

The Expulsion of the Déisi

Before we explore the other main themes in the Third Branch, the Wasteland Myth and the figure of the ‘Un-King’, we need to understand the background of the particular group that settled in Dyfed. These are identified in the medieval tradition as the *Déisi*⁶⁶⁵ or Dessi, a parallel branch of which inhabited a small tribal kingdom in the eastern coastlands of present day County Cork.

According to an Old Irish text (dated by Meyer to the late eight century AD),⁶⁶⁶ the Déisi were a vassal people whose homeland was originally in the Meath area. In the reign of Cormac they suffered abuse at the hands of the high king’s son, and were subsequently forced into exile. In the course of their wanderings they spent some time in Leinster, before being moved on again in the time of the reign of the High King Crimthann. They were then moved on to the South, where they eventually established a territory among the peoples of Munster.

The Expulsion of the Déisi, though an unremarkable tribal-historical tract in many respects, does include some interesting features. Telling as it does the story of a ‘wandering people’ (*immerge*), the Expulsion is perhaps necessarily anti-heroic. Throughout the story the Déisi are continually harried, routed and moved on by neighbouring tribal groups – resulting in their perpetual itinerant, landless status. While they are not portrayed as weak or cowardly, they are represented as suffering more than their fair-share of animosity and ill-fortune: a state of affairs that begins with the rape of one of their daughters by the High King Cormac’s son.

It is interesting to note that one of leading protagonists from among the Déisi is a rather sinister female druidic figure, known as Eithne Uathach ‘*Eithne Dread*’ who was ‘reared on the flesh of little boys’ to ensure her preternatural growth. It was prophesied that through Eithne the Déisi would eventually ‘seize land on which they shall dwell’. And indeed, this proves to be the case. Eithne first marries the High King of the Mumu (Munster), then negotiates a homeland for the Déisi, her mother’s people. But this homeland is only secured when the *Osraige* (‘Deer-People’), rival claimants to the land, are finally overcome. This victory itself is again largely the work of Eithne, following a prophetic vision induced by ‘two jars full of wine ... from the lands of Gaul’.

In this vision, the Déisi receive the rather unheroic injunction that as long as they do not strike the first blow, victory will be theirs. To this end, they magically transform a passing serf into the shape of a ‘red, hornless cow’ and send this hapless proxy over to where the Osraige were advancing, who kill it before they realise ‘it was man that had been slain’. After this follows one of the few military victories achieved by the Déisi throughout this tribal-historic account, with the Osraige turning and running ‘like deer’. After this, the Déisi divide up the newly won territories, to be held ‘until the day of Judgement’.

We are less concerned with the historical reality or otherwise of this mythico-legal tract. It was probably constructed largely to explain the presence of tribal groups with the name ‘Déisi’ in various parts of central, eastern and southern Ireland and to qualify the nature of the relationship of this last

665 Pronounced ‘Dayshee’

666 TD pp. 101-135

group with the high kings of Cashel (the Eoganachta of Mumu). It is an almost parenthetical reference to a fourth offshoot of the Déisi tribe – this time over the Irish Sea – that interests us in this particular context. This is mentioned shortly after the birth of Eithne, just as the Déisi are attempting to find a foothold in South:

*Eochiad, son of Artchorp, went over the sea with his descendants into the territory of the Demed [i.e. Dyfed], and it is there that his sons and grandsons died. And from them is the race of Crimthann over there, of which there is Tualodor son of Rigin, son of Catacuin, son of Caittien, son of Clotenn, son of Naeae, son of Artuir, son of Retheoir, son of Congair, son of Gartbuir, son of Alchoil, son of Trestin, son of Aed Brosc, son of Corath, son of Eochaid Allmuir, son of Artchorp.*⁶⁶⁷

Interestingly enough, almost *precisely the same* genealogical sequence is found in the Harleian genealogies of the kings of Dyfed, based on traditions current at the court of Owain ap Hywel, in tenth century Wales.⁶⁶⁸ Through this, we can fairly confidently link the name of ‘Gartbuir son of Alchoil’ with the ‘Vorteporix Protectoris’ commemorated on the aforementioned inscribed stone (in both Latin and ogham characters) at Narbeth in Dyfed. Gartbuir/Vorteporix can in turn be linked to Vortipor the *tyrannus demetorium* ‘the tyrant of Dyfed’ – a figure mentioned by Gildas, his sixth century contemporary. What this tells us is that even into the Early Middle Ages there was at least a memory of a common tradition linking the Expulsion of the Déisi with the extensive Irish settlements in Dyfed. It would even seem likely that the two regions involved, Dyfed and Southern Ireland, remained in close contact for some generations after this settlement.

The Irish presence in Dyfed is testified, as we have seen, in numerous ways: including the presence of ogham stones and Irish-style raths as well as a number of toponymic and linguistic indicators.⁶⁶⁹ Both the ogham tradition and the raths would seem to point to a particular connection with the *southern* area of Ireland: a connection which is also recognised by the medieval tradition. While we cannot be certain about the accuracy of the origin myths or even the genealogies involved, it is clear that these were traditions that were recognised on both sides of the Irish Sea, even into the Early Middle Ages. If we are looking, then, for the original Irish-Demetian tradition on which the Third Branch probably drew, we should at first consider this Southern Irish context, and any significant mythical parallels that might be found in it. The latter points most heavily to the exile myth of the Déisi outlined above, as well as the ‘un-king’ tale (with its Wasteland associations) found also in the Irish tale *Cath Maige Mucrama*, which we shall consider in due course.

667 TD § 11

668 The so-called ‘Harleian Genealogies’, found in MS. Harley 3859, converge on Owain ap Hywel (fl. 950) making it probable that they were originally drafted during the lifetime of this king. An edition of these genealogies can be found in Bartum’s *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966)

669 These include the entry into the South Welsh dialect of certain words of evident Gaelic origin, e.g. *cnwcc* < *knocc* the Irish word for a knoll or a small round hill.