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MACHA AND THE INVENTION OF MYTH

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides new literary analyses of two tales associated with Emain Macha, both of which feature a woman called Macha: *Noínden Ulad*, which purports to tell the origin of the debility that the Ulstermen suffered during the Táin, and the story of Macha Mongrúad, who overthrew her enemies and forced them to construct the fort of Emain Macha. The discussion considers issues of warriorhood, justice and gender, and seeks to disentangle the themes of sovereignty and war in relation to the women called Macha. Two of the four women bearing the name Macha are, in all probability, relatively late innovations, and the primary function of the remaining two figures lies in warfare.

INTRODUCTION

Four distinct characters called Macha (earlier Machae) are recorded in medieval Irish literature.¹ The first appears in *Lebor Gabála* where she is one of the wives of Nemed, the leader of the third wave of invaders to take Ireland. Little is said of her there, save that Mag Macha (at Armagh) was named after her. The second is Macha Mongrúad, a warrior-queen who seizes the sovereignty of Ulster from her rivals, enslaves them and forces them to dig the *ráth* of Emain Macha. The third and undoubtedly the best known is Macha, the wife of a figure variously called Cruinnchu, Cruinniuc and Cruinn,² an Ulster commoner (*aithech*). This Macha famously outruns the horses of the king of Ulster while she is heavily pregnant. At the end of the race she cries out in pain and imposes a curse on the Ulstermen, by which they will suffer the pangs of childbirth in their time of greatest need. The fourth and final Macha is one of three *morrígná* or war-goddesses to whom is attributed *mesrad Mache* or 'the mast of Macha', which is said to have consisted of the heads of slaughtered men.³

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Institute for Irish and Celtic Studies research seminar series, University of Ulster, 5 March, 2009, and at the *Celtic Mythology and Religion* symposium, Queen's University, Belfast, 12 February, 2010. I am grateful to the participants for their feedback. I am particularly indebted to the editors of *Ériu* for many helpful comments and criticisms. Translations are my own unless otherwise attributed.

² Cruinn is the usual nom. of this form of the name and is apparently indeclinable. It is used throughout *NU III*; see also *MD* iv 126.28, 36. The prose *Dindshenchas* gives his name only in the gen. (*Cruinn*) and Stokes renders it into nom. Cruinn in his translations (Stokes 1893, 480–1; 1894, 45). Similarly, Dobbs (1931, 174) renders gen. Cruinn of the *Banshenchas* as 'Cronn' in her translation. I use the spelling Cruinn throughout for nom. of this form.

³ See below, p. 103.

The narratives about each of these characters are recounted in separate and unconnected texts in their oldest forms, and the stories of only the first three ever appear together in a single text, namely, in the prose *Dindshenchas* (Stokes 1893, 480–1; Stokes 1894, 44–5). Notwithstanding the disparity of the earliest sources, modern scholars of comparative mythology have frequently considered these figures as manifestations of a single goddess, Macha, who appears to exhibit functions relating to war and fertility. This view has already been undermined by John Carey (1982–83, 263–4) who has suggested, with good cause, that Macha, wife of Nemed, is a late innovation in the *Lebor Gabála* tradition. I will argue here that the third Macha, the wife of Crunnchu, is not so called in the earliest extant text and that there is evidence to show that her name in later versions was abstracted from the placenames associated with Emain Macha. Thus, it will be argued that only two women of the name Macha—they being Macha Mongrúad and the war-goddess of the name—can be shown to have any antiquity in the tradition, and that only they should be considered in any investigation of the original Macha complex.

MYTHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The most sophisticated interpretation of the Macha stories is that developed by Georges Dumézil, and although it is not universally accepted, his interpretation provides a useful starting point for our analysis. Dumézil focuses on the first three discrete appearances of Macha listed above (that is, excluding the war-goddess figure, for whom no continuous narrative exists) and argues that they, respectively, display the three functions underlying Indo-European myth: magico-religious sovereignty, a martial function and fecundity (Dumézil 1995, 602–12). The first function, according to his scheme, is represented by the wife of Nemed. She is a seer (*voyante*) who has a vision of the destruction of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and her sacredness is clearly marked, according to Dumézil, in the name of her husband, Nemed, ‘sacred (one)’ (Dumézil 1995, 604). The representative of the second function is Macha Mongrúad, who operates through force and violence rather than by treaty and collaboration (Dumézil 1995, 606–7). In the first part of this story, she defeats the sons of Díthorbae in battle, and in the second episode she overcomes them by dint of strength, luring them to a secluded place with the promise of sexual favours before wrestling, binding and enslaving them. Dumézil sees the Macha who appears in some texts as a war-goddess as a later development of this function. The third Macha discussed by Dumézil, namely, the wife of Crunnchu, represents the third function—fecundity. She displays many of the attributes associated with the third function: she is beautiful, she increases the wealth of her husband, she is a model housewife, is accomplished at farming, and displays her fertility by means of conception and birth (Dumézil 1995, 610). The dispute between the king’s host (*slúag*) and her husband, into which she is

eventually dragged, is, according to Dumézil (1995, 610), a conflict between the second and third functions.

Dumézil's approach builds on but differs from earlier analyses, such as that proposed by Marie-Louise Sjoestedt. For Sjoestedt and many other mythologists, all three Machas are manifestations of a single fertility/war goddess. The wife of Crunnchu displays the traits of the fertility goddess who presides over the rites of childbirth (Sjoestedt 1949, 27). Macha Mongrúad combines the functions of a warrior with a sexual aspect in which the male partner is subjugated by the female. Macha, wife of Nemed, has an agrarian aspect because Nemed clears plains, one of which is named after Macha. Dumézil (1995, 611) accuses Sjoestedt of compounding separate characters and confusing their identities in order to create a single, nebulous mother-goddess. For Dumézil, the individuality of each character is key, and one should not interpret the attributes of one in light of those of another. Thus, we have two overlapping but distinct interpretations of the Macha complex: the Dumézilian notion that each Macha is a distinct and individual manifestation of one, and only one, of his three functions, and Sjoestedt's idea that they are all depictions of a single goddess representing fertility and war.

As already mentioned, Carey casts serious doubt on the antiquity and authenticity of Macha, wife of Nemed, who appears only in *Lebor Gabála*:

Her husband, the legendary colonist Nemed, is himself virtually unknown outside *Lebor Gabála* (LG), a pseudohistorical work so moulded by fabrication and foreign influence that its uncorroborated testimony can be used only with the greatest caution. (Carey 1982–83, 264)

He suggests that the wives of Nemed—Macha, Eba and Cera—could have been supplied from a list of plains found in both the first and second recensions. The nature of placename lore, both within the *Dindshenchas* and in other narrative texts, is such that characters in stories can be generated from existing placenames almost on demand (Baumgarten 1990). It is surely significant that plains in the *Dindshenchas* are frequently named after either those who cleared them or their wives/lovers (Toner 2011). This is a critical point, for it suggests that we should be very sceptical about the validity of any character whose name is linked to a placename in *Dindshenchas*-type material and is not known independently from any other context.

NOÍNDEN ULAD

I will turn first to the story now generally known as *Noínden Ulad*. This text is extant in three separate recensions. The oldest of the three (*NU I*) is extant in four separate manuscripts from which it has been edited by Vernam Hull, who dates it to the middle of the ninth century (1968, 23). The second recension (*NU II*) is preserved independently in the Book of Leinster and Royal

Irish Academy C i 2, ff 15rb–16rb.⁴ It may date to the tenth or possibly the eleventh century.⁵ The third and latest recension (*NU III*) appears in Trinity College Dublin manuscript H.3.18 and has been edited by Thurneysen (1918) under the title *Tochmarc Cruinn ocus Macha*. Versions of the tale are also preserved in the *Dindshenchas* (Stokes 1893, 480–1; Stokes 1894, 44–5; *MD* 124–31), and a brief telling occurs in the Riddling Colloquy in *Tochmarc Emire* (*TE* 32–3).

I shall give here a brief summary of the earliest of the three recensions. A woman appears to a wealthy, widowed commoner (*aithech*) called Crunnchu. She immediately sets about doing household chores, including milking the cows and preparing food for Crunnchu and his sons. That night, she sleeps with Crunnchu and becomes pregnant. The time comes for an assembly to be held among the Ulstermen, and Crunnchu determines that he will go. His wife warns him not to mention her at the gathering, but after the king's horses prove victorious in a race, Crunnchu foolishly boasts that his wife could outrun them. The king seizes him and holds him prisoner until his wife can come and prove him at his word. The woman, who is now about to give birth, begs not to be forced to race. Her cries fall on deaf ears, but despite her condition she outruns the horses and collapses at the finishing line where she gives birth to twins. On hearing her screams, all the Ulstermen become as weak as a woman in childbirth, and the woman declares that henceforth the men of Ulster will have only the strength of a woman in labour when called upon to defend the province against attack.

NU II follows *NU I* closely, even in its wording, but is generally narrated in a more succinct style.⁶ The main narrative difference is an additional passage of dialogue in *NU II* in which the woman reveals her name as Macha, daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith. Other differences include the name of her husband, given as Cruinniuc in *NU II*, and the length of time for which the Ulstermen suffered from the curse.

NU III bears little verbal similarity to either of the earlier recensions and at times departs quite radically from the narrative found there. While out wandering, Cruinn encounters a beautiful maiden who reveals herself to be Macha ingen Bruide, a druidess and female wizard (*bandrai 7 bancumachtach*). He asks her to sleep with him and she agrees so long as her innate powers permit it (*'diamo chet lem cumachtaib bunaidh'*). At the assembly of the Ulstermen, Cruinn boasts that his pregnant wife could outdo the horses and boytroop. He is forced to produce his wife on pain of death. Macha warns Conchobar that if she is forced to compete, he and his progeny will

⁴ For the text see *LL* ii 467–8. The text of C i 2 is nowhere superior to that of *LL*.

⁵ There are very few solid diagnostic features in the text. We may note the retention of *ol* 'says' throughout; preservation of *no* in two cases (as against *ro* for *no* in *ros-gabat*); absence of univibration in *ro-ánic* (but cf. *thánic, ruc*); there are no independent object pronouns, but the infixed pronouns are frequently confused. The alternation between *in/ind* in the definite article follows Old Irish practice for the most part, and we seem to have a neut. in *a n-óenach*; *inna* in gen. sing. fem. is rendered *na (na mná)*, which is also used for nom. pl. masc. in *na eich seo*.

⁶ Approximately 21% of words in *NU II* are also found in more or less identical form in *NU I*, but this conceals a far greater narrative agreement between the two texts.

regret it forever, and she imposes the *ces naídhén* on them. She gives birth to twins and dies forthwith. In the colophon it is styled *Tochmarc Cruinnocus Macha*, which closely echoes the title *Tochmarc mná Cruinn* in version A of the tale lists. That this recension is more closely related to *NU II* is suggested by the fact that both versions agree against all other versions with regard to the lineage of Cruinn/Cruinniuc.⁷

Most previous discussions of the tale have been based on the account in the *Dindshenchas* or on a compound version of the tale based on all extant recensions and incorporating details from each. This approach has tended to obscure differences between the versions and, more importantly, is heavily biased towards the later versions in which more detail is given. It is hardly remarkable, therefore, that virtually no attention has been paid to the fact that the woman, who is almost invariably called Macha in the scholarly treatments of the tale, remains anonymous in the oldest version of the tale. She is referred to on no less than eight occasions but never by name: the only designations used are *ben* 'woman, wife' and *banscál* 'woman'.⁸ One branch of the text, preserved in two of the four manuscripts, does say that her name was Macha: *Macha da- ainm na mna sin ut periti dicunt* (H); *Macha ainm na mna sin* (S) (Hull 1968, 6, 38). This phrase looks very much like an interpolation added at a later date, and Hull duly omits it from his critical edition. The rider '*ut periti dicunt*', with its appeal to unnamed learned men, suggests that there were some doubts about the name of the woman.⁹ It is noteworthy that the woman's name is not mentioned again even in these two manuscripts, and she is henceforth described simply as 'the woman'.¹⁰

This is not the only significant detail that is missing from Recension I but which commonly appears in modern summaries and discussions. Contrary to general belief, the events of the tale are not, according to *NU I*, said to take place at Emain Macha. The location at which the festival is held is not

⁷ Thurneysen (1918, 251–2; 1921, 359) thinks that *NU III* derives elements from both the earlier versions: the term for the debility there is *in ces naídhén* with which we may compare *ces NU I* 1, *in ces-sa*, 65, *in ces*, 67, as against *noinden Ulad*, LL 14547, 14578, *noenden*, 14579, 14580, 14585. However, the redactor of *NU III* would have chosen the name of the debility most familiar to him, so this argument carries little weight. More significantly, *NU II* and *NU III* agree against all other versions with regard to the lineage of Cruinn/Cruinniuc.

⁸ *óc-mnaí*, l. 7, *in ben*, ll 21, 32, 33, *mnáí*, ll 20, 34, *in banscál*, ll 8, 57.

⁹ Hull (1968, 10) assumes that the phrase *ut periti dicunt* was not found in the common exemplar of H and S, but the phrase is typical of learned interventions and it is more likely that these three words were omitted by the scribe of S or his exemplar.

¹⁰ Grigory Bondarenko points out that Rothnám ingen Umail Urcathaig is called by name only on the first occasion she is mentioned in *Airne Fingein*, and that subsequently she is denoted simply by the term *ben* (see Vendryes 1953, l. 8). However, the use of *ben* in the subsequent references to the woman is formulaic, occurring almost invariably in the repeated question and answer formula: '*Ocus cid búaid n-aile, a ben?*' for *Fingen*. '*Ní ansa*', for *in ben*. (e.g. ll 26–7; 44–5, 67–8, etc.) This is a development of the initial question and answer: '*Cia mét búad nád fetamar, a ben*', or *sé...* '*Coica búad*', for *in ben*. (see Vendryes 1953, ll 11–13). Women frequently remain nameless in medieval Irish narrative, for example, Mac Dathó's wife in *Scél Mucce Maic Dathó* (Thurneysen 1935, 3–4), the woman who appears to Bran in *Immram Brain* (Mac Mathúna 1985, 33–45), the woman who visits Connlae in *Echtrae Chonnlai* (McCone 2000, 121–3), and the daughter of Echaid, Rónán's second wife, in *Fingal Rónáin* (Greene 1955).

identified (save that it was in Ulster) and the king is not named. There is no reference to the festival of Lughnasad, and the phrase ‘Now the Ulidians used to hold great and frequent encampments and assemblies’ (*No-bítis dano dúnada et óenaige móra menci la Hultu*, l.18) is very vague and does not allow us to locate the events more precisely. The only contextual detail that is provided is that the period of the *ces* is said to last until the time of Fergus mac Domnaill, who has not yet been identified. Scholars customarily advert to the twins (*emon*) to which the woman gave birth and who (albeit in later versions) are connected to the placename Emain Macha through an interpretation of the name as the ‘twins of Macha’. However, the original text does not seem to have contained the word *emon* and we are told only that she gave birth to a boy and a girl at the same time (*berid mac 7 ingin i n-óen-tairbirt*, l. 56). Of the four manuscripts which preserve this recension, only the Book of Fermoy uses the crucial word *emon* ‘twins’, and so it can hardly have been in the archetype.¹¹

Recensions I and II are very closely related as we have seen, but we cannot tell whether *NU II* is based directly on the earlier version or both extant versions are derived from some lost version. In any case, there is some evidence to indicate that Macha, daughter of Sainreth, is a comparatively late invention who has been introduced into the later version. The woman remains anonymous throughout most of the second recension, being designated there simply as *ben* ‘woman’ on six occasions before the king asks her name, after which she reveals that she is Macha:

‘*Cia th’ainmsiu*’, *ol in rí*.

‘*Iss ed mo ainmse*’, *ol sí*, ‘*7 ainm mo gene bias arin oenuchsa co bráth. Macha ingen Sainrith meic Imbaith m’ainmse*’, *ol sí*. (*LL* 14569–71)¹²

“What is your name”, said the king.

“My name”, she said, “and the name of my children will be given to this assembly forever more. Macha daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith is my name”, she said.’

Although it cannot be proven, it looks as though the redactor of *NU II* concocted this dialogue in order to inform the reader of her name immediately before he employs it in the placename etymology.¹³ It may be significant, therefore, that the *Dindshenchas* appears to record an alternative tradition according to which the woman was called Grían, daughter of Midir of Brí Léith. The account in the metrical *Dindshenchas* (*MD* iv 124–30) is the earliest of the extant *Dindshenchas* accounts relating to the story of Crunnchu’s

¹¹ See note to l. 56; one MS only (H) gives the names of the children as Fír and Fíal.

¹² Punctuation is my own.

¹³ A similar dialogue is found in *NU-III* 6–8, but there it is placed at the beginning of the tale, immediately after her first appearance, and takes place between Macha and Cruinn, and the name is then used routinely in the remainder of the text. She is given a different lineage (daughter of Bruide mac Ceite) from that found in *NU II*.

wife (*MD* iv, 407).¹⁴ The woman is here given two names, Macha and Grían, and she is said to have been the daughter of Midir of Brí Léith:

*A dá hainm thiar cen tacha | Grían gel ocus glan-Macha. ||
A hathair, nír thréith 'ca thig, | Midir Bríg Léith meic Celtchair
ina treib thiar cen tuige | ba hí sin grían banchuire.*

‘Her two names, not seldom heard in the west, were bright Grian and pure Macha.

Her father, not without might in his home, was Midir of Brí Léith meic Celtchair;

in her roofless dwelling in the west she was Grian, the sun of woman-kind.’ (*MD* iv 126.47–52, 127)

This is the only place in the poem where she is called Macha. At the crucial point where she gives birth and dies, she is again called Grían, not Macha:

Emon ruc Grían cen gním ngann, | Fír ocus Fíal a n-anmann.

‘Fír and Fíal were the names of the twins that Grian bore, unsparing of effort.’ (*MD* iv 128.79–80, 129)

It is true that *Grían* provides internal rhyme with *Fíal* and this may explain the choice of name here, but the lack of any hint of an implied etymology is striking. Equally striking is the fact that the prose *Dindshenchas* omits the word *emon* and does not link the birth of the twins to Emain Macha, although the author must have known of this potential link, as we shall see. Rather, Ard Macha is the focus of the text:

*Beridh mac 7 ingen—Fír 7 Fíal a n-anmand—7 atbert co mbedis Ulaid
fo ceis óited in cach uair dus-ficfad eicin... 7 atbeb iar suidhiu, 7 focresa
a fert i n-Ard Machæ, 7 focer a guba 7 roclan[n]udh a líæ. Unde Ard
Macha.*

‘She brings forth a boy and a girl—Fír and Fíal “True and Modest” their names—and she said that the Ulaid would abide under feebleness of childbed whensoever need should befall them... And after this she died, and her tomb was raised on Ard Macha, and her lamentation was made, and her gravestone was planted. Whence Ard Macha “Macha’s Height”.’ (Stokes 1895, 45–6)

¹⁴ For evidence of some independence of the prose version, see Ó Mainnín 2009, 196–7. The version in the prose *Dindshenchas* in Stowe D ii 2 closely follows the version in *TE* (including the use of the verb *arisisbis*), and Gwynn is almost certainly correct in concluding that it has been borrowed from there (*MD* iv, 308–11, 459).

The *Banshenchas* also employs both names, but there they are reckoned as two distinct women. In one version, we are told very specifically that it was Grían, not Macha, who was the mother of the twins and who caused the Ulstermen's debility:

Macha ingen tAirith m. Baith [leg. tSainrith m. Imbaith] a Gall-gaeidelaib, diata Raith Macha, bean Cruind m. Agnomain. Grian Bancuiri bean aili do Chrund m. Agnomain, mathair a da mac. Is trithi in Cesnaiden for Ulltaib. (Dobbs 1931, 174)¹⁵

'Macha, daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith from Galloway, from whom is named Ráith Macha, was the wife of Cronn [*recte* Cruinn] mac Agnomain. Grían Banchuire was another wife of Cronn mac Agnomain and the mother of his two children. It was on account of her that the Ulstermen suffered the debility.'

The assertion that Cruinn had two wives, Macha and Grían, seems little more than an effort to reconcile conflicting traditions about the identity of the woman in *NU*, in contrast to the approach adopted in the *Dindshenchas* which deals with them as two different names for the same person. In any case, it is clear that there was a variant tradition that the twins' mother was Grían, daughter of Midir of Brí Léith. It is not possible to tell which is the older name for the woman, and it might be argued, following the *Dindshenchas*, that Grían is just another name for Macha. Nevertheless, the alternative tradition must, at the very least, cast some doubt on the authenticity of Macha, daughter of Sainreth.

The identification of the mother of the twins as Macha could lead to severe chronological problems. The *Dindshenchas* poet places the events of the story during the reign of Conchobar mac Nessa and makes him the king who condemns Macha/Grían to race against his horses (*MD* iv 130.89). Also, this poet states that the debility lasted nine generations,¹⁶ that is, until the reign of Mál mac Rochraide (*MD* iv 130.88, 92), who, according to the genealogies, lived nine generations after Iaréol Glúnmár, son of Conall Cernach, thus confirming his belief that the debility originated at the time of Conchobar.¹⁷ As we have seen, the *Dindshenchas* poet seems to avoid explaining the name Emain Macha from the woman's twins, but the etymology must have been in existence before his time in order for the connection between the twins and Macha to be made in the first place. Thus,

¹⁵ See also: *Macha ingen tShandraig m. Inboth 7 Grian Bancuire ingen Midir, da mnai Crundcon m. Adnamain* (Dobbs 1931, 209–10).

¹⁶ The phrase he uses, *cosin nómad n-ó*, originally denoted the four generations of the *derbfine*, that is, the nine categories of relatives up to and including second cousins, but was frequently misinterpreted by medieval writers (Binchy 1984; McLeod 2000; Baumgarten 2004). It echoes *co nnómad n-ó* of *NU* I §7 and shows that these two texts are closely related.

¹⁷ (1) Mál m. (2) Rochraide m. (3) Cathbath m. (4) Ailchada m. (5) Cuindchatha m. (6) Findchatha m. (7) Muiredaich m. (8) Fiachach Findamnais m. (9) Iaréol Glúnmair m. (10) Conaill Cernaig (O'Brien 1962, 324).

he successfully sidesteps the potential chronological problem of dating the naming of Emain Macha to the era of the Ulster Cycle tales, which would have been a nonsense in the face of the well-established use of the toponym in traditional history.

NU II does explicitly link the naming of Emain Macha with the birth of the twins, but it further compounds the problem by attempting to identify Cruinniuc in the genealogies. It makes him the son of Agnomán mac Curir Ulad meic Fhiatach meic Urmi, and says that the debility lasted until the time of Forc mac Dalláin meic Mainich meic Lugdach. This Forc must be the same person as the Forgo son of Dallán mac Dubthaig meic Miannaig meic Lugdach who, in the Laud genealogies, is the descendant, nine times removed, from the son of Ogaman mac Fiachach Fir Umai meic Dáire.¹⁸ However, according to *Senchas Síol Ír*, Ogaman assumed the kingship of Ulster approximately 100 years after the death of Conchobar (O'Brien 1962, 277). This produces the absurd chronology according to which both the cause of the debility of the Ulstermen and the naming of Emain Macha are placed *after* the events of the Ulster Cycle.

NU II appears to be independent of the *Dindshenchas* poem and probably predates it. A further important, related version of the tale is briefly retold in the Riddling Colloquy section of *Tochmarc Emire*:

Is de immorro asberar Emain Macha: Macha ingen Sainrith meic Inbotha, ben Crunnchón meic Agnomáin, ro reth fria dá gabair in rígar cur ailgesa fuirri, co ndechuid díb i rríth 7 arsisbis (.i. beris) mac 7 ingen di óentairbirt. Conid din emain sin asberar Emain di 7 conid din Macha sin ráiter Mag Macha. (TE 32–3 §29)

‘This is how Emain Macha was named. Macha daughter of Sainreth mac Inbotha, the wife of Crunnchu mac Agnomáin, ran against the king’s two horses after he had demanded her to do so, and they failed in a race and she bore a son and a daughter at the same time. And it is from that pair (*emain*) that it was called Emain and it was from that Macha that Mag Macha is so called.’

The *TE* account circumvents any chronological problems by not attempting to anchor Crunnchu or Macha in historical time and by avoiding identifying the king. In the absence of absolute chronology, the author is free to associate the birth of the twins with the origin of the name Emain Macha, and he may well have been the first to connect the two. Indeed, *TE* seems to stand midway between *NU I* and *NU II*. It agrees with *NU I* in naming the main male

¹⁸ (1) Forgo m. (2) Dalláin m. (3) Dubthaig meic (4) Miannaig meic (5) Lugdach, (Laud) m. (6) Oengusa Find m. (7) Fergusa Dubdétaig m. (8) Imchatha, m. (9) Findchada, m. Ogamuin m. Fiachach Fir-umai (O'Brien 1962, 322). See also the genealogy of Dál Fiatach in the Book of Leinster, where Forg is son of Dallán m. Dubthaig m. Miannaig m. Lugdach (O'Brien 1962, 407). O'Rahilly (1946, 350 n.2) has shown that Curir Ulad, found here in *NU II*, is a corruption of *moccu Fhir Ulad*.

protagonist as Crunnchu (gen. Crunnchon), and it identifies the twins as a boy and a girl, whereas he is called Crunniuc in *NU II* which also does not reveal the sex of the twins. We might also note the verbal similarity between *NU I* and *TE*: *berid mac 7 ingin i n-óen-tairbirt, NU I; arsisbis mac 7 ingin di óentairbirt, TE*; cf. *co mbert emun, NU II*.¹⁹ It is likely, therefore, that the redactor of *NU II* took the name of the Macha, including her lineage, and the etymology from *TE*.

To summarise to date, it is clear that Macha was not named as such in the earliest version of the tale known as *NU*. It might be argued that her name was simply omitted from *NU I*, but this cannot be proven and is inherently unlikely given that that version is intended as a prelude to the Táin. Moreover, when her name does appear, it does so in a distinctly onomastic context where it appears to have been abstracted from the name of the legendary Ulster capital. There is good evidence for another identity being attached to the woman, Grían, daughter of Midir, although it is uncertain whether this is any more authentic than Macha, daughter of Sainreth. Indeed, it is possible that the name Grían was invented to circumvent the kind of chronological problems the identification with Macha generated. In any case, there is reasonable doubt about the antiquity of Macha, daughter of Sainreth, and it is likely that the idea of Macha as the horse-like fertility goddess is a late invention which owes more to medieval scholasticism than residual pagan belief. As we shall see, this clarifies considerably the nature and role of the real Macha, but before considering such matters I would like to reconsider the underlying meaning of *NU I*.

NOÍNDEN ULAD—THEMES AND COMPOSITION

The narrative of *NU* has been analysed on a number of occasions, usually again without differentiation between the earliest recension and later accounts. The domestic role of the woman, her beneficial impact on her husband's wealth, the depiction of her giving birth and her extraordinary speed have drawn the attention of feminist critics in particular. Bitel (1996, 82), for example, places the horse race in the context of male appropriation and direction of the female role. It would be more accurate to say that the story presents an *attempt* to direct the female role of childbirth, for the most noteworthy feature of the story is the disastrous consequence that ensues for those men who attempt to do so. Far from establishing male hegemony over the female role of childbirth, the mother

¹⁹ Ó Concheanainn (1997, 30) draws attention to the verbal form *arsisbis* in *TE* and concludes that it must be drawn from a lost version of *NU*. This may be so, but it should be noted that *arsisbis*, although of unknown origin, is not an obscure form. It is twice attested in later texts in the sense 'gave birth': *Do-feacaid ella idan 7 tairblingis asa carput 7 arsisbis mac* (Hull 1952, 82.26) 'Her labour pains began and she descended from her chariot and gave birth to a son'; *D'óentoirpirt ructha iat a triur la Fuinche ingin Náir. Arsisbis do Lugaid mac Con*. 'At one birth they were all three brought forth by Fuinche, daughter of Náir. She lay in by Lugaid mac Con' (Meyer 1910, 4).

inflicts a debility on the Ulstermen with the result that the male principle of warriorhood is undermined. I shall return to this issue below. Condren (1989, 30) describes the story as the foundation myth of Irish patriarchal culture, the Irish equivalent of the Fall. Again, it is probably truer to say that the patriarchy is undermined rather than established in this story. It is not strictly true either that the story narrates the Irish Fall. Rather, it appears to be the inverse of the Fall. In the Biblical story of the Fall, Eve and all women after her are forced to endure the pains of childbirth as a result of her consumption of fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil in defiance of God's command. In *NU*, it is the men of Ulster who suffer the pains of childbirth as a result of their unjust refusal to listen to the pleas of the woman not to be forced to race while still in her pregnant state. In other words, it inverts the story of the Fall. Furthermore, contrary to the feminist interpretation of the text, there is much in the story that extols the female principle and castigates the male. Crunnchu appears as vain, boastful and stupid; and the Ulstermen crassly override the natural rights of the woman, leading to their own Fall. The woman, however, appears wise and loyal. She counsels her husband against going to the fair, for she foresees that he will endanger himself and bring their union to an end (*NU I* §3). She travels to the fair to try to secure the release of her husband after the inevitable has happened, and pleads for his life (*NU I* §6). She does not attempt to save her own skin by leaving her husband to answer for his own stupidity, and ultimately her loyalty and honour cost her her life.

B.K. Martin (1989, 106) draws attention to the woman's use of the legal term, *turbaid*, to make a case for respite, first to the messengers sent to bring her in front of the king, and subsequently to the assembled crowd at the fair:

'Is turbaid ém dam-sa', ol sisi, 'a nnt-sin, ol atú álacht co n-idnaib.'

"In sooth, that for me [is] a ground for exemption", she added, "in that I am pregnant with the pangs of childbirth". (*NU I* 38–9)

'Is turbaid ón', ol sisi, 'ar atú-sa co n-idnaib.'

"That is a ground for exemption", she said, "for I am in the pangs of childbirth". (*NU I* 47)

After the king rejects her second call for *turbaid* and calls for Crunnchu to be put to the sword, the woman makes a third and final appeal for delay:

'Anaid frium biucán trá', ol sisi, 'corom-asaitheir.'

"Wait for me but a little [while]", she said, "until I have been delivered". (*NU I* 49)

Hull translates *turbaid* as ‘ground for exemption’ in both instances, but the meaning is rather ‘postponement, delay’. The term occurs in legal texts in relation to a postponement of legal proceedings due to exceptional circumstances (Kelly, 1988, 183, 191; Binchy 1973, 44). However, it is questionable whether the term is used here in a legal sense at all. Syntactically, the logical subject of the copula in the first example, formally expressed by *a nnt-sin*, is either the demand to make the journey to have her husband released or the news that her husband had boasted that she was faster than the king’s horses. In the second example, the logical subject of the copula, expressed by *ón ‘that’*, is the demand that she race against the king’s horses. Neither of these can be understood as grounds for legal delay—only her advanced state of pregnancy could be understood as such, but that is not the logical subject here. It seems, therefore, that we have to do here with the non-legalistic use of the word in the sense ‘disturbance, prevention’ or ‘misfortune, disaster’ (see *DIL* s.v.; O’Rahilly 1942, 215–16). Therefore, we should not view the story within the narrow confines of man-made law but in more general terms of justice and, perhaps, natural law—self-evident principles of justice and right that are binding on all.

The king’s disregard for the law, according to Martin (1989, 106), is to be interpreted as a transgression against *fir flaithemon* and therefore an invalidation of his sovereignty. Leaving aside the dubious legal interpretation, Martin is correct that the injustice meted out by the king would have been regarded as a breach of his regal duty. However, this idea is not worked out in the text. Rather, the payback for this misdemeanour is worked out at the level of the province, not that of the king alone, and the men of Ulster are complicit in the injustice. Everyone at the fair gathers to see her, an act of voyeurism that she regards as unseemly (*Nochon fíu*, ‘It is not meet’, 44), and it is the crowd that initially demands that she take part in the ill-fated race.²⁰ Moreover, it is the men of the province rather than just the king that are punished. She shames them for their callousness (*Mebul dúib* ‘a cause of shame to you’, 51; *do-bér-sa mebal bas mó forib-si* ‘I shall bring an [even] greater shame for that upon you’, 51–2), and it is the warriors of the province as a whole that suffer the pangs (§7). In short, vengeance and humiliation are visited on the men of Ulster in general and on the military ranks in particular. Rather than being concerned with *fir flaithemon*, therefore, the story primarily deals with the subversion of the martial aspect of society.

The conflict between the warrior code and the domain of women is the subject of several early tales, including *Scéla Mucce Maic Dathó* (Thurneysen 1935) and *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (van Hamel 1933, 9–15). In the latter tale, Emer begs Cú Chulainn not to engage in combat with the strange warrior who has arrived on Ulster’s shores. By ignoring her advice and adhering to the warrior code, Cú Chulainn tragically slays his own son. Emer, therefore, stands for

²⁰ ‘*Cid dianom-tucad?’ ol sisi. ‘Do chomlúas fri da gabair ind rí’, ol cách.* “Wherefore have I been brought [hither]?” she asked. “To race with the two steeds of the king”, every one said’. (l. 46).

reason and good sense in opposition to the irrationality and senselessness of the warrior code (Findon 1997, 84–106). In *NU I*, the woman advises Crunnchu not to mention her at the fair, but he foolishly and inappropriately boasts of her speed, leading to his own captivity and the subsequent tragedy. She appeals to reason and to natural justice when she begs not to be forced to run the race while in her pregnant state. This stands in marked contrast to the lack of compassion and good sense on the part of the Ulstermen, and it is this irrational behaviour which leads to their downfall. The gender clash is obvious (lone woman against male host), but it is also a clash between a non-combatant fertility figure and warriors. As we have seen, the woman brings fertility and prosperity to the widower, Crunnchu, and is the model of a good housekeeper. As for the Ulstermen, the horse racing at the fair is doubtless a form of proxy combat—a means by which warrior-nobles can display their prowess and status. Thus, Crunnchu's boast is a direct threat to the king's status as a warrior, and when his wife actually outruns the king's horses, she effectively usurps his hallowed warrior status. The warrior caste is overthrown by a woman, and not just by any woman but by one who is about to give birth to twins. This symbol of fecundity thus defeats the king's symbol of martial superiority. The nature of the warriors' punishment, therefore, is most apt. They lose that which defines their being—their martial prowess—and become as weak and defenceless as women in childbirth whenever they are most in need of their military might.

It is frequently assumed that the pangs suffered by the Ulstermen were the result of the woman's curse. Condren (1989, 34) emphasises the act of birth itself as the source of the debility, arguing that for men to look upon the act of giving birth would be sacrilege of the highest order. Birth universally appears to have been the social domain of women, and for the woman of *NU* to have been forced to give birth publicly in front of men would have been a cause of humiliation to her.²¹ According to the version in the metrical *Dindshenchas*, she 'bared herself' (*rosnocht*, *MD* iv 128.61), but *NU I* is not explicit in this regard and it is not clear whether the woman gives birth at the finish line in full view of the public or whether she retires to a private place:

*Ba sisi boí urtharsna ara cinn i cinn na láithre. La sodain at-racht a screit
n-esi ar tíachra in galair. Ro-glé Día dí fo cét-óir, oculus berid mac 7 ingin
i n-óen-tairbirt.*

'At the end of the course she was across in front of them. Thereupon a scream arose from her on account of the pain of the travail. Forthwith God cleared it away for her, and she bore a boy and a girl at one birth.'
(*NU I* §7)

²¹ For Condren (1989, 34), because the woman was forced to give birth publicly she was compelled to hand over her secrets to the onlookers, who subsequently, by imitating her movements in childbirth, could summon the help of the goddess in time of war. However, it is clear from *NU* itself, and most particularly from the Táin, that this was a debility unwillingly suffered by the Ulstermen causing them to be incapable of fighting, not a ritual practice which enhanced their prowess.

Female nudity is elsewhere seen to emasculate or reduce the martial powers of men. Most famously, the women of Ulster bare their breasts to Cú Chulainn to calm his battle ardour (O’Rahilly 1976, ll. 802ff). He hides his face so as not to see their nakedness, thereby allowing the Ulstermen to seize him and throw him into vats of cooling water.²² In *Mesca Ulad*, the female satirist, Riches, exposes herself to Cú Chulainn who is forced to look at the ground for fear of seeing her nakedness (*ernochta*), despite the imminent danger of attack (Watson 1941, ll. 1040–3). In both cases, the hero averts his gaze so as to avoid seeing the women’s nakedness, and unfortunately it is not clear what would have happened had he looked at them. Nevertheless, parallels assembled by Cormier (1981), particularly the enculturation of Enkidu, suggest that it may have led to his disempowerment. A more germane example is thrown up by the alternative tradition of the debility of the Ulstermen as related in *Ces Ulad*, according to which Cú Chulainn cuts off the thumbs and big toes of Elcmaire of Brug na Bóinne and abducts his wife, Fedelm. She shows herself naked to the Ulstermen and causes their debility:

Tairmgert Fedlim bliadnai inna gnáis 7 a taidusin noc[h]t di Ulltuib rie tuidecht. Do-sn-adbait dia bliadna iar sene conid ead fo-fúoir cess for Ulltoip.

‘Fedelm promised [to be] for a year in his company and to exhibit herself naked to the Ulstermen at her arrival. On that day a year thereafter, she exhibited herself, and this it is that has caused an affliction [to be] upon the Ulstermen.’ (Hull 1962–64, 311, 314)

There may be more to this story, however, than this very condensed telling reveals. Cú Chulainn’s mutilation of Elcmaire may be a symbolic castration. Fedelm only agrees under duress to expose herself, perhaps fearing for her maimed husband’s life, and she may well have cursed the Ulstermen for her humiliation, although the text is silent on this.

Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that the woman of *NU* was seen naked, perhaps even in the throes of childbirth, and that this may somehow be related to the debility inflicted on the Ulstermen. However, in the text as we have it, it is the woman’s words, and more particularly her screams in labour, that induce the debility in the Ulstermen:

La sodain at-racht a screit n-esi ar tíachra in galair...Amail ro-cólatar in slúag uile a screit inna banscáile, fos-ceird fóo combo inann nert uli 7 in banscál boí isin galur.
‘Bid aithis trá dúib ond úair-se ind enechruice fo-rrurmid-si form-sa. In tan bas ansam dúib, nicon bia acht nert mná séolae lib do neuch thaircella a cóiced-sa.’

²² For discussion of this motif, see Cormier 1981; Nagy 1996, 142.

‘Thereupon a scream arose from her on account of the pain of the travail...As soon as all the people heard the scream of the woman, it laid them low so that the strength of all of them was the same as [that of] the woman who was in travail.

“The shame that you have inflicted upon me” [she said,] “shall be indeed a disgrace to you from now on. When things shall be most difficult for you, all those of you who guard this province shall have only the strength of a woman in childbirth”.’ (*NU I* §7)

Thus, it is the woman’s scream in childbirth that is the immediate cause of the warriors’ debility. Indeed, their debility both echoes and iterates the woman’s labour: they have become like women in labour. *NU II* has a briefer description of the moment of the infliction, but foregrounds the scream as the cause of the debility:

Iactaidsi dano lia hasait. Nach duine rodachúala son foscercded i cess. cóic laa 7 cethri aídche. (*LL* 14574–5)

‘Moreover, she cried out in her childbirth. Everyone who heard her was struck by an affliction for five days and four nights.’

While the scream is the immediate agent of the Ulstermen’s incapacity, the woman in *NU I* verbalises this destructive force in the accompanying admonition and prognosis (*Bid aithis...*) This follows a similar formula before the race commences, in which she invokes shame on the Ulstermen and threatens them with an even greater shame (the debility):

‘Mebal dúib ém cen esemul mbec dam. Ór nach tabraíd-si, do-bér-sa mebal bas mó forib-si dara ési.’

“[It] is indeed a cause of shame to you not to grant me a small favor (?). Since you do not grant it, I shall bring an [even] greater shame for that upon you”.’ (*NU I* §6)

This makes it quite clear that she knowingly and deliberately brings the debility on the Ulstermen and that it is not the action of some external force or some passive consequence of the Ulstermen’s lack of mercy or witnessing a woman in childbirth. This is her revenge. As such, we may describe her words as a curse, and it is the curse that is the prime cause of the Ulstermen’s debility. The scream may be viewed either as a non-verbal element of the curse, or simply as the moment at which the curse takes effect.

It would be easy to suggest that the woman’s curse and the havoc that it wreaks signals her darker, perhaps supernatural, side, but curses are frequently uttered by positive characters in early Irish literature, particularly by saints. In Muirchú’s *Life of St Patrick*, the saint curses the druid, Lochru, in the name of God, at which the druid is lifted up into the air, dashed

against a rock and killed (Bieler 1975, 88–90 (17.5–6)). In *NU*, the woman occupies a hallowed and respected position. She is very unambiguously and deliberately depicted as an ideal wife and mother.²³ She is young and attractive, ‘excellent in appearance, apparel, and aspect’ (*co febus delbæ et errid et ecuisc*, §1). She proves to be an excellent housewife. Without instruction or bidding she kindles the fire, prepares food for the household and serves them, milks the cows, and slacks down the fire at the end of the night (§§1–2). She falls pregnant to her husband (and later bears him twins), and on account of her union with him his wealth increases and this pleases her (*Móide dano a inbus-som dia hóentaid-si. Maith a bláth-som et a escrim lée-si*. §2). Most significantly, God comes to her aid when she is in labour, easing and hastening the birth (*Ro-glé Día dí*, §7).²⁴

The cause of the woman’s ire and her curse is clearly related to the demand that she undertake a gruelling task while heavily pregnant, but the text repeatedly lays emphasis on the fact that she is publicly humiliated by being brought before the people at the fair and being forced to race against the horses. It is not fitting, she says on being brought to the fair, to gaze upon her shape (*‘Nochon fíu taidbred ón’, ol si, ‘mo chrotha-sa’*. *NU* I 44), and after the race she declares that they have brought disgrace (*enechruice*) on her (l. 59). And as we have seen, she shames them (*mebal dúib*) and threatens to bring an even greater shame (*mebal bas mó*) on them. The significance of the public nature of shame has been highlighted by Charles-Edwards, who argues that shame negates the practical value of high status:

As shame deprives high status of practical value so does it humiliate a man’s whole social personality: he ceases to be the person he was... Public shame destroys the value of status. (Charles-Edwards 1978, 130)

Thus, the dishonoured person is without social status, and in *NU* the woman is almost literally reduced to the status of an animal when she is forced to adopt the role of a horse in a race.

Status is an important theme in the tale. It is surely significant that Crunnchu is depicted as an *aithech* ‘commoner’ living in a remote area, that is, a farmer and freeman who is not a lord.²⁵ His class makes him an unusual character in early Irish literature, which is primarily concerned with the nobility, and it marks the narrative as potentially fraught from the very beginning. It has previously been noted, for example by Charles-Edwards (2000, 137), that class plays an important part in this tale, not least because Crunnchu challenges the claim that the king’s horses were the fastest in the

²³ Compare Kelly 1988, 69.

²⁴ The verb is *gléid*, which I take to mean ‘resolves, concludes’ (see *DIL* s.v.).

²⁵ Charles-Edwards 2000, 134–5; Binchy 1941, 74. Crunnchu is described as wealthy (*somæ*), and in possession of great wealth (*indmus mór*) and he had many sons. His dwelling had a main house (*tech mór*) with a separate kitchen (*cuile*), and he had cattle which the woman milks (*NU* I §§1–2).

country. Crunnchu betrays his churlish background by claiming that even his wife could run faster than the king's horses. This is identified as a boast (*imarbág* §4), and it is clear that Crunnchu has been catapulted into the very hazardous environment of ritualised boasting associated with the warrior caste.

The non-noble would normally be expected to be crushed in such a competition, and the challenge is all the more audacious and impertinent because of Crunnchu's lower status. Arguably, if Crunnchu were to win the boasting, then not only would the king be worsted, which is of itself serious enough, but the whole fabric of society would be disrupted. If the king is to save face, he must challenge Crunnchu's boast and compel him to prove his claim. However, the immediate demands of a boasting contest here become entangled with natural justice. As well as two contending social classes, we now have two competing social codes—the warrior code, which shields the existing hierarchy, and natural justice, which protects all members of society. The king and his people subscribe to the former, while the woman advocates the latter. The king appears unwilling or unable to delay the race, and thereby subordinates natural justice to the warrior code. This is his undoing, for he brings shame on himself and the Ulstermen in the very domain in which they seek dominance. I have already drawn attention to the fact that the horse race is a proxy for war—the means by which warriors and nobles display their martial prowess—yet the king is humiliated by being defeated by this pregnant woman running on foot. This sporting defeat, however, is only a precursor to the more pervasive overthrow of the military might of the Ulstermen as manifested in the infliction of the birth pangs on them. The upholders of the warrior code are thus reduced from heroic fighters to being as vulnerable as a woman in childbirth. The disruption of the social order that the king feared would result from Crunnchu's boast has resulted rather in the overthrowing of the martial order.

The tale is a web of contrasts and conflicts. On the social level, the commoner (Crunnchu) and his wife come into contact with the king and his nobles, which gives rise to an ethical conflict between natural justice and the martial code. On the sexual level, the woman clashes with the men of Ulster, resulting in role reversal with the woman defeating the king's horses in a race and the might of the men being reduced to that of a woman in labour. These tensions are supported by a degree of symmetry within the tale. The men use words to boast and flatter and harass, whereas the woman uses words to offer counsel to her husband, issue warnings to the Ulstermen, and ultimately to bring vengeance on the corrupt king and his warriors. The woman prefers the isolated location of her husband's farm whereas the men favour the company and clamour of the fair. The woman works industriously in silence to feed and clothe Crunnchu and his family, as a result of which he flourishes, while the men of Ulster are conspicuous consumers at the fair. She brings life into the world where the Ulstermen sow dissension and conflict. These contrasting modes of behaviour serve to underline the central message of the tale that justice must be served at all times even in

dealings between the noblest of the noble and the most humble farmer's wife. Natural justice must take precedence over the older warrior code with its vain and dangerous boasting. If this lesson is not learnt, the tale illustrates the disastrous consequences that can follow.

MACHA MONGRÚAD

The story of Macha Mongrúad is adverted to in a number of texts, including the genealogies,²⁶ the *Dindshenchas*,²⁷ *Do Fhlaithiusaib Érenn*,²⁸ and *Tochmarc Emire*.²⁹ The earliest account is that preserved independently in RIA 23 N 10,³⁰ and it may once have been contained in the lost codex *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, although Mac Mathúna (1985, 457) is sceptical about this. The story is recounted in this manuscript as follows.

Rúad mac Baduirn, Cimbáeth mac Finntain and Díthorbae mac Dímaín (or Demáin) used to share the kingship of Ireland on a rotational basis, each spending seven years as king before passing it on to the next. Díthorbae died, and his share in the kingship passed to his sons. Rúad died without issue except for a girl, Macha, who made her case for her share in the kingship when her time came. Cimbáeth refused but was defeated in battle by Macha, who then took the kingship. When Cimbáeth's turn came around again, Macha refused to concede to him except in battle and again she defeated him. After seven years it was the turn of the sons of Díthorbae, but again Macha defeated them in battle and took their portion of the kingship. At this point Cimbáeth became Macha's husband.

The sons of Díthorbae took to plundering and were joined by all the sons of evil (*maicc uilc*) in Ireland. Macha sent out warriors to rout the pirates until only the five sons of Díthorbae were left. Then Macha disguised herself by donning rags and covering herself in a rye paste and journeyed throughout Ireland until she found them sitting by a fire in the wilderness of Boirenn in Connacht. They offered her food and demanded that they be allowed to lie with her. The eldest, Báeth, went first, but she wrapped her thighs around him and overpowered him. She did the same to each and bound them all before taking them back to Emain. She refused to allow them to be executed as the Ulaid apparently demanded. Instead, she forced them to dig the rampart of Emain which she had marked out with the brooch (*eó*) from her neck (*muin*). And so Emain Macha was named.

Following de Vries, Carey views the story of Macha Mongrúad in the light of tales telling of the transformation of an ugly hag, who represents

²⁶ O'Brien 1962, 118–19.

²⁷ Stokes 1894, 44 (Rennes); Stokes 1893, 480 (Edinburgh); Gwynn 1926–28, 81 (Uí Maine); *MD* iv, 124, 308.

²⁸ *LL* 2514–54 (edited and translated from there in Stokes 1895, 279–83).

²⁹ *TE* §30.

³⁰ Edited Meyer 1907.

sovereignty, into a beautiful woman when she sleeps with the rightful king. Carey (1982–83, 266) summarises the argument as follows:

The main elements of this account—brothers claiming kingship, a hunt in the wilderness, a disguised queen, an apparently repugnant sexual union—recur in the famous legends told of Niall Noígíallach and Lugaid Laíge; there the woman personifies the sovereignty of Ireland, and becomes beautiful after the union is consummated. The queen’s wanderings and ferocity also find parallels in stories with this theme; and Macha’s concern with *anfír* further indicates the tale’s preoccupation with the concept of sacred kingship. In the legends of Niall and Lugaid the true claimant is united with the goddess, and in the present case she subjugates the unworthy.

For Carey, then, Macha Mongrúad represents the terrible aspect of the sovereignty-goddess and exists in binary opposition to the wife of Cruinn who ‘displays traits borne by the war-goddess on those occasions when she appears benevolent, or promotes birth’ (1982–83, 268). While this interpretation of Macha Mongrúad as a manifestation of the sovereignty goddess is compelling on many levels, there is a fundamental problem, as Carey tacitly admits, in that although Macha as the ugly hag sleeps with the sons of Díthorbae, they are forced to undertake menial labour and it is their rival, Cimbáeth, who is made king.

Nevertheless, although Macha does not act as a typical sovereignty figure, the idea of kingship is central to the story. The introductory portion of the tale is concerned with the administration of the joint kingship of Ireland. This includes a significant section, usually omitted from discussion of the tale, concerning how the kingship was assigned to each of the three kings participating in the joint sovereignty. The kingship is bestowed on each incoming king by an unnamed person who lays certain injunctions on him and who is quoted directly:

Ocus is amlaid dofaspenta a righe do flaith nodgebed beus: ‘Ind flaith si doasselbtur duit a taspenad uait a n-ógi .i. dombiur duit cen gái cen ethech cen imarbæ cen anfír flatha. Glinne aurut friss .i. secht n-octhigerna 7 secht righ (no druith) 7 secht file .i. na h-oigthigirn dot fognam, na druith dot ressadh 7 dott imdergadh, na filid dott aorad tre mbricht co rabuit³¹ i talmain ria nomaide’. Is amlaid sin tra doaissilbith ind flaith co mbetiss immurgu na torthae iarna coir lasna flaithi. (Meyer 1907, 325, ll 4–12)

‘And this is how his kingship used to be revealed to a lord who obtained it, moreover: “This sovereignty which is assigned to you is to be displayed by you in fullness, that is, I give myself to you without untruth,

³¹ I take this as pres. sg. 2 pl. (for sg.) of *at-tá* (-*rabuith*/-*rabuid*) if not a mistake for 2 sg. -*rabair*.

without falsehood, without deceit, without royal injustice. A bond on you as well, namely, seven lesser lords and seven kings (or druids) and seven poets, that is, the lesser lords to serve you, the druids to oppose and reproach you, the poets to satirize you by means of a spell so that you may be in the ground within three days". This, moreover, is how the sovereignty was assigned, so that the lords should indeed have crops as is proper.'

These injunctions are not unlike the precepts that are laid upon kings elsewhere in the form of *tecosca* or *specula principis*. The sovereignty is granted 'without untruth, without falsehood, without deceit, without royal injustice', in the clear expectation that the recipient should carry out his duties in a similar spirit without any injustice or falsehood. A bond is placed upon the king as well, in the form of seven kings and druids and poets. If the king should stray from the principles laid down by the bestower of kingship, the druids will reproach him and the poets will satirize him so that he will die. All this, we are told, is to guarantee the fertility of crops and the fecundity of the king's reign. Thus, the story is placed firmly within the realm of sovereignty literature.

Macha is clearly entitled to the kingship through her father within the context of this story, although in real life she would have been barred on account of her sex. She is compelled to stake her claim by force when her rivals refuse to acknowledge her right, but she proves superior on the battlefield and thereby worthy of taking the kingship. However, the most interesting bit of the narrative is when the sons of Díthorbae take to plundering in an act that is clearly reminiscent of the *díberg* undertaken by the sons of Donn Désa in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. As has been shown in that context, *díberg* was incompatible with a king's justice, and Conaire's failure to deal effectively with it leads eventually to his downfall (Ó Cathasaigh 1977–78, 144–6). However, Macha does tackle the problem successfully and manages to quell the activities of the *maicc uile* through the deployment of force. Her method for overcoming the sons of Díthorbae requires a degree of subterfuge, however. Her masquerade as a scabby hag, which has been interpreted as an expression of the sovereignty goddess theme, is no more than a disguise as we are clearly told in the text; a disguise she adopts in order to lure the miscreants into a secluded place where she can overcome them one by one.

Macha further demonstrates her aptitude as a sovereign when, upon her return to Emain, she refuses to execute the plunderers on the grounds that it would be contrary to royal justice to slay them. Rather, she sets them to dig the earthen bank of Emain Macha. In *Críth Gablach*, it is asserted that a king performing manual work such as digging would have been reduced to the status of a commoner (*aithech*) (Binchy 1941, ll 530–3; Kelly 1988, 19). Thus, by forcing these royal heirs to dig the bank of Emain, Macha effectively prohibits them from any future claim to the kingship. It might further be argued that, in subjugating these erstwhile nobles, Macha creates a commoner caste that must have been seen as essential to the maintenance

of a king's wealth and power base. The name Díthorbae means 'profitless, without benefit', and none of his progeny succeeds in obtaining the kingship again. The names of his sons also betray the author's attitude: Báeth 'foolish', Brass 'boastful, strident', Bétach 'violent, wanton', Úallach 'arrogant' and Borbchass 'ignorant and curly-haired (?)', qualities that are, on the whole, deeply unsuited to kingship. Thus, she establishes herself as king of Ulster and simultaneously creates out of the obtuse and arrogant former aristocrats a class of commoners that will serve the king of Ulster in perpetuity.³²

Previous interpretations of this text have been conditioned by the equation of Macha with the woman of *NU*. However, it is now clear that what we have in this tale is not a retelling of the sovereignty myth but the foundation myth of the kingship of Ulster at Emain Macha. Macha founds the capital of ancient Ulster, marking it out like a saint marks out the site of a church, with her own brooch. She marries the primeval king of Emain—Gilla Cóemáin describes him as the first king of Emain (*cétflaith Emna*),³³ a designation which is taken up in a list of the kings of Ireland in the genealogies, where his reign marks the end of a 1200-year epoch beginning with Éber Donn, the eldest son of Míl Espáine.³⁴ Furthermore, she captures the sons of Díthorbae, brings them back to Ulster and so creates an unfree class for the service of future kings. Her remarkable warrior qualities closely echo those of warrior queens such as Medb,³⁵ but also those women warriors who trained Cú Chulainn in arms in Britain in *Tochmarc Emire*. Indeed, her martial attributes may have been intended to account for the renowned warlike qualities of the Ulstermen of the Ulster Cycle—what more fitting origin can the Ulstermen have than this amazonian queen?

In all of this Macha appears in human form, albeit in hyperbolic martial guise, and there is little to associate her with other fertility or sovereignty goddesses. She is a sovereign, but the emphasis is heavily on the seizing and retention of the kingship by force of arms. As such, she bears many similarities to the war-goddess Macha, and the connection between the two figures may bear further investigation.

³² No descendants of the sons of Díthorbae are recorded in the genealogies. *Senchas Síil Ír* in the Laud genealogies appears to make Rudraige, the eponymous ancestor of Clanna Rudraige, a descendant of Díthorbae: *Díthurba m. Dímaín m. Argatmair, is hūad Rudraige cona chlaind* (Meyer 1912, 325.29–30) but *hūad* here must refer back to Argatmair rather than Díthorbae. Cf. the Rawl. B 502 version of the same tract: *Díthorba mac Dímaín m. Argatmair. Fomuir mac Argatmair is uad Rudraige cona clainn* (O'Brien 1962, 271), and compare the ancestry attributed to Rudraige elsewhere in the same tract: *Rudraige dano m. Sittride m. Duib m. Fomuir m. Argatmair* (O'Brien 1962, 270; Meyer 1912, 325.26).

³³ Smith 2007, 138 § 89.

³⁴ *Cimbáeth trā mac Fintain m. Argatmair cētna flaith Emna Macha .xxviii. a flaith; ēc at-bath do galar. Mili bliadan 7 dā chēt ō Éber Dund co Cimbáeth.* (O'Brien 1962, 118). We may also note that *Senchas Síil Ír* places Cimbáeth at one end of a list of the kings of Ulster which culminates with Conchobar mac Nessa (*Anmann in so na rīg ó Chimbáeth co Conchobar*, O'Brien 1962, 276). Macha's role is somewhat diminished, however, in the genealogical material, and she is said only to have reigned after Cimbáeth's death (O'Brien 1962, 119; Smith 2007, 138 §90).

³⁵ See Edel (2001, 41), who also compares her to Boudicca and Cartimandua.

MACHA, DAUGHTER OF ERNMAIS

Macha, daughter of Ernmas, appears in medieval glossaries and in a number of texts relating to the invasions of Ireland. A poem in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* lists Macha, Badb and Morrígain, daughters of Ernmas, among the Túatha Dé Danann.³⁶ According to the Minugud recension, the three daughters of Ernmas, who is here called a witch (*bantúathach*), are Macha, Badb and Anand who, we are told, gave name to the Paps of Anu:

Badb 7 Macha 7 Anand, diatát Cichi Anand il Luachair—trī ingena Ernmais na bantúathige.

‘Badb and Macha and Anand, of whom are the Paps of Anu in Luachair—were the three daughters of Ernmas the witch.’³⁷

In the equivalent section of Recension 3, all four names are incorporated as daughters of Ernmas,³⁸ and at another point in Recension 2 Ernmas is said to have had six daughters, comprising Ériu, Banba, Fótla, Badb, Macha and Morrígain, and that Anand was a seventh:

Hēriu 7 Fotla 7 Banba, trī ingena Fiachna meic Delbaith meic Ogma. Hernmass ingen Etarlaim a mathair na mban sin... Trī hingena aile hic Ernmais, .i. Badb 7 Macha 7 Mōrrigū: 7 Anann, diatát cicha Anand in Urluachair, in sechtmudh ingen dī.

‘Ériu and Fotla and Banba, three daughters of Fiachna s. Delbaeth s. Ogma. Ernmas [daughter of] Etarlam was mother of those women... Ernmas had three other daughters, Badb, Macha, Morrighu: and Ana, of whom are called the Paps of Ana in Urluachair, was her seventh daughter.’ (Macalister 1941, 154–5)

In the First Battle of Mag Tuired, the three sisters, Badb, Macha and Morrígain, are sorceresses sending down a rain of fire and blood on the enemy:

Is ann sin dochuaidh Badhbh 7 Macha 7 Morrigha gu Cnoc Gabala na nGiall 7 gu Tulaigh techtairechta na tromsluagh, gu Temraig, 7 do feradar cetha doilbthe draidechta 7 cithnela cothaigetha ciach 7 frasa

³⁶ *Badb is Macha, mēt n-indbais, | Morrigan, fātha felbais, || tindrema aga amnuis, | ingena āna Ernmais*, ‘Badb and Macha, greatness of wealth, Morrighu—springs of craftiness, sources of bitter fighting were the three daughters of Ernmas’ (Macalister 1941, 216–17, §11).

³⁷ Macalister 1941, 122–3. I correct Macalister’s erroneous translation of *bantúathach* as ‘she-farmer’. See also Macalister 1941, 160 (= Recension 2) and cf. Macalister 1941, 130.

³⁸ *Badhbh 7 Macha 7 Morrighan 7 Anand, diata di chich Anand i l-Luachair, tri hingena Earmmhais na ban-thuathaighe*, ‘Badb and Macha and Morrighu and Ana, of whom are the Paps of Ana in Luachair, the three daughters of Ernmas the witch’ (Macalister 1941, 182; again, with correction of translation).

tromaidble tened, 7 dortad donnfala do shiltin as in aer i cennaib na curad, 7 nir legset scarad na scailedh do Feraib Bolg co cenn tri la 7 tri naidche.

‘It was then that Badb and Macha and Morrigan went to the Knoll of the Taking of the Hostages, and to the Hill of Summoning of Hosts at Tara, and sent forth magic showers of sorcery and compact clouds of mist and a furious rain of fire, with a downpour of red blood from the air on the warriors’ heads; and they allowed the Fir Bolg neither rest nor stay for three days and nights.’ (Fraser 1916, 26–7 §29).

Macha is killed alongside Náuadu Aircetlám by Balor in the second battle of Mag Tuired.³⁹

O’Mulconry’s Glossary asserts that she was a crow/war goddess (*badb*), that she was one of the three Morrígains, and that *mesrad Macha*, literally ‘the mast of Macha’, consisted of the heads of slaughtered men:

Machæ .i. badb. Nō asī an tres morrigan, unde mesrad Machæ .i. cendæ doine iarna n-airlech. (Stokes 1900, 271)

‘Macha, i.e. a crow. Or she is one of the three *morrígains*, whence Macha’s mast, i.e. the heads of men after they have been slaughtered.’

In a closely related glossary preserved in TCD MS. H 3.18, a single stanza, attributed to Dub Ruis, is added to the gloss. It depicts a nightmarish world in which pregnant women incite battle even while in the throes of childbirth, and where men take the heads of their enemies as if they were gathering fruit in the forest (Macha’s mast):

*Garbae adbae i-nnon-fil | i lloirad fir Maiche mes,
i n-agat laich liu i lles | i lluaiget mnā trogain tres.*⁴⁰

‘Rough the dwellings in which we are, | where men strip Macha’s mast, where warriors drive floods (?) into the courtyard, | where women in childbirth stir up strife.’⁴¹

³⁹ *Derocair dano Núdai Aircetlám ocus Maucha ingen Ernmoiss lie Balur uí Nét.* ‘Then Náuadu Silverhand and Macha the daughter of Ernmas fell at the hands of Balor grandson of Nét’ (Gray 1982, 60). The same episode is recounted in *Lebor Gabála* (Macalister 1941, 118 (Min); 148 (R2); 180 (R3); 228).

⁴⁰ *CIH* 632.20–3 (punctuation, length marks and translation are my own). Also edited in Stokes 1859, 213; Meyer 1919, 98. I am grateful to Dr Paul Russell and Dr Sharon Arbuthnot for providing me with their unpublished edition of this item. For the relationship of this glossary to others, see Russell 1988, 3.

⁴¹ I tentatively take *liu* as acc. pl. of Old Irish *li(a)ē* ‘flood, spate’, probably in the sense ‘gush (of blood)’. I follow *LEIA* T-147–8 in taking *trogain* to mean ‘childbirth’ rather than ‘raven’.

Thus, there is a fairly widely-attested and consistent tradition that there was a Macha, daughter of Ernmas, of the Túatha Dé Danann, who died in the battle of Mag Tuired alongside Núadu Aircetlám, and who was one of three war-goddesses with her sisters Badb and Morrígain or Anu.

MACHA, WIFE OF NEMED

Finally, we must turn to Macha, wife of Nemed, concerning whom so little material survives. As noted above, Carey (1982–83, 263–4) is doubtful about the authenticity of this Macha, suggesting that the character may have been abstracted from related placenames. The *Dindshenchas* of Ard Macha tells us that Nemed cleared the plain and gave it to her so that it would bear her name:

Macha ben Nemedh meic Agnomoin atbath and 7 rohadnacht, 7 ba hé indara magh .x. roslecht la Nemedh, 7 dobretha dia mnoi co mbeith a ainm uasa. Unde Mag Macha.

‘Macha wife of Nemed son of Agnoman died there (on Mag Macha) and was buried, and it is the twelfth plain which was cleared by Nemed, and he bestowed it on his wife so that it might bear her name. Whence Mag Macha.’ (Stokes 1895, §94)

The clearing of Mag Macha during the time of Nemed is mentioned in *Lebor Gabála* but it is not there explicitly connected with Macha:

Ro-slechts dá mag dēc la Nemed in Hērind:...Mag Macha in Airgialla.

‘Twelve plains were cleared by Nemed in Ireland:...Mag Macha in Airgialla.’ (Macalister 1940, 122–3 §240 = 132–4 §252)

She is not mentioned by name in Recension I of *Lebor Gabála*. Recensions 2 and 3 relate that Macha, wife of Nemed, was the first of the people of Nemed to die in Ireland, perishing just twelve days after setting foot in the country (Macalister 1940, 132 §250). These versions also mention a Macha who was the wife of Nemed’s son, Starn (Macalister 1940, 130 §249), but she is almost certainly the same figure as Nemed’s wife.

The Edinburgh *Dindshenchas* attributes her premature death to a vision she had of the cattle-raid of Cooley, which caused her heart to break within her:

Is i adchonnairc i n-aislinge foda reimhe a techt ina ndernad do ulc im Thain bho Cuailngi ina cotludh tarfas di uile ann rocesad do ulc and do droibhelaib 7 do midhrennaib, go romhuidh a cridhe inti.

‘Tis she that saw in a dream, long before it came to pass, all the evil that was done in the Driving of the Kine of Cualnge. In her sleep there was shown to her all the evil that was suffered therein, and the hardships and the wicked quarrels: so that her heart broke in her.’ (Stokes 1893, 480–1)

The following stanza describing her vision is appended to the end of the account:

*At-chonnaire Macha marglic | tri fhís, ratha na raidmid
tuirthechta trimsa Cuailghne | fa gnim ndimsa n-imuaibre.*

‘Very shrewd Macha saw | by means of a vision, graces which we do not mention, accounts of the conflict (?) of Cooley | concerning a deed of arrogance and great vanity.’⁴²

This almost certainly refers to the lost tale which is now remembered only in the tale-lists under the title *Fís mná Nemid* (Mac Cana 1980, 48, 58). However, it cannot now be established if the woman whose vision was described in that tale was called Macha: we have no other knowledge of the contents of the tale and Nemed’s wife is not named in the title of the lost tale.⁴³ Indeed, the connection may have been made solely by the author of the Edinburgh *Dindshenchas* based on the title of the lost tale and the fact that Macha is the name given to the wife of Nemed in the *Dindshenchas*.⁴⁴

Carey (1982–83, 264–5) links Macha’s vision, ‘insofar as the *dindshenchas* tale has any traditional background’, to the prophetic elements of the Irish mythology of war, but Herbert (1996, 142) avers that Macha, wife of Nemed, is quite distinct from the war-goddesses and should be treated separately. It may be significant that she is said to have had a vision (*fhís*) rather than to have uttered a prophecy, but in any case prophecies are not confined to the war-goddess. Connlae’s otherworld paramour in *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, for example, utters a prophecy on the coming of Christianity (McCone 2000, 122 §11). However, what truly distinguishes the wife of Nemed from the war-goddess is her death from a broken heart as a result of her vision. Elsewhere, we see her depicted as a gentle and dignified queen. She is described as *mass* ‘fine, handsome, goodly’ in the metrical *Dindshenchas* (*MD* iv 124) and Gilla Mo Dutu styles her ‘gentle Macha’ in the *Banshenchas*:

⁴² Stokes 1893, 481. The punctuation and translation are my own.

⁴³ *Fís mná Nemid* does not follow the expected alliterative pattern of the original list and may, therefore, not have stood in the archetype (Toner 2000, 111–12). We could emend to *Fís [Macha] mná Nemid*, but of the four titles in the list of this form, none includes the name of the wife (the others being *Tochmarc mna Cruinn*, *Aithed mna Gáéir maic Deirg re Glass mac Cimbaetha*, and *Aithed mná Ailella maic Eógain re Fothud Canann*).

⁴⁴ See Carey 1982–83, 264 n.5.

*Eua, Cera, Medar moltair, | Macha mīn, sochraid ro seirc
samuil ria samthuili ndemin | banchuiri Nemid ind neirt
Cera i crīch Connacht na cairddi | is Eua i Tír Chairpri cheirt.* (Dobbs
1930, 291 = LL 16509–11)⁴⁵

‘Eba, Cera, Medar who is praised; gentle Macha, dignified in love;
Like a sure united flood were the wives of strong Nemed:
Cera in peaceful Connacht and Eba in lawful Tír Cairpri.’

Their comparison to a flood may point towards a darker, more destructive side to the wives of Nemed, but this is far from certain given the other positive epithets used here and particularly the qualifying adjective *demin* ‘sure’. The simile might be more plausibly interpreted in Diluvian terms as a washing away of evil and the establishment of peace, but it seems more likely to me that it describes the force of their beauty and virtue which carries all before it.

We have here, therefore, a Macha quite unlike any of the other women bearing the name and probably unrelated to them. She is intimately linked to the development of *Lebor Gabála* and seems to have been created out of an inconvenient need to explain how the name Mag Macha came into being during the reign of Nemed, much earlier than traditional *Dindshenchas* accounts of Ard/Mag/Emain Macha permit. She may have been the subject of the lost MÍr tale, *Fís mná Nemid*, although the link is only established by a single, late *Dindshenchas* account. On balance, she is better treated as a distinct individual who can shed no light on the Machas associated with war.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears from the foregoing discussion that two of the four Machas are probably comparatively late literary inventions. Macha, the wife of Nemed, may or may not be derived from the placename, but in any case she seems to bear no relation to the Machas associated with war. Macha, the wife of Crunnchu, appears to be a scholastic invention conjured up by grafting an etymology of Emain Macha onto the story of the debility of the Ulstermen. As a consequence, Dumézil’s tripartite functionality, already seriously questioned by Carey, must fall, as must all the accounts that interpret Macha as a fertility or tutelary goddess. That leaves just two genuine figures of the name: Macha Mongrúad and Macha, daughter of Ernmas. Both are characterised by their associations with warfare: the daughter of Ernmas is explicitly a war-goddess whose crop is the heads of men, while Macha Mongrúad violently seizes the kingship of Ulster and enslaves her enemies. She is not

⁴⁵ The line *Macha mīn, sochraid ro seirc* makes little sense as it stands. I read *Macha mīn, sochraid re seirc* (cf. the Book of Lecan: *Macha ruad ba sochraid seirc*).

a sovereignty figure, although she adapts the guise of a sovereignty goddess to capture the sons of Dithorbae. She is, in fact, the founding mother of the capital of Ulster, whose warlike attributes, together with her sense of justice, reflect and prefigure the qualities expected of an Ulster warrior.

ABBREVIATIONS

- TE* *Tochmarc Emire* (van Hamel 1933, 20–68).
NU I *Noinden Ulad*, Recension I (Hull 1968).
NU II *Noinden Ulad*, Recension II (*LL* ii 467–8).
NU III *Tochmarc Cruinn ocus Macha* (Thurneysen 1918).

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