e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies

4-10-2013

"Finn and the Man in the Tree" Revisited

William Sayers
Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.uwm.edu/ekeltoi

Part of the Celtic Studies Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Folklore Commons, History Commons, History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, Linguistics Commons, and the Theatre History Commons

e-KELTOI

"Finn and the Man in the Tree" Revisited

William Sayers, Cornell University

Abstract

When he takes refuge in a tree along with animal familiars, Derg Corra, the fugitive in the anecdote "Finn and the man in the tree", not only positions himself between culture and nature but also extemporizes a world tree, complete with various insignia of the tripartite cosmos as conceived in early Irish thought. Thus sacralizing the tree, he hopes to escape Finn's retribution through the creation of a personal sanctuary.

Keywords

Cosmology, Finn mac Cumaill, sanctuary, World Tree

The anecdote known as "Finn and the man in the tree" is preserved in a single manuscript and figures in an extra-literary context, in that it is cited in a commentary on the law tract *Senchas már*. [1] Its ostensible purpose is to define, through illustration, the divinatory ability called in early Irish *imbas forosnai* (approximately "illuminating knowledge"). [2] The first half of the commentary explains how Finn acquired this talent—NOT the story of the salmon of knowledge and the burned thumb, [3] but of a finger caught in a closing Otherworld door—while the second shows this competency in action, when Finn can identify an exiled member of the *fían*, Derg Corra, who is discovered in the forest in exceptional circumstances: sitting in a tree and surrounded by representatives of the natural kingdom with whom he shares his simple, uncooked food.

In the recent collection of essays, *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (2012), no fewer than four contributions deal with some aspect of "Finn and the man in the tree". In a study with a wider scope than this single anecdote, Kevin Murray seeks to date the text and situate it chronologically in the early Finn matter, *fianaigecht*. [4] Sharon J. Arbuthnot mentions Finn and

the man in the tree in connection with an entry from *Sanas Cormaic* that begins "rincne quasi quinque".[5] And Geraldine Parsons calls attention to ways in which the anecdote differs from the later Finn tradition as exemplified in *Acallam na Senórach*.[6] A fourth scholar, Kaarino Hollo, on the other hand, makes the object of Finn's attention the focal point of her essay, which is entitled "'Finn and the man in the tree' as verbal icon".[7]

While the opening part of the commentary on *imbas forosnai* has been far from neglected in Irish studies, the concluding part is less than familiar to many and warrants reproduction here. The text follows Meyer's edition and translation of 1904.

> Luid didiu Derc Corra for loinges ⁊ arfoēt caill ⁊ imthiged for luirgnib oss n-allta (si verum est) ar a ētrumai. Laa n-aill didiu do Find isin caill oc a cuingidh-som co n-aca Find in fer i n-ūachtar in craind ⁊ lon for a gūalainn ndeis ⁊ find-lestur n-uma for a lāimh clī, osē co n-usce ⁊ hē brecc bedcach and ⁊ dam allaith fo bun in craind ⁊ ba hē abras ind fhir teinm cnō ⁊ dobered leth n-airne na cnō don lun nobíth for a gūalaind ndeis, no-ithed feisin al-leth n-aill ⁊ doicsed a uball asin lestar n-uma būi for a lāimh clī ⁊ noranda[d] i ndē ⁊ docuireth a leth don dam allaid būi fo bun in craind. No-ithad som iarom in leth n-aill ⁊ no-ibed loim fair den uisce asin lestur huma būi for a lāim co mbo comōl dō frisin n-iich ⁊ a n-oss ⁊ in lon. Friscomarcar didiu a muinter do Finn cia bo hē isin crunn, ar nī nathgēntar som digh celtair dī chlithe būi imbe.

> Then Derg Corra went into exile and took up his abode in a wood and used to go about on shanks of deer (*si uerum est*) for his lightness. One day when Finn was in the woods seeking him he saw a man in the top of a tree, a blackbird on his right shoulder and in his left hand a white vessel of bronze, filled with water in which there was a skittish trout, and a stag at the foot of the tree. And this was the practice of the man, cracking nuts; and he would give half the kernel of a nut to the blackbird that was on his right shoulder while he would himself eat the other half; and he would take an apple out of the bronze vessel that was in his left hand, divide it in two, throw one half to the stag that was at the foot of the tree, and then eat the other half himself. And on it he would drink a sip of the bronze vessel that was in his hand, so that he and the trout and the stag and the blackbird drank together. Then his followers asked Finn who he in the tree was, for they did not recognize him on account of the hood of disguise which he wore.

Hollo reviews earlier discussions of the anecdote by John Carey, Anne Ross, and Joseph Falaky Nagy, before proposing her own radical reassessment of the text and its eminently graphic qualities. This prior scholarship may be further summarized as follows, with schematization intentionally chosen to point to the complementary, if not exclusively novel, orientation of "the man in the tree" in conceptual space and time that will follow below. In separate notes, Carey considers the style of rhetorics and onomastics, and his explanation of *Derg Corra* is reviewed below. Ross, who interprets the name as "peaked red one", links Derg

Corra with representations of the horned or antlered and presumably divine "Cernunnos figure", other hypostases of which may be situated under the rubric of Nurturer or Lord of the Animals and also appear in a more overtly Christian environment.[8] Nagy's view is that the expelled Derg Corra is "in a condition of oscillation between the states of culture and nature" (see also Hollo 2012: 51). Nagy further writes:

> [T]he gilla, the member of a marginal human organization (the *fían*) before his expulsion, now lives together with beasts in a natural setting and even shares his food with them. The fundamental cultural distinctions between human and animal, hunter and game, and consumer and consumable are not in force here.[9]

Nagy emphasizes what could be characterized as a horizontal co-ordinate that runs between poles of nature and culture, the human and animal, even, to expand a bit, hermetical isolation and social organization, inchoate wilderness and the construct that is the lord's hall. Ross and Hollo, in rather different fashion, suggest a religious context and a hieratic image, one that we might well call two-dimensional, as suggested by the "icon" of Hollo's title. Signification is accessible only in the hidden third dimension of theology and religious belief, pagan or Christian. As for Hollo, she states:

> I wish to suggest … that the encounter of Finn and Derg Corra was designed by its author, no doubt incorporating pre-existing material from his native Irish tradition, to be read as a meditation upon the crucifixion and the Eucharist (2012: 54).

The remarks that follow address a different co-ordinate from that implicit in Nagy's study, the vertical one, as concretized in the tree and its ferule-like inscription on a tripartite cosmos that is also represented symbolically in the blackbird, stag, and trout.

Although the evidence is allusive and never as explicit as a statement of preserved prior belief, durable sets of motifs and far-reaching homological correspondences among these sets suggest an archaic Celtic conception of an equilibrated tripartite cosmos comprising 1) the sky or heavens, 2) the earth's surface, the human world, and 3) the underearth and undersea.[10] Christian theology, with its linear, rather than cyclic, time, and hierarchy of heaven above and hell below, modified the pagan worldview in both subtle and far-reaching ways and the synthesis as we meet it in the learned and narrative Irish texts of the early Middle Ages is distinctive. The two spatial co-ordinates—vertical and horizontal—organize cosmological motifs in early Irish literature: "vertical" but not necessarily hierarchized triadic sets and their "horizontal" extensions through homological correspondences that may vary in scalar terms. We may imagine a grid with such

groupings as 1) elemental dimensions (heaven; earth's surface; underearth and undersea); 2) social estate (kings, priests, lawmen, poets, historians; warriors; hospitallers, cultivators, herdsmen, hunters); 3) body parts (head, eyes, faculty of speech; arms, upper torso; lower torso, legs); 4) royal sins (injustice, sacrilege; cowardice, misuse of military force; economic extortion, sexual abuse); 5) punishments (hanging; wounding with weapons; pits, prisons); 6) colors (white; red; blue/green/black); and so on.

Three understudied reflections of the tripartite cosmos and its homological extensions that may be reviewed prior to a reconsideration of "the man in the tree" are water-fowl in early Irish narrative, the incantatory human stance called *corrguinecht*, and standing stones, sacred trees, and other expressions of the *axis mundi*. Water fowl often occur in the run-up to the central action of several Irish tales. They are elusive, when hunted by Cú Chulainn and his fellow Ulstermen in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn*), or tauntingly joined by chains of red gold as they fly overhead.[11] Such birds are hypostases of women from the *síd* or "fairy mound". In linking the water fowl motif with cosmic organization, we may identify the bird's trifunctionality in its ability to fly in the air, walk on land, and stand or swim in water. The crane, to take one gawky but graceful example, thus comprehensively resumes the inherent verticality of such phrasings as heaven, earth, and undersea. In early Irish texts the magic-working technique called *corrguinecht* (perhaps with an allusion to *corr* "crane") is an attribute of superior figures (euhemerized gods) and of sorcerers.[12] A vow or curse is given greater efficacy by the practitioner, with one eye closed, reciting in one breath into the fist of one hand, while standing on one leg (on occasion by a doorpost, see below). The three cosmic components are here implicated in the following equivalences: eye, breath (head) = sky; fist (as part of the arms and torso) = earth's surface; leg = underearth, all joined along the axis of the human body. The vertical position is combined with a reduction of the binary or dual (in a sense, horizontal and lateral) to the unitary, in what seems both a sacrifice and compensatory intensification of power (cf. the potent one-eyed and one-armed figures of many earlier and medieval literatures, not least Norse Óðinn and Týr). While not always an inimical or anti-social act, *corrguinecht* is performed alone and seeks to alter the course of events. The vertical axis that informs most allusions to a tripartite cosmos is also to be found in a variety of other metonyms, miniatures, or compressions of various kinds—all instantiations of the fundamental cosmic integrity.

To move closer to the anecdote of Finn and Derg Corra, the widespread conception of a cosmic or world tree—its roots in the underearth, the tips of its branches in the heavens, and the ceaseless activity of our best-known world throughout its boughs and foliage—has homologues in the various sacred trees (*bile*) of early Ireland that also served, it is believed, as traditional territorial boundary markers.[13] Standing stones may offer a fainter echo of this conception. A similar linearity is telescoped in the image of the doorpost to a hall, which has two coordinates, since, with its lintel and threshold, it also marks, horizontally, a *limes*, a threshold between the civilized, hierarchized, ruled Within of the royal hall and the wild, amorphous, and unruly Without of the forest, moor, and shore. In exercises of metonymical sacralization it would seem that almost any site on earth could be chosen and given provisional but heightened status as a kind of *omphalos*, an entry to, or contact point with, the whole cosmic force-field.

Against the backdrop of this dynamic, tripartite cosmology we may now review the situation and actions of "the man in the tree", Derg Corra. To simplify greatly and defer for the moment a discussion of the rich interconnectedness of the elements of the scene, a man in the top of a tree shares a nut with a blackbird on his shoulder, an apple with a stag at the foot of the tree, and a sip of water with the bird, deer, and a trout swimming in the bronze basin in his hand. While comparable animal taxonomies are central to the Western and Christian cultural tradition, in this iteration we may identify the blackbird with the aerial dimension of the cosmos, the stag with the terrestrial, and the fish with the subterranean and aquatic. The natural company the man keeps, including the tree itself with its crown, trunk, and foot, has homologues in his head, hands and arms, and lower body, while he himself may be thought to assume a degree of tripartite functionality.[14] The animal terminology is monosyllabic, with a variation on the position and quality of the vowel *o*: *oss*, *lon*, *eó* (the last-named animal introduced as *brecc* "speckled [fish]", generally understood as "trout", while *eó* is often "salmon", but also "yew").[15]

Homologous motif triads with cosmological overtones are not always complete or fully consistent in early Irish narrative, if external reality does not readily lend itself to the themes at hand. As concerns food stuffs in the anecdote under consideration, the water in the basin is easily recognized as representing the subterranean and aquatic dimension, as well as being the habitat of the fish, and the nut similarly evokes the aerial dimension, habitat, and sphere of operation of the blackbird. But the apple and stag do not appear to match up quite as neatly, since the former is, like the nut, an air-borne product, albeit of an earth-rooted tree. On the

vertical axis, the stag is also positioned below the fish, which has been removed by Derg Corra from its fully natural environment. The possible rigidity of homological sets pushed too far is also pertinent to the treatment of Derg Corra. His head (aerial dimension) is implicitly involved in eating and drinking; his shoulders, arms, and hand (terrestrial dimension) are in play throughout the quasi-ritual series of events; yet the lower body and legs (subterranean/aquatic dimension) are not named, since not implicated in the division and offering of food, it would seem, but are most surely engaged in maintaining the man's position in the tree.

Here, it is appropriate to note that other pairings, groupings and correspondences also tighten the weave of the narrative. Unlike the sorcerer's *corrguinecht* stance, the binary is not everywhere reduced to the unitary. Rather, the bird perches on one shoulder of two, the bronze basin is held in one hand of two. The nut and apple are divided in two and are shared with a pair of fellow beings. There is an effect parallel to that of *das Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder* on the verbal level according to which the third element of a speech or text string will have an amplified volume.[16] Paired with the scalar gradation from nut to apple, then basin, we have two instances of sharing a two-halved unit (nut, apple) between two eaters, followed by that of a less neatly quantifiable substance (water) shared among four "drinkers". In this context, we may note the prominent, even repetitive deictic effects in the text: right shoulder, left hand, cracking and passing across the nut, picking out, dividing, and throwing down the apple, then the complex of movements, the passing around, that would allow all four to drink together from the vessel ("comōl dō frisin n-iich ꟻ a n-oss ꟻ in lon").[17] Although Meyer translates "and this was the practice of the man", Old Irish *abras* generally means "gesture" or "action". Of these two, "gesture" seems the more appropriate in this hieratic context, since it both reflects intention and is suggestive of symbolic meaning.[18] To summarize as concerns triadic groups and homologies, implicated in the text are a vertical ordering of the cosmic dimensions, human body parts, animals and their Irish names, foodstuffs, shifts in scale, movement on the resulting grid, and the acts of fraternal division and joining among these.

A number of incidentals may be noted. The bronze vessel (which has a terrestrial tie as well), although serving the simplest of fare, is an economical marker of the Celtic Otherworld, where such luxury objects are part of the common décor of sumptuous feasts. There is no reason to think Derg Corra one of the Túatha dé Danann but the detail provides a hint of the preternatural and some enhanced or self-enhancing status on his part.[19] The juxtaposition of the

fish and nut recalls—is even a pointed reference to—one account of the process by which Finn acquired the skill of *imbas forosnai*, by biting his thumb burned by the roasted flesh of the salmon of knowledge that had consumed the nine hazelnuts from the Well of Wisdom (*Macgnímratha Find*). Both intertextuality and a kind of homeopathic empowerment are in play here, since this same *imbas forosnai* will allow Finn to identify the man in the tree with the nuts and fish. Derg Corra is said to move about as lightly as if on the shanks of a deer (note: *lurga* "shin-bone, shank" is also used of the trunk of a tree). Within the anecdote, this links the introduction to the actual deer at the foot of the tree but also recalls another Finn anecdote, preserved in *Sanas Cormaic*, where Finn again invokes *imbas forosnai* in order to identify another sought-after man, Ferchess, this one concealed in a large troop of men.[20] Numerology, fives not threes, is in evidence here too, as Finn scans the host by fives, perhaps sighting these warrior pentads over the outstretched fingers of his hand. In another narrative context, Ferchess is later killed by a spear cast when he is mistaken for a deer.

These cosmological referents, and intertextual and intracultural correspondences coalesce to create a scene dense with symbols and myriad interdependent details. But is the anecdote really about the cosmos or is such plenitude and detail no more than an intensifying, reinforcing rhetorical procedure intended to highlight thematics not readily apparent to modern readers? This is the fundamental question posed by the anecdote in the laconic circumstances of its citation in a commentary in *Senchas már*. At this point, it will be instructive to consider briefly three traditions with significant points of contact with the Finn tale, but apparently widely varying cosmological and ideological implications. These are the "wild man of the woods" (in a British frame of reference, often "woodwose"), the British Green Man and his European counterparts, and the Norse world tree, Yggdrasill.

Suibhne *geilt* is the best known Irish representative of the first category and it will be quickly seen that Derg Corra, as we have him, has little affinity with Suibhne, on whom panic was visited in the course of a battle, leading him to abandon society and live in the wilderness, less in the company of birds than as a bird. Even there he enjoys none of the calm that seems settled on Derg Corra. On Nagy's scale, Suibhne is far toward the pole of nature and far from that of culture. As noted, Ross discusses the hieratically posed, antlered Cernunnos figure of the Gundestrup cauldron, and the literatures and traditions of Britain have other hypostases of the Lord of the Animals.[21] Farther afield, we have the female Swedish *huldra,* male *huldrekarl,* and

skogsrå, Norwegian and Icelandic counterparts, Huld in continental Germanic tradition, and so on. The Scandinavian terminology is illuminating in that the names on the root *huld-* reference concealment (cf. Old Norse *hylja* "to hide") and shape-shifting, while *skogsrå* and related may be etymologized as "keeper of the forest". Both realizations are imminent in Derg Corra. But the deceit of which these Norse beings are thought capable is not present in the Irish figure, save in his possible act of self-concealment.

It is, however, the Green Man who has particular relevance to Finn and the man in the tree. In this tradition, often represented in Christian church iconography, a semi-human face appears in a mass of foliage, almost indistinguishable from the surrounding greenery, with facial features having leafy contours. In the Irish anecdote, however, one can imagine Derg Corra retreating into, not emerging from, the amorphous mass of boughs and leaves. It is only Finn's divinatory ability, the *imbas forosnai*, that allows this image to be brought back into focus, as in a successfully solved optical illusion or puzzle. There is, however, no apparent tie between the Green Man as a fertility figure and Derg Corra.

A schematic table will best set out the correspondences between Derg Corra's apparently quite ordinary tree and the world tree of Norse mythology (at least as transmitted by Snorri Sturluson).[22]

Derg Corra's tree	Yggdrasill
tree, earthly proportions	tree, cosmic proportions
seated warrior	suspended god
sharing food	acquiring knowledge
blackbird	eagle
stag	four stags
trout	serpent
man's moving hand	squirrel
food stuffs	foliage as food
basin of water	wells at foot of tree
site of reclusion	site of pain and learning

A major difference between the two in this comparison is the ceaseless activity, growth, and decay of the Norse tree, reflective of the northern European view of life itself, or so it would seem.[23] Óðinn's suffering, hanged on the tree in order to gain knowledge, like the secular acquisition of human experience and wisdom, stands in contrast to Derg Corra's untroubled presence, dispensing food, and thereby promoting the natural cycle, like a king in a well-ordered royal hall, where each food ration is appropriate to status and function. It may be best to view the tree as a template common to many cultures, which could be exploited for various kinds of

cosmological and existential statements.

Hollo's article makes only a brief allusion to the first half of the anecdote of Finn and the man in the tree and to Derg Corra's being expelled from the *fían*. It will, however, be relevant to present concerns to review this expulsion. Finn had returned from a foray with female captives and had reserved one for himself. She, however, preferred the *gille*, servant boy, who nimbly jumped back and forth across the fire pit, where the cooking was done. When Derg Corra, out of loyalty to Finn, rejected her advances, she denounced him in the love triangle familiar from the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, and the Irish *Fingal Ronáin*. Finn credits her allegations and judges the servant to have been disloyal and guilty of the crimes of implicitly contesting his authority and attempting to violate his property. Finn dismisses the servant, perhaps a young warrior-in-the-making,[24] and allows him three days grace (another "three") before Finn will come in pursuit. Derg Corra is then a fugitive, his exile is imposed, his situation in the tree is designed to keep Finn at bay, and his concealment, however effected, is intentional.

The name *Derg Corra* requires comment. Carey rejects a reading of *derg* "red" and instead proposes *dercc*, with one of three meanings 1) "eye, hollow, cavity"; 2) "pool"; 3) "berry". *Corr* is also polysemous: 1) "peak, point"; 2) "crane, heron"; 3) "pool, well, depression".[25] There is no comment on the further family connection (*Dercc Corra mac húi Daigre*). Given this plenitude and the various possible combinations, Carey makes no firm proposal and instead suggests that the personal name may originate in a place name from east Munster, where this and related tales are set. Yet Derg Corra's explicit tie to the *fulacht* or cooking pit and his subsequent dependence on uncooked food make his apparent function in the warrior troop a vital clue in explicating the name. In the field kitchens we may imagine for the semi-nomadic *fían*, some food may have been grilled over open fires but stones were also heated in fires and then dropped into pits to bring water to a boil and cook other meat. In addition to the meanings above, *dercc* also meant a "hole in the ground". Following this tack, we may proceed to select "well, depression filled with water" from among significations for *corr*. These equations would result in a name on a familiar Irish model (cf. Úath mac Imomain, "Fear, son of Terror"), based on the idea of the *fulacht* and cooking procedures: "Fire-Hole of/among the Boiling-Pits". Then, reading *daiger* as "flame, spark" (in preference to "blast, gust", as providing a draught for the fire, or "dart, arrow", etc.), the name Derg Corra can be completed by a pertinent family affiliation, *Úa Daigre* "of the Flame kin". It may not be amiss to suggest that, despite his

"concealment", Derg Corra does not entirely leave his former life behind. Although in the company of the *lon*, *oss*, and *eó*, blackbird, deer, and salmon (representatives of air, earth, and sea, but not fire), echoes of his function as cook's boy resonate in the unspoken near-homonyms *lón* "fat, provisions; haunch, rump, buttock", *eó* "point, skewer", and verb form *oss < oiscid* "he attends". Paronomasia is another homological technique of the early Irish *literati*. Nuts and cooked fish were a means for Finn to acquire knowledge—wherever it might be placed on the culture-nature axis; nuts and a live fish are Derg Corra's means to simple survival in nature.[26]

Derg Corra, the cook's boy, forced from the community and the communal cooking fire, has taken refuge in a natural world, among animals, and sustains himself with raw food without the benefit of utensils beyond the basin.[27] Hiding or simply sitting in a tree with animal familiars and a meager picnic might hardly be expected to put him beyond Finn's grasp. But Derg Corra and the storyteller have done more. Not only electing a strategic location on the horizontal nature to culture axis, they have aligned themselves with cosmic forces through an act of instantiation, turning an ordinary tree into an extemporized world tree or *axis mundi*, not so much making of this specific spot on the earth's surface the *omphalos*—or *omphalos* of the moment—as creating a vertical coordinate passing through the three dimensions or spheres of the cosmos, from the earth upwards. At every imagined point or stage on this axis the storyteller invests the construct with homologies of cosmic organization in the form of triads of attendant animals, foods, body parts, spatial zones, and movements. Like the sorcerer's incantation that follows assumption of the *corrguinecht* stance, Derg Corra has allied, even aligned, his will to concealment with cosmic dynamics in a kind of reverse epiphany in which he inscribes himself on the cosmos. He has turned an ordinary *crann* "tree" into a *bile* "sacred tree".[28] Through his desire for self-effacement—in a rather different sense than that of Zen Buddhism—he blends entirely into his natural surroundings, a Green Man (formerly a Red Man) falling back into the foliage. Only *imbas forosnai*, with its "illumination", can restore the original picture, in which a man can be clearly recognized against the backdrop of the tree, more specifically, the man in the tree recognized as the servant Finn is hunting. Derg Corra is, however, not a hypostasis of the Lord of the Animals but rather—as in the contemporary cult of celebrities—an impersonator.

It would seem that Finn's men see the man in the tree but can make nothing of the scene: "Friscomarcar didiu a muinter do Finn cia bo hē isin crunn, ar nī nathgēntar som digh celtair dī chlithe būi imbe" (Meyer: "Then his followers asked Finn who he in the tree was, for they did

not recognize him on account of the hood of disguise which he wore"). Here, there is a question of the degree of concreteness or abstraction. Old Irish *celtair* might designate a hood, as in Meyer's translation, but more abstractedly referenced "covering, concealment". Similarly, *clith* "hiding place, protection" is less personally immediate and willed than "disguise". "Hood of disguise" may then be something of an overreading. As Finn will show, identifying the symbolic import of the tree scene rather than a man's face is the key to identifying the protagonist. Here, Finn has credentials, since his family name *Úa Baiscne* is based on *baiscne*, explained by the learned Irish as 'large tree'.

Confronted with the man in the tree, Finn puts his thumb under his tooth and, when he withdraws it, is illumined with *imbas forosnai*.[29] In the elevated style of "rhetorics", he makes a pronouncement:

> "Con fri lon lethcno contethain cotith in dithraib Dercc Corra comól fri hich ni ba filliud fabaill a uball fín mblais cona fricarbaith m*a*c úi co dedail Daigre. Dercc Corra mac húi Daigre", ol sé, "fil isan crund."

Meyer excludes this rhetoric in his translation, save for the prosaic concluding sentence, but Hull offers a provisional rendering:

> "Along with drinking in common with a salmon, Dercc Corra of the desert eats jointly with a blackbird half of a nut that he has cracked. It was not with a bending (?) movement (?) of it that the son of Ó Daigre split his wine-sweet apple against a sharp set of teeth".[30] [Meyer] "Tis Derg Corra son of Ua Daigre," said he, "that is in the tree."

Some of the vocabulary calls for comment. *Dithrub* refers to a solitary and uninhabited place, not necessarily one without plant life or characterized by sand. Hull takes "filliud fabaill" to refer to Derg Corra's handling and division of the apple (twisting it in two?) but narrative and symbolical economy require that some reference to the deer be found in Finn's statement, as it must have figured in his deduction of not only the identity of the man in the tree but of his assumed symbolic status. Had there been no negative in the sentence, one might conclude that Derg Corra bent down and allowed the stag to bite off half of the apple. But *filliud* can also mean "turning around or back" and *fáball*, commonly "movement", has a temporal application with the signification "time, occasion". I suggest that the reference to the third and last of the animal familiars is both rhetorically amplified and allusive (in that the words *oss* or *dam* do not figure in it), and that the negative formulation is meant to emphasize its opposite, the positive action of

not averting oneself or refusing hospitality. Thus, "It was not by turning away on this occasion that the son of Ó Daigre split his wine-sweet apple against a (stag's) sharp set of teeth".[31]

Finn has grasped the whole scene and all its detail and, apparently prompted primarily by the presence of the three disparate animals, has drawn the same conclusion as this essay seeks to advance: that Derg Corra has created a sanctuary in and around a tree, if not originally sacred, then sacralized by his actions.[32] In this way, the denounced servant hopes to defend himself against his master's wrath. Unlike the externally directed effects of the *corrguinecht* stance and accompanying charms, and the internal, ingested, revelatory effect of *imbas forosnai*, Derg Corra seeks to create an exclusionary force field around his tree. We do not know how the story ends. The central albeit 'disguised' role of the concept of sanctuary in 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' has not been recognized in earlier scholarship.

Identification of the tree as a sanctuary prompts thoughts of Christian ecclesiastical sanctuaries. But—*pace* Hollo—the symbolic depiction of a Christian act of communion cannot have been the author's objective, which appears to be the creation of an appropriate pseudo-pagan setting for traditional tale-telling. At most, we may speak of eucharistic overtones to the scene. While Derg Corra has positioned himself strategically on the culture-nature axis, he has also identified his tree with the world tree and Irish sacred trees, through its willed coincidence with the vertical axis that unites the cosmos. He has, lastly, inscribed a more immediate but still invisible legal and jurisdictional line about the tree, through the creation of a personalized sanctuary.

While Christian theological matter is perhaps only hinted at in 'Finn and the man in the tree', the text is the product of the literate Christian society of medieval Ireland. Cosmological motifs, part of the traditional matter closely associated with Irish king tales and other heroic narrative (and having pan-European parallels), are employed by the author, as by the protagonist Derg Corra, to evoke the sacral ambiance once thought to be associated with venerated trees that were also highly functional, serving as boundary markers and sites of sanctuary. The similarly traditional compositional techniques of homologies, analogues, correspondences, intertextuality, multiple identities, even word play with near homonyms, often organized in triads, are complementary to, and referential of, the archaic conception of a tripartite but integrated cosmos.[33] This is not nostalgia for the old pagan ways nor simply learned antiquarianism as a means of amplifying the resonance of what John Carey (2006, 120) called a "curious little story".

At the heart of the anecdote, itself embedded—we now realize, appropriately—in the commentary to a legal tract, is a moot question of territoriality and jurisdiction. Derg Corra, already in exile and in jeopardy because of Finn's banishment and threat, has raised the stakes. He challenges Finn to understand his situation in the tree.[34] If Finn understands, Derg Corra stands to gain, since he trusts Finn to respect the sanctuary. Finn's gain, despite the advantage of *imbas forosnai*, can then be only comprehension, not vengeance. With the renewal of interest in Finn and the *fíana*, modern readers face a challenge similar to Finn's, albeit with less vital stakes: to win insight into a detail-rich anecdote that, by the rules of literary economy, should have a single, well defined theme in a comprehensible context. Not unlike the moment of epiphany at which the face of the Green Man emerges from the foliage, recognizing the intended function of Derg Corra's tree radically shifts our focus on the scene and what appeared a patchwork mosaic of motifs assumes its necessary structure and forceful clarity.

Endnotes

[1] *The Gaelic Finn Tradition*, Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), Dublin: Four Courts, 2012. The text has been edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, "Finn and the Man in the Tree," *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904), 344-9. Corrections were proposed in his *Fianagecht* (1910), XVIIIf., and in E. J. Gwynn, "Athirne's Mother," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 17 (1928), 156, n. 16, and "Varia: "Finn and the Man in the Tree"," *Ériu* 11 (1932), 152f.

[2] On *imbas forosnai*, see Paul Russell, "Notes on Words in Early Irish Glossaries," *Études Celtiques* 31(1995), 195–204, and John Carey, "The Three Things Required of a Poet," *Ériu* 48 (1997), 41–58. In the account of the acquisition of *imbas forosnai* in the present anecdote, we may note the connection with the serving of drink, the liminality represented by the door, the cosmic symbolism of the door post against which Finn's finger is jammed, and the general Otherworld ambiance—all matters to be discussed in greater detail below.

[3] For Finn and the burned thumb, see "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn" in Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), "Macgnímratha Find," *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881), 195–204, 508. Note the Norse parallel in the story of Sigurd.

[4] Kevin Murray, "Interpreting the Evidence: Problems with Dating the Early *Fianaigecht* Corpus," *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, 31-49.

[5] Sharon J. Arbuthnot, "Finn, Ferches and the *Rincne*: Versions Compared," *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, 62-80.

[6] Geraldine Parsons, "Breaking the Cycle? Accounts of the Death of Finn," *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, 81-96.

[7] Kaarina Hollo, ""Finn and the Man in the Tree" as Verbal Icon," *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, 50-61.

[8] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 135.

[9] Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 137.

[10] See William Sayers, "Tripartition in the Early Irish Tradition: Cosmic or Social Structure?" in *Indo-European Religion after Dumézil*, Edgar C. Polomé (ed.), *Journal of Indo-European Studies* Monograph Series 16 (Washington: Institute for the Study of Man, 1996), pp. 156-83., and, most recently, "Pre-Christian Cosmogonic Lore in Medieval Ireland: The Exile into Royal Poetics," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 14 (2012), 109-26.

[11] Otherworld women as water fowl in *Serglige Con Culainn*, Myles Dillon (ed.), Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953, par. 7; *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories*, Anton Gerard van Hamel (ed.), Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933, 3, par. 2.

[12] On *corrguinecht*, see Liam Breatnach (ed. and trans.), *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1987, 140, Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988, 60. Examples of practitioners are the god Lug in *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired,* Elizabeth Gray (ed. and trans.), London: Irish Texts Society, 1982, 59; the hag Cailb in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Eleanor Knott (ed.), Dublin: Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975, 11; and Cailb's counterpart in *Bruiden Da Choca*, Gregory Toner (ed.), London: Irish Texts Society, 2007, 118.

[13] The importance of boundaries and their markers is emphasized in several essays in *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*, Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman, and Edel Bhreathnach (eds), Dublin: Four Courts, 2011, in particular Edel Bhreathnach, "Transforming Kingship and Cult: The Provincial Ceremonial Capitals in Early Medieval Ireland," pp. 126-48, and Kay Muhr, "Place-names and the Understanding of Monuments," pp. 232-55.

[14] Metaphorical terminology for the body, family, and social status is pervaded by arboreal imagery, e.g., *bile* as 'warrior', and vice versa, e.g., *lám* 'hand' as 'branch'.

[15] For the Irish vocabulary discussed in this essay, see *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, E. G. Quin (gen. ed.), Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76. Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946, 319 2.c, confirms the monosyllabic status of *eó*. The interplay of the three words may be schematically presented as:

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\text{E}\\
\text{L O N}\\
\text{S}\\
\text{S}
\end{array}
$$

[16] Otto Behaghel, *Deutsche Syntax: Eine geschichtliche Darstellung,* 4 vols, Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1923-1932.

[17] Somewhat more speculatively, Derg Corra's actions can be referred to those of social stations in early Ireland: he gives as would a king, throws like a warrior, and shares as would the general population. The 3 (animals) + 1 (man) may be viewed as "a perfected 3".

[18] Here a few other slight correctives to Meyer's translation may be suggested. Building on the observation concerning *abras*, we may translate and repunctuate: "These were the man's gestures: when cracking nuts, he would give half…And after that, he would drink…". As for the opening metaphor "go about on shanks of deer for his lightness", it should surely read "go about on shanks of deer for their lightness", i.e., the lightness of the deer.

[19] On the Túatha dé Danann and Otherworld, see William Sayers, "Netherworld and Otherworld in Early Irish Literature," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 59 (2012), 201-30.

[20] See Arbuthnot (*op. cit.*), and William Sayers, "*Rincne quasi quinque* (*Sanas Cormaic*)," forthcoming.

[21] For a pan-European view, see the essays in *The Master of Animals in Old World Archaeology*, Derek B. Counts and Bettina Arnold (eds), *Archaeolingua*, Volume 24, Budapest: Archaeolingua Alapítvány, 2010; as concerns early Celtic iconography, see, in the same volume, Martin Guggisberg, "The Mistress of Animals, the Master of Animals: Two Complementary or Oppositional Religious Concepts in Early Celtic Art?", pp. 223-36.

[22] Information on Yggdrasill is found in three poems of *Elder Edda* and in Snorri Sturluson's prose *Edda*. The disputed etymologies of the names *Yggdrasill* and *Yggr* will not be pursued in the present note.

[23] The species of Derg Corra's tree is not stated but oak, Old Irish *daur*, would be an informed guess. The limited northern European distribution of the oak, plus other factors, would seem to exclude it from considerations of the Norse world tree, where ash is the preferred but not unanimous identification.

[24] On young Irish warriors-in-training, see Kim McCone, "The Celtic and Indo-European Origins of the *Fían*," *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, 14-30.

[25] John Carey, "Notes on Two Names," *Éigse* 35 (2006), 116-24, at 120-3.

[26] Derg Corra's non-martial status, youth, and sexual attractiveness also distance him from Finn.

[27] Note that all three animals are potentially edible.

[28] While *bile* is a common term for such venerated trees, it also has more mundane uses (*DIL*).

[29] It would be rewarding to gather all instances of *imbas forosnai* in order to determine whether the resulting insights are "case-specific" or whether they are experienced as a kind of epiphany, offering a holistic view of the cosmos and all its constituent truths.

[30] Vernam Hull, "A Rhetoric in 'Finn and the Man in the Tree'," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 30 (1967), 17-20.

[31] John Carey, "Obscure Styles in Medieval Ireland," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996), 23-39, offers a very different reading, which fails to account for Finn's recognition of the stag in the scene. Further, the apple is now shared with the salmon!

[32] Terminology in Old Irish for sanctuaries includes *sanctáir*, *termonn* (< Latin *terminus*), and *neimed*, with its pre-Christian origin. On the affinities of Christian ecclesiastical sanctuary with earlier pagan conceptions, see Tomás Ó Broin, "*Craebruad*: The Spurious Tradition," *Éigse* 15 (1973), 103-13; N. B. Aitchison, "Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland," *Traditio* 49 (1994), 45-75; Kelley A. Kilpatrick, "A Case Study of *Nemeton* Place-names," *Ollodagos* 25 (2010), 3-110; and Calvert Watkins, "Language, Culture or History?" in *Papers from the Parasession on Language and Behavior, Chicago Linguistic Society, May 1-2, 1981*, Roberta A. Hendrick, Carrie S. Masek, and Mary Frances Miller (eds), Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1981, pp. 238–48. On Christian sanctuary in practice and mispractice, see Donncha Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Aidan Breen, "The Laws of the Irish," *Peritia* 3 (1984), 382-438, and on its origins in the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, the gathering of essays devoted to the topic in *Peritia* 14 (2000).

[33] Another major equivalence that informs the story of Finn and the man in the tree is that between trees and the names of the letters of the alphabet and thus with literacy and literature. The anecdote then displays a meta-intertextuality, the story of a tree composed in tree-like symbols. *Crann* was also used of the axis on which Ogham letters were inscribed. To return to some earlier classificatory criteria, the nut, apple, and basin may be figured as roughly spherical objects. Inscribing these as round dots on the Ogham axis gives the letter *u*—for *uball*?

[34] If we were to trust *DIL* (*s.v.v. crann, fír*) on the matter, one might suggest that for Finn, the ordinary *crann* has become a *crann fír* "tree of truth, tree of ordeal". But the dictionary entry perpetuates a misreading of *crann fir* which means 'juniper'. No ordeal by tree figures in Fergus Kelly's comprehensive *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, "Ordeals", 209-11. The "tree of ordeal" is, however, known from ancient Indian jurisprudence; George King, *A Guide to the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta* by George King, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1895, 24.

References Cited

Aitchison, N. B.
1994. Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland. *Traditio* 49: 45-75.

Arbuthnot, Sharon J.
2012. Finn, Ferches and the *Rincne*: Versions Compared. In Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition,* pp. 62-80. Dublin: Four Courts.

Arbuthnot, Sharon J., and Geraldine Parsons, eds.
2012. *The Gaelic Finn Tradition.* Dublin: Four Courts.

Behaghel, Otto
1923-32. *Deutsche Syntax: Eine geschichtliche Darstellung.* 4 vols. Heidelberg: C. Winter.

Bhreatnach, Edel
2011. Transforming Kingship and Cult: The Provincial Ceremonial Capitals in Early Medieval Ireland. In Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman, and Edel Bhreathnach (eds), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*, pp. 126-48. Dublin: Four Courts.

Breatnach, Liam, ed. and trans.
1987. *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Carey, John
1997a. Obscure Styles in Medieval Ireland. *Mediaevalia* 19: 23-39.
1997b. The Three Things Required of a Poet. *Ériu* 48: 41–58.
2006. Notes on Two Names. *Éigse* 35: 116-24.

Counts, Derek B., and Bettina Arnold, eds.
2010. *The Master of Animals in Old World Archaeology*. Budapest: Archaeolingua Alapítvány.

Dillon, Myles, ed.
1953. *Serglige Con Culainn.* Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Gray, Elizabeth A., ed. and trans.
1982. *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired.* London: Irish Texts Society.

Guggisberg, Martin.
2010. The Mistress of Animals, the Master of Animals: Two Complementary or Oppositional Religious Concepts in Early Celtic Art? In Derek Counts and Bettina Arnold (eds), *The Master of Animals in Old World Archaeology*, pp. 223-36. Budapest: Archaeolingua Alapítvány.

Gwynn, E. J.
1928. Athirne's Mother. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 17: 154-56.
1932. Varia: Finn and the Man in the Tree. *Ériu* 11: 150-53.

Hollo, Kaarina
2012. "Finn and the Man in the Tree" as Verbal Icon. In Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition,* pp. 50-61. Dublin: Four Courts.

Hull, Vernam
1967. A Rhetoric in "Finn and the Man in the Tree". *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 30: 17-20.

Kelly, Fergus
1988. *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Kilpatrick, Kelley A.
2010. A Case Study of *Nemeton* Place-names. *Ollodagos* 25: 3-110.

King, George
1895. *A Guide to the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink.

Knott, Eleanor, ed.
1975. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies.

McCone, Kim
2012. The Celtic and Indo-European Origins of the Fían. In Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition,* pp. 14-30. Dublin: Four Courts.

Meyer, Kuno, ed. and trans.
1881. Macgnímratha Find. *Revue Celtique* 5: 195–204, 508.
1904. Finn and the Man in the Tree. *Revue Celtique* 25: 344-9.
1910. *Fianaigech, being a Collection of Hitherto Unedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and his Fiana.* Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Muhr, Kay
2011. Place-names and the Understanding of Monuments. In Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman, and Edel Bhreathnach (eds), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*, pp. 232-55. Dublin: Four Courts.

Murray, Kevin
2012. Interpreting the Evidence: Problems with Dating the Early *Fianaigecht* Corpus. In Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition,* pp. 31-49. Dublin: Four Courts.

Nagy, Joseph Falaky
1985. *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ó Broin, Tomás
1973. *Craebruad*: The Spurious Tradition. *Éigse* 15: 103-13.

Ó Corráin, Donncha, Liam Breatnach, and Aidan Breen
1984. The Laws of the Irish. *Peritia* 3: 382-438.

Parsons, Geraldine
2012. Breaking the Cycle? Accounts of the Death of Finn. In Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition,* pp. 81-96. Dublin: Four Courts.

Quin, E. G. (gen. ed.)
1913-76. *Dictionary of the Irish Language*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

Ross, Anne
1967. *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Russell, Paul
1995. Notes on Words in Early Irish Glossaries. *Études Celtiques* 31:195–204.

Sayers, William
1996. Tripartition in the Early Irish Tradition: Cosmic or Social Structure? In Edgar C. Polomé (ed), *Indo-European Religion after Dumézil*. Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series 16, pp. 156-83. Washington: Institute for the Study of Man.
2012a. Netherworld and Otherworld in Early Irish Literature. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 59: 201-30.
2012b. Pre-Christian Cosmogonic Lore in Medieval Ireland: The Exile into Royal Poetics. *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 14: 109-26.
Forthcoming. *Rincne quasi quinque* (*Sanas Cormaic*).

Schot, Roseanne, Conor Newman, and Edel Bhreathnach, eds.
2011. *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*. Dublin: Four Courts.

Thurneysen, Rudolf
1946. *A Grammar of Old Irish*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Toner, Gregory, ed. and trans.
2007. *Bruiden Da Choca*. London: Irish Texts Society.

van Hamel, A. G., ed.
1933. *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Watkins, Calvert.
1981. Language, Culture or History? In Roberta A. Hendrick, Carrie S. Masek, and Mary Frances Miller (eds), *Papers from the Parasession on Language and Behavior, Chicago Linguistic Society, May 1-2, 1981*, pp. 238-48. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.