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The Hound and the Bull:

How Is the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* Representative of the Irish Iron Age?

The remains of the Irish Iron Age (lasting from around 500 BC-400 AD) exist mostly in sparse archeological evidence and literal word-of-mouth preservation. The written word was essentially unheard of in early Irish communities, so transcription of traditions, rituals, and folklore occurred long after Ireland experienced a shift from being a Celtic territory to a Christian one, which occurred from the later eighth century through the twelfth century.¹ However, Ireland in comparison to continental Celtic Europe was able to hold on to its cultural characteristics for far longer due to its geographic isolation and the way in which folklore so heavily intertwined with the Irish identity. Irish folklore is notably unique in its deep ties to the land in which it is set, how it was preserved through oral tradition for centuries, its complex characters that transcend typical folk hero archetypes, and how reflective it is of the societal structures of Iron Age tribal kingdoms. Ireland was divided into different provinces that remained mostly independent from one another for the duration of the Iron Age into the early Medieval period (from the fifth to the eighth century). One thing that united them, however, was the spreading of folklore through oral storytelling and the preservation of rituals and cultural traditions, both of which were accomplished by druids and other poets across Ireland.

One of the best preserved folklore texts of the Iron Age is the *Táin*, sometimes nicknamed the “Irish Iliad” as it is one of the most well-known Irish epics from that time period.² It is a culmination of orally composed poetry, prose, and transcriptions by medieval monks that gives insight into a

¹ This transition from oral to written folklore can be seen in the production of transcribed manuscripts of Irish folklore such as the Book of Leinster by Irish Christian monks in 1160.

²“The *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, “The *Cúalnge* Cattle-raid,” the Iliad of Ireland, as it has been called, the queen of Irish epic tales, and the wildest and most fascinating saga-tale, not only of the entire Celtic world, but even of all western Europe.” Joseph Dunn, *The Ancient Irish Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúalnge*, xi.

mythologized and ancient landscape while also being an archive of Irish history. The *Táin* contains battles between kingdoms, a ruling class' power over warriors, and the integration of real topography and fictional events. It reflects the societal structures and cultural identities of that time period, so it acts as a bridge between the reality of the Irish Iron Age and its world of mythology. Folklore is an especially potent preserver of identity and history. It is literary art, cultural tradition, and historical documentation all at once, and the *Táin* embodies that multifacetedness extraordinarily well.

Identity has a multitude of definitions, to narrow down the concept of identity in this paper, it will be observed in a cultural sense. Cultural identity is self-reflective and involves the participation of communities. In the case of the cultural Irish identity in the Iron Age, it is understood through the artistic products of its time, most notably, its folklore. To find the Irish identity within its literary history, it is best to first characterize what makes Irish folklore unique. There are four main cycles of Irish mythology, each based on a certain period or set of locations in Ireland. As Jeffery Gantz explains in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, early Irish folk tales “reflect the existence of different ethnic groups” as “The Ireland of these tales is apportioned into four provinces”.³ Location or region is the main divider of the cycles that follow the first cycle, based in a location known as Mide. Also known as the mythological cycle, the Mide cycle is meant to predate human civilization in Ireland by focusing on the gods and other supernatural figures associated with the Celtic “otherworld”. This cycle is the oldest known set of folklore texts and, therefore, is not very well preserved aside from the Book of Leinster which was composed in the early 12th century.⁴ It does, however, create this connection between the supernatural and the “real world” used in future cycles. Here the fae, giants, and Celtic pantheon are not only placed into existence but are implied to still exist in future cycles and interact with the human world. Irish folklore in particular has no clear boundary between reality and myth, which is not uncommon for many different forms of storytelling in the medieval period. Often the “otherworld” and reality are simultaneously the settings of folk tales,

³ Jeffery Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 6.

⁴ Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy, *Lebor Na Huidre*.

almost indistinguishable from one another.⁵ Yet how Irish folklore incorporates supernatural elements into reality is especially notable.

Supernatural phenomena are commonplace in Irish folklore within early Iron Age settlements in which the tales were set. Cúchulainn can transform into a beast during battles and is visited by Celtic deities such as the Morrigan.⁶ These deities blend into the real world by assuming the forms of animals and people, they walk amongst the human characters and interact with them as “normal” beings, not necessarily divine nor immaterial. They are as real as the setting in which the tales were created. There is then a bleeding of these mystical elements of folklore into reality.

One example is the existence of a “druid” social class, a social sect that bridged the gap between clergy, teachers, and doctors, the natural and supernatural. Druids emerged across the Celtic territories but they were much more prominent in Ireland and continued to be after the Roman invasion of the British Isles⁷. They were seen to have a connection to the “other world” in the mythological cycle and therefore in later cycles of Irish folklore, they were advisors to rulers such as King Conchobar and Queen Medb concerning war strategies.⁸ In reality, they also maintained the tradition of oral storytelling by spreading folklore such as the *Táin*. These tales were only preserved through memory and recantation for centuries until some were transcribed in the medieval period by Irish monks. The *Táin* was transcribed in fractured pieces, most comprehensively in the *Book of Leinster*, compiled by historian Áed Úa Crimthainn in the 12th century.⁹ Beforehand, it was up to druids, poets, and other artisans to preserve this ancient part of the Irish identity.

⁵ “Their setting is both historical Ireland (itself an elusive entity) and the mythical overworld of the Síde (Ireland’s ‘faery people’ who live in burial mounds called ‘side’ and exhibit magical powers), and it is not always easy to tell one from the other.” Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 2.

⁶ “The Morrigan appeared to him in the shape of a squint-eyed old woman milking a cow with three tits.” Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin*, 137. Morrigan was the Irish goddess of war, witchcraft, and death.

⁷ “Eventually [the Roman Empire] established a new Roman province, Britannia, which formed part of the empire until the early 5th century AD.” Paul Pattison, *The Roman Invasion of Britain: The Earliest Campaigns, AD 43–7*.

⁸ “Thus [druids] have been known to control the course of wars, and to check armies about to join battle...” excerpt from *Geographia* by Strabo, in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Gantz, 10.

⁹ Lochlainn, *12th Century Irish Manuscript The Book of Leinster To Be Conserved, Researched, And Digitised For A Global Audience*.

Oral storytelling itself is a cultural characteristic of early Irish societies in the Iron Age, but it did lead to a lack of written texts from that period of time. Not much is known about the druids and the social structures that allowed them to be the preservers of history because along with folklore, most druid practices were maintained strictly through oral tradition.¹⁰ However, since druids held such a high ranking in Irish Iron Age societies, we can infer that their practice of oral storytelling was also highly valued. In a literary sense, little is known about the period between the emergence of Irish folklore in the Iron Age and the transcription of it in the Medieval Age because of the reliance on oral preservation. This lack of documentation however is part of what shapes the Irish cultural identity, and what is preserved, like the *Táin*, can give the modern historian a view into what that time may have been like.

The next cycle, and the one that will be explored the furthest in this essay, is the Ulster Cycle. Set in the first century, the Ulster Cycle is centered on the people of Ulaid, a northern territory in Ireland. Geography plays a major role in this cycle, this is seen in the *Táin* most noticeably since the people of Connachta and Ulaid travel to great lengths to go to war with one another in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* or “Cattle Raid of Cooley” as it is more commonly referred to. Locations are constantly identified in “Cattle Raid” so the reader, or in earlier cases, the listener is never unaware of how localized and specific to Ireland the tale is. Several times throughout the text, locations are created from battles or the effects of Cúchulainn’s rampage across northern and western Ireland. Most are *in memoriam* of those whom Cúchulainn killed, for example:

“[Cúchulainn] planted twelve stones for them in the ground and set a head on each stone, and Ferdu Loingsech’s head on its stone as well. It is from this, where Ferchu left his head, that the name Cinnit Ferchon Loingsig comes – reading it ‘Cenn áit’ Ferchon, the Place of Ferchu’s Head.”¹¹

¹⁰ “Since the Celts in general and druids in particular were averse to writing their knowledge down... all this material had to be memorized.” Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 11.

¹¹ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 166.

Folktales such as the *Táin* can add depth and reasoning to why the Irish landscape is shaped the way it is. A landscape is something that lasts long past any cultural or societal creations, and incorporating it into the literary world ties it to the cultural identity of Ireland, therefore, that identity is physically preserved for longer in the land itself. In the same 12th-century manuscript containing the *Táin*, the *Book of Leinster*, there is also a collection of poetic and prose works known as the *Dindshenchas* (translated meaning “topography”) that dates from the same period of oral storytelling. Originally memorized and cited orally, the *Dindshenchas* were works associated with different locations and landmarks across Ireland.¹² Through the Iron Age, documented first in the fifth century, both the *Dindshenchas* and the *Táin* were passed down as a part of cultural tradition. Like the *Táin*, each work within this collection relies on the land to shape it, and simultaneously these works defined parts of the Irish landscape by their cultural associations. This is something that folk tales from the Ulster cycle do particularly well. The landscape is also a preservation of the ancient world which the Ulster Cycle and other cycles of Irish mythology originate from. While descriptions of the landscape are heavily mythologized within the *Táin* especially, they are still grounded in reality by being actual locations. The mythological world from which these landmarks were named is inseparable from the real world.

The settings and descriptive landscapes are some of many aspects that show a unique literary characteristic of Irish mythology: a blend between what we now could describe as Romantic and tragic literature. The Ulster Cycle, as it centers mainly on themes of conflict and war, glorifies violence through its imagery. The entirety of the *Táin*, but most importantly the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* finds beauty in war, in a ford in which Cúchulainn kills an entire army, in a fight between two bulls that creates mountains and valleys with the littering of organs. The landscapes of Ireland are explained by folklore as being born out of destruction. The text itself is explicit in terms of describing physical mutilation and gore, yet it glorifies these acts by describing them in such heavy detail. That mixture of beauty and horror is exemplified through the final fight between Cúchulainn and his foster brother Ferdia. This is the longest battle in the

¹² Edward Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*.

text and is also seen as the most emotionally charged. Ferdia has aligned himself with Queen Medb and has to renounce his friendship with Cúchulainn. As they meet at the ford, instead of immediately jumping into a fight, they converse, revealing a more emotional side to both characters. Previously, Cúchulainn could kill multiple men at once in fits of rage, for example: in one event named the Sixfold Slaughter, “not one man in three escaped without his thighbone or his head or his eye being smashed...” as he rampaged across Ireland with seemingly no remorse. He leaves both physically and mentally unharmed, “without a scratch or stain on himself”.¹³ This fight with Ferdia breaks this pattern of slaughter. Cúchulainn expresses his feelings of betrayal and apprehension to Ferdia, who dismisses them in a state of anger.

“Chúchulainn: ‘Don’t break our friendship and our bond,
 Don’t break the oath we made once,
 Don’t break our promise and our pledge.
 Noble warrior, do not come.’”¹⁴

He repeats the phrase “don’t break” almost as a plea. This serves as a memory tool for those retelling this section of the story, the repetition both emphasizes the importance of Cúchulainn’s words and makes them easier to recite on command. He then warns Ferdia of the promise Queen Medb made to him of marriage to Finnabair, her daughter.¹⁵ The same offer had been made to every warrior previous to Ferdia, and all had been killed by Cúchulainn. He is most betrayed, however, by Ferdia taking the offer rather than staying loyal to him.

“If they had offered her to me,

¹³ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 136.

¹⁴ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 186.

¹⁵ Queen Medb is quoted, “... and queenly Finnabair, the heroes’ favorite — when the Hound is finished; all yours, Ferdia.” promising Finnabair’s hand in marriage to Ferdia before he leaves to fight Cúchulainn. Kinsella, *The Táin*, 172.

If I were the one that Medb smiled at,
 I wouldn't think to do you harm
 Or touch the least part of your flesh."¹⁶

In comparison to the other extended fights in the *Táin*, the fight between Cúchulainn and Ferdia seems to be purposely drawn out by both parties and comes across as almost diplomatic at times. Neither one can hurt the other with the weapons chosen on the first day by Ferdia: feat-playing shields, darts, and straight swords. And by nightfall, after no progress, they decide to stop fighting and take time to heal themselves and each other. This is a time when their loyalties to their rulers, their expectations in war, and their new rivalry can be abandoned in favor of their love for one another. To have this dynamic between two warriors amid battle is particularly unique because it is a literal night and day contrast. Folklore often relies on heavily typecasted characters like the hero, the villain, the love interest, and so on. Beowulf, for example, is an archetypal hero who doesn't veer from his role of a strong and stoic warrior. The *Táin* seems to stray away from that concept, favoring multifaceted and complex characters instead. Cúchulainn expresses his love for Ferdia adamantly through his poetic speeches and his actions both on and off the battlefield. During the nights, he sends Ferdia as many "wholesome, healing plants and herbs" that are put on him so he does not die without care. Ferdia then sends him an equal share of "all the food and health-giving, stimulating, delicious drinks that the men of Ireland gave him".¹⁷ Neither one wants the other to die in the night, or maybe even die at all. But because of their responsibilities as warriors and loyalty to their rulers, they don't have a choice but to fight.

The tragedy of the *Táin* is that the warriors are ultimately loyal to the ruling class, so they feel as if they must fight to live. Both Cúchulainn and Ferdia were raised and trained to be highly skilled in battle together, their lives having no separation from fighting. Their love for one another, mixed with feelings of betrayal and loyalty then bleeds into the war. The reason they are fighting in the first place is because of a

¹⁶ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 186.

¹⁷ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 190.

petty dispute between a queen and a king over one singular bull, Donn Cuailnge, who represents the ultimate sign of wealth.¹⁸ The reason why the bull is chosen is because Ailill and Medb hold an equal share of wealth represented in land and livestock. In a pastoralist and agrarian society, power is gained through the acquisition of land for farming and livestock such as bulls, rather than through a monetary system or trade. This war is reflective of what was considered a sign of power during this period in Irish history, even if the war itself is futile and unnecessary.

Yet the ruling class does not suffer for it, only the warriors of Queen Medb's army and Cúchulainn. The dynamic between him and Ferdia is a very literal example of the Romantic and tragic elements coming together as one within Irish mythology. The only way Cúchulainn can let both himself and Ferdia live is if they prolong the fight, which they do by stopping every night to heal and choosing equally strong weapons to fight with each day. But at the same time, they both desire for the fight to end so neither one has to hurt the other, and so they can both stay loyal to their rulers as members of the warrior class. There is this literal clashing of explicit gore and tragedy mixed with raw emotions between the two characters that manifests itself through the text. Rather than having this sort of endless rage displayed by Cúchulainn before in battles, such as the Sixfold Slaughter, he is slowly injured and slowed by his opponent. By the third day, Ferdia is visibly worn down but still adamant about killing Cúchulainn for Queen Medb. All Cúchulainn wants is for the fight to end, but Ferdia remains loyal.

“Ferdia: ‘Sweet Hound, if we part now
 — though foster-brothers— without a fight,
 Think of my ill-fame and shame
 At Cruachan before Ailill and Medb.’

Cúchulainn: ‘There is no man that ever ate,

¹⁸ Donn Cuailnge was found in the Ulster region to challenge King Ailill's bull, Finnbennach, in stature. “‘I know where to find such a bull and better,’ Mac Roth said... ‘the Brown Bull of Cuailnge.’” Kinsella, *The Táin*, 55.

No man that was ever born,
 No joyous son of king or queen
 For whose sake I would do you harm.'

Ferdia: 'Cúchulainn, tide of bravery,
 I know that Medb has ruined us.
 You will win victory and renown
 And no one think you were at fault.'

Cúchulainn: 'My high heart is a knot of blood,
 My soul is tearing from my body,
 I'd rather face a thousand fights,
 Ferdia, than this fight with you.'"¹⁹

Another characteristic to note about Irish mythology is that it is structured with a mixture of poetry and prose. The most important passages of dialogue are poetry which allows them to stand out on the written page, but likely was originally done to emphasize them while spoken in the tradition of oral storytelling. Texts that are orally composed benefit from a variation between poetry and prose in a specific way. For example, there is a certain meter found in this dialogue that mimics a structured poem. By attributing a rhythm and pattern of emphasized sounds to important text, it was likely easier to remember and recount over and over again. Structural techniques such as repetition discussed earlier in this essay with Cúchulainn's pleas to Ferdia as an example, were also likely implemented to help with memorization. Since this text is being analyzed from a translated perspective, it is unclear whether or not the same emphasis on syllables or cadence would be as prominent in the original language of Old Irish, but there is still a clear difference between the dialogue found in the prose versus poetry of the *Táin*.

¹⁹ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 191-192.

According to Jeffrey Gantz in the introduction to *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, the Irish language developed its characteristics separate from the original Gaulish Celtic language in the midst of the seventh century, as he states, “The principles of phonetic change were aesthetic rather than schematic; the resultant language was soft and subtle, verb poor but noun-and-adjective rich, static and yet vital.”²⁰ That description is notably applicable to the prose sections of the text in particular, as they emerged during this transformation of the Irish language.

The conversation between Cúchulainn and Ferdia is a pivotal moment within the text and, therefore, needs to stand out as much as possible in an oral and narrative sense. Most works within the Ulster cycle outside of the *Táin* also utilize this mixture of literary formatting, especially for dialogue spoken by Cúchulainn since he is the central hero figure of the cycle. It is theorized that the oldest parts of the text are in poetic verse, likely composed in the sixth century, as the story spread and developed, more prose was added, likely to expand the story beyond its original boundaries as an oral folk tale. Through the introduction of prose, details of regions and the people within them were added to the *Táin*, making it more representative of the Ireland it was developing within. Most of the language found in the prose passages of the *Táin* contain language dating to the eighth century,²¹ and the most complete transcription of the text dates to the twelfth century with the *Book of Leinster* as mentioned earlier. As a historical artifact, the *Táin* is evidence of linguistic and cultural development in Ireland this way.²² It acts as a collage of different time periods, each presenting itself as a form of storytelling, whether spoken, poetry, or prose, from the Iron Age, or Medieval Age.

When Cúchulainn finally kills Ferdia in the ford, he uses the *gae bolga*, a mythological spear with barbs that only he was trained how to wield. This act is described in violent detail, similar to other scenes of death in the *Táin*. Here returns the blend of tragedy and Romance, the idyllic and beautiful language utilized for gory scenes. For the entirety of the *Táin*, Cúchulainn has not rested or been visibly exhausted

²⁰ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 18.

²¹ Kinsella, *The Táin*, ix.

²² “They developed through the course of centuries until reaching their present manuscript state; consequently, they manage to be both archaic and contemporary.” Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 2.

from battle, nor has he lamented over killing his opponent until now. He falls into a trance-like state of fatigue as he holds Ferdia's body. Here the hero stereotype and the folklore character expectations are subverted again. Cúchulainn mourns the loss of Ferdia in poetic diction as if he is reciting an ode in his honor. This dialogue also follows the stanza structure of other pivotal scenes, meaning it was likely memorized word for word when told in the form of oral storytelling.

Not only is Cúchulainn given a greater emotional depth to his character than the average "hero" type²³, but he also comes to the realization of how futile this war is. He repeats five times in his state of mourning, "All play, all sport, until Ferdia came to the ford".²⁴ Leading up to this point, as mentioned earlier, war and violence were heavily glorified in the text, given flowery language and extensive description, it was "all play, all sport". The Ulster Cycle itself revolves around the conflict between the Ulaid and Connachta regions, but since it is folklore, it supposedly should maintain this separation from reality. This is where the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* shifts from a folk tale about two kingdoms fighting over a bull to a lesson about the tragedies of war, and a commentary on the hierarchical structures of Irish Iron Age societies. The tale originally may not have had this stance, as it started in the form of poetry and focused heavily on the glorification of war. But over time, as Irish societal structures shifted from agrarian tribal kingdoms to more unified regions in the same time period as prose was introduced to the *Táin* (from the sixth to eighth century) this concept of the *Táin* as a social commentary could have been introduced. Irish mythology had developed with Ireland and was consistently grounded in the land and history of the region, so in turn it is much more closely connected to Irish identity in this way. Folklore converts the reality of a time period into a more digestible form, and then future generations learn from those tales and rework societal and cultural characteristics. It is a constant cycle of mythology and reality reflecting and changing one another over time, and the product of that is a collection of learned lessons, landmarks, and characteristics that are unique to the region they originate from.

²³ The folklore "hero" archetype: characters such as Beowulf, as mentioned earlier, who maintain this stoic and strong persona with little to no physical or emotional vulnerability. Cúchulainn experiences both forms of vulnerability simultaneously in his fight with Ferdia.

²⁴ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 204.

Each of the cycles of Irish mythology are based on actual historical periods of time, the Ulster Cycle is set in the first century in the midst of the Iron Age. The folk tales of the Ulster Cycle center around real regions of Iron Age Ireland as well. While being folktales, therefore fictional, these stories are still a reflection of life, societies, and culture in the Irish Iron Age. The Ulaid was a territory in Northeastern Ireland, the Connachta ranged across Northwestern and Western Ireland. Both regions developed at the beginning of the first century, which is also when the Ulster Cycle was set. Across Celtic Europe, most settlements were agrarian or nomadic, especially in Ireland where geographic isolation prevented other groups such as the Romans from influencing settlement structures. Power was asserted through the acquisition of land, food, and most importantly, livestock.²⁵ The *Táin Bó Cuailnge* specifically reflects this, since the folk tale starts with Queen Medb's search for ultimate power and wealth, which culminates in a cattle raid on the Ulster region. In Francis John Byrne's article, 'Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland' he states,

“The wars of the Irish annalistic records tended to take the form of cattle raids. Although one cannot deny the occurrence of wars of conquest resulting in the expansion of major kingdoms and the political disappearance of the vanquished tribes, the majority of 'wars' were of this simpler nature”.²⁶

In the first century when the *Táin* was set, conflicts between tribal kingdoms were seemingly based on acquiring resources rather than exerting military force as a sign of political power. The mythological Ulster and Connachta kingdoms were representative of regional tensions across Ireland during this time period, especially between those two kingdoms in reality.

The cattle raid in the *Táin* was not a war of a “simpler nature”, however, it was a series of tragedies from the perspective of the warrior Cúchulainn, who had to fight on behalf of the ruling class for

²⁵ N.B. Aitchison, *Kingship, Society, And Sacrality: Rank, Power, And Ideology In Early Medieval Ireland*, 45.

²⁶ Francis John Byrne, *Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland*, 134.

an ultimately pointless reason. In reality, cattle stolen from neighboring kingdoms during the Iron Age were likely revered or used in an honorable way since livestock provided plenty of food and materials for these agrarian communities. In the *Táin*, Donn Cuailnge was neither honored nor revered. Instead, after being stolen from the Ulster kingdom he was forced to fight the white bull, Finnenbach to settle the marital dispute between Queen Medb and King Ailill. Both bulls die in the end, meaning neither provided resources for their kingdoms nor benefited the common people.²⁷ The fight between the two bulls draws a parallel between them and Cúchulainn and Ferdia's final battle. Both are used as playthings of the ruling class in ultimately futile fights, where no one benefits from the outcome, especially not the people of Ulster and Connachta.

Little archeological evidence of settlements in agrarian regions has been found, showing there likely was high residential mobility with the exception of cultivated farmlands and grain processors, which emerged in the early Iron Age.²⁸ Communities in these settlements have been referred to as "tribes" and "clans" by earlier historians²⁹, which is currently being disputed due to its inaccuracies as to what Irish societal structure was actually like. Some of the earliest textual documentation of Irish culture is from the perspective of the invading Roman Empire who brought with them the written word.³⁰ There is an inherent distance between sources of information available about Ireland's Iron Age and the culture and identities of that time period. This leaves folklore as the closest cultural documentation of Irish history and archeological evidence serves as the physical manifestation of that history.

What is known about the societal development of different regions across Ireland is mostly found in recovered Iron Age archeological sites. The transition from purely nomadic communities to settlements started first with the unification of people under kings. This brings in the topic of kingship and hierarchy

²⁷ "They took the bull away on the day after the battle. On Ai Plain, at Tarbga... he met the bull Finnbennach, the White-Horned. Everyone who had escaped the battle stopped what he was doing, to see the two bulls fight together." Kinsella, *The Táin*, 251.

²⁸ "Thus, while pastoralism clearly played an important part in society there is ample evidence for arable agriculture, possibly culminating in the largescale processing of grains in kilns in the early centuries AD." Katharina Becker, *Iron Age settlement in mid-west Ireland*, 45.

²⁹ "In a definition which has already become classical Dr. B has described early Irish society as 'tribal, rural, hierarchical, and familiar.'" Byrne, *Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland*, 128.

³⁰ Byrne, *Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland*, 128.

within Irish society, which is very prevalent in the Ulster Cycle. The ruling class has complete control over the classes underneath them, most notably the warrior class which Cúchulainn is a part of. The locations with the greatest evidence of human activity are ‘Royal Sites’ found across previously populated Iron Age territories: Navan Fort, found in the Ulster region, and Tara and Knockaulin found at the border between Ulster and Leinster towards present-day Dublin.³¹ In early Iron Age communities, groups of kings would be ruled by one “over-king” of a larger respective area.³² In the case of the Ulster Cycle, Conchobar is the over-king and Queen Medb is the over-queen of Connachta. Kingship was seen as sacral, often kings were “ritually married” to the land or one of the Celtic goddesses to assert their power.³³ It is suggested that Medb was seen as a fertility goddess along with being a descendant of royalty which is a literary example of this traditional ritual. Blurring the boundaries between rulers and the otherworld deifies the ruling class this way in both folklore and reality. By tying religious importance to rulers, it gave them a greater social stature and allowed them to assert power in a greater area through religion and ritual.

Religious beliefs held great power in early Iron Age communities, not only because of kingship but also the social standing of druids as community builders. In folklore texts transcribed in the later medieval period, the practices of druids were exaggerated to include large amounts of human sacrifice and deity worship. This likely was a byproduct of Christian invasion and the “othering” of Celtic tradition.³⁴ In reality, druids or another organized group did have influence over the construction of these Royal Sites according to Katharina Becker who states,

“The overarching morphological similarities between the sites have been discussed as being the possible result of a coordinated group of ritual specialists – akin to druids – instructing on the appropriate construction of these rituals, symbolically charged monuments.”³⁵

³¹ Katharina Becker, *Irish Iron Age Settlement and Society: Reframing Royal Sites*, 273.

³² Aitchinson, *Kingship, Society, And Sacrality: Rank, Power, And Ideology In Early Medieval Ireland*, 47.

³³ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 9.

³⁴ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 10.

³⁵ Becker, *Irish Iron Age Settlement and Society: Reframing Royal Sites*, 274.

Along with the responsibility of maintaining the cultural identity of Ireland through folklore such as the *Táin*, druids also were the constructors of national religious traditions. Religious and ritualistic beliefs were the unifiers within and between kingdoms across Ireland. While these sites were relatively far from one another in distance, the fact that they share many similarities in their structures shows that Irish traditions were able to be maintained and spread by these “specialists”, likely the druids. They connected regions and bridged the gaps between them through the worshiping of kings and deities. They connected communities through the spreading of religious rituals as well as through storytelling and gatherings at the Royal Sites.

These sites were composed of large-scale circular structures, characterized by “hilltop locations, the apparent non-utilitarian, ie, unroofable large timber structures and the non-utilitarian internally ditched ramparts found on some”³⁶, meaning that they were never meant to be settlements or places of power necessarily. This allowed tribal kingdoms to maintain their own regional identities and societal structures while simultaneously unifying under traditions and rituals. Archeological evidence of residential activity in these sites is sparse, which shows a lack of permanent residency, but rather confirms that the spaces were utilized for temporarily gathering as a large community.³⁷ Different regions of Ireland like Ulster and Connachta developed their own localized identities, this is seen most prominently in folklore rather than archeology as mentioned earlier. Social hierarchies and rituals such as the construction of Royal Sites maintained a staple of the larger identity of Iron Age Ireland, as in characteristics that ranged across the entire nation and weren’t particular to one region. These sites may have also been locations for communal storytelling and the recitation of folklore such as the *Táin* since they were the most public venues to spread stories and culture. By creating and preserving these spaces

³⁶ Becker, *Irish Iron Age Settlement and Society: Reframing Royal Sites*, 276.

³⁷ “Their primary roles in the Iron Age were as centres for communal gathering, religious ceremony and probably funerary ritual. Some were also venues for metalworking.” Brian Dolan, *Beyond Elites: Reassessing Irish Iron Age Society*, 363.

for community gatherings rather than to establish power or settlement, it shows that folklore and cultural practices held high importance in the Irish Iron Age, and acted as the main unifiers of these regions.

Folklore is more than a collection of stories. It is an amalgamation of identifiers that help define and shape periods of history that otherwise would be almost unknown to the modern world. The Irish Iron Age is still less understood than most time periods, but because of works like the *Táin*, there is some insight into this ancient world that preserved Celtic societal structures and highly valued oral storytelling as a cultural practice. While there is no way to truly know or define what the Irish identity was objectively, there does exist an artistic, idyllic, tragic representation of the Irish Iron Age in its folklore. It is an archive in the sense that it captures how Ireland viewed itself, its land, its language over centuries of development, and its people. Folklore is a subjective preservation of history. It is meant to captivate and entertain us, but through its poetry and prose we as a modern audience can find real reflections of Ireland, both mythological and historical.

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