

Sacral Elements of Irish Kingship

Daniel Bray

The institution of sacral kingship among the Pagan Irish was inherited from a tradition spanning millennia from Proto-Indo-European prehistory, and as such, shares many common features with other traditional forms of kingship from Europe and the Indian subcontinent. At the same time, Irish kingship developed many unique and distinctive features, which can be elucidated by examination of the evidence provided by the vast corpus of medieval Irish literature. Irish kings, as representatives of the entirety of their peoples, had not only to reflect exceptional qualities, but also to fulfil certain duties, corresponding to each of the divisions of their society. A great deal of the authority wielded by Irish kings depended upon the support of the *áes dána*, or learned class, to administer ritual confirmation, to provide genealogical and mythico-historical information, as well as to determine legal jurisdiction. The king simultaneously represented and transcended the social hierarchy, which provided for a role as the ideal intermediary between the divine and human realms, expressed through participation in communal ritual.

Old Irish kings were known by the title *rí*, a word cognate with Lat. *rēx* and Skt. *rāj*, and traceable to a reconstructed Proto-Indo-European form **rég'-(s)*, designating 'a sacral king'.¹ The verbal-root from which it is obtained, **rég'-*, is behind a considerable number of derivative forms relating to royal power, and itself likely meant 'stretch (out), reach, expand', later developing into 'protect', and then 'rule', a range of meaning demonstrated by OIr. *rigid*. These ideas are also conveyed by the epithet of Lug, king (after Nuada) of the Tuatha Dé Danann, namely *Lámfada*, 'of the long arm', similar to the Vedic god Savitr's byname *Prthupáni*, 'of the wide hand', referring to the reach of their power and authority,² perhaps in a way similar to the modern English expression 'the long arm of the law'. The eighth century *Críth Gablach* law tracts

¹ Andrew L. Sihler, 'The Etymology of PIE **rég'*- "king" etc.', *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1977, p. 221.

² Jan Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kingship', *Numen*, vols 3 & 4, Leiden, 1956, 1957, p. 143.

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offer their own interpretation of the etymology of *rí*, 'Because he rules (*riges*) over his peoples (*tuatha*) with coercive power'.¹

Typically, royal power was based first and foremost on the ability to exercise military force, and the king's primary role was that of a leader in times of war, which, according to Caesar of the Gauls, was waged virtually every year.² However, it is no mere coincidence that those cultures that retained the PIE title also maintained powerful priesthoods in the dominant position of the social hierarchy. Binchy suggests that the king may have once performed the sacral functions of priest, judge and lawgiver, in addition to that of war-leader, as did many Germanic kings; but at some stage, these functions would have been deferred to a caste of specialists, such as the Brahmins of India, or the *áes dána* of Ireland, which included druids, poets (*filid*), legal experts (*brithemin*), and historians and genealogists (*senchaid*).³ Perhaps this earlier situation is implied by Lug's other epithet, *Samildánach*, 'skilled in many arts', describing a king of the gods who also possesses the various arts of wright, smith, champion, harper, hero, poet, historian, sorcerer, leech, brazier, and cupbearer.

The sacral elements of kingship in Indo-European cultures are illustrated by mythological literature, particularly in relation to themes of creation. In the reconstructed PIE creation myth, 'Man' (*Manu), the first priest, shapes the cosmos through the sacrificial dismemberment of the body of his brother 'Twin' (*Yemo), the first king.⁴ At the same time, this royal sacrifice also brought into being the divisions of society, as is succinctly outlined in the Purusa-hymn from the *Rig Veda*:

When they divided Purusa, into how many parts did they
apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and
thighs and feet?

¹ *Críth Gablach*, cited in D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, Oxford, 1970, p. 4.

² Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, (*De Bello Gallico*), Harmondsworth, S. A. (trans.), Harmondsworth, 1951, p. 33.

³ D. A. Binchy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice: studies in ideology and practice*, Chicago, 1991, p. 7.

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His mouth became the *Brahmin*; his arms were made into the *Ksatriya*, his thighs the *Vaisya*, and from his feet the *Sudras* were born.¹

Parallel to the mythic creation of the cosmos, then, is the creation of society, which defines vertically stratified classes that not only derive their social position from the corresponding portion of the primordial king's body, but also define their social function by that part of the body; for example, the *Brahmin*, who directs society by thought and speech, corresponds to the mouth; the *Ksatriya*, who defends society by physical prowess, corresponds to the arms; the *Vaisya*, who produces food, to the lower body; and the *Sudra*, who serves, to the feet. These three main social classes (the *Sudra* caste is often treated as an outsider to the social order) are found in many other Indo-European societies (cf. Caesar's '*druïdes, equites and plebs*'), and it is this principle upon which Georges Dumézil based his 'tripartite ideology' of three divisions of society and their related functions; priests and kings, who wield magico-religious authority and sovereignty; warriors, who practice martial pursuits; and commoners, who are responsible for food production.

Although there are no extant Irish myths that explicitly define the social order (or creation of the cosmos, for that matter), there are a number of myths which are indicative of a similar form of social hierarchy, patterned on the human body. One such example is found in the tale of Lugaid Red Stripes, scattered amongst many Old Irish sources, most notably the *Dindshenchas*. In the story, three brothers named Bres, Nár and Lóthar, known as the Find-eamna, are making war on their father Eochaid Feidleich, King of Tara. Find-eamna means 'White Twins or Triplets', OIr. *eamna* being derived from PIE **yemo-no*, and it is said that they were all born at one birth. Furthermore, their names have specific meanings: OIr. *bres* 'fight, battle, combat', OIr. *nár* 'high, noble', and OIr. *lóthar* 'washing vessel', again corresponding to the three social functions. Before the battle in which they are all killed, their sister Clothru comes to them lamenting her childless state and persuades them to have sexual relations with her, resulting in the conception of a son, Lugaid Red Stripes (*Sriab Derg*). Lugaid had two red stripes around him, one at his neck and one at his waist, and it is said that his head looked like Nár, his breast like Bres, and his lower body like Lóthar. Thus, Lugaid represents the fusion of the three social

¹ Wendy D. O'Flaherty (trans.), *The Rig Veda*, 10.90.11-12, Harmondsworth, 1981.

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classes in hierarchical order in one body, and in another tale it is told that he later succeeded to the kingship of Tara.¹

A more detailed reflex of this theme is found in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, wherein the hero Fergus, in preparation for the climactic battle of the *Táin*, makes an oath to King Ailill describing the manner in which he intends to dismember his foes:

‘I swear by my people’s god,’ he said, ‘I’d heap up men’s hacked jawbones on men’s necks, men’s necks on men’s shoulders, their arms on their elbows, with elbows on wrists, wrists on fists, fists on fingers, fingers on nails, nails on skulls, skulls and trunks, trunks on thighs, thighs on knees, knees on calves, calves on feet, feet on toes and toes on nails! I’d send necks buzzing through the air like bees humming on a fine day’.²

Both the facts that men cannot be dismembered in this order in battle conditions and that severance of finger and toe nails are hardly grievous injuries indicate that another meaning is implied by this speech; illustrated by a text from the early Irish law tracts, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, describing the divisions of the family (*fine*):

The *derbfine* (‘certain family’) is like the trunk of the human body, the *taobfine* (‘lateral family’) is like the two upper arms that branch out from the flank, the *iarfine* is like the two forearms, the *innfine* is like the two fists, and the *ingen ar méraib* (literally ‘fingernails’ and the last degree of kinship) are like the fingers and the nails.³

So it appears that what Fergus is describing is a ritualised dismemberment which correlates closely to the early Irish pattern of kinship, as reflected in the divisions of the *fine*. Two series of divisions, from jawbone to fingernails and from skull to toenails, represent another form of social hierarchy, again using the model of the body to stratify degrees of kinship, giving primacy to the immediate family, a motif particularly significant to kingship for determining the course of succession.

¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos and Society: Indo-European themes of creation and destruction*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 159-161.

² T. Kinsella, *The Tain*, Oxford, 1969, p. 245 ff.

³ *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* cited in William Sayers, ‘Fergus and the Cosmogonic Sword’, *History of Religions*, vol. 25, no. 1, Chicago, 1985, p. 45.

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According to the mythic ideology of kingship, then, the king appears to be an unique figure in the social order, on the one hand at its centre and on the other set apart from it; since just as the cosmos and the social hierarchy took form from the body of the first king, so the entirety of society and the cosmos is incarnated in the form of the king. In other words, there is an identification of the king with the body politic, as well as with the land, in the relationship of microcosm to macrocosm. The king was thus expected to reflect the characteristic qualities of each of the classes of society, as well as perform specific duties to ensure the welfare of each.

In relation to the third function, comprising the vast bulk of the king's subjects, those whom Caesar called *plebs*, or commoners, whose occupation was the generation of produce and wealth, the king was expected not only to display that wealth, exacted in the form of tribute, but also to distribute it in the form of hospitality and gifts. A king who was wealthy but distributed his wealth fairly and generously was not only popular with his subjects, but if he prospered, then he was considered blessed by the gods as well, as a wealthy king calls for a fertile cosmos. Athenaeus, quoting Posidonius, expounds the exceptional generosity of a Gallic king Lovernius, who sponsored an enormous feast, served continuously for several days to all who arrived; and who rode through the fields distributing gold and silver to the crowds that followed, inspiring a poet to proclaim that 'even his chariot-tracks gave gold and benefits to the people'.¹

On the other hand, the king could be deposed for being too stingy, as occurs in the *Second Battle of Mag Tured*, when king Bres of the Fomoiré loses his claim to sovereignty upon the utterance of the first satire by the poet Cairbre Mac Etain, 'for their (the Tuatha Dé Danann's) knives were not greased by him, and however often they visited him their breaths did not smell of ale. Moreover, they saw not their poets nor their bards nor their lampooners nor their harpers nor their pipers nor their jugglers nor their fools amusing them in the household. They did not go to the contests of their athletes. They saw not their champions proving their prowess at the king's court'.²

Furthermore, because of the close mythic association of cosmic and social creation, there was the perception of a direct relationship between the health and vigour of the king and the fertility of the

¹ Athenaeus 4.37, from John T. Koch, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, Malden, Mass., 1995, p. 10.

² Tom P. Cross and Clark H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, New York, 1969, p. 33.

land he ruled. In Irish law, the king must be without blemish (*dianim*) to rule, and in the tale of the *First Battle of Mag Tured*, Nuada, king of the Túatha Dé Danánn, is forced to abdicate to Bres when his right hand is cut off in battle. Later, he is given a hand of silver wrought by Dian Cecht, which is afterwards replaced with one of flesh by his son Miach, allowing Nuada to take back the sovereignty of Ireland.¹

The role of the king in relation to the second function, that of the warrior aristocracy, was rather more mundane, but no less significant. The king was expected to be a warrior of exceptional courage and skill, and a leader in war. Victory in battle was the supreme confirmation of rightful kingship, and it enabled the king to not only protect his people, but also extend his dominion.²

The first function quality of the king, which allowed him to be distinguished from the ranks of the warrior nobility by the priestly class, was some kind of divine approval determined by various rituals and omens, which gave the king a religious basis for his sovereignty. One example, from the *Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, is the performance of a divinatory rite called the *tarbfeis*, in which a bull would be sacrificed and a poet would eat its flesh, drink its broth, and lay down while a spell of truth was chanted over his bed. Whomever the poet saw in his sleep would be the rightful king.³ As well, the candidate had to pass certain tests, which at Tara was accomplished only when the rightful candidate could drive a chariot between two stones, Blocc and Bluigne, which were only a hand's breadth apart, but would part to let him through; or over the Stone of Fál, which screeched against his chariot axle.⁴

The primary duty of the king in relation to the first function, however, was to preserve his honour (*enech*, lit. 'face') by upholding the sacred law, as determined by the *áes dána*, particularly the *brithemin*, and preserving truth and justice. The law, as retained and interpreted by the *brithemin*, was considered a complete and immutable formulation of ancestral wisdom, and as such, the king's role was enforcer rather than legislator.⁵

The king was expected to rule justly, bringing prosperity to his realm through 'the sovereign's truth' (*fír flathemon*), as detailed in

1 *Ibid.*, pp. 29-32.

2 D. A. Binchy, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

3 *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 11, John T. Koch, *op. cit.*, 158.

4 Maartje Draak, 'Some Aspects of Kingship in Pagan Ireland', International Congress for the History of Religions, *The Sacral Kingship*, Leiden, 1959, p. 654 ff.

5 D. A. Binchy, *op. cit.*, 16.

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The Testament of Morainn. Through *fír flathemon* came an abundance of grain in the fields, fruit on the trees, milk from cattle and fish in the rivers; internal peace was maintained, and victory over enemies granted; the well-being of sages and the continuity of the various arts was assured.¹ However, if the king ruled unjustly, signs would appear that his land would fall to ruin through 'the sovereign's falsehood' (*gáu flathemon*); fruit would rot, grain would be scarce, milk-cows would go dry, famine would occur; the king would suffer defeat in battle, and the priesthood would be troubled. An illustration of these ideas occurs in the *The Battle of Mag Mucrime*, when the king Lugaid Mac Con had made a false judgement of a certain case, whereas his foster-son, Cormac Mac Art, had given a true judgement before all assembled, whereupon the part of the house in which the false judgement had been given immediately fell down. For a year afterwards, grass would not grow on the ground, leaves would not grow on the trees, and grain would not ripen, until Lugaid was deposed by the men of Ireland.²

Peril would also stalk the king who failed to observe his tabus (*geissi*), which involve avoiding certain places or circumstances; for example, the king of Tara was prohibited from being in bed at sunrise in the plain of Tara, or to enter north Tethba on Tuesday, or to strike his horses in Fán Cummair. Although their meaning is at best obscure, it has been suggested that these particular conditions may be those under which some previous king met his fate, and that to repeat those conditions would inevitably bring about the same result.³

The cardinal feature of sacral kingship, however, is the king's active participation in communal ritual, particularly rites of inauguration. As the embodiment of society, the king was the perfect representative of the totality of society, thus when he performed ritual, it was as if all his subjects were involved in that activity, greatly amplifying its efficacy. There are a number of different forms of inauguration ritual recorded, most of which involved some form of 'sacred marriage' (Gk. *hieros gamos*), referred to as a *banais rígi*, or 'wedding-feast of kingship', to a figure which represented the sovereignty of the land.⁴

One such inauguration ritual took the form of a horse-sacrifice, described in graphic detail and unbridled scorn in Gerald of Wales'

1 *Audacht Morainn*, John T. Koch, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-80.

2 Maartje Draak, *op. cit.*, p. 661.

3 *Ibid.*, 662 ff.

4 Maartje Draak, *op. cit.*, 657.

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famed twelfth century account of a rite of the people of 'Kenelcunnil' (*Cenél Conaill*):

When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up into pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.¹

Although Gerald may be considered a somewhat hostile witness, this ritual of horse-sacrifice has distinct parallels in the Vedic inauguration rite, the *asvamedha*, which involved the sacrificial slaughter of a stallion, whereupon the queen symbolically slept with it under covers, and afterwards the flesh was cooked and eaten by the assembled people. As this activity was carried out, hymns were sung to praise the horse, to direct its dismemberment, and to petition favourable returns, phrased as follows: 'Let this racehorse bring us good cattle and good horses, male children and all-nourishing wealth. Let Aditi make us free from sin. Let the horse with our offerings achieve sovereign power for us'.²

Furthermore, there are the Roman accounts of the October Horse rite, held on the Ides of October, in which the right-hand horse of the winning chariot of a horserace on the Campus Martius is sacrificed to Mars with a spear and the dismembered pieces taken to either the Turris Mamilia or the Regia. This dedication, as well as one to Indra in the *asvamedha*, indicates that the horse-sacrifice was a rite of Indo-European antiquity, centred on the warrior class, and celebrating, among other things, the martial aspect of kingship.³ The purpose of these rites was manifold; to re-vitalise the cosmos (especially the crops), and to provide food; to reinforce the hierarchy of society, and to confirm its unity in the figure of the

¹ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, O'Meara, John J. (trans.), Harmondsworth, 1951, 1982, ch. 102.

² Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *op. cit.*, *Rgveda* 1.162.22.

³ Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, Baltimore, 1987, p. 272.

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king; to confer sovereign power to the king, and to enhance his status among his subjects. Also, by participating in the ritual and eating the sacrificial meat, the assembled people also participate in a restoration or re-creation of society, reinforcing the unity of the community.

Another type of inauguration ritual recorded in a number of annals was the *Feis Temro*, or 'Feast of Tara', which involved a 'sacred marriage' between the king and a goddess representing sovereignty. Although the *Feis Temro* is presented by some sources as a regular function of the so-called 'High-King of Ireland', a pre-eminence likely due to the influence of later pseudohistorical works of the powerful Uí Neill dynasties, the annals make it apparent that it was usually only held once by each king, and only when their power had been consolidated, so that it is more appropriately viewed as an inauguration rite expressing a formal recognition of royal status, rather than an embryonic form of 'parliament', as some scholars have argued. According to the older *Battle of Moira*, there were (at least) three famous 'feasts' of Ireland, namely 'Feis Eamna, Feis Temra, Feis Chruachna', indicating it was more properly the inauguration of a provincial king (*rí cóiced*), and probably differed only in detail (and scale) from those of the 'tribal' kings (*rí túaithe*) and overkings (*ruiri*).¹ The word *feis* (*banais* < *ban-fheis*), the verbal noun of *foaid*, 'sleeps, spends the night, marries', is used to express the symbolic 'marriage' or 'sleeping' of the king with his territory, often represented by a tutelary goddess identified with the sovereignty.

A figure called 'The Sovereignty of Ireland', *Fláith(ius) Érenn*, appears in many guises throughout the myths, which provide insight into the complex of ideas surrounding her. In *Echtra Mac nEchach*, Niall of the Nine Hostages and his brothers come across a well guarded by a loathsome hag who demands a kiss for access to the well. Only Niall dares to kiss her, and at once the hag turns into an extremely beautiful maiden, announcing her identity and the prophecy that Niall and his progeny will forever hold the kingship of Tara. She also explains that her transformation is in accord with the kingship, as it is rough in the beginning and smooth later on.²

In *Scél na Fír Flatha*, king Cormac Mac Art receives from a mysterious woman a cup which bursts apart when a lie is told and is restored when a truth is spoken. In *Baile in Scáil*, king Conn of the Hundred Battles visits an otherworldly house where he is given food

¹ D. A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *Eriu*, vol. 18, Dublin, 1958, p. 134 ff.

² John T. Koch, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-96.

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and drink by a woman identified as *Fláith(ius) Érenn*, who asks 'To whom shall be given this cup with the red drink?' The red drink, *dergflaith*, is a play on words, referring both to drink ((*fh*)*laith*) and to sovereignty (*flaith*), for which there is a curious parallel in the Sanskrit *úrj-*, itself derived from PIE **rég'-*, which means both 'nourishing drink' and 'strength, vigour', and is cognate with OIr. *ferg*, a word describing Cú Chulainn's 'battle fury'. Afterwards, the master of the house, a phantom, recites for Conn a prophecy on the Kings of Ireland.¹

The 'red drink' refers to the mead used in the *banais*, the word for 'mead' (derived from PIE **médhu* meaning 'mead, honey-drink', also 'ritual beverage', and by extension 'libation, sacrifice') being etymologically related to the name of queen Medb, which can be interpreted as 'the one who intoxicates'. However, it is also possible that her name is a shortened form related to the Gaulish royal name *Epomeduos*, cognate with the Indian name *Asvamedha*, both of which translate as 'Horse-Sacrifice(r)'.² Medb's importance as a sovereignty figure is evident in her instrumental role in the *Táin*, and lends great significance to her frequent temptation or seduction of young heroes; as she boasts to her husband Ailill, 'I never had one man without another waiting in his shadow'.³

However, Medb is always explicitly connected to the royal dynasty of Connacht, centred on Cruachan, so that it is more appropriate to consider her a sovereignty goddess associated with the *Feis Chruachna*, rather than with the *Feis Temro* as Binchy and others argue, and that therefore each *feis* was typically centred on a goddess representative of the region being ruled. It seems probable, particularly in the fifth and sixth centuries, during the turbulent period of the Uí Neill ascendancy and the sporadic post-conversion revivals of Pagan traditions, when the king of Tara was being identified as the 'High-King' (*Árd-Rí*) of Ireland, that the *Feis Temro* might have petitioned the eponymous goddesses of Ireland; Ériu, Banba, and Fódla.

However, in an older and more traditional context, as an inauguration of a provincial king, the *Feis Temro* was most likely associated with Bóand, eponymous goddess of the Boyne, whose valley is the predominant geographical feature of the province of Meath, and the location of Tara itself. In a number of texts, particularly the *Dindshenchas*, Bóand is said to have approached the secret well of her husband, Nechtan of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and

¹ Maartje Draak, *op. cit.*, 659, and Andrew Sihler, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

² Jaan Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

³ T. Kinsella, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

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circled it counterclockwise three times, whereupon three waves rose from it and crashed over her, severing a thigh, a hand and an eye. In terror, Bóand fled with the waters in pursuit, creating a river in her path, until she drowned in its mouth by the sea. This river then travelled under sea and land to reemerge as many of the world's great rivers, eventually returning to Nechtan's mound.¹

In this myth there are a number of significant themes: the creation of a major feature of the land involving a death at least implicitly sacrificial; the dismemberment of thigh, hand and eye, following the divisions of society previously demonstrated by the case of Lugaid Red Stripes; and the creation of the major rivers of the world, perhaps an allegory for the creation of the cosmos itself, establishing the Boyne as the source and centre. It thus becomes apparent that Bóand is explicitly connected to the same mythic themes that delineate kingship, and as such is the best candidate for the role of sovereignty in the *Feis Temro*.

Finally, Ulster's royal centre, Emain Macha, identifies the sovereignty figure of the *Feis Eamna*, the goddess Macha, who appears in texts as three different figures, one of whom claimed her father Aed Ruad's term of sovereignty and held it by force of arms, and another who is forced while pregnant to race against horses, winning the race, but immediately giving birth to twins, dying, and uttering a curse against the Ulstermen, that they shall share her labour pains at their moment of greatest need.² Macha, as a goddess associated with horses, bears comparison to the Gaulish goddess Epona and Rhiannon (<*Rígantóna 'Queen', (cf. Mórrígu 'Great Queen')) of the *Mabinogion*, ambiguous figures who may represent both the goddess of sovereignty and the horse of sacrificial ritual, or even the symbolic union of the two, as demonstrated by the *asvamedha* ritual.

In any case, there is significant evidence that the *banais* ritual was carried out as a symbolic marriage between the king and the sovereignty of his realm, represented in some cases by a sacrificial horse, and in others by a goddess or supernatural woman, sometimes bearing a cup of mead. It seems that this was intended to create a familial atmosphere for the participants, reinforcing the king's position and status by reference to the perceived natural dominance of parental figures, roles played by the king and his consort.³

¹ Jaan Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

² *Ibid.*, p. 274 ff.

³ Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age*, Dublin, 1996, pp. 283ff.

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In conclusion, it can be seen that the institution of sacral kingship among the Pagan Irish involved a complex web of ideas and ideologies, including some of incredible antiquity. The three-fold hierarchy of society (priests, warriors and commoners) was established and unified in the figure of the king, who possessed features of all three classes and had duties corresponding to all three classes. These duties were in essence much like those that Jan Gonda outlines for the ancient Indian king:

While upholding the *dharma* (sacred law) he was expected to extend his sway, to gratify his subjects, to control them with power, and above all to protect them with care. One of his first responsibilities was to see that the people were fed, not by making 'social laws', but by bringing rain and fertility. Without planning his subjects' welfare in any modern way he was their herdsman, the mediator, on their behalf, between the earth and the powers of heaven.¹

If the Irish king was successful in performing his duties properly, he would gain many benefits, including victory in battle, a fertile land and prosperous subjects; if he was unjust, disaster and ruin would surely result. The king ruled according to the dictates of 'sacred law', as interpreted by the *áes dána*, and was dependent upon their ritual confirmation to legitimise his authority. Perhaps the prominent ritual theme of the 'sacred marriage' was a symbol, not just of the king joining with his sovereignty, but also of the wedding of temporal and spiritual powers inherent to the very institution of sacral kingship itself.

¹ Jan Gonda, 'The Sacred Character of Ancient Indian Kingship', International Congress for the History of Religions, *The Sacral Kingship*, Leiden, 1959, p. 179.