
The Tailteann Games of Ancient Ireland: Their Origin, Growth and Continuity through Centuries of Unwritten History

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Irish history is rich with accounts of fairs or assemblies dating from ancient to contemporary times. Aenach Tailteann (the Tailteann Fair) was probably the most famous of the assemblies of Irish people. Originally held as funeral games in honor of Queen Tailtiu, the fair was staged yearly, drawing hordes of people, kings and common people, athletes and warriors, from many parts of the country. It was the place of the high king to call for the games, and their elegance and size was proportionate to the king's power. Thus, the games enjoyed an almost inviolable stay of several centuries. The games (Cuiteach Fuait) were first declared to be an annual assembly by King Lewey-the-Long-Hand upon the death of his foster mother, Tailtiu. The queen herself had ordered the games. She had even chosen her burial site and had assisted in the clearing of a great forest to give acclaim to a royal burial place. The games were held along the banks of the Blackwater River in County Meath at a place now known as Telltown.

As was the custom in pagan times, the death of famous personages was the occasion for funeral games in addition to rites and public lamentations. The death of a royal person was a time for including the mourning chants (Guba) of invited guests and a mystical dirge (Cepog) that recounted in song and poetry, the deeds and honors of the deceased.

The funeral games of Tailtiu that evolved into the Tailteann Fair are reputed to be the oldest organized games of history. Their inception was around 1500 B.C., and they were staged every year with few interruptions in the course of time. They ended in 1169 A.D. under Roderic O'Connor, the last high king of Ireland.

The events of the Tailteann Games through the years included equestrian contests, athletic and gymnastic type events, and almost any competition related to skills of the warrior. Throughout the pages of the ancient manuscripts, the writers have consistently referred to equestrian events: chariot racing, horse racing, and horse swimming as significant parts of the games.

Athletic contests (those related to modern day track and field events) receiving mention at sometime during the years of the Tailteann Games included running, long jumping, high jumping in addition to quoit throwing and hurling. Those events related to skills essential to the warrior included spear casting, sword and shield contests, spear and pole jumping, slinging contests, bow and arrow exhibitions and the indubitable wrestling and boxing. The funeral games of Tailtiu included almost anything that exhibited physical endurance and skill. Three of the above events need to be singled out as rather unique to Ireland: horse swimming, hurling and the high jump.

Aenach Tailteann was more than an ordinary fair or assembly, transcending in extent and importance the other fairs. It became an institution in its own right. Although the athletic competitions and contests of skill and strength prevailed, the assembly also became an important occasion for law-giving and judicial actions by the Ard Righ (high king). It also became an occasion for commercial enterprises, for such a large gathering of people inevitably drew its share of hucksters and those went to make a bit of gold. And finally, the Tailteann Assembly became famous as a marriage mart. Families always brought their eligible sons and daughters in hopes of arranging their marriage at the "Hollow of the Fair," a place set aside for such purpose.

Although the yearly staging of the games was interrupted several times by war or threat of war, the apparent continuity attests to their importance to the people. For example, the king declared a universal truce, and feuds and private quarrels were declared dissolved for the period of the games. In their intent to keep the games free of scandal, the people obliged that no known criminal could take part. The Tailteann Fair became a social institution rather than a one-time celebration of funeral games. The organized games carried moral obligations that mirrored the integrity of people of crude and barbarous eras.