

## THE CONCEPTION OF CONALL CERNACH

The story of Conall Cernach's conception and birth has not survived as an independent tale, but a brief account has been preserved as part of the *Cóir Anmann* or "Fitness of Names", a late Middle Irish collection of explanations of the names and epithets of characters from Irish literature and traditional history.

I have followed Stokes' edition of the text, although I have repunctuated it in places, and removed a gloss, which is incorporated into the text in the manuscript, to a footnote, and given the story a title.

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### Source:

Whitley Stokes (ed. & trans.), "*Cóir Anmann* (Fitness of Names)", *Irish Texts* ser. 3 vol. 2, 1897, pp. 392-395.

### Reference:

Sharon Arbuthnot, "The Manuscript Tradition of *Cóir Anmann*", *Studia Celtica* 35, 2001, pp. 285-298

## COMPERT CONAILL CHERNAIG

1. Conall agus Cernach, can assa ráiter? Ní ansa. Rosacht chlainne bóí for Finnchaímh ingen Chathbaidh .i. ben Aimirghin Íarghiunnaigh,\* coná beredh clann. Co tudchaidh araile druí ina dáil, con-epert in druí fría, “dám[b]a mhaith mo lógh,” ol sé, “doberthássa mac maith do Amhargen.” “Bidh fir son,” ol sisi. “Bid maith do lógh liumsa.” Con-eipert in druí, “tar don tiprait amárach agus tiaghstu lat.” Tiaghait andís íarnamhárach don tiprait, con cechain in druí brechtu agus tairchetla forsín tiprait. Con-epert in druí, “dot-fothraig eissi agus dofuisemha mac, agus ní ba hingaire nech aile día mathar macne oldás .i. do Connachtaibh.”

2. Atibh an ingen dígh assín tiprait iarsín, agus ro slúig duirb laisín dígh, agus baí in duirb sín a laimh in maic a mbroinn a mháthar, gu ra tholl an lámh agus gurus-cernaigh.

3. Ó'thúala Cet mac Maghach, brathair a mhathar, in ní sín,† boí sein a coimét a sheathar co mberid a mac. Táinic inbaid na hingine, agus rofug mac. Tangadar drúidh baidisidhe in maic i ngeintliucht gur chansat a mbaithis ngeintlidhe for in mac mbeg, agus roráidhsit, “ní ghinfi mac bhus ingaire oldás in mac so do Connachtaibh, agus ní bhíadh aidhchi gin chenn Connachtaigh for a chriss, agus mairbhfidh fer for leth Connacht.” Is ann sín roghabh Ceat in mac beg chuigi, agus dom-bert fó a saíl co mbrúid a brága, agus ní brúid a smir. Conid ann sín isbeir a mháthair fría Cet, “is connda in feall dogní, a derbbrathair!” ol sí. “Is fir,” ol Cet. “Bidh Conall nó confeall a ainm ó sunn.” Agus dobert a mac di. *Unde* Conall Claenbhraighdech Cernach *nominatur*.

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\* Amargein Iarghiunnach .i. Amarghein Dubh, *nam* iarn duibe *dicitur*. Íar .i. dubh giunnach .i. folt .i. folt dubh baí fair is de bá hAmarghein Iarnghiunnach eissium.

† .i. go mbéradh a siúr in ghin nómhuirbhfed fer for leth Connacht.

## THE CONCEPTION OF CONALL CERNACH

1. “Conall” and “Cernach”, from what are they said? Not hard. There was hesitation of children upon Findchóem, daughter of Cathbad, the wife of Amergin Dark-Hair,\* so that she bore no children. A certain druid came to see her, and the druid said to her, “if my fee is good,” he said, “you will bear a good son for Amergin.” “That will be true,” she said. “Your fee from me will be good.” The druid said, “come to the well tomorrow, and I will go with you.” They both went to the well the next day, and the druid sang spells and prophesies over the well. Then the druid said, “wash yourself with it and you will bring forth a son, and no other will be more impious to his mother’s family than him; i.e. to the Connachta.”

2. The girl drank a draught from the well then, and she swallowed a worm with the draught, and that worm was in the hand of the boy in his mother’s belly, and it pierced the hand and consumed it.

3. When Cet mac Mágach, his mother’s brother, heard that,† he protected his sister until she bears her son. The girl’s time came, and she bore a son. Druids came to baptise the boy into paganism, and they sang their pagan baptism over the little boy, and said, “there will not be born a boy more impious than this boy to the Connachta, and he will not be a night without the head of a Connachtman on his belt, and he will kill more than half of the Connachta.” It’s then he took the little boy to himself, and put him under his heel and crushed his neck, but he did not crush his marrow. It’s then his mother said to Cet, “wolfish (*conda*) is the treachery (*fell*) you do, brother!” she said. “It’s true,” said Cet. “Conall, or *Confell*,‡ will be his name from here on.” And he gave her son to her. From which his is named Conall Crookneck Cernach.

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\* The next entry in the *Cóir Anmann* is about Conall’s father: “Amergin Iarghiunnach: Amergin the Dark, for *iarn* means “darkness”, *iar* means “dark” and *giunnach* means “hair”, i.e. the dark hair that was on him: it’s from that he was Amergin Iarghiunnach.”

† (gloss incorporated into the text) i.e. that his sister would bear a child who would kill more than half of the Connachta.

‡ Lenited f (*f̊*) in Irish is silent.

4. Conall Cernach didiu, .i. cearn robói assa lethchinn bá meítithir fría cobhraidh sceith, iarna bhúalad a nAlbain im dhilsi mná. Is dé bá Cernach on mhudh sin.

5. Conall Cernach *post* .i. Conall Cern Niadh .i. tréfnér, *nam* cern fear ocus níadh tren *dicitur*. *Vel ab eo quod est cerno .i. uideo*, ar bá cuma dochíth ní il-ló ocus ind aidhchi trésin súil ngleoir boi ina chinn. Nó Conall Cernach .i. Conall buádhach, *nam* cern buáidh *dicitur*, ar bá mór in bhúaidh dó seach chach.

4. Conall *Cernach* then: there was a swelling (*cern*) on the side of his head which was as big as the boss of a shield, after he was struck in Scotland over the loyalty of a woman. It's in that manner he was *Cernach*.

5. Conall *Cernach*, after Conall *Cern Niad* i.e strong man, for *cern* means “man” and *niad* means “strong”. Or it is from (Latin) *cerno*, “I see”, for it was the same seeing something by day and by night through the bright eye which was in his head. Or Conall *Cernach* i.e. Conall the Victorious, for *cern* means “victory”, for great was the victory above everyone.

Source for information on Conall Cernach: Encyclopedia of Religion dictionary. The father of Conall Cernach was Amhairghin, the famous poet and hero of the Ulstermen, and he himself is represented as the most important of the Ulster heroes save C   Chulainn. He is also sometimes named as a foster brother of C   Chulainn, though evidently more mature in years: at the time of C   Chulainn's birth he was already one of the Ulster warriors, and it was he who guarded the southern border of Ulster when the youthful C   Chulainn came there to perform his first initiatory exploit in the epic T  in B  . Cuailnge (The cattle raid of Cuailnge). But whereas C   Chulainn died without progeny, Conall Cernach appears in the genealogies as the ancestor of the Cruthin or Pictish tribes of Ireland. C   Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and L  egaire B  adach are the three most eminent heroes, but the latter two often serve only as foils to enhance the former's status, when they come off second best in a variety of heroic trials. Conall figures as a principal character in a limited number of texts; nonetheless, a consistent, albeit complex, picture emerges of this epic hero. The lists of epic tales that qualified Irish poets were expected to know included a Comper Chonaill Cernaig [The conception of Conall Cernach], but the story has not been preserved in full form. Summaries, representing variant versions, do exist in other narrative matter, such as the tract C  ir anmann [The appropriateness of names], which explains both the name Conall (fancifully) and the epithet cernach (Stokes 1897, no. 251). That is Conall Cernach, son of Amorgen. He has chanced to be along with Conaire at this time. 'Tis he whom Conaire loves beyond every one, because of his resemblance to him in goodness of form and shape. Goodly is the hero that is there, Conall Cernach! To that blood-red shield on his fist, which has been speckled with rivets of white bronze, the Ulaid have given a famous name, to wit, the Bricriu of Conall Cernach. 2. '  l swear what my tribe swears, plenteous will be the rain of red blood over it to-night before the Hostel! That ridged spear above him, many will there be unto whom to-night, before the Hostel, it will deal drinks of death. Seven doorways there are out of the house, and Conall Cernach will contrive to be at each of them, and from no doorway will he be absent. Background Conall Cernach was a hero of the Ulaid in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology, probably their second greatest warrior after C  chulainn, whose foster-brother he was. His father was one of the Ulaid, Amairgin mac Echit while his mother was Findchoem from Connacht. His maternal uncle was a Connacht hero Cet mac M  igach, who tried to kill him at birth and who was later killed by Conall. Many of the old Irish tales feature Conall as one of the chief characters, such as 'T  in B   Cuailnge' or 'Cattle Raid of Cooley', 'Sc  la Mucce meic Da Th  ' or 'The Story of Mac Da Th  's Pig', 'Fled Bricrenn' or 'Bricriu's Feast', 'T  in B   Fra  ch' or 'Fr  ech's Cattle Raid', 'Togail Bruidne D   Derga' or 'The Destruction of Da Derga's'.