

## ANCIENT HURLING AT CŪNGA

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, [www.clandonnell.net](http://www.clandonnell.net))

From the Mythological Cycle's *Cath Maige Tuired Cúnga*

I'm going to tell you a story about one of the earliest known hurling matches. It takes place at least 2,000 years ago, and perhaps as long as 3,000 years ago. The story comes from one of the "cycles" of Ireland. There are several of these cycles, the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycles, the Fenian Cycles, to name a few, and each of them is a series of stories passed down through many generations by Celtic storytellers.

Medieval, or pre-Medieval, monks in Ireland endeavored to record these stories and it is from these manuscripts that we know about the stories today. The monks even figured out the exact dates of some of the stories. The hurling story I'm about to tell takes place, according to the monks, on June 10, 3303.

The year 3,303 might confuse you a wee bit, but that's because you probably count years with the modern calendar. According to my calendar, this is the year 2,021.

But these Irish monks used an entirely different system. Under their calendar, year zero was the year the earth was created. This hurling match was 3,303 years later. In this calculation, the monks were probably off by 4 or 5 billion years, give or take. But that can be excused, since they calculated this many centuries before the invention of Wikipedia.

The monks also figured out that the year 1,626 was the year of the great flood, and the rescue of humanity and two of every species of animal by Noah and the Ark. So the hurling

match was not all that much later. Any way you count years, this hurling match occurred a long, long time ago. Trust me on this.

The match was between the Fir Bolg (“FEER Ball-ug”) and Tuatha Dé (“TOO-ah DAY”).

By legend, Fir Bolg was the first group of people to settle in Ireland. This is not actually true. Fir Bolg, which means “Men of Lightning”, were an Erainn (“AY-rah”) Celtic tribe. The Erainn were one of the several Celtic groups which roamed Europe for many centuries. Julius Caesar wrote about them in his memoirs, and called the Erainn the fiercest of all the tribes outside of Rome. He said that these folks kept themselves away from merchants and other things which tend to effeminate the mind. Those are Caesar’s words, not mine.

The Erainn and other Celtic groups migrated out of Europe and into the British Isles. The migration may have been an invasion, depending upon your perspective. But the Erainn became one of the more dominant Celtic groups in Ireland. The words Erin, Eire (“AIR” or “AIR-ah”), and Ireland are derived from the Erainn.

Tuatha Dé means “tribe of the gods”. The tribe in the story is likely a Gaelic tribe. The Gaels were yet another Celtic group in Europe which migrated to, or invaded, Ireland. The Gaels became the most dominant group, and their language – Gaelic – supplanted all others.

The Gaels probably had a big ego, or else they would not have referred to themselves as the “Tribe of the Gods”. Or perhaps, the other Celts who lost to the Gaels in battle gave the Gaels this name. There is less shame in losing if the loss is to a tribe of gods. Or perhaps, the story doesn’t involve the Gaels at all, but rather a match between the Fir Bolg and a real tribe of gods.

In any event, when Tuatha Dé came to Ireland, Fir Bolg was already there. A battle between the tribes was inevitable, and the warriors of the two sides collided near Cúnga (“COON-ah”). Cúnga means “narrows” and it is the name of a narrow strip of land separating two large lakes in the west of Ireland. There is a little creek in the village which is the boundary between County Galway and County Mayo. The town there is now called Cong, and it was the site for the filming of “The Quiet Man” movie with John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara.

But it wasn’t very quiet there when the Fir Bolg and Tuatha Dé met there for battle. The monks writing the annals of Ireland reported that the two armies combined consisted of over 100,000 warriors. That number may or may not be accurate, and, if one thinks about how the monks counted years, this number may be off by a few billion. In any event, the two armies were huge.

The armies met at Moytura – the tower plains – in June. While the armies were readying for battle, some of the younger warriors of Fir Bolg grew impatient. 27 of them went to a nearby field and taunted the Tuatha Dé. The 27 challenged Tuatha Dé to a hurling match.

Today the game is played with 15 players per team. But 27 Fir Bolg stood on the field, and they were soon joined from 27 young men from Tuatha Dé, for a rousing hurling match.

Today, the game is played with rules and there are referees on the pitch to enforce the rules. A few thousand years ago, there were no rules and no referees. Today the game can be rough. You will see in today’s match a lot of body contact, swinging hurleys and fast moving balls. I saw an old newsreel which described the sport as “Athletic Manslaughter”.

That description is a bit of an exaggeration for today's game. But it was quite accurate in the early days of the game. Then it was positively brutal. While one player might try to score points in the match, another might swing his hurley towards the head of an opponent.

The modern hurley is a well-crafted instrument of the game. A hurley in ancient times was, as often as not, a shillelagh. A shillelagh of old was not a walking stick. It was a weapon. It had a long stiff shaft, usually of oak, and a hard knobby end, often from the root. It was smeared with butter or lard, and cured by fire. This blackened the stick, but also made it extremely hard.

Ancient warriors didn't often have swords or even battle axes. They fought with javelins and spears for throwing and thrusting. But for close end combat, the shillelagh was the weapon of choice. If you hit an enemy squarely with the knobby end of a shillelagh, you could shatter bones and even a skull.

The neat thing about a shillelagh is that it could double as a hurley. And that's what the warriors used at Moytura. In the match, it was more often used as a weapon than as a hurley.

Today a hurling match is 60 or 70 minutes. Then, it was as long as players on one side remained standing.

This match ended in a draw. I'm not certain of the final score, and I could not find any score reported in the ancient records. But it was a draw, since at the end of the match, no one remained standing.

None of the 54 players in the match was able to walk away. Some, it was recorded, were killed. By some accounts, all of the Fir Bolg players were killed. The pitch was littered with

players, none of whom were able to continue. Nearly all had one or more broken bones, and all were injured in some serious fashion.

Before the match, the two sides negotiated a possible peace. After the match, neither side was in the mood to continue negotiation. The day after the match, the battle began – known in legend as Cath (“CAATH”) Moytura Cúnga – The Battle at Cúnga Tower Plains.

The first day of battle was a horrific affair. Thousands remained on the battlefield – dead, wounded, or too exhausted to move. Those who could walk left the field at the end of the day. And nothing was decided – Fir Bolg retired to one side of the field, and the Tuatha Dé to the other.

The second day was the same as the first. The warriors of Fir Bolg charged from one side of the field, and those of Tuatha Dé charged from the other. Thousands more died. Thousands more were wounded. And at the end of the day, both sides retired to their respective sides of the field. Nothing was decided. The field between the two armies was littered with the dead and wounded, as well as a complete assortment of severed body parts.

The third day was the same as the first two – thousands dead or wounded, with neither side ending the day with any advantage.

Tuatha Dé came to the battle with far more men than Fir Bolg. This advantage in numbers finally had effect on the fourth day of the battle. By mid-day, Fir Bolg retreated from the battle field. Perhaps the results would have been different, if Fir Bolg had John Wayne on its side. Just a thought.

The elders of both tribes met that evening and negotiated a peace. Under the agreement, Fir Bolg retained dominion over Connacht. Tuatha Dé got the rest of Ireland.

There are many cairns around Moytura today. These are piles of rock, carefully placed and engineered to stand for centuries. It is said that the soldiers on each side left the battle at the end of the day, carrying a stone in one hand and the severed head of a foe in the other. These stones and skulls were placed on a cairn in remembrance of the battle.

The field on which the hurlers played is still called “The Plain of the Hurlers”. I read a report by a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish archaeologist which said that hurling was played on this field well into the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, the field looks the same as it did back then. This is Ireland, after all. If this field were in America, it would probably be a strip mall by now.

The field is no longer used for hurling, or at least not by humans. But local fairies still play the game of hurling on this field, usually by moonlight. Local people often report a glow coming from a nearby cave. It is, in fact, the glow of a fire kept burning by the fairies. It is in this cave that the fairies have their banquet, after a spirited game of hurling.

So that is the story. Hurling is indeed an ancient game. It was played by Celtic warriors in ancient times. It is played by athletes today in Ireland, and by the sons and daughters of Erin around the world. And it is still played by fairies at Moytura.