Séol

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SÉOL

Abstract

Following brief observations on the derivation of Old Irish *séol* and its cognates, various terms which are arguably based on *séol* 'sail', or its derivatives, are discussed, including *crann siúil*, *ben siúil*, *bard siúil*, *Mag Séola* and *Mag Siúil*.[1]

Opinions have differed on the relationship between Celtic and Germanic words for 'sail' – Old Irish *séol*, Old Welsh *huil*, Middle Welsh *hwyl*, Old High German *segal*, German *segel*, Old English *segel*, etc. The traditional derivation has been from the PIE root **sek-*, 'to cut (cloth, etc.)', with borrowing posited from Germanic to Celtic.[2] Peter Schrijver, on the other hand, has characterized the connection with **sek-* as 'semantically arbitrary', and pointed out that a borrowed Germanic **segla-* would give Welsh **heil*; he proposes instead to trace from Proto-Celtic **siglo-*: 'In Ir., **siglo-* > **siɣlo-* became **seɣlo-* by lowering, which yielded OIr. *séol*. In Gm., **siglo-* > **siɣla-* became **seɣla-* by *a*-umlaut'.[3] However he does not suggest an etymology for **siglo-*.

An attractive etymology has been proposed by Helmut Birkhan.[4] He traces from Celtic **seglo-* to the Indo-European root **seg-* 'to attach', with an instrumental/agentive *l*-suffix, in the sense of 'was man an-, auf- oder umhängt'. In Irish, **seglo-* (later **segla-*) resulted in *seɣ'la* through lenition, and, following compensatory lengthening for the loss of *-ɣ-*, and final syllable loss, in **sēl*. Professor Birkhan accepts that the Old Irish nominative singular *séol*, with diphthongization of earlier *-ē-*, is modelled on nouns such as *céol*, genitive singular *cíuil*,[5] and he explains the vocalism of the Welsh forms as resulting from the borrowing of *sēl* into Welsh as *Σēʲla* in the sixth century, before this diphthongization occurred, developing in the mid-seventh century to Old Welsh *huil*, and later to Middle Welsh *hwyl*.[6]

Birkhan notes that the direction of borrowing between Celtic and Germanic cannot be determined from linguistic evidence alone, since one might argue equally for the derivation Germanic **segla-* > Celtic **seglo-*, or Celtic **seglo-* > Germanic **segla-*, but he maintains that the wealth of archaeological, pictorial and written evidence for the use of sails in the Celtic-speaking world in the

[1] I thank the anonymous reviewer for many helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] *GOI*, 574; *IEW* II, 895; *GPC Online* s.v. *hwyl*; Wolfgang Meid (ed.), *Die Suche nach der Traumfrau: Aislinge Óenguso/Oengus' Traum. Eine altirische Sage* (Innsbruck, 2017), 75–6.

[3] Peter Schrijver, *Studies in British Celtic Historical Phonology* (Amsterdam, 1995), 357.

[4] Helmut Birkhan, 'Segel', in Werner Bauer and Hermann Scheuringer (eds), *Beharrsamkeit und Wandel: Festschrift für Herbert Tatzreiter zum 60. Geburtstag* (Vienna, 1998), 27–38.

[5] Cf. *GOI*, 574 (§924).

[6] Birkhan, 'Segel', 28–30.

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Iron Age, while there is little or none for their use by Germanic-speaking people until much later, possibly as late as the sixth century, clearly points to borrowing from Celtic to Germanic rather than the reverse. Other authorities concur with him on this.[7]

The derivation proposed by Birkhan for 'sail', from PIE **seg-* 'to hang', seems highly apt since sails were indeed hung.[8] In the North Atlantic world, sails were commonly made from entire or multiple widths of cloth (occasionally from animal skins), typically of woollen cloth which had been woven on looms.[9] These widths were likely to be stitched together, rather than cut: another reason to prefer PIE **seg-* to PIE **sek-* 'to cut'. It is striking that in Modern Irish, *séol* has replaced earlier *garman* as the common term for 'loom', and it is easy to see why sails, and particularly square sails, were associated with cloth hung from the top beam of a loom.[10]

A number of Irish terms based on *séol* will now be discussed. In Old Irish *séol* is a neuter o-stem, later masculine (or neuter and masculine).[11] *eDIL* identifies its primary meaning as 'a sail, a covering', and gives 'a bed, couch' as a secondary meaning, but indicates doubt as to whether this secondary meaning also underlies the term *ben siúil* which it defines as 'a woman in childbed'.[12] Any doubt on this seems unwarranted. It is likely that *séol* came to mean 'bed' from its use as an abbreviation of terms for beds such as *crann siúil* and *lige siúil*, which I take to mean 'wooden bed with a *séol*' and 'couch with a *séol*'.[13] I suggest that *séol* in these terms refers to a kind of vertical

[7] Ibid., 31–3. Unaware of Birkhan's article, and following Schrijver's suggested pre-form of **siglo-*, Katrin Their also concluded that the documentary and archaeological evidence indicated an origin for the word and technology in the Celtic world: see Katrin Their, 'Sails in the North—new perspectives on an old problem', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 32/2 (2003), 182–90. See also two recent studies, based on large collections of Celticisms and Celto-Germanicisms (including words for 'sail'): David Stifter, 'With the back to the ocean: the Celtic maritime vocabulary', and Paulus van Sluis, Anders Richardt Jørgensen, and Guus Kroonen, 'European prehistory between Celtic and Germanic: the Celto-Germanic isoglosses revisited', both in Kristian Kristiansen, Guus Kroonen and Eske Willerslev (eds), *The Indo-European Puzzle Revisited: Integrating Archaeology, Genetics and Linguistics* (Cambridge, 2023), at 172–92 and 193–243 respectively.

[8] It has been suggested that Gallo-Roman *sagum*, meaning 'coarse woollen cloak' made from square cloth, may derive from the same root: see Birkhan, 'Segel', 35.

[9] See Lise Bender Jørgensen, 'The introduction of sails to Viking Scandinavia: raw materials, labour and land', in Ragnhild Berge, Marek E. Jasinski and Kalle Sognnes (eds), *N-TAG TEN: Proceedings of the 10th Nordic TAG conference at Stoklestad, Norway 2009*, BAR International Series 2399 (Oxford, 2012), 173–81; Bill Cooke, Carol Christiansen and Lena Hammarlund, 'Viking woollen square sails and fabric cover factor', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 31/2 (2002), 202–10. Direct archaeological evidence for sail-making in the North Atlantic world outside of Scandinavia is extremely scarce and mainly inferential.

[10] The references in *eDIL* under 1 *séol* (c) 'a weaving implement, a loom' are in Modern Irish.

[11] *eDIL* states 'Poss. neut. in one or other sense (only in chevilles)', but note nom. sg. *a séol ndobróin* 'der Schleier der Trauer' in a short elegy for Máel Sechnaill (†862) son of Máel Rúanaid (in Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Bruchstücke der ältern Lyrik Irlands* (Berlin, 1919), 47 §105), and nom. sg. *séol mbuide … séol nglas* (siul mbodhe…seol n*h*glas) 'velo flavo, velo viridi' in Paul Grosjean (ed.), 'S. Columbae Hiensis cum Mongano heroe colloquium', *Analecta Bollandiana* 45 (1927), 78–83, at 78.

[12] S.v. 1 *séol*: '(b) a bed, couch: séol .i. leabha, O'Cl. siul .i. imda, ut est fech sin ar siul tuas, O'Dav. 1426 … ? To this in phr. ben siúil … a woman in childbed …'

[13] Conversely, *crann*, literally 'tree, wood', also occurs as an abbreviation of *crann siúil* in '*luid*

hanging, reminiscent of a sail, which gave privacy to the person lying in bed. To give an example, readers of *Aislinge Óenguso* will recall that when Óengus, son of Bóann and Dagda, first beholds the beautiful female visitant with whom he falls in love, he is lying in his *crann siúil*. She continues to visit him there for a full year but is never seen by anyone apart from Óengus. This may be because where he lies is shielded from other people's sight.[14] The tale relates that on first meeting her, Óengus tried to take his visitant's hand to draw her to him in his *imdae*.[15] This word is not a synonym for *crann siúil*, though it may be used loosely as such;[16] it signifies 'a compartment or cubicle' (cf. *eDIL*). Literary texts such as *Fled Bricrenn*, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Suidigiud Tellaig Temra* portray royal banqueting halls and hospitallers' hostels as having various *imdai* which were used for sleeping, resting or feasting, and typically were occupied by a number of people at a time. As William Sayers has pointed out, literary descriptions convey that these *imdai* were semi-enclosed compartments, mounted on daises or platforms called *airide* (< *air-suide* 'fore-seat'), with side-partitions 'over which diners could view others in the hall'.[17] Evidently then, their primary function was not to afford privacy. In real life, the higher a person's rank, the greater the number of *imdai* in his house. For example, according to the eighth-century law tract *Críth Gablach*, a *bóaire*'s house had one *imdae*, the houses of the *aire désa* and the *aire ard* had eight, and the king's house had twelve.[18]

While Óengus had privacy, perhaps, on account of his *crann siúil* (as well as the separation afforded by an *imdae*), there are not many other references associating males with a *crann siúil*. O'Davoren's Glossary provides one, in the entry for *fochlae*, a term used figuratively to mean 'seat of honour': *Fochlu .i. fēinnidh[a], ut est ar siúl ar bēlaib .f. .i. ar crann siū[i]l ⁊ i n-airidhiu*, 'Seat of honour, i.e. of the champion, i.e. on a *séol*-bed (*séol*) in front of the seat of

do c[h]runn ⁊ do uaitni', said of Deichtire as she was about to give birth (in '*Compert ConCulaind* nach D. 4. 2', ed. with German translation in Rudolf Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften und Litteraturdenkmälern* (Berlin, 1912), 41–8, at 43 and 46 (§6)). While translating the phrase literally as 'Stamm und Pfosten', Thurneysen asked: 'Soll das "Gebärstuhl" oder "Bett" heißen?' (p. 46). In the absence of references to the use of birthing stools in the early medieval period, I suggest that the woman giving birth may simply have braced herself against an *úaitne* which formed part of the *imdae* or the wall of the house.

[14] Alternatively, as the anonymous reviewer suggests, one might understand Óengus's supernatural visitant as being selectively visible to him alone, and comparable in this to the supernatural visitant to Connlae who remains invisible to his companions in the tale *Echtrae Chonnlai*, see Kim McCone (ed.), *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland* (Maynooth, 2000), 125, and 137.

[15] *do gabáil a llâmae dia tabairt cuci inna imdai:* cf. Meid, *Aislinge Óenguso*, 54 (restored text), 63 (German translation), and 78–9 (on the inflexion and derivation of *imdae*, earlier *imbith*, *immid* < *imb-* + *buith*, comparable to *lepaid* < *leth-* + *buith*).

[16] For an example, see footnote 15. Conversely, *crann siúil* may also be used loosely as a synonym for *imdae*: in one of the tableaux set within the many different *imdai* in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, the description of the *imdae* of the under-charioteers (*imda na forarad*) begins *Atchonnarc nonbur for craund siúil dóib* 'I saw nine men in a *crann siúil*', *LU* 233, l. 7607.

[17] William Sayers, 'Charting conceptual space: Dumézil's tripartition and the fatal hostel in Early Irish literature', *Mankind Quarterly* 34/1–2 (Fall/Winter 1993), 27–64, at 41.

[18] D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 11 (Dublin, 1970), ll. 229, 234, 337, 401, and 575.

honour, i.e. on a wooden *séol*-bed (*crann siúil*) and in the fore-seat (*airide*)'.[19] But in many cultures some degree of privacy is seen as desirable for parturient women, regardless of rank,[20] and it is noteworthy that *séol* features prominently in the specialized sense of 'childbed, birthing bed', in terms such as *lige siúil* 'childbed', *lén siúil* 'travail of childbed', *nert mná siúil* 'the strength of a woman in childbed'. The abstract *iā*-stem *séolae* is also well attested in the meaning 'the state of being in childbirth', e.g. *ni fil mo niachus … dar aindir liuin seolæ* 'My prowess does not exceed that of a woman in travail'.[21]

The practice of using sails to create privacy for parturient women is attested in our own time in Irish coastal communities, as the following passage from a memoir written by the Blasket islander Seán Ó Criomhthain (1898–1975) shortly before his death shows:

> I gcúinne an tí sa chistin a bhíodh an leaba luí sheoil. Seol báid, agus cheanglófaí in airde de na fraitheacha é, déanfaí fé mar bheadh seomra beag de, agus líonfaí istigh é d'easair nó de thuí nó de raithneach thirim, agus ansin ligint don bhean a bhí chun an leanbh a shaolú bheith ag iomlasc leí. Is mó fear agus bean mhaith a tháinig ar an saol seo ar an Oileán Tiar sa leaba luí sheoil seo. Ó shaolaíodh an bhean an leanbh ní raibh sí le feiscint arís go mbeadh na naoi lá caite aici, oiriúnach chun ráis arís.[22]
>
> 'The birthing bed used be in the kitchen, in the corner of the house. The sail of a boat used be secured to the rafters, made into something like a little room, and the inside of it filled with packing or straw or dry bracken. Then the woman who was about to give birth to the child was left to roll around. Many a good man and woman was born on the Western Island in this kind of birthing bed. When the woman had borne the child, she was not to be seen again until the end of her nine days, when she was ready for action once more.'[23]

Screens and hangings other than sails were also used. The following is from an account given by Máire Ruiséal (1855–1949), from the parish of Cill Mhaolcéadair in Corca Dhuibhne, to the folklore collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh:

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[19] *CIH* iv, 1498, l.18; W. Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'O'Davoren's glossary', *ACL* 3 vols (1900–07), vol. ii (1904), 337 §841. Trans. here is mine.

[20] For European perspectives see, for example, Katharine Park, 'Managing childbirth and fertility in medieval Europe', in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell (eds), *Reproduction* (Cambridge, 2018), 153–66; Alisha Rankin, 'From private ritual to public good: childbirth and midwifery in the writings of Anna of Saxony (1532–85)', in Natacha Klein et al., *Privacy in Early Modern Saxony: Perspectives on Architecture, Culture, Health, Law, and Religion* (Berlin, 2025) 15–39.

[21] R. I. Best, 'The battle of Airtech', *Ériu* 8 (1916) 170–90, at 172 and 180. See *eDIL* s.v. *séolae* for further examples.

[22] S. Ó Criomhthain in Pádraig Tyers (ed.), *Leoithne Aniar* (Baile an Fhirtéaraigh, 1982), 54. I owe this reference to my colleague Dr Pádraig Ó Héalaí.

[23] My translation.

> Tithe beaga a bhíodh ann cúpla glúin ó shin – cistin agus seomra síos ón gcistin ag formhór na ndaoine. Is minic ná raibh deighilt in aon chor ann ach aon tseomra amháin, an chistin in uachtar an tí agus dhá leaba in íochtar an tí. Nuair a saolaítí leanbh shocraíodh duine éigin leaba sa chúinne fén mbean bhreoite, leaba tuí, agus crochtaí fé mar a bheadh *screen* timpeall na leapan ach amháin go mbíodh slí ón dtaobh istigh den *screen* seo don bhanaltra, don bhean chabhartha uaireanta agus don leanbh.[24]
>
> 'A few generations ago, houses were small – most people had only a kitchen and a room down from the kitchen. Often there was no division of any kind, just a single room, with the kitchen up at one end and two beds down at the other. When a child was coming, someone would fix a bed in the corner for the sick woman, a straw bed, and something like a screen would be erected around the bed, leaving just enough room on the inside for the nurse, and sometimes the handy woman, and the child.'[25]

An unusual use of *séol* in reference to cattle is found in the Old Irish tale *Erchoitmet Ingine Gulide*.[26] This tells of a visit by Feidlimid mac Crimthainn, king of Munster, and his retinue to the house of Gulide, a famously stingy *cáinte*. Gulide sends his daughter out to convey to the visitors that they have in fact come at the worst possible time: their house is in disarray, their 'old food' supplies are exhausted and their 'new food' has not yet come. Among other examples of scarcity she cites this: *Englasa inar lilachaib iar n-dísca inar n-gamnachaib. Ar mna asiul, ar m-bæ ansiul.*[27] I take *asiul* to stand for *i siúl* 'in childbed', here used somewhat loosely to mean 'giving birth', and *ansiul* as its antonym, formed from *an-* 'non-' and the dative singular of *séol*, used adverbially. One might translate as 'Watery milk in our milch cows on top of dryness in our strippers. Our women giving birth, our cattle not giving birth'. A *gamnach* or stripper is a cow with a yearling calf whose milk-production is at an end.[28] The point is that the visiting party can expect little or no milk and 'white food' (*bánbíad*) since the cows with yearling calves have ceased to produce milk, while the cows that have not calved – the cows that are *ansiúl* – have yet to come into milk. To make matters worse, as the women of the house are *i siúl* 'giving birth', there is no one to attend on the guests.

The contrast between the strength of warriors and the weakness of women in childbed is a prominent theme in tales and verse of the Irish heroic cycle,

[24] University College, Dublin, Coimisiún Bhéaloideas Éireann MS 0469, pp. 123–5. I am indebted to Dr Pádraig Ó Héalaí for this reference also.

[25] My translation.

[26] Ed. and trans. by Kuno Meyer, in K. Meyer, *Hibernica Minora, Being a Fragment of an Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter with Translation, Notes and Glossary and an Appendix Containing Extracts Hitherto Unpublished* (Oxford, 1894), 65–9.

[27] Ibid., 66 §6. Meyer translated as 'There is water in our milchcows after our heifers have run dry. Our women are pregnant, our kine barren' (ibid., 68).

[28] On the *gamnach*, and this passage, see Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 1997), 354, and 526.

and presumably underlies the unusual description of an army as a *slúag siúil* 'feeble host' (literally 'childbed-host') in the following quatrain, reputedly addressed to Áed Allán (†743), king of Tara, to incite him to attack Áed Róin (†735), king of the Ulaid:

> Abair re hAodh Allán n-ūar
> dom-riacht forrán la slūagh siūil,
> rom-n-elacht Aedh Róin arraír
> im Chonna Cill an chaín chiúil.
>
> 'Say unto cold Áed Allán that I have been oppressed by a feeble army;
> Áed Róin insulted me last night at Cill Chonna of the sweet music.'[29]

However *séol* remained in use as an unmarked term for 'bed', as in the following quatrain from a poem attributed to Muirchertach Mac Líag (†1016), in which he is portrayed as leaving his patron, Brían Bóraime, to spend the next half-year with another patron, Tadg Mór Úa Cellaig, entertaining him as his *bard siúil*, which I take to mean 'poet of the bed-chamber':

> Leithblīadhoin damh is'tīr tīar
> ag Brīan ar Sionainn, ar Siúir,
> is bīad leithblīadhain oile ag Tadg
> in Āth Lūain ina bard siúil.[30]
>
> 'One half-year in the land to the west with Brían, by the Shannon and the Siur, and I will be another half-year with Tadg in Athlone as his *bard siúil*.'[31]

The word *séol* is used not only of vertical hangings but also of coverings laid flat, as sails would often have been while being made or repaired.[32] I suggest that an io-stem collective *séolae* in the sense of 'coverings (of soil)' may underlie the placename *Mag Séola*. This is the name of a flat, fertile plain lying east of Lough Corrib between Galway and Tuam which features only one small hill, 170 metres in height, named Knockmaa (Cnoc Meadha). The late-seventh-century *Collectanea* of Tírechán identifies a church founded by St Patrick on this plain as *ecclesia magna Saeoli*,[33] later called *Domhnach Mór Maige Séola*, and anglicized Donaghpatrick. There are other attestations of *Séolae* without *mag* which refer to this plain, including *hi Séolu* (in *Do*

[29]Text and trans. (here with minor changes in presentation) from *AFM* s.a. 733.

[30]From *Samhoin so, sodham go Tadg*, ed. Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP* 8 (1912), 222–5, at 222, quatrain 6, lightly modified.

[31]My translation.

[32]E.g. *a séol ndobróin* 'der Schleier der Trauer' in n. 8 above. For a recent overview of the production of textiles in Ireland see Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, *Textiles of Ireland: Archaeology, Craft, Art*, ed. by Mary Ann Williams (Cork, 2024).

[33]Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 140 §22.1. Bieler translates as 'the great church of Seól'. The place is called 'Domnach Mór Maigi Seolae' in the later *Vita Tripartita* (cf. Kathleen Mulchrone (ed.), *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin, 1939), 59, and Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, 2 vols (London, 1887), i, 96–7.

Fhlathiusaib Hérend in *LL*),[34] *cath Airrthir Sēola* 'the battle of Airther Séola' (in the Annals of Tigernach, for the year 652),[35] and *Uí Briúin Séola* (*passim*), the name of the branch of the Uí Briúin who occupied this territory.[36] *Mag Siúil* occurs as a variant name of this *Mag Séola*,[37] but only in Middle Irish and later sources and is unlikely to be the earlier form. Substitution of *séol* for collective *séolae* was liable to happen, and seems to be evidenced also in *a Sēolaib*, dative plural of *séol*, in apparent reference to (*Mag*) *Séola*.[38] *Séol* is also attested in the name for the low-lying land of *Mag Siúil* in Eliogarty, between Cloughjordan and Roscrea.[39]

In outlining the semantic development of *séol* from its primary meaning 'sail' to 'bed', 'hanging', 'covering', and 'childbed, parturition', it is hoped that this article has eliminated the uncertainty regarding the meaning of *ben siúil* expressed in *eDIL* s.v. 1 *séol* (b). Some rare usages of *séol* are discussed, and an io-stem collective *séolae* has been adduced and identified as occurring in a number of placenames.

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[34] *LL* i, 85, l. 2717 (= *i Seólmag*, ibid., 86, l. 2741).

[35] Identified in Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, *The Annals of Tigernach: Index of Names* (London, 1997), as 'prob. E. side of Mag Seóla, in bar. Clare, Co. Galway'.

[36] Later descendants were known as 'Muintir Mhurchadha', and a Middle Irish tract detailing their lands, families and occupations survives. For and edition and translation, see Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'A tract on the Connacht territory of Muintir Mhurchadha', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 113 (2008), 90–100; for comment on the names *Mag Séola*, *Uí Briúin Séola* and the variant *Uí Briúin Eola*, see ibid., 99.

[37] E.g. in the poem without attribution (but arguably by Aurard (†990) mac Coisse) which begins *A Mór Maigne Maige Siúil* (ed. and trans. in Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 88–91).

[38] Found in R. I. Best (ed. and trans.), 'The settling of the manor of Tara', *Ériu* 6 (1908/10), 121–72, at 162 §24. This is from the version of the tale in the Book of Lismore. The corresponding section in the Yellow Book of Lecan version of the tale (ibid., 146 §24) lacks the words *a Seolaib* but has words *a Meada*, which seems likely to refer to the area around *Cnoc Meadha* (the only hill on the plain of *Mag Séola*), with this area being either the same as *Mag Séola* or a portion thereof.

[39] Mentioned in Kenneth Jackson (ed.), *Cath Maighe Léna* (Dublin, 1938), ll. 243, 260, and 289.