

# The gods of Newgrange in Irish literature & Romano-Celtic tradition

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*Abstract: This paper examines the proposition put forward by Professor M.J. and Claire O'Kelly that medieval Irish literature provides us with evidence of gods who may have been worshipped by those who built Neolithic Newgrange. After examination of the literature, and the etymology of the various names used, it is agreed that the gods described may indeed originate in the prehistoric period but contrary to the O'Kellys' views, the late Iron Age/Roman period is put forward as the most likely dating range. It is further argued that the existence of such gods should be linked to the Roman coins and jewellery found outside Newgrange. It is suggested that the cultural context of these Roman finds is best explained by Roman worship outside megalithic tombs in southern England and the possibility of a late prehistoric invasion of the Boyne valley region from Britain is put forward.*

*Key words: Megalithic shrines - medieval literature - gods - Romans*

## The gods of Newgrange in Irish literature & Romano-Celtic tradition

In his book on the passage tombs of Cúil Irra, Stefan Bergh wrote that

"Seen from the point of view of man's need to create a final resting place for the remains of the dead, the erecting of a megalithic tomb seems an extremely complicated and extravagant undertaking. If all that is required is protected storage of the body of the deceased, then a pit in the ground would be fully sufficient - possibly complemented by some form of marker above ground if it was desirable to return to the spot (Bergh 1995, 141).

This inefficiency has increasingly led archaeologists to emphasise the ceremonial and ritual aspects of Irish megalithic tombs and to consider the possibilities that they are as much temples as they are places of burial. Current attempts to understand what type of worship may have taken place in these structures has tended to focus on two issues: the way in which bones from various individuals appear to have been collected and arranged in symbolic fashion within a monument (Bergh 1995, 141-156; Cooney 2000, 86-126) and on

the significance of other deposits within its immediate environment (O'Brien 1999, 201-216). Features such as the sun-box at Newgrange (Ray 1989) and the development of Martin Brennan's work on passage tomb orientations (Brennan 1983; Moroney 1999) has also led some scholars to infer that passage tomb religion was in some fashion concerned with the rising and setting sun at key points in the astronomical year. More recently, there have been attempts to explore the role that sound may have played in Neolithic ceremonies and the extent that drums and other instruments, played within the confines of the megaliths, may or may not have been audible to an awed and reverent audience standing outside the sacred space (Watson & Keating 1999).

Our late honorand, Professor M.J. O'Kelly together with his wife, Claire O' Kelly, suggested an alternative and peculiarly Irish approach to the study of Neolithic religion (Carson & O'Kelly 1977, 48-9; O'Kelly 1978, 70-4; O'Kelly 1982, 43-7). This approach was based on the fact that Ireland is unique among western European countries in the volume of early medieval documents to survive. Again, unlike most European countries, many of these sources are written in the native language of the inhabitants, a language which

we know Irish people certainly spoke in late prehistory and which they may have spoken at earlier periods. The O'Kellys argued that it is, therefore, worth considering the ways in which early medieval Irishmen depicted the area surrounding Newgrange as this may provide us with 'a window on the Late Neolithic' in Ireland (O'Kelly 1982, 48). This area was known in medieval literature as *Brug na Bóinne* (Modern Irish *Brú na Bóinne*), a phrase which translates simply as "inhabited or cultivated land of the Boyne [region]". That this "inhabited land" was specifically located in the vicinity of Newgrange is indicated by the place-name of BROUNYS WERE on the Boyne immediately below Newgrange in accounts of Cistercian landholdings of 1539 and as BROWE'S MILL in 1612 (O'Kelly 1978, 87).

Specifically the O'Kellys pointed to two key themes in the literary depiction of *Brug na Bóinne*; on the one hand, it was seen as the abode of the mythological Tuatha Dé Danann, the last invaders of the island prior to the arrival of human kind, known in Irish tradition as the Sons of Míl. On the other, the area is also described as a pagan burial place for the ancestral Uí Néill kings of Tara, depicted in the literature as high-kings of all Ireland.

In the early 1970s, when Claire O'Kelly was first developing these ideas, the study of early Irish literature was dominated by scholars such as Myles Dillon, Gerard Murphy and Proinseas Mac Cana (O'Kelly 1982, 48). Such men were concerned to stress the antiquity of Irish tradition and the extent to which aspects of that tradition may derive from ancestral Indo-European cultures, belonging to the era which saw the initial development of almost all the modern European languages (Dillon 1972; Murphy 1955; Murphy & Knott 1967; Mac Cana 1970, 131-6). Indo-European elements could, in their view, be identified through comparative analysis of mythological tales from Europe and Asia using a methodology which, in turn, had developed out of the primitivist theories of Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (Downie 1970, 32-43). It was the subject matter covered rather than the date of the story which was crucial; if, for example, a king was described as a sacred rather than as a political personage, this could be seen as an indication of the great age of that particular account (Dillon 1952, 1-2). Influenced by this environment, M.J. O'Kelly stated specifically that the age of the documents in which *Brug na Bóinne* was mentioned was irrelevant for behind the surviving sources lay older written texts and behind them again was a strong oral tradition. He wrote: 'Tales which are told and retold, whether in oral or written form, must

constantly undergo change but a basic and ancient theme or themes can often be detected regardless of the date of the versions" (O'Kelly 1982, 45). As a consequence, a number of the texts which are cited by O'Kelly, such as *Agallamh na Seanórach*, or *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (1982, 43, 46) are relatively modern Irish tales, belonging to the period after the Normans invaded Ireland.

Today, many literary scholars are increasingly sceptical of the Dillon/Murphy approach. The age of a document is seen as being fundamental to its study and scholars seek to understand it, in the first instance, against the contemporary social or political backdrop of the society in which the writer lived (Ó Corráin 1985, 1986; Herbert 1989; Herbert & Ó Riain 1988; McCone 1990; Breatnach 1996). In this light, it is of interest that the earliest traditions about *Brug na Bóinne* as a place of royal pagan burials occur in a poem attributed to Cináed Ua hArtacáin who died in 974 (Gwynn 1991, II 10-17). This poem, which refers among other things to the refusal of Cormac mac Airt to be buried in *Brug na Bóinne*, appears dedicated to the strongest ruler of the Knowth dynasty, Congalach mac Máelmithig, king of Cnogba or Knowth and high-king of Tara who died in 956 (Gwynn 1991 II 16; Byrne 1968, fn.27). An earlier cousin, Flann mac Máelfhinnia, is identified specifically in 931 as Flann of the *Brug* while a more remote ancestor, Cináed mac Írgalaig (who died in 728) is said to have built a monumental grave for his horse at the *Brug* (O'Donovan 1856 II 627; Gwynn 1991, II 22). In addition, from the early tenth century, historical sources indicate that the more powerful Irish kings were developing royal mausolea in important Christian settlements such as Clonmacnoise (Ó Floinn 1995, 254). In short, the traditions about *Brug na Bóinne* as the pagan place of burial of the Uí Néill kings at Tara, first occur in works composed by a poet working for the Uí Néill dynasty at Knowth, at a time when their ruler had recently attained the kingship of Tara and in a context where other kings were creating family burial grounds at Christian sites. This historical backdrop makes it seem likely that tenth-century claims concerning the role of *Brug na Bóinne* as a high-status burial site derives primarily from its medieval associations with the Uí Néill dynasty.

In point of fact, the O'Kellys had made this point, arguing that these stories probably arose "from an attempt on the part of the historians of the Uí Néill dynasty to aggrandise the kings of Tara" (1978, 71). The existence of these stories is, however, seen as further corroboratory evidence for the age of the

mythological literature concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann. Their 1982 formulation runs as follows:

"This is an obvious rewriting of an old tradition by 'historians' in Christian times and is probably an attempt to aggrandize the dynasty then ruling at Tara, the Uí Néill, by associating their ancestors with the famous Brú. The fact that the chroniclers adverted to the link between the Brú and the Tuatha Dé shows the strength of what must have been even then an old tradition" (1982, 46).

As with the stories about royal pagan burial, however, this second element in the depiction, associating *Brug na Bóinne* with the mythological Túatha Dé Danann, is only first attested in sagas written in late Old Irish, approximately late eighth or ninth-century in date. The best dated reference is the short but famous entry of 863 in the *Annals of Ulster* which, in translation, reads -

"The cave of Alduí's ground and of Knowth and the cave of Boadán's grave above Dowth and the cave of Ángobae's wife were searched by the foreigners - something which had never been done before. This was the occasion when the three kings of the foreigners plundered the land of Flaind mac Conaing", (ruler of Knowth and king of the surrounding territory of Brega).

The references to Knowth and Dowth make it clear that this entry is concerned with the area of *Brug na Bóinne* but further investigation of the other names yields valuable information. The name Alduí, for example, is a compound name; being made up of the preposition *al-* or *ol-* meaning beyond or supreme and the word *doé* which is cited in the medieval legal text *Míadsleхта* as one of three categories of the professional warrior class (Thurneysen 1946, 500; Binchy 1978, 584:15-16). It would seem that one of the particular duties of the *doé* concerned the execution of judicial ordeals which, in early Ireland, could include trial by combat. In addition, the word can mean "rampart" (DIL 1983, D:244) and this would seem to imply that the *doé*, in addition to his judicial function, could also be seen as a defender or protector of his people. Alduí's name, therefore, can be translated along the lines of 'Supreme Warrior/Defender/Judicial Enforcer'.

No figure is associated with the cave of Knowth but Dowth is linked to the grave of Bóadán, a name based on an early form of the word *buádach* or 'victorious'. The military ideology suggested by the etymology of Alduí is thus reiterated at Dowth which is identified

with the 'cave of the grave of the Victorious One'. The third name, Ángobae can be explained as the adjective *án-*, meaning fiery, bright or glorious and the noun *gobae* - a smith. In her discussion of this entry (1978,81) Claire O'Kelly followed Hennessey's original publication of the annals where *angobae* is translated simply as 'the smith' (Hennessey 1887, 373) but the Modern Irish definite article *an* was never used in the ninth-century entries in the *Annals of Ulster*. The name given to the last cave, therefore, can be translated as the cave of the Resplendent Smith's wife. Such a name, by its very nature, seems unlikely to belong to a pre-metal-working Neolithic society. In the case of the other two figures named in the 863 entry, the Victorious One and the Supreme Warrior/Defender/Judicial Enforcer, the case is less clear cut but both names reflect a martial ethos which does not appear to be a dominating feature in the Stone Age. The adulation of war as marked by the production of prestige weapons and their use as votive offerings in cult practices are features not of the Neolithic but of later Bronze Age and Iron Age societies in Europe. If the figures named in this 863 entry represent prehistoric gods, as suggested by the O'Kellys, they would seem to fit more easily into a later prehistoric milieu. While Newgrange itself produced almost no artefacts from this period, more extensive excavations at Knowth, Loughcrew and Carrowmore, in Sligo, have all produced considerable evidence for Iron Age activity around the megalithic passage-tombs (Swift 1996, 1-6; 1997, 17-18; O'Brien 1999, 137-8).

It is also worth noting that the two warrior figures, the Supreme Defender and the Victorious One, also occur in the pantheon of the Túatha Dé Danann. The Túatha Dé Danann or 'people of the goddess Danu' were the Otherworld people who, in medieval literary tradition, inhabited Ireland prior to the arrival of the ancestors of the historical rulers of Ireland. When the latter, known as the sons of Míl, arrived into Ireland, the Túatha Dé Danann were defeated in battle and they subsequently retreated into the *side* or Otherworld-mounds of Ireland (Ó hÓgain 1990, 407-9). In at least one instance, and admittedly a later medieval one, Knowth has been explicitly identified as one of these *sid*-mounds (Knott 1922, 162; Byrne 1968, 383) but it has generally been accepted that the mythological tradition of the *sid* is most likely to have been derived from the prominence of megalithic tombs and prehistoric mounds in the Irish landscape.

Alduí mac Tait is identified as an ancestor of the famous Túatha Dé Danann king, Bres mac Elathan, while his son, Edleo mac Aldoí, is the first man of the Túatha Dé Danann who is said to have died in Ireland

(Gwynn 1991, III 219; Best *et al.* 1954, 34). In addition, the *Metrical Dindshenchas* mentions a second character, Aldúi son of Íarlaithe, said to have been buried in the hill of Cerna, along with a large number of others, both mythological and historical (Gwynn 1991, IV 204). The historical figures consist of seventh and eighth-century rulers of Brega including Cináed mac Írgalaig, the king of Tara who died in 728 and who is said to have built a grave for his horse at *Brug na Bóinne*. The *Aldúi* of our entry could be either of these two figures, or they could both represent variant traditions of the one character but if one had to choose, the *Aldúi* of Cerna has at least the merit of being explicitly linked to the same area of the country as Newgrange. Cerna has been located at the modern townlands of Carnes in Co. Meath, south of the river Nanny on the Bellewstown ridge (O'Curry 1855, 66).

Bóadán or the Victorious One is associated with *Brug na Bóinne* in Cináed ua hArtacáin's tenth-century poem and is identified as the herdsman of Elcmar in the annotated version of the 863 entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*. (Gwynn 1991, II 12; O'Donovan 1856, I 497). This has all the signs of being a late rationalisation as the role of herdsman does not seem to correlate well with the epithet 'Victorious'. Elcmar himself (whose name means 'The Jealous One') is identified in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* as the *breithem* or 'judge' of the Túatha Dé Danann king, the Dagdae, and elsewhere he is described as the brother of Bóand (Gwynn 1991, IV 268; III 36). In the saga *Tochmarc Étaíne*, in contrast, Elcmar is termed owner of *Brug na Bóinne* and Bóand was his wife (Bergin & Best 1938, 142). Whichever tradition one prefers, clearly Elcmar was seen as being closely associated with the Boyne valley region.

In other sagas dealing with *Brug na Bóinne*, the action revolves primarily around the Dagdae whose name is etymologically glossed by medieval Irish writers as the 'Good God' (Best & O'Brien 1967, 1183) and the woman Bóand whose name mirrors the Old Irish word for the Boyne river. As a name for the river, the earlier form of this name is attested in Ptolemy's map of Ireland of the mid second century A.D as BUVINDA, possibly meaning 'Cow-white' (O'Rahilly 1946, 3). In the early medieval sagas, Bóand has sex with the Dagdae after he has tricked her husband into going away to the midlands for a day. In another short text, *De gabáil in t-sída* 'the taking of the *síd*', the Dagdae is identified as a king of the Túatha Dé Danann:

"There was a wondrous king over the Túatha Dé in Ireland, Dagdae by name. Great was his power, even over the sons of Míl after they had seized the land. For the Túatha Dé blighted the grain and milk of the sons of Míl until they made a treaty with the Dagdae. Thereafter they preserved their grain and their milk for them. Great too was his power when he was king in the beginning and it was he who divided the *síde* among the men of the [Túatha] Dé (Best & O'Brien 1967, 1120; Koch & Carey 1997, 134).

In other words, the 'Good God' is identified here as being the most powerful figure of his generation and as having power over agricultural fertility. In other, later tales, he is also said to have been master of druidery and a warrior leader, as well as a man capable of building some of the major fortresses in Ireland (Gray 1983, 121). *De gabáil in t-sída* further specifies that he was the original owner of *Síd in Broga* or the *síd* within *Brug na Bóinne*. As such he is specifically associated with a particular mound unlike his *breithem*, Elcmar, who is termed owner of the *ferann* or lands of *Brug na Bóinne*. In both tales, however, it is the Dagdae's son, the child of the river Boyne who acquires the *Brug na Bóinne*, a man known as Óengus Mac In Óc.

This is the figure most widely associated with *Brug na Bóinne* in Irish literature. Frequently, in fact, *Brug na Bóinne* is known by Óengus' name, and is simply termed *Brug meic Ind Óc* (Hogan 1910, 130). This name form, however, is a problematic one for one would expect the entire form to be declined while in this case, *ind Óc* is left in the nominative case and only *macc* is inflected. T.F. O'Rahilly suggested that the explanation for this oddity was that Óengus' original sobriquet was \**maccan* the 'youth' or 'boy-god', a Goidelic equivalent corresponding to British *Maponos*. The epithet *óc* - 'young' was later affixed permanently to the name leading to the subsequent misinterpretation in the Middle Irish period of the name as *mac* + unstressed definite article + *óc* (O'Rahilly 1946, 516-7).

*Maponus* is a Gallo-British god of the Roman period whose name occurs in a small number of inscriptions from altars found in the militarized zone around Hadrian's Wall (Collingwood & Wright 1965, 194-5, 368-70, 633; Frere & Tomlin 1991, 71). The name is also found on a similar altar at Bourbonne le Bains, in the département of the Haute Marne where, as in Britain, it occurs in conjunction with the classical Apollo. It is also attested at Rouen and at Savigny (Holder 1904, II 414).

If O'Rahilly is right, therefore, the figure most widely linked to Newgrange in Irish literature belongs in origin to the pantheon of western European Celtic gods; gods who are best attested on altars and in sculpture created by the inhabitants of the Roman empire. Unlike Alduí and Bóadán, his name is not overtly militaristic, stressing instead his primary quality of youthfulness. Like his father, the Dagdae, however, he is also depicted as a military leader and in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, he refers to his role as king of *Brug na Bóinne* and controller of land and troops (Bergin & Best 1938, 146-8). In addition, the Middle Irish epithet, *óc* 'young' which he later acquired is, by extension, also used to simply refer to warriors (DIL 1983, O 86-7).

Finally, one must also mention yet another figure to be associated with *Brug na Bóinne* in the earlier documentation and that is the mythological father of the famous warrior, Cú Chulainn, the hero of the Ulster saga tales. It is well known that Cú Chulainn was brought up in the Cooley peninsula in Co. Louth and that it is from there that he is said to have travelled to the court of King Conchobar Mac Nessa at Emain Macha (O'Rahilly 1976, 13). What is less well known is that, according to the ninth-century saga telling of his birth, *Compert Con Culainn*, he was conceived after an encounter at *Brug na Bóinne* between his mother, Deichtine and a member of the Túatha Dé Danann, Lug (Van Hamel 1968, 5).

Unusually within Irish tradition, Lug is known both by his father and by his mother's name - he can be described as either *Lug mac Céin* 'Lug son of [his father] Cían' or *Lug mac Ethnenn* 'Lug son of [his mother] Ethne' (O'Rahilly 1946, 38; Gray 1983, 126). Both of these parents have links to the area of the Boyne valley; Cían is seen as the eponym of the Cíanachta, a medieval dynasty who ruled east Meath and parts of Louth in the early medieval period (O'Brien 1962, 168-9; Byrne 2001, 68). Ethne is identified in *Tochmarc Étaíne* as a synonym for Bóand or the Boyne (Best & O'Brien 1938, 142). Like the other members of the Túatha Dé Danann so far mentioned, Lug is thus closely associated with *Brug na Bóinne* itself but also with the surrounding landscape of the Boyne valley region.

In addition, however, the later mythological literature depicts Lug as having had a glorious career as a leader of the Túatha Dé Danann whom he ruled for forty years prior to the Dagdae (Best *et al* 1954, 35). He is said to have invented the concept of horse-racing and assembly and to have instituted the important annual festivity at Tailtiu or Teltown (Gray 1983, 126).

He heals Cú Chulainn's wounds and fights at his side in the earliest recension of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (O'Rahilly 1976, 64-5, 70) He is also identified as *samildánach* or 'gifted in all the arts' in the epic *Cath Maíge Tuired* or the battle of Moytirra, which tells the story of the battle between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Formorians who preceded them as occupants of Ireland (Gray 1983, 40-1). Like the Dagdae, therefore, he is seen as somebody whose mastery is not confined to one particular area of expertise but is rather an embodiment of a whole series of virtues, both martial and domestic. In addition, like \*Maccan/Maponus, Lug has also been identified with a pan-Celtic god and his name occurs in Roman placenames such as Luguwallium (Carlisle), Lugudunon (Lyon) and Lugdunum (Leiden & Laon) (Ó hÓgáin 1990, 272-77; Holder 1904, II 307-343).

In short, in early medieval Ireland, we can detect at least three different contemporary traditions concerning the Otherworldly inhabitants of *Brug na Bóinne*. There is the entry of 863 which refers to the graves of Alduí, Bóadán and *ban Ángobann*, otherwise the Supreme Defender, the Victorious One and the wife of the Resplendent Smith. There is the family group of the Dagdae, Bóand and Óengus Mac In Óc, the Good God, the river Boyne and the Youthful God. Finally there is the figure of Cú Chulainn's Otherworld father, the god Lug *samildánach* who was gifted in all crafts.

There are links between them; in each case, for example, the key figures are seen as male warriors, each of which can be identified with members of the Túatha Dé Danann. In each of the three strands of the tradition, *Brug na Bóinne* is also associated with women and, in the two cases where we have stories rather than simply placenames, *Brug na Bóinne* is seen as the site of a sexual encounter resulting in the birth of a hero. In the story of Óengus Mac Ind Óc, the mother is explicitly Bóand or the personification of the river Boyne while in the birth of Cú Chulainn, the river, under her synonym of Ethne, is represented as his grandmother. In both cases, however, the river is being linked to tales of sexual fertility and procreation. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, two of the male warrior figures Óengus Mac Ind Óc and Cú Chulainn's father Lug hold names which are found elsewhere in Europe as names of Celtic gods.

This more detailed analysis of the pre-Viking documentation for the gods of *Brug na Bóinne* has served to confirm the O'Kellys argument that the Túatha Dé Danann were closely associated with Newgrange. Investigation of the etymology of the

names involved, however, has shown that at least two of them, Alduí and Bóadán, have military associations which most archaeologists would tend to associate with the later prehistoric period. As already mentioned, their associate, the Resplendent Smith, must belong to the period after the introduction of metal. Of the others, there is reasonable evidence for suggesting that at least three, Bóand, \*Maccan/Maonus and Lug existed in the Iron Age although whether they had earlier origins is now impossible to say.

Iron Age activity at Newgrange is most vividly illustrated by the existence of Roman coins and artefacts and the O'Kellys interpreted these items as evidence for a long-standing cult of the Dagdae and his son Óengus:

"Perhaps the tombs were built as much to commemorate and arouse respect for the gods or spirits as to provide resting places for the newly-dead. Newgrange unlike Knowth and Dowth was not tampered with throughout the thousands of years of its life. Was this because of its particular association with the chief of all the gods, the Dagda and his son Oengus? Were these the spirits to whom offerings of Roman coins and objects of jewellery were made in the early centuries of the Christian era?" (1982, 47-8; see also 1978, 73).

This interpretation identifies Newgrange as having had a unique role within *Brug na Bóinne* as the only site which was not subsequently re-used and suggests that it was held to be uniquely sacrosanct by virtue of its association with the chief of all gods in a Neolithic cosmos, the Dagdae and his son. This interpretation depends heavily on the statement in *De gabáil in t-sída* that the Dagdae was the original owner of *Síd in Broga* or the Otherworld-mound of *Brug na Bóinne*. Even here, however, it is made clear that this but one monument within the land unit which he controlled:

The Mac Óc came to the Dagdae seeking territory (*ferann*) when he had made the division [of *side* mounds] to everyone... 'I have nothing for you' said the Dagdae; 'I have finished the distribution'.

'Obtain for me then' said the Mac Óc, 'just a day and a night in your own dwelling (*treb*). That was granted to him then.

'Now go to your house (*dom*)' said the Dagdae 'for you have used up your time.'

'It is plain, he said 'that the whole world is day and

night and that is what was granted to me'.

Then [the Dagdae] departed from there, and the Mac Óc remained in his *síd*. That is a wondrous land (*tír*). There are three trees there perpetually bearing fruit and an everliving pig on the hoof and a vessel with excellent liquor and all of this never grows less (Best & O'Brien 1967, 1120; Koch & Carey 1997, 134-5).

Here the logic of the tale is that the Dagdae was living in *Síd in Broga* which functioned as his house, specified as his *treb* and his *dom*. From there he controlled his *ferann* or territory. The Mac Ind Óc, in turn, occupied the *síd* and thus came to occupy the surrounding *tír* or land of *Brug na Bóinne* with its trees and domestic animals. This agrees with the primary meaning of *brug* as farmland rather than abode or hall (DIL 1983, B 212; M 177) and is confirmed by *Tochmarc Étaíne* which makes it absolutely clear that *Brug na Bóinne* was seen as a territory (*ferann*) on the north side of the Boyne (Bergin & Best 1938, 144). Unfortunately, we have no firm evidence with which to identify *Síd in Broga* specifically with Newgrange except on the grounds that it is the only one of the three largest mounds within the passage grave complex for which we do not have an early medieval name.

Secondly, there is no real reason to suggest a hierarchy along the lines of a classical pantheon amongst the Irish gods. The Dagdae is but one of a number of Túatha Dé Danann kings as these are described in the mythological tales. He is also one of a number of figures and places who incorporates the word *dea* or god into his name (DIL 1983, D 168-9). It is true that the Dagdae is credited in *De gabáil in t-sída* with the distribution of other *síde* (Otherworld mounds) to members of the Túatha Dé Danann (Best & O'Brien 1967, 1120; Carey 1997, 137) but this is due to his royal role as their king at that particular time rather than to the unique nature of his power. Nor is *Brug na Bóinne* itself particularly strongly associated with the Dagdae; as already noted, *Tochmarc Étaíne* states that the *Brug* was the property of Elcmar who is described as standing on *Síd in Broga*, watching his young troops, when Mac Ind Óc arrived to take his land (Bergin & O'Brien 1938, 144). The suggestion that Newgrange is unique by virtue of its association with the Dagdae ignores these textual associations with other figures. Furthermore, on archaeological grounds alone, the relatively limited excavation that has taken place at Newgrange means that the statement that it was not used in subsequent periods can only be treated as provisional.

In their interpretation, the O'Kellys treated the occurrence of the Roman artefacts at Newgrange as a unique phenomenon; symbolic of the longevity and strength of Irish prehistoric tradition in a land unconquered by the Romans. Subsequent scholars such as Bateson, Thomas and Warner have interpreted them more specifically as evidence for Romans in Ireland as colonists, traders or military invaders (Bateson 1973, 31; Thomas 1981, 297; Warner 1995, 30). The O'Kellys idea that the god being worshipped through this Roman activity was likely to be the pre-eminent Irish god, however, has been accepted implicitly by these scholars without further qualification or discussion.

In fact, the distribution of Roman coins in the vicinity of megalithic monuments is not a unique phenomenon even within Ireland for a stray gold coin of late Roman date has been found at the monument known as the Giant's Ring, outside Belfast (Bateson 1976, 173; Hartwell 1998). The deposit of coins and jewellery outside shrines are a feature of Romano-British worship in general but they also occur outside Neolithic monuments in Britain (Swift 1997, 19-20). The nature of these parallels has the potential to throw new light on our understanding of the mythological associations of *Brug na Bóinne*.

At West Kennet long barrow in Oxfordshire, six Roman coins were found in the top-soil of the facade area; three coins in the vicinity of stone I and 3 others in the disturbed area over and to the east of stone-hole 39 (Piggott 1962, 55-6). Five of the six coins were mid to late fourth century in date. Piggott compared these finds with the evidence from the long barrow Julliberrie's Grave in Kent. Here a scatter of eight late fourth-century coins were found immediately under the present turf line at the southern end of the north/south orientated tomb (Jessup 1939, 263-5) as well as a pot of early fourth-century coins in the line of the ditch (Jessup 1937, 133). Also in this barrow were found four Roman burials, two inhumations and two cremations, accompanied by pottery and, in one instance, a bronze brooch. At least two of the burials seemed, on the basis of their associations, to belong to the mid first century AD.

In Dorset, seven scattered coins were found at Wor Barrow in association with Romano-British pottery in the surface mould from the ditch while a small hoard of Constantinian coins were discovered in a round barrow at Tarrant Hinton (Pitt-Rivers 1898, pl.258; Grinsell 1959, 68). Helen O'Neil and L.V. Grinsell also identified six of the Cotswold/Severn long barrows which may have been opened in the Roman

period and of these, coins were found at Foxcote, Windmill Tump, Woodchester I and Hetty Pegler's Tump (O'Neil & Grinsell 1960, 54-5). In this last, a Romano-British skeleton with three fourth-century coins were found in the highest part of the mound above the north-east chamber and within 6 inches of the surface. A round barrow with Roman burials and fourth-century coins was also found at Ivy Lodge, in King's Stanley (Clifford 1950, 63). Finally, two sites at Bisley and at Tidenham in Gloucestershire, have produced Roman altars as well as coins: eight in the case of Bisley of which three were dedicated were dedicated to Mars, one to Minerva and one, without inscription but carved with a serpent and a ram's horns was assumed to be dedicated to a local god. The site itself was interpreted as a round barrow whilst Tidenham, with an altar and single coin, was simply defined as a barrow (Clifford 1938, 297-8). It should be said that doubt was cast on both these last sites by Grinsell who classified Bisley as 'very doubtful' and Tidenham as a gazebo or folly built around 1700 (O'Neil & Grinsell 1960, 54).

There are clear similarities between these sites and the evidence of Newgrange where coins, ornaments and other objects were found in the topsoil of the mound and, most particularly, in the vicinity of the three tall standing stones by the entrance-way. These finds include two Roman disc brooches, two finger rings with oval bezel of fourth to fifth-century type and the remains of what are thought to be penannular brooches. In addition, some twenty-five Roman coins were found of which the majority of gold coins were fourth-century in date (Carson & O'Kelly 1977, 35-40). Like the British finds, the distribution appeared focussed on the entrance-area of the tomb and were found close to the modern ground surface (*Ibid.* 43-7). One might also note that while inhumations were not found in the relatively limited excavations at Newgrange, they were found around site I at Knowth where they were dated to between 190 BC and AD 250. Elizabeth O'Brien has pointed out that such inhumations represent a new and intrusive style in the Irish Iron Age and has suggested that they show Romano-British influence (O'Brien 1992, 131).

If we can accept the evidence from the nineteenth-century excavation at Bisley, the inscriptions on the altars there suggest that the gods being worshipped by these Romano-British visitors to Neolithic barrows included the Roman gods Mars and Minerva as well as an unknown Celtic god whose altar was marked by a serpent with ram's horns. As already mentioned, however, the classification of Bisley as a barrow is regarded as a very dubious by Grinsell. Hetty

Pegler's Tump, in Gloucestershire, on the other hand, is not only a clear example of a long-barrow with Roman coins and inhumations; it is also found on the perimeters of the site of West Hill, Uley, a multi-phase ritual complex which was excavated in considerable detail between 1977-1979 and published by Ann Woodward and Peter Leach in 1993. Phase one consisted of round-bottomed ditches which may have been part of an open-ended enclosure or possibly the quarries for a long barrow. North of these were various pits which may have held standing stones or massive posts. In the early first century AD, the ditches were re-cut to form the southern part of a major enclosure with, in the centre, a square timber structure which may have functioned as a shrine. This wooden shrine was replaced by a stone-built temple in the second century AD and re-vamped again in the mid to late fourth-century. Thus we have a long-barrow with Roman coins in close proximity to an excavated shrine which was in active use during the period of the Roman colony.

During the excavation, the head and fragments of the legs were found of a life-size statue of c. 1.8m which, judging by the accompanying animals, represented the god Mercury and appears to have been carved in the second century AD (Woodward & Leach 1993, 92). This identification is confirmed by the existence of approximately 87 lead tablets, of which 18 are addressed to the god Mercury. These tablets are not published in detail but R.S.O. Tomlin has stated that the god was also known by a Celtic name but he is not yet prepared to reveal it. He also states that two tablets were addressed to Mars and one to the god Silvanus and he interprets this as evidence that the god of Uley was a local Celtic god with attributes of these three Roman gods. If this were so, the god of Uley would have incorporated the warrior gifts of Mars, the fertility aspects of Silvanus and the skills of Mercury (Woodward & Leach 1993, 115). In this respect the god worshipped at Uley compares well with the figure of the Dagdae, in particular for, as already noted, he is said to be warrior-king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, to have power over agricultural fertility and to be master of druidery. Similarly, Cú Chulainn's Otherworld father Lug is given the title of *samildánach* or gifted in all crafts.

It is clear from this short catalogue that there was a tradition of Roman worship at Neolithic mounds in southern England and this tradition appears to have been at its most active in the later Roman period. It was characterised by votive deposits of coins and by burial, both features which are found at *Brug na Bóinne*, at Newgrange and Knowth respectively. On

the evidence of Uley and, possibly, at Bisley, such mounds were linked in the worshippers minds to gods with power over many different areas and this, too, is a feature of the early medieval Irish documentation for the key figures associated with *Brug na Bóinne*. On the whole, therefore, the existence of Roman coins and jewellery at Newgrange should not be seen as testimony to the unique nature of worship on the Irish site but rather as a manifestation of relatively widespread cult practices in areas of Roman influence. Furthermore, the evidence for the worship of \*Maccan/Maponus and Lug at both *Brug na Bóinne* and other regions of the provincial Roman empire suggests that these parallels were not limited to cult practices alone but also extended to at least some of the gods being worshipped.

One final piece of evidence for cross-cultural links in religious practice in the early years of the first millennium AD can be detected at the Roman temple-site of Lydney, across the Severn from Uley. Here inscriptions show that one of the local gods was Mars Nodons (Collingwood and Wright 1965, 304-5). The temple was built within an enclosure thought to have been originally constructed in the prehistoric period and, as at Uley and Newgrange, votive offerings of coins and jewellery were made at the site. Again, as at Uley, the temple was rebuilt in the fourth century (Wheeler & Wheeler 1932, 23-39).

From an Irish point of view, however, perhaps the most interesting thing about Nodons is his name for it represents an earlier form of what later became, in an Irish context, Nuadu. The exact meaning of this name is unclear but O'Rahilly suggested that it might mean 'cloud-maker' (1946, 495). As a figure in the Irish mythological tales, Nuadu is said to have been the king who brought the Tuatha Dé Danann to Ireland and who ruled in the generation before Lug (Best *et al.* 1954, 34). In the later saga literature, he loses his arm in the first battle of Moytirra and this is subsequently replaced by a silver limb, giving him his sobriquet, Nuadu Airgetlám or Nuadu Silver-hand.

Nuadu is connected to the Boyne valley region through his relationship with Alduí, whose great-great-grandson he is said to have been (Gray 1983, 130). More specifically, O'Rahilly equates him as a synonym of Elcmar, depicted as owner of *Brug na Bóinne* prior to the Dagdae and the Mac Ind Óc and the cuckolded husband of Bóand or the Boyne in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (O'Rahilly 1946, 320, 516). An association with water is also reflected within the temple of the British Nodons at Lydney. The site overlooks the Severn estuary and, in the second phase, fourth-century temple, a



mosaic floor with a frieze of sea monsters and fish was found. Bronze objects of unknown function were also discovered with depictions of sailors holding anchors, fishermen holding tridents and conch shells (Wheeler & Wheeler 1932, 42).

The Túatha Dé Dannan king, Nuadu, provides us with yet another example, together with \*Maccan/Maponus and Lug, of an Irish mythological figure who appears to have had connections, both with the wider world of provincial Rome and with the specific area of the Boyne valley. It is in the nature of our evidence, however, that we cannot trace these gods back beyond the use of the written word. O'Rahilly once wrote that "the Otherworld is impervious to archaeological exploration" (O'Rahilly 1946, 281) and it is unlikely that we will ever know whether the local gods of north-west Europe attested in Roman period sources had a long prehistoric tradition behind them. The O'Kellys' suggestion that such gods may have originated in Neolithic grounds cannot, therefore, be positively refuted.

As against this I would argue that the existence of non-Irish parallels for \*Maccan/Maponus, Lug and Nuadu, the martial significance of Alduí and Bóadán and the metal craftsmanship of Ángobae would all tend to suggest a later Iron Age origin for this cast of characters. In the literature they are all depicted as members of the Túatha Dé Danann, a people who invaded Ireland from abroad and who withdrew into the *sid*-mounds of Ireland in the face of the ancestors of the medieval Irish dynasties. If this tradition has any historical reality behind it, it, too, would seem to imply an origin for these figures in the immediate pre-Christian period rather than gods who had been known since the origin of farming. Finally, the archaeological evidence for late Iron Age/Roman worship at both Newgrange and Knowth provides us with clear evidence that worship, of a type also found in contemporary Britain, took place at these sites. My personal conclusion would, therefore, be that it is likely that the medieval literature gives us some insight into the gods of pre-Christian *Brug na Bóinne* but that we should see them as probably belonging only to the immediately pre-Christian or later Iron Age. Furthermore, I would suggest that features of their depiction: their association with the Túatha Dé Danann, the martial ethos of at least some, the wider Celtic cognates of others, suggest that they are likely to be gods worshipped by settlers in the Boyne valley region who had strong connections outside Ireland. In some of our earliest medieval documentation, parts of the Boyne valley are described as having been ruled in St. Patrick's day by Irish kings with British

mothers (Bieler 1979, 166-9); I would argue that the evidence for the pagan gods of Newgrange points to the probability of similar ethnic and cultural links connecting the Boyne valley with Britain at some point during the later prehistoric period.

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