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The deaths of Baldr and Fergus mac Roig

Zusammenfassung: Die mit dem in *Cath Maige Tuired* geschilderten Tod Balars vergleichbare altnordische Geschichte der Tötung Baldrs weist noch auffälligere Ähnlichkeiten mit der kurzen frühirischen Erzählung des Todes von Fergus mac Roig auf. Dieser Aufsatz argumentiert, dass der Tod von Fergus und drei weitere vom Verfasser in ZcP 69 behandelte Fälle sich in zwei Gruppen aufteilen: Einerseits wird ein einäugiger Riese (Balar, Polyphemos) von einem listigen Gegner (Lug resp. Odysseus) geblendet und andererseits wird ein sehender Gott (Baldr) bzw. Held (Fergus) von einem blinden Gott (Hǫðr) bzw. ‚Seher‘ (Lugaid) auf Anweisung seines hinterhältigen, sehenden Bruders (Loki resp. Ailill) umgebracht. Daraus lassen sich angesichts eines neuerdings von Riccardo GINEVRA (2023) auf die Schicksale von Balar und Baldr bezogenen altindischen Mythos zwei verschiedene aber doch zum Teil ähnliche und daher später gewissermaßen aufeinander einwirkende urindogermanische Mythen erschließen.

In a previous article (McCONE 2022: 188–93) indebted to a study by GINEVRA (2020), the death of the one-eyed giant Balar from a slingshot of the ritually (and temporarily) one-eyed (and one-legged) Lug in the Irish saga *Cath Maige Tuired* was directly compared with the fatal piercing of the deity Baldr by a branch of mistletoe cast at him by the blind god Hǫðr at the instigation of his visually unimpaired trickster brother Loki in the Norse *Gylfaginning*. According to this, the gods were casting all manner of objects at Baldr, as he stood in the assembly(-place) (*á þingum*), to test his invulnerability after oaths not to harm him had been exacted from a wide range of elements, creatures etc., but Loki went off in vexation and got the goddess Frigg to reveal that a shoot of mistletoe had seemed too young for an oath.

And Loki took the mistletoe (*mistiltein*) and pulled it up and went to the assembly (*til þings*). And Hǫðr was standing far outside the ring of men, because he was blind (*blindr*). And Loki said to him: ‘Why don’t you shoot at Baldr?’ He answered: ‘Because I cannot see where Baldr is and, furthermore, I am weaponless (*vápnlauss*)’. Then Loki said: ‘Do, then, as the others and grant Baldr honour like the others. I shall direct you to where he is standing (*ek mun vísa þér til hvar hann stendr*). Shoot at him with this branch’. Hǫðr took the mistletoe and shot at Baldr at Loki’s direction (*at tilvísun Loka*). The shot flew through him and he fell to the ground dead. And that is the greatest mishap (*þat mest óhapp*) that has happened among gods and men.

(*Gylfaginning* §49; LORENZ 1984: 548 and 551)

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An equivalence has been claimed between Lug's ritual combination of a seeing eye with a blind one and the fully sighted Loki's combination with a totally blind brother (McCONE 2022: 191). However, this comparison failed to note a still closer medieval Irish parallel entailing the killing of a hero by a weapon cast by a blind character at his fully sighted brother's deceptive direction. The introduction (§1) to the Ulster hero Fergus' brief death-tale *Aided Fergusa maic Roig* (MEYER 1906: 32–5) depicts his exile in Connacht under its king Ailill and his wife Medb along with three thousand other Ulstermen in the aftermath of the controversial murder of Uisniu's sons. It concludes by noting 'and his companion (*fer cumtha*) in Ailill's household was Lugaid the blind seer/poet (*dall-éices*), i.e. that Lugaid was a brother of Ailill's (*bráthair do Oilill*). The action begins (§2) with the host 'occupying a great encampment, i.e. games and races there (*dūnad mōr leo .i. cluichi 7 cēti ann*)' by the lake on Mag Aí, a setting reminiscent of an *óenach* 'assembly' (see BINCHY 1941: 102) and the Norse *þing* where the gods assembled above for their sport with Baldr. One day they all went into the lake to bathe and, at Ailill's prompting, Fergus too went down (*luid-som síis*) (§2).

Medb then went until she was on his breast with her crotch around him (*luid Medb didiu co raibi for a bruindi-sium 7 a gabla ime*), and he circled the lake then and jealousy seized Ailill (*7 rogab ét Ailill*). Medb then came up (*doluid didiu sías Medb*, §2). 'It is beautiful what the buck, o Lugaid, and the doe do in the lake (*Is álaind a ndogní an dam, a Lugaid, 7 an éilit isin loch*)' said Ailill. 'Why aren't they killed (*Cid nach gontar*)?' said Lugaid, and he had never issued a missing shot. 'You cast a shot at them for us!' said Ailill. 'Turn my face toward them (2sg. *impō m'agaid cuctha*)', said Lugaid, 'and give me a spear (2pl. *tabraid gāi dam*)!'. Fergus was washing himself in the lake with his breasts/chest facing them, and his chariot was brought to Ailill until it was beside him, and Lugaid cast a shot from the spear until it was (sticking) out through his back. 'The shot has hit!' said Lugaid. 'That is true', said everyone. 'The breasts/limits of Fergus are (there) (*atāt bruindi Fergusa*)' (§3). 'That is a pity (*trūag sin*)', said Lugaid, 'my foster-brother and companion's killing by me for no fault (of his own) (*mo chomalta 7 m'fer cumtha do marbad dam-sa cin cinaid*)'. 'Bring my chariot to me!' said Ailill. The whole host goes in flight, every man of both the Connachtmen and the exiles towards land. Fergus removes the spear and casts it after Ailill so that it went through the hunting hound that was between the two rear shafts of the chariot (*etir dā fertas in carpait*). Fergus then went out of the lake and stretches himself on the hill beside the lake, and his soul went from him immediately and his resting place is still there (§4). (MEYER 1906: 32–5)

Thus, with an inversion of human and animal victims, the blind Lugaid intended to kill a pair of deer but actually killed Fergus, whereas the dying Fergus intended to kill Ailill in revenge but actually killed his (deer-)hunting hound. Ailill's deliberately misleading reference to a buck/stag and a doe/hind spurred the blind Lugaid to ask to be given a spear and pointed towards a victim that he could not see but who turned out to be his bosom friend Fergus. The blind Hqdr, by contrast, knew the identity of the target, who was supposed to remain unharmed, but was excluded from

the fun by the lack of a guide or a weapon until his brother talked him into joining in and gave him an innocuous seeming branch that would prove fatal to Baldr. In the Irish tales ‘the *blindness* is essential’ (ROOTH 1961: 113) but an ability to see would hardly have enabled Hqdr to recognise the threat posed by the mistletoe. Loki’s contribution, then, was to persuade him to take part, provide him with a projectile and compensate for his blindness with directions. In short, Hqdr was aware of his target’s identity and meant him no harm, whereas Lugaid meant to kill his target and was unaware that it was not deer but his own foster-brother. Notwithstanding such relatively minor divergences, there is a significant core of circumstantial agreement between these two medieval narratives: the death of a major god/hero from a projectile cast right through him by a blind god/man on the basis of the encouragement and orientation supplied by his crafty clearsighted brother.

If mere coincidence is excluded as implausible, inheritance from a common source or borrowing, whether direct or by diffusion, are left as alternative ways of accounting for this striking Hiberno-Norse correspondence. An Old Irish date for *Aided Fergusa* makes borrowing from the Norse legend of Baldr quite unlikely and it does not seem sufficiently prominent to be convincing as the source of a major Norse legend for which there is, moreover, persuasive iconographic evidence dating from the 5th to 7th century AD (see GINEVRA 2023: 80). That would limit the basic possibilities for the two-brother variant to borrowing (in either direction) at a rather early stage of Celto-Germanic contact or separate descent from at least a Western IE prototype.

THURNEYSSEN’S (1921: 575) view of *Aided Fergusa maic Roig* (AF) was that ‘the meagre narrative is based upon Longas mac n-Uislenn (ch. 25) with motifs borrowed from Tāin Bō Fraich (ch. 16)’ (TBF). The death-tale of a closely related character¹ was designated *Echtra Fergusa maic Léte* (EF) by THURNEYSSEN (1921: 539) and believed by him to have been ‘invented in the law schools about the middle of the eleventh century’ (BINCHY 1952: 33). In the introduction to his edition of EF, BINCHY (1952: 34) concludes ‘on linguistic grounds ... that Thurneysen’s date for the composition of the prose saga is at least three centuries too late’, thereby making it ‘an early and authentic member of the Ulidian cycle’ (BINCHY 1952: 34).

In a review of THURNEYSSEN’S (1921) *Heldensage*, SCHULTZ (1923: 303–4) made the following criticisms of the former’s treatment of *Aided Fergusa maic Roig*:

‘Here he omitted from his summary (the detail) that by the lake of Mag Āi there was “a great camp with games and the pleasures of an annual fair”. That is a feature of decisive significance, since the spear-cast of the blind Lugaid at Fergus is to be compared with Hqdr’s at Baldr ... But

¹ ‘And if outside the present saga very little is recorded of Fergus mac Léti, this may well be due to his being a double of Fergus mac Roich’ (BINCHY 1952: 34; THURNEYSSEN 1921: 539 voices doubts).

the branch of mistletoe hits Baldr on the occasion of contests held in a place of peace; so it is important that the Celtic counterpart also mentions the games and the annual fair. Thurneysen, of course, takes a completely different line ... However, Longas mac n-Uislenn only contains the antecedents of Fergus' exile in Connaught with Ailill and Medb, and Lugaid dall éces "the blind poet" goes alreday beyond this and is an extremely central figure. Recognition of this and the connection with Baldr makes it no longer possible to "explain" the "Death of Fergus mac Roig" from the "Táin bō Fraich"; rather this Táin is just the diluted expansion of a saga that also underlies the death of Fergus and, indeed, also that of Fergus mac Lête (ch. 62, p. 541 ff.); for they are both the same figure'.

This is not the place to add to the discussion of the genesis of *Táin Bó Froich*.² Suffice it to say that the three tales in question (*AF*, *TBF*, *EF*) had all probably taken more or less their extant form in the Old Irish period and involve a female in a crucial role³ (as the protagonist's lover in *AF* and *TBF*, but as his provoked handmaid in *EF*) as well as an attack upon a hero in water by a man (*AF*), a water-beast (*EF*) or both (*TBF*)⁴ with fatal results for the two Ferguses but not for Fróech.⁵

ROOTH⁶ (1961: 90–161) argued that rather late diffusion and borrowing were a major factor in the formation of 'the Baldr myth' and proposed considering the part of it summarised and cited above in the light of

'further material which has not previously been discussed in Baldr-Loki research and which indicates that British material has provided the source ... This is the Celtic material treated by Carney [1955: 1–56] ... The Celtic variants of are of particular interest to the Old Norse myth of Baldr because they contain the motif of *the unlucky shot* and *the blind slayer* (javelin thrower)

² See THURNEYSSEN 1921: 285–6, CARNEY 1955: 1–65, and MEID 1967/1974: vii–xvi.

³ A recurring feature in the death-tales of Ulster heroes, as pointed out by MELIA (1977/8: 39–40): 'They can be simplified to two basic outlines ... I call one plot "Woman-Revenge" ... 1. Someone's wife is slept with illicitly. 2. The injured man takes revenge by killing the culprit [often by proxy]'.

⁴ The situation is rather complex in *TBF* (§§15–18 of MEID 1967/1974). Ailill, wishing to avoid the dishonour of killing a guest directly (presumably also to be understood as his reason for duping his brother Lugaid into killing Fergus in *AF*), encourages Fróech to show off his swimming prowess in a river. When he is attacked by a water-beast, Ailill's daughter Findabair (whom Fróech was wooing) goes to his aid with a sword. Ailill tries to thwart her attempt to save him by throwing a five-pronged spear (*sleg*), which goes through her hair but is caught by Fróech, cast back and goes through Ailill's clothes. Findabair then gets out of the water, leaving the sword with Fróech, who then decapitates the beast and brings it to the shore.

⁵ Although it was a rather close call and Fróech needed urgent attention, finally being taken off by his supernatural mother's women to be fully healed in the *síd* of Crúachain (§§19–20). MEID (1967/1974: xi), indeed, considers it 'possible that part one originally was a story of the *aided* type which was remodelled to allow the hero to participate in the great *Táin*'.

⁶ I am most grateful to Riccardo Ginevra for reading the first draft of this article and not only drawing my attention to Rooth's monograph on Loki but also kindly furnishing me with a scanned copy of it.

and the *lethal weapon made from a magic plant*. Of the greatest interest to this investigation is the tale of the Death of Fergus (Aided Fergusa) in which is told the motif of *the blind thrower tricked into killing his foster brother*.
(ROOTH 1961: 110–11)

CARNEY'S (1955: 14–15) translation of this was then reproduced by ROOTH (1961: 112), who went on to make the erroneous claim (1961: 113) 'that *both* the motif of the magic plant as a lethal weapon and the motif of the blind slayer were known in the Irish versions of the Death of Fergus' on the strength of a statement 'in *Silva Gadelica* [n. 25: '*Silva Gadelica* 2 p. 129'] that Ferchis (Fergus) was killed by Ael (Ailill) by means of a spear of "*hardened holly*", when the latter 'aimed at a stag and then unwittingly slew Ferchis the poet'. While this brief notice in *Agallam na Senórach* bears some similarity to Lugaid's fatal cast at Fergus when he thought he was aiming at deer, 'Ael mac Dergduibh' was definitely not Ailill mac Mágach/Mata and his victim 'Ferchis mac Comain, the poet',⁷ was quite different from Fergus mac Roig. So, although a couple of Irish narratives make a not obviously magical spit of holly with a fire-hardened tip responsible for loss of an eye (McCONE 2022: 193–4) or death, these do not include an account of Fergus' demise. Rooth casts her net of folkloristic and literary comparisons wide and makes valuable observations. That said, not only are her Hiberno- or Anglo-Norse correspondences, by and large, hardly close enough to put rather late direct borrowing beyond reasonable doubt but it has also 'not been possible to decide whether the Anglo-Saxon or the Celtic literature has been the source of the Old Norse Baldr myth. It seems as though both have influenced the Scandinavian tradition. Examples are on the one hand the Anglo-Saxon tradition of *Herebeald* and *Haeðcyn* and the word *Mistilteinn*, on the other hand in the Irish tradition the combination of *Balor-Lugh, the death of Fergus and the blind slayer; the misdirected weapon and the hardened holly*' (ROOTH 1961: 241).

It has been suggested (McCONE 2022: 194–5) that GINEVRA'S (2020) comparison between the aforementioned episodes featuring the etymologically (**b^heLH-* 'be white, shine'/**leug-* 'bend, break') related pairs Balar/Lug and Baldr/Loki may be extended to include, albeit without an etymological link, the ancient Greek pair Polyphemus/Odysseus.⁸ Further augmentation by the above account of Fergus' death at the hands of Ailill's apparently otherwise unattested brother Lugaid, almost

⁷ The saga *Cath Maige Mucrama* (ed. O DALY 1975: 38–63) opens with *Ailill Aulomm mac Moga Núadat ... rí Muman* (§1), a legendary king of Munster quite distinct from King Ailill (mac Mágach/Mata) of Connacht, and his sending for *Ferches mac Commáin éices ... Fáith side 7 fhénnid* (§3) 'Ferches son of Commán, a poet ... He was a seer and a *fian*-member'.

⁸ Given the virtual impossibility that Lug's blinding of the giant cyclops Balar derives from the episode of Odysseus and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey* (cf. McCONE 2020: 99), the only feasible way of connecting them seems to be via separate descent from a PIE prototype.

certainly a compound with Lug < **lugu-* as its first element (UHLICH 1993: 273–4),⁹ yields a quartet that falls naturally and obviously into two halves: two narratives featuring the blinding¹⁰ of a one-eyed and hence “semi-ocular” individual (the cyclopes Balar and Polyphemus) by a fully sighted trickster (Lug and Odysseus), and another two in which a fully sighted victim (Baldr and Fergus) was killed by the combined actions of a complementarily “semi-ocular” pair of brothers, one the fully blind perpetrator (Höðr and Lugaid) and the other his fully sighted manipulator (Loki and Ailill). The structural relationship between them is chiasmic as far as the key features of complete and partial vision are concerned: the first pattern features the blinding of a half-sighted giant by a weapon wielded by a full-sighted hero,¹¹ whereas the second features the killing of a full-sighted god/hero by a missile emanating from a half-sighted pair, one of whom was totally blind and duped into making the fatal cast by his visually unimpaired brother.

The evidence presented so far points to a PIE myth (I) of a one-eyed giant’s blinding by a god or hero with trickster traits and an apparently later variant (II, dating from WIE or a phase of Celto-Germanic contact) generated by inversion to the killing of a god or hero by the combined actions of an unwitting sightless and a crafty clearsighted brother. The fact that one of the two etymologically **b^helH-* ‘shining’ figures identified by Ginevra appears as the giant cyclops (Balar) and the other (Baldr) as the two brothers’ victim may reasonably be put down to subsequent interaction between myths I and II. A derivation of OIr. *cáech* ‘one-eyed’ and cognates from PIE **keh₂i-ko-* ‘blazing’ (McCONE 2022: 196–7) might be held to tip the balance of probability towards an original **b^helH-* named giant in myth I. Alternatively, it seems possible that a Celtic reflex **Balaros* originally belonging to myth II was shifted to myth I as a fitting name for a cyclops with a fiery eye.

That said, GINEVRA (2023) has introduced a further dimension by comparing narratives in which a woman plays a significant role, namely ‘the Indic myth of the wounded Sun’ and variant versions of the deaths of Balar and Baldr found in modern Irish folklore¹² and Saxo Grammaticus respectively. GINEVRA (2023: 71–2) draws attention to significant similarities shared by the already cited Norse myth of Baldr’s

9 Cf. ROOTH 1961: 114: ‘The name Lugaid for the blind javelin thrower takes us to another group of narratives of Lugh and Balar’.

10 The common denominator insofar as Polyphemus, unlike Balar, survived his blinding.

11 Lug’s cyclopism during the ritual of *corrguinecht*, which entailed hopping on one leg with one eye closed before his blinding of Balar (McCONE 2022: 188 and 190–1), was no more than a transient deviation from otherwise normal eyesight.

12 In the “Tory Island version” recorded by Curtin and published in 1894 (GINEVRA 2023: 67–8) Balar seeks to prevent his daughter from having issue because of a prophecy that he would die at the hands of his grandson (Lui = Lug). This motif of countering a warning of the danger posed by a daughter’s son is also found elsewhere, e.g. in the legend of Cyrus of Persia (Herodotus i, 107–10),

piercing, death and loss to Hel's domain with a Vedic myth which features 'a prominent god of light' having sexual relations with his daughter, the dawn, and being pierced 'with darkness' by the fire-god with the result that the sun falls from heaven and is hidden in darkness. A rescue mission is successful in this case but ultimately unsuccessful in Baldr's. The sexual element lacking in the Norse version is supplied by GINEVRA (2023: 69 and 75–8) from Saxo Grammaticus' largely euhemerised account (*Gesta Danorum* iii, 1–4) of the demi-god Balder's (Balderus = Baldr) slaying by the non-blind mortal Hother's (Hotherus = Hødr) magic sword in the wake of their rivalry for the hand of the latter's lovely foster-sister Nanna (Baldr's wife in *Gylfaginning* §49; LORENZ 1984: 549 and 552, 550 and 552). In Saxo's version, Hother's brother is not Loki and anyway plays no significant role in a narrative revolving around a love triangle constituted by Hother and Nanna's mutual love plus Baldr's unrequited desire for Nanna and murderous designs upon Hother after he had seen her bathing. The death of Fergus mac Roig was likewise due to a love triangle and Ailill's murderous reaction to the sight of his wife shamelessly bathing with Fergus. As ROOTH (1961: 114) puts it, 'Aided Fergusa agrees with Snorri with regard to the motif of the blind Lugaid who shoots his foster-brother, and with Saxo in Medb's and Fergus' bathing scene and the rivalry of Fergus and Ailill for Medb'.

Two perpetrators (an aptly blind piercer 'with darkness' and his manipulating clearsighted brother) in an original PIE version could have been reduced to one (visually unimpaired) shooter in its Indic outcome, but it also seems possible that a blind brother was added to myth II at a WIE stage (or through subsequent but still rather early Celto-Germanic contact) to yield a partially sighted pair of perpetrators mirroring the single partially sighted and ultimately blinded victim in myth I. Regardless of whether simplification or duplication of the original attacker(s) is envisaged, *Aided Fergusa maic Roig* offers additional support for a PIE myth along the lines posited by Ginevra.

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and Balar's Welsh equivalent, the giant Ysbadaden, similarly sought to prevent his daughter from marrying as this was due to cause his death (McCONE 2022: 189). This, then, may be another instance of the medieval Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen* preserving a feature 'predating the biblically inspired makeover responsible for the [medieval Irish] CMT version' of Balar's death (McCONE 2022: 193).

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