

CORMAC'S METRICAL TESTAMENT: 'MITHIG TECHT TAR MO
THIMNA'

IN this poem¹ Cormac mac Cuilennáin, the king-bishop of Cashel, is depicted as drawing up the terms of his will² before the battle of Belach Mugna which he fought in A.D. 908 against the combined forces of the Laigin and Uí Néill and in which he was killed. It is preserved in a number of copies which can be grouped into three main versions on the basis of the number of transmitted quatrains. The version edited here, which has thirteen (12 + 1) quatrains, appears to be metrically most coherent. It is found in one manuscript only:

A: Killiney, Franciscan House of Studies, MS A.9, a fifteenth-century (?) parchment manuscript, p. 37, lines 22–34. The poem has no title; the ascription to Cormac occurs in the concluding quatrain.³

A close variant of this version is preserved in two manuscripts:

Br: Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5100–5104, p. 46, written by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. The poem is ascribed to 'Corbmac', specified 'mac Cuileanain' in the margin. It belongs to a series of poems ascribed to various saints which is concluded by the following colophon: 'Air slicht Muirdesa meic Paidin ro scriobadh na danta sin Cholaim Chillí, Chormich, Phatruic, agus Brighde, as leabhur Mhuiris mac Lughaid i Clerigh, i cconveint brathar Dun na nGall 27 Febrú. 1630'.⁴ B1 is the only version of the poem which has been published.⁵ The order in A of quatrains 4–5 and 7–8 is reversed in B1.

B2: Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 20978–20979, 51v–52r, an early seventeenth-century manuscript.⁶ The order of the quatrains is the same as in B1. Variant readings from B2 will be given, since this text has not been published before.

¹ This edition is offered as a token of gratitude to the memory of Professor James Carney who discussed this text with me in great detail during my short but fruitful visits to the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, in the summers of 1986 and 1987. I also wish to thank Liam Breatnach, Seán Duffy, David Dumville, Máire Herbert, Uáitéar Mac Gearailt, Brian Ó Cuív, and Pádraig Ó Riain, for their generous help and advice.

² On the term *timna* see A. Ward, "Will" and "testament" in Irish, *Ériu* 24 (1973) 183–185, and *Bechbretha: an Old Irish law-tract on bee-keeping*, ed. T. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly (Dublin 1983), 159–160.

³ Quatrains 12 and 13 are both closed with a *dínad*. This seems to be a fairly frequent type of ornamentation – I wish to thank Gisbert Hemprich for drawing my attention to this. For a description of the manuscript see P. Grosjean, 'MS A. 9 (Franciscan Convent, Dublin)', *Ériu* 10 (1926–28) 160–169, and M. Dillon, C. Money, & P. de Brún, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the Franciscan Library, Killiney* (Dublin 1969), 17–21.

⁴ Quoted by B. Jennings, *Michael Ó Cléirigh, chief of the Four Masters, and his associates* (Dublin 1936), 96.

⁵ For a description of the manuscript see J. van den Gheyn, *Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique*, 1 (Bruxelles 1901), 319–321, and W. Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Gorman* (London 1895), pp. vii–xviii. For the text of B1 see A. G. van Hamel, 'Poems from Brussels MS 5100–04. III', *Revue Celtique* 37 (1917–19) 351–52. Van Hamel's text should be consulted for the readings of B1. Note the following corrections of his text: 2a, *dol co*; 4a, *aircitt*; 6a, *bharráin*; 7b, *dbo bi*; 8c, *shailmit*; 8d, *co*, *Maincin*; 9b, *na*; 9d, *don*.

⁶ For a description of the manuscript (not noted in Van den Gheyn's *Catalogue*) see B. Ó Cuív, 'A seventeenth-century manuscript in Brussels', *Éigse* 9 (1959–60) 173–180.

The oldest manuscript of the second and longer version, which has twenty (18 + 2) quatrains, is

Add: London, British Library, MS 30512, 35r/v, written mainly by Uilliam Mac an Leagha in the second half of the fifteenth century. Here the poem has the title ‘cormac mac cuilinnain in la iar mbas .cc.’.⁷

There are also some later copies of this version.⁸ Variants of differing degrees of closeness for most quatrains of A are found in Add, but partly in a different order (in the edition of A, relevant variants from these quatrains of Add will be given): A 1 = Add 1, A 2 = Add 2, A 3 = Add 3, A 4 = Add 4, A 5 = Add 5, A 6 = Add 10, A 8 = Add 11, A 9 = Add 12, A 10 = Add 19, A 11 = Add 17, A 12 = Add 20, A 13 = Add 18.

Two of the additional quatrains, (14) and (16), are in *deibide*, whereas the other quatrains are in *rannaigecht*, the metre used throughout A.

A third version of the poem, consisting of eight quatrains, is preserved in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paper manuscripts.⁹ The language of the poem in A is later Middle Irish, as is borne out by the following features.

1. *cían as insa mé* (1*b*), use of the independent subject pronoun 1 sg. with 3 sg. of copula (see also 13*a*);
2. *do charmaís* (: *bairrín*) (6*b*), 1 pl. imperfect, OIr. *no charmaís*, MidIr. *do charmaís* or *do charmaís*;
3. *sailmít* (: *Mainchín*) (7*c*), 1 pl. present indicative, OIr. *sailmi*, MidIr. *sailmít* or *sailmít*;¹⁰ 9)
4. *do bí* (8*b*, 9*b*), 3 sg. preterite of substantive verb, OIr. *ro buí*;
5. *faiceb* (12*b*), 1 sg. future (f-future without reduplication) without u-infection and with prosthetic f, OIr. reduplicated future;
6. *i Laignib* (12*d*), OIr. *i Laigniu*;
7. *fá* (13*b*), 3 sg. preterite of copula.
8. *ósa* (13*d*), conjunction with *ó* with 3 sg. present of copula, common in *PH* and later Middle Irish (earlier *ós*).

⁷ For a description of the manuscript see R. Flower, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the British Museum*, ii (London 1926), 470–505.

⁸ See, for example, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MSS 23 M 18 (154), 23 D 5 (156), 23 G 5 (781).

⁹ See Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G. 345, with an English paraphrase, and Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MSS 23 D 5 (156), 24 C 55 (1185) (‘Mithid ar mo thiomna ciath’), and 23 G 24 (257) (‘Mithid damhsa mo thiomna ciath’). There are two nineteenth-century manuscripts in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, which I have not consulted. M.13 contains a version of the poem with eighteen quatrains (‘Mithid teacht tar mo thimna’), and M.31 contains a version with seven quatrains (‘Mithid dámbhsa mo thiomna’): see P. Ó Fiannachta, *Lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge Choláiste Phádraig Má Nuadh*, II (Má Nuadh 1965), pp. 27 and 69. An English version is found in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12.C.15 (1251), a book of watercolours of subjects of antiquarian interest executed by Richard Molloy in 1813, which contains only a few texts of antiquarian interest.

¹⁰ For the lengthening of the vowel in endings of the type CV(C) see D. Greene, ‘Synthetic and analytic: a reconsideration’, *Ériu* 24 (1973) 121–133, p. 124.

The metre of the poem is *rannaigecht*; there is *aicill* (sometimes imperfect) between a and b as well as between c and d.

Cormac's metrical testament has its closest analogues¹¹ in Irish literature in a poem ascribed to Maedóc of Ferns in the second Life of that saint,¹² which is explicitly called his '*duan-tiomna*' ('verse testament'), and in the poem on Éimíne's bell.¹³ In these poems a saint is depicted on the eve of his death, giving away to named beneficiaries objects connected with his ecclesiastical status.

Similar gifts are often referred to in Irish saints' Lives¹⁴ and were intended to strengthen the relationship between two saints or between a saint and a lay person. Thus it is said in the Life of St Ciarán preserved in the Book of Lismore: '*conad annsin dorat Quiarán a clog do Cæimgen i comurtha a n-oentad*'¹⁵ ('then Ciarán gave his bell to Coimgen in sign of their unity').

In the late Middle Irish poem on Éimíne's bell, the saint is depicted as bequeathing his valuable possessions to various Leinster peoples. The composition of the poem may ultimately be connected with a renewed interest in the local tradition as a result of the foundation of a Cistercian house at Monasterevin in 1178 (or 1189) by the Uí Fhailge king, Diarmait Ua Dímmussaig, and with an attempt to define ecclesiastical connections for this new foundation. In his metrical testament, Maedóc of Ferns is described as dividing his possessions between his three foundations Ferns, Drumlane, and Rossinver. Charles Plummer has suggested that the redactor of the second Life of St Maedóc was connected with the monastery of Rossinver and that he used the Latin Life of St Maedóc, which dealt mainly with Ferns, as well as additional sources with a Northern bias, among them the '*duan-tiomna*', as the basis for his Life.¹⁶ It is likely that by doing this the redactor intended to enhance the status of the Northern foundations of St Maedóc, Drumlane and Rossinver.

In A's version of Cormac's metrical testament, Cormac names seven saints as heirs to venerated objects from his possession, which will then function as relics.

¹¹ Somewhat more distant secular analogues are M. Dillon (ed.), *Timna Cathair Máir and Timna Néill: Lebor na Cert* (London 1962), 148–178, and M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* i, (Dublin 1976), 131–132; both texts have been interpreted as modelled on *Genesis* 49. See also the poem spoken by Gráinne in N. Ní Shéaghda (ed.), *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, (London 1967), ll. 1799–1818.

¹² C. Plummer (ed.), *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* i, (Oxford 1922), pp. 265–266, for the prose-account, and pp. 267–273, for the poem.

¹³ Poppe, E., 'A Middle Irish poem on Éimíne's bell', *Celtica* 17 (1985) 61–72, especially stanzas 14–19.

¹⁴ See, for example, Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* i, pp. 15–16; W. Stokes (ed.), *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford 1890), ll. 2642–2645, 4365–4367; P. Power (ed.), *Life of St Declan of Ardmore and Life of St Mochuda of Lismore* (London 1914), pp. 50 and 52; and also C. Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* ii, (Oxford 1910), 51. For a slightly different function for similar endowments see, for example, W. Stokes (ed.), *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* i, (London 1887), pp. 40.6–9, 86.2–11, 104.26–27, 146.16–17, 176.5–7, when Patrick supplies new foundations with books, bells, and other basic equipment; but this too has an additional function of strengthening the new foundation's loyalty towards him. Palladius is represented as giving his books and relics to his Leinster foundations before leaving Ireland, Stokes, *Tripartite Life of Patrick* i, p. 30.20–22.

¹⁵ Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ll. 4469–4470.

¹⁶ Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* i, p. xxxvii.

His own *saltair* – presumably a reference to the now lost ‘Psalter of Cashel’, traditionally associated with Cormac mac Cuilennáin¹⁷ – he leaves to Cashel (stanza 10). The saints named in the poem are as follows.¹⁸

1. Ailbe of Emly (3): Ailbe is traditionally associated with the foundation of Emly in the sixth century. Emly became a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century, and its incumbent ceased to be one of the wealthier prelates of Munster because of the emergence of Cashel after the Synod of Ráith Bressail.
2. Barra of Cork (4): Barra (Bairre, Finbar) is traditionally associated with the foundation of Cork. Cork became a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century.
3. Mo Chuta of Lismore (5): Lismore is reputed to have been founded by Carthach (Mo Chuta) in 636; it became a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century and was a important religious centre at that time, but lost much of its importance at the end of the century.
4. Brénainn of Ardfert (6): Brénainn is traditionally associated with the foundation of Ardfert in the sixth century. Ardfert became a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century.
5. Mainchín of Limerick (7): Limerick became a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century.¹⁹
6. Senán of Inis Chathaig/Scattery Island (8): Senán is traditionally associated with the foundation of Scattery Island.

It was chosen as a suffragan see of Cashel at the Synod of Kells in 1152, but was incorporated into the diocese of Killaloe in the latter part (ca 1170?) of the twelfth-century. The most famous of the earlier abbots of Scattery Island was Flaithbertach mac Inmainén, who is said to have incited Cormac to fight the battle of Belach Mugna.²⁰

7. Ruadán of Lorrha (9): Ruadán is traditionally associated with the foundation of Lorrha in the sixth century. Several of its early abbots are recorded in the chronicle-sources. An Augustinian priory was founded there some time after 1140.²¹ Lorrha lay within the diocese of Killaloe, itself a suffragan see of Cashel in the twelfth century. However, Killaloe is not mentioned in the

¹⁷ See F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, (London 1973), 174, and P. Ó Riain, ‘The Psalter of Cashel: a provisional list of contents’, *Éigse* 23 (1989) 107–130.

¹⁸ See A. Gwynn & R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses. Ireland* (London 1970), for most of the information summarised here.

¹⁹ Mainchín is originally associated with Mungret. For references to Mainchín Luimnech, see P. Ó Riain (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1985), pp. 34 and 106.

²⁰ See J. N. Radner (ed.), *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin 1978), 152–154.

²¹ This is the date tentatively suggested by Gwynn & Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses*, p. 155, which appears to be based on the foundation of several other such houses in the region at around that time. *The Annals of the Four Masters* (ed. J. O’Donovan [Dublin 1854]) refer to the burning of a monastery at Lorrha in 1154, 1157, and 1179.

poem. It may be important for the political context of the poem that the Uí Briain, connected with Killaloe, but also with Scattery Island and Limerick, and the Éoganacht, whose hereditary church, Emly, is given pride of place, were rivals in the middle of the twelfth century.²²

Cashel became an archbishopric in 1111. Not all the twelfth-century suffragan sees of Cashel are listed in the poem; but the only place mentioned which did not have that status, is Lorrha which lay within the diocese of Killaloe. If we posit that all other churches referred to are of equal status in relation to Cashel, that is, are suffragan sees, we arrive at a historical setting for the poem before the end of the twelfth century, before Scattery Island was absorbed into the diocese of Killaloe. Thus the reference to Lorrha may ultimately provide a possible key to the context of the poem as transmitted in A. If all other churches are of equal, but superior status, then Lorrha's inclusion into the list of beneficiaries of Cormac's testament may have been intended to enhance its status and to assert a direct relationship between Lorrha and Cashel. As in the case of the poem on Éimíne's bell it is possible that the establishment of a new religious house was the prelude to the composition of the poem, in this case the foundation of the Augustinian priory at Lorrha some time after 1140.²³

Pádraig Ó Riain has recently discussed references to the lost 'Psalter of Cashel',²⁴ and he has pointed out that on the evidence of the 'Psalter of Tara' Cormac may have been associated in some way with the 'Psalter of Cashel' by the early eleventh century.²⁵ Cormac's psalter is mentioned in the poem, and if this is a reference to the 'Psalter of Cashel', as is likely, this association would allow for a date of the poem in the twelfth century. Other evidence, however, seems to imply that the 'Psalter of Cashel' was not in circulation from c.1200 to c.1400 and that Cormac's name may not have become associated with it before the (late) fourteenth century.²⁶ Lorrha clerics appear to have been prominent among its original compilers, but the fragmentary genealogical remains of the Lorrha manuscript now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B. 486, compiled c.1375 for Giolla Ruadháin Ó Macáin, the prior of the Augustinian house, do not derive from it.²⁷ This makes it difficult to

²² For an account of the hostility between Killaloe and Emly see D. Ó Corráin, 'Foreign connections and domestic politics: Killaloe and the Uí Briain in twelfth-century hagiography', in D. Whitelock, R. McKitterick and D. Dumville (ed.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe* (Cambridge 1982), pp. 213–231, at 229–230.

²³ Professor Pádraig Ó Riain has suggested to me that the poem is probably best placed in the earlier part of the twelfth century when Cormac's namesake, Cormac Mac Carthaig (obit 1143), was establishing the ascendancy of Meic Carthaig in Munster. Meic Carthaig prejudice may be reflected in the ignoring of the Uí Briain church of Killaloe and in the first position given to Emly, traditionally an Éoganacht church, in the order of the churches. Seán Duffy has pointed out that the sequence of the gifts seem to run in descending order of affiliation to the Meic Carthaig. Emly is followed by Cork, where Cormac's nephew Gilla Pátraic was *comarba* of Bara in 1157, and Lismore, to where Cormac retired temporarily in 1127 and where Tairdelbach Ua Briain submitted to Cormac's son in 1165. Ardfert comes within the Meic Carthaig's sphere of influence. Limerick and Scattery Island, however, were Uí Briain-dominated churches.

²⁴ See Ó Riain, 'The Psalter of Cashel'.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7; see also Ó Riain, *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*, pp. xxxiii–xxxvi, and P. Ó Riain, 'The shrine of the Stowe Missal, redated', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 91 C (1991)

associate the poem with Giolla Ruadháin’s activities, a possible alternative scenario for its composition – unless the ‘Psalter of Cashel’ was rediscovered after the compilation of Rawlinson B. 486.

The quatrains additional to A’s in Add include some further bequests, namely, Cormac’s silk and gold-coloured clothing (*bert*) and his cross (*cross*) to Fachtna (*fachna*, MS) of Ros Ailithir (Add 7), his silver seal (*sela*) together with some parts of the clerical vestment (*michta*) to Scripa Gilla Aeda (*sgripa gilla aedha* MS) (Add 8), his cloak (*brut*) to Colmán mac Léinín (*colman mor mac sleinín*, MS) (Add 9), and his staff (*lorg*) to Ciarán (Add 13). If Scripa Gilla Aeda means ‘the scribe of Gilla Aeda’, then it may be a reference to Gilla Aeda Ó Muigín, who became bishop of Cork in 1148 and who died in 1172.²⁸ Ciarán is not further identified; the most famous saint among the several of this name was Ciarán of Cluain Maic Nóis. In Add 9b a certain Domnall mac Éimín is mentioned as the person who gave a cloak to Cormac (*tucc damb domhnall mac Eimin*, MS). Colmán mac Léinín is associated with Cluain Uama (Cloyne), the place where Cormac wanted to be buried.²⁹ Ros Ailithir (Ross) is counted among the suffragan sees of Cashel in 1152. Quatrains 6, 14, 15, 16 of Add contain general reflections by Cormac on his situation and his predicament. In quatrain 15 Leithghlinn (Leighlin, Co. Carlow) is named as his destination.³⁰

Quatrains 18 and 20 in Add both close with a *dúnad*. The last line of quatrain Add 20, *triall a Laignib is mithid*, is similar to a line in quatrain A 14, *Mithid duin triall a Laignib*, and may have been rephrased to provide a *dúnad*. Quatrain Add 19 agrees with quatrain A 10 in A which mentions Cormac’s psalter. Quatrain 6 in Add, which has no parallel in A, contains another reference to Cormac’s psalter, *Is maith m’anóir ag Ísalatá sin scribtha am shaltair*. Cormac’s verse testament, as transmitted in A, appears to be a late Middle Irish composition. I have suggested above that the final item in the list of beneficiaries, the reference to Lorrha, may be of particular significance, since this is the only church of lower status mentioned in the text. On the additional hypothesis that all other churches are of equal status in relation to Cashel, a date for the poem after the establishment of a house of canons regular of St Augustine in Lorrha and before the incorporation of Scatterry Island into the diocese of Killaloe would appear plausible, perhaps some time in the third quarter of the twelfth century. If Lorrha was the place of origin of this version of the poem, then its intention would have been the assertion of a special connection between Lorrha and Cashel, perhaps more specifically an identification

285–295, p. 288, for the redecoration of the shrine of the Stowe Missal some time before the death in 1381 of Pilib Ó Ceinneidig, king of Ormond, which was undertaken at the behest of the coarb of Lorrha and prior of the Augustinian house, Giolla Ruadháin Ó Macáin.

²⁸ I wish to thank Professor Pádraig Ó Riain for pointing out this possibility.

²⁹ See Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, p. 152.

³⁰ R. Flower (*Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts*, 487) thought that the poem in Add. is based, ‘though with considerable variation in detail’, on the terms of Cormac’s will as given in Geoffrey Keating’s *Fonns Feasa ar Éirinn: the history of Ireland* (ed. D. Comyn vols 1–2; P. S. Dineen, vols 2–4, [London 1902–14]) iii, p. 198), but the list of beneficiaries given by Keating varies considerably from the list of places named in the poem and there are, furthermore, significant differences between the two accounts regarding the terms of Cormac’s bequest. There is no reference to Cormac’s will in the detailed narrative about the battle of Belach Mugna in *Fragmentary Annals*, 150–162.

with Meic Carthaig interests, particularly in view of the omission of Uí Briain-dominated Killaloe. However, two Uí Briain-dominated churches, Limerick and Slattery Island, are mentioned. If a twelfth-century date is accepted, the poem can be interpreted as further evidence for an early association of Cormac mac Cuilennáin with the 'Psalter of Cashel'.

The poem belongs to a small group of verse testaments. These can be described as retrospective speech poems attributed to a saint which are intended as a means to define certain aspects of the status and affiliation of a church or monastery within a specific historical context, even though we may not be able fully to capture this precise background.

TRANSLATION

1. It is time to discuss my testament, a long time am I unfortunate in danger, my life-time ends tonight, the end of my life has nearly come.
2. A testament at the end of my life, it behoves me, it is a distressing matter; it is proper, since this is what I have to do, to go to my death carefully.
3. My goblet of pure white silver, o fine, pleasant and wise cleric, I bequeath it – it is a matter for haste – (to be sent) westwards from me to Ailbe of Emly.
4. My gold-encircled drinking-horn, I bequeath it – what (would be) nobler payment? – to free my soul from evils, (to be sent) westwards to Cork to Barra.
5. My pure white silver vessel, take it with you from me, since we shall die; my precious laver of red gold, it is my bequest to Mo Chuta.
6. My staff and my mitre, which we loved up to now, I give them, for the benefit of my soul, to Brénainn to Ardfert.
7. My ring, my amice, my tunic, three things before which the Munstermen fall down; since we expect to part from them forever, take them from me to Mainchín of Limerick.
8. My splendid mass-chalice, which we had for a long time, I bequeath it as a definite pact to Senán of Scatterry Island.
9. My splendid cloak adorned with gold, which was on the altar of Rome, bring it to Ruadán to Lorrha, since we shall die on this day.
10. My decorated psalter with ornamented edges, equally bright both day and night, a gift for which there will be no return, let it be from me in Cashel forever.
11. I travel because of the heavenly king across the Barrow from the bank of the Suir, across the fine plain of Mag Ailbe, it is no reason for joy for us.
12. I say good-bye to Cashel which I shall never see again, good-bye from me to Munster rich in salmon, it is time to go to Leinster.
13. I am Cormac mac Cuilennáin, my service was lawful service, good-bye from me to the world itself, a gravecloth with me since it is time.

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