

Celtic Source 4

Magical Infants

1. Animals and Incarnation.

Dewi Sant

Taliesin

Sandde

Morfran

Gwion Bach

Santes Non

Ceridwen

no consent
spirirtually potent
water

- Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, Book 2, 123, ed. G.C. Macaulay:

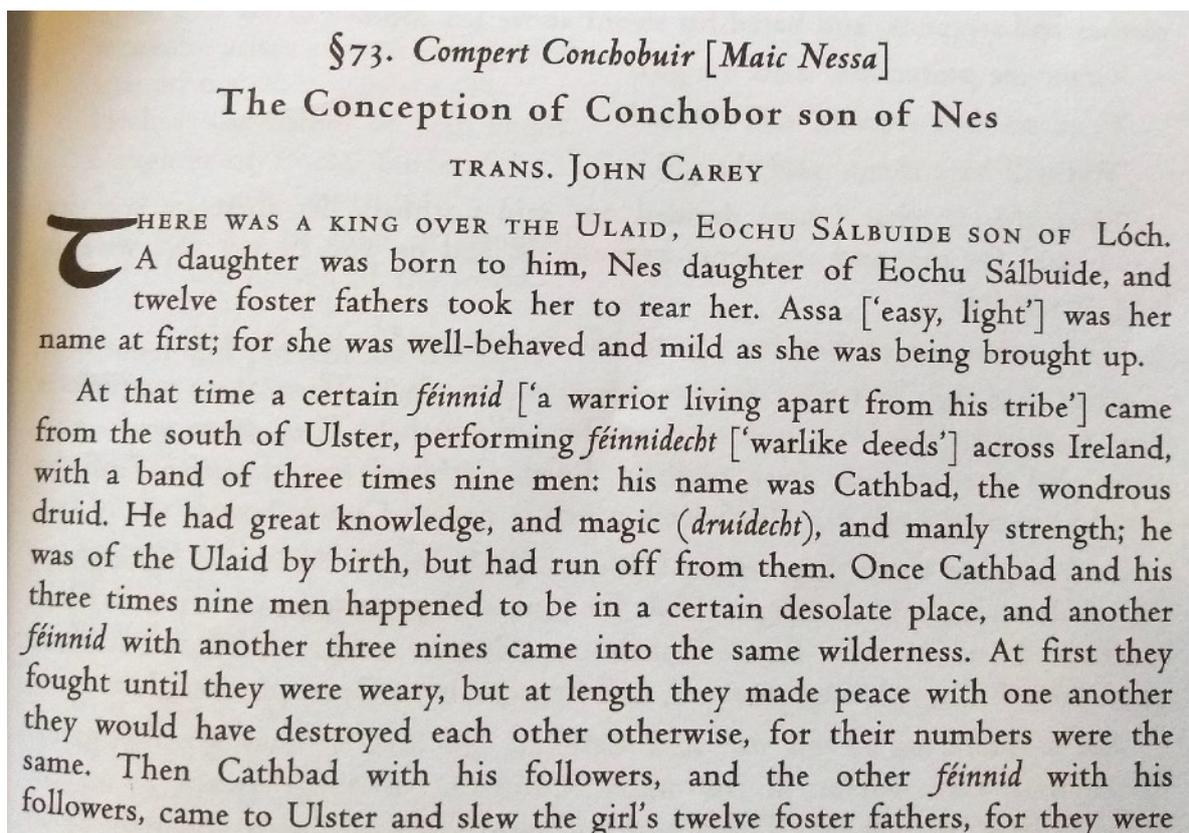
. . . the Egyptians are also the first who reported the doctrine that the soul of man is immortal, and that when the body dies, the soul enters into another creature which chances then to be coming to the birth, and when it has gone the round of all the creatures of land and sea and of the air, it enters again into a human body as it comes to the birth; and that it makes this round in a period of three thousand years. This doctrine certain Hellenes adopted, some earlier and some later, as if it were of their own invention, and of these men I know the names but I abstain from recording them.

2. The Irish Children.

- *Deirdre*, from *The Book of Leinster* (12th century), translated by Douglas Hyde:

Once upon a time Conor son of Fachtna, and the nobles of the Red Branch, went to a feast to the house of Feidhlim the son of Doll, the king's principal storyteller, and the king and people were merry and lighthearted, eating that feast in the house of the principal storyteller, with gentle music of the musicians, and with the melody of the voices of the bards and the ollavs, with the delight of the eloquence and ancient tales of the sages, and of those who read the keenes (?) *written on* flags and books; *listening* to the prognostications of the druids and of those who numbered the moon and stars. And at the time when the assembly were merry and pleasant one-with-another, it chanced that Feidhlim's wife bore a beautiful well-shaped daughter, during the feast. Up rises expeditiously the gentle Cathfaidh, the head-druid of Erin, who chanced to be present in the assembly at that time, and a bundle of his ancient (?) fairy books in his left hand with him, and out he goes on the horder of the rath and falls to minutely observing and closely scrutinizing the clouds of the air, the position of the stars, and the age of the moon, to get a prognostication and a knowledge of the fate that was in store for the child who was there born. Cathfaidh *then* returns quickly to all, in presence of the king, and told them an omen and a prophecy, that many hurts and losses should come to the province of Ulster on account of the girl that was there born.

- Conchobor, from *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. John Koch:



all feasting in a single house; and none escaped save the girl alone, and no one knew who had committed the slaughter.

The girl went to her father with great lamentation. Her father said that he could not take revenge, for it was not known who had committed the slaughter. The girl was savage and wrathful at that reply; and after that she took up *féinnidecht* with a band of three times nine men, to avenge her foster fathers. She ravaged and destroyed every region in turn. Assa had been her name up until then, for she was gentle; *Ní-assa* ['not-easy', that is *Nes*] however was her name after that, on account of the harshness [*ansatu* 'difficulty'] of her fury and her weapons. It was her custom to ask tidings of *féinnidi* from every visitor who came to her, in the hope of learning the name of the man who had carried out the slaughter.

Once when she was in the wilderness her people were preparing food for her. She went out alone to explore the wilderness, as it was her custom to explore every wilderness into which she came. When she was there she saw a fair lovely pool in the midst of the wilderness. She went into the pool to bathe, and left her weapons and her clothes on land.

Now Cathbad came, exploring the same wilderness, so that he came to the pool in which the girl was bathing. Then he went between the girl and her clothes and weapons, and bared his sword above her head.

'Grant me protection,' said the girl.

'Grant me three requests,' said Cathbad.

'You will have them,' said the girl.

'Since this is what I have decided on,' said Cathbad, 'let there be security (i.e. peace) for me, and covenants between us, and do you be my sole wife as long as you live.'

'That seems better than for you to kill me unarmed,' said the girl.

After that they and their followers met in one place. Then at an auspicious hour Cathbad came to Ulster and to the girl's father. They were made welcome, and territory was given to them: *Ráith Cathbaid* in the territory of the *Cruithni*, near the river in *Crích Rois* which is named *Conchobor*.

Once a great thirst came upon Cathbad in the night. *Nes* went throughout the whole stronghold seeking a drink for him, and could find no water for him to drink. Then she went to the *Conchobor* (that is, to the river), and strained water into the cup through her veil, and brought it to Cathbad after that.

'Let a candle be lit for us,' said Cathbad, 'so that we may see the water.' There were two worms in the water. Cathbad bared his sword above the woman's head, to slay her. 'Drink yourself,' said Cathbad, 'what you wanted me to drink: you will be dead if you do not drink the water.' Then the woman

took two drinks of the water and she swallowed a worm with each of them.

The woman became pregnant after that, for the length of time that every woman is pregnant. And although according to some it was because of the worms that she became pregnant, Fachtna Fáthach was the girl's young lover, and it is he who made her pregnant in spite of Cathbad the fair druid.

Once Cathbad went to speak with the king, Fachtna Fáthach son of Rudraige, so that they came as far as Mag nInis. Labour pains seized the woman on the way. 'It would be well, wife,' said Cathbad, 'if you were able not to bear the child which is in your womb until tomorrow; for your son would be king of Ulster, or of all Ireland, and his name would be illustrious throughout Ireland forever. For on the anniversary of that same day will be born the illustrious child whose fame and power have spread across the world: Jesus Christ, Son of the ever-living God.'

'I will do that, then,' said Nes. 'Unless he comes out through my side, he will not come by any other way until that time.' Then Nes came to the water-meadow beside the river which is named Conchobor. She set herself on the slab of stone which is on the bank of the river, so that it is there that the anguish of the pangs came upon her. It is then that Cathbad recited this *retoiiricc*, prophesying the birth of Conchobor; so that this is what he said:

3. The Tal-y-llyn Hoard (c. 300 BC)



