

The Ulster Cycle: Tales of Athirne

by Patrick Brown

The Birth of Athirne is an anecdote found in Old Irish legal text, the *Bretha Nemed* or 'Laws of Privilege'.

Athirne the Unsociable, *Does Greth Eat Curds?* and *The Siege of Dún Étair* all come from the Book of Leinster (c. 1160).

The Wooing of Luaine is found in two manuscripts dating from c.1390, the Yellow Book of Lecan and the Book of Ballymote.

The Birth of Athirne

Why was Athirne known as ‘Athirne the Fierce?’ Not hard to tell. It’s because of a poem he sang when in his mother’s womb.

When his mother was pregnant, she went to fetch fire from a house where a feast was being prepared. At the smell of the ale, the child inside her gave a leap, and knocked her headlong out the door.

Three times the woman asked for a drink of ale, but each time the brewer refused. He said that even if she died of thirst, or her child came out through her side, the ale would not be disturbed on her account. She would have to wait until she gave birth, however long that might be.

The tops of the barrels had been covered until the arrival of the king, who they had been prepared for. At that moment, they heard Athirne’s voice from his mother’s womb, chanting a poem about the ale. The hoops of all the unopened barrels burst, so all through the house people were wading in ale. The woman drank three mouthfuls of it from her palm before she left the house.

If a poet who has been refused a drink chants that poem in the correct form, the ale will explode from the barrels. It is by him the barrel is pierced, for it is not proper that he should leave it behind undrunk.

Athirne the Unsociable

Athirne the Importunate, son of Ferchertne: it's he who was the most inhospitable man who ever lived in Ireland. He went to Midir of Brí Léith and brought the three cranes of exclusion and inhospitality away from him to his own house, for the sake of stinginess and inhospitality, so none of the men of Ireland would visit his house expecting celebration or entertainment.

'You're not coming in,' said the first crane. 'Get out of here,' said its companion. 'Keep walking,' said the third crane.



From that day on, none of the men of Ireland who saw them would go to his door.

He would never eat his fill where anyone could see him. So he went with a cooked pig and a wineskin of mead to eat his fill by himself. He was settling himself down in front of the pig and the wineskin when he saw a man coming towards him.

'You were going to eat that by yourself!' said the man, striking the pig and the bottle from him.

'What is your name?' said Athirne.

'It's not well known,' said the man. 'Sethor Ethor Othor Sele Dele Dreng Gerce mac Gerce Ger Gér Dír Dír, that's my name.'

Athirne couldn't compose a satire on that, so he didn't get the pig back. It may be that the man was sent by God to take the pig, for Athirne stopped being unsociable from then on.

Does Greth Eat Curds?

There was a famous smith in Ulster, Echet Salach his name, a master of every craft, such that before or after there has been no better smith. Another name for him was Echen. A son was born to him, Amergin his name. The boy went fourteen years of his childhood without speaking.

His belly grew to the size of a huge house, and it was sinewy, grey and thick. The snot from his nostrils ran into his mouth. His hide was black, his teeth were white, and his face was pale and grey. Like the two handles of a smith's bellows his shins and his thighs. His feet were bent and crooked. His ankles were enormous. His cheeks were high and long. His eyes were sunken and dark red. His eyebrows grew down thickly. His hair was rough and prickly. His back was nobbly, bony and scab-rough.

So he wasn't a pretty sight. Due to neglect at his sitting to clean up underneath, his shit would pile up as far as his hips.

His favourite foods were boiled curds, sea salt, red blackberries, green berries, burnt ears of corn, cloves of wild garlic, and empty nutshells, which he used to play with on the table.

One day Athirne sent his servant, Greth his name, to Echet Salach to have him make an axe. Greth saw that lowly, ugly creature on the floor of the house, who scowled at him. Greth gave a start.

Echet's daughter was in the building near the boy. What was heard was the boy speaking to Athirne's servant. 'Does Greth eat curds?' he said, three times. Greth gave a great start. The boy spoke to him again:

Blackberries,
Sloes,
Cloves of wild garlic;
Pine nuts,
Crab apples,
Curds.
Does Greth eat curds?

Greth ran out of the house, out of the stronghold and across the causeway, and fell in the mud. Then he returned to Athirne.

‘You’ve been in the wars,’ said Athirne when he saw him. ‘You look terrible.’

‘And well I might,’ said Greth. ‘A boy who hasn’t said a word for fourteen years spoke to me today, and unless he’s done away with that boy will take your job.’

‘What did he say to you?’

‘Not hard to tell,’ said Greth, and repeated Amergin’s words.

Shortly after, Eccet returned to his house. ‘Amergin spoke to Athirne’s servant today, who came here to ask you to make an axe,’ his daughter told him.

‘What did he say to him?’ said Eccet. His daughter told him.

‘I know what will come of this,’ said Eccet. ‘Athirne will come and kill the boy, so he won’t get the better of him, for the boy who said that has great wisdom.’

The maiden left the fort, taking the boy with her, and they went south to tend their cattle on Sliab Mis. Eccet made a clay image of the boy, and put it to his left, between himself and the bellows. He dressed it in fine clothes, and set it lying down, as if the boy were asleep.

Athirne and Greth arrived, and saw the boy asleep. Their axe was ready, and they were pleased with it. Athirne took it by the handle and brought it down on the head of the image, thinking it was the boy. Then he and his servant fled, and an outcry was raised behind them.

The armies gave chase. Athirne gathered all his property inside his stronghold. The Ulstermen arrived and besieged him, and a treaty was made between them. Eccet was given the price of seven slave-women, and his own honour-price, and he and Athirne came to an agreement. Athirne took the boy as his foster-son, and taught him the skills of the poet. And that is how Athirne lost his position as chief poet of Ulster, and Amergin took his place.

The Siege of Dún Étair

In Ireland there lived a cold-hearted, merciless man, Athirne Ailgesach of Ulster. He was the kind of man who would ask a one-eyed man for his only eye, and demand favours of a woman in childbirth. By Conchobor's advice he went on a bardic circuit of Ireland. At first he went counterclockwise around Connacht. Then he went between two fords of hurdles, to Eochaid son of Luchta, king of Meath, to the south of Connacht. Eochaid went to deliver Athirne south across the Shannon to the men of Munster.

'We don't want you to be ungrateful to us, Athirne,' said Eochaid. 'If we have any jewels or treasures you like, take them.'

'There is one thing I would like,' replied Athirne. 'The single eye in your head.'

'I will not refuse you,' said Eochaid. 'You will have it.' And the king put his finger under his eye, tore it out of its socket, and put it in Athirne's hand. He then asked a servant to lead him to water, so he could wash his face.

As Eochaid poured three waves of water over his face, the servant cried, 'the lake is red with the blood from your eye!'

'Then Dergderc - Red-Eye - shall be its name forever.'

For the generosity the king showed in giving his only eye for the sake of his honour, God miraculously restored both his eyes.

After that Athirne went to Tigerna Tétbuillech, the king of Munster. All he would accept from him for the sake of his honour was a night with the queen – if he didn't get it, the honour of the Munstermen would be lost forever. So the woman was brought to his bed, and slept with him that night, to save her husband's honour.

Then Athirne headed for Leinster, and stopped in Ard Brestine in the south of Moyfea. The Leinstermen came south to meet him, offering him jewels and treasures not to enter their territory, for fear that he might leave invectives on them. For anyone who didn't give Athirne a gift would lose all his treasures, and no-one killed by him was entitled to reprisal. For this reason any man would give him the eye out of his head, or his wife, or the pick of his jewels and treasures.

He decided to leave invectives on the Leinstermen, knowing that if they killed him the Ulstermen would never be finished avenging

him on them. He made this demand of the men of South Leinster in Brestine: that he would leave a verbal insult on them, such that they could never hold their heads up in Ireland again, unless they gave him the greatest jewel on the hill. Nobody knew what this jewel was, or where it might be found.

To avert the disgrace that awaited them, the Leinstermen invoked the Lord of the Elements to help them dispel the outrage that had been committed against them.

There was a horseman training his horse on the hill above them. He turned his horse towards the gathering, and leapt from the hillside. A great sod was thrown up from the horse's hooves, and no-one noticed it until it hit the king, Fergus Fairge, in the chest.

In the clayey side of the sod, Fergus saw a brooch made with eighty ounces of red gold. 'What's this in my bosom?' he said.

'That's the jewel I was after,' said Athirne. 'My father's brother buried it there after the Ulstermen suffered a terrible defeat in the Battle of Brestine.'

The brooch was given to him. Then he went to Mes Gegra, the king of Leinster. Mes Gegra had a brother called Mes Róida, and they were the sons of two mutes – their mother and father were both deaf and dumb. Mes Gegra gave Athirne a great welcome.

Athirne demanded the king's wife that night.

'Why should I give you my wife?' said Mes Gegra.

'For your honour's sake,' replied Athirne. 'Otherwise, kill me, and the shame of Leinstermen will be so great that the Ulstermen will never be finished avenging me on you.'

'You will find no welcome here for the sake of the Ulstermen,' said Mes Gegra. 'You will have the woman for the sake of my honour, but there is no man in Ulster who could take her unless I gave her voluntarily for my honour's sake.'

'I say this truly,' said Athirne, 'I will not rest until an Ulsterman carries off your head and your wife.'

'I won't hold that against you,' said Mes Gegra. 'You will be made welcome.' So Buan, Mes Gegra's wife, slept with Athirne that night. Athirne remained on the circuit of Leinster for a whole year, and took 150 queens, the wives of princes and nobles of Leinster, and carried them off to his own country.

Athirne said to his charioteer, 'Go to the Ulstermen, and get them to come and meet me. I think the Leinstermen will be plotting to recover my booty, unless I appeal to their honour.'

The Leinstermen went to the Tolka to the north of Dublin to bid farewell to Athirne. He took his leave, leaving no blessing and taking none. The Leinstermen were sorrowful at the thought of their wives being taken into captivity, so they caught up with him at Ainech Lagen in an effort to retrieve his booty. That was when the Ulstermen arrived to protect Athirne, and battle was immediately joined.

The Ulstermen were routed. They retreated eastwards by sea, until they were shut up in Dún Etair.¹ They were there for nine watches without food or drink, unless they drank seawater or ate mud. In fact, Athirne had 700 cattle in the middle of the stronghold, but none of the Ulstermen tasted their milk. It was all thrown over a cliff, so that none of the Ulstermen would find Athirne's food. When wounded men were brought to him, he wouldn't let so much as a drop pass their lips, and they bled to death alone. The chiefs of Ulster came to him, begging him to let Conchobor have a drink, but to no avail. So all Conchobor had to eat was what the girl Leborcham could bring on her back from Emain Macha.

Leborcham was the daughter of a slave and a slave-girl from Conchobor's household. She was terrifically ugly, with her feet and knees turned to the back and her heels and calves to the front, but she was able to travel all over Ireland in a day. At the end of each day she returned to the Red Branch and told Conchobor everything, whether good or evil, that had happened in Ireland that day. She brought sixty cakes straight from the oven in Emain Macha to the troops in Dun Etair, and she brought Conchobor's share on her back.

The fighting continued day and night around the stronghold. The Leinstermen claim it was they who built Dun Etair. Cú Chulainn's Gap is there, and everyone wanted Cú Chulainn to build a bridge over it, but he refused, preferring to bridge it with a hail of spears.

Conchobor advised Cú Chulainn not to use his full prowess until reinforcements arrived, for Leborcham had gone to muster the Ulstermen to come by land and by boat to help them.

¹ Howth, County Dublin.

Mess-Dead, son of Amergin, Cú Chulainn's seven-year-old foster-son, was set to guard the gate of the stronghold, and he killed nine men an hour. The Leinstermen came to carry off Ulster hostages three times a day, but suffered the same fate at the hands of Mess-Dead in combat.

It was on Mess-Dead that unequal combat was first practiced in Ireland. When the Leinstermen landed on Benn Etair, 700 champions went to the gate to kill him. As they cut off his head, he gave out his war-cry.

Cú Chulainn heard the cry. 'Either the sky is falling, or the sea is crashing in on us, or the earth quakes, or my foster-son gives his war-cry at unequal combat being practised on him.'

Cú Chulainn started out suddenly, cutting the hosts of Leinstermen in two behind him. Battle was joined. The fighting was terrible, and there were heavy casualties on both sides. The heroes showed their destructive prowess. Three lines of battle were joined from nine o'clock in the morning to three in the afternoon, and the Leinstermen were routed. They raised a red wall against the Ulstermen, for it was a *geis*² for the Ulstermen to pass over a red wall. The conflict was dreadful on all sides.

Many Ulstermen fell in that battle. Mess-Dead, son of Amergin, was the first. Bríanan Brethach, Condla, Beothach, Conaead mac Morna, and many others, also fell.

Conall Cernach went off alone in pursuit of the fleeing Leinstermen, to avenge his brothers, Mess-Dead and Láegaire, who had fallen in the battle. He passed through Dublin, past Drummainech, through Uib Gabla, into Forcathain, by Uachtar Aird, past Naas, to Clane.

When the Leinstermen reached their own territory, they dispersed, each to their own lands. But Mes Gegra, the king, stayed behind the hosts, alone with his charioteer on the Path of Clane.

'I'll sleep now,' said the charioteer, 'and then you will.' Mes Gegra agreed. While his charioteer slept, he saw a wonderful nut, bigger than a man's head, floating down the river towards him. He went down to the water, lifted it out and cut it in two with his dagger, leaving half for the charioteer.

² *Geis*: a taboo. To break your *gessa* (plural form) would lead to your inevitable downfall.

But when he looked around he saw the charioteer lifted off the ground in his sleep! Suddenly, he woke up.

'What's the matter, lad?'

'I had an evil vision,' said the charioteer. 'Have you eaten the nut?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Did you leave half for me?'

'I lessened it first.'

'The man who would eat a little behind my back, would surely eat the lot!'

The king was holding his hand out towards the charioteer, with half the nut in it. The charioteer attacked him with his sword, cutting the king's hand off.

'That is an evil deed, charioteer,' said the king. 'Open my fist – you will find your half of the nut in it.' When the charioteer saw that, he turned his sword on himself, and it stuck out through his back, pointing west.

Mes Gegra yoked the chariot himself, lifted his severed hand, and set off. He came to the western bank of a ford. Conall Cernach was on the eastern bank.

They postured at each other. Mes Gegra told Conall to put his money where his mouth was. 'You killed my brothers,' said Conall. 'Do you see their heads on my belt?' replied Mes Gegra. Then Conall noticed Mes Gegra's severed hand.

'There's no true valour in fighting a one-handed man,' said Mes Gegra.

'In that case, I'll tie one hand to my side.' So Conall's hand was tied to his side with three bonds, and they fought in the ford, delivering such wounds to each other that the ford was red. But Conall's swordsmanship was mightier.

'Well then, Conall,' said Mes Gegra. 'I wouldn't have you leave without taking my head with you. Take my head, and add my glory to your own.'

So Conall cut off Mes Gegra's head, and took it to a flagstone on the edge of the ford. A drop of blood fell from the neck and went straight through the stone into the earth. He put the head down on the stone, and the head went through the stone onto the earth, and fell into the river.

Until then Conall had been known as Conall Clóenbráigtech (of the Crooked Neck). This was one of the Ulstermen's three blemishes: Conall of the Crooked Neck, Cú Chulainn Goll (the one-eyed)³ and Cúscraid Mend (the stammerer). The women of Ulster were divided into three groups, each group loving one of these three men. The ones that loved Cú Chulainn were one-eyed when they spoke to him; the ones that loved Conall crooked their necks; and the ones that loved Cúscraid stammered when they spoke to him.

So Conall lifted the head out of the river onto his shoulder, and from then on he was straight-necked.

Conall got into his chariot alone, and his charioteer took Mes Gegra's chariot. They travelled as far as Uachtar Fine, where they encountered fifty women, namely Mes Gegra's wife Buan and her maidens, coming south from the border.

'Whose woman are you?' asked Conall.

'I am the wife of Mes Gegra, the king,' she replied.

'Then you must come with me.'

'Says who?'

'Your husband.'

'Do you have a token from him?'

'Here are his chariot and his horses.'

'Many are those on whom he bestows treasures,' said Buan.

'Then here's his head!'

As Buan mourned her loss, the head turned red, then white. 'What's the matter with the head?' said Conall.

'I know,' said Buan. 'There was a dispute between my husband and Athirne, and he declared that no Ulsterman would carry me away. What ails the head is the breaking of his word.'

Conall told her again to come with him, but she asked for some time to mourn her husband. She lifted up such a cry of lamentation that it could be heard as far as Tara and Aillen. Then she fell backwards, dead. Her grave is on that road. It is named Coll Buana, after the hazel (*coll*) that grew through her grave.

Conall told his charioteer to bring the head, but he protested that he couldn't.

³ When Cú Chulainn has his *ríastrad* or battle-distortion, one eye retreats into his head, and the other bulges out on his cheek.

'Then cut out the brain with your sword,' said Conall. 'Take it with you, and mix it with lime, and make a ball of it.' So that was done, and the head was left beside the woman.

When they returned to Emain Macha, the Ulstermen rejoiced at the killing of the king of Leinster. That, then, was the Circuit of Athirne, and the Slaying of Mes Gegra by Conall Cernach, and the Battle of Etair.

The Wooing of Luaine

After the death of Deirdre, Conchobor mac Nessa was afflicted with great grief, sorrow and dejection. No music, or brightness, or beauty, or delight, could lift his spirits. He was always sad and mournful. The chiefs of Ulster persisted with him, telling him to search the kingdoms of Ireland for the daughter of a king or a lord who could dispel his grief over Deirdre, and he agreed.

His two messengers were brought to him: Leborcham, daughter of Ae and Adarc, and Leborcham Rannach, daughter of Uangamain. Both these messengers were hideously ugly. They searched the length and breadth of Ireland, through towns and forts and cities, but nowhere could they find a maiden who might drive away Conchobor's grief.

Then, back home in Ulster, Leborcham daughter of Ae and Adarc chanced upon the dwelling of Domanchenn son of Dega, and there she saw a maiden so lovely, with her pale colouring and curly hair, that she surpassed all the women alive in the world. She was Luaine, daughter of Domanchenn.

Leborcham told Domanchenn that Conchobor had sent her to seek Luaine, for she was the only girl in Ireland to compare with Deirdre, in looks and wisdom and skill. Her father was delighted, and agreed an appropriate bride-price.

So Leborcham returned to Conchobor's house and told him all about the girl she had found. As the messenger described her, love for Luaine filled Conchobor, and he couldn't bear not to go and see her for himself. And when he saw her, there wasn't an inch of him that wasn't filled with a long-lasting love for her. She was betrothed to him, and he was bound to pay the bride-price, and then he returned to Emain Macha.

At that time, Manannán son of Athgno, king of the Isle of Man and Inis Gall (the Islands of the Foreigners), came with a huge fleet to raid and ravage Ulster. He did this in revenge for the sons of Uisliu, for he had been a friend of theirs, and he had fostered the children of Deirdre and Noisiu – their son Gaiar and their daughter Aíb-gréne.

There were four Manannáns,⁴ and none of them lived at the same time. Manannán son of Allot lived in the time of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and was a splendid wizard of that race. His proper name was Orbsen. He lived in Arran, and Emain Ablach was named after him. He was killed in the Battle of Cuillen by Uillen Abradruad (of the red eyebrows), son of Caither, son of Nuadu Airgedlám (of the silver hand), while contending for the kingship of Connacht. When his grave was dug, Loch nOirbsen burst forth from the earth, and so was named after him.

The second was Manannán son of Cerp, king of the Isle of Man and the Islands of the Foreigners. He lived in the time of Conaire Mór son of Etirscél, and he wooed Tuag daughter of Conall Collamair, Conaire's foster-son. Tuag Inber is named after her.

Manannán mac Lir was a famous merchant who traded between Ireland and Alba and the Isle of Man. He was also a wizard, and the best pilot who ever came to Ireland. He could predict the weather by heavenly science – by inspecting the air he could tell whether there would be fair weather or a storm.

Manannán son of Athgno was the fourth Manannán.

It was he who came with a great fleet to avenge the sons of Uisliu, and who had supported them in Alba.⁵ The sons of Uisliu were in Alba for sixteen years, and conquered an area from Sliab Manann to the north of Alba, and expelled the three sons of Gnathal son of Morgann – Iatach, Triatach and Mani Lámgarb (rough hand) – from that territory, which their father had ruled. Indeed, it was the sons of Uisliu who had killed their father. The three of them came in exile to Conchobor, and they killed the sons of Uisliu as deputies to Eogan mac Durthacht.

Manannán took great plunder from Ulster. The Ulstermen assembled and offered him battle. A peace treaty was negotiated on Manannán's behalf by Bobarán the Poet, foster-father of Gaiar son of Noisiu. Gaiar received compensation for his father from the lords of Ulster. Noisiu's two brothers, Annle and Arddan, were left against Conchobor's honour. The district of Liathmaine was given to Gaiar from the lands of Dubthach the Backbiter, who was then

⁴ Manannán mac Lir is the principal sea god in Irish mythology, associated with the Isle of Man. The multiple Manannáns are presumably a way of rationalising his immortality.

⁵ Alba: usually Scotland, but originally Britain as a whole ('Albion').

warring against Ulster along with Fergus. Thus, they parted in peace, and were friends from then on.

Back to Luaine. When Athirne Ailgesach (the Urgent) and his two sons, Cuindesach and Apartach, heard that Luaine had been betrothed to Conchobor, they went to ask her for boons. When they saw her, the three of them immediately fell in love with her, and were so filled with desire for her that they would rather die if they couldn't sleep with her. They took turns beseeching her, declaring that they would die if she wouldn't go with them.

'It isn't right for you to say such things, when I'm going to be Conchobor's wife,' she said.

'But we can't go on living unless we can go in to you,' they replied. Nonetheless, she refused to sleep with them, so they made three satires upon her, which left three blotches on her face: Shame, Blemish and Disgrace, which were coloured black, red and white. After that the maiden died of shame.

Fearing that Conchobor and the Ulstermen would take vengeance on them for what they had done, Athirne and his sons fled to Benn Athirni above the Boyne.

Back to Conchobor. It seemed to him a long time since he had a wife to sleep with. So he went to the fort of Domanchenn son of Dega – his kin and his land were of the Tuatha Dé – along with the chiefs of Ulster, including Conall Cernach, Cú Chulainn, Celtchar, Blai Briuga, Eogan mac Durthacht, Cathbad and Sencha. They found the maiden dead, and the people of the fort in mourning for her. Great silence fell on Conchobor because of this, and the grief upon him was second only to his grief over Deirdre.

'What vengeance would be just for this?' he said. The chiefs of Ulster agreed that the only fitting punishment would be to kill Athirne and his sons, and his entire household. 'There has been many a time,' they said, 'that we have faced battle because of him.'

Then the maiden's mother, Bé-Guba, came before Conchobor and the chiefs of Ulster, wailing with sadness and sorrow. 'O king,' she said, 'it is not just the death of one that will result from this deed – I and her father will die of grief for our daughter. The fact that this would lead to our deaths was prophesied by a druid.'

Cathbad said, 'Athirne will set birds of prey against you: Satire and Disgrace and Shame, Curse and Fire and Bitter Word. He has the Six Sons of Dishonour: Stinginess, Refusal, Denial, Hardness,

Rigour and Rapacity. He will not hesitate to use them against you, and they will be warriors fighting against you.’

Then Domanchenn reproached the Ulstermen, and incited them to fight.

‘A question,’ said Conchobor. ‘How will you act, men of Ulster?’

Cú Chulainn advised the destruction of Athirne the Severe. Combative, Righteous Conall looked on. Celtchar the Wounding conspired. Munremar the Famous planned. Cúscraid the Custodian decided. The heroic, haughty, severe, two-edged youths of Ulster determined to go and destroy Athirne’s dwelling.

A mighty lamentation was made around Luaine’s body, and the death-chant and funeral-game were performed, and the gravestone planted. The grief of her mother and father was dreadful, and it was sad indeed to be in the presence of the wailing they made.

Conchobor:

On the plain is this grave of Luaine,
daughter of Red Domanchenn
Never came to yellow Banba (Ireland)
a woman that was harder to entreat.

Celtchar:

Will you tell us how that is,
o champion, o Conchobor
Luaine and Deirdre of the Companies:
whose was the fairer converse?

Conchobor:

I will tell you how that is,
o Celtchar son of Uthechar.
Better was Luaine, who never uttered falsehood,
there was no rivalry between them.

Sad is any prophesy that carries her off,
that from it she should go to death,
That from it her barrow should be dug,
that from it her grave should be conspicuous.

Bé-Guba and Dega's son, and Luaine –
'tis death that will cut me off -
On the same day they went on the journey,
so that they have only one grave.

Athirne of the four children,
evil for him the deed he has done:
They all will fall, man, sons, wives,
in vengeance for this grave.

Conchobor mightily bewailed the damsel, and then took to inciting the Ulstermen against Athirne. The Ulstermen followed Athirne to Benn Athirni, and walled him in with his sons and all his household, and killed his two daughters, Mór and Midseng, and burned his fortress with him inside.

That deed seemed evil to the poets of Ulster. Amergin said:

Athirne's tomb here,
let it not be dug by you, o poets.
Woe to him that wrought the man's destruction,
woe to him that caused his slaughter!

He had a hard javelin - lasting its brightness -
which Cridenbél the satirist used to make,
He had a spear
which would slay a king.

I will make his death-chant here,
and I will make his lamentation,
And I will plant his grave here,
and build his fair barrow.

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