

The Ulster cycle

The Ulster Cycle is a group of heroic tales relating to the Ulaid, a powerful prehistoric people of the north of Ireland, from whom the name of Ulster derives. Their territory extended from south Donegal to the mouth of the Boyne and their traditional seat was at *Emain Macha, now Navan fort near Armagh. Their opponents were the Connachta, associated with the province of that name who had their seat at *Cruachan in Co. Roscommon. The conflict between Ulaid and Connachta forms the basis of the tales grouped in this cycle, the most famous of which is **Táin Bó Cuailnge*, where the Ulster hero is *Cú Chulainn. At the time in which the cycle of tales is set *Conchobor mac Nessa is king of the Ulaid and *Medb, wife of Ailill, is queen of the Connachta. The tales reflect a dynastic struggle between these two peoples, while Medb, depicted as a turbulent spouse, retains associations with the goddess of sovereignty [see *mythology]. Conchobor is said to have reigned at the beginning of the Christian era but precise identification of characters in the cycle with historical personages is impossible. The world depicted in the tales, however, does reflect the culture of pre-Christian Celtic Gaul and Britain as described in classical writers such as Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Caesar: it is warlike; combat is often from chariots, manned by warrior and charioteer; the heads of opponents are cut off and used as trophies; the hero gets the finest cut of meat; druids, magic, and prophecy are central to society; and the otherworld is always close. The La Tene iron age culture of first and second century Gaul and Briton survived longer in Ireland because Roman influence did not impinge; and this is the world of these tales which evolved sometime between 100 BC and 400 AD [see *Celts]. They were written down by monks in the monasteries from the seventh century onward, by which time they were long established in the repertoire of poets and storytellers [see *tale-types]. The extent to which monastic scribes reshaped material derived from oral and pagan sources is a matter of debate, but undoubtedly there were some attempts to Christianize it: the death of Conchobor is made to coincide with Christ's crucifixion, for example.

The stories use a mixture of verse and prose, some of the poetry being very archaic. Topography is important, the text often indicating the precise location of an event. Verbal exchanges between characters are sometimes energetic and terse, sometimes declamatory, often brutally comic. Gods and supernatural creatures, male and female, constantly intervene in the action, while many of the protagonists are themselves of divine origin. *Cú Chulainn is *Lug's son [see *mythology]; *Conall Cernach is related to Gaulish Cernunnos, the horned god depicted on the Gundestup Cauldron from the first century BC. Tales in this cycle other than *Táin Bó*

Cuailnge are **Aided Chon Chulainn*, **Aided Oenfhir Aífe*, **Fled Bricrenn*, **Longes mac nUislenn*, **Scéla Mucce Maic Da Thó*, **Seirglige Con Chulainn*, **Tochmharc Emire*, and **Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. The stories are preserved in many **manuscripts*. See T. F. **O’Rahilly*, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (1946); and Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (1948).