A CHARM FOR STAUNCHING BLOOD

Iɴ an article on Irish charms contained in various medical manuscripts James and Maura Carney included the following charm for staunching blood from the RIA ᴍs 24 B 3, p. 55 (no. VI in Carney 1960: 150–151). The copy dates from the end of the fifteenth century, but the charm has 'every appearance of belonging to an early period':[1] *Obaid coisci fola. Argairim fuil tri grinni fir dolegem tracht argarem fuil sruth ances anfad dian dogar argairem fuil benaim galar.* Maura Carney translates: 'A charm for staunching blood. I forbid blood by true acuteness. (?) I destroy a flowing. I forbid blood. A stream a swift … storm prevents (?). I forbid blood. I slay disease.'

The charm is printed as prose although Maura Carney remarks that it seems to be 'roughly rhythmical with either two or four stresses to the line'. But the fact that the charm proper, disregarding the title *obaid coisci fola*, consists of 32 syllables with a distinct syntactical break after every eighth syllable can only mean that we are not looking at a specimen of rhythmical poetry, but at a syllabic stanza of the structure $8^1\ 8^1\ 8^2\ 8^2$. The poetical features do not, however, conform to those regular in syllabic poetry. The cadences of lines *a–b* (*fuil* : *fir*) and *c–d* (*dogar* : *galar*) do not rhyme, but make consonance. Line *a* has chiastic alliteration (*ar·Gairim Fuil tri Grinni Fir*), line *c* two pairs of normal alliteration (*sruth Ances Anfad Dían Dogar*). In line *d* the alliteration between *ar·Gairim* and *Galar* encompasses the whole verse.

My metrical analysis entails a different translation from Maura Carney's. I take *fir* to be the genitive of *fer* 'man', not the adjective *fír* 'true'. She reads *grinne* as the abstract noun 1 *grinde* 'intentness, keenness' (*DIL* G 161.51), but considers the possibility of 'some sort of xylomancy' if the word in question be 2 *grinde* 'a faggot, a bundle'. Possibly we are not looking at either of these. 'Acuteness' is vague for the context; xylomancy is excluded since the charm is for healing, not for prophecy. The charm is for staunching blood. The cause of the blood-flow is not indicated, but a wound inflicted in a fight is likely. If the aim of the charm is to work counter-magic, the application of an object resembling the one that inflicted the wound would seem appropriate. In this sense an interpretation of *grinne* as 1 *grinne* 'the point of a weapon' (*DIL* G 162.40) as *pars pro toto* for the weapon suggests itself. Likewise in the St. Gall incantation against a thorn, the thorn (*delg*) in the flesh is identified with another thorn-like instrument, Goibniu's goad, which in turn is used to drive out the thorn: *aird Goibnenn ré n-aird Goibnenn ceingeth ass* 'let Goibniu's goad go out before Goibniu's goad' (*Thes.* ii 248.6).

Like Carney, I regard *dolegem*, *argarem* and *argairem* as spellings of the 1sg., not of the 1pl. which would be untypical for the genre of charms and

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[1]The collection of charms announced at the end of the Carneys' article does not seem to have been realised.

incantations. The ending *-(a)imm* is used for all verbs, including those which originally had the ending *-iu*. But this is not necessarily to be explained as a consequence of the well-known spread of productive *-(a)imm* in the present tense at the expense of other stem classes (for this development in Old and Middle Irish see McCone 1997: 68). In our context, the identity of the endings could be a corollary of ritual language. An OIr. charm against parasites contained in the Old English *Lacnunga* (Grattan and Singer 1952: 106–9; Meroney 1945: 177–8; Stifter forthcoming) opens with the climactic sequence *gono mīl orgo mīl marbu mīl* 'I beat the animal, I slay the animal, I make the animal dead'. The verbal form *marbu* 'I make dead' with the ending *-u* instead of *marbaimm* is quite unexpected, but must be due to intra-phrasal rhyme (differently Thurneysen 1921). Something along these lines, this time with the other ending *-(a)imm*, could be the case here, too.

In *dolegem* I see *do·léci* 'to let go'. This is often encountered with the object *fuil* in the meaning 'to draw blood' (*DIL* D 329.86 ff.). Perhaps here in the context of a charm to stop blood from flowing, in a ritual situation, a semantic inversion has taken place: the enchanter deprives the blood of its power to flow outside, he 'draws blood from blood'. Its object *tracht* in line *b* is not immediately clear. It could be the word found in 3 *trácht* 'strength, vigour' and 2 *étracht* 'want of strength or power'. But in view of what has been said before, it may be understood as 'flow (of blood)', perhaps a special application of 5 *trácht* 'trade, intercourse; movement, travelling'; cp. also *niro fulig tractad fola fair* 'not a *trachtad* of blood bled on him' (LL 9191). But Maura Carney's analysis as *do·lega* 'to destroy, abolish, cancel' is also possible, although semantically its association with blood(-flow) does not look straightforward.

My interpretation of line *c* differs decisively from Maura Carney's. I understand *ances* as gen. pl. of *ainces* 'pain, ailment, complaint; difficulty, trouble, vexation, annoyance', not as the 3sg. rel. of *aingid* 'to protect'. This is apparently the interpretation underlying her translation 'prevents'. The *sruth* mentioned immediately before *ainces* is surely the 'stream of blood' that has to be staunched (cp. the expression *struth fola* in a garbled OIr. charm against blood-flow in two Old English manuscripts; Meroney 1945: 178). The 'stream of blood' (*sruth*) is the object of the charm that has to be quelled, not a curative subject that prevents harm. The word *dogar*, which she leaves untranslated, I take to be 'sad, gloomy'. That it cannot be the verb *do·gair* 'to call, summon' is shown by its alliteration with *dían* and its half-rhyme with *galar*. In normalised OIr. orthography and with the restitution, where applicable, of the OIr. endings the stanza reads:

> Epaid coisce fola
> Ar·gairim fuil tri grinni fir.
> Do·léicim [*or*: do·legaim] trácht, ar·gairim fuil,
> sruth ainces anfad dían dogar.
> Ar·gairim fuil, benaim galar.

'Charm for staunching blood
I hinder the blood through a man's point (of a weapon).
I let go (*or*: I destroy) the flowing, I hinder the blood,
the stream of pain, the swift, sad storm.
I hinder the blood, I slay the disease.'

There are a number of correspondences with other Irish charms. The central word of our incantation is *ar·gairim* 'I hinder'. It is repeated three times, in lines *a*, *b* and *d.* Another OIr. charm against blood-flow, already mentioned above, has been transmitted in two versions in Old English manuscripts (no. IV in Meroney 1945: 178–9). The Irish in it is so garbled that practically nothing of it can be understood at first sight except for *struth fola* 'stream of blood'. Meroney prints the two versions in six lines each of approximately equal syllabic length (7–8 syllables). The version in the *Læceboc* contains the forms *æȝryn*, *arȝrenn* and *ara. carn*; the one in the Bodleian ᴍs Addit. F. 3. 6., fol. 2ᵛ has *ær grim, ær grenn* and *ara carn*, in positions where verbal forms may be expected, in exactly the lines *a*, *b* and *d.* Given the deplorably corrupt shape of the Irish words in these texts, it is at least conceivable that these are scribal corruptions of the same verbal form *ar·gairim* as in our text. Another instance of *ar·gair* may be contained in another OIr. charm found in an Old English manuscript (no. III in Meroney 1945: 177–8), but the form is so uncertain that I will not discuss it here (for a full discussion see Stifter forthcoming).

The conclusion of our charm is *benaim galar* 'I slay the disease'. *Benaim* comes at the climax of the incantation after the thrice repeated *ar·gairim*, thereby ensuring its curative success. Likewise, the St. Gall incantation against headache has *benim a galar, ar·fiuch fuili* 'I slay its disease, I vanquish the (streams of) blood' (*Thes*. ii 249.7–8). The charm in the *Stowe Missal* against a thorn ends in *líi grene fris·ben att, benaith galar* 'the sun's lustre heals the swelling, slays the disease' (*Thes*. ii 250.9–12). A charm in the *Leabhar Breac* has *benaim galar, benaim crecht, suidim att, fris·benaim galar* 'I slay the disease, I slay the ulcer, I stop the swelling, I heal (literally: 'slay against') the disease' (Carey 2000: 116–117).

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