

## = The Tale of Mac Da Thó 's Pig =

The Tale of Mac Da Thó 's Pig ( Old Irish : Scéla Muicce Meicc Da Thó ) is a legendary tale from early Irish literature , written primarily in prose and heroic saga form and placed within the Ulster Cycle . The story 's composition in its present form can probably be attributed to an unknown author of Leinster c . AD 800 , and survives in at least six manuscripts , written between the 12th and 18th centuries . The three most important of these primary sources are held in Trinity College , Dublin and the British Library .

The story tells of a dispute between the Connachta , led by Ailill and Medb , and the Ulaid , led by Conchobar mac Nessa , over the acquisition of the hound of Leinster , Ailbe . The dispute is ultimately resolved through the plan of the king of Leinster , Mac Da Thó , to hold a feast at his hostel , at which a fight breaks out over the assignment of the curadmír or champion 's portion .

The story deals with the themes of provincial rivalry between Ulster and Connacht , communal feasting and the heroic contest over the curadmír , and includes elements which show parallels with older Gaulish and pan @-@ Celtic traditions . Although apparently the quintessential Ulster Cycle story in many respects , the tale 's composition also displays a sophisticated satiric quality as a parody of the genre . The story was apparently popular in the Middle Ages and later times , and became the subject of a number of independent poems . The central figure of the pig has parallels with the great boars of Welsh @-@ language literature and the Matter of Britain , particularly Twrch Trwyth in the 11th @-@ century Welsh story of Culhwch and Olwen .

## = = Summary = =

## = = = Plot = = =

The story opens with Mac Da Thó , a famous legendary king of Leinster , who possessed a hound called Ailbe . Ailbe defends of the entire province , such that his fame spreads throughout the entire island of Ériu ( Ireland ) . Ailill and Medb , king and queen of Connacht , send messengers to Mac Da Thó demanding the dog ; but at the same time so does Conchobar mac Nessa , king of the Ulaid , the warriors of the province of Ulster . The messengers from Connacht offer an immediate tribute of 160 milch cows , a chariot and two of the finest horses of the Connachta , and the same tribute to be paid to Leinster again the following year . The messengers of Ulster in turn offer Mac Da Thó " jewellery and cattle and everything else from the north " and an alliance through the " great friendship " that would result .

These events trouble Mac Da Thó greatly , such that he goes three days without food , drink or sleep . However , his wife devises for him a plan ? that he should give the dog to both parties and let them fight for it . Pleased by this scheme , Mac Da Thó takes each delegation aside in private , and intimates to both that he had awarded the hound to them after much deliberation . Unknowingly , both parties agreed separately that their people should come on the same day to a feast in Leinster to claim Ailbe formally .

The feast is to take place at Mac Da Thó 's Hostel , one of the five famed legendary " hostels " or feasting halls in Ireland at the time . The hostel itself has seven entrances , seven cauldrons full of beef and salted pork , and seven hearths ; and fifty paces between each pair of doorways . The Ulaid and the Connachta arrive at the door of the hostel at the same time to collect the hound . Mac Da Thó feigns innocence as to the immediately apparent inconsistency , yet invites both provinces inside to the feast nevertheless . Though the hostel is by no means small , it is nonetheless filled with tension , as warriors who had previously done each other injury sit opposite each other .

Mac Da Thó has his pig slaughtered for the feast ? an animal which had been nourished by 60 milch cows for seven years and which had 40 oxen spread across it for its enormous size . The pig immediately attracts the attention of the Ulaid and Connachta , who must decide over how it is to be divided up , and to whom shall be awarded the curadmír or " hero 's portion " . It is agreed that the warriors shall challenge each other to boast their past exploits in battle . At length the Connacht

warrior Cet mac Mágach manages to outboast his Ulster counterparts :

[ Cet ] took knife in hand and sat down to the pig saying " Find among the men of Ériu one to match me in feats ? otherwise I will carve the pig . " ... Lóegure spoke then : " It is not right that Cet should carve the pig before our very eyes . " Cet answered " One moment Cet , that I may speak with you . You Ulaid have a custom : every one of you who takes arms makes Connacht his object . You came to the border , then , and I met you ; you abandoned your horses and charioteer and escaped with my spear through you . Is that how you propose to take the pig ? " Lóegure sat down .

A narrative pattern follows , whereby Cet demands a challenge , an Ulster warrior rises , and the Ulaid cry out the name of the challenger ; Cet then proceeds to shame that warrior by recounting one of his deeds against him , as above . Cet shames the challenger Óengus son of Lam Gabuid , by recounting how he had cut off Lam Gabuid 's hands in battle ; he shames Éogan son of Durthacht , the king of Fermag , by recounting how he put out his eye in a cattle @-@ raid ; he reminds Muinremur son of Gerrgend how he had taken his son 's head as a trophy not six days earlier ; Mend son of Salchad , how he had cut off his father 's foot ; Celtchair son of Uthecar , how he had castrated him with his spear ; and even Conchobar 's son Cúscraid Mend Machae , how he had pierced his neck with a spear during Cúscraid 's first feat of arms , in ignominious circumstances which led to the abandonment a third of Cúscraid 's retinue in a cowardly retreat . In each case , the challenging warriors are compelled to retake their seats in shame .

Just as Cet is exulting in his victory over the full warrior contingent of Ulster present , the Ulster hero Conall Cernach enters the hostel , and leaps into the middle of the hall to roars of welcome from the Ulaid . Cet and Conall acknowledge each other in an exchange of archaic rhetorical verses , and Cet concedes that Conall is a better warrior than he . Cet adds that his brother Anlúan would best Conall in a contest : " ' It is our misfortune that he is not in the house . ' ' Oh but he is , ' said Conall , and taking Anlúan 's head from his wallet he threw it at Cet 's breast so that a mouthful of blood spattered over the lips . "

In shame , Cet leaves the pig to Conall , who rightfully claims the belly as his portion , a burden for nine men , leaving only the fore @-@ trotters to the Connachta . Dissatisfied with their meagre share , the Connachta rise against the Ulaid , and a drinking bout breaks out in the hostel and spills out into the courtyard outside . Fergus rips up a great oak tree from the ground by the roots . Mac Da Thó unleashes Ailbe to see which side it would choose ; Ailbe sides with the Ulaid , and precipitates the rout of the Connachta . The dog itself is decapitated by Aillil 's charioteer Fer Loga at Mag nAilbi .

As the hosts sweep westward across Mide , Fer Loga hides in the heather and leaps into the chariot of Conchobar as it passes , seizing the king 's head from behind . Conchobar promises him any ransom he wishes ; Fer Loga asks to be taken to the Emain Macha , capital of Ulster , where the women of the Ulaid and their nubile daughters are to sing to him each evening in chorus , " Fer Loga is my darling . " A year later , at the end of the tale , Fer Loga rides westward across Ath Luain with two of Conchobar 's horses and golden bridles for them both .

= = = Dindsenchas = = =

The final portion of the plot contains an example of Dindsenchas , or onomastic folklore , " a touch of antiquarianism dear to the ancient Irish " . The episode in which Fer Loga spits the head of Ailbe upon his chariot @-@ pole is used as an explanation for the placename of Mag nAilbi , " Ailbe 's Plain " , the valley plain bordering the River Barrow from County Laois and County Carlow to County Kildare .

= = Tradition and criticism = =

= = = Narrative style = = =

In the assessment of Celticist Nora Chadwick , " the tale is told with brilliant narrative power " : its

terseness , humour and laconic brevity is reminiscent of the best of the Icelandic sagas . The dialogue is particularly masterly in its " understatement and crisp repartee " , with " the utmost condensation and economy " in its choice of words . " [ I ] n the few remarks made by Mac Da Thó to his visitors , all his previous train of thought , all his cunning and address , are suggested in a few brief words intended by him to hide his true designs from his guests , while suggesting to ourselves his hidden intention . "

In spite of the literary finish of the surviving written versions , the tale remains one to be told orally . The story is characterised by " a total absence of reflection " ; " not a word is wasted , no statement is expanded " . The events of the narrative are expressed with swift movement , aiming to arouse and excite the interest and attention of the hearer rather than to stimulate the thought of the reader . " The story @-@ teller makes use of the element of surprise , of quick developments and dramatic moments . He seeks to impress by rapid crescendo to a startling climax , and a shock " ; as when Cet first reluctantly yields to Conall Cernach in the absence of Ánluan , then is unexpectedly and abruptly shamed in full view of the warriors of Ireland , by Conall suddenly hurling the head @-@ trophy of Ánluan " at the breast of his opponent with such violence that a gush of blood burst through Cet 's lips " .

Chadwick identifies a story calculated to appeal to men rather than women : a stark contrast with " the refined and delicately handled story of Eochaid and Étaín and their supernatural adventures with the god Midir " , with " the poetical beauty of the story of Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach " , indeed even with the later heroic tales of the Finn Cycle ? " stories of life in the open ? of hunting , and romance , and of the magic and prowess of a simpler and less organised society than that of Mac Da Thó 's feast . " The gulf separating the tale from this broad range of genres may be used to illustrate the impressive " range of theme which the early Irish story @-@ tellers had at their command " . In Chadwick 's final assessment :

One thing we can say with confidence . Our prose saga of Mac Da Thó 's Pig is a work of art of high quality in its own right . Without a touch of romance , without the glamour of magic or of the supernatural , almost without antiquarian elements , it holds us throughout by its swift unflagging narrative , the rapid pitch and toss of its dialogue , the brilliant quality of the dramatic presentation . Never has the tradition of the Irish Heroic Age received a more compelling form ...

= = = Theme and antiquity = = =

The Tale of Mac Da Thó 's Pig has been referred to as " one of the most brilliantly told of the early Irish sagas " , which " purports to give a picture of the old heroic life in Ireland and its warlike spirit " . The central theme of the narrative is the curadmír , the right of the greatest champion at a feast to receive the " hero 's portion " from a great central cauldron containing the communal supply . Wherever a great body of heroes was gathered together , this right was determined by boasting contests between the contenders : to assert the right to the hero 's portion , a claimant must first produce his credentials by boasting his heroic exploits , and then shame his opponents by quashing their objections and counter @-@ claims . In the event that this unsuccessful and the distinction between the heroes present unclear , the matter would be taken to arbitration , as in the similar Ulster Cycle tale Fled Bricrenn ; Chadwick suggests that this arbitration may be parodied when Mac Da Thó releases Ailbe to see which province the hound would side with first .

Chadwick argues that the antiquity of the tale 's theme ? feasting ? is probably the most anciently attested of all Celtic stories . The heroic communal feast was apparently central to the Celtic tradition , and classical ethnographers of the Posidonian tradition , notably the 2nd @-@ century Athenaeus , give accounts of Gaulish feasts which closely parallel their Insular counterparts . Similarly , in the 1st century BC , the Greek ethnographer Diodorus Siculus describes in detail how the Gauls " honour distinguished men with the best portions of the meat " , and how disputes often lead to challenges in which " they set about glorifying the valour of their forefathers and boasting of their own prowess ; and at the same time they deride and belittle their opponent , and try by their speeches to rob him of the courage he has in his heart " .

A secondary theme which drives the contest for the champion 's portion is the rivalry between the

royal provinces of Connacht and Ulster , resolved in the contest of the two heroes Cet Mac Mágach and Conall Cernach . The presentation of this rivalry is coloured by the author 's peculiar Leinster viewpoint . He turns both provinces to ridicule by the cunning of Mac Da Thó , King of Leinster ; in particular , the author 's political sympathies favour Connacht and remain hostile to Ulster to the end . To the heroes assembled , Mac Da Thó boasts that all the food provided for the feast is a mere trifle for the Leinstermen . It is tempting to conclude that the inspiration of the story is the claim of Leinster to supersede both Ulster and Connacht . However , it is apparent that by the time of the tale 's composition , even the story @-@ teller does not take the political issues very seriously , using the theme instead as a vehicle for a good story .

An unusual element is that the tale draws its characters from essentially the same cast as Táin Bó Cuailnge , making mention of some thirty heroes from that narrative , yet never once mentions Cú Chulainn . Chadwick suggests this is probably an indication of the antiquity of the tradition of the story 's tradition , predating the development of Cú Chulainn 's story within the Ulster Cycle . Some of the rhetorical verse elements are old and obscure , but certain seemingly parodic elements of the genre at least suggest a later composition of the present form .

= = = Satiric elements = = =

While The Tale of Mac Da Thó 's Pig appears to be the quintessential Ulster Cycle story in theme and narrative , there are certain unusual elements of the extant forms which suggest it may have a more satiric quality , parodying the heroic genre of the Ulster Cycle . The eponymous pig of Mac Da Thó may be mythic in origin , but its highly exaggerated size may also be satiric . In the Táin Bó Cuailnge , the Ulaid and Connachta go to war over a mythic best , the finest bull in Ireland , whereas here they come to blows over a dog .

In " an imitable passage of compressed humour " , Mac Da Thó promises the dog to both parties , then feigns ignorance when both arrive on the same day . During the bragging contest , the heroes of the Ulaid are not merely shamed , but are made to look ridiculous . Hyperbole is used to humorous effect when Conall flings the head of Ánluan at his opponent Cet . Thurneysen notes that in the Harley 5280 manuscript " the mutual slaying of the guests " is referred to as " ' performing a good drinking round ' " ( so @-@ imól ) ? a " somewhat coarse joke " that was revised or omitted in the other manuscripts because apparently the copyists did not understand it . Gantz notes that Fer Loga 's demand " that the nubile women of Ulaid sing ' Fer Loga is my darling ' to him every night is so comical that its inclusion cannot possibly be inadvertent " . In Chadwick 's assessment , the story is " a glorious travesty of the Ancient World by one who honoured and laughed at its traditions " .

The tale 's composition in the early period of the Viking Age in Ireland " may have done something to substitute laconic humour and a spirit of ripe burlesque for the dignity and poetical beauty " of other treasures of the Irish sagas . To call the tale a parody would not be entirely accurate ; instead , it seems " that a literary genius has presented us with a well @-@ preserved heroic tradition , seen through the prismatic lens of a later age . He brings to his theme a ripe sophistication , a concentrated irony , and a gay and lighthearted hyperbole . "

= = = Associated traditions = = =

The story appears to have been well known in literary circles . A variant of the tale is apparently mentioned in a poem by Flannacán Mac Cellaich in the Yellow Book of Lecan . Flannacán is said to have been killed by the Vikings in 896 . Another apparent reference , to an Orgain Mic Da Thó ? " The Slaughter of Mac Da Thó " ? is included in a 10th @-@ century list of the prímscéla , the " primary stories " or " chief stories " which the professional poetic class ( filid ) used to relate to kings . Mac Da Thó 's Hostel is also one of a number cited in a poem on the feasting halls or hostels ( bruidne ) of ancient Ireland . Clearly the tradition predates our oldest surviving copy , that of the Book of Leinster .

The tale was also apparently popular in later times , and became the subject of a number of independent poems ; none appears to have been directly based on the surviving text , however ,

suggesting that other versions of the same tale served as their inspiration . The first poem is appended to the old text in the Book of Leinster , Harley 5280 and H.3.18. Its author used the opportunity to display his knowledge of the names of Irish heroes in general , in which he does not confine himself to characters of the story . The second poem follows the first in Harley 5280 , and appears also in three other manuscripts : the Book of Lecan , Laud 610 in the Bodelian Library and lastly in the Stowe manuscript collection .

In these two poems , the real hero is not the dog Ailbe but the pig ? the latter being " practically a panegyric on the pig " ? although the story 's title implies this may have been an original feature . In the unusual choice of a pig as the main protagonist , the story becomes associated with a broader Celtic tradition , including the wild boar motif of Arthurian legend . The wild boar Twrch Trwyth , for example , causes considerable difficulty for the men of Arthur 's court in the 11th @-@ century Welsh story of Culhwch and Olwen ; while the exposition of the geographical details of Ailbe 's route in the rout of the Connachta in the Irish tale has parallels with the route taken by Twrch Trwyth in the Welsh hunt . Indeed , Thurneysen notes that in relation to Mac Da Thó 's pig , the poets use the words torc ( boar ) and muc ( pig ) interchangeably .

The poetic versions of the story allude to additional matter within the tradition of Mac Da Thó 's pig , including the names of Mac Da Thó 's wife Maine Athrai , of his two sons , and of his grandson Léna . According to these accounts , Léna first found the pig in Slieve Bloom , and was responsible for its nourishment until it had seven inches of fat on its snout . Maine Athrai needed the pig for her husband 's great feast ; Léna refused , but he was killed when the pig grubbed up earth with its snout , burying him alive in his sleep . In this version of the tale , which shows how much may have been omitted from the narrow version of the saga , Mac Da Thó 's swineherd Follascaide dutifully delivers the pig to his master 's feast .

In the Laud 610 and Stowe manuscripts , the poem in praise of Mac Dathó 's pig forms an appendix to the Dindsenchas of Mag Léna , a plain and heath in County Offaly . The explanation in prose and verse of " the plain of Léna " is as imaginative as could be expected from medieval etymologies : in reality , mag léna simply means " plain of meadows " . Similarly , an associated though dubious etymological tradition in another saga , somewhat later than the original Tale of Mac Da Thó 's Pig , equates the name of Mac Da Thó to " Mac Dá Túa " , " the son of two silent persons " , his parents having been deaf @-@ mutes . Though spurious at best , this explanation has been accepted nevertheless by some poets and redactors , such as that of Rawlinson B 512 , who write dá with a long a and make Thó alliterate with t .

= = = Commentaries = = =

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