EARLY IRISH MYTHS AND SAGAS

Translated with an introduction and notes by
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reveal that,' Eithal replied. 'Your head off,' said Ailill, 'unless you tell us.' 'I will conceal it no longer, then, but will tell you, since you are so obstinate,' said Eithal. 'Next Samuin she will be in the form of a bird; she will be at Loch Bél Dracon, and beautiful birds will be seen with her, three fifties of swans about her, and I will make ready for them.' 'No matter that,' said the Dagdae, 'since I know the nature you have brought upon her.'

Peace and friendship were made among Ailill and Eithal and the Dagdae, then, and the Dagdae bade them farewell and went to his house and told the news to his son. 'Go next Samuin to Loch Bél Dracon,' he said, 'and call her to you there.' The Macc Oc went to Loch Bél Dracon, and there he saw the three fifties of white birds, with silver chains, and golden hair about their heads. Oengus was in human form at the edge of the lake, and he called to the girl, saying 'Come and speak with me, Cær! 'Who is calling to me?' asked Cær. 'Oengus is calling,' he replied. 'I will come,' she said, 'if you will promise me that I may return to the water.' 'I promise that,' he said. She went to him, then; he put his arms round her, and they slept in the form of swans until they had circled the lake three times. Thus, he kept his promise. They left in the form of two white birds and flew to Bruig ind Maicc Óc, and there they sang until the people inside fell asleep for three days and three nights. The girl remained with Oengus after that. This is how the friendship between Ailill and Medb and the Macc Oc arose, and this is why Oengus took three hundred to the cattle raid of Cúailnge.

The Cattle Raid of Fróech

Introduction

'The Cattle Raid of Fróech' has a peculiar title. Fróech's 'cattle raid' is nothing more than the recovery of his own cattle (and his wife) from beyond the Alps; moreover, this exploit, which has a late look to it, is tacked on to the main tale, which could better have been called 'The Wooing of Findabair'. And the tale itself is unusual, for it is a mythological story — and with the personae of the Mythological Cycle — pressed into the service of the Ulster Cycle, as a preliminary tale to 'The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge'. It begins in the realm of the Side, with Fróech going to ask presents of his aunt, Bóand (compare Fróech's cattle with the hounds of Arwan in 'Pwyll Lord of Dyved': white animals with red ears are always from the otherworld); immediately, the setting shifts to the heroic warrior-world of Connacht, though Fróech returns to the Side for healing after his battle with the water monster.

The theme of 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', that of the young hero who must win his love away from her unwilling father, appears also in 'The Wooing of Étain' and 'The Dream of Oengus'; it is a degraded form of the familiar regeneration motif. The mythic — actually folkloric, in this manifestation — pattern imposes an uncharacteristic degree of villainy on Ailill and Medb. (Also uncharacteristic is the
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the cattle raid of Fróech

Fróech son of Idath of the Connachta was the son of Bé Find of the Síde, and Bé Find was a sister of Bóand. Fróech was the handsomest warrior in Ériu and Albu, but he did not live long. His mother gave him twelve cows from the Síde; they were white, with red ears. Although he had no wife, his household prospered for eight years. Fifty kings’ sons were the number of his household, all equal in age and form and appearance.

findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, fell in love with Fróech after hearing stories about him, for Ériu and Albu were full of his fame and his stories. Fróech was told of this at his house, and it fell to him to go and speak with the girl. He discussed the matter with his people, and they said ‘Go to your mother’s sister, that she may give you some of the wondrous garments and gifts of the Síde.’

Fróech went then to his mother’s sister, to Bóand, in Mag mBreg. He brought back fifty blue mantles; each was the colour of a beetle’s back, with four dark grey corners and a brooch of red gold. Fifty tunics of brilliant white, with animal embroidery of gold. Fifty silver shields with gold rims, and fifty candles of a king’s house in the hand of each man, with fifty rivets of white gold in each candle, and fifty coils of refined gold about each. The spear butts were of carbuncle, the spear blades of precious stones, and these would light up the night like the rays of the sun. Fifty men with gold-hilted swords, and fifty dapple grey horses; for each horse a bridle bit of gold, a silver breastplate with little gold bells, a crimson saddlecloth with silver threads, an animal-head pin of gold and silver, and a horsewhip of white gold with a gold hook at the end. Seven hounds on silver chains, with an apple of gold between each two hounds. Shoes of bronze, and no colour that was not on them. Seven horn-blowers, with horns of gold and silver and clothes of many colours, with shining mantles and the golden yellow hair of the Síde. Three fools preceding, each with a silver gilded diadem and a shield with an engraved spiral ornament and polished strips of bronze inlaid along the sides. Three harpers in royal garb about each fool.

That company set out for Cruachan, then, and the watchman at the fort perceived them as they entered Mag Crúachan. ‘I see a great company approaching the fort,’ he said. ‘Since Ailill and Medb became sovereigns, no nobler or
handsomer company have ever arrived, and no such company ever will arrive. The wind that blows from them is such that my head might as well be in a vat of wine. One warrior performs a feat the like of which I have never seen: he casts his javelin on ahead of him, and before it can strike the ground, seven hounds with their silver chains have caught it.

At that, the hosts came out of the fort of Crúachu to see the company, and there was such a crowd that the people suffocated, and sixteen men died looking. The company dismounted at the door of the fort. They unbridled their horses and unleashed their hounds; they hunted seven deer to Ráith Crúachan, and seven foxes and seven hares and seven wild boars, and the warriors slew these on the green of the fort. After that, the hounds leapt into the river Brei and caught seven otters and brought them up to the entrance of the royal dwelling.

The company sat down, then, and messengers came from the king to ask them who they were and whence they came; the company gave their true names, and their leader said he was Fróech son of Idath. The steward related that to the king. 'Welcome!' said Ailill and Medb. 'A splendid warrior Fróech,' said Ailill. 'Let him enter the courtyard.'

A fourth of the house, then, was set aside for the company. This was the arrangement of the house: seven rows, and seven apartments round about the house from the fire to the wall. Each apartment had a façade of bronze, divided laterally by specially ornamented red yew, and there were three strips of bronze at the base of each apartment. Seven rods of copper ran from the house vat to the ceiling. The house was built of pine, with a shingled roof; there were sixteen windows in the house, with a copper shutter for each window, and there was a copper grating for the skylight. In the exact centre of the house was the apartment of Ailill and Medb. It had copper pillars and was ornamented everywhere with bronze; two borders of gilded silver went about it, while a silver moulding from the headboard rose to the crossbeams.

The company made a circuit of the house, from one entrance to the next; they hung up their weapons and sat down and were made comfortable. 'Welcome!' said Ailill and Medb. 'It is for that we have come,' said Fróech. 'Then your journey will not be for nothing,' said Medb. Ailill and Medb played fidchell after that, and Fróech began to play with one of his own people. Beautiful his fidchell set: the board was of white gold, and the edges and corners were of gold, while the pieces were of gold and silver, and a candle of precious stone provided light. 'Have food prepared for the youths,' said Ailill. 'I have no wish,' answered Medb, 'but to go and play fidchell with Fróech.' 'Do that, then; it is fine with me,' said Ailill. Medb and Fróech played fidchell after that.

Meanwhile, Fróech's people were roasting the game. 'Let the harpers play for us,' said Ailill to Fróech. 'Indeed, let them,' said Fróech. The harp bags were of otterskin and were decorated with Parthian leather ornamented with gold and silver. The kidskin about the harps was white as snow and had dark grey eyes in the middle; the coverings of linen about the strings were white as swans' down. The harps were of gold and silver and white gold, with the forms of snakes and birds and hounds in gold and silver on them; and as the strings moved, these forms would make circuits round the men.

The harpers played, then, and twelve men died of weeping and sorrow. The three harpers were fair and melodious, for they were the fair ones of Úaithne, three brothers, Goltrade and Gentreade and Súantrade, and Bóand of the Side was their mother. They were named after the music that Úaithne, the Dagdae's harper, played. At first, the music was sad and mournful because of the sharpness of the pains; then it was
joyful and happy because of the two sons; finally, it was quiet and peaceful because of the heaviness of the birth of the last son, and he was named for the last third of the music. After that, Bóand woke from her sleep. 'Receive your three sons, O passionate Úaithne,' she said, 'for the music of sleep and laughter and sorrow will reach the cattle and women of Aílll and Medb that bring forth young. Men will die from hearing their music.'

The harpers ceased to play, then. 'It is a champion who has come,' said Fergus. 'Divide for us,' said Fróech, 'the food that has been brought into the house.' Lothir strode to the centre of the house and divided their food for them: he divided each piece in his palm with his sword, but neither skin nor flesh was ever touched. From the time that he became carver, no food in his hand was ever lost.

Medb and Fróech spent three days playing fídhcell, by the light of the precious stones in Fróech's company. 'I have been good to you,' Fróech said to Medb, 'for I have not beaten you at fídhcell, lest you be dishonoured.' 'The longest day I have ever spent in the fort this,' said Medb. 'Certainly,' said Fróech, 'for we have been here three days and three nights.'

With that Medb rose and went to Aílll, for she was ashamed that the youths had had no food. 'A great evil we have done,' she said, 'not to have fed the youths who have come from so far.' 'You preferred to play fídhcell,' replied Aílll. 'That ought not to have prevented the distribution of food to his people in the house,' said Medb. 'We were here three days and three nights, but we did not perceive night because of the brilliance of the precious stones.' 'Tell them,' said Aílll, 'to leave off their amusements until their food is distributed.' The food was distributed, then, and everyone was good to them, and they stayed and feasted for three days and three nights.

After that, Fróech was summoned to the house of council, and he was asked what had brought him. 'We would like to visit you,' he replied. 'Indeed, the household enjoys your company,' said Aílll. 'Better more of you than less.' 'We will stay about a week, then,' said Fróech. The company remained a fortnight in the fort; they hunted about the fort every day, and the Connachta would come to watch.

Fróech was distressed not to have spoken with Findabair since it was the need to do so that had brought him. One day, he rose at dawn to bathe in the river, and she and her serving maid came to bathe also. Fróech took her hand and said 'Stay and talk to me. It is for you we have come.' 'Welcome that, indeed,' said the girl, 'if it were possible. I can do nothing for you.' 'Will you come away with me?' asked Fróech. 'Indeed, I will not,' she replied, 'for I am the daughter of a king and queen. You are not so poor that you cannot get me from my people, and it will be my choice to go with you, for it is you I have loved. Take this thumb ring as a token; my father gave it to me, but I will say that I have lost it.' They parted after that.

'I fear,' Aílll said to Medb, 'that our daughter will run off with Fróech.' 'There would be profit in giving her to him,' replied Medb, 'for he would return with his cattle to help us on the raid.' Fróech found them in the house of council. 'Is it a secret?' he asked. 'There is room for you,' said Aílll. 'Will you give me your daughter?' Fróech asked. 'I will,' said Aílll, 'if you pay the stated bride price.' 'It will be paid,' said Fróech. 'Three score of dark grey horses,' said Aílll, 'with gold bridle bits, and twelve milk cows such that a drink of milk might be had from each, and a white calf with red ears for each cow, and your bringing your entire number and your musicians to help us take the cattle from Cúailinge.' 'I swear by my shield and my sword and my apparel, I would not give such a bride price for Medb herself,' said Fróech, and he strode out of the house.
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After that, Ailill and Medb conversed. 'A multitude of the kings of Eriu will besiege us if he takes the girl,' said Ailill. 'It would be best to set upon him and kill him now, before he can bring about our destruction.' 'Pitiful that,' replied Medb, 'and we will be dishonoured.' 'We will not be dishonoured, for I will arrange it so,' said Ailill.

Ailill and Medb returned to the royal house. 'Let us go out,' he said, 'to see the hounds hunt, until noon comes and they grow tired.' Ailill and Medb went out to bathe in the river. 'I am told,' Ailill said to Fróech, 'that you are good in the water. Come into this pool, that we may see you swim.' 'What sort of pool is this?' Fróech asked. 'We know of nothing dangerous in it,' said Ailill, 'and it is our custom to bathe here.' Fróech took off his clothes, then, and went into the water, leaving his belt behind. Ailill opened Fróech's wallet, then, and the thumb ring was in it, and he recognized it. 'Come here, Medb!' he said; Medb came, and he said to her 'Do you recognize this?' 'I do,' she replied. Ailill threw the ring into the river; Fróech perceived this, and he saw a salmon leap for the ring and catch it in its mouth. Fróech leapt after the salmon and caught it by the gills; he made for land and hid the fish in a secret place on the river bank.

After that, Fróech made to leave the water. 'Do not come out,' said Ailill, 'until you have brought me a branch from yonder rowan on the river bank. I find its berries beautiful.' Fróech went back, then, and brought the branch through the water on his shoulders. Findabair said afterwards that, whatever beautiful thing she saw, she thought it more beautiful to look at Fróech across the dark water, his body very white, his hair very beautiful, his face very shapely, his eyes very blue, he a gentle youth without fault or blemish, his face narrow below and broad above, he straight without blemish, the branch with the red berries between his throat and his white face. Findabair used to say that she had never seen anything to match a half or a third of his beauty.

Fróech brought the branches from the water to them, then. 'These berries are choice and delicious. Bring us more.' Fróech went back into the water, and in the centre of the pool a monster seized him. 'A sword for me!' he cried, but not a man there dared give him one for fear of Ailill and Medb. Findabair, however, threw off her clothes and leapt into the water with a sword. Her father cast a five-pointed spear at her so that it went through her two tresses. Fróech caught the spear, the monster at his side, and sent it back in a kind of play of weaponry, so that it went through Ailill's scarlet mantle and through his shirt. The youths rose about Ailill then. Findabair came out of the water, but she left the sword in Fróech's hand, and he struck off the monster's head and brought it with him to land. Thus is named Dublind Froich in the river Brei in the land of the Connacht.

Ailill and Medb went back into the fort, then. 'A great evil have we done,' said Medb. 'We regret what we have done against the man,' said Ailill. 'The girl, however, will die tomorrow night, and not for the crime of taking the sword to him. Have a bath prepared for the man, a broth of fresh bacon and the flesh of a heifer chopped up with an adze and an axe and added into the bath.' All this was done.

Fróech's hornplayers preceded him into the court, then, and such was their playing that thirty of Ailill's dearest ones died of yearning. Fróech entered the fort, then, and went into the bath. A company of women rose about him to rub him and to wash his hair; after that, he was taken from the tub, and a bed was prepared for him to lie down. But the people heard weeping outside Crúachu, and they saw three fifties of women wearing scarlet mantles and bright green headresses and silver animal bracelets on their wrists. Messengers were sent to find out why the women were weeping, and one woman said 'Fróech son of Idath is the
favourite youth of the king of the Side of Ériu.' At that, Fróech heard the weeping, and he said to his people 'Bear me outside. The weeping of my mother this, and of the women of Bóand.' Fróech was borne outside, then, and the women gathered about him and took him off into the sid of Crúachu. On the evening of the following day, the people saw him return, accompanied by fifty women and completely healed, without fault or blemish. Of equal age and form and beauty and fairness and comeliness and grace the women about him, so that there was no telling one from the other; and they had the look of the women of the Side. Men all but suffocated about them. The women departed at the entrance to the courtyard, but in leaving they so poured forth their lament that the people in the courtyard were laid prostrate. Thus it is that the musicians of Ériu possess the weeping of the women of the Side.

Fróech entered the fort after that; the hosts rose to meet him, and they welcomed him as if he had come from another world. Ailill and Medb rose also, and they expressed regret for what they had done to him, and peace was made. That night, a feast was held. Fróech called a lad of his people to him and said 'Go out to where I entered the pool. I left a salmon there; take it to Findabair and leave it with her, and have her cook it well. The thumb ring is inside the salmon, and I expect that it may be demanded of her tonight.'

After that, everyone grew intoxicated, and the singers and musicians entertained them. 'Bring all my treasures to me!' said Ailill, and these were brought before him. 'Wonderfull! Wonderfull!' said everyone. 'Call Findabair to me,' said Ailill; Findabair came, with fifty girls about her. 'Daughter,' said Ailill, 'the thumb ring I gave you last year, do you still have it? Give it to me that the warriors may see it — you will get it back.' 'I do not know what has happened to it,' said Findabair. 'Find out, then!' said Ailill. 'Otherwise, your soul

must leave your body.' 'It is not worth that,' said the youths, 'not with all the treasures that are here already.' 'There is no treasure I would not give for the girl,' said Fróech, 'for she brought the sword that saved my life.' 'You have no treasure that can save her if she does not restore the thumb ring,' replied Ailill. 'I have no power to restore it,' said Findabair. 'Do with me as you like.' 'I swear by the god my people swear by, you will die unless you restore it,' said Ailill. 'That is why I demand it of you — I know you cannot produce it. That ring will not come from where it has been put until the dead come to life.' 'Then neither wealth nor wishing will restore it. But since your need is urgent, let me go that I may bring it,' said Findabair. Ailill replied 'You will not go — let one of your people go for it.' Findabair sent her maid to look for the ring, and she said to Ailill 'I swear by the god my people swear by, if the ring is found, I will not remain under your protection so long as there is someone else to undertake it.' 'If the ring is found,' said Ailill, 'I would not refuse you that even if you went to the stableboy.'

The maid brought a platter into the royal house, then, and the salmon was on it; Findabair had cooked it well, and the gold thumb ring lay upon it. Ailill and Medb looked at the ring; Fróech said 'Give it here that I may see it,' and he looked into his wallet. 'I believe I was observed when I took off my belt,' he said to Ailill. 'By the truth of your sovereignty, tell us what you did with the ring.' 'That will not be concealed from you,' said Ailill. 'Mine the thumb ring that was in your wallet, and I knew that Findabair had given it to you. That is why I threw it into the dark water. By the truth of your honour and your soul, Fróech, tell how you managed to bring it out.' 'That will not be concealed from you,' said Fróech. 'I found the thumb ring at the entrance to the courtyard my first day here; I knew it was a fair treasure, and so I put it carefully into my wallet. The day I went into
the water I perceived the girl who had lost it looking for it, and I said to her ‘What reward will you give me for finding it?’ She said that she would give me her love for a year. It happened that I did not have the ring with me, for I had left it behind in the house. We did not meet again until she put the sword in my hand in the river. After that, I saw you open my wallet and throw the thumb ring into the water, and I saw the salmon that leapt to catch the ring in its mouth. I caught the salmon, then, I took it to shore, and I gave it to Findabair. That is the salmon on the platter before you.’

There was great praise and wonder in the house over that story. ‘I will not set my mind on any young warrior in Ériu but this one,’ said Findabair. ‘Promise yourself to him, then,’ said Ailill and Medb, and they said to Fróech ‘Come with your cattle to drive the cattle from Cúailnge. The night you return from the east with your cattle is the night you will spend with Findabair.’ ‘I will do that,’ said Fróech. He and his people remained there that night, and the following day they prepared to go, and Fróech bade farewell to Ailill and Medb.

The company set out for their own land; then it had happened, meanwhile, that Fróech’s cattle were stolen. His mother came to him, saying ‘Not prosperous your expedition — great sorrow has come of it, for your cattle and your three sons and your wife have been stolen and taken to the Alps. Three cows are in northern Albu with the Cruithnig.’ ‘What will I do?’ Fróech asked his mother. ‘You will not go in search of them,’ she said, ‘for you are not to give up your life for them. You will have my cattle, moreover.’ ‘Not at all,’ said Fróech. ‘I swore on my honour and my soul to go to Ailill and Medb with my cattle to drive the cattle from Cúailnge.’ ‘Their finding is not to be had,’ said his mother, and with that she left him.

Fróech set out, then, with thrice nine men and a falcon and a hound on a leash, and when he reached the land of the Ulaid, he met Conall Cernach at Benda Bairichi. He told Conall his problem, and Conall replied ‘Unhappy that which lies before you. Great trouble lies before you, though it is there your mind would be.’ ‘Help me, then,’ said Fróech. ‘Come with me until we find them.’ ‘I will, indeed,’ said Conall.

They set out across the sea, across northern England and the Channel to northern Lombardy, until they reached the Alps; they saw before them there a small woman herding sheep. ‘Let the two of us go, Fróech, to speak with the woman,’ said Conall, ‘and let the warriors remain here.’ They went to speak with her, then, and she said ‘Whence do you come? ’ ‘From the men of Ériu,’ said Conall. ‘Unhappy any men of Ériu who come to this land, indeed,’ she said. ‘My mother was of the people of Ériu.’ ‘Then help me out of kinship,’ said Fróech. ‘Tell us about our adventuring here — what sort of land have we come to?’ ‘A grim, frightful country with truculent warriors,’ she replied. ‘They seek to carry off cattle and women and bounty on every side.’ ‘What have they brought back most recently?’ asked Fróech. ‘The cattle of Fróech son of Idath from the west of Ériu, along with his wife and his three sons. His wife is with the king; his cattle are before you,’ the woman said. ‘Give us your help,’ said Conall. ‘I have no power but what I know,’ she replied. ‘This is Fróech here,’ said Conall, ‘and they are his cattle that were taken.’ ‘Do you trust your wife?’ asked the woman. ‘We trusted her before she came, but perhaps we do not trust her now,’ they said. ‘Go to the woman who tends the cows and tell her your need. She is of the race of Ériu, of the Ulaid, in fact,’ said the woman.

Fróech and Conall went to her and stopped her and identified themselves, and she welcomed them, saying ‘What has brought you here?’ ‘Trouble has brought us,’ said Conall.
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'Ours the cattle, and the woman who is in the house,' 'Unhappy you,' she said, 'to have to face the woman's host, and most difficult of all the serpent that guards the courtyard.' 'I will not go to my wife,' said Fróech, 'for I do not trust her. I trust you. We know that you will not betray us since you are of the Ulaid.' 'How are you of the Ulaid?' she asked. 'This is Conall Cernach, the best warrior in Ulaid,' Fróech said. The woman threw her arms round Conall's neck, 'Now the destruction will take place,' she said, 'for Conall has come, and the destruction of the fort by him was foretold. Let me go, now — I will not be milking the cows, but I will leave the door open, for it is I who close it, and I will say that the calves have sucked. Go into the fort, provided that they are asleep. Most difficult the serpent that guards the fort — many people have been left to it.' 'All the same, we will go,' said Conall.

They set upon the courtyard. The serpent leapt into Conall Cernach's belt. They destroyed the fort at once; they freed the woman and the three sons, and they carried off the best treasures of the fort. Conall let the serpent out of his belt, and neither did the other any harm.

After that, they came to the land of the Cruithnig and bore off three cows from the cattle there. They went west past Dún Ollaich maicc Brúin across the sea to Ard Óa nEchach. It is there that Conall's servant, Bicne son of Lóegure, died while driving the cows, so that there is an Indber mBicne at Bendchoir. They drove the cows across, and the cows threw their horns, so that the place is called Trácht mBendchoir.

Fróech returned to his own land, then, with his wife and his three sons and his cattle, and he went with Ailill and Medb to drive the cattle from Cuailnge.

The Labour Pains of the Ulaid

&

The Twins of Macha

Introduction

Although 'The Labour Pains of the Ulaid' purports to be history, it has been erected upon a foundation of myth. Macha, like Rhiannon in the Welsh 'Pwyll Lord of Dyved', is a euhemerized horse goddess, another insular version of the continental deity Epona, whose name means 'great horse'. Like Rhiannon, Macha appears seemingly out of nowhere; like Rhiannon, she selects a mortal husband and brings him great prosperity; like Rhiannon, she is associated with great equine speed. Rhiannon, however, is more thoroughly euhemerized, for she merely rides a horse that is faster (like those of the three Reds in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel') than any other; Macha actually runs faster than any horse.

On the narrative level, this story answers the question 'How did Emuin Machae get its name?' According to this version, the word emuin means 'twins', so that the name means 'The Twins of Macha'; according to another tradition, however, the word means 'brooch' and the name 'The Brooch of Macha', because Macha measures out the confines of Emuin Machae with her brooch.

The story also explains why it was necessary for Cú Chulaind to stand alone against the Connachta during the initial stages of 'The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge'. To the storyteller, of course, the inaction of Conchubur and the Ulaid merely