

Visualising The Cattle Raid of Cooley

By Gordon Rugg & Jo Hyde

Background: This article was posted for St Patrick's Day. It describes what happens when you visualise themes in the Irish national epic, The Cattle Raid of Cooley, compared to the Iliad. Depictions of heroes in the two epics are broadly similar, but the depictions of female central characters are very different.

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As Irish readers will know, Greece isn't the only country to have national epics; Ireland also has its share of great ancient epics, one of which is informally known as "The Irish Iliad". It's not as widely known as it should be, and this article is intended to help remedy that situation.

The epic in question is *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, usually known in English as *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* or *The Táin*. It tells the story of a war, as famous in Irish legend as the Trojan War is in Greek legend. Like the Trojan War, the Táin has a queen as a central figure, proud Medb of Connacht. The Táin also has its share of heroes, including Cú Chulainn, Ireland's answer to Achilles. So, how do the two epics compare?

We'll begin with the women at the heart of the two stories.

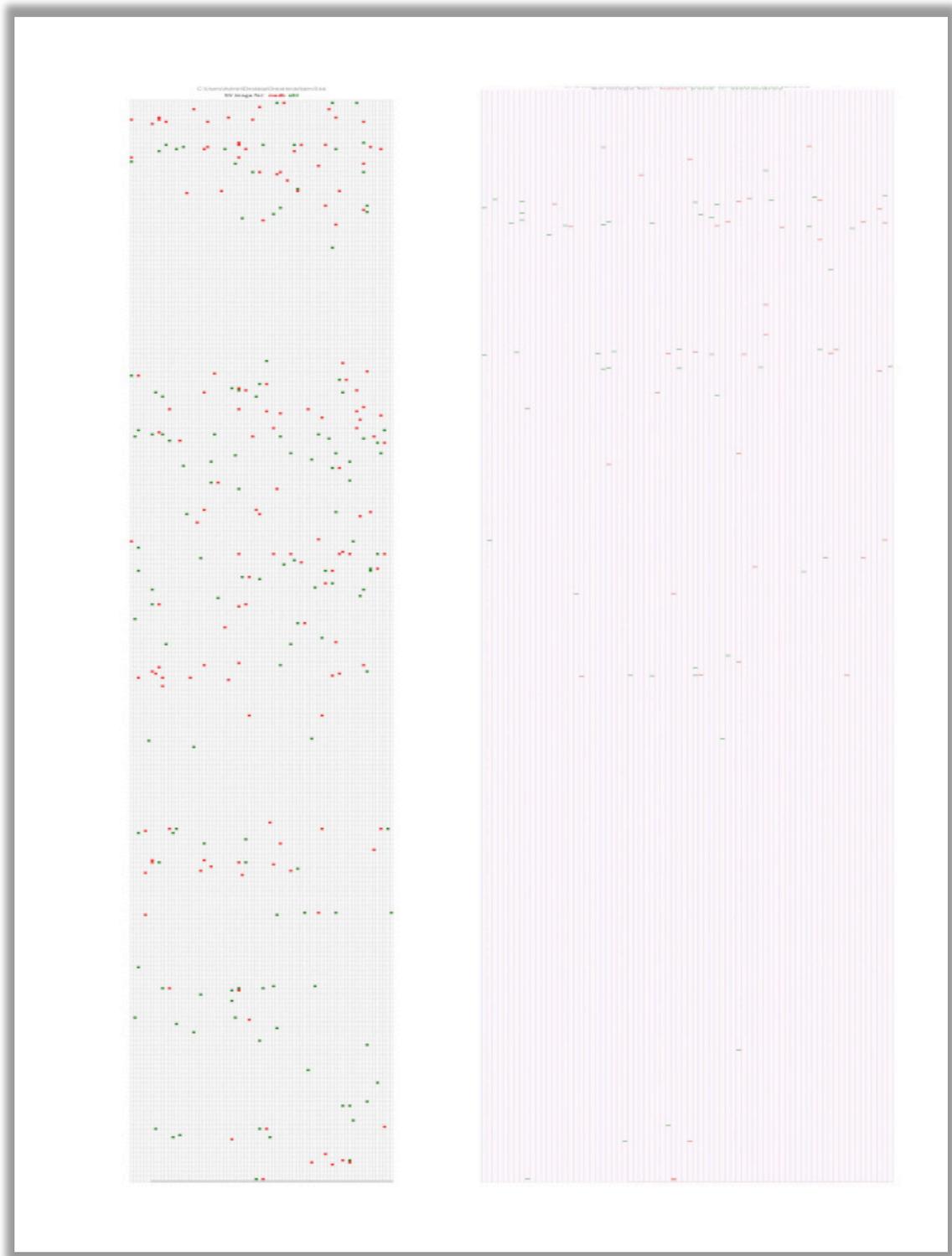
Helen launched a thousand ships by leaving her husband, Menelaus, for another man. Medb started a war after an argument with her husband Ailill about which of them owned the most; they owned exactly the same as each other, except that he owned a prize bull, and she didn't own anything that was its equal.

Helen stood on the battlements of Troy watching heroes fight; Medb stood on the battlefield, among the heroes.

Helen fades out of history in most versions of the story; Medb was killed by a piece of cheese hurled out of a sling by a warrior whose mother Medb had murdered.

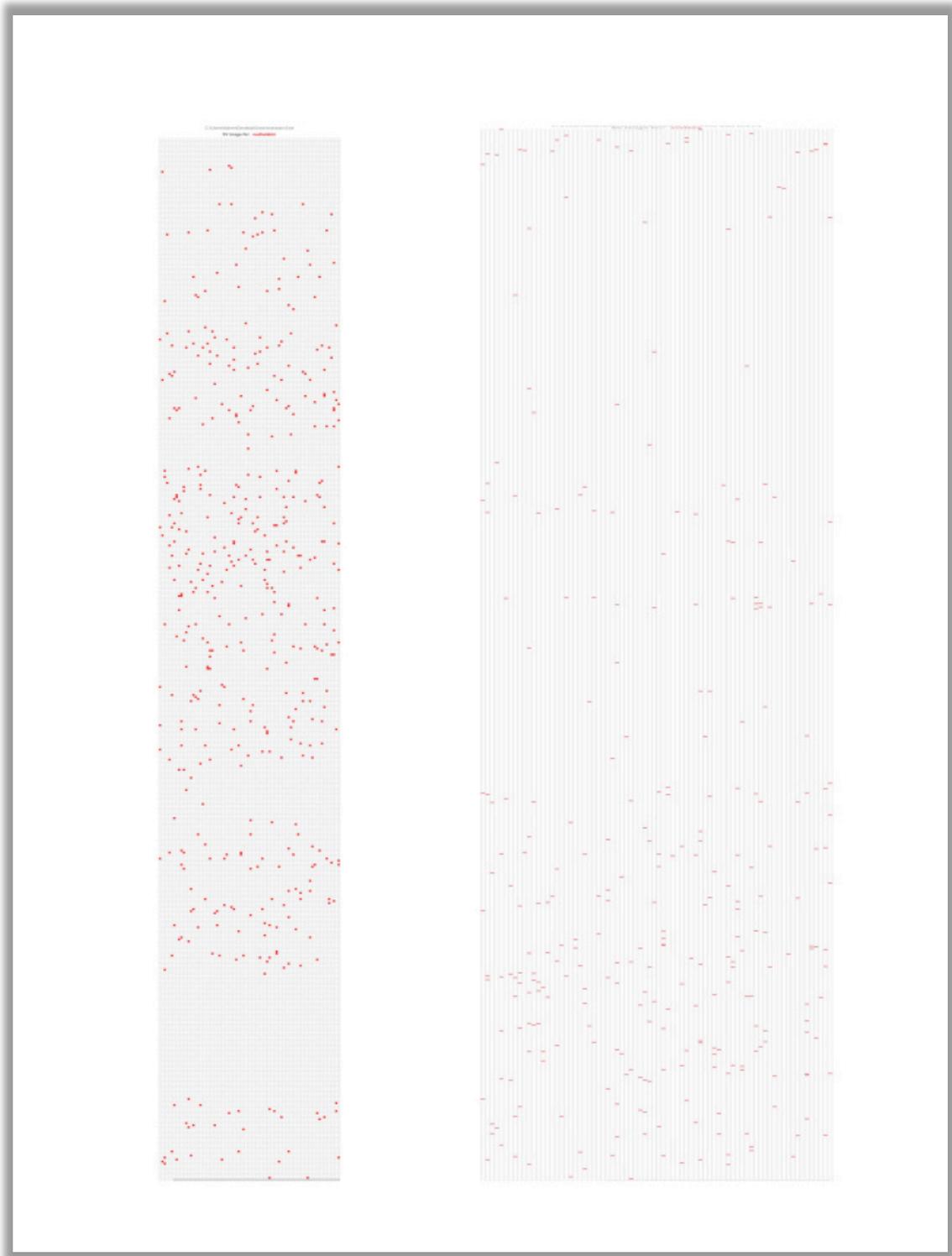
By anyone's standards, Medb is a forceful kind of woman. If we show where mentions of the two women (in red) and of their men (in green) occur in the two epics, we see some striking similarities and differences. (For Helen, we've shown occurrences of her lover Paris, rather than of the husband she abandoned.)

Figure 1: heroines, husband and lover. The Táin is on the left, the Iliad on the right.



The two heroes, Cú Chulainn and Achilles, both appear frequently, as you might expect for heroes, but both show an interesting feature in their appearances.

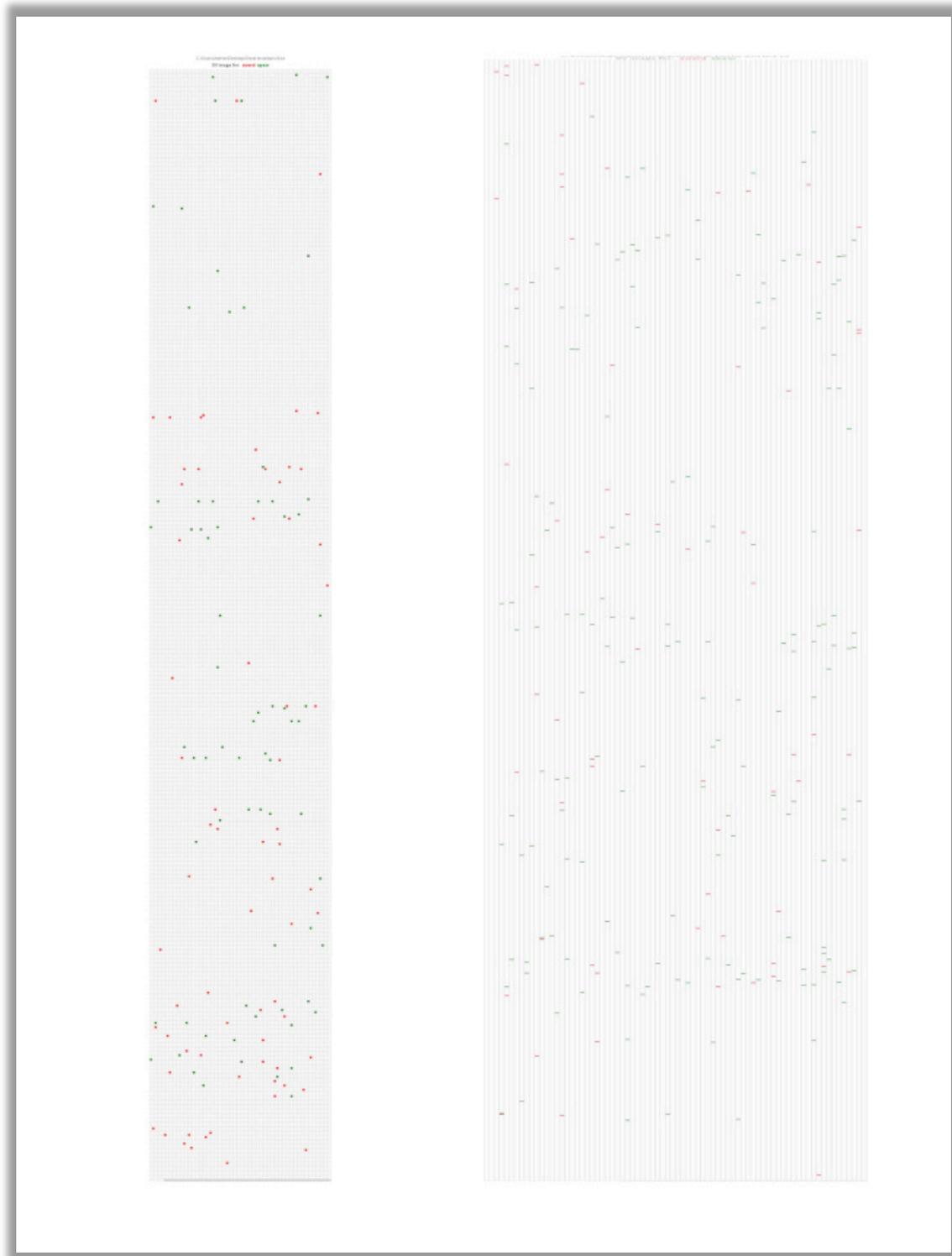
Figure 2: heroes (the Táin on the left, the Iliad on the right)



In both epics, there is a chunk of the story where the hero is conspicuously absent. In the case of Achilles, this happens at the start of the story, where he is busy with a sulk of epic proportions; in the case of Cú Chulainn, it's near the end of the story, when fighting an entire army on his own has left him so badly injured that even the hand protected by his shield has twenty wounds in it, and his comrades reckon that he could do with a rest.

Both heroes fought with the weapons of the time: sword and spear. When we visualise how often these two weapons were mentioned in the two epics (red for sword, green for spear) we see broadly similar patterns.

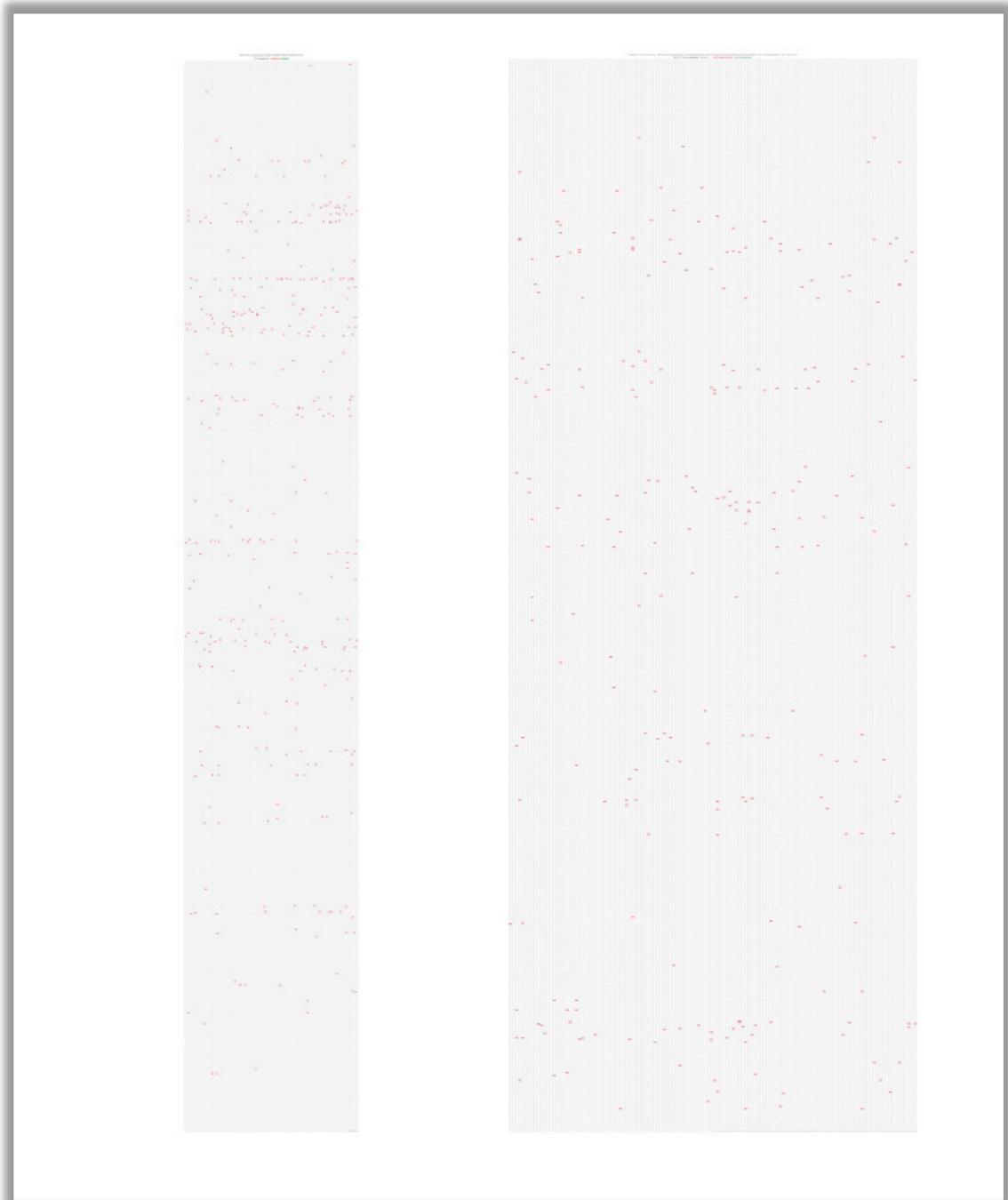
Figure 3: cold metal (the Táin on the left, the Iliad on the right)



In both cases, there's a concentration of mentions near the end, when both Cú Chulainn and Achilles fight and kill a hero against whom they have no personal grudge. In the case of Cú Chulainn the opponent is his close friend Ferdiad; in the case of Achilles, it's the Trojan hero Hector, a man widely admired by Greeks and Trojans alike.

The two epics also share an unusual feature in their descriptions of warfare. Both of them frequently refer to chariots. When the Táin was written down, war chariots were centuries in the past, but the pattern of mentions of chariots is broadly similar in the two epics.

Figure 4: chariots (the Táin on the left, the Iliad on the right)



So, when it comes to heroes, weapons and chariots, the Táin and the Iliad have a lot of similarities. When it comes to heroines, the two have a lot of differences. So, if you like a story with strong women as well as strong heroes, and if you haven't already read the Táin, then you might want to celebrate St Patrick's day by downloading a copy off Project Gutenberg and giving it a try. It's everything an epic should be, and you can't say fairer than that.

Notes

Irish spelling looks pretty exciting compared to most. It's actually sensible, if you have the time to get properly into it and you're familiar with how Irish grammar works. If that doesn't apply to you, then some very rough approximations for the names in the story are as follows (with apologies to Irish speakers for the mangling...)

Táin = Tan

Táin Bó Cúailnge = Tan bo Coolnye

Medb = Mave

Connacht = Connaught

Cú Chulainn = Coohoolin

The Iliad: Greek readers might like to know that we'll also be doing a feature on the Iliad at some point, in the spirit of even-handed coverage.

Cheese: Yes, the legend really does say that Medb was killed by a piece of cheese hurled out of a sling. That might well have happened, since some ancient cheese varieties were the stuff of legend; an episode of *Mythbusters* found that one old-style cheese was so hard it could be shot out of a cannon, and then punch clean through a heavy canvas sail.

Versions: We used the Project Gutenberg versions of the Táin and of the Iliad, in translation.

Other notes for people who appreciate that nit-picking perfectionism is a virtue, not a vice: We've deliberately gone for a simple approach in this article. For instance, we haven't included Cú Chulainn's given name of Sétanta in the searches above, nor have we included Paris' alternative name of Alexander or Alexandros (*Paris* was a nickname). We've also resisted the temptation to refer to the Hittite *Alaksandu Treaty* and its mention of a royal figure called Alaksandu who might just have been the Alexander from the Iliad. This is an article in celebration of St Patrick's Day, and we're not getting too heavy about the details for once.

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