

The killing of the Smith's Hound by Cú Chulainn and the reason why he is called Cú Chulainn

‘Indeed we know that boy’, said Conall Cernach, ‘and we know him all the better in that he is a fosterling of ours. Not long after the deed which Fergus has just related, he performed another exploit.’

‘When Culann the smith prepared a feast for Conchobar, he asked Conchobar not to bring a great crowd with him for the feast he had made was not provided by his possession of land or estate but was gained by the work of his hands and his tongs. Then Conchobar set off together with fifty chariot-warriors, the noblest and most illustrious of the heroes.’

‘Conchobar visited the playing-field then. It was always his custom to pay the boys a fleeting visit to ask a greeting of them. There he saw Cú Chulainn playing ball against thrice fifty boys, and defeating them. When they were engaged in driving the ball into the hole, he would fill the hole with his balls and the boys would not be able to ward him off. When it was they who were throwing at the hole, he by himself would ward them off so that not even a single ball would go into it. When they were wrestling, he alone would throw the thrice fifty boys, yet not all of them together could surround him to throw him. When they were engaged in the game of stripping one another, he would strip them all stark-naked but they could not even take his brooch from his mantle. Conchobar marvelled at this. He asked if the boy's deeds would correspond (to his present ones) when he attained the age of manhood. They all said that they would. Conchobar said to Cú Chulainn outside the territory of Ulster, nor yet I. ‘Come with me to the feast to which we are going since you are a guest.’ ‘I have not yet had my fill of play, master Conchobar,’ said the boy. ‘I shall follow you.’ When they had all come to the feast, Culann asked Conchobar: ‘Do you expect anyone to follow you?’ ‘No,’ said Conchobar. He did not remember the arrangement with his fosterling to come after him. ‘I have a blood hound,’

[i.e. a hound brought from overseas, i.e. the whelp of a mastiff.] said Culann. ‘There are three chains on him and three men holding each chain. He was brought from Spain. Let him be loosed to guard our cattle and our stock and let the fort be shut.’ At that point the boy arrived. The dog made for him. He still kept on with the play; he would throw his ball and then throw his hurley after it so that it struck the ball, neither stroke being greater than the other. And he threw his toy spear after

them and caught it before it fell. And though the dog was approaching him, it interfered not with his play. Conchobor and his household were so dismayed by this that they could not move. They thought they would not reach him alive though the fort was open. Now when the hound came towards the boy, he cast aside his ball and his hurley, and he tackled the dog with both hands, that is, he put one hand on the apple of the hound's throat and the other at the back of his head, and dashed him against the pillar-stone that was beside him so that all the hound's limbs sprang apart. According to another version, however, he threw his ball into the hound's mouth and it drove his entrails out through him.'

'The Ulstermen rose up to fetch the boy, some leaping over the wall of the court, others going out by the gate. They placed him in Conchobar's arms. A great alarm was raised by them at the thought that the son of the king's sister had almost been killed. At that point Culann entered the house.'

“Welcome, little lad, for your mother's sake. But as for myself, would that I had not prepared a feast! My livelihood is now a livelihood wasted, my husbandry a husbandry lost without my hound. That hound was not one of the three hounds that were in the brain of Conganchness, as some hold, for it was to take vengeance for Cú Roí's death on the men of Ulster that Conganchness had gone and that happened long after the Cattle-Raid, but Cú Chulainn was only seven years old when he killed the smith's hound. Thus the theory held by those people is false; the smith's hound had been brought from Spain, as is asserted in the text of the tale. The servant who has been taken from me, that is, my hound, maintained life and honour for me. He was defence and protection for my goods and my cattle. He guarded all my beasts for me in field and in house.”

“That is no great matter,’ said the boy. ‘A whelp of the same litter will be reared by me for you, and until such time as that hound grows and is fit for action, I myself shall be a hound to protect your cattle and to protect yourself. And I shall protect all Mag Murthemne; neither flock nor herd shall be taken thence from me without my knowing it.’ ‘Your name shall be Cú Chulainn (the Hound of Culann) then,’ said Catbhad. ‘I am glad that it should be my name,’ said Cú Chulainn. It were no cause of wonder that one who had done this when he was seven, should have performed a valiant deed now that he is seventeen years old,’ said Conall Cernach.

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