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'The role of the *Cuilebad* in *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla*'

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The Role of the *Cuilebad* in *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla*

Kevin Murray

In early Irish Literature the author or narrator of the story often liked to have details in the tale which helped 'prove' its veracity for the reader or listener. Two types of proof are common. The first is that a character in the story returns and relates the tale before departing again or the story is rediscovered in some way that confirms its authenticity.¹ The second is that the characters in a tale return from their exploits – often in the Otherworld – with some physical proof of their journey or deeds.²

This second type of 'proof' is the one with which this paper is concerned. The Otherworld tokens brought back to the mortal world by the returning hero may serve different functions in the stories in which they appear. They may remain as proof until the time of narration, they may disappear back into the Otherworld and in some cases we are not told what happens to them.

In *Baile in Scáil* after Conn Cétchathach has encountered the phantom (Lug) and the sovereignty of Ireland, they disappear leaving Conn and his poet Cessarn with the vat, ladle and cup of the sovereignty goddess along with the four rods of yew on which Cessarn had cut in *ogam* the names of the future kings of Ireland listed by the phantom.³ Even though this bringing back of physical property from the Otherworld serves as the basis of the validity of the following king-list as well as helping to 'prove' the occurrence of the encounter, we are not told what happens to these items. In *Echtra Nerai* Nera returns from the Otherworld to warn of the imminent invasion of Crúachu and he brings with him 'the fruits of summer' (*toirthé samruid*) to prove to his people that he had been in the *síd*.⁴ As in *Baile in Scáil* we are not told what happens to these Otherworld items afterwards.

1 See Nagy, 'Close Encounters', 129–49, for a detailed examination of this issue.

2 See Carey, 'Sequence and Causation', 72, for a list of some of these Otherworld tokens.

3 Thurneysen, ed., 'Baile in Scáil', §9.

4 *Echtra Nerai* (ed. Meyer, 'The Adventures of Nera'), §10. This is paralleled in *Vita S. Albei* §54 (ed. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 130–1), where Ailbe returns from overseas with a fruiting branch. See the discussion of this in M. Herbert, 'Literary Sea Voyages and Early Munster Hagiography', 184–5.

In *Da Apstol Décc na hÉrenn* an enormous flower appears to the 'twelve apostles' of Ireland from the Otherworld.⁵ A lot is cast amongst them to see who should go in search of this Land of Promise which is capable of producing such a wondrous flower. In the end Brendan of Clonfert goes (with a large crew) in the place of Brendan of Birr. He sees many awful and wonderful sights but the flower is mentioned no more in the tale. It has served its function by getting Brendan and his crew to undertake the journey.

In the tale *Tochmarc Becfhóla* the jewellery from the corpses of the Otherworld warriors who share Daminis with St Molaisse is used to make (or decorate) his shrine, crosier (and other emblems), and so the Otherworld tokens remain in this world.⁶

In *Echtra Cormaic maic Airt* Cormac finds himself once more in Tara having returned from the Otherworld with his family and with a magical branch and cup.⁷ This cup is said to have been able to distinguish between truth and lies but it disappears back into the Otherworld after the death of Cormac.

In the *immrama* the use of this literary tool is common. In *Immram Brain* Bran returns from the Otherworld and relates his adventures to the people of Ireland from a boat at the shore. He writes down the poems (which form the bulk of the text) in ogam and then sails off, never to be seen again.⁸ Earlier in the story Bran finds a magic branch which is taken from him and brought back to the Otherworld.⁹

In *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* five half-ounces of silver, part of a silver net that Máel Dúin and Durnán row through on their voyage, are brought home and placed on the altar at Armagh. Durnán explicitly states that he is bringing home this piece of silver net so that his story will be more readily believed.¹⁰ This is echoed in *Immram Curaig Ua Corra* where it is said that the adventurers row through the same net that Máel Dúin encountered and one of them, Lochán, puts three half-ounces of it aside as a token of the story.¹¹

This literary device is also used in the voyage tale *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla*.¹² The clerics, Snédgus and Mac Riagla, return home from their

5 Plummer, ed., *Bethada*, vol. I, 96.

6 *Tochmarc Becfhóla*, (ed. Bhreathnach, 'A New Edition'). This has been discussed by Carey, 'Otherworlds and Verbal Worlds', 35-7.

7 Ed. and trans. Hull, 'Echtra Cormaic'.

8 Mac Mathúna, ed., *Immram Brain*, §66.

9 Mac Mathúna, ed., *Immram Brain*, §31.

10 Oskamp, ed., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, §26. See also Stokes, ed., 'The Voyage of Mael Duin'.

11 Stokes, ed., 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', §51.

12 The poetry of this text is edited and translated by Thurneysen in *Zwei Versionen*; see also Thurneysen, 'Corrigenda to Snedgus', and 'Strophe 57'. The prose part of this text is edited and translated by Stokes, 'The Voyage of Snédgus'. The poetry has recently been translated by Ó hAodha, 'The Poetic Version'. All the *immrama* are edited by Van Hamel in *Immrama*.

voyaging with a wondrous leaf which is identified in the 12th century prose version of the text with Colum Cille's *cuilebad*.¹³ This is both a wonderful treasure to bring home from the Otherworld as well as serving as proof of the wondrousness of the voyage. We come across this *cuilebad* on the island of birds in the story. The clerics meet a great bird who tells them the story of creation and narrates to them the story of the life of Christ before giving them tidings of Doom. Then we are told:

7 dober in t-én duillinn di duilib in chrainn sin dona cléirchib, 7 méit seched daim móir in duillenn sin. 7 asbert frisna cléirchiu a tabairt leó for altóir Coluim Chille na duille sin. Conid hí cuilefaid Coluim Chille andiu, i Ceannandus atáside.¹⁴

And the bird gives one of the leaves of that tree to the clerics and that leaf was the size of the hide of a large ox. And he told the clerics to put that leaf upon Colum Cille's altar. So that is Colum Cille's flabellum today; it is in Kells.¹⁵

What is most interesting here is that this passage gives an Otherworld beginning to an item we know to have existed.¹⁶ There is an entry in the *Annals of Tigernach* for 1090 that reads:

¹³ *Cuilebad* is the entry in *DIL* while it is spelled *cuilefaid* in this text.

¹⁴ Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 84, ll. 72–6.

¹⁵ It is worth noting here that there is more than one version of the journey of Colum Cille's clerics. Along with the interspersed poetry and prose which make up *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla*, YBL also contains another prose version of the story known as *Echtra Cléirech Choluim Cille* which has been edited and translated by Stokes ('The Adventure of St Columba's Clerics') and which has also been edited and translated by R. Thurneysen in *Zwei Versionen*. He omits the text's abridged version of *Fís Adomnáin*. The additional MS 30,512 of the British Museum contains a copy of the story known as *Merugud Cléirech Choluim Chille* which has been edited by Ó Máille ('Merugud Cléirech Choluim Chille') with variant readings from the Book of Fermoy. The Book of Fermoy version of *Merugud Cléirech Choluim Chille* has been translated into Modern Irish by O'Growney ('Iomramh Shneadhghusa'). It has also been translated into German by Thurneysen ('Wie Snedgus'). Finally there is a version of the story known as *Sechrán Cléirech Choluim Chille* contained in Mánuis Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Colaim Chille*, (ed. and trans. O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 382–403). These sources range in date from the 10th century poetry of *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla* to the 16th century *Betha Colaim Chille*. The only source that identifies the leaf given to Colum Cille's clerics with his *cuilebad* is the early 12th century prose of *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla*. None of the other versions of the story make this identification. *Echtra Cléirech Choluim Cille* tells us that the leaf has stories of heaven and hell inscribed on it. *Sechrán Cléirech Choluim Cille* tells us that the leaf is to be found in Iona. The bird in *Merugud Cléirech Choluim Chille* tells the clerics to bring the leaf to Colum Cille's altar to reveal and to testify to the wonders they had seen and heard.

¹⁶ Colum Cille's *cuilebad* has recently been the subject of study by Ó Floinn in 'Sandhills, Silver and Shrines', 131–2; idem, 'Insignia Columbae I', 155–8.

Minda Colaim chille .i. Clog na righ 7 an Chuillebaigh 7 in da Sosscéla do tabairt a Tír Conaill 7 .uíí. fichit uinge d'airged, 7 Aenghus Húa Domnallan isse dos-fuc atuaidh.

The sacred relics of St Colum Cille, i.e. the bell of the kings and the flabellum and the two gospels were brought from Tír Conaill along with 140 ounces of silver; and it was Óengus Ua Domnalláin that brought them from the north.¹⁷

O'Curry¹⁸ makes a clever connection between this entry and one listed in the *Annals of the Four Masters* s.a. 1109, which makes it seem possible that Colum Cille's *cuilebad* may have ended up in Kells as is stated in our *immram*.¹⁹ The entry reads:

Oengus Ua Domhnalláin, primh anmchara 7 ard-shenoir samhtha Colaim Cille, décc hi cCenandus.

Óengus Ua Domnalláin, chief confessor and chief elder of St Colum Cille's community, died at Kells.²⁰

The most telling piece of evidence against the *cuilebad* being in Kells c.1090–1109, however, is the entry in the *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 1034.9 where it is stated:

Maicnia H. Uchtan, fer leiginn Cenannsa, do bathad ic tiachtain a hAlbain, 7 culebad Coluim Cille 7 tri minna do minnaib Patraicc 7 tricha fer impu.²¹

Maicnia Ua hUchtáin, lector of Kells, was drowned coming from Scotland [along with] Colum Cille's flabellum, three relics of Patrick and thirty men as well.²²

Dr John Carey has suggested to me that the loss of the original flabellum in 1034 and its replacement by another between 1090 and 1109²³ might have been

17 Ed. and trans. Stokes, 'The Annals of Tigernach. The Continuation', 12.

18 O'Curry, *Lectures*, 334–5.

19 John Bannerman notes that the *cuilebad* may, for a time, have been 'the badge of Columba's authority in Ireland'. See 'Comarba Coluim Chille and the Relics of Columba', 43–4.

20 Ed. and trans. O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*.

21 Ed. and trans. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*.

22 For more information on the roles of Óengus Ua Domnalláin and Maicnia Ua hUchtáin in the monastic *familia* of Colum Cille, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 89, 98–9, 102, 176.

23 Ó Floinn, 'Insignia Columbae I', 156, suggests that the *cuilebad* may have been recovered after being reported lost in 1034.

the motivation behind the 12th century prose redactor's identification of the leaf obtained by Colum Cille's clerics with his flabellum, thus vouching for the marvellous origins and importance of the substitute.²⁴

Olden²⁵ points out that *cuilebad* is a vernacular term compounded of *cuil* 'fly' (Latin *culex* 'midge') and *badh* 'destruction' which gives us a very succinct definition to what we call a liturgical fan or flabellum in English.²⁶ The term *cuilebad* is closest in meaning to one of the Latin terms for 'fan', i.e. *muscifugium* (*musca* 'a fly'; *fugio* 'to flee, escape, avoid') and appears to be a semi-calque on the Latin word.

A flabellum in liturgical use is a fan made of leather, silk, parchment or feathers intended to keep insects away from the Sacred Species and the priest.²⁷ The flabellum was used in the Roman church until the fourteenth century, but in the Oriental liturgies the flabellum is used to the present day.²⁸ The liturgical fan was known in the early Irish church as it is represented in illuminations in the *Book of Kells* as well as being among the religious relics associated with Colum Cille,²⁹ St Patrick³⁰ and St Éimíne.³¹ As Olden points out, the term *cuilebad* caused confusion for many years in the last century and gave rise to much debate³² until the publication of *Irische Texte* II, i³³ in which the word flabellum was glossed *culebath* in one of the glosses on the *Soliloquia* of St Augustine.

There is another interesting reference to Colum Cille's *cuilebad* which is given in the treatise on *ogam* in the *Book of Ballymote* (p. 312 of the facsimile).³⁴ It is in

24 Dr Carey has also drawn my attention to a striking parallel to the *cuilebad* in Patch's paraphrase of the 12th century (?) Alexander romance *Iter ad Paradisum*: '... It seems that after the conquest in India [Alexander] came to the Ganges and was told that its source was in the Garden of Eden. Inhabitants of the country round about had fished huge leaves out of the stream to cover the roofs of their houses, and these leaves when dried, had a marvellous fragrance.' Cited from Patch, *The Other World*, 157.

25 Olden, 'On the Culebath', 355–8. This is the most extensive discussion of the subject following on from the treatments in Reeves, ed., *The Life of Columba*, 321–3 and O'Curry, op. cit., 332–5.

26 This type of compound (formed with *bad* or *ba*) is also found for *bóbath* 'a murrain'; *duineba(d)* 'mortality'; *echba* 'mortality of horses' etc. Some of these are listed in Meyer, ed., 'Tochmarc Emire', 245.31.

27 Toke, 'Flagellants', 89.

28 For the best recent discussion of the *cuilebad* and the flabellum in general, see Richardson, 'Remarks on the Liturgical Fan', 27–34.

29 Richardson points out that 'some scholars believe that it is St Columcille's flabellum that is represented on the Carndonagh cross-pillar in Co. Donegal, near the saint's home territory', *ibid.*, 30. Ó Floinn, 'Insignia Columbae I', 157, notes that 'although these *may* be representations of flabella, the identification is by no means certain'.

30 His *cuilebad* is mentioned in the *Annals of the Four Masters* s.a. 1128.

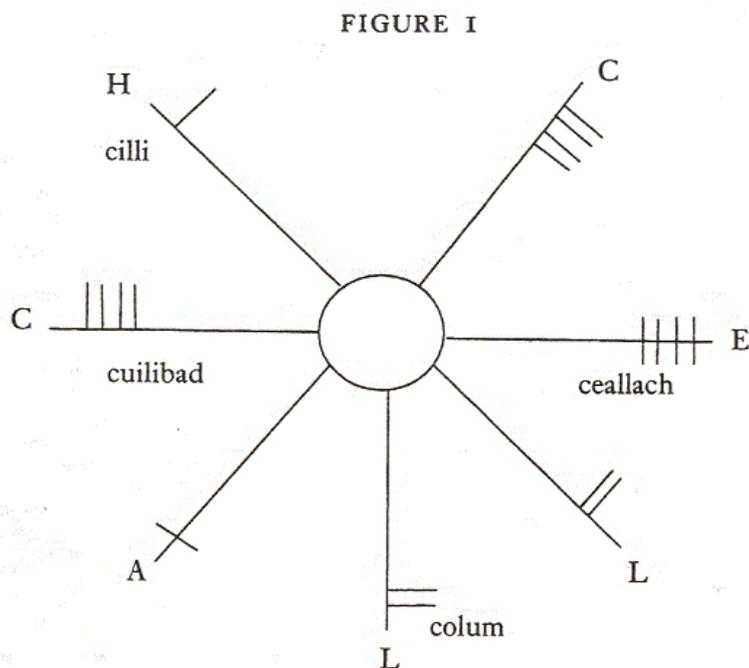
31 See Poppe, 'A Middle Irish poem', 59–72, at §17.

32 There is also a detailed footnote on the *cuilebad* in the *Annals of Loch Cé* (ed. and trans. Hennessy, vol. I, 36 n. 2).

33 Windisch, ed., 'Die altirischen Glossen', 155. See also Stokes and Strachan, eds, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, vol. II, 8.

34 This plate is reproduced in *Auraicept na n-Éces*, (ed. Calder, 302).

the form of a diagram (See Figure 1). The ogam letters spell out the name Cellach.³⁵ This is given (as Ceallach) on the right hand side of the diagram. When this name is removed the words *cuilibad colum cilli*³⁶ (recte *cuilebad Choluim Chille*) remain which Dr Carey suggests to me may have been a name for this kind of 'wheel-writing' because its appearance suggests the shape of a flabellum.



It is noteworthy to see how an item of historical record is given such an interesting beginning. This may be partly due to the absence of liturgical fans in the later literature with a consequent loss in understanding of the term *cuilebad*.³⁷ It is a striking example of the 'proof of occurrence' literary device. The *cuilebad* is exotic enough to be viewed solely as a treasure brought back from the Otherworld while its very historicity lends authority to the tale. In an era when the cult of relics played an important rôle in Christianity, the blending together of a relic of Colum Cille with an Otherworld origin serves as another instance of the concrete approach of early Irish writers to their subject material.³⁸

35 For another example of Cellach used in this way as a sample word, see Calder, ed., op. cit., 5826. I have spelt out C-E-L-L-A-C-H at the ends of the spokes of this 'wheel-writing'. This is not in the MS.

36 From left to right cilli-cuilibad-colum.

37 As Olden points out, the *culebad* of *AU* 1034 is rendered *cu lebad* by the Four Masters s.a. 1034 and translated by O'Donovan as 'with the bed'.

38 I wish to thank Prof. Próinséas Ní Chatháin, Prof. Máire Herbert and Dr Jonathan Wooding for their assistance with this paper; Dr Thomas Owen Clancy for making his paper 'Subversion at Sea' [q.v.] available to me in advance of publication and, most especially, Dr John Carey for his great help and many valuable suggestions.

ADDENDUM

Since completing this paper, I have had the opportunity to present it to the MPhil. Seminars of the Board of Medieval Studies, UCD. A number of interesting points were raised there, especially by Prof. F. J. Byrne, which I wish to briefly touch upon. Firstly, it was mentioned that names containing the first element *Snéd-* were very common in eighth-century Ireland, though relatively rare thereafter. This ties in with a point made a number of years ago that the events of the poem were originally set during the reign of Donnchad Midi mac Domnaill († 797) and deliberately confused afterwards [See Murray, '*Immram Snedgusa 7 Maic Riagla: An Early Irish Voyage Tale*', 31–2]. Secondly, *Cellach* is a particularly appropriate name to spell out in the context of the wheel-writing (noted above) as it was the name of the Abbot of Iona who founded Kells. Thirdly, part of the motivation for the prominent role given to the wonderful otherworld leaf of the 10th century poetry of *Immram Snédgusa 7 Maic Riagla* might be found in contemporary annal entries, such as that recorded in *The Annals of Inisfallen* s.a. 947:

Duilend do nim for altoir nImblecha Ibair 7 in t-én do labrad risna doenib ...

A leaf [descended] from heaven upon the altar of Imlech Ibuir, and a bird spoke to the people ...

Prof. P. Ní Chatháin pointed out that stories such as this were most probably motivated by pilgrims returning with palm leaves and similar tokens and then placing these on altars back in Ireland.