

Kings Dying On Tuesday

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IN several Irish texts there are mentions of kings dying on a specified day of the week. Some of these relate to pagan or early Christian times, before the Roman calendar had come into general use, and they are thus *prima-facie* anachronistic. These references have a peculiar feature: in most cases the day named is Tuesday (*dia mairt*). It is not easy to see why the kings should have a tendency to die on one special day of the week, or why the storytellers should invent such a tendency.

The situation is complicated by some errors of translation. The 'Dublin fragment' of the Tigernach annals has the following entry, in a mixture of Latin and Irish: 'Conn Cetcathach occissus est tertia feria hi Tuaith Ambrois, nó i n-Irrus Domnann ut alii aiunt'.¹ Whitley Stokes translated this as 'Conn of the Hundred Battles was slain on a Wednesday in Tuath Ambrois, or in Irrus Domnann as others say'. But 'tertia feria' is undoubtedly Tuesday, as a parallel passage makes clear: 'Cond Cetcathach occissus est . . . dia-mairt', etc.²

Again, in the narrative of the death of Muircertach mac Erca, he is said to have been killed 'adaig mairti iar samuin'.³ This was translated (again by Stokes) as 'on the eve of Wednesday', corrected later to Tuesday; but 'the eve of Tuesday' would be *Monday* night, and 'adaig' does not seem to be used in this sense; so 'on the night of Tuesday' would be the proper translation. 'Iar samuin', 'after Samhain', must be a mistake by the author; other accounts of Muircertach's death state that it was on the eve of Samhain, or on the night of Samhain (Halloweve, or the following night).

In a previous paper⁴ I have suggested that the Irish kings were sometimes ritually killed, and the cases include both Conn and Muircertach. There are other passages in which the idea of a

¹ *Rev. Celt.* xviii, 377.

² *Rev. Celt.* xvii, 8.

³ *Rev. Celt.* xxiii, 416, and corrigenda in the next volume. It is curious that Stokes should have twice written Wednesday for Tuesday.

⁴ 'The ritual killing of the Irish kings', *Folklore* lxxxi, 1-22.

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ritual killing seems to have been in the mind of the storyteller, though it may have had no basis in fact. The death of Cormac, for instance, is recorded as follows by 'Tigernach': 'Cormac, grandson of Conn of the Hundred Battles, died in Cletech on a Tuesday (*dia-mairt*), the bone of a salmon having stuck in his throat. Or it was the elves that destroyed him after he was betrayed by Maelchenn the wizard, since Cormac did not believe in him.'⁵ 'Death by the elves' would mean a ritual killing, especially in conjunction with the mention of a druid. In Cormac's case, however, this is unlikely. He had abdicated some years before, and this would exempt him. The fish-bone story is more probable; no one would invent so unheroic an end for a famous king. It would seem, then, that some later storyteller took it on himself to fabricate a more appropriate death story for Cormac, similar to those of Conn, Conaire Mór and other celebrated kings. On this view, the death on Tuesday would be part of the fictional story, and should be taken with the second alternative rather than the first. We need not assume that the storyteller had any definite knowledge; he may have merely gathered vaguely from tradition that Tuesday was an appropriate day for a king to die.

Much the same argument applies to another case, the death of Art son of Conn in the battle of Mag Mucrama. In the poem 'The Yew Tree of the Disputing Sons' this battle is said to have been fought on a Tuesday.⁶ The accounts of the battle include some suggestions of ritual elements, such as the intervention of Lugaid Lága, who seems to be a kind of professional king-killer. But these elements mostly recur in the accounts of the battle of Crinna, which has more claim to be regarded as a ritual one. Moreover, the Tigernach annals contradict the poem, stating that the battle was fought on a Thursday. It is possible, therefore, that a later writer, finding an account of the battle, added the ritual details to make it more impressive, and changed the day of the week to Tuesday for the same reason.

Another account in the same style is that of the battle of Mag Rath.⁷ Here there is little doubt of the historical reality of the battle, but the narrative has been tricked out with motifs from

⁵ *Rev. Celt.* xvii, 20; xviii, 382.

⁶ *Eriu* xiv, 164.

⁷ *Eriu* v, 226 ff.

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folklore and ritual. Again we are told that the death of the principal personage (Congal Claen, king of Ulster) took, place on a Tuesday. This battle was fought in 637, by which time, presumably, the Roman calendar was well established in Ireland, so that the mention of Tuesday is not anachronistic on this occasion; but it is more likely to be an element of folklore than of history.

We have, then, five mentions of Tuesday, and one of Thursday, in cases where a ritual killing may have been in the mind of the storyteller or may have actually occurred. Generally, it is rare for the annalists to specify the day of the week; apart from those already cited, there is only one other case in 'Tigernach' — the non-ritual death of Iriel Glunmar on a Sunday. The evidence, therefore, while by no means conclusive, suggests that 'Tuesday' may have some special meaning in this connection.

The ritual murders took place, it seems, during the Festival of Tara, which was held once every seven years. How long did the Festival last? The texts differ on this point. *Cath Boinde*⁸ and the *Agallamh*⁹ make it six weeks, and say nothing about Samhain. *Cath Crinna*¹⁰ and *Tochmarc Étaine*¹¹ have 29 days, with Samhain as the centre point. These long periods are unlikely, however; few people could spare the time. Moreover, it seems that other assemblies, such as the fairs of Tailltiu and Carman, lasted for no more than a week.¹² In *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*¹³ the festival is said to last for seven days. Samhain is not mentioned; but a poem quoted by Keating gives seven days with Samhain as the mid-point.¹⁴ Finally, there are two references to a festival of Samhain, lasting for seven days and centred on the day of Samhain itself, but not, apparently, at Tara; these are in *The Sickbed of Cuchulain*¹⁵ and *Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa*.¹⁶ In the first of these it is stated that this festival began in Ulster and spread from there over the country. This festival may have been the precursor of that at Tara, and in any case can scarcely be dissociated from it.

⁸ *Eriu* ii, 179.

⁹ *Silva Gadelica* ii, 142 and 231.

¹⁰ *Silva Gadelica* ii, 359-60.

¹¹ A. H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland*, i, 14.

¹² D. A. Binchy, 'The fair of Tailltiu and the feast of Tara', *Eriu* xviii, 115 and 125.

¹³ *Eriu* iv, 125.

¹⁴ *History of Ireland*, I.T.S. edition, ii, 133.

¹⁵ Thurneysen, *Sagen aus dem alten Irland*, 81.

¹⁶ *Eriu* iv, 27.

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On the whole, the evidence fits best with the conclusion that the Festival of Tara lasted for three days before and three days after the day of Samhain, that is, for seven days in all. A writer in Christian times, coming across a reference in earlier tradition to this seven-day period, would naturally and almost inevitably call it a week. Thus it is stated that Diarmaid son of Fergus Cerrbel was made king 'before it was a week's end', after the murder of Tuathal Maelgarbh.¹⁷ This was a ritual killing, and would therefore have happened during the Festival; and 'before a week's end' would mean 'before the Festival was over'. A similar expression is used for the establishment of Conall Corc as king of Munster, after the ritual murder of Crimthann mac Fidach.¹⁸

If, then, the seven days of the Festival were called a week, the third day would be 'tertia feria' or Tuesday, and the proper time for the ritual killing would be the night of Tuesday, which was the eve of Samhain; in modern terms, Halloweve. The fourth and central day of the Festival would correspond to Wednesday. This was Samhain itself, the first day of the Celtic year, and the most important day in the Celtic calendar. It was on this day, in a Festival year (the Festival was held once in seven years), that a new king was inaugurated; that is to say, as soon as possible after the death of his predecessor, if the latter had been ritually killed. Thus, after the death of Tuathal Maelgarbh, Diarmaid son of Fergus Cerrbel became king not merely 'before a week's end' but, according to another source, the very next day.¹⁹

In the pagan scheme of things, therefore, the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one were synchronised with the death of one king and the installation of his successor. Paralleling and symbolizing both these processes, all fires were extinguished on the eve of Samhain, and then re-lit. An account of this, intermixed with some pseudo-historical material, is given by Keating, seventeenth-century historian. 'Now, when Tuathal had put these four parts together and made them into one territory called Meath, he built therein four chief fortresses, that is, a fortress in each of the portions. Accordingly he built Tlachtga in the portion of Munster which goes with Meath; and it was there the Fire of Tlachtga was

¹⁷ *Silva Gadelica* ii, 77.

¹⁸ Myles Dillon, *Cycles of the Kings*, 37.

¹⁹ *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, 276.

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instituted, at which it was their custom to assemble and bring together the druids of Ireland on the eve of Samhain to offer sacrifice to all the gods. It was at that fire they used to burn their victims; and it was of obligation under penalty of fine to quench the fires of Ireland on that night, and the men of Ireland were forbidden to kindle fires except from that fire. . . . The fourth royal fortress, Tara, is situated in the part of Leinster given to Meath, and there the Feis of Tara was held every third [*recte* seventh] year after the sacrifice had been offered to all the gods at Tlachtga (as we have said) as a prelude to that royal assembly called the Feis of Tara.²⁰

The pagan feast of Samhain is usually translated by All Saints' Day, to which it corresponds in the Christian calendar. The latter feast, however, was not established on this date until the 9th century, and Irish writers make no mention of it in this connection. They prefer to compare Samhain with one of the two major Christian feasts — Christmas and Easter. In *The Destruction of Dind Rig*, the killing of Cobthach Coel is said to have taken place 'on the eve of great Christmas'.²¹ This cannot be taken literally, since Cobthach was an early pagan king; and there are elements in the story which suggest a ritual killing, though these were not strong enough to warrant the inclusion of the case in my previous paper. Consequently 'Christmas' here might stand for Samhain. Elsewhere there is a more definite comparison with Easter: two texts call Samhain 'the Easter of the heathen'.²² This is a natural idea, since the death of a king and the installation of his successor is not far removed from the Easter theme of death and resurrection. The assimilation of Samhain to Easter is evidently parallel to the assimilation of the third day of the Tara festival to Tuesday.

²⁰ *History of Ireland*, I.T.S. edition, ii, 247 and 251.

²¹ *ZCP* iii, 13.

²² *Irische Texte* iii (i), 216-7; *Silva Gadelica* ii, 88.