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Talland Étair



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DANGEROUS HEADS AND POSTHUMOUS REVENGE:
SOME PARALLELS FOR THE DEATH OF MESS GEGRA
IN *TALLAND ÉTAIR*¹

ABSTRACT

Mess Gegra is known for the role that his brain plays in the death of Conchobar mac Nessa, but the story of his own death, which is found in *Talland Étair*, is perhaps less well-known. Mess Gegra faces Conall Cernach in single combat and loses. Knowing that Conall Cernach will behead him, Mess Gegra instructs him to place his severed head on top of his own and claim Mess Gegra's honour for himself. Conall Cernach instead places the head on a nearby pillar-stone, which is pierced by a drop of blood from the head and then knocked over by its weight. Mess Gegra's attempt at posthumous revenge is thus thwarted. Two other notable deaths feature similar attempts at posthumous revenge: the death of Lugaid mac Con Ruí mic Dáire, also at the hands of Conall Cernach, and the death of Balor at the hands of his grandson Lugh. This article provides a detailed discussion of the parallels between these three deaths.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE DEATH of Mess Gegra, king of Leinster, takes place after he is forced into single combat with Conall Cernach, as described in *Talland Étair* (Ó Dónaill 2005). Mess Gegra is defeated and knows that Conall Cernach will take his head, and so he instructs Conall to place it upon his own head and thus take Mess Gegra's honour for himself. Conall Cernach instead takes Mess Gegra's severed head over to a pillar-stone, where a drop of blood falls from the head and pierces the stone, and then the weight of the head knocks the pillar-stone over. The specific sequence consisting of (1) the instruction to place the severed head on his own; (2) the head being placed somewhere else instead; and (3) the dangerous properties of the head then being revealed without causing the intended harm, also occurs in two other stories. First is the death of Lugaid mac Con Ruí mic Dáire, as related in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemni* (Kimp-ton 2009).² Second is the death of Balor at the hands of his grandson Lugh, as

¹I am very grateful to the anonymous reader as well as to the editor for their numerous helpful comments and corrections. I would also like to express my thanks to Professor Joseph F. Nagy and to Dr. Helen Imhoff for their many contributions to earlier drafts of this article.

²This is the earlier version of the story of Cú Chulainn's death and the beginning of the text is fragmentary. The later version is *Aided Con Culainn*, ed. van Hamel (1933). I discuss some differences between the two texts below.

described in multiple sources including a poem from *Duanaire Finn* (MacNeill 1908: 34–8), *Cath Muighe Tuireadh* (Ó Cuív 1945), and more recent folktales.³ Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor all face superior opponents in single combat, and all lose. Each acknowledges the accomplishment of the victor and indicates a desire that his opponent should gain some benefit from killing him, but what is really at stake is vengeance. All three attempt to avenge themselves against their killers by means of a trap involving the treatment and properties of their severed heads.

Posthumous revenge can take many forms, whether haunting by vengeful spirits, traps deliberately set by the deceased with the intention that they be sprung after their death, or even an unintended act by the dead or dying body which exacts vengeance. Kim McCone has described *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* as ‘essentially a tale of Bláí Briugu’s posthumous revenge upon his murderer, Celtchar, since it is the three tasks imposed upon the latter in lieu of death or exile that bring about his ultimate destruction’ (1984: 1–2). There is no direct link between Celtchar’s death and Bláí Briugu himself, though, neither through Bláí Briugu’s intentions, nor his actions, nor even his body. In what follows, I will restrict the term ‘posthumous revenge’ to revenge in which the deceased plays a direct role. *Aided Cheltchair* does furnish an example of this when, as one of the three tasks imposed on him, Celtchar is forced to kill his dog Dóelchú, which has been ravaging the flocks and herds of Ulster. Celtchar runs his dog through with his spear, and we are told that *fēimid brōen fola d’fuil na con cuici ar fut an gāi co ndecheid trūt co talmáin, co mbo marb de*,⁴ ‘A drop of the dog’s blood rushes to him along the length of the spear so that it went through him to the ground and he died from it’.⁵ In this case, the dog’s vengeance is unintended but enacted by his own body as a direct consequence of his death. Another example showing the dangerous properties of the body and its ability to self-avenge is that of the head of Máel Brigte, which was responsible for the death of Earl Sigurðr in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. After Earl Sigurðr killed Máel Brigte, he beheaded him and strapped the severed head to his saddle. Máel Brigte had the epithet *tönn* ‘tooth,’ generally translated as ‘buck-tooth’ or ‘tusk’. Later, as the text states, Earl Sigurðr ‘tried to spur on his horse with his foot, and he knocked his calf against the tusk which stuck out from Maelbrigte’s mouth, so that the skin was broken. The sore grew into a painful swelling, so that he got his death of it’ (Taylor 1938: 139–40). Here, as Bo Almqvist puts it, we have a motif in which ‘the head of a slain man

³This is the Early Modern Irish version of the text. The Middle Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray 1982) does not include this episode. Various spellings of the names Balor (Balar) and Lugh (Lug, Lui) are attested in the various texts under discussion. For the sake of clarity, I will consistently use the forms found in *Duanaire Finn*. There are many folktales concerning the conflict between Lugh and Balor. Those discussed in this article are from the following sources: O’Donovan (1856), Larminie (1893), Curtin (1894), and Laoide (1913).

⁴Text from Meyer (1906: §12). McCone (2005) includes a normalised edition of this text (pp. 169–71), where the verb *fēimid* is replaced by *memaid*, which makes for a clearer reading and which I have reflected in my translation. See Rodway (2008: 102), however, who argues that *fēimid* is the correct reading.

⁵Translations throughout this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

avenges the former bearer of the head' (1978–81: 98). Almqvist connects this incident with the death of Conchobar mac Nessa, in which the weapon used is the calcified brain of Mess Gegra but wielded some time after his death by Cet mac Mágach. In the cases to be considered here, we have a more direct parallel for Máel Brigte's killing of Sigurðr: the vengeance intended against Conall Cernach and Lugh is more immediate in that it would have occurred soon after the deaths of Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor, and in that it would have involved direct vengeance against their killers rather than remote vengeance against a symbolic third-party target.

The posthumous revenge in the texts currently under discussion is of a type that is carried out by the body of the deceased directly against their killer, as in the cases of Dóelchú and Máel Brigte. Those two acts of vengeance were clearly not intentional, however, but instead came about as the result of accidents involving the body, or part of the body, of the deceased. There is an important distinction to be made between accidental and intentional posthumous revenge, and the vengeance attempted by Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor is very much intentional. Each seems to be aware of the danger that his severed head will pose after his death, and each weaponizes it as a way to avenge himself against his killer. In each case, however, this fails when the instructions about how to handle the head are disregarded. The trap here depends on expectations about how the losers' bodies will be treated after death and the assumption that the victor should gain some benefit from his victory, certainly an increase in his fame and glory, but potentially also some material benefit. Specifically, the trap depends on the certainty that the losers' heads will be taken after their deaths, and the expectation that requests about their bodies may be honoured. Within the context of the Ulster Cycle, the taking of heads is a given, and these may then either be kept as trophies or placed on display to mark the site of the combat.

Sarah Künzler's study of Cú Chulainn's treatment of the bodies of his victims in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* demonstrates the ways in which arranging the body after death in single combat can convey messages regarding both the loser and victor of the combat (Künzler 2015). On the one hand, the defeated warrior may make requests regarding his death and the treatment of his body as a way of maintaining and displaying his honour, and on the other, the body (or parts of the body) may be arranged in ways that benefit the victor and display his triumph. As an example of this first type, Künzler discusses the death of Lóch mac Mo Febis, who faces Cú Chulainn in single combat at the request of Ailill and Medb.⁶ When he loses, Lóch requests that Cú Chulainn retreat and allow him to fall facing the east rather than the west, so that it is clear that he was not fleeing from Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn agrees, saying *is láechda ind ascid connaigi* (ll. 2009–10) 'the request that you are making is warrior-like', i.e. it is appropriate for a warrior in such a position to make this request. In this case, it is Lóch who benefits from the arrangement of his body, rather than Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn himself also makes requests about his death in *Brisleach Mór*

⁶This episode occurs at ll. 1962–2011 (pp. 193–4 of the translation) of O'Rahilly (1967) and is also referred to in the following poem.

Maige Muirthemni, asking that he be allowed to get a drink of water before his death and requesting that his enemies come and get him if he does not return, so that there can be no suggestion of his having fled. He then arranges his own body by using his belt to bind himself to a pillar-stone so that he can die standing (Kimpton 2009: §21–2). These examples demonstrate how the man about to die may make arrangements regarding his death that will benefit him and reflect well upon him through the treatment and position of his body.

Other episodes show Cú Chulainn arranging the bodies of the dead, and in particular their heads, for his own benefit. Künzler discusses the deaths of Ferchú Loingsech and his followers, who jointly attack Cú Chulainn.⁷ We are told that *ní fír fer ná comlond óenfir ra damsatar dó acht imsáiset na dá feraib déc fóe fa chétóir* (ll. 2525–6) ‘it is not fair play or single combat that they allowed him, but instead the twelve men attacked him at once’. Cú Chulainn retaliates by beheading them all and displaying their heads prominently: *sádis dá lia déc leó i talmain. Acus atbert cend cach fir díb bara líic & atbert cend Ferchon Longsig ’no bar[a] líic* (ll. 2528–9)⁸ ‘he planted twelve pillar-stones in the ground, and he placed the head of each man of them on a stone, and he put the head of Ferchú Loingsech on its own stone’. While Cú Chulainn frequently displays heads by putting them on poles or stakes, we see that the use of pillar-stones to display heads is also well within the normal treatment of bodies after combat. Here the severed heads are, as Künzler says, ‘consciously installed by Cú Chulainn as “monuments” to his heroic abilities’ (2015: 40), with the result that their treatment and display reflect on Cú Chulainn and act for his benefit, rather than for the benefit of the slain. Conall Cernach’s own well-known preference is to keep the severed heads of his enemies close by, and he is said to never sleep without the head of a man of the Connachta under his knee,⁹ but it is not remarkable that we should find him making use of a pillar-stone as a place to put Mess Gegra’s head.

These and similar episodes frame the treatment of the body as something that can reflect positively or negatively on both the slain and the slayer, and with care can bring benefit to both. Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor all leverage this potential benefit to attempt posthumous revenge against their killers, all appearing to ask that their heads be treated in ways that benefit their slayers rather than themselves. The pattern discussed above, in which the benefit is to the one making the request, would have occurred here as well, had their attempts at posthumous revenge succeeded. All three attempts fail, however, when Conall Cernach and Lugh opt for the more usual approach of keeping or displaying the heads.

I begin with a discussion of the death of Mess Gegra and then that of Lugaid mac Con Ruí mic Dáire, before considering some of the accounts of the death of Balor that contain this episode.

⁷This episode occurs at ll. 2510–31 (pp. 208–9) of O’Rahilly’s edition (1967).

⁸O’Rahilly notes that both instances of *atbert* in this passage should be read as *dobert*, as reflected in my translation.

⁹Stokes (1910: §19); Thurneysen (1935: §16).

2. THE DEATH OF MESS GEGRA

Mess Gegra's death is described only in *Talland Étair* (hereafter TÉ), although it is also mentioned in passing elsewhere, as in the poem *Fianna bátar i nEmain* (Stokes 1906) and in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemni*, where a description of Conall mentions that *do:beba Mis Gegra gnímrathu* (l. 678) 'Mess Gegra died by his deeds'.¹⁰ The subsequent treatment of Mess Gegra's severed head also provides a crucial backstory to the various versions of *Aided Chonchobair* (Kobel 2015; hereafter AC).¹¹ TÉ consists of three main acts. First, the Ulster poet Aithirne makes a tour of Ireland during which he abuses his privileges as a guest and a poet in horrific ways. This leads directly to a war between Leinster and Ulster, during which the Ulaid are besieged at Étar until reinforcements arrive from Emain Macha and the Leinstermen are routed. Finally, Conall Cernach pursues and kills Mess Gegra to avenge the deaths of his brothers, Mess Dead and Lóegaire, who were killed during the battle. Conall Cernach beheads Mess Gegra, but the severed head then displays several extraordinary properties and, in order to bring it back as a trophy to Emain Macha, Conall Cernach must remove the brain from the skull and leave the rest of the head behind at the grave of Mess Gegra's wife Búan.

Before his encounter with Conall Cernach, however, Mess Gegra comes into conflict with his own charioteer, who avenges a perceived insult against him by cutting off Mess Gegra's hand. The loss of Mess Gegra's hand is the result of a strange incident involving a nut. Following the final battle at Étar, Mess Gegra and his charioteer are left alone while the other Leinstermen return to their homes. Meanwhile, Conall Cernach has already begun his pursuit of Mess Gegra. While the charioteer sleeps, Mess Gegra sees a giant nut floating in the nearby river. He retrieves it and splits it, eating half and keeping the other half for his charioteer. This nut is described as *méite cenn fir* (ll. 183–4) 'the size of a man's head'. In the dual context of the bloody battle that has just taken place and the knowledge that Conall Cernach is coming to kill Mess Gegra and will certainly take his head, this description of the nut evokes the phrase *mesrad Machae* 'Macha's nut-harvest', known from the Early Irish glossaries and explained as *cendae doine iarna n-airlech* 'the heads of men after their slaughter'.¹² The nut as symbol of the severed head is further at play here in the treatment of this head-sized nut, which foreshadows the treatment of Mess Gegra's own head, which will be opened like the shell of the nut and have its interior (the brain) removed. Mess Gegra's skull is then left, or 'planted', in the grave of his wife Búan, through which a hazel tree later grows. The brain

¹⁰Kimpton (2009: 67) argues that *gnímrathu* must here be taken for *gnímrathaib* as a dative of agency.

¹¹I cite the more recent edition of Chantal Kobel, but the Meyer (1906) edition will likely be more familiar to most readers. All references to *Aided Chonchobair* will be to the 'A' version of the text unless otherwise indicated. For discussion of the different versions, see Kobel (2015) and Imhoff (2012).

¹²The phrase *mesrad Machae* is found in both O'Mulconry's Glossary (813 §2), which I quote here, and the *Irsan* main text (180 §2), both ed. Moran (2019) and both available online at the *Early Irish Glossaries Database*, ed. Russell et al. (2010).

is taken back to Emain Macha, but later, like the kernel of the nut, it is divided. According to *Acallam na Senórach*, one quarter of Mess Gegra's brain was swallowed by the earth and transformed into a monster living in the lake at Glendalough.¹³ Returning to TÉ, when the charioteer wakes up, he asks Mess Gegra about the nut and whether he has saved half for him. Rather than simply answering that he has, or even giving him the remaining part of the nut, Mess Gegra displays poor judgment by instead asking his charioteer to explain the question. The charioteer rather cryptically states that *In ferán doid a mbec sechom-sa [...] no:íssad a mmór* (ll. 189–90) 'The small man who ate the small thing behind my back [...] would eat the large'. He then attacks Mess Gegra and cuts off his hand. When Mess Gegra tells him that the nut was in the hand that has now been removed, and when the charioteer sees that this is true, he kills himself. Mess Gegra is therefore left alone and one-handed to face Conall Cernach, who conveniently arrives at this point.

Mess Gegra initially seems to acknowledge that Conall Cernach's quest for vengeance is justified, saying *Cid:fil and [...] acht int-í dia ndligi fiachu, saig fair cach ní ro-t:bé* (ll. 200–1) 'What is here, [...] except the one from whom you are owed debts? Seek from him each thing that should be yours'. When Conall more specifically accuses him of having killed his brothers, however, saying *A:taat mo bráthair lat-so* (l. 201) 'You have my brothers', Mess Gegra appears to deny the charge, responding that *Ní'm chriss a:taat* 'They are not in my belt'.¹⁴ Conall seems to find this particularly upsetting, and replies *Bid ainem ón* 'That will be a blemish'. *Ainim* can have the sense of blemish or defect, but also scandal, reproach, or even calamity (*eDIL* s.v. *ainim*).¹⁵ Ó Donnell suggests that Conall here is accusing Mess Gegra of lying about having the heads of his brothers (2005: 138), and that this lie is the *ainim*. It is difficult, however, to imagine that Mess Gegra could have two or more heads secreted about his person so discreetly that he could lie about their presence. It also seems unlikely that he would lie about having the heads, having just admitted that he owes a debt to Conall Cernach. It is possible that Mess Gegra is here denying having killed Mess Dead and Lóegaire, but this also seems unlikely. Mess Dead, at least, was a pre-eminent warrior and killing him would be a cause for boasting. TÉ never explicitly states who killed Lóegaire, but Mess Dead's death results from his being attacked by 300 warriors at once. There is, however, an alternate tradition in the *dindshenchas* of *Áth Clíath Cualann* (Gwynn 1913, vol. 3:

¹³Stokes (1900: ll. 2390–8); Dooley and Roe (1999: 74). In their note on this passage, Dooley and Roe state that 'According to *Talland Éitair* another part of the brain fell in Co. Kildare' (p. 237). Unfortunately, they do not provide a more specific citation for this assertion, and I can find no trace of any reference to parts of Mess Gegra's brain in TÉ or anywhere outside of the *Acallam* itself. It is possible that they are referring to the part of Mess Gegra's head (the skull) that is left at Búan's grave, but TÉ makes no reference to Mess Gegra's brain being divided.

¹⁴Dr. Helen Imhoff has pointed out to me that the heads of individuals are often understood as standing in for the entire person after their death, and has called my attention to the parallel phrasing in *Scéla mucce Meic Dathó* during the scene in which Conall tells Cet that his brother Anlúan is indeed present: *Atá immurgu* (Thurneysen 1935: §16.10) 'He is indeed,' when in fact he is referring only to Anlúan's severed head. Thus *A:taat mo bráthair lat-so* is clearly to be understood as a statement about the heads of Conall's brothers rather than their entire bodies.

¹⁵All references to *eDIL* in this article were accessed on 9 April 2021.

100; Stokes 1894: 328–9) that makes specific reference to Mess Gegra killing Mess Dedad mac Amargin.¹⁶ It seems likely that Mess Gegra is saying that although he killed Mess Dead and Lóegaire, or was responsible for their deaths, he does not have their heads. Severed heads are sometimes kept in the *cris*, often translated ‘belt’. In *Scéla mucce Meic Dathó* (Thurneysen 1935: §16.11), for example, Conall confronts Cet mac Mágach with the head of his brother Anlúan (both men are Conall’s uncles), which he pulls *assa chriss* ‘from his belt’. AC describes how, after stealing Mess Gegra’s brain, Cet keeps it with him *inna chriss* (Kobel 2015: 219) ‘in his belt’ so that he can be ready to use it when the opportunity arises. The heads of high-status individuals are also particularly prized as trophies.¹⁷ Mess Gegra’s own head (or at least the brain) will be one of Conall’s greatest trophies, one which will allow him to win boasting contests against even Cú Chulainn and Lóegaire Búadach, his two great rivals to the claim of being the best of the Ulster heroes, as described in AC (Kobel 2015: 219). Mess Gegra’s statement that Conall Cernach’s brothers are not in his belt may therefore be taken as an insult, suggesting that Mess Gegra did not see any benefit in keeping their heads, and this is what Conall judges to be an *ainim*. However, it must also be remembered that Mess Gegra has just concealed half of a nut the size of a head in his hand, and that this entire episode hinges on the fact that Mess Gegra is not dealing honourably or honestly with Conall Cernach. We therefore cannot entirely rule out the possibility that he is simply lying about having the heads, and that is the insult to which Conall refers.¹⁸

The one-handed Mess Gegra then points out that, given his injury, this cannot be a fair fight, and he appeals to the concept of *fír ngaiscid*, which can be literally translated as ‘truth of arms’: *Ní fír ngaiscid [...] comrac frim-sa co n-óenláim* (ll. 202–3) ‘It is not a truth of arms [...] to battle against me with one-hand’. Other possible translations of *fír ngaiscid* here are ‘true valour’ (Stokes 1887: 59) and ‘warrior’s truth’ (Ó Dónaill 2005: 60). The entry for *fír* ‘truth’ in *eDIL* (s.v. 1 *fír*) gives several other related phrases such as *fír flatha* ‘the word of a prince, justice of a ruler’, *fír catha* ‘truth of battle, a just cause in a fight’, and *fír fer* ‘fair play (in combat), single combat’. The concept of *fír flatha*, often translated as ‘the ruler’s/sovereign’s truth’, is well-known and has received considerable attention (see, e.g., Watkins 1979 and 1995, McCone 1990), but there has been less focus on these other types of *fír*, with one important exception being Philip O’Leary’s study of *fír fer* (1987), in which he also discusses some of these other *fír* phrases.¹⁹

Many uses of *fír fer* focus on fair combat as between two individuals as opposed to uneven combat, in which multiple people attack one, as in the

¹⁶Mess Dedad is an alternative spelling for Mess Dead. For a discussion of Conall Cernach’s brothers, see Dobbs (1929: 117). It should be noted that Conall Cernach’s brother Lóegaire is not Lóegaire Búadach.

¹⁷See McCone (2021: 211–14) for a discussion of head-hunting and the taking of heads as trophies in Ireland and other Indo-European cultures.

¹⁸I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this alternate reading of the passage.

¹⁹See also O’Connor (2013: 87–8) for the tension between *fír fer* and *fír flathemon* in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.

encounter between Cú Chulainn and Ferchú Loingsech and his followers, discussed above. O'Leary discusses multiple instances in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in which Cú Chulainn is attacked by several people at once, which is routinely condemned as a violation of *fír fer* (1987: 6). Unequal combat as a violation of *fír fer* plays a crucial role in provoking the confrontation between Conall Cernach and Mess Gegra, in that Conall Cernach's brother Mess Dead died when attacked by 300 warriors. In fact, TÉ states that *Is é forceta:immarbrath éccomlonn* (ll. 102–3) 'It is he against whom unequal combat was first plied'. As O'Leary points out though, while most of the words and phrases used to refer to single combat 'stress equality in numbers', as do those for unequal combat, *fír fer* is 'less quantitative' (1987: 7). O'Leary argues that, 'both the highest expression of heroic honour, *fír fer*, and the highest expression of kingly honour *fír flathemon*, are grounded in a sense of balance and harmony' (1987: 13 n. 48). *Fír fer* is not simply a matter of numbers then, or of one vs. one, but rather about equality in a more meaningful sense, and this can be seen in the symmetry that is imposed on the combat between Conall Cernach and Mess Gegra, who asks for *fír ngaiscid* because of his missing arm. *Fír ngaiscid* here seems to carry a meaning similar to that of *fír fer*, in that it implies that fairness is a requirement and reasonable expectation for the combat that is about to take place. Conall Cernach recognizes Mess Gegra's request for *fír ngaiscid* and binds his own hand to his side so that the fight between them will be balanced. As O'Leary observes, this and the corresponding scene with Lugaid mac Con Ruí show Conall adhering to *fír fer* in the absence of any witnesses. O'Leary argues that scenes such as these suggest that *fír fer* (and here, *fír ngaiscid*) functions as a moral heroic code that goes 'beyond the stage of unadulterated self-interest limited only by the dread of public shame' (1987: 13). That is, Conall is here behaving correctly not because he fears that dishonourable behaviour will bring him shame, but instead because of what O'Leary calls an 'internalized concept' of morality. In this episode, we find Conall's correct behaviour contrasted with Mess Gegra's incorrect behaviour, which is reflected in his physical asymmetry.

When Mess Gegra recognizes that he has lost the combat, he tells Conall Cernach that he knows that he will not leave without his head and gives him the following instruction: *tabair mo chenn fort chenn 7 m'orddan fort horddan* (l. 208) 'place my head upon your head and my honour upon your honour'. The first part of this statement is clear enough: Mess Gegra wants Conall Cernach to place his severed head on top of Conall's own. The second part suggests that Conall will derive some benefit from doing this: specifically, he will add Mess Gegra's *orddan* to his own. There are various possible translations for *orddan*, including 'dignity, honour, pre-eminence', 'raising to dignity, ordaining', 'nobility, aristocracy', and 'sovranty' (*eDIL* s.v. *ord(d)an*). Ó Dónaill opts for 'dignity' (2005: 60), while other translators of this text have chosen 'glory' (Stokes 1887: 61) or 'pre-eminence' (Ford 1999: 75). The central concept here is that by placing Mess Gegra's head on top of his own, Conall Cernach will gain some aspect of Mess Gegra's own status or be elevated in some way. This, at least, is what Mess Gegra tells him.

Once he has beheaded Mess Gegra, Conall decides to place the head on a nearby pillar-stone, which, as discussed above, constitutes a normal treatment of the head, instead of placing it on his own head. When he does this, however, Mess Gegra's attempt at posthumous revenge by means of his head is exposed and thwarted. The scene is described as follows:

Benaïd Conall a chenn dé oc Cassán Chlóenta oculus beirid Conall a cenn co:tarat forin liic for brú ind átha. Do:luid bannae a méidiu in chinn co:ndechuid i cenn in choirthi co:lluid triit co talmáin. Do:bert danó a cenn forin coirthe 7 a-t:n-aig a cenn in coirthe co talmáin co-n-id:tarlae fora béolu dochum inna habann. (ll. 209–12)

'Conall cut his head from him at Cassán Chlóenta and Conall took the head in order to place it on the pillar-stone at the edge of the ford. A drop came from the bottom of the head and went into the top of the pillar so that it went through it to the ground. Then he placed the head on the pillar and the head drove the pillar to the ground so that it knocked it on its face towards the river.'

The danger to Conall Cernach is clear, as are Mess Gegra's true intentions. The two specific dangers of the head are the drop of corrosive blood that pierces the stone and the supernatural and variable weight of the head, which would no doubt have crushed Conall had he placed it on his own. Corrosive blood and even sweat are known from other medieval Irish texts, as well as in non-Irish sources. A discussion of this motif can be found in Martin Puhvel's *Beowulf and the Celtic Tradition* (1979) in the chapter on the melting of Beowulf's sword by the blood of Grendel's mother. Parallels suggested by Puhvel include a modern Irish folktale in which Finn mac Cumáill places the severed head of an enemy on a holly bush, which is then burned to the ground, the blood that comes from the heads of Mess Gegra and Lugaid, the destruction of spears during battle by being burned and destroyed by blood, and the death of Lé Fer Flaith, son of Conaire, who is carried under the arm of the wounded warrior Mac Cécht and dissolved by his heat and sweat. One example not discussed by Puhvel is one that I have already mentioned: the drop of blood that pierces and kills Celtchar after he is forced to kill his dog. The passing of the drop of blood through Celtchar is described with the phrase *co ndechaid trít co talmáin* 'so that it went through him to the ground'. The close similarity of the phrase describing the drop of blood from Mess Gegra's head piercing the pillar-stone (*co:lluid triit co talmáin*) makes clear that Conall Cernach's death should have taken place in the same way as Celtchar mac Uthechair's. Failing this, however, the weight of the head would have struck him a blow strong enough to knock him down and most likely kill him. The fact that it is possible for Conall to lift the head at all, in spite of its previous display of great weight, suggests that the crushing blow from the head was a conscious act on Mess Gegra's part and not a permanent state of heaviness. Later events in *TÉ* make it clear that Mess Gegra's head does retain a degree of consciousness and appears to have some control over whether it can be moved or not.

TÉ here introduces what may appear to be a small digression, explaining that the women of the Ulaid have divided themselves into three groups based on which of three Ulster heroes they love: Cú Chulainn, Cuscraid Mend Machae mac Conchobar, or Conall himself. Each of these heroes has a blemish (*ainim*) and the women imitate this blemish to signal their allegiance to their hero of choice.²⁰ Conall Cernach is here described as Conall Clóen ‘the crooked’ and we are told that the women who loved him *batis clóin ocot acaldaim* (l. 216) ‘used to be crooked while talking to you’. One possible explanation for Conall’s crookedness is given in *Cóir Anmann* (Arbuthnot 2007: 69, trans. 142), where we are told that shortly after Conall’s birth his uncle Cet mac Mágach attempted to kill him by crushing his neck. Cet was stopped by Conall’s mother Finnchaím, but because of his broken neck Conall was known as *Claenbhraigdech* ‘crooked-neck’.²¹ Conall’s crookedness is introduced at this point in the narrative because he uses Mess Gegra’s head to correct it. After seeing the effect that the head has on the pillar-stone, Conall finally does follow Mess Gegra’s instruction to place the head on his own, perhaps now confident of his ability to control the force of the head: *Do:bert immurgu Conall a chenn-som fora chenn co-n-id:tarlae dara ais combo díriuch ónd úair sin* (ll. 217–9) ‘Conall then placed the head on his own head so that it knocked it backwards and from that time on it was straight’. It is worth noting, however, that the epithet *clóen* continues to follow Conall. In his death tale, *Goire Conall Chernaig i Crúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig*, Medb taunts him by saying, *Maith, a Chonaill, [...] Conall Cernach t’ainm-si cusaniu. Conall Cloentruag t’ainm festa* (Meyer 1897: 104, ll. 17–8) ‘Well, o Conall. [...] Conall the Victorious (*Cernach*) was your name until today. Conall the Crooked Wretch (*Cloentruag*) will be your name from now on’. This is in response to Ailill’s infidelity while supposedly under Conall’s watch. Like *ainim*, *clóen* has both physical and moral dimensions, carrying the additional meanings of ‘iniquitous, perverse, unjust, biased’ as well as conveying the sense of deception (*eDIL* s.v. *cláen*).

It is also worth noting that this confrontation between Conall Cernach and Mess Gegra takes place at Cassán Clóenta ‘Crooked Path’, which further draws attention to the tension between correct or straight and incorrect or crooked in this episode. Mess Gegra’s ill-judged behaviour toward his charioteer renders him one-handed (*óenláim*), and thus asymmetrical and vulnerable. He has been rendered unable to participate in single combat without accommodations on the part of his opponent and is therefore no longer fully functional as a warrior. He cannot face Conall Cernach without the latter being hampered artificially in order for fair combat (*fír ngaiscid*) to take place. Conall accuses Mess Gegra of *ainim* in the matter of the deaths of Conall’s brothers, but by avenging

²⁰The blemishes of these three heroes and the imitative behaviour of the women who love them are also described in *Serglige Con Culainn*, ed. Dillon (1953: ll. 39–44). For Dillon’s own translation of the text, see Dillon (1951). A less scholarly but more accessible translation can be found in Gantz (1981). See McCone (2021: 218) for a discussion of these two passages centred on Cú Chulainn’s blemish.

²¹For a discussion of alternative physical interpretations of Conall’s ‘crookedness’, see Coe (1995: 240–6).

them against Mess Gegra, Conall gains the means to rectify his own *ainim*, his crookedness (*clóen*), and become physically straight (*díriuch*). His physical crookedness is made straight through his correct behaviour, just as Mess Gegra's previously balanced physicality is rendered imbalanced through his faulty behaviour. Mess Gegra's offer to transfer his honour (*orddan*) to Conall Cernach further demonstrates his own moral crookedness and lack of honour, since this is clearly a trap, and might also be read as a betrayal of *fír ngaiscid*. Mess Gegra's fate here stands in stark contrast to that of Echu mac Luchtae, king of south Connacht, who, in the opening episode of *TÉ*, plucks out his own eye to satisfy his obligation as host to the poet Aithirne, and is rewarded for his correct behaviour when God restores his eye to him.²²

Not only has Conall Cernach defeated Mess Gegra's attempt at posthumous revenge by placing the head on the pillar-stone before placing it on his own head, he has also entirely subverted Mess Gegra's intentions by correcting the crookedness that had marked him since birth. In so doing, he also removes a physical defect that could potentially be seen as a source of shame. In this sense, Mess Gegra's promise that Conall Cernach would benefit from putting his severed head on his own has been fulfilled, despite Mess Gegra's own intentions. The full story of Mess Gegra's head is just beginning, and it goes on to display several other remarkable properties, but the theme of failed and subverted vengeance will persist. Mess Gegra's head will be divided: the brain will be removed and mixed with lime to calcify it, and then taken to Emain Macha, where it becomes a trophy of great importance. AC refers to a prophecy that Mess Gegra would avenge himself after his death: *ro bóí i tairngiriu do Mess Gegrai a dígal íarna écaib* (Kobel 2015: 219) 'there was a prophecy that Mess Gegra would have his vengeance after his death'. Cet mac Mágach knows this prophecy and steals Mess Gegra's brain, which he then uses as a weapon against Conchobar mac Nessa, who is eventually killed by it. There is a fitting symmetry here in that *TÉ* ends by describing how *Ba moídmach immurgu la Ultu rí Laigen do marbad dóib* (ll. 237–8) 'There was boasting then among the Ulaid that the king of Leinster had been killed by them', and yet that same king will later be instrumental in the death of their own king.

The prophecy that Mess Gegra will avenge his own death is fulfilled in that Mess Gegra's head acts as a vehicle for his posthumous revenge, but certainly not in the way that he had anticipated. Mess Gegra's revenge against Conall Cernach would have been deliberate, while his role in the death of Conchobar was not. Again, however, Mess Gegra's revenge is incomplete because in killing Conchobar, Mess Gegra's brain also provides his baptism and salvation. Here we must turn to the 'B' and 'C' versions of AC, which describe how, after seven years lodged in Conchobar's head, Mess Gegra's brain bursts forth accompanied by a gush of blood that baptizes Conchobar and makes him one of the first men in Ireland to enter Heaven.²³ The journey of Mess Gegra's head changes radically in this moment, and what was once a vehicle for vengeance

²²On the contrast between Echu and Mess Gegra, see further Scowcroft (1995: 146–7).

²³Kobel (2015: 346–7) for 'B' text and (379–8) for matching passage from 'C' text.

and a weapon becomes instead a holy relic.²⁴ The last known appearance of Mess Gegra's head is in *Acallam na Senórach* as a lake-monster that is bound in a show of power by Saint Cáemgen, a disciple of Saint Patrick. This episode is presented as a demonstration of Finn mac Cumail and his men deferring to the future authority of the saint and of Christianity, with Finn specifically refusing to kill the monster because of its holy destiny. We have seen that Mess Gegra's destructive intent and power are not only repeatedly denied, but also subverted in ways that benefit his enemies, and though the dangerous qualities of his head are retained even in its final form as a lake-monster, his posthumous revenge is never fully achieved.

3. THE DEATH OF LUGAID MAC CON RUÍ MIC DÁIRE

The death of Lugaid mac Con Ruí mic Dáire in *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemni* (hereafter BMMM) presents the closest textual parallel for that of Mess Gegra in *TÉ*, and Thurneysen suggested that BMMM likely served as the model for the episode in *TÉ* (1921: 510 and 549). In introducing her edition of BMMM, Bettina Kimpton comments that 'the theme of vengeance (*dígal*) generates the action of much of the tale' (2009: 1), which begins by describing a group of men and women who have joined together to avenge the deaths of their fathers by killing Cú Chulainn. Among these is Lugaid mac Con Ruí mic Dáire, whose father's death at the hands of Cú Chulainn is the subject of the various versions of *Aided Chon Roí*.²⁵ When Cú Chulainn is finally overcome, Erc mac Carpri urges Lugaid to take Cú Chulainn's head, saying *Is mebol dúib [...] cen chend ind fí do thabairt lib i ndígail chind m'athar-sa rucad leis* (ll. 373–4) 'It is a disgrace [...] for you not to take the head of the man in vengeance for my father's head, which was taken by him'. Lugaid eventually complies, but when he cuts off Cú Chulainn's head, the latter drops his sword and Lugaid's hand is cut off. Cú Chulainn's own hand is then taken also, but the loss of Lugaid's hand represents some measure of posthumous revenge for Cú Chulainn, enacted by his body after his death and without any intent on his part.

Full revenge against Lugaid is assured however, because, as we are then told, there exists a pact of mutual vengeance between Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach. Specifically, Conall has promised that *A llá not:géntar [...] do dí-gail dam-sa resin fescur-sin* (ll. 421–2) 'The day you are killed, [...] I will have vengeance for you before that evening'. Lugaid now finds himself in the same position as Mess Gegra: one-handed and pursued by an avenging Conall Cernach. Again, the confrontation takes place at a ford, and like Mess Gegra, Lugaid challenges Conall to claim his debt, using almost the same phrasing: *Int-í dano dia ndligi fíachu dos:fothlaig fair* (l. 456) 'The one indeed from whom you are owed debts, demand them from him'. Whitley Stokes' edition

²⁴On Mess Gegra's brain as agent of Conchobar's salvation and later treatment as a holy relic, see Clancy (1996).

²⁵There are multiple different versions of this story, each of which has been edited and translated in various places. See Mallory and Ó hUiginn (1994) and the CODECS website for a list of editions and translations.

of the text treats this line as being spoken by Conall Cernach rather than by Lugaid (1876–8: 184) and John Carey’s translation reflects this (2003a: 142), but Kimpton’s more recent edition assigns the line to Lugaid, a choice which is supported by the parallelism between these two passages, since in *TÉ* the line is unambiguously spoken by Mess Gegra. While Lugaid acknowledges the debt for having killed Cú Chulainn, he points out that there would be no honour for Conall Cernach in killing him before he is able to reach Munster with his spoils. Conall agrees and they arrange to meet in *Mag nArgetrois*, again demonstrating that requests regarding the circumstances under which a combat is to take place are not outside the range of expected behaviours, even under conditions as heightened as vengeance for Cú Chulainn’s death. Lugaid reaches the agreed location first, and when Conall arrives he does not wait to attack. He immediately throws a spear at Lugaid and wounds him. Lugaid then goes on to *Fertae Lugdach* in *Droichit Ossairge*, where Conall meets him again. This time Lugaid points out that combat between them would be uneven as he has only one hand, appealing to *fír fer*, which, as previously discussed requires a balanced and even combat.

As in *TÉ*, Conall decides to bind his arm to his side to ensure fair combat.²⁶ Lugaid appears to offer a greater challenge than Mess Gegra, however, and Conall is unable to defeat him unaided. He seeks assistance from his horse, the *Derg Drúchtach*, who is described as having the head of a dog. She takes a bite out of Lugaid’s side, effectively ending the combat. Lugaid objects that this is not *fír fer*, but Conall responds that he had not guaranteed *fír fer* on behalf of *na robb 7 na n-écodnach* (l. 476) ‘the animals and the non-competent ones’. While *fír fer* primarily signifies fair combat and not just ‘the truth of men’, this makes it clear that it is in some sense about ‘men’, and those that are judged legally competent to enter into such a conflict. The principle of *fír fer* is, as O’Leary has argued, an ethical concept, and it here seems to relate not only to the physical status of the participants in a combat, but also their mental and perhaps even legal status. *Éccodnach* covers all those who are not legally responsible for their actions, including children and those deprived of reason (*eDIL* s.v. *éccodnach*). We find this reflected in the fact that Cú Chulainn’s youth frequently disqualifies him as a suitable opponent in single combat in the eyes of older warriors, and it is only by making himself appear older through the application of a false beard that he is accepted as an equal by these warriors. In fact, *Lóch mac Mo Febis*, whose combat with Cú Chulainn is discussed above, is one of the warriors who initially refuses to engage with Cú Chulainn because of his youth.²⁷ If those who are *éccodnach* are not capable of engaging in *fír fer*, this sheds

²⁶The combat between Conall Cernach and Lugaid is also described in the Early Modern Irish *Aided Con Culainn* (van Hamel 1933: §57), but does not contain the relevant ‘incident of the head’. An additional point of divergence is that while Lugaid does not specifically appeal to *fír fer*, he does request that Conall bind his arm. This stands in contrast to *BMMM* and *TÉ*, in which Conall is the one to initiate this. See O’Leary (1987: 4–5) for further discussion of this passage in *Aided Con Culainn*.

²⁷For further discussion see Künzler (2015: 40).

further light on the conditions of parallelism, balance, and mutual equivalency required for *fír fer*.

Like Mess Gegra, Lugaid now knows that he is doomed and that Conall Cernach will take his head, and so he gives the same instruction: *Co tardda trá [...] mo chend-sa ardo chend 7 co n-erbara mo rígi-se fordo ríge et mo gaisced fordo gaisced* (ll. 478–9). Kimpton translates this line as ‘May you take, then [...] my head on your behalf, and wield my kingship in addition to your own kingship, and my weapons in addition to your own weapons’ (2009: 45). Many translators of this text have taken this approach, interpreting the instruction to Conall Cernach as referring to the claiming of some non-corporeal aspect of Lugaid himself by means of claiming his head, rather than directions for a literal, physical action. Stokes’ original translation was ‘take my head in addition to thine own’ (1876–8: 185), although in translating the parallel phrase in *TÉ* he opted for the more physical interpretation ‘Take thou my head on thy head’ (1887: 61). The more metaphorical sense is found also in the French translation of d’Arbois de Jubainville, ‘Je te donne donc ma tête en sus de la tienne’ (1892: 352). A more literal translation is given by Carey, however: ‘Do you then put my head on your head’ (2003a: 143).²⁸ This interpretation is certainly justified from the context and consequences of the act, as well as on linguistic grounds. The preposition used in *TÉ* is *for* ‘on’, but BMM and some of the texts about the death of Balor all use *ar*. While *ar* has the primary meaning of ‘for the sake of, on behalf of, etc.’, there is nothing requiring that reading here. In Middle Irish, *for* and *ar* fall together, with *ar* as the primary form (*eDIL* s.v. 1 *ar*). While the meaning ‘on’ is more typical of this preposition with a following dative, and the meaning ‘on behalf of’ (or similar) is more typical with a following accusative, this is not a strict division, as illustrated by Kimpton’s translations of *ar* + dative as both ‘on’ and ‘for the sake of’.²⁹ The accusative is also used to convey the sense of motion toward something, which is appropriate in this passage. There is therefore no reason not to assign the meaning ‘on(to)’ to *ar* + accusative in this passage, and it is clear that we must understand Lugaid’s intention as being that Conall should literally place his severed head upon his own. This is further evidenced by the subsequent revelation of the dangerous properties of the head.

As expected, Conall Cernach does not place Lugaid’s head on his own, but instead carries it away with him. When he encounters the Ulaid, he places the head on a stone and forgets it there. Once Conall realizes that the head is missing, he and the Ulaid return to fetch it. There, we are told, they saw that *ro:berbai in cend in cloich co ndecheid treithe* (l. 487) ‘the head had melted the stone so that it went through it’. Again, this fate was clearly intended for Conall, but by not following Lugaid’s instructions he has thwarted his attempt at posthumous revenge. Like Mess Gegra though, there will be some measure of

²⁸There are several other translations of this text (see Mallory and Ó hUiginn (1994) and CODECS), but those I refer to here serve to illustrate the two ways in which this line has been interpreted.

²⁹Ll. 43–4 *Cáin róg renar ar Ultaib* is translated as ‘[It is] a fair and pure one [that] is given up for the Ulstermen’, while l. 211 *arget ar crannaib* is translated as ‘silver on trees’.

vengeance gained later, since, as we are told in *Goire Conaill Chernaig*, after Conall's death, his head was severed and *rucsat sein siar a ceann do digail Conr[ó]i rucsat Ulaidh budhtuaidh* (Meyer 1897: 105, l. 40) 'They took the head westward with them to avenge Cú Rói, whose head the Ulaid took with them northwards'.³⁰ This grants some measure of vengeance to Lugaid for the death of his father.

4. THE DEATH OF BALOR

In moving on to the stories about the death of Balor, we leave the world of mortal warriors and move into the world of gods and monsters. While we have only one version each of the deaths of Mess Gegra and Lugaid, the story of Balor's death has been told and retold in many forms over centuries. As Elizabeth Gray notes in her edition of *Cath Maige Tuired* (hereafter CMT), 'the death of Balor at the hands of Lug, son of his daughter Ethne, is an important incident throughout Irish literary and folk tradition' (1982: 133). Joan N. Radner (1992) has discussed how 'the tale of the primordial conflict of Lug and Balor has changed dynamically through history to comment on the direct experience of its makers and remakers' (1992: 145).³¹ Ó Cuív has also discussed the popularity of this story and its reshaping in the folk tradition, pointing out that 'the connections with the Tuatha Dé Danann and the battle of Magh Tuireadh have been forgotten and new elements, including a magic cow called *An Ghlas Ghaibhleann*, have been introduced' (1945: 8–9). The connection to the earlier material has been so obfuscated that the original context for animosity between Balor and Lugh has been lost and consequently reinterpreted and reinvented several times. Jeremiah Curtin included two distinct versions of the story in *Hero-Tales of Ireland* (1894) and remarked that 'this was a great tale in the old time; but it is badly broken up now. If we could discover who Balor and his daughter were really, we might, perhaps, be able to understand why his grandson was fated to kill him' (1894: 554). Stories in which a hero is fated to kill his mother's father or his own father are known globally and reflect what is conventionally referred to as the 'heroic biography pattern'.³² These types of stories frequently feature explicit prophecies that a man will be killed by his daughter's son, which leads to attempts to isolate the daughter to prevent her ever conceiving a child. When she inevitably does conceive, attempts are made to kill the child, either before or after his birth. A version of the story collected from John McGinty of Achill Island, Co. Mayo and translated by William Larminie in *West Irish Folk-tales and Romances* describes how Balor's daughter was imprisoned because 'a prediction was made that she would have a son, who would kill his grandfather'

³⁰This is according to the text of TCD MS H 2. 17 (1319). The NLS Adv. MS 72.1.40 (Edinburgh codex XL) text says that *Rucsat sein leo cend Conaill a n-againd Conroi* (Meyer 1897: 105, ll. 16–17) 'They took the head of Conall with them in compensation for Cú Rói'.

³¹See also Radner (1991).

³²On the subject of the heroic biography in medieval Irish literature, see Ó Cathasaigh (1977). For a more general survey of scholarship on the pattern, see Taylor (1964). A more recent survey of work on the pattern and a discussion of how 'heroic' it truly is can be found in Pagé (2018).

(Larminie 1893: 6). In spite of his attempt to isolate her, Balor's daughter becomes pregnant, and her child is taken and hidden so that he can grow up in safety, but ignorant of his identity. He later encounters and kills his grandfather, as is typical for a story reflecting the 'heroic biography'. This story pattern is well represented by the folktale versions of the conflict between Balor and Lugh but is largely absent from the earlier sources. This is a further indication of how far the story has been removed from its earlier context in the war between the *Túatha Dé Danann* and the *Fomoiré*. Ó Cuív enumerates some of the published versions of the story up to the early twentieth century, and comments that there are also more recently recorded versions of the story in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission (1945: 8 n. 4). A full study of the different versions of this story is well beyond the scope of the current work,³³ and many of these versions do not contain the relevant episode involving the weaponized head and attempted posthumous revenge. I will refer to only a few of the versions that do contain this incident for the purposes of examining its continued presence in this story.

While the story of the conflict between Balor and Lugh has changed in many significant ways, the main and constant motif is the destruction of Balor's eye, which we find in CMT and in most later versions of the story as well. The dangerous properties of the heads of Mess Gegra and Lugaid develop only after their deaths, but Balor's eye is his most powerful weapon and makes his head dangerous and toxic long before his death. In CMT (§133) Balor is described as having a destructive eye that is opened only during battle, at which point four men are required to lift the lid. The poisonous nature of the eye is said to be the result of contact with the fumes of a venomous potion. While it is not made explicit in CMT, this destructive eye is interpreted as Balor's only eye, making him a cyclops.³⁴ Later folktales, however, have descriptions of his eyes that vary in terms of both number and position. A folktale collected by John O'Donovan from Shane O'Dugan of Tory Island describes Balor as having 'one eye in the middle of his forehead, and another directly opposite it, in the back of his skull,' with this second eye having 'foul, distorted glances' and 'beams and dyes of venom' which could kill (1856: 18).³⁵ A different version of the tale tells us that 'Besides his two eyes Balor had a third one, an evil eye, in the middle of his forehead, with the power to burn everything in the world that it looked upon' (Curtin 1894: 304). Central to all these descriptions is the idea that the eye is in some way toxic or poisonous and that this toxin can be spread to anything that Balor looks at. Radner, in discussing the folklore about Balor, says that his 'single, poisonous eye is said to have withered permanently all the

³³See, however, Krappe (1927) and Lacey (2012).

³⁴For studies on the cyclops in Irish tradition see especially McCone (1986, 1996, and 2021). See also Krappe (1927) and Borsje (2012) for further discussion of Balor's evil eye.

³⁵Brian Lacey (2018: 43) gives the following history of this version of the story: 'The Donegal version seems to have been recorded for the first time by John O'Donovan in a then-unpublished letter written from Falcarragh on 15 September 1835. He said that his source was Shane O'Dugan from Tory Island. O'Donovan gives the tale in English but almost certainly O'Dugan would have recounted it in Irish. In 1856 O'Donovan published a slightly polished-up version of the tale in his edition of the *Annals of the Four Masters*, which I quote from here.'

vegetation on Tory and on the visible mountains of the nearby Donegal coast' (1992: 143). Radner unfortunately does not cite her source for this, but it is in keeping with the various traditions of Balor's eye and head as transforming the landscape in ways that make it dangerous and uninhabitable, as we shall see.

The earliest attested form of the episode of the weaponized head and posthumous revenge in connection with Balor's death is found in the poem numbered XVI in *Duanaire Finn* (MacNeill 1908: 34–8: hereafter DF XVI), in which Balor's death is briefly described as part of the origin story for Finn mac Cumhaill's shield. The relevant portion of DF XVI is only 4 quatrains out of 62.³⁶ Balor's instructions to Lugh here are familiar, though the reward promised is more elaborate than what Mess Gegra offered to Conall Cernach, and he appeals directly to their kinship and suggests that Lugh should be heir to his powers.

Balor do cuingidh ar Lugh
seal beg ré na dhíchennadh
cuir mo cenn-sa ar do cenn cain
7 tuill mo bhennachtain

'Balor sought out Lugh,
a short while before his beheading.
"Put my head on your fair head
and earn my blessings.

In cosgar 7 in ghráin
do bhoí oramsa ag feraibh Fáil
is maith liomsa go prap dhe
a mbeit ar mhac mh'inghine

The triumph and the horror
that the men of Fál felt for me,
I would like for them to soon
belong to the son of my daughter."

An bennacht sin a aba
nochar thuill Lugh Lamhfhada
do cuir an cenn os tuinn thsoir
a nglaic chuill ar a bhéaluibh

That blessing however
Lugh of the Long-Arm did not earn.
He put the head above the eastern surface³⁷
in the cleft of a hazel-tree in front of him.

Snídhis bainne neimhe anúas
assin crann sin go nert-chrúas
iar snídhe an uilc nar bheg ró
do sgoilt in crann ar chert-dhó

A poison drop dripped down
from that tree with strong hardness,
after the dripping of the evil – it was
no small excess –
the tree split evenly in two.'

The image of the severed head as nut is once again invoked here through the placement of Balor's head in a hazel tree, which subsequently remains at the centre of a toxic landscape for a period of fifty years before Manannán has it uprooted. Here it is not Balor's gaze that destroys the land, but instead the

³⁶I quote from the MacNeill (1908) edition of the text from UCD MS Franciscan A 20(b). Flahive (2015) provides an edition of the poem from RIA Stowe MS D ii 1, where it consists of 56 quatrains. The four containing the death of Balor episode are present and largely identical in both copies. These four quatrains are numbered 10–13 in MacNeill's edition and 7–10 in Flahive's.

³⁷*Tuinn* is the dative of *tonn*, which has the primary meaning of 'wave', and MacNeill translates this line 'he set the head above an eastern wave'. However, *tonn* is also attested with the meaning 'surface' (*eDIL* s.v. *tonn*) and I believe that this is a better interpretation in this context.

presence of his head. The land remains so poisonous that its vapours kill eighteen workmen and blind another nine when the tree is uprooted. While Balor's posthumous revenge against Lugh fails, his head spreads its poison so effectively that it can kill even decades after Balor's death. From the wood of the tree, a shield is made for Manannán that cannot be touched in battle and that routs all before it. The poem goes on to describe the history of the shield and its various owners before explaining how it finally comes into the possession of Finn.

In the older version of CMT, Balor's death is not made explicit but is assumed to occur due to his being struck in the eye by a sling-stone cast at him by his grandson Lugh (CMT §135). In his discussion of the differences between the earlier and later version of *Cath Muighe Tuireadh* (hereafter CMT²), Ó Cuív notes that one of the more significant variations is the inclusion in the later version of what he calls 'The Incident of the Head' (6), which takes place after Lugh has knocked out Balor's eye with his sling-stone. After being struck, Balor flees and is pursued by Lugh. Balor points out that he is already wounded and asks that Lugh cause him no further injury, but Lugh refuses. Before their final combat begins, Balor gives familiar instructions to Lugh regarding his head, though these are more specific regarding the physical act required. The fact that Balor makes this request before their combat, instead of after, as in the cases of Mess Gegra and Lugaid, suggests that he already knows that he has been injured in a way that weakens him too severely to gain a victory over Lugh. In contrast to the episodes with Mess Gegra and Lugaid, there is no way that Lugh could hinder himself in a manner that would match Balor's injury, even if he were inclined to do so. As in DF XVI, Balor offers Lugh his own powers and attributes, even echoing the specific offer of his *gráin* 'terror/fearsomeness', and he also acknowledges their kinship.

'Madh cosgrach thusa orm-sa,' ar Balar, 'an tan beanfair mo cheann díom a chur ar mullach do chinn féin 7 a mhéidhe do chur red cheann ar dháigh go ndeach mo rath 7 mo rochonách, mo ghráin 7 mo ghaigseadh sa ort-sa. Uair ní fhāgbhuim dar mh'éisi neach is caradraighe dhamh inā thusa.' (ll. 1318–23)

"If you are victorious over me," said Balor, "when you cut my head from me, put it on top of your own head and put the neck against your head so that my success and my great prosperity, my fearsomeness and my acts of valour will go to you. For I do not leave behind me anyone who is more closely related to me than you".³⁸

Naturally, Lugh places the head elsewhere, but this version is closer to the story of Mess Gegra's death in that the head is placed on a pillar-stone rather than on a tree, at least initially.

Beanuis Lugh a cheann de, 7 téid risin cceann iar sin, 7 cóirighis ar cholamhain chartha cloichi móire baii a n-athfhogas dó é. Goirid

³⁸I am grateful to Dr. Gregory Darwin for his many helpful and insightful comments on my readings of the Early Modern Irish text.

do vhf ann asa h-aithle an tan do sgoilt 7 do sgaoil an cartha cruaidh
coimhreamhar cloichi i cceathra leathsgoilténuibh lánmhóra go lár.
(ll. 1336–40)

‘Lugh cut his head from him, and after that he went to the head,
and he placed it on the column of a large pillar-stone that was near
him. It was there a short while until the hard, very thick pillar-stone
split and scattered in four great, equal fragments on the ground.’

Lugh then verbally acknowledges the trap that Balor had set for him, saying that he had been given bad advice and his head would now be like the pillar-stone if he had put Balor’s head on his own. Lugh next removes the head from the remains of the pillar-stone and places it, as he did in DF XVI, *a nglai chuill* (ll. 1344–5) ‘in the cleft of a hazel tree’. There is no indication that the head causes further destruction at this point, but Lugh, needing another trophy, removes Balor’s leg at the knee and takes that with him. Here the motivation for taking Balor’s head, and then leg is made explicit with the statement that Lugh needs a *comhartha cosgair do-bhéradh lais do dheimhniughadh a ēchta do T. D. D* (ll. 1346–7) ‘sign of victory he could bring with him to affirm his deed to the Túatha Dé Danann’, and since he cannot take the head, he will take the leg instead. In fact, he does pick up the head again, but the text is not entirely clear on this point or what subsequently happens to the head. Like the head, the leg shows obstructive and even toxic properties. It becomes too heavy for Lugh to carry, and he is forced to abandon the foot itself and proceed with only the shinbone. When this also becomes too heavy, he drags it behind him from his chariot. The shinbone is rotting, and its putrefaction fills a ditch in the plain that Lugh is driving over, again spreading the toxicity of Balor’s body to the landscape. When Lugh is finally forced to drop the shinbone, we are told that a worm (*dorb*) burrows into it, eats the marrow, and becomes what the text calls a *smirrdris*, which is a late form of *muirdris* (*eDIL* s.v. *smeirdris*), a type of sea or lake monster. This *smirrdris* takes up residence in Loch Lurgan, where it remains until it is destroyed by Finn, who drains the lake until it becomes too small for the monster, as described in *Acallam na Senórach*.³⁹ After losing the shinbone, Lugh returns to retrieve the foot, which, presumably together with the head, he takes back to the Túatha Dé Danann at Magh Tuireadh.

Calvert Watkins (1995: 447) discusses the etymology of the earlier form *muirdris*, which is known from ‘The Saga of Fergus mac Léti’ (Binchy 1952). There it is described as *peist uiscide [uathmar]* ‘a [terrible] water monster’.⁴⁰ Watkins suggests that since the *muir* element clearly means ‘sea’, the element *-dris* must mean something like ‘monster,’ and he further argues that this form

³⁹This episode with Balor’s leg and the *smirrdris* may constitute an aetiological tradition about the lake, as the name Loch Lurgan can be interpreted as ‘the lake (*loch*) of the shin-bone (*lurgan*)’. Ó Cuív (1945: 66) notes that the origin of Loch Lurgan is explained in *Acallam na Senórach*. There we find mention of the *smirrdris*, but it is not connected to Balor in any way (Stokes 1900: 123; Dooley and Roe 1999: 127). As mentioned above, the *Acallam* is also where we learn that part of Mess Gegra’s brain turned into a monster (*peisd*) living in one of the two lakes at Glendalough.

⁴⁰Binchy (1952: §6). The word *uathmar* ‘terrible’ appears in the TCD MS H 3. 18 (1337) copy of the text but not the LL text.

is connected with the verbal noun used to describe Fergus mac Léti seeing the *muidris*: *diuderc* ‘gazing.’ The relationship between the *muidris* and the act of seeing or looking becomes clear when we consider that it is seeing the *muidris* that causes Fergus mac Léti to become disfigured. Watkins compares this with the Greek story of the Gorgon, who turns those who see her to stone and — it should be noted in the current discussion — whose head is severed and weaponized by Perseus. The Gorgon is described as having snakes for hair, but in Greek the word used to describe her hair is *drakóntōn*,⁴¹ derived from *drákōn*, which is the source of English ‘dragon’. Watkins treats *-dris* as cognate with *drak-*, and both as derived via a zero-grade **dṛk-* formation from the Proto-Indo-European verb **derk-* ‘see’, also the second element in *diuderc*. Watkins concludes his discussion by stating that:

Both branches then, Greek and Celtic, would attest both the verbal root **derk-* ‘see’ and a word for ‘dragon, serpent’ **dṛk-*. If the latter two should turn out not to be cognate — which I doubt — the folk etymology itself could be of Indo-European date, since the danger of the sight of the dragon is found in both traditions, Greek and Irish. (1995: 447)

In these linguistic forms and the stories that link them, we have an association between dangerous, even deadly, sight and a serpent or serpentine creature, though embodied in a single being. In Balor and the *smirrdris* that grows from the *dorb* that eats the marrow of his leg, we again find a connection between dangerous sight and a serpent-like monster.⁴²

While there is no reference to Balor losing his hand at any point, as Mess Gegra and Lugaid do, he is nonetheless already wounded before his final confrontation with Lugh and for this reason tries to avoid further combat. It is significant that his wound consists of the loss of his eye, and the post-mortem removal of his leg should also be read in this context. There is a well-established connection between one-eyed and one-armed figures in various Indo-European mythological traditions, as discussed by Georges Dumézil in *Mitra-Varuna* (1948). A discussion of these figures (generally referred to using the French terms *le borgne* ‘the one-eyed one’ and *le manchot* ‘the one-handed one’) in Irish sources can be found in Richard Mark Scowcroft (1995: 140f.), which argues that while Dumézil’s original conception of the relationship between the two figures and his interpretations of their physical attributes do not always hold for the Irish sources, a survey of one-eyed and one-armed figures makes it ‘obvious that the collocation of *borgne* and *manchot* is widely attested in Irish literature’ (1995: 146).⁴³ As Dumézil, Scowcroft, and McCone (2021) have

⁴¹Watkins here cites Pindar’s *Pythian* 10.46–8. For a full edition and translation of this ode, see Race (1997).

⁴²On the connection between *dorb* and serpents or serpentine creatures, see Pagé (2014: 149–50).

⁴³Scowcroft argues that Dumézil’s conception of *le borgne* and *le manchot* as associated respectively with hidden knowledge and broken contracts is perhaps best represented by *Talland Etair* (1995: 147).

noted, there is also a connection to be made with the passage in CMT in which Lugh performs a satire against Balor with one eye closed while holding one arm behind him and standing on one foot (CMT §129). McCone (2021: 215) in fact argues that to the collocation of one-handed and one-eyed we should add one-legged or one-footed, and that all three disfigurements pertain to the function of the warrior and not that of the sovereign, as originally suggested by Dumézil.

There are multiple difficulties in interpreting the state of Balor's body. We have seen already that while Balor has an evil eye, the exact position and powers of which can vary considerably, Lugh's destruction of that eye is a fixed point in the narrative in almost all cases.⁴⁴ As Scowcroft puts it: 'Balor himself may have one, two or three eyes, one of which is poisonous, incendiary, or otherwise malignant; he may have two eyes in front, one each in front and back, an extra eye in the middle of his forehead or one eye only. Lug always puts the evil eye out' (1995: 143). In considering the asymmetries of Balor's body, we must also bear in mind that he is one of the Fomorians, who are sometimes described as one-armed and one-legged and sometimes one-eyed, as in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, which calls them *fir con āen-chossaibh 7 con āen-lāmaibh* (Macalister 1937: 12–13, §216, R³ text) 'men with one leg and with one arm', in one recension, while another describes a battle in which they were involved as being fought *for āen-cossaib 7 āen-lāmaib 7 āen-sūilib* (Macalister 1937: 12–13, §216, R² text) 'on one foot and one hand and one eye'. Though the exact nature of the imbalance of Balor's body may be difficult to determine and even variable, it can certainly be said that he is asymmetrical, and, like Mess Gegra and Lugaid, he enters his final combat not merely wounded, but injured in a way that deprives him of his core defence. The damaging or destruction of his eye removes his power as a cyclops/giant/monster/Fomorian, just as losing a hand reduces Mess Gegra's and Lugaid's ability to function as warriors. It is also worth noting that Lugh's slaying of Balor in CMT and his initial wounding of Balor in CMT² both immediately follow Balor's killing of Núadu, himself a (temporarily) one-handed warrior, whom Dumézil associated with the figure of *le manchot*. As Scowcroft observes, there is an episode in *Cath Maige Tuired Cunga*, known as the 'First Battle of Mag Tuired' (Fraser 1916), in which Núadu is challenged to combat by Sreng, the warrior who had previously cut off his arm. Núadu points out that, because he has lost one arm, for their combat to be fair Sreng should bind his own arm (Fraser 1916: §58). Sreng refuses, but the parallel to Mess Gegra's and Lugaid's combats with Conall Cernach is striking and suggests that Núadu may indeed stand in as the one-armed warrior in CMT².

This allows for two interpretive possibilities. The first is to treat the figure of *le manchot* in this episode as replaced by the figure of *le borgne*, Balor himself, who also loses his leg. The second is to view Núadu as an indirect participant in this episode, fulfilling the role of *le manchot* through his association with Balor, *le borgne*. Given the common collocation of one-handed and one-eyed

⁴⁴The version of the story published in Larminie (1893) is the only variant that I am aware of that makes no reference to Balor's eye.

figures in medieval Irish literature, both scenarios are certainly possible. However, if we widen our focus and consider not just the ‘incident of the head’ but the totality of TÉ, BMMM, and CMT/CMT², we find that one-eyed and one-handed figures are present and paired in all three. As noted above, Mess Gegra’s behaviour in TÉ can be contrasted with that of Echu mac Luchtae, who plucks out his own eye and who, as Scowcroft has argued, represents the figure of *le borgne* corresponding to Mess Gegra as *le manchot*. These two kings are the first and last that Aithirne visits during his tour of Ireland. While Echu indulges Aithirne’s monstrous requests without objection and is rewarded for it, Mess Gegra only grudgingly satisfies his guest’s demands. As a result, Aithirne prophesies that Mess Gegra will lose his head, and war with the Ulaid ensues. Further, as Scowcroft argues, if we consider the descriptions of Cú Chulainn as *goll* ‘purblind, squinting’, and the many descriptions of his *ríastrad* that describe one eye retreating so far into his head that a crane cannot pluck it out,⁴⁵ then we find both the figure of *le borgne* and that of *le manchot* in Cú Chulainn himself, who makes Lugaid one-handed after his death, and loses his own arm at the same time, a post-mortem injury that matches the removal of Balor’s leg. To this we should add that Cú Chulainn enters his final battle with damage to his foot, hand, and left leg. He is first injured when his brooch drops and pierces his foot while he is dressing for battle (Kimpton 2009: ll. 62–4), and then further weakened when he is presented with dog meat, which he hides under his left thigh. The hand that took the meat and the leg under which he hid it then lose their strength (Kimpton 2009: ll. 241–3). This damage to his hand and foot is significant enough that, in her lament after his death, Emer refers to Cú Chulainn as going into battle *óenchossid óenlámaid* (ll. 634) ‘with one foot and with one hand’. The damage to a leg or foot is therefore clearly integrated into the schema of the one-handed one and the one-eyed one, and the removal of Balor’s leg can thus be treated as representing this third injury rather than as a substitution for *le manchot*.

In TÉ, BMMM, and CMT², at least, we can say that the ‘incident of the head’ is entangled with the collocation of *le borgne* and *le manchot*. Once we move on to the later stories about Balor, however, the connection with Núadu, and so with this aspect of the earlier mythic structure, is lost, or at least reduced. It is worth noting, however, that at least one of the modern folk-tale versions of the story does feature the collocation of a one-handed person with a one-eyed person. In the version of the story published by Larminie, Balor is instructed to send his son to seek out a woman with one hand and a child with one eye, who can provide the tools required to complete the construction of his palace

⁴⁵McCone (2021: 218) argues that Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* renders him, at least temporarily, a cyclops. As pointed out to me by the anonymous reviewer, in *Betha Colaim Chille* (ed. O’Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918: 176–9) we have an intersection of the motif of an eye being plucked out by a crane (as found in the descriptions of Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*, where it is offered a physical possibility, rather than something that actually takes place) and the restoration of an eye that has been plucked out (as in the episode with Echu mac Luchtae). When Columcille discovers that a youth has been spying on him, he instructs his pet crane to pluck out the youth’s eye, which it does through the keyhole that the youth is looking through. When Finden, the abbot, learns what has happened, he restores the youth’s eye.

(1893: 2–3). This version of the story does not contain the incident of the head and makes no reference to Balor’s evil eye or its destruction, yet in it we find an echo of the presence of *le borgne* and *le manchot*.

While some of the transformations that occur to the story of the conflict between Balor and Lugh shift it away from the other versions of this episode, other changes instead bring it closer to TÉ and BMMM. One element strongly present in Conall Cernach’s combats with Mess Gegra and Lugaid is the desire for vengeance, and specifically vengeance for a family member. He pursues Mess Gegra to avenge his brothers and he pursues Lugaid to avenge Cú Chulainn, his foster-brother. Lugh’s conflict with Balor contains a family connection in that Balor is consistently presented as Lugh’s grandfather, but in the earlier versions of the story the vengeance aspect is present only weakly, if at all. Gray notes that when Lugh kills Balor in CMT, he is ‘thereby avenging the fallen Níadu’ (1982: 3), but this is not explicitly his goal in confronting Balor. In fact, in CMT he does not even pursue Balor, instead facing him in the midst of the ongoing battle between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomoirie. In CMT² Lugh does pursue Balor and face him in single combat, but vengeance is not presented as a motivating factor. In the later folktales, however, Lugh is given a much more direct motive for killing Balor: vengeance for the death of his own father. The version of the story printed in O’Donovan (1856) describes how Balor kills Lugh’s father, named here as Fin MacKineely. Balor later boasts about this act, not realizing that he is in the presence of Lugh, who, ‘taking a glowing rod from the furnace, thrust it through the basilisk eye of Balor and out through the other side of his head, thus avenging the death of his father, slaying his grandfather, and executing the decree of fate, which nothing can avert’ (O’Donovan 1856: 21). The two stories about Balor’s death previously mentioned from Curtin’s *Hero-Tales of Ireland* are given the titles ‘Balor on Tory Island’ and ‘Balor of the Evil Eye and Lui Lavada, his Grandson’. Only the first of these, which Curtin collected from Michael Currann of Gort an Choirce, Co. Donegal, contains ‘the incident of the head’, and this is also the version in which vengeance for his father motivates Lugh’s attack on Balor. In this version, Lugh is unaware of his own relationship with Balor, and kills him only to avenge his father. In both of these stories, Fin MacKineely’s death involves his head being placed upon a stone and then cut off. In the version printed in O’Donovan (1856: 21), MacKineely’s blood is said to have marked the stone, and we are told that ‘it was raised, in 1794, on a pillar sixteen feet high’ and that this pillar, which the Four Masters refer to as *Cloch Chinnfhaolaidh*, remains ‘a very conspicuous object in the neighbourhood’.⁴⁶ Thus, in providing Lugh with the motive of vengeance for his father, these accounts also incorporate a secondary incident involving the placement of a severed head on a pillar-stone, with the heads of both MacKineely and Balor being placed on stones.

While there are many additional stories about the death of Balor, only a few contain ‘the incident of the head’, but they do so in ways that are remarkably

⁴⁶Lacey (2018) provides further discussion of this monument and its history.

similar to the literary versions previously discussed. One version of the episode is found in Seosamh Laoide's *Cruach Chonaill*:

D'iarr sé air an cionn a ghearradh dó agus a chur i mullach a chinn féin. Chuir sé i mullach na Cloiche Gairbhe é, agus thainic deor nimhe amach as a'chionn. Sgoilt sé an chreag agus d'éirigh loch ann. (1909: 65)

'He [Balor] asked him [Lugh] to cut off his head and place it on top of his own head. He put it on top of the Cloch Gharbh (Rough Stone), and a poisonous drop came out of the head. It split the rock and a lake rose out of it.'

This episode is found also in Curtin's 'Balor on Tory Island'. In this story, Lugh strikes Balor in the eye with a spear, leading Balor to recognize him as his grandson, since no one else could have struck him such a blow. He calls out to Lugh then, saying: 'Come near now. Take the head off me and place it above your own for a few moments. You will know everything in the world, and no one will be able to conquer you' (Curtin 1894: 294). Lugh beheads Balor but instead of placing the head above his own, he places it on a nearby rock. There, 'a drop came out of the head, made a thousand pieces of the rock, and dug a hole in the earth three times deeper than Loch Foyle, — the deepest lake into the world up to that time, — and so long that in that hole are the waters of Gweedore Loch, they have been there from that day to this' (Curtin 1894: 294).

Here again, we find the motif of the creation of a lake stemming from the properties of Balor's head and the way that it is handled, something entirely absent from the stories about Mess Gegra and Lugaid, but which continues a theme from some of the earlier stories about Balor, which is the reshaping of the landscape. A common thread that runs through the different versions of this story is the destructive and often profound impact that Balor's body has on the surrounding landscape, both before and after his death. This is something not found in the other texts, and again reflects the fact that with Balor we are not dealing with the body of a mortal, but that of a god or monster. In consequence, the dangers associated with his body are of a greater magnitude than what we find with Mess Gegra or Lugaid.

5. CONCLUSION

The departure point for this study was the core sequence of (1) an instruction that a severed head be placed on the head of the person who severed it; (2) the head being placed elsewhere instead; and (3) this resulting in the head causing damage wherever it was placed, rather than to the intended victim of this form of posthumous revenge. After examining the stories more closely, it is possible to give a fuller description of the narrative elements involved in this episode.

1. The encounter between the two opponents comes about when one seeks vengeance, most often for the death of one or more family members. We

have seen that Conall Cernach seeks out Mess Gegra in order to avenge his brothers and Lugaid in order to avenge his foster-brother. In the modern folk versions, Lugh seeks to avenge his father, and even in the earlier versions, vengeance for Núadu could be viewed as a motivating factor in his confrontation with Balor.

2. Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor are all injured in ways that impede their core functions before combat begins. Mess Gegra and Lugaid have each lost a hand, and Balor has lost his eye. These injuries, along with injuries to various figures within the narrative orbits of Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor, suggest a mythic framework involving the collocation of *le manchot* and *le borgne*, with the potential third injury of loss of foot or leg suggested by McCone (2021) also a common feature.
3. In each case, the injured party asks that their injury be acknowledged and taken into account. Mess Gegra and Lugaid ask for *fír ngaiscid* and *fír fer*, respectively, with the result that Conall Cernach binds his own arm in imitation of their injuries to ensure fair combat. In CMT² Balor simply asks that Lugh cause him no further injury, but Lugh refuses. In ‘Balor on Tory Island’, Lugh puts out Balor’s eye, and Balor then pursues him for a time before becoming too weak to continue. Each opponent of the hero is weakened in ways that make their deaths inevitable.
4. Each opponent makes another request, once they realize that they are doomed. Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor all request that their severed heads be taken by their killers and placed upon their own heads. Each offers a potential benefit along with this request: that by doing so their killers may inherit something from them. Mess Gegra offers his *orddan*, which, as discussed, has a range of meanings that include ‘sovranty’ and ‘ordaining, raising to dignity’. Lugaid’s offer is more concrete: he offers his kingship and his weapons. Balor directly names Lugh as his heir and offers him everything that he has. Each of these offers seems to acknowledge that the victor of the combat has earned the right to some form of inheritance or succession, but none of these offers are made in good faith.
5. In each case, the head, once removed, displays properties that make it physically dangerous. Specifically, all three heads develop corrosive properties. Lugaid’s head dissolves the stone on which it is placed. Balor’s head splits and poisons trees, or cracks rocks and the earth itself so deeply that a lake is formed. The blood that drips from Mess Gegra’s head pierces through a pillar-stone, and in a poem in the ‘D’ version of AC, his brain is described as giving Conchobar *dig di nathrach neim* ‘a drink of a snake’s venom’ and as being itself *neimnech* ‘venomous’ or ‘poisonous’.⁴⁷ The destruction that it causes to Conchobar leaves him immobilized and effectively sterile for a

⁴⁷ This poem is not found in all manuscripts of this version of AC, and so Kobel does not include it in her edition of the text (2015: 27). I instead here cite the edition of Meyer (1906: 18–21).

period of seven years. Given the association between the body of the king and the land itself, Mess Gegra's brain could potentially be read here as having a harmful impact on the landscape.⁴⁸ In all three cases, the various acts of dismemberment to the body are mirrored by the ability of the head to cause disintegration, though this is greatly magnified in Balor's case.

6. The attempt at posthumous revenge consistently fails when the instruction regarding the placement of the head is disobeyed. This comes about when Conall Cernach and Lugh instead take the heads as trophies, which suggests the value of the heads as trophies is greater than the rewards that were promised in consequence of placing the heads on their own.

In addition to these structural similarities, the stories discussed also present a number of parallel thematic concerns. In the two Ulster Cycle stories, there is a strong focus on questions of correct behaviour, particularly in the context of single combat. The appeals to *fir fer* and *fir ngaiscid* offer Conall Cernach an opportunity to display ethical behaviour and honour, just as the combats themselves allow him to display his martial abilities. The personal attributes and broad skill set of the hero are showcased in these stories not just through physical strength and honour, but also through intelligence. Conall Cernach and Lugh are both superior warriors, but both are also clever enough not to be taken in by the traps laid for them by Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor. Vengeance is another shared theme of these stories, both leading to and stemming from the central combats involved. In these episodes, posthumous revenge is a matter of intent rather than accident. That harmful intent is transferred from the living person to their severed head, which is thus transformed into a weapon and an instrument of vengeance. The dangerous properties that these heads develop after being severed can be connected to the more general circumstances that create restless spirits and malevolent ghosts in stories from all over the world: unfinished business and the desire for vengeance. In these dangerous and toxic heads, we see the reverse of the healing powers that are often attributed to the relics of saints, with the heads inheriting and perpetuating the malevolent intent of their previous owners, just as the saints' relics continue the holiness inherent in the body of the living saint.⁴⁹ We find positive attributes not only in the case of saints' relics, however. In *Goire Conaill Chernaig* we are told of Conall Cernach's own severed head that *Ata a tarngire do Ulaib a breth budthes aris 7 doicfa a nert cétna intib aris acht co n-ebad as as* (Meyer 1897: 105, l. 18–106, l. 2) 'The Ulaib had a prophecy about its being carried southwards again and that their original strength would come to them again, but only if they drank milk from it'. In Mess Gegra's severed head also, we find not only the dangerous, negative attributes previously discussed but also the more positive ones that might be expected of the heads of saints or kings: the ability to provide salvation

⁴⁸See McCone (1990), Chapter 5 on 'Kingship and society', for the reciprocal relationship between the king and the land.

⁴⁹Helen Imhoff (2018) has discussed some of the ways that aspects of the body after death, including its physical properties and its burial, act as a continuation of the characterization of the living person.

and the ability to provide protection. AC tells us that *is nemedach gach aen fora racha incind Miscegra ic dol fria bás 7 ata briathar a breth fodes a Lagnib 7 fortamlus doib iarsin* (Meyer 1906: 10n)⁵⁰ ‘each one upon whom the head of Mess Gegra goes as he is dying is guaranteed heaven and there is a saying that it will be brought southwards to Leinster and they will have supremacy after that’.

Transformation, both of the head itself and caused by the head, is also a theme found in the various versions of the ‘incident of the head’. In the case of Mess Gegra’s head, we see that the transformation does not end with the attempt on Conall Cernach’s life, or even with the use of his brain as a weapon against Conchobar. Mess Gegra’s transformation continues as his brain becomes a holy relic and then a lake-monster, and in its ability to offer salvation to those it touches at the moment of death, Mess Gegra’s brain also has a transformative power. Lugaid’s head is most limited in its transformations, but it does have the ability to melt stone, and the place where his head is forgotten is renamed because of this incident (Kimpton 2009: l. 486). Balor’s ability to transform spreads well beyond direct contact with his head, altering the landscape in which his severed head is placed, and thus extending his malicious intent beyond the limits of his own body. Just as the abilities of the living warrior are displayed by Conall Cernach and Lugh, so the potential abilities of the body after death are displayed by the heads of Mess Gegra, Lugaid, and Balor.

The affinities between these three separate episodes are clear, and so the question of the relationship between them must be considered. *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*, dated to the eighth century (Kimpton 2009: 8), is the earliest of the texts. As previously mentioned, Thurneysen saw the combat between Conall Cernach and Lugaid as a model for the combat between Conall Cernach and Mess Gegra in *Talland Étair*, which dates to the ninth century (Ó Dónaill 2005: 39).⁵¹ The earliest attested form of the ‘incident of the head’ in connection with Balor is DF XVI, which has been dated to c. 1150 by Gerard Murphy (1953: cxvi).⁵² Radner, who discusses Balor as a stand-in for invaders, first the Vikings and then the English, states that: ‘It seems to me no coincidence, furthermore, that the tale gains a new closing motif — the so-called Episode of the Head — during the period at which the English conquest of Ireland intensified’ (1992: 146). Radner further suggests that what Balor offers Lugh in exchange for placing his head on his own is, in fact, ‘that the Irish hero will learn to behave like his oppressor’ (1992: 147). This is an entirely plausible contemporary

⁵⁰I quote here from the Meyer edition of the text because this passage is found in the Edinburgh manuscripts of the text and is therefore not treated as part of the main text of the A version. Kobel refers to this passage (2015: 61, 143, and 342) and provides a transcription (433–4), but does not provide an edition of it.

⁵¹Ó Dónaill instead suggests that *TÉ* may be the source of BMMM, stating that ‘this episode is not contained in *TBC* Rec. I, so it is possible, as the language of *TÉ* is generally older than that of the LL *Táin*, that *TÉ* was the source for this incident in the later recension’ (2005: 6). The incident under discussion is not contained in any recension of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but there is an unrelated passage called *Bresleach Maige Murthemne*, which begins at l. 2121 of O’Rahilly’s edition. There may be some confusion between BMMM and this part of the LL *TBC* based on their titles.

⁵²On the dating of the poems in *Duanaire Finn*, see further Carey (2003b).

reading of this scene, and a demonstration of how the same narrative structure can convey different messages in different contexts. However, we cannot be certain that this episode had not previously been associated with Balor's death in the oral tradition, in which the conflict between Balor and Lugh continues to play a dynamic role into at least the nineteenth century. Despite the numerous transformations to the story, it has in many cases retained the 'incident of the head', which suggests that this is one of the more stable, and therefore potentially older, elements of the narrative. It is not possible to argue for direct influence in this case, but it seems that we are dealing with a relatively cohesive narrative episode that could be inserted into various stories about vengeance and single combat. Further, as we have seen, during the earlier period this seems to have been associated with the mythological context involving the figures of *le borgne* and *le manchot*. In the 'incident of the head' we have the framework of a narrative episode that could be fleshed out and reshaped as required in different ways and in multiple narrative contexts, a thematic and motival complex that offers insight into the dynamic and transformative nature of stories inherited throughout the Irish mythological, literary, and folk traditions across centuries.

6. ABBREVIATIONS

AC	<i>Aided Chonchobair</i>
BMMM	<i>Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemni</i>
CMT	<i>Cath Maige Tuired</i>
CMT ²	<i>Cath Muighe Tuireadh</i>
DF	<i>Duanaire Finn</i>
LL	The Book of Leinster (TCD MS H 2. 18 (1339))
TBC	<i>Táin Bó Cúalgne</i>
TÉ	<i>Talland Étair</i>

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