

OLD IRISH *GLÁOSNÁTHE* ‘LINEA, NORMA’

OLD IRISH *gló-snáithe* (*gláo-snáithe*), a masculine *io*-stem, is regularly used to translate Latin *linea*, *norma*, *flum*, words which are themselves figuratively used for ‘the thread of speech’, or any rhetorical model. The *Contributions to a dictionary of the Irish language* [DIL] G-111 very conveniently translate OIr. *gló-snáithe* as ‘the defining or delimiting thread or line, hence typical form, norm; passing into sense weaving, arranging (of a composition)’. We can divide the OIr. glosses according to the different Latin words that *gló-snáithe* is meant to gloss:

(1) Latin *linea*, Sg. 3 b 20, where two different spellings – and possibly two different layers – can be distinguished,

inna [n]gláosnathe nó inna fuath .i. is hé in glósnáthe caractar inna liter (gl. figurae linearum).

The two layers are clearly distinguished by ‘.i.’: the first spelling has kept an archaic diphthong *áo* (cf. *bao*, *brao*), reduced to long *ó* in the second part of the gloss (all the other examples, and particularly all the evidence from Milan glosses already have this long *ó*)¹. The two parts of the gloss are also of different natures, the first part being simply a translation of *linearum* (‘of the lines’, or ‘of the forms’) and the second part an explanatory definition of *gló-snáithe*, that is, of *linea*, with what seems to be a paraphrase of the Latin text (‘the line is the character of the letters’).² Needless to say, *gláo-snáithe* glossing *linea* is not the name of any kind of thread, first because the compound *gláo-snáithe* is necessarily a special kind of *snáithe* ‘thread’, and secondly because Latin *linea* itself meant a flax thread, and had a specialized meaning as ‘delimiting thread’: ‘a cord used by carpenters, masons, etc., for measurement or alignment, plumb line . . . (normally coloured so as to leave a mark when snapped on to a surface)’.³ This is the *technical meaning* of *linea*, which has been exploited by the grammarians and the rhetors.

¹ Another noteworthy difference in spelling is the use of the *punctum delens* above the *-s-* of *snaithe* in the second part of the gloss and not in the first. This innovation of Sg. might be restricted to its later glossators.

² The Latin text is from the first book of Priscian’s grammar, *Institutiones grammaticae*; cf. Martin Hertz’s edition in *Grammatici Latini* II (ed. H. Keil, Leipzig 1855) 6, 23–4: *littera est igitur nota elementi et velut imago quaedam vocis litteratae quae cognoscitur ex qualitate vel quantitate figurae linearum*. The use of *linea* in the definition of *littere* is obviously inspired by the Greek grammarians, where the pun between *γράμμα littera* and *γραμμή linea* is erected into a definition: cf. *Dionysii Thracis Ars grammatica*, ed. G. Uhlig, in *Grammatici Graeci* I pt I.i (Leipzig 1883) 9 § 6 (7 b).

³ *Oxford Latin dictionary* (Oxford 1984) s.v.

(2) Latin *filum*, when glossed with *glósnáithe*, is figuratively used for the 'thread' of a speech, of a narrative. In both examples, it is connected with the verb *detexo* 'I completely weave, I compose (a text)':

Ml. 72 a 8, *tali filo orationis (detextus): hua glosnathiu ind inni seo .i. tituli*, Stokes: 'by such a norm' (cf. *norma* § 3 below); better: 'by such a thread of speech'.

Ml. 145 b 5, *hunc (psalmum) perfectiore et uicinior detexuit filo, filo: huan glosnathiu*.

(3) Lat. *norma*, a 'square', refers to a model, a pattern, in both glosses, where it is glossed with *glósnáithe*; compare, for the semantic development, Br. *skouer*, Mid. Br. *skuezr* 'model, example', from Low Latin *squadra* 'square'. In the two following examples, *norma* means a model, a standard for such and such virtues:

Ml. 35 d 10, *ad normam iustitiae diriguntur, ad normam: don glosnathiu*.

Ml. 99 d 2, *exigerat recti norma ut . . . norma: in glosnathe*.

Later examples illustrate the figurative and rhetorical uses of the word. In the Tripartite Life of St Patrick, the same sentence is found twice, in the first part and the third, at the end of the list of miracles: *It é so ferta atchú[a]idetar sruithi Heirenn 7 dosratsat fo glo[s]nathi n-aisnesen* 'These are the miracles which the venerable men of Ireland have told, and they have put them under a thread of narrative',⁴ probably equivalent to: 'they have composed with them a continuous text'. Compare, for other applications to prose texts:

PH 7857, cindimm díb . . . glónshnáthi ernaiithe cumbri do denum (Jesus, speaking of the composition of the Lord's prayer) 'I fix for you a model of short prayer [to make]'.⁵

The idea of a short text, a résumé, is also present in the following examples (all in *DIL*). The first is taken from *Tochmarc Ferbe: con-dernad glónathe airchetail co cummair do chumnigud in sceóil sin*⁶ ('a brief poetical résumé'). *Glónaithe airchetail* 'poetic composition',

⁴K. Mulchrone (ed.), *Bethu Phátraic* (Dublin 1939) lines 634–5, 3056–7. Of all the Latin lives of St Patrick, the closest passage to this OIr. sentence is found in the beginning of Book II of Tirechán's Life: *Omnia quae scripsi a principio libri huius scitis quia in uestris regionibus gesta sunt nissi de eis pauca quae inueni in utilitatem laboris mei a senioribus multis et ab illo Ultan episcopo Conchuburnensi qui nutriuit me, retulit sermo* (L. Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae X, Dublin 1979) 138 § 18 lines 6–9).

⁵R. Atkinson (ed.), *The passions and the homilies from Leabhar Breac* (Todd Lecture Series II, Dublin 1887) 260.

⁶E. Windisch (ed.), 'Tochmarc Ferbe', *Irische Texte* III/2 (1897) 445–556, p. 518 lines 762–3.

is itself equivalent to *glonsnaithe filidhechta*;⁷ *tre glosnaithe fileta*;⁸ *tre glosnaithe filedh* and *tre glosnaithe ealadhna*.⁹

If the second element of this compound is clearly *snáithe* (neuter *io*-stem) 'thread', the first component is still obscure, as stated in *DIL*. Its form varied from *gláo-* to *gló-*, *glón-* and even *glun-* (we have no reference for this last variant). But under the lemma *gló* 'ball?' (a word of uncertain meaning), *DIL* refers to a possible compound in *gló-snaithe*. This reference has been inspired by W. Stokes¹⁰ and by a note written by Joseph Loth.¹¹ But it will now be obvious to every one that a 'thread from the ball' is a nonsense, or at least a common-place expression, which has nothing in common with the peculiar uses of the Latin words *linea* and *norma*.

Here again, a comparison with the Brittonic evidence might shed some light on the meaning and etymology of the Old Irish word. We propose a comparison with an Old Breton word *glou-* occurring in the compound *glou-lini*, which is used to gloss Latin *norma*. This OBr. gloss has been edited as *glou-lim* by Fleuriot.¹² The gloss occurs in the left margin of f. 44 v in the Paris manuscript, Bibliothèque national nouv. acq. lat. 1983, facing the text *quod potest habere normam a predicatione Pauli* 'a thing which may have been modeled on the preaching of St Paul'. I have seen the manuscript and I think that the final *-m* of Fleuriot's *gloulim* is rather awkward, its last stroke being lowered and incurved as a comma, much resembling an abbreviation stroke equivalent to *-i*. I would favour a reading *gloulini*. Fleuriot suggested a plausible meaning for his own *glou-lim*: both components would have meant 'model, guide', and *-lim* was presented as a word meaning basically 'warp, woof' (Welsh *dylif* being considered as a compound, in spite of the variant *dlif*). I think, however, that there are difficulties in Fleuriot's interpretation of both components. OBr. *glou-* cannot be compared to MW *glyw* 'chieftain, lord' or Br. *glew*, *gleo* 'plough handle'. And W. *dylif* (var. *dlif*) is probably an older **dlūm-*, if one thinks of OIr. *dlúth* 'warp, woof'. The compound *un-llif*¹³ and *ten-llif* quoted

⁷ *Ancient laws of Ireland* III (Dublin 1873) 88.15–16 (= Lebor Aiclé).

⁸ M. E. Byrne, 'Airec Menman Uraird maic Coisse', *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* II (Halle 1908) 42.10 and 51.18. See P. Mac Cana, *The learned tales of medieval Ireland* (Dublin 1980) 37–8; and L. Breatnach, *Uraiceacht na ríar* (Dublin 1987) 91–2.

⁹ C. Plummer, 'Betha Máedóc Ferna', in *Bethada náem nÉrenn* I (Oxford 1922) 251 § 206.

¹⁰ *Urkteltischer Sprachschatz* (Göttingen 1894) 120.

¹¹ 'Notes étymologiques et lexicographiques', *Revue Celtique* 41 (1924) 372–412, pp. 385–6: 'no. 309 Irlandais moyen *glau*, *gló*'. As did Whitley Stokes before him, Joseph Loth saw in the first component of *glósnaithe* the word *glao* 'ball (?)'; see W. Stokes, 'O'Mulconry's glossary', in *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* I (Halle 1900) 232–324, p. 306, in note referring to § 679.

¹² 'Nouvelles gloses vieilles-bretonnes à Amalarius', *Études Celtiques* 11/2 (1966–7) 415–64 (and five plates, pp. 470–74); see particularly pp. 430–31 § 6.

¹³ *Cywyddau Iolo Goch ac Eraill* (Bangor 1925) 364–5.

by Fleuriot are possibly graphical variants of *un-lliw*, *ten-lliw* (*un-lliw* = 'of the same colour'), but any connection with W. *dlif*, *dylif*, would surely be secondary and restricted to Welsh.

The second element has to be read as *lini*. This OBr. word is already attested in a gloss on Latin *ordo*, in Angers 477, f. 57 b.¹⁴ In Bede's text, *ita ut primus et secundus ordo uicenos et septenos dies complectatur*,¹⁵ *ordo* refers to an horizontal line in a computistic table. It is obvious that OBr. *lini* is nothing other than a loanword from Latin *linea*. The final *-i* might cause surprise, but it is a reflex attested for both Latin and native final *-iyo*, *-iyus*, *-iyum* (cf. OBr. *guileri*: Latin *uigil(i)arium*, OIr. *féilire*). Modern Breton *linenn* has a variant *linienn* (*lignenn*, Grégoire de Rostrenen) which has kept this final *-i* of the base. This word has kept the technical use of Latin *linea*: in Mid. Br., *linenn maçon de caluez* 'a line of mason or carpenter' is given as equivalent to Latin *amussis* (*Catholicon*);¹⁶ cf. Grégoire de Rostrenen 575 'ligne ou cordeau de maçon, de charpentier, *lignenn*, *linenn*'. Its use in Old Breton for translating Latin *norma* is understandable. Many squares were combined with a plumbline; in the Vannes dialect, *linenn* still has the meaning 'level'. Now OIr. *gláosnáithe* and OBr. *glou-lini* appear to be very close; each is a gloss on Latin *norma*, both have a second component meaning 'thread'. It would be satisfactory to posit an equivalence also between their first components, OIr. *gláo-* and OBr. *glou-*. Phonetically, the expected reflex of OBr. *glou-* would be Mod. Br. *glaou*. Mod. Br. *glaou* exists and means 'coal'; it is a cognate of Cornish *glow* and W. *glo* (with a peculiar reduction of Primitive Welsh *-ou* to *-o*),¹⁷ all these words having possibly the meaning 'charcoal' as well as 'coal'.¹⁸

A compound formed with the words 'coal' and 'thread' is attested in Old English, *cólþréd* '*perpendicularum*' (Épinal Glossary).¹⁹ This was

¹⁴L. Fleuriot, *Dictionnaire des Gloses en vieux breton* (Paris 1964) 243.

¹⁵C. W. Jones (ed.), *Beda's Venerabilis opera* IV (Corpus Christianorum, series Latina 123B, Turnhout 1978) ch. 19 line 8

¹⁶The evidence from the *Catholicon* is both plentiful and mixed: Latin *amussis* reappears under *Plom maczon* 'the plumbline of masons', together with the more correct *perpendicularum* and an optional variant *scuezr* (this last is the 'square'). Latin *perpendicularum* reappears itself under *reul an maczon* 'the rule of the mason', explained as 'regle de boys ou tout le plon' (où pend le plomb, J. Feutren). Under the same lemma is found *perpendicularis* or *linea perpendicularis* 'ligne au charpentier d'amont a bas' (a plumbline again?). An excellent commentary has been given in the 1499 edition of *Catholicon* by Jean Feutren (Mayenne 1977) under *cramailée, regle de boys, ligne*.

¹⁷K. Jackson, *Language and history in early Britain* (Edinburgh 1953) 379. For the etymology, cf. H. Pedersen *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* I (Göttingen 1909–1913) 63; J. Pokorny *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern und München 1969) 433.

¹⁸Cf. I. Williams, *Pedeir keinc y Mabinogi* (Caerdydd 1951) 184 (Branwen, 36.11); and T. Jones, 'Nodiadau testunol ar Lyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 12 (1948) 83–6, p. 85.

¹⁹See J. Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary* (ed. T. N. Toller, Oxford 1898 etc.), under *cólþréd*, *-þréd*, 'a coal or blackened thread, plumb-line'. The Glossary from Erfurt I has the variant *coldraed* (*Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum* V, 379.3).

a thread blackened with coal: a plumb line (*perpendicularum*) had to be blackened in order to be distinguished from the (white or whitish) stone. This theory, put forward by Holthausen, has been questioned by Meritt, who saw in *cól-* a name for the 'plummet'. Readers will find every detail in the recent edition by J. D. Pheiffer.²⁰

One may object that OE. *cólbréd* is not glossing *norma* or *linea*. In fact, the three words *norma*, *linea* and *perpendicularum* are normally found together in the specialized texts (Vitruvius).²¹ There was a *perpendicularis norma*, a combination of square and plumb line, the line hanging from the right angle of the square. One must recognize that all the OIr. and OBr. examples quoted above attest to figurative meanings, none of them being really used in a technical text concerning masonry or carpentry. Consequently we cannot be sure whether *glou-líni* and *gláo-śnáithe* were referring, in their primary use, to a plumbline (as the OE. *cól-bréd*) or to a square (as Latin *norma* would suggest). An OIr. gloss on *perpendicularum*, by John Scot Eriugena, presents a different expression: '*snathe*' cum *plumbo ad maceriam dirigendam*,²² but it is common to have different OIr. translations for the same Latin word. There is, in my opinion, no other occurrence of the same element *gló* in Old and Middle Irish, either as a simple word or in a compound. The *gló-* of *gló-béimnech*, *gló-lethar*, is probably a different word (or words), as is the *glau find* of O'Mulconry's Glossary.²³

We reach our conclusion. OIr. *gláo-śnáithe* is a hybrid: the first component is borrowed from Brittonic **glou* 'coal' (the native OIr. would have been *gúal*, of course).²⁴ Similarly, OBr. *glou-líni* is a hybrid, the second element being borrowed from Latin *linea*. Hybrids are frequent in technical jargons, where new technics have to be adopted with the foreign names that they have in their distant birth place. Here the technic is clearly Roman architecture and masonry. The words *glou-líni* and *gláo-śnáithe* are certainly related to stone-building. It is extremely

²⁰J. D. Pheiffer, *Old English glosses in the Épinal Erfurt glossary* (Oxford 1974): see text, p. 40 n. 763, and the corresponding note, p. 110.

²¹Ex Vitruvius 7.3 (F. Krohn, *Vitruvii de architectura libri decem* (Leipzig 1912) 154.29–155.2), 'uti longitudines ad regulam et ad lineam, altitudines ad perpendicularum, anguli ad normam respondententes exigantur. . .'. In the Celtic literatures, one should quote the famous passage from 'the Mystery of St Barba', when masons are coming to build a huge tower: É. Ernault, *Le Mystère de Sainte-Barbe* (Paris 1888) § 67, *Memeuz, n'en deuz sy, binhuyou/scuezr ha reulenn ha linennou*. . . 'I have tools, indeed, a square, a ruler and lines'; cf. also *ibid.*, 74.

²²'A thread with a plummet for the alignment of a wall': W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus* I (Cambridge 1901) 2.18–19; and P.-Y. Lambert, 'Les gloses bibliques de Jean Scot: l'élément vieil-irlandais', *Études Celtiques* 22 (1985) 205–224, p. 212 § 57.

²³Stokes, *Archiv* I, 306, in note referring to § 679.

²⁴This borrowing is evidently older than the evolution of Primitive Welsh *glou* into *glo*, a change which was itself older than the Welsh evolution *ou* > *öü*; cf. Jackson, *Language and history*, 379. As usual the Irish treatment of the borrowed words is phonetically modelled on parallel native words, as OW *dou*: OIr *dau*, *dó* 'two' (Bret. *daou* keeps fairly well the Old British diphthong).

interesting that the OIr. word for plumbline had its first component borrowed from Brittonic. It would however be injudicious to see there an indication that the Roman technic of stone-building was carried to Ireland by the Britons. On the contrary, we have to analyse *gláosnáthe* as a learned word borrowed by grammarians.²⁵

Although we have been able to identify three words, OE., OBret. and OIr., as formed with the same elements and all referring to some masonry tool, we have to recognize that, outside Irish (where the word has only a figurative meaning), all this evidence rests on a single gloss and on a glossary entry. As a consequence, there is some uncertainty about the exact technical meaning (*perpendicularum* or *linea*?) and even about the exact relationship of the British and OE. words.²⁶

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²⁵On some occasions I have been led to suppose an Irish influence on some OBret. glosses. One might argue that this kind of situation could explain the OBret. gloss *glou-lini* in the Paris copy of Amalarius, as Dr Paul Russell remarks. But even if that were the case (and it would be necessary to produce an Old Irish gloss on Amalarius to prove it), it would not weaken our etymological proposal. The direction of the borrowing was necessarily *from* Brittonic *into* Irish, as the form *glao-* clearly demonstrates (and supported, secondarily, by the existence of an Old English parallel to the Brittonic compound). Whether the Old Breton glossator had been inspired by an Old Irish model or not remains entirely hypothetical.

²⁶It is not impossible to think that the OE. word *toō* has been modeled as a calque on the British word, as Dr Paul Russell suggested after reading this (I am most grateful for his help).