

RETRIEVING THE PRONUNCIATION OF EARLY INSULAR
CELTIC SCRIBES: TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY¹

SINCE at least the beginning of the present century, the realization has been growing among Celticists of the need to distinguish between spelling and pronunciation in medieval texts. At the beginning of the period, for example, 'Sir John Rhÿs believed that lenition had not occurred at the time of writing O[ld] W[elsh]. In other words, *p*, *t*, *c*, etc. were written in the orthography because the sounds to be represented were still [p, t, k]'.² Now it is clear that Sir John assumed that *p* meant [p], *t* meant [t] and *c* meant [k] because in both Modern English and Modern Welsh that is what those symbols do mean; for him, Old Welsh *aper* (confluence) simply meant [aper], while, by analogy, Old Breton *motrep* (aunt) would have been pronounced [motrep], and Old Cornish St *Petroc*, [petrok]. But with further examination of the sources and with the growth in understanding of structural aspects of language and how sound-changes occur, it became clear that such pronunciations could not possibly be right; the sound-change of lenition, by which phonetically-single voiceless stops in British became voiced in postvocalic environments,³ must already have taken place in Old Welsh, Cornish and Breton, because original British final syllables, whose varying shapes can alone explain much of the distribution of initial lenition in the later languages, had patently already disappeared by then. Thus the Old Breton word for 'aunt', though spelt *motrep*, shows no trace of the original final /i:/ and must already have been [modrɛb], with the same consonants as the word's Modern Welsh cognate, now spelt *modryb*; similarly the Saint's name must already have been [pedrɔg], although spelt *Petroc*; and the Welsh for 'confluence' must already have been pronounced [aber], as it is today.

¹This article is the first of two on the subject; the sequel, subtitled 'The case of Dorbbëne', will appear in *Celtica* 22. Both are adapted from sections of my unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'Studies in early Insular Celtic consonantal spelling and phonology, with particular reference to Irish material' (University of Cambridge 1985). The research was also presented in lecture form at a pair of seminars held in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies during the Hilary Term 1987. I am very grateful to all who took part in the discussion on those occasions, as well as to Professor Ellis Evans, Dr Máire Herbert, Ms Anne King, Dr Richard Sharpe, Dr Patrick Sims-Williams, and the late Professor Gordon Quin, who have read drafts and offered comment and encouragement at various stages.

²T. A. Watkins, 'Points of similarity between Old Welsh and Old Irish orthography', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 21 (1964-6) 135-41, p. 136. See also Kenneth Jackson's strictures on J. Loth's methodology, *Language and history in early Britain* (Edinburgh 1953) 551.

³For the definition of 'British' see Jackson, *Language and history*, 4; on the phonetic nature of lenitable stops, see A. Harvey, 'Aspects of lenition and spirantization', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 8 (1984) 87-100, particularly p. 94; and on the environments P. Russell, 'A footnote to spirantization', *CMCS* 10 (1985) 53-6, p. 54.

This gave rise to the question why, if lenition had already occurred, the spelling of Old Welsh, Old Cornish and Old Breton did not show it. By the time that Professor Jackson was writing *Language and history* in the 1940s, one explanation had gained widespread acceptance: namely that 'a spelling like *bleuporthetic* [for [bleuborθedīg], or *motrep* for [modrēb]] is entirely traditional, following rules of Brittonic spelling which were fixed before the time when lenition took place, and that afterwards no attempt was made to bring the orthography into line with the pronunciation'.⁴ However, as Jackson points out, this theory is not convincing. His reason for saying so is that it requires us to posit for the vernacular 'a considerable written practice, before the middle of the fifth century'; he 'is fairly certain that there was no real written language [in Britain or Brittany] so early as that time other than Latin', and most scholars would probably agree with this objection (though, as I hope to suggest elsewhere, their basis for doing so is becoming increasingly shaky in the light of recent research).⁵ More cogently, however, the notion that Old Welsh, Cornish and Breton orthography was 'out of line' with the pronunciation depends on the presupposition that modern usage necessarily constitutes the only standard by which such things can be judged, a view which in fact amounts to mere prejudice. Much more reasonable is the theory which Jackson goes on to develop in *Language and history*, namely that the Latin language had been so assimilated to the native sound-system by at least the leading Britons that

when the loosening of articulation which was the cause of lenition began to affect internal consonants in the native British speech of these people, it inevitably affected also, and equally, their Latin pronunciation. . . . The result was then that the Britons . . . came to pronounce [Latin] *capere, socius, locus, medicus, platanus, ago, primus* as [kaber, sogiʊs, logus, medigʊs, pladanus, aɣo, pɾiμus], though naturally they continued to spell them as before. . . . [Hence to the Britons of subsequent times] the Latin letters *p, t, c, b, d, g, m* at the beginning of words meant [p, t, k, b, d, g, m] as before, but in certain positions in the interior of words they now meant [b, d, g, β, δ, γ (or j), μ]. When they wanted to spell a native word such as for instance the one they pronounced [adanogion], they were therefore obliged to write *atanocion*, since *adanogion* would have meant [aðanogion].⁶

⁴Jackson, *Language and history*, 69–70; see p. 68 for the pronunciations.

⁵See, for example, R. S. O. Tomlin, 'Was ancient British Celtic ever a written language? Two texts from Roman Bath', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 34 (1987) 18–25.

⁶Jackson, *Language and history*, 70–71 (with minor alterations in the phonetic symbols used).

As I remarked when quoting this passage once before in a different context,⁷ the argument it contains 'is lucidly presented and appears to have won almost universal acceptance over the last thirty-five years'. So does MacNeill and Jackson's view that the particular sound-letter correspondences which I have just specified were also transferred from British Latin into the vernacular in post-Patrician Ireland, since they eventually emerge as part of what may be called the standard orthography for the Old Irish language as well as for Old Welsh, Old Cornish and Old Breton.⁸

At the same time a more general awareness has been growing up that the connection between spelling and pronunciation is by no means as straightforward as had been thought, even in languages whose history is attested by texts dating from their earliest stages. The development of the Romance languages from Latin proves to be as well documented in contemporary sources as could reasonably have been expected, and is certainly the best-known example of linguistic evolution to have taken place anywhere in the world; yet even here some of the most fundamental axioms have been challenged in recent years. A good example of the new, more critical approach to the question of what historical orthographies are actually telling us is Roger Wright's *Late Latin and early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (Liverpool 1982). Here the author's thesis is effectively that the entire concept of 'Vulgar Latin', existing as a spoken language alongside the vernacular Romance dialects, is illusory. He sees it as a purely written standard, tending to remain fixed (as is the way with orthographical systems, since texts survive from one generation to another) while, in the Romance areas, even the 'grammarians themselves spoke the vernacular of their time, which had evolved as much, broadly speaking, as the reconstructionist philologists now claim, and more than Latinists and historians tend to believe'.⁹ Thus, to take one of Wright's most extreme examples, the tenth-century learned Leonese would write *audietur*, but would say [ojédor], and would pronounce the former as the latter. Again, they would say [verdade] and [plo]go] (these representing the natural local evolution of the words for 'truth' and 'it pleased' respectively) but would write *veritatem* and *placuit*, as representing the classically correct forms; and since [verdade] and [plo]go] existed only in speech, and *veritatem* and *placuit* only in writing, it is

⁷ A. Harvey, 'Some significant points of early Insular Celtic orthography', in *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (ed. D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, K. McCone, Maynooth 1989) 56-66, p. 56; there, however, the passage from Jackson is, unfortunately, badly misprinted.

⁸ I give the details *ibid.*, 56-7.

⁹ Wright, *Late Latin*, 61.

accurate to say that the latter were the spellings of the former.¹⁰ It is not a question of there having been two languages side by side. In this light, Wright maintains, one can see that what the pre-Carolingian Romance-speaking grammarians were concerned with inculcating was not a classically correct but now archaic pronunciation, but a classically correct, timeless orthography:

the evidence suggests that the fifth-century grammarians, on the few occasions that they mention pronunciation, discuss, prescribe and use the normal vernacular of their time and place. In previous centuries, Cicero, Quintilian, Caper, Velius Longus and others did the same. They were writing for an audience who already knew how to pronounce and did not need to be taught.¹¹

Late Latin and early Romance has been extensively reviewed, generally with a very high degree of favour;¹² and the very fact that the book is in print, and has caused such a stir, indicates the trend which attitudes to historical phonology and orthography have been taking.

Now there are a number of aspects of Wright's thinking which are particularly attractive. First, by arguing that the literati spoke the same language as their neighbours, he obviates the need to envisage a Latin which remained fixed in more or less its classical pronunciation but which co-existed with a Romance dialect that changed according to set laws. This requirement has always posed a problem, since one has paradoxically had to see the Romance speakers as unconsciously altering their pronunciation, at least between one generation and another, while the speakers of 'Vulgar Latin' (which was originally the same language) were somehow able to resist such normally automatic changes, presumably by reference to some – but what? – fixed standard.

Secondly, in deleting this requirement, Wright frees us from having to posit the rather rigidly-defined strata in society which the more conventional view requires us to imagine in order to lend credibility to its notion of linguistic apartheid, even in default of any other evidence that such layers ever existed.

¹⁰*ibid.*, 170. Wright, indeed, goes further than this: because in the tenth century the Leonese still wrote the classical *stabit* for 'will stand', but by now said [estaráβe], he sees the former as the written version of the latter and the latter as the pronunciation of the former, even though in strict phonological terms [estaráβe] derives from 'stare habet' rather than from 'stabit' (for an explanation of my notation see note 18 below).

¹¹*ibid.*, 61

¹²Of the twenty-four reports cited in a list kindly sent me by Patrick Sims-Williams, those most readily available to the readers of this journal are probably Suzanne Fleischman's in *Speculum* 59 (1984) 222–5; F. W. Hodcroft's in *Medium Aevum* 54 (1985) 132–3; and Frank Nuessel's in *Language* 60 (1984) 184–5. All these hold the book in high esteem; and even the more critical reviews, like Ralph Penny's in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61 (1984) 43–5, seem to accept the strictly phonological parts of Wright's argument.

Thirdly, and most relevantly for our purposes, he accounts for the initial writing-down of what was specifically the Romance *vernacular* in France and Spain in post-Carolingian times by connecting it with the then-recent reform of *Latin* pronunciation – *audietur* could no longer be read out as [ojédor], therefore if the Leonese wished to write [ojédor] they had to invent a new way of spelling it – and goes on to state that

it seems reasonable to assume that the sound-letter correspondences of the reformed Latin were the starting-point for the new orthography; that the system . . . for Latin pronunciation could be applied in reverse for the creation of a Romance orthography. The [Old French] Sequence [of St Eulalia, MS Valenciennes 143] is thus as good as evidence of Latin pronunciation as it is of Romance. For example, the fact that the [ts] of, e.g. [Old French] *ciel* . . . is spelt *c*, suggests that in Latin *ci* was pronounced [tsi] here now . . .; the fact that the [k] of, e.g. [Old French] *chi* . . . is spelt *ch*, suggests that in Latin *ch* was pronounced [k] here now, whether or not others elsewhere used [x] or [h]. *It is hard to see why these spellings were chosen if this were not the case.*¹³

Apart from the reason given for the production of the first texts in the vernacular – the Celtic languages do not derive from Latin and could therefore at no stage have been written *as* Latin – this entire exposition is obviously identical, mutatis mutandis, to Jackson's explanation of the orthography of Old Welsh (and Old Cornish and Old Breton) given above, and so reinforces it. Indeed, it prompts us to go further. Jackson's argument asserts that since Old Breton spelt [adanogion] as *atanocion*, it follows that the contemporary local pronunciation of Latin *capere* was [kaber]; but having established that British Latin was 'Latin pronounced (up to a point) as if it were British', he then goes on to claim that

the influence of the written language, so strong in the case of Latin but non-existent in the case of British, operated to prevent the process from going too far, and so British Latin did not follow British in developing *e* into *ui* or *q̄* into *ū*, or *ct* (pronounced *cht* in British Latin) into *ith*.¹⁴

Now one might well consider that the contemporary continental pronunciation of Latin would have been likely to restrain such idiosyncratic developments in the Latin of Britain, but Jackson specifically states that it was the spelling which did so. How he knows this, he does not say; the assertion appears to rest on the tacit assumption that written letters do, in fact, have some absolute value in pronunciation (so that to pronounce *ct* as [iθ] would be 'going too far'), although this is the very assumption which Jackson realized was naïve when it was made in a cruder form by

¹³Wright, *Late Latin*, 129–30 (my italics).

¹⁴*Language and history*, 124.

the likes of Rhÿs.¹⁵ If Wright is correct that *audietur* was pronounced as [ojédor], *veritatem* as [verdade] and *placuit* as [plogo] in tenth-century Leon, it does not in fact seem at all unreasonable to suppose that *ct* could indeed have come to be pronounced as [iθ] at a particular period in British Latin.¹⁶

Thus Jackson's treatment, as it stands, can be seen as representing a bold step in the twentieth-century trend to loosen the perceived connection between orthography and phonology in matters of historical linguistics, but one which should now perhaps be advanced upon. *Language and history* is not the final word on these matters, even where Celtic is concerned; instead, we are prompted to take Jackson's essential insight to its logical conclusion, rather than stopping short as he tends to do. That conclusion is, baldly, that in the Celtic-speaking world throughout the medieval period, at any given time and place there was just one sound-system in operation, whether Latin or the vernacular was being spoken, because Latin was assimilated to the native phonemics; and that, conversely, in orthography Latin was the fixed point, and writing in the vernacular was in the first instance adapted to the pattern of Latin graphemics. Put as bluntly as that, this is an innovative idea which will need to be shown to be compatible with the evidence in a good many specific cases before it is accepted;¹⁷ but if it is true, it does have important implications. For example, in the case I have just been

¹⁵In fact, the assumption is so seductive that almost everyone has made it at one time or another; but it can lead even the cleverest into adopting truly absurd positions. For example, R. Thurneysen, asserting the supremacy of one of the attested *V*-forms (*Vocluti*) over the Book of Armagh's *Focluti* as representing St Patrick's original spelling of the famous Irish placename (*Confessio*, 23), argues that 'die Schreibung *focluti* zu Patricks Zeit in einem irischen Wort unmöglich ist, weil *v* erst gegen das Ende des sechsten Jahrhunderts zu *f* geworden ist': 'Silva Vocluti', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1931-3) 191-2, p. 191. Can the absence of a particular fricative from the contemporary Irish sound-system *really* have physically prevented St Patrick from penning a perfectly common roman letter, already used twice by him in this very paragraph (in the words *filium* and *fide*)? Obviously not; yet that is what Thurneysen's argument actually amounts to.

¹⁶Since I first formulated this hypothesis, concrete evidence of its truth has come to light: John T. Koch points to 'the recurrences of *rector* scanning as *rheithur* (forming a *cyrch-gymeriad* with *gwreith*)' in the *Gododdin* B-text ('When was Welsh literature first written down?', *Studia Celtica* 20-21 (1985-6) 43-66, p. 59), though he seems to regard this as giving information about the spelling of Welsh rather than about the pronunciation of British Latin, an important distinction which I hope to address at greater length elsewhere.

¹⁷I have already attempted to do this in connection with (a) the question of mutual influences between the Ogham and roman-letter traditions in Ireland (A. Harvey, 'Early literacy in Ireland: the evidence from Ogam', *CMCS* 14 (1987) 1-15); (b) the use of simple *t* and *c* for /θ/ and /χ/ in the Old Irish Würzburg *prima manus* glosses, and the Insular Celtic coining of *th* and *ch* for these sounds ('Some significant points', in *Sages, saints and storytellers*); and (c) the question of whether or not Dark Age British Latin pronunciation was archaic, viewed in the light of the Old Welsh, Cornish and Breton spelling-system ('Notes on Old Irish and Old Welsh consonantal spelling', in *Celtic linguistics: festschrift for T. Arwyn Watkins* (ed. M. J. Ball, J. Fife, E. Poppe and J. Rowland, forthcoming)).

discussing (that of Jackson's exclusion of the sound-change $[\chi t] > [i\theta]$ from British Latin) the implications are worth investigating because, as the context in *Language and history* shows, our dating of the borrowing of British Latin words into Irish may be affected. For example, assuming that Old Irish 'lacht' (milk) is indeed a loan from British Latin 'lactem' (with $[\chi t]$), Jackson is prepared to allow that, at the time of the transfer, British itself may already have had 'laith' (with $[i\theta]$), since he sees the Latin as having been restrained by its spelling from suffering the same change;¹⁸ but if, as I suspect, this notion of 'restraint' (of what was after all an automatic sound-change) is contradictory and impossible, then it follows that the Latin will have developed $[i\theta]$ in pronunciation as soon as the British did; which means, in its turn, that the loan will have to be dated earlier than in Jackson's view would be necessary, namely before that development took place.

In a sense, the scenario with which this argument leaves us makes the historical investigation of the Celtic languages easier, because it blurs the distinction between Latin and vernacular texts and so, given that only one sound-system is being represented by any one text even if it is bilingual, it increases the amount of data which it is legitimate to use.¹⁹ In another sense, however, the problem of discovering the phonology of the language in particular texts is made much harder; the spelling of Latin is almost entirely fixed, and if even vernacular graphemic habits were largely conditioned thereby, it is hard to see how they can be other than opaque to the investigation of the sound-systems which they represent. More generally and less controversially, the role of Latin can be omitted and the problem stated succinctly as follows: if the spellings of particular texts can only be interpreted in the light of their phonologies, and if their phonologies, being of the past, are only recorded for us by the spellings in the very texts which we are examining, how are we to gain any purchase on the problem of elucidating those phonologies? The logical circle would appear to be unbroken, as shown in fig. 1.

In practice, however, the situation is not as intractable as it would appear at first sight. As I have argued at length elsewhere,²⁰ it is possible to feed various considerations into the methodology so as to make it constructively spiral rather than tautologously circular: see fig. 2. Beginning with the spelling, on the right-hand side (as one has to, in order to identify 'what word' a given form in a manuscript is), we can carry out reconstructions from the modern dialects, and bear in mind

¹⁸*Language and history*, 125. My slightly non-standard notation is to distinguish spoken forms, which I write in normalized spelling and enclose in quotation marks as here, from specific written types, which I italicize in the normal way.

¹⁹Hence the wording in the title of this article; by it I mean 'scribes who were native speakers of one of the early medieval insular Celtic languages and who wrote in the vernacular or in Latin or in a mixture'. I do *not* merely refer to 'scribes of early insular Celtic', a phrase which would mean something much more restricted.

²⁰In my unpublished doctoral dissertation, pp. 12-32.

structural considerations, and so arrive (on the left-hand side) at a more coherent view of the sound-system represented by a particular text than could be gained by contemplation of the spelling alone.

The potential of the modern dialects for solving historical problems in Celtic linguistics should be obvious enough;²¹ but my reference to structural considerations should perhaps be elucidated. By it I mean that set of axioms which insists on viewing a language as a whole at any given time, meaning that we are guarded against the danger of multiplying beyond what is realistic the number of significant sounds which we posit for any given stage. We shall be more careful to avoid including anachronistic 'hangovers' from previous stages in our presentation, and so in turn will be more successful at distinguishing what are merely conservative or misleading orthographies from actual features of the language. This was the idea which lay behind, for example, the reassessment of the Celtic consonant system, already referenced, which I published a few years ago;²² but it is one that even so careful a scholar as Professor Jackson may occasionally forget. The latter does tend, when confronted by a variety of historical spellings, to explain these in terms of a plethora of distinct pronunciations, when in fact differing orthographic conventions are probably responsible. Thus in dealing with the appearance of old composition vowels in certain personal names in Old Welsh and Old Breton texts, he maintains that this was because they were still present in speech 'in a reduced form' and in 'a few cases . . . until finally the accent-shift ended most or all of them',²³ this final demise occurring because the reduced vowel was then 'not enough to take the stress, and was eliminated'.²⁴ But this requires us to posit, for the stage before the shift, three 'weak' vowel phonemes in penultimate syllables in opposition to the full range of 'strong' ones which could take the stress. This structural consideration prompts us to use Occam's razor and adopt what Jackson acknowledges to be the alternative explanation, namely that we have to do with 'orthographic archaism or conservatism, depending on a firm epigraphic [and possibly manuscript] tradition'²⁵ going back to the time before syncope. Such a tradition would not have to be in the vernacular, since British personal names could appear in Latin-language texts; and apparent examples of the representation of what are reduced forms of the vowel can easily be assigned to a different, but still

²¹ Though even the great Indo-European reconstructionist Julius Pokorny was once compelled to admit: 'When writing my note on O[ld] I[rish] *derc*, "berry" (*Journal of Celtic Studies*, 1 [1950] 133) I had, unfortunately, omitted to consult the modern forms of the word. J. Macdonald draws my attention to Scottish Gaelic *dearcag*, "a little berry", spoken *jarkak*, where the *-k-* points to a stem with *k*, and not with *g*, as I had supposed' ('Further note on Old Irish *derc*, "berry"', *JCS* 2 (1953-8) 25).

²² Harvey, *CMCS* 8 (1984) 87-100.

²³ *Language and history*, 650.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 649.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 648.

purely orthographical, tradition, dating back not quite so far. So there is no need to suppose that composition vowels could survive syncope in speech, and Jackson's assertion that such a supposition is clearly the correct one remains unjustified.

Having established the phonology on a firmer base than could be derived merely from looking at the orthography as it stands (by using, as it were, the bottom half of the spiral), we can now use that phonology, in its turn, to cast light on the reasons for the particular graphemic habits of our scribe or school of orthographers. Once again, exterior and independent considerations can be fed into the reasoning to make it logically firmer – and once again, though these considerations are not new to the field of linguistics in general, I would suggest that they have tended not to be applied to best advantage to Celtic language study. We may begin with the following quotation from the great phonologist Daniel Jones:

People possess what the eminent American linguist EDWARD SAPIR (1884–1939) called 'phonemic intuitions', which come into action as soon as they begin attempting to write their own languages alphabetically. They work with phonemic intuition as long as they are phonetically untrained, and as long as they remain uninfluenced by alphabetic traditions (which always grow up sooner or later). They know by a sort of instinct which differences between speech-sounds are capable of distinguishing words in their own languages, and as a rule they do not notice other phonetic differences which may exist but which are not capable of distinguishing words. In other terms, it is natural that in their early attempts at representing their languages by means of an alphabet men should write them phonemically.²⁶

This is largely encouraging, because the assertion that (other things being equal) a scribe will apply phonemic intuition when writing his own language indicates that we may once more bring in the concept of structural oppositions as one of our external considerations when arguing from phonology back to orthography (the top half of the spiral). However, in pursuing this line of approach one quickly becomes aware that a strong caveat needs to be entered; it can be summed up by amending Jones's assertion so as to state that a native scribe's 'phonemic intuitions' will induce him to spell just sufficiently phonemically for another native speaker, given the context, to understand what is intended. In the absence of an ideological drive for standardization, it is hard to see why he should feel impelled to go further (seeing, for example, that even classical Latin orthography was content to rely on the context to distinguish between 'malus' (bad) and 'mālus' (apple-tree), or between first

²⁶ *The phoneme: its nature and use* 3rd ed., with an appendix on the history and meaning of the term 'phoneme' (Cambridge 1967) 253.

declension nominatives like 'ancilla' and ablatives like 'ancillā'). The fact that so much of our early Celtic material consists of isolated glosses makes this a particularly important point for our purposes. When one also bears in mind the fact that the less trained a writer is, the more often he will use entirely illogical and erratic spellings – a glance at a five-year-old's exercise book will confirm that this is the case – it becomes abundantly clear that the appropriate approach to the graphemic habits of our medieval scribes will, though having recourse to structural considerations, be very open-minded in that respect.

We may now turn to the second important dimension which needs to be born in mind when examining orthographies from a phonological point of view, and indeed this will help to control the first and give it the required breadth of vision. Again the cue is given by Jones when he refers, in the passage quoted above, to 'alphabetic traditions' which 'always grow up sooner or later'. Of these traditions, the most obvious kind may be described as traditions within a particular language.²⁷ These may be defined as any influences exerted on a scribe by his having seen, already written down, a word which he then has occasion to write himself. Whenever he writes graphemes which correspond more closely to the phonology of an earlier state of the language than to that which is reflected in his own pronunciation, this type of tradition may be adduced as a cause; and the great handbooks are indeed studded with references to such 'orthographic conservatism'. I maintain, however, that this line of argument can and should be taken much further than has been done when one is considering the graphemic habits of a particular scribe or, indeed, of a particular school of orthography. Thus (to take an example from the Schaffhausen Adomnán, the manuscript I shall consider in detail in the sequel to this paper) the scribe Dorbbēne could write *Colgion* for the genitive of the Irish personal name which he gives in the nominative as *Colgu*, and this spelling accurately reflects the pronunciation /kolg'ion/ which existed at a certain date; but that the /i/ had already in Dorbbēne's time been lost by syncope is shown by the fact that he also writes *Colgen*.²⁸ To say that this variation indicates Dorbbēne's access to earlier written sources is to give a fairly non-controversial diachronic explanation – though even here, some authors will make a statement such as that Adomnán (or Dorbbēne) 'retained

²⁷The other kind crops up when one language borrows a spelling pattern, or even a whole alphabet, from another. For example, the reason that *bh*, *dh*, *fh*, *gh*, *mh*, and *sh* are not used in Irish spelling to represent the lenited counterparts of *b*, *d*, *f*, *g*, *m* and *s* until the Late Middle/Early Modern period, whereas *ch*, *ph* and *th* appear in opposition to *c*, *p* and *t* from the Old Irish stage onwards, must be at least largely because only the latter three digraphs were familiar from the orthography of Latin; compare M. Ó Murchú, *The Irish language* (Aspects of Ireland 10, Dublin 1985) 62–3. I have argued elsewhere that Latin spelling influenced that of Irish even when the latter was written in the different (though derivative) alphabet of Ogham: 'Early literacy', *CMCS* 14 (1987) passim.

²⁸Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek MS Generalia I, pp. 35 b, 58 b and 44 a, for the forms cited.

some memory of the unsyncopated forms of names',²⁹ which suggests a certain vagueness about whether pronunciation or spelling is being discussed. But, in the sequel, I shall argue that the phenomenon also gives us the information that, to Dorbbēne at least, *io* and *e* in certain environments could represent the same sound and were therefore to some degree synchronically interchangeable for spelling purposes. This notion depends upon the supposition that a scribe, confronted with various spellings within his own language dating from different periods, will tend to pronounce them all in the same way as long as he perceives them to be representations of the 'same' word (or name), and will therefore, potentially at least, feel free to use them all himself when he wishes in his turn to represent the sounds concerned in writing. Again, the sequel will contain a justification of this supposition; but for the moment I am more concerned with its significance. It means, for example, that when we find Dorbbēne writing *Fergnovo* and *Virgnovo* indifferently for the dative/ablative (Latinized) of the name of one and the same man,³⁰ it is because, to him, the letters *F* and *V* (*U*) were synchronically interchangeable in Gaelic spelling for the phoneme /f/, whatever the historical origins of the duality.³¹ This conclusion is significant in its turn because, coupled with the other suggestion I have already made that such a scribe's spoken Latin will have had the same sound-system as his vernacular, it has the corollary that when speaking Latin, Dorbbēne will have pronounced both *f* and *v* (*u*) as /f/, at least in some positions.³² We shall thus have deduced something about his Latin pronunciation from his Gaelic spelling. This strategy, though apparently paradoxical, represents the opposite side of the coin to the observation, already made, that the key to recovering the phonology of the vernacular is not merely to examine the historical spelling of that language as it stands – which would be to beg the question – but to interpret it in the light of Latin's fixed patterns of orthography. The procedure in any case appears more productive than the attempt to reconstruct the pronunciation of Latin from its own spelling. In an article on the Schaffhausen manuscript, J. M. Picard states that 'in so far as it is possible to judge [Latin] pronunciation from the spelling of [Latin] texts that of the Irish monks was not very different from [that of] their continental counterparts: the majority

²⁹A. O. and M. O. Anderson (ed. and transl.), *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London 1961) 149.

³⁰Schaffhausen MS, pp. 131 a and 120 b.

³¹To make this synchronic statement about an individual scribe's graphemic system (or policy) should be no more controversial than to include originally foreign phonemes in a description of an individual speaker's sound-system – a practice which is universally accepted in dialect studies. As Brian Ó Cuív says with reference to the latter, 'it should be remembered that each phoneme must be based on an individual speaker and the speech described must be composed of the sounds as used by that speaker. Where such sounds or usage differ from those of other speakers of the language, these differences must be described separately': *The Irish of West Muskerry, Co. Cork: a phonetic study* (Dublin 1944) 9.

³²A hypothesis which is also likely on other grounds, as I shall show in the sequel.

of the anomalies . . . are also found in Merovingian manuscripts'.³³ But I question whether it is legitimate to make even this judgement, since in so far as the Irish and continental pronunciations did differ, one would expect that the all but fixed orthography of Latin would tend to conceal the divergence. Nor do the common anomalies necessarily tell us anything about the pronunciation, since all they need reflect is the existence of the same traditional spelling variants in the two places. It should never be forgotten that Latin was primarily a written language throughout medieval Europe.

As far as retrieving a particular Celtic scribe's pronunciation of Latin is concerned, I believe, then, that the key to success lies in analysing the spelling of any *vernacular* words or names which he may have embedded in his Latin text. These forms, alone in such a text, will not have been restrained by the straitjacket of the fixedness of Latin spelling; and, as we shall see, Schaffhausen Generalia I is an ideal manuscript on which to try out this approach. In the sequel, I apply the method in detail to specific forms in that codex, with a view to demonstrating that it can produce concrete and even historically significant results. What I hope to have shown so far is that the 'spiral methodology', though at first sight a long-winded and roundabout way of arguing, is in fact necessary when dealing with matters of historical orthography and phonology in general. When people have taken short cuts, they have made mistakes.

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³³'The Schaffhausen Adomnán – a unique witness to Hiberno-Latin', *Peritia* 1 (1980) 216–49, p. 248.