Early Irish historical verse: the evolution of a genre

PETER J. SMITH

The evolution of early Irish historical verse may be traced on two levels: the parallel development of individual types of verse dealing with specific themes, and the gradual synthesis of these types within a chronological framework supplied by regnal years and dates.¹

In the present article I attempt to describe these developments from the seventh to the twelfth century by surveying a representative cross-section of relevant printed materials.² Emphasis will be on the treatment of subject matter and chronology.²

Special role of verse in transmission of Irish learning and history

Linguistics,³ law,⁴ metrics,⁵ dindshenchas ('toponimatic lore'),⁶ geography,⁷ genealogy⁸ and history⁹ all fell within the scope of traditional Irish learning or seanchas.¹⁰ Much of this knowledge was communicated in the form of verse. Historical verse was thus only one variety of medieval Irish learned poetry.

Not only did the study of history form an important element in the education of the professional poets or filid,¹¹ but there is strong evidence to suggest that verse may have been

* I am grateful to Ms Beatrix Färber (CELT-Project, University College, Cork), Dr habil. Bernhard Maier (Sprachenwissenschaftliches Institut der Universität Bonn), Prof. Donnchadh Ó Corráin (University College, Dublin), and Dr Paul Russell (Radley College, Oxfordshire) for reading earlier drafts of this article and making suggestions for improvements.

¹ Some editors at the turn of the century merely provided editions of texts without translation; others also provided translations. Where a translation forms part of an edition which is cited here, I reproduce the editor's translation. Among the texts cited are poems which have been preserved in Lebor Gabála Érenn. Unfortunately, R.A.S. Macalister's texts and translations frequently leave much to be desired. Nevertheless, I have decided to adhere closely to Macalister's edition since it is available and conveys the sense required for our present purposes. Particularly significant keywords in the Irish texts and in the corresponding translations have been highlighted in bold. ² A substantial body of historical verse contained in Irish manuscripts remains to be published. ³ See, for example, Cúig cnéithead tiagbaid in es 'There are five commons which end in -es' ed. and trans. by David Greene, 'A Middle Irish Poem on Latin Nouns', Celtica 2 (1954), pp 278–96. ⁴ See, for example, the poem beginning Einnecland na trí secht ngrád' 'The honour-price of the thrice seven grades, ascribed to Muirgius ua Duib-dá-boirenn, on the honour-price of the church

perceived in Ireland as the medium *par excellence* for historical scholarship. As late as the first half of the seventeenth century Irish historians were still calling upon the authority of verse to support them in their scholarly disputes.

**Definition of historical verse**

Historical verse may be defined here as verse which is intended to record knowledge of the historical traditions of Ireland. Three principles underpin the genre: first, the synthesising of various strands of genealogical information which would allow the Irish to claim descent from Adam; second, the linking up of the pedigrees of the kings of the great Irish dynasties to allow these dynasties to claim common descent from Mil and thereby justify their political hegemony; and third, the drawing up of typological parallels between the great Irish dynasties, and the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Macedonians as a means of fitting the Irish into the larger scheme of world-history and the time-frame of the Six Ages of the World.

the types of compositions and ethical qualities required of a poet and includes *comgne*, which Thurneysen translated as 'Chronistik'. For the text see IT 3.1, pp 57–8, §110. Thurneysen thought that the passage on the *ceithre rutha déc* was ein spärter Einschiebe, p 111, cf. pp 118–19. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* (Dublin 1963), p. v, stated that 'the whole [MV II] may have been worked into a unified tract in the eleventh century'. In the eighth-century Old Irish law-tract *Uraicecht na Ríar*, ed. and trans., L. Bretnach (Dublin 1987), pp 102–3, § 2, we are told that the *ollam*, the highest grade of fālai, was required to be knowledgeable in *i cethic inngiuin* in all historical science. See also S. Mac Airt, *Filidecht and Coingné* (Dublin 1959), pp 139–52. 12 The seventh-century historian Keating noted *(h)uimadhar tigilbair an tuancunna suim iomhán an tuancunna i ndhuantaigh, inniu go rath leis an tuacunnu matair ar an seanchus i, agus fíos gurab amhlaidh i mo du cairbithe do mbeamar air leis na macaibh féigloite do bhíobh aca é* the authors of the ancient record framed the entire historical compilation in poems, in order that thereby change should be made in the record; and also, that in this manner, it might the more be committed to memory by the students who were attending them*, David Comyn, ed. and trans., *Foras fasta ar Eirinn I*, ITS 4 (1908) pp 90–1. See further C. Bretnach, *Rawlinson B 102*, Lebar Glinne Dé Locha and Saltair na Rann*, Eige 30 (1997), pp 109–12 at 111. 13 In 1650 the Franciscan scholar, Brother Michel Ó Cleirigh was embroiled in a controversy with a fellow Franciscan, Tuileagna Ó Maolchonaire, a member of the famous family of historians. Tuileagna attacked Ó Cleirigh for inaccuracy in his study of the history of the saints and kings of Ireland on four specific points. In delivering his fourth charge, that Ó Cleirigh was wrong in his assertion that Toirrdhealbhach had been king of Ireland for twenty years 'with opposition', Tuileagna referred to a stanza in *Étudh a tigí Barbhá* by Donnchadh Bán Ó Maolchonaire (d. 1410), which by contrast asserted that Toirrdhealbach had been king of Ireland for fifty years and contained no reference to Toirrdhealbach as king 'with opposition'. See P. Walsh, ed. and trans., *‘Genalogiae Regum et Sanctorum Hiberniae’ by the Four Masters* (Dublin 1918), pp 131–53 at 133. 14 See, for example, CGH I, p. 1, lines 115 a 19 a 20: *Bunadh Lagen immemor a tiadhro co Adam do ruintin in rigíth Find Rosa Ruaidh una forainnbh do-dorgáin do rigíth Lagen 7 dia ngenelogaib utána Enna Cennelach mac Labraid a m. Brionl Biailg m. Fiachba ba hAiscid co tice (?) a senadhair Adam. *Écide, Enna, Labraid ...* Ladhenn m. Barched, leading poet of Ireland, made another genealogical poem concerning the kings of Leinster and their genealogies from Enna Cennelach son of Labraid son of Bresal Belach son of Fiachbu ba Aiscid until his ancient father Adam: *Enna, Labraid ...*. 15 See, for example, *Can a mhunadh a nGaedhil* 'Whence the origin of the Goddil?' ascribed to Máel Mura of Fothain (Inis Eoghan) in Best and O’Brien *LL* III, pp 366–23. See edition with trans. by J. H. Todd in *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin 1948), pp 226–87. See also R.A.S. Macalister, ed. and trans., *LG 1–5*, ITS 34, 35, 39, 41–44 (1938–96). On the political theory of the common descent of the Irish from Mil, see Byrne, *Senchad* pp 137–59 at 143–4. 16 See S. Mac Airt, *Middle-Irish Poems on World Kingship*, ÉC 6 (1953–54), pp 255–80; 7 (1955), pp 18–45; 8 (1959), pp 98–119; 284–97. 17 D. Ó Cróinín (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi* (Dublin 1983); H.L.C. Hristrate, *Sex Aetates Mundii: Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Irn*: *Untersuchungen und Texte*, Anglistische Forschungen 165 (Heidelberg 1985).
Types of historical verse

While we know that medieval Irish scholars classified their tales into various types, they appear not to have left behind any detailed classification of their historical verse. A Middle Irish classification may, however, be implied by the recurrence of particular keywords or terms — *genelach* for instance — in the prefaces to historical poems; the repetition of keywords — *anmann*, *aideda*, *cathal/comrama*, *aimsera/flathshuair/reimes* — in the opening stanzas of the poems; and the description of the contents of the legendary Psalter of Cormac. On the basis of these criteria, I have made an attempt to draw up a typology of early Irish historical verse.

At least five specific types of historical verse may be identified on the basis of the nature of their content.

1. Versified Pedigrees of the Kings [*Genelait na Ríg*];
2. Versified King-Lists [*Anmann na Ríg*];
3. Versified Battle-lists and Death-tales of the Kings [*Cathal/Comrama ocsu Aideda na Ríg*];
4. Dynastic Synthetic Lists [*FlathshuAimsen na Ríg*];
5. National Verse Chronicles [*Annálad*].

I posit the following model as a means of tracing the development of early Irish historical verse.

Types 1–3 were cultivated more or less simultaneously from as early as the seventh century. The purely genealogical variety (type 1) receded in importance, but types 2–3 were cultivated at least until the end of our period in the twelfth century.

---

19 One class of historical verse, however, which does appear to be identifiable from medieval usage is *fursundud*. Kuno Meyer indicated that the term *fursundud* 'Erleuchtung, Erklärung' would appear to be used to describe genealogical poems in which kings and dynasties are celebrated. K. Meyer, ed. and trans., *Über die älteste irische Dichtung* I (Kgl. Preuss. Akad der Wissensch. Abhandl.) (Berlin 1913), p. 16. 20 K. Simms in an article entitled 'The study of *senchas* in A miracle of learning; studies in manuscripts and Irish learning. Essays in honour of William O'Sullivan, ed. by T. Barnard, D. Ó Cróinin, K. Simms (Aldershot 1998), p. 272, has drawn attention to the following lines from *The Irish Ordeals*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, IT 17.1, p. 199, p. 217 § 57: 'Durígnued didiu gnim n-ádamnara la Cormac an déin ...'. *Saltair Cormaic* do thisul, i.e. *do thisul* sin *n* *seanchad* Erenn, im Fidusan mac *MBochun* ... im *Fhíl* (*F*íl), *coru scribad* *coimneola* or *créba cailinnuas* *n* *remind a righ* or *a rairech* ... *a catha* or *a comraigh* or *a n-arsata aumall* ... *thunich domhain conici sin*, com *d* *d* *did**u Saláir Temnach as (fh)frum 7 as *bunad* 7 as *topur* do *seanchadh* Erenn nim cuimhne. A famous deed was also done by Cormac then, namely, the compilation of the *Saltair Cormaic*. The old men and the historians of the men of Ireland, including Fintan son of Bochra and Fíthel the Poet, were gathered together; and then the *synchronisms* and the *pedigrees were* recorded in writing, and the kings and princes, and their *battles and contests*, and their *antiquities*, from the beginning of the world down to that time. Wherefore this, the Psalter of Tara, is a root and a foundation and a source for Eriu’s historians from thence to the present day. Cf. the reference to the contents of the Psalter of Tara in E.J. Gwynn, *Met. Dinds. I* (Dublin 1903), Temnair III, pp 14–15 lines 16–24 where we are told: ‘Is inda atá do ceech leithéna *ndlig* ceech ri ciscúid *ndlig* ni Temnach thairdó ríg ceech ciscúid cceolmána. *Coimneol* ceechat ceech ríg *ceala* do ríthe fíchu críche. ceech ciscúid fo chríche/ étá traigteid in *pro-thiathaí*.' In it is set down on every hand/ what is the *right* of every king of a province/ what is the *right* of the king of Temair eastward/ from the king of every songful province. The *correlation*, the *synchronising* of every man of each king one with another together; the *limits* of every province marked by a stone-rick/ from the foot to the full barony. On the 'fictitious' manuscript known as the Psalter of Tara and the 'very real Psalter of Cashel' see P. Ó Ríain, ‘The Psalter of Cashel: a provisional list of contents’, *Éige 23* (1989), pp 107–30 at 108–12, 122. Another type which might be included here is verse concerning *certa ocus diged na ríig* (‘the rights and privileges of the kings’) as mentioned in *Temnair III* and as found in *Lebor na Ceart*, ed. and trans., Myles Dillon, ITS 46 (1962).
EARLY IRISH HISTORICAL VERSE: THE EVOLUTION OF A GENRE

Type 4 arose in the ninth century from a gradual synthesis of the kind of material found in types 1–3. Chronology played little or no role in types 1–3 but became increasingly important by the beginning of the tenth century and was fundamental to the development of type 4 and its corollary, type 5.

As early as the ninth century, the origins, the interrelationships and history of the various Irish dynasties had begun to be drawn together within a unified narrative. By the eleventh century, that narrative had been elaborated and refined within an established chronological framework in the poetry of contemporary ecclesiastical scholars, leading to the development of type 5.

Overlapping of types

The typology above should not be seen in the same light as a modern literary typology. It is provisional and may need to be modified in the light of future research. There are also inevitable problems of demarcation involved in such a typology. For example, the dividing line between types 1 and 2 is a fine one in view of the fact that dynastic king-lists and the corresponding genealogical lists inevitably contain much of the same material. Furthermore, in terms of form, the lists of the kings of Ireland which I have assigned to type 5 have arguably more in common with the dynastic synthetic lists, but in terms of content they are best considered within the wider context of the writing of national verse chronicles. The genres of eulogy and to a lesser extent elegy, for example, are intrinsically linked with types 1, 2 and 3. It could be argued that dindsenchas should be included here. However, I suggest that while dindsenchas and seanchas na ríig clearly influenced each other in that they both drew on scéala ('tales'), they seem to me to represent fairly clearly defined strands of the literary tradition.

Type 1: Versified pedigrees [Genelaig na Ríg]

In identifying our first type we are aided by the recurrence of the word genelach ‘genealogy’ in the prefaces to a number of versified pedigrees of the provincial over-kings of Leinster and Munster in Rawlinson B 502. A classic example is Énna, Labraid/ Labraid cáich Énna, Labraid/ mention of each, a preface of 54 stanzas ascribed in Rawl. B 502 to Laidcend mac Baircheda. Donnchadh Ó Corráin has taken Énna, Labraid as ‘a versified pedigree of Énna Cennselach, ancestor of Uí Chennselaig’ on the basis of its extant form. Ó Corráin has convincingly dated this, the second of the three long Leinster genealogical poems in Rawl. B 502, ‘to the first half of the seventh century, and not earlier’. This strand of the genre is developed to a more complex level by the ninth-century writer Máel Mura of Forthain. In Can a mbunadas na nGidele bh Máel Mura attempts not only to trace the origins of a single dynasty but those of the entire

---

22 I hope to return to this discussion in future work.
23 Cf. the classical and continental concept of origo gentis.
24 Note that the term crích coibnúsaca, which is found in the passage cited above from The Irish Ordeals, is translated by L. Breatnach, Unziehtet an Riar, pp 102–3, §2, gloss n. 7, as ‘genealogy’.
24 See CGH 1, p. 1, line 115 a 20; CGH 1 p. 2, line 115 c 52; CGH 1 p. 199, line 148 b 31.
27 D. Ó Corráin ibid.
In versifying this kind of information, scholars like Máel Mura were presenting their historiography in a memorable and authoritative form.

Type 2: Versified king-lists [Anmann na Ríg]
By telling us of their desire to focus on the names of kings, Middle Irish scholars allow us to identify a second type. The preface to the seventh-century poem *Nídu dir dermait* from Rawl. B 502 states:

_Cóc ríg tréchta do Laignib ro falluitar hērind a Temair ūa Labraid Longech Mōen cotici Nad-Buidh mac bEircc Buadaig do hūīb Dega; is hē rí dēdenach ro buī dīb ann amal ro-s-aímnig in prīmfle cēna Laidecenn mac Bairceda do Dāl Araide. [...] Is e so in fursunnud Laideind: ‘Thirty-five kings of the Leinstermen ruled Ireland out of Tara from Labraid Longech Mōen until Nad-Buidh son of Erc Buadach of the Uí Dega; he is the last king of them that there was in it [Tara] according to the manner in which that same pre-eminent poet, Ladchenn mac Barcheda of the Dál nAraide, has named them. [...] Here is the fursunnad of Ladchenn._

The Middle Irish author of *Cimbáeth cléithe n-óc nEmna*, a versified list of the pseudo-historical kings of the Ulaid, declares in stanza 3:

> Cluinet senchaide for selba,  
> a Ultu āna Emma;  
> anmann for ríg, rointe tot,  
> ó Chimbáeth co Conchobor.

Let the historians of your possession hear –  
O ye noble Ulaid of Emain! –  
the names of your kings, of divisions of rulers  
from Cimbáeth to Conchobor.

Poems belonging to this type are essentially versified lists of the names of the kings. The lists are arranged in a pre-ordained chronological sequence, generally beginning with the earliest king and finishing with the reigning king. This strand of the genre was cultivated in various forms from the seventh century until the twelfth century, and indeed beyond.

Like the versified pedigrees, the versified king-lists probably evolved as the most effective way of memorising a long list of names in a fixed chronological sequence. Indeed, the versified king-lists were probably modelled on the versified pedigrees. For the seventh century, the authors of the king-lists probably drew on genealogical tales, lists and poems, but with the passage of the centuries on a growing range of additional sources including annals and synchronisms.

Type 3: Versified battle-lists and death-tales of the kings [Catha/Comrama ocus Aideda na Ríg]
This is another instance in which the words of the Middle Irish scholars enable us to distinguish a further type, the versified battle-lists and death-tales of the kings (Catha/Comrama ocus Aideda na Ríg). *Dallán mac Móre* [fl. 887–909], in *Cerbhall Carrig cân-Life*, a poem of 20 stanzas on the victories of Cerball mac Muirecáin, clearly identifies his theme of _catha_ and _comrama_ in stanzas 6–8:

28a See n. 15. 29 _CGH_ I, pp 8–9, lines 116 c 1–116 c 6; for the poem see 116 c 7–116 c 51. 30 _LGV_, pp 462–3, q. 5; see similar lines at _LG_ III, p. 178, q. 32; _LGV_, p. 132, q. 1, q. 6, q. 12. 31 The versified king-lists [Type 2] may perhaps be equated with _réimenn na ríg_ mentioned in _The Irish Ordeals_. On _réim_ ‘series, succession, list’, see _DIL_ s.v. (d). 32 Type 3 may be equated with the _catha_ and _comraicthi_ mentioned in _The Irish Ordeals_. See note 20. 33 K. Meyer, ‘A poem by Dallán mac Móre’, _RC_ 29 (1908), pp 210–14. The text has been printed here in conventional stanzaic form.
In the opening verse of *Éstid a éolchu cen on*, ascribed in the Book of Leinster to the eleventh-century lector of Monasterboice, Flann Mainistrech, the author leaves us in no doubt that the focus of his poem is the death-tales of the kings:

*In the closing stanza the poet writes:*

The recounting in verse of the victories and the death-tales of the kings has its roots in the seventh century and continues until the end of our period. Its underlying function seems to be one of commemoration and celebration. Early examples of type 3 tend to be primarily concerned with the commemoration of a specific event in the history of an individual or his immediate family. A good example is the poem of three verses beginning *Mára galgata* on the battle of Cnámr os in which the legendary Leinster king, Bressal Bélach, is reputed to have defeated Cairpre Liphechair and his three sons, Eochaid, Eochaid Domplén and Fíachu Srapthine, together with nine thousand of their troops. I cite the first verse and Kuno Meyer’s translation:

The enumeration of his *triumphs* shall be heard till Doom;
– his *battles* and his *fights*,
all shall hear them from me.

Triumphs of his *triumphs*
of just Cerball of the saints,
– eight *battles* which he overthrew
on Flann the famous, the noble.

The battle of Mathach, the battle of Mucknoe
the battle of Brawney of deeds,
– the battle of Achaill, it was not easier,
to the tower of Tara yonder.
Fragments of verse in a similar vein commemorating a particular victory or defeat or the death of a specific king or saint occur frequently in Irish chronicles. The gradual shift in focus away from the commemoration of a single victory or death-tale in favour of the versification of a series of victories or death-tales won or suffered respectively by a sequence of dynastic kings seems to have begun in the ninth century. A good example of this development is the ninth-century poem of 37 stanzas beginning

A chóicid choín Chairpri crúaid

‘O fair province of stern Cairpre’ on the over-kings of the Laigin. The poem is attributed to Orthanach, whom Máirín O Daly identified as Orthanach, bishop of Kildare [ob. AFM 839 = 840]. Here we are told, for example, of the aided of Lorc at the hands of Cobthach Cóel [3c-d], the Dind Ríg episode [4a-d], the aided of Lugaid Ríab nDerg at the hands of the three Rúaid ‘red-haired men’ [5a-d], the aided of Conaire Mór at the siege of Bruiden Da Derga [7a-d], the triumph at Cath Duma Aichir [16a-d], and so on. Quatrain 16 gives a good example of this kind of poetry:

An illustration of the persistence of this strand of the genre in its most basic form is its continuation by Middle Irish poets such as Flann Mainistrech [d. 1056]. In his poem of 69 stanzas on the victories of the Cenél nÉogain beginning Aní do-rónsat do chalmu clanna Éogain,

Borbhath Duma Aichir and
– ar galoib crann mbrodcer mhbor
ba err durbarr dúálach drenn –
i mho báudach Dùnlang Donn.

‘The fierce battle of Duma Aichir in which Dùnlang Donn was victorious; in contests of huge, red-pronged spears he was a stern, strong curly-haired champion (?)’

An illustration of the persistence of this strand of the genre in its most basic form is its continuation by Middle Irish poets such as Flann Mainistrech [d. 1056]. In his poem of 69 stanzas on the victories of the Cenél nÉogain beginning Aní do-rónsat do chalmu clanna Éogain,

Borbhath Duma Aichir and
– ar galoib crann mbrodcer mhbor
ba err durbarr dúálach drenn –
i mho báudach Dùnlang Donn.

‘The fierce battle of Duma Aichir in which Dùnlang Donn was victorious; in contests of huge, red-pronged spears he was a stern, strong curly-haired champion (?)’

An illustration of the persistence of this strand of the genre in its most basic form is its continuation by Middle Irish poets such as Flann Mainistrech [d. 1056]. In his poem of 69 stanzas on the victories of the Cenél nÉogain beginning Aní do-rónsat do chalmu clanna Éogain,

Borbhath Duma Aichir and
– ar galoib crann mbrodcer mhbor
ba err durbarr dúálach drenn –
i mho báudach Dùnlang Donn.

‘The fierce battle of Duma Aichir in which Dùnlang Donn was victorious; in contests of huge, red-pronged spears he was a stern, strong curly-haired champion (?)’

An illustration of the persistence of this strand of the genre in its most basic form is its continuation by Middle Irish poets such as Flann Mainistrech [d. 1056]. In his poem of 69 stanzas on the victories of the Cenél nÉogain beginning Aní do-rónsat do chalmu clanna Éogain,
In contrast, they appear to have drawn on anachistic sources40 when dealing with historical figures. The underlying motive for composition appears to have been the desire to record historical events and to eulogise the dynastic and, at a later stage, the national past.41

The emergence of Type 4: synthesis and chronology

The most striking aspect of pre-tenth-century Irish historical poetry is that in most instances the only chronological framework used was one based on the counting of generations. This point is best illustrated by consideration of one of the early Leinster poems, *Énna, Labraid/liad cáich*. The complete absence of figures or years in that poem shows that the author was either not interested in or more probably was not in a position to, establish the precise chronology of the historical references which he gave in this poem.

What appears to be a disregard for matters chronological in *Énna, Labraid* is at odds with the situation in the synchronistic Hiberno-Latin poem beginning *Deus a quo facta fuit*.42 Dáibhí Ó Cróinín has shown that ‘the composer of these verses, writing in AD 645 probably in the northern part of the country, provides contemporary but independent confirmation of the date 642 for the obit of Domnall mac Áedo’.43 How was it that the author of *Deus a quo facta fuit*, in contrast to the author of *Énna, Labraid/liad cáich*, was so interested in establishing an exact chronology?

I would suggest that what we have in *Énna, Labraid/liad cáich* is a representation of an earlier, arguably more conservative, phase in the tradition. The author’s scholarly world is one of lists of names of kings and battles, which have been previously memorised, in chronological sequence with glor y’. J. Carney, ‘The dating of early Irish verse texts, 700–1100’, at 100, in fact a eulogy to Cerball. This much is clear from stanza 2: ar cara 5 ar culsiúh,cdn créan, rand na lámín, mac mór móléíshach Muircíór thú mhiadh, co mháig ‘Our friend and our darling, of lovely aspect, in his hand a spear: – great famous son of Muiregán, with triumphs, with glory’. J. Carney, ‘The dating of early Irish verse texts, 500–1100’, Éige 10 (1982–83), pp 177–216 at 187, described him as ‘the earliest recognisable court or household poet whose poems have survived in some quantity; in style and approach he anticipates that is ancestral to the type of poet that we know well from the fourteenth century onwards to the end of the Bardic Order’.42 Karl Strecker (ed.), *Rhythmi computistici*, MGH Poet. lat. 4/2 (Berlin 1896), versus de annis a principio pp 695–7, at 697. 43 D. Ó Cróinín, ‘Early Irish annals from Easter-tables: a case restated’, Peritia 2 (1981), pp 74–86, at 79–81. For the most recent discussion of this poem see D. Howlett, ‘Seven studies in seventh-century texts’, Peritia 10 (1996), pp 1–70, at 1–6. 44 Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: ancient, medieval and modern* (Chicago (2nd ed.) 1994), p. 81. 45 See note 41.

The Old Testament represented an intricate historical record, but it contained no dates. Succession in time was indicated by temporal words (‘then,’ ‘after,’ ‘soon’) and by the passage of the generations. A narrative which stayed primarily within one culture needed no more.

I have examined a reasonable cross-section of poetry in Irish for the period 700–1000 in the light of James Carney’s article ‘The dating of early Irish verse texts, 500–1100’ with a view to identifying the origins of the use of chronology in historical verse in Irish.46 The versification of regnal years seems to have its origins in the seventh century, beginning with the reigns of
contemporary kings and very early historical kings. An example is the incorporation of the regnal years of Catháer Máır into verse 16 of the seventh-century poem *Nidu dir dermaite*.

41. Is mór mbldád make blean,
    o fhlaith prímid Partholóin,
    co taiscr mac Miled már
    dochum néfrin a hÉspáin,
    It is a great number of vigorous years of glory
    from the reign of pre-eminent Parthalón;
    until the casting up of the sons of great Mill
    on Ireland from Spain,

42. Ó fhlaith hÉibir, méeit n-ada,
    co fhlaith Fiachach Fir Mara,
    ó f[hl]aith Fiachach fhir fessa
    co fhlaith meic níthaig Nessa,
    From the reign of Éber, a great length
    until the reign of Fiachu Fer Mara
    from the reign of Fiachu with knowledge
    until the reign of the martial son of Ness.


46 In this connection we might also consider the lines: *In Catháer Máır trí ata meic doruirimsc ciéca bhudan dh bi réuga hBéirein bi Temuir ut Leidcenn affirn*: ‘This Catháer Máır, moreover, whose sons we have recounted, fifty years to him in the kingship of Ireland in Tara as Leidcenn affirms’ *CGH* 1, p. 70, lines 124 a 22–124 a 23.

47 J. Carney, as above note 41, at p. 178, p. 184.


49 O Daly, as above note 37 at p. 182.


52 K. Meyer, as above note 39.

53 J. Carney, as above note 41 at p. 179.
There appears to be a hint in the final verse, however, that the author and his contemporaries were aware of a more exact chronology extending from Conchobur to Donnchad:

43  Ó f[h]laith Conchobuir Emna
co flaith Donnchada Temra,
daíg rofes, ní brfathar bras,
connach ecnaid cen éolas.

From the reign of Conchobur of Emain until the reign of Donnchad of Tara since it is known, it is no boastful word, so that he is no scholar [who is] without knowledge.

Two trends can be identified in the poems discussed in type 4 above: the drawing together of genealogical information, king-lists, and lists of battles and death-tales within individual poems and the gradual provision of a chronological framework through the integration of regnal years.

The elaboration of a chronological framework for historical verse may have begun as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, but it appears to have been a sporadic and perhaps merely ornamental feature until the tenth century. The turning point can be seen in Cóc ríg trích tríallait ríe, 'Thirty-five kings who tried the field of battle', an anonymous work of the early eleventh century. This was composed in its present form the poem comprises 35 stanzas. O'Brien, ibid. p. 35, regarded the first 38 verses as the original composition and suggested that these 'must have been drafted in the period 915–940', before Fáelán's death in 940 [FM]. He took verses 39 and 40 to have been added shortly after and regarded verses 41–53 as an addition which was composed c.1024–36 during the reign of Donnchad mac Dúnlaing (d. AU 1024), about 110 years later than the first poem.

Poems with a religious theme for example, Fêitre Oengus, ed. and trans. by W. Stokes (London 1905) may have formed the conduit for the extension of a chronological framework to Irish history. That this was the case by the early eleventh century is suggested by stanza 34 of A Dé dúilig, adar-torch, a poem ascribed to the lector of Ros Ailithir, Aírbertach mac Cosse [d. 1066] and edited by P. O Néill, 'Aírbertach mac Cosse's poem on the psalter', Éige 17 (1977), pp 19–46. Trídhe tugairt in each ríad / is bais amser i bhfuair / at-a-dhochtar sonn san char / rí a ngeatisd aithar Solman, 'The Three things which are found in every composition / – place and time and person – / are found here in places / before the poems of the father of Solomon'. For the close links between Irish historical verse and the study of biblical history, see also Fiche ríg – cía rím as fér – ? 'Twenty kings according to the best reckoning' attributed to Aírbertach, Gearóid Mac Eoin, Éiriu 20 (1966), pp 112–39; Réidig dam, a Dé do nim 'Make easy for me, O God from Heaven', ascribed to Flann Mainistrech [d. 1066], S. Mac Airt, 'Middle-Irish poems on world kingship', ÉC 6 (1953–54), pp 255–80 etc. The links between historical verse, chronicles and king-lists in this phase are well illustrated by the close agreement shown by Cóc ríg trích tríallait ríe with these other two sources in its statement of regnal years.

Synchronism: Comamserad

Having established the regnal years for the historical kings of Ireland by counting kalend-markers from one death to another, tenth-century Irish scholars were confronted with the inevitable task of establishing regnal years for the pseudo-historical kings of Ireland as part of their project of transforming Irish legend and pseudo-history into history for the purpose of the compilation of the Irish World-Chronicle. On being faced with Jerome’s version of Eusebius’ chronicle of the World and Bede’s historical work, Irish scholars may have perceived their own prehistory as being somehow flawed. Irish scholars had few reliable dates for events pre-dating Irish historical record. The timelessess of the raw materials of Irish prehistory – people and events – may have detracted from its perceived ‘credibility’. Only the assigning of dates would ‘authenticate’ Irish prehistory and allow it to be woven into the larger scheme of the new history of the Irish people in the form of the Irish World-Chronicle.

What was their solution to the problem? After the pattern of Eusebius, previously memorised names of people, places and battles could be given a chronology by means of synchronisation with important foreign events and by means of a control-device, namely the computation of the time-intervals between Irish events internally, and then horizontally, as it were, against the columnar lists of important external events. It is probable that Bede’s De Temporum Ratione, which was published in 725, influenced and sustained Irish scholars in their efforts to draw up their own World-Chronicle.

One of the earliest examples of the application of synchronism in verse in Irish may be found in Togail tuir Chonained co nglail ‘The capture of Conaing’s tower with valour’, from the Lebor Gabála. A signature-stanza [q. 14] ascribes the poem to the tenth-century writer Eochaid úa Flainn. In stanza 14 Eochaid writes:

| Clanna Israel for fecht      | The children of Israel on a journey |
| sin n-aimsir sin a Háigept: | at that time out of Egypt;           |
| ocus clanna Gaedil Glas    | and the children of Gaedel Glas     |
| dochum na Scith for longais.| were a-voyaging to Scythia.          |

Thus, in this particular instance, Eochaid has succeeded in fixing the date of the exodus of the Goidil from Egypt to *annus Abrahae 506* by synchronising that legendary event with the historical Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. This technique of *comamserad* or synchronisation continued to be used in the late eleventh century by Gilla Cóemáin.

**Computation: Rím**

The late tenth- and eleventh-century historical poets leave us in no doubt as to their use of computation through their frequent use of verbs of counting: *rímid* (a) ‘counts, reckons, estimates’; (b) ‘relates, recounts’, and its compounds, *ad-rími* (a) ‘counts, numbers, computes’ (b) ‘records, recounts’ and *do-rími* ‘enumerates, mentions (as items of a list)’.

To emphasise that there is a systematic scientific process behind their calculations, the poets frequently used the word *ríagal* ‘rule, authority, measure’, and its derived verb *ríaglaid*.

Eochaid úa Flainn declares in stanza eight of *A chóemu cláir Cuind cóemfhind*:

> Three hundred years, I boast of it, I speak through the rules which I reckon, pleasant Ireland, I proclaim it against the soothsayers was waste, after the Flood.

Eochaid makes unambiguous reference to his application of computistic methods in quatrain 72 of *Éistet*, *des écna aíbind* when he states:

> Though these be the tales published to the people of the world of generations, their truth is known with witnesses according to rules and catalogues.

Moreover in stanza 10 of *Ríge na Méd menmach mass*, ascribed to Flann Mainistrech, we read:

> Two hundred and fifty-nine years (verily, though thou compute it) was the span of the sovereignty of the strong and vigorous Medes during the reign of seven kings.

East Tyrone who died in 1004 (AU). Carney, as above note 40, at pp 188–9, states ‘I know no other example of the identification of the names Flann and Flannucán’. While we cannot be sure that Eochaid úa Flainn and Eochaid úa Flannacáin were one and the same person, Carney’s dating of these poems to the late tenth century appears to be sustainable.

Little is known about the identity of Gilla Cóemáin beyond his *floruit* supplied by qq. 57 and 58 of the poem *Annálad anall uile*, where Gilla Coémáin informs us that he is writing in the year 1072. Mac Carthy in his edition of *Hériu ard inis na rríg* in *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus*, No. 830 (Dublin 1892) suggested that Gilla Cóemáin may ‘have belonged to the Uí-Chairbre [= Cenél Coirpri]: a sept that inhabited the barony of Granard, co. Longford, in which the establishment of the saint in question is situated’, p. 98. He based this assertion on the line *úa G ille saír Samthainne* as given in the final verse of *Hériu ard inis na rríg*. For a recent discussion of the identity of this poet see T.O. Clancy, ‘Scotland, the ‘Nennian’ recension of the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Lebor Bretnach* in *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland*, 500–1200, ed., Simon Taylor (Dublin 2000), pp 87–107, esp. 103–7. 68 See *rímid*, DIL s.v. *69* See *ad-rími*, DIL s.v. *70* See *do-rími*, DIL s.v. *71* LG III, pp 46–7, q. 8, 72 LG IV, pp 280–1, q. 72. I translate *rímid* as ‘computations’. 73 S. Mac Airt, ‘Middle-Irish poems on world kingship’, *ÉC* 7 (1935–56), pp 22–3.
The twelfth-century poet Gilla Mo-Dúta Úa Casaidhe remarks in stanza six of *Éiriú and inis na náem*:

Tuirmim réimes gach ríg réigh
a ainm's a eighidh aigmeil,
mar adheair buidni ar beirt
maraid im cuimhni comnecirt.

I reckon the space of every brilliant king,
his name and his terrible death,
as companies narrate our relation,
its remains with equal strength in my memory.

To summarise, versification of the names of historical kings and their regnal years appears to have been sustained in several poems in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The original impulse behind this kind of verse may have been the need to create an effective mnemononic device for contemporary tenth-century king-lists. In developing the versified regnal years, the poets drew descended the Goídil', in

Archivium Hibernicum (Buckingham

impulse behind this kind of verse may have been the need to create an effective mnemonic device

medieval manuscripts written between c.1390 and c.1500, namely, the Book of Uí Maine, Oxford, Bodleian Laud Misc. 610 and Oxford Bodleian manuscript Rawl. B 512. A fifth medieval copy of the text exists. It was written in the sixteenth century and is now bound in with the Book of Leinster.

Type 5: The versified national chronicle [Annálad]

Among the verse chronicles in Irish which have survived is *Annálad anall uile,* arguably the most interesting poem attributed to Gilla Cóemáin. The subject-matter of the poem is the Six Ages of the World, the synchronic reigns of the legendary kings of Ireland and the kings of the East, and finally the pseudo-history and history of Ireland.

The text is found in the mid-twelfth-century Book of Leinster and in a group of three late medieval manuscripts written between c.1390 and c.1500, namely, the Book of Uí Maine, Oxford, Bodleian Laud Misc. 610 and Oxford Bodleian manuscript Rawl. B 512. A fifth medieval copy of the text exists. It was written in the sixteenth century and is now bound in with the Book of Leinster.

---

The poem can be divided into six sections: qq. 1–6 deal with the Six Ages of the World; quatrains 7 state the annus praesens; quatrains 8–24 synchronise the invasions of Ireland and kings of Ireland with the reigns of kings of the Near and Middle East and significant dates in secular history; in qq. 25–36 we find the computation of the time-lapse between significant dates in Irish history after the Incarnation, viz. the deaths of the kings of Ireland, important battles and the deaths of important saints. In the final two stanzas we are told the year of the death of Diarmaid mac Mili na mBó, and the poet makes his prayer of petition.

By comparing Annálad anall uile with several parallel texts of Irish, English and Continental origin, it may be established that Gilla Cóemáin either directly or indirectly used works by Eusebius, Orosius, Isidore of Seville, and Bede, among others, for the composition of the first half of his poem, together with a version of the Irish World-Chronicle and the Chronicle of Ireland for the writing of the second half.

Since the Irish World-Chronicle seems to have combined many of the works of earlier writers, it is difficult to establish whether Gilla Cóemáin was drawing directly or indirectly on the works of these scholars. Gilla Cóemáin’s material on the Six Ages could have been derived either directly from a copy of Bede’s De Temporum Ratione or from Bede by way of the Irish World-Chronicle. Similarly, the material from Orosius and Isidore could have come either directly from copies of the Historiae adversus paganos and the Etymologiae respectively or by way of the Irish World-Chronicle. As for the Chronicle of Eusebius, the numerous errors in the synchronisms in the part of the poem dealing with the pre-Christian era suggests either that Gilla Cóemáin did not have available the early tabular version of the chronicle or that (if he did) the alignment of the columns was askew.

The great disparity between Annálad and the extant parallel sources with regard to the dates and reign-lengths of prehistoric kings – Conchobar, Conaire et al. is not to be wondered at. Divergences may reflect the circulation of apparently contradictory doctrines arising from the work of several distinct schools of history operating over a long period of time. The attempts to historicize the pre-historic kings probably began as early as the eighth century. However, I suggest that it was only in the eleventh century that Irish scholarship reached a consensus regarding the chronological framework in which to place those kings who were reputed to have lived between the Nativity and the arrival of Patrick. The close agreement between Annálad anall uile and the chronicles suggests that Gilla Cóemáin was drawing on a version of the ‘Chronicle of Ireland’. His particular copy of the ‘Chronicle of Ireland’ may have had only kalend-markers rather than dates after the manner of the Annals of Tigernach. This would perhaps explain the discrepancy in dates, while Annálad anall uile shows very consistent agreement with the Clonmacnoise group of chronicles in terms of the time-lapse between any two events, the precise dating implied by Annálad anall uile frequently diverges. In particular, it should be noted that, in terms of dates, Annálad anall uile is in closer agreement with Chronicum Scotorum than any of the other chronicles.

84a This term was coined by K. Hughes in Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources (London 1972) p. 101. In ‘The Status of the Pre-Patrician Irish Annals’, Peritia 12 (1998) 98–132 at p. 111, n. 35, Dan McCarthey pointed out that the term ‘Chronicle of Ireland’ and other related terms were not clearly enough defined by Hughes, and were indeed unsatisfactory. 84b Cf. D. McCarthey, Peritia 12 (1998) 98–132 at p. 142. 85 On reduction of the tables into a paragraphs see J. Mac Neill, ZCP 10 (1914), pp 81–96. See esp. p. 81 where Mac Neill notes the existence in the Laud Synchronisms of ‘Irish examples of synchronic tabulated history of very early date, but also, side by side with these, examples of the gradual disarrangement of part of this material through its transcription into a form in which the synchronic tabular arrangement was abandoned’. 85a See J.V. Kelleher, ‘The Táin and the Annals’, Ériu 22 (1971) 107–27. 85b Dan McCarthey has suggested to me that secular scholars gained access to the monastic annals from Clonmacnoise in the eleventh century.
The evidence available from the extant corpus of early Irish poetry suggests that Annálad anall uile constituted the peak of the tradition of chronological and specifically synchronistic poetry in Irish scholarship. No other author of a chronological poem written in Irish after Annálad anall uile seems to have attempted to synchronise the reigns of the kings of Ireland and the world with significant events in secular history in such an elaborate manner. Similarities between measurements of time in Annálad, the Mínugad and Redaction 1 of Lebor Gabála Érenn suggests the possibility that the compilers of these early versions of Lebor Gabála may occasionally have drawn on the poem, or indeed that Gilla Cóemáin was active in the compilation of those recensions of Lebor Gabála. The authoritative nature of Annálad anall uile seems to be confirmed by the occurrence of the reference to the dedication of Kells to Colm Cille as a late-fifteenth-century marginal addition, apparently in the hand of scribe H2, Cathal mac Maghnuas Mag Uidhir, Dean of Lough Erne, in the Annals of Ulster to the year 804. As has been recognised by Máire Herbert, this reference is a citation from Annálad anall uile. The strictly learned nature of this poem implies that it was used either as a text-book in the ecclesiastical schools, or more probably that it was used as a work of reference by scholars.

Provision of chronological framework for national verse chronicles

The final phase involved the extension of computistic method to versified lists of the kings of Ireland and their aideda as part of a large-scale versification of national history within a chronological framework of world-history. I suggest that at the beginning of the eleventh century several scholars set themselves the task of producing a compendium of the historical knowledge of the entire Irish nation and its leaders, based on a synthesised presentation [negotium] of (a) personae drawn from the scéla, genealogy, aideda, catha, and regnal lists, (b) established loci drawn from dindshenchas; and (c) an authentic tempus or chronological framework established by reference to chronicles, synchronisms, and regnal years. From this common project arose the Lebor Gabála Érenn and the poems of Flann Mainistrech and Gilla Cóemáin on the legendary pre-Christian and Christian kings of Ireland.

Just as scholars converted dynastic pseudo-history in prose form (as found in Rawl. B 502) into national history in Lebor Gabála, Flann Mainistrech and to an even greater extent Gilla Cóemáin shifted their attention away from writing versified dynastic king-lists in favour of supra-provincial or national king-lists. Flann elaborated the concept and Gilla Cóemáin refined it. To this extent their work represents the apex of the tradition.

Flann wrote two important poems on the kings of Ireland: the first of these, Ríg Themra dia tesband tnú, concerns the aideda of the legendary kings of Ireland, while the second, Ríg Themra tóebaige íar tain, deals with the aideda of the Christian kings of Ireland. Flann listed the kings in chronological order starting with Eochu Feidlech in the first poem and finishing with Máel Sechnaill II mac Domnaill (d. 1022) at the end of the second poem. There are only three instances in these two poems where Flann's powers of innovation extend to supplying the regnal years.86

Nevertheless, Flann is the first poet on record to have compiled an authoritative versified list of the over-kings of Ireland, which embraced all the individual extant king-lists within its unified framework.

Gilla Cóemáin’s success lay in extending Flann’s list of the legendary kings of Ireland further back into Irish prehistory and assigning regnal years to all the pre-Christian and Christian kings previously listed by Flann. Héiriu ard inis na ríg is in many respects Gilla Cóemáin’s more polished response to Flann’s Ríg Themra dia teiband túná. Moreover, by incorporating the regnal years, in quatrains 2–20 of At-tá sund forba fessa, Gilla Cóemáin provided a supplement to Ríg Themra tóebaige iar tain,92 albeit at the expense of omitting the aideda given in Flann’s poem.

In Annalad anall uile Gilla Cóemáin went a step further. In order to authenticate his history of the kings of Ireland as presented in Héiriu ard inis na ríg and At-tá sund forba fessa, he incorporated this history into a wider chronological framework, an accepted and established chronological framework of world-history, beginning with the Creation and ending with the death of Diarmait mac Mál na mBó.

Conclusion
In summary, Irish historical verse developed first as versified genealogies. After the model of the versified pedigrees, versified king-lists, battle- and death-tale lists were drawn up. All of these versified lists lacked a chronological framework of dates and years. These separate lists were synthesised, initially without precise chronology, and then within a chronological framework by the addition of regnal years which had previously been computed by the ecclesiastic chroniclers.

The contribution of the poets of the tenth and eleventh centuries lay in their ability to unite these two strands of Irish historiographical tradition. In order to create in the vernacular a national history of Ireland, they successfully wove together an indigenous timeless historiography based on scéla and pedigrees which had been transmitted through Irish with an ecclesiastically-inspired historiography which was zeitgebunden and based on innovative techniques of annalistic computation and synchronisation which had been transmitted through Latin.

92 See LL III, pp 491–3.