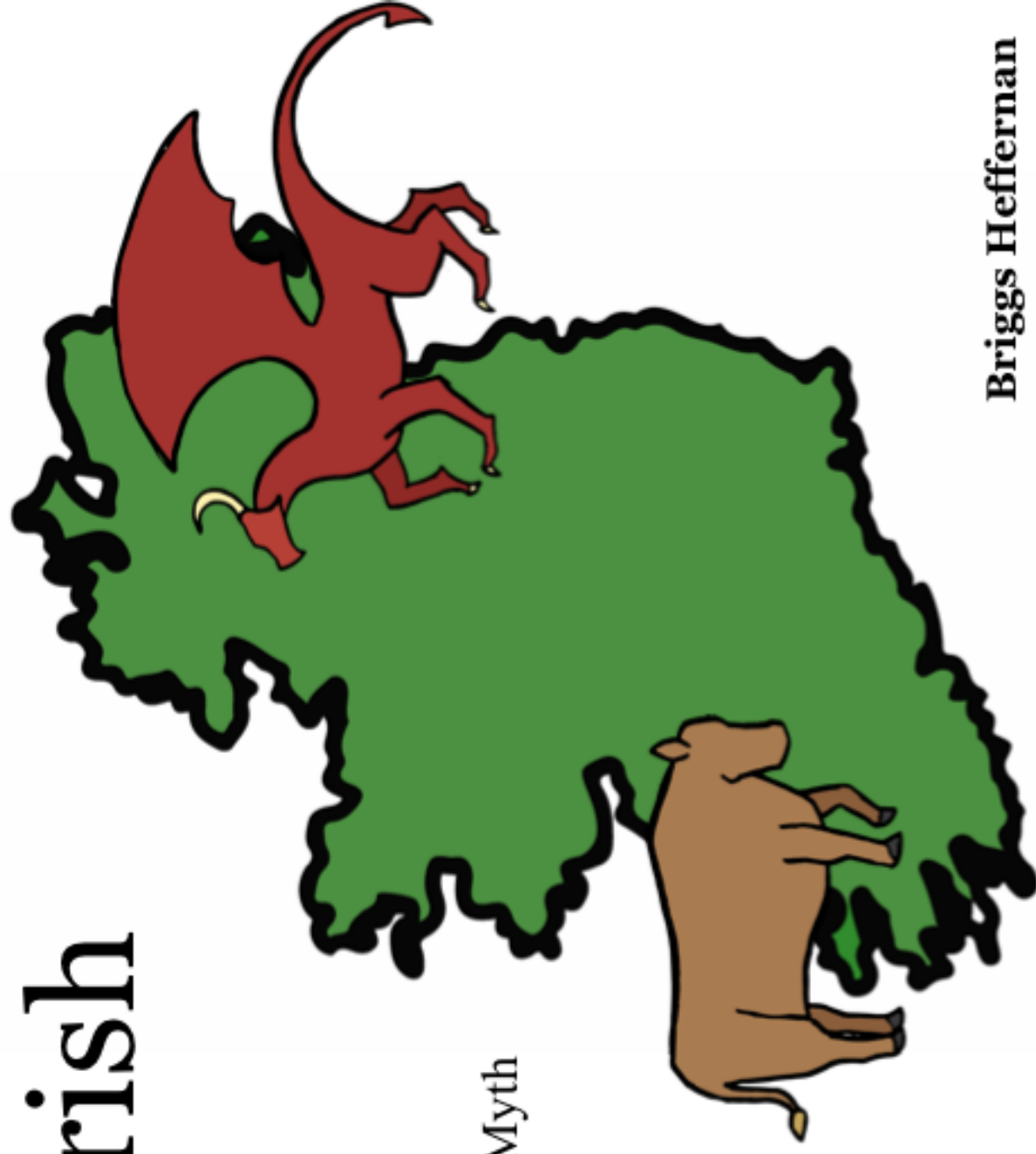


Old Irish

The Ulster Cycle
and the
Indo-European Cattle Myth



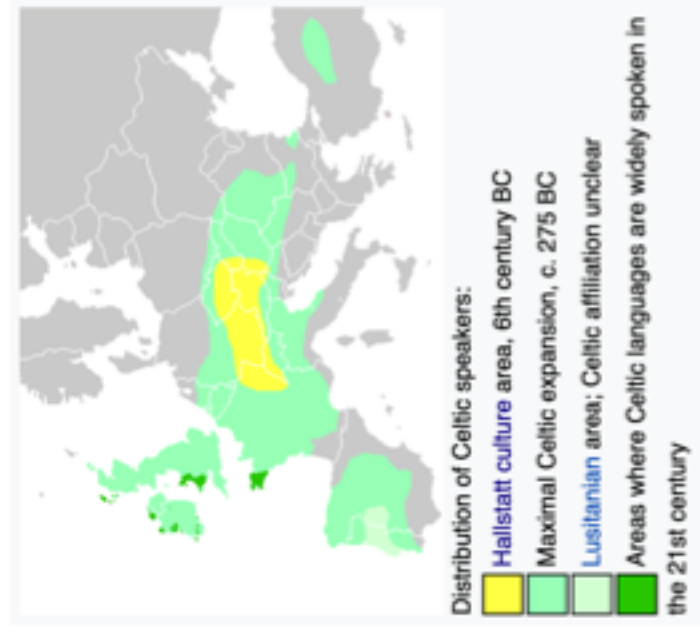
Briggs Heffernan

PIE to Celtic

The oldest form of Celtic was spoken in central Europe and northern Italy, which then spread to the Iberian Peninsula and the British Isles (Slocum and Stempel)

Major Changes (Fortson)

- Centum branch
- Loss of most $*p$, $*g^w$ became b
- Loss of laryngeals
- syllabic nasals became am/an , long syllabic resonants become normal but followed by $\bar{a}$
- Syllable-final $*\bar{o}$ became $\bar{u}$
- Verbs became clause-initial (Insular Celtic)



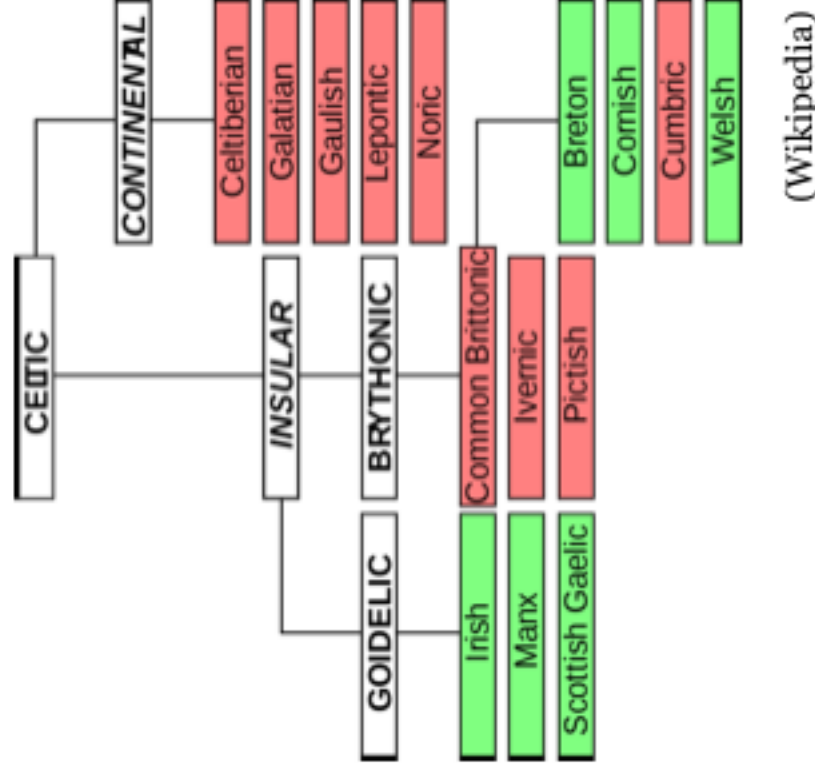
(Wikipedia)

(Insular) Celtic to Old Irish

“The Old Irish period begins with the earliest datable literature, written at the end of the sixth century... The early part of this period, into the first quarter of the seventh century, is called Archaic Old Irish, followed by Classical Old Irish, which lasted until the mid-900s.” (Fortson 319)

Major Changes (Fortson)

- Labiovelar became velars
- **Lenition**: intervocalic stops became fricatives
- **Nasalization**: (when the final sound of a preceding word was a nasal consonant) voiced stops became nasal stops, voiceless stops to voiced stops
- **Palatalization**: a front vowel (*i/e*) following a consonant palatalized that consonant
- **Vowel affectation**: *a-inflection*: a high vowel (*i/u*) became a mid vowel (*e/o*) before a syllable with a non-high vowel (*a/o*), *i-inflection*: a high vowel became a mid vowel when in a preceding syllable became a high vowel



(Wikipedia)

Old Irish Attestation

- “in Ireland, as in a great many other European countries, Christianity and literacy went hand in hand” (Binchy 7)*
- “Several manuscripts preserved on the Continent containing glosses on the Scriptures and other Latin texts represent the most important source of information on Old Irish. The major ones are the Würzburg, Milan, St. Gall, and Turin glosses” (Fortson 319)
- The major sagas from a long history of oral tradition were written down by monks as well (Binchy 8-10)

The Ulster Cycle

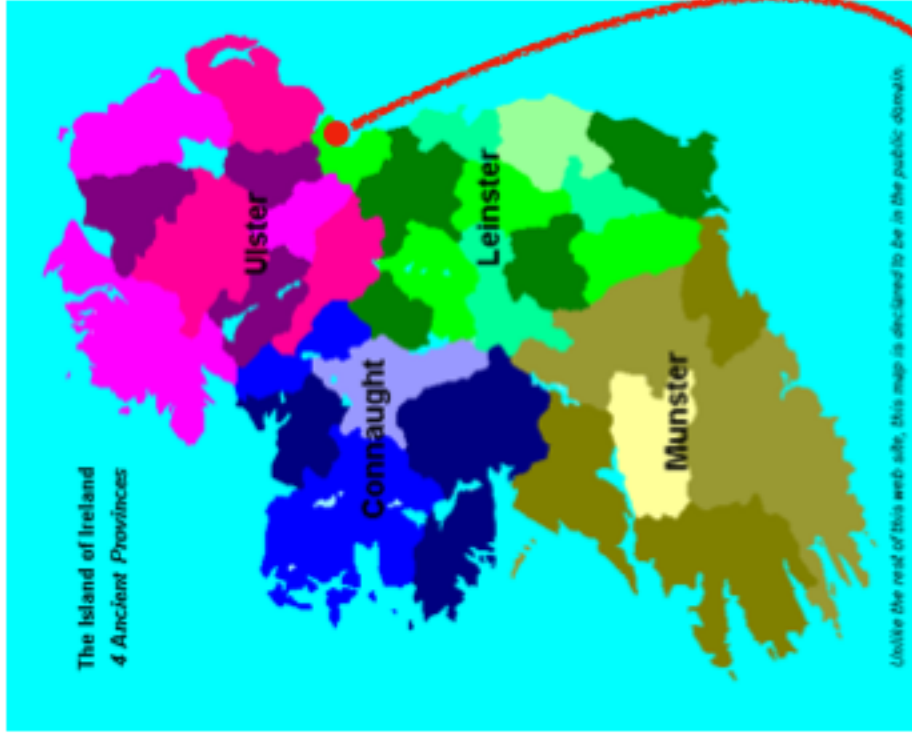
- Found in *The Book of the Dun Cow* written c. 1100 and *The Book of Leinster* from c. 1160. (Brittanica)
- Most individual stories are written in prose, with sections of verse, especially in important moments.
- King Conchobar Mac Nessa of Emain Macha rules the **Ulaid** (Ulster) people. His **Knights of the Red Branch**, and especially his nephew Cu Chulainn, are the main heroes.
- The Ulaid characters are often in conflict with the kingdom of Connacht.

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

Táin bó Cuailnge

- Queen **Mebh** and **Ailill**, her husband and king of **Connacht**, muster an army, looking for a famed brown bull which would give Mebh superiority over Ailill.
- They invade **Ulster** where the men are too weak to fight during the winter, except for **Cú Chulainn** who singlehandedly battles the army.
- The army ravages **Cooley**, until winter ends and the Ulster men rally and defeated the Connacht army.
- Mebh has her bull though, and it defeats Ailill's prized bull. Peace is made.



the **Cooley**
peninsula





Indo-European Myth

The dragon-slaying myth is considered a classic Indo-European story:

- “In PIE, this myth was encapsulated in the alliterative formulaic phrase **(e-)g^when-t^og^whim* ‘(he) killed the serpent,’” which could be “extended to a number of heroic exploits that did not involve dragons or serpents per se.” (Fortson 29)
- i.e.: Beowulf and Grendel (England) , Indra and Vritra (India), Sigurd and Fafnir (Germany), Ra and Apophis (Egypt), Herakles and the hydra (Greece), Thor and the Midgard Serpent (Scandinavia)

The cattle-raid myth is similarly ancient and evident in many later Indo-European cultures.

- In fact, Bruce Lincoln argues that these are interconnected, or even the same thing when he writes of a prehistoric Indo-European story: “the **Trito* myth... simultaneously a myth of victory over a serpentine monster and of the winning of cattle.” (44)



The Cattle Raid Myth



The Cattle Raid Myth

A widespread story: Odysseus and Helios' cattle, Indra and the Panis, Herakles and Geryon, "and the eleven other Irish stories which the bear the title *Tain Bó*." (Lincoln 63)

Cattle were hugely important to the early Indo-Europeans:

- "Movable wealth *par excellence* in a pastoral society was livestock. The most prominent PIE term in this regard was **peku*, but scholars differ over whether it referred to livestock (the meaning of such descendants as Sanskrit *páśu*, Latin *pecū*, and Old High German *fihu*) or more generally to 'movable wealth' (the English descendant is *fee*)." (Fortson 22)
- "The animals supplied milk and meat, the mean elements of the food supply; hides for clothing, blankets, bags, and shields; bones for tools; dung for fuel; and urine for disinfectant. They were also crucial to the social order, serving as bride wealth and wergild." (Lincoln 62-3)



The Cattle Raid Myth



Some relevant notes on Lincoln's 'proto-myth':

- “*Trita was a mythic personage and a great hero, but certainly not a god.”
However, a god is also involved, sometimes even fighting alongside the hero.
(48)
- The serpent/thief/foe is a foreigner (often symbolized by three heads) (62)
- The serpent's hoard changes between stories, but the oldest versions are likely indicative of the original: in the Indian, the beast guards cattle, but in the Iranian, there are two women — however, “Indo-Iranian **dhainu* ... one of the most frequent terms for “cow ... means nothing more than “one who lactates, gives milk,” being derived from the verb “to give milk, nourish” (Skt. *dhai-*). As such, it may be used for the female of any species” (52)





The proto-myth with regards to *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*:

- Cu Chulainn is only immune to the Ulster curse because his father was a god.
- The thief is a foreign ruler, with a foreign army.
- This story is a cattle-raid in its purest sense, so the object of value is a bull.
- BUT: the story is defensive, with Cu Chulainn trying to stop Mebh and Ailill. Additionally, the bull is not retaken.

Perhaps the story is 'young' enough to have strayed from the Indo-European myth significantly, perhaps Lincoln is wrong.



The Problem with Myth





It is very difficult to determine anything concrete through analysis of myths, regardless of one's technique.

Walter Brenneman Jr. offers a major problem with any analysis of Celtic myth as an Indo-European:

- “My suggestion is that it is a mistake to indentify, in terms of worldview and religious symbolism, the Indo-Europeans and the Celts, particularly the Goidel Celts. Despite the common linguistic roots within the Indo-European language group, the cultural heritage of the Celts from their earliest beginnings differs from the that of the Indo-Europeans who invaded India, Greece, and Iran.” (342)
- “Just as the serpent must be interpreted differently in pastoral nomadic and cereal grain cultures, so too must the cattle raid be interpreted differently in Celtic culture and in the Indo-European or Indo-Aryan context.” (344)

Bibliography

Binchy, D. A. "The Background of Early Irish Literature." *Studia Hibernica*, 1, 1961, pp 7-18.

Brenneman, Jr., Walter L. "Serpent, Cows, and Ladies: Constrasting Symbolism in Irish and Indo-European-Cattle Raiding Myths." *History of Religions*, vol. 28, no. 4, May 1989, pp. 340-54.

Fortson, Benjamin W. *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*. London, Blackwell Publishing, 2010.

Lincoln, Bruce. "The Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myth." *History of Religions*, vol. 16, no. 1, Aug. 1976, pp. 42-65.

"Ulster Cycle" *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Aug. 2013. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Ulster-cycle>

Image Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_languages

<https://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/geography/counties.html>

Any other art is my own.