

## A NOTE ON OLD IRISH *CÍRMAIRE*

IN Old Irish the ordinary meaning of *círmaire* is ‘comb-maker’. This is the case, for example, in the eighth-century law-text *Bretha Nemed toísech*, where the skills required of the comb-maker are described in the following terms: *A tri meither* [read *nemthigetar*] *cirmuire: coimrith fri coin for otrach a’ cosnam cnama, 7 dirge adairce reith can tinigh, 7 dicedal for otrach co tochraiger a mbi do congna 7 do cnamuib ina ichtar co mbi for uachtar* ‘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’.<sup>1</sup> A similar version of this triad is found in the ninth-century *Triads of Ireland* no. 117.<sup>2</sup>

In later sources *círmaire* 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. cirait na hetaidi no doniat na cira* ‘i.e. they comb the cloth or they make the combs’.<sup>3</sup> 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 tuilli no riascaidi robui isin etach do bunadh, aslan dosum cidbed brisit na cira de gin fis gin aicsin. Masa hetach gin ainim bunaid, is luigi dosum co nech diambi log einech ineich romilledh no robrised de cunach caemnacair a denam indus bu dligtech 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’.<sup>4</sup>

*Círmaire* obviously contains the noun *cír* ‘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 consonantalised *u* originating from the *u*-stems.<sup>5</sup> However, *cír* is a feminine *ā*-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 *lue* ‘steering oar, rudder’ (cf. Welsh *llyw* ‘id.’), with the agent suffix *-am*. Towards the

<sup>1</sup> *Corpus iuris hibernici* [CIH] I–VI (ed. D. A. Binchy, Dublin 1978): VI, 2220.5–7.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. K. Meyer, Todd Lectures Series XIII (Dublin 1906).

<sup>3</sup> CIH V, 1586.31.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 1586.31–5.

<sup>5</sup> E. G. Quin, ‘The origin of the *f*-future: an alternative explanation’, *Ériu* 29 (1978) 13–25, p. 15.

end of the OIr. period a by-form with the agent suffix *-aire* developed. This suffix was not attached to the original noun *lue*, but to *luam*. The resultant form *lúamaire* therefore contains two agent suffixes, *-am* and *-aire*. Ultimately, *luam* was displaced by *lúamaire*, so we find explanations such as *luamh .i. luamhaire no loingseóir* in O'Clery's glossary.<sup>6</sup> In the law-texts, *luam* may be glossed by *lúamaire* or a derivative, e.g. *CIH V*, 1617.13 *Luamain .i. luamairet na hetair* 'pilots i.e. they steer boats', cf. *CIH VI*, 2334.1.

*Círmaire* may likewise go back to an unattested *\*círám* (*cír* + *-am*) to which the agent suffix *-aire* was added at some time in the OIr. period. With regular syncope *\*círám* + *-aire* would give *círmaire*. There are other instances of the doubling of agent suffixes in Irish. For example, Lat. *ostiarus* 'door-keeper' was borrowed into Irish as *aistire* with the normal development of Lat. *-arius* to OIr. *-(a)ire*,<sup>7</sup> cf. Lat. *scriniarius* 'treasurer' > OIr. *scrínire* etc. Later, a form *aistreóir* is attested. Charles Plummer (quoted in *Dictionary of the Irish language* s.v. *aistire*) suggested that the internal *-r-* came in by analogy with *treóir* 'guidance, direction', but I cannot see how this word could exert influence on *aistire*. It seems far more likely that *aistreóir* is simply from *aistire* + the agent suffix *-óir* (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. *crutti*, *CIH II*, 570.21 = *Críth gablach*, 23.589.<sup>8</sup> D. A. Binchy suggests that *cruitt* goes back to *crutt* 'harp' + the agent suffix *-ith* (*-id*).<sup>9</sup> For similar coalescing of dentals in a disyllable, cf. *foít* 'sending' (verbal noun of *foídid*) from *\*foídiuth*, and *taít* 'come ye' (2 pl. imperative of *do-tét*) from *\*taítith*.<sup>10</sup> 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 *u*-stem *\*k<sup>w</sup>olu-*, which became *\*k<sup>w</sup>oly-* before the following vowel of the suffix.<sup>11</sup> However, there is no other evidence to indicate that *cul* was a *u*-stem. Possibly, therefore, *culmaire* also contains two agent suffixes: *\*cul-am* + *-aire*.

<sup>6</sup>A. W. K. Miller, 'O'Clery's Irish glossary', *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881-3) 1-69, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>See R. Thurneysen, *A grammar of Old Irish [GOI]* (Dublin 1946) 172 § 269.

<sup>8</sup>D. A. Binchy, *Críth gablach* (Dublin 1941, repr. 1979).

<sup>9</sup>'The date and provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*', *Ériu* 18 (1958) 44-54, p. 47 n. 3.

<sup>10</sup>*GOI*, 69 § 110.

<sup>11</sup>E. Bachellery, P.-Y. Lambert (ed.), *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien de J. Vendryes: lettre C* (Dublin and Paris 1987) 283.

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 *fissare*, *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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