OLD IRISH *Gláosnáithe* ‘Linea, Norma’

Old Irish *gló-snáithe* (*gláo-snáithe*), a masculine io-stem, is regularly used to translate Latin *linea, norma, fitum*, 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]*gláosnáthé nó *inna fualth*. i. is hé in glósnáithe cár náit in na litér (*gl. figurae linearum*).

The two layers are clearly distinguished by ‘i.’: the first spelling has kept an archaic diphthong *áo* (cf. *bao, bráo*), 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*)

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 *glósnáithe*, that is, of *linea*, with what seems to be a paraphrase of the Latin text (‘the line is the character of the letters’). 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)’. 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 *ó* of *snáithe* 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 1885) 6, 22–4: *littera est igitur nota elementi et velut imago quae cognoscitur ex qualitate vel quantitate *figurea linearum*. The use of *linea* in the definition of *littera* is obviously inspired by the Greek grammarians, where the pun between *γράμμα litterae* and *γράμμα ἐν αὐτῇ* is erected into a definition: cf. *Dionysii Thracis Ars grammatica*, ed. G. Uhlig, in *Grammatici Graeci* I pt I (Leipzig 1883) 9 § 6 (7 b).


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(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, lali filo orationis (detextus): hua glosnathiu ind inni seo .i. tituli, Stokès: ‘by such a norm’ (cf. norma § 3 below); better: ‘by such a thread of speech’.
ML. 145 b 5, hunc (psalmum) perfectiore et viciniore detexit 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. skueer ‘model, example’, from Low Latin quadrum ‘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, exiger at recti norma ut . . . norma: in glosnathie.

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 ichtû[a]idetar sruthi Heirenn 7 doiraisat fo glosnathie n-aistnse: ‘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 dib . . . glosnathie ernaigthe cumbrí do denu (Jesus, speaking of the composition of the Lord’s prayer) ‘I fix for you a model of short prayer [to make]’.

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: co-n-dernad glónathie aichetait co cuumair do chumnaí in secóil sin⁶ (‘a brief poetical résumé’). Glónathie aichetait ‘poetic composition’.

⁴K. Mulchrone (ed.), Beth a Phléisic (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 scriptae a principio libri huius scitis quin in uestris regionibus gesta sunt nisi de eis paucis quae inueni in uilitatem laboris mei et a senioribus multa et ab illo Ulten episcopo Conchaburmonai qui nutriuit mei, retulit sermo (L. Bider (ed.), The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh (Scriptores Latin i 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.
is itself equivalent to \textit{glosnaithi filidhechta};\footnote{Ancient laws of Ireland III (Dublin 1873) 88.15–16 (= Lebor Aicché).} \textit{tre glosnaithe filet\`a};\footnote{M. E. Byrne, ‘Airec Merman Uraid maic Coisse’, \textit{Anecdot\`e from Irish Manuscripts II} (Halle 1958) 42.10 and 51.18. See P. Mac Cana, \textit{The learned tales of medieval Ireland} (Dublin 1980) 37–8; and L. Breatnach, \textit{Uraiceacht na ris} (Dublin 1987) 91–2.} \textit{tre glosnaithe fi\`elh} and \textit{tre glosnaithe salad\`na}.\footnote{C. Plummer, ‘Betha M\`aeod oc F\`erna’, in \textit{Bethada n\`em n\`enn I} (Oxford 1922) 251 \S\ 206.}

If the second element of this compound is clearly \textit{snaithe} (neuter \textit{i} -stem) ‘thread’, the first component is still obscure, as stated in DIL. Its form varied from \textit{glao-} to \textit{gl\`o-}, \textit{gl\`on-} and even \textit{glun-} (we have no reference for this last variant). But under the lemma \textit{gl\`o ‘ball’?} (a word of uncertain meaning), DIL refers to a possible compound in \textit{gl\`o-snaithe}. This reference has been inspired by W. Stokes\footnote{\textit{Urkeltischer Sprachschatz} (G\`ottingen 1894) 120.} and by a note written by Joseph Loth.\footnote{Notes \textit{etymologiques et lexicographiques}, \textit{Revue Celtique} 41 (1924) 372–412, pp. 385–6: ‘no. 309 Irishba\`is moyen gl\`o, gl\`\i’. As did Whitley Stokes before him, Joseph Loth saw in the first component of \textit{glosnaithi} the word \textit{glo ‘ball’?}; see W. Stokes, ‘\textit{O’Mukomery’s glossary}’, in \textit{Archiv f"ur celtische Lexikographie I} (Halle 1900) 232–324, p. 306, in note referring to \S\ 579.} But it will now be obvious to everyone 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 \textit{lines} and \textit{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 \textit{glou-} occurring in the compound \textit{glou-limi}, which is used to gloss Latin \textit{norma}. This OBr. gloss has been edited as \textit{glou-lim} by Fleuriot.\footnote{‘Nouvelles gloses vieilles-bretonnes à Amalarius’, \textit{Etudes Celtiques} 11/2 (1966–7) 41–54 (and five plates, pp. 470–74); see particularly pp. 430–31 \S\ 6.} The gloss occurs in the left margin of f. 44 v in the Paris manuscript, Bibliothèque national nouv. acq. lat. 11983, facing the text \textit{quod potest habere normam in predications 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 -\textit{m} of Fleuriot’s \textit{gloulim} is rather awkward, its last stroke being lowered and incurved as a comma, much resembling an abbreviation stroke equivalent to -\textit{i}. I would favour a reading \textit{gloulini}. Fleuriot suggested a plausible meaning for his own \textit{glou-lim}: both components would have meant ‘model, guide’, and -\textit{lim} was presented as a word meaning basically ‘warp, woof’ (Welsh \textit{dyli\`f} being considered as a compound, in spite of the variant \textit{d\`if}). I think, however, that there are difficulties in Fleuriot’s interpretation of both components. OBr. \textit{glow} cannot be compared to MW \textit{glyw} ‘chieftain, lord’ or Br. \textit{glew}, \textit{gleo} ‘plough handle’. And W. \textit{dyli\`f} (var. \textit{d\`if}) is probably an older *\textit{d\`il\`y\`i}, if one thinks of OIr. \textit{d\`il\`uth} ‘warp, woof’. The compound \textit{un\textendash l\`i\`y\`i} and \textit{ten\textendash l\`i\`y\`i} quoted

\footnote{O\textsc{punp\`\i\`e \textipa{\textasciitilde{l}}o\textipa{\textasciitilde{c}}ac \textipa{\textasciitilde{u}}\textipa{\textasciitilde{m}}} (Bangor 1926) 364–5.}
by Fleuriot are possibly graphical variants of *un-liu*, *ten-liu* (*un-liu* = ‘of the same colour’), but any connection with W. *díth*, *díth*, would surely be secondary and restricted to Welsh.

The second element has to be read as *líní*. This OBr. word is already attested in a gloss on Latin *ordo*, in Angers 477, f. 57 b.14 In Bede’s text, *ú a ul primus et secundus ordo uianos et se plenos dies complectatur*,15 *ordo* refers to an horizontal line in a computistic table. It is obvious that OBr. *líní* 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 *-igo*, *-igus*, *-igum* (cf. OBr. *guileri*: Latin *uig(i)arium*, OIr. *feilire*). Modern Breton *linenn* has a variant *línenn* (*lienn, 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 calces* ‘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, *lienn, 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. *glao-snáthe* and OBr. *glaou-líní* 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. *glo* and OBr. *glaou*. Phonetically, the expected reflex of OBr. *glaou* would be Mod. Br. *glaou*. Mod. Br. *glaou* exists and means ‘coal’; it is a cognate of Cornish *glo* 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’.

A compound formed with the words ‘coal’ and ‘thread’ is attested in Old English, códbréd ‘perpendicular’ (*Épinal Glossary*).19 This was

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16 The evidence from the *Catholicon* is both plentiful and mixed: Latin *amussis* reappears under *Plom maçon* ‘the plumbline of masons’, together with the more correct *perpendiculum* and an optional variant *scuer* (this last is the ‘square’). Latin *perpendiculum* reappears itself under real *m a ç on* ‘the rule of the mason’, explained as ‘regle de bois ou tout le plon’ (ou pend le plomb, J. Feutren). Under the same lemma is found *perpendicularis* or *linea perpendicularis* ‘ligne au charpentier d’amont a has’ (a plumbline again?). An excellent commentary has been given in the 1499 edition of *Catholicon* by Jean Feutren (Mayerne 1777) under *cramaillea*, *regle de bois, ligne.
a thread blackened with coal: a plumb line \textit{(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 \textit{côl} a name for the \textit{plummet}. Readers will find every detail in the recent edition by J. D. Pfeiffer.\(^\text{20}\)

One may object that OE. \textit{côlbré} is not glossing \textit{norma} or \textit{linea}. In fact, the three words \textit{norma}, \textit{linea} and \textit{perpendicularum} are normally found together in the specialized texts (Vitruvius).\(^\text{21}\) There was a \textit{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 \textit{glou-lini} and \textit{glao-snáith} were referring, in their primary use, to a plumbline (as the OE. \textit{côl-bré}) or to a square (as Latin \textit{norma} would suggest). An OIr. gloss on \textit{perpendicularum}, by John Scot Eriugena, presents a different expression: '\textit{snathe cum plumbo ad maceriam dirigendam}',\(^\text{22}\) 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 \textit{gló} in Old and Middle Irish, either as a simple word or in a compound. The \textit{gló} of \textit{gló-béimnech}, \textit{gló-lethar}, is probably a different word \{or words\}, as is the \textit{glau} \textit{find} of O'Mulconry's Glossary.\(^\text{23}\)

We reach our conclusion. OIr. \textit{glao-snáith} is a hybrid: the first component is borrowed from Brittonic \{\textit{glou} 'coal\} (the native OIr. would have been \textit{guál}, of course).\(^\text{24}\) Similarly, OBr. \textit{glou-lini} is a hybrid, the second element being borrowed from Latin \textit{linea}. Hybrids are frequent in technical jargons, where new techniques have to be adopted with the foreign names that they have in their distant birthplace. Here the technic is clearly Roman architecture and masonry. The words \textit{glou-lini} and \textit{glao-snáith} are certainly related to stone-building. It is extremely


\(^{21}\)Ex Vitruvius 7.3 (F. Krohn, \textit{Vitruvii de architeturca libri decem} [Leipzig 1912] 154.29–155.2), 'uti longitudines ad regulam et ad lineam, altitudines ad perpendicularum, anguli ad normam respondentes exiguntur...'. 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: \textit{É. Ernault}, \textit{Le Mystère de Sainte-Barbe} (Paris 1888) § 67, \textit{Mémeus, n'en deus sy, binkuyou/scuer ha mullen ha linenou... I have tools, indeed, a square, a ruler and lines}; cf. also ibid., 74.


\(^{23}\)Stokes, \textit{Archiv} I, 306, in note referring to \S 679.

\(^{24}\)This borrowing is evidently older than the evolution of Primitive Welsh \textit{glo} into \textit{glo}, a change which was itself older than the Welsh evolution \textit{U} \textgreater \textit{o} \textcircled{a}; cf. Jackson, \textit{Language and history}, 379. As usual the Irish treatment of the borrowed words is phonetically modelled on parallel native words, as OW \textit{dua}: OIr \textit{dua}, \textit{dó 'two'} (Bret. \textit{duos} keeps fairly well the Old British diphthong).
interesting that the OIr. word for plumbl ine 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 glōsnáithe as a learned word borrowed by grammarians.  

Although we have been able to identify three words, O.E., O.Bret., 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 (perpendiculum or linea?) and even about the exact relationship of the British and O.E. words.  

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26 On some occasions I have been led to suppose an Irish influence on some O.Bret. glosses. One might argue that this kind of situation could explain the O.Bret. gloss glōslini 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 glō- 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.

26 It is not impossible to think that the O.E. word too 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).