



## King Cormac mac Airt: Ireland's Greatest King Lesson Transcript

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The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (1627) describe Cormac Mac Airt as "absolutely the best king that ever reigned in Ireland before himself...wise learned, valiant and mild, not given causelessly to be bloody as many of his ancestors were, he reigned majestically and magnificently".

With an introduction such as this we should probably spend a little bit of time getting to know this great man named Cormac mac Airt. The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Book of the Takings of Ireland) dates his reign at 161–180 A.D. or during the same era of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Geoffrey Keating in his *Foras Feasa na hÉireann* dates his reign to 204–244 A.D.; the *Annals of the Four Masters* give it as 226–266 A.D., while the *Annals of Ulster* dates his death as late as 366 A.D..

While the tales of his legacy are infused with myth and fable, and while the true dating of his life is unclear, he is generally regarded to be a real historical personage, or, at the very least, a composite of real figures. Further to his kingly qualities, he is also famous for his role in as the ruling high-king during the Fenian Cycle of Irish Myth, making him a contemporary of the hero Fionn MacCumhaill. Many mythic symbols and motifs have been attached to him, which, while obvious fictions, only serve to highlight his greatness as a king.

Cormac was the son of King Art 'the lonely' McCuinn, and the grandson of Conn (of the Hundred Battles), so in addition to MacAirt Cormac was also referred to as Cormac ua Cuinn (grandson of Conn) in respect for his heroic grandfather, and Cormac Ulfada, or 'long-beard'. He ruled for 40 years from around 218 – 254 at the Hill of Tara, and Ireland prospered during his reign.

Throughout the myths, we see the idea repeated that rule by a good king would have an affect on the produce of the crops, the fertility of the land, and the good fortunes of his people, whereas a bad king would produce a failure of crops, hardship, and burdens on his people.



Another kingly taboo which we have already mentioned precluded someone from being king if they were 'blemished', and we see a scenario highlighting this play out in Cormac's life when he is blinded by an arrow in battle. Clearly blemished, Cormac is unfit to rule according to Ireland's very old customs and traditions of kingship, he abdicates his kingly duties and the throne goes to his son Cairbre Liffechair, who would famously reject the Fianna warriors of Fionn MacCumhaill and rise against the warrior guild in the Battle of Gowra.

Cormac is always described as a champion of learning and it is said he founded three important schools at Tara, one for History, one for Poetics, and one for Military training. It is Cormac who is credited with introducing the first mill in Ireland, marking him out as a man with vision and of industry. And he is also described as a great law giver, a just man who had a head for fairness and good judgment that would rival king Solomon's. He is even credited with producing an important legal manuscript called the Book of Aicil while he was in retirement – it deals with compensation in cases involving harm to an individual's person, such as an injury to the eye.

Interestingly, however, Cormac is said to have turned to the Christian faith in his later life having been the third man in Ireland to hear about the Prophet from the East before Saint Patrick arrived on the island. As such, as a symbol, Cormac doesn't just represent the ancient pagan past, but rather he is more of a bridge figure, a tool of transition, between the old ways and the Christian ways. Here, we find Ireland's "best king that ever reigned" acting as a midwife by sanctioning the new myths of Christ.

"Cormac, it is said, was the third man in Ireland who heard of the Christian Faith before the coming of Patrick. One was Conor mac Nessa, King of Ulster, whose druid told him of the crucifixion of Christ and who died of that knowledge. The second was the wise judge, Morann, and the third Cormac, son of Art. This knowledge was revealed to him by divine illumination, and thenceforth he refused to consult the druids or to worship the images which they made as emblems of the Immortal Ones." - T. W. Rolleston

Sober accounts of his death say he choked on a salmon bone in later life while living near Slane. However, the magical accounts say he was killed by the sidhe, or fairy-folk, who lived under the hills in the otherworld to punish him for turning away from them and to the new Christian god. And other interpretations say his choking on the bone was the result of a druidic curse which was placed upon him for the same reasons.



Cormac's dying wish was that he not be buried at the customary royal resting place at Brugh on the Boyne (Newgrange) along with his ancestors because "all these kings paid adoration to gods of wood or stone, or to the Sun and the Elements, ... but [he had] learned to know One God, immortal, invisible", instead favouring the site of an east facing hill at Ross na Ree so he could await the coming of the light of the world, the son of God.

But upon his death, his wishes were disregarded – it was discussed and agreed by the living that he should be interred with his father and grandfather at the Brugh. The legend continues, that upon trying to bury him the waters of the river Boyne rose up three times to oppose them, and in one account, eventually carrying the coffin off downstream to Ross na Ree where he was finally put to rest.