

Bachelor thesis Celtic languages and culture; University of Utrecht

# Ravens, Crows and Bird hunting

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Four bird related motifs in nine tales from the  
Ulster Cycle

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## **Abbreviations**

### **Titles of stories<sup>1</sup>**

ACC – *Aided Con Culainn*

ACR – *Aided Con Roí*

AOA – *Aided Óenfhir Aífe*

CCC- *Compert Con Culainn*

LMnU – *Longes Mac nUislenn*

SCC – *Serglige Con Culainn*

TBC – *Táin Bó Cúailgne*

TBR – *Táin Bó Regamna*

TE – *Tochmarc Emire*

### **Manuscripts and library collections**

Brit. Mus. – British Museum

LL – *Book of Leinster*

LU – *Lebor na hUidre*

R.Ir.Ac. – Royal Irish Academy

TCD – Trinity College Dublin

YBL – *Yellow Book of Lecan*

### **Other**

DIAS – Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

DIL – Dictionary of the Irish Language

MS - Manuscript

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<sup>1</sup> When these abbreviations are used as references they refer to the edition of the Irish text and not to the translation of the text. References are made to paragraph numbers for all these stories (indicated by §) except for TBC and ACC, which are referred to using line numbers. When used denote a certain story they signify the title of that story.

## 1. Introduction

To any student of early Irish literature it will be clear that animal appearances are abundant in the stories. Oftentimes these animals play a key role in the story, such as in the famous Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, which centers around the stealing of a bull. And this is not the only cattle raid in early Irish literature.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the most famous of early Irish heroes, Cú Chulainn, is the namesake of an animal, a dog (*cú*). But there are more animals which play a role in these tales. This paper focusses on the role of birds in early Irish literature. It offers a narratological approach to a number of early Irish texts in which birds make an appearance. Birds appear frequently in these texts, which makes an examination of these appearances and what narratological function they might have interesting and fruitful. By studying a number of texts closely it is possible to discern certain patterns in the role which birds play and to group these together into motifs.

The first chapter, in the introduction, is comprised of four sub-chapters. The first is concerned with the research questions, followed by the method used in this paper, the third sub-chapter deals with the corpus used and last is the theoretical framework of this paper. This is followed by two chapters, each dealing with a motif-group, the first is that of the bird hunting motifs and the second of ravens/crows motifs. Each is divided into sub-chapters dealing with the different motifs. When all of this data has been analyzed it is summarized in the conclusion. Here the two groups of bird occurrences are recounted along with the motifs that this investigation has produced.

### 1.1 Research questions

The main research question of this paper is the following: Which narrative functions can be ascribed to the appearance of birds in the chosen nine texts of the Ulster cycle, when grouped based on the action they are involved in on one hand and their species on the other? To be able to answer this question two sub-questions need to be answered which deal with the two groups mentioned in the research question. These groups are examined based on motifs, which leads to the following sub-questions, one based on action and one on species. The first is: What motifs can be deduced from the cases of bird hunting in the Ulster cycle? The second sub-question deals with species: Is it possible to find motifs which apply to ravens and crows in particular and if so, what are these motifs?

### 1.2 Method

In order to find motifs in the role birds play in early Irish literature, a systematic approach to the available material is essential. The appearances of birds in the nine texts in the corpus, which is discussed later, are noted down and categorized based on five criteria. This is done to give a clear overview of the role of the birds found in the texts, and to serve as the

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<sup>2</sup> *Táin Bó Fraich, Táin Bó Regamna, Táin Bó Regamain, Táin Bó Dartada and Táin Bó Flidais*. Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Táin Bó Cuailgne' in ed. John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A History Encyclopedia*, 5 vols. (Santa Barbara-Denver-Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006) 1647.

foundation of this research paper. The criteria on which the examples are examined are the following: the species of the birds, their connection to death or war within the context of the story, any form of supernatural qualities the birds might have, the action which the birds are part of and whether or not the presence of the birds signals a change in the narrative. The species of a bird can be a marker for a motif. Birds of the same species can share certain characteristics on which a motif is based. The connection of birds to death or war can point in the direction of a motif such as that of a carrion bird or birds as bringers of death.<sup>3</sup> Some birds in these texts can do things ordinary birds can not, such as speak, or they are shapeshifted humans. These oddities are documented in order to better understand the use of the birds in the text. There are two ways in which a bird can be tied to an action. A bird can be the performer of the action, for example it can sing, or it can be subjected to an action, for example it can be hunted. If several cases are found, in which birds either perform or are subjected to the same action, it could indicate a motif. It also helps to determine why the birds are there and how active their role is. Whether or not the birds occur at junctures in the plot is fundamental in determining the role they play in relation to the plot of the story. The result of this examination of the sources is formalized in Table 1, which can be found in the appendix.<sup>4</sup> This data is discussed with regard to the sub-questions of this paper, all cases in which birds are hunted are discussed in chapter 2 and all cases in which the species of the birds is raven or crow are discussed in chapter 3.

This paper offers a narratological approach of nine early Irish tales. It is possible to uncover motifs by looking for patterns concerning the role of birds within the corpus.<sup>5</sup> A motif is a small information unit within a text, together they are the bricks from which the text is built.<sup>6</sup> I propose that some specific occurrences of birds in these stories held significance for the audience and what they signify is consistent throughout the investigated texts.<sup>7</sup> These occurrences can thus be called motifs. A motif conveys information to the audience of the text, that might either be static or dynamic. A static motif conveys information without changing the course of the narrative. A dynamic motif brings about a change in the narrative.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3 Corpus

To be able to discern patterns in the role birds play in early Irish literature a large corpus of texts is needed. However, due to the size of this research paper it is not possible to cover all

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<sup>3</sup> Ravens have been known to be linked to death and war. (Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: DIAS, 1998) 192. ; Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 177-78. ) And see DIL s.v. *bran*.

<sup>4</sup> All other tables in this paper are based upon Table 1 except for Table 2.1 dealing with Cú Chulainn's greetings, this is a standalone table and its data can not be found in Table 1.

<sup>5</sup> Kiene Brillenburg-Wurth and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Het Leven van Teksten: Een inleiding tot literatuurwetenschap* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that all cases will fit the motifs completely, deviation from the motifs is possible, as will become clear in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

of the texts that might be of interest to the topic. Therefore a selection is made which is both manageable within the scope of the paper and contains enough appearances of birds to allow the deduction of motifs. The texts chosen are all narrative texts since they allow the presence of birds to be placed within the plot of a story. The Ulster Cycle is the foundation of the corpus of this paper, however, using the complete Ulster Cycle would go beyond the scope of this paper. The Ulster Cycle is the totality of texts that deal with the adventures of the Ulstermen, the inhabitants of the province Ulster.<sup>9</sup> This cycle is the largest of the four cycles that are distinguished in early Irish literature, the others being the Mythological Cycle, the Fenian Cycle and the King's Cycle.<sup>10</sup> Thurneysen has listed around 80 tales in his book *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* as being part of the Ulster cycle, this includes long prose tales, short poems and *dindshenchas*, place name lore.<sup>11</sup> He only includes material composed until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but even after this period material has been composed. The texts written for the Ulster cycle span from the 7<sup>th</sup> century all the way to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> It is broad in terms of the amount of texts, time span and genre. A selection has been made that is primarily based on the date of the text. All texts of this corpus were composed before the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Moreover only the texts that Cross and Slover have recorded in *Ancient Irish Tales* are examined. This because it narrows down the corpus considerably, it contains seventeen tales from the Ulster Cycle, and provides prose texts only which are useful for narratological research. Ultimately nine of these texts have been used for this paper.<sup>14</sup> These are the nine texts: *Compert Con Culainn*<sup>15</sup>, *Táin Bó*

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<sup>9</sup> Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Ulster Cycle' in John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A History Encyclopedia*, 5 vols. (Santa Barbara-Denver-Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006) 1711.

<sup>10</sup> Ó hUiginn, 'Ulster Cycle', 1708-9.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Halle: Verlag Max Niemeyer, 1921) [hereafter IHKS]. The discussion of the Ulster Cycle starts at page 96 with the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* and end with *De maccaib Conairi* on page 665. There are a total of 84 entries in this list, some of these are groups of *dindshenchas*.

<sup>12</sup> Ó hUiginn, 'Ulster Cycle', 1709.

<sup>13</sup> Ó hUiginn, 'Ulster Cycle', 1710.

<sup>14</sup> Texts which only contain the figurative use of a bird such as 'he was as swift as a hawk' have been left out. When these purely figurative cases occur in texts that have been used for this paper they have been left out as well. Moreover, texts which did not contain any bird occurrences which might be related to any of the four motifs have been excluded.

<sup>15</sup> There are two versions of CCC left to us. The primary texts of version I (V1) is found in Lebor na Huidre (LU). Version II (V2) is found in two manuscripts, Egerton 1782 and R.Ir.Ac. D iv 2 and in both those manuscripts it occurs directly after V1. (Tomás Ó Concheanainn, 'The textual tradition of *Compert Con Culainn*', *Celtica* 21 (1990) 441.) The composition of V1 is dated to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Ó Concheanainn, *Textual Tradition*, 441.) V2 is believed to be slightly younger and Thurneysen dates its composition to the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. (Thurneysen, *IHSK*, 271.) Both versions are used in this paper, as they offer two very different accounts of the bird hunting scene. For V1 an edition by Van Hamel is used and the translation by Gantz. '*Compert Con Culainn*', in A.G. van Hamel, (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 3 (Dublin: DIAS, 1933) 1-8.; 'The Birth of Cú Chulainn', in Jeffrey Gantz (trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981) 130-133. For V2 the following translation is used: 'The Birth of Cú Chulainn', in Tom Peete Cross and C.H. Slover, (eds.), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969) 134-136. This translation is only partial but contains the scene most essential to this paper. (Ó Concheanainn, *Textual Tradition*, 442.) I will refer to this translation in the notes instead of an edition of the Irish text as no good edition was available to me.

*Cúailgne*<sup>16</sup>, *Táin Bó Regamna*<sup>17</sup>, *Tochmarc Emire*<sup>18</sup>, *Aided Con Culainn*<sup>19</sup>, *Aided Con Roí*<sup>20</sup>, *Aided Óenfhir Aife*<sup>21</sup>, *Serglige Con Culainn*<sup>22</sup>, *Longes Mac nUislenn*.<sup>23</sup> In this paper I mostly

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<sup>16</sup> There are two main manuscript traditions concerning the TBC. Recension I consist of the base text found in LU supplemented by the complementing text found in the Yellow book of Lecan (YBL). Recension II is found in the Book of Leinster (LL). The earliest date of composition is set in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. (Ciaran Carson (trans.), *The Táin: A New Translation of the Táin Bó Cúailgne* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007) xiii.) As both recensions offer different accounts of some of the scenes used in this paper both are used here. It will always be made clear which recension is referred to. For both recension I and II translations by Cecile O'Rahilly are used which are included in her editions of these recensions. Cecile O'Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailgne from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: DIAS, 1967); Cecile O'Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailgne: Recension I* (Dublin: DIAS, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> There are two manuscript containing TBR: YBL and Egerton 1782. There are only minor differences between the two texts. The composition of the text is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. (Johan Corthals (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Regamna: eine Vorerzählung zur Táin Bó Cúailgne*, Sitzungsberichte Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse 478, Veröffentlichungen der Keltischen Kommission 5, (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987) 11-15.) In this paper the edition by Johan Corthals, referred to above, is used, which has Egerton 1782 as its basic text. The translation by Cross and Slover is used. 'The Cattle-Raid of Regamna' in Tom Peete Cross and C.H. Slover, (eds.), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969) 211-14.

<sup>18</sup> There are two main recensions of TE, version I and version III (version II is hypothetical). Version I is found fragmentary in LU (beginning) and Oxford MS Rawlinson B.512 (ending). Version III is found in several manuscripts: LU (four leaves lost), three complete versions: R.Ir.Ac.D. 4.2., R.Ir.Ac. 23. N. 10, and Brit. Mus. Harl. 5280. The story has elements which could possibly place the date of composition in the 8<sup>th</sup> century but what has survived is dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. (Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn*, 16.) Version III is different from Version I in its ending, for example the story of Ruad's daughter Derbforgil is only contained in version III. (Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn*, 16-17.) As this is the part where birds occur, Version III is used in this paper. The edition used is by Van Hamel and the translation by Cross and Slover. 'Tochmarc Emire' in A.G. van Hamel, (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and other stories* (Dublin: DIAS, 1933) 16-68.; 'The Wooing of Emer' in Tom Peete Cross and C.H. Slover (eds.), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969) 153-171.

<sup>19</sup> Two early forms of ACC extant. The date of composition for the oldest version, found in LL and TCD H3.18, is the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Thurneysen, *IHSK*, 548.) An older version also survives, its composition is dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid., 557.) The oldest version is used in this paper as it is the only one composed before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The edition and translation by Bettina Kimpton are used in this paper. Bettina Kimpton (ed. and trans.), *The Death of Cú Chulainn: A Critical of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni with Introduction, Translation, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary*, Maynooth Medieval Irish Texts 6 (Maynooth: School of Celtic Studies, National University of Ireland, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Three early versions of ACR are extant, but no full version written down before the 12<sup>th</sup> century remains. Version I is found in Egerton 88 and its composition is dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Thurneysen, *IHSK*, 432.) Version II is found in Bodleian Laud 610 and appears to be an independent account of the story. (Ibid., 437.) Version III is found in YBL, this version's composition is dated somewhere between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. (Ibid., 440.) Version III is used in this paper as both a good edition and translation of this text are available and it contains the relevant parts. The following edition is used: R.L. Best (ed.), 'The Tragic Death of Cúroí mac Dári', *Ériu* 2 (1905) 18-35. And the translation by Maria Tymoczko: Tymoczko, Maria (trans.), *Two death tales from the Ulster cycle: The death of Cu Roí and The Death of Cu Chulainn*, Dolmen Texts 2 (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> The earliest version of AOA is only found in one manuscript: YBL. Its composition is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century by Meyer but Van Hamel dates it to the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. (Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn*, 9.) Both the edition and translation used in this paper are by Kuno Meyer. Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), 'The death of Conla', *Ériu* 1 (1904) 113-21.

<sup>22</sup> Two versions survive of SCC. One in LU and one in TCD H.4.22. The latter is based on the former and the composition of the earliest version has been dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. (Myles Dillon (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 13 (Dublin: DIAS, 1953) xi-xvi.) In this paper the LU version is used as it is the oldest, the above mentioned edition by Dillon is used and the following translation: 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn & The Only Jealousy of Emer', in Jeffrey Gantz (trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981) 153-178.

rely on translation of the Irish texts but where terminology is of importance the Irish is taken into account. For example when looking at the species of the birds the exact Irish word might be important.<sup>24</sup>

#### 1.4 Theoretical framework

Some work has been done with regard to birds in Early Irish literature but not much. Miranda Green has done extensive research into both the material culture and the literature of the Celtic world concerning animals, this she has documented in her book *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*. In this book she mostly deals with archeological sources but there is a chapter about animals in early Celtic literature.<sup>25</sup> Green does not attempt to argue any specific view point but provides an exploration of the role animals play in Celtic life.<sup>26</sup> For this paper her discussion of birds in early Irish literature is the most interesting. She pays special attention to ravens, which she mentions as omens of evil, death and destruction.<sup>27</sup> She also mentions their assumed ability to foretell the future and their use in augury practiced by druids.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, she briefly touches upon some of the cases discussed in this paper.<sup>29</sup> Green's work does not provide any in-depth insights into the motifs of birds in early Irish literature. But it does provide a good starting point for this research, as it touches briefly upon many themes. Anne Ross has written an article called *Chain Symbolism in Celtic Religion*. With this article Ross wants to add to the existing research into Celtic religion.<sup>30</sup> This research is often based upon archeological sources but, as these are quite limited for Ireland, Ross also conducts a narratological investigation.<sup>31</sup> To investigate the chain symbolism in the Irish literary sources she proposes two motifs to explore, 'the transformation of superhuman beings into swans, and the wearing of chains, or linking together by chains of the metamorphosed beings.'<sup>32</sup> She examines six Irish tales to establish these two motifs. Ross found that all the chain-bearing birds in the six tales were aquatic birds, mostly swans and some unspecified, these were transformed superhuman beings. Where the birds were specified as swans they were associated with non-harmful people, which would be in line with the perception of swans in the Celtic tradition according to

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<sup>23</sup> There are two version of LMnU, the earliest version is found in three manuscripts: LL, YBL and Egerton 1782. (Vernam Hull (ed. and trans.), *Longes Mac nUislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, The Modern Language of Association of America Monograph Series 16 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) 3-4.) The date of composition for this early version is the 9<sup>th</sup> century. (Hull, *Longes Mac nUislenn*, 32.) This early version is used in this paper and both the edition and accompanying translation of Hull, as referred to above, are used. This edition is based on all three early manuscripts.

<sup>24</sup> When referring to the texts I refer to the paragraphs and lines in the editions containing the Irish texts as this provides much more detailed references than page numbers in translations. When I do refer to a translation of the text this is made clear in the footnote.

<sup>25</sup> Green, *Animals*, 162-95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-78.

<sup>29</sup> SCC §7, ACR §4 and ACC 381-382 are briefly discussed by Green. (Green, *Animals*, 178-80.)

<sup>30</sup> Anne Ross, 'Chain Symbolism in Pagan Celtic Religion', *Speculum* 34/1 (1959) 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



Ross.<sup>33</sup> Ross then proceeds to apply these findings to the archeological evidence,<sup>34</sup> this part is less interesting with regard to the paper at hand but shows the possibilities of the investigation of motifs. Moreover, Ross argues that where the literary sources only offer slight evidence the material sources can substantiate this.<sup>35</sup> Ross' article offers both an example for this paper, as it shows the possibilities of narratological research, and it shines a light on some of the cases discussed in this paper with regard to the birds' supernatural qualities.<sup>36</sup> References to Ross' article will be made throughout this paper, but as the focus lies on bird hunting and ravens/crows the supernatural qualities of the birds are only discussed in relation to the four motifs at hand. Lastly, research has been done on the topic of the Morrígan by Matthias Egeler. He has written an intercultural analysis of death demons which includes the Irish war goddesses.<sup>37</sup> In his research he discusses several traits of death demons and compares them based on these traits. Egeler discusses the entire group of Irish war demons but the Morrígan is most important to the paper at hand, as she appears in the shape of a bird in three tales.<sup>38</sup> He first considers the problematic etymology of the name Morrígan. It can either mean 'Great Queen' or 'Phantom Queen'.<sup>39</sup> Egeler argues that 'Phantom Queen' would be the preferred etymology.<sup>40</sup> He bases his argument on the Morrígan's relation to death, for example in the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* where her warning of the Don Cuailgne is the cause of strife and death.<sup>41</sup> This is not the only case where the Morrígan is the cause of death according to Egeler. He insists that the Irish war demons often cause the death of people, but do not kill themselves.<sup>42</sup> This close link to war and death is connected, by Egeler, to the Morrígan's association with birds, and carrion birds in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55-59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>36</sup> Ross discusses two tales which are also part of this paper: ACC and SCC.

<sup>37</sup> Matthias Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 71 (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter 2011). But also the more concise article: Matthias Egeler, 'Death, wings, and divine devouring: possible Mediterranean affinities of Irish battlefield demons and Norse valkyries', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 5 (2008) 3–24. There is much debate about the way in which the Morrígan, Badb, Macha and Nemain are interrelated. Egeler proposes that they are all different identities but are part of collective unity. He proposes that the confusion of their names is historical, which makes them partially interchangeable. But, even though they are aspects of a collective they are not one character. The view taken in this paper on this matter is in compliance with that of Egeler. (Egeler, 'Death, wings, and divine devouring', 7) For a more detailed discussion of the evidence in favor of a collective character see Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 38-41.

<sup>38</sup> ACC 381-382, TBC I 954-956; TBC II 1303-1306 and TBR §5. For a discussion of these cases see chapter 3.3 'The Morrígan as death messenger'.

<sup>39</sup> Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>41</sup> TBC I 954-966; TBC II 1301-1319. For Egeler's argument see Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 36-38. This case is discussed more in depth later in this paper, in chapter 3.3 'The Morrígan as death messenger'.

<sup>42</sup> Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 71. For example TBC I 3877-3883 where the Morrígan prophesizes the victory of both Ulster and Connacht which, according to Egeler, is her way of causing more bloodshed. (Ibid., 58.) And in *TBR* and *Echtra Nerai* the Morrígan sets the wheels in motion for the coming about of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. (Ibid., 59.)

particular.<sup>43</sup> She can appear in the shape of a bird and through the collective identity of the Irish war goddesses she shares the *Babd*'s association with the scald-crow.<sup>44</sup> This paper is in part depending on Egeler's research, when the *Morrígan* is discussed the valuable research done by him is used.<sup>45</sup> And in part a continuation and broadening of Egeler's research. The *Morrígan*'s tendency to cause death is explored in chapter 3.3. And the traits ascribed to the *Morrígan* by Egeler, the relation to death and war and the habit of causing it, are examined in the carrion birds the *Morrígan* is often associated with, the raven and crow.

## 2. Bird hunting

The most prominently recurring bird related action found in this corpus is that of bird hunting. Bird hunting appears to have been part of early Irish society. There is archeological evidence for the hunting for several types of wild birds, probably to obtain food, although the evidence is scarce.<sup>46</sup> There is also some allusion to this purpose of hunting in the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. Three times *Cú Chulainn* greets someone using the following formula:<sup>47</sup>

	Irish text	Translation	Addressee
TBC I 1170-1171	“Dia foigela énlaithe Mag Murthemni rot bía caud co l-leith allailiu”	“If birds fly over Mag Murthemne you shall have a barnacle goose and a half” <sup>48</sup>	Lugaid
TBC I 1313-1314; TBC II 1596-1697	“araile dia tí íall a m-mag, rot bía caúth co l-leith,”	“or else if a flock of birds fly over the plain you shall have a barnacle goose and the half of another” <sup>49</sup>	Fergus
TBC I 2728-2729	“Dia toichle liath léna in mag, rodbía-so cadan co leith araile;”	“If a flock of birds fly across the plain, you shall have a wild goose and a half;” <sup>50</sup>	Fergus

The addressee of all three greeting is a friend of *Cú Chulainn* and every time the greeting is welcomed. It is a sign of hospitality, *Cú Chulainn* is willing to share his provisions with his

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Badb* can be found in dictionaries from the 19th century onward with the translation ‘scald-crow’. (Ibid., 44.) And in her scald-crow form she is often part of battle scenes. (Ibid., 48-50.)

<sup>45</sup> The *Morrígan* is only discussed in this paper with regard to the corpus and subject at hand. This means that only the scenes where she has taken on the shape of a bird are used.

<sup>46</sup> Green, *Animals*, 52

<sup>47</sup> O’Rahilly notes that this formula is also used in *Comrac Fir Diad*: 2728-2731. (O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 257.) In these cases there is no actual bird hunt going on, it is part of a greeting but the action itself is never performed. For this reason these three cases, where hunting is mentioned but not practiced, are not part of the cases discussed in this paper and are not found in Table 1.

<sup>48</sup> O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 157.

<sup>49</sup> O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 161.

<sup>50</sup> O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 199.

guest.<sup>51</sup> It appears from these greetings that the catching of birds, and in these three greeting geese in particular, was a source of food. The trapping of wild birds<sup>52</sup> or keeping of domestic birds<sup>53</sup> to provide food seems to have been common.<sup>54</sup> The hunting as we find it in this corpus points to a more elite type of hunting. Not as a necessity to obtain food but for fun and as a means for the elite to practice their skills.<sup>55</sup>

Excluding the previously mentioned greetings there are eight cases of bird hunting in the corpus used for this paper, these haven been documented in Table 2.2, below. Six of the ten stories, on which this paper is based, contain cases of bird hunting. I propose that two bird hunting motifs can be found in this corpus. One is a static motif that ties the capturing of birds alive to Cú Chulainn. The second is a dynamic motif in which a clear pattern can be seen where the hunt occurs at a juncture in the story. The change can be anywhere between a very minor change and a change essential to the development of the story. First the static motif related to Cú Chulainn is discussed, followed by a discussion of the dynamic change motif.

		Species	Change	Hunter	Caught alive
SCC	§4-6	Birds	Yes	Cú Chulainn	Yes
	§7	Birds	Yes	Cú Chulainn	Not Caught
CCC	V1 §2; V2 p. 134	Birds	Yes	Ulstermen	Not Caught
TBC	TBC I 781-801; TBC II 1117-1165	Swans	No	Cú Chulainn	Yes
	TBC I 1415-1424; TBC II 1706-1713	Wild-fowl	Yes	Cú Chulainn	No
TE	§84	Birds	Yes	Cú Chulainn	Wounded
AOA	§2	Sea-birds	Yes	Connla	Yes
ACR	§1-2	Raven	Yes	Cú Chulainn	No

<sup>51</sup> In TBC I 1317-1318, in reply to Cú Chulainn's greeting (TBC I 1313-1314), Fergus answers: "'I trust your welcome', said Fergus, 'but it is not for food that I have come. I know what provisions you have here.'" (O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 161.) In reply to TBC I 2728-2729 Fergus says the following: "'If we had come for hospitality,' said Fergus, 'we should be all the better pleased to get it, but that is not why we have come.'" (O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 199.) TBC I 2736-2737. Cú Chulainn shows his willingness to provide food for his guests, showing his hospitality. This is received well by his guests.

<sup>52</sup> There are several legal tracts dealing with the rules regarding the trapping of birds. For example *Bretha Forma* and *Bretha Sén Forma*. (Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 301-2.)

<sup>53</sup> Hens appear to have been the most common livestock birds in ancient Ireland as their value can be found in the legal material and they are included in the early Irish currency system. (Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 102-3.) There is also some minor evidence of geese being held as livestock and the same goes for ducks. (Ibid., 105-7.)

<sup>54</sup> Green, *Animals*, 22-24

<sup>55</sup> Green, *Animals*, 24.

## 2.1 Cú Chulainn's bird hunting motif

The connection between Cú Chulainn and bird hunting is evident from the amount of times when he is the one doing the hunting, in six of the eight cases in this corpus.<sup>56</sup> In TBC II 1117-1165 the young Cú Chulainn takes a chariot and a charioteer to prove his heroism. When he returns he performs several wondrous feats while in the chariot. First he catches and ties two stags from a wild herd of deer to the chariot and then he sees a flock of white swans. Cú Chulainn catches these alive as well and Ibar, the charioteer, ties them to the chariot. Cú Chulainn asks Ibar the following question:

'Which would be the more wonderful, to bring them alive to Emain or to bring them dead, Ibar?' said the boy. 'More wonderful indeed to bring them alive' said Ibar, 'For not everyone can catch the living birds.'<sup>57</sup>

Ibar expresses here that it would be an outstanding feat to catch the swans alive, and Cú Chulainn does exactly that.<sup>58</sup> This, along with the other feats performed by him in his childhood, are produced as evidence of Cú Chulainn's greatness by Fergus, who relays these stories to Ailill and Medb. Moreover, these swans tied to the chariot are part of the impressive stature of Cú Chulainn when he arrives at Emain Macha.

'A single chariot-warrior is here' said Leborcham, 'and terribly he comes. He has in the chariot the bloody heads of his enemies. There are beautiful, pure-white birds held (?) by him in the chariot. He has wild, untamed deer bound and tied and fettered. If he be not met tonight, the warriors of Ulster will fall at his hand.'<sup>59</sup>

Capturing birds alive is part of the imaging of the hero Cú Chulainn as a person able to perform extraordinary feats. He performs this feat again in *Sergilge Con Culainn* where he catches birds to perch on the shoulders of the Ulsterwomen.<sup>60</sup> Only one other character is able to catch birds alive, Connla, Cú Chulainn's only son. In *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* Connla makes

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<sup>56</sup> The other hunters are Connla in AOA §2 and the Ulstermen including heroes such as Bricriu, Fergus and Conchobar in CCC V1 §2; V2 p. 134.

<sup>57</sup> O'Rahilly, *TBC II*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> TBC I 771-773 offers a different account of this event. "'Would the men of Ulster rather I brought in, a live one or a dead one?' 'The experts take them alive,' said the charioteer." (Carson, *Táin*, 49.) Here catching birds alive remains a remarkable feat but appears to be less unique to the abilities of Cú Chulainn.

<sup>59</sup> O'Rahilly, *TBC II*, 170. Question mark is O'Rahilly's.

<sup>60</sup> SCC §4-6. The birds here appear to have been captured alive. Cú Chulainn hits them with a boomerang after which they flap their wings and claws against the water. Moreover, the women want to put a bird on each shoulder giving the impression that these birds would be alive. A pet bird on a shoulder is also found in TBC I 920-945 where Cú Chulainn kills Ailill's pet bird. In TBC II 1267-1279 the pet bird that is killed belongs to Medb. Cú Chulainn also planned on catching some sea-birds alive in *Oilaemhain Con Culainn* but is distracted from this task and never finishes it. OCC §59-61. (Whitley Stokes, 'The Training of Cúchulainn', *Revue Celtique* 29 (1908) 109-47.)

his way to the Ulstermen when he is seven years old.<sup>61</sup> While he is on the road he plays with a sling and sea-birds, catching them and reviving them again.

“He would put a stone in his staff-sling, and launch a stunning shot at the sea-birds, so that he brought them down, and they alive. Then would he let them up into the air again. He would perform this palate-feat, between both hands, so that it was too quick for the eye to perceive. He would tune his voice for them, and bring them down for the second time. Then he revived them once more.”<sup>62</sup>

This game Connla plays while travelling is reminiscent of that of his father when he first comes to Conchobar’s court.<sup>63</sup> As Cú Chulainn is the only other person who is able to capture birds alive, for his son to perform the same feat might be a way to connect the greatness of father and son.<sup>64</sup> The reader knows that Connla is the son of Cú Chulainn as this is told at the beginning of the story,<sup>65</sup> if the reader is familiar with the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn he will notice the similarity. The Ulstermen and Cú Chulainn himself do not have this information and fail to see the relation. Emer warns Cú Chulainn that he is about to kill his son.<sup>66</sup> But Cú Chulainn is not dissuaded: “‘Even though it were he who is there, woman,’ said he, ‘I would kill him for the honour of Ulster.’”<sup>67</sup> The impending tragedy of Cú Chulainn, who is about to kill his only son, is emphasized for the reader by showing their similarities. The link between Cú Chulainn and the capturing of birds alive has to be strong in order for this comparison between father and son to work, the reader needs to notice it. The motif is, in principle, quite static as it adorns the heroism of Cú Chulainn. But in AOA it is less so, as here it is not only used to point out Connla as a warrior of extraordinary qualities but also to emphasize his connection to his father. It strengthens the tragedy of this tale.

## 2.2 Bird hunting as a signal of change

The other bird hunting motif does produce change, however. In fact, the producing of change is the core of the motif. In seven of the eight cases in this corpus there is a change in the story after the bird hunting scene.<sup>68</sup> Below, the six stories containing these cases are

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<sup>61</sup> AOA §2.

<sup>62</sup> Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 172.

<sup>63</sup> Cú Chulainn plays a game with his toy javelin and hurley-stick. Throwing one after the other and catching them before they hit the ground. (TBC I: 415-417.)

<sup>64</sup> Connla is prophesied to give the Ulstermen the kingship as far as Rome if he would have been among them for five years. (AOA §12.) But as he is killed by Cú Chulainn this can no longer come to pass. Nevertheless Connla held the promise of being a great warrior, greater even than Cú Chulainn himself.

<sup>65</sup> AOA §1.

<sup>66</sup> AOA §8.

<sup>67</sup> AOA §9.

<sup>68</sup> See Table 2.2

discussed to illustrate this change.<sup>69</sup> First the calm moment in the story is described, followed by the moment of the hunt and finally the change after the hunt is addressed.

First *Aided Óenfhir Aife*,<sup>70</sup> as this story has already been discussed above. The scene where Connla is playing with the birds by catching and releasing them is at the start of the story. First a brief explanation of how Connla and Cú Chulainn are related is given and then young Connla goes on his way.<sup>71</sup> While on the road he is hunting birds for fun. The Ulstermen see him approach in that manner and are impressed by Connla's extraordinary feat in such a way that they deem him dangerous.<sup>72</sup> As Connla is not allowed to disclose his name to anyone<sup>73</sup> the Ulstermen take offence and this eventually leads to Cú Chulainn killing his only son.<sup>74</sup> The action of the story starts right after the hunt, and the hostility of the Ulstermen towards Connla is in part caused by his performance of this hunting feat.

In *Serglige Con Culainn* there are two cases of bird hunting which are closely connected.<sup>75</sup> When the story starts the Ulstermen are waiting for Conall and Fergus to arrive to being the annual festival before Samhain.<sup>76</sup> Then a flock of birds flies over and all the Ulsterwomen, seized by a great desire to obtain these birds, ask Cú Chulainn to catch these birds for them. He catches two birds for all the women except for his wife Ethne.<sup>77</sup> Cú Chulainn promises to get her the most beautiful birds when other ones would fly over.<sup>78</sup> Not soon after this promise two beautiful birds, bound together by a red-golden chain, fly over and Cú Chulainn tries to catch these, despite warnings by Lóg that these birds have a special power and should not be caught. He fails to catch the birds and they disappear under a lake.<sup>79</sup> Cú Chulainn falls asleep after this and is abused by two otherworldly women.<sup>80</sup> When he wakes up, he is unable to speak and is in his sick-bed for a year. After that year he recovers and returns to the place where he had fallen asleep a year earlier. Here he meets Lí Ban, who asks Cú Chulainn to help her husband Labraid, if he would do so he gets the hand of Fand.<sup>81</sup> Cú Chulainn agrees to this and goes with Lí Ban to the otherworld. The bird

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<sup>69</sup> The two times birds are hunted in SCC are part of one action. The first and second hunt are discussed together because the first hunt directly leads to the second.

<sup>70</sup> AOA §2 in Table 2.2.

<sup>71</sup> AOA §1-2.

<sup>72</sup> AOA §3-4.

<sup>73</sup> AOA §1: "Let no man put him off his road, let him not make himself known to any men, nor let him refuse combat to any." (Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 172.)

<sup>74</sup> AOA §11-12.

<sup>75</sup> SCC §4-6 and SCC §7 in Table 2.2.

<sup>76</sup> SCC §1-3.

<sup>77</sup> Emer is known as Cú Chulainn's wife, and she is again at the end of SCC. Ethne might appear as his wife due to a confusion of tales, or possible an older version in which she was his wife.

<sup>78</sup> SCC §4-6.

<sup>79</sup> SCC §7. The supernatural qualities of these birds are not discussed in this paper, unless it is relevant to the motif, as already mentioned in the introduction. For the discussion of the supernatural qualities of the two chained birds in SCC Anne Ross' article is very interesting. She mentions the singing as an otherworldly characteristic. (Ross, 'Chain Symbolism', 47-48.)

<sup>80</sup> SCC §8.

<sup>81</sup> SCC §12-14. Fand is a woman from the *síd*, the inhabitants of the otherworld. She is promised to Cú Chulainn as an enticement to help Labraid and Lí Ban against their enemies. (Jacqueline Borsje, 'The "terror of the night" and the Morrígain: Shifting faces of the supernatural', in ed. Mícheál Ó Flaithearta *Proceedings of the Seventh*

episode is far removed from Cú Chulainn's trip to the otherworld but nevertheless the two are tied together. The first hunt leads to the second and Cú Chulainn wants to please his wife. The second hunt then leads to Cú Chulainn's sick-bed which is followed by him going back to the place where he saw the birds and where he obtains his quest to venture to the otherworld. Ross proposes that these magical birds are Fand and Lí Ban and that they are also responsible for the first flock of birds. They do this to further their own causes, Lí Ban wants help for Labraid and Fand wants Cú Chulainn's affections.<sup>82</sup> The bird hunts have set the wheels in motion for the entire story.

In *Tochmarc Emire*<sup>83</sup> Cú Chulainn has won the hand of Derbforgil, which he has declined, but he has agreed to have a tryst with her in a year hence.<sup>84</sup> There is a pause in the narrative as this year goes by, nothing happens, Cú Chulainn is not able to get closer to Emer, his prospective bride. At the end of the year he and Lóeg go to the place where the tryst is to take place.<sup>85</sup> While on the road they see two birds, Cú Chulainn slings a stone at the birds and wounds one of them. The birds turn out to be Derbforgil, who has been wounded, and her handmaid. Cú Chulainn saves Derbforgil by sucking the stone out of her but having tasted her blood they cannot be wed,<sup>86</sup> Cú Chulainn gives Derbforgil to Lóeg.<sup>87</sup> Not long after this Cú Chulainn succeeds in getting Emer's hand and the story ends. Not only does this hunt start a new turn of action in the story but it is also used to resolve the problem of Cú Chulainn's obligation to marry Derbforgil.

Not all birds are hunted by Cú Chulainn. In *Compert Con Culainn*<sup>88</sup> he is not yet born and logically does not take part in the hunt. This story exists in two very different versions, the older version (V1) and the younger one (V2). Both are discussed below, as they offer two different accounts of the hunt. Starting with the oldest, V1, which starts with the hunting scene.

“One time, when Conchobur and the chieftains of Ulaid were at Emuin Machae, a flock of birds frequented the plain outside Emuin, and it grazed there until not so much as a root or stalk or a blade of grass remained. The Ulaid were distressed to see the land so devastated, and thus, one day, they harnessed nine chariots and set out to drive the birds away, for it was their custom to hunt birds. (...)

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*Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Celtica Upsaliensia 6 (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2007) 84.)

<sup>82</sup> Ross, 'Chain Symbolism', 47-48.

<sup>83</sup> TE §84 in Table 2.2.

<sup>84</sup> TE §82.

<sup>85</sup> TE §83.

<sup>86</sup> The blood sucking is seen as some kind of incest by some scholars. The blood of Cú Chulainn and Derbforgil is now mixed and thus they can not be wed. (Ross, 'Chain Symbolism', 39; Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses* (London: Routledge, 1995) 175.) However there is no actual mixing of blood, Cú Chulainn only gets a small drop in his mouth. The only thing which is clear is that it is an escape for Cú Chulainn, he does not have to marry Derbforgil and is now free to marry Emer.

<sup>87</sup> TE §84.

<sup>88</sup> CCC V1 §2 in Table 2.2.

Before them the birds flew, over Slíab Fúait, over Edmund, over Brega, and the Ulaid were enchanted by the birds' flight and by their singing. There were nine score birds in all, each score flying separately, and each pair of birds was linked by a silver chain. Towards evening three birds broke away and made for Bruig na Bóinde."<sup>89</sup>

The birds have a supernatural nature, they enchant the Ulstermen with their flight and singing and they are linked by chains, an indication of their otherworldly nature which we have also seen in SCC.<sup>90</sup> This is the beginning of the story, nothing has happened yet, and the action is set in motion when the birds are spotted. The Ulstermen go in pursuit of the birds but never manage to catch them.<sup>91</sup> When night falls they come to a house where they sleep. Dechtire, Conchobar's daughter who came as his charioteer,<sup>92</sup> helps deliver a baby boy there and she fosters it. The following morning the house has disappeared.<sup>93</sup> Dechtire fosters the baby until he is a young boy but then he dies. She then drinks water with small creatures in it and has a dream. In this dream Lug<sup>94</sup> tells her that he made her come to the house at Bruig na Bóind, and that the boy was his child, and that she is pregnant with his child, the same boy.<sup>95</sup> Promptly she becomes pregnant and is married off to Súaltaim. The baby she was already pregnant with is crushed on her wedding night and she becomes pregnant with Súaltaim's baby.<sup>96</sup> This story is very confusing and likely defective. This makes it difficult to distil the meaning of the bird scene. The point of the story probably is to explain how Cú Chulainn got to have two fathers, Lug and Súaltaim.<sup>97</sup> The birds are there to take Dechtire to the house, presumably in the otherworld, so she can take Lug's son to foster.<sup>98</sup> The presence of Lug at Bruig na Bóind could be indicated by the three birds that break free of the flock when evening falls. Ross proposes that one of these birds might be Lug, as all others come in pairs.<sup>99</sup> Lug's son is not Dechtire's child, this might be why he dies. Dechtire becomes

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<sup>89</sup> CCC V1 §1-2. Translation: Gantz, *Early Irish Myths*, 131-32.

<sup>90</sup> SCC V1 §7. These supernatural qualities are not discussed here any further, as this is not the aim of this paper, unless they are vital to the understanding of the change motif in this story. The otherworldly character of this story is discussed in the footnotes, however.

<sup>91</sup> CCC V1 §3.

<sup>92</sup> CCC V1 §1.

<sup>93</sup> CCC V1 §4. Clearly this house is supernatural as an ordinary house would not disappear. This, along with the chained birds might indicate that the Ulstermen spend the night in the otherworld.

<sup>94</sup> Lug is a leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the people of the Irish otherworld. (Ó Concheanainn, '*Textual Tradition*', 445.)

<sup>95</sup> CCC V1 §5. This provides even more evidence for the house to be in the otherworld. Being a deity, Lug would likely reside in the otherworld.

<sup>96</sup> CCC V1 §6.

<sup>97</sup> Gantz, *Early Irish Myths* 130.

<sup>98</sup> The otherworld is indicated by the chained birds, the vanishing house and the connection between Lug and the house. See notes 93, 96 and 97.

<sup>99</sup> Ross, 'Chain Symbolism', 47. Especially n. 19.



pregnant with this boy after her dream and after the drinking of the creatures.<sup>100</sup> This child is never born and Dechtire becomes pregnant again, but this time by her mortal husband. This gives Cú Chulainn three conceptions, which makes his birth story extraordinary, like that of a hero should be. The birds set the wheel in motif for this triple conception. They might even have acted as a key to the otherworld, which the Ulstermen were able to find due to the bird hunt.

The later version, V2, offers a different account of this story. Here the story starts with Dechtire eloping and taking fifty maidens with her. The story does not say with whom she is eloping. The Ulstermen do not hear from her for three years.<sup>101</sup> This is a clear point of rest in the narrative, nothing has happened for three years. But then fifty-one birds appear.

“Dechtire and her attendant maidens came then in the form of a bird-flock to the plain about Emain Macha, and destroyed the vegetation, so that they did not leave even the roots of the grass in the ground there. That thing was a great cause of vexation to the Ulstermen. They accordingly harnessed nine chariots for the hunting of the birds, for bird hunting was a custom of theirs. (...) The birds went southward across Slíab Fuait, over the Ford of Lethan and the Ford of Farach, and over the Plain of Gossa between the men of Ross and the men of Arda. Night overtook them and the bird-flock escaped;”<sup>102</sup>

Again, the purpose of the birds is very clear, they need to move the Ulstermen to a certain place. This again is a house, and again a supernatural one as it increases in size when more people enter it. While in this house, Bricriu hears fairy music and follows this music.<sup>103</sup> This leads him to a second house where a couple lives. The woman is revealed to be Dechtire and she is pregnant,<sup>104</sup> later Cú Chulainn is born from this pregnancy. At the end of the story it is explained that the man who was with Dechtire is Lug.<sup>105</sup> This time the purpose of the bird hunting is not for Dechtire to get pregnant, she has already eloped and lives with Lug. But the goal is for the Ulstermen to find her and find out about the pregnancy. The birds are instrumental in getting the Ulstermen to Dechtire’s house. But why Dechtire and her maidens appear in the shape of birds is unclear. This might indicate their connection to the otherworld, regular people would not be able to shapeshift.

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<sup>100</sup> Although the text is not clear on this point, the drinking of the creatures likely caused the conception. This theme is not uncommon in Irish literature, see for example Tom Peete, *Cross, Motif-index of Early Irish Literature*, Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1952) §T511.5.2.

<sup>101</sup> Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 134.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-35.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 136. The ending of the story and the reveal of Lug as the father of Dechtire’s baby is part of the second half of the story with is not provided by Cross and Slover, only briefly represented between brackets.

Next is the bird hunt by Cú Chulainn in *Aided Con Roí*.<sup>106</sup> This story is not discussed here in depth as it is also part of the death messenger motif found in the chapter 3.2. What follows is a brief summary of the tale as it is a part of this motif as well. After Cú Roí stole a woman, three magical birds and a cauldron from the Ulstermen, Cú Chulainn went to confront him. Cú Roí humiliated Cú Chulainn by putting him into the ground, cutting off his hair and smearing cow dung in his face. Because Cú Roí was disguised Cú Chulainn did not know the identity of his assailant.<sup>107</sup> After that Cú Chulainn avoided the Ulstermen for a year because of his shame. This is the pause in the story. Cú Chulainn then sees a flock of black birds (*énaib dubuib/eón dub*) and kills one of them. He does this with every flock he sees afterwards. The birds are leading Cú Chulainn to his, yet unknown, assailant.<sup>108</sup> Until he comes to *Srub Brain*, 'Raven's Beak', and beheads one of the black birds.<sup>109</sup> Cú Chulainn then realizes that Cú Roí is the one who shamed him.<sup>110</sup> The beheading happened near the dwelling of Cú Roí. The ravens have led Cú Chulainn towards his assailant and somehow have also revealed his identity, though how exactly they did this remains unclear. Due to the hunt, action is resumed in the story and now the plot to kill Cú Roí starts taking shape.

Not all nine cases of bird hunting in this corpus fit neatly into this motif. In TBC I 1415-1424; TBC II 1706-1713 we find a case of bird hunting which brings about a different kind of change, a change in motivation. This change is very minor but it still deserves to be discussed. Ailill and Medb are sending one warrior at a time to Cú Chulainn for single combat.<sup>111</sup> Then Nad Cantrail agrees to go and fight Cú Chulainn. But when he gets there the Ulster hero is busy fowling and while fowling he avoids all of Nad's attacks. He then runs away from Nad to give chase to the wild-fowl. It appears to all other that he is fleeing.<sup>112</sup> When Cú Chulainn is told of this he wants to avenge himself and is eager to kill Nad. In this case there is no change in the sense that action paused and is now resuming again after the hunt, but the motivation has changed. Cú Chulainn is now set on killing Nad to clear his name when before he would not have felt this need for vengeance.

In all of these cases there is a pause in the story, or calm of some sorts, before the birds are sighted and hunted. But there are variations within this motif. In TE §84 and CCC V1 §2; V2 p. 134 the identity of the birds is of importance. In both these cases the birds are humans in a bird form, not just birds. If the birds in SCC §7 are in fact Lí Ban and Fand as Ross has suggested their identity is of importance as well. In other cases the birds are just birds, they are used to progress the story. This happens in ACR §4 where the birds move Cú Chulainn across the land, just as the birds in CCC do, and in SCC § 4-6 where the first flock of birds provides the motivation for Cú Chulainn to hunt the chained birds. In some of the cases the birds lead the characters somewhere. This makes this motif, of change in the narrative

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<sup>106</sup> ACR §4 in Table 2.2.

<sup>107</sup> ACR §1-3.

<sup>108</sup> This is discussed more in depth in chapter 3.2, 'The death messenger motif'.

<sup>109</sup> ACR §4.

<sup>110</sup> Why Cú Chulainn suddenly knows the identity of this attacker is discussed in depth in chapter 3.2.

<sup>111</sup> TBC I 1286.

<sup>112</sup> TBC I 1415-1424.

due to bird hunting, a very dynamic motif. Not only does it cause change but it is also often dynamic in the sense of movement. Not all cases of bird hunting found in this corpus fit neatly into the motif, TBC I: 1415-1424; TBC II: 1706-1713, for example only brings about a change in motivation. But it does have the core element, of producing change, in common with the other cases discussed in this motif.

### 3. Two ravens motifs

Not only the action in which the birds are involved can produce a motif, a motif can also be linked to certain species. For most birds in this corpus their species is not defined, they are simply birds, 'én'.<sup>113</sup> When the species is given, the birds are mostly ravens. In this corpus twenty-seven birds are documented, of which twelve are either ravens or crows. Most are ravens, eleven, and one is a scald-crow. Both are put into one category here as they are closely related.<sup>114</sup> These twelve cases are displayed in Table 3 which can be found below. I propose that two motifs can be deduced from this table and are related to ravens and crows. The first is the carrion bird motif, where birds feed off dead and wounded men. This is a static motif as it serves an ornamental purpose in the description of battle. The second motif is that of the death messenger. Ravens often appear to be prognostic of death, their presence foreshadowing it, the birds play a more or less active part in the coming about of death. First the carrion bird motif is discussed, followed by the death messenger motif. And finally the Morrígan is considered within the context of the death messenger motif. This is done separately to make a distinction between the goddess and the birds.<sup>115</sup>

Before the cases in Table 3 can be discussed it is necessary to briefly discuss the terminology used with regard to ravens/crows. As the table shows, there are two terms used to denote a raven: *fiach* and *bran*. This gives rise to the question if there is any difference between these terms. DIL gives for *fiach* the following translation: "a raven", there is no alternative translation.<sup>116</sup> For *bran* DIL gives this translation: "raven. Very freq. associated with battles, slaughter carnage, etc".<sup>117</sup> DIL provides a more violent connotation for 'bran' and a neutral translation for *fiach*. In Table 3 below *fiach* is used in 2/6 war scene depictions and *bran* in 4/6.<sup>118</sup> *Fiach*, in this corpus, can thus also be associated with battle as both terms are used in the same context.<sup>119</sup> However, *bran* is slightly more dominant in the war scenes which aligns with the translation in DIL.

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<sup>113</sup> *én*, a bird. DIL s.v. 1 *én*.

<sup>114</sup> Ravens are part of the crow family and both are carrion birds. (P.G. Kennedy, 'Birds of the Countryside Part I: The Crow Family', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 31/126 (1943): 219-21.)

<sup>115</sup> The Morrígan is only examined within the limit of this corpus as not to go beyond the scope of the paper. This means that only her occurrences as a bird in the corpus at hand are discussed.

<sup>116</sup> DIL s.v. *fiach*

<sup>117</sup> DIL s.v. *bran*

<sup>118</sup> The terminology is consistent in the two recensions.

<sup>119</sup> Fergus Kelly does not point to any difference between these two terms either. He gives both as the Irish word for raven and mentions that they are used in the symbolization of a violent death. (Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 192.)

Table 3 : Ravens/Crows

		Species	Fragment	War scene
ACC	381-382	<i>ennach</i> <sup>120</sup>	"After that a scald-crow came onto his shoulder. 'It were not customary for that pillar-stone to have birds [perched] on it' said Erc mac Corpi."	
	445	<i>feochaine (fiach)</i> <sup>121</sup>	"'You [would] think that the ravens of Ireland were above him.'"	
SCC	§35	<i>fiach</i>	"Two druidic ravens announced Cú Chulainn's presence; the host perceived this and said 'No doubt the ravens are announcing the frenzied one of Ériu.'" And the host hunted them down until there was for the birds no place in the land.	
TBC	TBC I 194-197	<i>fiach</i>	"ravens on the battle-field will drink men's blood."	Yes
	TBC I 384	<i>fiach</i>	"nor a raven more voracious,"	
	TCB I 957-962; TBC II 1311-1318	<i>fiach</i>	"secret that the raven wrings from the writhing soldier (...) armies ground to dust the ravens struts on corpses"	Yes
	TBC II 2084	<i>bran</i>	"But the vultures are joyful in the camp of Ailill and Medb"	Yes
	TBC II 2380	<i>bran</i>	"raven shall eat raven's food"	Yes
	TBC I 2416; TBC II 2427	<i>bran</i>	"ravens tearing at dead meat"	Yes
	TBC I 3878; TBC II 4603	<i>bran</i>	"ravens gnaw men's necks blood gushes"	Yes
LMnU	§7	<i>fiach</i>	"She saw a raven drink blood from the snow. Then said to Leborcham: 'Beloved would be the one man on whom might be yonder three colors- that is, hair like the raven, and a cheek like blood and a body like snow.'"	
ACR	§4	<i>én dub/ bran</i>	"Then one day, when he was at Boirche's Peaks, he saw a big flock of black birds coming toward him across the open sea. He killed one of the birds immediately. After that he killed a bird from the flock in each district till he reached Srub Brain in western Ireland. From the head of the black bird he took there it is called Srub Brain, Raven's Beak."	

<sup>120</sup> *ennach*, a scald-crow. DIL s.v. 1 *ennach*. The scald-crow, or hooded-crow, is a member of the crow family of birds. It is a carrion bird and is commonly found in the countryside. (Kennedy, 'Birds of the Countryside', 220.)

<sup>121</sup> A collective word used to denote multiple ravens, derived from *fiach*. DIL: s.v. *feochaine*

### 3.1 The carrion bird motif

Ravens/crows are, by nature, carrion birds, they often feed off dead animals in the wild.<sup>122</sup> This aspect of the carrion birds found its way into this corpus. In six of the twelve cases found in Table 3 they are mentioned as feeding off dead or wounded people. The carrion bird quality of the ravens has been applied to the eating of diseased humans, or even those still alive. Not all examples state clearly that the men eaten by the ravens are dead.<sup>123</sup> All six ravens which are feeding off the dead or dying are part of a description of battle, and are all part of TBC.<sup>124</sup> This is not surprising as this is the story of a long ongoing battle in which many battle scenes are described. When describing the scene of battle ravens are often included in their role as carrion birds. The ravens have become an integral part of the imagery of a battle scene, they do not cause a change in the narrative but are an important ornament in creating the ambiance of battle. The amount of times this is documented in this corpus, six out of a total of twelve ravens/crows, is half of the cases.<sup>125</sup> This frequency in occurrence and the similarity between the cases allow the following definition of the carrion bird motif: Ravens eating humans as an ornamental part of the description of a battle scene.

But not all of the corpse eating ravens fit this motif precisely. In LMnU a raven is drinking the blood of a cow which has just been slaughtered.<sup>126</sup> Here the raven is depicted as a carrion bird but it is neither part of a battle scene nor does it eat humans. This raven's occurrence appears to be part of a different type of motif in which colors are of importance. The raven seems to only be relevant because of its black plumage, its qualities as carrion bird are an explanation of why it is present.<sup>127</sup>

It is also possible for a raven not to be feeding off the dead and still fit the motif partially. In TBC I 384 Fergus describes Cú Chulainn to Ailill and Medb to let them know who they are up against. Right before he starts recounting the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn, Fergus praises him, by summing up some characteristics of the Ulster hero.<sup>128</sup> Among these characteristics is Cú Chulainn's voraciousness, "You will not encounter a warrior harder to deal with (...) nor a raven more voracious"<sup>129</sup> Fergus says. Here Fergus relates a raven to voraciousness. This might be related to the carrion bird motif. The ravens in the battle

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<sup>122</sup> Kennedy, 'Birds of the Countryside', 219-21.

<sup>123</sup> TBC I 194-197: The ravens drink men's blood, but it is unclear if these men are dead or only wounded in battle. TBC I 957-962: The soldier is writhing and may be on the verge of death but is still alive as the raven 'wings a secret from him'.

<sup>124</sup> See Table 3.

<sup>125</sup> TBC I 194-197, TBC I 957-962; TBC II 1311-1313, TBC II 2084, TBC II 2380, TBC I 2416; TBC II 2427, TBC I 378; TBC II 4603. These six cases are part of a war scene and can be found in Table 3.

<sup>126</sup> LMnU §7 in Table 3.

<sup>127</sup> The motif is also found in the Welsh story of Peredur, where Peredur sees a raven in the snow, drinking the blood of a duck, which has been killed by hawk. This reminds him of the woman he loves. (Sioned Davies, (trans.), *The Mabionogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 79.) The white, red and black theme is found all throughout European folklore. An interesting article about this tricolor motif is: Francisco Vaz Da Silva, 'Red as Blood, White as Snow, Black as Crow: Chromatic Symbolism of Womanhood in Fairy Tales' *Marvels & Tales V* 21/2 (2007) 240-52. He also notes that the black part of the motif is often supplied by a raven or crow. (Vaz Da Silva, 'Red as Blood', 246.)

<sup>128</sup> TBC I 382-392.

<sup>129</sup> TBC I 382-384. Translation O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 135.

scenes are feeding off the dead, they thirst for blood and hunger for the corpses of men. The raven's voracious nature here is linked with Cú Chulainn's appetite for battle. It is used instrumentally to invoke the images of a battle scene, and here one where Cú Chulainn is dominating because of his voraciousness.

There remains one more case to be discussed in the light of this motif. This case is not included in Table 3 as it concerns a non-specified bird (*én*). In TBC II 3146-3149 there is a battle between the foster brothers Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn.<sup>130</sup> During this battle they inflict so much damage on each other that it is described like this:

“If it were usual for birds in flight to pass through men's bodies, they would have gone through their bodies that day and carried lumps of flesh and blood through their wounds and cuts into the clouds and the air outside.”<sup>131</sup>

It is not clear if the birds here are used because the two men are wounded and they would feed off the wounds, or if they are used simply because they are small and can fly. There is no indication that the birds in question are going to eat the blood and flesh; they simply fly away with it. However, the violent setting in which the birds are invoked might connect them to the carrion bird motif. There is no reason for ordinary birds to carry away pieces of the wounded men, but carrion birds would take it as food. If the severity of the injuries were to be emphasized the image of birds flying through the holes in the men would have been enough, yet the choice is made to have them take away blood and flesh. The carrion bird motif can be very neatly applied to the cases where the ravens are part of the description of a battle scene. However, there are some cases where ravens, or other birds, correspond to some of the aspects of the motif but do not fit it precisely.<sup>132</sup>

### 3.2 The death messenger motif

The second motif, the raven as death messenger, is a dynamic motif. Again there is a close connection to war and death as is the case with the carrion bird motif, but in this motif the raven is more an omen of death rather than part of a description. The presence of the raven foretells the coming of death and often the raven plays a role in the coming about of this death. Sometimes that role is very minor and the raven only delivers the message but the it can have quite a leading role. Two cases are part of this motif, SCC § 35 and ACR §4.

In chapter 2.2 Cú Chulainn's hunt in ACR has already been discussed,<sup>133</sup> in that chapter the focus was on the change brought about by the hunt, in this chapter the birds' relation to death is the focal point. As briefly touched upon in that chapter, the black birds

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<sup>130</sup> See Table 1 for this case.

<sup>131</sup> TBC II 3246-3149. This part is only found in recension II.

<sup>132</sup> LMnU §7 and TBC I 384 do not fit the motif entirely, these can be found in Table 3. TBC II 3146-3149 does not fit the carrion bird motif fully either, this case can be found in Table 1 in the appendix, as these birds are not ravens/crows.

<sup>133</sup> ARC §4 in Table 3.

turn out to be ravens. To clarify this is it necessary to look at both the Irish text and the translation.<sup>134</sup>

“A mbúi-seom didu laa n-and for Bendaib Barichi co n-acai éill móir do **énaib dubuid** chuige darsin fairrgi. Marbaid **én** díb fochétóir. Marbaid **én** cach tire dinn éill iarsin coránic Srub Brion inn-iathar hÉrend .i. a cend tall-som dond **eón dub**, is de dogaithe Srub Broin.”<sup>135</sup>

In all cases referring directly to the birds they are called black birds (*énaib dubuib/eón dub*) or just birds (*én*). But the place where Cú Chulainn beheads the last bird and which is named after this feat is called *Srub Brain*, which means Raven’s Beak. It follows that the black birds were in fact all ravens. But why does Cú Chulainn kill all these ravens? Tymoczko offers an explanation in the notes to her translation.<sup>136</sup> In *Echtra Nerai* the following is said about Cú Chulainn: “It was one of [Cú Chulainn’s] taboos that birds should feed on his land, unless they left something with him.”<sup>137</sup> To kill one bird from every flock would mean that all the flocks leave something with Cú Chulainn, namely their dead companion. This would explain the killing of the birds. Then there is the event after the bird hunting, which has already been briefly discussed in chapter 2.2. As Cú Roí was previously disguised, Cú Chulainn did not know the identity of his assailant.<sup>138</sup> But after he beheads the raven he suddenly knows it was Cú Roí who had shamed him. The story tells us that the beheading was close to Cú Roí’s hillfort but that alone does not explain why Cú Chulainn had this epiphany. The beheading of the raven seems to have provided this information. If that is true then there would have to be some kind of supernatural power surrounding the beheaded raven and a way for it to convey the information to Cú Chulainn. There is no way of knowing this as the story does not tell us, and this mystery sadly cannot be completely solved. However, the hunt did lead Cú Chulainn to the hillfort of Cu Roí and eventually to the realization that Cú Roí is his assailant. This information makes Cú Chulainn willing to kill Cu Roí. The ravens supplied the knowledge, in a unknown way, that leads to Cu Roí’s death.<sup>139</sup> Here their role in the bringing about of death is quite active, in other cases it is smaller.

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<sup>134</sup> The translation can be found in Table 3.

<sup>135</sup> ACR §4. The terminology for the birds has been made bold by me.

<sup>136</sup> Tymoczko, *Two death tales*, 89.

<sup>137</sup> Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 252. She also regards him as a guardian of the borders of Ulster and this would be an example of him chasing away invaders. (Tymoczko, *Two death tales*, 89-90.) However, I find her allusion to the taboo in *Echtra Nerai* more convincing and applicable to this case.

<sup>138</sup> ACR §3.

<sup>139</sup> Tymoczko agrees with this fatalistic role which the ravens have in this story. Moreover, she equates them with the Morrígan who is also known to appear as a raven or crow. This would emphasize their link to death as the Morrígan are war-goddesses. (Tymoczko, *Two death tales*, 89.) I do acknowledge the close relation of the Morrígan with birds and ravens/crows in particular, as will be discussed in chapter 3.3. But to relate these particular birds to the Morrígan seems strained. There is no direct connection between them and the Morrígan in this tale and there is no evidence to suspect such a connection either.

Such as in SCC where two druidic ravens announce Cú Chulainn's presence to the enemy.<sup>140</sup> Cú Chulainn has agreed to help Labraid defeat his enemy, Labraid brings Cú Chulainn to the opponent's host and leaves him there.<sup>141</sup> The enemy does not yet know that Cú Chulainn will fight but the ravens reveal this to them. They then chase the ravens out of their land, might have something to do with the bad news they bring, Cú Chulainn is a formidable opponent.<sup>142</sup> These ravens clearly have supernatural powers. Firstly they are called druidic *druídechta*<sup>143</sup>, ascribing some sense of magic and knowledge connected to hem. Secondly they announce (*fanócrat*) Cú Chulainn, *fanócrat* also has the meaning 'reveals'.<sup>144</sup> How they reveal Cú Chulainn to the host is unclear. One option is that the birds are able to speak, but this is not given in the text. Another option is augury, the birds convey their message either by their flight or by their calls<sup>145</sup> If this is the case then one person of the enemy host would have to be able to read these signs of the ravens. The text neither denies nor confirms any of these possibilities, therefore they are purely speculative. This ability to reveal Cú Chulainn along with their druidic nature indicates that they have knowledge that birds do not usually have. The next action is the following day when Cú Chulainn attacks and defeats the host.<sup>146</sup> The ravens have revealed to the host the cause of their demise, Cú Chulainn. They have not actively steered the enemy host towards death but they were announcers of it. But revealing Cú Chulainn might have worked as a sealing of their fate. At least for the audience. The audience would be familiar with the heroic power of Cú Chulainn through other stories and know that the enemy is doomed. If we take the druidic side of these ravens into account it is possible that they are prophetic. Thus, when they reveal Cú Chulainn's identity the host reacts by chasing the birds away, maybe hoping to avoid their fate.<sup>147</sup>

In both these stories the ravens are messengers of death in some way, and their presence has an impact on the plot, making this a dynamic motif. In ACR §4 the ravens direct Cú Chulainn to his previously unknown assailant and reveal his identity to him, if it had not been for the ravens Cú Chulainn might have never found out and Cu Roí might have gotten away safely. In SCC §35 the ravens do not actively advance anyone's fate but they do bring the host word of Cú Chulainn, the man who will bring about their death. Here they also add

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<sup>140</sup> SCC §35 in Table 3.

<sup>141</sup> SCC §32-34.

<sup>142</sup> SCC §35.

<sup>143</sup> *druídecht*, secret lore and arts of the druids; in wider sense occult science, wizardry. Attrib. gs. (as is the case in SCC §35) of magical formation. DIL: s.v. *druídecht*

<sup>144</sup> DIL: s.v. *fúacair*, *fo-úacair*, *fócair*.

<sup>145</sup> Druids were known to be able to foresee the future by augury, the overserving of the flight of birds. (Green, *Animals*, 177-78.) There is also evidence that they were believed to be able to understand the sounds made by birds and use this to foresee the future. See for example the texts edited and translated by R.I. Best concerning the reading of raven and wren sounds. (R.I. Best (ed. and trans.), 'Prognostications from the Raven and the Wren', *Ériu* 8 (1916) 120-26, especially 123-25.) The text on raven lore describes the possible meaning of various types of raven calls. The meaning depends on where the call is coming from and what situation the augur is in.

<sup>146</sup> SCC §36.

<sup>147</sup> The host seems aware of Cú Chulainn's reputation as they refer to him as the frenzied one of Ériu. Finding out his name might have been enough information for them to know their fate.



to the experience of the audience as they know of Cú Chulainn's power. There are three more cases which fit into the death messenger motif, which are discussed in the next section as these are the Morrígan in bird form.

### 3.3 The Morrígan as messenger of death

The next three cases all deal with the Morrígan as messenger of death.<sup>148</sup> TBR §5 and TBC I 954-956; TBC II 1303-1306 are discussed first, as they provide information essential for the interpretation of ACC 381-382. First the Morrígan's appearance in TBR, where she appears as a black bird.<sup>149</sup>

“Cú Chulainn prepared to spring again into the chariot; but horse, woman, chariot, man and cow, all had disappeared. Then he perceived that she had been transformed into a black bird on a branch close to him.”<sup>150</sup>

In this bird form the Morrígan prophesizes the coming of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.<sup>151</sup> She says she has taken the cows that will breed the Don Cuailgne. “So long as her calf<sup>152</sup> shall be a yearling, so long shall your life be; and it is this that shall cause the Cattle-Raid of Coolney.”<sup>153</sup> This might be the clearest example of the death messenger motif. Here a bird, the shapeshifted war-goddess Morrígan, prophesizes the most famous and the biggest war in early Irish literature. And not only that, she also prophesizes the death of Cú Chulainn, the greatest Ulster hero. She is the messenger of deaths beyond counting.<sup>154</sup> She is not merely a messenger here, she actively participates in the taking of the cows and breeding the Don Cuailgne. She is in part responsible for the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.

The Morrígan's second appearance, as a regular bird in this corpus, is in TBC I 954-956 where she warns the Don Cuailgne.<sup>155</sup> The Connacht army has come close to the place where the Don Cuailgne is and the Morrígan warns him about this, he then flees and the search continues.<sup>156</sup> It appears that the Morrígan is helping Ulster by keeping their bull out of enemy hands, but in the end Connacht still manages to find the Don Cuailgne. Egeler proposes that the Morrígan's intent here is not to help Ulster, but to induce more war and

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<sup>148</sup> These are ACC 381-382, which can be found in Table 3, TBC I 954-956; TBC II 1303-1306 and TBR §5, in Table 1.

<sup>149</sup> TBR §5. As we have seen before in ACR §4 the black birds turned out to be ravens, this might also be the case here. However, the text does not provide any evidence for this, it calls the bird ‘*én dub*’, black bird and offers nothing else to specify the bird with.

<sup>150</sup> Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 213.

<sup>151</sup> TBR §5.

<sup>152</sup> ‘her’ is the cow the Morrígan has taken in TBR and this is the mother of the Don Cuailgne.

<sup>153</sup> TBR §5. Translation Cross and Slover 1936: 213.

<sup>154</sup> Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 58-59.

<sup>155</sup> In TBC II 1303-1306 the Morrígan is not said to appear in birds form but this is implied. A human would not likely sit on a pillar-stone. Egeler agrees with the implication of a bird form. (Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 37.)

<sup>156</sup> TBC I 957-967.

death. If Connacht would have obtained the bull at this stage in the story lots of blood would not have been shed. Due to the Morrígan's interference there are many more pages containing war, carnage and death.<sup>157</sup> Because of her actions here many will die that would otherwise have been spared. She does not foretell anyone's death but she is the cause of many.

There is one case in Table 3 that has not yet been discussed.<sup>158</sup> This is the scald-crow found in ACC 381-382. When Cú Chulainn is close to his death a scald-crow (*ennach*) alights on his shoulder.

“After that a scald-crow came onto his shoulder. “It were not customary for that pillar-stone to have birds [perched] on it,” said Erc mac Corpi.”<sup>159</sup>

It is likely that this scald-crow is not just any crow but that it is in fact the Morrígan. The evidence for this can be found in the in the pillar-stone remark, the connection of the Morrígan to Cú Chulainn's death and the later version of ACC. The comparison of Cú Chulainn and the pillar-stone made by Erc mac Corpi is the first indication that this bird might be the Morrígan. In TBC I 954-956, discussed above, the Morrígan appears in the shape of a bird, sitting on a pillar-stone. Erc's rather cryptic pillar-stone comment could have invoked the image of the Morrígan sitting on a pillar stone in TBC for an audience familiar with that tale.<sup>160</sup> The importance of the Morrígan with regard to Cú Chulainn's deathbed can be found in TBR §5. Here the Morrígan says the following to Cú Chulainn: “I am now guarding thy deathbed, and I shall be guarding it henceforth.”<sup>161</sup> If the Morrígan is guarding Cú Chulainn's deathbed, as she says, it would be fitting for her to mark his passing.<sup>162</sup> The Morrígan, in bird form, signals the passing of Cú Chulainn. This connection between the Morrígan and the scald-crow has also been made in the later version of ACC. Here the Badb alights on his shoulder in the shape of a crow.<sup>163</sup> As mentioned in the introduction of this paper the Badb is part of the same triple goddess as the Morrígan, and they are often

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<sup>157</sup> Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 37-38.

<sup>158</sup> ACC 445 is not talked about in depth in this paper. The flock of ravens turns out to be mud, it is not discussed in this paper, as it can not be linked to either of the ravens motifs. However, it has been noted as an example of the 'erroneous watchman device' described by Patrick Sims-Williams. (Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 113.) He also includes TE §12 in this motif, which can be found in Table 1 but is not discussed in this paper either.

<sup>159</sup> Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, 43.

<sup>160</sup> Jacqueline Borsje also proposes that the Morrígan is indeed the bird on Cú Chulainn's shoulder and makes the same connection between the pillar-stone in ACC and in TBC I 954-956. (Jacqueline Borsje, 'Omens, ordeals and oracles: On demons and weapons in early Irish texts', *Peritia. Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland* 13 (1999) 247.)

<sup>161</sup> TBR §5. Translation Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 213.

<sup>162</sup> Borsje compares the Morrígan's part in Cú Chulainn's death with that of the Greek fury Alecto, sent by Jupiter to the warrior Turnus as an omen of his death. She argues that the Morrígan's role here is similar. (Borsje, 'Omens', 247-48.)

<sup>163</sup> Thurneysen, *IHSK*, 567.

confused.<sup>164</sup> This version is dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Thurneysen,<sup>165</sup> which proves that the connection made above is not new but has already been around for centuries.<sup>166</sup>

The cases discussed above demonstrate the expansive range of the death messenger motif. There are many ways in which it can apply to a bird that has a clear connection to death. The two motifs in this chapter are based on the species of the birds, ravens/crows. There is only one bird ‘én’ which partially fits the carrion bird motif<sup>167</sup> and the only other birds that fit the death messenger motif are guises of the Morrígan.<sup>168</sup> These two motifs of carnage and death seem very strictly tied to carrion birds and the raven in particular.

#### 4. Summary and conclusion

In this research paper nine texts of the Ulster cycle, which were all composed before the 12<sup>th</sup> century, have been investigated, *Compert Con Culainn*, *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, *Táin Bó Regamna*, *Tochmarc Emire*, *Aided Con Culainn*, *Aided Con Roí*, *Aided Óenfhir Aífe*, *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Longes Mac nUislenn*. They have been investigated in order to determine the narratological function of the appearance of birds within this corpus. Four motifs have been discussed, two with regard to the action in which the birds are involved and two concerning their species. Two dynamic motifs, one where the hunting of birds signals a change in the narrative and one where birds, often ravens/crows, function as a prognosticator of death. And two static motifs, where catching birds alive is an attribute of Cú Chulainn and one where carrion birds are used ornamentally in the description of battle scenes. These results have been formalized in Table 4, below.<sup>169</sup>

	Fit	Related
Cú Chullain’s bird hunting motif	TBC I 781-801; TBC II 1117-1165, AOA §2	SCC § 4-6
Bird hunting as a signal of change motif	SCC §4-6, SCC §7, CCC §2, TE §84, ACR §4, AOA §2	TBC I 1415-1424; TBC II 1706-1713
Carrion bird motif	TBC I 194-197, TBC I 957-962; TBC II 1311-1313, TBC II 2084, TBC II 2380, TBC I 2416; TBC II 2427, TBC I 378; TBC II 4603	TBC I 384, TBC II 3146-3149, LMnU §7

<sup>164</sup> See chapter 1.4 ‘Theoretical framework’ for a more detailed discussion of the relation between the Badb and Morrígan.

<sup>165</sup> Thurneysen, *IHKS*, 557.

<sup>166</sup> With regard to the scope of this paper only these three cases of the Morrígan as death messenger are discussed, as these are the only cases in which she appears in the shape of a bird in this corpus. Egeler discusses this aspect of the war-goddess much more extensively, using a broader corpus and not only including the cases where she takes on the shape of a bird. (Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, 55-60.) Or see the chapter 1.4 ‘Theoretical framework’ in this paper for a brief discussion of Egeler’s findings.

<sup>167</sup> TBC I 3146-3149.

<sup>168</sup> TBR §5, TBC I 954-956.

<sup>169</sup> The cases in the column with the heading ‘fit’ all fit the motif they are ascribed to fully. All cases under the header ‘related’ fit the motif in part but not completely.

Death messenger motif	ACC 381-382, SCC §35, TBC I 954-956; TBC II 1303-1318, TBR §5	
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Table 4 shows two important findings of this investigation. The first is that it is possible for a case to be related to a motif but not fit it completely. This does not mean that this case is not a part of the motif but it shows that variations is possible. In the carrion bird motif, for example, there are three cases which do not fit the motif entirely. In TBC I 384, where Fergus says that ‘no raven [is] more voracious’<sup>170</sup> than Cú Chulainn. The bloodlust of the raven as carrion bird is invoked but the statement is not part of the description of a battle scene. In LMnU §7 the raven drinks the blood of a dead animal and thus does exactly what a carrion bird does. But this raven is not part of a battle scene and there is not violent connotation to its action. And in TBC II 3146-3149 the birds are generic birds (*én*), but they act as carrion birds, taking pieces of blood and flesh from wounded men. These three cases all have some characteristics of the carrion bird motif but not enough to fit the motif entirely. Nevertheless they demonstrate the extend of this particular motif. Carrion birds have one strong characteristic and that is feeding of the death, this image is used in various ways. This variation in found in all motifs except for the death messenger motif. The second important finding of this investigation is that it is possible for one case to fit several motifs. An explanation for this is that both motifs are based on the same characteristic, this is the case with SCC §4-6 and AOA §2, where both motifs are based on bird hunting. It is possible for this hunt to produce a change in the narrative and at the same time be an attribute of Cú Chulainn. ARC §4 is part of the change motif based on bird hunting and the death messenger motif based on species, the raven/crow. The birds hunted in ARC §4 are ravens and this makes it possible for this case to fit multiple motifs.

Searching for motifs based upon action in which the birds are involved on one hand and their species on the other has proven to be very fruitful. All four motifs contribute to the investigation of the narratological function of birds in this corpus, the birds fulfill several functions. They can signal change, in narrative but also in motivation, catching them can be the mark of a great hero, and their species can invoke the image of death or even prognosticate it. The same case can fulfill multiple functions, and one story can contain several of these motifs. It is important to mention that not all of the cases documented in Table 1 have been discussed in this paper, because of its scope.<sup>171</sup> But these cases may also contain other motifs. Further research with a broader corpus or a different foundation for the motifs could uncover many more and add to the motifs found in this paper. The unearthing of the narratological function of textual elements can lead to a better understanding of texts so far removed from us in time. More research into these motifs would mean a greater understanding of these texts.

<sup>170</sup> Brackets are mine.

<sup>171</sup> ACC 445, SCC §27, TBC II 1175-1185, TBC 924-927; TBC II 1273-1275, TE §12 and ACR §1-2 are in Table 1 but not discussed in this paper.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Bird appearances						
		Species	Death/ War	Supernatural	Action	Change
ACC	381-382	Scald-crow	Yes	Morrígan	Sitting on Cú Chulainn's shoulder	Yes
	445	Raven			Flying over horseman	
SCC	§4-6	Birds			Bird hunting	Yes
	§7	Birds		Chained together	Bird hunting	Yes
	§27	Birds		Otherworld	Singing	
	§35	Raven		Druidic	Announcing Cú Chulainn	Yes
CCC	V1 §2; V2 p. 134	Birds		V1 Chained together; V2 Shapeshifted	Bird hunting	Yes
TBC <sup>172</sup>	TBC I 194-197	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
	TBC I 384	Raven	Yes		No raven more voracious	
	TBC I 781-801; TBC II 1117-1165	Swans			Bird hunting	
	TBC II 1175-1185	Birds			Flying over chariot	
	TBC I 924-927; TBC II 1273-1275	Bird (pet)			Killed by Cú Chulainn	
	TBC I 954-956; TBC II 1303-1306	Bird	Yes	Morrígan	Forewarns Donn Cuailgne	Yes
	TBC I 957-962; TBC II 1311-1318	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
	TBC I 1415-1424; TBC II 1706-1713	Wild-fowl			Bird hunting	Yes
	TBC II 2048	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
	TBC II 2380	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
	TBC I 2416; TBC II 2427	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
	TBC II 3146-3149	Birds	Yes		Feed off the wounded	
	TBC I 3878; TBC II 4603	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
TE	§12	Birds			Flying over chariot	
	§84	Birds		Shapeshifted	Bird hunting	Yes
AOA	§2	Sea-birds			Bird hunting	Yes
TBR	§5	Black bird	Yes	Morrígan	Prophesizing	Yes
LMnU	§7	Raven	Yes		Feed off the dead	
ACR	§1-2	Birds			Singing	
	§4	Raven			Bird hunting	Yes

<sup>172</sup> Both recension I and II are given here. When the fragment in question is only found in one of the recensions only that one is given.

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