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Typology of a Hero in Selected Celtic Myths

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Annotation

This bachelor thesis deals with Celtic mythological heroes. First, this thesis focuses on the Celts, then it focuses on a term myth and then it explains the division of Irish myths. In the practical part, it analyses the life of two Irish heroes, Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill and it compares it to the pattern of the life of a hero by Lord Raglan.

Key Words

Celts, myths, CúChulainn, Fionn, cycles

Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá keltským mytologickým hrdinou. Práce se prvně zaměřuje na kelty, poté zkoumá pojem mýtus a poté vysvětluje rozdělení irských mýtů. V praktické části analyzuje život dvou irských hrdinů Cú Chulainna a Fionna mac Cumhailla a přirovnává jejich životy ke vzorci života hrdiny dle Lorda Raglana.

Klíčová slova

keltové, mýty, CúChulainn, Fionn, Cykly

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	8
1 The Celts.....	10
2 Myths and Mythological Heroes.....	17
3 The Four Cycles of Irish Mythology	21
4 The Birth of a Hero.....	26
5 The Life of a Hero	30
6 The Death of a Hero.....	35
Conclusion	39
Bibliography	44

Introduction

Nowadays, the Celts are connected mainly with the islands of Great Britain and Ireland. However, it has not always been like that. They used to be one of the main ethnic groups in Europe before they were forced to the edges of the Great Britain. However, no matter where they were, they kept telling stories. They were not preserved in a written form, but they were passed down orally from one generation to another. These stories told about gods, and fairies, and other supernatural beings, and about the finest heroes. In Ireland, these tales were recorded after the advent of Christianity.

Though there are similarities between mythical heroes in various cultures, there are also certain nuances which make their hero unique. However, nowadays, a hero has different traits than he had two hundred or one thousand years ago. That is why even within one culture, the hero changes according to the likes of the people who tell the stories and those ones listening to them. People's values change and their ideal hero changes with them. Thanks to that a hero evolves and by that, he can gain a new trait or lose some in order to remain appealing to people.

There are many Celtic mythical stories on the British Isles. There are the stories of the Welsh, the Scottish, the Cornish, the Breton, and the Irish. Since this paper would be too extensive if it were supposed to look at a hero from every part of the British Isles, this bachelor thesis focuses only on Irish tales, especially on the ones about the two most well-known heroes called Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill. Whereas the former hero naturally finds his place in a tribe, the latter one lives outside of a tribe in the domain of the supernatural race called Tuatha Dé Danann. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt states that these two kinds of heroes share that they are a fusion of a warrior and a magician. They both also travel between the world of the men and the world of the *Síde* which belongs to the supernatural race. It is uncommon for a tribal hero to encounter the people of the Tuatha Dé Danann but Fionn and his war band called *fiána* live in this realm. This is also why Cú Chulainn is the normal, social type of a hero who is in the service of the tribe whereas Fionn is the asocial hero who shares the eternal and changing qualities of the forest and water deities.¹

This bachelor thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter answers the question who the Celts are, where they originated, and what can be learnt about them thanks to archaeology.

¹ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, California: Turtle Island Foundation, 1982), 73-110.

The second chapter explains what mythology is, the importance of myths and the pattern in a hero's life. The third chapter focuses on cycles which divide Irish myths into four groups based on the characteristics of the tales. Finally, the practical part focuses on selected Irish heroes throughout their lifetime, from their birth to their death, and what are the typical features of the heroes which we can encounter in Irish myths with an additional comparison to Lord Raglan's pattern in the life of a hero.

1 The Celts

The Celts can be seen as an enigmatic race. Because of their religion, they were not allowed to leave any written documents about their lives, laws, and beliefs. This narrows down possible sources about them to documents written by the Romans and the Greeks. However, they need to be read with a grain of salt since they are usually biased. Nevertheless, archaeologists have found many artefacts which bring some light to the Celtic culture.

The Celts emerged at the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C., becoming the dominant people in non-Mediterranean Europe thanks to their expansion to the west, east, and south from their homeland which is said to be in the Central Europe. Unfortunately, Celtic language and culture disappeared in the mainland Europe after the defeat of the Celts at Alesia in 52 B.C. where they fought against Julius Caesar. In the Great Britain, they were driven to Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland whereas in Ireland, they were not colonised by the Romans thanks to the isolated position of the island. Thanks to this, the society on the island did not change much until the arrival of Christianity in the 5th century. This is also the reason why the Iron Age survived there longer even though this era already ended elsewhere.²

While the Celtic race emerged in the 1st millennium B.C., they were first mentioned by the Greek historian Herodotus in the middle of the 5th century B.C., calling them the *Keltoi*.³ Peter Berresford Ellis adds that they were also called *Galatae* in Greece and the Romans used the terms *Galli* and *Celtae* when referring to this race.⁴ He also assumes that the origin of the word ‘Celt’ is from an Irish word *ceilt*. This word can be translated as ‘secret’ or ‘concealment’. That could be a reference to the Celtic prohibition to write down their knowledge which forced them to transmit their history, law, philosophy, and science orally from one generation to another.⁵ Miranda Green notes that this changed in Ireland with the advent of Christianity. The Irish material started to be preserved in the 6th century A.D., however, majority of the manuscripts written before 1100 did not survive. Christian monks who worked in Irish monasteries wrote down much of the early Irish material in the 12th century.⁶ But these monks also added some Christian features and sometimes even characters to the Celtic stories. To give an example, they added a story in which St Patrick talks to Cú

² Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 4-5.

³ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths*, 4.

⁴ Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Celtic Empire: The First Millennium of Celtic History 1000 BC – AD 51* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 162.

Chulainn and another story where this saint is talking with Oisín, Fionn mac Cumhaill's son, about Christianity but Oisín is reminiscing about the *fiána*, a mythological war band. He also showed Cú Chulainn's ghost to a king to persuade him to convert to Christianity.⁷ It is no surprise they did this since they looked at those pagan stories with contempt.

As it was already mentioned, authors, who wrote about the way they perceived the Celts, were not unbiased. This can show the Celts in various lights. For example, as Jeffrey Gantz states, Herodotus described these people as tall with light skin, hair, and eyes. According to him, they were boastful, childlike, ostentatious, and demonic in battle, however, they were also hospitable and they had a great fondness of hunting, feasting, poetry, music, bright colours, and glittering jewellery.⁸ Then, according to T. W. Rolleston, a historian called Hellanicus of Lesbos described them as practising righteousness and justice. Ephorus says that they have the same customs as the Greeks, and that they are on the friendliest terms with those who establish guest friendship. On the other hand, Plato describes them as drunken and combative.⁹

Herodotus was right about the Celts being interested in jewellery but they also loved gold. When they were before Rome, Diodorus wrote that they wore bracelets, armlets, costly golden finger-rings, arm-rings and neck-rings and even their corselets were made of gold. They also had a brooch which they used to fasten their cloaks.¹⁰ All these things were decorated with Celtic art which can be also found on military items such as knives, spearheads, shields and sword scabbards.

Various Celtic artefacts were also found by archaeologists. They found out that the Celts were excellent at making roadway systems. The Romans only reinforced them with stone which they were used to. The Celtic art also advanced especially their enamelwork and metal jewellery. These artworks were very popular in the Mediterranean world along with woollen cloaks which were known as *sagi*. And these cloaks even became a sign of prestige in

⁷ Tom P. Cross, Clark Harris Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1996), 347-354, 439-456.

⁸ Ellis, *The Celtic Empire*, 4

⁹ Ellis, *The Celtic Empire*, 8

¹⁰ Alexander Macbain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion, with chapters upon Druid circles and Celtic burial*, (Stirling: Eneas Mackay, 1917), 56-57

Rome.¹¹ Speaking of archaeology, there are two main archaeological sites in Europe. One is called Hallstatt and the other one was called La Tène.

Hallstatt is a town in Austria but it is an archaeological site too. Moreover, it is used as a name for culture in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age in the Central and Western Europe. Thanks to a prehistoric salt mine which is near the cemetery, parts of clothing and bodies were found because salt has preservative nature. The findings in this place are from about years 1100 to 450 B.C. Remains found in Hallstatt are divided into four phases. The first phase is called Phase A. At this time, iron was rare but there was apparent influence of Villanovan culture and cremations were practised in cemeteries. In Phase B, tumuli were common in burial but cremation was still predominant. Pottery was very well made in this phase. Cremation and inhumation were used in Phase C and pottery was both unpainted and polychrome. Some of the metal types were long, heavy iron and bronze swords, long, bronze girdle mounts and winged Hallstatt axes. There are no remains from Phase D in eastern Austria. Nevertheless, inhumation was the most common type of burial rite. Pottery was degenerating in technique and style in that phase because it was not that common anymore. And in the west, early archaic Greek vessels start to appear.¹² J. T. Koch adds that geometric art with straight was used the most during phases C and D and that there were used solar and lunar motives.¹³

The Hallstatt culture is followed by La Tène culture. La Tène is an archaeological site in Switzerland it is dated from the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 1st century B.C. This period is also divided into four phases like the Hallstatt period. La Tène A encounters Greco-Etruscan imports and ideas. Although this phase lasted only about 160 years, it created they style which is typical for La Tène. This style is characterised by spirals, S-shapes, and round patterns which are symmetrically applied to every ornament. La Tène B lasted for circa 100 years. Because of the Celtic migration, the unity of La Tène A was dissolved. But there were features which still remained to be popular. Those were for instance lanceheads, heavy knives, and burial by inhumation in coffins or by covering the body with stone heaps. La Tène C was the longest period. It lasted for about 200 years. In this phase, the Celts and the aboriginals intermixed culturally. The last period, La Tène D, lasted for only about 85 years. Roman Empire from the south and German invaders from the north caused the end of Celtic

¹¹ Ellis, *The Celtic Empire*, 15

¹²“Hallstatt: archaeological site Austria”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hallstatt-archaeological-site-Austria>.

¹³ J. T. Koch, *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 38-39.

power. The contact with Roman civilisation is visible on some findings. There were found typical peasant's implements such as sickles, scythes, hammers, saws, and ploughshares. The Celtic coins also underwent some changes. In La Tène C, coins were an important source for the knowledge of Celtic personal names. However, in La Tène D, the coins were based on Greek and Roman prototypes.¹⁴ J. T. Koch mentions that the Celts used Baltic amber, coral and cowrie shells. This indicates long-range trade patterns. Amber was used mainly as necklaces and bracelets than inlaid in metal. The usage of coral was mainly in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. However, it was replaced by inlaid red enamel. There were also blue, yellow, and green enamels but they were used scarcely. But this started to change in the 1st century B.C.¹⁵ While it is easy to find out what type of jewellery and ceramics the Celts used thanks to archaeology, it is more challenging to find out how their society worked.

Celtic society was not led only by a king but also by a druid-poet and these two powers were well balanced. When a new king was chosen, there was a ritual performed during which the king got 'married' to the goddess of the land and then served his people as the goddess's husband. If the land started to be less and less productive, the king was deprived from his reign by the druid-poet. Druid-poets had a complex role in the Celtic society. Since they were dependent on eloquence due to their religion beliefs, recitation was used to pass all information to next generations. As a result, druids were trained in memorisation and on top of that they possessed psychic skills. These people practised many arts. They worked as priests, historians, judges, poets, troubadours, and professors. But it was also normal that some members of the druidic orders were specialised only in one art, not all of them. Yet this group did not make one class, they were spread through society depending where their role was important. It is also noteworthy that in the Celtic society, women had the same rights as men. They fought alongside men, there were queens who ruled and led armies into battles and they could also become poets and druids.¹⁶

The Celts were agricultural groups of people. Since there is no record of them before they met with the Mediterranean nations, it is believed that they expanded because of their need of new fertile land. It is also unknown who the proto-Celts were. Jeffrey Gantz proposes that the

¹⁴ "La Tène: Archeological site, Switzerland," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/La-Tene>.

¹⁵ Koch, *The Celts*, 39.

¹⁶ Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Facts On File, 2004, XI-XII

Bell-Beaker people could be viewed as proto-Celts. Assuming they reached Ireland, they could be seen as the people who gave a beginning of Celtic culture in Ireland. However, archaeological evidence would be needed. But there is one thing certain, the Celts of the Hallstatt type reached Ireland in the middle of the 6th century and this migration lasted until the Belgic invasion in the 1st century.¹⁷ On the other hand, Patricia Monaghan proposes that 1,400 years ago, there were people in the central Europe who buried their dead by building mounds or barrows over the graves. Then few hundred years later, burial practices changed and the ashes of the dead were placed in urns after cremation. This is called Urnfield stage and it is seen as the first step to the distinctive Celtic culture. And since it is not fully Celtic, it is usually considered proto-Celtic.¹⁸ Nonetheless, there are still mysteries about this ethnic group which people have not uncovered yet and it is a question whether archaeologists will ever be able to make more things about the Celts clear.

According to Miranda Green, the Celts were animists. This means that they believed that everything in the natural world had a spirit. That is why even animals possessed symbolism. To the Celts, animals were similar to humans yet they were also different. The Celts also observed that different animals have different mental qualities and behaviour. Thanks to this the Celts were able to admire nature of each animal and acknowledge it.¹⁹ But otherwise it is not known very much about the religion of the Celts. However, it is known that druids were to the Celts the same as priests to Christians.

The Celts believed in an afterlife and therefore the druids taught about transmigration of souls and discussed the power and nature of the gods. The idea of the afterlife was called the Otherworld by the Celts, but it was also known under the names *Tír na nÓg* (“Land of the Young”) or *Tír na mBeo* (“Land of the Living”). This place was believed to be either under the surface of the Earth or on an island. The Celts believed that it was a place where old age, sickness and death do not exist and that there was eternal happiness. They also believed that time worked differently there. According to their belief, one hundred years in the land of the mortals was only one day in the land of the dead. They had even stories in which a beautiful girl approached a hero and tried to lure him to the Otherworld. The hero followed her and spent some time in that land, however, when he decided to return to his land, he learnt that all

¹⁷ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 5-6

¹⁸ Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology*, VI.

¹⁹ Green, *Animals in Celtic Life*, 196

his friends and family were dead because what seemed to him as few days took actually hundreds of years.²⁰

According to Poseidonius, the religion and culture of the Celts were a concern of three professional classes which were formed by the druids, the bards and the *filidh* (sg. *fili*) which were something like seers. As for the druids, the oldest record of them is from the 3rd century B.C. The word *druid* means ‘knowing the oak tree’. This could be derived from a druidic ritual which was performed in the forest. Druids had a role of judges, priests and teachers. They also were in charge of sacrifices. These sacrifices were usually done with animals but if someone were deadly sick, they offered a human sacrifice. Usually, a criminal was chosen but if there was no other way, they sacrificed an innocent person. Furthermore, they did not have to pay tributes and they did not fight in wars. Therefore, many people were attracted to this position. They had to spend about 20 years in training, studying astronomy, ancient verse, natural philosophy, and a lore concerning their gods. However, they were deprived by their position of a priest with the arrival of Christianity. But they still could have a position of judges, poets, and historians. There was an interest in druids again in the 19th century during Romanticism. From that moment there are now various movements claiming that they are of druidic beliefs.²¹

The Celts also held four festivals throughout a year. They were called Samhain, Imbolc, Beltine, and Lughnasadh. They were celebrated on 1st November, 1st February, 1st May and 1st August respectively. Samhain is still celebrated but it is known as Halowe’en now. According to the Celts, the year as split in two halves. One half of the year was from The New Year, Samhain, to Beltine and the other half from Beltine to Samhain. It was also believed that on Samhain Eve, the border between the mortals and the dead blurred and it was possible to communicate with the dead.²²

The Celts believed in many gods and goddesses but majority of their names were not preserved. Although Julius Caesar wrote about their religion too, he decided to use names of Roman gods instead of the native names. Therefore, we can read about Mars, Apollo, Mercury and other gods with Roman name even though this did not have to be the correct

²⁰ "Celtic Beliefs", Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-religion/Beliefs-practices-and-institutions>.

²¹ "Druid", Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Druid>.

²² Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Celtic Religion".

translation and they could have had even slightly different powers. But there are few names which are still remembered thanks to the Celtic myths. For example, Lugh was the god of light and he appears in the Mythological cycle and he also appears as a possible father of Cú Chulainn. The opposite of Lugh is Donn who is a god of the dead. Then there are war goddesses Badhbh, Macha and Nemain who are also called the Morrígan. They are able to shapeshift and they usually choose the shape of a crow and they also are omens of death in battles. These are at least the most well-known names of the Irish gods.²³

²³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Celtic Religion".

2 Myths and Mythological Heroes

Alexander Macbain says “the field of Mythology, strictly defined, embraces the fabulous events believed in by a nation and the religious doctrines implied in these”.²⁴ It is also important to define what a myth is. However, it is hard to find only one definition since not many people agree what a myth is. There can be used a quote by Philip Freeman. “The ancient Greeks thought of a *mythos* simply as a spoken story ... My definition for this book is simple – a myth is a traditional tale about gods and heroes”.²⁵ Everyone has ever heard at least a part of a myth, especially a Greek one which are one of the most well known in the world. So it is known that the story is about a hero and that there are usually supernatural beings like gods, centaurs or fairies.

Myths has always been important to people. The completely first mythological tales were about natural phenomena. A thunder struck a tree and suddenly there was a fire. And people did not know how to explain it. They did not have the knowledge how natural phenomena worked. They did not know about physical laws. That was why they came up with gods. With those supernatural beings who could control weather and elements. Suddenly there was a convenient explanation of the fire. A god sent a thunder on the earth and caused the fire by it. And then there were more and more stories about various other things.

Professor Jaan Puhvel says about the history of the word myth:

“Word, speech, talk” is the original sense, juxtaposed by Homer to *épos*...In Homer and the tragedians it can also mean “tale, story, narrative” without reference to truth content. But starting with prose writers such as Herodotus, the word *mûthos* takes on a polarized tinge of “fictive narrative,” “tall tale,” “legend.” As such it contrasts with *lógos*, another term for “word,” which came to denote “true story” to Herodotus; the father of history had no compunction about terming his own hodgepodge of legendary “Lógoi” and reserving the term *mûthos* for things that not even he could believe.²⁶

As it was already mentioned, the word *myth* is *mythos* in Greek and naturally, the English word is derived from it. As Encyclopaedia Britannica states, the word *mythos* has more than one meaning in Greek. It can be translated as ‘word’, ‘saying’, ‘story’ or ‘fiction’. Myths can

²⁴ Macbain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, 9.

²⁵ Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology: Tales of Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xiv.

²⁶ Professor Jaan Puhval, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 1

be related to other narrative forms such as fairy tales, sagas, epics, fables, legends and folktales. These types of genres are said by some scholars to be related to myths because they share some similarities. But this works only in Western culture. Non-Western cultures do not apply this kind of classification. They usually make a basic distinction between ‘true’ and ‘fictitious’ narratives in which case ‘true’ narratives correspond with myths in the West.²⁷

Myths are not always only stories to be told, some of them have a certain function. The function can be explanatory. This is the case of the thunder and fire. These tales explain facts. Another function can be justification. This one was usually used by the ruling families. They wanted to ensure their position by invoking myths in order to secure their reign. This tactic is known from pharaonic Egypt or imperial China. The third function is descriptive. This is used for events which people will never see for themselves. So those can be events like the origin of the world, a paradisiacal state, or the end of the world. The last function is healing. Myths can be used for healing. It is believed that when a person is very seriously ill, a myth can be read and it would work as a magical incantation.²⁸

Throughout history, people learnt that it was important to learn the mythology of other cultures in order to understand them and their way of thinking. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, there are seven ways to approach the study of myth and mythology: allegorical, romantic, comparative, folkloric, functionalist, structuralist, and formalist. When using the allegorical interpretation, people use similar situations which correspond with the myth. For example, for the description of the hostilities between Greek gods, opposite elements can be used such as wet against dry (Helios represents fire, Poseidon represents water). However, the problem with this interpretation is that there can be much more to the myth which cannot be explained by a simple comparison. In the romantic approach, people tend to emphasise emotions and lower the importance of reason. According to the Romantics, Greek and Roman myths and folktales were of higher value than artificial art and poetry of the European aristocratic civilisation. The comparative approach tends to make generalisation about more than one tradition. People in the folkloric approach collect data on the mythology which is believed to be lower and homogenous. The next approach is the functionalist one. People following this approach believe that myths are connected with other aspects of society and that they support social relationships. Another approach is called structuralist. A connection is made between a myth and language. They believe that as language has its own significant

²⁷ “Myth”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>.

²⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Myth”.

features so do myths have their own. The last approach is called the formalist approach. People who use this approach search for the structure of myths and they try to divide the narratives into basic elements. It was found out by this that there is a sequence which can be found in all myths.²⁹

It is also essential to know how each nation views their myths. Different nations can have a different view about their myths and history. As Marie-Louise Sjoestedt points out, the Romans thought of their myths historically but the Irish thought of their history, and also geography, mythologically.³⁰ This means that Romans thought about their myths as about something what happened. Those heroes of theirs are treated as real people, as people who truly once existed. On the other, mythology is omnipresent for the Irish. Every part of the island has ever witnessed a myth and the world of the supernatural and the world of the mortals are connected in harmony. As Marie-Louise Sjoestedt points out, the omnipresence of myths in Ireland can be seen in the *Dindsenchas* ('Tradition of Places') and the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ('Book of Conquests'). The first book marks mythological geography of the country and the latter book is about mythological prehistory and talks about all the invasions to Ireland that had been there.³¹

Legendary heroes are usually born to a princely class and some heroes can be of semidivine origin. The ones with one divine parent tend to be of unusual beauty and extraordinary precocity. All the heroes are stronger, more courageous and more skilled than ordinary people. They are just born to their role of a hero.³² However, it is hard not to be too specific when talking about all the heroes that all cultures have. Describing them all would be impossible. But neither can they be generalised. As Joseph Campbell notices, the adventure of a hero follows a certain pattern. The hero separated from the world, then he penetrates to some source of power, and his return enhances his life in some way.³³ This is called a monomyth. That is when a pattern is found in myths and it is possible to apply the pattern to myths of various mythologies all around the world. It shows how different cultures can share similarities with cultures on the other side of the world.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 11

³¹ Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 12

³² „Hero“, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/hero-literary-and-cultural-figure>.

³³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Harpercollins Publisher, 1993).

Another author who tried to find similarities in mythologies of different cultures was Lord Raglan. He came up with twenty-two points which the life of a mythical hero follows. The hero's mother is a royal virgin and his father is a king, usually her relative. The circumstances of the hero's conceptions tend to be unusual, and he may also be said to be the son of a god. However, after his birth, there is an attempt, usually by his father or grandfather, to kill him, therefore, the hero is sent away to a foster family. Once he reaches adulthood, he returns to his kingdom and wins over the king or a beast, and then he marries a princess, and becomes a king. In the end, he loses favour either with gods or his subjects and is driven from the city, after which he meets with death. If the hero has children, they do not succeed him, and his body is not buried. Yet he has got one or more holy sepulchres.³⁴ While it is interesting to compare a hero's life to this pattern, Lord Raglan also used it to determine how much likely it is that a particular hero actually existed. The more points a hero scored, the more likely it was that he was not a real character. However, this cannot be taken too seriously since it would make some real historical characters fictional and vice versa. While myths can be based on real people, it is very likely that people shaped it to make it more appealing to others. Especially since it is known that Celts shared their myths orally, it is clear that the tales kept changing and no one ever told a story twice in the same way.

³⁴ Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (London: Watts & Co., 1936), 178-179.

3 The Four Cycles of Irish Mythology

Now after getting familiar with the terms mythology, myths, and a mythical hero, there is the question how the Irish mythological tales are divided. Alwyn and Brinley Rees state that Irish tales fall into four cycles. According to them, the first cycle is the Mythological Cycle whose events happen at the same time as events in the ancient world and contains stories about gods and Tuatha Dé Danann (“The People of the Goddess Danu”). Next is the Ulster Cycle which takes place at the beginning of the Christian era during the reign of Conchobar of Ulster who is also known as Conchobar mac Nessa. The Ulster Cycle is followed by the Fenian Cycle which focuses on Fionn mac Cumhaill who served the king Cormac mac Airt in the 3rd century A.D. The last cycle is called the Historical Cycle which deals with kings who reigned between 3rd century B.C. and A.D 10th or 11th century.³⁵ This information is here to give an idea when each cycle took place before getting more acquainted with each cycle.

The first cycle is called the Mythological Cycle. John T. Koch notes that this cycle contains the fewest texts out of the four cycles. Since the stories were written at different times and places, many contradictions can be found in them. For example, Fir Bolg (‘Men of Bags’), a group of people who settled in Ireland before the Tuatha Dé Danann, are said to be driven out of Ireland after the First Battle of Mag Tuired, however, according to a different source, they were relocated to the province of Connacht.³⁶ Alwyn and Brinley Rees point out that the stories in the Mythological Cycle are full of magic and transformations. The distinctive features are intelligence and magic and characters gain victory thanks to these two features and wizards show their superiority by circumvention of destinies.³⁷

As it was already mentioned, the Mythological Cycle focuses on gods and Tuatha Dé Danann. Tom P. Cross says that the Tuatha are portrayed as beautiful strong beings that were learnt in magic and arts, however, they were not gods but neither were they ordinary people. He notes that they are said to have come from northern Europe and to have lived in Ireland before the

³⁵ Alwyn Rees, Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (United States of America: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 26–27.

³⁶ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 1326–1327.

³⁷ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage* 53–54.

ancestors of the present inhabitants, the Sons of Míl and that they lived along the river Boyne in County Meath and County Tipperary in *Síd ar Fémín* (“Fairy Mound of Fémín”).³⁸

Patricia Monaghan states that the central story is recorded in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (“Book of Invasions” in English). This book focuses on six invasions of Ireland and the contest between mythical races which begin after the biblical flood and end with the arrival of the last settlers, the Sons of Míl. According to Monaghan, Ireland was invaded before the Sons of Míl by Cesair, the granddaughter of the biblical Noah, Partholonians, Nemedians, Fir Bolg and Tuatha Dé Danann respectively. Since the book was written in the 12th century, meaning after Christianisation, there are visible biblical features that attempt to bring the history of Ireland into Judeo-Christian tradition such as the presence of Noah.³⁹ Alwyn and Brinley Rees suggest that *Cath Maige Tuired* (“The Second Battle of Mag Tuired”) is the centrepiece of this cycle.⁴⁰

The next cycle is called the Ulster Cycle which is also known as the Uliad Cycle, and the Red Branch Cycle. This cycle centres on the warriors of King Conchobar of Ulster and mainly on one of the most famous Irish heroes, Cú Chulainn. Charles Squire says that the tales can be found in the Book of Leinster, Book of the Dun Cow and the Yellow Book of Lecan, the first two books being from the 12th century and the third one from the 14th century.⁴¹ John T. Koch points out that older tales from this cycle were revised and rewritten even in the 16th century. New stories were written and some of them date even to the 18th century. At that time, stories which used to be passed on orally were recorded.⁴²

This cycle differs from the Mythological Cycle in characters. As John T. Koch observes, the characters are no longer gods and wizards but heroes and warriors and they celebrate fearless action and will-power instead of intelligence and wizardry. The stories depict conflicts between loyalties, mainly the rivalry between the northern provinces of Ulster and Connacht. They are also full of challenges and exploits and heroes are driven by honour and prestige.

³⁸ Cross et al., *Ancient Irish Tales*.

³⁹ Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, 53–54.

⁴⁰ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 31.

⁴¹ Charles Squire, *The Mythology of Ancient Britain and Ireland*, (London: Constable & Company, 1909), 55.

⁴² John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture*, 1709–1711.

The hero needs to decide between two courses even though they both are felt as evil and at the same time they are presented as a duty.⁴³

As John T. Koch states, the longest and most important story of the Ulster Cycle is an epic tale called *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley').⁴⁴ This story deals with the conflict between Queen Medb and her husband Ailill, the rulers of Connacht. They compare their respective wealth and after a long time Ailill wins thanks to an extraordinarily fertile bull Finnbhennach he owns and Medb lacks. However, Medb decides to get a bull from Ulster, Donn Cuailnge, which is equal to Finnbhennach and she goes for the bull to Ulster with an army. The only warrior who can fight her is Cú Chulainn because the rest of the Ulstermen is in pain due to a curse that was sent on them by the goddess Macha (this is explained in a separate story). After many months, the Ulstermen win, nonetheless, Medb is allowed to go back home with Donn Cuailnge. In Connacht, Medb's and Ailill's bulls fight and Medb's bull wins when he kills his opponent. Then the bull goes back home to Ulster but is mortally wounded.

The third cycle is known under four names – *fiannaíocht*, the Fenian, the Fionn, and the Ossianic Cycle. Alwyn and Brinley Rees suggest that the first and the second name are derived from the word *fianna*, the band of warriors of Fionn mac Cumhaill. The third name is derived from Fionn himself and the fourth name is derived from the name of Fionn's son Oisín who was also a poet and many poems in this cycle are attributed to him.⁴⁵ Patricia Monaghan states that the stories take place in the south of Ireland in the provinces of Munster and Leinster and they narrate not only about Fionn mac Cumhaill, they include even Oisín, Diarmait and Gráinne and Fionn's warriors called the *fianna*.⁴⁶

The word *fian* may be derived from more words. Alwyn and Brinley Rees suggest that the word *fian* can be derived from the same word, *Fian*, which means a troop of professional soldiers whose principal occupation is hunting and war. It can be also derived from the word *Féni* which indicates the Irish people but sometimes it also means the body of commoners as a distinction from the ruling class. The word *fian* can be found glossed by the word *ceithearn* which means a band of foot-soldiers. This word is suitable for the *fiana* since they fought on

⁴³ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture*, 54–55, 61.

⁴⁴ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture*, 1709.

⁴⁵ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 26.

⁴⁶ Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, 181.

foot, unlike Ulster heroes who fought in chariots. They also enjoyed sharing their life within their group whereas the Ulster heroes preferred individualism.⁴⁷ Even though there are differences between these two cycles, they still have in common that their tales tell about warriors. On the other hand, as Alwyn and Brinley Rees note, the Fenian and Mythological Cycle are connected thanks to Fionn's role as a poet and a diviner (though it is not as much as in the Mythological Cycle) and the close relations with the *síd*-dwellers the *fianna* has.⁴⁸

According to the Rees, the Fenian Cycle came into prominence in the 12th century when there was the poetry of troubadours and trouvères and the Arthurian romances in Europe. It is no surprise then that the stories in the Fenian Cycle are not heroic like in the Ulster Cycle but they are romantic. One of the stories in this cycle is about elopement; it is called *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* ('The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne'). The form of the literature is unique in this cycle; it is usually a speech-poem or a ballad. In this cycle, stories are usually spoken by Fionn, Oisín or Caílte.⁴⁹ Charles Squire notes that in the so-called post-Fenian ballads, the character of St Patrick appears. He tells Oisín about Christianity, God, and angels, and Oisín tells him about the deeds of Fionn and his *fianna*.⁵⁰

The last cycle is called the Historical Cycle or the Cycle of the Kings. This cycle has not got such distinctive features as the previous three cycles. It is observed by the Rees that this cycle is not as magical as the Mythological Cycle, nor is it as heroic as the Ulster Cycle or romantic as the Fenian Cycle. According to them, the stories in this cycle are about various high-kings of Ireland but also about provincial and lesser kings, nevertheless, they also tell about kingship, dynastic succession and the marriage between the king and the realm. The tales tell about the kings of Tara such as Niall of the Nine Hostages, Art mac Cuinn and Conn of the Hundred Battles.⁵¹ However, Patricia Monaghan adds that the stories about them are exaggerated and that there are magical elements.⁵²

Although Irish mythology is divided into four cycles, it does not necessarily mean that they cannot be connected. Alwyn and Brinley Rees notice that the Queen Medb of Connacht from

⁴⁷ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 62–63.

⁴⁸ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 67.

⁴⁹ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 68–69.

⁵⁰ Charles Squire, *The Mythology of Ancient Britain and Ireland*, 66-67.

⁵¹ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 73.

⁵² Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, 112.

the Ulster Cycle is indicated to be an embodiment of Sovereignty, the goddess of the realm, in the Historical Cycle.⁵³ Their next example is that the mothers of the Fenian heroes are members of Tuatha Dé Danann, the people of the goddess Danu, from the Mythological Cycle.⁵⁴ However, all of the cycles have got one thing in common, they all contain supernatural elements thanks to which is even the Historical Cycle considered as a part of the Irish mythology.

Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees note that mythological stories do not have to be divided only into cycles but they can be also sorted by events which occur in them. However, the lists are two, list A and B. These both lists contain stories about destructions (*Togla*), cattle-raids (*Tána*), courtships (*Tochmarca*), battles (*Catha*), feasts (*Fessa*), adventures (*Eachtraí*), elopements (*Aithid*), slaughters (*Airgne*), irruptions (*Tomadma*), visions (*Físi*), loves (*Serca*), expeditions (*Sluagid*) and invasions (*tochomlada*). Moreover, the first list also contains voyages (*Immrama*) and violent deaths (*oitte*), and the second list includes conceptions and births (*coimperta*).⁵⁵

⁵³ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 74.

⁵⁴ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 66.

⁵⁵ Rees et al., *Celtic Heritage*, 207-208.

4 The Birth of a Hero

Heroes are not ordinary people and so it makes sense that there is not only one marvellous moment in their life. The whole life of a mythological hero is remarkable. But these heroes are not only connected with their great deeds they did throughout their lifetime but also with their birth and death. Birth tales are called *coimperta* in Irish what means “tales of conception and birth.”⁵⁶ The advent of a hero into this world is connected with many striking features. The hero’s birth is the first event in his life which makes him unusual and different from other people. And there are many more adventures to come. Finally, it should be noted that since the Celts did not write down their tales from the very beginning, some events may have more than one version as people changed some aspects when they were passing the stories.

The tale *Compert Con Culainn* (“The Conception of Cú Chulainn”) has got two different versions. In one version, his parents are Dechtire, king Conchobar mac Nesa’s sister, and Lug, a god from the Tuatha Dé Danann.⁵⁷ In the other version, Cú Chulainn was conceived three times. The first time, he was born to Lug and a woman and Dechtire took him to take care of him since his parents disappeared overnight. Unfortunately, the child died of fever. The second time, Dechtire accidentally drank a water with a creature inside and became pregnant with Cú Chulainn. However, she miscarried on her wedding night with Sualdam mac Roich with whom Cú Chulainn was conceived for the third time and he was born named Sétanta.⁵⁸ His future was prophesied to him after his birth. This shows that his heroic deeds were already predetermined by higher power.

His praise will be in the mouths of all men; charioteers and warriors, kings and sages will recount his deeds; he will win the love of many. This child will avenge all your wrongs; he will give combat at your fords, he will decide all your quarrels.⁵⁹

In the latter version, Cú Chulainn has got two fathers, one of them is a god, the other one is a human. By being conceived three times, there appears the number three which does not appear only in myths but it can be also found in artistry. Given that the Celts are said to be

⁵⁶ Rees et col., *Celtic Heritage*, 213.

⁵⁷ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 134-136.

⁵⁸ Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology*, 57-60.

⁵⁹ T. W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 2013), V. Tales of the Ultonian Cycle.

superstitious, there is no surprise that they applied numbers, which they found magical, everywhere. Therefore, there are known Celtic symbols where the number three is prominent, such as triskelions, triquetras or the three-leaved shamrock. Numbers three and seven also appear in Cú Chulainn's description:

His hair, of three colours, brown on the crown of his head, red in the middle and fringed with gold," forms a triple braid before it falls in ringlets on his shoulders. A hundred strings of jewels decorate his head, a hundred collars of gold glitter on his breast. His cheeks are flushed with four colours, yellow, blue, green and red. Seven pupils shine in each eye, his hands have seven fingers, his feet seven toes.⁶⁰

While Cú Chulainn could be said to look like a monster due to his appearance which is very unusual, he was always perceived as a very handsome man by many women all around Ireland. When adding to it the fact that he is the son of a god, it is no surprise that he possesses a great strength, which is apparent when the Ulster hero is still a little boy, and fifteen *buada* ("excellences") which define a hero as an individual. To name a few, Cú Chulainn possessed an excellence in beauty, horsemanship, valour and in fine language. He was just the perfect Celtic hero. Nevertheless, there was one imperfection that he had and that was vulnerability. This aspect was given to the mythical heroes for the reason that such trait would diminish him in the eyes of the Celts since they valued heroism which even involved a suicidal extreme. It is very well known that the Gauls fought naked in order to be able to expose themselves more freely and to be able to display their wounds. The Celts also valued intelligence. Therefore, Cú Chulainn is familiar with *bérta na filed* which is a jargon of poets which allows a speaker to express their thoughts secretly by using riddles, kennings, and metaphors which are full of allusions to myth and ritual.

It is not known very much about Fionn mac Cumahill's birth since it is only mentioned in the tale *Macgnímartha Finn* ("The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn"). His parents were Cumhall mac Tréimhoir, leader of the *fiana*, and princess Muirne of the fair neck. He was named Demne and since the king wanted him dead, he was given to foster care to be brought up by two druid warrior-women called Bodball and Gray one of Luachar.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes*, 84.

⁶¹ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 360-362.

According to the pattern in hero's life proposed by Lord Raglan:

(1) the hero's mother is a royal virgin, (2) his father is a king, an (3) often a near relative of his mother, but (4) the circumstances of his conception are unusual, and (5) he is also reputed to be the son of a god. (6) At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but (7) he is spirited away, and (8) reared by foster-parents in a far country.⁶²

Cú Chulainn's story of his birth includes four of these points. His mother is a royal and his father is a god. The circumstances of his conception are very unusual and while his life is not threatened by a relative, he has got foster parents since that was their custom. As it is mentioned in the tale of his conception, Morann the druid decided that the boy should be a foster son of king Conchobar and his sister Finnchaem but also to Sencha, the judge and the wisest man in Ulster, warriors Bláí Briuga and Fergus, and the poet Amairgen. Thanks to this he would be raised as a prince, warrior, and sage.⁶³

Fionn mac Cumhaill's story includes five of the points. His mother is of royal blood and the king, his maternal grandfather, wants him dead so the boy has to be sent away and brought up by Bodball and Gray one of Luachar.

As it could have been noticed, both Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill are more known under names which were not given to them after birth. Cú Chulainn's birth name was Sétanta and his current name means 'Hound of Culann'. Sétanta took the new name as his after he slew a dog which belonged to a smith named Culann, and then offered himself to the smith to be the replacement for his dog.⁶⁴ While there is only one story about how Sétanta came to his new name, the story behind Fionn's name differs a little bit. In both versions, Fionn, at that time still known as Demne, won in a game of hurley. One version of the story is told by Philip Freeman. In that story, Fionn is attacked by a group of boys. He won against them and they asked his name. After he introduced himself, the boys went inside the fort in front of which they played and told the lord of the fort what had happened. They described the boy to the lord as 'handsome and fair' (fair is fionn in Irish). So, the lord decided that the boy would be called Fionn from the moment on.⁶⁵ Alwyn and Brinley Rees say that Fionn won against the

⁶² Lord Raglan, *The Hero*, 178.

⁶³ Freeman, *Celtic Mythology*, 60.

⁶⁴ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 136.

⁶⁵ Freeman, *Celtic Mythology*, 154-155.

king's man. The king then asked who the *fionn cumhal* (white cap) was. Then the boy's grandmother announced that the boy should be known as Fionn mac Cumhaill from that moment.⁶⁶ However, this should not be taken as a common feature of the Irish heroes. It is rather unusual that a hero's name would be changed.

Animals play a great part in mythical tales. Animals are connected to the birth of a hero. When Cú Chulainn was born, two foals were born at the same time. The hero can be also named after an animal and Cú Chulainn is the proof once again. Nevertheless, Fionn's son is also called after an animal. Fionn's wife called Sadhbh is half human and half deer. This is also true about their son. The boy's name is Oisín which means 'little dear'. Fionn also owns two dogs. But these dogs are transfigured people, more exactly they are Fionn's niece and nephew. Animals were also connected with wisdom; they were respected and they were not held in low esteem. Sometimes they lured hunters to the Otherworld. However, stags in particular were said to be used by the people from the Otherworld as intermediaries. It was believed that the reason was that in the land of the dead, the strength of a living hero was needed to fulfil a particular purpose. Just to mention one more example. The most famous epic tale called *Táin Bó Cuailgne* is set in the Ulster Cycle whose one theme is the conflict between Ulster and Connacht. In this story, the conflict is symbolised by the fight between two bulls. Other animals, which appear in other stories no matter whether as pure animals or as shape-shifted gods, will be mentioned in later chapters.

⁶⁶ Rees et col., *Celtic Heritage*, 154.

5 The Life of a Hero

Few years after their birth, heroes can already show their extraordinariness during their *macgnímartha* (“youthful exploits”). Those are the first amazing deeds of the heroes where they can show their strength and they deserve fame during their first exploits. But the hero’s life is not only about fighting against enemies. However, this is preceded by a training of the hero and it is also important that the hero gets married when he is older. In this chapter, there will be discussed only the youthful exploits, wooings and marriages of the heroes Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumahill.

The tale *The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn* tells of all the things he did while still being a child. Cú Chulainn’s first exploit was when he was five years old and he decided to go to Emain Macha to join King Conchobar’s boy-corps. He entered the corps without permission and one hundred fifty boys who were there threatened him with death and then they attacked him. But they were defeated by the little boy and Cú Chulainn became king’s favourite. A year later he slew Culann the smith’s monstrous dog when he came later than other to the feast which was held at the smith’s house. Conall lamented the dog’s death and so Cú Chulainn assumed the dog’s duty and he took the name Cú Chulainn. When he was seven years old, he heard Cathbad the druid telling his pupils that whoever claims arms and armour that day would become famous but the person’s life would be short. So Cú Chulainn went to King Conchobar to demand arms. Conchobar had seventeen sets of arms but the boy broke all of them. Then he was given Conchobar’s arms which finally endured him. Then he mounted a chariot but it shattered. He broke sixteen other chariots before he was given the king’s chariot. Then he went on a frontier and crossed it, entering alien territory. There he killed three Sons of Nechta Scéne and took their heads. On his way back to Emain Macha, he ran down two stags and shot eight swans without killing them.⁶⁷

Fionn ma Cumhaill’s childhood deeds are recalled in the story *The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn*. During his first chase, Fionn shot a duck without killing the bird. His next exploit was already mentioned in the previous chapter. One day, he set off and reached Mag Life. There were boys playing hurley and Fionn joined them. He won against them and that was the moment when he was given the name Fionn by the lord of the fort. When Fionn returned at the end of a week, instead of playing hurley, the boys were swimming and dared Fionn to drown them and Fionn drowned nine of them. Another time, when Fionn went across Sliab Bladma with

⁶⁷ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 137-152.

the two warrior-women he stayed with and they met a herd of wild deer. The women said that they would not be able to catch one of them. But Fionn did get a hold of one and then he always hunted for them. Then once, Fionn was told by the two warrior-women to leave so the king's men did not find him and did not kill him. So then he went into service to various kings but they always found out that he was the son of Cumhal and Muire and so Fionn always left. Once he got to Lochan, the chief smith, and the young hero was given the smith's daughter for a night. Next day Fionn asked the smith to make him two spears. Before he left, he had been warned that a dangerous sow called Beo lives there. But Fionn was not scared of it and killed it successfully. Then he continued to Connacht and killed a warrior Glonda on the way who killed a son of a woman Fionn had met. After meeting *fiana* in Connacht, Fionn went to visit Finneces to learn poetry from him. Finneces had been on the river Boyne watching the salmon of Fec's Pool for seven years because it had been prophesied that he would eat that salmon. After eating the fish, he would know everything. When the salmon was found, Fionn was order to cook it. When he gave it to Finneces, the latter asked whether Fionn had eaten any of the fish. Fionn answered that he only burnt his thumb and put it into his mouth. Then Fionn was asked his name and he answered that his name was Demne. However, Finneces knew that his new name was Fionn and then he told him that he, Fionn, was the one who should eat the salmon. At that moment, Fionn learnt everything about poetry and nothing was unknown to him anymore. Then when he visited Cethern, he learnt about a beautiful woman called Ele in the *síd* Breg Éle. However, whoever tried to woo her during Samhain Eve (night when everything in *side* was visible to mortals), one of his people was killed then. Cethern wanted to go to woo her too so Fionn went to Fiacal mac Conchinn for an advice. Then on Samhain Eve, Fionn went to the *síd* and waited. When the *síd* opened, he threw a spear and he successfully killed the killer of the wooer's men.⁶⁸

It can be seen that both young heroes possessed a lot of strength in a very young age. They were able to defeat a group of boys, both killed a deer, and shot a bird without hurting it. They both also got a new name in their youth by which they are known in later stories. There is also the separation of the hero from his mother. Cú Chulainn left his mother in order to go to Emain Macha and join the boy-corps and Fionn was left by his mother when he was born (though then she went to visit him at night when he was six years old and then left him for good⁶⁹). There is also place a role a smith. The number three appears again in Cú Chulainn's

⁶⁸ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 360-369.

⁶⁹ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 361-362.

story when he defeats one hundred fifty boys (in the tale it is written as thrice fifty) and then when he fights the three Sons of Nechta Scéne. On the other hand, wisdom appears in the story of Fionn and the salmon of wisdom thanks to which Fionn knows everything when he sucks his thumb.

Marriage is also important in Irish mythology. There can be found stories of *tochmarca* (“wooings”), stories which had a lot of popularity among people back in the days. Therefore, it is not surprising that Cú Chulainn was also told to find a wife even though he was still a boy at that time. The tale about his wooing is called *Tochmarc Emire* (“The Wooing of Emer”) and this story has many versions, the oldest ones go back to the 8th century.⁷⁰ However, this story could be also classified as an adventure (*eachtra*) since these adventures always took the hero into a foreign land. And in this story, Cú Chulainn had to go to the land of Scáthach.⁷¹

In the tale *Te Wooing of Emer*, Cú Chulainn was told that he should finally find a wife because all women in Ulster were enamoured of him, he was lucky that he was allowed to choose whom he would want as his wife. Cú Chulainn chose Emer, the daughter of Forgall the Wily. So the hero went to visit her in Luglochta Loga (“the Gardens of Lug”). She was there with other maidens but he decided to woo her anyway. Using a poetical language full of riddles which many people did not know and so it was safe to talk to the girl in front of others. But Emer’s father found out about it and he told Cú Chulainn to go to Alba (“Scotland”) to a warrior-woman Scáthach to be trained in arms by her. But the real reason was that Forgall hoped that Cú Chulainn would not survive it. When he reached Scotland and found Scáthach, she taught all arts of war. He also met Ferdiad there who became his best friend. During Cú Chulainn’s stay in Scotland, Scáthach faced a battle against Aífe. Since Scáthach was worried about Cú Chulainn getting hurt, she gave the hero a sleeping potion in order to keep him out of the battle. But since Cú Chulainn was too strong, the potion did not work for as a long time as Scáthach wanted and Cú Chulainn joined the battle. In the end, Aífe lost the battle and was seized. Cú Chulainn then decided to spare her life but only if she bore him a son and made truce with Scáthach. Then he returned back to Ireland even before his son Connla was born. He went straight to Emer but her father still refused giving her to him so Cú Chulainn stormed into the fortress and killed twenty-four men on his way. Then he abducted Emer and went back home. After Cú Chulainn and Emer’s wedding, Conchobar, king of Ulster had a right of the first night which allowed him to spend a night with the bride.

⁷⁰ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 153.

⁷¹ Rees et col., *Ancient Heritage*, 297.

He was scared of Cú Chulainn so he did not want to do it but Cathbad, the druid, proposed that Conchobar could spend a night with Emer but Cathbad would be between them.⁷²

Other stories about love were called *aitheda* (“elopements”) and *serca* (“loves”). These stories were about love triangles between two men and a woman. The most famous Irish myth on this topic is *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (“The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne”) where Diarmuid is in love with Fionn mac Cumhaill’s wife Gráinne. This tale dates back to the 10th century and it is compared to a similar story called “Tristan and Iseult”.⁷³

This story begins at a wedding of Fionn and Gráinne. During a feast, Gráinne put a sleeping potion into everyone’s drink but Diarmuid’s whom she loved and who was a member of *fiana*, and the drink of three friends of his. Then she put a *geis*, a prohibition, on Diarmuid telling him to elope with her otherwise he would be in danger because of violation of the *geis*. Diarmuid was hesitant because he did not want to break faith with Fionn. In the end, he was persuaded by his friends not to break the *geis* and go with her. The couple was hiding in the forest from Fionn and his *fiana* but they found them. Luckily, Oengus of the Bruig came to help them and they managed to escape. While they were running from Fionn, the couple also managed to get married and to conceive a child. After some time, Oengus made peace between Fionn and Diarmuid. One day, Diarmuid joined Fionn on a hunt of a boar. Diarmuid killed the boar but he was wounded by a poisonous bristle. The only thing that could save him was water from Fionn’s healing hands. But Fionn always let the water run through his fingers until Diarmuid was dead. The end of this story has two different endings. In one version, Gráinne mourned Diarmuid until her death, and in the other one she and Fionn reconciled.⁷⁴

In the tale *Serglige Con Culainn* (“The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn”), Cú Chulainn also finds himself in a love triangle with his wife Emer and a fairy called Fann. The woman from the Otherworld asked the Ulster hero for aid since three Fomorians were supposed to attack the Otherworld. He agreed to help her and then stayed with her for a month. When Emer heard of it, she went for her husband but when she saw him with Fann, she decided to leave him so he could stay with the other woman. Fann was moved by it and decided to return to Manannan, a member of Tuatha Dé Danann. Cú Chulainn and Emer drank a potion of forgetfulness to forget about what happened.

⁷² Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 153-171.

⁷³ Rees et col., *Celtic Heritage*, 281-283.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

When it comes to these two heroes and marriage, Cú Chulainn has ever had only one wife and that was Emer. Fionn, on the other side, had more wives. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, Sadhbh, a woman from a *síd*, was one of his wives. However, none of the two heroes were faithful to their wives for they had other lovers.

Next patterns in the life of a hero are these:

(9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but (10) on reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom. (11) after a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast, he marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and (13) becomes a king. (14) For a time, he reigns uneventfully, and (15) prescribes laws, but (16) Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and (17) is driven from the throne and city.

When comparing their lives to the pattern suggested by Lord Raglan (taking into consideration points nine to seventeen), Cú Chulainn's story fits only one point which is that he marries a princess while Fionn mac Cumhail's story does not fit any point from the suggested pattern. The childhood of both heroes is very well known since they perform their first exploits at a young age since they are precocious. They do not need to slay a beast though Cú Chulainn is supposed to go to Scotland to be trained in arms by her and although the Ulster hero marries a princess, he does not become a king, therefore, he cannot rule and prescribe laws. And they have never been forced to leave their home.

6 The Death of a Hero

Death is the only certainty in life and it is the perfect ending for a hero's journey. Tales about death are called *oitte* in Irish ("violent/tragic death").⁷⁵ Since myths are not fairy tales, it would be naïve to expect the famous line from these stories 'and they lived happily ever after'. The life of mythical heroes starts gloriously and it also ends that way. It would be an anti-climax if a hero died of old age or a disease. The most glorious way for a champion to die was to die in a battle. However, that brings the problem that a hero cannot be defeated by his stronger opponent. The cause of his death must be out of his control. This is why the hero needs a weakness which brings him to his doom. And in the case of Irish myths, this weakness is caused by magic which is in the form of *geasa*.

According to Ó Dónaill's Irish-English Dictionary, *geis* (pl. *geasa*) can be translated as a taboo, prohibition, spell.⁷⁶ This taboo is placed upon kings and heroes. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt notices that the number of *geasa* varied according to the person they were placed upon. The more eminent and sacred the person was, the more *geasa* he had. Therefore, kings had the highest number of these taboos.⁷⁷ Violation of any of the prohibitions had disastrous consequences and they usually led to the death of the bearer. While the *geasa* were mostly subjective, there were some objective ones too. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt mentions three examples of objective prohibitions. They could be tied to a place such as Tailtiu, to an occupation (it is forbidden to eat horsemeat before entering a chariot) or to an object. For instance, the spear of Ailill Ólomm bears three taboos. It must not kill a woman, nor must it not strike a stone and it cannot be straightened under a tooth. However, Ailill Ólomm killed Aine with this spear then the spear struck a stone and afterwards, the king straightened the weapon under his tooth. Violating all the *geasa* brought him blindness and insanity.⁷⁸

Cú Chulainn is also subjected to certain *geasa* which he is not allowed to break. Nevertheless, breaking at least one of a hero's taboos always precedes the hero's death. In the tale *Aided Con Culainn* ("The Violent Death of Cú Chulainn"), Cú Chulainn's death was predicted by various omens on his way to a battle. He also found himself to be stuck between two *geasa* on his way, he was invited by three crones to join him by a hearth where they cooked dog meat. However, it was a taboo for him to refuse hospitality and he was also forbidden to eat dog

⁷⁵ Rees et col., *Ancient Heritage*, 340.

⁷⁶ Teanglann, accessed 10 January 2021, <https://www.teanglann.ie/ga/fgb/geis>.

⁷⁷ Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 88.

⁷⁸ Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 87-88.

meat due to him killing Culann's hound when he was a boy. His death is seen as very heroic since he knew that he was going to meet his death because of all the omens he encountered on his journey and a *geis* that he broke. Even all these signs did not stop him from fighting single-handedly against his enemies at the plain of Muirthemne. Cú Chulainn also ensured that he would die while standing up by tying himself to a pillar.

It can be seen that Cú Chulainn had an enormous reputation since his enemies feared him even after his death, fearing that he was still alive. As retold by Cross and Slover: "Then came the men all around him, but they durst not go to him, for they thought he was alive...And then came the battle goddess Morrighu and her sisters in the form of scald-crows and sat on his shoulder."⁷⁹ As it can be seen here, the hero's foes waited on a sign which would confirm their success and that was by the goddesses Morrigan (in their version she is called Morrighu), Badhbh and Macha shapeshifted into crows. Only then did the foes dare to approach Cú Chulainn's dead body and cut his head off. Then they also took his hand for the reason that after separating his head from his body, a sword fell from Cú Chulainn's hand and cut Lugaid's right hand off. It can be also noticed that the number three appears again. Three crones invited Cú Chulainn to dine with them and the goddess Morrigan flew to the dead hero with her two sisters. Cú Chulainn also met three satirists on the way to the battle who threatened to ridicule him if he refused to fulfil their wishes.

While the story of Cú Chulainn's death was preserved, the same cannot be said about the death of Fionn mac Cumhaill. James MacKillop points out that early sources do not agree about the way of Fionn's death, neither do they agree whether Fionn was mortal or not. Nevertheless, the author also presents Fionn's possible types of death. Those legends suggests that he was either killed (each legend portrays someone else as Fionn's possible murderer, for example one of them is the chief of another *fianna* called Goll mac Morna), another version says that he was reincarnated as Mongán in the Cycle of the Kings, and another version claims that the hero did not die. According to the last version, Fionn is a part of the Sleeping Army and he is hidden in a remote cave waiting for his people call for him again.⁸⁰ Although from what is known, Fionn dying would make more sense. As it was already mentioned earlier, an invulnerable hero would not be seen as a hero by the Celts. Therefore, it would make sense if Fionn were killed during a battle. On the other hand, Fionn waiting when he would be needed again may be also possible since that does suggest that he is immortal but it

⁷⁹ Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 338.

⁸⁰ James MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005), The Hero and the Anti-Hero

does not have to mean that it is impossible to die. In addition to that, caves were seen as a portal to the Otherworld where time flows differently as it can be seen with Fionn's son Oisín who lived in the Otherworld with his wife Niamh and although he was there only for few years, three hundred years went by during that time. If this were the case, there would be a chance that it would be plausible for them.

There are last five points in the Lord Raglan's monomyth that these last parts of the heroes' lives can be compared with. These last points are that the hero "(18) meets a mysterious death (19) often at the top of a hill. (20) His children, if any, do not succeed him. (21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless (22) he has one or more holy sepulchres."⁸¹ Cú Chulainn's death can be described as mysterious since it was accompanied by various omens and his own *geasa*, and since the myth does not mention whether he was buried or not, it can be believed that it did not happen. The rest of the points made by Lord Raglan do not apply for Cú Chulainn since he died on a plain and killed his own son, therefore he could not have a successor. Since there is no clear legend concerning Fionn's death, it is impossible to compare his story to the pattern given by Lord Raglan. It is only known that his son Oisín does not succeed him since, as mentioned by Cross and Slover, he leaves Ireland for *Tír na nÓg* (the Land of Youth) to be with his future wife Niamh when Fionn is still alive.⁸²

It is also worth mentioning that there also exist stories in which Fionn mac Cumhaill possesses characteristics of an anti-hero. The term anti-hero is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the central character in a play, book, or film who does not have traditionally heroic qualities, such as courage, and is admired instead for what society generally considers to be a weakness of their character."⁸³ In a story called *Fionn's Visitor*, as told by Eithne Massey, Fionn is a giant who built the Giant's Causeway in Ulster to connect Ireland and Scotland to be able to go fighting Scottish giants. Once one of the giants decided to put his strength against Fionn and crossed the causeway to Ireland. However, since he was twice the size of Fionn, the Irish giant was too scared of the Scottish one. Luckily, Fionn's wife came up quickly with a plan according to which Fionn was supposed to pretend to be a baby. When the giant came over to Fionn's house, the wife told him that her husband was away hunting and invited the giant in. There the giant saw a big man with a beard in a bed. The woman told him that that was her new born and that the baby was teething. She asked the giant to sooth

⁸¹ Lord Raglan, *The Hero*, 179.

⁸² Cross et col., *Ancient Irish Tales*, 439.

⁸³ Cambridge Dictionary, accessed on 2 November, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/antihero>.

the child's gums but Fionn bit him. When the giant heard that Fionn's looked like this and were born with a full set of teeth apart from the wisdom teeth, he took off and destroyed the causeway on his way back to Scotland.⁸⁴ In this story, Fionn has not got traits which are typical for great heroes who are not scared of anything and does not turn away from any challenge that is put in front of them. In this story, Fionn behaves cowardly which is a great imperfection in a hero. He also depends on his wife to come up with a plan to protect her husband from fighting the Scottish giant. This could be seen as something what is against the ideal picture of a hero. Especially since in the original mythical tales, Fionn is granted all the knowledge thanks to eating the salmon of wisdom. In addition to that, he is being humiliated by pretending to be an infant instead of facing his enemy as a fearless hero that he is supposed to be. James MacKillop compares Fionn to the Greek hero Heracles. Like Fionn, Heracles started as a great hero with admirable virtues who was able to accomplish every single task, no matter how impossible it sounded, no matter whether he was supposed to kill a dangerous mythical beast. or to go to the Underworld, or to hold the whole world on his shoulders. However, with time, he was reduced to a caricature which is driven by lust and gluttony. On the contrary, MacKillop likens Cú Chulainn to Achilles whose character does not undergo a change and it is fixed in the *Iliad* in the same way that Cú Chulainn's character does not change in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Both of them remain great heroes known for their glorious deeds with their dignity intact without being made look and behave like fools as it happens with the former two popular heroes.

⁸⁴ Eithne Massey, *Legendary Ireland: Myths and Legends of Ireland* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2019), 261-264.

Conclusion

This bachelor thesis focused on typology of a hero in selected Irish myths. There were described the lives of two most well-known heroes called Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill, showing their strength, ability to fight but also them being skilled in expressing themselves orally.

First, this thesis focused on the Celts. There is not much first-hand information about because of their prohibition to write their knowledge down. This is why the first nations mentioning them are the Romans and the Greeks. However, their description of the Celtic nation is biased and therefore it must not be viewed as fully trustworthy. But there are also archaeological findings thanks to which people learnt more about the Celtic art, accessories and weapons. The Celts were pagans and they were animists (they believed that everything in nature has a soul) and they worshipped many gods and goddesses. But only few names of the divinity remained preserved because the Romans tended to replace them with Roman equivalents. On the other hand, their myths were preserved by the Christian monks who lived in Irish monasteries and recorded these stories. But due to their contempt to paganism, they also added some Christian aspects into the myths. This is proved for example by the presence of St Patrick in some of the myths where he talks to Irish mythical characters about Christianity and God and sometimes even tries to convert them to his own religion.

Secondly, the thesis dealt with mythology, myths, and a type of a hero. Myths have been around much longer than people could expect. The first myths were about natural phenomena which people were not able to understand because they did not have the knowledge of physical laws. That is why they came up with supernatural characters. It helped them understand more what was happening around them and it was convenient for them. It was easier to use one's imagination. But myths can also help to describe events which humanity will not be able to see such as the origin of the world or they can explain various rituals but they can be also used by ruling families so they do not lose their position of leaders in the society they live in. But it is also important to know other people's mythology. It can make it easier to understand their way of thinking and sometimes even how they understand the world. As for the mythological hero, he is always the main characters in myths and they have to deal with many obstacles which are either put in front of them by someone else or they do it thanks to their motivation to do noble deeds.

Thirdly, the Irish mythology was divided into four cycles according to the topic of the myths. The cycles were Mythological, Ulster, Fenian and Historical. While the Mythological cycle deals mainly with the gods of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Ulster cycle and the Fenian cycle deal with heroes. Cú Chulainn is featured in the former cycle and he is a hero who is inside of a tribe whereas Fionn mac Cumhaill is in the latter cycle which can be seen as more romanticised and he lives with the war band called *fianna* outside of tribes. The last cycle deals with various kings of Ireland. But this division does not mean that they this is their chronological order. There is a possibility for two characters from two different cycles to meet.

Lastly, the life of Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill were analysed and compared to the Lord Raglan's pattern in a hero's life. When adding the number of points together, Cú Chulainn got seven points out of twenty-two and Fionn got six points out of twenty-two. Therefore, if it were believed that the number of points determines whether a person was a real person or not, in this case it would mean that both heroes existed. While that can be true and the stories can be roughly based on their lives, it would be hard to prove their existence. That is why this shows that while it can be used for a comparison, it should not be used to determine an existence of a character.

The birth of an Irish hero can contain supernatural features such as multiple conception. When it comes to the heroes' life, they all have to perform great deeds thanks to which they can be called heroes and they start with their exploits at a very young age. There is also stress on marriage. Irish myths even have got a special category concerning elopements. Just a right hero should have a wife and he needs to earn her although there is also the truth that the men do not stay faithful to their wives and have other lovers. Cú Chulainn even has got a son out of wedlock. When it comes to the end of a hero's life, his passing can be violent. Since a hero cannot be invulnerable due to the beliefs of the Celts and so he cannot die by being defeated or struck by an illness, his death has to be caused by something the hero cannot control and that is magic. Therefore, there are *geasa*, magical taboos, that a hero must not break since that usually leads to death. That is why he gets stuck between two *geasa*, since there is no way to get out of the situation without breaking them, the hero is led to death. There can be also various omens which signal to the hero the inevitable end to whom every single person's life leads no matter whether they are only an ordinary person or a great hero who protected his people.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývala typologií hrdiny ve vybraných keltských mýtech. Ale z důvodu velkého množství mýtů, které byly zachovány na ostrovech Velké Británie a Irska, je tato práce zaměřena na hrdiny z Irska. Na národ Keltů může být pohlíženo jako na něco tajemného a neznámého z toho důvodu, že tento národ nezachovával své paměti v písemné formě. Z důvodu svého náboženství jim toto bylo zakázáno, a tím pádem mohli šířit svou historii, kulturu, tradice, právo a všechny další informace jen ústně z člověka na člověka a z generace na generaci. Toto ale zapříčinilo, že informací o tomto národě není mnoho, a proto se musí lidé odebírat k informacím shromážděným ostatními národy. V tomto případě jde o Římany a Řeky. Bohužel ale tito lidé nebyli předpojatí. Kvůli tomu se nemohou brát jejich poznatky jako zcela pravdivé. Měli o Keltech vlastní názor a ne vždy se jim podařilo zachovat objektivitu, a i přesto teda mohou Keltové zůstat ne úplně známou národnostní skupinou.

První část této bakalářské práce je zaměřena na Kelty a snaží se přiblížit jejich historii a kulturu, dále se zaměřuje na téma mýtů a jejich důležitosti a na všeobecnou typologii řeckého mýtického hrdiny. Nakonec popisuje čtyři cykly irských mýtů, do kterých se mýty tohoto národa řadí. Druhá část bakalářské práce se zabývá analýzou života dvou irských nejznámějších mýtických hrdinů, Cú Chulainna a Fionna mac Cumhailla.

Není přesně známo, kdy se dostali Keltové do Evropy. První zmínka o nich je z 5. století př. n. l., kdy se o nich zmínil řecký historik Herodotos. Podle poznatků Herodota a dalších řeckých a římských autorů se dá zjistit, že Keltové byli podle nich pohostinní, přátelští, ale zároveň byli i vychloubační. Velmi se zajímali o doplňky. Toto je také potvrzeno archeologickými nálezy v Hallstattu a La Tène, kde se údajně před mnoha staletími nacházeli. Ještě před tím než byli zatlačeni na ostrovy Velké Británie a Irska. Jak už bylo zmíněno, informace si mohli předávat jen ústně. Díky geografické poloze Irska to na onom ostrově zůstalo až do příchodu křesťanství, kdy mniši začali zapisovat vše o Keltech a spolu s tím i jejich mýty. Ale kvůli tomu, že Keltové byli pohani, mnichové pohlíželi na jejich mýty s opovržením, a do některých mýtů dokonce i zasadili křesťanské prvky a do pár příběhů i přidali svatého Patrika, který v nich rozpráví s původními irskými mýtickými postavami o Bohu a křesťanství.

Mýty jsou právě jedním z nejstarších druhů příběhu. Už od začátku věků si lidé snažili vysvětlit, proč a jak se dějí některé přírodní úkazy. Proto si vymysleli bohy a další nadpřirozené postavy, aby měli právě ono vysvětlení, proč třeba začne strom hořet, když do

něj uhodí blesk. Postupně se i do těchto mýtů dostali hrdinové, kteří byli až nadpřirozeně silní a nebojácní a dokázali všemu odolat.

Irské mýty jsou děleny do čtyř cyklů, mytologického, Ulsterského, Finnova a historického. Mytologický cyklus se zabývá hlavně lidmi bohyně Danu. Tento cyklus je typický tím, že se v něm nejvíce vyskytují kouzla a nadpřirozené postavy. Ulsterský cyklus je pojmenován podle severní irské provincie. Tento cyklus překypuje hrdiny a jeho hlavním a nejznámějším hrdinou je Cú Chulainn. Tento hrdina je také představitelem sociálního hrdiny, který bydlí v klanu. Finnův cyklus je pojmenovaný po Fionnu mac Cumhaillovi, který je hlavním hrdinou tohoto cyklu. Tento cyklus je romantičtější než ten předchozí a vyskytují se v něm hrdinové, kteří nejsou součástí klanu, jak tomu je u Ulsterského cyklu. Tito hrdinové mají vlastní skupiny jménem *fiana* a vyskytují se převážně mimo kmeny. Poslední cyklus se nazývá historický nebo také královský. Jak již jméno radí, tento cyklus se zabývá irskými králi. Někteří z nich jsou jen mýtičtí, ale někteří z nich opravdu existovali. Některé mýty mají ale více verzí a to je právě z důvodu, že je po dlouhou dobu nikdo nezapisoval a lidé je začali pozměňovat. Některé mýty nebo části mýtů se ale naopak vůbec nedochovaly. Je také důležité podotknout, že pořadí těchto cyklů není pořadí, jak šly mýty v nich obsažené po sobě. V některých mýtech je i možné, že se spolu setkají dvě postavy ze dvou různých cyklů.

V praktické části byl bližší pohled na život hrdinů od jejich narození až po jejich smrt. Většinou tyto postavy provází neobyčejné okolnosti již od začátku jejich života. Mezitím co Cú Chulainn byl zplozen třikrát a jednou k tomu byl navíc jeho otcem bůh Lug, Fionna už od narození chtěl zabít jeho vlastní děd z matčiny strany. Jejich životy provázela neskutečná dobrodružství již od útlého věku, kdy již ukázali svoji sílu, a tím už měli nakročeno k respektu od ostatních. Později si i našli manželky a také se dostali do milostného trojúhelníku. U Cú Chulainna je známá jeho smrt, kterou předurčila různá znamení při cestě k jeho poslední bitvě. Cestou také porušil svůj *geis*, což je kouzelné tabu, které předurčí smrt, je-li porušeno. Cú Chulainn se i přes všechna znamení dostavil k bitvě, a nakonec umřel vestoje přivázaný ke sloupu. U Fionna mac Cumhaille ale smrt známá není, příběhy se do dnešní doby nezachovaly. Ale je možné, že umřel v bitvě, nebo stále žije a čeká v jeskyni, až ho jeho lidé budou potřebovat.

Životy těchto dvou hrdinů byly porovnány se vzorcem života hrdinů dle Lorda Raglana. Vzorec obsahuje 22 bodů od narození hrdiny až po jeho smrt. Cú Chulainn splňoval sedm bodů z tohoto seznamu, Fionn o jedno míň. Lord Raglan používal tento vzorec i k určení,

zdali postava doopravdy existovala, či ne. Čím více bodů postava měla, tím víc bylo pro něj zřejmé, že se jedná o fiktivní postavu. Z důvodu, že nelze stoprocentně určit, zdali Cú Chulainn a Fionn mac Cumhaill někdy skutečně existovali, je těžké určit, kolik je na tomto tvrzení pravdy. Postavy totiž mohly být inspirované reálnou osobou a vypravěči si poté přidali do příběhů nadpřirozené prvky, aby se to jejich posluchačům více zamlouvalo.

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