



"The [Second] Battle of Moytura" | "Cath Maige Tuired"

Text Information

Author | Sharon Paice MacLeod

Language |

Period |

Genre |

Source |

Collection |

URL |

Transcription, translation and introduction by Albert Lloret.

Introduction to the Text

'The [Second] Battle of Moytura' is an Old Irish text which sets forth an account of an epic battle between the Túatha Dé Danann ("The People of the Goddess Danu")— the gods of pagan Ireland— and another supernatural race, the Fomoirie (anglicized as Fomorians). Although the present form of the text is no older than the 11th century, features of the language suggest it is based on an earlier version from the 9th century.

The contest depicted in the tale has been compared with the battle between the Asuras and Devas in Indic tradition, as well as that of the Aesir and Vanir in Scandinavian materials. This resemblance may point to a shared Indo-European mythology. While a full summary and discussion of the text is beyond the scope of this contribution, the identity of a number of key players on both sides of the conflict is important in order to understand allusions woven into the poem.

On the side of the Túatha Dé Danann (hereafter noted as TDD), the battle is led by Lug Lámfada ("Lug of the Long-Arm"), also referred to by the epithet Samildánach ("of many skills"). He is supported by his brother Ogma, the champion of the TDD. The forces of the TDD are empowered by a figure known as An Mórrígan ("The Morrigan"), a multi-functional goddess associated with battle, magic, death, prophecy, fertility and sovereignty, among other things. She appears in human and animal form, including the Badb or Scaldcrow, a supernatural presence associated with battle, omens, magic and death. It is the Mórrígan who eventually provides assistance to the TDD which results in their victory.

We also find allusions to Tethra, one of three Fomorian kings who imposed an oppressive tribute on the TDD, reducing their leaders and warriors to menial labor and servitude. It is this oppressive tribute which has led to the battle depicted in the poem. At one point in the action, Lug confronts and vanquishes Balor, who is both the champion of the Fomorians and his own grandfather (the father of Lug's mother Ethne).

The poem below was spoken by the Fomorian poet Lóch Lethglas, in praise of a sword named Orna that belonged to Tethra. Ogma found the sword, unsheathed and cleaned it. Throughout the poem there are references to members of the TDD and events described in the narrative, as well as overt and veiled threats to both Ogma and Lug.

The form of this poem is known as a rosc, seen in the earliest examples of Old Irish poetry, as well as in later materials that strove to appear older and thus more authoritative. A rosc could therefore be archaic or archaizing. This form of poetry did not rhyme in the modern sense, but was organized around word and syllable stress and complex patterns of ornamentation. In this rosc, we see a well-documented pattern known as binding alliteration, in which the first letter of the last word in a line is the same as the first letter of the first word in the next line. This pattern is easy to discern throughout the poem. However, its apparent simplicity should not detract from the fact that a rosc is a complex creation which involves cultural and mythic allusions, learned materials, and layers of meaning.

Another important feature of early Irish and medieval Welsh poetry is that instead of a narrative flow, the lines of a poem may often consist of discrete images— snapshots— of what the poet wishes to express; this feature has been compared with aspects of haiku. Indeed, in some instances the poet will refer directly to what s/he "sees." The following translation is a quite literal representation of word order to assist learners of Old Irish, but it also strives to create an aesthetically pleasing rendition, which would have been of great importance to the creators and reciters of these verbal art-forms.



Introduction to the Source

References to this story occur frequently in early Irish literature, including epic narratives, bardic poetry and folklore. However, despite the importance of this early text, there are only two surviving versions of the tale, and they are quite different from each other. Each is represented by a single manuscript. The older version, presented here, is found in a sixteenth-century vellum manuscript, Harleian 5280, whose primary scribe was Gilla Riabhach Ó Cléirigh.

About this Edition

The Old Irish orthography of the poem has been standardized to assist students as well as researchers in disciplines outside of Celtic Studies.

Further Reading

Carey, John, "Myth and Mythography in Cath Maige Tuired," *Studia Celtica* 24-25 (1989-1990), 53-69.

Gray, Elizabeth, ed., *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* (Naas: Irish Texts Society, 1982)

MacLeod, Sharon Paice, "Veiled Threats and Magical Weapons: An untranslated rosc in praise of a sword from Cath Maige Tuired" (forthcoming academic journal article)

MacLeod, Sharon Paice, "Early Irish Poetry and Wisdom Texts: The Knowledge of Poetry and the Poetry of Knowledge" (Jefferson NC / London: McFarland Publishers, forthcoming)

McLeod, Neil, "Irish law and the wars of the Túatha Dé Danann," in Breatnach, Lám, Ruairí Ó hUiginn, Damian McManus, and Katharine Simms (eds.), *Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of Celtic Studies, held in Maynooth University, 1-5 August 2011* (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 2015), 75-94.



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Admell, má Orna.

Úath-cath.

Cúila lecc.

Lúa fris;

Tethaínd tuínd formni.

Fa-roir. Is ress:

Nin i gallne.

Ám trí lócha:

Lóch aurbi,

Amm lías luch,

Loeg truim-chim.

Amm trichtaigh,

Tige fo aibne.

Mí-fúalaing

Tige Tethrae.

Tóe trá.

Do-bert mór,

Fot-riru fál:

Fomoire fáen(d)a,

For Balor.

Benn, bás.

A lán Fomoire,

Lug mac Ethne,

Uili óinfécht!

Ferr-si co láim.

Cath-ráin, rann-si.

Fodb; fer-samla:

Ferr-si, cethir.

Slichd fhid serbh,

Ár mór, míad.

Ainmm aile.

Fess fuile.

Tethra - a h-idús -

Faidter fortbe.

Mang dia fúbad

F-ruiris ilar

Fuile Ogmae.

A great destruction, greater [is] Orna.

A phantom-war.

Recesses of stone tombs.

A trampling on account of him¹;

5 He broke the outpouring of the choice part².

He was the equal of it. It is a vision:

An Ogam letter on a small standing stone³.

Indeed [there are] three lócha⁴:

The benefit of a breach,

10 A host who captures a reward,

A favoured one fated to die.

A host in early manhood,

Households beneath the whip⁵.

A baneful physical suffering

15 of the houses of Tethra.

Silence, then⁶.

He brought about a mighty thing,

A barrier⁷ reinforced it:

Fomorians [with] weapons levelled for attack,

20 Supported by Balor.

A wing of an army⁸, death.

Many Fomorians,

Lug⁹ son of Ethne,

All [in] a hosting at the same time!

25 It is superior by means of prowess.

A battle-torrent, a faction¹⁰.

Spoils taken from the dead; an apparition¹¹:

She is unrivalled, a member of a flock.

The cutting of a sharp spear-shaft,

30 A mighty slaughter, an elevation¹².

The reputation of a palisade.

Tidings of bloody wounds¹³.

A scaldcrow¹⁴ - [from] her perch -

A slaughter was observed.

35 Mournfulness on account of its smiting

Which holds back a multitude

of the bloodlines of Ogma¹⁵.



Critical Notes

- 1 The Old Irish word for sword (*claideb*) is masculine; in order to avoid confusion by the use of 'it' throughout the poem, references to the sword are given as 'him / his.'
- 2 The 'choice part' of a group of warriors.
- 3 The earliest historical use of Ogam was on upright stones that served as grave markers.
- 4 Here the poet Lóch engages in word-play with words similar to his name. The 'breach' refers to breaching the defense presented by a line of opposing warriors.
- 5 These lines refer to the oppression of the 'houses' or 'lineages' of the TDD, who experience suffering as the result of tribute imposed by the houses of Tethra.
- 6 This line also encodes an allusion to Tethra, whose name was sometimes spelled Tetra or Tetru.
- 7 The barrier (literally 'fence') consists of a group of Fomorian warriors with weapons extended outward in readiness for attack.
- 8 Binn means 'a mountain, peak, summit,' and was also used figuratively of a wing of an army.
- 9 Here the poet directly addresses Lug, warning him of the many Fomorians engaged in the hosting, in preparation for attack.
- 10 A 'faction' as in an opposing side in a fight, battle, contest, legal dispute or other situation.
- 11 The 'apparition' is the Badb or Scaldcrow, a 'member of a flock.'
- 12 An elevation of rank or status, as well as the 'elevation' of a palisade of spears or other pointed weapons.
- 13 In other sources, the Badb either presages or gives tidings of battle and death; indeed, the Mórrígan gives tidings of the success of the TDD in battle at the very end of the story.
- 14 The word Tethra has several other meanings, including 'scaldcrow;' the 'turret' refers to her watchful position in a tree, observing the battle.
- 15 While the final two lines could refer to the 'binding of bloody wounds,' the purpose of this *rosc* was to praise the sword, whose abilities held back the TDD (for a time at least); therefore the *fuile* are the 'bloodlines' of Ogma, the Túatha Dé Danann.