Some Key Concepts, Terms, Names, and Characters in Early Irish Myth

**kings and kingship**: rulers of small kingdoms or “peoples” (*tuatha*, sg. *tuath*) were regarded as sacred and were chosen and inaugurated with elaborate symbolic rituals. The “king’s truth/justice” (*fir flatheamon*) was a crucial concept upon which depended the fertility of the land as well as the prosperity of the kingdom. A king could not be physically blemished or give a false judgment (*gau flatheamon*, “the king’s falsity”). Some “petty kings” owed allegiance and tribute to more powerful “over-kings,” and in literature certain kings are regarded as ruling over all Ireland (the “high-kings of Ireland”). Historically the dominant royal line was the northern *Uí Néill* (“descendants of Niall”), and the first to claim high-kingship was the *Uí Néill* king Mael Sechnaill I (*c* 862), but the first true “high king” was the Brian Boruma in the early 11th century. The royal seat of the high-king was at Tara (Temair). The most important kingdoms/tribes in Irish myth are the Ulstermen (*Ulaid*) in the northern “fifth” of Ulster, with its royal seat (the “Red Branch”) at Emnain Macha, ruled by Conchobar; and the Connacht in the western “fifth” of Connacht, with its royal seat at Cruachan, ruled by Ailill and his wife Medb. Succession was not necessarily from father to oldest son (primogeniture); anyone who belonged to the *derbhheine* (descendants of a common great-grandfather) who was also the son or grandson of a king and his principle wife (*cétmainter*) or secondary wife (*adáltrach*) might be elected; seniority and competence were both considered. In literature supernatural signs might identify the rightful king: a man who had drunk broth made from the blood of a slaughtered bull would sleep and dream of the true king; or the “stone of destiny” (also called the stone penis) at Tara would scream at the touch of a rightful king. The high-king would be inaugurated at Tara in a symbolic “wedding feast” in which he would ritually “marry” the land, which might be represented by a horse and in literary texts is often portrayed as a “Sovereignty goddess” who offers the king (*flath*) a ritual libation of ale (*laith*).

**druids**: members of a Celtic order of priests, originally presided over sacrifices and acted as judges. In Ireland, druids are represented as powerful wise men (and women: there are also druidesses), who as magicians, diviners, and prophets advise kings. Conchobar’s druid Cathbad is a major figure in the Ulster cycle tales. During the Christian period druids got very bad press as pagan wizards and were ultimately suppressed, with some of their social functions being taken over by Christian priests or by the poets (*filid*). The druidic order has been “revived” in modern times by New Agers and Neo-pagans.

**poets** (*filid*, sg. *fili*): had powers similar to druids, expressed through their esoteric learning and poetic inspiration. Often represented as diviners and seers, poets were no mere entertainers or artists but respected, even feared persons of high status who could bring down an unjust king with a malicious satire, or cause red blotches to appear on the face of an enemy. There were female poets and especially female satirists. The chief poet was called the *ollam*.

**hostels and hostellers**: keepers of “hostels” (*bruidinea*, sg. *bruiden*). Since early Ireland did not have cities, hostels were important sites for hosting travelling nobles and kings with their retinues. The hosteller was obligated to provide lodging and banquets for a certain number of nights. A hostel or any royal hall had a central hearth with a cauldron, and around the walls there were compartments and couches for banqueting. There are five major hostels in early Irish literature, including those of Mac Da Thó and Da Derga, the settings of two major tales. The hosteller Bláth Buicga is a significant character in the Ulster cyle. The hostel often has otherworldly associations and can be a place of great danger.

**fianna** (sg. *fian*): bands of ladhless warriors, often younger sons of nobles who did not stand to inherit their fathers’ estates. They were hunters and mercenaries, yet despite belonging to no kingdom and subject to no king, they were not outlaws but were pledged to protect Ireland from foreign enemies. They are sometimes represented as having limited rights to plunder. To become a member one had to undergo rigorous martial training but also be adept in poetry (the Ninja bookclub?). The most famous *fian* band was that of Finn mac Cumail, about whom there is a large cycle of tales.
economy: the early Irish economy was agricultural and pastoral. There were no cities or towns as such until the Vikings established coastal trading towns (Dublin, Cork, and Limerick were all originally Viking settlements), but there were major churches and monasteries around which small service economies might develop. The fundamental economic unit in Irish society was the cow. Wealth and to some extent status (which was primarily based on birth) were determined by the number of cattle one owned. Hence the tāín bó ("cattle-raid") was no misadventure of country bumpkins, but serious business (and the major heroic literary genre) resulting potentially in major realignments of wealth and power. The most common mediums of exchange and measures of value were the milch cow and the female slave (cumal). In later medieval Ireland money (coins) existed but is rarely mentioned in the early literature. Wealth and status were also measured by land and moveable property including armor and treasures, especially jewelry made of precious metals. Slavery was practiced; slaves could be abducted on raids against other kingdoms or overseas, or bought and sold at slave-trading markets, especially during the period following the Viking settlements.

warfare and weaponry: the society of the sagas is a warrior culture. Young heroes are said to test their mettle by riding out to the boundary of a rival kingdom and challenging all comers; a warrior’s worth is based on the number of enemies he has slain, and there are many references to victors taking the heads of the vanquished as trophies. Shields and swords were standard issue (swords that talked were special order), and there were also projectile weapons (javelins). Cú Chulainn is famous for his deadly sling (from which he casts iron balls), his spear called the del chliss, and most of all the gāe bolga, a secret weapon taught to him by the Amazonian warrior-woman Scathach. Cú Chulainn used the gāe bolga in combat in fords by guiding it with his toes underwater and impaling his opponent through the rectum; after entering the body the weapon opened up into fifty barbs, disembowelling its victim. Beware the gāe bolga!

assemblies: a number of annual assemblies were held at traditional sites; these are sometimes called “fairs” but were not primarily for trade but for conducting political and legal affairs. Games, contests, and entertainments were staged and there were buffoons and jesters, even professional farthers.

marriage: polygamy was practiced in early medieval Ireland. A man could have a “principle wife” (cēmuinter) as well as a “secondary wife” (adaltrach, which literally means “adulteress,” a case of Christian influence on legal vocabulary), and kings might also have concubines. Marriages were arranged by the father of the bride in negotiation with the suitor and his family. The bridegroom paid a “bridal-price” to her father, and her father gave her a “dowry.” There were several legal classes of marriage, depending on whether the husband or the wife brought the greatest amount of wealth to the marriage. Wives retained certain legal rights, especially over the share of the property that they brought to the marriage.

fosterage: a son of a noble family (especially a younger son who was not direct heir) would be sent to be raised by an unrelated family, creating an alliance between them. The relation between the foster-father and foster-son was an extremely close and important one in Irish society, as was the relationship between foster brothers.

hostages: an over-king might accept “hostages” from another kin-group or tuath as guarantees of loyalty. The hostages live with the king and are pledged to serve him, but are not prisoners in the modern sense of the term.
honor: the fundamental legal and social principle of Irish society. A person’s honor was defined by his birth and rank, and the wealth and privileges that went with them. Insults or injuries to one’s honor (person or property) were protected by an elaborate legal code that required compensation keyed to the victim’s social status. In the literature, violence is instigated by real or perceived slights to honor, or by contests of precedence, more than by any other cause, including women or cattle. When warriors come to a feast, they may fight over the seating arrangement and the greatest among them will fight over “the champion’s portion,” the choicest cut of the roast pig.

fir fer (“truth of men”): the principle of fair play in combat; in single combat this often involves taking turns in choice of weapons or style of combat. To ambush a single warrior with a group of men was a violation of fir fer and meant loss of honor, but naturally some preferred loss of honor to loss of life.

arts and crafts: The preeminent musical instruments was the harp; a skilled performer was supposed to be able to play three “strains” (sleeping, laughing, and weeping strains), and there were three famed fairy musicians from the Otherworld associated with these strains. Other important instruments were the timpan (a small drum or tambourine), the horn, and the bagpipe. Skill in singing was highly prized, and in the sagas can be very powerful (Cú Chulainn could kill birds by modulating his voice; every cow that heard the singing of the sons of Úisliu gave two-thirds more milk, and every man who heard it grew peaceful). Plastic arts are rarely mentioned in the literature, but metalworking, jewelry, and sculpture were highly advanced arts in early Irish culture, and with Christianization the book arts (calligraphy and illumination) reached an astonishing level in masterpieces like the Book of Kells. Skilled craftsmen (especially poets, musicians, doctors, lawyers, smiths, carpenters) were members of a high-status class known as the Æs dánna “people of skill.”

names: men’s names are typically patronymic (mac means “son of” [+ Father’s name]). Úi in clan-names means “descendants of.” But often the second name of an Irish hero or god will be an epithet (“Yellow-Heel”; “Silver-Hand,” etc.). Women typically have just single names. Some of the most common place-name elements are Mag (“plain”), Tír (“land”), Sliab (“mountain”) and Inis (“island”). Note that Irish names can often be spelled in several different ways, depending on whether the form is Old Irish, Middle Irish, or Modern Irish. For guides to pronunciation, see pp. 32-33 in Gantz, Early Irish Myths and Sagas, and pp. xxviii-xxx in Carson, The Táin.

The Ulaid (Ulstermen): the major kingdoms in early Irish literature, ruled by king Conchobar. Cú Chulainn, the Ulster boy-superhero, was the son of Cú Chulainn’s daughter (or sister) Deichtine by the Tuatha Dé god Lug (see the entry “otherworldly beings” below). Along with his foster-brother Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn received martial arts training (but only Cú Chulainn learned the infamous weapon the gae bolga) from an amazonian warrior-woman named Scathach in Alba (Scotland), and fathered a son Aife by another warrior-woman named Aife. Cú Chulainn’s “warp-spasm” is probably the most bizarre and grotesque physical contortion/transformation ever imagined, with the possible exception of Mr. Potato Head’s tortilla avatar in Toy Story 3. Other major Ulster characters are the oversexed hero Fergus mac Róich, who goes “over there” to the Connacht side after Conchobar dishonors him; the warriors Lóeg and Conall Cernach; Cathbad, Conchobar’s chief druid and his wife Nessa; Cú Chulainn’s wife Emer, and his charioteer Lóeg; Sencha mac Ailella, Conchobar’s chief judge and peacemaker; the trickster/troublemaker Briocú “Poison-tongue”; and Lebacham, the female satirist (like Tina Fey, but even more dangerous).

The Connachtán: The people of Ulster’s chief rival kingdom, ruled by Ailill and his oversexed and domineering wife Medb. The great epic the Táin is about a cattle-raid against Ulster led by Queen Medb. Other important Connacht characters are Finnabair, Ailill and Medb’s daughter, and their great champion Cét mac Mágach.
otherworldly beings: the major group of “gods” were known as the Tuatha Dé Danann (“People of the goddess Danu”). They are usually represented as living in “fairy mounds” (side, sg. síd). The chief god is the Dagda (Echu Ollathir), the “good god” of fertility and fecundity. His son by the river-goddess Boand is Oengus, the Mac Og (“young son”), the god of youth and poetry who lives at the Brug na Bóinde (identified with the neolithic passage-grave at Newgrange). The king is Nuadu Silver-hand, but the most powerful god is Lug Lámhfhota (“long arm”), a master of all crafts. Other major gods are Manannán mac Lir, the sea-god; Dian Cécht, the god of healing; Goibniu the smith-god; Donn, the god of the dead; and the war-goddess the Morrigan (“Great Queen”), who also appears in alternate forms as Badb (crow/raven) and as Macha. The Tuatha Dé had great battles against the Fomorians, another group of divinities, sometimes represented as giants. The Fomorian king Elatha fathers Bres by Éiriú (the eponymous “Ireland”) of the Tuatha Dé. Lug of the Tuatha Dé is the grandson of the monstrous Fomorian Balor of the Evil Eye, whose beautiful daughter Eithne mated with Cian of the Tuatha Dé. In the great Battle of Mag Tured, Lug kills Balor by piercing his eye with a spear. Lug later fathers the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn by king Conchobar’s daughter (or sister) Deichtine.

space: there are two major realms: the underground Otherworld of the gods/fairies (Tuatha Dé), accessed through the side or fairy-mounds; and the world of humans above ground. The most important síd is the Brug na Bóinde, residence of Oengus, son of the Dagda. The human and divine realms are often in conflict, but Tuatha Dé and humans also sometimes intermarry. The Otherworld is also regarded as the land of the dead and is perilous for a human to enter. The boundary between the two worlds is most fluid during the feast of Samhain (see “time”). The otherworld may also be located on an island. The human world of Ireland is divided into five provinces (“fifths”): northern Ulster (Ulaid), western Connacht, eastern Leinster (Lagin), southern Munster (Mumu), and central Meath (Mide). The mythical central point is Uisnech, a major place of assembly. Tara and the Brug na Bóinde are in Meath. The royal seat of Ulster is Emain Macha, the royal seat of Connacht is Crúachan.

landscape: Irish narratives are often tied to major features of the landscape, and many stories (including an entire genre, the dimshencas or “traditions of famous places”) purport to explain their origins or their names. In addition to man-made boundaries and settlements, important natural features include hills (Tara and Emain Macha), rivers (the Boyne), plains (Mag Tured, the site of several mythic battles), forests, bogs, fords, and caves.

time: the Irish calendar revolved around four major seasonal festivals:

1 February: Imbolc, the beginning of the lambing season and also the feastday of the Irish saint Brigit, who had a fire-goddess pagan double.
1 May: Beltene, associated with ritual bonfires.
1 August: Lugnasad, the feast of the god Lug.
1 November: Samain, the chief festival. A harvest festival, it is associated (like Halloween) with the dead, and the boundary between this world and the otherworld is especially penetrable on this day. Many major events and crises take place on Samain.

In Irish Christian texts like The Voyage of Saint Brendan, annual time is reckoned according to the liturgical year, dominated by Easter and the “moveable feasts” tied to Easter (the temporale) and the fixed feast-days of saints (the sanctorale); diurnal time is reckoned according to the hours of prayer (matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers) as well as by the sun (dawn, mid-day, dusk).

liminality: anthropologists who study myth speak of “liminal” or threshold phenomena that fall in between places (e.g., this world and the Otherworld, civilization and the wild, outside and inside), or between times (e.g., New Year’s eve, dusk, midnight, the winter solstice, festivals marking a change of season), or between different states of being (e.g., childhood and manhood, life and death, animal and
human, sleeping and waking). Liminality involves crossing of boundaries (spatial, temporal, or existential) and is often marked by supernatural or marvelous occurrences.

**numbers**: The Celts, like many traditional cultures, loved to number things. Numbers functioned both as mnemonic devices and as symbols. The triad was especially favored as a device to codify and transmit knowledge. Many numbers, but especially three and nine, had symbolic values. In narratives, episodes and groups of characters often come in threes, and fifty or “three fifties” were favorite round numbers for crowds of people or flocks of birds or precious objects, and the like. One of the most common artistic motifs was the triskele, comprised of three interlocked whorl-shaped legs.

**geis** (pl. gessa): a “taboo” or prohibition that a king or hero may receive at birth or be imposed by a druid (or by a woman). Gessa are often negative (“you must not do such and such”) but can also be positive. Violating a geis more often than not leads to the hero’s death. Gessa may be ethical (“do not allow plunder in your kingdom”) or supernatural (Cú Chulainn is not supposed to eat dog meat because the word cú means “dog” and the dog is his “totemic” animal). Gessa are associated with fate because the hero almost inevitably ends up violating his gessa, no matter how bizarre and unlikely they may seem and no matter how hard he tries to avoid them. Often a hero is caught in a double-bind in which he must violate either a geis or some code of honor or social obligation.

**champion's portion**: contests of honor and precedence among warriors are often predicated on which one will receive the choicest cut of the roast pig, called the “champion’s portion,” at a feast. The bickering and posturing over who is most worthy typically lead to tests of courage or physical “feats” and may degenerate into combat. The most famous such contest is the beheading game in *Bricriu’s Feast*, an analogue for the beheading game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

**withershins** (*nuithbel*): turning or circling counterclockwise or lefthandwise as a way to challenge, insult, or bring ill-luck upon an enemy. Turning lefthandwise is generally inauspicious, and righthandwise (*deisel*) is auspicious.

**ogham**: the early Irish writing system, used mainly as inscriptions on stone monuments, but in the sagas sometimes said to be carved on wooden staves. The ogham alphabet has 29 letters, each based on a number of straight strokes (from one to five) along a vertical baseline (which, on a three-dimensional stone pillar, may be one of the vertical edges). Strokes can be aligned to the right or left of the baseline, or may cross it perpendicularly or obliquely. Vowels may be written with notches (dots) rather than lines. Each ogham letter is named after a tree or bush whose name begins with that letter. Five strokes aligned to the right, for example, represent the consonant [n], and that ogham letter is named “nin” (ash). You can buy magic ogham “runesticks” in the New Age or Metaphysical section of most bookstores, just don’t expect them to work.

**games**: the most common type of game mentioned in the sagas is “fichdell” (literally “wood-intelligence,” but usually translated “chess”), a board game for two players. The rules are unknown. Fichdell was a pastime for the nobility and was always played for a stake, which in the sagas can be very high. The “boy-troop” is often described as being engaged in some form of stick and ball game, probably an early form of “hurling.” Heroes often engage in contests of physical prowess, and Cú Chulainn is particularly noted for his remarkable “feats,” which he shows off at every opportunity. See also “beheading game.”

**clothing and accessories**: the standard Irish apparel (for both sexes) was a linen tunic under a woolen mantle, the latter secured by a brooch. The brooch could be a simple iron stick-pin, or a lavish gold and cloisonné jewel like the famous “Tara brooch.” There were three basic types of brooch: the annular (an unbroken ring with a stationary pin attached); the pennanular (a ring with a gap through which a
moveable pin could be passed and then rotated to secure the brooch); and the pseudo-pennanular (an unbroken ring with a decorative embellishment where the gap would be if it were a real pennanular). Another aristocratic accessory was the gold neck-ring or torque. Leather belts and shoes were also worn (if a character appears wearing bronze shoes, you know right away he or she is from the Otherworld). Unmentionables go unmentioned in the literature.

**animals:** Cattle were kept primarily as dairy animals, and sheep for wool, though both were slaughtered for meat and their hides were tanned for leather and parchment. Cattle-raiding was a way to acquire wealth, power, and status, and the táin bó or cattle-raid was a major literary genre (and *The Táin*, featuring the magnificent and magical white and brown bulls, was the major literary epic). Pigs were raised for meat (roast pig is the main course at any self-respecting heroic establishment). Dogs were trained to warn and protect, horses to be ridden and raced, oxen to pull wagons and plows. Pets are occasionally mentioned; Queen Medb had a pet squirrel, and Saint Columba a pet flea that kept his place in his Psalter; one of the most famous Irish poems is about a scholar and his pet cat Pangur Bán. Among wild animals, wolves, deer, and boars are the most important in literature. The salmon was the most prized fish, and “salmon of wisdom” that fed on magic hazelnuts would convey supernatural knowledge (including knowledge of the language of animals) if caught and eaten (the boy Finn famously and accidentally acquired this knowledge when he burned his thumb and sucked it while preparing the salmon for his master). Some animals have totemic significance for particular deities, heroes, or tribes (Cú Chulainn is associated with the dog). Divinities and supernatural humans had the ability to shape-shift into animal form. Animals from the Otherworld (especially cattle) are typically white with red ears (albino).

**transportation:** in the literature the major mode of land transport, also used in combat, was the chariot yoked to a team of horses; a hero typically did not drive the chariot himself but would have his trusty charioteer (Cú Chulainn’s charioteer is Loeg). People also rode (and raced) horses. The prototypical Celtic boat was the coracle (*eurragh*), made of a wicker frame covered with animal hides and tarred. Small, round coracles for two were common, but the *Voyage of Saint Brendan* describes a larger sailing coracle for a crew of twenty-nine.

**watchman device:** one character sees (often from a wall or window) an approaching host of warriors whom he does not know; he or she describes the physical appearance and demeanor of each warrior in lavish detail to another character who does know them but cannot see them; and the second character then identifies each one by name and reputation to the first character. In a “riddling” variation of the watchman device, the first character who sees the host mistakes one or more of the warriors’ superhuman physical attributes with features of the landscape (he thinks the eyes are two lakes, and so on), and the second character corrects him by identifying those features as parts of the hero’s body. Often an exuberant, hyperbolic, tour-de-force display of a writer’s descriptive powers (and cleverness in modifying the form), the watchman device can be extended to absurd lengths.

**genres and “cycles”:** the general term for “story” is *scél* (pl. *scélta*); specific early Irish genres include the birth tale (*coimpert*, “conception”); death tale (*aided*); cattle raid (*táin bó*); battle (*cath*); adventure (*echtra*); voyage tale (*immram*); wooing (*tochmar*); elopement (*ailted*); feast (*fled*); destruction (*togail or orgain*); vision (*aisling*); frenzy (*balie*); colloquy (*acallam*); lore of place-names (*dimshenches*), lore of women (*banshenchas*). Another way of organizing many of the surviving tales is by “cycle,” broadly according to the groups of people they deal with. The most important is the “Ulster Cycle,” focusing on the Ulaid, their king Conchobar and boy-hero Cú Chulainn (see “Ulaid”), culminating in the great *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (“Cattle Raid of Cooley”) about the invasion of Ulster by the Connacht forces led by Ailill and Medb; there is also a “Mythological Cycle” dealing with the gods and goddesses (see “Tuatha Dé Danann”) and with the origins of Ireland and its successive inhabitants, from the Tuatha Dé to the Fir Bolg and Fomorians and finally to the Children of Mil or “Mileseans” (the “Gaels,” the Irish themselves);
the “Cycles of the Kings,” about famous historical and semi-legendary kings; and a “Fenian Cycle” dealing with the hero Finn Mac Cumhaill and his warrior-band (see “Fianna”).

**Manuscripts:** early Irish literature would have circulated orally as well as in written from, but today survives only in manuscripts copied by medieval scribes (in the earlier period almost all scribes were monks or other clergy, but in the later Middle Ages there were secular professional scribes). Manuscripts are made from parchment, prepared from skins of animals (usually cows, but sometimes sheep). A sheet of parchment would be folded lengthwise once, making a “bifolium,” and several bifolia (in Ireland usually five of them) would be nested together and sewn in the “gutter,” making a “quire” (of ten leaves if five bifolia were used). A manuscript might consist of a single quire, but usually multiple quires would be sewn together and then bound. Each two-sided leaf in a manuscript is called a “folio,” and folios are usually numbered consecutively. The first side (the one lying to the right when the book is open) is called the “recto” (r) and the opposite side (the one lying to the left) the “verso” (v). The first leaf would be numbered 1r and 1v, the second leaf 2r and 2v, and so on; when you turned the first leaf over, folio 1r would be on the left side and folio 2r on the right side, and so on. Quires were “ruled” with a metal stylus, impressing horizontal lines in the parchment to guide the writing (in the later Middle Ages lines were ruled with ink instead). Black or dark brown ink was used, often with red ink for headings or titles (called “rubrics”) and for some capital letters. Many manuscripts would have little decoration other than ornamented capital letters, but some might contain simple or elaborate pictures (“illuminations”) either in black ink or in multiple colors. Much of the surviving vernacular literature is transmitted in a handful of later medieval manuscripts, the most famous being the Book of Leinster, the Yellow Book of Lecan, the Lebor na hUidre (the Book of the Dun Cow) and the Leabhar Breac (“Speckled Book”). The most famous religious manuscripts (mostly or entirely in Latin) are the Cathach (“Battler,” a psalter owned and possibly written by Saint Columba), the Book of Armagh, with important writings by and about Saint Patrick), and especially two lavishly illuminated gospel books, the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells.