Some Notes on the Origin of the Motif of the Ulaid's False Beards in *Cáth Áenaig Macha* and *Cóir Anmann*

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More than 25 years ago William Sayers published the article 'Early Irish Attitudes toward Hair and Beards, Baldness and Tonsure'. In that article he showed perfectly, based on Irish narrative and law tracts, that 'hair and hair styles', especially beards, were 'markers of sex, age and status' (Sayers 1991, 188). Also, he touched slightly on one peculiar topic—false beards, used by beardless youths and women in order to look like mature men, so they could, under special conditions, for example during military affairs, have rights similar to grown men and be treated like men, like warriors (Sayers 1991, 166-167). But Sayers pursued another goal with his article, and his bibliography was not enough to complete the research into this motif. Due to that, let us stop here and widen the topic with some up-to-date details.

In this article, I would like to focus on the description of a particular battle which is given in the saga *Cáth Áenaig Macha* and the tract *Cóir Anmann* (further CAM and CA accordingly), where the motif of the fake beard is presented.[1] However, first, I have to make several notes about the texts' contents, their dating and the connection between them.

Cáth Áenaig Macha[2] tells of the fictional battle between Conchobar and the Ulaid and the Viking invaders; the battle, perhaps, had a real prototype or prototypes. The episode that interests me runs as follows: the Vikings outnumber the Ulaid, and Genann mac Cathbaid offers to attach wool to the chins of all the beardless in order to create an image of beards and therefore *co mba moide bur n-uiregla* [┐] *bur ngrain ar na sloghaib* 'that the utmost fear and horror of you may come on the hosts'; because of this stratagem (i.e. ruse of war), the Ulaid win the battle (Dobbs 1927, 152–155). Unfortunately, there is only one version of the text extant: a manuscript, written around the fifteenth or sixteenth century, which is held in the Royal Irish Academy Library, Dublin (MS. C i 2, fol.16r.-19r.). However, this saga is also mentioned in genealogical compilation *Senchas Síl hÍr* (Dobbs 1921, 316–318), also titled *Senchas Síl h-Ír fo h-Érind* (O'Brien 1962, 270), and *Cóir Anmann*.

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1   This article is part of my paper presented at XV International Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica organised by the Finnish Society for Celtic Studies in Helsinki on the 24−26 August 2016. The symposium celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Finnish Society for Celtic Studies.

2   This text is only available in the edition and translation by Margaret E. Dobbs in 1927.

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Cóir Anmann is a tract devoted to etymologies of local Irish names (historical and mythological, personal and tribal, and so forth). In §245 (Stokes 1897, 386-387) we can see a version of the origin of the Ulaid's ethnonym:

> *No Ulaid .i. oll leith .i. ulchadha liatha léo h-i cath Áenaigh Mhacha .i. olann líath dochengladar día smechaibh isin cath cétna .i. uilliu leíth léo isin cath.*

> Or Ulaid, that is, 'great-grey', that is, they had grey beards in the battle of Oenach Macha, i.e. they tied grey wool to their chins in the same battle, that is, in the battle they had grey beards.

There is also a short retelling of the saga's plot and the episode with the false beards as well, but the last one has some details added to it, which are not present in the main text of the saga (Stokes 1897, 388-389). Whitley Stokes, the first editor of the tract, dates it to the twelfth century (1897, 284-287), while Sharon Arbuthnot dates it to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century (2005, 72). All this lets us to date CAM as early as a twelfth-century text, but there is a possibility that the saga could have been created later as an extended version of the story from CA.

Let us return to the motif that is of interest in this study: we have here people who used available means to change their appearance in order to mislead the enemy about their true identity and their social and professional status. Therefore, in CA: *amail bá rígh-laich sibh*, 'as if ye were kingly champions' (Stokes 1897, 388-389).

This entry that mentions beards is not unique within early Irish literature. In the work of Thomas P. Cross 'Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature', we find the following entry: 'K 1821.4*–Youths wear false beards (of grass, wool)' (1952, 378). There Cross provides links to the following texts: CA; CAM; '*Foras feasa ar Éirin*' by Geoffrey Keating, who cites CA (O'Mahony 1857, 278-279); and, of course, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (O'Rahilly 1967, 53-57; O'Rahilly 1976, 58-62). However, even Cross does not mention every case: for example, he does not advert to the text called *Immacallam in dá thúarad*, which tells of the young Neidhe mac Adhnai, who makes a fake beard from a handful of grass before sitting in the *ollam*'s chair also claimed by Fer Chertnae, also known as Athairne, in Emain Machae (Stokes 1905, 12-13).

Nonetheless, let us return to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. There we can see the combat between Lóch Mór and Cú Chulainn. Lóch Mór, the warrior from Ailill and Medb's army, refused to fight with Cú Chulainn, because *úair ní miedh nó maisi liom móethmaccóemh óg gan ulchain gan fhésóig d'ionnsaige*, 'for I deem it no honour to attack a youthful, beardless stripling' (O'Rahilly 1967, 53, 193). Cú Chulainn was a youth, seventeen years old as explained by Fergus,[3] for this reason, according to early Irish law, he was non-adult man called by law tracts – *Uraicecht*

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3   *Isin t-sechtmad biladain déc a áes ind inbaid sea*, 'At the present time he is seventeen years old' (O'Rahilly 1976, 12, 135).

Becc[4] and *Críth Gablach*[5]–*fer midboth*, 'man from the middle of the huts' (Binchy 1941, 89-90). *Fer midboth*–legal status of young person, who occupies temporary habitations on his father's land from fourteen years old to twenty, age of majority, in Old Irish called *cuairt ulcaigi*, 'beard-encirclement' (Kelly 1988, 81-83). This is precisely why Cú Chulainn drew a false beard using blackberry juice in order to look mature from his enemy's point of view.

Sayers uses Cú Chulainn's story to prove his theory, and we agree. But what would happen if we go beyond Irish texts and look at something similar in a continental narrative that could have influenced the authors of CAM and CA?

First of all, we know that the writings of Isidore of Seville used to be quite popular among the scholars of Ireland, especially his magnum opus, *Etymologiae sive Origines*, as Thomas O'Loughlin has shown (O'Loughlin 1994, 47; O'Loughlin 1996, 107-114). In book IX.ii.95 there is the following etymology: *Langobardos vulgo fertur nominatos prolixa barba et numquam tonsa* 'The Langobards are commonly said to have been named for their beards, long and never cut'. One can suggest that the author, or authors, of CA were thinking in the same way as Isidore when they created their etymologies using his pattern, and that they could have come up with the idea to look for some connection between the *Ulaid* eponym and the word *ulcha* 'beard', as in the case of *Langobardos*.

Secondly, the author, or authors, of CA and CAM could have been familiar not only with the etymology of Isidore, but also with the following story about the Langobards, as the episode that tells us about them receiving their ethnonym has much in common with CAM. Both stories tell about battles during which the main characters are outnumbered and have to use some kind of trick that they are taught to do. For example, they don fake beards. Yet, in the case of the Langobards, it is done by women instead of young boys, and they use their hair instead of wool. I think that hair can also be interpreted as available means.

My brief research (the results are shown in table 1[6]) into medieval texts describing the invasion of Italy by the Langobards shows that there are only three texts that contain an episode involving false beards. They are *Origo gentis*

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4   *Na tri fir mbidbad … a tri n-aesa .i. ceithri bliadna deg fictigi & trictaigi no cuairt ulcaigi*, 'The three *fer-midbads* … their three ages .i. fourteen years, twenty and thirty or until the coming of whiskers' (Hancock et al. 1901, 86-87).

5   *In forcmaidhter o cheteoraibh bliadhnaib deg co fichtigh co cuairt ulcaidh*[?], 'Is there anything determined for him, from fourteen years to twenty, till the encircling of beard?' (Hancock et al. 1879, 302-303).

6   Dating: FH—first half, SH—second half. Unshorn beard—use of Isidorian etymology. False beard—presence of the legend of false beard stratagem. Pannonia—presence of description of Langobardic invasion to Pannonia. There is a description of the invasion but no notes about the territory in Historia Francorum by Gregory of Tours Narsis — note about Narsis the patrician, who 'invited' the Langobards to Italy. Abbreviations for titles of literature appear in the 'Abbreviation' section appended to this paper.

Langobardorum, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici* by unknown author, and *Historia Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon. And, in theory, Irish *literati* were very likely to have been familiar with at least one of them.

Table 1.	Dating (c. century)	Unshorn beard	False beard	Pannonia	Narsis	Invasion of Italy
GregHistFr	SH of sixth			+ / -		+
MarChr	SH of sixth			+		+
GregIMagDial*	SH of sixth					+
IsidChr	FH of seventh			+	+	+
ProspChrContHav	FH of seventh			+	+	+
ChrFredg	Mid-seventh		+	+	+	+
Origo	Mid-seventh		+	+	+	+
BedaChr	FH of eighth				+	+
LibPontif	FH of eighth				+	+
PaulHistLang	SH of eighth	+	+	+	+	+
HistLangCodGoth	FH of ninth	+		+	+	+
AgnAndRav	FH of ninth					+

* Text was known in seventh-century Ireland (Herbert 1988, 137; O'Loughlin 1994, 41)

Still, I would vote for the *Historia Langobardorum*, as it was one of the most popular texts of Medieval Europe. There are at least 115 copies of this text (Pani 2000, 404-12); the earliest is held at the Abbey Library of Saint Gall (Codex Sangallensis 635) and dated the beginning of the ninth century. Still, we cannot completely deny the possibility of a typological similarity between these texts or a deeper relationship between their plots, which is common for Indo-European sources. Also, I would like to note that Paul was not the first to invent the idea of a stratagem of changing appearance, and, in particular, of putting on false beards. As early as the *Stratagemata*, book IV.1, Polyaenus writes about young Macedonian women with faces covered by wreaths, brandishing their *thyrsi* instead of spears; their enemy sounded the retreat (Melber & Woelfflin 1887, 158-159).

To sum up, I would like to say that, in my opinion, the story about false beards from CA and CAM could have originated not only from local tradition but also from the influence of continental texts. While I do not claim to give this problem an elaborate treatment, I strongly believe that there was an overlay of continental influence over Irish native tradition that gave us this unique saga that might hide many wondrous things within itself.

Abbreviations

AgnAndRav	*Agnelli qui et Andreas Ravennatis. Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*
BedaChr	*Beda Venerabilis. Chronicon. De Temporum Ratione LXVI*
CA	*Cóir Anmann*
CAM	*Cáth Áenaig Macha*
ChrFredg	*Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum Continuationibus*
GestRerFr	*Gesta rerum Francorum*
GregHistFr	*Gregorius Turonensis. Historia Francorum*
GregIMagDial	*St. Gregorius I Magnus. Dialogorum Libri IV, De Vita et Miraculis Patrum Italicorum*
HistLangCodGoth	*Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani*
IsidChr	*Isidorus Hispalensis. Chronica*
LibPontif	*Liber Pontificalis*
MarChr	*Marius episcopi Aventicensis. Chronica*
PaulHistLang	*Paulus Diaconus. Historia Langobardorum*
ProspChrContHav	*Prosperi Aqvitani Chronici continuator Havniensi*

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