gann and Genann and their thousands put into Inber Domnann on Friday; and the last two thousand Fir Bolg under Rudraige and Sengann landed at Tracht Rudraige on Tuesday."

"That is quite exact," stated the Monk with a guarded look on his face.

“August 1st? Why does that sound important to me?” asked Lannai.

“Ice age ended,” responded Anrad.

“Pardon?”

“That’s when the ice age ended, August 1st, Lughnasa.”

Clí groaned and continued,

“Once ashore, the five separated groups of Fir Bolg worried dreadfully about their kin. Anxious to know whether the others had made it, they followed their plan and each group walked from their landing place towards the center of the island. They met then at the Stronghold of the Kings in Tara, relieved to see that all of them had arrived in Ireland. ‘We give thanks to the gods,’ said they,” seeing the Monk’s look, Clí quickly corrected himself.

“God, I mean, just the one. Slip of the tongue. Anyway...”

“they thanked God ‘for our return to Ireland’ and said, ‘Let the country be divided equitably amongst us. Bring wise Fintan here, and let Ireland be divided according to his decision.’

“It was then that Fintan made five portions of Ireland. He gave Ulster to Rudraige and his wife Liban, Connacht to Genann and his wife Cnucha, Meath to Slaine and Fuat, Leinster to Gann and Edar, and Munster to Sengaun and Auaist. For thirty years, the Fir Bolg had Ireland to themselves. They became the first to crown a King of Ireland. The ninth and greatest of the Fir Bolg kings was Eochu Mac Erc. In his ten year reign, there was no rain during the day but dew each morning; every year brought a bountiful harvest; not one falsehood was spoken in Ireland; and the law of justice ruled in Ireland for the first time. The Fir Bolg constructed grand roads to connect each part of the island, to easily visit their distant kin across their five provinces.

“You’ve already heard how the battle of Mag Tuired, the first one, put an end to that. It’s true all but a few of the Fir Bolg fell in battle with the Tuath dé Danaan. They fled to the islands off Ireland’s shores. It was they who led the Fomor to the second battle of Mag Tuired. The Fir Bolg remained on those islands until the time of the Provincials over Ireland, when Cruithne drove them out. Cruithne paid them recompense with the lands of Cairbre Nia Fer, but they were unable to remain there for the heaviness of the rents and taxes which he put upon them. Evicted, they fled to the protection of Medb and Ailill, who gave them lands in Connacht.

“Did you get all that monk?” finished Clí.

“Well, yes, but, well, I have questions. Starting with, where is the Biblical connection? Is this story childish fantasy or the truth of the Lord?”

“Monk, I am a Clí of the fili and a descendant of Nemed myself. I cannot speak falsehoods. I tell you now, Nemed was a descendant of Japheth, the son of the biblical Noah. And, in Ireland, Nemed married Macha, the namesake of this center of learning here at Armagh, Ard Macha.”

“OK. Noah to Nemed to Ireland. Got it. Well done at that. Glad to see this great project of history progress so quickly. We have the origin of the Irish and your connection to the Bible. The Fomorians though, they were already here?” asked the Monk.

“Yes”

“But the Nemedians were the first people of Ireland? Do you meant to say the Fomorians were not biblical?”

“Aye, soulless gingers from the darkest islands were they.”

Anrad O’Partholon spoke up, “Are you kidding me? I mean are you fecking kidding me with this shite?” They looked at him in surprise, wondering what he thought the Fomora were if not soulless gingers.

“Not the gingers, the whole thing. Clí’s story is missing its beginning! *I* have an older story, passed down by my people’s fili from the beginning of time.”

4: Partholon

Anrad took the center of the floor with a flourish and began.

“It was not Nemed but Partholon who first took Ireland after the Flood, in the sixtieth year of the age of Abraham on a Tuesday, on the fourteenth of the moon, in Inber Scene, for three times was Ireland taken in Inber Scen.

“Our ancestor Partholon, son of Sera, son of Sru, was a king of Greece. But in the barbaric continental society of their time, he became king by murdering his own father and mother. He lost his eye in that treacherous attack, and somehow his followers remained with this blemished man as their king.

“Perhaps that had something to do with the Great Flood. For Noah was not the only builder of an ark on God’s earth. Partholon was the greatest boatwright of all Greece, and as the rains fell and the waters rose, Partholon welcomed all comers onto his great ark.”

“People too, not just animals like your man in the Bible there,” piped up Tanaide.

Then Anrad continued, “And as the rain fell for forty days and forty nights, Partholon and his people sailed far in search of dry land, or any land at all. They swept into the heart of the great Mediterranean without seeing so much as a gull. They sped through the Straits of Gibraltar

while they were but two small rocks visible on either side of their boat. They wandered the sea for seven long years, living on fish and kelp, until, with the noonday sun to their backs, they spotted fair Erin far to the north. And they sailed to this promised land with the sun behind them day after day until they reached dry land...

Lannai laughed, "Dry land is it here?"

"... well, not *dry* land exactly, I suppose, but anyway... they sailed to this glorious emerald land of mists and rains, great elk and endless salmon, berries and honeyed apples.

But after three years, the Fomorians came from the sea, from the north, and challenged the Partholonians at the battle at Slemna of Mag Itha. The Partholonians defeated the Fomorians and drove them back from Ireland. But after thrice fifty years, a great pestilence wiped out the Partholonians. That is, wiped them out save one man, Tuan, nephew of Partholon.

Tuan witnessed the arrival of Nemed and his followers – who, I repeat, were not the first people of the Bible to become the people of Ireland – and he kept himself hidden from them. Tuan was now a man of Erin, and they were not yet, and Tuan bore witness for this land. He lived for many generations. From being a man of Erin, he became a stag of Erin, then a boar, and later an eagle. Tuan witnessed people after people come to this island. And he watched as Erin made each of those people her own.

And when Tuan the eagle fell from the sky into the Shannon pot, Tuan became a salmon, a salmon carrying the whole of the knowledge of Erin's people down her great river. But one day, Cairill caught the salmon, gutted him, and fed this salmon of knowledge to his wife. She became pregnant, and when she birthed a son, they thought Tuan was a fine name for him. And Tuan Mac Cairill grew into the finest fili and scholar Erin had ever seen. He cloistered himself away at Kilbaha, and he composed this history of Ireland from Partholon through the Nemedians and all to this day." Anrad O'Partholon finished his telling.

After a moment, the Monk broke the silence. "I have questions..."

"No time for questions, Monk. Just write it down already will ye?" snapped Anrad. The other fili glared, and the Monk dutifully carried on, perhaps adding a few glosses of his own to answer his questions to his own liking.

"So, you see," said Anrad, "Our island's peoples arise from the Bible as well as from peoples your Christian fili forgot. Our language is but the best bits of the rest. Look around you here at Armagh my friends, are we not the most learned people on God's green earth?"

And the monks and fili looked about in contemplation until the woman at the center of the hall broke the silence. And a greater silence reigned in the hall between her words, for this was the great Bán Ollamh, the most learned and accomplished of the fili. She was ancient. You could be forgiven for mistaking her for a part of the building, so long had she remained still and silent.

5: Cessair & Fintan's Poem

The Ollamh cleared her throat, dust glinting in a shaft of light, and she spoke slowly and authoritatively. “Monk, my fili only speak truth, but I have a story older still.

“Cesair. Cesair was the name of the woman who led the first people to Ireland. And before you ask, Monk, Cesair was the daughter of Bith and granddaughter of Noah, who turned her away from the ark, only allowing two by two of each animal and reserving humanity for himself. So, Cesair gathered her people 40 days before the flood to seek out a new land. She brought fifty women and but three men, her father, her brother, and her husband, Fintan Mac Bochra.

Cesair's people journeyed from the land of Noah across the known world to Iberia. And there at the end of the world, at the sacred promontory of A Coruña, Cesair stood atop the Tower of Hercules built by Breogán King of Galicia. Cesair looked north on that exceptionally clear day. The sea was as glass and met the sky thousands of leagues away. Cesair spied straight north our promised land of Ireland, straight through the Corcu Duibne and the Hill of Uisneach.

Cesair prepared her people to journey north across the sea, and they sailed with the sun at their back until they arrived at Dun na mBarc in County Cork.

They divided into three groups with one man each. Her brother and seventeen women went west. Her father and sixteen women went east (one less to lighten the strain on the old man), and Fintan, Cesair and sixteen of her women traveled north to settle. Erin gave them no end of fish, oysters, berries, boars, and apples. With its bounty, Cesair hoped they could populate the island. And she would establish a matriarchy, one that could avoid the cruelty of her grandfather or the endless wars of his people. She figured men were needed for the one thing and one thing alone and that the three of her men should suffice.

But she figured wrong. And the sixteen women quickly exhausted Cesair's father. He became the first man to die on this fair isle, and what a way to go. And off in the west, the seventeen women rode Cesair's brother until his body broke. And so these 33 women reunited at Dun na mBarc and traveled north in search of Cesair, or perhaps moreso in search of Fintan.

And from the hill that Cesair enjoyed best, Fintan watched astounded as the women arrived. And the fifty women assembled, glad to see each other, if also in mourning of Cesair's father and brother. And when they turned their attention to Fintan, when Cesair presented Fintan with the responsibility of satisfying herself and 49 more women besides, Fintan fled. He spent months and years and a day alone in the deepest woods until he lost all sense of his self. Until he awoke, one day, as a salmon.

Cesair died from a broken heart. Her women lived on, enjoying Erin's bounty, never wanting for food nor water nor milk nor mead. Never freezing and never burning. Never killing and

never farming. Erin did not ask her people to toil. And they lived happy lives, but they lived and died without progeny on this bountiful Island of Women.”

“Yet how is it that you came to know all this, Ollamh, as no one survived to tell the tale?” asked the Monk.

“‘Yet’ he says like he’s English,” muttered Tanaide.

“If you wish to survive to tell tales, you would do well not to question me in such a manner,” replied the Ollamh, calmly, coldly. Then she continued,

“Not hard to tell. I survived. For I am the daughter of Fintan and Cesair. And I lived and learned as a salmon for many years until a great eagle plucked me from the water in its talons, and I became the eagle. I surveyed this land from the air for many years before a great crow fought me from the sky, and a boar took me in the forest where I landed, and I became the boar. And I learned the secrets of Erin’s deep forests and dark places for years and years until I became too old and tired to move. And then, I became the mushrooms connecting the boar’s rotting body to the trees, and the great trees to the bushes laden with berries, and all of Erin’s thoughts and knowledge flowed through me. I stretched across the island, connecting all, but I feared losing myself if I did not become one again, and from the great forests across Erin, I concentrated myself into a hazel tree, and from the tree into a single hazelnut.

And I fell from the hazel tree into the well of knowledge, where the salmon journeyed to feast. It was not a salmon who ate my hazelnut, but a woman. This woman, Sinan she was called, ate my hazelnut and drank from the well of knowledge below the sea to gain the greatest gift—the gift of poetic inspiration. And I was in Sinan, and my knowledge came with me, all the knowledge of Erin.

With our knowledge and inspiration, Sinan began to improvise *the* great poem, but the waters rushed forth from the well, spilling over the sea in a great wave over the land, spreading knowledge and inspiration along its new banks, until it came to rest not far from here at Corbeg. And some say Sinan died there, and they named the great river after her. But I tell you the truth, she became pregnant after eating the hazelnut, and she gave birth there at Corbeg. She brought forth a daughter, and she named her Fidelma, and all of my knowledge passed into her. And I tell you that woman Fidelma is the same you see before you telling this tale. For I am Fidelma, daughter of Sinan, daughter of Cesair and Fintan, and my decades and centuries of study are why I am the greatest Ollamh Ireland has ever known.”

“That’s almost as mad as the thing you told me about the fish and the loaves,” whispered Anrad to the Monk.

And the Ollamh sang this verse before continuing her tale:

“Ireland--whatever is asked of me
I know pleasantly,
Every taking that took her
from the beginning of the tuneful world.

Cessair came from the East,
the woman was daughter of Bith;
with her fifty maidens,
with her three men.

I was in Ireland here,
my journey was everlasting,
till Partholon reached her,
from the East, from the land of Greeks.

I was here in Ireland
and Ireland was deserted,
till the son of Agnomain reached Nemed,
brilliant his fashion.

And I asked them, ‘Children of powerful Nemed, what is the cause of your assembling? What has brought you here—contest, conflict, or combat?’

‘What has brought us from our homes, wise Fidelma, is this: we suffer at the hands of the Fomorians by reason of the greatness of their rents and taxes.’

And I told them, ‘Depart if you feel the time is ripe, glorious sons of Nemed; do not suffer wrong, but go far from this island.’

‘Is that your advice to us, wise Fidelma?’

‘It is,’ said Fidelma, ‘and I have more counsel for you: you must not go by one route or in one direction, for a fleet cannot be brought together without outbreak of fighting; a large number means quarrelling, strangers provoke challenge, and an armed host provokes conflict. You do not find it easy to live together in any one spot in Ireland, and it would not be any easier for your hosts in new homes. So, depart from this land, children of Nemed; leave Ireland, and escape the violence of your landlords.’

‘I prophesize, you shall stay here no longer, pay no more tribute. Yet, your sons or your grandsons will return to recover the land you now flee. You shall travel to the land of the Greeks and though your strength will not be sufficient in the East, another group of you, the children of steadfast Beothach shall leave you and go towards the cold North, while the children of Semeon go to the East though you feel it strange.’

So we parted from each other, I and the famous children of Nemed.”

The Monk opened his mouth but before he could utter a sound, the Ollamh sang this verse:

“The Fir Bolg and Fir Gailian came,
it was long ago;
the Fir Domnann came,

they landed on a headland in the west.

“Thereafter the Tuath dé Danaan came,
in their masses of fog,
so that there was sustenance for me
though it was a long lifetime.

The sons of Mil came from Spain,
from the south, so that there
was sustenance for me at their hands,
though they were strong in battle.

A long life fell to my lot,
I shall not conceal it;
I am Fidelma the white daughter of Sinan,
I shall not conceal it;
after the Flood here I am
a noble great sage.

A just division Fintan shared,
himself and Bith and bold Ladra;
for peace and for reason was it done,
in the matter of the fifty magnificent maidens.

Seventeen women he took, including Cessair--
Lot, Luam, Mall, Mar, Froechar, Femar, Faible, Foroll,
Cipir, Torrian, Tamall, Tam, Abba, Alla, Baichne, Sille:
that is the tale which we were there.

Seventeen Bith took, with Bairrfhind--
Sella, Della, Duib, Addeos, Fotra, Traige, Nera, Buana,
Tamall, Tanna, Nathra, Leos, Fodarg, Rodarg, Dos, Clos:
be it heard -those were our people further.

Sixteen thereafter with Ladra:
Alba, Bona, Albor, Ail, Gothiam, German, Aithne,
Inde, Rodarg, Rinne, Inchor, Ain, Irrand, Espa, Sine, Samoll:
that was our fair company.

None of the seed of Adam took Ireland before the Flood but those,” stated the Ollamh with finality.
Silence reigned in the hall.

“So you were a salmon then, old woman?” laughed the Monk, with a chuckle that rang out in the
silent room.

And before his laugh could echo back to the center of the great hall, Cormack’s sword tickled the
monk’s throat. “Do not forget your place, Monk. You and your Christian brothers study at Armagh
under the hospitality and protection of my father, the king of Ulster. If you are indeed insulting the

Ollamh, if this be illegal satire, you owe compensation both to the Ollamh and to me as host. And keep in mind, the honor price of an Ollamh, the highest of the fili with decades of study, is seven cumals. The price of a single poem from her is one cumal. Your honor price, Monk, is merely a three-year-old heifer, and that only because we choose to acknowledge your learning. She has a retinue of 24 men and women whom you should not anger. Your retinue is but that quill, ink, and vellum. Now then, what was it you were saying to the Ollamh?" Cormack held his sword steady, an inch from the Monk's throat.

"Yes... um... as I was saying..." stammered the Monk, "I thank you Ollamh for your story. I wrote it down here, um, just as you told it. From Noah, to matriarchy, to salmon, to Shannon, and so forth. Truly, this must be the oldest story of the people of this island. And, it does connect to the one true and holy Bible."

The Ollamh looked on, unblinking, silent.

Cormack returned his sword to its sheath, the only sword allowed inside the great hall, and he spoke, "Fair enough monk. Now rest your quill hand, and let's all have our fill of the fine mead set aside for our work. For, I have the most epic story of them all, the story of how my people, THE people of Ireland today, how we came to rule this land. So grab a mug and listen."

6: The Milesians

Cormack stood regally and addressed the room of scholars.

"As the Ollamh told you, the Sons of Mil came to Ireland from Spain, following the path that Cesair took north on a fair day to this promised land.

Íth son of Breogan, he was the first of us who saw Ireland, on a winter's evening, from the top of Breogan's Tower. Íth, with thrice thirty warriors, came to Ireland, and they landed on the fetid shore of the Headland of Corcu Duibne.

People of the Tuath dé Danaan came to converse with Íth on that strand, and Íth asked them the name of this island. Inis Elga, said they; Mac Cuill, Mac Cécht, and Mac Gréine are its three kings.

They brought Íth to the Dún and gave him hospitality. Over dinner, Íth praised Ireland endlessly. "This land where you dwell is unbelievable; you could never run out of fruit, honey, wheat or fish; and the weather is neither too hot nor too cold." After a night of hospitality, Íth bade them farewell with more praise for the land and left for his ship.

The men of Ireland became suspicious of Íth's intentions towards their land, which he praised to such a great degree. They laid a plot to kill Íth, and he fell at their hands in Mag Ítha. So it was to avenge Íth that the sons of Míl - the Gáedil - came.

The leaders, nobles, and servitors of the Gáedil brought a fleet of seven times twelve ships. As their great druí Amorgen son of Míl set his right foot upon Ireland, he spoke this poem—

I am Wind on Sea,
I am Wave on Ocean,
I am Roaring of Sea,
I am Bull of Seven Fights,
I am Vulture on Cliff,
I am Dewdrop,
I am Fairest of Flowers,
I am Bold as a Boar,
I am Salmon in Pool,
I am Lake on Plain,
I am a Mountain in a Man,
I am a Word of Skill,
I am the Point of a Weapon,
I am God who fashions fire for a head.

Who smooths the ruggedness of a mountain?
Who is He who announces the ages of the Moon?
And who, the place where the sun shall set?
Who calls the cattle from the House of Tethys?
On whom do the cattle of Tethys smile?
Who is the troop, who the god who fashions edges
in a fortress of gangrene?
Enchantments about a spear? Enchantments of Wind?

A fishful sea!
A fruitful land!
An outburst of fish
Fish under wave,
In streams of
A rough sea!
Birds,
A white hail
With hundreds of salmon,
Of broad whales!
A harbour-song—
An outburst of fish,
A fishful sea!

Thereafter, the sons of Míl journeyed across the land to pay their respects to Banba in Sliab Mis. Banba told them, 'If it be to take Ireland ye have come, it's an ill omen to see you have arrived safely.'

'It is by necessity,' said Amorgen Glúingel, the poet.

'I ask a gift from you to me then,' said she.

‘What gift?’ said they.

‘That you give this island my name,’ said she.

‘What is your name?’ said they.

‘Banba,’ said she.

‘Then let it be a name for this island,’ said Amorgen.

Afterwards they traveled to Eblinne to pay their respects to Fotla. She spoke with them in like manner, and desired that her name should be upon the island. Amorgen replied, ‘Let Fotla be a name upon this island.’

And finally, they went to Ériu at the center of the island in Uisnech. ‘Warriors, said she, welcome to you. Long have soothsayers known of your coming. Yours shall be this island forever, and to the east of the world there shall not be a better island. No people shall there be, more numerous than yours.’

‘Good is that,’ said Amorgen, ‘good is the prophecy.’

‘Don’t be crediting her or her prophesy for our prosperity,’ said Éber Donn, eldest of the sons of Míl, ‘thank our gods’ I mean, God, ‘and our own might.’

‘If the land’s all the same to you, if you put yourself above it, you shall have no profit of this island, nor shall your progeny. A gift to me, you sons of Míl, and you children of Breogan,’ said she, ‘that my name shall be on this island lest your progeny suffer.’

‘Erin shall be its principal name,’ said Amorgen.

The sons of Míl and Bregon went on to Tara to meet the three kings of Ireland, Mac Cuill, Mac Cécht, and Mac Gréine. They asked the Sons of Míl to have the island to themselves for three days, free from assault, from battle, or from giving of hostages.

‘Give the judgment, Amorgen, should we accept these demands?’ said Eber Donn.

‘I pronounce it,’ said Amorgen. ‘Let this island be left to them.’

‘How far shall we go?’ said Éber.

‘Past just nine waves.’ said Amorgen. This is the second judgement given in Ireland.

They left Tara heading south to their ships at Inber Féile and Inber Scéne. They boarded their ships and rowed them past nine waves, looking back at shore.

Then, the druids of Ireland and the poets of the Tuath dé Danaan sang spells from the beach for the wind and the waves to carry the Sons of Míl far from Ireland.

‘A wind of wizards is this!’ said Éber Donn, ‘Look! Our sails are slack.’

‘Patience! said Airech, steersman of the ship of Donn and fosterling of Amorgen.

Said Donn, the eldest, ‘This is a disgrace for our men of cunning! To be fooled by the kings of Ireland like this.’

‘Tis no disgrace!’ said Amorgen; and he spoke poetry to the winds:

I seek the land of Ireland,
Coursed be the fruitful sea,
Fruitful the ranked highland,
Ranked the showery wood,
Showery the river of cataracts,
Of cataracts the lake of pools,
Of pools the hill of a well,
Of a well of a people of assemblies,
Of assemblies of the king of Tara;
Tara, hill of peoples,
Peoples of the Sons of Mil,
Of Mil of ships, of barks;
The high ship Eriu,
Eriu lofty, very green,
An incantation very cunning,
The great cunning of the wives of Bres,
Of Bres, of the wives of Buaighe,
The mighty lady Eriu,
Erimón harried her.’

And the wind calmed to hear Amorgen’s verses. The Sons of Mil and their ships sailed for Erin in a fury that rivalled the wizard’s wind. They crossed the ninth wave. They rammed their ships into the strand. And as they piled over their prows, the druids and fili of the Tuath dé Danaan ran in fright.

The Milesians returned to Tara, and this time they demanded possession of Ireland.

The Tuatha dé conferred and made a counter-offer to the Sons of Mil. ‘We cannot give you possession of Erin, but we can share her with you. We offer you half of the island; your choice of which half.’

Amorgen would not be fooled a second time, ‘We need a judge and surety to divide between us fairly.’

Both sides agreed to call on Mananann Mac Lir, son of the seas, as a judge and surety to divide Ireland fairly between them. ‘Which half will you have?’ Mananann asked Amorgen.

‘The top half,’ replied Amorgen.

‘The land north of the Shannon?’ Mac Cecht clarified.

‘No, the half on top of the earth. The Tuath dé Danaan shall have the half under the ground.’

Mac Cecht spat, ‘Have it then, and let Eriu’s prophecies rule your fate and let your progeny suffer. To that other world we will go.’

With that, Mananann waved his cloak between the Tuath dé Danaan and the Sons of Mil, creating a veil to separate their worlds forever. And the Tuath dé Danaan marched into their dún, under their palaces, and were gone.”

“Where did they go? Are you saying ye have molemen living underground?” asked the Monk

“Ach, you’re slow,” said Fidelma.

“That’s not nice.”

“I wasn’t trying to be nice; I was trying to be accurate,” Fidelma explained, “It’s like this; The Tuatha Dé arrived in ships from the sky, but when the Gaels came they retreated to the Otherworld. The Otherworld is not above or below. It is between the here and between the now. It is the dark matter to our light matter. It is the water we swim in, unknowingly. But our worlds exert gravity on each other. They interacted, for a while. Then, as human memory of the Tuatha Dé faded, communication came to a close.”

Cormack continued, “The Sons of Mil became the Men of Erin. Bile and Míl, their descendants are all the Gáedil. All the Ulaid are of Éber son of Ír. As am I, Cormack son of Airt.

“And, that, Monk, is the complete history of the takings of Erin from Cesair’s first steps on this land to my voice in this hall.”

Cormack’s admirers let out a quiet applause, and perhaps a verse or two of praise poems. The Monk continued inscribing Cormack’s words on parchment, quietly, having learned more than a story from Cormack today.

7: Summing it up so

The Monk rose from his desk, and without a word he retrieved two large pitchers of mead. He circled the table, serving Cormack, and the Ollamh, and the rest of the fili in the order of Gaelic custom.

“Do we have it, Monk? Our history in writing?” asked Lannai.

“Aye, I believe so,” replied the Monk. “Let me try to recount it to you all.” And the Monk recited the history of the takings of Ireland:

“First came Cesair with her fifty women and three men, of which only Fintan survived to tell his... or, pardon, I must have read my writing incorrectly... of which only Fidelma, her... tale,” said the Monk with a glance towards the Ollamh. “Yes, of course it was a woman who first led people to this land. Very plausible idea that is. Sure, it’s grand. The Church has nothing but respect for women.”

The Monk coughed and continued, “Then came Partholon, but plague took all his people save one who told the tale. Then came the Nemedians, who enjoyed Erin’s bounty until the Fomora demanded rent and taxes that sent the Nemedians into exile. Many landed in bondage in Greece and later returned to Erin as the Fir Bolg. But others, after the defeat of the Nemedians at Conaing's Tower, had fled from Ireland into the north of the world where they learned magic and wizardry. And when Nuada was their king they came in dark clouds to Ireland, and alighted on the mountain of Clonmaicne Rein,” and with a glance to Lannai the Monk added, “or alternatively, they came to Ireland in ships, which they burnt on landing, and proceeded under cover of dark clouds of steam and smoke to Sliabh an Iarinn. And it was they, the Tuath dé Danaan who defeated the Fomora and the Fir Bolg and yet provided the Fir Bolg with lands in Connacht. And the Tuath dé Danaan were the Men of Erin until the Gaedil – that’d be you lot – wounded them without a war, through cunning above even the strong and wise Tuath dé Danaan.”

Thirsty and thinking that was fair enough, the fili and their retinue and the monks feasted and drank. The bards shared songs and stories late into the night, even as some guests enjoyed the women’s hospitality of Armagh.

And as the Monk came into the courage of his cups, he yelled out of nowhere to no one and everyone, “None of this makes sense! None of it! The magic, the fanciful genealogies, the contradictions, the demons, and the... the... the wo- women!”

The fili, looked about each other and Fidelma suggested, “Would you say we should tell him the secret?”

The Monk looked from each to the other in expectation.

“But sure we’re here now,” shrugged Lannai.

“Monk, you must swear not to write this down.” He nodded. Cormack continued, “The secret knowledge behind our stories is this:

“Our story is not a story of people; it is the story of this island. This Lebor Gabala is our history, but the land is the central character. The stories relate the cycles of life and the ways of living with and on Ireland. They ask why people came, how they made a living, how they shaped the land, and what became of them.

“Long ago, giant rivers of ice flowed into Ireland and Alba from the north. Of course people came to this island from the south, where else was there? The first people, Cesair’s people, were matriarchal. They practiced the honorable harvest of fish and game and fruit. Nemed’s people sought sanctuary in Ireland, and ‘nemeton’ remains the word for a druidic sanctuary. Partholon’s people brought cows, and they built the first hostel and brewed the first beer. They held the first trial, in which their law upheld a wife’s sexual freedom by convicting her husband for her lover’s murder. The Fir Bolg, the Men of the Bag, brought sheep and practiced horticulture to live with the land. The Fomorians took their living from the sea and taxing land dwellers. The Tuath dé Danaan, the People of Craft, represent our evolution into agriculture and smithcraft. The Gaels, the Sons of Mil, brought civilization, and the disappearance of the Tuath dé Danaan represents our people’s transition from living *with* Erin to extracting a living *from* her, our forgetting of the land’s language. And you Christians, you represent the severing of our relationship with our ecosystem, with your fear of women and sex.”

Fidelma handed the Monk a crudely carved stone figure, “Learn from Sheela here, Monk, birth and death, one follows the other endlessly. Life moves in cycles. There are times of chaos and times of prosperity. Times of iniquity and times of humanity. We change. Erin changes. God is change.”

The Monk gasped in shock at the heresy as Fidelma raised her voice and shouted, “Let the truth of the history suffice! I answered the question keenly.”

Appendices

Sources:

- Lebor Gabala
- The Primer of the Auraicept na néces
- Cath Maige Tuired
- Early Irish Law
- Story Archaeology, In Search of the Dagda
- Graham Robb, The Ancient Paths
- Banshees of Inisherrin
- Father Ted

Character names

Fidelma, the Ban Ollamh

Lannai Mac Leabhar, the Librarian

Clí O'Nemed, a fili

Anrad O'Partholon, an arsehole

Tanaide, a fili

Cormack Mac Airt, son of the King of Ulster.

The Monk
