

Cosmography In *Tochmarc Étaíne*

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Since Newgrange in County Meath, Ireland, is well known to incorporate a winter solstice sunrise alignment, the tale of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, in which the monument plays a prominent role, was analyzed to see if it, too, had astronomical associations. Not only does the character of Étaín appear to be a personification of the moon, but each of the three sections into which the tale is divided appears to contain information about one of the three characteristics of the moon most likely to have been noted in ancient Ireland—its monthly cycle, the relationship of the lunar and solar years, and the 19-year Metonic cycle. It thus seems likely that one of the purposes for which the tale was composed was to serve as a pedagogical tool or mnemonic device. It also appears to contain information concerning the relationship among several sacred sites.

The tale known as *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ‘The Wooing of Étaín,’ in its current form seems to date from the end of the ninth century (Dillon 1968 :20). In an essay published in 2002, Charles-Edwards offered an analysis of *Tochmarc Étaíne* on “a literal level,” noting that it was likely the composer intended it to be understood on several levels. I agree. Another possible level was provided by MacKay in a paper given at the 12th International Congress of Celtic Studies in 2003, in which he presented a Dumézilian three-function analysis. And I believe we can safely assume that *Tochmarc Étaíne*, like all early Irish myths, was also originally intended to serve as entertainment. However, what I propose to discuss in this essay is its meaning on another level, whose significance would also have been clear to those trained to interpret it. This level is the cosmographical. And closely allied with this is its meaning in terms of the sacred landscape of ancient Ireland.

T. F. O’Rahilly (1946: 293), without offering much in the way of support, saw Étaín as a sun goddess, the consort of the sun who travels with him during the day. The imagery provided for Étaín does strongly support the suggestion that she must

represent some heavenly body, since as a fly she almost never lands, and in a later portion of the tale she becomes a swan, once again taking to the air. However, I believe the evidence points quite unambiguously to her representing the moon. The meaning of the name Étaín is unclear, but she is also referred to as Bé Find, which means ‘white (or bright) lady’ (Bergin & Best 1938: 159). It is probably relevant that her by-name, Echrade, means something like ‘swift horse’ or refers to a team of chariot horses. In Irish tradition, the moon was referred to as *an láir bhán*, ‘the white mare’ (O’Rahilly 1946: 293, fn 2). Associated imagery also includes a silver basin, which is referred to in the version of the tale that appears in Egerton 1782 (Dobbs 1954), where, as Dobbs notes, its mention seems to have no bearing on the course of the story. A very similar passage occurs in the opening of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Stokes 1910), supposedly referring to Étaín’s granddaughter, also Étaín, which goes on to tell us, “The bright radiance of the moon was in her noble face.”

Such imagery aside, there is more substantial evidence contained within the tale suggesting not only that Étaín was the embodiment of the moon but that *Tochmarc Étaíne* was intended to incorporate and convey the author’s understanding of the regular cycles involving that body.

Lunar Cycles

Before looking at this hypothesis in detail, it seems necessary to say a bit about the cycles of the moon that would have been easily observed in ancient Ireland. There are three components of lunar behavior that are likely to have been of interest to the ancient Irish—the lunar month, the less familiar 19-year Metonic cycle, and the correlation of the lunar year with the solar.

While our word “month” can be traced back to an ancient word for “moon,” the lunar month does not exactly match the solar month of our calendars. There are, in fact, several kinds of lunar month—anomalistic, draconic, synodic, sidereal, and tropical—ranging in length from 27.2 to 29.5 days. Of these, only two are likely to have been observed by the ancient Irish, the sidereal and the synodic. The first, the sidereal month of 27.3 days, is the time it takes the moon to return to the same position relative to the stars. It was observed by many ancient cultures, particularly across Asia. The second, the synodic of

29.5 days, is the one familiar to most of us, based on the time between identical phases of the moon—new to new or full to full, for example.

The moon also goes through a more complex cycle, known as the Metonic cycle after the Greek astronomer who first described it in the fifth century BC. This cycle lasts not a month but nineteen years, bringing the lunar and solar years into correlation with one another. It is easily paired with another of almost the same length, the Saros. Over the course of a lunar month, the moon not only goes through a series of phases of illumination but also moves from south to north and back again along the horizon, in much the same way the sun does between the solstices. However, unlike the sun's, the moon's arc of movement is not constant. It changes from month to month and year to year over a period of 18.6 years, allowing the prediction of eclipses and creating two sets of extreme positions, which Alexander Thom (1967) called the major and minor lunar standstills. The major standstill limits are further north and south than those of the sun's annual swing. At the time of the minor standstill, 9.3 years later, the moon's monthly arc is less than that of the sun. One feature of this monthly swing is that the full moon always rises more or less diametrically opposite the setting sun, i.e., if the sun sets in the southwest (as at winter solstice), the full moon will rise in the northeast.

Finally, there is the problem of correlating lunar and solar years. To put it simply, a solar year does not contain an even number of lunar months, although one can bring the two types of calendars into alignment over the period of the Metonic cycle. Thus, some cultures choose to use a solar calendar, some a lunar, and others try to combine the two. There is a reasonable amount of evidence that the Celts used the latter approach.

What I will attempt to show in the sections that follow is that each segment of *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Leahy 1905, Bergin & Best 1938, Gantz 1981, Carey 1994) concerns itself with one of these features of lunar behavior.

Part I: The Marriage of Étaín with Midir

Turning now to *Tochmarc Étaíne*, we note that the tale is divided into three sections. The first of the three sections revolves around events that begin at the ancient site of Brug

na Bóinne, now known as Newgrange. The Brug, constructed around 3100 B.C., certainly has astronomical associations, the best known occurring at the winter solstice, when the rising sun shines through an opening above the entrance and illuminates the 22-meter passage and the central chamber. However, the site is also known to have lunar alignments. In particular, a survey I carried out of Newgrange and surrounding monuments in 1977, since independently confirmed by others, revealed that, from Newgrange, the other two major passage graves in the Bend of the Boyne complex, Dowth and Knowth, mark, respectively, the northerly extreme rising and setting positions of the moon for a few months surrounding the time of the minimum lunar standstill position (Hicks 1985). It therefore seems reasonable to ask if there is any evidence connecting Étain with the shifting positions of the moon over the course of this cycle. The first section of *Tochmarc Étaine* does appear to refer to this movement—in particular the changing position of the midwinter full moon.

We do not immediately meet the subject of the story, Étaín. Instead the story begins with the Dagda, ‘the good god’ more properly known as Eochaid, desiring Elcmar’s wife, Eithne, also known as Boand, the goddess for whom the River Boyne is named. In order to pursue her, the Dagda sends Elcmar from his home at the Brug on a long journey to see Bres, who lives in Mag Inis in what is now County Down. In order to have time for their tryst, the Dagda makes nine months appear to last for only one day and causes Elcmar not to notice the passage of time. By the time of Elcmar’s return, Eithne has borne the Dagda a son, Oengus, of whom it is said that he was conceived at dawn and born by sunset, implying that he is in some sense connected to the sun or at least the daytime sky.

That Elcmar’s journey is to Mag Inis appears to be significant. Oengus must later make a similar trip, after he acquires possession of Brug na Bóinne. This raises the question of whether Oengus may be an alter ego of Elcmar, since both live at the Brug and they make similar journeys. This is only one instance of several in which we find a hint that the stories are concerned with repeating cycles—the names and events may change, but certain aspects are repeated.

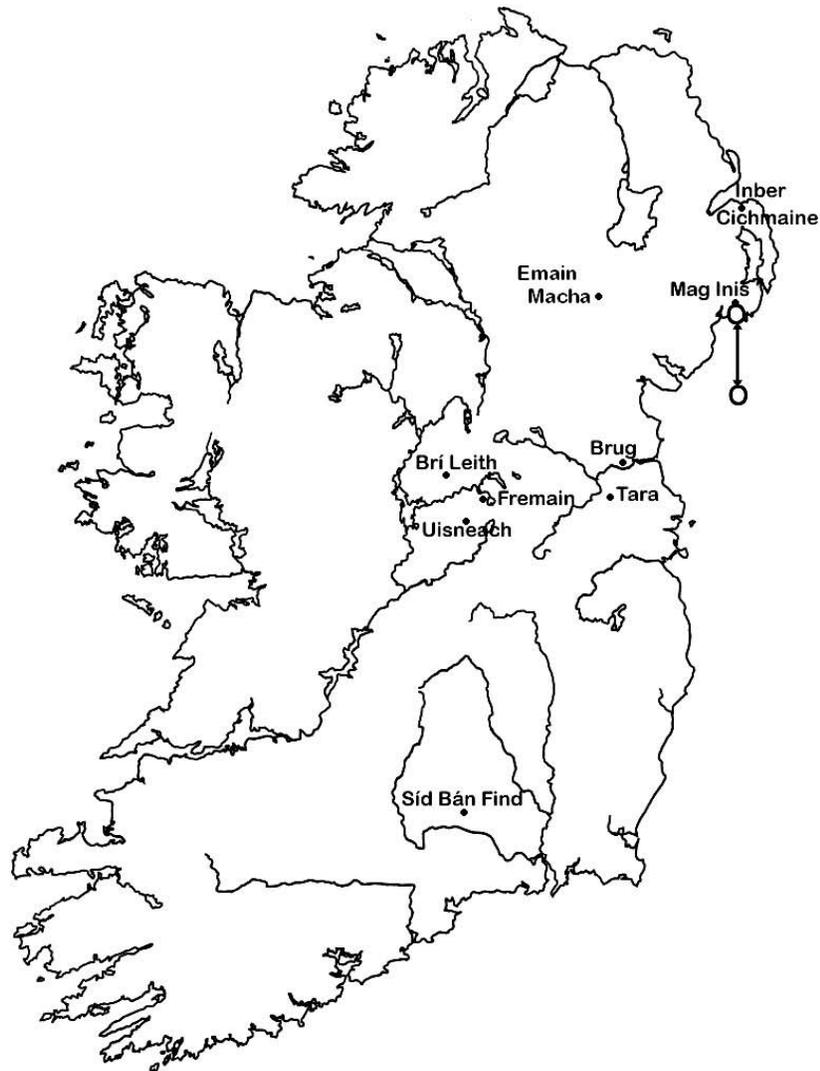


Figure 1. Map showing the principal sites in *Tochmarc Étaíne* as well as the range in position of the rising full moon nearest to winter solstice as seen from the vicinity of the Brug over the course of nineteen years, relative to Mag Inis.

The next obvious question concerns the geographical relationship of the Brug and Mag Inis. A glance at the map makes it clear that Mag Inis is to the northeast, separated from

the Brug by Carlingford Lough and the Mountains of Mourne (Fig. 1). One immediately wonders if there is anything on the plain called Mag Inis that compares to Newgrange. The most likely candidate is the stone circle in Ballynoe Townland (Fig. 2). There one finds a clearly marked alignment toward the point of winter solstice sunset (on Slieve Donard, named for a son of Eochaid, who is identified in this legend as an evil pagan king). Newgrange and Ballynoe stone circle certainly are not intervisible, but the line between the two falls very near that for the maximum lunar standstill position—the extreme northern position for moonrise. For a period of a few months every 18 to 19 years, the moon's monthly swing along the horizon would cause it to rise near this position as viewed from Newgrange, and in the winter months this would be as a full moon. In other words, from Newgrange, the winter full moon during the period of the lunar maximum would rise near the Mountains of Mourne, on this alignment to Mag Inis. Such a lunar connection would seem to fit well with other aspects of the tale, as we will see in a few moments.



Figure 2. Ballynoe stone circle, showing the winter solstice sunset alignment, with pointed stones on opposite sides of the circle aligned with the similarly shaped peak of Slieve Donard.

Several other characters and sites play a prominent role in this first section of the tale. Before Elcmar's return, Oengus

was taken by the Dagda to Brí Leith and put in the care of Midir as his foster-father. There are reasons to suspect that Midir is an aspect of the Dagda (O’Rahilly 1946: 132).

When he reaches the age of nine (about half of one of the longer lunar cycles), Oengus demands to be told the identity of his parents. Midir takes him to Uisneach, traditional center of Ireland and home of the Dagda, and there Oengus asks to be given land. The Dagda’s response is to offer him the Brug, but to get it Oengus must trick Elcmar out of it by going to it armed at Samhain, which is a day of peace. He is to offer to spare Elcmar’s life in return for being allowed to be king in the Brug for a day and a night. But when Elcmar comes to reclaim it, Oengus is to say that he had asked for “kingship of day and night.” This seems to say something about the role of Oengus as a deity, linking him again with the movements of the sun.

A year to the day later (i.e., the following Samhain), Midir comes to the Brug from Brí Leith to visit his fosterling. While there, Midir goes to settle a dispute among young men on a playing field in front of the Brug and has an eye knocked out by “a split of holly.” One-eyed characters appear in a considerable number of the Irish myths, most prominently Balor, who has a single great eye that it is death to look upon. Eochaid, too, appears in another tale with one eye. It is tempting to suspect that the one-eyed characters are each aspects of the sun.

In this instance, Oengus summons Dian Cecht, the physician of the gods, who heals Midir. Then Oengus asks Midir to stay with him for the coming year. Midir agrees to do so only if rewarded with a chariot, a mantle, and the fairest maid in Ireland. This is the occasion of Oengus’s journey to Mag Inis, where the maid, Étaín Echrade, lives.

Oengus stays in Mag Inis three nights, and in payment for his daughter, Étaín’s father, Ailill, asks three things of Oengus. First is that he clear twelve plains of forest so that they may be used for grazing, habitation, and gatherings. Second, is that he must cause twelve rivers to flow to the sea so they may drain the land and bring produce from the sea. And lastly, he must pay her weight in gold and silver. Gold and silver obviously suggest the colors of the sun and moon, as the twelve suggests the months of the year.

It is interesting that only nine plains and ten rivers are

actually named in the story, matching the nineteen of the Metonic cycle. The identification of most of the rivers is still uncertain, but the nine plains all lie in Ulster. They are named in sunwise/clockwise order starting from the plain in which lies the northern royal site, Emain Macha, and ending just to its southeast.

Ailill's demands having been met, Oengus returns to the Brug with Étaín, and Midir remains with him there until the next Samhain.

Because the festival of Samhain is mentioned repeatedly in this section of the tale, it seems likely that it is important to the tale's interpretation. Samhain is, of course, the forerunner of our modern Halloween, though originally it seems to have referred to a period in early November rather than a fixed day. It marked the end of the harvest and a time of feasting. It is generally believed that it marked the end of the year in the old Irish calendar, a time when the herds and flocks had returned from the summer pastures and the gates to the underworld were open so the spirits of the dead could return home for a visit. It also marked the beginning of winter. Oengus's journey to Mag Inis begins at Samhain and thus at the beginning of winter, consistent with a focus on the winter moon. While the time of Elcmar's journey along the same path is not specified (although we cannot completely discount the summer solstice), we do know its length, nine months, although to him it occurs in a single day. This is of course the traditional length of a pregnancy and can be explained on that basis, but it may also be that the intention was to emphasize that period of nine months. If it was the nine months preceding Samhain, nine months that center on the summer solstice, that would encompass the other three seasons of the traditional agricultural calendar, the time from planting through harvest.

As the tale continues, all is well until Midir returns to Brí Leith, where his wife, Fuamnach, resents her new competition. Being a druidess, she takes action, turning Étaín into a pool of water and returning to the home of her foster-father, Bresal, a druid who in another tale is clearly linked with the summer solstice (Gwynn 1924: 271-273).

Étaín does not remain a pool of water but turns first into a worm and then into a purple fly as large as a man's head who accompanies Midir everywhere (the first three of a series of

transformations in keeping with the druidical doctrine of reincarnation; it is interesting that these three also seem to reflect the three domains of the Irish cosmos—water, earth, and air [Mac Mathuna 1999]). She is a very special fly, with a voice and hum of wings sweeter than pipes and harps and horns, eyes that shine like precious stones, a fragrance that would turn away hunger and thirst from those around her, and wings from which drops of spray would cure all sickness and disease. Her sight and sound would nourish hosts in gatherings and assemblies.

Fuamnach eventually returns to Brí Leith, accompanied by three gods for protection—Lugh, the Dagda, and Ogmá (who appears only rarely in the stories and who seems to likewise be connected with the sun). This time Fuamnach succeeds in banishing Étaín, still in the form of a fly, preventing her from landing for seven years on any hill or treetop in Ireland but only on the ocean or rocks at sea. This again would seem to apply to the movements of the moon, since it reflects the years leading to the minor lunar standstill, when the winter full moon as seen from the vicinity of Newgrange does not move far enough north along the horizon to rise near the Mountains of Mourne.

After the seven years, Étaín goes to Oengus in the Brug for protection. He places her in a crystal sun-bower, which he carries with him wherever he goes during the day. Although translators have differed over the next passage, two elements appear significant, that he drapes a scarlet or purple cloak about her and that her color returns to her at night. This sounds rather as though she—or at least her crystal bower—may be the moon when it appears in the sky during daylight hours. The comment about her color returning to her certainly fits the moon's appearance at nightfall when it has been in the sky during daylight hours.

One reason for the interest in the winter full moon is likely to be because it is in the sky for up to nineteen hours each day, rising near sunset and not setting until after sunrise, thus providing light for significantly longer each day than does the sun.

Étaín remains at Newgrange for an unspecified period, and then Fuamnach again strikes, sneaking into the Brug and blowing Étaín away once more so that she is not able to land for another seven years. This time she eventually lands in a

house in Inber Cichmaine, where she falls into a golden goblet, is swallowed by the lady of the house, wife of Etar, and is reborn once more as Étaín, 1012 years after her first begetting. While Hogan (1910) identifies three possibilities for Inber Cichmaine, only one appears to fit this story, the mouth of a stream entering Bangor Bay in Co. Down, somewhat further to the northeast than Mag Inis (Fig. 1).

Part II: The Marriage of Étaín with Eochaid Airem

This brings us to part two of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, where the lunar connection is a bit more obvious. Here the concern appears to be with the lunar month.

Eochaid Airem ('the ploughman') is high king with two strongholds named Dún Fremainn. A year after becoming high king, he orders the Feast of Tara to be held (traditionally this, too, is at Samhain—Gwynn 1924: 297), but the people refuse to come because he has no queen. He sends men to find the fairest maiden in Ireland, and of course they find Étaín, whom he marries so the feast may occur. The Egerton 1782 version contains an additional passage that makes a point of telling us that he goes to her at Inber Cichmaine by way of Brí Leith. It is possibly significant that the alignment between these two places is within a degree or so of that to summer solstice sunrise.

At the feast, Eochaid's brother Ailill falls in love with Étaín. He will speak of this to no one, and his health goes into an abrupt decline. After his physician tells Ailill he cannot help him, Eochaid Airem leaves on a "circuit of Ireland," leaving Étaín to take care of the necessary funeral arrangements for his brother. Each time she visits Ailill at Fremainn Tethba (Frewin Hill on the western shore of Lough Owel), however, he gazes at her and gets better. She finally asks what has made him ill and, upon being told, says he should have said so sooner so she could cure him. She then starts coming to see him each day, and in "thrice nine days" he is cured. It takes just over "thrice nine days"—27 days—for the moon to return to the same position in the sky relative to the stars, the sidereal month mentioned earlier. Probably of more importance, during 26.7 days of each 29.5-day synodic month, the moon is at least partly illuminated. Or, to put it another way, the moon is actually visible in the sky for just under 27 days out of each lunar month and invisible for three. Thus this

portion of the story refers to the moon's cycle over the course of a month rather than to the longer Metonic cycle.

The three dark days are also incorporated into the story. After he is cured, Étaín agrees to meet with Ailill, but not in Eochaid's house—only at dawn atop the hill. Ailill lies awake waiting for morning, but as it approaches he falls asleep and doesn't awaken until three hours after dawn. But someone who looks like him does meet with her. When she returns, she asks Ailill why he looks so sad. He tells her it is because he fell asleep and couldn't keep their tryst. She shows no surprise but simply tells him it doesn't matter because one day follows another. The same thing happens the next day, and the next. On the third morning, Étaín asks the false Ailill his identity. He tells her he is her husband, Midir, who has come to reclaim her. But she refuses to leave Eochaid unless he bids her go. This ends part two of the story.

Part III: Eochaid Seeks to Recover Étaín

Part three of the tale begins on a summer morning—the exact time in summer unspecified—at Tara, when Eochaid Airem encounters a strange warrior. The warrior has golden yellow hair to the edge of his shoulders and a shining blue eye in his head. He wears a purple tunic and carries a five-pointed spear in one hand, a white-bossed shield with golden gems on it in the other. What is most noteworthy here, aside from the color of his hair, is that he is described as having a single eye.

The warrior introduces himself as Midir of Brí Leith and challenges Eochaid to a game of fidchell (something like chess). Eochaid agrees to play only if there is a wager on the outcome. Midir bets 50 dark grey horses with dappled, blood-red heads and enameled reins. He promises to have them in Eochaid's hands by the third hour after sunrise on the following morning if he loses. There appears to be something important about the third hour after sunrise, since that is when Ailill awoke each morning from his sleep when he missed his assignations with Étaín. While its significance is unclear, in research on three stone circles with summer solstice alignments in Ireland, I did note that in each case there was a hill on the alignment, which meant that it had been broad daylight for quite some time before the sun actually appeared above the hill.

Midir does lose, pays his wager, and challenges Eochaid

again the next day. This time the stakes are higher: 50 young boars together with a vat of blackthorn into which they all will fit, 50 gold-hilted swords, 50 red-eared cows with white red-eared calves with a bronze spancel (hobble) on each calf, 50 grey wethers with red heads, three-headed, three-horned, 50 ivory-hilted swords, 50 speckled cloaks, each 50 to be delivered on its own day. The total, 350 items (including the 50 dark grey horses of the first wager), is suspiciously close to the number of days in a solar year and even closer to 12 lunar months (354 days); further, the items are to be delivered over the course of roughly one phase of the moon. This is the first hint that this section may have to do with the relationship between the lunar and solar years.

While the tale doesn't explicitly mention the outcome of the second *fidchell* game, it appears that Midir again loses, for Eochaid demands that Midir clear Meath of stone, put rushes over Tethba (the area around Brí Leith), a causeway over Moin Lamraige (a bog, apparently in Westmeath, and thus perhaps referring to the causeway at Corlea), and a wood over Breifne (an area in counties Cavan and Leitrim).

When Midir again challenges Eochaid to a game of *fidchell*, Eochaid asks him to name the stakes. Midir's response is that they shall be whatever the winner decides. Eochaid agrees, and this time Midir wins, telling Eochaid he could have won before if he had wished. Eochaid asks what the stake shall be, and Midir says to hold Étaín in his arms and kiss her. Eochaid tells him to come back in a month to collect. Midir, in effect, has met Étaín's condition that she come with him only if Eochaid bid it.

After the month has passed, Eochaid has Tara surrounded by the best warbands of Ireland and all the doors locked, while that night Étaín is serving drink to all those who are inside. Despite the guards, Midir suddenly appears in their midst. His appearance was always fair but this night is fairer. He demands what he was promised and says that Étaín herself had said a year earlier she would come away with him. Étaín protests that she said she would come away only if Eochaid sold her. Eochaid says that that he will not do, but Midir may claim his embrace and kiss. Midir takes his weapons in one hand and puts the other arm around Étaín, at which point they turn into swans and fly out through the skylight.

The swans flew to Síd Bán Find, the "Sidhe of the Bright

Woman,” today known as the ridge of Slievenamon in Co. Tipperary, some 117 km due south of the Dagda’s home at Uisneach.

When Eochaid and his men arrive at Síd Bán Find and begin to dig into the hill in search of the couple, they are told that they have gone to Midir’s dwelling at Brí Leith. There they dig for a year and three months—five seasons—without success. The searchers return to Síd Bán Find and begin to dig there again. An inhabitant of the *síd* comes out and asks why they are doing this to their hill since they have done Eochaid no wrong. Eochaid replies that he will only go away if he is told how to find his wife. He is told to take two whelps and two blind cats each day to Brí Leith.

Once again they return to Brí Leith, and finally Midir comes to them and agrees to send Étaín back to Eochaid at Tara at the third hour of the next day. When the time arrives, fifty women appear, all looking like Étaín. They tell Eochaid to choose one, for they must return to Brí Leith.

Eochaid claims he can recognize the true Étaín by the way she serves drink. When the next-to-the-last poured, he said “This is Étaín, yet it is not.” The others agreed that it was Étaín but not her serving. The others all returned to Brí Leith. The gist of this portion of the tale is that there is one true Étaín and 49 who are not. And this brings us once again to the relationship between the lunar and solar years. The number of phases of the moon encompassed by any solar year alternates between 49 and 50.

Conclusion

While I have not dealt with every element in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, I believe I have been able to show that there are enough references to characteristics known to be associated with the moon and in particular to characteristics likely to have been known to the learned classes of ancient Ireland—the synodic month, the Metonic cycle, and the relationship of the lunar and solar years—to offer support for the notion that the tale is, indeed, meant as an allegory about lunar cycles in which Étaín represents the moon. As to why such a tale would have been composed, I believe it is most likely because it provided a simple mnemonic device, allowing those who memorized the tale also to keep in mind the most important characteristics of the moon’s behavior. Although some would

see it as a purely medieval composition, it is nonetheless undoubtedly to a member or members of the learned classes that we owe *Tochmarc Étaíne*. Those learned classes were, to one degree or another, the heirs to the druids, so one would expect them to be familiar with the learning of their predecessors. And we are told by Julius Caesar nearly a thousand years earlier that astronomy was a primary concern of the druids. It is not at all surprising that scholars of either period should seek ways to pass their knowledge along to their students, and memorization of a tale such as *Tochmarc Étaíne* would have accomplished this. It seems likely that other early Irish tales had a similar goal.

Note

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