

The Intersection of Literature and Law: The Saga of Fergus mac Léti

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The story of Fergus mac Léti is a fascinating text as it provides both a saga tale as well as an insight into the Old Irish legal tradition. The tale itself has primarily been discussed within the legal context, and understandably so as its extant Early Irish versions exist exclusively within legal material. This paper examines *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* within the context of the literary *echtra* tradition and compares it to the existing corpus of *echtra* material, discussing key elements that are common across all the texts. This paper argues that the similarities between the text and the other extant *echtra* are enough to consider that the extant version may reflect the original version identified in Tale List B and contends that *Echtra Fergussa maic Lete* has earned its place within the saga material.

Keywords: Irish literature; Fergus mac Léti; *echtra*; Old Irish law

*The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti*¹ is attested in two versions in two manuscripts. The first of these is written on a single leaf inserted into London, British Library MS Harley 432 f.5 (CIH ii: 354.28–355.41). In his discussion of the codicological information, Binchy (1952: 35) notes that this version of the text (the one he refers to as L) was the only one that was available to Thurneysen, who suggested that it was an invention of eleventh-century jurists (Thurneysen 1921: 539 f., 668), as he was not aware of the second version of the text. The second version is written in Dublin, Trinity College MS 1337 pp. 363b–365a, better known as H. 3. 18 (CIH iii: 882.4–883.28) and has been dated by Binchy to the eighth century (Binchy 1952: 45) although Bisagni (2012: 52) has argued that none of Binchy’s dating criteria are particular to the eighth century, and has suggested that instead of dating it so precisely, it instead should be understood as belonging to the Old Irish period generally. The two versions of the story make up a part of the commentary of the *Senchas Már*, used as a ‘leading case’ on discussions of distraint.

In the opening sections of *Cethairíslicht Athgabálae*, one of the constituent tracts of *Senchas Már*, there is a verse version that gives the rough outline of the

1 Here I am following the lead of Binchy (1952) who thus titled the text to be discussed, though the difficulty in utilising the name, the one found in the Tale Lists, will be acknowledged and discussed further. Any paragraph references to the text will be to Binchy’s edition, and unless otherwise indicated will follow the text he identified as ‘H.’

major plot points of the saga, indicating the tale must have existed already in the seventh century (see Qiu 2013: 126). The first section of verse was considered by Binchy to be both prose and unrelated to the tale, and he edited only the second section (Binchy 1952: 46), while McLeod (2011: 88–10) has edited the first section of three stanzas (CIH ii: 352.26–31, CIH v: 1897.16–21), and considered both sections to belong together. The glosses on this poem provide an additional outline of the story, in broad strokes, though they are not included in Binchy’s edition. There is another, more modern prose version of the story that alters the content of the story to enhance the role of the leprechaun king and that has been edited by O’Grady in *Silva Gadelica*, entitled *Aidedh Ferghusa* ‘The Death of Fergus’ (1892 vol. i: 238–252).²

The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti begins with a feud over the sovereignty of the Féni, one of the three primary races in Ireland, along with the Ulaid, and the Gáilni whom the text equates to the Laigin. Eochu Bélbuide son of Tuathal Techmar, and Conn Cétchathach, also known as Conn Cétchorach, are the two primary contenders for the throne.³ Eochu, having inflicted thorough violence on Conn, flees to Ulster and into the protection of our eponymous king. He remains with Fergus for a significant period of time, before returning to his people in search of peace where he is slain by Conn’s son, Asal, the four sons of Buide mac Ainmirech, and Buide’s grandson, named in the Harley 432 copy of the text (see Binchy 1952: 36, L§1) as Fotlin.⁴

The text itself is illustrative of a number of legal principles (McLeod 2011), a few of which are necessary for the understanding of the story. Having attacked the Féni, Eochu likely faces legal repercussions himself and he flees to avoid these consequences and requests ‘litigation protection’ from Fergus. While under this protection, the accused cannot be attacked without his honour-price being owed

2 O’Grady (1892: vol. i 238–252) contains the edition of the text, with translation found in vol ii. 269–285, though the translation is not complete.

3 The version of this text contained in Harley 432 contains only two rivals, Eochu Bélbuide and Conn Cétchathach, while the text contained in MS H. 3. 18 names three: Eochu and both Conn Cétchathach and Conn Cétchorach, but makes no distinction between the two Conns in the rest of the text. McLeod (2011: 2 n. 9) has suggested we understand the Conn referred to in the rest of the text as Conn Cétchathach when he is settling martial disputes and Conn Cétchorach when dealing with legal disputes.

4 Binchy (1952: 40 n.4) identifies the son’s name as Foitlinne, though the text he edited contains only the version Fotlin. Preceding the tale itself, the name appears twice as Foitline in the commentary: *co ndeochatar in .i. do chuardugud i sliab nuaid, conid and doralá doib a marbad; , desimirecht air: Asal eochu, garg a ngle. foitline , tibraite. enda ailill, an a clu. Seser las torchair eochu* (CIH ii: 354.5–354.7), ‘the six persons had gone to search for him in Sliabh Fuaid, where they overtook and killed him, as this quotation shows: “Asal, Eochu, fierce and fair, / Foitline and Tibraide, / Enda, Ailell, noble their fame, / were the six by whom Eochu was killed”’ (ALI: i 69); *.i. a cinaid a meic foitline* (CIH ii: 353.38), ‘for the crime of her son, Foitline’ (ALI: i 69). Here I have opted to use the version found within the text.

to his protector (Kelly 2015: 141). McLeod (2011: 20–21) has suggested a further option, that there was another protection in early Irish law that allowed a person in danger (as Eochu would be, fearful of the Féni seeking revenge) to seek protection of another, specifically a foreigner in a protector’s home kingdom and that this perhaps is the protection that was violated.

With his protection violated, Fergus marches with his armies in order to avenge the death of his protégé (§3). Restitution is paid to him in the form of gold, silver, Conn’s land and Fotlin’s mother, Dorn, who is expected to serve him (§3). The enslavement of Dorn may seem peculiar to the modern reader: the text explicitly states that her son was involved in the murder, not Dorn herself, and thus the motivation for her punishment is unclear. A *mac déoraid*, the son of an outsider, is not the responsibility of his paternal family because they live outside the kingdom, and therefore outside the scope of the Irish laws (McLeod 2011: 21; CIH ii: 442.13; CIH v: 1575.17).

As per the text, Fotlin is the son of Dorn and a foreigner: *mac ronuc dorn ingen buide do deorath*⁵ (§1) ‘and a son whom Dorn, the daughter of Buide had borne to an outlander’ (Binchy 1952: 37, 39). In this instance, with the paternal family absent and unaccountable, the maternal family would be responsible for the child, unless the woman’s father disapproved of the union (see McLeod 2011: 22; CIH v: 1894.8), which Harley 432 explicitly states is the case in this instance: *mac deoraid no albanaig he tar sarugu no i nainfis fine maithre dorinne he* (Binchy 1952: 36 L§3) ‘he was the son of a stranger, or of an Albanach (Scotsman), and was begotten against the wish or without the knowledge of the tribe of the mother’ (ALI i: 71).

As well as within the text, the commentary preceding it makes a nearly identical observation, but the suggestion that the father may have been Scottish is absent: *uair mac deoraid he, tar sarugud fine mathar no i nanfis fine mathar dorigine he* (CIH ii: 354.1–354.2) ‘for he was the son of a stranger, and had been begotten against the wish of the mother’s tribe, or without the knowledge of the mother’s tribe’ (ALI i: 69).

Thus, without his paternal kin to pay his fines, his maternal kin equally avoiding responsibility and Fotlin seemingly to have fled, the only one left responsible for Fergus’ restitution is Dorn. Presumably without the ability to pay the fine herself, Dorn is offered in servitude: a noblewoman worth seven *cumala* is equivalent to Eochu’s own honour-price. While the tale itself does not specify whether Dorn offered herself or if her function as surety was imposed upon her, the commentary makes it explicitly clear that this was the decision of Fotlin: *is ed dorineth: mathair do thidlacad ina cinaid do Fergus a ndaire no cum a ngill* (CIH ii: 354.2–

5 In his edition Binchy indicated expansions by italicisation. As I have italicised the text itself, the opposite applies.

354.3) ‘and it was he that, for his crime, gave up his mother in bondage, or as a pledge to Fergus’ (ALI i: 69).

After receiving his spoils and returning home, Fergus ventures to the seaside, accompanied by his charioteer, and they soon both fall asleep. During their slumber, sea sprites⁶ separate Fergus from his sword and carry him from his chariot to the sea. When his feet touch the water, Fergus awakens and grabs three of the sprites—one in each hand and one against his chest. The chief of the sprites requests mercy and Fergus complies, requesting three wishes. The sprites agree, and Fergus asks only for the ability to travel underwater. The sprites supply him with either herbs to put in his ears or a mantle to wind about his head that will allow him to do so. The text provides both options, and acknowledges them as competing traditions:

Dobertatar didiu in lucuirp luibe dosom ina cluasa(ib), ⁊ imtigid leo fo muirib (§4). *Asberat araile iss int abac dorat(a) a brat do ⁊ atcortad fergus ima cenn fo(r)bered muire ⁊ uisce samlaid* (§5)

‘Some say that the dwarf gave him his cloak and Fergus used to wind (?) it about his head, and in this way used to pass under seas and water. Then the sprites gave him herbs [to put] in his ears, and he used to travel about with them underseas.’ (Binchy 1952: 41–42)

The chief sprite warns Fergus that while he has been given these gifts, he is prohibited from using them to traverse under Loch Rudraige, which was situated in Fergus’ territory. Fergus does not follow these explicit directions and decides that he would like to swim underwater in his own lake and travels to Loch Rudraige with his charioteer. He submerges himself and encounters a fearful water-monster that is described as writhing and contracting in a manner akin to a smith’s bellows. The monster is so incredibly fearsome that Fergus’ mouth is permanently stretched open in horror:

§6 *A lluid fon loch con(f)acaf[e] in muirdris and peist uiscide uathmar. ala nuair rosraigid⁷ in uair naili nosnimairced⁸ amal ⁊ bolg nobenn. La diuderc do fuire rosiapartha a beoil doa dib culadaib*

6 This is, according to the estimation of Binchy (1952: 41 n. 2), our earliest extant reference to the modern leprechaun based on his dating of the text. Bisagni (2012: 52) has noted that while this might be the earliest in-text reference to the term, there is a scribal notation of the form *luprucan* with superscript scribal emendation to *lucrupan*, which is the second form found subsequently with a marker of lenition over the *c* indicating *luchrupan*. These forms are found in Lebor na hUidre, an earlier manuscript than those containing the text as discussed here, see Best & Bergin 1929: 2a31 & 2a45 respectively.

7 Binchy suggests this be read as *no-s-rigid*.

8 Binchy suggests this be read as *do-s-n-immairced*.

‘When he dived under the lake he saw there a *muirdris*⁹, a fearful water-monster which kept alternately inflating and contracting itself like a smith’s bellows. At the sight of it, his mouth was wrenched back as far as his occiput...’ (Binchy 1952: 42)

Fergus returns to the shore and his charioteer and queries as to how he is looking. His charioteer assures him that sleep will lessen his affliction and lays Fergus down.

While his king sleeps, the charioteer returns to Ulster where he consults with the wisemen of Emain Macha, telling them of his king’s newfound affliction, and asks whom they would want to have in his stead, as it would not be fitting for a blemished king to reign in Ulster. The wisemen decide that Fergus will continue to rule; however, his household will be emptied of any common folk, jester or fool who might mock or otherwise call attention to the blemish, and that Fergus shall have his hair washed while lying on his back so that he may never be confronted with his own disfigurement (§7).

For seven years, Fergus’ shame is hidden, with the assistance of Dorn who by now is functioning as his slave and is the one in charge of his washing. One day, Fergus asks Dorn to wash him and finding her too slow in completing her task he strikes her with a horsewhip. Furious, Dorn retaliates by mocking his disfigurement. Fergus then kills her by cutting her in two with his sword (§8).

He returns to Loch Rudraige, perhaps believing that defeating the monster will cure him, and dives underwater. The lake bubbles and froths from the great fight between him and the sea-beast, lasting an entire day until Fergus emerges, victorious, holding the head of the monster aloft and declaring himself the victor. He then dies and sinks down to a watery grave (§8). H. 3. 18 continues to explain that the Féni requested an *éraig*-fine for the death of Dorn and for the restoration of their land, but that it was not returned for some time due to the inability of the Ulstermen to decide upon a king (McLeod 2011: 6–7). The commentary surrounding the verse version provide us with essentially the same narrative, with the only two major differences being that Fergus’ blemish and the monster are not mentioned until after Dorn has been killed (CIH ii: 354.9, 354.14–354.19) and her death is brought about by a *cloich fothraicthe* (CIH ii: 354.11) ‘bathing stone’ and not a sword.

Neither the prose, the verse nor the commentary provide us with the title *Echtra Fergusua maic Lete* utilised by Binchy, instead, this title has been taken from the Tale Lists (Mac Cana 1980: 53). Purported to be a catalogue of a *fili*’s repertoire (Mac Cana 1980: 33) there are two extant Tale Lists known to modern scholarship

9 Borsje (1997) discusses this monster in particular in relation to other monsters who equally expand and contract, or spew water, in the early Irish tradition.

as List A and List B.¹⁰ List A, found in Dublin, Trinity College MS 1339, better known as H. 2. 18 or the Book of Leinster (LL), 189 b 43 and Dublin, Trinity College MS 1336, better known as H. 3. 17 col. 797, does not contain the title of our text. However, *Echtra Fergussa maic Lete* appears in List B which is found within the Middle Irish text of *Airec menman Uraird maic Coise*, and contained in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy 23 N 10, p. 29; Oxford, Bodleian Library Rawlinson B. 512, f. 109; and London, British Library Harley 5280, f. 47. Though the two lists are similar in order and content, there are differences: List A has seventeen categories of tales, compared to the fifteen in List B, with thirteen common between them including *echtraí* (Mac Cana 1980: 41–49). Of the *echtraí* themselves, Mac Cana notes that they include only three titles that are common to both lists, with eleven original in A and seven in B (Mac Cana 1980: 69).

Without an attestation of the accompanying title, we cannot definitively link the (potentially lost) text intended by List B, and the extant versions of the text contained within the legal material. Binchy was of the view that this version of the story does not represent the original narrative, but instead is a fairly faithful retelling with added ‘legalistic trappings’ (Binchy 1952: 48) in order to better suit the intention of the jurists. Thurneysen (1930: 103–104) and McLeod (2011:12) both consider the text to be an invention of jurists and while McLeod does not explicitly address the question of whether or not this version of the tale is the one referenced in List B, he does state that he believes it was composed as a legal teaching tale due to the number of legal principles it expertly illustrates. Considering the evidence that the law tracts were a cooperative effort between ecclesiastics, academics and lawyers, the inclusion of the *fili* in the composition of the law tracts (see Breatnach 1990: 3–5)¹¹, and the propensity for the jurists to rely on saga material as ‘leading cases’ (Binchy 1952; Dillon 1932) it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, if the invention of jurists, is the same *echtra* known to the compiler of List B. The compilers of the law tracts were undoubtedly skilled enough to invent a convincing saga text that contained all the necessary characteristics to conform to others in the tradition and that could have earned its place within the repertoire of a *fili*.

Borsje (1996: 19–20) has suggested that the text was not a legal invention and that it existed independently before its inclusion in the *Senchas Már*, and that it represents a native Irish tale that was amalgamated into the legal corpus during the

10 There are two additional, shorter lists in Edinburgh, Advocates Library MS vii f. 7r b. and London, British Library Harley 432 f. 3D., see Mac Cana 1980: 64–65. Both contain only four categories and neither include the *echtraí*.

11 For further discussion of the authorship of law tracts, see Breatnach (1984: 459) for *Bretha Nemed*; Breatnach (1986: 46–47) for *Cáin Fhuithirbe*; McLeod (2005: 155) for *Bretha Déin Chécht*. See also Carey (1994: §9) for the introduction to the *Senchas Már* that cites its own authors as three bishops, three kings and three poets or judges.

compilation of the *Senchas Már*. This idea of the narrative as an independent story is perhaps supported within the text itself by the evidence of differing versions of the tale such as the example of competing traditions about what the sprites gave to Fergus (§4–5), as well as an inserted line about Fergus leaving his servant Ogma and his hound (§5) that is in contrast with a gloss on the subsequent poem that names the servant as Aibinn and the hound as Ogma (Binchy 1952: 46). Additionally, the slight variations present within the commentary and the verse versions (such as Fergus' weapon of choice in Dorn's murder being a bathing stone and not a sword) suggest that different versions of the tale were known to the compilers of the law tracts. Had they invented this narrative it would presumably not contain references to other material, or any internal inconsistencies.

McLeod (2011: 13–19) has expertly detailed the ways in which this tale, specifically the verse found within the *Senchas Már*, illustrates the legal concept of distraint and allowed the Féni to reclaim their land as restitution for the slaying of Dorn, a topic which does not need to be revisited here. Instead, we will now turn to the elements of the tale that align with our other saga material and the way in which it fits within our current understanding of early Irish material. Some broader points will be briefly touched upon before turning specifically to a comparison with other *echtraí*.

Outside of this text, our hero, Fergus is relatively absent. He appears twice listed as a predecessor to Conchobor mac Nessa in the early material,¹² and for this reason, he is often considered to be a double of the better-known Fergus mac Roích (O'Rahilly 1946: 68) who likewise met an aquatic end (Meyer 1906: 34–35). As discussed by Ó hUiginn (1993: 35–37) the two men are made distinct in the material, both listed as guests at Bricriu's feast (Best & Bergin 1929: 249) and with Fergus mac Róich describing the second Fergus as *mo chomalta fén* 'my own foster-brother' in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (O'Rahilly 1976: 225). On this basis, Ó hUiginn (1993: 37) argues that while there are certainly overlaps in the two characters, they are hardly identical and suggests that perhaps their 'partial identity' is the result of two competing genealogical traditions concerning the historical and mythological king.

A common theme within medieval Irish sagas is the idea of a king being an embodiment of physical perfection (McManus 2009: 59). A king must be *dianim* 'without blemish,' in order to be a suitable king (Binchy 1970: 10). An introduction to the *Bretha Éitgid* expresses explicitly that it was a *geis*, a taboo, to have a blemished king in Tara (CIH i: 250.13–15). This idea of physical perfection as a necessary aspect of a righteous king is part of the concept of *fír flathemon* or 'king's truth' that necessitates a king must be exemplary in every way: physically,

¹² See Stokes (1895: 404) and Meyer (1918: 217).

intellectually, martially and socially (McCone 1990: 127). Watson (1986: 133) expresses this best:

sovereignty must create order in all things. This is why the king's truth is seen as so all important in early Irish society. Schematically, the king is viewed as someone whose truth and person must be flawless, for it is by upholding his own honour that he upholds the honour and face of his tribe. The monarch creates order in a society by himself being a personification of order. If the king cannot embody these concepts, then disaster can befall the tribe which he rules.

Texts such as *Togail Brudne Dá Derga* (Knott 1936), *Tecosca Cormaic* (Meyer 1909) and *Audacht Morainn* (Kelly 1976) exemplify the importance of this concept, though not all texts appear to follow it. *Fír flathemon* is alluded to in *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* (see Nagy 1983: 40) when the wisemen of Emain Macha and his charioteer discuss how it would be unsuitable for Fergus to remain on the throne while disfigured. However, instead of requiring him to abdicate, there is an agreement that allows him to continue to rule and he does so until his death. This decision is not unique, despite the emphasis on kingly perfection:¹³ Conchobor mac Nessa, incapacitated by having had a brain-ball hurled into his head and permanently disfigured, was allowed to continue his reign (albeit ineffectually) until his death some seven years later (Meyer 1906: 10, §8). A similar case (like our own Fergus, found in legal material and not saga), is that of Congal Cáech, a king of Tara who was blinded in one eye by a bee and thus ousted from the kingship of Tara (Charles-Edwards & Kelly 1983: §31–32). There is a second tradition in which Congal Cáech is a king of Ulster, still blinded by a bee (Marstrander 1911: 234) but his kingship is not taken from him, and he dies in battle as a king (Marstrander 1911: 242).¹⁴ In these instances, it would seem that the kingship of Ulster was not as strictly bound by the requirements of an unblemished king as was the kingship of Tara.

One of the difficulties of the Tale Lists is that while they provide us with convenient thematic categories and a classification of tales, they do not provide us with criteria that would elucidate the reasons behind the categorisation of the tales. The differences between some categories are clear, but the differences between the *echtrai* and the *immrama*, for example, have been long discussed

13 See McManus (2009) for a fuller discussion on the importance and implications of physical perfection.

14 There is an additional Middle Irish tale in the Yellow Book of Lecan which discusses Labraid Lorc, a king over all of Ireland who had *dachluais capaill fair* 'two ears of a horse (on him)' (Stokes 1873–1875: 197). He retains his kingship by concealing his blemish and executing anyone who discovers it, specifically those tasked with shaving his head. Stokes (1873–1875: 198) notes that this is an Irish retelling of the Phrygian Midas tale, and thus is a non-native text, though it certainly engages similar elements.

and debated.¹⁵ Though it is generally accepted that an *echtra* involves a voyage to the Otherworld (Mac Cana 1980: 75)¹⁶ one of the best known *echtra*, *Echtra mac Echach Muigmedóin* (Stokes 1903) does not contain an explicit journey to the Otherworld, though there is an encounter with an Otherworld woman.

Duignan (2011: 38) in her comprehensive overview¹⁷ has identified certain criteria for defining *echtraí* as a genre, many of which will be discussed below: the spatial and temporal context of the invitation; the identity of the person invited; the identity of the person/figure issuing the invitation; the purpose of the invitation; the location of the Otherworld and the journey to it; depictions of the Otherworld; the nature of the hero's intervention; the hero's relationship with Otherworld figures; and the objects acquired from the Otherworld. I have opted here to highlight the common traits between the stories, as some of the categories laid out by Duignan yield exceptionally varied results: while certain elements such as fair lands and abundance certainly appear in multiple texts (Duignan 2011: 52), there is no single description of the Otherworld that appears in all of them. Equally, the location of the Otherworld (see below) is significantly varied, as is the journey there itself; as noted by Dumville (1976: 79) 'the journey (which is by no means necessarily over sea) is an unimportant aspect of the story.'

The Saga of Fergus mac Léti is similar to *Echtra mac Echach Muigmedóin* in that there is no overt journey to the Otherworld, and no description of the Otherworld is given. The Otherworldly encounters in these tales are closely associated with water as the sprites attempt to carry our hero into the sea, and the beast is encountered under Loch Rudraige, while the Otherworld woman is encountered by Niall and his brothers by a well. The concept of liminality in relation to both water and the Irish Otherworld is well known;¹⁸ Carey (1982: 39–41), in his discussion on the location of the Otherworld in early Irish tradition, notes that the Otherworld is often encountered within *síd* mounds, underwater, on islands in the water, off the coast as well as within buildings that appear at night and disappear in the morning. He has, in subsequent scholarship, included wells and houses found 'in darkness, storm or mist' to the list (Carey 1987: 2).

The most analogous text to that of Fergus is that of *Echtrae Lóegairi* (Jackson 1942, hereafter EL) in which Lóegaire and his fifty warriors descend into the lake (EL: 382.67) in order to enter the Otherworld, just as Fergus' sprites seem to

15 See as examples Dumville (1976) and Oskamp (1970: 41).

16 Carey (1982: 39) notes that, speaking specifically about *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, the Otherworld voyage itself is 'secondary and extraneous.' Dumville (1976) reaches the same conclusion as Mac Cana.

17 Duignan does not include *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* in her overview of the genre, considering it to be a 'lost *echtra*', and concludes that without evidence that the extant text is the one referenced in List B, it should be excluded (Duignan 2011: 18–19).

18 See Nagy (1981–1982) for further discussion on liminality.

inhabit an underwater realm as does, of course, the *múirdris*. There are also liminal conditions surrounding the arrival of Fiachna mac Rétach, the Otherworldly warrior who invites Lóegaire into the Otherworld, as he arrives *triasin cíaig* ‘through mist’ (EL: 380.4).

Echtrae Nerai (EN) has Nera enter the Otherworld through a *síd* at Samhain, a liminal time (Meyer 1889: §1, §6). *Echtrae Chonnlaí* (EC) occurs at Bealtaine, and the Otherworld is found on an island across the water (McCone 2000: §1, §14), which is likewise where the Otherworld of *Echtrae Airt maic Cuinn* (EA) is located (Best 1907: §20). *Echtrae Chormaic maic Airt* (ECA) likewise occurs at Bealtaine and Cormac is transported to the Otherworld by mist (Stokes 1891: §25, §32).

In many of the *echtraí*, an Otherworldly figure is involved in the passage to the Otherworld; our adventurer does not independently stumble upon the Otherworld, they are either led there or invited for the first time. Nera follows a host into the *síd* (EN: §6), Connla (EC: §5) and Art (EA: §3) both follow an Otherworld woman, while Cormac (ECA: §53) and Lóegaire (EL: 380.10–17) are both invited by a warrior. If we understand the lake near which Fergus rests to be an Otherworldly space, based on the sprites’ habitation therein, the attempt to bring him into the lake could potentially be viewed as an ‘invitation’ of sorts, similar to that of Nera who is not explicitly invited but is ushered towards the *síd* by the host. It is interesting to note that both Nera and Fergus, after their initial Otherworldly encounter, are able to re-enter the *síd*, or the lake, seemingly at their own will: Fergus returns to Loch Rudraige to fight the *múirdris*, without invitation and without his magical charms, while Nera is able to return to his wife in the *síd* (EN: §12), exit, re-enter and exit again with the purpose of retrieving a cow (EN: §15), before finally bringing the host of Connacht into the *síd* and remaining there (EN: §19).

The adventures within the Otherworld are varied, some are martial, such as Lóegaire who massacres an Otherworld host (EL: 382.72–78), and some are entirely peaceful, such as Cormac (ECA: §27) who makes an alliance with an Otherworldly warrior. Connla’s Otherworld adventure revolves around an Otherworldly woman, and Nera’s adventure revolves around saving the people of Connacht. The texts themselves follow no particular template: there are only a few overlapping plot points, as discussed here and equally in Duignan (2011), and characters do not behave in identical ways.

Whatever the nature of the encounter is, the hero tends to return to the mortal realm with Otherworldly gifts. Fergus has his mantle or herbs that allow him to swim underwater; Nera (and his king, Ailill) receive the mantle of Lóegaire in Armagh, the crown of Briun in Connaught and the shirt of Dunlaing in Leinster (EN: §9); Art receives hostages, gold, silver and a wife (EA: §28); Cormac returns with a cup that discerns truth and a branch that plays music (ECA: §53); Lóegaire

receives gold, silver and a joint sovereignty with the Otherworld and the mortal realm (EL: 384.99–102); and Connla receives an everlasting apple (EC: §8).

The *Saga of Fergus mac Léti* contains a few primary elements that align with the other *echtrai*, and considering the variability within the other established *echtrai* the divergences in Fergus' tale should not be considered evidence that the tale found within the law tracts is not representative of an original *echtra* tale, especially considering that other texts have equal divergences. As examples, Nera is the only adventurer who is not explicitly named to be either a king or descended from kings, and *Echtrae Connlai* is the only text in which there is no impact on the sovereignty of either the mortal or the Otherworld realm. Fergus' adventure follows a similar pattern to the other *echtrai*, namely in that there is an Otherworldly encounter (arguably this encounter includes an invitation) whose spatial or temporal location is liminal,¹⁹ and while the exact adventures are too varied by which to compare, Fergus' saga aligns again with his receiving of Otherworld gifts. Judging by these metrics, *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* seems to retain features, or at least be a convincing imitation of, the *echtra* tradition.

The *echtra* that diverges the most from this pattern, and yet is likely the best known of the tales, is the *Echtra mac Echach Muigmedóin* (EEM). The text follows Níall, the son of a king and a slave-woman, who suffers from the common affliction of a wicked stepmother (EEM: §1, §5, §8), the mother of his four half-brothers. After repeated prophecies and insistences that Níall be king (EEM: §3, §6, §7), he and his brothers set out hunting. At rest, having kindled a fire, the brothers are thirsty and one of the brothers, another Fergus, breaks from the group to seek water (EEM: §10). He encounters a hag by a well who requests a kiss in return for the water he seeks. Repulsed by her appearance, Fergus refuses, is denied water and returns to his brothers unsuccessful (EEM: §10–§13). A second brother, Ailill, sets off on the same quest but also meets the same hag and again denies her request for affection. He too, returns to the hunting party empty-handed. The eldest brother, Brian repeats the mistake of his younger brothers, equally denies the hag

19 It is possible to argue that the seashore on which Fergus has his first Otherworldly encounter is not a liminal space, and I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion. Though the presence of water may not indicate liminality, it is certainly associated with the supernatural: the Otherworld encountered by Lóegaire is underwater; Níall and his brothers encounter a supernatural woman by a well; and both Connla and Art cross water in order to reach their respective Otherworld locations. As noted by Carey (1982: 40) Otherworldly denizens are often encountered living under bodies of water, on islands as well as off the coast, indicating a clear supernatural association with water. As the beings encountered by Fergus are undoubtedly supernatural and equally connected with the water, perhaps the distinction could be made that the location of the invitation to the Otherworld—or the encounter itself—be understood as having either liminal qualities (as with Nera) or otherwise supernatural associations (as with Níall and Lóegaire).

her kiss and returns unsuccessful. The fourth brother, Fiachra, agrees that he *would* kiss her and in return is promised that he will visit Tara, a promise the text tells us is fulfilled as two of his progeny would become kings (EEM: §13), unlike his brothers who, by refusing the hag her kiss, have deprived themselves of water in the present and their progeny of kingship in the future.

Although Fiachra was amenable to the hag's amorous intentions, he too returns empty-handed, presumably having not gone through with the deed. Níall, the final brother, goes to fetch water and meets the same hag by the well. The hag repeats her request and Níall more than enthusiastically complies and the hag is transformed into a beautiful woman who promises him and all his descendants uncontested kingship, with the exception of Fiachra's two future kings. She likewise gives him water and instructs him to not share it with his brothers until he extorts fealty from them (EEM: §14–§16). Níall again follows the instruction of the now-clearly-identified sovereignty goddess, and his brothers submit to him.

Níall's adventure diverges from the other traditions in that it contains no explicit foray into the Otherworld; while the presence of the well arguably creates a liminal space, Níall and his brothers are not mentioned as having crossed or traversed under water, travelled through mist or passed through a *síð* as in the other texts. While Níall's exploits do have implications for sovereignty, namely, he and his descendants will rule forever, the only material good Níall receives is the water, which is unlike the gifts received by our other heroes in that it does not appear to be magical or supernatural in any way, as there is no mention of abundance, magical qualities, or any particular mythological associations. The only function of the water is that of extortion, as Níall uses it to force fealty from his brothers. The tale equally lacks an invitation into the Otherworld, whether it be explicit or implicit, and thus we are given no indication that the well itself is intended to be understood as being outside the mortal realm.

Duignan (2011: 39, 71) asserts that in all the texts examined in her study, all of them make a royal site the location of the 'invitation', a suggestion with which I disagree in a few cases. Lóegaire receives his invitation at Énloch, which the text tells us was on Magh Aí (EL: §1), the plain in which Crúachan was located. Whether or not this constitutes a royal site is debatable: how far can a 'royal site' be considered to extend?

In both EEM and a tale Duignan refers to as the 'Five Luguids',²⁰ the action of the tale is instigated by an instruction to go hunting: in EEM the brothers are instructed by the smith, Sitchenn (EEM: §5), and in the 'Five Luguids' by a druid

20 This account is contained within *Cóir Anmann* (edited by Arbuthnot 2007) and concerns the five sons of Dáire Doimthech. There is no evidence for a title, however Duignan states she elected to include it as the story both refers to the prior action as an *echtra* and contains similar narrative elements to that of EEM (Duignan 2011: 28).

(Arbuthnot 2006: §72). Both of these instructions were given at royal sites (Níall and his brothers were at Tara, the five Luguids at Tailtiu) however this demand can hardly be seen as an ‘invitation’ to enter the Otherworld, not only because they both lack an explicit invitation of any kind, but also because neither are instigated nor followed immediately by an Otherworldly encounter. Perhaps if the wilderness into which the sets of brothers go to hunt were considered the Otherworld, then possibly placing their adventures as having begun with the hunting quest would make sense. However, even in Duignan’s (2011: 51) analysis of the descriptions of the Otherworld she does not discuss the woods and within the texts themselves the woods lack any expected depiction of the Otherworld, with no mention of abundance, beauty or prosperity.

Instead, as discussed, Níall and his brothers have an Otherworld encounter near a well, but do not venture into the Otherworld itself. The five Luguids are beset by snow, and stumble upon an Otherworld home (Arbuthnot 2006: §72), in a manner which is more or less identical to the way in which the Otherworld home is encountered in *Compert Con Culainn* (Van Hamel 1933: §2–§3).

Conversely, we have Nera whose adventure undoubtedly begins at a royal site but who is not issued an explicit invitation either: he follows a group of Otherworldly figures, but he is neither asked nor commanded to follow them. It would seem, therefore, that while an explicit invitation is often extended, it is not strictly necessary if there are other liminal or supernatural conditions, i.e. a snowstorm, the presence of water, a royal site (Carey 1987: 6), a liminal time or any combination of the above.

Níall and Fergus’ tales are interesting to compare, because the primary way in which *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* diverges from the other *echtraí* is that the repercussions of his Otherworld adventure are negative. In contrast, Nera saves his people (EN: §19); Art and Níall both receive sovereignty (EA: §30; EEM: §18); Lóegaire receives silver, gold and Otherworldly kingship (EL: 384.99–102, 386.128–130); Cormac not only receives gifts but saves his family (ECA: §54); and though Connla never returns, it is implied that he is happy (EC: §15).

Fergus, however, returns from his Otherworldly encounter disfigured. He returns to his kingdom shamed, and no longer deserving of his throne. After his second overt excursion in which he fights the *muidris*, Fergus dies. But these negative repercussions are unsurprising because Fergus differs from our other adventurers in one very important way: he explicitly disobeys the rules of the Otherworld. In all the other *echtraí*, our adventurers comply, they fight battles for the Otherworld denizens, they are invited in and obey the rules of the world, and they exhibit kingly qualities whilst on their adventures.

Fergus, on the other hand, attacks the sprites as they attempt to lead him in. He explicitly disobeys his single instruction and dives into Loch Rudraige, wherein he

does not even attempt to fight the monster, an act entirely unbecoming of a king as, according to *Crith Gablach*, a king who demonstrates cowardice in battle reduces his honour-price (Kelly 2015: 19), and Fergus' failure is physically manifested. Fergus' behaviour, then, is more comparable to that of Niall's brothers, who do not comply with the wishes of the sovereignty goddess and are consequently punished both by their failure to procure water, but also by the denial of kingship for themselves and their descendants. Fergus' *echtra* can thus be understood as a cautionary one; a tale of what goes wrong when you disobey the rules and flout the guidelines laid out by the Otherworld beings.

The Saga of Fergus mac Léti contains elements that are present in the other saga material, as well as vivid illustrations of early Irish legal principles. The variability of the other *echtraí*, and the common elements and themes between them, allows for this extant version of the text to be considered a part of the collection of *echtraí*, or at the very least, an authentic retelling of a saga text with legal influence. *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* provides an excellent insight into medieval Irish society, providing us both with a text that exemplifies a variety of legal material, as well as a text that manages to be both in keeping with the wider *echtraí* tradition, but that shows us the opposite end of the spectrum: when the adventurer is not noble and not obedient he is judged by the Otherworld as not being worthy, and he suffers for it.

Abbreviations

ALI	<i>Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland</i> (Hancock et. al. 1895–1901)
CIH	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i> (Binchy 1978)
EA	<i>Echtrae Airt maic Cuinn</i> (Best 1907)
EC	<i>Echtrae Chonnlaí</i> (McCone 2000)
ECA	<i>Echtrae Chormaí maic Airt</i> (Stokes 1891)
EEM	<i>Echtra mac Echach Muigmedóin</i> (Stokes 1903)
EL	<i>Echtrae Lóegairi</i> (Jackson 1942)
EN	<i>Echtrae Nerai</i> (Meyer 1889)

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