

A cryptic *probatio pennae* in the *Seifín Duanaire* (TCD MS H 4.22 (1363), part XII)¹

Abstract: This article provides an edition and translation of a *probatio pennae* of four short lines length, found on a slip inserted in the so-called *Seifín Duanaire*. This brief note is written in a deliberately obscure style. One line is written in reverse to conceal an attack at a prominent political figure, Máel Mórdha. We suggest identifications for Máel Mórdha and the scribe of the note, Fearghal Ó Gabhann, both of which have connections to the region of Bréifne, and we make proposals to the meaning of the last two lines that appear to add reflections by Fearghal about his note.

The *Seifín Duanaire*, a collection of praise poems by the fifteenth-century poet Seifín Mór and his sons, forms the twelfth of the sixteen discrete sections of the composite manuscript Trinity College Dublin H 4.22 (1363), namely, pp. 125–156.² Two colophons at the end reveal the name of the scribe, Tanaidhe Ó Maoil Chonaire, who wrote the *duanaire* in the house of Doighre Ó Duibhgeannáin in Drumcollop, Co. Leitrim. This allows the manuscript to be situated in the sixteenth century and before 1589, when Doighre died (Hoyne 2021). Between pages 128 and 129 two slips have been inserted one on top of the other and sewn together with the rest. They are designated pp. 128a and 128b here. 128a contains the end of the poem *Sguiream feasd do chrannchur Chathail* that begins on p. 128 (poem 3 in Hoyne 2018: 119–143; see also McManus & Ó Raghallaigh 2010: 237), while “the other (a mere scrap) contains the end of the poem on p. 129, and the signature of Fergal ua Gabann” – thus the terse description in Abbott & Gwynn’s catalogue (1921: 208). This is the poem *Fada mé ar mearughadh sligheadh* (cf. Ó Cuív 1950).³ This “signature” on the second slip (i.e., 128b), or rather a brief *probatio pennae* of four lines (with a tiny spill-over into a fifth), is indeed in a different hand from the main scribe Tanaidhe. The scribal note is printed in full below for the first time. A high-resolution photograph is available as image 2 in Hoyne (2021). The present article is only concerned with these four lines, which read, first in a close diplomatic rendering and then in an interpretative semi-diplomatic transcription:

lo
aḍromleam ref na c
fech̄ glesa f̄ gail igab̄
ailmes ime_asx cema
coirgérkǵe

olc an fer Mael Mordha
fech_{ain} glesa Ferg hail i Gabann
ailmes i measx cema[dh]
coir gércatghe

Notes

The letters *lo* belong together with the *c* at the end of what we designate here as the first line. The scribe ran out of space and had to add the final two letters on top of the main line. This is certainly the case in the first line, whose letters are a tiny fraction smaller than lines 2–4. It appears to have been squeezed into the remaining space after the second line, and perhaps lines 3–4, were already in place. To make sense, the line must be read in the reverse: *olc an fer Mael Mordha* ‘Máel Mórdha is an evil man’. Maol Mórdha is a name strongly associated with the Uí

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² Abbott & Gwynn (1921: 199–216); Ó Cuív (1973: 22–23); Ó Cuív (1950: 285 n. 2); Hoyne (2018: 119–120); Hoyne (2021).

³ Ó Cuív (1950: 285 n. 1) corrects the incorrect information about the poem in Abbott & Gwynn (1921: 215). They had given the first line incorrectly as *Fada me ar mearugadh* and had described the poem misleadingly as ‘Poem on the Crucifixion’.

Raghallaigh of East Bréifne (Co. Cavan) in the 15th and 16th centuries in the Annals of the Four Masters. At least half a dozen different persons with that name are referred to by the Four Masters, either as historical figures – not infrequently the rulers of the Uí Raghallaigh – or as the fathers of historical figures. The Annals of the Four Masters allow us to distinguish at least the following individuals with that name: Maol Mórdha mac Con Condacht (†1411), Maol Mórdha Ua Raghallaigh (†1432), Maol Mórdha Riabhach (early 15th century?), Maol Mórdha mac Cathail (†1482), Maol Mórdha mac Seaáin (middle of 15th century?), Maol Mórdha mac Failghe (†1509), all of whom are too early to be contemporary with the note in the *Seifín Duanaire* – if Fearghal’s disdain is directed at a contemporary at all. Later in the century, we meet two individuals: Maol Mórdha mac Seaáin mic Cathail (probably middle of the 16th century, since his son Aodh Conallach is mentioned in 1581 and 1583, his wife died in 1582, and his grandson Seaán Ruadh was active in 1585) and Maol Mórdha mac Maoil Mhuire mic Eoghain (slain in 1581). Either of the two could be the intended person, although the second one may be closer to the likely composition date of the *duanaire*.

Line 2 is the *probatio pennae* proper. It appears to have been written first. Abbott & Gwynn (1921: 208) understood it as, in normalised spelling, *féchain glésa Fergail Uí Gabann* ‘testing the instrument of Fearghal Ó Gabhann’. This name does not occur in the Annals, but a *Farrel duff O Gawine* is mentioned in the year 1590 in the Elizabethan Fiants (Nicholls 1994: 128 no. 5497). According to MacLysaght (1985: 133), the name Ó Gabhann, anglicised O’Gowan, “has an early connection with Breffny, where it was a clerical family of note, but it is primarily of north Oriel”.⁴ Geographically this ties in with the associations of the manuscript in general, but also with the connections discussed above.⁵

The last two lines of the *probatio pennae* are more difficult to crack, but we present the following avenues towards a tentative interpretation:

ailmes: One approach is to assume that the scribe inverted the letters of the internal consonant cluster, a common feature of *Bérna na Filed* vocabulary. This is known as the stylistic device of *delidin litterda*, discussed in the *Trefocal Tract* (Breatnach 2017: 32, 41). Instances in *Bérna na Filed* prose include *Dorndine* for *Orndine* (in the first line in Meyer 1912: 102) and *Ailbe* or *Ailui* for *Baile* (Meyer 1892). *Ailmes* would then stand for the intended word *aimles* ‘disadvantage, harm, mischief; evil report, false charge’. Alternatively, but in our opinion less likely, *ailmes* could be resegmented as *ailm es*. It is noteworthy that *ailm* is the ogam name of the letter *a*. It could conceivably stand for the interjection *á!*, *há!*, followed by *es*, an occasional spelling variant of the copula *is* or *as* in 15th or 16th-century manuscripts.

imeasx: The ninth character in line 3 is an *e-caudata*. A reader reminds us that Hoyne (2018: 121) discusses the use of the glide-vowel *a*, ligatured to a previous vowel, in contexts where the *a* is to be elided (but not, in fact, after *e!*). Hoyne gives examples such as *maa tcim* (= *má at-c[h]im*), *da an geall*, or *oa ninit* (= *ó an init*) etc. where elision is required metrically. This observation, however, does not add to the understanding of the present context. We read the eleventh character in line 3 as an *x*, which may stand for *sc*, rather than *cs*. Parallels for such a spelling are *basalixa* for Lat. *basiliscus* ‘basilisc’ (Gaelic Maundeville §261; Stokes 1899: 296), *astrix* for *aistrisc* ‘asterisk’ (British Library, MS Harl. 5280, fol. 23v19 and 23v23), and perhaps *tixail* in *Leabhar Breac* p. 11a26. While the spelling of the latter word could simply reflect OIr. *tícsál*, the verbal noun of *do-ícsa* ‘to raise, draw out, remove’, it is equally clear from spellings of the verb and the verbal noun with *sc* that the internal cluster had undergone metathesis after

⁴ Two examples of the surname Ó Gabhann occur in the poem *Do chuamair-ne ar creich* (verse 3a: *Do loiteadh O Gabhann ann*; and 6a: *Dob é cuid Uí Ghabhann dámhuigh*; Carney 1959: 73–74). Significantly, the patron of the poem is one Giolla Íosa Ruadh Ó Raighilligh (†1331). Two other references to Ó Gabhann appear in a text relating to the Confederate Wars in Ireland and dating to 1650–1700. They are *Pilib Ó Gabann* and *Eogan Ó Gabhann* (Smith 2017: 45). Both seem to be connected with Bréifne and the Uí Raghallaigh.

⁵ A reader wonders whether instead of *i gabann* = *Uí Ghabhann* the words after *Fergail* should rather be read as *ig [g]abáil* = *ag gabháil*. Ní Shéaghdha (1968) argues that in the context of scribal activity the verb *gaibid* can have the meanings ‘to edit, choose, excerpt’ in addition to ‘to take down by dictation’ or ‘to make the first copy’. Since, however, the entire contribution of scribe Fearghal to the *Seifín Duanaire* is limited to writing four short lines of *probatio pennae* on the corner of a slip, the use of such a rather grandiose term is hardly justified by his ephemeral activity. On balance, it seems best to take *i gab* as indicating the name of the family of the scribe.

the Old Irish period (see numerous examples in *eDIL* s.vv. *do-ícsa* and *tíscál*). This means that, irrespective of its original meaning, synchronically the spelling *tixail* in the *Leabhar Breac* could have been understood by its scribe as representing *tíscáil*. The finishing stroke of the *x* ends in a dot, but this is unlikely to be a punctuation mark. Reading the letter *x* for *sc*, as outlined above, the phrase *imeassc* can be normalised as *i mmesc* ‘in the midst of, amidst’. Perhaps this is meant as a variant for *ar mesc* ‘in confusion, mixed up’.

cema: The final letter is an *m* with a rounded, inward-bent third minim in ligature with subscript *a*. *Cema* stands for *cema[d]* or *cema[dh]* ‘though it be’, i.e. the conjunction *cia^N* ‘although, even if’ + 3sg. conditional of the copula *bad*, with the final lenited *d* omitted, a common practice in manuscripts of this date.⁶

coirgérkge: The letter *k* is very rare in genuinely Irish words, although it is common in historical sources, especially in the Latin abbreviation *kl* for *calendae* ‘calends, first day of a month’. As a reader reminds us, the letter *k* can represent the syllable *ca* or the word *cath*, e.g. *ktt* for *catt* ‘cat’ (British Library MS Add. 30512, fo. 33a marg. inf.) or *senk.* for *Sencath*, the name *Senchad* (*CIH* 1664.35 and *ibid.* note m).⁷ While the expansion *coirgércaghe* does not lend itself to a meaningful analysis, *coirgércathge* can be split into *cóir gérchathge*, where *cathge* is the genitive or an analogical nominative of *caithig* ‘trespass, fine, liability for trespass’. The phrase could either be nominal, i.e. ‘a penalty (substantivised *cóir*) for a severe offence’ or a virtual copula clause ‘a severe penalty is appropriate (adjective *cóir*)’. An alternative way of solving the ‘riddle’, as it were, is to read *k* as a cipher for the vowel that immediately precedes it in the alphabet, i.e. for *i* (Bischoff 1990: 177). The resulting reading *coirgérighe* could conceivably stand for *cóir-géraigthe* ‘properly sharpened’, referring to the pen that Fearghal was using, with *gérighe* being a deficient spelling for *géraigthe*, the past participle of *géraigidir* ‘to sharpen, whet’. The two words *cóir* and *géraigthe* could also be separated, as in the suggestion above.

Conclusion

In summary, lines 1–2 mean ‘Máel Mórdha is an evil man. Testing the instrument of Fearghal Ó Gabhann.’ Lines 3–4, on the other hand, are open to a number of diverse interpretations, none of which is straightforwardly self-evident. Read as normalised *aimles i mesc cema[d] cóir gérchathge*, this can be translated as ‘a mischief / evil report in the midst, although a penalty for a severe offence / a severe fine for trespass were appropriate’ or as ‘malice in muddled form (lit. harm in confusion), though a severe penalty be just (for doing so)’. *Aimles* ‘malice’ here perhaps refers to the slight of Máel Mórdha’s character, albeit written backwards, i.e. *i mesc*. This malice is written in spite of the fact that it should incur a penalty. Or punctuation could be inserted: *aimles i mesc cema[d] cóir; gérchathge* ‘a mischief / false charge / malice in muddled form, although it were appropriate; [the pen is] sharpened’. A less likely alternative would be to read *Á! es i mes .x. cema[d] cóir gércathge*, the meaning could be something like ‘oh! it’s in the judgement of ten although a penalty for a severe offence / a severe fine for trespass were appropriate’.

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⁶ Previously we had read the word as *ceir*, the genitive of the substantivised adjective *cíar* ‘dark, murky, black’, used as a lexical substitute for the near synonym *dub* ‘black, dark’ in its substantival meaning ‘ink’. However, the spelling with double *ii* and the ‘swan-necked’ *r*, normally at home only in ligature with *o* or *b*, militate against this reading.

⁷ Cf. Norberg (2004: 50–51): “The letter *k* was in general rendered, in accordance with the teaching of the grammarians, by a word beginning with the syllable *ca*.”

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