

THE HEROIC BIOGRAPHY OF CÚ CHULAINN.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Irish literature is romantic, idealised, stylised and gruesome. It shows a tension between reality and fantasy¹ which seem to me to be usually an irresolvable dichotomy. The stories set themselves in pre-history. It presents these texts as a “window on the iron age”². The writers may have been Christians distancing themselves from past heathen ways. This backward glance maybe taken from the literature tradition in Latin transferred from the continent and read by Irish scholars. Where the authors “undertake to inform the audience concerning the pagan past, characterizing it as remote, alien and deluded”³ or were they diligent scholars trying to preserve the past. This question is still debateable. The stories manage to be set in both the past and the present, both historical Ireland with astonishingly accuracy and the mythical otherworld. Most of the time these two places and the people involved are hard to distinguish and their fates are intertwined. It seems at the time of writing these stories some of the characters were euhemerised Gods.

The literature portrays its Celtic origins in its very graphic descriptions of the warrior lifestyle but also can have very beautiful descriptions of the *Sid*- the fantastic otherworld. The Celts were Indo-Europeans who expanded across modern Europe all the way to Ireland; the question of when they first arrived in Ireland is still in debate. But their warlike temperaments are reflected in the literature, they seem boastful but demonic in battle, childlike but hospitable also fond of hunting, feasting, music and poetry. The Celtic culture survived in Ireland because of our western geographical location, Ireland escaped the Roman colonization, which devastated all the other Celtic colonies destroying all evidence of their existence. Ireland didn't change very much after the coming of the Celts until the advent of Christianity and later the Viking invasion but we still held on to our literature and Celtic heritage long after it had been extinguished by the Romans elsewhere.⁴ This is why early Irish literature is so precious, not only for it's early composition and fantastically descriptive style but also

¹ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 1.

² Jackson K. H: 'The oldest Irish tradition: A window on the iron age' *Cambridge University Press*, 1964.

³ Carey, J: 'The uses of Tradition in Serglige Con Culainn' *Ulidia* 1994 page 77-84

⁴ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 5.

for its content because wherein it preserved a lot of valuable information about Celtic Culture.

The literature has survived to this day in the form of manuscripts. It is estimated they were written throughout the centuries, the earliest being the eighth centuries right up until the modern Irish period in the sixteenth century. We are very lucky to have a large volume of material that survived Ireland's tumultuous history but we also know of manuscripts named that didn't survive like the *Cín Dromma Snechta* which is mentioned in several manuscripts along with its contents. The literature we have today is quite different to the form it would have originated from because of a number of circumstances. It is debated if they originated from an oral tradition or were first written down; we know the literature was written in ecclesiastical settings and was influenced by Christianity. Carey suggests we can only speculate about the conflict and compromises that must have accompanied the Christian handling of old Irish literature.⁵ It is widely attested that the *fili*⁶ who wanted to keep their craft secret and special were adverse to writing their knowledge down for fear of losing their power and status in society. Therefore we cannot be sure how much of the information they memorised has been preserved. The original tales would have deteriorated considerably by the time they reach us in manuscript form with interpolation, miscommunication and editing. Language changes and developments also meant that words and spelling patterns were changing as the manuscripts were being duplicated and copyists in the modern Irish period copying older manuscripts did not even understand what they were reading, so this led to them making a few mistakes and us misunderstanding them and then confusion in our translations. Sometimes there may be two versions of a tale that have not been well integrated and much evidence of confusion and duplication remains. All this means that we have to be very mindful of these factors and careful when reading and interpreting the tales. It does seem however that "the make believe world of the Ulster Cycle seems to have been a collaborative effort, involving a large number of narrators, redactors and copyists. Discrepancies, inconsistencies, alternative versions and recessions indicate that this effort was no one man show. Mythology is essentially a communal effort... it seems that purely as literary creations the heroes of the Ulster

⁵ Carey, J: 'The uses of Tradition in *Serglige Con Culainn*' *Ulidia* page 77-84.

⁶ The poets that recited poetry, law and genealogy to the kings courts for entertainment.

Cycle appear to have had very much a life of their own, they are not mere names but have families, Heroic Biographies and often individual stories attached to them...not only do Ulster Heroes have lives of their own but the texts seem to be aware of their biographies and accommodate them”⁷. On the whole you would expect more inconsistencies in such a wide ranging genre so it seems these characters were real to the authors and audiences and were even incorporated into genealogies as if they were historical characters.

The Irish tales distinguished different ethnic groups within the country at the time of the manuscript writing. It tells us of five provinces Ulaid- Ulster, Connachta- Connaught, Lagin- Leinster, and Mumu- Munster, Mide- approx modern day Meath. The Irish literature is now divided into sections: The Mythological Cycle, The Ulster Cycle, The cycle of the Kings and The Find Cycle⁸. Mide was the centre of action for the mythological tales and some of the Ulster Tales because it holds the burial mounds of Bruig na Boinne- Newgrange in the Boyne Valley and Temuir- the hill of Tara. The bulk of the written material is about the Province of Ulster called the Ulster Tales. These stories were set in the capital Emhain Mhaca. The king was Conchubur mac Ness but the champion, the man who got most of the attention, was Cú Chulainn. Their arch-rivals were the Connachta lead by the Queen and King Medb and Ailill. The history and myth about these enemies is all intertwined. The Province of Munster also features in the stories especially their King Cú Ruí. The strongholds of Emhain⁹ where the Ulster king lived with his people and entertained them feature extensively in the stories as a vibrant bustling centre for commerce as well as home for the main characters in the tales. “Early Irish literature depicts a heroic warrior society for which honour was a virtually absolute value, providing a universally accepted and shared standard of idea and behaviour and serving as a profound emotional force for social cohesion. Definition and interpretation of this stand was tradition external and public, directed and imposed by society, with shame and disgrace the major sanctions and acknowledgement, honour and glory the ultimate rewards.”¹⁰ Honour was earned and maintained through physical competition and geissi were made to safeguard honour

⁷ Hillers, B: ‘The heroes if the Ulster cycle’ *Ulidia* 1994 page 101-106

⁸ Mc Cana, P: *The Learned tales of Medieval Ireland*, Dias, 1980.

⁹ This is thought to be modern day Armagh.

¹⁰ O’ Leary, P: ‘Honour bound; The social context of early Irish heroic geis’ *Celtica* 20 page 93.

and maintain conflict.¹¹

My thesis is about the ultimate Irish hero Cú Chulainn. I will focus on his life and show what I believe to be the heroic biography within his stories. Cú Chulainn was the nephew of the king, his mother Dechtine was the king's sister¹². From the time he was a boy he was destined for greatness. He developed very fast; he was the master of multiple talents and was incredibly strong. He took arms at seven years old and became the defender of the province until his death at seventeen. He lived a full famous life and died young as he chose. Most of the Ulster tales centre around him. In fact the ultimate Irish saga *Táin Bó Cúalnge* encompasses *Maccgnimrada Con Culaind*¹³ and the story itself is a bloody show of his strength while he single handily held off Medb's army. I believe that the old Irish tales were written with a specific theme in mind but also mostly as a didactic tool to advise and instruct its readers. The stories of heroes provided somewhat of a comfort, in that there was always the chance that some heroic character might exist to save the people from the invasions and other dangers that they were susceptible to at all times. The people of medieval Ireland were superstitious and the tales of how their heroes travelled their land prevailing good, provided a peace of mind for them.

The type of setting below is perfect for the dichotomous nature of the Ulster Cycle and the liminal nature of the Hero. It suggests reincarnation, death and confusion. Mac Cana referred to Samhain as 'a partial return to primordial chaos'.¹⁴ The Irish year was divided into two parts: Summer and Winter. The first day of November was the start of winter and it was called Samhain. This was a very liminal day. On this day the barriers between the otherworld realms and the mortal world was permeable and the people of the *Síd* could roam freely around our world. This myth of uneasy liminality and superstition has given rise to the feast of Halloween in modern days.

This liminal theme is carried very strongly in the accounts of the otherworld. It is a kind of heavenly paradise which entrances were available here in Ireland but were not in tune with mortal life on this land, as if on a parallel dimension. The location of the

¹¹ Myles Dillon quoted in O' Leary, P: 'Honour bound; The social context of early Irish heroic geis'

¹² Depending on the version he might have been his grandson, its said in different versions that Dechtine was the kings sister or daughter.

¹³ Cú Chulainn's Boyhood Deeds

¹⁴ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 13.

otherworld could be an *Sid* mound¹⁵, an island on a lake, out in the sea; all very liminal areas or you could be lured into the otherworld by a storm, or invited by a beautiful woman or king. The otherworld mirrors the mortal world in some ways; people are always happy and beautiful, never hungry or sick and always enjoying the joys of warrior life like hunting, feasting and lovemaking.

I believe that the otherworld was intimately intertwined with Cú Chulainn. Every adventure I deal with in this paper happens to him at Samhain the liminal time of the year. We are either told this or we can see from the weather descriptions of great snow storms that it was obviously winter. He seems to be controlled by the otherworld, his *ríastrad* where his body contorts and he goes into battle rage is triggered and if not controlled by the otherworld. I believe that Cú Chulainn violated the sanctity of Tara on his first outing in his boyhood deeds and ever since that he was manipulated by otherworld deities or circumstances and never had any good fortune or self control again. The otherworld could intervene for better or worse throughout his life and at all these important events birds feature. Birds were seen as liminal creatures that could pass through the boundaries between worlds and they portend that something supernatural is about to happen. I believe the *geiss* or taboos given to a warrior are connected to the otherworld and in this way Cú Chulainn is controlled by these too. They give him his role in society, he is to be the guardian of the province but they also doom him to death.

It seems to me that the otherworld had a hand in controlling the sovereignty of the kingship and the martial values. It is indicated in the literature that there was a tense balance that must be upheld by the king and warrior, when Conaire Mór for example destroyed the protection of the *fir flaitheamón* upon his sovereignty and he disrespected the otherworld by breaking his *geiss*¹⁶ he broke the rules that maintained balance and peace in society and brought the wrath of the otherworld down upon himself. This shows us that the writers saw the otherworld as powerful and dangerous and must be respected and obeyed. This idea of respect is also applicable to Cú Chulainn, he was the son of a God and a man, his power was given to him by the otherworld God Lug, his father so he was also bound by *geiss* that he must obey or offer his life.

¹⁵ Commonly known as a fairy mound

¹⁶ Taboos given to warriors and kings at birth that must be obeyed.

The Irish literature is a treasure of early writing, one of the earliest written accounts of people in the world. It encompasses descriptions of a by gone age and a glimpse of our pagan origins. “ As history, the early Irish tales verge upon wishful thinking, if not outright propaganda”¹⁷ It is suggested that the Ulster tales were written as propaganda to enhance the status and power of the Uí Néill dynasty and establish them as a dominant political force in contemporary Irish politics. I also agree with Gantz when he says that we have to look at the tales in perspective and to see these stories in historical context, they have “suffered from faulty transmission, political distortion, historical overlays and church censorship”¹⁸

¹⁷ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 24

¹⁸ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 15.

HEROIC BIOGRAPHY

The stages of a heroic biography are universal. The same stages occur in every hero's life Irish or Japanese, past or present. These stages are what make a hero who they are and they are still relevant today. Everyone from Hercules to Christ all have some or all of these stages in their characters history. They usually have an unusual conception and birth; begotten out of wedlock, life threatened sometimes even before they are born, left exposed, reared by a stranger, there is a prophecy of the child's greatness, exile, trials and tests, triumphant return home and acquiring of their lost status. They usually develop quickly, they are usually invulnerable, fight a monster, seek a wife and have an exceptional death. The stories seem to concentrate on areas of life crisis for ordinary people usually transitional times but are always exaggerated for the hero. Liminality is a theme that runs through the heroic biographies. These stages are what make a hero who they are and they are still just as important and relevant in modern tales as they were in the past. I think these stories were a form of Aetiology¹⁹ and didactic teaching social behaviour and its consequences to ordinary people.

Ó' Cathasaigh said "The historical event and the heroic legend can be said to oppose one another- as entities... the heroic life is a life sui generis, which does not belong to history and which cannot be lived by ordinary mortals"²⁰; in his book on the heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt it infers that the hero is always different, exemplary and outside the rules of ordinary society but something to aspire to as well. It was De Vries who introduced the notion of the ten point system, which is now internationally recognised. De Vries identified a specific pattern to the presentation of the hero's life in the literature of many nations and the result of his work is that we can see the heroes of virtually all parts of the world have features in common. It acts as a reference table for those studying the biographies of the heroes to consult. Certain traditions concentrate on different points, i.e. Irish literature concentrated on stories about conception, birth, wooing, and Otherworlds. Monsters don't feature much in the Irish tradition of the Heroic Biography but they do in Greek mythology.

Ó' Cathasaigh says that we find "Mythology and ideology refracted through

¹⁹ Myths and stories that explain the origins of things.

²⁰ Ó' Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975 page 5.

literature²¹ and this gives us great insight into the belief structures of the societies for whom stories were written. The myths of the great heroes may have been originally told in oral tradition where they had immense didactic value to the listeners, they also provided a sense of comfort to people in such a dangerous society when invasion could occur at any time. The two types of heroes that were most popular in Ireland were; firstly, the martial hero like Cú Chulainn, the warrior figure that could protect from invasion no matter how intense the raid was and the second is the truthful leader. His powers included the ability to judge fairly and rule wisely, the most famous of these characters is Cormaic mac Airt.

From conception to death, many of their sagas and rites of passage contains elements of liminality²², be it where the event occurred e.g. on a bridge or in water, or whether the hero was under going a transitional period in their lifetime e.g. a trip to the Otherworld to improve their combat skills. The use of liminality is perhaps a key point in the immortalisation of a hero in his biography. The Irish people of the time used their heroic literature in teaching morality, social behaviour and compassion; it is for this reason that they needed to identify with their heroes. Ó Cathasaigh refers to this in his book “in seeking to establish the configuration of a hero within a particular cultural tradition, one is not solely concerned with the bare bones of an intellectual pattern. One must see how this pattern operates within the tradition in question”²³. The heroic biography is concerned with life crisis like the Rites of Passage as described by Van Gennep. These stories are significantly more than mere entertainment they involve serious zymology which is always culturally specific. The hero’s dramatic life is not the same as an ordinary human. He outshines everyone else and is always in societies limelight.²⁴ The Rites of Passage²⁵ which is an intrinsic part of everyone's life has to be more significant in the heroic biography to give people something to aspire to even if the limitations are physically impossible the inspiration is however present. Liminality is embedded in most well-known stories especially heroic biographies. Running through most of these biographies are many recognised stages. These are the same stages most ordinary people go through i.e. conception, birth, marriage, and death. According to

²¹ Ó’Cathasaigh, T: ‘The concept of hero in Irish myth’ *The Irish mind*, Wolfhound Press Dublin 1985 page 88.

²² Gennep, V: *Rites of passage*, Chicago 1908.

²³ Ó’Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975 page 7.

²⁴ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961.

²⁵ A term coined by Van Gennep in his book *Rites of passage*, Chicago 1908.

Leach these exemplary tales exaggerate these stages for the hero to outline how special or extraordinary he or she is²⁶. It also gives ordinary people who also go through these stages in their own lives a behaviour to which they can aspire to.

Many scholars have worked on this pattern but it started with Von Hahn in his work called '*Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*'²⁷ which established the heroic biography on fourteen heroes. He set up the 'Aryan Expulsion-and-Return' theory as well. Later Nutt extended his theory to include Celtic heroes adding two motifs and extending items of variants making the theory more flexible. He added items Hahn didn't see as important or fit. He saw lots more similarities in the biographies.

Forty years later the psychoanalyst Otto Rank studied the pattern of fifteen biographies including Moses and Jesus Christ. His study was wider than the Indo-European studies that had come before and so disproving Hahn's theory that the Heroic Biography pattern was strictly 'Aryan'²⁸. The theories were also developed and uniquely revised by Lord Raglan²⁹, J Campbell³⁰ and De Vries³¹. Taylor said "in the pattern Hahn saw unity of biography altered and adapted by 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 that develops as culture develops and changes"³². All this work shows just how universally applicable the framework is. Heroic biographies vary in tradition but they are all internationally recognised by scholars.

²⁶ Edmond Leach described this phenomena in his book *Genesis as myth* in 1969.

²⁷ Hahn, V: '*Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*', Jena 1871-1876 in O'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*.

²⁸ Ó'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 4.

²⁹ Raglan: '*The hero of tradition*' 1934 in *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 4.

³⁰ Campbell: *The hero with a thousand faces* 1949 in *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 4.

³¹ De Vries: *Heroic song and heroic legend* 1959 in *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 4.

³² Ó'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 4.

DE VRIES TEN POINT SYSTEM

1. Begetting by (a) Virgin mother seduced by a God or an affair (b) Human mother and a God (c) God disguised as an animal visit's the mother or (d) incest.
2. Birth
3. Youth
4. The way the hero is brought up
5. Acquires invulnerability
6. Hero fights a monster
7. Hero woos a maiden after dangerous adventures
8. Otherworld voyage
9. Banishment and return with a victory over his enemy
10. Death³³

Rees and Rees apply the traditional classes to the sagas i.e. Birth, Youthful Exploits, Wooing's, Elopements, Adventures, Voyages and Deaths. They believe that the Heroic biography is concerned with life crisis and that the "symbols whether they be myths... reveal their full significance only within a particular tradition"³⁴. Rees and Rees suggest "where as the pattern of heroic life has little in common with what is historically significant in the lives of men, it does as Lord Raglan has shown, correspond with the ritual life cycle"³⁵.

Ó' Cathasaigh³⁶ questions scholars inability to explain the origin and history of the pattern. How widespread is it and how can their distribution be explained?

Ó' Cathasaigh reminds us that we must do more work on the biographies to refine the method's used and always bear in mind that the patterns works in specific traditional and cultural contexts. He argues that the heroic biography is not restricted to martial heroes and puts forward the case for the king heroes utilising Cormac MacAirt as his example.

Thurneysen and Chadwick did most of the work on the Irish heroes. We owe a lot to Thurneysen not only for his linguistic work but also his work on heroes made the

³³ De Vries: *Heroic song and heroic legend* 1959 in *The heroic biography of Cormaic mac Airt* page 6.

³⁴ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 25.

³⁵ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 213.

³⁶ Ó' Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

literature about Cú Chulainn more widely available. The Irish authors classified the literature by theme. Most of the themes of the stories were alike but they vary in recensions and regional variations but the scholars could still see the international Heroic Biography framework imbedded in the stories.³⁷

Sjoestedt's analysis was mainly on Celtic myth and she showed that it possessed some oppositions. Like hero versus God, hero of the tribe as opposed to the hero outside the tribe. She highlighted the structuralist ideas of a binary structure in all human communication; Claude Lévi-Strauss developed this theory³⁸. Leach took it further and saw the binary opposition as intrinsic in human thought so logically it was transmitted into mythical structure³⁹.

O'Rahilly sees the heroic biography as exploring the conflict between the hero and the otherworld gods. He sees the hero as having cosmic origin. O'Rahilly saw this as a relationship of opposition⁴⁰. Is the semi-human hero modelled on the Gods or is he the central figure because he raised himself to the level of the Gods? I believe Cú Chulainn was shaped by otherworld; he was announced, incarnated and protected by the otherworld. Whatever is the answer it is undeniable that the hero's life is closely linked to otherworld people and places.

Ó'Cathasaigh thinks that the Irish authors used myths to explore the nature of men and gods and that the hero was used as the vehicle to explore the relationships between them. He uses the structuralist view that mythical systems were built upon oppositions mediated by an abnormal third category and so the hero was created in this category.

"The hero belongs to this third category: he is at once the son of a God and of a human father; he is mortal and he lives out his life among men, but otherworld personages intervene at crucial moments of his life"⁴¹. I believe that Cú Chulainn maybe the human incarnation of his god father Lug who was a martial hero in his own right. This was so that the Irish warriors could relate to him better. The otherworld interfered a lot because of his supernatural origins and always at what Van Gennep called rites of passage or transitional periods in his life and since the heroic biography is all about life crisis it is not surprising that the otherworld features in every story in Cú Chulainn's

³⁷ Ó'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

³⁸ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1982.

³⁹ Edmond Leach described this phenomena in his book *Genesis as myth* in 1969.

⁴⁰ Ó'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975 page 13.

⁴¹ Ó'Cathasaigh, T: 'The concept of hero in Irish myth' *The Irish mind*, Wolfhound Press Dublin 1985 page 80.

life because we only have his biography.

O'Rahilly believed that the 'expulsion and return' motif is a political theme and in Irish literature it is seen as the struggle between the hero and an otherworld God⁴².

Ó'Cathasaigh suggests that for example the hero battles a supernatural deity; Cú Chulainn fights Cualu's dog, an otherworld Goddess and Cú Roí. The hero kills them with their own weapons. In O'Rahilly's 'The Syntagm' theory the otherworld deity is not always hostile but the otherworld does interfere a lot in the heroes life for good or ill⁴³.

O'Rahilly developed a theory of 'The Paradigm' where X and Y were quasi-historical personages. He explained that the hero fills the same structural slot as the deity they just disposed of. Taking over their function and responsibilities⁴⁴. Usually it's a new hero who disposes the king but in the case of Cú Chulainn he slayed the hound and then became the hound, taking its function of guardian. In this way Cú Chulainn goes through what O'Rahilly calls the 'Transformation of the hero'. He receives his name, becomes a man and gains his place in society by killing the hound and taking up its responsibilities. O'Rahilly found this motif quite common in heroic literature⁴⁵.

McCone disagrees with Ó'Cathasaigh and O'Rahilly's theory above he thinks that the hospitaller not the hound is the otherworld deity and so you can't have two gods in this theory⁴⁶.

O'Rahilly also made the point about 'Repetition' he explained that to slay an otherworld god didn't always mean to kill him but just incapacitating him for a time⁴⁷ like Cú Chulainn's beheading of Cú Roí in *Fled Bricrend*⁴⁸.

Von Hahn commented on the expulsion and return formula that he dies by an act of revenge at the hands of an insulted servant, which is a common theme. This theory was then revised by Nutt adding that the hero injures an inferior who takes revenge upon him or by his children⁴⁹. Cú Chulainn died at the hands of the daughters and sons of

⁴² O'Rahilly, T.F: *Early Irish history and mythology*, Dublin 1946 page 278 in *The heroic biography of Cormac MacAirt* page 14.

⁴³ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*.

⁴⁴ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*.

⁴⁵ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*.

⁴⁶ McCone, K: 'Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: Hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story', *Eriu* 35 1984 page 1-30.

⁴⁷ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*.

⁴⁸ Henderson, G: *Fled Bricrend*, Dublin: Irish Texts Society 1899.

⁴⁹ Ó'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormac MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

Calatin Dana, whose father he had killed earlier.

The storytellers of old Ireland were very conscious of the theme of liminality but not under that name, it seemed to come natural to them. It is also a literary way of thinking, it was fully explored as a theory by anthropologists in the last hundred years or so and was named then but the theme has always been a part of stories. For this reason the motifs and theme of liminality used in early Irish tales was deliberate and was a way of explaining the unearthly happenings in their stories⁵⁰.

Van Gennep first developed this concept and described it as a transitional stage. He saw these Rites of Passage as ways of separating the sacred from the profane, a way of regulating actions and reactions to guard society so it suffered no injury. He thought that the sacred parts of life happened at stages in human development of transition. He saw it as part of three stages of Rites: Separation from the old way (pre-liminal), Transitional stage of ambiguous social or physical standing (liminal) and Incorporation where you are joined into the new way (post-liminal)⁵¹.

Cú Chulainn is a typical liminal hero; this not only parallels his semi-divine parentage but also his place of birth on the borders of the tribe. His mightiest deeds were during his adolescence, the transition between boy and man. Weiser described the “old Norse berserkers as mighty fighters... with an ability to enter a state of ecstasy in which they are superhumanly strong and invulnerable... dangerous”⁵². They were possessed by an animal and could call on it in a frenzy. It came upon them unexpectedly and most warriors grew out of it and became farmers.⁵³ In the *Táin*⁵⁴ while he single-handedly fought off an entire army most of the conflict was in liminal areas on the borders of the province at fords and rivers. In fact the *Gáe Bolga* was made especially for fighting at fords⁵⁵. Thus because of his cosmic responsibility as guardian of Ulster he could call upon his supernatural function to boost his powers, to defend his home.⁵⁶ He belongs to the mid-ground; there is no doubt about the otherness of the hero's life according to O'Cathasaigh. Even though the hero is mortal he is also and incredibly skilled warrior

⁵⁰ Nagy, J: *The wisdom of the outlaw* University of California Press 1985 and Scowcroft, M: 'Review of the wisdom of the outlaw', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 13, 1987 page 97-100.

⁵¹ Van Gennep: *Rites of passage*, Chicago 1908.

⁵² Weiser 1927 page 44-45 described in McCone 'Hound, wolf and warrior among the Indo-Europeans' 1987 page 40.

⁵³ McCone 'Hound, wolf and warrior among the Indo-Europeans' 1987.

⁵⁴ O'Rahilly, C: *The Cattle raid of Cúailnge*, Dublin Institute for advanced Studies 1967.

⁵⁵ His supernatural weapon given to him by an otherworld queen.

⁵⁶ Sjoblom, T: 'On the threshold: the sacredness of borders in early Irish literature' *Ulidia* 1994.

but still subject to special conditions, his *geissi*.

THE HERO- Cú Chulainn

Sjoestedt stated “the Hero is the incarnation of the ideal qualities of the race”⁵⁷.

Cú Chulainn is portrayed as the ultimate Irish hero. He is definitely a hero of Dumézil’s second martial function. O’Cathasaigh showed that he had nine out of ten of the characteristics that define an international heroic biography by De Vries⁵⁸.

He had at least four foster fathers and referred to himself as being reared by all of Ulster. In this way he had the personality traits of a warrior and magician: he could heat water with his body, go without sleep from Samhain until the following harvest and the wounds he inflicted only he could cure. He had fifteen excellences including beauty, judgement, horsemanship, valour, council and eloquence in the language of secrets. This intimate knowledge of the secret druidic language *Bérta na filed* learned from his foster father is what he used to woo Emer, talking out loud but in secret. Nineteen *Clessa*⁵⁹ including the salmon leap, stretching on a spear-head, cat’s leap, and the wheel-turn. He had unfailing marksmanship. He lacked the most important attribute bestowed upon heroes’ invulnerability; he was invincible but not invulnerable. He also had *geissi*, which seemed to be common knowledge as well. He is a ‘berserker’ so when he gets angry or goes to battle he distorts both physically and mentally and can no longer distinguish friend or foe. He is left outside society not really conscious of what he’s doing and everyone is terrified of his destructive capabilities. He cannot control this change or his behaviour while in the battle rage; he cannot even change back to his original state. While distorted he is dangerous and cannot be let back into civilisation. He must be ritually restored both physically and psychologically reintegrated into society. Through his whole life he was restless and uncontrollable, never fully integrated into society because he carried this monster into society with him. There was always a dark side to him that he didn’t want to show and couldn’t control. His breakouts were always triggered by outside issues that he couldn’t control. Cú Chulainn’s name is liminal; *Cú* meaning hound, which suggests that he is not fully human. He never fully grows up and his most notorious deeds are described in

⁵⁷ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ 1982 page 57.

⁵⁸ O’Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormac MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

⁵⁹ Acrobatic feats.

the stories of his boyhood deeds, he is an early developer in everything he does and dies young. .

Bruford believes he was a “manufactured perfect defender”⁶⁰ made by Christian authors to consolidate the Christian beliefs with the warrior lifestyle and this is why he is so akin to Christ. He agrees with Kelleher and Mc Cone that his life has parallels with Christ and suggests these are deliberate, that a “perfect secular hero was being created by monastic a author using the saviour himself as a model, but with victories in place of miracles, it’s no wonder he seems to good to be true”⁶¹. I think his theory is wrong because a perfect Christian hero would not kill women, as he has been known to do⁶². I don’t agree with Bruford, I think Cú Chulainn wasn’t a perfect hero but a hugely flawed completely human hero, I believe he was made this way so that Irish warriors could more easily aspire and relate to him. If he was invulnerable and never felt the pain after a battle, it offended the notion of a real Celtic warrior⁶³.

O’Cathasaigh⁶⁴ and Gray⁶⁵ talk about the relationship between Lug and his son and how Cú Chulainn was the human incarnation of the god hero Lug. This makes sense to me because people could understand Cú Chulainn much better than a god that was invulnerable, in this way Cú Chulainn is an even greater exemplary hero. In this way it even more parallels Christ’s life, he was the Christian god made man to teach the ordinary people how to live .I see Cú Chulainn this way. He also flawed in that he kept offending the otherworld he even kills a king of Tara.

Bruford also suggests that the descriptions of the battle rage descend from the same type used to describe god heroes like Lug⁶⁶, so he inherited his powers and a literary style from his father.

Bruford tries to explain the name “Cú Chulainn’ and after going through tedious and confusing explanation’s he concludes that the smith’s name was Collon and that he was from modern day Co. Louth⁶⁷. He sees the character of Cú Chulainn as being a local hero who was “likely a successful historical defender of Ulster against early attacks

⁶⁰ Bruford, A: ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’ *Ulidia* 1994.

⁶¹ Bruford, A: ‘Cú Chulainn an ill made hero?’ *Mythology in Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 1994 page 202.

⁶² Marstrander, C: (ed) ‘Aided Derbfhorgaille’ *Ériu* 5, 1911 page 201-8.

⁶³ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ 1982.

⁶⁴ O’Cathasaigh, T: ‘Between God and man: the hero in Irish tradition’ *The Crane bag of Irish studies* 2, Black water Press 1979 page 72-81.

⁶⁵ Gray, E: ‘Lug and CúChulainn: king and warrior, God and Man’ *Studia Celtica* 24-25 1989-90 pg 37-52.

⁶⁶ Bruford, A: ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’ *Ulidia* 1994.

⁶⁷ Bruford, A: ‘Cú Chulainn an ill made hero?’ *Mythology in Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 1994

from Leinster, who died heroically young enough to leave no descendents to complicate the politics”⁶⁸. He thinks the difference in spelling is just linguistic upheaval and scribal error. He cannot seem to correlate the existence of his name popping up in place names through out Clare and the fact that he is involved with southern stories of Cú Roi of Munster. He suggests that maybe he was a Munster hero appropriated by a northern author and used as a puppet for Uí Néill propaganda. I agree with the first part of his suggestion, Cú Chulainn was probably a local hero from Co. Louth that was immortalised in the stories because a lot of place names on that area incorporate aspects of his name in them. Bruford highlights the most interesting question about Cú Chulainn: why is he conspicuously absent from tales like *Scéla muicce maic Da Thó*? I explain that myself by assuming that this story is a didactic tale about hero behaviour and status, they had to earn the hero’s portion and fight and debate it to an outcome. If Cú Chulainn was there it would be a very boring tale because you know from the outset he would win and we would be without the wonderful visual imagery of the man’s head being thrown across the room to his brother.

Bruford asks why he is he exempt for the Ulster pangs bestowed by Macha on all Ulstermen? Is it because of his fathers he had divine parentage which couldn’t be taken as Ulster and his human dad was Sualdam mac Roich also not an Ulsterman or because he lived on the boarder of Ulster? Or is it simply because children were exempt.

Like his Celtic counterparts the number three has special symbolic significance and it is invested throughout his career, this Celtic Triplicity motif is seen best in his warrior destiny thus reinforcing the international heroic biography⁶⁹.

⁶⁸ Bruford, A: ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’ *Ulidia* 1994 page 27.

⁶⁹ Dumézil compared him with Hercules who killed the triple headed dog.

BIRTH

Compert Con Culainn

Birth tales are part of a broader category of stages in a hero's life. As Ó' Cathasaigh described above the *comperta*⁷⁰ are the part of the heroic biography that varies the most in its themes and content. According to Leach⁷¹ these exemplary Birth tales exaggerate the hero to outline how special and extraordinary he is.

Kinsella's version of the birth tales is probably one of the most recognised today⁷². Conchobor, King of Ulster and the men of Ulster are out hunting birds that were terrorising the plains of Emhain. They chase the nine score birds who are singing an enchanting song and connected by silver chains. The otherworld can interfere in mortal realms at any time; like these birds laying waste to the plains of Emhain, this implies that a vigorous male is needed as a vital force of nature and the hero is needed to restore balance. We can see the theme of laying waste of the land by the gods showing their power, framing the story to tell the audience something special is about to happen and restoring the universal balance of nature through the hero⁷³. It has been noted by scholars that this is a very close parallel to the notion of the right king restoring balance and fertility to the land, we can see in some stories especially in the *Táin* and *Macgrímrada CúChulainn* that sometimes Cú Chulainn assimilates some of the kingly hero roles while the king is indisposed.⁷⁴ Cú Chulainn was fostered by a hospitaller and so embodies elements of that otherworld figures functions, Dumézil described the hospitaller as filling his third function. McCone says that this otherworld character was the guardian, bestower and remover of sovereignty⁷⁵ so it's not surprising that CúChulainn periodically assumes the kings function.

Birds are always present at important times in CúChulainn's life. These are definitely otherworld birds devastating Emhain, they sing an enticing song so the warriors follow them and they are connected by a silver chain, these birds are letting us know that something extraordinary is about to happen and warning us that it is supernatural in

⁷⁰ Conception tales.

⁷¹ Leach, E: *Genesis as myth*, 1969.

⁷² Kinsella, T: *Coimpert Con Culainn* in '*The Táin*', Dublin: Dolman Press, 1969.

⁷³ Ó' Cathasaigh, T: 'The concept of hero in Irish myth' *The Irish mind*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1985 pg 79-90.

⁷⁴ Ó' Cathasaigh, T: 'The concept of hero in Irish myth' *The Irish mind*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1985 pg 79-90.

⁷⁵ McCone, K: 'Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: Hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story', *Ériu* 35 1984 page 1-30.

origin just like the birds in *Serglige Con Culainn*.

A heavy snow storm starts, it's obvious here that this is winter possibly Samhain and when night falls they are in need of refuge for the night. They find a small house and the owners invited them in for the night. Inside are a pregnant woman and her husband. During the night the woman gives birth to a son, aided by Deichtine. At the same time a mare of the Ulster warriors gives birth to twin foals at the door. The animal motif is expressed here as the gift of the horses, they seem to be born with supernatural intelligence and power and are his lifelong companions, defenders and chariot horses.

By morning the house and godly parents have disappeared, only the baby remains.

This concludes the first of Cu Chulainn's liminal conceptions and birth's.

Deichtine is left to foster the baby boy, and they return to Eamhain with the baby and the two foals. The boy caught an illness and died. After her lamentation for her foster son, Deichtine grows thirsty, when she takes a drink a tiny insect slips into her mouth. That night she dreamt a man came to her, he said he was the God called Lug Mac Eithniu; he had summoned her to the woods to sleep with her. He told her the boy she had nursed was his, he was again implanted in her womb and she should call him Sétanta. This is perhaps one of the most typical motifs in hero birth tales that involve mismatched parents, a godly father and an earthly mother. Also occurring is the common motif of insect ingestion through a drink causing impregnation. This is the second in Cu Chulainn's conceptions.

As Deichtine becomes heavily pregnant, rumours begin to grow as to who is the father. It was suspected that Conchobor himself was responsible; in a drunken state he took advantage of his own sister. The ambiguous incest allegations are also present, Rees and Rees saw the hero's birth and conception as "all wrong"⁷⁶ the family integrity was violated by incest as well as the laws of biology being broken through the 'creature in the drink' motif, they saw the hero as a child biologically of earthly parents but spiritually the incarnation of some supernatural essence. In some of the heroic biographies the mother is ashamed and embarrassed about the child in her womb and tries to abort it, she sees it as illegitimate and having no right to be there. These are all common themes in heroic biographies ⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 255.

⁷⁷ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961.

To halt such slander he gave his sister in marriage to Sualdam mac Roich. Deichtine herself was ashamed to go into a marriage pregnant, so she aborted it. Kinsella states "the living thing spilled away in the sickness and so she was made virgin and whole"⁷⁸.

She and her new husband conceived another child and named it Setanta. This is the third and final episode in Cú Chulainn's series of unusual conceptions and births.

This hero's conception and birth is really unique in that it occurs three times. Every possible outcome of conception is covered: death, abortion, and life. He is also unique in that he has three possible fathers: God, king and human. The theme of liminality can be seen in Cú Chulainn's transition from supernatural to human being. First he is the son of two gods; this child does not make the transition and dies. This first birth is mediated by the second which is the product of the union of a human virgin and a God but this incarnation does not make the transition and so Cú Chulainn is finally born from the union of two humans.

Rees saw the Heroic biography in the birth tale as involving nine important episodes and out of these I believe Cú Chulainn has five⁷⁹:

1)A mystery surrounds a hero's begetting; does he have an earthly or human father?

Cú Chulainn has both; Lug was his Otherworld Father while his Human father was Sualdam mac Roich. There was incest implied in his conception. His mother swallowed a creature in a drink of water. Usually only one of these is present in a hero's conception but Cú Chulainn incorporates a bit of them all.

2)His birth is at an auspicious time heralded by signs from the natural world; Birds seem to be a very important feature in Cú Chulainn's life, they feature in all of the stories I will deal with and they usually herald the coming of something supernatural.

3)Animals assist with the birth and upbringing; two foals are born at the same time as the baby and are given to him as gifts, they become his lifelong chariot horses and companions. The grey of Macha defends him until his death.

4)In his birth and youth he displayed extraordinary talents and qualities as described by Rees, he takes arms at seven years old and the only arms that would sustain him are the king's own weapons and the royal chariot. He also must defend himself against one hundred and fifty boys, a monstrous hound and the spectres of the half dead men.

⁷⁸ Kinsella, T: *Coimpert Con Culainn* in 'The Táin', Dublin: Dolman Press, 1969.

⁷⁹ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 223.

5) He is given his name in unusual circumstances; just like Finn and other heroes he is born with one name but earns the famous name by which he is remembered by his own accomplishments.

All of these unusual circumstances contributed to Cú Chulainn's uniqueness and individuality. The fact that his final conception and birth was of normal earthly parents is significant because it makes him unquestionably real, in comparison to other heroes that came from half earthly and half godly parentage. This makes it easier for the audience to relate to his character.

Kim McCone sees a strong similarity between Cú Chulainn and Jesus lives in the context of the heroic biography. The announcing of his coming, the obvious similarities of the Father God and Mother Virgin parallel.⁸⁰ However Tomás Ó' Cathasaigh disagrees with this, stating that Cú Chulainn had three conceptions whereas Jesus only had the one.⁸¹

Ó' Cathasaigh thinks the hero mediates the relationship between god and man in structuralist terms. The hero is the son of man and god, he is mortal and lives in communication with ordinary humans but otherworldly intervenes at important times in his life.⁸² In *Compert Con Culainn* his mother is lured into Brúig na Boinne by the God of this local *Síd* Lug at night to become pregnant by him and name their son Sétantae⁸³ to give her the first incarnation of the child. It's interesting the name he is given at birth is not the name he is remembered by, he must earn his famous name himself.

This story shows the triplicate feature of Celtic iconography very strongly: birds and enemies in multiples of three's as well as his three births.

Unlike other children who have one set of foster parents Cú Chulainn had four foster fathers to teach him different aspects of society: Sencha was a warrior who taught him to be wise, strong, noble and skilled. Blái was a hospitiller who taught him to feed the Ulstermen for a week and entertain the men of Ireland and respect and support the arts. Fergus was a champion who taught him to guard and protect Ulster from evil and uphold the weak. Finally Amairgen a poet who taught him justice, wisdom and eloquence. Cathbad taught him the arts of druidism and excellences of knowledge. In

⁸⁰ McCone, K: *Pagan Past and Christian present*, Maynooth Monographs 3, 2000.

⁸¹ Ó' Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormac MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

⁸² Ó' Cathasaigh, T: 'the concept of hero in irish myth' *The Irish mind*, Wolfhound Press Dublin 1985 page 80.

⁸³ Sétantae means 'one who has knowledge of roads and ways' according to Gantz.

Tochmarc Emer he describes himself as being reared by all the man of Ulster, thus they were all a part of him and that's why he fought for them.

YOUTH AND LIFE THREATENED

Macgnímrada Con Culainn

EPISODE 1

This group of stories are an early part of the *Táin*, supposedly told by Fergus an Ulsterman in exile who was also Cú Chulainn's foster father to Medb's army before the battle against Cú Chulainn.

Cú Chulainn was raised by his mother Dechtine and his human father Súaltam in Airgdech of Mag Muirthemni, on the liminal borders of the province⁸⁴. Cú Chulainn decided to go to Emhain to join the famous Red Branch Knights, his mother Dechtine warned him to wait for an Ulster hero to accompany him but he refused and impetuously set out on the road with only his toy javelin, shield, hurly and ball for protection. When he reached the boy troop he barged in on them. They knew he was an Ulsterman but could not understand why he ignored the protocol of asking for their protection so they attacked him. This is the first instance that Cú Chulainn's life is threatened; even though he could defend himself against the attack he is isolated and alienated by society. Like all heroes he must earn the right to participate in society. Nagy argues that Cú Chulainn earns his right to be in society through his martial prowess and is always redeemed and reintegrated after his battle frenzy as opposed to Finn who is never fully accepted into society. Even though these are both liminal heroes Cú Chulainn is apart of the tribe where as Finn is always outside part of the Fianna⁸⁵.

He defended himself with toy weapons from the onslaught of one hundred and fifty boys. The *riastrad* came upon him for the first time: his hair stood on end full of electricity with a drop of blood on each strand, one eye sunk back into his head and the other became as huge as a saucer, his mouth was so wide you could see his intestines and the hero's moon rose above his head. The contortions that come upon him here for the first time but successively thought his life have parallels in lots of different Celtic traditions, most notably Scandinavian. We find the same huge eye, and the hero's moon on the head of Ogmios. All these contortions were obviously familiar to the

⁸⁴ This is thought to be in present day Co. Louth.

⁸⁵ Nagy, J.F: ' Heroic destinies in Macgrinrada of Finn and CúChulainn', *ZCP* 40 1984 pg 23-39.

widespread Celtic culture.⁸⁶ The theme of the “entering of the hero by force into the social circle by force”⁸⁷ is seen here with him barging in unafraid and demanding his due initiation into society. When Cú Chulainn contorts he reverts to his Formorian ancestry destructive element and he appears as a Cyclops which his killers and his female fans copy. His name meant he was associated with the wolf which was a wild animal and was associated with the liminal band the *Fian*, who lived by plunder and hunting always living outside society.⁸⁸ In all cases Cú Chulainn is calmed from his rage and accepted back into society but he is always restless having an uncontrollable force inside him seems to unnerve him but society must see it as an acceptable risk because they always reintegrate him and the next day he appears at the king's side again.

He hunted and chased after the boys right past his uncle the King, knocking over his game of chess. The king grabbed him and demanded he explain his behaviour and asked why he didn't seek the boys protection before entering the playing field, Cú Chulainn replied he didn't know the protocol so the king gave him his protection instead and he went off to play with the boys. Later a fight broke out because Cú Chulainn wanted to be the boy troops protector; the king broke the fight up and let him guard them. Here he is taking tentative steps towards his guarding destiny. The youthful hero's strength as a champion grows rapidly and he abandons childish things to intrude into society. Without fear or respect he rejects the protection of his elders⁸⁹. He breaks the rules to join the boy troop and risks his life to do so, he becomes the king's favourite not because he is related to him but he earns it by demonstrating his skill and so can do as he wishes. This is a reoccurring theme in the international heroic biography; the hero is born different, blessed if you will with superhuman abilities but must always fight to earn his right to participate in society.

It parallels international 'initiation rites'. The hero must leave home, fight at contests, get a new name, take arms, spill blood and win his first head.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1948 page 62.

⁸⁷ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1948 page 63.

⁸⁸ McCone, K: 'The Cyclopes in Celtic, Germanic and Indo-European Myth', *Studia Celtica* 30, page 89-111.

⁸⁹ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1948 page 57.

⁹⁰ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961.

EPISODE 2

Once there was a battle that the Ulstermen fought while Cú Chulainn was asleep. On the way to the battle he met a horrible sight; half a man carrying another half a man on his back the man pleaded with Cú Chulainn to carry his burden, his brother for him. Cú Chulainn refused and the man slung the half of his brother onto the boy who threw it off. This can be taken as Cú Chulainn's first meeting with a monster he is again unafraid and confronts the spectre, presumably with one eye and a corpse with one eye, leg and arm. Loss of limbs was a down side of the warrior lifestyle and maybe this Formorian pose was just a symbol of being a warrior⁹¹. He shows he has his priorities right when he refuses to help a fellow Ulsterman because he must rescue the king. The man and boy wrestled and Cú Chulainn was knocked over. The Badb was among the corpses. Sometimes she is depicted as one eyed a very supernatural trait she is the sister of Macha and the Morrigan these women were supposedly the otherworld goddesses of death. They usually appear as black birds, scavengers among the dead on the battlefield. Again the otherworld birds can be seen. She began to mock him calling him a terrible warriors apprentice, a silly boy scared by spectres. The mocking makes him more determined to win against the phantom and it brings on a frenzy again showing the interference and power of the otherworld. Grey⁹² suggests that it is the otherworld that is responsible for the contortions within Cú Chulainn. I believe that his frenzy is controlled and triggered by the otherworld.

Cú Chulainn was enraged by the satire and attacked the first man, beheaded him with his hurley and drove it like a ball ahead of him. He commits kin slaying, he had a conflict of obligations; it was his duty to the tribe to save the king that overrode his duty to the Ulsterman so he killed him.⁹³

Cú Chulainn found and rescued Conchubur. He found a man roasting a boar in the forest, the man was a terrifying formidable opponent but Cú Chulainn attacked him stole the boar and beheaded him. We see him here doing his duty; doing what is needed even though it is a terrible sight to serve and protect the king the symbol of the province, again fulfilling his guardian function.

⁹¹ McCone, K: 'The Cyclopes in Celtic, Germanic and Indo-European Myth', *Studia Celtica* 30, page 89-111.

⁹² Gray, E: 'Lug and CúChulainn: king and warrior, God and Man' *Studia Celtica* 24-25 1989-90 pg 37-52.

⁹³ Gray, E: 'Lug and CúChulainn: king and warrior, God and Man' *Studia Celtica* 24-25 1989-90 pg 37-52

EPISODE 3

On day Conchubur was invited to a feast by Cualu the smith before leaving the king went to visit his boy troop. Cú Chulainn was defending a goal single handily against all one hundred and fifty boys. Not a single ball went in to his goal but he filled their goal with all his balls. The king was very amused and amazed and all the company were sure this boy would be a great warrior probably the best and would outshine all others before or after him. Her his great future is being prophesised for him. He was so impressed that he invited Cú Chulainn to the feast but the boy replied he was not finished playing and would follow the king later. He is being shown here as the ultimate warrior, fighting off an army of boys single handed. His peers are no match for him now. He also only plays by his own rules; he decides when to go not the king. The king arrived at the feast and forgetting about his fosterling let the smith lock up and he loosed his ferocious hound to protect the lands and cattle. The dog took three chains and nine men to control him. This is accepted as a supernatural dog because of it's origins, it's litter was found in a dead mans head. The motif of Celtic triplicity is in the dog's nature; it was one of a litter of three dogs that all had adventurous tales of their own. Its brothers were Ailbhe Mac Da tho's dog and the other the hound of Celtchar. All the hounds eventually attacked their home and all the heroes involved were intimately intertwined with the dogs function and destiny⁹⁴. This may explain why Cú Chulainn could turn on his own people.

Cú Chulainn was coming along the path when the hound attacked, Cú Chulainn grabbed him and smacked him against a tree, then he hit his ball with his hurl and it went into the hounds mouth through him and out his back. Cú Chulainn faced the dog and killed it by *fír fer*⁹⁵ so had to assume the dogs duty which in a way is preparing him for his adult role of the Guard dog of Ulster. Mythical hounds traditionally guarded otherworld hospitallers, possessions and functioned as symbols of the warrior virtues embodied by society.⁹⁶

They then rushed out, after the dog was defeated and they were all overjoyed to see the king's nephew alive. All but the smith who was lamenting his dead protector and

⁹⁴ McCone, K: 'Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: Hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story', *Ériu* 35 1984 page 1-30.

⁹⁵ Translated 'Men's truth' or the idea of a fair fight, equally matched opponents.

⁹⁶ McCone, K: 'An introduction to early Irish saints lives' *Maynooth Review* 11, 1984 page 26-59.

pet, his household and all his animal stock were defenceless now and to him his life was ruined. Cú Chulainn replied that he would rear a pup from the same pedigree but until it was big enough he would be the smiths protector. This is how he got his name Cú Chulainn meaning ‘the hound of Culainn’ and he became the protector of Mag Muirthemni. Rees and Rees stated “ it was thought appropriate to name a child from an exclamation made on the spur of the moment as though the truth unwittingly was revealed in a moment of thoughtlessness”⁹⁷ his name was pronounced in the presence of the king and a druid representing sovereignty and sacred thus affirming his positive role in the social structure.⁹⁸ Cú Chulainn was six years old when he received his adult name and identity, he has now passed the supreme test of killing a hound that embodies the martial values of the warrior society and assimilates these virtues and assumes its function. The benefits are positive and permanent infusion of both personalities to make the perfect hero.⁹⁹

In the story Cú Chulainn must protect all of Mag Muirthemni, the earth and the sky, neither flock nor herd can be taken without his knowledge. This is preparing him for his job as provincial defender, one of his *geiss* is that neither bird can fly over Ulster lest he bring one down nor fish can show above water lest he catch one. He must protect all aspects of Ulster: earth, sky, water, human and supernatural.

He was monster and man at the same time as his name suggests¹⁰⁰. Cú Chulainn assuming the role of the hound in this story compares with the Scandinavian idea of a berserker and its relationships with wolves. *Cú* can mean a hound whether wild or domestic and was used to refer to both, wild dogs were as near to wolves as Ireland ever had.¹⁰¹

Bruford suggests that the killing of the dog in this episode is meant to distract from the real pagan meaning behind this naming story. He thinks the smith Cualu represents an otherworld deity and has magical connotations. It is him who bestows Cú Chulainn with his powers as opposed to getting them from the hound¹⁰². McCone agrees thinking the Smyth was an otherworld person with druidic connections¹⁰³.

⁹⁷ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 242.

⁹⁸ Gray, E: ‘Lug and CúChulainn: king and warrior, God and Man’ *Studia Celtica* 24-25 1989-90 pg 37-52

⁹⁹ McCone, K: *Pagan Past and Christian present*, Maynooth Monographs 3, 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Lowe, J: ‘Kicking over the traces- the instability of CúChulainn’ *Studia Celtica* xxxiv 2000 pp 119-130.

¹⁰¹ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ 1982.

¹⁰² Bruford, A: ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’ *Ulidia* 1994.

¹⁰³ McCone, K: ‘Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: Hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story’,

EPISODE 4

One day Cathub the druid was instructing his pupils, one student asked what this day would be good for, the druid replied that the warrior who took up arms this day would be famous in Ireland forever. Cú Chulainn overheard this and went to the king under the pretence of being sent by the druid to take up arms. The king agreed and gave him arms even though he was only seven years old. Cú Chulainn went through fifteen sets of weapons until the king gave him his and they endured him. The king found out that Cú Chulainn had lied to him but the boy replied that he had over heard what the day would be good for and used his own initiative. Usually a hero is invited to take arms by society and then receives the toga of manhood to show he is now part of the state¹⁰⁴ but the theme of the “entering of the hero by force into the social circle by force”¹⁰⁵ is again seen here with him taking it upon himself to take up arms. The contortions are an example of the physical manifestation of fire, which Cú Chulainn literally embodies¹⁰⁶, this fire has dangerous consequences for friends and foes. In the end he receives the cloak from the queen showing he has been let back into society. Maybe this episode is a symbol of the end of his adolescent time with the *fian*. He is reintegrated into society by being immersed in water like Christian baptism, the old life is drowned and the hero emerges cleansed ready for new life leaving the wild behind him¹⁰⁷. Celtic triplicity motif is here too in the form of three vats of water.¹⁰⁸

The druid warned him that although he would be eternally famous we would not live long. Cú Chulainn was happy stating ‘I would rather be famous forever and live only one day’. Cú Chulainn chooses everlasting fame even though it means a short life, in fact most heroes don’t live very long they preferred to go out with a legendary battle then die old in a bed, that fate was meant for kings. A short life didn’t matter to him once he would be remembered, it was the influence of the *Airscéla*¹⁰⁹ that lead him to

Ériu 35 1984 page 1-30.

¹⁰⁴ McCone, K: ‘Hund, Wolf und Krieger bei den Indogermanen’ (Hound, wolf and warrior among the Indo-European) *Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz, Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft* 52, 1987.

¹⁰⁵ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ 1948 page 63.

¹⁰⁶ McCone thinks the descriptions of him with sparks of fire in his hair is his embodiment of the warriors fire and could parallel the Christian fire of the holy spirit.

¹⁰⁷ Van Gennep: *Rites of passage*, Chicago 1908.

¹⁰⁸ McCone, K: *Pagan Past and Christian present*, Maynooth Monographs 3, 2000.

¹⁰⁹ These are the legendary adventure tales of the Red Branch Knights.

join the boy troop of Emhain.¹¹⁰ He values fame over life it's self and so makes a name for himself and the name is what remains famous to this day as Ford put it fame and name are interrelated "his name would be over Ireland forever in respect of his feats of weaponry and his famous tales would last forever"¹¹¹

The next day a pupil asked the druid what this day would be good for and he replied that the warrior who climbed into a chariot that day would be known through Ireland. Cú Chulainn heard this and went to the king, he went through twelve chariots and in the end only the kings would hold him. Cú Chulainn headed off, he persuaded the charioteer to drive him around Emhain. They went to the boarder where they met Conall Cernach protecting Ulster, he wanted Conall to go home and leave him to protect the province but Conall thought he couldn't fight well enough to be left alone. Cú Chulainn broke Conall's chariot with a stone on the pretence of practicing his throw and so the warrior had to return home because of the damage. He relieves Conall Cernach of his post because he ambitiously thinks himself the same level as a warrior, it turns out he has the capacity for fighting but lacks the social pleasantries at this stage.

Cú Chulainn and the charioteer rode around Ulster and the charioteer named all the landmarks for him, from Tara to Cenandas. Then they headed into alien territory. They came upon the forts of the sons of Nechta Scéne and Cú Chulainn persuaded Ibor to go have a look, knowing that these men were Ulster's greatest enemies and had killed multitudes of Ulstermen.

"Ocus sréthe in n-id boí forsín corthe rout a láma isin n-abaind agus léicthe la sruth dáig ba coll ng[e]jisse do maccait Nechta Scéne aní sin"¹¹²

("And Cú Chulainn cast the wither that was on the pillar-stone as far as his arm could throw it out into the river and let it float downstream because that was a violation of the taboos of the sons of Nechtan Scéne")

He then went asleep leaving Ibor to keep watch telling him not to disturb him unless a large crowd attacked. Ibor was terrified when the three sons of Nechta Scéne arrived and he said to them "you have no reason to incur the enmity of the ulaid"¹¹³ but they

¹¹⁰ Ford, P: 'The idea of everlasting fame in the Táin' *Ulidia* 1994

¹¹¹ Ford, P: 'The idea of everlasting fame in the Táin' *Ulidia* 1994 page 258.

¹¹² O'Rahilly, C: *Táin Bó Cuailnge* DIAS page 22

¹¹³ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 144

started mocking Cú Chulainn calling him a boy unworthy of combat and they told the charioteer to get him off their land. Cú Chulainn awoke and challenged them, the three sons of Nechta Scéne thought this would be an easy win so they accepted. Each one attacked and Ibor tells Cú Chulainn of their special traits. Cú Chulainn slays them all and takes their head and weapons. I believe that the sons of Nechta Scéna were named after the Skayne river in the Skreen valley and that they were the supernatural protectors of Tara. We know their territory was right beside Tara and their name cannot be coincidence. Cú Chulainn violated the river, a *geiss* of theirs and violated their boundaries. He threw something into the river polluting it and to provoke them to attack him for revenge of all the Ulstermen they had killed. They mock him and tell him to leave because he was trespassing on sacred ground. When he kills the guardians of the sacred area of Tara he has offended the otherworld and so just like Conaire Mór he is doomed, but in Cú Chulainn's case to be an unstable force and from then on and the otherworld had a right to interfere in his life for taking this action against them. They spend the rest of his life the otherworld provokes him, most of the time this leads to his *riastrad*. The otherworld bird motif is continued here the description of the second son called Fannall was that he could tread water and is compared to a swan or swallow. The sons of Nechta Scéne have always been described as a supernatural entity parallel to the three headed monster that the hero faces in other literature. In Heroic biographies usually the mother of the slain supernatural creature attacks the hero in grief but in this tale they flee and just here her screams from afar, warning them never to trespass here again. The repercussions of his bad behaviour are visible for the rest of his life.

Cú Chulainn had been overtaken by his battle fury and was eager for hunting. On the way home they came upon a herd of deer, Cú Chulainn asks Ibor what they are and he tells him, Cú Chulainn asks if it would be a better feat to bring them home alive or dead, alive the charioteer replies so Cú Chulainn traps and captures a deer and ties it to the chariot. The same happens with a flock of swans, so Cú Chulainn captures one alive and ties it to the chariot. So he arrives at Emhain with swans flying over head, deer riding beside the chariot with three bloody heads attached and Cú Chulainn in his *riastrad*. Cú Chulainn is a berserker so when he gets angry or goes to battle he metamorphosis, he distorts both physically and mentally and can no longer distinguish friend or foe. He is very liminal in that he is left outside society not really conscious of

what he's doing and everyone is terrified of his destructive capabilities. He cannot control this change or his behaviour while in the battle rage; he cannot even change back to his original state. While distorted he is dangerous and cannot be let back into civilisation. Cú Chulainn turned the chariot to the left of Emhain a *geiss* for the capital and demanded that warriors be sent to meet him in combat or he would kill everyone inside. He is liminal in his battle rage no words will calm him only the shocking gesture of fifty of the Ulster women sent out to meet him naked and baring their breasts to him has an effect on him, he hid his face and they captured him. He must be cooled before he can be restored both physically and psychologically reintegrated into society. They plunged into three vats of cold water. The first burst with heat the second bubbled boiling and the third was lukewarm. After his distortion the queen gave him a blue cloak and he sat at the king's side, he must reappear in society to show he has been restored, to repay and repair the social structure and psychological damage he had done while berserk.

Dumézil suggested to Sjoestedt that at the end of this episode the boy has sexually come of age by seeing the women naked and that the sacred number seven was inscribed all over him. His relationship with women is on a different level now and he then receives his man's clothes from the queen and takes his place at the king's throne.¹¹⁴ He is abashed by the women and hides his face, maybe this is suggesting that he is growing up a little too fast¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁴ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' page 66.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Cormier, R. J., "Pagan shame or christian modesty?" *Celtica* 14 (1981) 43-6.

ACQUIRES A WIFE

*Tochmarc Emere*¹¹⁶

The warriors of Ulster were wary of their wives, daughters and sisters because as described in *Serglige Con Culainn* the three main Ulster heroes had a female fan base. They loved him for his dexterity, beauty, wisdom, valour and gifts. Society decided it was time Cú Chulainn got married, they knew he would not live long and wanted him to leave an heir whom they thought might be an incarnation of him. After nine men searched Ireland for a year to find him a wife he chose Emer daughter of Forgall from Luglocht Loga¹¹⁷. It is very interesting that Cú Chulainn chooses a wife from a place called 'the gardens of Lug' and that this area is on the very boarder of Ulster. This reinforces just how liminal our hero is. It also adds weight to the theory that Cú Chulainn was the human incarnation of his god father Lug so where else would he go for a wife. He choose her because she was equal to him, she had the six gifts of beauty, voice, sweet speech, needlework, wisdom and charity. He went out to visit her it is said a "flock of swift birds follow him"¹¹⁸ he is again surrounded by birds. When they met they spoke in the druids rhetoric so none listening could understand them because he didn't want anyone to know he was wooing her. They are able to talk in secret because of their intelligence they both know the secret language.

She explained that she could not marry before her older sister but Cú Chulainn had fallen in love with her, he also wanted to marry a virgin. He could see her breasts and when he complemented her on them she described what he would have to do to gain her. She said he must slay one hundred men between Scenn Menn and Banchuing Arcait, also "no one comes to this plain who has not achieved the feat of leaping over three walls and slaying three times nine men at one blow, one of each of my brothers being in each group, yet preserve the brother in the midst of them alive; and then accompanied by them and my foster-sister, bring out my weight in gold"¹¹⁹. The Celtic

¹¹⁶ Van Hamel, A.G: Tochmarc Emire in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories, Medieval and modern Irish Series III* DIAS 1978 page 16-68.

¹¹⁷ 'The Gardens of Lug' Cross and Slover: *Ancient Irish tales*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969 page 155.

¹¹⁸ Cross and Slover: *Ancient Irish tales*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969 page 156

¹¹⁹ Cross and Slover: *Ancient Irish tales*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969 page 160.

triplicity motif is prevalent in the story, three or multiples of three are used everywhere, nine men, six gifts, the achievements to get Emer are all three times, She asked him to explain himself, he said “I am the nephew of the man that disappears in another in the wood of Badb”¹²⁰. Forgall was not impressed when he found out that the Monster of Ulster wanted to woo his daughter so he disguised himself and went to court to persuade the King of Ulster to send Cú Chulainn to Donall the Soldierly in Alba¹²¹ hoping that he would train with Scathach and die there. While he was away training Forgall tried to set Emer up with another man but she explained her promise of chastity and love for Cú Chulainn, the man was so scared of Cú Chulainn that he went home. Meanwhile he had multiple affairs while away. Sexual promiscuity seemed to go hand in hand with the wild warrior lifestyle¹²² but at least it was in the otherworld. He was faithful to her in Ireland. He comes back for her at Samhain and does what she told him to and takes her home with him.

It shows how much they feared and respected their top warrior because it was the custom that the king got to spend the first night with the new bride but a compromise was made to accommodate everyone’s ego and good name, that they slept in the same bed with a warrior and druid between them thus adhering to tradition and not angering the volatile hero.

This wooing has all the characteristics that usually show up in these types of tales. A hostile father, dangerous journeys through strange lands with difficult tasks before he can escape with her. And Emer embodies everything a proper bride should; feminine, beautiful, enchanting and proper manners.¹²³ A wooing is a seal of social conformity and initiation, the marriage is appointed by a common social secession to remove the disorder that Cú Chulainn is symbolising as an eligible virile young man and promote the young warrior to the status of a married man the only choice he gets is who he marries.¹²⁴

The birds also show themselves in this story, he arrives with birds flying over him and he mentions himself a kinsman of Badb the raven. He then becomes related to Derborgaill the otherworld woman who is also a bird by sucking her blood.

¹²⁰ Another allusion to the raven otherworld goddess.

¹²¹ Scotland.

¹²² McCone Hound, wolf and warrior among the Indo-Europeans 1987.

¹²³ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 259.

¹²⁴ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ 1982.

The story ends with the statement that Emer and Cú Chulainn would be together forever. There is no mention of a wedding as you might expect in a heroes life. In Ireland the big event was the engagement, it usually involved the payment of money making the woman the fiancée's property and a feast. After this the couple is free have intercourse. Sometimes there wasn't a marriage ceremony. In Cú Chulainn's case he had proved his worth to Emer, killed his only obstacles her parents and got her and her foster sister's weight in gold for his work.

VISITS TO THE OTHERWORLD

Tochmarc Emere and Serglige Con Culainn

Cú Chulainn is essentially epitomised as the ultimate warrior hero of both worlds, real and supernatural. The most important of these is *Tochmarc Emere* the other journey is a late tale and so we still don't understand its significance because most heroes only venture once into the otherworldly. The most liminal elements of Cú Chulainn's biography are his trips to the other world. He makes two trips and they are a huge contrast. Elements of parallel can be seen though. The hero is the eternal solitary, he who preserves when others turn back. He makes these voyages at Samhain, this is a very liminal time of year, when interaction between real and otherworld people would be most frequent. He meets a lot of otherworldly figures some who help and some who hinder.

Tochmarc Emere

In this tale he meets helping otherworld figures like the man on the road and negative figures like the ones who mock him, the lads on the lake and the hag Éis. The mist would be in keeping with the mysterious location of the Otherworld, as it essentially hides its true location. Also it more commonly occurs at the transitional or liminal periods of the day, dawn or dusk, thus supporting Cú Chulainn's liminal passage from one world to the next. Cú Chulainn's ability to travel through this passage to the Otherworld alone perhaps can be linked to his divine parentage as well as the fact that the hero must always go on ahead alone. Cú Chulainn is not an ordinary human, perhaps he has thus exhausted the resources of the ordinary world and thus is drawn to the superior powers of his divine parentage to epitomise his character and training. Scáthach's island home is protected from unwanted intrusion by a deceptive bridge. The bridge continues the passage from the profane to the sacred Otherworld. Bridges are commonly represented as a passage or perhaps obstacle to the Otherworld. He must cross an enchanted bridge that only the apprentices of Scathach can cross. On his third attempt he uses his salmon leap to cross the bride. These otherworld voyages don't show Cú Chulainn in a very flattering light, he never failed at anything in his life or maybe this show that it is harder to achieve martial honour in the otherworld thus if

he passes he will be the best warrior in the real world. Scathach's name unsurprisingly means shadowy one.

In keeping with the heroic biography of Cú Chulainn, we are presented with accounts of Cú Chulainn overcoming a number of warriors despite being outnumbered and presumably overcoming a number of warriors who have trained in the Otherworld and are thus by their very nature highly skilled.

In the otherworld Cú Chulainn seems to be relieved from his responsibilities in the real world, he has two affairs- one woman becomes pregnant with his son, despite his engagement and pledge of chastity to Emer.

Cú Chulainn's encounter with a one eyed hag, at the borders of the Otherworld is also of a precarious nature. We are presented with a liminal image of him hanging by his big toe from the side of a cliff, perhaps at the edge of the Otherworld. We can see here he is being the good obliging positive martial figure. He must kill her in self-defence. She was an otherworld female demon called Éis Énchenn meaning Birdhead who was blind in her left eye. This clearly shows in the Irish literature that she was some kind of sorceress as the daughters of Calatin were also blinded in the left eye.¹²⁵ She was killing him for revenge of her three sons who he killed in Aífe's army.

Cú Chulainn thus completed his training in arms in style and thus was given the secret weapon of the *gae bolga*. Cú Chulainn essentially returns to the ordinary world with the Otherworldly weapon of the *gae bolga* that is the physical manifestation of ultimate warrior success and training. Thus true to the heroic biographical Otherworldly visit, the hero returns from the ordinary world superior in character.

On his way home he meets and rescues Derbhorgaill on an island at Samhain. Again a lot of liminal elements can be seen here. When they meet again a year later he sucks a stone out of her and so drink her blood, so she is his kin by blood not by family a very liminal relationship. The second time they meet she comes to him as a bird showing her otherworld connections.

Within the heroic biography as outlined by De Vries, the hero's visit to the Otherworld is thus complete. Cú Chulainn has the physical manifestation of his ultimate warrior status, thus essentially has no reason to visit the Otherworld again. Thus it becomes difficult to put the saga *Serglige Con Culainn* into context as a literary piece. Indeed

¹²⁵ 'birdhead' Kinsella 33, page 56

to the extent that it seems 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.'¹²⁶ Nonetheless we cannot simply ignore the Otherworld elements and motifs because they do not slot easily into our literary typologies. Clearly it cannot be understood as component of the heroic biographical pattern. The hero has essentially gained nothing from this visit. Cú Chulainn is the quintessential hero, thus he does not need to return to the Otherworld, to master his skills. Then again if other heroes only visit the otherworld once and Cú Chulainn is the ultimate Irish hero maybe they exaggerated his biography by giving him a second trip to surpass all other heroes. Maybe because the otherworld was so important in the literature they concentrated on this aspect as opposed to fighting a monster that wasn't an important issue in Ireland. In *Aided Derbhorgaill*¹²⁷ it snows when Cú Chulainn goes to meet her this is reminiscent of the snow at his birth and when they set out at the start of the *Táin*, this suggests to me it is Samhain.¹²⁸ In her death tale he kills the one hundred and fifty queens who murdered her thus explaining a place name as occurs so often in early Irish material.

Serglige Con Culainn

"He is victory, the embodiment of a spirit no boundaries can contain"¹²⁹ This quote by Rees and Rees shows that the liminal hero can permeate the boundaries into the otherworld and the ordinary rules don't seem to apply there. The otherworld is clearly affecting the hero in this story. The Ulstermen were celebrating Samhain at Mag Muirthemni and so this story also starts at this liminal time of year.

A flock of beautiful birds landed on the lake, the women of Ulster all wanted a pair for their shoulders. Lebarcham went to Cú Chulainn and asked him to get the birds for the women. Not impressed he insults the Ulster women and replied 'have the sluts of Ulster nothing better for us than to hunt their birds?' she reprimanded him reminding him that he was the reason a third of the women blinded themselves in his likeness

¹²⁶ Carney, J

¹²⁷ Marstrander, C: (ed) 'Aided Derbhorgaill' *Ériu* 5, 1911 page 201-8.

¹²⁸ page 208 in the text and page 214 in the translation.

¹²⁹ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 258.

because they loved him¹³⁰. Cú Chulainn captured the birds but after giving them out there was none left for his own wife. Cú Chulainn promised her two different birds more beautiful than the ones he just caught. Two swans connected by a silver chain landed on the lake singing an enchanting song. The swans are obviously otherworld birds letting us know that something strange is going on, they are the same kind as the ones at his birth. In his birth following the birds brought a positive outcome; the conception of Cú Chulainn but in this story following the birds nearly kills him. His wife recognises the otherworld signs and warns him not to go but he must because of his geiss that he must bring down at least one of the birds that fly over his territory.

He shot three times and missed twice wounding one of them the third time. The swan sank in to the lake and went underwater. Only in the otherworld stories does he ever miss a shot.

Two women appeared to Cú Chulainn. They sung a sleeping enchantment upon him. In a vision two women came to him and whipped him until he was nearly dead. He lay in a sick bed for a whole year. When Samhan approached again Oengus son of Aed Abrat came to him and invited him to the other world to heal and where his sister Fand was waiting for Cú Chulainn. He went back to the stone where he fell asleep and met one of the women. She said all they wanted was friendship and now she had a message from her husband Labraid and from his sister Fand who's husband Mananán mac Lir had left her. She told him if Cú Chulainn fought for Labraid he could have Fand. In a cowardly way Cú Chulainn sent his charioteer to learn more. They crossed to an island in a lake, he was welcomed by Labraid and Fand. He came home and told Cú Chulainn about it and was sent back again. In the story the charioteer goes to the otherworld three times for Cú Chulainn, this is either the Celtic thriplicity motif, a version of O'Rahilly's repetition motif¹³¹ or just very bad editing. Emer came to Cú Chulainn and gave out to him for being lazy. He went to the otherworld and there two druidic ravens announced his presence and the otherworld people were worried and frightened the ravens off. The term 'Ravens' is used here in Gantz edition but it is translated wrong¹³², there were no ravens in Ireland The ravens announcing him is

¹³⁰ Is this an allusion to sorcery or his Formorian background or as McCone argues just a symbolic consequence of the warrior lifestyle.

¹³¹ O'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975 page 13.

¹³² On page 20 of the original text they were called *fiach* which we use the word raven as the closest type of bird.

reminiscent of his boyhood deeds where the raven Bodb mocks him.

He was asked to fight and he did. He defeated the other army in a frenzy and had to be cooled in water like in his boyhood deeds. Lowe¹³³ believes that Cú Chulainn embodies contradictions, even his body is unstable and threatening, this dichotomy McCone believes to be inherent in the warrior class. He is a threat to society as a berserker and undermines the very idea of heroism. He embodies the instability of Samhain the liminal time of year. He has no self control. He is a victim of circumstances and of his bodies' contortions as much as everyone else is.

He spent a month with Fand as his wife and leaves promising to meet her at Ibor Cind Tráichta. He brings his mistress home and breaks moral and social rules this way. Emer hears this and goes to meet them with fifty women armed with knives. Cú Chulainn protects Fand but he is disturbed by Emer's words. She sees Fand as no better than her just "new" and "bright", what "is familiar neglected". Cú Chulainn admits he wanted Emer for ever when they married so Fond says she will give him up. Emer replies no I'll give him up. Fond says no she should be "abandoned" and so she sings a lament. Mananán mac Lir comes for her and she goes reluctantly because Cú Chulainn has Emer and Mananán mac Lir is alone like her she doesn't love him anymore but "love is a vain thing it vanishes quickly".¹³⁴

He seems a pathetic hero in this story, he runs off to sulk in the mountains. He seems almost unrecognisable as the Cú Chulainn we know from the other stories. He goes to the mountain of Munster and takes no food or drink until Emer intervenes to the king and the druids. The druids give him and Emer a drink so they will forget the whole episode. Mananán mac Lir shakes his cloak between Cú Chulainn and Fond so they will never meet again. In this story the otherworld god restores society.

Lowe, Nagy and Ó'Cathasaigh agree that he was always unstable and restless because of the unpredictable and uncontrollable force inside him. His actions consequences permeate society and rock it's institutions like marriage to the core. In this story he embodies social disorder. His life is completely constrained by his obligations. He is controlled by supernatural forces within him, and the otherworld forces around him, he must obey his king, he is controlled by women and he is restrained by his

¹³³ Lowe, J: 'Kicking over the traces- the instability of CúChulainn' *Studia Celtica* xxxiv 2000 pp 119-130.

¹³⁴ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 307.

responsibilities of a hero and as guardian of society.¹³⁵

Gantz described this tale as “part myth, part history and part soap opera”¹³⁶ the text is very unusual because it is a composite of two different versions. “After the first quarter of the tale, there appears an interpolation detailing Cú Chulainn’s advice to Lugaid Reader after the latter has been made king of Tara... Cú Chulainn is married to Emer instead of Eithne Ingubai... the two versions have not been well integrated and much evidence of confusion and duplication remains.”¹³⁷ It’s as if the two versions had different agendas and so our final conflation is very confused. They seem to be very fond of ‘cutting and pasting’ from other manuscripts whole chunks of literature. There have been differences of opinion about the origins of the *Briathartheosc* section and its relationship with the rest of the tale. The *Briathartheosc Con Culainn* is the advice that Cú Chulainn gives to his foster son Lugaid Roederg from his sick bed before he leaves after he is chosen by the *Tarb Feis* to become the king of Tara . The most important element of the *Briathartheosc* is it shows Cú Chulainn as intelligent and dispensing his wisdom immediately after he has acquired knowledge from the Otherworld. It also shows him again assuming the duties of the king. It is usually the wise old king bestowing his learning upon the new king but here it is suggesting to me again that the otherworld and the kingdom’s sovereignty are related if not controlled by the otherworld and that the mediator between them and the real world the hero is the one who speaks for them.

In both these otherworld stories we see Cú Chulainn training in the otherworld, in the liminal land of shadows. “Thus the heroes military training, which began within the tribe is completed at the court of formidable otherworld queens who are both teachers and warriors”¹³⁸. He is confronted by hostile forces and taught the secrets by supernatural women. Cú Chulainn the almost invulnerable hero even obtains scars from this training.

In both *Tochmarc Emer* and *Serglige Con Culainn* we see Cú Chulainn having violent and sexual relations with otherworld women like Scathach, her daughter, Aífe and

¹³⁵ Lowe, J: ‘Kicking over the traces- the instability of CúChulainn’ *Studia Celtica xxxiv* 2000 pp 119-130.

¹³⁶ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 153.

¹³⁷ Gantz: *Early Irish myths and sagas*, Penguin 1981 page 153.

¹³⁸ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 ‘The hero of the tribe’ page 76

Fand. This shows another international motif of the joining between apprentice and teacher as a symbol of the pupil bonding with his profession. In these tales he is humiliated and elevated and the positive trait seems to be the one celebrated this also functions as an imitation of educating the adolescent about how to behave in adult society.¹³⁹ It also demonstrates McCone's theory mentioned above that sexual promiscuity is an intrinsic part of the warrior lifestyle. At least he is only unfaithful in the otherworld where it doesn't seem to count.

The Celtic Triplicity motif is seen in both tales quite obviously: in both stories he fails three times and he asks three things of the otherworld women. Other comparisons are he is satirised by otherworldly figures, beaten and overpowered by otherworld women, the sites of the otherworld are both islands, the tales centre around Samhain, Birds are a strong motif and the hero is not seen in a flattering positive light in either tale. In both stories the otherworld figures mocking him provokes him into *riastrad*.

Birds are typical otherworld creatures that can easily cross the boundaries of the two worlds.¹⁴⁰ We saw a flock of birds laying waste to Emhain, the swans connected by golden chains, Derborgaill as a bird and the hag Éis who's name means birdhead.

Cú Chulainn was never expelled from his home like other heroes but his voyages to the otherworld do have similar motifs. He does leave Ulster completely and then come back assuming a new position in society.

¹³⁹ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 257.

¹⁴⁰ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 308.

DEATH

*Brislech Mōr Maige Muirthemne*¹⁴¹

Medb made the sons and daughters of Calatin sorcerers to avenge their father. They were blinded in the left eye and sent to train in Scotland¹⁴², England, Babylon and hell for seventeen years where Vulcan made them three swords, daggers and spears to kill Cú Chulainn. He had also killed the king of Tara and so Medb gathered an army of his enemies for revenge to invade Ulster. The Ulstermen were incapacitated by their pangs and so couldn't help him.

From the start of the tale everyone knows Cú Chulainn is destined to die. Everything tries to delay him at the start of his journey to Maige Muirthemne: The Morrigan¹⁴³ destroys his chariot during the night, his horse won't be harnessed and his cloak clasp breaks. He is warned over and over again by signs like his weapons falling, his broach breaking and stabbing his foot and his broken chariot. Everyone else knows he is doomed too, this makes reading the story more harrowing because all his loved ones plead with him to stay. His faithful horse turns and won't be harnessed while weeping blood. The women of Ulster also weep and beg him not to go because they know he wasn't coming home from this fight. He has a last drink with his foster mum, some say the cup of milk turns to blood and his clothes are full of blood.

Cú Chulainn is set up to break his *geissi*. On his way he to battle he meets three hags who trap him between two of his *geissi* of not eating dog and not passing a feast. They poison a dog and stew it, he knows that he shouldn't eat but when reprimanded he is reminded of his social obligations so he submits. Just like Conaire Mór he cannot avoid breaking his *geiss* now and this is a sure sign that his death is near at hand. By eating the dog "Cú Chulainn partakes of himself... the opposition of eater and eaten... is superseded"¹⁴⁴. The hags seal his fate, the hero dies at Samhain the same time of year he was born a time of opposites, liminality and ambiguity. When the stew touches him it disfigures him. He reverts to his Formorian ancestry he becomes half a man with only

¹⁴¹ Tymoczko, M: *Two death tales*, (Dolmen Press 1981).

¹⁴² Scotland was notorious as an otherworld place this is where Cú Chulainn's otherworld voyages started.

¹⁴³ Another otherworld death goddess a sister to Badb who also appears as a raven.

¹⁴⁴ Rees A and B: *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961 page 335.

one eye, leg and arm. This strips him of his mystical powers and makes him easier to take down by the army. He also encounters a kind of time warp where he performs the same actions three times. This is probably another example of the Celtic Triplexity motif. The sons of Calatin Dana try to trap him with his *geiss* again but this time with the power of words and satire but Cú Chulainn out smarts them three times and kills them all. At one point in the fight Cú Chulainn asks for time out to get a drink. He waddles off to the lake holding in his intestines, he is half alive with his insides half in and half out. The loaded liminal image of him holding his intestines shows us a lot about martial death. He is still allowed a time to recuperate in this civilised fight. He goes to the lake to drink but kills an otter¹⁴⁵ by mistake and then knows he is doomed because it was foretold to him that his career would begin and end with the killing of a dog. He wants to fight to his last breath so he ties himself to a standing stone and continues to defend himself until the heroes' moon fades from him and he dies. The Morrigan in the shape of a black bird lands on his shoulder to symbolise his death. So his life is framed by birds from his birth to the black bird of death. His enemy Lugaid the son of Cú Roí carefully approaches and beheads him but Cú Chulainn's sword falls from his hand and strikes off his enemies arm. Conall Cernach gets revenge and kills Lugaid and brings Cú Chulainn's body back to Emhain to bury it, Emer is devastated and throws herself on the grave and dies, thus she was buried with him. The death of a great hero is usually prophesied and the hero knows he is doomed from the outset. Cú Chulainn knows this when he sets out on his last journey, his death ride. This is liminal because he is in the inescapable journey of no return to his death meaning he is half dead and alive. It is accepted that a hero's death is the climax of his career. Extraordinary hero means a glorious death. "Death is highlighted by familiar elements reserved for the greatest hero: he is caught by conflicting demands of his gesso and his honour, he dies... at the hands of overwhelming forces... his death is presaged by portents and prophesy"¹⁴⁶ The story doesn't end with the death of the hero but in a familiar 'satirical anti-climactic style' that we also see used in '*Mac Dá Tho's pig*' the story continues after the massacre. In one way it nearly reinforces the continuity of the heroic lifestyle where the coda of vengeance and fighting continues.

¹⁴⁵ Known in Irish as water-dog.

¹⁴⁶ O'Cathasaigh, T: *The heroic biography of Cormaic MacAirt*, Dias 1975.

One great hero dies but another warrior takes his place. Ymoczky stated in her article that it was Cú Chulainn's treachery of Cú Roí that led to his downfall but I don't agree. I think he needed a good heroic death to conclude his heroic biography. She describes his death as vicious and impetuous because of his treachery.

"Violent death is the crowning of the hero's career. Incarnating all human values and charged with the whole burden of human destiny, he finds completion only in death"¹⁴⁷. but how can this magnificent warrior die undefeated? How can he be killed without disgrace? They make him the victim of trickery so his defeat is not real by introducing a force without heroism, the witches trick him with his *geiss*.¹⁴⁸ Thus he dies with his honour intact. This didactic tale of how to die well sees him in the end fighting to the last standing up with a sword in his hand. Amazingly even after he has been beheaded¹⁴⁹ he manages to cut off his murderer's arm, this is truly the ultimate liminal hero.

Cú Chulainn's *geiss* feature very strongly in this tale, he must adhere to them even though they are public knowledge and it is them destroying him. Like the exemplary hero should he do the right thing even though it means his life. His *geissi* mean that he must oversee all the boundaries of Ulster as guardian; the land and men, the air and birds and the water and fish. Also interestingly all the animals he is associated with are cannibals and attack and eat each other, but his *geiss* stops him from eating himself. Some *geissi* are objective attached to an object, place or occupation but most are personal multiform doom *geiss*, their like an unconditional prohibition for a more sacred person.¹⁵⁰ Some of Cú Chulainn's are that he cannot eat dog, give his name to any warrior, not allow a warrior to trespass on his territory without confrontation, not allow birds to feed without bringing some down or let fish come to the top of a river without catching some. He basically must protect the territory and know the movement of every foreigner inside. This reinforces Philip O' Leary's belief that *geiss* are common sense rules made by the otherworld that the hero is honour bound to observe. Most of them we can't explain but others seem obvious common sense advice for a hero or king. It ensures the protection of the individual, community and social order through

¹⁴⁷ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1982 page 77.

¹⁴⁸ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1982 page 77.

¹⁴⁹ McCone identifies this as the Celtic Headhunting motif in *Pagan Past and Christian Present* 2000.

¹⁵⁰ Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1982.

constant vigilance. They are sanctions sustaining the Irish ideology of heroism and kingship. The king and hero were guarantors and symbols of political, social and cosmic harmony. Usually the most dramatic part of the death tale is the agonizing ethical crisis where the hero is divided by two *geissi* just like Cú Chulainn at the hag's feast of poisoned dog. In true heroic fashion they always choose to break their personal *geiss* to limit the social damage. They humbly sacrifice their own *geiss* and their lives for the greater need of the society. This is ultimately the right choice because he receives an exemplary, honourable death.¹⁵¹

In this tale we see that Cú Chulainn lacked the most important attribute bestowed upon heroes invulnerability, we are told in an earlier story after a fight that he was badly wounded. He was invincible but the hags had to break this attribute to make him mortal, they were not making him vulnerable so he could be injured they were making him mortal so he could be killed. It still took magical weapons to injure him though and only when he was dead did they dare approach, this was how formidable he was in life. Sjoestedt suggests the Irish denied him invulnerability because it could "maybe diminish him in their eyes, for it offended against the ideal of Celtic heroism which involved a suicidal extreme"¹⁵². He was not invulnerable but he was an incredibly skilled great warrior, it makes him more of an inspiration to the real life warriors if he also had to endure they pains they endured after battle.

McCone sees many parallel's between Christ and Cú Chulainn; their lives overlap by a year, "each has a divine father but is known as the son of a mortal father, each dies for his people erect and pierced with a spear"¹⁵³ immobilized between life and death. They both ask for a drink when dying and they both appear after their death.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ O' Leary, P: 'Honour bound; the social context of early Irish heroic geis' *Celtica* 20 page 85-107

¹⁵² Sjoestedt, M-L: *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, Chapter 6 'The hero of the tribe' 1982 page 68-69

¹⁵³ McCone, K: *Pagan Past and Christian present*, Maynooth Monographs 3, 2000 page 197.

¹⁵⁴ McCone, K: *Pagan Past and Christian present*, Maynooth Monographs 3, 2000

CONCLUSION

Cú Chulainn was the ultimate hero, he always did the right thing, guarded and upheld societal values even though in his case he was never really integrated into society. He was always restless because he was half man half monster that he couldn't even control. In this way he is a threat to his people and his kingdom's social structure. He is both the biggest asset and liability that they have. He had no self-control and embodied the social disorder of Samhain, his *riastrad* seem to be given and triggered by the otherworld. Just like every hero before him that fills the heroic biography he grew fast and strong, performed manly feats while still a boy and was invincible, fighting whole armies single handedly. He received his social responsibilities at seven by killing a hound and assuming its function and his whole life both in the real world and the otherworld- including his *geiss* were all about becoming the best warrior so he could defend the borders of his province. He negotiated the liminal thresholds of society with every interaction. He had two journeys to the other world that are packed with liminal images just like his life in the real world. Images of bridges, islands, cliffs, infidelity, failure and capture. Birds are typical otherworld symbols of supernatural episodes as well as being the animal most often used to metamorphosis into and birds are also in every story. The otherworld was always part of him but also interfered in his life in every story for both good and ill. Personally I believe that Cú Chulainn did not have a mortal descendent is because they could never surpass the ultimate Irish hero? His wife was from the gardens of Lug on the borders of the province that he must guard but although they were together most of his life they never had children, his only son was by an otherworld woman, who he kills. Emer was always faithful to her husband but he was unfaithful in the otherworld, infidelity comes with the heroic lifestyle and doesn't seem to matter in the otherworld. His death tale is sadly the culmination of all his liminal liabilities of being a hero: he must face his journey to his death and fight an army alone, he is manipulated into breaking his *geissi* reducing him to half the man he was and stripping him of his supernatural powers, he eventually dies in the most liminal way possible: at a lake with his insides spilling out, tied standing to a pillar fighting even after his death.

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