



"Tuán mac Cairill ro clos" | "Tuán mac Cairill—it was heard"

Text Information

Author | Unknown

Language | Middle Irish

Period | Middle Irish

Genre | Early Irish verse (in *debide scáilte* metre)

Source | Kuno Meyer (ed.), "Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: II. Aus Rawlinson B. 512. Die Verwandlungen des Tuán mac Cairill", in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 3 (1901), 31.

Collection | Making History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/tuan_mac_cairill/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Shannon Paice McLeod.

Introduction to the Text

The Middle Irish poem "Tuán mac Cairill—it was heard" tells the story of Tuán mac Cairill, a legendary figure said to have lived throughout the ages in the form of a human, stag, boar, bird and salmon. In this final form, he is eaten by the wife of an Irish king named Cairell, which causes her to become pregnant. She then gives birth to Tuán in the form of a man once again.

The poem comes down to us as a semi-independent text which was added after "The Story of Tuán mac Cairill to Finnen of Mag Bile" (*Scél Tuáin meic Cairill do Finnen Maige Bile*) in two medieval manuscripts: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512 [s. xv - s. svi], f. 98vb, and The Book of Fermoy (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 29, pp. 17-216. As we see at the end of the poem, Tuán's story is embedded in a frame narrative: Tuán has been conversing with Saint Finnian, describing how he has spent hundreds of years in different animal forms.

A version of the story of Tuán was also inserted into the third recension (Recension C) of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (literally, "The Book of the Taking of Ireland"), also known as "The Book of Invasions." This pseudo-historical work was a medieval fabrication compiled from various **Biblical**, **Classical**, and native Irish sources, as well as more recent medieval material. These were woven together into a decidedly un-historical narrative which purports to recount five successive "invasions" of Ireland, from the time of Noah onwards. The purpose of the text was to provide the people of Ireland with a **Biblical** origin, including them in the medieval Christian milieu. It therefore includes a flood event, as well as a variety of rather fantastical invasion myths, during which various features of the land were created, and cultural skills and institutions founded.

The theme of humans transforming into animal forms occurs in a number of early Irish and medieval Welsh narratives. In some stories, it is clear that the human beings are not just changing shape temporarily due to magical intervention, but are being 'reborn' in either human or animal form. It is interesting to note that several accounts by early **Classical** authors mention that Celtic-speaking population groups in Gaul believed in reincarnation or the transmigration of the soul. While it would be difficult to prove any kind of direct connection or continuity, the fairly widespread existence of related themes in ethnographic reports and literary sources is at least worthy of note.

Introduction to the Source

"Tuán mac Cairill—it was heard" is found in five separate manuscript sources. These include an early 15th-century vellum manuscript known as The Book of Lecan (Dublin, RIA, MS 535, f. 275, 23 P 2); a 14th- to 15th-century vellum manuscript known as The Book of Ballymote (Dublin, RIA, MS 536, p. 25); a 15th- to early 16th-century parchment manuscript known as Dublin, RIA, MS. Rawlinson B. 512 (f. 98vb); an 18th-century paper manuscript by scribe Aodh Ó Dálaigh (Dublin, RIA, MS 619, p. 41); and a 19th-century paper manuscript by scribe Joseph O' Longan (Dublin, RIA, MS 803, p. 181).



About this Edition

The digital edition presented here is adapted from the 1901 edition of Dublin, RIA, MS Rawlinson B. 512 by Kuno Meyer (see "Further Reading" below). A portion of the poem was edited by R.A.S. Macalister in 1939, accompanied by a preliminary translation of some stanzas. The remainder of the poem has remained untranslated and, as with many late 19th-century and early 20th-century materials, has been in need of a new translation.

Further Reading

Carey, John (ed. and tr.), "Scél Tuáin meic Chairill," *Ériu* 35 (1984): 93-111.

- An edition and translation of *Scél Tuáin meic Cairill do Finnen Maige Bile* ("The story of Tuán mac Cairill to Finnen of Mag Bile").

Carey, John (trans.), "Scél Tuáin meic Chairill. The Story of Tuán mac Cairill," in Koch, John T., and John Carey (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland & Wales*, Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2000, 223-225.

- A translation of *Scél Tuáin meic Cairill do Finnen Maige Bile* ("The story of Tuán mac Cairill to Finnen of Mag Bile").

John Koch and John Carey, eds., *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2000), pp. 226-271.

- A translation of *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ("The Book of Invasions"), including a version of the Tuán story.

José María Micó. "Translating Medieval Catalan Poetry Today: Jordi de Sant Jordi and Ausiàs March." *Translation Review* 87 (2013): 18-29.

- Reflections on translating Sant Jordi's poetry into Spanish.

R.A.S. Macalister. *Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*. Irish Texts Society 35 (1939), iii 80.

- An edition and partial translation of "Tuán mac Cairill ro clos" ("Tuán mac Cairill - it was heard").

Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), "Appendix A. Tuan mac Cairill's story to Finnen of Moville," in: Nutt, Alfred, and Kuno Meyer, *The voyage of Bran, son of Febal to the land of the living*, 2 vols, vol. 2: *The Celtic doctrine of rebirth*, London, David Nutt, 1897, 285-301.

- An edition and translation of *Scél Tuáin meic Cairill do Finnen Maige Bile* ("The Story of Tuán mac Cairill to Finnen of Mag Bile").

Kuno Meyer (ed.), "Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: II. Aus Rawlinson B. 512. Die Verwandlungen des Tuán mac Cairill", in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 3 (1901), 31.

- An edition of "Tuán mac Cairill ro clos" ("Tuán mac Cairill - it was heard").

R. Mark Scowcroft, "Leabhar Gabhála, Part 1: The Growth of the Text," *Ériu* 38 (1987), 79-140.

- The first of two articles containing an important analysis of *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ("The Book of Invasions").

R. Mark Scowcroft, "Leabhar Gabhála, Part II: The Growth of the Tradition," *Ériu* 39 (1988), 1-66.

- The second of two articles containing an important analysis of *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ("The Book of Invasions").



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Tuan mac Cairill ro clos

Do-rad Ísu for anfos

Di-rumalt cét m-blíadan m-búan

A richt duine, ba deg-dúal.

Tuán mac Cairill—it was heard

Jesus caused him to wander.

He spent one hundred long years

In the shape of a human being; it was an excellent destiny

Trí cét blíadan dó i richt

Daim allaid forsna mór-muigib

Do-rumailt cét m-blíadan m-bil

A richt antrellaig allaid.

5 Three hundred years [he spent] in the shape

Of a wild stag on a great stretch of land.

He spent one hundred fortunate years

In the shape of a wild boar.

Trí cét blíadan dó for feóil

dia raibi i richt in t-sen-eóin

do-rumailt cét m-blíadan m-binn

i richt bratáin bodair-chinn.

Three hundred years [he spent] for the purpose [of being] (in?) flesh

10 From which he was in the shape of an ancient bird.

He spent one hundred harmonious years

In the shape of a wandering chief salmon.

Co fúair íascaire 'na linn

co tuc leis do dún an rí

ó 't-ces an t-écne glé glan

ro míanaig an banrígan.

Until a fisherman discovered him in his fishing net.

He brought it with him to the dwelling of the king.

15 From his basket, the queen desired

The very bright fish.

Ro fuineth dí é for ruth

gu ro tomail a h-óenur

ro toirched an rígan rán

is de ro choimpred Tuan.

He concealed it for her quickly

So that she consumed it alone.

The noble queen was impregnated;

20 It is from this that Tuán was conceived.

Tuan mac Stairn sdiurda slóig,

é mac bráthar Partolóin

ba h-é Finntan, ferddi a rádh

frisi n-abairthea Tuan.

Tuán mac Starn: guide of a host

Son of the brother of Partholón.

It was Finntan who was more skilled in speaking

In regards to the feats of Tuán.

Is dó at-chúaid an scél-sa iar fír

co nach raib nech 'na imsním

Finnén Maige Bile bán

ro baí ac acalláim Tuain.

25 It is from him that the story is related according to truth

So that no one was in concern in regards to it.

[With] blessed Finnén of Mag Bile

Was [the] conversing of Tuán.