

RUSSIA, CRADLE OF THE GAEL

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0. Introduction

One of the points of overlap between Celts and Slavs is a matter of geography, although it is the geography of the imagination, not that of conventional history: certain of the Celtic peoples claimed to have originated in a region where certain of the Slavic peoples subsequently settled. This is the territory known as Scythia: a term which was used by many ancient writers as a general designation for the northernmost parts of the world, but which was more specifically applied to the lands north and northeast of the Black Sea, including what are now Russia and the Ukraine.

1. Medieval pseudohistorical tradition and Scythia

Although the notion of derivation from Scythia is, as we shall see, one of the constants of Gaelic pseudohistorical tradition, it appears to have played a relatively peripheral part in shaping Irish and Scottish conceptions of identity. The doctrine that the Gaels invaded Ireland from Spain probably arose as a result of cultural contacts between Ireland and Iberia in the seventh century; it went on to serve the interests of propaganda in the attempts to forge an Irish-Spanish alliance against England a thousand years later, and is not without its adherents even today.¹ The belief that they had also come into contact with the Israelites, upon whose wanderings their own were largely modelled, enabled the Irish to claim that their pagan ancestors had had some knowledge of the Mosaic Law.² An alternative view that the Gaels were originally Greeks, often attested despite being at odds with the normative pseudohistorical model canonised in *Lebor Gabála*, also had an obvious motivation in that it linked Irish origins with the high culture of the ancient world.³ But what was to be gained from an association with the Scythians?

On the face of it, such references to Scythia as would have been available to a medieval Irish scholar would not have suggested that such

¹ Van Hamel 1914-15: 173; Carey 2001. The latter article provoked one reader into writing a letter arguing on behalf of the historicity of a Gaelic migration from the Iberian peninsula.

² Macalister 1938-56: i, xxvii-viii; followed e.g. by Scowcroft 1988: 20; and McCone 1990: 67.

³ See now Jaski 2003.

an association was a flattering one. Thus a reader of Orosius's *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* would learn that Ninus taught the ancient Scythians to drink human blood; that the heinousness of an atrocity could best be evoked by saying that it would have been "loathsome... even to the remotest barbarians of Scythia"; that "the vast Scythian peoples" were "feared by all [our] ancestors, and even by Alexander the Great" ; and that the barbarian leader Radagaisus was "truly a Scythian, who in his ravenous cruelty loved not so much fame, or plunder, as carnage for the sake of carnage".⁴

For Isidore of Seville, Scythia was one of the remote refuges of the monstrous races, home to the Panotii with their enormous ears, and to the horse-footed Hippopods; "the land as a whole, on account of the barbarous peoples by whom it is inhabited, is called Barbarica".⁵ Elsewhere, Isidore spoke of Scythia as containing

many peoples, who wander far and wide on account of the barrenness of the land. Some of them till the fields while others, monstrous and savage, subsist on human flesh and blood. Many regions in Scythia are prosperous, but many others are uninhabitable: for while they are, in many places, abundant in gold and gems, men can seldom come there because of the ferocity of the gryphons.⁶

In such an account, it is the exotic and gruesome which stick in the mind: it is not surprising that Airbertach Mac Coise's geographical poem, based extensively on Isidore, says of Scythia only that it contains "gryphons of valleys, guarding gold and pure gems".⁷

The Irish were also accused of barbarism, and indeed of cannibalism, by ancient writers.⁸ But such potential resemblances with the Scythians would only be made the basis of comparison by hostile outsiders: it is difficult to imagine that an Irish scholar would have claimed an ancestral connection simply because of the Scythians' reputation for savagery.⁹ Considerably

⁴ *Libri septem historiae contra paganos* i.4; v.4; vii.34, 37 (Migne 1844-64: xxxi, 700, 927, 1149, 1159).

⁵ *Etymologiae* XI.iii.19, 25; XIV.iv.3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XIV.iii.31-2.

⁷ Best et al. 1954-83: lines 16254-6. The story of gryphons guarding gold in the far north goes back at least as far as Herodotus (iii.16; iv.13, 27).

⁸ Diodorus Siculus and Strabo; cited by Friedrich Engels, "History of Ireland", in Marx and Engels 1971: 291.

⁹ See however Carey 1990a: 41-4, where I suggest that a reference to *barbari* by Julian of Eclanum furnished the basis for an image in the saga *Mesca Ulad*.

more plausible is the hypothesis that the derivation from Scythia originated as etymological conjecture, a type of speculation which the Irish - like many other medieval peoples - assiduously cultivated.¹⁰ A plausible scenario was sketched by Eoin Mac Neill:

To provide a theory of the origin of the Gaels..., a search was made through the Latin historical and geographical writings that were used in the Christian schools of Ireland and suitable discoveries were made.... In those times, the ordinary Latin name for the people of Ireland was Scotti, Scots. It is the name used for them by Orosius, and also by St. Patrick, and it was accepted by all the early Irish writers who wrote in Latin. But this name Scotti does not appear in Latin before the fourth century and gave no direct clue to trace the origin of the Gaels. In the historical and geographical Latin writings to hand, the people's name that most clearly resembled Scotti was Scythi, Scythians. Accordingly, we are told that the Gaelic people were of Scythian origin.¹¹

This analysis has often been echoed since;¹² and indeed I believe it to be correct. It should however be noted that Mac Neill cites no medieval text in its support. So far as I have been able to ascertain, the earliest Irish source to explain the word *Scot* as coming from "Scythian" is Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, written in the 1630s. Dismissing the view of "a certain author" that *Scot* is a synonym for *saighdeóir* 'archer',¹³ Keating stated that "it is the general opinion of the historians" (*céadfaidh choithchenn na seanchadh*) that the reason why the descendants of Goídel are called "the race of Scot" (*cine Scuit*) is "because of their having come from Scythia, with respect to their origin".¹⁴

"The general opinion of the historians" is rather a vague reference, especially as Keating liked to invoke specific authorities wherever possible; and our confidence that such a doctrine was in fact widespread among the learned men of Ireland is not increased when John Colgan, making the same assertion, seems merely to be echoing Keating.¹⁵ Prior to Keating, in

¹⁰ Thus Baumgarten 1983; Russell 1988: 16-27.

¹¹ Mac Neill 1919: 90-91. Cf. Meyer 1913: p. 26; van Hamel 1914-15: 173.

¹² E.g. by Macalister 1938-56: ii, 3; Baumgarten 1983: 226-7; Scowcroft 1988: 17; Carey 1994: 12.

¹³ That the word is to be taken in this its original sense, not more generally as "soldier" in accordance with later usage, is evident from the equivalent *feor bogha* "bowman" in the next sentence. The unnamed "author" presumably associated *Scot* with some form of the word "shoot" (Old English *scéotan*).

¹⁴ Comyn & Dinneen 1902-14: ii, 26.

¹⁵ *Quod optime nostri passim historici tradunt* (Colgan 1645: 502).

fact, explicit mentions of the Scot/Scyth equivalence are confined entirely to English writers. Thus Edmund Spenser, in his *View of the State of Ireland* (1595), wrote of how

the Scythians... at such time as the Northerne Nations overflowed all Christendome, came downe to the sea-coast, where inquiring for other countries abroad, and getting intelligence of this countrey of Ireland, finding shipping convenient, passed thither, and arrived in the North-part thereof, which is now called Ulster, which first inhabiting, and afterwards stretching themselves forth into the land, as their numbers increased, named it all of themselves Scuttenland, which more briefly is called Scutland, or Scotland.¹⁶

In England, the derivation goes back at least as far as the writings of Ralph de Diceto (second half of the twelfth century),¹⁷ resurfacing in Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* (mid-fourteenth century),¹⁸ and then appearing again a hundred years later in Thomas Walsingham's *Ypodigma Neustriae*.¹⁹ Since Keating cites Walsingham earlier in the very chapter in which he speaks of "the general opinion of the historians", there would appear to be some grounds for the suspicion that it was the monk of Saint Albans whom he has swathed in the collective mantle of the *seanchaidhe*.

2. The question of Scythian etymology

There is one medieval Irish text which comes close to asserting the Scythian etymology: the Third Recension of the influential pseudohistorical treatise *Lebor Gabála*. Here we find for the most part a recapitulation of ideas from the earlier recensions, some of which will be further discussed below; but then there is something extra.

...Or else *Scota* is the name of the kingdom (*túath*) from which they came to Nimrod's tower, out of Stony Scythia (*ota in Sceithia Clochaig*) in the east... The kingdom (*túath*) from which they came was *Scoititsianos*.²⁰

Have we finally found a medieval Irish witness to the Scythian etymology? In fact, no. The passage is not saying that the Scots derived their name from Scythia; rather, they are supposed to have come from a place some-

¹⁶ Hadfield & Maley 1997: 44-5.

¹⁷ Stubbs 1876: i, 10 (*Abbreviationes chronicorum*), ii, 36 (*Ymages historiarum*).

¹⁸ Babington and Lumby 1865-86: i, 382-3. At *ibid.*, 388, Higden provides the most ingenious explanation which I have yet encountered of St Andrew's status as patron saint of Scotland, linking it with the apocryphal doctrine that Andrew preached among the Scythians.

¹⁹ Riley 1876: 107-8.

²⁰ Book of Lecan, fol. 268 rb 48-va 3.

where within the borders of Scythia called *Scota* or *Scoititsianos*. The very fact that such a fantastic name as the latter should have been added to the story seems to indicate that the man responsible for the addition saw no significant connection between the name *Scot* and that of Scythia itself.

Should all of this lead us to conclude that the standard explanation for the Scythian ancestry of the Gaels is a purely English invention? The question deserves to be squarely put, but in the end I am inclined to answer it in the negative. The resemblance between the names *Scoti* and *Scythae* seems, after all, too close to be coincidental; and I have argued elsewhere that the derivation of the former from the latter could have been modelled on a passage in Isidore, who used a closely analogous similarity of name as a pretext for tracing the *Gothi* of Spain from the *Getae* on the Scythian frontier.²¹ The principal question which confronts us is, rather, why the Scythian etymology is not mentioned in any medieval Irish source.

The simplest answer is that it had been displaced by another explanation, which derived the name *Scot* from that of the ancestress *Scota* daughter of Pharaoh. This *Scota* was an important figure in the overall pseudohistorical scheme, serving to anchor the Gaels in Egypt at the time of the Exodus: her status as eponym of the *Scotti* is already mentioned in two ninth-century manuscripts on the Continent,²² and is repeatedly asserted in Irish sources throughout the Middle Ages. Eventually there came to be two *Scotas*, each the daughter of a Pharaoh: one was the wife of *Nél*, son of the ruler of Scythia; the other was one of the wives of *Míl Espáine*, patriarch of the Gaelic conquerors of Ireland. With so conspicuous a figure to account for the name, any alternative etymology would have been superfluous and might even have cast doubt on the reality of *Scota* herself: thus Keating was at pains to explain that *Scota* was so called “because the father of [her son] *Góidél* was of the race of *Scot* (*cine Scuit*), from Scythia, and it was customary among them for women to take their names from their husbands”.²³ This is by no means the only example of a pseudohistorical doctrine whose etymological basis appears to have been forgotten within the tradition

²¹ Carey 1994: 12-13. After writing this, I was both startled and gratified to find that Ralph de Diceto had anticipated me by some eight centuries: *A regione quadam quae dicitur Scitia, dicitur Scita, Sciticus, Scoticus, Scotus, Scota. Similiter a regione quadam quae dicitur Getia, dicitur Geta, Geticus, Goticus, Gotus, Ostrogotus, Witsigotus* (Stubbs 1876: ii, 36).

²² Thus Contreni 1992.

²³ Comyn & Dinneen 1902-14: ii, 20. He makes a similar statement regarding the second *Scota*, *ibid.*, 44.

itself - although, as can be seen in the case of Higden and others, it remained easy enough to recognise and rediscover it.²⁴

Whatever its rationale, the Scythian origin of the Gaels is already to be found in the oldest systematic account of Irish origins to have come down to us, that which the Welsh author of the treatise *Historia Brittonum*, writing in 829 or 830, claims to have received from the “most learned of the Irish”:

When the sons of Israel came through the Red Sea, the Egyptians came and followed them and were drowned, as is read in the Law. There was a noble man from Scythia, with a large family, dwelling with the Egyptians, who had been expelled from his own realm. And he was there when the Egyptians were drowned, and he did not set out to pursue the people of God. But those who had survived took counsel to drive him out, lest he should assail and occupy their realm, since the strong among them had been drowned in the Red Sea; and so he was driven out.

The route which the noble Scythian took through northern Africa to Spain is then described; his descendants lived there for many centuries, and eventually conquered Ireland.²⁵ Here, as will be evident, the real purpose of the story is to link Egypt with Spain: the ancestor-figure’s Scythian origins are mentioned only in passing, and contribute nothing to our sense of his identity or of that of his descendants.

It is otherwise with our next piece of evidence: the poem “Can a mbunadas na nGoídel” [“Whence is the origin of the Gaels?”], plausibly ascribed to Mael Muru Othna, a “royal poet” whose death is assigned by the annals to the year 887.²⁶ Retelling the story - already to be found in the grammatical tract *Auraicept na nÉces*, as part of its first (eighth-century?) stratum - of how one Fénus constructed the Irish language in the aftermath of the building of the tower of Babel,²⁷ Mael Muru adds the information that Fénus journeyed to the tower “from Scythia”. He goes on to relate how Fénus’s son Néil went to Egypt and married Pharaoh’s daughter Scota; their descendants lived peacefully in Egypt until, as in *Historia*

²⁴ Some eponyms were probably already opaque in the pre-Christian period: for the case of *Íth* see Koch 1991: 22-3. The name of *Éremón* son of Mil, although clearly contrived to be an eponym (cf. Scowcroft 1988: 19-20), is not so far as I know ever acknowledged as such in the sources.

²⁵ Cited from Mommsen 1894-98: 156-8.

²⁶ See Carey 2004.

²⁷ For the background of this legend, see Carey 1990b.

Brittonum, their position became untenable following the flight of the Israelites. At this point, Mael Muru's account takes a different tack:²⁸

The offspring of Nél feared Pharaoh's anger, so that they were sorrowful; for they had not gone to take revenge along with the warrior.

Even when Pharaoh did not escape from the travelled (?) sea, they feared that the peoples of Egypt would enslave them.

They stole Pharaoh's ships from the land where they dwelt. On a cold night they rowed upon the strait of the Red Sea.

They rowed past India, past Asia (so that you may know it), to Scythia, with lofty strength, to their own country.

They held sway over the channel of the Caspian Sea, a trusty war-band. They left Glas in Coronis, upon the Libyan Sea.

After a time Srú son of Esrú departed from Scythia on a difficult circuit, swiftly, around the north of the Rhipaeon mountains.

He settled in Golgatha of the river-mouths, a shining covenant. His offspring remained there without reproach for two hundred years.

Brath son of Deáith journeyed thither, kingly ranks, into the Maeotic marsh (?) from the north, in the north of the world.

Therefore he went along the marshes with (their) islands, kingly exiles: to reach the crested Tyrrhenian Sea.

They rowed to Crete, to Sicily, chieftains upon an errand, past the Pillars of mighty Hercules to wealthy Spain.

Where *Historia Brittonum* brought the noble Scythian from Egypt to Spain by the most direct route possible, across a northern Africa whose landmarks are all drawn from the account of world geography at the beginning of Orosius's *History*,²⁹ Mael Muru prolonged the migration by hundreds of years and took the wanderers the long way round, by way of a protracted sojourn in "their own country", Scythia. Scythia has become an integral part of the story: it is the homeland yearned for by the uprooted Gaels.

The geography, apart from certain baffling details (why is the Libyan Sea near the Caspian Sea? what is Golgatha?), is again taken from Orosius. From him, Mael Muru or his source would have learned that the Caspian Sea opens onto the northern ocean, explaining how it was possible for the

²⁸ In what follows I cite my own translation of the poem, from a critical edition which is still in progress. The only prior edition is Todd 1848: 220-71; cf. Best et al. 1954-83: lines 15990-6158.

²⁹ *Libri septem* i.2 (Migne 1844-64: xxxi, 691-4).

Gaels to reach it by sailing “past India, past Asia”, and then around the Asian landmass northwestward. Orosius went on to describe how the Maeotic marshes (the ancient name for the Sea of Azov, north of the Black Sea) can be reached by following the shore of the ocean further westward; and he spoke too of the Rhipaeian mountains in the farthest North, the source of the Tanais (or Don) which flowed into the Maeotic marshes as well as the Black Sea. The journeys of the Gaels, however difficult they may be for us to visualise at first, make sense in Orosian terms.³⁰

But why, having found their way home again to Scythia, did the Gaels then wander further? This question is addressed in the poem “Goídel Glas, ó tát Goídil” [“Goídel Glas, from whom are the Gaels”], written by Gilla Coemáin mac Gilla Shamthainne (flourished 1072). The relationship of this poem to the earliest version of *Lebor Gabála* is not altogether straightforward;³¹ they cannot in any case have been very far apart in date. In terms of doctrine, Gilla Coemáin seems to stand between Mael Muru and *Lebor Gabála*, broadly conforming with what the latter has to tell us but preserving a few scraps of information characteristic of the former. For most purposes, citing the First Recension of *Lebor Gabála* gives a convenient summary of his views as well. Again, it is Srú who leads the Gaels out of Egypt and back to Scythia; but Scythia is not empty when they get there:

At that time Noenual descendant of Fénius died, i.e. the ruler of Scythia; and immediately after coming to Scythia Srú died also.

Éber Scot [son of Srú] took the kingship of Scythia by force from the children of Noenual, until he was killed by Noenual’s son Noenius.

There was strife between Noenius and Boamain son of Éber Scot. Boamain took the kingship until he was killed by Noenius.

Noenius took the sovereignty until he was killed by Ogamain son of Boamain, in vengeance for his father.

Ogamain took the kingship until he died.

Refill son of Noenius took the kingship until he was killed by Tait son of Ogamain.

Thereafter Tait fell by the hand of Reflóir son of Refill. There was strife concerning the sovereignty then, between Reflóir son of Noenius [*sic*] and Agnoman son of Tait, until Refloir was killed by Agnoman.

³⁰ Orosius, *Libri septem* i.2 (Migne 1844-64: xxxi, 685); cf. Scowcroft 1988: 17-18.

³¹ For what is perhaps a too simplistic view, see Carey 1994: 22; cf. Scowcroft 1988: 4-5.

That is why the descendants of Goídel, i.e. Agnoman and his son Lámfhind, were driven into exile upon the sea, so that for seven years they were voyaging around the world to the north. They suffered more hardships than can be counted.

Their wanderings take the Gaels across the Caspian Sea and past the Rhipaeen Mountains to the Maeotic marshes, where they settle; after seven generations there they migrate again, crossing the Mediterranean to Spain.

This account fills in the gap which Mael Muru had left, telling of a feud extending over four or five generations between two rival lineages claiming the rulership of Scythia. The background of these two lineages is spelled out earlier in the text, where we are told of the expedition of Fénius Farsaid to the tower of Babel:

Fénius had two sons. One was Noenual, whom Fénius left behind as lord of Scythia. The other, Nél, was born at the Tower; and he was a master of the many languages. That is why Pharaoh sent for him, so that he might learn the many languages from him. But Fénius returned from Asia to Scythia, from which he had gone for the building of the Tower; and forty years thereafter he died as lord of Scythia, and gave the lordship to his son Noenual.

The two lines are therefore descended from the two sons of Fénius, Nél and Noenual: in their protracted struggle, the kingship of Scythia passes back and forth between them.

3. The Scythian adventures of the Gaels and the scheme of alternating kingship

There is an obvious analogy here to the tradition whereby the kingship of Ireland alternated between two related dynasties. In the pre-Norman period, this pattern was actually put into practice: from the time of Aed Allán in the eighth century to that of Mael Sechnaill II in the eleventh, with only a single disruption in the person of Congalach Cnogba, the high-kingship passed back and forth between two branches of Uí Néill - Cenél nEógain in the north and Clann Cholmáin in the midlands.³² The same pattern was projected back into the legendary history of the centuries before Patrick, with the kingship here alternating for the most part between the northern and southern halves of the island, the ancestors therefore of Uí Néill and Eóganachta respectively. In this artificial antiquity, as in the equally fabulous Scythian

³² The most recent discussion is Warntjes 2003-4.

past, each king is portrayed as killing his predecessor, and being killed by his successor.

More than analogy is at work in this resemblance between the fortunes of the descendants of Fénius and the standard model of the trajectory of Irish kingship: the primeval Gaels and their Scythian cousins appear actually to be derived from the medieval Uí Néill. It was long ago suggested that the name Néil is a form - perhaps in fact the oldest form, perhaps an archaising back-formation - of *Niall*, the name of the king and patriarch looked back upon as the ancestor of all of the Uí Néill dynasties.³³ But what of *Noenual*? I find it tempting to see this name as a version of Niall's epithet *Noígiallach* or *Noí nGiall* 'of the Nine Hostages'. *Noen-* is certainly close to *noí* 'nine', a numeral followed by the nasal mutation; and *-ual* as an archaic or archaising counterpart of the suffix *-al(l)* (*Bresual* for *Bresal*, *Conual* for *Conall*) was well known from early praise poetry.³⁴ It is not at all far from *Niall Noí nGiall* to *Néil* and *Noenual*.

If I am correct in this analysis, then the Scythian adventures of the Gaels were deliberately constructed as a type, to be fulfilled in the antitype of Irish history. The polarisation and rivalry which were intrinsic to the scheme of alternating kingship are here symbolised, with vivid audacity, by splitting the apical ancestor of the Uí Néill into two brothers. There is something of Jacob and Esau about them: the clever one making his fortune by marriage far away, while the other is intended by his father to succeed him. But this last analogy is not one which I would wish to press too far. What we can say is that some historian, writing probably in the tenth or the early eleventh century, came up with the inspired notion of using Scythia not just as a source which the Irish could use to explain their origins, but as an exotic mirror in which they could see themselves foreshadowed.

For the medieval writers whom I have been discussing, Scythia was little more than a blank screen on which to project their own concerns. The name was of course important for the sake of the original etymology, and a few scraps of geography could be used to make the story more vivid and more plausible, but the pseudohistorians preferred to ignore the less complimentary details regarding Scythia and the Scythians which it would have been easy enough for them to find in the pages of Orosius and Isidore.

³³ Van Hamel 1914-15: 143; O'Rahilly 1946: 232-3.

³⁴ Discussion in Lehmann 1920: 152-3.

I know of only one Irish writer who attempted to arouse in his readers a sense of pride in their Scythian heritage as such: again, this was Geoffrey Keating.

...From Scythia too, of the race of Magog by origin, was Zeliordes king of the Huns, who was at war with the emperor Justinian. And from Scythia came the Lombards, the Hungarians and all the Goths... From Scythia, moreover, came the Turks. What shall I say? Buchanan, a pursuer of the antiquity of the diffusion of the races of the world, cites Epiphanius to the effect that the people of Scythia took the supreme rule of the world directly after the Flood, and that their sovereignty lasted until the empire of Babylon. The same authors say that it is from Scythia that the other regions used to obtain laws and duties and ordinances; and also that they were the first race that began to be held in honour after the Flood.

Keating goes on to cite various authors, ancient and modern, as witnesses to the great courage of the Scythians, and to their resistance to foreign domination. Thus he quotes the historian Justin as saying that

They drove Darius king of Persia out of Scythia in disgrace; they killed Cyrus, with all his army; they annihilated Zophyron, leader of the army of Alexander the Great, together with his host; they heard of the power of the Romans, and they never felt it.³⁵

It is not hard to see why Keating was prepared to turn a blind eye to the savagery for which the Scythians were so notorious,³⁶ and to celebrate their ferocious defense of their own independence. Again, the present was shaping the imagined past: if the Scythians were primordial Gaels, then one could hope that the overwhelming might of England might eventually succumb to the same fate which had overwhelmed the forces of Darius and Alexander. But this of course was not to be.

4. Conclusion: seventeenth century Ireland and the Scythian origins of the Gaels

Even so, curiosity concerning the Scythian origins of the Gaels continued to bear various fruits as the seventeenth century advanced. Thus Roderick O'Flaherty, writing in 1685, drew upon his extensive learning to find traces of the Scythian ancestry of the Irish where none had been discerned

³⁵ Comyn & Dinneen 1902-14: i, 226-8.

³⁶ This is not to say that he was indifferent to testimonies to a more civilised side of the Scythians. Thus he approvingly cites the assertion of Polydore Virgil, in the latter's *De inuentoribus rerum* (1499), that the Scythians were a more ancient race than the Egyptians, and had been their teachers (Comyn & Dinneen 1902-14: ii, 12).

before. He was able to point to passages in the *Punica* of Silius Italicus which seemed to assert that the Scythian tribes of the Sarmatians and Massagetae had once lived in Spain, supposedly the home of the Scythian exiles who went on to people Ireland;³⁷ and he found a copy of Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae* which spoke of piratical Scots and Picts attacking Britain not "across the valley of Tethys" (*trans Tithicam uallem*) — the mannered kenning for the sea which Gildas had actually used — but "across the Scythian valley" (*trans Scythicam uallem*) — implying that the Scythian origins of these peoples were reflected in one of the names for the Irish Sea.³⁸

A Scythian parallel more in keeping with the melancholy realities of the Irish situation in the seventeenth century is adumbrated by Keating at the end of the same chapter from which I have just quoted. In a passage whose logic eludes me, but whose personal relevance it is easy enough to recognise, Keating proposes that the Scots were so called precisely because they did *not* have sovereignty in their ancestral homeland.

I take it that that is why the name of Scots is given specifically to the race of Goídel son of Nél son of Fénius Farsaid, to whom the supreme rule of Scythia came, and to his descendants after him. And Nél was the second son of Fénius, and got no share of territory at all, as the kin of Fénius had received territories from which they themselves and their descendants took their names. Therefore Nél ordained that his own race should take their name from Scythia, and call themselves Scots forever, for there was no land at all in their possession; and his father had left him no property save for the privilege of the arts and of the many languages...³⁹

It is not a bad description of the position in which Irish men of learning found themselves, after the flight of their patrons - their return, the pseudohistorians would have said - to Spain. Once again, in the twilight of the old order, the Scythians were a mirror in which the Irish saw themselves reflected.

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³⁷ O'Flaherty 1685: 82; citing *Punica* iii.340, 360-61.

³⁸ O'Flaherty 1685: 251, 354. In Mommsen's edition of Gildas (Mommsen 1894-98: 35), only a single source is given for a reading *sciticam*, rather than *tithicam* or the like: some notes jotted in a copy of the text are kept in the Heidelberg public library.

³⁹ Comyn & Dinneen 1902-14: i, 230.

SUMMARY
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Россия, родина гэлов

Псевдоисторические теории о том, что древние гэлы находились в близких отношениях с израильтянами, о том, что их происхождение связывало их с древним Египтом, и о том, что они прибыли в Ирландию из Испании, на протяжении нескольких столетий разными способами использовались в целях про-ирландской пропаганды. Последняя из этих традиций до сих пор зачастую воспринимается как отражающая реальную миграцию эпохи железного века. Идея о греческом происхождении гэлов привлекает гораздо меньше внимания, однако в связи с последними работами Барта Яски наметились новые перспективы исследования проблемы. Существует другая теория, которая не оказала влияния на формирование современных представлений об ирландской национальной идентичности. Согласно этой теории первый гэльский вождь был правителем Скифии. Под древней Скифией мы понимаем территорию, располагающуюся к северу от Черного моря, включающей часть современной России и Украины. Теория о скифском происхождении гэлов прослеживается по меньшей мере уже в источниках восьмого века. В статье рассматриваются различные гипотезы о происхождении теории и ассоциации, связанные с понятием «скифский» в источниках, на которых скорее всего основывались ирландские *literati*.