The Táin is Táin Bó Cúailnge

Táin Bó Cúailnge is the story of a cattle-raid reputed to have taken place during winter sometime around the time of Christ. Set in Ireland, Wales and pages beyond, it is populated with familiar warriors, fought over quests and kings and poems both sweet and sour. It is often regarded alongside Ireland’s greatest literary classics and frequently received as epic literature. This subject alone is a commonplace among scholars of the heroic tales of Greece, and recent scholarship suggests that for the scholars of the heroic tales it was the Trojan War, based on Homer’s Iliad, which inspired the Táin Bó Cúailnge.

The story of Cúchulainn, the central character, is a clear example of the heroic cycle, a narrative form which encompassed the story and do not cover the variance with the main text of this day (Pl. 4).

The main act of the Táin is the great cattle-raid, which involves the meeting of two armies, each side led by a warrior-king. The story begins with the defeat of Queen Medb’s forces by Cúchulainn, and ends with Cúchulainn’s death. The Táin is divided into three parts: the battle for the blacksmith’s forge, the battle for the gold mare, and the battle for the ruined city.

Reading and walking

Táin Bó Cúailnge is available in various on-line and print formats. Cecile Haley’s (2004) translation of the epic provides a new perspective on the story for modern audiences. It is regarded as the most authoritative (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies). The translations by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford University Press, 1970) and Ciarán Carson (Penguin, 2007) are more lyrical. The Táin is often compared to the Odyssey and the Iliad, and plotted through Ireland, landscape. Records of the texts are preserved in manuscripts, of which the Book of the Dun Cow (Lebor na hUidre) is the most complete, and is acknowledged as the central tale.

To read the Táin is to travel back across Ireland. The various cycles and walking routes developed by the text’s authors parallel the Táin route. The Táin Way—its route of passages in Cuchulainn’s Ireland—is a geographical and cultural walking route. For the Táin is a story about a cattle-raid that took place 2,000 years ago. The medieval texts provide road networks and across real river fords and plotted it through specific landscapes. Many of the set pieces have geographical and historical associations, and individual monuments. By re-reading the stories, re-tracing old routeways, identifying river heads, climbing hills and walking community lore, it is possible to re-imagine the battle of Queen Medb’s forces in the black牡鼻.

Tracing the route

The route of Táin Bó Cúailnge

The route of Táin Bó Cúailnge is a story of a cattle-raid that is said to have taken place sometime around the time of Christ. Set in Ireland, Wales and pages beyond, it is populated with familiar warriors, fought over quests and kings and poems both sweet and sour. It is often regarded alongside Ireland’s greatest literary classics and frequently received as epic literature. This subject alone is a commonplace among scholars of the heroic tales of Greece, and recent scholarship suggests that for the scholars of the heroic tales it was the Trojan War, based on Homer’s Iliad, which inspired the Táin Bó Cúailnge.

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Retracing the route of Táin Bó Cúailnge in Louth

Much of the core action of the Táin takes place in south Louth (Map 3). This is reflected in the route, which crosses the counties from north to south. Traveling up the River Slieve, Medb’s forces approached Cooley during the early part of the Táin. This was the favoured route as it allowed Medb’s forces to cross the River Mattock at its junction with the River Slieve, the crossing point used by the aspiring Medb’s forces and by the armies of the Ulster kings in the ninth century. The lands around the Mattock and Slieve valleys were considered a ‘sliab’ (the flat stretch of terrain between two hills) and the crossing of the Mattock was one of the most important in Ulster.

River Mattock: The winding course of the River Mattock at its junction with the Slieve, this crossing-point is the area of Meath from Louth. In the early outlines of the story, Medb’s forces probably tracked northwards from Meath rather than appear as queen of Tara and the cattle-raiders originate from Meath rather than Tara. In the later versions of the Táin, the Slieve forces appear as queen of Tara and the cattle-raiders originate from Louth. In the River Mattock, this crossing-point is one of the main routes from Tara to Cooley. In the later versions of the Táin, Medb followed this route to the coast and to Cooley.

Dundalk Bay: It was Harried by the Ulster forces at Dundalk and the invading armies had to descend to the shores of Carlingford Lough on or around the site of the present town of Carlingford. From here they would have forded the river or at least have viewed it by the coastline. Haley and Kinsella both reposition this site as being close to the village of Blackrock. Haley interprets the name ‘Blackrock’ as a desert island. In the later versions of the Táin, this crossing-point is one of the main routes from Tara to Cooley. In the later versions of the Táin, Medb followed this route to the coast and to Cooley.

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