

A POSSIBLE DATE FOR ALDHELM'S 'LETTER TO HEAHFRITH'

In an earlier issue of this journal I edited Aldhelm's 'Letter to Heahfrith', a polemic composition designed to dissuade a young Englishman from study in Ireland by extolling Theodore and Hadrian and flamboyantly displaying the form of learning inculcated in their school at Canterbury.¹ In implying that the new English learning superseded the older Irish tradition Aldhelm quoted respectfully at the beginning of the letter the diction of the finest Irish Latin poem, *Altus Prosator*, perhaps by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus.² At the end of the letter in the words

Ut uersidicus ait : Digna :
Fiat fante Glingio
gurgo fugax fambulo

Aldhelm simultaneously parodied Irish Latin verse and prose, the rhyming heptasyllabic couplets composed by Irish poets of the seventh century and the words of the most famous and imaginative Irish grammarian of the seventh century, who had written³

Verumtamen ne in illud Glengi incedam, quod cuidam conflictum fugienti dicere fidenter ausus est : gurgo inquit fugax fambulo dignus est, pauca tibi tui negotii necessaria de pronomine profabor.

1. D. R. HOWLETT 'Aldhelm and Irish Learning', *ALMA* LII (1994), pp. 37-75 at 37-58.

2. *Idem* 'Three Works by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus' in 'Seven Studies in Seventh-Century Texts', *Peritia* X (1996), pp. 1-70 at 50-7.

3. G. POLARA and L. CARUSO ed. and transl. *Virgilio Marone grammatico Epitomi ed Epistole* (Naples 1979), p. 206.

Long before Aldhelm a feature recurrent in the Hiberno-Latin tradition was the infixing of indications of dates of composition. In the *Epistola de Controversia Paschali* written to Ségéne fifth abbot of Iona and Béccán the hermit A.D. 633 about reckoning of the date of Easter the computist Cummián enclosed his argument within a chiasmic envelope, A-B-C-argument-C'-B'-A', in which the six outer parts contain exactly 633 words.⁴

In *Versus de Annis a Principio* the poet dates his work three ways,⁵ first from the baptism of Christ to the death of Domnall King of the Scots in A.D. 645, second from that date forward to the end of the period of his reckoning, and third backward to Creation. The number of the ages of the world squared equals the number of lines in the poem ($6 \times 6 = 36$), and the number of lines squared equals the number of letters in the text ($36 \times 36 = 1296$). The three categories of the poet's reckoning doubled equal the number of ages of the world, which, added to the doubled number of the year of composition, equals the number of letters ($3 \times 2 = 6$; $645 \times 2 = 1290$; $6 + 1290 = 1296$).

Laidcenn mac Báith Bannaig of Clúain-ferta Mo-Lúa signed his *Lorica* in a central line, in which the central word is *centro*.⁶ Within the verse is an anagram identical in metre and rhyme with the verse in which it is embedded :

CÁPÍTÁLI CÉNTRO CÁRTILÁGINI
TÍ[B]I PRÁCTICÁ LORÍCA LÁITGENNI

for you an effective Lorica of Laidcenn.

Laidcenn may also have dated his poem.

4. M. WALSH and D. Ó CRÓINÍN ed. and transl. *Cummián's Letter 'De controversia paschali' together with a related Irish computistical tract 'De ratione computandi'*, Studies and Texts LXXXVI (Toronto 1988). D. R. HOWLETT 'Cummián's Letter to Ségéne and Béccán' in 'The Earliest Irish Writers at Home and Abroad', *Peritia* VIII (1994), pp. 10-17; 'Afterthoughts on Foreskins in Cummián's Letter' in 'Five Experiments in Textual Reconstruction and Analysis', *Ibid.* IX (1995), pp. 1-50 at 3-6; *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* (Dublin 1995), pp. 91-102.

5. 'Seven Studies', pp. 1-6.

6. D. R. HOWLETT 'Laidcenn mac Báith: *Egloga* and *Lorica*' in 'Five Experiments', pp. 6-18; 'A Possible Date for Laidcenn's *Lorica*' in 'Seven Studies', pp. 68-9.

Suffragare Trinitatis Unitas,
 Unitatis miserere Trinitas,
 Suffragare queso mihi posito
 Maris magni uelut in periculo,
 Ut non secum trahat me mortalitas
 Huius anni neque mundi uanitas.

Undertake support, Unity of Trinity,
 be merciful, Trinity of Unity,
 undertake support, I ask, for me placed
 as if in the peril of a great sea,
 so that the mortality of this year may not draw me with it
 nor the vanity of the world.

The last syllable of *huius anni* is the fifty-ninth of the poem, representing perhaps the year of the century. The sixth line may represent the month of the year. The twenty-third word may represent the day of the month. In the year 659 the twenty-third day of June was the Second Sunday after Trinity, the twenty-second day from Whitsun inclusive, which occurred after the twenty-second week of that year. Laidcenn's death is recorded in the Annals of Ulster *s.a.* 661.

In the Antiphony of Bangor the *Memoria Abbatum Nostrorum*, which begins *Sancta sanctorum opera*, celebrates fifteen abbots of Bangor, of whom the last named, Cronanus, who ruled A.D. 680-91, is mentioned in the present and future tenses.⁷ The numbers of letters in the Prologue, the four alphabetic stanzas, and the refrain in the future tense about Crónán, 152 + 120 + 124 + 121 + 125 + 41, total 683, which may suggest the year of composition.

In the same manuscript the *Versiculi Familiae Benchuir*, which begin *Benchuir bona regula*,⁸ contain exactly 686 letters, which may suggest the year of composition.

Nearly a century after Cumian in the Hiberno-Latin tradition, a generation after Aldhelm in the Anglo-Latin tradition, the Venerable Bede published his Ecclesiastical History of the English People in A.D. 731, composing the Preface in one hundred lines, every one of which ends with a correct cursus rhythm.⁹ From *Historia*

7. *Celtic Latin Tradition*, pp. 187-9.

8. *Ibid.* pp. 189-93.

9. D. R. HOWLETT 'Insular Latin Writers' Rhythms', *Peritia* XI (1997 forthcoming).

Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum and *Praefatio* to *Explicit Praefatio* inclusive there are exactly 731 words.

In his *Breuilloquium de omnibus sanctis* Wulfstan the Cantor of Winchester fixed the text with a Prologue in epanaleptic couplets, in which the first letters of the hexameter verses form the acrostic *VVLFSTANVS*.¹⁰ There are as many letters in the Prologue as there are lines in the rest of the poem, 696. The Epilogue exhibits an acrostic *NVNC ET IN AEVVM DEO GRATIAS AMEN* and a telestich *NVNC ET IN AEVVM SIT DEO LAVS AMEN*. The 994 letters of the Epilogue may suggest the year of composition.

In an earlier issue of this journal I edited *Aldhelmi Carmen Rhythmicum*, about a storm that destroyed a church in which Aldhelm was praying on Saint Paul's Day, 29 June.¹¹ Beginning from 1 January, 29 June is the 180th day of the year. There are 180 lines of verse before *et nisi natalicia Pauli Sancti sollemnia*. Beginning from *et nisi natalicia* there are eighteen words before *nouies binos circiter*. After *Pauli Sancti sollemnia* there are eighteen lines of verse to the end of the Epilogue. From *sollemnia* inclusive to the end of the Epilogue there are fifty-two words, one for each week of the year. From *Pauli Sancti* inclusive to the end of the Epilogue there are 365 letters, one for each day of the year. The number of letters in parts I and II is exactly ten times that amount, 3650.

Given the conventions of dating texts long before Aldhelm in the Hiberno-Latin tradition and after Aldhelm in the Anglo-Latin tradition, indeed in Aldhelm's own poem, it is not unreasonable to look for indications of date in the 'Letter to Heahfrith'.¹²

Theodore and Hadrian began to teach in Canterbury from A.D. 670 and may have taken awhile to persuade someone like Aldhelm, who had been taught by the Irishman Maeldub, that their learning was superior to that of Irish scholars. As from A.D. 675 Aldhelm was

10. F. DOLBEAU 'Le *Breuilloquium de omnibus sanctis*. Un poème inconnu de Wulfstan chantre de Winchester', *Analecta Bollandiana* CVI (1988), pp. 35-97. D. R. HOWLETT 'Numerical Play in Wulfstan's Verse and Prose', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* XXXI (1996), pp. 61-7.

11. D. R. HOWLETT 'Aldhelmi Carmen Rhythmicum', *ALMA* LIII (1995), pp. 119-40.

12. I owe thanks to Dr Dáibhí Ó Cróinín for suggesting the possibility of an infixed date in this composition.

abbot of Malmesbury, he is likely to have written this letter during the period between 670 and 675.

In the edition and analysis I presented evidence of composition on multiples of the number 8. Among eight parallel and chiasmic patterns the centre of the first parallelism is at line 20, and the crux of the first chiasmus is at the same place.¹³

Postquam uestram repedantem istuc ambrosiam ex Hiberniae brumosis circionis insulae climatibus.	20 (19)
Ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo. uber sofiae sugens metabatur.	
Territorii marginem Britannici sospitem applicuisse. rumigerulis referentibus comperimus. ...	25 (24)

Including the Salutation the sentence beginning *Postquam* is the twentieth line of the composition, though it is the nineteenth of the letter proper. The line that details Heahfrith's sojourn in Ireland is *Ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo* 'where in about a thrice-double cycle of years'. If one played loosely with the numerals *ter bino*, as 32, and multiplied them by the number of the line (21), 32×21 would equal 672. Reckoning more precisely, from the beginning of the letter proper, from *Primitus pantorum procerum praetorumque* to *ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo* inclusive, there are 112 words, which, multiplied by 3 and 2, equal 672. The Irish among whom Heahfrith had been studying used to reckon Easter on an eighty-four-year cycle. That, multiplied by the number 8 on which composition of the letter is based, would equal 672.

Oxford
Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
Bodleian Library

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13. 'Aldhelm and Irish Learning', pp. 46-7, 51, 54-5.