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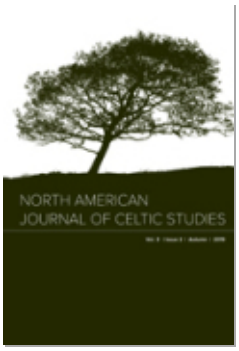

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‘My druid is Christ’. The development and transformation of a tradition relating to St. Columba of Iona

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the origins and growth of a tradition which attributes the saying ‘my druid is Christ’ to the sixth-century St. Columba of Iona. In recent decades, the phrase has enjoyed particular currency among practitioners of modern ‘Celtic spirituality’, who have taken it as evidence of the positive and appreciative attitude of early Irish Christians towards their native ‘pagan’ past. These notions, however, represent only the most recent example of the creative processes of re-appropriation that have transformed the meaning of the expression in the course of its transmission history. The examination presents an overview and analysis of relevant textual sources, including annals, hagiography, and later literary materials, to trace the ways in which the phrase has been decontextualised and reframed to meet the interests and needs of different audiences from the early medieval period up to the present day.

KEYWORDS: Saint Columba, tradition, druids, hymn, reception history

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Introduction

Among its miscellaneous collection of genealogical, historical, ecclesiastical, and narrative material, the late medieval Irish manuscript known as the Yellow Book of Lecan includes a poem that has traditionally been attributed to the famous sixth-century saint, Columba of Iona.[1] The composition in its entirety reads as follows (O'Donovan 1846):

> Colum cilli .cc. ocus sé oc imthecht a oenar; ocus is coimdi d'on t-í nod geba ag dul for séd.
>
> Columbkille cecinit while passing alone; and it will be a protection to the person who will repeat it going on a journey

§1. M'oenuran dam isin sliab, a ríg grían rop sorad séd, nocha n-eaglaigi dam ní, na da m-beind tri fichit céd.

Alone am I in the mountain, O royal Sun of prosperous path, nothing is to be feared by me, nor if I were attended by sixty hundred.

§2. Da m-beind-si trí fichit céd, do slúagaib, cédh aincid cnis, ó thic caingen mo báis brais, ní uil daingen gabas fris.

If I were attended by sixty hundred of forces, though they would defend the skin (body), when once the fixed period of my death arrives, there is no fortress, which will resist it.

§3. Gid a cill gontar trotha, gid in indsi ar lár lacha, aincid etrotha in beatha, beith a ced torach Catha.

Though even in a church the reprobates are slain, though in an island in the middle of a lake, the fortunate of this life are protected, while in the very front of a battle.

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[1] TCD 1318 (MS 2.16), col. 320. The Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL) is a composite Middle Irish manuscript associated with the learned family of Mic Fhir Bhisigh. It was written between 1391 and 1401. The poem in the manuscript comes between the stories on the death of Muirchertach mac Erca and the historical battle of Magh Rath (Abbott & Gwynn 1921: 99). On the codicology of the manuscript, see further Oskamp 1975.

§4. Ní tualaing neach mo marbad, ge som teagma do a m-baegal, ní mo is tualaing m'anaccul, in la ticfa mo saegal.

No one can slay me, though he should find me in danger, neither can I be protected the day my life comes to its destined period.

§5. Mo shaegal! Leic mar is áil re Día: ní de nocha teisteoba, tuillead air nocha bia.

My life! Let it be as is pleasing to my God, nothing of it shall be wanting, addition to it will not be [made].

§6. Bíd i n-galar neach is slan, bíd co slan neach is eas-slán, bíd i n-inill neach is trú, bíd i n-esinill etrú.

The healthy person becomes sick, the sickly person becomes sound, the unhappy person gets into order, the happy person gets into disorder.

§7. Cech ní chindes Día do neoch, ní teit do'n bith go ru scaich, gid airchind shires ní is mó, urdail friged ní fó fair.

Whatever God has destined for one as he goes not from this world until he meets it, though a prince should seek more, the size of a mite he shall not obtain.

§8. Comairci, bereas duine leis for séd, ocus cid h-í in comairci, cred, ros ainic sein ar éc.

A guard one may bring with him on his path, but what protection, what—has guarded him from death?

§9. In lus beantar do na buaib iar toidecht doib ar in t-sleib, créd do ber ar fhir na m-bó, cen lus do buain dó bodéin.

An herb is cut for the kine after their coming from the mountain; what induces the owner of the kine not to cut an herb for himself?

§10. Nocha n-fhitir mac duine, cuich d'á n-denann ré cruinne, in cruindi do bodéin é no in cruinde do neach aile.

No son of a man knows for whom he makes a gathering, whether it is a gathering for himself or a gathering for another person.

§11. Léic ass in léire coléic, dena féile, ferrdi duit, Mac Muire mine conic, tic cech aigi co n-a chuid.

Leave out penury for a time, attend to hospitality, it is better for thee, the son of Mary will prosper thee; each guest comes to his share.

§12. Is menic, in ní chaiter co tairic, ocus in ni nach caiter, cen co caiter h-étairic.

It is often the thing which is spent returns, and the thing which is not spent, although it is not spent, it vanishes.

§13. A Dé bí, is mairg do ní olc fá ní, tic chugad in ní nach faic, téit as do glaicc in ní at chí.

O living God, alas for him who does evil for any thing; the thing which one sees not come to him, and the thing which he sees vanishes from his hand.

§14. Nocha n-ag sreód ata ar cuid, nocha n-ag eóin da barr slat, ní ag curnán do chrand chas ní ag sordán, glac i n-glaic. Fearr in té re tabraim taeb, in t-Atair 's in t-Aen 's in Mac.

It is not with the *sreod* our destiny is, nor with the bird on the top of the twig, nor with the trunk of a knotty tree, nor with a *sordan* hand in hand. Better is he in whom we trust, the Father, the One, and the Son.

§15. Roind cecha nóna a tig Dé, is e do roine mo Rí, is e in Rígh do rigne ar corp, nach am leicfea anocht cen ní.

The distribution for each evening in the house of God, it is what my King has made; He is the King who made our bodies, who will not let me go tonight without aught.

§16. Ni adraim do gothaib én, na sreód na rén for bith-che, na mac na mana na mnai, is e mo drai Crist mac De.

I adore not the voice of birds, nor the *sreod,* nor a destiny on the earthly world, nor a son, nor chance, nor woman. My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.

§17. Crist mac Muire morda in t-ab, athair Mac is Spirut Noem, m'fearannus ic Righ na Righ is ord i Cenandus is Moen.

Christ, the son of Mary, the great abbot, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. My estates are with the King of kings, my order is at Cenannus and Moen.

In the introduction to his edition and translation of the text, O'Donovan 1846: 2 remarks that the various beliefs and practices mentioned in the poem indicate that the composition was originally intended to warn people off such fallacies, and to 'root out of the

minds of the Irish their lingering veneration for some of their old objects of Pagan superstitions'. Without asserting that the poem had actually been composed by St. Columba himself, O'Donovan, nevertheless, argued that the writer's strong belief in predestination suggested that it must date from 'a very early date'.

The intermingling of Christian and seemingly 'pagan' elements in the composition has since attracted the attention of others, as well, but despite the length of the poem as a whole, what it is nowadays best known for are two lines that appear in §§15–16:

> is e mo drai Crist mac De.
> Crist mac Muire morda in t-ab, Athair Mac is spirut noem.
>
> My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.
> Christ, the son of Mary, the great abbot, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In modern-day 'Celtic spirituality', it is not uncommon to see these words being quoted as first-hand evidence of the essentially appreciative attitude that the early Irish Christians had towards their native pre-Christian tradition. From this perspective, the saying attributed to the great saint has been variously interpreted to illustrate either Columba's 'willingness to accept traditional Irish culture and religion as precursors to the gospel' (Newell 1997: 30) or the view that the 'spiritual path of Druidry' represents an ecumenical meeting point between all religious traditions (Carr-Gomm 2018).

While the popular notion of the 'fluid syncretism of Celticism and Christianity' (Baumann 2000: 103) in the early Irish cultural milieu remains open to academic debate, the fact that this statement has come to be so pervasively associated with one of the most important saints of early Ireland is in itself interesting, as it serves to illustrate the complex processes by which earlier texts are continuously re-interpreted and re-appropriated by new audiences. The following discussion outlines the contours of this tradition in order to ask why this particular piece of Columban lore appears to have appealed to various audiences up until the present day. The analysis illustrates how by tracing the changing reception of the poem over centuries, it is possible to identify several key stages in the transmission process in which the saying gained new resonance as it became further removed from its origins.

The historical Saint Columba

St. Columba (521–597) is one of the central figures of the early Irish church, and, alongside Saint Patrick and Saint Brigit of Kildare, he has traditionally been considered one of the national saints of Ireland. Columba's political and spiritual influence as a patron of a significant monastic *familia* extended to both sides of the Irish Sea, and in the centuries following the saint's death the Columban cult effectively reached all parts of the Gaelic world and even beyond (Herbert 1988).

The most important source of information about Columba's life and career is the seventh-century *Vita Columbae* written in Latin by Adomnán, Columba's ninth successor as abbot of Iona (trans. Sharpe 1995). Adomnán did not set out to write his biography to serve primarily as a historical record, but, instead, sought to compose a work of hagiography that portrayed its subject as an ideal example of Christian perfection. Later audiences have sometimes found Adomnán's concentration on miracle stories, prophecies, and visions troubling and even distasteful, but for Adomnán, like many of his contemporaries, prophecy and miraculous powers were among the gifts of the Spirit, and, thus, proof that Columba truly had a claim for universal sanctity.[2]

Columba was renowned early on for his learning and poetry, and as his cult developed, this aspect of his saintly image provided a fertile ground from which a substantial corpus of legendary material flourished (see Lacey 2013). Texts written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and even later gained authority or spiritual appeal from being attributed to the great saint, and, in the process, many elements of Columban hagiography became incorporated and reworked into new compositions.[3] The poem preserved in YBL also belongs to this later layer of tradition, although some of its components may potentially be traced back earlier.

Columba's prayer at the Battle of Cúl Drebne

By far the most significant event in Columba's career is his exile from Ireland to the island of Iona in the year 563. The circumstances surrounding his departure are not entirely known, and the only meagre detail given by his hagiographer Adomnán is that, at the age of 41, *de Scotia ad Brittanniam pro Christo perigrinari uolens enauigauit* (ALC 6 §4[a]) 'Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ' (trans. Sharpe 1995: 105).

Leaving one's own native land and going abroad as a *peregrinus* or exile was considered the highest expression of devotion and dedication to Christ in early Irish Christianity (see Charles-Edwards 1976), and, therefore, there was no need for Adomnán to elaborate on this brief statement. Yet, it is likely that Adomnán's silence on the issue was one factor in the growth of a popular tradition that Columba's reason for leaving Ireland had been motivated by factors other than mere piety. These speculations were particularly fuelled by the chronological proximity of Columba's departure to the historical Battle of Cúl Drebne in 561, during which he was thought to have provoked the anger of King Diarmaid of Tara by getting personally involved in the conflict.

Columba's actions in the battle are recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* (AU 561.2), *Chronicon Scotorum* (CS 561), the *Annals of Tigernach* (ATig. 560.1) and the *Annals of the Four Masters* (AFM 555.2), all of which state that the saint intervened by praying for his own

[2] For an analysis of the theological importance of miracles as signs of the saint's holiness, see Ritari 2009.

[3] The nature of this body of poetry is discussed in more detail in Kenney 1929: 436–441.

kinsmen, thereby dispelling *in erbe ndruad* 'the druidic mist' which the druid of King Diarmaid had created to confuse the opposing side.[4] Although there is no certainty as to the contemporaneity of these records, considering Columba's familial and political connections, his participation in the conflict is plausible (Herbert 1988: 27–28). No further details of this event are given in AU, but others quote Columba's prayer, which is here cited from the tenth-century *Chronicon Scotorum:*

A Dhia,
Ciodh nach dingba an cia
Dus an ermaismis a lin,
An tsluaigh do boing breta din?

O God!
Why dost thou not ward off the mist,
that we might reckon the number
of the host which has taken judgment from us.

Sluagh do cing a ttimcell cairn
Is mac ainfthe nosdusmairn.
Ase mo drú ni mera no [mel]l[a]
Mac Dé is finne congena.

A host that marches around a cairn,
and a son of storm that betray us;
My druid—he will not refuse me—
is the Son of God; with us He will act.

As alainn ferus a lluadh
Gobar Baedain resin slúaigh;
Fo-la Baodán fuilt buidhe,
Beraidh a heren fuirre.

How grandly he bears his course—
Baedan's steed—before the host;
good for Baedan of the yellow hair
he will win his renown on him.[5]

[4] eDIL s.v. *airbe* defines *eirbe* or *airbe* as a 'fence' or 'hedge' and *airbe druad* as a 'druidic hedge, name of some magic obstruction to keep off an enemy'. The notion that the druids could use their supernatural powers to manipulate the elements and other natural phenomena is common in the early Irish narrative tradition. On this motif, see further Slavin (forthcoming).

[5] AFM sets the prayer in a different narrative context, following here the account of the cause of the Battle of Cúl Drebne as given in Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Choluimb Chille* (see below). The 'druidic fence' is mentioned in AU, but the causal connection between it and Columba's prayer is not made explicit.

In the prayer, the reference made by the saint to the Son of God as his 'druid' serves as a powerful rhetorical device by which the saint is able to counter the supernatural powers invoked by his opponent: when King Diarmaid's druid casts his harmful mist, Columba uses his prayers to dispel it, thereby demonstrating that the druid's magic arts are no match for the thaumaturgical power of the saint. By seemingly associating Christ with druidry, the prayer effectively underscores the absolute supremacy that Christ and, by extension, the saint himself has over his foes as a wonder-worker and a performer of miracles. Therefore, no matter how skilful the druid working for the pagan King Diarmaid may be, Columba's 'druid', Christ, is still superior in might, as He is working for the highest King of all.

Columba's encounter with King Diarmaid's druid is firmly set within early Irish literary tradition, in which the conflict of holy men with druids was a popular topos of hagiographical lore (see Bray 1992). A paradigmatic example of this theme comes from Muirchú's seventh-century account of Saint Patrick's confrontation with the druids of another pagan king, Loíguire, which culminates in a dramatic contest of miracles taking place at Easter at Tara. The king's druids challenge Patrick to prove his power by having him remove snow and a thick fog they have cast over the land 'through the invocation of demons', as well as by asking him to subject one of his followers to an ordeal by fire. Patrick complies, and after the druids' attempts to outwit the saint with their magical arts repeatedly fail, the spectacle brings King Loíguire to the conclusion that it is better for him and his people to convert to Christianity than to die (PTBA 84–97).[6]

It is probable that the confrontation between Columba and the druid at the Battle of Cúl Drebne was influenced by this episode, as well as other accounts similarly drawing upon shared models, but eventually Columba's pagan opponent became marginalised and removed from the story altogether. Over the course of the medieval period, traditions surrounding Columba's involvement in the conflict continued to grow, but framed the original prayer in an entirely different way. Instead of portraying Columba's actions as a necessary measure taken to safeguard his people from imminent danger, some of these anecdotes rather unexpectedly cast the holy man as the main instigator of the whole battle.[7] This was the version of the events that came to take hold in later Columban hagiographical lore, as it provided an imaginative way of filling in some of the obscure details surrounding the historical saint.

The question of why Columba's role in the battle became represented in this manner is a complex one. Rekdal 1994: 26–28 has argued that the anecdote was first incorporated into the Life of Columba after the reformation of the Irish church in the thirteenth cen-

[6] It should be noted here that, although the Classical sources have been highly influential in promoting the notion of druids as teachers and priests, the Hiberno-Latin literary sources predominantly portray druids as magicians. The biblical roots of Muirchú's treatment of the theme can be traced back, for instance, to the Book of Daniel and the confrontation between Peter and Simon Magus in Acts 8:9–24. On druids and magic, see further Slavin (forthcoming).

[7] Glosses in the preface to the Hiberno-Latin hymn *Altus prosator,* ascribed to Columba, mention three battles for which the saint was responsible; see Lib. hymn. i 62–63 (text), ii 23 (translation), & ii 140–141 (notes).

tury, when initiatives were taken to make Irish saint's Lives accessible in Latin to English and Anglo-Norman religious communities. These circumstances entailed that the story, which previously would not have conformed to the saintly image promoted by earlier hagiographies, 'was brought up to the surface of writing where it hitherto, apparently, had never been let' (Rekdal 1994: 27).[8]

Whatever forms the legendary matter relating to Columba's exile may have taken in earlier popular tradition (see Lawlor, Armstrong, & Lindsay 1916–1917: 292–307), one of the works that had a seminal role in its later development was Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Choluimb Chille* 'The Life of Colum Cille', completed in 1532. Ó Domhnaill wished to produce a new vernacular Life of Columba, and, for that purpose, he sought to bring together all the available sources relating to Columba's career (Kenney 1929: 442; Rekdal 1994). In this endeavour, he appears to have taken particular interest in the 'intrigue' surrounding Columba's penitential exile to the extent that the theme has been characterised as determining the literary structure of the entire work (Rekdal 1994: 37).

The poem as a protective *lorica*

According to Ó Domhnaill's narrative (BCC §§167–181), Columba had once stayed with Saint Finnian, from whom he borrowed a psalter book to read. Without Finnian's knowledge, Columba set out to make a copy of the book for himself, but his actions were soon found out by Finnian, who was furious that Columba would do such a thing without his permission. The pair decided to take their dispute to King Diarmaid to seek his judgment on the matter (§168):

> 7 do inneis Finden a scela ar tus don righ 7 ass ed adubhairt ris: 'Do scrib C. C. mo leabhur gan fhis damh fen', ar se, '7 aderim corub lim fen mac mo leabhuir'. 'Aderim-se', ar C. C., 'nach mesde lebhur Findéin ar scrib me ass, 7 nach coír na neiche diadha do bi sa lebhur ud do muchadh no a bacudh dim fein no do duine eli a scribhadh no a léghadh no a siludh fa na cinedachaib; 7 corb ail lium a chur a tarba do na poiplechaibh, 7 gan dighbail Fhindein no a lebhair do techt ass, cor cedaigthe dam a scribudh'.
>
> And Finnian first told the king his story and he said: 'Columcille has copied my book without my knowing, and I contend that the son of the book [the copy] should be mine'. 'I contend', said Columcille, 'that the book of Finnian is none the worse from my copying, and it is not right that the divine words in that book should perish, or that I or any other should be hindered from writing them, or

[8] The tract titled 'de causa peregrinationis S. Columbae' is preserved in two Latin collections of Irish saints' Lives, the *Codex insulensis* (thirteenth century) and in an incomplete form in the *Codex Salmanticensis* (fourteenth century). For the text, see Lawlor, Armstrong, & Lindsay 1916–1917: 409–412. Herbert's 1988: 203 observation that in hagiography '[t]he form of each Life epitomizes the epoch to which it belongs' is also pertinent here.

> reading them, or spreading them among the tribes. And further I declare that it was right for me to copy it, seeing there was profit to me from doing in this wise, and seeing it was my desire to give the profit thereof to all peoples, with no harm therefrom to Finnian or his book'.

After hearing their testimonies, King Diarmaid gave his judgment: *le gach boin a boinin .i. a laogh 7 le gach lebhur a leabrán* 'To every cow her calf, and to every book its transcript', thereby deciding that Columba's book belonged to Finnian. Columba, however, was not happy with this ruling, and he vowed revenge, saying (§§168–169):

> Rachud-sa a cend mo braithrech .i. Cinel Conaill 7 Eogain, 7 dober cath duit-se a ndighail na drochbrethe rucais orm fan lebur . . . oir ní lór lem Día do dénamh indigthe ort and gan me fen do denamh digaltais ort do taeb an tshaeghail-se.
>
> I will go to my kinsmen, the clan of Conall and of Eogan, and I will make war against you to avenge the unjust judgment you have given against me concerning the book . . . for it is not enough for me that God take vengeance on you hereafter, but I shall myself take vengeance on you in this world.

This was how Columba's rash reaction led to unnecessary bloodshed and the reason why the guilt-ridden saint was eventually forced to leave Ireland for Iona two years later.[9]

The anecdote concerning Columba's illicit copying of Saint Finnian's book came to form an important part of Columban hagiography, since it pertained to one of the most famous relics of the saint, the manuscript called the Cathach of St. Columba (Lawlor, Armstrong, & Lindsay 1916–1917). By weaving this strand of lore into his account of Columba's role in Cúl Drebne, Ó Domhnaill shifted the focus from the original confrontation between the Christian saint and his pagan opponent to an altercation between Columba and Finnian. In Ó Domhnaill's story, there is no mention of Columba's prayer during the battle, as recorded in the annals, nor of the 'magic mist' dispelled by him, as these details would have made little sense in the new narrative setting.[10] Instead, Ó Domhnaill depicts Columba at the scene of the battle praying in cross-vigil behind his people while St Finnian does the same for his own host (BCC §173).

[9] The translation of O'Kelleher & Schoepperle 1918 has been slightly modernised here.

[10] Traces of the original account are discernible in a poem in §159 of Ó Domhnaill's work, which includes the following quatrain:

> Dardain doradadh an cath
> Cula Dremne, dail go rath
> mar do toiligh Dia duilech
> dar gabudh an Sciathluirech
>
> On a Thursday was fought the battle
> of Cuil Dremne, a meeting with grace
> for God the Creator consented
> when the Lorica then was recited

Despite these changes, an echo of the earlier tradition is still preserved in this version, as well, albeit in a well-disguised form. The clue comes in a poem which Columba is said to have composed when hastening to summon his kinsmen to battle after King Diarmaid's fateful judgment. As the king's troops lay in ambush to keep Columba from reaching his people, the saint besought God's protection with his verse and, thus, managed to escape from the situation unharmed. Only the first lines are given by Ó Domhnaill (BCC §171):

Am aenurán damh 'sa sliab,
a Rí grian, rob soreidh sét!
nocha n-eclaighe damh ní
no da mbeind trí fichtib céd.

Alone I am on the mountain
O King of Suns, may the way be smooth.
No more am I affrighted
Than if I were three score of hundreds.

The opening quatrain indicates that this composition bears close similarity to the poem in YBL, in which the line 'my druid is Christ' is also found. Ó Domhnaill's quotation is from the poem's other extant version preserved in the early sixteenth-century manuscript Laud Misc. 615, which contains a collection of Old and Middle Irish religious verse associated with Columba (see Meyer 1910; Herbert & O'Sullivan 1973).[11] Although it cannot be proven that the poem was linked with the historical events of Cúl Drebne prior to Ó Domhnaill's work, the evidence of both YBL and Laud Misc. 615 confirms that during the earlier medieval period, it was, in any case, already circulating independently as a composition attributed to the saint. Columba's fame as a poet and a seer entailed that there were numerous similar pieces in existence (Kenney 1929: 441), and fragments of many of them also became incorporated into Ó Domhnaill's Life (Rekdal 1994: 84). In this instance, Ó Domhnaill supplied the poem with a memorable narrative framework, which not only explained how its composition originated, but also reinforced the conception of its protective force.

The perceived function of the verse merits closer attention because it illustrates how Columba's words took on a new meaning in this context. The scene in Ó Domhnaill's narrative where Columba composes his poem to seek the protection of God on his hazardous journey recalls another famous episode in Muirchú's Life, in which Patrick and his entourage escape from the ambush of King Loíguire in the form of eight stags (PTBA 91). This particular episode had, by the eleventh century, become associated with a text known as the *Faíd fiada* 'The deer's cry', which has been characterised as 'one of the most popular and highly regarded productions of the medieval Irish church' (Carey 2000: 129).

[11] YBL and Laud Misc. 615 both preserve versions of the second recension of the text. The earlier recension, dated to the tenth or eleventh century, does not have any connection with the saint. For an edition, see Carney 1940.

Faíd fiada is an example of a particular type of poetic composition known as a *lorica* (Latin for 'breastplate'), figuratively signifying the spiritual armour worn by the faithful.[12] Due to the specific imagery and usage of these texts, the *lorica* has often been considered to be particularly Celtic or 'pagan' in character (see Kenney 1929: 254; cf. Lambert 2010), but as formulaic words of power held to derive their efficacy from supernatural entities, as well as the performative speech act itself, they also bear resemblance to many Christian prayers and hymns (Borsje 2008: 129–141; cf. Hull 1910).

Even though Columba's poem may not belong in the *lorica* genre proper (see Lambert 2010), like the *Faíd fiada,* it clearly bears witness to the belief in 'words of power' and the ability of particular poetic compositions to protect a person from various spiritual and physical dangers (Borsje 2008; 2015).[13] The 'complicated relationship between native tradition and Christian spirituality' (Carey 2000: 129), which has been considered one of the defining features of *loricae,* may likewise be identified in many of the motifs employed in Columba's poem. In §14, for instance, mention is made of different types of divination, which are subsequently rejected by means of the statement that the only source of guidance and protection is God or the Trinity (O'Donovan 1846: 12):

> Nocha n-ag sreód ata ar cuid,
> nocha n-ag eóin da barr slat,
> ní ag curnán do chrand chas
> ní ag sordán, glac i n-glaic.
> Fearr in té re tabraim taeb,
> in t-Atair 's in t-Aen 's in Mac.
>
> It is not with the *sreod* [sneeze] our destiny is,
> Nor with the bird on the top of the twig,
> Nor with the trunk of a knotty tree,
> Nor with a *sordan* [humming] hand in hand.
> Better is He in whom we trust,
> The Father, the One, and the Son.

Jacqueline Borsje, who has sought to trace the background of these somewhat puzzling beliefs and practices, has pointed out that, in the medieval period, many of the commonly used methods of divination were condemned as superstition and idolatry because they were associated in the Scripture with magic. One example of this is the passage on the commands governing the worship and conduct of the Israelites in Deut. 18:9–12, which lists practices such as human sacrifice, sorcery, and witchcraft as abominations that are

[12.] The underlying inspiration for this term derives from the writings of St. Paul, where the notion occurs, for instance, in his Letter to the Ephesians (6:11–18).

[13.] In Columba's case, similar beliefs were also associated with many Latin hymns ascribed to him, including *Noli pater,* which, in the eleventh-century *Liber hymnorum,* is said to protect from a lightning strike anyone who recites it; see Lib. hymn. i 87 (text) & ii 28 (translation). There is another text in Laud Misc. 615 known as the *lorica* of St. Columba (*Scíath-lúirech Choluim Chille*), which conforms more closely to the style and structure of the genre (Meyer 1915: 346–347).

detestable to the Lord. Since prognostications made from bird cries and sneezes were arguably closer to the everyday experience of medieval Irish Christians than necromancy, Borsje, among others, has speculated that the text could, in this instance, afford us a glimpse of popular belief (2015: 27–29).

The omen of sneezing was treated with utmost gravity already in the classical period, and the belief was widespread enough to warrant ecclesiastical censure from the early Church Fathers, including Ambrose, Augustine, and Caesarius of Arles. While various positive omens could be inferred from a sneeze, it was more commonly taken as an unfavourable premonition (Pease 1911). The association of ominous sneezes with beginnings of different kinds, especially the beginning of a journey, is among the beliefs specifically mentioned by Caesarius, who, in one of his sermons, advises that such signs should not be heeded if one has put their trust in God's protection. In the same context, he also states that making 'devilish prophecies' out of the sounds of birds or paying attention to the 'both impious and ridiculous [interpretation of] sneezes' when on the road is equally condemnable (Mueller 1956: 266).

It is noteworthy that prognostication from these same signs is specifically attributed to druids in the eleventh-century *Leabhar Breathnach,* which is an Irish version of the Latin *Historia Brittonum* written by the Welsh monk Nennius in the early ninth century. In the text, a reference is made to *seisear demnach druadh* 'six demon-like druids', who are reported to practice idolatry, as well as *morad sred is mana, raga sin, am sona, gotha én do faire* 'the honouring of sneezes and omens, choice of weather [and] lucky times, [and] the watching [of] the voices of birds' (Todd 1848: 145). As Borsje 2015: 45[100] has noted, it is likely that the Irish text has been influenced by the earlier ecclesiastical authorities, especially Caesarius, but the association is nevertheless pertinent. Guesses as to what kind of omens one would have expected to learn from the knots on the trunk of a tree, or from humming while holding hands, remain more tenuous, however, as does the interpretation of the son, chance, and woman in §16 (O'Donovan 1846: 12–13):

> Ni adraim do gothaib én,
> na sreód na rén for bith-che,
> na mac na mana na mnai,
> is e mo drai Crist mac De.
>
> I adore not the voice of birds,
> Nor the *sreod* [sneeze], nor a destiny on the earthly world,
> Nor a son, nor chance, nor woman,
> *My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.*

It is possible that the wording of this line—*na mac, na mana, na mnai*—could have resulted from something as ordinary as the use of alliteration as a poetic device, without any specific significance assigned to the relationship or connection between the individual mem-

bers of the triad.[14] In fact, the recension preserved in Laud Misc. 615 renders both stanzas slightly differently, giving them as follows (Meyer 1910: 303; trans. Borsje 2015: 23–24):

Nī hag sreoidh atá mo chuid,
nī ag énaibh do bharr ślat:
ferr in triúr ris'tabhruim taobh,
Athair, Spirat naom is Mac.

It is not with a sneeze that my destiny is,
Nor with the birds on the top of twigs;
Better is the trio [Trinity] in whom we trust,
Father, Holy Spirit and Son.

Nā hadhair do ghothaibh gerg,
ná sreōdh ná sēn ar bith cé,
nā creid mana bīs ag mnái,
is é is ri[g]ḟāidh Críst mac Dé.

Do not adore/adhere to the voices of birds,
Nor a sneeze nor a portent in this world;
Do not believe an omen that a woman has,
Christ the Son of God is the pre-eminent seer.

It can be seen how the personal tone of the poem as given in YBL has here turned into exhortation, and the obscure mention of the 'son' has been dropped as the line was rendered to give a general meaning of 'do not believe the omens of women'. The reference to Christ as a 'druid' has, likewise, been altered, now referring to Him as rí[*g*]*ḟāidh,* or 'pre-eminent seer'. The Irish word *fáith* was used of pre-Christian seers and druids, but also the prophets of the Old Testament. Therefore, the wording here lacks the more explicitly negative connotations of magic that the term *druí* would have had in the Irish language from the early Christian period onwards, bringing it closer to the terminology that the contemporary audience of the text would have been familiar with.

Against this background, the poem invokes a more implicit, but nevertheless recognizable, frame of reference within which the druids have become associated with an array of perceived superstitious beliefs. Instead of attempting to gain protection by observing ominous signs or listening to the advice of soothsayers and fortune-tellers—that is, 'druids'—the poem urges Christians to entrust their lives to the hands of the only true source of help, the Christian God. As the imagined speaking subject composing the hymn, Columba acts in accordance with his role as a spiritual warrior, whose example all believers are encouraged to emulate. Thus, the protection that he receives is held to

[14.] Borsje 2015: 44[82] refers to an admittedly tenuous parallel in the Talmud in which it is stated: 'Although one may not deliberately divine by them, a house, an infant, and a woman may be regarded as prognostics'.

extend with the same effect to those who recite his hymn and trust the saint to act as an intermediary between themselves and God.

The revival of Columba's 'hymn of trust' in the late nineteenth century

The nineteenth century witnessed a growing enthusiasm for the Celtic past of the British Isles, making the 'Golden Age of Celtic Christianity' a focus of particular fascination. The distribution of early texts preserved in the medieval manuscripts was made possible by significant advances in linguistic and textual scholarship, as well as the establishment of institutions and learned societies pioneering the study and publication of these sources (see Bradley 1999: 119–156). In the Romantic and nationalistic currents of the period, the early saints were recognised as the conveyors of a pertinent spiritual message, serving either as symbols of Roman Catholic orthodoxy or as the ideals of various Protestant denominations. In Columba's case, the fusion of the saintly portrait presented by Adomnán through popular lore and legend also resulted in the creation of an image that proved appealing on both sides of the ecclesiastical divide.

A decade after John O'Donovan's edition and translation of Columba's poem from YBL had been published in 1846, a brief reference to it was included in the edition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* by William Reeves, who used the line 'Christ the Son of God is my druid' in his notes to illustrate the background and meaning of the word *magi* (1857: 73–74[i]). In this instance, it was Reeves's description of the poem as 'an ancient hymn' that came to assume particular significance, as it validated the antiquity and authenticity of the composition and ascribed it to a particular genre of Christian religious writing. Reeves's interpretation was followed by Count de Montalembert in the third volume of his monumental series *The monks of the west* in 1867,[15] who not only referred to it as a hymn, but, more specifically, as a 'song of trust' (1896: 23–25). In this manner, the composition became associated with an even more important body of poetry, the poetic prayers of the Bible, and, especially, the songs of divine inspiration and praise found in the Old Testament.

Following formal criteria, the biblical 'songs of trust' conform to the style of devotional compositions that articulate faith in God's succour during times of adversity, and they may also include petitions for His intervention on behalf of the faithful (see Miller 1994). For de Montalembert, therefore, the spirit and content of Columba's poem was not 'pagan', but, instead, distinctly similar to psalms composed in this mode, which recurrently employ the motif of shielding oneself against harm and finding refuge in God when one is alone (Ps. 23) or attacked and outnumbered by enemies (Ps. 3, 27, 35, 59).[16] An overview of publications from the following decades reveals that this view was soon accepted, as other commentators adopted Reeves' and de Montalembert's nomenclature

[15] This volume was also published independently the following year under the title *Saint Columba. Apostle of Caledonia.*

[16] The numbering of the Psalms follows the New International Version.

in referring to the composition as 'an ancient hymn' (O'Hanlon 1873: 384[6]; Rhys 1882: 71; Cooke 1888: 88), 'a song of trust' (O'Kane Murray 1880: 272; Stone 1897a: 19), 'a hymn of trust in God' (Anon. 1867: 10), and even 'a psalm' (Anon. 1868: 408).

De Montalembert's reproduction of the poem was slightly revised to modernise the language, but otherwise it made no attempt to alter the text edited by O'Donovan. However, when Sister Mary Frances Cusack undertook to produce the first metrical translation of the poem, including it in her work *The Lives of Saint Columba and Saint Brigit* (1877: 72–73) and, a few years later, in another volume titled *Cloister songs and hymns for children* (1881: 24–25), the result bore only faint resemblance to the original. A comparison of the relevant section from the two versions illustrates how Cusack's attempt to introduce end rhyme to each stanza transformed the text as given by O'Donovan 1846: 12–13:

> It is not with the *sreod* [sneeze] our destiny is,
> Nor with the bird on the top of the twig,
> Nor with the trunk of a knotty tree,
> Nor with a *sordan* [humming] hand in hand.
> Better is He in whom we trust,
> The Father, the One, and the Son.
>
> The distribution for each evening in the house of God,
> It is what my King hath made;
> He is the King who made our bodies,
> Who will not let me go tonight without aught.
>
> I adore not the voice of birds,
> Nor the *sreod,* nor a destiny on the earthly world,
> Nor a son, nor chance [or: omen], nor woman.
>
> My Druid is Christ, the Son of God,—
> Christ, the son of Mary, the great abbot, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.—
> My estates are with the King of kings,
> My order is at Cenannus and Moen.

Cusack 1877: 73:

> No augur's word can tell our future faith—
> No bird or omen say how long our death shall wait.
> I trust not in a bird, or twig, or dream,
> But in the Lord of Heaven's eternal might;
> He who has made us all will help me now,
> Nor leave me in this mountain lone to-night.
> I have no love of earthly kin or kind,
> The love of Christ, the Son of God, fills my mind.
> The great King's Son, my Lord and Abbot, rules;

All that I have is in the great King's hands:
The houses of my order are at Kells and Moone,
He will protect my people and my lands.

Cusack was not the only one to modify the composition to render it more palatable to contemporary audiences. In 1885, a version titled 'Alone with none but Thee, my God', attributed to a certain R. M. M., was published in the Anglican missionary periodical *Church work and mission life,* whence it subsequently became cited in other similar publications (Anon. 1890). In 1894, an anonymous contributor to *The Church times* enquired whether Columba's 'hymn of trust' could be introduced to the hymnal of the Church of England as an acknowledgement of the legacy of the great saint. The translation was given as follows (Anon 1894):

Alone with none but Thee, my God,
I journey on the way:
What need I fear when Thou art near,
O King of night and day?
More safe am I within Thy hand
Than if a host did by me stand.

My destined time is fixed by Thee,
And Death doth know his hour;
Did warriors strong around me throng,
They could not stay his power;
No walls of stone can man defend
When Thou Thy messenger shalt send.

My life I yield to Thy decree,
And bow to Thy control
In peaceful calm, for from Thine arm
No power can wrest my soul:
Could earthly omens e'er appal
A heart that heeds the heavenly call?

The child of God can fear no ill,
His chosen, dread no foe;
We leave out fate with Thee, and wait
Thy bidding where we go;
'Tis not from chance our comfort springs,
Thou art our Trust, O King of kings!

Anglican interest in the spiritual heritage of the early Celtic Church had previously generated new English translations of St. Patrick's *lorica.* Of these, Cecil Frances Alexander's version from 1889 gained particular popularity after being appended to the hymnal of

the Church of Ireland in 1891 (Bradley 1999: 134). Columba's hymn was to follow suit in 1919, making 'Alone with none but Thee, my God' the official version incorporated into Christian worship. While this devotional composition was better suited to the religious sensibilities of the period, it evidently could not accommodate the seemingly 'pagan' elements that had attracted the attention of early commentators in the mid-nineteenth century. In its new, pseudo-archaic form, the poem no longer bore witness to remnants of lingering superstition as O'Donovan 1846: 2 had characterised it, but rather became considered one of the finest examples of the hymnody of the early Celtic Church, on a par with other renowned Columban hymns of veritable antiquity such as *Altus prosator, In te Christe,* and *Noli pater* (Bernard & Atkinson 1898; see also Clancy & Márkus 1995: 39–95).[17]

There was, moreover, at least one other version of the hymn circulating in the late nineteenth century. This was created by the Rev. Samuel John Stone, who, in the same year, published his text both in the magazine *The quiver* (1897a) and in a collection titled *The lays of Iona and other poems* (1897b: 116–117). Stone's version was never as widely disseminated as 'Alone with none but Thee, my God', but it, nevertheless, made its way all the way to the United States, where the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross included it in their manual of prayers and devotions (Anon. 1909). Interestingly, although, by the author's own admission, the text was merely a paraphrase devised third-hand with no knowledge of the Irish language, the last stanzas illustrate that it still succeeded in approximating the original remarkably well (Stone 1896b: 117):

> No magic mirror may mine end foretell,
> No bird in bush sing fortune's oracle;
> In Thee alone, my Father, I will trust,
> God, evermore the Faithful and the Just.
>
> O Christ, the Son, my Prophet, King Divine,
> Yet human, born of Mary—Master mine—O Father, and blest Spirit, One-in-Three,
> All that I am and have I trust to Thee.

Conclusion

The overview of the reception of the poem shows that, despite the transformations undergone in the course of its transmission, the line from the original prayer never entirely disappeared from cultural memory. Yet, the fluid processes by which historical texts are repeatedly decontextualised and recontextualised by readers with different motivations and interpretive strategies entail that the question of the meaning of the words attributed to Columba needs to be qualified by asking whose meaning is intended.

[17.] Due to this association, the prayer was even mistakenly referred to as the 'Altus of St. Columba' (Atkinson 1896: 287), but apart from the ascription there is no similarity between the vernacular poem and the Latin hymn.

Considering the historical development of this tradition, what the saying 'my druid is Christ' most definitely does *not* prove is that Christianity and 'Druidry'—whatever the latter is imagined to be—would have been perceived as equally valid 'spiritual paths', especially not by St. Columba himself. However, whereas for academics such seemingly uninformed and non-historical construals tend to hold little intrinsic value, the desire to outline the parameters of appropriate readings, or properly informed responses, may ultimately stem from a position that fails to distinguish between historical engagements with a text on the one hand and interpretations which take place within a tradition on the other. Preserving the integrity of the primary sources, and separating the authoritative and the authentic from the spurious and the fabricated, are important tasks for scholars, but they are not necessarily of same importance for readers for whom the texts simply need to have some contemporary relevance. The Columba of modern-day 'Celtic spirituality' may not be a figure that his hagiographer Adomnán would recognise, but the long history of this tradition demonstrates that audiences in very different historical and cultural contexts have always found in the saint some qualities that have enabled them to model him in their own image.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFM	=	O'Donovan 1848–1851
ALC	=	Anderson & Anderson 1991
ATig.	=	Stokes 1895–1897
AU	=	Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983
BCC	=	O'Kelleher & Schoepperle 1918
CS	=	Hennessy 1866
eDIL	=	*Dictionary of the Irish language* http://www.dil.ie
Lib. hymn.	=	Bernard & Atkinson 1898
PTBA	=	Bieler 1979
YBL	=	Yellow Book of Lecan

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