

PROPHECY, STORYTELLING  
AND THE OTHERWORLD  
IN *TOGAIL BRUIDNE DA DERGA*

RALPH O'CONNOR

Prophecy plays a central role in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*TBDD*). Many of its main characters have prophetic powers, not only the various Otherworldly characters Conaire meets on his last journey, but also at one point Conaire himself. In the extended description-sequence which forms most of the second half of the saga, two of his renegade foster-brothers predict the outcome of the final battle, responding to Ingcél's descriptions of the men inside the hall by identifying each one in turn and stating how he will perform in the battle. As a result, large parts of the story are narrated as predictions of future events rather than as ordinary past-tense narrative, so that when the battle eventually happens, there is nothing left to be told.

Rudolf Thurneysen mentioned this feature as evidence that *TBDD* was not written by a literary craftsman.<sup>1</sup> His criticism was predicated on an assumption that stories ought to be told in broadly sequential order, and that the final battle ought to be the climax of a story about the death of a king. More recently, Thomas Charles-Edwards has further refuted Thurneysen's objections by showing that the predominance of omens and prophetic utterances in this saga, and the apparent lack of interest in getting on with the story, stem naturally from the preoccupations of the professional tellers of tales, the *filid*. As Charles-Edwards puts it, the "principal inherited function" of the *filid* "was not story-telling but prophecy. (...) Irish prose tales (...) began as one of the duties of a professional order which claimed other functions of greater importance. It is not surprising that these other functions should have left their mark upon the matter of these tales."<sup>2</sup> In his view, *TBDD* is largely the product of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königssage bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1921), 627.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, "Geis, Prophecy, Omen, and Oath," *Celtica* 23

learned orders, so we should not expect it to work like a heroic tale: its learned author was more interested in the practice of prophecy and the reading of omens than in storytelling *per se*.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me, however, that the author of the extant *TBDD* was very interested in storytelling as well as prophecy. In this paper I should like to take a closer look at the connections between the two concepts, as a kind of meandering footnote to Charles-Edwards's article. However, my angle is different to his in one important respect: he and most other scholars treat *TBDD* as an essentially Old Irish text to be viewed in an eighth- or ninth-century context, but I shall be treating it as a Middle Irish literary creation of the eleventh century (albeit one which incorporates linguistically earlier material). Since the Old Irish recensions on which our extant saga is based have not survived, we cannot know how much and how aggressively this earlier material was edited by the eleventh-century redactor. For this reason, in an analysis of literary technique I prefer to deal with the extant recension rather than its putative sources.<sup>4</sup>

The predictions of doom in *TBDD* do more than merely emphasize the importance of seers and druids in the society depicted. They contribute directly to a gradual build-up of tension which structures the bulk of the saga, from the point at which Conaire banishes his foster-brothers (lines 216-18).<sup>5</sup> At this point the story splits into two opposed strands, in which Conaire on the one hand and his foster-brothers on the other find themselves increasingly trapped by their respective obligations: Conaire by his contract with the Otherworld, his foster-brothers by their contract with Ingcél.<sup>6</sup> These two strands spin off in their own directions before finally colliding at Da Derga's Hall.

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(1999), 59.

<sup>3</sup> For the view that *TBDD* is best seen as a heroic biography, see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology," in *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), 79-90; Tom Sjöblom, *Early Irish Taboos: A Study in Cognitive History* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Department of Comparative Religion, 2000), 154-65.

<sup>4</sup> The recension referred to here has been termed "Recension II" by Máire West ("The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: A Reappraisal of the 'Two-Source' Theory," *Celtica* 23 [1999], 413), but it is the earliest extant fully-fledged recension; West's "Recension I" is essentially a synopsis.

<sup>5</sup> References to *TBDD* are to line-numbers in Eleanor Knott, ed., *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Dublin: DIAS, 1936). Máire West is currently preparing a critical edition.

<sup>6</sup> On the nature of Conaire's contract with the Otherworld see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Semantics of *síd*," *Éigse* 17 (1978), 137-55; Sjöblom, *Early Irish*

This process of convergence takes up the bulk of the saga, and is dramatized with consummate artistry. Both Conaire and his foster-brothers are seen to experience a dawning awareness of what they will be compelled to do: to meet in battle, and there to meet their deaths. As the geographical distance between them lessens, the proportion of direct speech increases, as does the sinister nature of the omens, prophecies, and other predictive utterances which accompany their last journeys. The time taken to narrate each episode also increases, culminating in the long description-sequence. This may be seen as a last-ditch attempt by the increasingly desperate foster-brothers to delay the battle. When they reach a point from which they can move no closer to the hall without actually attacking, they tell Ingcél that he must first describe everyone within the hall (lines 659-61).

This part of the saga is almost timeless, like a series of tableaux. It may be seen as a form of extended ekphrasis in which the story's forward movement is put "on pause" to allow its larger significance to be developed in a virtuoso performance of lyricism, description, and prophetic utterance. By "on pause" I have a very specific technological analogy in mind: not the modern CD player, whose pause button merely disengages the laser, but the old-fashioned cassette player where pressing pause does not prevent the motor from continuing to tug at the tape (resulting in damage if left on for too long). The description-sequence does not disengage or relieve the tension of the first half; on the contrary, it sustains this tension, all the more so for not letting the story move on. The grim predictions made about each warrior by Fer Rogain and Lomna Drúth intensify the sense of mounting doom, repeatedly tugging the audience's attention towards what is just about to happen; but, after each prediction, the request for more information from Ingcél staves off the narrative future yet again. The sense of frustration which some readers experience today from these passages seems to be built into the saga's dramatic purpose.

Prophecies are also embedded into the descriptions themselves. In two of the tableaux narrated by Ingcél, Conaire and his jester are seen uttering prophecies which help intensify the sense of doom. But their prophecies have a further significance, and may be used as springboards for a circuitous exploration of a *self-reflexive* element in *TBDD*. What I would like to suggest, rather tentatively, is that the saga-author used prophecy not only as a powerful storytelling technique in itself, or as a means of harking

back to the professional duties of his ancestors, but also as a means of prompting reflections on his own saga and its larger importance.<sup>7</sup>

In Conaire's tableau, the king is described waking up from a trance and uttering a poem (lines 1049-66) which is printed here in full with a tentative translation.<sup>8</sup>

1049	“Do-ríussaig íarum asa chotlud <sup>7</sup> at-raracht <sup>7</sup> ro chachain in laíd seo:	[Ingcél:] “Then [Conaire] awoke from his sleep, rose up and sang this lay:
1051	““Gáir Osair Osar cumall goin gáir ooc immuallach Tuile Goissi gaeth úar tar faebur eslind adaig do thogail ríg ind adaig se.’	““The cry of Osar Osar the hound <sup>9</sup> wound-cry of Tuile Goissi's proud youths cold wind on a perilous edge a night to destroy a king, this night.’
	“Co clos ní a rithise:	“It was heard again:
1054	““Gáir Osair Osar cumoll cath ro ndlom *doerad <sup>10</sup> tuaithi *togail <sup>11</sup> bruidne bróncha fianna fir guíti goíth immomuin	““The cry of Osar Osar the hound has announced a battle enslavement of a people a hall's destruction sorrowful plunderers men wounded wind of terror

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<sup>7</sup> By “saga-author” I refer to the editor/compiler/redactor/author/literatus (or group of the same) responsible for the production of Recension II of *TBDD* (i.e. the archetype of its variant versions existing in manuscript).

<sup>8</sup> This text is based on Knott's edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Departures from Knott's text (which follows the Yellow Book of Lecan almost exclusively) are marked with asterisks and are based on information given in Knott's notes. In my textual notes, Y refers to the longer of the two texts in the Yellow Book of Lecan, U refers to the text in *Lebor na hUidre*, and D refers to the text in RIA D.iv.2. Fuller information on these texts and their relationships is provided by Máire West, “An Edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*,” (PhD diss., National University of Ireland, 1986), some of whose emendations I follow here.

<sup>9</sup> *cumall* = “hound” is suggested by the gloss *.i. cu Conaire* in U, and by D's reading, *chuinn*.

<sup>10</sup> Y has *deórad*; emended to *doerad* using U and D.

<sup>11</sup> Y and D have *tail*; emended using U.

	imorchor sleg saeth écomlonn ascur tigi Temair fás forba n-anúil comgne cuíniud Conaire coll atha *lith <sup>13</sup> ñgaland gáir égem	hurling of spears hardship of unequal forces a house's downfall <sup>12</sup> Tara deserted unknown patrimony a story, a lament for Conaire spoiling of corn feast of slaughter a cry of screams
1057	orgain ríg Hérenn carbuid hi cuicligi dochraidi ríg Temrach.'	massacre of Ireland's kings chariots whirring misery for Tara's king.'
	“As-bert in tres fecht:	“The third time he said:
1060	““Gáir Osair Osar cumoll combáig ánrad óic in n-orcain orcuin íurthar orta curaid claentar fir fadbaidther láith gaili búiread tromthresa	““The cry of Osar Osar the hound combat of champions youths in the massacre the massacre will be wrought warriors were massacred men are brought low heroes are despoiled bellowing of fierce fighting
1063	tóigébthar gáiri *dommarfas <sup>14</sup> imned imed síabra slúag faen	cries will be uttered I see suffering <sup>15</sup> spectres aplenty a host laid low
1065	fálghud námad comroc fer for Dothra dochraidi ríg Temrach i n-óitid ortae.’” <sup>16</sup>	overthrow of foes an encounter of men on the Dodder misery for Tara's king murdered in his youth.”’

Like his foster-brothers' predictions, this set of *roscada* provides us with glimpses of the approaching disaster and underlines the speaker's own

<sup>12</sup> West suggests that *ascur* derives from \**ess-scar-* (“fall”); see “An Edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*,” 792.

<sup>13</sup> *lith* is missing in Y and D; supplied from U.

<sup>14</sup> Y has unintelligible *dom-ársad*; emended using D and U.

<sup>15</sup> Literally, “suffering is revealed to me”.

<sup>16</sup> D, F and U omit the lines from the third *Gáir Osair* to *tóigébthar gáiri*.

lucid awareness of his own fate. But its field of allusion is broader. Fer Rogain foresees the specifics of the battle, but Conaire foresees what lies beyond: not only carnage and his own death, but also its political ramifications, including the dynastic chaos of the Pentarchy which this event would usher in. Hence line 1055, *Temair fás / forba n-anúil* (“Tara deserted / unknown patrimony”); hence also the reference to *dóerad tuaithe* (“enslavement of a people”) in lines 1052-53. Conaire also seems to sense who or what is bringing about this catastrophe. In line 1053, the phrase *bróncha fianna* (“sorrowful plunderers”) suggests that he perceives the torments suffered at that precise moment by his foster-brothers. He also intuitively senses the underlying presence of a hostile Otherworld working to destroy him. In line 1064 he says that *dommarfas (...)* *imed síabra* (literally, “spectres aplenty are revealed to me”).

The second of the two prophetic tableaux is that of Conaire’s jester Taulchaine, which contains certain cryptic echoes of Conaire’s own. The passage in question (lines 1165-80) runs as follows:

“.ix. claidib ina lámab 7 .ix. scéith airgdidí 7 .ix. n-ubla óir. Fo-cherd cach hae díb in n-ardae 7 ní thuit ní díb for lár 7 ní bí acht oen díb for a bais 7 is cumma 7 timthrecht bech i llau ánlí cach hae sech alaile súas. In tan ba n-ánem dó at-chonnarcsa ocon chliús 7 amal do-rréochasa, fo-cartatar grith immi co mbátar for lár in tigi huili.

“Is and as-bert in flaith fil isin tig frisín clesammach, ‘Cot-ráncamar ó bim<sup>17</sup> mac 7 ní rala do chles n-airít cosín-nocht.’

“‘Uch, uch, a phopa cháin Conaire! Is deithbeir dam. Dom-récache súil féig aáidaraíd, fer co triun meic imblesan for-aicce dul nóí ndrong. Ní méiti dósom a ndéicsín. Aáidaraíd sin. Fichither catha de,’ orsé. ‘Ro-feasar co dé brátha, bas n-olc ar dorus na Bruidne.’”

[Ingcél:] “Nine swords are in [Taulchaine’s] hands with nine silver shields and nine golden apples. He throws each of them up in the air, and none of them falls on the floor, and there is only one of them on his palm. It is like bees buzzing around on a warm day, each of them going up past the other. When he was at his most brilliant, I watched him at his feat and, as I looked, they clattered about him and they all fell onto the floor of the house.

“Then the sovereign in the house said to the jester, ‘We have known each other since I was a lad, and your feat never failed you before tonight.’

“‘Alas, alas, fair friend Conaire! It is appropriate for me. A sharp, baleful eye looked at me—a man who watches the movement of nine

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<sup>17</sup> U and D have second person singular forms here, thus referring to when Taulchaine was a lad rather than Conaire.

groups with the third pupil of his eye. It is not hard for him to watch them.<sup>18</sup> That [eye] is fierce. Battles are fought because of it,' he said. 'It will be known until the Day of Judgement that there is<sup>19</sup> evil before the Hall.'"

In at least one other Middle Irish text Taulchaine is identified as Conaire's druid, but not in *TBDD*.<sup>20</sup> In this saga Taulchaine's prophecy is presented as the result, not of any druidical gifts, but of the specific and adverse circumstances under which he is performing. The hostile force of Ingcél's gaze shatters the precarious balance of Taulchaine's juggling *in tan ba n-ánem dó* ("when he was at his most brilliant", line 1170). The parallels with Conaire are clear: Ingcél is about to disrupt the precarious balancing-act of Conaire's kingship, previously described by Ingcél himself as the pinnacle of earthly achievement.<sup>21</sup> As usual, the royal jester becomes the king's alter ego: in Taulchaine's juggling-feat, Conaire's kingship is represented emblematically as a harmonious equilibrium of military power (swords), security (shields), and natural bounty (apples).

### Ingcél, knowledge and the Otherworld

Under Ingcél's gaze, Taulchaine experiences a form of vision: he perceives that a spiny eye with three pupils is watching him with murderous intent, and that a great battle is about to take place.<sup>22</sup> Conaire's *rosc*, too, appears as an immediate reaction to Ingcél's gaze: Conaire wakes up precisely when Ingcél looks at him.<sup>23</sup> The word *rosc* is also a poetic term for "eye" and has already been used (line 671) to refer to the baleful eye with which Ingcél spies on the Hall. In this sense, Ingcél's *rosc* may be said to prompt Conaire's *rosc*. Ingcél's intentions, in the form of narrative fragments of the near future, are picked up by the two characters on whom he gazes most intently. This violates the typical pattern of the "watchman device": watchers are conventionally invisible to the people

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<sup>18</sup> See West, "An Edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*," 800-01.

<sup>19</sup> The word *bas* could be either the future or the present subjunctive of the copula.

<sup>20</sup> See Knott, ed., *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> For related interpretations see William Sayers, "Charting Conceptual Space: Dumézil's Tripartition and the Fatal Hostel in Early Irish Literature," *Mankind Quarterly* 34 (1993), 44; Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, "*Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and the Politics of Anatomy," *CMCS* 49 (Summer 2005), 3.

<sup>22</sup> On the nature of Ingcél's gaze and its relation to the "evil eye", see Jacqueline Borsje, "Approaching Danger: *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and the Motif of Being One-Eyed," *CSANA Yearbook* 2 (2002), 80-81.

<sup>23</sup> See Sayers, "Charting Conceptual Space," 47.

being watched, but the author of *TBDD* wanted to remind his audience precisely whose eye they are looking through.<sup>24</sup>

The physical power of Ingcél's gaze seems to reflect his power over the course of events. Here I differ slightly from the interpretation of Joseph Nagy, who has suggested that the plunderers as a group are seen to be controlling events. Nagy points to the earlier episode (lines 620-28) where they build a cairn to mark the genre of their act as a massacre (*orgain*) rather than a battle-rout: according to Nagy, the plunderers "control the story, as if they were projections of the author internalized within the text"; Nagy also points to the fact that the description-sequence tells the story from the plunderers' viewpoint.<sup>25</sup> However, it seems to me that Ingcél, rather than the plunderers as a group, is the one in control. The cairn-building was just one of a series of formal and increasingly specific announcements by which Ingcél has forced the sons of Donn Désa to acknowledge that they will kill their foster-brother.<sup>26</sup> He has been bending their wills to his own in order to bring about this event, and for a very good reason: he is acting on the principle of *lex talionis* or, as he puts it, *orcain fon orgain*, a massacre for a massacre (line 437). In Britain, under the terms of their pirate pact, he consented to massacre his own family. Until he is required for this loss, narrative equilibrium cannot be satisfied. This imbalance generates a powerful forward momentum to the story.

It therefore does not seem too fanciful to describe Ingcél's role in the second half of *TBDD* as "authorial". He takes up this role explicitly when rebuffing Lomnae's initial plea for a retreat. In lines 718-21 he predicts a battle *co teinnet co dered mbetha. Ní aisnébet sin ná seanchaid dul damsa ónd orguin, corrom mé nosn-orr* ("which they [will] recount until the end of the world. Neither they [the defenders of the hall] nor historians will recount that I drew back from the massacre before I carried it out"). Ingcél means to make history. The sons of Donn Désa, by contrast, are powerless to change the plot of the story: after hearing Conaire's three sons identified in the description-sequence they cry, *Ron-mairg más ar scél* ("Woe to us if that is our story!", line 891).<sup>27</sup> History, for them, is a nightmare from which they are unable to awake.

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<sup>24</sup> Middle Irish examples of the "watchman device" with invisible watcher(s) include those in *Fled Bricreann*, *Mesca Ulad*, and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. On the device generally, see Patrick Sims-Williams, "Riddling Treatment of the 'Watchman Device' in *Branwen* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*," *SC* 12/13 (1977-78), 83-117.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 294.

<sup>26</sup> Compare lines 483-91, 591-94, 629-31, 655-58, 667-69.

<sup>27</sup> The Yellow Book of Lecan text has *ro mairg*; this reading is taken from D and



The same self-reflexive language informs the prophecies of Taulchaine and Conaire. Echoing Ingcél's assertion, Taulchaine predicts a battle which *ro-feasar co dé brátha* ("will be known until the Day of Judgement", line 1179). In his second *rosc* Conaire foresees *comgne, cuíniud Conaire* (lines 1055-56), which I have translated "a story, a lament for Conaire". The word *comgne* is something of a semantic minefield, but in Middle Irish texts is often found coupled with *scéla* ("tales"); it would appear to connote communally-held historical knowledge and/or the narrative forms which such knowledge took.<sup>28</sup> It may seem to fit oddly beside *cuíniud* ("a lament"), but the saga's overwhelmingly tragic flavour makes the link not entirely counter-intuitive: the whole saga may be characterized as "a story, a lament for Conaire". The resonance of Conaire's words with the telling of *TBDD* itself is set up by his previous phrases in lines 1051-53, *adaig do thogail rí* ("a night to destroy a king") and *togail bruidne* ("a hall's destruction"); these are the only instances of the word *togail* in the saga apart from its title. The plunderers had announced an *orgain* as the genre of their attack, marking this with a cairn; but Conaire actually intuitively grasps the genre and title of the story which will be told about him in centuries to come. In the narrative stasis of the description-sequence, both Conaire and his foster-brothers are trapped in a web of prophecy, transfixed by the eye of Ingcél who is directing the course of events with his unholy power.

But what exactly does Ingcél represent? Space precludes a full discussion here, but, following up a line of inquiry suggested by Jacqueline Borsje, it is possible to interpret Ingcél's increasingly monstrous physical appearance and resemblance to Conaire's unwelcome Otherworldly visitors as a sign that he has become the tool or pawn of a hostile Otherworld. Just as the vigorous campaigns of saintly heroes like Patrick are seen as the expression of God's will through human agency, so the almost mechanical energy of Ingcél's purposes appears as the expression of an Otherworldly will. Ingcél's desire for requital forms part of a larger movement at work in this saga. Conaire has sinned against kingship itself, and hence against his own Otherworldly kin; this sin must be purged by the Otherworldly forces which raised him up. There is a fearful symmetry in the fact that the *togail*, the event which will complete

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<sup>28</sup> On the semantic range of *comgne* see Séan Mac Airt, "Filidecht and Coimgne," *Ériu* 18 (1958), 139-52; Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: DIAS, 1980), 123-27. I am grateful to Harriet Thomsett for letting me see her research materials on this subject.

this larger movement, will spell the deaths not only of Conaire but also of those whose crimes he originally failed to curtail.<sup>29</sup>

The Otherworld's role in propelling the narrative ties in suggestively with the saga-author's own interest in prophecy and the ancestral roots of his own profession, as noted by Charles-Edwards.<sup>30</sup> The role of the *filid* as repositories of information about the past was not easily separable from their role as seers of the future. This link, which recalls the Indo-European semantic connection between concepts of "seeing" and "knowing",<sup>31</sup> seems confirmed by the references to storytelling in *TBDD*, where the word *scéla* covers both past and future events: to tell is to foretell. In the fatalistic pre-Christian world depicted by the saga-author, a life such as Conaire's is a tale which has already been told.<sup>32</sup>

In *TBDD*, as Grigori Bondarenko has shown, the Otherworld appears as the ultimate source of hidden knowledge.<sup>33</sup> What has attracted less comment is the specifically narrative form this knowledge takes. Near the beginning of the saga (lines 55-6) Étaín tells Eochaid that she has come to him from the Otherworld because of the *airscéla* ("great tales") about him: *atot-gén fo chétóir ar do thúarascbáil* ("I knew you at once from your description"), she says, anticipating the principle of visual recognition which structures the second half of the saga. Later, in lines 775-77, we are told that nine Otherworldly pipers have joined Conaire's company *ara airsceláib* [sic] ("because of the great tales about him") told in the *síd*-mound of Brí Léith.<sup>34</sup> This fund of Otherworldly narrative includes stories about the future, as seen in the three prophetic *roscada* of the mysterious red horseman (lines 304-32). Each *rosc* begins, *Én a meic / mór a scél* ("Lo, lad, / great the tale"), and the third line of the first *rosc* is *scél ó*

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<sup>29</sup> On the significance of the foster-brothers' initial thieving see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "Gat and díberg in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*," in *Celtica Helsingiensia: Proceedings from a Symposium on Celtic Studies*, ed. Anders Ahlqvist et al. (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996), 203-13.

<sup>30</sup> Charles-Edwards, "Geis, Prophecy, Omen, and Oath," 59.

<sup>31</sup> On this connection see Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> On the concept of fate more generally in Gaelic literature, see Edward Gwynn, "On the Idea of Fate in Irish Literature," *Journal of the Ivernian Society* 7 (1910), 152-65; Jacqueline Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An Investigation Related to the Process of Christianization and the Concept of Evil* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 67-75.

<sup>33</sup> Bondarenko, "Дороги и знание в *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*," *Средние века* 65 (2002), 145-65.

<sup>34</sup> This reference may be interpreted as an allusion to *Tochmarc Étaíne* and other "great tales" about the *síd*-mound of Brí Léith, destroyed by Conaire's great-grandfather.

*Bruidin* (“tale from the hall”). These glancing references raise a suspicion that the tale they refer to might approximate to the story we ourselves are reading, and this suspicion is strengthened when Conaire later refers to our saga’s title, *togail bruidne*, in his own *roscada* (line 1053).

Implicit in the red horseman’s words *mór a scél* is a sense that the denizens of the Otherworld know the full story. The one-legged churl Fer Caille rubs this in soon afterwards when he says to the king, *Cían ro-feas do thíachtain sund* “Long has your coming here been known” (lines 359-60). This hidden knowledge cannot be accessed in full by mortals, but is revealed to them only in fragments. This is reflected in the syntax of the *rosc* form, which generally lacks main verbs and other definite time-markers, trapping past, present, and future within a timeless realm of visionary truth. The effect is heightened in Conaire’s *rosc* by the fact that where main verbs do appear, as in lines 1061-3, they refuse to settle intelligibly into any single tense. As in the larger structure of the description-sequence, the story shatters into freeze-frame images, enigmatic pictorial fragments which demand interpretation—whether by us or by audiences within the saga.

Like the Otherworld itself, these visions exist outside normal time. Conversely, the story they point towards is time-bound: for Conaire and his foster-brothers, the minutes are ticking by. Moreover, both the content and timing of their fitful glimpses seem orchestrated to cause maximum distress to the “seer”. The sons of Donn Désa are repeatedly compelled to tell the “story” of their own violent deaths, while Conaire is made to narrate the ruin of his kingship and its aftermath—including, in lines 1055-56, the fact that his death will be the subject of future storytelling. He becomes his own historian; indeed, Ingcél praises him in lines 996-97 for possessing the royal quality of *comairle senchad* (“the prudence of a historian”), though he gains it too late to be of any practical use.

These connections between storytelling and the Otherworld may help to explain why Ingcél’s hostile gaze should be seen to trigger a sudden access of prophecy to Conaire and his jester. Ingcél’s physical appearance already associates him with the Otherworld, and his act of gazing with an “evil eye” (*admilliud*) reinforces these connotations by aligning him with the most blatant manifestation of the Otherworld’s displeasure, the seeress Cailb.<sup>35</sup> It is the Otherworld which is glaring upon Conaire and his kingship through Ingcél’s angry eye; in so doing it reveals to him something of its hidden knowledge.

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<sup>35</sup> On these alignments see Borsje, “Approaching Danger,” 89-96.

## Conclusion

The author of *TBDD* was fascinated by the divinatory origins of his own art and found prophecy an effective means by which to construct his saga. Here he presented prophecies themselves as fragmentary glimpses of hidden stories deriving ultimately from the Otherworld, where they exist unbounded by time. As the saga progresses, Otherworldly commerce with humans (partly instigated by these same stories) becomes increasingly pervasive, and the mortal actors find themselves increasingly glimpsing fragments of their own story. At the same time it seems to be hinted that the saga we are reading has emerged from the secret realm of the *síð*-mounds into recorded history—in other words, into the textual world of eleventh-century Christian Ireland. Taulchaine and Ingcél both prophesy that the story will be remembered until the end of the world, but Taulchaine uses the words *co dé brátha* (“until the Day of Judgement”, line 1179). The implication is that this tale of ancient times will be remembered by a specifically Christian audience, and therefore will continue to be meaningful for that audience.

Looking at the saga in this way sheds some light on the occasional intrusions from the author’s Christian world into that of *TBDD*, which would otherwise be disconcertingly anachronistic. The plunderers’ calling on God (*Día*) is one example (e.g. lines 491, 594); another is the comparison of the fire in Da Derga’s hall to *daig ndairthaigi* (“a burning oratory”, line 586), that classic symbol of clerical anxiety about godless raiding bands, whether Norse or Irish. Such passages may have been designed to prompt the saga’s audience to compare the situation dramatized in *TBDD* with specific situations or general areas of concern in present-day Ireland—as it were, nudging them to make the story relevant to their own times.

The metatextuality I have been trying to tease out from *TBDD* bears comparison with the authenticating techniques of other Middle Irish sagas, many of which are ascribed some kind of Otherworldly authorship across the pagan-Christian boundary. In *Siaburcharpat Con Culainn* and *Do Fálsgud Tána Bó Cúailnge* long-dead heroes are resurrected to tell stories of their adventures, while in *Acallam na Senórach* St. Patrick gains angelic authority to write down stories told by the unnaturally long-lived *fianna*. In a variant on this pattern, it might be suggested that the author of *TBDD* has appropriated the old prophetic associations of storytelling in order to demand that his saga be taken seriously not only as a record of past events, but also as the expression of timeless and potentially uncomfortable truths about the theory and practice of kingship. This, in

turn, would help to explain why this author devoted so much space to modes which work outside ordinary narrative time: prophecy, lyrical description, praise-poem, *rosca*. These modes allowed him the textual space to give his story the significance it needed to live as long as it has.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This paper comes out of my ongoing work on a book-length analysis of *TBDD*, in which the saga’s literary strategies and treatment of kingship ideology will be more fully examined. I should like to offer my warmest thanks to the participants of the Societas Celtologica Nordica symposium for their helpful comments on this paper.

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