

# Motivation for incest: Clothru and the battle of *Druim Criaich*.

Kicki Ingridsdotter

## Abstract

The topic of this article is an episode found in Early Irish literature in which Clothru, Medb's sister and Eochaid Feidlech's daughter, mates with her three brothers Bres, Nár, and Lothar<sup>1</sup> before the battle of *Druim Criaich*, resulting in the conception of Lugaid Riab nDerg.<sup>2</sup> These episodes are found in *Aided Meidbe* 'The death of Medb',<sup>3</sup> The Prose<sup>4</sup> and Metrical<sup>5</sup> *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich*

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1 Incest as a literary motif is seemingly universal and is found in literary traditions through time and space, covering a variety of textual and cultural sources and contexts. We find this motif for instance in Old Indic literature, in the antique tradition of Oedipus, in the Old Testament, in hagiographical sources, and in medieval literary sources and traditions. Incest in an ancient, biblical and medieval context has been discussed in detail by Archibald (2001). There are two main treatments of incest in medieval sources, one concerns the legal ramifications: the societal rules that govern whom one is allowed to marry (and have intercourse with) as well as the punishments for transgressing these rules. The second is a literary treatment in which motifs of incest are dealt with in all types of narrative literature: in poetry and prose, hagiography, genealogies, and many types of heroic narratives. Incest can be found as a single occurrence between two family members, but throughout medieval European literature we can also find the motif of double incest, in which incest is carried on with further family members, whether in the same text or as part of the wider tradition (Archibald 2001, 110 ff.). The topic of incest in medieval Irish sources has been discussed by Edel (2007/2009). Eochaid Feidlech and his (extended) family are connected with incest, either actual or rumoured, in several texts and traditions in Early Irish literature. A full treatment of this is unfortunately outside the scope of the present article.

There is only one legal reference to incest in the Early Irish laws. This reference is concerned with what to do with a child resulting from incest. It comes from a commentary to the legal tract *Córus fine* which deals with family relationships. It states that a son born of incest shall be put to sea. If he is washed up again, he is to be reared but to a lesser value than the rest of the family. It is translated and discussed by O'Neill (2006).

2 Lugaid's epithet, Riab nDerg or Sriab nDerg 'of the red stripes', relates to the stripes dividing his body, as some sources state dividing his body in three parts, one for each father. This explanation can be found in *Cóir Anmann* (Arbuthnot 2005 § 105), see further Burgess 2004, 22–24, and Ingridsdotter 2009, 17, for a discussion of Lugaid's name.

3 *Aided Meidbe*, Hull 1938, 52–61.

4 The Metrical *Dindshenchas*, Vol IV, Gwynn 1991, 42–57.

5 The Prose *Dindshenchas*, Stokes 1895, 148–150.

and *Cath Boinde* 'The battle of the Boyne'.<sup>6</sup> Previous work has focused mainly on mythological and political connotations of the episode, particularly Clothru's function as a sovereignty figure. Issues of kingship are central to all extant examples of the episode, and it is possible to read Clothru's incest as replete with liminality. However, this article will present an alternative reading of the texts in which Clothru's character and behaviour is seen as less bound to sovereignty and more as acting within literary motifs of mediating violence, preventing strife and securing offspring for doomed men. The main focus will be on the immediate textual context and subtle differences in the motivation and narrative function of the incest and the conception of a child as found in these sources. Whereas the surface motivation shifts from text to text, the underlying motivation—to keep her brothers from killing their father—remains throughout. This motivation is also comparable to other episodes in which violence is negotiated and mediated by women or men in Early Irish literature. Although several scholars have noted this shift in motivation, it has not been discussed in full and merits a more thorough treatment.

## Introduction

The tradition concerning Clothru's incestuous relationship with her three brothers, as depicted in the tradition of the battle of *Druim Criaich* and resulting in *Lugaid Riab nDerg*, has been the topic of much discussion. It has been discussed or mentioned in a mythological context by Dumézil (1973),<sup>7</sup> Lyle (1982, 2007)<sup>8</sup> and

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6 O'Neill 1905, 173–185.

7 Dumézil discussed the tradition as found in *Aided Meidbe*, the *Dindshenchas* and *Cath Boinde* (1973, 99–103). The main emphasis is a comparison between Medb, of which he sees Clothru as a multiform, with Madhavi. The incest and Clothru's motivation therefore have also been interpreted by Dumézil. In his discussion, Clothru is deemed to have sacrificed herself 'in order to mystically and perhaps physically weaken her brothers, to put them at a disadvantage against their father' (1973, 102). Dumézil, quoting a previous view by Le Roux, further states: 'The most likely interpretation is that Clothru paralyzes her brothers or deprives them of their martial vigour, all the while assuring her father of a male descendant' (1973, 103). None of the texts describing this incident include any textual material supporting any kind of paralyzation or direct cause of loss of material vigour as reason for the brothers' defeat. Even though Dumézil's discussion is part of a wider argument, it is somewhat difficult to see exactly what textual material he bases his conclusions on.

8 Lyle 1982 discusses the tradition of Clothru and her brothers in a discussion about Dumézil's theories about the same, expressed in Dumézil 1973. In her 2007 article she bases her discussion of the same tradition on an 'analogical discovery method' to connect the narrative to a 'deeper prehistory than has been reached through the study of Indo-European languages' (Lyle 2007, 59). Lyle further connects the incest episode with matrilineal succession and inherited cultural memory stemming as far back as Indo-European culture.

McCone (2000),<sup>9</sup> from a mythological and folkloristic view by Burgess (2004),<sup>10</sup> in a genealogical and political context by Kelleher (1971)<sup>11</sup> and Edel (2007/2009).<sup>12</sup>

Most of this previous discussion has focused on the mythological aspects of the episode and particularly on Clothru as a sovereignty figure. It will be argued below that whereas mythological interpretations are hardly surprising given the subject matter: kingship, the liminal space of the night before the battle, the production of a spectacular child as well as the incest, a close textual reading will reveal a literary function of the incest, occluded by these interpretations.

### The texts

Four extant texts mention the tradition about Clothru and her brothers in some detail: *Aided Meidbe* ‘The death of Medb’, The Prose and Metrical *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich* and *Cath Boinde* ‘The battle of the Boyne’.<sup>13</sup> It will be noted that the four main texts are all dated to the eleventh or twelfth century, thus comprising

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- 9 McCone discusses Clothru’s incest in a wider discussion about sacral kingship (2000, chapter 5). In this discussion he puts Clothru’s behaviour in strong connection with the sovereignty: ‘These incestuous mating habits are presumably determined by her mythological role as the carrier of sovereignty rather than reflecting actual past or present behavioural norms (...)’ (2000, 120). Clothru is further seen as ‘symbolising the kingship transmission and reintegration in the person of her triply fathered son Lugaid.’ (2000, 120).
  - 10 Burgess discusses the incest in her monograph about the traditions concerning Lugaid Riab/Sriab nDerg. In this discussion she treats the subject matter of the early modern text *Cath Cumair* (ed. Dobbs 1926) as a continuation of the medieval episodes, discussing the tradition as a whole (2004, 185–7). Whereas *Cath Cumair* includes the episode of Clothru’s incest, it is a much later text with added material which cannot be safely attributed to the same time period as the episodes discussed in this article. Therefore, in my view, the added material in *Cath Cumair* cannot be used to explain the earlier material.
  - 11 Kelleher’s discussion about this episode is centred around the three parts of Lugaid, which he claims are symbolising the union in Dál Cuinn of the three dynasties Uí Neill, Connachta and Airgialla. Kelleher concludes that Clothru’s subsequent mating with the son resulting from the incest, Crimthann Nia Nár, further symbolises unified kingship into one people (1971, 120). Even though matters concerning the sovereignty can be seen as having political allusions in Early Irish literature, the argument as Kelleher presents it seems stretched and as it is presented, not very compelling.
  - 12 Edel discusses the episode in her article about incest in Early Irish literature, noting, but not discussing, the shift in Clothru’s motivation between the extant texts of this episode and following Kelleher in reading the episode as a political commentary (2007/2009, 51).
  - 13 In addition it is mentioned in sources for Crimthann’s lineage: *Is é in Lugaid Riab nDerg do rónsat trí meic Echach Feidlech ra siair .i. re Clothraind; 7 dana daróne in Lugaid sin mac ria mathair féin, .i. Crimthand mac Lugdech ri h-Ereinn (Flathiusa nEreinn (LL 23b) in *Lebor Gabála Éreinn* (Mac Alister 1956, 302–303, cf. also 304–305)). A reference is also found in the *Banshenchas*, cf. Gilla Mo Dutu’s poem LL 138 b, l. 1.6821 where Crimthann’s mother is given as Clothna (Dobbs, 1930, 299).*

comparatively late text material. A tradition of Lugaid Riab nDerg as the son of the three Find Emnas, i.e. Bres, Nár and Lothar, can be found slightly earlier.<sup>14</sup>

### *Aided Meidbe*

The longest text containing the episode of Clothru's incest with her brothers is found in *Aided Meidbe*. This tale has not been dated more precisely than to 'not earlier than the mid-twelfth century, possibly containing earlier material (Hull 1938, 54)'. It is preserved in two manuscripts, the Book of Leinster (LL, the A text in Hull's edition) and NLS Adv. MS 72.1.40 (the B text in Hull's edition).<sup>15</sup>

*Aided Meidbe* can be seen as consisting of three main episodes: the incest episode with Clothru is reported first, then Clothru is pregnant again and Medb kills Clothru in order to take the sovereignty, finally Medb is killed by Clothru's son of the second pregnancy.

*Aided Meidbe* begins with a question: *Cid dia tá aided Meidbe ingine Ehdach Feidlig a Temraig?* 'What is the death of Medb, daughter of Eochaid Feidlech?' (Hull 1938, 55). Following this is a description of Eochaid's father and brothers, his three sons—the three Find Emna—and three daughters—Eithne Uathach,<sup>16</sup> Medb of Cruachu and Clothru of Cruachu.<sup>17</sup> It is stated that Clothru is queen in Cruachan before Medb takes the sovereignty by force from Eochaid, their father:

*In Chlothru dano is sí ban-rígan i Cruachain riasiu no gabad Medb flathius. Ar ecín ón o Ehdach. Batar trí maic Ehdach oc triall ríge do gait ar a n-athair:*

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- 14 For a discussion about the tradition of Lugaid see Burgess (2004) and Ingridsdotter (2009, 16–18). Lugaid is found with this epithet in *Aided Derbforgaill*, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. (Ingridsdotter 2009, 67) and in *Briathartheosc Con Culaind* 'Cú Chulainn's instruction to a prince' in *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon 1953a, ll. 233–310). The earliest manuscript source of *Serglige Con Culainn* is LU, dated to c. 1106, see Dillon 1953b). Dillon believes that the *Briathartheosc* was interpolated into *Serglige Con Culainn* in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. (Dillon 1941–1942, 129).
- 15 Formerly known as Edinburgh MS XL. For a discussion of the manuscript tradition, see Hull, 1938, 51–53. The version in LL is considered to be the older text with the version from NLS Adv. MS 72.1.40 occasionally containing older linguistic forms. All quotations in this article are from Hull's edition of the A text, found in LL, unless otherwise stated.
- 16 Medb and Clothru's sister Eithne is not commonly found with this epithet. The B text of *Aided Meidbe* contains further details about Eithne eating children. Hull gives an additional reference to Eithne with this epithet from 'The Exulsion of the Dessi', and concludes that this is a confusion of Eithne, daughter of Eochaid Feidlech, and another Eithne, reputed to eat the flesh of children (Hull 1938, 57, n. 5). Another reference to an Eithne eating children, connected to the Dessi, is found in *Cóir Anmann* (Arbuthnot 2005 § 169).
- 17 In the A text a quatrain is found which repeats the information of the three daughters of Eochaid. In this poem, Medb is called Medb Cruachan, but Clothru's name is found without this sobriquet (Hull 1938, 55).

Now Clothru was queen in Cruachu before Medb took the sovereignty, that [was] by force from Eochaid. The three sons of Eochaid were attempting to take away the kingship from their father. (Hull 1938, 55, 58)

This statement then leads into the episode of the attempt by the three brothers to take the kingship from their father, and Clothru's intervention.

*Do-lluid Clothru dia tairmesc 7 dia codnugud. Ar ai-som dano do-focrait cath for Eochdaig. Do-lluid Clothro ar a cind. 'In do sárgud far n-athar duib?' ar si. 'Is anfir mór cia do-gnether.' 'Is ecen tra ar ind oic.'*

Clothru came to hinder and to restrain them. Nevertheless they then proclaimed battle against Eochaid. 'Are you intending to outrage your father?' she said. 'It is a great injustice that will be done.' 'It is indeed a necessity,' said the youths. (Hull 1938, 55, 58)

The Old Irish word used for necessity here is the word *écen* which in all instances recorded in DIL includes a very strong compulsion, inevitability, force or violence (Greene 1975: 43–49).

Clothru inquires whether the brothers have children:

*'In-facbaid iartaigi etir?' ar in ben. 'Ní morithir' or ind oic. 'Is doich tuittim dúib triana far n-anfir. Tait chucum-sa' ar si 'or is inbaid comperta dam.'* (Hull 1938, 55, 58)

'Do you leave [any] descendants at all?' the woman enquired. 'Not any at all,' the youths said. 'It is probable that you will fall [in battle] through your unrighteousness. Come to me,' she said, 'to see whether you will leave descendants with me, for it is my time of conception.' (Hull 1938, 55, 59)

Clothru states that it is likely that the brothers will fall in battle through their unrighteousness and that they should mate with her as it is her time of conception. After this mating, she tells them that they should not go against their father:

*Do-gnither on. Luid cach fer ar n-úair díb cucci co mbaí maith de.i.Lugaid Riab nDerg mac na Trí Find Emna. 'Na-tait a fect-sa' ar sisi, 'i n-agid for n-athar. Is lór d'anfir dúib comrac ria far stair cenca tisaíd do chath ria far n-athair.' Iss ed trá sin ro thairmisc iat de choscur in chatha.*

This is done. Each man went in turn to her and good came thereof, namely Lugaid Riab nDerg, the son of the three Finns of Emain. 'Do not come now,' she said, 'against your father. It is sufficient unrighteousness for you to have sexual union with your sister without coming to [engage in battle] with your father.' That then hindered them from victory in the battle. (Hull 1938, 55, 59)

It is entirely unclear from the text if it is the going against their father, the incest, or Clothru's words that is hindering the brothers from success, the pronoun *ed* 'that' does not specify to what action it refers to. The brothers' reasons for going against their father are not clear from the text. However, the B text gives an alternative reading concerning the motivation for the sons' behaviour: *Fechtus ann do-cuaid trí meic Echdach do iarraid forba for a n-athair*. 'Once upon a time the three sons of Eochaid came to demand the inheritance from their father.' (Hull 1938, 55, 58 and p. 58, n. 6).

In this particular source, Clothru's motivation for her behaviour clearly seems to be to hinder her brothers from going into battle with their father. The text states that Clothru first tries to 'hinder and restrain them', but that the brothers nevertheless proclaim battle. It is then stated that Clothru urges the brothers that the act they are about to perform is an act of injustice, to which the brothers reply that it is a necessity. Only after having urged her brothers twice<sup>18</sup> and the brothers both times ignoring her, does Clothru ask after the whereabouts of the brothers' descendants and suggest that they sleep with her to produce an heir. After the mating is completed, Clothru uses the fact that the brothers have done an unrighteous deed by sleeping with their sister in an attempt to convince her brothers that one bad deed is enough and that they should not perform a further injustice. The brothers again ignore her.

The incest can here be seen as a trick to get her brothers to do one deed that is unrightful in order that they should not do a further unrightful deed. Whereas the incest does produce an heir to the brothers, the heir does not seem to be the primary reason or goal for her behaviour. To diffuse strife and prevent her brothers from killing their father, by any means she can, seems to be her motive in this particular text.

It is specifically stated here that the product of the incest is good, and Clothru is not punished for the incest. That Clothru is killed by Medb in the following episode is motivated by Medb's wanting the queenship of Cruachan and does not seem like a punishment for Clothru's actions in the first part of the story. The notion that an heir resulting from a conception before a battle can be seen as good can be compared with the two episodes concerning the conceptions of Fíachu and Cormac, discussed below. The result of the battle and the further adventures of the brothers are not told in *Aided Meidbe*, and the tale moves on to how Medb kills Clothru.

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18 It may be that the first statement, in which it is said that Clothru tried to hinder and restrain them, refers to the second statement, in which it is specified that she tells her brother that they are about to perform an injustice, thus not being two acts of refraining her brothers, but one. Even so, the text gives a clear sense of insistence to Clothru's actions and words in this part of the text.

The episode of Medb killing Clothru has its own textual tradition. An episode of a sister of Medb being drowned, and her child Furbaide being cut out through her side after she is killed, is found in six sources: *Aided Meidbe*, the Metrical *Dindshenchas* (*Carn Furbaide*)<sup>19</sup> and Prose *Dindshenchas* (Rennes: *Carn Furbaide*, Bodleian: *Eithne*),<sup>20</sup> *Cóir Anmann*<sup>21</sup> and *Cath Boinde*<sup>22</sup>. In all sources but *Aided Meidbe*, the sister killed is Eithne, not Clothru. Furthermore, in no other source is Medb specified as the killer of the sister.

In three of the sources a prophecy has been made that Clothru will be killed by her nephew, and Eithne goes to Cruachan for her delivery.<sup>23</sup> The Metrical and Prose *Dindshenchas* of *Carn Furbaide* give Lugaid Riab nDerg, Clothru's son, as the killer. *Cóir Anmann* and *Cath Boinde* just mention that Eithne was drowned and Furbaide delivered through her side after she was drowned with no specification whether it was drowning by accident or by a specific agent. The Prose *Dindshenchas* (Bodleian) of *Eithne* gives the drowning as an accident and the delivery by Lugaid Mac Con. A revenge for the killing is found in *Aided Meidbe* and in the *Dindshenchas*, Metrical and Prose, of *Carn Furbaide*. In the latter two sources, Eithne is drowned, the child is brought out through her side after the killing, the child Furbaide grows up and kills Clothru, then Clothru's son Lugaid kills Furbaide.

*Aided Meidbe* goes against the other sources for this incident. In *Aided Meidbe*, Medb (not Lugaid) kills Clothru (not Eithne), and Medb, (not Clothru), is killed by Furbaide in revenge. These episodes have been discussed in detail by Wong (1996) who concludes that the sisters were interchangeable (Wong 1996, 238). I disagree with this as all sources agree as to the identity of the sisters involved, except *Aided Meidbe*.

I argue that the redactor of *Aided Meidbe* used an episode in which a sister of Medb was killed, altered the episode to fit the purpose of the present tale and placed it in the text as motivation for the subsequent killing of Medb. Using an episode in which Eithne was the main character would make little sense since Eithne is nowhere described as being a ruler in Cruachan. Outside *Aided Meidbe*, there are no sources in which Medb killed either Clothru or Eithne. The second episode in *Aided Meidbe* in which Clothru is killed by Medb thus serves both to bind the narrative of the battle against Eochaid, in which Clothru has a prominent

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19 Metrical *Dindshenchas*, Gwynn 1981, 30–35.

20 Prose *Dindshenchas* (Rennes), Stokes 1895, 38–39, Prose *Dindshenchas* (Bodleian), Stokes 1892, 476–477).

21 *Cóir Anmann*, Arbuthnot 2005 § 255.

22 *Cath Boinde*, O'Neill 2005, 176.

23 In the Metrical *Dindshenchas* Eithne explicitly travels to Medb in Cruachan, in the Prose *Dindshenchas* (Rennes and Bodleian) it is just stated that Eithne goes to Cruachan.

part, to the following episode, in which the queenship of Cruachan is taken from Clothru. It further serves as motivation for the killing of Medb.

The function of the parts of *Aided Meidbe* can therefore be described as follows: Medb's usurpation of Clothru is mentioned before the incest episode to bind together Medb's behaviour to the ensuing narrative of her brothers' actions. In this, the text uses the same phrase in describing Medb's usurpation of Clothru as in the brothers attempted overthrowing of their father.<sup>24</sup>

The main female character in the incest episode is Clothru. The episode following this in which Clothru is killed binds together the incest episode with the episode explaining Medb's usurpation and killing of Clothru. This episode of the killing of Clothru then gives the motivation for the death of Medb that ends the tale.

### *Metrical Dindshenchas*

The second text that mentions the relationship between Clothru and her brothers is the Metrical *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich*. The poem consists of 46 quatrains of which the first 34 concern the battle of *Druim Criaich*: the events leading up to the battle, the battle itself and the outcome. The remaining quatrains concern a battle made upon Maelsechnaill, identified in the text as of Eochaid's seed. The earliest version and the version underlying Gwynn's edition (1981, 42–57) is found in LL, attributed to Cúán úa Lothcháin whose death is noted in the Annals in 1024.<sup>25</sup>

As in *Aided Meidbe*, the Metrical *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich* gives no reason as to why Bres, Nár and Lothar go against their father, although it is alluded to in quatrain seven: *cath im Bress, fors' tardar sár*, 'an army with Bress, on whom a wrong was wrought' (Gwynn 1991, 44–45). It is expressively stated in quatrain four that Eochaid was upright, therefore presumably there is no question of the brothers going against him because he was a bad king. Furthermore, in quatrain nine it is reiterated that Eochaid was well-graced. In the same quatrain it is specifically stated that it is the act of going against their father that is the reason for the brothers' downfall.<sup>26</sup>

24 The text specifies that Medb is trying to take the sovereignty by force from her father, not specifically from Clothru: *Ar ecin ón o Echdaig*. We may presume that the rulership of Cruachan would have had to be bestowed upon Clothru by her father, and by taking that from Clothru, Medb was going against her father, like her brothers. The battle of *Druim Criaich* and Clothru's incest is only connected to the episode of Medb killing her sister in the context of *Aided Meidbe*.

25 Annals of Ulster, see AU1024.3 (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, 1983, Mac Carthy 1893), Annals of Innisfallen, see AI1024.6 (Mac Airt 1988).

26 Further statements supporting Eochaid's good grace are found in quatrains 8, 16, and 26. Further references to the injustice of the brothers' behaviour are found in quatrains 20, 21 and 22.



*A thrí maic táncatar riss  
ri Eochaid firén fid-liss:  
gním dia tánic dóib dibad  
a ndeg-athair d'athrigad.*

His three sons came against him, against upright Eochaid of the forest-keep, to dethrone their good father—a deed that caused their own destruction. (Gwynn 1991, 44–45)

In quatrain eight it is stated that Clothru overtook them, the action being described as a *dub-dál*, ‘a darkling tryst’, and that *ropo dochlú*, ‘it was shamefully known’. In this text then, we have some value judgement as to the fact that the incest was seen as something shameful, at least by the redactor. As opposed to *Cath Boinde*, below, the incest is not specified to take place on the eve of the battle, but at some point during the long roundabout journey to the battle:

*Andsin dosfarraid Clothru;  
(cia dub-dál, ropo dochlú,  
siur Breiss is Náir is Lothair,  
ingen Echach il-chrothaig.*

Then Clothru overtook them, the sister of Bress and Nár and Lothur, the daughter of well-graced Eochaid: through a darkling tryst, it was shamefully known. (Gwynn 1991, 44–45)

Finally in quatrain nine it is stated how Clothru coaxed them: *Co rosbréc dia póic phecca*, ‘with a sinful kiss to share her bed’. Again, Clothru’s behaviour is judged unfavourably, but as opposed to *Aided Meidbe* the reason for her behaviour is explicitly expressed: *combad olc a fir catha i n-agaid a n-ard-fhiatha*, ‘that their fair cause might be foul in battle against their high king’. If we interpret the phrase *fir catha* as it is translated by Gwynn, then it may be implied that the brothers did indeed have a fair cause to go to battle with their father. However, *fir catha* can be read as a kenning for success in battle, not necessarily implying that the cause was just. Eochaid is again described in favourable terms, and the reason for the sons going against the father is never given.

*Co rosbréc dia póic phecca  
do shaighthin a comleptha,  
combad olc a fir catha  
i n-agaid a n-ard-fhlatha.*

She coaxed them with her sinful kiss to seek and share her bed, that that their fair cause might be foul in battle against their High king. (Gwynn 1991, 44–45)

The Metrical *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich* includes several interesting details. In the course of this poem, the three brothers will have done the following

deeds: go against their father, sleep with their sister, refuse their father the month long armistice he has asked for, violate his fast,<sup>27</sup> and flee from battle. The incest here is one in a series of violations and transgressions that the three brothers commit against their father. The conclusion of the quatrains concerning this battle in the poem (quatrains 32–34) specifically mention the fact that after the battle is won, Eochaid proclaims over the severed heads of his three sons that no one should rule in Tara directly after his father:

*Dochratar de na Find,  
robenta díb a trí cind:  
daruacht cach cend díb fo leith  
re n-aídchi co Druim Criaich.*

*Ar n-aicsin dó na trí cend  
trén dorairngert ri Hérend  
briathar comailter co gnáth,  
cía beith nech dianid ingnáth.*

*Nach gébad nech, gembad gar,  
Temraig dar éis a athar  
can rígad eturru neich  
ón dáil sin Dromma Criaich.*

So perished the three Finds: their three heads were struck off: each head came separately before nightfall to Druim Criaich.

When he saw the three heads, the king of Erin made a solemn vow—a word that is duly fulfilled, though there be some to whom it is unfamiliar:

That none, even for a little while, should possess Temair, in succession to their father, without another king reigning between them, after the encounter at Druim Criaich. (Gwynn 1991, 52–53)

The brothers' actions thus result in a clear legal rule, preventing anyone from usurping their fathers. In this text the pronoun used is *nech*, 'no one', although the rule stems directly from the brothers' behaviour. This proclamation is found also in the Prose *Dindshenchas* and in *Cath Boinde*, where it specifically refers to sons.

#### *Prose Dindshenchas*

The Prose *Dindshenchas* of *Druim Criaich* (Stokes 1895, 148–151, number 140) corresponding to the Metrical *Dindshenchas* is much briefer and leaves out most

27 Gwynn takes this to be fasting against his sons, and that '(...) they disregarded this quasi-magical procedure (...) and so brought their fate on their own heads.' (Gwynn 1991, 387 n. 65).

of the details found in the metrical version.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting however in the details that it does include. After a description of the brothers and their marching towards the battle with their father, Clothru intervenes:

*(...) conad andsin rosiacht Clothra a siur 7 rochai friu 7 ros-poc, 7 adbert: 'Ba saeth lim beith can clanda!' 7 ro-chuindich a coimlemaid, conid[d]e dorala Lugaid Riab ndearg mac na tri Find-emna. IS airi dono doronnad sin, cona gabdais fir catha fria n-athair.*

... and there their sister Clothru sought them, and wept to them, and kissed them. And she said: 'I am troubled at being childless.' And she entreated them to lie with her. And thence was born Lugaid Red-stripes, the son of the three Find-emna. This was done that they might not get 'truth of battle'\* from their father. \*i.e. 'I suppose, fair play in fight.' (Stokes 1895, 148–150)

This episode includes the same type of manipulation as in both *Aided Meidbe* and the Metrical *Dindshenchas*, but it changes the argumentation of her trickery. In this text it is pity on her childless state, rather than the brothers' childless state, that is being played with. Again the reason for the incest is given: *Is airi dono doronnad sin, cona gabdais fir catha fria n-athair*, 'This was done that they might not get truth of battle from their father.' As opposed to the Metrical *Dindshenchas*, here neither sin nor shame is implied. The fasting that Eochaid does is here, as opposed to the Metrical *Dindshenchas*, specifically translated as having been against his sons:

*Tri tricha ced andsin im Eochaid. Timnais dono Eochaid troscad ara macaib im thelcaid doib nó im chairdi mis dó fri cath, 7 ni thucad do acht cath ar namárach.*

Thrice ten thousand was then with Eochaid, and he ordered a fast against his sons to overthrow (?), or to make them grant him a month's truce from battle. Nought, however, was given him save battle on the morrow. (Stokes 1895, 148–150)

Again the month-long truce from battle asked for by the father is denied by the sons. At the end of the story, the three heads of the brothers arrive in front of the father:

*Co tancadar a tri cind co Druim Criaich [ria n-aidchi], co-nad and isbert Eochaid in mbreithir, nach ngabad mac andiaid a athair flaithius Temra can nech eturru on dail sin anuas.*

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28 According to Gwynn, the collection of Prose *Dindshenchas* is later than the Metrical *Dindshenchas* (1932, 239).

And there Eochaid uttered the word, that from that time forward no son should ever take the lordship of Tara after his father unless someone came between them. (Stokes 1895, 149–150)

This latter statement, which we already saw in the Metrical *Dindshenchas*, will also be found in the last of the four texts, the battle of the Boyne, *Cath Boinde*.

*Cath Boinde*<sup>29</sup>

The incest episode is referred to in the introduction to this tale and only serves to give some additional information about Eochaid’s family. The extract in full reads:

*Ceathrar mac lais .i. na trifindeamna (.i. Eamain ræd nach dealaighther, & d’æntairbirt rucad .i. Breas & Nár & Lothar a n-anmand, & is iad dorigni Lugaid tri riab n-derg rena siair bodein in agaig reim chath Dromacriadid do thobairt da n-athair, corthoitsead and na triur le h-Eochaid Feidleach, corob e Eochaid Feidleach rochuindid in itchi næmda cen macc indeog a athar for Erind cobrath; cor firad sin) & Conall Anglondach mac Echach Feidlig, diatat Conailli la firu Breg.*

He had four sons, namely, the three Findeamna (*eamain* meaning ‘a thing which is not divided’), and they were born of one birth, Breas, Nár, and Lothar their names; it is they who made Lugaid-of-the-three-red-stripes with their own sister the night before giving the Battle of Druimcriad to their father. The three of them fell there by Eochaid Feidleach; and it was Eochaid Feidleach who made the holy request that no son should rule Ireland after his father for ever, and that was verified); and Conall Anglondach, the son of Eochaid Feidleach, from whom are the Conailli, in the land of the men of Breagh. (O’Neill 1905, 175)

*Cath Boinde* is sparse in detail concerning the incest episode as compared to the other three sources: the incest is not described in detail and the sister involved in the incest is not named. Clothru is mentioned later in the text in relation to her sisters Medb and Deirbrill as Conchobar’s wives. The incest in this text is thus connected to the brothers, not to Clothru. However, the night before the battle of *Druim Criaich* is mentioned as the time of the incest, and the rule that no son should rule in Tara directly after his father forever is also present. Medb is specifically stated as having received the queenship in Cruachan by her father Eochaid against the wishes of Tindi, king of Connacht. The remaining story concerns Medb’s political dealings and her various relationships, her mating with men and making them kings, as well as a battle. Whereas no motivation on the part of the sister involved in the incest is found in the text, again, the rule against usurpation is clearly stated.

<sup>29</sup> This exists also in an almost identical version, titled *Ferchuitred Meidba inso* ‘Medb’s husband allowance’ (Ed. Meyer 1913). The subject matter is the same, as is the placement and wording of the incest episode.

## Development of tradition

The origin and development of the episodes of the battle of *Druim Criach* is difficult to prove with certainty since all extant sources are dateable to the same period. I have argued above that *Aided Meidbe* is a deliberate composition, using pre-existing material, clearly placing it in a context focused on the tradition of Medb. The Metrical *Dindshenchas* provides the most developed treatment of the incest motif, and is the only source that gives a sense of a redactor's displeasure of Clothru's behaviour. The Prose *Dindshenchas* seems clearly derived from the metrical version, with some alterations. *Cath Boinde* is the least detailed account in which the sister responsible is not mentioned and the tradition of incest clearly connected to the brothers, not to Clothru.

## Motivation for incest

### *Sovereignty*

Clothru's motivation can be read in three of the four extant versions of this episode. *Cath Boinde* does not provide a specification of the sister involved in the incest, nor a thorough treatment of the episode. The other three sources have two things in common regarding Clothru's behaviour: the prevention of a *fingal* and begetting a child to childless men likely to die in battle. The queenship of Cruachan is used in *Aided Meidbe* as necessary background information to Medb having taken this queenship from Clothru. This is the only text in which it is stated that Medb replaced Clothru as ruler in Cruachan. In the Metrical and Prose *Dindshenchas* the interception of the brothers by Clothru takes place at Mag Cruachain, but Clothru is not specifically described as the ruler. In *Cath Boinde* Medb is described as the ruler of Cruachan. In three of the four episodes under discussion it is nowhere stated that Clothru was queen in Cruachan, neither at the time of the incident or previously. Whether Clothru is trying to defend her own interest as ruler in Cruachan and whether or not her brothers assuming kingship in Tara would have affected or threatened Clothru's queenship is not clear from any of the episodes. Therefore, based on the texts themselves, it can be argued that her motifs are not selfishly motivated, and that she is trying to prevent a *fingal*, as Emer in *Aided Óenfir Aife*, and to ensure the continuation of a dynasty, as the women in *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* and *Cath Maige Mucrime*.

### *Preventing fingal*

In *Aided Óenfir Aife* (Van Hamel 1933, 14 §8), when Emer is pleading with Cú Chulainn not to kill the boy on the beach on account of it being his son, she is

trying to prevent a *fingal* from occurring. In trying to prevent her brothers from going against their father, I would place Clothru's actions squarely in the category of mediating violence as discussed above.

*Boí Cú Chulainn immurgu oca chluichiu oc dul dochum in gillai, 7 lám Emire ingine Forgaill tara brágaid. 'Ná téig sis!' ol sí. 'Mac duit fil tís. Ná fer fingail immot óenmac, co sechnam, a maic saigthig soailti. Ní soáig ná soairle coméirge frit mac mórghnámach mór ... n-esiut. Artai o riag cnis fochlóc ót biliu, ba cotat fri Scáithchi scél. Mad Conlae céssad clár clé, comad fortamail taidbecht. Tinta frim! Chuinte mo chlois! Fó mo chose! Bad Cú Chulainn cloadar! Atgénsa cid ainm asind ón, maso Conlae óenmac Aife in mac fil tís,' ol in ben. (Van Hamel 1933, 14 §8)*

Cú Chulainn, however, was playing [and], going towards the boy, and the arm of Emer, Forgaill's daughter, around his neck. 'Do not go down there' said she. 'It is your son who is below. Do not inflict *fingal* on your only son, until you shall abstain, oh aggressive and well-bred man. It is not a good fight nor good advice to rise up against your son of great and valorous deeds ... from you. Turn from torture of skin, [it is a] sapling from your tree, it is a severe thing against Scáthach's lesson. If Conla were to sustain 'left-board', that the strong would be abolished. Turn to me. Hear my voice. My instruction is good. Let Cú Chulainn listen. I know what name he would tell, if it is Conla, the only son of Aife, that is the boy down there,' said the woman. (Translation by the present author.)

### Conception before battle

Examples from Early Irish literature of conception before battle include two episodes concerning the conception of Fiachu Muillethain and the conception of Cormac son of Art. These birth-tales are found together in all versions of *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* (Ó Cathasaigh 1977) and they also occur together in *Cath Maige Mucrime* (Stokes 1892, 426–474; O Daly 1975).<sup>30</sup> This motif is centred around the production of heirs, and the night before the battle as the last chance to do so.

<sup>30</sup> The discussion in this article is based on Stokes's edition. Cf. Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 107 for a discussion of the textual tradition of these two tales.

In the episodes of the conception of Fiachu in *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*<sup>31</sup> and *Cath Maige Mucrime*,<sup>32</sup> it is clearly stated in the text that Éogan is childless. Moncha, the daughter of the man Éogan stays with, is summoned by Éogan on the night before battle, and Moncha is given to him. Whereas the father's name is different in the two episodes, and the girl in *Cath Maige Mucrime* is not named, it is clear that they fulfil the same function in both episodes. The conception of Cormac includes a strikingly similar situation in which Art sleeps with Achtán the night before battle,<sup>33</sup> and the text likewise states that Art had either no son (in *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*) or only one son, deemed too little to ensure the continuation of his blood line (in *Cath Maige Mucrime*).<sup>34</sup> In the dialogue between Aiche and her father, following the king's proposition and regarding the subsequent intercourse, it is specifically pointed out that the union will be fortunate:

*'Biaid maith de' ol hOlc Aiche, 'Ac[h]t a mbére-so, ní fuicéba-som di chlaind;  
7 in chlann no-mbére bit ríg hÉirenn co bráth'*

31 *Luid Éogan Mór do chath Mucruime. Fiu hi tig Tréth moccu C[h]r]eccai. Ingen álaind la suide, Monchaf[e] a hainm. Timgart in n-ingin c(h)uccu i llige 7 do-breth dó, ar ní buí cland dó co s(e)in. Is de birt Monchæ mac n-amræ iar to(i)t[h]im Éugain Móir isin c[h]ath fri Mac Con.*

Éogan Mór went to the battle of (Mag) Mucruime. He spent the night at the house of Triath of the Crecraige. The latter had a beautiful daughter called Monchæ. Éogan summoned the girl to him unto his bed, and she was given to him for he had no children until then. Hence did Monchæ bear a fine son after the fall of Éogan Mór in the battle against Mac Con. (Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 119 ll. 1–5, 124).

32 *Amlaid rosiachtatar Mag Cliach. Atgéoin immorro in drúí for labrad Eogain ropad trá. 'Maith, a Eogain' ar in drúí, 'in fácbaisceo iartaige?' 'Ní mórithir' ar Eogain. 'Maith ám, a ingen' ar Dil. 'Foi la Éogan dús in biad rigi Muman uaimse co bráth'. Deirgidir don lanamain. Maith a ngein concompred and .i. Fiacha Mullethain mac Eogain.*

Thus they reached Mag Cliach. The druid, however, knew from Éogan's speech that he was doomed to death. 'Well, O Éogan,' says the druid, 'leavest thou posterity?' 'Not so great,' says Éogan. 'Good indeed, my daughter' says Dil, 'sleep with Éogan to see if the kingship of Munster shall be from me forever'. A bed is made for the couple. Good the offspring that was conceived there, to wit, Fiacha Broadcrown, son of Eogan (Stokes 1892, 452–453 §§ 40–41).

33 *A chommut Art mac Cuind, ní breth mac dó-side co comarnic ind aidchi resin chath fri hAchtán hingin n-Uile Aiche in druad. Is sí máthair [Chormaic maic] Airt maic Cuind. Similarly, Art son of Conn, no son was born to him until, on the night before the battle, he had intercourse with Achtán the daughter of Olc Aiche the druid. She is the mother of Cormac son of Art son of Conn. (Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 119 ll. 17–19, 124).*

34 *'Cia méi di chlaind forácbai-seo, a Airt' ar se. 'Oen mac' ar Art. 'Robec ám' or se. 'Fóe lamm ingen-se innocht, a Airt. Ata i tairngire damsa orddan mór do genemain uaimse.'* 'How many children dost thou leave, O Art?' saith Olc-Acha. 'One son,' answered Art. 'Too little indeed,' says the smith. 'Sleep with my daughter tonight, O Art. It hath been foretold to me that a great grandeur will be born of me'. (*Cath Maige Mucrime* Stokes 1892, 454–455 §45).

‘Good will come of it’ said Olc Aiche. ‘Save what you bear he will leave no progeny, and the progeny that you bear will be kings of Ireland until doomsday.’ (Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 120, ll. 41–43, 124).

Neither of these episodes include incest. However, there are several similarities between these texts and the episodes of the battle of *Druim Criaich*: a woman takes the responsibility for producing an heir. The warrior is felt or expressively deemed to be doomed and destined for death. The mating occurs on the night before the battle. It is done in order to ensure the continuation of a noble blood line. The function of the women involved can be directly compared to the actions and outcome of the episodes concerning Clothru’s incest with her brothers. Furthermore, the statements regarding the childlessness of the men going into battle and the explicit good that is the outcome of the intercourse are strikingly similar.

## Conclusion

Two main features are found in all extant episodes of this tradition, the brothers going against their father and the incest. *Aided Meidbe* clearly describes the brothers as being compelled to do so, although no underlying reason for their behaviour is given. Furthermore this behaviour is repeatedly described as unjust. Bres, Nár and Lothar are breaking social code after social code, not only in going against their father, but also in refusing their father truce from the battle and in violating his fast. Finally they not only lose the battle, they are fleeing from the battle, hounded down and decapitated, their heads being sent to be placed at their father’s feet.

Clothru is nowhere punished. Whereas she gets killed by Medb in the episode following the incest in *Aided Meidbe*, this seems not to be a punishment for her behaviour, but a result of her ruling in Cruachan. In *Aided Meidbe*, Clothru herself claims that the act of incest is unrightful and the redactor of the Metrical *Dindshenchas* deems her behaviour as both sinful and shameful. Beyond this, she is nowhere punished for her actions. In fact, good comes out of this in form of her son Lugaid Riab nDerg.

It may seem that issues concerning the sovereignty are strong in this episode as in *Aided Meidbe* the episode is used in the context of rulership of Cruachan. Clothru can also be seen as the protector of the king and as the mother of a liminal character. It should be noted, though, that Clothru is not mating with the king, only with the unrightful usurpers of kingship and as such is not bestowing kingship so much as preventing kingship. In addition, I have argued that the connection between the sovereignty of Cruachan and the incest episode is tenuous, and that Clothru is only specifically mentioned as a ruler of Cruachan in one of texts discussed here. Consequently, I do not think that Clothru’s actions are necessarily evidence for a connection to sovereignty quite so strictly as previously thought.



I argue that even though the incest found in this episode has attracted more attention than anything else, by medieval redactors and modern scholars alike, the most salient outcome of this episode is not that the incest depicted is necessarily bad, but that sons should not go against their fathers. I would further argue that both the incest and the producing of the heir before the battle are motifs used in this episode not so much to produce a hero as to prevent strife. In acting this way, Clothru acts like several other women and men in Early Irish literature, mediating and intervening to prevent violence. The outcome of the episode under discussion here is that Bres, Nár and Lothar end up decapitated in front of their father's feet. And the one strong prohibition that comes through explicitly in three of the four examples of this episode is that sons should not take the kingship after their father.

Clothru is explicitly described as wanting to prevent this battle between her father and her brothers from happening, and in doing so she uses a variety of arguments as surface motivations for her actions; in *Aided Meidbe* it is to produce an heir to her brothers, and in the Prose *Dindshenchas* the argument used is that she herself is childless. The incest and the production of an heir are the means used to prevent both a patricide and a filicide, and the incest, I would argue, is here used as the transgression that will prevent a greater transgression.

The succession is guaranteed from Eochaid, but bypasses the unrightful sons, being continued in his grandson<sup>35</sup>, through the intervention of Clothru. She does not only attempt to prevent a *fingal*, a kin slaying, but Clothru also ensures the continuation of the kingship within the family, and that the kingship shall not be in the hands of unrighteous people. Even though the list of regents bypasses the male protagonists of the same generation as Clothru, i.e. the brothers, it does not give evidence of matrilineal succession, as discussed by Lyle (2007, 67–68). Furthermore, whereas it can be read as Clothru is bestowing kingship in terms of giving birth to a king, the aim of her actions in all texts seems to her acting to prevent strife, mediate violence and ensure the continuation of her bloodline.

That the episode is replete with issues of kingship seems clear, but in focusing almost exclusively on the mythological aspects of incest and Clothru's connection to the sovereignty, we may miss the very intricate narrative context in which the incest is used and that Clothru's relationship to sovereignty may not indeed be as straightforward as previously presumed.

Whereas I would neither deny nor dispute that mythological, political or historical motifs may be involved in this episode, focusing on a deeper meaning or a mythological function may disguise that as a literary character, in her literary context, Clothru's behaviour makes perfect sense.

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35 And in his great grandson, if we include the tradition that Clothru also slept with Lugaid to produce Crimthann, cf. footnote 13.

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