

Warriors, Words, and Wood: Oral and Literary Wisdom in the Exploits of Irish Mythological Warriors

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Michael Enright, in his study *Lady with a Mead Cup*, intriguingly hypothesized that the figure known as the ‘Gaulish Mercury’ and the later Germanic figure of Odin (and his cognates) not only have a common ancestry, but that the latter may have been in origin the former.¹ While it has generally been accepted that Julius Caesar’s description of this ‘Gaulish Mercury’² is probably the figure known as Lugus in continental inscriptions, cognate to Lug in Ireland and Lleu as well as Llewellys in Wales (Carey 2002, 99-126; Koch 1991, 25), and keeping in mind Bernhard Maier’s caveats on the matter (Maier 1996, 127-135), I would like to suggest that perhaps Lugus is one among many possibilities—both identified and unknown—for a deity with some of the characteristics of Caesar’s ‘Gaulish Mercury’. An exploration of several of the above-mentioned figures is necessary before proceeding further into this analysis.

While there is not the space at present to do justice to the many facets of Hermes/Mercury or Odin in their various cultural manifestations, a few noteworthy features of each might simply be mentioned which are relevant to this discussion. Hermes is best known in his role as a psychopomp, but he is also a god of verbal eloquence and trickery. He is referred to from his birth onwards in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* as the Argus-Slayer, an epithet which stresses a warrior-like aspect, and pseudo-Apollodorus reports that he killed Argus by casting a stone.³ This method of slaying a many-eyed monster is a manner perhaps similar to Lug’s slaying of Balor (with a sling stone into his magical eye) in *Cath Maige Tuired* §133-135. In an interesting further move, the Homeric Hymn also has the newborn deity inventing

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- 1 Enright 1996, especially in the chapter “Warband Religion and the Celtic World,” pp.169-282. While some of the evidence in what follows in the present discussion is also treated in Enright 2006, my own conclusions and assumptions on these matters vary widely from his. It is a testament to the richness of the material here treated that such different interpretations can be advanced with similar bodies of evidence.
 - 2 Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, Bk. VI.17: *Deum maxime Mercurium colunt. Huius sunt pluri-
ma simulacra: hunc omnium inventorem atrium ferunt, hunc viarum atque itinerum ducem,
hunc ad quaestus pecuniae mercaturasque habere vim maximam arbitrantur* (Among the
gods they most worship Mercury. There are numerous images of him; they declare him the
inventor of all arts, the guide for every road and journey, and they deem him to have the
greatest influence for all money-making and traffic).
 - 3 *The Homeric Hymns*, 31-47; Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, 92-93; Apol-
lodoros, *The Library* I, 132-133.

both the lyre (with which all inspired song and verse was accompanied), as well as the fire-drill for kindling fires, in rapid succession (Brown 1990, especially pp. 3-31 and 66-101). The root of Odin's name signifies 'fury' or 'ardor', both of which are related to warrior activities as well as poetic inspiration, and likewise Odin also has connections to death and the afterlife; he was said to have hung on the world-tree in order to gain knowledge of the runes.⁴ We thus see in both the figures of Hermes and Odin an assemblage of inspired art (verbal, musical or literary), warriorship, a psychopomp function, and wood (Odin on the world tree, presumably made of wood, and Hermes with his ability to start fires). It is no surprise for students of Celtic mythology to see poetic and martial inspiration in close association, and to see how these various aspects may connect to the 'Gaulish Mercury' described by Caesar, as well as to Lugus and his insular cognates. However, two further Gaulish figures deserve our attention meanwhile.

The first is the figure of Ogmios, as described in Lucian of Samosata's *Prolalia Herakles*, but who is also known from two Latin curse tablets.⁵ The old, bald, blackened and wrinkly Ogmios, armed with a club and a bow and trailing a retinue of followers by chains from his tongue connected to their ears, is said in the first line of the *Prolalia* to be identified with Herakles. Lucian was further informed:

We Celts do not agree with you Greeks in thinking that Hermes is Eloquence; we identify Heracles with it, because he is far more powerful than Hermes...In general, we consider that the real Heracles was a wise man who achieved everything by eloquence and applied persuasion as his principal force. His arrows represent words, I suppose, keen, sure, and swift, which make their wounds in souls. In fact, you yourselves admit that words are winged.⁶

This Ogmios-Herakles figure deserves the Irish epithet *milbél*, 'honey-mouthed', not only because of the sweetness of his words, but also because of their stickiness.⁷ Maier suggests that perhaps Ogmios is instead a chthonic deity of some sort—and there is a tradition of Herakles being a psychopomp as well (Wagenvoort 1971, 113-161)—but based on the previous examples of Hermes and Odin, there is little difficulty in the possibility that Ogmios was connected to warfare and eloquence as well as the underworld. While linguistic particularities prevent a full identification of the Irish deity Ogma with Ogmios, they do share in common a connection with

4 *The Poetic Edda*, 36-40; Dumézil 1973, 26-38; Simek 1993, 240-246; Davidson 1993, 76-79, 98-101; Kershaw 2000; Compton 2006, 253-267. Davidson 1993, 59, 72, 78-79 outlines a number of similarities between Odin and Lug (with some linguistic mistakes).

5 Lucian I, 62-71; Maier 1997, 213; Nagy 1990a, 206-207.

6 Lucian I, 64-67.

7 While it is uncertain if Lucian had this in mind, he does report his Celtic informant speaking of honey-tongued Nestor as well; *ibid.*

warrior activities as well as inspired verbal art, specifically in literary form as the eponymous ogam alphabet.⁸

The other continental deity which relates to this discussion is Esus. This deity is known from one inscription and relief sculpture, showing the deity engaged in wood-cutting, which is very similar to a further relief on an altar to Mercury, which suggests a connection between the two deities (Ross 1961, 405-438). Additionally, Esus appears along with Taranis and Teutates in the first book of Lucan's *Pharsalia* as a recipient of human sacrifices among the Gauls (*Pharsalia* 14 lines 444-446; Duval 1958, 41-58), and likewise in Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones* §1.21.3, this deity and Teutates are said to be propitiated with blood. The Berne Scholia on Lucan further equate him with Mercury, and elaborate that Esus' victims were hung on trees,⁹ which has long been recognized to suggest similarities to the myths of Odin.¹⁰ Attempts to correlate Esus' mythic iconography with events in the life of Cú Chulainn have been suggested in the past, but are generally discounted now.¹¹ Suffice it to say for the moment that there is a particular similarity between the two that has been overlooked, to which we shall turn in due course.

A number of mythic parallels suggest themselves between Irish narratives and the myth of Odin (Carey 1983, 214-218; Sayers 1983, 63-78; Buchholz 1983, 427-437), including the story of Bóand and her loss of an eye, an arm and a leg as the result of violating the *geis* of the well of Nechtan, which floods to form the river Boyne.¹² With Bóand and the well of Nechtan or Segais, we come into the realm of the Indo-European myth of the 'fire in water' (Ford 1974, 67-74; Puhvel 1987, 277-283), and in the specifically Celtic manifestations of the myth this is generally

8 *Cath Maige Tuired* §59, 72; *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 272-273; McManus 1991, 150-152. See also Sayers 1990, 221-234, for further interpretations of Ogmios, Ogma, and other figures, some to be discussed in the remainder of the present discussion.

9 Maier 1997, 36, 110-111. Note, however, that Esus is also connected to Mars in other scholia, as noted in Borsje 2007, 42-44.

10 Ward 1970, 134; he further suggests Esus replaced Lug (*Lugus) in the Odinic-Varunic position which Dumézil outlined as a cornerstone of Indo-European mythology. Dumézil retracted the position which suggested Lug and Náada for the roles of Varuna and Mitra in Dumézil 1974, 21.

11 D'Arbois de Jubainville 1904, 63-65; MacCulloch 1964, 157-158; Campbell 1964, 303-306. For a view which still upholds this direct identification as viable, see Olmsted 1979, 155-156.

12 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', 315-316; 'The Bodleian Dinshenchas', 500; *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, vol. III, 26-39; Cináed Ua hArtacáin, 'Poem on Brugh na Bóinne', 210-238. Olmsted 1992, 12-13, suggests that the three wounds inflicted on the Morrigan by Cú Chulainn while the former is in the form of various animals parallel the three wounds of Bóand; while I would agree that this is the case, and that the two are further connected with prophecy in some sense, I would not agree with his fundamental identification of the two figures (or indeed of his general tendency to collapse many characters into an ultimate unity). McCone 1996, 94-97, suggests that this type of wounding is particularly associated with 'the sphere of the warrior and his lethal profession' (97). As will become apparent in the subsequent discussion, the connection between assuming such a posture and the type of 'word-wisdom' under consideration here is at the very heart of my arguments.

connected to poetic inspiration, *imbas forosnai*.¹³ The warrior-poet-seer Finn mac Cumhaill is particularly associated with this form of inspiration, which is gained in various accounts through a variety of otherworldly contacts, usually involving ‘otherworldly water’ in some form.¹⁴ One of the other prominent warrior figures in Irish tradition, Cú Chulainn, is said also to be skilled in eloquence in *Tochmarc Emire*,¹⁵ but his relationship to *imbas forosnai* is quite different than that of Finn. In the text which Vernam Hull entitled *Ces Ulad*, Cú Chulainn and his charioteer go specifically seeking *imbas* on the river Boyne, but in the end it seems that he fails, and the debility of the Ulstermen is said to result from his encounter there with Fedelm and Elcmaire.¹⁶ In another tale, Cú Chulainn encounters the diminutive Senbecc, who is himself seeking *imbas*, but the hero ends up being put to sleep by him and the little old man escapes.¹⁷ It is surprising to see the undefeated hero in both cases stymied by those who, it would seem, have attained, are attempting to attain, or already possess and dispense *imbas*. It is also noteworthy that the seeress Fedelm, who in the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is said to have *imbas forosnai* herself, reports that she just came from Alba, where she learned her prophetic arts.¹⁸ It seems reasonable to assume that Scáthach, Cú Chulainn’s foster-mother and principal trainer in arms, was the teacher of Fedelm in this case, as Scáthach herself had poetic and prophetic skills.¹⁹ Perhaps, echoing the words of Cú Chulainn’s son Connla upon his slaying by his father, we can put the statement

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- 13 Chadwick 1934, 97-135; Nagy 1981-1982, 135-143; Carey 1997, 41-58; further, Carey 1991, 163-185, discusses many of the narratives and figures already mentioned and yet to be addressed in this discussion, but without the conclusions which I will reach below. Further references to the Boyne/Segais and the hazelnuts of wisdom include: *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* §17; and the ‘Cauldron of Poesy’, in Henry’s translation pp.114-128 at 120n2, and 124-125; in Breatnach’s translation pp.66-67 §11 and pp.92-93.
- 14 Nagy 1981-1982, 139-142; ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, 344-349 (the splashing of an otherworldly vessel on Finn’s thumb); ‘Macgnimmartha Find’, 195-204; ‘The Boyish Exploits of Finn’, 180-190 (eating the salmon of wisdom, which has eaten the hazel nuts fallen into the well of Segais); *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, 34-41 (a drink from Cuillen after an adventure involving a magical lake). For an excellent treatment on Finn and these various matters, see Nagy 1985.
- 15 *Tochmarc Emire* 446-447, 455 note 48, where an unnamed maiden says that herself and Cú Chulainn learned ‘melodiousness’ (*bindius*) together in fosterage with Wulfkin the Saxon. See also Sayers 1991-1992, 125-154.
- 16 ‘Ces Ulad: The Affliction of the Ulstermen’, 305-314; in translation pp. 67-68.
- 17 ‘An Old Irish Tract on the Privileges and Responsibilities of Poets’, 26-27; in translation p.67. This mention of *imbas* is in the ‘B’ version of the tale only.
- 18 *TBC I*, 2, 126 lines 40-45. The coincidence of the name of this seeress and the woman encountered by Cú Chulainn in his search for *imbas*, and the etymological cognate of Fedelm in the Gaulish seeress Veleda; see Enright 1996, 171-173 and *passim*.
- 19 Despite the lack of mention of Scáthach at this point, on this matter I follow the interpretation of Dooley 2006, 68-72. We shall deal with the actual text of Scáthach’s prophecy in due course.

in Cú Chulainn's mouth that *imbas forosnai* was a feat which Scáthach did not teach him.

A text identified as one of the earliest indications of the existence of the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the seventh-century *Verba Scáthaige*, which is one of several texts deriving from the lost manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechtai*. Of particular interest to the present discussion are two lines in this text, *Tithis fidach fáeburamnus / fethul feulae, fedchlessaib* (8-9),²⁰ 'Hard-bladed, he will cut (or conjure) the trees / by the sign of slaughters, by wood-feats.'²¹ Many commentators have seen this as a reference to Cú Chulainn's use of the forked branch adorned with the heads of four slain enemies as a warning and an obstacle to the invading army of Medb.²² However, P. L. Henry keenly observes that Cú Chulainn cuts an ogam warning before this, which causes the advancing army to divert by cutting down a forest,²³ in addition to the ogam message on the forked pole itself.²⁴ The way this first ogam-cutting is described in the *Book of Leinster's* version of the *Táin* is noteworthy: 'Cú Chulainn went into the wood and cut a prime oak sapling, whole and entire, with one stroke and, standing on one leg and using but one hand and one eye, he twisted it into a ring and put an ogam inscription on the peg of the ring and put the ring around the narrow part of the standing-stone at Ard Cuillenn.'²⁵ If this is not an accurate description of a 'wood-feat', one would wonder what indeed constitutes such a maneuver. A similar action occurs with the one-foot, one-eye posture of Lug in *Cath Maige Tuired* when he enacts the *corrquinecht* ritual.²⁶ In both cases,

20 'Verba Scáthaige', 191-207. On *fedchlessaib*, 'wood-feats', I follow the suggestion of Olmsted 1979, 229-238 and 1992, 7-8; in his edition, Henry notes that of five manuscripts versions of this text, two have the *fed-* form, and a third has *fer no fed*, thus his choice to take *ferchlessaib*, 'manly feats', as the definitive reading seems somewhat arbitrary; p. 203.

21 'Verba Scáthaige', 200, with the minor edit mentioned in the previous note. Olmsted's variant edition renders these lines 'Keenly-pointed flesh-adorned / timber will attest to wood-feats.'

22 'Verba Scáthaige', 203; Olmsted 1992, 9-10; *TBC* I, 11-12, 134-135; *TBC* II, 16-17, 153-154.

23 'Verba Scáthaige', 203; *TBC* I, 9, 131; *TBC* II, 13, 150. The editor of 'Verba Scáthaige' Henry further connects this to one of the *rosc* passages later in the text, spoken by Fergus but untranslated by O'Rahilly, *TBC* I, 35 line 1131, *For-toing glaiss, boccit cuillte, ár sílestar i rrichtu*, 'He conjures the stream, woods move, slaughter will be done at his coming'; see also *Táin Roscada* 37, 40, 60, 70. Further discussion below will draw connections between the rising of various rivers in defense of Ulster and these incidents. A similar 'none shall pass' effect is achieved with an ogam inflicted upon Bres, as noted in the ogam tract: *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 304-305.

24 *TBC* I, 26, 148, has a further ogam challenge by Cú Chulainn, inserted just after the last of his boyhood deeds is related.

25 *TBC* II, 150; text on p. 13, lines 456-460: *Luid Cú Chulaind fón fid , tópacht and cétbunni darach d'óenbéim bun barr , ro sniastar ar óenchois , ar óenláim , óensúil , doringi id de. Ocus tuc ainm n'oguim 'na mennuc inn eda , tuc in n-id im cháel in chorthe ic Ard Chuillend.*

26 *Cath Maige Tuired* 58-59 §129; McCone 1996, 95; Borsje 2003, 92-93. Lug is further said to have been one of the owners of the *corrbolg* or 'crane-bag' of Manannán, and indeed cranes play an interesting role in the early life of Finn. However, this is a very large topic, and while

an incitement to martial conflict is the result of this activity, which seems in some sense to mimic the apparent posture of a crane (with only one eye of the bird generally visible, and its patient balance on one leg). This would seem to at least suggest the relation between the *TRIGARANUS* or ‘Three Cranes’ associated with the relief sculptures of the god Esus, but this is not the only connection between the Gaulish deity and these Irish counterparts. In the continuity of the action of the *Táin*’s narrative, soon after the challenge of the forked pole following the original ogam cutting, Cú Chulainn encounters the charioteer of Orlám cutting holly wood to make a new swingletree for his master, and the hero himself helps the charioteer strip the wood.²⁷ Here, he is doing what seems to be servile work, which also happens to a number of other characters in Irish literature,²⁸ but most notably for our purposes Ogma, who is forced by the oppressing Fomoiré to carry firewood in servitude (*Cath Maige Tuired* §25, 32-33, §37; Hull 1929-1930, 63-69). Interestingly, Ogma is said to be among the muster of the Ulstermen in the first two recensions of the *Táin* (*TBC* I, 106, 218; *TBC* II, 113, 248). Perhaps wood-carrying and wood-cutting, both of which would be implied in the skill of using ogam, are distantly related to a deity-form in Continental Celtic tradition noted for verbal skill of some sort.

These various connections of this type of written word wisdom and wood carrying also seem to have a correlation on a narrative level to flooding, which as mentioned earlier is connected to the stories of the origin of the Boyne. The first recension of the *Táin* in particular has repeated floodings of rivers, especially the Cronn, in defense of Ulster,²⁹ and the narrative sequence in the *Book of Leinster* version likewise proceeds in the order of the incident with the forked pole, the holly wood-cutting, and the flooding of the Glais Cruind.³⁰ Further, we note that two thirds of Ogma’s burden of firewood are carried away by the sea at Clew Bay each day.³¹ In the text *Imacallam in Dá Thuarad*, it is remarked at the very outset that

relevant, there is not time nor space here to fully elucidate these points. See further references on Lug and crane-figures in Ó Cuív 1963, 338.

- 27 *TBC* I, 27-28, 149-150; *TBC* II, 33-34, 171-172; Nagy 1996, 145. I follow the suggestion of Sayers 1984, 171-183, in the translation of ‘swingletree’ here, instead of ‘chariot pole’.
- 28 For further references to some of these, see Ó Riain 1971-1972, 183, 200. A further example not mentioned is that of Nera in *Echtra Nerai*, which is discussed by Olmsted 1992, 13, but not as it would relate to the episodes in *TBC*. Compton 2006, 10-11, discusses a Greek example of how a great hero must act as a servile woodsman as part of a ‘scapegoat’ myth, which often involves a poetic/warrior hero.
- 29 *TBC* I, 31-32, 36, 153-154, 157. For extensive discussion of these, see Nagy 1996; Nagy 1997, 603-609; Carey 2004, 10-24.
- 30 *TBC* II, 37, 175; Nagy 1996, 140n2.
- 31 *Cath Maige Tuired* §37. Possibly relevant in this regard is the property associated with the *corrbolg*, which belonged to and was made by Manannán, but then was given to Lug, then was taken by the sons of Cermait Milbél (who slew Lug), then it passed back to Manannán until the time of Conaire Mór, and later was given to Finn (many of whom are connected

‘the bank of a body of water was a place where knowledge was always revealed for poets’.³² These *limines*, in the truest sense, are dangerous places because they are the most liable to be subject to the devastation of flooding, whether the positive flood of poetic inspiration or the destructive actual floods of sea and river. Ogma’s wood-collecting was certainly the worse for this, but Cú Chulainn’s protective activities seem to be aided and enhanced by the assistance of the rivers in this regard.

We must, however, reckon with a further fact in the texts of the *Táin*: the first ogam warnings and the forked pole are separated from the later wood-cutting and flooding episodes by the *Macgnímrada Con Culainn*. While this most certainly makes narratological sense in the overall scheme of the epic, I would like to suggest that certain elements of what Daniel Melia has called the ‘A Version’ of the *Macgnímrada*³³ are in fact continuous with some of the thematic concepts with which we have been dealing. In the first incident of the ‘A Version’, Cú Chulainn arrives in Emain Macha for the first time, and in his confrontation with the boy-troop, he undergoes his first *riastartha*,³⁴ in the second, he slays and replaces the hound of the smith Culann,³⁵ and in the third, he takes up arms for the first time and defeats the sons of Nechta Scéne.³⁶ In this first episode, the young hero proves his mettle against a veritable army, and with his *riastartha* he literally demonstrates that he ‘has the fire’, while in the second, he ends up becoming apprenticed to a smith, the archetypal wielder of fire. In the third, he fights with three adversaries associated with water (and possibly the well of Nechtan through their parentage by Nechta Scéne).³⁷ He sends a withe down the river, said to be ogam-inscribed in the *Book of Leinster* version,³⁸ to signal his wish to do combat with them, and in the

either to birds or eloquence in some manner). The property of the bag relevant here is that its treasures were visible when the sea was full, but empty when the sea was in ebb. *Duanaire Finn* Part I, 21-22, 118-120.

32 Nagy 1981-1982, 139n1; ‘The Colloquy of the Two Sages’, 8-9.

33 Melia 1974, 211-226. The ‘A Version’ only contains three episodes, and is found in the Book of Leinster’s version of *TBC*, as well as the tale-list in the same manuscript: Cú Chulainn’s arrival at Emain Macha, his slaying of the hound of Culann, and his taking up of arms and combat with the sons of Nechta Scéne.

34 *TBC* I, 13-15, 136-137; *TBC* II, 21-23, 158-160. Though he does defeat the boys in the Book of Leinster version, it does not say that he underwent a *riastartha* in doing so.

35 *TBC* I, 17-19, 140-142; *TBC* II, 23-25, 160-163.

36 *TBC* I, 19-23, 143-146; *TBC* II, 25-31, 163-169.

37 Nagy 1996, 141. Sayers 1983, 73-74n10, notes that a character called Nechtan dies by a wave at the end of *Immram Bran; The Voyage of Bran*, 32-35. After this death of Nechtan, the quatrans of Bran are said to be recorded in ogam. The second highest grade of poet in Old Irish is the *ánsruth*, a term which is also applied to warriors (e.g. *TBC* I, 13 line 408, 136—*ánrodaib*), that could be etymologized as *án* ‘fiery, brilliant’ + *sruth* ‘stream, flood’, (see *DIL* s.v. *ánrad*, *án*, *sruth*), the imagery of which occurs frequently in relation to poets and poetry, in addition to connecting with the themes discussed here.

38 *TBC* II, 29 line 170,167.

fight, he uses his feat called the *deil chlis* against one of them, a feat which might possibly mean ‘split-wood feat’.³⁹ Both William Sayers and Michael Enright have written on the confluence of warriorship, poetry, heat, and water in the activities of smiths and metalwork (Sayers 1985, 227-260; Enright 2002, 342-367), and indeed all of these seem to have relevance to the incidents just mentioned. These relations between wood, poetry, warriors, and smithcraft make sense if, for no other reason, one acknowledges that smiths would have needed wood as the fuel for the fires in their forges.

There is one final similarity between the word-wise Ogma and the warrior Cú Chulainn, which in a sense further extends this connection between words and warfare. Both heroes are said to be associated with swords which can, in some sense, ‘speak’.⁴⁰ In *Cath Maige Tuired* Ogma captures Orna, the sword of the Fomoire king Tethra, and when he unsheathes and cleans it, it tells him its deeds, and it is mentioned that swords used to be sureties.⁴¹ In the complex legal fiction of *Scél na Fir Flatha*, the sword of Cú Chulainn is made to act as an *audacht* or ‘pronouncement’ on behalf of the dead through a false inscription inside its hilt.⁴² The tale of *Serglige Con Culainn* opens with an account of how, in the past, swords were the guarantors of the truth of warrior’s deeds and that demons spoke from them,⁴³ which echoes the commentary in the *Cath Maige Tuired* incident just mentioned. It seems possible that in all of these cases, perhaps the interpretation that it was demons speaking from weapons is a reinterpretation of a warrior-specific, possibly poetic and magical, use of inscriptions on swords, shields, and other objects, which figuratively makes the objects ‘speak’ without a human voice. Further, ogam as mentioned in other narratives allows mute stones to proclaim the names of the dead, and inanimate pieces of inscribed wood to tell stories.⁴⁴

This conjecture brings us into a realm which Joseph Nagy has discussed in a number of contexts, namely that of the tension between oral and literary cultures in early Ireland,⁴⁵ and in particular to the drowning of the two foremost *senchaid* of Ireland in the rising of the Cronn, which in effect caused the tale to be lost until it

39 Sayers 1989, 91-94. Further, on p. 106n23, Sayers notes that a similar type of spear seems to be the one carried by Cú Chulainn in his encounter with Fedelm and Elcmaire in *Ces Ulad*.

40 On these matters, see Nagy 1990b, 131-136; Carey 1992, 1-12; Borsje 1999, 224-248.

41 *Cath Maige Tuired* §162. Further, *Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann* includes a similar idea when Cian, the father of Lug, warns his murderers that their weapons will testify against them; translation 56.

42 ‘The Irish Ordeals, Cormac’s Adventure in the Land of Promise, and the Decision as to Cormac’s Sword’, 199-202, 217-221.

43 *Serglige Con Culainn*, 1. In translation p.48.

44 McManus 1991, 153-163, collects the varied references to ogam in narrative literature.

45 Nagy 1990b, 134-135; Nagy 1990a, 221-224. The tale discussed in the latter is found in ‘Stories from the Law Tracts’, 48-49, 58-61.

was recovered by poets assisted by the ghost of Fergus.⁴⁶ To this erudite discourse I would only add that on a narratological level in the *Táin*, it is as if the ‘wood-feat’ of ogam writing has in some sense brought about the death of the storytellers, as the flooding which kills them occurs after the various interconnected wood-cutting and -carrying incidents discussed here. Cú Chulainn’s wish to be famous for all time, expressed upon his taking up of arms in the *Macgnimrada*, is for a time thwarted by the death of these storytellers; and it is only because another wood-wise figure, Fergus, intervenes in one last demonstration of the art of storytelling, that the imminent death of the art is delayed for a few hundred more lines of written narrative. Just as the ambivalence of the warrior—both beneficial to society in defense but dangerous in the capacity for unrestrained battle-fury—is reflected in Cú Chulainn’s taking up of arms, his fight with Nechta Scéne’s sons, and his subsequent return to Emain Macha, so too is the gift of the ‘wood-wisdom’⁴⁷ of ogam and other later literate arts both a blessing for the learned but also the eventual downfall for the oral culture of Ireland.

When inanimate objects speak with voices as authoritative as the human voice, the power of poets and storytellers would appear to diminish considerably. It is readily admitted that most of the mentions of ogam in medieval Irish literature are short warnings of various types, or perhaps names or other brief verbal informational items, nowhere near on the scale of extended or even abbreviated narratives.⁴⁸ However, the usual ogam terminology of ‘cutting’ (*benaid*) a message in inscribed ogam on an object shifts in the first recension of the *Táin* to one of ‘writing’ (*scribaid*) (Ní Chatháin 1996, 212-216), which demonstrates that the writers of this literature were connecting their own literate activities to those earliest chippings away at creating a literate culture of their earlier ancestors. On a literal level, ogam production would not have been a threat to the oral culture of medieval Ireland; but on a metaphorical level, and on the level of narrative as presented in many of these tales, writing—whether of ogam or of other literate languages—is not merely a threat, but in fact a direct replacement of orality.

46 Nagy 1996, 147; Nagy 1997, *passim*.

47 I would define ‘wisdom’ here, as used throughout this article, as the practical application of a particular learned skill which is uncommon, and often definitive of superlative achievement. The detail that Cú Chulainn excels in the form of what I have termed ‘wood-wisdom’, to the amazement of his enemies and their inability to match him, and that Fergus (another wood-wise figure) is exempted from using his wisdom to compete with his foster-son, gives the impression that this particular skill and its successful deployment was not only difficult to master and rarely encountered, but also something that is reckoned as truly powerful and even threatening to those lacking in such wisdom. See Bergin 1923 for a further reflection of the power associated with Cú Chulainn’s ogam-cuttings on warning withes.

48 Two exceptions would be the very early mention in *Immram Brain* of the recording of Bran’s voyage, as cited in note 37 above, and the recording of the names of the descendants of Conn by the poet Cessarnn in *Baile in Scáil*, 34-35, 51 §9.

As a final point in this discussion of warriors, words, and wood, I would like to note a last significant detail in the incidents from the *Táin* which have been the main focus of this discussion. An intriguing suggestion for the etymology of Cú Chulainn's smith fosterfather's name was made by Alan Bruford, who suggested among other possibilities that it was a reference to a placename involving the word *cuilenn*, 'holly' (Bruford 1994, 200-201), thus making the hero in effect the 'Hound of Holly-wood'. Both where Cú Chulainn leaves his first ogam warning to the army of Medb, and where he stripped the swingletrees with Orlám's charioteer, is a placename involving this element: Iraird Culenn.⁴⁹ Cú Chulainn's fight with Nad Crantail occurs later in the text, with the latter sending a shower of fire-blackened holly spits at the hero, which Cú Chulainn is able to deflect easily and skillfully, in a birdlike fashion as he hunts birds.⁵⁰ Further, Cú Chulainn is wounded through the foot by a holly-spear from his fosterbrother Fer Baeth, but then return-casts the spear and kills Fer Baeth.⁵¹ Finn encounters many characters (several of whom are female)⁵² with the name Cuil(l)en(n), but notably he goes to Lochán the smith at Cuillenn of the Uí Chúanach in his own boyhood exploits, where he obtains spears for his further adventures;⁵³ and further, the otherworldly figure who grants him a drink of inspiration in *Feis Tighe Chonáin* is called Cuillen.⁵⁴ If we turn to the various ogam lists, we find that holly is the principal tree connected to the letter T in the *crannogam*,⁵⁵ and in the various *briatharogam* lists, this letter name, *tinne* 'bar of metal', is described with the kennings *trian roth* 'one of three parts of a wheel', *smuir guaile* 'marrow of charcoal', and *trian n-airm* 'one of three parts of a weapon'.⁵⁶ The connection of chariots with holly has been discussed above.⁵⁷ The spits of holly used as weapons against Cú Chulainn by Nad Crantail and Fer Baeth may, indeed, suggest the use of this wood for spear shafts. Finally, the connection

49 *TBC* I, 9, 27-28, 131, 149-150; *TBC* II, 13, 33-34, 150, 171-172. '*Táin Roscada*', 33-34, mentions the 'truce of Cuilleann' (*ossad Cuilleand*), but what this may be referring to is not noted or discussed.

50 *TBC* I, 43-46, 163-166; *TBC* II, 46-47, 185-187; Sayers 1985, 238.

51 *TBC* II, 51, 191; *TBC* I, 54-55, 174-175, which differs slightly in that Cú Chulainn accidentally steps on a holly-shoot, which penetrates his leg to the knee, and then he casts it at Fer Baeth and kills him.

52 E.g. *Acallamh na Senórach*, 157-162, 230-235.

53 Nagy 1985, 212-213. In the *Acallam na Senórach*, 20, this same place is said to be where Finn killed Cuillenn son of Morna; In translation, 23.

54 *Feis Tighe*, 33-41; Nagy 1981-1982, 141.

55 *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 90-91, 284-285.

56 McManus 1991, 42-43; for further explanations of these (with which I offer alternatives above), see also Meroney 1949, 29; McManus 1988, 154-155.

57 Calder at *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 90-91, says that holly was used in chariot wheel construction as well. A further point, which I do not wish to insist upon, is that in the *Book of Leinster* recension of the *Táin*, Fedelm is said to have appeared wondrous to Medb because she traveled on the swingletree of her chariot, the very portion discussed above which was likely to be made of holly; *TBC* II, 5, 143; Sayers 1984, 177.

between the letter-name and the second kenning, ‘marrow of charcoal’, would connect this particular tree to the smith’s craft (Enright 2002). Perhaps there is a further pun in the name of Cú Chulainn and the relationship suggested here to *cuilenn* in the term *cúal*, pl. *cúala*, ‘firewood’.⁵⁸ It seems likely that part of Cú Chulainn’s tasks under Culann’s canid-identified period of tutelage would have been to obtain firewood, just as Ogma did. Perhaps this idea is buried behind Cú Chulainn’s lament after his battle with Lóch and the Morrígan in the *Táin*, that ‘a single log will not catch fire. If there were two or three, then their firebrands would blaze up’.⁵⁹ While far from certain, the possibility at least remains intriguing.

In summary and conclusion, we have a complex constellation of figures and incidents here, which can be put forth as follows. First, we have a number of non-Celtic deities (Hermes/Mercury, Odin) and continental Celtic deities (the ‘Gaulish Mercury’, Ogmios, Esus) who are in some way connected to wood, warfare and eloquence, who bear some resemblances to later medieval insular figures (Lug, Ogma, Cú Chulainn). Second, we have a series of incidents in the medieval recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* involving wood-cutting which seem to be echoed by two lines in the linguistically earliest poetic references to the epic;⁶⁰ whether the lines in *Verba Scáthaige* allude to these episodes as we know them, or the equally likely case of the episodes being expanded from these lines of poetry, is a matter for one’s own discretion. Third, we have the paradigm of poetic wisdom through *imbas forosnai*, related in various ways to flooding and the River Boyne, and a second type of verbal wisdom (but a literate form) in the cutting of ogam, also associated with flooding, and particularly associated with warriors, and involving wood. This latter form of word wisdom, which we might call *fidchell* in its literal meaning of ‘wood sense’,⁶¹ seems to be a more dangerously employed form of wisdom than *imbas forosnai*, and yet it is comparable to it on many levels. And finally, we have what may be another example of the conflict between oral and literate cultures in early Ireland playing itself out in the text and its extended intertexts, which could as easily be an interpretation based on modern scholarly interests as much as a

58 Though I can only mention them briefly, there are further possibilities as well for punning. One is in the word *cuilén*, ‘pup’, which would suggest a reduplicated name for emphasis, not unlike Patrick Ford’s suggestion on Culhwch’s name; Ford 1990, 292-304. A second possibility, in relation to the spectacular nature of Cú Chulainn’s hair, might be in the term *cúlán*, a particular Irish warrior hairstyle reported in various sources; see Simms 1997, 101.

59 *TBC* I, 62, 181; *TBC* II, 55, 195; Nagy 1996, 139. Further, in both recensions, one of Fer Diad’s opening flytings of Cú Chulainn has him employing the same image for the vanity of the hero’s fight against him; *TBC* I, 91, 206; *TBC* II, 81, 219.

60 *Táin Roscada*, 40, includes these incidents in his discussion of what the original core of the epic may have been.

61 The *Ces Ulad* tale mentioned above specifically states that Cú Chulainn took *fidchell* with him, and it was also said to be one of his skills at his first appearance in the *Book of Leinster* version: *TBC* II, 16, 133.

development by the medieval authors themselves from their own fascination with such matters. It is difficult to have any certainties in this regard, as the texts (both extant and lost) as well as the oral storytellers of the past do not share their secrets easily, just as Ogham's invention of ogam was meant to confound the ignorant and communicate only with the learned and those initiated in this craft.⁶²

Whether any of these points is useful for further inquiry and interpretation of texts is, of course, a matter for others to decide in the continuing battle of 'wood-feats' waged on factory-produced slices of pulped wood with digitally-inscribed letters; but for the moment, I might parody the common children's saying in relation to these characters discussed in the early Irish narratives: sticks and stones did break their bones, and names were written on them—often with destructive effects.⁶³

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62 *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 272-273.

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