

## Fedelm and the *claideb corthaire* (TBC I ll. 37 f.)\*

### Zusammenfassung

*Eines der lexikalischen Probleme der Táin ist der Terminus claideb corthaire, der einen Gegenstand bezeichnet, den die Seherin Fedelm in der Hand hält, während sie das Scheitern von Medbs Feldzug prophezeit (TBC I ll. 37 f.). Auf der Grundlage der Wortbildung dieser Objektbezeichnung und unter Berücksichtigung der an einem mittelalterlichen Gewichtswebstuhl verwendeten Werkzeuge wird vorgeschlagen, daß claideb corthaire als „Webschwert“ aufgefaßt werden sollte. Die in den Parallelstellen der späteren Táin-Rezensionen beschriebene Handlung, wo Fedelm webt, ist nicht auf TBC I zurückzuprojizieren. Dies hat auch Konsequenzen für die wiederholt vertretene Annahme eines keltischen Einflusses im altnordischen Gedicht Darraðarljóð.*

Many passages of the *Táin* contain rare or obscure words or phrases, the interpretation of which presents significant challenges for the modern reader. One such is the scene of Fedelm's appearance (TBC I ll. 29–113). Here, the seer is described as holding a *claideb corthaire* (ll. 37–9), literally a 'fringe sword' or 'sword of/for a fringe' (i.e., the fringe of a textile): *Claideb corthaire do fíndruine inna láim, esnaid óir and. ... Gaisced lasin n-ingin 7 dá ech duba foa carput*. O'Rahilly translates: 'In her hand she carried a weaver's beam of white bronze, with golden inlay. ... The maiden was armed and her chariot was drawn by two black horses.' In a note on this passage, O'Rahilly equates this *claideb corthaire* with the better attested *claideb garmnae* ('a weaver's beam').<sup>1</sup> However, a consideration of how such 'weaver's beams' were used in both practical and literary contexts casts considerable doubt on this equation. As used on a warp-weighted loom, a *claideb garmnae* is the beam on which the warp (the vertical thread) is fastened; the warp in turn is held in tension by the loomweights suspended

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\* An early version of this note was written with the support of a 'DAAD Doktorandenstipendium'. I owe thanks to Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards, Professor Liam Breatnach and the editors and anonymous reviewers of the *Zeitschrift* for valuable suggestions on points of the argument, and to Dr. Kathryn Stevens for corrections of my English style and grammar. For any shortcomings I bear, of course, sole responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> TBC I: 240 (note on l. 37). For a collection of attestations of *claideb garmnae* cf. *DIL* s.v. 'garman', col. 46 l. 87 – col. 47 l. 1. The clearest single attestation for the semantics of *claideb garmnae* as 'weaver's beam' is a biblical gloss in cod. Regina 215, in which Lat. *liciatorium* ('weaver's beam') is glossed *claideb garmne*: *Thes.* i p. 1 l. 24.

from each of the individual threads.<sup>2</sup> Since the weaver's beam is thus carrying the combined weight of all the loomweights, it is necessarily a rather massive piece of timber, rather awkward to carry on a chariot (all the more so if made of metal, as it would be the case with Fedelm's 'weaver's beam of white bronze'). Indeed, the primary associations of the *claideb garmnae* seem to have been with size and bulk, as illustrated by two passages in *TBDD* where the term is used to suggest the immense size of other objects of presumably similar shape. The first of these is *TBDD* §61, where the length of Cailb's shins is compared to a *claideb garmnae*; the second is *TBDD* §128, where the huge swords of monstrous warriors whose limbs are as thick as a man's waist are said to be as long as a *claideb garmnae*.<sup>3</sup> This literary usage of the 'weaver's beam' follows naturally from its everyday function and makes it difficult to imagine that this object is meant in the description of Fedelm.

In order to support her interpretation of *claideb corthaire* as 'weaver's beam' in the *TBC I* passage, O'Rahilly refers to the parallel prophecy scene involving Fedelm from *TBC LL*, where Fedelm 'is said to be weaving a fringe'.<sup>4</sup> In the passage in question, the sentence from *TBC I* which mentions Fedelm's *claideb corthaire* has the following counterpart (ll. 185 f.): *Is amlaid bóí ind ingen ic figi chorrthairi 7 claideb findruini ina láim deiss cona secht n-aslib do dergór ina déssaib*. O'Rahilly translates this as: 'The girl was weaving a fringe, holding a weaver's beam of white bronze in her right hand with seven strips of red gold on its points (?).' The 'weaver's beam' in this translation reflects an implicit emendation of the obscure sentence, as the Irish has *claideb findruini*, 'sword of white bronze', rather than *claideb garmnae* or *claideb corthaire*.<sup>5</sup> This rather mysterious scene is explained by O'Rahilly in a note on the nearly identical sentence in *TBC St* ll. 198–200<sup>6</sup> with the following statement: 'Obviously the meaning here is that the *banfháidh* was weaving threads in a magical way on her weaver's beam (*cloidheamh*), preparatory to foretelling the future of Medb'. For the nearest Celtic parallel for the kind of magical weaving she envisages here, O'Rahilly points to modern Scottish folklore, where the crossing

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the warp-weighted loom, with illustrations, cf. POOLE 1991: 132–137.

<sup>3</sup> *TBDD* §61, ll. 537–538: *Sithir cloideb ngarmnai ceachtar a dá lurcan*; *TBDD* §128, ll. 1228–1229: *Trí claidib duba dímóra leó, sithigtir claideb garmnai cach ae*. The shaft of Goliath's spear in the Old Testament is also described as being like a weaver's beam: 1 *Sam.* 17.7.

<sup>4</sup> *TBC I*: 240 (note on l. 37).

<sup>5</sup> O'Rahilly's reasoning for translating *claideb findruini* as 'a weaver's beam of white bronze' might have been that *claideb findruini* could be an elliptical phrase representing a *claideb [corrthairi] findruini* which could have been shortened because of the immediately preceding *chorrthairi*. An alternative suggestion for the genesis of this sentence in *TBC LL* will be developed below.

<sup>6</sup> *TBC St* ll. 198–200: *Is amhlaidh do bhí an inghean ag fichce corthuire 7 cloidheamh fiondruine ina láimh ndes cona seacht n-aisle do dheargór*.

of threads as on a loom is attested as a magical practice. Even with evidence for a high degree of continuity, it would be problematic to use such late material to explain either of the episodes in question, and in particular to make it the basis for any interpretation of *claideb corthaire* in the Fedelm scene from *TBC I*, which dates to over a millennium earlier. Yet there is little to no evidence for such continuity. *TBC LL* and *TBC St* do not necessarily provide a chronological or motif-historical link between *TBC I* and the witchcraft of modern folklore, as the counterpart of the relevant sentence from *TBC I* in *TBC LL* and *Stowe* does not speak of a *claideb corthaire*.

A close comparison of the equivalent sentence from *TBC LL* with that from *TBC I* also raises the question of how far it can be used to shed light on the episode from the earlier text. Virtually every word of the sentence in *TBC I* recurs in *TBC LL*:

*TBC I* *claideb corthaire do fíndruine inna láim*

*TBC LL* *Is amlaid bóí ind ingen ic fígi chorrthairi 7 claideb fíndruini ina láim*

In the later version, however, the phrase *claideb corthaire* does not appear as a unit; the two constituents are assigned to different clauses and prefaced with an explicit description of weaving which is not present in *TBC I*. If there is any direct relationship between these two texts that would allow us to use the one to elucidate the other, this re-arrangement and expansion may indicate an attempt to rephrase the sentence in order to make sense of an unintelligible passage. The weaving described in *TBC LL* and *Stowe* may therefore be nothing more than an *ad hoc* interpretation by a medieval redactor faced with what he considered to be an intractable text; in a way, it is not so much a transmission of the original text as rather a commentary on this text. Furthermore, there are to my knowledge no definite Old or Middle Irish examples of magical weaving, which casts further doubt on the validity of O’Rahilly’s interpretation. A final practical consideration is that the type of loom used for weaving fringes would not be the warp-weighted kind with a large beam, but a much smaller tablet weaving loom. If one chooses to retroject the scene from *TBC LL* and *Stowe* and interpret Fedelm as weaving a fringe in *TBC I*, the *claideb corthaire* would have to be translated as a ‘tablet weaving loom’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The possibility of a connection with tablet weaving seems to be implied by the *Lexique* s.v. ‘corrthar’ (C-213), where it translates *cloidem corthaire* as ‘épée de frange’, which is explained as ‘baguette utilisée pour confectionner des franges’; for an illustration of this object the *Lexique* refers to HENCKEN *et al.* 1950/1951: 215, which shows a schematic drawing of a tablet weaving loom and the tools used in weaving on such a loom. Faraday suggested ‘shuttle’ (*DIL* C column 487 line 2); the *DIL* s.v. ‘cor(r)thar’ explains it as ‘term in weaving, appar. rod used in making fringes’ (column 486 lines 84 f.). WINDISCH 1905: 26 f. (note 2) offers some discussion but without reaching a conclusion about the character of the instrument.

Other attestations of *claideb corthaire* are of little help. The only other example listed in the *DIL* and the *Lexique* is in *Laws I 150.7 = CIH 379.7*,<sup>8</sup> where *cloidem corthaire* appears in the main text of the *Senchus Mór* as part of a list of weaving and spinning items and is explained in a gloss as *.i. asa figther in corrthar*, ‘out of/by/with which the fringe is woven’; this gloss is impossible to date with any certainty, but may possibly be late Middle Irish.<sup>9</sup> As the preposition *a* can be used in a merely instrumental sense (cf. *DIL s.v. 7. a II b*, esp. col. 6 ll. 65 f. and 68–70), this gloss merely shows that the *claideb corthaire* was some sort of weaving implement.

A consideration of the tools used for weaving on the warp-weighted loom, however, suggests a new possible interpretation of the *claideb corthaire*. When a cloth is woven on this type of medieval loom, the weft (the horizontal threads) must be beaten tightly into the warp (the vertical threads) using a special tool, the ‘sword beater’ or ‘weaver’s sword’.<sup>10</sup> Without this tool, it would not be possible to create a dense layering of the weft as it is interwoven with the warp. For functional reasons, the ‘weaver’s sword’ consists of a handle and a slender ‘blade’, since it is used during the weaving process to beat the weft in between the threads of the warp. Thus, practical considerations alone require the tool to have a shape closely approaching that of a sword, and this natural resemblance between tool and weapon is also reflected in the linguistic evidence: apart from the English terms ‘sword beater’ or ‘weaver’s sword’ one may recall the German term ‘Webschwert’.<sup>11</sup> Material examples with a sword-like design are well attested in North-Western Europe: some Norse female graves have even been found to contain weaver’s swords with a metal blade, leading to an extremely close resemblance between the tool and the weapon.<sup>12</sup> Of particular relevance for the current discussion are the archaeological specimens from Viking Age Ireland (and therefore nearly contemporary with the passage in *TBC I*) which have been well preserved in the waterlogged environments of Irish bogs. Such ‘weaver’s swords’ essentially have the same shape and dimensions as wooden, single-edged swords. Although their shape is determined primarily by functional considerations, some of these tools seem to have been modified to increase their resemblance to swords by the addition of elaborately carved hilts. For example, one item in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin has

<sup>8</sup> *DIL* C column 487 ll. 2 f. also lists *MR*, 214 line 23, but this passage only presents a flowery description of a battle array of the Saxon army ‘in their fringe [i.e. array] of swords and sharp spears and battle-shields’ (*ina corrthair chlaidem ocus chorr-shleag, ocus chath-sciath*).

<sup>9</sup> *Pers. comm.* Thomas Charles-Edwards.

<sup>10</sup> On which in general (although without reference to the Irish material) cf. HOFFMANN 1964: 279–283. She also lists many examples made from metal, one of which may actually have been manufactured from a real sword (p. 281). On the strong similarities between the ‘weaver’s sword’ and the sword of war cf. also POOLE 1991: 136 f.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. TIDOW 2006 *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. TIDOW 2006: 323 and above note 10.

a pommel in the shape of an animal's head with gaping jaws,<sup>13</sup> which indicates that the association of this sword- or sabre-shaped tool with the weapon already existed in early medieval Ireland. This object, which is sword-shaped, used like a sword for beating and deployed on the running edge of the growing textile, would seem a plausible candidate for the *claideb corthaire* with its literal meaning of 'fringe sword'. The semantic range of *corthar* is consistent with this interpretation, since the word does not only mean 'fringe' in the sense of the border that would be woven on a tablet weaving loom, but can also refer more generally to other types of border or edge – compare for instance *corthar teined*, 'fringe of fire, conflagration, blaze' (*DIL* s.v. 'cor(r)thar' col. 486 ll. 75–78).

If such a 'weaver's sword' were made of the bright metal *findruine*, it would look virtually identical to a warrior's sword. In this light, the *claideb corthaire* which Fedelm is said to be holding in *TBC I* could be interpreted either as a poetic circumlocution for a real warrior's sword in her hand, or to mean that she is carrying a symbolic representation of a sword.<sup>14</sup> Either of these readings would align Fedelm's *claideb corthaire do findruine* with the generally martial character of the scene, in which she appears armed and driving a chariot (*TBC I* l. 39).

It may be noted finally that this reinterpretation of the *claideb corthaire* which rejects the idea that weaving could constitute a magical act in early Ireland is also of relevance for the interpretation of the much-discussed Old Norse poem *Darraðarljóð* (10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>15</sup> It has been claimed – among other interpretations – that the weaving by supernatural figures described in this poem should be seen as due to Celtic influence, with Fedelm's supposed magical weaving in *TBC* adduced as the only medieval Celtic example of the motif in question.<sup>16</sup> Such a borrowing cannot, of course, have occurred if this image was not in use in contemporary Ireland, and I hope to have shown at least that the material cited as evidence for the existence of this image is open to an alternative interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> Wooden weaver's sword from Littleton Bog, Co. Tipperary, 10<sup>th</sup> century, inventory no. 1954:7.

<sup>14</sup> There is little to be gained by speculation about the possible symbolism of the *claideb corthaire*. Given that the term has at once extremely domestic and extremely warlike connotations (weaving vs. sword), its use by Fedelm might reflect her liminal status as a prophet. Or, less mystically, its blunt edge might be a less-than-subtle hint at the impending failure of the campaign, mirroring Fedelm's prophecy. Without concrete evidence, there is no way to tell.

<sup>15</sup> Ed. POOLE 1991: 116–119. For a detailed general discussion of this poem cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> GOEDHEER 1938: 74–87, especially 79–82, 85. Cf. more recently CLOVER 1984: 106; ZIMMERMANN 2012: 35, 236, 251. POOLE 1991: 140 considers a Celtic connection for the prose-frame of the poem.

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