

On the date of the *Dialog*: a re-examination
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Arthurian poem in Middle Breton



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Celtica 36 (2024), 193–223

DOI: 10.58480/SCS-fj9rn-4hmsh

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ON THE DATE OF THE *DIALOG*:
A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE DATE OF COMPOSITION OF
THE EARLIEST ARTHURIAN POEM IN MIDDLE BRETON

ABSTRACT

This article re-examines the date of the earliest surviving Arthurian poem in the Breton language, *An Dialog etre Arzur, Roe d'an Bretounet, ha Guynglaff* ('The Dialogue between Arthur, King of the Bretons, and Guynglaff'). Traditionally, scholars of the poem have accepted 1450 – the year copied alongside the text in its sole manuscript version – as the *Dialog*'s date of composition. Hypotheses both that parts of the poem (thought to have existed in some form prior to 1450) were assembled at some stage around the mid-fifteenth century, and that the preserved text is the product of many layers of profound scribal manipulation, have also proved influential. The present article reassesses such theories, and examines the question of the poem's date in the light of other textual, linguistic, and historical evidence. It concludes that the text was probably written in the aftermath of the French Wars of Religion, and argues for an original date of composition at some point during the last decade of the sixteenth, or first few decades of the seventeenth, century.

A MANUSCRIPT DATE

IN 1716 DOM LOUIS LE PELLETIER copied the only now-extant manuscript version of the Middle Breton poem *An Dialog etre Arzur, Roe d'an Bretounet, ha Guynglaff* ('The Dialogue between Arthur, King of the Bretons, and Guynglaff') into the second volume of his manuscript *Dictionnaire de la langue bretonne* ('Dictionary of the Breton Language').¹ As its name suggests, the *Dialog* takes the form of a dialogue between King Arthur and the Breton prophet Guynglaff – who is to be numbered among Celtic Wild Men such as the Welsh Myrddin, the Scottish Lailoken, and the Irish Suibhne.² The poet first presents Guynglaff – who leads a solitary, sylvan existence – before introducing *An Roe Arzur* ('The King Arthur'), who seizes the prophet and compels him to predict what will happen in Brittany before the world ends. Guynglaff agrees to expound almost anything Arthur asks, and launches

¹This *Dictionnaire* also appeared in a printed, single-volume edition in 1752 (published in Paris by François Delaguet), which does not feature the *Dialog* poem.

²For further discussion of Celtic Wild Men, including Guynglaff, see Léon Fleuriot, 'Prophéties, navigations et thèmes divers', in Jean Balcou and Yves Le Gallo (eds), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, 3 vols (Paris, 1987), i, 153–72.

into his prophecies. These prophecies occupy the majority of this 247-line poem; they are interrupted only three times by Arthur repeating with very slight variation his original question. Guynghlaff's vaticinations deal first with religious corruption in Brittany; second with catastrophic events in Brittany in the 1570s and 1580s; and third with the threat of an English invasion of Brittany. I return to this structure below: it is significant, I argue, in indicating the text's date.

The *Dialog* appears in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire* directly after another Middle Breton text, *La vie de saint Gwenolé* ('The Life of Saint Gwenolé'). Both are prefaced by a foreword (*avertissement*). Here, apart from describing the two works as *deux pièces de rimailles* ('two pieces of doggerel') which barely merited the effort he exerted in their translation, Le Pelletier advises his reader that they represent *les plus anciens que j'ai pu voir en cette langue* ('the oldest that I have been able to see in this language').³ Here also he conveys almost all the information currently available concerning the *Dialog*'s textual history. Le Pelletier accessed the poem, he writes, via two manuscript versions of the text: the first a copy formerly belonging to Père de la Chaize, confessor to King Louis XIV from 1675 until 1709; the second a copy which he himself was sent by a prior of the regular canons at Daoulas Abbey, whom he names as M. de Plaisance. One of these – that which Le Pelletier used as his base text – bore the date 1619, which seems to represent the poem's *terminus ante quem*.⁴ Regarding the *Dialog*'s original date of composition, however, Le Pelletier informs us only that the rubric *l'an de N. S. Mil quatre cens et cinquante* ('the year of O[ur] L[ord] fourteen fifty') had been written in French after the title, but that *quelque mal avisé a été assez imprudent pour effacer Mil afin de rendre cet écrit plus ancien de mille ans* ('a certain ill-advised person has been so imprudent as to erase *Mil* in order to render this work older by one thousand years'). The poem cannot date from the year 450, Le Pelletier points out, because it includes both French loanwords, which were not in use during the fifth century, and descriptions of cannon artillery, which did not appear in Europe until around the beginning of the twelfth century.⁵ Thus, in his *Dictionnaire* version of the *Dialog*, Le Pelletier wrote the date 1450 between the title and the opening lines.

While many *Dialog* critics have accepted this mid-fifteenth-century date of composition with varying degrees of certainty (and sometimes with the proviso

³Dom Louis Le Pelletier, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Bretonne, où l'on voit son Antiquité, son Affinité avec les anciennes langues, l'Explication de plusieurs passages de l'Ecriture Sainte, et des Auteurs profanes, avec l'Etymologie de plusieurs mots des autres langues*, Bibliothèques Rennes Municipales MS 1007, pp. 1353–4. The *avertissement* is also printed in René Largillière, 'Le dialogue entre Arthur et Guinclaff', *Annales de Bretagne* 38/4 (1928), 627–74.

⁴Le Pelletier in fact copies the rubric bearing the 1619 date of his base text directly after his copy of the *Dialog*: *Ego, D[om] Y[ves] Queau, exscripsi die decima sexta Augusti, Anno Domini 1619* ('I, D[om] Y[ves] Queau, copied this out on the sixteenth of August in the year of our Lord 1619', BRM MS 1007, p. 1440). As for his other source for the poem, Le Pelletier informs us in his *avertissement* that it contained further prophecies, but that he had not copied these owing to their illegibility (BRM MS 1007, p. 1354). Le Pelletier does, however, record several variant readings from his second source throughout his copy of the text.

⁵BRM MS 1007, p. 1353.

that the poem draws on earlier material, but has been subjected to alterations at various stages both before and after this date), a few scholars have accepted that the 1450 dating is insecure.⁶ Kenneth Jackson, for example, writes in his brief description of the *Dialog* that the text ‘appears to be a recension of the second half of the 16th century’, with the MS date seeming to be ‘without foundation’.⁷ Meanwhile, Norris Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, on the basis that the prophet Guynglaff’s vaticinations refer to eight precise years during the 1570s and 1580s, assert confidently that ‘the extant version of the *Dialog* dates from the end of the sixteenth century or the early seventeenth’. However, they concede the possibility that the poem may be ‘derived from a considerably older tradition, updated by the near-contemporary references’.⁸ Lacy and Ashe provide little further evidence to support the former hypothesis of a date of composition around the turn of the seventeenth century. Indeed, no substantial study has yet tested this theory, or measured its merits against arguments for an earlier date. That is what this article undertakes to do.

I begin by interrogating arguments previously advanced in favour of the 1450 date. I then re-examine the idea – prominent in *Dialog* scholarship – that the poem in its current form is both the product of many years’ worth of layers of scribal interventions, and was composed in multiple stages. My analysis indicates that these hypotheses are flawed. I then study the poem’s linguistic features. These do not discount the mid-fifteenth-century hypothesis outright; nonetheless, many linguistic forms appear compatible with a date of composition towards the end of the Classical Middle Breton period – that is, the latter end of the period *c.* 1450–1600, rather than the earlier part.⁹ Finally, I examine the historical record in search of information which might shed light on the dating question. I conclude that striking parallels between the *Dialog* and Breton historical events between *c.* 1560 and 1594 point to an original date of composition for the poem at some stage after 1594, and before the 1619 *terminus ante quem*.

⁶Scholars who appear to accept the 1450 date include Largillière, ‘Le Dialog’ (1928); J. Tournier-Aumont, ‘Le prophète Guinglaff au service du roi de France Charles VII’, *Annales de Bretagne* 1 (1930), 1–17; Henry Lewis and J. R. F. Piette, *Llawlyfr Llydaweg Canol (Diwygiedig)* (Cardiff, 1966); Hervé Le Bihan, ‘An *Dialog etre Arzur Roe d’an Bretounet ha Guynglaff* / ‘*Le dialogue entre Artur roi des Bretons et Guynglaff*’: Texte prophétique breton en vers (1450) édité et présenté avec commentaires et notes par Herve Le Bihan (Rennes, 2013); Gwennolé Le Menn, ‘La Littérature en Moyen-Breton de 1350 à 1650’, *Questions d’Histoire de Bretagne: Actes du 107e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes* (Paris, 1982), 89–104, at 92; Antone Minard, ‘*The Dialogue between King Arthur and Gwenc’hlan*: a translation’, *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 30/1 (1999), 167–79.

⁷Kenneth Jackson, *A Historical Phonology of Breton* (Dublin, 1967), xxxii.

⁸Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe (eds), *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (Abingdon, 2013), 115.

⁹I use Peter Schrijver’s divisions of the Middle Breton period given in ‘Middle and Early Modern Breton’, in E. Ternes (ed.), *Brythonic Celtic – Britannisches Keltisch: From Medieval British to Modern Breton* (Bremen, 2011), 359–429, at 360.

THE 1450 ARGUMENT

In affirming the 1450 date, Dom Le Pelletier seems to have started a trend which most subsequent *Dialog* scholars have followed. For René Largillière, the work's first modern editor, *il semble que cette date de 1450 soit exacte* ('it seems that this date of 1450 is correct').¹⁰ Similarly, for J. Tourneur-Aumont, the *Dialog*'s internal evidence *permet[...] de dater l'œuvre avant le 16 juillet 1450* ('permits [us] ... to date the work to before the 16th of July 1450').¹¹ The Welsh scholar Henry Lewis, for his part, states unequivocally that the text *perthyn ... i'r cyfnod 1450* ('belongs ... to the period 1450'), adding somewhat gratuitously that it is an *Ymddiddan, cân heb ddim teilyngdod llenyddol* ('a Conversation, a song without any literary merit').¹² Meanwhile the poem's most recent editor, Hervé Le Bihan, while accepting a theory of many years of layers of scribal reworkings and interpolations for the poem (on which more below), nevertheless presents the *Dialog* as a *Texte prophétique breton en vers (1450)* ('Prophetic text in verse (1450)'). In this edition, Le Bihan seems to uphold Le Pelletier's date as the moment at which the text assumed the earliest form of the (in his view) highly-reworked version in which it has been preserved.¹³ Although the date in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire* appears to be the primary basis on which the 1450 hypothesis rests, both Largillière and Tourneur-Aumont attempt to find further evidence in its favour in the historical events of fifteenth-century Brittany, as I discuss shortly. Before this, however, some preliminary observations.

First, I note the obvious but fundamental point that the date in the *Dictionnaire* represents no cast-iron guarantee that the *Dialog* was composed in 1450. Scholars have, however, found it convenient to accept this date: the text presents few other firm indications of its dating; and since dates of composition rarely accompany manuscript witnesses to medieval texts, those which we do have might appear all the more significant. Yet there are good reasons to approach with caution – and even reject – Le Pelletier's mid-fifteenth-century date. At a most basic level, manuscript dates are notoriously unstable, prone to scribal or textual corruption, with the result that they may be altered over time. This is especially true of figures, and although the year 1450 is written in words in the *Dictionnaire*, it is possible that at some stage in the poem's transmission Roman numerals were used instead – from which confusion may have arisen as the text was copied and recopied.¹⁴

¹⁰Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 634.

¹¹Tourneur-Aumont, 'Le prophète Guinglaif', 6.

¹²Lewis and Piette, *Llawlyfr*, 5. The German version of the same work, translated by Wolfgang Meid as *Handbuch des Mittelbretonischen* (Innsbruck, 1990), retains the same remark (p. 4). This view is most probably based on Largillière's opinions as expressed in 'Le dialogue', 632–3. These may derive ultimately from the aforementioned remarks of Le Pelletier's *avertissement*.

¹³Le Bihan, 'An *Dialog*'.

¹⁴For another example of a text of Breton provenance which is accompanied by a dubious date in its sole surviving manuscript version, see *Vita Sancti Goëznovei*, ed. by André-Yves Bourguès in *Le Dossier littéraire de saint Goëznou et la controverse sur la datation de la vita sancti Goëznovei* (Morlaix, 2020).

Moreover, the language of the manuscript date prompts certain questions of its own. Le Pelletier not only copied, in French, the words, *mil quatre cent et cinquante* ('one thousand, four hundred, and fifty') in his *Dictionnaire*; he also related that it was similarly *ecrit ainsi en François* ('written thus in French') in his manuscript source – presumably only one of them, although this is not made explicit.¹⁵ This raises the question of why a poet composing in Breton would have dated his work in French rather than Breton. It is true that other Middle Breton texts feature rubrics in a language other than Breton. The stage directions in the Breton play *Buhez Santez Nonn* ('The Life of Saint Nonn'), for example, are in Latin.¹⁶ Yet the difference in language between the *Dialog* and the date that accompanies it might nevertheless suggest a certain distance between the two, and perhaps also one of the following possibilities. The 1450 date may have been added at some unknown stage after the poem was written – and by a scribe who may or may not have known its true date of composition. Alternatively, this date may originally have been written in figures, and only translated into French by a later scribe. We cannot know for certain whether either of these is true, but in both scenarios there is potential for scribal error or textual corruption.

Much more damaging to the 1450 hypothesis, however, is the fact that Le Pelletier tells us in his *avertissement* that his source conveyed not a straightforward *mil quatre cent et cinquante* ('one thousand, four hundred, and fifty'), but instead the words *quatre cent et cinquante* ('four hundred and fifty'), preceded by a crossed-out *mil* ('one thousand'). Le Pelletier interprets this as an ill-intentioned intervention from an unwise scribe desiring to make the poem seem one thousand years older than it actually was: composed in the year 450, and thus from the (supposedly) authentic Arthurian age. Such an Arthurian dating, however, would accord with medieval ideas of Arthur's dates popular on the continent. Whereas many medieval chroniclers of the Latin tradition harmonised their accounts of Arthur's life with the one Arthurian date provided by Geoffrey of Monmouth – that of 542, for Arthur's death – they also accessed Geoffrey's Arthurian narratives via 'universal histories' (histories of the world beginning at creation).¹⁷ On the continent, one of the most influential of these was Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale* (c. 1255), which placed Arthur's activity in the years of the emperor Leo – that is, c. 470.¹⁸ This fifth-century Arthurian dating aligns relatively well with the 450 date of Le Pelletier's source,

¹⁵It seems less likely that the supposed error of the erased *mil* would have appeared in both – rather than simply one of – Le Pelletier's sources. And given that Le Pelletier seems usually to record places where his second manuscript gave variant readings, it may be conjectured that the 'error' appeared only in his base text.

¹⁶Yves Le Berre (ed. and trans.), '*Buez santes Nonn hac ez map Deuy*': *transcription et traduction* [*'Buez santes Nonn hac ez map Deuy*': *adskrivet diwar an destenn a orin ha troet e galleg*], in Yves Le Berre, Bernard Tanguy, and Yves-Pascal Castel (eds), *Mystère breton: Vie de sainte Nonne = Buez santez Nonn* (Treflevenez, 1999), 113–94.

¹⁷Ad Putter, 'Latin historiography after Geoffrey of Monmouth', in Siân Echard (ed.), *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature: The Development and Dissemination of the Arthurian Legend in Medieval Latin*, (Cardiff, 2011), 85–108.

¹⁸Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, book 20, chapter 59: *Speculum quadruplex: sive, Speculum maius*, facsimile ed. (Graz, 1964) of edition published Douai, 1624, 4 vols, iii, 799–801.

and may have motivated the original creation of the *Dialog*'s dating rubric. All this would have been lost on Le Pelletier, however, since he was convinced that the Arthur intended by the *Dialog* poet was not the legendary British king, but rather one of Brittany's three dukes named Arthur.¹⁹ Thus it was that the author of the *Dictionnaire* restored the erased *mil* in an emendation which produced the date 1450.

Assuming that Le Pelletier was correct in reading the erased word as *mil*, we have no evidence to suggest that the date's original author had not in fact intended the year 450 all along, had mistakenly begun with *mil*, and had accordingly corrected his work immediately by crossing out the *mil*. It would be a natural mistake to make for a later medieval writer more accustomed to writing second-millennium dates. If this were to have been the case – as I think probable, especially in the light of continental medieval ideas about the 'historical' Arthur's dates, mentioned above – it would mean that the 1450 date was Le Pelletier's accidental invention, and has no further relevance to the poem.

Finally, I suggest that despite previous scholarly attempts to make a case for the 1450 date based on historical arguments, mid-fifteenth-century Brittany does not provide the most plausible historical context for the *Dialog*'s composition. I tread carefully here, since the larger themes of Guynghall's prophecies mentioned above (religious corruption, years of general disaster, and the threat of an English invasion), may be viewed as generic, common to much – and especially Welsh – vaticinary literature until the end of the seventeenth century, such as, for example, early Welsh Myrddin poetry.²⁰ These themes' appearance in the *Dialog* may thus have no wider significance than that they featured among a limited range of stock prophetic literary motifs. Yet medieval (and early modern) prophecy was often written to support particular political ends, and may thus be viewed as the product of very specific political, historical, and economic circumstances.²¹ Indeed, by listing precise years in the final few decades of the sixteenth century, the *Dialog* poet seems even to invite the historicisation of his work (although it is clear that the historical parallels implied do not concern the mid fifteenth century). Nonetheless, Largillière justifies his espousal of the 1450 date based on the historical record for that period:

notre auteur n'envisage que des guerres avec l'Angleterre; ce sont pour lui les seuls événements qui puissent se présenter; c'est là la marque de cette triste période du milieu du xve siècle, qui est celle

¹⁹BRM MS 1007, p. 1353.

²⁰For editions and translations of early Welsh Merlin poetry, see John K. Bollard, 'Myrddin in Early Welsh Tradition', in Peter Goodrich (ed.), *The Romance of Merlin* (New York, 1990), 13–54. For further discussion of Welsh vaticinary literature, see Helen Fulton, *Welsh Prophecy and English Politics in the Late Middle Ages*, Sir Thomas Parry-Williams Memorial Lecture (Aberystwyth, 2008). For a broader discussion of the function of medieval prophetic literature, see Victoria Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place in Medieval England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceldoune* (Cambridge, 2016).

²¹See, for example, G. A. Williams, 'The bardic road to Bosworth: a Welsh view of Henry Tudor', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1986), 7–31 for discussion of Welsh prophetic poetry written to support Henry Tudor's claim to kingship during the Wars of the Roses (1455–87).

*de la fin du règne de François Ier. Notre texte est antérieur à la mort de François II, 1488, et aux négociations qui précédèrent le mariage d'Anne de Bretagne.*²²

'our author envisages only wars with England; these are for him the only events which could manifest themselves; it is this which is the hallmark of this sad period in the middle of the fifteenth century, which is that of the end of the reign of Francis I. Our text is earlier than the death of Francis II, 1488, and earlier than the negotiations which preceded the marriage of Anne of Brittany.'

While conflict with an English enemy is certainly envisaged in the *Dialog*, Brittany in this period still retained its independence from the French crown – in relation to which its dukes were in a position of relative strength in the year 1450. For the French King Charles VII (1403–61) needed the Bretons' military aid in his campaigns against the English. It was with the support of the Breton ducal army that Charles achieved both his reconquest of Normandy and victories over the English in Formigny (1450) and Guyenne (1453).²³ The English therefore primarily posed a threat to French, and not Breton, authority and territory around the year 1450. In the resulting conflict, Brittany was only indirectly involved. Yet the *Dialog* poet explicitly speaks of the English descending on named places in Brittany – *Perzell* (Fort de Bertheaume, l. 172), *Brest* (l. 173), *Leon* (Léon) and *Guengamp* (Guingamp, l. 174), *Treguer* (Trégor, l. 180), *Goelou* (Goëlo) and *Porz Guenn* (Le Port Blanc, l. 182), etc. – and the poem as it survives ends with the image of *an oll Saouson* ('all the English') coming *da quemeret e Breiz possession* ('to take possession in Brittany', ll. 246–7).²⁴ Any serious prospect of such events is thus difficult to reconcile with the mid-fifteenth-century Breton context.

Moreover, in contrast with Largillière's view, *guerres avec l'Angleterre* are not the only events the *Dialog* presents. As previously stated, religious corruption – specifically heresy – and a state of general disaster also loom large in the poem. Regarding the former, Tourneur-Aumont, favouring a mid-fifteenth-century date, argues that *les malheurs du clergé* ('the misfortunes of the clergy') prophesied by Guynghaff represent part of the fallout from the Great (Papal) Schism of 1378–1417, in which two – and for a time three – rival popes jostled for authority. As for the predicted *hoeresi* ('heresy', l. 51), he writes that this *fait penser à la Pré-Réforme, aux Hussites, contre lesquels, en 1429, se tournait l'esprit de croisade de Jeanne d'Arc et s'armait l'évêque de Winchester* ('brings to mind the Pre-reformation, the Hussites, against whom, in 1429, Joan of Arc's crusading spirit turned and the bishop of Winchester took up arms'). Meanwhile, the general catastrophe that the poem portrays – mothers' hearts *rannet* ('torn', l. 104) and *entre pep ty / An bresel criet* ('between each house / war

²²Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 634.

²³Joël Cornette, *Histoire de la Bretagne et des Bretons. 1: Des âges obscurs au règne de Louis XIV* (Paris, 2005), 312.

²⁴Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the *Dialog* are taken from BRM MS 1007; their accompanying English translations are mine.

cried', ll. 105–6) – Tourneur-Aumont interprets as part of the fallout from the Breton War of Succession (1341–65).²⁵

While such identifications are not impossible, they hardly seem probable. The dates of both the Great Schism and Joan of Arc's 1429 campaign against the Hussites align at best only awkwardly with the *Dialog*'s hypothesised mid-fifteenth-century date of composition – the former ending 33 years before 1450, and the latter occurring 21 years before 1450. Neither event seems to have had the calamitous effect on Brittany foretold by Guinglaff. The link made between the Breton War of Succession and the *Dialog*'s descriptions of calamity appears similarly dubious. Ending 85 years before the mid-fifteenth-century period in which Tourneur-Aumont believes the poem to have been composed, this conflict would scarcely have been in the living – let alone recent – memory of the *Dialog* poet hypothesised to be writing about 1450. Moreover, the idea of general catastrophe does not appear to be particularly pertinent to mid-fifteenth-century Brittany. Whereas England and France during this period were engaged in ongoing conflict with each other, Brittany seems to have enjoyed relative peace and great economic prosperity since the reign of Duke Jean V (1399–1442), who, through managing to maintain good relations with both parties in the final decades of the Hundred Years War, assured Brittany's prosperity.²⁶ The mid-fifteenth-century Breton dukes Francis I (r. 1442–50) and Peter II (r. 1450–7) seem to have continued to both enjoy and augment the fruits of Jean's reign. Brittany's economy continued to flourish well into the reign of Peter II, during which time the region's yearly revenue equalled that of an average European state of the period. Indeed, so secure was Brittany's position during Peter's time that the duke felt he could afford to refuse homage to the French king, and instead establish new direct relations with Castille and Portugal.²⁷ This backdrop hardly presents itself as a likely context in which the *Dialog* poet would have sung of *trubuyll meurbet* ('great trouble', l. 41) in Brittany.

In the light of the analysis thus far, then, the date of 1450 is implausible. Representing not the words of Le Pelletier's source itself (the writer of which seems to have intended the year 450) but rather Le Pelletier's emendation to his source, the 1450 date seems to have originated accidentally with the author of the *Dictionnaire*. Furthermore, the historical record for the mid fifteenth century presents itself as an unlikely context for the *Dialog*'s composition. I have argued that the three most prominent themes of the poem (religious corruption, years of general disaster, and the threat of an English invasion) do not align with a 1450 Breton context: Brittany in 1450 does not seem to have experienced severe religious crises; it enjoyed general economic prosperity; and it does not seem to have had particular reason to fear an English invasion. By contrast, I will argue later in this paper that all these three themes find convincing parallels in a late-sixteenth-century context. Before this, however, two hypotheses must be re-examined: (i) that there existed a c. mid-fifteenth-century 'original' of the poem, composed in multiple stages; (ii) that this 'original' was

²⁵Tourneur-Aumont, 'Le prophète Guinglaff', 3–4.

²⁶Cornette, *Histoire*, 310–12.

²⁷Cornette, *Histoire*, 314.

subjected to large-scale textual corruption occurring during transmission. The text's linguistic evidence must also be explored.

THEORIES OF SCRIBAL REWORKING AND COMPOSITION IN MULTIPLE STAGES

1. *The scribal reworking hypothesis*

I turn now to another theory that has significantly influenced scholarly interpretations of the *Dialog*'s date, and so merits discussion here. It has been espoused notably by the eminent Breton scholars Émile Ernault (in the early twentieth century) and (more recently) Hervé Le Bihan. This theory has two central premises, the first of which is that the *Dialog* text as it is preserved has been subject to many layers of scribal interventions over time – born of scribal misunderstanding, and evinced by irregularities in the poem's metre, internal rhyme, and syllable-count per line. Meanwhile some elements are taken as interpolations. Le Bihan articulates this view thus:

*Le texte ayant été fortement remanié dans l'unique version qui nous est parvenue, bon nombre de rimes internes ont disparu, et les vers ont été notablement modifiés: leur longueur est devenue alléatoire au gré des émendements et des ajouts, tout en ne tenant plus compte de la rime interne. Parfois certains membres de vers ont été changés de place, lorsque l'on ne voyait plus la rime interne.*²⁸

'The text having been greatly reworked in the sole version which has reached us, a good number of internal rhymes have disappeared, and the lines have been notably modified: their length has become unpredictable as a result of emendations and additions, while simultaneously no longer taking account of the internal rhyme. Sometimes certain elements of the lines were changed in terms of their order, when the internal rhyme was no longer seen.'

According to this conceptual framework, the *Dialog* text was originally written according to a certain poetic practice (*versification*), and particular principles of internal rhyme (*principes de rimes internes*), that are represented in a Breton lay surviving only in a mid-fourteenth-century manuscript: one of the so-called Ivonet Omnes fragments.²⁹ The only other certain representatives of the Breton poetic tradition to which the Ivonet Omnes lay seems to belong date from the

²⁸Le Bihan, 'An *Dialog*', 46.

²⁹Le Bihan, 'An *Dialog*', 46. For the text of the Ivonet Omnes fragments, see Émile Ernault, 'Encore du breton d'Ivonet Omnes', *RC* 34 (1913), 249–52. On the basis of certain word forms, Le Bihan believes that this text was originally composed in the eleventh century, and reached its fourteenth-century form through modifications arising during scribal copying (Hervé Le Bihan, *Ar c'hrennvrezhoneg: un evezhiadennoù bennak war testenioù krennvrezhoneg abred. Kudennnoù hennadiñ ha lec'hiañ*: unpublished paper presented at Aberystwyth and Kemperlé, 2017). However, I know of no evidence securely pointing to an original date of composition anterior to the fourteenth century for this lay.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – that is, from the late-Classical Middle Breton and the Late Middle Breton periods. The fact that the *Dialog* text in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire* does *not* reproduce this tradition's internal rhyme scheme is taken as evidence that various copyists had altered the poet's original work at various stages during textual transmission, as explained by Le Bihan in the above quotation. The poem's often irregular syllable-count per line (discussed in greater detail below), moreover, is taken as further evidence of scribal tampering. That this tampering is viewed as the product of incompetence is also made clear. Comparing the *Dialog* with the prologue to the Breton mystery play *Buhez Santez Nonn* ('The life of Saint Nonn'), Le Bihan writes:

*le début du Dialog a subi à peu près le même traitement que le prologue de la Buez santes Nonn. Les deux textes ont subi un rajeunissement et une transcription fautive, dès lors que leurs scribes respectifs ne comprenaient plus ce qu'ils avaient devant les yeux.*³⁰

'the beginning of the *Dialog* has suffered approximately the same fate as the prologue to *Buhez Santez Nonn*. The two texts have undergone modernisation and a faulty transcription, arising from the fact that their respective scribes no longer understood what they had before their eyes.'

These contentions pose certain important problems, however. First of all, it is not necessary to believe that the *Dialog* poet, thought to have been working around the mid fifteenth century, intended to write in the same tradition of poetic versification as that to which the Ivonet Omnes lai apparently belongs. Given that this tradition has just one pre-sixteenth-century example in the form of the aforementioned lai, there is little evidence to suggest its prevalence early in the Classical Middle Breton period. Meanwhile, there exist numerous Middle Breton texts which do not conform to this tradition of strict versification. One rather late example may be found in a 15-line poem headed by the rubric *Admonition dan Gvuir Christenyen, ha Catholiquet Parfet* ('Admonition to the true Christians and Perfect Catholics'), found in a book from 1625, but thought by Gwennolé Le Menn to date from the second half of the sixteenth century. Like Guynglaff's prophecies, it is largely written in octosyllabic lines; but again like Guynglaff's prophecies, not all the lines of the *Admonition* follow this consistent syllable-count. In terms of internal rhyme scheme, the *Admonition* likewise corresponds with the *Dialog* insofar as it does not always follow the pattern scholars have expected for it of *rimes internes classiques* ('classic internal rhymes').³¹ The poetry in Gilles de Keranpuill's late-sixteenth-century Middle Breton Hours, whose internal

³⁰Le Bihan, 'An *Dialog*', 47.

³¹Gwennolé Le Menn, 'Vers moyen-bretons écrit contre les «hérétiques» (1625)', *EC* 21 (1984), 275–83. For discussion of syllable-count and internal rhyme, see pp. 277–8. My thanks to Myrzinn Boucher-Durand for drawing this poem to my attention.

rhyme and syllable-count are relatively loose, provides another example.³² The probable late-sixteenth-century dates of these poems may be significant: I will argue below that the *Dialog* was also composed around this time. My argument here is that while some kind of tradition of Breton strict verse certainly existed, there is no secure evidence indicating that it was so pervasive that all Middle Breton poetry conformed to it – or would have done so in hypothesised ‘original’ forms composed much earlier than those in which they have been preserved until present. Rather, these texts may simply lie outside of the strict-verse tradition. In the light of other evidence set forward in this article, I believe this possibility in the *Dialog*’s case to be more plausible than the theory of scribal mangling.

Regarding the *Dialog*’s metrical and other irregularities, it is not necessary to view these solely as the product of large-scale scribal reworking – indeed there is good evidence not to do so.³³ The Breton works, already cited, which do not conform to the pattern of Breton strict verse provide some justification for this view. Further support may be found in Middle Welsh – the only other Brittonic language which has a larger corpus of literature than Breton, and which may provide a possible parallel. Medieval Welsh poems of some types tend, like the *Dialog*, to vary their syllable-count per line. For example, in an analysis of the metrical organisation of Welsh pre-*Gogynfeirdd* verse, Marged Haycock highlights ‘frequent deviations from the syllabic norm in early poetry’. In this light, it is feasible that similar variation in the *Dialog* could be authorial rather than the result of erroneous scribal intervention. Indeed, Haycock finds that scholars working on the assumption that early Welsh verse was written in lines of regular syllable-counts have been unable convincingly to explain such deviation from the syllabic ‘norm’, with the worrying result that otherwise acceptable lines of poetry have at times been emended ‘in order to obtain a ‘normal’ line length’.³⁴ I will argue shortly that the *Dialog* has also, unnecessarily, received similar treatment.

The issue of sense is also significant to the question of scribal reworking for the *Dialog* text. If the poem as it has been preserved had indeed been subjected to alterations born of scribal incompetence, as Le Bihan suggests, it would be reasonable to expect it to be frequently illogical, if not incomprehensible. Yet there are only a few places in the poem where this seems to be the case

³² Gilles de Keranpuill, *Middle Breton Hours*, ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes (Calcutta, 1876). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this text.

³³ There are of course some occasions on which relatively minor miscopying seems certainly to have occurred, as may be expected whenever texts are transmitted via manuscripts. One of these appears to be at l. 49, which reads, *An douar fallaff a roy guellaff* (‘The worst soil will give the best’). Here, it has been assumed that the word *ed* (‘corn’, ‘grain’) in final position has been lost: this assumption is justified both by the rhyme scheme (the surrounding lines end in *-et*), and by the presence of *ed* in very late Breton proverbs (Hervé Le Bihan, ‘*An Dialog etre Arzur Roe d’an Bretounet ha Guynglaff* and its Connections with Arthurian Tradition’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 29 (2009), 115–26, at 122–3). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this passage.

³⁴ Marged Haycock, ‘Metrical models for the poems from the Book of Taliesin’, in Brynley F. Roberts (ed.), *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin* (Aberystwyth, 1988), 155–77, at 157.

– and nothing beyond what is usual for any manuscript witness to a text.³⁵ While the *Dialog* undoubtedly contains certain riddling and puzzling elements, such features are (to a greater or lesser extent) a customary characteristic of the prophetic genre. Moreover, I will argue below that on an overarching structural level the poem's broad thematic progression seems highly logical when viewed in a late sixteenth-century context. On a more granular level, meanwhile, two examples will serve to demonstrate that logical thought underlies the *Dialog*'s structure in its detail as much as in its broader shape, and thus that the text makes best sense when left unemended.

The first of these examples concerns the following passage, quoted below as it appears in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire*:

Calz a fizio en beth muy evyt en Ilis:
An-tra-se a coezo dre vicz.
Huy guelo etre tut a Ilis
Baeleien hep nep justiçç:
Pep foll a goulenno offiçç. (ll. 27–31)

'Many will trust more in the world than in the church:
 that will happen through vice.
 You will see among the people of the church
 priests without any justice:
 every fool will ask for an office.'

In the interests of regulating the metre and internal rhyme of this section, Ernault recommends both emending the word *baeleien* ('priests') to *barnerien* ('judges'), and adding the qualifying adjective *rust* ('cruel').³⁶ The whole line would thus read: *barnerien rust hep nep justiçç*. These alterations would have the double advantage of both bringing the syllable-count of line 30 up from 7 to 8, in accordance with the lines by which it is directly preceded and followed, and of providing an internal rhyme on the *rust* and *justiçç*. These changes are accepted by Le Bihan in his most recent, 'restored', edition of the text.³⁷ In terms of thematic sense, however, these emendations are inferior to the manuscript reading, which is consistent with the religious ideas suggested in the surrounding lines. Although the allusion to *justiçç* recalls the legal sphere of the proposed 'judges' (*barnerien*), the passage dwells

³⁵ An example of one of the *Dialog*'s more obscure phrases may be found in the lines *Ma forcher eno abbay, Da pep sort gant un flechy* ('While they are forced into their abbey, / To every sort, because of a *flechy*', ll. 118–19), which are puzzling not least because the meaning of *flechy* is unclear. In his French translation Le Pelletier leaves a blank for this word, and marks it as *inconnu* ('unknown'). Le Bihan reads it as the Breton word *floc'h* ('squire', 'page', 'horseman'), presumably taking the final -y as a plural marker, in addition to the internal vowel change. Yet this theory is not wholly satisfactory owing to the fact that *flechy* is preceded by the indefinite article 'un', which requires a noun in the singular. Another alternative theory is that *flechy* is a loan-word from the Middle French *flèche* ('arrow'), attested in Breton as *flech* from at least the eighteenth century. In this case the final -y could be explained relatively plausibly by the requirements of rhyme. Other such instances of more opaque vocabulary in the *Dialog* are, however, relatively rare.

³⁶ See Ernault's notes in Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 662.

³⁷ Le Bihan, 'Essai de restitution du texte', in 'An *Dialog*', 77–86, at 80.

predominantly on the realm of religion (which in the medieval period had an important legal jurisdiction of its own). In line 27, the poet presents the opposing ecclesiastical vs secular spheres: *en beth* ('in the world') contrasted with *en Ilis* ('in the Church'). In line 28, he writes of *vicz* ('vice'), a word whose identification with spiritual and religious failing is demonstrated by its entry in the 1499 Breton-French-Latin dictionary, *Le Catholicon*: *uicc*, g. *idem*, *pechie*, l. *uicium* ('uicc, m. the same as sin, pl. *uicium*').³⁸ In line 29, the poet informs the reader where the noun under discussion will be seen: *etre tut a Ilis* ('among the people of the church') – evidently a more natural place for priests than for judges. In this case, then, the manuscript reading makes good sense in its poetic context, and the proposed emendations are both less suitable and unnecessary.

For the second example, heavier emendation has been proposed. The relevant passage according to Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire* reads:

*Huy a guelo, quent an gourfenn,
Hoereticquet a drouc empenn,
Na sellont pep quis dispenn
An feiz a Doe, so Roy ha Penn.* (ll. 55–8)

'You will see, before the end,
Heretics of an evil mind,
Who will look only for ways to destroy
The faith of God who is King and Head.'

Le Bihan prints the same lines with the incorporation of Ernault's suggested emendations, given in italics:

*Huy a guelo gnou quent an gourfenn
Hœretiquet a drouc credenn.
Na sellhont e pep quis dispenn
An fez a Doe so guir roen glenn,*³⁹

While numerous emendations are suggested for this passage, I highlight here only the substitutions of *credenn* ('faith') for *empenn* ('brain', l. 56), and *guir roen glenn* ('true king of earth') for *Roy ha Penn* ('King and Head', l. 58), since these significantly alter the sense. In fact, these emendations also obscure an effective poetic device found in the *Dictionnaire* version of the text. In the unemended poem, lines 56–7 introduce a play on the word *penn* ('head'). The *hœretiquet* ('heretics', l. 56) have an 'evil' (*drouc*, l. 56) 'mind' – which the Breton *empenn* (l. 56), literally what is 'inside the head', spells out in greater explicit detail than my English translation conveys – and they look only to *dispenn* ('destroy', l. 57) – literally to 'un-head' – God's own 'faith' (*feiz*, l. 58). The use of adnomination on the word *penn* (in the form of the added prefixes *em-* and *dis-*) has the effect of creating a climactic build-up, culminating in its

³⁸Jehan Lagadec, *Le Catholicon: Dictionnaire Breton, Français et Latin* (Tréguier, 1499), 221.

³⁹Le Bihan, 'Essai de restitution', p. 80.

final occurrence, in line 58, with the reference to the ultimate *Penn* 'Head', i.e. God (*Doe*). Thus, while *penn* appears in connection with the heretics only in adulterated, variant versions of the word, it is applied to God in its pure, whole, and (the context implies) best form; and God's headship is made to seem all the more glorious by this contrast. The manuscript readings here are therefore both logical and, from a literary perspective, effective. Like the first example cited above, then, these lines present no substantial indication of scribal revisions, and so the proposed emendations appear gratuitous.

Thus far in this section I have argued that there exists insufficient evidence to support the claim that the *Dialog* text, in its present form in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire*, represents but a shadow of its original state, having been subjected to many layers of scribal intervention over time. The central pillars of this hypothesis – that the poem must originally have conformed to the tradition of strict Breton versification which the Ivonet Omnes lai is considered to represent, and that the *Dialog*'s metrical irregularity results from scribal error – appear unsound. Rather, on the basis of comparison with other Brittonic works – non-strict verse in both Breton and Welsh – I have contended that the *Dialog*'s irregularities in line-length and internal rhyme scheme exist by authorial acceptance. This view is itself supported by the logical sense and literary merit which, I believe, characterise the text. Instead of viewing the poem as the product of many layers over a long period of scribal error, I therefore favour the simpler explanation that the text as it is currently preserved is a relatively good witness to the *Dialog* poet's original work.

2. The two-stage composition hypothesis.

The second tenet of Ernault and Le Bihan's view is that the poem's core was written at two very different (but unspecified) points in time, with the first ten lines having been composed at an early date, and the rest written later. Under this view, it seems, the *Dialog* was put together as a whole by a 'redactor' around the year 1450. The first ten lines are considered to have endured the most acute scribal revisions. Ernault writes that they were *fort maltraité, écourté et rajeuni* ('greatly ill-treated, shortened, and modernised'), and on this basis suggests heavy and imaginative emendations, which are printed in Le Bihan's *restitution* of the text.⁴⁰ Le Bihan summarises the theory as follows:

Une des clés pour comprendre l'âge du texte passe par la compréhension de sa structure. Le texte présente clairement deux parties: les 10 premiers vers sont en réalité des hémistiches constituant des vers de 12 syllabes, initialement organisés en quatrains; ces premiers vers présentent Guinglaff, l'homme sauvage (et peut-être aveugle), avatar de Merlin ... et d'autres vers, plus courts, de 8 syllabes, qui donnent un dialogue entre le

⁴⁰Ernault's notes in Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 660. For Le Bihan's emended version of the text, see 'Essai de restitution', 80.

*Roi Arthur et Guinglaff à propos de malheurs et d'événements futurs qui se situent en apparence au milieu du seizième siècle.*⁴¹

'One of the keys to understanding the age of the text emerges from the comprehension of its structure. The text clearly presents two parts: the first ten lines are in reality hemistichs [i.e. half lines] constituting lines of twelve syllables, initially organised into quatrains; these first lines present Guinglaff, the wild (and perhaps blind) man, avatar of Merlin ... and the other lines, shorter, of eight syllables, which give a dialogue between King Arthur and Guinglaff regarding the future misfortunes and events which apparently take place in the middle of the sixteenth century.'

Now, there are no linguistic differences between the *Dialog*'s first ten lines and the rest of the poem which might suggest these two parts' difference in age. As for linguistic forms distributed throughout the text that indicate the date of the poem as a whole, these will be analysed in detail in the next section. The following brief comparison between notable linguistic features of the first ten lines and the rest of the text, however, will highlight the lack of linguistic evidence to support a theory of composition in two stages.

In their present state, the *Dialog*'s first ten lines feature no clear cases of Early Middle Breton forms. To take a few examples, line 7 has *dindan* ('under', l. 7), which is striking in featuring a dialectal nasalisation that is introduced in the Kerne (Cornouaille), Leon, Treger (KLT) areas during the Classical Middle Breton period. The older and conservative form in Middle Breton is *didan*, which Middle Breton texts from the Gwened (Vannes) region retain.⁴² Indeed, *dindan* is not particular to the poem's first ten lines, appearing again in the same form in line 207. Elsewhere, forms such as *gloar* (l. 9) similarly fail to betray any sign of conservatism. The earlier form of this word is *gloer*, with the transition from *-er* to *-ar* seeming to have occurred in Breton texts of KLT provenance – which constitute the majority of the surviving Middle Breton corpus – around the mid fifteenth century (although again, Gwened literature conserves the earlier form).⁴³ *Gloar* does not reappear in the text. By contrast, however, Guinglaff's prophecies feature plenty of innovations, as I discuss below. Linguistic forms such as *dindan* and *gloar* thus offer no convincing indication that the *Dialog*'s first ten lines were composed at an earlier date to the rest of the text. While such lack of supporting evidence for the two-stage composition theory could be attributed to the modernising work of successive scribes, it is explained more simply, and probably more logically, by a single original date of composition for the poem as a whole.

⁴¹ Le Bihan, 'An *Dialog*', 15.

⁴² See Myrzinn Boucher-Durand, '“On pourrait les multiplier presque jusqu'au nombre des paroisses”: a study of the dialects in Middle Breton', unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2024, K1.4, p. 155.

⁴³ See Boucher-Durand, '“On pourrait les multiplier”', NS2.1, pp. 102–3. Le Bihan ('An *Dialog*', 51) argues that this is an example of a form modernised by the scribe, pronounced *gloer* despite being spelt in *-oa*; however, the internal rhyme scheme does not necessitate this interpretation.

Nevertheless, the argument in favour of the *Dialog*’s two-stage composition rests primarily not on linguistic evidence, but on differences in the syllable-count per line between the first ten lines and the rest of the work. The view expressed in the above quotation from Le Bihan, who in turn follows Ernault, regarding the poem’s ‘original’ metrical patterns is key here: under this proposition, the *Dialog* is thought to have originally been composed of ten lines of 12 syllables each, followed by regular octosyllabic lines. The *Dialog* does not obey such consistent patterns in its *Dictionnaire* form, however. The difference in syllable-count per line between the first ten lines of the poem, as it is preserved, and a portion of Guynghlaff’s prophecies is demonstrated in the following tables — which also imply the extent of the emendation required in order to bring the work into conformity with the regular 12- and 8-syllable counts per line which have been claimed for it.

Syllable count per line for the first ten lines of the <i>Dialog</i>		Syllable count per line for the first ten-line run of Guynghlaff’s prophecies	
Line number	Syllable count per line	Line number	Syllable count per line
1	6	36	8
2	8	37	7
3	6	38	9
4	6	39	7
5	6	40	8
6	5	41	8
7	8	42	7
8	9	43	8
9	10	44	8
10	5	45	8

It is evident from these tables that some metrical difference does exist between lines 1–10 and lines 36–45. While the syllable-count per line for the former group varies widely between 5 and 10, that for the latter group hovers around 8, which is itself the average syllable-count per line for Guynghlaff’s prophecies as a whole (although some of these lines are much longer: line 26, for example, has a total of fifteen syllables). I have already argued above that the *Dialog*’s variable syllable-count is not anomalous in a medieval Brittonic literary context, and thus is more probably the result of authorial acceptance than of scribal error. I now suggest further that the metrical discrepancy between the first ten lines of the work and Guynghlaff’s prophecies proper need not be interpreted as evidence of a difference in dating. It is in fact quite usual for medieval and antique texts to have prologues in a different metre to the main text. To again borrow an example from the Welsh corpus, *Canu Heledd* begins with a four-line *englyn* which, in Jenny Rowlands’ words, ‘seems to serve as a prelude’

to the rest of the work – which is in turn written in three-line *englynion*.⁴⁴ It seems to me far more plausible that metrical differences exist between the *Dialog*'s opening lines and the rest not because these two sections were written at different times and later glued together, but instead because the *Dialog*'s opening similarly serves as an introductory prelude to the rest of the text – which, consisting mainly of Guynghlaff's prophecies, seems suited to a different metre.

It remains in this section to examine one final justification which has been posited in favour of the scribal-reworking and multiple-stage composition hypotheses discussed here. That is, that the account of Guynghlaff the Wild Man, in the opening lines of the *Dialog* in their earliest and 'original' form, would have conformed to Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Merlin in *Vita Merlini* (*VM*). Within this framework, the *Dialog*'s presentation of Guynghlaff – being (it is argued) of greater antiquity than the rest of the text, but subsequently reworked almost beyond recognition by various scribes – seems to be taken as a direct inheritor of *VM*, and written in compliance with it. The *Dialog* poet, according to this understanding, appears to possess the role of mediator between Galfridian and native Breton tradition. Arguing, on the basis of comparison with *VM*, that the *Dialog*'s opening lacks a line (*un vers*), the prophet's name (*le nom du personnage*), and details of his fare (*le menu de sa pitance*), Ernault suggests emendations intended to 'restore' the text to its earliest form, viz. in line with *VM*.⁴⁵ These suggestions are printed in Le Bihan's *restitution*. Thus, among other alterations, line 1 – which in the *Dictionnaire* version reads *Dre Gracz Doe ez veve* ('Through God's grace he lived') – becomes in the *restitution*, *Dre grâce Doe oz beuaff vn den Guinclaff hanuet* ('By the grace of God lived a man named Guynghlaff'). Meanwhile, an entirely new line, reading *Grisiou, lousou, ha froez an guez, euel goezet* is inserted at line 3.

Yet since such emendations are not produced by Ernault's access to any manuscript witnesses beyond the *Dictionnaire*, but are instead chiefly the fruit of his own invention, there is no good reason to accept the 'restituted' version of the text as representing the *Dialog* in its 'original' form better than Le Pelletier's copy. While some Galfridian influence on the poem is certainly possible, especially given the enduring popularity of Geoffrey's works on the continent, the text as it stands presents no indication whatsoever of any early conformity with *VM* on the scale Ernault implies.⁴⁶ I have argued elsewhere, in fact, that the *Dialog*'s Guynghlaff has in some respects more in common with the medieval Wild Men of the other Celtic vernacular literatures than with *VM*'s Merlin.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: A Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990), 572.

⁴⁵ Ernault's notes in Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 660–1.

⁴⁶ While the popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's other works pales in comparison with that of his *De Gestis Britonum*, *VM* nevertheless enjoyed a respectably sized medieval readership. For further discussion on the medieval readership of both texts, see Simon Meecham-Jones, 'Early reactions to Geoffrey's works', in Georgia Henley and Joshua Byron Smith (eds), *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Leiden, 2020), 181–208.

⁴⁷ Jessica Shales, 'An *Dialog etre Arzur Roe d'an Bretounet ha Guynghlaff*, Celtic "Wild Man" legends, and the Brittonic Arthurian tradition', unpublished paper presented at the annual conference of the International Arthurian Society, Cardiff, 2023.

Moreover, the *VM* hypothesis with regard to the Breton poem seems to be to some extent circular. The *Dialog* poet is thought to have originally followed *VM*'s presentation of Merlin in his own portrayal of Guynghlaff, which helps indicate that the *Dialog*'s description of the prophet is of an early date, which is in turn reason to believe that the *Dialog* poet originally followed *VM*'s presentation of Merlin. If, however, the poem as a whole may reasonably be shown to have a single, much later, date of composition, any plausible reason for supposing that the *Dialog* poet, in his hypothesised role as early mediator between Galfridian and Breton Arthurian traditions, had originally intentionally and significantly conformed his work to *VM*, vanishes altogether.

The arguments presented thus far clear the ground for accepting just such a later date. In the first part of this article, I contended that the MS date of 1450 is largely irrelevant to the text. I have argued further in this section that there is inadequate evidence for, and good evidence against, both the theory that the poem was subjected to large-scale scribal interference, and the hypothesis that it was composed at two separate points in time. I have suggested rather that a single authorial intention underpins the whole text as it is preserved in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire*, which itself seems an acceptable representation of the *Dialog* poet's original work.⁴⁸ Because Guynghlaff's prophecies refer to specific years at the end of the sixteenth century, it is highly unlikely that the prophecies for these same years would have been written ahead of time: practically all medieval prophecy can be shown to have been written retrospectively. Therefore, if, as my analysis so far has found, the poem features no clear scribal interventions or interpolations, the inference is that the whole work was written at some stage *after* the last date named by Guynghlaff in the course of his prophecies – that is, at some stage after 1588. The case for a later date around this time is reinforced by the linguistic and historical evidence, as I will argue in the two remaining sections of this article.

THE LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

Overall the *Dialog* presents a mixture of linguistic archaisms and innovations. It is impossible conclusively to answer the dating question through examining the text's language in isolation from other factors. But the fact, to be shown presently, that the linguistic evidence presents nothing which precludes an original date of composition at some stage towards the end of the sixteenth, or at the beginning of the seventeenth, century is nevertheless significant. While the presence in the poem of innovative linguistic forms may of course be interpreted as the result of later scribal intervention, I find no positive textual evidence to support this reading. The following brief analysis suggests that both the *Dialog*'s 'modern' forms *and* its archaisms, when viewed collectively, favour an original date of composition towards the end of the Classical Middle Breton period.

⁴⁸I note, however, that the *Dialog* may have originally contained further prophecies from Guynghlaff: see note 3.

Linguistic features indicative of a date relatively early on in the Middle Breton period are discernible in the *Dialog* mainly in verbal forms. The conservative spellings *monet* ('going') and *donet* ('coming') – and not the more modern *mont* and *dont* – are used consistently throughout.⁴⁹ Yet, although relatively archaic, these forms are also widespread throughout the Middle Breton literary corpus. Moreover, verbal forms are often among the most resistant to change, and thus cannot be taken as conclusive proof of the *Dialog*'s greater antiquity: *monet* and *donet* may have been in use alongside newer forms up until the end of the Classical Middle Breton period.

Regarding non-verbal forms, the older spelling *dou* ('two') – and not the more modern *daou* – is used consistently throughout the text. While the *-a-* slowly begins to appear in Middle Breton spellings in *-ou-*, the words *dou* and *gou* are among the last of these to resist this change. Again, then, the occurrence of an older form (in this case *dou*) cannot confirm an earlier date for the poem. Since we are therefore in possession of good evidence to suggest that these particular conservative forms may all have been in use up until the end of the Classical Middle Breton period, the *Dialog*'s apparent archaisms alone cannot substantiate arguments for the text's antiquity.

Linguistic innovations in the text are more numerous. In terms of verbal features, the form *bezaff* ('being') – and not the older *bout* – is used in every instance of the word throughout the poem.⁵⁰ While it is true that *bezaff* also occurs in earlier Middle Breton works, in these cases it appears alongside *bout*. The fact that the *Dialog* has only *bezaff* would therefore seem to point to a later date of composition. Elsewhere, the form *punissa* ('punishing', l. 243) occurs once. This seems certainly to be an innovation: the form *punissaff* is expected in texts dating from earlier in the Middle Breton period.⁵¹

Moreover, in contrast with the case of *dou* discussed above – and perhaps also in confirmation of the idea that *dou* is not a marker of the poem's antiquity, but rather represents a conservative spelling – the *Dialog* features several examples of more modern spellings in *-aou(-)*. The words *burzudaou* ('miracle', l. 190) and *saouzan* ('chagrin', l. 23) feature in their sole appearances in the poem in the more modern *-a-* spelling. Elsewhere, the form *gouaz* ('worse', l. 219), more usually spelt *goaz*, may be innovative, although the text does have a variant of the word in which the *-u-* does not feature (*goazha*, l. 113).

Most modern of all, however, are the spellings of the preposition *evit* ('for') and the past participle *quemesket* ('mixed', 'confused'). The former, *evit*, occurs six times in *-i-* (ll. 35, 61, 65, 165, 200, and 243), and once in *-y-* (l. 27). The

⁴⁹ *monet/donet* are listed as the earlier forms in Peter Schrijver, 'Middle and Early Modern Breton', in E. Ternes (ed.), *Brythonic Celtic – Britannisches Keltisch. From Medieval British to Modern Breton* (Bremen, 2011), 359–429, at 411.

⁵⁰ The introduction into Middle Breton texts of the form *bezaff* for *bout* is noted by Le Bihan, *Ar c'hrennvrezhoneg*.

⁵¹ Cf. also the case of the standard Middle Breton form *bremant/bremaff* ('now') versus its later, Early Modern, form *brema*, noted in Boucher-Durand, "On pourrait les multiplier", NS2.1.11, p. 102. I am grateful to Myrzinn Boucher-Durand for sharing with me her expertise regarding the *Dialog*'s linguistic forms over many verbal and written communications.

older form of this word – and the one which is most common in Middle Breton literature – is *eguyt*; but the later spellings in *-v-*, *evit/evyt*, appear regularly in many later, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century, Middle Breton texts.⁵² The occurrence in the *Dialog* of the *-v-* form of this word therefore appears to be consistent with a later date for the text. Meanwhile, the latter word, *quemesket*, features a strikingly innovative-looking medial *-k-* in place of the more characteristically Middle Breton *-qu-*. The possibility cannot be discounted that innovative forms in the *Dialog* originate not with the *Dialog* poet, but rather with Le Pelletier, who may occasionally (and perhaps subconsciously) have modified some spellings in line with those to which he was most accustomed. The preposition *evit*, for instance, is used so often in the Breton literary corpus as a whole that it might have been natural for Le Pelletier to update its spelling. When viewed collectively, however, the *Dialog*'s numerous innovations appear to point away from a mid-fifteenth-century date, and towards a point in the Late Middle Breton period.

Linguistic analysis of the text therefore reveals that the occurrence of apparently archaic features cannot yield definitive answers to the dating question. It is certainly possible to attempt to explain the *Dialog*'s earlier forms through hypothesising an original date of composition falling at an early stage in the Middle Breton period. However, the text seems generally to feature only archaic forms which number among those most resistant to change – and so may well have been in use alongside more innovative features throughout the Classical Middle Breton period. The *Dialog*'s conservative spellings may thus accord equally harmoniously with an original date of composition at the end of the sixteenth century. Indeed, this last hypothesis seems the more likely given the occurrence in the poem of the archaic *dou* alongside other more modern spellings in *-aou(-)*.

The text's more numerous innovative forms, meanwhile, must also be explained. Although it is possible that Le Pelletier updated the spelling of certain very common words (perhaps the preposition *evit*, which is almost ubiquitous in everyday speech, would present itself as the most likely candidate for such modernisation), the fact that older spellings still remain in the text suggest that he did not deliberately set out to modernise the work he was copying. Alternatively, it is also possible to view the *Dialog*'s more innovative forms as evidence for scribal intervention at a different stage in the poem's transmission – yet the findings of the preceding section in this article suggest that the text experienced only a minimal level of scribal interference. The presence in the *Dialog* of both archaic features probably still in use at a later date, and a significant number of innovative forms, may however be accounted for most simply by the theory that the poem was originally

⁵²Among such texts number *Buhez Sante Barba* (which first appeared in print in 1557), *Buhez Santez Nonn* (whose sole manuscript witness is dated to the late sixteenth century; we have no secure evidence that text is earlier), *Le Mirouer de la Mort* (firmly dated to the sixteenth century), and *An Nouelou, Ancien ha Devot* (firmly dated to the early seventeenth century). For further discussion of these texts and their dates, see Ronan Calvez, 'Breton literature between the 16th and 17th centuries: the work of artisans', *Studia Celto-Slavica* 13 (2020), 59–72.

written at a time when all of these forms would still have been in current usage – i.e. later in the Middle Breton period. Evidence from the historical record, discussed below, may justify the narrowing of this date range through providing a potential a *terminus post quem* in the form of the year 1594.

A LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY READING

In pursuit of answers to the *Dialog*'s dating question, this article has so far examined the evidence of the date copied by Le Pelletier, the poem's versification, and both its archaic and innovative linguistic forms. But it remains to consider whether any particular set of historical circumstances could be shown plausibly – or, at least, more plausibly than any other – to have given rise to the *Dialog*. It seems apposite at this stage to recall the caveat given above regarding the generic characteristics of vaticinatory literature. A significant part of the *Dialog*'s themes, or thematic elements, may be viewed as stock features of the prophetic genre – many of which in turn are apparently designed to be universally applicable to almost any context – and thus they may be interpreted as historical allusions only with caution. The fact remains, however, that no text is produced in a vacuum, or composed by writers entirely divorced from the social, political, or economic concerns of their day. It is therefore not unreasonable to ask whether the *Dialog* presents any evidence of such contemporary concerns, and to use this evidence (if it should be found) to help us situate the poem at a particular point in history. Indeed, in referring explicitly to certain events which took place in named years between 1570 and 1588 inclusive, the *Dialog* poet provides a clear starting point for such an investigation.

Assuming the prophecies' falsity, Largillière advised his reader: *Il serait puéril de chercher à interpréter ces prophéties, et encore plus de tenter de les vérifier* ('It would be puerile to seek to interpret these prophecies, and all the more so to attempt to verify them').⁵³ However, the ensuing analysis will show that some of the predictions made by Guynglaff for specified late sixteenth-century years – which occur at a central point in the prophecies (ll. 86–161) – align with some of the most important events on the Breton/French historical record at precisely the same time. And once it is established that these predictions allude to specific historical events in the final few decades of the sixteenth century, we can also begin to look for real parallels pre-1570, and post-1588, for the broad themes which respectively precede and follow the named years in the poem. The sixteenth-century rise of Protestantism, which was widely considered heretical by French and Breton contemporaries, and English activity in Brittany in the 1590s present themselves as convincing parallels respectively for the description of heresy with which Guynglaff begins his prophecies and the account of English destruction with which he ends them. Thus, the *Dialog*'s chronology may be mapped broadly onto the chronology of events in Brittany and France in the second half of the sixteenth century. From this it is natural

⁵³Largillière, 'Le dialogue', 630.

to infer that the poet wrote with the events of this period in mind. The implications of such an inference on the dating question are clear: the *Dialog* must have been written at some stage *after* the last historical allusion discernible in Guynglaff's prophecies – that is, after some point after the middle of the final decade of the sixteenth century.

This analysis begins part-way through the poem with the first named year: 1570 (l. 67). Guynglaff's predictions for this year are matched strikingly by a significant historical event which took place at the same time. *En bloaz mil pemp-cant, triugent, ha dec* ('In the year 1570'), announces the prophet,

*Ez vezo an peuch criet,
Maz lavarar e pep kaer gouezet
Ez vezo an bresel finisset.* (ll. 68–71)

'Peace will be proclaimed,
So that in every known place it will be said
that the war will be ended.'

The historical record obligingly presents a notable French Peace Treaty for this year. The third of the eight conflicts which together constitute the French Wars of Religion had begun in 1568 and was brought to a close in 1570 by the so-called Peace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, signed by the Catholic King Charles IX of France and prominent Huguenots Gaspard II de Coligny and Jeanne d'Albret.⁵⁴ Although none of the battles of the French Wars took place in Brittany, Bretons were enlisted as combatants in the conflict from a relatively early stage, and would also have been affected via the significant Breton diaspora in Paris. The turbulent events of the Wars therefore could not have failed to impact Brittany. It is thus feasible to read Guynglaff's allusion to peace in 1570 as a reference to the Peace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye which took place in that year.

That it is reasonable to attribute the correspondence between the peace of the poem and that of the historical year 1570 to more than mere fortuitous coincidence is supported by other parallels between Guynglaff's forecasts for particular years and real historical events for the same time. The prophet's prediction for 1572, for example, seems to be a concise – and devastatingly accurate – summary of the main event of that same year on the French historical record. *En bloaz douzec ha triugent*, declares Guynglaff,

Ez vezo bresel ha meruent. (ll. 75–6)
'There will be war and death.'

In the historical 1572, war and death is precisely what there was. On 25 August 1572 began the slaughter of Protestants by Catholic factions across France, remembered today as the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. While the

⁵⁴For further discussion of the Peace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, see Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion 1562–1629* (Cambridge, 2005), especially at 70 and 76–7.

killing spree did not take place in Brittany, it provoked widespread revulsion and fear throughout France. The total number of deaths across the country seems to have been anywhere between 5000 and 30,000. The massacre led directly to France's fourth War of Religion, in which Breton combatants fought, as mentioned above.⁵⁵

Similarly, the period of ease proclaimed by the prophet for the year 1573 is matched in reality for this year by another lull in the hostilities of the French Wars of Religion. *En bloaz triuguent ha trizec* 'In the year [15]73', Guynglaff predicts,

*Ez vezo an beth dipreder,
En esament tout entier.* (ll. 77–8)

'The world will be without care
Wholly at ease.'

It seems necessary here to allow some room for poetic hyperbole: the world in 1573 (or any year for that matter) could not be described as wholly *dipreder* ('without care') in the strictest sense. However, it is significant that 1573 saw the conclusion of the Peace of La Rochelle, which closed the fourth War of Religion in France, and ushered in a period of relative tranquility – at least until the next war began the following year.⁵⁶

Guynglaff's remaining prophecies for specific years appear mostly to be about disasters of a rather generic nature, which complicates attempts to find for them historical parallels. Yet it may be significant that the seer predicts loss and wretchedness and war (*truez gant bresel*, l. 97), for the years 1587 and 1588 respectively: these dates are both embraced by the eighth and final French War of Religion, which certainly engendered the kind of hardship Guynglaff describes.

A more distinctive parallel with real events, however, seems to fall under the period described somewhat more vaguely by Guynglaff as 'before 1588'. The prophet states:

*Ha quent pevaruguent hac eiz,
...
Un laerz a savo a Goelou,
Hac a taulo Breiz oar he guenou.
Neuse ez lazer pep autrou
Gant clezeffiou dir hac armou.* (ll. 96–111)

⁵⁵For an account of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in relation to Brittany, see Cornette, *Histoire*, 468. For a more general discussion of the massacre, see Holt, 'Popular disorder and religious tensions: the making of a massacre, 1570–1574', in *French Wars*, 76–98.

⁵⁶See Holt, *French Wars*, 97.

‘And before [15]88,

...

A thief will rise up in Goëlo,

And he will throw Brittany on her face.

At that time every lord will be killed

With steel swords and weapons.’

It is the destructive thief (*laerz*) of Goëlo who interests me here. Although the *Dialog* leaves this character anonymous, one notorious figure from this period of Breton history appears to be a good match for Guynglaff’s description. Guy Éder de La Fontenelle, born in 1572 or 1573 on the Côtes-d’Armor, where Goëlo is also situated, left Brittany to pursue his studies in Paris towards the end of the 1580s.⁵⁷ It was there in 1587 that the Canon Jean Moreau claims to have met him, and observed that *il monstroït déjà des indices de sa future vie despravée* (‘he displayed already the indications of his future depraved life’). Aged fifteen to sixteen years, so Moreau continues, La Fontenelle found himself back in Brittany (having sold his schoolboy paraphernalia and used the proceeds to buy a sword and dagger), and integrated himself among those who had taken up arms on the side of the ultra-Catholic faction known as the ‘Holy League’, which had been established with the purpose of eradicating Protestantism. Moreau recounts that the ‘Leaguers’

*en fit estat, parce qu’il estoit de bonne maison et du pais, et, le voyant d’un esprit actif, lui obeïssait volontiers. Il se fit suivre de quelques domestiques de son frère aîné, et d’autres seigneurs de la commune, et commença à piller les bourgades et à prendre prisonniers de quelque parti qu’ils fussent ...*⁵⁸

‘were impressed by him, because he was of good house and of the district, and, seeing that he had an energetic spirit, obeyed him willingly. He was followed by a few servants of his elder brother, and of other lords of the commune, and began to pillage the villages and take prisoners of whatever party they were ...’

La Fontenelle wrought havoc of the sort Moreau describes across Brittany, pillaging villages from Quimper in the far West, to Trégor in the North, and Vannes in the South. Moreau writes that La Fontenelle performed these antics in the year 1589, but the possibility that these events at least began to take place before 1588, and thus apparently in line with Guynglaff’s admittedly ill-defined timeframe, is not excluded. Moreau gives La Fontenelle’s age at the time he embarked on his pillaging as fifteen or sixteen – which, given that we do not know whether he was born in 1572 or 1573, could place the beginning of La Fontenelle’s violent activity in Brittany anywhere between 1587 and 1589

⁵⁷The likeness between the *Dialog*’s thief and La Fontenelle was also observed by Ernault in his notes in Largillière, ‘Le dialogue’, 667.

⁵⁸Jean Moreau, *Mémoires du chanoine Jean Moreau sur les guerres de la Ligue en Bretagne*, ed. H. Waquet (Quimper, 1960). For further discussion of La Fontenelle’s life and activity, see Jean Lorédan, *La Fontenelle seigneur de la Ligue (1572–1602)* (Paris, 1926).

inclusive. Whatever the case, it can be said that although Guynglaff leaves some vagueness around the exact year in which the thief of Goëlo began his antics, the time implied falls around the end of the 1580s, which is also when the historical La Fontenelle began to cause trouble in Brittany. Moreover, Guynglaff's words could reasonably be applied to La Fontenelle: he was indeed a 'thief' who would in some sense 'throw Brittany on her face', inflicting destruction 'with steel swords and weapons'.

Further research may yield other historical correspondences for the more riddling of Guynglaff's predictions. The prophecy that Christmas Day will fall on a Sunday in the year 1574 (*E triuguent ha pevarzec, / Pan vezo da Sul dez Nedelec*, ll. 86–7), for example, has long caused scholarly perplexity. For in 1574 Christmas Day fell on a Saturday – a fact which led Breton critic Goulven Pennaoud to suggest that the *Dialog*'s core was written around a century before this year, with the mention of 1574 representing (he thinks) *un distresadenn bet savet moarvat gant ul lenner o vevañ war-dro 1570–1* ('an alteration that was made probably by a reader living around 1570–1').⁵⁹ While there remains no clear explanation for this prophecy other than error on the part of the *Dialog* poet, the historical events which align with Guynglaff's other vaticinations, discussed above, provide good general grounds for reading the prophecies for named years as retrospective allusions to real events. Indeed, this historical reading finds further support in the prophecies which both precede and follow the named years. These are discussed in the following analysis, which in turn reveals that the structure of Guynglaff's vaticinations in their entirety aligns with sixteenth-century Breton/French historical chronology.

It is clear that religious concerns feature most prominently in the first section of Guynglaff's prophecies (ll. 24–61, until a structural break is provided in the form of Arthur's second question to the prophet). It is also clear, after some comparative analysis, that these religious concerns align strikingly with certain sixteenth-century Breton/French Catholic perceptions of Protestantism. The first prediction Guynglaff makes is about religious depravity (ll. 27–8). In a passage already quoted in this article, the prophet informs Arthur of the deterioration, *dre vicz* ('through vice'), of ecclesiastical authority (*Calz a fizio en beth muy evyt en Ilis*, l. 27). The church, he foretells, will become corrupt: priests will be devoid of justice; fools, he seems to say, will infiltrate ecclesiastical ranks (ll. 29–31). Guynglaff expands on the kind of religious degeneration he envisages a few lines further on, predicting the rise of a noxious heresy:

*Hac un hoeresi a puplio,
Dre Cristenez, huy a guelo,
Hac a tenno da muyha glachar,
Quent ez finuezo an douar.* (ll. 51–4)

⁵⁹Goulven Pennaoud, 'A-zivout deizadañ « An Dialog etre Arzur ... ha Guynglaff »', *hor Yezh* 40 (1963), 23–4, at 23.

‘And a heresy will be preached,
Through Christianity, you will see,
And will cause the greatest affliction,
Before the world will end.’

The prophet does not mince his words regarding the extent of the harm this heresy will cause: the *muyha glachar* (‘greatest affliction’). Heretics of evil mind, he announces further, will look for ways to destroy the faith of God, King and Head (ll. 55–8).

The clearest candidate for an affliction-inducing heresy in a sixteenth-century Breton context, preached, as Guynglaff says, ‘through Christianity’, is the reformed Protestant doctrine which began its ascendancy in Europe in 1517 with the publication of Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses. Although the Protestant Reformation took greatest hold in France in the South of the country, it did not (as has traditionally been thought) bypass Brittany. By 1560, as historian Joël Cornette has documented, reformed Calvinist and Lutheran teaching had been embraced by members of some of the oldest and most notable Breton noble families, including the clans of Rohan, Rieux, Montfort-Laval, Parthenay-Larchevêque, and Roche-Giffart. Huguenot churches sprung up especially in Nantes, where Protestantism particularly flourished in Brittany (it has been estimated that, in 1562, around 1000 of Nantes’ 40–45,000-strong population were Huguenots).⁶⁰

It was the rise of this same Protestant doctrine that led to the events of the French Wars of Religion, some of which align so well with Guynglaff’s prophecies for the named years, as described above. A feature of this conflict was that each side condemned the other as heretics. Indeed, the identification of Protestants/Protestantism (or ‘Huguenots’/‘Huguenotism’) with heretics/heresy is well documented in Breton literature after the sixteenth century. For example, a late Middle Breton confessional text from 1672 implies a link between the two phenomena through pairing the word ‘heresy’ with ‘Huguenotism’ at least twice, in its condemnations of both *scridou hæretic ha hugunod* (‘heretical and Huguenot writings’), and *meuliff an hæretiquet, ha hugunodet* (‘to praise/praising the heretics, and Huguenots’).⁶¹ Elsewhere, another late Middle Breton text from 1625 (a translation commissioned by Guilhelm the Priest, bishop of Querneau, of an Italian source text) implies that the words ‘heretic’ and ‘Huguenot’ are interchangeable, and thus mean more or less the same thing, in phrases such as *heretiquet (autramant hugunodet)* (‘heretics (otherwise Huguenots)’).⁶² This implication is made explicit by Grégoire de Rostrenen in his eighteenth-century *Dictionnaire*

⁶⁰Cornette, *Histoire*, 453. For a detailed study of Protestantism in Nantes in particular, see Roger Joxe, *Les Protestants du Comté de Nantes (XVIe—XVIIe siècle)* (Marseille, 1982); the estimate of Protestant numbers in Nantes is given at p. 70.

⁶¹Euzen Gueguen, *Confessional Dastumet eves an Doctoret Catholic Apostolic ha Romain: Pé en heny è caffo pep guir Christen ha parfet Catholic, an manier, da rentaff è eneff pur ha net, ves à vîcz ha pechet*, (Quimper, 1666).

⁶²*Declaration abundant eves an catechism, hac an doctrin christen*, trans. into Breton by Robert Bellarmin (Querneau, 1625), 171.

françois celtique ou françois breton. Under the entries for the French *heresie* and *hérétique* respectively, Rostrenen prints ‘... hugunodaich ... voyez huguenotisme’ (‘... Huguenotism ... see huguenotisme’) and ‘hugunod ... voyez huguenotisme’ (‘huguenot ... see huguenotisme’). The French *Huguenotisme* (‘Huguenotism’), meanwhile, Rostrenen defines as *la doctrine des huguenots*. *Hugunodaich* (‘the doctrine of Huguenots, *Hudunodaich*’), adding in parentheses that *par le mot de hugunodaich, le peuple entend toutes sortes d’heresies: & par celui de hugunod, toutes sortes d’heretiques* (‘by the word *hugunodaich*, the people understand all kinds of heresies, and by that of *hugunod*, all sorts of heretics’).⁶³

Brittany’s process of ‘Protestantisation’ peaked in the early 1560s.⁶⁴ Meanwhile the French Wars of Religion kicked off in 1562, with intermittent conflict lasting at least until the end of the final ‘War’ in 1589, and ultimately until the 1598 Edict of Nantes. By beginning with a discussion of heresy and heretics (terms known to have been used to designate Protestants in Breton literature), before moving on to vaticinations about the 1570s and 1580s (the less generic of which align strikingly with the events of France’s Wars of Religion, which took place in the same years), Guynglaff’s prophecies thus reflect the historical pattern of Protestantism’s rise in Brittany up until, and including, the 1560s, and the conflict to which this led in France more widely during the final decades of the sixteenth century.

If the prophecies of Guynglaff which precede those regarding the 1570s and 1580s may be identified with historical occurrences before 1570, the predictions which follow those for the named years equally find parallels in real historical occurrences after 1588. As the *Dialog*’s earliest predictions are marked most prominently by religious corruption, Guynglaff’s final vaticinations are dominated by just one theme, although this time it is the threat posed to Brittany by the English:

Cals a vezo a listry
Azrouaentet digoezien. (ll. 131–2)

‘Many will be the ships [Guynglaff says]
Of foreigners, new arrivals.’

Again, he predicts,

En bloaz pevaruguent hac eiz,
Ez deuy an Saouson e Breiz.
Donet a rahint a flot meurbet ... (ll. 160–2)

⁶³ Grégoire de Rostrenen, *Dictionnaire françois-celtique, ou françois-breton: nécessaire à tous ceux qui veulent apprendre à traduire le françois en celtique, ou en langage breton ... utile pour trouver l’éthymologie de plusieurs mote français & bretons, de noms propres de villes, & de maisons* (Rennes, 1732), 492 and 502–3.

⁶⁴ Cornette, *Histoire*, 454.

'In the year [15]88,
The English will come to Brittany.
They will come from a great fleet ...'

Once more, the historical record for this period presents a striking parallel. By the early 1590s, there seem to have been three principal, and rival, factions in Brittany. First, there was a so-called 'Holy League', composed (in Mack Holt's words) 'of a variety of different Catholic cohorts and loosely directed by the [highly powerful and politically influential] Guise family', whose ultimate goal was to keep a 'heretic' (i.e. the Protestant Henry of Navarre, by this time Henry IV of France) away from the French crown.⁶⁵ In Brittany, the Holy League was supported by Spanish forces, whose principal base was positioned centrally in the region, at Blavet, although they were also significantly active in the strategically important far western coastal city of Brest.⁶⁶ The second faction was made up of Catholic Bretons wary of the growing Spanish presence and influence in their region. And the third faction consisted of supporters of France's new Protestant king, Henry IV. Henry IV was in turn supported by the English forces of Elizabeth I, to whom he had appealed for military aid against his opponents. Because the Spanish presence in Brittany – and especially in Brest – was considered a major English national security threat, Elizabethan England had a strong interest in the region in the final decades of the sixteenth-century.⁶⁷ As Michael Jones writes, Elizabeth I's positive response to Henry IV's plea for assistance was *due au danger que présentait pour l'Angleterre la présence d'une puissance hostile sur un point stratégique vital, l'accès occidental de la Manche* ('due to the danger that the presence of a hostile power at a vital strategic point, western access to the English channel, posed to England'). It was on account of this that, in May 1591, the English soldier Sir John Norris disembarked at Paimpol, on Brittany's northern coast, at the head of 2400 English troops. Indeed, for the three years which followed, English troops continued to be stationed in Brittany – with reinforcements of course arriving and descending on Brittany's shores in and from ships, in line with Guynclaff's dire predictions cited above, at intervals during this time.⁶⁸ English soldiers experienced fluctuating fortunes in Brittany in the 1590s, but achieved a notable victory in 1594, when they managed to take a heroically defended Spanish fortress at Roscanvel, which commands one side of the entrance to the strategically crucial Bay of Brest. This is especially interesting in the light of Guynclaff's prophecies that:

*Saouson e Perzell disquennet,
Ha Brest, ne fazio quet* (ll. 172–3)

⁶⁵Holt, *French Wars*, 121.

⁶⁶Michael Jones, 'Les Anglais à Crozon à la fin du XVI^e siècle', *Mémoires du Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne* (1997), 11–35, at 13.

⁶⁷For further discussion of the fear which the Spanish presence in Brittany inspired in the English, see R. B. Wernham, 'The Spanish threat to Brest and the taking of Groningen', in his *After the Armada: Elizabethan England and the Struggle for Western Europe 1588–95* (Oxford, 1984), 514–37, especially at 528.

⁶⁸Jones, 'Les Anglais', 14–15.

‘The English will have disembarked in Perzell,
And Brest, they will not fail’ (ll. 201–2)

And that the English will

... *laquat sig oar an kaerious,*
Disquar questel ha thourellou.

‘... lay siege to the towns,
Knocking down castles and turrets.’

Perzell (or Kastel Persel) is the Breton name for the Fort de Bertheaume, which is on the opposite side of the Bay of Brest to Roscanvel, where the English triumphed over the Spanish in 1594. A Spanish plan to establish two fortresses – one at each entry to the bay of Brest – had become publicly known at the end of January 1594, but in the event only that at Roscanvel was completed.⁶⁹ In light of all the other correspondences between the *Dialog*’s prophecies and sixteenth-century Breton events, the similarity between Guynglaff’s description of the destruction, by the English, of castles and turrets in the region of Roscanvel around the same time that the English historically took the Spanish fortress at the same location seems too distinctive to be dismissed as coincidence. Rather, it appears to provide further evidence that the poem’s original date of composition fell at some stage considerably after the 1450 manuscript date. If a *terminus ante quem* of 1619 is provided for the text by one of Le Pelletier’s two manuscript sources, a convincing *terminus post quem* may therefore be found in the English victory at the fort of Roscanvel in 1594.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted in this article suggests the following conclusions. First, that the 1450 date which accompanies the *Dialog* in the *Dictionnaire* may reasonably be taken as the result of Le Pelletier’s mistaken interpretation of the rubric in his manuscript source, and thus its value for dating the text is negligible. This conclusion seems generally to be supported by the historical record, which shows mid-fifteenth-century Brittany to have been economically prosperous, and to have enjoyed relatively harmonious relations with its English and French neighbours. It does not thus appear a likely context for the composition of Guynglaff’s doom-laden predictions – especially those regarding the English destruction of Brittany. By contrast, I have argued that the late sixteenth century provides a more promising historical context for such vaticinations.

Second, the dual theory of large-scale scribal reworking over time and a multiple-stage composition – which has featured prominently in *Dialog* scholarship thus far – appears unnecessarily complicated. I have argued that the poem’s divergence from the strict-verse tradition to which the Iveton Omnes lai appears to belong need not be read as the consequence of erroneous or incompetent scribal intervention. Rather, it is reasonable to believe that the *Dialog*

⁶⁹Jones, ‘Les Anglais’, 15.

poet, like other composers of both Breton and Welsh verse, did not intend to write according to a pattern of strict versification. Moreover, the argument that the preserved poem has experienced significant textual corruption, caused by extensive scribal interference, appears still weaker when it is considered that the *Dialog* text generally makes good sense, both in its overarching progression and at a more granular level. The text's frequently irregular metrical patterns, meanwhile, do not represent substantial evidence in favour either of significant scribal intervention, or of the theory that the poem, as it is preserved, was composed at two separate points in time. I have suggested rather that a single authorial intention underpins the whole work. Comparison with early Welsh poetry, which in some cases features similarly irregular syllable-counts, supports this hypothesis. In this light, the text in Le Pelletier's *Dictionnaire* may be viewed as an acceptable representation of the *Dialog* poet's original work.⁷⁰

Third, the *Dialog*'s linguistic features appear most compatible with a date of composition towards the end of the sixteenth century. It is the text's numerous linguistic innovations which indicate most saliently this later dating. Yet the *Dialog*'s smaller number of linguistic archaisms – all of which co-existed alongside more modern forms at least until 1600 – are consistent with the same conclusion.

Finally, having established a basis for viewing the poem both as the product of a single author at a single point in time, and with linguistic features indicative of a date towards the end of the Classical Middle Breton period, I have suggested on historical grounds that the text was composed at some stage between 1594 and 1619. The *Dialog*'s prophecies, I have argued, speak retrospectively, and from a Catholic perspective, of Brittany and France's sixteenth-century religious turmoil. My analysis has shown that the years Guynglaff names in the 1570s and 1580s align in some significant cases with real events of the corresponding historical years. I have argued further that the rise of a heresy, which is presented and examined in the poem before the predictions for the named years are given, aligns with the historical rise of Protestantism – equally denounced as heretical by papist parties, and which peaked in Brittany in the early 1560s – and thus also with historical chronology. Meanwhile, the English threat on which Guynglaff dwells after delivering his predictions for the last named year in the 1580s (that for 1588) corresponds with the real English military presence in Brittany in the 1590s – and thus again with the chronology of historical events. If the description of the English destruction of fortresses and towers in the vicinity of 'Kastell Perzell' is identified with the historical English victory over the Spanish in the same vicinity – as seems reasonable, given the other historical parallels identified in the prophecies – then this event provides us with the *terminus post quem* of 1594. I therefore posit some stage during the twenty-five-year period between 1594 and the 1619 date of Le Pelletier's dated manuscript source as the *Dialog*'s original date of composition.

⁷⁰I note, however, that the *Dialog* may have originally contained further prophecies from Guynglaff: see note 3.

We cannot know precisely what motivations underpinned the *Dialog*'s composition, although it is tempting to speculate. It may be that the poet desired to attempt to make sense of the harrowing events of the religious wars which had scarred his country, arranging them in a providential schema – and thus attributing to them a divinely ordained status – through presenting them through the medium of divinely inspired prophecy.

Be this the case or not, the findings put forward in this article both illuminate our interpretation of the *Dialog*, and provide reason to re-examine the dating of other Breton texts, such as *Buhez Santez Nonn*, for which similar scribal reworking theories have traditionally been accepted.⁷¹ They also show that Breton literature could provide a new and rare literary window onto both Breton views of France's sixteenth-century religious wars, and the nature and extent of intellectual activity in Brittany more generally.

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⁷¹Cf. Christian-J Guyonvarc'h, *Le Catholicon de Jehan Lagadeuc* (Rennes, 1975), lxxxiii–v.