

VARIA I

The king of Dál nAraidi's salve*

The purpose of this note is to bring to light a remedy for an eye ailment preserved in a fifteenth-century Irish medical compendium that consists mainly of remedies to treat ailments affecting the human body. The main scribe of the text in question is Connla Mac an Leagha, who was working as a practising physician, probably under the patronage of the Mac Diarmada lords in the medieval lordship of Magh Luirg (Moylurg) in Roscommon.¹ The remedies are, for the most part, arranged in the *a capite ad calcem* order, as is usual in this kind of compendium, and they include cures for ailments for every part of the body from the head to the feet. The single copy of the compendium is now divided between two manuscripts. The larger part survives in the composite manuscript RIA MS 445 (24 B 3) (pp 33–93). The text of two lacunae in that manuscript (after pp 70 and 74), is found in sixteen pages preserved in RIA MS 467 (23 N 29) (ff 1–4, 6–9).²

This compendium contains both prose and versified remedies of varying length and complexity, as well as a number of charms. Some of the longer, more complex recipes are termed *urchosc* ‘antidote, preventive’.³ The vast majority of the recipes are presented in a short format, beginning with the name of the disorder for which the recipe is recommended as a cure, followed by a list of the ingredients required and a brief description of the method of application. A typical entry is demonstrated in this example:

Ar galur súla .i. mecon losa na croichi do bruith ar uisce, in t-uisce do cur fona rosca, briscén do cur umpo , icaid doig , derge , amrosca.⁴

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¹ For a discussion on the Mac an Leagha family of physicians and of the colophon (RIA MS 467 (23 N 29) fol. 4r 34–40) indicating that Connla Mac an Leagha was a working physician, see Paul Walsh, ‘An Irish medical family—Mac an Leagha’, in Colm Ó Lochlainn (ed.), *Irish men of learning* (Dublin, 1947), 206–18; 214–17.

² For a revised collation of these two sections of the compendium, which are not recognised in the RIA manuscript catalogue as forming a single text, see David Stifter, ‘Zur Bedeutung und Etymologie von altirisch *sirem*’, *Die Sprache* 45 (1–2) (2005), 160–89; 161, citing the unpublished cataloguing work of Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha; see also Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, ‘Early Modern Irish medical writings’, *Newsletter of the School of Celtic Studies* 4 (1990), 35–9; 36; Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, ‘An Irish medical treatise on vellum and paper from the 16th century’, in Pádraig Ó Macháin (ed.), *Paper and the paper manuscript: a context for the transmission of Gaelic literature* (Cork, 2019), 111–25; 111.

³ See *eDIL* s.v. *airchosc*: ‘check, hindrance esp. of preservative or prophylactic against disease; antidote, spell’, and P.S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (Dublin, 1927), s.v. *urchosc*: ‘act of hindering, preventing; a preventive or antidote, a medicine or specific, an injection or enema; a preventive against evil, a charm or spell’.

⁴ RIA MS 445 (24 B 3) p. 51. 5–6 [Beginning on 6 and finishing on 5].

For eye disease, boil fennel root with water and put the water on the eyes; put a mash around them. It heals pain, redness and blindness.⁵

The absence of measurements in this recipe may be disconcerting to the modern reader, but it must be borne in mind that these compendia were compiled by physicians for physicians, who would have been aware of the quantities and proportions needed for an efficacious cure. From experience they would have had a knowledge of the potency and possible toxicity of ingredients, and this would have guided their decision regarding dosage. This absence of measurements is mirrored in other European vernaculars. In an examination of Old English medical texts, Anne Van Arsdall explains that the compilers of such texts assume that ‘the user already has a great deal of familiarity with such material and knows how to diagnose conditions and make the remedies listed. The texts are not intended to be instructional, but are like cookbooks for experienced cooks.’⁶ As mentioned above, our scribe, Connla Mac an Leagha, was a practising physician, making it conceivable that the same principle applies to Irish medical texts.

Each section of the compendium deals with one part of the body, and many begin with a list of the diseases which can affect the part of the body being dealt with. The beginning of the section dealing with eye ailments is marked with a large ornamental capital ‘D’ and starts with three stanzas on the subject of eye ailments, including *find* ‘cataract’, *cáer abra* ‘stye’, *ceó inglan* ‘unclean mist’, *slándoille* ‘epiphora’,⁷ *sremaige* ‘streaming’, *derge* ‘redness’ or perhaps ‘conjunctivitis’, and *amrosc* ‘blindness’.⁸

The recipe for the king of Dál nAraidi’s eye salve is found in RIA MS 445 (24 B 3) p. 52.4–6, about mid-way through the section of the manuscript listing almost 100 eye ailment recipes. The most striking feature of this particular cure is that the first element of the recipe does not specifically mention the condition for which it is intended, as, for example, in the recipe cited above, and instead begins with the words ‘fobairt rīg Dāl⁹ nAraidi’:

Fobairt rīg Dāl nAraidi .i. edursnam glas uindsend , soilech brister ,
fáscther tre brét , curtur mil tana air , salann , do berar fiuchad , curtur
fon súil , iccaid.

The king of Dál nAraidi’s salve, .i.e. green inner bark of ash and willow are broken and strained through a cloth, and thin honey is put on it and salt; it is brought to the boil and is put on the eye and it heals.¹⁰

⁵ My translation.

⁶ Anne Van Arsdall, *Medieval herbal remedies: the old English herbarium and Anglo-Saxon medicine* (London: 2002), xiii.

⁷ Whitley Stokes, ‘Three Irish medical glossaries’, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 1, part 3 (1900), 325–47: 337, ‘epifora .i. sl. doilli’. Epiphora is an eye disorder in which tears do not drain away normally but flow down the face.

⁸ RIA MS 24 B 3, p. 48, 14–19.

⁹ The manuscript has *Dāl* here instead of the expected genitive *Dāil*.

¹⁰ My translation.

When the condition being treated is not specifically named it is usually obvious that it is the same as that found in the preceding remedy. This is generally indicated by the use of such words as *item* ‘also’ or *fobairt eile* ‘another salve’, indicating that the previous topic will continue in the next remedy. The words at the end of the recipe, ‘*curtur fon súil , īccaid*’, ‘is put on the eye and it heals’, signify that this remedy is for an eye ailment, but the condition for which the treatment is recommended is not immediately apparent.

The title ‘king of Dál nAraidi’ must be the key to the purpose of this remedy because it has supplanted the name of the disease. The over kingship of the Ulaid was shared between Dál Fiatach, Dál nAraidi and Uí Echach Cobo.¹¹ Dál nAraidi is the name associated with a kingdom mostly situated on the east side of Lough Neagh in what is now county Antrim.¹² The king’s residence was at Ráith Mór, east of Antrim town in the district known as Mag Line.¹³ There is one king of Dál nAraidi who could plausibly be associated with an eye-salve: Congal Cáech or Cláen (‘Congal the one-eyed’ or ‘squinting’).¹⁴ He is included in the regnal lists of the Dál nAraidi.¹⁵ In the Ulaid regnal list, the individual in question is named as Congal Cáech mac Scanlái.¹⁶ The earliest annalistic reference to him is in the *Annals of the Four Masters* under the year 624:

Cath Duin Ceithern ria n-Domhnall, mac Aodha, mic Ainmirech, for Conghal Caoch no Claon, mac Scandlain, dú in ro marbhadh Guaire Gaillseach mac Forannain, & aroile sochaidhe, & ro meabhaidh iarumh for Congal.

The battle of Dun Ceithern was gained by Domhnall, son of Aedh, son of Ainmire, over Congal Caech, or Claen, son of Scannlan, where Guaire Gaillseach, son of Forannan, and many others, were slain; and Congal was afterwards defeated.

It is not any medical expertise on the part of Congal Cáech that has led to his name being attached to our remedy, but rather the nature of his affliction. According to several medieval Irish sources, Congal lost the sight in one eye as a result of a bee sting. There is an account of the episode in which Congal is blinded in the law tract on bee-keeping known as *Bechbretha*, a component tract of *Senchas Már*.¹⁷ Liam Breatnach has most recently argued that this compilation was put together at Armagh in the second half

¹¹ F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), 107.

¹² For further reading on the political groupings of this area, see, T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), 54–67.

¹³ T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Congal Cáech’, *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (23 September 2004), available online at: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-50096> (accessed 26 June 2019).

¹⁴ I thank Denis Casey for pointing this out to me.

¹⁵ *LL* vol. i, 195.

¹⁶ *LL* vol. i, 193.

¹⁷ Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly, *Bechbretha*. Early Irish Law Series (Dublin, 1983; repr. 2008), §30–4 (hereafter *Bechbretha*).

of the seventh century.¹⁸ The incident leading to Congal's blinding is also recorded in two saga narratives. Myles Dillon suggests that the first one, *Cath Maige Rath*, may be dated to the tenth century.¹⁹ The second saga is the late-eleventh or twelfth-century *Fled Dúin na nGéd*.²⁰ In the earliest text, *Bechbretha*, the reference is to Congal Cáech, king of Tara, while the two later texts refer to him as king of Ulster.²¹

*Air is sí cétnae breth inso ceta-rucad im chinta bech for Congail Cháech cáechsíte beich. Ba-ch rí Temro conid-tubart assa fláith.*²²

For this is the first judgment which was passed with regard to the offences of bees on Congal the One-eyed, whom bees blinded in one eye. And he was king of Tara until [this] put him from his kingship.²³

There is no other evidence for Congal having held the kingship of Tara, and for the purposes of this study it is only the kingship of Dál nAraidi that is relevant. Charles-Edwards and Kelly state that his acquisition of the kingship of Tara could have been possible due to feuding among the Uí Néill.²⁴ In both of the saga accounts Congal is called the king of Ulster.

Our remedy refers to a king of Dál nAraidi and, as noted earlier, Congal Cáech is included in this kingdom's regnal list. Both of the sagas narrate the history of the hostility between Congal Cáech and his foster-father, Domnall mac Áeda, over-king of the Uí Néill, which culminates in Congal's death in 637 at the Battle of Mag Rath (Moira, County Down).²⁵ Congal sustained the ill-fated bee sting when he was under the care of Domnall. In *Cath Maige Rath*, dissatisfaction over the inadequate compensation that Domnall, the owner of the bees, granted to Congal is the cause of enmity between them. The Ulstermen called for the eye of Domnall's son to atone for Congal's injury, but Domnall's judgement was that the swarm of bees alone be destroyed.²⁶

¹⁸ Liam Breatnach, *The Early Irish law text Senchas Már and the question of its date*, E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 13 (Cambridge, 2011).

¹⁹ For dating of the saga, see Myles Dillon, *The cycles of the kings* (Dublin, 1994), 65. Carl Marstrander, 'A new version of the Battle of Mag Rath', *Ériu* 5 (1910), 226–47. Máire Herbert proposes that the verse elements of *Cath Maige Rath* may be earlier, see Máire Herbert, 'Fled Dúin na nGéd: a reappraisal', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 18 (1989), 75–87; 78.

²⁰ John O'Donovan, *The banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and the battle of Magh Rath* (Dublin, 1842); Carl Marstrander, *Fleadh Dúin na nGéadh agus Cath Muighe Ráth* (Christiania, 1910); R.P.M. Lehmann, *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 21 (Dublin, 1964); R.P.M. Lehmann, 'The banquet of the Fort of the Geese', *Lochlann* 4 (1969), 131–59; Herbert, 'Fled Dúin na nGéd: a reappraisal', 75.

²¹ For further discussion on Congal Cáech as he is portrayed in *Bechbretha*, *Cath Maige Rath* and *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, see Jacqueline Borsje, 'Demonising the enemy: a study of Congal Cáech', in J.E. Rekdal and A. Ó Corráin (eds), *Proceedings of the eighth symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica* (Uppsala 2007), 21–38.

²² *Bechbretha*, 68, §31–2.

²³ *Bechbretha*, 69, §31–2.

²⁴ See *Bechbretha*, 123–31 for a detailed discussion on Congal Cáech's genealogy and the kingship of Tara.

²⁵ Charles-Edwards, 'Congal Cáech'.

²⁶ Marstrander, 'Battle of Mag Rath', 233.

Fled Dúin na nGéd sets a similar scene, with additional information about a second eye injury suffered by Congal. According to this account, Congal was accompanied by his own nurse when he first came to Domnall as a child to be fostered, but Domnall sent this woman back to the Ulaid and allocated one of his own women to care for the child instead. It was through this woman's neglect that Congal was stung, resulting in the squint that gave rise to his epithet 'Cláen'. Later, after a defeat in battle by the high-king, Suibne Menn, Domnall, accompanied by Congal, is forced to flee to Scotland. On their return to Ireland Congal kills Suibne, with the expectation that on Suibne's death Domnall would restore Congal's familial territory to him. In his dying moments Suibne manages to hit Congal with a chess piece, causing total blindness in his already damaged eye, and thus earning him the name 'Cáech'. Domnall does not fully honour his commitment to Congal, thus compounding Congal's resentment.

The references to Congal Cáech's eye injury in these texts support the argument that the association of an eye-salve with the king of Dál nAraidi in Connla Mac an Leagha's compendium is indeed an allusion to this figure. While he is not specifically called the king of Dál nAraidi in *Bechbretha*, *Cath Maige Rath* or *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, Congal's kingship of Dál nAraidi is established in the regnal lists.

The compendium has many other examples of references to mythical and historical authorities, which must have had significance for the users of this text. Deborah Hayden has shown how classical medical authors such as Dioscorides, Galen and Hippocrates are cited alongside Irish authorities, some of whom seem to have been historical physicians (for instance Conn Mac an Leagha, Conn Mór Mac Gilla na Naomh [Mac an Leagha?] and an unnamed abbot of Bangor)²⁷ while others are mythological figures (such as Dían Cécht, the Dagda, Míach and Oirbea).²⁸ Indeed, Míach is mentioned as an authority in the ornamented title at the beginning of the collection of recipes for eye ailments (RIA MS 445 (24 B 3) p. 48, 12–13):

De dolore oculorum .i. do gallraib na sūl , is iat so iat mar derbus Míach mac Dīan Cēcht do bī ag leiges Eochach Ollathar .i. in Daga ...

On diseases of the eyes, and these are as follows as Míach, son of Dían Cécht, has attested to belong to the healing art of Eochu Ollathair .i.e. the Dagda ...²⁹

These mythological attributions demonstrate that the compiler of the medical compendium was familiar with aspects of Irish literary tradition beyond

²⁷ Deborah Hayden, 'Three versified medical recipes invoking Dían Cécht', in Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill (eds), *Fir fesso: a Festschrift for Neil McLeod*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 17 (Sydney, 2018), 107–23: 114–15, which includes transcriptions and translations of the full stanzas in which these names occur; Deborah Hayden, 'Attribution and authority in a medieval Irish medical compendium', *Studia Hibernica* 45 (2019), 19–51: 35–8.

²⁸ Hayden, 'Attribution and authority', 38–46.

²⁹ Hayden, 'Attribution and authority', 44.

the strictly medical or scientific sphere. I believe that the reference to the king of Dál nAraidi would have been sufficient for an enlightened reader to understand that this remedy was for a bee sting in or around the eye.

As Máire Herbert points out, ‘the public ... sought recognition of familiar codes and conventions shared from one work to another. ... This involves identification of the signals by which the text disclosed itself to its public.’³⁰ It would appear that the compilers of our text and possibly its exemplar(s) used historical and mythical persons to enrich what could have been an unvarnished scientific and medical text with inter-textual references. A knowledge of literature and history, though not essential to understand all the cures, adds an enigmatic and thought-provoking element to at least some of the remedies. If the reader was unable to decode this particular remedy, there were instructions for many other salves which would also have soothed the sufferer, although to my knowledge, there is no other recipe in the text specifically for bee stings. It could also be argued, however, that the reference to the king of Dál nAraidi was in no way enigmatic and that the purpose of this salve would have immediately been apparent to the intended audience.

The ingredients called for in the ‘king of Dál nAraidi’s salve’ are not unusual, and many are common to several other recipes in the compendium. *Soil*³¹ ‘willow’ is found as a component in eight different eye recipes and *uinnius/uindsend* ‘ash’ in two recipes, but here the stipulation is for *edursnam*³² *glas uindsend* , *soilech* ‘the inner green bark of ash and willow’. Other recipes also call for this ingredient, but this is the only occurrence in the collection of eye recipes.

Willow bark had been used as medicine for the relief of pain in Asia, Africa, North America and Europe at least as early as biblical times.³³ In 1757 Rev. Edward Stone, a vicar from Oxfordshire, discovered that willow bark was effective against agues and other fevers. The bark of ash was also used for allaying fevers.³⁴ Willow bark contains salicylic acid (named from Latin *salix*, willow tree); this compound was one of the starting materials utilised in the production of acetylsalicylic acid (commonly known as the painkiller aspirin) in 1897. Hayden has noted the inclusion of willow bark in a versified cure for headache in the medical compendium being considered here.³⁵ Furthermore, the first-century Greek physician, Dioscorides,

³⁰ Herbert ‘*Fled Díin na nGéd: a reappraisal*’, 75.

³¹ *Soil/sail*, ‘willow’ is always spelt *soil* in this compendium.

³² *eDIL* s.v. *etarsnam*. On this, see Stifter, ‘Zur Bedeutung’, 168.

³³ D.E. Allen and Gabrielle Hatfield, *Medicinal plants in folk tradition: an ethnobotany of Britain and Ireland* (London, 2004), 115. Dioscorides used willow bark in remedies for gout and other inflammatory diseases: see Volker Schulz, Rudolf Hänsel, Mark Blumenthal and V.E. Tyler, *Rational phytotherapy: a reference guide for physicians and pharmacists* (5th edn; Berlin, 2004), 197–8.

³⁴ Allen and Hatfield, *Medicinal plants in folk tradition*, 249.

³⁵ Deborah Hayden, ‘A versified cure for headache and some lexicographical notes’, *Keltische Forschungen* (2019), 7–22: 16.

recommended the sap of willow for, among other things, its ‘ability to clean the elements that cast a shadow over the pupils of the eyes.’³⁶ An internet search for home remedies for bee stings yields among its results a recommendation that a wet aspirin tablet or aspirin paste be applied to the site of the sting. This comes with the caveat that, according to a 2003 study, this remedy, although popular, is not as effective as the application of ice in reducing the swelling, and actually increased redness at the site.³⁷

Another requirement in the king of Dál nAraidi’s salve is *mil tana*, ‘thin’ or possibly ‘diluted’ honey, even though simple *mil* ‘honey’ is included in 24 of the eye recipes. Honey, as well as being a medicinal ingredient itself, is used as a vehicle for administration of the potent components of a remedy. Twenty-first century home remedies also recommend the application of a small amount of honey to the site of a sting and covering it with a loose bandage for up to an hour.³⁸ Honey has been proven to have antimicrobial properties and has been used to treat infection effectively.³⁹

Salt is the final ingredient in our salve. Salt worked into a paste with water is recommended to reduce the itch associated with bee stings. Dioscorides recommended that salt be:

mixed with itch salves; they (the salts) check small protuberances on the eyes, they draw in membranes that grow over the eyes from their inner corners and other types of flesh overgrowths.⁴⁰

The same text advises the use of salt ‘for the bite of a millipede, with vinegar and honey, also for the sting of wasps and of earth-wasps.’⁴¹

Modern conventional medical treatment for a bee sting in the eye, or in the eye area, recommend the use of anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, anti-histamines and corticosteroids to control the inflammation.⁴² The combination

³⁶ L.Y. Beck (trans.), *Pedanius Dioscorides of Anazarbus: de materia medica* (Hildesham, 2010), 74, §I 104, (hereafter cited as Dioscorides).

³⁷ C.R. Balit, G.K. Ibister and N.A. Buckley, ‘Randomized controlled trial of topical aspirin in the treatment of bee and wasp stings’, available on the website of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14677790> (accessed 20 January 2020).

³⁸ Annette McDermott, ‘Home remedies for bee stings. What works?’, *Healthline.com* 18 November 2016; published online: <https://www.healthline.com/health/outdoor-health/home-remedies-for-bee-stings> (accessed 19 June 2019).

³⁹ Peter Charles Molan, ‘Honey as a topical antibacterial agent for treatment of infected wounds’, *World wide wounds*, November 2001, published online: <http://www.worldwidewounds.com/2001/november/Molan/honey-as-topical-agent.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

⁴⁰ Dioscorides 383, § V 109, 2.

⁴¹ Dioscorides 384, § V 109, 4.

⁴² M. Gilboa, M. Gdal-on and S. Zonis, ‘Bee and wasp stings of the eye. Retained intralenticular wasp sting: a case report’, *British Journal of Ophthalmology* 61 (1977), 662–4; available online at: <https://bjophthmol/61/10/662.full.pdf> (accessed 14 May 2019).

of the four ingredients in the king of Dál nAraidi's salve (ash bark, willow bark, honey and salt) may have had a similar effect.⁴³

Further examination of this compendium may reveal more of this type of recipe, which requires some knowledge of historical and literary material to enable the modern reader unpick the mystery of its purpose. Our physician, or the scribe of his exemplar, injects some variety into what could have been a repetitive list of diseases and their cures by making his reader pause to think about what the reference to the king of Dál nAraidi could mean. Working it out would presumably not have been a difficulty for Connla Mac an Leagha or one of his contemporaries, whose familiarity with the wider literary and historical tradition would have allowed them to easily decipher such a reference.

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⁴³ The potential usefulness of old remedies has been demonstrated by a team at the University of Nottingham, which reconstituted a salve from a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon medical text, *Bald's Leechbook*, to treat bacterial infection. The salve chosen by the team was one for a *wen* 'stye'. The instructions call for garlic and a second *Allium* species (whose translation into modern English is ambiguous), to be combined with wine and oxgall (bovine bile). The mixture is then left to stand in a brass or bronze vessel for nine days and nights. The Nottingham team found that it kills the most common cause of the infection it was designed to treat. The scientists involved suggest its success depended on the combined activity of several antimicrobial ingredients and on the nine-day storage period specified in the recipe. See Freya Harrison, Aled Roberts, Rebecca Gabriliska, Kendra Rumbaugh, Christina Lee and Stephen Diggle 'A 1,000-year-old antimicrobial remedy with antistaphylococcal activity', *mBio* 6 (4) (2015), e01129–15; doi:10.1128/mBio.01129–15. Available online at: <https://mbio.asm.org/content/6/4/e01129–15.full> (accessed 1 July 2019).