A NOTE ON OLD IRISH CIRMAIRE

In Old Irish the ordinary meaning of cirmaire is 'comb-maker'. This is the case, for example, in the eighth-century law-text Bretha Nemetais, where the skills required of the comb-maker are described in the following terms: A tri meither [read nemthigetar] cirmauire: coimrith fri com for oltrach a' cosnam cnama, 7 dirge adaire reith car tinhig, 7 dicedal for oltrach co lochmiger a mbi do congna 7 do cnamub ina ichtar co mbi for achatar 'three things which distinguish a comb-maker: racing a dog on a dunghill in contending for a bone, and straightening the horn of a ram without fire, and chanting on a dunghill so that what there is below of horns and bones comes up'. A similar version of this triad is found in the ninth-century Triads of Ireland no. 117.

In later sources cirmaire is also used of the person who combs down the cloth after it has been woven. A legal glossator in the Trinity College manuscript 1363 (H.4.22) gives both meanings: Cirmairi . i. cir m na hetaidi no domiat na cira 'i.e. they comb the cloth or they make the combs'. He goes on to discuss the legal consequences if a cloth-comber breaks the comb which he is using: Mass e inti ciras na hetaidi, acht mas tuillt no riaceardi robui isin elach do bunadh, aslan dosum ciibed brisil na cir a de gin fis gin aicsin. Masa helach gin asnim bunaid, is luigi dosum co nech diambi log einich imich roimelidh no robried de conach caemmacair a denam indus bu dilech 7 conach roibe run fogla lais 7 islan do. 'He who combs the cloth, unless there was gappiness or coarseness (?) in the cloth originally, is not liable if the combs break without knowledge or looking on [i.e. if he does not know that they will break or if he does not look on as they break]. If it is cloth without a basic flaw, he must swear an oath to the person to whom belongs the honour-price of what was destroyed or broken by him [i.e. to his employer?] that he was not able to do it in a way which was lawful and that he did not have the intention of damaging it and [in that case] no liability attaches to him'.

Cirmaire obviously contains the noun cir 'comb' with the agent suffix -aire (< Latin -arius). But where did the -m- come from? E. G. Quin suggested that the -m- in this and other nouns is a consonantализed -u originating from the u-stems. However, cir is a feminine á-stem, so this explanation is unsatisfactory. The development of another agent noun, luam, provides a possible solution. The word luam is well attested in OIr. in the sense 'pilot, steersman'. It is formed from lué 'steering oar, rudder' (cf. Welsh llwy 'id.'), with the agent suffix -am. Towards the

2 Ed. K. Meyer, Todd Lectures Series XIII (Dublin 1906).
3 CII V, 1385.31.
4 Ibid., 1586.31–5.
end of the OIr. period a by-form with the agent suffix -aire developed. This suffix was not attached to the original noun lu, but to luam. The resultant form luamaire therefore contains two agent suffixes, -am and -aire. Ultimately, luam was displaced by luamaire, so we find explanations such as luamh a. luamhaire no loingseoir in O’Clery’s glossary. In the law-texts, luam may be glossed by luamaire or a derivative, e.g. CII V, 1617.13 Luamain i. luamaint na helair ‘pilots i.e. they steer boats’, cf. CII VI, 2334.1.

Cirmaire may likewise go back to an unattested *ciram (cir + -am) to which the agent suffix -aire was added at some time in the OIr. period. With regular syncope *ciram + -aire would give cirmaire. There are other instances of the doubling of agent suffixes in Irish. For example, Lat. ostiarius ‘door-keeper’ was borrowed into Irish as aistire with the normal development of Lat. -arius to OIr. -(a)ire, cf. Lat. scirnarius ‘treasurer’ > OIr. scirne etc. Later, a form aistreoir is attested. Charles Plummer (quoted in Dictionary of the Irish language s.v. aistire) suggested that the internal -r- came in by analogy with treoir ‘guidance’, direction’, but I cannot see how this word could exert influence on aistire. It seems far more likely that aistreoir is simply from aistire + the agent suffix -oir (which was particularly productive in the Middle Irish period).

Another possible instance of the doubling of agent suffixes is Irish cruittire ‘harpist’. The earliest word for ‘harpist’ is the masculine i-stem cruitt, which is well attested in the law-texts, e.g. nom. pl. cruitti, CII II, 570. 21 = Crith gablac, 23. 589. D. A. Binchy suggests that cruitt goes back to cruith ‘harp’ + the agent suffix -ith (-id). For similar coalescing of dentals in a disyllable, cf. foti ‘sending’ (verbal noun of fotid) from *fotidiath, and lai ‘come ye’ (2 pl. imperative of do-lai) from *taisith. (Subsequently, the agent suffix -ire was added to cruitt, giving cruittire.

The noun culmaire ‘chariot-maker, charioteer’ obviously contains the elements cul ‘chariot’ + the agent suffix -aire. In Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien it is suggested that cul was originally a w-stem *kul-o-, which became *kel-o- before the following vowel of the suffix. However, there is no other evidence to indicate that cul was a w-stem. Possibly, therefore, culmaire also contains two agent suffixes: *cul-am + -aire.

8 D. A. Binchy, Crith gablac (Dublin 1941, repr. 1979).
10 GOI, 69 § 110.
Finally, I should add that the doubling of agent suffixes is also attested in other languages. For example, in Old English a man who earned his living by catching fish was called a *fiscere* (later *fisarere, fyssher, fisher* etc.), but in the sixteenth century a by-form developed with the additional suffix *-man*. *Fisherman* has now ousted the original *fisher*, except in compounds such as *kingfisher, fisher weasel*, etc.

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