
The
Modern Traveller
to our **Past**

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Old Irish for archaeologists – an interdisciplinary perspective

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As an early medieval specialist, Ann Hamlin has been an outstanding advocate of the need for archaeologists to be aware of the contemporary historical documentation which in Ireland survives to a degree which is unique in western Europe. Whereas her work has drawn on both Latin and Irish-language sources, other archaeologists have alluded specifically to vernacular texts when offering interpretative models of our pre-Christian and early Christian past. The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail some of the difficulties involved in using Irish-language sources in translation.

One fundamental point worth stressing at the outset is the need to date the materials being used. The Irish language, unlike Latin, is relatively easily divided into chronological phases of development. Where Latin is taught to a standard which, by convention, uses the vocabulary and syntax of the centuries around the time of Christ, Irish has evolved and changed in distinctive fashions which permit the subdivision of our sources into Archaic, Primitive, Old, Middle, Classical and Modern. Archaic and Primitive Irish are found on ogham stones of the fifth to the seventh centuries AD; Old Irish belongs to the period seventh to ninth centuries AD and Middle Irish to the period tenth to twelfth centuries AD.

It is, however, rare that these subdivisions are mentioned when dealing with Irish terms for archaeological material. It is common, for example, to see parallels drawn between ornate cauldrons of the late Bronze and Iron ages, on the one hand, and the role of the cauldron as a symbol of plenty in Irish and Welsh saga on the other.¹ It is important to bear in mind that such literary references are, for the most part, Middle Irish or Middle Welsh in date, roughly contemporary with the Battle of Hastings. If a text was written in English it is doubtful if such parallels would be drawn and even if they were, they would never be identified as reflecting possible cultural continuity from the Bronze Age through to the Vikings and beyond. There seems to be an attitude of mind amongst some scholars that, if written in a Celtic language, texts of any period can be of timeless relevance.

The reasons for the frequent disregard of the age of an Irish text are complex but one contributory factor may be the historiographical development of the discipline of Irish archaeology. The first State involvement in surveying Irish monuments began with the work of the topographical department of the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s and was undertaken by officers appointed to produce standardised Irish place-names for maps. These men worked in a highly politicised environment where Irish, of whatever period, was seen as the hallmark of native as opposed to British phenomena and where stories told by Irish-speaking peasants were seen as revealing important facts about primeval cultural realities on the island.² This attitude can be seen most clearly in the contrasts between their discussion of Irish and Latin language sources. If a text was written in Latin, the author and the historical context were identified and the date discussed before using the information contained within. If a text was written in Irish, no such test was applied for it was believed that it could be assumed to denote a true historical record even back as far as three hundred years before Christ. This was the approach of men like John O'Donovan and Eoin O'Curry during their work in the Irish Ordnance Survey and later as first professors of Celtic in Queen's College Belfast and University College Dublin respectively. Both saw nothing problematic, for example, about the long accounts of Ireland's prehistoric kings written in later medieval annals. Comparable works written in England, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the kings of England* have, in contrast, not been seen as betokening real historical records since the Renaissance. Because of the tiny numbers of Irish medieval historians, many of these nineteenth-century ideas and works are still in circulation and indeed, are still often voiced by those scholars whose work is not primarily focussed on medieval Ireland.

The development of early Irish literary studies as a specialised field is also worth bearing in mind when attempting

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to develop an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of Ireland's past. A fundamental necessity in translating Old Irish texts is a knowledge of the physical and social realities of the society which used the language. The tiny number of scholars who laboured long years to produce the *Dictionary of the Irish language* between 1913 and 1976 were primarily linguists, interested in the grammatical complexities of the Irish language and, particularly concerned to elucidate the connections between Irish, its ancestor Common Celtic and, further back, Indo-European. Archaeologists and historians tend to imagine that the primary purpose of a dictionary is translation but at least as important to the *Dictionary* compilers was the identification of specific stem classes for nouns and the ancestral pre-verbs which made up the verbal complexes in Old Irish. English translations tended to be taken verbatim from editions extant at the time the particular fascicle was being compiled rather than being reassessed in the light of the data compiled by the *Dictionary* workers themselves. Daniel Binchy drew attention to this problem in 1976, citing the work of Charles Plummer as one of the great pioneers in the study of vernacular texts. He wrote:

"his erroneous translation of various legal terms have been repeated almost verbatim in the august columns of the Academy's *Dictionary* and *Contributions* and this apparently authoritative endorsement is bound to mislead the unwary student. Indeed a proper edition and translation of all the early legal sources will, I think, lead to a drastic revision of many lexicographical items besides the purely technical ones.³

Here Binchy was querying definitions put forward for legal processes but similar problems occur elsewhere. Many of the *Dictionary's* translations for material objects, for example, are drawn from either the nineteenth-century translations of *Ancient Irish laws* (roundly condemned as inadequate by Binchy throughout his long career) or from sagas translated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by men such as Whitley Stokes and Kuno Meyer. Such translations were produced at a time when the study of the Irish language was only beginning; the classic grammar of the language by Rudolf Thurneysen not appearing until 1909.

Similarly, the study of Irish archaeology was still in its infancy. George Petrie and his contemporaries had collected together the nucleus of what was to become the National Museum's artefact collections; Westropp and Wood-Martin were working on ring-forts and crannogs; Dunraven was travelling the country taking photographs of early architecture while H.S. Crawford were studying early Irish art. In prehistory, George Coffey and R.A.S. Macalister were writing the first general surveys. We know that Whitley Stokes was deeply interested in the work of his sister, Margaret,⁴ but generally speaking, the level of expertise in early Irish artefacts and settlement forms was not sufficient to inform the work of the language scholars.

The result is that many of the earlier translations used by the *Dictionary* compilers float in a nineteenth-century environment of Romantic Primitivism. This, in turn, has had an impact on the English vocabulary which has been used to translate many Old Irish words. Evocative but imprecise terms such as 'Mantles', 'tunics' 'bowers', 'vats', 'steeds' and 'hounds' abound in works such as Cross and Slover's *Ancient Irish tales* or Gantz's *Early Irish myths and sagas*.⁵

Furthermore, in some cases, these only vaguely approximate to the original physical reality. A classic example is the word *faithche* which is often translated as '[village] green',⁶ a word which owes everything to clustered settlements of a type typical of southern Britain but which has little relevance to Irish settlement forms of any period prior to the eighteenth century.

It must be said that even modern translations don't always add to the clarity of a description from an archaeologist's viewpoint. A feature of the royal house of Ailill and Medb at Cruachu is described in the early Middle Irish saga, *Táin Bó Frach*, as *cuing umai darsa forlés*.⁷ In A.O. Anderson's translation of 1903 this is rendered as "a yoke of copper across the roof-light" while A.H. Leahy in 1906 rendered it as "a tie of brass across the roof-light". M.E. Byrne & Miles Dillon translated the same phrase in 1967 as "a lattice of copper across the skylight" while Jeffrey Gantz used the incongruously modern-looking phrase "a copper grating for the skylight".⁸

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Of these, the most accurate is that of Anderson who indicates clearly that the object is known by the same word *cuing* as is used elsewhere of a yoke used to control draft animals. On analogy therefore, we might speculate that it is probably a long beam with some form of wide loop attached to it. It is not clear whether the material *umae* is copper or a copper alloy such as bronze; the Latin words which gloss it can be used of either.⁹ The *Táin Bó Fraích* description also indicates that while this object is above the dwelling or *forlés*, it is entirely separate from the feature called a *seinistir* or window.¹⁰ In other words, despite the use of "roof-light" and "sky-light" there is no evidence that this object had the purpose of admitting light.

Taken together, these facts strongly suggest that what is being described is a smoke hole along the ridge pole of the roof. Given that the norm in early Ireland is for two oxen to be yoked together,¹¹ there may have been more than one opening involved. They could apparently be lined with metal, perhaps to prevent the surrounding thatch from catching fire. Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence as yet for the roofing framework used in Irish medieval houses but this phrase, carefully examined, can add to our understanding of what they may have been like. It has been suggested that descriptions of houses within saga texts are fantastical and bear little resemblance to reality; I would argue that elimination of such objects as skylights latticed with copper and their replacement with such mundane objects as smoke-holes may help to reduce the surreal element in their depiction.

In this particular phrase, the translation has been affected by the desire of the translators to produce something which reads reasonably well in modern English. In other cases, there has been a concentration on the etymology of the word rather than on its meaning. In a number of texts describing high-status objects one comes across the word *carmocol* which, in the *Dictionary*, is said to be a loan word from Latin *carbunculus*. As a consequence the *Dictionary* editors offer the translation "carbuncle" and this has been taken up by others. So, for example, in Cecile O'Rahilly's edition of the first recension of the *Táin*, a description of Cú Chulainn describes him as wearing around his head "a hundred strings interspersed with carbuncle-gems".¹² In the translation of *Tochmarc Émire*, a description of Conchobar's chamber states that it glittered with gold and was set with carbuncles while in his translation of *Fis Adamnáin*, Kenneth Jackson refers to stalls and canopies of carbuncle.¹³

Carbuncle in English is nowadays normally used to refer to a bunion on one's foot but it can also mean a red garnet cut without facets. These twin meanings also existed in Latin where *carbunculus* can mean either a "burning or devouring sorrow" or "a reddish bright kind of precious stone".¹⁴ There are two texts which appear to support the interpretation of Irish *carmocol* as meaning a precious red stone; the first being in *Togail Bruidne Da Dergae* where there is a description of a silver basin decorated with gems of purple carbuncle or *carmogul corcaí* (Knott 1936, 1; Cross & Slover 93). Since *corcaí* is used in other texts to describe the colour of Mary's face and the blood that poured from Christ's side while he hung on the cross, it is clear that the colour range of *corcaí* included crimson or dark red.¹⁵

The second text is a lapidary in Irish, based on the Latin *Proprietates Rerum*, a text which was current in England by the end of the thirteenth century (Greene 1952, 68-9). Here the word is given in its Latin form as *Carbonculus* and in translation, it reads:

Carbuncle, a precious stone which is called *carbuncula* and it is a blood-red colour and it has greater-strength than any other redness.¹⁶

Illustrative of the *Dictionary's* attitude to translation is the fact that the first part of this description *le(a)g logmur risin abartar carbuncula* or "a precious stone which is called *carbuncula*" is quoted in the *Dictionary* in an entry listing the variant spelling *carbuncaíl*.¹⁷ The statement that the stone was red is, however, eliminated and here too, the only English translation offered is "carbuncle". From an archaeological viewpoint, however, translation of the word as "precious red stone" would not only add to one's comprehension of a descriptive passage but might also provide pointers as to the specific styles involved. Garnet or other red precious stones is rare on Irish metalwork but is a feature of Germanic styles as, for example, on the shoulder clasps and purse from Sutton Hoo.

Minimal discussion of the material reality involved can also be a feature of the translations of Irish words

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proffered by the *Dictionary* even where there is no Latin loan-word involved. The entry for *ballán* provides a useful illustration:

Ballán o, m (ball?) *a type of drinking vessel, vessel for holding drink bóge dana ainm do ballán beg i mbáitis cóic ungi óir sech nobid fri hól sainlenna as... Inde dicitur isna Brethaib Nemed; ballán baissi bóige cóic nunga [bánóir] Corm Y.142 'balláni. fúath dercon bíss fair...ballán ían duine beill .i. duine thróigh. 167'*¹⁸

These definitions are excerpted from two separate entries in Cormac's glossary but they are abbreviations of the originals. Here I offer translations of the originals with the sections which the *Dictionary* editors eliminated marked by underlining.

Entry 142: A *bóige* is a name for a small *ballán* which equals five ounces of gold and besides it is used for special ale which can be drunk out of it. It is used as a pledge by poets (*filid*) and masters of learning (*ollamain*). From thence it is said in *Bretha Nemed*: A *ballán* worth five ounces [of white-gold] is a drinking vessel (*bóige*) of the palm (?).

The second entry, number 167, reads:

A *ballán* is [etymologically] a leper's (*bill*) wooden drinking vessel (*ían*), in other words, it is the container of a wretched man. Alternatively, *ballán* is *balloinis* in Greek or *glandis* in Latin, that is an acorn. A *ballán*, therefore, it is the shape of an acorn which it has.¹⁹

Both entries provide important descriptive elements which have been left untranslated by the *Dictionary* compilers in addition to the details which they eliminated from the citations. In the first, the quotation from *Bretha Nemed* provides the detail that the vessel is in some ways associated with the palm of one's hand. Since the hand is often used as a measurement, this may refer either to the diameter of the cup or to its height. In the second entry, we are told that the container is acorn-shaped. The etymological reference to *ían* implies that it may be made of wood. In the second entry, a *ballán* is treated as a drinking vessel of the poor while in the first, the wording implies that *ballán* was a generic term which could include the sub-category *bóige*. The latter appear to be richer vessels which could be used as pledges.

In terms of the tiny resources which compilers of the *Dictionary* enjoyed, it is probably unreasonable to expect that they could have produced discursive entries which could explore the nuances of meaning of every word. On the other hand, it is instructive to compare the relatively abbreviated treatment of a word like *ballán* with that meted out to any of the Old Irish prepositions which can run for pages: the preposition *do* for example, runs over six columns or three A4 pages.²⁰ It is clear that the editors were deeply interested in the exact meaning of prepositions and the syntax governing their use but were nothing like as interested in artefacts or settlement forms.

Current attempts to use Irish language sources in tandem with archaeological evidence are thus presented with major problems. Translations of Irish words, whether they occur in editions of texts or as entries in the *Dictionary* come complete with the cultural baggage of the translators. The people involved in the compilation of the *Dictionary* were experts in their own field and experts moreover who laboured for sixty years to produce a massive and crucial work on the basis of very poor resources but (and from the point of view of this paper it is an important *but*) they were not primarily interested in the material reality of medieval Irish society. If we are to build on the interdisciplinary legacy of Ann Hamlin's work, it will be up to archaeologists and Old Irish scholars, working together as equal collaborators, to bridge this gap.

Participation

Footnotes

- ¹ T.G. E. Powell, *The Celts* (London 1958), 110-11; M. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic myth and legend* (London 1992), 57-8; B. Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London 1994), 184
- ² D. Murray, *Romanticism, Nationalism and Irish Antiquarian Societies, 1840-80* (Maynooth Monographs Series Minor III, 2000)
- ³ D.A. Binchy, "Irish history and Irish law", *Studia Hibernica* 16 (1976), 7-45, 14
- ⁴ M. Stokes, *Early Christian Architecture in Ireland* (London 1878); *Early Christian Art in Ireland* (London 1894); *Christian Inscriptions in the Irish language chiefly collected and drawn by George Petrie* ed. M. Stokes, 2 vols (Dublin 1872-8).
- ⁵ T.P. Cross & C.H. Slover, *Ancient Irish tales* (New York 1936 rep. 1996); J. Gantz *Early Irish myths and sagas* (Harmondsworth 1981).
- ⁶ *Dictionary of the Irish language* ed. E.G. Quin et al. (Dublin 1913-76), F: 33
- ⁷ *Táin Bó Fráich* ed. W. Meid (Dublin 1967), 3:72
- ⁸ A.O. Anderson, "Táin Bó Fráich" *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903), 127-54, 130; A.H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland* Vol. 2 (New York 1906 rep. 1974), 16; M.E. Byrne & M. Dillon, "Táin Bó Fráich" *Études Celtiques* 2 (1937), 3; Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, 116
- ⁹ *Dictionary* U:79-80.
- ¹⁰ Meid, *Táin Bó Fráich*, 3:71.
- ¹¹ F. O'Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin 1997), 473-4
- ¹² *Táin Bó Cúailnge. Recension I* ed. & trans. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin 1976, 190)
- ¹³ Cross & Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 153; K. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* (London 1951, rep. Harmondsworth 1971), 291
- ¹⁴ C.T. Lewis & C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1879 rep. 1993), 290. An editorial note adds "probably comprising the ruby, carbuncle, hyacinth and garnet".
- ¹⁵ *Dictionary of Irish language* C: 478.
- ¹⁶ D. Greene, "Lapidaries in Irish", *Celtica* 2 (1952-4), 67-95, 68-9.
- ¹⁷ *Dictionary* C:74
- ¹⁸ *Dictionary* B:26
- ¹⁹ *Sanas Cormaic: An Old-Irish Glossary* ed. K. Meyer in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* (Dublin 1912) IV, 14, 16.
- ²⁰ *Dictionary* D: 171-176