

A note on *Sect.o.f.n.*



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## A NOTE ON *SECT.O.F.N.*

### ABSTRACT

This note suggests a reconstruction of the first line of a poem on the subject of Brug na Bóinne from the Book of Leinster, p. 209, beginning *Sect.o.f.n.* The poem was previously edited and translated by Lucius Gwynn and translated into French by Christian Guyonvarc'h, although neither scholar attempted to reconstruct the first line. Issues of mise-en-page, as well as the content, language, and metre of the poem will be discussed.

A poem of 78 quatrains beginning *Sect.o.f.n.* was edited by Lucius Gwynn from the sole manuscript witness, the Book of Leinster (Trinity College Dublin MS. H 2. 18 [1339]; *LL*),<sup>1</sup> where it is erroneously ascribed to Cináed úa hArtacáin.<sup>2</sup> The poem begins in the middle of p. 209b where it runs for 24 lines before the scribe notes, *ut ante. in precedenti pagina* 'as before, on the preceding page'.<sup>3</sup> It continues on p. 208b (*A éicsiu Banba*), and further on p. 209a, and finishes in the middle of column b of that page, just before the beginning of the poem (see Fig. 1). *Sect.o.f.n.* is preceded by a nature poem on winter beginning *Fuit co bráth*,<sup>4</sup> and is followed by the metrical *dindsenchas* of Mag Femin. The manuscript is stained and the writing faded on the top right area of p. 209, which affects the legibility of a number of lines towards the end of the poem.

\*This note is the result of a seminar which I gave at the Department of Early and Medieval Irish at University College Cork in February 2017. I would like to thank all those present for their helpful input. I further wish to thank Ruairí Ó hUiginn, Liam Breatnach, Clodagh Downey, as well as the anonymous reader and the editors of *Celtica* for their comments and suggestions; any errors that remain are entirely my own.

<sup>1</sup>Lucius Gwynn, 'Cináed úa hArtacáin's Poem on Brugh na Bóinne', *Ériu* 7 (1914), 210–38. *Corrigenda* to the edition were published in Kuno Meyer, *Miscellanea Hibernica*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 2.4 (Urbana, Illinois, 1917), 38–9. A translation into French can be found in Christian Guyonvarc'h, 'La Courtise d'Étain', *Celticum* 15 (1966), 283–327.

<sup>2</sup>Rudolf Thurneysen and Gerard Murphy both dated the poem to the twelfth century, see Rudolf Thurneysen, 'Allerlei Irisches', *ZCP* 10 (1915), 421–44: 438–40; addenda *ZCP* 11, 167, and Gerard Murphy, 'On the dates of two sources used in Thurneysen's *Heldensage*', *Ériu* 16 (1952), 145–56, at 156. However, John Carey has noted that James Carney, in a seminar at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies some thirty years ago, strongly advocated Cináed's authorship of the poem. Indeed, Carney lists *Sect.o.f.n.* among the poems composed between c. 950 and 1004, and cites the poem as evidence from the tenth century for the present tense third sg. dependent ending *-ann/-enn*. See James Carney, 'The dating of Early Irish verse texts, 500–1000', *Éigse* 19:2 (1983), 177–216, at 179 and 206. Further, John Carey, 'Irish parallels to the myth of Odin's eye', *Folklore* 94:2 (1983), 214–18, at 218 n.17.

<sup>3</sup>*LL* iv, 1017.

<sup>4</sup>Most recently edited in Vernam Hull, 'Four Old-Irish songs of summer and winter', *Celtica* 9 (1971), 200–1.



Fig. 1: Book of Leinster pp. 208 and 209.

To my knowledge, the meaning of the opening line, *Sect.o.f.n.*, has never been deciphered. It may be that the line was written out in full in the exemplar behind the Book of Leinster; and that the meaning of the first line was obvious to the scribe so that he abbreviated it,<sup>5</sup> confident that it would be understood without difficulty by other readers. Another possibility is that the opposite was the case and that the scribe's exemplar was in some way defective, so that the letters he wrote were the only ones he could read. This would also explain why he left a space between *Sect.o.f.n.* and the first word of line b of the verse, *ním thabair* (see Fig. 2). In this poem, lines a and b usually occupy one line in the manuscript, and lines c and d occupy another line, so that each quatrain

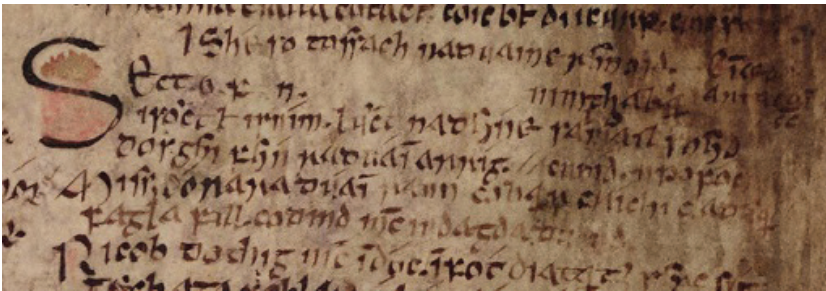


Fig. 2: Opening lines of *Sect.o.f.n.* (Book of Leinster p. 209b).

<sup>5</sup>A mere coincidence, perhaps, but as David Herriott has pointed out to me, the number of letters in the first line is seven. Wherever the word *secht* is found in the rest of the poem, it is either spelt out in full, or else the *c* carries a *spiritus asper*. But this is not the case in the opening line.

takes up two lines. If the opening of the poem was not legible to the scribe, it is possible that he left as much space as the illegible words took up in his exemplar, perhaps in the hope of getting hold of a better copy of the poem at a later stage.

The 24 lines in the lower half of p. 209b make up the first nine quatrains of the poem and seem to constitute a sort of introduction or *raison d'être* for the text.<sup>6</sup> This section ought to precede what the scribe may have initially mistaken for the actual beginning of the poem (since he wrote it on the preceding p. 208): a section beginning *A éicsiu Banba* ‘O scholars of Ireland’ (see Fig. 3) with a more lavishly decorated initial than the first section.<sup>7</sup>

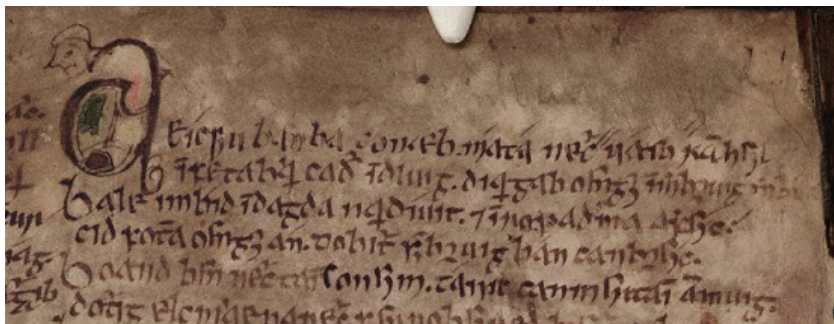


Fig. 3: Beginning of Section 2, *A éicsiu Banba co n-æb* (p. 208b).

Whatever may have been the scribe's reason for rendering the opening line of section 1 in this manner, the meaning of *Sect.o.f.n.* is not obvious to us.<sup>8</sup> Lucius Gwynn assumed – correctly I think – that these letters, once expanded, make up the first line of the poem to complete the quatrain and

<sup>6</sup>See further discussion below.

<sup>7</sup>This would be an understandable mistake, since the phrase *A éicsiu X* is a common opening line in poetry. See, for example, a poem beginning *A éicsi Banba na mbend* (Gisbert Hemprich, ‘Das Gedicht *A éigsi Banba na mbend* von Giolla Íosa Mac Fírbhisigh (gest. 1301) und die irische *Réim rioghraidhe*-Tradition’, in Helmut Birkhan (ed.), *Kelten-Einfälle an der Donau. Akten des Vierten Symposiums deutschsprachiger Keltologinnen und Keltologen* (Vienna, 2007), 255–78); a further example is *A éicsiu Fáil fégam sein* (Kuno Meyer, ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, *ZCP* 8 (1912), 102–20, at 105–6).

<sup>8</sup>As Liam Breatnach points out to me, *Sect.o.f.n.* looks rather like a *dúnad* marker. A comparable puzzle, in an internal *dúnad* to an acephalous poem on the origin of the Uí Mhaine (north Co. Galway, south Roscommon), can be found on fol. 18vb41 in British Library Egerton MS. 90, where the letter sequence *Re.c.c.* occurs at the end of the penultimate quatrain. The cataloguer notes that this ‘gives a clue to the beginning of the poem’. See S. O’Grady and R. Flower, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols (London, 1926), i, 83. My thanks to Ruairi Ó hUiginn for the reference. This type of abbreviation is very common in internal and final *dúnada*. At times, each abbreviated letter stands for a word; while at other times one or two words are rendered with a *punctum* after each letter, e.g. ‘S.u.n.n.d.ea.si.n’, which stands for the opening line *sund dessid do-munemar*, and stands after the *dúnad* of the poem on Ráith Ésa in the *Dindsenchas*, beginning in TCD MS. 1318 (the Yellow Book of Lecan), col. 407.

therefore should make up at least four words, filling seven syllables in total.<sup>9</sup> Gwynn translated the word *secht* and then proceeded to line b of the first quatrain as follows:

Sect o. f. n.

ním-thabair i socht nó i sním

lucht na déine samail snéid

dos-gén féin radúain a ríig.

‘The seven o. f. n.

it casts me not into grief or anxiety:

a race that does not make comparison trivial [?].

I will compose them a mighty song of their King.’<sup>10</sup>

#### CORRECTIONS TO QUATRAIN I

Before any reconstruction of the first line can be attempted, Gwynn’s rendering of the rest of the quatrain, both text and translation, requires a few corrections. There is no issue in line b, but line c contains a number of problems. Gwynn interpreted *lucht na déine* as *lucht nád déine* ‘people who do not make’, taking it as a relative clause with the antecedent *lucht* ‘people, folk, company’, followed by the negative relative *ná(d)* ‘which ... not’ and the third sg. pres. ind. prototonic of *do-gní* (OIr *-dén[a]i*, cf. *GOI* §§ 831; 857).<sup>11</sup> Since this word ends in an unstressed final vowel – and these were no longer distinguished in the period this poem was written – this vowel can be rendered as *-e*. The problem with this interpretation is that, while spellings like *-déní* and *-déne* are attested for this form (although both are from the Glosses and therefore much earlier), the prototonic forms of the verb *do-gní* normally have a broad *n*, while *-déine* in our poem clearly has a palatal *n*.<sup>12</sup> I would therefore suggest that *déine* is not a verbal form, but rather a noun in the genitive,

<sup>9</sup>I would like to thank Pádraig Ó Macháin for suggesting that the first line of the quatrain could be short. Gerard Murphy records several metres in which the first line of each quatrain is shortened from seven to three syllables. See, for example, the metre called *rannaigeacht chetharcubaid gairit dialtach*, which follows the structure 3<sup>1</sup>7<sup>1</sup>7<sup>1</sup> (Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* (Dublin, 1961), 54). There are further examples in Old and Middle Irish poetry of poems in which the first line of a quatrain has been shortened to three syllables, but where this feature is not observed throughout. For example, in an Old Irish poem on the Old Woman of Beare (Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 74–83) several quatrains begin with a trisyllabic line, while the rest of the quatrain observes the structure 7<sup>2</sup>7<sup>2</sup>7<sup>2</sup>. If the first line of our poem is indeed a short line, it would have to have four syllables, with each of the words beginning with *o.f.n.* being a monosyllable. Shortened first lines, in heptasyllabic metres, tend to have three syllables, rather than four, as exemplified by the preceding poem beginning *Fuit co bráth*. Only the first quatrain begins in a short line; the other quatrains each have seven syllables in line a.

<sup>10</sup>Gwynn, ‘Cináed úa hArtacáin’s Poem’, 219 (text); 230 (translation).

<sup>11</sup>In the French translation of this poem, Christian Guyonvarc’h seems to have interpreted *déine* as a form of *duine* ‘person, human being, man’, since he translates 1c as ‘la foule des hommes, comparaison qui n’est pas petite’ (Guyonvarc’h, ‘La Courtise d’Étain’, 283–327; at 323).

<sup>12</sup>In the later language, palatal forms of *-dén* are attested. See for instance, J. G. O’Keeffe (ed.), *Buile Suibhne*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series, i (Dublin, 1931), 95, ll. 15–16: *ní déinim comnaidhe i n-áon áit* ‘I do not abide [lit. ‘make habitation’] in any place’.

preceded by the feminine definite article *na*, and qualifying *lucht*. The most straightforward interpretation would be to take it as the gen. sg. of the *iā*-stem noun *déine* ‘swiftness, eagerness’, abstract noun of the adjective *dian* ‘swift’. This would give ‘people of eagerness’. But I think another interpretation is possible here, namely to take *déine* to be the gen. sg. fem. of *ā*-stem *dian*, which is the name of a type of metre (e.g. *dian airseng*, *dian midseng* etc.).<sup>13</sup> According to this interpretation, *lucht na déine* would give ‘people of the [metre] *dian*’.

As Kuno Meyer pointed out in his corrigenda to the poem, the penultimate word in line c should not be *samail* but *sádail* ‘indolent, lazy’. While the reading in the manuscript may be *samail*, the scribe corrects this with *no d* ‘rather d’, above the letter *m*.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the line can hardly mean ‘which makes comparison trivial’. Gwynn translates line d as ‘I myself will compose them a great poem for their king’. He takes the *-s* in the verbal form *dos-gén* to be the third pl. class A infixed pronoun, apparently taking *lucht* as the antecedent. The problem with this translation is that *-s* cannot be the indirect object of the verb. This indirect or dative use of infixed pronouns is not only highly restricted,<sup>15</sup> it would also be completely unexpected in a twelfth-century poem. If the intended meaning was ‘I will make a poem for them (i.e. *lucht*)’, then the preposition *do* would most likely have been used. The infixed pronoun can only be the direct object of *do-gní*, in which case it makes more sense to take it as being a third sg. feminine proleptic pronoun, anticipating *radúain*, so that the line translates as ‘I will compose it myself, a great poem [...]’. But the verbal form *dos-gén* is actually written with a *punctum delens* above the *s* in the manuscript.<sup>16</sup> While this may indicate lenition in another context, here the scribe sought to delete the letter (and lenition would not make sense here at any rate) so that the correct reading is *do-gén*, not *dos-gén*, with *radúain* being the only possible object of the verb. I would therefore emend the line to *do-gén féin radúain* ‘I myself will compose a great poem’. A final possible emendation concerns the last two words in line d, which Gwynn has rendered as *a rríg* ‘their king’. Another possible interpretation is *ar rí* ‘for a king’.<sup>17</sup> Both interpretations are equally possible, but the second case would eliminate any remaining relationship to line c: while *a rríg* maintains a relationship to *lucht na déine*, which is its only possible referent, *ar rí* would make the noun indefinite and sever any link in line d to line c or the remainder of the quatrain.

<sup>13</sup>Although *DIL* s.v. 4 *dian* records no declension, it is clear from the examples of dat. sg. *déin* and the nom. pl. *diana* that we are dealing with an *ā*-stem feminine noun. Note that Murphy takes *dian* to be an *ā*-stem (*Early Irish Metrics*, 79).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *LL* iv, 1016 n. 2.

<sup>15</sup>See Thurnseisen in *GOI* §409(b), who notes that this construction is extremely rare with verbs other than the substantive verb. He notes one example from *Táin Bó Fraich* (*LL* 252\*25) and another from the Würzburg Glosses (Wb. 17\*4).

<sup>16</sup>Best and O’Brien seem to have noticed this as well, although they note ‘*n* may be expunged’, instead. Since there is nothing unusual about the *n*, they must have meant the *s*. See *LL* iv, 1016 n. 3.

<sup>17</sup>My thanks to Clodagh Downey for suggesting this reading to me.

## METRICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While it may not be possible to reconstruct the first line with absolute certainty, we can narrow down possible answers, or, at least, exclude impossible answers with the help of metrics. The first word of the opening line, *secht*, is confirmed by the *dúnada*. The poem is made up of three parts: an introduction, and two narrative sequences. The sections are as follows:

§1, qqs. 1–9: Composing a poem for Óengus Mac Ind Óc, Feis Tigi Óengussa;

§2, qqs. 10–65: How Óengus was born and how he gained the Brug;

§3, qqs. 66–78: Boand's death from the Well of Segais.

Each section ends in a *dúnad* in the word *secht*. Thus, 9d [*tech*] *ran can socht co fo secht* 'a glorious [house] without gloom sevenfold'; 65d *do-rat sain i sním foa secht* 'it cast him into sevenfold grief'; and the final *dúnad* 78d *cóic bliadna di i curp cóic secht* 'in this body she was five years and five times seven'. While it appears that each *dúnad* repeats the opening word of the poem in full (*saigid*), we must not discount the possibility that *secht* itself stands for a longer word beginning in these letters, so that the *dúnada* only repeat the first syllable of the opening word (*aschnam*).<sup>18</sup> The poem is written in *ran-naigeacht mór*, which follows the structure 7<sup>1</sup>x 4.<sup>19</sup> This metre requires end-rhyme between the final words in line b and d (here *sním*: *ríg*). Since each line must end in a monosyllable, the word beginning with *n* can only be a monosyllabic word. In quatrain 1, there is alliteration between the final stressed words in the lines which we have, i.e. *socht*—*sním*; *sáadail*—*snéid*; *radúain*—*ríg*. There is also *aicill* rhyme (*snéid*: *féin*) in lines c and d. All three end words, *sním*/*snéid*/*ríg*, make *úaitne*.<sup>20</sup> From this picture emerge four questions:

- Is there alliteration in the first line, and if so, does it occur between the final two words, or, as is also permissible, between the penultimate word and the antepenultimate word? In other words, should we look to expand *Sect.o.f.n.* + *n.* or *Sect.o.f.* + *f.n.*?
- Does *aicill* rhyme – though optional in the first couplet – occur between a and b?
- In the absence of *aicill* rhyme, does internal rhyme compensate for this feature?
- Does the final word in line a participate in *úaitne*?

<sup>18</sup>This possibility is further discussed below.

<sup>19</sup>See Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics*, 52.

<sup>20</sup>While matching consonant quality, in addition to matching vowel length and matching consonant class, is a requirement for *úaitne* in *dán díreach*, the same is not true for the earlier period (Murphy notes this by way of exception to the later rules only, see Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics*, 35 n. 3; further see Ó Cuív in his review of Murphy in *Éigse* 10 (1961/63), 238–41, at 239; and Liam Breatnach, 'III. Poets and Poetry', in Kim McCone and Katharine Simms (eds.), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth, 1996), 65–77, at 68). Thus *sním* (later *sníomh*) ends in a broad lenited *m*; *snéid* ends in a palatal lenited *d*; and the *g* in *ríg* is either broad or palatal depending on whether we take it as genitive *ríg* (later *ríogh*) or dative *ríg* (later *rígh*) respectively.

Indeed, the speaker even makes a comment about the metrical strictures of his composition in the (highly ornamented) seventh quatrain:<sup>21</sup>

Dar Dia ra *dírig* cach *ndáim*  
 noco bia 'na *thrírig thréin*  
 rind *éclinne* cen a n-*úaim*  
 im *dúain* rig *Féiclinne féin*

By God, who has directed every company of poets,  
 there will not be in his mighty lyric  
 an unsounding<sup>22</sup> rhyme without any<sup>23</sup> harmony,  
 for the poem of the king of Fiacc's Pool himself.

In addition to the end rhyme *thréin: féin*, we get internal rhyme *dírig: thrírig* in a–b and *éclinne: Féiclinne* in c–d; we get *aicill* rhyme *úaim: dúain*, as well as alliteration in every line.<sup>24</sup> For the sake of determining whether any of these features are present in 1a, we need to draw up their statistics from the rest of the poem. To avoid contamination of the results, I am excluding those quatrains, either in part or as a whole, where a metrical fault (e.g. lack of a word or syllable)

<sup>21</sup>End-rhymes are written in bold; *aicill* rhyme is written in small capitals; expanded character spacing is used for internal rhyme; *italics* are used for initial letters participating in alliteration.

<sup>22</sup>In order to rhyme with *Féiclinne*, the rhyming word in line c cannot be *éclainne*, which – gathering from Gwynn's translation – he took as a form of *clann* with a negative prefix. Rather, I would suggest that this noun is based on a word related to *clinnid* 'sounds, rings' with a negative prefix, since the concern of this verse is clearly how the poem sounds. In *DIL* s.v. *éclinne*, for which our quatrain above is the only entry, the word is taken as the genitive of the preceding entry *éclind*. Examples from *TBC* are given. I do not think that the use of *éclinn* or *églinne* (as it is also spelt) in *TBC* has any relationship to the *éclinne* we are looking for. As the variants in *TBC* demonstrate, other forms of the word are given as *églinne* and *inglinne*, as negatives to *glinne* 'safety, security, pledge', since the context in *TBC* is an unsafe chariot. Cf. *LU* I. 5094; *TBC* I, l. 684. Of course, it is possible that the quatrain above refers to an 'unstable verse', although I am not sure what exactly that would entail. I find that a word based on *clinnid* makes more sense here.

<sup>23</sup>This line is problematic. If we take *a<sup>N</sup>* to be the third pl. possessive pronoun, then what is its referent? *Rind* at the beginning of the line is in the singular so that the only possible candidate is *dáim* (semantically plural) in line a. But line a does not have a very strong connection to the remainder of the quatrain, being syntactically independent from it. I am also not sure what sense 'their alliteration' would make. Another possibility would be to take *a<sup>N</sup>* as the old accusative neuter definite article before *úaim(m)*, originally a neuter *n*-stem. On the other hand, I would not expect to find a neuter article in a poem this late, and the use of the definite article in this instance seems redundant to me. A third possibility would be to emend *an* to *áen* 'one, any', and to translate as above. If the poet meant that there will not be a verse-final end-rhyme (i.e. *rind*) without lit. 'stitching together', and in the extended sense 'harmony', and later specifically 'alliteration', his assertion does not hold true since there are quatrains which do not feature alliteration in line d between the final two stressed words of the line. If we are to take *úaim* in a less specific sense of 'joining together', and if the poet simply means to say that all of his verses have harmonious end-rhyme with perfect rhyming partners, then this assertion holds true.

<sup>24</sup>Although the speaker says that there won't be a quatrain without alliteration, he does not say that it has to occur in every single line. While alliteration between the ultimate and the penultimate, or the penultimate and the antepenultimate word was compulsory for every line in the most common metres in *dán díreach*, this was not the case for the earlier period.

affects the inquiry,<sup>25</sup> and further those quatrains which Gwynn has reconstructed in his edition due to the stained section on the top of p. 209. The quatrains variously affected are:

metrically faulty: 6, 13, 41, 52, 60  
 stained: 70–3.

I have drawn up the statistics as follows: for *aicill* rhyme and internal rhyme, I have taken the couplet as a unit and have separated the evidence for the first and the second couplet. I have done the same for internal rhyme, but with the following addendum: I have counted as separate those instances where internal rhyme compensates for the absence of *aicill* rhyme in both the first and the second couplet. For alliteration, I have first counted each line individually, then the first line only (where possible). For *úaitne*, since we are only interested in the first line, I have counted all quatrains in which the first line participates, and have not taken the third line into consideration since *úaitne* in line c is often sacrificed in order to make *aicill* rhyme with a word in line d. The tally, then, is as follows:

alliteration (total): 266/304 = 87.5%  
     alliteration (line a only): 68/76 = 89%  
*úaitne*: 72/73 = 99%  
*aicill* rhyme (total): 82/146 = 56%  
     *aicill* rhyme a–b: 13/73 = 18%  
     *aicill* rhyme c–d: 69/73 = 94.5%  
 internal rhyme (total): 86/150 = 57%  
     internal rhyme a–b: 64/75 = 85%  
     internal rhyme c–d: 22/75 = 29%  
 internal rhyme (compensatory; a–b): 46/73 = 63%  
 internal rhyme (compensatory; c–d): 2/73 = 3%

As these numbers demonstrate, *aicill* rhyme and internal rhyme are almost equally common, with the former being dominant in the second couplet, while the latter occurs more frequently in the first. It therefore follows that internal rhyme can compensate for the absence of *aicill* rhyme in the first couplet, but this is almost never true for the second couplet; when internal rhyme occurs in c–d, it is nearly always in addition to, and not instead of, *aicill* rhyme. *Úaitne* and alliteration are the most pervasive features in the poem, with *úaitne* occurring in every instance but one. While the percentage for alliteration is high, it is not as pervasive as *úaitne*, so that it need not necessarily be present in 1a.

<sup>25</sup>Not all features under consideration are equally affected by this and the numbers are adjusted accordingly. For example, verse 6 lacks the final word in line a. It is therefore excluded from the count for *aicill* rhyme in a–b and *úaitne*, but not from the tally for alliteration since the previous two stressed words, *fer* and *ferand*, alliterate.

We will now be able to check for the presence of these features in the first couplet, one by one. If we assume that *aicill* rhyme is present in 1a–b, then the participating word in a must be *n*. and the only possible rhyming participant in b is *socht*, since the other stressed word in the line, *-thabair*, has two syllables when only one is required. If the rhyming pair is *n*.: *socht*, then the only word in *n*- which rhymes with *socht* is *nocht*. This could be the adjective *nocht* meaning ‘naked, bare’, as well as the petrified prepositional phrase *innocht* ‘tonight’ (which counts as a monosyllable for the sake of rhyme, and alliteration, but as a disyllable for the sake of syllable count in the line as it originally represented two words, *i* and *nocht*). But it should be noted that neither of these two words make *úaitne* with the rest of the quatrain.

There are more possibilities for internal rhyme in 1a–b since both *-thabair* and *socht* are possible rhyming partners in this case. For *socht*, the rhyming partners can be both the word abbreviated *o*. and the word abbreviated *f*. For *-thabair* the rhyming partner cannot be the word abbreviated *o*. since the vowels do not match. It also cannot be the word in *n*., because this word must be monosyllabic. The only possible rhyming partner for *-thabair* is the word abbreviated *f*. The possible combinations, respecting vowel quality and length, and consonant class, are:

- a. *socht*: *ocht, olc, orc, ort, folc, folt, forc, fort*
- b. *-thabair*: *-fagaib, fagail, falaig, fanaid, faraid*

Both *-fagaib* (<*fo-gaib*) and *fanaid* (the verb *anaid* ‘stays’ with prosthetic *f*.) are singular forms, which would not work after *secht*, since we would expect the word abbreviated *o*. to be a plural word. And neither *falaig* (<*fail*) ‘ring, enclosure’ or *falaig* (<*folach*) ‘hiding, covering’, nor *fagail* (as a later form <*fogal* ‘attack’) or *faraid* (<*forad*) ‘mound, platform’ make sense in the line either.

Given the limits of rhyming possibilities for 1a–b just laid out, neither *aicill* nor internal rhyme may be present in the first couplet. This leaves us with *úaitne* and alliteration, for which the statistics were considerably higher. For *úaitne*, we require a word beginning with *n*-, which has to be a monosyllable with a long vowel or diphthong, ending in a voiced continuant. The following words beginning in *n*- make *úaitne* with *sním/snéid/rraig*:

- ná(i)r* ‘high, noble’
- nél* ‘cloud’
- ném* ‘lustre, radiance’
- nóeb* ‘holy, sacred’
- nóin* ‘(ninth) canonical hour’
- núaill* ‘noise’
- núin* ‘evil, harm’.

I would give preference to the first option, especially since the adjective *nár* occurs twice again in the phrase *Mac Namat náir* in 69a and in 70c, where it alliterates in both instances.

Alliteration is one of the most pervasive features throughout the poem.<sup>26</sup> But since the scribe only indicated one word beginning in *f*- or in *n*-, we would need to supply another stressed word for alliteration. In this case, we must postulate either *sect.o.f.f.n.* or *sect.o.f.n.n.* One possibility for the arrangement *f. n. n.* would be *for nim nár* ‘in high heaven’, or *fo nim nár* ‘beneath high heaven’. This phrase is attested elsewhere: we find several examples of it in *Saltair na Rann*, e.g. l. 1759 *mo chur do maig nimi nár*; l. 4181 *manbad ruirig nimi nár*; l. 5488 *ó rig nime nár nóebfind*.<sup>27</sup> The phrase *for nim nár*, specifically, is found in the *Dindsenchas* poem on Achall,<sup>28</sup> which, incidentally, is commonly accepted to be Cináed úa hArtacáin’s composition.<sup>29</sup> While this phrase fulfills a number of metrical exigencies in keeping with the rest of the poem, it gives the line *secht o. for nim nár* ‘Seven o. upon high heaven’, and nothing of the sort is referred to either in the rest of the quatrain or anywhere else in the poem. While alliteration is a dominant feature throughout the poem, there are still nine instances in which we do not get alliteration in the first line. All we can say for certain is that the last word is a monosyllable, and that the line must fill seven syllables in total, which means that besides *secht* and the final monosyllable, there are a further five syllables to fill. But what may not be inferred from the metre may yet be inferred from the context.

#### CONTEXT OF THE QUATRAIN

Due to the cryptic nature of the first line, Gwynn admitted to having some difficulties with translating the rest of the quatrain. His notes state: ‘I cannot discover what were the seven ‘*o. f. n.*’ which ‘cast not into grief’: nor why *-thabair* is not plural.’<sup>30</sup> It is true that we would not expect a singular verb to agree with whatever comes after *secht*, since the numeral indicates that a word in the plural is to follow. There is a dot between the word *Sect* and the letter *o*, however, which, although marked by the editors of *LL*, seems to have gone unnoticed by Gwynn. If *Sect* itself was abbreviated, it could stand for a longer word which begins with these letters. The ordinal *sechtmad* ‘seventh’ is a possibility here, since whatever follows an ordinal stands in the singular and must therefore take a singular verb. Another possibility for a numeral is *sechtmoga* ‘seventy’ (later also *sechtmad*), followed by (*a h*)ocht, giving the numeral ‘seventy-eight’. Seventy-eight is the number of quatrains in the poem. The problem with this suggestion is that the following *f.* cannot

<sup>26</sup>With the exception of quatrain 20, all quatrains which do not feature rhyme in a–b do feature alliteration.

<sup>27</sup>All lines taken from Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The Saltair na Rann. A Collection of Early Middle Irish Poems* (Oxford, 1883).

<sup>28</sup>See Gwynn, *MD* i, 50–1.

<sup>29</sup>See John Carey, ‘Cináed ua hArtacáin’ [Cineth O’Hartagain] (d. 975), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20636>, accessed 2 Feb 2017]. Curiously, the quatrain which contains the phrase is only found in the copy of the poem in the Book of Leinster. It also contains Cináed’s full name.

<sup>30</sup>Gwynn, ‘Cináed úa hArtacáin’s Poem’, 237.

stand for a noun, since it would have to stand between the tenth and the digit in that case, so that only a relative clause can follow here, e.g. *fil*, or later *filet*. Another issue is the syntax of the quatrain. If we are changing *secht* to *sechtmad*, for instance, in order to have a singular subject for the verb *ním thabair*, it should be borne in mind that whatever *Sect.o.f.n.* is, is not the only possible subject. It is equally possible that the whole noun phrase which makes up line c, *lucht na déine sádaíl snéid* is the subject of *ním thabair*, so that we would get *ním thabair* [...] *lucht na déine* [...] ‘the folk of the *dían* does not cast me etc.’ But whatever the syntactical relationship of either line a or line c to the verb in the second line, some echo or semantic link probably still exists between line a and c.

In order to determine what the semantic link to *lucht na déine* may be, we will have to cast a wider net and look at the rest of section 1 down to quatrain 9. What we know is that the speaker is composing a *radúain rann* ‘a great poem of verses’ (2a), which will not contain any *rind éclinne* ‘unsounding verse’,<sup>31</sup> *cen ... úaim* ‘without alliteration’ (7c), and that he is going to attend *Feis Tigi Óengussa áin / ro fitir cach fili fír* ‘The Feast at the House of noble Óengus’,<sup>32</sup> which<sup>33</sup> every true *fili* knows’ (8a–b). All of these lines contain references to poetry, poets, or metrics. The speaker evidently intends to present his composition: he is attending an event where *deich fichit fichi cét cām* ‘ten score and twenty hundred nobles’ (4a) will be present, and describes them as *l[u]cht can locht* ‘a company without fault’ (9c). And, at the beginning of sections 2 and 3, he addresses the crowd as *a éicsiu Banba* (10a) ‘scholars of Ireland’, and *[a] senchaide in talman* ‘historians of the world’ (66a).

As previously noted, the phrase *lucht na déine* gives both ‘people of swiftness/eagerness’ or ‘people of the [metre] *dían*’. The *dían*, specifically, is the metre assigned to the lowest grade (*grád*) of *fili*, the *fochloc*.<sup>34</sup> There are a number of Old and Middle Irish texts which deal with the *secht ngrád filed* ‘seven grades of poets’. In the majority of these, the grades are listed from

<sup>31</sup>See footnote 22; this seems to me to be the most likely meaning.

<sup>32</sup>Although the category *feis tige* X ‘feast at the house of X’ features in the medieval Irish tale lists, there is no such title as *Feis Tigi Óengussa*. See Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1980), 44, 55. The only guess I could venture here is that *Feis Tigi Óengussa* may be a different title for the first section of *Tochmarc Étaíne*. It was not uncommon for what was essentially the same story to be known under different names. The tale lists give several titles for versions (or sections) of the courtship(s) of Étaín as known from the Yellow Book of Lecan (see edition in Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, *Ériu* 12 (1934–8), 137–96). There is also a short poem of three quatrains, beginning *Tomus tighe Mec ind Ócc*, which deals with the measurements of Óengus’ house, edited in Kuno Meyer, ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, *ZCP* 8 (1912), 102–20, at 108. My thanks to the anonymous reader for this reference.

<sup>33</sup>Or ‘whom’, since both Óengus, or the whole phrase, *Feis Tigi Óengussa*, could be the antecedent of the relative clause here.

<sup>34</sup>For a description of the seven poetic grades, see Liam Breatnach (ed.), *Uraicecht na Riar* (Dublin, 1987), 177, 182, 183. See further Liam Breatnach, ‘*Sluindfét dúib dagaisti an dána*’, in Caoimhín Breatnach and Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail (eds), *Aon don Éigse* (Dublin, 2015), 51–90, for an edition of a Middle Irish poem which also deals with the seven grades of the *fili*. My thanks to Liam Breatnach for pointing me to this possibility.

highest (*ollam*) to lowest (*fochloc*) so that the *fochloc* is named in seventh place.<sup>35</sup> A possible rendering of the opening line, then, may be:

**Secht** n-*ō*engrád a fochloc<sup>36</sup> náir  
ním thabair i socht nó i sním  
lucht na déine sádail snéid  
do-gén féin radúain ar rí.

‘[There are] seven grades from the noble *fochloc*,<sup>37</sup>  
the indolent eager folk of the *dían*  
do not cast me into gloom or grief;  
I myself will compose a great poem before a king.’

This may not be a metrically elegant solution, since – with the exception of *úaitne* – it leaves most of the ornamentation aside.<sup>38</sup> But the first quatrain is actually less ornamented on the whole than we would expect the opening quatrain of a poem to be.<sup>39</sup> Compare the second quatrain with both internal rhyme and *aicill* rhyme in both couplets: *radúain: cladúair, rann: barr; fagla: Dagda, fill: dind*. The same holds true for most of the quatrains in the first section. In the first quatrain, on the other hand, there is no internal rhyme in the second couplet. As can be seen from the statistics above, the most dominant feature in the poem is *úaitne* so that it is highly likely that *úaitne* was present in the first line. If we do have *úaitne*, however, then we cannot have *aicill* rhyme since the only *aicill* rhyming partner in the second line is *socht*, and no word rhyming with *socht* (see possibilities above) would make *úaitne* with *sním/snéid/ríg*. If *aicill* rhyme is not present in the first couplet, then internal rhyme can compensate for it, as the numbers above show, and as is exemplified by 5a–b and 8a–b, for instance. But even here the possibilities for internal rhyme in 1a–b are extremely limited, and we are faced with the constraint that the first line must still link up with the rest of the quatrain, especially since an echo of some sort with line c will be expected. None of the words making internal rhyme with either *socht* or *-thabair* proposed above would make sense in connection

<sup>35</sup>Thus presented, among others, in *Bretha Nemed*, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, and *Midílechta*. See Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 148, 154, 160.

<sup>36</sup>Alternatively, we could expand the line as *secht n-ord a fochlocain nár*, since *fochloc* is also attested as an *n*-stem (see the example in Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 43), and the word *ord* (though the word *grád* is usually used) can also mean ‘rank’.

<sup>37</sup>That is, inclusive of the *fochloc*.

<sup>38</sup>Another line of inquiry, which I briefly pursued, was to look for other poems with an opening line beginning in *secht* in the catalogues of manuscripts, to see whether there was any other poem beginning with the same line. While there are many poems beginning in *secht*, there seems to be no other example of *secht.o.f.n.* or something similar. See T. K. Abbott and E. J. Gwynn, *Catalogue of the Irish Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin* (Dublin, 1921), 398–9; and Kathleen Mulchrone, Thomas F. O’Rahilly, Elizabeth FitzPatrick, and A. I. Pearson (eds), *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, 8 vols (Dublin, 1926–70), viii, 498–9.

<sup>39</sup>After a cursory look through other poems in *rannaigeacht* type metres in the Book of Leinster, it appears that most opening quatrains are indeed highly ornamented. Note one exception in *LL* v, 1239 (l. 36778).

with line c. But there is semantic equivalence between *fochloc náir* and *lucht na déine*, since the latter seems to be paraphrasing the lowest rank of the *fili*. As already mentioned above, restoring alliteration would mean supplying an additional word in either *f* or *n*, which, given the extremely narrow possibilities we are already operating under, may simply not be present in line a.<sup>40</sup>

The adjective *sádail* seems to express criticism since *sádail* ‘indolent, lazy’ is used in a derogatory sense. The primary meaning of the adjective *snéid* is ‘swift, quick’, but in our context it may mean ‘eager’. Not unlike *déine*, with its double association of swiftness and poetry, it is possible that some sort of pun was intended here.<sup>41</sup> It is certainly hard to shake off the feeling of condescension in this phrase: the speaker, most likely a *fili* himself (perhaps even a *fochloc*) criticises the laziness of his fellow scholars, although he himself is not troubled by it (*ním thabair i socht nó i sním*) because he will make a great poem (*radúain*). And *snéid* also creates a nice contrast to its rhyming partner *féin*, underscoring the difference between the speaker and those he seems to criticise. Moreover, if the speaker is a *fili*, whether *fochloc* or not, he may wish to progress to the next *grád*. *Uraicecht na Riar* tells us that, when a *fili* wanted to progress to the next *grád*, he had to compose a poem and submit it to the highest representative of his guild, the *ollam*, who would then submit the young scholars’s petition before a king, as it was the king who would confirm him in his grade:

§6 Ceist, cia cruth do-berar grád for filid? Ní hansae, taisbénad a dréchtea do ollamain – 7 biit na secht ngráda fis occa – 7 gaibthi in rí inna lángrád, inid-focladar int asa dréctaib [...]

‘How is a grade conferred on a poet? Not difficult; he shows his compositions to an ollam—and he has the seven grades of knowledge—and the king receives him in his full grade, in which the ollam declares him to be on the basis of his compositions, [...].’<sup>42</sup>

In the context of the conferral of a higher grade, the reading *ar rí* makes sense, since the most basic meaning is ‘before a king’. It is possible that the speaker wished to progress to the next rank of poet and that he composed the poem for that purpose.

Indeed, the question of the purpose of the poem is a tricky one. Thomas Owen Clancy has argued that,

[i]n this poem, the opening clearly praises the local ruler of the area around Brug na Bóinne, before going to tell the tale of

<sup>40</sup>One way to avoid supplying a word would be if the word in *f-* were lenited, in which case it would alliterate with the word in *o-*. *Secht n-óengrád ó fochloc náir* would be a possibility.

<sup>41</sup>Moreover, the word *snéid* is found in compound nouns designating metres such as *snéd-bairdne* or *snéddechnad* etc. (Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics*, 29). What the metres called *snéid-X* have in common is a lack of internal or *aicill* rhyme (as well as alliteration) in the first couplet of a poem, which is exactly what appears to be happening here.

<sup>42</sup>Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 104–5.

‘the feast of Óengus’s house’, and a somewhat different version from the prose of the story of *Tochmarc Étaíne*. In this work we have a mixture of praise-poem and entertaining story, with a locality and to some extent a discernible motivation for the telling of the story.<sup>43</sup>

As becomes evident quickly, the king referred to in the first quatrain is Óengus Mac Ind Óc, since the poem describes how he obtained Brug na Bóinne. He is variously referred to as *barr críchi cladúair Cuinn* ‘the chief of the cold-trenched territory of Conn’ (2b), *meic* [gen.] *in Dagda duind* ‘the noble Dagda’s son’ (2d), *mac ríge Banba* ‘son of the king of Banba’ (6c), and *ríge* [gen.] *Féiclinne* ‘the king of Fiacc’s Pool’ (7a).<sup>44</sup> Similar or identical phraseology can be found in another poem on Brug na Bóinne, also ascribed to Cináed úa hArtacáin.<sup>45</sup> This is the poem beginning *Án sin a maig Mic ind Óc*, which is found in the *Dindsenchas*<sup>46</sup> and in *Senchas na Relec*.<sup>47</sup> Note, for instance, the reference to *lind find Féic* ‘the clear pool of Fiacc’ (l. 17), or the phrases *mic in Dagda déin* (l. 74), and *tech Mic in Óc* (l. 9). While the characters in the poem are fictional, it is possible that the poet is praising an actual ruler of Meath as suggested by Clancy, but through the figure of Óengus Mac ind Óc, and by telling the well-known story of Óengus’s ruse.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>See Thomas Owen Clancy, ‘Before the ballad: Gaelic narrative verse before 1200’, in Colm Ó Baoill and Nancy R. McGuire (eds), *Caindel Alban. Féil-sgríobhainn do Dhómhnaill E. Meek* (Aberdeen, 2008), 113–36, at 126. My thanks to Clodagh Downey for this reference.

<sup>44</sup>Near Rosnaree on the Boyne. See Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), 490. Fiacc’s Pool is also mentioned in a poem on Brug na Bóinne (Gwynn, *MD* ii, 10:17) and in the *dindsenchas* of Linn Féic contained in RIA MS. D ii 2 (see Gwynn, *MD* iv: 296).

<sup>45</sup>The language of the text suggests that this ascription is genuine as there appear to be no features that would contradict a tenth-century date.

<sup>46</sup>Edited and translated in Gwynn, *MD*, ii, 10–17 and labelled *Brug na Bóinne* I. The thematic and rhetorical similarities between this poem and *Sect.o.f.n.* could explain why the latter was ascribed to Cináed. Indeed, Cináed seems to have been the author of several poems focusing on areas in Meath.

<sup>47</sup>Further see *LU*, 129–32.

<sup>48</sup>Noting the reading *Mac Ócán* in 5c, Gwynn remarked ‘An Óengus mac Ócán is mentioned Ann. Ult. 956’ (Gwynn, ‘Cináed úa hArtacáin’s Poem’, 230 n. 2). But the correct reading is *mac Nocáin* (see *AU* s.a. 956.1), and this person seems to have been a cleric, not a secular ruler. At any rate, a *obit* of AD 956 would be too early for the poem to have been written for this person. The reference to *críchi cladúair Cuinn* in 2b could suggest that the poem was written for an Uí Néill ruler. More recently, Donnchadh Ó Corráin has proposed an eleventh-century date for the poem and suggested that Óengus son of Carrach Calma (d. 1017) was its intended honorand. See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium*, 3 vols (Turnhout, 2017), iii, 1566.