

The role of Cú Chulainn in Old and Middle Irish narrative literature with  
particular reference to tales belonging to the Ulster Cycle.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the role and presentation of Cú Chulainn in a broad range of texts belonging to the Ulster Cycle.

Chapter I offers a general introduction to the thesis. Relevant scholarly theories to date are presented along with an outline of the methodological approaches underpinning this study. The scope of the research in the form of a database of tales is detailed in Chapter II. The textual history of this material is also found therein. This is intended as a quick reference chapter. Chapter III considers the key area of Cú Chulainn's heroic biography. This encompasses a study of his depiction in a number of tales including *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

In a bid to provide a well-rounded evaluation of the hero, a number of key thematic elements are addressed in the remaining chapters. Understandably, considerable emphasis is placed upon his function as a warrior. Chapter IV looks at his martial prowess, his *ríastrad*, his weaponry and his special skills or *cleasa*. Warrior codes and honour are discussed in Chapter V. Chapter VI moves away from the domain of warfare to examine his physical presentation and his appeal to the opposite sex. His offspring are also considered therein. Cú Chulainn's parentage and his connection to his homeland, Mag Muirthemne, are appraised in Chapter VII along with an evaluation of his presentation as a saviour-type figure. Finally, Chapter VIII draws together the general research findings with concluding remarks about Cú Chulainn's role within these sagas.

## Chapter I: General Introduction

### I.1. Ulster Cycle material

The Ulster-Cycle material is the platform upon which Cú Chulainn is presented. This body of literature consists of about eighty sagas, poems and shorter texts and its central concern is the warfare-related activities of the pre-historic inhabitants of Ulster (Ó hUiginn, 1992, 29).<sup>1</sup> Most of the tales are set in Ulster and Connacht with Emain Machae being presented as the royal centre of the Ulstermen. It is the most significant literary collection of this period with the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (TBC) being its centrepiece owing to its length and the number of tales, referred to as *remscéla*, that are either dependant on or derivative from it.

Material from the Ulster Cycle, like *Verba Scáthaige* and *Conailla Medb Míchura*, are amongst our earliest surviving written pieces with a tentative date of the seventh century being proposed for both of these texts. Mac Cana's (1975, 103-4) assertion that the following two centuries were particularly productive is largely true. The writing down of many primary texts, including key Ulster-Cycle tales such as *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, *Compert Con Culainn*, *Tochmarc Emire*, *Loinges mac nUislenn*, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is testimony to this. For example, *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, *Compert Con Culainn*, *Tochmarc Emire*, *Loinges mac nUislenn*, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and a number of others, is testimony to this. He claims that this creative phase draws to a close in the ninth century and is followed, until the twelfth century, by a period whereby tales are mostly reworked and embellished with some expansion to the corpus. Certainly, this seems to be the case with respect to tales such as *Tochmarc Emire*, *Mesca*

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<sup>1</sup> See Ó hUiginn (1992) for a comprehensive evaluation of the background and development of TBC.

*Ulad, Serglige Con Culainn* and perhaps *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*. However, beyond this there is further evidence for expansion and the reworking of tales down to the Early Modern Irish period as indicated through the existence of narratives like *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, *Táin Bó Flidais*, *Cath Letreach Ruide* and *Aided Con Culainn*. So, the timeframe for interest in Ulster Cycle material extends beyond the twelfth century.

Some of the key studies on this literature have been provided by Thurneysen (1921), Carney (1955), Jackson (1964), Greene (1968), Aitchison (1987), McCone (1990), Ó hUiginn (1992) and Tristram (1995). For the most part, these approaches tend to focus on determining the origins and possible influential factors in the creation of these works as opposed to subjecting figures associated with the tales to close examination and study. These, therefore, are not central to the current research and will be revisited here only where relevant. In this respect, McCone's (1990, 197-200) re-evaluation of the literary tradition, in which he suggests that there are parallels between the lives of Christ and Cú Chulainn will be considered in detail.

Among the greatest difficulties surrounding this study of Cú Chulainn is the diverse range of sources spread over a wide time span in which he features. While some of the material can be dated to an early period, some of it can be shown to have undergone considerable reworking at a later point. Other material originated at a later stage. The textual history and datings for the relevant sagas are detailed in Chapter II. Tales pertaining to the central events in Cú Chulainn's heroic biography, namely those recounting his conception, *Compert Con Culainn*,

marriage, *Tochmarc Emire*, and death, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, are in existence from an early stage. All of these have been assigned dates in the eighth century. The first two are found in LU, the latter occurs in LL. While this may indicate the events in the hero's life which were of interest in the eighth century, these also seem to reflect the manner in which tales are grouped thus together in the tale lists which are later, for example *comperta*, *tochmarca* etc. Nevertheless, there appears to be no concrete evidence to suggest that there was an integrated attempt to create a unified heroic biography for Cú Chulainn in a way that we have one for Christ in the Bible.

The disparate tales that form Cú Chulainn's biography can be compared with those pertaining to the biography of Cormac mac Airt. Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 24) refers to these as a cycle and notes that the oldest text of them is *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*, which details his conception, birth and ascension to the kingship of Tara. The later account of his birth tale, *Geneamuin Chormaic*, 'extends to his death and burial'. The former account or version I is found in Laud 610, H.3.17 and in a Modern Irish account of *Cath Maige Mucrama*, while the latter, version II, occurs in YBL, BB and the LL text of *Cath Maige Mucrama* (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 111-7). The language of version I is dated to the eighth century and version II is thought to 'represent a source which dates to the tenth century', 'but survives only in full form in two fourteenth-century MSS' (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 112-3). Interestingly, he asserts that '[w]hat is striking about these two tales is that they each comprise of a sequence of episodes which are found also in the biographical pattern outlined by

de Vries' (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 24).<sup>2</sup> According to Ó Cathasaigh, the correspondence between Cormac's life and the international heroic biographical pattern is indicated by the presence of seven of the episodes from de Vries' schema in these two tales thus allowing him to be treated as a hero. Other items from de Vries' model are found in *Esnada Tige Buchet*, which tells of Cormac's winning of a maiden and *Echtrae Cormaic* relating his expedition to the Otherworld. Some attempt seems to be made towards writing Cormac's biography in *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* and *Geneamuin Chormaic* with *Esnada Tige Buchet* and *Echtrae Cormaic* appearing to be quite independent of these leading Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 72-3) to assert that 'there is no reason to suppose that their authors were thinking of the remainder of Cormac's biography when they put them together'.<sup>3</sup> Although acknowledging that by grouping all these tales together 'we are thus departing from the practice of the native literati', nonetheless, his justification for doing so rests in the 'existence of the international biographical pattern' and his structuralist approach to the heroic biography which views it as a sequence of slots:

...in Cormac's case the versions of his Birth-tale fill seven slots, while ETB [*Esnada Tige Buchet*] and EC [*Echtrae Cormaic*] fill another two. In short, ETB can be seen as a wooing-episode forming an integral part of the heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt, the same being true, *mutatis mutandis*, of EC. At this level of analysis the author's conscious attitude to his material is irrelevant (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 73).

Obviously, even more difficulties arise with the Cú Chulainn texts, given that there is not a concentration of such 'slots' in any one tale, unlike the biography of

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<sup>2</sup> International heroic biographical patterning and de Vries' (1963) model are discussed in detail in I.4.

<sup>3</sup> Like *Geneamuin Chormaic*, it is noteworthy that *Echtrae Cormaic* and *Esnada Tige Buchet* also occur in YBL (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 80n).

Cormac. At this point, it is best to leave the quandary about whether there was a deliberate attempt to fashion a heroic biography for Cú Chulainn in the Old Irish period or not. Instead, the present study will appraise key events in his life in the relevant tales in light of the international biographical pattern as Ó Cathasaigh has done with Cormac mac Airt.

Though the earliest account of Cú Chulainn's *macgnímrada* found in Recension I of TBC are generally dated to the ninth century, they may extend back to the previous century. These seem to be central to his heroic persona and may more tentatively also be considered among the texts relating to the key milestones in his life. Evidence for his most significant adult martial conquests in TBC is found in the possibly seventh-century prophetic piece, *Verba Scáthaige*. This also suggests that his training with Scáthach is part of a very early tradition. TBC poses a number of difficulties, given that there seems to have been additions and changes to it as time evolved. For example, if we look at his *macgnímrada*, these are scaled back considerably in Recension II. Perhaps those pertaining to his youthful deeds and TBC might also be added to the list of central biographical texts.

If we bear in mind modern scholarship on international heroic biographical models, a trip to a distant or otherworldly realm is also of importance. His journey to the lands of Scáthach, as first detailed in *Tochmarc Emire* is one text that seems to cover this aspect of the hero's career, but others might also be considered, including the eighth-century tale, *Forfess Fer Fálgae*. However, we must be mindful of the presence of a tale entitled *Echtrae Con Culainn*, for which no saga bearing this name has been transmitted to us. It is, nevertheless, important not to

rigidly impose modern views on what a heroic biography entails when the perception, if indeed one existed, may have differed considerably in the Old and Middle Irish period. For example, de Vries' (1963) schema does not cater for Cú Chulainn's martial endeavours in TBC but yet these seem to be central to his presentation in the pre-Norman period.

It is noteworthy that some of his central biographical texts remain popular as time passes, for instance *Tochmarc Emire* undergoes considerable expansion in the Middle Irish period. Presumably, popular views and concerns at the time of writing influence the later text, yet the core narrative plot remains much the same as the earlier account. Indeed we must rely on this later tale for the courtship scene which is lost from the earlier version. A modernised account of *Tochmarc Emire* without the courtship appears in the later period, namely, *Foghlaim Con Culainn*. The production of *Aided Con Culainn* in the Early Modern Irish era indicates that his death continues to be of interest. As noted above, TBC and his *macgnímrada* are also subject to emendations as time evolves.

Tales outside of these are quite varied in their content and date. While *Aided Óenfir Aífe* dates to the ninth or tenth century, the tradition of Cú Chulainn slaying his son may extend back to the eighth century. Surviving only in YBL, this tale is somewhat at odds with the chronology of the Ulster-Cycle material. Cú Chulainn is seven when he completes his *macgnímrada* and seventeen in TBC, while Connlae is seven when he comes to Ireland (TBC I, ll.379-80; Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §2). Cú Chulainn mourns the death of Aífe's son in TBC II, placing *Aided Óenfir Aífe* before this epic (l.3457). This would suggest that he was perhaps ten or

younger when he courted Emer and went to the lands of Scáthach.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to consider possible influences for the central motif of this tale.

Alternative depictions of the hero are found as early as the eighth century in the oldest account of *Aided Con Roí* in Eg. 88. While Cú Roí, the Munster hero, is killed therein, it is noteworthy that he bests Cú Chulainn earlier on in the text. As well as eventually prevailing over this southern hero, Cú Chulainn likewise defeats and kills the Connacht heroes, Fróech and Fer Diad in TBC. *Serglige Con Culainn* is particularly pronounced in its negative portrayal of Cú Chulainn. This text was worked on in the ninth and eleventh centuries by different redactors, yet it is largely consistent in its depiction of the hero. For *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, which McCone (1990, 200) dates to the ninth century and also accepts (2000, 8) that it may have been contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, the hero's esteemed status is deemed to belong to the distant pagan past. The broader agenda of the tale determines Cú Chulainn's representation therein. *Mesca Ulad*, the earliest section of which is found in LU and dates to the Old Irish period with the newer part from LL being assigned a date to the first part of the twelfth century, is a little less favourable in its *exposé* of him and the Ulstermen in general. Conversely, *Fled Bricrenn* also found in LU, and usually placed in the ninth century, presents him positively and relates a key event in his martial career, namely his acquisition of the hero's portion, according him a status superior to two other prominent Ulster warriors, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach. A tale with a similar title, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, is dated to the ninth century by its recent editor, Hollo (2005, 8). This is essentially a wooing tale involving an

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<sup>4</sup> The text of TBC I, which gives a chronology of Cú Chulainn's career, states that he is six or seven when he goes to Scáthach's home (see III.3.4).

overseas adventure, but significantly this offers an alternative tradition to that found in *Tochmarc Emire*. His wife is Findchóem in this account and she notably does not appear elsewhere in the tales of the Ulster Cycle.

Cú Chulainn's meeting with the Morrígan is found in the tale, *Tain Bó Regamna*, a text which is assigned a date in the tenth century and which bears a number of similarities with his encounter with her in TBC. Conceivably, a skeletal version of this tale is also found in *Echtrae Nerai*, a tale in which Cú Chulainn makes a very brief appearance but which nonetheless, contains a valuable inventory of some of his *geisi*. Initially dating this text to the tenth century, Thurneysen later reviews this by not ruling out an eighth-century origin (Ó Duilearga, 1940, 522). Significantly, the section containing the majority of Cú Chulainn's *geisi* seems to be a later addition. Indeed the other significant collection of these is found in the Middle Irish text, *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* which is found in LL. In general, this tale is thought to have borrowed significantly from earlier sources and largely presents the hero in a positive light. He also makes an appearance in *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*, a tale dating to the late twelfth century, occurring also in LL. This manuscript also contains the tale, *Aided Derbforgaill*, dating to the tenth century, which features Cú Chulainn's slaying of a number of women in retaliation for their killing of Derbforgaill. Some lesser known tales, namely, *Ces Ulad* and *Comracc Con Chulainn re Senbecc* feature the hero's unusual adventures to the Boyne. While a much later tale, *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann* is found only in D.4.2 and details Emer's elopement with another man and Cú Chulainn's subsequent retrieval of her (Thurneysen, 1921, 428-9).

A substantial cluster of ‘Cú Chulainn’ tales appear in LU, namely, *Compert Con Culainn*, *Mesca Ulad*, *Serglige Con Culainn*, TBC, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and *Tochmarc Emire*. LL contains a smaller number but from a wider timeframe, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* from an earlier stage, *Aided Derbforgaill* and *Talland Étair* from the tenth century, a number of later tales including TBC II, *Mesca Ulad*, *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*, *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* and *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*. A significant collection is also found in Eg. 1782, namely *Compert Con Culainn*, *Feis Tighe Becfoltaig*, *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, TBC, *Táin Bó Regamna*, *Verba Scáthaige* and *Echtrae Nerai* among others. Eg. 88 and YBL each hold a significant number of these. It is also important to be aware of tales such as *Scéla Muicce Maic Da Thó* and *Loinges mac nUislenn* in which he does not feature, and to consider the possible reasons for this.

Tales concerning Cú Chulainn remain unusual in that they span a six-hundred-year period. During this time, attitudes clearly change and are presumably reflected in the literature. The Christian milieu in which this material is created is also of significance and naturally evolved as time progressed. The political alliances of these monastic houses also left its mark on these sagas. It is imperative that these difficulties along with those concerning the diverseness of the sources are borne in mind in any study of Cú Chulainn. Though a significant amount of Ulster-Cycle tales survive, it is generally accepted that there is a considerable body that has not. This again presents problems in terms of whether we have a sufficient selection of material to allow us to draw accurate conclusions about Cú Chulainn’s role in this

literature. We can deal only with what we have and therefore our conclusions about his role will be based on this. In addition, it is important not to take a deductive approach whereby evidence is sought to support particular theories. An accurate reflection of Cú Chulainn's presentation in the Ulster-Cycle material can only be achieved through a close analysis of the relevant sources.

## **I.2. Modern scholarship**

Consideration of Cú Chulainn to date has been of a piecemeal nature. In his study of the pre-Patrician annals, Kelleher (1971) asserts that there is a deliberate attempt to associate Cú Chulainn's life with that of Christ. He outlines common elements in their heroic biographies, including the fact that each have a divine father but were known as the son of a mortal father, that each dies for his people, and expires while in an erect position having been pierced by a spear (Kelleher, 1971, 121-2). Concurring with these theories, McCone (1990, 197-200) additionally sees Cú Chulainn's triple conception as an 'orthodox native allegory and native "typology" of Christ's incarnation as set forth in the New Testament'. He views the hero's taking of a drink prior to his death and his address at Emain Machae thereafter to be in imitation of similar scenes in the Bible. More recently, Kimpton (2009, 1-5) has alluded to Cú Chulainn's Christian associations in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*.

With regard to Cú Chulainn's unusual begetting, Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 127) rejects McCone's view, suggesting that it is wiser to appraise this in light of the prevalence of triplicity in early Irish literature. For him, this sequence reflects the way in which the Irish believed that they descended from the gods. Evidence from

*Compert Con Chulainn* and TBC leads Ó Cathasaigh elsewhere (1985, 81; 1993, 126) to conclude that Cú Chulainn is a fecundating hero, a rejuvenating force. He considers him as a saviour-type figure but not in the same way that Christ is (Ó Cathasaigh, 1993, 127). Aside from the suggestion that Cú Chulainn can be viewed as such a figure in TBC, there has been little elaboration on this with surprisingly little analysis of his presentation in this epic tale. However, with respect to specific criteria set forth for what constitutes an epic by Abrams (1971, 49), Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 116) acknowledges that it fits a number of these in particular the fact that it is centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure, namely Cú Chulainn, on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race.

Cú Chulainn's youthful deeds have been the subject of an insightful evaluation by Nagy (1984). These are comparatively analysed alongside those of Finn mac Cumail in light of Sjoestedt's (1949, 73-110) theory that the former is essentially the 'hero of the tribe' with the latter being the 'hero outside the tribe'. Whereas Finn's deeds confirm his status as an outsider, Cú Chulainn's essentially secure his incorporation into society. According to McCone (1984, 9-11), the hero's martial prowess is boosted significantly upon his slaying of the hound in his penultimate boyhood deed when he assumes the canine martial attributes of the latter thus marking a watershed in his career. The telescoping of Cú Chulainn's taking up of arms and entering into a chariot is attributed to clerical reluctance to explicitly present a *fian* stage in the young hero's life by McCone (1986, 17). He interprets his immersion in three vats of water subsequent to his first expedition as an erstwhile baptism marking his transition to full membership of propertied society

(McCone, 1990, 172). Ultimately, the hero's remarkable abilities are showcased therein.

The adult Cú Chulainn's depiction has also suffered from lack of any extensive study. His winning of Emer has received some attention in light of its relevance to his heroic biography. His presentation therein, particularly with regard to the features of wooing tales has been considered by Sjoestedt (1949, 91-4), Rees & Rees (1961, 259-78), Cormier (1975), Sayers (1991-92) and Findon (1997, 23-56). For the most part, this is represented as being ideal in that the hero must fulfill a number of danger tasks before winning his maiden. While a number of general assertions have been made about Cú Chulainn's possible overseas voyages, these again have not been evaluated in any meaningful manner (Dillon, 1948, 101-23; Rees & Rees, 1961, 305-6; Dumville, 1976, 92; Löffler, 1983, 118-279; Ó Beárna, 2009, 190). Findon (1997, 107) notes that Cú Chulainn undergoes a reassignment of his normal role from an active to a largely passive one in *Serglige Con Culainn*. A similar view is taken by Lowe (2000, 125). Alternatively, Ní Bhrolcháin (2009, 345) sees this tale as a sexual analogy with the basic message being that Cú Chulainn has temporarily lost his virility.

Of the more well known tales of this cycle, surprisingly, Cú Chulainn's presence in *Mesca Ulad* and *Fled Bricrenn* has largely escaped scholarly attention. His function in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* is assessed alongside that of Patrick and Lóegaire in the general context of the tale by Johnston (2001). His overseas voyages therein are considered by Ní Mhaonaigh (2006, 26-7).

Key or defining aspects of his character, like honour, *ríastrad* and *geisi* have been addressed as part of general studies of such motifs or related ones. Elements of his distortion are briefly surveyed by McCone (1984, 20-21; 1996, 99-108; 2006, 99-108) and Borsje (Borsje & Kelly, 2003, 1-33). Research on *geisi* by Greene (1979), Charles-Edwards (1999) and more importantly by O'Leary (1988) shed some light on the nature of those assigned to Cú Chulainn. The importance of honour to the warrior also features in O'Leary's article, while his consideration of the important martial code of *fír fer* is of relevance to the present work (O'Leary, 1987). Sayers' (1983) attempt to decipher a number of the hero's *cleasa* is also particularly helpful. The physical appearance and appeal of the hero in Early Irish saga and Early Modern Irish classical verse is considered by McManus (2009). Particular emphasis is placed upon the dependence of the latter material on Cú Chulainn's heroic biography.

### **I.3. Methodologies**

The aim of this project is to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the figure of Cú Chulainn within a select but wide range of material. There are three interrelated strands which underpin this research project. The first of which involves the assembly and examination of a diverse a range as possible of modern research pertaining to Cú Chulainn. The gathering and analysis of relevant data from all relevant Old and Middle Irish sources constitutes the second element. Finally, the third part consists of an evaluation of the first strand in light of the second along with the presentation of new findings. This will also involve a consideration of the context in which relevant tales are written down in so far as this can be established. The Christian setting in which these are composed is important in this regard; so

too is the social and political context for these but this cannot always be deciphered. For example, influence from external sources, such as the Bible, in the creation of this figure will be assessed. Similarly, specific patterns in the development of his persona in light of changing trends around particular motifs are also pertinent. The completion of these stages leads to an overall appreciation of the figure of Cú Chulainn as presented in the literature which is the foremost concern of this thesis.

In order to clearly define the parameters of this research, a database of tales was compiled. A number of subcategories were identified in order to classify the tales in the context of their importance. These data, along with the manuscript details and textual traditions of these texts, are outlined in a specifically dedicated chapter, Chapter II.

During this process, it became evident that key events in the hero's life were central to his presentation in this collection of tales. It was deemed necessary to devote the core portion of the thesis to evaluating this aspect of his character. This is dealt with in a lengthy section, namely, Chapter III. In this respect, the international heroic biographical framework presented by de Vries (1963) is used to examine this aspect of Cú Chulainn's presentation (see I.4). As part of this process, its efficacy will be tested to determine its suitability bearing in mind its strengths and shortcomings with this issue being revisited in the concluding chapter.

Thereafter, a number of key thematic elements were identified in order to present a rounded study of this Ulster hero. Chapter IV specifically concerns itself with his prowess and its manifestations in number of sagas, with particular emphasis on the contest for the hero's portion in *Fled Bricrenn*. His remarkable *ríastrad*, which further boosts his power, is also assessed here before we move on to a catalogue of his weapons. Finally, a consideration of his *cleasa* and other unusual skills complete this study.

Chapter V is similarly martially orientated. It looks at possible warrior codes which influence or govern Cú Chulainn's behaviour. The level of consistency over the full range of sources in terms of such practices is assessed and the groups of people who usually escape his ire are identified. Honour as a catalyst to his heroic endeavours is also pivotal to this discussion. The insulting of the hero as a means of inciting him into action further complements this study. Finally, we examine the role and influence of his *geisi* on his actions.

Cú Chulainn's physical appearance, and in particular his appeal to the opposite sex, represents another important facet of his persona. Descriptions of him are drawn together in an attempt to visualise the young hero and in a bid to ascertain the features which are appealing to a female audience. His sexual magnetism is established along with a catalogue of his sexual exploits and the possible offspring borne from these liaisons. Finally, his most lasting female relationship that with his wife, Emer, is appraised.

The last thematic study focuses on a consideration of his origins. Evidence associating him with Mag Muirthemne is gathered and assessed while his lineage is also looked at. Finally, a discussion of Cú Chulainn's possible depiction as a saviour type figure draws this subject to a close.

Chapter VIII concludes this thesis with a critique of the research findings.

#### **I.4. International heroic biography**

The international biographical pattern has inevitably affected analytical research of heroic figures of Irish and indeed many other traditions. This model proposes that common features exist in the biographies of the lives of heroes within different literary traditions. Von Hahn in the 1870s was the first to insist that such a pattern existed (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 2). Through his work on the biographies of fourteen heroes, he established his *Arische Aussetzungs-und Ruckkehr-Formel*, which became known in English as the 'Aryan-Expulsion-and-Return-Formula'.<sup>5</sup> The lives of heroes such as Perseus, Heracles and Oedipus from ancient Greece, Romulus and Remus of Roman tradition, the German Siegfried and Woldietrich, Cyrus of Persia and Karna and Krishna of India were included in this study (Taylor, 1964, 115). Alfred Nutt then developed this further and applied this scheme to Celtic tradition adding two motifs and a number of variants to von Hahn's formula, making it a more flexible tool (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 2-3). Nutt considered Irish characters such as Finn and Cú Chulainn (McCone, 1990, 181-2). In 1914 Otto Rank again considered this concept, looking beyond Indo-European

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<sup>5</sup> Aryan refers to any member of the peoples who spoke an Indo-European language or one of its descendants. The idea of an 'Aryan race' relating to people who spoke such a language was taken up in the nineteenth century; some scholars linked this with theories of racial superiority. The idea was subsequently revived by Hitler for political reasons and was central to the anti-Semitic doctrine adopted by the Nazis.

tradition to include the biographies of Moses and Jesus Christ (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 4). Crucially, Otto Rank's work concluded that von Hahn's proposal that this pattern was essentially 'Aryan' was no longer sustainable.

In 1936, Lord Raglan put forth a twenty-two-item schema based on much the same biographies that had been previously studied (Taylor, 1964, 118). Despite differing to some degree with von Hahn and Rank, a general sense of agreement is evident. Campbell (1949) considers the notion of a 'monomyth' which identifies patterns in the hero's journey. The work of some of these scholars is aptly summed up by Taylor (1964, 119-20) as follows:

In the pattern Hahn sees the unity of a biography altered and adapted by a traditional narrative formula; Rank, the unity of human psychology; Lord Raglan, the unity of pseudo-history and ritual; and Campbell, the unity of a formula (mythological or psychological in origin) that develops as culture develops and changes.

Somewhat later, a multi-tradition approach, including Celtic, was taken by de Vries (1963) in his proposal of a ten-item biographical profile with a number of variant motifs. Its flexibility appealed to Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 6) who proposed it as the soundest framework to date and uses it his appraisal of Cormac mac Airt's heroic biography. The following is de Vries' (1963, 211-6) ten-item model:

- I The begetting of the hero.
- II The birth of the hero.
- III The youth of the hero is threatened.
- IV The way in which the hero is brought up.
- V The hero often acquires invulnerability.

- VI The fight with a dragon<sup>6</sup> or other monster.
- VII The hero wins a maiden, unusually after overcoming great dangers.
- VIII The hero makes an expedition to the underworld.
- IX When the hero is banished in his youth he returns later and is victorious over his enemies. In some cases he has to leave the realm again which he has won with such difficulty.
- X The death of the hero.

Relevant variants outlined in this model are detailed in the appropriate sections of Chapter III. Though not all these points are relevant to Cú Chulainn's heroic biography and it fails to cater for the most important tale in terms of his adult martial exploits, namely, TBC, it was deemed to be the most insightful in terms of approaching his heroic life. Its main advantages are its concise and clear structure with its degree of flexibility. In addition, the fact that it has been used by Ó Cathasaigh (1977) in his similar study of Cormac mac Airt further supports the argument for using it. More recently, this model forms the framework for Ní Bhrolcháin's (2009, 112-36) general appraisal of heroic presentations in early Irish literature. This work identifies the heroic features in the lives of many figures as presented predominantly in literary sources with due mention to different aspects of Cú Chulainn's biography. In the present work, each item will be discussed in light of the evaluation of Cú Chulainn's heroic biography in Chapter III.

Further theoretical approaches to the study of heroic figures have been offered by Sjoestedt (1949). The concept that binary oppositions are intrinsic to the human thought-process is central to her work. A structuralist approach has been applied to the study of mythology by scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund

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<sup>6</sup> De Vries (1963, 215) words this item as follows: '[o]ne of the most common heroic deeds is the fight with a dragon or another monster'.

Leach (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 11). Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 11) notes that the procedure used by these scholars differs from that of Sjoestedt:

..the former use the close analysis of a single myth as a point of departure, whereas Sjoestedt's method is deductive, so that she tends to use her material in illustration of her theory, rather than embark upon close analysis of the texts.

While her examination of Cú Chulainn and Finn mac Cumáill is extremely valuable, her twofold typology is limited to these heroes (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 12). In addition, Ó Cathasaigh notes that her work lays 'undue emphasis on martial heroes'.

Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 10) also offers this criticism about the Chadwicks' (1932-40) work on the hero. By concentrating their attention on warrior heroes, they neglect other 'realizations of the heroic type', a case in point being Cormac mac Airt. For them, he stands for intellectual as opposed to heroic activities (Chadwick & Chadwick, 1932, vol. I, 100). Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 10-1) concludes that:

..Cormac is a wise hero, whereas Cú Chulainn is pre-eminently a martial hero. In Dumézilian terms, Cormac is a hero of the first function, Cú Chulainn a hero of the second. The more general point to be emphasized here, however, is that in Irish tradition, as elsewhere, the heroic biography is not limited to martial figures, and that it does not always relate to a setting dominated by a military aristocracy and celebrating martial virtues.

The question of which world the hero belongs to, namely, a mortal or a sacred one has evoked some discussion. Sjoestedt (1949, 73-4) posits that:

The hero is in the camp of men. Gods, spirits, elves, fairies, however one imagines them, whatever name one gives them, are in the other camp. The hero is of our race, the race of the Sons of Míl. He is one of us.

For de Vries (1963, 209), ‘the heroic life is a life *sui generis*, which does not belong to history and which cannot be lived by ordinary mortals’. He adds that heroic legend is not a myth of a god but of a man ‘who raised himself to the level of the gods’ (de Vries, 1963, 241). In response to this assertion, Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 5) states that:

It seems unnecessary to speak of the hero’s “raising himself to the level of gods”. What is important is that by means of the heroic biography the human person (real or imaginary) is transmuted into something *quite other*, that is, into a sacred personage.... The hero is a mortal personage whose life is characterized by certain definable features which mark him off as sacred.

In terms of the historicity of such heroes, Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 5-6) observes that the ‘treatment of a personage in this fashion does not prove that his name and acts bear no relation to the facts of history’. This can only be assessed through the availability of reliable contemporary records.

Hillers (1994, 99-106) provides an important account of the *dramatis personae* of the Ulster Cycle. She notes that ‘purely as literary creations’ these heroes seem to have ‘very much a life of their own; they are not mere names, but they have families, heroic biographies, and often individual stories attached to them’ (Hillers, 1994, 101). While these are not complete in many cases, the biographies for the

most famous heroes, including Cú Chulainn, Conchobar and Fergus, can be reconstructed owing to the presence of tales pertaining to their births, childhood deeds, wooings, heroic exploits, and deaths. Additionally, Hillers (1994, 106) asserts that the ‘texts seem to be aware of their biographies and accommodate them’ accordingly. She tabulates the ‘top twenty’ Ulster heroes in terms of their presence in a given number of tales, the most popular figure being, Conall Cernach, with Cú Chulainn appearing in one less tale. Ultimately, her work alludes to the presence of a circle of Ulster heroes gathered around their king; a concept which is not confined to Ireland (Hillers, 1994, 99).

Surprisingly, biographical studies of Ulster Cycle figures are rather limited with the most comprehensive of these being Ó hUiginn’s (1993) appraisal of Fergus mac Róich. He does not employ any of the international heroic biographical models outlined above, formulating his discussion instead around Fergus’ career, loss of kingship, exile, the name Fergus and the possibility of there being two Ferguses. Similarly, no such theoretical approach is used by Chekhonadskaya (2009, 252-61) in her examination of the biography of Bricriu mac Carbada. She notes that the events of his early life are not recounted and she labels his biography as

‘unheroic’.

## **Chapter II: Sources**

This chapter outlines the pre-Norman narrative Ulster-Cycle tales to be considered in this thesis. The relevant manuscript background along with the extant versions and the date of the text will be supplied. In the case of texts with more than one version, the oldest one and the most recent edition will be used unless otherwise stated. The key relevant secondary literature pertaining to Cú Chulainn's presentation within the given texts will be briefly identified. Greater detail will be provided later in the relevant sections as deemed appropriate.

These texts will be divided into four categories, the first of which will specify the tales in which Cú Chulainn plays an appreciable role and, for obvious reasons, these will be accorded most attention. The second category will consider sagas where he has a more limited role or tales which are not deemed to be central to his overall presentation in the Ulster Cycle. Secondary commentary pertaining to these texts will be included at the appropriate points in the thesis. Cú Chulainn either makes a minor appearance or is only referred to in the third category of texts. Finally, it was considered useful to include a fourth grouping listing the tales where he does not feature. Though the majority of these arguably shed little light on his characterisation in the Ulster Cycle, his absence in for example, *Scéla Muicce meic Da Thó* is noteworthy. The tales will be addressed in alphabetical order under the relevant categorical heading.

### **II.1. Category A: Texts in which Cú Chulainn plays a significant role**

*Aided Óenfir Aífe*

Cú Chulainn's slaying of his only son, Connlae, is the concern of this tale. Dating to the later Old Irish period, probably to the later ninth or tenth century, the earliest version of *Aided Óenfir Aífe* survives only in YBL (van Hamel, 1933, 9). Albeit not named as Connlae, the tradition of Aífe's son coming to Ireland at the age of seven is found in the earliest account of *Tochmarc Emire* which dates to possibly as early as the eighth century (Toner, 1998, 71; see below). The YBL edition is edited and translated by Meyer (1904) and van Hamel (1933, 9) states that he has based his subsequent edition on it. An account of Cú Chulainn's slaying of his son also features in the TCD manuscript, H.3.17. Given that it is surrounded by other legal material, O'Keefe (1904, 123) whose edition of the tale will be used here, observes that this more skeletal account of Cú Chulainn's slaying of Connlae is 'designed to serve as a peg on which to hang the characteristic legal discussion with which the text concludes' namely the fines incurred by Cú Chulainn for committing this crime.<sup>7</sup> Ó hUiginn (1996, 228) considers its language as Early Modern Irish.

Chiefly concerned with Emer, Findon (1994, 139-48) also comments on Cú Chulainn's decision to kill his son in a bid to preserve the honour of the Ulstermen in this tale.

***Aided Guill Meic Carbada agus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige.***

LL contains the oldest copy of this tale, the only other vellum one surviving in pp. 29-37 in the Kilbride manuscript XL, a codex in Advocates' Library, Edinburgh (Stokes, 1893, 396). Stokes' (1893) edition, which relies on the earlier account,

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<sup>7</sup> An anecdote which observes that the Ulstermen, including Cú Chulainn, were expected by law to have silver shields is also found in this manuscript (see IV.4).

with some consideration of the latter text, will be used herein. The text is generally dated to the Middle Irish period and it contains a significant number of themes and motifs which seem to be borrowings from earlier tales (Mac Cana, 1975, 82). It has received very little scholarly attention. One of the most significant features of the tale in light of the current study is its list of Cú Chulainn's *geisi*.

### ***Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne***

The tale of Cú Chulainn's death has been transmitted to us in two recensions, one of which dates to the pre-Norman period. An acephalous account of *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* is found in LL with a number of glossed excerpts occurring in H.3.18 (Kimpton, 2009, 1).<sup>8</sup> Van Hamel (1933, 69) observes that the sections found in H.3.18 'only to a very limited extent cover the part lost in LL'. Some additional details can be taken, with caution, from the Early Modern Irish version which van Hamel (1933, 69) dates to about the fifteenth century. A complete edition of the earlier text, including the H.3.18 extracts is provided by Kimpton (2009) and she concludes that the 'LL text presents a late ninth- or early tenth-century reworking of an early eighth century composition, with later scribal modernizations' (Kimpton, 2009, 9).<sup>9</sup> This edition will be used in the present discussion. Reference will also be made to van Hamel's (1933, 72-133) and Ní Mhaoláin's (2008) editions of the Early Modern Irish account of his death.

Rees & Rees (1961, 326-41) provide a very useful evaluation of some of the most significant aspects of Cú Chulainn's death. They note that the hero's demise is largely brought about by supernatural elements and that he is trapped by *geisi* and

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<sup>8</sup> The latter manuscript dates to c.1500.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kimpton (2009, 1) for a discussion of the editions and translations carried out thus far.

impossible situations that are beyond his control. Tymoczko (1981, 11-9) largely agrees with this but further identifies this event as the ‘climax of his career’. Revenge is also been identified as a key factor in this tale by Melia (1977-78) and Kimpton (2009, 1-2). Strong parallels are drawn between aspects of Cú Chulainn’s portrayal in this tale and that of Christ’s in the New Testament by Kelleher (1971, 121-2), McCone (1990, 197) and Kimpton (2009, 1-5).

### ***Compert Con Culainn***

There are two main surviving versions of the tale concerning Cú Chulainn’s conception and birth. Version I or *Compert Con Chulainn* is found in a number of manuscripts including LU, H.4.22, the RIA manuscripts 23 N 10 and D.4.2 and the British Library manuscripts Eg. 88 and Eg. 1782 (Van Hamel, 1933, 1). The LU text is truncated, the earlier part of the tale down to the point where Deichtine gives birth to the boy, concluding with *birt mac* is in the hand of M(áel Muire) who worked on it around 1100 AD, and the concluding portion in the hand of the interpolator H (McCone, 2005, 8; van Hamel, 1933, 1-6). McCone notes that the ending added is ‘considerably more elaborate than the one found in several other manuscripts’ namely, H.4.22, 23 N 10 and Eg. 88. A note is also added to the title of M’s piece indicating that it came *a Libur Dromma Snechta* ‘from the Book of Druimm Snechtai’.<sup>10</sup> McCone (2005, 8-9) observes that the version of this text found in H.4.22, 23 N 10 and Eg. 88 and M’s hand in LU ‘obviously derives from an Old Irish original and is one of the earliest Irish sagas to have survived’.

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<sup>10</sup> Thurneysen dates this lost manuscript to the first half of the eighth-century while also acknowledging that it may have been written as late as the tenth century (McCone, 2005, 8).

Windisch (1880) has provided separate editions of the text from LU and Eg. 1782. Drawing on LU and a number of other manuscripts, Thurneysen (1912a) attempts a reconstruction of the text from *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (Van Hamel, 1933, 1) and follows this with the text from D.4.2. Van Hamel's (1933) edition based on the LU text will be used for the purpose of the present research.

The second version of Cú Chulainn's birth, which also bears the title *Feis Tighe Becfoltaig*, 'The Overnight Stay in the House of Becfoltach', is found in D.4.2 and in Eg. 1782, immediately after version I in each manuscript (Ó Concheanainn, 1990, 442). An edition of the former has been provided by Meyer (1905) and the latter by Windisch (1880, 142-5). Thurneysen (1912, 41) largely considers the D.4.2 copy as a reworking of the Eg. 1782 one. Van Hamel (1933, 1) asserts that Version II is an expanded and later form of Version I, suggesting a later eighth or ninth century date for it. Meyer's edition will be used herein.

Rees & Rees (1961, 213-43) provide a comprehensive account of unusual heroic conceptions and births in early Irish tradition in which they refer to both accounts of the birth of Cú Chulainn. Ó Cathasaigh's (1985) analysis of the tale concludes that Cú Chulainn is presented as a fecundating hero therein. McCone (1990, 198-9) and Kelleher (1971) emphasise the biblical influences on Cú Chulainn's triple conception with the former insisting that it is essentially a native typology of Christ's incarnation in the New Testament. Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 127-8) argues against this and notes that there is no need to look beyond Irish tradition to account for this motif of triplicity.

### *Fled Bricrenn*

This tale centres around a feast and in particular a contest between Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach and Cú Chulainn for the champion's portion therein. There are five manuscript copies of this text and a sixth in H.3.18 containing glossed extracts.<sup>11</sup> The earliest account is found in LU and is not without its problems, given that it lacks the ending and it contains interpolations by H. It is also contained in a number of manuscripts dateable to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, namely Eg. 93, H.3.17, Leiden Codex Vossianus and the Edinburgh, NLS, Advocates 72.1.40 olim Gaelic XL which is edited by Meyer (1893) and is the only one to contain a complete account of the ending *Cennach ind Rúanado*.<sup>12</sup> Windisch's (1880a) early edition is based upon the LU version with readings from Eg. 93, and H.3.17, while Henderson's (1899) later work, includes readings from the remaining manuscripts with the exception of H.3.18. However, neither take into account the considerable inroads made by H upon M's text in the LU version (Slotkin, 1978, 64). Slotkin (1978, 64) observes that the narrative of the LU text is a 'very queer one indeed, redundant and illogical' in comparison to the more logical and natural structure of those in Eg. 93, H.3.17 and the Leiden MS Codex Vossianus.

According to Oskamp (1966-67, 126), the LU text contains 'two leaves intercalated by H; pp. 103-4 and 109-110' while '105-108 show an erased surface' and he concludes that 'H added more than three columns which were not in the original MS'. In his analysis of the text of LU, Slotkin (1978, 70) deduces that:

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<sup>11</sup> See Slotkin's (1978) invaluable study of the manuscript tradition of this tale.

<sup>12</sup> 'The lack of the last five paragraphs in all four manuscripts is the more surprising as the titles of the texts which preserve the opening unanimously mention the Champion's Bargain' (Slotkin, 1978, 66).

M's text of *Fled Bricrenn* included at least the following episodes: the dissensions and contests in Bricriu's hall; the procession to Crúachan and arrival there; the attack of the Crúachan cats; the awarding of the cups to heroes; the return to Emain Macha and display of the cups; the adventures in Cú Roí's house and the return to Emain; the Champion's Bargain, whether or not complete. This *Fled Bricrenn* is a tidy narrative with no awkward or inconsistent passages. It is also the core of every other text of the tale, excluding the Crúachan cats episode. Excepting this passage, there is every reason to believe that the common text underlying all manuscripts looked like M's text.

Slotkin (1978, 72) further observes that H simply added the following sections to M's text:<sup>13</sup>

the catalogue of women of paragraph 28, not found elsewhere; Emer's *rosc* and the story of Cú Chulainn's horses of paragraphs 29 through 32, found in other manuscripts; the encounter with the giant of paragraphs 33 through 41, found in other manuscripts but in a different position in the tale; the further tests at Crúachan of paragraphs 63 through 65, in Egerton and Leiden but in a different position; the Ercol-Samera passage of paragraphs 66 through 71, found in Egerton and presumably at one time in Leiden; and the story of Budi and Úath of paragraphs 75 through 78.....

Slotkin (1978, 77) offers the following reconstructed order for the tale;

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| 1-28  | Dissensions and contest in Bricriu's Hall.                  |
| 28    | The catalogue of women (LU only).                           |
| 29-32 | A <i>rosc</i> by Emer; how Cú Chulainn obtained his horses. |

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<sup>13</sup> Slotkin (1978) uses the same paragraph enumeration system as Windisch (1880) and Henderson (1899).

- 42-56 The procession to Crúachan and arrival there.
- 57 The attack of the Crúachan cats.
- 63-5 Further tests at Crúachan.
- 58-62 Medb decides the hero's portion and awards the cups to the heroes.
- 66-71 Ercol, Samera, the witches and return to Emain Macha.
- 72-74 The heroes display their cup-tokens.
- 75-78 Budi, Úath and return to Emain Macha.<sup>14</sup>
- 33-41 The encounter with the giant in the mist.
- 79-90 The adventures at Cú Roí's house and return to Emain.
- 91-102 The Champion's Bargain.

The encounter with Úath mac Imomain, found on a leaf inserted by H, is exclusive to LU (Slotkin, 1978, 66). Given that this scene and the ending (which is missing in LU) involves a beheading test, Slotkin (1978, 72-3) proposes that H essentially wrote the Úath episode himself, basing it on the common ending and inserting it at an earlier point to fill the remaining part of his added leaf and is thus redundant in his view. Borsje (2005) refines Slotkin's theory somewhat to conclude that H was instead drawing on an alternative tradition (see IV.2).

Henderson's (1899) edition of the tale will be used herein but owing to the problematic nature of some of his translations my own will be used where deemed appropriate. I will also draw on the LU text of the tale and Meyer's (1893) edition of the concluding section, entitled, *Cennach ind Rúanado*.

Cú Chulainn's role in this text has not been analysed in any great detail thus far. A number of the tests to which Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn

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<sup>14</sup> Slotkin (1978, 77n) observes that with a 'Champion's portion extant, this episode is obviously redundant'.

were subjected for the hero's portion are discussed by Borsje (2005) in the context of *úatha* (tales of terror).

***Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait***

This tale records Cú Chulainn's wooing of a woman and one of his overseas journeys. YBL preserves the only copy of the saga (Hollo, 2005, 37). She concludes that it is 'best regarded as a text first written in the late Old Irish period that was subject to a certain amount of revision in the course of its manuscript transmission' (Hollo, 2005, 49). It is further suggested that this originated in Clonmacnoise in the ninth century (Hollo, 2005, 8). The earliest edition of it has been provided by Windisch (1884) and the most recent by Hollo (2005). The latter will be used herein.

*Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* has received relatively little scholarly attention, the most comprehensive of which has been supplied by Hollo (1992; 1994; 2005) in a number of works. The possible reasons for creating a tale in which Cú Chulainn acquires a wife, who does not feature elsewhere in the Ulster Cycle, are explored by Hollo (2005, 12-3). She concludes that the author was familiar with texts in which Emer was presented as his wife, but deliberately wrote a tale outside of this tradition, setting out to create an overseas adventure modelled on a traditional story pattern. Subsequently, she provides a brief but valuable comparative structural analysis of the tale with *Tochmarc Emire*, focusing on Cú Chulainn's wooing of a woman and overseas adventure in both accounts (Hollo, 2005, 27-31).

### *Forfess Fer Fálgae*

Cú Chulainn's siege of the men of Fálgae is detailed in this brief tale.<sup>15</sup> Apparently contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, extant copies of it survive in several manuscripts, including; Eg. 88, H.4.22, Harleian 5280, 23 N 10, Rawlinson B.512, Eg. 1782 (Thurneysen, 1912, 53-6; Meyer, 1912, 564).<sup>16</sup> Linguistically, Thurneysen asserts that this text can be dated to the eighth century. Its importance is indicated by the fact that it seems to have been contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai* and several other manuscripts along with its presence in the Medieval Irish tale lists, A and B (Mac Cana, 1980, 49, 52). Two editions of it are available, one by Thurneysen (1912) which draws on a number of the manuscript accounts. The second by Meyer (1912) is based on Eg. 1782 with variants from Harleian 5280 and Eg. 88 will be used in the present study. The saga consists mostly of rhetorics which have proved somewhat problematic and may account for the relatively little scholarly attention that it has received. This narrative may be further supplemented by data from other sources including *Aided Con Roí* and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (see III.4.2 & III.4.3.3). Hellmuth (2004) has done some work on this narrative while Ó Béarra (2009) concludes that this tale may contain fragments of the lost tale, *Echtrae Con Culainn*.

### *Serglige Con Culainn*

Cú Chulainn reluctantly visits the Otherworld in this tale. It is extant in two manuscripts, LU and TCD H.4.22, but the latter is a copy of the former thus we are reliant on a single text (Dillon, 1941, 120). Dillon (1941, 120) observes that

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<sup>15</sup> Mac Cana (1980, 76) translates *forfess/forbais* as 'beleaguering, siege, night-watch'. *DIL* considers it to be a compound of the preposition *for* and *fess/feis* which is the verbal noun of *foaid* 'spends the night'.

<sup>16</sup> It also seems to be attested in TCD MS 1287 (H 1.13) and a fragment occurs in the RIA MS B iv 1a.

‘*Serglige Con Culainn* is one of the few sagas of which *Lebor na hUidre*, in its present fragmentary state, presents a complete text’. Salberg (1992, 161) states that *Serglige Con Culainn* is found in two parts in *Lebor na hUidre*, the first (43a1-47a18) in the hand of the interpolator H and the second (47a19-50b14) in the earlier hand of M with certain interpolations by H. The part written by M is referred to by scholars as version A and that by H as version B (Dillon, 1941, 121). Thurneysen asserts that the ‘language of B is not later than the 9<sup>th</sup> century, while that of A includes forms which point to the 11<sup>th</sup> century’ (Dillon, 1953a, xiii). Thus §§1-29 of Dillon’s (1953a) edition are by H and the remainder by M aside from H’s insertions. There are a number of problems with the tale including the depiction of Eithne Ingubai as Cú Chulainn’s wife in the first part of it and Emer thereafter (§§6-10, §§28-48). In addition, there are duplications about the hero’s recovery from his sickness and his meeting with Lí Ban (§12, §13, §31) along with the journey of Lóeg to Mag Mell (§13, §32) (Dillon, 1941, v). The inclusion of the passage entitled, *Briatharthesosc Con Culaind*, which relates Cú Chulainn’s instructions to his foster-son, Lugaid, also interrupts the narrative flow of the text. Some questions have been raised about the origin of this passage with Dillon (1953a, x) proposing that it can hardly have belonged to the story in its original form before noting that it ‘belongs to the group of *tecosca* or “Instructions”, of which *Tecosca Cormaic* is perhaps the best known example’. It occupies the reverse side of leaf 46 and Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 88) posits that ‘the last words of which signal a shift in the narratorial focus’.<sup>17</sup> Dillon’s (1953a) edition of the text will be used herein.

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<sup>17</sup> See Dillon (1941a, 124-5n) for a synopsis on the scholarly views pertaining to the origin of this section of the tale.

Scholarly debate concerning this tale has tended to focus on the depiction of the Otherworld therein as opposed to focusing on Cú Chulainn. Rees & Rees (1961, 297-313) and Dillon (1948, 101-23) categorise *Serglige Con Chulainn* as an *echtrae* with the hero of the Ulster Cycle as its hero. Findon (1997, 107) and Lowe (2000) suggest that there is a reassignment of Cú Chulainn's usual role from that of an active to a passive one. Ní Bhrolcháin (2009) asserts that the hero therein is suffering from erectile dysfunction which is cured by his visit to the Otherworld.

### ***Síaburcharpat Con Culainn***

In this tale, Cú Chulainn is called back from the grave by Patrick in an attempt to convert Lóegaire, the pagan high king of Ireland. It survives in three manuscripts; LU, Eg. 88 and the British Library manuscript, Additional 33,993, with the former containing the earliest account (Johnston, 2001, 111). Accordingly, Johnston adds that 'the two latter represent a shorter and, at times, abbreviated recension of the tale' with some variant in content and ordering of the material but otherwise bearing no great significant differences. While Johnston (2001, 111) dates the text to the late tenth or early eleventh century, McCone (1990, 200) offers an earlier date of the ninth or tenth century for the LU text. In a later work, he entertains evidence indicating that *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* may have been contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai* with the possibility that the original Old Irish form having 'undergone some modernisation via a shared post-*Cín* intermediary' (McCone, 2000, 68-9). O'Beirne Crowe's (1870) translation of the story is incomplete and somewhat problematic in places. Meyer's (1910) edition, without translation, of the text in Eg. 88 collated with Additional 33,993 and the LU text from Best & Bergin (1929) will be used herein.

Cú Chulainn's presentation in this tale is considered in light of its broader agenda concerning the salvation of the individual and of society by Johnston (2001). Ní Mhaonaigh (2006, 26-7) also briefly appraises his catalogue of overseas adventures therein.

### ***Táin Bó Cuailnge (TBC) and the macgnímrada***

Cú Chulainn's finest and numerous martial exploits are related in TBC, the longest and perceivably the most important Ulster-Cycle tale. Preserved in three recensions (O'Rahilly, 1976, vii), it is found in a number of manuscripts, the earliest of which is LU, containing Recension I.<sup>18</sup> This version is also contained in YBL, Eg. 1782, and O' Curry I (Tristram, 1994a, 11). Recension II is contained in LL and in RIA MS C vi 3, formerly of the Stowe collection, in a more modernized and expanded form (O'Rahilly, 1967, xv). Recension III is incomplete and is found in fragmentary form in two late manuscripts, H.2.17 and Eg. 93 (O'Rahilly, 1961, xvi). Ó hUiginn (1992, 31) observes that the three main versions of TBC 'ultimately derive from the first recension' which is a 'compilation showing different linguistic strata and is marked by many inconsistencies and doublets'. Thurneysen considers this text as a 'conflation of two written versions which, on linguistic grounds, he dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century' (Ó hUiginn, 1992, 31). According to Thurneysen, the earliest evidence for the events of the epic is contained within the prophetic poem, *Verba Scáthaige*, which he dates to the early part of the eighth century (Ó hUiginn, 1992, 31; see below). This discussion will, for the most part,

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<sup>18</sup> Thurneysen proposes a Táin IV where the Fer Diad text is viewed independently (Tristram, 1994a, 11-3).

limit itself to Recension I which is edited by O’Rahilly (1976).<sup>19</sup> Her work is principally based upon LU, but also draws on YBL where the former text is lacking. Recension II, also edited by O’Rahilly (1967), will be considered as required. Her translations will also be used unless otherwise indicated.

Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds are related in TBC. Manuscript tradition indicates that these are an integral part of this epic. Melia (1974, 214) notes that there is not one version of TBC which lacks these deeds and further argues that they should be considered as part of TBC from the time that it was put together as an entity.<sup>20</sup> Melia (1974, 212) observes that the version in Recension I is ‘compact, self-contained, interrupts the flow of the narrative about the advance of the host, is told as a flashback, contains no *roscada*, and adds nothing to the story of the cattle raid itself except some background on Cú Chulainn’s early life’. Thus this raises the possibility that these deeds may have existed as a separate entity, interpolated into the main tale at a later date. However, there is no evidence for their survival outside of this epic. Three of Cú Chulainn’s youthful exploits are included in a list of the fore-tales to TBC in *Do Fallsigud Tána Bó Cualnge*, but it is noted that these are included in the main body of the saga (LL, ll.32905-9). In addition to the three main deeds found in both recensions, Recension I also contains four other anecdotes which have been subjected to relatively little scholarly attention. While the earliest account, namely Recension I, will be of central concern here, the later Recension II will also be scrutinised in some detail where relevant.

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<sup>19</sup> See the introduction to both editions by O’Rahilly (1967; 1976) for a detailed consideration of the textual history of the tale.

<sup>20</sup> O’Rahilly (1967, xiii) states that ‘in all versions of TBC the narrative is interrupted while the banished Ulstermen recount to Medb and Ailill the noteworthy exploits of Cú Chulainn’s boyhood’.

TBC has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention, however, the role and presentation of its chief hero has received comparatively less. Admittedly, written almost twenty years ago, Ó hUiginn's (1992) comprehensive account of the most important studies and issues encompassing this tale remains invaluable. Among the influential commentators on the Ulster Cycle and thus TBC include Thurneysen (1921), Carney (1955), Jackson (1964), Greene (1968), Aitchison (1987), McCone (1990) and Ó hUiginn (1992). Much emphasis has been placed on trying to ascertain the origins for this lengthy saga and whether it finds its roots in an oral or literary tradition. Much of this debate does not concern us here. More recently, Dooley's (2006, 5-7) study of the tale concentrates specifically on how this text and others 'reveal themselves' and most specifically 'how it is they *come to mean*'. Her viewing of this tale as an 'open text' is central to her work, an approach which allows 'reading things into texts'. She examines closely episodes and aspects of it with a view to uncovering the processes that underpin its composition with particular emphasis on Cú Chulainn's portrayal. Latterly, TBC has featured strongly in Miles' (2011) consideration of the influence of classical learning on medieval Irish narratives offering a detailed insight into TBC in this regard. He convincingly concludes that 'features of narrative and iconography which derive ultimately from *imitatio* of classical epic permeate *Táin Bó Cúailnge*' affirming its epic status in the minds of medieval literati and audiences (Miles, 2011, 192).<sup>21</sup>

Of particular note is Ó Cathasaigh's (1993, 126-7) view that TBC is essentially a celebration of Cú Chulainn's martial heroism and a depiction of him as a saviour to

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<sup>21</sup> This work was published subsequent to the submission of this thesis and thus it was not possible to consider it as part of the research.

his people. His presentation as the ultimate martial hero in TBC has also been considered to some degree by Bruford (1994b) and Sjoestedt (1949, 73-98). His youthful exploits have attracted more scrutiny with Nagy (1984), Sjoestedt (1949, 73-110) and Gray (1989-90) all observing that the hero, in particular Cú Chulainn, is not automatically accepted into society but must reveal his heroic traits in order to gain entry. Nagy's (1984) comparative consideration of Cú Chulainn's and Finn mac Cumail's *macgnímrada* is particularly insightful. Likewise, McCone's (1984) study of the hero's slaying of the hound in a trio of tales sheds much light on Cú Chulainn's disposal of Culann's canine guardian.

### ***Táin Bó Regamna***

This relatively brief saga is concerned with an encounter between Cú Chulainn and the Morrígan, elements of which bear strong similarities to their meeting in TBC I (ll.1845-73). Corthals (1987), who has edited this text, offers the tenth century as the *terminus ad quem* for its archetype. The passage in LU entitled *Imacallam na Mórigna fri Con Culaind* (TBC I, ll.1845-71) is considered by some scholars to be an early interpolation into Recension I of TBC (O'Rahilly, 1967, xxxi-xxxii). O'Rahilly (1967, xxxii) further concludes that it is based on *Táin Bó Regamna*. During the subsequent fight with Lóch, a direct reference is made to the three things that Cú Chulainn had threatened the Morrígan with in *Táin Bó Regamna* (TBC I, ll.2024-5). Conversely, Mac Gearailt (1993, 166) insists that there is no reliable evidence to support this and concludes as follows:

However, if one assumes that the *Imacallam* and TBR are independent OIr. developments of the same tradition, and TBR is a fuller reflection of that earlier tradition, then the *Imacallam* is in any case an interesting example of

editing and adapting by an early Irish author with abundant material at his disposal, in this case to match other similarly structured passages in the *Táin*.

A skeletal version of this tale also features in *Echtrae Nerai* (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13). YBL and Eg. 1782 both contain copies of this narrative; the former account with considerations from the latter, are translated by Windisch in *Irische Texte*, II (Leahy, 1905, 129). Hull (1898) provides a translation of this text based on Windisch's edition of the tale while Leahy (1905, 129-41) bases his on the YBL version. Corthals' (1987) more recent edition will be used in this study.

There has been no significant assessment of the manner in which Cú Chulainn is depicted in this saga.

### ***Tochmarc Emire***

The details of Cú Chulainn's wooing of a maiden and subsequent military training with Scáthach are found in *Tochmarc Emire*.<sup>22</sup> There are two main extant recensions of this text, a longer and a shorter one (Toner, 1998, 71). The former (V) survives in a number of manuscripts, the earliest of which is a fragment in LU, while the complete text is in RIA MS D.4.2, British Harley 5280 and RIA 23 N 10 (Toner, 1998, 71-3). He adds that the 'fragments in the Book of Fermoy in the Royal Irish Academy (F) and the British Museum Egerton 92 (E) are originally from the one MS, but even considered together they do not preserve a complete copy of the text'. This version is edited by van Hamel (1933).

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<sup>22</sup> Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer is listed as one of the *remscéla* of TBC in the catalogue of these in LL (Best & O'Brien, 1967, ll.32901-5). Meyer (1890, 433n) observes that it is not listed as one of these in the corresponding passage in D.4.2.

The LU account of the tale is the product of the scribes M and H:

The first part of the tale ( $U^m = LU 10113-10250$ ) is the work of M, and it ends at the bottom of p. 122 in the middle of a line at the point where Cú Chulainn is describing to Emer how he arrived at Luglochta Loga. The remainder of the text ( $U^H = LU 10250-10556$ ) is in the hand of H beginning on a smaller, intercalated leaf (pp 123-4) (Toner, 1998, 72).

The shorter version (R) survives only in Oxford MS Rawlinson B.512 and lacks the early part of Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer, beginning with a brief account of *Bletine* and *Brón Trogin* and concluding with his winning of Emer (Toner, 1998, 71). This is edited by Meyer (1890). Toner (1998) accurately adds that '[e]ssentially the two versions recount the same events, although V contains some additional material and is generally expanded throughout'. R is viewed as the earliest text with the earliest forms from it possibly dating back to the eighth century but being transcribed, 'with some modernization, in the Middle Irish period. This was the version that was copied into Rawlinson B.512 in the fifteenth century and it also appears to be the same version that was reworked to produce V'.

Toner (1998, 88) succinctly evaluates the major expansion which the text underwent in the Middle Irish period as follows:

The redactor of V has enshrined the earlier text to the extent of conserving almost exactly the wording of his exemplar. Only occasionally does he depart from it to produce a modernized form. At the same time, he expands and clarifies the text of his exemplar, weaving his own additions through the Old Irish framework into a unified whole. Many incidents appear for the first time

in V, some culled from related Ulster Cycle texts, others from unidentified sources. V, therefore, is a careful work of scholarship, in which the redactor has endeavoured to assemble all the available materials relating to Cú Chulainn's courtship of Emer and his training in arms to produce a lucid and compelling biography of the greatest of the Ulster heroes.

A later version of the second part of the tale concerning Cú Chulainn's training, known variously as *Foghlaim* or *Oileamhain Con Culainn*, will be referred to as required, but will not be analysed in detail (Stokes, 1908; Ó hUiginn, 2002).

Rees & Rees (1961, 256-78) consider Cú Chulainn's winning of a maiden alongside similar tale-types in early Irish and Welsh tradition. More recently, Bitel (1996, 39-65) outlines the key features of literary courtships noting that direct negotiations are central to this process. Although centrally concerned with Emer's role in the courtship process in this tale, Findon's (1997, 23-56) detailed analysis remains of value. There has been somewhat less analysis of the hero's trip to the lands of Scáthach within this saga. It has been fleetingly acknowledged as a possible otherworldly trip by scholars including Murphy (1961, 43), Rees & Rees (1961, 298), Ó hUiginn (2000, 77) and Ó Béarra (2009, 190) but none of them have tested this in a significant manner. A land in which one encounters bridges that move of their own accord is most likely to be of the Otherworld.

## **II.2. Category B: Texts in which Cú Chulainn plays a more limited role**

### ***Aided Con Roí***

Cú Chulainn's more unusual role in the death of Cú Roí is of particular relevance to this study. Best (1905, 18) notes that the oldest existing version of this tale is found in YBL. Conversely, Tymoczko (1981, 16) suggests that the oldest account,

albeit a short one, exists in the British Museum manuscript, Eg. 88, which Thurneysen dates to the eighth or ninth century. Thurneysen (1913) labels the latter text as *Aided I* and that found in YBL and Eg. 88 as *Aided II*. Tymoczko (1981, 16) asserts that *Aided II* is no earlier than the tenth century. Best's (1905) edition and translation of the YBL text will be used herein. Thurneysen's (1913) account of *Aided I*, which differs considerably, will be consulted as required.

### ***Aided Derbforgaill***

This tale tells of Derbforgaill's love for Cú Chulainn, the other women's jealousy of her and his killing of the latter. Marstrander (1911, 201) dates the tale to the tenth century and his edition of it will be used here. It survives in LL, H.3.18 and D.4.2.

### ***Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann***

Cú Chulainn's pursuit of Tuir Glesta after the latter elopes with Emer is detailed in this brief tale. It is found, without title, only in D.4.2., which is dated to around thirteen hundred by Thurneysen (1921, 428-9), but he also notes that a further copy was extant in the Edinburgh manuscript, Advocates' Library XXXII, which is missing since the latter part of the first half of the nineteenth century. He observes that it is not found in either of the medieval tale lists. The text of the tale has been provided and translated, with the exception of three concluding verses issued by Cú Chulainn, by Meyer (1883-85, 184-5).

### ***Ces Ulad***

This anecdote concerning Cú Chulainn's encounter with Feidelm at the Boyne purports to explain the origin of the Ulstermen's debility. It survives in the British Library MS Harleian 5280, the text of which is provided by Meyer (1912a). Hull (1962-64, 309) provides a translation of this and suggests that it may have been composed 'within the period of transition from Old Irish to Middle Irish'. A translation of this also features in Koch & Carey (2000, 67-8).

### *Comracc Con Chulainn re Senbecc*

In this anecdote, Cú Chulainn meets a little man at the river Boyne. There are two versions of this tale, one is found in D.4.2. and the other in H.2.15B. Meyer (1883-85) provides the text of and translates the former, apart from the sections in verse. Gwynn (1942, 26-7) offers the text of the latter without translation. More recent translations of both are provided by Koch & Carey (2000, 66-7). Gwynn (1942, 9) offers an Old Irish date for the tract in which this occurs in the legal manuscript, H.2.15B.

### *Mesca Ulad*

This unusual tale tells of the drunken adventures of the Ulstermen. Two versions of it survive, but neither is in its entirety (Watson, 1941, vii). The earliest of these is acephalous and is found in LU and the later one, without its ending, is found in LL (Watson, 1941, vii). This part of the LU text is in the hand of M with some relatively minor interventions by H (Watson, 1941, vii). Watson (1941, xx-xxxiii) dates the language of this to the Old Irish period and that of LL to the first third or

quarter of the twelfth century. No. 8124 of the Phillipps Collection of Irish MSS<sup>23</sup> and Edinburgh Gaelic MS XL also preserve this tale both of which ‘are descended from a common ancestor, which contained, not a complete copy of either version, but a conflation of the beginning of the later version and the end of the earlier’ (Watson, 1941, ix). Hennessy’s (1889) early edition of the tale attempts unwisely to reconcile the LU and LL versions into one story, unaware of the existence of the other manuscript accounts. Watson’s (1941) later edition is based upon the LU and LL texts and will be used in the present discussion. Reference will also be made to his translation of the text (Watson, 1938).

### *Verba Scáthaige*

This rhetoric placed in the mouth of Scáthach, prophecies the events of TBC. It is most likely to have been found in *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (Henry, 1990, 191). Of the two extant versions of it, Version A survives in Rawlinson B.512, Eg. 1782, Eg. 88 and 23 N 10, while Version B, an expanded text included in *Tochmarc Emire* is found in LU, D.4.2, Harleian 5280, the Book of Fermoy and 23 N 10 (Henry, 1990, 191). Henry (1990, 192) observes that ‘[i]n LU, the outstanding exponent of Version B, the poem is expanded to eighty-one verses [*sic.*], with six added at the beginning, twenty-nine at the end and the rest interspersed’. Henry (1990, 196) deduces that Version A of the poem may have been composed orally in the seventh or perhaps the sixth century. His critical edition relies principally on the four manuscripts copies of Version A in consultation with the LU text where necessary (Henry, 1990). Both Henry’s and the text in van Hamel’s (1933) edition of *Tochmarc Emire* will be used herein.

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<sup>23</sup> This manuscript was originally part of YBL (Watson, 1941, viii).

### **II.3 Category C: Texts in which Cú Chulainn makes a minor appearance or reference is made to him.**

#### ***Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair***

Cú Chulainn is largely incidental to the key events of this tale, limiting its relevance to the present work. Kuno Meyer's (1906) edition of this tale, which will be used herein, is based on the LL and the Edinburgh manuscript 1x. According to Thurneysen (1921, 571), this tale was in existence from the ninth century.

#### ***Aided Chonchobuir***

An insignificant reference to Cú Chulainn is made in the LL copy of this tale, none is found in the other four manuscript accounts. All of these versions are edited by Meyer (1906). The RIA manuscript, 23 N 10, and the LL versions of this tale contain an incomplete copy of a poem spoken by Conchobar which is dated by its most recent editor, Corthals (1989, 59), to possibly the early eighth century.

#### ***Amra Con Roí***

A very minor reference to Cú Chulainn's contention with Cú Roí for the birds of Ochainne is found in this poem. Of the three manuscript accounts of it, two are contained in the versions of *Aided Con Roí* found in Eg. 88 and YBL. The sole independent copy survives in H.3.18 (Henry, 1995, 183). All of these texts are considered in the most recent edition of the tale which has been provided by Henry (1995) and thus will be used here. A date of no later than the first half of the eighth century is suggested for this text (Henry, 1995, 182).

### ***Brinna Fertchertne***

Fertchertne's vision, in the form of a poem, is concerned with the storming of Cú Roí's fort by Cú Chulainn and the Ulstermen and the former's death. Thus it relates much the same events as *Aided Cú Roí*. The sole surviving copy of this is preserved in the Bodleian Codex Laud 610 and is edited and assigned a tenth century date by Meyer (1901, 41-6).

### ***Cath Airtig***

Cú Chulainn plays no part in this tale, yet it contains significant information about the land perceived to have been assigned to him. The extant manuscript copies of the tale from The Book of Lecan and H.3.18 are both considered in Best's (1916) edition of the tale. Breathnach (2003, 23) dates this to the Middle Irish period.

### ***Cathcharpat Serda***

While Cú Chulainn is not mentioned in this text, an examination of its content suggests that it contains a description of him, his finery and his charioteer. O'Rahilly (1976a, 194-6) labels this as a 'run' and notes that such 'passages of semi-rhythmical and alliterative prose are found in what may be called "identification scenes": a watcher describes the approach of a chariot-warrior who is identified for him by his interlocutor'.<sup>24</sup> Miles (2011, 203) suggests that its language is later than that of the bulk of Recension I of TBC but may be contemporary with Recension II. It occurs in isolation in LL and has been edited with translation by O'Rahilly (1976a).

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<sup>24</sup> Essentially, this is an example of the 'watchman device' which Carney (1955, 307) notes is a 'particularised form of dramatic description'. See Carney (1955, 305-21) for a detailed consideration of this device.

### ***Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn***

Cú Chulainn throws a feast in this tale and also gets involved in the battle to some degree. It also mentions his daughter Fínscoth. This text survives in a number of manuscripts, the earliest version of which is found in LL (Hogan, 1892, vii). Mac Gearailt (1992, 192) dates this tale to the late twelfth century.

### ***De Maccaib Conairi***

The LL text of this tale contains a reference to Cú Chulainn's sword-blade in the last line (Gwynn, 1912a, 153).

### ***Goire Conaill Chernaig i Crúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig***

Cú Chulainn's presence in this tale is limited to a fleeting reference to him as Conall Cernach's foster-brother. Copies of this tale survive in two manuscripts, namely, Edinburgh Codex XL, and H.2.17, and both of these are significantly different. Although it is listed along with other Ulster-Cycle tales in LL, Meyer (1897, 102-11) observes that the oldest version of it has not come down to us while suggesting that the extant accounts were rewritten from older materials around the thirteenth century.

### ***Echtrae Nerai*<sup>25</sup>**

Playing a very minor part in this tale, nevertheless, it remains very significant because of its inclusion of a number of Cú Chulainn's *geisi*. The two extant copies of this tale are found in H.2.16 and Eg. 1782. Meyer's (1889) edition, which is

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<sup>25</sup> Meyer (1889, 212) observes that this tale is also known as *Táin Bé Aingen*. Of the two texts of it that survive, only the one in YBL bears this title, the one in Eg. 1782 lacks it. Owing to certain inconsistencies, he concludes that neither of these accounts was copied from the other but that they did descend from a common archetype.

principally based on the latter, will be used here. Thurneysen suggests a tenth century date for this text but does not rule out an eighth-century origin (Ó Duilearga, 1940, 522).

### ***Noínden Ulad***

An alternative explanation for the origin of the Ulstermen's debility to that mentioned above is outlined in this text. Despite playing no role in this text, Cú Chulainn is listed as one of those who are immune from this ailment. It survives in four manuscripts, Harleian 5280, No. 1010 (formerly B iv 2 and also Stowe MS. 869) of the RIA, The Book of Fermoy and YBL (Hull, 1968, 2-5). Hull (1968, 2) offers a date of possibly before the middle of the ninth century for its composition.

### ***Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa***

Cú Chulainn's famous martial deeds, along with his *ríastrad* and a list of his *cleasa* all feature in this tale. His shield, *fuban*, is also mentioned therein and *DIL* equates this with the same weapon called *duban* which is the subject of an anecdote in the manuscript, H.3.17 (Best, 1911, 72; see IV.4). Carey (1995, 160) observes that Stokes (1910) assigns the above title to the tale in his edition of this Middle Irish text.

### ***Táin Bó Flidais***

The end of this tale contains a fleeting reference to Cú Chulainn and his homeland Mag Muirthemne. There are two recensions of the early form of this tale, the first of which is found in LU and is acephalous, while the other is found in a number of

manuscripts the earliest of which is in LL (Ó hUiginn, 2006, 151).<sup>26</sup> The earliest account of this tale dates to the Old Irish period (Ó hUiginn, 2006, 151). Windisch's (1887) edition of the text is used herein.

### *Talland Étair*

Despite playing a rather minor role in this tale, it tells of Cú Chulainn's reaction to the beheading of his foster-son and how the women of Ulster render themselves purblind as a sign of their love for him. Ó Dónaill's (2005) edition, which is based on the LL and Harleian 5280 manuscript copies, will be used here. A date in the latter part of the Old Irish period is established for this text (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 30-2).

### *Tochmarc Luaine ocus Aided Athairne*

Cú Chulainn features in this text in the context of exacting revenge, along with other Ulster magnates, on Aithirne. Found complete in three manuscripts, YBL, The Book of Ballymote and H.2.17, it has been edited by Stokes (1903b) and more recently without translation by Breatnach (1980). The latter will be used herein. Breatnach (1980, 4-6) dates this tale to the second half of the twelfth century.

### *Tochmarc Treblainne*

This tale only contains two very minor references to Cú Chulainn, the most relevant of which compares Fróech's proficiency at feats to the former. The sole surviving copy of this late Middle Irish tale, survives in the Book of Fermoy

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<sup>26</sup> See Ó hUiginn (2006) for a full consideration of this text and for the manuscript details of the later version.

(Jennings, 1997, 73). Jennings (1997, 73-8) provides a translation of Meyer's (1921) earlier edition and suggests a late Middle Irish date for it.

### ***Togail Bruidne Da Derga***

A brief reference to Cú Chulainn's sparing of the life of three churls during a siege of the Fir Fálgae is found in this tale (Knott, 1936, 38-9). There are three complete manuscript copies of it found in YBL, D.4.2 and Eg. 1782 with fragments surviving in a number of other sources including LU, Eg. 92 and others (Knott, 1936, xiv-xv). According to Thurneysen, the earliest recension of this tale in YBL has been dated to the eleventh century but is believed to have been compiled from two versions which may have been written down in the ninth century (Knott, 1936, xi).

### **II.4. Category D: The tales in which Cú Chulainn does not feature**

Based on the catalogue of Ulster-Cycle tales listed in *Ulidia* (Mallory & Stockman, 1994, 291-30), Cú Chulainn does not feature in the following of these.

*Aided Ceit maic Mágach*

*Aided Fergusa maic Roich*

*Aided Lógairi Buadaig*

*Aided Meidbe*

*Aislinge Óenguso*

*Bruiden Da Choca*

*Cath Aenig Macha*

*Cath Cumair*<sup>27</sup>  
*Cath Findchorad*  
*Cath Leitrech Ruide*  
*Cocad Fergusa ⁊ Conchobair*  
*Compert Conchobuir*  
*Conailla Medb Míchura*  
*Da Gabáil int sída*  
*De Chopur in Dá Mucado*  
*De Faillsigud Tána Bó Cúailnge*  
*De Síl Chonairi Móir*  
*Echtrae Fergusa Maic Léti*  
*Ferchuitred Medba (Cath Boinne)*  
*Fochonn Loingse Fergusa meic Róich*  
*Immacaldam in dá thuarad*  
*Imthecht na Tromdáime (Tromdámh Guaire)*  
*Imthechta Tuaithe Luachra ⁊ Aided Fergusa*  
*Lánellach tigi rích ⁊ ruirech*  
*Loinges mac nUislenn*  
*Nede ⁊ Caier*  
*Oided Mac nUisnig*  
*Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*  
*Táin Bó Dartada*  
*Táin Bó Fraích*

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<sup>27</sup> This text contains the following reference *Léim Chon chomhramhaigh Choluinn* by way of explanation of the name for a sharp-edged protruding island called Corcu Baisginn. Dobbs (1926, 282-3) translates the former as ‘the leap of combative Cu Chullain’ before proposing that this be identified with Loop Head in Co. Clare.

*Táin Bó Regamain*

*Tochmarc Étaíne*

*Tochmarc Ferbe*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This text contains a single reference to Dimor from Spain being in love with Cú Chulainn (Leahy, 1902, 14).

### **Chapter III: Cú Chulainn's heroic biography**

This chapter will focus on a number of tales concerned with milestones in Cú Chulainn's career as the warrior hero *par excellence* of the Ulster Cycle. These will be examined in light of the international heroic biographical pattern as outlined by de Vries (1963), whose ten-point schema will be used as the basic point of reference. Only those items relevant to Cú Chulainn's biography will be addressed in this discussion, however, his representation in the epic TBC will also be considered because his actions there can be seen as his greatest achievement, although they are not straightforwardly covered by de Vries' model. Cú Chulainn's heroic biography is unusual in Irish tradition in that it spans a number of different texts.<sup>29</sup> The key texts concerning his conception, his youth, his winning of Emer incorporating his trip to the Otherworld, TBC itself and finally his death have all been dated, in their basic form at least, to the Old Irish period (see II.1). However, it hardly follows from this that their authors deliberately set out to create such a biography, particularly given that the very concept is essentially a modern one. Key aspects of his life had obviously been given narrative substance in this period. The chapter will be divided into the following sections:

III.1. Cú Chulainn's conception and birth

III.2. Cú Chulainn's youth

III.3. Cú Chulainn's winning of a maiden

III.4. Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trips

III.5. The culmination of Cú Chulainn's martial career

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<sup>29</sup> Conaire Mór's is largely found in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Knott, 1936), Níall Noígíallach's is mostly in *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* (Stokes, 1903a) and Brigit's complete biography is found in *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* (Connolly, 1989).

### III.6. Cú Chulainn's death

### III.7. Remaining points in De Vries' schema

Each of the above will be further subdivided as follows:

- Information relating to the basic point and its variants from de Vries' schema
- Relevant research to date
- Further discussion and analysis

## **III.1. Cú Chulainn's conception and birth**

### **III.1.1. De Vries' schema**

The first and second points of de Vries' heroic biography are concerned with the conception and birth of the hero. De Vries (1963, 215) lists four variants of the former. The first states that '[t]he mother is a virgin, who is in some cases overpowered by a god, or has extramarital relations with the hero's father'. 'Deichtire, the mother of Cúchulainn' is listed as a mother of this type (de Vries, 1963, 211). The second specifies that '[t]he father is a God', and Cú Chulainn's father Lug is taken as an example by de Vries (1963, 212). The third, namely '[t]he father is an animal, often the disguise of a god' (de Vries, 1963, 212), is not applied to Cú Chulainn but the fourth whereby '[t]he child is conceived in incest' is taken to be exemplified by a tradition which 'takes Cúchulainn to be the son of Conchobar and his daughter' (de Vries, 1963, 212). Though the details may vary, it is clear that their conception sets heroes apart from ordinary mortals. The birth of the hero tends to be similarly unusual and often 'takes place in an unnatural way' as when 'Zeus brings forth Dionysus out of his thigh, Athene out of his head' (de Vries, 1963, 212). The hero may also be born by caesarean section, examples

of which are found in Persian, Welsh and Russian tradition (de Vries, 1963, 212). No reference is made to Cú Chulainn's birth here.

### **III.1.2. Relevant research to date**

Rees & Rees (1961, 225) observe that the way in which the hero is born is 'all wrong' in relation to the established order of things. Unlike ordinary children who are usually born within wedlock to unrelated parents, the hero is more likely to be conceived 'illegitimately' and subsequently born outside of marriage (Rees & Rees, 1961, 225-6). Moreover, the integrity of the family is often violated through incest, by for example, having a hero begotten by (a) a father upon his daughter, (b) a son upon his mother (c) a brother upon a sister (Rees & Rees, 1961, 226). They also observe that 'a mockery is made even of the laws of biological nature, for a barren woman may conceive a hero by drinking water, by swallowing worms'. Rees & Rees (1961, 228) state that there is a belief in the fructifying potential of water in childless women throughout the ages. The mother is typically a maiden or, if married, is barren until the intervention of the third factor (Rees & Rees, 1961, 228). Chadwick & Chadwick (1932, vol. I, 216) observe that 'the births of Cú Chulainn (in Version I), of Conchobar and of Conall Cernach were all due to their mothers swallowing worms in water'. McCone (1990, 231) suggests that this motif of miraculous pregnancy as a result of swallowing a small creature may originate from the Old Testament. He offers the divinely sanctioned ordeal in Numbers (5:11-28) used to determine whether a woman has committed adultery or not as the possible source. The woman is forced to drink water with earth in it. If she is innocent, she will fall pregnant and give birth, but if she is guilty her belly will swell and her thigh will rot.

Along with earthly parents there may also be the incarnation of a supernatural essence and the role of the earthly father is then often minimized ‘as though to stress the third factor in conception’ (Rees & Rees, 1961, 226-8). Sjoestedt (1949, 77) observes that both divine and incestuous motifs appear in the first version of *Compert Con Culainn*, Lug being the divine element and the rumour that Conchobar had fathered the child fulfilling the second. Rees & Rees (1961, 229) also suggest that the ‘supernatural essence in the child is personified as the incarnation or reincarnation of a particular deity’. They further note that there is possibly a hint of individual reincarnation in relation to the begetters of Finn mac Cumail and Cormac mac Airt, given that their fathers die around the time of their conception. Rhys (1898, 435) claims that Lug is reincarnated in Cú Chulainn.<sup>30</sup> The supra-personal character of the incarnating spirit in the case of Cú Chulainn is indicated by the simultaneous birth of two colts, who are deemed to possess supernatural intelligence (Rees & Rees, 1961, 231-2).

Kelleher (1971) and McCone (1990, 197-9) argue that scribes’ familiarity with the Bible was influential in the creation of tales pertaining to the life of Cú Chulainn. Kelleher (1971, 121-122) claims that deliberate attempts were made to associate the life of Cú Chulainn with that of Christ, in that each had a divine father but was known as the son of a mortal father. Thus each had dual paternity: Cú Chulainn’s divine father was Lug and his mortal father was Súaldaim, while Christ was the Son of God but was also known as the son of the mortal Joseph. McCone (1990, 198-9) draws particular attention to Cu Chulainn’s triple conception and concludes

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<sup>30</sup> O’Rahilly (1946, 271, 514) similarly suggests that Cú Chulainn is in origin Lug.

that '[g]oing as it does well beyond the standard requirements of heroic liminality, this genesis of the Ulster hero *par excellence* can hardly be understood except as an orthodox allegory and "native" typology of Christ's mysterious incarnation as set forth in the New Testament'. However, he does not elaborate this point in greater detail. Further possible parallels in the characters of Christ and Cú Chulainn are discussed in detail in VII.4.

Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 127-8) rejects the notion that aspects of Cú Chulainn's life are modeled on that of Christ. He acknowledges that Cú Chulainn shares dual paternity with Christ and a number of other heroes but begs to differ with regard to his triple conception. Alternatively, he asserts that this motif should be considered in view of the 'prevalence of triplicity of gods and heroes in Irish literature, and of the occurrence of triplicity in Celtic iconography'. It is further posited that there are grounds for connecting Cú Chulainn's inherent triplicity with his destiny as a warrior and the following proposal regarding the sequence of Cú Chulainn's triple conception is offered:

..the hero recapitulates in his own life the history of man, since, if we may judge from the occurrence of deity names in their pedigrees, the Irish apparently believed themselves to be descended from the gods. Furthermore, this sequence gives us a singularly clear example of the manner in which the hero mediates between the gods and men: the second (or middle) conception, linked to the first and third by Lug and Deichtine respectively, mediates the opposition between the divine and the human (Ó Cathasaigh, 1985, 82-3).

Ó Cathasaigh (1985, 81) posits that there is evidence in *Compert Con Culainn* and TBC for viewing Cú Chulainn as a fecundating hero (see III.5.2-3). Drawing on

the work of Ó Broin (1961-63) on the *ces* or 'debility' suffered by the Ulstermen in TBC, Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 126) argues that:

...the theme of the Waste Land implies the need for a fecundating hero, an element which is of course consistent with Ó Broin's interpretation of the debility of the Ulstermen as a winter sleep, from the effects of which Ulster is rescued by this vigorous young male as the vital force in nature.<sup>31</sup>

In Irish tradition, this role is closely associated with that of the king and usually filled by him, but in this instance it is fulfilled by Cú Chulainn (Ó Cathasaigh, 1985, 81).

### **III.1.3. Discussion and analysis**

Unlike those of some other Irish heroes such as Finn mac Cumhaill, Conaire Mór and Níall Noígíallach, the details of Cú Chulainn's conception and birth are found in a specifically dedicated tale, namely *Compert Con Culainn*. It highlights his unusual conception and birth, thus setting him apart from an ordinary mortal, and asserts his partially divine parentage distinguishing him further from those around him in the ordinary world and marking his ambivalent heroic status.

In both versions of the tale, the vegetation at Emain Machae is ravished by a flock of birds with the result that the Ulstermen give chase and are forced to seek shelter in an unfamiliar land. These birds are said to be Deichtire and her maidens who had been missing for three years in version II. A house in which the Ulster men receive generous hospitality is found in both cases. A man and a heavily pregnant

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<sup>31</sup> *Ces* will be discussed further in III.5.2-3 and VII.4.

woman also play a central role in these visits. The latter then gives birth to a boy who is then left in the care of the Ulster people. While this essentially marks the end of version II, version I proceeds then to detail the hero's second and third conceptions. The second of which arises as a result of Deichtine swallowing an insect, whereupon she is visited by Lug who informs her that she is pregnant. Seeing that Deichtine is single, rumours arise about the possible father of her unborn child, one of which involves her own father, Conchobar, with the result that she is betrothed to Súaldaim mac Róich. Reluctant to go into the marriage pregnant, she aborts the baby and thereafter falls pregnant within wedlock.

The beginning of the tale sets the scene for the coming of a great hero. In version I of the tale, the very existence of Ulster is threatened by what can only be perceived as otherworldly birds, whose intrusion into the ordinary world would ultimately bring the hero into existence (van Hamel, 1933, 3, §1).<sup>32</sup> They intervene by stripping bare the lands in front of the royal centre at Emain Machae:

*No:tathigtis énlaithe mag ar Emuin. Na gelltis conná: fácbatis cid mecnu na féir ná lossa i talam* 'A flock of birds used to frequent the plain in front of Emain. They used to graze upon it so that they did not leave even the roots of grass or of vegetables in the ground' (§1; my translation).<sup>33</sup>

This results in the Ulstermen giving chase to these birds, drawing them into what can be understood as an otherworldly realm. Ó Cathasaigh (1985, 80-1) takes this location to be the edge of Bruig na Bóinne (Newgrange), obviously interpreting the

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<sup>32</sup> This is suggested by their ability to completely strip the land of vegetation, their linking together by a chain along with the fact that the Ulstermen are unable to catch them.

<sup>33</sup> The wasting of land by otherworldly birds and pigs is also found in *Cath Maige Mucrama* (O'Daly, 1975, 49, §§35-6).

word *Bruig* as a proper noun, whereas McCone (2005, 97, 261) restores the older *mruig* form, apparently taking it as a common noun meaning ‘land, homestead’ in his reconstruction of the tale. There are a number of elements indicating its otherworldliness, including the heavy snowfall, the Ulstermen’s unfamiliarity with the area, the mysterious small house and its inhabitants, all of which vanish the following morning (van Hamel, 1933, 3-4, §§2-3).

The threat to the Ulaid in their own territory, where they should be at their strongest, may also suggest that their defensive capacity is inadequate to some extent.<sup>34</sup> This is even more pronounced in the second version of the tale owing to the fact that Deichtire, Conchobar’s sister, and fifty other maidens are allowed to escape from the Ulstermen for three years:

*Luidh Deichtir siur Concubuir caecaid inghen for aithedh can fis do Concubur ná do Ultaib. Nicon fes eng ná éis dóib 7 robas oc a n-iaraidh co cend teora mbliadan* ‘Conchobar’s sister, Deichtire, and fifty maidens fled unbeknown to Conchobar and the Ulstermen. Not a trace or track of them was found though they were being sought for three years’ (Meyer, 1905, 500; my translation).<sup>35</sup>

The early Irish *Díre* text stresses the dependence of women on their respective male guardian figure throughout their life (Kelly, 1988, 76).

The disappearance of such a large number of Ulster women of marriageable age raises questions in relation to the Ulstermen’s control over their land and suggests a

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<sup>34</sup> In addition, they are also said to have been defeated by Eógan mac Durthacht, leaving Cú Chulainn to rescue Conchobar in one of his *macgnímrada* (TBC I, ll.481-523).

<sup>35</sup> Cú Chulainn’s earthly mother is variously represented as being Deichtine, who is Conchobar’s daughter or Deichtire his sister (see VII.3).

degree of social disorder. It would seem that these women should not have been allowed to roam freely, particularly given that it would render their protection impossible. It seems plausible to suggest that they may have been residing in the Otherworld during this time. Presumably, their absence would also have serious reproductive repercussions thus introducing the motif of barrenness prior to the birth of the hero into the tale.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the Ulstermen were unable to find them for three years also suggests that their martial and particularly their hunting skills are inadequate to some extent. This is compounded further by their inability to catch the offending birds. The stripping of the land by the birds in both versions, and the disappearance of the women in the second, plausibly set the scene for the arrival of a force to fill this void and restore order. Interestingly, these two elements feature in Cú Chulainn's *geisi* listed in *Echtrae Nerai* and are also incorporated into his role as protector of Ulster (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13; see V.6).

The images of decay are deemed to support the theory that Cú Chulainn should be considered as a rejuvenating force, representing the triumph of life over death and decay as a result of seasonal change (Ó Cathasaigh, 1985, 81). It is further suggested by Ó Cathasaigh that the theme in this instance 'presages the decisive intervention by the otherworld in the affairs of Ulster'. It seems that these two motifs should not be linked together, principally because they are fundamentally different. The decay that is suffered goes beyond that experienced as a result of seasonal change owing to the fact that the roots of the plants are removed as well.

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<sup>36</sup> Findchóem suffers from 'hesitation of offspring' before becoming pregnant with Conall Cernach (Arbuthnot, 2007, 69 & 141, §264).

Since the birds themselves are not ordinary birds, their feeding on the vegetation can be viewed in the same manner.

These aspects may, then, be viewed as merely the means by which the otherworldly personages intervene in the ordinary world when they chose to. In the case of version II, Deichtire and her maidens may be viewed as messengers from the Otherworld. Admittedly, the snow shower in version I might be taken to indicate that these events take place in winter. However, this occurs as the Ulster warriors are about to enter an otherworldly domain and so may alternatively be considered as a correlative to the mist and vision that Cormac mac Airt and Cú Chulainn encounter in similar circumstances (see III.4.3.1). Furthermore, there are no associated images of replenishment following the birth of Cú Chulainn. It seems that such motifs are more closely related to kings, where images of plenty and rejuvenation surround the just king while images of death and decay are associated with the opposite (Kelly, 1988, 18). Nevertheless, the function of the warrior is ultimately to protect and defend the lands and people of the kingdom, thereby helping the king to fulfil his responsibility of ensuring that his people are provided for.

Version I encompasses virtually all the aforementioned variants of conception as well as some that are not identified in de Vries' model. An unnamed divine woman and the divine Lug mac Ethnenn are his parents in the first conception.<sup>37</sup> A completely divine pairing is not catered for within de Vries' schema and does not seem to be consistent with the heroic profile because the child of such a union

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<sup>37</sup> This woman's presence alongside Lug in an otherworldly location along with her mysterious disappearance alludes to her supernatural status.

would be a god and hence normally incompatible with mortal existence. Indeed, this is reflected by the fact that the child of this pairing dies shortly after being brought to Emain Machae, McCone (1990, 198) remarking that it failed to make the complete transition from supernatural to the fully human realm and thus died. The second conception, while somewhat unusual, is more typical of the heroic biography. The divine Lug mac Ethnenn, impregnates Deichtine, who is presumably a virgin, in the guise of an insect in version I.<sup>38</sup> This combination corresponds closest with that found in version II where an unnamed divine father appears to unite with Deichtire, Conchobar's sister, to produce Cú Chulainn (Meyer, 1905, 501-2). This pairing of a divine father and a mortal woman fulfils the requirements of the heroic biography. In version I, the child of this union (the second conception) is aborted, whereas this is Cú Chulainn's one and only birth in version II. Finally, Cú Chulainn is begotten like any other mortal in the confines of wedlock in his third and last conception in version I.

The incestuous variant of this point is also alluded to in both versions. The first observes that, because a father was not known for Deichtine's unborn child, it was thought that Conchobar had slept with her in a drunken stupor (van Hamel, 1933, 6, §6). The details differ in version II. The women of Ulster, who were earlier in the form of birds, are in the mysterious house where the Ulstermen subsequently take shelter. Deichtire, Conchobar's sister, is among them and is heavily pregnant. Thereafter Conchobar requests to sleep with her, unaware of her true identity:

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<sup>38</sup> In the late Middle Irish treatise on personal names, *Cóir Anmann*, Findchóem becomes pregnant with Conall Cernach after ingesting a drink with a worm in it (Arbuthnot, 2007, 69 & 141, §264). This is also found in the Stowe MS No. 92 account of Conchobar's birth where his mother, Ness, appears to conceive after swallowing two worms, but it is stated later on that Fachtna Fáthach is the father (Meyer, 1883-85, 179-80). This motif is similarly reflected in *De Chopur in Dá Mucado* (Kinsella, 1969, 48-9).

*“Tabair íarum a ben chugam-sa do feis lium anocht”, ar Conchobar* ““Then give his wife to me to sleep with me tonight”, said Conchobar’ (Meyer, 1905, 502; my translation). She is granted a stay because of her labour pains. When Conchobar wakes in the morning, he finds the young hero in his arms.

Cú Chulainn’s triple conception in version I appears to reflect a deliberate attempt to place him above other heroic figures. Dual paternity is found elsewhere in Irish tradition, one obvious example being Conaire Mór, who is the son of a divine bird-man but is also known as the son of a mortal father, the king, Éterscélae (Knott, 1936, 3-4, §§7-8). McCone’s proposal that this unusual conception has strong biblical echoes requires further consideration. It seems that Cú Chulainn’s mysterious first account of his conception can be compared with that of Christ’s because both contain the triple element. The latter is considered as the son of God the Father and the son of Mary by God the Holy Spirit and the son of Mary and Joseph.

The Gospel according to Luke (1:26-38) tells how the angel Gabriel visited a virgin called Mary, who was betrothed to a man called Joseph, and tells her that she would conceive the Son of God through the Holy Spirit and should call him Jesus. Similarly, in the Gospel according to Matthew (1:18-25), Mary is found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit when she is betrothed to Joseph. Joseph was about to divorce Mary when an angel appears to him and tells him not to be afraid, as she had conceived the child through the Holy Spirit, and to call him Jesus. One obvious similarity between the conception of Cú Chulainn and that of Christ is the non-sexual impregnation of a virgin mother by a divine element, a swallowed

worm, also found elsewhere in Irish tradition, and the Holy Spirit respectively. Both involve a visitation by a divine figure announcing the divinely-authored conception of the child and also revealing the name by which he should be called. However, the sequence of events in Lug's visitation, also agree closely with that found in Conaire Mór's conception: Mess Buachalla, his mother, is visited by a bird-man who impregnates her and then tells her that she will bear his son, whose name would be Conaire (Knott, 1936, 3, §7). In both of these cases the woman is impregnated by the divine man before being informed of her condition and the name to be given to the son thus conceived.

Although there seem to be definite similarities between the conceptions of Christ and Cú Chulainn, a number of these can be attributed to the unusual elements characteristic of heroic impregnations in general. Cú Chulainn's triple conception clearly surpasses that of most other heroic figures. Triplicity appears to be integral to Cú Chulainn's existence and it is noteworthy that his conception, like Christ's, reflects all possible conceptual combinations and thus mediates between three different levels of existence: completely divine, semi-divine and exclusively human.

It remains to consider certain aspects of Cú Chulainn's actual birth, beginning with the 'supremely liminal' nature of this event (McCone, 1990, 189). Heroic births typically take place outside the normal domain. For example, Níall Noígíallach and Cormac mac Airt (*Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*) are born on the *faithche* or 'green' which McCone (1990, 189) considers as a 'liminal place of sanctuary' located

‘between the central walled homestead (*les*) and the world beyond’.<sup>39</sup> Cú Chulainn is born away from Emain Machae in both versions, the Ulster warriors having travelled southwards over Slíab Fúait and down through Brega, an area roughly corresponding to present-day Meath,<sup>40</sup> in version I and apparently southwards away from Emain Machae in the second version (van Hamel, 1933, 3, §2; Meyer, 1905, 501). It would appear that in both (as a result of his first conception in version I) he is born beyond Ulster territory in what seems to be an otherworldly location.<sup>41</sup> His birth in such a mysterious location essentially frames his unusual and ambivalent status thereafter. Again, a further two eventualities are explored in version I, when he is not born as a result of his second conception and presumably arrives in the normal way in the third (van Hamel, 1933, 6, §6).

Cú Chulainn’s birth (his first in version I) differs from others in that a number of these are quite humble, the mother often being more or less alone.<sup>42</sup> In both versions, the king and other significant warriors are present at what is clearly an auspicious occasion. It also appears to occur in both versions at the time of a feast, an important warrior activity central to a number of Ulster tales, including *Aided Con na Cerda*, *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* and *Loinges mac nUislenn*. This may be

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<sup>39</sup> In *Geneamuin Chormaic*, Cormac is born while his mother is on the way to Lugnae Fer Trí in Connacht (McCone, 1990, 214-5).

<sup>40</sup> *Onomasticon Goedelicum* indicates that Brega Midi is a plain in Meath.

<sup>41</sup> Brigit is also born outside the territory of her father (Connolly, 1989, 15, §§4-7).

<sup>42</sup> Fíachu Muillethan is born on a flagstone in the middle of a river (O’Daly, 1975, 51, §43); Conchobar is similarly born on a flagstone on the edge of a river in one account of his birth (Meyer, 1883-85, 180-1). In *Vitae Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, Brigit is born over a threshold (Connolly, 1989, 15, §6).

viewed as a ceremonial event marking the birth of the hero amidst an elite group of Ulster warriors<sup>43</sup> in token of his own destiny as a supreme warrior.

It has been noted that the brief final section of version I has been removed in the LU text and replaced with a longer ending focusing on the arrangement of Cú Chulainn's fosterage. In the shorter account, Cú Chulainn is taken into fosterage after his birth by Culann, the smith who is referred to as his *aite* 'foster-father' (van Hamel, 1933, 6, §6).<sup>44</sup> This is replaced with a far more detailed account of the manner in which he is fostered.

A dispute arises over who should have the privilege of rearing him between Findchóem, Senchae, Bláí Briugu, Fergus and Amairgen (van Hamel, 1933, 6-8, §7). Conchobar, who is unable to reach a decision, refers the matter to the wise Morann. He concludes that all of them should play a role in fostering him and that each should teach or provide for him in their particular area of expertise. Thus he would be furnished with many talents (*Ba cumma no ndamnaigfetar uili etir errid 7 rí 7 ollamain ol bid carae sochaide in mac so*; §7). Findchóem is given the role of foster-mother, and will most importantly raise him alongside the warrior, Conall Cernach. Senchae will be responsible for his eloquence and his negotiation skills, while Bláí Briugu is to provide for him. Fergus mac Róich will hone his martial skills. Finally, Morann decides that Amairgen, who is known for his wisdom, is to be Cú Chulainn's teacher (§7).

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<sup>43</sup> Van Gennep (1960, 20) suggests that a shared meal can be interpreted as an incorporation rite, welcoming or marking incorporation into a new group or society.

<sup>44</sup> This is also one of the explanations given for Cú Chulainn's name in *Cóir Anmann* (Arbuthnot, 2005, 87 & 126, §34).

Charles-Edwards (2000, 83) indicates that it is fitting and indeed expected for Cú Chulainn, because of his noble status, to have several fosterers, thus creating a network of alliances for him. This would also be mutually beneficial for those involved in rearing him. The two most important alliances or bonds that he makes are with Fergus and Conall Cernach. Cú Chulainn's strong connection with Fergus is particularly evident in TBC, where Fergus, though on the enemy's side, constantly looks out for him (see V.5). The avenging of Cú Chulainn's death falls on Conall Cernach (see V.1). It also seems to be apt that a number of people are fighting for the honour of fostering him. This may be because he is the king's grandson (or nephew in version II) or may be associated with a deliberate attempt to present him as the supreme martial hero.

## **Conclusion**

The accounts of Cú Chulainn's begetting, in particular, the triple one, are quite elaborate thus indicating that this is an important event. There is no doubt but that this meets and indeed surpasses the criteria set out in the first point in de Vries' schema. The divine element is particularly highlighted thus framing his ambivalent heroic status. His triple conception goes well beyond the heroic norm, and possibly, may have been influenced to some degree by Jesus' begetting, but it is difficult to prove this with certainty.

## **III.2. Cú Chulainn's youth**

### **III.2.1. De Vries' schema**

The third and fourth points in de Vries' schema are concerned with the hero's youth. It is only the fourth which is truly reflected in Cú Chulainn's heroic

biography and thus this discussion will concentrate on this point. There are two variants listed here but only the first is relevant to Cú Chulainn. This states that the hero reveals his strength and courage, or other specific features, from a particularly young age and Cú Chulainn's youth is given as a case in point (de Vries, 1963, 73, 214). It is also observed that it is not unusual for the hero not to be recognized initially as is the case when Cú Chulainn first approaches Emain Machae and is attacked by the boy-troop (de Vries, 1963, 73). De Vries (1963, 74) further asserts that not every *cuirass* or set of arms may be good enough for the hero and he notes that this is realised in Cú Chulainn's final *macgním* when none but the king's weapons withstand him. The information for this point is found in Cú Chulainn's *macgnímrada* which are located in TBC (see II.1). The Recension I account of these will be used as the primary source.

### **III.2.2. Relevant research to date**

Cú Chulainn's arrival at Emain, his slaying of Culann's hound, and his taking up of arms, are his *macgnímrada* which have received most scholarly attention. These three deeds are common to Recension I and II. Relevant scholarly theories will be outlined in relation to each of them.

#### **Cú Chulainn's arrival at Emain Machae and his encounter with the boy-troop**

Sjoestedt (1949, 78) notes that as soon as Cú Chulainn sets forth with his childish toys to join the boys at Emain Machae, a series of initiation feats into adulthood begins. Rees & Rees (1961, 244) observe that the hero's abandonment of his childish things and his 'triumphant intrusion upon adult society is one of the universal themes of mythology'. The first group that he meets and must overcome

is that of his peers, in the same transitional state from childhood to adulthood as himself (Nagy, 1984, 26). The hero is not automatically accepted and welcomed into society but must fight to prove himself in order to be recognized, and ‘this contention leads to the definition of the hero’s identity and his relationship to society’ (Nagy, 1984, 26). Sjoestedt (1949, 80) also comments on the hero’s forcible entry into the social circle prior to becoming a member of society and proposes that ‘he must establish himself against it in disregard of its customs and even of the royal authority’. Gray (1989-90, 39) compares this incident to Lug mac Ethnenn’s coming to Tara in *Cath Maige Tuired* observing that in both cases the hero arrives ‘unrecognized among his own people; his entry is challenged; he must reveal himself as a hero if he is to be welcome among them’. Moreover, both display extraordinary qualities to gain entry: Lug displays his mastery of every art, while Cú Chulainn is an unexpected match for the boys at Emain Machae (Gray, 1989-90, 30). Gray (1989-90, 41) claims that a demonstration of prowess was a condition of entry into the social circle.

Nagy (1984, 26) asserts that Cú Chulainn ‘utilizes this quarrel with the boy-troop, a peripheral segment of society, to gain access to the inner sanctum of society’ and to the king, Conchobar. Through his interruption of the king’s game, whilst chasing the boys he acquires the king’s due recognition and assumes his rightful place in society. Thus ‘Sétanta penetrates society and stays inside it; he becomes the fosterling of Conchobar and the other Ulster worthies’ and ‘he is accepted into society as an important, albeit precocious and unusual, member in this episode of his *macgnímrada*’ (Nagy, 1984, 26). Even though not observed by Nagy, it is noteworthy that Cú Chulainn’s status as the king’s nephew/ grandson in this deed

would presumably have entitled him to automatic membership of this inner royal circle.

Thereafter, his heroic energy is harnessed to serve society as a whole but remains potentially disruptive, as is reflected in a subsequent and briefer incident in which Cú Chulainn attacks the boy-troop causing the deaths of fifty of them (Nagy, 1984, 26-7). Subsequently, he retreats and hides under the king's couch, whereupon the warriors come to attack him and Fergus and Conchobar must stand up for the youth (TBC I, ll.471-80). Cú Chulainn's throwing of the couch along with some of the warriors onto the floor enrages some of the Ulstermen to the point that Fergus and Conchobar are required to intervene to restore calm. Cú Chulainn may at times be a menace to society, but he can be controlled through its moral restraint as embodied in the king, to a 'sufficiently sociable figure to make his presence in society desirable' (Nagy, 1984, 27). Gray (1989-90, 42) suggests that the threat of the warrior is 'countered by the establishment of contract, and by royal authority' exercised by the king, who must be able to identify power equal to his own and accept and direct it.

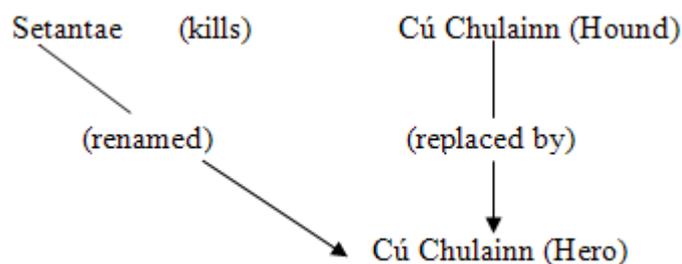
**The killing of the Smith's hound by Cú Chulainn and the reason why he is called Cú Chulainn.**

Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 12-14) discusses Cú Chulainn's slaying of the hound in light of his broader analysis of possible interpretations of myth. Following O'Rahilly, he asserts that there is a *system* of Irish myth whereby 'the conflict of the hero and the Otherworld god is seen as the essential pattern underlying a wide and varied selection of Irish tales and episodes'. O'Rahilly (1946, 314) states that in the

primitive form of myth the hero typically slays the god with the latter's weapon. Heroic figures such as Lug, Cú Chulainn and Finn thus slay gods such as Balar, the hound of Culann and Áed respectively.

Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 14) posits a 'two-fold typology, the types being designated hero and Otherworld god'. Their relationship of hostility is basic to the whole system. Looking at this paradigmatically, such figures as Lug, Finn and Cú Chulainn are deemed to occupy the same slot and can, in effect, be substituted for each other. This paradigmatic axis can then be extended more or less indefinitely, should evidence be found to warrant it. Thus Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 14-15) proposes that if 'O'Rahilly is correct in his reading of the victory of Setantae (Cú Chulainn) over Culann's dog (as I believe he is), we may add Cú Chulainn to the paradigm of the hero and Culann's dog to that of the Otherworld god'.

McCone (1984, 8-10) accepts the basic methodological assumptions involved but points out two major difficulties confronting the ascription of the hound of Culann to the value of 'Otherworld god'. Firstly, the story already has such a figure in the shape of the hospitaller, Culann, and secondly 'Cú Chulainn, who is isofunctional with the hound in it, is a martial figure through and through rather than an "Otherworld god" in any meaningful sense' (McCone, 1984, 10). Concurring with Ó Cathasaigh's (1977, 16) claim that '[i]t is not too fanciful to compare Setantae who, upon slaying the hound of Culann, becomes himself the hound of Culann (whence his name Cú Chulainn 'The hound of Culann'), and eventually guards the province of Ulster', McCone (1984, 9) schematises these relationships as follows:



He states that the relationship between Cú Chulainn the hound and Cú Chulainn the hero is not syntagmatic but paradigmatic, since the ‘hero quite literally replaces the hound as protector of Culann and his property’ (McCone, 1984, 9).

Thus ‘the tale in which he slays the hound marks a watershed in Cú Chulainn’s career, because the hero hitherto called Setantae, assumes his adult identity in it at the typically precocious age of six years as a direct result of killing Culann’s Hound’ and ‘passes the supreme test of overcoming the great dog that embodies the martial virtues and is thus able to incorporate those same virtues in its stead and to fulfill its function as aggressive guardian of people and property from outside attack’ (McCone, 1984, 11).<sup>45</sup> Kelly (1992, 74) agrees that ‘by killing the hound Sétantae appropriates its martial spirit’. McCone (1984, 11) argues that the transfer of the canine attributes to Sétantae facilitates his transformation from a child prodigy into a fully-fledged hero capable of guarding all Mag Muirthemne thus marking an elevation in his martial prowess. He further suggests that, although Cú Chulainn’s replacement of the hound was only temporary, the effects

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<sup>45</sup> In this study, McCone (1984) considers Cú Chulainn’s slaying of the hound in light of similar acts in *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* and *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair*, his conclusion being that all aspects of Cú Chulainn’s slaying of the hound are manifestly positive and favourable for the hero. In the other two tales, by contrast, negative attributes and patterns preponderate (McCone, 1984, 12, 17).

of the slaying are more longstanding in that his role as guardian continues to expand. Gray (1989-90, 43) similarly states that 'what the boy becomes through his initiatory combat he remains throughout his life: his province's guardian and watchdog'.

Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 36-8) notes that wolves and dogs are ambiguous in that they can be benign and malign in turn as members of a 'widespread class of canine guardians of the Otherworld' and that this is in keeping with the 'duplex character of the Irish Otherworld'. According to McCone (1984, 13-4), 'the two facets of the dog's behaviour reflect different aspects of warriors and warfare', namely as the loyal defenders of their own people and aggressive attackers of the enemy and thus this behaviour is malign from the standpoint of the enemy and benign from that of the people he is defending. However, on this occasion there is no question of good versus bad, simply just two martial figures in conflict, each behaving correctly (McCone, 1984, 14).

### **The Death of Nechta Scéne's three sons**

O'Leary (1986, 24) comments on Cú Chulainn's use of extraordinary verbal means to procure arms at the outset of this deed' noting that he 'surpasses his fellows in his use of words as much as his use of weapons, and is perhaps even more elusive verbally than physically' and essentially tricks Conchobar into giving him arms. Nagy (1984, 36-7) proposes that Cú Chulainn essentially 'steals' the required information from the druid, Cathbad, by acting aggressively toward him in a manner comparable to his actions against Culann, the smith, in the preceding boyhood deed. He further observes that by encroaching on these holders of

supernatural knowledge, he is in turn circumscribed by them in that Culann makes him his servant and Cathbad seems to be responsible for shortening his life by declaring the negative side to his taking up of arms. This leads him to conclude that ‘the druid/craftsman adds the finishing touches to the process of formulating and refining Sétanta’s heroic identity’.

McCone (1990, 121) notes that the receipt of *gaisced*, ‘a compound of *gáe* “spear” and *sciath* “shield”, meaning “set of arms” then by extension “martial prowess, valour”’, was a central feature in the initiation of the young warrior. According to Jackson (1964, 18), ‘when a young man reached the age of manhood he seems to have been ceremonially initiated into the status of the warrior by receiving from his lord a set of weapons, a spear and shield, precisely the *gaisced* just mentioned, and formally mounted a chariot’ and this ‘ceremony was called “taking arms”, and it bears a loose resemblance to that associated with receiving knighthood in medieval Europe’. Upon receiving the arms of the initiated warrior, the youth:

...leaves his native province in search of *oaic féne* ‘youths of the *fíán*’, slays three enemies of his people and hunts deer and birds successfully before returning home in such a dangerous state of martial frenzy that he must be immersed in three successive vats of initially cold water before his ardour and bloodlust can be cooled off sufficiently for him to be readmitted to the life of the *túath* (McCone, 1986, 17).

McCone (1986, 16-17) draws comparisons between these events and:

...a well-known panel from the Gundestrup Cauldron depicting a line of lightly clad footsoldiers armed with spear and shield moving towards a vat in which a larger-than-life figure is immersing one of them. Above these is a row of mounted figures moving away from the vat.

He concurs with de Vries' suggestion that this scene depicts the initiation of new knightly members of the tribe and argues that 'the status of the infantry awaiting initiation by immersion in the vat', which de Vries did not consider, is that of members of a Gaulish equivalent of the *fían*. It is duly noted that Cú Chulainn's situation differs to some extent, given that 'he receives a chariot and horses a day after being presented with spear and shield and prior to his expedition rather than after the immersion as in the Gundestrup sequence' and the telescoping of these events is attributed to a 'clerical reluctance to acknowledge explicitly a Fenian stage in Cú Chulainn's career, although this episode contains pretty clear narrative vestiges of a partially submerged tradition to that effect' (McCone, 1986, 17).

McCone (1990, 172) proposes that Cú Chulainn's outing and subsequent immersion in three vats constituted:

...a somewhat formalized and clerically bowdlerized literary reflex of the aristocratic youth's semi-bestial phase as a member of a *fían* or hunter-warrior association before his transition to full membership of propertied society was marked by an erstwhile baptismal rite similar to that represented iconically on the Gundestrup Cauldron.

He also suggests that Cú Chulainn's transitional immersion has been endowed with culinary overtones: 'Cú Chulainn has the wildness literally boiled out of him in a vat. The violent young warrior is "cooked" into social acceptability, so to speak'.

During this process, the first vat bursts, the water in the second boils and the third becomes lukewarm, which leads McCone (1990, 171-2) to suggest that an:

...early Irish warrior like Cú Chulainn lent himself to representation as a kind of self-heating vessel that could boil over all too easily, a tendency that needed restraining in time of peace and directing properly in time of war if it was not to prove indiscriminately destructive.

Dumézil (1969, 15) considers Cú Chulainn's combat with the triple adversary, the three sons of Nechta Scene, in this final deed as fundamental to his initiation as a warrior. He declares that this motif, 'the third kills the triple', exists in other Indo-European material. This can be understood as the element of triplicity which is evident throughout the lives of several heroic figures including Heracles who is conceived in one night three times as long as normal (Dumézil, 1969, 16). This element also features in Cú Chulainn's conception (see III.1.3).

Dumézil (1969, 10) refers to his frenzied state after his expedition as a 'dangerous state of mystical *furor* born of combat' quenched after the queen 'tries to calm him by the crudest of sexual propositions' by his immersion in the vats, yet 'he will keep in reserve this gift of *furor* which renders him invincible and which is the precious result of his initiation'. McCone (1990, 171) states that Cú Chulainn 'is shamed by the sight of bare-breasted women into covering his face'.<sup>46</sup> Sjoestedt (1949, 83) suggests that the Christian redactors interpret Cú Chulainn's subsequent confusion as a sign of modesty and that it could be considered an 'expedient

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<sup>46</sup> O'Leary (1988, 103) considers this incident in the context of *geisi* (see V.6).

analogous to that which Caesar attributes to the women of Gergovia for the purpose of turning the fierceness of a warrior to thoughts less bloody'. Cormier (1981, 43) raises the possibility that the hero is subdued by 'dirty thoughts' or perhaps feels guilty about the impropriety of looking at females in a state of undress. He concludes that 'the scene displays no Christian influence whatsoever; in fact it appears to enshrine a dark hint from the dawn of civilization' (Cormier, 1981, 46). Sjoestedt (1949, 83) alternatively attributes this scene to the 'magic of naked sacredness as a propitiatory rite' as a prelude to the following conclusion:

...this episode, coming at the end of a series of initiatory ordeals, becomes clear if we compare it with scenes of a sexual character which accompany the tribal initiation of young men in various primitive communities. The young man enters into the class of men, to whom commerce with the women of the tribe is permitted. He has sexually come of age.

Accordingly, she regards the tunic and blue cloak held with a silver brooch in which the queen dresses him as 'his manly garments or *toga virilis*'.

### **III.2.3. Discussion and analysis**

There is little doubt but that Cú Chulainn's *macgnímrada* are a realisation of the fourth point in de Vries' schema as outlined above. The magnification of his deeds to such an extent may also be attributable in some degree to the fact that they are related within the main body of TBC. Thus he swiftly moves up the rungs of the ladder to become the great warrior hero capable of defending Ulster against the armies of Medb and Ailill. Cú Chulainn's three main deeds as outlined above will be addressed in greatest detail but reference will also be made to the remaining four deeds as found in Recension I (TBC I, ll.373-824).

The prelude to these indicates that Cú Chulainn is only five when he goes to Emain Machae (TBC I, ll.376-7). Upon hearing the tales concerning the youths residing there, he is eager to join them. His extraordinary courage is palpable from his defiance of his mother's request to wait for some of the Ulster warriors to accompany him (ll.400-17). This also indicates that this is a perilous journey, yet Cú Chulainn proceeds fearlessly with only his childish toys as weapons (ll.408-9). Perhaps the seeds of the warrior's fascination or even obsession with personal honour are also evident here. Therefore, if he encounters and overcomes any adversaries along the way, he alone will receive the credit.<sup>47</sup> This also seems to deliberately place him in the line of conflict from an early age. His arrival unannounced and in disregard of the normal etiquette ensures his subsequent combat with the youths (ll.418-20).

Hence, Cú Chulainn is provided with the perfect opportunity to demonstrate his remarkable strength and abilities as a fledgling warrior, given that conflict and contests were the crux of the warrior's existence. His initial challenge aptly takes place on the field of play which is the first platform of learning for children. In keeping with other aspects of his life, he finds himself outnumbered but is nevertheless exceedingly successful in this first contest (ll.423-7). It is his heightened prowess while distorted that enables him to overcome them (see IV.3). Given that these youths are already in Conchobar's court, it is to be expected that they would have received a certain amount of training there and would consequently be more advanced than the young Cú Chulainn. This perhaps points

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<sup>47</sup> O'Leary (1991, 37) notes that there seems to be an unwillingness to share the honour created by success in heroic literature and that there 'never seems to be enough glory to go around' (see V.1).

to the inherent nature of his prowess. His victory secures his place on the first rung of the ladder toward becoming a fully-trained warrior.

His martial appetite is harnessed by Conchobar who engineers a truce between the youths and Cú Chulainn. Along with the boys ensuring Cú Chulainn's protection, he likewise insists that he guarantees their protection (ll.446-54). It would seem that this essentially means that either party would protect or safeguard the other from attack. *DIL* states that the verbal noun *fáes(s)am*, which is used in this instance, usually means 'protection' or 'safeguard' in the literature. The fact that Cú Chulainn is granted this role points to his physical supremacy over his peers. Crucially, he is presented as being stronger than all of them put together and thus this perhaps lends weight to his possible consideration as their natural leader, but there is no concrete evidence for this.<sup>48</sup> His intellectual superiority is also alluded to in this scene through his ability to successfully negotiate with the king, again indicating that he should be viewed from here on in, as their chief warrior.

This conquest assures his progression as a warrior. These three main deeds can be considered individually or collectively in light of van Gennep's basic thesis that life consists of a series of transitions from one stage to the next:

Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings:

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<sup>48</sup> Óengus is described as the leader of the one hundred fifty boys and maidens at his foster-father, Midir's home, in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Bergin & Best, 1938, 142-3, §2).

birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death (van Gennep, 1960, 3).

The rites of passage involved are divided into three stages, termed, separation or preliminal rites, transitional or liminal rites and incorporation or post-liminal rites (van Gennep, 1960, 21). Cú Chulainn is essentially separated from his mother's home in this tale and goes through a transitional phase where he encounters the boy-troop before being incorporated into Conchobar's court. In this instance he is also physically moving from his mother's home to the king's, accordingly, he is no longer sheltered by his mother but is instead answerable to Conchobar. Nagy (1984, 28) notes that this event marks the beginning of his fosterage, with Conchobar in the role of primary fosterer, and regards this as his initiation into the warrior *Männerbund*. He has taken his first step into the warrior's world and assumes the role as the protector of the boy-troop as a 'foreshadowing of his function as the protector of the entire province, which he assumes later in life' (Nagy, 1984, 26).

The next anecdote provides an insight into the young hero's sleeping pattern and further underlines his extraordinary strength to Medb and Ailill (TBC I, ll.457). Upon being woken too early one morning, he immediately strikes and drives the unfortunate culprit's forehead into his brain (ll.464-6). This reaction has the desired effect, judging from Ailill's response: "*Rofes,*" or Ailill, "*robó dor[n]d níad 7 ropo rig rúanada*" "Surely," said Ailill, "that was the fist of a warrior and the arm of a strong man!" (l.467). This also indicates that the young hero is

always on his guard. While his strength is recapitulated in his subsequent brief deed when he defeats and trounces to death a number of youths, it also points to his potentially malign side (ll.470-5). Once again his actions bring him into contact with Conchobar (ll.476-80).

These shorter exploits may not mark clear milestones in his early career, but they still support his portrayal as a martial hero. Hereafter, Cú Chulainn moves closer to the warrior domain of the battlefield when he goes to rescue a defeated and badly injured Conchobar, demonstrating once more his loyalty to him (ll.482-4). Upon waking from his sleep he proceeds fearlessly to the battleground in spite of hearing the groans of the injured Ulstermen and meeting a very badly wounded Fergus along the way (ll.487-8). Nor does he falter even when he meets the horrendous spectre of a man with half a head carrying half of another man on his back (ll.492-3). Despite his lack of proper weapons, he duly disposes of him with his hurley (ll.501-2). His astounding bravery is implicit from the following remark from Conchobar: “*Cid día tánac isin n-ármag,*” *ol Conchobar,* “*co ndeochais úathbás and*” ““Why have you come to the battle-field” said Conchobar, “where you may die of fright?”” (ll.506-7). His remarkable strength is compared to that of six of the strongest Ulster warriors by Fergus when he lifts Conchobar from the ditch where he lay half-buried (ll.508-9) and is further underlined when on return from the battlefield he also carries the seriously injured Cúscraid son of Conchobar on his back (ll.521-2). Prior to this, he duly fetches a roast pig to cure the ailing Conchobar and in the process he beheads a gruesome man (ll.516-9). Though Cú Chulainn misses out on the actual battle, his extraordinary bravery and his budding

martial skills are demonstrated in the aftermath, again bringing him to the king's attention because of his exceptional prowess, setting him apart from his peers.

The scene is again set perfectly for Cú Chulainn's encounter with the twenty-seven men from the Isles of Faiche in the following anecdote (ll.525-39). The Ulstermen are suffering from their debility, all except Cú Chulainn, his father, and the women and boys of Ulster (see III.5.2-3 & VII.3-4). All the youths, apart from Cú Chulainn, flee on catching a glimpse of these fearsome men. In what may be viewed as a foreshadowing of his role in TBC, he defends the territory on his own and manages to kill nine of the attackers with his hurley, before they subsequently flee (ll.530-6). Fergus' declaration that he was only five when he carried out all of the above deeds clearly serves to give Medb and Ailill and the rest of his audience just cause for concern.

Cú Chulainn's subsequent slaying of the hound constitutes another significant event in his heroic biography (ll.540-607).<sup>49</sup> His superb skill once again distinguishes him from his peers and earns him a coveted invitation to Culann's feast, alongside Conchobar and his most noble of warriors. Clearly, this is a great honour for him, a boy of only six years of age. Albeit rather casual in his response, Cú Chulainn accepts but chooses to go along alone at a later point thus setting the scene for his decisive single combat with Culann's hound echoing his encounter with the troop of boys on his arrival at Emain Machae in his first *macgním*. Cú

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<sup>49</sup> This scene perhaps provides the inspiration for Cú Chulainn's slaying of Conaill maic Gleo Glaiss' hound, Conbél, in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 422-3, §41). He also quickly defeats him with his bare hands.

Chulainn does not waver as the fierce hound aggressively approaches him and the brilliance of both contestants is underlined in advance, Cú Chulainn's on the playing field as mentioned above and the hound's by stating that he needs to be secured by three chains with three men holding each chain (ll.572-3).

The incorporation of the hound's martial virtues with those of Sétantae into the warrior figure of Cú Chulainn has been argued by McCone as outlined above and will not be re-visited here. However, a few comments are necessary. It is noteworthy that reference is made to another version (ll.586-7; TBC II, ll.881-5) in which Cú Chulainn kills the hound by casting his ball into its mouth. Either way, he does not use a proper weapon and thus the martial principle of *fír fer* is also adhered to here. Apart from replacing the hound as Culann's protector, Cú Chulainn goes a step further and vows to guard all of Mag Muirthemne (TBC I, ll.600-1). This expanded role reflects his enhanced martial status. Given that there is a fusion of the martial attributes of Sétantae and the hound, it is only fitting that Cú Chulainn's new task should be greater than either of their independent roles.

It is also significant that he bears a name which thereafter reflects this great martial achievement. In addition the most illustrious of Ulster warriors are present to witness his great feat, significantly associated with a feast. It is noted in III.1.3 that a feast could serve as a type of incorporation rite, marking integration into a new group in society (van Gennep, 1960, 20). A change of name accompanies this transition, van Gennep (1960, 63) also noting that the act of naming is viewed as an incorporation rite.

Cú Chulainn's final *macgním* concludes his initiation as a warrior and details his first proper martial outing. He finds himself back in Emain Machae a year later to take up arms. It seems that the 'taking up of arms' or *gabál gaiscid* may have occurred after fosterage, although the legal texts *Críth Gablach* and *Bretha Crólige* disagree as to the age of its conclusion, fourteen and seventeen respectively (Kelly, 1988, 88-9). Admittedly, Cú Chulainn is doing this at a precociously early age as is usual. Thereafter, he leaps to the equestrian phase, which may not have normally occurred until youths reached the age of twenty, symbolised by the presence of a beard when they were entitled to inherit land (McCone, 1990, 204-5).

Once more Cú Chulainn's superiority is accentuated as he displays great cunning and intelligence to procure arms, i.e. a spear and shield, from Conchobar (TBC I, ll.610-21). He smashes fifteen sets until he is given the king's own as an obvious mark of distinction (ll.621-4), a pattern which is repeated when he obtains a chariot and by implication horses as well (ll.649-52). As only the king's weapons can withstand him, Cú Chulainn's strength is equal to his thus pointing to his exceptional strength. As in a number of the other *macgnímrada* discussed above, he once again deals directly with the king, an unusual distinction for a child of his age, even if the king is a close relative of his. Indeed, it is also noteworthy that from a distance he could be mistaken as the king given that he bears his weapon and travels in his chariot. It would seem that Cú Chulainn should have had two separate expeditions, one after obtaining his set of arms and a second after reaching the equestrian phase. While this is in line with his rapid progress to date,

McCone's views as outlined above are particularly valid and explain the omission of a 'proper' *fíán* period in his life. It is perhaps fitting that the budding hero of the tribe should not require such an extended period in the *fíán*. Cú Chulainn very much proves that he is capable of performing the deeds of an adult warrior at the age of seven so it is perhaps more appropriate that he be catapulted up the martial ranks so that he can better serve society. In this regard, Cú Chulainn is once again differentiated from his peers.

Attention is also drawn to his extraordinary bravery in his response to Cathbad's prophecy that whoever took up arms on that particular day would be renowned but would die young (ll.640-1). A short life is noted as a common feature in the biographies of heroes (de Vries, 1963, 74). The fact that Cú Chulainn chooses fame over a lengthy existence is particularly appropriate given his martial status and appears crucial to the enhancement of his warrior profile.

Cú Chulainn's first encounter is with Conall Cernach on Slíab Fúait, whom he tries to relieve of his duties of protecting the province (TBC I, ll.672-3). He is now ready to extend his role as protector and guardian and to fulfill his responsibilities as an Ulster warrior. Despite Conall's dismissive response to his request to permit him to guard the province for a day, he essentially gives him no other choice when he breaks his chariot (ll.680-6). Given Conall Cernach's status as a great Ulster warrior, it is particularly significant that the young Cú Chulainn manages to get the better of him. Conceivably, it is his role as chief warrior that he assumes and this returns to Conall on his death (Kimpton, 2009, 25-7 & 44-6, §§25-30; see VII.3). Unsurprisingly, Cú Chulainn chooses the mammoth task of ridding Ulster of the

scourge of the three sons of Nechta Scéne for his first expedition (TBC I, ll.702-54). Determined that his first outing will be glorious, he deliberately breaks one of their *geisi* in order to secure combat with them (ll.711-4; see V.6). His going to sleep prior to their arrival and his instruction to his charioteer only to wake him if a large number of warriors come, points to his almost suicidal bravery (ll.714-6). Cú Chulainn proves to be more than a match for each of these warriors and takes their heads as proof of his great accomplishment (l.758).

Cú Chulainn is determined to add to this and thereupon hunts deer and swans but captures them alive to impress the Ulster warriors further (ll.767-87). The enormity of his accomplishments is also indicated by the charioteer's comments that the young hero would be unable to perform these deeds (ll.707-28, ll.767-75). Finally, he displays his spoils to all at Emain Machae leaving no doubt but that his first expedition is astoundingly successful (ll.799-801). However, he is whipped up into such a state of martial frenzy that he threatens to turn on his own people (ll.807-9). It is in this regard that Cú Chulainn parallels with the young *fíán* members and demonstrates his potentially malign side. It is noteworthy that prior to this outing, he announces his intention to go in search of *óc féne* at Loch Echtra (ll.676-8; see IV.3).<sup>50</sup> His desire to slay more people after this outing also indicates his abnormally large appetite for battle. The text indicates that Cú Chulainn can be controlled when the king orders that the naked women be sent forth to greet him (ll.810-2). This has the envisaged effect of stopping him until such time as he can be seized (l.814-5). Scholarly theories which seek to explain

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<sup>50</sup> The inclusion of *echtrae* in the name of the lake perhaps suggests that this may be viewed as an *echtrae* type-adventure.

Cú Chulainn's reaction of hiding his face have been outlined above. Alternatively, he may be shamed by such a blatant display of female nakedness, particularly in view of his young age or it may be attributed to his shame at having almost entered into combat with a group of semi-naked women. It is noteworthy that he turns his face to the ground at the sight of the female satirist, Riches, and refuses to rise while she remains in such a state in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 46, ll.1040-7).

While McCone's (1990, 171-2) proposal that the hero is cooked into social acceptability in the three vats of water is perfectly acceptable, viewed more simply this may have just been the normal means by which hot objects including the self-heating enraged hero in this case, are cooled and thus returned to their normal temperature:

*La sodain atnethat láith gaile Emna ⁊ foherdat i ndabaig n-úarusci. Maitti immi-seom in dabach hísín. In dabach aile dano in ro lád fíches dornaib de. In tress dabach i ndeochaid iar sudiu, fosngert-side combo chuimsi dó a tess ⁊ a fuacht* 'Then the warriors of Emain seized him and cast him into a tub of cold water. That tub burst about him. The second tub into which he was plunged boiled hands high therefrom. The third tub into which he went after that he warmed so that its heat and its cold were properly adjusted for him' (TBC I, ll.814-8).

Hence, the sequence may be considered in the opposite manner in which McCone interprets it. Cú Chulainn's martial rage is similarly quenched in *Serglige Con Culainn* and the latter may have drawn on this episode (*"in fer d'imbirt a ferci*

*fornd*”; Dillon, 1953a, 21, §36).<sup>51</sup> Bare-breasted women and three vats of cold water are likewise prepared to quench the martial ardour of Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach and Cú Chulainn as they approach Crúachain in *Fled Bricrenn*, but no further details are provided (*do tathugud a m-brotha*; Henderson, 1899, 66-9, §§52-4).<sup>52</sup> While in *Mesca Ulad*, Ailill calls for washing water to be heated and food and drink to be prepared to mellow the Ulstermen (Watson, 1941, 41, ll.920-3).

Coming as it does after his acquisition of weapons, a chariot and his successful first outing, his immersion herein may be viewed as a ceremonial baptismal rite marking his progression as a warrior, thus serving to cleanse or rid the hero of some of his youthful wild, and perhaps *fíán* ways before rendering him fit for life as a fully-fledged warrior within the community. His initiation into the next stage of warriorhood is evident from the manner in which he is wrapped in a mantle by the queen and takes his place alongside Conchobar in which he remains subsequently (TBC I, ll.819-21).<sup>53</sup> To draw on the rites of passage once more, he is no longer viewed as a child, despite his age. He has moved away from his mother, through various stages to full initiation as an adult warrior with the arms and trophies to prove it.

## Conclusion

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<sup>51</sup> *DIL* translates *ferg* as ‘anger, wrath’. Dumezil (1969, 135) views his *ferg* on his return to Emain Machae in his final boyhood deed as being ‘as troublesome as it is precious: the child is not its master; on the contrary it possesses him’.

<sup>52</sup> Alternatively, he is sent to gather the herds of Slíab Fúait to subdue his anger in the latter stages of *Tochmarc Emire* when faced with the news that Conchobar will sleep with his new bride, Emer (van Hamel, 1933, 64-5, §§88-9; see VI.7).

<sup>53</sup> He sits in the hero’s seat before Conchobar in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 10, ll.228-9).

The fourth point in de Vries' model is unquestionably reflected in Cú Chulainn's heroic biography. His remarkable courage, strength and abilities are persistently showcased in his *macgnímrada*. Despite little progression in his age, these in effect mark his transition from a child to that of an 'adult' warrior bearing arms. These also mark his introduction as the budding martial hero of Ulster.

### **III.3. Cú Chulainn wins a maiden**

#### **III.3.1. De Vries' schema**

Point seven in de Vries' schema is concerned with the hero's winning of a wife. The hero usually does this after overcoming a number of difficulties according to de Vries (1963, 215), who does not make any direct reference to Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer. This stage is connected to the pubescent period in a youth's life and viewed as a rite of passage in van Gennep's sense: 'the child dies and the man begins his life. They are, as it were, two different beings who at this moment separate within the same individual' (de Vries, 1963, 220). This is symbolically represented through an appropriate ritual involving a 'passage through death to a new life' and goes beyond this to include a sexual element in which the male matures and shows the capacity to beget children (de Vries, 1963, 221). Hence the initiation process which 'often takes the form of orgiastic promiscuity; the newly-gained virility has first run its full course in unbridled vehemence so as afterwards to be canalized, often by the strictest regulations of social life' and accordingly the

‘marriageable young man must choose himself a wife, and often has to prove himself worthy of her by giving proofs of his valour’ (de Vries, 1963, 221).<sup>54</sup>

### III.3.2. Relevant research to date

Bitel (1996, 44) observes that the two most important genres of formal love tales were *tochmarca* (wooings) and *aitheda* (elopements). In these stories a familiar pattern existed, whereby ‘a man and woman saw or heard about each other, met, fell in love, negotiated a relationship, consummated their union, and experienced the social effects of it’ (Bitel, 1996, 44). No single paradigm for romantic coupling is expressed. Indeed, alternative accounts are detailed in *tochmarca* and *aitheda*, which are defined as a ‘story of active negotiation between a woman and a man, sometimes leading to her willing abduction and often to their marriage’ and a story which ‘usually recounted a woman’s seduction of a man’ respectively (Bitel, 1996, 45). Bitel (1996, 51-2) notes that roles played by men and women differ in these tale-types with the former actively pursuing his maiden, whose role is largely passive, in the *tochmarca* while the latter plays a more active role in the *aitheda* by choosing her man and compelling him to do her will. She further concludes that *tochmarca* tales are more inclined to result in a happier outcome for the couple, albeit after trials and tribulations (Bitel, 1996, 45-6). While Bitel (1996, 56) provides a good general survey of a number of wooing tales including *Tochmarc Emire*, *Tochmarc Luaine* and *Tochmarc Becfola* and perhaps somewhat fewer *aitheda*, these assertions require further scrutiny. The wooing process along with its outcome in a number of wooing tales is considered below.

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<sup>54</sup> De Vries (1963, 222) observes that the hero may have to overcome a dragon or some sort of monster as part of this ritual.

Sjoestedt (1949, 91) considers the marriage of a hero to be an integral component in his career and observes that *Tochmarc Emire*:

..bears the mark of the same conceptions that inspire the other sagas: it is under the seal of social conformity and ritual violence; and it includes an episode of initiatory character, comparable to those which mark the earlier stages of the hero's career.

Cú Chulainn is seen as a threat to social order because of the women of Ulster's desire for him; the decision to marry him off being dictated by the need to maintain society and facilitate his promotion into the class of married men (Sjoestedt, 1949, 91).

A number of typical features have been identified within this genre of tales, and these call for discussion. It is proposed that from an analysis of tales of courtship like *Tochmarc Becfola*, a type of literary courtship can be demarcated from the type of courtship accounted for in early Irish legal texts, which principally involved the family of the bride and that of the groom possibly including him too (Bitel, 1996, 47). The distinguishing factor was the nature of the negotiation process, which centres around direct negotiations largely initiated by the couple in literary texts and that once this process began, gender status issues were irrelevant, each having equal rights to make, accept and reject demands until agreement was reached on the conditions of the relationship (Bitel, 1996, 47-8). She notes that early Irish legal material implies that families essentially guided the mating process for their children and negotiated the terms of formal unions. However, she

observes that the presence of these guardians cannot be clarified in some *tochmarca*, because of a tendency to focus on the actions of the mating couple and particularly on their negotiations. No such ambiguity is found in the negotiations between Cú Chulainn and Emer in *Tochmarc Emire*, where they are carried out in clear defiance of her guardian.

The speech act in this initial encounter has received a considerable amount of attention. Cormier (1975, 119) suggests that this scene may be interpreted as a customary act, which led to the hero's very practical acquisition of a wife. Furthermore, at a literary level, he regards the dramatic dialogue as a 'fitting prelude to the hero's union with a wife who ought not to succumb to him too easily, and whom he can embrace as a mate worthy of his status'. This speech act serves to locate the characters in relation to each other and to introduce Emer as the woman whom Cú Chulainn chooses to court (Sayers, 1991-92, 126). This crucial interplay also points to Cú Chulainn's exceptional intellectual skills through his proficiency in this secret language of the poets (Sjoestedt, 1949, 86). In contrast to the riddling element contained in other *Bride-wager* stories, this tale portrays a hero who wants to marry a woman because of her ability to understand and use these riddles as opposed to her failure to understand these or his obligation to solve them for her (Baudiš, 1921-23, 104-5). In *Tochmarc Emire*, Emer skillfully manipulates the conversation to set out the conditions under which Cú Chulainn can win her and hence for their relationship. Emer appears hostile at the outset of the conversation, but by the end of it she tells him exactly how she can be carried off (Findon, 1997, 38).

Other common features of these wooing tales have been identified by Findon (1997, 29):

..the quest for a bride is opposed at some stage by a parent or rival; the hero must accomplish a series of difficult or dangerous tasks before winning his bride; his journey usually involves a separation from his familiar surroundings and often a passage through a hostile realm; he receives help in his quest, often from the bride herself; and he eventually overcomes all obstacles and claims his bride.

The hostility of Emer's family, in particular her father, is quite obvious in *Tochmarc Emire*. Rees & Rees (1961, 259, 268) consider Cú Chulainn's initial journey from Emain Machae to Emer's home in Brega as a trip to another world and one which 'becomes a ceremonial progress into the world beyond'. For Rees & Rees (1961, 268), the hero is not met with unequivocal refusal, but is instead promised the girl if he can accomplish seemingly impossible tasks.

Campbell (1949, 344) proposes that 'the motif of the difficult task as prerequisite to the bridal bed has spun the hero-deeds of all time and all the world'. Findon (1997, 39) suggests that 'by subtly shaping the conversation to put pressure on Cú Chulainn, Emer comes just close enough to impugning his honour to goad him into action to prove himself'. This array of feats is further bolstered by the actions of Emer's father, Forgall, who conspires to send the hero on a dangerous journey to the lands of Domnall and Scáthach. According to Cormier (1975, 120), Forgall's actions are born out of his fear of acquiring Cú Chulainn as a relative. Sjoestedt (1949, 91-2) claims that there is no obvious reason for Forgall's opposition to Cú Chulainn's marriage of Emer apart from 'ritual conventions, which require that

every marriage shall be an abduction'. Campbell (1949, 344) concurs, noting that the tasks or tests imposed are indeed difficult beyond measure and that 'they seem to represent an absolute refusal on the part of the parent ogre, to permit life to go its way; nevertheless, when a fit candidate appears, no task in the world is beyond his skill'. Rees & Rees (1961, 259-60) assert that the events leading up to Cú Chulainn's eventual rescue of Emer are pre-ordained before the action began and that these are set out by Emer in their first encounter with the result that Cú Chulainn and his adversaries are 'simply going through the motions of a drama'.

### **III.3.3. Discussion and analysis**

Cú Chulainn's progress hitherto gives no clear indication that he has ripened sexually but in *Tochmarc Emire* he has become the object of desire (van Hamel, 1933, 21-2, §6; see VI.5). This development marks his further advancement into adulthood and another milestone in his career. It is recounted in *Tochmarc Emire* and is intertwined with his further training in arms with Scáthach. The Scáthach episode seems to overshadow his acquisition of a wife to some degree and is addressed in detail in III.4.3.1. Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer in the first and concluding parts of the tale will be discussed in detail in this section. His representation will be explored in light of other *tochmarca*. A comparative analysis of this tale and a number of others in the genre with a view to establishing basic structures indicates that this tale generally displays positive aspects. It appears to match material found in early Irish law texts dealing with marriage more closely than some other wooing tales, due allowance being made for the different orientation of legal and narrative material.

In *Tochmarc Emire*, a minimalist approach to the wooing is adopted and Cú Chulainn's martial persona remains prominent. Its positive depiction of this event will be illustrated with reference to certain key elements displayed by a number of other wooing tales, namely: *Tochmarc Becfola* (TB), *Tochmarc Treblainne* (TT), *Tochmarc Luaine 7 Aided Athairne* (TL), *Táin Bó Fraích* (TBF), *Tochmarc Étaíne* (TET) and *Tochmarc Ailbe* (TA). The following components will be examined:

- 1) **Whether the man takes the initiative or not**
- 2) **Whether the woman takes the initiative or not**
- 3) **The presence of direct negotiations between the couple**
- 4) **The necessity for the man to accomplish a series of designated tasks in order to win his bride**
- 5) **The outcome of the wooing**

The occurrence (+) or absence (-) of these is tabulated below. The abbreviated title appears on the horizontal axis and the numbered features above on the vertical axis.

**Table**

	TE	TB	TT	TL	TET	TBF	TA
1)	+	-	-	+	-	-	+
2)	-	+	+	-	-	+	-
3)	+	+	-	-	-	+	+
4)	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
5)	+	-	-	-	-	-	+

**1) Whether the man takes the initiative or not**

**2) Whether the woman takes the initiative or not**

In his discussion of the legalities of early Irish marital unions, Kelly (1988, 11) observes that the more formal types 'were usually arranged by the families of the couple'. However, the legal texts do not give any detailed accounts of this process. The *Díre*-text observes that throughout her life a woman remained dependant and was thus unlikely to have been involved in the arrangement:

...her father has charge over her when she is a girl, her husband when she is a wife, her sons when she is a [widowed] woman with children, her kin when she is a 'woman of the kin' (i.e. with no other guardian), the Church when she is a woman of the Church (i.e. a nun). She is not capable of sale or purchase or contract or transaction without the authorization of one of her superiors (Kelly, 1988, 76).

It is quite likely that certain men, kings and lords, would have been directly involved or instrumental in arranging their own marital contract with the bride's family. Scholars have noted that the man is typically the protagonist in this literary genre. The man's role is not as straightforward as suggested hitherto, it nonetheless seems to be crucial to the success of the wooing that the man take the initiative, that the choice of woman rest with him and that his behaviour be appropriate.

All aspects of Cú Chulainn's initial wooing of Emer are exemplary in this regard. The messengers' failure to find him a wife, despite an extensive search, highlights the fact that the hero is the only one capable of identifying a suitable maiden.

Thereupon, he goes directly to woo Emer at Luglocha Loga<sup>55</sup> (*Luid Cú Chulainn fessin íarom do thochmarc ingine rofitir i lLuglochaib Loga .i. Emer ingen Forgaill* Monaigh; van Hamel, 1933, 23, §9). He thus chooses his own maiden, acting and behaving in a straightforward manner in keeping with his heroic status.

In the tales TL and TA, the man is also the instigator but his actions are not as direct as Cú Chulainn's. The beginning of TL and TE are similar in that messengers are sent forth to find a mate for Conchobar. In contrast to TE, a mate by the name of Luaine is found for Conchobar and upon hearing a description of her: *Ro lin trá írna do sere na hingine ⁊ níro dámaid dó co ndecheid féin dia féig-fí orcsin* 'Signs of love for the girl filled him<sup>56</sup> and he could not endure it until he went himself for her clear viewing' (Breatnach, 1980, 10, §5). Though the girl is subsequently betrothed to Conchobar, presumably by her male guardian in accordance with legal procedure, his irrational behaviour is far removed from Cú Chulainn's more controlled interaction with Emer. Finn's initiatory actions in TA are not as purposeful as those of Cú Chulainn's. Ailbe's desire for him is made clear at the outset, notwithstanding the reservations of her father, Cormac mac Airt. Finn attends a feast at Cormac's home in the hope of finding a suitable maiden and triggers a game of witticisms in order to identify his chosen wife (Ní Dhonnchadha, 2002, 208). In contrast to Cú Chulainn, who went specifically to woo Emer, Finn has not identified Ailbe as his mate prior to his arrival at Tara.

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<sup>55</sup> Van Hamel (1933, 196) observes that this is 'a district in the east of Ireland, south of the Boyne'.

<sup>56</sup> The first part of the sentence is Breatnach's (1980, 23) translation, the second is my own.

In TBF and the later TT, the wooing is initiated by the woman when her desires are indirectly made known to Fróech.<sup>57</sup> Treblann acts in defiance of her legal guardian, her foster-father, Cairpre son of Ros, who forbade her union with Fróech, proposing instead to find her a better warrior (Jennings, 1974, 74). Like Cú Chulainn, Fróech in TT is renowned for his beauty and valour and is the object of the desire of countless women. Indeed, this seems to be a trait of such martial figures (see VI.5). However, his prolonged hesitation over which maiden to choose is in contrast to Cú Chulainn's decisiveness: *úair is íat imat a leannán 7 a thoga tochmairc rofuridh a óentúmha dá blíadain .x. ar ngabáil trebe 7 tighedais, oir ní fitir cía dibh noberad* 'for it was the great number of his sweethearts and lovers that prolonged his unmarried state for twelve years after taking house and husbandry, for he did not know which of them he would take' (Meyer, 1921, 166; Jennings, 1997, 74). He pursues Treblann upon hearing of her desire for him and like Conchobar in TL, Fróech, is impelled in TBF to go and converse with Finnabair.

Bec fola instigates proceedings in the tale TB when she encounters the king Díarmait mac Áeda Sláine in Áth Truim. Díarmait initiates the conversation by enquiring of her origin and the reason why she has come (Bhreathnach, 1984, 77, §2). Bec fola's response initiates the wooing "“To seek seed-wheat,” said she. “I have good arable land but lack seed which is suitable for it””. He responds with an offer of his seed wheat (§2), which may be a double entendre referring also to the sexual aspect of a king's union with a kingdom, often depicted as a woman. Later in the tale, she unsuccessfully attempts to make a tryst with Díarmait's foster-son,

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<sup>57</sup> Fróech is listed as the son of Idath of the Connachta in TBF and as the son of Fidach Foltrúad from Síd Fidach in TT and pursues Finnabair and Treblann respectively.

Crimthann, before encountering a lone warrior whom she follows first to an island and later into his bed (§§4-8). This tale highlights, in *Bec fola*, the wanton aspect of female figures whose brazen actions contribute to the failure of her union with Díarmait. Admittedly, the opening scene bears some resemblance to two other tales dealing with the union of a sovereignty goddess figure with an older king in place of his son, namely *Fingal Rónáin* and *Echtrae Airt meic Cuinn*, but these are only superficial (Greene, 1955, 3-12; Best, 1907, 150-73). In contrast with the other tales, Crimthann is presented as a foster-son of Díarmait and not a son and thus seems to have no rights to the throne. *Bec fola*'s union with the aging king is similarly a mismatch and leads to her unbecoming behaviour.

The instigation of the wooing in TET rests in the hands of a third party, the Mac Óc (Óengus), who is Midir's foster-son. The rewards offered to Midir to entice him to remain with his foster-son for a year include the fairest maiden in Ireland, whom Midir identifies as Étaín Echraide (Bergin & Best, 1938, 149). The Mac Óc arranges the union by negotiating directly with Étaín's father, Ailill. Midir's lack of input into the wooing of Étaín contributes to its temporary nature, as does the fact that he already has a wife, Fúamnach, who is strongly opposed to the union and whose actions prove instrumental in its demise.<sup>58</sup> The complexities of this tale are compounded by the fact that Étaín assumes the characteristics of a sovereignty goddess as the tale progresses (Charles-Edwards, 2002, 172), a development that lies beyond the scope of this discussion. A number of actions in this wooing tale seem ill-advised and hence hardly constitute a positive paradigm.

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<sup>58</sup> Cú Chulainn's temporary union with Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn* is similarly opposed by his wife Emer (see VI.7).

### 3) The presence of direct negotiations between the couple

The legal texts do not give a clear description of the cementing of formal marital unions. Ó Corráin (1995, 47) states that ‘the most formal type of marriage is a contract brought about by a procedure called *airnaidm*’ which he translates as ‘binding, tying’ coming from the verbal noun of *ar-naisc* ‘binds’. The preverb *ar* either gives the sense ‘bind forward’ or, more likely means ‘bind publicly’ (Ó Corráin, 1995, 47). Negotiations between both families, with or without the groom, were essential in such cases in order to agree the terms of the contract and document the property brought by each partner into the union and divided by them in the event of separation. In literary narratives the success of the union seems to be largely dependent upon the participation of the couple in direct and meaningful negotiations.

The table above presents some variation here. TT, TL and TET contain no direct negotiations between the couple in question. No such process is explicitly mentioned in TL, but it is stated that Luaine is betrothed to Conchobar after an agreed bride-price is bound upon him (Breatnach, 1980, 10, §5). It is more likely that these negotiations would have taken place between Conchobar and Luaine’s father rather than with the girl herself. By the time Fróech and Treblann meet in TT, the willingness of both parties to enter into a marital union is clear, whence perhaps the absence of negotiations: ‘When she arrived at the same place (as him), they welcomed each other. “It is time to hurry,” said the girl. “We are not alone,” said Fróech’ (Jennings, 1997, 76). Negotiations elude the couple entirely in TET and take place instead between Étaín’s father, Ailill, and Midir’s foster-son, the

Mac Óc. The relationship is thus not properly sealed and proves to be no more than transitory.

The remainder of the tales contain some form of direct negotiation between the couple. While the initial scene in *Tochmarc Becfola* seals the union between Díarmait and Becfola, it is very brief, lacking any real discussion and fails to set out the conditions of the relationship or determine the suitability of the couple. This is particularly relevant to the woman, whose true name and origin remain a mystery throughout the tale and whose unsuitability is indicated by Díarmait's response when she leaves him for another man: "Let her go," said Díarmaít, "the evil one, for one knows not whither she goes or whence she came" (Bhreathnach, 1984, 80, §11). However, the fact that Díarmait appeared to demean her during their brief negotiations by offering her a little brooch as her bride-price may have damaged their relationship and led to her unfaithfulness. Díarmait's poor offering implies that she is of subordinate status in contravention of the ideal marital union, *lánamnas comthinchuir* 'union of joint property' (Ó Corráin, 1978, 2), whereas her noble or royal status is suggested from her attire (Whitfield, 2006, 5). There are a number of negative aspects here and the result is a less than ideal temporary union.

The negotiation between Fróech and Finnabair in TBF, when they meet by chance after he has spent some time in the company of her parents, is also quite brief but he does express his desire for her to elope with him. Though she dismisses this on account of her royal status, she does express her love for him. He then resorts to asking her parents to give her to him. Doubts about the suitability of the couple are dispelled in TA, when Ailbe successfully engages in a lengthy game of witticisms

with Finn, who is sufficiently impressed to offer to take her away with him: “‘If you’d like to go with me to bed and sleep with me, girl, the life you’ll enjoy with me afterwards will be described for you forthwith, and you’ll not be refused it” (Ní Dhonnchadha, 2002, 209-10). This negotiation is presented in a positive light and is in many respects quite similar to the one in TE.

Although part of the negotiation between Emer and Cú Chulainn consists of a riddling dialogue, it remains clearly structured and focused on the crucial issue of their suitability and the conditions for the relationship before both reach agreement on the terms of the union. Cú Chulainn’s conduct appears exemplary and it is noted that: *Is sí sin dano óeningen ba fú lesseom di ingenaib Érenn do acallaim 7 thochmarc* ‘Furthermore she was the only maiden of all those in Ireland that he thought worthy to address and to woo’ (van Hamel, 1933, 23, §10; my translation). Unlike Fróech in TT, he does not waste valuable time deliberating over other women.

Cú Chulainn’s distinctions are mentioned at the outset and matched by Emer’s attributes: ..

*..ar is sí congab na sé búada fuirri .i. búaid crotha, búaid ngotha, búaid mbindiusa, búad ndrúine, búaid ngáise, búaid ngensa* ‘..for it is she who possessed the six gifts that is: the gift of appearance (beauty), the gift of voice, the gift of sweet speech, the gift of embroidery, the gift of intelligence, the gift of chastity’ (§10; my translation).

She is thus marked out as an exceptional figure on a par with Cú Chulainn in a manner analogous to the legal requirements of the marital union *lánamnas*

*comthinchuir* ‘union of joint property’ between a man and a *bé cuitchernsa* of equal status (Ó Corráin, 2002, 23).<sup>59</sup> Cú Chulainn is impressed:

“*At maithi ém na feba sin,*” *ol Cú Chulainn.* “*Cindus dano,*” *ol Cú Chulainn,* “*nachar chomtig dún dib línaib comríachtain? Ar ní fúaras sa cosse ben follongad ind airis dála imacallaim fon samail seo frim*” ““Indeed those distinctions are great,” said Cú Chulainn, “Moreover how,” said Cú Chulainn “should it not be customary for us both to unite (sexually). For I have not found to date a woman who could hold the subject of the conversation like this with me”” (van Hamel, 1933, 30, §26; my translation).

Using the analogy of a plain for her breasts in his riddling dialogue, Cú Chulainn’s desire for Emer is quite clear. He remains in control of these urges in contrast to Fróech in TBF and Conchobar in TL. The critical elements of the negotiation are then essentially completed when both parties undertake to adhere to the conditions outlined, suggestive of a basic verbal contract that seals their union despite the absence of legally required guarantors or witnesses capable of understanding their riddling dialogue: “*Asberthar, dogéntar,*” *ol Cú Chulainn.* “*Forregthar, forimregethar, gébthar, arfóemtar,*” *ol Emer* ““It will be said, it will be done”, said Cú Chulainn. “Let it be bound, Let it be bound upon me, it will be taken, they will be/it is accepted,” said Emer’ (§27; my translation).

#### **4) The necessity for the man to accomplish a list of designated tasks in order to win his bride**

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<sup>59</sup> Ó Corráin (1995, 45-50) observes that this marital union is heavily influenced by clerical thinking and became the norm in place of the earlier *lánamnas for ferthinchur* ‘marriage on man contribution’.

The designation of tasks is found only in the literary material. It is noted above that the hero commonly had to accomplish a number of perilous feats in order to win his bride. However, this feature is lacking in a number of the above tales, including TB, TL and TA. The absence of these in TB may be attributed to role reversal. In TT, the battle results from the opposition of Treblann's foster-father to the union and is not incorporated as a task requiring completion. A number of feats along with a payment are required to win Étaín in TET but these are listed by her father and performed by a third party, the Mac Óc.

The emphasis is initially placed on the payment of a bride-price in TBF deemed extortionate by Fróech: "*Dothofígusa tar mo scíath 7 tar mo chlaideb 7 darm threlam, ní thibrind i tindscra cid Meidbi insin*" "I swear by my shield and sword and equipment I would not give that as bride-price for Medb herself!" (Meid, 1967, 7, §14; Carney, 1955, 7, §14). Thereafter, he faces a number of challenges as a consequence of Ailill and Medb's opposition, but these are not specifically identified as prerequisites to his winning of Finnabair. In the case of Cú Chulainn and Emer, by contrast, these are clearly represented as essential to their marital union. A series of prescribed feats must be fulfilled as a condition to the winning of Olwen by Culhwch in the Medieval Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, which is not included in the above analysis (Ford, 1977, 119-57). Here too, the woman's father issues a long list of seemingly impossible tasks to Culhwch, but these are principally performed by his cousin Arthur and his comrades. The ones imposed by Emer appear impossible at the outset, but Cú Chulainn proves himself by accomplishing them single-handedly to win her at the end of the tale.

### **5) The outcome of the wooing**

The couple do not remain united in the majority of the tales examined. Despite the fact that Luaine is betrothed to Conchobar in TL, the union does not take place owing to her untimely death. Moreover, it includes elements from Conchobar's earlier relationship with Deirdre and incorporates Manannán son of Athgno's quest for vengeance for the deaths of the sons of Uisnech, at the jealous Conchobar's instigation. Despite being betrothed to the king, Athairne and his sons are able to harass Luaine to the point of bringing about her death by three satires because of her refusal to sleep with them. This scene of a proposal to Luaine bears similarities with the one in which Emer is proposed to by Lugaid mac Nois in the absence of Cú Chulainn but successfully rejects him.

The outcome of TT, TBF and TB, all with female initiators, is similarly negative. Fróech and Treblann are briefly united in TT, but the tale ends in tragedy through the interventions of third parties acting on behalf of Treblann's foster-father, Cairpre Nia Fer, who exacted revenge on Fróech for taking her without his consent and brought about her death. Fróech and Finnabair never unite in TBF, and it appears that he is reunited with his wife and children toward the end of the tale. The fact that he already had a wife may have contributed to the ultimate failure of the relationship. Equally, Becfola and Díarmait's union is of a temporary nature and she elopes with Flann the warrior. The outcome of the wooing in TET is likewise unfavourable because the couple remains separated.

Though it is not explicitly stated, Finn and Ailbe were presumably united at the end of TA, following his offer of marriage after their game of witticisms as in TE, the

actions of the male protagonist and negotiations between the couple are also conducive to a positive outcome, namely a union embodying the ideal result. Upon completion of the prescribed tasks after a period of physical separation, Cú Chulainn and Emer's union is made public when he returns with her to Emain Machae: *Atnagar Emer isin Cróebrúaid co Conchobar ⁊ co maithi Ulad olchena, ⁊ ferait fáilti fria* 'Emer is escorted into the Cróebrúaid to Conchobar and to the other noble Ulster warriors and they welcome her' (van Hamel, 1933, 64, §88; my translation). Problems arise with regard to the king's prerogative to avail of his *prima noctis* but major conflict is averted, when Cú Chulainn's anger is assuaged, by his being sent to gather a number of herds on Slíab Fúait. Fergus and Cathbad also remain with Conchobar and Emer's presence to protect Cú Chulainn's honour. The union is finally sealed when:

*Ícaid Conchobar tindscraí Emire arabáruch, ⁊ dobreth a eneclann do Choin Chulainn, ⁊ fois íar sin la banchéili ⁊ níro scarsat íar suidiu co fúaratar bás dib línaib* 'The following day Conchobar pays Emer's bride-price and Cú Chulainn's *eneclann*<sup>60</sup> was given to him. Then he spends the night with his wife and they did not separate until they both died' (§90; my translation; see VI.7).

Furthermore, with reference to van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage, both began the tale as unmarried individuals before going through a transitional stage where they are promised to each other until subsequently united and incorporated into society as a married couple.

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<sup>60</sup> According to *DIL*, this is the payment due for insult to or unlawful loss of one's honour price.

### III.3.4. Further comment

Cú Chulainn's visit to Domnall and Scáthach presents problems chiefly on account of the manner in which the stages of Cú Chulainn's career are listed in Recension I of TBC, which is extant in the manuscripts LU, YBL, Eg. 1782 and O'Curry MS 1:

*“Ní handsa ém,” ol Fergus. “Inna chóiced bliadain luid dia cluchiu cosin macraid do Emain Machai. Isin tšessed bliadain luid do fóglaím gaiscid 7 chless la Scáthaig. Isin tsechtmad bliadain gabais gaisced. Isin tsechtmad bliadain déc a áes ind inbaid sea”* “I can tell you that,” said Fergus. “In his fifth year he went to the boys in Emain Macha to play. In his sixth year he went to learn feats of arms to Scáthach. In his seventh year he took up arms. At the present time he is seventeen years old” (TBC I, ll.376-380).

The chronology in the YBL text differs in that it states that Cú Chulainn is seven when he goes to receive training from Scáthach and eight when he takes up arms (Strachan & O'Keefe, 1912, 342-7). The acephalous O'Curry version does not contain the above section (Ó Fiannachta, 1966).

Cú Chulainn's training in the lands of Scáthach is thus made one of his *macgnímrada*, possibly as a separate entity, but the list remains problematic because it omits Cú Chulainn's pivotal slaying of the hound. Indeed, in the list of *rémscéla* 'fore-tales' at the end of the tale *Do Fallsigud Tána Bó Cual[n]ge* 'The Finding of Táin Bó Cúailnge' in LL, Cú Chulainn's going to Emain Machae and to Culann's house along with his taking up of arms and entering a chariot are grouped together with no mention of Cú Chulainn's training in arms with Scáthach (TBC II, ll.32905-9). In terms of the chronology of his *macgnímrada* given above, this may quite well have represented another crucial phase in his development, namely his

training in arms prior to his taking up of them. This apprenticeship would make sense as a precursor to his final *macgním*, where he took up arms. The hero's wooing of Emer may have then been attached to this tale to produce *Tochmarc Emire* in something like its present form, the result being the removal of the Scáthach episode from his *macgnímrada*. The sexual element may have been added at this point or may have been present from the outset.

This possibility is further strengthened by consideration of the narrative plot of the text. The second part of the tale pertaining to Cú Chulainn's trip to the lands of Domnall, which serves as a stepping-stone to the main trip to Scáthach's home, is largely superfluous to the central plot of his wooing of Emer. Although Forgall Manach is presented as the instigator of this trip, this feature may have been inserted in order to merge the two tales (van Hamel, 1933, 44-5, §§56-7). While Cú Chulainn is with Scáthach, the story shifts back to Emer and Forgall's attempts to marry her off to Lugaid Mac Nois. This section could have been incorporated into the tale, since it is not integral to this part of the narrative (§§72-3). It is, nevertheless, present in the earliest extant account of the tale (Meyer, 1890, 448-9). Indeed, if we consider this component of the tale in light of the church's attempted reform on early Irish marital practices, this section serves a clear purpose (see VI.7). Significantly, from the time Cú Chulainn leaves Emer to visit Domnall and Scáthach up to the point of his return, the tale is otherwise devoid of references to his wooing of her. The wooing narrative is recommenced on his return to Emain Machae, but once again this could have been simply interwoven into the altered

plot. However, it is noteworthy that dangerous trips were often found in such wooing tales.<sup>61</sup>

There are two further factors in relation to the section quoted above namely the statement *7luid do thochmorc nEmeiri* ‘and he went to woo Emer’ placed after the reference found only in YBL to his training with Scáthach, and the gloss *Obicitur Tochmarc Emire deso (doso Eg.)* ‘Tochmarc Emire is contrary to this’ found in LU and Eg. 1782. Both imply a version of *Tochmarc Emire* containing the Scáthach episode from a relatively early stage. The presence and similarity of the gloss in LU and Eg. 1782, in particular the use of *obicitur* in both, suggest that they may have been derived from a common archetype different from that of YBL. Ó Concheanainn (1996, 92) observes that the presence of this marginal note ‘may point to some direct relation between the texts of TBC in these two manuscripts’.

There is a difference in the chronology listed between the statement in YBL and in the gloss in LU, which is the hand of M, and in Eg. 1782. Cú Chulainn’s training in arms and his wooing of Emer are listed alongside each other in this order and without comment in YBL. However, this sequence is not entirely consistent with the events as they are found in the extant version of *Tochmarc Emire* where the visit to the lands of Scáthach occurs as a result of Cú Chulainn’s wooing of Emer. The other two manuscripts do not contain the statement concerning his wooing of Emer, which may have been erased prior to the insertion of the gloss. The gloss, which Meyer (1890, 433n) translates as ‘Tochmarc Emire contradicts this’, suggests that this tradition viewed Cú Chulainn’s tender age as problematic and

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<sup>61</sup> In *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*, Emer implies that he invades Scáthach’s home on account of her (Kimpton, 2009, 33 & 49, §35).

sought to rectify this situation. YBL does not share this concern. The gloss may have been the product of M, or may have been copied by him from an earlier exemplar. The incorrect nasalisation in *7 luid do thochmorc nEmeiri* may be an instance of Middle Irish hypercorrect nasalization (see McCone, 2005, 179). Interestingly, there are no references to his age or indications of his unusual youthfulness within TE itself, perhaps because he is seen as physically developed beyond his years sexually as well as in other respects highlighted by the *macgnímrada*. At all events, these sexual exploits appropriate to a warrior demonstrate virility and masculinity.

Regardless of whether this part of the tale is viewed as a separate entity originally or not, it depicts a period of sexual promiscuity for Cú Chulainn.<sup>62</sup> De Vries (1963, 221) observes that a sexual element is inseparably linked with the initiation process in wooing tales, although, this does not seem to be the case in most of the ones discussed above, and that it may take the form of orgiastic promiscuity. At any rate, Cú Chulainn progresses from sexual innocence through a stage of promiscuity to a point where he proves his masculinity by fathering a child with Aífe as a prelude to married life. In van Gennep's (1960, 21) terms, he is separated from his youthful peers at a stage of sexual innocence, passes through a transitional phase where he has promised himself to Emer but also sows his wild oats, and is finally reintegrated into society as a married man.

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<sup>62</sup> Cú Chulainn's relations with the opposite sex are considered in detail in VI.5-7.

## **Conclusion**

Point seven in de Vries' schema is very much evident in Cú Chulainn's life, given that he overcomes great dangers to win his wife, Emer. Once again, this milestone is related in a specifically dedicated tale, *Tochmarc Emire*, indicating its significance. A comparative analysis of this tale and a number of others in this genre shows that it generally exhibits positive features with both Cú Chulainn and Emer behaving in an exemplary manner. Essentially, this finalises his incorporation into society as an adult.

### **III.4. Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trips**

#### **III.4.1. De Vries' schema**

The hero's expedition to the underworld is the eighth in the scheme (de Vries, 1963, 224) and Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 61) suggests that this location can be equated with the Otherworld of Irish tradition. De Vries (1963, 216) does not elaborate on this point in any great detail and does not include Cú Chulainn's expedition among those considered. Scattered references in his work to certain features of such trips indicate that these might include something magical or supernatural that could not be obtained in the ordinary world (de Vries, 1963, 147, 191).

#### **III.4.2. Relevant research to date**

The Otherworld features strongly in a number of early Irish tales such as, *Immram Brain*, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, *Tochmarc Becfola* and *Serglige Con Chulainn*. Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 19) observes that in:

Irish tradition the heroic biography is inextricably bound up with “Otherworld” personages and locations: many of the heroes make journeys to the Otherworld, personages from the Otherworld intervene at crucial stages in heroes’ lives, and heroes sometimes marry (or have sexual relations with) Otherworld maidens.

The various presentations of these visits and the location of the Otherworld, along with the occurrence of certain motifs and their possible pagan or Christian origin, have evoked some controversy. However, most of these issues are not of concern here and the emphasis will instead be placed on the context of the otherworldly expedition in relation to the heroic biography. Löffler (1983, 442) observes in this regard that ‘the mortal hero’s voyage to the otherworld may be regarded as a necessary step in his life, which completes the image of the hero and may be compared to an element in the mosaic of the heroic life’.

According to Campbell (1949, 30), the ‘mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth’. He describes the hero’s journey as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 1949, 30).

Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 85) observes that *Echtrae Cormaic*, the tale in which Cormac mac Airt visits the Otherworld, corresponds closely to this scheme.

Rees & Rees (1961, 297) state that there is a class of tales concerning visits to strange lands, which are known as ‘adventures’. Mac Cana (1980, 75-6) defines an *echtrae* as an ‘expedition, journey (to the otherworld), adventure’ and notes that:

...*echtrai* tell of the hero’s incursion into the world of the supernatural whether this is thought of as being beyond the sea, under the earth or a lake, within the depths of a cave, or simply within the confines of a magic mist.

The title *Echtrae Con Culainn* is found in the tale lists but no story of that name is extant (Mac Cana, 1980, 45). Dillon (1948, 101-23) classifies *Serglige Con Culainn* with the *echtrai*, as do Rees & Rees (1961, 305-6) who note that Cú Chulainn’s ‘initiation in the land of Scáthach could well be classified with “Adventures”’. Dumville (1976, 92) suggests that *Echtrae Con Culainn* may have consisted of a story containing elements from both *Tochmarc Emire* and *Serglige Con Culainn*. More recently, Ó Beárta (2009, 190) claims that it survives as fragments in a number of other texts namely *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Aided Con Roí*, in the *Dindshenchas* entry on Findglas, the Tír Scáith section of *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and other briefer references such as *Sanas Cormaic*. However, definite conclusions can hardly be drawn on the basis of the evidence available.

Intrusion into the Otherworld by mortal heroes is noted as a common feature in early Irish stories including those concerning Cú Chulainn and Finn and may come about as a result of an invitation from an Otherworldly figure ‘in which case the otherworld realm is normally pictured as a land of wonder and beauty and joy’ (Mac Cana, 1980, 75-6). The hero may also instigate this trip himself, in which case the Otherworld is ‘conceived of as the home of hostile forces whose power

and possessions are a challenge to the hero's prowess' (Mac Cana, 1980, 75-6). The object of such journeys is to 'seize its treasures and its magical talismans' (Mac Cana, 1970, 126). Löffler (1983, 247) draws similar conclusions and states that 'the return of the hero [Cú Chulainn] as a fully trained champion and with the ability to perform magic feats of valour secure him an exceptional and a powerful position among the warrior society in Ireland'.

Hollo (1998, 13) observes that Cú Chulainn goes on at least one trip to the Otherworld in *Serglige Con Culainn*. Scholarly debate concerning this tale has tended to focus on the depiction of the Otherworld itself as opposed to the relevance of this trip to Cú Chulainn's portrayal in the Ulster Cycle. Thus Dillon (1941, v) refers to 'its long descriptions of the Irish Elysium, here called Mag Mell "the Plain of Delights"' while for Carney (1955, 293) the tale is a 'mere jumble of picturesque incidents adapted from earlier literature, and as a whole it has no moral to teach and no consistent underlying philosophy'. Carey (1994, 77, 83-4) observes that version B of *Serglige Con Culainn* is based upon the Ulster Cycle whereas version A presents a critique or reinterpretation of the Otherworld, drawing 'upon a variety of sources in order to create a vision of its mystery and beauty'. Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 87) describes *Serglige Con Culainn* as a triptych depicting Ulster's heroic past and the Otherworld along with 'the conditions necessary for a Golden Age in Ireland'.<sup>63</sup>

It is observed above that Rees & Rees (1961, 297-313) and Dillon (1948, 101-23) categorise *Serglige Con Chulainn* as an *echtrae* with the hero of the Ulster Cycle

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<sup>63</sup> The first of these is addressed in the first seventeen lines, the second part most notably in two poems recited by Lóeg, Cú Chulainn's charioteer, and the third in Cú Chulainn's instructions to his foster-son, Lugaid Réoderg, the king elect of Tara (Ó Cathasaigh, 1994, 87).

as its hero. For Findon (1997, 107), *Serglige Con Chulainn* is a ‘complicated text which toys with the conventions of the “heroic age” literature and presents Cú Chulainn as an ambiguous hero’ by constantly undermining his reputation. Furthermore, as a result of ‘the reassignment of Cú Chulainn from an active to a largely passive role’, ‘he spends a large portion of the tale sick in bed, stripped of the strength and sexual power which define him as a great hero’ and when action is taken it is typically unwise (Findon, 1997, 122). Lowe (2000, 125) takes a similar view noting that Cú Chulainn is ‘manipulated almost arbitrarily by supernatural beings’ and that he ‘does not shape events so much as he is shaped by them’. Lowe (2000, 126) concludes that Cú Chulainn is treated as a site as opposed to an ‘active presence’ and that ‘*he* becomes the thing fought over –and his near supine body is placed at the centre of a complex struggle that involves mortals, Otherworld women and gods’. Ní Bhrolcháin (2009, 355) posits that the hero suffers from erectile dysfunction in this tale and is only revitalised after his visit to the Otherworld.

Hollo (1998, 13) claims that Cú Chulainn goes on a number of Otherworldly trips in the tales *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, *Tochmarc Emire*, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, *Forfess Fer Fálgae* and *Amra Con Roí*, ‘the last three relating versions of the same journey’.<sup>64</sup> *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Aided Con Roí* and related matters, and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* are part of a small group of tales ‘in which Cú Chulainn travels overseas, fights there, and brings back treasures to Ireland’ and may constitute the earliest recorded tradition of his travels outside of

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<sup>64</sup> Hollo does not include *Amrae Con Roí* in her subsequent discussion on Cú Chulainn’s overseas quest tales, but does include *Aided Con Roí*.

Ireland (Hollo, 2005, 10).<sup>65</sup> The overseas quest within these tales is thematically linked to the one found in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, but the latter differs in that the hero's quest is for knowledge as opposed to treasure (Hollo, 2005, 10-2).

Hollo (2005, 10) declares that '[a]lthough it is not explicit that Cú Chulainn travels overseas in FFF [*Forfess Fer Falgae*], the fact that the story starts with the arrival of a bird bearing a blossom, presumably from the land of the *Fir Falgae*, is suggestive of an overseas location. This is reinforced by the opening sentence (*Incipit forfess fer Falgae .i. fer Manann*) in which the land from which the bird comes is equated (in what is probably an incorporated gloss) with the Isle of Man'. Hollo (2005, 11) outlines the overseas expedition of the Ulstermen and Cú Chulainn to Airdi Achdi found in the Eg. 88 version of *Aided Con Roí* in which they succeed in carrying off 'Bláthíne, Echde's cows and their "calf" (a huge cauldron in which they let down their milk)' and other treasures. Reference is also made to the poem in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* in which Cú Chulainn relates the details of two expeditions that he made, 'one to Lochlann and the other to Tír Scáith' (Hollo, 2005, 11). There are two verses in the poem about the latter, depicting great treasures and the calf of three cows which are also found in *Aided Con Roí* along with a statement noting that they have come from *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*. Therefore, Hollo (2005, 11-2) concludes that:

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<sup>65</sup> Hollo (2005, 10) notes that *Forfess Fer Falgae* was part of the lost eighth century manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechtai*; that the Eg. 88 version of *Aided Con Roí* could be dated to the eighth or ninth century and that the poem in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* could be dated to no earlier than *circa* tenth century.

The *Síaburcharpat*'s story of the journey to Tír Scáith has many clear similarities to ACR [*Aided Con Roí*]: the overseas expedition, the seizure of treasure, a king's daughter, and three wondrous cows and their 'calf', and some sort of challenge (pursuit or a storm) on the homeward journey.

Finally, Hollo (2005, 12) states that 'these two texts, along with FFF [*Forfess Fer Falgae*], show that Cú Chulainn was known as a hero who had travelled overseas not just for education (as in *Tochmarc Emire*) but for other purposes as well, in this case booty'.

Ní Mhaonaigh (2001, 103) notes that the literary texts of eleventh and twelfth centuries indicate that Lochlann, from where Vikings came, was in the 'process of being accorded a quasi-mythical status' and was 'frequently indistinguishable from the Otherworld'. Subsequently, in her consideration of aspects of Cú Chulainn's journeys in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, she notes that in his trio of adventures, to *aile-thúath* 'other land', then to Lochlann and finally to Tír Scáith, he experiences ever-increasing difficulties (Ní Mhaonaigh, 2006, 26-7). In the broader context of the tale, these expeditions function as anticipatory tales but are inadequate to prepare Cú Chulainn for the horrors of hell.

#### **III.4.3.1. Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trip I<sup>66</sup>**

Cú Chulainn makes a number of trips to seemingly otherworldly locations. In this section, these will be considered primarily in the context of suggesting which might best reflect this component of his heroic biography. In this context, it seems reasonable to expect that the hero would be portrayed in a positive light with

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<sup>66</sup> Preliminary research findings pertaining to Cú Chulainn's possible outings to otherworldly settings were presented at the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle, University of Ulster, Coleraine in June 2009.

particular emphasis on the promotion of his exceptional martial skills. Cú Chulainn appears to make expeditions of this nature in *Tochmarc Emire*, *Serglige Con Culainn*, *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Aided Con Roí*, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*.

Firstly, if we look at his trip to the land of Scáthach, we find that the earliest evidence for this dates to the eighth century in Rawlinson B.512. This is found in an acephalous account of *Tochmarc Emire* with a more expanded version occurring in the later reworked form of the tale dating to the Middle Irish period (Meyer, 1890, 442-53; van Hamel, 1933, 16-68). The presence of the seventh century prophetic piece, *Verba Scáthaige*, raises the possibility that it belongs to an even earlier strata. This discussion will consider the earlier and later accounts of this narrative.

In light of de Vries' comments above, this journey seems to have been principally concerned with the acquisition of something, which would set the hero apart in the ordinary world. Campbell's (1949, 30) description of the hero's otherworldly sojourn seems to broadly fit the framework of the heroic biography as outlined above. It is perhaps best to consider the boons bestowed as the benefit received by the hero's people as a result of his otherworldly trip. It seems that these frameworks can be applied with relative ease to Cú Chulainn's venture to Scáthach's homeland in *Tochmarc Emire*. Like Cormac mac Airt's trip to the Otherworld in *Echtrae Cormaic*, Cú Chulainn's outing here also sits well with Campbell's (1949, 30) scheme, despite focusing on a king and warrior respectively. Both their heroic profiles are enhanced and Ó Cathasaigh's (1977-78,

141) claim that Cormac thereby gains his ‘functional attribute’ might also be applied to the journey undertaken by Cú Chulainn. While extant evidence for Cú Chulainn’s journey stretches at least back to the eighth century, a tenth century date is the earliest we can posit for *Echtrae Cormaic*, a time when *Tochmarc Emire* was undergoing considerable expansion.

In both tales the trip is chiefly instigated by a third party, a disguised Forgall Manach in *Tochmarc Emire* and a mysterious warrior in *Echtrae Cormaic*. Cú Chulainn’s journey to the land of Scáthach is motivated by the suggestion that he would receive further training in arms, which would set him apart from all other warriors in Europe (van Hamel, 1933, 44, §57).<sup>67</sup> He willingly consents, even though, he later finds out that Forgall had acted in the hope that he would not return from the dangerous trip. Cormac sets off in pursuit of his son, daughter and wife, who have been taken by the mysterious otherworldly warrior. Forgall’s possible raising of a vision, his sending of monsters to destroy Cú Chulainn while on route to Scáthach’s home (van Hamel, 1933, 48-9, §65), along with his description as the nephew of Tethrach, King of the Fomorians (§48), all point to his mysterious nature.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> He travels to Domnall’s home for the same reason in the earlier account, where he is then advised to go to Scáthach for further training (Meyer, 1890, 444-7). His journey on to Scáthach’s home is very similar in both accounts.

<sup>68</sup> Forgall is also said to have *ilchumachtae*, *cumachtae* meaning ‘power, ability’, but may also mean ‘supernatural power, magic’, with the *il*-prefix may mean ‘many powers’ possibly supernatural (van Hamel, 28, §19). This text also presents him as the king of a number of *brugaid* around his *dún* or fort (§10, §18, §56). Cf. McCone (1984, 1-30) for a discussion on the otherworldly associations of hospitallers. O’Rahilly (1946, 32n, 124) firmly views Forgall’s home as otherworldly. *Tochmarc Emire* also notes that his sister, Scennmenn, has the ability to change shape (van Hamel, 1933, 42, §53). His special powers and his ability to change shape is also indicated in *Cóir Anmann* (Arbuthnot, 2007, 55-6 & 128-9, §208).

These trips can be viewed as otherworldly because they contain a number of unusual features, not least a mysterious location not easily accessible to the ordinary mortal. Carey (2000, 116) observes that '[o]therworld beings are depicted as living within hills, beneath lakes or the sea, or on islands in lakes or off the coast; there are also tales of halls chanced upon in the night, which vanish with the coming of day'. In both of these tales it is located beyond the bounds of normal society. Cormac goes to the evidently supernatural *Tír Tairngire* 'The Land of Promise'.<sup>69</sup> Sailing first in a boat to the home of Domnall in Alba, Cú Chulainn then goes further east by land to the home of Scáthach. His peculiar journey, discussed below, to Scáthach's island dwelling which can be accessed only by means of a treacherous bridge, is suggestive of an otherworldly destination. Though his path to Scáthach's home is also quite treacherous, a bridge does not feature, nor is she furnished with an island home in the earlier text (Meyer, 1890, 446-7). An overseas island setting is also the preferred destination for the majority of his other otherworldly trips (see below). Perhaps, this tradition influences the refining of Scáthach's home in this manner in the later text. At any rate, the hero is depicted as overcoming obstacles to reach Scáthach in both accounts.

Further evidence for viewing Scáthach's abode as otherworldly occur in the context of her name which derives from the word '*scáth*' 'shadow, phantom, spectre' by addition of an *-ach* suffix and so may be translated as 'phantom one' or 'shadowy one' in clear indication of her supernatural nature.<sup>70</sup> This is further confirmed by the mysterious nature of the typically solitary journey which the hero undertakes to reach the supernatural realm. He is accompanied on the first stage of

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<sup>69</sup> *Tír Tairngire* also features in *Echtrae Airt meic Cuinn* (Best, 1907, 150-73).

<sup>70</sup> See VI.6 for a further consideration of Scáthach.

this trip, to the home of Domnall, by Conchobar, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach (van Hamel, 1933, 45, §57) but:

*Is and doadbas dóib Emain Macha ara súilib. Ní ro fétat iarom Conchobar 7 Conall 7 Lóegaire secha sin. Ingen Domnaill dosfuc in taidbsin fo déiga scartha Con Culainn fria muintir ar dáig a admillte* ‘Then Emain Macha appeared to them in front of their eyes. Conchobar, Conall and Lóegaire could not go beyond it. The daughter of Domnall had created that vision in order to separate Cú Chulainn from his companions with the purpose of destroying him’ (§60; my translation).<sup>71</sup>

It is at this point that Cú Chulainn’s otherworldly adventure, proper, begins. Once again, Cú Chulainn is placed alone for a significant event in his life. Cormac mac Airt is also separated from his original followers, this time by a mysterious mist, and left alone on an unfamiliar plain before entering an extraordinary fortress (Stokes, 1891, 213, §32).<sup>72</sup>

More commonly, emphasis seems to be placed on the hero’s trip to the Otherworld as opposed to his return from it. This journey itself can be viewed as a rite of passage in which he is physically separated from the ordinary world, goes through a transitional phase or journey and then is incorporated into the Otherworld. The vision and mist can be regarded as an otherworldly intervention, drawing both figures into the otherworldly realm, and also as a boundary between the two worlds which can only be crossed by the hero.

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<sup>71</sup> Conall and Lóegaire are in the home of the King of the Isles, Rúad, when Cú Chulainn visits there on his return from Scáthach’s home (van Hamel, 1933, 60, §80).

<sup>72</sup> A mist similarly leaves each of the three warriors Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn lost for their separate encounters with a giant in *Fled Bricreann* (Henderson, 1899, 45-9, §§36-40). Becfola also finds herself in unfamiliar terrain in *Tochmarc Becfola* (Bhreatnach, 1984, 78, §§6-7).

Cú Chulainn has a number of unusual encounters and tests before he reaches and gains entry into Scáthach's home. Mac Mathúna (1985, 241) states that a guide was a common feature of otherworldly journeys. Cú Chulainn encounters a trio of helpers. Firstly, he wanders aimlessly on the back of a beast likened to a lion for four days to the border of the land until they meet a group of youths (van Hamel, 1933, 47, §63). Thereafter, he meets a fair maiden claiming to be his foster-sister, who welcomes and feeds him (§64). Next, he meets a young warrior who tells him how to cross the plain of ill-luck and gives him a wheel and an apple to facilitate his safe passage along with further instructions on how to traverse a glen full of dangerous monsters sent by Forgall Manach (§65). His trip is only completed when he successfully manages to cross the treacherous bridge leading to Scáthach's home after a number of attempts. Clearly, such an arduous journey precludes all except the extraordinary.

Delightful descriptions are characteristic of a significant portion of otherworldly tales, but these are not found in *Tochmarc Emire* with its emphasis upon warfare and martial exploits.<sup>73</sup> Campbell (1949, 30) notes that a decisive victory was fundamental to such outings, and it appears that the hero must prove his worthiness in order to obtain otherworldly assistance. Ó Cathasaigh (1977-78, 141) discusses the Act of Truth performed by Cormac mac Airt with reference to the work of Dillon (1947). In contrast to Cormac, whose tests of truth are completed on a single occasion and are specific to his kingly status, Cú Chulainn undergoes a number of martial tests at different points during his visit.

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<sup>73</sup> Mac Mathúna (1985, 267) notes that because the trips in *Echtrae Lóegaire* and *Serglige Con Culainn* are motivated by military reasons, a 'warlike and less arcadian aspect of otherworld life' is presented.

The first involves his crossing of the precarious bridge (van Hamel 1933, 50, §68), mentioned above, and thereafter he overcomes Scáthach's chief warrior, Cochar Cruibne and two groups of three warriors of Aífe's and indeed Aífe herself, 'the hardest woman-warrior in the world' (*in banfénnid ba hansam isin domun*; §75).<sup>74</sup> In assuming Cochar's role, he echoes his replacement of Culann's hound in his penultimate deed (§69). His victory over Scáthach is the most significant given that it secures 'his instruction without neglect' (*a forcetal cen díchell*; §70), the ultimate goal of his visit.

Crucially, both Cormac and Cú Chulainn prove themselves worthy of otherworldly benefits. Cormac's victory is clearly rewarded with a special cup of truth, which guarantees a major attribute of his kingly office and remains on loan with him on his return to Tara until his death (Stokes, 1891, 216, §54). Cú Chulainn attains thorough training in the martial arts:

*Ó ro scáich íarom do Choin Chulainn lánfoglaim in míllti do dénum la Scáthaig – etir uballchless 7 toranchless 7 fóebarchless 7 fóenchless 7 cless cleitinech 7 téchless 7 corpchless 7 cless cait 7 ích n-erred 7 cor ndeled 7 léimm tar nám 7 filliud erred náir 7 gaí bulga 7 baí braisse 7 rothchless 7 otharchless 7 cless for análaib 7 brud ngéme 7 sian curad 7 béimm fo chomus 7 taithbéimm 7 fóidbeimm 7 dréimm fri fogaist co ndírgiud creite fora rind 7 carpat serrdae 7 fonaidm niad for rindib sleg* 'When Cú Chulainn had completed full training in arms with Scáthach including the apple-feat and the thunder feat and the edge-feat and the supine feat and the javelin-feat and the rope-feat and the body-feat and the feat of the cat and the hero's salmon (leap) and the throwing

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<sup>74</sup> The hero's approach to Scáthach's home is also not without difficulty in the older text (Meyer, 1890, 446-7).

of spears and leaping over a hurdle (?) and the turning (?) of a valiant champion and the *gáe bolga* and the profit (?)/feat of quickness and the wheel-feat and the support-feat and the feat upon breaths and the mass of shout (?) and the hero's cry and the stroke under control and the return-stroke and the cutting sods and the climbing against the spear with the straightening of a body upon its point and the sickle chariot and the binding of champions on the points of spears' (van Hamel, 1933, 56, §78; my translation).

These feats are a defining feature of the warrior hero, and one of them is a gift, the *gáe bolga*, corresponding to the king-hero Cormac's cup.<sup>75</sup> However, it seems that this aspect of the tale evolves over time. While the oldest account of the text also implies that Cú Chulainn's victory over Scáthach secures further martial training, the specific feats taught are not detailed, unlike the later reworked version (Meyer, 1890, 448-9; van Hamel, 1933, 56, §78).

Although it is not explicitly stated that Cú Chulainn acquired the *gáe bolga* from Scáthach, this is implied by her apparent status as the sole instructress of this weapon. This is supported by a statement found in the tale *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, in which he encounters his son, Connlac, resulting from his and Aífe's sexual union:

*Luid risin mac íarom ata uisci co robrégai cosinn gái mbulga, ar ní romúin Scáthach do duine ríam in gaisced sin acht do Coinculaind aenur* 'Thereupon Cuchulinn went at the boy from the water (?), and played him false with the *gai bulga*; for to no man had Scáthach ever taught the use of that weapon save to Cuchulainn alone' (Meyer, 1904, 118-21, §11).

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<sup>75</sup> Cú Chulainn's weapons are discussed in IV.4 and his special feats in IV.5.

Indeed, this weapon is the decisive factor in Cú Chulainn's victory over a number of warriors, including Loch mac Mo Femis (TBC I, ll.2024-7) and Fer Diad (ll.3095-100) in TBC and Connlæ above.<sup>76</sup> Despite the fact that Connlæ was born in this hostile realm, albeit as Aífe's son and not Scáthach's, he did not receive such training and duly laments Cú Chulainn's fatal advantage over him: "*Is ed ón tra,*" or sé [Connlæ] "*ná romúin Scáthach dam-sa!*" "Now, this is what Scáthach never taught me", cried the boy' (Meyer, 1904, 120-1, §12).

Clearly, this is no ordinary weapon, given that it has the ability to transform itself once cast into someone's body from a single barb to a fatal multitudinous one. It is described as follows in TBC I:

*"Fomna an gaí mbulga!" ol in t-ara. Dolléici ndó lasan sruth. Gaibt[h]i Cú cona ladair 7 imambeir do Fír Diad a timt[h]iracht a chuirp. Tochomlai amail óenga co mba cethéora randa fichet* "Look out for the *gaí bulga!*" cried the charioteer and cast it to him downstream. Cú Chulainn caught it between his toes and cast it at Fer Diad into his anus. It was as a single barb it entered but it became twenty-four (in Fer Diad's body)' (TBC I, ll.3095-8).

Like Cormac, who returns to Tara immediately after his acquisition of the special cup, Cú Chulainn makes the journey back to Emain Machae, but not before he receives a prophecy concerning his role in TBC (van Hamel, 1933, 57-60, §79). The earliest version implies that he goes straight back to Ireland after receiving some words on his future from Scáthach, whereupon he happens on the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Meyer, 1890, 452-3).

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<sup>76</sup> Despite spending time with Scáthach, Fer Diad did not learn the feat of the *gáe bolga* (TBC I, ll.2573-4, ll.3057-60). Indeed, Fer Diad had to be rescued from Scáthach's steward by Cú Chulainn (ll.2890-6).

The later reworked text offers a new adventure for the hero during his journey home. He sails in a ship, crewed by a number of warriors, including Fer Diad and Fer Báeth to the home of King of the Isles, Rúad, on the eve of Samain (van Hamel, 1933, 60-1, §80). His encounters here are not remarkably different from others in such distant hostile realms. Arguably, he intervenes in another dispute and successfully overcomes the Fomorians to win Rúad's daughter back (§81; see VI.6). Rúad offers her as a reward to Cú Chulainn and once home, the story picks back up with the conclusion to his wooing of Emer.

#### **III.4.3.2. Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trip II**

Another of Cú Chulainn's otherworldly journeys is central to *Serglige Con Culainn*. The oldest part of this text dates to the ninth century and the later to the eleventh century (see II.1). Some typical components are present and others appear to be deliberately modified in order to present Cú Chulainn in an uncharacteristically negative light at odds with the normal thrust of his heroic biography. Nevertheless, given the flexibility afforded by de Vries' (1963, 216) schema, this outing can be viewed as a possible contender for this point.

The initiation of Cú Chulainn's outing is less straightforward than elsewhere in that he does not accept the initial invitations from Óengus, son of Áed Abrat, and the otherworldly woman, Lí Ban. His receipt of an otherworldly invitation matches those found in other *echtrae* tales such as *Echtrae Cormaic* and *Echtrae Lógairi* (Jackson, 1942, 380-9) but contrasts with them insofar as his initial interaction with these supernatural figures is quite negative. This appears to stem from two unusual

birds, which can be regarded as otherworldly because they are linked together with a chain and sing soporifically (Dillon, 1953a, 2, §7). The appearance of birds as a prelude to an outing to a supernatural destination is a familiar theme. Variations of this motif are found in two earlier texts concerning Cú Chulainn, namely, *Compert Con Culainn* and *Forfess Fer Fálgae* (van Hamel, 1933, 3-4, §§1-2; Meyer, 1912, 564). Despite the protests of his charioteer, Lóeg, and his wife, Eithne, in this text, Cú Chulainn's decision to attack the birds and his wounding of one of them, results in their retaliation.<sup>77</sup>

After attacking them, he falls asleep and has a dream or a vision in which he encounters and is flogged by two women (§8), presumably to be identified with the two birds. These are also to be identified with the two women, Lí Ban and Fand, figuring in the remainder of the tale (Ní Bhrolcháin, 2009, 349).<sup>78</sup> The transformation of birds into women or vice versa is found in a number of other tales, for example in *Aislinge Óengusa* where it also occurs at Samain at a lake accompanied by the appearance of other birds (Shaw, 1934, 59-63, §§12-4).<sup>79</sup>

His female assailants appear to inflict a type of wasting sickness on him (Dillon, 1953a, 3, §§8-9). In *Cath Maige Mucrama*, Ailill Ólomm twice sets his horses at Samain to graze bare the hill of Áne Chlíach and then rapes the otherworldly

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Carey (1995) for a detailed consideration of Eithne (see VI.6).

<sup>78</sup> The end of the tale concludes that these events were, in actual fact, a vision that was shown to him by the fairies whose power was very strong before the faith (Dillon, 1953a, 29, §49).

<sup>79</sup> This motif is also found in *Tochmarc Emire* when Cú Chulainn casts a shot at two birds, but when he approaches them, he finds two women, namely, Derbforgaill and her handmaiden (van Hamel, 1933, 62, §84). Étaín turns from human form to water, then to a worm and lastly to a fly in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Best & Bergin, 1938, 152-155, §§16-8). It is also found in version II of Cú Chulainn's conception tale when the Ulsterwomen turn into birds and attack the lands in front of Emain Machae as mentioned in III.1.3 (Meyer, 1905, 500).

woman, Áne (O'Daly, 1975, 39, §§3-4).<sup>80</sup> She retaliates by sucking the skin from Ailill's ear, thus giving rise to his name Ailill Ólomm 'bare ear' (Ó Cathasaigh, 1981, 217). Albeit the retaliation against Cú Chulainn is less explicit, he too should have respected these supernatural birds especially in view of his wife's aforementioned warning: "*Dia coistithe frim,*" *ol Ethne*, "*ní righta chucu, ar itá nách cumachta fora cúl na n-én sa*" "If you would have listened to me", said Eithne. "You should not go to them, for there is some power behind those birds" (Dillon, 1953a, 3, §7, my translation).

This painful experience may account for Cú Chulainn's unusual reluctance, indeed his physical inability, to go to the Otherworld. This is implied in his brief dialogue with the woman in the green cloak who appears to him after the visit of Óengus son of Áed Abrat: "*Ní maith dún ém cid for túrusi chucund innuraid,*" *ol Chulaind*. "*Ní du for fogail ém,*" *ol si* "It is not to our benefit if it be (like) your visit to me last year", said Cú Chulainn. "I have not come to attack you," she said' (§13; my translation). Though Cú Chulainn only seems to receive one other otherworldly invitation, that from the strange bird bearing a blossom in *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, no fear or hesitation is shown and his readiness to embark on the otherworldly trips in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* is also more in keeping with his typical portrayal as fearless.

Here, however, Cú Chulainn is not tempted by the request to fight alongside the warrior Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb in Mag Mell, the reward of Fand or the offer of a cure for his illness. Rather than accepting the invitation directly, he sends a

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<sup>80</sup> This motif is also found in *Fled Bricrenn* when the horses of Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn graze the meadow of an otherworldly figure, presumably Cú Roí, provoking the latter to attack them (Henderson, 1899, 44-51, §§36-41; see IV.2).

mere charioteer in his place rather as he sends him in his stead to meet and negotiate with the fierce warrior, Goll, in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 405-6, §§11-7). The extant text describes how both of Lí Ban's invitations to Cú Chulainn, are rejected, and Lóeg sent instead (Dillon, 1953a, 5, §13; 15-6, §§31-2). The fact that these scenes are found in the different hands of H and M (Salberg, 1992, 161-2), suggests that this is merely duplication betrayed by compilation although both agree about Cú Chulainn's unwillingness to go to the Otherworld. In version A (M), Cú Chulainn appears to be unhappy that the invitation is issued by a woman instead of the figure seeking assistance, as is the case in *Echtrae Lóegairi*. Carney (1955, 293) proposes that:

The adventures of Loegaire son of Crimthann may best be taken as a derivative of *Serglige Con Culainn*, using as it does the pattern of a human hero going to the Otherworld to assist one Otherworld chieftain against another, and obtaining the love of a woman as a reward.

Alternatively, Ní Mhaoldomnaigh (2007, 114-71) has argued that the satirically motivated author of *Serglige Con Culainn* in fact took motifs from *Echtrae Lóegairi* in order to undermine the hero. Cú Chulainn shows little trust in Lí Ban and only makes the trip upon hearing Lóeg's eyewitness account of the Otherworld, perhaps heartened by the latter's survival of his visit unscathed (Dillon, 1953a, 15, §32).

Cú Chulainn's eventual journey thither is recorded perfunctorily and lacks the mysterious elements like the vision and mist found in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Echtrae Cormaic: Luid Cú Chulaind lee íarom is tír, 7 bert a charpat les co*

*ráncatár in n-insi* ‘Then Cú Chulainn went with her into the land and he took his chariot with him until they came to the island’ (Dillon, 1953a, 20, §35; my translation). In this regard, it parallels *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, yet this tale is in general much briefer and less detailed. While it is not stated explicitly, it is to be presumed that he took a boat to the island, like Lóeg (§15). If so, the manner in which he reaches the Otherworld is the same as in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* and may be interpreted as a stylistic variation of similar journeys in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Echtrae Cormaic*.<sup>81</sup> A boat is used by him to get to Domnall’s home in the earlier version of *Tochmarc Emire* while he returns from Scáthach’s home in the same way in the later account (Meyer, 1890, 444-5; van Hamel, 1933, 60, §80).

Cú Chulainn’s adventures in the Otherworld also receive relatively little consideration and are detailed in five out of the forty-nine paragraphs of the complete text edited by Dillon (1953a). His martial exploits there receive even less attention and are mostly dealt with in a matter-of-fact manner, lacking the type of elaborate descriptions found in other tales such as TBC or *Tochmarc Emire* which typically serve to accentuate his martial excellence. This being so, he is victorious, slays a number of warriors including Labraid’s enemy, and becomes so furious in the battle that three vats of water are necessary in order to quench his martial ardour, as at the end of his first expedition (§§35-6; see III.2.3).

Cú Chulainn’s main reason for travelling to the Otherworld in this tale differs from *Tochmarc Emire* in that he goes to help Labraid, for which he is to be rewarded

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<sup>81</sup> Bran also goes in a boat to an otherworldly island location in *Immram Brain* (Meyer, 1895, 16, §32).

with Fand. In this respect, it is comparable with Lóegaire's trip, where he goes to assist Fíachna mac Réda to win back his wife from Goll mac Dolb in return for Fíachna's daughter (Jackson, 1942, 380-9). Rees & Rees (1961, 308) regard the concept of a mortal solving disputes in the supernatural world as quite strange, but note that these two worlds could 'intrude upon one another in a variety of ways. They can help and they can harm one another; they can rob and they can enrich one another'. The trips of Cú Chulainn and Lóegaire are instigated so that they can intervene and solve a specific difficulty in the Otherworld.

The conclusions of *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Echtrae Lógairi* differ in that Lóegaire returns home briefly to Connacht before returning to the *síd* mound, where he remains with Fíachna and his daughter, whereas Cú Chulainn returns home and a tryst is arranged with Fand a month later at Ibor Cind Tráchtá (Dillon, 1953a, 24, §39). It would seem from its negative outcome, namely the stop put to Cú Chulainn and Fand's union that sexual encounters initiated in the Otherworld were viable there, as also in *Echtrae Nerai*, *Echtrae Lógairi* and *Tochmarc Emire* but were not so elsewhere. Indeed, it would seem that they were perhaps part of the course in a number of these otherworldly trips namely, *Echtrae Nerai*, *Echtrae Lógairi*, *Serglige Con Culainn* and indeed *Tochmarc Emire*. Rees & Rees (1961, 309) observes that the 'supernatural mistress entices the hero to a friendly feminine world' as in the case of *Immram Brain* and that 'those who succumb altogether to the fascination of the mysterious otherworld woman are thus lost forever to the world of men'. Viewed thus, Cú Chulainn was mistaken in thinking that his relationship with Fand could be sustained in the ordinary world.

### III.4.3.3. Cú Chulainn's Otherworldly trip III

The brief and difficult *Cín Dromma Snechtai* text, *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, which dates to the eighth century, depicts another of Cú Chulainn's overseas sojourns, this time to the land of the Fir Fálgae, also referred to as the *fir Manann* in this tale and so associating them with the Isle of Man, an overseas location and one which Carey (2000, 117) designates as otherworldly.<sup>82</sup> The arrival of an unusual bird, which Thurneysen (1913, 234) describes as *der Vogel Greif* 'the griffin', bearing a blossom, presumably from their lands, is reminiscent of the woman and or warrior that bears a branch to Bran and Cormac prior to their respective otherworldly trips in *Immram Brain* (Meyer, 1895, 2-4, §§1-3) and *Echtrae Cormaic* (Stokes, 1891, 213, §32).

According to Carey (1982, 39-40), *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Connlae* are two of our earliest sources for an overseas setting for the Otherworld. Both of these are also identified as probable *Cín Dromma Snechtai* texts. Thus, it is quite likely that early interaction between these narratives accounts for Cú Chulainn's similar outing in *Forfess Fer Fálgae*.<sup>83</sup> This shared theme may also explain their inclusion in many of the same manuscripts, namely, Rawlinson B.512, Eg. 88, 23 N 10 and Harley 5280 (Mac Mathúna, 1985, 1-12; McCone, 2000, 1-9; Meyer, 1912, 564; II.1). This might be an indication of a 'native' method of grouping texts according to content. Notably, these are found in particularly close proximity in Eg. 88. *Forfess Fer Fálgae* is found on folio 11a, while *Echtrae Connlae* and *Immram Brain* occur from folios 11a to 13b (Meyer, 1912, 564; McCone, 2000, 7). Another

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<sup>82</sup> Perhaps, this also accounts for the appearance of unusual birds as a prelude to the Ulstermen's journey to Newgrange for Cú Chulainn's birth in another *Cín Dromma Snechtai* tale, *Compert Con Culainn* (van Hamel, 1933, 3-5, §§1-5).

<sup>83</sup> They are also equated with the *firu Faal* 'men of Fál' in the text (Meyer, 1912, 564).

probable *Cín Dromma Snechtai* text, *Verba Scáthaige*, is also found on folio 11a in this manuscript. As noted above, this may point to an early tradition of a narrative concerning Cú Chulainn's expedition to the land of Scáthach.

At any rate, *Forfess Fer Fálgae* is one of the earliest attestations to the hero's overseas expeditions. Its presence in eight manuscripts alludes to its popularity. However, unlike *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Connláe* and many other Ulster Cycle tales, it is not contained in LU as we now have it. According to Best & Bergin (1929, xiii), LU, in its present state, is 'little more than a fragment' thus it may have contained *Forfess Fer Fálgae* at some point.

Returning to the text of *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, the bird in the opening scene seems to appear to the Ulstermen collectively. However, Cú Chulainn is the only one who reacts, making the subsequent solitary journey to the kingdom of the Fir Fálgae, in a manner similar to his journey to Scáthach in *Tochmarc Emire* and that of Cormac in *Echtrae Cormaic*. This may represent another deliberate summoning of Cú Chulainn to solve an otherworldly conflict, as in the later tale, *Serglige Con Culainn*. Thereafter, his experience is martially orientated as he defeats the Fir Fálgae in honourable single combats before slaying their king, Gét, who is described as *ríg Fomoiri* 'the king of the Fomoiri'.<sup>84</sup> Thus the Fir Fálgae, Fer Manann, Fir Fál and the Fomoiri all seem to be equated in this tale's skeletal account of a successful otherworldly trip of Cú Chulainn's.

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<sup>84</sup> Cú Chulainn defeats three Fomorians on his return from the home of Scáthach while assisting Rúad, King of the Isles (van Hamel, 1933, 60, §80).

The storyline may be supplemented from other sources, notably the beginning of the Eg. 88 (*Aided I*) and the YBL (*Aided II*) versions of *Aided Con Roí*, less certainly in the prose *Dindshenchas* of *Findglas* (Stokes, 1894, 448-9, §53) and in the Tír Scáith part of *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*.<sup>85</sup> Both versions of *Aided Con Roí* begin with an attempt to explain why the Ulstermen sought to kill Cú Roí. A thematic link with this text is indicated by the following reference to Cú Roí at the end of *Forfess Fer Fálgae: feis hi crolecht Caunrai* ‘lying in the blood-grave of Cú Roí’ (Meyer, 1912, 565). The later, possibly tenth century, version (*Aided II*) depicts a siege of the *Fir Fálgae* by the Ulstermen, including, Cú Chulainn and Cú Roí, the events of which serve as the catalyst for the latter’s downfall. This *forbais fer Failgi* ‘the siege of the men of Falga’ (Best, 1905, 20-1, §1) is portrayed as a collective expedition, the booty acquired being listed as Bláthnait, the daughter of Mend, the three cows of Iuchna, the men of Ochain, which are described as the birds on the ears of the cows, the cows’ calf and a special cauldron.<sup>86</sup> Bláthnait is described later in the text as the daughter of Iuchna, king of the men of Fálgae, who are described as *fál mara i n-indsib mara nobítis* ‘they were a “sea-wall” in the islands of the sea’ (§4).<sup>87</sup> While this later tale may draw on a tradition of a raid on the *Fir Fálgae* involving Cú Chulainn, there is, nonetheless, a substantial divergence in detail. Most notably, the trip in *Aided II* is not initiated by a third party and it is not a solitary adventure. Moreover, Cú Chulainn is not the main

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<sup>85</sup> *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* observes that Cú Chulainn spares the life of three churls (*aithech*) on account of their strangeness (*ara n-ingantai*) during a siege on the *Fir Fálgae* (Knott, 1936, 38-9, §131).

<sup>86</sup> The cauldron could hold the milk of thirty cows, but the three cows yield enough to fill it, while the three birds sing to them thus pointing to their magical qualities (Best, 1905, 20-1, §1). A gloss on a verse in the Eg. 1782 version of *Fianna bátar in Emain* about the deaths of Irish heroes mentions Lúar’s siege upon the *Fir Fálgae* and his seizure of the cauldron of Mend, Bláthnait and the three cows of Iuchna (Stokes, 1902, 325, §14).

<sup>87</sup> She is also described as the daughter Mend who is described as the *ríg Insi Fer Falga* in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 112-3, §89).

hero. Unlike *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, the acquisition of otherworldly booty is an important feature in *Aided II*.<sup>88</sup>

The earlier *Aided I* also differs from *Forfess Fer Fálgae* in a number of respects. Echde Echbél, one of the Fer Ecen Caill, carries off Bláithine, Conchobar's daughter, at the beginning of the tale (Thurneysen, 1913, 190-1, §1). The Ulstermen, unaware that he was the culprit, cross the sea to his home in Aird Echdi (Echde's Hill) *i Cinn Tíre Fer* 'in the Headland of the men' to seize his three speckled cows which yielded sixty sextarii of milk into a special cauldron, because their grazing of the land of Ulster vexed them (§§1-3). In this regard, this tale resembles the early scene in *Compert Con Culainn* where the Ulstermen give chase to supernatural birds who strip their land bare (van Hamel, 1933, 3, §§1-2). The name Cenn Tíre (anglicised Kintyre) is the south-western Scottish peninsula. The actions of Cú Chulainn, who reluctantly joins the Ulstermen in their endeavours in *Aided I* only, are subordinate to those of the disguised Cú Roí in both accounts with the exception of three quatrains, common to both, which will be considered below (§§4-5; Best, 1905, 22-3, §1).<sup>89</sup> The retrieval of Bláithine along with Echde's cows, their calf, a cauldron and other valuables, corresponds to the booty obtained in *Aided II*. The link between *Aided I* and *Forfess Fer Fálgae* is extremely tenuous given that the former contains no reference to a siege on the Fir Fálgae. Nevertheless, these are located near each other in Eg. 88. *Aided I*, which is found on folio 10a-b, lies just before *Forfess Fer Falgae*. While there are significant differences in *Aided I* and *Aided II*, both involve a collective expedition

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<sup>88</sup> A woman, possibly Gét's wife, is mentioned in *Forfess Fer Fálgae* but there is no indication that Cú Chulainn took her as booty (Meyer, 1912, 564-5).

<sup>89</sup> Cú Chulainn goes in a boat with a darkly clad warrior who turns out to be Cú Roí (Thurneysen, 1913, 191, §3).

to an otherworldly overseas setting with the seizing of more or less the same treasures. Additionally, Cú Roí is the main hero in both texts. Notwithstanding the difficulties with respect to the relationship between these tales and the variation in essential details, they at least reflect a tradition of trips to unusual overseas locations by Cú Chulainn either alone or with companions in search of warfare, and quite likely magical booty and possibly a girl.

An entry in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* concerning Findglas makes what seems to be a somewhat jumbled reference to the events at the beginning of both versions of *Aided Con Roí* in relation to a meeting between Cú Chulainn and Bláthnait who conspire to bring about Cú Roí's death:

*Ni ansa .i. Blathnat ingen Mind rí Fer Falga, bancele Conroí meic Daire, banserc-side Conculainn. Is í rogeall Coinculainn o[i]dhchi samna dia saighid do digail [na] n-erc n-Iuchna Eachach Echbeoil, 7 in coire..* 'Not difficult that is Bláthnait, daughter of Mend, King of the Fir Falga, wife of Cú Roí son of Dáire. Cú Chulainn's beloved (is) she. It is she that pledged Cú Chulainn to come to her one Samain night to avenge the cows of Iuchna Eochaid Echbél and the cauldron' (Stokes, 1894, 448-9; my translation).<sup>90</sup>

The ensuing reference to Cú Chulainn's humiliation at the hands of Cu Roí is also largely consistent with findings in *Aided Con Roí*.

*Aided I* and *Aided II* contain three almost identical quatrains, uttered by Cú Chulainn, extolling the excellence and phenomenal capacity of the cauldron taken, and crediting him with its capture along with the king's daughter, presumably

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<sup>90</sup> Stokes (1894, 449n) states that *Fir Falga* is glossed with *inse Gall indiu* which he translates as 'the Hebrides today' in the LL version of the *Dindshenchas*.

Bláthnait (Best, 1905, 20-1, §1; Thurneysen, 1913, 191, §2). Both sections are preceded by a statement that they come from *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and a corresponding piece is also found there under the relatively brief account of his excursion to Tír Scáith (Meyer, 1910, 55). The following is the version given in the earlier *Aided I*:

*Is de as:bert CúChulinn isint síaborcharput:*

*Boí coire isin dún.*

*lóeg na teora mbó*

*tricha aige ina cróes.*

*níbo luchtlach dó.*

*Tathigtis in coire sin.*

*ba meldach in bág*

*Ní:téigtis úad aitherruch.*

*co:fargbatis lán.*

*Boí mór n-óir [is] n-arcait and.*

*robo maith in fríth*

*do:biurt sa in coire sin*

*la ingin ind ríg.*

It is of it (that) Cú Chulainn said in the *síaburcharpat*:

There was a cauldron in the fort.

The calf of three cows,

thirty oxen in its gullet.

It was not enough to fill it.

They used to visit that cauldron.

delightful was the declaration/struggle

they would not come away from it again

until they would get [their] fill

There was much gold and silver there.  
The find was good  
I carried off that cauldron.  
with the king's daughter.  
(Thurneysen, 1913, 191, §2; my translation).

Cú Chulainn is thus accredited here with acquiring the same treasures, as in the two variant versions of *Aided Con Roí*, yet, the details of all these trips differ somewhat. Dates ranging from the ninth to the eleventh centuries have been offered for *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (McCone, 1990, 200; Johnston, 2001, 111; see II.1-2). Additionally, McCone (2000, 69) raises the possibility that a form of this text may have been present in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*. Thurneysen (1921, 432) places *Aided I* in the eighth or ninth century. *Aided II* is believed to date to no earlier than the tenth century (Tymockzo, 181, 16; see II.1-2). Given the author's reference to *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and the presence of *Aided I* and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* in Eg. 88, Thurneysen's (1921, 433n, n2) suggestion that these three verses are interpolated into *Aided Con Roí* seems reasonable.

Cú Chulainn's adventures in Tír Scáith are related after those in *aile-thúath* 'other land' and then Lochlann when Patrick summons him from the dead to speak with the pagan king of Tara, Lóegaire, in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (Meyer, 1910, 54-5). It is difficult to establish the location of *aile-thúath* on the basis of this brief non-specific reference. The otherworldly associations of Lochlann and its Viking connections have been alluded to above.<sup>91</sup> Its northern overseas location and the

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<sup>91</sup> See Ó Béarra (2009, 186-7) for a consideration of Lochlann as an otherworldly location and Etchingam (2007), Ní Mhaonaigh (2006) and Ó Corráin (1998). *Derbforgaill* is described as the

fact that it is inhabited by a giant coupled with the fact that Cú Chulainn carries off a substantial amount of gold are all suggestive of its otherworldliness (Ó Béarra, 2009, 187). Recently, Duignan (2011, 174-5) has suggested that this Lochlann episode may correspond to Cú Chulainn's trip in *Forfess Fer Fálgae* given that both seemingly involve his defeat of giant Fomorian kings and many other warriors. Additionally, the Isle of Man is known to have been settled by the Vikings. Though this is a reasonable suggestion, it is noteworthy that some details differ. Unlike *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, there is no mention of a triggering factor for his visit to Lochlann. While he overcomes the king followed by his supporters in the earlier text, the opposite sequence is found in the Lochlann episode. Thereafter, he imposes what seems to be a large *cain* or tax on them and thus his efforts are duly rewarded. In contrast, *Forfess Fer Fálgae* does not mention treasures. However, the later author could have developed this element.

In the much later tale, *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann*, Cú Chulainn is also forced to make an overseas outing after the king of Lochlann's son, Tuir Glesta, elopes with his wife (Meyer, 1883-5, 184-5). Tuir Glesta travels first with his booty to the Isle of Man, before moving on to, what seems to be, Scotland. Cú Chulainn finally catches up with him, defeating him in combat, before ramsacking his fort to win Emer back. While there seems to be no implication that this is an adventure to an Otherworld, it seems to resemble some of his other expeditions discussed in this section. These include the instigation of his

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*ingen ríge Lochlainne* 'daughter of the King of Lochlann' in *Aided Lugaid ocus Derbforgaill* and her ability to transform herself into a swan confirms her otherworldliness (Marstrander, 1911, 208).

trip by a third party, a journey overseas, his defeat of a key figure there, and his carrying away of a woman, namely, his wife, in this instance.

To return to our analysis of his outing to the unusual Tír Scáith in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*. Tír 'land' is a relatively common element in otherworldly locations (Dillon, 1948, 101) and *scáth* has already been discussed, but Thurneysen (1913, 196n) warns that this should not be confused with Scáthach in *Tochmarc Emire*. The descriptions of Dún Scáith and the creatures there are also indicative of its mysterious nature. These brief accounts of overseas trips must be considered in light of the broader theme of the tale which is concerned with subordinating or supplanting old pagan beliefs with current Christian ones. In contrast to his other adventures, Cú Chulainn's opponents in Dún Scáith are serpents, toads, beaked creatures and monsters, painting a pretty unpleasant picture described by McCone (1990, 201) as a rather 'pale allegorical reflection of hell'.

It is clear that there are some common thematic elements in *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Aided Con Roí I* and *II*, the Tír Scáith, and, possibly the Lochlann sections of *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* entry for Findglas. Yet, significant differences are apparent as outlined above. *Forfess Fer Fálgae* provides an early account of an expedition overseas by Cú Chulainn and this may have inspired, at least in part, the outing there in the later *Aided II* and perhaps the Lochlann episode. The relationship between *Forfess Fer Fálgae* and the earlier *Aided I* is rather tenuous given that it is limited to a reference to Cú Roí's grave in the former tale along with the shared theme of an overseas outing. The *Rennes*

*Dindshenchas* no doubt picks up on the details found in the opening scenes of *Aided Con Roí*. Arguably, this seems to resemble *Aided II* a little closer.

A desire to authenticate claims made about Cú Chulainn's overseas exploits in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* may account for the insertion of the same three verses here and in the two accounts of Cú Roí's death. *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* may have drawn on existing narrative accounts of Cú Chulainn's travels to such hostile settings across the sea. Familiarity with *Aided Con Roí* has been alluded to above in the context of three common verses in these sources. *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* is found on folios 14v-15r in Eg. 88, thus following soon after *Aided Con Roí* (10a-b), *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Verba Scáthaige*, *Echtrae Connlæ* and *Immraim Brain*. Aside from *Verba Scáthaige*, these are all concerned with transmarine voyages to otherworldly locations.

At any rate, the anecdotes in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* are based on a familiar storyline in that the hero travels to hostile overseas settings where he is victorious against unfamiliar opponents. Significantly, Cú Chulainn's deeds are confined to a past era which is at odds with the other tales mentioned here and with much of the Ulster Cycle material. Arguably, Cú Chulainn and the lifestyle he represents is being frowned upon by those who framed this text by showing that one of its prime exponents essentially ends up in hell. In this regard, his character is manipulated to serve the broader agenda of the tale as outlined above.

Looking back at the tales discussed here, uncertainty remains as to the number of outings to hostile otherworldly places ascribed to Cú Chulainn. *Forfess Fer*

*Fálgae* may reflect one, yet *Aided II* also shares this destination. *Aided I* recounts a trip to a different location as does the Tír Scáith section in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*. His outing to Lochlann in the latter tale may be connected to the one in *Forfess Fer Fálgae* but there is no definitive evidence for this. On the whole, there is too little evidence and too many inconsistencies to support O'Béarra's view that these particular tales make up the components of an original tale *Echtrae Con Culainn*. At the very least, these present a custom of Cú Chulainn journeying overseas, mostly alone, in pursuit of combat, wonderful treasures and possibly a girl.

#### **III.4.3.4. Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trip IV**

Cú Chulainn's otherworldly trip in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* bears affinities with the one found in *Tochmarc Emire*. The basic framework of a hero embarking on a transmarine outing in the context of his wooing of a maiden is common to both. However, there is no obvious connection between the manuscript traditions of these tales (see II.1). The author of this late Old Irish text, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, creates a new narrative which shows no signs of integration into the extant corpus of Ulster Cycle material. Its survival in a single manuscript, YBL, suggests that it was not particularly popular. Nevertheless, its existence points to further interest in the occasion of the hero's winning of a maiden along with his outings to distant lands. We are only concerned with the latter event here.

The trips in both these tales are instigated by a third party opposed to his attempts to woo his daughter. In this text Eochu Rond places an injunction on Cú Chulainn to make the journey:

*“nít-raib sáim suidi na laigi, a Chú Chulainn, co-fesar cid ruc trí maccu Duíl Dermait asa tír”* ““may you not have ease of sitting or of lying down, Cú Chulainn, until you may find out what took the three sons of Dóel Dermait from their land”” (Hollo, 2005, 55 & 100, §16).

Thereafter, when he tries to sit, it appears as if his clothes are burning him so that he proclaims:

*“Is doich lim, a ócu,” olse, “a n-ad robairt Echaid Rond frim-sa, ro-sia ní dam. At-bélad mo béoil-sea mana-thías as”* ““I think, warriors,” he says, “that what Eochu Rond said to me, it will come to me. I will die if I don’t set forth”” (§17).

Thereupon, he announces that he will die unless he sets forth to acquire this knowledge. After a number of martial encounters he reaches the coast at Tráig in Baili to the east of Dún Delca, where he is given a boat by the son of the king of Alba (§§18-21).

This journey across the sea to a number of mysterious islands is somewhat reminiscent of Bran’s voyage (Meyer, 1895, 16, §32). Cú Chulainn obtains the knowledge that he seeks on the third island visited. He appears to travel to the first island on his own, but later Lugaid Réo nDerg and Lóeg mac Riangabra are also mentioned as being there, the three being washed in a vat and experiencing

generous hospitality (Hollo, 2005, 57 & 101, §§26-8). On the second island, Cú Chulainn meets the giant Condla Cóel Corbracc and his wife, a daughter of Dóel Dermait, who takes him to another island to meet Cairpre Cundail, the uncle of the sons of Dóel Dermait (§§31-8). Cú Chulainn defeats Cairpre, but despite brandishing his *gáe bolga*,<sup>92</sup> does not kill him because of his pleas for mercy (§§38-9). He also benefits from his conquest in this tale by obtaining the knowledge that he sought from the defeated Cairpre thus releasing himself from Eochu Rond's nasty injunction. Just as he helps Scáthach in her endeavours against Aífe, he slays Eochaid Glas for Cairpre, releasing his captives, the *sí-dwellers* and the sons of Dóel Dermait (§§40-2). Though it is stated that he is rewarded with marvellous gifts, these are not detailed and it seems that he did not receive anything comparable to the *gáe bolga*, which he already possesses for this trip (§39). However, owing the rather

The lack of extant extra-textual references to this adventure suggests that it is relatively insignificant in terms of Cú Chulainn's heroic biography in comparison to his visit to the land of Scáthach.

### **Conclusion**

The existence of a considerable amount of sources concerned with the hero's outings to overseas locations indicates that this is an area which was of considerable interest to medieval *literati*. The oldest account of *Tochmarc Emire* and *Forfess Fer Fálgae* suggest that this tradition is at least evident from the eighth century. However, the even older text, *Verba Scáthaige*, may point to an even

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<sup>92</sup> Usually, when Cú Chulainn produces the *gáe bolga* in combats it leads to the death of his opponent (see IV.4).

earlier date for Cú Chulainn's trip to Scáthach's home. Early interaction between *Immram Brain*, *Echtrae Connlae*, and *Forfess Fer Fálgae* likely account for shared themes, including a voyage to an overseas otherworldly setting, though experiences there differ with Cú Chulainn's being distinctly martial in flavour. The later Old Irish period reveals a new tale, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, which is built on a story-pattern similar to that found in *Tochmarc Emire*. The ninth, tenth or possibly eleventh century narrative, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, acknowledges an established tradition with respect to Cú Chulainn's expeditions but conversely confines these to the distant past. In addition, it alludes to otherwise unattested adventures of this type. *Serglige Con Culainn*, with parts dating to the ninth and eleventh centuries, similarly builds a tale around the hero's expedition to an otherworldly transmarine region. Though *Tochmarc Emire* undergoes considerable reworking in the Middle Irish period, the hero's depiction here is largely consistent with the earliest account of the tale. Cú Chulainn's expedition to Scáthach's mysterious home for further training in arms is central to both accounts. Some components evolve in the later tale, for example, it details the specific feats taught to Cú Chulainn.

In the case of Cú Chulainn, it seems likely that these overseas expeditions replace the more usual raids into neighbouring enemy territories. Thus, Cú Chulainn is further distinguished from other Ulster warriors. In line with other aspects of his characterization, his exceptional martial skills are magnified to the extent that they are deemed equally relevant in such hostile settings. In certain respects, he appears to be portrayed as a hero of both worlds, the ultimate liminal figure called upon to intervene in otherworldly affairs in *Serglige Con Culainn*, *Fled Bricrenn ocus*

*Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait, Tochmarc Emire* and arguably *Forfess Fer Fálgae*.<sup>93</sup>

While the ordinary world benefits greatly from the hero's presence, it is perhaps to be expected, given his semi-divine parentage, that otherworldly locations would similarly profit.

Turning to this facet of his heroic biography, it seems that more than one of these could reflect this milestone. While de Vries' work draws us to this significant event in heroic lives, this point on the schema is very general allowing us to consider a number of Cú Chulainn's trips as contenders for this. As indicated above, a number of these might simply be viewed as excursions into transmarine hostile realms in a bid to underscore Cú Chulainn's remarkable prowess in comparison to his fellow warriors. In terms of Cú Chulainn's depiction as the supreme Ulster warrior it is reasonable to expect that he would experience a significant advancement in his martial power as a result of such an outing in the way that Cormac's kingly abilities are also boosted. In this regard, it seems plausible to suggest that his journey to the land of Scáthach best realises this aspect of his heroic biography, particularly because of the further training in arms that he receives while there. Arguably, this point is perhaps refined further in the later text when the author clearly outlines the *cleasa* that he acquires and in particular the deadly weapon, the *gáe bolga*, both of which can be viewed as positive indices of his enhanced martial capacity.

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<sup>93</sup> McCone (1990, 188) states that 'ambivalence and liminality are the hero's essential attributes' and that the hero can move freely between worlds including that of men and god(s) because of his superhuman makeup.

### **III.5. The culmination of Cú Chulainn's martial career**

#### **III.5.1. De Vries' schema**

Cú Chulainn's finest hour is found in the lengthy epic, TBC. This saga provides the most detailed account of his adult exploits and so is central to his heroic biography. Although it does not slot neatly into De Vries' schema, it does merit consideration here.

#### **III.5.2. Relevant research to date**

It is not surprising that TBC has been the focus of extensive scholarly attention over a lengthy time period but many of the issues need not concern us here. Ó hUiginn (1992, 62) provides a comprehensive study of the key factors involved in the creation of TBC and concludes that it can be regarded as a 'literary creation which grew over a period of centuries', notwithstanding a 'debt to preceding oral traditions' that is hard to quantify. Moreover, 'certain aspects of the tale were developed under the influence of classical and biblical material' including the synchronisation of the Ulster-Cycle tales with the time of Christ with a view to establishing a place for the Irish in the scheme of world history (Ó hUiginn, 1992, 62). These are just some of the questions concerning the platform upon which Cú Chulainn is presented.

Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 126-7) observes that TBC celebrates Cú Chulainn's 'martial heroism, his courage and ingenuity, his mastery of the martial arts, his unswerving loyalty' as 'saviour to his people' by single-handedly defending Ulster. He finds that TBC fits all but the first of Abrams's criteria for an epic:

...in its strictest use by literary critics the term 'epic' or 'heroic poem' is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race (Ó Cathasaigh, 1993, 116).

He comments on its length, its elevated style, its serious subject, namely the invasion and defence of Ulster, and most importantly the fact that it is centred upon 'the heroic figure of Cú Chulainn, on whose actions the fate of Ulster depends' (Ó Cathasaigh, 1993, 116).

Bruford (1994b, 199) suggests that the hero's role in TBC could alternatively have been filled by Fergus or his son, Fiacc, or by Conall Cernach but was not, because these candidates were all politically undesirable. Cú Chulainn, whose characteristics are 'almost entirely those of a stereotyped, indeed an exaggerated version of the typical young hero', was chosen instead (Bruford, 1994b, 199-200). Ó Broin (1961-63, 291) observes that Cú Chulainn takes over the role of the king, Conchobar, who suffers from a debilitating illness for most of TBC, as 'head of the tribe, and defends them successfully against their enemies as the normal tribal leader should'.

Bruford (1994b, 203) comments that the affliction that the men of Ulster suffer for TBC serves to exalt Cú Chulainn further but that the author surely could not have invented this feature. Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 122) considers this *ces* or 'debility' to be a necessary condition of the raid in TBC, 'since it renders the Ulstermen unable to defend their territory'. Its origin and nature is not detailed in TBC. Ó Broin (1961-63) outlines a number of flaws in the theory of the *couvade* school which

views it as a ‘mimed travail’ ‘conducted by the Ulstermen in honour of the Mother-Goddess or Earth-Goddess Macha’ (Ó Broin, 1961-63, 286).<sup>94</sup> The affliction in this instance is longer than that described elsewhere, most importantly in *Noínden Ulad* (Hull, 1968, 28-9). Ó Broin (1961-63, 286) states that *noínden* is a compound of *noí* (nine) and *den* (a space of time), and in this ‘context is taken to be an attributive genitive used to describe the duration of the ceremony and meaning nine half-days (five nights and four days or *vice versa*)’. The debility in TBC spans the three months of winter from Samain to Imbolc (TBC I, ll.2137-42) and so can be regarded as a ‘death or winter sleep’ typically found in seasonal myth or ritual (Ó Broin, 1961-63, 288).

The basic idea behind this theory is ‘the triumph of life and fecundity over death and decay’ (Ó Broin, 1961-63, 289). Central to this approach, is Cú Chulainn’s union with the earth Goddess, Feidelm, which Ó Broin (1961-63, 292) views as a fertility rite. This interpretation draws heavily on a brief tale concerning Cú Chulainn and Feidelm which attributes the debility of the Ulstermen to their viewing of the goddess, Feidelm Foltcháin, naked (Meyer, 1912a, 120).<sup>95</sup> Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 125) argues that ‘it is not necessary to follow Ó Broin in his theory that the *cess* is based on a fertility ritual’. It is acknowledged that the seasonal character of the debility is suggestive of a connection with fertility but that it is best to view him instead as a ‘fecundating hero’ as noted in III.1.2 (Ó Cathasaigh, 1993, 125). However, as already observed with regard to *Compert*

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<sup>94</sup> Ó Broin (1961-63) states that this school of thought finds its roots in the theory that the custom of *couvade* or *Wochenbett der Männer*, which is viewed as a pre-Aryan relic, was preserved by the early Ulstermen. See Ó Broin (1961-63, 286) for a further synopsis of the scholarly views concerning this approach.

<sup>95</sup> This anecdote refers generally to the debility of the Ulstermen and does not specifically mention TBC (see VI.6).

*Con Culainn*, there are no associated images of replenishment or fertility in the text to support this approach.

### **III.5.3. Discussion and analysis**

TBC marks the consummation of Cú Chulainn's status as the chief warrior of the Ulster people. The scene is deliberately set, through the employment of a number of devices, to facilitate his presentation in this manner. The early part of the tale devotes a considerable amount of attention to creating the backdrop for the subsequent battle. Cú Chulainn's opponents consist of a large army from the four provinces of Ireland led by Medb and Ailill of Connacht (TBC I, ll.2-23). The fact that the Ulstermen are suffering from a debilitating illness is also highlighted at this early stage, since it leads Medb to dismiss Feidelm's prophecy concerning her army's imminent doom at the hands of Cú Chulainn (ll.48-64).

The Ulstermen's debility excludes all other warriors except Cú Chulainn from the limelight and provides the platform for his prolonged single-handed defence of Ulster as saviour hero of his people during the rigours of winter.<sup>96</sup> This only begins in earnest after the narration of his *macgnímrada* to Medb and Ailill who are represented as hitherto unaware of his existence. His setting of obstacles and slaying of four of their men, makes them wonder who has accomplished this (ll.330-46) but various great Ulster warriors other than Cú Chulainn are the only candidates to occur to them (ll.361-7). Fergus, however, assures them that Cú Chulainn must be the perpetrator (ll.369-72). Thus he is singled out above other

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<sup>96</sup> There are a number of references to the snow early in the tale and it perhaps stands as a further sign of Medb's poor judgment to instigate the battle in such treacherous conditions (TBC I, ll.309-10).

great Ulster warriors, underlined further with Fergus's eulogy of his exceptional skills (ll.382-92).

The placing of the *macgnímrada* in the main body of TBC clearly serves to direct attention on Cú Chulainn and his role in the tale (see III.2.3). Thereafter, his encounters with and slaying of many opponents are detailed, some are connected with the naming of places. Such is the extent of Cú Chulainn's martial prowess and destruction on the Connacht forces that a truce is required to stall his onslaught (ll.1238-86)<sup>97</sup> with Ailill remarking: "*Bid dimbúan ar slóg la Coin Culaind in cruth sa,*" *ol Ailill* "Our army will not long survive with Cú Chulainn attacking us in this fashion," said Ailill' (ll.1238; see IV.1).

The terms of the truce are dictated by Cú Chulainn after the predictable failure of Medb to bribe him by offering the women and milch cows of Ulster (ll.1264-76), his aim being to delay the advancement of the Connacht forces until the Ulster warriors can recover and come to his aid (ll.1282-3). A daily single combat with Cú Chulainn is agreed in an attempt to minimise his slaughter of the enemy. There are a few instances in the tale where Cú Chulainn seeks assistance from others, including Rochad mac Fathemain (ll.1659-60) and his own divine father, Lug mac Ethnenn (ll.2178-9). Even though he is seriously injured, he is unhappy when his earthly father, Súaldaim, comes to his side because he is afraid that he would be unable to avenge him in the event of his death (ll.3417-8). However, he does instruct him to summon the Ulstermen to the battle and also calls on the river

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<sup>97</sup> His killing of one hundred of the enemy nightly for three nights is particularly devastating (TBC I, ll.1235-6).

Cronn to help him against the advancing army earlier in the tale (ll.1158-9).<sup>98</sup> A number of other groups challenge Medb's forces at different intervals including the boy-troop while he lies gravely wounded (ll.2164-72) and, later in the tale, Cethern mac Fintain (ll.3162-74), Mend mac Sálchada (ll.3336-45) and others. However, most of these groups face almost complete annihilation at the hands of Medb's army,<sup>99</sup> thus further distinguishing Cú Chulainn's solitary achievements.

Though on the opposite side, Fergus remains largely loyal to Cú Chulainn and Ulster throughout TBC owing to his status as an Ulsterman and Cú Chulainn's foster-father and helps Cú Chulainn on occasion. Early on, he sends a warning to Cú Chulainn about Medb and Ailill's planned attack (ll.216-9) and acts similarly before some of his single combats including that with Fer Diad (ll.2687-748). He also deliberately leads the host astray in order to buy more time for the Ulstermen (ll.227-9) and continually has Cú Chulainn's interests at heart in trying to ensure that he receives fair play from Medb and Ailill (ll.1134-6, ll.2056-9). Even when he is plied with sufficient drink to go forth to challenge Cú Chulainn, he does so with no weapon and with no intention of fighting him (ll.2501-10; see V.5).

The importance of single combat to a warrior has been mentioned already in connection with Cú Chulainn's slaying of the hound in III.2.3.<sup>100</sup> His fearsomeness is evident from the reluctance of other warriors to fight him. Medb

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<sup>98</sup> It has been proposed that this motif is a borrowing from the *Iliad*, although Ó hUiginn (1992, 40) does note that the exact channels remain obscure. In his consideration of the rivers that run through TBC and the *Iliad*, Nagy (1996, 147) suggests that this motif may be of shared Indo-European heritage.

<sup>99</sup> The youths of Ulster attack the enemy and meet their death in an earlier attempt to help Cú Chulainn (TBC I, ll.1631-47).

<sup>100</sup> See also V.4.

offers her daughter as a reward to combatants and later breaks the agreement outlined above by sending twenty men together to attack him (ll.1407, ll.1552-4).<sup>101</sup> She employs deceitful tactics in the hope of slaying Cú Chulainn throughout the epic (ll.1910-49, ll.2067-8). For instance, Gaile Dána and his twenty-seven sons and his nephew are sent against Cú Chulainn but he kills them all with some help from the two sons of Ficce (ll.2547-66).<sup>102</sup> There is also an account of the Morrígan's attack on him in three different guises while he is in combat with Lóch mac Mo Femis (ll.1975-2026). Against the odds, Cú Chulainn is victorious in all of these encounters (see V.4).

Nevertheless, they take their toll on him as a mere mortal lacking the protective skin or the like possessed by two of his opponents, Lóch mac Mo Femis and Fer Diad (ll.2027, ll.2575-6). After curing him with magic herbs, his divine father, Lug mac Ethnenn, rejects Cú Chulainn's request for further assistance (ll.2136-84). Once rejuvenated, Cú Chulainn is bent on avenging the deaths of the aforementioned boy-troop and he duly goes on to massacre large numbers of the enemy after undergoing one of his distortions (ll.2185-334; see IV.3). The climatic duel of the whole tale is clearly that between Cú Chulainn and his beloved foster-brother, Fer Diad (ll.3009-142) which will be discussed in IV.1. Expectedly, the former emerges victorious.

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<sup>101</sup> Fer Báeth and Láiríne are both promised Finnabair and plied with wine to fight Cú Chulainn (TBC I, ll.1750-6, ll.1818-20). A significant amount of land and other goods are offered, along with a maiden, to Long mac Ebonis (ll.1875-9).

<sup>102</sup> There is some variation in TBC II, where the former is listed as Calatín Dána and he is again accompanied by his sons along with his grandson as opposed to his nephew (ll.2534-45).

## **Conclusion**

While Cú Chulainn's *macgnímrada* suggest that he will be a great warrior, TBC affirms this. The scene is deliberately set in the latter tale for him to do this. Cú Chulainn fulfils his role admirably by protecting his people and staving off the attack of the enemy until the Ulstermen recover to repel and defeat them. TBC thus marks the culmination of his martial career and it is without question a major milestone in his life.

### **III.6. Cú Chulainn's death**

#### **III.6.1. De Vries' schema**

De Vries (1963, 216) states that the 'hero often dies young, like Achilles, Siegfried and Cúchulainn' and that '[i]n many cases their death is miraculous'. Furthermore, 'it is noteworthy that the true hero is the brave young man who dies an early death. This applies to Siegfried and Achilles as much as to Roland and Cúchulainn' (de Vries, 1963, 182). Although the hero may be safeguarded in a number of ways, 'his fate will be fulfilled inexorably' and, despite his extraordinary strength, this fate shadows him for his brief life (de Vries, 1963, 183).

#### **III.6.2. Relevant research to date**

Cú Chulainn's early death in his martial prime may be regarded as conforming to an ideal heroic paradigm (Rees & Rees, 1961, 340). Rees & Rees (1961, 341) assert that mythological deaths are preordained works of violence, 'a cutting down' presented in 'grimmest brutality'. It would be an anti-climax for these champions merely to die of disease or old age: '[i]t is essential to the ethos of a warrior caste that death in battle should be the most glorious of all deaths, the death which ensures admission to

paradise' (Rees & Rees, 1961, 340). Rees & Rees (1961, 326) state that '[t]he circumstances of the hero's death have been foretold by druids or seers and in many cases he goes through life knowing precisely what his end will be'. Cú Chulainn's journey to his last battle is viewed as a 'veritable "death-ride"' during which he is warned by a number of omens and unusual occurrences but proceeds until he meets three crones, each blind in the left eye, cooking a feast of dog-meat, thereby placing him in a quandary (Rees & Rees, 1961, 326-7). Cú Chulainn's acceptance of the invitation to their feast leads to his violation of a *geis* 'prohibited thing' which Rees & Rees (1961, 327) interpret as such 'a sure omen of approaching death that it might almost be inferred that a hero is safe from harm while his *gessa* remain inviolate'.

Cú Chulainn being essentially caught in a checkmate position between his two *geisi* implies that he can no longer 'choose between right on the one hand and wrong on the other. He is already in a world where right and wrong have merged' (Rees & Rees, 1961, 331). His attackers are only able to bring about his death because of their access to the 'world where all things are possible' (Rees & Rees, 1961, 331). Tymoczko (1981, 11-2) also notes that Cú Chulainn's death is 'plotted and planned; he is brought down by sorcery and occult powers; his death is presaged by portents and prophecy'. Rees & Rees (1961, 33) observe that he 'has either to make the foolhardy gesture of presenting his enemies with his weapon, or he has to suffer the ignominy of being reviled for behaviour unbecoming for a warrior'. They conclude that 'Cú Chulainn is brought to his death by being placed in a series of ambiguous situations where heroism is of no avail' (Rees & Rees, 1961, 333). Tymoczko (1981, 12) states that '[i]n many ways Cú Chulainn's death is the climax of his career'.

Meyer (1901, v) notes that Cú Chulainn's death tale is one of eight concerning Ulster-Cycle heroes which are listed in LL and elsewhere, 'under the title *oitte*, i.e. 'tragical or violent deaths''. Lehmann (1989, 6) views Cú Chulainn's as the finest of all of them. Melia (1977-78, 39) states that the Ulster death tales contain one of two plots, which he refers to as 'Woman-Revenge' and 'Tabu-Revenge'. He lists three of Cú Chulainn's encounters with women, namely the women who ask him to defend Muirthemne, the nurse whom he stops with and the three crones mentioned above. Under the second heading he notes that Cú Chulainn breaks his taboo and that he is killed because of his loss of strength and in revenge (Melia, 1977-78, 42).

Kimpton (2009, 1-2) acknowledges that the 'theme of vengeance (*dígal*) generates the action of much of the tale', suggesting a connection with the Indo-European myth of the slayer slain posited by Watkins. Accepting his view of the myth of dragon slaying as 'a symbolic victory of growth over stagnation or dormancy in the cycle of the year, and ultimately a victory of rebirth over death', she notes that Cú Chulainn's death at Lugnasad is in keeping with this tradition and Ó Bróin's suggestions that Cú Chulainn plays a rejuvenatory role in a seasonal myth (Kimpton, 2009, 1-2). Kimpton (2009, 2) concludes that '[t]he Christianisation of his tale of death and rebirth, effected by the narrative parallel drawn between him and Christ, is advanced by this underlying mythological significance'.

The proposals of McCone (1990) and Kelleher (1971) concerning the influence of Christianity on aspects of Cú Chulainn's life are discussed in III.1.2-3 and VII.4. Kimpton's (2009, 4) assertion that Cú Chulainn is afforded a salvific role analogous to those of Christ and Patrick is also considered in VII.4.

### III.6.3. Discussion and analysis

The hero's death completes his biography and is typically unusual like the other events in his life discussed so far. In *Cú Chulainn's* case a highly elaborate plot, deeply rooted in supernatural forces, is hatched over a number of years in order to bring him down. Though facing a losing battle, he challenges his opponents for as long as possible, thus remaining true to his role as protector of Ulster up to, and even after, his death. If we look to other sources, we learn that *Cú Chulainn's* slayers are the offspring of warriors who he had slain, namely, Calatín, his twenty seven sons and his nephew are killed in TBC (TBC I, ll.2547-566), *Cú Roí* and *Cairpre Nia Fer* are killed in *Aided Con Roí* (Best, 1905) and *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* (Hogan, 1892) respectively. This event is highly stylized and differs greatly from the death tales of other Ulster heroes, not least in being much longer and more extraordinary. Its style is also more elevated and 'passages with metrical structure constitute a large portion' of it (Kimpton, 2009, 5).<sup>103</sup>

As noted in II.1, the sole LL text lacks the earlier part of the tale and this must be inferred from the fragments in H.3.18 and from a later version. This details the supernatural tactics employed by his opponents. In keeping with other battles in his life, he is once again outnumbered, this time by the collective forces of the children of Calatín, Erc mac Cairpre and Lugaid mac Con Roí, a trio of adversaries reminiscent of those in his final *macgním* and later in the lands of Scáthach in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 54, §75; see V.4). Kimpton (2009, 2) notes that two of this trio are marked by triplicity: 'Lugaid is also called "Mac Trí Con", Calatín's three sons

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<sup>103</sup> See Kimpton (2009, 5-8) for an analysis of the stylistic content of these passages.

prepare spears and spells to act against the hero, and his three daughters, learned in witchcraft, trick Cú Chulainn into breaking his *gessa*'. The extensive training of the children of Calatín in occult powers and the crafting of special weapons to slay Cú Chulainn reinforce his exemplary heroic status and highlight the tactics required to kill such a hero (Kimpton, 2009, 11 & 35, H.3.18, §§1-7).<sup>104</sup> Ordinary means will not suffice to kill him. Far-reaching supernatural elements and a lengthy conspiracy are not found in the deaths of other Ulster heroes such as Conchobar, Celtchar mac Uthechair, Cet mac Mágach, Lóegaire Búadach and Fergus mac Róich (Meyer, 1906).

Cú Chulainn's dual paternity appears to be a potential obstacle: *Óenní sin amáin mac Dé mac duini. Mairg mindóene..* 'That alone [Cú Chulainn] is the son of God, the son of man. Woe for the common folk..' (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §13). The wording of this piece is clearly reminiscent of Christ (see III.1.3 & VII.4). During the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, it is announced that because she has conceived through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be known as the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Upon being questioned by the high priest as to whether he is the Son of God prior to his sentencing to death, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man (Matthew 26:64). Supernatural elements feature strongly in Cú Chulainn's conception and birth and now in his death but are beneficial in the former and predominantly malevolent in the latter (see III.1.3).

An extensive range of motifs including a strong female presence, warning omens, a prophecy, a drink, impossible situations, the breaking of *geisi*, and a protracted contest are evident in this text. There is some degree of correspondence with

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<sup>104</sup> 'H.3.18' will be inserted in the relevant references to Kimpton's edition of this text to indicate that these have come from this manuscript. Those without this identifier can be taken to derive from the LL section of the tale.

Conaire Mór's death in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, containing as it does impossible situations, a prophecy, lack of a drink, a protracted contest and warning omens chiefly linked to his breaking of *geisi* (Knott, 1936). Additionally, it could be argued that conspiracy also contributes to Conaire's downfall when he prohibits his foster-brothers, the sons of Donn Désa, from engaging in the practice *díberga* 'plundering, marauding', the occupation of their ancestors (§§19-20; see IV.3). Conaire banishes them from Ireland ordering them to direct their activities on Britain whereupon they make a pact with Ingcél Cáech to plunder with them there and consequently a return bout is owed in Ireland which culminates in the destruction at Da Derga's hostel (§§141-5).

As the catalyst for the deaths of Conchobar, Celtchar, Cet and possibly Fergus as well as Cú Chulainn, vengeance seems to have been a key driving force behind the actions of a warrior. The Early Modern Irish version of the tale tells us that Cú Chulainn was responsible for the deaths of the fathers of the children of Calatín, Lugaid mac Con Roí and Erc mac Cairpre (van Hamel, 1933, 71-5, §§1-5) and that his archenemy in TBC, Medb, also contributed to his undoing. The earlier version notes of the children of Calatín: *Et ro:cóecha uile comtar túathc[h]óecha (.i. láncacha no clécacha)* 'And [she?] blinded all [of them] so that they were blind in the left eye (i.e. fully blind or blind in the left eye)' (Kimpton, 2009, 11 & 35, H.3.18, §2). The later version states: *tháinig Meidbh cuca is do-rinne sé hamaidedh taoi tuathchaocha dhíobh* 'Medb came to them [children of Calatín] she (he?) made mute witches blind in the left eye of them' (van Hamel, 1933, 72, §1; my translation). Medb appears to be the main organiser and co-ordinator of the attack on Cú Chulainn in the Early Modern Irish

version and this was presumably also the case in the LL version despite the missing opening. The role of revenge is clear in both versions.

Uncharacteristically, he appears less than eager to act on Leborcham's advice to save Mag Muirthemne from attack, perhaps mindful of the Ulstermen's instructions to him not to leave Emain Machae unaided (Kimpton, 2009, 11 & 35, H.3.18, §8). However, he cites his exhaustion as one of his excuses in the following rhetoric:

*“An dím, a ingen.*

*Ni mm'óenur do:miul-sa Chonchobuir cóiced.*

*Cíabo bidbu imnedach ní:imgén m'óenur*

*ar is dáirle íarna scís mo scís.*

*Nidam eirr imtholtanach accobrach imgona indiu”*

“Desist from [inciting] me, maiden. I do not alone enjoy Conchobar's province. Though it be a troublesome enemy, I will not fight alone, for it is ill-advised to exhaust myself after exhaustion. I am not a warrior eager and desirous for battle today” (Kimpton, 2009, 12-3 & 36, §§2-4).

However, it is noted elsewhere that he is not always eager to engage in battle (see III.4.3.2). This lapse is short-lived and he soon returns to his usual warrior ways vowing to fight to defend his honour, even though he knows that his death is imminent:

*“cíabam trú-sa nim:tharraid cubés.*

*Con:róetar m'ainech.*

*Nim- ág -archelad.*

*Ni- mmo guin –immgabaim”*

““though I may be doomed, an equal has not overtaken/will not overtake me. I have preserved/will preserve my honor. I will not be guarded from battle/valor will not be/has not been stolen from me. I do not avoid my death”” (§5).

Indeed, he persists in his preparation for battle despite a range of signs warning him of his impending doom. The main omens include the difficulty he has putting on his cloak, his brooch falling from it and piercing him, the reluctance of the Líath Machae to be harnessed, its tears of blood, the horse’s turning of his left-side to Cú Chulainn three times and the Morrígan’s breaking of his chariot the night before the battle in an attempt to prevent him leaving (§§6-8). The Morrígan, Cú Chulainn’s horse and the women of Ulster seem unwilling to allow the hero to embark on his journey of death. There are no such omens in the death tales of the other Ulster heroes mentioned above. However, it is Conaire’s violation of each *geis* that points to his impending doom in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Though there is a feeling of gloom expressed by Fer Diad’s people in TBC prior to his fatal contest with Cú Chulainn and his charioteer tries to dissuade him from going to meet the hero, there are no comparable warning signs (TBC I, ll.2817-58). Cú Chulainn’s recognition of his impending doom and his extreme bravery are captured in a rhetoric, in which he gives a detailed prophecy of his own slaying in the subsequent unfair battle, but this does not deter him from entering into the battle (Kimpton, 2009, 16-8 & 38, §10). Similar prophecies are not found in the death tales of the Ulstermen listed above, but do occur in the deaths of major kings including Díarmait mac Cerbaill (Koch, 2000, 212) and Conaire Mór (Stokes, 1901, 206-8, §101).

His encounter with the three one-eyed witches, presumably the three daughters of Calatín, cooking a feast of poisoned dog-meat places Cú Chulainn in an impossible situation: *Ba do gessib Con Culaind cen adall fulachta dia chathim*. ‘it was one of Cú Chulainn’s *geissi* not to stop at a cooking pit to eat’ and *[g]eiss dó dano cárna a chomanma do ithi* ‘[i]t was also *geis* for him to eat the flesh of his namesake’ (Kimpton, 2009, 18-9 & 39, §11). In her closing lament, Emer observes that: “*Cú glas fo: noiset fri tindell a clíu*” “‘They cooked a grey hound for the ensnarement of his body’” (§33). Consequently, he attempts to pass the three unnoticed. However, one of them extends an invitation to him, and although he refuses to join them at first, he quickly does so after further pressure leaves him with no choice.<sup>105</sup> In this instance, supernatural beings seem to have the power to force Cú Chulainn to break his *geisi*. Violation of the first *geis* marks the beginning of the end for him.

It is noteworthy that a feast, albeit a miserly one, features at a significant point in Cú Chulainn’s downfall (§11). It has been observed that a number of key events in Cú Chulainn’s life occurred at or were marked by feasts,<sup>106</sup> which also feature strongly in the deaths of a number of kings, including Conaire Mór and Díarmait mac Cerbaill. It is also significant that the meal here is one of dog, given Cú Chulainn’s close association with that animal, not least in his name, and has adverse effects:

*Ata:ella-som íarom 7 to:n-indnaig ind ammaid leithi in chon dó assa láim chlí.  
Ad:etha Cú Chulaind íarum assa láim 7 da:mbeir fó slíasait clí. Ind lám  
rod:[n]gab 7 int slíasait fó tarat ro:gabtha ó chund co fond conna:rabi a nnert  
cétna indib* ‘He visits them then and the witch hands to him the shoulder of the  
hound from her left hand. Cú Chulainn takes it then from her hand and places it

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<sup>105</sup> Cú Chulainn’s *geisi* are discussed in V.6.

<sup>106</sup> Cú Chulainn’s birth and his slaying of Culann’s hound are marked by a feast.

by his left thigh. The hand which took it and the thigh by which he placed it were seized from top to bottom so that the same strength was not in them' (§11).

This cannot be considered as a normal feast whereby the participants eat to fulfil dietary requirements. Here this motif is inverted when Cú Chulainn is offered a non-food so to speak.

Part of Cú Chulainn's body seems to have physically died away, marking the beginning of his transition from life to death. Hence he is in a highly liminal position. A pivotal role is thus played by the killing of a dog in his initiation as a warrior (see III.2.3) and by a dead dog in his demise. It also seems to be significant that it is the hound's shoulder that renders the hero's leg, and especially his arm, useless. These human and canine bodily parts are arguably functionally analogous. A hound is also instrumental in the death of another hero, Celtchar mac Uthechair (McCone, 1984, 20), and a canine element also features in the death of Lugaid later in this tale (see below).

It is obvious that the hero is facing an unfair contest, particularly in view of his semi-incapacitated state and, on the evidence in the later version of the text, the fact that the Ulstermen are again prostrated by their debility (*ces*) at this time (van Hamel, 1933, 76, §7). Men from the four provinces of Ireland, collectively referred to as the 'men of Ireland', are also among the opposition (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §13). There is an obvious parallel with the events of TBC, where the lone Cú Chulainn also faced the 'men of Ireland' until the Ulstermen recovered from their debility. However, here Cú Chulainn is required to go forth and fight the enemy, who await him in Mag Muirthemne, as oppose to warding them off as he did in TBC.

This time the attack is directed at Cú Chulainn and his homeland as opposed to the greater province and its people. The unfairness of this contest is duly noted by Cú Chulainn in his earlier prophecy, but this does not deter him: *Con:coillfithir fír fer; forgoba oín fēr; écomluind ili* ‘The truth of men [i.e. fair play] will be violated; a single thrusting man; many unequal combats’ (§10). This is far removed from the warrior-like contests that he has with the hound of Culann, Connlac and Fer Diad.

Despite the fact that the hero realises his end is nigh, he is not willing to be subjected to a harmful satire, presumably for fear that it would tarnish his honour after his death: *“Tír ém nad:ránac-sa ríam ní:ricfat scéla m’écnaig remum, úair is bec atá dom s aegul”* “‘Tidings of my slander will not precede me to the land which I may not have reached, for little remains of my life’” (§19). Nor is he willing to allow the Ulstermen or his kindred suffer the same fate (§§17-9). Thus he remains committed to his role as their protector for as long as he lives. He is firstly forced to intervene between three pairs of fighters and hand over his spear on three occasions or else suffer a satire. Satire can be seen as another weapon, which is used unjustly against him at this point. Clearly, aware of the impropriety of these requests, he retaliates by fatally killing each of the satirists and a number of others with the spear demanded. Thus he is fulfilling his attacking role too and, despite his severely weakened state, the opposition only manage to strike him on their third attempt, the first two fatally killing Lóeg mac Riababra and the Líath Machae respectively (§§17-18).

McCone (1990, 197) draws a parallel between the drink that Cú Chulainn requests prior to his death from a nearby lake and to the drink of vinegar given to Christ as

he approaches death (Mark 16:36, Matthew 27:48).<sup>107</sup> It is noteworthy that a drink, or the lack of one, figures elsewhere in early Irish death tales and Bhreathnach (1982, 257) notes that ‘[t]here is a definite connection between the liquid motif and the death of the king’. Ale made from a single grain features in the death of Díarmait mac Cerbaill (Koch & Carey, 2000, 213-15) and when a great thirst is inflicted upon Conaire Mór in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, a drink is eventually found for him, but it is too late (Bhreathnach, 1982, 257). In *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, Sín gives a drink to Muichertach mac Erca which drains his strength and he subsequently drowns in a cask of wine (Stokes, 1902a, 421-5, §§36-42).<sup>108</sup> Cú Chulainn’s request for a drink seems similar to those found in the deaths of kings and, indeed, to that of Christ, who is also known as the king of the Jews (Mark 15:18). This may be partly attributed to the fact that Cú Chulainn is also acknowledged as a king in this tale by the sons of Calatín and in general appears to be considered as the king of Mag Muirthemne (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §20; see VII.2).

His bathing in the river may be part of a ritual in preparation for his death (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §21) and may also be linked with his concern for his physical presentation thereafter:

*Et téit dochum coirthi cloiche file isin maig co tarat a choimchriss immi nar:ablad na suidiu nach ina ligu combad ina sessam at:balad* ‘..and he goes

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<sup>107</sup> Cú Chulainn also calls to his foster-mother’s house earlier in the tale for a drink (Kimpton, 2009, 18 & 39, §11).

<sup>108</sup> Water or, more specifically, a lake, features indirectly in the deaths of the Ulster heroes Lóegaire Búadach and Fergus (Meyer, 1906, 22-3, 32-5). It is also found in the deaths of Fer Diad (TBC I, ll.3095-6), Connláe (Meyer, 1904, 119-21, §11) and Lugaid at the end of this tale (Kimpton, 2009, 25 & 44, §25).

towards a pillar-stone in the plain, and placed his body-belt around it so that he might not die sitting or lying down, [but rather] so that he might die standing' (§22).

This is reminiscent of his positioning against a rock while sleeping in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*frisin liic*; Dillon, 1953a, 3, §8) and in his final youthful deed (*ocon chorthe*; TBC, I, ll.714-5). He similarly seems to place himself or more specifically, *a druim frisin coirthe* 'his back against the pillar-stone', in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 54 & 99, §11).<sup>109</sup>

Even when he is thus constrained, the enemy remain wary of him: *Is íar sin do:dechatar na fir immacúairt immi 7 niro:lámsatar dul a dochum. Andar leo ropo béo* 'Thereafter the men came around him, and they did not dare to approach him. They thought he was alive' (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 43, §22). When Lugaid beheads him, Cú Chulainn's sword falls from his hand cutting the former's hand off in what can be interpreted as an act of posthumous revenge. Parallels have been drawn between his pierced erect stance and that of Christ's, though, he is in a less elevated position than Christ but remains above that of the commoner supine or prone position of a corpse (Kelleher, 1971, 121-2; see VII.4).

Though Cú Chulainn is deceased, the avenging of his death by Conall Cernach is included as a fitting conclusion to his martial career (Kimpton, 2009, 25 & 44, §25; see V.1). Thus the motif of revenge spans this tale from the beginning to the latter

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<sup>109</sup> He also sits down beside a pillar-stone during a break in his contest with Nad Crantail in TBC (TBC I, ll.1440-2; TBC II, ll.1733-7). He drags it out of the ground unbeknownst to himself in the second recensions such is his rage (see IV.3).

stages and, indeed, serves as the catalyst for much of the action throughout. It is noteworthy that Conall and Cú Chulainn's slayer, Lugaid, remain locked in battle until the intervention of the former's horse, Derg Drúchtach, which unusually has a hound's head and used to slay men in battles and contests (*for:dibad na firu isna cathaib 7 isna irgalaib*; §29).<sup>110</sup> The animal inflicts a similar fatal injury on Lugaid to that suffered by Cú Chulainn (§§20-29). It seems significant that a dog-like figure plays a role in the slaying of Lugaid, whose father's name, Cú Roí (Hound of the Battlefield), suggests a further canine link.<sup>111</sup> Thus a hound plays a significant role in the death of two warriors that have clear canine connections.

The remainder of the tale is concerned with Cú Chulainn's posthumous appearance at Emain Machae and Emer's lament of him. Much of this part of the tale will be discussed in relation to Cú Chulainn's possible depiction as a saviour figure in VII.4. Emer's lament emphasising the greatness of Cú Chulainn and listing the vast number of people he killed can be considered as an appropriate and glorious conclusion to his death tale (§34).

## Conclusion

The final point in de Vries' model is quite closely reflected in our hero's biography. Owing to his status as a martial hero, it is to be expected that he will die young, in an unusual and dramatic way. His reputation remains intact, given that extraordinary means are required to bring him down and that his slayer is

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<sup>110</sup> The horses of Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn participate in each pairing's fight against Ercol in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 88- 90, §§69-70; see IV.2).

<sup>111</sup> The head of Cú Roí's brother, Conganchnes, posthumously spawns three dogs in *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* (Meyer, 1906, 28-31, §11).

quickly disposed of. In comparison to other death tales in Irish tradition, Cú Chulainn's is rather elaborate.

### **III.7. The remainder of the points in De Vries' schema**

The above sections have discussed in detail the realisation of six of the points from de Vries' schema in Cú Chulainn's heroic biography. De Vries (1963) model contains a further four points which will be considered in brief below.

### **III The youth of the hero is threatened**

Some heroes are left exposed and thus threatened as a child (de Vries, 1963, 213-4). Níall Noígíallach is a good example of this when he is left unprotected on the green in front of Tara as a baby and is attacked by birds until rescued by the poet, Torna (Stokes, 1903a, 191, §3). De Vries (1963, 214) observes that such endangered children may subsequently be fed by animals. Cormac mac Airt is one such example in Irish tradition, when he is taken and suckled by a she-wolf (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 125). Neither of these variants are realised in this form in Cú Chulainn's life. It is shown in III.2.3 that he faces a number of dangerous encounters in his youth for example with the boy-troop, the hound of Culann and the three sons of Nechta Scéne. However, these are best interpreted as a means by which his extraordinary prowess is illustrated and merely as a part of his destiny as a warrior whose existence is defined by conflict.

### **V The hero often acquires invulnerability**

Invulnerability may be conferred on the hero and perhaps the best known example of this is Achilles, who could only be wounded in his heel (de Vries, 1963, 215).

This often serves to safeguard the hero in certain ways, a case in point in Irish literature being that of Cormac mac Airt, who has a number of protective bands put upon him ‘against slaying, drowning, fire, sorcery, wolves, against every evil’ by the druid-smith Olc Aiche (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 125). The first three attempt to accoutre him against a particular threefold death to which kings such as Díarmait mac Cerbaill were subjected. However, ‘[i]n no case, of course is the invulnerability of the hero absolute: the hero is mortal’ (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 50). Sjoestedt (1949, 86) states that ‘[a]mid such a luxury of faculties, Cú Chulainn lacks the one most precious to a warrior, one which mythology readily attributes to heroes, namely invulnerability’. She concludes that ‘the Irish rightly denied this precious faculty to their typical hero. It could only serve to diminish him in their eyes, for it offended against the ideal of Celtic heroism which involved a suicidal extreme’ (Sjoestedt, 1949, 86). Certainly it seems that this adds to Cú Chulainn’s greatness, given that he does not enjoy a protective cushion and is thus completely reliant on his own martial skills.

## **VI One of the most heroic deeds is the hero’s fight with a dragon or another monster**

De Vries (1963, 215) gives a number of examples of heroes from other traditions who engage in a dragon fight. No reference is made to any Irish heroes engaging in such battles. The young Cú Chulainn’s courageous slaying of the hound of Culann, which has been discussed in detail in III.2.3, may be proposed as a possible realisation of this point. However, difficulties arise in the consideration of the hound as a monster particularly given that he fulfilled a very important role as guardian of Culann’s homestead. It is noteworthy that he is one of three hounds

spawned from the head of Congachnes posthumously and is designated as an otherworldly guardian by McCone (1984, 10).

**IX When the hero is banished in his youth he returns later and is victorious over his enemies. In some cases he has to leave the realm again which he has won with such difficulty.**

De Vries (1963, 216) once again lists a number of examples but none from Irish tradition. A good example is provided by Níall Noígíallach's heroic biography after he is taken from Tara and reared by the poet Torna before returning later to take the kingship of Tara (Stokes, 1903a, 191-203, §§2-19). Gray (1989-90, 39) proposes that there are two incidents in Cú Chulainn's life which reflect this aspect of the international heroic biography namely his 'arrival at Emain to face the boytroop; and his late arrival at a feast given by Caulann the smith'. In both these cases she notes that he displays his extraordinary qualities to gain entry (Gray, 1989-90, 39).<sup>112</sup> However, these incidents do not seem to truly reflect this point and are best understood as a realisation of the fourth point in de Vries' schema (see III.2.3).

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<sup>112</sup> She compares the latter incident to Lug's entry into Tara in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1989-90, 39).

The role of Cú Chulainn in Old and Middle Irish narrative literature with  
particular reference to tales belonging to the Ulster Cycle.

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2 Volumes  
Vol. 2

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## **Chapter IV: Cú Chulainn's martial prowess, *ríastrad*, weaponry and *cleasa***

This chapter will begin with a general exploration of Cú Chulainn's exceptional martial prowess before continuing with an evaluation of his role in the contest for the hero's portion in *Fled Bricrenn*. The heightening of his power while in a distorted state will form the next part of this discussion. Cú Chulainn's weapons, the basic tools of his profession, will be considered thereafter. An examination of a number of specific *cleasa* 'feats' which are ascribed to him will complete this study.

### **IV.1. Cú Chulainn's martial prowess**

Cú Chulainn's exceptional prowess is central to his depiction as the greatest martial hero. It is aptly captured in Fergus' eulogy of him in TBC I:

*“Ní fuircéba-su and fer rosasad a áes 7 a ás 7 a erriud 7 a erúath, a erlabra, a áinius, a irdarcus, a guth, a c[h]ruth, a chumachta, a c[h]rúas, a chless, a gaisced, a béim, a bruth, a barand, a búaid, a bráth, a búadrisi, a fórim, a fomsigi, a fían-choscur, a déni, a t[h]arptigi, a dec[h]rad co cliuss nónbair for cach rind amal Chon Culaind”* “You will not find there any man his equal in age like unto Cú Chulainn in growth, in dress, in fearsomeness, in speech, in splendour, in voice and appearance, in power and harshness, in feats, in valour, in striking power, in rage and in anger, in victory and in doom-dealing and in violence, in stalking, in sureness of aim and in game-killing, in swiftness and boldness and rage, with the feat of nine men on every spear-point” (ll.387-92).

Understandably, it is his martial superiority which is most frequently emphasised particularly in the tales concerning his heroic biography. His prowess is realised for the most part in a series of unequal contests along with a significant number of

encounters with strange beings, some of whom are conceivably supernatural. These battles are integral to his existence as a warrior and enhance his warrior profile.

The eagerness of so many to rear him, as detailed in the interpolated section in the LU version of *Compert Con Culainn*, represents an attempt to indicate his extraordinary heroic potential from an early age (van Hamel, 1933, 6-8, §7). Certainly, his *macgnímrada* support this. His remarkable deeds serve as the catalyst to his premature initiation as a warrior and are thus essential to his heroic biography (see III.2). All in all, his skill surpasses the collective ability of the one hundred and fifty boys at Emain Machae in fighting and in numerous games including driving a ball into a hole, wrestling and a stripping one (TBC I, ll.423-7, ll.470-5, ll.552-60). The young hero is also put up against a number of other difficult opponents in order to further underline his ability to the Connacht forces, namely, the frightening spectre with half a head carrying half another man on his back (ll. 492-50), the fearsome man cooking a pig (ll.516-9), the invaders from the Isles of Faiche (ll.530-6), Culann's hound (ll.542- 607) and the three sons of Nechta Scéne (ll.704-54).

His conquests in his final deed polarise his remarkable youthful prowess. Cú Chulainn's taking up of arms and entering into a chariot puts him on a higher martial plain where stronger opposition is to be expected. His forcible removal of Conall Cernach from his watch post can be interpreted as a warning to Conall and other Ulster warriors of his intent to supersede them (ll.672-86). He quickly responds to Conall's questioning of his martial ability by seeking out warriors,

namely the three sons of Nechta Scéne, to fight. Casting aside the withe from the pillar-stone, he purposefully leaves them with no other option but to challenge him. Each of these brothers possess a particular skill which was presumably key to their defeat of many an opponent. Ibor, the charioteer, warns Cú Chulainn that Fóill must be hit with the first thrust (*issin chét f'orgam*; ll.734-5), that Fannall can skim over water as fast as a swan or a swallow (ll.741-2) and that Túachell cannot be wounded by weapons (ll.748-54). Unperturbed by this, Cú Chulainn duly disposes of all three. These conquests in enemy territory, along with his subsequent capture of deer and birds, serve to further accentuate his brilliance (ll.702-87). Whether set against his peers or singled out from them to face more daunting oppositions, Cú Chulainn is consistently placed on a platform whereby his exceptional skills are highlighted in his *macgnímrada*.

The theme of Cú Chulainn's martial excellence permeates the remaining tales recounting his key biographical events. Though the performance of tasks is a feature found in wooing tales, *Tochmarc Émire* contains a relatively large portion of material centred on the wooer's soldierly abilities, some of which is inconsequential to the courtship process (see III.3.2-3). Notwithstanding the missing first section of the earliest account of *Tochmarc Émire*, the essential details seem similar to the later account which is also expanded considerably. Cú Chulainn's warrior exploits are represented as a determining attribute to Emer's acceptance of him. While she acknowledges his brief inventory of his feats to date in their preliminary dialogue, including his capacity to defend to the level of twenty when at his weakest, to take on forty on his own, to protect one hundred and the fact that a third of his strength equals thirty; these are not sufficient to win

her over (van Hamel, 1933, 28, §20). Her prescription of seemingly insurmountable tasks, namely the killing of eight men with a single stroke out of a group of nine three times<sup>1</sup> and a hundred at each ford between Áth Scéne Menn at Ollbine to Banchuing Arcait provide another excuse for parading his astounding talents (§27). Cú Chulainn also notes that she additionally requests him to kill Scennmenn, Forgall's sister, who is capable of changing herself into different shapes (§53) and to perform a salmon leap over three ramparts to rescue her (§54). All of these are duly performed (§§86-8).

The second part of the tale is almost entirely focused on his warrior development with his trips to the homes of Domnall and Scáthach. Oblivious to Forgall's reason for instigating these, Cú Chulainn readily accepts the challenge, presumably driven by his desire to hone his soldierly skills further (§57). His separation from his companions, Conchobar, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach, for the journey from Domnall's home to Scáthach's is noted as being apt in the context of a hero's otherworldly trip in III.4.3.1, however, it may also indicate that he is the only one fit for Scáthach's highly specialised training.<sup>2</sup> Prior to commencing training with her, he manages to surpass the feats of her chief warrior, Cochar, pointing to his instinctive fighting finesse (§69). His taking on of Cochar's role optimises his chances of being involved in further battles including that with the female warrior,

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<sup>1</sup> Emer's three brothers, Scibur, Ibur and Cat survive out of each group of nine (van Hamel, 1933, 63, §86).

<sup>2</sup> The early Modern Irish redaction of this part of the tale, *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, singles Cú Chulainn out from Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach to receive further training in arms (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 44-5).

Aífe. His overwhelming of Scáthach and the latter suggests that his martial excellence is equally transferable in this hostile land (see V.3).<sup>3</sup>

Like the oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire, Forfess Fer Fálgae* provides another early attestation to the testing of Cú Chulainn's martial proficiency in foreign territories. This theme is further upheld down to the Middle Irish period in tales such as *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait, Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* and *Serglige Con Culainn*; all of which are discussed in III.4.3.2-4. Despite dealing with texts belonging to an extended timeframe and varied manuscript traditions, the outcome is pretty much the same for the hero given that he achieves significant victories in all cases.

He leaves his mark on the Fir Fálgae, killing them in single combats before presumably slaying their king, Gét, in *Forfess Fer Fálgae* (Meyer, 1912, 564-5). He overcomes Cairpre Cundail before taking on and dealing with Cairpre's enemy, Eochaid Glas, in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 60-1 & 104-5, §§39-40). Along with Eochaid Iúil, he also disposes of Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb's other enemies, Senach Síabortha and Éogan Inbir, in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 5, §13). A later text again, *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann*, describes the hero's revenge on Tuir Glesta in Dún Monaig after the latter elopes with his wife Emer (Meyer, 1883-85, 184-5; see VI.7).

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<sup>3</sup> These women are discussed in detail in VI.6.

It seems apparent that these conquests carried out in distant and hostile realms are designed to further underline his heroic qualities. Arguably, accounts of his successful exploits are presented as being necessary to validate his status as the great Ulster hero in *Síaburcharpát Con Culainn* (Meyer, 1910, 54-5). Unusually, this text locates his era in the distant past and in this regard seemingly condemns the heroic martial lifestyle that he represents (see III.4.3.3 & VII.4). It seems reasonable to suggest that this author was aware of an established tradition for Cú Chulainn's successful overseas exploits. This is then manipulated to suit the overall agenda of the tale which is to promote the Christian faith.

The relatively late tale, *Aided Guill Meic Carbada agus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, presents somewhat of an inversion of this theme in that Cú Chulainn is made to ward off the giant invader, Goll mac Carbad, son of the king of northern Germany who arrives at Áth Mór, Mag Muirthemne, in a boat (Stokes, 1893, 402-11, §§9-21).<sup>4</sup> The earlier Viking raids may have provided the inspiration here and Mac Cana (1975, 80-2) has argued for the infiltration of the Viking theme, which is more typical in the Fenian Cycle, in this tale. Nevertheless, influence from earlier narratives such as the *macgnímrada* and TBC is also likely. Cú Chulainn's conquest over Goll and the two-headed Garb Glinni Rige are his two key victories in this text. Ultimately, this tale is built around the Ulstermen's invitation to a feast at the home of Conall mac Gleo Glaiss in Dún Colptha in Cúailnge but Cú Chulainn is not invited, yet, subsequently arrives unannounced to the gathering. In this regard, the tale strongly resembles his boyhood deed revolving around Culann's feast given that he also slays Conall's hound here (TBC I, ll.540-607;

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<sup>4</sup> It is renamed Áth nGuill to reflect Cú Chulainn's slaying of Goll there (Stokes, 1893, 428-9, §50).

TBC II, ll.820-914). Cú Chulainn's display of the heads of Goll and Garb in front of the Ulstermen as proof of his great conquests also reminds us of his brandishing of the heads of the three sons of Nechta Scéne on his return to Emain Machae in a subsequent youthful exploit (Stokes, 1893, 428-9, §§49-51; TBC I, ll.739-802, TBC II, 1082-181). It is also proposed herein that elements of Cú Chulainn's fight with Goll parallel quite closely with his triumph over Fer Diad in TBC (TBC I, ll.3081-93; TBC II, ll.3295-316; Stokes, 1893, 408-11, §§18-20; see V.2). TBC II and this tale are both found in LL and thus TBC II may have inspired this text.

Given the close relationship between TBC and his *macgnímrada*, it is understandable that his prowess is portrayed similarly in both. With all the Ulster warriors conveniently removed from the arena in TBC, his exploits are once again centrefold and thus catapulted above those of any other warrior (see III.5.3). Much of the tale is taken up with detailing his various killings, some of which could be removed without affecting the storyline. Exact figures are not given in all instances, but it seems that a large number of people die at his hands in Recension I. In some cases the losses are so great that they are incalculable, the *Sesrech Breslige* 'Sixfold Slaughter' where he leaves a layer of six corpses around the enemy in revenge for their killing of the youths of Emain Machae being a case in point (TBC I, ll.2310-4).<sup>5</sup> He is accredited with annihilating one hundred warriors and one hundred and forty-four kings at the river Cronn (ll.1012-4), three hundred (a hundred per night) at Druim Féine (ll.1233-6) and sixty-six at Áth nGrencha (ll.1913-7), but virtually no details are given. That being so, they reflect

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<sup>5</sup> TBC I states that other versions say that Lug mac Ethnenn fought alongside Cú Chulainn in this battle (ll.2316-7). Later, it is stated that he will leave layers of dead men in his efforts to rescue Erc, son of Cairbre Nia Fer (ll.3836-7). Feidelm, the prophetess, notes that a thousand severed heads will be left with Cú Chulainn over the course of TBC (ll.102-6).

advantageously on his martial profile. Although lesser numbers are involved, his victories over Fráech (ll.848-52), Órlám, (ll.897-8), the three sons of Gárach (ll.908-15), Lethan (ll.947-50), Nad Crantail (ll.1456-81), Cúr (ll.1720-6) and Gaile Dána, his many sons and nephew albeit with the help of the two sons of Ficce (ll.2547-63) to list but a few, can be interpreted in the same light.

Of particular significance is Cú Chulainn's contest with the horn-skinned Lóch mac Mo Femis which is compounded by the simultaneous attack of the Morrígan in her various guises (ll.1975-2030). Despite the Morrígan outlining her three proposed attacks to him, namely; in the form of an eel she will wrap herself around his legs so that he will fall; as a wolf she will drive cattle at him and lastly in the form of a hornless red heifer she will lead the cattle against him. Cú Chulainn opts for these as oppose to the seemingly more pleasurable option of sleeping with her (ll.1846-71). Unperturbed by these threats, Cú Chulainn vows to crush her ribs, to destroy her eye with a sling shot and to break her legs with a stone in response to her respective attacks. As to be expected, he staves off her attack before slaying Lóch with the *gáe bolga* (ll.1981-2027).

Of all of Cú Chulainn's fights in TBC, it is his combat with a single warrior, Fer Diad that has received most attention and thus is presented in many respects as the ideal one. Fer Diad, chosen by the four provinces of Ireland, is deemed to be the perfect challenger based on the severity of his attack and the fact that his feats equal Cú Chulainn's except for the *gáe bolga*, but his horn-skin is considered

capable of protecting him from that (TBC I, ll.2567-76; TBC II, ll.2607-16).<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the combat is depicted as a fair one. Greater emphasis is placed on the build up to the fight than the actual contest in TBC I, in particular to Medb and Ailill's efforts to persuade Fer Diad to face Cú Chulainn and to Fergus' warnings to Cú Chulainn. Fergus' prediction that Fer Diad will be victorious<sup>7</sup> along with his adulation of his greatness as a warrior aggrandises Cú Chulainn's victory further (TBC I, ll.2747-74; TBC II, ll.2725-58).<sup>8</sup> Cú Chulainn remains fearless despite these applauds from his trusted advisor and foster-father, Fergus. Prefaced with a war of words, the contest in TBC I is not detailed apart from an acknowledgment that wonderful feats are performed, and the final stage of the battle which sees Cú Chulainn being cast from Fer Diad's shield three times to which he retaliates by destroying him with the *gáe bolga* before piercing him in the heart (ll.3082-100). Cú Chulainn's inflation prior to killing his opponent is discussed below in the *ríastrad* section, IV.3. A rather civilised and lengthy contest in which both participants agree in advance on the weapons to be used therein is described in TBC II (ll.3087-374). Plying their weapons on each other with great accuracy and precision while defending them in an equally admirable manner by day, the two great heroes come together in the one paddock at night to rest and nurse their many wounds (ll.3119-77). Of the healing herbs and potions placed on Cú Chulainn's wounds, an equal portion is sent by him to Fer Diad to avoid any suggestions that he had an unfair advantage over the latter and the same procedure is followed by Fer Diad with regard to the food rations that are sent to him. Admittedly, being a

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<sup>6</sup> TBC II observes that Fer Diad had this horn-skin when fighting with a warrior on the ford (*'ac comrac ra láech ar áth 'na agid-side*; ll.2615-6).

<sup>7</sup> This prediction is in TBC I only.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that Fer Diad is considerably older than Cú Chulainn is noted in TBC II (ll.2940-3).

little more detailed, the bones of the finale in this account is much the same as TBC I with Cú Chulainn similarly emerging victorious.

Despite Cú Chulainn's demise occurring in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, his martial record largely remains intact in this eighth century text (Kimpton, 2009, 9). Echoing his position to some extent in TBC, Cú Chulainn is once again seriously outnumbered, nonetheless, he bravely challenges his attackers with great feats, littering the ground with their heads (Kimpton, 2009, 20-1 & 40, §15; see III.6.3). He intervenes as requested in each of the three staged fights, disposing of the participants, the satirists and a number of others (§§16-9). Even though the Líath Machae and Lóg are mortally wounded, he does not retreat; courageously waiting instead for the fatal spear to be cast at him. Indeed, he manages to inflict damage on his attacker even after his death when his sword cuts off the hand of his killer, Lugaid (§23).

There are a number of texts in which Cú Chulainn's prowess is questioned to some degree. Again, the dates of these representations vary as does the manuscript tradition for the tales in which they are found. In the opening part of *Serglige Con Culainn*, which is in the hand of H and dates to the eleventh century, the hero's accuracy is called into question (Dillon, 1953a, 2-3, §7; II.4.3.2). While much uncertainty remains as to how much of the earlier scribe, Máel Muire's, ninth century text was reproduced by H and how much new material was introduced by him, nevertheless, a general sense of agreement concerning Cú Chulainn's more negative portrayal across both sections of the tale has been noted (II.4.3.2).

A further undermining of Cú Chulainn's supreme warrior status is evident in both versions of *Aided Con Roí*, occurring in Eg. 88 and YBL, with the earliest account possibly dating to the eighth century and the later to the tenth. Not only is Cú Chulainn bested by Cú Roí, he is represented as being deeply humiliated by him when he clips his hair and buries him in the earth up to his armpits while rubbing his head in dung (Best, 1905, 21-3, §§5-6; see VI.3). The humiliation suffered is further underlined in the text by placing Cú Chulainn in hiding from the Ulstermen for a year. The hero is somewhat similarly disgraced at the hands of his son, Connlae, in *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, when his hair is also cropped (Meyer, 1904, 118-20, §§10-1; see III.4.3.1, IV.4, VI.3). It is worth noting that the sole copy of this tale, which is dated to the later ninth or tenth century, is also found in YBL. Though Cú Chulainn's martial expertise is doubted in both tales, these conclude with the death of the culprit. It seems possible that the *Aided Con Roí* might have inspired elements of *Aided Óenfir Aífe*.

*Aided Óenfir Aífe* is clearly younger than some of the earlier strata of tales relating to Cú Chulainn and within it we see somewhat of a replication of the young Cú Chulainn in Connlae. Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds seem particularly influential in this regard and it is noteworthy that YBL contains a copy of these as part of TBC. Although there is variation in the finer details of the narratives, the exceptional skills of both warriors are exposed at a young age when they arrive unannounced to the Ulstermen causing some consternation (TBC I, ll.399-456; Meyer, 1904, 114-121, §§2-13). Further examples of affinities in their characterisation include the fact that both are equipped with and adept in using a sling, unlike the majority of warriors in early Irish literature (TBC I, ll.680-1;

Meyer, 1904, 114-9, §§2-7; IV.4). Additionally, both are particularly skilled at wrestling (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §§10-1; TBC I, ll.556-8; TBC II, ll.840-2). It seems that earlier traditions pertaining to Cú Chulainn are manipulated in the creation of his son, Connlae, with particular emphasis also being placed on his precocious martial prowess.

*Mesca Ulad*, which survives in incomplete sections dating to the Old Irish period and the twelfth century in LU and LL is not particularly complementary in its depiction of the Ulstermen in general along with their great hero, Cú Chulainn (Watson, 1941). Notwithstanding the considerable disparity in the date of the extant sections of these tales, these are largely consistent in their portrayal of them. On their drunken travels from Fintan's feast to Cú Chulainn's, the latter's orienteering skills are called into question when he leads them astray into Crích na Déisi Bice in the territory of Cú Roí (Watson, 1941, 11-4, ll.252-318).<sup>9</sup> His offer to quickly put them back on the right track to ensure their escape from the enemy is considered as cowardly and weak (*comairli merbi ná mettachta ná mígascid*; ll.320-8). To compound matters, Bricriu accredits him with leading the Ulstermen into the *cró bidbad* 'enemy's pen' when they become locked in a dwelling in Temair Lúachra (ll.883-92).

In this regard, we must also bear in mind other contemporary compositions, most particularly, *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* and Recension II of TBC which are found in close proximity to the *Mesca Ulad* text in LL. Additionally, we find that relations are somewhat strained between Cú Chulainn and the Ulstermen in *Aided*

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<sup>9</sup> It is further stated that this is in Clíú Máil meic Úgaine in eastern Limerick (Watson, 1941:26).

*Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, which is also found in LL and of a similar date (Stokes, 1893, 410-31, §§22-55). The copy of *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* therein is proposed as an ‘original composition’ by Mac Gearailt (1991, 129-50) though based on an existing narrative. The *Mesca Ulad* and TBC texts in LL appear to be modernised versions of earlier tales. Though Mac Gearailt (1991, 128-9) questions Thurneysen’s assertion that these are all derived from the same author, he affirms that these tales are without doubt ‘closely related’ adding that ‘it is very likely that the style and narrative method they exemplify reflect a significant trend of the mid-twelfth century’. He adds that the author of *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* borrowed freely from and depended on a wide range of literary sources and in this way differs remarkably from the LL texts of *Mesca Ulad* and TBC (Mac Gearailt, 1991, 141).

Significantly, in this account of *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* Conall Cernach plays the role of central hero and Mac Gearailt (1991, 149) indicates that the explanation for this is found in the genealogies of the Láigsi, in whose territory LL was written down, more specifically in Nuachongbáil. The LL genealogies reveal that the Láigsi descend from a son of Conall’s, Lugaid Laígsech Cennmór or Laígsech Cennmór (O’Brien, 1962, 87-90). The Leinster genealogies describe them as *cenél Conaill Chernaig* ‘Conall Cernach’s race’ and in this way announcing Conall and not his son as ‘the real source of Láigsi pride’ (Mac Gearailt, 1991, 149).<sup>10</sup> Mac Gearailt argues that the scribe of this tale, perhaps Áed mac Crimthainn or a young contemporary of Láiges origin set about transforming the ‘archetype, A’ of this tale

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<sup>10</sup> According to Mac Gearailt (1991, 149) the placing of the ‘Conall’s pedigree second only to that of Míl Espáine’ further confirms that the same Laois scribe held the ‘apical ancestor of his people in great reverence.

with a view to affording Conall a prominent role and may have been prompted to do so owing to the insignificant part he plays in Recension II of TBC.

A survey of the compendium of Ulster tales in LL, reveals further evidence for the foregrounding of Conall Cernach. More specifically, while Cú Chulainn is notable through his absence in *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, Conall Cernach is presented as the chief warrior. Likewise, *Talland Étair* arguably assigns this role to Conall Cernach (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 43-62). It seems significant that the compilers chose to include a tale about Cú Chulainn's death, particularly given that Conall Cernach avenges this and in effect replaces him as leading warrior (Kimpton, 2009, 25-7 & 44-6, §§25-30). Thus it seems that the political and social context in which LL is compiled has a direct influence on the tales included and may also have inspired the reworking of older tales to further support this agenda.

While there can be no dispute but that LL is very much concerned with promoting Leinster, Mac Eoin (2009-10, 93-4) raises much doubt about Nuachongbáil being the setting for this, particularly given that there is a lack of evidence for this as an ecclesiastical foundation and thus no scriptorium where this manuscript would have been written. He argues instead that this is a parish formed after the coming of the Normans. He underlines the importance of considering the historical context in which this manuscript is produced, namely a time of huge social, cultural, ecclesiastical and political change. He rightly acknowledges the lack of religious matter in this book and concludes that the 'general impression one gets from the book is that the people who compiled it had little enough interest in piety' (Mac Eoin, 2009-10, 81-94). He puts forward convincing evidence to suggest that this

was written in Uí Fhailge territory with much cooperation amongst its scribes and further refines this to the monastic settlement at Kildare.<sup>11</sup> Mac Eoin (2009-10, 94) rules out the other monastery, Killeigh, within the Uí Fhailge territory as a possibility on the basis that it became an Augustinian priory in the mid-twelfth century. Additionally, Find who contributed to it, was bishop of Kildare and he argues that it is more likely that this is the product of an ecclesiastical house which had preserved the ancient monastic organisation and traditions as Kildare had up until at least the end of the twelfth century, if not later.

If Mac Eoin's suggestion is correct, this does mean that we must discredit Mac Gerailt's view completely. It might allude to a close relationship between the compilers of LL at Kildare and a king of the Laígse which would continue to explain the manuscript's Leinster bias and for Conall Cernach's replacing of Cú Chulainn as the main hero.

### **Conclusion**

For the most part, Cú Chulainn's exceptional talents are positively portrayed in texts dating from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. Given that he is a martial hero, it is perhaps not surprising that this is interwoven into the narrative plots of the sagas concerning milestones in his life, thus constantly highlighting this aspect of his character. Indeed, to a large degree we find these attributes realised again in a somewhat later narrative layer, in the figure of his son, Connlae. However, again there are deviations from this in texts across this timeframe with this being particularly pronounced in a collection of tales in LL. In this regard, it seems that

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<sup>11</sup> Marginal notes suggests that LL was in Leinster in 1161 ans 1166 (Mac Eoin, 2009-10, 84-5).

the political and social context in which this manuscript is compiled seems to be directly responsible for his downgrading from position of chief warrior in the majority of these. Nevertheless, the prevailing view of Cú Chulainn in the extant material from the Ulster Cycle is that of supreme warrior.

#### **IV.2. Cú Chulainn's contest for the hero's portion in *Fled Bricrenn***

It can be argued that *Fled Bricrenn*<sup>12</sup> is the most explicit in terms of its *exposé* of Cú Chulainn's martial expertise and so will be discussed in greater detail. Set around a feast hosted by the evil-tongued, Bricriu, it quickly develops into one concerning three warriors' entitlement to the *cauradmír* 'hero's portion' of Emain.<sup>13</sup> Bricriu announces that it should be awarded to the most valiant warrior (“*In caurathmír ucut.....Láech bas dech lib do Ulaib, damberaid dó*”; Henderson, 1899, 14-5, §13). The right to this portion, though the term *cauradmír* is not used, is also central to another Ulster-Cycle tale, *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*. Despite not being the host in this instance, Bricriu is once again instrumental in creating contention between the warriors of Ulster and Connacht over the division of this specially reared pig when he proposes that it should be divided according to the brave deeds of the attendees (Chadwick, 1927, 11, §6).<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, a war of words ensues or more specifically a boasting competition, with a number of heroes vying for the right to carve it. Among those to contest it is a warrior simply referred to as Loegaire, presumably Lóegaire Búadach, nonetheless, he is quickly dismissed by the Connacht warrior, Cet mac Mágach, who holds it until the arrival

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<sup>12</sup> Henderson's (1899) paragraphing system will be used unless otherwise stated.

<sup>13</sup> 'Warrior, hero' are among the meanings given by *DIL* for *caur* (gen. sg. *caurad*), 'ration, portion of food' for *mír* and 'warrior's portion' or the 'champion's bit' for *mír curad*, which it explains is 'the portion of food assigned to the foremost in valour'.

<sup>14</sup> The pig was reared on the milk of sixty milch cows for seven years along with some kind of poison in order to create trouble amongst the men of Ireland (Chadwick, 1927, 14 & 18, §§5-6).

of Conall Cernach. Unchallenged, Conall gains the right to divide the pig, taking the hind-quarters which is enough to feed nine men for himself (§17). Conall's remarkable prowess in eating, while aggravating the Connacht men, is in line with his extraordinary skill.<sup>15</sup> Cú Chulainn's eating of a *feis* (nighttime meal) and a *díthat* (daytime meal) in one sitting after a heavy snow shower in TBC II similarly points to his enlarged appetite (ll.527-8), leading Kelly (1997, 317) to conclude that '[t]he implication seems to be that these two meals are normally separate, but that the hunger of the hero was so great that he ate them both at one sitting'. This is also alluded to in the same saga when Lugaid mac Nóis uí Lomairc brings an ox, a fitch of bacon, and a barrel of wine to Cú Chulainn during his negotiations with him (TBC I, l.1202).<sup>16</sup> Not only is Conall Cernach's portion substantial, but it is also the choicest cut of meat. Understandably, the best is reserved for the finest warrior. Cú Chulainn's absence from this text, particularly given its subject, is most noteworthy (see VII.3).

In contrast, he is one of the key participants for this prize in the longer and more elaborate tale, *Fled Bricrenn*. In this instance, the title of *ríge láech n-Erend* 'kingship of the warriors of Ireland' accompanies it (Henderson, 1899, 8-13, §§8-11). The contest is here restricted to the three best warriors in Ulster, namely Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn.<sup>17</sup> It is not based upon past conquests like *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, nor is it settled between the contestants, it is instead referred to a number of judges outside of the province. Not only is

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<sup>15</sup> Prowess in eating is 'a prowess which is attributed to braves all over the world' (Chadwick, 1927, 8).

<sup>16</sup> It is stated in TBC II that Cú Chulainn lives on fish, fowl and venison while defending Ulster (ll.1708-9).

<sup>17</sup> Although Conchobar is also present, it is noted above that Cú Chulainn is distinguished from Lóegaire and Conall in *Tochmarc Emire*, to proceed alone to Scáthach's home (van Hamel, 1933, 45, §58).

their martial skill tested but also their mettle in a series of trials against giants, monsters and unusual creatures, most of which are supernatural, in unfamiliar terrains. The more formal primary trials will be addressed prior to a number of the more minor ones. Given that there are three warriors involved, it is understandable that the encounters have a tripartite structure.<sup>18</sup> The exploits of the heroic trio generally bear a number of common elements; Lóegaire's and Conall's in particular, given that they receive the same fate, the former's adventures, in a relatively full form, are typically related first. Conall's are, for the most part, simply said to be the same as Lóegaire's while Cú Chulainn's receive more attention with the emphasis being placed on the nature of his victories.

After the intervention of Fergus and Conchobar to stop Lóegaire and Conall's joint assault on Cú Chulainn, Sencha orders that the hero's portion be divided amongst all the host on that night before referring the matter to Ailill mac Mágach, but Medb also gets involved (§§15-6).<sup>19</sup> Having spent a night in Crúachain, Ailill's proposal that their nocturnal trials with the cats therein be used to judge them is rejected by Lóegaire and Conall on the basis that it is a test against men and not beasts that is required (§57).<sup>20</sup> The courage and staying power of the threesome is tested. Lóegaire and Conall are so intimidated by the cats, that they take flight leaving their food to them. Cú Chulainn, on the other hand, stands his ground until

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<sup>18</sup> Taking into account the tripartite structure of the giant in the mist episode in LU, Mac Cana (1977, 170) observes that the similar language in each of the encounters 'contrived to modify the recurring verbal pattern without obscuring it. He [The redactor] does this very simply by echoing each phrase of the passage while varying one or more of its constituent elements'. He gives twelve cases of verbal reoccurrences in this episode and these are also subsequently highlighted by Slotkin (1999, 242-4). The tripartite structure also features in the *bríatharcath na mban* section (see VI.7).

<sup>19</sup> Contention between the Ulstermen is similarly problematic in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 7-9, ll.161-88).

<sup>20</sup> These cats are also referred to as *tri bíasta druidechta* (Henderson, 1899, 72, §57).

morning, striking one of the cats with his sword after it stretches its neck out to take some of his food pinpointing his unwavering bravery.

Angered by Ailill's inability to reach a decision on the matter, Medb assigns the hero's portion and its associated title along with a cup, each made from different metals, to each of the warriors; the relevance of which becomes apparent later in the tale (§§58-62; see VII.2).<sup>21</sup> She directs them to the home of Ercol and Garmna<sup>22</sup>, where they are told to proceed to Samera for arbitration (§66).<sup>23</sup> The latter sends them to fight the *geniti glinne*, which Borsje (2005, 176) translates as '(female) creatures of the valley'.<sup>24</sup> These creatures dispose of Lóegaire and Conall and almost get the better of Cú Chulainn by shattering his spear and shield until Lóg questions his valour (Henderson, 1899, 84-7, §67; see V.2). Shamed or enraged, Cú Chulainn is instantaneously spurred on:

*Sia[ba]rthar co urtrachta im Choinculainn andaide ocus insoi cusna húaithaib ocus noscerband ocus nosbruend iat, co-mbo lán in glend día fulriud*  
'Thereupon Cú Chulainn is contorted in a spectral way and he turns towards the terrors and he hacks and fragments them so that the valley was full with their blood' (§67; translation; Borsje, 2005, 176).

The fact that he only overcomes them after engaging in his distortion indicates the brilliance of his opponent while in return adding to the significance of this

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<sup>21</sup> The heroes are represented as undergoing a number of more minor tests while in Crúachain, including one concerning a wheel feat, unsurprisingly, Cú Chulainn surpasses all the others (see IV.5).

<sup>22</sup> Consistent with Ailill and Medb's presentation elsewhere in the Ulster Cycle, the latter is again more dominant here. Ailill appears incapable of judging them. Ercol and Garmna are described as Medb's foster-father (*aiti*) and foster-mother (*mummi*) (Henderson, 1899, 84, §66).

<sup>23</sup> This episode only occurs in LU (in the hand of H) and Eg. 93, but Slotkin (1978, 72) deduces that it may also have been part of the account found in Leiden Codex Vossianus. Borsje (2005, 177) suggests that it is probably part of a variant tradition.

<sup>24</sup> They are also called *lochnamat* 'dark enemies' (LU, 1.8894).

conquest (see IV.3). He carries away spoils as proof of his victory along with his companions' armoury, adding to their humiliation while placing his martial prowess above theirs. Borsje (2005, 178) rightly asserts that 'courage and martial skill are being tested' here. Samera declares Cú Chulainn worthy of the hero's portion and requests that his valour be ranked above that of everyone, except Conchobar (Henderson, 1899, 88-9, §68). While no adverse reaction to his declaration is documented, the matter remains unresolved.

Having returned to Emain Machae, the problem arises again at a feast where the cups, given to them by Medb, are used in an attempt to isolate the worthy recipient of the champion's portion. Consequently, Conchobar, Fergus and other Ulster nobles pronounce Cú Chulainn to be deserving of it. Not satisfied, Lóegaire and Conall object, accusing Cú Chulainn of purchasing his ornate cup of gold (§74), requiring them to engage in another ordeal, this time against Úath mac Imomain 'Terror son of Great Fear' at his loch. Úath, referred to as a *sirite* 'shapeshifter, sprite', who has the ability to change form (§75), participates in the test while also acting as judge on the condition that they will all accept his decision which they duly consent to. Borsje (2005, 178) adduces that truthfulness and courage are examined in this scene. As part of Úath's covenant, each man is required to behead Úath with an axe before presenting himself to Úath for guillotining on the following day in order to earn the hero's portion. On hearing this, Lóegaire and Conall withdraw their pledge and refuse to take part on the basis that they do not have the supernatural power to survive (*ar ní bóí occo-som do chumachta a m-bith béo iarna n-dichennad*; Henderson, 1899, 98-9, §77), perhaps suggesting that Cú Chulainn does. Borsje (2005, 178) observes that 'only that other *sirite*, Cú

Chulainn, is able to past the test'. This text refers to other books (*araili libair*) where the pair keep the first part of the bargain, they nevertheless both shirk from the second element thus failing to fulfil the terms of the agreement. Cú Chulainn on the contrary, readily agrees to it and lops off the giant's head before bravely returning the following day to receive the same fate and moreover stretches out making the task easier for his opponent.<sup>25</sup> Although the giant brings down the blunt edge of the axe on the hero three times, Cú Chulainn does not attempt to dodge it (*Tairnid fo thri in m-bial for a munel ocus a cúl rempi*; Henderson, 1899, 100-1, §78). Thus Cú Chulainn's fulfilment of the covenant demonstrates his honour and also poignantly highlights his exceptional bravery in stark contrast to his opponents who cowardly renege on their word.

The provenance of this scene has been questioned by Slotkin (1978) and Borsje (2005). Exclusive to LU and in the hand of H, Slotkin (1978, 72-7) proposes that it is largely a reworking and repositioning of the ending of the tale by H in an attempt to fill his inserted leaf. Thus, he views it as being redundant. While commending elements of Slotkin's theory, Borsje (2005, 179-82) conversely suggests that H drew on an alternative tradition for this episode and that it is instead weaved into the story with exceptional skill. Noting that the tale type called *úatha* usually contain the singular of this form along with a place name in the genitive, Borsje (2005, 179-80) observes that *Úath* is connected with *Belach Muni in tSiriti* 'the pass of the bush/trick/neck of the *sirite*' herein and that this place name is also found in the annals. She takes this as a clue that 'there was a tale of the *úath* type or a *dindshenchas* tradition used here'. Furthermore, this account refers to other

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<sup>25</sup> According to H's gloss *iar cor dó brechta hi fáebur in bélae* in LU (1.9027), the giant puts a spell on the axe prior to his own execution thus possibly accounting for his ability to walk away while carrying his own head.

variant versions of what actually happened as noted above. In her analysis of H's glosses on these pages (109-110) she states that only one of these, namely, *iar cor dó brechta hi fáebur in bélae* (LU, 1.9027), refers to the prose tale and she puts forward the possibility that H forgot to write this detail down, adding it in at a later point.<sup>26</sup> She also suggests that this data could have been taken from one of the 'other books' mentioned therein. Her suggestions with regard to how this scene is interwoven into the tale will be dealt with in due course.

Aware of the warriors' pending visit, Cú Roí counsels his wife, Bláthnait about them before taking his leave (Henderson, 1899, 100-3, §79). Thereafter, she then outlines the next task whereby each one of them is required to take his turn in guarding Cú Roí's magical fortress (*cathair*) by night.<sup>27</sup> As the ultimate protectors of Ulster against dangerous enemies, the warriors are required to use these skills to protect Cú Roí's home.<sup>28</sup> On the first night watch, Lóegaire encounters a large horrible giant (*scáth*) who tosses him over the wall of the fort (§§81-2) while Conall has the same experience (§83), thus both fail miserably. While in the watch seat, Cú Chulainn faces even greater challenges, the first of which are the combined forces of the *Trí Glais Sescind Úairbeóil*, the *Trí Búagelltaig Breg* and the *Tri Maic Dornmair* along with two other groups of nine and a monster (*in pheist*) from the lake (§§83-6). Unperturbed by the roars emitted from the troops of nine, he proceeds to slaughter them, making a cairn with their remains. He responds to the monster's onslaught by ripping its heart out before hacking it to

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<sup>26</sup> Borsje (2005, 180) remarks that all the other glosses are in rhetorics.

<sup>27</sup> Cú Roí casts a spell over the fort every night causing it to revolve so that the entrance could not be found after sunset (Henderson, 1899, 102-3, §79).

<sup>28</sup> Cú Chulainn identifies his fierceness in valour and prowess as essential to his ability to protect the borders, presumably of Ulster, against strangers in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 29, §23).

death (§86).<sup>29</sup> The beginning of his subsequent encounter with the giant, whom he addresses as *a bachlaig* ‘o churl’, is similar to that of his predecessors, but Cú Chulainn manages to overbear him so that he begs for his life in exchange for three wishes, which include the title of *ríge láech n-Erend* along with the hero’s portion (§§86-7).<sup>30</sup> Hellmuth (1998, 7) proposes that his subsequent mysterious disappearance is an indication that ‘he is not a real giant, but a magician, namely Cú Roí, in disguise’. Soon after Cú Chulainn’s return to the fortress, Cú Roí arrives bearing the trophies from the former’s first slaughter of the three groups of nine along with that of the beast and consequently declares him fit to guard a king (“*Ba gilla comadas*” or *se* [Cú Roí] “*do faire duine ríge do grés in gilla sa, at a chomrama óenaidche so ule*”; Henderson, 1899, 112-5, §89). In addition, he pronounces him deserving of the hero’s portion and rewards him with silver and gold.

Despite all these displays of Cú Chulainn’s martial superiority the rewarding of the hero’s portion and the associated title is not actualised until after the public contest in Emain Machae. Like the test with Úath, this also involves a beheading challenge. Borsje (2005, 181) identifies a number of interesting points in these two scenes:

Úath’s test consists of entering into a covenant, in which today a contestant may cut off Úath’s head and tomorrow Úath will cut off that contestant’s head. The horrible (*úathmar*) huge (*mór*) ugly (*grainne*) churl (*bachlach*) at the end of the tale whose first appearance occurs during the absence of our three contestants

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<sup>29</sup> This monster ascends out of a lake (§85).

<sup>30</sup> This sequence of events brings to mind his overwhelming of Scáthach and Aife in *Tochmarc Emire* (see III.4.3.1 & V.3).

demands the opposite: he wants to cut off the warrior's head the first night, and then offers his own neck on the next.

The LU version ends at this point, but the finale is provided in the Edinburgh MS, but with the introduction of a new hero, Munremor mac Gercinn 'Fat-neck son of Shorthead' who takes up the beheading challenge, but in reverse order, in the absence of Lóegaire, Conall and Cú Chulainn.<sup>31</sup> Munremor's offer is belittled by the churl who observes that he could have found a contender with ease if that were his challenge. Borsje (2005, 181) rightly observes that the same beheading test is described twice in LU, 'but the proceedings are in inverted order' and whereas Úath's test takes place privately after the contestants are guided to him, 'the test of the churl takes place publicly in Emain Macha before all the Ulster people, and is therefore a climax'. By bringing the contest to Emain, the outcome cannot be questioned.<sup>32</sup> The valour, honour and truth of the Ulstermen in general are called into question and intertwined into the churl's bargain (Meyer, 1893, 451 & 456, §93). In addition, the tale essentially goes full circle in that Bricriu goes to Emain to fetch the Ulstermen at the beginning of the tale and the closing scene ends there. Bricriu also informs the heroes at the outset that his hero's portion will entitle them to the corresponding one at Emain (Henderson, 1899, 8-9, §9).

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<sup>31</sup> The *muin* 'neck' element in his name 'alerts the audience or readers to the character of the test, just as the place name *Belach Muni in t-Siriti* may have done' (Borsje, 2005, 181). Refusing the order of the test, Munremor beheads the giant, but the latter's exit while carrying his head fills the Ulster people with fear. Just as the lack of supernatural power (*cumachtae*) is significant in Lóegaire and Conall's decision to withdraw from Úath's covenant, it is also the reason for Munremor's insistence that the order of the beheading game be changed for him to take up the churl's challenge (Borsje, 2005, 182).

<sup>32</sup> Both Lóegaire and Conall persistently fail to accept the determinations of the arbitrator. This may be attributable to the relatively 'unknown' quantity of some of the judges, namely Samera and Úath and the lack of 'known' witnesses.

Borsje (2005, 182) asserts that the concept of *fír fer* ‘the truth or justice of men’ features strongly in this contest and is more apparent than in Úath’s test (see V.4). Lóegaire and Conall yet again withdraw from the challenge thus failing to adhere to the churl’s pledge. Rather uncharacteristically, Cú Chulainn is reluctant to enter into the churl’s bargain and only does so by default, and in reverse order, after the latter taunts him by calling him a *cuil truad* ‘wretched fly’ to which he retaliates by lopping his head off with an axe and thus finds himself locked into the covenant (Meyer, 1893, 453 & 458, §§98-9). Thus the proposed bargains of Úath and the churl are in opposite order but in practice the sequence of events turn out to be the same. Clearly frightened, Cú Chulainn nonetheless offers himself, neck outstretched, on a block for the churl on the following night. He extends it further to facilitate the latter’s huge axe and it is again its blunt side which comes down on Cú Chulainn’s neck. Thereupon, the churl confers the desired title and the hero’s portion on him before revealing himself to be Cú Roí (*Ríge laech n-Eirenn duit on tratso 7 in curadmir gen chosnum*; §102). By doing so, Cú Roí fulfils his word to Cú Chulainn (*7 as e Curui moc Daire dodeachoigh issin riucht sin do comallad na bretre rodnuc do Coinculaind*; §102). Given the friction between the Ulstermen and the Connacht duo, Medb and Ailill, it appears fitting that they are not accredited with solving this serious issue. Conversely, it is more appropriate that someone with Cú Roí’s exceptional judging ability and martial skill should resolve it.

Outside of these specific tests, the heroes’ martial prowess is also central to a number of situations. One of the more important of which is against a giant (*in scáilfer mór*) in the mist (Henderson, 1899, 42-51, §§34-41). Its location prior to

the events at Crúachain in the LU version is at odds with the other manuscript copies where it is placed prior to their journey to Cú Roí's homestead. Slotkin (1978) cogently argues that it was removed from that original position by H and considerably shortened to fit it into his interpolated pages. He further suggests that Eg. 93, H.3.17 and Codex Vossianus manuscripts preserve 'both the original order and a longer text which probably conformed to Mael Muire's original LU text before H had rewritten it'.<sup>33</sup> Viewed comparatively, H's text 'is much terser; and the description of the giant in the other texts is much longer' thus it is necessary to take both into account (Slotkin, 1999, 232).

Each warrior is disorientated and halted by a heavy mist<sup>34</sup> while travelling westward toward the slope of Brega<sup>35</sup>, thereafter their respective charioteers set their horses to graze in the nearby meadow, an act which vexes a nearby giant and instigates his attack on each of them (Henderson, 1899, 45-9, §§36-40).<sup>36</sup> The disorientation of the warriors by a heavy mist along with the presence of a mysterious giant suggests that this can conceivably be viewed as an otherworldly encounter. Hellmuth (2000, 58) states that this giant is Cú Roí in disguise but does not elaborate further.<sup>37</sup> Though this is not indicated in the tale, this is more plausible if Slotkin's reconstructed order of the text is taken into account given

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<sup>33</sup> The account in H.3.17 lacks the final third of the passage (Slotkin, 1999, 232).

<sup>34</sup> It is also referred to as a *ceo druidechta* and *in dubnel cetna dorcha doborda* (Henderson, 1899, 48, §39).

<sup>35</sup> The places that they travel through are only detailed in Lóegaire's account, but Conall is said to arrive at the plain where Lóegaire encounters the mist.

<sup>36</sup> This confrontation is also reminiscent of the one between Ailill Ólomm and the supernatural woman, Áne, in *Cath Maíge Mucrama* (see III.4.3.2). Trespass of land by animals is a criminal offence and entails substantial penalties. Greater fines are due for the incursion of meadows and grass-land as opposed to moorland or after-grass and the fines due are outlined in *Bretha Comaithchesa* 'the judgements of neighbourhood' (Kelly, 1988, 142-3). The giant's anger is thus understandable and he views his assault on the charioteers as a just penalty for the damage incurred (Henderson, 1899, 46-7, §38). The Ulstermen are similarly vexed by the grazing of their land by Echde Echbél's cows in *Aided Con Roí* (Thurneysen, 1913, 190-1, §§1-3; see III.4.3.3).

<sup>37</sup> See Hellmuth (1998; 2000) for a discussion of Cú Roí's role in *Fled Bricrenn* and a consideration of his magical qualities.

that, it places this episode prior to their adventures at Cú Roí's stronghold (see II.1). Lóegaire and Conall, failing in their attempts to save their respective charioteers from the giant, quickly flee back to Emain Machae, leaving their weaponry, horses and their charioteers behind them and are thus largely disabled as warriors (Henderson, 1899, 46-9, §§38-9). In contrast, Cú Chulainn's speedy response to Lóeg's cry for help saves the latter from the giant, in what is reduced to a one line wrestling fight in LU, recuperates the others' belongings while also taking the giant's, before returning to Emain Machae with his spoils, an act which adds further insult to Lóegaire and Conall (§40).

While the outcome is the same, a slightly lengthier contest is found in the Eg. 93 text, where both glare and then ply some kind of weapon on each other; Cú Chulainn delivering two strokes for each of the giant's, before overcoming the fury and power of the latter (*coro foruaislig Cú Chulainn a bruth 7 bríg in scáil*; Slotkin, 1999, 238; see IV.5). Observing that the deeds of the others are not on a par with those of Cú Chulainn, Bricriu proclaims him as the worthy champion (*"Is let-su in curadmír" ol Bricri fri Coinculaind. "Is follus as for n-gnimaib ni dligthi comardad fris eter"*; Henderson, 1899, 50-1, §41). Conall and Lóegaire are unwilling to relinquish their claim to the hero's portion on the basis that Cú Chulainn was unfairly assisted by his supernatural friends (*conid áen di chardib sidchairechta dosfanic do immirt mela ocus cumachta forni immon curadmír*; §41).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> With the matter remaining unresolved in LU, Conchobar and Fergus send them to either Medb and Ailill or Cú Roí for deliberation. Henderson (1899, 51n) attributes the inclusion of both options to the indecision of the scribe in LU and his attempt to harmonise two written accounts.

The warriors' close associates also appear to be tested to some degree in this tale. The combined skills of each warrior and their respective mounts are tested in a fight against Ercol and his horse (§69).<sup>39</sup> Ercol's horse kills Lóegaire's and Conall's horses while Ercol overcomes their respective owners before they escape to Emain Machae. The Líath Macha slays Ercol's horse and Cú Chulainn captures Ercol, binding him to his chariot before returning to Emain for all to see (§70). Cú Chulainn's wife, Emer, is also set against the wives of Lóegaire and Conall in the earlier part of the tale (see VI.7). On a par with Cú Chulainn, the abilities of the Líath Macha and Emer are also portrayed as being above that of their peers. Albeit being less clear in relation to the manner in which the charioteers are presented, Cú Chulainn's plays a pivotal role in urging him on at various points, unlike those of Lóegaire and Conall (see VI.2).

## **Conclusion**

Falling beyond the strict remit of the hero's biographical tales, *Fled Bricrenn*, in any case, provides the most in-depth exploration of his prowess. Not alone is this tested against a series of daunting opponents, it is also comparatively weighed against that of two other great Ulster heroes, Conall and Lóegaire. He receives his due reward of the much coveted prize of the hero's portion along with the title of the greatest warrior in Ireland. Significantly, this tales depicts him as the best Ulster warrior.

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<sup>39</sup> One of Cú Chulainn's horses is described as being eager for battle (*tresmar*) in TBC I (II.2289-90). Conall's horse participates in his fight against Lugaid mac Con Roí in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 27 & 45, §29; see III.6.3). On arriving to Crúachain, Lóegaire and Conall choose *airthend da bliadan* 'grass which had not be grazed for two years' to feed their horses while Cú Chulainn opts for *grán éorna* 'barely grain' for his (Henderson, 1899, 80-1, §63).

### IV.3. *Ríastrad*

One of Cú Chulainn's most remarkable features is his *ríastrad* 'distortion' or 'warp spasm' which affords him the epithet *in ríastartha(e)* 'the Distorted One'. During these events, his prowess is significantly boosted. Interestingly, these events are relatively poorly attested with only three extant 'eye-witness' accounts. Two of these are found in TBC, one in the boyhood deed section of Recension I and the other much later in the text (TBC I, ll.428-34, ll.2245-78; TBC II, ll.2262-94). The latter highly-stylised report is almost identical in all three recensions, thus, it is only counted as one example herein. The other occurs in the early part of *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 32-3, §27). Perhaps this suggests that the audience was familiar with this to the extent that there was no need to detail it each time. The preterite passive form of *ríastraid* are used in all of these examples along with the preposition *imm* which identifies the person affected by the action, namely Cú Chulainn. *DIL* defines *ríastrad* as 'the act of contorting; a distortion' coming from the verb, *ríastraid* 'contorts, distorts'.<sup>40</sup>

According to Zimmer (1901, 299n), 'hinders, frustrates' is the original sense of *ríastrad* and he suggests that it is etymologically linked to the Welsh word, *rhwystr* 'hindrance'. Comparing the phonological development of Irish *briathraim* and *criathraim* with Welsh *brwydraf* and *crwydraf* respectively, a similar connection is suggested for *riastraim* and *rhwystraf*. Semantically, he proposes that the root meaning of the latter is to hinder in the sense of being an obstacle in someone's path. Dooley (2006, 79-81) offers a somewhat questionable etymology for

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<sup>40</sup> *DIL* notes that forms of the verb *dáistir* are also used with *imm* to indicate that a person has become mad or enraged and observes that it is synonymous with *dechraidir imbi*. The former can be used to describe this process in humans or animals whereas as the latter is exclusively used with humans.

*ríastartha* with reference to the use of prepositional pairings used in accounting for Cú Chulainn's sword play as part of his *ríastrad* in TBC I (ll.1650-7). She proposes that:

...in this case *re is tar* or *ria is tair(i)sde* is a reasonable bridging doublet, and thus a precise syllabic analysis type of etymology of the Isodorean kind so dear to the medieval Irish scholars may be suggested for *ríastartha*. Indeed, the whole passage is constructed around linked prepositional phrases, all working up to this etymological invention of a nickname.

In the account of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* in *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*, which is based on the LL version of the tale, he similarly slays in front and behind, but the prepositional phrases identified by Dooley are not used therein (*Cumma no sliged iarna chulaib 7 ara belaib*; Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20).

Another general description of it is found in TBC I (ll.1651-7) in the context of explaining his appellation, 'The Distorted One' (*in ríastartha*).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, it also features in the Middle Irish text, *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*, alongside a catalogue of some of his great feats (Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20). While *ríastraid* is not used therein, the obvious similarities in the content indicate that it is indeed referring to the hero's unusual metamorphosis. Other non-descript references to him becoming distorted are found in TBC I (*Siabartha im Choin Culaind amal doringni frisna maccu i nEmain*; ll.1478-9; *Riasdardha imbi*; l.4093), in TBC II (*ra síabrad immi*; l.1737; *Is and sin ra chétríastrad im Choin Culaind*; l.3317), in *Fled Bricrenn* (*Sía[ba]rthar co urtrachta im Choinculainn andaide*; Henderson, 1899, 86-7, §67; *Lasin n-adabair ocus lasin siabrad ro síabrad immi*; §88) and in

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<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that this section is in the hand of the Interpolator (O'Rahilly, 1976, 247).

*Tochmarc Emire (Ríastarthaé iarom imbe*; van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68).<sup>42</sup> Significantly, *síabraid* is used to account for his distortion when fighting Nad Crantail in TBC I (ll.1478-9) where it is directly compared to his youthful distortion. Given that a form of *ríastraid* is used to account for the latter, the text appears to use these two verbs to report the same event. Thus, examples using *síabraid* will be included in the present study. *DIL* offers ‘arouses to fury, distorts, transforms (originally as a result of supernatural influence)’ as possible meanings for *síabraid*. Matasović (2009, 325) suggests that this is connected with *sáeb/sóeb* ‘crooked, misleading, false’ which ‘may be from PCelt. \*soybo-, with the o-grade in the root’.<sup>43</sup>

The most extensive descriptions of Cú Chulainn’s distortions are found in TBC I and *Fled Bricrenn*. A number of associated references, including his nicknaming as the distorted one, suggest that this is a reasonably established part of his martial persona (*in ríatarthe/ríastarthé*; TBC I, ll.209; *ind riastarthe*; l.1473; *in ríastartha*; ll.1656-7; *ind ríastairthe*; l.1814, ll.1822-3; *in ríastartha* l.2372; *in ríastarde*; l.2391; *in ríastarde*; TBC II l.261; *in riastarde*; l.2380, l.2400; *in ríastairthe*; van Hamel, 1933, 44, §56; *in ríastartha*; Dillon, 1953a, 20, §35; *in ríastarthe*; Hollo, 2005, 60, §40). The past participle of *ríastraid* is used in all these. A number of other terms used for him further support this, including Lóeg calling him “‘O distorted little sprite’” in TBC II (“*a sírithi síabarthe bic*”; ll.3309-10), as “‘O shape-shifter, O spectral-one’” in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada agus Aided Gairb*

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<sup>42</sup> Medb also expresses her fear of a distorted Cú Chulainn subsequent to his prompt slaying of her messenger who interrupts him while playing chess in *Fled Bricrenn (día siabairthe immi*; Henderson, 1899, 76-7, §61).

<sup>43</sup> This is further linked to Welsh *Gwen-hwyfar* or Guinevre, Arthur’s wife in the Arthurian romances. He notes that this name is etymologically linked to Old Irish *Findabair*, the daughter of Ailill and Medb in the Ulster Cycle. It means ‘white spectre’. He further suggests that Pokorny’s derivation of these words from PIE \*seh<sub>2</sub>i- ‘bind’ ‘is possible but uncertain’.

*Glinne Rige* (“*a siriti, a siabairthe*”; Stokes, 1893, 408-9, §19) in his fights against Fer Diad and Goll respectively (see VI.2).<sup>44</sup> For similar reasons, he labels him as a ‘one-eyed shape-shifter’ in *Fled Bricrenn* (“*a siriti lethguill*”; Henderson, 1899, 84, §67). Likewise, the *bachlach*’s reference to him as *in siartha claontrúad* ‘the squinting doomed distorted one’ can be considered in the same light (§98).<sup>45</sup>

Further evidence is found in *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Talland Étair*. The former text considers Cú Chulainn’s ability to become one-eyed as a *dán* ‘gift’ which he uses when he is in a bad mood or perhaps in an angered state (*ar bá dán dósom in tan ba n-olc a menma*; Dillon, 1953a, 2, §5). It is deemed as a suitably recognisable trait to mimic by his female admirers in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 2, §5) and in *Talland Étair* (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 50 & 60-1) in their endeavours to illustrate their affection for him. Leborcham scorns him for raging at these women given the extraordinary measures to which they go to in order to show their love for him in the former. Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh (2007, 109-10) proposes that the author leads us to believe that this self-mutilation is permanent through the use of the word *anim* ‘blemish’ by Leborcham and the verb *no gollad* to describe the act of blinding. Conversely, their maiming in *Talland Étair* seems to manifest only when they are talking to someone and is thus transient (*A trian ro:charsat Coin Chulainn batis guill ocot acadlaim*; Ó Dónaill, 2005, 50 & 60-1).

Next to consider the physical transformations which Cú Chulainn undergoes during these events. His youthful distortion is recounted as follows in TBC I:

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<sup>44</sup> He is addressed similarly by Fergus in TBC II (“*don serriti síabarda*”; l.1669; “*a serriti síabarda*”; l.1673). *DIL* states that *sirite* is often qualified or accompanied by *síabartha*.

<sup>45</sup> *Lóg* also addresses him as a *cláin trúaig* ‘O wretched squinter’ therein (Henderson, 1899, 52-3, §43; see V.2).

*Ríastartha immi-seom i sudiu. Indar lat bad tinnarcan asnot cach foltne ina chend lasa comérge conérracht. Indar lat bá hoíbell tened boí for cach óenf innu de. Iadais indara súil dó conárbo lethiu indás cró snáithaiti. Asoilgg alaile combo móir beólu midchúaic. Dóerig dia glainíni co rici a hóu. Asoilg a béolu coa inairddriuch combo écna a inchróes. Atreacht in lúan láith assa mullach* ‘Thereupon he became distorted. His hair stood on end so that it seemed as if each separate hair on his head had been hammered into it. You would have thought that there was a spark of fire on each single hair. He closed one eye so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as large as the mouth of a mead-goblet. He laid bare from his jaw to his ear and opened his mouth rib-wide (?) so that his internal organs were visible. The champion’s light rose above his head’ (TBC I, ll.428-34).

The ascription of this faculty to Cú Chulainn at such a young age clearly sets this out as an inherent ability and one which supports his heroic credentials. The extant descriptions display some variation, but there is on a whole a general sense of agreement to be found. Changes to his head, in particular, to his hair and face, are most frequently highlighted. Contortions to his lower legs are also somewhat to the fore. Understandably, these are even greater and even more fantastic in the most elaborate account in TBC (TBC I, ll.2245-78; TBC II, ll.2262-94).

The process by which he becomes a one-eyed figure is variously depicted; in one instance his eye is said to go into his head (*No theiged*; Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20), in another, he simply closes it so that it essentially disappears (*Iadais indara súil dó conárbo lethiu indás cró snáithaiti*; TBC I, ll.430-1), while elsewhere, he sucks it into his head (*imslo[i]c indara súil dó ina chend*; 1.2256).<sup>46</sup> The more embellished

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<sup>46</sup> In the other account in TBC I, it simply states that his eye is in his head, while the other is on the outside (*indala súil ina chend 7 araili fria chend anechtair*; 1.1653).

account late in TBC I, announces that not even a crane can pluck it out from the back of his skull (*iss ed mod dánas tairsed fíadchorr [a] tagraim do lár a grúade a hia[r]thor a c[h]locaind*; ll.2256-8). As one eye recedes, the other becomes enlarged and more prominent, thus rendering him one-eyed. Symbolic of warfare, one-eyedness, in particular, the oversized eye, as in the case of Cú Chulainn during his distortions, enhance the ‘terrifying aspect of the warrior’s burning frenzy’ (McCone, 1996, 97, 108).

The most pointed example from Irish literature is that of Balor’s destructive eye in *Cath Maige Tuired* which has the ability to paralyse people at a glance (Gray, 1982, 60, §133). Borsje observes that ‘[a]s Balor’s eye is only opened on a battlefield, the eye specifically serves as a weapon in battle’ (Borsje & Kelly, 2003, 6).<sup>47</sup> It is further asserted that it also has a supernatural context, given that it is capable of destroying from a distance without any physical contact. Cú Chulainn’s single eye, while contorted, is not adorned with any such anaesthetising powers. His rendering of a stag motionless by glaring at it in his final boyhood deed appears somewhat comparable with the paralysing effect of Balor’s eye:

*“Tongu-sa do dia toingte Ulaid, clóenad clóenfat-sa mo c[h]end fair nó in tsúil dogén-sa fris, nocon fíocher cor día chind riut 7 noco lémaither a glúasacht”* “‘I swear by the god by whom the Ulstermen swear, that I shall so

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<sup>47</sup> According to O’Rahilly (1946, 58-60), the destructive nature of Balor’s eye is depicted as a realisation of the malevolent aspect of the sun-god. The sun is perceived as the divine Eye of the heavens and when conceived athromorphically often manifests as a large one-eyed being. Lightning, which is its destructive force, ‘was sometimes conceived as a flashing glance from the god’s eye’. One-eyedness is also a characteristic adopted by those engaged in *corrguinecht* as outlined in V.6.

nod at him and so glare at him that he will not move his head towards you and that he will not dare to stir” (TBC I, ll.794-6; see Borsje & Kelly, 2003, 21).<sup>48</sup>

There are also considerable changes to his mouth during these bouts: *Ríastartha a bél co úrtrachta* ‘His mouth is distorted in a spectral way’ (TBC I, ll.2259). His distortion is described similarly in *Fled Bricrenn* through its use of *co urtrachta* (*Sía[ba]rthar co urtrachta im Choin Culaind*; Henderson, 1899, 86-7, §67). Notably, both of these tales are found in LU with the latter piece being in the hand of H and thus may have been inspired by that written by M in TBC. Alternatively, ‘*coa inairddriuch*’ occurs in the description of his mouth in TBC I (ll.428-34) in the hand of M with O’Rahilly (1976, 248) suggesting that this may be a scribal error for *co urtrachta* (or *co urthrachda*). Cú Chulainn’s cheeks seem to strip back to his jaw-bones so that his innards are visible (TBC I, ll.428-34, ll.1651-7, ll.2245-78). It is said that a man’s head can fit into his mouth as a result (TBC I ll.1651-7). The lengthier account in TBC, states that his lungs and his liver flutter in his throat while the remaining upper and lower part of his mouth moves like a great big pincer (TBC I, ll.2260-3).

His hair thickens and stands on its end becoming fiercely bristled implying that it is much shorter than normal.<sup>49</sup> It becomes sharp like the thorns of a hawthorn plant with an apple being unable to pass through it.<sup>50</sup> As Cú Chulainn is usually represented as being small in stature, this no doubt increases his size. This may

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<sup>48</sup> The corresponding episode in LL states that he uses the same technique to control his horses (TBC II, ll.1172-4).

<sup>49</sup> Cú Chulainn’s physical appearance is discussed in detail in VI.3.

<sup>50</sup> Of the fearsome youths who appear in the incomplete text *Fochonn Loingse Fergusa meic Róich*, it is said that a fist full of apples would have stuck to their hair if thrown at it on account of its bristliness (Hull, 1930, 295-6). Fer Caille’s hair in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is described similarly and it is also said to have been cropped (Knott, 1936, 11).

also parallel with the manner in which a dog's hair stands up when in threatening situations. Similar to his canine counterpart, Cú Chulainn is equally dangerous when so aroused and the chances of him attacking are hugely increased. Credibly, this is yet another way in which Cú Chulainn is likened to hounds and is a visible manifestation of his close connection with these animals. It is noteworthy, that he has this trait prior to his slaying of Culann's hound. Bearing this parallel in mind, his contorted mouth, with its cheeks peeled back so that his teeth are bared, perhaps resembles a snarling dog. Indeed, the lengthier account of his contortion parallels the loud beating of his heart against his rib-cage to the baying of a hound or to a lion attacking bears. Essentially, the hero experiences a major adrenaline rush which quickens and strengthens the beat of his heart.

In *Fled Bricrenn*, it is stated that the hero sucks his hair into his head so that his dark yellow curly hair looks as if it has been clipped or shorn (*rosuíg a folt inna chend, corbo suas maeldub demis [a] chas chirdub ba forcsi fair*; Henderson, 1899, 32-3, §27). Interestingly, Cú Chulainn is usually depicted as having long curly hair of three colours; dark next to his skin, blood-red in the middle and golden on the outside (see VI.3). This account is largely in keeping with this, in that the inner two layers are absorbed into his head while the golden one remains visible. It is noteworthy that the hair of the giant in the mist in the same tale, possibly a disguised Cú Roí, is also clipped (*Maeldub demsidi fair*; §37). A long curly haired Cú Chulainn is rendered into a short bristly-haired one in a bid to make him unrecognisable, fiercer and conceivably to associate him with more mysterious figures.

Cú Chulainn also experiences a hyperpyrexia. Generally, a warrior's heat is taken as an indication of his ardour. Evidence for this is found in the vocabulary, for instance, *bruth* means 'boiling/intense heat' as well as 'fury, ardour, valour'. Likewise, *fichid* means 'fights' and 'boils'; and its verbal noun, *gal*, combines the meanings 'steam, vapour, mist' with 'valour'.<sup>51</sup> McCone (2006, 96-100) finds evidence for this martial trait in the berserk warriors of Norse tradition, Hector in the *Iliad* and Cú Chulainn in Irish literature. This process involves an accession in the warrior's strength and also essentially heats him up, 'producing visible bright, fiery effects' (see below). The latter reflex is found across a range of traditions, including, Greek, Roman, Armenian, Germanic, Indic and Irish.

It is to be expected that Cú Chulainn's ardour and thus heat would be above the norm. Indeed, the snow is said to melt for thirty feet around him owing to the heat of this in TBC II (ll.1484-6).<sup>52</sup> A heightening in his ardour sees a rise in his temperature. Unsurprisingly, this soars during these events. Sparks of fire radiate from each hair and head in general (TBC I, ll.429-30, ll.2265-8), and from his throat (ll.2260-3). The hero's light '*luan láith*' rises from his crown (TBC I, ll.433-4, l.1651, l.2272).<sup>53</sup> McCone (2006, 100) notes that this bears resemblances with the bright flame which is depicted as rising from Achilles' head. The more elaborate account notes that a stream of dark blood rises from his head before

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<sup>51</sup> McCone (2006, 96-100) states that *gal*, along with *gal(a)*- underlying Gaulish *Galatia* derive from earlier *\*galā* and adds that 'the fury and ardour of Celtic *\*galā* have primarily martial connotations that may equally well have applied to the PIE root from which it derives. Assuming that they did, PIE *\*ǵ<sup>h</sup>elh<sub>3</sub>* would have related to a martial fury or frenzy that was prone to make a warrior so strong as to be virtually invincible'.

<sup>52</sup> It also noted that he removes his twenty seven shirts so that he might not be deranged when his fit of fury comes upon him in TBC II (ll.1481-4).

<sup>53</sup> This is also a feature of the undistorted Cú Chulainn (TBC II, l.236; Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 43, §23). *Láith* can mean 'warrior' or 'heat' and frequently occurs in the phrase *láith gaile* meaning 'warrior', according to *DIL*. McCone (2006, 102) notes that the latter is a combination of *láith* 'heat, rutting' with the gen. sg. of *gal* discussed above.

dissolving into a smoky mist (TBC I, ll.2274-8). Thus the hero seems to be smoking hot underscoring the potency of his martial ardour.

A number of contortions to Cú Chulainn's body are also evident. His *ríastrad* is labeled as a *sáebgles díberge*<sup>54</sup> 'wild feat of contortion' in TBC I, (ll.2248-9; TBC II, l.2266) where it is qualified as follows: 'He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin' (*Ro láe sáebglés díberge dá churp i mmedón a chrocind*; TBC I, ll.2248-9). This seems to suggest that the hero is in control of and largely initiates these changes to his body. His legs rotate three hundred and sixty degrees with his feet facing backwards and his heels and calves to the front. In the more fantastic account of this, the sinews on his calves and head become enlarged, bulbous and visible to the naked eye (ll.2251-5). The ones on his head stretch down to his neck, perhaps thickening and strengthening it. In essence, it seems as if his lower limbs turn back to front and parts of the rest of his body inside out. In addition, his body quivers or shakes (ll.2246-8). The re-orientation of his legs may again be an attempt to parallel these with the hind legs of a dog.

In many respects he takes on a non-human appearance, thus, perhaps reaffirming his liminal heroic status. The distorted Cú Chulainn is very different to the beautiful young hero (see VI.5). Normally, descriptions of him emphasise the beauty of his hair, eyes, colourful complexion, mouth and teeth (see VI.3). These must be altered in order to turn him into a frightening spectre. TBC I notes that this process makes him 'horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognisable' (*úathbásach n-ílrechtach n-ingantach n-anaichnid*; ll.2245-6).

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<sup>54</sup> It is listed as *sáebchless* in LL.

Next to consider the triggering factors, and, in particular, whether this is presented as a voluntary or involuntary action. The questioning of Cú Chulainn's ability is a key factor in a number of these circumstances. This is certainly the case in relation to his initial inability to scale the bridge in *Tochmarc Emire*, to lift Bricriu's house and to jump Cú Roi's wall in *Fled Bricrenn* (van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68; Henderson, 1899, 32-3, §27; 110-3, §88; see IV.6 & V.6). On the brink of being overthrown by the *geniti glinne* '(female) creatures of the valley' in *Fled Bricrenn*, Lóg chastises him for allowing these figures to defeat him so easily causing him to change again (§67). In all of these, apart from one, the hero's failings are witnessed thus this public humiliation no doubt compounds matters further for him. Ultimately, his honour is also at stake. As a result, the hero seems to become enraged leading to his 'warp spasm'. While his attempts to vault over Cú Roi's wall are not observed, there is perhaps a sense of a personal failure which is sufficient to anger him. His distortion upon hearing a false account that he is to blame for the defeat of the Ulstermen can be viewed in a similar light (TBC I, ll.4090-3). For the most part, it seems that these events are presented as involuntary reactions.

The violation of 'fair-play' seems to aggravate the hero in some of the other situations. While Cú Chulainn allows the grievously wounded Nad Crantail a brief reprieve to reveal the location of his hidden treasures to his sons in TBC I, the latter double-crosses him by attacking him on his return, infuriating him and causing him to become distorted (ll.1467-81). This may also be the case in his first youthful exploit when he is clearly outnumbered by the one hundred and fifty boys (ll.423-7). There also seems to be a sense of injustice in the Connacht-men's slaying of

the youths of Ulster which has a similar effect on Cú Chulainn (ll.2167-79). The first two of these are quite spontaneous, while the latter is a delayed reaction to the news of the death of the youths and occurs as part of his bid to seek revenge for this. Fundamentally, all of these situations madden the hero leading to his distortions. *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* concurs with this finding, noting that his *ríastrad* occurs when he is angered (*Ba dolig bith friss in tráth ba fergach*; Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20).

Ultimately, Cú Chulainn's martial prowess is intensified during such episodes. Significantly, an increase in strength is also one of the features of an adrenaline rush. In spite of being in a heightened state of anger during these events, his actions are very much directed toward a specific task or the person who has triggered this, with the outcome being successful for him in all cases. It enables him to lift the house, jump the wall in *Fled Bricrenn* and to scale the bridge in *Tochmarc Emire* with no apparent threat to those around him (Henderson, 1899, 32-3, §27; 110-3, §88; van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68). His forceful piercing of Scáthach's door with his spear subsequent to his transformation in the latter, presents some danger to her. Once he performs these events he seems to return to normal. Achieving redress against Nad Crantail and the *geniti glinne* in TBC I and *Fled Bricrenn*, his anger again dissipates (Henderson, 1899, 86-7, §67; TBC I, ll.1479-82). However, in the former case he subsequently states that it is a pity that he does not face Medb with a third of her host at that point indicating his awareness of his heightened prowess (ll.1482-6).

For the most part, he distinguishes friend from foe. This is somewhat less clear in his youthful distortion when he attacks the boys at Emain Machae (ll.435-8). It is arguable that the boys are not his friends at the time of this encounter. Even so, he looks to be a little more out of control, given that Conchobar must intervene to calm him. Late in TBC, he inflicts wide-scale carnage and his killing of women and children indicate that he is out of control (see V.5). His rage runs its course when he has his fill of fighting and killing. This warp spasm can be labelled as a ‘full-blown’ one. Perhaps it is to be expected that the distortion of a seventeen-year-old Cú Chulainn would be greater than that of a five-year-old one.

Next to consider in brief some later developments in the way in which his *ríastrad* is presented. Though the scene in which Cú Chulainn attempts to cross the bridge leading to Scáthach’s home in *Tochmarc Emire* and the later related text, *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, are almost identical; there is one key difference. Cú Chulainn becomes distorted in the earlier tale and simply enraged in the later one (*ro fergaighedh Cúchulainn tridsin* ‘Cúchulainn was enraged’; Stokes, 1908, 122-3, §22). The end result is the same in both, in that he subsequently crosses the bridge. In spite of facing defeat at the hands of Goll in the Middle Irish tale, *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, he does not distort, even though Lóeg eggs him on by calling him “*a siriti, a siabairthe*” (Stokes, 1893, 408-9, §19; see V.2 & VI.2). Given that this tale is deemed to have borrowed considerably from earlier texts, it is interesting that this unusual feature is not found therein. Conversely, subsequent to Lóeg’s designation of him as “*a siriti lethguill*” in *Fled Bricrenn* he duly distorts (Henderson, 1899, 84, §67; see V.2 & VI.2). There is

evidence in the earlier material of Cú Chulainn not becoming distorted where we might expect him to.

Cú Chulainn's overwhelming of Goll bears strong similarities with his slaying of Fer Diad in TBC I and II (see V.2). Lóeg again plays a crucial role in inciting the hero to final victory therein. In TBC I, we are told that: *Ra lín at 7 infisi amail anáil i llés. Forbrid a méd co mba móam oltás Fer Diad* 'Cú Chulainn swelled and grew big as a bladder does when inflated. His size increased so that he was bigger than Fer Diad' (ll.3093-4). He similarly inflates in TBC II, where it is noted that he towers over Fer Diad and grows as big as a Fomorian or a *fer mara* (TBC II, ll.3317-20). Despite there being no mention of Cú Chulainn becoming one-eyed in this instance, it is noteworthy that the Fomorians are sometimes represented as bearing this trait (Scowcroft, 1995, 142n). Giant overseas invaders, like Goll, are part of a literary motif that is found in the later tales which seem to have been inspired by the Vikings (Ní Mhaonaigh, 2001, 101; see VI.7). This may also account for the shift to compare him to such figures in the later tale. Interestingly, TBC II labels this as a *ríastrad*, but TBC I does not. It is clear that this act of inflation is different to his *ríastrad* discussed to date and the triggering factors are similar for both. While there may be an increase in his strength, he subsequently relies on the *gáe bolga* in both accounts to dispose of Fer Diad.

It is observed above that Cú Chulainn undergoes one of his warp spasms when Nad Crantail double crosses him in TBC I. This scene varies somewhat in TBC II, where the hero has a somewhat delayed reaction to the accusation that he had fled from his opponent (ll.1721-51). Early the following morning, an enraged Cú Chulainn puts on his cloak, but unbeknownst to him, it also wraps around a pillar-

stone and he drags this along. Thereupon, he becomes distorted and duly slaughters Nad Crantail.

For the most part, this faculty seems to be downplayed in the LL version of TBC. The nickname, ‘The Distorted-One’ is used less frequently therein (see above). The text bears only one detailed description of this event, namely the elaborate one which is almost identical in all three recensions as indicated above (TBC II, ll.2262-94). Thus it lacks his youthful distortion. It is noteworthy that Zimmer believes this to be superfluous in TBC I and an obvious interpolation (O’Rahilly, 1976, 247). O’Rahilly (1976, 247) observes that ‘[t]he sentence *Benaid fona maccu* 435 follows naturally on from l. 422’.<sup>55</sup> Looking at the storyline, it would be possible to remove this section without interrupting the flow of the narrative. In addition, there is no reference to Cú Chulainn’s distortion when he comes into contact with Fergus and Conchobar. Its inclusion may have been fuelled by a desire to associate this unusual faculty with the hero from as a young an age as possible and prior to his receipt of any formal training. Ultimately, this distinguishes him further as a budding heroic figure.

It is outlined above that the heightening of a hero’s prowess as a result of an enraged state is not exclusive to Cú Chulainn in early Irish literature. The following is an account of the berserks of early Norse tradition from Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglingasaga*, 6:

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<sup>55</sup> O’Rahilly (1976, 247) further adds that ‘[n]ote, however, that in the fight with Nad Crantail Cú Chulainn was distorted *amal dorigni frisna maccu i nEmain* (infra 1478-9). Again the description of Cú Chulainn’s distortion in the H-interpolation (infra 1651-7) seems completely out of place and may have been built by the interpolator on the sentence in Aided Nad Crantail’.

His men fought without armour, and were rabid as hounds or wolves. They bit into their shields, and were strong as bears or bulls. They slew the men, but neither fire nor iron could restrain them at all. That is called ‘going berserk’ (McCone, 1986, 21).

McCone (1986, 21) likens Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* to this and he posits that ‘[f]or Cú Chulainn, going berserk means *ríastrad*’. He further parallels their lifestyle with the *fián* way of life and in particular with the malign practice of *díberg* ‘freebooting, reaving, marauding’. He notes that this term may also apply to the practitioner and thus also means ‘reaver, freebooter’ (McCone, 1996, 100). McCone (1986, 4-5) pulls together evidence from a number of sources to conclude that there is no major difference between the practice of *díberg* and membership of the *fián*.<sup>56</sup>

*DIL* defines *fián* membership as a ‘band of roving men whose principal occupations were hunting and war, also a group of professional fighting-men under a leader’. McCone (1986, 13) proposes that:

...it thus appears that for many males of free birth in early Ireland the termination of fosterage around fourteen years of age was followed by a stage in the *fián*, an independent organization of predominantly landless, unmarried, unsettled and young men given to hunting warfare, and sexual licence in the wilds outside the *túath*, upon which it made claims, by agreement or force as the case might be, to sustenance and hospitality and for which it might perform certain elementary police or military services where relations were not strained by hostility. Upon the acquisition of the requisite property, usually

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<sup>56</sup> McCone (1986, 6) qualifies the term *díberg* further by noting that it ‘had a more specialised reference to a particularly nasty aspect of it that early churchmen were prone to emphasize in order to discredit the institution as a whole’. Although *Agallamh na Senórach* does not tarnish Finn and his *fianna* with the practice of *díberg*, the older sources do not attempt to make such differentiations between *díberg* and the *fiannas* (McCone, 1986, 3-4).

on the death of the father or other next of kin but not before the age of twenty, one would normally pass from the *fian* to full membership of the *túath* of married property-owners.

The division of a man's life in this manner along with the associated key transitional phases such as puberty and marriage is in keeping with the features with what anthropologists label as 'age grading' and 'age sets' of 'more or less approximate coevals bound together by a common rite of initiation, the *Männerbund* or society of young male warriors being a particularly prominent association of this type' (McCone, 1986, 13). McCone indicates the presence of this phenomenon, in particular the junior segregated, unmarried, promiscuous and martially orientated warriors of this system, in a range of societies including medieval France, the more recent Masai of East Africa and the early Irish *fian*. These characteristics similarly manifest themselves in the Irish *fian*'s Celtic forebears alongside the *berserks* and the Vikings as evident in Old Norse literature as mentioned above (McCone, 1986, 20). McCone (1986, 18) points to a number of features on the Gundestrup cauldron, including the presence of a horned-god 'Cernunos' flanked by a wolf and a stag, along with smooth-haired males in hunting scenes, as a visual depiction of the Gaulish *Männerbund* and its activities.

Werewolf characteristics along with one-eyedness are proposed emblems of this group leading McCone (1986, 22) to conclude that there is little doubt but 'that the early Irish *fian* continues an Indo-European prototype with remarkable little alteration'. Although Cú Chulainn becomes one-eyed during his distortions, this is not sufficient to confirm *fian* membership nor is his obvious canine links. Despite the use of *díberg* in the description of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* late in TBC (TBC I,

II.2248-9; TBC II, 1.2266), it is difficult to equate his actions during this as *díberg* in the same way that it applies to the *fián* warriors. There are a number of other one-eyed figures who pursue this practice, namely, Macuil moccu Greccae in Muirchu's seventh century Latin life of Saint Patrick and Ingcél Cáech in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (McCone, 1996, 100-1). Cú Chulainn's actions differ considerably from the plundering or *díberg* exacted by the sons of Donn Désa, the *féindid* or *fián*-champion, in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* which is deliberately planned yet random in its nature, self-fulfilling and destructive to society as a whole, to the extent that they are eventually captured and banished from Ireland (Knott, 1936, 6-7, §§19-20). Ingcél Cáech's pillaging can be viewed in the same light. Despite being in a heightened state of anger during his distortions, as we have seen, Cú Chulainn's responses are very much directed toward a specific task or the person who has triggered this and thus in this regard differ from those of the figures just mentioned.

Words with associated canine semantics, such as *luchthonn* 'wolf-skin' and formations containing *fáel* 'wolf' and *cú* 'hound' are considered as originally referring to the werewolf aspect of the *fián* member (McCone, 1986, 16). The wolf is more closely associated with the wilder side of warrior life (McCone, 1985, 173). '[W]hen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* the sons of Donn Désa are running amok and engage in *díberg* with three hundred young aristocrats, they are said to be "wolfing in the territory of Connacht" (*oc fáelad i Crích Connacht*)' (McCone, 1985, 173). Feasibly, it is the lesser malignant canine element, *cú*, which features in our hero's name, serving to minimise his untamed side. *Cú* is used more commonly in the names of the different domesticated dogs in early Irish society

(Kelly, 1997, 114-21). The hero acquires this title through his slaying of Culann's *árchú* 'slaughter-hound' (TBC I, ll.572-87). These dogs, 'bred and trained to kill', are 'particularly associated with the homes of nobles and other powerful men' (Kelly, 1997, 115). Evidently, this *árchú* must have received training or was domesticated from the outset in order to fulfil its role as protector of Culann's homestead. It can be tentatively suggested that Cú Chulainn's canine associations are limited to the more domesticated or civilised *cú* type. Indeed, the extending of his role as the warrior of Ulster reflects that of the young *árchú*, who Kelly (1997, 115) notes is expected to 'gradually extend its guarding duties in a fortified dwelling':

In the first year it guards the doorway (*dorus*) and the cleared area (*airscartad*) in front. As it gains in size and confidence in its second year it also guards the plank (*comlae*) leading up to the door. In its third year it also guards the bridge of access (*drochet*) to the dwelling.

McCone (1986, 17) accredits his almost immediate entering into a chariot after taking up arms to 'clerical reluctance to acknowledge explicitly a Fenian stage in Cú Chulainn's career', but he also concedes that this 'episode contains pretty clear narrative vestiges of a partially submerged tradition to that effect'. Thus, he is distanced from activities or membership of a *Männerbund* type group which pose a threat to society. It can be argued that it is necessary to represent such a period in his career in order to ensure his credibility as a martial hero, while also marking his initiation as a warrior. He is depicted as leaving Emain Machae in search of *oaic féne* 'youths/warriors of the *fían*' whereupon he kills the three sons of Nechta Scéne and captures birds and deer, returns in a state of martial frenzy before being

immersed in three vats of water leading to his reintegration into society albeit at a more elevated level alongside the king (see III.2.3).<sup>57</sup> Albeit not bearing all the hallmarks of a *Männerbund* group or its practices as outlined above, in particular in terms of its brevity and its solitary nature, his roaming martial conquests leading to his frenzied state are sufficient to credit it as a *fian* type adventure. Simultaneously, it conceivably meets the favoured warrior-type of the monastically-cultivated Ulster Cycle, termed by Sjoestedt (1949, 73-98) as the ‘hero within the tribe’. Cú Chulainn is dissociated from the contrasting martial-form, the ‘hero outside the tribe’, which is typified in the character of Finn. His linking with the more domesticated canine figure lends further weight to this proposal.

### **Conclusion**

Cú Chulainn’s distortion is unique to him in Irish tradition and further demarcates him as the great Ulster hero. A survey of the Ulster-Cycle tales indicates that there are only a very limited number of extant descriptions of his *ríastrad*. A number of associated references allow us to view this as a reasonably established component of his martial persona. Notwithstanding some variation in the reports of this act, a degree of consistency is found. The contortions to his head, in particular to his hair, eyes and mouth are most frequently detailed. Essentially, his hair becomes short bristled and thorny. His mouth opens wide making his gullet visible. He bears a large single eye. His legs twist back to front and he becomes raging hot. As well as these physical changes, his strength is also significantly boosted allowing him to perform otherwise insurmountable deeds. These bouts are mainly

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<sup>57</sup> The statement that Cú Chulainn’s comely appearance is restored after his immersion in three vats of water in the LL account of this episode suggests that some kind of transformation may have taken place while he is thus enraged (TBC II, ll.1197-9).

triggered by situations in which his ability is called into question or when someone crosses him. For the most part, he poses no threat to his own people while in such states. Finally, evidence suggests that this remarkable feature is less frequently attributed to the hero in the later period.

#### IV.4. Weaponry

Cú Chulainn's taking up of a spear and shield, followed by his entering into a chariot, are depicted as crucial events in his martial advancement (see III.2.3). The former two are perhaps considered as the basic equipment of any warrior. He is adorned with a range of other weapons at various points in the Ulster-Cycle material, some of which appear exclusive to him.

Cú Chulainn's use of his toy-like javelin (*bunsach*) is limited to his early years, with references to it found only in his *macgnímrada* (TBC I, ll.415-6, 1.578). Thereafter, he is represented as carrying a spear-like weapon(s), variously referred to as; *gaí*, *sleg*, *crann*, *luinech*, *cleitíne*, *faga*, *goth*, *cruísech*.<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to determine the essential differences, if any, between these weapons.<sup>59</sup> It seems that he is only given a single spear when he takes up arms, but he is depicted as bearing more than one such weapon at various points. In TBC I, he is described as carrying a 'long shining-edged spear (*gaí*) together with a sharp attacking javelin (*faga*) with rivets of burning gold' (ll.2362-3).<sup>60</sup> His spears (*a chranda*) are brought to him in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 55

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<sup>58</sup> He bears a *certgaí* which O'Rahilly (1976, 167) translates as a 'small spear' in TBC I (ll.1504-5; see also Windisch, 1913, 268-9).

<sup>59</sup> His spear appears to be mounted on a wooden shaft in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15).

<sup>60</sup> Other warriors including Eógán mac Durthacht and Lóegaire Búadach are laden with more than one spear-like weapon for the final battle in TBC I (ll.3634-5).

& 100, §18) and he also wields more than two of these on another occasion in TBC I (ll.2081-2). In the subsequent elaborate description of his battle attire in the latter, he is generously armed with eight little spears (*slegíni*), a five-pronged spear (*sleig cóicrind*), eight little javelins (*gothnatha*), eight little darts (*cletíni*), his *deil cliss* and another type of javelin (*goth néit*) (ll.2229-36).<sup>61</sup> His lavish armoury at this point in the tale is in keeping with and contributes to the heightening of the tone at this particular section of it.

He duly disposes of numerous warriors with his spear, including Eochaid Iúil in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*Doléici gaí dó co luid trít*; Dillon, 1953a, 21, §36), Fóill (*Sréthis fair íarom in sleg co mmebaid a druim trít. Dobeir leis a fodb 7 a c[h]end íar sudiu*; TBC I ll.739-40), Nad Crantail (*Léigid Cú Chulaind in ngáe fair acht bá i n-ardda conid anúas tocorastár inna mullach co lluid trít co talmain*; ll.1465-6) and Buid mac Báin in TBC I (*Sraithe din chertgaí co lluid i nderc a oxaille co mmebaid i ndé ind óe altarrach resin gaí*; ll.1504-5). Similarly, he kills large numbers with his spear-shots in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 21-3 & 41-2, §§16-20) and uses it in his combat against Garb in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 420, §37). According to *Serglige Con Culainn* (*Bróenán fola fota fland la tóeb crand comard a dé*; Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37), and *Fled Bricrenn* (*crithir fola for a crund*; Henderson, 1899, 26, §24), his spear was constantly wet with blood, alluding to his martial excellence.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Lug, Conchobar and Eógan mac Durthacht also carry five-pronged spears in TBC I (l.2096, l.3619, l.3634). Additional arms are also employed during his duel with Fer Diad in TBC II (ll.3093-5).

<sup>62</sup> His spear is also described as being blood-red in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15).

It is named as *Blad ar Bladaib* ‘Triumph upon Triumphs’ in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §14).<sup>63</sup>

Another one of his spear-like arms, the *gáe bolga*, which is exclusive to him, is of particular interest. O’Rahilly (1946, 62-4) states that its meaning has been invariably misinterpreted in recent times:

O’Curry connects it with *bolg*, “belly”, and explains it as “belly-dart”. O’Beirne Crowe translates it as “the bellows dart” and the “the dart of belly”. Meyer explains it as “gapped spear”, i.e., I take it, a weapon like a pitchfork”. Pokorny connects *gae bolgae* (sic) with *bolg*, m. “bag”, f. “bubble”, and explains it as “Blasenspeer”; *bolgae*, he suggests, either represents *\*bolgios*, adj., or else is a compound, = *\*bolg-gaí*....MacNeill takes *gaí Bulga* to be a scribal corruption of *\*diabul-gaí*, “of the twofold spear”. Rhys alone gets a slight inkling of the true explanation; *gaí Bolgae* he takes to mean the spear of “the goddess Bolg”, “in other terms it would be a spear characteristic of the Fir Bolg”.

O’Rahilly then offers his own theory about this spear, linking it with the god, Oengus Bolg, who possesses a deadly spear. He notes that:

In an account of the blinding of Cormac by Oengus, introduced into an anonymous poem dealing with Bórama (LL 375 f.), Oengus is said to have been also called Gaí Bulga (*Oengus dárb ainm Gai Bolce*, 376 a 12, and cf. ib. 30); the confusion is obvious, but the statement no doubt rests on an identification (which need not be questioned) of the spear wielded by Oengus Gaíbuaiibthech with the *gaí Bulga*.

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<sup>63</sup> TBC I states that if Cú Chulainn was deprived of his javelin (*a c[h]letíne*) he would be no better than anyone else (ll.1508-9).

According to the extant accounts of it, this lethal weapon appears to enter the body as a single barb, creating one entrance wound, before multiplying into twenty-four or thirty according to TBC I (ll.3097-8) and TBC II (ll.3346-7) respectively; the latter account stating that the victim's flesh had to be cut from it in order to extract it from his body. TBC II states that it is set downstream and cast from between the toes (ll.3344-6). It is suggested in III.4.3.1 that Cú Chulainn acquires it from Scáthach.<sup>64</sup> It proves decisive in his victories over a number of opponents, namely Lóch mac Mo Femis (TBC I, ll.2024-7) and Fer Diad (TBC I, ll.3095-100; TBC II, ll.3353-9) in TBC and Connlac in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 118-21, §11). On all of these occasions Cú Chulainn fights his opponent in the water and may have caught the victim off guard to a certain extent by launching it under the water where it enters the latter's body through the anus. Given that the former two have a protective horn skin, the anus may have been the only penetrable part. Fer Diad dons a huge stone and an apron of iron in anticipation of Cú Chulainn's use of it in TBC II (ll.3250-4) and he lowers his shield for the same reason in both accounts but none of these tactics are capable of screening him from it.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, Cú Chulainn throws it upwards before it comes down on Eochaid Glas's head, piercing his body until it reaches the ground (*Do-léig-side in gáe bulgae i n(d)-ardai hi siudiu co tochrastar annúass fora chathbarr na lúirighe ina mullach co-ndechaid trít co talmain*; Hollo, 2005, 60 & 104, §41).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> In his lay after his slaying of Fer Diad in TBC II (ll.2068-71), Cú Chulainn refers to Aífe's spear (*in gae Aífe*) that is sent downstream by Lóg to him with which he kills Lóch Mac Emonis, suggesting that he may have instead acquired the *gáe bolga* from Aífe. The onus of teaching him this feat interestingly falls upon Aífe in *Foghlaim Con Culainn* (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 50).

<sup>65</sup> The *gáe bolga* smashes the stone in three (TBC II, ll.3357).

<sup>66</sup> He inflicts a very similar injury upon Nad Crantail with a spear in TBC I (ll.1465-6).

He also bears it in *Forfess Fer Fálga* (Meyer, 1912, 565), *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9448) and earlier in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* for his encounter with Cairpre Cundail but refrains from using it (Hollo, 2005, 60 & 104, §39). It is listed as one of his many feats in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 56, §78) and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9290; see below).

Another projectile weapon, the *deil cliss*, is also exclusive to him.<sup>67</sup> He threw it at Túachall in his final youthful exploit in the hope that it would ‘confound him so that it may riddle him like a sieve’ (TBC I, ll.750-1). Like Fer Diad and Lóch mac Mo Femis, no weapon was deemed capable of wounding this warrior. Conversely, he uses it instead on his brother Fóill in TBC II, fatally wounding him in a horrendous manner:

...fo cheird [Cú Chulainn] róut n-urchair úad co tarla i llaind a [Fóill] scéith 7 i llaind a étain 7 berid comthrom inn ubaill dá inchind tria chúladaig co nderna retherderg de fria chend anechtair comba léir lésbaire aeóir triana chend ..[Cú Chulainn] hurled it so that it landed on the flat of his [Fóill] shield and the flat of his forehead and took the ball’s equivalent of his brains through the back of his head, and he was holed like a sieve so that the light of the air was visible through his head (TBC II, ll.1107-10).

It is described as *fón n-ubull n-athlegtha n-íarnaide* ‘the round ball of refined iron’ in TBC II (ll.1102-4). *DIL* offers ‘piece of wood, spear, wand, sling, pillar’ as the meanings for *deil* thus suggesting that it is spear like weapon. Considering the obvious lethality of this weapon, it is unusual that Cú Chulainn did not make

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<sup>67</sup> Windisch (1905, 281n; ll.2574-5) views *deil* in the context of the feat *cor ndelend* and in conjunction with the reference *ocht cleitini ma deil chliss* in LL as a type of *cleitini*.

more use of it. While he is listed as carrying it late in TBC I as noted above, aside from these, there seem to be no other extant references to it.

The shield (*sciath*) is part of a warrior's basic set of arms. Cú Chulainn's *sciath slissen* 'wooden shield' (TBC I, l.415) is presumably replaced by that given to him by Conchobar in his last boyhood deed (l.621). Nonetheless, the former is used by him in a protective capacity against the onslaught of toy javelins cast by the youths on his arrival at Emain Machae (ll.423-4). There are a significant number of references, some merely fleeting others more descriptive, to Cú Chulainn's shield. This dark red or purple object (TBC I, ll.2232-5, l.2360; LU, ll.9271; Henderson, 1899, 62-5, §51) is curved in shape (*cromsciath*; TBC I, l.2233),<sup>68</sup> and has a rim of white bronze (*co mbil finddruini fair*; l.2360-1; *co mbil findruini*; Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37) or silver.<sup>69</sup> It is ornamented with some kind of bosses or rings of gold (*sciath co mbúalid óir budi*; §37), five according to TBC I (*co cóicroth óir*; ll.2360) and a single large boss of red gold in TBC II (*medónaig do dergór*; ll.3260-3) along with some animal figures. Cú Chulainn's shield is not particularly unusual in the context of those of other Ulster warriors, like Fergus, who similarly carries a curved shield with a rim of white gold (*Cromsciath co fáebur chondúala fair di findruini*; TBC I, ll.1303-4) and one with a boss of red gold (*Sciath cobradach condúalach co cobraid óir deirg úasu*; TBC II, ll.1584-5). Conchobar's

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<sup>68</sup> Cú Chulainn refers to his *sciath scenbda* in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, possibly meaning 'pointed shield' (Stokes, 1893, 404-5, §10).

<sup>69</sup> The descriptions of the silver rimmed shield in *Staburcharpat Con Culainn (Sciath corcorda co comrod argit co túagmílaib óir úasa dib n-imdadaib*; LU, ll.9270-1), *Fled Bricrenn (Sciath concorda co comroth argit co túagmílaib óir úasa a dib n-imdadaib*; Henderson, 1899, 64n) and *Tochmarc Emire (Sciath corcurdae co comroth airgit co túagmílaib óir ósa dib n-imdadaib*; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15) are principally the same.

white shield is also ornamented with gold animal figures (*Gelscíath co túagmílaib óir fair*; TBC I, ll.3599-600).<sup>70</sup>

An anecdote in the manuscript, H.3.17, concerned with the making and engraving of Cú Chulainn's shield, observes that by law silver shields, bearing a unique design, should be crafted for each of the Ulstermen (Best, 1911, 72). Accordingly, it states that while training in the lands of Scáthach and Búanann, Cú Chulainn employs the expert shield-maker, Mac Endge, to make his. Having exhausted all his designs on the Ulstermen's shields, Mac Endge struggles to think of one for Cú Chulainn's. The inspiration is provided by Dubdetba who appears to him through the skylight, instructing him to scatter ashes on the ground. He then sketches an exclusive *luaithrindi* motif which may be rendered as 'ash-points' or 'points from the ashes' or possibly 'swift-points'. The shield is named *Duban*.<sup>71</sup> At any rate, this account is not referred to in the descriptions of his shield found elsewhere.

Primarily a protective device, its serrated or sharp edge, rendered it a useful attacking weapon (*a scíath co fáebur chondúala fair*; Kimpton, 2009, 14 & 37, §7; *imma chromscíath ndubderg....cona bil áithgéir ailtnidi imgéir ina hurtimcheull contescfad finna i n-aigid srotha ar áthi ⁊ ailtnidecht ⁊ imgéiri*; TBC I, ll.2233-6). The latter text also states that Cú Chulainn slashes (*imthescad*) with his shield, spear or sword while performing the 'edge feat' (ll.2236-7), and later notes that he wields his shields (*oc imbirt na scíath*; ll.2273-4) at the host during one of his

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<sup>70</sup> See McGuirk (2008, 229-32) for an account of the shields' of the Ulster warriors.

<sup>71</sup> *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* contains a reference to Cú Chulainn's *fuban* (Stokes, 1910, 28-9, §17), which *DIL* lists as his shield and notes that it is later called *Duban* with reference to the current text.

*ríastrad*.<sup>72</sup> He similarly uses (*no:imbred*) his shield on the enemy in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §15).<sup>73</sup>

A sword, usually referred to as *claideb*, is frequently used by Cú Chulainn. Its hilt is variously described as being made of gold (*claided órduirn*; TBC I, ll.2361-2, ll.3853-4; Meyer, 1910, 50; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15), silver (*cona imdurnd airgididú*; Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37), or ivory (*colg dét*; TBC I, l.90; *arm dét*; l.2230). In some cases it is described as being ornamented with large knobs of red gold (*co torceltaib óir derg i n-ardgabáil gaili fora chris*; ll.2361-2). These features are comparable with the swords of other Ulster warriors.<sup>74</sup> His sword is twice named as *in Cruadín Catutchend* ‘Hard-head Steeling’ in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 410-11, §20; 420-1, §38). Prior to the end of the LL section of *Mesca Ulad*, Cú Chulainn vows to use his *crúadín* to free the Ulstermen from the enemy’s house in Temair Lúachra (Watson, 1941, 39-40, ll.883-92).<sup>75</sup> He also bears a number of small swords or daggers in TBC I (*ocht claidbíni*; l.2230; *ceithri claidbíni*; l.3853) at the height of the battle.<sup>76</sup>

Again, Cú Chulainn is attributed with spilling a great amount of blood with his sword (Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37; Henderson, 1899, 27, §24). Fergus refers to him as *a Chú Chulaind claidebrúad* ‘O Cú Chulainn of the red sword’ (TBC I, l.2779) as

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<sup>72</sup> It is stated that he carries eight shields along with his curved dark-red one at this point (TBC I, ll.2232-4).

<sup>73</sup> Súaldaim beheads himself after falling on the scalloped rim of his own shield in TBC I (ll.3443-4).

<sup>74</sup> See McGuirk (2008, 232-3) for a discussion of the type of swords found in the Ulster sagas.

<sup>75</sup> Cú Chulainn notes that his sword was hard in *Siaburcharpat Con Culainn (mo chlaideb ba cruaid*; Meyer, 1910, 55). The *Cruadín Catutchend* seems to have been capable of cutting through stone, wood and bone, however, his sword fails to penetrate, and indeed glides off the head of the supernatural cat, released from the cave at Crúachain, in *Fled Bricrenn (dounsi Cuchulainn béim din claidiub na cend doscirred di mar bad do charraic*; Henderson, 1899, 72-3, §57). His spear and shield are also shattered against the *geniti glinne* later in this tale (§67).

<sup>76</sup> Feidelm’s predicts that he will perform great deeds with four small swords in TBC I (ll.87-8).

does Erc in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §13). Clearly, a powerful weapon, he threatens to crush Fer Diad's joints and limbs with it if he dares to come before him at the ford in TBC I (ll.2749-52). Likewise, Fergus vows to inflict untoward damage if given his sword in the closing stages of the saga (ll.4006-8). Although not included amongst the initiation weapons given to Cú Chulainn in his final youthful exploit (l.621), it appears to be integral to a warrior's existence, particularly in duels.<sup>77</sup> Categorised alongside his spear and the *gáe bolga*, his sword (*colg dét*) is considered as one of his weapons of choice for attacking enemies by Feidelm in her prophecy at the beginning of TBC I (ll.89-92). *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 60 & 104, §38) observes that Cú Chulainn's and Cairpre Cundail's swords blunt each other in their combat. Aífe, on the other hand, manages to dispossess Cú Chulainn of his during their encounter in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 54, §76). He shows his adeptness with it when he cuts down a forked branch with a single stroke, confounding and impeding the enemy greatly in TBC I (ll.330-72). In addition, he removes Etarcomal's clothing and hair with it, without scratching his skin (TBC I, ll.1353-9). He captures the birds in *Serglige Con Culainn* with a *táithbéim* 'return-stroke' from his sword (Dillon, 1953a, 2, §6).

The sling (*tailm, táball*) is another one of Cú Chulainn's weapons. It is also used by Connlae in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 114-9, §§2-7), Cet in version A of *Aided Chonchobuir* (Meyer, 1906, 6-7, §6), Conaire Mór in *Togail Bruidne Da*

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<sup>77</sup> Conall Cernach's sword is described as his chief weapon in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 84-5, §67).

*Derga* (Knott, 1936, 5), and Lug in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 60-1, §135).<sup>78</sup> Cú Chulainn only uses it in TBC, once in *Serglige Con Culainn* and in *Tochmarc Emire*.<sup>79</sup> The absence of archaeological evidence for slings may indicate that this motif is a borrowing. Cunliffe (1997, 93-6) observes that slings were used by the Celts and he notes that there is ample archaeological evidence for its use as a ‘defensive weapon at hill forts’ with the excavation at Maiden Castle, Dorset revealing a pit containing about ‘20,000 carefully chosen pebbles to serve as sling stones for the defence of the fort in the first century AD’. He also notes that according to Caesar’s accounts of Gaulish warfare, slings were used in attacks on such hill forts and would have been particularly effective in such situations but ‘less so in open warfare’. Alternatively, Cú Chulainn’s use of a sling and stones may echo to some degree David’s use of these in the Bible (First Samuel:16-18). While Cú Chulainn generally uses it when attacking at a distance, David kills Goliath with a stone from his sling. Lug’s killing of Balor with a sling corresponds more closely with the latter episode.

Cú Chulainn’s first use of it is in his last boyhood deed when he breaks the shaft of Conall Cernach’s chariot with it (*Focheird-seom cloich asa thábaill co mmebaid fertas carpait Conaill Chernaig*; TBC I, ll.680-1). In the main body of TBC, he wreaks havoc on Medb and Ailill’s forces by attacking them with it, injuring thirty before killing a further hundred nightly for three nights, forcing Ailill, using Mac Roth as messenger, to request him not to ply his sling on them by night (ll.205-68). Providing protection from such a distant attack was presumably very difficult, thus

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<sup>78</sup>Although it is not explicitly stated that Lug uses a sling in *Cath Maige Tuired*, this can possibly be deduced from the statement that he casts a sling stone (*Fucaird Luc íer sin líc talma dó*; Gray, 1982, 60-1, §135).

<sup>79</sup> Connlae casts shots with his sling in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 114-9, §§2-7). Cet casts Mesgegra’s brain at Conchobar with his sling in the latter’s death tale (Meyer, 1906, 6-7, §6).

it seems to be the weapon which they fear most. In approximately the first two thirds of the saga, he uses it on a number of other occasions, including threatening and subsequently killing Órlám's charioteer (ll.897-918), casting shots at Ailill and Medb (ll.921-2), killing the latter's pet marten (ll.922-4) and maiming the Morrígan (l.2000). He uses it to cast stones at birds in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Serglige Con Culainn*, but fails to hit them while using it in the latter and resorts to his spear instead (van Hamel, 1933, 62, §84; Dillon, 1953a, 2-3, §7).<sup>80</sup>

Elsewhere, Cú Chulainn improvises with alternative weapons. His hurley (*lorg áne*) is used to dispose of the spectre (TBC I, ll.501-2) and against the twenty-seven men from the Isle of Faiche (ll.530-6) in two different *macgnímrada*. According to another version referred to in TBC I (ll.585-7), and in TBC II (ll.881-5), he kills the hound of Culann with a ball.<sup>81</sup> He fatally injures Fer Báeth in TBC I with a holly shoot (*sleig culind*; TBC I, ll.1776-89) and he uses an axe (*biáil*) on two occasions in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 98, §77; Meyer, 1893, 453 & 457-8, §98). He throws a *fidchell* piece, killing one of Medb and Ailill's messengers, in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 76-7, §61).

He casts stones at Medb's hound, Baiscne (l.562), at the jester (ll.1600-1), at Finnabair (l.1602), and at Taman (l.2485) in TBC I.<sup>82</sup> He also appears to pelt the enemy with stones, but it is not clear whether he throws them or uses his sling; the former seems more likely (*Dosmbidc Cú Chulaind a Delga conná cáemnacair anmanna de duniu ná cethir ronucad a ainech secha fadess iter Delga 7 muir*;

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<sup>80</sup> This particular scene in *Tochmarc Emire* also appears in *Aided Derbforgaill* with slight variation (Marstrander, 1911, 208). Cú Chulainn throws the stone at the birds in the latter.

<sup>81</sup> He also kills Cú with a ball in TBC I (ll.1725-6).

<sup>82</sup> He also launches stones at the invading twenty-seven men from the Isle of Faiche in his third *macgním* (TBC I, ll.534-5).

ll.2035-7), given that the verbal form, *do-bidci*, is also used to describe the casting of stones by Óengus mac Óenláime (ll.2491-2), Aimirgin (ll.3394-5), and Cú Roí (ll.3400-1) in the saga.

He is not completely reliant on his weaponry, opting instead to use his own natural skills on a number of occasions. Represented as an inherent warrior reflex, Cú Chulainn drives the forehead of the unfortunate man who wakes him into his brain in one of his early deeds (ll.464-6).<sup>83</sup> He disposes of a woman in the same manner in the land of Cairpre Cundail in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 59 & 105, §36), and the first pair of fighters in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 21 & 41, §16).<sup>84</sup> Using his bare hands, he squeezes Láiríne so tightly that his excrement spills out of his body polluting the surrounding air and water in TBC I (ll.1836-41). Casting his spear aside in his contest against Garb in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, he shakes the latter's arm so hard that it rips from his body, resulting in Garb conceding defeat (Stokes, 1893, 420-1, §37).

## Conclusion

Even though the basic set of arms bestowed on Cú Chulainn at an early age is that of the spear and shield, his sword also appears equally as important and useful to him. While his final boyhood deed indicates that his weapons must be exceptionally durable to withstand his outstanding strength, these do not seem to be remarkably different from the arms of other Ulster warriors. However, a number

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<sup>83</sup> Awakening to the cries from the battlefield in a later deed, his stretching causes the two flagstones underneath him to shatter (TBC I, ll.485-6).

<sup>84</sup> He drives his heel through the door and uses it a second time resulting in the lintel falling from the hearth in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 42, ll.958-64).

of weapons including the *gáe bolga*, *deil cliss* and to some extent the sling, are represented as being exclusive to him. The *gáe bolga* proves pivotal in a number of duels while the sling seems to be his long-distance weapon of choice in TBC, affording him great advantage over the enemy. A marked increase in the number and range of his weapons is depicted with the escalation of warfare in TBC.

#### IV.5. *Cleasa*

Integral to Cú Chulainn's heroic dossier, is his proficiency in an extensive array of special skills which are catalogued in the following texts: *Tochmarc Emire* (TE) (van Hamel, 1933, 56, §78), TBC I (ll.1714-9), TBC II (ll.1834-8) *Fled Bricrenn* (FB) (LU, ll.8441-4), *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (SíCC) (LU, ll.9287-93)<sup>85</sup> and *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* (SCon) (Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20).<sup>86</sup> Scáthach is accredited with teaching him these in *Tochmarc Emire (lánfoglaim in míllti)*<sup>87</sup> and *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* whereas the other tales simply indicate that these are among his warrior attributes. The lists are as follows:

#### *Tochmarc Emire*

*etir uballchless* 7  
*torannchless* 7  
*fóebarchless* 7  
*fóenchless* 7  
*cless cleitinech* 7  
*tétchless* 7  
*corpchless* 7

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<sup>85</sup> The LU text of this tale along with that of *Fled Bricrenn* will be used for this consideration of Cú Chulainn's *cleasa* (Best & Bergin, 1929).

<sup>86</sup> A number of his feats are also listed in the Early Modern Irish version of his death tale. (van Hamel, 1933, 93, §24). Of the different recensions of TBC, the list in TBC I will be used herein. The manuscript variants found in LU, LL and the Stowe versions of TBC are provided by Windisch (1905, 278-87). He also considers the nature of these feats therein. See Sayers (1983) for an in depth consideration of these. Material from the Early Modern Irish period is not central to the present discussion but may be included if deemed relevant.

<sup>87</sup> However, it is noteworthy that he was competent in at least one of them, *ích n-erred* 'the salmon-leap', prior to reaching her home (van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68). The beginning of *Aided Óenfir Aífe* observes that Cú Chulainn received his mastery of feats (*súithi cleas*) with Scáthach (Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §1).

*cless caít* 7  
*ích n-erred* 7  
*cor ndeled* 7  
*léimm tar ném* 7  
*filliud erred náir* 7  
*gaí bulga* 7  
*baí braisse* 7  
*rothchless* 7  
*otharchless* 7  
*cless for análaib* 7  
*brud ngéme* 7  
*sian curad* 7  
*béimm fo chomus* 7  
*taithbéimm* 7  
*fóidbeimm* 7  
*dréimm fri fogaist co ndírgiud creite fora rind* 7  
*carpat serrdae* 7  
*fonaidm niad for rindib sleg* 7  
 (van Hamel, 1933, 56, §78)

### **TBC I**

*in t-ubullchless* 7  
*fáeborc[h]less* 7  
*fáenc[h]less* 7  
*cless cletenach* 7  
*tétc[h]less* 7  
*corpc[h]less* 7  
*cless caitt* 7  
*ích n-erred* 7  
*cor ndeled* 7  
*léim dar néib* 7  
*filliud erred náir* 7  
*gaí bolga* 7<sup>88</sup>  
*baí brasse* 7  
*rothchless* 7  
*ochtarchless* 7  
*cless for análaib* 7  
*bruud gine* 7  
*sian caurad* 7  
*béim co commus* 7  
*táithbéim* 7  
*dréim fri fogaist co ndírgiud crette fora rind co fornaidmaim níad náir*  
 (TBC I, ll.1714-9)

### **Síaburcharpat Con Culainn**

*Tairmcles nónbai .i.*  
*cles caít* 7

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<sup>88</sup> *Otar* is found in LU, *ocharchless* in Eg. 1782 and *otharcles* in O'Curry (O'Rahilly, 1976, 53n).

*cles cúair* 7  
*cless daire* 7  
*dallchless n-eóin* 7  
*léim dar neim* 7  
*dergfíilliud erred náir* 7  
*gai bolga* 7  
*baí bresse* 7  
*bruth ngéine* 7  
*sían churad* 7  
*rothchles* 7  
*fáeborchles* 7  
*ubullchles* 7  
*torandchles* 7  
*dréim fri fogaist* 7  
*dirgiud creitte fora rind* 7  
*fonaidm níath náir* 7  
*táithbéim* 7  
*béim co fomus*  
(LU, ll.9287-93)

### ***Fled Bricrenn***

*eter chles for análaib* 7  
*ubullchles* 7  
*siaburcles* 7  
*cles cúair* 7  
*cles cait* 7  
*dergfíilliud erred nair* 7  
*gai bolcai* 7  
*bai brasi* 7  
*bruth ngene* 7  
*sían curad* 7  
*rothchles* 7  
*faeburchles* 7  
*dreim fri fogaist* 7  
*dírgiud cretti for cach n-aí* 7  
(LU, ll.8441-4)

### ***Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa***

*cless Caitt* 7  
*cless Cuair* 7  
*ubullchless* 7  
*faeborchless* 7  
*faenchless* 7  
*cless clettinech* 7  
*tetchless* 7  
*corp-chless* 7  
*ich n-erred* 7  
*cor ndeiled* 7  
*léim dar néim* 7

*filliud erred nair* 7  
*gai bolga* 7  
*bai brassi* 7  
*rothchless* 7  
*ótar* 7  
*cless for analaib* 7  
*bruud gine* 7  
*sían curad* 7  
*beim co commus* 7  
*tathbéim* 7  
*réim fri fogaist co ndirgud chrette for a rind, co fornaidm niad*  
 (Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20).

Although there is a certain degree of consistency in these enumerations, it is clear that the number, order and orthography of the elements differ to such an extent that there appears to be no uniform list. Furthermore, a number of additional feats occur outside of these sources. If the lists alone are taken collectively, the following twenty-nine or thirty feats can be determined. The source in which each is found is indicated with relevant abbreviations.<sup>89</sup> The integrity of those exclusive to a single list is questionable.

1. *uballchless* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
2. *torannchless* (TE, SíCC)
3. *fóebarchless* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
4. *fóenchless* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
5. *cless cleitinech* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
6. *tétchless* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
7. *corpchless* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
8. *cless cait* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)

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<sup>89</sup> The forms from *Tochmarc Emire* are used where extant. Feat number twenty-three is presented as two instead of one in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9292) and *Fled Bricrenn* (LU, 1.8444).

9. *ích n-erred* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
10. *cor ndeled* (TE, TBC I, SCon)
11. *léimm tar ném* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, SCon)
12. *filliud erred náir* (TE, TBC I, FB, SCon)<sup>90</sup>
13. *gaí bulga* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)<sup>91</sup>
14. *baí braisse* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
15. *rothchless* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
16. *otharchless* (TE, TBC I, SCon)<sup>92</sup>
17. *cless for análaib* (TE, TBC I, FB, SCon)
18. *brud ngéme* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
19. *sian curad* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)
20. *béimm fo chomus* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, SCon)
21. *taithbéimm* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, SCon)
22. *fóidbeimm* (TE)
23. *dréimm fri fogaist co ndírgiud creite fora rind* (TE, TBC I, SíCC, FB, SCon)<sup>93</sup>
24. *carpat serrdae* (TE)
25. *fonaidm niad for rindib sleg* (TE, SíCC, SCon)<sup>94</sup>
26. *cless cúair* (SíCC, FB, SCon)
27. *cless daire* (SíCC)

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<sup>90</sup> *Dergfilliud erred náir* in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9290) and *Fled Bricrenn* (LU, 11.8442-4).

<sup>91</sup> *Gáe bolga* will be used elsewhere in the thesis.

<sup>92</sup> There seems to be a number of variants of this feat and these are discussed below.

<sup>93</sup> This is variously represented as one or more feats (see below).

<sup>94</sup> *Fonaidm níath náir* in *Síaburcharpat Con Chulainn* (LU, 11.9292-3). This is incorporated into the discussion concerning *dréim fri fogaist co ndírgiud creite fora rind co fonaidm níath náir* (see below).

28. *dallchless n-éoin* (SíCC)

29. *tairmcless nónbair* (SíCC)

30. *siaburcles* (FB)

Although of great value, these catalogues shed little light on the practicality of these exploits. Offering no translation for them in *LL*, O’Rahilly (1967, 189n) states that ‘it is impossible to translate most of these with any certainty as to the meaning’. Limited attestations beyond these sources further hinder their accurate interpretation. In as far as it is possible, an attempt will be made to shed some light on them.

Cú Chulainn seems to be presented as a master feat-performer. Of the Ulster warriors who entertain a gathering with the following three feats in *Tochmarc Emire*; *cless cleitinech*, *uballchless* and *fóeborchless*, Cú Chulainn executes them with greater splendour and dexterity than all of the others (*Doróisced Cú Chulainn díb uile ocon chliss ar áini 7 athlaimi*; van Hamel, 1933, 21, §6) and thereafter the *búaid clessamnachtae* ‘gift of feats’ is declared as one of his special talents.<sup>95</sup> His expertise is also alluded to in *Tochmarc Treblainne*, when Fróech is described as being a ‘Cú Chulainn for feats’ (Jennings, 1997, 76) and again in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* when the men of Ireland wonder how they will manage to defend themselves against his feats (“*Cinnas fúirechlem? Cinnas aurisfemmar clessu?*” *ol firu hÉrend*; Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §14). Prior to this, the latter tale points out that Cú Chulainn carries a multitude of weapons for performing these

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<sup>95</sup> *Tochmarc Emire* also notes that the women of Ulster loved him because of his excellences at feats (van Hamel, 1933, 21, §6). Likewise, Fergus concedes that nobody can match Cú Chulainn at feats (TBC I, ll.386-92) and his charioteer, Lóeg, addresses him as a *Chú na cless* ‘O Hound of feats’ in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 10, l.226).

acts and refers to him as a ‘beautifully-helmeted feat-performer’ (*co mórsaide do chlessaib cliss gascid i carput chain chlessamna colgachain*; §12).

Each of these feats will now be considered.

### ***uballchless***

As mentioned above, the *uballchless* ‘apple/ball-feat’ is listed among the feats performed by a number of warriors at the beginning of *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 21, §4) ‘Apple, missile, ball, or any globular object’ are among the meanings found in *DIL* for *uball*. In *Fled Bricrenn*, Cú Chulainn appears to juggle nine feat-apples (round objects) along with other items for his female audience (LU, ll.8565-6).<sup>96</sup> Nine balls are also used in this feat in TBC II, eight of which are cast into the air and the ninth at Cú mac Da Lóth, fatally injuring him (ll.1846-9). This series of events vary to some degree in TBC I, where reference is only made to a single ball which is likewise pelted at Cú perforating his shield, before lodging in his head (*sraíthi in n-ubullchless tarraid ina láim co lluid iter chobrad 7 bróin in scéith co lluid tríana chend ind athig síar*; TBC I, ll.1725-6). Trisgatal is also described as throwing the *uballchless* in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 28-9, ll.645-50). In this case, the *uball* is a large pillar-stone which seems to be passed or juggled from one finger to another prior to being launched (*In corthi cloichi sea immuich na fétat Clanna Dedad uile da thócbáil ra gat a talmáin 7 da-ríngni ubullchless án méor co a chéli de*; ll.646-8).

### ***torannchless***

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<sup>96</sup> Tulchinne Druith similarly juggles nine swords, nine shields and nine apples of gold with variable success in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*ix.n-ubla óir*; Knott, 1936, 35, ll.1165-6).

This can be rendered as ‘thunder-feat’. Cú Chulainn engages in thunderfeats in TBC I (ll.2292-6) and *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §15). These form part of his attack on the enemy and were likely to have been executed on or more specifically with his chariot in both cases.<sup>97</sup> Thunderfeats of one, two, three, four and five hundred are carried out by him in TBC I and three in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, namely that of hundreds, three hundred and thrice nine. Huge losses are inflicted on the enemy and their advancement is duly delayed. Unfortunately, neither of these passages detail the actual feats performed but they presumably involve the creation of a thunderous sound. The great thunderfeats of Lóch mac Mo Femis and Cú Chulainn are sufficient to scare the cattle eastwards in TBC I (ll.1996-8). TBC II links this feat with his plying of his sling on the enemy every night (ll.1524-7).<sup>98</sup>

### *fóebarchless*

As mentioned above, the *fóebarchless* ‘edge-feat’ is one of the three feats carried out by Cú Chulainn and others in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 21, §4). It also occurs with little detail in TBC I (ll.2236-7), where it states that Cú Chulainn wields the sharp edge of his shield and or his spear or sword during this feat.<sup>99</sup> An unclear reference is also found in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* where Cú Chulainn purports to have broken edge-feats on the points of the swords of his opponents (LU, ll.9353-4). TBC II states that Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad were at the edge-feat of swords during their lengthy combat (l.3338). Ferchertni mac Corpri meic Iliach’s performance of this deed in *Mesca Ulad* is particularly enlightening

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<sup>97</sup> Cú Chulainn’s horse, the Líath Machae, is described as performing thunder-feats (*torandclessach*) in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 19 & 39, §12).

<sup>98</sup> A thunderous noise from Connlae’s sling shot upends Conall Cernach in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 116-9, §7).

<sup>99</sup> A similar description is offered in TBC II (ll.2253-5).

(Watson, 1941, 24, ll.540-6). Accompanied by Conchobar and Cú Chulainn, he thrusts two swords into the air so that a shadow falls on Conchobar's hair and cheek. He duly catches them by their points or edges before they hit the ground. Swords seem to have been the weapon of choice for this feat.<sup>100</sup> Alternatively, Cú Chulainn uses his shield for it against Calatín Dána and his companions in TBC II, presumably catching their twenty-nine spears with the edge of it (*Doríngni Cú Chulaind fáebarchless don sciath comdas ralatar uile coa mbolgánaib 'sin sciath;* ll.2561-3).

### *fóenchless*

'Prostrate, supine, lying on one's back' are the meanings given for *fáen/fóen* in *DIL* thus 'supine/prostrate feat' can be offered as the literal translation of *fáenchless* while the former describes it as 'a feat performed with a (horizontally poised?) shield'. Sayers (1983, 52) suggests that the edge-feat where Cú Chulainn catches his opponents spears on his shield may have been confused with this, given that both seem to involve a horizontally-held shield.<sup>101</sup> They occur as two separate feats as Mac Cecht engages in a *fáenchless* with his shield and a *fáeborchless* with his sword about his head as he breaks through the enemy at the hostel in his efforts to obtain a drink for Conaire Mór in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (LU, ll.7889-97). Clearly, the *fáenchless* with his shield is used as an offensive tactic in this example.

### *cless cleitinech*

Performed on a rope, alongside the *uballchless* and the *fóebarchless* in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 21, §4), the *cless cleitinech* 'javelin-feat' may also

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<sup>100</sup> Mac Cécht does a *faeborchles* with his sword around his head in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (LU, ll.7894-6).

<sup>101</sup> The LL version of his fight with Fer Diad contains a reference to *sciath cliss* (TBC II, 1.3099).

involve juggling objects, javelins in particular. In possible support of this, *Fled Bricrenn* (LU, ll.8565-6) contains a reference to *cletíne clis* ‘feat- javelins’, where Cú Chulainn juggles these along with knives, needles and feat-apples/objects as mentioned above. Grouping this with the following feats; *ubullchless*, *fáeborchless*, *fáenchless*, Sayers (1983, 52) deduces that this would ‘yield a foursome of exercises with the basic weaponry –spherical missile, sword, shield, and spear’. A *n-ocht clettíni* are among the weapons used by Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad in their choicest feats of arms in their fight in TBC II, however, this reference is not explicative (ll.3093-104).<sup>102</sup>

### *tétchless*

Beyond the lists, there are no direct references to the *tétchless* ‘rope-feat’. Albeit *súanem* is used to refer to the rope in *Tochmarc Emire*, it is noteworthy that the feats mentioned above are performed on it (*No clistis errid Ulad for súanemnaib tarsnu ón dorus co raile isin tig i nEmain*; van Hamel, 1933, 21, §4). It is conceivable that this feat involves the performance of certain acrobatics on a rope and or other feats like those mentioned in *Tochmarc Emire*. The confusion surrounding the terms *tét* and *tét cliss* in this tale are appraised in detail by Ó Concheanainn (1999, 169-79). The occurrence of *tét cliss* elsewhere in the text is deemed to have contributed to this. Cú Chulainn overcomes a number of warriors along with Aífe on the *tét cliss* (van Hamel, 1933, 54, §§75-6). It is suggested that *tét* ‘rope’ may have become mixed up with (*forsin*) *tsét* (*tséit*) ‘path’. Further confusion arises from the addition of the adjectival genitive *cliss*. This is proposed

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<sup>102</sup> O’Beirne Crowe (1870, 434) gives Cú Chulainn’s encounter with Redg the satirist in TBC, where the latter asks for his *cletíne*, as an example of this feat (TBC I, ll.1511-20).

as a later addition and indeed, an unnecessary one. It is conjectured that this is a reference to a path like that on which he encounters Éis Énchend (§77).

*corpchless; cless cait; cless cúair*

Not occurring outside of the lists, the *corpchless* ‘body-feat’ presumably involved feats of the body which emphasised its exceptional dexterity.<sup>103</sup> The *cless cait*, if taken to mean the ‘feat of the cat’ may involve bodily exploits which mirror cat movements.<sup>104</sup> Sayers (1983, 53) suggests that this feat may complement the *ích n-erred*, because of their zoological connections. Sayers (1983, 53) dismisses suggestions that the *cless cait* and *cless cúair* may have been feats associated with Scáthach’s sons, Cat and Cúar. This conclusion is chiefly based on the fact that the latter feat is not found in the repertory of feats in *Tochmarc Emire* which closely follows the section in the text where Cúar is named. Featuring more prominently in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, Cúar is described as being accomplished in a range of feats including those of Cat, Cúar, and Fúaracht. Cat’s are not listed. Scáthach’s daughter, Úathach observes that the feat of Cúar along with that of two others, Cat and Fuaracht,<sup>105</sup> had not been taught to anyone prior to Cú Chulainn’s arrival but these are not described (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 48-50). *Cless cúair* is translated as ‘screw-feat’ by Henderson (1899, 37n). ‘Curved, bent, twisted, crooked’ are among the meanings given by *DIL* for the adjective *cúair*. It renders it as ‘crooked (one)’ if taken as a neuter pronoun, thus, suggesting in the present context it may refer to the ‘feat of the Crooked-One’. Though seeming to point automatically towards Cú Chulainn’s infamous *ríastrad* ‘distortion’, this is unlikely given that, *cúair* is no

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<sup>103</sup> Windisch (1913, 280n) considers Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*, as described in TBC II, as an example of this (*ro láe sáebchless díberge dia churp*; ll.2265-6; see IV.3).

<sup>104</sup> O’Rahilly (1976, 173) translates it as ‘cat-feat’.

<sup>105</sup> *Cleas ocht uisgé* ‘the feat of eight waters’ features in *Foghlaim Con Culainn* in place of the feat of Fuaracht (Stokes, 1908, 132-3, §45).

where used to refer to his distorted state. It may have involved a twisting or contorting of the body into different shapes but this cannot be proved. Alternatively, it may be an act linked with Scáthach's son.

### *ích n-erred*

Extant references for Cú Chulainn's *ích n-erred*, literally 'hero's salmon', allow us to extend its meaning to the 'hero's salmon-leap'. Considered as one of his attributes in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15) and *Fled Bricrenn* (LU, 1.8348, ll.8677-8), it is outlined as one of the prerequisites to his winning of Emer in the former (van Hamel, 1933, 42-3, §54). This enables him to cross the treacherous bridge and three ramparts to access the homes of Scáthach (§68) and Forgall (§86) respectively. He also uses it to overcome Scáthach to secure training in heroic deeds, the main purpose of his trip (§70).<sup>106</sup> He manoeuvres himself from the side of a cliff to safety with a salmon-leap during his encounter with Éis Énchend, whom he duly disposes of (§77) and his engagement of it displaces the uppermost roof beam of one house, catapulting him onto the roof of another in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 42, ll.952-4). It allows him to quickly intervene and save his charioteer, Lóeg, from the giant in the Eg. 93 version of the 'Giant in the Mist' episode from *Fled Bricrenn* (*Cú Chulaind a gaisced 7 fo-cerd cor n-iach nerred de dochum in scáil 7 do fóirithin Láoi*; Slotkin, 1999, 238 & 240). These descriptions indicate the remarkable heights and distances that he can achieve with it, surpassing the more 'ordinary' leap associated with him (see IV.6). Presumably, it imitates a salmon's leap while travelling upstream and jumping weirs when trying to reach their place of birth. Kelly (1997, 291) observes that salmon are the

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<sup>106</sup> He similarly uses it to overpower the giant (presumably a mutated Cú Roí) to secure three wishes in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 108-11, §87).

most referenced fish in our sources and that one text defines it as *clesach uisce .i. éicne* ‘the crafty one of the water’ (McManus, 1988, 146, E: B<sup>24</sup>).<sup>107</sup>

### *cor ndeled*

Occurring in three of the lists, there is no evidence for this item beyond these. Among the keywords in *DIL* for *cor* include ‘putting, throwing, performing’ while ‘piece of wood, spear, wand, sling, pillar’ are all found for *deil*. This deed may have involved the throwing of some kind of a spear like weapon and may be translated as the ‘throwing of spears’. The *deil chliss*, which is mentioned above, is a weapon which Cú Chulainn throws at his opponents but in neither accounts of his casting of it in TBC I or TBC II is *cor* used to describe this action. Sayers (1983, 54) alternatively proposes with caution that it may be a ‘feat of agility, such as a salmon-like run among rods (*deled* as gen. pl.) planted in the ground’.<sup>108</sup>

### *léimm tar néim*

Despite appearing in four of the lists, there are no attestations elsewhere, making its interpretation difficult. *Léim(m) tar* indicates that this feat involves leaping/jumping/moving/bounding (rapidly) over/through/beyond something. Bearing this feat in mind, *DIL* suggest that *néim* (?*néib*) may refer to a ‘hurdle or obstacle of some kind’. Sayers (1983, 55) tentatively puts forth the possibility that it may be ‘a running and/or jumping feat over a hurdle, e.g. of thorns, or a pit with

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<sup>107</sup> Connlae announces that he manages to capture birds without a salmon-leap in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 116, §6).

<sup>108</sup> *Imorchor ndelind* is listed as one of Lóeg’s three gifts of charioteering in TBC I (ll.2210-2) and in *Mesca Ulad* (*immorchor ndelend*; Watson, 1941, 11, ll.247-51). In his study of these three skills, Sayers (1981, 166) postulates that this ‘may refer to the use of the charioteer’s wand both to sight a straight course (cf. *certimthecht* LL TBC 1174), perhaps with reference to the stars and prominent landmarks, and to hold the team on this course’. See Sayers (1981) for a consideration of the gifts of a charioteer.

stakes or symbolically dishonouring if not cleared, e.g. water or refuse-filled'. Windisch (1905, 282n) suggests that this feat is similar to the charioteer's gift of *léim dar boilg* and proposes that the former involves 'Springen über eine Kluft' and gives Cú Chulainn's leap over the wall of Cú Roi's fort in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 110-3, §88) and his leap over the three ramparts in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 63, §86) as examples of this. The form *neim* 'poison, venom', which is exclusive to the *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* catalogue, alternatively suggests that a poisonous element may be fundamental to this challenge. It is also noteworthy that this component features in the description of the weapons of Cú Chulainn (*Betit curaid arna raind fa neim claidib Con Culaind*; ll.675-6) and Conchobar (*fón cruísig neme*; ll.1121-2) in TBC II.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps it involves scaling some type of poisonous weapon.

### ***filliud erred náir***

Van Hamel (1933, 178) offers 'the folding (turning?) of a valiant champion', while O'Rahilly (1976, 173) gives 'the bending of a valiant hero' as their respective translations of this feat. The adjectival prefix *derg* further qualifies *filliud* in *Fled Bricrenn* and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*. 'Returning, turning (back)' are among the keywords for the verbal noun *filliud* in *DIL*; the compound *dergfilliud* may then be rendered as 'the red (i.e. bloody) return' of a valiant hero. It would be at odds with the majority of the discernible other feats which refer to an individual act. Taking it as a complement to its preceding element, *léim dar néim*, Sayers (1983, 55) hypothesizes that 'it could refer to the running passage *under* an obstacle such as a hurdle or ducking a swung weapon'. Yet again, lack of attestations outside of this material hinders its further elucidation.

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<sup>109</sup> *Neim* 'poison' is found on the weapons of the men of Calatín in TBC II (ll.2535-8).

### ***gáe bolga***

The feat of the *gáe bolga* is presumably the manner in which Cú Chulainn uses this weapon to slay a number of figures and has been discussed already in IV.4.

### ***baí braisse***

Among the keywords in *DIL* for *báe/bái* are ‘profit, benefit, advantageous’ and for *braise* ‘quickness, boldness, daring, boastfulness’. The lack of extant evidence for this feat outside of the lists creates obvious difficulties. Van Hamel (1933, 144) and O’Rahilly (1976, 173) translates it as ‘profit of quickness’ and ‘the feat of quickness (?)’ respectively. This perhaps incorporates a spurt of speed, possibly given that, as Sayers (1983, 56) points out, running is not mentioned elsewhere in the feats.

### ***rothchless***

A reasonably good description of the *rothchless* ‘wheel-feat’ survives in *Fled Bricrenn* where it is practised by a number of youths before the arrival of the three great Ulster warriors, Lóegaire, Conall and Cú Chulainn (LU, ll.8843-55). A wheel-shaped object or an actual wheel is hurled into the air by each of them. More skilled than his peers, Cú Chulainn catches it in mid-air before throwing it higher than the others to displace the ridge-pole of the house.

### ***otharchless***

Sayers (1983, 57) considers *ochtarchless*, *otharchless* and *otar* as variants of the one feat.<sup>110</sup> During Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's battle in TBC II, they each arm themselves with *a n-ocht ocharchliss*, possibly a type of weapon, along with the same number of javelins, ivory-hilted blades and battle darts for their choice of feats (ll.3093-5).<sup>111</sup> The manner in which these feats are executed is not clearly explained, but the lines immediately following these suggest that they cast all of these weapons at each other and thus *ocharcless* appears to have been a type of weapon feat (ll.3095-6). In the context of this reference, van Hamel (1933, 204) translates *ochar-chless* as 'the rim-feat' presumably taking *ochar* as a variant of *ochair* meaning 'edge, side' and tentatively suggests that *othar-chless* 'the support-feat'<sup>112</sup> should be in place of it in the above reference. Taking *ochtar* as the personal numeral referring to eight people, *ochtarchless* may also translate as 'feat of eight men'. Sayers (1983, 57) suggests that this may have involved one man supporting a human pyramid and he acknowledges the accuracy of van Hamel's translation of this as 'support-feat'. With such limited data, it is impossible to draw definite conclusions.

### *cless for análaib*

Cú Chulainn's statement that he played on the breaths over the horses' ears in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, is conceivably a reference to *cless for análaib* 'the feat upon breaths' (*Ro clisius for analaib uasa uíb na n-ech*; LU, ll.9345-6).<sup>113</sup> In

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<sup>110</sup> The variant forms *ochtarchless otar*, *ocharcless* and *otharchless* are found in the different manuscript copies of TBC I i.e. YBL, LU, Egerton 1782 and O'Curry 1 respectively (O'Rahilly, 1976, 53n).

<sup>111</sup> *DIL* simply views *ocharchless* as the 'name of some kind of weapon' and the 'name of a feat'.

<sup>112</sup> His translation presumably draws on the noun *othar* 'work, labour' and the related verb *othraid* which *DIL* notes can mean 'maintains, supports, provides for' in a wider sense.

<sup>113</sup> Fer Diad acknowledges the steam above Cú Chulainn's horses in TBC I (*úas análaib t'ech*; l.3020).

addition, Emer observes that Cú Chulainn fights from the ears of horses and the breaths of men in *Fled Bricrenn* (*arfích ó aíb ech 7 analaib fer*; LU, 1.8347). At any rate, difficulties remain as to the exact nature of this feat.

***brud ngéme; sian curad***

With no obvious extant evidence for *bruud gine* or *brud ngéme* outside the current sources, even greater difficulties arise. Van Hamel (1933, 149) translates it as ‘mass of shout’, O’Rahilly (1976, 173) as ‘bruising with a sword’. Sayers (1983, 58) observes that ‘*brúd* meaning ‘beating, crushing, bruising’ must be weighed against *bruth* ‘raging heat, glowing mass, boiling, fury, valour’. *DIL* gives the meaning of the noun *gen* as ‘sword’ and *géim* as ‘shout, roar, muffled sound’. Regardless of which meaning is taken, Sayers (1983, 58) suggests that both possible feats appear to be covered by others in the lists. If ‘mass of shout’ is taken as its meaning, the *síregém* ‘long-lasting cry/roar’, equalling that of one-hundred warriors, emitted from Cú Chulainn’s battle helmet in TBC I (ll.2237-42), might be tentatively suggested as an example of it.<sup>114</sup> The ferocity of this screech seems to match that which is implied by the term *bruth*, and the noun *géim* is similarly used. Taking the latter meaning, it is difficult to determine the differences between this feat and that of *sian caurad* ‘a hero’s cry’, given that both presumably involve the release of a type of heroic roar. Featuring in all of the five lists, the latter does not occur beyond these apart from a confusing reference to *siangles* in *Aided Con Culainn* where it is accompanied by a description which seems more applicable to the *sáebchless* as observed below (van Hamel, 1933, 102, §34; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008,

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<sup>114</sup> A similar analogy is found in the corresponding passage in TBC II (ll.2255-7). Cú Chulainn is attributed with having a proud and triumphant cry by Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37). Unable to come to the battle in TBC II, Cú Chulainn emits a far reaching loud cry which Fergus instantly recognises as his (*núall mór*; ll.4587-93).

vol. 1, 215, §59). Van Hamel (1933, 210) tentatively suggests that the former may be the same trick as *sian curad*. Enraged at the numerical advantage of the enemy in TBC I, Cú Chulainn releases a ‘*srem caurad*’ (l.2082), which O’Rahilly (1976, 182) translates as a ‘hero’s shout’. Although *DIL* indicates that *srem*, the verbal noun of *sreinnid*, is rendered as ‘snorting or snoring’, the sentence concludes with a reference to the terror of Cú Chulainn’s shout (*re úathgráin na gáire*; TBC I, ll.2081-4). In the corresponding scene in TBC II, it is said of Cú Chulainn that *dobert rém curad asa brágit* ‘he uttered a hero’s shout from his throat’ (l.2131), before qualifying it in the same manner as TBC I. The ferocity of Cú Chulainn’s roar is indicated in the following description offered by Súaldaim prior to going to his assistance in the later stages of TBC I: “*In nem maides fa muir thar chrícha fa thalam conscara fa gáir mo maic se,*” *ol se,* “*re n-éccomlonn?*” “‘Is it the sky that cracks, or the sea that overflows its boundaries, or the earth that splits, or is it the loud cry of my son fighting against odds?’”; ll.3415-6).<sup>115</sup> Medb reports his shout as *allbach m-bratha brógene* which Henderson (1899, 64-5, §52) translates as ‘[h]is shout the fury of doom’.

### ***béimm fo chomus***

*Béimm fo chomus* ‘stroke under/with control’ is presumably a well-directed or ‘measured blow’ with a weapon such as a sword. This is listed as one of two strokes that Cú Chulainn wields for every one of the giant’s in the ‘Giant in the Mist’ episode in the Eg. 93 copy of *Fled Bricrenn*, but with no description (Slotkin, 1999, 238 & 240). Connlac humiliates Cú Chulainn by cropping his hair with a

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<sup>115</sup> Cú Chulainn describes the cry of his foster-son, Amargein, very similarly in *Talland Étair* (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 46 & 56). The verbal noun, *búiriud* ‘roaring’, is used therein. Facing defeat at the hands of Calatín Dána in TBC II, he utters a fierce cry (*Rabert-sun a rucht míled bar aird 7 a iachtad n-écomlaind connach baí d’Ultaib i mbethaid do neoch donárbo chotlud ná cúala*; ll.2569-71).

*bém co fomus* in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 118, §10). This scene bears similarities with one in TBC where Cú Chulainn likewise deals a precision blow with his sword to shear Etarcomal's hair off, wherein it is described as a *fáebarbéim co commus* (TBC II, ll.1650-1).

### ***táithbéimm***

Cú Chulainn's *táithbéim(m)* 'return-stroke' is a little less clear. He uses it to bring down a number of birds in his last *macgním* (TBC I, ll.785-7). In this instance it is used in the context of his throwing of stones at these birds, yet it is possible that he may have used a sling, given that his use of the latter is mentioned just prior to this scene (ll.765-6). Owing to the similarities between the youthful deeds of Cú Chulainn and his son, Connlae, it is noteworthy that the latter casts shots at the birds with his sling using a *tathbé[i]m* in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §2).<sup>116</sup> Presumably, this shot has a boomerang effect whereby it is equally as effective on its return, inflicting twice as much injury or damage. A return-stroke of Cú Chulainn's sword is used to lower the birds sufficiently to facilitate their capture in *Serglige Con Culainn (ataig táithbéim dia chलाईub dóib co ruilddetar a mbossa 7 a n-eti dind usciu;* Dillon, 1953a, 2, §6). He beheads Nad Crantail with a *táithbéim* in TBC II (ll.1745-8) and delivers a similar *athbéim* 'return-stroke' with his sword to the two headed Garb in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 420, §38).<sup>117</sup> A similar motif is found in the Eg. 93 account of the 'Giant in the Mist' episode in *Fled Bricrenn* where a *tathbéim* is one

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<sup>116</sup> Subsequent to this, in a rather unclear description, Connlae performs *a carpad cliss* 'his palate-feat'. Van Hamel (1933, 150) translates it as 'jaw-feat'.

<sup>117</sup> An *athbéim*, translated as 'second blow' by Stokes (1893, 410-1, §20), is used by Cú Chulainn in his defeat of Goll earlier in the tale.

of the two strokes used by Cú Chulainn to overcome the giant as mentioned above (Slotkin, 1999, 238 & 240).

### *fóidbeimm*

Van Hamel (1933, 180) translates this feat as the ‘cry-stroke’ without further elaboration. Alternatively, it is possibly a combination of *fót* meaning ‘sod (of earth), a clod’ (nom. pl. *fóit*) and *béim(m)* ‘striking, cutting’ i.e. ‘cutting/striking sods’. A *fotalbéim* of Cú Chulainn’s sword is used by him to cut the sod (*in fót*) from under Etarcomal in TBC II (ll.1647-8).<sup>118</sup>

### *dréim fri fogaist co ndírgiud crette fora rind co fornaidmaim níad náir*<sup>119</sup>

Uncertainty as to whether this is one or a number of feats is obvious from its presentation in the lists and in particular from the variable use of the connectives *co* and *ocus* before *dírgiud*, while the final element *co fornaidmaim níad náir* in its variant forms can be viewed in a similar light (Sayers, 1983, 60).<sup>120</sup> Van Hamel (1933, 171) translates *dréimm fri fogaist* as ‘climbing along a lance’, Windisch (1905, 284) gives ‘und das Steigen auf die Lanze mit Strechen des Körpers auf ihrer Spitze’ and O’Rahilly (1976, 173) ‘the mounting on a spear and straightening the body on its point’ while giving ‘with the bond of a valiant champion’ for the third element. The first two elements, presumably a combined feat, appear relatively straightforward. A possible example of this is found in *Tochmarc Emire* where Domnall teaches Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach, Conchobar and Cú

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<sup>118</sup> Thereafter, Cú Chulainn delivers him a *fáebarbéim co commus* (TBC II, ll.1650-1) and then a *múadalbéim* on his crown splitting him down to his navel (ll.1658-9). O’Rahilly (1967, 301) observes that there must have been some ‘technical meaning for these compounds, but except for *béim co commus* it is impossible to get the exact significance’.

<sup>119</sup> See above for the variant forms and presentation(s) of this feat(s). This is the form from the TBC I list.

<sup>120</sup> Sayers (1983, 60) groups these together.

Chulainn a feat which involves climbing up a spear and performing on its point (*Aill (.i. fecht) for sleig frisndringtis, co clistis fora rind (.i. fonaídm níad for rindig sleg) ná ferad fora fonnaib*; van Hamel, 1933, 46, §60).<sup>121</sup> Sayers (1983, 60) determines that the ‘clue to the last component of the feat list is found in the YBL *TBC* reading of *fonnad maídm* (so edited)’ and in particular to *fonnad*, referring to a part of a chariot and more specifically might be associated with the wheels and so he proposes the following:

Related are the verbal noun *fonnad* ‘moving rapidly’, the noun *fonnám* ‘rapid movement to and fro’, and perhaps *fonna* ‘barrel hoop’ and *fonsad* ‘encircles’. The expression *ógdér g a fonnaí* ‘all red his rapid movement’ is used by Emer of Cú Chulainn in a verse followed by an allusion to a number of feats (*FB*, l. 8345). With this notion at the base of the interpretation of the final element and assuming a hypothetical verbal noun *\*fonnadm*, it is suggested that we have, to close the list, a single complex feat: ‘climbing a lance, straightening the body on its point, and the wheeling of a valiant hero (Sayers, 1983, 60).

In conclusion, he observes that it would have involved ‘a somersaulting vault over a spear planted in the ground or thrust down by the vaulter, the hands held near the point of the spear which was turned down’ and may have been a continuous movement or there might have been a pause when the body is inverted over the spear (Sayers, 1983, 60-1).

This feat is conceivably described more fully in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*. It is performed by Dordmair, the daughter of Domnall. Driving the shaft of a five-

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<sup>121</sup> Similarities between this feat and Cú Chulainn’s hopping on the tips of Nad Crantail’s holly spears in *TBC* are highlighted by Windisch (1905, 285n).

pronged spear into the ground, she ‘jumped nimbly up and descended on the point of the spear until her bosom lay on the pointed prongs’ of it, whereupon she stayed for a considerable length of time without even ruffling her clothes (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 44; Stokes, 1908, 110-3, §4). Thereafter, she challenges Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach and Cú Chulainn to do this. Unsurprisingly, Cú Chulainn is the only one capable of doing so, in fact it is observed that he could have easily stayed balanced on it for the whole day.

### *carpat serrdae*

Exclusive to the *Tochmarc Emire* list, it is rendered as ‘sickle chariot’ by van Hamel (1933, 210). This feat probably refers to the special adaptations made to his chariot, allowing him to wreak havoc on the enemy.<sup>122</sup> In TBC I, he quizzes Lóeg about the equipment for it and about harnessing it in preparation for his attack on the enemy in revenge for their slaying of the boys from Emain Machae (ll.2185-8). Introduced as *ina chathc[h]arpat serda*, this swift moving chariot is studded with an array of sharp, lacerating points with a structure particularly suited for the performance of great feats (ll.2206-8, ll.2279-89). Thereafter, he executes thunderfeats, mentioned above, before encircling the four provinces of Ireland and driving through the enemy causing wide scale carnage (ll.2292-315). Prepared for his rescue of Emer from Forgall’s fort, it does not seem to be used therein (van Hamel, 1933, 63, §85). This entry offers two explanations for its labeling as *carpat serrdae*, the first of which attributes it to its protruding blades; the second claims that it was first invented by the Syrians.

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<sup>122</sup> The lethal potential of the sickle-chariot is alluded to in the following analogy in *Amra Choluim Chille*; .i. *amal téit carpat serda tré chath corop amlaid dech m’animsea tría chath nemna dochum nime* (LU, ll.438-9). *Cathcharpat Serda* gives an account of a swift-moving gold and bronze roomy chariot, which is presumably Cú Chulainn’s, but his feats in it are not detailed therein (O’Rahilly, 1976a, 196-9).

### *cless daire*

Exclusive to the list in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, this feat is extremely problematic. Considering this alongside the two preceding entries, *cles cait* and *cless cuair*, O’Beirne Crowe (1871, 435-6) tentatively suggests that these feats derive their name from three heroes who became synonymous with them, after receiving training in them from Scáthach. Sayers (1983, 62) suggests, without elaboration, that the second element in these feats may be personal names. Although Scáthach has sons by the name of Cúar and Cett, the third is called Cruife with no mention of Daire as being her son or her pupil for that matter (van Hamel, 1933, 54, §75).

### *dallchless n-éoin*

With only a single non-descriptive attestation to this feat outside of the only list in which it occurs, its meaning can only be conjectured. ‘Blind-feat of the bird’ can be offered as a literal translation. Sayers (1983, 62) renders it as the ‘stunning feat of birds’. In her lay extolling the virtues of her husband in *Fled Bricrenn*, Emer refers to it after mentioning Cú Chulainn’s salmon-leap; *atetha cles dond cless dall cless n-éoin* ‘he performs the feat of the feat, the blind-feat of the bird’ (LU, I.8349, my translation), but this sheds little light on the nature of it.<sup>123</sup> Even though no definite link can be established, it brings to mind the manner in which he stuns the birds to capture them alive in his final boyhood deed (see III.2.3).<sup>124</sup> Cú Chulainn’s movements are compared to that of a bird in TBC during his encounter

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<sup>123</sup> Windisch (1913, 280n) observes that this should be understood as two feats.

<sup>124</sup> Connlae performs a similar trick in *Aided Óenfir Aife* (Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §2).

with Nad Crantail (TBC I, ll.1415-24; TBC II, ll.1706-8) and he later refers to the greatness of this feat (*cless*) in TBC I (ll.1435-6).<sup>125</sup>

### *tairmcles nónbair*

Found only in the *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* list, Emer accredits him with this feat in *Fled Bricrenn* (*atetha cless nonbair*; LU, ll.8351). Translating it as the ‘noise feat of nine men’, Sayers (1983, 61) compares it to the ‘thunder feat of one hundred’.<sup>126</sup> The numeral nine occurs elsewhere in relation to feats of Cú Chulainn. *Cless níad nonbair* ‘feat of nine champions/warriors’ is attributed to him later in *Fled Bricrenn*, alongside the ‘salmon-leap’ where these feats are presumably performed above his chariot (*úasa errid óencharpait*; LU, ll.8677-8). This is questionably also the case with regard to the reference *naí cles do chor dó a n-ardai* which is similarly incorporated into a description of Cú Chulainn in his chariot in TBC I (ll.3847-58). Tentatively translated by O’Rahilly (1976, 229) as ‘he casts nine feats aloft (?)’, it seems to suggest that it or they are performed at a height or presumably above or on his chariot. In any event, neither of these references account for this feat with any significant degree of clarity. Fergus concludes his praise of Cú Chulainn prior to narrating his youthful exploits, by noting that the latter’s equal will not be found in relation to *co cliuss nónbair for cach rind* ‘with the feat of nine men on every spear-point’ (TBC I, ll.391-2). Yet again this may represent a variant form of this feat.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> O’Beirne Crowe (1870, 436) speculatively asserts that this feat refers to the peculiar character of Cú Chulainn’s eyes and makes reference to his purblind state in *Serglige Con Culainn* and a feat that he performed with his eyes in TBC.

<sup>126</sup> O’Beirne Crowe (1870, 435) likewise suggests that it is the same feat as *torannchless*.

<sup>127</sup> Along with the strength of one hundred, Emer’s protectors are listed as having *cliss nónbair* ‘the feat of nine men’ (van Hamel, 1933, 27, §19).

### *siaburcles*

Possibly meaning ‘ghost/sprite feat’, this entry is exclusive to the list in *Fled Bricrenn* without further extant evidence. It is notable that Cú Chulainn reassures Lóegaire in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* that it is not a phantom or spectre that appears to him but himself (*ar ní síabrae rodatánic is Cú Chulaind mac Sóalta*; LU, ll.9302-3, ll.9314-6, ll.9538-9). He casts a spell over his charioteer and horses making them invisible for his attack on the enemy toward the latter stages of TBC I (ll.2208-10). This being so, it is impossible to establish a connection between these two references and this feat.

### **Conclusion**

Cú Chulainn’s reputation as a gifted feat performer complements his martial prowess further. While having a clear functional value, his status as the invincible warrior dictates that he should possess extraordinary skills. Though there is no extant uniform list, the presence of such collections point to a desire to furnish him with such talents. As with other aspects of his character, this appears to be grossly exaggerated and thus contributes to the confusion and apparent overlap in some of these. This is further supported by the fact that the majority of them are relatively poorly attested elsewhere. Essentially, these add to his repertoire of martial skills.

### **1V.6. Other skills**

A number of additional feats are accredited to him, the majority of which are fundamental to his martial endeavours. He uses his *foramcliss* ‘swooping feat’ in his efforts to overcome the monster and then the giant while guarding Cú Roí’s

home in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 107-11, §§86-7). Seemingly jumping above his opponent, he encircles him at pace, with a drawn sword in the second contest, causing the latter to become severely dizzy, at which point he slays the monster and extracts three requests from the giant. A *sáebchless*<sup>128</sup> ‘crooked feat’ is part of his *ríastrad* in TBC (TBC I, ll.2248-9; TBC II, l.2266). The former account offers the following description and translation of it: *Ro láe sáebglés díberge dá churp i mmedón a chrocind* ‘he performed a crooked feat of revenge with his body in the middle of his skin’ (see IV.3)<sup>129</sup> References to *chluchi in átha* ‘feats of the ford’ are found in Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad’s showdown at the ford in TBC, a little more detail is found in TBC II (TBC I, ll.3088-90; TBC II, ll.3281-94), however, it is not described. It seems likely that this is in fact a series of feats performed at the ford as opposed to a specific one.<sup>130</sup> Cú Chulainn’s expertise in it is indicated by Fer Diad’s fear to engage in it with him owing to the number of warriors that had previously fallen at the hands of the former at the ford. During this battle, it is stated that both heroes performed wonderful feats that were not taught to them by anyone else including Scáthach, Úathach or Aífe, yet again these are not detailed (TBC II, ll.3263-79).

A number of more isolated citations ascribe Cú Chulainn with some more unusual skills. His twisting of a withe into a ring and his subsequent throwing of it over the top of a pillar-stone with one hand is laid down as a challenge to any member of

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<sup>128</sup> It occurs as *sáebglés* in TBC I (l.2249). O’Rahilly (1967, 201; 1976, 187) translates it as ‘wild feat’ in both recensions.

<sup>129</sup> A reference to *siangles* with the same description as found in TBC occurs in *Aided Con Culainn*, again in the context of his *ríastrad* (van Hamel, 1933, 102, §34; *sian gléas*; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol. 2, 215, §59).

<sup>130</sup> Indeed, O’Rahilly (1967, 212) translates *do chluchi na n-átha* as ‘in the battle of the ford’ in TBC II where Fer Diad insists on a number of guarantees from Medb to fight Cú Chulainn there (ll.2663-4).

Medb and Ailill's army in TBC, none of whom takes it up (TBC I, ll.225-300; see V.6).<sup>131</sup> His cutting down of a forked branch and its casting with one hand from the back of a chariot is viewed with astonishment in TBC I, particularly, given that Fergus breaks fourteen chariots trying to uproot it and only does so with his own vehicle (ll.330-55). He redirects a spear cast at him to strike the thrower's horse in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 55 & 99, §15). He renders the deer motionless in his final youthful exploit by nodding and glaring at it (TBC I, ll.794-6). He equips himself with a false beard by casting a spell on a handful of grass in TBC I (ll.1904-5). A description of him later on in the saga, states that he has the grasp of a hawk's claws and the grip of a hedgehog's claws in each of his seven fingers and seven toes (ll.2351-3).<sup>132</sup> He uses his fingers to strip the bark and all the knots from the wood to make chariot-shafts in TBC I (ll.885-6). In his final youthful deed, Cú Chulainn remarks upon his ability to walk on the river Calland at Emain while carrying a number of boys in TBC II (ll.1137-42). Evidence also suggests that Cú Chulainn is especially swift (TBC I, ll.387-92, ll.1766-7, ll.2997-8; TBC II, ll.424-5, l.3310).<sup>133</sup>

TBC I (ll.325-6) affords him the gift of sight, the gift of understanding and the gift of reckoning (see VI.3). An even lengthier dossier of attributes are assigned to him in TBC II, namely:

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<sup>131</sup> Fergus is excluded from the challenge. Cú Chulainn removes the withe from the pillar-stone to incite combat with the three sons of Nechta Scéne in his final deed (TBC I, ll.711-3).

<sup>132</sup> It is noted above that Cú Chulainn casts the *gáe bolga* from between his toes at Fer Diad, indicating their exceptional dexterous qualities (*i lladair a chossi*; TBC II, l.3354). In addition, Fer Diad remarks upon the strength of Cú Chulainn's throw from his right foot (l.3360).

<sup>133</sup> His ability to catch the shot from his sling in his final boyhood deed also indicates his swiftness (TBC I, l.765-6).

...the gift of beauty, the gift of form, the gift of build, the gift of swimming, the gift of horsemanship, the gift of playing *fidchell*, the gift of playing *brandub*, the gift of battle, the gift of fighting, the gift of conflict, the gift of sight, the gift of speech, the gift of counsel, the gift of fowling (?), the gift of laying waste (?), the gift of plundering in a strange border (ll.548-3).

Similar talents are also assigned to him in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 22, §6).

Although forced upon him, Cú Chulainn, nonetheless, rises to the challenge to perform ‘the spike-feat’ in the lands of Scáthach in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, and thus avoids being severely wounded (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 47-8; Stokes, 1908, 124-7, §§27-32). Taking place in the House of the Spear-makers, Cú Chulainn is thrown to the top of the house where twenty-seven spikes are cast at him but he manages to descend along a number of them into safety and thus completes the feat which nobody else had done previously.

Cú Chulainn’s preternatural ability for leaping is a decisive factor in number of contests. Briefly commented upon by Ó Riain (1972, 197-8) in his study on the Irish legend of the wild man, the performance of enormous leaps is identified as a feature of Irish heroic action and one which is emphasised ‘when it proves necessary to state the heroic qualifications of the novice, or unfulfilled hero’. In support of his argument, he states that:

For instance, Lug’s failure to gain admittance to Tara on the merits of his many crafts and the effect of a *geis* induced him to gain entrance by means of a mighty leap over the rampart. Similarly, Cú Chulainn’s abduction of Emer was prefaced by an enormous leap over three ramparts, while Diarmait’s flight

with Gráinne was preceded by a *baothléim* or “wild, light leap” from the fort. Significantly, Diarmait’s leap was also the product of a *geis* which disallowed the normal form of exit. Diarmait’s *baithléim* recalls the *trí léimenn báise*, or three leaps of folly, made by Mo-Ling while yet a novice on his travels. Thence he returned, like Cú Chulainn from his first *echtra*, “with the glow of the anger and the feat on him”. The sequel to Mo-Ling’s *echtra* was his change of name, which reveals the initiatory character of the performance, and in this context it may be observed that one of the requirements for entry into the ranks of the Fiana Éirenn was the capacity to perform a great leap. Clearly, leaping had a definite initiatory character and was therefore a fitting attribute of both the madman and the novice (Ó Riain, 1972, 197-8).

Bearing in mind Ó Riain’s observations, Cú Chulainn’s propensity for leaping is examined in the context of heroic actions, expectations and behaviour and in particular its relationship to both the internal and external audiences of the story by Nagy (2009).<sup>134</sup> Constantly required to demonstrate his skills publicly, Nagy (2009, 17) concludes that ‘the hero’s leap showcases the hero at his most performative. It is characteristically performed in front of an audience, going away from an audience, or coming toward one, and the success of the heroic trajectory depends on its successful execution’. He also defines it as the ‘rite of passage by which he [the hero] conspicuously attempts to vault over the record set by his heroic predecessor...’ (Nagy, 2009, 5).

Cú Chulainn’s ability to jump is fundamental to his encounter with Nad Crantail in TBC (TBC I, ll.1415-81; TBC II, ll.1696-755). Seemingly oblivious to Nad Crantail’s initial attack, Cú Chulainn appears to hop on the tops of the holly stakes

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<sup>134</sup> In considering the question of whether the hero or the audience is in charge of these heroic performances, Nagy (2009, 4) deduces that the relationship between them results from a delicate process of negotiation ‘with the storyteller (oral or literary) as the middleman’.

cast at him while simultaneously pursuing a flock of birds, leading Nad Crantail and those watching to believe that he was in fact taking flight from the latter. With the escalation of their duel and in response to Nad Crantail's request for fair play, Cú Chulainn agrees only to avoid the latter's cast by leaping upwards, drawing attention to his subsequent stunt. Unsurprisingly, Cú Chulainn successfully does so (*Lingid Cú Chulaind i n-arddi ríam*; TBC I, ll.1461-2) and he duly out wits his opponent by requesting him to do likewise; on doing so Nad Crantail is impaled from head to toe on the former's spear.<sup>135</sup> Clearly, Cú Chulainn is confident in his own leaping abilities. Thereafter, he leaps on his shield before dissecting him into four. This series of heroic jumps is interpreted as 'the most conspicuous of heroic gestures, as an attempt to dodge the bullet of heroic expectations, and as a sudden, aggressive move against the hero's opponent, or even the hero's audience' by Nagy (2009, 6-7). Cú Chulainn is viewed as a 'self-launching "weapon" whose heroic reputation is assessed and re-assessed by his opponent, the viewing audience within the story, and the audience of the story itself, depending on where he "throws" himself, and how his "throws" are interpreted'.

More simplistically, this scene depicts another facet to Cú Chulainn's already astounding repertoire of martial skills. Elsewhere, this tactic is pivotal in his routing of a number of other rivals. He leaps onto the shields' of Fer Diad in TBC (TBC I, ll.3091-100; TBC II, ll.3295-316)<sup>136</sup>, Goll in *Aided Guill Meic Carbadaocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 408-11, §20) and Eochaid Glas in

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<sup>135</sup> The heroes' casting of spears and their leaps to avoid them are not found in the corresponding scene in TBC II.

<sup>136</sup> Leaping three times onto the shield of Fer Diad, these are largely ineffective given that he is tossed aside by Fer Diad each time.

*Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 60 & 105, §40)<sup>137</sup> in the final stages of their duels, with the death of his opponents quickly following in the former two cases.<sup>138</sup> Eochaid receives a more unusual faith as he is blown (*séitid*) out to sea by Cú Chulainn. These precision leaps on to their shields, puts him in a position of physical dominance over his challengers thus underscoring his superior martial prowess. His leap (*Focaird íarom bedg de*) on to the beast's back in *Tochmarc Emire* progresses him further along his journey to the home of Scáthach (van Hamel, 1933, 47, §63). Elsewhere, Cú Chulainn launches his assault on the enemy with a forward leap in response to their slaying of his foster-son in *Talland Étair* (*foceird.. bedg*; Ó Dónaill, 2005, 46 & 56) and in a similar manner he surprises a group of nine in *Fled Bricrenn* leading to their deaths (*conclith*; Henderson, 1899, 106-7, §84).

Thinking that Lóegaire and Conall had both scaled the wall after their encounter with the giant while guarding the home of Cú Roí in *Fled Bricrenn*, where in fact they had been tossed over by the giant, determined not to be out classed, Cú Chulainn endeavours to leap over it (Henderson, 1899, 110-1, §88). Indeed Cú Chulainn seems to suggest that leaping is one of the more basic martial skills when having failed to jump the wall twice, due to his severely fatigued state arising from his strenuous efforts to win the hero's portion, he is dismayed that he could lose the latter by failing this more minor task (*"Mairg dorumalt a n-imned dorumalt-sa cus trath-sa imma cauradmír"* ol Cuculainn *"ocus a techt úaim la féimmed ind lemme*

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<sup>137</sup> He jumps firstly on to the edge of his shield then on to one of its panels and lastly onto his chest in the latter tale (Hollo, 2005, 60 & 105, §40).

<sup>138</sup> Leaping towards the first two pairs of fighters in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, he then deals them fatal blows (Kimpton, 2009, 21-2 & 41, §§16-7).

*dochúatár ind fer aile!’*”; §88; see IV.2-3).<sup>139</sup> Albeit involving a warrior leaping in a chariot, it is the basis of one of the obstacles put in place by Cú Chulainn to decelerate the Connacht attack in TBC I (ll.827-31).<sup>140</sup>

Outside of these duels, leaping features strongly in his encounters with a number of women. Using a salmon-leap to reach Emer at her father’s home, having rescued her along with her foster-sister and some treasures, he leaps back over the three ramparts in his escape (*foceird bedg*; van Hamel, 1933, 63, §86). It is noteworthy that immediately prior to this, her father, Forgall, fell to his death after leaping on to rampart while fleeing from Cú Chulainn. He leaps eastwards to reach, and then to carry off, Findchóem in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 53 & 98, §7). His leaping towards the end of *Serglige Con Culainn* subsequent to his separation from Fand is notably different (Dillon, 1953a, 28-9, §47). He makes three high-leaps (*ardlémend*) and three leaps south (*deslémend*) before retreating to the wilds and abstaining from food and drink in what seems to be a period of mourning or lament in response to her departure with her husband, Manannán mac Lir. Including this example of Cú Chulainn’s leaping in her comparative analysis of wild men and wailing women in Irish tradition, Partridge (1980, 36) observes that bereavement may be marked by a withdrawal from society and may be ‘expressed by loosening the hair and going naked or dressing in rags, by taking to the wilderness, and most dramatically, by leaping’. Drawing again on van Gennep’s (1960) work on the rites of passage, Cú Chulainn’s more controlled

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<sup>139</sup> A poorly measured leap proves fatal to Súaldaim when he falls thereafter on to his shield in TBC I (ll.3442-4) and also to Lóegaire who strikes his head off the door lintel after leaping forth in *Aided Lóegaire Búadach* (Meyer, 1906, 22-3, §2).

<sup>140</sup> Competence in leaping is understandably advantageous for any charioteer. *Léim dar boilg* variously translated as ‘leaping across a gorge/gap/chasm’ is among Lóeg’s three gifts of charioteering listed in TBC I (ll. 2210-2) and in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 11, ll.247-51). Cú Chulainn’s horses perform a warlike white-leap in the latter (ll.253-4).

leap away with Emer symbolises the beginning of their life together while his aimless leaping away from Fand reflects the break-up of their relationship.

### **Conclusion**

These additional skills complement Cú Chulainn's status as the supreme warrior. Those limited to a singular attestation hardly have a major bearing on his martial persona. Of significance is his propensity for leaping which seems to be an important warrior attribute.

## **Chapter V: Martial codes, honour and *geisi***

This chapter will examine evidence for specific codes of conduct or martial principles which guide the hero's behaviour. The importance of honour and how it motivates his actions will be fundamental to this discussion. His reactions to doubts over his honour and martial ability and his employment of more deceitful tactics provide further insight into the psyche of the hero. Martial principles with specific emphasis on *fír fer* also require appraisal. In conclusion, his various *geisi* will be considered in detail.

### **V.1. Honour and shame**

Early Irish legal texts emphasise the importance of a person's rank or status. 'The measure of a person's status is his honour-price or *lóg n-enech* (lit. 'the price of his face')' (Kelly, 1988, 8), and this largely determines his legal capacity and entitlements in society. Greene (1979, 10) observes that 'honour and status were so closely linked as to be indistinguishable and the same word, *enech*, is used for both'. The centrality of honour also prevails in the literature, in particular, in the Ulster Cycle. For martial figures, the maintenance and acquisition of this is the essence of their existence and it is thus represented as a catalyst for warrior action.<sup>141</sup> O'Leary (1987, 1) notes that aggressive competition, 'particularly the exercise of prowess at the expense of others' is the means by which such honour is accessed and validated. Such conquests ensure fame and glory for the victor while the loser experiences shame and disgrace. According to O'Leary (1987, 1), a hero's victories should either be in public or public proof should be available to verify them.

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<sup>141</sup> Along with preserving his life, Culann indicates that his hound also protects his *ainech* 'honour' (TBC I, ll.594-6).

Two references to *enech-gressa* ‘honour-contests/attacks’ in the discourse arranging Cú Chulainn’s fosterage in the interpolated final section of version I of his conception tale, indicate the significance of such acts to the martial figure. In the context of his proposal to rear the hero, Bricriu states that he will support (*forruith*) the men of Ireland in *a n-écnach ⁊ a n-enechgressa* ‘their reviling and their honour-contests’ (van Hamel, 1933, 7-8, §7).<sup>142</sup> In conclusion, the judge, Morann, proclaims that Cú Chulainn’s multiple fosterages will enable him to fight or avenge (*dofich*) the Ulstermen’s *enechgressa* and to win their ford-fights and battles (§7).<sup>143</sup> Although no detail is given as to the nature of these contests, the latter reference seems to point to their physical nature and indicates Cú Chulainn’s *raison d’être* from an early stage.

The Ulster warriors must safeguard and enhance both personal and group honour. For the most part, these are closely intertwined. The placing of Cú Chulainn alone for the majority of his battles affords him ample opportunities to embellish his own status and to become renowned. In his final youthful deed, he proclaims his willingness to trade a long life to become famous (TBC I, ll.635-41). Chadwick & Chadwick (1932, vol. I, 89) observe that ‘[t]hirst for fame, especially the desire to leave a glorious name after death, appears to be a governing principle of the ideal hero’. Essentially, his courageous deeds ensure his fame after his death.<sup>144</sup> His lone departure for Emain Machae at such a tender age is proposed as a possible example of the warrior’s fascination with the acquisition of personal honour in

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<sup>142</sup> A corresponding statement is uttered by Cú Chulainn in his conversation with Emer in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 29, §22).

<sup>143</sup> The reference to the ford-fights may allude to Cú Chulainn’s many fights at the ford in TBC.

<sup>144</sup> Cú Chulainn’s astonishing repertoire of conquests is discussed in detail in IV.1.

III.2.3. Thereafter, his conquests ensure that his honour is constantly enhanced throughout his youth.

A similar trend is evident in relation to the majority of his adult exploits. The prime example being his singled-handed defence of Ulster in TBC (see III.5.2-3). It is noteworthy that Cú Chulainn's divine father, Lug, declines to join forces with his son in exacting revenge for the slaying of the youths in TBC I, despite the hero's weakened state. It is perhaps only because of the latter that Cú Chulainn seeks aid in the first instance. Lug refuses on the grounds that despite his best efforts, Cú Chulainn will receive all the fame and glory (*irdarcus; allud*) for their joint conquests (TBC I, ll.2180-2). This scene underlines the importance of the acquisition of personal honour to the warrior while also suggesting that such figures are not simply interested in fighting just for the sake of it. Cú Chulainn's prompt dismissal of Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb prior to the battle in *Serglige Con Culainn* may also be fuelled by his reluctance to share the credit for his victories with the former (Dillon, 1953a, 20, §35). Similarly, Cú Chulainn's breaking of Conall Cernach's chariot in his final boyhood deed in TBC II ensures that he will have the opportunity to perform great deeds and receive the associated credit: *Ó rasiacht Conall ard fri aird fris, demin leis giano thachrad écht dó, ná lécfad Conall dó a dénam* 'When Conall came abreast of him, the boy was certain that if (the chance of performing) a great deed were to come his way, Conall would not let him do it' (ll.1024-5).<sup>145</sup> Comparable scenes are depicted for Cú Chulainn's solitary adventures in a number of overseas, possibly supernatural locations and in

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<sup>145</sup> O'Leary (1991, 37) observes that a 'similar mentality underlies Medb's treacherous plan to wipe out the awesomely competent Gaileóin' early in TBC I.

a number of other tales.<sup>146</sup> Thus the hero alone receives the accolades for all of these conquests, continually enhancing his reputation.

Cú Chulainn takes threats to his honour very seriously and these generally prompt him into action. Cú Chulainn's concern for his own honour is indirectly expressed by Lógé's comments in the aftermath of the slaying of the youths from Emain Machae in TBC I.<sup>147</sup> In response to the hero's dismay upon hearing of their demise, Lógé urges him to "*Cossain archena, a Chúcán, ní haisc dot inchaib 7 ní táir dot gasciud*" "Fight on, little Cú, it is no reproach to your honour, no disgrace to your valour" (TBC I, ll.2176-7). It appears that Cú Chulainn's severely-wounded state grants him a temporary reprieve from his martial responsibilities. Later on in the tale, Cú Roí considers it unfitting to attack the hero owing to the gravity of his injuries (ll.3396-400). Comparably, Cú Chulainn offers his exhaustion (*scís*) as an initial reason not to enter into battle in the early stages of *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 13 & 36, §4).<sup>148</sup>

In his attempts to procure the hero's javelin in TBC I, Redg, the satirist, vows to bring dishonour upon him by satire with the result that he casts it through his head (ll.1516-8). A similar, but more elaborate scene is found in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* when Cú Chulainn is forced to intervene between the pairs in three staged-fights. It is deemed as a cause of disgrace (*mebol*) to him if he does not come between them (Kimpton, 2009, 21-2 & 41-2, §§16-9; see III.6.3).<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> These are discussed in detail in III.4.3.1-4 and in IV.1-2.

<sup>147</sup> The Connacht forces make a similar advance when Cú Chulainn goes to heal himself in the streams of Conaille Muirthemne after his fight with Fer Diad in TBC I (ll.3143-50).

<sup>148</sup> On return from the lands of Scáthach in *Tochmarc Emire*, he similarly suffers from fatigue (*scís*) (van Hamel, 1933, 62, §83).

<sup>149</sup> Although this is not explicitly stated in the case of the third contest, it seems to be implied.

Thereafter, Cú Chulainn, the Ulstermen and his kindred, in that sequence, are threatened with satire unless the hero surrenders his spear. In dire need of his weapon, he relinquishes it in order to safeguard his own honour and that of the Ulstermen and his kindred. In contrast to Cú Chulainn's readiness to defend Ulster's honour, Nad Crantail is not similarly driven when requested by Medb to fight against him in order to maintain Connacht's honour in TBC I (ll.1403-5).

The honour of the Ulstermen and Cú Chulainn stands threatened in *Fled Bricrenn* when Bricriu confronts them with a *geis* (Henderson, 1899, 30-3, §§26-7; see IV.2 & V.6). The warriors are required to put his house back to its normal position after Cú Chulainn raises it to allow his wife, Emer, to enter. The hero is no doubt conscious that a threat lies over their honour and is thus spurred into action (§§26-7). While the Ulstermen's public entreating (*impidi*) of him to solve the matter places his own honour on the line. Clearly, a violation of such a *geis* would bring dishonour to all parties. Upon suffering a defeat in *Mesca Ulad*, Aillil announces that the Ulstermen have brought shame upon themselves to which Cú Chulainn responds by attacking the opposition (Watson, 1941, 44-5, ll.1008-16). The hero exercises some reserve in the final stages of *Fled Bricrenn* when initially he is unprovoked by the *bachlach's* insulting of the Ulstermen (Meyer, 1893, 453 & 458, §98; see IV.2). Once the insults take a more personal tone, that is, when he is called *cuil truad* 'wretched fly' and is accused of being fearful of death, he instantly reacts by beheading the culprit.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> He directly questions Lugaid in TBC I about the army's perceptions of him (ll.1548-54). Lugaid informs him that they deem his request to have the women, girls and half of the cattle returned to him as a mockery (*cuibiuad*). Thereafter, it is stated that a number of men were slain by him.

The importance of honour to the warriors of the Ulster Cycle is perhaps most poignantly portrayed in *Aided Óenfir Aife*. Therein, Cú Chulainn chooses to commit the horrendous crime of *finjal* in his efforts to restore the collective honour of the Ulstermen. Kelly (1988, 127) observes that these crimes ‘strike at the heart of the kin-based structure of early Irish society’. In a legal system where offences are usually atoned for through the payment of compensation to the victim’s kin, recompense for *finjal* is problematic. Fines could not be paid to the victim’s kin because the perpetrator is also of that kin. While a revenge killing would constitute a further kin-slaying. The laws allow for a fort in which this crime has been carried out to be destroyed without impunity, while a king guilty of *finjal* loses his honour-price (Kelly, 1988, 127). Kelly (1988, 127) notes that ‘some kings who acquired their kingship through *finjal* are known to have reigned successfully for many years’. Findon (1994, 143) observes that a ‘scan of the entries between the eighth and the twelfth centuries reveals no mention of a father slaying his own son. This, we must conclude was the most heinous of kin-slayings and likely very rare’.<sup>151</sup>

Connlac is perceived to mock (*gen*) the Ulstermen when he refuses to reveal himself to them and by the manner in which he upends Conall Cernach (Meyer, 1904, 116-9, §§4-7). The issue of a third party declining to name himself to Cú Chulainn also arises in *Táin Bó Regamna*. Cú Chulainn perceives the Morrígan and her male companion to be making a fool of him with their twisted responses to his demand that the man speak directly to him and to identify himself (Corthals,

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<sup>151</sup> Among the threats outlined by Bricriu to Conchobar in his efforts to persuade the Ulstermen to come to his feast in *Fled Bricreann*, is that he will stir up enmity between father and son to the point that they will kill each other (Henderson, 1899, 6-7, §6).

1987, 53, §3). Cú Chulainn retaliates by leaping and bearing his weapons on the Morrígan.

Connlae's extremely public humiliation of Conall spurs him into action, albeit unsuccessfully, in an attempt to save the honour of the Ulstermen. Seemingly cognisant that Connlae is his son, Cú Chulainn ignores Emer's pleas not to slay him: "*Cid hé nobeith and, a ben,*" *ar sé* [Cú Chulainn], "*nangonaind-se ar inchaib Ulad*" "Even though it were he who is there, woman," said he, "I would kill him for the honour of Ulster" (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §9). Findon (1994, 146) rightly observes that Cú Chulainn 'prizes honour more highly than the survival of his own bloodline'. In addition, she notes that even though he is essentially defending the honour of the Ulster men as a group, 'Connla's public defeat of his father in single combat would also dishonour him'. Despite having the opportunities to overwhelm Cú Chulainn, Connlae refrains from doing so (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §§10-1).

Cú Chulainn's honour suffers further at the hands of the boy when the former crops his hair with his sword leading him to pronounce that: "*Is co cend cuidbiud*" "The mockery has come to a head" (§10). The hero endures a similar, if not worse fate at the hands of Cú Roí in *Aided Con Roí* after the latter's seizure of a number of items from the Ulstermen (see III.4.3.3 & VI.3). Cú Roí quickly dispels Cú Chulainn's challenge by cropping his hair and rubbing cow-dung into his head (Best, 1905, 20-3, §3). Cú Chulainn's reaction: *Búi Cúchulaind íarsin blíadain láin for imgabáil Ulad* 'After that Cúchulainn was a whole year avoiding the Ulstermen' (§4), indicates the shame and embarrassment felt by him. A related

poem, *Brinna Ferchertne*, uses the verb *sáraigid* ‘outrage, violate’ to describe Cú Roí’s offence against the Ulstermen before observing that Cú Chulainn spends the full year in silence (*hi toí*; Meyer, 1901, 41-2, §§1-6). Thereafter, he comes across Cú Roí’s stronghold and is instantly reminded of the shame that the latter had brought upon him (*rofiter is é dorad mebal fair*; Best, 1905, 22-3, §4). Subsequently, he conspires with Bláthnait to kill Cú Roí, presumably in an attempt to restore his own, and Ulster’s, honour (see below). To return to *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, Connlae’s dying words outlining his aspirations to conquer distant lands on behalf of Ulster, underlines the futility of his premature passing.

The issue of this particular *fingal* arises in a summary of the tale contained in the H.3.17; a manuscript heavily laden with legal material (O’Keefe, 1904, 124-7). Although less explicit, Cú Chulainn is again forced to challenge the youth on account of his refusal to name himself. Cú Chulainn only becomes aware of his true identity after he has dealt him a fatal blow. Cú Chulainn’s ignorance in this respect allows him to be classed as an innocent person in the guise of a guilty one and is a factor in the reduced fine that is payable by him to the Ulstermen. According to Kelly (1988, 151), ‘ignorance may halve the penalty for an offence’. On the other hand, Connlae is listed in the tale as a *deorad* ‘outsider, alien, exile’, a category of person who has very limited legal rights and whose killing may not entail any penalties (Kelly, 1988, 5-6). Accordingly, Connlae’s death should result in a limited or even no payment. Findon (1994, 144) argues that the latter ‘idea was obviously a bothersome one that demanded amendment in the light of the boy’s parentage. The legal commentary makes the point that Cú Chulainn pays only half the body-fine normally due because Connla was an “alien” in Ulster’.

Interestingly, Ó hUiginn (1996, 227) asserts that it can equally be argued that this tale can be viewed as casting a ‘completely bad light on the whole heroic ethos’.

He adds that:

The dilemma in which Cú Chulainn finds himself is one of his own making; it was he who placed the fateful injunction on his unborn son, and the upshot of the tale is that sorrow death and destruction are the direct issue of adherence to a purely militaristic code of honour.

With regard to the central theme of the tale, Ó hUiginn (1996, 227) observes that:

The theme of our story is familiar. It is found in the Persian tale of Sohrab and Rostam in the *Shahmana*, as well as appearing in the German *Hildebrandslied*, and while polygenesis might be argued with regard to the literary use of parricide or fratricide, the context and sequence of events, and particularly the employment of the ring motif establishes a generic connection between the tales.

The execution of revenge is integral to the process of reinstating honour, particularly in the case of a slain warrior, where it, presumably, re-establishes the victim’s status. Despite his gravely injured state, Cú Chulainn quickly dismisses his earthly father, Súaldaim, in TBC I owing to his concern that the latter would not be capable of avenging his death (ll.3416-20). In *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* we are told of a covenant between Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn concerning their willingness to avenge each other’s death. Conall vows to seek redress for Cú Chulainn before nightfall on the day of his demise, while Cú Chulainn, going one step further, promises to do so before Conall’s blood goes

cold (Kimpton, 2009, 25 & 44, §25). Such swift retribution ensures that the perpetrator has little chance to boast of his deeds, thus the victim's honour largely remains intact. Warriors boasting of their conquests plays a central part in *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* (Chadwick, 1927, 11-23, §§7-17) and such an event is also alluded to at the beginning of *Serlige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 1, §2).<sup>152</sup> With reference to the present discussion, both heroes are assured that they will be replaced by a worthy warrior.

Subsequently, Conall informs Lugaid, Cú Chulainn's slayer, that:

*“Dligim dít-su,” ar Conall Cernach, “.i. marbad mo chomchéili Con Culaind 7 itú ic tríall a acraí fort”* ““You owe me,” said Conall Cernach, “that is, [for] the slaying of my comrade Cú Chulainn, and I am attempting to prosecute the claim for it upon you”” (Kimpton, 2009, 26 & 45, §28).

While the legal texts allow a killer to atone for his crime by payment, failure to do so obliges the victim's kin to carry out a blood-feud (Kelly, 1988, 125-7).<sup>153</sup> Ultimately, the victim's honour is restored by either of these means. The latter form of redress is most prominent in the heroic literature. Essentially, Conall's slaying of Lugaid reinstates Cú Chulainn's honour.

## Conclusion

Cú Chulainn's many lone contests constantly embellish his honour. The protection of his own and of Ulster's honour is a key part of his role as the guardian of Ulster.

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<sup>152</sup> Fer Diad describes Cú Chulainn as the most boastful man on earth in TBC I (l.3064).

<sup>153</sup> Immediately after Cú Chulainn's death, Erc mac Cairbri views it as a shame not to behead the hero and adds that it should be taken in revenge for his father's head, which was taken by the former (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 43, §22). In addition, Cú Chulainn's hand is cut off in retaliation for Lugaid's (§23).

He is thus represented as being very sensitive to threats placed on these and usually reacts almost instantly to eliminate them.

## V.2. Incitement of the hero

There are a number of examples where a third party incites the hero into action by questioning his honour. Cú Chulainn's charioteer is particularly aware of the hero's sensitivity to doubts concerning his martial capabilities and thus uses this to egg him on in times of need. At the brink of defeat at the hands of Mand in a wrestling game in TBC I, Lóeg reminds him of how powerful he would be if he were fighting for the hero's portion against other warriors in Emain (ll.2540-5).<sup>154</sup>

The effect is described as follows: *Tic a ferg niad 7 atraig a bruth míled cor trascair Mand fón corthi coro scor i mminágib* 'So then his hero's rage and his warrior's fury arose in Cú Chulainn, and he dashed Mand against the pillarstone and shattered him into fragments' (ll.2544-5).

Cú Chulainn calls upon Lóeg to urge him on when he is overcome and to praise him when victorious during his fight with Fer Diad in TBC I (ll.3082-4). Cú Chulainn's instructions are somewhat more explicit in TBC II:

*"...is aire sin mad f'orum-sa bus róen indiu, ara nderna-su mo grísad 7 mo glámad 7 olc do ráda rim gorop móite éir m'fír m'fergg f'oromm. Mad romum bus róen 'no, ara nderna-su mo múnod 7 mo molod 7 maithius do rád frim gorop móti lim mo menma"* "Therefore if it be I who am defeated this day, you must incite me and revile me and speak evil of me so that my ire and anger shall rise higher thereby. But if it be I who inflict defeat, you must

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<sup>154</sup> Likewise, Lóeg exhorts Cú Chulainn to return to his former glory so that he can go to assist Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 11, §28).

exhort me and praise me and speak well of me that thereby my courage rise higher” (ll.3270-5).

In both accounts, Lóeg’s incitement takes the form of a number of analogies describing the manner in which Fer Diad overbears the hero; the list is somewhat longer in TBC II. In TBC I, Lóeg states that:

*“Tét an fer tarat amail téti bott tar catt. Nodnigh an fer amail neghar coipp i llundai. Notcúra an fer amail cúruss ben boídh a mac”* “Your opponent goes over you as a tail goes over a cat. He belabours you as flax-heads (?) are beaten in a pond. He chastises you as a fond woman chastises her son” (ll.3085-7).<sup>155</sup>

He concludes his barrage of insults in TBC II as follows: “...*connach fail do dluig ná do dual ná do díl ri gail ná ra gaisced go brunni mbrátha 7 betha badesta, a s iriti síabartha bic*” “...so that never again will you have a claim or right or title to valour or feats of arms, you distorted little sprite” (ll.3308-10). Cú Chulainn renews his assault on his opponent thereafter with limited success causing Lóeg to taunt him a second time in TBC I (*Co nangresed in t-ara arithisi*; ll.3092-3). Eventually, Cú Chulainn defeats him with his *gáe bolga* in both versions.

A similar scene is depicted in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* when Cú Chulainn is being overwhelmed by Goll (Stokes, 1893, 408-11, §§18-20).<sup>156</sup> Again, Lóeg emphasises the easy manner in which Goll casts him

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<sup>155</sup> With reference to Pokorny’s work who takes *bott* to mean ‘penis’ and *catt* to mean ‘vulva’, Mac Cana (1992, 77n) questions O’Rahilly’s translation of this, suggesting that it is instead a sexual insult. This item does not occur in the corresponding episode in TBC II.

<sup>156</sup> This scene, particularly the incitement of the hero, the latter’s leaping on to his rival’s shield before being cast aside, bears strong similarities with the final stages of Cú Chulainn’s battle with Fer Diad in TBC I (ll.3081-92) and TBC II (ll.3295-316).

aside and concludes by noting that the latter is no more than a match for him. Despite being tossed aside again, he beheads his opponent thereafter. Bearing in mind that *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* is a derivative tale, this description has most likely been taken from another source.

Cú Chulainn's decision to remain behind to entertain the womenfolk with his feats, while the Ulstermen travel to Crúachain for the adjudication of the hero's portion in *Fled Bricrenn*, is met with disgust by Lóg: "*A cláin trúaig,*" or *se, "roscaíg do gal ocus do gaisced, dochúaid uaít in caurathmír...*" "You wretched squinter" said he, "Your valour and prowess has been exhausted, the hero's portion has gone from you" (Henderson, 1899, 52-3, §43; my translation). Once subjected to his charioteer's incitement (*iarna grisad dond araid*), Cú Chulainn immediately sets out for Crúachain at great pace. Lóg proves pivotal once again, when Cú Chulainn is facing defeat at the hands of the *geniti glinne* later in the text, when he chastises him as follows: "*Amein a Cuculainn*" or *Láeg "a midlach thruag, a siriti lethguill, dochóid do gal ocus do gaisced, in tan ata urtrachta notmalartat*" "Well then, O Cú Chulainn," said Lóg, "you wretched weakling/doomed coward, you one-eyed sprite/shape-shifter, your valour and prowess have gone when it is phantoms that destroy you" (§67; my translation). Cú Chulainn is instantly enraged, possibly distorted, leading him to annihilate these spectres (see IV.2 & IV.3).<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Elsewhere, Fergus accuses the Donn Cúailnge of dishonouring his clan and lineage in an attempt to break the deadlock in the fight between the two bulls at the end of TBC I, with the effect that the former draws back his foot and the contest progresses (ll.4136-40).

Lóeg takes a more interventionist approach when the hero is on the cusp of defeat at the hands of Crumthann Niath Náir towards the end of *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 46-7, ll.1029-52). The female satirist, Riches, who is also Crumthann's foster-mother, urges the latter to seek revenge upon Cú Chulainn. Thereafter, she advises him that provided that he has two hands to deal with Cú Chulainn, he will be able to overwhelm him. Riches removes her clothes in front of the hero causing him to shield his face whereupon she instructs Crumthann to attack him. Despite Lóeg's warning, Cú Chulainn refuses to rise while Riches remains in her naked state at which point the former hurls a stone at her breaking her back in two. Subsequently, Cú Chulainn defeats Crumthann. This unusual scene should perhaps be considered in the broader context of the tale which is in general less than favourable in its depiction of Cú Chulainn (see IV.1).

Bricriu's incitement of Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn sparks intense rivalry amongst the trio for the hero's portion in *Fled Bricrenn*. Prior to their departure from Crúachain in the same tale, Lóegaire, Conall and Cú Chulainn join a group of youths playing the *rothchless* 'wheel-feat' which involves tossing a wheel-shaped object into the air (Henderson, 1899, 81-3, §§64-5; see IV.5). The castings of the first two participants, Lóegaire and Conall, are greeted with laughter from the boys but both figures misinterpret this for applause. O'Leary (1991a, 15-6) observes that in early Irish literature, laughter was usually 'a conscious condemnation of unacceptable behaviour' and thus needs to be refuted which neither hero does.<sup>158</sup> Conversely, Cú Chulainn perceives their shouts of applause (*gáir commaidmi*) for him as ones of ridicule (*gáir chuitbiuda ocus fonamait*)

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<sup>158</sup> Having been informed by the women of Ulster that he was subject to ridicule (*cutbiud*) in the Connacht camp because of his beardless state, Cú Chulainn applies a false beard so that he can seek combat with Lóch (TBC I, ll.1899-900).

(Henderson, 1899, 81-3, §§64-5). Presumably it is in response to this, that the hero proceeds to perform an additional feat with the thrice fifty needles of the womenfolk, which is again praised. O’Leary (1991a, 16) claims that ‘Cú Chulainn’s reaction makes perfect sense, for, as he knows from painful experience, almost all Irish laughter is meant to mock and ridicule’. Having failed to scale the bridge to Scáthach’s home on the first three attempts in *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn is seemingly jeered by a group of warriors, bringing on a distortion which allows him to cross it thereafter (*Nos cáinet ind fir*; van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68).<sup>159</sup>

Unaware of the Morrígan’s underwater attack on Cú Chulainn while the latter fights Lóch mac Mo Femis in TBC I, Fergus orders that the youth be taunted (*gressed*) for his wretched performance in the presence of the enemy (ll.1987-9). Bricriu’s jeering of him is pivotal to his subsequent defeat of Lóch and the Morrígan (ll.1990-2030).<sup>160</sup> The warrior goddess’ doubting of his ability in one of his initial boyhood deeds, spurs him on to dispose of a ghastly phantom (ll.498-502). Leborcham’s initial attempts to foment Cú Chulainn to fight in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne fail*, but Conall Cernach’s wife, Níab, succeeds by indicating that her husband has surpassed him in terms of greatness. Cú Chulainn’s reaction suggests that he perceives this as an insult to his honour:

“A *ben ném*,” ar Cú Chulaind, “*ciabam trú-sa nim:tharraid cubés. Con:róetar m’ainech. Nim- ág -archelad. Ni- mmo guin –immgabaim*”  
 “Indeed, woman,” said Cú Chulainn, “though I may be doomed, an equal has

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<sup>159</sup> The hero is also insulted in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* when he feels that he is being treated as a *fertigess* ‘steward’, whereupon he reacts by beheading nine people (Hollo, 2005, 55 & 100, §18).

<sup>160</sup> Similar tactics are employed by Medb to coerce Fer Diad to fight his beloved foster-brother, Cú Chulainn, when she leads him to believe that the latter considered him to be weak and cowardly (TBC I, ll.2609-14).

not overtaken/will not overtake me. I have preserved/will preserve my honor. I will not be guarded from battle/valor will not be/has not been stolen from me. I do not avoid my death” (Kimpton, 2009, 13 & 36, §5).

## **Conclusion**

The substantial number of examples discussed provides a general understanding of the significance of honour to the martial figure. Doubts concerning the hero's ability or honour clearly spur him into action. Lóeg's interventions in this manner underline his importance to Cú Chulainn. He keeps his master in check when required, while his timely intrusions in a number of contests are pivotal to his final victory. Additionally, a number of these scenes point to a particularly human element in Cú Chulainn. They allude to limitations to his heroic ability, owing perhaps to the fact that, while he is endowed with great powers and ability, he nonetheless is mortal.

### **V.3. Treachery and honour**

O'Leary (1991, 29) asserts that:

the regular recourse to what strikes a modern sensibility as treachery pure and simple make sense when one recalls that the Irish hero is judged by success, not intention. What matters is winning or losing, not how one plays the game, for public perception of triumph retroactively validates the methods that produced that triumph.

Thereafter, he observes that examples of 'such efficacious treachery in early Irish literature are too numerous to detail'; a number of which involve Cú Chulainn.

Deceitful tactics are employed by the youth to procure arms in his final boyhood deed. Conchobar uses the word *bréc* ‘falsehood, lie, deception’ in his condemnation of the hero and he appears satisfied with the latter’s explanation:

“A rí Féne, ní bréc,” ol Cú Chulaind. “Is hé dorinchoisc [sén] dia *felmacaib imbúarach* ⁊ *rachúala-sa fri hEmain andess, dodeochad-sa chucut-su íarom*”  
““O king of the Fían, it is no deceit,” said Cú Chulainn. “He prophesied good fortune for his pupils this morning and I heard him from where I was on the south side of Emain, and then I came to you”” (TBC I, ll.633-7).

Thereafter, Cú Chulainn is also somewhat devious in his efforts to replace Conall Cernach as protector of Ulster (ll.667-79). Perhaps insulted to some degree by Conall’s swift dismissal of his request, the hero reacts by breaking the former’s chariot with a slingshot forcing him to relinquish his post (see V.6). Given Cú Chulainn’s premature development as a warrior, alternative stratagems must be used by him to establish himself as a martial hero.

Rather than being depicted as a slight in his heroic persona, his ability to resort to such means underlines his astuteness. This additional faculty is pivotal in his conquests over a number of opponents in distant or supernatural realms (see III.4.3.1-4). He catches Eochaid Íuil unawares while washing himself, presumably attacks him from behind by piercing him in the shoulder in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 20, §36). This too is the case with Scáthach when he overbears her with a sword in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 51-2, §70).<sup>161</sup> The manner in which he overcomes the renowned female warrior, Aífe, in this tale is particularly

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<sup>161</sup> Cú Chulainn redirects the spear that is cast at him by a warrior to hit Eochu Rond’s horse in *Fled Bricreann ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* (Hollo, 2005, 55 & 99-100, §15). This is viewed as a misdeed (*bét*).

deceitful. Having enquired as to her most treasured possessions, namely, her horse, chariot and charioteer, Cú Chulainn uses this knowledge against her during their duel:

*Is and asbert Cú Chulainn: “Aill amae,” ol sé, “dorochair a harae Aife 7 a dá ech 7 a carpat fon nglend, conid apatar uili.” Déicid Aife la sodain. Fosdichet Cú Chulainn la sodain (.i. ro soich) 7 gabthus foa dib cíchib 7 dosmbert tarsna amal asclaind co tulaid coa slúagu fodéin Cú Chulainn. Conrodastar a béimm fri talmain de. 7 dobert claideb urnocht úaisti.* ‘Then Cú Chulainn said: “Alas,” said he, “The charioteer and the two horses and chariot of Aife have fallen into the valley and they are all dead”. Suddenly Aife looked up. Then Cú Chulainn approaches her (that is, he reaches) and seizes her under her two breasts and he threw her across like a load and he came to his own host. He intended to crush her against the earth (he threw her on the ground) and he held an unsheathed sword over her’ (§76; my translation).

Cú Chulainn’s actions are not condemned in either text. Less conventional tactics are required to overcome such accomplished opponents.

Cú Chulainn is involved in a more protracted plot to kill the mysterious Cú Roí in *Aided Con Roí* with Bláthnait.<sup>162</sup> The early part of the tale underlines Cú Roí’s exceptional martial skills when he successfully manages to seize substantial booty from the Ulstermen and humiliate their chief warrior (Best, 1905, 20-3, §§2-3; see III.4.3.3). Hellmuth (2000, 56-7) observes that in the literature the warrior, Cú Roí, is depicted as having strong associations with magic and is the possessor of superhuman strength.<sup>163</sup> In the Eg. 88 version of *Aided Con Roí*, Cú Roí is equipped with an external soul which is found in a salmon that only reveals itself

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<sup>162</sup> It is noted in III.6.2-3 that treachery and women often feature strongly in the deaths of heroes.

<sup>163</sup> Cú Roí’s presentation in *Fled Bricrenn* is considered to some extent in IV.2.

every seven years (Thurneysen, 1913, 192, §§10-1).<sup>164</sup> Cú Roí's strength and bravery is immediately drained when Cú Chulainn kills the salmon.<sup>165</sup> Clearly, Cú Roí is an exceptional figure thus extraordinary means are required to bring about his death. It is noteworthy that while the related text, *Brinna Ferchertne*, strongly condemns Bláthnait's deceit of her husband, Cú Chulainn's involvement is not condemned.<sup>166</sup>

The relationship between Cú Roí and Cú Chulainn elsewhere is also worth noting.<sup>167</sup> Having found themselves in Cú Roí's territory in *Mesca Ulad*, Cú Chulainn's suggestion for the Ulstermen to flee is met with shock and dismay by Fergna mac Findchonna of the Ulstermen; "*Ní fhetamar*"..... "*comairli merbi ná mettachta ná mígascid acut d'Ultaib ríam, a Chú Chulainn, cusinocht*" "O Cú Chulainn, we have not known you before tonight to have counsel of weakness or timidity or cowardice for the Ulstermen" (Watson, 1941, 15, ll.325; my translation). While in *Fled Bricrenn*, Cú Chulainn, conceivably, has two encounters with a disguised Cú Roí and the latter is responsible for awarding him with the hero's portion therein (see IV.2 & V.1). Cú Roí features on the side of the Connacht forces in TBC but does not engage in single combat with Cú Chulainn. Intending to fight him in TBC I, Cú Roí withdraws owing to the latter's severely injured state (ll.3396-400). TBC II adds that Cú Roí is concerned that Cú Chulainn may die as a result of the

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<sup>164</sup> Hellmuth (1998, 9) observes that this associates Cú Roí with 'near immortality'.

<sup>165</sup> It is not entirely clear whether Cú Roí dies as a result of Cú Chulainn killing the salmon or if he is killed separately. See Baudiš (1914) for a consideration of this episode.

<sup>166</sup> *Amra Con Roi* presents a similar view (Henry, 1995, 188-94).

<sup>167</sup> A fuller discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this research.

wounds inflicted by Fer Diad and not by him and is thus unwilling to enter into combat with him (ll.3949-55).<sup>168</sup>

## Conclusion

For the most part, Cú Chulainn's seemingly treacherous behaviour is not condemned. It is a decisive part of his heroic character, particularly given that it is pivotal in his overwhelming of a number of more mysterious characters like Aífe, Eochaid Íuil and Cú Roí.

## V.4. *Fír fer*

Literally translated as 'the truth or justice of men', O'Leary (1987, 5-8) observes that 'the usual meaning of *fír fer* in the Ulster Cycle is single combat, a one to one fight'. It also seems to apply to the manner in which a fight is contested. Binchy (1952, 42n) states that '[o]riginally *fír fer* ('the justice of men') stands for ordeal of battle' as opposed to *fír nDé* 'iudicium Dei', the ordeal by fire, water, etc. It also comes to mean a fairly conducted duel, a fair fight...'.<sup>169</sup> McCone (1984, 12) observes that the martial principle of *fír fer* is weakly translated as 'fair play'. The terms *fír fer* and *comlann óenfir* 'one man's fight' are used together in TBC II, suggesting a further differentiation in the meaning of the former. Both references occur in the context of Cú Chulainn being outnumbered in contests (TBC II,

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<sup>168</sup> Although Cú Chulainn offers to do battle with him, it does not materialise (TBC II, ll.3954-5). With respect to Cú Roí's decision not to fight the injured Cú Chulainn, O'Leary (1991, 36) rightly observes that '[i]n other words, Cú Roí's concern is not ethical, the injustice of killing a helpless opponent, but competitive, the possibility of advancing the prestige of a rival, even a dead one like Fer Diad'.

<sup>169</sup> Binchy (1952, 42n) suggests that the scope of *fír fer* may extend further, for example, he notes, with reference to Fergus mac Léti's encounter with the dwarf in *Echtrae Fergusa Maic Léti*, that it may also have been a breach of this code to 'deny quarter to a vanquished opponent who begged' for it in the manner that the dwarf did therein. The dwarf sucks his breasts and holds his cheek.

ll.2525-6, ll.4002).<sup>170</sup> The absence of any significant elaboration renders it difficult to determine the nature of this suggested differentiation.

*Fír fer* seems to be predominantly connected with numerical equality in martial situations. In addition, O’Leary (1987, 5-8) observes that the terms denoting single combat stress the importance of equality in numbers:

*comlann óenfir* (‘one man’s fight’),<sup>171</sup> *comrac óenfir* (‘one man’s combat’), *comrac deise* (‘the combat of a pair’), *ar galaib óenfir* (‘according to the deeds of a single man’), *comlann comardae na fer* (‘an equal combat at men’), *connert* (‘equal strength’), *comrac fri fer/láech* (‘combat against a man/warrior’), *comrac fír re fer* (‘man to man combat’), *comcomlann coir* (‘a proper equal fight’), *comrac comthrom* (‘an equal combat’), and *comthrom comlainn* (‘equality in battle’).

Earlier, he concludes that ‘[i]n ancient Ireland, as in virtually all heroic cultures, the single combat was central’ and that unequal combats are condemned throughout the literature (O’Leary, 1987, 5).

There are a number of references to Cú Chulainn’s killings in single combat (*ar galaib óenfir*; TBC I, ll.1557-60, ll.1736-7; van Hamel, 1933, 61, §81).<sup>172</sup> It is noted in IV.1 that Cú Chulainn’s single combat with Fer Diad in TBC is accorded much attention and is represented as the ideal honourable contest in many respects. O’Leary (1987, 8) asserts that ‘the single combat remained the absolutely central

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<sup>170</sup> Thereafter, Súaldaim reiterates Cú Chulainn’s dismay that *fír fer* and *comlann óenfir* are not granted to him in his beseeching of the Ulstermen to come to his son’s aid (TBC II, l.4025).

<sup>171</sup> O’Leary (1987, 6) observes that this term along with *fír fer* is the most common.

<sup>172</sup> Cú Chulainn remarks that he killed his enemies by equal combat in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (*a comlond comarda na bfer*; Meyer, 1910, 53).

event in any warrior's heroic career'. It is the ultimate platform for any warrior.<sup>173</sup> Swerving from the path of another warrior and refusing to enter into a duel are considered in the context of martial *geisi* in V.6. The value of single combat is succinctly portrayed in Fergus' comments in reaction to Cú Chulainn's perceived fleeing from Nad Crantail in TBC I:

*“Is féli dó immorro...a imfolach in tan teches ría n-áeniur, ol nípo móo a gress dó andás do Ultaib archena”* “It is better for him, however, to hide himself when he flees from a single opponent, for it is no greater dishonour for him than for the rest of the Ulstermen” (ll.1431-2).

*Fír fer* is represented as a martial code which should be adhered to in TBC, but it is its violation which prevails therein. Even though Cú Chulainn finds himself numerically challenged on several occasions in his *macgnímrada*, these are not condemned in the way that similar situations are in the main body of TBC.<sup>174</sup> The collective attack of the three sons of Garách and their charioteers on Cú Chulainn is viewed as an abuse of the terms of fair play and thus justifies his slaying of them (*ro brisisset fír fer fair*; TBC I, ll.914-5).<sup>175</sup> The assaults of groups of five (*Is and sin conbocht fír fer fair-seom*; ll.2031-3)<sup>176</sup> and twenty (*Bristir fír fer for Coin Culaind*; ll.1552-5) on other occasions are similarly represented. Moreover, Súaldaim expresses his dismay that Cú Chulainn is persistently fighting against the

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<sup>173</sup> It is noteworthy that Cú Chulainn refuses to enter into a duel (*comlund*) in *Fled Bricrenn* until he has eaten and slept (Henderson, 1899, 38-9, §31).

<sup>174</sup> Although generally condemned in the Ulster Cycle, O'Leary (1987, 7-8) observes that this is not the case in relation to unequal contests in the Cycle of the Kings where these are in general reported upon with no comment. While in the Fenian Cycle, he asserts that the majority of fights are fair and in the relatively rare instance where they are not, foreign invaders are usually the perpetrators.

<sup>175</sup> Although a similar scene is found in TBC II, the fairness of the contest is not commented upon (ll.1247-57).

<sup>176</sup> Medb sends a group of six, three druids and three druidesses, against him at a similar juncture in TBC II. Therein, it is noted that the terms of fair play and single combat are broken against him and thus he duly retaliates (*[á]ra brisisset fír breth for Coin Culaind 7 comlund óen[f]ir*; ll.2098-9).

odds in TBC I (*re n-éccomlonn*; ll.3415-6).<sup>177</sup> The outnumbering of an opponent is strongly condemned and is viewed as an *anfír* ‘injustice’ in the following scene from *Fled Bricrenn*:

*...ocus rofergaigestar Conchobar fodessin oculus Fergus mac Róig oc ascin ind étúalaing 7 ind anfír, .i. in días do gabáil immón n-óenfer, .i. Conall Cernach 7 Loegaire Búadach im Choinculaind* ‘...and Conchobar and Fergus mac Róich were angered at seeing the oppression and the injustice, that is of the duo surrounding a single man, that is Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach around Cú Chulainn’ (Henderson, 1899, 14-6, §16; my translation).

Thereafter, Conchobar and Fergus intervene between the combatants.<sup>178</sup>

Indeed the violation of this martial code is pivotal to Medb’s efforts to dispose of the hero in TBC; the implication being that this is the only possible way that Cú Chulainn will be defeated. Despite apparently agreeing to send only one warrior a day to fight Cú Chulainn at the ford, Medb and Ailill are quite liberal in their interpretation of the terms of this truce and in particular, the meaning of single combat (TBC I, ll.1280-6). Thereafter, Medb dispatches the six royal heirs of Clanna Dedad against him (ll.1689-93).<sup>179</sup> Later in the tale, she sends Gaile Dána, his twenty-seven sons and his nephew against the hero, all of whom cast their spears at the latter at the same time (ll.2547-54). In TBC II, this is rationalised by stating that this group constituted a single person owing to their blood relationship,

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<sup>177</sup> Towards the end of TBC I, Cú Chulainn’s wounds are attributed to the fact that he has been fighting against the odds (*i nn-écomlund*; ll.3843-4).

<sup>178</sup> The overwhelming of Cú Chulainn’s foster-son by three hundred Leinstermen is condemned in *Talland Étaíre* (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 46 & 56).

<sup>179</sup> In the latter stages of TBC I, Cú Chulainn proclaims that: “*nephní lem robad re n-énláech dam*” “‘I think nothing of a warning against the coming of a single warrior’” (ll.2804).

thus presenting this contest as a fair duel (ll.2534-45). This seems to be Medb's justification for sending both these groups against Cú Chulainn in TBC I.

Prior to Cú Chulainn's fight with Lóch mac Mo Femis, Medb issues the following order: *brister fír fer fair* 'let terms of fair play be broken against him' and that a band of warriors (*fíán láech*) be sent against him until Lóch is ready for the contest (TBC I, ll.1884-5, ll.1911-2).<sup>180</sup> Soon after the joint attack of Lóch and the Morrígan on Cú Chulainn, Fergus demands of his sureties that Cú Chulainn should get *fír fer* (ll.2056-7). Some of the subsequent challengers oppose him in single combat, but this reprieve is short-lived with Medb quickly resorting to her previous tactics by sending one hundred against him (ll.2060-8). Much earlier in the tale, there is a reference to a request by Fergus to front the Connacht army, alongside the banished Ulstermen, in a bid to ensure fair play in a contest between Cú Chulainn and Mane, the son of Ailill (ll.1134-6). This being so, these breaches add to Cú Chulainn's general depiction as the mighty warrior in TBC. A contrasting account of how fair play is violated against the Ulster warrior, Óengus mac Óenláime, when he finds himself outnumbered and thus defeated further underscores Cú Chulainn's conquests (*Brisit fír fer fair íarom 7 ra mbeótar i n-écomland*; ll.2489-94).

Cú Chulainn's adherence to his word is highlighted by contrasting it with that of Lóegaire and Conall's in *Fled Bricrenn*. A dim view is taken of Lóegaire's false report, which leads the Ulstermen to believe that Conall and Cú Chulainn have fallen at the hand of Ercol (Henderson, 1899, 88-91, §§69-71). In a bid to prevent

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<sup>180</sup> Thereafter, she conspires to send a number of men against him while she parleys with him (ll.1918-25).

Cú Chulainn from claiming the hero's portion with the gold cup that Medb had bestowed upon him, they accuse him of having bought it (§74). The duo are also represented as initially giving their word to adhere to Úath's judgment only to withdraw it upon hearing the details of the proposed covenant (§§76-7; see IV.2). Conversely, Cú Chulainn fulfils his word.

Much emphasis is placed on *fír fer* in the closing contest in *Fled Bricrenn* (see IV.2). Soon after his arrival at Emain Machae, the churl (*bachlach*) announces that despite extensive travels he cannot find an opponent to fulfill the rules of fair play in his special challenge (*nech nocomallnad fír fer frimm imbe*; Meyer, 1893, 451 & 456, §93). The churl only agrees to reveal the quest on the condition that he will be granted fair play (*fír fer*; §94). O'Leary (1987, 9) rightly observes that 'he is not seeking simple single combat, but rather fair play in the sense of a willingness to abide by the arbitrary yet mutually accepted terms of a dangerous covenant'. Borsje (2005, 182) observes that the hero's truthfulness is tested in this scene and despite his frightened state, Cú Chulainn keeps his word.<sup>181</sup> Cú Chulainn is the only one brave enough to present himself for beheading and it is this that 'makes him the true hero, which is now publicly acknowledged in the presence of all' (Borsje, 2005, 182).

The term *fír fer* also applies to the manner in which contests are carried out. This is perhaps most poignantly illustrated in the contest between Lugaid mac Con and Conall Cernach at the end of *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 26-7 & 45, §29). Conall renders himself one-armed by tying his hand to his side to

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<sup>181</sup> It is noteworthy that Cú Chulainn shows signs of fear to the extent that Conchobar forbids him to leave until his word to the churl has been fulfilled (Meyer, 1893, 453 & 457-8, §§98-9).

match Lugaid’s similar state in order to adhere to the latter’s request for *fír fer*. The subsequent attack of Conall’s horse on Lugaid is viewed as a breach of these terms but the former quickly reminds him that he only promised *fír fer* on behalf of himself and not for his horse.<sup>182</sup> Similarly, Conall’s hand is bound to his side to match Mess Gegra’s one-armed state in their contest in *Talland Étair* after the latter points out that it would not be a *fír ngaiscid* ‘truth of weapons/bravery’ unless this is done (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 49 & 60). Chadwick & Chadwick (1932, vol. I, 86-7) observe that in single combats ‘heroes are usually expected to show a chivalrous spirit, which will prevent them from taking advantage of any disability on the part of their opponents’.

O’Leary (1987, 7) identifies and translates a number of other terms for a fair fight: *cert comlainn* ‘just or fair fight’, *coir ngaiscid* ‘proper or correct valour’, *fír ngaiscid* ‘truth of valour’, and *fír láechdachtae* ‘truth of warriorship’.<sup>183</sup> Nad Crantail issues the following request to Cú Chulainn prior to their contest in TBC I: “*Déne coir ngaiscid frim trá*” “Grant me fair play now” to which Cú Chulainn responds: “*Rot bíá són co fesamar*” “You shall have it provided that we know it” (ll.1457-8). Thereafter, both warriors are involved in arranging the terms for their duel. Nad Crantail instructs Cú Chulainn not to avoid his casts while the latter promises only to do so by leaping upwards (ll.1459-64). However, Nad Crantail is dissatisfied when Cú Chulainn does this and when the latter asks him to carry out the same act; it leads to his death (see IV.6). A similar response is given by Cú Chulainn to Fráech’s request for a fair fight in TBC I: “*Committi són amal bas*

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<sup>182</sup> It is noted in III.2.3 that Cú Chulainn adheres to this code when he casts aside his hurley and ball in his fight against the hound in his penultimate boyhood deed (TBC I, ll.581-5).

<sup>183</sup> Cú Chulainn asks Lugaid mac Nóis úí Lomairc for fair play and goodly combat when he visits him briefly in TBC I (*Imgéna fír lim-sa 7 dagláechdachtae*; l.1178).

*maith latt*” ““Arrange that as you please”” (ll.846).<sup>184</sup> These examples, along with those involving Conall as outlined above, suggest that at least some of the codes were tailored to the contest in question.

Cú Chulainn is clearly dismayed at his foster-brother, Fer Báeth’s decision to fight him in TBC I because it is contrary to the solemn covenant (*cotach*) between them (ll.1749-76). He sends the following message to Fer Báeth via Lugaid mac Nóis úí Lomairc: “*Apair friss dano ní fír láechdachta dó tuidecht ar mo chend-sa*” ““Tell him it is unworthy of his valour that he should come against me”” (ll.1767-8). Cú Chulainn draws upon their bond as foster-brothers and that arising from their common foster-mother, Scáthach, in his efforts to persuade Fer Báeth not to fight him. Finally, he orders Fer Báeth to renounce their bond of friendship if he insists on proceeding with the contest.<sup>185</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The term *fír fer* refers mostly to a numerically even contest and to one which is fairly conducted. Single combat seems to be the generally accepted ideal in the context of warrior combats. Additional terms, which may be contest specific, can also be agreed by both contestants. Much emphasis is placed upon the breaching of these codes in fights against Cú Chulainn, most predominantly in TBC serving to secure his position as the greatest warrior of the Ulster Cycle.

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<sup>184</sup> Before entering into a fight with Cú Chulainn, Fráech asks the following of him: “*bad chert do c[h]luchi frim*” ““give me fair play”” (TBC I, ll.844-5).

<sup>185</sup> Lugaid refers to his bond of friendship with Cú Chulainn in an effort to persuade the latter not to kill his brother in TBC I (ll.1830-5).

## V.5. Other martial codes

Cú Chulainn is further portrayed as entertaining other rules around martial combat, though exceptions are often made. Among the categories of people or more specifically non-combatants, not usually slain by him in TBC I include charioteers, unarmed men, women and possibly physicians.<sup>186</sup> Despite reassuring Órlám's charioteer that he does not kill members of his calling in TBC I, he kills him soon after (ll.895-919). Within this anecdote, the three sons of Gárach and their charioteers also fall at the hands of Cú Chulainn.<sup>187</sup> The text qualifies Cú Chulainn's actions by observing that exceptions are made when such groupings are found to be at fault. In the above example, these people participate in a collective attack on the hero thus their slaying is justified but his reason for killing Ailill's charioteer, Cuillius, is not so apparent (ll.1230-2). Killed with a stone while washing the wheels of his chariot at the ford, Cuillius probably oversteps his mark by taking such liberties at a place in which Cú Chulainn usually dominates.

Cú Chulainn avoids battle with Nad Crantail owing to the fact that he is armed only with holly spears (ll.1415-43).<sup>188</sup> Thereafter, a wagon is used to carry Nad Crantail's weapons for their subsequent contest. In his initial encounter with Fóill in TBC II, he urges him to fetch his arms, explaining that he does not wound the unarmed (ll.1095-8). Presumably, after the pleading of Láiríne's brother not to kill him in TBC I, Cú Chulainn meets him unarmed, casting aside his opponent's weapons before squeezing him until the excrement is driven out of him (ll.1836-

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<sup>186</sup> In TBC II, Cú Chulainn announces that he does not wound charioteers, messengers and those who are unarmed (ll.1727-9).

<sup>187</sup> He also proclaims that he does not wound charioteers or messengers in his final *macgnímrá*d in TBC II (ll.1095-8).

<sup>188</sup> A similar scene is found in TBC II (ll.1706-31). Chadwick & Chadwick (1932, vol. I, 87) consider Cú Chulainn's behaviour as chivalrous in this instance.

41). Refusing to use weapons against such a young boy, Mand Muresci casts his aside before engaging in a wrestling match against Cú Chulainn with neither party appearing to use arms (ll.2530-41). Cú Chulainn's beardless state is problematic for a number of warriors in TBC. He smears on a false beard for his fight with Nad Crantail (TBC I, ll.1449-55). Later in the tale, Cú expresses his dissatisfaction at fighting such a young boy (ll.1700-1). He chants a spell over grass to create a beard to qualify to fight Lóch mac Mo Femis (TBC, ll.1899-907).

TBC II adds that striking from behind goes against his principles. Having encountered Medb as she urinated toward the end of the tale, he spares her life because he is not accustomed to striking from behind (ll.4833-4).<sup>189</sup> Conversely, TBC I notes that he does not attack her because she is a woman (l.4117). On the other hand, earlier in the saga it is revealed that he vows to cast a sling-shot at Medb and Ailill whenever he sees them (ll.921-2). Thereafter, it is noted that in his attempts to strike Medb with a sling-shot, he kills her handmaid, Lócha (ll.974-7).

It is suggested that women are essentially safe from Cú Chulainn's martial exploits, but there are a number of examples where this is not the case.<sup>190</sup> Angered by the fact that he is unable to join the final battle owing to his gravely ill condition, the hero's wounds become unplugged causing him to lash out violently to fatally smash the heads of two women against each other before becoming distorted in TBC I (ll.4086-93). Subsequently, it is stated that these women were sent by Medb

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<sup>189</sup> It is noted in III.4.3.1 that he spares the lives of Scáthach and Aífe in *Tochmarc Emire*.

<sup>190</sup> While not taking the form of a woman during their combat, Cú Chulainn forcefully shatters the Morrigan's attack in TBC I (ll.1982-2005). Ailill urges Fergus not to fight against the women and cattle of Ulster in TBC I (l.2429).

to falsely lament over him in an attempt to aggravate his wounds thus justifying their slaying.<sup>191</sup> His motivation for killing a woman with a single punch in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* is somewhat less clear (Hollo, 2005, 59 & 104, §36). Though not a murder, his manhandling of Finnabair much earlier in TBC I, in response to her involvement in a plot to ambush him, is condonable (ll.1593-605).

While TBC I notes that a large number of women as well as hounds, horses, children and the common folk die in the battle of Breslech Mór, it is not clear whether Cú Chulainn alone was the responsible party or not (ll.2329-32).<sup>192</sup> If he is, it is noteworthy that he is undergoing a *ríastrad* at the time and thus he is possibly incapable of discerning the different categories of people. Prior to this, three druids' wives and their husbands fall at his hands but no detail is supplied (ll.2064-6). Two female thieves, ten jesters, and ten cupbearers are also killed by him (l.1557-60). In retaliation for the torture and death of Derbforgaill, Cú Chulainn kills one-hundred and fifty women (Marstrander, 1911, 212 & 215).

Cú Chulainn also seems to have quite a practical principle of not slaying physicians suggesting that the hero is cognisant of their potential value should he be injured. In TBC I, he advises Lugaid mac Nóis uí Lomairc to get his battalion to bear a sign so that he will recognise them and thus he will not cast at them. He also urges him

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<sup>191</sup> The women are also instructed to tell Cú Chulainn that the Ulstermen and Fergus had fallen because the hero was unable to take part in the battle (TBC I, ll.4089-93). These women are identified as the two satirists, Fethan and Collach, in TBC II where their behaviour and fate is similar (ll.4596-9, ll.4793-6).

<sup>192</sup> Enraged at the refusal to allow him to enter the fort of Conall mac Gleo Glais in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, he throws a boulder at it, killing one hundred and fifty slaves (Stokes, 1893, 424-5, §§43-4).

to get his physicians to do the same (ll.1187-90). Indeed later in the tale, he scolds Cethern for killing a number of these medics (ll.3191-2).

A rare example of transcendence from martial codes is evident in Cú Chulainn and Fergus' meetings in TBC.<sup>193</sup> The strength of the bond between these two men is indicated by Cú Chulainn's initial refusal to respond to Etarcomal's insulting of him in TBC I offering the following explanation:

*“Cid nom cháne,” ol Cú Chulaind, “nít gén-sa for bith Fergus[a]. Manipad do snádud immorro, roptís do renga rigthi 7 do chét[h]remain scaílte ricfaitís úaim dochum in dúnaid i ndegaid do charpait”* ““Though you revile me”, said Cú Chulainn, “I will not kill you because of Fergus. But for your being under his protection, I would have sent back your distended loins and your dismembered body behind your chariot to the encampment”” (ll.1329-31).

Herein lies what seems to be a reference to an important principle of early Irish law, namely, the right of a freeman to give protection (*snádud*) to another person of equal or lower rank for a specific period of time.<sup>194</sup> Among the payments due in the event of the injuring or killing of the protected person include one equalling the protector's honour-price thus this suggests that such acts are essentially viewed as a crime against the latter and presumably an insult to his honour. Understandably, Cú Chulainn is unwilling to commit such an offence particularly against Fergus.

Elsewhere in TBC, this strong connection makes both characters act in rather surprising ways. O'Leary (1991, 39) observes that '[t]hrough their *unwitnessed*

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<sup>193</sup> In *Serglige Con Culainn*, Cú Chulainn blindly casts a spear at the enemy and states that he has never done that before (Dillon, 1953a, 23, §38).

<sup>194</sup> See Kelly (1988, 140-1) for a discussion on the violation of protection in early Irish law.

pact, the two men affirm the profound value of their personal relationship over the competitive imperatives of the heroic code, and thereby to a meaningful extent free themselves from it, if only briefly'. Fergus is goaded into fighting Cú Chulainn by Medb and goes to meet him without his sword. Having proclaimed that he would not use this weapon on Cú Chulainn, he requests of him: "*Teilg traigid dam, a C[h]ú Chulaind*" "Retreat a step from me, Cú Chulainn" and Cú Chulainn responds as follows: "*Teilgfe-so dano dam-sa arísi*" "You in turn will retreat before me" (TBC I, ll.2510-1). To which Fergus replies: "*Samlaid écin*" "Even so indeed" (l.2512). Although this scene is not very explicit, it seems that Cú Chulainn may have initially took one step back and perhaps Fergus does the same before the former departs fully. The initial more gradual retreat seems not to have been witnessed but Cú Chulainn's leaving is; at which point the Connacht supporters urge Fergus to give chase. He refuses to do so on the grounds that the youth is too lively for him. While in TBC II, he informs Medb that no other warrior had brought about the hero's exit (ll.2504-7).

No such slow withdrawal is depicted in TBC II, where Fergus asks Cú Chulainn to flee for the sake of the honour of the Ulstermen (ll.2490-508). Cú Chulainn is reluctant to do so: "*Is lesc lim-sa innísin ám,*" *bar Cú Chulaind*, "*teiched ria n-óenfer for Táin Bó Cúalnge*" "I am loath to do that," said Cú Chulainn, "to flee before one man on the Foray of Cúailnge" (TBC II, ll.2495-6). Fergus' subsequent claim that he and the men of Ireland will flee from him in a subsequent battle changes his mind causing him to take his leave. Feasibly, Cú Chulainn stands to gain more than Fergus in the context of acquisition of honour, given that

a whole army will retreat from him. Thereafter, Fergus and a large number of the men of Ireland, do so without hesitation (TBC I, ll.4103-10; TBC II, ll.4807-14).

O’Leary (1991, 39) observes that ‘both major players win here, but the rules of the game have been significantly altered’. This confrontation could have been avoided by Fergus refusing to challenge in the first instance, but this would credibly have been very damaging to his reputation. O’Leary (1991, 39) further adds that:

...both men are at this moment able to accept and look beyond what they know will be spontaneous and unavoidable negative public perception of their respective retreats, for they see this pact as the best way to manoeuvre out of the dreadful impasse to which Medb believes she has driven them.

He notes that Fergus essentially ‘wins’ the first fight while Cú Chulainn’s victory at a decisive juncture essentially sabotages Medb’s efforts in the final battle.

Interestingly, Cú Chulainn plausibly displays a more magnanimous side when he retreats from the fatally injured Lóch mac Mo Femis and Fer Diad. In TBC I, Lóch requests that Cú Chulainn take a step back from him which the hero duly does (“*teilg traigid dam!*” ll.2028-9). While in TBC II, Lóch asks Cú Chulainn for a favour and reassures him that it is not one of quarter (*anacal*) or cowardice (*midlachas*) before explaining that he wishes to fall facing the east ruling out possible suggestions that he may have fled from Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn agrees to retreat “...*dáig is láechda ind ascid connaigi*” ““for it is a warrior’s request you make”” (ll.2004-10). Albeit in a different context, Binchy (1952, 42n; see footnote 169) observes that it may have been a breach of *fír fer* to deny quarter to a

vanquished foe. Given that there is no evidence that Lóch was cowardly in the contest, perhaps Cú Chulainn also deems it fitting that he should not be misrepresented in death. Indeed much emphasis is placed on the manner in which Cú Chulainn's corpse is positioned on his death (see III.6.3 & VII.4). Perhaps this is also somewhat in his own interest, because, presumably, a conquest over an opponent who is considered as a fair match is surely of greater significance than that over a rival who flees.

O'Leary (1991, 41) draws parallels between this scene and that between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad in TBC II (ll.3375-8). He adds that '[w]ith Fer Diad, no request is necessary, as Cú Chulainn embraces his dying foster-brother and carries him all the way to the Ulster side of the ford 'so that it would be north of the ford his spoils would be and not west of the ford with the men of Ireland', thereby allowing him a shred of posthumous triumph'. O'Leary (1991, 40) claims that in both these instances Cú Chulainn 'freely yields both a significant honorific concession'. In further conclusion, he notes that:

...thus by according such respect to the vanquished bodies of Lóch and Fer Diad. Cú Chulainn does act with genuine if sharply restricted selflessness, enhancing the appearance and thereby the reputation of worthy foes at the expense – albeit slight- of his own (O'Leary, 1991, 42).

Compassionate acts are also performed by Cú Chulainn on other occasions. His returning of Eochu Rond to the enclosure after knocking him from his horse with a special trick in *Fled Bricreann ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* can be viewed in this way (Hollo, 2005, 55 & 99-100, §§15-6; see footnote 161). At the request of his brother, Cú Chulainn spares the life of Láiríne in TBC I (ll.1830-44).

## Conclusion

Cú Chulainn is depicted as adhering to a number of basic rules in terms of the categories of people who he does not kill. Significantly, efforts to develop this component of his character are more pronounced in TBC and for the most part these are not particularly unusual and arguably reflect codes of combat that one might expect of warriors. In this regard, this also introduces a very human element to his character. Conceivably, little kudos would be obtained by slaying such people anyway. Yet, if members of these groups antagonise or cross him, they will suffer accordingly. Evidently, there are some exceptions where Cú Chulainn is seen to exercise his own discretion with respect to conceding honorific concessions in certain circumstances.

## V.6. *Geisi*

*DIL* translates *geis* (nom. pl *geisi*) as a ‘taboo’ or ‘prohibition’<sup>195</sup> or alternatively as a ‘positive injunction or demand’ and observes that the ‘infraction of which involved disastrous consequences’ while further proclaiming that these were sometimes ‘fortuitous, originating in the fact that a certain course of action had produced disastrous results in the past, sometimes they were rules of honour or prudent abstention, often they rested on deep seated primitive beliefs and ideas’. It also notes that it is connected with the verb *guidid* ‘beseeches, prays’ and Greene (1979, 11-2) suggests that it derives etymologically from it. Using McCone’s (2005, 107) system of classification of early Irish verbs, *guidid* is an S2 verb<sup>196</sup>. McCone notes that ‘the stem of all passive preterites is formed by adding a dental

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<sup>195</sup> McCone (2005, 250) offers ‘forbidden thing’ as another meaning. Other plural forms include *gessi* and *geasa* in early Modern literature.

<sup>196</sup> The present stem of all strong verbs ends in a consonant, while S2 verbs display a basic palatal stem final throughout the present forms (McCone, 2005, 68).

suffix' 'directly to the verbal root'. In the case of *guidid*, it combines with a dental (*guid-*) as *-s(s)(-)* giving *-ges(s)* 'was besought/prayed' (sg. conj.). The past participle has the same stem as the passive preterite, but inflects like a class IV adjective<sup>197</sup> i.e. *ge(i)sse* 'beseeched', while the verbal of necessity is usually the same as the former except that it is indeclinable and ends in an *-i* i.e. *gessi* '(due) to be beseeched'. *DIL* translates *ailges* as 'prayer or request', 'the refusal of which brings reproach or ill-luck'.<sup>198</sup> Likewise, the entry *ailgess dano .i. geis guide* in *Sanas Cormaic* links these elements (Meyer, 1913, 7). Thurneysen (1921, 80-1) gives 'Bitte' as its original meaning and adds that: 'aber diese Bedeutung ist vergessen'.

Kelly (1988, 20) describes *geis* as 'a supernatural injunction or "tabu" which forbids the performance of certain acts by an individual or group. The term may also be used of the prohibited action itself'. Sjoestedt (1949, 87) observes that it 'differs notably from the tabu in that the emphasis is most often placed not upon the objective passive aspect (that an object is in itself tabu) but upon the subjective active aspect (that a person is subject to a particular prohibition)'. O'Leary (1988, 86) makes the suggestion that '[*g*]eis, like all taboo, is a means of defining and thereby restricting and to some extent controlling danger',<sup>199</sup> while Steiner (1967, 146-7) asserts that:

Danger is narrowed down by taboo. A situation is regarded as dangerous: very well, but the danger may be a socially unformulated threat. Taboo gives notice

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<sup>197</sup> McCone (2005, 28) notes that this group are traditionally termed *yo-/yā-* stems.

<sup>198</sup> *DIL* states that *geis* in the general sense of 'request' is poorly attested.

<sup>199</sup> See O'Leary (1988) and various works by Sjöblom (1998, 2000, 2008) for a full discussion of the social context of *geis* in early Irish tradition along with the earlier works of Hull (1901), Dillon (1951) and Greene (1979).

that the danger lies not in the whole situation, but only in specified actions concerning it. These actions, these danger spots, are more challenging and deadly than the danger of the situation as a whole, for the whole situation can be rendered free from danger by dealing with it, or rather, avoiding the specified danger spots completely.

Turning to Celtic evidence, Reinhard (1933, 14) draws a similar conclusion: '[a]s we find them set forth in early Celtic literature it seems to have been the function of *geasa* to cause avoidance of dishonour, disaster, or death'. Kelly (1988, 20) observes that *geis* are not mentioned in the legal texts, surviving only in legal commentary.<sup>200</sup>

A supernatural or magical element is often found with respect to the *geisi* linked to sacral kingship. The wisdom text, *Tecosca Cormaic*, dating to the ninth century, states that a king is expected to be *sogeis*, 'which seems to mean that he must not break his *geisi*' (Kelly, 1988, 20).<sup>201</sup> *DIL* tentatively suggests that *sogeis* means 'having good *gessa*'. Compounded with the particle *so-*, it may also bear the sense that someone is amenable to the tie involved in *geisi*. Scholars such as Dillon (1951, 2-4) and Greene (1979, 11-4) suggest that these regal *geisi* may represent an earlier stratum of tradition and that these may have influenced their wider application in the literature. The presentation of Conaire Mór's taboos in *Togail*

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<sup>200</sup> In light of his proposal that 'taboos were characteristically a religious institution supervised and controlled by the religious experts, the druids', Sjöblom (2008, 152-3) asserts that 'it is possible that taboos are not mentioned in the medieval legal tracts because after druids had lost their social position, taboos were no longer a part of the official control mechanisms of the early Irish society, but existed as informal popular customs among lay members of society'. Alternatively, he notes that their personal and idiosyncratic nature is a more likely reason for their exclusion in the legal material.

<sup>201</sup> Legal commentary considers it a *geis* for a physically blemished king to rule at Tara (Kelly, 1988, 20).

*Bruidne Da Derga* is depicted as the *locus classicus* in this regard.<sup>202</sup> Significantly, these are revealed to him by the birdman, Nemglan, at the beginning of his inauguration (Knott, 1936, 5-6, §§13-6). Conaire's transgression of these leads to the end of his reign and ultimately his death.<sup>203</sup> Cormac Connloinges, whose *geisi* are placed on him by Cathbad, experiences a similar fate in *Bruiden Da Choca*, however, the *geisi* therein are 'probably loosely modelled' on those in the former (Toner, 2007, 32-3).<sup>204</sup> Toner (2007, 15) notes that the author of this text 'clearly considered that the violation of *geisi* was rather more than a bad omen and could actively cause the premature death of the bearer of the taboos'. A king's behaviour is circumscribed by these, thus affording him, and society as a whole, greater protection, but departure from these results in disaster for all.<sup>205</sup> Nevertheless, the power and the meaning associated with *geisi* vary considerably in different literary contexts. Greene (1979, 14) asserts that there are instances 'in sagas which appear to be just as old as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, where the meaning of the word has been greatly weakened' and refers to a number of examples from TBC relating to Cú Chulainn which will be addressed below.

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<sup>202</sup> Thurneysen believed that the early version of this tale (Recension II), surviving in YBL and edited by Knott (1936), 'was compiled in the 11<sup>th</sup> century from two different versions of a floating tradition, which were written down probably in the 9<sup>th</sup> century' (Knott, 1936, xi). Only a fragment of the earliest version, Recension I, remains (Toner, 2007, 30). West (1999) has argued that multiple sources were used in the compilation of Recension II.

<sup>203</sup> Charles-Edwards (1999, 46) observes that 'Conaire's father must be the true source of the *geissi*, and Nemglan's authority is that of a privileged intermediary. Although the full list of prohibitions is reserved until §16, it is clear that they derive from an earlier stage in the tale'. Conaire's transgression of a taboo in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is viewed as an offence against the Otherworld by Ó Cathasaigh (1977-78, 145).

<sup>204</sup> These *geisi* occur in the context of Cormac, who is in exile in Connacht, being chosen as the successor to the kingship. Toner (2007, 3) dates the earliest version of this tale, BDC-A, to the twelfth century.

<sup>205</sup> Dillon (1951) has edited a Middle Irish text which outlines the prohibitions (*urgarta*) and prerogatives (*búada*) of five provincial kings (McCone, 1990, 136). The relatively late dating of this text places it beyond the scope of the present research.

Sjoestedt (1949, 88) observes that the more ‘eminent a person is and the more sacred he is, the more *geasa* he has’. In the later tradition in particular, Cú Chulainn is furnished with a range of such taboos. The majority of these are listed in *Echtrae Nerai* (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13) and *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (Stokes, 1893, 398-401, §§1-6) along with a smaller number in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 18 & 39, §11), TBC II (ll.1994-6), the early Modern Irish version of his death tale (Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol. 2, 68, §18) and the late tale *Tóruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus* (O’Rahilly, 1924, 16-7) and scattered throughout a number of other tales. His *geisi* in the former, occur in the context of his exchange with the Morrígan as she crosses back over his territory after mating a cow with the Donn Cúailnge (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13). The opening of the second tale includes a list of his *gessa 7 ilberta* ‘*geisi* and many burdens/tasks’ (Stokes, 1893, 398-401, §§1-2).<sup>206</sup> Outside of these catalogues, his *geisi* are relatively poorly attested, appearing to be somewhat removed from his general warrior activities. Unlike Conaire Mór’s in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and Cormac Connloinges’ in *Bruiden Da Choca*, no information is provided as to who or how these are imposed upon Cú Chulainn.<sup>207</sup>

The following is an inventory of his *geisi* with translations from the chief sources identified above:

### ***Echtrae Nerai***

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<sup>206</sup> An isolated *geis* is found a little further on in §6.

<sup>207</sup> The birdman, Nemglan, reveals Conaire’s to him (Knott, 1936, 5-7, §§13-6; see footnote 203), while Cathbad is accredited with placing Cormac’s on him on the night of his birth only in the later Recension B of the tale (Toner, 2007, 226-7, §6). *Sjöblom (2008, 159) asserts that ‘no ritual elaborations appear to have been connected with tabooing in early Irish tradition. They were imposed by the use of simple speech-acts consisting of traditional formulas and recitations’.*

1. *Ar ba do gessib Conqlaind, ceteit ban asa thir, manip aurderg leis* ‘For it was one of Cú Chulainn’s *gessa*, that even a woman should go out of his land, without his knowledge’
2. *Ba dia geissib enlaith do fógailt a thiri, mani f’acbatis ni leiss* ‘It was one of his *gessa* that birds feed on his land, unless they left something with him’
3. *Ba dia geissib iascc ind inberuib, muni thuitidis laiss* ‘It was one of his *gessa* that fish should be in the bays, unless they fell by him’
4. *Ba dia geisib oicc echtarchiniul ina thir mad i n-agaid thistis, gen imacalluim forru ria matain, mad fria laa thistais, cen imacallaim fri matain* ‘It was one of his *gessa* that warriors of a another tribe should be in his land without his challenging them, before morning, if they came at night, or before night, if they came in the day’
5. *Nach ingen macdacht ⁊ nach ben aentamai nobid la hUlltai, is for a inhuib-seom no bitdis noco n-irailtis for feraib*<sup>208</sup> ‘Every maiden and single woman that was in Ulster, they were in his ward till they were ordained for husbands’ (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13).

***Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige***

6. [A] *slonniud do oen laech* ‘to name himself to a single warrior’<sup>209</sup>
7. [T] *raig ferdail di[a]chonair ria comlund oenfir* ‘to swerve a foot from his path before a fight with one man’
8. [C] *omlund do opa oenfir* ‘to refuse a duel’
9. [T] *echt i ndáil cen airiasacht* ‘to enter an assembly without leave’
10. [T] *echt ra oenlaech dochum dala* ‘to go with one warrior to an assembly’
11. [F] *eiss etir mná cen firu ocaib* ‘to sleep among women without men beside them’
12. [G] *eiss dó commaid la mnai* ‘[a] tabu of his was to consort with a woman’
13. [G] *eis dó grian d’ergi fair i n-Emain Macha, acht co mbad é atressed rempi* ‘[a] tabu of his was that the sun should rise upon him in Emain Macha: it was he, on the contrary, that should rise before it’ (Stokes, 1893, 398-401, §§1-6).

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<sup>208</sup> The statement that these are Cú Chulainn’s *geisi* immediately after this item, allows us to view it as one of them.

<sup>209</sup> *Batar iát a gessi* ‘these are his tabus’ precedes this brief list (Stokes, 1893, 398-9, §2).

## TBC II

14. *Dobertsat in banntracht gesa 7 airmberta for Coin cCulainn dá ttísadh úadh gan fhosdadh gan aidmilledh fuirre* ‘The womenfolk put Cú Chulainn under tabus and prohibitions not to let the Morrígan go from him without checking or destroying her’ (TBC II, ll.1994-6).

The items in the list in *Echtrae Nerai* are, for the most part, orientated toward his general role as protector of Ulster and thus they indicate the expectations placed on him. Their effect is twofold in that they ensure the security of the province while enhancing his martial profile. O’Leary (1988, 96) rightly asserts that a ‘warrior’s commitment to his role as guardian and protector of his people is fortified by *geis*’. Thus they relate similarly to the warrior and society in general in the same way that the king’s do. These force Cú Chulainn to be in control of the movements of humans, animals and fish in his homeland. Indeed, TBC II may contain an incidence of one of these when Cú Chulainn is said to give chase to birds that flew out of the plain so that they would not leave without leaving him that evening’s meal (ll.1706-8). As we can see from the list of *geisi* in *Echtrae Nerai*, he must also be alert to any invaders of his territory and is obliged to promptly challenge them. His responsibilities also extend to protect the unmarried women of Ulster.

Cú Chulainn’s presence and this catalogue appear to occur in a rather isolated context in *Echtrae Nerai*. By featuring the hero in it, the author creates another link between this tale and TBC and thus helps to qualify it as one of the latter’s *remscéla*. It is among a number of texts which were subordinated to TBC at a later date. The first of Cú Chulainn’s *geisi*, to allow a woman to leave his land without his knowledge, explains his pursuit of the Morrígan therein. A more expanded

account of this episode is the crux of the tale entitled, *Táin Bó Regamna* (Corthals, 1987). Significantly, Chulainn's *geisi* are not mentioned there. While the Morrígan definitely escapes from him in the latter, this also seems to be the case in *Echtrae Nerai*. This transgression does not seem to invite any immediate repercussions for the hero. Interestingly, the Morrígan issues the following warning in their subsequent exchange in *Táin Bó Regamna*, before threatening to attack him in TBC: “*Is oc (do) ditin do báis-[s]iu atáú-so ocus bia*”, *ol(l)sí* (Corthals, 1987, 32, §5). While Hull (1898, 105) renders this as “I am guarding your death-bed, and I shall be guarding it henceforth”. Baumgarten (1983, 190) asserts that *dítíu* ‘protecting’ is ‘semantically unacceptable, and a corruption of the text is suspected’. He notes that a minimal emendation of *dítin* to *dídín* unearths the word *díden*, the verbal noun of *do-feid* (*di-fed-*).<sup>210</sup> The semantic range for *di-fed-* is postulated as ‘leading (in the sense of escorting) from one point to another’, ‘bringing (about)’ (Baumgarten, 1983, 190). Bearing this in mind, he translates the sentence in question as follows: “I am and shall be bringing about your death”.

While dating the extant form of *Echtrae Nerai* to the tenth century, Thurneysen reputedly revised his proposal by not ruling out an eighth-century origin (Ó Duilearga, 1940, 522). Amongst his editorial guidelines, Meyer (1889, 213) notes that the manuscript copy of the text has been subject to ‘later additions and corrections by the hand of a different scribe and in a paler ink being enclosed in parentheses’. All of Cú Chulainn's *geisi*, apart from the one prohibiting women to flee his land, are in this different hand thus raising the possibility that these are later additions. The fact that these seem to be dislocated from the main plot, or

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<sup>210</sup> He gives three instances where *díden* occurs as the verbal noun of *di-fed-* (Baumgarten, 1983, 190-2).

more specifically from the events of this episode, lend further weight to this suggestion. Furthermore, none of these bear a supernatural element which seems to be more consistent with the later meanings of the term.

The lack of a magical component also seems to be a hallmark of Cú Chulainn's *geisi* in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada agus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* which is dated to the late Middle-Irish period. These focus specifically on his individual martial behaviour and the associated acquisition and safeguarding of his personal honour by ensuring that he is placed in a series of contests. O'Leary (1988, 93) observes that 'many *geisi* are clearly designed to eliminate any such resting places or times, imposing on heroic life a series of challenges, the meeting of which promotes if not guarantees the acquisition of honour'. The hero is prohibited from naming himself to a single warrior, from swerving from the path of another warrior and from refusing to enter into a duel therein.<sup>211</sup> Cú Chulainn, through Aífe, places the same restrictions on his son Connlae in *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, but these are not described as *geisi* (*nachamberead áenfer dia conair ⁊ nachasloindedh do aenfir ⁊ ná fémded comland óenfir*; Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §1).<sup>212</sup> It seems likely that Connlae's and Cú Chulainn's strict adherence to these leads to their fight and ultimately, Connlae's death.<sup>213</sup> These may simply be among the more general warrior *geisi*, given that the sidestepping of an opponent is a *geis* which is ascribed to Conchobar, the

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<sup>211</sup> In a lay prior to his fight with Fer Diad in TBC I, Cú Chulainn proclaims that he does not retreat a step to avoid an encounter with a single warrior (ll.2760-1).

<sup>212</sup> In the account of this tale in H.3.17, Cú Chulainn leaves an order that Connlae should not name himself to a single person (*abbair ris cen a sloinded d'óenduine i n-Eirinn*; O'Keefe, 1904, 124-5).

<sup>213</sup> Taboos concerning names feature in a variety of literary traditions and are discussed in detail by Reinhard (1933, 126-37). One is found in the eleventh century text of *Aided Muichertach meic Erca* where *Sín* forbids Muirchertach from saying her name, his breaking of which marks part of his downfall (Stokes, 1902a, 398-9, §4).

generic warrior ‘Beard’ in *Geis Ulchai*<sup>214</sup> and Diarmaid ua Duibhne, Conall Cernach and Fothad Canainne in more variant forms (O’Leary, 1988, 94).

A related form of this *geis* possibly features in Cú Chulainn’s final boyhood deed. Therein, an iron ring encircling a pillar stone contains an inscription which states that it is a *geis* for an armed warrior to come to that particular green (*faithche*) and to leave it without challenging to single combat (TBC II, ll.1067-148). These elements are found at a possible natural boundary or liminal location at the confluence of a bog and a river to the south of the fort of the sons of Nechta Scéne in TBC I (ll.710-6). In both instances this *geis* seems to be employed as a means to halt attacks on the latter’s homestead. While Cú Chulainn’s casting of the stone and its attachments into a nearby pool indicates his willingness to fight, it is depicted as a violation of the *geis* in TBC I which binds the sons of Nechta Scéne to make amends for it. Despite this, Fóill engages in combat with the youth only after the latter further insults his honour. In both cases the possibility of allowing the youth to return home with a stern warning is proposed, but rejected by the former. *Geis* in this instance has a distinctly martial flavour and its power and semantics in both recensions is very similar.<sup>215</sup>

Subsequently, his turning of the left side of his chariot towards Emain Machae, which is viewed as a *geis*, is seemingly exacted for the same reason (TBC I, ll.799-

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<sup>214</sup> *With respect to Geis Ulchai*, Sjöblom (2008, 154-5n) dates it to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and concludes that it seems to ‘amount to a poetic rumination over the essence of being a warrior’ as opposed to ‘an authentic list of real injunctions’. It consists of a catalogue of *geisi*, a number of which restrict the warrior from engaging in a number of more basic labouring duties.

<sup>215</sup> Charles-Edwards (1999, 56) notes that the meaning given to *geis* in both these accounts is similar, but that ‘[o]therwise everything- context and syntax alike- is different’.

801).<sup>216</sup> Despite this trespass, no ill-effects are indicated when conflict is avoided through the Ulster women's exposure of their breasts prior to the hero's immersion in three vats of water. Later in this version of the tale, the turning of the left side of Etarcomal's chariot toward Cú Chulainn is viewed, by the latter, as a challenge that must be met, and interestingly, he immediately goes to meet him (*"dofil in carpat afrithisi 7 doralá clár clé frinn"*. *"Ní fiach opaid," ol Cú*; TBC I, ll.1341-2).<sup>217</sup> Interestingly, it is viewed as a *fiach* 'obligation', presumably in the legal sense as opposed to a *geis*.<sup>218</sup> With reference to these two instances, Greene (1979, 15) observes that 'clearly *geis* in these passages has nothing to do with a tabu the infraction of which has fatal consequences; it is nothing more than a word for a challenge to battle'.

Similarly, TBC II (ll.1034-5) refers to a *geis* of the Ulstermen to travel in broken chariots while TBC I (l.684), sees it as a *bés* 'custom, habit' not to do so. Clearly, this rule is very practical. The wise young Cú Chulainn casts a sling-shot at Conall Cernach's chariot and thus forces him to relinquish his duties as guardian of Ulster. According to TBC I, Conall is so perturbed by this event that he never returns to that particular location (l.687).<sup>219</sup> Again a *geis*, although somewhat indirectly, is used by Cú Chulainn in his quest to become a warrior. Unaware of a *geis* of the youths' of Emain Macha to allow a youth to join them without claiming protection in TBC II, he violates it leading to his contest with them (ll.775-7). In TBC I, it is

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<sup>216</sup> This does not feature in TBC II. Medb's charioteer turns the chariot right-handwise so as to invoke a good omen in TBC I (ll.27-8).

<sup>217</sup> In TBC II, Cú Chulainn is more specific, viewing it as an indication of his opponent's seeking of combat (l.1637).

<sup>218</sup> In *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*, the Líath Macha's turning of its left side towards Cú Chulainn three times is considered as 'customary' or 'usual' (*gnáth*) (Kimpton, 2009, 14 & 37, §7).

<sup>219</sup> Charles-Edwards (1999, 55) states that '[h]ere we meet the idea of a *geiss* being put upon someone, an idea which does not occur in *TBDD*, or in Version I of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but which is commonplace in later texts' while offering this as evidence for the extension of the use of *geis* in the Middle Irish period.

viewed as a custom that people did not approach this group without prior arrangement (*ní théged nech*; ll.418-9). Yet, a gloss, in the hand of H, refers to it as a *geis* which was upon them (*.i. ges boí foruib*; O’Rahilly, 1976, 14n). Furthermore, Cú Chulainn’s actions are taken very seriously, and Follomon mac Conchobair uses the verb *sáraigid* ‘violate, outrages, transgresses’ to account for them (“*Non sáraigedar in mac*”, *ol Follomon mac Conchobair*; TBC I, 1.421).

Much later in the text, it is depicted as a custom for the Ulstermen not to speak before their king in TBC I (ll.3428-9), whereas it is viewed as a *geis* in TBC II (ll.4016-7). Bearing this example and the one concerning Cú Chulainn’s surprise arrival at Emain Machae in mind, Charles-Edwards (1999, 56-7) notes that ‘[f]or Version I of the *Táin*, both were simply the customs of particular groups that such-and-such a thing was not done. In Version II, both were *geissi*’.<sup>220</sup> The divergent treatment of this event and the others in the *macgnímrada* in TBC I and TBC II, are considered as evidence by Charles-Edwards (1999, 53-7) in support of his theory that there is an extension of the meaning of *geis* in the Middle Irish period. Further evidence is found in TBC II, where it is noted that the womenfolk put Cú Chulainn under *gesa 7 imberta* not to let the Morrígan escape from him (ll.1994-6). The *geisi* listed in *Echtrae Nerai*, particularly those proposed as possible later additions to the text, and in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* lend further support to this proposal. All these examples suggest that this term, with its

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<sup>220</sup> The word *airmert* is found in TBC I, which Charles-Edwards (1999, 57) suggests derives from *air(i)mbert* meaning ‘(negative) custom, practice’ in this context. He draws parallels with it and the word *bés* ‘custom, habit’ and suggests that by the late Middle-Irish period *geis* might have taken over territory previously occupied by these words. A hag threatens Cú Chulainn with *gesa 7 airmeartha* unless he gives way to her on the road in *Foghlaim Con Culainn* (Stokes, 1908, 138-9, §55).

more extended meanings, is more frequent in later texts. As we will see, there also seems to be a trend towards people putting *geisi* on others in the later material.

Elsewhere in TBC, Cú Chulainn engages in similar tactics to delay the Connacht army. In the earlier part of TBC II, he becomes one-legged, one-armed and one-eyed when cutting a sapling with a single blow while twisting it into a ring. Thereupon, he makes an ogam inscription on it before putting it on a pillar stone and pushing it down to the thick part of the stone (ll.456-8).<sup>221</sup> A member of the Connacht army is required to imitate Cú Chulainn's great feat or risk death and general doom for the rest of the troop.<sup>222</sup> Charles-Edwards (1999, 54) claims that the 'challenge has peculiar authority: if it had been ignored, truth would have been violated and the ring placed round standing-stone would have been insulted'. Not described as a *geis*, but this bears obvious similarities with the *geis* put in place by the sons of Nechta Scéne outlined above. It may also be significant that a *geis* is used by him for similar reasons in approximately one hundred lines later in the text. Cú Chulainn's unusual transformation hints at a possible supernatural element to this challenge. Plausibly, Medb blinds the children of Calatín in the left eye in *Aided Con Culainn* (see III.6.3), while Lug closes one eye and hops on one foot when chanting a spell during the battle in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 58-9, §129), for the same reasons. Surely, these can be taken as examples of sorcery, more specifically as *corrquinecht*, which 'apparently involved the recitation of a satire standing on one leg with one arm raised and one eye shut (in imitation of a

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<sup>221</sup> Fergus subsequently describes the manner in which he transforms himself to perform this act to the Connacht forces, pointing to its significance (TBC II, ll.502-6). This event, in briefer form and without the unusual technique employed by Cú Chulainn, also appears in TBC I (ll.225-313). The term *geis* is not used in either case.

<sup>222</sup> Greene (1979, 15) considers this as a challenge to the enemy's honour.

heron's stance?)' (Kelly, 1988, 60).<sup>223</sup> Essentially, this appears to place a curse on the person(s) it is directed at. In addition, it is also noteworthy that figures bearing similar characteristics force him to break his *geisi* in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 18-9 & 39, §11). Failing to even attempt this feat, the Connacht forces experience a night of terror in the snow without food or shelter thereafter, but ultimately, they survive (TBC II, ll.516-26).

Soon after, Cú Chulainn cuts a forked branch of four prongs with a single stroke, points and chars it, puts an ogam inscription on it before casting it from the back of his chariot with the tip of his hand, so that two thirds of it goes into the ground (TBC II, ll.560-5, ll.630-4).<sup>224</sup> He then impales the heads of four men on its spikes, but this act is viewed as less significant than the aforementioned one. Unlike TBC I, the later TBC II lists it as a *geis* for anyone to enter the ford until someone removes the pole with the tip of his hand, but does not indicate the consequences of failing to do this (ll.634-6). With great difficulty, Fergus eventually manages to pull it from the ground (ll.637-64). It is noteworthy that the later TBC II is more explicit in its treatment of the enactment of these *geisi* than TBC I.

The threat of trespassing a *geis* is sufficient to spur Cú Chulainn into action in *Fed Bricrenn* (LU, ll.8385-94).<sup>225</sup> Bricriu proclaims it a *geis* for the Ulstermen to eat, drink or sleep until they restore his house to normal position after Cú Chulainn

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<sup>223</sup> See also Breatnach's (1987, 140) note on *corrguinecht* in his edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar*. Other relevant works are outlined there.

<sup>224</sup> A similar episode is found in TBC I (ll.330-55).

<sup>225</sup> Hellmuth (1998, 8) observes that Cú Roí is forbidden from eating and from reddening his sword in Ireland in *Fled Bricrenn*. These are not listed as *geisi* in the text.

raises it to allow Emer to enter in *Fled Bricrenn*.<sup>226</sup> Unsurprisingly, it is Cú Chulainn who completes this task and frees them from it. O’Leary (1988, 96) observes that the *geis* in this particular instance is ‘used to invoke honour and thus ensure the performance of daunting tasks other than combat’. In addition, he states that this is similarly the case in relation to the imposing of a *geis* on Iubdán by Esirt in *Echtrae Fergusa Maic Léti* and in Bécuma and Art’s doing likewise to each other in *Echtrae Airt meic Cuinn* (O’Leary, 1988, 96).

To return to the inventory of *geisi* in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, there are two others which ensure that he is forever watchful and proactive in his role as the guardian of the Ulster people. It is a *geis* for him to allow the sun to rise before him in Emain Machae while he is also obliged not to go there without having been involved in a combat (Stokes, 1893, 400-1, §§2-6).<sup>227</sup> The latter provides him with another platform to enhance his personal honour, while the former rather practical one, ensures that he will be alert to any early invaders. Significantly, the latter similarly applies to both the kings of Tara (Dillon, 1951, 8, §1) and is also found in *Geis Ulchai* (O’Looney, 1870, 190).<sup>228</sup> He is also prohibited from going to an assembly (*dál*) without permission (*cen airiasiacht*) or to come to one with a single warrior (Stokes, 1893, 398-401, §2). O’Leary (1988, 101) states that ‘[w]hile the latter restriction may, however uncharacteristic for the impetuous Cú Chulainn, be a cautionary requirement to seek strength in numbers, the former is immediately comprehensible when one sees

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<sup>226</sup> Sjöblom (2008, 161-2) states that by placing this taboo on the Ulstermen, Bricriu indicates that the Ulstermen have violated his hospitality. *Talland Étair* lists, but does not elaborate on, one of the Ulstermen’s more obscure *geisi*, namely, to go past a red wall (*Ó Dónaill, 2005, 46 & 56*).

<sup>227</sup> At the beginning of §3 *we are told that he rises in Emain Machae before daybreak* (Stokes, 1893, 400-1, §§3).

<sup>228</sup> *De Shíl Chonairí Móir* (Gwynn, 1912, 135, 140) observes that Conaire should not allow the sun to rise or set upon him in Tara.

the near riot that follows his violation of the *geis* in the later tale' when he goes unannounced to the home of Conall mac Gleo Glaiss.<sup>229</sup> The necessity to maintain social order and in particular, the assembly in this manner, indicates the potential disruptive nature of the warrior. His arrival after darkness in an angered state appears problematic and this may be linked to *geisi* like those concerning Tara where it is considered as a *geis* for a warrior to go there after sunset bearing arms or likewise to go there after sunset with strong behaviour.<sup>230</sup> Indeed, Cú Chulainn's request to enter Conall's home is met with the response that he will not be permitted to enter until sunrise on the following morning when both sides will be capable of recognising each other (Stokes, 1893, 424-5, §43).

Two of the *geisi* in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* serve to curb Cú Chulainn's sexual exploits, namely, one which prevents him sleeping with women without men beside them (*feiss etir mná cen firu ocaib*) and a second which forbids him living (*commaid*) with a woman (§2).<sup>231</sup> Alternatively, Thurneysen (1921, 485) suggests that the former may be read as 'nicht mit einer (seiner?) Frau zusammenwohnen'.<sup>232</sup> O'Leary (1988, 103-4) traces some of Cú

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<sup>229</sup> Although the latter is attended by the king and other dignitaries, it is noteworthy that it is described as a *fled mórchain* 'great beautiful banquet' and is convened by Conall and thus it is perceivably not a true *dál*. It is noted above that Cú Chulainn's unannounced arrival at Emain Machae in his first exploit violates one of the boy troop's *geis* and results in considerable upheaval.

<sup>230</sup> O'Leary (1988, 101) draws evidence from a law tract in *Lebor Aicle* and the metrical *dindshenchas* to show that the prestigious assembly site in early Irish literature, Tara, is similarly guarded from such chaos by its own *geisi*. However, Lug's unannounced arrival at Tara in *Cath Maige Tuired* is not described as a violation of a *geis*, in fact it is pivotal to his replacement of Núada as king of the *Túatha Dé Danann* therein (Gray, 1982, 38-71, §§53-163).

<sup>231</sup> A sexual *geis*, namely, to meet a woman at Senáth Mór, is also one of Cormac's in *Bruiden Da Choca* (Toner, 2007, 106-7, §6). *The king of Cóiced nÓl Nécmacht is forbidden from trysting at Segais* (Dillon, 1951, 17, §4).

<sup>232</sup> The hospitaller, Bláí Briugu, is bound by a *geis* to sleep with unaccompanied women staying at his guest house. His strict adherence to it unites him with Celtchar's wife, leading to his death in *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* (Meyer, 1906, 24-5, §1). O'Leary (1988, 104) observes that sexual *geisi* also mark the special significance of prominent characters and in the case of Conchobar in *Tochmarc Emire*, he notes that his '*ius primae noctis* is confirmed by *geis*, even when the woman in question is to become the wife of Cú Chulainn'. Again, this is not referred to as a *geis* in the tale.

Chulainn's anguish after sleeping with Feidelm Noíchríde in TBC, to his awareness that he had broken such *geisi*. On the other hand, the text attributes this to the fact that the Connacht forces seem to have gained considerable ground in his absence. He further points to the widely held belief that women drain the strength and will of warriors before concluding that 'Cú Chulainn's various sexual *geisi* serve to simultaneously shield him from this debilitating force and to keep his mind on proper business, the acquisition of glory through the exercise of heroic prowess' (O'Leary, 1988, 104). Certainly, the malevolent side of women in this respect is alluded to in another *geis* which is used by Cú Chulainn in his attempts to rebuff the sexual advances of Úathach in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*. He reminds her that it is a *geis* for someone who is sick to have a woman visit his sick-bed (Stokes, 1908, 132-3, §43; Ó hUiginn, 2002, 49). Cú Chulainn's turning away from bare-breasted women in his last *macgním* (TBC I, ll.804-15) and in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 46, ll.1040-7) are considered as prohibitions by O'Leary (1988, 103). In any case, he does acknowledge that looking at naked women is only viewed as a *geis* of Cú Chulainn's in the late tale *Tóruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus* (O'Rahilly, 1924, 16-7).

Among Cú Chulainn's more unusual *geisi* are two others listed in *Aided Con Culainn*, namely to see the horses of Mac Lir and to listen to the harp of Mac Mannoir even when played merrily, sweetly or plaintively (van Hamel, 1933, 81, §13; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol. 2, 68, §18). Upon seeing the former and hearing the latter, Cú Chulainn knows that his demise is imminent and accordingly issues a lay in which both of these feature (§19). It is noteworthy that the hero is rather unfortunate in this situation given that his breaking of these arise as a result of the

fact that he seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cormac Connloinges is similarly prohibited from listening to Craiphtine's 'hollow-headed *céis*' (Toner, 2007, 106-7, §6). This *geis* makes much more sense than Cú Chulainn's, given that Craiphtine's wife is Cormac's lover. Toner (2007, 15) observes that the author 'repeatedly underlines the destructive power of Craiphthine's instrument' and the unleashing of its mysterious destructive powers is a direct consequence of Cormac's affair with Scenb. Given the late date of *Aided Con Culainn*, it seems unusual that these *geisi* are imbued with a supernatural element which is comparable with that found in *Bruiden Da Choca* and is somewhat at odds with the findings presented thus far in relation to Cú Chulainn's *geisi*.

The *geisi* that Cú Chulainn is faced with in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* are remarkably different to those discussed thus far (see III.6.3). Three one-eyed witches, who presumably have access to supernatural power, snooker him between two of these, namely, to eat dog meat and to refuse an invitation to a feast (Kimpton, 2009, 18-9 & 39, §11). His prohibition to eat dog meat is classified as totemic by O'Leary (1988, 90-1). Conaire's *geis* to cast at birds has been categorised similarly by him,<sup>233</sup> as has Diarmaid's to hunt a particular boar in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*.<sup>234</sup> Aside from this taboo, Cú Chulainn's remaining ones, outlined thus far, do not bear any striking similarities with Conaire's, though the effect of transgressing the present two are quite similar to Conaire's experience.

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<sup>233</sup> Charles-Edwards (1999, 48) views this as a prohibition against *fingal* 'kin-slaying'.

<sup>234</sup> The *geis* for charioteers to enter their vehicles for twenty-seven days after consuming horse-meat, which is listed in *Tochmarc Emire*, can be classified alongside these (van Hamel, 1933, 35, §32). All of these are specific to the individual's profession.

The form that Cú Chulainn's prohibitions take is considerably different to that of Conaire's. The latter's is deemed to be similar to texts purporting to give kings instructions, most notably *Audacht Morainn* and *Tecosca Cormaic*, by Charles-Edwards (1999, 46). It is noteworthy that Cú Chulainn seems to be aware of his *geisi* prior to his encounter with the hags. In his earlier prophecy, he states that witches, blind in the left eye will bring about his destruction (Kimpton, 2009, 16 & 38, §10). A woman, with one eye closed while standing on one foot, prophecies Cormac's death in *Bruiden Da Choca* (Toner, 2007, 108-11, §16), and a female bearing the same traits appears later in the text in Da Choca's house (§33).<sup>235</sup> The involvement of such female figures and their use of *geisi* against Cú Chulainn followed by his demise soon after, suggests that the sense of the term *geis* in this instance is more in keeping with that more typically associated with sacral kingship and the earlier stratum of the tradition, referred to above. The force of these *geisi* appears to be, to some extent, supernatural. It is of significance that Cú Chulainn is also referred to as a king in this tale by the sons of Calatín (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §20; see VII.2). In addition, the relatively early dating of this text to the beginning of the eighth-century which precedes those discussed thus far, may account for the meaning that his *geisi* hold in this instance.

## Conclusion

The ascription of a number of *geisi* to Cú Chulainn largely occurs in the later tradition. The two most clearly identifiable from the earlier period are found in his death tale and align best with those more typical of the earlier stratum of the

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<sup>235</sup> A one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged man, Fer Caille, accompanied by a very ugly woman also crosses Conaire's path when he is on the road to his death (Knott, 1936, 11, §38).

tradition associated with sacral kingship and thus seem to bear supernatural elements. Even though *geisi* feature in TBC I and more frequently in TBC II, it is Cú Chulainn's knowledge of *geisi* and how to manipulate and impose these on opponents for his own or his people's benefit which is most prevalent. Charles-Edwards' (1999) comparative study of these examples rightly indicates that a wider extension of the term, *geis*, occurred in Middle and Early Modern Irish narrative. A more frequent use of the term is also evident. The relatively large number of these occurring in his *macgnímrada*, particularly in his final one, is also noteworthy. The two rather lengthy catalogues of Cú Chulainn's *geisi* in *Echtrae Nerai* and *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* are more concerned with honourable warrior behaviour and his role as the protector of Ulster, both at an individual and a societal level. Indeed, some of these are quite practical and sensible in the context of his status the guardian of Ulster. However, these inventories are rather isolated in the context of his exploits in the Ulster-Cycle material in general. The relatively late dating of these texts, or more specifically the list of *geisi* in the case of *Echtrae Nerai*, may account for this. All things considered, they indicate a desire to confer the hero with a significant number of *geisi* at a later point, none of which seem to bear any supernatural element.

## **Chapter VI: Cú Chulainn's physical appearance and relations with the opposite sex**

Moving from a discussion of Cú Chulainn's martial abilities, the focus of this chapter will be on his physical appearance and his attractiveness to the opposite sex. Terms indicating his youthfulness, like *mac* and *gilla*, will firstly be addressed. A discussion of the application of the term *sirite* will follow. Descriptions of the hero and his clothing will then be considered. Attention will then be paid to his sex appeal, his intimate relations with the opposite sex and the resulting offspring. A more detailed evaluation of his relationship with Emer will conclude this chapter.

### **VI.1. *Mac* or *gilla* or both**

Understandably, Cú Chulainn's youthfulness is highlighted in a number of texts and the terms *gilla* 'lad, youth' and *mac* 'lad' and their variants are the most commonly used for him.<sup>236</sup> Nagy (1985, 125) states that the former 'functions as a designation for young males on the verge of entering into adult status' and observes that '[a]lthough the words *gilla* and *mac* are occasionally used synonymously, ...*gilla* usually refers to someone closer to manhood than a *mac* is'. While this distinction may be true for Finn, it is not for Cú Chulainn and thus both are expectedly used in his *macgnímrada* given his young age.<sup>237</sup> *Gilla* is more frequently used in the *macgnímrada* section in TBC I than in TBC II, but it is also extant elsewhere in both recensions, albeit much less frequently, and more rarely in other tales (TBC I, 1.375, 1.457, 1.474, 1.542, 1.566, 1.575, 1.598, 1.628, 1.1450, 1.3070; *in gilla bec* TBC II, 1.718; *in gilla bec*; 1.887; *in gilla bec*; 1.1063; *in gilla*

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<sup>236</sup> *Mac* and *gilla* are used to refer to Connlae in *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, with the former being most common and *mac bec* occurs twice therein (Meyer, 1904, 114-21, §§1-13).

<sup>237</sup> See Nagy (1985, 124-63) for a further discussion of the term *gilla*.

*bec*; ll.1080-1; *in gilla bec* 1.1183; *gilla* 1.1512; *gilla* 1.2480; *gilla oac amulach*; Dillon, 1953a, 21, §37; *a gillai*; §44; *forsin ngillu*; van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68; *gilla*; Henderson, 1899, 112, §89). The examples listed from TBC I are for the most part not qualified by the adjective *bec(c)* ‘small, little’ whereas the majority of those from TBC II are. Nagy (1985, 124) states that Finn is called *gilla* ‘after he has shown that he is as fast as a deer and can take care of himself in the wilderness’, a similar pattern is not found in relation to Cú Chulainn.

*Mac* is used a number of times, while *gilla* occurs once, in *Compert Con Culainn* (van Hamel, 1833, 4-8, §§3-7).<sup>238</sup> *Mac* and its variants are much less prevalent in the *macgnímrada* section of TBC I and the remainder of the tale (*in mac*; 1.421, 1.728, 1.2341; *mac*; ll.729-30; *don mac*; 1.1175; *mac bec*; 1.723; *a maccáin*; 1.592<sup>239</sup>; *maccáem*; 1.1327). TBC II, differs hugely in this respect, where Cú Chulainn is repeatedly referred to as a *mac bec* ‘little boy/lad’ in the prelude to and in the *macgnímrada* (ll.719-21, 1.750, 1.751, ll.754-5, 1.769, 1.784, 1.791, 1.792, ll.793-4, 1.797-8, 1.800, 1.801, 1.803, 1.811, 1.812, 1.814, 1.821, 1.843, 1.844, ll.845-6, 1.847, 1.848, 1.852-3, 1.854, 1.861, 1.874, 1.878, 1.895, 1.901, 1.906, 1.908, 1.909, 1.912, 1.915, 1.921, 1.930, 1.931, 1.932, 1.933, 1.934, 1.935, 1.942, 1.945, 1.949, ll.956-7, 1.958, ll.962-3, 1.969, 1.971, 1.975, 1.976-7, 1.978, 1.979, 1.982, 1.983, 1.989, 1.990, 1.991, 1.992, 1.1014-5, 1.1016, 1.1017, 1.1019, 1.1021, 1.1024, 1.1036, ll.1037-8, 1.1044, 1.1047, 1.1051, 1.1056, 1.1065, 1.1073, 1.1093, 1.1095, 1.1099, 1.1100, 1.1102, 1.1117, 1.1121, 1.1126, 1.1132, 1.1134, 1.1137, 1.1142, 1.1150, 1.1155, 1.1158, 1.1163, 1.1168, 1.1169, 1.1173, 1.1192, 1.1194, 1.1208). For the most part, this is overused and in some instances it occurs twice in close proximity, where a pronoun could have

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<sup>238</sup> The latter term is found in a reference to his slaying of the hound (van Hamel, 1933, 6, §6).

<sup>239</sup> This term is in the vocative case and is thus a term of endearment uttered by Culann the smith.

been adopted in its place, for example: *Luid in mac bec 'na ndíaid dia nn-imdibe. Gebid Conchobar a rígláma in meic bic. "Ale atchíu ní fóil amberai-siu, a meic bic, in maccrad."* "*Fail a mór damnae dam-sa,*" *ar in mac bec* (ll.791-4). Interestingly, a considerable number of these attestations are in the vocative case, 'a meic bic' (l.751, ll.793-4, 1.797-8, 1.811, 1.812, 1.848, 1.895, 1.906, 1.908, 1.909, 1.931, ll.962-3, 1.978, 1.982, 1.989, 1.992, 1.1016, 1.1019, ll.1037-8, 1.1099, 1.1117, 1.1134) suggesting that it was also viewed as a term of endearment. It is used in this way most frequently by Conchobar (ll.793-4, 1.797-8, 1.811, 1.812, 1.848, 1.906, 1.909, 1.931, ll.932-3)<sup>240</sup> and his charioteer, Ibor (1.978, 1.982, 1.989, 1.992, ll.1037-8, 1.1099, 1.1117, 1.1134) and to a lesser degree by Cathbad (ll.962-3), Conall Cernach (1.1016, 1.1019), Culann (1.895), and Cú Chulainn's mother (1.751). In contrast, none of the *gilla* references outlined above are in the vocative case.

Thus, Cú Chulainn is largely presented as a little boy therein, magnifying his accomplishments further. Once he has completed this initiation process, this label is no longer suitable. However, in the later literature the 'little' Cú Chulainn is often placed against a giant-like opponent, bolstering his conquests further. The disparity between Cú Chulainn and Goll in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* is underlined when the latter refers to him as *in láech mbecsin* 'that little hero' (Stokes, 1893, 406-7, §15).<sup>241</sup> A comparably interesting dialogue occurs in *Foghlaím Con Culainn*, between the *macaoimh óg/fear beag*, Cú Chulainn, and *an t-áonduine adhbhalmhór* 'a solitary huge man'/*fer mór* 'big man'

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<sup>240</sup> Conchobar simply refers to him as *a meic* in ll.902-3, as does Conall Cernach in 1.1029.

<sup>241</sup> Subsequently, in his efforts to egg on his master, Lóeg uses the following analogy: "*Is litiud maic bic dia scamun dorone in laech sin dít*" "'Tis a little boy's litiud to his stool that that hero hath made of thee'" (Stokes, 1893, 408-9, §19; see V.2). He is affectionately referred to as *a macdretill Emna* 'O darling of Emain' in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 10-1, §11).

(Stokes, 1908, 114-5, §§10-1).<sup>242</sup> Conversely, Connlae becomes the *mac bec* when fighting his father, Cú Chulainn, in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §10).

Forms of *mac*, without the adjective *bec*, also feature in his *macgnímrada* and elsewhere in TBC II (*mac/meic(c)*; 1.722, 1.736, 1.739, 1.782, ll.786-7, 1.881, 1.897, ll.902-3, 1.1029, 1.1043, 1.1068, 1.1187, 1.1191, 1.1197, 1.1206, 1.4026, 1.2344; *óenmac*; 1.832; *a maccáin*; 1.993, 1.1006; *máethmaccáem*; 1.1087; *maccáem*; 1.1613; *maccaím*; 1.1410; *móethmaccóemh óg*; ll.1965-6).<sup>243</sup> The range of other terms, which are more applicable to an adult warrior, also used to describe him in the text following his youthful exploits, include the following: *fer/fir/óenfir*; 1.1452, 1.2520, 1.2523, 1.2806, 1.2884, 1.2886; *óclaíg/óclách*; 1.1496, 1.1498, 1.2245; *láech/laích*; 1.1741, 1.13048; *rígníath* 1.2245; *caur/curaid*; 1.2230, 1.2894, 1.2898, 1.2966; *cathmílid*; 1.2230; *err*; 1.2296; *fóendelach*; ll.2388-9; *niad*; ll.3287; *in chathmíled*; 1.3341. In general, it is terms like these that are used for him in the other Ulster-Cycle tales.

A number of references to Cú Chulainn's beardless state also point to his young age; again, these are more concentrated in TBC, however, this is hardly surprising given his young age therein: (*do chend ngillai n-amluaig*; TBC I, 1.1450; *for cend siriti amluaig*; ll.1700-1; *mac nád lánulach*; 1.2406; *for siriti n-amulach amne*; 1.2531; *fri níach n-amulach*; ll.1108-9; *móethmaccóemh óg gan ulchain gan fhésóig*; TBC II, ll.1965-6; *gilla n-óc n-amulchach gan ulcha*; 1.2480, *cesu amulach is óc*; *gilla oac amulach*; Dillon, 1953a, 21, §37). This is problematic for him in a number of contests in TBC I and forces him to render himself 'bearded' in

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<sup>242</sup> He is referred to as *in fer bec* in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 24-5, ll.554-6).

<sup>243</sup> Emer compares his deeds to those of a *móethmacáim* during the early stages of their courtship in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 28, §21).

order to persuade some opponents to fight him (see V.5). McCone (1990, 204) notes that there are two requirements for graduation to full adult status in the *túath*, namely, ‘the attainment of a minimum age of twenty symbolized by growth of a full beard and the acquisition of the appropriate property rating by inheritance’ and offers this as the reason for Etarcomal’s refusal to fight Cú Chulainn in TBC I.<sup>244</sup> The text itself gives Cú Chulainn’s age as seventeen at the time of the battle, and thus understandably, he is represented as being beardless (TBC I, ll.379-80, l.824).

Ford (2006, 69) proposes that the ‘beard, or lack thereof, emerges as the principal indicator of status among the Ulad’, adding that the ‘Ulstermen appeared to believe that their name was derived from the noun *ul* meaning “beard”’.<sup>245</sup> For him, Cú Chulainn is transitional:

...he has reached the age of beard encirclement but has not yet sprouted. As in every other respect, he is a liminal figure: in assuming a beard in his several encounters, he is a bridge between the mythic past and the present, he is recreating that act whereby threatened youth became fearless warrior (Ford, 2006, 73).

Clearly, Cú Chulainn’s lack of facial hair underlines his young age and thus serves to emphasise the greatness of his deeds. Ford (2006, 69) asserts that TBC ‘is a tale that emphasizes the failure of mature warriors and celebrates youth’, noting that

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<sup>244</sup> Growth of a full beard appears to occur at the age of twenty according to the legal text *Críth Gablach* (Mac Neill, 1923, 285, §73).

<sup>245</sup> Ford’s theory relies strongly on the entry for *Ulaid* in *Cóir Anmann*, which gives one of the explanations for the name as *oll leith .i. ulchadha liatha léo h-i cath Áenaigh* (Arbuthnot, 2007, 66, §255). See Ford (2006, 73n) for a discussion of the possible meanings of words relating to face and its hair. Therein, he raises the question as to whether Cú Chulainn was lacking a moustache or beard or both and observes that in ‘the anterior Celtic times on the continent, the moustache or the beard or both was apparently the mark of nobility, manliness and mature manhood, and it appears to have been so in early Ireland as well’.

those of a beardless state, namely Cú Chulainn and the boy-troop are depicted favourably in the tale.

### **Conclusion**

Expectedly, Cú Chulainn is frequently referred to as *mac* and *gilla* in his *macgnímrada* with the former being used somewhat excessively in TBC II, where it is repeatedly qualified with the adjective *bec*, highlighting his remarkable youthfulness even further. This is a feature of some of the later texts. His beardless state is underlined, particularly in TBC, for much the same reasons. In contrast to *gilla*, *mac* occurs in the vocative case on a number of occasions suggesting that it is used as a term of endearment.

### **VI.2. *Sirite***

The term *sirite* is applied to Cú Chulainn on a number of occasions but the intended meaning is not always entirely clear. *DIL* observes that it originally referred to ‘some sort of supernatural being who had the power of changing shape’ while alternatively noting that it is ‘usually a mildly contemptuous term applied to Cú Chulainn by both friends and enemies’ and offers the following meanings for it: ‘imp, stripling, sprig, whipper-snapper’.<sup>246</sup> Evidence indicates that it points to Cú Chulainn’s ability to change shape on some occasions and, alternatively, to the young hero’s remarkable audacity on others.

His opponents, Cú and Mand label him as a *sirite* but qualify it with a reference to his beardless state in TBC I, therefore, highlighting his young age (*for cend siriti*

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<sup>246</sup> Úath mac Imomain in *Fled Bricrenn* is listed as an example of a *sirite* therein. His name ‘Terror son of Great Fear’ does not lend any positive connotations to the term.

*amulaig*; ll.1700-1). Likewise, Conchobar uses it to scold him when he deceitfully procures arms in his final boyhood deed (*a siriti*; l.633). Medb lists him as a *siriti bras* ‘boastful lad’ in her efforts to incite Lóch mac Mo Femis to fight him (l.1973). In a similar tone, she refers to him as *in serrite óc amulchach* ‘the youthful beardless sprite’ prior to his *macgnímrada* in TBC II and later in the tale when he is perceived to have fled from Nad Crantail (ll.734-5, l.1715). In the events leading up to his fight with Lóch, the women inform Cú Chulainn that he is jeered in the Connacht camp because he is beardless and that only *siriti* ‘lads’ or ‘striplings’ would oppose him (TBC I, ll.1899-901).<sup>247</sup> Certainly, in these examples it holds a contemptuous tone. Most notably, Cú Chulainn’s youthfulness is also a feature in all of these and thus this term in these cases is specifically linked to his young age.

He is labelled as *a siriti lethguill* by Lóg in his efforts to prod him into action in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 84-5, §67). The second element here, seems to be a reference to his one-eyed state when distorted, thus, in this instance, *sirite* may be better translated as ‘shape-shifter’ i.e. ‘O one-eyed shape-shifter’ (see IV.3). The fact that the tale contains another *sirite*, namely, Úath mac Imomain, and a number of other strange beings, perhaps lends further weight to this suggestion (§75; see IV.2). Lóg’s reference to him as *a siriti*, *a siabairthe* in a similar context in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* can be interpreted in the same light (Stokes, 1893, 408-9, §19). Indeed, Lóg seems to be almost willing him to change so that he can overcome his opponent(s). It is noteworthy, that *sirite* is in the vocative case in these latter examples, in the one

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<sup>247</sup> Among the analogies used by Conall Cernach to describe his own weakened state includes *siriti glaslaithe* in *Cath Airtig* (Best, 1916, 172). See *DIL* for other general references to it.

concerning Conchobar and in the one pertaining to Fergus listed in footnote number 44 in IV.3.<sup>248</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The term *sirite* is applied to Cú Chulainn on a number of occasions. It seems to bear two alternative meanings which are generally decipherable from the context in which it is used. Firstly, it suggests that he is somewhat of an unusual being who has the ability to change shape. Alternatively, it is used to account for the young hero's extraordinary audacity.

### **VI.3. Physical appearance**

A reasonable number of descriptions of Cú Chulainn are extant in a small range of tales. While a certain degree of consistency is evident, there is also significant divergence. In the majority of the more elaborate examples, these accounts are given by women or are given for their benefit. The features highlighted are those which can be deemed as being most appealing to them with his facial aspects most specifically his hair, eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, teeth, lips, receiving most attention. Correspondingly, these are also underlined in the accounts of royal figures for whom 'physical perfection was an absolute essential' (McManus, 2009, 58). A reference to King Conaire Mór's perfect form in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* states that there is no fault in his eye, hair and whiteness (Knott, 1936, 32, §105). The whiteness of Cormac mac Airt's body and teeth, the redness of his lips, the colour of his cheeks, eyes and eyebrows indicate his suitability as king in *Echtrae*

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<sup>248</sup> His designation as *in genid* 'the sprite-like creature' in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 40, 1.908) appears to have a negative connotation. Conversely, Emer's use of it in her lament for him in his death tale is a little less clear when she proclaims that witches blind in the left eye ruined 'the very doomed brow, the terrible sprite' (*díchimmid n-étain, gránne genite*; Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §33).

*Cormaic* (Stokes, 1891, 186 & 204, §3).<sup>249</sup> In the context of royal figures, McManus (2009, 63) observes that:

...the focus tends to be on facial features rather than an olympian frame, on beauty rather than brawn. The emphasis is on dazzling colours, but in particular on dazzling brightness: not of the king's regal bejewelled attire, but of his body itself.

A similar trend, in the case of the former, is evident for Cú Chulainn.

The end of Cú Chulainn's final youthful exploit in TBC II contains the sole description of the young boy:

*Secht méoir cehtar a dá choss 7 secht méoir cehtar a dá lám, 7 secht meic imlessan cehtar a dá rígrosc iarum 7 secht nígemma de ruthin ruisc fo leith cech mac imlesan díb. Cethri tibri cehtar a dá grúad: tibri gorm, tibri corcra, tibri úane, tibri buide. Coíca urla fégbuide ón chlúais go 'chéile dó amal chír mbethi nó amal bretnasa bánóir fri taul ngréne. Máel glé find fair mar bó ataslilad* 'He has seven toes on each of his feet and seven fingers on each of his hands. He has seven pupils in each of his royal eyes and seven gems sparkling in each pupil. Four dimples in each cheek, a blue dimple a purple, a green and a yellow. Fifty tresses of hair he had between one ear and the other, bright yellow like the top of a birch-tree or like brooches of pale gold shining in the sun. He had a high crest of hair, bright, fair, as if a cow had licked it' (ll.1199-205).

In the context of the elaborate description of a young Níall Noígiallach, McManus (2009, 64) observes that '[j]ust as his heroic birth prefigured his heroic destiny, so

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<sup>249</sup> Cormac's cheeks are likened to the mountain foxglove or a forest-forcle therein. McManus (2009, 60n) observes that the latter phrase is also found in a description of Níall Noígiallach. See McManus (2009) for a more detailed discussion of the descriptions of male beauty in a range of Irish texts.

Níall Noígiallach's stunning appearance, even at the age of nine, identifies him as hero and guarantees his heroic credentials'. This same analogy can be applied to Cú Chulainn.

A seventeen-year-old Cú Chulainn is described as follows in TBC I:

*Faircsi trí folt fair: dond fri toind cind, cróderg ar medón, mind órbude ardatugethar. Caín cocarsi ind fúilt sin co curend teóra imsrotha im c[h]lais a chúlaid, comba samalta ⁊ órsnáth cach finna fathmainnech forscáilte forórda dígrais dúalfota derscaigt[h]ech dathálaind dara formna síar sell sechtair. Cét cairches corcorglan do dergór órlasrach imma brágit. Cét snáthéicne don charmocol cummasca hi timthacht fria chend. Cethri tibri cehtar a dá grúad .i. tibre buide ⁊ tibre úane ⁊ tibre gorm ⁊ tibre corca. Secht ngemma do ruthin ruisc cehtar a dá rígrosc. Secht meóir cehtar a dá choss, secht méoir cehtar a dá lám co ngabáil ingni sebaic, co forgabáil ingne griúin ar cach n-áí for leith díib-sin* 'He seemed to have three kinds of hair: dark next to his skin, blood-red in the middle and hair like a crown of gold covering them outside. Fair was the arrangement of that hair with three coils in the hollow in the nape of his neck, and like gold thread was each fine hair, loose-flowing, bright golden, excellent, long-tressed, splendid and of beautiful colour, which fell back over his shoulders. A hundred bright crimson ringlets of flaming red-gold encircled his neck. Around his head a hundred strings interspersed with carbuncle-gems. Four shades (?) in each of his cheeks, a yellow shade and a green, a blue shade and a purple. Seven brilliant gem-like pupils in each of his noble eyes. Seven toes on each of his feet; seven fingers on each of his hands with the grasp of a hawk's claws and the grip of a hedgehog's claws in each separate toe and finger' (TBC I, ll.2342-53).<sup>250</sup>

Clearly, there are a number of parallels in these two accounts.

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<sup>250</sup> A very similar description is found in the corresponding scene in TBC II (ll.2344-56).

The three shades in Cú Chulainn's long curly locks equally feature in Erc's portrait of him in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* with the outer one being referred to as a crown (Kimpton, 2009, 19 & 39, §12). Fer Diad's charioteer, and Fand in lesser detail, also remark upon Cú Chulainn's tri-coloured hair later in TBC I (ll.2959-65) and *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 21, §37) respectively.<sup>251</sup> His external layer of hair in the former example is likened to a crown of gold (*mind n-óir dotuiget[h]ar in tres folt*). In *Fled Bricrenn*, Lóegaire's long tresses are also said to have the same tri-fold colouring, with a diadem-like tier on the outside (Henderson, 1899, 56-7, §45). Conchobar also seems to have a crown of golden hair in *Aided Chonchobuir* (Meyer, 1906, 8-9, §10). O'Rahilly (1970, 177) states that '[o]utstanding heroes were depicted as having hair of three colours' and also notes that the 'hair is thought of as enveloping the head, as a garment covers the body'.<sup>252</sup>

Sayers (1991, 157-8) states with reference to the descriptions of the approaching Ulster army in the latter stages of TBC I, '[i]n the some twenty vignettes, hair goes unmentioned in only two instances' and '[i]n only three other cases is the colour of the hair not stated'.<sup>253</sup> He adds that '[w]hile the terminology varies slightly, golden hair is associated only with King Conchobar, his sons and grandsons' and that:

...brown and black hair are attributed to chieftains and heroes in nine cases, greying hair in two. Here that culture/nature antithesis which marks the

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<sup>251</sup> Sayers (1991, 160) observes that his tripartite hair is linked with the colour code of the Indo-Europeans, namely, 'black, red and gold, may be equated with the three estates of agriculturalists and herdsmen, warriors, and priests and kings'.

<sup>252</sup> See O'Rahilly (1970) for a detailed consideration of the words used in the descriptions of hair in Irish.

<sup>253</sup> Sayers (1991, 157) further notes that these descriptions are in 'general agreement with those left by classical authors, even down to the detail of hair and beards'. See Sayers (1991) for a detailed discussion of the attitudes towards hair and beards in early Irish tradition.

warrior estate is expressed through long, carefully arranged, often brown hair, or short, bristly dark or grey hair.<sup>254</sup>

Cú Chulainn has long black curly hair in this instance, yet some uncertainty is expressed as to whether this is actually him or not (*súasmáel cas círdub fair co ticci áth a dá ghualand*; TBC I, ll.3851-2),<sup>255</sup> while Lug (l.2093) and Conchobar in TBC I (ll.3593-4), and Elatha mac Delbaíth in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 28-9, §16), all have long, curly, yellow hair.<sup>256</sup> In addition, Cú Chulainn's hair seems to have a sparkling golden hue which is likened to yellow bees on a summer day (TBC I, ll.2962-5)<sup>257</sup>, or buttercups at the same time (Kimpton, 2009, 19 & 39, §12), or like the top of a birch tree, or like gold brooches shining in the sun (TBC II, ll.1203-4). Elsewhere, Feidelm refers to Cú Chulainn as the *fer find* 'fair man' (TBC I, l.67).

Alternatively, having made an appearance from hell, Cú Chulainn's hair is described as follows in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn: Láech and isin charput in súas máeldub demis fair for suidiu. Atá lim is bó roda lig* 'There was a hero in that chariot, the upstanding black crop-headed, sheared/tonsured upon him, upon the aforementioned. It seemed to me, it is a cow that licked it' (LU, l.9264-5; my translation). Albeit orthographically the same, *DIL* distinguishes three different meanings for the term *mael*; for the first it offers 'crop-headed', 'shorn', 'bald',

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<sup>254</sup> In the parallel scene in TBC II, Conchobar's hair is short, so too is Munremur's and Fergus mac Leiti's (ll.4302-3, l.4390, l.4437).

<sup>255</sup> Cú Chulainn's hair does not feature in the description of him in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25-6, §§15-6). Conversely, Lóg's is described.

<sup>256</sup> While a range of hair-types or styles are outlined in the section describing the advancing Ulster warriors in TBC I, a number of them seem to have curly hair in different colours (ll.3593-4, l.3606, l.3616, l.3658, l.3681, l.3753) and the three sons of Fiachna have long yellow hair (ll.3772-3). Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb has long yellow hair of many shades in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 16, §33).

<sup>257</sup> Therein, and in his death tale (Kimpton, 2009, 19 & 39, §12), the sparkle of his hair is equated with a gold thread being manipulated on an anvil.

‘tonsured’ and for the third item, it states that the original meaning of *mael* followed by the genitive of a common or proper name was that of ‘slave’ or ‘servant’. In his consideration of the term *mael* and its association with Finn and other liminal figures in society such as druids, Nagy (1981, 9-10) observes that youths often have cropped hair or go bald, while the ‘clerics of the early Irish church had a tonsure different from that prevalent throughout the rest of the Christian West; the Irish church reformers who opposed this Celtic tonsure claimed that it originated with the druids’. There has been some controversy as to the nature of the Celtic tonsure; earlier scholars believing that the entire frontline of the head was shaven up to a midline reaching from ear to ear, others holding that this area was not completely denuded, owing to the presence of a fringe area extending back to each ear (Joynt, 1926-28, 130). Sayers (1991, 179) suggests that the ‘pagan druidic tonsure may have left a tuft at the front of the head’. In promoting the Christian faith, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* aligns Cú Chulainn to the pagan belief system of the remote past and in this regard it seems that Cú Chulainn’s tonsured/sheared appearance is more likely to be aimed at associating him with pagan elements (see III.4.3.3). Alternatively, it may be an indication of the subservient state in which he finds himself.

While acknowledging that *máel* generally means a close cropped head of hair, O’Rahilly (1970, 328-9) also proposes that in some contexts it means ‘an upstanding tuft of hair, a crest of hair’. She notes that this is the case in relation to the description of Cú Chulainn at the end of his *macgnímrada* in LL, where his long tresses are indicated in the preceding sentence (ll.1203-5; see above). She proposes that this meaning would also fit the above example from *Síaburcharpat*

*Con Culainn* (LU, 9264-5), where she reads *suas maeldub* as *suasmael dub*. The indication being that a section of the hair may have been trimmed and arranged into a tuft or ‘quiff’ and thus in this instance seems to denote a haircut or hairstyle. Sayers (1991, 164-5n) asserts that while the later emendation is acceptable, it neglects the term *demis* from *deimes* ‘shears’ ‘which suggests cutting, either to create or highlight the crest’ and adds that ‘[i]t is an open question whether the simile of the cow’s licking refers to the upright “cowlick” or to the smooth remainder’. It is further suggested that ‘[w]arrior hairstyles may also have depended on age, with some initiatory cutting rite followed by subsequent growth and styling’. McCone (1986, 18) interprets the presence of smooth-haired males in hunting scenes on the Gundestrup cauldron as a visual depiction of the Gaulish *Männerbund* and its activities. Equally, the hair of the gruesome youthful warriors who arrive at Emain in *Fochonn Loingse Fergusa meic Róich* is jet-black and shorn (*Máel demis chir-dub for cehtar de*; Hull, 1930, 295; see IV.3). It is noteworthy that the hair of the giant in the mist in *Fled Bricrenn*, possibly a disguised Cú Roí, is also clipped or tonsured (*Maeldub demsidi fair*; Henderson, 1899, 46-7, §37).

Conversely, Cú Chulainn’s unusual hairstyle in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, may suggest that he has been humiliated like he is by his son, Connlae in *Aided Óenfir Aife* (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §10) and by Cú Roí in *Aided Con Roí* (Best, 1905, 22-3, §3; see V.1).<sup>258</sup> Cú Chulainn’s reaction to both these offences, in particular his going into hiding for a year after the latter, indicates the gravity of such acts. His temporary removal from society gives him the opportunity to grow his hair. Early

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<sup>258</sup> Indeed, Cú Chulainn shears Etarcomal’s hair in TBC I (ll.1357-9) and later in the tale, he cuts off Finnabair’s two plaits (ll.1600-1).

Irish legal material states that if half or all of a person's hair is cut off, then fines in addition to the victim's full-honour-price are due (Sayers, 1991, 174). The visual impact of such crimes presumably accounts for the severity of the compensation due.<sup>259</sup>

A variant account of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* in *Fled Bricrenn*, notes that there is a drop of blood at the root of each hair, with his dark yellow hair absorbed into his head so that it looks as if he has been clipped (*co rabi banna fola im bun cacha finna dó, oculus rosúig a folt inna chend, corbo suas maeldub demis [a] chas chirdub ba forcsi fair*; Henderson, 1899, 32-3, §27). The following are the descriptions of the transformations to his hair during two lengthy accounts of his *ríastrad* in TBC I:

*Indar lat ba tinnarcan asnort cach foltne ina chend lasa comérge conérracht. Indar lat bá hoíbell tened boí for cach óenfinnu de* 'His hair stood on end so that it seemed as if each separate hair on his head had been hammered into it. You would have thought that there was a spark of fire on each single hair' (ll.428-30).

*Ra chasnig a folt inma c[h]end imar craíbred nídergscíach i mbernaid at[h]álta. Ce ro crateá rígaball fó ríghorad immi iss ed mod dá rísad ubull díb dochum talman taris acht ro sesed ubull for cach óenfinna and re frithchassad na ferge atracht dá fult úaso* 'His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence a gap in a hedge. If a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it, but an apple would have

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<sup>259</sup> Kelly (1997, 162) notes that the culprit who shaves a dog must pay half the fine that would be due were he to have killed it.

stayed impaled on each separate hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above his head' (ll.2268-72).

In both cases the hero's hair seems to become short and bristled so that he appears more frightening. The changes that occur to his hair while he is distorted are discussed in full in IV.3.

The young Cú Chulainn is said to have seven royal pupils in each of his royal eyes and seven gems sparkling in each pupil in the above quote from TBC II (see VII.2). While his pupils are not commented upon in the second extract from TBC I above, it is noted that: *Ruithnigud tened rómóiri ima rusc* 'In his eyes the blazing of a huge fire' (l.2967).<sup>260</sup> Fand comments upon the seven lights in his eyes in *Serglige Con Culainn (Fil secht suilse ara rusc*; Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37). His eyes are depicted as follows in TBC II: *Secht n-gemma de ruithin ruisc cehtar a dá rígrosc* 'Seven gems of brilliance of an eye in each of his royal eyes' (ll.2353-5). Of the seven pupils in his royal eyes in *Tochmarc Emire*, four are in one eye and three are in the other (*Ar bátar secht meic imlesain ina rígroscuib .i. a chethair isin dara súil dó, 7 a trí isin tsúil aili*; van Hamel, 1933, 22, §6). Subsequently, Fíal, Forgall's daughter, characterises them as follows: *Secht n-gemma derga dracondai for lár cehtar a dá imcaisen* 'There are seven red dragon gems in the middle of each of his two eyes' (§15; my translation). Finnabair offers an almost identical depiction in *Fled Bricrenn* except that he has eight instead of seven dragon gems in his eyes (*Ocht n-gemma deirg dracondai for lár o da imlisen* 'Eight red dragon gems upon

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<sup>260</sup> Fergus notes that the eyes of the Ulster warriors flash in their heads like sparks of fire (TBC I, ll.3571-4).

the middle of his two eyes'; Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51; my translation).<sup>261</sup> Feidelm states that: *Fail secht ngemma láith ngaile for lár a dá imlisse* 'There are seven gems of a warrior in the middle of his two eyes' (TBC I, ll.71-2; my translation).<sup>262</sup> *DIL* observes that *gemm* means 'a gem, precious stone' or conversely 'of the pupil of the eye', so in this instance the term may simple be an acknowledgement of the numerous pupils in his eyes. For the most part, these appreciations are offered by females and are depicted as an attractive feature. *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* is somewhat at odds with these with the following remark about his eye: *Súil glas bannach ina chind* 'A grey lively/jerking eye in his head' (LU, 1.9265; my translation).

Cú Chulainn's eyes also feature in an attempt to elaborate on the reason why he is nick-named *cúa* in TBC I:

*Dáig cúa ainm na claíne isin tsengaidilc, 7 secht meic imleasan bátar i rígrosc Con Culaind, dá mac imleasan díb-sidi 7 siat cláena, 7 nocho mó a domaisi dó iná [a] maisi dó-som, 7 dá mbeith ainib bad mó for Choin Culaind, is ed rothuibédad fris* 'For *cúa* is the word for squinting in old Irish and Cú Chulainn had seven pupils in his royal eyes, two of which were asquint. But this was more an adornment than a disfigurement to Cú Chulainn, and if he had had a greater bodily blemish, he [Fer Diad] would undoubtedly have taunted him with that' (ll.3011-4).

While this account largely concurs with the previous ones, significantly, it explicitly states that his squinting pupils are a sign of beauty as opposed to a

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<sup>261</sup> There are a number of parallels in these two descriptions of Cú Chulainn in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51) and *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15). Feidelm observes that Cú Chulainn takes the form of a dragon in battle in TBC I (l.78).

<sup>262</sup> His eyes are similarly described in the corresponding account in TBC II (ll.238-9).

blemish.<sup>263</sup> Although the different colours, shapes and general beauty of the eyes of some of the approaching Ulster warriors near the closing scene in TBC I are indicated, none are said to have multiple pupils (ll.3589-858).<sup>264</sup> Similarly, it is the beauty of Conchobar's (Meyer, 1906, 6-7, §5) and Conaire Mór's (Knott, 1936, 32, §102) eyes which is highlighted elsewhere, but numerous pupils are not a trait of either. Cormac mac Airt's eyes are likened to bluebells in one account (Stokes, 1891, 186 & 204, §3), but like Cú Chulainn, he is afforded seven pupils in another, again this is viewed as an attribute in *Tesmolad Cormaic meic Airt* (O'Grady, 1892, 90). In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* the warrior, Ingcél Cáech, has a large single eye bearing either three or seven pupils (Knott, 1936, 12, §44; 16, §58). Borsje compares Ingcél's triplex of pupils with those of Feidelm, the poetess and prophetess of Connacht, who is depicted similarly in TBC I (*Trí meic imlisse cehtar a dá súla*; ll.38-9; Borsje & Kelly, 2003, 15).<sup>265</sup> With respect to Feidelm, she states that this 'could be a sign of beauty and it could be a sign of her supernatural sight', the latter being more probable but the beauty element is excluded in the case of Ingcél, nonetheless, his extraordinary sharp sight parallels with hers.

Perhaps it is Cú Chulainn's many pupils which account for his ability to estimate the size of the advancing army early in TBC I. In response to Lóeg's failure to do so, Cú Chulainn states that:

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<sup>263</sup> See IV.3 for a consideration of Cú Chulainn's one-eyedness in the context of his *ríastrad*.

<sup>264</sup> Cú Chulainn's eyes do not feature in this depiction of him, but it is noted above that there is some doubt as to whether this is him or not (TBC I, ll.3847-58).

<sup>265</sup> Feidelm is depicted as having a *rosc glass gáirectach* 'bright, laughing eye', but not as having several pupils in TBC II (l.188).

“*Is assu ém dam-sa,*” *ol Cú Chulaind,* “*oldás dait-siu, air itát trí búada form-sa .i. búaid roisc 7 intliuchta 7 airdmessa. Ro láosa didiu trá,*” *ol sé,* “*fomus forsání sin. Ocht [t]ríc[h]ait chét déac inso,*” *ol sé,* “*ara rím . acht forodlad in t-ochtmad trícha chét fón slóg n-ule conid mesc fria rím .i. trícha chét na nGalión*” ““It is easier for me, however, than for you. For I have three gifts, namely, the gift of sight, the gift of understanding, the gift of reckoning. I have reckoned up the numbers here. There are here in number eighteen divisions, but the eighteenth division, that is, the division of the Gailiún, has been distributed among the whole host so that it is confusing to count them”” (ll.325-9).

A marginal note parallels this act with Lug’s and Ingcél’s estimating of the approaching armies in the battle of Mag Tuired and in Bruiden Da Derga respectively (O’Rahilly, 1976, 11n, 134n). While Cú Chulainn’s multiple pupils add to his beauty, they may also sharpen his sight, perhaps in a supernatural way and in a manner comparable with that of Feidelm and Ingcél.<sup>266</sup> He may have inherited this skill from Lug.

The somewhat doubtful account of Cú Chulainn’s physical appearance late in TBC I, considers him as being *corcaineach* ‘ruddy-faced’ (ll.3850-1), while Lóg similarly refers to him as *a fir rudi* ‘o ruddy man’ in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 11, §28). His particularly colourful cheeks receive a considerable amount of attention with the above extract from TBC II declaring that he has *cethri tibri cehtar a dá grúad* (ll.1202-3). According to *DIL*, *tibre* means ‘smile, laughter’ or possibly ‘shade’ or ‘dimple’, thus he has either ‘four shades’ or ‘four dimples’ in his cheeks. The related verbal form *tibid* ‘laughs, smiles’ and the

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<sup>266</sup> The gift of reckoning is also listed as one of his skills in *Tochmarc Emire* (*búaid n-airdmessa*; van Hamel, 1933, 22, §6).

adjective *tibrech* ‘laughing, dimpled’ suggest that ‘dimple’ may be the most likely meaning seeing that such facial indentations often occur as a result of smiling. In some respects, ‘shade’ seems to fit the context better. O’Rahilly (1970, 171) translates it as ‘dimple’ and thus blue, purple, green and yellow are the colours of his dimples, but in a comparable account in TBC I (ll.2349-50),<sup>267</sup> she offers ‘shades’ as its meaning (O’Rahilly, 1976, 190). Similarly, Fand also uses this term in her remarks about Cú Chulainn’s unusual cheeks, again identifying four colours including a red one in place of the yellow one in contrast with the aforementioned examples (Dillon, 1953a, 21, §37). Elsewhere, Dillon (1953, 43, §37) gives ‘shades’ as the meaning of ‘*tibri*’ in this instance. This term is not used in Finnabair’s depiction of his cheeks in *Fled Bricrenn: Da n-grúad gormgela cróderca dofíich uiblich tened oculus análaich* ‘Two blue-white blood-red cheeks that seethe sparks of fire and vapour(?)’ (Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51; my translation). Fíal describes them in an almost identical manner in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15). It may be that they are blue-white when cold and blood-red when hot and thus cold vapour and fire is emitted from them when in these respective states.

His general countenance is viewed favourably and this is reiterated in his death tale, wherein Leborcham notes that:

“*Fíal do gnúis.  
 Gartach do grúad.  
 Goirthrech caíngnúis  
 do gnúis cnedach*”  
 ““Your countenance is honourable.

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<sup>267</sup> His cheeks are similarly depicted in the corresponding scene in TBC II (ll.2352-3).

Your cheek is noble.  
Your wounded countenance is a glowing,  
fair countenance” (Kimpton, 2009, 14-5 & 37, §8)

While the facial colouring, most often of a reddish tinge, of other Ulster figures is indicated, Cú Chulainn’s unusual complexion appears to be unique to him. Conchobar is depicted as having a ‘[c]oinsiu c[h]orcada lais ‘crimson countenance’ (TBC I, ll.3596-7), while Conall Cernach has a red and white one (*drech lethderg lethgabur laiss*; Henderson, 1899, 58-9, §47). Noísiu’s, and Díarmaid ua Duibhne’s (in later tradition), red cheeks along with their black hair and the former’s white skin are underscored and presented as appealing features to Deirdriu and Gráinne respectively (Hull, 1949, 45 & 62-3, §7; Ní Sheaghda, 1967, 8-9). The whiteness of the skin of a number of kings, most notably, Conaire Mór, Cormac mac Airt and Níall Noígiallach is presented as an important aspect of their physical beauty but this does not seem to be an attribute of Cú Chulainn (Knott, 1936, 32, §102; Stokes, 1891, 186 & 204; Meyer, 1900-01, 91).<sup>268</sup> The whiteness of his breast is highlighted in the context of a description of his brooch in *Tochmarc Emire* and in TBC (*bánbruinde*; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15; *bánbruinni gel*; TBC I, l.2356).

The descriptions of Cú Chulainn’s eyebrows and teeth are not particularly unusual. The blackness of his eyebrows is highlighted in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, ll.9272-3), by Fíal in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15), by Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 22, §37) and in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 24-5, ll.554-6). Cormac mac Airt’s eyebrows are also dark in colouring (Stokes,

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<sup>268</sup> The whiteness of Feidelm’s skin is also highlighted in TBC II, along with her crimson or rich-blooded countenance (ll.188-93).

1891, 186 & 204, §3), so too are Feidelm's as described in TBC I (ll.32-3). Cú Chulainn's teeth are likened to a shower of pearls; a fairly standard analogy in early Irish literature (Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15), while the redness of his lips is indicated in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9273).

Little light is paid to the remainder of Cú Chulainn's body and thus in this respect he is in line with royal figures (see above). This is also the case with respect to the chronicle of the Ulster warriors in TBC, where the emphasis is placed upon their facial appearance and their general attire. Cú Chulainn is described as having seven toes on each of his feet and seven fingers on each of his hands (TBC I, ll.2351-3; TBC II, ll.1199-200, ll.2354-6; van Hamel, 1933, 22, §6; see IV.6). Similarly, relatively little attention is afforded to his general size. Feidelm sees him as a *fer mór* 'big/tall man' in TBC I (l.85) and later in the tale he is said to be *cetherlethan* 'broad' (ll.3850-1). Fer Diad's charioteer views him correspondingly: *Ní broth bec a falach Cú Chulaind áit i mbíad*: 'Cú Chulainn is no small hidden trifle, wherever he might be' (l.2880), before subsequently perceiving him to be a man of great size (*Is fúath fir co farpairt*; l.2919). Conversely, he is referred to as a small-browed man in *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 24-5, ll.554-6) and as a little warrior in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada agus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (see above). The use of the adjective *bec* to refer to him is discussed above. Significantly, Cú Chulainn's growth rate does not seem to be represented like that of the doomed hero, Bres, in *Cath Maige Tuired*, who reaches the growth of a fourteen year old, even though he is only seven (Gray, 1982, 28-9, §23). Nevertheless, it is stated in the eulogy preceding his *macgnímrada* in TBC I that no man is equal to him in

growth (1.387). On the whole, Cú Chulainn is not depicted as being of great physical stature.

### **Conclusion**

The majority of the more detailed descriptions of him are given by women or for their benefit. It is his facial attributes which are highlighted most, a feature he shares with a number of royal figures. Cú Chulainn's colourful aspect distinguishes him from the latter group and from other Ulster warriors. Clearly, this contributes to his attractiveness. In his appreciation of the hero in TBC I, Fer Diad's charioteer describes him as [c]ú co ndelb cach datha 'the Hound with beauty of every colour' (1.2937).<sup>269</sup> Though, multiple pupils are not exclusive to him, this feature is quite unusual and is again presented as a defining quality. In addition, this seems to account for his extraordinary sight. While a modern-day audience might expect that a warrior's physique should be his most notable characteristic, this is not the case in relation to the representation of Ulster warriors in general, Fergus mac Róich being the main exception. Regardless of this, it is clear that Cú Chulainn has the physical beauty of a hero. On the whole, there seems to be considerable agreement in relation to his appearance. The undistorted hero seems to be normal or small in stature with long hair bearing a golden hue; his cheeks are multi-coloured and his eyes have many pupils; his lips are red and his teeth pearly white.

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<sup>269</sup> He is referred to as *a lígbraitaig Liphe* 'o bright banner/ mantled one of the Liffey' in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 10-1, §11).

#### VI.4. Clothing

The accounts of Cú Chulainn's clothing are chiefly found in the context of his preparations for battle. The most extensive ones feature in TBC. Cú Chulainn's first expedition concludes with the queen, Conchobar's wife, Mugain, wrapping him in a *brat(t) gorm* with a silver brooch and a hooded tunic (TBC I, ll.818-9).<sup>270</sup> According to *DIL*, *gorm* covers a wide range of colours including, blue, green, black and red. A cloak along with a fastening brooch can perhaps be viewed as one of the essential items of clothing for an adult warrior. These seem to complete his initiation as a warrior. Thereafter, this garment is relatively frequently commented upon and is generally said to be of a reddish-purplish colour with some ornamentation: *brut derg* 'red mantle' (TBC I, 1.93), *brat gorm crúanchorca* 'dark purple mantle' (1.2958), *cethocruss nó ceatharfochrus bruit deirg imbi* 'red girded mantle' (ll.3852-3). Legal commentary on fosterage outlines the colour of clothing worn by various ranks, indicating red (*derg*), grey (*glas*) or brown (*donn*) as that borne by the sons of lords and purple (*corcra*) or blue (*gorm*) for the sons of kings (Kelly, 1997, 263; see VII.2). Elsewhere, Cú Chulainn wears a *fúan* which McGuirk (2008, 227) defines as 'some sort of loose cloak worn over the tunic'. In TBC I, it is described as a fair garment, which is 'well-fitting, bright purple, fringed, five-folded' (ll.2354-5). He wears a beautiful five-folded purple one when he goes to woo Emer (*Fúan caín corcrae cóicdíabail*; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15), a purple-blue one in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn (fúan corcorgorm*; LU, ll.9265-6) and a purple-bordered one in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige (fuan corcra cortharach*; Stokes, 1893, 402-3, §8). A type of cloak seems to be part of his normal attire and is in keeping with those worn by other Ulster

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<sup>270</sup> While these three elements also feature in TBC II, his cloak is green and his tunic is made of gold (ll.1205-6).

warriors.<sup>271</sup> As well as keeping the hero warm while on the move, it functions as a blanket for the sleeping hero in *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* (§8).

In the elaborate description of his preparation for seeking revenge for the deaths of the youths of Ulster: *Ro chress a c[h]eltar comga taris don tlachtdíllat Tíre Tair[n]gire dobretha [dó] ó aiti druidechta* ‘He cast around him his protective cloak made of raiment from Tír Tairngire, brought to him from his teacher of wizardry’ (TBC I, ll.2242-4). As well as receiving this item of clothing, the implication seems to be that he obtained some training in wizardry, but it does not state with whom. TBC II is more specific by observing that it is brought to him *ó Manannán mac Lír ó ríge Thíre na Sorcha* (ll.2259-61). O’Rahilly (1967, 313) observes that this line is quoted in *Contribb.* s.v. 2 as if *Tír na Sorcha* meant “‘Land of Brightness”, a synonym of *Tír Tairngire*’ but she adds that ‘*Sorcha, Tír na Sorcha*, was one name for Syria’ and that it is used as a ‘synonym for Arabia in a passage of *Cathcharpat Serda LL 189<sup>a</sup>*’. She adds that it seems probable that it was from this passage that the LL-compiler took the name, *Tíre na Sorcha*, for the Táin.

Presumably, the implication being that this is some sort of magical cloak. We are told in *Altram Tige Dá Medar* that Manannán comes from overseas bearing a number of gifts to the Túatha Dé Danann (Duncan, 1932, 188 & 207, §2), one of which is the *féth fíadha* which Ó hÓgáin (2006, 330) notes is a ‘cloak of concealment through which they could make themselves invisible’. Significantly,

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<sup>271</sup> See McGuirk (2008, 225-31) for a detailed consideration of the clothes of the Ulstermen.

Manannán uses his cloak (*brat*) to separate Cú Chulainn from his wife, Fand, at the end of *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 29, §48), but he is not depicted as giving it to him. Nonetheless, these two figures do not seem to meet elsewhere.

Such is the splendour and brilliance of Cú Chulainn's white brooch with silver inset and decorative gold that it dazzles those who look at it (TBC I, ll.2356-8). Conversely, in *Fled Bricrenn* and *Tochmarc Emire* he sports a gold one (*Héo óir..*; Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15). The first fold of his cloak is said to fail him thus causing his brooch to fall and pierce his foot as he attempts to prepare for his final battle in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 13 & 36-7, §6).<sup>272</sup> Cú Chulainn states that: “*Ni bidba bratt beres robud. Is bidba delg athchummas chness*” “‘The mantle which brings a warning is not a culprit. The brooch which wounds the flesh is a culprit.’” (§6).

A tunic of silky satin is worn next to his skin in TBC I and a heavily adorned one in TBC II (*Clíabinar sróil sirecda re chnes..*; TBC I, 1.2358; *Cliabinar siric fri[a] chness arna imthacmañg massi de chimsaib 7 chressaib 7 chorrtharaib óir 7 argit 7 fíndruni*; TBC II, ll.2361-3). As noted above, he is dressed in a hooded tunic at the end of his boyhood deed in TBC I, in *Fled Bricrenn* (*leni gelchulpatach*; Henderson, 1899, 62-3, §51) and in *Tochmarc Emire* (*Léne gelchulpatach*; van Hamel, 1933, 25, §15). In the latter two examples, it seems to be ornamented with red and gold; a feature which is also found on the tunics of other Ulster warriors.<sup>273</sup> While in TBC II, his tunic is made of gold threads (*Léni órsnáith immi*; ll.1205-

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<sup>272</sup> The word *fathi* is initially used to refer to his cloak, which Kimpton (2009, 94) proposes means ‘a fold of garment, (by extension) a cloak’.

<sup>273</sup> See McGuirk (2008, 226).

6).<sup>274</sup> Cú Chulainn also wears twenty-seven shirts when going into battle which are bound to him with ropes and cords when entering into battle in TBC I (*cneslénti*; ll.4093-4). Earlier in the tale, these are described as being waxed and board-like (ll.2215-7).

A type of apron also seems to be part of Cú Chulainn's battle attire. He dons a dark-red, soldierly one of royal satin in TBC I (*a dondfúathróci donddergi míleta do sról rí*; ll.2359-60). In the most elaborate account of his battle dress, he is said to wear two aprons; the first of which is of filmy silk with a border of variegated white gold and covers the lower part of his body, while the second dark leather one is made from the best parts of four yearling ox-hides (ll.2223-8). No further reference is made to the clothing worn by him on the lower part of his body and this is also generally the case with the other Ulster heroes in the saga material. His torso is further protected by a heavier battle-girdle (*a chathcriss curad*) of toughened and tanned leather from the choicest part of seven yearling ox-hides (ll.2219-22).<sup>275</sup> This can repel spears, points, darts, lances and arrows (ll.2219-3). Finally, he wears a crested war-helmet on his head (*a chírchathbarr*; ll.2237-8). Lóeg also bears a crested, flat-surfaced, rectangular and multicoloured one (*a chathbarr*) for this particular encounter (TBC I, ll.2196-8). *Cathcharpat Serda* observes that Cú Chulainn received his helmet adorned with shining gems as a princely gift from Arabia that is Syria, from the fertile land of Manannán mac Lir (O'Rahilly, 1976a, 197-8). In general, the Ulster warriors do not wear head-gear.

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<sup>274</sup> While sitting naked in the snow in TBC I, he inspects his shirt for lice (ll.1255-6).

<sup>275</sup> He is dressed similarly in the corresponding scene in TBC II (ll.2230-45).

While much of these items serve a purpose, they also add to their bearer's beauty. Emphasis is placed upon Fer Diad's and Cú Chulainn's appearance prior to their fight in TBC I. Lógé notes that:

*“Is amlaid doraga Fer Diad dot indsaigid-so fo núamaisi figi 7 ber[r]tha 7 f  
oilc[th]i 7 fothraicthi, 7 ceithre cóicid hÉrenn lais do fegad in chomlaind”*  
“Fer Diad will come against you freshly beautified, washed and bathed, with  
hair plaited and beard shorn, and the four provinces of Ireland will come with  
him to watch the fight” (ll.2809-10).

Lógé adds that he would like Cú Chulainn to go to Emer to get the same adorning, which he does (ll.2810-2). After his tryst early in TBC I, he remains there until he washes and bathes (ll.3134). His bathing prior to his death in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, may be in line with the idea that a warrior was conscious of his appearance and that he strived to look his best, even in death (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §21).

### **Conclusion**

Cú Chulainn's cloak and brooch are his most defining items of martial clothing. He receives them as part of his initiation as a warrior. Significantly, these also feature in his death tale and thus these items essential mark his rise and fall as a warrior. Additional items of clothing, most of which have protective qualities, are worn by him in times of battle, almost exclusively in TBC. His representation in this manner therein heightens the tone of the tale while reiterating the exceptional nature of its central hero.

## VI.5. Sex appeal

Cú Chulainn's attractiveness to a female audience is represented as an important aspect of his heroic persona. His strong sex appeal is represented in a number of sources, but most poignantly at the outset of *Tochmarc Emire*:

*Ro carsat mná Ulad co mór Coin Culann ara áini ocon chliss, ar athlaimi a láime, ar febas a ergnai, ar chaími a gnúise, ar sercaigi a dreiche* (van Hamel, 1933, 21-2, §6) 'The Ulsterwomen loved Cú Chulainn greatly for his excellence at play, for the dexterity of his hand, for the quality of his wisdom, for the beauty of his face and for the irresistibility (lit. lovableness) of his appearance' (McManus, 2009, 69-70).

It categorises his three faults as follows: *a bith ro-ócc,....a bith rodánae, a bith ro-álainn* 'his being too young, ...his being too daring, his being too beautiful' (van Hamel, 1933, 21-2, §6, my translation). The men of Ulster hope that if he has his own wife, he would be less likely to deflower their maidens and to accept the advances of their women (van Hamel, 1933, 22, §7). In this regard, McManus (2009, 70) rightly observes that '[t]he irresistibility of the hero touches not only the young, unattached girls but also mature, married womenfolk, and the greatest *kudos* of all, perhaps, lies in seducing the wives of mortal enemies'. Indeed in *Fled Bricrenn*, he is described as *o lennáin ban ocus ingen* '[o] beloved/sweetheart of wives and of maidens' (Henderson, 1899, 10-1, §11), while in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* he makes reference to their affections for him (Meyer, 1910, 52). The mimicking of Cú Chulainn's one-eyed state by the Ulsterwomen also reiterates their passions for him (see IV.3). Feidelm also highlights their desires for him in TBC I:

*Dofil gnúis as gráto dó*  
*Dobeir mod don banc[h]ureo*  
*Duni óc is álaind dath*  
*Dofeith deilb ndracuín don chath*  
‘His face is beautiful.  
He amazes women-folk.  
This lad of handsome countenance  
looks in the battle like a dragon’ (TBC I, ll.75-8).

Similar remarks are passed by Eithne and Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn: Ní fil díib mnaí náchit charad no ná beth cuit dait* (Dillon, 1953a, 2, §6) ‘There is not a woman among them (the Ulster women) who would not love you or in whom there would not be a share of affection for you’ (McManus, 2009, 72). Fand states that: *álaind a lí, lí súla do andrib* ‘Beautiful his colour, an attractive sight to women’ (Dillon, 1953a, 23, §38; my translation). Elsewhere, he seems to be akin to a modern-day ‘babe-magnet’. Dornoll falls in love with him in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 46, §60), and so too does Úathach the moment she lays eyes on him:

*Luid dano Úathach ingen Scáthaige ara chend. Donécci 7 ní n-aicill ara mét dobert toil dí in delb derscaigthech, co n-accai forsin ngillu a toil de* (van Hamel, 1933, 50, §68) ‘Then Úathach, daughter of Scáthach, went to meet him. She looked at him and did not converse with him because of the extent of the pleasure his splendid body gave her and she drank her fill of gazing at him’ (McManus, 2009, 71).

Although less detail is provided, Búan, daughter of Samera, is likewise smitten by him in *Fled Bricrenn (Dobretha Búan ingen Samera grad do Choinculainn;* Henderson, 1899, 84-5, §66). Subsequently, she chases him but dies after striking

her head off a rock in an attempt to leap into his chariot (§70). This scene is somewhat comparable with Deirdriu's suicidal leap from a chariot in the closing scene in *Loinges mac nUislenn* (Hull, 1949, 51 & 69, §19). Perhaps, Búan's jump can be viewed in the same way. Upon hearing of his wonderful deeds, Findchóem also falls for him in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* and once united with him places her hands about his neck and kisses him (Hollo, 2005, 53 & 98, §§6-7). This is also the reason why Derbforgaill and the daughter of Búan (Morrígan) become enamoured by him in *Aided Derbforgaill* (Marstrander, 1911, 208, 214) and TBC I (ll.1849-50) respectively. In the lesser well-known tale, *Tochmarc Ferbe*, the female warrior, Dimor, travels from Spain to Emain Machae because of her love for him (Leahy, 1902, 14).

Upon occasion, he is also known to showcase himself and duly does so to Emer on their first meeting (*Ba cona thimthacht óenaig doluid Cú Chulainn in lá sin acallaim Emhire 7 do thaidbred a chrotha dí*; van Hamel, 1933, 23, §11).<sup>276</sup> Such behaviour is perhaps expected of him and necessary to ensure the continued adulation of the womenfolk.<sup>277</sup> In *Fled Bricrenn*, Medb tells her daughter to describe the *delb a fir* 'form/appearance of the man' approaching (Henderson, 1899, 54-5, §44; my translation). After undergoing a *ríastrad* late in TBC I, he parades *a chrotha álgín álaind do mnáib 7 bantrochtaib 7 andrib 7 ingenaib 7 filedaib 7 áes dána* 'his gentle and beautiful form to women and girls and maidens, to poets and men of art' on the following day (ll.2336-40).<sup>278</sup> Thus the hero is not

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<sup>276</sup> In an effort to persuade the sons of Nechta Scéne not to fight Cú Chulainn, the charioteer, Ibar, informs them that the hero has come to the border *do thasselbad a delb* 'to display his form' as opposed to seek combat (TBC II, ll.1088-9).

<sup>277</sup> In *Fled Bricrenn*, he remains behind to entertain the womenfolk instead of departing for Crúachain with the other Ulstermen (Henderson, 1899, 52-3, §42).

<sup>278</sup> This section is entitled *Túarascabáil Delba Con Culaind so* (TBC I, 1.2335).

deemed to be attractive while in his distorted state. In response, the women of Ulster and Connacht clamber on mens' shoulders in order to behold the hero (ll.2367-8).<sup>279</sup> TBC II is a little more specific in noting that the women are amazed at his beauty in light of his more unsightly appearance on the previous night (ll.2373-5). It is noteworthy that he is equally appealing to the Connacht women.

The women's devastation in anticipation of Cú Chulainn's death drives home the extent of their adoration for him. While Leborcham urges him not to leave at first, she acknowledges that he must do so and informs him that there will be a lasting and great lament for him (Kimpton, 2009, 14-5 & 37, §8; see VII.4). These sentiments are said to have been reiterated by the one hundred and fifty women who then proceed to wail and cry for their hero (§10). In addition, these feelings are further reinforced by Emer in her lengthy lament which concludes the hero's death tale (§§33-5). As expected, his death has a desolating impact on the men and women of Ulster.

### **Conclusion**

Cú Chulainn's great deeds and his beauty render him intensely desirable to a female audience of both single and married women. Indeed, he is equally attractive to otherworldly women such is his beauty. Again, this helps to confirm his status as a hero. It is perhaps understandable that he leaves a trail of broken hearts. He has a sense of duty towards the womenfolk and seems to be obliged to entertain them or display his form to them in order to secure their continued applause.

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<sup>279</sup> Dubthach comments upon the manner in which the womenfolk raise their heads above battle to see Cú Chulainn in his subsequent lay (TBC I, ll.2384-5).

## VI.6. Intimate relations with women and the resulting children

As indicated above, the hero is linked sexually with a selection of female figures, ranging from a more formal marriage in the case of Emer, to a number of more transient encounters. In general, the saga material names Connlac as Cú Chulainn's only progeny. Genealogical material, however, paints a rather different picture. The prose *Banshenchas* text, contains a number of particularly enlightening entries in this respect. The following is a catalogue of the women that Cú Chulainn is depicted as having some kind of sexual relations with:

### **Emer, daughter of Forgall,**

For the most part, texts from the eighth to the twelfth century present Emer as Cú Chulainn's wife. This tradition is found in a range of tales including *Brislech Mór*, *Maige Muirthemne*, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Tochmarc Emire*, TBC, *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, *Mesca Ulad*, *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac rí* *Lochlann* (see below).<sup>280</sup> It is his wooing of her which is presented as being integral to his heroic biography (see III.3.2-4).<sup>281</sup>

*Tochmarc Emire* lists her as Forgall Manach's daughter and locates her in Luglochta Loga; the latter is described by van Hamel (1933, 196) as a 'district in the east of Ireland, south of the Boyne' and *Onomasticon Goedelicum* suggests that from the context it seems to be near the river Delvin, which flows by Gormanstown, at Lusk, north of Dublin. To the best of my knowledge, her mother is not indicated therein or in any other saga source, but the prose *Banshenchas* lists

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<sup>280</sup> His wife (*a ben*) is mentioned in *Táin Bó Regamna*, but she is not named (Corthals, 1987, 51, §1).

<sup>281</sup> She is sometimes referred to as Emer *Éoltcháin* (TBC I, 1.2811; Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57).

her as Bé Bóinne (*Bé Boinde bean Forgaill Manach máthair Emiri mná Con Culaind*; Dobbs, 1931, 172, 208). Cú Chulainn and Emer are not represented as having any children in the tales but this source indicates that they may have a daughter, Finnscoth, together (see below). The fact that Cú Chulainn's wife does not bear a child for him is not presented as problematic in the literature.

### **Eithne Ingubai**

An alternative tradition in the earlier (B) version of *Serglige Con Culainn* gives Eithne Ingubai as his spouse (*Ethne Inguba ben Chon Culaind*; Dillon, 1953a, 2, §4). In the later (A) version of the text, Lóeg mentions the hill in which she dwells in his recounting of the *síde* to Cú Chulainn but Emer is represented as his wife in §34. Another Middle Irish source describes Eithne as Cú Chulainn's aunt, Súaltaim's sister, and the wife of Elcmar of the *síd* (*Cuchulainn mac Sualtaim maic Becaltaig maic Moraltaig maic Umendrúaid a sídib, ocus Dolb mac Becaltaig a brathair, ocus Ethne Ingubai ben Elcmaire a sídib a siur, ocus Dechter ingen Chathbad a mathair Chonculainn*; Stokes, 1910, 28-31, §20). These references point to her supernatural nature and Carey (1995, 160-4) asserts that the link with Elcmar and the *síde* 'suggests an identification of Eithne in Gubai with the goddess Bóand'. He adds that the author made several attempts to bring this text into line with the Ulster-Cycle material as a whole, stating that '[i]t seems likeliest that in this instance he was not seeking to adapt his primary source, but rather simply transmitting an anomalous doctrine which he found already there'.

Eithne is cast as Cú Chulainn's wife in the *Banshenchas* material where they are said to have a number of children. One entry lists both Emer and Eithne as his wife:

*Emer ingen Fhorgaill Manach m. Rosa Ruaidh do Laignib bean Con C[h]ulainn: ⁊ ba ben do Eithne Inguba; ⁊ adearaid corab í Eithni mathair Chairpri Chlaín ⁊ Fhinscoithi* 'Emer daughter of Forgall Manach son of Ros Ruad of the Leinstermen wife of Cú Chulainn and Eithne Inguba was his wife and it was said that Eithne was the mother of Cairpre Cláen and of Finnscoth' (Dobbs, 1931, 172; my translation).

While Findscóp is listed as his daughter later in the text, Emer, and not Eithne, is her mother (Dobbs, 1931, 208). This is the pattern in the majority of the extant manuscript copies. Therein, she is said to be *bean Eírc m. Coírpri* and a parallel entry is found earlier in the text (Dobbs, 1931, 173). This is echoed in *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* where his daughter Fínscoth is given to Erc as his wife (Hogan, 1892, 56). While the Rawlinson B. 502 account of *Senchas Síol Ír* contains a reference to a *mac Findscuapi ingini Conchobuir* 'son of Findscóp daughter of Conchobar', both the LL and the La versions list her as Findscóp and consider her as the daughter of Cú Chulainn (O'Brien, 1962, 281).

Unfortunately, less is known about Cú Chulainn's alleged son, Cairpre Cláen. Such a figure does not feature in the *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, the *Banshenchas* or in *Cóir Anmann*. In a lay at the end of *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait*, Cú Chulainn twice refers to a Cairpre Cláen (Hollo, 2005, 61-2 & 106, §44). Prior to this, he had fought Cairpre Cundail and thus it seems likely

that he is referring to him and perhaps *cláen* ‘crooked’ is simply an appellation for him.

### **Finnabair and Medb**

Finnabair’s dalliances with the hero are principally found in *Fled Bricrenn*. As part of the hospitality extended to the Ulstermen on their visit to Crúachain, groups of fifty women, along with a single maiden, are allotted to Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach and to Cú Chulainn therein (Henderson, 1899, 80-1, §63). This reference alludes to the enormous sexual appetite of such martial heroes. Finnabair is given to Cú Chulainn and her mother, Medb, seems to join them as well. The former also seems to have a sexual encounter with him a little earlier in the text (§54). They are also united at the end of TBC I (ll.4157-9).

### **Findchóem, daughter of Eochu Rond; Etan**

In many respects, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* is an account of the union of Cú Chulainn and Findchóem, who is described as the daughter of Eochu Rond, king of the Uí Maíne (Hollo, 2005, 53 & 98, §9). According to Hollo (2005, 12, 108), she first appears on a mound at Áth Ferthain, which seems to be on the Galway-Roscommon border on the River Suck; again another Connacht woman, but it is noted that she is ‘nowhere else cast in this or any other role’. In this regard, this chief lady stands in significant contrast to Cú Chulainn’s ‘usual’ wife, Emer. Hollo (2005, 13) asserts that the author of this tale was familiar with the Emer-texts but opted to present an alternative scenario based upon a traditional story pattern. She lays her claim on the hero by throwing herself at him, as outlined above, before leaving with him against the wishes of the Uí Maíne (§§6-

17). The latter give chase, and after being humiliated further by Cú Chulainn, her father, Eochu Rond, inflicts a painful injunction on him and brings about his trip to a supernatural realm (see III.4.3.4). Thus, this narrative is in keeping to some degree with other wooing tales discussed in III.3.2-3, most notably, the bride's father is hostile towards his prospective son-in-law and brings about his sojourn to a supernatural realm as a prerequisite to his union with his daughter. Toward the *finale* of the text, Cú Chulainn states that Findchóem has led him astray (*is í do-rat fordul form*) and expresses regret at entering into the marriage (*am aithreach in lánamnass*; §44). Nonetheless, this suggests that he was married to her and thereafter it is noted that she remained (*anaid*) with him.

When Cú Chulainn goes on his overseas or otherworldly journey in this tale, he stays in a house in which there are the three daughters of Riangabar, namely, Eithne, Etan, and Étaín (§§29-30). Cú Chulainn sleeps with Etan and leaves a thumb-ring of gold with her as he does with Aífe in *Tochmarc Emire* but in contrast to Aífe, she is not accredited with bearing him any children. Subsequently in the text, he spends the night with a king's daughter (§39).

### **Fand, wife of Manannán mac Lir**

Fand is another of Cú Chulainn's conquests in *Serlige Con Culainn*. In the B version of the tale, it is stated that her husband, Manannán mac Lir, has left her (Dillon, 1953a, 5, §13). She seems quite keen to meet Cú Chulainn and she falls for him like a number of other women as noted above. Despite being wooed by many men, she refuses all of them aside from Cú Chulainn (§44). She gives him a *fáelti sinredaig* 'special welcome' (§35) and he spends a month with her thereafter

(§39), before trysting with her at Ibor Cind Tráchtá shortly after his return (see below). Cú Chulainn feels that he is almost entitled to sleep with Fand while being with Emer, Emer is not in agreement and Fand returns to Manannán. Subsequently, Cú Chulainn makes a number of aimless leaps and retreats into the wilds indicating his despair at their separation (see IV.6). The more normal course of events is that the hero breaks a woman's heart as is the case with Búan in *Fled Bricreann* (see above). This theme may be inverted here in order to present the hero in a more negative light.

### **Úathach, Scáthach and Aífe**

Cú Chulainn enjoys considerable success with a number of females in *Tochmarc Emire*. His refusal of the ugly Dornoll indicates that he is not willing to go off with any woman (van Hamel, 1933, 46, §60). As noted above, Úathach is instantly captivated by him and the earlier version of the text describes Cú Chulainn as being in the companionship of her (*a munterus hUathchae*; Meyer, 1890, 448-9). Even though Úathach acknowledges that the hero has excited her, she suggests to Scáthach that she should sleep with him that night in the longer account of the tale (van Hamel, 1933, 50-1, §68). Subsequently, the text mentions other versions which claim that Cú Chulainn mated on the beach with Scáthach (§71), perhaps in an attempt to clarify the situation. In *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, he cohabits with Úathach but also enjoys sexual favours from Scáthach (Stokes, 1908, 134-5, §49; Ó hUiginn, 2002, 49-50). This arrangement is presented as being acceptable to all in the latter.

Little clarification is offered as to the identity of Scáthach and that of her daughter in *Tochmarc Emire*. They are simply referred to as Scáthach and Úathach and the former's home is described as being: *baí fri hAilpi anair* 'it was to the east of the Alps' (van Hamel, 1933, 46, §60; see III.4.3.1). *DIL* notes that *Alpae* is a Latin loanword and gives both 'Alps' and 'Scotland' as its possible meanings. *Alba*, however, is not. Van Hamel (1933, 136) gives 'the Alps' as the meaning of *Ailpe* while Meyer (1890, 444-5) suggests 'Alba' for *Alpi* which *DIL* notes originally meant the 'whole island of Britain; later localised to North Britain, Scotland'.

No further detail is provided in the references to her in TBC I (1.1753, 1.2890, 1.3057 1.3089). *Foghlaim Con Culainn* is slightly more explicit, listing her as *Sgathach inghen Búanuinne*, the king of Great Scythia which is described as being in the northeast of the great eastern world (Stokes, 1908, 114-5, §11; Ó hUiginn, 2002, 45). A great many countries are said to lie between Cú Chulainn, when in Scotland, and this distant land. She is listed as Scáthach Uanaind, daughter of Ardeimm in Letha in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §1) and as Scáthach Buanann daughter of Argeimm in Letha in *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* (Stokes, 1910, 30-1, §20). Van Hamel (1933, 194) notes that Letha is 'the Continent, originally Brittany (Litavia) or Latium'. In the anecdote concerning the making of Cú Chulainn's shield, there is a reference to his training in the lands of Scáthach and Búanann (Best, 1911, 72). *Sanas Cormaic* contains a reference to a Búanann who was *muime na fían* 'foster-mother of the *fíana*' (Meyer, 1913, 11, §104). Nagy (1985, 102n) asserts that 'Bodbmall, Búanann, and Scáthach are all multiforms of a supernatural martial foster-mother figure who appears in various contexts'. *DIL* considers Búanann as the 'nurse of warriors, name of a goddess'.

In TBC II, Scáthach, Úathach and Aífe are referred to as foster-mothers (ll.2611-3).<sup>282</sup>

Cú Chulainn's other paramour in this tale is Aífe, the mother of his son Connlae, who is depicted as Scáthach's rival. Again, her identity is somewhat of a mystery. She is listed as the daughter of Ardgeimm in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* and is thus Scáthach's sister (Meyer, 1904, 114-5, §1). In the summary style tale of Cú Chulainn's slaying of his son in H.3.17, Scáthach is represented as living in Alba and is said to give her daughter Aífe to the hero (O'Keefe, 1904, 124-5). Later tradition describes her as 'the daughter of the High-King of Greece, in Greece' and thus living in a comparably easterly location to Scáthach (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 45). In *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn forces her to sleep with him to bear him a son in exchange for her life (van Hamel, 1933, 55, §76). He orders that he be named Connlae and leaves a list of instructions along with a thumb-ring for him. Essentially, his relationship with Aífe is no more than that of a forced transient sexual encounter. Conversely, in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, Aífe falls irresistibly in love with him and they cohabit for a year leading to her pregnancy (Stokes, 1908, 134-5, §50; Ó hUiginn, 2002, 50). Cú Chulainn raises the possibility that she may have conceived a girl and accordingly offers her some brief advice. More detailed recommendations, on the lines of those found in *Tochmarc Emire*, are issued by him in the event of a boy having been conceived, and that he should be called Connlaoch.

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<sup>282</sup> They are referred to again as a trio elsewhere in the text (TBC II, ll.2939, l.3091).

Connlae, as Aífe's son, is the strongest tradition for his offspring in the literature. Cú Chulainn also makes reference to the fall of Aífe's only son in TBC II (l.3457) and he mentions him (*fer Aífe*) in his phantom-speech in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 28 & 46, §31).

The poem, *Créad tárraidh treise Connacht*, written by the fifteenth century bardic poet, Maol Eachlainn 'na nUirsegeál' Ó hUiginn, holds that Cú Chulainn and Aoife have a daughter called Bé Tuinne (McManus, 2009, 72-3n). It tells of the lament at the passing of the hero, Cú Chulainn, and the meeting of Lógé and this woman. She replies as follows to Lógé's enquiry about her identity:

*“Ingen dho Coin an chlesraidh  
mé as d’Aoífe’ ar an ingen-soin  
Bé Tuinne rinne ’ga rádh  
sinne ga truime tochrádh?”*

“I am the daughter of Cú [Chulainn] of the feats, and of Aoife”, said the girl; “Bé Thuinne I am called; what greater misery than I?” (McManus, 2009, 72-3n).

It seems likely that the Aoife in question is a different person, namely, the daughter of Aodh Ruadh. In *Tochmarc Emire*, Aodh's daughter is Derbforgaill (van Hamel, 1933, 62, §84). Cú Chulainn's departure from the pregnant Aífe in *Tochmarc Emire* seems to rule out the possibility of her being the mother. While in the later tale, *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, he has a sexual relationship with Aoife, the daughter of Aodh Ruadh (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 52; see below).

Ultimately, the outcome of Cú Chulainn's sexual encounters with these women is quite tragic, leading to his killing of his only son. The tale seems to advise against sleeping with such strange women who have such poor morals. Their behaviour is contrasted strongly with Emer's who remains loyal to her husband even in the event of temptation. His sexual exploits seem to be more liberal in the later version of *Tochmarc Emire*. The Church Reform of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had a major difficulty with the wayward marital and sexual endeavours of the Irish, in particular the practice of incest. This is evident in letters written by Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, to Gofraid, King of Dublin in 1073/4 and Tairdelbach Ua Briain, King of Munster c. 1074 (Jaski, 1996, 16-42). A similar tone is found in a subsequent letter by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Muirchertach Ua Briain, King of Ireland c. 1097. The laws of consanguinity held that once a person married their bloods mixed and thus to have sexual relations with one's mother-in-law/grandmother-in-law/sister-in-law/father-in-law/ etc was in fact incestuous.<sup>283</sup> Tragedy would unfold as a result. By having sexual encounters with Úathach, her mother Scáthach and the latter's sister Aífe, Cú Chulainn was committing such crimes, thus the outcome is understandably negative.

### **Derbforgaill, the daughter of the king of Ruad**

Cú Chulainn encounters Derbforgaill, the daughter of the king of Ruad, on his return from the lands of Scáthach in *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel, 1933, 60-2, §§80-4). He rescues her from the Fomorians with the result that her father offers her to him but he refuses, advising her to follow him to Ireland in a year's time if

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<sup>283</sup> This is indicated in the Decrees of the Synod of Cashel in 1101 (Byrne, 1973, 191-2). See Ó hUiginn (2000) for a detailed appraisal of the sexual practices in *Tochmarc Emire*.

she so desires. With no specific meeting place arranged, Cú Chulainn and Lóeg go to the *airer in tíre* ‘the border of the land’ to the shore of Loch Cuan to meet her. She appears with her handmaiden in the form of two birds and Cú Chulainn injures Derbforgaill with a slingshot. He is reprimanded by her companion and thereafter sucks the stone from her along with a clot of blood before proclaiming that he cannot marry her because he has drunk her blood. This scene, with some variation, is also found in the opening section of *Aided Derbforgaill* (Martsrander, 1911, 208 & 214).<sup>284</sup>

As is mentioned above, in the later version, she becomes Aoife, daughter of Aodh Ruadh (Ó hUiginn, 2002, 52). He sleeps with her, gives a bride-price for her, brings her home with him, and possibly fathers a daughter with her, namely Bé Tuinne.

### **Feidelm Noíchride and her bondmaid**

There is some confusion as to whether Cú Chulainn meets with Feidelm Noíchride<sup>285</sup> or her bondmaid (*a hinailte*), in the early stages of TBC I (ll.221-4): “*Isim écen-sa techt i ndáil*” *Fedelmae Noíchride-.i. i ndáil a hinailte boí i comair Con Culaind i ndormainecht* “‘I must go to Feidelm Noíchride’- he meant to tryst with her handmaiden who was secretly Cú Chulainn’s concubine’. Carey (2004, 18) asserts that *inailt* more commonly means ‘foster-sister’ as opposed to ‘servant-girl’ and he notes that ‘[t]he additional statement that Cú Chulainn’s errand was

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<sup>284</sup> She is simply listed as the daughter of the King of Lochlann therein (Marstrander, 1911, 208). He proposes that the coming of the birds in this tale has been modelled upon a scene found in the opening section of *Serglige Con Culainn* (Marstrander, 1911, 202).

<sup>285</sup> She is called Feidilimid Noíchruathach in TBC II and he goes southwards to Tara to meet her therein (ll.450-1). A woman of this name is described as Conchobar’s daughter in *Talland Étair* (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57).

only with his foster-sister is self evidently secondary'. Dooley (1994, 124) asserts that the redactors of TBC I were aware of a problem with placing Cú Chulainn with Feidelm and thus amend the material accordingly. In an effort to account for this, Dooley puts forth a number of theories including one that states that it is 'not proper for Cú Chulainn himself to display a socially disruptive promiscuity?' In *Talland Étair*, there is a reference first to a Feidelm Noíchruthach<sup>286</sup> who is Conchobar's daughter and in the following line to a Feidelm Fíoltcháin who is described as Lóegaire Búadach's wife (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57). Although the first Feidelm is not accorded any husband, it is impossible to determine whether these are two different women or not. A similar description is found in *Fled Bricrenn* in the context of an account of those attending a feast: again a many-shaped Feidelm Noícrothach, daughter of Conchobar is mentioned along with a Feidelm Fíoltcháin who is Lóegaire Búadach's wife, but she is said to be another daughter of Conchobar (*Fedelm Fíoltchain dano ingen aili Conchobair*; Henderson, 1899, 34-5, §28). Thus, this suggests that he may have had two daughters with the same name but this seems somewhat unlikely. This implies that this woman could possibly be a first cousin or grand-aunt of Cú Chulainn thus any sexual relations with her would be of an incestuous nature and thus perhaps problematic.

Cú Chulainn is also depicted as having a sexual liaison with Feidelm Fíoltcháin, the wife of Elcmar of Brú na Bóinne in a brief anecdote recounting the former's adventure to the Boyne (Meyer, 1912a, 120). It is noted above that the sobriquet

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<sup>286</sup> Feidelm Noíchruthach is said to have nine appearances each one more beautiful than the next (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57). This characteristic is implied in her sobriquet *noí* 'nine' + *chruthach* 'shaped'. An entry concerning Feidlim Nochruthach in *Cóir Anmann* concurs with the latter explanation and infers that she was also known as *Nuachraidech*, a compound of *nua* 'new' and *craide* 'heart', which refers to her love of kin (Arbuthnot, 2005, 107 & 144, §124).

*foltchain* is also attached to Emer in TBC I (l.2811), *Talland Étar* (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57), *Mesca Ulad* (Watson, 1941, 3, 1.44) and *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 18-9, §19; 34-5, §28). Perhaps, this is the same Feidelm as is mentioned in TBC. Feidelm's subsequent exposure of herself to the Ulstermen is outlined as a cause for their *ces* (Meyer, 1912a, 120). Bearing this example and the one from TBC I in mind, Carey (2004, 18) asserts that Cú Chulainn's union with Feidelm renders the province defenceless (see below). In addition, he views it as reasonable to speculate that Feidelm personifies the water. Interestingly, both Eithne and Feidelm are depicted as being wives of Elcmar. Additionally, it is stated in *Tochmarc Étaíne* that: *Bai ben la hEalcmar an Broga .i. Eithni a hainm. Ainm n-ailldi Boand*: 'Elcmar of the Brug had a wife whose name was Eithne, and another name for her was Boand' (Bergin & Best, 1938, 142-3, §1). Thus, these women are perhaps different manifestations of the same woman and are possible representations of the river Boyne. A section of the river is named as *Smiur mná fedelmai* 'the Marrow of the Woman Feidelm' (van Hamel, 1933, 37-8, §41).<sup>287</sup>

### **Morrígan**

The Morrígan's attempts at seducing the hero in TBC I fail. Interestingly, this scene does not appear in TBC II, but she is listed as the daughter of Ernmas of the fairy mounds therein (*ingen Ernmais a síodaibh*; l.1989).<sup>288</sup> She appears to him as a beautiful woman and introduces herself as the daughter of the king, Búan (TBC I, ll.1846-55). Her advances are rejected by him and he proclaims that: "*Ní ar thóin mná dano gabus-sa inso*" "It is not for a woman's backside that I undertook this"

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<sup>287</sup> A text concerning the names for the Boyne from Laud 610 includes *Smir fin Feidelm* 'The fair marrow of Feidelm' as one of them (Meyer, 1912b, 105-6).

<sup>288</sup> She is also listed as the daughter of Ernmas from the fairy mounds in *Cóir Anmann* and is referred to as a queen therein (Arbuthnot, 2007, 44 & 118, §153).

(l.1855; my translation). Perhaps, he has learnt his lesson from his earlier tryst with Feidelm (or her female companion) which results in the enemy gaining major ground in his absence. Indeed, he views his own temporary abandonment of his post therein as a betrayal of the Ulstermen (TBC I, l.315).<sup>289</sup> While in TBC II, he announces that he is compelled (*écen*) to keep this arrangement despite his father's advice not to (*"Amm écen-sa trá techt, dáig meni digius, gúigfítir dála fer 7fírfaitir briathra ban"* "I must go however, for unless I do, men's contracts will be falsified and women's words be verified"; ll.453-5). Carey (2004, 18) rightly suggests that 'Cú Chulainn's rebuff to the Morrígan implies that fighting and lovemaking are incompatible'. She launches her attack on him while he is in the water fighting against Lóch mac Mo Femis (TBC I, ll.1981-2025). Their meeting is the crux of *Táin Bó Regamna* but it seems not to be of a sexual nature (Corthals, 1987, 51-7, §§1-7).

### **Bláthnait**

Bláthnait, who is variously described as the daughter of Mend and that of Iuchna, is referred to as his *banserc* or his 'beloved' in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* concerning Findglais (Stokes, 1894, 448-449; see III.4.3.3). While in *Aided Con Roí*, it is noted that Cú Chulainn loved her even before she was captured (Best, 1905, 22-3, §4). It is not explicitly stated that they have a relationship, but it is noteworthy that she willingly sides with Cú Chulainn to conspire to kill her husband, Cú Roí, thereafter (§§4-6). Evidence for his romantic involvement with a woman with much the same forename is arguably attested in tale-lists A and B

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<sup>289</sup> Similarly, Lóeg pronounces that Cú Chulainn has brought shame (*méla*) upon himself by keeping this arrangement in TBC II (ll.536-7).

where the tale *Aithed Bláthnaite ingine Puill maic Fhidaig re Con Culaind* occurs (Mac Cana, 1980, 46, 56). At any rate, no extant tale of this title survives.

### **Níam, daughter of Celtchar**

Níam, daughter of Celtchar mac Uithechair features as Cú Chulainn's lover in *Aided Con Culainn (a cháemlennán féin; van Hamel, 1933, 84, §16; ar a chaoimhleannán féin; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol.2, 72, §24)*. She is represented as Conall Cernach's wife in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* but there are no sexual undertones in their encounter in the earlier tale (Kimpton, 2009, 15 & 36 §5).<sup>290</sup> Subsequently, in the former tale, Emer urges Cú Chulainn to go into hiding with Níam, noting that he will find it hard to refuse her (van Hamel, 1933, 86, §18; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol.2, 75, §30).

### **Lebarcham, daughter of Oe 7 Adarce**

Cú Chulainn is said to have twin boys, Caulnia 7 Condluan, with Lebarcham ingen Oe and Adarce in the genealogies in LL (O'Brien, 1962, 154). While he meets with her in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, there is no suggestion of a sexual connection between them (Kimpton, 2009, 14 & 37, §8).<sup>291</sup> There is a little more interaction between the pair in *Aided Con Culainn* when Conchobar orders her to summon the hero to him, which she does (van Hamel, 1933, 76-8, §§7-8; Ní Mhaoláin, 2008, vol. 2, 64, §11). Significantly, she seems to be somewhat aroused by him:

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<sup>290</sup> The *Banshenchas* also lists her as Conall Cernach's wife (Dobbs, 1931, 172).

<sup>291</sup> Her parents, Auae and Adarc, are said to be a male and female slave therein (Kimpton, 2009, 14 & 37, §8).

*“Is tairisi linne an fháilte sin,” ar Leabharcham, ⁊ is amhlaidh do bhí sí ⁊ a tenga ar tibernsain ina cend ⁊ a ruisg ar foluamhain ⁊ a boill uile ar coimhchrioth..* ““That welcome is fitting”, said Leabarcham, and she was like this and her tongue dripping in her head and her eyes quivering and all her limbs trembling..’ (van Hamel, 1933, 78, §8; my translation).

Regardless of this, there is no indication of further intimacy. She goes to Dún Delca to fetch him for Conchobar in *Mesca Ulad*, but there is no hint of sexual contact (Watson, 1941, 2-3, ll.34-41).

In summation, the various sources afford the following children to Cú Chulainn, with their possible mothers indicated in brackets:

Finnscoth/Findscóp (by Emer/Eithne)

Cairpe Cláen (by Eithne)

Connlae (by Aífe)

Bé Tuinne (by Aoife, daughter of Aodh Ruadh)

Caulnia ⁊ Condluan (by Leabarcham)

The meanings of some of the names of these women suggest that some may be literary creations. For example, Emer possibly means ‘granite’ or some kind of ‘stone’ and thus is largely in line with her general portrayal (see below). Findscóp may mean something like ‘white brush’, Eithne ‘nut’/‘kernel’, Finnabair ‘white spectre/phantom’, Úathach ‘horrible’, Scáthach ‘shadowy one’, Níam ‘beauty’ and Bláthnait ‘little flower’. Bé Tuinne could mean ‘girl of the wave’ or ‘girl of the skin’ possibly alluding to the sexual encounter which produced her. Unfortunately, a further consideration of this topic is beyond the scope of the present research.

## **Conclusion**

Cú Chulainn's sexual conquests further complete his heroic persona. His membership of the Ulaid is largely finalised by his marriage to Emer. Significantly, a number of his additional sexual encounters are with women who are quite mysterious and who are feasibly supernatural. While his contests in overseas hostile realms or otherworldly locations distinguish him further as a hero, so too do his dalliances with women who are not simply ordinary Ulsterwomen. Given his semi-divine makeup, it is perhaps to be expected that he will appeal to such women and that he will be able to copulate with them where the normal warrior would not be in the position to do so. For the most part, the literature assigns Connlac as Cú Chulainn's only son. The links for some of his other children, particularly for Cairpre Claen are quite sketchy, and Finnscoth/Findscóp to a lesser degree. The reference to his twin boys is decidedly isolated, while his daughter Bé Tuinne seems to belong to a relatively late tradition.

### **VI.7. Cú Chulainn and his relationship with Emer**

Emer is the most significant female in Cú Chulainn's life. She is largely represented as a strong, active and articulate figure. Findon (1997, 20-1) remarks upon the consistency in which she is depicted across a number of tales and notes that '[h]er words play prominent and powerful roles both in generating the plots of the tales.....Most significant is the uniformly positive portrayal of Emer in these texts' and 'unlike the aggressive Medb, she is not censored for her forthright speech and behaviour'. On the other hand, Emer is an Ulster woman while Medb is not and thus this surely is a key factor in their alternative characterisations.

She is introduced into Cú Chulainn's life in *Tochmarc Emire*. Their interactions in this tale of courtship are discussed in III.3.2-3 and will only be briefly revisited here. In this text, she is represented as the ideal partner, in terms of her intelligence, gifts, beauty and virginity. Indeed Cú Chulainn rebukes her older sister Fíal on the grounds that she is not a virgin and chooses Emer largely because of her discursive abilities (van Hamel, 1933, 30-1, §26). Admittedly, the early Irish legal texts do not particularly emphasise the desirability of bridal virginity in comparison to other early legal systems, but Kelly (1988, 72-3) asserts that a 'society which set such store on paternity also had a high regard for bridal virginity and marital fidelity (at least in the short term)'. Much emphasis is placed upon Emer's chastity and restraint in the wooing dialogue and Findon (1997, 46-7) notes that this is 'especially clear in her phrase *decraid nad décsenach*, (the one who looks but does not gaze) and the *doirb i ndobur* (a worm in water) who descends to the bottom out of shyness'. Earlier she describes herself as: "*Temair ban, báine ingen, inching gensa*" .i. *amal atá Temair ós cach thulaig, sic atúsa ós cach mnaí in gensa* (van Hamel, 1933, 27, §18) which Findon (1997, 46) translates as: "'Tara of women, whiteness of maidens, champion of chastity," that is, as Tara is above every hill, thus I am above women in chastity'. Findon (1997, 47) somewhat speculatively adds that:

This emphasis on discretion, chastity, and self-containment does raise the possibility of clerical influence on the reshaping of female imagery here. The suggestion that Emer's sister Fíal is an unsuitable mate for the hero because she has slept with another man only adds to the impression that the inviolate status of the woman is being exalted in this section of the tale. Thus, it would be unwise to accept too readily the idea that Emer's self-contained imagery is

based on some native Irish concept of woman's self worth; it may be a matter of clerical propaganda.

When the couple part initially, they vow to remain chaste (*genas*) until they should meet again (van Hamel, 1933, 45, §59). Indeed, Emer defies social conventions by strongly rejecting her father's endeavours to marry her off to Lugaid mac Nois (§§72-3). She grabs Lugaid's two cheeks and proclaims that he will suffer loss of honour if he takes her as his wife and that he will be answerable to Cú Chulainn. Interestingly, her actions are not condemned therein. Upon returning from his adventures, a number of which are sexual, Cú Chulainn remains committed to winning his maiden and duly rescues her along with her foster-sister, with their weight in gold and silver, while completing all the tasks in the process (§86).

Upon hearing from Bricriu that Conchobar is to deflower (*coll*) his new wife, Cú Chulainn is enraged (*Nos fúasnaithe im Coin Culainn and sin oca chloistecht sin 7 nos bertnaigenn co róemid in cholcid baí foí, co mbátar a clúma for folúamain imon tech ima cúairt*; van Hamel, 1933, 64-5, §88). Thereafter, a dilemma is presented in that it is a *geis* for Conchobar not to do what Bricriu says but it is noted that Cú Chulainn will slay anyone that sleeps with his wife. While it is reasonable and perhaps expected for Cú Chulainn to sleep with others, understandably he is not willing to share his wife, even with the king. Regardless of this, he dutifully obeys his king when he orders him to collect the flocks from Slíab Fúait and he accepts the resolution that Cathbad and Fergus remain in the room with Conchobar and Emer, earning the couple the blessing of the Ulstermen (van Hamel, 1933, 65, §§89-90).

According to early Irish law, a husband ‘is felt to purchase his bride from her father’ by giving a ‘*coibche* “bride-price” to his bride’s father’ (Kelly, 1988, 71-2). Conversely, in this instance, Conchobar pays Emer’s bride-price (*tindsrai Emire*)<sup>292</sup> and Cú Chulainn’s *eneclann* (see III.3.3). Jaski (1996, 23) suggests that ‘[*tindsra* is used on several occasions as a payment for services which are agreed upon beforehand, and seems to have been used as a gift to the woman by the man for her sexual services’. While it is not explicitly stated that the payment is issued directly to Emer nor are the exact details of her encounter with the king revealed, it may be viewed in this light. In addition, the award to Cú Chulainn makes amends for the insult to his honour. Once these matters are resolved, Cú Chulainn sleeps with his wife and is said to remain with her until his death (van Hamel, 1933, 65, §90).

The issue of their loyalty to each other is explored in *Serlige Con Culainn*. Eithne appears as his wife in the earlier part of the tale, but Emer is also mentioned when Cú Chulainn refuses to go to her in Dún Delca (Dillon, 1953a, 3, §9). Later, the rather helpless Cú Chulainn sends Lóeg to tell Emer about his weakened state and to request her to visit him. Upon hearing of this, Emer is quite forthright in her condemnation of Lóeg and the Ulstermen in their failure to find a cure for the hero. In addition, she expresses her dismay at being in the unusual situation of not being able to sleep with her husband for over a month and a season and a year (§29).

Findon (1997, 123-4) asserts that Emer’s speech is designed to goad Lóeg into action in the hope of securing a cure for Cú Chulainn. When she meets Cú

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<sup>292</sup> The term *tinnscra* is more commonly found in the sagas and the wisdom literature rather than the laws (Kelly, 1988, 72n).

Chulainn, she tells him that it is shameful for him to lie for the love of a woman as this will make him sick, presumably, in a bid to return him to his heroic ways (Dillon, 1953a, 14, §30). Interestingly, he enjoys some sort of rejuvenation thereafter and duly goes to Airbe Roír where he is greeted by Lí Ban (§31). When Cú Chulainn informs Emer of his tryst with Fand, she takes on the persona of a martial leader, organising for knives to be prepared to kill his lover and a battalion of fifty women to fight with her (§39). Indeed, they sneak up on Cú Chulainn and Lóg, and it is Fand who alerts the duo to their presence (§40). Findon (1997, 125) observes that '[h]ere, in her moment of greatest crisis, she has abandoned her reliance on the power of speech alone, and comes prepared to reinforce her words with deeds'. In spite of siding with Fand, Cú Chulainn does not seem overly willing to engage in battle with Emer and her companions and proclaims that he avoids them like he would a friend (Dillon, 1953a, 24, §41). Thereafter, the conflict shifts to that of a discursive one in which Emer and Fand soon dominate (§§41-4). Findon (1997, 122) states that the 'surprising degree of control that these women exhibit here serves to highlight the incapacity of the great hero whom they desire'.

Emer's biggest problem with his actions is that he has dishonoured her in front of the women of the province and Ireland and the honourable men, given that she is under his protection (Dillon, 1953a, 24, §41). Ultimately, he is not fulfilling his role as her husband and guardian. Her concerns in this regard are essentially ignored by Cú Chulainn and instead he questions why he should not be allowed to tryst with Fand and proceeds to highlight her intelligence, beauty and chastity thus

likening her to his wife (§42).<sup>293</sup> The possession of a number of wives, in a variety of sexual unions, is catered for in the legal text *Cáin Lánamna* which is generally dated to the eighth-century (Kelly, 1988, 70-3). Interestingly, despite largely instigating the affair with Cú Chulainn, Fand is not particularly criticised in the text. While Emer acknowledges that Fand may be better than her, she quickly offers to reunite with him if he still desires her (*áil*; Dillon, 1953a, 25, §43). Findon (1997, 127) complements Emer's consummate skills with words which are designed to remind the hero of their past happiness and to turn him away from his new lover. His quick response that he will always desire her sparks Fand's response that he should leave her and thus Emer's words have the desired effect (Dillon, 1953a, 25, §43). Findon (1997, 131) accredits Emer with breaking Fand's hold on him.

In the end, Fand opts to leave with Cú Chulainn playing no part in this decision. She expresses regret at having separated from her husband, Manannán mac Lir, to pursue her romance with Cú Chulainn.<sup>294</sup> Upon reuniting with Manannán, her love for Cú Chulainn remains strong but she knows that nothing will become of it. Despite her departure, both Cú Chulainn and Emer remain perturbed by the preceding events. Cú Chulainn is in a more dangerous state than before. Emer is once again proactive in that she persuades the Ulstermen to rescue the deranged Cú Chulainn. Neither return to normal until they are given a potion of forgetfulness

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<sup>293</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin (2009, 353-5) proposes that this tale 'may be read as a sexual analogy for Cú Chulainn suffering erectile dysfunction and that his visit to the Otherworld revitalises him' and she notes that on his return, '[h]aving regained his strength and his potency he seems to revel in his ability to satisfy two women'.

<sup>294</sup> Her estranged husband, Manannán mac Lir, comes to her aid on hearing that she was involved in an unequal combat with the women of Ulster (§45).

which makes Cú Chulainn forget about Fand and makes Emer forget about her jealousy for his lover (Dillon, 1953a, 29, §48). Findon (1997, 131) concludes that:

...Emer is clearly the winner in this narrative. Whether her victory is to be read as a triumph of the mortal, Christian world over the immortal, pagan one, or simply as an affirmation of stable monogamous marriage over polygyny, it seems clear that Emer is the one with whom the audience is to identify. She is a moral agent, arguing forcefully against the chaotic forces of fragmentation unleashed in male-female relationships by uncontrolled desires. She is perhaps the paradigm of the loyal aristocratic wife, who knows her rights and has the strength of mind to insist on them (Findon, 1997, 131).

Emer features strongly in the unusual *bríatharcath na mban* ‘the women’s war of words’ section of *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 22-35, §22-8). This contest parallels with the male one for the hero’s portion therein and also adopts a similar tripartite structure (see IV.2). Failing to ignite a contest between three of the Ulster heroes, Bricriu seems to view their wives as extensions of them and turns his attention to them offering a comparable title to the woman who enters the banqueting hall first (*banrígnacht úas bantrocht Ulad uli*; Henderson, 1899, 18-9, §17).<sup>295</sup> This may be a mocking section which is designed to poke fun at these women. The idea of these high-status women racing against each other seems rather humorous. Their presence outside of this scene is virtually non-existent. The results of the challenge are perhaps pre-empted in that Bricriu must use thrice as much deceit (*mainbech*) to incite Emer than is required for Feidelm and twice as

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<sup>295</sup> Feidelm Noíchríde and Lendabair are Lóegaire Búadach and Conall Cernach’s respective wives therein (Henderson, 1899, 18-9, §§17-8).

much for Lendabair (§§17-9).<sup>296</sup> Thus, the implication being, Emer and Cú Chulainn are the most admirable couple, followed by Lendabair and Conall Cernach, and lastly by Feidelm and Lóegaire Búadach.

Albeit reaching the house first, this does not entitle Emer to enter, instead she must engage in a war of words with the other two contestants (§§22-4). Therein, Emer demonstrates a competitive streak comparable to that of Cú Chulainn and also a willingness to boast of her own virtues and those of her husband. Even though Emer has essentially proven herself, she finds herself in a similar situation as Cú Chulainn in the tale in that the terms of the competition are moved and she must re-affirm herself. While the structure of the women's speeches are much the same, Emer's is much longer and so too is the inventory of her own and Cú Chulainn's qualities. Again, Emer's words and those of the other women spur their husbands into action, but Cú Chulainn outshines the others when he raises the whole house to allow Emer, her retinue and those of the other two women, to enter (§25).<sup>297</sup> This being so, the actions of the hero and his wife are not sufficient to settle the dispute. Thus, it rambles on with the women persisting in the background to laud their heroes causing Sencha to intervene in an attempt to silence them (§29). Emer replies that it is fitting for her to speak given her status as the chief-hero's wife and proceeds in declaring his greatness (§30). Conall Cernach quickly cuts across her and requests Cú Chulainn to intervene but it is stated that he is too weary. While this is essentially the close of this episode, the winner is not announced, but the issue later resurfaces and becomes an appendage to the competition for the hero's portion. When Medb awards Cú Chulainn with a special cup, she declares that the

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<sup>296</sup> In addition, her retinue of fifty women is twice that of either of the other two women (Henderson, 1899, 30-1, §25).

<sup>297</sup> Slotkin (1978, 68) notes that the last few lines of §24 and §§25-41 are in the hand of H.

other warriors should not be compared to him and neither should their wives be likened to Emer. She proceeds to announce that Emer should precede the others into the Mead Hall (§62). Subsequently, Samera reaches the same decision about the couple (§68), so too does the giant (possibly a transformed Cú Roí) (§87), Cú Roí (§89) and the *bachlach* also a disguised Cú Roí at the close of the tale (Meyer, 1893, 454 & 459, §102). Though Emer proves herself earlier on in the tale, ultimately her acquisition of this title is conditional on her husband's entitlement to the hero's portion.

In spite of there being little direct interaction between Cú Chulainn and his wife, in comparison to *Tochmarc Emire* and *Serglige Con Culainn*, this episode remains valuable in that it demonstrates their loyalty to each other and also indicates that the hero's wife must also be superior to her female counterparts. While Emer's depiction in this tale is largely in keeping with her presentation in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Serglige Con Culainn*, her involvement essentially complements her husband's claim to the hero's portion, the indication being that the hero's wife is expected to be on a par with him. Her role is less crucial to the main plot of the tale; the bones of which is in place prior to the episode concerning the women and largely resumes thereafter.

Emer makes a brief, but key appearance in *Aided Óenfir Aife*.<sup>298</sup> She enters the tale alongside Cú Chulainn when he is about to challenge Connlac over his mockery of the Ulstermen (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §8; see V.1). With her hand across his throat, presumably in an attempt to stop him, Emer proceeds to try to persuade him not to

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<sup>298</sup> She does not figure in the summary version of the tale in H.3.17 (O'Keefe, 1904).

kill his only son. She seems to be the only one who knows of Connlae's true identity. Even though Cú Chulainn is said to have left a ring for Connlae with Aífe in *Tochmarc Emire*, which presumably would have made him readily identifiable to his father, as the ring borne by Bres distinguishes him for his father in a similar situation in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 34-7, §§42-4), this is not mentioned in *Aided Óenfir Aífe* or in the earlier version of *Tochmarc Emire* but must have been part of it.

Findon (1994, 139) draws parallels between Emer's presentation in this tale and in *Serglige Con Culainn*, observing that 'Emer emerges as a force of opposition, challenging the attitudes of her society and opposing her husband's choices'. She qualifies this further by noting that:

In *Serglige Con Culainn* her resistance is highly personal, directed as it is toward her husband's affair with an Otherworld mistress. In *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, Emer challenges the heroic honour code that plays such an important role in the Ulster Cycle tales (Findon, 1994, 139).

Emer proclaims that Cú Chulainn will be committing *fingal*, while she also appeals to the codes of *soáig* 'fair-fight' and *soairle* 'good counsel' in an effort to convince him not to proceed (Meyer, 1904, 118-9, §8). Cú Chulainn's prompt retort quickly dismisses his wife. It is indicated in V.1 that Cú Chulainn sacrifices the life of his only son in order to restore the honour of the Ulstermen. It is noteworthy that Emer disappears from the tale at this point and her reaction to Connlae's death is

not indicated.<sup>299</sup> Ultimately, Emer is depicted as the voice of reason, but her husband is not willing to listen to her, in contrast to their relationship elsewhere.

Emer appears towards the end of *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* making a response to Cú Chulainn's posthumous phantom speech (Kimpton, 2009, 27-34 & 45-9, §§30-5). Her lengthy *núallguba* 'lament-cry' draws the tale to a close. Firstly, she speaks of the Líath Machae, moving then to recount the events of Cú Chulainn's death, before identifying some of the many warriors who were slain by him. She condemns the Ulstermen for not assisting him, like she does in *Serglige Con Culainn*, as mentioned above. She sums up her own devastation at his loss as follows:

*“Dom:chommart a chuma.*

*Cotom:essart a díth.*

*Rom:díthracht a díbad.*

*Am dímaín dia éis*

*Ar nim:dá ní íarum”*

“Grief for him has oppressed me.

His loss has crushed me.

His death has weakened me.

I am lost after his death, for there is nothing for me after him” (§34).

Thereafter, she alludes to the fact that she will remarry, but that she will never find a husband like him.

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<sup>299</sup> Findon (1994, 146-8) also proposes that Emer becomes Connlae's symbolic mother, 'arguing for the protection of the young against the ravages of combat and acting as a voice for the absent mother who remains a shadowy figure in the background'.

It is of note that Emer essentially plays no role in TBC, the tale which is essentially a celebration of Cú Chulainn as an adult warrior. While his wooing of her is mentioned in his *macgnímrada* (see III.3.4) and he goes to her prior to his fight with Fer Diad (TBC I, ll.2809-14), this is the extent of her presence therein. In the context of the latter reference, it is Lóeg who suggests that Cú Chulainn should go to his wife so that he can be adorned and beautified for his battle with Fer Diad, shedding some light on the roles played by the wives of warriors. Emer features very briefly in *Mesca Ulad* when she offers her husband advice concerning the kingship of Ulster which he takes on board (Watson, 1941, 3-7, ll.44-143).

Emer's presentation in *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann* is very much at odds with her characterisation elsewhere in the Ulster-Cycle material. While the motif of the bride of a hero running off with another man is found in other traditions, it is also central to a later Irish tale, *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Gráinne* (Thurneysen, 1921, 429). Gráinne falls in love with Díarmuid, one of her aging husband, Finn's, warriors and convinces him to flee with her. Finn immediately gives chase but the couple remain together and are accredited with having a number of children together. A somewhat similar love triangle is found in *Loinges mac nUislenn* between Conchobar, Deirdriu and Nóisiu, but with a more disastrous outcome for the young lovers (Hull, 1949).

*Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann* opens with Cú Chulainn chasing birds, a theme which is found in other Ulster-Cycle tales, in particular in *Serglige Con Culainn*, where it has similarly disastrous effects for him. While he is thus engaged, Tuir Glesta, the son of the king of Lochlann, comes to Dundalk and Emer

falls fervently in love with him (*co facaid Emir é 7 tuc grad dichra do*; Meyer, 1883-85, 184) before leaving with him (*do gluais leis*). This tale contains a theme which prevails in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Irish literature, which is described by Ní Mhaonaigh (2001, 101) as follows:

Long cultivated in Irish literature, therefore, was the notion of heathen, plundering Vikings hovering in the Irish Sea waiting to invade should the balance of social and moral ills tip in their favour. Moreover, it was this inherited perception which the authors of a number of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century pseudo-historical tracts turned to their advantage.

The author usually depicts their heroes as being triumphant over these fearsome enemies (Ní Mhaonaigh, 2001, 101). In his consideration of the influence of the Vikings on Celtic literature, Mac Cana (1975, 82) views this tale as a ‘late variation of the *aithed*-theme, again combined with reminiscences of the Viking period’.

The opportunistic Tuir Glesta carries his booty from the surrounding environs to the Isle of Man (*co Manuind*), to the Hebrides (*co hindsib Gall*), and *co Dun Monaig* which seems to be in Scotland, possibly Edinburgh. Cú Chulainn, along with Lóeg, goes in pursuit, defeating Tuir Glesta before taking Emer back. Cú Chulainn’s slaying of him, completes the narrative plot.

## **Conclusion**

For the most part, Emer is depicted as an eloquent, beautiful, virtuous, monogamous woman and wife throughout the earlier Ulster-Cycle material. In

essence, she is the paragon of all Ulster women. Much more air-time is afforded to her than any of the other wives of the Ulster warriors. She is represented as Cú Chulainn's ideal match and their relationship is one of two equals. She complements his presentation as the best Ulster warrior. In spite of her exemplary character being slightly tarnished in *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríg Lochlann*, this must be considered in light of the lateness of the tale and the influence of popular motifs at the time of writing.

## **Chapter VII: Cú Chulainn as a saviour type figure**

This chapter will open with a discussion of Cú Chulainn's homeland, Mag Muirthemne, before considering evidence which suggests that he may have been viewed as the king of this area. His ancestry and his status as an Ulsterman will then be addressed. Finally, possible biblical influence in the creation of this secular hero will complete this evaluation of his presentation in the Ulster-Cycle tales.

### **VII.1. Cú Chulainn's homeland**

As well as being presented as the provincial hero of Ulster, Cú Chulainn is also quite strongly associated with Mag Muirthemne. O'Rahilly (1976, 310) describes it as a plain south of Dundalk and *Onomasticon Goedelicum* as being between 'Sliad Fuait and Dundalk'. Nagy (1984, 26) declares that Mag Muirthemne 'is not part of Ulster proper', but without further elaboration, and thus describes Cú Chulainn as a stranger to Ulster. Similarly, Ó Cathasaigh (1986, 152) deduces that Súaldaim is an outsider because he resides at Mag Muirthemne which is in Conaille. Conversely, Jaski (1999, 10) states that 'in the *Táin* Mag Muirthemne and the surrounding territories appear to be part of Ulster, and in the historical period the Conaille Muirthemne were of Ulster descent'. In the *macgnímrada*, Conall Cernach guards the province from Slíab Fúait alluding to its border location (TBC I, ll.666-70). Some of the events of TBC are set in this general area (ll.947-1038) and in the passage entitled *Tochestol Ulad inso* 'The Muster of the Ulstermen', Conchobar's son is sent to Cú Chulainn in Mag Muirthemne (ll.3451-97).

Mac Niocaill (1972, 73) outlines the boundary markers of the Ulaid up to 603 A.D. as follows:

The traditional boundaries of the over-kingdom of the Ulaid, of the ‘province of Conchobar son of Nessa’, had been from the river Drowes in the west to the Boyne in the east; the fall of Emain Macha, however, and the compression of the Ulaid into the eastern half of the province, had put paid to all probability, if not all hope, of their again dominating the entire province. The position of the tract of land between Carlingford and the Boyne, the plain of Muirtheimne in which the Conaille were later to emerge as a people of some consequence, presents a problem: its inhabitants seem to have been accepted as being of the Ulaid, but as far as the overlordship thereof went, it was apparently a Tom Tiddler’s ground.

Byrne (1973, 107) refers to the lower segment of the province as the ‘border state of Conailli Muirtheimne’ and puts forth a plausible reconstruction of fifth century history as one which would:

...place the fall of Emain Macha around the year 450, followed by the withdrawal of the Ulaid eastwards across Glenn Rige, where the new boundary is marked by the Dane’s Cast. It seems that the collapse of the Ulaid was not total nor regarded as irreversible. They may have occupied southern Louth well into the seventh century....’<sup>300</sup>

One might therefore draw the conclusion that the borderland status of Mag Muirthemne reflects an eighth-century reality rather than an earlier one which TBC purports to represent, at which point Ulster extended from the Drowes to the Boyne. The liminal position of Mag Muirthemne is in harmony with Cú Chulainn’s heroic and thus liminal status.

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<sup>300</sup> Byrne (1973, 107) notes that by the eighth century the Ulaid were reduced to Antrim, Down and north Louth.

For the present study, evidence from the literature is of key importance. *Mesca Ulad* offers the following account of the division of Ulster during the time of Conchobar:

‘Those who divided the province with Conchobar were his own foster son, Cú Chulainn son of Sualtair, and Fintan son of Niall Niamglonnach from Dún Dá Benn. The partition that was made of the province was, that from the Hill of the Upland of Forcha, which is called Uisnech of Meath, to the centre of the Strand of Baile was Cú Chulainn’s share of the province. Conchobar’s share again was from the Strand of Baile to the Strand of Tola in Ulster; (262a) Fintan’s from the Strand of Tola to the Point of Semne and Lathairne’ (Watson, 1938, 2).

Accordingly, Cú Chulainn’s land stretches from the coast in modern day Co. Louth to the Hill of Uisnech in Co. Westmeath. Conchobar occupies the middle third of Ulster with Fintan being placed in the northern part of the province. Subsequently, Dún Delgae in Dundalk is presented as Cú Chulainn’s dwelling. Elsewhere, he is also linked with Dún Imrid which is described in *Onomasticon Goedelicum* as a fort of his in Muirthemne (Dillon, 1953a, 3, §9; Corthals, 1987, 51-7, §§1-7; Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §32).<sup>301</sup>

The partitioning of Ulster also features in *Cath Airtig*. The mourning of Conchobar in the opening of the tale indicates that it is set at a later date (Best, 1916, 172 & 179, §2). Thereafter, an account is given of the manner in which Cúscraid, Conchobar’s son, divides his land among his people. After being coaxed back to Ulster, Fergus requests the lands of Súaldaim and Cú Chulainn to seal the

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<sup>301</sup> The devastation of Dún Delgae at the death of Cú Chulainn is highlighted a number of times in the closing stages of *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 30-3 & 47-9, §§33-5).

arrangement. Their lands are described as follows: *crích Cuailngne 7 Muirthemne & crích Rois & in Brug mna Elcmair* ‘Crich Cuailnge and Mag Murthemne and Crich Rois and Brug Mna Elcmairi’ (§8). In TBC I, Súaldaim informs the Ulstermen that his son has kept the attackers out of Crích Rois and Mag Muirthemne for the three months of winter (ll.3433-4). Again Cú Chulainn and his father are associated with the most southerly part of the province, most specifically, with counties Meath and Louth.<sup>302</sup> Fergus also receives the lordship of Mag Muirthemne which is said to have belonged to Cú Chulainn in the earlier account of *Táin Bó Flidais* (Windisch, 1887, 215, §7). However, the area between Inber Colpa, the mouth of the Boyne, to Coba, the baronies of Upper and Lower Iveagh, Co.Down, are awarded to Conall Cernach in *Cath Airtig*, probably in an attempt to associate him with Conaille Muirthemne (Best, 1916, 174 & 181, §4).

Even though, Emain Machae is the royal centre of the Ulaid, and Conchobar’s home, it is clearly not Cú Chulainn’s permanent home. The Ulster warriors are drawn southwards away from here for his birth and he is said to have been reared in Dún Imbrith in Mag Muirthemne (van Hamel, 1933, 8, §7; see III.1.3). Fergus observes that he was reared by his father and mother at the Airgthech in Mag Muirthemne in his *macgnímrada* (TBC I, ll.399-400). Thereafter, he travels over Slíab Fúait to join the boys at Emain but he remains strongly connected with Mag Muirthemne. Upon slaying the hound of Culann, he assumes the role of protector of this area in TBC I only (ll.600-1).<sup>303</sup> Nevertheless, on completion of his first

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<sup>302</sup> Súaldaim comes to Cú Chulainn’s aid in TBC I from Ráith Súaltaim in Mag Muirthemne (ll.3411-2).

<sup>303</sup> While *Cóir Anmann* confirms his naming as Cú Chulainn as a result of slaying the hound, it alternatively suggests that he was named *cú* + *Cuilenn* after Cuillen Muirthemne (Arbuthnot, 2005, 87 & 126, §34).

expedition, he secures his seat beside Conchobar at Emain Machae (TBC I, ll.819-20).

Tales of his early adulthood maintain his connection with Mag Muirthemne. He remains as its loyal guardian in sources such as TBC I (ll.250-1, ll.1527-8), *Táin Bó Regamna* (Corthals, 1987, 51-7, §§1-7) and the related tale *Echtrae Nerai* (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13).<sup>304</sup> In the hero's absence, the territory is vulnerable to outside attacks. While he is hunting birds by the side of Traíg Baile in *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríge Lochlann*, Tuir Glesta escapes with his wife and plunders Mag Muirthemne (Meyer, 1883-85, 184-5). He sacrifices his life in order to defend it in his death tale (Kimpton, 2009, 11-49, §§1-35).

## Conclusion

Although Cú Chulainn seems to reside at Emain Machae while being initiated as a warrior, Mag Muirthemne is represented as his homeland. His connection with this area begins as an early child and continues on until his death as a young adult. As well as being a provincial hero, Cú Chulainn is very much the local hero of this territory.

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<sup>304</sup> He is also associated with Mag Muirthemne in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (LU, 1.9316) and *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 13, §29; 22 §37). He is referred to as the chariot-fighter of the land of Muirthemne in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §33).

## VII.2. Cú Chulainn as king of Mag Muirthemne

Though Cú Chulainn seems to be the chief warrior of Mag Muirthemne, he is also possibly its territorial leader or lord, if not even its king. Some attempts seem to have been made to place him in the latter categories. A number of texts present him as a feast-giver, a role more often fulfilled by kings, lords or even more frequently hospitallers. The opening of *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* states that one of Conchobar's first acts as king is to pass a law which decrees that every warrior is required to host a feast for the Ulstermen for a night and that he will do likewise for seven nights or four nights, but there is little indication that warriors fulfil this responsibility (Hollo, 2005, 52 & 97, §1).

The hero is represented as the host of an annual gathering (*óenach*) at Samain for the Ulstermen in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1953a, 1, §§1-2). Games, general socialising, and a contest concerning the prowess of the Ulstermen are the main features of this event. Kelly (1988, 4), Byrne (1973, 30-1) and Binchy (1958, 124) propose that the regular assembly of the *óenach* was convened and presided over by the king for political, social and perhaps commercial purposes. The most famous of which was the *Óenach Tailten*, however, this was held at Lugnasad (Binchy, 1958, 115). Gray (1982a, 22) argues that the celebration of a feast by a king at Samain 'affirmed the structure of society during a season of chaos and renewal' while also asserting the 'central role of the king in the maintenance of that order'. Significantly, in the context of the feast in *Serglige Con Culainn*, Cú Chulainn is the voice of authority and calls for it to be cancelled, owing to the absence of Conall Cernach and Fergus mac Róich (Dillon, 1953a, 1, §3).

Thereafter, chaos descends, particularly for Cú Chulainn, thus he makes the wrong decision to postpone it.

In the context of her study of *Cath Maige Tuired*, Gray (1982a, 13) posits that:

[t]he relationship between an Irish king and his people was essentially a contractual one, marked by continual exchange: the king was accorded the honour and responsibility of sovereignty by his people, and he dispensed hospitality to them in return, this being one of the signs of the validity of his kingship.

The failure of the miserly king, Bres, to fulfil this obligation, demarcates him as an unworthy king and is pivotal in his downfall (Gray, 1982, 32-3, §36). His actions are contrasted with those of Núadu who immediately throws a *mórfleg/mórfled* at Tara for significant dignitaries on re-gaining the kingship (§53). Gray (1982a, 20-22) concludes that this feast may have been an inaugural one or it may represent the tradition that the 'Feast of Tara was a recurring seasonal festival, held at intervals throughout a king's reign'.

The act of feast giving in *Mesca Ulad* by Conchobar, Fintan and Cú Chulainn seems to be linked to their status as the territorial leaders of the relevant sections of Ulster. Cú Chulainn is described as throwing a banquet (*comfhled*) for the people of his own territory, perhaps in recognition of their allegiance to him (Watson, 1941, 2-3, ll.41-4). His reluctance to leave the feast at the behest of Conchobar further indicates his loyalty to his people. On the advice of his wife, he goes to speak with Conchobar and agrees to relinquish his third of the province to him for a year contingent upon Conchobar's performance during this time (ll.44-85). At the

end of the year, it is established that Conchobar is the rightful king and thereupon discord arises between Cú Chulainn and Fintan over hosting a feast for the new king.<sup>305</sup> In this way, Cú Chulainn and Fintan demonstrate their allegiance to their ‘over-king’, Conchobar. In *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn indicates his willingness to feed the Ulstermen and Conchobar for a week (van Hamel, 1933, 29, §22).

Elsewhere, there are a number of fleeting references to Cú Chulainn as a king. In TBC II, he is referred to as the ‘territorial king’ of Mag Muirthemne (*ríg n-aurraindi*; ll.4570-3). It is noted in III.6.3 that he is recognised as a king by the sons of Calatín in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §20). Likewise, Fand applies the same label to him (*ní fúair a samail di ríge eter mín 7 anmín*; Dillon, 1953a, 21, §37). In the subsequent paragraph, Lí Ban refers to him as *mál mór Maigi Murthemni* ‘great prince/chief of Mag Muirthemne’ (§38; my translation).<sup>306</sup> In his exaltation of Fand to Emer, he states that she is fit for a king, possibly suggesting that he considers himself as such a figure (§41). It is also perhaps of significance that his divine father, Lug mac Ethnenn/Ethlenn, is the king of the Túatha Dé Danann and that his uncle or grandfather is Conchobar, the king of Ulster (see below).

While *ríg-*, the form of *rí* ‘king’ found in compounds, used to refer to Cú Chulainn or to describe aspects of his physical appearance, implies a royal sense, it also bears the meanings ‘pre-eminent of its kind’ ‘great, immense’, according to *DIL*. This element features frequently in the context of descriptions of his eyes (*rígrosc*;

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<sup>305</sup> This is reminiscent of the manner in which Conchobar acquires the kingship from Fergus. Similarly, a woman, his mother, Ness, plays a pivotal role in bringing this about (Stokes, 1910, 22-5, §§5-8).

<sup>306</sup> Lóeg refers to him as a lord (*tigern*) in *Fled Bricrenn* (Slotkin, 1999, 238 & 240). Fer Diad’s charioteer acknowledges him as a lord (*a flatha*) in TBC I (l.2948).

see VI.3). It is noted therein, that while his eyes are very unusual, in particular his multiple pupils, this is not a common trait of kings. Fergus refers to him as *in rígnía* ‘the royal hero’ in TBC II (1.503),<sup>307</sup> while in the early Modern version of his death tale he is similarly described as *ríghmíledh* ‘the royal warrior’ (van Hamel, 1933, 102, §34).

Cú Chulainn’s long curly tri-coloured hair, which appears golden on the outside, bears similarities with the long yellow hair of royal figures such as his father, Lug (TBC I, 1.2093), Conchobar (ll.3593-4) and Elatha mac Delbaíth in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 28-9, §16; see VI.3). It is suggested in VI.4 that the colour of his cloak indicates that he is at least of noble if not of royal status. There are references to him playing the board-game, *fidchell*, a skill which is taught to the sons of kings and nobles during fosterage (Kelly, 1988, 87). Conchobar is said to spend one third of the day playing this game (TBC I, 1.403) and Lug mac Ethnenn must succeed at it, which he does, in order to gain entry to the royal court at Tara in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray, 1982, 40-1, §§69-70). A description of Cú Chulainn and Lóeg in TBC I notes that a board for this game is placed between the two of them and that his thighs rest on another type of one, referred to as *búanbach* (*Fithchell for scarad eturra*; ll.3856-8). The implication in this case being that the two play it together and this too is the case in *Serglige Con Culainn* as they await the arrival of Fand for her tryst with Cú Chulainn (Dillon, 1953a, 24, §39) and in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 76-7, §61). These references are in no way definitive in terms of characterising Cú Chulainn as a king.

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<sup>307</sup> *Nía* also means ‘sister’s son/nephew’. See Ó Cathasaigh (1986) for a further discussion of this.

In the *Bríathartheosc* section of *Serglige Con Culainn*, Cú Chulainn issues advice to his foster-son, Lugaid Réoderg, on how a rightful king should behave (Dillon, 1953a, 9, §§24-5). It is noted in II.1 that the origin of this passage is somewhat problematic and it is generally deemed to be an interpolation into the tale. Dillon (1941a, 125n) asserts that it is best to view it as a separate tale ‘composed for the glory of the hero, who is thus made wise as well as brave, and inserted here by the compiler who was the interpolator’s source’. Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 88) suggests that the location of this scene subsequent to Lóg’s visit to the Otherworld, whereupon Cú Chulainn experiences some sort of a revival from his debilitated state, may be connected with the ‘notion found elsewhere in early Irish literature that the Otherworld was the source of the righteous kingship’.

Principally concerned with the contest for the hero’s portion, the scene in *Fled Bricrenn* involving Medb’s awarding of cups to each of the three contestants contains motifs which seem more fitting in tales concerning the inauguration of kings (see IV.2). The relationship between a king and his territory was viewed in sexual terms with the land been represented by a female figure commonly referred to as a sovereignty goddess.<sup>308</sup> Divine power seems to pass to the king upon sleeping with the relevant goddess thus this is viewed as a type of *hieros gamos* or ‘sacred marriage’ and it is noted that ‘female symbols of sovereignty are not infrequently represented as bestowing a drink upon kings-to-be’ (McCone, 1990, 109-10). Evidence for this is found in *Baile Chuind*, *Baile in Scáil* and *Echtrae mac nEchach Muigmedóin* (McCone, 1990, 109). In addition, McCone (1990,

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<sup>308</sup> The development of the sovereignty goddess motif over time might also be considered here but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. See Herbert (1992; 1996) for a discussion of this.

109) states: '[m]oreover, the very name Medb (<\*Med<sup>h</sup>w-ā) is a feminine derivative of *mid* "mead-woman"'.

Medb gives an empty cup of bronze to Lóegaire and a silver one full of wine to Conall (Henderson, 1899, 74-7, §§59-60). Cú Chulainn is suspicious of Medb at first and refuses to go to meet her. She actively pursues the hero and puts her two arms around his neck in an effort to coerce him to listen to her (§61). She succeeds and he proceeds with her to her palace where she gives him a bejewelled gold cup full of luscious wine (§62). Unlike Conall, Cú Chulainn drinks the wine before departing. Clearly, motifs more closely aligned with the ascension of kings to the throne are interwoven into this scene. This perhaps lends weight to Cú Chulainn's claim to the hero's portion and to the title of chief warrior which essentially allows him to be viewed as the 'king' of the warriors which is also the suggestion offered in his death tale (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §20).

### **Conclusion**

The strongest argument for Cú Chulainn as king of Mag Muirthemne is found in *Mesca Ulad*. There seems to be sufficient evidence to consider him as a type of warrior chief of this area. The scene in *Fled Bricrenn*, in particular, intimates that he may be viewed as the 'king' of the warriors in a much more general sense. The other varied and scattered references which also attach a royal element to him can be appraised likewise. Ultimately, it is his martial aspect that qualifies him as a hero.

### VII.3. Cú Chulainn's lineage

Lug mac Ethnenn and Súaldaim mac Róich are represented as Cú Chulainn's divine and earthly fathers respectively in version I of *Compert Con Culainn* (van Hamel, 1933, 5-6, §§5-6). The latter is also listed as his father in a variety of texts including TBC (TBC I, ll.101-2, 1.217, 1.255, 1.444, 1.2316, ll.3412-3, 1.3421, 1.3480, 1.3860; TBC II, 1.267, 1.386, ll.397-8, ll.441-2, 1.796, 1.888, 1.909, 1.2345, ll.2620-1, 1.2845, ll.3982-3, ll.4076-7), *Fled Bricrenn* (*mac Sualdaim*; Henderson, 1899, 34-5, §28; *Sualdaim mac Roig athair Conculaind*; §72),<sup>309</sup> *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (*mac Soaltaim*; Hollo, 2005, 52-3 & 97-8, §§4-9), *Talland Étair* (*maic sualtaim*; Ó Dónaill, 2005, 47 & 57), *Mesca Ulad* (*mac Sualtaim*; Watson, 1941, 2, ll.22), *Serglige Con Culainnn* (*mac Soalte*; Dillon, 1953a, 4, §11), *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* (*mac Sóalta/Soalta/Soaltai/Soalda/Soaldaim*; LU, 1.9302, 1.9316, 1.9538, 1.9548, 1.9550), *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (*maic saighthig soailte*;<sup>310</sup> Meyer, 1904, 118, §8), *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (*mac Sualtim*; Kimpton, 2009, 24 & 43, §24) and in the summary tale of Cú Chulainn's slaying of Connlac (*mac Sualtaim*; O'Keefe, 1904, 124-5).

It is clear from these examples that there is considerable variety in the manner in which the name Súaldaim is presented orthographically. The etymology of this name presents some difficulties. According to Meyer (1917, 9-11), a considerable number of early Irish historical and legendary figures owe possibly their existence, or at least their names to 'a misunderstanding of words or phrases, a misinterpretation of place-names, or to the mistakes or careless or ignorant

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<sup>309</sup> He is referred to as *mac Subaltaim* in the Eg. 88 version of the 'Giant in the mist episode' from *Fled Bricrenn* (Slotkin, 1999, 238).

<sup>310</sup> Meyer (1917, 10) renders this as *Soailte*.

scribes'. He concludes that such a mistake is responsible for the name if not the creation of our figure. In his view, later tradition sets about furnishing the hero with an earthly father. The earliest forms for his name are *Soalta* and *Soa(i)lte* and Meyer (1917, 10) states that none of which are inflected 'which seems to show that we have not here to do with a genuine old proper name'. He adds that *mac soalte* 'well-nurtured son' is the original phrase from which this name finds its roots. Leborcham's address of Cú Chulainn as [*a*] *gein Loga soalta* '[w]ell-reared child of Lug' in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirtheimne* is taken as proof of this (Kimpton, 2009, 12 & 36, §3). The phrase *Derbad soaltim* also occurs later in the text (§35), and Kimpton suggests that it may also be read as *Soaltim*, the genitive of the name while acknowledging that this may lend further support to Meyer's theory. A meaning of 'well-jointed' is offered for the later form, *Sualtach*, and he views the frequently attested form, *Sualtaim* as the superlative of *su-alta*, 'the genitive having, as so often in proper names, taken the place of the nominative' (Meyer, 1917, 11).<sup>311</sup> The *alta* element also occurs in the names of his father, Becalta, and grandfather, Móralta in the genealogies (O'Brien, 1962, 285).<sup>312</sup>

Very little is known about Súaldaim. He makes very few appearances in the Ulster-Cycle material, TBC being one of the notable exceptions.<sup>313</sup> Overall, he is not given any significant martial credentials and thus does not pose a threat to his son's status as the supreme warrior. Indeed, Cú Chulainn uses him as his messenger early on in the tale when he instructs him to warn the Ulstermen of the

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<sup>311</sup> Some doubts are cast on this suggestion by Thurneysen (1921, 90-1) and he raises the possibility that it may derive from *suaill-dáim*, meaning 'small-entourage'. However, it is noteworthy that the attested genitive form of the latter is *dá(i)me*.

<sup>312</sup> *Tesmolta Cormaic* gives *Sualtach* as the name of Finn mac Cumhaill's grandfather (*Finn mac Cumhaill meic Sualtaigh meic Báiscni meic Nuadhat necht*; O'Grady, 1892, 92).

<sup>313</sup> Súaldaim tends to the Ulstermen at a feast in *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson, 1899, 92-3, §72).

ensuing attack (TBC I, ll.222; TBC II, ll.446-9). In the latter text, Súaldaim subsequently questions Cú Chulainn's decision to tryst with a woman in place of guarding the Ulstermen (ll.452-3; see VI.6).<sup>314</sup> It is noted in V.1 that Cú Chulainn quickly dismisses him when he comes to his aid in TBC I, because he considers him incapable of avenging his death (ll.3416-20). TBC II offers the following clarification on the matter: *Ór is amlaid ra boí Sualtaim acht nírbó drochláech é 7 nírbó degláech acht múadóchlách maith ritacaemnacair* 'For the truth was that Sualtaim was not a coward but neither was he a valiant fighter but only a middling one' (ll.3994-6). In both accounts, Cú Chulainn again orders him to go to the Ulstermen to urge them to join the battle (TBC I, ll.3419-20; TBC II, ll.3996-9). Essentially, his clumsiness leads to his own death (see footnotes 73 & 139). TBC II is perhaps a little more favourable in its portrayal of Súaldaim.

The genealogies present Súaldaim as a brother of Fergus mac Róich; both being sons of Roach (Ó hUiginn, 1993, 32).<sup>315</sup> Thus Fergus is Cú Chulainn's uncle. Róich or Roach is a woman according to the genealogies and *Cóir Anmann*.<sup>316</sup> The entries concerning Fergus shed a little more light on this woman's pedigree. The following one is found in the genealogical tract, *Senchas Síil Ír; Fergus mac do Róich ingin Echach meic Carpri* 'Fergus son of Roach the daughter of Eochaid son

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<sup>314</sup> Súaldaim refers to Cú Chulainn as *a daltaín* 'O foster-son' in TBC II (l.449). *DIL* notes that this is also a term of endearment.

<sup>315</sup> Their relationship as siblings is not highlighted in the literature.

<sup>316</sup> It is not entirely clear whether Súaldaim and Fergus have the same father or not, a central factor in terms of kin membership. However, Ó hUiginn's (1993, 33) proposals about the former are worth noting. He states that Roach (disyllabic) is poorly attested and that Thurneysen's (1921, 92) view that it derived from *ro-ech* 'great horse' is very plausible given the abundance of names in Irish and Celtic tradition stemming from *ech*. It is further asserted that although *roach* is a masculine noun, its application to a woman is peculiar but it is not without parallel. However, given the variations in Fergus' pedigree, he suggests that Roach may have been originally conceived as a masculine identity and that 'the subsequent application of this name to his mother, with Russ being retained for his father, is a later attempt to rationalise two confusing and sometimes conflicting genealogical traditions'.

of Cairpre’ (O’Brien, 1962, 281-2, 428). In the context of an entry concerning Fergus, in which Súaldaim also features, *Cóir Anmann* claims that Róich is the daughter of Eochaid son of Dáire, but it alternatively suggests that Ruad, son of Derg Dathfhola from the fairy mounds, was her father (Arbuthnot, 2007, 76-7 & 149, §295). It adds that she bestowed the magical powers of the fairy mound on her son, Sualtach, and that it is from her that he got the name *Sualtach Sídhe*. She is listed as Roach Rithfhota, a daughter of Eochu, and the mother of Fergus and Subaltach in the *Banshenchas* (Dobbs, 1931, 171). It is noteworthy that these traditions are late and are most likely an attempt to explain the various different patronymics Fergus has.

Despite being presented as Cú Chulainn’s earthly father, various sources connect Súaldaim with the *síd* folk, one of which is noted above. TBC I states that he is *a sídaib* ‘from the fairy mounds’ (l.3860), while he is referred to as *Sualtach sídech* and *Súaltaim éside mac Becaltaig meic Móraltai* ‘Sualtiam was the son of Becaltach mac Móraltai’ in TBC II (ll.442-3, l.3982). The latter tradition is also found in a more expanded form in *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*:

*Cuchulainn mac Sualtiam maic Becaltaig mac Móraltai mac Umendruaid a sídib, ocus Dolb mac Becaltai a brathair, ocus Eithne Ingubai ben Elmair a sídib a siur ocus Dechter ingen Chathbad a mathair Chonculainn* ‘Cúchulainn son of Sualtam son of Beccaltach son of Móraltach, son of Umendruad (?) out of the elfmounds, and Dolb son of Beccaltach his brother, and Ethne Ingubai, wife of Elcmaire out of the elfmounds, his sister, and Dechter Cathbad’s daughter, Cúchulainn’s mother’ (Stokes, 1908-10, 28-31, §20; see VI.6).

Carey (1995, 160) notes that ‘[t]he elliptical use of possessive pronouns leaves the relationships somewhat ambiguous; but Dolb’s patronymic indicates that he is Sualtam’s brother, hence Cú Chulainn’s uncle, and I take Eithne correspondingly to be the sister of Sualtam, not of Cú Chulainn’. While Becaltach, Móraltach and Umendruad are not readily identifiable, ultimately they are connected to the *síde*. An entry in the *Senchas Síil Ír* genealogy in Rawlinson B.502 largely concurs with this: *Sétanta id est Cú-Chulaind. m. Soaltaich, m. Becalta, m. Móralta, m Dubthaich, m.Ibair, m.* (O’Brien, 1962, 285). O’Brien notes that the remainder of the genealogy has been ‘deliberately obliterated’. Conversely, the corresponding item in LL presents Súaldaim as the son of Dubhtach, thus excluding Becaltach and Móraltach from the family tree (O’Brien, 1962, 285; see below).

The RIA manuscript, D.4.2, version II of Cú Chulainn’s conception tale is given the following title *Feis Tige Becfóltach*. Van Hamel (1933, 1) translates this as ‘The Passing of the Night in Becfóltach’s House’. *Becfóltach* is possibly a compound of *bec(c)* ‘small’ and *foltach* which relates to ‘possessing qualifications in property or otherwise’. *DIL* gives the meaning of *becfoltach* as ‘having little wealth’.<sup>317</sup> A somewhat similar name, *becfhola*, is given to the mysterious woman in *Tochmarc Becfhola* (Bhreathnach, 1984, 72 & 77, §3). This seems to refer to the relatively valueless small brooch that Díarmait mac Áeda Sláne gives to her. In the present context, Ó Concheanainn (1990, 452) observes that *becfóltach* ‘refers to the small bare dwelling which (in both versions) the Ulstermen at first locate’. The first line of a lay by Bricriu later in the tale is “*Sochla bríg becfóltach*” “Renowned regarding strength is *Becfóltach*” (Meyer, 1905, 503; my

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<sup>317</sup> This reference is found under the entry for *foltach* in *DIL*.

translation). Although no connection is made between Cú Chulainn and this figure in the tale, perhaps the latter's presence is in some way connected to the relatively late tradition of Becaltach as Súaldaim's father and thus Cú Chulainn's grandfather. The lenited *f* may have been lost in the Middle Irish period while an *-a-* may have replaced the *-o-*. Alternatively, these names may have simply have been inspired by *Sualta*.

The somewhat contrasting presentations of Súaldaim and Lug in TBC is noteworthy. Lug is described as being tall with curly yellow hair and dressed in a green mantle bearing a silver brooch along with a tunic of royal satin adorned with red gold (TBC I, ll.2092-5). He carries a black shield with a boss of white bronze, a five-pointed spear and a forked javelin and like Cú Chulainn he can perform remarkable feats with them (ll.2095-8). Failing to recognise him at first, Lug introduces himself as follows to Cú Chulainn: "*Is messe do athair a ssídib .i. Lug mac Ethlend*" "I am your father, Lug mac Ethlend, from the fairy mounds" (l.2109).<sup>318</sup> Thereafter, he heals Cú Chulainn's many injuries with his magical cures and is referred to as *in láech síde* 'the warrior from the fairy mounds' (l.2142). In contrast to his quick dismissal of Súaldaim, he beseeches Lug to remain with him to help him exact revenge for the slaying of the youths of Ulster, but he refuses (ll.2178-9).<sup>319</sup> In his phantom speech in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*, he notes that when he is alone in one-to-one combat, he invokes the fair son of Eithne (Kimpton, 2009, 28 & 46, §31). Earlier, he is described as the

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<sup>318</sup> This episode is similarly portrayed in TBC II, but Lug does not introduce himself nor is his name revealed (ll.2137-201).

<sup>319</sup> TBC I and TBC II refer to other versions which note that Lug fights with his son in the battle in Sesrech Breslige (TBC I, ll.2316-7; TBC II, ll.2322-3).

well-reared son of Lug, while later there is a reference to Lug's great fosterage of him affording him a significant role in his son's life (§3, §35; see above).

*Cath Maige Tuired*, a tale in which Lug plays a central part, gives us some valuable genealogical data. His mother is listed as Eithne who is the daughter of Balor,<sup>320</sup> a Fomorian, while his father is Cían son of the magical physician, Dían Cécht, of the Túatha Dé Danann (Gray, 1982, 24-5, §8). Thus Lug seems to be named after his mother, Eithne. Lug's excellence is also emphasised in this text, in particular, in the scene where he attempts to gain entry to the feast at Tara. It is revealed that he is omniscient or multi-talented in various arts (*samildánach*) (§§53-68). Once he gains entry, he is subject to a number of other tests before Núadu, the king at the time, decides to exchange seats with him; the indication being that the kingship of the Túatha Dé Danann now passes to Lug (§§71-4). Finally, much of the remainder of the tale, which focuses on the successful defence of the territory from an attack by the Fomorians, affirms Lug's capabilities as a king and a great warrior. In the process, he kills his maternal grandfather, Balor, thus proving his loyalties to his father's people (§135). Interestingly, Lug mac Ethnenn appears as an ancestor of figures such as Conall Cernach, Conchobar and Fergus (O'Brien, 1962, 155, 91-2, 282).

Two alternative genealogies are set out for Cú Chulainn at the end of *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, one of which traces him back through Súaldaim to Míl Espáin(e):

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<sup>320</sup> Balor is described as a champion (*trénfer*) and the grandson of Nét, the king of Hebrides (*ríg na n-Innsi*; Gray, 1982, 36-7, §50). Dot is named as his father (§128).

Cú Culaind mac Soaldaim  
meic Dubthaige  
meic Cubair.  
meic Lir meic Nelruaid  
meic Cúsantin meic Adagair  
meic Boada meic Midgin  
meic Caiss meic Uacais  
meic Branaill meic Rethaig  
meic Rindail meic Rindbailc  
meic Slóitgen meic Rothchlaim  
meic Uacais meic Meic Cuill  
meic Cermata meic in Dagdai  
meic Elathan meic Delbaith  
meic Neit meic Induí  
meic Alloí meic Thait  
meic Thabuirnd  
(LU, ll.9549-65).

ita genelogia Con Culaind  
Cu Chulaind mac Soaldaim  
meic Dubtaigi meic Cubair.  
meic Lir meic Cusantin  
meic Adachair meic Báetain  
meic Midgini meic Úachail  
meic Cais Clothaig meic Cermata  
meic in Dagdai meic Inde  
meic Dorain meic Nomaill  
meic Condlai meic Memnón  
meic Samrith meic Buithe  
meic Tigerndmais  
meic Follaig meic Ethrióil  
meic Íareóil Fátha  
meic Erimoin meic Miled Espain

The LL account of the *Senchas Síil Ír*, mentioned above, provides one which is very similar to the second one listed here: *Cú-Chulaind m. Sualtaim m. Dubthaig m. Caubir m. Lir m. Causantín m. Aedachair m. Báetáin m. Midgnai m. hUachail m. Caiss m. Chlothaig m. Cermata m. in Dagdai m. Inde m. Doraim m. Nomuail m. Condlai m. Memnóin m. Samrid m.... buithe m. Thigernmais m. f'allaig 7 rl. Usque Mílid hEspáin* (O'Brien, 1962, 285). The Dagda is cast as one of his ancestors in all of these accounts.

Deichtine or Deichtire is represented as Cú Chulainn's earthly mother. It is noted in III.1.2-3 that in his first conception in version I, his mother appears to be an unnamed supernatural woman (van Hamel, 1933, 4, §3). Deichtine, Conchobar's

daughter, is depicted as his earthly mother in §1 and §6 (van Hamel, 1933, 3-6). The text represents Findchóem as her sister (§7).<sup>321</sup> Alternatively, in another account of this tale, Deichtire, Conchobar's sister, is his mother (Meyer, 1905, 500). This tradition is also found in TBC I (*mac Dechtere do phethar-su*; ll.444; *Cú Culaind mac Soaltain 7 mac sethar Conchobair*; l.4103)<sup>322</sup> and TBC II (*mac-sa Dechtiri do derbsethar-su*; ll.796). He is listed as her son a number of times elsewhere in TBC II (l.682, l.1298, l.1458, l.2027) and in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*meic delba Dechtere*; Dillon, 1953a, 12, §29), but scribe H of LU has inserted *Deichtine* in the latter case (Dillon, 1953a, 12n). *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* considers him as Conchobar's unnamed sister's son (Stokes, 1893, 398-9, §1), and he refers to himself as *forcu Deichtire* 'Deichtire's choice one' in his phantom-speech in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 28 & 46, §31). In her closing words, Emer alludes to the unusual union between Deichtire and a god; Cú Chulainn being its product (*Siachtum mórhocmarc meic dea Dechtiri*; §35). The *Banshenchas* lists Deichtire as the daughter of Cathbad the druid and it also contains a reference to another daughter of his, Indlenn, who is the wife of Uisliu and mother of three sons, Noísiu, Ainnle and Ardán making Cú Chulainn a first cousin of the latter (Dobbs, 1931, 173). Though Cathbad marries Nessa, the daughter of Eochaid Sálbuide, it is not entirely clear whether she is her mother or not.

While this material suggests that there are a number of variations in Cú Chulainn's family tree, a simplified reconstruction of his 'earthly' one taking Deichtire, Conchobar's sister, as his mother, is outlined in Appendix 1. Nevertheless, it

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<sup>321</sup> Accordingly, it states that Conall Cernach is Findchóem's son (van Hamel, 1933, 7, §7). Similarly, she is depicted as Deichtire's sister and Conall's mother in version II (Meyer, 1905, 502).

<sup>322</sup> Her name is spelt *Deichdene* in the YBL account of TBC (O'Rahilly, 1976, 14n).

seems likely, according to Toner (2000, 7), that the more important characters, like Cú Chulainn, in the Ulster Cycle 'were accepted as historical by the medieval literati'. Perhaps, the best evidence for this is the recording of the death along with a chronology of other important events in Cú Chulainn's life in the *Annals of Tigernach* (see VII.4).

Ó Cathasaigh (1986, 136-7) states that the 'ambivalence regarding Cú Chulainn's relationship with Conchobar might seem merely to show the existence of two different versions of Cú Chulainn's pedigree'. Looking at the history of *gormac*, he notes that it is no doubt significant that the variation is between 'sister's son/maternal uncle and grandson/grandfather'. He adds that the former denotes a son who has been adopted for the purpose of maintaining the adopter but also mean's 'sister's son' indicating that such a son may be appropriated by someone for this reason. While the Modern Irish reflex of *gormac* is *garmhac* 'grandson', there seem to be no early attestations of it bearing such a meaning (Ó Cathasaigh, 1986, 137). Ó Cathasaigh (1986, 137) proposes that 'it may be that the duty of maintenance sometimes devolved on a grandson'. In light of Bres' poor kingship of his mother's people in *Cath Maige Tuired*, he suggests that it was perhaps improper to elevate a sister's son to such a position; the more fitting role would be as professional champion to the king, his maternal uncle, and this is what is indicated in the case of Cú Chulainn (Ó Cathasaigh, 1986, 141). A reference to Cú Chulainn as the *gormac* in which he gives poor advice in *Mesca Ulad*, is taken by Ó Cathasaigh (1986, 142) as an indication that he is to be viewed as the 'gormac of the Ulaid as a whole'.

Nevertheless, Cú Chulainn is directly related to Conchobar and thus to the Ulstermen through his mother. He is either his nephew or his grandson, the former being the more common tradition. According to early Irish laws, it is the male kin-group (*fine*) which is the most important (Kelly, 1988, 12).<sup>323</sup> Cú Chulainn's mixed descent along with the peripheral location of his homeland, and a number of somewhat contradictory references causes considerable confusion over whether he is an Ulsterman or not. *Noínden Ulad* states that Cú Chulainn escapes the debility because he is not one of the Ulstermen (Hull, 1968, 29 & 38, §8). TBC I phrases this a little differently: “*Ní bí nóendin linni iarom*”... “*for mnáib 7 maccaib nách for neoch bís fri crích nUlad anechtair nach for Coin Culaind 7 for a athair*” ““Among us”... “women and boys do not suffer from the debility nor does anyone outside the territory of Ulster, nor yet Cú Chulainn and his father” (ll.525-8). While Follomain acknowledges him as an Ulsterman on his arrival at Emain Machae as a young boy, he considers his behaviour as unbecoming in this regard and thus orders an attack on him (TBC I, ll.421-2).

Significantly, Cú Chulainn is very poorly represented in the genealogies in comparison to other Ulster heroes. Additionally, none of the population groups trace their origins back to him nor does he appear in their genealogies unlike Fergus and Conall Cernach.<sup>324</sup> The Conaille descend from the latter, while the Ciarraige are said to be of the seed of Fergus and he appears in a number of other genealogies including those of the Laígisi, the Fir Maige and the Ciarraige Luachra

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<sup>323</sup> Kelly (1988, 15) notes that it is probable that the maternal uncle is ‘expected to take a particular interest in the rearing of his nephews’.

<sup>324</sup> Later genealogical tradition holds that some minor groups of the Conaille claim descent from Caulnia and Condluan, Cú Chulainn's twins (O'Brien, 1962, 154; see VI.6).

(O'Brien, 1962, 137, 154, 288, 385).<sup>325</sup> O'Rahilly (1946, 349) notes that '[t]he Ulidian heroes (Cú Chulainn and Cú Roí excepted) were provided with a descent from Rudraige, who in turn was made a descendant of Ír'. In the H.3.17 account of Cú Chulainn's slaying of his son, it is noted that:

...[Cú Chulainn] was a stranger (*doeraid*) in Ulster, even though he belonged to them (?). The extent of the cantred of Muirthemne was his own land in Ulster, and thus he was [adjudged] a native (*urraid*), and his son a stranger' (O'Keefe, 1904, 126-7).

Sjoestedt (1949, 75) traces Cú Chulainn's birth name, Sétanta to the Setantii, a people who are placed on the west coast of Britain, directly opposite to his own home in Mag Muirthemne and she concludes that 'Cú Chulainn was thus originally the eponymous hero of a tribe belonging to the British family of Celts'.<sup>326</sup>

Ó hUiginn (2006, 145) asserts that Cú Chulainn's 'genealogical "neutrality" may have made him a natural hero for Ulstermen of various genealogical backgrounds'. The lack of evidence in such sources and the failure to present him as an ancestor figure lends weight to the argument that he may have been a relatively late addition to the Ulster-Cycle material. Amongst the earliest attestations for TBC are those in *Conailla Medb Míchura*, an early seventh century poem found in the Laud genealogies which is attributed to Luccreth moccu Chíara (Henry, 1997, 53). Significantly, Cú Chulainn does not appear to feature therein (see below). Fergus is in exile with Medb and Ailill in Tara and not Connacht. The former's son, Fiacc, assumes the role of protector of the Ulad against the attacks of Medb and her

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<sup>325</sup> See Ó hUiginn (1993) for a detailed discussion of Fergus, Russ and Rudraige.

<sup>326</sup> This association is also made by Byrne (1973, 50).

army. Clearly, this is at odds with TBC as it survives. Of the two other poems assigned to Luccreth, one of these entitled, *Ba molad Midend Midlaige*, recounts how the Corcu Ché are compelled to leave Ulster to seek refuge in Munster as a result of a mythical disaster. Carney (1971, 75) proposes that this poem resembles *Conailla Medb Míchura* in that it is a tradition of origin and he concludes that TBC ‘belongs in its genesis to the well-known class of “origin-tale”’. Such features allow a ‘local’ epic to be transformed into a national one.

Carney (1971, 79) notes that *Conailla Medb Míchura* reflects:

...an early stage in the evolution of the *Táin* where *Cú Chulainn* was a title borne by Fiacc, son of Fergus. This was carried over in the extant *Táin* by creating a deeply sentimental bond between *Cú Chulainn* and his *poppa* Fergus.

Henry (1997, 53) asserts that Fiacc may have served as a ‘prototype of the great Ulster hero’.<sup>327</sup> According to Carney (1971, 79), it seems clear that *Cú Chulainn* under that name, existed as the Hero in the “rhetoric” stage’.

The seventh century text, *Verba Scáthaige*, which is one of our earliest attestations to TBC, firmly places *Cú Chulainn* as the main hero (Henry, 1990, 200-1). It may be tentatively suggested that this text may also allude to an early existence for *Cú Chulainn*’s trip to Scáthach’s home. In this wise, this points to *Cú Chulainn*’s presence in the Ulster Cycle as a warrior figure from early on. Unlike Fiacc, this is

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<sup>327</sup> Fergus’ son, Fiacc does not appear in TBC I or II.

a tradition that is very clearly built upon with Cú Chulainn playing the role of warrior-hero in a significant number of texts across an extended timeframe.

Nevertheless, Cú Chulainn is notable by his absence in a number of other important Ulster-Cycle tales. In contrast to Fergus and Conchobar, he is not found in *Loinges mac nUislenn*, although both are depicted in somewhat of a negative light therein. Having said that, other significant warriors such as Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach also do not appear in it. Cú Chulainn also fails to make the cast in *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*; a tale in which Conall Cernach is granted the role of chief warrior. It is noteworthy that like *Conailla Medb Míchura*, this tale also has somewhat of a Leinster theme, given that the locus of the tale is the home of Mac Da Thó, a Leinster king (Chadwick, 1927, 9 & 16, §1). Conall's status as one of the elite warriors of Ulster is also alluded to elsewhere. This is indicated in Cú Chulainn's final deed when the youth relieves him of his duties guarding the province (TBC I, ll.666-70) and he seems to reclaim his position as chief warrior on Cú Chulainn's death (Kimpton, 2009, 25-7 & 44-6, §§25-30). The copy of the mid-twelfth century tale, *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*, which survives in LL also assigns the role of principal warrior to Conall while *Talland Étair* gives equal coverage or perhaps a little more to Conall's exploits (Ó Dónaill, 2005, 43-62). All of these sagas are found in LL, a manuscript which is very much pro-Leinster (see IV.1).

## **Conclusion**

There is a strong tradition across a wide variety of texts presenting Súaldaim as Cú Chulainn's father. Aside from this, his existence is almost exclusively limited to

TBC, where he is very much a minor figure. Cú Chulainn's divine father, Lug, is accorded precedence in terms of his excellence therein and is a much more established figure in early Irish literature with his heroic credentials being firmly established in *Cath Maige Tuired*. Uncertainty as to the location of Súaldaim's homeland or Lug's status as a divine being, or both, may account for Cú Chulainn not being viewed as an Ulsterman. There is no question but that he is related to Conchobar through his mother who is either a sister or a daughter of the latter. The limited number of attestations for Cú Chulainn in the genealogies, and the fact that no population group claim descent from him, sets him apart from other significant Ulster warriors and makes him acceptable to a wider audience.

#### **VII.4. Cú Chulainn as a saviour-type figure**

Finally, it is necessary to assess elements which might indicate a potential Christian characterisation of this secular hero. For the most part, evidence for this is limited to TBC, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* and possibly *Compert Con Culainn*. The possible similarities between the genesis of Cú Chulainn and Christ are visited in III.1.2-3. The most salient aspects are the non-sexual conceptions of both virginal mothers by a divine element followed with a visitation by a divine figure announcing the conception while also revealing the name by which the child should be called. These motifs are found only in version I of his conception tale. Clearly, both their begettings comply with heroic norms, with Cú Chulainn's triple conception going beyond that of Christ's.

The highly stylised closing scene in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* is remarkably different to the corresponding tales for other Ulster figures such as

Conchobar, Lóegaire, Celtchar and Fergus. Kimpton (2009, 4) alludes to resonances between Cú Chulainn and Emer's rhetorics and texts lamenting Christian figures such as *Amrae Choluimb Chille* and the poems of Blathmac.<sup>328</sup> Significantly, there is no suggestion of such intense lamenting for the above mentioned Ulster figures (Meyer, 1906, 4-35). This practice seems to have been more frequently associated with religious figures and thus this milieu may have been influential in this regard.<sup>329</sup> McCone (1990, 8) asserts that these components in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* are composed in a Christian setting and this explicit Christian sentiment is exclusive to these passages. Kimpton (2009, 4) indicates that the placement of Cú Chulainn's 'narration of his own death and heroic past (§31) between prophecies of Patrick (§30) and of Christ (§32), and their connection through linking alliteration (*Emain* and *Úaine* ll. 503 and 505; *Cride* and *Críst* ll. 534 and 536), suggest an association in their salvific roles'.

Kimpton (2009, 4) states that Emer's lament recalls aspects of *Amra Choluimb Chille* and she gives *mór n-essad* (ll.578-81) and a line concerning the coming of St. Patrick in Cú Chulainn's prophecy (*cotton- Sion –suidigthe leis*; 1.499) in support of this suggestion. *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* reads: *mór n-essad, mór ndirsan, mór ngalgat, mór mairg* 'great affliction, great sadness, great calamity, great woe' and *Amra Choluim Chille* as *mór mairg, mór n-deilm* 'great woe, great outcry' (Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §33; Clancy & Márkus, 1995, 105-6). The Christian tone of Cú Chulainn's speech is clearly palpable. Further links between Cú Chulainn and Christ are outlined as follows by Kimpton (2009, 4):

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<sup>328</sup> The poems of Blathmac are edited by Carney (1964) and he dates their composition to 750-70. Blathmac is the son of Cú Brettan son of Congus and came from a territory now in Co. Monaghan. These are found in a seventeenth century manuscript, G 50, in the National Library of Ireland.

<sup>329</sup> While *Cath Maige Tuired* indicates that Bríg laments the death of her son Rúadán, this is in no way comparable to Emer's keen of Cú Chulainn (Gray, 1982, 56-7, §125).

The reference to Christ's Harrowing of Hell in "De adventu Christi" (*tria erscartad iffirn*, l. 567) echoes the description of Cú Chulainn's attack upon the invading hosts in Mag Murthemne (*do urscartad na slog*, ll. 294-5), and Erc mac Carpri's reference to Christ/Cú Chulainn as *flaith findnélach* (ll. 278-9) is echoed by Emer's reference to Cú Chulainn as *nél find* (l. 587).

For Kimpton (2009, 4), these associations, and others, along with Cú Chulainn's admonition to follow Christian law, indicate that the 'text promotes a conversion from a martial ethos to pacifism under Christian law' and thus the tale 'adapts a tale of vengeance to a Christian one of salvation, and depicts a victory over pagan violence'.

If we turn to the Blathmac poems, we see that Christ is labeled as *geluain* 'white lamb', *uan* 'lamb' and *int uan findgel* 'the gleaming white lamb' therein while Cú Chulainn twice refers to himself as *úaine* 'little lamb' in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Carney, 1964, 34-5, §§97-8; 70-1, §208; Kimpton, 2009, 28 & 46, §31; see below). Indeed earlier in the tale, Erc announces Cú Chulainn to be the *mac Dé, mac duini* 'son of God, son of man' (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §13; see III.6.3).<sup>330</sup> The status of these figures as 'the sister's son' is also emphasized in both sources. Ó Cathasaigh (1986, 142) states that 'Christ belongs to the human race through Mary, his mother, and he is in that sense a sister's son to mankind'. Christ is designated as *maic a ndeirbsethar* 'their [the Jews] sister's son' in the Blathmac poems (Carney, 1964, 34-5, §100) and this relationship is also highlighted elsewhere in the text (§§46-7, §103). In his announcement of the coming of Christ, Cú Chulainn refers to him as *nia doíne* 'sister's son of men'

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<sup>330</sup> This could also be rendered as 'the son of a god, the son of a man'.

(Kimpton, 2009, 29 & 46, §32).<sup>331</sup> While in the preceding paragraph, he describes himself as *forcu Dechtire* ‘Dechtire’s choice one’ (§31). The implication may be that one sister’s son will replace another. However, there is a fundamental difference in their relationship with their maternal kin, Christ is persecuted by his, but Cú Chulainn is not.

Kimpton (2009, 67) notes that the responsibility for lamenting Christ and Cú Chulainn in the poems of Blathmac and Emer’s rhetoric, are expressed in similar terms:

*Ba méte no bed co bráth*  
*Tar cech ngruaid hi cech oentráth*  
*Tromder folo, loim cró*  
*Oc coíniud in chimbetho*

*Mairc ro-char mac rí nime,*  
*Ad-chondairc a chrólige;*  
*Cith cách ro-choalae a chlú*  
*Forda-tá a bithchíniu.*

‘It were no matter for surprise that there should be at every single hour till doom a heavy tear of blood, a drop of gore, upon every cheek keening the captive.

Alas for the one who has loved the son of the king of Heaven and who has seen him lying in blood; even all those who have (merely) heard his fame, it is incumbent upon them to keen him perpetually’ (Carney, 1964, 44-7, §§132-3).

*Ba méite cach cride rod:car con:bóssad.*

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<sup>331</sup> This passage is quoted in *Sanas Cormaic* with respect to explaining *nia* (Meyer, 1913, 81, §959).

*Ba méite cec clúas rod:cúala co bráth noco:ndermanad.*

*Ba méite cach dér no:cíthe co bráth ba[d] dia bithchoíniud.*

*Ba méite cach rosc at:connairc no:ciad frassaib fola*

‘It were likely that every heart that loved him should burst.

It were likely that every ear that ever heard him should not forget him.

It were likely that every tear that was ever shed should be constantly lamenting him.

It were likely that every eye that has seen him should cry with gushes [of tears] of blood’ (Kimpton, 2009, 32 & 48-9, §34).<sup>332</sup>

In the context of his detailed study of the structure of the keen in the Blathmac poems, Lambkin (1985-86, 70-1) observes that a Universal Keen is appropriate and expected ‘in the case of an entire people suffering a calamity in common’ and this is what the poet demands for Jesus Christ.<sup>333</sup> His words are directed at the Jews, the latter’s maternal kin, who have failed in this regard. Lambkin adds that the size of the keen is an indication of the power of the deceased. Memories of the deeds of the latter and his violent death heighten the intensity of the lament. Christ’s miracles are recalled early on in the first poem and considerable emphasis is placed upon his Crucifixion and the unfairness of it thereafter (Carney, 1964, 2-3, §2; 12-7, §§32-47; 16-21, §§46-60; 22-3, §66, 26-7, §77; 34-5, §100; 36-7, §103, 44-5, §131). Significantly, a commensurate loss is indicated in Emer’s lament, outlined above, as a result of her husband’s death pointing to his importance to the Ulster people (Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §33). Along with this, she recalls his great deeds and the manner in which he is killed while alluding to the injustice of it (§§33-4).

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<sup>332</sup> The image of blood gushing forth in response to Christ’s slaying is also found earlier in the Blathmac pomes (Carney, 1964, 22-3, §64).

<sup>333</sup> Essentially, Lambkin (1999, 144-5) notes that Blathmac considers this as one of their duties. Lambkin (1985-86, 67-8) states that there is very little evidence for the *caoine* or keen in Old or Middle Irish. The term *núallguba* ‘lament-cry’ is the term used to describe Emer’s lament in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Kimpton, 2009, 30 & 47, §33).

The imagery of blood being shed or gushing forth as part of the lament is common to both texts as noted above. Thus there seems to be considerable parallels in the presentation of grief for both figures.

In a later consideration of these poems, Lambkin (1999, 149) depicts “secular” (pre-Christian) values of keening the dead and commemorating the deeds of famous men’ within these. Arguably, what we have here, are similar elements in two texts believed to have been written in the eighth century with *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* being possibly the slightly older of the two. Lambkin’s (1985-86, 71) comments that Blathmac connects Jesus with secular tradition by referring to him as *galgat* and *gérat* are also noteworthy. In his reappraisal of the Blathmac poems and the *Céili Dé* he evaluates the connection between the pagan past and the Christian present as follows:

Blathmac’s poems seems to belong in a literary milieu where pagan past and Christian present are harmonised, where Conchobar is described as the foster-brother (*comalta*) of Jesus.....Once Jesus was accepted as foster-brother of the greatest pagan *flaith*, Conchobar, and his superiority to Conchobar conceded, there would seem to have been no compelling reason for Irish Christians to cease being interested in their pagan past. Once Jesus was acknowledged as the most powerful *flaith*, attention was naturally then focused on him and his *céili*, but it would seem more likely that Conchobar and his *céili* (the other pagan heroes) were regarded as still worthy of interest as a lesser branch of the family of Jesus, rather than that Christianity required their rejection and the salving of the conscience of anyone who continued to take an interest in them (Lambkin, 1999, 146).<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> The reference to Conchobar being Jesus’ foster-brother is found in his death tale (Meyer, 1906, 16-7, §4).

Subsequently, he suggests that the heroes of the ‘pagan Irish past seem to have been regarded in much the same light as the kings and the prophets of the Old Testament to whom Blathmac refers (383-4)’ (Lambkin, 1999, 148). The harmonisation of figures from the pagan and Christian traditions is also evident in *Aided Chonchobuir* where Conchobar’s character is manipulated in a way that connects him and perhaps Ireland with Christ and the Christian tradition. As we find with his birth, the timing for his death is also linked with that of Christ’s (Stokes, 1910, Meyer, 1906, 8-17).

It is indicated above that Cú Chulainn is viewed by some scholars as a saviour type figure. Certainly, in TBC and *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, Ulster and more specifically, the greater Mag Muirthemne area, would have been destroyed by invaders were it not for him (see III.5.3 & III.6.3). Bearing this in mind, he can essentially be classified as a type of ‘warrior-saviour’ figure. Difficulties arise when we attempt to equate him with the more typical modern image of Christ which depicts the latter as a pious, miracle performing, peaceful figure who is somewhat averse to using physical force.<sup>335</sup> Indeed, this fundamental difference between the Ulster warriors and perhaps the more typical pious image of Christ is arguably played out in the Old Irish poem found in *Aided Chonchobuir*.<sup>336</sup> It describes Conchobar’s conversion from being a pagan King, who intuitively resorts to his sword, to a believer in the Christian faith. Rather than using his sword to defend Christ, Conchobar indicates that his heart should have been with him during his time of need, expressing his growing understanding of proper Christian conduct (Corthals, 1989, 51-3). Corthals’ close study of this poem and in particular the

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<sup>335</sup> Bruford (1994b, 202) suggests that Christ’s miracles may have been replaced with Cú Chulainn’s deeds in the creation of the latter.

<sup>336</sup> Corthals’ (1989) edition and translation is used here.

prose account of Conchobar's death in RIA 23 N10, where he is baptized by his own blood, leads him to conclude that the justification for Conchobar's 'salvation was rooted not in legend but in the Bible and in late antique concepts of martyrdom'.

In consideration of Cú Chulainn's role in TBC, Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 127) argues that Cú Chulainn is indeed the saviour of his people but that 'he is a very different kind of personage from Jesus Christ'. In this regard, he discounts Kelleher's (1971) proposals concerning the annalistic evidence linking the two figures in the case of the former scholar and McCone's (1990) theory that Cú Chulainn's triple conception is 'an orthodox allegory and "native" typology of Christ's incarnation' (see III.1.2-3). However, in III.5.2, it is noted that Ó Cathasaigh (1993, 116), in light of Abrams criteria for an epic, considers Cú Chulainn in TBC as the heroic figure upon whom the fate of Ulster depends. Thus there seems to be somewhat of a contradiction in his views.

The depiction of God the Father in the Old Testament is quite different to that of Christ in the New Testament. On a whole, there is more of a martial tone in the presentation of the former. He is far from a peaceful figure and once enraged he is quick to exact punishment on those who cross him. Thus fury and wrath are among his characteristics. Cú Chulainn similarly wreaks havoc on his enemy and his rage is pinpointed when he undergoes his *ríastrad* (see IV.3). Perhaps the most striking example of this in the case of God is Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit whereupon he condemns mankind to die and womankind to have painful childbirth from then on (Genesis 2, 3). Referred to as a *rí* 'king', he is

depicted as reacting similarly in *Saltair na Rann* (Greene & Kelly, 1976, 52-5, ll.1441-560). Adam later speaks of how he and Eve have outraged God (*ro saraig in flaith*; l.1522) and subsequently expresses his fear that God might exterminate them completely if God is maddened again (*Noco chóir dúin as nach mud atherruch dia athsargud, ná dernai in fírflaith, a ben ar ndíbad, ar lándilgen[n]*; ll.1545-8).

This concept of inflicting an ailment on an entire race may have provided inspiration for the idea of the *ces* of the Ulstermen which facilitates Cú Chulainn's portrayal as the saviour figure in TBC and *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* (see III.5.2-3). Essentially, the *ces* may be viewed as a type of original sin. In this regard, he is paralleled with Christ who is similarly immune from such a curse. Viewed thus, this would imply that Cú Chulainn is free from this because he is the son of the divine figure, Lug, like Christ is because he is the Son of God. Significantly, the punishment of heightened labour pains occurs in the Bible and the pains of childbirth are also central to the *ces* in *Noínden Ulad* (Genesis 3:16; Hull, 1968, 29 & 38, §§7-8). The victims will only have the strength of a woman in childbirth.

There are a number of other examples of God's wrath becoming ignited thus on determining that humankind is wicked, he decides to blot out all except for Noah and his family (Genesis 6:11-3). He decimates the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in an act of punishment before turning Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for going against his instructions (Genesis 19:1-26). In the Book of Joshua (10:11), he inflicts great slaughter on Joshua's enemy by showering them with stones. On

learning that the Israelites have abandoned him for other gods, he becomes enraged, giving them over to plunderers (Judges 2:11-4). Later, he throws Sisera's nine hundred chariots into disarray before Barak, which ultimately allows the latter to slaughter the former's army (Judges 4:12-6). In the psalms he is beseeched to rise up with his sword to dispel the enemy (Psalms 17:13), while in the Book of Jeremiah (25:29-31), the Lord speaks of summoning his sword against all the inhabitants of the earth and putting the guilty to the sword. The prophet Isaiah also highlights his wrath (Isaiah 13:9-13).

Arguably, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that biblical material no doubt provided some inspiration for the formation of Cú Chulainn's character in the two texts and possibly the third one outlined above. Another such element is Cú Chulainn's representation as a lamb toward the end of *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, as outlined heretofore. This seems to echo Jesus' depiction as the Lamb of God who is ultimately sacrificed by God the Father to save the human race. The implication seems to be that Cú Chulainn is likewise being offered up for the Ulster people. It is noted in VI.6 that a number of offspring are linked to Cú Chulainn, however, essentially, the earlier literature assigns only Connlae to him. In this respect, Cú Chulainn is likened to God the Father. While God the Father does not actively slay his son, he allows him to be crucified. Likewise, albeit playing a more active role, Cú Chulainn kills his only son to save the honour of the Ulstermen (Meyer, 1904, 118-21, §§11-2). Both sacrifice their only son for their people. This seems to be the ultimate test and God makes a similar demand of Abraham with regard to his son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-14). Interestingly, Isaac is also referred to as a lamb. Abraham's willingness to carry out this act is sufficient

to prove his fear of God and thus he is not required to follow through on it. Ultimately, the seed of Cú Chulainn and God the Father does not live on, thus this ensures that no figure will supersede either of them thereafter.

The terminology used in considering Cú Chulainn's age in the longer version of *Verba Scáthaige* in *Tochmarc Emire* may associate Cú Chulainn with Christ. The general thrust of this piece is that Cú Chulainn will be the saviour, but that he will suffer by dying prematurely much to the despair of the women-folk (van Hamel, 1933, 57-60, §79). Cú Chulainn's power over his enemies is said to last [*t*]eora bliadnai ar trénríocht 'three years on full thirty' meaning thirty-three years (§79). This may have been influenced by the belief that Jesus was thirty when he starts his ministry and it is generally believed that he was thirty-three at the time of his death, but there is some dispute over this (Luke 3:23). It is noteworthy that there seems to be somewhat of a blank space in his life between the ages of twelve and thirty (Luke 2:41-50). In terms of a chronology for Cú Chulainn's later years, he is depicted as being seventeen during TBC I (l.824) and as the text above implies, he is possibly thirty-three when he dies. Aside from this saga, his age is not highlighted in any of the other tales recounting his adventures beyond his youth. Close thematic parallels are evident between TBC and his death tale and the latter gives the sense that it is a sequel to the former. It may be tentatively suggested that this blanks out part of Cú Chulainn's life.

Kelleher (1971) theorizes that the lives of Cú Chulainn and Christ are deliberately associated in a number of entries in the pre-Patrician annals.<sup>337</sup> Conchobar and Cú Chulainn and thus the tales of the Ulster Cycle are located to the time of Christ.<sup>338</sup> The dates offered for the birth and death of Cú Chulainn along with that for the occurrence of TBC in the *Annals of Tigernach* are inconsistent.<sup>339</sup> His birth is placed at 34 B.C., his death at 2 A.D. and it adds that he was twenty-seven when he died (Stokes, 1895-96, vol. 1, 34, 37). However, this would imply that he was thirty-five and not twenty-seven at the time of death. It also states that Cú Chulainn is seventeen at the time of TBC and that this took place in 19 B.C.<sup>340</sup> so this entry is not in line with the birth or death dates listed. If we take Cú Chulainn's death date of 2 A.D to be the most reliable one, this ultimately implies that entries for the dating of TBC and his birth date are wrong.<sup>341</sup> Notably, the latter two items are in the later hand of the LU scribe H (Kelleher, 1971, 109-10). Running with this death date for Cú Chulainn and one of 33 A.D. for Conchobar, Kelleher (1971, 121) sees this as a deliberate attempt to link these two figures with Christ. He supports this proposal by noting that Cú Chulainn's and Christ's life overlap by a year with each having a life-span divisible by three. While the latter seems evident in the case of Jesus, the annal entries for Cú Chulainn present some

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<sup>337</sup> The fullest record for this period is the first part of the *Annals of Tigernach* (Kelleher, 1971, 108).

<sup>338</sup> Kelleher (1971) focuses specifically on the following annals, namely, *Annals of Inisfallen*, *Annals of Tigernach*, *Annals of Ulster* and *Chronicon Scotorum*. The text, *Do Flathusaib hÉrenn*, is also central to his comparative analysis.

<sup>339</sup> See Kelleher (1971, 109-11) for a discussion of the problematic nature of these entries. Similar difficulties arise in relation to the entries concerning Conchobar.

<sup>340</sup> The possible dates implied for TBC by these entries, gives rise to further problems as any of these dates 'would require that the Pentarchy, if it began in 30 B.C., have lasted much longer than the five or seven years otherwise allotted to it' (Kelleher, 1971, 110).

<sup>341</sup> An entry in the *Annals of Inisfallen* (§389) places the hero's death at 2 B.C. and Conchobar's at 19 A.D. In this regard, Kelleher (1971, 111n) admits that he cannot 'make out the purpose of that emendation'.

difficulties in this respect, although, evidence from *Verba Scáthaige* outlined above suggests that this is in fact the case.

An entry in the *Annals of Inisfallen* (§389) places the hero's death at 2 B.C. and Conchobar's at 19 A.D. These are contextualized alongside the Incarnation: *Ab Incarnatione Domini nostri Iesu Christi usque hunc annum .ccccxxxii anni sunt. A morte Con Culainn herois .ccccxxxiii. A morte Conchobuir Meic Nessa .ccccxiii.* Kelleher (1971, 112-3) observes that the 'reckoning of dates both from the Incarnation and from the deaths of Cú Chulainn *heros* and Conchobar mac Nessa shows the annalist again stressing the importance of the Ulster Saga'. He admits that he cannot make out the reason for the emendation of their death dates (Kelleher, 1971, 112n). Dumville (1977-79, 52) succinctly outlines Kelleher's proposals as follows:

It is Kelleher's view that the prehistoric portion of the annals, constructed *ca* 790, was reworked in the following generation. This reworked version constituted what we now see as the common source of the annals. The reworking was due to Abbot Cuanu of Louth (expelled 818; *ob.* 825); his revised text "was brought to Clonmacnoise from Louth in 835, where it became the basis of the common sources of the annals". The "common source" is therefore a Clonmacnoise text in its last century. The reworking of the annals involved, *inter alia*, the incorporation of a whole group of entries dealing with the *dramatis personae* of the Ulster Cycle and particularly of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. This was done partly for ideological reasons and partly because of the importance to Cuanu of the Brega "history" enshrined in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

Thereafter, Dumville (1977-79, 52) questions the reasoning upon which he arrives at the date and textual history for them particularly given that there is ‘no agreement between experts as to the detailed relationship of the early Irish annalistic collections’.

A number of aspects of Cú Chulainn’s death which bear similarities with Jesus’ are outlined by Kelleher (1971) and McCone (1990) without much elaboration. The drink element, identified by McCone (1990, 197) is discussed in III.6.3 and it is noted therein that this features in other death tales. Based on the evidence outlined above, Kelleher (1971, 121-2) seems correct in his observation that both die erect and pierced by a spear for his people. While both die in an upright position, this is also portrayed as the ideal warrior stance in III.6.3. Jesus seems to be nailed to a cross with his arms outstretched (John 20:25), while Cú Chulainn secures himself to a pillar stone, presumably with his arms down by his side. A similar idea may be behind the scene where a light emanates from Cú Chulainn’s head until his soul leaves his body and that which alludes to the passing of Jesus’ spirit from him when he bows his head (John 20:30). This also suggests that both die with their heads slumped forward. Whereas both suffer an abdominal wound, Jesus is pierced by a spear in the side after his death (John 20:33-5), while Cú Chulainn’s wounding by a spear causes his death with the puncture site being over his stomach and thus possibly on the front left upper region of his abdomen (Kimpton, 2009, 23 & 42, §21).

Certainly, Cú Chulainn’s posthumous address seems to strongly reflect the resurrected Jesus. Both figures appear firstly to females (§30; Matthew 28:9-10; Mark 16:9; John 20:11-17). Unlike Jesus, Cú Chulainn uses a prop, namely his chariot. While Jesus rises on the third day after his crucifixion (Luke 23:6-7), Cú Chulainn appears

sometime during the first week after his death or possibly on the day of it (Kimpton, 2009, 27-8 & 46, §§30-1). Like Christ, Cú Chulainn's plays a prophetic role to some degree in foreseeing the foundation of Armagh and the salvation of mankind by Jesus. In the context of Cú Chulainn's prophecies, McCone (1990, 197) asserts that '[i]n this way the standard biblical device of prophecy linking the Old and New Testaments places Cú Chulainn's demise on the threshold looking forward from his own marginally pre-Christian era to Christ's imminent world mission and Patrick's future conversion of Ireland, more specifically of Emain into Ard Machae'. McCone's (1990, 98) pinpointing of John the Baptist's function as 'the last representative of the old law and prophets and as Christ's harbinger' is an analogy that is useful in determining Cú Chulainn's depiction in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*. While John the Baptist foresees the coming of a messianic figure who will be greater than himself, conceivably, the same sentiment is found in Cú Chulainn's prophecies of Christ (Kimpton, 2009, 29-30 & 46-7, §32). By allowing Cú Chulainn to return from the dead, his words are accorded considerable authority. Both are essentially depicted as paving the way for Christ (Luke 1:13-7). In addition, Cú Chulainn parallels with Christ and Patrick in his efforts to persuade the Ulster people to convert to Christianity.

At this point, we must turn to *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* where Cú Chulainn fulfils a somewhat similar purpose.<sup>342</sup> The message of this tale is fundamentally the same, if not stronger, in that it calls for paganism to be renounced in favour of Christianity. Viewed as somewhat of an authority figure, the resuscitated hero is used in a bid to convert Lóegaire to the new faith. His resurrection again bears

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<sup>342</sup> The content of the text implies that the text is younger than *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*. It is noted in II.1 that dates ranging from the early ninth century to the eleventh century have been proposed for it.

obvious affinities with Christ.<sup>343</sup> Johnston (2001, 113) observes that ‘validation can only occur through the spoken authority of an individual witness...The past functions, in these cases, as an artefact of the present. In this way *Siaburcharpat* resembles modern science-fiction stories of time-travel’.<sup>344</sup> Cú Chulainn is the only figure to communicate in verse therein and while this underlines his importance it also marks him as a ‘figure out of time’ (Johnston, 2001, 116). Saint Patrick must bless Lóegaire’s mouth in order to enable him to describe Cú Chulainn’s appearance (*mani sénasu 7 mani chosecra mo gin*; LU, ll.9234-5).<sup>345</sup> Johnston (2001, 116) asserts that the ‘saint simplifies the past for his audiences within and without the tale. In fact, the past is only approachable through the medium of the saint’.

Cú Chulainn’s placement in hell herein is in contrast to *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* where it seems to be implied that the hero is guaranteed his place in heaven. Ultimately, the alternative and somewhat isolated depiction of Cú Chulainn in this text can be attributed to the fact that he is essentially used and molded in a way that supports the overall agenda of the tale. Here, he beseeches Patrick to raise him up to heaven, and indeed Conchobar who is likewise suffering in hell (LU, ll.9459-71). This plea along with Cú Chulainn’s acknowledgment that his martial skills are useless in hell, confirms that his era has passed and it indicates that his ways are no longer relevant (LU, ll.9504-11). However, Cú Chulainn prevails in a number of other contemporaneous tales and those of a later period, like *Aided Guill*

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<sup>343</sup> In this respect, Johnston (2001, 114) notes that the tale shares close affinities with hagiographical material in which saints do likewise.

<sup>344</sup> Johnston (2001, 113) further asserts that ‘this obsession with the past as a validatory tool is symptomatic of uncertainty rather than certainty, a sign of change rather than its lack’.

<sup>345</sup> For Johnston (2001, 116), this scene is ‘reminiscent of the prophet’s Jeremiah’s call. God touches Jeremiah’s mouth so that he can become a vessel of divine revelation (Jr 1:9)’.

*Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige*. In the current tale, power has now shifted to Patrick and indeed this is underlined by Cú Chulainn's admission that it is the former who has created this vision for Lóegaire's benefit. Indeed, Johnston (2001, 114-5) rightly observes that the 'wonder-working ever-conquering all-knowing, and proselytizing Patrick of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* is typical of the saints in Irish hagiography, indeed of Patrick himself in the many lives composed in his honor'. It seems evident that such hagiographical works may have been of further influence, and Johnston adds that there is no doubt but that 'the meeting between Patrick and Lóegaire ultimately takes its cue from the various confrontations of king and saint detailed by Tírechán and, especially, Muirchú in their compositions dating from the second half of the seventh century'.

To return to the above discussion, it seems understandable that a number of further correlations can be seen in the closing stages of the lives of Cú Chulainn and Christ, however, one must do so with caution and must be careful not to fall into the trap of fashioning evidence to support a pre-conceived theory. If one takes the latter blinkered approach, no doubt a large number of resemblances will be seen but the Bible cannot be perceived as the sole possible source for all such motifs. Some of the more obvious associations include the devastation felt by the female followers at the loss of their hero. The opening LL section of *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* contains a reference to the women of Ulster baring their breasts at the end of his boyhood deeds and the preceding line mentions the wailing of the women, perhaps in some way connecting these two acts (Kimpton, 2009, 11 & 35-6, §1).<sup>346</sup> Although not the same, it is noteworthy that women beat their breasts while

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<sup>346</sup> Subsequently, they wail and clap their hands in grief (Kimpton, 2009, 15 & 37-8, §9).

lamenting Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (23:27). One of the roles of women is to flatter their male warriors so it is understandable and thus expected that they will equally mourn their loss. Indeed their lamentations may be viewed as a form of adulation and may not necessarily derive from the Bible.

Furthermore, conspiracy and treachery is pivotal in bringing about their premature deaths (Matthew 26: 3-50; Mark 14:1-53; Luke 22:2-54; see III.6.3). Both are acutely aware that their death is imminent and express some anguish in this regard (Kimpton, 2009, 16-8 & 38, §10; Matthew 26:39). This underlines the human aspect of both heroes thus making it easier for the audience to identify with them. Both proceed on the road to death without wavering. Ultimately, both are required to do so in order to save their people, but it would also be cowardly for Cú Chulainn not to do so and thus would be at odds with his status as a warrior. Certainly, the odds are stacked against them and there is a palpable sense of injustice concerning their deaths. In this regard, the miraculous element often found in the death of the hero, as outlined by de Vries (1963, 216) is accentuated for both figures. The feast motif is also common to both, but with considerable difference. Jesus is consulted with regard to his and is thus a willing attendee while it is forced upon Cú Chulainn and it is essentially used as a means to disable him (Matthew 26:17-29; Mark: 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-21; Kimpton 2009, 18 & 39, §11). The food, seemingly not very extravagant in both cases, bears a personal link to the heroes. The dog meat, which Cú Chulainn does not seem to ingest, bears obvious links with the 'Hound of Culann' while Jesus announces that the bread and wine of his meal is his body and blood. In both instances, the 'Last Supper' marks the beginning of their demise.

A considerable number of other correlations between the Passion of Christ and Cú Chulainn's death are enumerated by Keenan (2010, 24-39) in her recent MA thesis. Cú Chulainn's early prediction that companies of women will mourn 'our' deaths in dark lament is taken as a possible reference to Christ in light of statements in the Bible that the whole country is covered in darkness for three hours when the latter dies along with an indication that women were also present (Kimpton, 2009, 16 & 38, §10; Matthew 27:45-55; Mark 15:33). Cú Chulainn's subsequent statement therein that [*r*]andfaider domun deslámaib '[t]he world will be divided by right/just hands' is deemed to be a possible allusion to the Book of Revelations and its proposal that the world will be divided into two with the good going to heaven and the evil going to hell (Kimpton, 2009, 16 & 38, §10). His further evaluation that [*e*]cnaithi ad:rainfet comarbae cumachta beca '[I]earned ones will divide the small powers of heirs' is viewed in the same light (§10). Keenan (2010, 28-9) states that this further exclusion of heirs may give rise to conflict on a scale comparable with what is indicated in the Book of Revelations. *Gand gein gignithar gair ríandomu[i]n díth* 'Mean is the person who will be born shortly before the destruction of the world' is seen as a reference to the apocalypse and the evil person to such figures bearing the same traits in the biblical material, namely the Beast or the false prophet (Kimpton, 2009, 16 & 38, §10; Revelations 13:5; 19:20).

Furthermore, the following statement is viewed as a direct resonance of the heavenly Christ who appears from the clouds in the Four Gospels and the Book of Revelations (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 21:27; Revelations 1:7): "*Aid:gén in flaith, flaith findnélach fornélach*"...“I recognize the ruler, a ruler having qualities of the fair, high clouds/heavens...” (Kimpton, 2009, 20 & 40, §13). Although acknowledging

that neither Christ nor Cú Chulainn leave a biological heir, Keenan (2010, 26-7) concludes that both leave a successor, namely Simon Peter in the case of Jesus (Matthew 16:19), and Conall Cernach in Cú Chulainn's case. Another parallel is deemed to be the fact that two figures die alongside them (Keenan, 2010, 33-4). Cú Chulainn's bathing prior to death is viewed as a symbolic baptism, after he has renounced his sins, allowing him to enter heaven. If one takes on board all of these apparent resonances, it is understandable that one would conclude that the Bible plays a considerable role in the depiction of Cú Chulainn, particularly in his final days. At this point, a more detailed comparative evaluation of the influence of biblical material on the creation of the hero Cú Chulainn, and on the Ulster-Cycle material, is beyond the scope of the present research.

### **Conclusion**

Evidence for Cú Chulainn's characterization as a Christ-like figure is mainly confined to *Compert Con Culainn*, TBC and *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*. Given their status as heroes, it is to be expected that there may be common aspects in their biographies. This alternatively suggests that all these aspects may not have been directly borrowed from or influenced by biblical material. Certainly, he seems to be presented as a warrior-type-savior-figure in TBC and *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*. The wrathful God the Father in the Old Testament and Christ in the New Testament and other motifs therein, seem to have played some part in the molding of Cú Chulainn. Toward the end of his death tale, the phantom Cú Chulainn returns as a Christianized figure confirming that there is little doubt but that this aspect of his life is strongly influenced by biblical material. Cú Chulainn is used as a mediator between the past and present presumably in a bid to encourage or

justify conversion to Christianity. His function in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* can be viewed in the same light. Be that as it may, there are a considerable number of texts, for example *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Fled Bricrenn* and *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDúil Dermait* and others in which there is no evidence to suggest that the authors were trying to liken him to Christ, but we must bear in mind the fact that the sources are very varied and from many different periods as outlined in I.1. Thus, it is to be expected that diverse approaches and influences will feature throughout this time. For the most part, Cú Chulainn remains very much a secular warrior hero.

## Chapter VIII: General conclusions

The foregoing chapters examined Cú Chulainn's presentation across the Ulster Cycle. He is somewhat unusual in that he appears fairly prominently in texts composed at various times during a six hundred year period. The earliest body of tales in which he is given prominence date to the eighth century, although, material embodied in some of them, for example the shorter *Verba Scáthaige*, may be older still (II.1-3). More belong to the next two centuries, a lesser amount to the eleventh and twelfth centuries and a very small number dating down to the Early Modern Irish period. While he is very much depicted as a martial hero, his character evolves and develops in the context of a changing political and religious environment along with the societal changes that this brought, thus maintaining his relevance and appeal across such an extended timespan.

However, we cannot ignore a group of texts recounting core elements in his life, dating to the eighth century. These include *Compert Con Culainn*, *Tochmarc Emire* and *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* which describe his conception, birth, marriage along with his journey to a distant hostile realm, and death respectively (II.1). His *macgnímrada* can, arguably, be located in the same era and we have further early evidence for *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the form of the seventh century prophetic piece, *Verba Scáthaige* (II.1-2). These underline his extraordinary youth and the defining moment in his adult martial career defending Ulster in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

In essence, we have in existence from an early stage the fundamental parts in his heroic biography and these form the centrepieces of his characterisation in the pre-Norman period. In the strictest sense, a ‘biography’ is taken to mean a written account of another person’s life and is usually compiled by a single author. Within this, there are often defining moments like birth, marriage, death etc. In the case of our material, there is no evidence to suggest, nor is it being proposed here, that stories about Cú Chulainn are written by one author. Due allowance must also be made for the fact that we are dealing with a literary figure from the distant past as opposed to a real person. Having said that, a number of these milestones are shared with the ordinary mortal but Cú Chulainn’s are distinguished through the introduction of particular themes and motifs, like the divine ingredient in his conception (III.1.3).

In Cú Chulainn’s case, it seems that the crux of his biography is related in the format of themed narratives, such as his conception tale, hinting at the early existence of at least some ‘tale-types’ which are largely borne out in the medieval Irish tale lists (Mac Cana, 1980, 41-63). The details of Conchobar’s conception are exposed in a similar way in the eighth century anecdote *Compert Chonchobuir* (Ó Cathasaigh, 1994, 85-6). *Comperta* for other Ulster figures, such as Conall Cernach and Celtchar mac Uithechair, are also enumerated in the tale-lists but do not survive, apart, possibly, from the preservation of a form of *Compert Conaill Chernaig* in the late Middle Irish treatise, *Cóir Anmann* (Mac Cana, 1980, 53-4; Arbuthnot, 2007, 69 & 141-2, §264). *Tochmarc Emire* may be one of the oldest attestations to the genre of *tochmarca* with these tale-lists enumerating others such as, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *Tochmarc Ailbe* and *Tochmarc Luaine*. *Aideda* are tabulated

for a cast of Ulstermen, including Conchobar, Fergus, Lóegaire and Celtchar and narratives for all of these deaths are extant (Meyer, 1906, 2-35). Even though one is also mentioned for Cú Chulainn, our earliest account of his demise is found in an acephalous document identified as *In Brislech* (Kimpton, 2009, 1). Toner (2000, 88) notes that the tale lists were in ‘a constant state of growth and change’ so this is possibly included under the revised title of *Aided Con Culainn*.

It is reasonable to propose that this thematic arrangement of tales formed the template upon which heroic biographies were based in the early Irish period. It seems likely that medieval Irish writers were familiar with broader customs and tales pertaining to different figures, like, for example, the conception and death tales of a particular hero. With respect to *Compert Chonchobuir*, Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 86-7) speaks of its ‘unspoken relationship’ with its narrator, reader and presumably composer, given that Ness’ son is identified only in the title and ‘in order to get to the point of the tale, the reader must have some acquaintance with other stories concerning Conchobar’. While such texts, including *Compert Con Culainn*, are self-contained, they have as ‘their *raison d’être* an intertextual relationship with other items’ in the Ulster Cycle. For example, the tradition for Emer being Cú Chulainn’s wife, is borne out in material with variable dates including *Tochmarc Emire*, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, *Fled Bricrenn*, *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, *Mesca Ulad*, *Serglige Con Culainn*, *Aithed Emere le Tuir nGlesta mac ríg Lochlann* and in the prose *Banshenchas*, though *Serglige Con Culainn* bears testimony to another tradition (VI.6-7). Although it may not always have been the case, all extant copies of his *macgnímrada* are found within *Táin Bó Cúailnge* thus marrying together the exploits of the young hero and

those of the adult warrior (II.1). It has also been argued here that there are similarities in his depiction in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* alluding to an author's awareness of other data about Cú Chulainn beyond a single source (III.6.3; VII.4). The most obvious parallel in these two texts is Cú Chulainn's role as the solitary martial defender of his people (see below). A biography formulated around a series of themed narratives lends itself well to further additions. This does not dictate, however, that it was written as a single text by a lone author.

Heroes and mortals often share key milestones, but special features and qualities are often impregnated into the life of the hero to confirm his/her exceptional status. This certainly seems to be true in Cú Chulainn's situation and similar manifestations occur in other international literatures. In the late nineteenth century, von Hahn was the first to indicate that a pattern was apparent in the biographies of various heroes (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 2). However, a number of questions about this remain with the main ones being fixating on the identity of its remote origin and the reason for its widespread distribution (Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 4-5). While the representation of heroes in Irish literature may owe some debt to traditions of this type in a wider European context, this could also have occurred through polygenesis. Conclusive theories have not been reached on this matter and a fuller comparative analysis of evidence from global literary traditions is required to resolve this, if it is even possible to do so. This matter will not be explored further here as it is beyond the scope of this research.

Using de Vries' (1963) schema, Ó Cathasaigh (1977) endeavours to show that Cormac mac Airt's biography as displayed in a number of sources was a realisation of this international phenomenon. Our approach here differs in that de Vries' model is used as a tool for exploring a complex series of intertwining sources about Cú Chulainn as opposed to seeing if it too is an expression of this pattern. Though quite old, the edicts of this theory helps us to interpret our findings to form a core understanding of him. The efficacy of this approach is determined by ascertaining its suitability in terms of its strengths and shortcomings. In this way, we can determine its serviceability as a framework for appraising Cú Chulainn's presentation in tales which recount important defining moments in his life.

On the whole, De Vries' ten-point model is concise, clear and with the inclusion of variants under many of its items offers considerable flexibility. Additionally, it does not require that each item be represented, nor does it insist that these are found in a single source. Although a degree of flexibility is required given the matter involved, this can also be viewed as a weakness as it means that it can be applied to practically any hero. The manifestation of aspects of this within the heroic life may infer a common root for such biographical traits but this has the potential to mislead or at the very least prove problematic to verify without much more research into this topic. Nevertheless, some of its provisions are catered for in Cú Chulainn's case, but not all are, and others can only be made to fit with special pleading. Thus, we can only use this in a very select and rather less than ideal way. Given that de Vries (1963) was not attempting to write a schema for Cú Chulainn's heroic biography, deficiencies are to be expected. His consideration of Cú Chulainn alongside international heroic norms is rather superficial.

Additionally, vital elements like his possible otherworldly visits are not included in his discussion, nor is there scope to analyse his exploits in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* within this framework.

Divergent begetting narratives are not anticipated under this framework but this is what we find for Cú Chulainn and indeed for Conchobar. In this way we can see that stories about a particular event are not entirely fixed and may evolve over time. There is no accommodation for this within de Vries' framework. In any case, the details of Cú Chulainn's conception match the first point quite well. Both accounts allude to a divine segment in his make-up along with the motif of conception due to incest; the two of which are variants in de Vries' model (van Hamel, 1963, 3-6, §§1-6; Meyer, 1905, 501-4; III.1.3). It is clear that incidences of deviation can be of equal importance and this is most certainly true for Cú Chulainn's triple conception in Version I which goes well beyond the 'heroic norm' by exploring all possible conceptual combinations (III.1.1-3). The underlying message in both of these is that Cú Chulainn should be viewed as a heroic figure of mixed origin and of liminal status. On the whole de Vries' model permits us to reach this conclusion. Lug mac Ethnenn and Súaldaim mac Róich, Fergus' brother, are presented as his divine and earthly fathers respectively. Two different traditions are communicated about his mother Deichtire or Deichtine being a sister or daughter of the king, Conchobar, with the former being more common (VII.3).

An unnatural birth or one by caesarean section are the variant motifs identified by de Vries. Given an absence in the details about the way in which Cú Chulainn is born, it is reasonable to conclude that these do not materialise in his (III.1.3). Having said that, it seems that the upshot of this is that the hero is born in an unusual way thus often complementing an atypical conception. A similar idea seems to be expressed in the case of a number of early Irish heroes, but the emphasis here is on the unusual setting for these. For example, Brigit's mother gives birth astride a doorway, Níall's on the green in front of Tara, Cormac's on the way to Connacht, Fiachu's on a stone in the middle of a river and Conchobar's beside a river (Connolly, 1989, 15, §6; Stokes, 1903a, 190-1, §2; Hull, 1952, 82-3; O'Daly, 1975, 51-51, §§42-3; Meyer, 1883-5, 174-81). Essentially, all of these are born at liminal locations underscoring the hero's social ambivalence and it seems that Cú Chulainn's is no different. The Ulstermen are drawn away from Emain Macha to what seems to be an otherworldly location, possibly Newgrange, for Cú Chulainn's first birth in Version I and also in Version II. On the face of it, de Vries' model seems to have limited applicability, yet, it helps us to tease out what seems to be the main theme in his birth. His arrival outside of Ulster, reinforces his liminal status and further implies that he is not an Ulsterman (VII.2; VII.3).

De Vries' fourth slot highlights the hero's premature exposition of strength, courage and other skills. A second alternative provides for another extreme by noting that the development of the hero may be delayed. These variants permit too liberal an application of this, and in this way, it is perhaps of limited use in terms of trying to identify more specific features. In the case of the former option, it can be argued, for instance, that this is realised in the youths of divergent Irish figures,

such as Cormac mac Airt, Brigit, Finn mac Cumail and indeed Cú Chulainn (O'Daly, 1975, 58-9, §§63-4; Connolly, 1989, 16-20 §§11-30; Nagy, 1985, 211-8; TBC I, ll.373-824). This is in itself useful in that it indicates that medieval Irish literati appropriated narratives in line with the perceived status of a figure, such as a king, saint or warrior. The terms *mac* and *gilla* are employed to emphasise Cú Chulainn's youthfulness with the version of his deeds in the later recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* accentuating this heavily by repeatedly referring to him as *mac bec* 'little boy/lad' magnifying his accomplishments further (VI.1). Moreover, the use of the qualifying adjective, *bec*, seems to be in line with later developments in the literature in this regard.

It is clear that we would expect that a warrior like Cú Chulainn would demonstrate his martial ability from early on and the first variant directs our attention to one of his defining attributes, his extraordinary prowess (III.2.3; IV.1). In this regard, there seems to be a deliberate intention to set this figure apart from others in a way that is comparable with his begetting story. His exceptional abilities act as a unifying theme upon which his deeds are anchored. This is particularly obvious in his defeat of the large boytroop, the great hound of Culann and the three sons of Nechta Scéne and we see that his deeds are streamlined to these three conquests in the later recension (TBC II, ll.738-1217). His remarkable prowess is also pivotal to his depiction in many other tales, like *Fled Bricrenn*, along with those from the closely linked early collection identified above (IV.1). Ultimately, this forms the axis of his characterisation in these tales and others.

The *macgnímrada* also underline other aspects of his character that fall outside the strict remit of this theoretical approach but are equally indispensable to his profile. Most importantly, these detail his physical move from outside Ulster, namely, Mag Muirthemne, to Emain Macha, the heart of Ulster (III.2.3; VII.2). Furthermore, this marks his adoption into Ulster as the ‘sister’s son’ and *gormac* ‘adopted son’ who is then elevated to the status of professional champion to his maternal uncle, Conchobar, and indeed the wider Ulster people (VII.3). In this respect, this tale is presented as a follow-up to his conception tale where his rather nebulous connection to Ulster is set out and his *macgnímrada* are designed to draw him closer to the province. A degree of interconnectedness at the level of composition of these tales or at the very least familiarity among the composers of some stories about the hero is implied here. Of further significance, is his initiation as a warrior where he exchanges his toy-like weapons and acquires his spear and shield and goes into a chariot thus becoming an ‘adult’ warrior at the premature age of seven (IV.4). Additionally, we find considerable focus on his role as protector, in the first instance possibly of the boytroop, then Culann’s home and Mag Muirthemne, and finally the Ulster people by getting rid of the three sons of Nechta Scéne in what seems to be a foreshadowing of his most important function as an adult warrior. By the end of his *macgnímrada* he assumes his rightful place when he sits at Conchobar’s knee, an action that perhaps likens him to a dog sitting at his master’s knee (*suidid fo glún Conchobair*; TBC I, l.820).

Moving to the hero’s winning of a maiden, de Vries notes that he does so after overcoming great dangers. Again, this criterion is very general and thus it can be

argued that Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer and Finnchóem in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* can be equally made to fit this point (III.3; VI.6). Nonetheless, we are required to look beyond this to establish the centrality of either of these, or both, in terms of his overall characterisation. The greater prevalence of the tradition of Emer as Cú Chulainn's wife from the eighth century confirms this as a key factor in his biography. Whereas, his wooing of Finnchóem is a later and rather peripheral addition to the Cú Chulainn story. At the very least, this intimates a continued interest in him along with this milestone and perhaps this story-pattern, yet, this does not have any meaningful impact on his characterisation. The existence of a tale chiefly focused on Cú Chulainn's winning of Emer as part of our early corpus of texts along with the attestations to this, including in his death tale and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, embeds this into his early profile. One of the key purposes of this tale is to affirm Cú Chulainn's incorporation into society as a married man and thus it is intended to build on his earlier integration into society as an 'adult' warrior seen at the end of his final *macgním*.

This theoretical approach does not support, nor is it meant to, an elucidation of his sexual relations with other women (VI.6). Having said that, none of these appear to be vital to the substance of his presentation in the way that Emer is. Unsurprisingly, Cú Chulainn is depicted as being highly attractive to the opposite sex and we find that many of the descriptions of him are given by women or for their benefit (VI.3). Emphasis is usually placed on his beautiful face, particularly on his multiple pupils, many hued cheeks, tri-coloured hair with its golden sheen. In this way, his character is infused with distinguishing qualities which further guarantee his heroic credentials while also rendering him appealing to a female

audience. When distorted he becomes unattractive and is depicted as being very prompt to parade his beauty to all upon returning to normal late in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (TBC I, ll.2336-40; VI.3).

His dalliances with other women are very transient and are mostly with mysterious or arguably otherworldly women. Most of these occur during his adventures in distant lands which, for Cú Chulainn, seem to replace the more usual warrior raids into enemy territories (see below). Again, this perhaps reflects an attempt to present him as an exceptional hero who has the ability to consort with such women while also underlining his sexual prowess (III.4.3.1-4; VI.6). This trend is attested from the eighth century in *Tochmarc Emire* through his unions with Úathach, Scáthach, and Aífe and develops somewhat in later sources as evident from his mating, for example, with Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn*, Etan in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* and Aoife, the daughter of Aodh Ruadh, in the much later *Foghlaim Con Culainn*. De Vries' model permits us to consider Cú Chulainn's sexual encounters with Úathach, Scáthach and Aífe as a manifestation of the orgiastic promiscuity often experienced as part of the wooing process but this cannot be applied to any others, except perhaps to those in *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* (III.3.3). The listing of the relatively unknown Eithne Ingubai as his wife in the introductory part of *Serglige Con Culainn* differs to these and remains problematic. Having said, the tradition of Eithne as his wife must have been significantly well known to be included in the later *Banshenchas* and indeed occurs alongside that of Emer who is also portrayed as his wife therein (VI.6). Not only this, but she is also credited with bearing him two children, namely, the otherwise unattested, Cairpre Cláen, and Finnscoth, yet, Emer is also

named as the latter's mother. Perhaps, there might be further attestations to Eithne in other Ulster Cycle material that has not survived, still, we can only work with existing evidence. Unfortunately, this is quite limited and not particularly revealing.

On the whole, his liaisons with women, though usually quite fleeting, increase in later sources and so too does the offspring attributed to him as indicated above. For the most part, narrative sources assign Connlae as Cú Chulainn's solitary son. This tradition, in particular Cú Chulainn's killing of him, evolves, in the form of *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, into a very popular component of the Cú Chulainn narrative legend (V.1; VI.6). Yet, it does not make its way into the genealogical or *Banshenchas* material. Others might be invented or reflect otherwise undocumented traditions or later developing ones. For example, it seems likely that the fifteenth-century attestation to his daughter, Bé Tuinnne, with Aoife, daughter of Aodh Ruadh, who he unites with in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, is perhaps a later invention seeing that her name means 'girl of the wave' or 'girl of the skin' thus alluding to the sexual act which conceived her (VI.6). His twin sons, Caulnia and Condluan, by Leborcham, mentioned in a single reference in the genealogies in LL might have been concocted to fulfil the role of ancestor to some minor groups of Conaille or perhaps an early, now lost, tradition could lie behind this (VI.6). Indeed, the attestation to Emer bearing him a child, namely, Finnscoth/ Findscóp, is also quite late and is problematic as mentioned above. The tradition of his daughter, with a slight variation in name to Fínscoth, where she is listed as Erc's wife, finds its way into *Cath Ruis na Ríg* which is a near-contemporaneous text to the *Banshenchas* (VI.6). Cú Chulainn's relationship with Emer is the one that is

most developed in the extant material that we have, but, in spite of this, Emer as the mother of his offspring is not elemental to this (VI.6; VI.7).

There are a number of difficulties pertaining to the eighth position on de Vries' model relating to the hero's expedition to the 'Underworld'. Most importantly, there is a lack of clarity around the typical hallmarks of such events and the nature of the 'Underworld', perhaps best referred to as the 'Otherworld' in Irish tradition. Bearing this in mind, and the fact that the concept of the Otherworld is 'fluid' and not defined, a number of texts relating Cú Chulainn's outings to distant realms could be made to agree with this, yet, a single one is what is expected within the international heroic biographical framework. In this regard, a case can be made for each of Cú Chulainn's adventures in *Tochmarc Emire*, *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, *Serglige Con Culainn*, *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, *Aided Con Roí*, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* and perhaps some of his adventures in *Fled Bricrenn* (III.4; IV.2).

The inclusion of a possible adventure of this type, namely to the lands of Scáthach, in one of our early tales, seems to represent another phase in Cú Chulainn's martial development. De Vries' very loose parameters enable us to view Cú Chulainn's outing there as a realisation of this (III.4.3.1). Campbell's (1949, 30) even older theory also facilitates a similar interpretation of this but this is more useful in terms of trying to determine its meaning for Cú Chulainn. While de Vries' model would also concede a consideration of this under the umbrella of the 'great dangers' that a hero is expected to overcome when wooing his maiden, this outing seems to have a

more specific relevance than this. Although it has been argued that this can be viewed as an excursion to an otherworldly setting, it does not necessarily have to be. If we view this instead as a distant hostile realm, it would not automatically detract from the implication of this trip to Cú Chulainn. The significance of this is that the hero succeeds in going abroad to a hostile, and arguably otherworldly realm, proves himself worthy to receive special training in arms from Scáthach resulting in an advancement in his martial capacity. This is the nub upon which other elements are hinged, like his killing of his son, Connlae, and his defeating of a number of other warriors with the *gáe bolga* (III.4.3.1; IV.4). Having said that, were a copy of *Echtrae Con Culainn* to have survived, this might shed a very different light on our findings in this regard.

The loose parameters offered by de Vries' model allow us to view Cú Chulainn's overseas otherworldly exploits in the equally early tale, *Forfess Fer Fálgae* and the others, as a realisation of this milestone, but this is problematic and misleading (III.4.3.2-4). Thus these require further exploration to determine if these are pivotal pieces in his profile. In the case of *Forfess Fer Fálgae*, it seems probable that the overseas setting for the Otherworld in *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Connlae*, which are also likely to have occurred in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, might have inspired a similar outing for Cú Chulainn in the former text (III.4.3.3). Thus, it is more appropriate to interpret this, in the main, as another exposition of this tale-type. Aside from the earliest account of *Aided Con Roí*, the other tales mentioned are all later and on the whole also delineate his further successful escapades in seemingly transmarine supernatural settings. The channels of interaction, if any, may be much less clear, but these are again likely to have been

influenced by earlier tales of this nature. It seems likely that these might have evolved in conjunction with the more usual practice of warriors going into neighbouring enemy territory in search of warfare, pretty much in the way that Cú Chulainn does in his final *macgním* (III.2.3). Typically, Cú Chulainn is made to go one better and thus ventures to more mysterious places where other warriors dare not, or are unable to, go.

A study of the narrative sources in which Cú Chulainn makes a significant appearance confirms that *Táin Bó Cúailnge* marks the culmination of his martial career (III.5). In this regard, it is the cornerstone upon which his persona is based and it also seems to be central to the early group of tales, namely, *Compert Con Culainn*, *Tochmarc Emire*, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* and his *macgnímrada*. Indeed, the interconnectedness of these texts is also intimated in a later source through the identification of *Compert Con Culainn* and *Tochmarc Emire* as *remscéla* to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the enumeration of these in *Do Fallsigud Tána Bó Cúailnge* in LL (ll.32878-909). His *macgnímrada*, or at least the three key ones mentioned above, are distinguished as being part of the corpus of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as opposed to the *remscéla* therein. Additionally, the inclusion of these texts, aside from *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*, in LU may lend further support to this proposal. Given that LU as it has been transmitted is incomplete, it is not outside the bounds of possibility that it also contained a copy of Cú Chulainn's death (Best & Bergin, 1929, xiii). Furthermore, in the later version of *Tochmarc Emire*, there is mention with varying detail, of Cú Chulainn's unusual conception, birth outside Ulster, wooing of Emer, adventures in Scáthach's homeland, his martial exploits in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and his demise (Van Hamel, 1933, 21-65, §§6-90). Again, these

events are tied together here in what seems to be an effort, at the very least, to provide an integrated outline biography for him (Toner, 1998, 88).

In any case, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* seems to encapsulate the next natural key phase in Cú Chulainn's life-cycle after his wooing of Emer and exploits in a foreign region. Yet, this cannot be matched to de Vries' schema. The ninth item mentions the banishment of the hero and his later victorious return over his enemies (III.7). While this alludes to a defining moment in the adult hero's life, it is realised in Níall Noígíallach's, but not in Cú Chulainn's (Stokes, 1903a, 190-203, §§2-19). While the absence of this point in Cú Chulainn's case points to a deficiency in this approach, an even greater shortcoming is the failure of this to cater for Cú Chulainn depiction in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (III.5.1). In view of the fact that this is not created exclusively for Cú Chulainn, it is expected that it will not fit his situation perfectly. Its arrangement into a series of slots, lends it well to adaptation and thus one can be omitted or inserted without undermining the overall framework as a theoretical approach. In this instance, an additional item is inserted to address his representation in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (III.5).

The *macgnímrada* predict that Cú Chulainn will be an exceptional warrior, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* confirms this (III.2.3; III.5.3). These also announce his future role as the chief guardian of the province and this comes to full fruition here. A number of key literary devices are employed to facilitate this with the removal of the Ulstermen from the battle being a critical one (III.5.2-3; VII.4). This is also the case in his death tale and in this regard these two tales seem to be closely linked

(III.6.3). The final position for de Vries is the premature and possibly miraculous death of the hero and we find that Cú Chulainn's aligns well with this (III.6). The essence of this is that his early and rather dramatic demise is a fitting one for a martial hero and this approach allows us to establish this. The use of supernatural items such as two lethal *geisi* against him can be taken to constitute the miraculous component mentioned by de Vries (III.6.3; V.6; VII.4). Taking this set of early tales, this completes the cycle for Cú Chulainn.

Central to both, is the image of Cú Chulainn as the ultimate defender who is prepared to die for his people. It is this depiction along with specific imagery, like, for example, his death while in an erect position having been pierced by a spear which has led some scholars to conclude that he is modelled to some degree on Christ (VII.4). Indeed, a comparative analysis of his death and the Passion of Christ reveals a seemingly noteworthy list of common motifs and themes. In the case of some of these, alternative interpretations are equally possible and thus these may not necessarily be indebted to biblical influence or a specific intention to liken him to Christ (III.6.3; VII.4). A particularly good example is the reference to him as *mac Dé, mac duine* in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne* which has been rendered as 'son of God, son of man' by Kimpton (2009, 20 & 40, §13; see III.6.3). Translated like this, it seems to bear a clear reminiscence to Christ. Alternatively, this could be read as *mac dé, mac duine* 'son of a god, son of a man' and thus would instead seem to invoke Cú Chulainn's divine and earthly fathers, Lug and Súaldaim respectively. There are also clear divergences, one of the most obvious being the instrumental role that *geisi* play in Cú Chulainn's demise with no comparable precursor featuring in that of Christ (V.6). In spite of this, the

influence of Christianity on *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* is evident and this is particularly obvious in the concluding section where the hero is made to promote the Christian faith.

The introduction of the *ces* in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ensures that Cú Chulainn is the saviour of Ulster. This is also the case in his thematically-linked death tale, though, arguably, more specifically for the people of his homeland, Mag Muirthemne, in this situation. The inspiration for inflicting such a malady on a whole race might have been inspired by the concept of original sin as presented in the Bible (V.II.4). Certainly, the fate of the people of Ulster depends on Cú Chulainn as he is pretty much their sole protector in both tales. There is no doubt but that the hero is prepared to die for his people like Christ is. However, as a warrior, or more specifically a professional champion to the king, it is his duty to defend his province and people whatever the cost (V.1). Clearly, it would be dishonourable for him and for Ulster if he reneged on this responsibility. Possible evidence, in so much as it can be deciphered as such, to denote an intention to create Cú Chulainn in the image of Christ is very much confined to the two tales just mentioned and perhaps his conception tale (III.1.2-3). Nonetheless, it seems clear that his biography owes much more to his role as defender of his people as opposed to their saviour in the way that Christ is depicted.

Six out of ten of the slots in de Vries' model can be applied with varying degrees of success to Cú Chulainn's narrative existence. It is proposed here that the other four items are not realised in Cú Chulainn's situation, but such is the flexibility

offered that other occurrences can be made to fit these but it would not be accurate to do so (III.7). For example, the third item reveals that the young hero is often threatened and we find that the Cú Chulainn finds himself in a number of precarious situations in his *macgnímrada*. Instead, these should be viewed in the context of the usual situations of conflict which are the backbone to a warrior's existence providing a means to show off one's combat skills.

At the very least, the tenets of this approach promotes the identification of distinct life-points from a series of intertwining texts. The presence of five of these in three eighth century tales along with the sixth one in the roughly contemporaneous *macgnímrada* is significant. As we have seen, it has certain limitations and thus can only be used in a modified way. The most serious drawback in de Vries' model is that Cú Chulainn's representation in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* cannot be examined within this framework. Having said that, it is amenable to modification and thus a new slot is created for this with minimal impact on this theoretical approach. Thus, it can be argued that de Vries' model, though not perfect, remains a useful tool to analyse this crucial part of Cú Chulainn's literary life in a number of related sources and it offers a viable framework upon which to present findings. It is clear that one needs to be very mindful of its constraints as a theoretical approach and one needs to be vigilant to avoid shoehorning material to accord with its provisions. Additionally, one must be prepared to amend it where the material warrants this. Aside from the crowning moment in his adult martial career in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, this schema has drawn our attention to what appear to be the key concerns in Cú Chulainn's biography in the early period. This confirms a particular interest in different events in this process that equate to, at the very least,

a thematic-based heroic biography. Although the level of integrated thought around this is impossible to gauge with certainty, these tales are built around a particular view of him as the great Ulster warrior. This approach, with the necessary adjustments and enquiry beyond its basic edicts, enables us to decipher the crux of his characterisation across these tales.

Cú Chulainn's 'outsider' status is the prevailing theme in this collection of tales. *Compert Con Culainn* sets out his mixed genealogy and birth outside Ulster (III.1.3). This is perhaps reinforced through his absence from the genealogies along with the lack of attestations to him as the forefather of any population group (VII.3). Some scholars put this down to Cú Chulainn being a late addition to the Ulster Cycle, however, evidence from the seventh century poem, *Verba Scáthaige*, allude to his status as warrior-protector of Ulster seemingly in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (VII.3). This might also infer an early existence of a tale about Cú Chulainn's expedition to Scáthach's homeland. *Forfess Fer Fálgae* and *Compert Con Culainn* are believed to have occurred alongside the former in the lost manuscript, *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, and thus Cú Chulainn's existence as the martial hero in an early stratum of Ulster Cycle material is clear and very definitely well entrenched by the eighth century (III.4.3.3). His genealogical neutrality is likely to be deliberate so as to ensure his acceptance as the guardian hero of Ulster by a wider provincial audience. Bearing this in mind, the next step in his legend is to attach him to Ulster in a way, to some degree, that Patrick is affixed to Armagh by Muirchú and Tírechán (Hood, 1978; Bieler, 1979). For Cú Chulainn, his *macgnímrada* mark his physical transition from Mag Muirthemne into Ulster society proper and also confirm his incorporation into the community as a single 'adult' warrior. His

marriage to Emer in *Tochmarc Emire* consolidates his full membership of society. All of these factors form the basis of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. His ‘outsider’ status ensures his immunity from the *ces* creating the perfect scene by leaving him alone to protect Ulster. In order to fulfil this role, he must then be appropriated into Ulster society and this is what is done. The hero is then lured back to Mag Muirthemne for his death.

Essentially, this forms the basis of his character in the early period. Thus far, we have concentrated on the tales deemed to be intrinsic to his biography, but this is by no means the sole context for narrative attestations to him. Aside from *Forfess Fer Fálgae* and the earliest account of *Aided Con Roí*, the rest of these tales are later than the eighth century. We find a good deal of diversity in the content and dating of these along with some compartmental evolvments in his persona. The assigning of two lists of *geisi* to him in *Echtrae Nerai* and *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* can be viewed in the latter context and these are largely in keeping with their more frequent use and wider application in the later literature (Meyer, 1889, 222-3, §13; Stokes, 1893, 398-401, §§1-6; V.6). These are very much separate to the two crucial ones in his death tale which are reminiscent of the earlier stratum of *geisi*, the violation of which likewise results in death, associated with sacral kingship as advanced by scholars such as Greene (1979, 11-4; III.6.3; V.6). The assigning of lists of *cleasa* to him is more popular from the ninth century with standalone attestations to some of these surviving from the eighth century (IV.5). It seems that warriors were expected to perform great feats for their people and thus there is a clear effort to portray Cú Chulainn as an expert in these. Unique to him, his *ríastrad* is somewhat more integral to his

warrior image (IV.3). There are limited ‘eye witness’ accounts to this but further evidence, like his nicknaming as *in ríastartha* and the application of the term *sirite* to him in certain contexts, confirm this as a fairly fixed part of his make-up (IV.3; V.2; VI.2). It serves to further distinguish him and its positioning early on in his *macgnímrada* attempts to depict this possibly as an inherent trait as opposed to a skill learned. The hero’s metamorphosis into a frightening spectre, along with the associated boost in his prowess, is fundamental to this *ríastrad*. Nevertheless, there are some indicators to suggest that it is applied less frequently to him in the later period. Ultimately, all of these represent different means by which his persona is fleshed out or evolves at different junctures.

Some of the later tales in which he features appear to draw on existing traditions and others introduce entirely or partly new material. There is no evidence to indicate that any of these form a tight-knit collection in the way that some of the earlier texts seem to. For the most part, these appear quite random and independent of each other. The degree of variation in his portrayal in these sources can be attributed to influences such as the Church, or in some cases more localised political factors or indeed the prevalence of other motifs in external literary sources. While these can be identifying with varying degrees of certainty in some tales, in others it is not possible to do so (see below). Some narratives appear to be offshoots of older material and this seems to be true of the ninth century text, *Noínden Ulad*, and the slightly later text, *Ces Ulad*, both of which purport to explain the debility of the Ulstermen. It is clear that *Aided Óenfir Aífe* is to be viewed more specifically as a sequel to events in the second half of *Tochmarc Emire*. A combination of factors might have inspired this including exposure to

the motif of killing a close relative as evidenced in other literatures (V.1.) The disastrous outcome recorded for Connlae might point to the composer's intent to highlight the futility of the heroic ethos. Conversely, according to Ó hUiginn (1996, 227), it may 'represent the apex of the heroic ideal', in that the great hero is forced to kill his son to preserve the honour of the Ulstermen. Yet, if we couple it more closely with its sister tale, *Tochmarc Emire*, it might reflect the Church's disapproval of the wayward sexual practices of the Irish focusing particularly on Cú Chulainn's encounters with Úathach, Scáthach and Aife (Ó hUiginn, 2000, 83-7; VI.6). This was of intense concern to the Church reform in the eleventh century and might have influenced the redactor of the later *Tochmarc Emire* as Cú Chulainn's sexual encounters appear more liberal therein. Notwithstanding the lost front section of the earlier account of this tale, in direct contrast to Scáthach, Úathach and Aife, Emer's virtues, in particular her virginal status and chasteness, are heavily emphasised along with their uniting within a formally recognised union (VI.7). It seems likely that in the Church's eyes, she is very much the ideal woman.

A more blatant Christian influence in his portrayal is evident in *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*. This is particularly interesting because it contrasts to some extent with evidence from his earlier death tale where he is also made to fulfil a similar function, namely to promote Christianity (VII.4, VI.3). Though there is some disagreement around the dating of *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn*, the oldest extant copy seems to date, at the earliest from the ninth century (II.1). This text represents a clear shift whereby Cú Chulainn, as an exponent of the heroic pagan lifestyle, is clearly condemned and confined to the distant past. In this way, he and

his era are very much presented as being out of time. This is communicated by placing him in Hell where his exceptional martial abilities are of no use. Perhaps, this asserts that the Ulster Cycle material was falling in popularity in some quarters, but if we accept a ninth century date for this, there is little corroborative proof for this. Conversely, it might simply indicate a more localised effort to denigrate it by targeting its main figure. Having said that, the inclusion of him as the main character affirms his continued relevance to the wider community. The interaction between the secular hero and the great saint, Patrick, here is perhaps somewhat of a precursor to similar themes in the later Fenian tales with Patrick's interactions with the aged heroes in *Accallamh na Senórach* being a good example (O'Grady, 1970, 101-265). In both cases, this is a method of exploring distant times gone by. However, our text is much more negative and downgrading of the lay hero. At any rate, Cú Chulainn is used to convey a particular Christian message in his death tale and *Síaburcharpat Con Culainn* but the latter text is much more dismissive of his legend. Again, this might represent a shift in wider societal views, but it could also be attributed to a more local one.

We have later evidence to substantiate the further manipulation of his character to appease a more local political agenda. More specifically, this refers to a compendium of tales occurring in LL and the chief tales involved are *Cath Ruis na Ríg fer Bóinn*, *Mesca Ulad* and we might also include *Talland Éitair* and *Scéla Muicce meic Da Thó* (IV.1). It seems that the political and social milieu in which LL was compiled directly influenced the choice of tales included and the way in which older tales were reworked. This largely amounts to the foregrounding of Conall Cernach as the best Ulster warrior in place of Cú Chulainn.

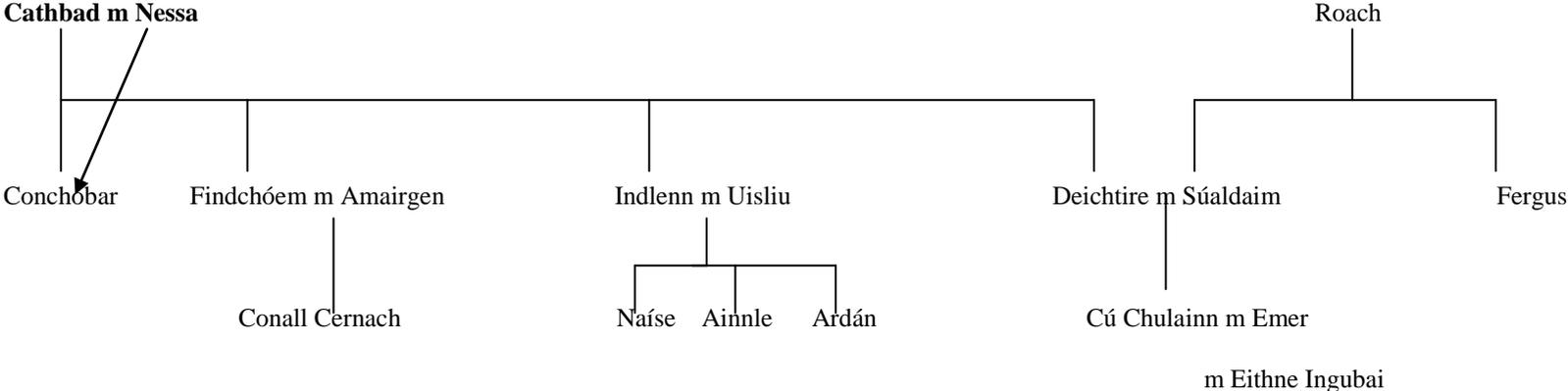
Notwithstanding uncertainty as to the location of the monastery in which this was compiled, it appears likely that it was closely associated with the Laígse who claimed Conall as their ancestor, but Mac Eoin's (2009-10, 79-96) arguments on the provenance of LL might militate against this.

On the whole, the later material acknowledges the fulcrum of Cú Chulainn's character as attested in the earlier sources, namely as the warrior hero *par excellence* of the Ulster Cycle. However, there is much more variation in the tales in which he features and perhaps some attempt to erode his character, like for example in *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Síaburchapat Con Culainn* as we have seen (III.4.3.2-3). In some cases, this appears to be attributable to a particular local or Christian agenda and thus we find an altered representation from that found in the older group of core biographical texts.

In summation, we can determine six major milestones in Cú Chulainn's life from an interrelated group of tales dating to the early period. These constitute the centrepieces in his heroic biography. It is proposed that the template for this is a series of themed narratives as opposed to a single text. De Vries' theory can be used as a starting point to evaluate this but is by no means a perfect fit. It has been found that these texts are consistent in their contribution to Cú Chulainn's characterisation. From this, we have extracted the essence of his personification as the superhuman warrior-hero of Ulster. Over time, there is evidence to suggest a more piecemeal development of his persona through, for example, the association of certain *geisi* and *cleasa* with him, while other components seem to fall out of

favour like his *ríastrad*. While a later layer of tales, most of which date from the ninth century on, generally acknowledge his status as the chief protector of Ulster, these are much more diverse in their portrayal of him and might reflect, in some instances, an attempt to question his personification in this way. Rather than detracting from his image, these seem to underline the high level in society at which Cú Chulainn and the Ulster Cycle material continued to operate.

**Appendix 1: Cú Chulainn's genealogy**



## Appendix 2: Abbreviations

The following abbreviated forms are used in the thesis:

BB – The Book of Ballymote, MS 23 P 12, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin (Abbott & Gwynn, 1921, 108).

*DIL - Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1913-75).<sup>347</sup>

Eg. 88 - Egerton 88, British Library, London (Flower, 1926, 85-140).

Eg. 92 - Egerton 92, British Library, London (Flower, 1926, 505-19).

Eg. 1782 - Egerton 1782, British Library, London (Flower, 1926, 259-98).

LL - Book of Leinster, MS 1339, Trinity College, Dublin (Best, Bergin, O'Brien & O'Sullivan, 1954-83).

LU - *Lebor na hUidre*, MS 23 E 25, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin (Best & Bergin, 1929).

*RC - Revue Celtique*

RIA – Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

TCD – Trinity College, Dublin.

*TBC - Táin Bó Cúailnge*

TBC I - *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Recension I (O'Rahilly, 1976).

TBC II - *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Recension II (O'Rahilly, 1967).

YBL - The Yellow Book of Lecan MS 1318, Trinity College, Dublin (Abbot & Gwynn, 1921, 108).

*ZCP - Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*

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<sup>347</sup> I have mainly used the on-line version ([www.dil.ie/](http://www.dil.ie/))

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