

Early Irish Grammarians

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1. Introduction

The study of language in western Europe has its roots in the early medieval Church's need to teach newly recruited monks and clergy the rudiments of Latin, and to develop that competence in the pursuit of ecclesiastical learning. To this end, descriptive grammars of Latin written during the later Roman imperial period were copied, adapted and elaborated according to pedagogic need. This happened everywhere in Europe. In Ireland, however, grammatical scholarship developed in ways that were unique throughout the early medieval centuries. Specifically, Roman grammatical analysis was applied to the Irish vernacular, etymological dictionaries of Irish were compiled, and there was considerable interest in the historical development of the language. The aim of this paper is to show why these developments occurred.

2. Latin grammar in early medieval Europe

By the late fifth century, the Christian Church had effectively become a branch of the imperial civil service. This had far-reaching consequences for the development of the medieval Church and of medieval European states more generally. The one that concerns the present discussion most directly is the Roman Church's pronounced scholarly character. The higher levels of the imperial civil service were controlled by well-educated members of the politically and economically dominant segments of Roman society, and the Church was no exception. Popes, bishops, priests and major monastic officers were typically drawn from the upper middle class and the aristocracy. This resulted in a Church which interpreted its core scripture – the Bible – using the intellectual tools provided by Roman education: Greek philosophy, Roman law and rhetoric. By the start of the Middle Ages, Christian teaching amounted to much more than the Bible. It also included a large corpus of interpretative writing by the Church Fathers, of doctrinal formulations by ecclesiastical councils, of canon law, and of devotional literature.

From the late fifth century onwards, the Church set about establishing itself in the barbarian kingdoms of western and central Europe. The first

priority, always and everywhere, was royal patronage, for without it churches and monasteries could not be built. Once that was in hand, monks and clergy had to be locally recruited and trained (for what follows, see Riche 1962). As a bare minimum, such recruits had to be able to read and understand the New Testament together with the liturgy; later, a start could be made on the penumbra of interpretive, doctrinal, and devotional material mentioned in the preceding paragraph. All of this material was in Latin, but Classical Latin was no longer a spoken vernacular anywhere in the West. This is self-evidently true of those European territories where Latin had either never been spoken – present-day Germany, Scandinavia and Ireland – or confined to the ruling class – Britain and northern Gaul; but it also applied even in former Latin-speaking areas such as southern Gaul and Italy itself, where romance dialects were already well developed and the imperial educational system had broken down. Ecclesiastical recruits consequently had to be taught Latin *ab initio*. This was accomplished by means of textbooks of Latin grammar written several centuries before for use in Roman schools (Law 1982, Ch. 2). These Roman grammars ranged from introductory manuals such as Donatus' *Ars Minor*, which emphasised rote learning of paradigms as a first step in acquiring a knowledge of correct inflection, to more advanced grammars such as Donatus' *Ars Maior* and Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae*, which dealt more generally with correct idiomatic usage and matters of literary style. These grammars were designed for use by native speakers of Latin, and assumed a great deal of intuitive knowledge of the language. For non-native speakers, they were inadequate in many respects, often woefully so – syntax, for example, was simply not dealt with, and had to be inferred from reading of texts. Early medieval teachers of Latin grammar therefore began to produce their own manuals to make good some of these deficiencies, though they never strayed very far from their Roman models.

3. *Latin grammar in Ireland*

Christianity came to Ireland comparatively early (Hughes 1966). When St. Patrick undertook his mission in the later fifth century there were already Christian communities in Ireland: Patrick refers to them in his own writings, and place-names show that such communities were not confined to his sphere of activity in the north-east, but were to be found all over the country. In the course of the sixth century the Church gradually integrated itself into Irish social structure, and by the seventh the process was essentially complete.

The first evidence of Latin scholarship in Irish monasteries appears in the second half of the sixth century, and by the mid-seventh identifiable monastic schools such as Iona, Durrow and Armagh emerge (Kenney 1957;

Bischoff 1966; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985). Such schools produced not only the staples of the religious life – bibles, psalters, penitentials – but also works of biblical exegesis, computistical texts and hagiography. Unsurprisingly, Irish copies and adaptations of Classical Latin grammars start to appear about this time as well. The two *Artes* by Donatus and Isidore of Seville's brief grammar in the *Etymologiae* were known by the mid-seventh century, and Priscian's *Institutiones* by c.800; the earliest native Irish productions included the *Anonymus ad Cuimannum* and the *Ars Malsachani* (Law 1982, Chs. 4–6).

4. *The study of the vernacular in Ireland*

There was nothing inevitable about the extension of Latin grammatical scholarship to any of the vernaculars of early medieval Europe. Latin grammar was studied not for its intrinsic interest, but as a means to an end. It was the language of Christian texts, and so knowledge of it was a necessary condition for the professionally religious. And, because Latin was the canonical language of Christianity, it became the medium for medieval ecclesiastical scholarship. The vernacular, on the other hand, was by definition perfectly comprehensible, and nothing of any interest to a churchman was written in it; indeed, most of western Europe was just emerging from preliteracy, and nothing at all was written in it. There was, in short, no reason whatever for the early medieval Church to take an interest in the study of the vernacular, and as a matter of fact it didn't anywhere in Europe at any time in the early Middle Ages. Anywhere, that is, except Ireland. The rest of this section is devoted to explaining this exception.

The Celts emerged as an identifiable culture in central southern Europe round about the first millennium BC (Filip 1977, *Die Kelten* 1980). Soon thereafter they began to expand their influence over large areas of Europe and beyond: the Balkans and as far afield as Asia Minor to the east, Italy to the south, Gaul and Spain to the west, the Low Countries, Britain and Ireland to the north. By the second century BC the Celts were the dominant cultural force in Europe. Thereafter, however, their fortunes were to decline very rapidly. A new and aggressive Germanic culture was emerging to the north and east, while in the south the Roman Empire, already spreading around the Mediterranean basin, was turning its attention north of the Alps. By the middle of the first century BC the Germans had occupied the territories to the east of the Rhine; the campaigns of Julius Caesar subjugated the Celts of Gaul in very short order, and Britain succumbed in the next century. Following incorporation into the Empire, romanisation of Celtic institutions proceeded apace and produced distinctive Gallo-Roman and Romano-British cultures in Gaul and Britain respectively. These were in their turn overlaid during the period of Germanic invasions and

settlement of western Europe from the third century onward. But geographically remote Ireland was never incorporated into the Empire and was untouched by the Germanic invasions until the coming of the Vikings, and even these were limited in their impact. In other words, Celtic culture in Ireland had been able to develop free from major foreign influence for many centuries.

Classical and Irish sources both describe the druids as an important aspect of Celtic culture (Piggott 1968; Moisl 1987). A great deal has been written about these druids since romanticism took hold in late-eighteenth century Europe, most of it utter nonsense. They were, in fact, a priesthood of the sort attested among pre-literate societies at various times and places throughout the world, and they are the key to understanding the development of an interest in the Irish vernacular.

The druids occupied a socially prestigious and politically influential position in Celtic society (Moisl 1987). The basis of Celtic political organisation was tribal. Each tribe was ruled by a king, and each king had a druid in his court whose legally defined status, and hence social rights and privileges, were equal to his own. That status derived from the druid's broadly tripartite function. Firstly, he administered the cult of sacral kingship, which derived royal authority from the sanction of the tribal deity: the druid was custodian of the relevant mythology and associated ritual, and so was able to bestow and reiterate that authority on public occasions. Secondly, the druid maintained tribal and, more narrowly, royal dynastic history on behalf of his patron, and was thus crucial in determining such things as historically based royal prerogatives and rights of succession. And thirdly, the druid oversaw the administration of justice within the tribe, and advised the king in his role as ultimate legal arbiter.

The druids were able to discharge these functions by virtue of the corpus of orally transmitted knowledge which they, as an order, maintained and transmitted from generation to generation: history, law, mythology and ritual (Moisl 1987). In the cultivation of this traditional knowledge, the druids were highly disciplined. Druidical schools existed in which students spent years – Julius Caesar says twenty among the Gauls, the Irish sources say twelve – memorising the entire corpus of oral tradition. To aid in memorisation, the material was in verse form; because it was transmitted from generation to generation in a fixed and memorised metrical format, its language tended to remain unchanged and thereby tended to become archaic relative to the current vernacular.

Wherever the Church went in barbarian Europe, a main priority was to eliminate the existing pagan religion and any associated priesthood. Bede's description of the Roman missionary Paulinus' encounter with the pagan Germanic priest Coifi in the court of the Northumbrian king Edwin (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, II.13) is a well-known example. In the event,

paganism appears not to have been a major problem for the Church, at least among those segments of the native population that mattered; though it survived among the population at large for centuries after official Christian conversion, the aristocracy accepted Christianity with surprising willingness, and institutionalised paganism disappeared very quickly. Once again, Ireland was the exception. Early missionaries correctly saw the druids as a pagan priesthood, and therefore as the enemy, but the druids did not fade away as elsewhere. Why the Irish did not follow the general European pattern is not clear. One possibility is that the druids were more highly organised and influential in Irish society than Germanic priests were elsewhere in Europe. Whatever the explanation, the druids in Ireland survived by evolving in the face of Christian conversion. Specifically, they abandoned their sacral aspect, but retained their politically and socially influential position, together with their schools (Moisl 1987). In this form, they coexisted with the established Christian Church throughout the early Middle Ages and beyond.

By the seventh century, then, there were two professional learned orders in Ireland, each with its own structures and schools. On the one hand was the Church, as elsewhere in Europe, using Latin for its business. On the other was the reformed druidical order, now instantiated in the *fili* (the court poet) and the *brithem* (the legal specialist), whose work was done in Irish. There is virtually no evidence of antagonism between the two. There is, however, plenty of evidence of contact, of cross-fertilisation, and even, in some cases, of amalgamation (Moisl 1987). The best example is Cennfaelad mac Ailello, a member of the Ui Neill royal dynasty who, having been injured at the battle of Mag Roth in 637, gave up secular life and turned to learning. But learning of what sort? The Irish annals record the death of 'Cennfaelad sapiens' in 678; the term *sapiens* is used in these annals exclusively of monastic scholars. That was not all, however. There is an early account of Cennfaelad's injury and subsequent career. He was, it says, taken to be healed at a house which was

... at the meeting of three streets, between the houses of three sages. And there were three schools in the place: a school of *leigenn* (Latin learning), a school of *fenechas* (secular legal learning), and a school of *filidecht* (poetic learning). And whatever he heard recounted in the three schools every day, he memorised every night, and he put it into poetic form, and he wrote it onto slates and tablets, and then wrote it into a parchment book. (O'Donovan 1865-1901, Vol. 3, 88)

The three streets and three schools are obviously too schematic to be literally true. The account does, however, capture the essence of the situation in the early seventh century: the rise of scholars whose competence spanned both ecclesiastical and traditional learning, and the application of literacy to the redaction of material that had in earlier times existed

exclusively in oral tradition. Nor was *Cennfaelad* unique. Examples of scholars who combined Latin and traditional native learning are relatively abundant. A very early example is Colman mac Leneni, a court poet who founded the monastery of Cloyne near present-day Cork and became its first abbot round about 600 AD (Thurneysen 1931). Somewhat later are Ruman mac Colmain (*ob.* 742), described in the *Annals* as 'a scholar of ecclesiastical learning, of history, and of secular poetry' (O'Donovan 1856, *sub anno* 742), and Flann Mainistrech (*ob.* 1056), 'the chief ecclesiastical scholar and expert in native law of all Ireland' (Hennessey and MacCarthy 1887-1901, *sub anno* 1056). Indeed, so common were such scholars that the Irish law tracts explicitly categorise them, and assign to each category the status assessments which were fundamental to an individual's legal rights in the native legal system. The *ro-sui* (great sage) has a status equal to that of a king or a bishop, and is expert in *filidecht*, *leigenn* and *coimgne*, a term which defies easy translation but refers in general to historical-cum-genealogical learning which the native court poets cultivated (O'Donovan 1865-1901, Vol. 4, 354-6).

The necessary conditions for the application of Latin grammatical scholarship to the Irish language demonstrably existed in individuals such as those just mentioned, and in the schools, both monastic and druidical, where they worked. The motivation, however, is not yet clear. The explanation for it lies in large part with the publication of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* in 636 AD. Isidore was an ecclesiastical scholar of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain (Brunholzl 1975, 74ff.). His interests were wide-ranging. Indeed, he explicitly intended the *Etymologiae* as a compendium of all worthwhile human knowledge in twenty books. Thus, the first three books are on the seven liberal arts, the fourth on medicine, the fifth on law, and so on. To Irish scholars, relatively starved of Mediterranean books and learning at the edge of the known world (Contreni 1986), the arrival of this encyclopedia round about the mid-seventh century was a major event, and Isidore's influence can be discerned in most Irish exegetical and grammatical work of the seventh and later centuries (Bischoff 1966). It also marked the beginning of Irish scholars' interest in their own language. Why?

In Book 9 of the *Etymologiae*, Isidore dealt with the descent of European languages and peoples from Noah through subsequent biblical history into more recent times, and thereby in effect defined a European Christian community. The Irish were not included. They therefore set about incorporating themselves into Isidore's scheme by inventing a line of descent of the Irish and their language from Noah through Egypt and Spain to Ireland. The results of this work can be seen in *Lebor Gabala*, 'The Book of Invasions' (Macalister 1938-56), an elaborate compilation which in its present form dates from c.1100 AD, but whose beginnings can be traced into the seventh century. It is an amalgam of pagan Irish mythology, native

tribal and royal dynastic history, biblical narrative and material taken from the *Etymologiae*, and it exemplifies the blending of native, originally druidical learning and ecclesiastical learning characteristic of the hybrid scholarship described earlier. A feature of the *Lebor Gabala* tradition is the interest not only in the place of the Irish in more general world history, but also in the relationship between Irish and other languages, above all Latin. Given the scholarly context in which *Lebor Gabala* originated, the reason for this is easy to see. Much of that scholarship was in Irish, and so, unlike other European vernaculars at the time, the Irish language enjoyed an institutionalised prestige alongside Latin in monastic as well as druidical schools.

The influence of the *Etymologiae* is also discernible in compilations which, on several criteria, look like dictionaries. These are the so-called 'glossaries' – actually lists of Irish words, mainly technical and archaic, together with meanings, etymologies and textual attestations. The earliest of these nascent Irish-language dictionaries dates from the late ninth century (Meyer 1919) but, again, their origins can be traced to the seventh. The notion of such word-lists, and more especially the use and format of the etymologies, point unmistakably to Book 10 of the *Etymologiae*, where Isidore has lists strikingly like the Irish ones. The similarity can in part be explained by a simple desire by Irish scholars to emulate the work of a respected author, but the chief motivation was more practical. Etymological dictionaries had a direct application in the study of native learning, and particularly of law. It was noted earlier that oral transmission of traditional druidical lore tended to preserve archaic linguistic usage, which could make interpretation difficult. The problem was compounded in legal material by extensive use of technical vocabulary. When the corpus of traditional law was given literary form in the seventh century (Kelly 1988), some of it was comprehensible and some of it was not. The process of interpreting obscure material began almost immediately, and continued for centuries thereafter in the form of commentaries on the canonical seventh-century text. One of the main preoccupations of the commentators was to establish etymologies for obscure words in the belief that knowledge of a word's origin revealed its 'true' meaning, a notion that Isidore states explicitly in Book 10. Seen in the context of this sort of scholarly activity, the Irish etymological dictionaries had a direct application in native legal schools; Isidore provided the scholars with an interpretative tool.

A third aspect of Irish interest in the vernacular is not directly attributable to the influence of the *Etymologiae*: the grammatical description of the Irish language. Rather, the impetus must have come from the more general study of Latin grammar described earlier. An early medieval descriptive grammar of Old Irish exists. It comprises part of *Auraicept na n-Eces* (Calder 1917; Thurneysen 1927), a compilation of material with a strongly linguistic orientation dating from – very approximately – the early

eighth to the eleventh century. The *Auraicept* begins with an excursus on the origin of the Irish language which is closely related to the *Lebor Gabala* tradition, whereby Irish was supposed to have originated at the Tower of Babel; this section is attributed to Cennfaelad mac Aillello. It is followed by a section on the origin of the alphabet. Thereafter come several relatively long sections on Irish grammar which are concerned mainly with nominal inflection and the use of prepositions. The analytical framework is taken directly from contemporary Latin grammars, and there is an emphasis on comparison of Irish and Latin usage. These grammatical parts are in their turn followed by chapters on metrics. What prompted such a compilation? *Eces* means 'court poet', and the title of the work translates as 'The court poet's primer', which suggests that it was intended for use of trainee poets in poetical schools. The make-up of the *Auraicept* supports this: a section on linguistic history, another on Irish grammar, and a third on metrics; the latter two sections are heavily tutorial in nature, stressing correct linguistic and metrical usage. On this interpretation, the motivation for grammatical description of the Irish language was entirely practical, and paralleled the study of Latin grammar in ecclesiastical schools: where monks learned correct Latin usage, professional court poets were taught correct Irish usage in their poems.

The impetus given to the study of the Irish vernacular in the seventh and eighth centuries was not subsequently developed. The very form of *Lebor Gabala*, the law tracts, and to some extent the *Auraicept* testify to this: early stratum of material surrounded by an elaborate interpretative commentary which attempts to understand what the early text means, but which offers no substantial advances over it. The early stratum became canonical, and, in the minds of the commentators, that precluded any improvement. Such was the state of Irish linguistic scholarship throughout the middle ages and on into the seventeenth century, when Cromwell's subjugation of the Irish finally put an end to the unique druidical-ecclesiastical tradition of learning which had developed a thousand years before (Flower 1949).

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