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ULSTER CYCLE

The large body of stories and poems that constitute the Ulster Cycle concern the exploits of the Ulaid, a group of peoples that in the early Middle Ages are confined to northeastern Ireland but in the tales stretch across the whole of the North. Their king is Conchobor mac Nessa who has his royal palace at Emain Macha (Navan Fort near Armagh City). Among its best-known warriors are Fergus mac Róich, Conall Cernach, and Cú Chulainn. There is a state of almost constant warfare between the Ulaid and the Connachta whose capital is at Crúachu or Crúachain (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon). They are led by their king, Ailill mac Máta, and his queen, Medb, the daughter of Eochaid Feidlech, king of Tara. The events of the Ulster Cycle are traditionally dated to around the time of Christ by medieval scholars who largely believed in the historicity of the main events and characters of the Cycle.

The earliest accounts of the deeds of the Ulstermen were written in the seventh century. It has been suggested that the interest in the Ulster Cycle tales was first cultivated in the great monastery of Bangor, County Down, in the district where the Ulaid were located in the early Middle Ages, but some of the earliest references to the events of the Cycle are contained in the work of the seventh-century poet Luccreth moccu Chérai who is associated with Munster. The Cycle was very popular throughout Ireland until the twelfth century. The earliest manuscript copies were written at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly and Terryglass, County Tipperary in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Several tales of the Ulster Cycle were reworked in the later Middle Ages, but it no longer dominated the literary scene as it had done up to the twelfth century.

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

The central tale of the Cycle is the Cattle Raid of Cooley (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*), which tells of the heroic single-handed defense of Ulster by the young Cú Chulainn. The men of Ireland, led by Ailill and Medb, attack Ulster in order to obtain the Brown Bull of Cúailnge (Cooley peninsula, Co. Louth). Cú Chulainn fends them off by engaging them in single combat, tragically slaying his beloved foster-brother Fer Diad in the process. The Bull is carried off and dies fighting against the White-Horned Bull (*Finnbennach*) of Connacht. A number of other tales, called foretales (*remscéla*), purport to explain the events that lead up to the Cattle Raid, although the connection between the foretales and the Cattle Raid is often tenuous. The reason for the inability of the Ulaid to defend themselves is given in the tale *Ces Ulad* "the debility of the

Ulaid." The otherworld woman Macha is forced to race against the king's horses while heavily pregnant. She gives birth to twins on winning the race, and as she lies dying she curses the Ulstermen so that they will suffer the pangs of childbirth at times of greatest danger. The origin of the two bulls is explained in *De Chophur in dá Muccida* ("Of the generation of the two swineherds"). The swineherds of the title transform themselves into various animals to demonstrate their magical powers. When they take on the form of worms, they are swallowed by two cows that subsequently give birth to the two bulls. Another important prefatory tale is "The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech" (*Longas mac nUisnig*), which explains how various Ulster warriors, most notably Fergus mac Róich, went into exile in Connacht and so accompany Ailill and Medb on the Cattle Raid.

The earliest surviving version of the tale was compiled in the eleventh century from ninth-century material, and the earliest copy is preserved in *Lebor na hUidre*. This version has been heavily criticized for the lack of unity that results from the presence of different linguistic strata, doublets, variants, inconsistencies, and interpolations. However, the aim of the redactor was scholarly rather literary, and it has been suggested that he deliberately juxtaposed contradictory versions in an attempt to establish the historical facts. In the twelfth century, the tale was revised to produce a more consistent narrative, and this version is found in the Book of Leinster. The story was clearly known long before this, as it is referred to in three seventh-century poems: one attributed to the Morrígán, which is preserved in the Cattle Raid, *Verba Scáthaige* ("Scáthach's words"), and a poem by Luccreth moccu Chérai. A later tradition attributes the "finding" of the story to the son of the seventh-century poet, Senchán Torpéist, who supposedly obtained it directly from Fergus mac Róich.

Historicity

The surviving texts postdate the period in which the Cycle is set by some six hundred years, and so they cannot be viewed as historically reliable. Nevertheless, many scholars have been struck by parallels between the Ulster Cycle and classical accounts of the Gauls and Britons of the second and first centuries B.C.E., which appear to suggest that the tales were remarkably conservative. More recent scholarship has shown that Christian monks had a far greater creative influence on these tales than formerly believed. Many of the surviving tales are fresh compositions, while others may have adapted traditional material to suit a contemporary context. Studies of the material culture

depicted in the Cycle have shown that it broadly reflects post-Viking society, and analyses of the tales themselves show a concern for contemporary matters, often of directly Christian interest. According to this approach, the convincingly archaic nature of the tales was deliberately cultivated by the writers of the tales. Nevertheless, it is likely that a small number of elements, such as the enmity between Ulster and its southern neighbors, do preserve genuine memories. Emain Macha itself was an important site at the time in which the Cycle is set, although archaeological investigations have shown that it was a religious structure rather than a habitation site.

Some scholars have sought the origins of the Cattle Raid of Cooley and associated tales in pagan myth. The conflict between the two bulls at the end of the Cattle Raid resulting in the reshaping of the physical landscape is widely thought to reflect a cosmogonic myth. Medb, whose name may mean "drunken one" or "she who makes drunk," is seen by many as a reflex of the goddess of sovereignty, but she has also been interpreted as a vague memory of a once-powerful queen such as Boudicca of the Iceni of Roman Britain. Conchobor is described as an earthly god (*día talmaide*) of the Ulstermen in *Lebor na hUidre*, but this may merely be an expression of his exulted status rather than a belief in his divinity. Conall Cernach has been compared to Cernunnos, who is usually depicted sporting stag's antlers in continental European art and is often accompanied by other animals, but the evidence is inconclusive.

Heroic Conduct

The Ulster Cycle is a heterogeneous body of material written at different times and locations with diverse aims. Nevertheless, most of the texts are concerned with the fundamentals of heroic behavior: valor, loyalty, martial prowess, and adherence to the martial code of honor. Cú Chulainn, for instance, preferred fame to long life, and the Cattle Raid of Cooley is a celebration of his bravery and skill against superior odds. Warriors were morally bound by a heroic code of conduct that guaranteed fair play in battle. In *Breslech Mór Maige Muirthemne* ("The great rout of Mag Muirthemne"), Conall Cernach ties one of his arms behind his back before fighting Lugaid who has lost an arm fighting against Cú Chulainn. Warriors eschewed any semblance of cowardice and were given to vaunting their own bravery. The originally eighth-century tale of Mac Dathó's pig (*Scél Mucce Meic Dathó*) shows the Ulstermen and Connachtmen engaged in a series of boasts about their conquests in a bid to win the right to the champion's portion

(*curadmír*). However, these acts of bravado end in a devastating battle and humiliation for the kings of both Ulster and Connacht. The posturing of warriors is further parodied in *Fled Bricrenn* ("The feast of Bricriu").

Women are often portrayed negatively. Medb is by far the most prominent woman in the Cycle, even rivaling her husband Ailill in some tales. In the Cattle Raid of Cooley, she usurps the role of the king, and she is portrayed as foolhardy, manipulative, and immodest, offering sexual favors to warriors who will fight against Cú Chulainn. The positive traits of women are frequently depicted as virtue, modesty, fidelity, wisdom, beauty, and skillfulness. When portrayed in such a light, they often act as a counterpoint to their menfolk. In *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* ("the death of Aífe's only son"), Cú Chulainn's wife Emer attempts to prevent him from engaging his own son in mortal combat. In *Scél Mucce Meic Dathó*, the Leinster hosteller Dathó falls ill with worry when both the Connachta and the Ulaid ask him for his famous hound. His wife determines the cause of his illness and devises a clever ruse that results in a battle between the Connachta and the Ulaid.

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See also *Aided*; *Comperta*; *Connachta*; *Emain Macha*; *Historical Tales*; *Mythological Cycle*; *Scriptoria*; *Ulaid*