The Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is a yearly spring conference organised by postgraduate students of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. Information on the next Colloquium, including details of registration and submission of abstracts, may be found on the Colloquium's official website: **http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/ccasnc/**.

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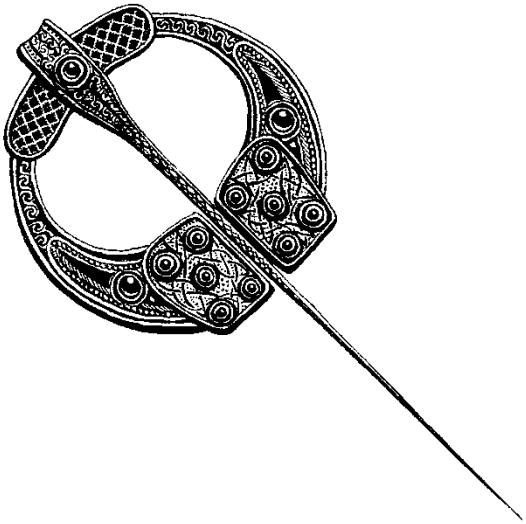

# *UAESTIO INSULARIS*

*Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| eDIL | *eDIL: Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, edited by Gregory Toner, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Sharon Arbuthnot, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf and Dagmar Wodtko (www.dil.ie, 2020) |
| *JEGP* | *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* |
| K4 | *Klaeber's 'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburg', Fourth Edition*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) |
| MRTS | Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies |
| NFCS | National Folklore Collection (Schools' Collection) |
| *PMLA* | *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* |
| *SMMD* | *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, ed. by Rudolf Thurneysen (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1935) |

# PREFACE

The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is proud to be associated with *Quaestio Insularis*, the journal of the annual Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (CCASNC). The Colloquium and *Quaestio* were established in 1999 and 2000 by the department's lively postgraduate community, and successive generations of students have maintained the superb quality of both the event and its proceedings volume. The 2020 conference, on the theme of Disorder and Dishonesty, was another very successful event which saw a stimulating array of papers given by postgraduate students from a wide range of institutions. Following the example of Dr Francis Leneghan's insightful keynote lecture on Beowulf and the Staffordshire Hoard, the papers published in this volume showcase the cross-disciplinary ethos which distinguishes CCASNC, combining research into the peoples and cultures of early medieval Northern Europe from literary, historical, linguistic and material perspectives. *Quaestio Insularis* 21 and all back numbers of the journal can be ordered directly from the Department's website (www.asnc.cam.ac.uk).

Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, FSA

Head of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic

University of Cambridge

## COLLOQUIUM REPORT

The 21st Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic took place in Room GR06/07 of the Faculty of English on Saturday 8 February 2020. This year's Colloquium saw a wide range of fascinating papers on the theme of 'Disorder and Dishonesty'. Nine postgraduate speakers from across the United Kingdom and further afield were invited to discuss their research. We were especially delighted to welcome this year's keynote speaker, Dr Francis Leneghan, University of Oxford. The papers given at the 2020 Colloquium exhibited an impressively wide range of topics and each was followed by a fruitful and engaging discussion. As the day drew to a close, we gave thanks to our speakers and the organising committee and enjoyed a well-deserved post-conference wine reception to continue discussion on the papers of the day. After a conference which brought order to disorder and was more honest than dishonest, the attendees retired to Wolfson College, Cambridge for dinner. The 'disorderly' theme of the conference proved to foreshadow what was to follow, as this in-person conference was one of the final chances for scholars to gather before the onset of the pandemic!

Session I (*Chair: Eleanor Smith*)

Flannery McIntyre, 'Dishonest Narratives: Material Evidence for Slavery in 5th–8th Century England'

Emmet Taylor, 'Conall Cernach and Kinslaying in a Narrative Context'

Sven Rossel, 'Reconstructing Manuscripts, Assembling Scriptoria: A Puzzle of Danish Manuscript Fragments and their Scribes in 12th Century Lund'

Session II (*Chair: Lee Colwill*)

Alisa Valpola-Walker, 'Testing the Boundaries of History: *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* in AM 589f 4to'

Courtney Selvage, '"I am the lion destroying cattle, I am the bear for courage": An Examination of the 16th Century *Betha Naile*'

Ashley Castelino, 'The Sámi in *Heimskringla*: Disorderly Giants or Óðinnic Family?'

Plenary Speaker (*Chair: Brittany Hanlon*)

Dr Francis Leneghan, 'Dishonouring the Dead: *Beowulf* and the Staffordshire Hoard'

Session III (*Chair: Kathryn A. Haley-Halinski*)

Anouk Nuijten, 'Subverted Heroism in *Aided Cheit maic Mágach*'

Markus Mindrebo, '*Þá brá hon knífi'*: Female assassins in Snorri's *Heimskringla*'

Kayla Kemhadjian, 'Such Great Heights: Discord in the Written Record of Self-killings in Late 10th Century England'

The members of the colloquium committee for 2019–20 were Kathryn A. Haley-Halinski, Lee Colwill, Eleanor Smith, Brigid K. Ehrmantraut, Calum Platts, Patrick McAlary and Brittany Hanlon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Quaestio Insularis* 21 was edited by Kathryn A. Haley-Halinski, Lee Colwill, Eleanor Smith, Brigid K. Ehrmantraut, Calum Platts, Patrick McAlary and Brittany Hanlon. The editors wish to acknowledge the assistance of our anonymous peer reviewers. Editorial design is by Alistair Vining and the *Quaestio Insularis* logo was drawn by Katharine Scarfe Beckett. The production of this volume and the successful running of the conference have been made possible through the generosity of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic and the support of the Faculty of English.

# Dishonouring the Dead: *Beowulf* and the Staffordshire Hoard

Dr Francis Leneghan
University of Oxford

## 'BEOWULF' AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The discovery of a seventh-century princely ship burial at Sutton Hoo in 1939 was immediately heralded as a major breakthrough in the understanding of *Beowulf*.[1] During the late twentieth century, however, as the old consensus that *Beowulf* was a product of 'the age of Bede' or 'the age of Sutton Hoo' began to crumble, scholars became increasingly sceptical about the use of archaeological evidence in discussions of the poem. In his contribution to the 1981 volume *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, for instance, Eric Stanley cautioned:

> Whenever a piece of dark-age Britain is lit up by knowledge, Sutton Hoo, Bede, Aldhelm, Offa, Alcuin, Alfred, Athelstan, it is tempting to connect with it our unique poem. […] The connection of *Beowulf* with Sutton Hoo is attractive, yet it remains unproven.[2]

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[1] See esp. Sune Lindquist, 'Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*', *Antiquity*, 22 (1948), 131–40; Charles L. Wrenn, 'Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*', in *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie*: *Fernand Mossé in Memoriam* (Paris: Dider, 1959), pp. 495–507, repr. in *An Anthology of 'Beowulf' Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 311–30; J. L. N. O'Loughlin, 'Sutton Hoo—The Evidence of the Documents', *Medieval Archaeology*, 8 (1964), 1–19; Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*', in *'Beowulf' and its Analogues*, ed. and trans. by G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1971), pp. 350–64; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo and the Background to the Poem', in Ritchie Girvan, *'Beowulf' and the Seventh Century: Language and Content*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 85–98; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London: Gollancz, 1974), esp. pp. 55–60, 258–59; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *et al*., *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (London: British Museum, 1975–83). See also J. D. Mosteller, Jr., 'A Case for the East Anglian Provenance of *Beowulf*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 7 (1992), 124–40; Barbara Raw, 'Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. by Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), pp. 167–74; Sam D. Newton, *The Origins of 'Beowulf' and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993). For a recent study of the burial, see Georgina Pitt, 'The Enigmatic Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: Fresh Insights from Assemblage Theory', *Parergon*, 36 (2019), 1–29. See further Catherine M. Hills, '*Beowulf* and Archaeology', in *A 'Beowulf' Handbook*, ed. by Robert. E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 291–310.

[2] Eric G. Stanley, 'The Date of *Beowulf*: Some Doubts and No Conclusions', in *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 197–212 (p. 202).

Stanley's views were echoed by Roberta Frank in a celebrated 1992 essay, which memorably characterised *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo as an 'odd couple' who, despite appearances, have little in common.[3] Frank stressed that *Beowulf* is a 'work of the imagination', a poem whose material culture 'is that of the conventional apparatus of heroic poetry' and whose archaeological horizon stretches 'from late Roman times to the Norman Conquest'.[4] Nevertheless, in 2000 Gale Owen-Crocker reminded us that *Beowulf*-scholarship still has much to learn from archaeological discoveries such as Sutton Hoo, regardless of when or where we think the poem was composed:

> It would be as wrong-headed to refuse admission of the Sutton Hoo evidence to *Beowulf* as it would be to over-stress it or to blinker oneself to the possibility of evidence from other sources and other dates.[5]

In 2009 the largest ever haul of Anglo-Saxon treasure was unearthed in a field near Hammerwich, Staffordshire, by Terry Herbert, a local metal-detectorist. The hoard comprises over 4000 fragments, the vast majority of which are silver and gold fittings taken from the hilts of high-status weapons.[6] Over 200 sword-hilts and more than 80 pommels were recovered, many of them finely decorated with inlaid garnets and intricate zoomorphic designs, as well as parts of what may once have been a spectacular and probably royal helmet. There are also several

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[3] Roberta Frank, '*Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo: The Odd Couple', in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, Medieval Cultures, 5, ed. by Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 47–64 (pp. 324–25). Frank had earlier argued for dating *Beowulf* to the ninth or tenth century, see Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', in *Dating*, ed. Chase, pp. 123–49.

[4] Frank's views are echoed in *Klaeber's 'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburg', Fourth Edition*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. clxviii–clxix. All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from this edition (henceforth K4), though I have silently deleted editorial markers and hyphenated compounds. All other Old English poems are cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition*, 6 vols, ed. George Phillip Krapp and Elliot van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–52). Translations are my own.

[5] Gale Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in 'Beowulf' and the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 30. Owen-Crocker fruitfully explores links between Sutton Hoo and the funerals of Scyld Scefing, Hildeburh's kin and Beowulf, as well as the Lay of the Last Survivor (pp. 114–32).

[6] Chris Fern, 'Characterizing the Objects', in *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, ed. by Chris Fern, Tania Dickinson and Leslie Webster (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2019), pp. 30–121 (p. 30).

Christian objects, including eight gold crucifixes and a strip with a Latin biblical inscription.[7] The absence of female jewellery, brooches or coins, combined with the strongly martial character of the majority of the items, suggests that we are looking at the looted property of a small army. Dated to *c*. 650–750, the Staffordshire Hoard therefore provides an unparalleled window onto the aristocratic warrior culture of this period. More specifically, as Chris Fern has recently commented, the items within the hoard were probably 'part of the proceeds' of the dynastic wars between Mercia and its powerful rivals: East Anglia, Kent and Northumbria.[8]

The discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard presents new opportunities—and challenges—for *Beowulf* scholarship. Recent research on the dating and provenance of *Beowulf* indicates that we might tentatively place the poem within a broadly similar cultural milieu. Most significantly, in his 1992 study of the metre and language of Old English verse, R. D. Fulk concluded that *Beowulf* was probably composed before *c*. 725 if the poet was Mercian, or before *c*. 825 if Northumbrian in origin, adding: 'although the evidence for a Mercian origin for *Beowulf* is not incontestable, neither is it inconsiderable'.[9] Since then, a number of studies of the poem's language, metre and culture have strengthened the case for situating *Beowulf* in an Anglian kingdom before the Viking age.[10] The Mercian royal house traced its ancestry back to the line of King Offa of Angeln, a hero celebrated in *Beowulf* (1944a–62) and *Widsith* (35–44),[11] and I have argued elsewhere that the wars between Mercia and Northumbria in this period form an attractive context within which to read the poem's tales of dynastic strife among the Scyldings, Scylfings and Hrethlings.[12] In addition to these linguistic

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[7] For a full description and analysis of all the items, see *Staffordshire Hoard*, ed. Fern, Dickinson and Webster. See also Chris Fern and George Speake, *Birds, Beasts and Gods: Interpreting the Staffordshire Hoard* (Warwickshire: West Midlands History, 2014). Individual items can be viewed online at <http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk> [accessed 19 May 2021].

[8] Chris Fern, 'Date and Origin', in *Staffordshire Hoard*, ed. Fern, Dickinson and Webster, pp. 258–80 (p. 279).

[9] R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 385–91.

[10] For the case for early East Anglian provenance, see Newton, *Origins*. See further *The Dating of 'Beowulf': A Reassessment*, ed. by Leonard Neidorf, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 24 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014).

[11] See George Bond, 'Links Between *Beowulf* and Mercian History', *Studies in Philology*, 40 (1943), 481–93; Richard North, *The Origins of 'Beowulf': From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Francis Leneghan, 'The Poetic Purpose of the Offa Digression in *Beowulf*', *Review of English Studies*, 60 (2009), 538–60.

[12] Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 39 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), pp. 237–40.

and cultural links, there are a number of further points of contact between the hoard and the poem: for example, neither features money, and in both gold is more prevalent than other precious metals.[13] Such commonalities certainly invite further investigations into links between the hoard and *Beowulf*.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the hoard is the dismembered state of the items it contains. By contrast with princely burials such as Sutton Hoo, Taplow and Prittlewell, in which intact grave-goods were symbolically arranged to accompany the deceased on their journey to the next life, the items in the Staffordshire Hoard were crudely dismantled and effectively 'de-commissioned'.[14] The hilt-fittings, mounts and pommels, in particular, were prised from the sword-handles which they had once adorned, in some cases with tongs; no trace remains of the blades themselves, or indeed of any other weapons.[15] Similarly, the crucifixes and other items have been crushed or folded, as if they had been hurriedly stuffed into a bag. Moreover, while the treasures at Sutton Hoo, Taplow and Prittlewell were interred in prominent barrows, the Staffordshire Hoard, as Tom Shippey notes, 'seems to have been buried secretly,

[13] Rory Naismith has recently noted that the two references to *sceattas* in *Beowulf* (378a, 1686b) are just as likely to refer to wealth or goods in a general sense as to coins, 'The Economy of *Beowulf*', in *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R. D. Fulk*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 31, ed. by Leonard Neidorf, Rafael J. Pascual and Tom Shippey (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), pp. 371–91 (p. 373, n. 4). See further Ernst Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*', *Anglia*, 71 (1952), 259–73, trans. John D. Niles with the assistance of Shannon A. Dubenion-Smith, in John D. Niles, *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism, with Selected Readings* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 173–83. Viking-age Anglo-Saxon deposits such as the Watlington and Cuerdale hoards comprise mostly silver items, but the Staffordshire Hoard is dominated by gold. On the absence of silver in *Beowulf*, see K4, p. 137; and Naismith, 'Economy', pp. 380–82. The word *gold* appears in *Beowulf* as a simplex twenty-nine times, and as the first element of a compound a further twenty times. The importance of hoards in the poem is similarly borne out by lexical evidence: *hord* appears as a simplex twenty-four times and as the first or second element of a compound a further twenty-two times.

[14] For a discussion of the deliberate bending and destruction of swords in Viking culture, see Hanne Lovise Aannestad, 'Charisma, Violence and Weapons: The Broken Swords of the Vikings', in *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages*, ed. by Marianne Vedeler, Ingunn M. Røstad, Elna Siv Kristoffersen and Zanette T. Glørstad (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018), pp. 147–66.

[15] For a recent discussion of Anglo-Saxon sword-pommels and hilts, including those found in the Staffordshire Hoard, see Sue Brunning, *The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe: Experience, Identity, Representation*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 36 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019). The classic study is Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1962; repr. 1998).

in an unmarked field'.[16] Taken together, these features are more indicative of an act of practical hoarding or concealment than a votive offering.[17]

In a recent study, Barbara Yorke outlines three possible scenarios which might have resulted in the burial of this hoard: (1) the so-called 'Restoration of the *Iudeu*', when King Penda of Mercia shared out tribute from King Oswiu of Northumberland to the Welsh kings prior to the Battle of the Winwæd in 655; (2) the hiding of Mercian treasure after Penda's defeat at the Winwæd; and (3) an attempt by the descendants of Eowa, brother of Penda, 'to obliterate traces of their rivals' after the deaths of Penda's last descendants, Ceolred and Ceolwold, in 716.[18] While acknowledging that there are interesting parallels between the archaeological evidence and *Beowulf*, Yorke highlights one particular aspect of the hoard that, in her view, sets it apart from the world of Old English heroic poetry:

> The Staffordshire assemblage appears to reflect some aspects of the heroic culture presented in *Beowulf* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, but also provides some challenges to the impression they can give. […] The honour paid in heroic verse to swords and their personal biographies can make them seem akin to warriors themselves. *But the dismembered state of the sword-fittings in the Staffordshire assemblage may lead us into an area that the heroic verse does not dwell upon, namely, that which can bring honour can also be used to dishonour; just as a warrior can be killed, so can their weapons.*[19] (Emphasis added).

Certainly, the *Beowulf*-poet displays a great reverence for swords, weapons and treasure more generally, employing a rich array of compounds and other poetic words to describe them.[20] Weapons are closely identified with their owners and,

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[16] Tom Shippey, Review of *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, 'In an Unmarked Field', *London Review of Books*, 42 (2020) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n05/tom-shippey/in-an-unmarked-field> [accessed 8 April 2020].

[17] On the distinction between votive and practical hoarding, see Wade Tarzia, 'The Hoarding Ritual in Germanic Epic Tradition', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 26 (1989), 99–121 (pp. 99–101). For a survey of the various different models of hoarding practised across early medieval Europe, see Leslie Webster, Tania Dickinson, Peter Guest, Matthias Hardt and Svante Fischer, 'Hoards and Hoarding', in *Staffordshire Hoard*, ed. Fern, Dickinson and Webster, pp. 322–49.

[18] Barbara Yorke, 'Historical Background', in *Staffordshire Hoard*, ed. Fern, Dickinson and Webster, pp. 286–92 (pp. 289–92).

[19] Yorke, 'Historical Background', p. 292.

[20] See Caroline Brady, 'Weapons in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet's Use of Them', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 79–141.

on several occasions, are given personal names.[21] As a number of studies have demonstrated, the bestowal of treasure confers honour on the recipient.[22] Yet, the poet does not turn a blind eye to the violent manner in which such valuable items were typically acquired. Indeed, *Beowulf* contains numerous references to the dishonouring of the dead and their weapons, the looting of corpses and the denial of a proper burial to the defeated.[23] This article reappraises these passages in the light of the new archaeological evidence presented by the Staffordshire Hoard and, concurrently, asks whether the poem might prove useful in unlocking some of the mysteries of the hoard.

## THE LOOTING OF THE SLAIN IN OLD ENGLISH HEROIC VERSE

The practice of plundering corpses in the aftermath of battle suggested by the Staffordshire Hoard was commonplace throughout the early medieval period and

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[21] On the poet's frequent punning on *se ecg*, 'the sword', and *secg* 'man', see Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 76.

[22] See Elizabeth M. Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006), pp. 9–100; Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in 'Beowulf',* Anglo-Saxon Studies, 20 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), p. 38; Richard North, 'Gold and the Heathen Polity in *Beowulf*', and Winfried Rudolf, 'The Gold in *Beowulf* and the Currencies of Fame', both in *Gold in der europäischen Heldensage*, Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, Ergänzungsband, ed. by Wilhelm Heizmann, Victor Millet and Heike Sahm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 72–114, 115–41; Naismith, 'Economy'; Amy Faulkner, 'The Language of Wealth in Old English Literature: From the Conversion to Alfred', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2019; Denis Ferhatović, *Borrowed Objects and the Art of Poetry: Spolia in Old English Verse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 143–63. See also Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*'; Taylor Cuthbert, 'The Narrative Function of Beowulf's Swords', *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 13–20; Robert P. Creed, '*Beowulf* and the Language of Hoarding', in *Medieval Archaeology: Papers of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, MRTS, 60, ed. by Charles L. Redman (Binghampton, NY: State University of New York, 1989), pp. 159–64; David C. Van Meter, 'The Ritualized Presentation of Weapons and the Ideology of Nobility in *Beowulf*', *JEGP*, 95 (1996), 175–89; Paul Beekman Taylor, 'The Dragon's Treasure in *Beowulf*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 98 (1997), 229–40; William Cooke, 'Three Notes on Swords in *Beowulf*', *Medium Ævum*, 72 (2003), 302–07; Joseph E. Marshall, '*Goldgyfan* or *Goldwlance*: A Christian Apology for Beowulf and Treasure', *Studies in Philology*, 107 (2010), 1–24. On the poet's 'delight in material things', see further K4, pp. c–ci.

[23] See further Gale Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*: Mutilation, Decapitation, and the Unburied Dead', in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg*, MRTS, 252, ed. by Elaine Treharne and Susan Rosser (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), pp. 81–100.

is frequently depicted in Old English heroic poetry.[24] In *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, a Viking attempts to strip the wounded hero, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, of his *bēagas* […] *rēaf and hringas and gerenod swurd*, 'ringed ornaments […], booty and rings and decorated sword' (159–60).[25] However, if the English *fyrd* similarly plundered the corpses of fallen Vikings, the *Maldon*-poet chooses to remain silent on the matter.[26] In Old English biblical verse, by contrast, both the enemies of God and the chosen people engage in the act of looting the slain. Hence, while *Daniel* describes how Nebuchadnezzar plundered the Temple (56–74), in *Judith* it is the Bethulians who return to the battlefield to strip trophies from the corpses of the defeated Assyrians:

> Rūm wæs tō nimanne
> lond-būendum on ðām lāðestan,
> hyra eald-fēondum unlyfigendum
> heolfrig here-rēaf, hyrsta scȳne,
> bord ond brād-swyrd, brūne helmas,
> dȳre mādmas.
> (*Judith*, 313b–18a)
>
> There was room for the land-dwellers to take from those hated ones, their unliving ancient foes, bloodstained battle-plunder, shining ornaments, shield and broad sword, bright helmets, beloved treasures.

Once they have finished looting the Assyrians, the Bethulians return home in triumph bearing the helmets, swords and mail coats of their enemies, as well as the head and helmet of their leader, Holofernes (323b–41a). In the biblical source we simply read that the Bethulians 'went into the camp of the Assyrians, and took away the spoils which the Assyrians in their flight had left behind them', carrying away with them cattle, beasts and *mobilibus eorum*, 'their moveables' (Jud. 15.7–8). As Peter Baker comments, the poet has transformed the biblical passage to

[24] For a survey of looting in Old English verse and a range of late antique and early medieval Latin texts, as well as discussion of images of corpses being stripped of their armour on the Bayeux Tapestry, see Baker, *Honour*, pp. 35–76.

[25] *The Book of Ely*, from the twelfth century, records that the Vikings decapitated Byrhtnoth and took his head from the battlefield. For a translation, see Michael Allen and Daniel Calder, eds and trans., *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry, vol. 1: The Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 191–92.

[26] This silence might suggest the poet's distaste for such conduct, as well as his clear bias against the Vikings, who are referred to as *lāðe gystas*, 'hateful visitors' (86b) and *wæl-wulfas*, 'slaughter-wolves' (96a).

make it resemble scenes of looting after a battle that we find in other Old English heroic poems such as *Beowulf*.[27]

*Genesis A* describes how first the Elamites plundered Sodom and Gomorrah (1999b–2017), before Abraham recovered the treasures and womenfolk of Sodom by force (2092–95). In another expansion of a biblical source (Gen. 14.16–22), the poet depicts Abraham granting to Melchizedek *þæs here-tēames/ ealles tēoðan sceat*, 'the tenth part of all that war-booty' (2121b–22a). In *Elene*, Cynewulf presents Constantine's army *hūðe hrēmig*, 'rejoicing in plunder' (149a) after their victory over the Huns, a detail absent from the *Acta Cyriaci* but which echoes Grendel's attack on Heorot (*Beowulf*, 124a).[28] Similarly, the final lines of *Exodus* describe the Israelites seizing *here-rēaf*, 'battle-plunder', from the corpses of drowned Egyptians after the Crossing of the Red Sea, as well as the subsequent redistribution of the spoils to the victors:[29]

> þā wæs ēðfynde  Afrisc mēowle
> on geofones staðe  golde geweorðod.
> Handa hōfon  hals-wurðunge,
> blīðe wæron,  bōte gesāwon,
> hēddon here-rēafes,  hæft wæs onsæled.
> Ongunnon sæ-lāfe  segnum dælan
> on ȳð-lāfe,  ealde mādmas,
> rēaf and randas.  Hēo on riht sceōdon
> gold and god-web,  Iosepes gestrēon,
> wera wuldor-gesteald.  Werigend lāgon
> on dēað-stede,  driht-folca mæst.
> (*Exodus*, 580–90).

> Then it was easy to find the African woman on the shore of the water, adorned with gold. Hands lifted up neck-rings, they were happy, they saw the reward, possessed the war-booty, they were released from captivity. The survivors of the sea began to dole out

[27] Baker, *Honour*, pp. 47–48.

[28] The *Acta Cyriaci* simply records that Constantine massacred the Huns; for a translation, see Allen and Calder, pp. 60–69 (p. 61).

[29] Cf. Ex. 14.31: *et viderunt Aegyptios mortuos super litus maris et manum magnam quam exercuerat Dominus contra eos timuitque populus Dominum et crediderunt Domino et Mosi servo eius*, 'And they saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore, and the mighty hand that the Lord had used against them: and the people feared the Lord, and they believed the Lord, and Moses his servant.' For debate as to the identity of the 'African woman', see Zacharias P. Thundy, '*Afrisc Meowle* and the Old English *Exodus*', *Neophilologus*, 64 (1980), 297–306.

> treasures among the men on the beach, ancient wealth, plunder and shields. They divided up the gold and good cloth by rights, Joseph's treasures, the glorious possessions of men. The guards lay in the place of death, the greatest of lordly people.

The absence of these looting-scenes from their respective Latin sources, and the participation of both God's chosen people and their enemies in this activity, suggests that these poems to some degree reflect contemporary Anglo-Saxon custom. As such, these literary accounts hint at the violent social realities that might lie behind the deposit of the Staffordshire Hoard.

## THE LAY OF THE LAST SURVIVOR

The *Beowulf*-poet takes an equally sanguine view of the grim realities of the aftermath of battle, with several passages either directly describing or alluding to the looting of the slain and the dishonouring of the defeated through the denial of proper burial. As has been noted, perhaps the most immediate Beowulfian parallel with the Staffordshire Hoard is the so-called 'Lay of the Last Survivor'.[30] In this passage, the narrator describes the origins of the great treasure-hoard now guarded over by the dragon. Having witnessed the fall of his nation in battle, an unnamed man placed his people's treasures in a barrow for safekeeping, before addressing the earth itself in a moving apostrophe:[31]

> 'Heald þū nū, hrūse,  nū hæleð ne mōstan,
> eorla ǣhte.  Hwæt, hyt ǣr on ðē
> gōde begēaton;  gūð-dēað fornam,
> feorh-bealo frēcne  fȳra gehwylcne  2250
> lēoda mīnra,  þone ðe þis līf ofgeaf;
> gesāwon sele-drēamas.  Nāh hwā sweord wege
> oððe forð bere  fǣted wǣge,
> drync-fæt dēore;  duguð ellor sceōc.
> Sceal se hearda helm  hyrsted-golde,  2255
> fǣtum befeallen;  feormynd swefað,

[30] See, for example, Vanessa Thorpe, 'Anglo-Saxon Hoard Casts *Beowulf* and Mercia in a New Light', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2009, available at https://www.theguardian.com/science/2009/sep/27/anglo-saxon-treasure-hoard-staffordshire [accessed 19 May 2021].

[31] There are some discrepancies between this account of the origins of the dragon's hoard and that provided in lines 3049b–57, in which the narrator alludes to a curse placed on the same treasure. See K4, pp. 238–39.

> þā ðe beado-grīman  bȳwan sceoldon;
> gē swylce sēo here-pād,  sīo æt hilde gebād
> ofer borda gebræc  bite īrena,
> brosnað æfter beorne.  Ne mæg byrnan hring  2260
> æfter wīg-fruman  wīde fēran,
> hæleðum be healfe.  Næs hearpan wyn,
> gomen glēo-bēames,  nē gōd hafoc
> geond sæl swingeð,  nē se swifta mearh
> burh-stede bēateð.  Bealo-cwealm hafað  2265
> fela feorh-cynna  forð onsended.'
> (*Beowulf*, 2247–66)
>
> 'Hold you now, earth, now that warriors cannot, the possession of men. Indeed, the good ones got it from you before. Battle-slaughter took them away, terrible deadly affliction, each of the race of my people, of those who gave up this life, they had seen the last of hall-joys. I have no one to bear the sword, or to carry forth the decorated cup, the prized drinking vessel. The old troops have gone elsewhere. The fierce helmet, wound with gold, must be deprived of its treasures. The polishers sleep, those who should burnish the battle-visor; also the war-shirt, which at battle endured over the breaking of shields, the bite of irons, decays alongside the warrior. Nor may the ringed mail coat travel far after the war-chief, beside the warriors. Nor is there joy of the harp, delight of the joy-wood, nor does the good hawk swoop through the hall, nor does the swift steed beat across the courtyards. Dreadful death has sent forth a great many of the kin of the living.'

At first glance, the Survivor's careful, almost ceremonial placement of these treasures in a barrow, and his loving itemisation of each valuable object, seems closer to votive offerings such as Sutton Hoo or Taplow than the hastily stashed Staffordshire Hoard.[32] However, on closer inspection, a number of interesting parallels with the Staffordshire Hoard begin to emerge, inviting us to read this well-known passage in a new light. For example, the fact that the Survivor hid (*gehȳdde*) his nation's treasures in a place chosen for its inaccessibility (*nearo-cræftum fæst*), following the crushing defeat of an entire people in battle (*gūð-dēað fornam,/ feorh-bealo frēcne*), points to the opportunistic concealment of the

[32] Owen-Crocker argues that this passage describes the funeral of a nation, linking it to the three other funerals in the poem (of Scyld, Hildeburh's kin and Beowulf), *Four Funerals*, pp. 61–84.

loot. By committing these treasures to the earth, the Survivor may have been honouring his unburied fallen comrades with the funeral that they were denied by their enemies. Yet, comparison with the Staffordshire Hoard may hint at another, more pragmatic, dimension to the Last Survivor's actions, suggesting that he hid his people's treasures to prevent their enemies from returning to the battlefield to claim (or even reclaim) as trophies. Indeed, this theme of reclaimed treasure is implicit in the opening of the Survivor's address to the earth, from which, he says, these same treasures were formerly taken (2248b–49a).[33] As we have seen, the Staffordshire Hoard itself may have been hidden by a Mercian survivor of the Battle of the Winwæd in 655 in order to prevent looting by Northumbrian enemies.[34] In such a scenario, the Lay of the Last Survivor might have spoken eloquently to a contemporary Mercian audience about the shame of defeat and the need to protect national wealth from enemies.

## THE MARRIAGE OF FREAWARU AND INGELD

Treasures recovered from the battlefield might be prominently worn by a warrior to symbolise their victory. However, as *Beowulf* demonstrates, the public display of looted items could also be viewed as an affront, resulting in further bloodshed. On his triumphant return from Denmark, Beowulf tells Hygelac about Hrothgar's plan to bring about a truce between the Scyldings and their neighbours, the Heathobards, through the marriage of his only daughter, Freawaru, to Ingeld, son of King Froda. In the hero's estimation, all such attempts at peace-weaving are futile, given the overriding impulse to avenge the death of kinsmen (2029b–31). To illustrate his point, Beowulf invites his audience to envisage a scene in which an old Heathobard warrior takes offence at the sight of one of Freawaru's attendants, decked out in looted armour:

> On him gladiað  gomelra lāfe,
> heard ond hring-mǣl  Heaða-Beardna gestrēon,
> þenden hīe ðām wǣpnum  wealdan mōston —
> oð ðæt hīe forlǣddan  tō ðām lind-plegan
> swǣse gesīðas  ond hyra sylfra feorh.
> (*Beowulf*, 2036–40)

> On him glistens the treasure of the Heathobards, ancient heirloom, fierce and ring-marked, when they were able to wield weapons —

[33] The same hoard is returned once again to the earth during Beowulf's funeral (3163–68).
[34] Yorke, 'Historical Background', p. 292.

> until their own dear comrades led to destruction at that shield-play both them (i.e. the weapons) and their own lives.[35]

Beowulf goes on to predict that the *eald æsc-wiga*, 'old spear-warrior' (2042a), enraged by the sight of this Dane *frætwum hrēmig*, 'rejoicing in treasures' (2054a), will incite a young Heathobard to strike him down; the youngster will thereby avenge his own father's death and reclaim the looted *mēce*, 'blade', that by rights should belong to him (2041b–69a).[36] This poetic passage serves as a useful reminder of the great power that weapons could still wield even after the death of their owners. Considered within this literary context, the practice of dismantling and burying weapons attested by the Staffordshire Hoard might be viewed as an attempt not only to dishonour the dead but also to erase them from memory.

## THE FRANKS PLUNDER HYGELAC'S CORPSE

The fall of Hygelac during a raid on Frankish territory is referred to more times than any other event in the poem, save the hero's own impending death.[37] This story appears to have been the subject of a popular legend as early as the seventh century.[38] One reason why the poet is so interested in the theme of Hygelac's death is that it provides him with an opportunity to meditate on the fate of looted treasure. First, as the Danish queen, Wealhtheow, rewards Beowulf for his victory over Grendel with the gift of *heals-bēaga mǣst*, 'the greatest of neck-rings' (1197b), the narrator compares this great treasure with the legendary

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[35] The meaning of these lines is contested, in particular whether the subject is the weapons themselves or the Heathobards, see K4, pp. 231–32.

[36] The audience of the poem, learned in Scandinavian royal legend, would not need reminding that the reawakening of this same feud would result in the burning of Hrothgar's royal hall, an event already alluded to in *Beowulf* (82b–85) and mentioned also in *Widsith* (45–9). Similarly, in the Finnsburg Episode, it is the contemplation of a sword that compels Hengest to act, with devastating consequences (1142–59a).

[37] For discussion of this 'leitmotif', see Arthur Brodeur, *The Art of 'Beowulf'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 78–9. See also Frederick M. Biggs, 'History and Fiction in the Frisian Raid', in *Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. Neidorf, pp. 138–56; and now Edward Currie, 'Hygelac's Raid in Historiography and Poetry: The King's Necklace and *Beowulf* as "Epic"', *Neophilologus*, 104 (2020), 391–400.

[38] On the legend of Hygelac, see Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 52–53; Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 98–99; Michael Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi Medievali*, 3rd Series, 23 (1982), 151–92 (pp. 176–79); Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, pp. 121–26.

*Brōsinga mene*, 'necklace of the Brosings' (1199b), itself stolen from Eormenric, king of the Goths, by Hama.[39] Then, we learn that this same ring will one day be looted from Hygelac's corpse by Frankish warriors:[40]

> Þone hring hæfde  Higelāc Gēata,
> nefa Swertinges  nȳhstan sīðe,
> siðþan hē under segne  sinc ealgode,
> wæl-rēaf werede;  hyne wyrd fornam
> syþðan hē for wlenco  wēan āhsode,
> fǣhðe tō Frȳsum.  Hē þā frætwe wæg,
> eorclan-stānas  ofer ȳða ful,
> rīce þēoden;  hē under rande gecranc.
> Gehwearf þā in Francna fæþm  feorh cyninges,
> brēost-gewǣdu,  ond se bēah somod.
> *Wyrsan wīg-frecan  wœl rēafeden*
> *æfter gūð-sceare;  Gēata lēode*
> *hrēa-wīc hēoldon.*
> (*Beowulf*, 1202–14a). (Emphasis added).
>
> Hygelac of the Geats possessed that ring, the nephew of Swerting, on his last expedition, when he contested for treasure under the banner, protected the spoils of battle; fate took him away, since he out of daring (*or* arrogance) sought out strife, a feud with the Frisians. He carried that treasure, the ancient stones, over the expanse of the waves, mighty prince; he fell under the shield. The life of the king then fell into the possession of the Franks, the breast-garment, and the ring together. *Inferior battle-warriors plundered the corpse after the battle-shearing; the bodies of the Geatish people covered the place of corpses.*[41]

The importance of royal funerals in *Beowulf* cannot be overstated: the poem begins and ends with the splendid funerals of Scyld and Beowulf, both of whom die in their homeland, honoured with treasures by *swǣse gesīðas*, 'beloved

[39] Eormenric, king of the Goths, is mentioned in *Deor* (21–7) and *Widsith* (8–9, 18b, 88–92); Hama also appears in *Widsith* (24b–31). For traces of the legend of Hama and Eormenric in other sources, see K4, pp. 193–94.
[40] We later learn that Beowulf gave this same ring to Hygelac's queen, Hygd, on his return from Denmark, and that she wore it proudly on her breast (2172–76). Presumably Hygd subsequently gave it to Hygelac. See K4, p. 194.
[41] For alternative readings of lines 1213b–14a, see K4, p. 195.

retainers' (29a), and *heorð-genēatas*, 'hearth-companions' (3179).[42] Conversely, the denial of a proper burial dishonours the dead.[43] Brodeur has noted that Beowulf's love for his uncle is his 'strongest and most enduring emotion'.[44] It is all the more poignant, then, that Hygelac should meet his end on a foreign battlefield, surrounded by enemies, stripped of his breast-garment (*brēost-gewǣdu*) and the peerless ring (*bēah*) given to him by his nephew, his unburied corpse left as food for the beasts of battle on the place of slaughter (*hrēa-wīc*).

## BEOWULF PLUNDERS THE FRANKS

We learn the identity of one of these *wyrsan wīg-frecan*, 'inferior battle-warriors' (1212a), when the hero describes how he brutally prevented Dæghrefn, a champion of the Hugas, from presenting Geatish loot to his Frisian lord:

> nalles hē ðā frǣtwe  Frēs-cyninge,
> brēost-weorðunge  bringan mōste
> (*Beowulf*, 2502–03).
>
> Not at all was he able to bring those treasures, breast-adornments, to the Frisian king.

The ferocious manner in which Beowulf kills Dæghrefn, crushing his *bān-hūs*, 'bone-house', in a *hilde-grāp*, 'battle-grip' (2505–08a), recalls his earlier struggle with Grendel.[45] In both contests, Beowulf dishonours the corpse of his adversary by mutilation.

Having avenged his uncle's death, Beowulf himself now takes on the role of plunderer. Echoing the actions of Grendel in Heorot (120–25), discussed below, the hero swims back home with the armour of thirty slain Franks as loot:

> Þonan Bīowulf cōm
> sylfes cræfte,  sund-nytte drēah;
> *hæfde him on earme  ealra þrītig*

[42] See Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in 'Beowulf'*, Medium Ævum Monographs, 5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950, repr. 1965), pp. 1–11; Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*.
[43] See Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*', pp. 82–3. Owen-Crocker notes that burial of the dead was important to the Anglo-Saxons even before the conversion (p. 91), while in the eyes of the church, '[t]he worst fate of all is to be denied burial of any kind' (p. 92).
[44] Brodeur, *Art of 'Beowulf'*, p. 80.
[45] Orchard notes that the hero is here 'at his most bear-like', *Critical Companion*, p. 121.

> *hilde-geatwa þā hē tō holme þrong.*
> Nealles Hetware hrēmge þorfton
> fēðe-wīges, þē him foran ongēan
> linde bǣron; lȳt eft becwōm
> fram þām hild-frecan hāmes nīosan.
> (*Beowulf*, 2359b–66). (Emphasis added).
>
> From there Beowulf escaped, through his own skill, endured a long swim; *he had on his shoulders the battle-gear of all of thirty, when he plunged into the sea.* Not at all did the Hetware have need to rejoice in that foot-battle, when they carried shields against him; few came back to seek out their homes from that war-chief.

Through these multiple narrations of Hygelac's death, each told from a different perspective, we are given to understand that the act of looting the slain after a battle was not in itself seen as shameful in the eyes of the *Beowulf*-poet, any more than it was by the authors of the Old English biblical poems. Rather, in the heroic society depicted in these poems, looting brings glory to the victors and dishonours the defeated.

## WULF AND EOFOR PLUNDER KING ONGENTHEOW'S CORPSE

The repeated allusions to the plundering of the Geatish king's dishonoured corpse are counterbalanced by the Geatish Messenger's account of the slaying of the feared Swedish ruler, Ongentheow, and the subsequent stripping of his body of its armaments by two of Hygelac's own warriors, Eofor and Wulf.[46] In return for this courageous deed, Eofor is lavishly rewarded by his king with the gift of a prestigious marriage:[47]

> Lēt se hearda Higelāces þegn

[46] Ongentheow had himself threatened to dishonour the slain Geats at Ravenswood by hanging their bodies as sport for birds (2939–41).

[47] Alaric Hall argues that Hygelac's reward to Eofor is excessive, jeopardising the future of the Hrethlings, 'Hygelac's Only Daughter: A Present, a Potentate and a Peaceweaver in *Beowulf*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 78 (2006), 81–87. For a more positive interpretation of Hygelac's actions, see Leonard Neidorf, 'Hygelac and His Daughter: Rereading *Beowulf* Lines 2985–2998', *Medium Ævum*, 89 (2020), 350–55. King Onela rewards Weohstan for slaying Eanmund, allowing him to keep the latter's looted helmet, mail coat and sword (2611–19). Highlighting the poet's interest in systems of non-monetary exchange, Naismith observes that *Beowulf* 'paints a picture of young warriors aspiring to win land through the favour of lords', comparable to that presented by Anglo-Saxon charters, 'Economy', p. 379.

brādne mēce, þā his brōðor læg,
eald-sweord eotonisc entiscne helm
brecan ofer bord-weal; ðā gebēah cyning,
folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen.
Ðā wron monige þe his mǣg wriðon,
ricone ārǣrdon, ðā him gerȳmed wearð,
þæt hīe wæl-stōwe wealdan mōston.
*Þenden rēafode rinc ōðerne,*
*nam on Ongenðīo īren-byrnan,*
*heard swyrd hilted, ond his helm somod,*
*hāres hyrste Higelāce bær.*
Hē ðām frætwum fēng ond him fægre gehēt
lēana mid lēodum, ond gelǣste swā;
geald þone gūð-rǣs Gēata dryhten,
Hrēðles eafora, þā hē tō hām becōm,
Iofore ond Wulfe mid ofer-māðmum,
sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þūsenda
landes ond locenra bēaga — ne ðorfte him ðā lēan oðwītan
mon on middan-gearde, syððan hīe ðā mǣrða geslōgon —
ond ðā Iofore forgeaf āngan dohtor,
hām-weorðunge, hyldo tō wedde.
(*Beowulf*, 2977–98). (Emphasis added).

The fierce thane of Hygelac (i.e. Eofor) then let the broad blade, the gigantic ancient sword, break the giant's helmet over the shield-wall, when his brother (i.e. Wulf) lay dead. Then the king (i.e. Ongentheow) bent down, shepherd of the people, he was struck to his life. Then there were many who bandaged his kin, quickly raised him up, when room was made for them, so that they were allowed to hold sway over the slaughter-place. *Then one warrior plundered another, he took from Ongentheow the mail coat, fierce hilted sword, and his helmet all together, bore the ornaments of the grey-haired one to Hygelac*. He received those treasures and fairly promised him reward among the peoples, and he fulfilled that; the lord of the Geats, Hrethel's son, repaid Eofor and Wulf for that war-rush, when he had returned home, with a surfeit of treasures, gave to each of them a hundred thousand *sceattas*' worth of land and locked rings — men on middle-earth had no need to reproach him

> for that payment, since they struck for glory — and he gave to Eofor his only daughter, as a home-honouring, to wed with honour.

As Owen-Crocker notes, the personal names *Eofor*, 'boar', and *Wulf*, 'wolf', themselves recall animals associated with battle and carrion respectively.[48] The hint of bestiality suggested by these names is brought to the fore in the concluding lines of the Messenger's speech, which provide a startling variation on the popular 'Beasts of Battle' motif:[49]

> Forðon sceall gār wesan
> monig morgen-ceald  mundum bewunden,
> hæfen on handa,  nalles hearpan swēg
> wīgend weccean,  ac se wonna hrefn
> fūs ofer fǣgum  fela reordian,
> earne secgan  hū him æt ǣte spēow,
> þenden hē wið wulf  wæl rēafode.
> (*Beowulf*, 3021b–27)
>
> Therefore the spear must be grasped in the grip on many a cold morning, held in the hands, the sound of the harp will not awaken warriors, but the dark raven often calls out eagerly over the doomed, telling the eagle how he got on at the feast, when he plundered the slain together with the wolf.

The Messenger's speech highlights both the bestial and courtly dimensions of the accepted social practice of plundering the slain: on the one hand, the mercenaries Eofor and Wulf engage in an animalistic desecration of Ongentheow's corpse;[50] on the other, by presenting Hygelac with the symbols of Ongentheow's royal power, namely helmet and sword, Eofor demonstrates his loyalty to his own king and proclaims a significant Geatish victory over the Swedes, for which he is suitably rewarded. However, while these and other scenes in the poem certainly

[48] Gale Owen-Crocker, 'Beast Men: *Wulf* and *Eofor* and the Mythic Significance of Names in *Beowulf*', in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen Glosecki (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 257–80.
[49] The seminal study is Francis P. Magoun Jr., 'The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 56 (1955), 81–90.
[50] Cf. *The Wanderer*, lines 80–84.

hint at a less glorious side to plunder, it is in the hero's encounters with monsters that the theme of dishonouring—and looting—the dead comes to the fore.[51]

## BEOWULF PLUNDERS THE HOARD OF THE GRENDELKIN

The hero's three combats with the monsters provide the poet with an opportunity to dramatize the realities of contemporary warfare and plunder, as suggested by the Staffordshire Hoard. Most strikingly, the three decapitation-scenes—of Æschere, Grendel's mother and Grendel—all involve an element of public display intended to dishonour the victim.[52] Helen Appleton and Thijs Porck have both recently shown how the custom of displaying heads on spikes reflects an Anglo-Saxon practice of demarcating boundaries as well as the ritual humiliation of the defeated.[53] Having wreaked havoc inside Heorot, Grendel returns to his watery abode with the bodies of *þrītig þegna* […] *hūðe hrēmig*, 'thirty thanes […] rejoicing in booty' (123a–24a). Similarly, Grendel's mother quickly seizes Hrothgar's most cherished warrior, Æschere, before returning to the fens (1294–95). Within their water-hall is a pile of treasures (1557a), presumably looted from the corpses of those whom they had previously slain and devoured.[54]

Conversely, in defeating the monsters, the hero loots their respective halls and mutilates their bodies: after the first fight, Grendel's arm and shoulder are displayed as a wonder in Heorot (833b–36); then, on Beowulf's return from the

[51] The passage is in fact structured around the theme of plunder: in the central section, the Messenger envisages the Geats themselves will be *golde berēafod*, 'stripped/plundered of gold' (3018b), after news of Beowulf's death reaches their enemies. Another example of arguably inglorious plundering is the sombre return journey made by *Scēotend Scyldinga*, 'the bowmen of the Scyldings' (1154a), bearing the grimly-won treasures from Finn following their disastrous expedition to the hall of the Frisian king (1154–59a).

[52] For the possibility that Beowulf had to decapitate Grendel to prevent his corpse from reanimating, see Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*', pp. 92–93.

[53] Helen Appleton, 'The Role of Æschere's Head', *Review of English Studies*, 68 (2017), 428–47; and Thijs Porck, 'Marking Boundaries in *Beowulf*: Æschere's Head, Grendel's Arm and the Dragon's Corpse', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 77 (2017), 521–40. Bede, for example, describes how Penda had Oswald's head, hands and arms cut off and displayed on poles after the Battle of Maserfield in 642 (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.12). See also Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., 'Grendel's Arm and the Law', in *Studies in English Language and Literature: 'Doubt wisely': Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. by M. J. Toswell and Elizabeth M. Tyler (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 121–32; and John Edward Damon, '*Descecto Capite Perfido*: Bodily Fragmentation and Reciprocal Violence in Anglo-Saxon England', *Exemplaria*, 13 (2001), 399–432.

[54] Following most editors, I take *on searwum* (1557a) to mean 'among the treasures'; for alternative translations, see K4, pp. 208–09.

mere, the hero has four men carry Grendel's head to Hrothgar (1634b–39),[55] before, finally, the dragon's corpse is similarly dishonoured and unceremoniously shoved over the sea-cliff while its hoard is plundered (2743b–46, 2773–82, 3129b–33).

Save for Grendel's mother's use of a *seax*, 'knife, single-edged short-sword' (1545b), in self-defence, the monsters do not themselves use weapons. Nevertheless, Beowulf brings a part of a looted weapon as a trophy from the Grendelkin's hall. While grappling with Grendel's mother, Beowulf narrowly avoids defeat after the blade given to him by Unferth breaks. Just in the nick of time, the hero spies an *eald-sword eotenisc*, 'ancient sword of the race of giants' (1558a), which only a man of his enormous strength could brandish. Once Beowulf has used this weapon to decapitate both Grendel and his mother, the blade magically melts away leaving only the hilt. The hero takes this mysterious trophy, together with Grendel's severed head, and presents them to his lord, Hrothgar:

> Þā þæt sweord ongan
> æfter heaþo-swāte hilde-gicelum,
> wīg-bil wanian; þæt wæs wundra sum
> þæt hit eal gemealt īse gelīcost,
> ðonne forstes bend fæder onlæteð,
> onwindeð wǣl-rāpas, sē geweald hafað
> sǣla ond mǣla; þæt is sōð metod.
> Ne nōm hē in þǣm wīcum, Weder-Gēata lēod,
> māð-mǣhta mā, þēh hē þǣr monige geseah,
> *būton þone hafelan ond þā hilt somod*
> *since fāge*; sweord ǣr gemealt,
> forbarn brōden-mǣl; wæs þæt blōd tō þæs hāt,
> ǣttren ellor-gǣst sē þǣr inne swealt.
> (*Beowulf*, 1605b–17). (Emphasis added).

> Then that sword, the war-blade, began to dissolve after the battle-sweat into war-icicles; that was a certain wonder that it all melted, most like ice, when the Father unleashes the bonds of frost, unwinds the water fetters, He who has power over time and seasons; that is

[55] Eofor and Wulf similarly loot King Ongentheow's helmet and present it to Hygelac; see above. On the presentation of Grendel's body as a suit of armour, see Megan Cavell, 'Constructing the Monstrous Body in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 43 (2014), 155–81. On the hero's gift of Grendel's body parts, in lieu of armour, to Hrothgar, see Baker, *Honour*, pp. 40–41.

> a True God. The Prince of the Weder-Geats did not seize any more treasures in those strongholds, although he could see many there, *except the head and the hilt together, bloodstained treasure*; the sword had melted before, the decorated blade completely burnt up; that blood was too hot, the deadly alien spirit who had perished inside there.

It is unclear whether Beowulf's decision to take only the head and hilt was motivated by a sense of restraint or the practicalities of his upward swim through the mere—or both. But in his subsequent retelling of his underwater exploits to Hrothgar, the hero emphasises that his plundering of the Grendelkin's hall, as much as the vengeance that motivated it, was entirely justifiable and appropriate:

> Ic þæt hilt þanan
> fēondum ætferede, fyren-dǣda wræc,
> dēað-cwealm Denigea, *swā hit gedēfe wæs*.
> (*Beowulf*, 1668b–70). (Emphasis added).
>
> I carried that hilt away from the enemies, avenged the terrible deeds, the murderous slaughter of the Danes, *as was fitting*.

As we have seen elsewhere in the poem, a warrior was expected to offer the spoils of battle to his lord as a demonstration of loyalty. Beowulf duly presents the looted sword-hilt to Hrothgar, signalling to the Christian audience the defeat of this branch of the race of giants and, to the company in Heorot, the hero's loyalty:

> Þā wæs gylden hilt gamelum rince,
> hārum hild-fruman on hand gyfen,
> enta ǣr-geweorc; hit on ǣht gehwearf
> æfter dēofla hryre Denigea frean,
> wundor-smiþa geweorc;
> (*Beowulf*, 1677–81a)
>
> Then that golden hilt, ancient treasure, was given to the hands of the ancient warrior, old war-chief, the ancient work of giants; it fell into the possession of the lord of the Danes after the fall of devils, the work of wonder-smiths.

Scholars have demonstrated how the runic inscription on the patterned hilt (*wreoþen-hilt*, 1698a) imaginatively links the hero's victory over the Grendelkin with 'the great feud' between God and the giants described in Genesis 6.[56] Again, comparison with the Staffordshire Hoard opens up interesting new ways of thinking about this passage. As noted above, all of the various hilts and pommels found in the hoard were prised from their handles and blades, either for melting or to dismember and dishonour their former owners. Just as the Lay of the Last Survivor may present a stylised account of the pragmatic concealment of loot after a defeat, so too Beowulf's presentation of the mysterious giant's sword-hilt as a trophy to Hrothgar appears to transform the contemporary practice of plundering the slain into an event of mythical significance and wonder. In both cases, our understanding of these poetic descriptions of looting is considerably enriched by the archaeological evidence of the Staffordshire Hoard.[57]

## CONCLUSION

In the conclusion to her 1992 essay, Roberta Frank observes that *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo are destined to remain a couple until a 'more likely prospect' turns up.[58] This article has suggested that the Staffordshire Hoard presents, if anything, a better match for the poem than the East Anglian ship burial, though again a direct link cannot be proven. It goes without saying that *Beowulf* describes a distant, imaginary and highly idealised world.[59] Yet, the poet was doubtless informed by certain aspects of his own material culture and the conduct of contemporary warriors, kings and queens, as well as tales of the heroes of old. As Barbara Raw comments in her discussion of royal symbols in *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo, also published in 1992:

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[56] See, for example, Marijane Osborn, 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 973–81, repr. in *'Beowulf': Basic Readings*, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, 1, ed. by Peter Baker (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 111–25; Daniel Anlezark, *Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 293–97, 304–11.

[57] Cf. the gleaming sword hilt of the dragon-slayer *Wulf*, 'Wolf', in *Solomon and Saturn II*, lines 214–15: *Git his sweord scineð swiðe gescæneð,/ and ofer ða byrgenna blicað ða hieltas*, 'Yet his sword shines, highly polished, and the hilts gleam over the graves.' For links with the giant's sword in *Beowulf*, see Daniel Anlezark, 'Poisoned Places and Avernian Tradition in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), 103–26.

[58] Frank, 'Odd Couple', p. 331.

[59] Cf. Naismith, 'Economy', p. 391: '*Beowulf* helped build and reinforce its audience's conception of their own position by illustrating how their ancestors had supposedly led a magnified form of the same lifestyle.'

> although a poet might well include descriptions of objects which were not of his own period in his main narrative, he is less likely to invent when making casual passing references. The implications of what he says, therefore, the assumptions lurking between the lines, are probably an accurate reflection of the society in which he lived.[60]

Reading *Beowulf* in the light of the Staffordshire Hoard helps to bring into focus some of what we might consider the less 'heroic' customs that pertained in the poet's own day: casual references to the looting and mutilation of corpses; the deliberate exposure of unburied bodies on the battlefield as carrion; the opportunistic concealment of treasure in the earth in the aftermath of a defeat in order to prevent further pillaging; the provocative display of looted items as trophies; and the presentation of the spoils of victory to a lord in the hope of social advancement.[61]

This article has also argued that literature can prove a useful tool in giving meaning to archaeological evidence. We will never know if the individual who buried the Staffordshire Hoard was a victor *hūðe hrēmig*, 'rejoicing in booty', anticipating a splendid reward from his lord, or if, like the Last Survivor,

> unblīðe hwearf,
> dæges ond nihtes, oð ðæt dēaðes wylm
> hrān æt heortan.
> (*Beowulf*, 2667b–79a)

> he wandered unhappily, day and night, until death's surging touched his heart.

Yet, by reading the Staffordshire Hoard in the light of *Beowulf* and other Old English poems, we can at least begin to imagine how these ornate treasures, once so highly prized, became *gold on grēote*, 'gold in the earth' (*Beowulf*, 3167a).[62]

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[60] Raw, 'Royal Power', p. 174.

[61] Baker notes that the lack of narratorial comment on the practice of looting indicates that the poet viewed this as an unremarkable fact of the heroic life, *Honour*, p. 42.

[62] I would like to thank the organisers of CCASNC 2020, Brittany Hanlon and Patrick McAlary, for inviting me to speak on *Beowulf* and for organising such an excellent conference. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Oxford Medieval Britain and Ireland seminar and the Oxford Old English Work-in-Progress group, and I am grateful to contributors at these events for sharing their insights. I also thank Daniel Anlezark, Amy Faulkner, Emma Irwin and the anonymous reader for *Quaestio Insularis* for their helpful comments.

# Anti-Heroism and Warrior Society in *Aided Cheit mac Mágach*

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Medieval Irish literature displays a perpetual interest in warrior culture—central to which is the idea that heroes can gain and consolidate their honour and reputation through combat. The literary depiction of this kind of heroic warrior society has attracted much scholarly attention, particularly in the case of the Ulster Cycle tales.[1] At its most general level, warrior society is depicted in these texts as an elite social system which is rooted in the oppositional values of honour and shame, at the heart of which lies a preoccupation with the accumulation of glory through physical combat.[2] This theme is also front and centre to the late medieval Irish tale *Aided Cheit mac Mágach* (hereafter *Aided Cheit*) or 'The Death-Tale of Cet son of Mágu', which is considered to belong to the Ulster Cycle. This article examines the representation of the values associated with warrior society in this tale by offering a reading informed by its socio-historical background; its manuscript context and position in a wider anthology of tales.

Before such an analysis can be attempted, however, a summary of the tale *Aided Cheit* needs to be provided. The narrative opens with the Connacht warrior Cet in the province of Ulster, seeking to kill his enemy Ulstermen. The Ulster warrior Conall Cernach is sent in pursuit of him, and he finds Cet in an empty house. Conall's charioteer urges Conall to attack Cet, but Conall refuses. Before he leaves, he puts a wisp of horsehair on Cet's chariot. When Cet and his charioteer find the wisp, Cet's first reaction is positive. His charioteer, however,

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[1] While the term 'Ulster Cycle' is not a medieval classification, the Ulster Cycle tales arguably comprise a body of interrelated narratives that share a *locus*, *tempus* and *dramatis personae*. Barbara Hillers suggests that the imaginary world of the Ulster Cycle was the product of a collaborative effort, 'involving a large number of narrators, redactors, and copyists', 'Heroes of the Ulster Cycle' in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James Patrick Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), pp. 99–106 (p. 99). See also, Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures, 9 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2008), p. 11. I follow Hillers and Erich Poppe in the idea that the connections between these tales are virtual: they are part of a narrative universe that resides in the minds of the writers, redactors and the audience, and can be invoked by introducing any number of characters from the Ulster Cycle.

[2] For the role of honour and status in Irish society, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in Some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', *Ériu*, 29 (1978), 123–41. For a sociological approach towards heroic behaviour, see also Philip O'Leary, '*Fír Fer*: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', *Éigse*, 22 (1987), 1–14.

tells him the wisp is an insult and convinces Cet to go and challenge Conall to a fight. Cet finds Conall and they engage in combat. Cet dies, and although Conall survives, he is badly wounded. A man called Bélchú of Bréifne finds him and initially plans to leave Conall to die. However, Conall wants to be killed, as he has made an oath that he would only be killed by multiple assailants. Since having Bélchú kill him would mean that he fulfils this promise, he begins to taunt Bélchú. When Conall resorts to calling him a miserable hag (*caillech trūag*), Bélchú decides to take Conall home with him and nurse him back to health, so that he can fight him in a proper battle. Conall recovers, but Bélchú is now afraid that Conall is going to escape and orders his sons to kill Conall in his sleep. This plan backfires when Conall overhears their conversation and the warrior forces Bélchú to swap beds with him. When the sons enter the room later that night, they unknowingly kill their father, upon which Conall leaps up and kills them. He takes their heads and goes home.

When it comes to previous scholarship on this tale, very little work has been done so far. The only edition and translation of the tale was produced by Kuno Meyer in 1906 and lacks textual notes or an analysis of the date of the language.[3] When this understudied tale *is* mentioned, it mostly figures as part of wider discussions of elements associated with warrior culture, with certain episodes being analysed in the context of a specific theme or study. Examples of this are Philip O'Leary's contribution on the ethical concept of *fír fer* in Irish literature, in which he explains Bélchú's sparing of Conall as a question of honour, as well as Proinsias Mac Cana's article on formal incitement, in which he briefly considers the battle between Conall and Cet in a footnote.[4]

Considering the dearth of material which treats *Aided Cheit* specifically, it is essential to first consider the wider tale cycle to which the narrative belongs. For a long time, the status of the Ulster Cycle tales as heroic narratives has been central to their interpretation. The tales were taken to represent an ideal heroic world, inhabited by perfect heroes and flawless kings. Much of this work has been undertaken by O'Leary, in a number of articles in which he examines specific aspects of Irish heroic society.[5] While O'Leary's studies into the warrior

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[3] *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, ed. and trans. by Kuno Meyer, Todd Lecture Series, 14 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1906), pp. 36–41. I argue in my doctoral dissertation that the language of the tale can be dated to the late eleventh or early twelfth century, which is generally taken as the late Middle Irish period.

[4] O'Leary, '*Fír Fer*', p. 12; Proinsias Mac Cana, '*Laíded*, *Gressacht* "Formalized Incitement"', *Ériu*, 43 (1992), 69–92 (p. 76).

[5] These articles include Philip O'Leary, 'Contention at Feasts in Early Irish Literature', *Éigse*, 20 (1984),115–27; 'Verbal Deceit in the Ulster Cycle', *Éigse*, 21 (1986), 16–26; '*Fír Fer*'; 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 27–44; 'Honour-Bound: the Social Context of Early Irish Heroic Geis', *Celtica*, 20 (1988), 85–107; 'Magnanimous Conduct

codes of the society represented in the Ulster Cycle have brought valuable insights, recent scholarship has challenged the idea that these tales depict a perfect heroic society.[6] Thomas Owen Clancy has criticised O'Leary for displaying a tendency to rationalise 'within an evolving behavioural system, rather than turning to the question of the rhetoric and purpose of the tales themselves'.[7] By taking the warrior society as depicted in these tales as an actual representation of early Irish society, O'Leary attempts to reconstruct the heroic codes that underlie this society, rather than first posing fundamental questions about the potential (political) bias and motives of the authors of the Ulster Cycle tales. According to Clancy, many of the Ulster Cycle tales can in fact be seen to demonstrate 'a view of the proper and improper functioning of society'.[8] This view is also shared by Joan Radner, who states that 'behind the immense vitality, humour and imagination of the Ulster stories is a picture of society moving to dysfunction and self-destruction'.[9] In her opinion, the Ulster Cycle revolves around the gradual breakdown of the relationships that formed the very basis of Irish society and led to the eventual disintegration of that very society.[10] Instead of an ideal world inhabited by just kings and heroic warriors, the tales present us with a subverted society in which traditional roles are reversed and ultimately break down.

In order to find out more about the underlying ideological significance of the Ulster Cycle, the social and historical contexts in which these tales were written and disseminated need to be examined. Nick Aitchison notes that because of their contents and subject matter, it has been assumed that the Ulster Cycle tales were composed and transmitted by the Ulaid and therefore date back to

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in Irish Heroic Literature', *Éigse*, 25 (1991), 28–44; 'Choice and Consequence in Irish Heroic Literature', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), 49–59.

[6] See for instance, Nick Boyter Aitchison, 'The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality', *Journal of Medieval History*, 13 (1987), 87–116; Joan Newlon Radner, '"Fury Destroys the World": Historical Strategy in Ireland's Ulster Epic', *Mankind Quarterly*, 23 (1982), 41–60; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Court, King and Justice in the Ulster Cycle', in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 163–82; 'Die Like a Man? The Ulster Cycle Death-Tale Anthology', *Aiste*, 2 (2008), 70–93; Gregory Toner, 'Wise Women and Wanton Warriors in Early Irish Literature', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 30 (2010), 259–72; 'Conflict and Restraint in Irish Heroic Literature', in *Scotha cennderca cen on: A Festschrift for Séamus Mac Mathúna*, ed. by Ailbhe Ó Corráin, Fionntán de Brún and Maxim Fomin (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2020), pp. 39–50. I am thankful to Professor Gregory Toner for providing me with his article prior to publication.

[7] Clancy, 'Court, King and Justice in the Ulster Cycle', pp. 180–81.

[8] Ibid., p. 169.

[9] Radner, p. 47.

[10] Ibid.

before the mid-sixth century.[11] However, the heroes of the Ulster Cycle are often cast in an ambiguous manner, and instead of being depicted as glorious heroes they are often presented in a ridiculous light. Rather than evoking their former glory, the Ulster Cycle tales belittle and mock the Ulaid, indulging their eclipsed power. According to Aitchison, this raises considerable doubts regarding the Cycle's supposed status as celebrating the heroic past of the Ulaid. He suggests that the composition and transmission of these tales is to be sought elsewhere, and argues that the Ulster Cycle tales were most likely composed after the height of the rule of the Ulaid, in the fifth and sixth centuries, after the northern Uí Néill (*Cenél nEógain*) and the Airgialla had pushed the Ulaid back north-east of the River Bann, into the present-day counties Down and Antrim.

It should be noted that while Aitchison places the composition of the Ulster Cycle in Uí Néill territory, opinions on this issue differ.[12] Ruairí Ó hUiginn points out that it is more likely that 'the first stories of the cycle were initially compiled by Ulaid *literati*, and whatever their original political message, if any, may have been, concerned the Ulaid and their affairs'.[13] However, Ó hUiginn agrees with Aitchison that the significance of these tales is likely to have changed over time, and notes that 'once established, this literature became part of the common literary inheritance and was further redacted, transmitted and added to outside of its area of origin'.[14] Similarly, Radner notes that while 'the original shaping of the Ulster material lay within Ulaid control, its subsequent development and preservation did not'.[15] Although the original tales were likely conceived by the Ulaid, the Cycle's consequent transmission and preservation took place in monastic scriptoria in Uí Néill territory, such as Clonmacnoise.

Radner argues that the reason for presenting the world of the Ulster Cycle as one of destruction and violence was part of a political strategy created by the Uí Néill. While it may seem as if the essential Ulaid-bias of the Ulster Cycle tales has been retained, Radner shows that they in fact 'teach the Uí Néill lesson': by depicting the heroes of the Ulster sagas as being part of an inherently flawed pre-Christian society, heroic but ultimately doomed, the Uí Néill found a way to present themselves as the rightful rulers, a Christian dynasty sanctioned by St.

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[11] Aitchison, p. 109.

[12] John Kelleher suggests that the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* was originally composed around the ninth century in County Louth, as this is where most of the action in the narrative takes place, before then being brought to Clonmacnoise in 835, John Vincent Kelleher, 'The *Táin* and the Annals', *Ériu*, 22 (1971), 107–27 (p. 122).

[13] Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'The Background and Development of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*', in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. by James Patrick Mallory (Belfast: December Publications, 1992) pp. 29–67 (p. 58).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Radner, pp. 45–46.

Patrick himself.[16] Similarly, while discussing the ideological function of pagan monuments in a Christian context, Aitchison argues that the Ulster Cycle tales, being literary monuments, attest 'not so much to the superiority of the Ulaid's pagan past over the Christian present, but rather to the vanity and arrogance of past gods, kings and heroes, all of them pagan, with their aspirations of immortality and eternal glory'.[17]

Before moving forward, it is important to note that this interpretation of the Ulster Cycle is by no means the only way to explain the social and historical contexts in which these narratives were composed and transmitted, nor is it the only way to interpret the ideological significance of the tales.[18] However, this reading of the Ulster Cycle narratives is particularly fitting for *Aided Cheit* because of the unique collection of tales of which it is a part. The text's manuscript context forms an important aspect that guides our understanding of the tale and can in fact be seen to support the idea that the universe of the Ulster Cycle tales is inherently flawed, and represents a doomed society moving into dysfunction and destruction.[19]

*Aided Cheit* survives in only one manuscript—Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.40 (formerly Gaelic XL, hereafter referred to as Ed.), beginning on page seven (f. 4r), line ten. Ronald Black's entry in the *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland* provides the most recent and detailed codicological description of the manuscript and its compilation.[20] The manuscript consists of five distinct layers or gatherings, written in different periods and with various provenances.[21] The first gathering, which runs from pages one to twelve and contains *Aided Cheit*, has been dated to

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[16] Ibid., pp. 47, 55.

[17] Aitchison, p. 109.

[18] For a general and concise (but by no means exhaustive) discussion of different approaches to reading the Ulster Cycle, and in particular the *Táin*, see Hildegard Luise Charlotte Tristram, 'What is the Purpose of *Táin bó Cúailnge*?', in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. Mallory and Stockman, pp. 11–21. See also Ó hUiginn for a more extensive discussion, in which he agrees with Kelleher.

[19] For the importance of the compilation of manuscripts as an act of textual interpretation, see Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland, 800–1200: from the Vikings to the Normans', in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature. Volume I: to 1890*, ed. by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 32–73 (p. 35).

[20] Ronald Black, 'Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland', in *Irish Script on Screen – Meamrám Páipéar Ríomhaire* (2011) <https://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/NLS/NLS_Adv_MS_72_1_40/english/catalogue.html> [accessed 20 May 2020].

[21] Donald Mackinnon, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh, and Elsewhere in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Brown, 1912), pp. 153–54.

the fourteenth century by Kuno Meyer on the basis of the handwriting, while Ronald Black ascribes a fifteenth-century date to the material.[22] Black suggests that the first, third and fourth sections are associated with the Antrim Macdonalds or the Clanranald and that the first layer may have been brought to Scotland on the occasion of the return of Domhnall mac Iain Mhùideartaich and Iain, son of Brian MacMhuirich, from Ireland in *c*. 1650.[23]

The first gathering of this manuscript consists of a collection of seven *aideda* or 'death-tales' from the Ulster Cycle, all written in a single column. These tales appear in the following order:

*Table 1: Ulster Cycle Tales in Ed.*

| *First gathering* (pp. 1–12) | |
|---|---|
| *Aided Chonchobair* | 'The Death-Tale of Conchobar' |
| *Goire Conaill Chernaig i Crúachain & Aided Ailella ocus Chonaill Chernaig* | 'The Cherishing of Conall Cernach in Crúachan and the Death-Tale of Ailill and Conall Cernach' |
| *Aided Fergusa maic Róich* | 'The Death-Tale of Fergus mac Róich' |
| *Aided Meidbe* | 'The Death-Tale of Medb' |
| *Aided Cheit maic Mágach* | 'The Death-Tale of Cet mac Mágach' |
| *Aided Lóegairi Búadaig* | 'The Death-Tale of Lóegaire Búadach' |
| *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* | 'The Death-Tale of Celtchair mac Uthechar' |

Clancy has pointed out that the contents of this section are unique in that it contains a collection of tales of only one specific tale type, namely the *aideda* or 'death-tales'.[24] He argues that the construction of this group appears to be deliberate and that the tales have to be read as an anthology of *aideda*.[25] The tales form a self-contained unit within the manuscript that may have once travelled separately from the other gatherings, as noted by Black.[26] This is supported by codicological evidence such as the staining and fading of the first and last leaves

[22] Kuno Meyer, 'The Edinburgh Gaelic Manuscript XL', *Celtic Magazine*, 12 (1887), 208–18 (p. 208); Black.
[23] Black.
[24] Clancy, 'Die Like a Man?', p. 74.
[25] Ibid., p. 77.
[26] Black.

of the layer.[27] Chantal Kobel argues that the layer may be referred to as a 'booklet', and cites Ralph Hanna's definition of a booklet as 'a group of leaves forming at least one quire […] presenting a self-contained group of texts'.[28] Based on their shared theme, the seven tales can be called a 'thematic cluster', a term coined by Erich Poppe, and it is evident that the narratives should therefore not be read in isolation but in conjunction with each other.[29]

In the context of the collection of death-tales found in the Edinburgh manuscript, the position of *Aided Chonchobair* or 'The Death-Tale of Conchobar' merits particular consideration. Since this text appears first in the collection, this has implications for how the following tales in the group (including *Aided Cheit*) can and should be read.[30] Moreover, the placement of *Aided Chonchobair* shows that the writer put thought into the ordering of the tales. The narrative opens with the Ulstermen arguing over who is the best warrior, showing that military achievements and honour are perceived to be the most valued qualities. During a battle, Conchobar steps aside after the women of Connacht have asked to see him because of his beauty. This is when Cet throws a hard ball fashioned out of brains and lime at Conchobar, which lodges itself in the back of Conchobar's head. Later, when Conchobar is on his deathbed, he hears about the death of Christ and goes into a final frenzy. The king reverts to his behaviour as a warrior in an attempt to defend Christ, although the latter is absent and already dead. This causes the brain ball to explode and we are told Conchobar ascends to heaven.

As the first tale in the sequence, it links Conchobar, the premier literary king of the Ulster Cycle, to the first moment of the Christian era, the crucifixion of Christ. By doing so, the tales that follow are set to take place in the Christian era and are therefore also put in a Christian context. However, the influence of Christianity goes much further. The conversion of Conchobar forms a turning point in *Aided Chonchobair*, since up until that point the values of the Ulster warriors are portrayed in a negative light. It is through pride and vanity that Conchobar receives the wound that leads to his ultimate downfall. As Helen Imhoff puts it: 'the main part of the prose section […] is intended to reflect […] the morals ills of a society which has not yet received enlightenment through the

[27] Chantal Kobel, 'A Critical Edition of *Aided Chonchobair* "The Violent Death of Conchobar" with Translation, Textual Notes and Bibliography' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2015), p. 126.
[28] Ralph Hanna, 'Booklets in Medieval Manuscripts: Further Considerations', *Studies in Bibliography*, 39 (1986), 100–11 (pp. 100–01).
[29] Poppe, pp. 15, 23.
[30] *Aided Chonchobair* was first edited by Kuno Meyer, *Death-Tales*, pp. 4–11. See also Kobel, pp. 219–345.

teaching of Christianity'.[31] It is only when Conchobar uses his martial skills in the service of Christ instead of for personal gain that he is converted and receives salvation upon his death.

It is in this context that not only *Aided Chonchobar* but the whole anthology of death-tales in the manuscript can be read. The heroes of the other tales, who have not yet received enlightenment, still adhere to the egocentric values of warrior society, such as the pursuit of personal glory and honour. This quest leads to destruction and eventually the breakdown of society as a whole. As Clancy notes, this breakdown can be seen reflected in the collection of deaths as a group: all the main characters of the Ulster Cycle are killed off one-by-one throughout the anthology.[32] Moreover, in this world of subverted heroism most of the characters die in a manner that is far from heroic and often borders on the absurd, which can even be seen as ridiculing the warriors and their values.[33] In light of both the socio-political history of the Ulster Cycle tales and their ideological significance, as well as the deliberate collocation of the death-tales in this particular manuscript, I argue that one of the possible readings of the *aideda* is as anti-heroic tales in which warrior society is criticised and parodied. The tales can be seen to serve as social commentaries on literary warrior society and to condemn its egocentric values.

As Radner argues, early Irish society as depicted in the Ulster Cycle tales is one of dysfunction and self-destruction, caused by the tragic breakdown of the relationships upon which this society was founded.[34] Indeed, when *Aided Cheit* is examined, we can see how these relationships fail to function as they should. The traditional social bonds between men and women, host and guest, hero and charioteer, lord and client are subverted, leading to social chaos and disorder. In order to explore the depiction of warrior society and its values in *Aided Cheit*, the bond between the hero and his charioteer will be examined here. In the Ulster Cycle tales, the charioteer is traditionally depicted as accompanying the hero everywhere he goes, navigating their way and assisting the warrior on his exploits.[35] More than often, these adventures lead the duo to the site of some sort of conflict, where the charioteer is often the hero's sole companion. The

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[31] Helen Imhoff, 'Pre-Christian Characters in Medieval Irish Literature: An Examination of *Fástini Airt meic Cuind*, *De Suidigud Tellaig Temra*, *Aided Chonchobair* and *Aided Echach maic Maireda*', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2010), p. 91.
[32] Clancy, 'Die Like a Man?', p. 79.
[33] Ibid., p. 82.
[34] Radner, p. 47.
[35] For an in-depth examination of the charioteer in Medieval Irish literature and his role as foil to the hero, see Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 216–28.

charioteer also supports the warrior during combat, spurring him on before and during the encounter. He often acts as the hero's advisor, offering guidance or advocating caution where necessary. Evidently, the relationship between the two is presented as being founded upon a deep trust, as the hero relies upon his charioteer to navigate their way through any dangerous situation that may arise, while the charioteer depends upon the hero's martial abilities, so that he may fight and defeat their enemies.

Mac Cana has noted that this dependence of the hero upon his charioteer highlights the 'very special social and personal relationship which joined the two in the context of traditional ideology'.[36] Aled Llion Jones agrees, and adds that 'the charioteer is more than a mere companion, but […] inseparable from the warrior's subjectivity and agency'.[37] This close relationship between the two and the central role of the charioteer are most clearly illustrated in the tale *Fled Bricrend*, when the three warriors Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach are about to set off to Cú Roí maic Dáire.[38] As the heroes boast about the speed and nimbleness of their chariots, the charioteers are in effect directly representing the skills and strengths of their warriors. Jones notes that ideally the charioteer and the warrior form a bounded unit, interior to the martial heroic act—a team which is in direct opposition 'to the scission of the relationship between [enemy] fighters'.[39] This close social bond between charioteer and hero, and the obverse relationship between inimical warriors, can also be observed in *Aided Cheit*. The following discussion examines the dynamics and interactions between these characters by focussing on the theme of honour by providing close readings of the tale and drawing on related Ulster Cycle texts for comparison.

The quest for honour plays an essential part in *Aided Cheit* and motivates both Conall and Cet in their decisions. In these processes, they are both assisted by their charioteers: much of the first half of *Aided Cheit* consists of dialogues between the heroes and their charioteers. Central to their discussions is the accumulation and loss of honour. However, the reactions of the two warriors to their charioteers' counsel differs greatly. Through a close reading of these sections within the context of anti-heroism and the subversion of warrior society,

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[36] Mac Cana, p. 88.

[37] Aled Llion Jones, 'Two by Two: The Doubled Chariot-Figure of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*', in *Ollam: Studies in Gaelic and Related Traditions in Honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. by Matthieu Boyd (Madison, New Jersey; Teaneck, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), pp. 19–34 (p. 22).

[38] *Fled Bricrend*, ed. and trans. by George Henderson, Irish Texts Society, 2 (London and Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1899), §§34–36 (pp. 42–47).

[39] Jones, p. 21.

I suggest that a different light may be cast on the motivations of their arguments and consequences of their actions.

The first episode that is examined is the discussion between Conall and his charioteer when they arrive at the house in which Cet is staying:

> §3 'Is ē Cet-so', ar Conall, '7 nī fīu dūin comrac fris ar a doilghi 7 ar a c[h]rōdacht. Is amnus in fer fil [and]', ar Conall.
>
> 'Fē amai!' ol in t-ara, 'nī maith tig tar do bēolu, in pēst fil for dīgail Ulad [can] gabāil tige fair, 7 nī meabal uero comtuitim duit fris, ōir atā dia bēogacht a connuic so.'
>
> 'A athair', ar Conall, 'nī tibur m'anum do láith gaili fer nĒrenn 7 do-bēr trā comarṫa forsna eochu.'
>
> 'This is Cet', said Conall, 'and it is not worth [it] for us to fight against him because of his sternness and his vigour. He is a strong man', said Conall.
>
> 'That's a pity!' said the charioteer, 'what comes out of your mouth is not good, not to take the house from him, the beast that is punishing (the) Ulaid. And there is truly no shame for you to fall because of him, since that what he can do is on account of his vigour.'
>
> 'O father', said Conall, 'I will not give my life to a warrior of the men of Ireland, but I will put a sign on the horses.'[40]

Central to this commentary is the word *fíu* ('worthy') in reference to Conall's perception of Cet. As one of the most celebrated warriors of Ulster, it may have been expected of Conall to take this opportunity and kill the warrior who has been harassing the province of Ulster. However, Conall is not swayed by his charioteer, and the warrior argues from the outset that it is not *fíu* for him to engage in battle with Cet. Conall gives Cet's *doilghi* and *crōdacht* as his reasons for refusing to fight the Connacht warrior, which Meyer translated as the negative terms 'severity' and 'cruelty'.[41] They convey the sense that Conall refuses to fight Cet because he regards the latter as a cruel and savage warrior. However, these terms need not necessarily be perceived as negative, and could be taken to refer to Cet's strength and skills as a warrior. This implies that Conall's unwillingness to fight Cet is because the latter is actually a very skilled and strong fighter.

Turning to the *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* (henceforth eDIL), the primary meaning for the noun *doilge* (iā, f) is given as 'trouble,

[40] All edited and translated passages from *Aided Cheit* are my own. For the only published edition and translation of this tale see Meyer, *Death-Tales*, pp. 36–41.
[41] *Death-Tales*, pp. 36–37.

difficulty', which is used in both the positive and negative sense.[42] The related adjective *doilig* gives a clearer sense of its connotations.[43] It is used as a superlative to indicate the level of difficulty of certain actions, like the performance of a feat, as in the following example from *Táin Bó Cúalnge* from the Book of Leinster: *is air is doilgiu leis daragad*.[44] When referring to people, the adjective takes on the meaning of 'hard, stern, intractable, inexorable', particularly in martial contexts. In the current context, I take *doilghi* to refer to the difficulty that Conall would face in fighting Cet and have translated it as 'sternness', referring to Cet's skill in battle.

When looking at the entry for the noun *crōdacht* (ā, f), we find that it initially had mostly negative connotations and meant 'bloodthirstiness, cruelty', but that in later texts it more frequently came to denote 'courage, valour'.[45] The latter positive meaning is found in use in other late Middle Irish texts, such as in the following example from *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*: *a ċrodacht is a ċruas*.[46] Furthermore, the related adjective *cródae* is often found in glossaries together with the adjectives *béodae* 'living, animate; lively, active, vigorous' and *calma* 'strong; brave, valiant'.[47] This supports the idea that *crōdacht* is associated with a positive type of physical power as it is connected to bravery as opposed to cruelty. As with *doilghi*, I therefore take *crōdacht* as referring to Cet's vigour in battle, describing his qualities as a powerful and courageous warrior.

Similarly, Meyer translates *amnus in fer* as 'savage man', again taking the adjective *amnus*, which is a variant spelling of *amnas*, in a negative sense.[48] According to eDIL, the word *amnas* can be translated as 'strong, hard', and even as 'keen, clever, crafty', encompassing a range of positive and negative connotations.[49] The sense of this word appears to be similar to the noun *doilge* in that it is often used to describe someone's strength and more particularly refers

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[42] eDIL s.v. doilge or <dil.ie/17831>.
[43] eDIL s.v. doilig or <dil.ie/17839>.
[44] *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly, Irish Texts Society, 49 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), l. 3284: 'It was the feat he deemed it hardest to encounter'.
[45] eDIL s.v. cródacht or <dil.ie/13059>.
[46] *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or The Invasions of Ireland by the Danes and Other Norsemen*, ed. and trans. by James Henthorn Todd, Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores, 48 (London: Stationery Office, 1867), LXVIII, pp. 112–13: 'its valour and its severity'.
[47] eDIL s.v. cródae or <dil.ie/13060>; 'O'Davoren's Glossary', ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie*, 2 (1904), 197–504 (p. 258, entry 386); 'The Glossary in Egerton 158', ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie*, 3 (1907), 148–214 (p. 150).
[48] *Death-Tales*, pp. 36–37.
[49] eDIL s.v. amnas, or <dil.ie/3185>.

to the martial skills of a warrior in a positive sense. In the tale *Compert Con Chulainn*, the word appears in a similar context, where it is used by a warrior to boast of his fighting skills: *Am amnas ar gail 7 gaisciud*.[50] I argue that like *doilghi* and *crōdacht*, the word *amnus* also refers to Cet's skills as an exceptional warrior. I have translated *amnus* as 'strong', in accordance with my interpretation of *doilghi* and *crōdacht* as describing Cet's attributes as a strong and courageous warrior.

This re-evaluation alters the reading of the passage, as it becomes clear that Conall refuses to fight Cet on account of his sternness and his courage, and not because Cet is a cruel warrior. It may be suggested that Conall refuses to face Cet because he recognises that Cet is strong, perhaps even stronger than him. Conall's mention of Cet's *doilghi* and *crōdacht* can be seen as an acknowledgement of the latter's remarkable martial feats and may perhaps even convey a certain degree of respect for the other warrior. This idea is further strengthened by the next lines in the exchange between Conall and his charioteer, in which Conall's charioteer attempts to sway Conall. The charioteer acknowledges that Cet is a warrior strong enough to potentially kill Conall, as he argues that it would not be shameful (*nī meabal*) for Conall to die by Cet's hand. In response, Conall says that he will not be killed by a warrior of the men of Ireland, thereby admitting that he recognises that Cet has the power to kill him, which can be seen as an admission on Conall's part to Cet's superior strength as a warrior.

If Conall's reason to refuse to engage in battle with Cet is on account of the latter's strength, Conall may be interpreted as being unheroic for his unwillingness to engage in battle with Cet and could even be accused of cowardice. This plays into the idea of anti-heroism, as it would be expected of Conall, a great Ulster warrior, to engage in combat with the enemy Connachtmen, no matter the risks involved, in order to defend and enhance his personal honour. Thus, Conall's refusal to attack Cet can be taken as an example of how the image of the belligerent warrior is turned upside down.

At this point, it is important to discuss *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (henceforth *SMMD*), the other narrative in which Cet and Conall are cast in main roles and come into conflict with each other. At a feast hosted by the Leinster king Mac Dathó, Cet defends his position as prime warrior and his right to receive the *curadmír* 'champion's portion' of the meal. A series of verbal exchanges

[50] *Compert Con Chulainn*, ed. by Anton Gerard Van Hamel, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), §7, p. 8: 'I am strong in valour and prowess' (my trans.). Rudolf Thurneysen translates this as 'Ich bin scharf in Kampf und Streit', 'Setantas Geburt', in *Sagen aus dem alten Irland*, trans. by Rudolf Thurneysen (Berlin: Wiegandt & Grieben, 1901), pp. 58–62 (p. 61).

ensue in which Cet bests every warrior present, until Conall arrives, having just beheaded Cet's brother Anluan, and Cet is forced to acknowledge the Ulster warrior's martial superiority. It is likely that (some of) the audience would have read the passage in *Aided Cheit* in the context of the relationship between Cet and Conall as set out in *SMMD*, where Conall is the superior warrior and their enmity leads to a battle between the Ulaid and Connachta. It can be suggested that *Aided Cheit* builds on the idea of these existing hostilities between the two warriors.

While *SMMD* has often been interpreted as a parody of heroic society,[51] it would appear that the relationship between Cet and Conall as depicted in *Aided Cheit* may be a parody of that of the two warriors in *SMMD*, as the belligerence and animosity displayed by both champions in this text have been replaced in *Aided Cheit* by restraint and avoidance of conflict. In this context, Conall's unwillingness may alternatively be interpreted as a more sensible decision, especially since the eventual battle leaves him near death. His charioteer chides Conall for not attacking the enemy of Ulster and suggests that there would be no *meabal* ('shame') should he die by Cet's hand. Despite these appeals to Conall's honour, the Ulster warrior refuses to attack Cet. As argued by Gregory Toner, the authors of the Ulster Cycle tales advocated restraint of violence and the avoidance of unnecessary conflict.[52] Instead of trying to act as a hero by engaging in battle with a potentially stronger warrior, Conall recognises his own limitations and opts not to pursue Cet. Unheroic or not, what emerges from a close reading of this passage and examining the terms used by Conall to describe Cet is that Conall's opinion of Cet may not have been as negative or straightforward as originally taken by Meyer.

This discussion between Conall and his charioteer is followed by a similar conversation between Cet and his charioteer, in which both personal and public honour can be seen to play a key role:

§4 'Fē, a C[h]eit!' ar an t-ara.

'Nī fē', ar Cet, 'is mait[h] in t-anocul trā for na heocha. Conall-so', ar sē, '7 biaid caradrad de 7 bid maith hē.'

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[51] Nora Chadwick, '*Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*', in *Irish Sagas*, ed. by Myles Dillon (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1968), pp. 79–93 (pp. 81–93); Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish Origin Legends and Genealogy: Recurrent Aetiologies', in *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, ed. by Tore Nyberg, Iørn Piø, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Aage Trommer (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985), pp. 51–96 (p. 86); John Kelleher, 'Humor in the Ulster Saga', in *Veins of Humor*, ed. by Harry Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 35–56 (p. 45); Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 180; Patricia Kelly, 'The *Táin* as Literature', in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. Mallory, pp. 69–102 (p. 71).

[52] Toner, 'Conflict and Restraint in Irish Heroic Literature', p. 40.

> ‘Fē amae!’ or in t-ara, ‘in fer ro-lá ár Connacht do tabairt mēla fort, 7 nī toircēba t’ainm co bráth can a bás no can a rūacad a fescur.’
>
> ‘Maith ám’, ar Cet.
>
> Lotar ina diaid co hĀt[h] C[h]eit.
>
> ‘A pity, Cet!’ said the charioteer.
>
> ‘It’s no pity’, said Cet, ‘it is good that he has spared the horses so. This [was] Conall’, said he, “and an alliance will follow from it and it will be well.’
>
> ‘A pity indeed!’ said the charioteer, ‘that the man who has slaughtered the people of Connacht has put shame on you, and your name will never be mentioned until Doomsday unless he is killed or put to flight by evening.’
>
> ‘Well then’, said Cet.
>
> They went after him to Áth Cet.

Although most of this passage follows the same pattern as the preceding episode, the structure diverges at the end. Whereas Conall is not swayed by his charioteer, Cet proves to be more receptive to his charioteer’s admonitions. Crucial to the charioteer’s argument is bringing up the prospect of injury to Cet’s honour and reputation should he refuse to fight. Initially, Cet does not wish to engage in battle with Conall as he takes the latter’s gesture to spare the horses as a sign of peace. However, Cet changes his mind when the charioteer suggests that Conall is putting *mēla* (‘shame’) on Cet. The charioteer argues that this will result in the Connacht warrior’s reputation not living on after his death, meaning that Cet will not receive the everlasting fame for which he strives. Parallel to the plea made by Conall’s charioteer, Cet’s charioteer also brings up the slaughter of the men of Connacht, which is directly linked to his personal honour, and how it will suffer if he lets Conall walk away without consequence. Evidently, Cet is guided by the prospect of his honour being damaged. It may even be suggested that he has a chance to put a stop to the cycle of killing in which both warriors have been engaged up until now, but instead chooses honour over peace in his decision to fight Conall and avenge the deaths of his fellow Connachtmen.

After having analysed these two episodes, it can be argued that this section of the tale has a dual structure. This is evident when the two episodes above are read in conjunction with one another: both warriors have a discussion with the charioteers on whether or not to attack their enemy, and both charioteers try to incite the warriors to attack their adversaries. The parallel reactions of the charioteers are juxtaposed, which is reinforced by their use of the identical

exclamation *fē amae!* ('a pity!'). I suggest that by echoing these verbal signals, the author wishes the audience to identify these two episodes as mirroring each other. By placing the warriors in parallel situations, their different reactions are deliberately contrasted and emphasised.

When the motivations for their contrasting reactions are examined in the context of the literary depiction of the doomed warrior society in the Ulster Cycle, this further illustrates how the heroic ethos is criticised. There is a play between the charioteer and the warrior, as in both cases the charioteer pushes the warrior towards a confrontation and the warrior refuses to engage. A keenness to engage in battle is to be expected of the warriors, but instead the preamble to the fight presents the heroes quibbling about what the proper course of action would be. Thus, these parallel episodes subvert their roles as warriors who supposedly would be eager to engage in battle, and comment on the values of warrior society by playing with their different approaches to honour.

Moving on, at the end of the discussion between Conall and his charioteer in §3, there is a peculiar passage in which Conall takes hair from the horses:

> 'A athair', ar Conall, 'nī tibur m'anum do láith gaili fer nĒrenn 7 do-bēr trā comartha forsna eochu.'
>
> Gadaid Conall dūal a muing na n-eoch 7 do-beir an dlochtān a cinn in carpait, 7 tēit as sair co hUltu.
>
> 'O father', said Conall, 'I will not give my life to a warrior of the men of Ireland, but I will put a sign on the horses.'
>
> Conall takes away a lock from the hair of the horses and puts the small wisp on end of the chariot, and he goes eastwards towards Ulaid.

The equivocality of this passage is the centrepiece of the near-conflict between Cet and Conall. This short passage functions as a narrative pivot: it not only postpones the ultimate confrontation, but also brings the two characters to the verge of establishing peace. This would most likely not be expected by the audience, who are awaiting some form of bloodshed and killing, as the title of the tale has set up the prospect of a violent death awaiting Cet. The key element in this episode is the *dlochtán*. When consulting eDIL, we can see that this word is rarely attested.[53] In the glossary to his edition of *Aided Cheit*, Meyer takes this word as *an-dlochtan*.[54] Supposedly, as no explanation is given, Meyer analyses the first syllable of the word as the Middle Irish form of the definite article *an*.

[53] eDIL s.v. 1 dlochtán or <dil.ie/17050>.
[54] *Death-Tales*, p. 48.

He also adds lengthening to the final vowel, thereby turning the ending *–an* into the diminutive suffix *–án*, which attached to the noun *dlocht* ('bunch, wisp') gives us the word *dlochtán*.[55] The meaning of this word, however, is not without its problems. In the late Middle Irish tale *Macgnímartha Find* 'The Boyhood Deeds of Finn' it is found in direct relation with the noun *crem* ('dog's leek, wild garlick leek'),[56] referring to a small bunch of wild garlic for cooking.[57] In the Middle Irish metrical tract known as *Mittelirische Verslehren* III, the diminutive form *dlochtán* is found twice, once in combination with *crem* again, but the meaning remains unclear.[58] In the other instance Roisín McLaughlin takes it as 'little wisp', but is also uncertain as to what it refers.[59] In my edition of the text, I follow Meyer's interpretation, separating the Middle Irish form of the article *an* 'the' from the noun, and taking the word as the noun *dlocht*, meaning 'bunch', followed by the diminutive suffix *–án*. I translate it as 'small wisp', taking it to refer to the lock of hair Conall took from the horses.

The intent of this gesture is not explained in the text. It might be suggested that the ambiguity of its meaning is deliberate and is reflected in the different ways in which Cet and his charioteer can be seen to interpret it. In placing the *dlochtán* on the chariot, Conall might have intended to insult and warn Cet of his presence: he was able to come close enough to the horses to inflict serious harm, but instead left merely a *dlochtán* on the chariot.[60] In Cet's mind, however, Conall's gesture was an expression of alliance as he abstained from doing serious harm to the horses. Cet's charioteer is quick to oppose this idea and calls the affair a *méla* ('shame, disgrace').[61] He argues that letting Conall go would reflect

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[55] eDIL s.v. dlocht or <dil.ie/17047>.

[56] eDIL s.v. crem or <dil.ie/12849>.

[57] *Macgnímartha Find*, ed. by Kuno Meyer, *Revue Celtique*, 5 (1882), 195–204 (p. 202).

[58] 'Mittelirische Verslehren', ed. by Rudolf Thurneysen, in *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch*, ed. by Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes, 4 vols (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891) III.1, pp. 80, 82; Roisín McLaughlin, 'A Critical Edition of *Mittelirische Verslehren* III' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2006), p. 233.

[59] McLaughlin, p. 215.

[60] Doing actual harm to another man's horse was seen as a great insult in Irish and Welsh literature. In *Branwen ferch Llyr*, when Efnisien mutilates Matholowch's horses, the only thing that can compensate Matholwch for this grave offence is a magic cauldron that can restore the dead to life, *Branwen Uerch Lyr: The Second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, Edited from the White Book of Rhydderch, with Variants from the Red Book of Hergest and from Peniarth 6*, ed. and trans. by Derick Smith Thomson, Mediaeval and Modern Welsh Series, 2 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1961), p. 3. For examples from European and Scandinavian literature, see Andrew George Miller, '"Tails" of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics, and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England', *Speculum*, 88 (2013), 958–95 (pp. 970–76).

[61] eDIL s.v. méla or <dil.ie/31875>.

badly on Cet and might result in loss of reputation. The fact that Cet initially does not interpret the gesture this way might even be taken as an attempt to ridicule *him*, as he needs his charioteer to point out the intended meaning behind the wisp.[62]

The equivocality of this gesture ties into the parodic nature of the episode as a whole and plays on the antagonistic relationship between Cet and Conall as depicted in *SMMD*. The placement of the wisp on the chariot could be an offering of peace *or* an offence, and while Cet sees Conall's action as an expression of alliance, his charioteer takes it as an insult to Cet's honour. In this narrative strategy, the author plays with the audience's expectations to create an entertaining story, but also subverts possible expectations about heroic conduct. By structuring the narrative in this way, the indecisiveness of the warriors is emphasised. Rather than being paragons of action and combat, the heroes are more preoccupied with internal squabbling and the pursuit of personal glory. In subverting the roles of the warriors and the audience's expectation, the author thus provides a social commentary on the egocentric values of warrior society as depicted in the Ulster Cycle.

Returning to the relationship between the charioteer and the hero in the Ulster Cycle warrior society, what becomes clear is that the social bonds *between* these two in this tale are not necessarily presented as breaking down. Despite Conall's rejection of his charioteer's counsel, the latter still supports him in his fight with Cet and afterwards attempts to bring the wounded Conall home. However, of note are the different reactions that the individual heroes display to their charioteers' advice. Conall is reluctant and choses to ignore his charioteer's counsel, and thereby almost manages to avoid a conflict altogether. Cet, on the other hand, is eager to listen to his charioteer's admonitions, which lead to the confrontation between the two warriors. The consequences of this battle speak for themselves: Conall is heavily wounded but survives the fight, while Cet's unquestioning reliance upon his charioteer's advice causes his death.

The charioteer-warrior duo is always depicted as searching for ways to increase glory and upholding honour as the greatest gain. In this case, however, the charioteer's traditional counsel, which promotes the quest for glory and fame, fails the warrior. What lies at the heart of the advice from both charioteers is the concept of honour— honour which Conall decides not to pursue, and which Cet seeks through blindly trusting his charioteer. By rejecting his charioteer's advice,

[62] The episode with the wisp could possibly have been inspired by a chapter from the Book of Samuel. In I Samuel 24, David is hiding in a cave from king Saul, when the latter enters to relieve himself. David's followers urge him to kill Saul, but David refrains and only cuts off a piece of Saul's robe. While this parallel warrants further consideration, it cannot be explored here due to lack of space.

Conall in effect breaks with this literary tradition and splits up the martial unit, which is depicted as the cornerstone of warrior society. By presenting the martial unit of charioteer and warrior and their reciprocal relationship as failing, it is in fact warrior society as a whole that is deemed dysfunctional and condemned in *Aided Cheit*.

This examination of the fraught relationship between hero and charioteer in *Aided Cheit* has implications for the reading of the whole *aideda* anthology, as it reinforces the idea that they can be read as a collection of anti-heroic tales, ridiculing and condemning the martial values of an inherently flawed society. Presenting the warriors of the Ulster Cycle as part of this heroic but doomed society may have been part of a political strategy developed by the Uí Néill authors, as Radner suggests, intended to justify their rulership of the formerly Ulster territories. However, the positioning of *Aided Chonchobair* in the *aideda* anthology emphasises the Christian context in which these tales—including *Aided Cheit*—should be read and may point to another reason for portraying the Ulster Cycle warriors and their community in this fashion. By ridiculing and condemning this pre-Christian warrior society and its inherent values, perhaps the authors sought to provide a way for the Christian audience to read and listen to these tales without risking glorification of the pre-Christian past. In any case, this analysis of *Aided Cheit* demonstrates that much is to be gained from examining understudied tales such as this one. Reading short and enigmatic tales as part of their wider literary and manuscript context is essential, as this leads to a fuller appreciation of these narratives which is at once more nuanced and more expansive.

# Testing the Boundaries of History: *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and its *apologiæ* in AM 589f 4to

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*Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is believed to have been written in the late fourteenth century and is set, for the most part, in the pre-Christian legendary Scandinavian world, stretching to England in the west and Garðaríki in the east.[1] It incorporates multiple traditional 'supernatural' elements into a bridal-quest romance structure, furnished with numerous 'chivalric' motifs and vocabulary.[2] As a result, it has been variously designated a *fornaldarsaga* (legendary saga), an *Abenteuersaga* (adventure saga), and an Icelandic romance.[3] As one text in a large corpus of sagas that have historically been viewed as formulations of a set of stock motifs, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* has received limited literary comment.[4] However, there is one factor that makes it stand out from the rest: it is uniquely concerned with its sources and defending its own truth value, so much so that Stephen Mitchell has

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[1] Garðaríki roughly refers to the kingdom of the Kievan Rus which emerged in the ninth century in modern day eastern Europe and western Russia. For a recent discussion about the toponym, see Tatjana N. Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), pp. 65–69.

[2] Peter Hallberg, 'Some Aspects of the Fornaldarsögur as a Corpus', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 97 (1982), 1–35 (pp. 15–20, 30–35); Lars Lönnroth, 'Fornaldarsagans genremässiga metamorfoser: mellan Edda-myt och riddarroman', in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 28 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, Institutionen för nordiska språk, 2003), pp. 37–45 (pp. 40–44); Jacob Wittmer Hartmann, *The Göngu-Hrólfssaga: A Study in Old Norse Philology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), pp. 37–42, 100–102; John D. Martin, 'Hreggviðr's Revenge: Supernatural Forces in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 70 (1998), 313–24; Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, Islandica, 46 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 147–55; Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 82–85.

[3] For a variety of perspectives on genre among this group of sagas, see 'Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-Table Discussion', ed. by Judy Quinn, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 2 (2006), 275–96.

[4] For a summary of such views, see Matthew J. Driscoll, 'Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture, 31 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 190–203 (pp. 196–98); Marianne E. Kalinke, 'Norse Romance (riddarasögur)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching, 42 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 316–63 (pp. 316–17).

described it as 'easily one of the most self-absorbed of all the *fornaldarsǫgur*'.[5] This self-absorption is nowhere clearer than in a series of oft-commented upon passages that (following the work of Marianne E. Kalinke) have come to be known as the *apologiæ*, in which saga narrators address their audiences directly to defend the truthfulness of their narratives.[6] These passages occur in numerous sagas and vary in length and complexity, but those in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* are perhaps the longest and most complex.[7]

The *apologiæ* have been a popular tool in modern scholarship for determining how medieval audiences perceived the historical status of the 'romance' sagas. Although it has now become commonplace to argue that the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, *samtíðasögur*, and the more 'traditional' *fornaldarsögur* were viewed in their time as fundamentally historical, it is still the prevailing view that the 'romance' sagas were perceived as fictional narratives produced by another school of saga writing that took inspiration more from continental romance and 'folklore' than from the stuff of history (such as oral legends and skaldic poetry).[8] The *apologiæ* have been used to substantiate this position. Because most of the sagas they accompany in their manuscripts are so farcical, manifestly untrue and untraditional, the argument goes that the *apologiæ* must have been jokes which satirised traditional saga style and signalled a conscious departure from it. Kalinke adopted this stance when she coined the term, writing that they 'bespeak the author's awareness of the fictional and alien character of the literature they were propagating'.[9] Several other scholars have followed similar lines of argument.[10]

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[5] Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 85.

[6] Kalinke, 'Norse Romance', pp. 318–19.

[7] For a full list of the *apologiæ*, see Ralph O'Connor, 'History or Fiction? Truth-Claims and Defensive Narrators in Icelandic Romance-Sagas', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 101–69 (pp. 126–28).

[8] For a summary of these views, see Ralph O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 88–110 (pp. 88–96).

[9] Kalinke, 'Norse Romance', p. 319.

[10] Hallberg, pp. 6–11; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum: rannsókn bókmenntahefðar*, Rit, 33 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988), p. 250–53; Geraldine Barnes, 'Authors, Dead and Alive in Old Norse Fiction', *Parergon*, 8 (1990), 5–22 (pp. 13–6); Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 86–88; Else Mundal, 'The Growth of Consciousness of Fiction in Old Norse Culture', in *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe, c. 1100-1400*, ed. by Panagiotis A. Agapitos and Lars Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2012), pp. 167–98 (pp. 185–86); Karl G. Johansson, 'Narratives and Narrators on the Move: Some Examples of Change and Continuity in the Tradition of Fantastic Fiction', in *Legendary Sagas*, ed. by Lassen, Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson pp. 351–70 (pp. 363–66).

However, Ralph O'Connor has called into question the use of the term 'fiction' in such scholarship. Rather than the common-sense use, meaning a 'narrative that has been invented', he adopts Dennis Green's narrower definition of fiction as a literary mode that is predicated on an agreement between author and audience that what is narrated does not represent events that really happened.[11] O'Connor argues that there is no evidence for such an agreement in any saga genre: sagas were assumed to represent history, and those that failed to convince their audiences of their truthfulness were liable to be dismissed as lies (*lygisögur* or *skröksögur*).[12] And indeed, as he notes, the historical expectations of late medieval audiences are hinted at in many of the 'fictional' interpretations: Kalinke, Hallberg and Mitchell all refer to a sense of anxiety present among saga compilers regarding the historical credentials of their texts.[13] The key difference is that in O'Connor's argument, fiction only exists when all parties are aware and accepting of it and so no such anxiety should be present in true fiction. The *apologiæ* should therefore, he argues, be seen as genuine authentication techniques which, rather than evidencing a divergence from the traditional historical mode, arose out of a tension between the enduring historical expectations of the form (as well as those of the audience) and the potentially 'unhistorical' nature of the sagas they came to be attached to.[14]

The potentially 'unhistorical' nature of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is the subject of this article. Most previous analyses of the *apologiæ* have focussed on the passages in isolation, often relating them to the whole of the romance or *fornaldarsögur* corpus without considering how they bear specifically on the texts they accompany in their manuscripts.[15] To begin filling this gap, I will draw connections between the saga and its *apologiæ* to explore what it was about the saga that might have made it seem 'unhistorical' and prompted the inclusion of the truth defences. As is often noted, medieval Icelanders certainly had space within their concept of 'history' for things which modern critics typically

[11] Dennis Howard Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 4, 11–17.
[12] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', pp. 133–41. See also Anatoly Liberman, *Saga Mind and the Beginnings of Icelandic Prose* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2018), pp. 77–79, 105.
[13] Kalinke, 'Norse Romance', p. 318; Hallberg, p. 5; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 87.
[14] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', pp. 167–69.
[15] With the exception of Philip Lavender although his overarching concern is with the saga's composition rather than its truth value, '"Sumar eptir fornkvæðum eðr fróðum mönnum ok stundum eptir fornum bókum": Some Observations on the Sources of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 90 (2018), 78–109 (pp. 86–93).

associate with fiction.[16] However, as Mundal writes, the presence of the *apologiæ* clearly shows that 'there was a limit to what people in an Old Norse audience would believe', and thus there were limits within which texts would have been considered history.[17] What those limits were have rarely been the subject of study.[18] The overarching aim of this article is, therefore, to use the *apologiæ* to explore the boundaries of the saga as a historical form, at least for audiences in this later period.

First, it is pertinent to provide a brief overview of the manuscript in question, AM 589f 4to (1450–1499, hereafter 589f), and explain why I will be looking at just one of the saga's witnesses.[19] 589f is the final part of what used to be a much larger book that was separated into six parts (now under the shelf marks AM 589a-f 4to) by Árni Magnússon when he received it at the end of the seventeenth century.[20] The only other text in 589f is *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, which tells the story of Göngu-Hrólfr's father Sturlaugr starfsami. The other six parts contain *fornaldarsögur*, indigenous *riddarasögur*, and three *þættir*.[21] All six parts were written by two closely related hands who also produced AM 586 4to (which contains a number of other 'romance' sagas, *Íslendingasögur*, and some *ævintýr*) but are otherwise unknown. The location of either manuscript's production has been impossible to ascertain.[22]

The principle reason for focussing on just one witness of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is that its *apologiæ* are 'textually extremely unstable'.[23] In all, the saga has three different *apologiæ*—a prologue, an epilogue and a mid-saga interjection—but their presence varies across the extant medieval manuscripts, of which there are five in all: three are mostly complete and two are fragments. The prologue appears in 589f and in partial form in the fragment AM 567 XI β 4to (fifteenth

[16] For example, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 96–98; Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls? *Bárðar saga* as an Historical Narrative', *Saga-Book*, 25 (1998–2001), 53–71 (pp. 53–55).

[17] Mundal, p. 185.

[18] An exception is Carl Phelpstead, 'Fantasy and History: Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*', *Saga-Book*, 36 (2012), 27–42.

[19] All manuscript dates referred to are those provided in the catalogue entries of *handrit.is* [accessed 18 May 2020].

[20] Agnete Loth, *Fornaldarsagas and Late Medieval Romances: AM 586 4to and AM 589a-f 4to*, trans. by P. Foote, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile, 11 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977), pp. 9, 23.

[21] These are (a) *Kirialax saga*; (b) *Samsons saga fagra*; (c) *Valdimars saga*, *Klári saga*; (d) *Ectors saga*, *Stúfs þáttr*; (e) *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, *Egils saga einhenda og Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, *Ála flekks saga* and *Hákonar þáttr Hárekssonar*.

[22] Loth, pp. 20–23.

[23] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', p. 263.

century) it is copied at the beginning of *Sigurðar saga þögla* in AM 152 fol (1500–1525, hereafter 152), which also contains a version of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* without the prologue. The witness of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* in 152 does, however, preserve the epilogue in full, whereas 589f only includes the first few lines. Both 152 and 589f include the mid-saga interjection although the latter's version is more detailed. The other medieval witness, GKS 2845 4to (1440–1460), was copied without the prologue but there is a large lacuna covering the section where the mid-saga interjection would occur and the text cuts off shortly before reaching the epilogue. The other fragment, AM 567 XI α 4to (fifteenth century), covers a small section in the middle (roughly chapters 31–32) where we would not expect any *apologiæ*. 589f includes then, in summary, the full prologue, the longest extant version of the mid-saga interjection and the beginning of the epilogue.

589f is also unique because it is the only extant medieval version of the saga which was copied after its prequel. The two texts do not fit together neatly, however, since they record different information regarding the place and manner of Sturlaugr starfsami's death. This and the evidence of *Sturlaugs rímur* have prompted the suggestion that *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* was originally composed by someone with knowledge of a shorter, now lost version of its prequel.[24] However, in the late fifteenth century when the scribes of 589f wished to copy the two texts sequentially, only the longer version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* seems to have been available, in this case AM 335 4to.[25] As a result, although some effort was made to iron out easily fixable inconsistencies such as the number and names of Sturlaugr's children and the destination of his quest for the aurochs' horn, the manuscript which they produced contains two sagas which differ in regards to some significant detail.[26]

It is these specific conditions which make the witness interesting and show that any discussion about *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s historical value has to look at it

[24] Björn K. Þórólfsson, *Rímur fyrir 1600*, Safn fræðafjelagsins um Ísland og Íslendinga, 9 (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller, 1934), pp. 399–402; Christopher Sanders, '*Sturlaugs saga starfsama*: Humour and Textual Archaeology', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th–12th August, 2006*, ed. by John McKinnell, Dave Ashurst and Donata Kick, 2 vols (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), II, pp. 876–85 (p. 877).

[25] *The Two Versions of Sturlaugs saga Starfsama: A Decipherment, Edition, and Translation of a Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Mythical-Heroic Saga*, ed. and trans. by Otto J. Zitzelsberger (Düsseldorf: M. Triltisch Verlag, 1969), pp. 308–09.

[26] In other witnesses of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* the destination of Sturlaugr's quest is 'incorrectly' given as Ireland (for example AM 152 fol, fol. 99$^{v}$, line 39) whereas in 589f's version it is Bjarmaland (AM 589f 4to, fol. 15$^{v}$, lines 16–17), as is told in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*.

on a witness level, because that is where we can see the scribes mediating their material and making decisions about how to represent it. The scribes of 589f were certainly not the 'original' authors of the various parts of the text, neither the saga itself nor its *apologiæ*. In fact, Philip Lavender has argued that it is more likely the prologue was written for *Sigurðar saga þögla* and then 'at some later time, an author (or scribe) of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* became aware of the prologue's wholesale applicability to his or her work too […] and thus reproduced it in its new context'.[27] It is unlikely that the first scribes to do so were the ones who wrote 589f. But reproducing a passage is as much of a choice as removing it, and when the passage in question is an elaborate claim to truth, its inclusion fundamentally changes the significance of the accompanying text.[28] Thus the compiling and copying choices made by the scribes of 589f warrant specific consideration.

In what follows, the potential critiques addressed by the prologue (the longest *apologia* in this witness) will be discussed and related to the saga and its other *apologiæ*, with the aim of revealing what may have been considered 'unhistorical' about it. Since it is likely the prologue was not written specifically 'for' this text, there are some things mentioned that do not correspond with the saga directly. In particular, following the quotation below there is a reference to how unclean spirits have been known to possess dead bodies. This does not relate to the text, as Lavender observes.[29] *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* features both seemingly unclean spirits and the waking dead, but there is nothing to suggest the corporeality of the former nor the demonic possession of the latter. Although this line in the prologue is tantalising, an exploration of its relationship to the saga would not fit within this short article.

The prologue broadly covers three main criticisms which might be levelled at the saga by incredulous audience members. These are (1) its lack of an authoritative source; (2) its contradiction of other accounts; and (3) the potential implausibility of its supernatural content, which is of most interest to this article. The relevant section of the prologue is as follows:

> {M}arg*ar* fra sagn*ir* hafa m*enn* saman sett t*il* ske*mm*tan*ar* m*önnu*m sum*ar* ept*ir* forn skræd*um*[30] edr f*r*od*um* m*önnu*m *ok* stu*n*d*um* ept*ir* forn*um* bok*um*

[27] Lavender, p. 92.
[28] Johansson, p. 357; Lavender, pp. 92–93.
[29] Lavender, p. 89.
[30] As Ralph O'Connor notes, this is likely a scribal error which should read *fornkvæðum* (old poems), as is written in 152, 'Truth and Lies in the *fornaldarsögur*: The Prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*', in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske*

er i fystu hafa sett*ar* uerit m*ed* stuttu male e*n* sida*n* ordu*m* fylldar þui flest hef*ir* seirna uerit e*n* sagt er u*er*da m*enn* iaf*n*a*n* misf*rod*i*r* þui þ*at* er optliga an*ar*s syn *ok* heyrd er an*ar*s er e*igi* þo þ*ei*r se uid atburd stadd*ir*. Er þ*at ok* m*ar*gra heimskra man*n*a nattura at þ*ei*r t*ru*a þui einu er þ*ei*r sia sinu*m* augu*m* edr heyra sinu*m* eyru*m* er þ*ei*m þick*ir* fi*ar*lægt sin*n*i natt*ur*u suo se*m* ordit hef*ir* u*m* uitra m*anna* rada giordir edr m*ik*it afl edr f*ra*bæra*n* lettleika fyri m*ann*a suo *ok* e*igi* sidr u*m* konstr edr huklara skap *ok* m*ik*la fiolkyngi þa þ*ei*r seiddu at sumu*m* m*önnu*m æfi*n*liga ogiæfu edr aldr tila. e*n* su*m*um ueralldar uirding fiar *ok* metnadar. þ*ei*r æstu stu*n*du*m* haufudskepn*ur*. e*n* stu*n*du*m* kyrdu suo se*m* u*ar* odi*n* edr adr*ir* þ*ei*r er af h*onu*m námu galldr list*ir* edr lækning*ar*.[31]

Many stories have been put together for people's entertainment, some after old scrolls [or poems] and others after learned men, and some from old books which were first set down quickly and later filled in because most things take place more slowly than in the telling.[32] People are differently informed because often one sees or hears what another does not even though they may have been present at the same event. And it is also in many foolish people's nature to believe only what they see with their own eyes or hear with their own ears, [not that] which to them seems distant from their nature, such as the advice of the wise or the great strength or overwhelming lightness of men of old and, no less, the skill or tricks of

*fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Agnete Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009), pp. 361–78 (p. 368).

[31] AM 589f 4to, fol. 13r, lines 13–22. Diplomatic transcriptions of the text are based on the black and white images provided by the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen ('AM 589 f 4to', in *Digitale samlinger af sprogligt-kulturhistorisk materiale på Institut for Nordiske Studier og Sprogvidenskab* <http://digitalesamlinger.hum.ku.dk/> [accessed 18 May 2020]) with the guidance of Rafn's normalised edition ('Gaungu-Hrólfs saga', in *Fornaldur sögur Nordrlanda*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Enni Poppska Prentsmiðja, 1829–1830), III, pp. 235–64). Full colour images are also available at 'AM 589 f 4to', in *handrit.is* [accessed 18 May 2020]. The manuscript differentiates sections of the text which have been given chapter numbers by subsequent editors. These are referred to throughout in brackets. Words in {} are supplied from Rafn's edition in cases where the manuscript is damaged or something seems to have been missed by the scribe. Translations are my own but in cases of uncertainty they are informed by *Göngu-Hrolf's saga: A Viking Romance*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1980); O'Connor, 'Truth and Lies', pp. 368–69; O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', p. 146.

[32] Here I have followed the translation provided by O'Connor who adds this gloss: 'stories briefly told will leave large gaps in the narrative, giving the misleading impression that things happened very quickly, so later redactors are duty-bound to fill these gaps as they see fit', O'Connor, 'Truth and Lies', p. 70.

> the mind or great sorcery, which they would use to cast spells to bring some men everlasting bad luck or death, but to some all the world's honour, wealth, and esteem. Sometimes, they would stir up the principal elements and sometimes calm them, as Óðinn did and those others who learned magic arts and healing from him.

## LACK OF SOURCES

The first potential critique in the prologue concerns the saga's sources. In response, it makes a general claim to nonspecific old sources and learned men and suggests that any errors in the text may have arisen during transmission. Indeed, a criticism of the saga's source base would be justified since *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* does not seem to have had one in the traditional sense. There is no evidence to suggest that it was based on a pre-existing legend, there is no reference to its events in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, which overlaps with some other *fornaldarsögur*, and there is no surviving eddic poetry it could have been based on. The saga itself does contain three verses in *fornyrðislag* metre but these have been dated to the same century within which the saga itself was composed, so it seems likely they were written for inclusion in the prose rather than being a source of inspiration for it.[33]

An anxiety about the saga's lack of traditional sources pervades the main text as well. It includes numerous occurrences of the formula 'svá er sagt' (so it is said) which imply the story was derived from orally transmitted tales. Peter Hallberg has counted twenty-two instances and, among the *fornaldarsögur* he surveyed, it is eclipsed only by *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, which has twenty-six.[34] The compiler also capitalised on gaps in cultural memory, for example relating to the eastern river routes that were travelled by Scandinavians during the Viking Age.[35] Frequently when Hrólfr travels between Denmark and Garðaríki it is commented that 'ecki er sagt f*ra* hueria leid hann for' (it is not said which way he travelled).[36] Such inversions of the 'svá er sagt' formula make up for places where no evidence was available to corroborate the story: they highlight instances where, if the compiler were prone to lying, they could have easily made something up.

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[33] AM 589f 4to, fol. 31$^{v}$, lines 21–25 (ch. 32); Margaret Clunies Ross, '*Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*' in *Poetry in* fornaldarsögur *1*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, Skaldic Poetry from the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 8, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), I, pp. 298–302 (p. 298).
[34] Hallberg, p. 16.
[35] Jackson, pp. 46–51.
[36] AM 589f 4to, fol. 18$^{v}$, line 22 (ch. 12).

These allusions to a (seemingly fabricated) oral tradition are counterweighed by several references to knowledge of a more 'learned origin'. It seems that the saga compiler wanted to provide as much detail as they could regarding the settings and so included information of both an encyclopaedic and historical nature.[37] For example, references are made to the eastwards journey of Yngvarr víðförla and to Heðinn Hjarandason's westwards journey from India.[38] The saga also concludes with descriptions of the three main settings: Garðaríki, England and Denmark. The description of Garðaríki (chapter 38) is brief but appears to include as much information as the compiler had access to and was later supplemented with additional place names by another scribe.[39] The description of England's main towns and exports (chapter 37) has no known source but likely resulted, as Jacob W. Hartmann notes, from the 'common knowledge of the educated classes' during what is now sometimes referred to as Iceland's English Age.[40] Finally, the lengthy description of Denmark (chapter 37), which includes a large number of place names, was adapted from the account given in *Knýtlinga saga* of the realm ruled by Knútr the Saint in the eleventh century.[41] And so, the prologue's vague claim to sources adds to the attempts that were already being made throughout the saga to defend against the (quite reasonable) accusation that it was not based on historical sources.

## CONTRADICTIONS WITH OTHER ACCOUNTS

The second potential critique which the prologue presupposes concerns the saga's contradiction of other accounts. It explains how these accounts may arise: sometimes people present at the same event notice different things. The first few lines of the epilogue refer to a related flaw: 'þo þessi saga þicki e*igi* sa*m*hlioda u*erd*a audru*m* þ*ei*m er at {ganga} þessu male, u*m* man*n*a nauf*n*, edr adra atburdi, huat er huer*r* uan*n* edr giordi {með} frægd edr uizku' (Even if there are discrepancies between this story and others that deal with the same events, about

[37] On the compiler's geographical knowledge, see Hartmann, pp. 55–77.

[38] AM 589f 4to, fol. 13$^{v}$, lines 12–14 (ch. 1); AM 589f 4to, fol. 22$^{r}$, line 35 (ch. 17). The latter seems to be a reference to something like the *Sörla þáttr* (*Flateyjarbók*, 1387–1394) version of the *Hjaðningavíg* legend although there it is said that Heðinn came from Serkland: *Flateyjarbók: En samling af norske konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl Rikard Unger, Norske historiske kildeskriftfonds skrifter, 4, 3 vols (Christiania: P. T. Malling, 1860–1868), I, pp. 275–83.

[39] The unique place names are Lifla*n*d, Nog*ar*dr and Rudzala*n*d (fol. 36$^{r}$, line 34– fol. 36$^{v}$, line 1).

[40] Hartmann, p. 77.

[41] Hartmann, pp. 72–75; Lavender, pp. 93–99.

people's names and other details, and what each person achieved or did with greatness or wisdom).[42]

As mentioned, the manner of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s contradictions with other accounts do not relate to how various individuals interpreted an event, but rather to matters of significant fact: the location and cause of Sturlaugr starfsami's death. In the extant version of *Sturlaugs saga*, he dies as a petty king in Sweden, whereas in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, he is said to have been a jarl in Hringaríki who died in Garðaríki. Further, it seems that when *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* was originally put together to follow the now-lost version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, it already contradicted the existing account. As Sturlaugr dies in Garðaríki the saga says:

> u*m* þen*n*a atburd á gr*e*inir miog bækr {at því} suo seg*ir* i sturl*augs* saugu *ok* fleiru*m* audru*m* boku*m* at h*ann* hafi sottdaudr ordit heima i hri*n*gar*iki ok* u*er*et þar heygdr. En her seg*ir* suo at ept*ir* fall þord*ar* ko*m* g*ri*mr æg*ir* {upp ór} iórduni at baki sturl*au*gi *ok* hio m*ed* mæki á hrygg h*onu*m suo at h*ann* tæki i su*n*dr i m{iðju} uitu*m* u*er* e*igi* hu*or*t san*ar*a er.[43]
>
> About these events books disagree greatly, because it says in *Sturlaugs saga* and several other sagas, that he had died of sickness at home in Hringaríki and was buried in a mound there, but this saga says that after Þórðr fell, Grímr Ægir came up out of the ground behind Sturlaugr and struck his sword in his back so that he took [him] apart in the middle. We do not know which is truer.

589f therefore refers to three distinct accounts of Sturlaugr's death. The one in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (where he dies in Sweden), the one presumably in the now-lost saga which is alluded to but never delineated outright in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (where he dies in Hringaríki), and the one described in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* itself (where he dies in Garðaríki). The acknowledgement of contradictory accounts in the prologue and epilogue was, therefore, already arguably relevant when the saga was first compiled, but the need for the defence was heightened when the scribes of this manuscript put their version together since the information they had access to was riddled with further inconsistencies. Thus, not only did the additions of the *apologiæ* mirror the saga's already self-conscious tone, but in this case, they provided a defence that was even more necessary than before.

[42] AM 589f 4to, fol. 36$^{v}$, lines 11–13.
[43] AM 589f 4to, fol. 31$^{v}$, lines 2–6 (ch. 31).

## IMPLAUSIBILITY OF THE SUPERNATURAL

The third critique anticipated in the prologue addresses the potential implausibility of the saga's supernatural events, particularly the magical skills afforded to people of the heathen age. It states that these skills — 'konstr edr huklara skap *ok* m*ik*la fiolkyngi (the skill or tricks of the mind or great sorcery) — could have both positive and negative effects, bringing death and misery to some but great success to others. The particular kinds of magic mentioned relate to the manipulation of the elements ('haufudskepn*ur*') and healing ('lækning*ar*'). As Lavender has noted, we encounter both kinds of magic in the saga.[44] Magical manipulation of the elements is relatively common across the saga corpus, but there is one unusual instance of healing magic in this saga — when the dwarf Möndull uses some *smyrsl* (ointment) to reattach Hrólfr's feet to his legs after they have been cut off by the conniving Vilhjálmr. This was clearly considered unusual at the time since it is Möndull's act of healing which elicits the following the mid-saga interjection:

> er þar *ok* uan*n*t i mote at mæla, er hin*ir* fyr*r*i m*enn* hafa sa*m*sett, hefdi þ*ei*r þ*at* uel matt seg*i*a at á an*nan* ueg hefdi at borezt ef þ*ei*r villdi, hafa þ*ei*r *ok* su*m*ir sp*ek*ing*ar* u*er*it er mióg hafa talad i figuru u*m* su*m*a hlute, suo se*m* meist*ar*i gallt*er*us i alexa*n*dris saugu, edr umeris skalld i troio m*anna* saugu *ok* hafa ept*ir*ko*man*di meistrar þat helldr t*il* san*nen*da fært, e*n* i mote mællt at suo mætte uera, þarf *ok* eingi meira t*ru*nad á at legia, e*n* hafa þo gledi af á m*eda*n h*ann* heyr*ir*.[45]
>
> It is difficult to speak against those things which have been set down by past men. They may well have said that it had been another way if they wanted. And there have been some philosophers who have spoken figuratively about such things, such as Master Galterus in *Alexanders saga* and the poet Homer in *Trójumanna saga*, and subsequent masters have turned it into truth and not disagreed that it could have been that way.[46] No one needs to give more credence [than he wants] but nevertheless be happy while he listens.

[44] Lavender, p. 89.
[45] AM 589f 4to, fol. 26$^{v}$, lines 30–35 (ch. 25).
[46] On the phrase *til sanninda fært*, see O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', pp. 146–49.

As O'Connor has explained, the compiler deals with the implausibility by blaming their sources and suggesting previous storytellers had misunderstood what originally may have been figurative.[47] The inclusion of this narratorial aside clearly shows that a literal interpretation by the audience might have damaged the saga's claim to historicity. It is, by modern standards, a ludicrous act of magic and it seems likely that the narratorial aside was prompted by the expectation that even for medieval audiences it would have been a step too far.

However, this defence strategy points towards a concern which extends beyond general plausibility. We can compare it, as O'Connor has, to the epilogue of *Mágus saga jarls* where the removing and reattaching of hands and feet is given as an example of the *sjónhverfingar* (optical illusions) worked by the Æsir.[48] By describing such phenomena as illusions, *Mágus saga jarls* uses the popular demonic interpretation of paganism.[49] In this framework, the heathen gods were considered demons in disguise and the effects wrought through the magic they taught were devilish illusions rather than material realities. It is interesting that this widely available interpretation was not the one offered by the compiler of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, and I would argue that it is because they wanted to avoid the suggestion that Hrólfr might have been benefitting from the work of demonic magic. They were clearly aware that the episode was stretching the limits of plausibility and so suggested an alternative reading which avoided both the accusation of lies *and* of demonism.

The desire to protect the hero from association with demonism can be seen beyond the mid-saga interjection and in the language used throughout the saga. Grímr Ægir—whose name combines one of Óðinn's *heiti* with that of the sea deity Ægir—is unmistakably an agent of the devil. He tempts the weak-hearted Vilhjálmr to do his bidding (chapter 27); he is rumoured to be of monstrous parentage as it is said that 'h*an*s edle u*ar* ólikt allra an*ara* m*anna* natt*ur*u' (his nature was unlike any other man's); and when he dies at the saga's end his shapeshifting body is revealed to be an immaterial illusion which 'drafnadi i su*n*dr se*m* snior i elldi {ok uarð} at dufte einu' (melted away like snow in a flame and turned into nothing but dust).[50] The magic he uses to intervene in the lives of men is described as 'fiolkyngi *ok* galldra', terms which were inherited from the

[47] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', pp. 146–47.
[48] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', p. 148; *Mágus saga jarls*, in *Riddarasögur*, ed. by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1949–51), II, pp. 134–429 (p. 427).
[49] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Demonism and the Pre-Christian Gods of Scandinavia', in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception, Volume I: From the Middle Ages to c. 1850*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 119–26.
[50] AM 589f 4to, fol. 14$^{r}$, lines 13–14 (ch. 2); AM 589f 4to, 33$^{r}$, lines 2–3 (ch. 33).

pre-Christian vocabulary of magic.[51] By contrast, it is said that Möndull has 'konstr t*il* læknisdo*m*s' (*konstr* in healing) and that 'dv*er*gsnatt*ur*u hef*ir* eg at kynstru*m ok* hagleik' (I have a dwarf's nature in *kynstr* and craftsmanship).[52] In contrast to those associated with Grímr Ægir, these terms (*konstr*/*kynstr*) seem to have entered the Old Norse lexicon at a relatively late date since an overview of their entries in the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose reveals that they are mostly used in the later 'romances' to denote some kind of occult (although not necessarily maleficent) art or skill, such as that of Bera in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Philotemia in *Dínus saga drambláta*, and the dwarf Asper in *Gibbons saga* (a character who has much in common with Möndull).[53] By terming their skills differently in this way, the two characters and their magical powers are kept semantically and morally separate.[54]

This distinction between good and bad magic contributes to the saga's wider thematic exploration of the forces of causation which exist beyond human understanding. John D. Martin has shown how Möndull is part of an undercurrent of mysterious 'good forces' that pervade the whole saga and which enable Hrólfr's success.[55] At the heart of these is the dead king Hreggviðr, who supports Hrólfr from the confines of his grave mound by providing him with powerful tools and advice. Martin argues that since Hrólfr's mission turns out to be, in essence, to avenge Hreggviðr and ensure the successful continuation of his dynasty by marrying his daughter Ingigerðr, rather than Hreggviðr helping Hrólfr, the 'passive hero' Hrólfr seems more accurately to be acting as dead king's human proxy.[56] If we follow Martin's reading, there is another level of action behind the saga's main plot in which forces for good battle forces for evil and men are caught up in the middle.[57] The implication of such a reading is that some kind of divine will might manifest itself in even the most pagan figures; in this case, through the mound-dwelling dead king Hreggviðr, the dwarf Möndull, and an unnamed *álfkona* who spurs Hrólfr along on his way.

This idea of 'good' pagan magic may well have raised a few eyebrows among medieval audiences. As Mitchell has noted, magic in the *fornaldarsögur* usually

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[51] AM 589f 4to, fol. 19$^{v}$, line 27 (ch. 14). Nicholas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance*, Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 29–36.

[52] AM 589 4to, fol. 26$^{v}$, lines 10, 12 (ch. 25).

[53] Aldís Sigurðardóttir et al., 'kynstr', in *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?> [accessed 18 May 2020]; Aldís Sigurðardóttir et al., 'konstr', in *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* [accessed 18 May 2020].

[54] A similar strategy seems to be at work in *Örvar-Odds saga*: Meylan, pp. 112–17.

[55] Martin, pp. 314–20.

[56] Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 147–55.

[57] Martin, pp. 321–22.

represents the demonic forces that Christianisation would overcome. The legendary world is conventionally, he writes, 'devoid of a benevolent creator to whom prayer may be addressed and is instead a world consisting entirely of soulless mechanistic appeals to demons'.[58] *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s suggestion otherwise may well have been considered at odds with the expected historical narrative of conversion; a narrative on which, if we follow Joseph Harris and Margaret Clunies Ross, the generic divisions of the whole saga corpus hinge.[59] Grímr Ægir's demonic *fjölkynngi* is clearly meant to be symptomatic of the old order, before (in Clunies Ross's words) 'the powers of Christendom could eradicate the dangerous illusions and manifestations of Satan', but Möndull's mysterious *konstr* is difficult to fit within the usual teleological scheme.[60] Thus, although the saga is embedded into the conceptualisation of history articulated in the rest of the corpus by oral allusion phrases and intertextual references, the legendary past it hints at is distinctly different from that which medieval audiences likely would have come to expect.

However, while the interpretation Martin suggests is compelling, it is just one possible reading of a text which is steeped in ambiguity. Although the powers of Möndull and Grímr Ægir are linguistically distinct, in practice the natures of their magic are impossible to separate with confidence. When they come head to head in the final battle (chapter 33), they both shake cloth bags to create storms (stirring up the *höfuðskepnur*) and shoot arrows at each other which meet in mid-air. They then dive into the earth to continue their battle unseen underground where it seems they each enlist further unnamed forces: Möndull later says that he only escaped because 'fleiri uaro min*ir* {vinir} e*n* h*an*s þar f*yrir*' (more were my {friends} than his down there).[61] As Ármann Jakobsson has shown, Möndull is (typically for a dwarf) a morally ambiguous character.[62] He enters the saga as

[58] Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 92.

[59] Joseph Harris, 'Saga as Historical Novel', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Viking Collection, 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 187–219 (pp. 194–218); Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organisation in Early Iceland', *JEGP*, 92 (1993), 372–85 (pp. 382–83).

[60] Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 78. A similar problem is dealt with by the compiler of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls', pp. 67–69.

[61] AM 589f 4to, fol. 33$^{r}$, lines 17–18.

[62] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enabling Love: Dwarfs in in Old-Norse Icelandic Romances', in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2008), pp. 183–206 (pp. 186–89).

a power-hungry villain and only joins Hrólfr's cause after being thoroughly humiliated (chapters 23 and 25). Once his obligations to Hrólfr have been fulfilled, he disappears, and rumours spread that he has reverted to his old lascivious ways and made off with the defeated king Eiríkr's sister Gyða (chapter 34). And so, while it is possible to read Möndull as an angelic figure sent by the all-knowing and benevolent Hreggviðr, it is also possible to interpret him the other way: cut from the same cloth as Grímr Ægir, manipulating situations and using magic for his own gain rather than in pursuit of a larger goal.

The obvious question that arises next is, why? If *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* was intended to be fundamentally historical, why present pre-Christian magic in this controversial way? If we look beyond the saga context, it would seem that the reason is that the compiler was interested in exploring wider questions in medieval thought about the nature of magic. Whereas magic had once been considered the purview of the devil alone, in this period 'natural magic' became a subject of legitimate study which sought to manipulate the occult virtues of nature to achieve various effects (such as healing) without appealing to demons.[63] For many, this magic was a kind of science that brought them closer to understanding God's creation, but not all were so generous. Some medieval scholars saw no difference between acts described as 'natural magic' and traditional 'demonic magic': since they ultimately appealed to the same occult forces, for many, all magic relied on the intervention of demons.[64]

Tracing these kinds of learned debates in a vernacular literature is, of course, fraught with complexity; saga accounts are very rarely accompanied by theological explanation and, as Mitchell has observed, a clear-cut distinction between natural and demonic magic is not articulated explicitly in medieval Nordic sources more generally.[65] Both perspectives are, nevertheless, apparent in the Icelandic material. The demonic interpretation is clearly delineated, for example, in the Norse translation of Honorius Augustodunensis's *Elucidarius*, which lists 'fiolkv*n*nige*r*' (practitioners of *fjölkynngi*) among those who suffer

[63] Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages: the Wiles Lectures Given at Queen's University of Belfast, 2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 20–23; Richard Kiekhefer, 'The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic', *The American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), 813–36 (pp. 818–19); David J. Collins, S. J., 'Learned Magic', in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by David J. Collins, S. J. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 332–60 (pp. 335–37).

[64] Kiekhefer, p. 820; Michael D. Bailey, 'Diabolic Magic', in *Cambridge History of Magic*, ed. by Collins, pp. 361–92 (pp. 366–71).

[65] Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Scandinavia', in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 136–49 (p. 138).

torment in hell.[66] By contrast, the indigenous *riddarasögur* feature a positively coded conceptualisation of magic which is distinctly learned and aristocratic.[67] A similar anxiety about the nature and ethics of this magic is evident in *Dínus saga drambláta*'s princess Philotemia, one of the characters mentioned above who is skilled in *kynstr*. After mastering the seven liberal arts, she turns her attention to more occult matters which resemble the various components of continental 'learned magic'.[68] Although the saga does not go as far as saying the magical skills she develops as a result are demonic in nature, it is, as Geraldine Barnes demonstrates, certainly concerned with the potential of practitioners like her to become entangled with evil.[69] It concludes as a cautionary tale: ultimately it is Dínus (also a master of occult arts) who wins out with God, it seems, on his side, whereas Philotemia, who followed her curiosity too far, ends up placing her trust in a servant of the devil.

*Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s ambiguous depiction of magic seems to be tapping into the same area of anxiety. For some, Möndull's *konstr* and spreading of *smyrsl*, of which 'eingi eru slík á nordr lo*n*du*m*' (there is nothing like it in the northern lands), on Hrólfr's stumps may have been understood as a kind of non-demonic 'natural magic'.[70] But by then having Möndull partake in exactly the same kind of ritual performances as Grímr Ægir and refusing to explain which forces each is manipulating, it also hints that Möndull's 'natural magic' may have been just as demonic as that of the saga's villain. In doing so it playfully invites its audiences to contemplate the murky middle-ground that existed in medieval thought, hinting at both interpretations but refusing to commit to either one.

This ambiguity seems to be the issue addressed in the prologue, which does not simply defend the existence of magic in a general sense but rather seems to be specifically concerned with defending the idea that different *types* of magic

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[66] *The Old Norse Elucidarius: Original Text and English Translation*, ed. by Evelyn Scherabon Firchow (Columbia: Camden House, 1992), p. 82. For other sources of the demonic interpretation and how it echoes throughout the sagas, see Meylan, pp. 52–92.

[67] Inna Matyushina, 'Magic Mirrors, Monsters, Maiden-kings (the Fantastic in *Riddarasögur*)', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature*, ed. by McKinnell, Ashurst, and Kick, II, pp. 660–70 (pp. 660–61, 664–67); Vera Johanterwage, 'The Use of Magic Spells and Objects in the Icelandic *Riddarasögur*: *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature*, ed. by McKinnell, Ashurst, and Kick, I, pp. 446–53.

[68] *Dínus saga drambláta*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Riddarasögur, 1 (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1960), pp. 12–13; Collins, pp. 335–49.

[69] Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, Viking Collection, 21 (Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014, pp. 53–65, especially p. 65.

[70] AM 589f 4to, fol. 26$^{v}$, line 10 (ch. 25).

may have had the same origin and the capacity to produce the same effects. The correlations between this section of the prologue and the saga itself — both in terms of vocabulary (*konstr*, *fjölkynngi*, *lækningar*, and *galdr*) and thematic concerns (the difficulty of distinguishing between good and bad magic) — suggest that it was the intentionally controversial depiction of magic which may have brought the saga's historical credentials under question. It seems likely that it contributed to the decision made at some unknown point, by an equally unknown scribe, to add the prologue.

The representation of magic may also shed light on the limited nature of 589f's epilogue. We cannot know why it was never finished: it may simply be because the beginning was all that the scribes had access to. What we can say, however, is that either the scribes themselves or some later reader did not like the last few words that had been written down, since the words which seem originally to have followed 'huat er huerr uan*n* edr giordi {með} frægd edr uizku' (what each person achieved through greatness or wisdom) appear to have been erased. According to the full epilogue found in 152, what we would expect to come next are the words 'fjölkynngi eða svikum' (*fjölkynngi* or treachery). It is difficult to ascertain the motivation behind the erasure of these words, but it certainly seems that something about them was controversial, which gives weight to the argument that it was specifically the saga's magic that caused uneasiness among its audiences.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the saga and its *apologiæ* has shown that even if the prologue was not originally written for *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, it was applied because it related specifically to problems that were already evident in the text and because it was in keeping with its already playful and self-conscious style. Some of those problems are quite predictable — its lack of traditional source base (the same reason why many modern critics might deny the saga's historical status) and the contradictions in its plot, which are amplified in 589f. The other problems, relating to plausibility, are perhaps less predictable: it seems that the narrative's paranormal events were not just potentially unbelievable because of their sheer outlandishness, but because they forced audiences to contemplate issues of considerable uncertainty. As has been argued, the saga hints at an unusual interpretation of the heathen age. But by only hinting at it and revelling in the resulting uncertainty, it also draws attention to the controversy of such an interpretation. Although the 'goodness' of Möndull's magic is implied and he is kept linguistically distinct from the evil of Grímr Ægir, his dwarfish ambiguity and the occult nature of his knowledge is unsettling and forces audiences to ask:

is Möndull a practitioner of benevolent natural magic? Are he and Hreggviðr actually instruments of divine will in an otherwise pagan age? Or are they both just manipulating the same demonic forces as Grímr Ægir but in support of the hero rather than against him? And so, as seems to be the case in so many sagas, the audience are asked to decide what is really happening behind the scenes and how they should interpret the hero. Their possible conclusions would be either, on the one hand, historically and theologically problematic or, on the other, deeply undesirable. I would argue that the saga's ambiguity in this regard motivated the decisions made to both include and erase the *apologiæ* of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*.

These considerations support the argument made by O'Connor that the *apologiæ* were genuine attempts at authentication rather than admissions of fictionality since the prologue's defence seems targeted to the text's specific problems. But it would also be fair to argue, as O'Connor and Mundal have both suggested, that the *apologiæ* ultimately resulted from a desire to move away from the strictly historical.[71] Although *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is another strand in the web of the legendary history, it seems that its historical mode was being used as a vehicle to explore another issue: in this case, the nature of magic. In its nebulous depiction of Möndull's powers and the inclusion of the outlandish (and arguably inessential) leg-healing scene, the saga raises a theological problem which, ultimately, it refuses to answer. By using the saga as a space to play with these ideas, the narrative's plausibility, and thus its claim to history, is put under strain.

By the late medieval period when this saga was written, copied and read, the political concerns which have often been considered triggers for the development and popularisation of the Icelandic saga as a form of historical writing (the civil wars and the collapse of the commonwealth) had long passed. And so, with the change of political priorities and artistic interests, saga compilers put together texts like *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, which is by modern accounts a work of fiction, but which was written within the confines of history because that was still the prevailing form. Such 'fictions' still in some manner had to satisfy the demands of history: being based on sources, not totally contradicting other works of history, and being consistent with what individuals and the church believed to be possible. It seems that *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* may have been deemed to fail on all those accounts, particularly in regard to its depiction of magic, and, as a result, we have its *apologiæ*.[72]

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[71] O'Connor, 'History or Fiction?', p. 168; Mundal, pp. 185–86.

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# ‘I am the lion destroying cattle, I am the bear for courage’: An Examination of *Betha Naile*

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The Life of St Náile, *Betha Naile*, is a Life that has received little attention since it was published as an edition and translation in Charles Plummer’s *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica*.[1] It is only preserved in one manuscript witness, Brussels, KBR, MS 4190–4200, fols. 129r–142r, recorded in 1629 by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, and copied from a manuscript possibly kept in the Donegal barony of Banagh.[2] In Plummer’s edition of the text, he states that *Betha Naile* pulls directly from the ‘second’ Irish Life of Máedóc which Raymond Gillespie has dated to the late sixteenth century. Pádraig Ó Riain has indicated that *Betha Naile* ‘could be as late’ as the early sixteenth century.[3] Gillespie further believes *Betha Naile* is one of a group of newly-composed Lives ‘written in a relatively restricted area of north-west Ireland comprising the dioceses of Raphoe, Kilmore, and Clogher in the early sixteenth century’.[4] The content of the Life is a mixture of prose and verse; most often the narrative told in the prose is then repeated in lengthy verse which reiterates or elaborates upon the same details.

Little is known of Náile historically; the genealogies and the prologue to *Betha Naile* provide him with a Munster pedigree as the son of Óengus mac Nad

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[1] It should be noted that while the name of the text as given by Ó Cléirigh and Charles Plummer is *Betha Naile*, I maintain the spelling of this saint’s name as Náile, as the Anglicisations of the name as Naail and other variants would indicate a historically long vowel. Ó Cléirigh inconsistently provides a fada on Náile within the manuscript, but the name is also normalised as Náile by Raymond Gillespie and Pádraig Ó Riain. All transcription and translations of *Betha Naile*, unless otherwise mentioned, are my own. When referring back to the text I have provided the appropriate citations of Charles Plummer’s edition, Charles Plummer, *Miscellanea hagiographica hibernica: vitae adhuc ineditae sanctorum Mac Creiche, Naile, Cranat*, Subsidia Hagiographica, 15 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1925).

[2] Brussels, KBR, MS 4190–4200, fols. 129r–142r (fol. 142r) <http://isos.dias.ie> [Accessed 2 July 2020]; all future references are to this manuscript. Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 98.

[3] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 98; Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), p. 509; Raymond Gillespie, ‘A Sixteenth-Century Saint’s Life: The Second Irish Life of St. Máedoc’, *Breifne*, 10 (2004), 147–54.

[4] Raymond Gillespie, ‘Traditional Religion in Sixteenth Century Gaelic Ireland’, in *Christianities in the Early Modern Celtic World*, ed. by Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin and Robert Armstrong (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 29–41 (p. 38); Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, p. 509.

Froích,[5] but Plummer believed, if he existed, he likely would have been contemporaneous with Colum Cille.[6] Regardless of this connection with Munster, Náile ultimately became associated with southwest Ulster; in folklore he is heavily associated with Cill Náile (Kilnawley), Fermanagh and Inbher Náile (Inver), Donegal. Ruins of a monastery and two holy wells associated with St Náile (known locally in the area as Naail and Naul) remain in Inver, as well as another ruined church associated with the saint in Kilnawley.[7] As Raymond Gillespie has indicated:

> The sixteenth century life of [Náile] provides him with a Munster pedigree and the cult was probably well established at Kilenaule, near Cashel, by the middle of the thirteenth century as evidenced by the place name. One late seventeenth century genealogical account suggests that there was a movement of learned families from Cashel into Breifne and if this preserves a memory of a real event, it may explain the appearance of the Ó Droma as the erenagh family of Náile's church at Kilnawley by 1373 according to an entry in the Annals of Ulster.[8]

Folklore from the Kilenaule (Cille Náile) to which Gillespie refers does tell us that it is named for a saint named 'Naule', another English spelling variant of Náile.[9] His suggestion that the cult of the saint was brought into Breifne with the movement of these learned families seems certainly plausible. Gillespie notes also that '[t]he traditional nature of the saints of Gaelic Ireland, as elsewhere, meant that cult was more important than historical accuracy in creating a sense of who these friends of God were and how their power might be appropriated to local families'.[10] This idea of appropriation applies to Náile, as he is associated with Colum Cille early in the text, likely to legitimise his claim to the area. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh further tells us in his colophon that the text was copied from a book belonging to Niall Meirgech (mac mhic Suibne Bhoghainigh), a member

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[5] Pádraig Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1985), p. 78; Paul Walsh, *Genealogiae regum et sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son Ltd., 1918), p. 118.
[6] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 98.
[7] Rev. E. Canon Maguire, *A History of the Diocese of Raphoe*, 2 vols (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1920), I, p. 502; Liam Kelly, *The Diocese of Kilmore c.1100—1800* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017).
[8] Gillespie, 'Traditional Religion', pp. 35–36.
[9] National Folklore Collection (Schools' Collection, hereafter NFCS) 0564: 187; Patrick Geoghegan, Killnaule, County Tipperary. Collector: Patrick Geoghegan, Killnaule, Dúrlas Éile (B), County Tipperary (1937–8). Teacher: Seán Ó Muireadhaigh.
[10] Gillespie, 'Traditional Religion', p. 35.

of Clann Suibhne.[11] In the sixteenth-century text *Craobhsgaoileadh Chlainne Suibhne*, the members of the family were said to have been inaugurated by the successors of Colum Cille on Iona when they remained in Scotland.[12] In Ireland, their inauguration rites were instead performed in Kilmacrenan, Donegal, by a member of the Ó Domhnaill from the fifteenth century onward.[13] It is clear that the members of Clann Suibhne sought to maintain their connection with Colum Cille by any means available to them, and even more so that Ó Cléirigh's source must have come from Donegal.

The sixteenth-century Life of Colum Cille, *Betha Colaim Chille*, is perhaps the most well-known example of hagiographical writing during this period in north-western Ireland. The Life itself is a remarkable piece of work both in its retelling of the life of Columba, but also in its preservation of local traditions relating to folklore about Colum Cille and other local saints in the period of its composition. The reason for the completion of this Life was to indicate Ó Domhnaill's personal relation to Colum Cille; this was only solidified in the claim that he had found and preserved the life as he sought to maintain his political status as a member of the Ó Domhnaill clan in order to eventually become chieftain, succeeding his father Aodh Dubh. The author of Náile's Life seems to have utilised *Betha Colaim Chille* as a source for narratives about his saint, as the texts share two almost identical passages.[14] A further section of text in *Betha Naile* exists nearly verbatim in the second Life of St Máedóc of Ferns, *Betha Máedóc Ferna*, which again dates to the sixteenth century. *Betha Naile* is clearly a composite text which has not only pulled from other examples of hagiography, but also contains narratives about the saint that seem to be reflective of local folk traditions about Náile.

The sections of the text that connects Náile closely to Colum Cille are about his association with Inber Naile in Donegal. Equally, those that connect him with Máedóc of Ferns and Molaise of Devenish detail his association with Cill Naile in Fermanagh. In line with the fact that the text contains narratives shared with *Betha Colaim Chille* and *Betha Máedóc Ferna*, it seems plausible that these sections could have been separate texts originating from the areas in Donegal and Fermanagh where the cult of Náile was particularly strong. Several examples of folklore local to Inbhear Naile repeat the story in the opening section of *Betha Naile*, in which Náile is told by an angel to meet with Colum Cille, who

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[11] KBR, MS 4190–4200, fol. 142$^{r}$.

[12] Paul Walsh, *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne. An Account of the Mac Sweeney Families in Ireland, with Pedigrees* (Dublin: Dollard Printinghouse, 1920), p. 51.

[13] Katherine Simms, *From Kings to Warlords* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1987), p. 30.

[14] A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille: Life of Colum Cille* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1918), pp. 142–45, 344–45; Plummer, *Miscellanea*, pp. 140–41, p. 129.

grants him his monastery there.[15] This could indicate that the author of *Betha Naile* included folklore and distinctly local stories in the compilation of *Betha Naile*, as was done in the creation of *Betha Colaim Chille*. With these things in consideration, this paper seeks to examine some aspects of the structure and contents of *Betha Naile* in more detail, the shared material found within this Life and potential influence from other texts, as well as the context of its composition.

The text opens with a brief description of Óengus mac Nad Froích's succession to the sovereignty of two provinces of Munster. Náile's genealogy is provided through the frame of his father, a descendant of Ailill Ólomm.[16] His mother Eithne's vision of his birth follows in verse, describing Náile as a pup washed with milk so that every territory of Ireland would be full in Náile's lifetime.[17] Óengus himself interprets the vision, telling her that St Patrick blessed him with a prophecy that she would bear his son, who will fill the mouths of Ireland with his piety.[18] Following his birth, Náile is instructed by an angel to travel north in order to meet Colum Cille, so that a church may be constructed for him. Náile travels 'from the south' with a band of followers, where he meets Colum Cille, who is reciting psalms.[19] When Colum Cille and his clerks meet Náile, they fall on their knees before him; in return Náile falls on his own knees in the presence of the saint and begins kissing him in reverence. Colum Cille both blesses the place where he and Náile have met and tells Náile to build a church there, and states:

Inb*h*er Naile an átha.
A ainm go laithe an b*h*rát*h*a
bron*n*aim a*r* Colaim na ccned*h*.
Duit a Naile as moc*h*en

Inbhear Náile of the fort
Its name until doomsday
I bestow, said Colum of the wounds

[15] NFCS 1036: 116; Charles Campbell (85), Frosses, Inver, County Donegal. Na Frasa, County Donegal, 1938. Teacher: Seán Mac Robhartaigh; NFCS 1036: 144; Charles Campbell (84), Frosses, Inver, County Donegal. Collector: Sean Kelly, Na Frasa, County Donegal, 1938. Teacher: Seán Mac Robhartaigh; NFCS 1037: 94; Francis Kennedy, Keeloges, County Donegal. Keelogs, County Donegal, 1938. Teacher: Francis Kennedy.
[16] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 126.
[17] Ibid.
[18] It should be noted that Óengus mac Nad Froích is himself baptised at Cashel by St Patrick. See Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, 2 vols (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), I, p. 197.
[19] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, pp. 127–28.

To you, Náile, and welcome.[20]

As Colum Cille is most heavily associated with Donegal, and if this Life was recorded from a northern source, or in Inbhear Náile, it is unsurprising that the author of this Life sought to associate Náile with him as closely as possible; having Colum Cille specifically grant the place in which to build his church fulfils this narrative. We are told that Náile only partially spent his life in Inbhear Náile, and the text then shifts focus to Náile's association with Cill Náile. Molaise of Devenish is described as suddenly falling ill while in the presence of 'twelve saints from his monastery'.[21] His followers ask who will take his place and guide them, and he tells them that Náile is the only saint that can replace him, as he has been chosen by both Molaise and God. If his clerics question that decision, a bell which he describes as being under his head, presumably his holy bell, will indicate the most appropriate successor.

With Náile's family, church, and respectable associations firmly established in the beginning of *Betha Naile*, it is clear that the author of the text sought to enhance Náile's status as a saint by associating him with the major saints of the area, as well as to reinforce his cult. St Patrick prophesies the birth of Náile to his father; Colum Cille calls him northwards from Munster in order to grant him his church in Inbhear Náile; Molaise names him as his successor on his deathbed, allowing the foundation of Cill Náile.

The emphasis on Náile's association with Colum Cille is of particular interest. As briefly discussed in the introduction, the text shares two narratives with the early modern Life of Colum Cille. The first of these is a version of the story as has just been related, in which Óengus is described as being the king of Munster, whose wife Eithne has a prophetic dream about the birth of Náile. Again, Náile is represented as a pup bathed in 'new milk', Eithne details her vision to the king, and Óengus tells her that their son is a result of a prophecy related to him by Patrick at Cashel. After growing up, Náile then makes his way to Inbear Náile with his group of clerics at the counsel of an angel, where he meets Colum Cille. This is similar to *Betha Naile*'s version of events, wherein Náile and Colum Cille hastily fall on their knees in front of each other upon meeting:

> Ocus an uair do f*h*ec*us*tair Coluim Cille *con*a cléircib*h* ar Naile *con*a nós buid*h*in ro leiccet*ar* ar a nglúinib*h* dó íatt. Et ót *con*n*air*c Naile an onóir sin ag in Priómaid*h* pen*n*-c*h*orcra phaid*er*-b*h*in*n* aga tab*h*airt dó b*úd*déin ro

[20] KBR, MS 4190–4200, f. 130$^{v}$.
[21] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 129.

> léicces t*air* a g*h*lúine go talm*an* go tin*n*esn*ach* dum*h*la don úasal erlamh et tuccaitt teora pócc daraile go tin*n*easn*ach* .i. Colum Cille, et Naile *agus* do f*h*erat*ar* na cléir*each* com*h*fáilte f*ri*s ar cena.[22]
>
> And when Colum Cille with his clerics saw Náile with his renowned retinue they fell on their knees before him. And Náile saw that honour being given to him by the primate of crimson pen and sweet prayer, he suddenly fell to his knees on the earth with humility to the noble patron saint and they earnestly gave three kisses to one another, that is, Colum Cille, and Náile and the clerics bestowed welcome to him moreover.[23]

In comparison in his own Life, Colum Cille is said to have prophesied Náile's arrival and specifically chosen the land upon which his church would be built:

> Acus failtighis C. c. reme 7 tuc pocc dó. Acus do leicc Naaile ar a gluínib a fíadnais C. c. é 7 do fiarfaig de cait a bfuighedh se ferund a ndinguad se aitiugad 7 eclus a mbeith se ag moladh De, amail adubramar romaind. 'San inadh-sa fen', ar C. c. Beanduigis C. c. 7 Naail an t-inadh-sin iar sin, 7 toiligis do Naail comnaide do denamh and. Gonadh Inber Naaile ainm ó sin ille.
>
> Colum Cille welcomed him and kissed him. Náal fell on his knees before Colum Cille and asked where he would get land on which to build his dwelling and church (in which he would be praising God, as we have said before). 'In this very place', said Colum Cille. Then he and Náal blessed the place and Náal was allowed to make his home there, so that Inver Náile is its name since then.[24]

While it is certainly tempting to assume that the author of *Betha Naile* borrowed this passage verbatim from *Betha Colaim Chille*, the version preserved in *Betha Naile* has a greater focus on Náile. In *Betha Naile*, Colum Cille's grant of land to Náile is not recorded in the same prose as seen here, but in significantly expanded verse. The details of the story remain the same in both versions: Náile is the son of Óengus mac Nad Froích and therefore the son of the king of Munster; Náile is told by an angel to follow and seek out Colum Cille; Náile miraculously provides the saint and his followers with food; and Colum Cille, alongside his

[22] Lenition is marked in the manuscript.
[23] KBR, MS 4190–4200, fol. 130$^{r}$.
[24] Brian Lacey, *The Life of Colum Cille by Manus O'Donnell* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), p. 81. I have provided a translation for the text omitted in Lacey's edition.

clerics, welcome Náile and grant Inbhear Náile to him. Colum Cille and his followers are presented as regarding Náile with a particular sense of awe in *Betha Naile*, but the saints are described as blessing the church land together in both Lives. Náile's provision of food is detailed in two verses in *Betha Naile* in which he provides Colum Cille's retinue with fish and wheat along the strand through prayer.[25] In *Betha Colaim Chille* the saints share equal guilt at the lack of feast provided for the other, together they order the strand to be full of fish, and gather sand from the beach, blessing it to make flour.[26] This version of events is said to elevate both saints, making the emphasis on Náile alone in *Betha Naile* even more clear. It seems possible if we are to believe that *Betha Naile* was compiled later, that the author of *Betha Naile* may have borrowed this particular narrative from Ó Domhnaill and readapted it to provide Náile with more agency within his own Life. However, given the deviations in structure and content from the version found in *Betha Colaim Chille*, it seems also possible that this narrative about the two saints was in local circulation, included in both examples of hagiography, and adapted accordingly by the respective authors. As Colum Cille is consistently associated with other saints affiliated with the northwest of Ireland in this text, this certainly seems plausible.

Náile is consistently said to be the son of Óengus mac Nad Froích, the king of Munster, whose wife was known as Eithne. This Eithne, as discussed earlier, is described in both Lives as having a prophetic dream about Náile's birth. She shares her name with Colum Cille's mother who is described as having several prophetic dreams about the birth of her own son in *Betha Colaim Chille*.[27] In *Betha Naile*, Eithne is described as being the daughter of Crimthann 'the victorious', with no other explanation as to her identity.[28] Óengus and Eithne are perhaps most notably described in the eighth-century text *Tairired na nDéssi*, the Expulsion of the Déisi, relating the migration of the Déisi to Munster. Óengus is encouraged to woo Eithne, the daughter of Crimthann mac Ennaí, king of Leinster, to be his wife. As Eithne is described as being the mother of a saint in *Betha Naile*, the prophecy regarding her birth in this text is particularly curious.

> Mell ingen Ernbraind ben Crimth*aind* bert m*a*cco do Chrimth*und* 7 atbath Mell iar suidiu. Ocus dobreth Cuiniu ingen Ernbraind do iarum. B*er*t Cui*n*iu ingin do .i.. Eithne Uatha*ch*. Bæ Bri mac Bairceda in drui isin dun in n-aidchi rogenair Eithne. 'Ind ingen rogenair innocht', ar Bri, 'rosfessatar fir Herenn uili 7 ardaig na hingine sin gebait a mathre in tir artrefat'. Am*ail*

[25] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 129.
[26] O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, p. 145; Lacey, p. 81.
[27] O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, pp. 32–33, 36–37, 40–41.
[28] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 126.

> atchualatar som coir in sceoil sin lasin druid, co mbad tria chumachtu na hingine nogebtais forbbæ, ros-altatar for carnaib mac mbec co mbad luath no-assad. Is de bad Heithne Uathach a hainm-se, ardaig nos-aigtis in meicc bicc.
>
> Meld, the daughter of Ernbrand, the wife of Crimthand, bore sons to Crimthand and then died, whereupon Cuiniu, the daughter of Ernbrand, was married to him. Cuiniu bore him a daughter, even Ethne the Dread. In the night when Ethne was born Bri, the druid, son of Bairchid, was in the stronghold. 'The maiden that has been born to-night', said Bri, 'all the men of Ireland shall know her, and on account of this maiden her mother's kindred will seize the land on which they shall dwell.' When they heard the truth of that story from the druid, that it was through the power of the maiden that they would obtain inheritance, they reared her on the flesh of little boys that she might grow quickly. Hence Ethne the Dread was her name, for the little boys dreaded her.[29]

With this in consideration, and if the cult of Náile had its origins in Munster, Náile's particular association with Óengus mac Nad Froích and Eithne is not surprising. As saints are commonly given a royal pedigree, given the proximity of the original Cell Náile to Cashel, Náile being given Óengus as his father seems natural. However, Eithne is consistently referred to as the 'dread' or 'horrible' in medieval and later Irish texts. Another example of this is found in the *Annals of Tigernach* for 489, where Óengus and Eithne the Horrible are described as dying at the battle of Cellosnad in Mag Fea.[30] The omission of Eithne's horribleness therefore appears to be intentional—can a saint's mother be described as such?

Prophesies of a saint's birth and visions of angels in hagiography are of course not unique to either of these texts. In *Vita Columbae* Adomnán describes Colum Cille's mother, albeit nameless, as having a prophetic dream about his birth. She dreams that an angel gives her a beautiful cloak of every colour, which is then taken away from her as she is told that she will give birth to her son.[31] Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's Life relates a number of prophesies and visions about the birth of Colum Cille; the most relevant of these are those experienced by Eithne. This prophecy related by Adomnán is readapted in Ó Domhnaill's Life at great length, where again the angel grants her a gift of a cloak and napkin, both

[29] Kuno Meyer, 'The Expulsion of the Déssi', *Y Cymmrodor*, 14 (1901), 101–135 (pp. 108–9).
[30] Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'The Annals of Tigernach', in *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts* <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100002A> [accessed 20 January 2021].
[31] Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of Columba* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 205.

of which are said to be signs of the miraculous child which she will bear.[32] While Eithne is in Gartan, a youth appears to her, and details that Colum Cille will be born the next day on a particular flagstone.[33]

It seems impossible that the authors of these texts were not aware of Eithne the Horrible's cannibalistic upbringing. As evidenced from these examples, and given that Ó Domhnaill was significantly influenced by folkloric sources in the compilation of his Life, it might be argued that stories about Náile's mother were significantly influenced by the mother of Colum Cille, thus absolving Eithne of her cannibalistic nature. As both Eithnes are described as having prophetic dreams about their sons, this readaption, clearly influenced by folklore about Colum Cille, might be seen as the creation of a totally separate tradition about the wife of Óengus mac Nad Froích, allowing her a pious role as the mother of a saint.

A third section is shared between *Betha Naile* and *Betha Colaim Chille*. This relates the creation of Náile's holy bell shrine and the manner in which Náile ultimately received this bell. In both versions of the narrative, Colum Cille is described as travelling to Scotland with his retinue of followers, where they are either swallowed or approached by the Loch Ness monster. Colum Cille prays to the blacksmith Senach to assist him, Senach forges a piece of iron and miraculously throws it from Ireland to Scotland, straight into the monster's mouth, killing it. Colum Cille asks that the metal be retrieved from the corpse, and has it forged into three bells, one of which ultimately becomes Náile's.[34] Again, the version of this narrative in *Betha Naile* has been intentionally readapted to focus more on Náile, as we are told that the bell first belonged to Molaise and is the same bell which determined Náile's aptitude to become the successor to the abbacy of Devenish.[35] As before, if the author of *Betha Naile* borrowed this from *Betha Colaim Chille*, this section would have been significantly readapted so as to maintain the substantial role in the Life that Náile's bell possesses and to give the holy object a notable origin.

This is most conspicuously seen in the manner in which Náile is presented as utilising his bell in order to ensure the contracts to which he and his church are entitled. The rest of the text is structured into distinct stories which focus on Náile's securing of tribute for his monastery and cursing certain individuals with his bell, most notably an individual named Lúan. While Náile is at a conference of saints of the Lough Erne area, conveniently at 'the spot where lies the stone of Náile, at which baptism was performed', the group of holy men are approached

[32] O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, pp. 30–33; Lacey, pp. 28–29.
[33] O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, pp. 36–39; Lacey, p. 32.
[34] O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, pp. 344–45; Lacey, p. 175.
[35] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 142.

by an individual named Lúan, said to be a descendant of Cairbre Lifechair.[36] Lúan states that he is sixteen years old, and he wishes to be baptised in order to be 'rescued from the rough devil and to be chosen and brought to the Trinity'.[37] The group of saints decides that Náile should be the one to baptise Lúan, which Náile does, and then states that Lúan is named due to his *lúth* (vigour) which he has shown in his fervent desire to be baptised. This is described in a section of prose, which is then followed by a section primarily in verse, which describes at length the details of the baptism-fee that Náile requires Lúan to pay towards his monastery. If Lúan and his descendants maintain their payments to Náile's monastery, he and his descendants will maintain their noble status. However, as Náile warns, this will only continue as long as they do not dispute the contract that he has created in performing his service.[38] Náile then continues to detail the tribute that he claims on behalf of his monastery as a baptism-fee at great length:

Ag so duit an dlúth cái*n* si*n*
Dlig*h*im-si ó d'c*h*ined*h*aib*h*
Céid s*h*errac*h* gach aon lára
Is ced *ar*c gacha crán-muice
Is ced laog*h* gac*h* bó benn-bláit*h*i
C*ed* úan gac*h* aon cáorach

Do-b*ér* gorta gér-g*h*aibt*ech*
Et dít*h* ar deig*h*-eall*ach*
Is gerr-s*h*aog*h*al guas*acht*ach
Do mnaib*h* 7 do m*a*caoimaib*h*
Muna ccongb*h*a an c*h*aom*h* cáin-si
Dlig*h*es me ó d'móir c*h*ined*h*

Here to you that compact tribute
I am entitled to from your descendants
The first foal of every mare
And the first piglet of every sow pig
And the first calf of every smooth-horned cow
The first lamb of every sheep.

[36] Ó Cléirigh is inconsistent in providing a fada in Lúan's name, and at times seems unsure as to where a fada would go in his name, giving Luan, Lúan, Lúán, and Lú´án. As this seems to be a play on words with lúan meaning 'doomsday', I have chosen to refer to him as Lúan.
[37] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, pp. 136–37.
[38] Ibid., p. 138.

I will bring severe danger of hunger
And ruin on good livestock
And dangerous short life
To women and to youths
Unless you uphold the fair tribute
I deserve from your great race.[39]

Further, Náile is represented as using his bell specifically to validate the tributes—and if the tributes are not paid to his monastery, Náile will use his and Molaise's bell, and calls upon those of other saints to curse Lúan and his descendants:

Bent*ar* clocc Molaisi an*n*
Is Ronáin is Fuince feid*h*m tean*n*
Ar siol Luáin go mbrig*h*e
Da n-díocúr on deig*h* rígh*e*

Let the bell of Molaise be struck there
and of Ronán and Fuinche of hardy vigour
Against the seed of Lúan forcefully
To expel them from their good kingship.[40]

A legal contract is made between Náile and Lúan in the course of Lúan's baptism—Náile has provided a service for which Lúan must ultimately provide a payment. If Lúan and his descendants do not hold up their end of the mutual exchange, Náile's holy protection will cease to exist. While neither the act of baptising pagans nor the implementation of baptismal fees are unique to this text, the intentional approach of Lúan to Náile with the specific request to be baptised is notable.[41] This is in distinct contrast to Patrick's baptism of Lóegaire, for example, as Patrick faces death and considerable difficulty in dealing with

[39] KBR, MS 4190–4200, fols. 136r–137r.
[40] KBR, MS 4190–4200, fol. 141r.
[41] St Máedóc of Ferns is approached by Áed Dub in a similar request for baptism in his second life, after which the text names the tributes owed to his monastery. This is seemingly adapted from the earlier *Betha Caillín* in the Book of Fenagh, and as Náile's life shares material with *Betha Máedoc Ferna*, the three seem intimately connected, Charles Plummer, ed. and trans., *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), II, p. 195; W. M. Hennessy, and D. H. Kelly, *The Book of Fenagh in Irish and English* (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1875), pp. 115–17.

Lóegaire's druids in his efforts to finally baptise the king.[42] As the author clearly presents Náile in a pseudohistorical image of the early Middle Ages, maintaining this trope of a pagan noble available to be baptised is unsurprising. The contrast between this trope in early medieval Saints' Lives and Náile's Life is significant—Náile is able to baptise Lúan with ease, and details at length his baptism fee, which comes with the threat of death if it is not maintained. A clear structure exists here: Náile baptises Lúan and the two formulate what might be read as a legal contract—Náile performs a valuable service for Lúan and by baptising him he is evidently protected by God. Náile requests a certain number of items, and a certain sum to be paid and given to his monastery. Then, the saint goes on to explain what will happen to Lúan and his people if they do not maintain the tribute for the service that Náile has performed.

Some attention should be drawn to the distinctly legal nature of this portion of the Life, seen particularly in the use of terms such as *sochar*. While it can be translated as 'profit', 'dues' or 'revenue', which is ultimately what Náile receives in this contract between himself and Lúan, it also holds the distinct meaning of 'a good or advantageous contract'.[43] The evident contract between Náile and Lúan is a clearly advantageous one, as both will ultimately gain—Lúan through his own baptism and Náile's protection of his people, and Náile through the tribute that he and his monastery will receive. As declared by Náile, the first fruits of every animal, human and crop owed as tribute payment to Irish monasteries seems to have been well established by the early Middle Ages; this especially may be seen through its inclusion in *Córus Bésgnai*.[44]

However, the structure of this section of *Betha Naile* more closely resembles a charter or the *notitiae* commonly used by Columban monasteries.[45]

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[42] Patrick also revokes the succession rites of Lóegaire's heirs due to the difficulties in his conversion, see Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, 10 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1979), p. 97; Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels & Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), p. 40.

[43] s.v. Sochar', in *eDIL*, <http://dil.ie/38232> [accessed 20 January 2021]; A discussion of *sochar* and *dochar* in accordance with early Irish law is present in Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Córus Bésgnai: An Old Irish Law Tract on the Church and Society*, Early Irish Law Series 7 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2017), pp. 124–25.

[44] Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999), p. 239.

[45] Wendy Davies, 'The Latin Charter-Tradition in Western Britain, Brittany, and Ireland in the Early Medieval Period', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, and David Dumville, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 258–280; Richard Sharpe, 'Dispute Settlement in Medieval Ireland: A Preliminary Inquiry', in *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Ultimately based on the Latin charter tradition, this particular formula is commonly used in hagiography and other examples of ecclesiastical writing, naming the sureties and property rights of churches. While only excerpts of its use in *Betha Naile* can be provided in this article, that Náile declares his church's tribute in the presence of several other Breifne associated saints—namely Sinell, Tigernach and Rónán—is of great importance.[46] Their inclusion in this sense is intentional by the hagiographer to serve as the witnesses of the charter and abettors to the invocation of Náile's curse if Lúan's descendants do not uphold the covenant made by the saint. Charles Doherty indicated that one of the earliest examples of the formula could be found in the *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh, naming property owed to Armagh.[47] Using this and other examples, he argued that this particular type of grant embedded within hagiography was written based on other extant documents, though the extent to which these authors had access to charters is unclear.[48]

The use of hagiography to claim land, property rights and tribute from the laity is common within the Irish textual tradition. In the case of *Betha Naile* and its later date, if the Life was ultimately composed in the interests of the erenagh, the hagiographer likely intended these claims to legitimise and underscore the status of Náile's monastery.[49] In this sense, the use of this kind of charter was not only, as Wendy Davies explains, 'the development of a cult, for property was the possession of the saint and hence protected by him', but also served to reinforce the rights and privilege of the saint's cult in local Irish society.[50] The structural similarities of this formula allowed for its readaption in various examples of hagiography and texts relating to saints in Ireland and the other Celtic societies.[51] In the case of *Betha Naile*, this seems to account for the hagiographer's borrowing from the Lives of Caillín and Máedóc. After these saints baptise Áed Dub in their

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1986), pp. 169–90, (p. 173). See also Mary A. Valante, '"Notitiae" in the Irish Annals', *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies*, 1 (2006), 71–96.

[46] Plummer, *Miscellanea*, p. 140.

[47] Charles Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 300–328 (p. 305). This has been more recently discussed in Andrew Rabin, 'Preventive Law in Early Ireland. Rereading the *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh', *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 2, 37–55.

[48] Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography', p. 307.

[49] Valante, '"*Notitiae*"', p. 81; Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography', p. 304; Sharpe, 'Dispute settlement,' p. 174.

[50] Wendy Davies, 'Charter-Writing and its Uses in Early Medieval Celtic Societies", in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. by Huw Pryce, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 99–110, (p. 109).

[51] Davies, 'The Latin Charter-Tradition', pp. 263–66; Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography', pp. 304–07.

respective Lives, they both demand tribute utilising the same formula, which has perhaps been readapted by the hagiographer of *Betha Naile*.[52] This may especially be seen in that Náile's cursing seems to have been copied directly or from the same source as those found in the verse in the end of *Betha Máedóc Ferna*:[53]

> B*ídh* me in nat*h*air ag dit*h* sl*uagh*
> As me an teine as cró derg guál
> As me an leom*an* ag dit*h* cruid
> As me an mat*h*gam*ain ar* m*h*enmui*n*
>
> I will be the serpent destroying armies
> I am the fire of blood red coal
> I am the lion destroying cattle
> I am the bear for courage.[54]

One similar earlier example of this charter structure is found in one of the eleventh-century charters added to the Book of Kells, detailing the supposed grant of Cill Delga to Colum Cille by Conchobor Úa Maelsechlaind. As Náile curses Lúan's family 'until doom' if the tribute is not upheld, this example also indicates that violation of the sureties granted to Colum Cille will result in a curse until doomsday, as well as the loss of kingship as is also threatened to Lúan:[55]

> [d]o rata na slā[na] sein ocus na commairche, ocus tucsat uile etir laechu ocus clēirchiu a mbennachtai[n] do cach rīg nā tairgad dar in saīre sein co brāth ocus tucsat uile a mallachtain do cach rīg do roised tairis sein; ocus gid guasacht do cāch [sāru]gud Coluim Cille is guasachtucha do rīg
>
> [t]hese sureties and guarantees were given, and they all gave, both lay and clergy, their blessing to every king who should not violate this freedom until Doomsday; and they all gave their curse to every king who should violate it; and though it is dangerous for everyone to violate Columba it is particularly dangerous to a king[56]

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[52] Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, II, p. 196; Hennessy and Kelly, *The Book of Fenagh*, pp. 121–37.
[53] Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, I, p. 285.
[54] KBR, MS 4190–4200, fol. 141r.
[55] Esscáinim oníu go brath, KBR, MS 4190–4200, fol. 141r.
[56] Davies, 'The Latin Charter-Tradition', p. 266. Another late example can be found in *Betha Meic Creiche*, Plummer, *Miscellanea*, pp. 13–91.

While this example does not mention any use of a bell to enforce this curse, *Cáin Eimíne Báin*, which dates to the late Old Irish period, does. The text details the manner in which Éimín—believed to be the abbot of Monasterevin, Co. Offaly—requires tribute to be given to his monastery. In the text, Éimín and forty-nine of his monks decide to sacrifice themselves in order to save the Leinster king Bran úa Fáeláin and his people from an epidemic ravaging his province. When the king pledges an oath of surety to Éimín, the saint threatens to curse him with his bell, which would lead to the revoking of his kingship and unconsecrated death.[57]

The saint's book, crozier and bell were the most common holy relics associated with saints in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period and cursing with bells in Irish hagiography is particularly common.[58] While they are portrayed as objects of protection, they are also instruments of malediction and a source of power for the saint and their associated monastic *familia*. In the context of the sixteenth century, this extended to families that owned them and served as their guardians. As Karen Overbey has described, '[bells] figure prominently in accounts of administrative importance to the monastic community: land grants and locations of foundations, territorial rights, and the relative authority of church and state. Holy bells rang to voice the monastery's corporate concerns'.[59] Monasteries needed support from secular bodies in order to exist and function, and the legal requirement of tribute to be paid to them allowed them to obtain land, food and supplies; offering salvation to nobility and the threat of revoking it and endangering the succession of the royal lines would ensure that these tributes would continue to be paid. Further, bells were the purveyors of identity for the monastic communities with which they became associated and could be used to protect the monastic territory as well as to ensure contracts.[60] The maintenance of this tradition makes sense as the utilisation and the power of the saint's bell allowed him to maintain his connection with a particular location, his church, and this maintained the status of the cult in a particular area. It seems possible, therefore, that Náile's bell and the powerful force that it has in this text is not only an extension of the role and relationship of bell shrines with early Irish

[57] Erich Poppe, 'The List of Sureties in *Cáin Éimíne*', *Celtica*, 21 (1990), 588–92 (p. 588); 'A New Edition of *Cáin Éimíne Báin*', *Celtica*, 18 (1986), 35–52 (p. 36).
[58] Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), p. 126; Lisa Bitel, 'Tools and Scripts for Cursing in Medieval Ireland', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 51–52 (2006–2007), 5–27. See especially Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adamnáin: An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnan*, Anecdota Oxoniensia, 12 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 11–12.
[59] Karen Eileen Overbey, *Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland*, Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), p. 128.
[60] Ibid., p. 126.

saints but is also reflective of the status these reliquaries had in the context of the sixteenth century.

A number of new reliquaries were made in southwest Ulster in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including the Cathach of Colum Cille, which was kept and used by the Ó Domhnaills.[61] These relics had important functions not only in their hagiographical contexts, but in their political roles as objects that important families could own and control. It might be argued that the significant role of the bell in this Life serves to provide context and history for a reliquary associated with Náile which may have existed at the time. Folklore in English about the parish of Kilnawley indicates that 'the Drumm family were coarbs of the old abbey and they had possession of St Náile's bell for centuries. There is no authentic record of what became of it'.[62] If the bell was in the possession of this family or another local one, the text provides a narrative as to how Náile received his bell. Gillespie further states that: 'This sort of hagiographical writing produced the story of the relics in the context of deciding which was the powerful saint and hence determining what dues were owing to whom in the ecclesiastical and political stakes'.[63]

As Raymond Gillespie has indicated, a number of Lives were composed in close succession between 1516–1550 in the northwest of Ireland, with *Betha Naile* the last to be compiled.[64] Learned families in this area of Gaelic Ireland were particularly significant during this period, and the great political uncertainty of the time accounted for their interest in the preservation and continuation of traditions. Aside from Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's compilation of *Betha Colaim Chille*, this can most prominently be seen through the commission of the Book of Fenagh in 1516 by Tadhg Ó Rodaighe, himself well versed in these matters. As the coarb of Fenagh in Breifne, one of Ó Rodaighe's motivations for his commission of a Life for Caillín, his supposed ancestor, was to maintain Fenagh's status as a centre of learning and monasticism during this later period. Ó Rodaighe's political motives were equally evident—written at an unstable time during which several families were vying for control over this particular area of Breifne. With the commission of the text, he sought to solidify the ancestral role of the Ó Rodaighe as the coarbal family. The scribe of *Betha Caillín*, Muirgheas Ó Maoilchonaire, was formally trained as a poet and scribe with a library of

[61] Raymond Gillespie, 'Relics, Reliquaries and Hagiography in South Ulster, 1450–1550', in *Art & Devotion in Late Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Rachel Moss, Colmán Ó Clabaigh and Salvador Ryan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), pp. 184–201 (p. 187).
[62] NFCS 0969:2; Uragh, Kilnawley, County Cavan. Collector: E. Mc Caffrey. Uragh (C.), County Cavan, 1937–1938. Teacher: E. Mc Caffrey.
[63] Gillespie, 'Relics', p. 200.
[64] Gillespie, 'Traditional Religion', p. 38.

manuscripts of his own from which to copy texts. These especially included examples of hagiography, at the very least the Life of Berach, from which he copied greatly in order to produce *Betha Caillín*, though the verse sections of the text are claimed to have derived directly from the lost, so-called, 'old book of Caillín' and potentially date to the thirteenth century.[65]

The manner in which Ó Maoilchonaire ultimately 'composed' his Life is particularly relevant in discussing the provenance of *Betha Naile*. It may be argued that nearly all examples of Irish hagiography can be described as political texts. The composition of a saint's Life was a method of bolstering the prestige of the saint within the medieval Irish church, but also to elevate the church of the hagiographer and his monastic *familia*. An early example of these political motivations can be seen in the composition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*. While the cult of Colum Cille was indubitably well established by the time his Life was written, shifts in patronage away from Iona and Colum Cille and the influence of Armagh were influential factors in its composition.[66] In the post-Norman invasion period of Gaelic Ireland in which *Betha Naile*, *Betha Colaim Chille* and *Betha Caillín* were compiled, this idea of 'political hagiography' is pertinent, especially in its perceived recovery and preservation of Gaelic tradition. The manner in which *Betha Caillín* was compiled is again of particular note—this was not completed just in the addition of new and fragmented material to that found in the old book, but 'the invention of a new saint's Life'.[67] Similarly, it has been indicated that *Betha Naile* was likely commissioned for the Ó Droma family, the erenagh family of Kilnawley, Co. Fermanagh.[68] The author of *Betha Máedóc Ferna*, another member of this group of sixteenth-century hagiographical texts, likely modelled his text both on the earlier Latin Life of his saint and borrowed heavily from that of Caillín.[69] *Betha Naile*'s author apparently did not have the same luxury of having any surviving earlier version of his Life. It seems much more certain that *Betha Naile* was newly composed out of surviving, fragmentary materials about the saint, as seen through the comparison of the narratives it shares with *Betha Colaim Chille*.

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[65] Raymond Gillespie, 'Imagining St Caillín: The Making of the Book of Fenagh', in *Making the Book of Fenagh; Context and Text*, ed. by Raymond Gillespie, Salvador Ryan and Brendan Scott (Cumann Seanchais Bhreifne, 2016), pp. 63–83; Liam Kelly and Brendan Scott, 'Fenagh in 1516: The Social and Religious Context for the Book of Fenagh', in *Making the Book of Fenagh; Context and Text*, ed. by Raymond Gillespie, Salvador Ryan and Brendan Scott (Cumann Seanchais Bhreifne, 2016), pp. 27–42.

[66] Jean-Michel Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 160–77.

[67] Gillespie, 'Imagining St Caillín', p. 79.

[68] Raymond Gillespie, 'Saints and Manuscripts in Sixteenth Century Breifne', *Breifne*, 11 (2008), 533–47 (p. 546).

[69] Gillespie, 'Sixteenth-Century Saint's Life', p. 150.

Even if *Betha Naile* is ultimately a composite text made up of various elements in order to create another piece of political hagiography, the characterisation of this saint is fascinating. His intentional connections to Colum Cille and Molaise legitimise his role as a saint as he is presented as their equal in his piousness and humility, yet he threatens death upon anyone who should cross his church or his bell. The utilisation of legal language in his demand for tribute is also of particular interest. While a pattern common in the hagiography of this period, and an important connection between the church and society, this may also be an intentional importation and readaption of these earlier Irish concepts in order to more accurately present Náile as an early Irish saint, and grant agency to his claims. If saints held a distinct role in the cultural memory of later medieval Ireland, deliberate inspiration from earlier texts allowed the hagiographer to emphasise Náile's status in order to fulfil his political and religious motives. While the author of this text clearly had certain motivations in its compilation, can we also interpret *Betha Naile* as an attempt to create an example of 'authentic' early hagiography? As *Betha Naile* has never been the subject of any detailed study, future close textual analysis of this text, which has been relatively ignored, would reveal the answer to this with more certainty.[70]

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