Cu Chulainn: a Homeric hero?

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Cu Chulainn: the 'Irish Achilles'[1]. Much has been made of this comparison, and yet there are two opposite conclusions which can be reached. Either, the suggestion is that the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* is Ireland's national epic in the way that the *Iliad* was for the Greeks, or that the *Tain* is a response to the *Iliad*: Homer made Irish. Both sides demonstrate the need for a legitimised Irish culture. The former position asserts the individuality of the Irish tradition, and its value stems from its unique nature. The latter seeks to emphasise a direct connection between the Irish tradition and the foundations of Western literature. Both positions are inherently political. Cu Chulainn stands in the General Post Office in Dublin as a monument to the Easter Rising, and yet is depicted on the walls of Belfast as the hero of Ulster and defender against the Irish. To cede entirely to the primacy of Homer is to deny the Celtic soul of Ireland, but to insist on an organic mythical tradition is to ignore the context of the texts themselves. However, the third position in the debate provides another solution. If we consider an Indo-European mythic tradition, of which the *Iliad* and the *Tain* are both parts, this might explain common features whilst acknowledging cultural differences. A complete explanation requires elements of all three positions. This essay will examine the historical and literary environment in which the *Tain* was written, and in particular knowledge and understanding of Classical texts. Using this as a background, a consideration of similarities between the *Iliad* (and other Classical epics) and the *Tain* as a result of similar cultural phenomena will highlight the ways in which the influence of Homer has been misunderstood. Finally, there will be an exploration of the ways in which the *Tain* directly and indirectly makes reference to Homer. The Homeric allusions seem to be later additions to a Celtic, or even pre-Celtic[2], myth, however the similarities between the two are widespread.

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[1] Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, 5. Impression (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 1.
[2] *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, ed. by Jeffrey Gantz, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 1981), p. 1.

We may assume that the tales of the Ulster cycle were being written down in the eighth century, if not earlier.[3] However, the *Tain* itself is much older. A consideration of the literary culture of pre-Christian Ireland presents significant challenges, as we lack written records of the period, but the evidence suggests that there was no knowledge of Homer at this time. Firstly, Ireland did not have significant trade with the Greeks. Tin was the main good imported to Greece from the British Isles, and 'the tin deposits of Wicklow in Ireland are not extensive enough to have given rise to any regular commerce.'[4] As a result it is unlikely that the *Iliad* reached Ireland directly from the Greek-speaking world. It is also improbable that it reached Ireland indirectly. Ireland's main cultural communication was with Britain. As Britain also had Celtic cultures, who transmitted knowledge orally through druids, any contact with Greek literature would have been passed on in this manner. Details and literary style would doubtless have been lost in the process. If the Iliad did reach Ireland at this time, only the contours of the story would have been received. Even after the Roman invasion of Britain, at which point a written copy of the Iliad might have been able to reach Ireland, its cultural impact would have been minimal, due to a lack of knowledge of Greek. Conversion to Christianity, and the creation of an Insular tradition of scholarship seem not to have changed this. There was some knowledge of Greek among Irish scholars[5], but there is no evidence of a manuscript of Homer, let alone Homeric scholarship. Monks who travelled to the continent may have brought back Greek texts, but there is no record of Homer being brought to Ireland as a result of such journeys.[6] Knowledge of Homer may also have come from secondary texts, such as Macrobius' *Saturnalia,* which contain significant quotations from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey.* Once again, however, the lack of manuscripts from the period, due to Viking raids on Irish monasteries, makes it difficult to ascertain what texts the Irish monks had. Given the evidence, we must conclude that the influence of Homer on the *Tain* cannot have come from direct knowledge of the texts.

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[3] Jeffrey Gantz, 'The Irish Manuscripts', in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 1981), p. 20.
[4] M. Cary, 'The Greeks and Ancient Trade with the Atlantic', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 44 (1924), pp. 166–79, doi:10.2307/625380, p. 167.
[5] *Classical Influences on European Culture A. D. 500 - 1500: Proceedings of an International Conference Held at King's College, Cambridge April 1969*, ed. by Robert R. Bolgar, Repr (Univ. Press, 1979), p.48.
[6] Leighton Durham Reynolds and Nigel Guy Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, Fourth edition (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 89.

Knowledge of Virgil, and therefore Homeric themes, is more certain. The claim that 'Virgil's poem was known in early medieval Ireland'[7] is strengthened by the fact that his work was known to Irish authors who never left the island[8]. This could merely suggest a knowledge of the content, rather than the themes and style of his work. However, the presence of an eighth-century fragment of Servius' commentary in the Insular style from south-west England[9] suggests that Insular (and therefore Irish) monks had an understanding of Virgil's poem specifically, if not access to the *Aeneid* itself. Furthermore, 'the writings of Sedulius testify that classic poetry was cultivated at a very early period in Ireland.'[10] Sedulius was Irish by background – Sedulius is the latinized form of Siadhal – and his knowledge of Virgil suggests that it was available in Ireland during the period of Insular scholarship. Sedulius' work, the *Carmen Paschale,* owes much to the *Aeneid*, both in terms of style and content. Sedulius' poem was so similar to Virgil that it was used to teach Virgilian prosody without using non-Christian themes.[11] This use as a didactic tool meant that it was in widespread use; since St Augustine the Christian world had grappled with the problem of teaching great literature with its pagan themes, and Sedulius' work provided a solution.[12] Sedulius does not merely imitate the *Aeneid* in form, but also makes allusions to it throughout his poem.[13] If the scribes of the *Tain* did not have access to Virgil, access to Sedulius would have allowed some knowledge of the *Aeneid* to appear in their work. Kratz suggests that 'the artistry of Sedulius' poem turns on the balancing and not the separation of two discordant traditions', those of Latin epic and Christianity.[14] This has two major implications for the *Tain.* Firstly, it would further facilitate indirect allusions to the work. Secondly, it may have been a model for assimilating the Classical tradition into other works, and thus into Irish epic. In these ways Virgilian influence on the *Tain* was more possible than Homeric.

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[7] Mark Williams, *The Celtic Myths That Shape the Way We Think* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), p. 170.
[8] Bolgar, p. 47.
[9] Reynolds and Wilson, p. 92.
[10] John D'Alton, 'Essay on the Ancient History, Religion, Learning, Arts, and Government of Ireland', *The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 16 (1830), p. 219.
[11] Carl P. E. Springer, 'The Manuscripts of Sedulius a Provisional Handlist', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 85.5 (1995), pp. i–244, doi:10.2307/1006648, p. 3.
[12] Dennis M. Kratz, 'Aeneas or Christ? An Epic Parody by Sedulius Scottus', *The Classical World*, 69.5 (1976), pp. 319–23, doi:10.2307/4348438, p. 319.
[13] Kratz, p. 320.
[14] Kratz, p. 322.

This is problematic. The *Tain* shares more similarities with the *Iliad* than it does with the *Aeneid.* However, many of those similarities are the results of a broader Indo-European mythic tradition of which both the *Iliad* and the *Tain* are a part. This does not account for all the shared elements, so there must be another source: the *Togail Troi.* The *Togail Troi* is an Irish re-working of a Latin account by Dares the Phrygian, the *de Excidio Troiae,* which purports to be an eye-witness account of the Fall of Troy.[15] Its age is uncertain: it may be from the same period as both recensions of the *Tain,* or earlier. This text reveals both an Irish fascination with the Classical world[16], and a knowledge of the Greek mythic cycle during the period in which the *Tain* was written down. The Latin on which it is based may be from as late as the fifth century A.D.. This suggests that Dares' debt is primarily to Homer and Virgil, rather than the other texts of the Greek Epic Cycle. *Togail Troi* provides us with a strong indirect link between the *Tain* and the *Iliad,* and allows for the suggestion that the *Tain* may incorporate elements from Greek epic, even if Greek epic was not read in Ireland before the *Tain* was written down.

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The idea of an Indo-European epic tradition is central to understanding how similarities between the *Iliad* and the *Tain* arise. The aspect of Cu Chulainn's life which the *Tain* focuses on – the Cattle Raid of Cooley – demonstrates this. Whilst 'cattle were the very basis of the I-E economy'[17] Irish society differed from this model, being more agricultural than pastoral. It is therefore surprising that the centrepiece of the Irish epic tradition revolves around such an act. Brenneman argues that 'because of the early influence of Indo-European peoples on the formation of Celtic culture the importance of the cattle raid was maintained.'[18] Similarities between Greek cattle-raiding myths, such as Heracles' theft of Geyron's cows, and Irish ones, of which the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* is one example, are the result of this

[15] Michael Clarke, 'An Irish Achilles and a Greek Cu Chulainn' <https://www.academia.edu/9136280/An_Irish_Achilles_and_a_Greek_Cu_Chulainn> [accessed 23 July 2024], p. 197.
[16] William Bedell Stanford, *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (Allen Figgis ; Rowman & Littlefield, 1977), p. 74.
[17] Bruce Lincoln, 'The Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myth', *History of Religions*, 16.1 (1976), pp. 62.
[18] Walter L. Brenneman, 'Serpents, Cows, and Ladies: Contrasting Symbolism in Irish and Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myths', *History of Religions*, 28.4 (1989), p. 348.

older tradition, rather than direct imitation. Sainero observes the similarities between the Ulster Cycle tale of the Exile of the Sons of Uisliu (in which it is prophesied that the central character, Derdriu, will bring sorrow to the Uliad) and the tales of the birth of Paris and Oedipus[19]. However, given the prevalence of this story-type among Indo-European cultures, it is unlikely that this is a direct response to a Classical text. These examples illustrate the way in which an Indo-European epic tradition can better explain broader thematic similarities. If we consider the narrative material of the *Tain* itself to be a combination of pre-Celtic and Celtic myths, then it is clear that the fundamentals of the story cannot be the result of Homeric influence, given that the Irish epic may pre-date Homer. Both the *Tain* and the *Iliad* make mention of other parts of their respective cycles. However, as part of the epic genre 'overlap and even contradiction would have been natural and expectable, since the narratives were not reacting primarily to one another but were instead emerging from a multiform tradition.'[20] This is both the case for the separate Greek and Irish traditions from which the *Iliad* and the *Tain* emerged, but also for an older Indo-European tradition of which both epics were heirs. We may therefore discount broader structural and thematic similarities between the two as the result of this inheritance, rather than direct adoption of Homeric themes and structure by the scribes of the *Tain.*

One specific structural aspect of epic is worth further consideration: catalogues. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the catalogue of the Ulstermen in the *Tain* was influenced by Homer. Compare the following: 'τῷ δ' ἅμ' Ἄβαντες ἕποντο θοοί, ὄπιθεν κομόωντες, αἰχμηταὶ μεμαῶτες ὀρεκτῇσιν μελίῃσ ιθώρηκας ῥήξειν δηίων ἀμφὶ στήθεσσι.'[21] (His followers were quick on their feet; they wore their hair long at the back, fighters hoping to lunge with their ash spears and rip through the armour on their enemies' chests)[22] (Hom. Il. 2.542-4); '"Buiden rochaín roálaind itir lín & costud & timthaigi. Is borrfadach dofarfobrit in tulaig."'[23] ("A most impressive company, their cohorts well drilled and

[19] Ramon Sainero, *Celts and the Historical and Cultural Origins of Atlantic Europe: The Celtic-Scythians in the Leabhar Gabhala* (Academica Press, 2013) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wincolluk/detail.action?docID=3425610> [accessed 23 July 2024], p. 267.
[20] John Foley and Justin Arft, 'The Epic Cycle and Oral Tradition', in *The Greek Epic Cycle and Its Ancient Reception: A Companion* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[21] Homer, 'Iliad, Book 2', *Loeb Classical Library*, p. 2 <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/homer-iliad/1924/pb_LCL170.101.xml> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[22] Homer and others, p. 35.
[23] 'Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I' <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G301012/index.html> [accessed 25 July 2024].

splendidly kitted out. They marched imperiously up to the hill.")[24] Both catalogues display details irrelevant to the rest of the epic – neither of the these cohorts receive specific mention in the rest of their respective texts. This does not justify a connection between the two. However, when we consider this passage from *de Excidio Troiae* – 'Podalirium crassum, valentem, superbum, tristem.'[25] (Podalirius, was sturdy, strong, haughty, and moody.)[26] (Dares Phrygius, *de Excidio Troiae,* 13) – and note that Podalirius is only mentioned in this catalogue, we would be forgiven for thinking that the *Tain* is indirectly imitating Homer in this manner. This is incorrect. One function of a catalogue is to demonstrate the author's (or speaker's) knowledge of the broader epic cycle. Invoking the names and attributes of the combatants legitimises the account; how would they know who was present if they did not have a reliable source? The similar genesis of both texts allows for the organic creation of such a catalogue independent of one another. Furthermore, catalogues are a common feature of Celtic storytelling. In the Welsh tale *How Culhwch Won Olwen* there is an extended catalogue of people pledged to support Culhwch. Once again, the catalogue features specific attributes of characters who will receive no other mention in the text: 'Drem son of Dremidydd, who from Celli Wig in Cornwall could see a fly rise in the morning with the sun as far away as Pen Blathaon in Pictland.'[27] The function of this catalogue is to make reference to the broader Arthurian cycle, and so demonstrate the author's knowledge. It is clear, therefore, that catalogues are not a feature adopted by the Irish from Homer.

A central theme shared by Classical epics and the *Tain* is intense relationships between men. Once more there appears to be a connection between the two. Comparisons between Achilles and Patroclus, and Cu Chulainn and Fer Diad are common. Achilles' response to Patroclus' death – '"Πάτροκλος, τὸν ἐγὼ περὶ

[24] *The Táin: A New Translation of the Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by Ciarán Carson, Penguin Classics, Publ. in paperback (Penguin Books, 2008), p. 187.
[25] 'Dares the Phrygian, De Excidio Trojae Historia' <https://thelatinlibrary.com/dares.html> [accessed 26 July 2024].
[26] 'DARES PHRYGIUS - Theoi Classical Texts Library' <https://www.theoi.com/Text/DaresPhrygius.html> [accessed 26 July 2024].
[27] 'How Culhwch Won Olwen', in *The Mabinogion*, ed. by Sioned Davies, Oxford World's Classics, Hardcover edition (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 186.

πάντων τῖον ἑταίρων, ἶσον ἐμῇ κεφαλῇ·”’[28] (Patroclus, who was more to me than any other of my men, whom I loved as much as my own life)[29] (Hom. Il. 18.81-2) – and Cu Chulainn's response to Fer Diad's

'Dámbad and atcheind-sea th'éc	(Had you fallen at the hands
eter míledaib mórGréc,	Of Greek warriors, my life
ní beind-se i mbethaid dar th'éis,	Would not have outlasted yours,
gombad aróen atbailméis.'[30]	I would have died by your side.)[31]

shares the idea of valuing their lives equally. Cu Chulainn's mention of 'Greek warriors' is of particular interest here, and may be an intertextual reference, more likely to *Togail Troi* than the *Iliad* itself. The description of Fer Diad's death suggests a sexual relationship between himself and Cu Chulainn: the *gae bolga* 'ndechaid dar timthirecht a chuirp and gorbo lán cach n-alt & cach n-áge de dá forrindíb.'[32] (entered the rear portal of Fer Diad's body and filled every nook and cranny of him with its barbs.)[33] The sexual undertones of the *gae bolga,* a weapon unique to Cu Chulainn, are clear from the fact that it is only used twice in the *Tain,* both times against young men in single combat, and enters the body through the anus. Assuming that the *Tain* borrows the idea of the death of a close friend from the *Iliad,* there must be an intermediary. *Togail Troi* and *de Excidio Troiae* both provide perfunctory accounts of Patroclus' death, and do not suggest the close relationship shown in the *Iliad.* Virgil is a more promising candidate. Aeneas, like Achilles, responds with fury at Pallas' death: 'proxima quaeque metit gladio latumque per agmenardens limitem agit ferro'[34] (Everything that stood before him he harvested with the sword, cutting a broad swathe through the enemy ranks)[35] (Verg. A. 10.513-4). His killing of Turnus at the end of Book 12 matches Achilles' killing of Hector, thus Aeneas becomes a 'second Achilles' as a result of Pallas' death.[36] It is possible that this feature was taken from the *Aeneid*, but there is a more

[28] Homer, 'Iliad, Book 18', *Loeb Classical Library*, p. 18 <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/homer-iliad/1924/pb_LCL171.293.xml> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[29] Homer and others, p321.
[30] 'Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster' <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G301035/index.html> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[31] Carson, p. 158.
[32] 'Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster'.
[33] Carson, p. 151.
[34] Publius Vergilius Maro, 'Aeneid, Book X', *Loeb Classical Library* <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/virgil-aeneid/1916/pb_LCL064.191.xml> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[35] Vergilius Maro, *The Aeneid,* p. 226.
[36] Ursula Gärtner, 'Virgil and the Epic Cycle', in *The Greek Epic Cycle and Its Ancient Reception: A Companion*, ed. by Marco Fantuzzi and Chrēstos K. Tsangalēs (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 553.

plausible explanation. Homeric society and the society of the Ulster Cycle were both homosocial. It is therefore natural that intense friendships between men would occur. 'Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn are then near-peers, the latter's semi-divine birth giving him one slight edge'[37], much as Patroclus and Achilles are brought up together. Therefore we should not ascribe this thematic feature to a knowledge of Homer.

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There are, however, features of the *Tain* which appear to be the result of Homeric influence. The fates of Achilles and of Cu Chulainn are exactly alike. Achilles destiny – '"εἰ μέν κ' αὖθι μένων Τρώων πόλιν ἀμφιμάχωμαι, ὤλετο μέν μοι νόστος, ἀτὰρ κλέος ἄφθιτον ἔσται·"'[38] (If I stay here and fight it out round Ilium, there is no home-coming for me but there will be eternal glory instead)[39] (Hom. Il. 9.412-3) – requires death in order to achieve κλεος. This is a key aspect for Cu Chulainn, as shown by the inclusion of his destiny in both recensions of the *Tain:*

'"Bat án-su & bat urdairc, bat duthain & dimbúan."'[40] ("You will be splendid and renowned but short-lived and transient.")[41] (The Book of Leinster)

'"Is glé bid airdairc & bid animgnaid intí gébas gaisced and acht bid duthain nammá ."'[42] ("There is no doubt that the one who takes up arms today will achieve great fame. But his life will be short.")[43] (Recension 1).

Its inclusion in the Book of Leinster is to be expected, as it presents a longer and 'more unified narrative'[44], but its appearance in both versions suggests that this idea was central to an earlier text, if not to the myth itself. One explanation for this shared feature is that it was 'characteristic of the Irish

[37] Sayers, p. 7.
[38] Homer, 'Iliad, Book 9', *Loeb Classical Library*, p. 9 <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/homer-iliad/1924/pb_LCL170.425.xml> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[39] Homer and others, *The Iliad* (Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 155.
[40] 'Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster'.
[41] 'Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster' <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T301035/index.html> [accessed 25 July 2024].
[42] 'Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I'.
[43] *The Táin: A New Translation of the Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by Ciarán Carson, Penguin Classics, Publ. in paperback (Penguin Books, 2008), p. 44.
[44] Carson, p. xiii.

Celts to value glory and fame over a longer but duller existence.'[45] However, its position within the structure of the text favours another interpretation. This prophecy appears as part of the *Boyhood Deeds of Cu Chulainn*. This section of the *Tain* comes from a different part of the Ulster Cycle, and it is uncertain whether these incidents were always included as part of the narrative of the *Tain.* It shares this feature with Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, in that both use a character to introduce another part of their epic cycles told in flashback. This narrative technique prefigures a superior epic as part of the cycle, as in the oral tradition these would have been separate tales. The Greek epic tale *Iliou persis* lies behind Virgil's flashback; it is likely that the same is true for the *Tain.* Knowing that the Irish had some knowledge of the poem, 'this structural feature of the epic has persuaded some experts that it was conceived in conscious imitation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.'[46] Considering this section as an addition by a scribe at some point in the text's history allows for the possibility that this particular section was added into the group of *Boyhood Deeds* in order to make a Homeric allusion. The issue is complicated by the *Togail Troi,* in which no mention is made of this prophecy concerning Achilles. It may be that another source provided the link to Homer, and as the two prophecies are so alike, this has credence. Cu Chulainn's fate 'seems modelled on the tradition that Achilles chose a short life in order to win great fame,'[47] making him an Irish Homeric hero.

Another Virgilian influence is the 'hero's light' which comes upon Cu Chulainn before he enters the Irish camp: 'Atracht in lónd láith asa étun comba sithethir remithir áirnem n-ócláig.'[48] (the hero's light sprang from his forehead, long and thick as a warriors whetstone.')[49] For Aeneas this also occurs before a major battle, this time with the Rutulians: 'ardet apex capiti'[50] (On the head of Aeneas there blazed a tongue of fire)[51] (Verg. A. 10.270). A 'hero's light' is not common in Irish mythology. It occurs only for Cu Chulainn in the *Tain* itself, and not in the other tales about him. As a result, we may consider it a

[45] Eleanor Farrell, 'The Epic Hero and Society: Cuchulainn, Beowulf and Roland', *Mythlore*, 13.1 (47) (1986), p. 26.
[46] Williams, p. 169.
[47] Jeffrey Gantz, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cu Chulaind', in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 1981), p. 135.
[48] 'Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster'.
[49] Carson, p. 109.
[50] Vergilius Maro, 'Aeneid, Book X'.
[51] Vergilius Maro, *The Aeneid,* p. 219.

feature specific to the *Tain* as a text, rather than a feature of Cu Chulainn as an individual. The lack of evidence for it elsewhere in the Irish tradition suggests that it was adopted from another tradition. Given that it is quoted and discussed in Servius (Serv. A. 10.270)[52] it is likely that the Irish scribes knew this part of the *Aeneid*, and so are making reference to it here. This use of Virgil supports the idea that Virgil is used elsewhere, allowing for the structural choice which permits a Homeric allusion, as shown above. Thus the use of the 'hero's light' from Virgil makes clearer the Homeric influence on the *Tain.*

A final Homeric aspect to the text of the *Tain* is their method of fighting with chariots. It is certain that some Celtic peoples made extensive use of chariots in their battles. Caesar mentions the use of chariots in Gaul: 'cum se inter equitum turmas insinuaverunt, ex essedis desiliunt et pedibus proeliantur.' (When they have worked their way in between the troops of cavalry, they leap down from the chariots and fight on foot.)[53] (Caes. Gal. 4.33.1). This is similar to the use of chariots in the Iliad, in which they are primarily used to move heroes on and off the battlefield.[54] In Britain chariots were also used, as seen in Tacitus' description of Boudicca's rebellion: 'Boudicca curru filias prae se vehens' (Boudicca, mounted in a chariot with her daughters before her)[55] (Tac. Ann. 14.35). In Ireland, however, it seems that chariots were not used in battle; 'the archaeological evidence for chariots in Ireland is almost entirely lacking.'[56] As Sainero suggests, 'One of the main sections of the Iliada is the fight between the two heroes Héctor and Achilles that has an Irish correspondence in the fight of the heroes Cuchulainn and Ferdius, in both combats using Greek-style chariots, knowing that in historical Ireland heroes and warriors never used these cars in their confrontations.'[57] We are left with the same problem as before: if the Irish did not have the *Iliad,* where did this style of combat come from? *De Excidio Troiae* has no

[52] 'Maurus Servius Honoratus, Commentary on the Aeneid of Vergil, SERVII GRAMMATICI IN VERGILII AENEIDOS LIBRVM DECIMVM COMMENTARIVS., Line 270' <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0053%3Abook%3D10%3Acommline%3D270> [accessed 26 July 2024].
[53] Caesar, 'Gallic War, Book IV', *Loeb Classical Library* <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/caesar-gallic_wars/1917/pb_LCL072.223.xml?mainRsKey=poPYxr> [accessed 24 July 2024].
[54] J. K. Anderson, 'Greek Chariot-Borne and Mounted Infantry', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 79.3 (1975), pp. 175–87, doi:10.2307/503478.
[55] Publius Cornelius Tacitus, 'The Annals Of Tacitus: Book XIV: Chapter XXXV', *Loeb Classical Library* <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/tacitus-annals/1931/pb_LCL322.165.xml?mainRsKey=KvYbzL> [accessed 26 July 2024].
[56] Carson, p. xx.
[57] Sainero, p. 238.

mention of chariots, so the *Tain's* use of them cannot come from that source. Virgil, on the other hand, maintains the Homeric model of warfare, and so chariots feature in the battles at the end of the *Aeneid*: 'Interea biiugis infert se Lucagus albis in medios'[58] (Meanwhile Lucagus was coming into the middle of battle on a chariot drawn by two white horses)[59] (Verg. A. 10.575-6). Thus the style of fighting with chariots in the *Tain* appears to have been adopted from the *Iliad,* via Virgil.

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The *Tain Bo Cuailnge* is not a derivative work. It may contain elements which imitate Classical epics, but the story itself is a distinctly Irish version of an Indo-European story-type. The use of Homeric ideas within the text does not show a lack of an individual culture; 'to make our own great cattle-raid chime and interact with the war of Troy is an act of nationalistic self-invention.'[60] The ancient origins of the *Tain* show that it is not merely an imitation of the *Iliad.* Its references to Greek and Latin epic are the product of the period in which it was written down, an age in which Homer, and to a greater extent Virgil, were still central to the understanding of epic. The *Tain's* 'principal intertextual relationship is not directly with continental literature but with the one major text in which the Graeco-Roman heroic past was appropriated and recast as a purely Irish narrative.'[61]: the *Togail Troi.* The Cu Chulainn of the *Tain* is not the authoritative depiction of the hero; he reappears with differing characteristics throughout the Ulster Cycle. Even if he shares common features with Achilles and Aeneas in the *Tain,* as part of the oral and mythic traditions he is fundamentally Irish. The *Tain* itself has relationships with Indo-European epic and Classical epic, as well as the Irish tradition, just as Homer has a debt to the oral tradition which preceded him. This does not deny their greatness; it reveals their artistry in turning their predecessors into masterpieces.

[58] Vergilius Maro, 'Aeneid, Book X'.
[59] Vergilius Maro, *The Aeneid,* pp. 227-8.
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