

LIAM BREATNACH, ed., *Córus Bésgnai: An Old Irish Law Tract on the Church and Society*. (Early Irish Law Series 7.) [Dublin]: Dundalgan Press for the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2017. Pp. xii, 346. €40. ISBN: 978-1-85500-232-6. doi:10.1086/703898

This volume contains a critical edition of the Old Irish law tract *Córus Bésgnai* (*The Arrangement of Discipline*), one of the constituent tracts of the late seventh-century compilation *Senchas Már* (*The Great Tradition*). It has taken the editor a very long time to bring this work to completion, but the result is a highly accurate and informative edition representing the highest standard of scholarship in early Irish language and law.

Córus Bésgnai mainly deals with the regulations by which the society functions orderly, paying special attention to the relationship between the church and the laity. It starts with a discussion on the establishment of contracts and the importance of abiding by contracts, then states the roles of lord, church, and kindred in an orderly society. It elaborates on the reciprocal rights and duties of the church and the laity and demarcates the claims and obligations to an individual's property between the church and the kindred. In what is left of the tract it also discusses the relationship between father and son, vassals and church, succession of abbacy, and other topics. Needless to say, this is an important text not only for the study of early Irish law, but also for understanding the power structure and daily life in medieval Ireland.

The text of *Córus Bésgnai* survives only in late medieval manuscripts, and roughly the second half of its content is lost. During centuries of transmission the Old Irish text has been modernized or corrupted, and substantial glosses and commentary have been added. In editing Old Irish law tracts it is the norm both to reconstruct the Old Irish text, keeping the spelling and morphology closely to the standard of the Old Irish glosses in early medieval manuscripts ("normalization"), and to present the later glosses and commentary together with their referends in the Old Irish text. Previous editions of early Irish law texts, including the ones in the same series, have attempted to display the normalized text, manuscript variants, and glosses and commentary from all witness copies together, which is quite a challenge for the editor and the readers alike. In the present book, Liam Breatnach adopts a different approach, namely to offer the normalized Old Irish text first, clear of glosses and commentary but accompanied by English translation, so that readers can have an immediate idea of the legal issues in question and can more readily appreciate the original structure and coherence of the tract. Then each copy of the tract, together with the glosses and commentary, is diplomatically transcribed and (more literally) translated, showing precisely what is read from the manuscripts. Such an approach provides a clear dichotomy between what is reconstructed and interpreted by the editor and what is actually preserved in late medieval manuscripts. The former is regarded as an approximate of the original seventh-century text, while the latter reflects centuries of accumulation and development in Irish legal thought. Comparison of variants and reasons for emendation are relegated to the textual notes, which also contain extensive discussions of Irish legal and social institutions. I think the editorial method is very judicious and establishes a fine model for the field.

Following this editorial method, the book is divided into six chapters. After a brief foreword and a list of abbreviations is an introduction describing the content and structure of the tract, methodology, manuscript copies, title, further adaptations in other law texts, and the text's language and stylistics. The second chapter consists of the reconstructed Old Irish text, an English translation conveying the full meaning, and extensive notes. The notes have especially benefited from the editor's unparalleled knowledge of early Irish law texts, in that

a large number of similar expressions or passages on the same topic are cited and translated from other law tracts, many of which are yet unedited. This rich body of cross-references is invaluable for future researchers who wish to explore those law tracts. Chapters 3 to 6 each offers the diplomatic transcription, English translation and notes of one of the surviving copies of *Córus Bésgnai*, including all the glosses and commentary. The first appendix informs on the orthography and edition, which should rather be placed in the introductory chapter; other appendices contain extracts of *Córus Bésgnai* and similar passages found in other texts, corrigenda to the semidiplomatic edition of *Corpus iuris Hibernici*, and a list of constituent tracts of *Senchas Már*, followed by an index and bibliography.

The only problem with this excellent piece of work is that in normalizing the text, the editor sometimes follows the manuscript rather than the standard Old Irish grammar. For example, section 38, *co fortacht cach etail má fa-n-orr anetail* . . . (gen. sg. and nom. sg., MS *atail* and *anetail*), but section 40, *Comloigthi cach etal ría n-anetal* (nom. sg. and dat. sg., MS *etal* and *anetal*). Old Irish *etail* “pure, sinless” is a *bahuvrīhi* i-stem adjective (<**ess-tol-i-* “without desire”), and so is its negative *anetail* “impure, sinful,” in these two passages substantivized (“pure/impure person”). Section 40 therefore should be reconstructed *Comloigthi cach ettail ría n-anetail*. The nominative plural “wergilds” *éircea* in section 16 and *éirci* in section 29 should be *éirce*, given that *éaic* is an i-stem feminine noun (although later confused with ā-stem). Despite these minor inaccuracies, the whole book is a prime example of scholarship and will be indispensable for anyone interested in early Irish law and history.

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