Heroes of Their Time: The Irish Development of Heroism in Early Irish Literature

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Abstract

Though medieval Irish literature is awash with characters described as 'heroes' by scholars and the public alike, such as Cú Chulainn and Finn mac Cumailll, what precisely is meant when we describe these characters as heroic remains uncertain. This project argues that, based on an intensive comparative study of two hundred and fifty-one medieval Irish works of heroic literature, drawn predominantly from the seventh through the fifteenth centuries, that there are six common qualities connecting medieval Irish heroes. These six qualities do not exist in a vacuum they emerged in response to cultural factors and were modified as society developed. At least two of the qualities are potentially based in ancient Celtic cultural practices described by Classical authors, while others appear to be rooted in medieval Irish aristocratic lifestyles. All six qualities change as they are influenced by historical events that shift how medieval Ireland conceptualizes aristocratic violence, such as the Norse and Norman invasions.

Keywords: hero, Celtic, Irish, medieval, headhunting, warrior.

> *'What heroes like best is themselves'.*
> — *Terry Pratchett, The Colour of Magic, 1983*

Introduction

While an albatross and a penguin are strikingly different animals, found in different parts of the world, behaving, and appearing differently, we group them together with the term 'bird' on account of their shared ancestry and similar characteristics. This is a standard phenomenon of language, which has engaged the attention of linguists and philosophers since ancient times; other examples would be a Model A Ford from 1903 and a Honda Element from 2003 both being 'cars', or Iron Age leather foot wrappings pulled out of a bog and the engineered marvels

worn by Olympic athletes both being 'shoes', their differences dissolved by the strengths of their similarities. However, sometimes such classifications are erroneous and imply the existence of similarities that do not exist, as we can see with the challenges surrounding the term 'hero' and its use to describe characters from medieval Ireland.

Cú Chulainn, Finn mac Cumailll, their companions, and their rivals are all described as 'heroes' in public and scholarly circles; and as we invoke similarities when calling both an albatross and a penguin 'birds', we suggest that these Irish characters are in some significant way similar to other characters from around the world that we also label with this term, such as Achilles, Gilgamesh, Xbalanque, and Batman. While scholars from the late 19th into the mid-20th century searched for structural similarities in the stories told of such characters (described as 'Heroic Biographies'), these systems, as noted in recent critiques by Anna Pagé and Clodagh Downey, are not a good fit for the analysis of Irish heroes.[143] While there are some similarities between some characters labeled as heroes, such as propensity for masculine violence, it remains to be seen whether Cú Chulainn and Gilgamesh are as similar as an albatross is to a penguin.

As an alternative to these international approaches, this project has sought to analyse medieval Irish heroic literature on its own terms, to uncover what a hero is in medieval Ireland, how the image of the hero changes over time, and what might be causing these changes. By prioritizing the evidence rather than seeking to prove an overarching global theory, this project emphasizes the unique cultural traditions and beliefs that contributed to the concept of the hero in medieval Irish literature, establishes that the Irish heroic literature was a living tradition that changed across the centuries as a result of contemporary events influencing the authors and audiences of these tales, and provides a system for comparative analysis for future scholars seeking to compare heroes across cultures more thoroughly than has been done in the past.

The Qualities of an Irish Hero

Firmly to establish shared characteristics of medieval Irish heroes across seven centuries of literature, as large a body of evidence as possible was required, resulting in a corpus of two hundred and fifty-one texts, predominantly from the seventh through the fifteenth centuries, with later texts included occasionally with reference to later developments. By examining the characterization of heroes across this corpus, six shared qualities were identified connecting these characters. (1) The heroes are predominantly aristocratic warriors, (2) they operate in close-knit social groups comprised of fellow warrior aristocrats, and (3) compete for status within a hierarchy of warriors, with heroes commonly striving to hold the position of supreme warrior. These heroes often (4) use the severed heads of rival warriors as trophies and tools in their contests over status; (5) are willing to violate social norms to help gain an edge in contests over status; and (6) learn, teach, and practice *clis*, martial arts that vary from mundane to supernatural in function.

While this large corpus was necessary as a basis for firmly identifying these six qualities

and studying how they develop, it was at the same time too large to discuss in depth, and thus a more limited selection of texts was used to represent the greater whole. Further, twelve sample heroes were selected to provide a series of case studies showing the prevalence of these qualities across a wide range of characters, with the complete data of the two hundred and fifty-one texts presented in a spreadsheet.

Warrior Aristocrats

The heroes of medieval Irish literature are overwhelmingly upper-class warriors, often the sons or close relatives of kings or otherwise landowning aristocrats, similar (though these are inexact analogies) to European knights or Japanese samurai. For instance, Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach are the nephews of Conchobar mac Nessa, king of Ulster. Finn and Caílte are (according to one genealogy) the descendants of Núadu Necht, high king of Ireland; while Finn's son and grandson, Oisín and Oscar, benefit from this royal genealogy and Finn's pseudo-royal characterization in the later tales.[201219]

As might be expected, aspects of this characterization changed over time as the social and military role of the warrior-aristocracy in medieval Ireland developed, with the heroes in early texts such as the unnamed poem beginning with the words *Find Taulcha* ('Find (and) Taulcha') appearing as independent aristocratic warriors, while only a few centuries later in *Tochmarc Ailbe* ('Wooing of Ailbe'), they appear as warriors in a king's royal guard, matching shifts in the role of the historic warrior-aristocracy.[211]

Warrior Bands

While the warriors of medieval Irish literature are sometimes forced into situations in which they operate independently of their fellow warriors, such as Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('Cattle Raid of Cooley'), they predominantly operate in groups alongside their fellow warrior aristocrats.[13] For instance, Cú Chulainn, Lóegaire Búadach, and Conall Cernach are only a handful of the warriors of the Red-Branch who serve the king of Ulster; while Finn, Oísin, Oscar, Caílte, and Goll mac Morna are all members of the Fíana led by Finn.[915]

As the social expectations of the warrior aristocracy developed across the centuries, so too did the manner in which the texts imagined the warrior bands. While the warriors of the Red-Branch initially appear as a relatively small band of warriors in service to a king (as seen in *Tochmarc Emire*, 'Wooing of Emer'), in the 12th century social expectations of the warrior aristocracy shifted from their providing personal military service, to providing small armies to their kings which they would personally lead (as seen in the closing portions of the 12th-century recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*).[99164]

Warrior Hierarchy

Inside these warrior bands, a hierarchy structured these warriors from least to greatest, judged solely on their capacity to commit violence, predominantly in service to a social superior such as a king. Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lóegaire Búadach compete for status as repre-

sented by a prize portion of meat in *Fled Bricrenn* ('Bricriu's Feast'), and in the poem beginning *Lá Do Bhí Sealg Shléibhe Guillenn*, Oscar proves himself the supreme warrior in the Fíana by defeating invaders that his fellow heroes fail to defeat.[68]

While this idea of a hierarchy of warriors might be an ancient tradition, possibly going back as far as descriptions of ancient Celtic warriors competing for prize portions of meat at feasts as described in a lost work by the ancient Greek traveller Posidonius, the initial theme of arguments at feasts over access to prize portions of meat is replaced in the tradition by warriors clashing with an overseas invader, with only the supreme warrior managing to overcome the attacker as in *Lá Do Bhí Sealg Shléibhe Guillenn*.[8] This shift is possibly related to the increasing societal anxieties of foreign forces in the wake of the Norse and Norman invasions.

Headhunting

In a literary tradition where each hero sought to establish himself as the most accomplished warrior, severed heads served as indisputable evidence that one warrior had overcome another. In *Scelá Muicce Meic Dathó* ('Stories of Mac Dathó's Pig'), Conall Cernach produces the head of his uncle Anlúan to dismiss Cet mac Mágach's accusation that Anlúan was a superior warrior to Conall.[18] In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Cú Chulainn brandishes the severed heads of the sons of Nechta Scéne to display his victory to the people of Ulster.[13]

Like the contests of status that this practice of trophy taking is connected to in the texts, headhunting in these tales might go back to an ancient Celtic tradition, as warriors collecting the severed heads of enemies and refusing to part with them is referenced by Diodorus Siculus, likely quoting Posidonius.[5] Whether this tradition of headhunting survived into the Irish medieval period, and if so, for how long it persisted, is unknown. However, notable similarities in the use of severed heads for display purposes by the warrior aristocracy in the medieval literature and Classical histories, leaves the suggestion that these traditions may be connected.

Heroes Behaving Badly

While in modern parlance 'hero' often refers to an individual who is morally upstanding, the heroes of medieval Irish literature frequently proved themselves to be so concerned with their status within the warrior hierarchy that they were willing to violate social norms to better their social standing within this subculture. In *Aided Con Culainn* ('Death of Cú Chulainn), when Conall Cernach realized that he would lose a duel that he had sworn would be a fair one-on-one fight, he signalled his monstrous gore-drenched wolf-headed horse to attack his rival.[7] In a poem beginning *Sgéla catha Cruinn Mhóna* ('Story of the Battle of Cronnmhóin'), Finn considers killing Goll mac Morna while he slept rather than risk a fair combat – before a bystander arrives and shames Finn.

This attitude appears to change the least throughout the tradition, showing a willingness on the part of the authors of these texts to critique the perpetual violence and destruction inherent to the heroic cycles: a negative undertone that can be found elsewhere in the tradition.

Clis

The most unique of the attributes of heroes in medieval Irish literature are the *clis*, sometimes translated as 'feats'. While *clis* are sometimes referenced in the abstract sense, with a group of warriors being praised for their *clis*, other tales go into more depth, ascribing specific names and functions to different *clis*. For instance, one feat involves warriors juggling swords to impress onlookers, while the 'Thunder Feat' has Cú Chulainn strike hundreds of warriors down with a single strike.[17][13] In *Tochmarc Emire* Cú Chulainn travels to Scotland to be trained in *clis* by the mysterious warrior-woman Scáthach; while in 'The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn and the Death of Finn', Finn and a rival warrior employ *clis* against each other when they come to blows.[9][10]

The background of *clis* is unclear, as they predate the rise of formalized martial training, with named techniques, elsewhere in Europe by several centuries. While they first appear as techniques that can be learned, by the 17th century they appear to have fully transitioned into magical weapons imbued with the properties that had been ascribed to the techniques: the association with warrior education has been lost.[12] Further, in these later texts the *clis* are repeatedly associated with Hell as their source, transitioning from learned techniques expressing a character's martial mastery to Hell-forged weapons.

Conclusion

Medieval Irish literature has a rich and unique tradition of heroism, worthy of being considered alongside the other great medieval European heroic traditions, such as the better-known Arthurian corpus. Influenced by the changing world that told the stories of these heroes, and possibly drawing on ancient Celtic cultural practices referenced by Classical authors, the heroes of medieval Ireland are a significant part of the Ireland's cultural heritage. While these characters rarely appear in modern popular culture, they deserve their time in the spotlight, when we might tell stories of these heroes, of their victories, glories and *clis* – and when, like the original authors of these tales, we might also critically question heroic violence, how these heroes compromised their society's values to get ahead in their hierarchy, and the consequences of a society fuelled by dead young men.

Acknowledgements

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