

The Poems of Blathmac, 8th Century Poetry in the 21st Century¹

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The *Poems of Blathmac mac Con Brettan maic Conguso do Feraib Rois*, ‘Blathmac, Son of Cú Brettan, son of Congus of the Fir Rois’, are two long, 8th century, Old Irish, religious poems preserved in a 17th century manuscript now called MS G 50, which is housed in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin. While the provenance of the manuscript is not certain, it has been suggested that this text was transcribed by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, or one of his consorts, who are collectively known as the Four Masters. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, a Franciscan brother from County Donegal, is renowned for the work he did as a collector of texts and is the chief scribe associated with the *Annals of the Four Masters*. The connection between this manuscript and Mícheál Ó Cléirigh is based on the fact that in 1846, it was in the possession of John O’Clery, who claimed to be a descendant of one of the Four Masters and who also claimed that the manuscript was once the property of his famous predecessor. The content of this manuscript would certainly be consistent with other material copied and collected by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. This manuscript was acquired by the National Library in 1931 and the poems were discovered in 1953 by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (Stifter, 2015, p. 47).

James Carney stated in his 1965 Thomas Davis lecture: ‘Some years ago in a manuscript in the collection of the National Library I came upon twenty-three pages of Irish verse which had not hitherto come under the notice of scholars’ (Carney, 1965, p. 45). Blathmac’s poems were edited by James Carney and published in 1964 as part of the Irish Texts Society series. At the time, it was rightly welcomed as a significant addition to the corpus of Irish literature. However, Carney’s edition is not a complete one. There is a section at the end missing. He did not work on the final part of the poems probably because of the poor condition of the last few pages of the manuscript. Additionally, Carney (1964, p. xxxix) conceived of his edition as an ‘interim comment’ on the text of the manuscript and there are indeed occasions where an improvement of the text is possible. Therefore a new edition, including the previously unedited section, is required and is one of the aims of my research project. Another aim is a specialised dictionary which will make the text available online along with a translation and linguistic analysis.

There is considerable value in being able to identify an author geographically and chronologically by finding external evidence to reinforce the contextualisation arrived at internally. The best place to find this kind of historical information is in the annals and genealogies. However, they only contain evidence for Blathmac’s father and brother. *The Annals of Ulster* record Cú Brettan’s death in AD 740 and the *Annals of the Four Masters* record the death of his son, presumably Blathmac’s brother, Donn Bó in AD 754. In the genealogy in the *Book of Ballymote* we find Donn Bó, son Cú Brettan, son of Congus, but listed under the Uí Ségáin, a different kin group, but from the same area as the Fir Rois. It is not unusual that Blathmac’s name does not appear in the genealogies because they are generally lists of kings, but Donn Bó, the king, was probably his brother. Cú Brettan, Blathmac’s father, is mentioned as being the only royal survivor in *Cath Almaine*, ‘The Battle of Allen’, between

¹ Research for this article was funded by an IRC Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship. All translations from Old Irish are my own, unless otherwise stated. The text is reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Ireland.

Ulster and Leinster which took place in AD 718 at the Hill of Allen in County Kildare. In this saga, Cu Brettan is connected to the Fir Rois, so this may be the source of the Fir Rois connection which is found in the ascription at the beginning of the Blathmac poems. Donn Bó is also a character in this saga (Ó Riain, 1978). Sagas, however, are seldom reliable historically, but they may reflect the annalistic material available to the 10th century author of the tale. This poem is the only piece of evidence we have for Blathmac's existence and it is also the only evidence of his family connection to Cú Brettan. If we accept this evidence as enough to link Blathmac to these historical figures, this would fix his lifetime as more or less contemporary with that of his brother and date the composition of the poems to the middle of the 8th century, meaning that the language certainly is Early Old Irish. This text is of great value for linguistic reasons because of its age but also for the insights that these long poems give us to Irish society in the 8th century demonstrated in the religious beliefs and attitudes to kingship and clientship that are described within them.

The two Poems of Blathmac are both religious in content and are both addressed to Mary the mother of Christ. The first poem is 149 quatrains long. Carney's edition is a faithful transcription of the complete poem as it has survived in that manuscript. At the most basic level, the first poem describes the birth, life, and especially the death of Christ. The poet, being from an Irish family of high status, was almost certainly a well-educated cleric. Therefore, his frame of reference is that of the top level of Irish society. He applies his understanding of the nuances of a king/client relationship in an Irish context and transfers it to the relationship between God and the Jews, making use of specific legal terminology which is particular to the relationship between an Irish lord and his clients (Breatnach, 2015, pp. 108-114). He has expectations as to the code of conduct of both lord and client and with much detail he depicts the evolution of the relationship between God and his clients, the Jews. Fundamentally, God has been an exceptional lord and king who led them out of captivity and into the Promised Land. He has behaved in every way like the ideal lord. He also chose one of them to be the mother of His son. In the poet's opinion, the Jews have been doubly disloyal because, in the first place, they crucified the son of their lord, and secondly, they murdered one of their own kin-group by virtue of the fact that Mary, Christ's mother, was also a Jew.

In Irish law, kin-slaying was seen as the most despicable act (Kelly, 1995, p. 127). Blathmac uses very strong negative imagery in describing his horror at this treacherous act, describing the Jews as dog-like and as swine, very disparaging terms.

Stanza 103

*Ainbli gnúisi, condai fir
ro-fersat in fíngail-sin.
Céin ba diib a máthair
ba diäll for fírbráthair.*

Of dishonourable faces and dog-like were
the men who carried out that kin-slaying.
Since his mother was of them it was
treachery towards a true kinsman.

Stanza 107

*Ce dod-rindnacht recht doäib
ra-sáebSAT co sáebgoäib.
ba nóeb do chonaib gortaib,
margarét do méthtorcaib.*

Though he had granted them a law they had
twisted it with perverse lies. It was a holy
thing to hungry dogs, a pearl to fat swine.

The first poem begins and ends with an invitation from Blathmac to Mary to come to him so that he can perform a keening for her son.

Stanza 1

*Tair cucum, a Maire boíd,
do choíniud frit do rochoím.
Dirsan dul fri croich dot mac
ba mind már, ba masgérat.*

Come to me loving Mary that I may keening
with you very dear one.
Alas that your son should go to the cross, he
who was a great emblem, a beautiful hero.

Stanza 149

*Do airchisecht chridi cen on
con-roírem ar ndiäbor,
a chonn na creitme glaine,
tair cucum, a boídMaire.*

Come to me, loving Mary, head of pure
faith, that we may hold converse with the
compassion of unblemished heart.

Keening involved the public performance of a specially composed lament over a deceased person. This tradition has long roots in Ireland but whether it is a continuation of pre-Christian practices is difficult to say. The usual formula incorporates praise for ‘the dead man’s beauty, generosity, bravery and aristocratic lineage and cursing of his enemies and the objects thought to be responsible for his death’ (Bourke, 1988, p. 288) and all of these are included in Blathmac’s first poem.

The Christian church had concerns about keening from an early date. If the *Irish Penitentials*, some of which may be as early as 6th century, are to be believed, the practice of keening was an offence and set penances were imposed on transgressors. According to the text called *The Old-Irish Penitential*, the only Irish language penitential (Gwynn, 1914, pp. 121-195), penalties were incurred for keening. A married woman who makes lamentation over a layman or laywoman, incurs fifty nights penance, if over a cleric she incurs twenty nights penance, but if over a bishop or king only fifteen nights penance (Bieler, 1963, p. 273, §17). It is noteworthy that it is women who are used as examples of likely offenders putting women centre stage in the keening tradition. It is also curious that the higher the status of the dead person, the lesser the penance that is incurred. This could be an indication that there was some tolerance for the practice. As Bergholm (2015, p. 5) points out there was some ambivalence in the Church’s attitude to keening and this is evidenced by the Bigotian Penitential.

CONCERNING THE MAKING OF LAMENTATION AND ITS BEING RECKONED AS GOOD MERIT, IT IS SAID IN THE LAW:

Jacob son of Isaac was lamented for forty days in Egypt and for a whole week in the land of Canaan: and so was Christ in the New (Testament), the women wept for Him: and it is found in the Canon with almost innumerable examples of the Scriptures, and for whom no lament is made to him it is reckoned as bad merit (ed. and trans. Bieler, 1963, p. 231, §7).

The *Bigotian Penitential* is a Latin text that was probably composed on the continent around the 8th century. Bieler (1963, p. 10) states that it is closely related to *The Old-Irish Penitential* and contains material that derives from the *Canones Hibernenses* and other such texts. This statement regards lamenting as a mark of respect and is not included in the *The Old-Irish Penitential*. Blathmac's attitude seems to support the view of the *Bigotian Penitential* since he states that Christ was not mourned in a suitable way within the time allocated because his friends were prevented from so doing.

Stanza 124

*Nícon·dernad trúag amne,
nach dimbág nó dochraite:
nád·leth for Críst gubae mór
cein ro·ndét bith fo dobrón.*

There was never done such a pitiful thing,
any sorrow or misery: that a great
lamentation did not spread over Christ as
long as being in great sorrow was allowed.

Additionally, the following section which supplies detailed descriptions about the mourning or keening performance itself reinforces Blathmac's expectations as to how the son of a king should have been treated both before and after death. He is outraged that the appropriate rituals did not take place. The poet talks about beating hands over the corpse, how every great household keens its lord and how no cry was raised over the body of Christ.

Stanza 126

*As·oirc cach teglach co lí
bassa fora tigernai:
lámchomart for corp Críst glain
nícon·reilced do apstalaib.*

Every beautiful household beats hands over
their lord beating of hands over the body of
pure Christ was not allowed to apostles.

This could be interpreted to mean that keening for a person of high status is not only tolerated but even obligatory. Perhaps it is only keening of the lower orders which was discouraged. This would explain the apparent discrepancy in the two penitentials. So Blathmac probably felt no conflict in composing a keen for Christ. His status is obviously very high because He is not just the son of a king, He is the son of God.

The main section of the poem, from Stanza 3 to Stanza 143, is surrounded by invitations to Mary to come to the poet. This section could stand alone as a keen but Blathmac uses the device of framing this section by the invitations contained in stanzas 1 and 2 and also from stanza 144 to the end in a self-deprecating way to display both his unworthiness and his inability to perform this keen alone. Perhaps an explanation for this invitation is that Blathmac was a man and keening is traditionally the informal expression of grief performed by a woman. This explains, perhaps, his need to have Mary in attendance so that she would lead the keen.

The second poem moves away from the sadness of Christ's death to the happiness of the resurrection. Christ is eternally alive and the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets with regard to Christ have been fulfilled to a large degree. These prophecies relate to his birth (Isaiah 7:14), baptism (Isaiah 11:1-3), crucifixion (Zechariah 12:10), burial (Isaiah 53:9), resurrection (Psalm 16:10), ascension (Psalm 68:18), and to the second coming or the last judgment (Psalm 110:1-7, 1 Kings 2:45). The only prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled is the second coming

and this is the subject matter of the end of the poem. The end of the second poem becomes apocalyptic in nature. The signs indicating the Day of Judgment are detailed. A terrible battle will take place and vengeance will be had for the deaths of the martyrs. This kind of narrative referred to as the Signs of Doomsday is a popular medieval theme. The preoccupation is understandable given that it may allow sinners some time to make amends and was used with great effect to strengthen the resolve of sinners. No doubt Blathmac had something of the sort in mind here too. Martin McNamara (1975, p. 137) has pointed to the exceptional importance of the inclusion of the Signs of Doomsday in Blathmac's second poem due to its early 8th century date. He states that the earliest instance of the Signs of Doomsday was the Greek 4th or 5th-century Apocalypse of Thomas, which lists seven days leading up to the Day of Judgment. He explains that at some stage the seven day tradition developed into a 15 day tradition but the transition from and the influence of the seven day system on this longer sequence has not yet been determined. The Irish tradition has several versions of these signs but all later than Blathmac. In Blathmac we have a simple version of the Signs of Doomsday, he supplies seven: the earth and sky ablaze; smile of the seas will be erased; there will be severe shaking (earthquake?); ocean, sea, and pool will be dry; the stars fall from heaven; the world will be levelled; every dead person will arise.

Stanza 236

*Nallsa thuidecht do dúiri,
imm-brúifea na mórdúili.
Lasfaid talam ocus nem,
tibre trethan bith aithgen.*

Woe the coming of hardship, it will utterly crush the great elements. Earth and sky will blaze, the smile of the seas will be an un-smile.

Stanza 237

*Bid crúaid cuicalige in se,
at-béla forgnúis dúile;
bet tírmai trethan, ler, lind,
do nim do-tóetsat caínrind.*

This will be a severe shaking; the appearance of the elements will perish; ocean, sea, and pool will be dry, beautiful stars will fall from heaven.

Stanza 238

*Bet comarda slíab fri fán,
níba bec int athchossán;
bed clárchosmail in domun
conid-reised óenubull.*

The mountain will be as high as the hollow; the attack will not be small; the world will be boardlike so that one apple could run over it.

Stanza 239

*Is ret mac oirdnidu cen on
sifais int aingel dagthob;
ata-resat frisa seinm
cach marb ro-boí i ndóendeilb.*

Before your noble unblemished son the angel will sound a good trumpet; every dead one who has been in human shape will arise at the sounding.

Blathmac does not organise the signs by number nor does he assign particular days to them. Indeed there is nothing in the poem to suggest that all of these seven signs could not occur on the same day. Because of Blathmac's deviation from the more common patterns, Martin McNamara suggests that 'it is possible that he (Blathmac) knew of a list of Signs before Doomsday, even if not quite any known to us' (2007, p. 232). The closing stanzas in Carney's (1964) edition of the poems describe the build up to the Day of Judgment and list the deaths of all those for whom vengeance will at last be taken. The very last stanza of Carney's edition is an account of the prophesied slaying of the Antichrist by Michael, the Archangel, as a warrior of Christ. This heralds the Day of Judgment and indeed the end of time. The logical development of the narrative is that the signs of Doomsday will be followed by a description of the Day of Judgment and indeed that is what follows.

What is described from this point has not been translated until now. Nessa Ní Shéaghda did provide a transcription for these damaged pages, which was published posthumously in 1999 in a volume in honour of James Carney, but she did not provide any translation or commentary. For the most part, the manuscript of the Poems of Blathmac is legible (pages 122 to 140) and this is what Carney edited up to stanza 259. Carney wrote of the second poem that 'about 117 quatrains can be read in full and fragments of approximately 26' (1958, p. 1). This would give a total of 143 in the second poem. In fact, there are traces of at least 11 more, even though some are very fragmentary, which brings the total of the second poem up to 154 quatrains (Stifter, 2015, p. 59). Although his edition of the second poem breaks off after 111 quatrains, Carney didn't address why he chose to stop where he did. The remainder of this article offers a provisional description of some of these 'fragmentary quatrains' along with references to the passages from the Bible and other texts which have been useful as a guide to possible meaning.

Towards the end of page 141, there is some tearing and staining and this disimproves on page 142, deteriorating dramatically in 143 and 144 which are merely fragments. It is not even clear if the poem was complete at this stage or if other pages of the manuscript have been lost. While the manuscript is difficult to read, parts of it are not completely illegible and an improvement on Ní Shéaghda's edition, although still not complete, can be made now with the aid of technology, particularly the high resolution images provided by Irish Script on Screen. As well as reading and transcribing the text there is very often a need to correct and normalise the spelling according to Early Irish orthographical practices. This is an 8th century text which has been copied by a 17th century scribe. His exemplar no longer exists and so we do not know which mistakes and modernisation are due to our scribe or to a previous scribe. It is likely that the scribe did not understand much of what he was copying. The text is very problematic and in an effort to understand and to translate these fragmentary quatrains, it would be useful to ascertain what the poet's sources of inspiration were. The earlier stanzas of Blathmac indicate that the Bible, and in particular the Gospel of Matthew, was his main source and this continues to be his inspiration in the previously unedited section.

In spite of the fact that there is much that is illegible, it is clear that these stanzas describe the Day of Judgment. Christ is named as the Judge on the Day of Judgment who separates the good from the bad and determines their fate. The Day of Judgment in these stanzas is also referred to as the *láithe an mórúanae* (l.1054), 'Day of the Great Harvest', and *laithie rigdae* (l. 1037), 'the Royal Day / the Day of the Lord'. Bible passages and in particular Matthew's Gospel are paraphrased. Blathmac seems to select passages and then combine them to create a pastiche of

biblical imagery. For example, in the first stanza 260 he refers to Mount Zion, to the saints being rewarded and also to tears and sorrow.

*Ar at-tát laithe ríгдаe
donaib nóebaib a ndagdílae,
bith sí díгдаe dér a mbróin
in mórchath Sléibe Síoin.*

Since on the day of the Lord
the saints will have their good rewards,
The great battle of Mount Zion
will be the prayer of their tearful sorrow.

Although there does not seem to be one single direct borrowing, it is clear that the poet is drawing from many biblical passages. Parallels are obvious in these few examples:

For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you.
Isaiah (30:19)

In the Book of Revelations (11:18) we find:

The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.

And in Joel (2:1-2):

Blow a trumpet in Zion;
sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.

An account of a gathering on the day before Doom at Mount Zion is also found in *Airdena Inna Cóic Lá nDéc ria mBráth*, ‘The Tokens of the Fifteen Days before Doom’, a Middle Irish text, and the parallels with Blathmac’s poem are strong:

This is the token of the day before doom, to wit, the pure King of Glory, the only son of the King of heaven, earth and hell, with a countless multitude of angels and archangels, to wit, the nine ranks of heaven, in His company (will go) on that day to the summit of Mount Zion to judge their deeds, both good and evil, for Adam’s impure children’ (Stokes, 1907, p. 315).

The greater part of this unedited section of the second poem seems to be based on an amalgamation of three passages from the Gospel of Matthew: *The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*, 13:24-3; *The Separation of Wheat and Chaff*, 3:12, and *The Judgment*, 25:31-46.

Stanza 264

*Is é biäs band mbúadae
i llaithiu na mórbúanae.
Etar-scarfaider cach mbert
corcae chuindfig fri cruithnecht.*

It is he who will reap a deed of victories
on the day of the great harvest.
Each bundle of tares
will be separated from wheat.

Stanza 265

*Fóidfid fo thúaid – crúaid costud –
in corcae dia ógloscud.
Fora leth ndes – comrád cert –
do-bérthar leis a chruithnecht.*

He will send northwards—hard gathering –
the tares to their complete burning.
On his right side—a fitting conversation –
his wheat will be taken with him.

Stanza 270

*Óis in phecaid doilig duib
in corcae ocus in gabuir.
Is do áesaib donaib daínib
in chruithnecht, na glanchaírig.*

The tares and the goats [are]
the folk of grievous, black sin
The becoming fine people are
the wheat, the pure sheep.

Stanza 264 is very close to Matthew’s parable of the *Wheat and the Tares*. In the last line Blathmac uses the words *corcai chuindfig*, the literal translation of which is ‘empty oats’, later on he uses *corcae* ‘oats’ on its own in stanzas 265 and 270. The use of the term oats would seem to conflict with the message of Matthew’s parable: ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ (Matthew 13:30). This apparent anomaly can be explained. In Classical Latin sources, two main weeds of the corn-field are identified, and one of these is the wild oat (*Avena fatua*) (Kelly, 1997, p. 234). The literal translation of *Avena fatua* is ‘wild or barren/empty oats’. This would support the use by Blathmac of the term *corcai chuindfig* to equate with ‘weeds’ or ‘tares’ and it clarifies his subsequent use in later stanzas of the word *corcae* alone. Blathmac uses *corcai chuindfig* as a translation for tares and in stanzas 265 and 270 he refers to *corcae* because the audience will understand that in this context he is referring to tares.

The account of Judgment Day, is the third passage of the Gospel of Matthew, from which Blathmac draws:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Matthew (25:31-33)

Stanza 267

*Is do mac dna – níba bréc –
miästar in da mórrhrét.
Scarfaid – mairg nád·ais a thnú–
caírcha gela fria mindu.*

It is your son, indeed – it will not be a lie—
who will judge the two great flocks
he will separate—woe the one who does not
fear his wrath—
bright sheep from his goats.

Blathmac’s use of the motif of the sheep and the goats is absent in other Irish texts describing Judgment Day. The only other reference that I have come across so far in this research to sheep and the goats is in *Cáin Domnaig*, ‘Law of Sunday’, which is also considered to be an 8th century text. Unusually, here the separation is taking place on Sunday, when more traditionally Monday is the Day of Doom.

*In-domnach etarscarfas Críst in dá trét.i.
trét na n-úan n-endac .i. na nóeb 7 na fírían,
fri gaburtrét na pechach n-diúmsach in
domuin*

On Sunday, Christ will divide the two
flocks, namely, the flock of innocent lambs
and of saints, and of the righteous from the
goat-flock of the proud sinful ones of the
world.

(O’Keeffe, 1905, p. 200).

Among other texts which draw from Matthew’s description of the Day of Judgment are two homilies, contemporaneous with Blathmac, *An Old Irish Homily* (Strachan, 1907, pp. 1-10) and the Latin *Everyday Sermon* (O’Sullivan, 2014, pp. 593-605). Neither of these chooses to employ the motif of the sheep and the goats nor of the wheat and the tares. Another depiction of the Day of Doom is in the Middle-Irish *Scéla Láí Brátha*, ‘Tidings of Doomsday’, which begins proclaiming its validity by pronouncing that:

Matthew wrote and revised these tidings of Doomsday as he heard them from the lips of his Master, namely, Christ, and left them in remembrance with the Church. (Stokes, 1879-1880, p. 247).

However, again no goats or sheep are mentioned in this account. The same is true of *Saltair na Rann*, ‘Psalter of Quatrains’, a separation of the assembled people on Judgment Day according to their deeds is described, the just on the right and the unrighteous on the left (Canto cxlii, 8325-8336). This lack of parallel motifs leads to the assumption that Blathmac did not influence later eschatological texts, at least in this regard, indicating that his poems were not widely known or else not well-received for some reason. In any case, it is unlikely that there were many, if any, copies in circulation besides the exemplar for the extant 17th century copy.

There is quite a bit of work remaining to be done. Pages 143 and 144 are mere scraps but what remains of the text is quite legible and appears to continue to be consistent with Matthew’s account of the Judgement. This fact may be the key to deciphering some more words in the stained section of the manuscript. Unfortunately, sometimes there is as little as one word and sometimes only a partial word legible in a stanza. The work on these fragmentary quatrains is ongoing. It is to be hoped that more problems will be clarified by the end of this research.

Images from *The Poems of Blathmac*

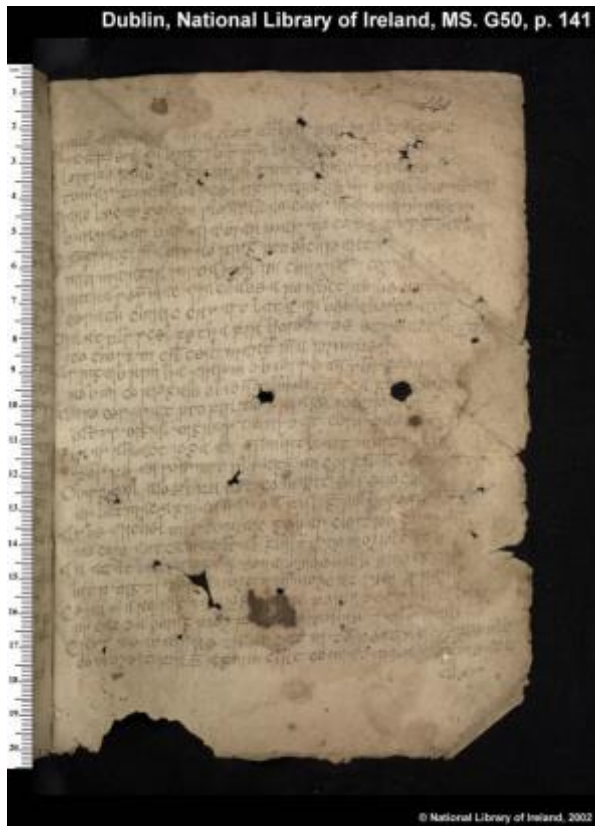


Image 1: G50 Blathmac p. 141 (st 249-262)



Image 2: G50 Blathmac p. 142 (st 263-276)



Image 3: G50 Blathmac p.143 (st 277-290)



Image 4: G50 Blathmac p. 144 (st 291-303)

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