



# ‘My only friend is my charioteer’: Láeg mac Ríangabra in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

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This paper examines the portrayal of Cú Chulainn’s charioteer, Láeg mac Ríangabra, across different recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. I will demonstrate how each recension emphasises different aspects of Láeg’s character in the form of unique episodes or, more subtly, through small differences in shared scenes. In doing so, I will highlight Láeg’s crucial contribution to the story of *TBC*, the complexities of his characterisation, and his potential to help illuminate the tale’s development.

**Keywords:** *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Láeg mac Ríangabra, Cú Chulainn, friendship, social status, narrative doubles, brothers, hierarchy

*Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*TBC*) is often viewed as the climax of Cú Chulainn’s heroic career.<sup>1</sup> With the warriors of the Ulaid laid low by a curse and the massed armies of Ireland invading the territory, the seventeen-year-old hero mounts a lonely defence of his homeland, defeating every opponent in single combat until at last the Ulaid rise from their sickbeds. This solitary figure has been memorialised as a symbol of doomed youth or heroic glory – but Cú Chulainn is not entirely alone. With him is Láeg mac Ríangabra, his charioteer.

Láeg is a curious character. He is rarely considered as an individual in his own right, treated instead as another weapon in Cú Chulainn’s arsenal, both in the medieval texts and in scholarly discussion of them, and as such, his characterisation has not been explored in depth. *TBC* provides the most detailed medieval portrayal of Láeg, since he functions here as Cú Chulainn’s closest and often only companion throughout the lengthy text. He is a mirror or narrative foil, doubling and reflecting Cú Chulainn; he is an advisor and strategist, guiding Cú Chulainn and ensuring his behaviour stays within societally demarcated boundaries; and he is an intermediary and messenger, enabling communication between Cú Chulainn and his enemies and friends. Although he is rarely foregrounded, his role is essential, and he provides advice, military support, and information, enabling Cú Chulainn’s victories. But he is also Cú Chulainn’s

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1 This article originated as a chapter of my MA thesis, and I wish to thank Kevin Murray for his supervisory guidance, as well as the editors, the two anonymous reviewers, and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for their helpful comments on this article. Any errors remaining are, of course, my own.

friend, and on numerous occasions the two are seen playing board games (*fidchell* or *búanbach*) between combats.

While many aspects of Láeg's character are portrayed consistently across all recensions of *TBC*, there are key differences between them. As such, it is worth outlining briefly the versions of the text under discussion:

1. The first recension (*TBC1*), as edited and translated by Cecile O'Rahilly (1976). This is the earliest version under discussion, originally composed in the Old Irish period – perhaps in the ninth century – and later reworked in the eleventh century (Herbert, 2009, 211). It survives incompletely in four manuscripts, of which the earliest is *Lebor na hUidre*, dated c. 1100.<sup>2</sup> *TBC1* offers a complex picture of Láeg as a strategist and advisor, guiding Cú Chulainn's actions and with significant power over and responsibility for his master's honour and status.
2. The second recension (*TBC2*), in the form of the Book of Leinster text (*TBC-LL*),<sup>3</sup> edited and translated by Cecile O'Rahilly (1967), and the 'Stowe' text (*TBC-St*), edited by Cecile O'Rahilly (1961).<sup>4</sup> The text in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster is dated to the Middle Irish period (Mac Gearailt 1992). The Stowe text represents a modernised reworking of the second recension, designated 'Recension IIB' by Thurneysen (1921, 115); the seventeenth-century 'Stowe' manuscript (RIA MS C vi 3) is the oldest copy.<sup>5</sup> Thurneysen (1921, 117) dated the text to the fifteenth century, but more detailed scholarship on its date is needed. In *TBC2*,

2 The manuscripts of *TBC1* are: Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25 (1229), *Lebor na hUidre* (LU), ff. 55a–82b; Trinity College Dublin MS 1318 (*olim* H 2.16), the Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL), pp. 17a–53a; British Library MS Egerton 1782, ff. 88r–105v; and Maynooth, Russell Library MS 3a1, O'Curry MS 1, pp. 1–76. No single manuscript is complete. O'Rahilly edits the text from LU and YBL, with variant readings in footnotes. All quotations given as *TBC1* are from this edition.

3 Trinity College Dublin MS 1339 (*olim* H 2.18), the Book of Leinster (LL), ff. 53b–104b.

4 In the following discussion, '*TBC2*' refers to both manuscripts; primary citations will be from LL, given as *TBC-LL*, with reference to *TBC-St* where it differs. Translations of quotations from *TBC-St* are my own, since O'Rahilly does not include a translation in her edition. Partial translations of Stowe exist: Ernst Windisch translated portions of it into German in his edition of *TBC-LL* (1905), while Joseph Dunn (1914) rendered some passages into English. However, neither treats the text separately from LL and the combination of recensions makes these translations less useful for comparative study. I have on occasion consulted Dunn's English text for guidance, but my translation does not directly follow his.

5 Royal Irish Academy MS C vi 3 (740), ff. 28ra–65vb. Later manuscripts of this recension (some incomplete) include: National Library of Scotland Adv. MS 72.2.9 and MS 14873; Trinity College Dublin MSS 1362 (H 4.21) and 1287 (H 1.13); National Library of Ireland MS G 457; Maynooth Russell Library MS M 103; British Library MS Add. 18748; Royal Irish Academy MSS 24 M 10; 23 A 23; 24 B 1; 23 E 11; and 23 G 28. For further discussion of these manuscripts see O'Rahilly (1961: 1–1vi).

Láeg's narrative influence is diminished in comparison with *TBC1*, but his role as a messenger is developed, and the expansion of the 'Comrac Fir Diad' episode foregrounds his role as a double of Cú Chulainn, as well as the importance of the trust and emotional connection between the pair. Already present in *TBC-LL*, this element is emphasised further in *TBC-St*, where Láeg's loyalty to Cú Chulainn brings him into conflict with his brother Id.

3. The third recension (*TBC3*) is fragmentary, and its relationship to the other recensions is complex (see O'Rahilly 1961: xv–xxiv; Mac Gearailt 1994). It is found in British Library MS Egerton 93, edited by Max Nettlau (1893–94), and Trinity College MS 1319, edited by Thurneysen (1912b).<sup>6</sup> Ó Bearra (1996) translated the combined fragments from his own edition. This recension has been dated to the thirteenth century (Ó Béarra 1994: 76; Mac Gearailt 1994: 70). The fragmentary nature of *TBC3* means that it offers few direct comparisons of a sort that might illuminate Láeg's character development, so my discussion will focus primarily on *TBC1* and *TBC2*. However, it does offer occasional glimpses of a new or altered role for Láeg.

The shifts in emphasis observable in the depiction of Láeg's character demonstrate the redactors' priorities, and enable us to observe how changing literary tastes and conventions – as well as more specific concerns, such as *TBC-St*'s focus on the question of fairness in single combats – shape the way characters like Láeg are portrayed and their role within the tale. A close reading of this understudied figure is therefore not only vital to understanding Láeg himself, but also sheds new light on *TBC* and its development more broadly.

## I. Láeg as Outsider

Láeg's presence at Cú Chulainn's side throughout *TBC* tells us that he, like his master, is exempt from the debility (*ces*) that afflicts the men of Ulster. The curse that led to this affliction and its exemptions are never explained within *TBC* itself – to understand it, we must look to another tale, *Noinden Ulad* (*NU*, 'The Debility of the Ulstermen'). This tale recounts how the Ulaid forced Macha, who was heavily pregnant, to race the king's chariot to prove her husband's boast about her speed. She wins the race, but gives birth at the finish line; as she cries out in labour, she curses the Ulaid to be struck by the same pain in times of trouble. *NU* informs us that, *Ni bíod trá in ces-sa for mnaib 7 macaib 7 for Coin*

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6 British Library MS Egerton 93, ff. 26r–35v; Trinity College MS 1319 (H 2.17), pp. 111–118, 334–351. For ease and clarity of referencing, quotations from Nettlau's edition will be given as *TBC3-N* and quotations from Thurneysen as *TBC3-T*.

*Culainn, ar nirbo do Ultaib dó, nach for cach óen no-blíid frisin crích anechtair* ‘This affliction, however, did not used to be upon women and boys and upon Cú Chulainn, for he was not one of the Ulidians, nor upon every one who used to be outside of the territory’ (*NU*, ll. 65–66). However, although *TBC1* appears to quote *NU*’s list of exemptions, it omits the explanation for Cú Chulainn’s inclusion in the list: *Ní bí nóenden linni iarom [...] for mnáib 7 maccaib nách for neoch bis fri crích nUlad anechtair nach for Coin Culaind 7 for a athair* ‘Among us, women and boys do not suffer from the debility nor does anyone outside the territory of Ulster, nor yet Cú Chulainn and his father’ (*TBC1*, l. 525–528). In fact, the *Macgnímrada* (‘Boyhood Deeds’) portion of *TBC* explicitly identifies Cú Chulainn as *di Ultaib dó* ‘of the Ulaid’ (*TBC1*, l. 422), or *[mac] ánróth Ulad* ‘son of an Ulster chieftain’ (*TBC-LL*, l. 778), contradicting *NU*. This is a reminder that although *NU* is transmitted alongside *TBC* in both LL and YBL, it remains a separate text, and cannot be taken uncritically as the explanation for the debility or its exemptions in this tale – as Sheehan (2009, 54) notes, it is only ‘one available intertext’ which is ‘not necessarily authorized by the *Táin* itself’. An alternative explanation is provided by *Ces Ulad* (‘The Affliction of the Ulstermen’), which attributes the *ces* to an encounter Cú Chulainn has with Fedelm Foltcháin (Hull: 1962–64). Both Cú Chulainn and Láeg are participants in this tale, which may explain their shared exemption, although this is not spelled out within the text. *Ces Ulad* appears to represent a less widespread tradition than *NU*, surviving in only one manuscript, British Library MS Harleian 5280. Regardless of the cause of the debility, Cú Chulainn’s exemption marks him as an outsider to the category of ‘men of Ulster’.

Láeg’s exemption similarly invites examination of his position among the Ulaid. His origins are unclear, and referenced in only two texts. The first, *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* (*LMDD*, ‘The Feast of Bricriu and the Exile of the Sons of Dóel Dermait’), locates his parents Rían and Gabar on an Otherworldly island,<sup>7</sup> along with Láeg’s eight siblings (elsewhere, he has only two brothers).<sup>8</sup> However, Hollo (2005: 12–13) observes that this tale is unusual,

7 Hollo (2005: 86–87) notes some confusion and doubling of names in the manuscript, suggesting a possible original reading of ‘a máthair 7 a n-athair .i. Rianganbar 7 Finnabair’, before the name ‘Rianganbar’ was split into its constituent parts. To my knowledge, however, no texts survive in which *Rianganbar* appears as a single character.

8 In *Fled Bricrenn* (§14), Láeg’s brothers are listed as Id and Sedlang, while *LMDD* (§29) adds three additional brothers, Eochaid, Áed, and Óengus, and three sisters, Eithne, Etan, and Étaín (*LMDD*, §29). Conchobar’s charioteer Ibar is identified in *TBC2* as ‘mac Rianganbra’ (*TBC-LL*, l. 972; *TBC-St*, ll. 1006–1007), but not explicitly named as a brother to Láeg, unlike Id in *TBC-St* (see below). I have elsewhere argued that *mac Rianganbra* may have originated as a descriptive epithet for a charioteer before being reinterpreted as a patronymic (Longman 2022a: 32–33), and this may be how we should read it in Ibar’s case. Some very late texts, like *Coimheasgar na gCuradh*

and only 'loosely connected' to other Ulster Cycle texts, not least because it revolves around Cú Chulainn's pursuit of a woman named Findchóem and ignores the better-established tradition of his marriage to Emer. The second tale, which connects more neatly to *TBC*, is a unique addition at the end of Version I of *Compert Con Culainn* ('The Conception of Cú Chulainn') in Royal Irish Academy MS D iv 2 (*CCC-D*).<sup>9</sup> This additional passage, for which Hollo (1998: 15) proposes an eleventh- or twelfth-century date, describes the fostering of the newborn Cú Chulainn by the Connacht warrior Cet mac Mágach, who gives him to his own foster-parents, Sríán and Gabur, to be nursed.<sup>10</sup> They are accompanied by their infant son, Láeg, and the encounter takes place at Síd Truim, a place associated with Cú Chulainn in *Serglige Con Culainn* ('The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn') (Hollo: 1998). This placename suggests that, as in *LMDD*, Láeg has an Otherworldly connection or origin. However, Sríán and Gabur's fosterage of Cet mac Mágach also suggests a possible association with Connacht, introducing further ambiguity around the question of Láeg's provincial loyalties.<sup>11</sup>

*TBC* does not explicitly support either an Otherworldly origin or a Connacht connection for Láeg, nor does it directly contradict either reading. When Láeg goes among the men of Ireland as a messenger, nobody in the Connacht camp expresses kinship with him, nor is there any reference to his kinsmen among

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(Ní Chléirigh 1942: 36), do present him as one of these charioteering brothers; this is likely in imitation of Id in *TBC-St* or the independent *Comrac Fir Diad* tradition.

- 9 The addition is found on folio 46v(b), ll. 10-44. This version of the tale has been edited by Thurneysen (1912a), with German translation; English translations given here are my own. I am working on a new edition and full English translation of this text.
- 10 The variant *Srían* is reflected in the spelling of Láeg's patronymic as *Sríangabra* in this text. A clue to understanding Cet's association with Láeg's family may lie in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, where Cet appears allied with several members of the Ulaid despite his Connacht origins, and – interestingly – is identified as a charioteer (Macalister 1939: 68–69). It seems possible that this connection with charioteering could have been reworked into a fosterage relationship with Láeg's parents thanks to the reinterpretation of the descriptive term *mac (s)riangabra* into a patronymic (see fn. 8).
- 11 Tomás Ó Concheanainn (1988: 28) considered this version of *Compert Con Culainn* to be, alongside the text of Egerton 1782, 'the superior Connacht version', and elsewhere (Ó Concheanainn 1985) demonstrated the manuscript's reliance on Connacht sources. However, he does not discuss this additional passage in his evaluation of this story, and in a later article (1990: 452 fn. 32) states that 'it does not seem [...] that the piece in question was ever intended as part of the text'. It is true that it is separated from the main text by the word 'FINIT', but the scribe nevertheless seems to have treated it as part of the same tale; it does not follow the manuscript's conventions for the start of a new story, with no gap, title, or decorated first initial (or an empty space for one, as is common in this section of the manuscript). If the author is drawing on Connacht sources, perhaps Cet's fosterage of Cú Chulainn represents an effort to 'rehabilitate' this Ulster enemy by giving him a kinship tie to the Connachta; if so, Láeg's implied origins would further strengthen that link.

them. However, in *TBC-St*, Fer Diad's charioteer is named as Id mac Ríangabra, Láeg's brother, which does create a familial link with the Connachta.<sup>12</sup> Only once does Láeg express a connection to any of the Ulaid besides Cú Chulainn, referring to Conchobar as *mo phopa Conchobar* 'my master Conchobar' (*TBC1*, l. 4081; *TBC-LL*, l. 4786).<sup>13</sup> *TBC* also provides some evidence of supernatural abilities, which might suggest Otherworldly traits: Láeg is able to perceive Lug when he is invisible to others (*TBC1*, ll. 2090–2102; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2137–2151; *TBC3-N* §120) and he places a protective spell on the horses which renders them invisible. This facility to manipulate perception is 'fitting', we are told, because Láeg possessed the three gifts of charioteering (*TBC1*, ll. 2210–2212; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2226–2229; *TBC3-N* §137).<sup>14</sup> The implication is that it is not a unique talent of Láeg's, but connected to his role as charioteer. These three charioteering gifts are also mentioned in *Mesca Ulad*, a text in which Láeg is shown to be knowledgeable and canny. Cú Chulainn asks him to *fairc-siu lett renna aeoir, finta lat cuin ticfa midmedón aidchi ár it menic i crichaib cíana comaidchi 'com fhóit 7 'com fhorairi* 'Look to the stars of the sky. Find out when the very middle of the night will come, as you are frequently in distant foreign countries watching for me and protecting me' (*MU*, ll. 218–21; Carey, 2003, §20). Elsewhere in *MU*, the ability to perceive Otherworld beings moving unseen among the host is displayed by the druid Crom Deróil, with Cú Roí interpreting his words (*MU*, ll. 526–783; §§34–47). As a druid, Crom Deróil has a special status as a keeper of knowledge which appears to grant him power over visual perception. Perhaps charioteers, because of their interpretative role, have a similar status. It is also possible, however, that Láeg has a closer connection to the Otherworld, above and beyond the norm pertaining to a charioteer's position.

Láeg may also be young, like Cú Chulainn himself. *CCC-D* tells us that when Srían and Gabur arrive, they have Láeg *ar cich leó* 'on the breast with them', and this is reinforced by the statement made twice in the text below, once in prose and once in verse, that *bentar Láegh da chich roime* 'Láeg was taken from the breast before him' to enable Cú Chulainn's nursing (*CCC-D*, 44).<sup>15</sup> This suggests they are not dissimilar in age (Longman 2022a: 29). Throughout *TBC*, the curse appears to be limited in scope to the grown warriors of the Ulaid: young boys,

12 In earlier recensions, Fer Diad's charioteer is unnamed, and Id mac Ríangabra appears in *Fled Bricrenn* as Conall Cernach's charioteer. In *TBC*, however, Conall's charioteer is consistently named Óen or Én (*TBC1*, l. 3987; *TBC-LL*, l. 4673; *TBC-St*, l. 4783).

13 *Popa*, a term of respect and endearment usually used for an elder, often seems to carry connotations of kinship or allegiance (*eDIL*, s.v. *popa*); Láeg therefore appears to be expressing loyalty to Conchobar, separate from his obligations to Cú Chulainn.

14 See Sayers (1981) on the nature of these gifts.

15 Thurneysen's edition does not give line numbers. In the manuscript, the phrases are found on f. 46v(b) at lines 14, 22, and 38.

the elderly, and other non-combatants are not afflicted. This allows the boy-troop to take to the field while Cú Chulainn is being healed (*TBC1*, ll. 2145-2153; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2167-2175; *TBC3-N*, §127), and enables the elderly Iliach to ride into battle before the rest of the Ulaid rise from their sickbeds (*TBC1*, ll. 3367-3386; *TBC-LL*, ll. 3895-3936). If Láeg is in his late teens, like Cú Chulainn, and thus not yet a legal adult,<sup>16</sup> his youth may be the cause of his exemption from the *ces*.

Láeg's youth, parentage, and Otherworldly connections may therefore all be factors in his exclusion from the debility, but it is also possible that *all* charioteers are exempt. An episode titled *Airecor nArad* ('The Missile-throwing of the Charioteers') depicts the charioteers of the Ulaid fighting Medb's army: three fifties of charioteers defeat three times their number, before being killed (*TBC1*, ll. 3387-3392; *TBC-LL*, ll. 3857-3861). Occurring some way before *Sírrabaid Súaltaim* ('The Long Warning of Súaltaim') and the mustering of the Ulaid, and shortly ahead of Iliach's appearance, this episode's position suggests that charioteers are atypical combatants. The debility appears to be in its final stages by this point, so it is possible that the charioteers, previously affected, have recovered more quickly than the warriors they serve. However, it is equally plausible that the charioteers were never affected by the debility at all, not being classed as warriors and thus separated from the men of the Ulaid by their societal position. This is curious, if we take *NU* as the origin of the *ces*: having been forced to race the king's horses, it would be surprising for Macha to exempt charioteers from her ire, but this may be another reminder not to rely too heavily on *NU* to provide context. In any case, if all charioteers are free of the debility, Láeg's exemption has nothing to do with his own traits or background, but is simply a matter of social status and role.

## 2. Láeg as Strategist and Equal

Cú Chulainn and Láeg's shared exemption from the debility places Láeg in a unique position as Cú Chulainn's companion at a time when he has no others, and there are intriguing hierarchies at play in this relationship, which are particularly noticeable in *TBC1*. Láeg is Cú Chulainn's servant, tending the fire and the horses, making a bed for his master, and otherwise fetching and carrying. Moreover, his first appearance in *TBC1* portrays him as less expert at counting than Cú Chulainn, whose special talents allow him to reckon the numbers of Medb's army while Láeg is confused by the dispersal of the Gailiún among the host (*TBC1*, ll. 316–317).<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere in the text, however, Láeg is positioned as Cú Chulainn's

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16 See Kelly (1988: 82) on twenty as the age of 'beard-encirclement', which neither Cú Chulainn nor Láeg would have reached.

17 In *TBC2* the same scene occurs, but the conversation about their enemies' numbers is preceded by Láeg shaming Cú Chulainn for neglecting his duty (*TBC-II*, ll. 532–548).

intellectual and strategic equal, demonstrated by the board games they play together: *Dobered leth brandaigechta 7 fí[d]chillachta fora thigerna; fer foraire 7 forcométa for cheithri airdib hÉrind ó sin amach* ‘He used to win every second game of draughts and chess from his master. Apart from that he acted as sentinel and watchman on the four airts (*sic*) of Ireland’ (*TBC1*, ll. 2703–2705).<sup>18</sup> Wong (1993: 135) notes that ‘since in the society depicted in *TBC1*, a person’s excellence can be estimated by his skill at board games, the assertion that Láeg habitually wins every other game from Cú Chulainn implies that he is Cú Chulainn’s proper match’. It also tells us something about Láeg’s status and upbringing. Glosses and commentaries on *Cáin Íarraith* state that the playing of *brannuigucht* and *fichillucht* were skills taught to the son of an *aire túisea* (‘freeman of leadership’),<sup>19</sup> among other skills including *marcuighecht* ‘horse riding’ and *snamh* ‘swimming’ (*CIH* vol. 5, 1760, ll. 32–34),<sup>20</sup> and many stories portray board games as a fitting occupation for kings and high-status figures: Conchobar supposedly spends a third of his time playing *fídhchell* (*TBC1*, l. 403). All of this together suggests that Láeg, far from being a low-born servant, has had a noble education – as we would expect, if he were raised alongside Cú Chulainn as *CCC-D* suggests, or if his parents were the rulers of an Otherworldly island, as seen in *LMDD*.<sup>21</sup>

While several of these board game scenes are shared with *TBC2*, the motif is more pronounced in *TBC1*, and this recension contains an additional board-game episode. At the very end of the text, during the extended ‘watchman’ episode in which Mac Roth describes the companies of the Ulaid to Fergus, he describes a warrior and his weapons, adding,

*Ara ara bélaib. Dá chúlaid ind arad frisna heocho. Na éisi ina ladair riam sair. Fíthchell for scarad eturra. Leth a fairne di ór buidi, anaill ba de findruine. Búanbach foa dib slíastaib.*

In front of him was a charioteer whose back was turned to the horses and who held the reins between his fingers in front of him. A chess-board spread between the two, half the chessmen of yellow gold, the other half of white gold. His thighs rested on another boardgame, a *búanbach*.

(*TBC1*, ll. 3855–3858)

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- 18 O’Rahilly translates ‘brandaigecht’ as ‘draughts’ and ‘fídhchillacht’ as ‘chess’. *Brandub* seems to be a slightly different game from either *fídhchell* or *búanbach*; all appear to be games of skill. See MacWhite (1945: 25–35).
- 19 In this translation of the term I am following Charles-Edwards (1986: 56).
- 20 See also Kelly (1988: 87).
- 21 Indeed, one of the first details mentioned about the island of Ríangabar is that *fídhchell 7 brandub 7 timan húas cach imdai* ‘there was a *fídhchell* board and a *brandub* board and a *timpán* above each compartment’ (*LMDD*, §24), suggesting both that the games were highly valued in the household, and that guests were expected to have the skill to play – i.e. that they would be of high status.

Subsequently, these figures are identified as Cú Chulainn and Láeg. This episode is unique because in *TBC2*, Cú Chulainn is explicitly absent from this gathering of the Ulaid, and his company laments his absence (*TBC-LL*, ll. 4569–4573). It is an unexpected and amusing image: Cú Chulainn and Láeg playing *fidchell* in a moving chariot while riding into battle, and Láeg driving with his back to the horses – surely unwise, and very different from the normal image of the charioteer as one who sees and interprets the path ahead. Perhaps this provides further support for reading Láeg as a youth of around Cú Chulainn's age – and occasionally prone to youth's folly and flamboyance.

Elsewhere, Láeg appears to be the steadying influence in the relationship. As strategist and equal, *TBC1*'s Láeg fulfils an advisory role not found in the other recensions: he gives advice on two occasions, with both incidents concerning Cú Chulainn's status and honour. One occurs prior to the combat with Fer Diad, when Láeg tells Cú Chulainn to visit his wife Emer, in order to be better prepared to meet Fer Diad as an equal (*TBC1*, ll. 2808–2812). Here, his concern is that Cú Chulainn should be well-attired and beautified in order not to be shamed when he encounters Fer Diad, who will have had the attentions of the women of the Connachta. Láeg's advice is intended to safeguard Cú Chulainn's honour in the form of his physical appearance, although Láeg himself cannot perform the work of beautification. The other incident concerns status more directly. There, Láeg instructs Cú Chulainn not to go unarmed to a meeting with Medb – not because he fears for Cú Chulainn's safety, but because if Cú Chulainn were hurt or killed while unarmed, it would affect his legal status and therefore the honour-price to which he would be entitled. Láeg observes *ár ní dlig láech a enecland dia mbé i n-écmáis a arm. Conid cáin midlaig no ndlig fón samail sin* 'for if a warrior is without his weapons, he has no right to his honour-price, but in that case he is entitled only to the legal due of one who does not bear arms' (*TBC1*, ll. 1935–1936). As observed by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (2005, 221), the 'older and more worldly-wise' Láeg is not only advising caution, but coaching Cú Chulainn in 'a point of law'. The term *midlach* has a number of extended meanings, including 'coward, weakling', but here implies an individual of lower status than a warrior (*eDIL*, s.v. *midlach*; Ó Cathasaigh 2005: 222). Cú Chulainn defers to Láeg's understanding of the law, acknowledging his expertise and judgment and taking his advice.

Láeg's function as an advisor appears not to be unique to his character, but reflective of *TBC1*'s treatment of charioteers more generally. At the very beginning of the tale, Medb confides in her charioteer that she fears backlash from those who will suffer as a result of the invasion she has triggered, and her charioteer advises her to delay their departure until a better omen is obtained: *'An-su didiu, ol in t-ara, co n-imparrá in carpat deisel 7 co tí nert in tseúin ara tísam ar frithisi* '“Wait then,” said the charioteer, “until the chariot has turned right-handwise to strengthen the good omen so that we may come back again”' (*TBC1*, ll. 27–28). This exchange is absent from the other recensions. It seems

that *TBC1* places greater emphasis on charioteers as a distinct category of well-educated individuals with special knowledge, able to give advice and be listened to by their masters.

### 3. Láeg as Messenger

In all recensions of *TBC*, Láeg functions as an intermediary and messenger, but the exact nature of this role varies.

Cú Chulainn relies heavily on Láeg's messenger role, sending him to the camp of the Connachta to gather information about who will come to fight the following day, so that he will not be taken by surprise. In *TBC1*, Láeg is sent directly to Lugaid mac Nóis, who reveals that it is Cú Chulainn's foster-brother, Fer Báeth, who will be facing him. Dismayed by the news, Cú Chulainn dispatches Láeg again, this time to fetch Lugaid so that he may speak with him directly (*TBC1*, ll. 1738–1762). In *TBC2*, Cú Chulainn's more extensive instructions serve to explain Lugaid's relationship to Cú Chulainn, and therefore why he might be prevailed upon to provide information, as well as emphasising how many friends and associates Cú Chulainn has in the enemy camp:

*beir a n-ime[h]omarc | úaim-se dom áes chomtha 7 dom chomaltaib 7 dom chomdínib. Beir a imchomarc do Fir Diad mac Damáin & do Fir Dét mac Damáin & do Bress mac Fírb, do Lugaid mac Nóis & do Lugaid mac Solamaig, do Fir Báeth mac Baetáin & do Fir Báeth mac Fir Bend, & a imchomarc féin béus dom derbchomalta, do Lugaid mac Nóis, dáig is é óenfer cōngeib commond 7 caratrad frim-sa don chur sa forin tslúagad, & beir bennachtain ar co n-eperta-som frit-su dotháet dom fúapairt-se imbárach.*

‘take a greeting from me to my friends and my fosterbrothers and my coevals. Take a greeting to Fer Diad mac Damáin and to Fer Dét mac Damáin and to Bress mac Fírb, to Lugaid mac Nóis and to Lugaid mac Solamaig, to Fer Báeth mac Baetáin and to Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend. And take a special greeting to my fosterbrother Lugaid mac Nóis, for he is the only man who keeps faith and friendship with me now on the hosting, and give him a blessing that he may tell you who comes to attack me tomorrow.’

(*TBC-LL*, ll. 1859–1867)

Sending Láeg with a list of greetings in this way bestows upon him a significant level of responsibility, but more importantly, it implies that he is able to go unhindered among the men of Ireland without being viewed with suspicion, although they must know him to be Cú Chulainn's companion. A charioteer in the role of a messenger is positioned as a noncombatant, able to move freely and carry information from one camp to another without being perceived as a threat – although we will see below that in Láeg's case, this is not necessarily accurate. *TBC2* also tells us that Láeg succeeded in delivering these greetings, although we

are given no indication of how Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers responded, nor is it ever referenced again.

Cú Chulainn also sends Láeg as a messenger to the Ulaid on more than one occasion. The most prominent of these episodes comes towards the end of the text, where Láeg is sent to rouse the Ulaid, speaking a *ros* to summon them to battle (*TBC*-LL, ll. 4632–3638). In *TBC*1, Láeg's *ros* is alternatively attributed to 'the poet Amargin mac Eicit' (*TBC*1, ll. 3928–3929), a statement which lends authority and expertise to Láeg's words. In doing so, it highlights the complex poetic form of this summons, and therefore Láeg's verbal skill and ability to speak with both style and authority. This alternative attribution is absent from *TBC*2, in keeping with this recension's disinclination to offer multiple accounts or explanations; Láeg is unambiguously identified as the speaker. Interestingly, Stowe uses the term *greasacht* to describe this summons (l. 4751), locating this moment within the charioteer's broader role of incitement.<sup>22</sup> The Ulaid respond swiftly to Láeg's call, referenced briefly in *TBC*1 and described more fully in *TBC*2: *Is and sain atraachtatar Ulaid uile i n-oenfécht ra costud a rrig 7 ra bréthir a flatha 7 ra frithálim coméirgi bréithri Laig meic Riagabra* 'Then all the Ulstermen rose together at the call of their king and at the behest of their lord and to answer the summons of Láeg mac Riagabra' (*TBC*-LL, ll. 4639–4641). Láeg is thus more successful in his role as Cú Chulainn's messenger than Súaltaim, whose earlier warning is badly received and whose efforts to rouse the Ulaid result in his own death (*TBC*1, ll. 3421-3450; *TBC*-LL, ll. 4009-4047). This once again disrupts simplistic interpretations of Láeg's societal role: it is not just any messenger who can be trusted to command the Ulaid to fight and return unscathed from such an errand, and where Súaltaim – a warrior, but a mediocre one<sup>23</sup> – fails, Láeg the charioteer succeeds, demonstrating his skill and trustworthiness.

Láeg's position as Cú Chulainn's friend and only companion is emphasised by these messenger episodes, sometimes explicitly. In *TBC*2, Cú Chulainn sends Láeg to the Ulaid to plead for their help following his combat with Lóch (*TBC*-LL, ll. 2012–2092). In verse, Cú Chulainn laments his isolated position, recounting the struggles of his duel with Lóch, including details that are absent from the prose, such as Láeg's assistance in using the *gae bolga*: *Ó indill Láeg in gae Aife | risin sruth, ba seól faethe* 'Láeg sent Aife's spear downstream, a swift (?) cast' (*TBC*-LL, ll. 2068–2069).<sup>24</sup> Cú Chulainn also speaks of Láeg's position as his only ally and companion: *Nim thic cara ar báig nó ar blait | acht mad ara óencharpait*

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22 See Mac Cana (1992).

23 He is a *miadóclach* 'middling fighter' (*TBC*-LL, l. 3995) who is not strong enough to avenge Cú Chulainn (*TBC*-LL, ll. 3993-3994; *TBC*1, l. 3418).

24 *TBC*1 lacks this verse passage, but contains an extended version of the duel with Lóch, and includes this detail in the prose (*TBC*1, ll. 2025–2026). Láeg's involvement in the deployment of this weapon matches how it is used in *Comrac Fir Diad*.

‘No friend comes to me in alliance or to help, my only friend is my charioteer’ (*TBC-LL*, ll. 2034–2035). It is rare for Cú Chulainn to express affection or appreciation directly to Láeg, but statements like this highlight his importance and the trust between the pair.

There are two other instances of Láeg acting as messenger in *TBC*. One is unique to *TBC1*: Cú Chulainn sends Láeg to Rochad, one of the Ulaid, in order to ask for his help. Rochad is subsequently captured, and a bargain is made that he will not attack the men of Ireland until he comes with the rest of the Ulaid, in exchange for Finnabair, who is in love with him (*TBC1*, ll. 1658–1684). The final instance of Láeg-as-messenger occurs when Cú Chulainn sends him in search of physicians to help Cethern, who is badly wounded. In *TBC1*, Cú Chulainn sends him to Fiacha mac Fir Fēbe, among the Ulster exiles; Cethern attacks the physicians because they give him bad news, and messengers are instead sent to Fingin, Conchobar’s healer (*TBC1*, ll. 3176–3190). In *TBC2*, Láeg is dispatched more generally to the encampment of the men of Ireland, the opponents of the Ulaid, with similar results; subsequently, Láeg, rather than unnamed messengers, seeks out Fingin (*TBC-LL*, ll. 3635–3659).

As well as taking messages on Cú Chulainn’s behalf, Láeg mediates Cú Chulainn’s own understanding of events, most commonly through use of the ‘watchman’ device.<sup>25</sup> In *TBC2*, these episodes generally involve Láeg describing in detail each individual who approaches their camp, and Cú Chulainn interpreting it. Hildebeitel (1982, 473) notes that the charioteer has a ‘unique revelatory function’, since ‘the warrior sees the true nature of what he encounters through what he hears from his charioteer’. For example, in his description of Mac Roth, Láeg states, *Mátadlorg fíndchuill issindara láim. Claideb lethfáebair co n-eltaib dét ’sind láim anaill dó* ‘He carries a staff of white hazel in one hand and in the other a one-edged sword with guards of ivory’, which Cú Chulainn interprets as the tokens of a messenger (*TBC-LL*, ll. 1491–1493). The same pattern exists in *TBC1*: Cú Chulainn identifies Fergus and Lug from Láeg’s descriptions and interprets the circumstances of their coming, even discerning that Fergus’s scabbard is empty and why, though how he learned of these events is never explained (*TBC1*, ll. 1306–1310).<sup>26</sup> The initial episode with Mac Roth is slightly different in this recension, however: Cú Chulainn identifies Mac Roth only as ‘one of the king’s warriors’ (*TBC1*, l. 1252), and it is Láeg who notes that he wears or carries *fethal* (*TBC1* l. 1250) – some kind of ‘characteristic badge or emblem’ displaying his status or role, presumably identifying him as a messenger (*eDIL*, s.v. *fethal*).

25 For more on this motif, see Miles (2011: 175–192) and O’Connor (2014: 165–195).

26 This episode is not told in full in *TBC2*, and Cú Chulainn does not at this point in the tale reference the replacement of Fergus’s word with one of wood, although Láeg comments on its size (*TBC-LL*, ll. 1585–1587). Later, however, Cú Chulainn appears aware of the substitution, and the circumstances of the switch are briefly recounted (*TBC-LL*, ll. 2486–87).

By interpreting Mac Roth's clothing in this way, Láeg reads significance into his appearance just as Cú Chulainn interprets Mac Roth's staff and sword as a messenger's symbols in *TBC2*. The role of interpretation has been shared: Láeg is partially responsible for understanding the scene, not simply describing it.

Láeg's capacity for acting as interpretive watchman rather than neutral describer is seen again towards the end of *TBC1*. Wounded and strapped to his sickbed to prevent him from joining the battle, Cú Chulainn is reliant on Láeg to describe and interpret events he can only hear, not see. When he hears the sound of Conchobar's shield being struck, it is Láeg who provides the interpretation that Fergus is responsible, and that his presence will turn the tide of the battle: *Fuile formach n-áir, an fer Fergus mac Róeich* 'The (coming of the) hero Fergus mac Róig means wounds and increase of slaughter' (*TBC1*, ll. 4079–4080). Here, Láeg demonstrates not only descriptive interpretation, but *predictive* interpretation: his eye for strategy and understanding of battle enables him to pass judgments on the likely outcome of events. Jones (2016: 23) reads these instances where 'the charioteer is seen to have greater knowledge' as 'exceptional inversions' of the watchman motif as established within *TBC*, with Láeg's interpretation of the final battle mirroring Ibor's interpretation of the landscape of Ulster at the beginning of the tale, thus completing a 'cycle of knowledge' (29). But this may be over-emphasising the redistribution of roles in order to underline the symmetry of the text, since such an inversion does not subvert or problematise the charioteer/warrior pair's 'complementary relationship of observation, knowledge, warning, incitement, and action' described by Jones (2016: 21). Rather, Láeg's role as interpreter is here required because of and enabled by Cú Chulainn's infirmity: the pair's interdependence means that one party can and must compensate for the lack of knowledge or ability of the other, their complementary skills creating a perfect whole. What Cú Chulainn cannot do, Láeg must do for him – observing where he interprets, and interpreting where he observes. That his capacity to do so has already been established earlier in *TBC1* allows him to play this role convincingly at this crucial and significant moment.

As interpreter, Láeg also mediates others' understanding of Cú Chulainn. In *TBC1*, when Nad Crantail questions Cú Chulainn's identity because of his beardlessness, it is to Láeg that Cú Chulainn turns for help (*TBC1*, ll. 1453–1456). By smearing a false beard on Cú Chulainn, Láeg enables him to be perceived by his enemies as a suitable opponent, granting him entry into the privileged space of 'men'. Cú Chulainn's identity requires the mediation of a third party if it is to be correctly read by others and, given his isolation, Láeg is the only one in a position to provide that.<sup>27</sup> As such, Láeg changes not only his appearance, but also his 'social and military positioning' (Jones 2016: 31). This episode occurs

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27 For more on the significance of Cú Chulainn's false beards as a marker of gender and status, see Longman (2023: 5–12).

only in *TBC1*, and reflects Láeg's broader responsibility for Cú Chulainn's honour and status throughout this recension, as seen above in the context of his role as strategist and advisor. By ensuring that Cú Chulainn is correctly perceived by others as a worthy opponent, he makes sure that Cú Chulainn's status as a warrior remains intact.

It is clear that although Láeg functions as an intermediary in all recensions, *TBC1* places greater emphasis on Láeg's interpretative role. While he always facilitates communication between Cú Chulainn and the world around him, the subtle differences in the 'watchman' episodes in this recension and the unique false beard episode give Láeg the power to *shape* interpretation, including of Cú Chulainn's body.

#### 4. Láeg as Double

Alongside his role as intermediary, *TBC* positions Láeg as a double of Cú Chulainn. This aspect is present in all recensions, but achieves new prominence in *TBC-St*.

Just as Cú Chulainn is loyal to Conchobar, so is Láeg loyal to Cú Chulainn, and the two relationships are portrayed as an equivalent duty to protect and serve. For Cú Chulainn, this encompasses his lonely defence of Ulster as its watchdog; for Láeg, it means months at Cú Chulainn's side as he fights. These layered and equivalent hierarchies are apparent in the dialogue between the pair and Mac Roth, an encounter found in all recensions:

*Doroacht Mac Roth iarum co ránic airm i mbáe Láeg. 'Ciarsat comainn céli-siu, a gillai?' ar Mac Roth. 'Am chéli-se ind óclaig út tús,' ar in gilla. Tánic Mac Roth cosin magin i mbaí Cú Chulaind. 'Ciarso comainn céli-siu, a óclaig?' ar Mac Roth. 'Am céle-se Conchobuir meic Fachtnai Fáthaig.'*

Then Mac Roth arrived at the spot where Láeg was. 'Whose vassal are you, fellow?' asked Mac Roth. 'I am vassal to the warrior up yonder,' said the driver. Mac Roth came to the spot where Cú Chulainn was. 'Whose vassal are you, warrior?' asked Mac Roth. 'I am the vassal of Conchobar mac Fachtna Fáthaig.' (*TBC-LL*, ll. 1495–1499)<sup>28</sup>

Neither Cú Chulainn nor Láeg identifies himself by name; Cú Chulainn's subsequent refusal to tell Mac Roth where he might find Cú Chulainn, as though he were not talking about himself, suggests he is deliberately trying to infuriate the messenger. But both identify themselves as *céle*: Láeg of Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn of Conchobar. O'Rahilly translates this as 'vassal', and the passage neatly encompasses the parallel bonds of obligation and loyalty between these

28 See also *TBC1*, ll. 1253–1258 and *TBC3-T*, 540.

pairs of characters. Ó Cathasaigh (2005: 225) highlights this scene's emphasis on the relationship between the fighter and his charioteer and between a lord and his client as 'legally that of a reciprocal pair', *'lánamain'*. According to *Uraicecht Becc*, a charioteer was legally bound to his employer, so that if injured, he would receive half of his employer's honour-price (*CIH* 1617.12; Kelly 1988: 67).<sup>29</sup> By describing this reciprocal, hierarchical relationship with the same term (*céle*) as the relationship between a lord and his client, the scene draws attention to Láeg and Cú Chulainn's parallel roles within a broader network of interpersonal obligation – each is in a position of service to and reliance on another. It also demonstrates how their identities are constructed according to these social roles, inextricable from their position: Mac Roth only asks whom they serve, as though this alone would reveal to him whether they are the men he seeks.

*TBC1* includes a second encounter of this sort, which expands on the theme:

*Téit Mani Aithreamail a dochum. Téit-side co llÁeg hi tossiuch.  
'Cia díandat céli-siu?' ol sé. Ní n-arlaisair Láeg dano. Asbert Mani fris fo  
thrí in cruth sin.*

*'Céli do Choin Culaind,' for sé, '7 nacham forraig nád n-ecma nád benur  
do chend dit.'*

*'Is lond in fer so,' ol Mani la sóud úad. Téit iarom do acallaim Con Culaind.  
Is and ro boi Cú Chulaind iar [m]béim dei a léned 7 in snechta immi ina súdiu  
co rici a crís, 7 ro lega in snechta immi fercumat fri méit brotha in míled.  
Asbert Mani dano ón mud chétna fris-side fo t[h]rí cia díambo chéli.*

*'Céli Conchobair, 7 nacham forraig. Dianam forgea immorro ní bas síriu,  
bíthus dí chend dit amal tiscar dí lun.'*

*'Ní réid,' ol Mani, 'acallaim na desi seo.'*

Maine Aithreamail went to him, and he went first to Láeg.

'Whose vassal are you?' he asked. Láeg did not address him. Maine asked him the same question three times.

'I am Cú Chulainn's vassal,' said Láeg, 'and do not plague me lest perchance I strike your head off.'

'What a bad-tempered fellow!' said Maine, turning away from him. So then Maine went to speak to Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn had taken off his shirt and was sitting in the snow up to his waist while around him the snow had melted a man's length, so great was the fierce ardour of the warrior. Maine asked him three times in the same way whose vassal he was.

'Conchobar's vassal, and do not plague me. If you bother me any more, I shall cut off your head as the head is cut off a blackbird.'

'It is not easy to speak to these two,' said Maine.

(*TBC1*, ll. 1572–1584)

Once again, Láeg's relationship to Cú Chulainn is equated with Cú Chulainn's relationship to Conchobar, a reflex of the same hierarchical obligation. It is

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29 I am grateful to Christina Cleary for providing this reference.

notable that in this passage, Láeg threatens Maine, a threat subsequently echoed by Cú Chulainn. Láeg's threat positions him as a fighter, with the capacity to pose as much danger as Cú Chulainn does, challenging any identification of charioteers as non-combatants. However, although Maine Aithremail, one of the sons of Ailill and Medb, is ordinarily described as a warrior, he is serving here as a messenger.<sup>30</sup> Since Láeg often fulfils the same function within *TBC*, this essentially positions Maine as his equal, which may make it more appropriate for Láeg to threaten him than it would if the power differential between the two were clearer. A parallel can be found in *TBC3*, in which Láeg kills Muilchi, the charioteer of Lethan, in an event described as *aeinecht Laeigh* – the 'single exploit of Láeg' or the 'single slaying of Láeg' (*TBC3-T*, 540). Láeg here proves himself a combatant, but only against an equal, another charioteer. Since this threat against Maine is repeated almost verbatim by Cú Chulainn, however, the primary impact of this scene in *TBC1* is to emphasise Láeg's role as a double, acting in parallel with, in imitation of, or on behalf of Cú Chulainn.

Láeg's function as double is clearest in the unique elements of *Comrac Fir Diad* (*The Combat with Fer Diad*) found in *TBC-St*. In its largest divergence from *TBC-LL*, *TBC-St* depicts Láeg in conflict with his brother Id, Fer Diad's charioteer (*TBC-St*, ll. 3204–3262). As this is less well-known, and has not been translated into English, I will briefly outline the scene. Cú Chulainn asks Láeg for the *gáe bolga*, which here requires substantial preparation before it can be used, including blocking the stream to manipulate the water flow and direct the spear downstream (*TBC-St*, ll. 3200–3204). Fer Diad instructs Id to prevent Láeg from doing this, but Id is pessimistic, claiming that he is no match for Láeg, *uair is fer comlainn cet esiomh* 'because that man is the equal of a hundred' (*TBC-St*, l. 3210). He nonetheless does as he is told, releasing the dam that Láeg has made and interfering with his preparations. After this has happened twice, the two brothers confront each other directly, and Láeg insults his brother, because *niorbh áil les airm d'imbirt fair* 'he did not like to use weapons upon him' (ll. 3224–3225). During their next encounter, Láeg injures Id, and finally, he grows angry enough to attack him wholeheartedly: *Ferccaighter Laogh fris ann sin 7 beris sidhe da iondsai ghe 7 iadhais a lamha leabra langasda tairis gurro trascair co hathlamh 7 ro chreapail fo cetóir* 'Láeg grew angry at him then and he advanced towards him and he closed his supple, skilful hands around him so that he swiftly overthrew him and he bound him immediately' (ll. 3247–3249). This enables Láeg to finish preparing the *gáe bolga*.

There has been some debate as to whether the additional scenes found in *TBC-St* are new or whether they belong to an earlier tradition; this discussion has been outlined by Rutten (2006: 143–151). Although Thurneysen (1915: 436–437) theorised that the combat between the charioteers was originally part of the first

30 On the Maines as warriors or otherwise, see Longman (2022b: 14–15).

recension, lost due to the fragmented state of *Comrac Fir Diad* in YBL and its absence from LU, O'Rahilly believed it to be purely a later addition, and not one of particular merit. In particular, she claims that the episode is repetitive to the point of 'anticlimax', and that it '[reads] almost like a parody', with a 'monotonous' style that marks it as 'an interpolation by a less skilful hand' (O'Rahilly 1961, xxix). Additional material in *TBC-St* may not be *either* new to this recension *or* a remnant of a lost detail from the first recension: Rutten (2006: 152–154) proposes that *Comrac Fir Diad* was 'evolving outside of its *TBC* context', with some passages in *TBC-St* interpolated 'from a self-standing version of the text'. The exact origin of the combat between the charioteers is less important for our purposes than its effects, and on this matter, I would disagree with O'Rahilly's negative evaluation of this repetitive scene. Rather than being a clumsy and parodic anti-climax, this passage is carefully constructed to emphasise Cú Chulainn's superiority by positioning Láeg as a double and avoiding accusations of unfairness.

The repetition condemned by O'Rahilly as 'clumsy' is, in fact, crucial to *TBC-St*'s portrayal of Láeg as Cú Chulainn's double. Like Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, Láeg and Id are two brothers who face each other in combat, made enemies by circumstance and conflicting hierarchical obligations. Id, like Fer Diad, is afraid of his opponent; Láeg, like Cú Chulainn, is reluctant to fight his brother, but will do so when it becomes clear that there is no choice. Although they happen in close succession, their repeated confrontations echo the four days of Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's duel, following the same pattern of increasing enmity. Their brotherhood survives the first two encounters, just as Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad fight brutally during the first two days of their duel but exchange kisses and share resources in the evening: in their first encounter (*TBC-St*, ll. 3212–3215), the two charioteers do not come to blows, and in the second, Láeg insults and 'overthrows' Id, but refuses to use weapons against him (*TBC-St*, ll. 3222–3225). In both encounters, the kinship between the pair is emphasised by the use of the word *bráthair* 'brother, kinsman' (*TBC-St*, l. 3213 and l. 3223). Their third encounter (*TBC-St*, ll. 3228–3231), however, marks a turning point, just as the third day marks a point of no return for Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad: this time Láeg hits Id repeatedly in the face, knocking him out, and the breaking of the kinship bond is emphasised by the identification of Id only as *ara Fer Diad* 'Fer Diad's charioteer' (*TBC-St*, l. 3234). Finally, during their fourth encounter (*TBC-St*, ll. 3247–3249), Láeg loses his temper, and his anger allows him to defeat Id, once again impersonally described as *ara Fer Diad*. Láeg's violent fury is reminiscent of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*, and probably deliberately echoes it – although less grotesque, it fulfils the same function of allowing him to perform a feat of which he was otherwise incapable, whether because of physical ability or because of his reluctance to fight Id. Láeg's victory over Id is less complete than Cú Chulainn's over Fer Diad (Id is not dead, although we hear nothing more about

him), but it is essential to enabling Cú Chulainn's success. The episode functions as the story of *TBC* in a microcosm: because of Láeg's loyalty and assistance, Cú Chulainn is able to defeat his enemies and defend the Ulaid, and the hierarchies and interpersonal bonds that underpin *TBC* are emphasised.

## 5. Láeg as Ally and Unfair Advantage

Id's presence and combat with Láeg serves a second narrative purpose: it makes this a fairer fight, and *TBC*-St appears particularly concerned with the issue of fairness. Charioteers are often treated as tools or weapons more than as people – in the *Macgnímrada*, granting Cú Chulainn use of Conchobar's chariot also means granting him use of Ibar, Conchobar's charioteer (*TBC*1, ll. 653–654; *TBC*-LL, ll. 972–974). Nevertheless, Láeg's presence problematises the idea of a 'single' combat. The use of the *gáe bolga* is already suspect: O'Leary (1987, 2) observes that it is 'repeatedly condemned by his foes as unfair, although in each instance they seem to accept and condone his use of the weapon before they die'. The involvement of a third party risks suggesting that Cú Chulainn is cheating, even if it may be fair repayment for all the times Medb violates the rules of *fir fer* by sending groups against him (O'Leary 1987: 5). Earlier in *TBC*-St, Fer Diad accuses Cú Chulainn of unfairness because of his invisible Otherworldly helpers, Dolb and Indolb (*TBC*-St, ll. 3168–3171). Cú Chulainn retorts that Fer Diad's horn skin, here conceptualised as something removable whose mechanism has been concealed from Cú Chulainn, is at least as much of an unfair advantage: *ata congancnes agat d'iomarcaidh cles 7 gaisgidh toram-sa 7 nior taispenais damh-sa a iadhadh no a fhoslaccadh* 'you have a horn skin for superiority of feats and deeds of arms against me, and you have not shown me how it is closed or how it is opened' (*TBC*-St, ll. 3174–3176). To resolve this dispute, *do taispensit a n-uile gliocas 7 derridacht da chéle conach raibhi diamair caic diob ag aroile acht mad in gae bulga ic Coin Culainn* 'they displayed all their ingenuity and secrets to each other, so that they had no mysteries from each other except that Cú Chulainn had the *gáe bolga*' (*TBC*-St, 3176–3178).<sup>31</sup> When all other secrets have been revealed and the playing field levelled, the *gáe bolga* remains an unfair advantage. Even in *TBC*1, Láeg is implicated in the weapon's use, but here in *TBC*-St, where it cannot be operated without his quite substantial assistance, his role emphasises the potential unfairness of the weapon. However, Id's involvement balances the scales once more. Cú Chulainn might have Láeg to prepare the *gáe bolga*, but Fer

31 The wording here may suggest supernatural or Otherworldly skills: see eDIL s.v. *gliccus*, 'cleverness, ingenuity, skill' but also 'witchcraft, sorcery', and eDIL s.v. *derritacht*, 'secrecy, that which is secret'. Likewise eDIL s.v. *diamair*, 'hidden thing, secret, mystery' and so also 'wonder', 'miracle'. Cú Chulainn's Otherworldly helpers, Fer Diad's horned skin, and the various feats and skills that the pair possess are all grouped together beneath these terms, and so presented as equally strange and secret.

Diad has Id to prevent him from doing so. Cú Chulainn's victory can no longer be attributed to superior numbers, as it could arguably be in the earlier recensions.

By his own admission, however, Id is no match for Láeg. The difference between Cú Chulainn and Láeg's relationship and Fer Diad and Id's less affectionate partnership is apparent in earlier recensions, but the contrast is greater and more direct in *TBC-St*. Hildebeitel (1982: 468) sees the charioteer-warrior relationship as a crucial element of this episode in *TBC-LL*, signifying the bonds of friendship that underlie its tensions and deciding the outcome of the duel: 'the warrior and charioteer put themselves into a situation of ultimate mutual trust, where the life of each is in the other's hands'. The relationship between Cú Chulainn and Láeg is the ideal representation of this friendship and trust, 'characterized by an easy and intuitive naturalness' that contrasts strongly with Fer Diad's 'strained and bitter' relationship with his own charioteer (Hildebeitel 1982: 469). Though Láeg is frequently unflattering in how he addresses Cú Chulainn, particularly when inciting him to fight through the use of shaming insults, Fer Diad's charioteer is negative in a way that is unnerving rather than motivational (Hildebeitel 1982: 477). In *TBC-St*, where the charioteers are given greater responsibility for the outcome of the fight itself, this difference becomes more acute: Id hesitates to follow Fer Diad's orders, declaring himself a poor match for Láeg (ll. 3209–3212), and is ultimately defeated by his brother. The sense of an uneasy relationship that must be constantly negotiated, rather than a pairing of implicit trust, dogs Fer Diad and Id throughout the scene, and Fer Diad's flaws are reflected in the breakdown of the hero-charioteer pairing, foreshadowing his defeat. Wong (1993: 136) notes that 'the performances of Láeg and Cú Chulainn contrast starkly with those of Fer Diad and his deficient charioteer'; *TBC-St*'s more explicit juxtaposition invites a direct comparison between the two, depicting Láeg as the superlative charioteer to Cú Chulainn the superlative warrior. The idea that 'a charioteer's worth is proportionate to his lord's' (Wong 1993: 135) is proven to refer not only to his honour-price, but to his skill, reputation, and trustworthiness.

Id's presence and active participation in *TBC-St* may then be intended to counterbalance the unfair advantage represented by Láeg's assistance and establish the combat as a fair fight, but the contrast between these two pairs of doubles only highlights Láeg's true superiority as a charioteer. Id is an imperfect echo of Fer Diad, reflecting his flaws and unable to execute his orders, but Láeg is exactly what he has always been: Cú Chulainn's greatest weapon, as well as his closest friend.

## 6. Conclusions

*TBC* offers a complex portrayal of Láeg, and each recension emphasises different aspects of his character, reflecting not a linear progression but the different

tone and priorities of their redactors. *TBC1* disrupts simplistic hierarchies and portrays Láeg as Cú Chulainn's intellectual and strategic equal, giving him an interpretative and advisory role. This appears not to be unique to Láeg, but reflective of a broader pattern in how charioteers are portrayed, although Láeg is the most developed of these characters. These interpretative and advisory elements are somewhat diminished in *TBC2*, but the development of the *Comrac Fir Diad* episode introduces several unique scenes and emphasises Láeg's superiority as a charioteer and the importance of his relationship with Cú Chulainn to ensuring Cú Chulainn's success. *TBC-St* builds on the foundation laid by *TBC-LL* to position Láeg strongly as Cú Chulainn's double, and the juxtaposition of this pair with their Connachta counterparts, Fer Diad and Id, underlines the essential role of the charioteer in ensuring and enabling a warrior's victory. Finally, while it is hard to draw any conclusions about *TBC3*'s portrayal of Láeg due to its fragmentary state, its inclusion of Láeg's slaying of Muilchi may suggest a greater emphasis on Láeg's capacity as a fighter.

Láeg is not the glorious hero, but he is nevertheless as essential to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as Cú Chulainn. It is because he has Láeg beside him that Cú Chulainn is able to defend his territory, and the fact that Láeg, like Cú Chulainn, is a very young man whose humanity, parentage, and provincial loyalties are all in question is a vital part of that. Both are marginal figures, their status as outsiders crucial to their roles, but Láeg as messenger connects Cú Chulainn to his allies and informs him about his enemies; Láeg as advisor ensures that Cú Chulainn maintains his honour, status, and place in society; and Láeg as double represents the complex web of personal and political loyalties that underlie the interpersonal tensions of the story. As such, any discussion of *TBC* – or of Cú Chulainn – is incomplete without the inclusion of Láeg.

## Abbreviations

<i>CCC-D</i>	<i>Compert Con Culainn</i> from Royal Irish Academy MS D iv 2 (1223) (Thurneysen 1912a).
<i>CIH</i>	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i> (Binchy 1978).
<i>eDIL</i>	<i>An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> .
<i>LL</i>	Trinity College Dublin MS 1339 ( <i>olim</i> H 2.18), The Book of Leinster.
<i>LMDD</i>	<i>Fled Bricreann ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait</i> (Hollo 2005).
<i>LU</i>	Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25 (1229), Lebor na hUidre.
<i>MU</i>	<i>Mesca Ulad</i> (Carmichael Watson 1941).
<i>NU</i>	<i>Noinden Ulad</i> (Hull 1968).
<i>TBC</i>	<i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i> .
<i>TBC1</i>	The first recension of <i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i> (O'Rahilly 1976).
<i>TBC2</i>	The second recension of <i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i> , consisting of <i>TBC-LL</i> and <i>TBC-St</i> .

- TBC-LL *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from the Book of Leinster (O'Rahilly 1967).  
TBC-St *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from Royal Irish Academy MS C vi 3, the 'Stowe' version (O'Rahilly 1961).  
TBC3 The third recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.  
TBC3-N Nettlau 1983–84.  
TBC3-T Thurneysen 1912b.  
YBL Trinity College Dublin MS 1318 (*olim* H 2.16), The Yellow Book of Lecan.

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