

# The oath and the breaking of oath as curse in the ancient Celtic world: The case of the encounter between the Celts and Alexander the Great on the Danube in 335 BC

DAN-TUDOR IONESCU\*

Institute Mircea Eliade, Metropolitan Library of Bucharest, Romania

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: December 31, 2018 • Accepted: June 2, 2020

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### ABSTRACT

This small study aims at clarifying some aspects of the encounter between Alexander the Great and the Celts on the Danube in 335 BC and the possible oath sworn by the Celts in order to seal their treaty with Alexander. The main idea is that the breaking of the oath works on the wrongdoer as a curse and the elemental gods of the Universe will seek and succeed in bringing about the evildoer's destruction.

### KEYWORDS

oath, elemental gods of the Universe, oath breaking, curse, perjurer

*Alexander of Macedon and the Celts: The encounter and agreement of the year 335 BC* – this could be an alternative title of my small study. The main aim of my short communication is to compare and analyze the answer of the Celts to Alexander of Macedon (the future Alexander the Great) in the northern military campaign of the year 335 BC. He had encountered the envoys of the Celts somewhere on the shores of Lower Danube immediately after his victories against three other peoples. These were the autonomous Thracian tribes of the Rhodope and Haemus (Balkan) Mountains, the Triballians (the *Triballoi* ruled by King Syrmos) located between the

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: dan\_tudor.ionescu@yahoo.com

Northern Balkan mountain range and the Danube, and also the tribes of the *Getae* living north of this great river.

The starting point of our analysis is the fragment of Arrian's *Anab.* 1. 4. 6–8, which approximately runs as follows: "In Alexander's camp<sup>1</sup> envoys of the other free peoples came to him from around the *Istros* (the lower course of the Danube). There came also envoys from Syrmos the king of the Triballians [*Triballi/Triballoi*] and an embassy from the Celts settled in the region of the Ionic Gulf." The Ionic Gulf or Bay is here the northern half of the Adriatic Sea, the Celts mentioned there being situated to the north of the Adriatic Sea, in what the Romans will later call the provinces of *Noricum* and *Illyricum Superius et Inferius* or Pannonia and Northern Dalmatia, in the lands which are now Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia.

The Celts are tall people and very proud (of high stature and even conceited, at least according to Alexander, as we shall later see); they all had nevertheless told Alexander that they had come wishful to bind friendship with him. King Alexander assured them of his good intentions towards them and received from the Celts the same insurances of good will; he [*scil.* Alexander] however asked the Celts what thing on earth, from the realm of things concerning mankind, makes them afraid the most, hoping that his fame/renown had reached them and even went beyond them and that they will answer that they fear him the most. The Celts' reply was however not that expected by Alexander (and namely that they dreaded his power and glory the most in this world). Because they knew instead that their regions were located far away from Alexander's kingdom and due to the fact that Alexander's expedition aimed elsewhere (we shall return later what precisely could the Celts truly know of Alexander's future intentions), *the Celts have answered Alexander that they fear only that Heaven could fall upon them. Alexander bound therefore friendship and alliance with them and then sent the Celts back to their lands of origin, saying only to his Macedonian Companions that the Celts are very conceited men.*<sup>2</sup>

We can come upon some logical inconsistencies here by simply analyzing this fragment: first, the Celtic envoys come to Alexander's army camp with the declared intention of establishing a peace and friendship treaty (or rather a mutual non-aggression deal) with the young and victorious Macedonian King. The fame of Alexander's exploits against the neighboring Thracian peoples possibly reached them via their Illyrian neighbors, sandwiched as they were between Macedon, the Thracian and Getic tribes, and the warlike Celts of Pannonia and Noricum, who were already encroaching upon territories belonging to Northern Illyrian tribes of the *Pannoni* and *Delmatae/Dalmatae* (as the Romans later called them). All the peoples of the Central-Northern Balkans and of the Carpathian and Middle-Lower Danube area, be they Macedonians, Thracians (including the *Getae* and perhaps the *Triballi* also), or Illyrians were formidable warriors, forming heroic societies quite similar to what we find described in Homer's poems. Overall, their social structure was probably the same as that described by the Homeric poems even as late as the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. It was when Alexander's Macedonians

<sup>1</sup>The young Macedonian King had his military camp on the southern bank of the Lower Danube, after his blitz raid across the Danube against the *Getae* and the conquest of one of their fortified settlements there, in the late spring or early summer of the year 335 BC (*vide* Arr. *Anab.* 1. 4. 6–8).

<sup>2</sup>This English translation is mine, after the Romanian translation of Professor Radu Alexandrescu from the Greek text of Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandri* (the Romanian edition of Arrian's *Anabasis*, Bucharest 1966): Arrianus, *Expediția lui Alexandru cel Mare în Asia* [The Expedition of Alexander the Great in Asia]. Bucharest 1966 (Romanian Translation and Names Index by R. Alexandrescu; Introduction, Notes, and Terms Index by A. Suceveanu).



first met in battle the *Getae* from north of the Danube that they crossed the mighty Danube by night for the first time. They had been already accustomed to the *Getae* and the *Triballi* between the southern bank of this river and the mountain range of the Balkans at least from the times of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander's own father. The Macedonians waded through the rich wheat fields of the land of the *Getae* and, according to Arrian (*Anab.* 1. 3), they made their way through the field by putting down the wheat with their *sarissae* (phalanx pikes). Immediately after the victory over the *Getae* the last resisting *Triballi* from the wooded Danube island surrendered to Alexander. The Celtic envoys (along with envoys of other Northern Balkan and Danube tribes or populations, such as the Illyrians and the *Dardani* probably including also the defeated *Triballi*) arrived to Alexander's camp on the southern shore of the Lower Danube. The very question of victorious Alexander seems a bit pointless in the context of sealing a mutual non-aggression deal with the Celts. Alexander, who had recently triumphed over the Southern Thracians, the *Triballoi/Triballi*, and the *Getae*, had no interest whatsoever in antagonizing the Celts. After all, the Celts came to the Macedonian camp precisely because they already knew that Alexander was a mighty and young warrior king, whose army has recently vanquished all his neighboring peoples. Although Celts lived far from Macedon and Thrace, to the distant lands of the Northwestern Balkans and the Eastern Alps (and probably also in the Pannonian plain or the present day Hungarian fields), the fame of Alexander's early military exploits in the Balkans had reached them. It is also interesting to notice that immediately after the allegedly rhetorical question of Alexander and the Celts haughty answer both parties struck a treaty of friendship.

The text fragment also points out that the Celts knew both that Macedon was located relatively far off Celtic territories and that Alexander's aims of future conquest was not directed towards them (a fact that Alexander was also well aware of). Alexander's rhetorical question makes therefore little sense: why would he wait for a Celtic recognition of his dread inspiring military force, when he knew already that his victories had determined those peoples to send envoys to him? This testified at least that the Celts tacitly acknowledged his military might. This is so unless (as Arrian's sources, be they Ptolemy, Aristobulus, or other, for example Cleitarchus suggested) he (Alexander) has been driven by his famous desire (*pothos*) of being universally accepted as the strongest king of all. This explanation is of course psychologically consistent with Alexander's well known Achilles like pride, but is somehow insufficient, at least in my humble opinion, to explain all of Alexander's behavior. After all, the young Macedonian warrior already knew he was a tough fighter and an able general, at least from the plains of Chaeronea in 338 BC. Moreover, he had been already victorious against the rebellious Thessalians and southern Greeks already in 335 BC, only through a blitzkrieg demonstration and he had defeated in open battle the Thracians, the Triballians, and the *Getae* alike. The Celts had heard of his sweeping victories and hurried to make friendship and alliance with him, otherwise they would not have been in his army's camp. He had until then conquered and crushed all those who openly opposed him up in arms. The very presence of the Celtic embassy in his camp was a living proof of that fear he inspired in all tribes, even in peoples who only heard of his victories, although they never saw or faced a Macedonian army in battle. Did he need more proof by making the Celtic envoys manifest their fear and therefore directly humiliate them? This would be hardly possible, at a time when he badly needed a peace treaty with the northern peoples. He did this in order for him to turn against the insurgent southern Illyrian warriors of Cleitos son of Bardylis (who was the Illyrian King defeated by Philip II of Macedon, Alexander's father, at the beginning of his reign, some twenty years before) and of Glaucias King of the Taulantians (another



population of Southern Illyria). He did that against these dynasts as well as against the *Autariatae* Illyrian army.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the Celts knew that Alexander's immediate military targets (in the future weeks) were the Southern Illyrians and therefore they had nothing to fear directly from Alexander in the next months. Alexander moreover could have conversely feared a Celtic, Getic, and/or Northern Illyrian attack coming from the north and the north-west, against the Macedonian Thrace, for example, when he would have been busy fighting the Illyrians of the south. They were located immediately to the north-west of Macedon and to the north of Epirus and west of the lands of his Paionian and Agrianian vassal kings of Central Balkans. He had no interest whatsoever to antagonize the Celtic ambassadors, when his primary interest lay in gaining at least the Celts' neutrality in the war he was planning against the Illyrians. It is also improbable to suppose that the Celts were aware of Alexander's plans with Thebes, Athens, or Sparta; and even less probable that they were aware of his project of attacking the Persian Empire in Asia.<sup>4</sup> It is logical to suppose that Arrian and/or his literary sources were wrongly interpreting the context of the negotiations between Alexander and the Celtic ambassadors and possibly even the text of the treaty struck between Macedon (represented by Alexander as King of the *Macedones*) and the Celts. Such a pact would have been normally associated with a sacrifice to the gods and an oath sworn by both the parties involved.<sup>5</sup>

It will make much more sense to interpret otherwise the Celts' answer (as reported by Arrian) to Alexander's question (if it had really been a question like this asked by Alexander from the Celts) as a Celtic oath formula which strengthened the making of a pact or treaty.<sup>6</sup> There are several possibilities here, which found no record in the ancient Greek sources. One is that Alexander simply did not put that question (or at least not in this way, but somehow indirectly tried to approach the topic of the Celts' worst fear), but rather straightforwardly asked the Celts *which oath was the most dreadful to them*, in order to make the treaty stronger.

The other was that *he indeed directly and openly questioned the Celts about their worst fear* and secretly hoped that they would reply to him that they feared his wrath the most in the world. This approach had a twofold aim: first, to gain access to their mind and soul (to know their psychology and their way of thinking, an obvious strategic and tactical reason for his trap question) and second to fathom what kind of oath was the strongest to the Celts themselves, in order to fortify the treaty bound with them. The secondary aim (of Alexander's double-targeted question), although tempting in itself, carried nevertheless the risk of antagonizing the Celtic envoys, a thing which Alexander would have avoided at any cost. I personally think that the first version should have been the most plausible explanation for this enigmatic scene recorded by Arrian's *Anab.* 1. 4. 6–8. The first version is that of the Celts making their most solemn oath to bind themselves with respecting the treaty with Alexander of Macedon, because the sense of their oath was not quite fully comprehensible by the Greek and Macedonian early chroniclers of

<sup>3</sup>Arr. *Anab.* 1. 5. 1.

<sup>4</sup>This is although still a matter for future debate. The very existence of this empire was most probably unknown to the Central European Celts of the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>5</sup>Vide Hom. *Il.* 3. 270–290 and 293–300; Livy 1. 7. 24. Cf. Titus Livius, *Ab Vrbe Condita*. Vol. I. Romanian translation, Chronological table, and Notes by Paul Popescu Gălăţeanu; foreword by A. Marinescu-Nour. Bucharest 1976.

<sup>6</sup>Vide MARKALE, J.: *L'Épopée celtique d'Irlande*. Paris 1971, *passim*; and MARKALE, J.: *Le Roi Arthur et la société celtique*. Paris 1977, 369–370; cf. GREEN, P.: *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 BC. A Historical Biography*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 1991, 129–130.



the Macedonian hero (and so they thought to invent Alexander's question). In this version of events, Alexander's tag question so to speak to the Celts was no more and no less than an invention of the Greek writers of Alexander's early histories. The Greek authors simply either unintentionally misunderstood (hardly believable such a thing) or (more probable) intentionally distorted Alexander's straightforward question addressed to the Celts, that was which oath was the ultimate or supreme kind of binding formula to them. They did that because the terms of the Celtic oath on the elements (as we shall later see in this study) were not so clear to them, although in essence this kind of oath was quite similar to the Homeric Greek oath on the gods taken as witnesses to the oath that strengthened the treaty. The Celts' answer, as recorded by Arrian (*Anab.* 1. 4. 7–8), was that they feared the most the falling of the sky upon them. Alexander's later reply that the Celts are overwhelmingly proud people clearly betrays his dissatisfaction at their answer. In this version of events, he simply hoped that they would tell him that his deeds of arms had been so formidable that they were frightened of him the most in the world, could simply signify they did not fall for Alexander's obvious gambit.<sup>7</sup> This would have been a defeat for Alexander in his mind game he tried to play to the Celts and would be hardly consistent with the content of an official history of the king. Therefore, neither Callisthenes of Olynthus nor Eumenes of Cardia would have ever written such a thing nor, probably Ptolemy, Aristobulus, and Cleitarchus would have ever tried to diminish Alexander's achievements. The episode taken in it does not make much sense. We could therefore presume that the Greek authors tried to rationalize it by making Alexander put a question and the Celts give a weird answer, which was in fact their oath formula. They did not quite understand the significance of this episode from the Celtic point of view (in other words, they had not fully understood the religious meaning of the Celtic oath formula); and this is, of course, a simple hypothesis.

We shall return to our main problem: if this episode described by Arrian had been in fact the performing of a specific formula of a Celtic oath by the Celtic envoys, which form had this oath specifically? What kind of oath was it? It appears to me that Jean Markale's hypothesis is closer to the truth. He wrote that the Gallic (*i.e.*, Celtic) warriors had in fact thus spoken to Alexander: "If we fail to observe our part of the deal with you, let the Heaven fall upon us and crush us, let the Earth open and swallow us whole, let the Sea flood and drown us all."<sup>8</sup> This was the supreme oath of the Celts, the oath on the elements,<sup>9</sup> and the breaking of this most solemn and ultimate oath would have brought upon the perpetrators the fury of the elemental gods (Sky with astral bodies and Air/Wind, Earth and Underground Fire, and Sea/Water respectively), meaning their total and utter annihilation. Alexander must have been more than pleased with such an oath accompanying his treaty with the Celts, if his translators knew not only the Celtic language, but also fundamental elements of Celtic religion and culture. Essentially the Celtic oath in this form

<sup>7</sup>See GREEN (n. 6) 130.

<sup>8</sup>Vide MARKALE: *Le Roi* (n. 6) 369. We can notice that in this formula not only Heaven is involved, but also the Earth and the Sea. The Greeks perhaps only recorded the first term of the oath (namely the Sky), because it was the most similar with their own kind of oath on Zeus. See also IONESCU, D.-T.: The Campaign of Alexander the Great in the Balkans: the Year 335 BC in the Writings of Arrianus and Plutarchus. In *Travaux de Symposium International "Le Livre. La Roumanie. L'Europe"*. 3ème édition – 20–24 Septembre 2010. Tome IV: quatrième section: *Latinité Orientale*. Bucarest 2011, 413–426, esp. 422–423, n. 8.

<sup>9</sup>MARKALE: *Le Roi* (n. 6) 369.



was the earnest engagement of all: if the party who undertook it failed to his/hers/theirs contracted duties, the Universe will see to bring the wrongdoer's total destruction. The Celts, if Alexander had ever tried to intimidate them, disarmed him by implicitly and indirectly saying that not him and his army they feared the most, but they feared instead the gods of the Universe if they would somehow fail to the treaty struck with Alexander of Macedon.<sup>10</sup> The young Macedonian king clearly did not realize yet the magnitude of this oath; his subsequent behavior at Persepolis in 330 BC, in front of another Indo-European civilization (in this case the Old Iranian one) based upon religious and spiritual values had proved that point more than enough.<sup>11</sup>

Wherefrom did we get the knowledge about the formulae of the Celtic oath? The Celtic culture until the Roman conquest of Gaul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC was an overwhelmingly oral culture. The Gallic druids knew the Greek alphabet and the Latin script as well, although they preferred, according to Caesar's testimony in the *Commentarii de bello gallico*, to transmit their theological, mythological, poetical, philosophical, and historical knowledge by word of mouth. The same went with other druidical lore like medicine, astronomy, physics, magic, and law; only in the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD in Ireland and in the Irish colonized regions of Wales and what is now Scotland there appeared the *Ogham* script, made of lines and dots written mostly on a vertical line, used for short inscriptions on stone.<sup>12</sup> After the Christianization of Celtic Britain and then of Gaelic Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the churchmen had transcribed in Latin alphabet, but still in the old Gaelic (Celtic Irish) language, the old laws of the land (until then only orally transmitted). They did the same with the old myths, epics, and legends of the Celtic Gaels and they recorded also in writing the epic *Tain Bó Cualnge* (the raiding for the cattle of Cooley). There Conchobar mac Ness, the king of the Ulstermen, vows a solemn oath before his compatriots: "the Heaven is above us, the land is under our feet, the sea is around us like a girdle. If the Sky with his rain of stars will not fall upon us, if the earth will not be broken by earthquakes, if the sea with his grey and bluish-green waves will not drown us, I will fight and bring back home the cattle and the women captured by our enemy etc." This is one example of Celtic oath. The king essentially says before the Ulstermen that he will perform his duty of defender of the realm and avenger of his people wronged by raids of foreign or domestic enemies by doing the utmost in his power, as long as the Universe lasts. Only if the Universe collapses will he obviously been forced to abandon his mission (of protecting his land and people); the epic tale in question was probably composed between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. This is a specific case of treaty or social contract struck between two parties, the king and his people, not between two kings or representatives of two distinct peoples. Another legend, dating perhaps from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, was that of the Irish *Ard Ri* or High King of Ireland, Loegaire (a contemporary of Saint Patrick, the Christian Apostle of Ireland), who vowed that he will not exact any more tribute from his vassal kings. He swore that oath on all the visible or perceivable elements or natural gods of the Universe: the sun and the moon, water and air, day and night, the sea and the

<sup>10</sup>MARKALE: *Le Roi* (n. 6) 370.

<sup>11</sup>Vide GREEN (n. 6) 299–300, 314–316 and 318–321.

<sup>12</sup>Vide AA. VV.: *Dictionary of the Celts*. New Lanark 1999 [1997], 176–177 and WALTER, PH.: *Merlin și cunoașterea lumii* [Merlin and the Knowledge of the World]. Bucharest 2004, 8 for the oral science and lore transmitted by the Druids to their disciples. Celtic knowledge (and its transmission) was essentially an initiation into the mysteries of the Universe.





land (country soil, earth). He had then violated his oath and the sun burnt him (fire and sky punishment), the air refused to enter his lungs (he could not breathe any more), and the earth covered him. Loegaire the High Irish King died of course instantly, as a perjurer or oath breaker.<sup>13</sup> This is a late and indirect proof of a Celtic oath done long after the times of Alexander the Great, but this tale or half-mythical story of the Irish Gaels gives us a glimpse on the kind of Celtic oath performed by the Celts before Alexander of Macedon; it is little evidence, but is the best we have.

To put it briefly, the oath strengthened the contract made between two parties. It has as essential parts the following three elements:

1. The establishing or exposition of terms or conditions that both parties must respect;
2. The enumeration of the gods or divine beings taken as witnesses and defenders of the terms of the oath;

<sup>13</sup>Vide MARKALE: Le Roi (n. 6) 370. For the *Ogham* writing system in Ireland and the Irish colonized territories of the south-western and north-western shores of Wales and Western Scotland see also DRIMBA, O.: *Istoria Culturii și Civilizației* [History of Culture and Civilization]. Vol. II. Bucharest 1987, 54. As for the Irish hierarchy of kings, from the *ri* (king) of a small tribe or people (*tuath*) to the so called “superior king” (*ruiri*) to the “King superior to superior kings/High King” (*ri ruirech/Ard Ri*) and the Irish social organization and hierarchy [druids, kings and warrior noblemen or *flaithi*, free men who were mainly herdsman and peasants (*bo airig, grad fene*), as well as the *aes Dana* (the craftsmen, both manual workers and intellectuals like the *filid* and the *bards*) affiliated to the druids and the aristocratic warriors vide MARKALE: Le Roi (n. 6) 221–224 ssq. (225–239), 363–370; DRIMBA 33–34; DUMÉZIL, G.: *Mit și epopee* [Myth and Epic]. Bucharest 1993, 318; DUMÉZIL, G.: *Uitarea Omului și Onoarea Zeilor și Alte Eșuri Douăzeci și cinci de schițe mitologice* [The Oblivion of Man and the Honour of Gods Twenty Five Mythological Drafts]. (Romanian translation by G. Anania). Bucharest 1998, 65–71 (about the death and deification of Heracles by fire on the Mount Oeta), 84–99 (Celtic myths), 100–116, 145–151 (esp. 148–149 about the mythic character of *Pilumnus* in Roman mythology), 188–193 (about the Scythian oath formula as recorded by ancient Greek authors and the Ossetian legends of the *Nart* heroes), 203–207 (about the religious symbolism of colours of the war garments worn by the Persian Achaemenid Great King/King of kings Darius III Codomanus), and 208–212 (about Alexander the Great and the Iranian royal ideology of the *Hvarenah/Hvareno* or the heavenly glory and light of victory descended by heavenly mandate upon the rightful Iranian king); DUMÉZIL, G.: *Cele Patru Puteri ale lui Apollo și Alte Eșuri Douăzeci și cinci de schițe mitologice* [The Four Powers of Apollo and Other Essays Twenty Five Mythological Drafts]. Bucharest 1999, 13–30 (about the magical and spiritual power of the sound, spoken word, poetry, and music in the Indo-European cultures, from the Vedic *Vāc*, the Divine Voice or the Word/Sound as God, to the solar god Apollo of Delos, divine patron of many arts, such as healing, archery, but also *poetry and music*) and 31–49 (about mythological Indo-European parallels in the case of Apollo and of the Indo-European ideology/mythology of the three functions, esp. 40–41 for the Celtic mythological examples), 72–83 for the Northern Iranian (Scythian and Ossetian) mythological parallels, 84–88 (Roman and Latin-Italic deities associated with sound, articulate speech, and therefore with words, oaths, and prophecy), 174–185 (esp. 180–181 about the religious symbolism of colours associated with gods and their functions or attributes in the case of the Norse and Old Germanic gods); RHYS, J.: *Celtic Britain*. London 1996 [1904] 57–67 for the three sacred objects of Irish royalty (the possession of these defined Gaelic/Goidelic Irish Kingship of the High King of Eriu/Ireland: the ever filled cauldron of the “good god” Dagda, the invincible sword of the king Nuada of the *Tuatha Dé Dannan* (the tribes of the goddess Dana *i.e.* the old Irish gods before the Sons of Mile or Gaels arrived in Ireland coming from Spain, according to the *Lebor Gabala Eireann* or the Book of Conquest of Ireland), the unfailing spear of the god Lug; and they added also a fourth sacred royal thing, the “Stone of Destiny/Stone of Fál”, which seemed to be a symbol of the Irish land, of the country’s soil or earth, located in the field of Fál, the *Magh Fhál*, stone that uttered a specific cry or sound only when the rightful king stood on it to be enthroned or crowned as High King). For the royal symbolism of these objects and especially of the sword vide WALTER, PH.: *Arthur Ursul și Regele* [Arthur the Bear and the King]. Bucharest 2006, 165–169 and *Dictionary of the Celts* (n. 12) s.v. Arthur (10–11), s.v. Cauldron (28), s.v. Conchobar mac Nessa (36–38), s.v. Caladin (26), s.v. Cuchulainn (40–45), s.v. Dagda/Dagda (48–50), s.v. Gae Bolg (81–82), s.v. Leabhar Gabhala Eireann (136–137), s.v. Lugh (144), s.v. Nuada Airegetlamh (170–177).



3. The description of the penalty involved by a potential guilty party, in case of breaking the oath by violating the terms of the treaty.

All of these constituent elements appear in the Celtic Gaelic oaths. If Markale's hypothesis could be expanded in a valid theory (that Arrian and Plutarch transmitted via their own Greek sources a distorted understanding and memory of the oath performed by the Celtic envoys to Alexander of Macedon in 335 BC), Gaelic oath forms included all these three components. The King first said to his folks what he must do for them (in exchange for his subjects' loyalty), then names the elemental gods of the Universe on whom he does so swear to uphold the rights of his people, to defend his people, to address the wrongs done and do justice to his people, and finally is the description of the penalty he should suffer if he fails to his word. Interesting in this case is that we don't have the oath of fealty sworn by the people to his king. The breaking of the oath by King Loegaire acts on him like the fulfillment of a curse. The Celts swear on the elemental gods of the Universe and if they fail to the terms of the treaty or oath, they risk and face total destruction. The Celts, like the Achaean and Trojan heroes of Homer or the old Italic warriors mentioned by Livy, swore their oaths orally (theirs are spoken oaths only). *The invariant element or the constant of this ritual equation is the future and instant annihilation of the potential oath breaker.* In this respect, the Celts formula was perhaps the most archaic of all Indo-European oath types (being specifically an oath on the basic elements of which Universe is made, Heaven with air, space, and astral bodies, Earth with waters and underground fire, and the Sea) and the most frightening of all as well. Seeing things in this perspective, the Celtic envoys before Alexander the Great had spoken the truth.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Vide *Dictionary of the Celts* (n. 12) s.v. Ogham (173–174), s.v. Oghma or Ogma (174), and s.v. Ogmios (174–175) for the power of the spoken word in the Celtic world and for the magic script Ogham in the Gaelic Irish world (although totally different in form, with a function sometimes similar to the Germanic runes).

