

LULGACH ‘A MILCH COW’

THE MEANING of the word *lulgach* ‘milch cow’ is undisputed but its etymology is still slightly uncertain. There is a suggestion in *DIL* (s.v. *lulgach*) that it is ‘possibly substantival use of adj. from *lulaíg*’. It is the contention of this note that this is indeed the case.

The compound *lulaíg* ‘small calf’ is attested in the glosses to *Bechbretha*¹ along with similar compounds *luorc* ‘small pig’ and *luúan* ‘small lamb’.² It is also found in an etymological gloss in *Dúil Dromma Ceta* (CIH 616.18): *Lú .i. cach mbec. unde dicitur lúláigh .i. laeg mbec*, ‘lú, i.e. every small thing, from whence is said *lúláigh*, i.e. a small calf’.³ *Lulgach* would then be a regular adjectival formation from *lulaíg* with the meaning ‘possessing a small calf’,⁴ used substantivally as ‘the one who possesses a small calf’.⁵

The reason why this is such a good description of a dairy cow is that traditionally they are smaller than their dry-stock counterparts and would generally have had much smaller calves. It was only with the introduction of different breeds in the modern period that it was possible to combine a good milker with a producer of big calves in one animal. Normally, the male calf of a dairy cow and the female calf of a suckler cow are not valued nearly as much as the female calf of a good milker (a future milch cow) and the male calf from a suckler (to be fattened for beef). In his recent study on *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin 1997), Fergus Kelly does not cite any evidence for this demarcation in the Old Irish law-texts.⁶ However, references to the breeding of large cattle (p.

¹Ed. T. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly (Dublin 1983) 86 § 53.

²Cf. CIH 1109.22: *lulaig nó luuan nó luorc* (ref. from *Bechbretha*).

³Cf. CIH 1074b.19–20: *Lú .i. cach mbec ut est. laulaegh .i. laeg mbec* (also from *Dúil Dromma Ceta*).

⁴The variant *loilgech* (< *lulaíg* + *-ech*) may be explained as a normal palatalised alternative to *lulgach* — this gave rise to the regular form in Modern Irish (*loiligheach*, *loilíoch*). The initial syllable of the other common variant, *laulgach*, is paralleled by *lelap .i. laulep .i. láu cech mbec* (Corm. Bodl. 8.22). The form, *laulgach*, may have given rise to the gloss in *Dúil Dromma Ceta*, i.e. *láu .i. bó* (CIH 1074b.31) as *DIL* suggests (s.v. *láu*), but the alternative explanation given in the same text (CIH 1074b.21–3: *Lau .i. olc .ut dicitur. ni len lí lesugud .i. ni len olc cia tecma olc ocin lesugud*) is harder to account for.

⁵This word is also preserved in placenames, e.g. Owendalulleegh r., Co. Galway and perhaps in Lullymore, Co. Kildare. The medieval name for Lullymore, however, was *Lilcach* (cf. E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin 1910) s.v. for examples) which seems to have been treated as a masculine *o*-stem. It may have originated as a river name (cf. P. Ó Riain (ed.), *Cath Almaine*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series XXV (Dublin 1978) 45 n. 118) and was possibly a distinct word that later got confused with the more common *loilgech*.

⁶Many thanks to Prof. Kelly who informs me (pers. comm.): ‘when working on *Early Irish Farming*, I tried to find evidence of a distinction between breeds for milking and

36) may suggest that this distinction was present — good animal husbandry values would suggest that it should be so. It is possible that the etymology of *lulgach* may also point in the same direction.⁷

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breeds for fattening in the early sources. But I found nothing at all to suggest that they made any such distinction at this period'.

⁷In *Early Irish Farming*, 30–31, Fergus Kelly reminds us that medieval Irish cattle were thought to be similar to the modern Kerry cow in size and build. As my friend John O'Grady points out to me, Kerry cows are neither good milkers nor good dry-stock. He suggests that their principal benefit is that they are easy to feed, thus ensuring a supply of beef and milk from bad land and when fodder is scarce.