

Aspects of *Echtra Nerai*

I. Introduction

This paper is based on Kuno Meyer's edition of *Echtra Nerai* from the manuscript Egerton 1782 dating from 1517. This text also appears in the Yellow Book of Lecan in the fifteenth century folio 60a42¹. A fragment consisting of Meyer's lines 1 to 82 can be found in the Liber Flavus Fergusiorum, written between 1437 and 1440. The oldest reference to *Echtra Nerai* that we have dates back to the Irish tale list in the twelfth century Book of Leinster and a list which is embedded in the fourteenth century narrative of *Airec menman Uaird maic Coise*.² Further reference can be found in the list of rémscéla to *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.³

Thurneysen originally dated *Echtra Nerai* to the tenth century⁴ but reputedly later on modified this by not ruling out an eighth century origin⁵. This paper seeks to look at the text mainly from a structural viewpoint and to compare *Echtra Nerai* with other echtraí and immrama. Since it is also a *rémscél* to *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, the final chapter will deal briefly with *Echtra Nerai* in this context.

II. Summary of *Echtra Nerai*

One Samain eve, Ailill and Medb are in Ráth Cruachan with their household. Two captives have been hanged and a prize is offered by Ailill for putting a withe round the foot of one of them. Everybody fails to do so except Nerae, who succeeds in this owing to the advice of one captive and in return carries him on his back to get him a drink. Two houses are passed, a third entered, dirty water is drunk and the remains of it spat at the inhabitants by the corpse.

On their return, Nerae sees the fort destroyed by an otherworld army and follows it into their *síd*. There he is ordered by the king to live with a single woman and to bring firewood to the palace daily.

Delivering the wood, he sees a lame man carried by a blind man visiting a well. His wife tells him they look after the king's diadem and that the destroyed fort was only a vision that will come true if it is not revealed to Nerae's people.

¹ Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, p. 312.

² Maier, *Lexikon der keltischen Religion und Kultur*, p. 281.

³ Backhaus, "The Structure of the List of Remscéla Tána Bó Cualngi in the Book of Leinster", p. 19.

⁴ Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, p. 312.

⁵ Ó'Duilearga, "Nera and the Dead Man", in: *Féilscribhinn Eoin Mhic Néill*, p. 522.

So he returns with summer fruit from the *síd* to his people and claims his reward from Ailill. Though three days have passed in the *síd*, none has in the fort. A year later Ailill sends Nerae to get his family out of the *síd* so that it can be destroyed.

On returning, Nerae finds he has a son and takes over the delivery of firewood from his wife again and tends his cattle. Through his negligence one cow is taken by the Morrígan and bulled by the Bull of Cuailgne. On her way back, the Morrígan is stopped by Cú Chulainn.

Nerae is then told by his wife to leave the *síd*, He does so, reports its wonders to his people and warns them to destroy it. It is agreed to do this in a year's time and three days before the next Halloween, Nera gets his family and belongings out. On getting out, the Donn of Cuailgne's calf bellows, meets Ailill's Findbennach in a fight and dies. His death shriek is interpreted by Medb's herdsman as a prophesy that the Donn of Cuailgne would surpass the Findbennach in a fight. Medb takes an oath to see them fighting soon.

The men then go into the *síd* and raid it and bring three wonderful gifts out of it. Nera, however, returns to the *síd* with his family.

IIIa. Structure

A long and controversial discussion has been going on about the structure of this text.

Thurneysen held the opinion that it does not constitute an entity at all:

"Wie er überliefert ist, bildet der Text keine einheitliche Erzählung. Ein Abschnitt findet sich fast ganz gleichlautend zweimal darin (Z. 90-92=192-194). Auch kehrt Nera zweimal aus dem *síd* nach Cruachain zurück und jedesmal erstattet er Bericht, und zwar das zweite Mal so, wie er es nur ein erstes Mal tun könnte; [...]. Es sind also deutlich zwei Parallel-Erzählungen verschmolzen, wohl wesentlich so, daß der Schluß der einen an den Anfangsteil der anderen angehängt wurde, wobei aber die Mittelstücke von beiden aufgenommen und notdürftig verknüpft wurden."⁶

This break was considered to be in line 140 with the second text beginning with "*erg ass tra...*". O'Duilearga holds a different opinion, namely that the story about the

⁶Thurneysen, pp. 311-312.

captive is independent, deriving from folk tales.⁷Carey⁸, Rees⁹ and Watson¹⁰ discuss this episode as a forshadowing of later events in the *echtra*.

Given the general disagreement about how to structure the text there is much to be said for Ó Coileain's proposal¹¹ to take it as it stands and look at it as an entity, despite the possibility that some of it may be fragmented or corrupt. He suggests that this structure may be due to a pattern of emphasis or may be a stylistic means. Pointing out that the major aim of such a story would hardly be the highlighting of such common concerns as good housekeeping (i.e. removing dirty water), he states that it rather seems to be aiming towards the end of raiding the *síd* and getting the crown of Briúin. Concerning the repetitions in the text, Ó Coileain states that the storyteller has:

"been temporarily delayed in attending to other necessary but, [...] clearly subordinate considerations.[...], (it is) not Nerae, but the storyteller who must retrace his steps [...] to regenerate the thematic energy that will carry the narrative through to its conclusion."¹²

This text seems to consist of at least three clear thematic entities, the first of which is Nerae's encounter with the captive at Samain (lines 1 to 43). The second is his first visit to the *síd* (lines 44 to 98), as a consequence of which his son is born. The third one is his second visit to the *síd* leading to the birth of the bull calf (lines 99 to 144) and its subsequent defeat by the Findbennach and the invasion of the *síd* by the men of Connacht (lines 145 to 195).

A striking feature of the relationship between the two worlds is their temporal disparity. As Watson points out, otherworld time is cyclical in so far as past and future are equally accessible¹³. The passing of the borders between these two worlds may therefore mean time changes, too. While on his second return from the *síd* a year had passed both in the human world and in the otherworld, no time passed in the human world while Nerae first spent three days in the *síd*. Carey interprets this as Nerae experiencing two possible versions of the present¹⁴: the destruction of Rath Cruachan unless the otherworld army

⁷O'Duilearga, p. 522.

⁸Carey, "Sequence and Causation in *Echtra Nerai*", p. 67.

⁹Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 300-303.

¹⁰Watson, "A Structural Analysis of *Echtra Nerai*", pp. 130-134.

¹¹Ó Coileain, "Echtra Nerai and its Analogues", p. 429.

¹²ibid, p. 438.

¹³Watson, p. 139.

¹⁴Carey, p. 70.

be prevented from causing this or the second possibility, Nerae's return to the fort, as mentioned in line 99: "Luid Nero iarum co a muinntir, conusfuair imon coiri *cetno*." ("Thereupon Nerae went to his people and found them around the same caldron.")

Through his sojourn in the *síd*, Nera was enabled to bring this alternative outcome about. The condition for him entering the otherworld, though, was his proven valour in the episode with the corpse.

The parallel ordering of the text also becomes very apparent in the two births in the text: the birth of the calf and of Nerae's son both occur after a period during which Nerae is absent from the *síd*.¹⁵ Both newly born individuals are of double parentage, they both have an otherworld mother and a father from the 'ordinary' world. Watson argues that as liminal beings they are "potentially dangerous" and the calf by its bellowing brings about the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.¹⁶

Ó Coileáin (1990: 434) also offers a very interesting parallel for the captive episode; namely a story called "The Fairy Hill is on Fire"¹⁷. It is taken from folk tradition and is evidence for the presence of what he suggests may be "a gradual weathering process"¹⁸ of the captive episode in folklore.

In EN, Nerae's interference with the *síd* certainly was very profitable for his people since the destruction of Rath Cruachan was thereby averted. It is interesting to note that otherwise all the story's narrative sequences lead to destruction: the people in the house caused their death by not observing the rules of good housekeeping, the king causes the destruction of the *síd* by letting Nerae in. Furthermore the bull calf challenges the Findbennach and is beaten. The Connachta prove superior to the otherworld in these respects.

¹⁵ibid, p. 68.

¹⁶Watson, p. 138.

¹⁷ Two fairy women bring an enchanted girl into the house of an old woman who overhears that she herself is to be killed by them. She turns the fairies out by pretending that their fairy hill was on fire and afterwards bars their entrance by throwing foot water out, fastening the axe in a block of wood and smothering the fire with ashes. She then returns the girl to her parents.

In this story a number of parallel features appear: A mortal has contact to otherworld beings not at Samhain but at dawn, another ambivalent point of time¹⁷, intended killing of the mortal is averted by- in this case pretended not enacted- destruction of the *síd*, a second mortal being, neither fully alive nor dead, is involved. Finally the house is protected by carrying out domestic duties that had been neglected before: foot water is thrown out, an axe fastened, the fire smothered. This implies that, had these duties been attended to before, the woman would not have been endangered by the fairies. But on the other hand, in that case she would not have been able to save the girl, so her interference with the otherworld beings was on the whole a profitable one.

¹⁸ ÓCoileáin, p. 437.

IIIb. Motives

As we have seen above, EN makes use of narrative parallels to a very large extent. Some themes and ideas are also repeated within the text. A prominent function of this may be the linking of the story's parts: the first episode and the 'actual echtrae'. Also a recurring motif may be emphasized by this. Watson argues¹⁹ that some items would seem insignificant if it were not for their repeated occurrence. These motifs include containers for water and the carrying of burdens on the back. In the case of containers for water, the well holds supposedly clear water and the diadem, a sign of kingship, while the buckets holding dirty water prove a destructive force for the house's inhabitants. Watson considers the captive episode a negative paradigm, based on the dirty water as opposed to the clear water of the well. Its message is that sovereignty must create order or else it leads to chaos and destruction²⁰. This may be applicable, too, to the king of the *síd* as a sovereign bringing ruin to his tribe through battle or through making bad decisions that cause his kingdom to be destroyed.

Identical use of a motif can be observed in Nerae's carrying of the captive on his back and the blind guardian bearing the lame man. This form of co-operation thus seems to indicate a combination of abilities which in Nera's case may account for his ability to travel between the world of the living and that of supernatural beings. A further instance of bearing a burden is the gathering of firewood. The significance of this is less apparent since combining Nera and the wood does not seem to be very profitable. However, it gives us some additional intertextual parallels. Comparison between Nera's fate, the menial duty forced on him by the king, and that of Ogma in the *Cath Maige Tuired*, lends itself quite readily.²¹ In both cases the hero has to perform labour that is completely unworthy of his status and abilities. So this bad judgement by the otherworld king might disqualify him by immediately creating a parallel with Bres of the *Formoiri* who was considered a bad king due to lacking the kingly virtue of generosity. A further instance of the shortcomings of EN's king is his putting Nerae and the woman together and afterwards complaining about a son having been born of this union. This also proves to be a fatal misjudgement as the woman's revelation of how to avoid the pending destruction of *Ráth Cruachain* leads to the destruction of the *síd* instead.

¹⁹Watson, p. 130.

²⁰ Watson, p.133.

²¹Watson, p. 134.

Watson discusses the moral failings of the woman who by thus proving her loyalty to Nerae betrays her own people.²²

Yet it seems questionable whether the fairy woman in EN treacherously betrayed her own people or whether she rather duly supported Nerae in a case of moral conflict because he was her husband and she had to stand by him. The situation of the couple is neither clear to the reader nor to the king himself who at first ordered Nera to team up with the woman. Lines 56-58 state: “Aircc don taig uut tall *tra*’, ol in rig, ‘ata *ben aentomu ann, denud maith friut. Abair fria iss uaim faiter chuici.*” Meyer translates this as: “There is a single woman there, who will make thee welcome. Go now to yonder house’, said the king. Tell her it is from me thou art sent to her“. The king as the head of his people ought to have the authority to give the woman to Nera. Even though the king makes it clear later in the text that this is not what he meant, it could be inferred from these lines that giving her away is precisely what he has done here. However, in the course of the tale the king changes his line of argument and complains about the woman having slept with Nera (lines 114-115: “I am displeased that the woman should sleep with thee without asking“). If this does not involve a change of his attitude in mid-stream, it certainly is an example of his extraordinary lack of foresight.

A situation similar to that in EN is encountered in *Cath Maige Tuired*.²³ Here the Dagda sleeps with the daughter of a hostile king. She also proves loyal to him rather than to her own people by warning him of their bad intentions. As allusions to *Cath Maige Tuired* could be assumed in the wood-carrying parallel, it might not be unreasonable to assume that, even if female conduct in such a situation was not clearly specified by law texts, the conceptual parallel might have presented itself to a contemporary reader/listener. So even if the woman’s loyalty was not strictly required by a social code, her behaviour might not have been unexpected.

It can be seen from these examples that the king in this story lacks part of the essential *fír flathemon* of the just and righteous king²⁴: *Audacht Morainn*²⁵ states:” Is tre f[ír] f[lathemon] fo- síd sámi sube soad sádili – sláini.”, i.e. that: “it is through the justice of the ruler that he secures peace, tranquility, joy, ease, [and] comfort”. In contrast to the king of the *síd* Ailill acts appropriately throughout the tale and encourages his hero wisely: he is depicted as a good king who acts to the benefit of his people. The overall outcome of the story, destruction of the *síd* and taking of the gifts, is in opposition to Ó

²²Watson, p. 137.

²³Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, p. 41.

²⁴ cf. discussion of good kingship in Ó Cathasaigh "The semantics of 'síd'", p.140.

Cathasaigh's model of the *síd* as meaning 'fairy-mound' and 'peace', the latter standing for 'peaceful place' and 'source of peace'²⁶. He points out that the otherworld is frequently portrayed as the source of regal legitimacy, but in EN sovereignty is not granted freely by a member or king of the *síd*. Rather symbols of it are obtained through the taking of the three gifts by the good king. In order to justify the removing of the gifts, the *síd* must be depicted in hostile terms, the former owner of the gifts had no right to them as he was not a just and rightful king. This puts him in line with Conaire's unjust judgement in TBDD whose downfall started after that and is in contrast to Cormac's good and generous behaviour in ESTB.

A very important motif of the text seems to be the procuring of the so called "three wonderful gifts" from the *síd*. Their importance is underlined by the fact that they are mentioned twice in the text, namely in lines 90 to 92 and again in the last paragraph, lines 192 to 194 which- apart from the possibility of its being a scribal error or evidence for mechanical compilation as held by Thurneysen- suggests that the redactor of the text might have wanted to be quite sure that this point was not lost on his audience. When they are first mentioned, it is stated that (in Meyer's translation):

"These are the three things, which were found in it, viz:
the mantle of Loegaire in Armagh, and the crown of Briun
in Connaught, and the shirt of Dunlaing in Leinster in Kil-
dare."

Wonderful gifts are mentioned on other occasions in Irish literature. In *Airne Fíngéin*²⁷ an example of a comparable set of treasures is described to Fingéin by a fairy woman on a Samain evening:

"Téora prímaicde Érenn innocht fofrítha 7 ro foillsigthea .i. Cathbarr
Bríain a sídaib Crúachan, Bréo mac Smetrach cerd Óengusa meic úmóir
dorigne [...]. Fidchell Crimthain Niad Náir [...]. Mind Lógairi mac
Luchtai Lánfind [...]. (The three chief artefacts of Ireland were found
and revealed tonight, namely the Crown of Bríón from the *síd* of
Crúachan, it is Bréo mac Smetrach, the craftsman of Óengus mac Úmóir

²⁵ Ed. Kelly 1976, par. 14, p.6.

²⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, p. 150.

²⁷ Ed. Vendryes, 1975, chapt 5. C.f Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, p. XXX. See also O'Curry, *On Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, vol III, p.201-2.

who made it [...]. The Fidchell of Crimthan Niad Náir [...]. The Diadem of Lóegaire mac Luchtai Lámfind. ”

Even though the crown of Brión appears in EN and the above mentioned instance, EN lists the mantle of Loegaire in Armagh, but in the Fingen-episode given by Stokes Loegaire is stated to have been given a diadem.

Instead of the third item named in *Airne Fíngein*, the chess-set of Crimthann, EN lists a different one, the shirt of Dunlaing, replacing an object connected with Ulster with a Leinster one.

Further variation can be encountered in a quote from the Rennes Dindshenchus, which can be found in Bromwich²⁸: Crimthann, too, is visited by a fairy woman who bestows a gilt chariot, a golden fidchell, a mantle "and many treasures also"²⁹. Crimthann's fidchell, also mentioned in *Airne Fíngein*, appears here, too. A mantle is mentioned in both *Airne Fíngein* and the Rennes Dindshenchus but not in connection with the same person, so that this might be coincidental. Further items Bromwich found include "Cormac's Cup, and his Branch, and his Sword"³⁰ or in another source Crimthann's sword and his cup of plenty³¹.

Bromwich argues for a common Celtic inheritance of wonderful gifts, comparing the Irish items to Thirteen Treasures of Wales, the "Tri Thlws ar Ddeg"³². Since only three specific treasures are mentioned in the examples quoted above, except in the Rennes Dindshenchus, which mentions a number of unspecified further objects given to Crimthann, it is hard to determine whether there is a specific group of Irish treasures from which the authors drew their material. It rather seems as if a motif of three gifts existed, obtained with the help of- a fairy woman in particular. The exact objects may then have been supplied by the redactors of a text according to their particular aim. It seems likely that the author or redactor of this text intended to promote the existence of these three gifts and their origin from Ráth Crúachain. For the mantle of Loegaire and the shirt of Dunlaing both secular and ecclesiastical connections are given: in addition to adding to the importance of the monastic centres of Armagh and Kildare, they underline the importance of the Uí Néill via Lóegaire in Ulster and the dynasty of Uí

²⁸Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. CXXXIV.

²⁹ibid.

³⁰ ibid.; drawn from Windisch, *Irische Texte* III. p. 202: The Irish Ordeals.

³¹ ibid.; from Gwynn *Metrical Dinshenchas* III, pp. 120 ff.

³²Bromwich, p. CXXXII.

Dúnlainge in Leinster³³. The latter ruled Leinster roughly from the mid eighth century to 1042 and also provided abbots and bishops of Kildare³⁴. They were divided into three segments, one of which, the Uí Fáeláin, were to be found around Naas³⁵. After the battle of Clontarf they became less powerful and the Uí Chinnsealaigh took over in Leinster. The question to address here therefore seems to be: does mentioning of a regal object for this dynasty mean that they were in power when EN was composed? And were good relations between the three dynasties or good relations to them to be promoted?

The crown of Brión seems to be a symbol of worldly power supposedly giving legitimacy to one of the branches of the Uí Briúin dynasty of Connacht who are said to descend from their 5th century eponymous ancestor. They divided into the Uí Briúin Seola (whose last ruler was slain in 683), the Uí Briúin Aí with their dominant segment Síl Muiredaig (who were in kingship till 956) until the third string of the Uí Briúin Breifne took over.³⁶

The dynasty gained importance in the seventh century³⁷ against the competing dynasty of the Uí Fiachrach and superceded them in the eighth century. Concerning their origins, however Donnchadh Ó Corráin states: “Uí Briúin emerged in the seventh century, obscure in origin, but later fitted out with a fine pedigree and prehistory.”³⁸ It seems possible that the appearance of the crown in our story serves a similar purpose.

Given the geographical and political distribution one possibility is that these gifts are designed to establish three of the main players in TBC. Ulster and Connacht appear on the stage, likewise Leinster. Munster is left out but this may be due to the Leth Cuinn orientation of the text.

IV. *Echtra Nerai* in the context of *Echtraí* and *Immrama*

EN is firmly embeded in the context of other *Echtraí*, not only because of its title but also by appearing among the *Echtraí* in both Irish tale lists. In fact of the fourteen titles

³³ Ó Coileáin (1990:439, fn) writes that Padraig Ó Riain suggested these gifts to have aetiological function for the dynasties of Uí Néill, Uí Briúin and Uí Dúnlainge.

³⁴ Byrne, *Irish Kings and Highkings*, p150ff. Byrne implies that at the beginning of the 9th century relations between parts of the Uí Briúin and Uí Dúnlainge as well as with the Uí Néill segment of Clann Chólmáin seemed to have been quite good. Fínsneachta Uí Dúnlainge accepted the reign of the Uí Briúin king Muiges Mac Tommaltaig of Connacht in 806.

³⁵ Ó Corráin 1972: 26.

³⁶ Ó Corráin 1972, 9-10.

³⁷ Mac Niocaill 1972:115,117.

³⁸ *ibid.* Ó’Corráin, “Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland“, p.30.

mentioned in List A and the ten in List B, in which it is called *Echtra Nero maic Niatain*, only this, *Echtra Con Culaind* (*Echtra Chonculaind* in B) and *Echtra Crimthaind Nia Náir* (*Echtra Chrimthoinn Niad Nair*) are to be found in both. Yet there are some significant differences between EN and other texts, or Echtraí in particular such as *Echtrae Chonlai*. In order to give a generalized definition of the genre, Dumville wrote:

"One can agree, then, with Kuno Meyer that the word *echtrae* 'specially denotes expeditions and sojourns in Fairy-land'. Other-world music, a fairy-woman, the magic branch, and the journey to the otherworld, not to mention the description of the pleasures of this supernatural land, are all features of the *echtraí* and occur variously elsewhere in the Irish secular literary tradition."³⁹

EN displays some of these features but deviates in others as will be pointed out in the following section.

Nerae is able to enter the fairy realm after he has proved to be a hero in the captive-episode. Being a hero, or in the case of *Echtrae Chonlai* being of supreme physical beauty, also facilitates the protagonists' entry into the otherworld in *Echtrae Laegairi* and *Serglige Con Culainn*. Yet the latter three are summoned because of their particular qualities by members of the *áes síde*. In contrast to this, Nerae enters the *síd* of his own accord, not in order to be of assistance to the *síd* folk but to avenge the killing of his people. So his starting point is different from that of the other characters mentioned. He consequently is not treated as a guest of honour but reduced to menial duties. In line with this, the king is not depicted in a favourable light but makes a number of bad decisions. This is in stark contrast to the king in *Echtrae Chonlai*, who is described as a prototypical good king: "Co-t:ngairim do Maig Meld inid rí Bóadag bithsuthain cen gol cen maírg inna thír ó gabais flaith."⁴⁰ McCone translates this as: "I summon him to the Plain of Delights in which Bóadag the everlasting is king without grief, without woe in his land since he assumed sovereignty". The Christian connection is further strengthened by the woman's words in *Echtrae Chonnlai*, which states:

"do:dechad-sa a tírib be, i-nna:bí bás na peccath na imarmus. Do:melom

³⁹Dumville, "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition", p. 74.

⁴⁰McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, p. 121, par. 5.

fleda búana cen frithgnam. Caínchomrac lenn cen debuid. Síd mar i:taam,
conid de suidib no-n ainmnigther áes síde.“⁴¹

McCone translates this:

"I have come from (the) lands of (the) living, in which there is neither death nor sin nor transgression (/original sin). We consume (ever)lasting feasts without service (exertion). (There is) harmony without strife. (It is) great peace in which we are so that it is from these we are called people of peace“

This points to the view that "*Echtrae Chonlai* is an early Irish ‘paradise regained’, a thoroughly Christian composition inspired by the Bible“ as McCone puts it⁴².

A comparable passage can be found in *Immram Brain* where the otherworld is also described as free from sin in clearly Christian terms.⁴³

A general characteristic of the otherworld realm is the inherent happiness and immortality of its inhabitants mentioned especially in *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonnlai*. In *Immram Brain* it is also stated that there is no sickness or “debility from wounds“⁴⁴. Neither of this is the case in EN. Here no perpetual feasts take place⁴⁵, there is no unusual happiness discernible in the inhabitants of the kingdom of the *síd* and not only is there no debility from wounds but two of its inhabitants have been wounded on purpose, namely the blind and the lame, in order to be trusted with guarding the king’s diadem. Not only are the king’s subjects not described as participating in feasts all the time, but no pleasant diversions are mentioned at all.

A further characteristic feature in *echtraí* and *immrama* is the description of the otherworld’s brightness. We encounter descriptions of gold and silver trees and halls⁴⁶, of chystal ships⁴⁷ and multicoloured treasures⁴⁸. In *Immram Brain* it is also suggested

⁴¹McCone, p. 121, par. 3.

⁴²McCone *Echtrae Chonnlai*:100ff. Compare also McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 82.

⁴³Mac Mathúna, *Immram Brain*, p. 54, §44: “We are from the beginning of creation without age, [...] the sin has not reached us“.

⁴⁴MacMathúna, *Immram Brain*, p. 48, § 10.

⁴⁵ cf. for instance Echra Condle, p. 133: ‘We consume (ever)lasting feasts without service (exertion)’ or M. Dillon, “The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn“ p.65: ‘There is a vat of intoxicating mead which is served to the household; it stays ever -a lasting custom- so that it is always full.’

⁴⁶cf. “The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn“, p. 63.: ‘A bridle of gold on every horse, and that is not all: pillars of silver and of glass in the house in which he is.’ and p. 64: ‘... a silver tree on which the sun shines, like gold is its brilliance.’

⁴⁷e.g. *Echtrae Chonnlai*, p. 188: ‘... in my ship of crystal,...’.

⁴⁸e.g. *Immram Brain*, p. 48: ‘Riches, treasures of every colour ...’ or in “The Wasting Sickness“ p. 64: ‘The stead of each bed is copper, white pillars gilded; the candle which stands before them is a gleaming precious stone.’; p. 66.: ‘I saw gaily clad warriors at play with weapons: I saw coloured raiment fit only for princes.’.

that trees bear blossoms and fruit at the same time⁴⁹. As a whole, the narrative abounds in the use of adjectives of colour, conveying an atmosphere of multicoloured beauty and happiness.

In contrast to this, there are none of these descriptions in the *síd* of EN. In fact colour is hardly mentioned at all in EN. In line 7 it is stated: "Ba mor iarum a dorchotai na haidqi sin, ogus a grandatai, ..." which is translated as "Great was the darkness of that night and its horror, ...". As no further images of colour or atmosphere are added to this, this determines the readers impression of the situation. In addition to the crown of Brian the only other instance of colour being mentioned in this otherworld is that in line 99 among the summer fruit *buiderad* is named. Even though the exact name of this plant is not known⁵⁰, the name seems to incorporate the adjective *buide*, 'yellow'. This seems like a faint echo of the golden splendor mentioned in other voyage literature (see above).

Among the summer fruit Nera takes back to Rath Cruachan, there are some belonging to different seasons: "Dobert iarum crem leis ocus sobairche ocus buiderath" (lines 95-96). Meyer's original translation of this was: "Then he took wild garlic with him and primrose and golden fern."

In his discussion of the significance of these fruit⁵¹, Carey has pointed out that *crem* was associated with Easter and *buiderad* with May. *Sobairce* 'primrose' generally appears at about the same season. Therefore these fruits are in contrast to the season in which the EN is set. Only in an otherworld which is subject to a different time scheme from ours could flowers of spring and summer be found at Samain. So here the same disparity of seasons is at work that is also described in *Immram Brain*, where a tree can bear blossoms and fruit at the same time. Further compelling evidence for this temporal disparity can be found in the cauldron episode (see above). The concept of temporal disparity is also employed in *Immram Brain*: When Bran returns to Ireland after what seemed a year's absence, he is told that his fate is already legendary. So many generations have lived since he left.⁵²

⁴⁹ p. 53: 'A wood with blossom and fruit ...'.

⁵⁰ Meyer's original translation was 'golden fern' but this was emended to 'buttercups' later (RC 11, p.210). Carey in "Sequence and Causation", p. 72 also mentions a comparison of Cú Chulainn's hair to 'buiderad' on which the sun shines, on a summer day in the middle of May'.

⁵¹Carey, "Sequence and Causation", p. 72.

⁵²Mac Mathúna, p. 57; §§ 62 and 64.

An additional feature that can be found in EN as well as in other texts is the renouncement of Ireland by the protagonist who decides to stay in the otherworld instead. For Nerae it is said: “For-fagbud Nero *tra cona muinntir ina síd* 7 ní tainic as cose, acus níe thicfo co brath.” (lines 194-196) In Meyer’s translation this is: “Nerae was left with his people in the *síd*, and has not come out until now, nor will he come till Doom.”

The same situation arises in *The Adventure of Laeghaire Mac Crimthainn*⁵³, *Echtra Chonlai*⁵⁴ and *Immram Brain*⁵⁵. The implication seems to be here, that the protagonists leave our world for a better one. This tradition is carried on in EN, too.

A further interesting fact in connection with otherworld pleasures can be encountered in EN. Even though, apart from the presence of the crown and the fruit mentioned, no special pleasures of this *síd* are mentioned, Nera praises its beauty on his second return to Rath Cruachan. Meyer translates lines 147-149 of the original text as:

”I was in fair lands“, said Nera, “with great treasures and precious things, with plenty of garments and food, and of wonderful treasures.“

None of these, however, have been mentioned while he actually was in the *síd*. Even though it is possible that its beauties were just not described to the reader at an earlier stage, it is more likely that even though the otherworld is not described in particularly flattering terms here, evidence from other texts suggests that a eulogy was the proper way to describe the otherworld for somebody returning from a sojourn there.

Examples for this can be found in *Immram Brain*⁵⁶, *Echtra Chonlai*⁵⁷, *The Adventure of Laeghaire Mac Crimthainn*⁵⁸ and *The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn*⁵⁹.

⁵³Jackson, “The Adventure of Laeghaire Mac Crimthainn“, p. 386: “After that he turned from them into the fairy mound again; [...]; and he has not come out yet.“

⁵⁴p. 195-196: “Thereupon Connlac took a leap from them so that there was an escape (to safety) in the pure ship. They saw them [going] from them. [...]t and they were not seen thereafter.“

⁵⁵p. 66: “Then Bran related all of his adventures from the beginning until that time to the people of the gathering, [...] and thereafter he bade them well, and his adventures are not known from that time on.“

⁵⁶p. 47: “there is an island far away around which sea-horses glisten; a fair course against the little white-sided wave, four legs hold it up.// It is a delight to the eyes, a wonderful arrangement, the plain on which the hosts play games;...”

⁵⁷p. 132-4: “I have come from (the) lands of (the) living, in which there is neither death nor sin nor transgression (/original sin). We consume (ever)lasting feasts without service (exertion). (there is) harmony without strife.“

⁵⁸p. 385: “Fine plaintive fairy music, going from kingdom to kingdom, drinking mead from bright vessels, talking with the one you love.// We mingle a set of men of yellow gold on chessboards of white bronze; we have drinking of clear mead along with a proud armed warrior.“

The implication of what has been said seems to be that in EN, the intention is not to describe the otherworld as a sinless paradise but rather as the opponent of the EN's protagonists. But in spite of this, some of the 'traditional' positive features of the otherworld do appear, too, possibly because they belonged to the genre. They, however, create a tension between positive attributes of the *síd* in other echtraí and the negative attitude prevailing in EN.

V. *Echtra Nerai* in the context of the *rémscéla* of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*⁶⁰

In addition to being part of the Irish tale lists, the title of the EN also appears in the lists of fore-fores to TBC given in *Do Fallsigud Tána Bó Cualnge* in the Book of Leinster. It includes: 1. *De Gabáil in tSída*; 2. *Aislinge in Maic Óic*; 3. *De Chophur in dá Mucado*; 4. *Táin Bó Regamna*; 5. *Echtra Nera*; 6. *Compert Conchobair*; 7. *Tochmarc Feirbre*; 8. *Compert Con Culaind*; 9. *Táin Bó Flidais*; 10. *Tochmarc Emire*.⁶¹

Backhaus analyses the ten titles of the fore-fores provided in the list and divides them into titles 1-5 belonging into a group of tales featuring super-human and non-human characters, namely the Túatha Dé Danann and the two bulls; and titles 6-10 featuring human characters, who are to appear in TBC itself.

In his discussion of the list, he points out that the tales in those two groups deal with parallel topics which lead up to the climax of TBC. Thus titles 1. and 6. deal with youth and acquiring property. 2. and 7. feature marriage; 3. and 8. birth and transformations; 4. and 9. cattle raids and provisions and finally both 5., *Echtra Nerai*, and 10., *Tochmarc Emire*, deal with journeys to the otherworld and marriage⁶². The significance of the EN in this context is that the two bulls are brought into opposition. The final fight of TBC is thus prepared just as the one between Cú Chulainn and Fergus in the human world.

Also EN and *Táin Bó Regamna*⁶³ add to each other as *rémscéla* to TBC. In TBR, the Morrigan, when driving a cow through the Plain of Murthemne, threatens Cú Chulainn

⁵⁹pp. 63-64. Lógé says after his return: "I came in joyous sport, to a place that is wonderful though not unknown, to a mound where scores of companies were assembled, where I found long-haired Labraid.// I found him seated on the mound, with thousands of weapons, his hair yellow of lovely shades, a golden ball clasping it."

⁶⁰henceforth TBC.

⁶¹Backhaus, "Rémscéla Tána Bó Cualnge", p.22.

⁶²Backhaus, pp. 24-26.

⁶³henceforth TBR.

who opposes her and she states that he will die when the cow's bull calf will be a year old and that the same calf will cause TBC⁶⁴. From this point onwards, EN supplies us with additional information: we are informed about the birth of the bull calf, its leaving the *síd* and provoking a fight with the Findbennach. This is stated to be the reason for Medb to utter her oath as described in lines 184- 189 of EN:

“I swear by the gods that my people swear by, that I shall not lie down, nor sleep on down or flockbed, nor shall I drink butter-milk nor nurse my side, nor drink red ale nor white, nor shall I taste food, until I see those two kine fighting before my face:“

Ó Flaithearta makes the important observation that no reason for TBC like the pillow-talk is mentioned in the Book of Leinster⁶⁵. He argues therefore that EN, together with *De Chophur in dá Muccida*, the tale about the origin of the two bulls, provides an alternative reason for the beginning of the *Táin Bó Cuilgne*.

He also makes an interesting statement concerning the list of Cú Chulainn's taboos: he argues that the list of *gessa* was added to the original text in later times because such a list is not to be found anywhere else in the literature, not even in the list of Cú Chulainn's taboos mentioned in the Book of Leinster.⁶⁶ These may conceivably be later additions to the text.

In contrast to TBC, where Ulster defeats the Connacht army and the Bull of Cuaile defeats the Findbennach, in this text Connacht wins every battle: the Connachta destroy the *síd* and the Findbennach kills the the Bull of Cuailgne's calf in an opening round for the big final fight.

Taking together the Connacht setting of the text and its in every respect positive outcome for the Connachta, a Connacht background for EN seems plausible. If the repeated mentioning to the three gifts is taken into consideration this seems to point to a possible Uí Briúin background.

VI. Conclusion

Echtra Nerai displays some features of a 'prototypical' echtrae: the hero's visit to the otherworld, temporal disparity with the world of the humans, the hero's eulogy of the *síd* on his return.

⁶⁴ Ó Flaithearta, pp. 159-160.

⁶⁵ Ó Flaithearta, pp. 168-169.

Yet the splendor and joy usually associated with the otherworld are absent from this story; a rather grim atmosphere pervades. While some texts that we have (*Echtrae Chonlai*, *Immram Brain*) give a (re-)interpretation in terms of a Christian paradise, we here encounter an otherworld opposed to the protagonists. The humans prevail, seemingly aided by the inability of the *síd*'s king as opposed to the right and just kingship displayed by Ailill. They therefore gain a number of gifts from the *síd*, especially the 'crown of Brión', which can be read as a symbol of legitimacy.

EN appears to be different from other *echtrae* due to the fact that its aim is to provide a setting for the acquisition of the three gifts mentioned; an *echtrae* into a *síd*, whether in form of an already existing story or not, may have been chosen because a motif of regalia obtained from the *síd* existed.

While the main bulk of the text appears to point firmly towards this aim in structural terms, it seems possible that the captive episode can be read as a negative paradigm which may or may not belong to the original body. Those parts referring to Táin Bó Cuailgne could conceivably be later additions in order to link an appropriate story to the Táin.

The elements of the Táin Bó Regamna and the oath Medb takes prepare for the TBC, to which both stories are *rémscéla*. The fight between the Findbennach and the bullcalf seems to foreshadow the final fight in TBC but unlike there, in *Echtra Nerai Connacht* is the overall winner. *Echtra Nerai*, then, appears to provide us with a legitimacy claim inserted into an *echtrae*, composed from the point of view of Connacht.

VII. Literature

Backhaus, N.: "The Structure of the List of *Rémscéla Tána Bó Cualgni* in the Book of Leinster", *CMCS*, 19, 1990, pp. 19-26.

Bromwich, R.: *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961.

Byrne, F.J.: *Irish Kings and Highkings*. Repr. London: Batsford Ltd 1987.

Carey, J.: "Sequence and Causation in *Echtra Nera*", *Ériu*, 39, 1988, pp. 67-74.

Carey, J.: "The Rhetoric of *Echtra Chonlae*", *CMCS*, 30, 1995, pp. 41-65.

Dillon, M.: "The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn", *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 7, 1951-3, pp. 47-88.

⁶⁶Ó'Flaitherta, p. 169.

- Dumville, D.N.: "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition", *Ériu*, 27, 1976, pp. 73-94.
- Jackson, K.: "The Adventure of Laeghaire", *Speculum*, 17, 1972, pp. 377-389.
- Kelly, F.: *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988.
- Mac Cana, P.: *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980.
- McCone, K.: *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990.
- McCone, K.: *Echtrae Chonnlai*. Maynooth: An Sagart, 2000.
- MacMathúna, S.: *Immram Brain, Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985.
- Mac Niocaill, G.: *Ireland before the Vikings*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Maier, B.: *Lexikon der keltischen Religion und Kultur*, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1994.
- Meyer, K.: "Echtra Nerai", *Révue Celtique*, 10, 1889, pp. 212-228.
- Ó Cathasaigh, T.: "The Semantics of 'Síd'. *Éigse* 17, 1977. pp. 137-150.
- Ó Coileáin, S.: "Echtra Nerai and its analogues", *Celtica*, 21, 1990, pp. 155-176.
- Ó Corráin, D.: *Ireland before the Normans*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Ó Corráin, D.: "Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland", *The Oxford illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster, Oxford: OUP, 1989, pp. 1-53.
- O'Curry, E.: *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, repr. New York: Lemma Publ.Corp., 1971.
- Ó Duilearga, S.: "Nera and the Dead Man", *Féilscríbhinn Eoin Mhic Neill*, ed. J. Ryan, repr. Dublin: Four Courts, 1995, pp. 522-551.
- Ó Flaithearta, M.: "Echtra Nerai, Táin Bó Regamna und ihr Verhältnis zur Táin Bó Cuailgne", *Deutsche, Kelten und Iren*, ed. H.L.C. Tristram, Hamburg: Buske, 1990, pp. 155-176.
- Oskamp, H.P.A.: "Echtra Condla", *Études Celtiques*, 14, 1974, pp. 207- 228.
- Pokorny, J. : "Conle's Abenteuerliche Fahrt", *ZCP* 17, 1928.
- Rees, A. and B.: *Celtic Heritage*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1961, pp. 300-305.
- Sjoestedt, M.-L.: *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, London: Methuen, 1949.
- Stokes, W.: *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, Oxford: Claredon Press, 1890.
- Thurneysen, R.: *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, Halle: Niemeyer, 1921.
- Vendryes, J.: *Airne Fíngéin*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975.

Watson, A.: "A structural analysis of Echtra Nerai", *Études Celtiques*, 23, 1986, pp. 129-142.