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)”, Irische Texte ser. 3 vol. 2, 1897, pp. 392-395.

Reference:

2. Atibh an ingen digh assin tiprait iarsin, ocus ro sluig duirb laisin dhích, ocus bai in duirb sin a laimh in maic a mbroinn a mháthar, gu ra tholl an láimh ocus gur-us-cernaigh.


Amargein larghiúnnach .i. Amargein Dubh, nam iarn duibe dicitar. Íar .i. dubh giunnach .i. folt .i. folt dubh baí fair is de ba hAmargein larghiúnnach eissium.

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 Croonknock Cernach.

*Amargein Iarghiúnnach .i. Amargein Dubh, nam iarn duibe dicitar. Íar .i. dubh giunnach .i. folt .i. folt dubh baí fair is de ba hAmargein larghiúnnach eissium.

†i. go mbéradh a šiúr in ghin nómbuirbhfeid fer for leth Connacht.

‡The next entry in the Cúir Anmann is about Conall’s father: “Amergin largiúnnach: Amergin the Dark, for Íar 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 largiúnnach.”

†(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 (j) in Irish is silent.
4. Conall Cernach didiu, i.e. cearn robóí assa lethchinn bá meítithir fría cobhraidh sceith, iarna bhúalad a nAlbain im dhílsi mná. Is dé bá Cernach on mhudh sin.

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

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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.
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 Cú Chulainn. He is also sometimes named as a foster brother of Cú Chulainn, though evidently more mature in years: at the time of Cú 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 Cú Chulainn came there to perform his first initiatory exploit in the epic Táin Bó Cualnge (The cattle raid of Cualinge). But whereas Cú Chulainn died without progeny, Conall Cernach appears in the genealogies as the ancestor of the Cruthin or Pictish tribes of Ireland. Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lágéargair Bóthead 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 Compert Chonall 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 Cú Annamn [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 Amorgan. He has chanced to be along with Conaire at this time. À¢t t’is 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. À¢c¢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 Cú Chulainn, whose foster-brother he was. 1 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 Mágach, 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 À¢Tá’in Bó CualingeÀ¢TM or À¢Cattle Raid of CooleyÀ¢TM, À¢ScÀ©la Mucce meic Da ThÀªÀªÀstitute or À¢The Story of Mac Da ThÀªÀªÀstitute PigÀ¢TM, À¢Fled BricrennÀ¢TM or À¢BriccriuÀ¢TM FeastÀ¢TM, À¢Tá’in BóÀ¢FraÀ¨chÀ¢TM or À¢FrÀ¨echÀ¢À¢À¢À¢M Cattle RaidÀ¢TM, À¢Togail Bruidne DÀ¡ DergaÀ¢TM or À¢The Destruction of Da DergaÀ¢TM.