‘God-kings’ at Newgrange

In 2020, a genetic study of ancient DNA from the Neolithic passage-tomb at Newgrange, Co. Meath, revealed that the man buried in the most elaborate recess was in fact the child of a first-degree incestuous union [1]. In consequence, the research team – Cassidy et al.– proposed that the tomb complex, which dates to ca. 3200 BCE [2], had been built as a burial monument for an endogamous family elite. The power of this elite was not confined to eastern Ireland because the team also discovered other family members buried at passage-tombs in the far west [3]. In other early world cultures, the leaders of such power-wielding endogamous dynasties typically presented themselves as god-kings [4], often being buried in imposing tombs. For example, the Old Kingdom monarchs of Egypt (ca. 2686-2181 BCE) were considered to be the sons of the sun-god Re and many were buried in large pyramids [5], while the New Kingdom pharaohs (1550-1069 BCE) – some of whom engaged in incestuous marriages [6] – had elaborate rock-cut tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The genetic findings from Newgrange prompted a flurry of news features bearing headlines such as “DNA study reveals Ireland’s age of ‘god-kings’”[7].

Mythological parallels proposed thus far

The entrance passage of the Newgrange tomb is aligned with sunrise on the winter solstice [8], when the point on the horizon where the sun rises stops its travel southward and reverses
direction. Cassidy et al. pointed out that their findings in respect of the incestuous union “strongly resonate with mythology that was first recorded in the eleventh century AD, in which a builder-king restarts the daily solar cycle by copulating with his sister. Fertae Chuile, a Middle Irish placename for the Dowth passage tomb (which neighbours Newgrange), is based on this lore, and can be translated as ‘Hill of Sin’ or ‘Hill of Incest’”[9]. It seems that this myth was chosen because it combines the following elements: (a) Reference to the solstice, which literally means “sun-stopping,” insofar as the king’s sister magically stops the sun in the sky to allow her brother to build a Babel-like tower to heaven; (b) Sibling incest, which in this case destroyed the magical solar arrest and brought night, and (c) Reference to a megalithic tomb near Newgrange, in that the tale rationalises the tumulus at Dowth as the base of the abandoned tower and justifies Dubad (“darkening”) as its Irish toponym.

Subsequent news reports have tended to point to the same myth [10], assuming it to be the most appropriate one. However, it presents several problems. One objection is that its builder-king – Bresal Bódíbad – belongs to the Historical Cycle (3rd century BCE - 8th century CE) [11]; he is the 88th Milesian king, who ruled 209-198 BCE according to the Annals of the Four Masters [12]. As such, his reign comes aeons after the mythic construction and occupation of Newgrange, events that are described in the Mythological Cycle and ascribed to the settlers known as the Tuatha Dé Danann [13]. In addition, Bresal Bóidbad is an obscure and non-divine king of Ulster whose connection to Dowth is probably accidental [14], and who has no connection to Newgrange [15]. Lastly, the story seems to be based on the biblical Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) and the incestuous liaison is condemned as sinful rather than accepted as a royal/divine prerogative.

In response, a few authors have sought other instances of incest among the protagonists of Irish mythology. Anthony Murphy has proposed several candidates [16]. His first relates to the birth of Cú Chulainn, but this hero – who was never a king – belongs to the Ulster Cycle (ca. 1st century BCE to 1st century CE) [17]. While one version involves the divine conception of Cú Chulainn in a dream-sequence set in Newgrange, it is only in a (mutually exclusive) alternate version that the conception arises from incest, and then not at Newgrange. Murphy’s second proposal relates to king Eochaid Airem, whose wife Étain was replaced by the couple’s daughter without him realising it. But Eochaid Airem is from the Historical Cycle – the 94th Milesian king (r. 130-115 BCE) [18], non-divine and with no connection to Newgrange. Moreover, the incest was unwitting and the resulting child was rejected. Murphy also mentions the incestuous unions of Clothru with her three brothers and her son (the 98th Milesian king, r. 34-8 BCE) [19], but these tales are again both late and unconnected to Newgrange [20].

Ali Isaac undertook a similar exercise [21]. Three of her proposals involve tales already

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dealt with. Another involves Englec, a minor character with whom her half-brother Aenghus Óg became smitten [22]. Both Aenghus and his (and Englec’s) mother Boand – the River Boyne personified – were strongly connected with Newgrange [23], but Englec did not reciprocate Aenghus’s desire and – given her prompt abduction by Midir [24] – it is unlikely that the half-siblings ever slept together. Isaac’s final suggestion relates to Corc Duibne, a child born to the son and daughter of king Conaire Cóem. But Conaire Cóem was the 111th Milesian king [25], a non-divine sovereign who ruled 158-165 CE [26]. There is no connection with Newgrange and, far from being tolerated, the forbidden intercourse led to a curse on the land [27].

Better mythological parallels have been overlooked

At this point, one might be forgiven for thinking that there is in fact little correspondence between the mythology of the site and the recent scientific discovery, yet nothing could be further from the truth. As mentioned earlier, the mythic construction and occupation of Newgrange is described in the Mythological Cycle and ascribed to the Tuatha Dé Danann, “the people of the goddess Dana”[28]. The sequential settlements of Ireland that form the Mythological Cycle are laid out systematically in the Lebor Gabála Érenn, the 11th-century CE Book of the Taking of Ireland [29]. The Lebor Gabála describes six major “Takings” and documents the island’s waves of (often sub- or superhuman) inhabitants until the advent of the very human Milesians [30].

The Tuatha Dé Danann – the fifth major group to “take” Ireland – contain the best-known personalities of the Mythological Cycle [31]. Effectively divinities operating within a quasi-human social structure – similar to the Younger Olympians of Greek mythology – the Tuatha Dé are variously described in the Lebor Gabála as druid-wizards, gods or (in Christian polemic) demons [32]. The Annals date their kingship in Ireland to 1896-1699 BCE [33]. Archaeologically, this corresponds to the Early Bronze Age [34], whereas Newgrange was built in the preceding Neolithic. The point, however, is that the Annals place the Tuatha Dé millennia deep in Irish prehistory; given that this chronicle was compiled ca. 1635 CE [35], one cannot expect modern precision in the dating of such a remote period. The Tuatha Dé Danann were ultimately displaced by the final group of settlers, the Milesians – a heroic but non-divine race described as “Scotic-speaking” Gaels [36], and thus consonant with the insular Celts [37]. After their defeat by the Milesians, the Tuatha Dé retreated forever into the sídhe – the mounds, passage-tombs and fairy-forts that dot the Irish landscape [38].

Newgrange typically appears in myths as Brú/Brug na Bóinne (“the Palace of the Boyne”) or Síd in Broga [39]. The Lebor Gabála reports that the monument was constructed as a
dwellings for the fourth king of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda [40]. We do not need to look far to find this king implicated in a close consanguineous union; the Dagda seduced Boand, the daughter of his brother Delbaeth [41], at Newgrange, and had by her his most prominent son, Aenghus Óg [42]. Aenghus later displaced his father from Newgrange (Síd in Broga) by trickery and made it his own dwelling [43]; for this reason, he is also known as “Oenghus in Brog, a name connecting him with the important cemetery called Brug na Bóinne near Drogheda, persistently associated in tradition with In Dagda and his family”[44]. Both the conception of Aenghus and the ploy by which he took ownership of Newgrange involved temporal trickery. The former saw the Dagda stretch a single day into the nine months needed to encompass Aenghus’s conception, gestation and birth, so that the husband of Boand – Elcmar – would remain unaware of her infidelity [45]. It therefore constitutes another “solstice” event connected directly with Newgrange [46], but this time set in the mythological period of its construction and early use.

Another illicit union involved Delbaeth, who succeeded his brother the Dagda as king [47]; he copulated with his daughter Dana(nd), for whom the Tuatha Dé Danann as a whole are named. The resulting three sons – Brian, Iuchar, and Iucharba – were so exalted that they were known as “the gods of the Tuatha Dé Danann”[48]. Incestuous unions continued in the next generation with Fiachna, the son and successor of Delbaeth in kingship [49], sleeping with his mother Ernmas. Out of this relationship arose Ériu, Banba and Fôla, the tutelary goddesses of Ireland [50]; from Ériu comes Éire, the country’s name in modern Irish.

Early in the subsequent Taking by the Milesians – the Sons of Míl – we encounter another mother-son union when Míl’s son Érimón married his widowed mother, the Egyptian princess Scota (dau. Nectanebo II, r. 360-342 BCE) [51], after his father’s death [52]. Érimón too became king of Ireland [53]. Elsewhere in the Lebor Gabála we read that Érimón had been married to (and had three sons by) his sister Odha before leaving her for a new woman, Tea [54]. A further son of Míl’s – Donn, another king [55] – was similarly married to his sister Díl [56].

**Analysis and conclusions**

Unlike the transgressive relationships from later mythological epochs – such as those selected by Cassidy et al., Murphy and Isaac – the incestuous unions among the Tuatha Dé Danann and early Milesians attract little or no moral commentary by the redactors. This suggests that they were integral to the source material and considered normative for that era. One possible objection arises from the existence of alternative genealogies in Irish mythology; by combining excerpts from mutually exclusive pedigrees, one might falsely create the illusion of
an incestuous union. This accusation could be levelled at the claim that Aenghus Óg was a
child of incest, insofar as the identification of Boand as the Dagda’s niece comes from the Le-
bor Gabála, while her identification as Aenghus’s mother comes from a Mythological Cycle
tale named Tochmarc Étaine. In the Lebor Gabála, the mother of Aenghus is not specified
[57], whereas in Tochmarc Étaine, Boand’s parentage is not mentioned [58]. While the latter
narrative focuses on the issue of Boand’s infidelity to her husband, it does not preclude the
possibility that her liaison with the Dagda was also incestuous. Nor does the allegation of
incest rely on a minor or defective genealogy; Boand is niece to the Dagda in all three of the
main redactions of the Lebor Gabála [59], and her status as the mother of Aenghus Óg is
entirely canonical [60]. There is even less uncertainty about the incestuous couplings asso-
ciated with Delbaeth, Fiachna, Érimón and Donn because all of the kinship data comes from
the Lebor Gabála and is common to multiple redactions. Indeed, the kinship of the sexual
partners is often remarked by the redactors, but in a neutral manner rather than in censure.

The central importance of the characters implicated in – or arising from – incestuous
unions among the Tuatha Dé Danann and among their immediate Milesian successors is ev-
ident both from the designation of many of these gods/men as kings of Ireland (Dagda, Del-
baeth, Fiachna, Érimón, Donn) and from the prominence of the peoples, features and lands
(Tuatha Dé Danann, River Boyne, Ireland, Scotland) named in honour of the relevant god-
desses/women. Incestuous unions by the Tuatha Dé kings gave rise to some of the key “triple
deities” of Irish mythology: the three sons of Delbaeth by his own daughter were regarded as
the “gods of the gods,” while from Fiachna’s relations with his mother arose the three tutelary
goddesses of Ireland. Unlike the episodes of incest in the Ulster and Historical Cycles dis-
cussed earlier, incestuous relationships in the Mythological Cycle involving the “god-kings”
of the Tuatha Dé and their immediate Milesian successors are not reviled as aberrations or
sources of shame. On the contrary, the narratives reveal the acceptance, prevalence and pres-
tige of close consanguineous unions among the divine royalty of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the
mythologically-nominated builders and users of Newgrange [61].

References

All URLs were accessed 7 August, 2021.

[1] Lara M. Cassidy, Ros Ó Maoldúin, Thomas Kador, Ann Lynch, Carleton Jones, Peter C.
Woodman, Eileen Murphy, Greer Ramsey, Marion Dowd, Alice Noonan, Ciarán Campbel,
Eppie R. Jones, Valeria Mattiangeli & Daniel G. Bradley (2020) “A Dynastic Elite in


[15] For this and subsequent analyses I exclude the generic belief that High Kings of Ireland ruled from Tara and were buried at Newgrange; Joshua J. Mark (2015) “Newgrange,” World History Encyclopedia, online at https://www.worldhistory.org/Newgrange/.


[27] Isaac (2020b).


[34] Harbison (1994), 86 & 133.


[38] Carey (1990), 24; Ellis (1991), 77 & 209.


[40] Macalister (1941), LGÉ IV, 121, 151 & 181.


[43] De Gabáil int Síde; Carey (1990), 24; Ellis (1991), 33, 51 & 77.


[46] Isaac (2020b) reports this time-dilation tangentially in relation to Englec, but without remarking its connection to the solstice or the fact that Aenghus was the child of an incestuous liaison instigated at Newgrange by a king.

[47] Macalister (1941), LGÉ IV, 125, 167, 185. In response to feedback from Jane Dougherty, Ali Isaac appended a note to her second article [Isaac (2020b)] correctly identifying Delbaeth as fathering three sons by his own daughter, but without mentioning that he was a king of the Tuatha Dé, a brother of the Dagda (for whom Newgrange was constructed), the importance of this daughter, or the fact that the three sons of the incestuous union were exalted and revered by the Tuatha Dé.


[50] Macalister (1941), LGÉ IV, 131, 155 & 195. Macalister, 296, notes that there is no Fiachna in the genealogies other than the king, thereby reinforcing the redactors’ claim of a mother-son union.

[51] Macalister (1956), LGÉ V, 51 & 63-65. The presence of Scota, the (undoubtedly fictive) daughter of a 4th-century BCE pharaoh – the last native ruler of Egypt – among the family of Míl is one of many temporal clues that the Milesians do indeed correspond to the Celtic phase (ca. 5th century BCE onward [Harbison (1994), 171]).


[57] Macalister (1941), LGÉ IV, 121, 151 & 157.

[58] Tochmarc Étaíne, ¶1.
[59] See note 41. Graham (2002), Fig. 1, presents a genealogical chart of each group of Takers, including the Tuatha Dé Danann; Boand is there spelled BOIND.

[60] Ellis (1991), 33 & 43-44.

[61] Macalister (1941), LGÉ IV, 121, 151 & 181. The correspondence of the mythological situation with bioarchaeological reality could represent either an extraordinary feat of social memory in the Irish oral tradition or a fortunate coincidence; see David Musgrove (2020) “Medieval(ish) Matters #9: Do Early Medieval Irish Texts Shed Light on Prehistoric Incest?,” History Extra, June 24, online at https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/do-early-medieval-irish-texts-shed-light-prehistoric-incest/. Either way, the mythological and bioarchaeological data do correspond well – much better than one might suspect from the comparanda selected by previous authors.