

**HAIL BRIGIT: AN
OLD-IRISH POEM ON
THE HILL OF ALENN**

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Hail Brigit: An Old-Irish Poem on the Hill of Alenn by Kuno Meyer

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KUNO MEYER

**HAIL BRIGIT: AN
OLD-IRISH POEM ON
THE HILL OF ALENN**

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TO
RICHARD IRVINE AND EDITH BEST
IN MEMORY
OF OUR VISIT TO KNOCKAWLIN ON JUNE 19TH 1910
AND OF MANY OTHER HAPPY HOURS
SPENT IN THEIR COMPANY

BERLIN

CHRISTMAS 1911

THE Old-Irish poem here printed and translated for the first time has for its theme the disappearance of the pagan world of Ireland and the triumph of Christianity, as exemplified by the deserted ruins of the ancient hill-fort of Alenn contrasted with the flourishing state of the neighbouring Kildare. Indeed the poem reads like an amplification of Oengus' lines in the Prologue to his *Félire*:

*Borg Ailinne úallach atbath lia slóg mbágach:
is mór Brigit bíadach, is cáin a rrúam dálach.*¹

'Alenn's proud citadel has perished with its warlike host: great is victorious Brigit, fair is her multitudinous cemetery.'

The hill of Alenn,² now called Knockawlin,³ is situated in the county of Kildare, not far from Old Kilcullen, and still contains vestiges of what was the largest fort in Ireland after Emain Macha. It has often been described.⁴

¹ See The Martyrology of Oengus, ed. by Wh. Stokes, 1905, p. 25.

² This is the oldest form of the name, a feminine *ā*-stem, making its genitive *Ailinne* and its dative and accusative *Alinn*. Forms with *ll* appear early, and in the latter half of the ninth century the genitive *Alend* occurs, as if the nom. were *Aliu*. See RC. XX, p. 10 (*i n-óenuch Alend*) and LL 45 b (*Énna Ailend*, spelt *Aillenn* 393 a).

³ By folk-etymology, as if *Cnoc Alaimn* 'Delightful Hill'.

⁴ As e. g. by the late Mr. T. O'Neill Russell in CZ. IV, p. 340.

According to an early tradition the wall or rampart of Alenn was constructed by Art Mes-Delmonn,¹ son of Sétna Sithbacc, king of Leinster, though it had been a royal seat even before his time.² In an ancient alliterative poem on his death, ascribed to Briccine mac Brigni, Alenn is mentioned as the stronghold from which he descended upon his enemies:³

*Mál adriálaid iathu marb, mac sóer Sétnai;
selaig srathu Fomóire for dóine domnaib.
Di óchtur Alinne oirt trünnu talman,
trebunn trén tuathmar Mes-Delmonn Domnann.*

'A prince has gone to the meadow-lands of the dead, the noble son of Sétna. He ravaged the straths of Fomorians over worlds of men. From the height of Alenn he slew the mighty ones of the earth, a powerful captain⁴ of many tribes, Mes-Delmonn of the Domnainn.'

The tradition that Alenn was a seat of the Leinster kings before the time of Art Mes-Delmonn is borne out by a very ancient poem, where it is mentioned together with Tara and Crúachu (Rathcroghan). This is a composition of twenty-two stanzas called *Fursunnud Laidcinn*, i. e.

¹ That this, and not Mes-Telmonn as it is sometimes written, is the correct form is shown by alliteration: *mac Mis-Delmond dorar már*, LL 51b.

² Is lais conrotacht múr nAlinne, licet antea ciuitas regalis fuit, Rawl. B. 502, p. 118 a 30 = LL 311 b 31 and 378a. Art Mes-Delmaud mac Sétna cedna conaclaid múr nAilinne, Dinds. 17 (RC. XV, p. 309). Cf. also the poem on Alenn in E. Gwynn's *Metrical Dindsenchas II*, p. 80.

³ See Rawl. B. 502, p. 118 a 32, LL 311 b 33 and 378 a 19.

⁴ Literally, 'tribune'.

'The Illumination of Laidcenn (mac Bairchedo)', preserved in a single copy only in Rawlinson B. 502, p. 116 c. This remarkable poem is one of few revealing a metrical system which has never been noticed before. This system stands midway between the old alliterative rhythmical poetry and the later syllabic rhymed unrhythmical poetry. There is rhythm, each verse having as a rule three, and sometimes four or two stresses; there is alliteration from word to word and from verse to verse; and there are full disyllabic rhymes at the end of the couplets. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that we have here to do with poems belonging to a period when the introduction of rhyme into the old purely alliterative metres prepared the way towards a complete adoption in Irish poetry of the rhymed metres based upon the Latin church hymns.

The lines referred to are:

*Olldam Elgga āighthide Amloñgaid ān Ōengus
 attreb tōeba Temro,¹ tosnort² arid n-ōenlus.
 Ailenn chruind, Crūachu, cāinu³ dūn dindgnai,
 duir conserad rōmdæ rīgrad rūad rindgnai.*

'The dread ollam of Ireland, the noble Great Supporter⁵ Oengus, dwelt on the sides of Tara; he vanquished it by his sole strength.⁴

¹ attreb toebu temra Ms. For the spelling *attreb* compare *atrefea*, Ml. 107 a 15.

² dosnort Ms.

³ Read either *cāine* or *cāinem*.

⁴ Here *arid n-* seems to contain the personal instead of the possessive pronoun of the 3 eg. m. (*id n-*).

⁵ The name which is here written *Amloñgaid* has undergone many changes in the course of time. It is best known in its

Round Alenn, Cruachu, fairest¹ of hill-forts, . . .²
glorious strong kings of spear-craft.³

Oengus Ollam Amlongaid was the son of Ailill Abratcháin and grandson of Labraid Loingsech. See his pedigree in Rawl. B. 502, p. 117 f. He was slain by Irero mac Meilge, ib. 135 b 46. But the Leinster king who is most frequently associated with Alenn is Find fili mac Rossa Rúaid. While his brother Corpre Nio-fer made himself king of Tara, and his brother Ailill mac Máta by virtue of his maternal descent ruled in Connaught, Find became king of Leinster with his residence at Alenn. The three brothers and their royal seats are celebrated in many poems dating from various periods. The oldest is one ascribed to Senchán Torpéist, a wellknown poet of the seventh century:³

*Tri maicc Rúaid, ruirig flaind:
fiangal⁵ Find, Ailill acher, cóem Corpre.⁴*

latest form *Amalgaid*, where *g* as it does often stands for *ng*. In AU. 717 we find *Amalgaid*, gen. *Amalgado* 592. The Book of Armagh (fo. 10 b 1) has *Amolngid*. But the earliest Old-Irish form has been preserved by the scribe of Rawl. B. 502 who on p. 144 g writes *Anblongaid*. This clearly stands for **an-folangid* 'great supporter', just as the gen. *Anfolnithe* goes back to the ogham *Ana-clamattias*, as John MacNeill (Notes on Irish Ogham Inscriptions, p. 358) has shown.

¹ Literally, 'excellence'.

² I can make nothing of *duir conserad*. An leg. *converad*?

³ See Rawl. B. 502, p. 118 b 15, LL 311 c 34 and 380 a 13.

⁴ This line occurs with a slight change in the *Fursunmud Laidcenn* (Rawl. B. 502, 116c): *Finn fili, Ailill acher, caem Cairpre*.

⁵ It is interesting to find this epithet applied to Find mac Rossa. The more one studies these old texts, the more evident it becomes that the connexion of Find mac Cumail with the hill

Cáine dind dem i fóat:

Alenn chruind, Cruachu, Temair thóebglan.

'Three sons of Ruad, noble great kings: Find of the valour of warbands, fierce Ailill, loveable Carbre. Fairest of hills¹ is the shelter² in which they sleep:³ round Alenn, Cruachu, bright-sided Tara'.

In the same way the three brothers and their residences are celebrated in a poem placed in the mouth of Conchobor mac Nessa at the end of *Cath Ruiss na Rig*,⁴ and again in the following unassigned verses in LL 379 b 34:

*Amra in mhaicni maicne Rossa, rādth gin mebail,
Oilill a Cruachain,⁵ Find i nAillinn, Cairpri i Temair.*

A poem on the thirty-five kings of Leinster who were also high-kings of Ireland likewise mentions them as follows, adding the name of a fourth brother:⁶

*Ross Rúad, Find file q hAlinn, Ailill mac Rosa robind,
Corpre Nia-fer co n-aeb úath is Conchobor Abratruad.*

Lastly, there was a poem on the three brothers by Orthanach, of which however the first verse only has been preserved:⁷

Can trí macco Rúaid dín rind 7 rl.

of Allen rests on a confusion with his namesake and of Alenn with Almu (Allen). It is remarkable that among the kings 'who loved to be at Alenn' our poem mentions Find mac Roith (§ 13), whose name, so far as I know, occurs nowhere else.

¹ Literally, 'excellence of hills'.

² As to this meaning of *dem* see my Contributions s. v.

³ Cf. *is úar in adba i fáat*, Otia Merseiana I, p. 125.

⁴ See Hogan's edition, p. 5.

⁵ Read *Oilill Cruachna*.

⁶ See Rawl. B. 502, p. 83 a 44. ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118 b 17.