

Some Specific Features of the Perception of Early Medieval Irish Feasts^{*}

Grigorii V. Bondarenko

To the memory of Viktor Pavlovich Kalygin

In the everyday life of modern European peoples time is usually historical, linear; however, in the case of medieval Continental and Insular Celts the perception of time was completely different. If it is possible to speak of any historical time at all in reference to these peoples, then it was only in the perception of medieval Irish and Welsh annalists. Usually, in them, one encounters cyclical time and the so-called “continuous time,” that is, eternity. The first is usually associated with mortals and their calendar and the second with gods and the world order they established. Things are not that simple, however; cyclical time can be seen as a reflection of the divine order, while mortals often enter eternity during their travels in the Otherworld. In Celtic history, daily life and mythological time can be homogeneous or heterogeneous. This means that feasts and liminal periods of time have a different nature in comparison with everyday time.

Cyclical time is typical of pre-literate societies. For them the present is a repetition of the past. For example, in medieval Ireland famous prehistoric monuments such as Brug-on-Boyne (New Grange), Emain Macha or Temair were constantly re-used.¹ Cyclical time reckoning continued to exist even after the Christianisation of Celtic lands; for example, in the ecclesiastical calendar of the annual feasts which regulated the yearly life of monasteries and laity. As we know from Gallic material, before Christianisation the Celts had quite a complicated cyclical calendar. The famous Gallic calendar of Coligny, engraved on bronze, calculated for a five-year period and was based on solar as well as on lunar time reckoning. These five-year cycles included sixty normal and two additional months. To make a comparison with other Celtic systems of time reckoning it is necessary to bear in mind that the first half of the year in the Coligny calendar starts with the month *samoni(o)s* and the second half of the year with

^{*} Originally published as “Некоторые особенности восприятия древнеирландского праздника,” *Одиссей. Человек в истории* 2005, 8-22. Translated by Elena Glushko.

¹ Nicholas B. Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1994), 26.

the month *giamoni(o)s*.² The first name corresponds to the medieval Irish *Samain*, the feast of the beginning of winter, which was celebrated for three days from the eve of November 1. *Giamoni(o)s* is related to the medieval Irish *gem* (winter). Supposedly, the Calendar of Coligny was used by Druids and its five-year cycle corroborates the evidence of Diodorus of Sicily about five-year cycles of sacrifices among Continental Celts.

Feasts

In the Celtic languages no special word existed for a feast. Thus, when one speaks about Celtic festive time or festive cycles, the word “feast” can be used only conventionally, since it has completely different connotations. The closest would be the Irish word *fešta*, derived from the Latin adjective *festus* (*dies*). This rare word was used mainly to designate ecclesiastical feasts. Medieval Irish and Middle Welsh texts reveal a wholly different perception of these chronological breaks in everyday life which we call “feasts.” In Ireland these time breaks could have different characteristics: *óenach* (a gathering, a fair) and *feis* (a banquet, a night spent somewhere); *fled*, in Welsh *gwledd* (a banquet); *dail* (a gathering, an assembly); *féil* (a saint’s feast), in Welsh *gwyl* and Breton *goel*, derived from Latin *vigilia*.³ Secular “feasts” of the Insular Celts were, in a way, sacred; they hallowed secular time rather than opposed it.

The Early Medieval Irish festive cycle was connected with the alternation of seasons. Traces of this annual cycle can be found in later folklore as well. It consisted of four main feasts dividing four seasons (one should bear in mind that they were never called “feasts” in Irish). It becomes clear from some medieval Irish texts that the feast of Samhain was perceived as the beginning of the New Year (for example, in the tale “The Adventures of Nera” the main character goes to *síd*⁴ on the eve of Samhain, “at the end of the year”⁵). Three other feasts are Imbolc (February 1), Beltain (May 1; it was called also Cetamain – “the beginning of summer,” in contradiction to Samhain, the end of summer) and Lugnasad (August 1). Imbolc and Lugnasad emerged later; they were connected with the agricultural cycle.⁶ From the point of view of a medieval Irish farmer, however, Beltain, Lugnasad, and Samhain had special economic importance, since the cost of livestock increased precisely on these days. For example, a heifer from birth until Samhain cost two *scrupulae*, but after Samhain it cost three. On

² Xavier Delamarre, *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise* (Paris, 2003), 179, 267 (hereafter: Delamarre).

³ Françoise Le Roux, Christian-J. Guyonvarc’h, *Les fêtes celtiques* (Rennes, 1995), 26-29.

⁴ *Síd* in the Medieval Irish tradition is the Otherworld, which can be located differently; a magic hill, one of the sites of the Otherworld.

⁵ Kuno Meyer, ed., “Echtra Nerai. The Adventures of Nera,” *Revue celtique* (hereafter: *RC*) 10 (1889), 221.

⁶ Kalygin V. P., “Keltskaia kosmologia” (The Celtic cosmology), in *Predstavlenia o smerti i lokalizatsia Inogo mira u keltov i germantsev*, ed. Tatiana A. Mikhailova (Moscow, 2002), 91 (hereafter: Kalygin).

the next Beltain the price increased to four, on the next Samhain to six. The heifer acquired its highest value on its sixth Beltain. The price of sheep and pigs increased likewise during Beltain, Lughnasad, and Samhain.⁷

Geoffrey Keating, an Irish antiquarian writing in the seventeenth century, described four main feasts in geographical context and associated them with four sacred centres of the central part of the island: Usnech, Tlachtgha, Temair, Taltiu (strangely, he mentions here only three feasts, Beltain, Lughnasad, and Samhain).⁸ This observation witnesses the special interdependence in Irish tradition between time and space. In history, this model has frequently re-appeared, as in the case of King Diarmaid, son of Fergus Cerbell, who, after a long interval, re-established the feast in Temair in 560. The perception of time reflected in these annually repeating festivities was connected partly with the agricultural cycle, although the fact that the festive cycle started in winter as well as the existence of night feasts reminds one of the meaning of night and winter in the Gallic calendar of Coligny. Moreover, medieval Irish literature clearly demonstrates that mythological events usually occurred during feasts, especially at the time of the banquet on the eve of Samhain.

The two oldest Irish feasts, Beltain and Samhain, divided the year into two parts, each containing six months. The dark and cold winter part started with Samhain and was considered to be the first; the light and warm summer part began with Beltain and was regarded as the second. During the dark winter, young people, after returning from pastures to the winter houses of their parents, spent long nights by the hearth, practicing crafts and listening to skillful storytellers with their lengthy tales. In summer, starting with Beltain, young people left their winter dwellings and moved to temporary summer houses; they grazed cattle and sheep on the hills. The *finnians* (young unmarried warriors and hunters, who formed special male communities) spent their year in the same way. According to “The Colloquy of the Ancients,” from Samhain until Beltain they lived in settlements, and in the summer they hunted and raided in the woods.⁹ The feast of Beltain, which opened the light part of the year, also indicated the beginning of summer grazing. Druids drove livestock, accompanying them with incantations, between two “good” fires, to prevent disease.¹⁰ The twofold division of year with two main feasts corresponded to the twofold night-and-day time division; night was the first.

Night and the lunar calendar

Caesar gives the main evidence in favour of such time reckoning. He writes about the Gauls that “they compute the divisions of every season, not by the number of days, but of nights; they keep birthdays and the beginnings of months

⁷ Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 1997), 461.

⁸ Geoffrey Keating, *Forus Feasa ar Éirinn* 2 (London, 1902), 247 sqq.

⁹ Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (New York, 1994), 84.

¹⁰ *Sanas Cormac*, ed. Kuno Meyer (Lampeter, 1994), §122 (hereafter: *Sanas Cormac*).

and years in such an order that the day follows the night.”¹¹ Night has the same meaning in medieval Irish texts, for example, in “Fingen’s Night-Watch,” where the night when King Conn was born appears to be actually the first night of his reign and the beginning of a certain secondary cosmogony.¹² Moreover, linguistic evidence also witnesses the special attitude of the Celts towards night. Thus, Samhain (see below) in medieval Irish texts is most frequently designated as “the night of Samhain” (*adaig Samna*). The bronze tablets of the Gallic calendar of Coligny contain the older name of (seemingly) the same feast: *trinoxtion Samoni sindiu* (three nights of Samhain today [start?]).¹³ Not surprisingly, Samhain, according to some medieval Irish texts, was celebrated for three days before the date itself and three days afterwards (compare *na trenae Samna* — “triads of Samhain”¹⁴). The Welsh word *wythnos* (eight nights) means “week,” and *pymthegnos* (fifteen nights) are two weeks. In the Breton language *antronoz* (tomorrow) literally means “on the other side of night.”

In the Welsh epos “Mabinogi” the time within which a certain feast should be completed is often indicated quite concretely. It is “a year starting with tonight” (*blwyddyn y heno*).¹⁵ The Old Irish term *innocht* (tonight), which frequently designates the night of a feast or the night of an important event in human life, is also related to this Welsh concept.

Probably such an attitude towards night is due to the fact that Celts in the pre-Christian times used a lunar calendar. The Irish division of time into three-, five- and fifteen-day periods was based on this type of time reckoning, the traces of which have been preserved in Old Irish legal treatises; in pre-Christian times the seven-day week was not known. Christian missionaries from the fifth century onwards introduced the Julian calendar and the seven-day week, which slowly replaced the earlier practice.

The list of the earliest known Irish names for the days of the week is dated to this transitional period, when Christian terms and the Christian perception of time started to take root in Ireland. This list includes Irish as well as Latin words: *dies scrol*, *diu luna*, *diu mart*, *diu iath*, *diu ethamon*, *diu triach*, *diu satur*.¹⁶ The first term, which stands for Sunday, is explained in “Cormac’s Glossary:” *Sroll .u. soilssi, unde est aput Scotoss diu srol .i. dies solis* (“Sroll, that is, light, hence among Irishmen *diu srol*, that is, Sunday”).¹⁷ It seems,

¹¹ *De Bello Gallico* vol. 6, 18; tr. W. A. McDevitte. Druids supposed that all Gauls were descendants of a certain god, identified by Caesar with the Roman Father Dis (*Dis pater*). “Dis pater” is the Roman god of the underworld, considered identical with the Greek Pluto. The so-called secular games with nightly peace offerings were dedicated to him.

¹² *Airne Fíngin*, ed. Joseph Vendryes (Dublin, 1953), 2 (hereafter: *Airne Fíngin*).

¹³ Delamarre, 267.

¹⁴ *Serglige Con Culainn*, ed. Myles Dillon (Dublin, 1953), 1 (hereafter: *Serglige Con Culainn*).

¹⁵ *Pwyll penduic Dyuet*, ed. Robert L. Thomson (Dublin, 1957) 3, 11, 13.

¹⁶ Daibhí Ó Cróinín, “The Oldest Irish Names for the Days of the Week?” *Ériu* 32 (1981), 95-114.

¹⁷ *Sanas Cormaic*, § 1134.

though, that this is only a pseudo-scholarly etymology, and the word *scroll/srol*, after this appearance in the list and the dictionary, does not occur anywhere else. At the same time three other Irish words from the list (*diu iath*, *diu ethamon*, *diu triach*) could easily mean this very three-day period of the lunar calendar, especially if *diu triach* is the third day of this period.

Samhain

In medieval Irish literature Samhain plays a much more important role than other seasonal feasts. The action of traditional stories takes place quite frequently (if not to say as a rule) on the eve of Samhain. As was already mentioned, Samhain in Early Medieval Irish literature indicated the border point between the old and new year; it was the time of great gatherings in royal centres (according to one etymology of the word *Samain*, suggested by Joseph Vendryes, it is connected with the Sanscrit word *samana*: “meeting, festival”).¹⁸ The expression “the feast of Samhain” does not appear in Early Medieval Irish sources; sometimes one can find “the banquet of Samhain” (*feiss Samna*), “the gathering of Samhain” (*óenach Samna*), but most frequently it will be “the night of Samhain” (*adaig Samna*). Therefore, one can call Samhain “a feast” only conditionally. Samhain, as well as Beltain, was a crucial point of the year, first of all, for stockbreeders. As was noted above, Samhain coincided with the end of the summer grazing season. Sheep and cattle were driven back from the hills; they were gathered in a herd and led to slaughter; only some of them were spared for breeding.¹⁹ Thus, to prepare a lavish banquet for a king of Ireland of the fifth century of Ireland was not such a hard job.

The eve of Samhain was the most significant period of time, dense with events. In Early Medieval Irish literature the banquet of Samhain (on the eve of November 1) indicated the limit, the beginning of winter, of the first, dark and dangerous half of the year. The Otherworld and *síds* were open at that time, and the powers of chaos dominated the world. One can find analogous phenomena in ancient Rome, where on certain days (August 24, October 5, November 6) some types of activities (warfare, sea travel, and weddings) were prohibited since on these days the entrance into the otherworld was open (*mundus patet*).²⁰

It is interesting to mention that in the tale “Fingen’s Night-Watch” wonders and supernatural things occur in the world on that very night (for example, the great King Conn was born on that night). All these miracles emerged from the same “otherworldly” source which opens into our world on the eve of Samhain. For common people, simply to go outside their dwellings on this night was dangerous.

¹⁸ Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique d’irlandais ancien RS* (Dublin, Paris, 1974), 22.

¹⁹ Thomas G. E. Powell, *The Celts*, used in the Russian translation: T. Pauell. *Kelty*. Tr. O. A. Pavlovskaja (Moscow, 2003), 132.

²⁰ Roger Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré* (Paris, 1939), 108.

On the eve of Samhain people gathered for the royal feast, as is described in “The Tidings of Conchobar, son of Ness:”

Now Conchobar himself used (to give) them (the feast of) Samhain because of the assembly of a great host. It was needful to provide for the great multitude, because every one of the Ulstermen who would not come to Emain at that night on All Hallow’s-eve lost his senses, and on the morrow his barrow and his grave and his tombstone were placed.” (*Conchobar immorro fessin no gaibed Samuin dóib fodagin terchomraic in tshluáig móir. Ba hecen in tsochaide mór do airchill, fobith cech fer do Ulaib na taircébad aidchi Samna dochum nEmna no gatta ciall de 7 fho-cherte a fhert 7 a lecht 7 a lie arnabarach*).²¹

Even if it is not stated explicitly in the text, Ulstermen were probably forbidden to stay outside walls of Emain Macha on that night: it was a *geis*. One can suppose that everyone would perish who was not present at this “feast of safety.”

In Early Medieval Irish tales, which frequently reflect the world perception of monks-*literati*, Samhain is often described as the feast of the common people, who still preserved pagan rituals somewhere on the periphery. In the poem “The Gift of Conn” Samhain is called “the feast of western *finnians*” (*féil na Fian fuineta*).²² The Old Irish *féil* (“a religious feast, saint’s day”) derived from Latin *vigilia* (compare with Welsh *gwyl* from the same origin). This word almost always designates Christian feasts, and only in rare cases was used for secular or pagan feasts. Samhain was defined as *féil* in at least one more situation. The tale “Death of Crimthann” contains a story about how Monginn, a witch from *síd*, died on the eve of Samhain. According to the tale, because of her death “Samhain is called ‘the feast of Monginn,’” among the common people, and now these unfortunate “common people” together with women “pray to her on the night of Samhain.”²³ Thus, the author or the compiler of the tale perceives Samhain as a feast of “common,” ignorant people, persisting in their paganism. That was why, perhaps, the Christian religious term is used here for a pagan religious feast. Probably it also helped to make the contrast clearer between the ecclesiastical name and pagan characteristics of the feast. This contrast was to increase “the liminal nature” of *finnians* and all other “powers of Samhain.”

The eve of Samhain was a short period of time which in reality belonged neither to the end of the year nor to its beginning. At this night, “continuous time,” the eternity of *síd*, came into immediate contact with our world. One can call the night of Samhain “a period of chaotic time.” To leave human time also meant to leave the area of cosmic order and to enter the region of chaos, the state of “pre-division.” Thus, the eve of Samhain was the period of collision

²¹ Whitley Stokes, ed., “Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa,” *Ériu* 4 (1910), 26.

²² Grigorii V. Bondarenko, *Mifologia prostranstva Drevnei Irlandii* (The mythology of space in Early Medieval Ireland) (Moscow, 2003), 138 (hereafter: Bondarenko).

²³ Whitley Stokes, ed., “Death of Crimthann,” *RC* 24 (1903), 178.

between the immeasurable time of *síd*, which possessed the quality of eternity,²⁴ and human time.

The feast of Samhain, celebrated at Temair, Emain Macha, Cruachan or other centre on the island, always took place at night. One can recall the original meaning of the word *feis*: a night spent somewhere. The connotations are not necessarily sexual. On one hand, time and space on the night of Samhain acquire the qualities of dream; double characters appear, logical connections vanish, the past and future exchange places. On the other hand, during this “feast” one has to stay awake: sleep and dreams are dangerous for mortals. For example, in “The Colloquy of the Ancients” Finn mac Cumhall visits Temair when frightened people are waiting for Allen, a cunning musician from *síd*, who each Samhain lulled people to sleep with his music and then set fire to the whole Temair. Finn is the only one who stays awake and kills the stranger from *síd*.²⁵ “Fingen’s Night-Watch” describes how the main character kept awake the whole night, while young sons of kings from all over Ireland were coming in chariots to the feast in Temair.²⁶ Probably, the representatives of local nobility truly gathered in Temair for the royal feast, but they scarcely came from all over Ireland. Ulstermen certainly celebrated at Emain Macha, the people of Connacht in Cruachan, and so on. Apparently, people had to gather on the day before Samhain.²⁷

On the other hand, in the tale “The Sickbed of Cuchulainn” the festive gathering (*óenach*) of Ulstermen went on for three days before Samhain and three days after on the coast of dell Muirthemne, to the south of Emain Macha. On these days there were “only games and welcomes, lustre and joys, banquets and regales.”²⁸

How to carry a vetala on the eve of Samhain

The tale “The Adventures of Nera” (*Echtra Nerai*)²⁹ contains the most interesting description of time in *síd* and time on the night of Samhain. It is a story about the adventures of Nera,³⁰ a warrior of Connacht, on two eves of Samhain (one year apart).

²⁴ Two Celtologists, as far as I know independently of each other, noticed this immeasurable, eternal time of *síd*: François Le Roux, “Le rêve d’Oengus, commentaire du texte,” *Ogam* 18 (1966), 148-149 and John Carey, “Time, Space and the Otherworld,” in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1987), 8.

²⁵ Whitley Stokes, ed., *Acallamh na Senórach* (Leipzig, 1900), 47.

²⁶ *Airne Fíngin*, 9-11.

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Gray, ed., *Cath Maige Tuired* (Naas, 1982), 46.

²⁸ *Serglige Con Culain*, 1.

²⁹ Kuno Meyer, ed., “The Adventures of Nera,” *RC* 10 (1889), 212-228 (hereafter: The Adventures of Nera).

³⁰ The name of Nera corresponds exactly to the Gallic theonym “Nerios.” These Celtic words derived from the Indo-European root *ner-, to which two meanings are usually ascribed: “vital force” and “human, man, male.” See V. P. Kalygin, “Keltskaia etnonimika v ‘Geo-

At the night of Samhain people of Connacht cook dinner in a big cauldron under the supervision of Ailill and Medb. Now, King Ailill recalls the existence of two hanged captives and asks somebody to go and to tie the feet of one of them with a withe (or chain?).³¹ Only Nera obeys the order of king; he goes outside the walls of Cruachan, the royal centre of Connacht, and, imperceptibly to himself, he arrives in the Otherworld with the tied half-dead man on his back.³² They search for a hospitable house where the dead man can get some water and enter the Otherworld further and further. In the third house the dead man is finally given water, and Nera brings him back to the gallows and torments. When Nera returns to Cruachan (the first return; a year has passed in the world of mortals, Nera comes back on the second Samhain), he sees the heap of cut off heads in front of the burnt out fort (compare with the burnt down Temair). Nera follows the murderers and enters the cave of Cruachan, the *síd*. He stays there and finds a woman who becomes his wife and tells him that the burnt out Cruachan is not yet true. It is a vision created by an elfin host, but it can become real if Nera does not warn his people about the attack which is prepared in the *síd*. Nera returns to our world (the second return on the first Samhain) on the same night when he was ordered to bind the captive. Taking his wife's advice, Nera takes the fruits of summer from the *síd* – wild garlic, primrose, and golden fern – to make the people of Connacht believe his story. He informs them about what is going to happen and spends one more year with them. On the next Samhain he returns to the *síd* for his wife and son, but something happens again, and his

grafii' Ptolemeia" (Celtic ethnonyms in the *Geography* of Ptolemy), in *Colloquia classica et indogermanica* vol. 3, ed. N. N. Kazanskii (St. Petersburg, 2002), 368-369.

³¹ According to the legal literature, one of the ways of execution in Early Medieval Ireland was hanging (*croichad*, from *croich* – “cross”). A criminal was hanged and died slowly, so that he could arrive in the Otherworld step by step. See Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1995), 216; T. A. Mikhailova, “Znamenii smerti v keltskoi epicheskoi i folklornoi traditsii” (The signs of death in Celtic epic and folk tradition), in Kalygin, 264-265. One has to mention that the bonds with which their feet were tied are preserved on the bodies of people sacrificed in Britain and Ireland.

³² Alwyn and Brinley Rees noticed the similarity between this story and the ancient Indian text “The Five-and-Twenty Tales of the Genie,” where at night King Vikramaditya takes a hanged corpse from a tree where an evil spirit (*vetala*) dwelt and then carried the *vetala* into his palace on his back. The point is that a certain sorcerer needs the *vetala* for acquiring magical power (*Dvadtsat' piat' rasskazov Vetaly*, tr. I. Serebryakov, Moscow, 1958, 24-26). Moreover, in the *síd* of Cruachan we again find the same pair: a cripple on the back of a blind man, a counterpart to Nera with the hanged man. One who sees (knows) and one who walks (acts) make a pair on the night of Samhain, when the visible and invisible worlds meet. As Myles Dillon has pointed out, such a pair also exists in ancient Indian philosophy. According to the school of *sankhya*, the physical and spiritual elements of nature are called *prakriti* and *purusha*. The *prakriti* is independent and active, but it lacks consciousness, it is “blind,” and the *purusha* is passive, but it possesses consciousness, it is “disabled.” Together they can carry out their mission in the same way as a cripple on the back of a blind person is able to reach his goal. This image was used by the school of *nyaya*; it is known as *andhā-khañjā-nyāya* (“the example of a blind man and a cripple”). See Myles Dillon, *Celts and Aryans* (Simla, 1975), 84.

wise wife allows him and the warriors from Cruachan to lead a quiet life for one more year. Nera comes again back to the same fire and the same people at the same cauldron (the third return on the first Samhain). Finally, on the second Samhain Nera goes to the *síd* with an army. It is destroyed, but Nera with his family stay there; he “has not come out until now nor will he come till Doom.”³³

In the world of mortals the events take one year, although the time spent by Nera in the *síd* of Cruachan is much longer and is somehow heterogeneous: even Nera’s son became a grown-up man during this period. Interestingly, Nera, while returning from the *síd* to the world of humans, enters three different versions of the present and future. Thus, the continuous time of *síd* can play the role of a starting point for a journey into different versions of human time. Depending on the situation, “the sacred time” of *síd* can be equal to a day, a year, or eternity. The events happening over several days can last from one feast until another or can occur during several consequent feasts.³⁴

The story ends with eternal imprisonment of Nera in the *síd*, and such an ending corresponds well to the beginning – to the meeting of Nera with the half-dead captive. The time of Samhain is not described as a kind of blessed eternity. Evil signs accompany Nera during his adventures, and even his supernatural wife and son appear before him as a threatening sign: “the appearance which Nera saw on them was the same as that which Cuchulain saw in the Tain Bo Regamna.”³⁵ Cuchulain saw: “A red woman was in the chariot, and a red mantle about her, she had two red eye-brows... A great man was beside her chariot, a red cloak was upon him.”³⁶

These red persons mark the transition from one perception of time to another and are reminiscent of the red knights from “The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel,” who fulfill the same function.

The Feast of Temair

The feast of Temair (*Feis Temro*), the celebration of royal “inauguration,” most likely also happened on the night of Samhain. Early Medieval Irish tales confirm that here this banquet is perceived as protection from evil power, necessary on the eve of Samhain. According to the annals, in the fifth century AD, after the Christianisation of Ireland had started, kings from the Ui Neill dynasty celebrated their successful rule by organising the habitual “Feast of Temair.”³⁷ In pre-Christian times kings probably celebrated “the Feast of Temair” not in the beginning, but in the glorious middle of their rule; this feast could have perhaps

³³ The Adventures of Nera, 212-228.

³⁴ Françoise Le Roux, Christian-J. Guyonvarc'h, *La civilisation celtique* (Rennes, 1998), 161.

³⁵ The Adventures of Nera, 224.

³⁶ Whitley Stokes, Ernst Windisch, ed., *Irische Texte*, vol. 2, 2 (Leipzig, 1887), 242-243. Tr. A. H. Leahy.

³⁷ Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), 80 (hereafter: Byrne).

also marked the acquisition of sacred dominance over Temair by an important king.

One should, however, begin with the statement that “the feast of Temair” as depicted in many Early Medieval Irish texts is a mythologically reiterated event; it was revived as such by King Diarmaid mac Cearbhaill in 560. In the “Annals of Tigernach” under this year one reads about *cena postrema Temrach la Diarmuit mac Cerbaill* (“The last feast in Temair during the time of Diarmaid mac Cerbaill”). Clearly, memories of the Ui Neills’ celebrations in the fifth century were still alive during Diarmaid’s lifetime, but I would rather think that this “last feast” was only an imitation, its new meaning hidden under the old name.

As is known from different sources, Diarmaid’s sins evoked the anger of Irish clerics. Influential abbots, Ruadan of Lothra, Brendan of Birr, and others (altogether “twelve apostles of Ireland”) decided to fast against the king, came to Temair and cursed this ancient royal centre.³⁸ In spite of an obvious legendary character in this story, from that time kings and warriors definitively left Temair, and kings with the official title “the King of Temair” no longer organised sacred feasts. The concept of the “feast of Temair” as the political enterprise of a centralised monarchy emerged quite late, when the reminiscences of the last feast of Temair faded away under the pressure of the urgent need to develop the Ui Neill dynasty.

Let us now turn to the meaning of the pre-Christian “feast of Temair.” Daniel A. Binchy, in his article about medieval Irish feasts, based on annals and the etymology of the word *feis* (the substantive derived from the verb *foaid*: “to spent a night, to sleep, to sleep with a woman”), comes to the conclusion that Kings of Temair used to organise a banquet in their sacred centre only once during their rule; they marked the culmination of their governing by a symbolic copulation with the goddess of royal power.³⁹ Binchy doubts the connection traditionally drawn between the feast of Temair and Samhain, since the historical “feast of Temair” as a ritual of fertility could not have been celebrated on the cold night of Samhain, the beginning of winter. The problem is that not every *ἱερός γάμος* can be called a fertility ritual. Here the sacred marriage symbolised rather the union between the royal masculine order and the feminine chaos of the goddess, which was embodied in the forces of Samhain and its temporal disorder. Moreover, as Nerys Patterson has pointed out, the “royal marriage” (*banais rí*) probably implied reinforcement of the king’s power: the goddess confirmed the virile power of the king. Thus, Samhain, the time of greatest political disorder, seems to have been quite an appropriate period for celebrating the Feast of Temair.⁴⁰ Generally speaking, it is impossible to ignore all the literary

³⁸ John O’Donovan, ed., *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and the Battle of Mag Rath* (Dublin, 1842), 4; see also Byrne, 95.

³⁹ Daniel A. Binchy, “The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara,” *Ériu* 17 (1958), 134-135.

⁴⁰ Nerys Th. Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen* (Notre-Dame, London, 1994), 148, note 6. John Carey also underlines the connection between the feasts of Temair and Samhain; he

evidence which connects the feast of Temair with the night of Samhain; it should reflect a certain historical reality.

In an Irish legal treatise from the seventh century, “The Order of Right Behaviour” (*Córus Béschai*), three types of banquets are distinguished: the divine banquet (*fled déoda*), the human banquet (*fled doena*), and the demonic banquet (*fled demanda*).⁴¹ The banquet of Temair is described as “human” in the poem “The Gift of Conn.”⁴² The treatise depicts a “human banquet” as a feast of hospitality: “What is a human banquet? The banquet in everyone’s ale-house for his master according to his duty...” The parallel with winter hospitality (*cóe*) is obvious. Another kind of banquet, the demonic, is described in the text as the regale offered to “sons of death,” that is, to the *finnians*. In other words, the feast of Temair as represented in “The Order of Right Behaviour” and in “The Gift of Conn” has human as well as demonic features; it is at the same time “the part of man,” to be acquired by mortals, and “the feast of Finnians.” Such a combination is not too surprising, if one bears in mind that Early Medieval Irish legal treatises often presented an idealised image of daily life, while real Irish social life was much more complicated. The same with banquets; it would be quite unrealistic to suppose that any clear division between the so-called “human” and “demonic” feasts existed in actuality.

In sources the so-called “bull’s feast” (*tarbfheis*)⁴³ on the eve of Samhain is also associated with Temair. It is difficult to say whether it is the same traditional royal Feast of Temair or whether it can be considered as a separate ritual of election and enthroning a king. A bull’s feast was organised in Temair during the period of interregnum after the death of a king. The main aim of the ritual was to find out who should become the next ruler. Both tales which describe a bull’s feast (“The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel” and “The Sick-bed of Cuchulainn”) characterise it as an important ceremony for the whole of Ireland. One cannot tell whether it was true or not. If one thinks that Temair from the Neolithic age had a special meaning for the entire island, then it is possible that the nobility from all five kingdoms of Ireland gathered for this feast.

At the beginning of the banquet a white bull was sacrificed (according to “The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel,” the bull was killed by the assembly, the function of druids is not defined), and one of the men ate his fill of its flesh and drank the water in which it was cooked. On the basis of relatively late historical and ethnographic descriptions one can suppose, together with Thomas O’Rahilly, that this man also covered himself in the skin of the newly killed bull

disagrees with Binchy’s sceptical position. See Dzh. Keri, “Vremia, prostranstvo i Inoi mir” (Time, space, and the Otherworld), in *Predstavlenia o smerti i lokalizatsia Inogo mira u drevnikh keltov i germantsev*, ed. Tatiana A. Mikhailova (Moscow, 2002), 148.

⁴¹ *Corpus iuris hibernici* vol. 2, ed. Daniel A. Binchy (London, 1978), 524.

⁴² Bondarenko, 130.

⁴³ It can be also translated as “bull’s feast.”

or lay on it.⁴⁴ Then he fell asleep with satiety, and four druids sang the spell of truth (*ór firindi*) above him. The person about whom he dreamt would become the new king. After the oracle woke up, he had to describe the appearance of the future king. If he dared to lie, his lips would grow stiff.⁴⁵

Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* already mentions sacrifices of white bulls by druids. At night, when the moon was waxing, Gallic druids prepared the offerings and a banquet in an oak grove; but according to Pliny, the main sacred object of the ritual was mistletoe rather than the bulls. After cutting the mistletoe two young white bulls were sacrificed (*Natural History* 16, 249). Probably this Gallic festive custom was connected neither with prophecies nor royal power. One has to bear in mind, however, that in this period kings in Gaul had already ceased to exist, and originally these rituals could easily have been associated with inauguration.

The significant role of the white bull in Celtic (more precisely, in Irish) cosmogony justifies its function in these magic rituals. It is enough to recall the final scene of “The Cattle Raid of Cooley,” where the great brown bull of Cualnge bests his old rival the white-horned bull (Finnbennach) and scatters parts of his body about the whole island, from which Ireland was reborn.⁴⁶ Thus, the land is born from the body of a god after the god was sacrificed.

There is also no doubt about the miraculous qualities of a white bull at the bull’s banquet on Temair. As Viktor P. Kalygin justly pointed out, the consumption of a divine animal signifies a mystical union with the god and the acquisition of divine qualities, including divine knowledge.⁴⁷ The oracle acquired the bull’s characteristics; the actions of covering with bull’s skin or sleeping on it are especially meaningful in this case. Moreover, the king could also take on the features of a bull, as is clear from such an epithet of the ruler as “the bull ruler” (*tarbflaith*). This term has been preserved in “The Testament of Morann” (*Audacht Morainn*, seventh century) and is related to a cruel aggressive king: “The bull ruler strikes [and] is struck, wards off [and] is warded off, roots out [and] is rooted out, pursues [and] is pursued.”⁴⁸ Such a person seems to be an ideal pagan king, and this epithet should be connected with the ritual of election.

⁴⁴ Thomas F. O’ Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1984), 324. Compare with similar prophetic rituals on bull’s skins as known among druids: *Stories from Keating’s History of Ireland*, ed. Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1996), 24-25.

⁴⁵ See the description of the bull’s banquet (or bull’s sleep) in two tales which complement each other: *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1975), §11 and *Serglige Con Culainn*, §22-23.

⁴⁶ *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. Cecile O’Rahilly (Dublin, 1961), 135-136. The plot of Scottish tale, “The Black Bull of Norrøway,” is of the same origin, where the black bull wins over his rival in the last battle. See *Folk-Tales of the British Isles*, ed. James Riordan (Moscow, 1987), 213.

⁴⁷ Kalygin, 109. Compare with the medieval Russian Veles-Volos: the god of poetic wisdom and, at the same time, “the cattle god.”

⁴⁸ *Audacht Morainn*, ed. Fergus Kelly (Dublin, 1976), 143-155.

The bull's feast (*tarbfheis*) and the feast of Temair (*feis Temro*) were probably two different festive ceremonies with different functions, but both of them were related to the power of High Kings of Temair. The bull's feast was clearly connected with the election of a king from among several noble candidates, and it is known in many details; on the other hand, the feast of Temair, functionally the ritual of inauguration (?), is not known in any detail except from the above-mentioned sacred marriage of the king and the goddess. In any case, the association of these "festive" events (including the custom described by Pliny) with night and sleep is quite important for the present subject. Bearing in mind the special attitude of the Celts towards night, one will not be surprised that they regarded this moment of original universal unity as an appropriate time for prophecies and inaugurations.

When one wants to outline certain problems or special characteristics of the perception of feasts in Early Medieval Ireland, the main obstacle is the fact that the sources are scarce and contradictory. Moreover, the basic texts for such research describe a kind of mythological reality. The absence in Celtic languages and cultures of a strict term for "feast" is also quite significant. It is important that even the word which stands more or less close to it, namely, *feis*, reveals to us its new, double and triple hidden meanings. These can be "banquet," "a night with a woman or a goddess" and "sleep," depending on the context and on the preference of each scholar. We started with the feast of Samhain and moved to regale and, finally, to ritual. But the ritual of royal election, which has to be accomplished in a strictly defined time span, brings us again to the feast of inauguration: if not to an annual feast, then to a repeated one, the one which is essentially important for the entire society.

MEDIUM AEVUM
QUOTIDIANUM

54

KREMS 2006

HERAUSGEGEBEN
VON GERHARD JARITZ

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER KULTURABTEILUNG
DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

niederösterreich kultur

Titelgraphik: Stephan J. Tramèr
Copy editor: Judith Rasson

Herausgeber: Medium Aevum Quotidianum. Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters, Körnermarkt 13, 3500 Krems, Österreich. Für den Inhalt verantwortlich zeichnen die Autoren, ohne deren ausdrückliche Zustimmung jeglicher Nachdruck, auch in Auszügen, nicht gestattet ist. – Druck: Grafisches Zentrum an der Technischen Universität Wien, Wiedner Hauptstraße 8-10, 1040 Wien.

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort	5
Grigorii V. Bondarenko, Some Specific Features of the Perception of Early Medieval Irish Feasts	7
Vladimir Ia. Petrukhin, The “Feast” in Medieval Russia: On the Question of Its Specific Historical Features	20
Besprechung.....	29
Verzeichnis der Veröffentlichungen des „Instituts für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit“ der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften	31

Vorwort

Der vorliegende schmale Band von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* konzentriert sich, wie angekündigt, auf zwei Studien aus der russischen Forschung, die sich der Untersuchung mittelalterlicher Festkultur widmen. Wieder ist die Möglichkeit dieser Veröffentlichung unserer Kooperation mit den Herausgebern der am Institut für Universalgeschichte der Russischen Akademie der Wissenschaften erscheinenden Jahresschrift *Одиссей. Человек в истории*, und dabei im Besonderen mit Frau Professor Svetlana Luchitskaya, zu verdanken. Der Band des Jahres 2005 setzte sich zentral mit dem Thema „Fest: Zeit und Raum“ auseinander, und die zwei hier vorliegenden Beiträge stellen die Übersetzungen von für unser Forschungsfeld relevanten Forschungsansätzen dar.

Die Vereinbarung zur Publikation der zwei Aufsätze geschah zu einem Zeitpunkt, als Professor Aron Ja. Gurevich, der auch als leitender Redakteur von *Одиссей* fungierte, noch unter uns weilte. Herr Gurevich, einer der weltweit bedeutendsten Repräsentanten einer Geschichte mittelalterlicher Kultur und Mentalität ist im August 2006 seinem Leiden erlegen. Seine Methoden und Forschungen haben international die heutigen kulturhistorischen Fragestellungen und Ansätze entscheidend beeinflusst und geprägt. Dafür sind wir ihm sehr dankbar.

Die für das Jahr 2007 vorgesehenen Hefte und Sonderbände von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* werden sich einerseits wieder neuen Untersuchungen zu Alltag und Sachkultur des Mittelalters widmen, welche im nächsten Jahr bei den wichtigen internationalen Mittelalter-Kongressen von Kalamazoo und Leeds präsentiert werden. Ein Sonderband wird sich mit dem Aussagegehalt von Testamenten für eine Geschichte der materiellen Kultur im kleinstädtischen Raum des Spätmittelalters beschäftigen. Darüber hinaus wird wiederum ein Schwerpunkt auf die Funktion, Perzeption, Repräsentation und Symbolik von Tieren in der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft gelegt werden. Gerade diese Fragestellungen finden sich augenblicklich häufig in der internationalen kultur- und alltagsgeschichtlichen Forschung und werden auch in einigen länder- und fächerübergreifenden Forschungsprojekten kontextualisierend und mit komparativen Methoden analysiert.

Wieder möchten wir allen Mitgliedern und Freunden von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* für das fortgesetzte Interesse, für die gute Zusammenarbeit und vielfältige Unterstützung herzlich danken. Wir hoffen, auch im nächsten Jahr und in weiterer Zukunft dazu beitragen zu können, dass die Geschichte von

Alltag und materieller Kultur des Mittelalters mit Hilfe interdisziplinärer Ansätze und im Rahmen verstärkter internationaler Zusammenarbeit eine anerkannte Rolle im Rahmen der kritisch analysierenden historischen Wissenschaften einzunehmen imstande sein wird.

Gerhard Jaritz, Herausgeber