

CHAPTER TWO

THE LANGUAGE OF THE POEMS OF BLATHMAC*

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0.1. The discovery by Nessa Ní Shéaghda in 1953 of a sizeable body of until then neglected religious verse in the 17th century manuscript G 50 in the National Library of Ireland constituted the largest addition of text to the corpus of Early Irish in the 20th century.¹ Its subsequent publication in 1958 and 1964 by James Carney, augmented much later by Nessa Ní Shéaghda with stanzas left unedited by Carney, was an exceptional philological, linguistic and editorial achievement.² Contemporaries immediately realised that the discovery of the four texts entailed a major new source for the knowledge of Old Irish. The texts add up to over 5,000 words in a rough estimate. This compares, for instance, with something in the order of 35,000 words contained in the Milan glosses, the largest of the Old Irish glossed corpora, or with around 12,500 words in the St Gall glosses. Carney's work thus added a substantial amount of new text to the corpus of testimonies of Old Irish, approximating to a seventh of the Milan glosses or less than half of the St Gall glosses. The particular value of the poems lies on

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¹ Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue*, 66-68; Ó Macháin, 'Nessa Ní Shéaghda', 102 fn 64.

² Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*; Ní Shéaghda, 'The Poems of Blathmac'.

the one hand in the fact that they are continuous texts which through their length lend themselves better to investigations into strategies of textual cohesion and syntax than the rather isolated units in the glosses. On the other hand, they are also valuable because of their language which, at least at first glance, appears to be authentic Old Irish, unlike the idiom of the glosses which often bears the hallmarks of translatism. But the concept of, as it were, an unpolluted Irish of these poems is actually illusory. It will be shown below that Blathmac's text not only depends on Latin literary models, but that occasionally the poet has followed Latin models even to the letter.

0.2. The respective value of the linguistic witnesses, that is, the Old Irish glosses on the one hand and Blathmac's poems on the other, nevertheless remains of unequal order. The glosses, being preserved in contemporary manuscripts, provide a direct snapshot of the written standard in the Old Irish period, whereas texts in manuscripts of later or much later transmission are always liable to interference from younger stages of the language. Still, despite looking back at a transmission history of almost a thousand years, the fact that Carney's poems are encased in the straightjacket of metrical composition lends them a higher amount of reliability in preserving authentic Old Irish than is normally the case, although there is still plenty of room for modernisation.

0.3. Notwithstanding the widespread acknowledgment of the literary and linguistic value of these poems, it is surprising that in the past half century not very much has been added to the 19 pages that Carney devoted to the linguistic and orthographic peculiarities of the text in the introduction of his edition. Mac Eoin made some philological comments in his review of Carney's edition, as did Carey, and Mac Mathúna added to the semantic analysis of some key terms used by Blathmac in the narrative of the passion of Christ.³ While some stray remarks in works that are not specifically dedicated to the *Poems of Blathmac* may have been overlooked for this overview, it is still fair to say that the amount of scholarship directed at these texts stands in no relation to the attention they deserve in the study of early Irish language and literature. The 50th anniversary of the edition is thus an opportunity to reappraise the characteristics of the language of these texts and their significance for the Old Irish language. The present

³ Mac Eoin, 'Review', 225-6; Carey, 'Three Notes'; Mac Mathúna, 'The Christianization'.

study concerns itself exclusively with the two *Poems of Blathmac* proper, beginning *Tair cucum, a Maire boíd* and *A Maire, a grían ar clainde*. The other two poems, the *Irish Gospel of Thomas*, beginning *Imbu maccán cóic bliadnae*, and the *Poem to the Virgin Mary*, beginning *Maire máthair in maic bic*, which appear to have been written by different, probably earlier authors, deserve independent studies.⁴ The objectives of this study are to outline some characteristics of the language of *Blathmac's Poems*, to reflect what conclusions they allow to be drawn for the dating of the language of the poems, and to speak about how insights into these texts can contribute to the study of Old Irish as a whole. In the case of a long and comparatively little-studied text such as this it is not possible to illustrate more than a few select phenomena in all three sections.

1. BLATHMAC SON OF CÚ BRETTAN: HIS NAME, TIME AND PLACE

1.1. The discovery of the texts received additional significance by Carney's suggestion about the person of the poet and his era. Since such information is notoriously lacking for most literary compositions from early Ireland, a text of considerable length from that period receives particular importance if its time and place can be determined with the necessary accuracy.

The manuscript attributes the two poems to a poet named Blathmac. The form of the name and its etymology necessitate a digression. Blathmac was a fairly popular name in medieval Ireland, the index of *CGH* records 27 bearers of the name. Modern scholars traditionally write it with a short *a* in the first syllable, but since the genealogical manuscripts very rarely show length marks, the absence in them of a length mark constitutes no compelling argument for a short first syllable. More crucial are three rhyming examples.⁵ In a poem in *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin*, *Blathmac* rhymes twice with a short vowel, with *rathmac* 'son of grace' (l. 8, *rannaigecht*-rhyme) and with

⁴ Carney, 'Two Old Irish Poems'; idem, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 89-111. Currently a PhD-thesis on Blathmac is being undertaken in Maynooth University. Its aim is to create a lexicographic database for a specialised dictionary of Blathmac's poems on the basis of a revised edition of the text, and to make progress in their philological and literary elucidation. Since autumn 2013, a research seminar accompanies this research thesis. The present study is based on preliminary results arising from this seminar.

⁵ Meyer, *Betha*, 20, 111-112; Stokes, *Félire hÚi Gormáin*, 236; *CGH* 127 (= Rawl. B502 137 b 9; Book of Ballymote 81 a).

athbac ‘confusion (again)’ (l. 9, isosyllabic *deibide*-rhyme).⁶ In the *Martyrology of Gorman, Blaithmec* (*sic!*) makes *aicill*-rhyme with *taithmet* ‘memory, commemoration’. Meyer himself explains the name as a compound of *blad* ‘fame’. The same etymological connection is made in a cheville in a genealogical poem, but the consistent spelling of the name with *th*, never with *d* as required by *blad*, casts doubt on this solution. At first sight, the name seems to contain the word for ‘flower’, *bláth*, and to be the male counterpart of the female *Bláthnait* ‘little flower’. Odd (in the double meaning of the word) references to this explanation are found in scholarship. The medieval Alemannic scholar Walahfrid Strabo wrote between 827–829 a Latin hexameter poem of 172 lines about the martyr St. Blathmac of Iona, a different person from the present author.⁷ It is mysterious how Meyer came to make the claim that Walahfrid had latinised the Irish name as *Florigenus* since nothing of this sort occurs in the poem.⁸ Walahfrid calls his hero once by his Irish name (l. 14) in the body of the poem, and once each in the title and in the explicit, always using the spelling *Blaithmaic*. The closest the poet gets to ‘flower’ is l. 18 where he says about his hero *florebat regius heres* ‘the royal heir flourished’, but this metaphor is so trite that it need not imply any pun on the name. Equally mysterious is the source for the claim by Cardinal Moran that the latinisation of *Blathmac* is *Florentius*.⁹ I have not been able so far to trace a medieval Irish source for the etymological connection between *Blathmac* and ‘flower’.

Instead, Walahfrid offers a different explanation when he states in l. 29 that the name means *pulcher natus* ‘handsome boy’ in Latin. Apparently commenting on this translation, a marginal note in a modern hand in manuscript S of the *Vita Beati Blaithmaic* remarks that *Blaith iucundum Maic uero similem Scotice significant* ‘*Blaith* means ‘pleasant’, but *Maic* ‘similar’ in Irish’. Notwithstanding the puzzling but clearly erroneous explanation *maic* = ‘similar’ (probably a confusion with *macsamhail* ‘equal, like’), the etymology of the first part of the name which connects it with Ir. *bláith* ‘smooth, polished’ may be the motivation for Walahfrid’s statement. Walahfrid, who surely was not conversant with the Irish language, must have gotten this knowledge from the same Irish informant from whom he heard

⁶ Hypothetically, the first part of *rathmac* could also be *ráth* ‘surety’ or ‘rampart’, but this makes no good sense.

⁷ Edited in Dümmler, *Poetae Latini*, 297–301.

⁸ Meyer, *Betha*, 112.

⁹ Moran, *Irish Saints*, 211; repeated in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1907.

about St Blathmac's martyrdom. This, and Walahfrid's spelling *Blaithmaic*, proves indirectly that in the early 9th century the first part of the name *Blathmac* was associated with the adjective *bláith*. However, it is questionable if this is the correct etymology of the name. In earlier Old Irish this word was *mláith*, but to my knowledge there is no trace anywhere of the expected early form of the name **Mláithmac*. Blathmac himself uses the adjective *bláith* once in the strongly alliterative l. 753 *is í in briathar builid bláith* 'this is the fair, smooth word' which establishes its initial *b-*, and with this the change *ml > bl*, for the original beyond any reasonable doubt.¹⁰ The 1643 Bollandist edition of the Life of Blathmac states that *Hibernis nunc 'brah' siue 'braa' pulchrum sonat, mac filium* 'In Irish, *brah* or *braa* now means 'handsome', *mac* 'son'.¹¹ The source for phonetic *brah/braa* 'beautiful, handsome' is either OIr. *bregda*, ModIr. *breágh* 'fine, lovely', which is blatantly wrong as an explanation of *Blathmac*, or it derives from a dialect in which the initial *bl-* of *bláith* had become *br*. However, I am not aware of such a dialect.

Westropp, speaking about the church in Rath in Co. Clare dedicated to yet another St Blathmac, records the local pronunciation of the name in his time as 'St Blawfugh'.¹² The *-aw-* may indicate a long vowel. This is borne out by Hogan who uses *Ráith Bláthmaic* as the headword in the *Onomasticon Goidelicum*.¹³ A similar form of the placename, *Rathbláthmaic*, is also used for the church site in a recent article, even though the author spells the local saint himself as *Blathmac*.¹⁴

To sum up, there is conflicting evidence for the pronunciation and for the synchronic meaning of the name. Middle Irish rhymes with short vowels stand against the modern pronunciation with a long vowel and against the medieval folk etymology that links the name with long-vowel *bláith* 'smooth, polished'. However, *mláith/bláith* seems to be ruled out as the etymology by the fact that the initial of the name is always attested as *bl-*, not *ml-*. Meyer's *blad* 'fame, renown' is unlikely because the name is never written with *-d-*. The short-vowel rhymes speak against the identification of the first element with *bláth* 'flower'. For the moment, the explanation of the name remains a mystery.

¹⁰ Compare this with the Milan glosses, where initial *ml-* and *mr-* are retained.

¹¹ Dümmler, *Poetae Latini*, 297.

¹² Westropp, 'The Churches', 127.

¹³ Hogan, *Onomasticon*, 567.

¹⁴ McInerney, 'A Note'.

1.2. The manuscript says that the poet Blathmac was the son of Cú Brettan son of Congus of the Fir Rois, a people who inhabited parts of the modern counties Louth and Monaghan.¹⁵ The main monastic foundation in that region was Lann Léire, today Dunleer in Co. Louth, controlled by the Uí Ségáin.¹⁶ If our poet was a man of holy orders, it is likely that he was associated with this place, but nothing is otherwise known about Blathmac. Carney's identification not so much of the poet, but of his father Cú Brettan mac Congusa and of his brother Donn Bó as historical figures of the first half and middle of the 8th century provides circumstantial information. According to the saga *Cath Almaine*, which follows literary conventions rather than historical facts, his father, whose obit is given as 740 (AU), was a participant in the Battle of Allen of 718.¹⁷ The annals record the brother's period of activity for the forties and fifties of the 8th century. He killed Congal, lord of Airthir, in 743 (AFM), and was himself killed in the Battle of Emain Macha in 759 (AU). None of the annalistic sources specifies the territory to which Cú Brettan and Donn Bó belong; only the historically unreliable saga of the Battle of Allen, which suppresses any association between Cú Brettan and Donn Bó, calls Cú Brettan king of the Fir Rois. Both Cú Brettan and Donn Bó are portrayed as poets in the saga, which – if authentic – sheds an interesting light on the family. However, Mhac Craith disputes Cú Brettan's ascription to the Fir Rois, preferring to follow a genealogy in the Book of Ballymote (f. 66v f 12) which associates him with the Uí Ségáin, another sept of the Airgialla.¹⁸ He makes the point that the reference to the Fir Rois at the beginning of the *Poems of Blathmac* could be due to literary influence from the saga.¹⁹ Although the precise affiliation is of historic importance, it is negligible for linguistic purposes since both population groups belonged roughly to the same East Ulster area.

1.3. There is some evidence that seniority was one, although probably not the only, factor in royal succession.²⁰ Since his brother Donn Bó was the one who pursued a political career, it may be tentatively

¹⁵ *Blatmac mac c̄breatan m̄c̄ c̄ngosa do f̄eroib rois d̄i|ric̄ne an d̄utrāc̄ta do Mairi 7 da Mac* (p. 122).

¹⁶ Byrne, *Irish Kings*, 118.

¹⁷ Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine*.

¹⁸ Mhac Craith, 'Review', 218

¹⁹ For more information on Fir Rois and Uí Ségáin, see Byrne, *Irish Kings*, 118, and Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine*, 34-5, 38.

²⁰ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 130-42.

concluded that Blathmac was the younger of the two. For him a path outside of politics would have remained which effectively would have meant a clerical career. Using exclusively generational arguments derived from the above-mentioned figures, Carney said that ‘the period of his maturity, and consequently of the composition of these poems, fell at latest somewhere in the years 750–70’, and later spoke of ‘the middle of the eighth century’, but slightly alternative scenarios are conceivable.²¹ In l. 553, the poet requests from Mary *mo buith for bith comba sen* ‘that I be in the world until I become old’. If this is not merely a rhetorical figure, this request insinuates that the poet was comparatively young at the time when he composed the poem, maybe around 30 years of age. These considerations could place the language of the poems perhaps even a decade or more earlier than the time-span indicated by Carney.

1.4. Ultimately, for all that optimism, the claim that the *Poems of Blathmac* are literary products of the mid-8th century is no more than an hypothesis that can potentially be falsified, but that cannot be verified as such. If this dating were correct, it would make the poems an invaluable yardstick to measure linguistic variation and developments in Old Irish. On the other hand, given the uncertainties surrounding the poet and his time (less his place, as I show below), the evidence of the language compared to other texts is itself a factor that can help to be more precise about the provenance of the texts. As a rough methodology to assess the date, the linguistic profile of *Blathmac’s Poems* can be compared with the characteristics of texts that are better anchored chronologically, although by no means absolutely. The texts that offer themselves for this purpose are, unsurprisingly, the glosses by the main hand of the Würzburg glosses, which are traditionally taken to be roughly contemporaneous with the received dating of Blathmac, *Félire Óengusso* from the early 9th century, which would be around two generations younger, and the Milan glosses, preserved in a manuscript that is slightly later than *Félire Óengusso*, but go back to an earlier date, maybe the latter part of the 8th century, or even earlier.²²

²¹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xiv, xix.

²² See Ó Riain, *Feastdays*, 75–98 for the most recent discussion of the controversial date of the text (differently Dumville, *Félire Óengusso*, 19–31). See also *Thes.* i, xv, xviii; Bronner, *Verzeichnis*, 27–28 for the dating of the glosses. The matter is much disputed, see *Thes.* (i, xxiii;) and Bronner, *Verzeichnis*, 54.

1.5. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that there is no external proof outside of the sole manuscript witness either that the poems were actually written by Blathmac, or that a poet of this name and pedigree existed. Carney's observation that the attribution of the poems to such an obscure person is the best argument for its authenticity falls short of a proof.²³ A tiny linguistic piece of evidence may be cited in support of the claim. One of the numerous lexemes exclusive to *Blathmac's Poems* is *pailt* in the compound *paitlám* in l. 134: *ba paitlám fial in fodlóir* 'the distributor had a hand of plenty and was generous'.²⁴ The non-palatalised *-lt-* in Blathmac's *paitlám* is probably due to progressive assimilation in a compound.²⁵ *Pailt*, a loan from British **palt* (cf. Corn. *pals* 'plenteous', MBret. *paout*, Bret. *paot* 'rich, numerous'), which itself is of unclear origin, does not occur in *Corpas na Gaeilge* 1600–1882, but has its first appearance in the lexicography of Irish at the beginning of the 19th century.²⁶ Edward O'Reilly's 1817 dictionary contains the adjective *páilt* 'abundant, plentiful, copious, affluent' and the abstract *páilteas* 'plenty, abundance'. While in these entries O'Reilly gives no information about his source, he acknowledges in the preface to his dictionary (*sine pagina*) that he culled several lexical items from William Shaw's Scottish Gaelic dictionary, where they are recorded as *pailt* 'abundant, plentiful' and *pailteas* 'plenty, abundance'.²⁷ It is from this source that Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh believes the two entries to have been taken, the length marks, which Shaw never writes, having been added by hypercorrection.²⁸ But already before O'Reilly, *pailtios* appeared in print in William Neilson's grammar, a work that drew strongly on dialect material from Co. Down.²⁹ In the 20th century, there is

²³ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xix.

²⁴ Carney's translation (13) 'the distributor was generous-handed and bountiful', though smoother in English, is somewhat imprecise in its rendering of *palt*.

²⁵ Cf. Uhlich, *Die Morphologie*, 126-7.

²⁶ Macbain (*An Etymological Dictionary*, 272), rather unhelpfully, ascribes it to a loan from Pictish and compares it with *clann!* Deshayes (*Dictionnaire*, 556), who also refers to Old Breton *palt* and Welsh *pallt*, both of which are unattested to my knowledge, derives it from Proto-Celtic **k^hal-to-*, *k^hel-to-* without further explanation. Perhaps what is meant is a participial formation from the PIE root **k^helh-* 'to turn, revolve', but both the formal and the semantic side of this explanation is difficult. See also below at p. 103.

²⁷ Shaw, *Galic and English Dictionary*, *sine pagina*.

²⁸ For this entire section of the article, I am heavily indebted to an abundance of information (*pailteas eolais*) about the dialectal Irish evidence for *pailt*, generously provided to me by Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh; for Scottish Gaelic, I received a lot of information from Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh.

²⁹ Neilson, *Introduction*, ii, 42; O'Rahilly, *Irish Dialects*, 185-6.

scattered evidence for *pailt* and its derivatives from various places in East and North Ulster, namely Rathlin Island, Antrim, and Inishowen.³⁰ Most of these areas, including Blathmac's putative home territory, belong to the traditional East Ulster dialect of Irish. There is no trace of the word from the rest of Irish. In Scottish Gaelic (*pailt*, *pailteas*) and Manx (*palçhey*, *palçhys*), on the other hand, it is very well established.³¹ It seems, therefore, that this is a word of specifically North-East Gaelic provenance. Watson, in discussing the language of the Book of the Dean of Lismore, singles out *pailt* as one of the words that are specific to Scottish Gaelic, but are absent from Irish (although not entirely, as shown here).³²

1.6. The fact that it was used by Blathmac can thus support the scant historical information about his pedigree and is a tiny addition to the historical dialectology of Irish. The loanword *pailt* is not the only piece of evidence that shows a link between Blathmac and British Celtic. In section 7.7., two further possible British loanwords in Blathmac's idiolect will be discussed. It is also noteworthy that Blathmac's father bore the name *Cú Brettan* 'hound (= defender?) of the Britons', and the major ecclesiastical foundation in the presumed homeland of Blathmac is *Lann Léire* 'churchland of Léire', with the quite untypically Irish, but typically Welsh element *lann* (Welsh *llan*) referring to the church.³³ Despite their overall rarity in Ireland, there is in fact a cluster of placenames with *Lann* in north-east Ireland, as well as in Brega, which may indicate early British influence there.³⁴

1.7. Another lexical item seems to have a different geographical bias. In l. 277, *gráic* (MS: *graic*) is used for 'stead, abode, place', apparently referring to a structure in Pilate's palace. This is the word's only attestation as a simplex noun in Early Irish. It only surfaces again in Modern Irish in *gráig* 'village, hamlet' and *grágán* 'village, suburb;

³⁰ Dinneen, *Foclóir*, 829, drawing on O'Reilly and Mac Gréagóir, *Sgéaltan*; Holmer, *The Irish Language*, 221; Wagner, *Linguistic Atlas*, vol. 1 (map 183); Holmer, *On Some Relics*, 123; Ó Cuinn, 'Iarsmaí', 252.

³¹ See *Corpas na Gàidhlig* / DASG (<http://www.dasg.ac.uk/corpus/>) for attestations (visited 7.3.2015). Beside many examples of *pailt* with palatalised ending, *Corpas na Gàidhlig* cites two examples of *palt*. However, since they are found in text 152 which was typeset by a printer with no command of Gaelic, they are to be regarded as printing errors, and not as rare survivals of an older non-palatalised form of the adjective.

³² Watson, 'Vernacular Gaelic', 286–7.

³³ Flanagan and Flanagan, *Irish Place Names*, 104–5.

³⁴ Hogan, *Onomasticon*, 475–6.

manor' and as *Gráig*, anglicised *Graigue*, *Graig*, in a wide range of placenames.³⁵ *Logainm.ie*, which defines its meaning as 'hamlet, cattle-steading?', records over 130 places with this lexeme, confined almost exclusively to the southern half of Ireland, south of a line stretching from Dublin to north Co. Galway, with a single northern outlier in *Coillidh Ghráige*, angl. *Killygragy* in Co. Monaghan, close to the area from which Blathmac allegedly hails.³⁶ The presence of *gragan* (*sic!*) in Dwelly's dictionary of Scottish Gaelic is suspect.³⁷ Aside from the apparently wrong spelling, the headword is marked by a dagger with which Dwelly indicates obsolete words and meanings. *Corpas na Gàidhlig* contains no example of the use of this word.³⁸ It is possible therefore that Dwelly drew on Irish sources, and that the word is totally absent from Scotland. Apart from its use as a simple noun, *grá(i)c* appears as the second element in the Old Irish compound *engraic* and its derivatives *engraicigidir*, *engracugud*, which are almost exclusively attested in the Milan and St Gall glosses, mostly as grammatical terms for pronouns. While the toponomastic evidence sets the word firmly in the south of Ireland, the single placename from Co. Monaghan and especially the grammatical usage in two manuscripts that have been suspected of coming from Bangor, help to establish the word also for the north and thus do not make it a witness against Blathmac's northern origin.³⁹

1.8. The occurrence of a rather un-Old Irish prepositional relative clause with stranded preposition in l. 323 *nacha-rultais námait lais* 'on account of which the enemies could not move' (see section 8.3), a construction which becomes popular in Modern Irish, but is rarer in Scotland, could be seen to set Blathmac's language apart from Scottish Gaelic, but given the overall rarity of evidence for its distribution in the early middle ages one should not read too much into its presence in this poem.⁴⁰

1.9. A final question connected with the person of the author is whether the two poems are written by a single poet, as their headings

³⁵ Dinneen, *Foclóir*, 565. For *grágán*, Dinneen cites only older glossaries and dictionaries.

³⁶ URL: <http://www.logainm.ie/ga/gls/93-gr%C3%A1ig> (visited 7.3.2015).

³⁷ Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*, 520.

³⁸ URL: <http://www.dasg.ac.uk/> (visited 22.4.2015).

³⁹ McCone, 'The Würzburg and Milan Glosses', 97.

⁴⁰ However, see Watson, 'Gaeilge na hAlban', 697–8, who makes reference to both types of construction for Scottish Gaelic (*pace* McCone, 'The Würzburg and Milan Glosses', 97).

suggest. Stylometry could be applied to establish if there is a difference in the language use between the two texts, but this has not been done yet. Considerations of plausibility dictate the acceptance of the most natural assumption, that is, the two poems, which are intertextually connected, were composed by a single author for whom the name Blathmac can be used for practical purposes.

1.10. Even if one does not accept Carney's identification of the poet, one cannot avoid the impression that the language of the *Poems of Blathmac* is Old Irish. Carney's dating to the mid-eighth century has been accepted almost universally, but Daniel Binchy was troubled by a number of linguistically younger-looking forms that ruled out a date before 900 for him.⁴¹ Unfortunately, Binchy provided only a sole illustration of his doubts, and never returned to the subject in written form. L. 424 *ro-coillset a cobfolaid* 'they violated their counter-obligations', as edited and translated by Carney, is problematic because the rhyme with l. 423 *mogaib* (MS *modhaib*) requires a palatalised *-d* in the final word, appropriate to a feminine noun. However, *folud* 'obligation', the second element in the hapax compound *cobfolaid*, is a neuter *o*-stem in Old Irish. It starts to be treated as a feminine only in the later language.⁴² John Carey proposed a solution for the troublesome form.⁴³ He suggested that the original reading had been *cobfodail* 'division, share, portion', a compound of *fodail* 'share', that had been mechanically metathesised in the process of transcribing. Carey's suggested translation is: 'They have spoiled what was allotted to them', i.e. the Jews had abused their gifts from God. I endorse this explanation, especially because of a passage in a text referred to by Carey only in passing. In a Middle Irish episode about the fool and poet Mac Dá Cherda, an immodest *aithech* 'peasant' is said to have drunk *can nach cobfodail* from a miraculous wine well.⁴⁴ In the narrative, this means that he drank 'without equally sharing' the wine with others, beyond his fair share. The results of this pretentiousness are drastic: the peasant's belly explodes. This underpins the suggested emendation for *Blathmac's Poems*. The Jews did not make proper use of the fair share granted to them by God. Accordingly, it is only fair that they should have to suffer the drastic consequences of their own imprudence. Alternatively, the extant reading *cobfolaid* could be analysed as an instance of an exocentric

⁴¹ Binchy, 'Irish History', fn 27.

⁴² *eDIL* F 280.

⁴³ Carey, 'Three Notes'.

⁴⁴ O'Keefe, 'Mac Dá Cherda', 36.

bahuvrīhi adjective based on *folud* ‘obligation’, with transference to the *i*-stems, following an inherited pattern of Indo-European word formation.⁴⁵ However, the number of morphological parallels involving *com-* as first members of such compounds in Irish is small. Most examples from the glosses, discussed by Wodtko, are problematic.⁴⁶ A comparable instance of this formation outside of the glosses is *comfósaid*, also spelled *cobsaid* ‘steadfast’, derived from the *o*-stem *fossad* ‘fixed, stationary; a fixed position’, but unlike *cobfolaid* this is an adjective, not a noun. In any case, Binchy’s objection is not critical to an 8th-century date of the poems.

2. CARNEY’S EDITION

2.1. When one wants to speak about the language of the *Poems of Blathmac*, the first hurdle to be overcome is Carney’s text. His edition was a pioneering achievement under the conditions in which it was produced. The diverse subject matters and the great length of the poems make it an enormous task for a single person to handle all the literary and cultural threads that run through them. Only a part of the fascicles of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* had been published at the time, and there must have been pressure on the editor to make the text available within a reasonable time.

Still, when one works closely with the text, alternatives to many of Carney’s emendations and interpretations occur which, taken together, change the text quite considerably. Carney himself acknowledges the provisional nature of his work when he says in the introduction that his ‘*textus restitutus* may best be regarded as an interim comment on the text of the manuscript’, and that ‘[i]t is not pretended that the potentialities of these poems are exhausted either in the notes [...] or in the present comments’.⁴⁷ The contemporary reviews demonstrate vividly that the imperfect character of the *editio prima* was recognised by his peers.⁴⁸ Despite this early awareness that the final word had not

⁴⁵ Carey, ‘Three Notes’, 126 fn 18.

⁴⁶ Wodtko, *Sekundäradjektive*, 139–47.

⁴⁷ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xix fn 31, xxxix.

⁴⁸ Brian Ó Cuív (‘Review’, 154): ‘A great deal of emendation has been necessary to make good the imperfections, both linguistic and metrical, which are seen in the extant copy. The result is a text which Carney does not regard with any degree of finality but as “an interim comment on the text of the manuscript”’. Cuthbert Mhac Craith (‘Review’, 219): ‘He [i.e. Carney] himself remarks ... “It is not pretended that the potentialities of these poems are exhausted ...” If one chose, one might elect to differ with him about some of his conclusions’. Gearóid Mac Eoin (‘Review’, 223–4) quotes the same phrase, but is overall well-disposed to Carney’s efforts, although he points out that the edition is open to disagreement in small details.

yet been spoken, the number of textual emendations that have been proposed for the poems in the half century since is unexpectedly – and unjustifiably – small.

2.2. At the outset, some considerations of a literary nature are in place that have an impact on the interpretation of the language. First, a word about the structure of the poems. Apart from a belief in the innately triadic mind of the Celt, there is nothing to commend Carney's tentative suggestion 'that the original work [of Blathmac] consisted of three poems'.⁴⁹ What remains in physical form today belongs to only two poems. He further suggested that each poem had an original extent of 150 stanzas. In the case of the first poem 149 stanzas survive. While it is conceivable that one stanza required for the full 150 was lost in the intervening period of transmission, the case is more difficult to uphold for the second poem. Carney's edition of the *Poems* has 259 stanzas in total, which means that he only edited 110 stanzas of the second poem, although the manuscript contains considerably more text. Carney's edition stops abruptly in the middle of page 141 of the manuscript. Despite being somewhat faint, the next three stanzas on this and the next six on the following page are fairly easily legible in the manuscript.⁵⁰ After that, on the lower half of page 142 (st. 269–276), the paper has been badly stained, and only fragments survive of pages 143 and 144.⁵¹ Only fragments of twelve stanzas (st. 277–288) can be seen on page 143, and there must have originally been space for two more on the bottom of the page which is now lost (st. 289–290). On ISOS, the vestiges of ten stanzas on page 144 (st. 294–303) can be made out, and there is conceivably space for three stanzas before that (st. 291–293). As on the preceding page, there would have been space for two more stanzas at the bottom, but given the state the manuscript is now in, nothing can be said about whether it actually contained any text after stanza 303. In total, then, there were probably at least 44 stanzas after the 259 edited by Carney, nine of which are well preserved, the others being fragmentary to varying degrees. After the publication of the ITS volume, Carney never

⁴⁹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xiii–xiv.

⁵⁰ St. 260–8 in Ní Shéaghda, 'The Poems of Blathmac'.

⁵¹ See: http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/NLI/NLI_MS_G_50/tables/8.html#147 (p. 141) and http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/NLI/NLI_MS_G_50/tables/8.html#148 (p. 142). The fragmentary pages 143 and 144 at: http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/NLI/NLI_MS_G_50/tables/8.html#149 and http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/NLI/NLI_MS_G_50/tables/8.html#150.

returned to editing the remaining parts.⁵² This was finally undertaken by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha in the memorial volume of *Celtica* dedicated to James Carney.⁵³ Ní Shéaghdha's transcription is a tremendous achievement.⁵⁴ She was able to extract much more text from the final two pages than is visible even on the high-resolution digital images on ISOS.⁵⁵ Where ISOS reveals anything at all, her transcriptions are fairly accurate.⁵⁶ While the text on the shreds of the last page is badly damaged, there remains just enough to get an idea of the final words of the stanzas. If the second poem consisted of 150 stanzas, as Carney surmised, a *dúmad* mirroring the initial line *A Maire, a grian ar clainde* would be expected around stanza 299. There is none, as far as can now be judged. Also, unlike the first poem, the initial word of the second poem is not repeated in large letters on the margin around stanza 299. If the second poem ended before the section that remains visible, that is, somewhere between stanzas 277–290, it had 144 or fewer stanzas. If, on the other hand, it went on after the surviving sections, it had at least 154 or more stanzas. The extant material therefore suggests that the second poem did not have the 150 stanzas that Carney predicted. Hopefully future research will lead to a clearer picture.

3. BLATHMAC AND HIS SOURCES

3.1. Where Blathmac narrates events of the New Testament, circumstantial details leave no doubt that he follows the Gospel of Matthew, albeit with a certain amount of creative freedom, especially in abbreviating the plot of the passion and in adopting a perspective that centres very much on the tragic, human side of Christ, but that barely acknowledges the inevitability of the events in the salvation history of mankind. There are indications that Blathmac was not – or not only – using the Vulgate version, but perhaps a different rendering of the Bible, either an earlier Vetus Latina translation of the Bible, or a creative retelling of the biblical matter.⁵⁷

⁵² Carney gives no explanation as to why he left out the remaining stanzas, but one may suspect that he was driven by a similar urgency for publication as the one mentioned by Ní Shéaghdha ('James Carney', 151) with respect to his *Studies in Irish Literature and History*.

⁵³ Ní Shéaghdha, 'The Poems of Blathmac'.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ó Macháin, 'Nessa Ní Shéaghdha', 102.

⁵⁵ See fn 52.

⁵⁶ In the currently on-going research project in Maynooth, it is hoped to subject the manuscript to a hyperspectral scan to attain clarity about a few uncertain readings.

⁵⁷ Collected in Jülicher, *Itala*, for the Gospel of Matthew.

3.2. It was pointed out to me by Conor McDonough that Blathmac may have been inspired for his work by two Latin epic versifications of the Gospel, Juvencus' *Euangeliorum libri quattuor*, the first-ever Latin hexameter version of the Biblical tale, written around 330, and the slightly younger *Carmen Paschale* by the poet Sedulius from the mid-5th century. Blathmac's vehement anti-judaism, for instance, may have been inspired by Juvencus. The precise relationship between Blathmac and his possible precursors has yet to be determined. One case in point to illustrate the possible influence from the Latin poets is line 66, which is part of stanza 17 (ll. 65–68):

*Batar é na dána trá
aurum, tús et mirrha.
Ba coindfē do Ísu uile.
rí ba Día, ba fírduine.*

Carney translates: 'These, then, were the gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh; all this was fitting for Jesus, a king who was God, who was true man'.⁵⁸ L. 66 is special in several respects. Carney's edition reads *aurum, túis ocus mirrha*. First, there are several issues with the reading. In the manuscript, the connector is not *ocus*, neither in its common form as the Tironian note 7 which is otherwise used in *Blathmac's Poems*, nor written out full, but the scribe unmistakably and exceptionally wrote the Latin ligature <&> *et*. Because of its exceptionality, there is no reason to doubt that this is what the scribe found in his exemplar, and what the poet wanted to write. Also, the first word of this line is exceptionally written with a large letter which is otherwise reserved for the beginnings of stanzas, as if the author and/or the scribe wanted to highlight that this line is not Old Irish at all but is entirely composed in Latin. The second word of the line is *túis* in Carney's transcription of the manuscript, with a palatalised *s* at the end, making the word look Irish. But this palatalisation instead of expected Lat. *tus* could have crept into the text during transmission, in an attempt to adapt the form to the later Irish shape of the word. The *eDIL* (T 369) entry uses the form *túis* as the headword, but the earliest attestations rather point to an original feminine *ā*-stem *tús*: the compound *tuslestar* 'censer, thurible' in Sg. (53a16) and *Saltair na Rann* (l. 4364), the nominative *tuss* in *Passions and Homilies from the Leabhar Breac* (7017), and finally a gloss on the Latin Hymn of St Hilarius *Caspar tucc in tus dimoir* 'Caspar brought plenty of

⁵⁸ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 7.

frankincense' (*Lib. Hymn.* 37.34), where the accusative *tus* could be due to the generalisation of the form of the nominative with non-palatalised ending. However, the question of the palatalisation of *tuis* may be shadow boxing. Carney's reading *tuis* is by no means certain. The sequence of characters that he interpreted as *is* could also represent *ss*. Other examples for a similar graphic shape of *ss* on the same manuscript page 123 are *fessid* (l. 55) and *Nassarieth* (l. 100). In any case, I conclude that the entire line has to be read as Latin *aurum, tus et mirrha*. The line also stands out by the fact that when read in this way, it scans as a hexasyllabic line. Perhaps the unmetricality of the line was acceptable to Blathmac because it was in a foreign language.⁵⁹ A more speculative alternative solution will be mentioned in section 5.9.

3.3. The Vulgate (Mt. 2,11: *aurum tus et murram*) calls the third gift of the magi not *myrrha*, as Blathmac does, but uses a different Latinisation of the original Greek $\mu\upsilon\pi\pi\alpha$. *Murra* is also used by Sedulius, but *myrrha* is found in Juvenecus who must have obtained it from an older version of the Latin Bible.⁶⁰ Some variants of the Itala have *mirram*, some *myrram*.⁶¹ So Blathmac may have been directly or indirectly relying on this late Latin author. There is another coincidence between Blathmac and Juvenecus in the allegoric interpretation of the episode, as Conor McDonough informs me. The gifts of gold and frankincense are traditionally related to kingship and divinity, respectively, as in Blathmac's poem, but in the majority interpretation, myrrh is taken to point to mortality. Juvenecus and Blathmac agree in following a minority line here whereby myrrh refers to the human nature of Jesus:⁶²

*tum munera trina
tus, aurum, myrrham regique hominique Deoque
dona ferunt.*

'Then they give him threefold presents as gift, frankincense, gold, myrrh for the king, the man, the God.'

⁵⁹ This phenomenon was observed for verse in late medieval Cornish drama by Bruch, 'Medieval Cornish Versification', 68. He surmises that 'it is likely that the authors of Middle Cornish texts did not feel they could modify quotations from Scripture or the Mass. Since these formulae would likely have been familiar to the audience, it may have seemed inappropriate to alter them merely for the sake of metrical regularity.' See also below for other such cases in Blathmac's work.

⁶⁰ *Carm. Pasch.* 2, 95–6; *Evang. Libri IIII*, 1,250.

⁶¹ Jülicher, *Itala*.

⁶² Compare Blathmac's verse above with Juvenecus's *Evang. Libri IIII*, 1, 249–51.

The slightly divergent spelling of ‘myrrh’ and the different order of the gifts argue against a close connection between the two, but the latter could be owed to the particular exigencies of the metres in each language. Sedulius, on the other hand, represents the majority view:⁶³

Aurea nascenti fuderunt munera regi.

Tura dedere Deo, murram tribuere sepulchro.

‘They poured out gold as a present fit for a new born king; they gave him frankincense, a gift for a god, they offered him myrrh for his grave.’

That Juvenius was read in medieval Ireland is evident from the Cambridge manuscript of Juvenius which contains glosses in Old Irish, beside the better-known glosses in Old Welsh.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the 11th-century glossator of the *Liber Hymnorum* in MS TCD E.4.2 (1441) explicitly quotes these lines of Juvenius.⁶⁵ St Jerome also quotes them approvingly in his Commentary on Matthew.⁶⁶ The agreement between Blathmac and Juvenius could thus be due either to Blathmac’s direct familiarity with Juvenius’s work, or he could have known it from Jerome’s quotation, or from some other Irish adaptation of the lines.

3.4. Blathmac draws on various apocryphal material, in some instances he is the earliest evidence for the knowledge of a particular parabiblical tradition in the West.⁶⁷ For instance, the episode with the Roman centurion Longinus who pierces Jesus’ side on the cross goes back to the pseudoepigraphical *Gospel of Nicodemus* of the mid-4th century where Longinus is first mentioned.⁶⁸ However, the legends that Longinus’s blindness was healed and that the skull of Adam was baptised by Christ’s blood when it flowed down Mount Calvary do not appear in that Gospel. *Blathmac’s Poems* may be the first time that all these motifs were amalgamated in one narrative.⁶⁹ Attention has to

⁶³ *Carm. Pasch.* 2, 95–6; McKee, *The Cambridge Juvenius*.

⁶⁴ Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.4.42 (1285); edited by McKee, *The Cambridge Juvenius*.

⁶⁵ *Lib. Hymn.* 37.

⁶⁶ *Commentariorum in Euangelium Matthaei libri quattuor*, book 1, ch. 2.

⁶⁷ Dumville, ‘Biblical Apocrypha’, 305–8.

⁶⁸ Lawrence, ‘The Harrowing of Hell’, is sceptical of Blathmac’s familiarity with the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

⁶⁹ Dumville, ‘Biblical Apocrypha’, 308. Peter Harbison uses this argument to speak out against an early dating of Blathmac in the middle of the 8th century.

be paid to small details. For instance, in st. 87 the poet talks about a brazen serpent which was used to drive away snakes during the Israelites' wanderings through the desert after leaving Egypt. The small divergence from the Biblical account (Num. 21: 4–9) where the brazen serpent heals those bitten by fiery, poisonous snakes, but is not actually said to repel the snakes themselves, may indicate the use of an intermediary source, as noted by Daniel Watson.⁷⁰

3.5. Thus, it is not only essential to make a thorough philological assessment of the sole manuscript witness, but it is indispensable to keep an eye also on possible sources in order to illuminate passages that would otherwise remain dark, or to shed light on Blathmac's use of the language. Linguistic interference from Latin makes itself felt in Blathmac. In line 191, it is said that *fo·cresa saile i n-einech in dúilemon* 'spittles were cast into the face of the creator'.⁷¹ The entire stanza 48 is a conflation of two separate episodes in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 26:67 and 27:30). In Matthew, the act of spitting is expressed through the verbs *expuerunt* and *expuentes*, which mirror exactly the Greek originals ἐνέπτυσαν and ἐμπτύσαντες. What is remarkable about Blathmac's rendering of the scene is not so much the use of the light-verb construction *fo·ceird saile* 'to cast spittle', but rather that the object 'spittle' is expressed by the plural form, indicated by the preterite plural passive *fo·cresa*. *Saile* 'spittle' is regularly used as an uncountable singular mass noun in Early Irish, except in translations from Latin where it literally replicates Latin plurals: *honaib selib* gl. *sputaminibus* 'by spittles', *na saile* gl. *sputa* 'the spittles'.⁷² But the corresponding passage in the Vulgate does not have such a plural, the action being expressed verbally alone, and likewise in the Itala-version of the episode.⁷³ The most likely source for the plural of spittle are Juvencus or Sedulius who both use *sputa* in their expositions of the scene.

⁷⁰ Pers. comm.

⁷¹ The manuscript has the apparently masculine plural *saili* (l. 191). The external evidence for the neuter gender of the word (e.g., pl. *na saile* in *Lib. Hymn.* 39 n. 38; neuter pronoun *dabir* 'give it' in *Thes.* ii, 249.10) makes Carney's emendation of the neuter plural *saile* the wisest decision, although in the light of other examples of deviant gender in *Blathmac's Poems* the authenticity of the masculine cannot be excluded either. Compare also the non-neuter *mo saele an* 'my splendid spittle' in the second of the Stowe Missal spells (the reading *macc saele* in *Thes.* ii, 250.10 is wrong).

⁷² See *eDIL* s.v.; Tur. 91; *Lib. Hymn.* 39 n. 38.

⁷³ Jülicher, *Itala*, 199, 205.

Juvencus (*Evang. Libri IIII*, 4, 566):
Tum sanctam Christi faciem sputa improba complent.
 ‘Then vile spittles fill the face of Christ.’

Sedulius (*Carm. Pasch.* 5, 102):
Haec sputa per dominum nostram lauere figuram.
 ‘These spittles washed our features on account of the Lord.’

3.6. A much more blatant example of Latin influence occurs in l. 892. There, the request *ní·accobrae ad·n·áichther* ‘may you not wish that you may be afraid’ is virtually meaningless in Irish. Its meaning is only elucidated when confronted with the Vulgate (Rev. 1,17) *noli timere* ‘don’t be afraid’.⁷⁴ This construction, whereby an infinitive is the complement of the imperative of *nolle*, the negative form of *uelle* ‘to want’, is one way of forming a negative imperative in Latin. Instead of saying *ná·áigthe*, the regular negated imperative of Old Irish, Blathmac creates a word-for-word imitation of the Latin expression. He chooses the prohibitive 2sg. subjunctive *ní·accobrae* ‘you should not want’ to render the imperative *noli*. The Latin infinitive, unless in indirect speech, is commonly rendered in Old Irish by a nasalising relative clause with a subjunctive verb, as it is done here with *ad·n·áichther*.⁷⁵

It would be a fruitful exercise to compare Blathmac’s text with all identifiable Latin sources, and to see what other Latin influence can thus be gauged.

4. METRICS

4.1. The final extra-linguistic factor is metrics and the poetical aspects of Blathmac’s versification. The poems are written in *deibide scáilte*, that is seven syllables in each line with *rinn·ardrinn* rhyme in the two couplets and rather loose additional ornamentation. This relatively simple metrical pattern is maintained fairly consistently throughout the work, although the manuscript contains a relatively large amount of deviation in the syllable count of the lines, of which more below. The rhyme is sometimes freer than in later poetry, e.g., in ll. 37–38 *úait* rhymes with *mórbúaid*, in ll. 305–306 *ban* with *imma·rordaisem*. On the rare occasion when the rhyme pattern is broken, the poet may compensate for this deficiency by introducing an extra ornamentation. In ll. 257–258, *Dé* and *cé* exceptionally form an isosyllabic rhyme

⁷⁴ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 148.

⁷⁵ See Aaron Griffith, ‘Glossing the Latin infinitive in Milan’, paper delivered at *Teangeolaíocht na Gaeilge 16*, National University of Maynooth, May 2014.

but, as if Blathmac wanted to make up for this, the rhyme in final *-é* is maintained throughout the entire quatrain, encompassing also *ngné* and *ngalgaite* in the following couplet.

4.2. *Fidrad freccomail*, that is, linking alliteration between the stanzas, is common, although not absolutely regular, and often of such a flimsy nature that Carney was able to make ample use of examples from Blathmac in a special study of the bizarre phenomena possible in this device.⁷⁶ Ll. 248–249 contain an extraordinary instance of linking alliteration: in the pair *máraitlich ~ Hierosalem*, apparently the *m*, *r*, *l*, and *h* correspond to each other, but in inverted, mirrored order. In other stanzas the already very elastic rules of linking alliteration have to be stretched even further to find one. Normal alliteration within the lines is typically found at least once per stanza, but it may be missing altogether. The rules are apparently more flexible than in later poetry. Occasionally it involves unstressed words, or second elements of compounds or even both members of compounds, and it can go across stressed words, e.g., l. 2 *do choíniuth frit do rochoím*, l. 30 *brestu cech sóer a balcbruth*. In l. 338 *do-bert Dïa dagdánad*, the conventionally recognised alliteration is between *Dïa* and *dagdánad*, but *do-bert* clearly adds to the effect as well. The presence of altogether five *d*'s is hardly merely coincidental, even more so in light of the preceding line which goes *ba doib – dígrais dámar!* –. The sort of complex alliteration identified by Sproule does not appear to any prominent extent, although occasional examples such as ll. 357–8 occur:⁷⁷

*Ba doib tindnacht in ri
a Tír toirthech Tairngiri*

‘It was to them that the king had granted the fertile Land of Promise.’

With their fourfold repetition of *t-r* these look like more than chance. However, if it is deliberate, Blathmac made very sparing use of this device in his composition. In general, the problem with all alliterative devices in *Blathmac's Poems* is that their use is too patchy to allow the identification of a consistent system behind it.

4.3. Blathmac is not parsimonious in his employment of chevilles, but he manages to limit them to an acceptable measure and not to overly inflate his composition in this way. Typically, chevilles do add some

⁷⁶ Carney, ‘Linking Alliteration’.

⁷⁷ Sproule, ‘Complex Alliteration’.

semantic content to the text. For instance, in l. 749 *ro-ggab flaith – cennacht etail* ‘he took over rule – pious headship’, the noun in the cheville modifies the noun in the main expression, or in l. 1011 *césath Chiric – crúaid láthar* ‘the suffering of Quiricus – cruel power/machinations’, the cheville comments on the main text. Now and then a more ambitious approach to verbal art shines through, for instance when in the scene of Christ’s crucifixion (ll. 195–198, straddling stanzas 49–50) the word *croch* is repeated three times in a row, as if to illustrate the three crosses on Golgotha.⁷⁸ Blathmac is also versed in rhetorical art. In a formidable sequence of 19 stanzas (st. 79–97) he piles up before the audience’s inner eye a long catalogue of benefits that the Jews had received from God throughout their history, only to be reciprocated by their eventual ingratitude through killing their own sister’s son in an act of *fiugal* ‘kin-slaying’ (l. 410). This style is reminiscent of Ciceronian orations. At the end of this list, at the latest, the reader must find their ultimate condemnation entirely justified. The ensuing sequence of ten stanzas (st. 98–107) of slander and reviling of the Jews consequentially culminates in the worst conceivable term of abuse for them, in their being called *méthtuirc* ‘fat swine’ (l. 428).

4.4. At a superficial glance, a relatively large number of stanzas in the manuscript do not adhere to the syllabic count required by the metre. The statistics for the first 400 verses reveal that around 14% have 6 or 8 (one 10) syllables as they appear in the manuscript:

Syll.	Count	Remedy	Example
7	345 (86.3%)	–	
6	27 (6.8%)	supply syllable through emendation	l. 222 <i>mac rí g [na] secht nóebnime</i>
8	27 (6.8%)	elide vowel or contract hiatus	l. 370 <i>di bágaib Dé ad-choidemar</i> l. 366 <i>do-dechuid lea toisechu</i>
10	1 (0.3%)	dittography (?)	l. 289 <i>Cain id etsat atair athair denim</i> ⁷⁹

⁷⁸ This observation was made in class by Daniel Watson.

⁷⁹ The deletion of *athair* is Carney’s solution, but this still leaves an octosyllabic line. This line, if not the entire stanza 73, is corrupt. One explanation may be that the extant text results from the inadvertent conflation of two stanzas, one containing the phrase *athair de nim* ‘father from heaven’ in its first line, the other *athair = a thóir* ‘his rescue’. Because of the outward similarity of *athair* and *athair*, the scribe’s eye may have strayed from one stanza to the next.

Most of the syllabically deviant lines can be accounted for non-controversially by either supplying an extra syllable through making an obvious textual emendation, if the line is too short, or by contracting a hiatus or by eliding a vowel, if the number of syllables has to be reduced. Elision is not an obligatory, let alone automatic rule in Blathmac's works. In most instances when two unstressed vowels follow each other, elision does not take place.⁸⁰ It seems that the author reverted to it only as a last resort.

However, even when these standard solutions are brought into play, there remain a handful of hyposyllabic or hypersyllabic lines that cannot be emended without substantial interference with the text. It was suggested in section 3.2. above that the hyposyllabicity of l. 66 could be due to the fact that it is Latin. A similar case is l. 295 which in the manuscript is *uirutes taidbsitis an nert* 'the virtues would show their strength' with eight syllables. Carney avoids the metrical difficulty by deleting the possessive pronoun *a*, even though the sense requires it, and by unnecessarily emending the following line also. Finally, a clearer example of the principle which I argue for is found in l. 841. The manuscript has *As ainm dot mac alfa 7 o*. Without further comment, Carney edits *is ainm dot mac Alfa ocus O* 'your son's name is Alpha and Omega', but this has nine syllables as it stands. The only way to arrive at the desirable seven syllables would be to read the end of the line quite exceptionally as *Alfa 's O* with an almost complete reduction of *ocus*. It may be preferable to allow for the metrical licence of hypo- or hypersyllabic lines where Latin or Greek words are used.

4.5. For a small number of hypersyllabic lines, Carney proposes that unstressed initial vowels in an accentual group can be dropped, a rule that is similar to, although not identical with, elision.⁸¹ The relevant instances are always at the beginning of a line. Carney cites l. 405 (*i nIerosalem núall na mac*), l. 459 ('*námtar aithrig i nach am*), l. 854 (*i llaithiu na Cásc fo chétúair*), l. 880 (*as·bert nád·léicfed dilechtu*). Another possible example of this rule is in l. 387 (*'sí don·gegai – nibu bréc –*), for which see below. Those cases (l. 459 *aithrige* | '*námtar* < *anámtar*; l. 880 *clú* | *as·bert*) where the preceding line ends in a vowel may be examples of elision across the lines, but examples where the preceding lines end in a consonant actually predominate. It is also

⁸⁰ Compare Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics*, 39: 'In Old Irish poetry elision is not frequent'.

⁸¹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xxxi, 129.

conceivable that already in the language of Blathmac a rule of aphaeresis, i.e. the loss of initial pretonic vowels, was at work, a rule that becomes more prominent in later Irish.

In l. 387, the manuscript reads *si dō gegai ni bu breg*. Carney edited this as *'sí do-ngegai – níbu bréc*, translating 'it was it that he chose (no lie!)'. Carney's arrangement of the text implies that he assumed that the present tense of the copula *is sí* > *'sí* was concealed in the aphaeresis at the beginning of the line, although he translated it as the past 'it was it'.⁸² If his assumption is correct, this would furnish another possible example of phrasal aphaeresis. The matter is not so clear-cut, though. The matrix clause of which *sí* is a fronted constituent is in the past (*do-ngegai* 'chose'). In such constructions, Blathmac can use the present tense of the copula, but the past *ba* is more common. This sentence may therefore rather involve a trivial instance of omission of the past copula.

4.6. What is altogether lacking for *Blathmac's Poems*, as is lacking for almost all early medieval literature from Ireland, is external information about the performative aspects of the texts. By their very nature as keens, a genre discouraged by church law, the poems stand outside of the accepted norms of medieval Irish versecraft.⁸³ It is only by observing the contents and the style of the poem that hints at the performance can be extracted. The discontinuous and partly incongruous syntax of stanzas 65–71 only makes sense if it is understood as reflecting an emotional outburst that, perhaps, was dramatically performed. Several lines with complement clauses (e.g., ll. 269–71, 273–78) do not have an obvious antecedent to which they are subordinate. They flow like a stream of consciousness, with ideas pouring forth, dissociated from their proper grammatical context. The apodosis *nibtis étroma a n-aithbir* 'their reproaches would not have been light' at the end of st. 68 (l. 272) only makes sense if it is read as being dependent on the prodosis *día-festais a degdúili* 'if his good

⁸² His translation 'it' for *sí* is wrong. The reference of the pronoun must be l. 385 *úaig* 'a virgin' (i.e. Mary).

⁸³ See paragraph V §17 in the Old Irish penitential (Gwynn, 'An Irish Penitential', 170–1, translated also by Binchy in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, 273). Strictly speaking, only the first of the two poems is referred to as a keen by the poet himself. The statistical proof of this are 20 occurrences of forms of the verb *coínid* or the noun *coíniud* in the first poem, attributed both to the poet himself, but also to animals, angels and the elements, as opposed to a single occurrence at the very beginning of the second poem in stanza 150 in which the poet recapitulates what he did in his first poem. The second poem is more laudatory in nature.

elements had known' at the end of the preceding stanza 67 (l. 268), but those two clauses are separated by three lines of totally unconnected utterances.⁸⁴ The interpretation of this whole passage is too complex to be treated in detail in this survey article.

5. PHONOLOGY

5.1. Despite Carney's (ix) assertion 'that such early material [...] appears so unexpectedly late in manuscript tradition, and, considering the date, in such an unparalleled state of preservation', reading, interpreting and editing the text is no simple task. He goes on to say that '[d]espite a certain overlay of seventeenth century orthography, I know no medieval literary or religious manuscript that reflects as closely as does the transcript of the present poems the orthographical features of eighth and ninth-century codices. We may note that the material edited here is in many ways better preserved than the rest of the material in G 50'. While in the majority of cases the spellings do indeed conform amazingly well to the early medieval conventions, or such spellings can be easily scratched out from under a thin varnish of modernisation, this should not mislead one into believing that the extant text can be taken at face value. When he recognised the words, the scribe (or a precursor) was inclined to revert to modern spellings, e.g. *Iosa* for *Ísu*, *naomh* for *nóeb*. In general he prefers to write *ao* for *óe*, *áe*, *-iot* for *-et*, or *mh*, *dh*, *gh*, *bh* for lenited *m*, *d*, *g*, *b*, but these substitutions are merely automatic. It is manifest that the last scribe often did not understand what he was copying, and consequently introduced wrong word divisions and corruptions that significantly complicate the editorial work. For instance, for the entirely meaningless l. 457 *Arus nancha nach re* in the manuscript, Carney emended *a rrus-n-anacht i nach ré* 'at any period when he protected them'; while l. 289 *Cain id etsat atair atoir denim* has remained impervious to a solution so far (but see footnote 79).

5.2. The faithfulness invoked by Carney needs to be qualified where systematic deviations from the expected Old Irish standard are found: for instance, the masculine and neuter infixed pronoun class A *-a* is regularly and numerously represented by *-o* (Carney xxi). This is best ascribed to later scribal interference, not to the original author, and it is an instance of hypercorrection. After the vowels in pretonic syllables had become schwa by Middle Irish, a sound which could be expressed indiscriminately by *-a* or *-o*, it must have suggested itself to

⁸⁴ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 125.

an overeager scribe to restore pure-Old-Irish-looking *-o* in all such syllables, thereby obliterating the original distinction between plain preverbal *-o* and the *-a* which was due to an infixed pronoun.⁸⁵

5.3. Metrical exigencies frequently facilitate emendations, especially in rhyming position. Where the manuscript contains innovatory Irish forms, those that can be emended usually display a more archaic character. An uncontroversial example occurs in lines 63–64: *no-rádu: degdánu* are the only morphologically and phonologically sensible emendations for the formally impossible *no rada* and *dana* in the manuscript. Likewise, *u-* and *i-*stem genitives end consistently in *-a* in the manuscript, but the evidence of a single rhyme proves that the original poem contained the archaic *-o*. In ll. 175–176 the manuscript reading *do : cobhfola* makes metrical sense only if emended to *dó* ‘to him’ : *chobfola* ‘bloodrelationship’. Examples like these allow us to emend also in positions that are not metrically fixed. Proceeding in this manner, it is inevitable that to a certain extent we will always have to deal with artifacts of our own interference. One way of minimising the effects of wishful thinking is to keep statistics of metrically certain instances. If the statistics paint an unambiguous picture, then it can be justified to extrapolate a specific phenomenon and apply it to other contexts which are ambiguous in their transmitted form.

5.4. Copyists can be ‘form-oriented’ or ‘content-oriented’.⁸⁶ The former is basically unfamiliar with the language of the text he is copying and treats it as a venerable, archaic whole which he attempts to preserve faithfully. This does not absolutely preclude automatic orthographic modernisations such as the ones mentioned above. The content-oriented scribe, on the other hand, is sufficiently familiar with the language of the text he is copying in order to interfere with it and correct it (in his eyes) where he deems it necessary. If we assume that the scribe of the extant manuscript – one of Mícheál Ó Cléirigh’s associates in the 17th century – was so far removed from the language of *Blathmac’s Poems* as to treat them basically in a form-oriented way, the number of linguistic corruptions in the text, compared to what can plausibly be reconstructed for the Old Irish original, as well as

⁸⁵ With this habit of the scribe in mind, an infixed pronoun can accordingly be introduced where the sense requires it, e.g. at l. 14 which Carney edits as *do-forsat cen chneid ngalair* ‘you have brought forth without ailing wound’, but the parallel with lines 13 and 15, which both contain unambiguous instances of infixed pronouns, would justify *da-forsat* ‘you have brought him forth’.

⁸⁶ Rodway, *Dating Medieval Welsh Literature*, 20.

corruptions that betray someone who was actively trying to improve the text, necessitate the assumption that there must have been at least one intervening stage of modernisation in the transmission of the text between the assumed 8th-century original and the extant 17th-century copy. This reviser or redactor who, for instance, brought vowel endings into line with his contemporary practice, probably belonged to the Middle Irish period.

5.5. Carney identified this reviser with the scribe of the lost 12th-century Book of Glendalough.⁸⁷ The vexed question of the Book of Glendalough cannot be entered here, but suffice it to say that Carney argues in favour of two other items contained in NLI G 50 to be derived from the lost manuscript. These two texts, the poems *Druim Ceta cete na naem* and *Colum Cille co Dia domerail*, have a close relationship with versions of the same poems in RIA C iii 2 where it is explicitly stated that one of them was copied from the Book of Glendalough. However, to suggest the same for the *Poems of Blathmac* requires the leap of faith that all items in G 50 were copied from the same exemplar. While this is conceivable, it is equally possible that they came from another source. There is at least one item in G 50, *Amra Šenáin*, which does not seem to have any known 'Book-of-Glendalough connections'.⁸⁸ If *Blathmac's Poems* had indeed been present in the Book of Glendalough, the complete silence which surrounds them in the Irish literary tradition would be all the more mysterious.

5.6. A traditional dating criterion for Early Irish is to observe how the language treats words with hiatus. Syllabic poetry with its regulated number of syllables is especially helpful in this regard. The relevant findings for Blathmac are unambiguous. While hiatus is often required for the necessary number of syllables in a line, it has been given up in many other cases. In particular, at times it needs to be ignored even if two vowels are written for a long vowel, e.g. l. 129 *bendachais da hích [= ích] nammá* 'he blessed but two salmons'. MS *hích* is probably an instance of conservative spelling of the hiatus, despite the progressive pronunciation, and not an instance of the early practice of indicating a long vowel by a geminate vowel letter, although at least one certain example of this is found shortly afterwards, namely l. 143 *híic*.⁸⁹ L. 478 *ba moo liach cech soertroich* (MS) is ambiguous. If *moo*

⁸⁷ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xi–xii.

⁸⁸ Breatnach, 'An Edition'.

⁸⁹ Cf. *GOI* 20.

is taken at face value as a disyllabic form, the line can be read as a genitival relative clause: ‘whose woe was greater than (that of) any noble doomed person’. Perhaps because *mó* ‘greater’ occurs elsewhere numerous and always unequivocally as a monosyllable (ll. 10, 33, 263, 339, 371, 523, 719), Carney chose to edit a main clause instead, namely *ba mó a liach cech sóerthroich* ‘his wretchedness was greater than that of any noble captive’. If Carney’s emendation is correct and the possessive *a* had been lost during the manuscript transmission, MS *moo* can be understood as a geminate spelling for a long vowel, but it is also conceivable that the second *o* of *moo* is a miscopying of the possessive *a*.

By and large Carney’s judgement holds true that hiatus was already waning in the spoken language.⁹⁰ The poet could draw on whatever form suited best his purpose. In nouns, hiatus is rather weak, whereas in pronouns and verbal forms it is better preserved.⁹¹ In foreign names, usually of Biblical origin, the poet shows a propensity towards retaining hiatus. For instance, *Diabul* ‘devil’ is trisyllabic in all its three occurrences (ll. 698, 824, 968). This must be regarded as a learned Latinism. In Vulgar Latin, the word was pronounced *d̥iablus*, as, among others, the British descendants show (MW *diawl*, Corn. *dyaul*, *dyowl*, *jawl*, MBret. *diaoul*). In Welsh poetry, *diawl* can count as a mono- as well as a trisyllable.

5.7. The observation that hiatuses are already in a precarious position in Blathmac’s language has a consequence for the metrical analysis and edition of lines. It seems that, in order to provide the language with a more archaic look, Carney put in more hiatuses into Irish words in his edition than a philological assessment would warrant. For instance, in l. 194 the manuscript has *ofar cuada ergabail*, where the *a* is clearly set apart from the following noun, thereby indicating a lexically meaningful element, viz. a possessive pronoun, referring to the topic (Christ) inherent in the conjugated preposition *fris* ‘to him’ in the preceding line. This straightforward reading ‘when his [i.e. Christ’s] capture was completed’ makes straightforward sense. However, in order to achieve the desired hiatus in the verbal form *for-cuãd*, the augmented preterite passive of *for-fen* ‘to complete’, Carney had to suppress the possessive pronoun by merging the letter *a* with the following word. As it stands, this yields the uncommon

⁹⁰ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xxvi–ix.

⁹¹ Among conjugated prepositions, the following are disyllabic: *d̥iib* (ll. 315, 411), *doib* (ll. 187, 337, 341, 349, 351, 357, 394, 425, 729), *tr̥iit* (l. 784); monosyllabic *d̥ib* (ll. 303, 367), *doib* (ll. 133, 455).

sequence *aergabail* which Carney then beautified into *ó for-cuäd aurgabál* ‘when (his) capture was completed’. The verbal noun *aurgabál* ‘capture’ has the notorious orthographically unstable short diphthong *au* in its first syllable. This finds a great variety of graphic expressions in Early Irish. While *er-* as found in the manuscript is a common and acceptable spelling, the sequence *aer-* implied by Carney’s reading of the line is very rare. I conclude that *for-cuäd* in l. 194 is better read with a diphthong than with a hiatus, and the line should be edited as *ó for-cuäd a ergabál*. In l. 380, Carney edits *di threib deec mac nlsrael* ‘the twelve tribes of Israel’ with disyllabic *deëc* ‘-teen’ where the manuscript has *da threib decc mac nisrael*. There is strong evidence that Biblical names of a shape such as *Israel* were pronounced with three syllables in early Ireland. All 52 examples of this name in the Milan glosses, and 19 out of 22 examples of the derived adjective *Israelde* ‘Israelite’ are actually written *Israhel(de)* with a *h* that can only indicate a hiatus. The situation is similar in the Würzburg glosses. In the one unambiguous example in the *Poems of Blathmac*, l. 922 *as-réacht i nlsräël* ‘who has arisen in Israel’ (featuring the same rhyme with *lén* as in l. 380), it is also clearly trisyllabic. The introduction of the hiatus form *deec* into the edition at l. 380 is therefore unwarranted, and we should rather read *di threib dec mac nlsräël* with the progressive, contracted form *dec* ‘-teen’. By the same token, l. 96 *du altrum i tír Isräël* ‘to be fostered in the land of Israel’ requires a trivial elision in *d’altrum*.

5.8. For a comparison, the author of *Félire Óengusso* always seems to get his hiatuses right in the nouns, the verbs and the few conjugated prepositions. One area where Blathmac’s usage diverges significantly from that of the *Félire*, though, is that in the latter combinations of prepositions + the possessive pronouns *-a* or *-ar* always count as monosyllables, whereas these are often disyllabic with Blathmac.⁹² I am undecided as to whether this is to be seen as an archaic trait of Blathmac’s language, or rather as an area where hypercorrections were possible. On the whole, it is fair to say that Blathmac does not represent a particularly archaic stage of the language in the matter of hiatuses.

⁹² Disyllabic: *diä* (ll. 220, 697, 769, 814, 1022), *friü* (ll. 734, 978), *leä* (l. 308?), *triä* (l. 224), but outnumbered by monosyllabic forms: *coa* (l. 850), *dia* (ll. 71, 151, 188, 211, 322, 326, 329, 376, 378, 510, 728, 748, 823), *fria* (ll. 566, 682, 900), *lea* (l. 366), *lia* (ll. 335, 1017), *tria* (ll. 203, 204, 374, 831). Combinations of prepositions + relative particle *-(s)aN*, including *dia* ‘if, when’, are not included in this count. They are exclusively monosyllabic.

5.9. Hypercorrect forms give evidence of how far the language had evolved. The hyposyllabicity of l. 66 was earlier explained with reference to the fact that it is in Latin and therefore may stand outside of the normal metrical scheme (section 3.2.). An alternative explanation is to read *aurum* in this line quite exceptionally as *aürum* with three syllables, as if it had a hiatus. Such a treatment of foreign names is not isolated. In several instances, Hebrew names beginning with *yod*, such as *Iacób*, *Iese*, have to be read with syllabic *i*, that is, *Iácób* (l. 920, 998), *Iése* (l. 402), perhaps also l. 212 *Iüdae* (see below). For instance, in l. 920, *oirnide ó Iácób* ‘of dignity from Jacob’, not only is there no elision, but the final word has also to be read with an enlarged syllabic count.

5.10. The matter is of a different nature where native words are concerned. *Diä* ‘God’ is disyllabic in l. 338 *do·bert Diä dagdánad* ‘God gave a fine endowment’. Although there is nothing in **deĩyos*, the Proto-Celtic etymology of this word, that warrants a hiatus, it is not infrequently found with two syllables in Irish poetry.⁹³ There is an even more stunning example in line 31b of the *Irish Gospel of Thomas*, a text which otherwise appears to be linguistically more archaic than *Blathmac’s Poems* or *Féilire Óengusso*. Influence on a purely formal basis is conceivable from the disyllabic plural forms acc. pl. *déü*, dat. pl. *déib* ‘pagan gods’ or from disyllabic *diä* ‘day’, but neither model imposes itself semantically. It is more likely that the disyllabic reading of *Diä* was triggered by a purely phonological rule whereby any diphthong in a monosyllabic word could optionally alternate with a hiatus. This implies that the contraction of hiatuses had already taken place in the spoken language at the time when this poem was written. This is also true for l. 252 *dlochtae fial in tempuil* ‘the curtain of the Temple was rent apart’ where the only way to achieve seven syllables is to read *fial* ‘veil’ < Lat. *uēlum*, etymologically incorrect as *fial*.

5.11. L. 179 *ar·foët* and l. 995 *·foët*, *t*-preterites respectively of *ar·foím* ‘to receive’ and *fo·eim* ‘to accept’, are of a different nature. Here, the historically unjustified hiatus did not simply arise from an artificial disyllabic pronunciation of the vocalic digraph <oe>, but must be analogical after augmented forms of the type *(ar)·roët* < **(ar)·rofoët*, where the vowel of the augment was separated from the root-vowel by a lenited *f*. In this latter context, hiatus is regular, as in the 1sg.

⁹³ E.g., *Fél.* (Epilogue 153), *SR* 1905, 2033, 2685, etc.; Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 161.

augmented preterite *arroiéitsa* (Wb. 6d14), the spelling of which can only mean that *o* and *é* belong to two different syllables. The analogical transfer of the hiatus from the augmented preterite to the originally diphthongal simple preterite is easy to motivate psychologically, and it can conceivably be of very old age. Instances of intra-paradigmatic analogies of this sort cannot be considered ‘younger’ or ‘more progressive’ than ones without these changes, because phenomena of this sort are the result of the natural intraparadigmatic pressure towards regularisation. Only where morphological or phonological simplification occurs systematically across a broad range of words or across an entire category is it legitimate to speak of actual phonological progress.

In a preliminary summary (not counting Hebrew names), 67 instances of retained hiatuses stand vis-à-vis 61 contracted forms and two forms which can or must be classified as hypercorrect hiatuses.

6. MORPHOLOGY

6.1. A problem that straddles the boundaries between phonology and morphology are the short versus the long forms of the article *inna* in the genitive singular of feminine nouns and the nominative, genitive and accusative plural of all genders. Of their 40 occurrences in the *Poems of Blathmac*, 33 are of the short variant *na*, 7 of long *inna*.⁹⁴ Carney notes the basic facts without commenting on the distribution, but in a later article on the dating of Early Irish verse he viewed a high incidence of short forms as an indicator of a young age.⁹⁵ He thought that there was a linear increase of the short form *na* over the 8th century. However, things are not as simple. In a paper given at *Teangeolaíocht na Gaeilge* 2014, I argued that *na* was a contextually

⁹⁴ For *na* see ll. 48, 52, 63, 65, 130, 198, 212, 222, 313, 314, 360, 395, 405, 417, 551, 595, 626, 641, 714, 762, 766, 782, 851, 852, 854, 942, 974, 1031; in the sections edited by Ní Shéaghdha (‘The Poems of Blathmac’): st. 261a, 262b, 264a, 267c, 270d. In l. 212, Carney edits *inna* against the manuscript, but see below for a justification for retaining the transmitted form. For *inna* see ll. 128, 232, 291, 741, 783, 838, 982. The metre requires l. 741 *do Dia athair, ri na rig* (MS: *Do dia athair Ri inna rig*) with transmitted *inna* to be read as *na*; alternatively the first part of the line *do Dia athair* would have to be read with three syllables, which is most unlikely. It is plausible that *ri (in)na rig* be understood as a nominative in apposition to a dative, Carney’s dative *rig inna rig*, plus retained disyllabic *inna*, creates an unmetrical line with no possibility for elision.

⁹⁵ ‘We have plainly here a dating criterion of some importance. The graph of *inna* falls slowly and regularly from 100% in the seventh century to zero from about 900 onwards, a clear example of the linguistic progression that we may expect to find in our list’ (Carney, ‘The Dating’, 199).

admissible allomorph of *inna* already in Early Old Irish, originally probably in complementary distribution with the long form. Poets probably took advantage of the availability of mono- and disyllabic forms, using whatever suited best their metrical necessities. The apparent increase in frequency in the 8th century is perhaps not a chronological indicator at all. Things are complicated by the observation, mentioned earlier, that aphaeresis may already have been a factor in the language of Blathmac. If that is the case, it would be impossible to decide whether a given instance of *na* is an old allomorph of *inna* or due to aphaeresis.

6.2. In l. 63 the manuscript has *na tri druīdi* ‘the three magi’. Leaving the question of the young form *druīdi* aside, which Carney emended to the metrically equivalent OIr. *druīd*, the *na tri* for the masculine nominative plural stands like a thorn in the side of an early date of the text.⁹⁶ This usage is expected in texts of a later date where it occurs frequently, and it could conceivably be due to interference by a later scribe. However, it compares directly with *natrirecte* ‘the three laws’ in the Old Irish manuscript of the Würzburg glosses (Wb. 29a16), and with *na tri maccaín maith-sin* ‘those three good children’ of *Félire Óengusso*, where all manuscripts agree.⁹⁷ Because of the formal agreement in construing *na* with the numeral *tri* (not *in tri* nor *inna tri*), this is perhaps not simply an early instance of the intrusion of (*in*)*na* into the masculine nominative plural, but we may be looking at a very specific syntactic rule of early Old Irish that has not been recognised so far.⁹⁸ The sole example of the hitherto expected sequence *in tri* that I have been able to identify so far occurs in a poem on *Trefócul* edited by Calder as part of *Auraicept na nÉces*.⁹⁹ In view of the apparently Middle Irish age of this poem it could be a hypercorrection.

6.3. L. 212 *ba he ri na niudae*, as it stands in the manuscript, scans as a hexasyllabic line and requires some remedial treatment. Carney’s solution is as simple as it is compelling. He emends the long form of

⁹⁶ Cf. Ó Cuív (‘Review’, 154): ‘there are forms and usages in them which hitherto one would have expected in texts of later date, such as *na*, *inna* as n.pl. form of the article with masc. nouns’.

⁹⁷ Stokes, *Félire Óengusso*, 2 Aug. There are further possible instances of nom.pl. *na tri* + masculine noun in texts of possibly Old Irish origin, but of later transmission, e.g. Meyer, *Von heimlichen Sünden*, a stanza in the *Annals of Tigernach* 596, or Strachan, ‘Two Monastic Rules’, 227, st. 5. *CGH* provides numerous examples.

⁹⁸ Thus Stokes, *Félire Óengusso*, xxviii, 338.

⁹⁹ Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 154, l. 2018.

the article *inna* for short *na*. Archaising the transmitted text in this way immediately yields the required seven syllables. However, the transmitted reading can be defended with an alternative solution. The statement ‘he was the king of the Jews’ reflects the title on the famous plaque that Pilate attached on top of the cross. Blathmac’s wording is closest to the account in Matthew 27,37 and Luke 23,38: *Hic est Jesus rex Iudaeorum*. John 19,19: *Jesus Nazarenus, rex Iudaeorum* and Mark 15,26: *Rex Iudaeorum* diverge slightly. Sedulius in his *Carmen Paschale* (5,196) makes the following of the episode:

Scribitur et titulus: ‘Hīc¹⁰⁰ est rex Iudaeorum.’

‘And as superscription is written: ‘This is the king of the Jews.’

The metrical pattern is: $\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ with an extraordinary series of spondees at the end of the hexameter, in particular in the penultimate foot instead of the prescribed dactylic cadence $\overset{\sim}{\sim}|\overset{\sim}{\sim}$. This imparts the words with a sombre funereal pace. Perhaps Blathmac tried to imitate this effect on the listener, by creating something equivalent in Irish. The solution he came up with is a sequence of four monosyllabic words at the beginning of the line, followed by the name of the Jews *nIudae* which he could not transform into a monosyllable. Instead he may have adopted a different solution. Blathmac sometimes allows for words starting with consonantal *yod* to be read with an extra vowel *i* (see section 5.9.), and this may be the case here. By having four monosyllabic words followed by one that is artificially stretched out over three syllables, the poet creates a slow, heavily pounding rhythm that gives dramatic expression to the ominous scene: *ba hé rí na nIudae*. Another possible instance of trisyllabic *Iudae* is in l. 404 *in leu di thrib Iudae* ‘the lion from the Tribe of Judah’ where Carney reads *leü* and *Iudae*, both with two syllables. Although conceivable as a learned Latinism in view of *leō*, this is the only direct witness for the disyllabic reading of *leo* ‘lion’ cited in *eDIL*, aside from trisyllabic *leoamain* in *SR* (7368, 6098, 5720 and 6102) which could point indirectly to a disyllabic basis *leō* to which the agentive suffix *-mon-* had been added. A monosyllabic example of *léon* ‘lion’ occurs at the end of l. 836.

¹⁰⁰ This syllable has to be measured long, thus meaning literally ‘here is the king of the Jews’ in Classical Latin. Sedulius probably intended *hic* ‘this one’ instead of *hīc* ‘here’, the wrong vowel length resulting from a Late Latin hypercorrection after the collapse of vowel quantities in Latin.

6.4. Carney remarks that neuter gender, a traditional indicator of the Old Irish provenance of a text, is normally preserved in *Blathmac's Poems*.¹⁰¹ Occasionally the neuter has to be brought out from under the veneer of Modern Irish spelling. L. 1004 *do codar gusan ernnbas* is undoubtedly to be normalised as *do-cótar cosa n-ernbas* 'they have come to the death by iron', with the unusual prepositional phrase *co bás* 'to death' rendering what is more commonly expressed by the direct object after verbs of movement.¹⁰² Carney makes this, less convincingly, *do-cótar cosind ernnbas* 'they have come with the iron death'. In the case of l. 206 *lasa senad* 'by the synod, assembly', we get an additional, rare piece of evidence for the original neuter gender of this word, apart from the previously known two examples.¹⁰³ In ll. 405–6 *da-bertat* 'they gave it', the non-nasalising infixed pronoun provides evidence for the neuter gender of its reference *núall* 'shout, acclamation', against the masculine gender witnessed in Ml. 51c9. Its second appearance in l. 793 *a nnúall* (thus Carney) proves nothing because the MS reading *an nuall* could contain the Modern Irish spelling of the animate article *in*.

6.5. However, there remain a number of perplexing instances of unexpected gender. This not only goes in the usual direction, whereby masculine or feminine gender replaces older neuter, but Blathmac also offers some instances of neuters that have no parallels outside his poems. L. 270 has been transmitted as *ateine* with the neuter gender for the word for 'fire'. Carney emended the animate article *in teine*. The manuscript reading *ateine* can perhaps be explained as being due first to a scribal modernisation of the article *in* → *an*, of which in a second step the *n*, written either as a letter or as a stroke over the vowel, was accidentally omitted. In this case, the overwhelming evidence from the glosses and elsewhere for feminine or masculine gender of this word makes the decision relatively clear. In cases where words are not frequently attested, the decision is not always so clear-cut. Such an example of isolated neuter gender is found in a cheville in l. 474 *húag n-abras* (MS *huagnabras*) 'the (handi)work (is) complete'. This word of unknown etymology (*LEIA* A-8) is masculine in Ml. 138a4 nom. sg. *intabras* 'the gesture (of the hand)'. Other early attestations do not allow conclusions about its gender.

¹⁰¹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xx.

¹⁰² Cf. Wb. 11d12 *tiagait báas*, and other examples in *DIL* (B 41.84 ff.).

¹⁰³ *fria* (leg. *frisa*) *senad* (*Irish Texts* i,13 §40), *senad n-ecalso* (*Ériu* 40, 12 §10, *Bretha Nemed Toisech*).

6.6. Only five lines further down from *teine*, the nominative singular l. 275 *popul mbras* is unmistakably marked as neuter. One might be inclined to explain this as a mechanical, formulaic echo in line-final position, perhaps introduced by an unattentive (or over-attentive) scribe, from l. 105 *popul mbras* where, however, the nasalisation is warranted because the phrase is in the accusative. But the problem goes deeper than this superficial and not very convincing explanation. While *popul* is numerous and unequivocally attested as a masculine noun in the Milan glosses (e.g. 45b21, 138a11, etc.), and is not present in the St Gall glosses, in the Würzburg glosses (33a15) the vocative singular *aphopul* without palatalised ending (against Ml. 103a4 *a popuil*) could be a faint hint for the neuter treatment of this noun. In Wb. 10c20 *apho|l* could stand for the same form, although the editors of *Thes.* (i 562) emend *apho(pui)l*. All other instances of the word in Würzburg are undecided. Line 275 is part of a larger and very difficult rhetorical passage, running from stanza 67 to stanza 70. Lines 270, 271 and 273 contain the repetition of what is ostensibly a neuter infixed pronoun *nachad* (MS: *načat*). While it is clear from the context that the intended objects of Blathmac's attack are the Jews (which would require the plural pronoun *nacha·*), the only word in the entire passage that the neuter pronoun can conceivably refer to from a grammatical point of view is precisely *popul mbras* in l. 275. The feminine *cúain trúaiḡ* 'the miserable pack' in l. 274, which would require the feminine pronoun *nacha·*, is excluded. There are, then, three separate pieces of evidence that point to the neuter gender of *popul*: the nasalisation in the nominative *popul mbras* in l. 275, the non-palatalisation in the vocative *a phopul* in Wb. 33a15, and the thrice-repeated neuter pronoun *nachad·* in ll. 270–273.

6.7. Its neuter treatment is remarkable against the overall tendency in Irish which goes in the other direction. Even Latin neuters are sometimes borrowed as masculines or feminines into Old Irish.¹⁰⁴ However, there are a handful of other examples for neuter gender in Old Irish vis-à-vis original Latin masculines. One, *senad*, was already alluded to above. Irrespective of whether it was borrowed from Lat. *senatus* 'senate' or *synodus* 'synod', it was masculine in Latin. *Ordan* 'dignity, honour' from Lat. *ordo* is neuter in *Amra Senáin* and in the tale about how Conchobar gained the kingship of Ulster.¹⁰⁵ *Sanct*

¹⁰⁴ E.g., *srián* (o, m) 'rein' < *frenum*, *tempul* (o, m) 'temple, church' < *templum*, *bachall* 'staff, crozier' (ā, f) < *baculum*, *proind* (f) 'meal' < *prandium*.

¹⁰⁵ Breatnach, 'An Edition', 24, 29; Hull, 'How Conchobar', 243.

‘saint’ is treated as a neuter in the prologue to *Amra Senáin* and in the Egerton 1782 version of the recovery of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.¹⁰⁶ Some of these neuters may well be hypercorrect. The neuter gender of another example, *domnach* ‘Sunday, church’, ascribed in *DIL* to the word on account of *Domnach n-Aissi*, could be due merely to the placename character of the latter, where the accusative form was generalised in the nominative.¹⁰⁷

6.8. However, caution is called for in the matter of overt nasals indicating neuters in the manuscript. In at least one instance there is positive proof that wrong nasalisation was introduced during the transmission of the text. In l. 726 the manuscript reads *siol nadoim* ‘the race of Adam’ at the beginning of the line. However, this is a genitival phrase that depends on *clais cóir* ‘harmonious choir’ in the preceding line, and neither the broad *l* of *siol* nor the nasalisation can be original. This type of enjambment where head noun and dependent genitive are separated by a line break is relatively frequent in *Blathmac’s Poems*, but a later redactor or scribe no longer understood it.¹⁰⁸ Instead, it seems that he mechanically inserted the nasalisation after *síl* without paying attention to the context. Carney therefore rightly edits *síl Ádaim*.

6.9. Likewise, mere lack of nasalisation is in itself no reliable indicator of non-neuter gender since nasalisation can be suppressed in various phonological environments. Several similar-looking, but different phenomena need to be kept strictly separate. First, a nasal was often lost between two consonants. Thurneysen describes this as a frequent, but optional word-internal phenomenon.¹⁰⁹ Since this is clearly a phonological process, it must have also operated across word boundaries in close phrases. Its seemingly non-regular occurrence finds a ready explanation in inter- and intraparadigmatic pressure which would have reintroduced the nasals in many contexts. Different from this is the observation by Quin that in the Old Irish glosses the word-initial voiced stops *b*, *d*, *g* are virtually never nasalised after nasalising *in*.¹¹⁰ Finally, nasalisation may have been lost in transmission through oversight or through the wrong analysis of

¹⁰⁶ Breatnach, ‘An Edition’, 9; Meyer, ‘Neue Mitteilungen’, 3.

¹⁰⁷ *DIL* (D 340.71); *Trip.* 2945.

¹⁰⁸ Breatnach, ‘On the Line-break’, (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁹ *GOI* 112–3.

¹¹⁰ Quin, ‘Nasalization’.

forms. These phenomena affect the accusative singular of animate nouns as much as they affect the neuter.¹¹¹

6.10. The manuscript contains several examples of non-neuter marking of words whose neuter gender is beyond doubt from other sources. Only a selection of unequivocal examples will be given here, and most or all of them can be relatively easily explained as conscious or unconscious modernisations by later scribes, thus highlighting some of the interference that the text experienced: For l. 200 *fris an crañsī* (MS) Carney prints *frisín* (!) *crann-sin* ‘against this tree (= cross)’, but this should clearly be *frisa crann-sin*; l. 760 *cen nach forcenn* ‘without any end’ is for expected *cen na forcenn*; l. 1010 has a *mbé boídenae* for a *mbé mboídenae* ‘their loving, smiling mother’, but the nasalising effect of this word seems to be unstable even in early sources.¹¹² The *a^N* at the beginning of the phrase is not the article, but the 3pl. possessive pronoun. In l. 761 *As e mo celboinde ngle* (MS) it is evident from the nasalisation on *nglé* that the neuter gender of *célmaine* must be original and that the masculine pronoun *e* is a later corruption, so Carney rightly edits *is ed mo chélmainte nglé*. The non-neuter marking can be purely graphic. In l. 764 *is aoi in escae netracht* (MS), the apparent non-neuter article *in* may simply be a hypercorrection by a late scribe for a *n-éscae n-étracht* (thus edited by Carney), in particular in view of the nasalisation following *éscae* ‘moon’.

Only in the case of ll. 43, 103 *co clú gil* and l. 903 *co ngné gil*, all of which stand in rhyming position, is it incontrovertible that the feminine morphology of the adjective, i.e. *gil* with palatalised *l* instead of neuter *giul*, must be original. Carney’s suggestion that the characteristic *-iu-* of the masculine and neuter dative singular was sometimes treated as *-i-* is special pleading.¹¹³

6.11. Two derivatives of *scél* are treated as masculines in the text, viz. l. 990 *in soiscélae* ‘gospel’ (acc.sg., MS: *an soiscele*) and l. 804 *int aithscélae* ‘repetition’ (nom.sg., MS: *ind aitscele*). *Soiscélae* is masculine also in the Würzburg glosses (Wb. 7b15, 18c8, 18c10). In light of this, the one example in Blathmac is best taken seriously,

¹¹¹ Examples of neuters are l. 21 *prímgein Dé*, l. 487 *ba sruith grúad* (MS: *na sruith gruaíd*), but nasalisation is also often absent from accusatives singular, e.g., l. 51 *loc glé*, l. 450 *in dílguthach* (MS: *an dílgadhac*), l. 481 *mac Dé*, l. 566 *fria ais imdeirg*.

¹¹² Cf. the beginning of Ultán’s Hymn *Brigit bé bithmaith* (*Theas.* ii, 325.15).

¹¹³ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 114.

in particular when confronted with the neuter Latin equivalent *euangelium*. As for *aithscélae*, *eDIL* records no form of the word that allows a conclusion about its gender. Carney takes the nominative singular article *ind aithscéle* to be a spelling variant for the regular masculine nom. sg. *int*.¹¹⁴ This finds occasional parallels in Old Irish spelling practices elsewhere: in the Milan glosses, there are 13 examples of *ind* written for *int* in the masculine nominative singular before words starting with a vowel, beside 4 examples of *in* and 87 of the expected *int*.¹¹⁵ In his edition of *Blathmac's Poems*, Carney emended the article to *int*, but in the light of the other Old Irish evidence *ind* could conceivably be original. However, an even more entangled explanation is possible. The spelling *ind* is occasionally (ll. 76, 640) found in the manuscript for the preposition *i n-* 'in' before a vowel.¹¹⁶ At the same time, plain *i* can be an alternative spelling for *a*, and vice versa, a trivial confusion that is found in the entire post-Old Irish manuscript tradition. Combining the two observations, *ind aithscéle* could be a uniquely faulty rendering of neuter *a n-aithscélae*.

6.12. I want to discuss one example of a noun which in Carney's edition shows remarkably progressive phonology, but which, through a different interpretation of the text, disappears and gives way to a perfectly acceptable Old Irish form. In l. 406, the manuscript has *as do dauiddo bertat*. Carney makes of this in his edition *is d'ó Dauid da·bertat* 'it is to the descendant of David that they [i.e. the youths of Jerusalem] gave it [i.e. 'a shout, acclamation]'. Carney refers this acclamation directly to Jesus, who is a descendant of David's (*ó Dauid*) according to Mt. 1, 6 and Lk. 3, 31, and who is mentioned two lines later in l. 408. Two difficulties beset this interpretation. Although the vowel of the preposition *do* has to be elided on occasion in *Blathmac's Poems* in order to achieve a heptasyllabic line, this is not regularly indicated in writing.¹¹⁷ It would be a strange coincidence if

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 146; *GOI* 294.

¹¹⁵ *MI*. 24b16, 29a6, 31b21, 51c18, 60b18, 61a28, 65b11, 68c9, 73c2, 86b11, 109b3, 131c9, 145b6.

¹¹⁶ Probably also in l. 325. Carney takes the MS reading at face value and prints an independent dative *ind aidchi* 'at night', but the parallel with *i llaithiu* 'at daytime' three lines earlier speaks rather for emending *i n-aidchi*.

¹¹⁷ Elision is not indicated in, e.g., l. 422 *do Iudib ara célsini* (MS *do iudibh*); l. 576 *do airchisecht do chridi-siu* (MS *do airchisiuēt*); 593 *do airchisecht chridi cen on* (MS: *Do airchiseēt do chridi*, with the possessive *do* copied from l. 576). L. 692 *do athair robu airlithe* is uncertain because the elision could also occur between *robu* and *airlithe*; in fact the manuscript does have *do aiair rob airlithe*. In l. 292 *d'anacul a géraite* (MS: *danacal*) the vowel is actually omitted in writing.

the vowel were dropped precisely in the one instance where an ambiguous reading would result. Secondly, the dative singular of *úa/uae* ‘grandson, descendant’ should be *ú* or even disyllabic *uu* in the Old Irish of the 8th century.¹¹⁸ The first evidence for the dative *ó* in the *Annals of Ulster* is as late as 1038. It is more likely that stanza 102 has to be read as consisting of two contrasting couplets. In ll. 405–6, the poet speaks about the acclamation that David received from the youths of Jerusalem in his own time, paralleling this in ll. 407–8 with the reception that was given to Jesus, implicitly David’s descendant, upon entering Jerusalem (Mt. 21, 9).

6.13. Ó Cuív stressed Blathmac’s use of superlative forms in *-em* as a sign of the great age of the text.¹¹⁹ Ó Cuív must have perused the poems rather superficially, or else he would have noticed that the morphology of comparison is one of those areas where an argument could be made for a later provenance of the texts. The poems contain 24 examples of adjectives that are formally marked as comparatives and three superlatives.¹²⁰ In three instances, the manuscript contains a form that looks like a comparative, but has the meaning of a superlative. One of these, l. 92 *oirnidíu in fócarthae* ‘most eminent the outlaw’, could have been introduced by a later scribe because comparative and superlative are metrically equivalent. In l. 523 *ba hé cimbith ba mó fiach* ‘he was the captive who paid the greatest debt’, monosyllabic *mó* cannot be exchanged for the disyllabic superlative *moam*, so the reading must be original. Likewise, ll. 483–484 are valuable because the comparative in *-iu* with superlative semantics is secured by rhyme:

dirsan corp ro-mesc hi crú

co n-ordun as echnaidiu

‘Alas, the body possessing wisest dignity has been plunged into
gore’

¹¹⁸ Cf. for instance *hu* (AU 617, a non-contemporaneous addition), *huu* (Book of Ballymote RIA MS 23 P 12, f. 244v a21, *Togail Troi*).

¹¹⁹ Ó Cuív, ‘Review’, 154.

¹²⁰ Comparatives: Ll. 9 (twice), 10, 27 (twice), 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 (three times), 79, 92, 160, 263, 339, 371, 473, 478, 484, 523, 719, 883. In many instances, the OIr. comparative morpheme *-(i)u* survives only as a schwa, represented by *-a*, *-e* or *-i*, in the extant text. Superlatives: Ll. 139 (?), 381, 773. In l. 139, *foircimem* has to be emended for MS *foircem*.

Thus the *Poems of Blathmac* are an important witness for the incipient collapse of the morphological distinction between superlative and comparative. There is a stark mismatch between the language usage in the glosses on the one hand where superlatives and comparatives are perfectly distinguished, and the great verse compositions. *Félire Óengusso*, too, contains a series of morphological comparatives that are used in a superlative sense.¹²¹

6.14. The one area where the *Poems of Blathmac* make a particularly rich and probably the most striking addition to our knowledge of the language is verbal morphology. It is in this area that the question of conservative versus progressive forms is most virulent, a question which has an immediate relevance for the dating of the poems. Conservative means that verbal forms conform to the morphology that comparison with the Old Irish glosses makes us expect for the 8th century, or forms that are even more archaic than that. Progressive forms show innovations, e.g. intra- and interparadigmatic levelling that simplifies the staggering allomorphy which diachronic sound changes had caused in synchronic Old Irish. It is as common as it is amiss to refer to such progressive forms as ‘Middle Irishisms’. Strictly speaking, a form that occurs in an Old Irish source must be Old Irish by definition, even if it does not conform to the morphology of an idealised early Old Irish. Especially in the verbal system, there is a great formal spread caused by synchronic variation and change that may have considerable significance for the precise chronology of the language.

6.15. The diversity of styles that Blathmac employs and that testify to his inventiveness as an author entail a great variety of morphology. The genres range from New and Old Testament expository narrative, over praise, keen, apocalyptic prophecy, to intimate dialogue with Mary. This diversity results in a flurry of 1st and 2nd person singular forms beside the 3rd persons, a large amount of preterital and perfect formations, futures, subjunctives and conditionals. Many forms are attested in this quarry of verbal morphology that are not instanced anywhere else. In this way, the poems fill many lacunae in verbal paradigms. If we didn’t know better, it might be believed that the *Poems of Blathmac* had been fabricated by a modern scholar in order to settle disputed questions of Old Irish verbal morphology. It will suffice to single out a few verbal forms that are attested exclusively here.

¹²¹ Stokes, *Félire Óengusso*, xxx.

Among preterites, there is the absolute 3sg. passive *dlochtae* ‘was rent apart’ (l. 252) from *dlongid* ‘to split, cut’; the conjunct 3sg. passive *·tobrath* ‘was given’ (l. 863) from *do-beir* with the rare *o* in the stressed syllable; the disyllabic relative 3sg. *bië* ‘who hit’ (l. 279) of *benaid* is remarkable because even in the Milan glosses such relative forms had started to give way to ones without relative endings.¹²² Among augmented ‘perfect’ forms, there are the 3sg. *terglainn* ‘has/d chosen’ from *do-eclairn* (l. 385); *ro-decht* ‘has been crushed’ (l. 699), the augmented passive of *dingid*; and *do-derces* ‘has been led’ (l. 686) has been analysed as a 3sg. passive form of the otherwise unattested compound **do-deret* (< **to-di-are-üed-*).¹²³ Rudolf Thurneysen only managed with some effort to come up in his *Grammar* with examples of the absolute 3pl. passive preterite for which he gives the ending *-th(a)i* with a question mark.¹²⁴ Exactly such a form is found in l. 203 *bíthi* ‘they were struck’, from *benaid*.

Among the future forms, the 1sg. reduplicated *i*-future of *ciid* ‘to weep’ can be mentioned. The manuscript and Carney have *ciche* ‘I will lament’ (l. 589), for which I, in accordance with McCone, would rather emend *cichiu*; the relative 3sg. reduplicated *s*-future *to-esarr* ‘who will save’ (l. 612) from *do-esoird*; the 3sg. reduplicated *s*-future *sifais* ‘will sound’ (l. 954) from *seinnid*; the 3sg. passive reduplicated *i*-future *bethir* ‘will be struck’ (l. 957) from *benaid*; and the 3sg. passive reduplicated *s*-future *didistair* ‘will be crushed’ (l. 972) from *dingid* ‘to oppress’.¹²⁵ Several conditionals of simple verbs are formed without the empty particle *no*: *gébtas* ‘they would take (the side)’ (l. 293) from *gaibid*, *cathaignitís* ‘they would battle’ (l. 294) from *cathaignidir*, and the substantive verb *betis* ‘they would be’ (l. 297). The omission of *no* before secondary endings is not infrequent in poetry, but full statistics for Blathmac have not yet been compiled.¹²⁶

In addition to non-3rd person forms already cited before, more 1st and 2nd person singular forms can be cited. 2sg. absolute *s*-preterites are probably not too frequent in Irish literature, but our poet, addressing Mary, offers one, *fersai* ‘you spent’ (l. 85) of *feraid*, as he does with the 2sg. *t*-preterite of *alaid*, *ro-n-ailt-siu* ‘whom you have raised’ (l. 722). *·tochmurr* ‘I may beat’ (l. 5; MS: *tochmuir*) is a 1sg. augmented

¹²² Cf. *baí* for *boíe* in Ml. 29c15.

¹²³ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 143.

¹²⁴ GOI 440.

¹²⁵ McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 46.

¹²⁶ GOI 348; Kelly, ‘Remarks’.

s-subjunctive of *do·oirg*; the 1sg. present *dot·gaur* ‘I call you’ (l. 573) of *do·gair* is progressive in that it shows *u*-infection instead of the ending *·gairiu* expected for an S2 verb. This is clearly influenced by the S1-type *·biur*, like other forms of the present paradigm of the root *gar-*.

6.16. Even beyond what Carney edited, new discoveries can be made. In l. 323, the MS has *rulaittis*, but since the line has eight syllables as it stands, and as there is no other possibility in the line to reduce the syllable count, Baumgarten’s suggested emendation to *rultis* is surely correct.¹²⁷ The ending *-aittis* can have been copied over from the verbal form *congnaittis* in the following line. However, even ignoring the semantic problems created by this solution, it is formally impossible that this verb is a form of *ro·lá*, the augmented stem of *fo·ceird* ‘to put, throw’, as proposed by Carney. The raising of *ro-* to *ru-* can only be accounted for if the verb is taken as a form of *luithir* ‘to move’, which in fact gives the line much better sense (see section 8.3).¹²⁸

6.17. Even on a superficial assessment, the verbal forms in the poems generally make a rather conservative impression. On the other side of the balance, however, there are a number of forms that look decidedly young. How are these to be weighed against the older evidence?

A conspicuous example is l. 217 *du·ruidmiset* (MS *du ruidhmisiot*). Carney analysed it as an innovatory perfect ‘3 pl. perf. of *du·midethar* [‘to weigh, measure, estimate; judge, consider’], an example of the spread of the *s*-preterite [...]. *-dhm-* of MS. (for *-md-*) could possibly have arisen from the misplacement of an *m*-stroke. But there is a similar metathesis in *imruidmithe* (Laws, 1, p. 8, l. 24).¹²⁹ Under close scrutiny, this stretches plausibility. Not only does Carney’s analysis imply that a verb with a regular frequency in the language had undergone an unparalleled amount of innovation: it had lost the deponent inflection, which is generally retained by Blathmac, it had adopted a weak preterital inflection, despite the usually conservative nature of his morphology, and it had metathesised *md* to *dm*. All this in spite of the retention of the inherited preterital stem *-mid-* well into Middle Irish in other instantiations of this root. If an alternative explanation could be found, the introduction of a disconcertingly

¹²⁷ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 128.

¹²⁸ For *luid/luid* see *eDIL* (L 238) and Mac Eoin, ‘Review’, 225; deponent *luithar* ‘moves’ occurs again in l. 770.

¹²⁹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 123.

young and analogical form could be avoided. The vocalism of the augment *rui-* reveals that the following, syncopated syllable contained an *i*. When the order of the *d* and the *m* is assumed to be inherited, a different verb suggests itself. The only verb with the preverb *do-* followed by *dim-* in the stressed part is *do-dimen* ‘to bind, make fast, fix’.¹³⁰ This makes perfect sense in the episode after the final humiliation of Jesus by the soldiers and the Jews, and before Longinus pierces him with the spear: ‘after they had bound Jesus [i.e. to the cross]’. The strong nasal-infix verb *do-dimen* belongs to the small group of verbs with a reduplicated preterite such as *benaid* where the reduplicated lenited consonant is lost on the surface. The stressed 3sg. preterite of this verb would have been **mí < *míyi*, but, when unstressed, it is reduced to *-mi* in the single attestation *to-ndemi*. Because of the rarity of this formation, it is conceivable that such a form, which superficially looks like the conjunct 3rd singular of a weak *t̄*-verb, gave early rise to an analogical *s*-preterite plural as it is found in Blathmac. Like Carney’s, my explanation also requires the assumption of an innovatory form, but one that needs less drastic intermediate steps.

6.18. The poems offer a lucrative quarry to test various hypotheses about the morphosyntax of the Old Irish verbal system, hypotheses which may not even have been formulated at the time of Carney’s edition. Only exemplary areas can be sketched here. One question is that of contracted verbal forms, that is, those superficially prototonic forms of compound verbs in independent position where deuterotonic verbal forms would be normally expected.¹³¹ This phenomenon occurs as a tendency, not with the precision of a law, when the pretonic preverb ends in a vowel, typically *-o*, and the stressed part of the verb starts with a vowel. Typical examples are *tic* instead of *do·ic* or *fácabar* instead of *fo·ácabar*. This phenomenon has received several explanations in the past, most recently by Schrijver, McCone and García Castellero.¹³² Some of these hypotheses make predictions about the distribution of contracted forms. The 30 relevant examples in the *Poems of Blathmac* offer a statistically significant sample to test the reliability of the predictions.¹³³ Based on his theory of a verbal

¹³⁰ *DIL* s.v..

¹³¹ McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 3; García Castellero, ‘The Type’.

¹³² Schrijver, *Studies*, 113–129; McCone, *The Origins*, 87–90); García Castellero, ‘The Type’.

¹³³ 23 times contracted: 46, 49, 56, 249, 295, 299, 351, 357, 385, 421, 549, 623, 676, 700, 705, 751, 853, 865, 885, 896, 909, 272c, 285a. 7 times uncontracted: 362, 547, 612, 742, 788, 855, 875.

particle **es* (ultimately from **eti*) added after the pretonic part of a complex verbal form, Schrijver tried to link the presence or absence of contracted forms to specific syntactic contexts. Fundamentally he argued that contracted forms would originally have occurred in relative clauses after neuter objects or subjects, and in main clauses in verbs with telic Aktionsart.¹³⁴ The vagueness of the criterion ‘telic Aktionsart’ has been criticised elsewhere.¹³⁵ The distribution of contracted and uncontracted forms in the *Poems of Blathmac* is completely random in respect to Schrijver’s categories. His theory consequently finds no support in the material. García Castellero sees multiple phonological (contraction of hiatus) and morpho-syntactic factors at work that lead to the establishment of contracted verbal stems, but ultimately the frequency of verbs plays an essential role in his scheme.¹³⁶ If anything can be said about the distribution of contracted versus uncontracted forms in the *Poems of Blathmac*, it is linked with specific verbs. This is rather in support of García Castellero’s hypothesis. Contraction dominates overall and must be viewed as the default morphology for eligible verbs, but some verbs prefer non-contraction.¹³⁷ Again, this field warrants much more study.

6.19. Another huge topic is the pragmatics of ‘perfect’ forms of verbs instead of preterites. Carney, as well as some reviewers, was puzzled by the variation: ‘In narrative passages the preterite and perfect are usually distinguished. Not infrequently, however, a perfect form is found where a preterite might be expected’.¹³⁸ The *Poems of Blathmac* are an ideal object to study the question of what are potential triggers for the use of augmented forms of the preterite instead of unaugmented ones, to use McCone’s terminology for the phenomenon.¹³⁹ Because they contain narrative passages in the past of considerable

¹³⁴ Schrijver, *Studies*, 128.

¹³⁵ McCone, *The Origins*, 88. The apparent telic Aktionsart may have something to do with the fact that naturally, simply by their sheer number, compounds with *to* make up a very high percentage of relevant forms. As I have argued elsewhere (Stifter, ‘The History’, 237–9; see also section 7.3. of this article), the preverb *to-* may originally have had the semantics of ‘back (to a place)’. Compounds in which this preverb was used in this function would be inherently telic. The preponderance of compounds with *to-* among contracted forms could then secondarily create the impression that telicity was specifically frequent among contracted forms.

¹³⁶ García Castellero, ‘The Type’.

¹³⁷ E.g. *do-essoirg* ‘to save’: twice uncontracted (ll. 545, 612), once contracted (l. 299); *do-adbat* ‘to show’: three times uncontracted (ll. 362, 855, 875), twice contracted (l. 885, st. 272c).

¹³⁸ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xxii; Ó Cuív, ‘Review’, 154.

¹³⁹ McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 91–3.

length, *Blathmac's Poems* greatly surpass the evidence of the glosses, due to the fundamental lack of narrative stretches in the latter.

The *Poems of Blathmac* contain 458 preterital forms in total. 37 of these belong to verbs which do not make a formal distinction between augmented and unaugmented preterites, such as compounds of *·icc* or words with lexical *ro·* such as *ro·cluine-thar*; 192 are augmented, 229 unaugmented.¹⁴⁰ Among the latter group, the copula constitutes the largest subgroup with 104 examples. For practical reasons, because its high incidence would unduly skew the statistics, unaugmented *ba* is here taken out of consideration, which leaves 125 unaugmented preterites. The augmented past copula is very rare and has been counted (ll. 265, 692, 697, 970, st. 277a). Whereas the augmented preterites are divided perfectly evenly between the poems, 96 in each, this is not so with the unaugmented forms. In poem 1, 99 unaugmented preterites outnumber the 96 augmented ones by a tiny margin. Poem 2 has only 26 of them. In poem 1, the occurrence of unaugmented versus augmented forms is governed fairly consistently by the tendencies established for Old Irish: unaugmented preterites express the distant, narrative past, whereas augmented forms usually carry additional semantic information, in most cases conveying anteriority or the resultative aspect, in some cases potentiality.¹⁴¹ Only rarely are augmented preterites found in narrative contexts of poem 1, and in some of these cases it would be possible for a bold editor to emend unaugmented forms without disrupting the metre.¹⁴² In poem 2, the picture is turned on its head. Augmented forms occur in long narrative stretches, thereby prefiguring later Irish developments, unaugmented preterites are scattered few and far between, almost like intruders. No obvious explanation offers itself to account for this astonishing distribution between the two poems. It is hardly likely that it is due to a difference in time when the texts were written – the idea of the unitary poet who wrote both poems at the same time is still the economically most appealing one. It may be that the difference in

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 144–7.

¹⁴¹ *GOI* 341–3; McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 93–121.

¹⁴² An example for this is stanza 61 (ll. 241–244) whose four lines are construed in a parallel manner. The lines are opened by verbal forms that are clearly meant to provide a plain narrative of the past, namely *to·celt* ‘hid’, *ro·coini* ‘has keened’, *luid* ‘went’, *búiristir* ‘roared’. The odd man out here is *ro·coini*, referring to the same subject as the preceding *to·celt*, and describing a similar unique event in the past. As Carney (*The Poems of Blathmac*, xxii fn 38) remarks, one could emend the simple deponent preterite *coinistir* instead without disturbing the metre.

relative frequency of unaugmented forms has something to do with the genre. The first poem, the *keen* proper, offers the poet the opportunity to recount facts of the past. Although also recounting past facts, the second poem, more of a praise poem in nature, being addressed to Mary, is perhaps more immediate and therefore encourages the use of augmented forms that create a feeling of greater personal involvement of the poet and his audience. This question clearly merits further and deeper examination to reveal subtle nuances in the use of the augment in early Old Irish.

6.20. The same is true for the morphology of the augment. As if the author wanted to show off his competence in the intricacies of verbal morphology, poem 1 starts off with a cascade of augmented forms that do not use the default morpheme *ro*, but use rarer allomorphs and formations instead. In the first 15 lines the following forms occur:

l. 5	<i>·tochmurr</i>	<i>do·oirg</i> ‘to clap’, augment <i>com</i>
l. 7	<i>con·atoí</i>	<i>con·toi</i> ‘to turn; here: conceive’, augment <i>ad</i>
l. 8	<i>·fochmai</i>	<i>fo·ben</i> ‘to attack, wound’, augment <i>com</i>
l. 13	<i>cot·n·abairt</i>	<i>con·beir</i> ‘to conceive’, augment <i>ad</i>
l. 14	<i>do·forsat</i>	<i>do·fuissem</i> ‘to create’, augment <i>ro</i>
l. 15	<i>rot·nert</i>	<i>nertaíd</i> ‘to strengthen’, augment <i>ro</i>

The poet ostensibly has a command of a language that is characterised by a highly complex allomorphy. Sometimes a younger, simpler usage has been edited into the text by Carney. In l. 425 *Ce do tecomnaçt reçt doib* (MS), the *t* in the deuterotonic 3sg. augmented passive preterite *do tecomnaçt* represents the particle or stereotyped infix pronoun *-d* after the concessive conjunction *ce* in the indicative mood, i.e. *dod·écomnacht* in normalised spelling.¹⁴³ This form compares with the contracted 3sg. augmented active preterite l. 421 *técomnacht* only four lines above. However, Carney emends the younger form *dod·rindnacht* for metrical reasons in order to get rid of a syllable in l. 425. This syllable cannot be gained from reading contracted *dóib* at the end of the line because this conjugated preposition is undeniably *doib*, rhyming with *sóebgoäib* in the next line. So what can one do with *do tecomnaçt*? Carney’s emendation, the younger form *do·rindnacht*, is actually attested in l. 492 (MS: *do ridnaçt*),¹⁴⁴ and

¹⁴³ GOI 561.

¹⁴⁴ Although it would be metrically possible to emend more conservative *técomnacht* there.

thus proves that the poet was aware of conservative and progressive forms of this verb.¹⁴⁵ Did the poet therefore himself use the progressive *dod-rindnacht* in l. 425 which was then archaised to *dod-écomnacht* by a subsequent scribe, as Carney tentatively proposed?¹⁴⁶ Another solution is possible. Ll. 421–428 hark back to the long catalogue of benefits that God had granted to the Jews (st. 79–97). L. 425 ‘although a law had been granted to them/although he had granted them a law’ echoes very specifically l. 351 *ba doib tindnacht in recht* ‘it was to them that the law was granted’. Perhaps the poet wanted to transfer the formula from l. 351, only changing the order of the words in the process and introducing an augmented preterite to conform to the overall anterior context of the surrounding lines. In this process, it may have been only a minor concern to him that this resulted in a hypersyllabic line, the phrasal echo was of greater importance to him.

6.21. A related question is that of the position of the augment. In the attested history of Irish, *ro* has the tendency to move from the position immediately before the verbal root to the left margin. This development has received different, albeit not necessarily mutually exclusive explanations by McCone and García Castillero.¹⁴⁷ *Blathmac's Poems* have potential significance to shed light on this question, especially when one considers pairs like ll. 283–4 *lasar-chrochad* and *las-rosoirad*. These forms occur in a couplet whose lines are evidently meant to be internally parallel. Yet, despite being metrically and grammatically equivalent, they show a striking difference in the position of the *ro*. Carney was of the opinion that *lasar-soirad* had been the original reading of the second form which then underwent scribal reformation, yet he did not carry out this emendation in the edited text.¹⁴⁸ According to McCone's observations of the diachronic positioning of *ro*, however, proclitic *ro* as fundamentally present in a form like *lasar-chrochad* should represent a younger stage of developments than preverbal *ro* which may be present in *las-rosoirad*; unless, of course, one reads this form as *lasro-soirad*. A close study of all such relevant forms used by Blathmac will contribute to a better understanding of the processes

¹⁴⁵ This situation finds a parallel in the Würzburg glosses where the progressive pass. pret. *dorrindnacht* (Wb. 20d15) stands beside three conservative forms *do-écomnacht*, *-técomnacht* (Wb. 14c33, 19c8, 25c26).

¹⁴⁶ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 133.

¹⁴⁷ McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 127–61; García Castillero, ‘Morphological Externalisation’.

¹⁴⁸ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 126.

that were at work in the transformation of the system of augmentation in Old Irish.¹⁴⁹

7. LEXICON

7.1. Blathmac is a creative poet. He confronts the reader with neologisms, *hapax legomena* and a series of first attestations in Irish. Sometimes, the words resurface only centuries later. For those fascicles of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* that appeared after Carney's edition of the *Poems of Blathmac*, the poems meant an important source of new material, and they are frequently cited. Examples of words that make their debut in Blathmac's poems are: *slániccaidecht* 'salvation' (l. 168), *dánad* 'giving' (l. 338), *bel* 'way, path' (l. 319). Aside from the compound *engraic* 'instead', *grác* 'stead, place' (l. 277) does not recur until Modern Irish, mainly as a place-name element (see section 1.7.). The potential diatopic significance of *pailt* has already been discussed above (section 1.5.). Other words are rare elsewhere, e.g., *scísid* 'to trouble, fatigue' (l. 916), or are used with unusual meanings. Particularly troublesome is *láthar* (ll. 627, 1011) and its derived verb *láthraid* (ll. 23, 185, 233). DIL defines the noun as 'arrangement, disposition; vigour, energy, power; place, position'. 'Power' in a vague sense satisfies the two occurrences of the noun (but see note 150). The verb is defined by DIL as 'to explain, expound; arrange, dispose'. Hardly any of these meanings fit the context in *Blathmac's Poems*. In l. 23, the meaning is undoubtedly 'to beget'; in l. 185 *ce no-láthrae (sic! not Carney's láithre)* 'although you may argue (it)' the meaning is close to 'explain'; in l. 233 *láthairsit dó dig séto* the context requires an action in the semantic field of 'to give', perhaps 'give forcefully', i.e. 'they forced him to drink the parting drink'.¹⁵⁰

7.2. *Blathmac's Poems* also add important information about previously known words. For instance, the poems underline the existence of a separate proximal, i.e. near-deictic, demonstrative pronoun 'this' of the form *-se* in enclitic position and *sé* in stressed position.¹⁵¹ Although recognising its different origin, Thurneysen

¹⁴⁹ McCone, *The Early Irish Verb*, 154-5.

¹⁵⁰ The sentence *ro-láithreth hi compairt glain | tri rath spirto* (ll. 23-24) 'he has been begotten in a pure conception through the grace of the Spirit' has a phrasal echo in *ba mad-chombairt ... | Crist di láthur spirto noib* (ll. 625-7) 'Christ's was a good conception by the power of the Holy Spirit'. Conceivably the noun *láthar* could be understood as 'begetting' here.

¹⁵¹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, xxi-ii.

treated *se* as a mere synchronic allomorph of *so/sa* after palatalised sounds, especially after the front vowels *-e* and *-i*.¹⁵² By and large, this distribution is borne out by the Würzburg and Milan glosses, as well as by *Féilire Óengusso*. Accordingly, *se* is not awarded a headword of its own in DIL, but examples of it are dispersed among those of *so*. In *Blathmac's Poems*, the situation is different. *Se* occurs altogether 16 times, very often in rhyming position, without any correlation with the quality of the preceding sound, against not a single instance of *so*.¹⁵³ This points perhaps to a dialectal feature and a state of the language where *so* and *se* were still in free variation.

7.3. Without touching much on their etymology, O'Rahilly discusses several pairs of Irish idioms of the shape *X t(o)-X* that denote movement 'to and fro' in an expressive linguistic way.¹⁵⁴ In pairs like *techt tuidecht*, *aig taig*, *soí toí*, or the late and possibly corrupt *áimh tháimh* she essentially sees 'riming jingles'. In 2014, I put forward the hypothesis that the semantic contribution of the preverb *to-* in Irish and Celtic verbal compounds may originally have been 'back' or Latin '*re-*'.¹⁵⁵ Therefore it should not come as a surprise that the second member of these idiomatic pairs typically begins with *t-* or *to-*. *Blathmac's Poems* offer a small opportunity to check the explanatory power of this hypothesis on a specific pair of verbs in the living narrative. The episode of the three magi (st. 12–18) contains three instances of the verbal stem *ad-ell-* 'to visit, approach, go to, come to', two formed directly from this stem (2pl. imperative *aidlid* 'visit! go!' (l. 53), 3pl. preterite *adallsat* 'they went to' (l. 72)), and one enlarged by the preverb *to-* (3pl. preterite *tadallsat* 'they came to' (l. 49)). In addition, there is a further instance of the latter verb in poem 2 (3sg. augmented preterite *táraill* 'it returned' (l. 705)). While the last example conforms to the prediction of my theory, the three instances in the tale of the magi behave surprisingly in the reverse way. The first visit of the magi to Jerusalem is expressed by *tadallsat*, whereas *adallsat* is used for their return visit, which does not materialise after their adoration of the child. *Aidlid* refers to their movement from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. My hypothesis can only be salvaged if it is assumed that all three movements of the magi are viewed from the point of view of Jerusalem. Any movement to it is definite and leads 'back' to the centre in the mind of the author,

¹⁵² GOI 300, 304; cf. Schrijver, *Studies*, 22–5.

¹⁵³ Lines 18, 77, 161, 361, 395, 431, 505, 539, 557, 633, 745, 757, 829, 897, 931, 945.

¹⁵⁴ O'Rahilly, '*Techt tuidecht*'.

¹⁵⁵ Stifter, 'The History', 237–9.

whereas any movement away from it is indefinite, but I realise that this explanation requires special pleading.

7.4. The *hapax legomena*, some of which must be coinages by Blathmac himself, and some of which may have had only a restricted currency in space and time, can be challenging. The contracted compound verb *taithsloic* ‘vomited’ (l. 249) < **to-aith-sloic-* ‘lit. re-swallow’, and *ortan* ‘he conferred orders’ (l. 867), a denominal verb from *ordan* ‘dignity, honour, nobility’, semantically influenced by *ord* ‘order’, are formally transparent and contextually clear.

7.5. Several other words are more puzzling. Sometimes the context allows us to determine the approximate meanings of words, such as in the case of *soisech* (l. 329) and *soismid* (l. 1027), both apparently meaning ‘leader’. Because of their formal similarity, Carney thought of a connection between them, but wrongly so, as I think.¹⁵⁶ *Soisech* can be analysed as an artificial backformation from *toisech* ‘leader’ (e.g., gen.sg. in *toisig* → *int soisig*), but this still leaves the apparently related *soismid* unexplained. Therefore it is preferable to treat the two as etymologically separate and regard *soismid* as a variant for *tuismid* ‘begetter, creator’, an agentive noun in *-aid* derived from *do:fuissim* ‘to generate, create’, with the same variation of *s~t* as noted for *soisech*. For the initial variation *s~t* in Old Irish, compare the pairs *solam* ~ *tolam* ‘ready, speedy’, *seillén* ~ *teillén* ‘swarm (of bees)’, as well as *sopar* ~ *topar* ‘well’, *socht* ~ *tocht* ‘silence’, *sost* ~ *tost* ‘silence’.¹⁵⁷ This variation is independent of whether the original etymon started with *s-* or *t-*. Examples for original *s-* are *solam* ‘ready, speedy’ < *so-* ‘good’ + *lám* ‘hand’ and *socht* ‘silence, gloom, dejection, stupor’ < **sugto-*, whereas in *topar* ‘well, spring’ < **to-od-ber-*, in the abstract *tost* ‘silence’¹⁵⁸ beside the adjective *tóe* ‘silent’ < **taúsjo-*, and in *teillén* ‘swarm of bees’ < *to-* + *ell* ‘flock of birds’ the variant with *t-* is clearly the older one.¹⁵⁹ The exact motivation as to why the etymologically wrong form was used, is difficult to ascertain, but it may be noted that in l. 1027 the *s* of *soismid* contributes to the alliteration of the line.

¹⁵⁶ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 129.

¹⁵⁷ Kelly, *Marriage Disputes*, 88.

¹⁵⁸ The word-final *-st*, which is phonotactically impossible as a suffix in Irish, is curious.

¹⁵⁹ *LEIA* S-161; T-110; T-90-1, 118; T-44.

7.6. Sometimes finding a convincing explanation for a word is not so easy. The comparative *estu* ‘more grievous (?)’ (l. 9) is best connected with the rare word *esad* of unknown origin which is glossed as a noun for ‘affliction, sorrow, disease’ in DIL (E 179.58).¹⁶⁰ The few literary, non-glossarial attestations of *esad* (e.g. *mór n-essad* ‘a great number of sorrows’, LL 14.220) do not preclude the possibility that the word is really an adjective used substantivally of which *estu* would then be the regular comparative. Alternatively, one has to operate with a derived, otherwise unattested adjective **estae* as an intermediate stage.

Dindlairg (ll. 281, 971) occurs twice. In both passages it seems to refer to an act involving violence, but while in the earlier instance it involves injustice towards a just person, in the second occurrence it seems to imply the infliction of justified punishment upon the unjust. Although it looks enticingly like a compound of *dind* ‘height’ + *lorg*¹ ‘trace, track, path, pursuit’, *lorg*² ‘staff, club’ or *lerg* ‘hillside, battlefield, surface’, the semantic side of such a compound is completely obscure. The word *dind-lerg* may denote a movement downhill from a height, i.e. something that ‘goes completely downhill’ and leads to disaster? The question is best left unanswered.

7.7. The couplet ll. 585–586 contains the unique occurrence of two hapax loanwords in rhyming position. The last word in l. 585 *do lámchomairt cen moraich* was obscure to Carney.¹⁶¹ He translated the line as ‘so that with beating of hands without ...’, leaving a blank where he could make no sense, despite the fact that there is an obvious solution. The acc. *moraich* is evidently identical with Welsh *morach* ‘joy; joyous, merry’, inflected in Irish as a feminine *ā*-stem abstract noun. Although DIL records no trace of this or of a related word for Early Irish, ModIr. *mórachas* ‘rejoicings, cheeriness, joy’ seems to be derived from it and would indicate a long vowel.¹⁶² In Scottish Gaelic, the adjective *mòrach* ‘pompous’ occurs in the poetry of Sileas na Ceapaich.¹⁶³ The abstract *mòrachd* ‘greatness, majesty, etc.’ is current in Scottish Gaelic. Dinneen lists *móracht* as a variant of *móireacht* and *mórdhacht* ‘greatness, majesty’, but says nothing about its geographical distribution.¹⁶⁴ The further prehistory of the Welsh word

¹⁶⁰ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 112.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 140.

¹⁶² Dinneen, *Foclóir*, 762.

¹⁶³ Ó Baoill, *Bàrdachd*, 6, l. 56; 269; pers. comm. Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh.

¹⁶⁴ Dinneen, *Foclóir*, 762.

is unclear. It could itself be borrowed from an unattested OIr. adjective **mórach* ‘joyous, pompous (?)’ (possibly the ancestor of Scottish Gaelic *mòrach* cited above), or it could have been formed within Old Welsh (or British) from **mōr* (later *mawr*) ‘big, great’ + the suffix *-ach* in an abstract or diminutive or pejorative function.¹⁶⁵ Although it may look uneconomical to trace an Irish word back to a Welsh word which itself may have been borrowed from Irish, the linguistic details necessitate it. Blathmac’s *móraich* ‘joy’ is unlikely to be a primary formation within Irish since derivatives in *-ach* do not form adjectival abstracts in Old Irish.¹⁶⁶

Its rhyming partner *ferolaib* manifestly means ‘(with) men’ in l. 586 *mnáib, macaib, ferolaib* ‘with women, children and men’, but Carney was perplexed by its morphology.¹⁶⁷ The only suggestion he could make was that ‘an ending *-ol-* (*-ól-*)’ had been arbitrarily inserted for rhyming purposes. If this explanation seems too fortuitous, a comparison with MW *gwrwl*, ModW *gwrol*, Bret. *gourel* ‘manly, valiant, male (adult)’, formed from the word for ‘man’ **giro-* + the productive British adjectival suffix **-āli-* < Lat. *-ālis* may be more constructive. The word must have been borrowed from a British language when the suffix was either still **-āl-*, or the monophthong *-ó-* was substituted if it had already turned into Welsh *-awl*. In the process of borrowing, the Irish lexical element *fer-* was substituted for the British equivalent *gur-* ‘man’. Considerations of historical phonology make it likely that both *móraich* and *ferólaib* had a long vowel. It is peculiar that two words apparently borrowed from Welsh or another British Celtic language should appear in such close proximity in *Blathmac’s Poems*. Unless one wants to dismiss this as mere chance, it may point to a British source that Blathmac was using for this passage. In any case, the rhyme between *móraich* and *ferólaib* as such cannot go back to a Welsh model because it is created by exclusively Irish inflectional morphology.

7.8. Syntactically, all three puzzling forms built on a stem *rist* seem to be verbs. It is useful to cite the attestations in their context. In the first passage, the form under scrutiny occurs twice:

*Co-rist glonn sund, co-rist scél,
mac rig sechtnime nóebnél* (ll. 489–490)

¹⁶⁵ Zimmer, *Studies*, 275–81.

¹⁶⁶ Russell, *Celtic Word Formation*, 93.

¹⁶⁷ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 140.

The manuscript allows for no ambiguity about the reading of the other words. Carney translates ‘... a deed here ... a wonderful thing, the son of the King of seven heavens of holy clouds’. In these two instances, both the conjunction *co* ‘so that, that, until’ or the interrogative *co* ‘how?’ could conceivably make sense, but the context allows no precise estimation of the meaning of *·rist*. Although the manuscript has nominative singular *mac*, which is the fronted subject of the following quatrain, conceivably the genitive *maic* could be emended, depending on the preceding *scél*.¹⁶⁸ The third example occurs in ll. 961–962:

Ce·ristar cath clótho denn
do cach cocud bid forcenn;

The manuscript has *cloita* where Carney plausibly emends the genitive of *clöüd/clód* ‘turning, overturning, vanquishing’.¹⁶⁹ The phrasal connection with *cath* ‘battle’ gives some support to Carney’s suggestion that *·ristar* could be *ro* + a form of *fichid* ‘to fight’, on account of which he translates ‘though there be fought (?) a war that will destroy hues – it will be the end of all war’.¹⁷⁰ However, both the 3sg. passive present subjunctive *·festar* and the future *·fiastar* (which would fit contextually) show a different vocalism from what is found in *·ristar*, unless corruption or analogy account for the single *i*. Alternatively, *·ristar* could be the 3sg. passive *s*-subjunctive of *ro·icc*, but this is semantically not compelling. In any case, whatever solution is adopted for *·ristar*, it leaves the other two forms unexplained. The phonology and morphology of *·rist* as a verbal form are highly unusual. The sequence *-st* is phonotactically and morphologically impossible at the end of a native Irish word.¹⁷¹

7.9. *Deisen* ‘right hand’ is only attested in Blathmac’s l. 548 *dessin*, l. 756 *deisenaib* and in the abstract l. 751 *desinriuth*. If it continues the ancient formation PIE **déksino-* it makes a perfect equation with Ved. *dákṣiṇa-*, Avest. *dašina-*, Lith. *dėšinas* ‘right (hand)’.¹⁷² This is of

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Breatnach, ‘On the Line-break’, (forthcoming).

¹⁶⁹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 83, 150.

¹⁷⁰ For Carney’s justification of translating *denn* as ‘hues’ see his commentary on p. 150. It may be, however, that the genitive plural of *dind* ‘height’ is intended. Cf. the gen.pl. *inna tuaisrenn* (Ml. 94b21) of the neuter *u*-stem *rind* ‘constellation’. I will discuss the Ø-ending of the genitive plural of neuter *u*-stems in greater detail in a future article on *ubull* ‘apple’.

¹⁷¹ Cf. note 158.

¹⁷² *LIPP* 2, 135.

interest for Indo-European comparison but, although mentioned by Greene, it has been overlooked by a wider audience so far.¹⁷³ Alternatively, if the non-syncope in *deisenaib* is not simply due to intraparadigmatic levelling, the preform may be **deksiyono-* or **deksijono-*, which still holds important information for the reconstruction of the semantic family of ‘right’ in Celtic.

7.10. An example for a Latin loanword that did not become a regular item of the Old Irish vocabulary is *captura* ‘captivity’ which appears in the manuscript in ll. 310 and 376 in the form *cechtor*. Perhaps *cach-* had been abbreviated as *c̄* like the indefinite pronoun, which was then wrongly expanded with *e* by a later scribe. Although Carney drew attention to the fact that *cachtor* ‘captivity’ could be the intended lexeme, he nevertheless emended to the dative plural *cachtaib* for ‘captivity’ in both instances in his edition, despite the lack of parallels for such a usage of the plural of *cacht*.

8. SYNTAX

8.1. Syntax will be touched upon only in passing here, with reference to a few isolated observations, without implying that the following list is in any way exhaustive. The syntax of the poems conforms overall to regular Old Irish usage. Systematic deviations from prose usage that occur in other works of early poetry such as tmesis or Bergin’s Law constructions are not encountered, with the sole exception of occasional instances of preposed genitives. However, in some instances remarkable constructions that cannot be attributed to poetic language are found, and these merit a brief discussion.

8.2. L. 57 *inmailli ferais in rí* ‘the king exuded longing’ shows the unusual word order OVS (object-verb-subject). Because of the unambiguous non-relative ending of the verb (MS: *feruis*), it is clear that this is not a cleft construction; neither does it contain a resumptive pronoun. More examples of the overt order OVS can be found, but in those cases the verbal forms are ambiguous and could be relative, e.g. in l. 281 *dindluirg do-génai in trú* ‘the wretch made *dindluirg*’, *do-génai* could be a lenited relative form. OVS is a rare, but not unheard-of construction. Among Mac Cana’s sample of 13 sentences with deviant word order from *Fiacc’s Hymn* (*Thes.* ii, 308–321), only a single one corresponds to the present example, and even this

¹⁷³ Greene, ‘Varia II’, with reference to Michael O’Brien. It is missing, for instance, in *LIPP*.

correspondence is not perfect because an overt subject is lacking: *tūatha adortais síde* ‘they used to worship the people of the *síd*’ (*Theas.* ii, 317.4).¹⁷⁴

8.3. L. 323 *nacha·rultis námait lais* caused Carney considerable trouble. His translation ‘so that with it [i.e. the cloud brought by God] enemies might not see [...] them’ is utterly forced and implausible: ‘so that not’ should be expressed by *conná·* or *arná·* in Old Irish, but not by the plain dependent negative *ná·*. Carney had to acknowledge that there was no parallel for his assumed use of *fo·ceird* in the meaning ‘to see’.¹⁷⁵ The true solution is very different. It was pointed out earlier (section 6.16.) that Carney was wrong in his identification of the verb, which must be *luithir* ‘to move’. More interesting is *nacha·rultis ... lais* which is a prepositional relative construction with stranded preposition, for standard *lasnacha·rultis námait lais* ‘on account of which [i.e. the cloud] the enemies could not move (themselves)’ (if the infixed pronoun is interpreted as reflexive) or ‘on account of which the enemies could not chase them [i.e. the Jews]’.¹⁷⁶ Only comparatively few other examples of this type of relative construction are known in Old Irish. Ó hUiginn gives four examples (but hints at the existence of a few more): *suidigther ... do* ‘to whom is established’ (Ml. 87d15), *nád tai ... fair* ‘on which ... does not go’ (Sg. 26b7), *na fedar ... dó* ‘for whom I do not know’ (*Ériu* 12, 170.19), *na biat ... ann* ‘in which there are not’ (*Ériu* 22, 82).¹⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that of those four examples plus our present one, four are negative clauses, only one is positive. In Modern Irish, relative clauses with stranded prepositions are preponderant in positive clauses, but the old prepositional relative construction is available beside them as an option. In negative clauses, the stranded construction is obligatory. The distribution in the admittedly small Old Irish sample seems to foreshadow this modern rule. One can easily see why a morphologically complex sequence like *lasnacha·*, which merges a preposition, a relative particle, a negative particle and an infixed pronoun in only three syllables, would be split up into independent segments. This reduction of morphological complexity is one step away from synthetic to analytic constructions, a principle that underlies many developments from Old to Modern Irish.

¹⁷⁴ Mac Cana, ‘On Celtic Word’, 94–5.

¹⁷⁵ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 128.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *Met. Dinds.* iv 70.31 for this causative use of *luithir*.

¹⁷⁷ Ó hUiginn, ‘A Note’, 165–6; see also McCone, ‘The Würzburg and Milan Glosses’, 96–7.

8.4. As regards the agreement of subject and verb, I noted the following instance of a plural verb in *constructio ad sensum*: ll. 183–184 *at-n-ortat in sib úaine | co ndornaib* ‘the green reed (sg.) with fists struck (pl.) him’. The verb has been attracted to the inherent plurality of the fists, even though the overt grammatical subject is the singular *sib* ‘reed’.¹⁷⁸ *Sib* cannot be plural (**int sib*) because the adjective would then have to be *úaini*, but its final singular *-e* is secured by rhyme with *gormgrúaide*.

8.5. A matter that straddles syntax and metrics is the observation, made by Breatnach, that occasionally dependent genitives are found going across a line break.¹⁷⁹ Later scribes apparently did not recognise the construction anymore because in several cases what must be the genitives in this enjambment construction have been changed into nominatives in the extant manuscript. For ll. 221–222, Carney, with only minor emendations to the manuscript, writes:

*Ó fo·rócbath a chride,
mac rí na secht nóebnime,*

His translation ‘the king¹⁸⁰ of the seven holy heavens, when his heart was pierced’ demonstrates that he did not realise that *maic* instead of *mac* must be read as a genitive which resumes the proleptic possessive pronoun of *a chride*, i.e. ‘when the heart of the son of the king of the seven heavens was pierced’.¹⁸¹

8.6. Some minor observations relate to uses of verbal nouns that prefigure later developments of Irish. In l. 190 *ind rí do·gníth do thromchosc* ‘lit. of the king who was made to severe chastisement’, i.e. ‘who was severely chastised’, *do·gní* functions to all extents and purposes like a light verb where the semantic load is carried exclusively by the verbal noun. In ll. 983–984 *macrath Beithile ... do guin i nÍsu noibrícht* ‘the infants of Bethlehem ... being slain in the holy guise (= instead) of Jesus’, the impersonal construction *do* + verbal noun replaces a finite verb form.

¹⁷⁸ Carney unnecessarily emends *sim* in accordance with the headwords *sima* ‘stalk, stem’ and *simin* ‘reed’ in *DIL* (S 230), but as several examples of *sibin* cited in *DIL* show the variant with *b* is a legitimate form. *Simin* with *m* could be due to assimilation to the nasality of the final consonant.

¹⁷⁹ Breatnach, ‘On the Line-break’, (forthcoming).

¹⁸⁰ In fact, Carney forgot to translate ‘the son of the king’!

¹⁸¹ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, 21. See also the example in section 6.8.

8.7. As is often the case in syntax, the evidence for some phenomena is more controversial than for others. This is the case for the following possible instance of case attraction which requires various assumptions and emendations. Ll. 9–10 read in the manuscript *Ansu estu cech ingir | cr- caid*. Carney edits this as *ansu, estu cech ingir Crist cháid* ‘more difficult, more grievous (?) was every tribulation of holy Christ’, taking *cech ingir* as the subject of the sentence. However, Blathmac’s normal pattern for such comparative phrases is that the standard of comparison follows immediately after the comparative and, especially when an attribute of Christ is compared to that of others, the standard of comparison is emphasised by the quantitative pronominal *cech*. This pattern is amply illustrated by the catalogue of comparisons stretching from l. 27–33. This leaves hardly any doubt that *cech ingir* must be a dative of comparison. *Crist cáid* in the next line must then be the subject, not a dependent genitive. But can a person, i.e. Christ, be compared with an abstract concept, i.e. tribulation? Logically, this is not possible, but what can instead be compared is the negative experience of Christ, compared to that of everyone else. The underlying full sentence would be *ba ansu, ba estu ingir cech duini ingar Chríst cháid* ‘more difficult, more grievous than the tribulation of every person was the tribulation of holy Christ’. Through a series of reductions and omissions, this cumbersome sentence is shortened: the 3sg. copula is omitted, *ingir cech duini* is collapsed into *cech ingir*, and the second iteration of *ingar* (the subject) is elliptically suppressed. With the subject slot now empty, the genitive that originally depended on the subject is now itself promoted into subject position, with concomitant changes in the morphology. Thus the surface representation [*ansu, estu*]_{pred.} [*cech ingir*]_{dat. of comp.} [*Crist cáid*]_{subj.} ‘more difficult, more grievous than every tribulation [was] holy Christ’ is arrived at.

9. CONCLUSION

In a radio broadcast, Carney remarked about the *Poems of Blathmac* that, ‘[i]f Thurneysen had had this text it would have altered his grammar only in small things, but he would have drawn upon it heavily for illustrations and examples. Indeed, it would seem that this text will make the study of Old Irish easier and more pleasant for the learner’.¹⁸² There is nothing to add to this appraisal of the text, except to express the hope that it will continue to receive attention in the next

¹⁸² Carney, ‘Poems of Blathmac’, 45.

50 years. The little bit of scratching the surface, which I did for the purposes of this survey article, may give an indication of what remains to be mined in this rich quarry.

Postscript to Footnote 26: The Old Breton and Welsh cognates of *pailt* ‘plenty’, only hinted at by Deshayes (*Dictionnaire*, 556), are the OBret. compound plural superlative *gurpelthemion* (< **gur-palt-ham-ion*), glossing Lat. *confortissimis* (for *confertissimis*) ‘very dense, crowded’ in MS Zanetti lat. 349, fol. 35^v (Venice, Bibl. Marciana), that is discussed by Ifor Williams in ‘Irische und britannische Glossen’, 301-2 and ‘Nodiadau Cymysg’, 37-8, where he suggests a derivation from PIE **k^hel-* ‘flock, troop, host’ (*IEW* 640). For Welsh, Williams (‘Irische und britannische Glossen’, 302) proposes to regard the obscure *phellas* (Black Book of Carmarthen 102.4) as a cognate of Gaelic *pailteas* ‘plenty’; *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* records one doubtful example of *pallt* under the heading of *pall* ‘failure, defect’.