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# Metrical systems of Celtic traditions

David Stifter

On the basis of fragmentary evidence from the ancient Celtic languages (e.g., Gaulish), but especially from the rich poetic heritage of the medieval Insular Celtic languages (e.g., Old Irish, Middle Welsh), the poetic terminology reconstructable for Common Celtic is presented. The possible metrical remains from ancient Celtic are reviewed and an attempt is made to identify their principles of versification. The characteristics of the medieval Irish and medieval British systems of versification are described. Finally, the question of the genetic relationship of ancient and medieval Celtic versification is discussed, and the possible relationship of Celtic with neighbouring Germanic, especially medieval Scandinavian, traditions is briefly reviewed.

## o. Introduction

It is the modest aim of this survey article to paint a general picture of the systems of versification used in ancient and medieval Celtic literary traditions, to trace lines of historic development where they can be discerned, and to identify sources of external influence on these systems, as well as their mutual interactions. The novel aspect under which these traditions are scrutinised is the question if there are traits that are common to all systems, and if so, if these commonalities go back to a Common Celtic period or if their presence can be explained in other ways. Given the cultural and literary diversity of the geographically and chronologically vast area that will be studied in this article, it is inevitable that detail will have to be sacrificed for the sake of the bigger picture. Finally, in keeping with the theme of this volume, the question will be briefly reviewed if Scandinavian modes of versification exerted influence on medieval Celtic metrics, or if, conversely, medieval Celtic poetry could have contributed to the development of Scandinavian metrics. Previous research in this area, for a survey of which the reader is referred to Tranter (1997:40–51), was mainly concerned with the relationship of skaldic poetry with the syllabic poetry of Ireland. The net is cast wider here, in that all accessible ancient and medieval Celtic traditions will be studied.

No original research into the metrical systems of Celtic literary traditions was undertaken for this survey. While some of the conclusions that will be drawn about the prehistory of the systems of versification in the Celtic languages will be novel, and while some may not have been formulated in such an explicit way before, the factual information on which the conclusions are based is generally drawn from standard handbooks and from other scholars' research, supplemented by own observations and ideas, in particular in the chapters about the Common Celtic terminology of poetry, Continental Celtic and medieval Irish.

That all Celtic languages and cultures possessed some form of poetic expression is evident from the fact that several central lexical items and, it can be surmised, concepts belonging to the semantic field of poetry can be reconstructed for the Proto-Celtic language. When surveying the poetic traditions and techniques of versification in the medieval Insular Celtic and — as far as they can be gleaned from the very fragmentary material — the ancient Continental Celtic literary traditions, certain formal commonalities among them, but also with neighbouring traditions are apparent. A preliminary survey of Insular Celtic compositions reveals that such universal metrical features as syllable count, alliteration, rhyme and stress count play important roles in them, although in varying degrees and shapes at different times and in different genres.

It will be attempted here to investigate whether these internal and external similarities are due to common inheritance, borrowing, or chance. In order to do this, the poetic evidence for each of the various and quite different Celtic cultural areas will first be introduced and the internal history of each cultural area will be looked at in isolation, before hypotheses about commonalities and inheritance can be put forward. The cultural areas comprise seven ancient and medieval traditions; modern traditions will not be studied. The ancient Celtic languages of the European Continent are Lepontic (6th cent. B.C. until 0), Gaulish (ca. end of 3rd cent. B.C. until 3rd/4th cent. A.D.) and Celtiberian (ca. 150 B.C. until 0). Only tiny bits of texts have survived from these language. If and how much poetic material is among those remains is a question that will be addressed in Chapter 2.

In stark contrast to this, the medieval Celtic literary tradition is extremely rich. Medieval evidence for the Goidelic branch of Celtic is exclusively found in Early Irish literature, i.e. in Old (ca. 600–900) and Middle Irish (ca. 900–1200). Being the earliest and best attested tradition in the British-Celtic branch of Celtic, Old (ca. 800–1100) and Middle Welsh (ca. 1100–1400) literature will serve as the main representative of the poetic traditions of British Celtic, but for a fuller picture a brief look will also be taken at the two other British languages, Breton and Cornish. At least geographically and culturally, if not genetically, the two branches, Goidelic and British Celtic, form the Insular Celtic subgroup of Celtic. Medieval Insular Celtic poetic traditions are attested in an abundance of metrical

compositions, as well as in self-reflective literature that discusses technical, legal and ideological aspects of the poetic systems. For instance, Early Medieval Ireland provides us with legal codes about the social position of poets such as *Uraicecht na Ríar* ‘The Primer of the Stipulations (for becoming a poet)’ (Breatnach 1987), grammatical treatises such as *Auraicept na nÉces* ‘The Scholars’ Primer’ (Calder 1917, Ahlqvist 1983), or outright metrical tracts such as the so-called *Mittelirische Verslehren* (Thurneysen 1891). To illustrate the amount of extant primary material, the collection of the Classical Modern Irish bardic tradition of the high medieval and early modern period (1200–1650) alone contains almost 2000 poems, many of which are as of yet unedited.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Common Celtic perspective

Some central items of the Common Celtic terminology connected with poetry are reconstructable on the basis of close correspondences in two (usually the Insular Celtic branches) or even three branches of Celtic. In some instances, the non-productive or archaic type of word-formation of a lexical item found only in a single branch makes it likely that it goes back to the earliest period of Celtic, or indeed beyond that. Sometimes the etymology or similarities in the material reality referred to by those items make a strong case for the notion that not only the lexical shell, i.e. the *significans*, goes back to the ancestor language, but also the described concept, the *significatum*. The following list does not claim to be exhaustive.<sup>2</sup>

Various expressions for ‘poetic inspiration, poetic craft’ are derived from the Indo-European root for ‘to blow’,  $*h_2ueh_1-$  (LIV: 287). In particular, the archaic morphology of OIr. *aí* ‘poetic inspiration, inspired wisdom, poem, metrical composition’, gen. *uath* < PC  $*auet-$  < pre-Clt.  $*h_2euh_1-et-$ <sup>3</sup> speaks for a very early formation of this word. The same root is also the basis for OW *aguen* (in the name

1. *Bardic Poetry Database*, compiled by Damian McManus and Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh, Trinity College Dublin 2011 ff. For more information see: URL <<https://www.tcd.ie/Irish/database/>> (accessed October 30, 2015).

2. See also Watkins (1963: 213–217) who occasionally puts a different emphasis on the semantic range of the words discussed. He stresses the magical and prophetic connotations that some of the terms can have.

3. See Irslinger (2002: 57–58) and Zair (2012: 28–29) for further discussions of the formal side of this etymology. Watkins’ (1995: 117) proposal that these words are related to the root of Hittite *au(š)-* ‘to see’ has semantic and formal weaknesses.  $*auet-$  would be an agentive noun ‘seer’, not an abstract ‘seeing’, and the root needed to account both for Celtic and Hittite would be PIE  $*au-$  with an uncanonical root-shape. In contrast to this, LIV: 243 sets up the root of the

of the legendary poet *Talhaern Tat Aguen* ‘Iron-brow Father of Poetry’), *W awen* ‘poetic inspiration, poetic gift’ < \**awe/inā*, and *W awdl* ‘poem’, OBret. *odl* ‘signification’ (< \**au(a)tlā*<sup>4</sup> < \**h<sub>2</sub>eu(h<sub>1</sub>)tlo-*?). See also below for PrCelt. \**uātis*, one of the words for ‘prophet, seer’. The proliferation of terms deriving from the root \**h<sub>2</sub>ueh<sub>1</sub>-* ‘to blow’ in the semantic field of ‘poetry’ suggests that the notion of poetry being breathed, perhaps by a supernatural force, into gifted persons was current in Proto-Celtic.

Semantically close is the PIE root \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>-* ‘to breathe’ (LIV: 267–268), and, apart from furnishing various terms for ‘breath’ and ‘soul’, this, too, lies at the heart of a host of expressions in the field of poetry. Although no certain precise correspondences can be found between the Celtic languages, it is evident that the root PC \**ana-* must have referred to a central poetic concept. OIr. provides the two terms *anamain* < PC \**anamni-*, as if from pre-Clt. \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>mni-*, and *anair* < \**ana/āri-*, as if from \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>ri-* or \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>Vri-*,<sup>5</sup> names for metres proper to the *ollam*, the highest, and to the *clí*, the third-highest rank of poets respectively. Middle Welsh has *anaw* ‘musician, singer, poet’ < \**anauon-* < \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>uon-* (cf. Bret. *anao* ‘harmony, music’), pl. *anant* ‘musicians, minstrels, bards’ < active participle \**anantes* ‘lit. breathers?’ < \**h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>nt-*, and perhaps *anawr* of somewhat unclear meaning, perhaps ‘honour, praise’ or alternatively ‘might, force, vigour’. If it belongs here at all, it could make an equation with OIr. *anair*. In the ancient Celtic world a handful of personal names are found that formally may contain cognate expressions (e.g., *Anarius*, *Anauus*), but given the nature of the evidence this hypothesis remains unprovable.

The art of verse-making is considered a ‘craft’ (cf. West 2007: 35–36). The coincidence of the terms OIr. *cerd* and *W cerdd* < PC \**kerdā*, both of which have the general meaning ‘craft’ as their basis, but which can also be applied specifically to the trade or to the products of poets, allows us to establish this concept at least for the Common Insular Celtic culture. Since this word is not productively derived from any synchronic root, it must have been inherited from the parent language. It is related to Gr. κέρδος, -εος ‘gain, profit’, pl. κέρδεα ‘cunning arts, wiles’, κερδώ, -όος ‘the wily one, thief (of the fox)’, and the personal name Κέρδων, the basis of

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Hittite verb as \**h<sub>1</sub>eu-*, which would not be a formally viable starting point for the Celtic group of words. Furthermore, the connection with \**uātis* would be severed with Watkins’ etymology.

4. Isaac (1999: 89) sets up PC \**auatlā*. This is indeed expected from \**h<sub>2</sub>eu(h<sub>1</sub>)tlo-* (see the discussion of the behaviour of laryngeals in such a position in Zair 2012: 225–243), but it should have resulted in *W \*\*awadl*, unless it underwent the same type of syncope as *cawr* < \**kauros* ‘giant’ (see Schrijver 1995: 100–101).

5. The native medieval explanation as *an-áer* ‘not satire’ (*Sanas Cormaic* 41) is a manifest instance of folk etymology.

which is an unattested noun \*κέρδων that was borrowed into Latin as *cerdō* ‘lowly craftsman’.

The relationship between intellectual creativeness and the productive process is reinforced by another Insular Celtic equation which perhaps can be projected back to Proto-Celtic. One of the Old Irish words for ‘poetic art’, but again also for ‘craftmanship’ in general, is *creth*, gen. *cretha*. This has been identified as having arisen out of a ‘split paradigm’ from the very common term *cruth*, gen. *crotha* ‘form, shape, appearance, shapeliness’, but also ‘way, manner’, cognate with MW *pryd* ‘appearance, form, beauty; time, moment, meal’<sup>6</sup> (McManus 1983:47). The Welsh word does not preserve a poetic connotation, but that it must have existed at one time is manifest from the derivatives *prydu* ‘to compose poems’ and *prydydd*, OCorn. *pridit* ‘poet’ < \**k<sup>u</sup>ritijos*. The latter agentive noun has possible Ir. cognates in the personal names *Crithe*, OIr. QRITTI (Ziegler 1994:223) and *Luccreth*, *Lucraid*, OIr. LUGUQRIT (Ziegler 1994:199), and, perhaps, in several Gaulish personal names such as *Prittius*, *Pritto*, *Prittusa* etc. (Delamarre 2003:253). These words ultimately continue PC \**k<sup>u</sup>ritus* < PIE \**k<sup>u</sup>r-tu-*, literally ‘shaping, fashioning, crafting’, an abstract of the PIE root \**k<sup>u</sup>er-* ‘to cut (off), carve’ (LIV: 391–392, Irslinger 2002:93–94). The process of creating poetry could thus be conceived of as one of physical production, thereby putting the poet in a line with other professional practitioners of their trade (cf. Marold 2005:570–571 for parallels in skaldic poetry). The medieval poets did not miss the opportunity to make self-referential use of this parallel.

A very different aspect of poetry emerges in another group of expressions found in the Celtic languages. From the variety of significations in the individual languages, it is obvious that the boundary between poets, who wove words into metrical compositions, and seers, who delivered inspired divination, was fluid. This ambivalence is borne out by many narrative texts in medieval Celtic literature that depict poets as either imbued with vaticinary powers, or as protagonists of tales in which they gain, in some extraordinary way, supernatural knowledge that gives them deeper insights into the world. Some extant texts, such as the MW *Cad Goddeu* ‘The Battle of the Trees’ or the OIr. *Immacallam in da Thúarad* ‘The Colloquy of the two Sages’ are explicitly phrased as the obscure utterances of poets who boast with their esoteric wisdom.

PrCelt. \**uātis* ‘prophet, seer’ was already mentioned earlier. Its presence in Proto-Celtic is established by the comparison of OIr. *fáith*, pl. *fáithi* ‘prophet, seer’ with Gaul. pl. οὐάτεις (Strabo IV,4,4),<sup>7</sup> which may either be cognate with or

6. Cf. also OCorn. *prit* ‘hour’, Corn. *prys* ‘time, moment, meal’, Bret. *pred* ‘moment, meal’.

7. The evidence for the Gaulish οὐάτεις is eruditely discussed by Hofeneder (esp. 2005:148–150; 2008:47–50, 223–229, 330–332, 397–399).

borrowed into Lat. *uātēs* ‘seer’. It probably continues pre-Cl. *\*h<sub>2</sub>uoh<sub>1</sub>ti-* ‘blowing, inspiration’. Related expressions are OIr. *fáth* ‘reason, cause, motive; subject-matter; wisdom, learning; a composition (?)’ < *\*h<sub>2</sub>uoh<sub>1</sub>tu-*, ModIr. *fáth* ‘reason, cause’, but as a prefix also used for ‘mystic’, and the derivative OIr. *fáit(h)sine* ‘prophecy, augury’. Gaulish provides a cognate of *fáth*, but since *uatu-* is found only as the initial element of names such as *Vatumaros* ‘possessing a lot of *uatu-*’, it cannot be determined what exactly it refers to. While there is thus no strong link with poetry in the Irish and Gaulish evidence, the Welsh term *gwawd*, formally corresponding to OIr. *fáth*, means ‘song, poem, satire’. That the formation of these terms must go back to Pre-Celtic, if not Proto-Indo-European times, is evidenced by its cognates in Germanic such as PG *\*uōđā-* ‘obsessed, furious’ (e.g., Goth. *wop̃s* ‘id.’), *\*uōđu-* ‘fury, poetry’ (Oícel. *óđr* ‘id.’), *\*uōđō-* ‘voice, song, poetry’ (OE *wōþ* ‘id.’), *\*uōđi-* ‘fury, madness’ (OHG *wuot* ‘id.’; all reconstructions after Schaffner 2001: 322), which also underline the already pre-Celtic connection between mental agitation and poetry. However, there are morphological arguments that cast doubt on the etymological derivation of these words from the root *\*h<sub>2</sub>ueh<sub>1</sub>-*.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Schaffner (2001: 321–327) postulates an alternative PIE root *\*ueh<sub>2</sub>-* ‘to be agitated’ from which the Celtic group of words connected with *fáith* (< *\*ueh<sub>2</sub>ti-*) and the related Germanic expressions would be derived. In this case, the etymological connection with *ái* ‘inspiration, poetry’ and *awen* ‘poetic inspiration’ postulated above is severed, but the semantic motivation still remains close to the explanation advanced above.

The usual OIr. word for the ‘poet’ is *fili*, gen. *filed*, Oírl. VELITAS, which also serves as the basis for the most common word for ‘poetry’, *filedacht*. Although its archaic word-formation PC *\*uelit-* < pre-Cl. *\*uel-ēt-* betrays it to be an ancient word,<sup>9</sup> it has no direct cognate in any other Celtic language. Its closest correspondence is found in the name of the Germanic prophetess *Veleda* of the second half of the 1st c. A.D., mentioned by Tacitus (Hist. IV,61,65). Etymologically, *\*uel-ēt-* is derived from the root *\*uel-* ‘to see’ (LIV: 675), attested for instance in W *gweled* ‘to see’, via the addition of the agentive suffix *-et/ēt-*. The semantic shift from ‘seer’ in the reconstructed prehistory to ‘learned poet’ in attested early medieval Ireland is the most palpable piece of evidence for the connection of prophetic seeing and poetic craft.

The word for the ‘praise-poet’ was PC *\*bardos*. The general lines of the etymology are clear. It continues something like pre-Cl. *\*g<sup>u</sup>rH(s)-d<sup>h</sup>h<sub>1</sub>-o-* ‘he who

8. In a nutshell, the *o*-grade in the root required for these formations is unparalleled elsewhere. See Irslinger (2002: 98–100) for a detailed discussion.

9. See Stifter (2011a: 557, 560–561) for a discussion of the stages of morphological restructurings that this word underwent in its prehistory.

puts (gives) praise, a nominal compound of the phrasal collocation  $*g^u erH-$   $d^h eh_1-$ , found in Ved. *gíras dhā-*, Avest. *girō dā-* ‘to offer praise’, but some phonological details remain debated.<sup>10</sup> The word is present in almost all known branches of Celtic: Gallo-Lat. *bardus*, Gallo-Gr. βάρδος,<sup>11</sup> OIr. *bard* ‘praise poet, poet or rhymester inferior in qualifications and status to the *filí*’, ModIr. *bard* ‘poet, bard’, W *bardd*, pl. *beirdd* ‘poet’ (used throughout the medieval and modern period), OCorn. *barth* ‘actor’, MBret. *barz* ‘fiddler’, ModBret. *barzh*, pl. *barzhed* ‘poet’. The meanings of the words in the current Celtic languages have been influenced by modern Celtic scholarship about ancient and medieval bards.

It was shown above in the case of *cerd* and *aí* that terms for the abstract concept ‘poetry’ or ‘poetical craft’ can also refer to the concrete products, the ‘poems’. Other words appear to have started out as concrete nouns right away. A likely candidate for a pan-Celtic term for a versified composition is PC  $*natV-$ . Since gender and inflection of the attested forms vary (evidence for *u*-stem predominates in OIr., but  $\bar{a}$ -stem is also supported), the exact stem formation is not reconstructable. OIr. *nath* occurs sometimes as a general term for ‘poem’, as well as a specialised term for technically advanced compositions of poets of the sixth grade, and for funerary elegies. The Welsh cognate *nad* has the related meanings ‘song, poem, poetry; shout, cry, screech; wailing, lament; (loud) noise’. In Irish, it occurs as second element *-nad* in a series of compound terms designating particular metres or styles of versification, the exact semantics of which are not always clear. Of these, OIr. *marbnad* merits special mention because it makes an equation with W *marwnad* ‘elegy’ <  $*maruonV-$ , literally ‘dead-*natV-*’.  $*NatV-$  is perhaps also attested in the Gaulish compound *duscelinatia* in the inscription from Larzac (L-98, 1a.8). According to Lambert (RIG II-2, 264), this could be a compound of *dus-* ‘bad, evil’, an unclear second component, and the instrumental of  $*natā$ , perhaps in the sense of ‘poem’. However, there are alternative explanations, for which see Irslinger (2002: 151). In view of the widespread metaphors for ‘poetry’ and ‘literature’ taken from the textile industry (cf. West 2007: 36–38), the explanation of  $*natV-$  as the passive participle  $*sñh_1to-$  ‘spun’ from the root  $*sneh_1-$  ‘to spin’ (LIV: 571–572)

10. See Zair (2012: 82–83, 259–262) and Delamarre (2003: 67) for the involved problems (in particular the exact source of the sequence *-ar-*), with references to the extensive previous scholarship. Starting from a root  $*g^u erd^h-$  ‘to hear, sound’, as *Additions to LIV* does (URL <<http://www.martinkuemmel.de/liv2add.html>>, accessed October 30, 2015; sub lemma  $*g^{(u)} erd^h-$ , corresponding to LIV: 187), is wrong in any case. Starting from such a root, the vowel *a* of *\*bardos* could only result via an Osthoff-type shortening from PC  $*bārdos$ , itself from  $*g^u ōrd^h os$  whose lengthened grade would be unmotivated.

11. For a discussion of the Gaulish evidence for bards, see Hofeneder (esp. 2005: 118–124, 147–150; 2008: 223–229, 300–301, 327–328, 331–335; 2011: 38–40).



looks attractive, but the etymology is beset with phonological and morphological holes. In particular, it does not account for the attested inflectional classes and for the lack of initial *s*- in Irish.<sup>12</sup> It was seen above that several expressions in the field of poetry derive from the root  $*h_2enh_1$ - ‘to breathe’. In this light, one may wonder whether  $*natV$ - reflects a related formation, e.g. a participle  $*h_2\eta h_1to$ -, but the evidence that the input sequence of laryngeals and resonant would yield the required output is meagre (cf. Zair 2012: 43–46). One better remains agnostic for the time being.

Although OIr. *dúan* ‘poem’ has no cognate in any Celtic language, three equally plausible etymologies have been proposed for it, all of which require a formation of the word at an early stage of Proto-Celtic or even before.

1. The first proposal connects *dúan* via the reconstruction  $*d^h(e)ug^hneh_2$  with Gr. τεύχειν ‘to make’, from the PIE root  $*d^heug^h$ - ‘to happen, succeed, achieve’<sup>13</sup> (LIV: 148–149), which in Greek poetical diction can refer to the ‘making of poems’ (Delamarre 2003: 146; West 2007: 35). This explanation opens up an interesting perspective because it allows to connect *dúan* with the Gaul. verb *dugióntiío* in the inscription from Alise-Sainte-Reine (L-15). This sole attestation of the verb is isolated in Celtic, so its exact meaning is unknown. However, it has long been believed to belong to the root  $*d^heug^h$ - (see Stifter 2011: 166), and within the context of the inscription it makes most sense to read it as something like ‘(they) who worship’. If the root thus had acquired the meaning ‘to praise, to make a praise poem’ in Proto-Celtic, both the Gaul. verb *dugióntiío* and OIr. *dúan* as a resultative noun ‘praise, praise poem’ can be brought under one semantic umbrella.
2. Watkins’ (1976) alternative explanation derives *dúan* from PIE  $*dh_2pno$ - ‘portion, allotment’ from the root  $*deh_2p$ - ‘to divide into portions (of a meal)’, implying the concept of an apportioned gift by the poet, a gift that entails the patron’s liability to recompense the poet.<sup>14</sup> Despite the substantial semantic gap between the root and the OIr. word, this suggestion has found wide acceptance

12. See Irlinger (2002: 151–152) for details and further references; Zair (2012: 65) is more optimistic about this etymology.

13. See LIV: 149 for the complex semantics of this root.

14. The social aspects of the relationship between the poet and his patron will not be discussed in detail in this article. Suffice it to say that many similarities can be discovered among the Insular Celtic societies on the one hand, and between them and what little is known about the role of poets in ancient Celtic societies. Further reading about these aspects are, for instance, Carney 1967, Ford 1999, the articles on bards by Caerwyn Williams, Koch and McKenna in Koch (2006: 169–172), and the discussion by Hofeneder (see fn. 11).

among Indo-Europeanists before the background of Indo-European poetic ideology.

3. Finally, a derivation of *dúan* from *\*doh<sub>3</sub>uno-* ‘that which is given, gift’ cannot be ruled out either, either from the expanded verbal root *\*deh<sub>3</sub>u-* ‘to give’ (LIV: 107), or secondarily derived from a nominal stem *\*deh<sub>3</sub>-u<sub>2</sub>/u<sub>2</sub>en-* ‘the giving, gift’. It is noteworthy in this context that in Irish the inherited common noun for ‘gift, endowed skill’, *dán* < *\*deh<sub>3</sub>nu-*, has taken on exactly this additional meaning ‘poem’. Like in Watkins’ proposal, the motivation for the term is one of a relationship of mutual exchange, involving the person of the poet and his patron. In any case, the reciprocal word for the price to be paid by the patron, OIr. *dúas* ‘gift, reward, recompense’ < *\*doh<sub>3</sub>usteh<sub>2</sub>-*, is definitely derived from the Indo-European root *\*deh<sub>3</sub>-* ‘to give’ (LIV: 105–106), or rather from its expanded variant *\*deh<sub>3</sub>u-* ‘to give’ (LIV: 107). The relationship between *dúan* and *dúas* may have been that of a *figura etymologica* from earliest times (*\*doh<sub>3</sub>uneh<sub>2</sub> ~ \*doh<sub>3</sub>usteh<sub>2</sub>*), but if they derive from two entirely different sources, it is easy to see that such a connection could have arisen by folk etymology within Old Irish, as soon as the two words were phonetically similar enough.

OIr. *cétal* ‘song’, W *cathl* ‘song, ditty, poem, psalm, hymn’, MBret. *quentel* ‘liturgical lecture, lesson’ all continue the verbal abstract PC *\*kantlo-* from the root *\*k<sup>(?)</sup>an-* ‘to sing, resound’ (LIV: 342–343). The possible Gaulish cognates are uncertain: *cantalon*, with an anaptyctic *a*, in the inscription from Auxey (L-9) looks like the expected Gaulish cognate of these words, but the word seems to refer to the stone monument, so the similarity may only be superficial; another word in the Calendar of Coligny, nom. *gantlos* (with scribal variation of *g* for *c?*) and gen. *cantli*, both without anaptyctic vowel, is the name of twelfth month in the Gaulish year, and again this may only be a chance resemblance. The root *\*k<sup>(?)</sup>an-* is, of course, also continued in the verbs for ‘singing’ in Celtic: OIr. *canaid*, W *canaf*, Corn. *cane*, MBret. *canaff*, Bret. *kanañ*.

The next expression to be discussed here is more problematic. Ir. *rosc*, defined by the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* as ‘a short poem or chant; a legal maxim’, is traditionally (e.g., LEIA: R-44) explained as PC *\*φrosk<sup>u</sup>om* < pre-Clt. *\*pro-sk<sup>u</sup>-o-*, consisting of *\*pro* ‘before, forth’ and a nominal formation of the root *\*sek<sup>u</sup>-* ‘to say’ (LIV: 526–527). In accordance with this etymology, which would put the formation of the word at a fairly early date, it could be rendered literally as ‘that what is uttered forth’. This could refer maybe not to a poetical text in the strict sense, but to stylised language. However, Corthals (2004: 108) has drawn attention to the fact that *rosc* occurs only in young texts, sometimes replacing the earlier attested *roscad* ‘a legal maxim or aphorism, later also an extemporaneous dithyrambic composition’. Corthals concludes that *rosc* is merely a late back-formation from *roscad*, for

which, in turn, he offers a language-internal explanation as *ro-scoth* ‘great flower’, an early medieval loan translation of Latin *flos* in the sense of ‘bloomer, Stilblüte’.

This is not the place to go into any further discussion of individual technical terms of verse-making, especially since the lack of Ancient Celtic comparanda reduces the foundation for secure Proto-Celtic reconstructions. A single example shall suffice to illustrate the character of the material. The equation of OIr. *cubaid* ‘harmonious, proper, fitting; musical harmony, assonance’ and OW *couid*, MW *cywydd* ‘poem, song, metrical composition; a class of metres, a poem composed in this metre; vocal song’ allows to set up common InsClt. *\*ko(m)-u̇idi-*. The involved phonology excludes a formation prior to Insular Celtic. In a Proto-Celtic compound consisting of the two elements *\*kom-* ‘(together) with’ and *\*u̇id-i-* (for which see below), i.e. erstwhile *\*komu̇idi-*, the cluster *\*mu̇* would have been regularly simplified to *\*u̇*, i.e. *\*kou̇idi-*. While W *cywydd* may indeed continue this, it could equally be a young formation using the nasal-less allomorph *\*ko-* (*cy-*) of *\*kom*. Irish, on the other hand, excludes this preform, which would have resulted in *\*\*cuaid* in Old Irish. The *b* /*v*/ of OIr. *cubaid* can only go back to a bilabial glide *\*u̇* /*w*/ that became a fricative /*v*/ after an immediately preceding nasal, but this entails that the compound *\*komu̇idi-* had been created relatively recently, after the operation of the Common Celtic soundchange *\*mu̇* > *\*u̇*. So the formation of *\*ko(m)-u̇idi-*<sup>15</sup> cannot be ancient; the Old Irish and the Welsh words are similar, but not identical formations. They probably arose in a common cultural area around the Irish Sea, not independently, but separately from each other. The definition given for *cywydd* in *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* is that, in later medieval poetry, it refers to a “strict metre composed of rhyming couplets (with full consonance throughout except in its early form), each couplet consisting of lines of seven syllables rhyming a stressed with an unstressed syllable or vice-versa”. This definition coupled with the fact that in Irish the word can refer to the metrical feature of assonance (for which see below), suggests that the poetic feature whereby words in a sequence of verses are linked by matching consonants existed in this common culture. Since words for ‘tree, wood’ could be used for ‘letters, characters’ in the InsCelt. languages, it is likely that the second element of the compound *\*ko(m)-u̇idi-* is not the verbal root *\*u̇eid-* ‘to know’, but is *\*u̇idu-* ‘wood, tree, letter’, and that the original meaning of the compound was ‘having the same letters’. Note that this explanation presupposes literacy.

This reconstructable common lexicon for the semantic field of verbal art suggests that there was a Proto-Celtic poetic tradition. To what extent the poetic, metrical and, quite generally technical, influence of this ancient tradition makes itself felt in the extant poetic corpus of medieval Celtic literature, however, is more

15. The (*m*) is bracketed to indicate that it is not required for the Welsh form.

difficult to assess. One way to try to come to an answer is to apply the same comparative method to techniques of versification that is used in linguistic comparison, both among the Celtic poetic systems and with neighbouring and related poetic traditions, like Italic or Germanic.<sup>16</sup> The descriptions of the Celtic systems in the following chapters will be a step towards such a comparison.

## 2. Verbal art in Ancient Celtic

Although a fair amount of terminology for poets and poetry has thus survived from the Ancient Celtic period, or can be reasonably expected to have existed, the actual evidence for poetic texts is thin and shaky. Ancient Celtic, in contrast to the later Insular Celtic traditions, lacks a manuscript tradition of texts. The only texts accessible to modern readers are stray archaeological discoveries preserved on imperishable materials such as stone, pottery or metal. Classical Greek and Roman authors occasionally make brief remarks about Gaulish poets, which in general stress their elevated role in Gaulish society and their function as praise-givers of their patrons, but which otherwise contain typical clichés and stereotypes that one expects in pre-scientific colonial ethnography.<sup>17</sup> Of particular interest for the present investigation is Posidonius' report (preserved in Athenaeus VI,49 and IV,37; cf. Hofeneder 2005: 118–124) about Gaulish “poets who deliver eulogies in song”, and his tale of the nobleman Louernios who in an attempt to gain the favour of the populace, lavishly rewarded a poet who produced a spontaneous praise-poem about him. The well-known passage from Caesar's *Gaulish Wars* (BG VI,14; cf. Hofeneder 2005: 187–198) about the schools of the druids who had to learn by heart a large number of verses in many years of study makes direct reference to metrical compositions, but it reveals nothing about the ornamental devices used in these texts.

The ancient Celtic languages known today are Gaulish (attested ca. end of 3rd century B.C. until 3rd/4th century A.D., mainly across the territory of modern France), with the greatest amount of texts, Celtiberian (attested ca. 150 B.C. until 0 in Central Spain) and Lepontic (end of 6th until 1st century A.D. in Northern Italy and Southern Switzerland). Lepontic is sometimes regarded as an early dialectal variant of Gaulish, but it is here treated as a separate language. In all three languages texts can be found that have been interpreted as metrical. The first task that the student of Ancient Celtic poetry has to solve is establishing a corpus of

16. This approach has been used before, most notably by Watkins 1963 who looks at the Old Irish tradition from a pan-Indo-European point of view, but many others use it explicitly or implicitly, e.g. Olmsted 1991, Eska & Mercado 2005.

17. Caerwyn Williams & Koch in Koch (2006: 169–170); cf. also Hofeneder in fn. 12.

poetry which can then be analysed metrically. In doing so, one is confronted with several obvious practical difficulties:

1. None of the extant Ancient Celtic texts is identified as metrical by a reliable text-internal or text-external marker, for instance by the use, in the title, of a word that is recognisable as a term for a poem, or by the arrangement of the text in such a way that it immediately and unambiguously evokes line divisions.<sup>18</sup>
2. The mode of transmission of the Ancient Celtic languages stands in the way of allowing an easy understanding of the involved metrics. The writing systems used are such as to occasionally conceal metrical information rather than display it. Celtiberian is for the most part written in a particularly unwieldy orthography, using the semisyllabic Iberian script. It rarely distinguishes between voiced and voiceless consonants, thus encumbering the identification of potential instances of alliteration, and it occasionally inserts empty vowels into the written words, or suppresses characters, which affects the syllabic count of the texts. Lepontic is written in a variant of the North Etruscan script which, like the Iberian script, fundamentally lacks a graphic distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants, again causing problems for modern linguists where alliteration is concerned.<sup>19</sup>
3. All writing systems, including the Greek and Roman scripts used for Gaulish, have in common that the quantity of vowels, which is an important factor in quantitative metrical systems, is regularly not indicated, but must be inferred from external clues such as etymology and language comparison.

Where does verbal artistry in the form of stylised, ornamented prose end, and where does verse begin?<sup>20</sup> For instance, the relatively recently found Gaulish

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18. This is not to say that such markers do not exist. For the inscription from Vergiate (VA-6), Eska & Mercado (2011: 231–232) point out that a notch in the top-left corner of the stone may indicate a line division. For the Gaulish inscription from Alise-Sainte-Reine (L-13), I suggested that the ostensibly redundant appearance of a *hedera* in the middle of the text could be interpreted as a line divider (Stifter 2011: 169). However, a purely ornamental use of the device cannot be excluded, in view of the presence of two more *hederae*, without any apparent metrical significance, further down in the inscription. The text of L-35.1 is written out in three lines which could coincide with verses.

19. For instance, in the inscription of Vergiate (see further below), it is unclear whether the first grapheme of *pala* ‘gravestone’ stands for /pa(:)lā/ or /ba(:)lā/. Only in the second case an alliteration with graphemic *pelkui* and *pruiam* in the same text, which are universally taken to represent /belgūi/ and /bru(:)jām/, is possible.

20. See also the considerations in Eska & Mercado (2011: 229).

inscription from Chartres (Viret, Lambert et al. 2014) contains obvious phrasal repetitions and variations (*eto cantipisontas* A5, B5; *duti so adogarie* A7, *eti so adogarie* A10, *duti so cantigarie* B9), probably also unusually convoluted syntax, and its two or three lists of names could be analysed along the lines of syllable- or stress-counting short lines,<sup>21</sup> but all of this is not sufficient to classify the text as a poem.

Even if a text has been identified as metrical beyond reasonable doubt, there remains the methodological difficulty of determining the exact nature of the involved metrics: is it accentual, is it quantitative, is it syllabic? Because of the lack of comparable contemporaneous verse from the same language, only comparisons with texts from other languages, within and without Celtic, are possible, but such comparisons are fraught with a-priori assumptions that bias the analysis.

With these caveats in mind, a critical survey of all Ancient Celtic texts for which a metrical analysis has been suggested in previous research will be given in the following. In order to determine the validity of the claims, the Ancient Celtic texts in question will be tested against several criteria that typically are indicative of verse: recurrent patterns of syllable count or stress count, alliteration, rhyme, unusual syntax,<sup>22</sup> repetition of phrases, and graphic features such as line divisions. Archaic phonology, morphology or diction may also be a feature of verse, but in the case of fragmentarily attested languages it is difficult to assess what is archaic and what is not. Obviously, any of these features may also occur in prose,<sup>23</sup> so that usually only an accumulation of these features will make a good case for reading a text as metrical.

Starting with the oldest material, we turn to Lepontic first. The text for which the strongest case for a metrical composition has been made so far is the Lepontic inscription of Vergiate (LexLep: VA-6): *pelkui : pruiam : teu : kalite : isos : kalite : palam* ‘Deuū erected the *pruia* for Belgos, the same erected the gravestone’. Eska & Mercado (2005: 170–177) recognise a series of telltale signs of verbal art: the chiasmic arrangement of the constituent parts of the sentence that goes against the unmarked sentence structure, and a considerable amount of phonological

21. The basically octosyllabic character (with variations up- and downwards) of these lines with two main stresses each is, of course, only a trivial and natural consequence of the morphological structure of Gaulish onomastic practices.

22. Eska & Mercado (2005: 161) speak of deviations from the normal syntactic patterns of a language as “distraction of clausal configuration” (2005: 161). Valid as this observation is, it must not be taken as a *sine qua non*. It cannot be taken for granted that every verse will contain unusual syntax.

23. The presence of manifest cases of verbal ornamentation has been commented on repeatedly in previous scholarship, e.g. by Meid (1990: 47–48), and many others.

ornamentation (alliteration, phonological ring-structure by matching the initial *pVl-* at the end, homoioteleuton). If the poem is analysed as accentual (assuming initial stress), it can be read as having a trochaic<sup>24</sup> structure (with several substitutions of dactyls for trochaei). Depending on the line division, it could consist of a long line of one trochaic heptametre, or of a couplet, with a trochaic tetrametre followed by a trimetre (172). An analysis on the basis of quantitative metrics, which, however, requires several additional assumptions about the system of metrification, results in a couplet of an enneasyllabic line followed by a heptasyllabic one, both closed by a cadence familiar from the Greek choriambic dimetre [ $\vee \vee \times$ ] (172–174). Moreover, Eska & Mercado find several parallels to “archaic heptasyllabic lines [...] in Old Irish texts” (175–176), as in, for instance, an accentual dactylic cadence in the first line. Mees 2008 criticises the too “Italianising” (188) approach chosen by Eska & Mercado, and instead advocates an analysis which is closer to metrical practices found in medieval Celtic languages. He arrives at an accentual rhythmic structure which consists of two pentasyllabic short lines plus a heptasyllabic line. In order to achieve this, however, he has to arbitrarily read *pelkui* as a trisyllabic word (189). He also awards rhyme a more important role in the versification. In 2011, in response to Mees’s critical assessment of 2008, Eska & Mercado refine their metrical analysis and add further arguments. They now regard the first word *pelkui* as extra-metric, which allows them to scan the rest “as a couplet of trochaic-dactylic [heptasyllabic] verses with chiasitic respension” and they make a remark about similarities with Italic versification (236). They also make the pertinent observation that a stroke on the stone may function as a graphic marker of the boundary between the two verses (231–232). The various suggestions made for this single, short text underscore the methodological difficulties in analysing Ancient Celtic metrics.

Markey & Mees (2003: 157–158; re-iterated in Mees 2008: 197–199) suggest a metrical reading for the long inscription from Prestino (LexLep: CO-48) which belongs to the same early period as the Vergiate inscription: *uvamokozis : plialethu : uvtiauiopos : ariunepos : siteś : tetu*. Applying to the language the accentuation of Sanskrit, they recognise alliteration, isosyllabicity and rhyme (*plialethu : tetu*), calling the metre “virtually a Gāyatrī stanza (three octosyllabic verses)”. Eska & Mercado (2005: 177–178) dismiss these ideas. They object that the inscription shows no sign of unusual syntax and that the case of rhyme is uncertain because the quantity of the vowels in *plialethu* and *tetu* is unknown.

A short line on a vase from Ornavasso (LexLep: VB-3.1), belonging to the late phase of Lepontic, seems to follow quantitative metrics: *latumarui : sapsutai*

24. The authors (2005: 172) actually speak of iambs, but this must be a slip of the pen.

: *pe* ∶ *uinom* ∶ *našom*<sup>25</sup> ‘for Latumaros and Sapsuta — Naxian (?) wine’. Lejeune (1987:499; followed by Stifter 2011:175) observes that it can be analysed as a trochaic tetrameter, if some fairly uncontroversial assumptions are made about the quantity of the syllables:

– ∪ – – ∶ – ∅ – ∶ ∪ ∶ – ∅ ∶ – ×

The same rhythm remains if an accentual scansion with stress on the first syllable is used or superimposed on the quantitative verse:

˘ ∪ ˘ – – ∶ ˘ ∅ – ∶ ∪ ∶ ˘ ∅ ∶ ˘ ×

The division into cola is graphically reinforced by a sophisticated system of word dividers. The strongest break — equivalent to a caesura — is felt between the two main constituent phrases (indirect object *latumarui* ∶ *sapsutai* ∶ *pe* — subject *uinom* ∶ *našom*) of the text; consequently that break is expressed by four dots. Each part of the sentence is in turn made up of two constituents, two coordinated recipients in the case of the indirect object (two cola), noun and attributive adjective in the case of the subject (one colon). They are separated by three dots. The enclitic connector *-pe* is separated from the stressed word to which it is attached by merely two dots. Unlike the other texts discussed above and further down in this section, this verse contains no other obvious poetic embellishment, such as alliteration or rhyme, and it thus does not participate in what otherwise seems to be typical in Ancient Celtic versification. Considering its late date (end of the 2nd, beginning of the 1st cent. B.C.), the use of a plain quantitative metre will best be attributed to Latin or Greek influence.

After the three possible examples of metrical texts from Lepontic, next is Celtiberian for which two candidates have been identified. Even if one does not want to interpret it as a poem, one is struck by the remarkable number of alliterations in the great rock inscription from Peñalba de Villastar (MLH: K.3.3; Hesperia: TE.17.03):

*enioroŕŕei*  
*uta.tigino.tjatumei*  
*trecaiaŕ.toługuei* (or: *ługueŕ*)  
*aŕaianom.comeimu*  
*enioroŕŕei.equoiŕŕique*  
*ogriŕ.ołocas.to.giaŕ.sistał.luguei.tiaŕo* (or: *ołocas*)  
*togiaŕ*

25. In order not to overload this survey with questions of textual philology, I retain the most widespread reading of the final word, but I want to point out that there are epigraphic reasons to read either *natom* or even *naxom* (with an *x*!).



Olmsted (1988; 1991:287–289) duly notes the alliterations, as well as the presence of rhyme (which, however, may not be more than chance homoioteleuton). Expanding on his hypothesis of an ancient Celtic long verse line that falls into two shorter sections separated by a caesura, one section having two, the other one or two stresses of varying syllabic count, he takes the alliterating words to create line-internal links between the first and the second short lines. A common criticism that can be brought against Olmsted’s several experiments in Ancient Celtic metrics is that the texts he builds his analysis on are often riddled with errors when compared to the standard editions in Celtic scholarship.<sup>26</sup> Most naturally, where erroneous readings serve to support an argument, the entire metrical analysis stands or falls with the correct reading. Additionally, Olmsted’s decisions as to which words are stressed and which are not are occasionally irreproducible, his metrical analysis frequently violates the manifest clausal structures of the texts, or his analysis ignores the perceivable graphic arrangement of the texts. All of this is the case here with Peñalba de Villastar and therefore renders his analysis unusable.<sup>27</sup>

Isaac’s (2008:162–165) take on Peñalba de Villastar is more sophisticated. Noting that the two sections of the inscription, both beginning with *enioroŕsei*, have 28 syllables each, he further observes that each section, which he calls sentence, further divides “in a syntactically regular way, into two phrases (‘lines?’) of fourteen syllables each” (162), which in turn show a central break after the seventh or eighth syllable. The half lines are not held together by alliteration, but the second half lines usually have internal alliteration. Isaac thus arrives at a quatrain whose structural design he finds to be a quantitative metre, a basic heptasyllabic short line with a preferred cadence:

□ □ □ □ □ — — .

26. To be fair, in some instances those standard editions were published or became widely accessible only after Olmsted finished his research. However, this does not explain all errors in his texts.

27. I will illustrate some of Olmsted’s shortcomings for the present inscription, but will refrain from doing so in other cases. In the second verse, according to his arrangement, *erecaias* alliterates with *arianom*. Apart from the detail that the second word unmistakably reads *araianom*, the first one is *trecaiaŕ*, which alliterates with the immediately preceding *tigino* and *tiatumei*, but not with *araianom*. In his third verse, there is a triple alliteration between *eimu*, *enioroŕsei* and *equei*. In the inscription, *comeimu* is clearly written as one word. It would have to be proven first that this word should be split into two separate units *com* and *eimu*. In the inscription, the immediately following *enioroŕsei*, is positioned in such a way to suggest that a new syntactic unit (sentence?, stanza?) begins. Nothing supports Olmsted’s idea that it should belong into the middle of a verse line. Instead of *equei*, the inscription has *equoisuique*. It should have become clear from these few examples that Olmsted’s arrangement of the words into lines is completely unsubstantiated.

He notes the similarities of this metre with the Old Latin Saturnian verse. He does not, however, explain these similarities as a common inheritance from Indo-European poetry, but he rather thinks of metrical fashions in Western Europe that crossed linguistic boundaries. Isaac does not address the question if — and how — the quantitative scansion of the text may have interacted with a possible accentual system of the language.

The famous first bronze from Botorrita (MLH: K.1.1; Hesperia: Z.09.01) is too long to be presented here in detail. Only Olmsted (1988; 1991) has so far proposed a metrical analysis of the text within the scheme of his 2/1–2/2 accentual line. However, the readings with which he operates diverge so significantly from the received edition, and his metrical units run so massively against the general understanding of the clausal structure of the text as to make this attempt valueless. By ignoring the graphic distinction between the two separate sibilant signs of Celtiberian, and by introducing arbitrary word divisions, he greatly increases the instances of alliteration and assonance. When one bases oneself on the standard edition and on current phonological interpretations of the text, the majority of the alleged alliterations vanish. The case of a metrical reading of Botorrita I is too weak to be upheld.

Gaulish, finally, provides the largest number of texts that show unmistakable signs of verbal art, be they metrical or not. Because of their comparatively large number, only texts for which metrical analyses have been proposed by more than one scholar will be discussed in detail. Texts which only figure once in metrical scholarship will be treated cursorily. The first thing to be noted about the longest text, the lead tablet with a charm from Larzac (RIG II,2: L-98), is that it displays a high incidence of alliterative pairs: *bnanom brictom*,<sup>28</sup> *uidluias uidlu*[, *lidssatim liciatim*, *uodui uoderce*,<sup>29</sup> etc., to cite only the most striking examples from the first six lines of the text. If Gaulish had initial stress, these pairs would automatically constitute accentual trochaic or dactylic dimetres. It seems that even the names of women mentioned in Larzac are manipulated in such a way as to achieve a maximum alliterative effect (Olmsted 1989:159; Mees 2009:60). Curly brackets are used to set the phrases apart from each other; bold letters indicate the alliteration:

28. The formulaic nature of this expression emerges from the fact that it has an exact cognate in Old Irish *brichtu ban*, *brechtaib ban* ‘charms of women.’ That alliteration as a rhetoric device thus finds supports at least for the common ancestor of Gaulish and Irish is highly significant for the prehistory of the entire Celtic poetic tradition.

29. In this pair the alliteration could be between *u... u...*, as well as between *d... d...*, if the stress falls on the second element.

{*andernados brictom*} {*bano[na] flatucias*} {*paulla dona potiti[us]*} {*iaia duxtir adiegias*} {*poti[ta m]atir paullias*} {*seuera du[xtir] ualentos dona paullius*} {*adiega matir aiías*} {*potita dona primus*} {*i[...] abesias*}

Mees does not go so far as to call Larzac a full-blown poem, but he speaks of the “poetic nature of the text” (2009:63), and he frequently describes it as “rhythmical” (*ibid.*: 55, 63), although he does not specify the nature of this rhythm. Meid (1990:47–48) makes similar remarks. Only Olmsted (1989; 1991:280–282) has so far proposed a metrical analysis. According to him, Larzac possesses the structure of a poem, being made up of 48 lines following a rigid 2/1-stress pattern, which he compares with archaic Irish poetry, the lines concatenated by alliteration. This analysis suffers from similar defects as already observed in his treatment of other texts. Eska & Mercado (2005:180) “grant that there is some evidence for alliteration, assonance, and rhyme”, but they point to the almost arbitrary variation in syllable count which undermines any confidence in Olmsted’s analysis of these texts as metrical. In the final analysis, Larzac is clearly composed in a stylised language, but it falls short of being a metrical composition in the strict sense. It is remarkable, though, that phrases, ranging from one to four or five words, but usually tending towards two, are demarcated by word separators in the form of raised dots in the written text. These could indicate what the scribe regarded to be phrasal units, but no clear metrical pattern emerges from them.

The next long Gaulish text that warrants closer inspection is the lead tablet from Chamalières (RIG II,2: L-100), which also contains a magical text. The contorted syntax of the opening words *andedíon uediúmi díiúion risun|artiu mapon arueriátin* has attracted most attention, and it is mostly for them that concrete metrical suggestions have been made so far. Because of the imponderables of Gaulish phonology and orthography, the metres suggested by the scholars are quite diverse and mutually contradictory. It was first claimed to be versified by Fleuriot (1976–77: 190), who, however, restricted himself to note the fundamental methodological problem that “la principale difficulté est de trouver les limites des vers”. Lambert (1979:151) compares the text’s key word *brixtia* with OIr. *bricht*, which, apart from ‘spell, charm’, can also mean ‘octosyllabic verse’. Accordingly, he analyses the first three lines of the text as four verses of eight metrical feet. For the scheme to work, he has to assume that *eθθic sos* in his fourth line is “en surnombre”, i.e. extra-metrical. Meid (1989:37–38) sees three octosyllabic verses at the beginning, which he compares with the Vedic Gāyatrī stanza. West (2007:52) recognises “three verses of seven or eight syllables with quantitative cadences in ... ∨ – – || or ... ∨ – ∨ – ||”. Mees (2008:192–194, 203–204) embarks upon a farther-reaching metrical analysis than the previous scholars. He also sees isosyllabism at play in the opening section of the text, but unlike his predecessors he finds

hexasyllabic lines which continue for a few more lines afterwards. However, he has to admit that this metre is not sustained to the end of the text, but from the middle of the text the lines are of varying length, taking up 5–7 syllables. If anything, the number of feet seems to stay identical, but the internal structure of these feet varies rather haphazardly. All metrical attempts mentioned above have in common that in order to arrive at their analyses the scholars have to manipulate the text in one way or the other, sometimes fairly arbitrarily. Mees further assumes that the metrical coherence is achieved by phonological means such as assonance and rhyme, even though the actual realisation of these devices is fairly subtle. For instance, according to him one particular section of the text is demarcated by the ring composition effected by the phonological correspondences that link “*meïon, ponc sešīt* [...] stylistically with *ison son bissjet*”, another one in the form of “*andedïon ... anderon*” (2008: 203). The triple repetition of the phrase *luge dessumiís* at the end of the text, followed by a single *luxe*, is evidently an instance of stylised language. Mees comes to the conclusion that “the ornamentation at Chamalières, though, does seem to suggest that end rhyme (and consonance) were part of the Old Celtic stylistic repertoire — at least by the first century” (194).

Several suggestions have been made regarding the inscription on stone from Alise-Sainte-Reine, also known as the *Martialis Dannotali* inscription (RIG II,1: L-13):<sup>30</sup>

*Martialis · Dannotali*  
*ieuru · Ucuete · sosin*  
*celicnon ꝛ etic*  
*gobedbi · dugiíontíó*  
*ꝛ Ucuetin*  
*in · Alisiía ꝛ*

Early metrical attempts read it as an accentual hexametre (Rhÿs 1906: 276–282) or as a sequence of quantitative trochaic dimetres (Gray 1942: 442). In both cases, considerable liberties had to be taken in the phonological interpretation of the text. Lejeune (RIG II,1: 155), Eska & Mercado (2005: 178–180) and Stifter (2011: 168) reject these proposals on the basis of their methodological shortcomings, but while Eska & Mercado strictly maintain that the text must be viewed as non-metrical, not least because of the lack of any poetic syntax, and Lejeune remains agnostic, albeit not a priori dismissive, towards the possibility of it being in verse, I proposed an interpretation which, although it does not operate with

30. See above for the possible metrical significance of the hederæ in this text, and for the possible etymological link of the verb *dugiíontíó*, if it refers to ‘praise by poems’, with OIr. *dúan* ‘poem’.

a strict quantitative metre, tries to recognise patterns in the arrangement of the words and in the syllable count (Stifter 2011: 170–173). I observed that the text could be broken down into two ‘long lines’ of 19 syllables, which again consisted each of two shorter lines, of 10 syllables length the first, of 9 the second. Like in all the examples before, in order to make things work this syllabic analysis necessitates certain a-priori assumptions about the syllabification of Gaulish. Furthermore, I noted parallelism and isomorphism in the number of lexical elements and stresses in the constituent lines, falling short, however, of any clear rhythm. I also noted the lack of alliteration and of other types of phonological ornamentation.

In the same publication, I noted that a short Gaulish inscription on a spindle-whorl (RIG II,2: L-119) gives the impression of verbal art (Stifter 2011: 174–175). A metrical reading of this text was independently proposed by Mees (2008: 202):

<i>moni gnatha</i>	‘Go, girl,
<i>gabi buđđutton imon</i>	‘take this (as a ) <i>buđđutton</i> (= kiss?)’

If *buđđutton* is taken as extrametrical, which finds pragmatic support in the observation that by isolating it, *buđđutton* is awarded special prominence and is thus rendered the focus of the attention, the other four words are linked by isosyllabism (2 + 2 : 2 + 2), alliteration (*gnatha* : *gabi*), ring composition involving phonological mirroring (*moni*: *imon*), and consonantal and vocalic assonance (*moni* : *gabi*; *gnatha* : *gabi*; *moni* : *gnatha*). Prósper (forthc.: fn. 10), who has a very different understanding of the text, reads the first syllables of *gnatha* and *buđđutton* as short and sees “a catalectic iambic trimeter with a dieresis dividing the two lines”. Earlier, Watkins (1999: 541) had read the text as an “11 syllable verse line with caesura after the fourth syllable, thus a 4 || 7 pattern that is characteristic both of Vedic and Iranian metric texts”.

Mees (2008: 199–201) added several other short inscriptions of Gaulish to the metrical dossier.<sup>31</sup> They each consist of two or three phrases, which Mees reads as lines, with two stresses per line and preponderantly four, but sometimes six syllables in the line. In one case he speaks of an “(accentual) trochaic dimetre”, an analysis that probably can be applied to all texts. Additionally, Mees recognises alliteration and rhyme, although in my eyes the latter is very weak at times. As for the long, Late Gaulish inscription from Châteaubleau (RIG II,2: L-93), Mees (2009: 85–86) only remarks that it may contain “stylistic ringing (or chaining) [...] although there is rather less consistent phonological decoration”, and he goes on

31. The texts are (not including Mees’ scansion and quantitative analysis): 1. Le Mas-Marcou (RIG L-99): *Bregissa Branderix / drondo genes / drondo međis*; 2. a charm by Marcellus of Bordeaux: *in mon derco<n> / Arcos axat ison*; 3. other short inscriptions on spindle-whorls for which he uses the one from Sens as an example (RIG II,2: L-120): *Geneta im(m)i / daga uimpi*.

to say that it “appears largely to be rhythmical — deliberately song-like”, without providing any concrete metrical analysis.

Finally, Olmsted (1991: 279, 282–286) maintains that the Calendar of Coligny (RIG 3) contains a handful of lines of druidic teaching in gnomic verse and that the obscure magical inscription from Rom (RIG L-103) is also composed in the 2/1–2/2 stressed metre postulated by him for Celtic. In both cases, the assumptions necessary for his hypothesis diverge so significantly from the received interpretations of the texts, and especially the latter inscription is so fraught with fundamental uncertainties that they are best left aside for the time being.

### 3. Evaluation

After this survey of the Celtic linguistic evidence and the possible Continental Celtic verse material,<sup>32</sup> an interim summary is called for. Apart from the trivial and hardly unexpected insight that poetry was produced by a special class of people in all Celtic societies at all historical stages, only some general conclusions about the nature of the poetic systems can be drawn. Given the scarcity and inherent difficulty of the material, the interpretations arrived at so far diverge significantly depending on the expectations and, more importantly, on the approaches taken by the scholars. One, which can be called the metrical approach, seeks to discover metrically regular structures, be they quantitative or accentual. The other one is “ornamental”, that means, it tries to identify poetic texts by the presence of ‘verbal art’, i.e. mainly phonetic ornamentation: alliteration, rhyme, ring composition. The two approaches do not, of course, exclude each other and, when combined, make an even stronger case in favour of verse, if positive evidence for it can be found.

32. In a footnote, Eska & Mercado (2005: 170 fn. 26) report that “Graham Isaac views two other Transalpine Celtic inscriptions, RIG L-35.1 and L-66, as metrical in an unpublished manuscript”. This paper has not, to my knowledge, seen publication in the meantime. For completeness’ sake I mention these two texts, but in order not to pre-empt Isaac’s discussion of them, nor to do him unfair injustice, I will restrict myself to a few brief words. (1) L-35.1 from La Graufesenque is a short text arranged in three lines: *aricaní lubitias / ris tecuandoedo / tidres trianís*. Depending on one’s analysis of the vowels, the first two lines could be counted as heptasyllabic, and the third as pentasyllabic. The cadence of each line could be analysed as  $\sim \sim -$  or  $\sim \sim \times$ , and a string of alliterating words in *t-* is obvious. (2) L-66, the plate of Lezoux, is a relatively long, albeit fragmentary text. It is estimated that about a quarter of its original extent remains. The text apparently contains the advice of a father to his son, a *speculum principis* in a family context. Such a genre lends itself to a versified textualisation. The text is too long, and the philological problems posed by it too complex, to discuss it here.

All approaches pose their own problems. To start with the accentual metrical approach, its fundamental weakness lies in the fact that the stress systems of Ancient Celtic languages are unknown. Only more or less sophisticated hypotheses have been proposed about their nature. In many instances where accentual metrics are involved, the implicit assumption is that the texts have to be scanned with initial dynamic stress. One argument in favour of it is the fact that alliteration, which is particularly suited for stress-initial languages, is of relatively frequent occurrence in Ancient Celtic texts. Initial stress automatically entails that the language tends towards a trochaic or dactylic rhythm in its poetry. Given also the fact that due to the Indo-European character of Ancient Celtic words in these languages tend towards a structure of two or three syllables (syllable 1: root, syllable 2: suffix, syllable 3: ending, with 2 and 3 often merged in a multifunctional desinence), a trochaic or dactylic dimetre will result most naturally for any given bimembris phrase, for instance for sequences of two elements such as noun + adjective, subject + verb or verb + object. This natural rhythm can be exploited by a poet for versification, but it can also be a coincidental feature of prose.

Moving on to the quantitative approach, it too requires a-priori assumptions about how the quantities of syllables were perceived and measured in the Ancient Celtic languages. Some phonetic universals can be used as guidelines whether a syllable is measured as short (that is, if it contains an etymologically short vowel in an open syllable) or long (etymologically long vowels or closed syllables), with a grey area in between. However, despite this slightly better theoretical starting point for the quantitative analysis, not much confidence is instilled by the actual practice. All too often the consistent application of the phonetic principles leads to no discernable patterns, and neat metres can only be achieved by arbitrary and irreproducible decisions about syllabification and syllable length.

More promising is the search for recurring patterns of syllable count. Phrases in groups of four, six, seven or eight syllables are indeed very frequent. However, caution must be applied: as argued above, the structural constraints of a language, especially its morphology, entail an expectancy value for the number of syllables that an average self-contained phrase or clause will have. For strongly inflectional languages with a rich and overt derivational morphology like the Ancient Celtic ones — and most likely for the majority of languages in the world with the exception of perfectly isolating or excessively incorporating languages — the expected number of syllables for meaningful phrases falls precisely in the above-mentioned range.<sup>33</sup> A random sequence of lines within this range of syllables is therefore of little significance. Only where a repetition of several isomorphous lines is found is

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33. As a consequence, the occurrence of verse lines of this length in many poetic traditions around the globe should come as no surprise.

it appropriate to think of a deliberate poetic design. In this context, Isaac's (2008) analysis of the Celtiberian inscription of Peñalba de Villastar as a sequence of heptasyllabic lines is probably most striking among the Ancient Celtic texts.

As for the question if Ancient Celtic poets used stress-counting metres, this has been answered in the positive by several scholars. In particular, units bearing two main stresses have been frequently identified, or long lines where two such units were combined into a longer structure. Mees' (2008: 203) statement that "many of the texts [...] seem to be best scanned as paired or tripled word feet" can serve as representative. While the presence of such structures cannot be denied, the same concerns apply here as mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Maybe the discernible structures of this type, or at least some of them, do not belong to poetry in the strict sense, but are rather part of the stylistics of rhythmic, stylised prose.

All analyses so far that require the quantification of elements suffer from the methodological deficiency that every one of them has to make some more or less arbitrary assumptions about the syllabification of the languages, e.g. about the syllabic count of sequences of stops + glides, esp. *j*. In addition to these difficulties that are inherent to the involved linguistic systems and their very often ambiguous graphic representation, some of the quantitative interpretations are very erratic due to the occasionally inconsistent and plainly faulty work of the scholars.

Ornamental poetical devices are easier to identify than properly metrical ones because in most cases the information gleaned from the texts can be taken at face value. The one thing that can be said with a high degree of confidence about verbal art in Ancient Celtic is that alliteration seems to have played an important role. It occurs in texts in all three languages, and it occurs in a sufficiently wide variety of texts to raise it above any doubt. The matter is less clear-cut in the case of rhyme. Although several scholars have referred to possible instances of rhyme in Continental Celtic texts, the relevant examples typically feature homoioteleuton, i.e. identical endings, and therefore only isomorphism of the final syllables of words. In inflectional languages with intact final syllables, such isomorphism is to be expected, especially when words of the same syntactic function, and consequently of the same case, occur in similar or parallel contexts. The similarity in inflectional morphology is thus concomitant with their function, and consequently unavoidable. In any case, the alleged instances of Continental Celtic rhyme have nothing in common with the elaborate rhyming systems of medieval Celtic languages. Related to rhyme is the feature called assonance, i.e. the repetition of similar syllables, or of sequences containing similar sounds, albeit not always in exactly the same order. The examples identified so far, vague as to the rules governing them and few and far between the extant texts, suggest rather chance similarities, and not a systematic poetic design. Mees (2008: 205) recognises in "later



Continental Celtic texts” an inclination to “use a loose form of ring composition to mark out distinct (or complete) sections of verse”. This feature lends itself to be superficially compared with the medieval Irish practice of *dúnad* ‘closure’ whereby the initial element of a poem (a syllable, a word, or even the whole line) is repeated at the end. Leaving aside the question whether the alleged instances of ring composition in Continental Celtic are really deliberate, the fundamental difference to how *dúnad* is used is that in medieval Irish poetry it unmistakably demarcates the ending of the composition. Some of the alleged Continental Celtic examples occur text-internally. The symbolic function of Continental Celtic ring composition is thus of a much less forceful nature. Other stylistic or rhetoric devices that can be undeniably identified in the texts, such as parallelism, repetition, etc., could be the expressions of stylised prose.

Finally, there remains the question about potential external influence on the metrical systems of Ancient Celtic languages. Those texts for which the strongest cases have been made for syllabic or quantitative metrics, Ornavasso in Lepontic and Peñalba de Villastar in Celtiberian, both belong to a cultural environment that is already in intensive contact with Roman civilisation. Incidentally, Peñalba de Villastar is the only good candidate for a metrical text in Celtiberian. However, in a partial answer to the question what constitutes ‘native’ Celtiberian poetry, it is noteworthy that the probably native feature of alliteration still figures very prominently in Peñalba de Villastar. Ultimately, the metres of the inscriptions from Ornavasso and from Peñalba de Villastar do not therefore add anything to the understanding of a ‘native’ Celtic system of versification, except for underscoring the fact that any poetical system can easily be influenced or replaced by a more fashionable external one. Due to the lack of more material from within the discussed cultures and from their neighbours, it is impossible to say what other poetical features could have been imported from outside.

In summary, assuming that at least some of the texts discussed in the foregoing are actually in verse, the features that can claim greatest plausibility for having formed part of Ancient Celtic versecraft are alliteration and some kind of rhythmic stylisation, probably involving units of recurrent stress patterns.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps a system of syllable counting, which may have been taken over from culturally dominant areas in the Mediterranean basin, was also employed, but at the moment this can only be argued for the late period of Ancient Celtic.

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34. Cf. the equally vague conclusion by Mees (2008:205) that Gaulish and Lepontic texts “represent word-foot dimetres and trimetres in stanzas where isosyllabism may only have been an option (not a necessity), much as phonological ornamentation could be used both within (internal) or across (concatenating) lines”.

#### 4. Medieval Celtic

The discussion of the medieval Celtic systems of versification will differ profoundly from that of Continental Celtic. A huge body of poetry has survived, whose character as verse texts does not need to be vindicated and critically analysed. Instead, scholars can rely on a long tradition of written metrical scholarship that in the case of Irish goes back more than a thousand years, and in Wales at least 700 years. The transmission of the native poetic tradition enjoyed an almost unbroken continuity in Ireland and Wales up to the present day, although the agents and means of transmission changed over time. There is circumstantial or documentary evidence that poetry was set to music,<sup>35</sup> but since none of the tunes have been recorded this aspect will not be investigated here.

Although the amount of knowledge about the position of poets in medieval Celtic societies varies sharply between the countries, ranging from an abundance of detailed legal, historical and legendary information in Ireland, to only indirectly inferable evidence in Brittany and Cornwall, what is known about the practitioners of versecraft creates the impression of a prominent social class of professionals in all countries. The complexities of the systems of versification render it likely that the training of poetical students was organised professionally in all countries, but again it is only for Ireland that a sufficient amount of information survives. The emerging picture is thus necessarily patchy, but by and large it is compatible with what is known about poets in the ancient Celtic world, thereby creating the impression — or the illusion — of a continuity and connection between the individual traditions. Further information about formal, functional and historical aspects of poetry in the various medieval Celtic traditions can be found in specialised articles in Koch (2006).

#### 5. Medieval Irish<sup>36</sup>

The written literary tradition of Medieval Ireland begins around the middle of the 7th century, but for two reasons this date is only an approximation and of no crucial significance for the development of poetry as such. First, the poetical tradition probably goes back deeper in time than the mid-7th century, even though the exact time-depth cannot be specified. James Carney (1982–3; 1989) argued

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35. Medieval Irish poems are often introduced by the phrase *X cachain/cecinit* ‘X sang’. For early modern Ireland, singing is documented in contemporary descriptions. For Breton, see Le Duc (2006: 270).

36. See Breatnach (1996) for a survey of “Poets and Poetry” in medieval Ireland.

for some of the extant poems to originate from as early as the 5th century. Even though this overly optimistic opinion has been duly criticised (e.g., Corthals 1990; Breatnach 1996: 75–76), a number of poems can be assigned to the late 6th or the early 7th century with some certainty. Secondly, almost all extant texts have been transmitted in manuscripts of much younger provenance, sometimes a millennium younger than the texts they preserve. By and large, though, the textual constitution of verse compositions is beset with less philological problems than that of contemporaneous prose. Although they, too, can suffer many corruptions in the course of transmission, the metrical straightjacket in which they are set helps to reduce the amount of textual interference that prose texts typically undergo.

A large portion of poems of the early period are anonymous, and even where names of authors need not be disregarded as pious frauds, ascribed retrospectively to famous names of the past in order to convey authority, even plausible ascriptions are not more than rough guides when it comes to assigning the compositions to a specific date, in particular in those cases where nothing is known about the poets outside of the information contained in the poems themselves. Only in Middle Irish do names of poets whose biographical details are known begin to be attached to compositions more regularly.

Medieval Irish literature abounds in poetry. Apart from the surprisingly small number of poems that were recorded and transmitted for their own sake or for their literary merits, a huge portion of the extant material is contained in narrative tales of which it forms an integral part. This mixture of prose and poetry, which is so common that some see it as a unique characteristic of medieval Irish literature, is called prosimetrum (see, for instance, Mac Cana 1997). Other poems have been preserved solely to exemplify rare types of metres in medieval poetic handbooks, compiled and utilised for educational purposes by the very same class of people who were also the creative producers and the relayers of that poetic tradition. The metres have their individual names, most of them technically descriptive within the parameters of the tradition, but some quite fanciful such as *snám sebuic* ‘a hawk’s swimming’. They are found in metrical treatises from the Middle Irish period (900–1200), traditionally referred to as *Mittelirische Verslehren* ‘Middle Irish Metrical Tracts’, the name given to them by their first editor (Thurneysen 1891; Ó hAodha 1991; McLaughlin 2005). The second of these tracts details in curricular form what the poetic students were expected to learn in their traditional seven years of training. The other three treatises are dedicated to illustrating the various metres, but only the first provides a minimum amount of explanation of the syllable count and the rhyme scheme, while the others restrict themselves to providing a representative stanza for each metre, usually taken from longer compositions that are very often otherwise lost. Modern scholars are therefore required to abstract the characteristics from those model poems. While this is

straightforward in the case of syllabic poetry, the constituent features of accentual poetry have proved to defy an easy analysis. The poets strove for formal perfection, although the formal requirements may differ over time. Deviations from the rules were regarded as metrical faults, which had their own technical terminology, discussed in the so-called *Trefocul*-tract (Calder 1917: 258–269; Hollo 1996).

Verse compositions in medieval Ireland belong to a wide variety of genres: there are compositions of a lyrical and epigrammatic character, religious poetry of diverse types (e.g., hymns, devotional poems, calendars, monastic rules, translations of Biblical and apocryphal texts), and didactic compositions, very often concerned with history, topography or genealogy. Secular praise poetry is known in great quantities from the Modern Irish period although there is evidence that it was much practised throughout the entire history. The reverse side of the coin, satire, is only weakly attested in writing, although historical and legal records leave no doubt that it was a well-recognised and much-practised aspect of a poet's powers. Even legal texts were composed in metrical form.

From the earliest accessible period, there existed in Ireland two formally very distinct traditions of versification: one, accentual poetry in the so-called *retoric* or *rosca*-style, appears to be of greater age. It is predominantly alliterative, rhythmic, rhymeless, non-quantitative,<sup>37</sup> non-stanzaic and without syllabic equality in the lines. The other tradition is syllabic poetry which is stanzaic, rhyming, non-rhythmic, non-quantitative and syllable-counting, i.e. displaying syllabic equality between corresponding lines, accompanied by optional alliteration.<sup>38</sup> That the latter type is younger than the former can be inferred from the fact that it is disparagingly labeled *núachrutha* 'new forms' in *Mittelirische Verslehren I* (Thurneysen 1891, I: 23, § 68). It seems to have arisen in the 7th century under the influence from Latin hymnody, and quickly spread to oust the older system in popularity.

The distinction between the two types of poetry is, however, not one of an absolute dichotomy. In a number of poems from the 7th century, the characteristics overlap (Breatnach 1991: 204–205; 1996: 72). Some of these transitional poems have prominent alliteration and irregular syllable count, but obligatory rhyme (e.g., the poems edited in Meyer 1913), and others can be analysed in terms of both systems, displaying extensive linking alliteration between cola *and* a consistent stress and syllable count, and regular end-rhyme between lines (e.g., the

37. 'Non-quantitative' means that, unlike in metres known from Classical Antiquity, regular patterns of short or long syllables are not being sought after in the metres.

38. Murphy (1961: 1) distinguishes a third period of Irish versification with "richly assonated stanzaic verse in which syllabic equality [...] is not strictly adhered to, but in which an equal number of feet [...] often with a fixed rhythm [...] is to be found in corresponding lines". This is the Modern Irish *amhrán* which lies outside of the scope of this study.

poems edited in Carney 1971; Kelly 1973; 1975). It thus seems that, as might be expected *a priori*, the rise of the syllabic system alongside the accentual one was accompanied by a certain amount of experimentation, transformation or amalgamation. The move from the one system to the other was gradual, not abrupt.

Whereas phonology and morphology seem to be largely unaffected by poetic style,<sup>39</sup> the language usage can differ significantly from prose in the area of syntax: genitives and adjectives can be preposed to their head nouns instead of following them, rarer use is made of the article, prepositionless datives in various adverbial meanings are found. This greater syntactic variability derives from the fact that the order of elements in a sentence is more accessible to conscious manipulation than the lower-level systems of sound and inflection. Strong deviations from ordinary syntax such as sentence-final (instead of sentence-initial) position of the verb and tmesis, that is the separation of the pretonic and tonic parts of verbs, are frequent in accentual poetry, but can occur also in syllabic poetry.

As regards the lexicon, most poems use relatively straightforward language. However, in a particular subset of compositions, the poets strive for deliberately obscure language by applying artificial techniques of language manipulation, partly resulting from the misunderstanding of earlier techniques. References to the dark, unintelligible speech of the poets is already contained in tales of the Old Irish period, e.g. *Immacallam in da Thúarad* ‘The Colloquy of the two Sages’ or in the so-called Pseudohistorical Prologue to *Senchas Már*. An early composition in this style that makes exuberant use of complex metaphors similar to kennings is *Fil and grian Glinne Aí* ‘There is there the gravel of Glenn nAí’. Kennings are occasionally used elsewhere, in particular in the deliberately obscure style, but they do not play the central role they possess in Old Norse poetry. If the poem *Fil and grian Glinne Aí* goes back to the early 8th century, as seems possible, it would pre-date Scandinavian influence, but influence from erudite Latin style as found in the *Hisperica Famina* is possible. In the Middle Irish period this obscure style, brought to a climax of artificiality, came to be called *Bérta na Filed* ‘language of the poets.’<sup>40</sup>

39. Too little is known about the absolute dates of texts from Early Ireland, so it is moot to speculate whether phonology and morphology tend to be significantly more archaic in bound language than in contemporaneous prose. It is to be hoped that future research will shed more light on this.

40. Although he does not mention *Bérta na Filed* explicitly, Carey (1996) gives an overview of the principles of Irish obscure styles and of their changes over the centuries. A detailed and up-to-date study of the many facets of obscure styles of expression in Early Ireland is a desideratum.

## 5.1 Ornamentation

The main ingredients of phonetic ornamentation in medieval Irish poetry are alliteration and rhyme, and these are further differentiated into several subtypes. The one combining factor for both is that the guiding principle is the similarity or near-sameness of sounds (cf. Tristram 1995), but not their identity, as would be typical in many other traditions.

Alliteration, OIr. *úaimm* or *comúaimm* ‘stitching together’, in its basic form is the concatenation of stressed words beginning with the same radical consonant. Like in Germanic, all vowels alliterate, which may be indicative of a glottal stop at the onset of the word.<sup>41</sup> Unstressed elements in the line, i.e. articles, prepositions, conjunctions, preverbal particles and other pretonic portions of words are generally ignored for alliterative purposes, just as they are for rhyme. However, I would argue that this is not an absolutely strict inhibition, and it may be tempting on occasion to also include unstressed elements into the account. For alliterative purposes, the underlying ‘radical’ initial consonant of a word counts, irrespective of the initial mutation that the word underwent syntactically. For instance, unmutated *b* = [b], lenited *b* (*bh* in ModIr. orthography) = [β] and nasalised *mb* = [mb] in EIr. pronunciation, [m] in ModIr. pronunciation, all alliterate with each other, whereas unmutated *d* = [d] and nasalised *t* (*dt* in ModIr. orthography) = [d] do not alliterate. Neither is there alliteration between a word starting with *n*, nasalised *nd* ([nd] in OIr. pronunciation, [n] in ModIr.) and a nasalised vowel which is also pronounced with an initial *n* [nV]. Obviously, the disparity between mental lexicon and phonetic realisation could lead to tensions. Where the difference between the underlying sound and its surface representation is too extreme, like in the case of *f* which becomes Ø when lenited, alliteration between radical sounds no longer applies. The most probable explanation for this unusual situation is that alliteration was a phonetic feature inherited from an earlier stage of the language before the phonemicisation of initial mutations changed the grammatical shape of the language.<sup>42</sup> As soon as the system of mutations had established itself as a central

41. Whereas in Modern Irish speech in a sequence of two vowels the first one is automatically elided, elision is not an obligatory feature in Early Irish verse. For instance in the *Poems of Blathmac*, elision is only resorted to in a minority of examples when there is no other means of arriving at the required number of syllables. This avoidance of elision is perhaps another piece of evidence for a glottal stop before vowels.

42. Watkins’ (1963:220) argument that morphophonemic alliteration in Irish proves that alliteration “must be coeval with the system of initial mutations, and is no older” is not comprehensible to me. Aaron Griffith reminds me that, if, as is likely, voiced stops experienced allophonic lenition in intervocalic position already in Proto-Celtic, the alliteration of voiced stops could have been ‘psychological’ as early as Proto-Celtic.

morphophonemic process of the language, the inherited system of alliteration was reinterpreted as a mental, psychological phenomenon and no longer as a phonetic, aural device in medieval Irish poetry (Bergin 1923; Ó Cuív 1966:94–95).

According to the metrical handbooks (Murphy 1961:36–37), alliterative chains are broken if a non-alliterating stressed word intervenes, but the practice can be different from the theory. In particular, it seems that in poetry of the earliest period alliterating words can be arranged in much more complex patterns than in the later practice. In some cases, interlaced structures can be created which Hollo (1990) calls ‘double’ or ‘paired alliteration’. In them, sequences of four words alliterate according to the formula  $x...y...x...y...$ . Often, the first and third words are the same. In another variant of alliteration not only initial but also internal consonants play a part in the structural design, thereby creating complex patterns of consonantal correspondence. Sproule (1987:195–200) was the first to draw attention to this phenomenon which he calls ‘complex alliteration’. Finally, de Vries (2015) identifies examples of mirrored alliteration of the type  $x...y...y...x$ . It is interesting to note that while rules of versification in Irish usually tend towards increasing complexity over time, these complex types of alliteration are regularly employed in poetry of the early period, especially in early accentual poetry, but they are absent as a deliberate feature in later syllabic verse.

In accentual poetry, alliteration typically connects the last stressed word of a line with the first stressed word in the following line. In syllabic poetry, alliteration typically figures prominently within lines, but goes across lines only unsystematically and rarely, linking them like in the accentual system. In this way, quite complex structures can be achieved, in particular if unstressed elements are also allowed to play a role, as for instance in *Líadain and Cuirithir* 32:

<i>Céol caille</i>	‘The music of the forest
<i>fom-chanad la Cuirithir,</i>	used to sing around me with Cuirithir,
<i>la fogur fairce flainne.</i>	together with the sound of the blood-red sea.’

*Fidrad freccomail*, literally ‘letters of correspondence’, but usually called ‘linking alliteration’ in English, refers to a variety of devices that go beyond the ordinary rules of alliteration. In non-stanzaic accentual poetry, its domain are consecutive lines that are thus linked together. In stanzaic syllabic poetry, it typically encompasses the last line of a stanza and the first one of the following stanza, but consecutive lines within a stanza can also be affected. In its simplest manifestation, linking alliteration binds the last word of the preceding stanza to the first word of the following stanza by normal alliteration. However, the rules of what classes of words and sounds can be linked are much looser than in normal alliteration. Unstressed words, pretonic elements of stressed words, and even word-internal sounds, as well as sounds that share the place, albeit not the mode of articulation, such as *t*

and *d*, can participate in this variant of alliteration. Nasals that arise as the result of mutational effects also count. In rare cases, *fidrad freccomail* transcends alliteration by repeating the last word or by completely repeating or rephrasing the last line. Where alliteration, even of the flimsiest type, is lacking, other devices such as rhyme, repetition, parallelism etc. can be substituted to link stanzas (Carney 1981; Mac Mathúna 1985: 308–314).

The other central feature of ornamentation in Irish versification is rhyme. It is the constituent ingredient of syllabic verse, but very rare in accentual poetry. Full rhyme starts with the stressed vowel of a word. Any pretonic morphemes, usually found in verbs or certain adverbs, are disregarded for rhyming purposes and do not count for the cadence of a line, either. The stressed vowels of two fully rhyming words must be identical in quantity (either both long or short, or the same diphthong) and in quality. Identity in quality means that the ‘colour’ either of simple vowels or of diphthongs must be matched. When the rhyming words consist of more than one syllable, a *schwa* /ə/, confined by the phonotactics of Old Irish to unstressed, internal syllables, rhymes with another *schwa*. Vowels in absolute final position of a word must be identical. In respect to rhyme, Irish consonants fall into six classes. The sound values are given in phonological brackets in the table below, but because of the rules of OIr. orthography, the written representations of these sounds can be spelled in a great variety of ways. Since rhyme does not involve word-initial sounds, these spellings refer only to internal consonants, and they only represent their most typical spellings:

Class I (voiced stops): /b d g/ (spelled *p, bb; t, dd; c, gg, cc*)

Class II (voiceless stops): /p t k/ (spelled *p, pp; t, tt; c, cc*)

Class III (voiceless spirants): /f θ x/ (spelled *f, ph; th; ch*)

Class IV (voiced spirants and lenited liquids): /β/v ð γ l r n β̃/ (spelled *b; d; g; l; r; n; m*)

Class V (unlenited liquids): /l: r: n: ŋg m/ (spelled *ll; rr; nn, nd; ng; m, mm*)

Class VI: /s/ (spelled *s, ss*)

Examples for perfect rhymes are: *brot : boc; bratt : macc; leth : bech; ben : fer; crann : ball; dos : ros*. In later strict verse from the 12th century onwards, with very few exceptions only consonants of the same group may rhyme with each other (Ó Cuív 1966:96), but in the Early Irish period the rules are looser. The voiceless spirants /f θ x/ can also enter into rhyme with voiced ones /β/v ð γ/, and even rhymes of these with /b d g/ or /p t k/ may occur, all of which would be considered wrong by later poets. Rhyming consonants must not only belong to the same class, but they must also have the same quality, i.e. they must either be palatalised (C') or non-palatalised. The rules are more complex where consonant groups are involved. The system proposed by Ó Cuív (1966:97–103) to describe the principles



for consonant groups in Classical Modern verse are so elaborate that they cannot be reproduced here. Even if the rules are not identical, Ó Cuív's principles may offer an orientation what to look for also in early medieval poetry. In some early poems, rhyme encompasses only the final syllable of a polysyllabic word (Sproule 1987: 198). This behaviour, which is reminiscent of rhyme in the British languages (see below), may be the link with the *homoiooteleuton* of late Latin verse which is plausible as a source for the rise of rhyme in Irish.

The preceding paragraph outlined the basic rules for perfect full rhyme in line-final position. In addition to this main type of rhyme, Irish versecraft recognises, and requires, several subtypes with variations of the rules. Full rhyme also occurs in positions other than the end of the line: *aicill*-rhyme (for which there is no English term) refers to rhyme between the final word of a line (usually line c) and an internal word of the following line. This is not to be confused with internal rhyme which encompasses two words in the interior of two consecutive lines, especially frequent in lines c and d of *deibide* stanzas from the 10th century onwards (Mac Mathúna 1985: 317).

In so-called *rinn-ardrinn* rhyme, the rhyming words are heterosyllabic, i.e. a shorter word rhymes with a longer one. Since the stress nevertheless remains on the first syllable of each of the participants, as a consequence a stressed vowel will rhyme with an unstressed one, e.g. *clius* : *áithius*, *dul* : *gérchrub*. The quality and quantity of the two vowels must still match. Only in the case of words ending in a vowel can a stressed long vowel correspond to an unstressed short one of the same colour, e.g. *cú* : *togu*. Typically, the line with the shorter word precedes the one with the longer word, but occasionally reversal of *rinn-ardrinn* can be found. Although examples occur throughout the entire OIr. period (Meyer 1914: 10–11), this feature has been taken to be generally indicative of earlier practices when the rules of *deibide* had not yet been fully fixed (Thurneysen 1917: 34–38; Mac Mathúna 1985: 307–308). Also Mac Cana (1972: 177–178 fn. 2) regarded the inverted pattern as a sign for the “undeveloped technique” of an author, and saw it as indicative of an early time of composition. For *rinn-ardrinn* in later Irish verse, see Ó Buachalla (2011).

Half-rhyme, also called assonance or consonance, occurs at the end of lines in addition to full rhyme, and it chiefly helps to integrate lines a and c of *rannaigeacht* stanzas with the main rhyme carried by lines b and d. For half-rhyme, the stressed vowels of rhyming pairs need not be identical, but must match in length, e.g. *brígaib* : *dálaib*. Word-internal (not word-final) consonants need not have matching quality, i.e. they can diverge with regard to palatalisation or non-palatalisation.

## 5.2 Accentual poetry

On the basis of the observation that in the ostensibly older of the two systems of medieval Irish versification the regulated occurrence of stressed words is the central characteristic, this poetic style will be called accentual poetry in the following chapter. Alternative names are non-syllabic poetry, an unfortunate designation that makes use of a negative definition, i.e. it is derived from the absence of a characteristic of the successor system. Native, medieval terms are *retoric* (from Lat. *rhetorice* ‘in rhetorical style’) and *roscad*. The similar term *rosc*, long taken to be an ancient expression for ‘utterance’ < \**pro-sk<sup>h</sup>om*, has been recently argued to be a late, innovatory shortening of *roscad* (Corthals 2004).

Even though the general outlines are clear, the precise rules of accentual poetry have not been worked out in all details yet. This is partly due to the fact that the medieval metrical handbooks do not contain information about their internal structure. Unlike many syllabic metres, the handbooks restrict themselves to listing representative examples for a number of accentual metres, assuming that the contemporary readers will be able to understand the details themselves. Consequently, no exhaustive modern description of accentual poetry exists. Law texts, prophecies and direct speeches inserted in prose tales are often set in this style. There is no anthology or reader specifically devoted to accentual poetry, although many important texts have been edited with extensive commentaries.

The age and origins of accentual poetry are disputed. Slotkin (1996) argues on typological grounds that Irish, as a stress-timed language, naturally has accent-counting poetry which he determines to consist of three beats per line with a double off-beat at the end. Watkins (1963) attempted to derive basic accentual metres from Indo-European ancestors, but his methodological approach has been met with criticism, for instance his arbitrary selection of examples that suppresses contradictory material (Klar et al. 1983–4: 47–49; Greene in Turville-Petre 1971: 1; see also West 2007: 53 fn. 78; Mac Mathúna 1985: 302 approvingly summarises Watkins’ position). Furthermore, some of the axioms on which his hypothesis rests have been disproved. The antiquity of the Irish legal tradition which he sees “uninfluenced by Roman law, civil or canon” (Watkins 1963: 220), and which he needs to argue for a great time-depth of accentual poems, is now an outdated concept. For instance, the allegedly “extremely archaic *Bretha Nemed*” (Watkins 1963: 215) has been shown to be of 8th-century provenance and to be dependent on Latin canon law (Breatnach 1984), thus belying both the earlier belief that poems in such metres were generally orally transmitted from a remote past and the belief in the purity of the native tradition.

As for the actual metrical principles underlying accentual poetry, Breatnach (1996: 70–71; see also Breatnach 1991) distinguishes two basic types, one “which

consisted of units of two or three stressed words with connecting alliteration” and one may add, frequent internal alliteration (Breatnach 1991: 199–202), and another one “where syllable count rather than stress is the primary structural feature”, again accompanied by binding and internal alliteration, sometimes also by rhyme (Breatnach 1991: 202–204). “A particularly well represented variety is that with a heptasyllabic line and trisyllabic ending” (Breatnach 1996: 71). Not only strictly metrical features are essential factors for accentual poetry, but syntactic peculiarities are of equal importance (Breatnach 1996: 73; the main features were already referred to above). They result in the very artificial appearance of *retoric*-style. Several scholars (Wagner 1967; Breatnach 1996: 73; Corthals 1996; 1999) have indeed stressed the artificial character of the syntax which they believe is modelled on Latin.

### 5.3 Syllabic poetry

The great majority of medieval Irish poetry is written in syllable-counting metres. Several modern descriptions are available, e.g., Meyer (1909), Thurneysen (1949: 37–38), but Murphy (1961) has proved to be the most popular handbook, even though in some respects it is a step backwards from what his predecessors had achieved. Murphy’s description of EIr. versecraft takes as its starting point the practices of Classical ModIr. poetry for which the rules were codified in writing in the medieval period. Although the two systems, syllabic poetry of Early Irish and of Classical Modern Irish (after 1200), are very similar, the latter being a development of the former, there are subtle differences in the rules, a discrepancy that has been noted frequently (e.g., Ó Cuív 1963; Breatnach 1996: 68). The metres of ModIr. syllabic poetry, called *dán díreach* ‘straight poetry’, are not only regulated more strictly than their predecessors, but also the correct usage of the language, e.g. of inflection, was laid out in handbooks, the so-called *Irish Grammatical Tracts* (Bergin 1916–55) and the *Bardic Syntactical Tracts* (McKenna 1979). Representative and popular collections of syllabic poetry from the EIr. period are Murphy (1956) and Greene & O’Connor (1967).<sup>43</sup>

Syllabic versification developed in the 7th century. Although a certain amount of experimentation is discernible in compositions of the 7th and 8th century, and the rules become manifestly stricter over the centuries, the fundamental metrical characteristics of this style are fully developed already at the earliest time accessible to us. There is a consensus that Latin Christian hymns provided the model (e.g., Thurneysen 1883–5: 336–347; Murphy 1961: 18–20, 25), but the special characteristics of Irish syllabic poetry, the prominence of features such as complex

43. See also URL <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/earlypoetry.html> (accessed October 30, 2015).

types of rhyme, line-internal alliteration, and linking alliteration betray the influence from metrical devices that belonged to the accentual tradition. Another line of thought that has found few followers would trace the development of syllabic metres from native accentual verses (Watkins 1963: 247–248).

Turning to the metrical principles now, syllabic poetry is exclusively arranged in stanzas (OIr. *rann*), predominantly four lines in length, but occasionally involving three, six or eight lines. The use of three-line stanzas in the famous *Líadain's Lament* may serve the iconic function of giving formal expression to the speaker's emotional state of being torn apart and 'incomplete'. The use of stanzas as an organisational principle is doubtlessly due to the imitation of Latin hymnodic models because it finds no parallel in the accentual poetry. Two large families of stanzas can be distinguished, depending on the position of the main rhyme:

1. In the *dían*- and *rannaigecht*-types of metres, there is end-rhyme between lines *b* and *d*, line *c* is often connected with the following line by *aiccill*. Rhyme in this class is regularly between isosyllabic words. Not infrequently, the main rhyme is accompanied by additional rhymes, e.g. half-rhyme that connects line *a*, sometimes also *c*, to the main rhyme.
2. In *deibide*-metres, line *a* rhymes with *b* and line *c* with *d*. Even though rhyme can be between isosyllabic words, especially in the first couplet of a quatrain, *rinn-ardrinn*-rhyme is very common in *deibide*.

The number of syllables per line is fixed, their precise number varying according to the metre. The metre, that is, the type of stanza, is characterised by a fixed syllable count and a cadence per individual line. While the fixed cadence imposes a recurring rhythm at the end of the lines, what comes before it has no fixed rhythm. There is no rhythm that would be particularly preferred in the cadence: stressed monosyllables, trochees, and dactyles are all very frequent. The numbers of syllables per line can range between the extreme poles of one to thirteen. The vast majority of metres, however, uses lines of seven syllables, or one up or down. In Irish philology, the syllabic count of a metre is indicated by writing the successive numbers of syllables of each line in arabic numerals. The cadence, that is the syllable count of the last stressed word in the line, which is also the word that participates in the end-rhyme, is indicated by a superscript numeral after that for the syllable count of the line, e.g. 7<sup>1</sup> 7<sup>2</sup> 7<sup>1</sup> 7<sup>2</sup> or 3<sup>1</sup> 7<sup>2</sup> 7<sup>1</sup> 7<sup>1</sup>. While poems are often written in one metre throughout, variation between different metres, even between families of metres, is not uncommon. A poem that is longer than one or two stanzas has to have a 'conclusion' (OIr. *dúnad*), i.e. the initial morpheme, word or line of the poem has to reoccur at its very end; its absence is a strong sign that the poem has been transmitted incompletely.

Chevilles belong more to stylistics than to metrics proper, but because of their frequency they will be mentioned briefly. They are asyntactic phrases employed as line-fillers, typically at the end of a line, in order to achieve the desired syllable count, rhyme or alliteration. Being formulaic, they usually contribute little to the meaning of the sentence into which they are inserted, but their semantic and formal integration into their environment or isolation is first of all a matter of individual poetic skill.

The combined employment of alliteration, rhyme, half-rhyme, internal rhyme and *aicill* by master poets of Irish versification can lead to extremely complex textures. Over time, this becomes a goal in itself and leads to the emergence of ever more rigid regulations for the employment of the ornaments and devices. As a consequence of the rigid rules, versification becomes more challenging, and there arises a greater need for chevilles to fulfil all the formal requirements of expert versecraft. Concomitantly with this, the importance of the contents declines versus that of the form. From a purely aesthetic point of view, poems may become duller because the poetic flexibility of the earlier period was lost.

## 6. Medieval British

Medieval poetry in the British languages survives for the most part from the high and late medieval period. At least up to c. 1100, the conventional rough cut-off point for Old Welsh, Old Breton and Old Cornish, the three languages are hardly more than variants of one common British language (also called Brythonic), spread over Western Britain and Armorica, distinguished only by a few dialectal features. It is only during the “Middle” period of the British languages that the differences between them increase so much that one can reasonably speak of separate, although closely related languages. This common linguistic area must have favoured a common literary and poetic tradition. However, since no literary texts have survived from the early medieval period of Brittany and Cornwall, the onus for the reconstruction of a common British system of versification of the early middle ages rests largely on the Middle Welsh tradition, with some input from Middle Breton. The extant Cornish material is of a very different, externally influenced nature.

### 6.1 Welsh

Only for Welsh is there sufficiently early material available to get an impression of the historical dimension of versification. Among the few fragments from the Old Welsh period (800–1100), a handful of stanzas (conveniently collected in Falileyev

2008: 105–119) clearly adhere to the metrical scheme known from the later *englynion* tradition. A substantial body of Welsh texts, surviving in manuscripts from the 13th and 14th centuries, is traditionally ascribed to poets of a much earlier time, even as early as the 6th or the 7th century (e.g., Taliesin, Aneirin). Although attempts are not lacking to vindicate the antiquity of this tradition, modern scholarship has been increasingly reluctant to accept these ascriptions. The consensus is nevertheless that these compositions come from a tradition that is — at least in parts — considerably older than the extant manuscripts. Verse compositions in Welsh belong to a great variety of genres: praise poetry, saga poetry, nature poetry, gnomic poetry, religious poetry, prophecies and mythological lore. Although satires do not survive, circumstantial evidence proves that a tradition of satire similar to that in Ireland existed.

Even more so than in Ireland, the extant material shows that the Welsh systems of versification are in a constant flux. Different stages of development correspond to distinct periods of poetry. Welsh scholarship speaks of the poetry of the *cynfeirdd* ‘early poets’ (before 1100), the *gogynfeirdd* ‘not so early poets’ or *Beirdd y Tywysogion* ‘poets of the princes’ (1100–1350), and the *cywyddwyr* ‘*cywydd*-poets’ or *Beirdd yr Uchelwyr* ‘poets of the nobility’ (1320 until mid 16th century), although there are differences in the usage of these terms and they are not strictly synonymous. Like in Ireland, over time versification proceeds towards ever more complex rules which were eventually codified in Einion Offeiriad’s 14th-century treatise *Llyfr Cerddwriaeth* ‘Book of Poetry’. This so-called *Cerdd Dafod* ‘tongue craft’ consists of twenty-four strict metres. The metrical terminology is very elaborate, some of which have no corresponding English expression.

Although the precise practice varies over time and is subject to fashion and perhaps even extra-linguistic factors such as the political climate, the poets, especially the *gogynfeirdd*, can make use of especially difficult language. The syntax can be very loose and strive after deliberate ambiguity by being characterised by sequences of nouns without clear syntactical relationship with each other (MacKenna 1991: 11–13). Also, the vocabulary of the poets can be challenging. The poets may make use of archaisms and rare words or create new words, especially compounds, that occur only once or twice in the entire corpus (MacKenna 1991: 12).

The normal syntax can be interrupted by *sangiad* ‘parenthesis, interpolation’, phrases which are not syntactically related to the immediately surrounding sentence. They are different from the chevilles of the Irish tradition in that *sangiadau* are not purely formulaic, but have some meaningful relation to the overall contents of the sentence.

## 6.2 Ornamentation

In an account of Welsh versification, it is convenient to distinguish even more sharply between poetic ornamentation and metrical principles in the narrow sense than in the case of Irish poetry. While the chief devices of the former are readily recognisable and will therefore be discussed first, the diachronic and synchronic principles of the Welsh metrical arrangement of verses are far from settled.<sup>44</sup> The central ornamental ingredients are various kinds of rhyme, alliteration and a line-and-stanza-linking device called *cymeriad* (Rowland 2014: xxiv–xxvi).

Rhyme means identity of the vowel<sup>45</sup> and consonant (if there is one) in the final syllable of the words. This manifestly reflects the conditions of Old Welsh when the language was oxytonic, i.e. when it had final stress and the rhyming syllables were thus fully accented.<sup>46</sup> Synchronically, Middle Welsh is paroxytonic, i.e. it has penultimate stress. Consequently, rhymes between stressed (in monosyllabic words) and unstressed syllables (in all other words) are the norm. Rhymes can occur at the end of lines (end rhyme) or between words within a line (internal rhyme). The main end rhyme, or the stanza-final rhyme that is echoed in other stanzas, is called *prifodl* ‘main rhyme’, but beside this there are several further subtypes of rhyme. Generic rhyme of the Irish type whereby consonants with similar phonetic characteristics are bundled in groups has been clearly borrowed from Irish. This is underlined by the fact that the native expression for this type of rhyme is *odl Gwyddeleg* ‘Irish rhyme’ (Rowland 1990: 333–334). *Proest* is a looser correspondence of final syllables where only the consonants have to be identical, but the vowels differ. These types of rhyme are used line-finally, line-internally and across lines. *Llusrhyme* is an exclusively internal rhyme where the final syllable of a line-internal word rhymes with an accented penultimate syllable later in the line.

Alliteration is found in two shapes. In early poetry, ‘psychological’ alliteration of radical consonants that is blind to the actual mutated pronunciation and which is therefore similar to the Irish system, may occur. This is later, in the system of

44. For outsiders of the field, the situation is aggravated by the fact that much of the scholarship, including all handbooks, are written in Welsh, for instance Morris-Jones 1925; Jones 1974; 2005. Likewise, many editions and translations of primary texts exist only in Modern Welsh. Some English-language studies or editions contain chapters with overviews of some of the aspects of poetry: Rowland (1990: 305–355; 2014: xiv–xvi), McKenna (1991: 9–13), Haycock (1991), Lewis (2015: 30–45); see also the entries on specific technical terms in Koch (2006).

45. Identity only refers to the quality of the vowels. Unlike Irish, the British languages do not usually distinguish vowel quantity. In late medieval Welsh, the distinction in the quality of *i*, *u*, *y* becomes unstable.

46. It is impossible to say whether a system of rhyme existed before Old Welsh, that is, before the inherited Proto-British final syllables were lost.

strict *cynganedd*, replaced by phonetic alliteration of the audible sounds. A further variation is consonance where not only initial but also internal consonants need to be matched phonetically.

*Cymeriad* ‘taking’, finally, means the linking of metrical units, which can be lines, couplets, or stanzas. This can be achieved by making use of any of the previous ornaments, as well as by the repetition of a word, phrase or consonant in successive beginnings of lines. It thus encompasses both alliteration in the strict sense and what one could rather characterise as anaphora. *Cyrch-gymeriad* ‘cross-cymeriad’ across stanzas can be used to build a chain of *englynion*.

Most of the metres are fundamentally non-stanzaic in that the sequence of lines or couplets adheres to no recurring numerical scheme and cannot be broken down into multiples of smaller numbers. The patterns of end-rhyme are generally simple and include monorhyme stanzas (type: *aaaa...*) or chains of couplets (*aab-bccdd...*) of unspecified length. Building ‘chains’ (*W cadwyn* < Lat. *catēna*), i.e. long poems, from a random number of couplets that are linked by a *prifodl* or by *cymeriad* is a characteristic of Welsh versification.

### 6.3 Metres

Turning to the earliest metrical system now, its precise nature is not easily determinable from the extant texts. This has to do with a double uncertainty about the nature of the accent system in the history of the British languages. One question, in the prehistoric perspective, is whether the Proto-British language since time immemorial had a system of penultimate stress which eventually, after the loss of Proto-British final syllables in the early middle ages, gave way to the attested final accent of the Old Welsh, Old Breton and Old Cornish periods,<sup>47</sup> or if Proto-British originally had initial stress (thus Schrijver 1995: 16–22; 2011: 41), and if so, when did it shift to the penultimate system. The possibility of an original initial accent has a bearing on historical metrics because if — as is conceivable — there is a great time-depth to the functional core of British versification that ultimately goes back to Proto-British times, this first shift to the penultimate would be expected to have had an impact on metrical practices. In such a case, the role that alliteration plays in Welsh poetry could be seen as an inheritance from a time when British was stress-initial (similarly Klar et al. 1983–1984: 32), whereas the subsequent shift to penultimate syllables which eventually became final syllables in the attested languages would have favoured the emergence of rhyme. The nature of British rhyme which only involves final syllables clearly reflects a period when

47. To complicate things even further, this system eventually gave way to yet another instantiation of penultimate stress from the Middle period onwards.



the language was oxytonic. The two principal types of ornament, alliteration and rhyme, could thus serve as guiding fossils that give evidence of distinct historical stages in the development of the accentual system.

It is essential to recognise that, if one favours the idea of original initial accent, one has to operate with two completely unrelated accent shifts to the penultimate in the history of the British Celtic languages. The conjectural one just mentioned, which moved the accent forward in the words, would belong to the dawn of the historic period. The other accent shift took place in the historic period. Whereas the old stages of the British languages (Old Welsh etc.) were oxytonic (see above), the second shift led to the retraction of the accent one position towards the beginning. The precise date of this change, which was surely crucial in the development of the system of versification, is unknown, but may have occurred in the 9th century in Welsh (Schrijver 2011: 41), and roughly at the same time in a parallel act in the other British languages. Conceivably, the conservative pronunciation of poets may have lagged behind the spoken language, but by Middle Welsh the shift to paroxytonic had taken place (with retention of a high pitch on the final syllable).

The experts are divided over the question whether the earliest system of British versification was syllable or stress counting (for surveys see Haycock 1988; 2007: 37 fn. 119; Rowland 1990: 308–314). Some (e.g., Ifor Williams, Kenneth Jackson) favour the idea that the system was originally syllable-counting. In this framework, the frequent deviations from the assumed underlying metres are explained as textual corruptions that occurred during the transmission. This position encourages emending tendencies in textual philology. A difficulty arises from uncertainties pertaining to the syllabic count of lines, i.e. whether the elision of prothetic vowels and the deletion of emphasising post-verbal pronouns can be invoked to manipulate the syllabic count in such a way as to create more uniform lines.

A different school of thought holds that the poetry before 1100 was based on accents (e.g., Morris-Jones 1925; Haycock 1988, 1991). Haycock, for instance, believes that in this system, as a tendency, sequences of two stressed syllables or of more than two unstressed syllables occurring immediately after each other were avoided. Between 1100 and 1350, during the time of the court poets, a shift towards a not yet strict syllabic system took place. This metrical change was probably a consequence of the accent shift from the ultimate to the penultimate syllable shortly before that time. As long as the language was oxytonic, accentual metrics would automatically have resulted in a preponderance of iambic or anapestic rhythms. The new paroxytonic system favoured a trochaic rhythm, certainly in the cadence, but it may also have led to a loss of rhythmical regularity in the line. This may have favoured the move towards fixed syllabic counts as the new metrical principle.

Neither school is able to explain the entire material without taking occasional recourse to textual irregularities and metrical freedom (Rowland 1990: 308–314), although a stress-counting system is probably more flexible and can easier accommodate the amount of observable variation in the earliest extant texts. Jones' (2005: 153) cautious conclusion is therefore that an accentual system was prominent among the early poets as a subconscious structure of the *language*, but that the syllabic system became increasingly stronger until a situation was reached where it emerged as a fixed structure of *expression* with the poets of the nobles (cited after Haycock 2007: 37).

The use of specific metres in medieval Wales varies in rough alignment with the earlier-mentioned periods of poetry. For the earliest phase, that of the *cynfeirdd*, Haycock (1988; 1991: 159–168; 2007: 37–39), who, as outlined above, favours an accentual system, distinguishes three non-stanzaic classes of verse forms and two mixed classes. These classes also provide a basis for analysing later metres.

1. Class I is a short line of two accents comprising usually of 4–6 syllables, rarely going to the extreme poles of 3–8 syllables. The clash of accents is avoided. The short line has no caesura. From a pair to up to twelve of such short lines are tied together by a single end rhyme, the average being four lines. The rhyme usually encompasses even-numbered lines.
2. Class II is a longer line of four accents, with a caesura that separates two ictus before and after it. It varies from 7–12 syllables, but preponderantly has 9–10, the second part usually being shorter with a relatively fixed cadence of four syllables. This line is characterised by greater ornamentation in which internal rhyme, alliteration and assonance connect the two halves.
3. Class III is a tripartite line with two caesuras and a strong accent in every section, sometimes bound by alliteration and/or rhyme. The lines have 7–10 syllables, with 8–9 being the norm. The cadence usually has the form  $\sim - \sim$ . Although this last class is rare in early poetry, it leads to developments that become important in the growth of the three major groups of metres that dominate the poetic production in the ensuing periods.

These are the *awdl* (pl. *awdlau*), the *englyn* (pl. *englynion*) and the *cywydd* (pl. *cywyddau*). They are all syllable-counting. The periods of medieval Welsh poetry are partly distinguished by the relative prominence awarded to each of these types of metres. There is a considerable diversity of variants within each type which cannot be discussed in any depth here.

The term *awdl* (related with *odl* 'rhyme') originally referred to a non-stanzaic verse composition of indeterminate length with one persistent main rhyme (monorhyme), but later came to signify a whole poem that may consist of sections of different rhyme. For instance, the fundamental unit of *cyhydedd naw ban*

'nine-part equivalence' is a rhyming couplet of 18 syllables in total with rhyme on syllables 9 and 18. More complex *awdlau* incorporate internal rhyme into the scheme, with a *prifodl* 'primary rhyme' linking across couplets, while the couplet itself is in turn held together by a number of internal rhymes. For instance, *cyhydedd hir* 'long equivalence' is a couplet consisting of 19 syllables. Internal rhyme links syllables 5, 10 and 15; the *prifodl* occurs in syllable 19.

*Cywyddau* (sg. *cywydd* 'harmony') are among the simplest and at the same time most commonly used of the codified strict metres (Rowlands 1976:xx–xlix). Their basic unit is a couplet of two heptasyllabic lines with three ictus each. The rhyme is between a monosyllabic and a polysyllabic word at the end of each line, the order of which is unimportant. Apart from the simplest and most frequent type, *cywydd deuair hirion* 'harmony of two long lines', three more types are recognised in the poetic handbooks. The *cywydd* was refined in the 14th c. through the introduction of stricter rules, such as the obligatory use of *esgyll* (the last two lines of the *englyn unodl union*, see below) and *cynghanedd*.

*Englynion* are the only stanzaic metres in Early Welsh poetry. Originally consisting of three lines, some time before 1100 four-line variants arose (e.g. the *englyn unodl union*) which ultimately eclipsed the shorter ones in popularity. The simplest variants gravitate towards seven syllables per line, but in many variants the first line is lengthened and the second line shortened. *Englynion* are characterised by end rhyme. In those variants that have a lengthened first line, the *prifodl* lies on the syllable two or three *before* the end of the line. The remaining syllables of the first line are usually linked by some ornamental device with the following line. The obligatory, defining ornamental features can be complemented by a variety of additional, optional ornamentation which become obligatory over time.

The *gogynfeirdd* compose mainly in two types of those syllabic metres (Mackenna 1991:9–11), in the *awdl* and the *englyn*. More effort than in *cynfeirdd* poetry is put into higher-register, formal verse: rhymes are sustained over a longer series of lines than before. The poets could optionally add further embellishment to their verses, such as internal rhyme, additional alliteration and *cyrch-gymeriad*, thus anticipating or paving the way for the later strict *cynghanedd*.

As the name implies, the use of *cywydd* becomes predominant in the last medieval metrical period, that of the *cywyddwyr*. At this time, the metres become strictly regulated. Earlier licences in the count of syllables and accents are abandoned and previously optional, additional ornaments become obligatory for strict versification. The central feature is *cynghanedd* 'harmony' which is not a metre as such, but which is the cover term for a system of strict ornamentation using alliteration, consonantal correspondence and internal rhyme that is added on top of the metres. This system of strict rules has remained in use in Welsh poetry until today, and the word *cynghanedd* has become almost synonymous with formal

Welsh poetry. The poetical practice knows four basic types with a large range of sub-types. The chief rules are that in the simplest type, *cynghanedd lusg* ‘dragging/limping harmony’, the stressed syllable of the line-final polysyllabic word rhymes with a word inside the line. A caesura occurs after the line-internal rhyming word. In *cynghanedd groes* ‘cross harmony’ and *cynghanedd draws* ‘bridging harmony’, again a caesura splits the lines in two parts, not necessarily of equal length. Instead of rhyme, the two parts are bound together by various types of consonantal correspondences. Alliteration is only one aspect of this. The matching of word-internal consonants, and their re-occurrence in the same order is of central importance. *Cynghanedd sain* ‘sound harmony’ makes use of both devices, rhyme and consonantal correspondence. Lines are divided into three sections, of which the ends of Sections 1 and 2 must rhyme, and of which Sections 2 and 3 must be linked by alliteration. Some allowance is made in alliteration: some consonants (mainly *n*, *m* and *r*, but also *f* and *h*) do not need to be matched.

#### 6.4 Breton

In Breton, the extant written evidence for literature sets in only in the Middle Breton period from c. 1500, at a much later date than in Ireland and Wales. At this time, the growth of the tradition of versification has reached a point that is basically beyond the focus of this survey. For Breton, the evidence from this late period has to be used to make inferences about the past. The extant Middle Breton versified literature is almost exclusively restricted to religious drama. Only fragments of the written tradition before that time survive. Occasional glimpses at the poetic strategies of Old Breton have to be inferred from a comparison with Wales, and from translations of vernacular material into Latin which survives in saints’ lives. From this circumstantial evidence, Le Duc (2006:264–265) deduces “that poetry was based on schemes of approximately regular numbers of syllables per line bound to a precise number of stresses, that final and internal rhyme was known, and that alliteration between initial consonants was common”<sup>48</sup>

Middle Breton poetry is syllable-counting, with five, eight, ten or twelve syllables being most common, but up to 23 are possible. It uses a system of internal rhymes beside final rhymes (Hemon 1969:xix–xxiii; 1981:x–xii) which is reminiscent of *cynghanedd* and use of which in printed works continued until the middle of the 17th century (Le Duc 2006:269–270). The following brief characterisation

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48. Unfortunately, Le Duc does not indicate how much of this assessment is based on inference and transfer from the Welsh tradition, and how much is extracted from the formal characteristics of native Latin writing. However, he draws very insightful conclusions about poetic practices from the onomastic formulas used on a small group of Old Breton inscriptions.

of the governing principles of versecraft is taken from Le Duc (2006:270): “The basis of the rhyme is the vowel, and the following consonant is not always taken into account. Vowel length, nasality, and stress seem not to matter, and rhymes are possible between similar sounds.” The neglect of distinctions in vocalic length and nasality, features which arose within the history of Breton, can be seen as an inheritance of the earlier phonological system. “Each line has a compulsory final rhyme and a compulsory internal rhyme between the last syllable of the first half-line and the penultimate syllable of the line as a whole. [...] Often, metrical ornamentation in the form of non-compulsory internal rhymes occurs in addition to the compulsory rhymes. Consonantal alliteration can occur, and is especially common in the first half-line. [...] Another common feature is linking (by rhyme or assonance) between lines.” This complex system of formal versification implies the existence of institutionalised professional poetry, as it is found in other medieval Celtic countries, and it is likely that the Common Celtic term *barzh* was used for the ‘poet’.

[PS: See now also Widmer 2015a and 2015b, which could not be taken into account for this article.]

## 6.5 Cornish

The extant poetry from medieval Cornwall is of a very different nature from the rest of British. It is obviously strongly influenced from outside, namely from the Middle English poetic tradition. Like in Brittany, the surviving material is of a late date, setting in in the 15th century, and it is confined exclusively to religious drama. The number of poetic works is very small, but because of their length they sum up to a considerable amount of material.

While some poetical features are shared with the Welsh and Breton tradition, in particular the use of syllable-counting lines and of ‘British’-style rhyme, “it lacks the ornamentation — alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, *cynganedd*, and *cymeriad* — that is commonplace in Irish, Breton, and Welsh poetry from the Middle Ages” (Bruch 2009: 119). Seven syllables per line preponderate in Cornish metres, the four-syllable short line is an important by-form. Cornish poetry is stanzaic.

A stanza normally comprises a sequence of four to thirteen lines of seven or four syllables which are linked to one another according to one of a small number of permitted end-rhyme patterns (Bruch 2009: 87).

The patterns of this special formal characteristic of Middle Cornish verse “most likely have their roots in the stanza forms used by the writers of Middle English religious drama” (Bruch 2009: 87).

Middle Cornish writers [...] relied solely on end-rhyme for ornamentation, and thus developed ever more elaborate stanza forms as a way to vary patterns of end-rhyme, while keeping individual lines of verse completely unadorned. Although the medieval Cornish corpus provides a few notable examples of alliteration or internal rhyme [...], these stand out precisely because they are so rare, and there was certainly no requirement for poets to add any such embellishment (Bruch 2009: 73).

A single text, the so-called *Charter Endorsement*, deviates from the general pattern, but it displays even heavier influence from English than the others (Bruch 2009: 120).

## 7. Historical and areal evaluation

### 7.1 Insular Celtic

Before potential common Celtic metrical devices can be assessed, the commonalities and differences between the Insular Celtic languages have to be looked at first. Irrespective of the question whether the Insular Celtic languages form a specific genetic subnode within the Celtic language family, they are definitely closely connected with each other because of their geographic and chronological proximity in a common medieval cultural area.

Both the Irish and the British systems of versification appear to be built on accentual metres originally. This is virtually certain for Irish where accentual poetry is manifestly earlier than syllabic verse, and it is very probable for Welsh (and, because of the absence of sufficiently early material from Breton and Cornish, implicitly for all British languages) where the huge variation in the syllable count of early poetry is best explained by an underlying accentual system. While in Irish the change to a syllabic system occurred early, in the 7th century, under the influence from Latin, a strict syllabic system established itself in Wales only at a considerably later date, on the transition from the *cynfeirdd* to the *gogynfeirdd* around 1100. It is attractive to connect this with the reign of Gruffudd ap Cynan, the preeminent figure of Welsh politics at the end of the 11th and the early 12th centuries who was of half-Welsh and half-Hiberno-Norse descent. He had been born and raised in Dublin where he was likely to have become acquainted with sophisticated Irish syllabic poetry, and perhaps also with skaldic verse. There is a late tradition that he introduced new rules to the bardic order in Wales during his reign (cf. Russell in Koch 2006: 853).

Despite differences in the details, alliteration plays a role in both traditions. Definitely in Irish, and possible originally in Welsh, too, alliteration is of a psychological nature, that is to say, the unmutated archiphonemes count for alliteration,

not their phonological realisations. Despite claims to the contrary, such a highly unusual device is best explained as the result of an inherited system of normal alliteration that was re-interpreted after morphophonemic mutations had completely transformed the phonologies of the languages and had left inherited poetic formulaic expressions in a state of apparent chaos. That Welsh eventually reverted to normal surface alliteration at a later stage is a natural step. Watkins (1963:219–220) downplays the importance of alliteration for Irish poetry. He regards it as a relatively recent device, linked to the equally recent emergence of initial stress in Irish. This is disproved by the Gaulish-Irish formulaic equation *bnanom brictom* ~ *brichtu ban/brechtaib ban* ‘magic by women’ which should leave no doubt about the antiquity of alliteration in Celtic versification.

Some aspects of *cynghanedd* are enticingly reminiscent of the complex alliteration in Early Irish accentual poetry (a similarity not explicitly referred to in Sproule 1987), but due to the large time gap between the two they cannot be easily brought into a causal connection with each other. It is more likely an internal development in each of the languages, or due to delayed transmission through cultural agents. Complex alliteration is only rarely employed in Irish and its occurrence is limited chiefly to the earliest period. It seems to be the product of early experimentation that, for whatever reason, was regarded as a dead end, perhaps because it unduly overburdened versification if transferred to syllabic poetry with its already many other limitations. If syllabic poetry had not seen a surge in popularity from the 7th century onwards, it is conceivable that complex alliteration would have prevailed.

Rhyme is a central principle of versification in all medieval Celtic traditions, but the differences in the details are so huge that no common ancestor system can be reconstructed. In the Old British languages, rhyme of only the final syllables arose as a natural consequence of their final stress. In Irish, the emergence of rhyme as a new poetic device in the 7th century is observable in the extant material. Rhyme only between final syllables in a handful of early poems has been ascribed to the imitation of Latin patterns by Sproule (1987: 195–200) who did not note the similarity to the British system of rhyme. The nature of Irish rhyme builds on the phonological system of the Irish language that developed in its extant form after the rise of palatalisation around the 5th–6th centuries. Rhyme being more natural to stress-final languages, it is conceivable that early experimentations with rhyme spreading from the seeds of Late Latin hymns of the Christian tradition did play a role in its emergence in Ireland, and a similar influence may have been at work in Britain. Nevertheless, its unparalleled prominence as an ornament in medieval Celtic versification is probably due to an areal development.

Tristram (1995) stresses the prominence of the principle of near-sameness in medieval insular poetry. According to this principle, phonetic and prosodic units

must not be identical in order to create poetic patterns, but they have to share features. Near-sameness is particularly obvious in psychological alliteration, in Irish rhyming rules, and in the heterosyllabicity of rhyming words. All of these are patently the result of relatively recent or late historical developments, so the shared tendency towards near-sameness can hardly be ascribed to common inheritance, but must be the product of a common cultural climate or of diffusion around the early medieval Irish Sea province. A common development in those countries that can be studied in a long time-frame, Ireland and Wales, is that over time the metrical rules become stricter and more complex. This is most economically viewed as a natural tendency inherent to all systems of versification.

On the linguistic side, in both traditions, the Irish and the British, a certain predilection for obscure styles can be observed, manifesting itself in unusual syntax (e.g., modification or inversion of normal word order) and the use of rare words. However, an inclination towards archaism is a universal tendency of poetical traditions, especially if they are taught in conservative educational systems, and in both cases the frequency of rare expressions becomes stronger only in the course of time, so again this looks more like a common areal innovation or even an independent internal development in each of the traditions. In both traditions, narrative texts contain tongue-in-cheek references to the obscurity of poetical diction (e.g., *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* ‘The Dream of Rhonabwy’, or *Immacallam in da Thúarad* ‘The Colloquy of the two Sages’), evoking the impression that ordinary people without professional training were not able to decode poetic compositions.

In summary, a basic type of stress-counting metres with alliteration has the highest plausibility of forming the core of an inherited Insular Celtic tradition of versification.

## 7.2 The Celtic and Western European perspective

Although some poetic devices such as rhyme have already been ruled out as continuing an ancient inheritance in the preceding chapter on Insular Celtic, arguments for and against them will nevertheless be briefly studied from a Common Celtic and from an areal point of view. Reference to neighbouring traditions will be made where appropriate to get a broader perspective of what was going on culturally in ancient Western Europe.

The survey starts with alliteration. In all three main Celtic traditions, the two Insular Celtic branches and Continental Celtic, it has been seen to play an important role in texts that display characteristics of poetry. This could be used as an argument for common inheritance, but things are not just as simple as that. Alliteration is also a common metrical feature in several other old Western Indo-European poetic traditions, for instance, in early Latin poetry and in related Old



Italic inscriptions, and in various Old Germanic traditions. Consequently, in all of these it could have been inherited from the parent language, and Celtic would only be one current in a much wider stream. Watkins (1995: 23) argues that “alliteration was one of a number of phonetic figures available to the Indo-European poet”, for which he cites examples from various languages (cf. also West 2007: 58–59). But two issues must be kept separate here. The occasional employment of alliteration as an ornamental device as it is found in Vedic or, even more rarely, in Ancient Greek, two central languages for the reconstruction of Indo-European, is different from the systematic use and central position that it occupies in the poetology of ancient and medieval Western European languages. Barring a typological study of the phenomenon, from a purely European point of view there is a strong correlation between stress-initial languages and systematic, not just occasional, alliteration. Even outside of the Indo-European speaking area, alliteration is linked with fixed initial stress for instance in the Finnic languages. It is suggestive, although unprovable, that the presence of alliteration constitutes an argument in favour of a stress-initial phase in Gaulish and British. Rather than thinking of it as an Indo-European inheritance, it is more likely that the systematic employment of alliteration had diffused at some unspecified time from an unspecified source across an area that had a shared prosodic feature, namely initial stress. Within this hypothesis, it is not possible to decide whether alliteration had spread before the consolidation of a separate Celtic branch, or whether it reached the individual Celtic traditions as an areal phenomenon during the early historic period.

Rhyme can be dealt with quickly. The homoioteleuton found on occasion in Ancient Celtic texts is of a very different nature from the genuine rhyme as it appears as an innovation in medieval Insular Celtic. Homoioteleuton implies identical desinences only, and arises partly automatically in stretches of text with similar morphology, whereas genuine rhyme aims at phonetic parallelism across grammatical categories. Homoioteleuton may link sections of text, but full-fledged rhyme usually encompasses the entirety of a text.

A lot of ink has been spilt over the question whether the metres of Celtic were accentual or syllabic. Most notably Watkins 1963 tried to derive Celtic and other Western Indo-European metrics from Proto-Indo-European metrics, typically reconstructed on the basis of Vedic, Avestan and Greek poetry. This has met with some reservation (see Section 5.2), not unrightly so because, in my view, the method is inherently flawed. Unlike linguistic reconstruction, which operates on a very large set of arbitrary phonetic symbols so that systematic correspondences soon rise above the level of mere chance, only a fairly limited number of basic poetic principles and metrical structures occur in the literary traditions of the world. These are not completely arbitrary either, but derive, to a certain extent, from the phonetic and prosodic characteristics of the languages. For instance, the

fact that many Indo-European poetic traditions show basic metric units (cola) of around four syllables, containing one or two stresses is a direct consequence of the morphological and syntactical structures of these languages. In languages where words typically are made up of a root + desinence (the desinence in its turn being made up of a suffix + ending, often merged), cola, which often reflect constituents of sentences, would necessarily tend towards the number of syllables and stresses indicated above. Other constraining factors are, for instance, physiological such as breathing which sets certain natural limits to the length of verses. With this in mind, I am doubtful that, for instance, the OIr. short line is anything other than a trivial superficial correspondence to the “less elevated” shorter line of other Indo-European traditions (Watkins 1963:238–241).

The position taken here is that in all Celtic traditions rhythmical, stress-counting metres can be found, at least in their earliest accessible periods. Short lines of around two stressed words seem to be the most primitive building blocks in what appears to be a formal core of Celtic versification (Celtic in the sense that it may have been in use in the Proto-Celtic period and that it was inherited from there into all daughter systems). The precise details of these accentual systems are likely to have differed from one another, simply because of the very divergent language structures of the Old and the New Celtic languages. Especially when they come into contact with external syllabic traditions, accentual systems can be easily rearranged into syllable-counting systems, by subjecting the sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables to more regulation. This certainly happened to the Insular Celtic traditions surveyed here, but possible instances of syllable counting in the Ancient Celtic material may also be due to contact with Latin models of versification.

There is no evidence from the Continental Celtic, the earliest Irish or the majority of the Welsh tradition that stanzaic organisation played any role in early Celtic poetry. Only in the newly introduced syllabic metres of Ireland does the stanzaic form become pervasive, clearly under Latin influence.

A unifying factor from the social perspective is the special relationship between the poet and his patron that is observable in all traditions. This is well attested for medieval Ireland and Wales, but we are afforded also glimpses at it in external reports about Ancient Gaul. However, such a parallel in the social organisation can be due to social diffusion and can be a common areal feature of the entire Western European culture.

### 7.3 The Germanic and Scandinavian interface

In a sense, the observable similarities between the Ancient and the Insular Celtic metrical systems do not extend far beyond the trivial, and they place the common

Celtic system in a Western-European areal context. The parallels of these simple structural elements in the old Germanic tradition (alliteration, rhythmical short lines of two stresses) have not gone unnoticed before.<sup>49</sup> However, to compare the Celtic system exclusively with Germanic runs up against the methodological problem that any similarities between attested systems may be misleading because of the loss of so many other contemporaneous traditions. The gaps in the evidence may create the impression of a particular affinity of the few surviving traditions, although in fact submerged traditions could have been more important for the overall development of versecraft in Western Europe.

When we leave the prehistoric phase and turn to the medieval period, it is unlikely that Irish versification experienced significant influence from Norse poetry. By the time of the first contacts between the Irish and the Scandinavians, after 795, all formal characteristics of Irish syllabic poetry had already been established, excluding therefore the possibility that Scandinavian influence provided the initial impulse for their emergence. At best, the gradually stricter application of the existing rules in the Middle and Modern Irish period may be ascribed to the long-term effects of interaction with the skaldic tradition, but such a development is also easily conceivable to have happened naturally on its own. In the case of British versification, the situation is less clear-cut because of the lack of reliable texts from the pre-Viking period, and because of the uncertainties surrounding the analysis of the early poetry. However, the rule of Gruffudd ap Cynan in the early 12th century, coinciding with an important watershed in Welsh literature, offers one of the few clear opportunities for an historical constellation that could have favoured the influx of Irish and possibly Scandinavian concepts of versification into Welsh poetry, although again a natural development towards tightening the rules, typologically parallel to what happened in Ireland and the Norse World, cannot be excluded.

The reverse question, namely if skaldic poetry drew inspiration from Irish (or even Welsh) models, is at first glance more amenable to an affirmative answer. Even at a superficial glance, complex skaldic versification in the courtly *dróttkvætt* metre has several things in common with medieval Celtic syllabic poetry: fixed syllable count per line, alliteration, and internal rhyme are the most salient features. It is believed that this kind of strict poetry, as opposed to the freer eddic verses, began to develop in the early 10th century (Marold 2005: 569–570, 2006).

49. In the words of Mees (2008: 204), Travis (1973: 2–3, 86–90) argues that “parallels between Germanic and Celtic metre suggest that accent and the word foot were the main salient features of both poetries originally and that the isosyllabic and rhythmically corresponding lines commonly used in Insular verse represent a development on an original form comparable to the system of lifts (stressed plus heavy/long) and sinkings of Old Germanic poetry”. Travis’s study is unfortunately fairly speculative.

This is about a century after the first contacts of Scandinavians with Ireland, and offers a sufficiently long window of opportunity for cultural cross-fertilisation. It is obvious from Irish sources that the initial phase of the Viking period was characterised by hostile encounters, but that closer cultural links emerged already in the 9th century. Turville-Petre (1971: 15–17, 20), who favours an even earlier date in the late 9th century for the creation of *dróttkvætt*, emphasises the potential role that Scandinavian settlers in Ireland could have played in its formation. Tranter (1997: 203–206) highlights other contexts such as trade or the role of high-status hostages, but he ultimately remains agnostic and regards *dróttkvætt* as “an eclectic combination, influenced by untraceable factors”.

The formal differences between Irish syllabic verse and *dróttkvætt*, that are evoked to emphasise the unlikelihood of the latter’s derivation from the former (e.g., Holland & Lindow 1996), are generally of a trivial sort. All of them could have arisen by an organic development in the new environment.

1. That Irish syllabic poetry prefers seven syllables per line whereas the *dróttkvætt* has six is only a minor divergence. There is an enormous amount of formal variation within the Irish tradition, the choice of one syllable more or less can be a response to specific constraints of the language systems.
2. The exclusive (?) use of trochaic cadences in *dróttkvætt* against greater variation in Irish is an instance of stricter regulation.
3. The different role of alliteration is not highly significant either. Alliteration is present in Irish syllabic poetry, albeit chiefly as an ornament, not as a constitutive element, but this subtle distinction could easily have been reinterpreted in the process of adaptation to another language system where alliteration was still deeper rooted.
4. Although a syntax that diverges from normal prose practice is common in Insular Celtic poetry, there is nothing comparable to what is found in skaldic poetry in the way of deviation from normal language. This is clearly a trait that sets skaldic verse apart from Irish verse, but if one adopted the idea that Irish poetry provided the impetus for the creation of skaldic versification, one may wonder if the — mildly — deviant syntax of Irish, which follows a few, simple rules of word order inversion, was overgeneralised and reinterpreted as a licence for large-scale variation in the situation of linguistic and cultural contact.

As a concluding remark, I want to point out another possible area of Irish-Germanic poetic interaction. Busse (2002) has argued for Old Irish influence on some early examples of Old High German rhymed poems, in particular Otfrid von Weissenburg. The context for this interaction are the Irish missionary activities in Central Europe in the early middle ages.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used: Bret. = Breton, Cib. = Celtiberian, Clt. = Celtic, Corn. = Cornish, Elr. = Early Irish, Gaul. = Gaulish, InsClt. = Insular Celtic, Ir. = Irish, Lep. = Lepontic, MBret. = Middle Breton, Mlr. = Middle Irish, MW = Middle Welsh, OBret. = Old Breton, OCorn. = Old Cornish, Ogr. = Ogam Irish, OIr. = Old Irish, OW = Old Welsh, PC = Proto-Celtic, W = Welsh.

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