



POETS AND POETRY IN THE MIDDLE IRISH PERIOD

Achoimrí | Abstracts



1 February, Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (UCC)

‘Contextualizing *Saltair na Rann* within the Tradition of Biblical Paraphrase’

Saltair na Rann or ‘The Psalter of the Quatrains/Stanzas’, a metrical account of biblical history including much apocryphal material, is a remarkably long text of 162 cantos, which amount to 8393 lines in all. The ambitious intention was to create a work which encompasses all of time, with a particular focus on biblical chronology from creation to Judgement Day. Such an expansive work must have been created by a culture with an intense interest in Biblical scholarship and especially in the Old Testament, since a considerable proportion of the cantos are devoted to the latter. *Saltair na Rann* does not exist in a vacuum, however, it has been demonstrated that it is related to a wider tradition of Old- and Middle-Irish verse adaptations of biblical or apocryphal themes. These Irish texts in turn, are to some extent medieval reflexes of the late-antique tradition of the biblical paraphrase, a genre which developed from the didactic exercise of paraphrasing seminal texts in Hellenistic culture. With the conversion to Christianity, instead of paraphrasing classical literature, the Bible became the key text for this exercise. The earliest surviving evidence for this new Christian literary genre is the poetic Gospel paraphrase *Evangeliorum libri quattuor* composed by Juvencus around the year around 330. Juvencus’ composition where he married Christian narrative with elegant Latin verse was immensely influential and inspired other such works. The biblical paraphrase genre came to maturity in the fifth century, most notably in the composition by Caelius Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale*. Sedulius’ poem was even more influential than that of his predecessor and became a set text in monastic schools across medieval Europe. In the later Middle Ages, the polished Latin verse of the biblical paraphrases gave way to vernacular versification and the genre termed vernacular popular bibles by Brian Murdoch. *Saltair na Rann* must in some way be part of this development of vernacular versified paraphrases of the Bible but in many ways is atypical of the genre. This paper will attempt to situate the Irish material within the wider European context and to interrogate the question of influence.



8 February, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (NUI Galway)

‘The Invention of Aurard (†990) mac Coisse’

Although the Connacht poet Aurard mac Coisse is titled *príméices Éirenn* and *príméices Gaídel* in the early annals, the extant poetry with direct attributions to him is quite scant. However his association with the remarkable prosimetrum tale *Airec menman Auraird maic Coisse*, and the possibility that he authored much of it, adds greatly to his importance. So too does the fact that his main patrons were Domnall úa Néill, high-king of Tara, and his consort, Derb Áil, daughter of Tadc mac Cathail, king of Connacht, as evidenced in the *Airec menman* and his poetry.

Drawing on this material and on references to him in other sources, this paper will speculate on his Connacht ancestry, on the reception of his work for his secular patrons in centres of learning such as Clonmacnoise, where he ended his days, and Armagh, and on cultural contacts between Clonmacnoise and Armagh in his time and their possible implications for the development of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.



15 February, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf (Cambridge)

‘The Life and Work of Cináed úa hArtacáin (†975)’

The poems of the tenth-century poet Cináed úa hArtacáin are among the earliest datable texts which form part of the prosimetrical *Dindshenchas Érenn* (DSÉ); indeed, most of his poems seem to survive as part of that work. However, those of his poems which have no close association with DSÉ still seem to be concerned with the topography and history of the land. It is my aim in this talk to focus on historical as well as philological aspects of Cináed’s work. Since Máirtín Ó Briain completed an MPhil dissertation on the poetry of Cináed úa hArtacáin in the 1970s, which he unfortunately never published, it is only right to begin my talk with reference to his research. I will further provide an overview and short summaries of the poems ascribed to Cináed and suggest, insofar as possible, a rough chronology of composition for his various works in the context of the two patrons for whom he seems to have worked in his lifetime. Questions of language, metre and style will also be discussed.



22 February, Clodagh Downey (NUI Galway)

‘Composition and Authorship in the Poetry of Cúán úa Lothcháin’

The consideration of a body of poetry collectively as a creation of a particular poet naturally depends to a great extent on being able to rely on the attribution of that poetry to that poet. It is clear, however, that medieval poetic ascriptions are not always to be taken at face value: the period they point to may not match the chronology evidenced by a poem’s language, for example, or a poem’s subject matter or style may not accord well with what we know about a poet’s sphere of activity. Furthermore, many Middle Irish poems show signs of compilation or accretion of additional stanzas, which raises questions that are clearly relevant to how we understand a poet’s work: for example, were these extensions made by the poet to whom the poem is ascribed (if such an ascription exists) or by a different poet, or at what remove from the original composition were they made? This paper will consider the composition and construction of poetry ascribed to Cúán úa Lothcháin, and what this might tell us about these poems, about Cúán and his profile, and about Middle Irish ideas of poetic authorship.



1 March, Eystein Thanisch (Indep.)

‘Who is Flann Mainistrech?’

Flann Mainistrech (ob. 1056) was apparently a *fer léiginn* (‘teacher’), based mainly at Monasterboice (Co. Louth). In medieval manuscripts, he is presented as the author of metrical compilations of chronologically ordered information, mainly regnal histories. These relate to various polities, including the most prominent Uí Néill kingdoms of his day, the kingship of Tara, and, in the tradition of Eusebius-Jerome, the kingship of the world.

From contemporary sources onwards into the beginnings of modern scholarship, Flann is treated as an authoritative, sometimes almost omniscient, source of history. This paper considers why he is understood this way by comparing and contrasting the significance he is ascribed in modern scholarship with the contributions he might have been understood to have made in a medieval intellectual context. It identifies one major influence on modern understandings of Flann as being the idea that he also composed prose synchronisms, a type of text with important qualitative differences compared to what is ascribed to him in earlier sources. Another key issue is the changing conception of authorship. Flann can come across as something of a solitary genius in modern scholarship, while medieval sources often stress his role within collaborative relationships. As such, the paper offers insights into how not only Flann but also Middle Irish intellectual culture more generally were understood in different subsequent periods.



8 March, Peter Smith (UU)

‘*Góedel Glas ó tát Goídil* by Gilla Cóemáin (fl. 1072)’

Peter Smith (Peadar Mac Gabhann) has edited four of the five poems that are generally attributed to the eleventh-century poet, Gilla Cóemáin, namely, ‘*Hériu ard inis na rríg*’ (2007), ‘*At-tá sund forba fessa*’ (2007), ‘*Annálad anall uile*’ (2007) and ‘*Tigernmas mac Follaig aird*’ (2015). In this paper, he proposes to revisit Gustav Lehmacher’s 1921-edition of Gilla Cóemáin’s remaining poem, ‘*Góedel Glas ó tát Goídil*’, with a view to providing a new edition of this last poem, which concerns the wanderings of the Irish in the Mediterranean until their arrival on the Iberian Peninsula.

‘*Góedel Glas ó tát Goídil*’ differs from Gilla Cóemáin’s other poems insofar as it contains short passages of sustained narrative alongside the enumeration of the names of people and places that are so characteristic of this kind of historical poetry. To that extent, ‘*Góedel Glas ó tát Goídil*’ provides interesting opportunities for linguistic analysis. This paper, however, will examine the various strategies for approaching the act of textual editing and indeed the final presentation of the edited text.



15 March, John Carey (UCC)

‘Gilla in Choimded Úa Cormaic: A Scholar and his Books’

Gilla in Choimded’s poem *A Rí ríchid, réidig dam*, uniquely preserved in the Book of Leinster, is a composition of III quatrains, devoted to lore of the ancient past. Kuno Meyer edited and translated the section relating to Find mac Cumaill in his collection *Fíanaigeacht*, but most of the remainder has received little scholarly attention. The present contribution, the first fruits of an attempt to edit the poem in its entirety, will consider the 42 quatrains that are concerned with classical (and to a lesser extent biblical) antiquity, endeavouring to ascertain Gilla in Choimded’s sources, and to describe the uses that he made of them.



22 March, Kaarina Hollo (Sheffield)

‘Talking to God in Middle Irish’

This talk will be focused on a select corpus of eight Middle Irish poems in which the entire poem takes the form of a direct address to God (in contradistinction to poems in which God is apostrophized or invoked at a discrete point or points). The poem beginning ‘*In roghsa, a Rí na rún*’ (attributed to Cormac mac Cuilennáin) and ‘*Deus Meus, adiuva me*’ (attributed to Máel Ísu Ó Brolcháin) will receive particular consideration. ‘*In roghsa*’ was seen very differently by David Greene and P.L. Henry, the former stating, in his prefatory remarks to the poem in *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, ‘as it stands, the poem is not only incomplete, but a great many new verses have been added to it; these we have omitted.’ P.L. Henry, on the other hand, explains that his ‘tendency and practice is to accept MS readings if at all possible, and to turn from them only as a last resort’ (*The Early English and Celtic Lyric*, 55). Following Henry, we will consider the poem in its entirety (29 stanzas as opposed to Greene’s 9). ‘*Deus Meus, adiuva me*’ is a remarkable poem that has somehow escaped serious critical attention, and I hope to go some little way towards remedying that lack.



29 March, Kevin Murray (UCC)

‘Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside and the Irish Historical Verse Tradition’

Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside (*fl.* 1147) is best known to modern scholarship as the author of the metrical *Bansenchas*. In an article published in the *Festschrift* for Pádraig Ó Riain (*Cín Chille Cúile*, ed. Carey, Herbert & Murray), I examined his connections with Tigernán Úa Rúairc, king of Bréifne, and his wife Derborgaill, and noted how a significant number of works are attributed to him thanks to his habit of naming himself in the final quatrains of his poems (though some of these may not be his compositions in their entirety). Building on the insights of Peter Smith in the last of the *Irland und Europa* volumes (‘Early Irish historical verse: the evolution of a genre’) and of Gispert Hemprich in the *Festschrift* for Hildegard Tristram (‘Die frühen Fassungen von *Éri óg inis na náem*’), I wish to examine further Gilla Mo Dutu’s oeuvre and to focus in particular on his contribution to the Irish historical verse tradition.



5 April, Mikael Males (Oslo)

‘Metrical and Lexical Hibernicisms in Old Norse Poetry’

This talk addresses Irish features in Old Norse (ON) poetry. A crucial factor to be addressed is whether Irish words in ON poetry should be understood as loans or as cultural allusions. The general allusive nature of skaldic poetry points to this as a likely explanation of their presence, and so does the fact that several items are attested only once. A final indication to this effect is the fact that the poets who use Irish words are also stylistic innovators.

The final observation leads us to the second topic. If we are dealing with cultural allusions in the poetry of stylistic innovators, might this open new perspectives on Irish influence on the most prestigious ON metre – *dróttkvætt* – which emerged around the middle of the ninth century? The possible Irish background of this metrical innovation has been debated since the nineteenth century, but no clear conclusion has been reached. The possibility of concomitant linguistic and metrical allusions has not been discussed, however, and may contribute to an informed choice between competing hypotheses.



12 April, Simon Rodway (Aberystwyth)

‘Welsh Poetry and Ireland, c. 800 X 1100’

I shall look at poetry in Welsh which can reasonably be dated to the Old Welsh period, roughly corresponding to the late Old Irish and Middle Irish period. I shall consider the three poems preserved in manuscripts from this period, as well as poems contained in later manuscripts which may have been composed in this period. This will involve an excursus on problems of dating anonymous poetry. Finally, I shall look at the Irish dimension in some of these poems, and ask whether similarities between them and medieval Irish poetry can be taken as evidence for mutual influence across the Irish Sea, to a common inheritance, or to other factors.



19 April, Thomas Owen Clancy (Glasgow)

“*Imbed n-ingnad ós ler lindglass / An abundance of wonders on the blue ocean*”: The Verse Versions of Two *Immrama*’

We have versions in narrative verse of two of the *immrama* or voyage tales: *Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin*, "The voyage of Máel Dúin's coracle", and *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Ríagla* "The voyage of Snédgus and Mac Ríagla", both likely dating to the tenth century. With the exception of the recent work on the verse "Snédgus and Mac Ríagla" by Kevin Murray, most commentary to date has focused on the relationship between these verse versions and the better known and studied prose versions of the tales. As well as introducing these texts and proposed contexts, this seminar will explore the two poems side by side, and will probe further the relationship between them. Previous comments on their relationship have assessed the sequential priority of one over the other on rather subjective and aesthetic grounds, and these assessments provide a springboard for further discussion of what Middle Irish verse narrative is, and how we should approach it.

Because there has been some recent work on the verse "Snédgus and Mac Ríagla", the seminar will devote more attention to the verse "Máel Dúin", usually seen as the less successful as a standalone poem. The poet's compression of the underlying story has suggested that it cannot be read without the prose, or at least knowledge of the prose. Is this so? Or is this part of the aesthetic of this type of verse? A final, necessary consideration will be of both poems as they are presented in manuscript, where they are laid out interleaved with the prose. This has been characterised as prosimetrum, but it is substantially different from many other prosimetrum texts, and considering these differences can, in turn, help foster our understanding of verse narrative and its place in the wider ecology of Middle Irish poetry.



26 April, Pádraig Ó Macháin (UCC)

‘The *Seanchas* Poem in the Post-Middle-Irish Period’

In the surviving records of Middle-Irish literature, poetry as a vehicle for the transmission of learning (*seanchas*) dominates at the expense of the praise-poem. In the post-Middle-Irish period, from the late twelfth century onwards, this situation is somewhat reversed. Nevertheless, while the metrically-accomplished praise-poem achieved prominence as an art-form, and *seanchas* could have a role to play as a component in such poems, poetry also continued in its function purely as a conveyance for learning. Varieties of this type of poetry will be mentioned here, and the approach of one scholar in the making of such a poem will be examined.



3 May, Ann Dooley (Toronto)

‘Loving the Place of Many Waters: Poets and Poetry in *Acallam na Senórach*’

Le teacht | Forthcoming