

# Divine Deformity: The Plinian Races (via Isidore of Seville) in Irish Mythology

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**Abstract:** This article examines the characteristics of the Fomoiri in Irish mythological literature—particularly their being one-eyed, one-legged, and one-handed or one-armed—and rather than positing a proto-Indo-European or native Irish origin for these physical motifs, instead suggests that these characteristics may be derived from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, which contains a catalogue of the 'Plinian races' of classical mythology and pseudo-ethnography within it. All of the Fomoiri's characteristics can be compared to the physiological forms of the Giants, Sciopods, Cyclopes, and Blemmyae from the canonical list of Plinian races. Further comparison of Irish accounts of *cynocephali* (dog-headed humanoids) within texts like *Lebor Gabála Érenn* are also likely derived from Isidore.

Irish pseudohistorical writings of the medieval period suggest that the isle of Ireland was invaded by successive waves of inhabitants, the first being a granddaughter of the biblical Noah called Cesair, who invaded Ireland shortly before the flood (Carey 1987), but died with the rest of her companions (apart from one, a long-lived shape-shifting survivor) in the flood itself. The next post-diluvial invasion was that of Partholón, and it was during this period when Partholón's people were the principal inhabitants of Ireland that the first battle in Ireland occurred, which was against Cichol Grichenchos of the Fomoiri, a race described as 'men with single arms and single legs' in the first recension of the pseudohistorical text *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 'The Book of the Taking of Ireland' (*The Book of Invasions*, First Recension, 238 §38). The name of the Fomoiri leader here, like the names of many figures in Irish literature, further suggests that he may be one-eyed, which is similar to the Praenestine king Caeculus in Roman pseudohistory, who leads an army of (symbolically) one-footed warriors, and whose name also suggests the meaning 'blind in one eye' (McCone 1996, 98–99).

The Fomoiri are one of the standard supernatural races found in Irish literature from a very early date, and in their earliest appearances in the Leinster Dynastic Poetry (c. 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE), it is simply indicated that they are resident in the subterranean otherworld (which seems to be the realm of the dead), with nothing particularly special noted about their physiognomy (*Mess-Telmann*, 52 §1). Within the tale *Cath Maige Tuired*, a circa 12<sup>th</sup> century CE composition (with possible origins in the 9<sup>th</sup> century; Carey 1989/1990) detailing the battle between the Fomoiri and the other major Irish supernatural race, the Tuatha Dé—the latter of which came

to be regarded as the primary *aes side* ('people of the otherworld') race—the only population said to be resident within the otherworld mounds is the Fomoiri (*Cath Maige Tuired*, 34–35 §41). Further texts, including the eight-century *Echtra Chonlai* as well as later recensions of *Lebor Gabála*, also seem to indicate there is little difference between the Fomoiri and the Tuatha Dé (Carey 1995, 54). Irish folk etymology linked the Fomoiri to being sea-raiders, perhaps due to their assimilation to the invading Vikings (Carey 1989/1990), or perhaps to being from beneath the sea, since Fomoiri seemed to be derived from *fo*, 'under' + *muir*, 'sea'.<sup>1</sup> Later Irish folk tradition took the Fomoiri to be giants as well (*Cath Maige Tuired*, 132).

A number of mythologists have attempted to link this rivalry between the Tuatha Dé and the Fomoiri to other Indo-European 'war of the gods' schemata (Oosten 1985, 116–133). Others, including Georges Dumézil (1974) and Kim McCone (1986, 1996), have suggested placing the one-eyed, one-armed Fomoiri (as well as other Irish mythological figures in McCone's case) into an Indo-European mythic schema of *Le Borgne* and *Le Manchot*, a one-eyed and one-armed figure associated with the two aspects of the First (Sovereignty) Function in reconstructed Indo-European ideology and myth. An extremely useful corrective to some of this theorizing is that of R. Mark Scowcroft (1995), who suggests in particular relation to the idea of *Le Borgne* and *Le Manchot* (140–148) that it is an attractive, repeated pattern that simply became standardized in medieval narrative (145), and that ultimately Dumézil's reconstructive methods are useful for phonology, but not so much for the syntax or semantics involved in reconstructing ideologies (154–155).

However, what the Dumézilian schema leaves out is the detail, found very often in the Irish examples of the Fomoiri as well as other supernatural beings, of being one-legged or one-footed. Is there any other likely source from which to account for this particular physiognomic detail?

My suggestion in the present context is that not only can the one-footed detail be found in an important and influential source, but that the same source provides for almost all of the other details, as well as a few further instances which will be discussed below, that are found in the Fomoiri's description in Irish texts. That source is Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, which in Irish was known as the *Culmen*, 'The Culmination (of All Knowledge)' (Ó Máille 1921–1923). The influence of Isidore's work on Irish literature in general is pervasive (Hillgarth 1984), and at least partial knowledge of Book XI of the *Etymologiae* is known to have been present in Ireland from the mid-seventh century CE (Smyth 1987, 69–70). Book XI contains the descriptions of the various monstrous races, also known as the Plinian Races, as derived from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* Book VII, 9–32 (Pliny the Elder, Vol. 2, 512–527; Friedman 1981) and various other sources, and which

1 Though this etymology is not generally accepted now. It is taken to be *fo* plus *mor*, with the latter cognate to the *-mare* in English 'nightmare'; *Cath Maige Tuired*, 132.

therefore provides the direct authorities upon which the later descriptions of the Fomoiri may have been based.

Isidore's account of the Plinian Races begins in Book XI.iii.12, with a mention of the Giants, the Cynocephali, and the Cyclopes (Isidore, 244). The first and the third of these are obviously relevant to the developing Irish ideas about the physical characteristics of the Fomoiri, but we shall see in turn that the Cynocephali are likewise relevant to the question as well. The classical and biblical understandings of the Giants are detailed in §13–14, and the Cyclopes in §16, with the expected details given. After a variety of other races are described, §23 mentions the Sciopods, 'shade-feet', who are said to have a single leg, but are nonetheless very speedy (Isidore, 245).

Between these several monstrous races, the general characteristics of many of the Fomoiri, as well as some related magical postures found in Irish literature, seem to be accounted for. Cú Chulainn, the great warrior-hero of the Irish epic tradition, who has divine ancestry, is said to adopt a one-footed, one-eyed and one-armed posture in order to carve a challenge in ogam during the tale of his most important martial exploits (*TBC* II, 13 lines 456–460, 150). The death of Cú Chulainn is brought about through the devices of a sextet of magical women, who are said to have a single eye in their heads, a single arm, and a single leg (McCone 1996, 96). A further example of this physical posture is that of Lug—the half-Fomoiri, half-Tuatha Dé protagonist of the tale *Cath Maige Tuired* and the supernatural father of Cú Chulainn—who in his *corrquinecht* magical posture is said to have gone around his army on one foot and with one eye closed (*Cath Maige Tuired*, 58–59 §129; McCone 1996, 95).<sup>2</sup> This technique is used as a magical offensive against the Fomoiri hosts in their battle with the Tuatha Dé.

The *corrquinecht* posture is described elsewhere in Irish literature as being an element in the performance of a particularly virulent form of satire called the *glám dicenn* (McCone 1996, 95). The connection between monstrosity and satire is born out in a further example from *Cath Maige Tuired*. One of the characters in *Cath Maige Tuired* is a satirist named Cridenbél, who is clearly antagonistic to many of the Tuatha Dé, but is said to be one of their number. In §26–30 of the tale, the Dagda, one of the foremost of the Tuatha Dé, is enslaved to build ramparts for the Fomoiri. Each day, the three best parts of his food are taken from him, under threat of satire by Cridenbél, who is said to be blind and to have his mouth in his chest. Through a deception, in which gold is put into the Dagda's food, and then the food with the gold in it is consumed by Cridenbél, the satirist dies, and the Dagda is not held responsible for the death when the gold is found in the satirist's stomach upon investigation by the king (*Cath Maige Tuired*, 28–31). Interestingly, a further

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2 On these (and other) examples, see Bernhardt-House 2009, 9.

monstrous race detailed in Isidore's *Etymologiae* is the Blemmyae, also described in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* Book V, 46 (Vol. 2, 252–253), who are said to have no heads, with their mouths and eyes located in their chests, in Book XI.iii.17 of Isidore's work (245). It seems that, again, Isidore's work has provided a source for monstrous characteristics that can be employed in the description of supernatural beings in Irish literature.<sup>3</sup>

In a further intriguing interrelationship, the character of Cridenbél is cited in the onomastic text *Cóir Anmann*, under the heading of *cáinte*, 'satirist', in the following terms: '*Cáinte* "satirist", i.e. from that which is *canis* [Lat.] "dog." For a satirist, while "barking", has the head of a dog. Whence Cridenbél the satirist' (Arbuthnot 2005–2007, Vol. 2, 64, 137 §249; Stokes 1891, 384–385 §240).<sup>4</sup> The detail of being dog-headed is of course familiar to those who know of the other Plinian Races, and indeed the Cynocephali are mentioned in Isidore's *Etymologiae* XI.iii.15 (245). The doghead races in Irish are called the *Conchinn*, and they are a very frequently occurring monstrosity in Irish literature, as well as the singular form of the word, *Conchenn*, being a common personal name for either gender (Bernhardt-House 2010, 257–325). In the second recension of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, a citation of the lost eighth-century CE manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechtai*<sup>5</sup> is given as the source of the doctrine which follows: 'At the end of three hundred years thereafter, Partholón took Ireland: he dwelt there five hundred and fifty years, till the Cynocephali drove him out, and there escaped [survived] not one of his children alive. For thirty years after that there was not a man living in Ireland' (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Vol. 2, 178–179 §167, 196–197 §187). Recall that earlier in the present discussion, it was mentioned that the first description of the Fomoiri as having single arms and legs was in the first recension of *Lebor Gabála*, when the race first fought against Partholón's people. John Carey has suggested that here in the second recension, the dogheads are considered to be identified with the Fomoiri (1995, 50n15), but this need not be the case, as the Fomoiri are described independently and are readily recognizable from an earlier date. But, in the various

3 Interestingly, the *corrguinecht* term seems to include the element *corr*, which can mean 'peak', 'point', or in some cases 'crane/heron'. Cranes/herons come into the description of Cú Chulainn's battle frenzy (to be discussed subsequently), particularly in the detail of one of his eyes receding into his head. Further, there is an incident in the later Irish *vita* of St. Colum Cille, in which he is besieged by satirists while cutting wood in the forest. He has nothing he can give them, but through the grace of God his sweat is converted into gold. Colum Cille is associated quite closely with cranes in a number of incidents throughout his life and legends, as well as with poetry and poetics (of which satire was a component); but further, his menial work in this incident, as well as the satisfaction of satirists with gold, seems to distantly echo this narrative of Cridenbél the satirist, who is in conflict with the laboring Dagda. Ó Domhnaill, 70–71 §80; Nagy, 165–166, 182–189.

4 The translation given here is that of Arbuthnot.

5 For an account of the manuscript in general, see Carey 2007, 27–41.

other texts in which doghead invaders do occur, they often come from across the sea, not unlike the implied folk etymology of Fomoiri mentioned earlier. The close association between Giants, Cynocephali, and Cyclopes in Isidore's text certainly makes a putative interrelationship between these three monstrous races in the literary constructions of the medieval Irish pseudohistorical writers a strong possibility.

As one final example of monstrous characteristics deriving from Isidore in Irish literature, I would tentatively suggest the following further details of the Irish hero Cú Chulainn. We have already heard how his father was the half-Fomoiri Lug, and how the hero himself made an ogam cutting with one foot, one hand, and one eye. In the description of the distortions Cú Chulainn undergoes in his battle frenzy, one of his eyes is drawn into his head, and it is said that women who admired him blinded themselves in one eye to signify their admiration (McCone 1996, 100). In the epic narration of the great cattle-raid of Cooley, Cú Chulainn experiences his battle-frenzy, but then subsequently shows his beautiful form to the opposing army. In his battle-frenzy, it is said that 'His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front' (*TBC I*, 68 lines 2249–2251, 187). When he has resumed his more pleasing form, the following is reported about his digits: 'Seven toes on each of his feet; seven fingers on each of his hands with the grasp of a hawk's claws and the grip of a hedgehog's claws in each separate toe and finger' (*TBC I*, 71 lines 2351–2353, 190). One of the further races mentioned in Isidore's discourse on the Plinian Races is the Antipodeans, who are described briefly as having 'the soles of their feet twisted behind their legs, and eight toes on each foot' (245 §24). While the details of each do not match up entirely perfectly, the detail of having reversed legs and supernumerary toes is certainly a point of parallelism in the two, which suggests at least the possibility of influence.

While there is no Plinian race reported in Isidore's work that is said to have a single arm or hand, the possibility is suggested earlier in Book XI.iii.8, where the reasoning for portents and monstrous races' names is explained. 'Yet others are so called due to missing parts of the body, individuals in whom one corresponding part is deficient compared with the other, as when one hand is compared with the other hand and one foot with the other foot. Others due to a cutting off, as in the case of those born without a hand or without a head' (244 §8). The particular constellations of single-features in the Irish races, whether physically or in terms of ritual postures, vary greatly, with sometimes only two of the three features being mentioned. Neither the strict reliance upon the Isidorean account of the Plinian Races, nor possible protoforms in Indo-European myth, can entirely encompass all the range of possibilities.

Yet, there is another European account of a single-leg, -arm, and -eye race, which is never fully realized, but is given as a possibility, in the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, in the familiar story of the origins of erotic attraction. The three sexes of humans, who originally had two heads, four arms and four legs, were split in half by the gods due to their power and disobedience, and each was altered so that they became the various varieties of humans who fall in love with each other's other half. The threat that remains is that if humans continue to disobey, they might be cut in half again to be single-legged, -armed, and -eyed (Plato, 193a). If this tale too has an origin in Indo-European myth, then it is intriguing that this single-featured threat is a further punishment to the previous splitting of humans. The Fomoiri are portrayed as, to an extent, a demonic and fallen race, said to have originated with either the offspring of Cain or Ham son of Noah from the Genesis narrative (Gray 1983, 132). Perhaps, therefore, this singular physiology is a reflection of their accursed status in comparison with other divine races like the Tuatha Dé.

While the Indo-European hypothesis and the native tradition suggestions of Kim McCone and John Carey may still be tenable in relation to the physical characteristics of the divine races in Ireland, the likelihood of these being drawn from a known, influential, respected source like Isidore would appear to be far more plausible, in absence of any definitive evidence demonstrating that these characteristics were common in the tradition prior to the mid-seventh century.

## Abbreviations

TBC I *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension I*

TBC II *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*

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