

A wrong turn on the way to Troy: Samson and the classical tradition in medieval Ireland



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A WRONG TURN ON THE WAY TO TROY:
SAMSON AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION
IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines the sources and style of a short narrative found in RIA MS D iv 2 (1223) and edited by Carl Marstrander as *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. I argue that this text adapts the myths of Hercules and Busiris, and Philomela, retelling them to star the biblical Samson as the protagonist. This process of creative adaptation draws on late antique synchronisms and medieval Irish pseudohistorical traditions, linking Classical and biblical characters and events; this article offers suggestions as to the textual sources that influenced the production of the narrative and analyses its medieval Irish cultural context. *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* has received very little critical attention to date, but a careful consideration of its contents and context helps to illuminate our understanding of the processes of reception and intellectual innovation at work in twelfth-century Ireland.

A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY manuscript contained in Dublin's Royal Irish Academy, RIA MS D iv 2 (1223) contains a curious narrative.² Carl Marstrander edited the text in question under the title *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* in 1911 but it has received virtually no critical attention since.³ Kuno Meyer had already provided a short summary of the first half of the text in 1903 but made no mention of Samson's appearance in the second half.⁴ To the best of my knowledge, the only scholar to mention the tale in a critical article is Jacqueline Borsje, who discusses it in passing when listing instances of human sacrifice in medieval Irish literature.⁵ Marstrander suggests a

¹ I extend my heartfelt thanks to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Paul Russell, Barry Lewis, and the anonymous reviewer and copy editor for their time, consideration, and helpful suggestions, to Agnese Fontana for sharing her research on Byzantine chronicles, to James Miller for reading multiple drafts of this article, and to the Harding Distinguished Postgraduate Scholars Programme for supporting this research. All errors are my own. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

² *ISOS* catalogues the text as fol. 69vb–71ra. (The old numbering in Carl Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', *Ériu* 5 (1911), 145–59 and Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP* 4 (1903), 467–8 is fol. 61vb–62vb.)

³ Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda'.

⁴ Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', 467–8.

⁵ Jacqueline Borsje, 'Human sacrifice in medieval Irish literature', in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, Studies in the History and Anthropology of Religion (Leuven, 2007), 31–54, at 45.

late twelfth-century date for the text, which seems reasonable on linguistic grounds.⁶

The plot runs as follows: the land of the Gesteda faces a terrible drought because the angry gods conceal the waters. A priest from India named Proiss arrives and narrates the cause of his banishment to the king of the Gesteda. Proiss had been married to Algdha, the daughter of the King of Thrace. He conceived a terrible passion for Tabuile, his wife's daughter by the King of Africa. After Tabuile rejected his advances, he raped her on a hunting trip. When Algdha learned of this, she violently whipped Proiss, killed his seven sons and his nobles, and finally exiled him after her own retinue convinced her not to kill him. Despite hearing this narrative of shame and violence, the Gesteda request Proiss's advice concerning how to fix their drought. Proiss tells them to sacrifice all their priests, druids and seers to the gods, and when they have exhausted those, to move on to other men. The narrative suddenly shifts focus at this point and recounts how Priam's son Helen(us) has come to request Samson's aid against the Greeks in the Trojan War. Samson sends messengers to Troy to ascertain whether the Trojans worship the same god as the Israelites. En route, his messengers are shipwrecked in the land of the Gesteda. The king begins sacrificing the messengers, but allows one to return to Samson and tell him what has occurred. Upon learning the fates of his messengers, Samson rushes off to fight the Gesteda in his ivory ship, dragging along his unwilling wife, Lilia, and the priest, Nehemias. Samson wields his camel jawbone, two beams of light shoot from his eyes, and he jumps on the floor of the palace so that it shakes, prompting everyone inside to fall upon their own weapons in fear. He then ties up the king, queen, and Proiss, and kills the rest of the Gesteda. Finally, Samson forces the king, queen and Proiss to watch the waters return before killing them too. Samson thanks God and the text ends with a note that the priest Nehemias recorded the story.⁷

In RIA MS D iv 2, *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* immediately follows a series of short Classical adaptations, *Fingal Chlainne Tantai*, *Merugud Uilix*, and *Sgél in Mínaduir*, and is itself directly followed by *Riss in Mundtuirc*. All of these twelfth- or thirteenth-century texts represent creative approaches towards reconstructing and retelling tales from Classical mythology that were most likely not available to the medieval Irish in their original Greek forms.⁸

⁶Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', 146. Linguistic features that support this dating include 3 pl. perfect passive forms such as *rocelilit* (l. 5) and *rotimairgit* (l. 6), and independent object pronouns such as *Roghuidhiusa hí* (l. 29) and *dia deoin í* (l. 35). Most verbs have been simplified, suggesting a general Middle Irish date as well, e.g., *Rotinoiled* (l. 78), *Tangatar* (l. 92), *Doriachtsat* (l. 94), and *roinnsitar* (l. 95).

⁷Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', ll. 228–9.

⁸For editions and source analysis of these shorter Classical adaptations see the following: *Fingal Chlainne Tantai*: Mary Byrne (ed. and trans.), 'The parricides of the children of Tantalus', *RC* 44 (1927), 14–33; R. J. Crampton, 'The uses of exaggeration in *Merugud Uilixis Meic Leirtis* and *Fingal Chlainne Tantai*', in Ralph O'Connor (ed.), *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative*, *Studies in Celtic History* 34 (Woodbridge, 2014), 58–82. *Merugud Uilix*: Robert T. Meyer (ed.), *Merugud Uilix maic Leirtis*, *Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series* 17 (Dublin, 1958); Barbara Hillers, 'The medieval Irish *Wandering of Ulysses* between literacy and orality', in Ralph O'Connor (ed.), *Classical Literature*, 83–97, and her 'Ulysses and the Judge of

Whoever placed *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* beside these other tales clearly thought that it was a similar text and indicated how it should be read. *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* is positioned, then, as a Classical adaptation. Its length is commensurate with the other short Classical adaptations that precede and follow it in the manuscript. Its innovation and synthesis of multiple sources also put it in good company with these shorter Classical adaptation texts that assemble mythological narratives out of references in Classical Latin authors, later commentaries, mythographies, and scholia.⁹ These contrast with longer adaptations that translate lengthier works of Classical Latin verse such as the twelfth-century *Togail na Tebe* (the medieval Irish adaptation of Statius's *Thebaid*) and *In Cath Catharda* (the medieval Irish version of Lucan's *De Bello Civili*).

Marstrander gives only one page of commentary in his edition of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. He suggests that the location of the land of the Gesteda should be taken as the land of Goshen in Egypt. He bases this both on the observation that the location is reachable by sea from Israel and India and the fact that the *Leabhar Breac* (henceforth, LB) refers to Goshen as *Gessen issind Egipt*, 'Gessen in Egypt'.¹⁰ LB is an early fifteenth-century manuscript, largely containing Latin and Irish religious texts, including hagiography, and mentions Samson in a biblical historiographical tract (henceforth, the *LB Biblical Tract*), which will be discussed below.¹¹ LB also contains *Scéla Alaxandair*, a tenth-

Truth: sources and meanings in the Irish Odyssey', *Peritia* 13 (1999), 194–223; Michael Clarke, 'A Latin source for *Merugud Uilix*, the medieval Irish narrative of Ulysses', *Ériu* 70 (2020), 95–118. *Sgél in Minaduir*: Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften. VI: Aus dem Stowe MS. D. 4. 2. Sgél in Mhínaduir', *ZCP* 4 (1903), 238–40; Barbara Hillers, 'Sgél in Minaduir: Dädalus und der Minotaurus in Irland', in Erich Poppe and Hildegard L. C. Tristram (eds), *Übersetzung, Adaptation und Akkulturation im insularen Mittelalter*, Studien und Texte zur Keltologie 4 (Münster, 1999), 131–44. *Riss in Mundtuirc*: Brent Miles (ed. and trans.), 'Riss in Mundtuirc: the tale of Harmonia's necklace and the study of the Theban Cycle in medieval Ireland', *Ériu* 57 (2007), 67–112.

⁹For further discussion of the shorter Classical adaptations in RIA MS D iv 2 and their affinities to 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', see Brigid Ehrmantraut, 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', in Michael Clarke, Erich Poppe, and Isabelle Torrance (eds), *Classical Antiquity in Medieval Ireland: The Antiquity Sagas and Related Literature*, Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception (London, forthcoming).

¹⁰Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', 145. Marstrander does not specify where in LB this quotation occurs, but he must refer to the appearance of the phrase in LB fol. 49a26, in a text on the Paschal Feast. We might compare Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, I.13, which describes the first Easter as being celebrated in *Gessen*, although this reading is disputed between different manuscripts; see L. Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 82–3, 202 for apparatus and commentary.

¹¹The tract runs from LB fol. 109a to 150a, begins *Dorigne Dia imorro in rigthech uachtarach*, and summarises biblical history from the creation of the world through the life and teachings of Christ. The section of the text in fol. 133b23 to 144b22 concerning the infancy of Christ has been edited in Martin McNamara et al. (eds and trans), *Apocrypha Hiberniae, 1: Evangelia Infantiae* (Turnhout, 2001), 247–439. The Old Testament section of the text remains unedited and, in addition to the Samson material discussed here, includes a poem on the Ark of the Covenant and a meeting between Moses and Niul, father of Goídel Glas. The section on Samson appears in LB fol. 127a20 to 128a20. The manuscript catalogue as given on *ISOS* maintains the textual divisions given in Joseph Ó Longáin and J. J. Gilbert (eds), *Leabhar Breac, the Speckled Book, Otherwise Styled Leabhar Mór Dúna Doighre, the Great Book of Dun Doighre*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1872–6),

or eleventh-century compilation of material drawn from Orosius, the *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* and the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo rege Bragmanorum*. In both the *LB Biblical Tract* and *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, Samson has a servant named Gerson. I have found no other example of a character associated with Samson by this name, or in fact any other biblical or apocryphal character who shares the name except a son of Levi in Num. 3:21, and a son of Moses in Exod. 2:22, both of whom significantly predate Samson in biblical chronology.

SOURCES: HERCULES AND SAMSON

In *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, we have a tale of a legendary strong hero killing a king (likely in Egypt) who has been sacrificing visitors to the gods in order to avert a drought. This is ultimately the myth of Hercules and Busiris, recast to star the biblical Samson. In the Classical myth (individual versions of which will be presented below), Busiris, the king of Egypt, struggles with a terrible drought. The foreign seer Thrasius tells him to sacrifice his guests to the gods. Busiris decides that Thrasius himself, being a guest, will be the first sacrifice. Hercules later arrives in Egypt between Labours and kills Busiris when he tries to capture and sacrifice him. The death of Busiris ends the drought.

Numerous versions of the myth circulated in the Classical and late antique world. Greek versions, such as that in (Pseudo-)Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*, can probably be ruled out as sources of transmission given the minimal knowledge of Greek in medieval Ireland.¹² Confining ourselves to versions of the myth found in Latin retellings known to have been read in the early medieval west, we still have a significant range of possible texts that could have transmitted this story to medieval Ireland, including Ovid, scholia on Ovid, Hyginus, Servius's and Philargyrius's commentaries on Vergil, Lactantius Placidus's commentary on Statius, Orosius, and the Vatican Mythographers. I shall attempt to narrow down the possible sources from this list, based on episodes and names that appear in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*.

Ovid alludes to the myth three times. In the *Metamorphoses*, IX.182, Hercules states:

ergo ego foedantem peregrino templa cruore
Busirin domui ...?

but introduces the heading 'Biblical tract' under which nineteen sub-texts are listed (these nineteen texts are presented as separate, individual entries in Ó Longáin and Gilbert's facsimile). McNamara, *Apocrypha Hiberniae*, I, 249–56 discusses the unity (or lack thereof) of the New Testament sections of the text, but it is unclear to what degree the individual sub-texts of the Old Testament section represent a single, unified work. I refer to the entire text spanning LB fol. 109a–150a as the *LB Biblical Tract* for the sake of present clarity. Further investigation and the production of future editions are desirable.

¹²For knowledge of Greek in medieval Ireland (or lack thereof), see Pádraic Moran, 'Greek in early medieval Ireland', in Alex Mullen and Patrick James (eds), *Multilingualism in the Greco-Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, 2012), 172–92, and his 'A living speech? The pronunciation of Greek in early medieval Ireland', *Ériu* 61 (2011), 29–57.

‘Was it for this I slew Busiris, who defiled his temples with strangers’ blood?’¹³

In *Ars Amatoria*, I.647–52, Ovid gives a more detailed account:

Dicitur Aegyptos caruisse iuvantibus arva
Imbribus, atque annos sicca fuisse novem,
Cum Thrasius Busirin adit, monstratque piari
Hospitis adfuso sanguine posse Iovem.
Illi Busiris ‘fies Iovis hostia primus’,
Inquit ‘et Aegypto tu dabis hospes aquam’.

‘Egypt is said to have lacked the rains that bless its fields, and to have been parched for nine years, when Thrasius approached Busiris, and showed that Jove could be propitiated by the outpoured blood of a stranger. To him said Busiris, “Thou shalt be Jove’s first victim, and as a stranger give water unto Egypt.”’¹⁴

Ovid also obliquely mentions the story in *Ibis*, ll. 393–4:

Ut qui post longum, sacri monstrator iniqui,
Elicuit pluvias victima caesus aquas.

‘As he who taught a cruel rite, and after long time, a victim slain, brought rainy showers’.¹⁵

The scholiast on *Ibis* clarifies this reference, drawing on the information from *Ars Amatoria*.¹⁶

Hyginus mentions the myth twice in his *Fabulae*:

Busiridem in Aegypto, qui hospites immolare solitus erat; huius legem cum audiit, passus est se cum infula ad aram adduci, Busiris autem cum uellet deos imprecari, Hercules eum claua ac ministros sacrorum interfecit.¹⁷

‘Busiris in Egypt, who was accustomed to sacrifice guests. When [Hercules] heard of this, he allowed himself to be led to the altar with the ribbon of sacrifice, however, when Busiris was about to invoke the gods, Hercules killed him and the assistants of the sacrifice with a club’.

Busiris. In Aegypto apud Busiridem Neptuni filium cum esset sterilitas et Aegyptus annis nouem siccitate exaruisset, ex Graecia

¹³Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, in F. J. Miller (ed. and trans.), *Metamorphoses*, revised by G. P. Goold, LCL 43 (Cambridge, MA, 1916), 16 (edition), 17 (translation).

¹⁴Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, in J. H. Mozley (ed. and trans.), *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, revised by G. P. Goold, LCL 232 (Cambridge, 1929), 56 (edition), 57 (translation).

¹⁵Ovid, *Ibis*, in J. H. Mozley (ed. and trans.), *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, 266 (edition), 267 (translation).

¹⁶Robinson Ellis (ed.), *P. Ovidii Nasonis Ibis, ex novis codicibus edidit, scholia vetera commentarium cum prolegomenis* ... (Oxford, 1881), 72.

¹⁷Hyginus, *Fabulae*, in Peter K. Marshall (ed.), *Fabulae* (Munich, 1993), §31.

augures conuocauit. Thrasius Pygmalionis fratris filius Busiridi monstrauit immolato hospite uenturos imbres, promissisque fidem ipse immolatus exhibuit.¹⁸

‘Busiris: In Egypt in the land of Busiris, son of Neptune, when there was a famine and Egypt had been dry for nine years, the king called together augurs from Greece. Thrasius, the son of Pygmalion, Busiris’s brother, related that rains would come if a guest were sacrificed, and showed the truth in his promises when he himself was sacrificed.’

Servius comments on the myth in two instances in Vergil. On *Aeneid*, VIII.300, he says, *inde in Aegypto Busiridem necavit, qui aduenientes hospites immolare consueverat*,¹⁹ ‘Thence in Egypt [Hercules] killed Busiris, who had been accustomed to sacrifice arriving guests’. On *Georgics*, III.5, he elaborates, *Busiris rex fuit Aegypti: qui cum susceptos hospites immolaret, ab Hercule interemptus est, cum etiam eum uoluisset occidere*,²⁰ ‘Busiris was king of Egypt: who, because he sacrificed his welcomed guests, was killed by Hercules, because he wished to kill him likewise’. Philargyrius expands the story somewhat, also commenting on *Georgics*, III.5:

Busiris, Aegypti rex, omnibus annis Iovi hospites immolabat: nam per octo annos sterilitate Aegypto laborante, Pygmalion Cyprius finem futurum non ait, nisi sanguine hospitis litatum fuisset. primus autem Thyestes alienigena immolatus originem sacrificio dedit. *alii sic*: Busiris, Neptuni filius, rex Aegypti: qui cum Iovi hospites immolaret, pari exemplo mactatus est ab Hercule, ipsum quoque ausus aris admovere.²¹

‘Busiris, king of Egypt, used to sacrifice guests to Jove every year: for, when Egypt was afflicted with famine for eight years, the Cyprian Pygmalion said there would not be an end, unless the blood of guests was offered. However, Thyestes was the first foreigner to be sacrificed. Others [say] thus: Busiris, son of Neptune, king of Egypt: who, because he sacrificed guests to Jove, was killed by Hercules as a suitable example, having dared to lead that one [i.e., Hercules] likewise to the altars’.

Lactantius Placidus offers the following commentary on Statius, *Thebaid*, XII.155: *Busiridis Aras: hic rex Aegypti fuit, aduenas solitus ad aras mactare. postremo aduentu Herculis immolatus exemplo est*,²² ‘Altars of Busiris: this

¹⁸Ibid., §56.

¹⁹G. Thilo and H. Hagen (eds), *Servii grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii* (Leipzig, 1881–1902), ii, 242.

²⁰G. Thilo (ed.), *Servii grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii Bucolica et Georgica commentarii* (Leipzig, 1887), 272.

²¹H. Albert Lion (ed.), *Commentarii in Virgilium Serviani sive commentarii in Virgilium qui Mauro Servio Honorato tribuuntur* (Göttingen, 1826), ii, 333.

²²Robert Dale Sweeney (ed.), *Lactantii Placidi in Statii Thebaida Commentum* (Leipzig, 1997), 643.

was a king of Egypt, he was accustomed to sacrifice foreigners on altars. Afterwards he was sacrificed as an example at the arrival of Hercules’.

Orosius mentions Busiris twice. He writes:

Busiridis in Aegypto cruentissimi tyranni crudelis hospitalitas et crudelior religio tunc fuit; qui innocentum hospitem sanguinem diis scelerum suorum participibus propinabat: quod execrabile sine dubio hominibus uiderim an ipsis etiam diis execrabile uideretur.²³

‘The hospitality of the gory tyrant Busiris in Egypt was cruel and his religion was even crueller; who used to propitiate the gods — partners in his crimes — with the innocent blood of his guests, which I would think, without a doubt, would seem execrable to humans or indeed also execrable to the gods themselves’.

He also questions, *an [...] Busiris in Aegypto peregrinorum infelicitur incurrentium impiissimus immolator?*²⁴ ‘Did not most impious Busiris in Egypt sacrifice travellers who unluckily crossed his path?’

Lastly, the First and Second Vatican Mythographers mention the episode. As they do so in nearly identical wording, I give only the Second:

*Busiris rex fuit Aegypti. Qui quum susceptos hospites immolare solitus esset, ab Hercule, quum eum etiam uoluisset occidere, interemptus est. Huius laudes Sostrates scripsit.*²⁵

‘Busiris was a king of Egypt who used to sacrifice guests whom he had welcomed. He was killed by Hercules when he also wanted to slay him. Socrates [Isocrates] sang his praises’.²⁶

Ovid and Hyginus are the earliest authors listed here, and it is likely that the other fourth- and fifth-century (or possibly as late as the eleventh-century in the case of the Vatican Mythographers) writers drew on them or on Greek or other non-extant Latin versions of the story. The basic Hercules and Busiris story could have been sourced from any of these Latin texts, but not all of them give all the details that are found in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. From Lactantius and Orosius alone, there is no way to connect Busiris with Hercules. Only Ovid, the scholiast on Ovid, and Hyginus mention Thrasius by name. If the name Proiss in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* is based on the name of the seer in the Hercules story, however, the source for the story may have had the more common Greek variant spelling *Phrasius* (Φρασίος) for *Thrasius*.²⁷ This does

²³ Orosius, *Historiae Contra Paganos*, in Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet (ed.), *Histoires contre les païens*, 3 vols (Paris, 1990–1), i, 58–9.

²⁴ Ibid., ii, 85.

²⁵ Péter Kulcsár (ed.), *Mythographi Vaticani I et II*, CCSL 91C (Turnhout, 1987), 29, 238.

²⁶ Ronald E. Pepin (trans.), *The Vatican Mythographers* (New York, 2008), §180.

²⁷ For example, Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, in J. G. Frazer (ed. and trans.), *Apollodorus: The Library*, LCL 121–2 (Cambridge, 1921), ii, 224–5.

not rule out a Latin source with a variant reading or a gloss containing the name *Phrasius*, or a conflation of *Phr*- and *Thr*- by Irish scribes.

There are closer-to-home variants of the Hercules story as well, found in both the eleventh-century first recension and twelfth-century second recension of *Togail Troí* (henceforth, TTr, TTr-1, and TTr-2, respectively). TTr is a vernacular version of the Troy story loosely based on Dares Phrygius's *De Excidio Troiae*. The Irish text expanded over time, gaining mythological details and dramatic descriptions more in keeping with the story's Homeric or Vergilian predecessors than with Dares's matter-of-fact style.²⁸ In TTr-1, *Is he damarbh Bussirim robói i coraidecht hi taeb srotha Níl. Is he side noedbrad a óeghedhaidh do sruth Níl*, 'It is he who killed Bussiris who was champion on the side of the river Nile. It is that one who used to sacrifice his guests to the river Nile'.²⁹ TTr-2 from the *Book of Leinster* adds to the narrative:

Is é dano ro marb Bossírim ro baí i curadacht i taib srotha Níl. Is éside no marbad a aigedu. ra chubrig sé Hercoil i cumma chaich 7 rasuc leis co bruach in tsrotha da edbairt. O ra siachtatar in sruth brissid Hercoil a chubrech. 7 marbaid Bossírim.³⁰

'It is he also who killed Bossíris who was champion on the side of the river Nile. That one used to kill his guests. He bound Hercules like the rest and took him with him to the edge of the river to sacrifice him. When they reached the river, Hercules broke his bonds and killed Bossíris'.

Neither recension mentions a Thrasius/Proiss character.³¹ TTr-2 does, however, mention Samson elsewhere and compares him twice to Hercules. In Nestor's description of Hector, Samson and Hercules are referenced:

Iss eside dorósce ar gail 7 gasciud. nirt 7 niachus. d'ócaib na huli Asia. acht Samsón mongach móradbul. tuísech mac n-amra nIs-raél. ar nira genair ríam a šamailside acht Hercuil. 7 ni thicsede inbar n-agidsi etir.³²

'It is he [Hector] who surpassed in valour and arms, strength and prowess the warriors of all Asia, except longhaired, very mighty Samson, leader of the marvellous sons of Israel, for there was not

²⁸For the development of TTr, see Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History 34 (Woodbridge, 2011), 95–144; Leslie Diane Myrick, *From the De Excidio Troiae Historia to the Togail Troí: Literary-Cultural Synthesis in a Medieval Irish Adaptation of Dares' Troy Tale*, Anglistische Forschungen 223 (Heidelberg, 1993).

²⁹Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'The Destruction of Troy', in Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1884), II.1, 1–142, at II. 48–9.

³⁰*Togail Troí from the Book of Leinster*, in LL, iv, ll. 31231–4.

³¹See Brent Miles, 'Irish evidence for shared sources of classical mythology in Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Ireland', in Gernot R. Wieland, Carin Ruff, and Ross G. Arthur (eds), *Insignis Sophiae Arcator: Essays in Honour of Michael W. Herren on his 65th Birthday*, Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin 6 (Turnhout, 2006), 124–48 for a discussion of Busiris sacrificing his guests to the Nile instead of Jove.

³²*Togail Troí*, LL iv, ll. 32579–82.

born before him his like, except Hercules, and that one does not oppose you at all [i.e., Hercules is not fighting against you].’

More importantly, TTr-2 mentions Samson and Hercules again, this time in the context of Hector’s death, when it says of Achilles:

Mairg da tarla frithalim a feirgge in láásin. ar ní rabi ‘sin domun in tansain oenfer da tísad díngbáil Achíl. ar níra mair Hercuil mac Amphitrionis 7 Alcmena. acht Samsón mongach móradbul túsech mac n-amra n-Israél. bes ticfad desede da mbeth and.³³

‘Woe to him to whom it befell to withstand his [Achilles’s] wrath on that day, for there was not in the world at that time any man who could equal Achilles — for Hercules son of Amphitryon and Alcmena was not still alive — except longhaired, very mighty Samson, leader of the marvellous sons of Israel. Perhaps it would have been possible for the aforementioned if he were there.’

TTr-2 thus connects Samson to Troy, entertaining the idea of an alternate (pseudo)historical tradition where Samson (could have) fought at Troy. I propose that it was this speculation, either made in TTr-2 or a text with similar contents, or drawn from wider traditions of synchronism connecting Samson and the Trojan War in time, that prompted the composition of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*.

The historiographical methodology that synchronized biblical and Classical figures and historiography can be traced back to Eusebius’s *Chronicon*, which the Irish would have accessed through Jerome’s Latin translation.³⁴ Eusebius’s preface to the *Chronicon*, as translated by Jerome, states:

Samson autem est, quem in corporis robore Herculi similem ferunt posterī Judaeorum, et mihi videntur non multum inter se distare tempore, si quidem ambo circa Troiae captivitatem fuerunt.³⁵

‘Samson, however, is whom the descendants of the Jews report was similar to Hercules in bodily strength, and it seems to me they were not far apart in time, if indeed both lived around the time of the capture of Troy’.

Eusebius’s *Praeparatio Evangelica* also compares Samson to Hercules and asserts that the capture of Troy occurred seven years before Samson ruled the

³³Ibid., ll. 32823–5.

³⁴See Elizabeth Boyle, ‘Biblical history in the Book of Ballymote’, in Ruairí Ó hUiginn (ed.), *The Book of Ballymote*, Codices Hibernensis Eximii 2 (Dublin, 2018), 51–75, at 54 for a discussion of medieval Irish biblical pseudohistory within the framework of Eusebian (and other) chronologies.

³⁵Eusebius, *Chronicon*, in J. K. Fotheringham (ed.), *Eusebii Pamphili Chronici Canones latine vertit, adauxit, ad sua tempora produxit S. Eusebius Hieronymus* (London, 1923), 12.

Hebrews.³⁶ However, as this text circulated in Greek, it is probable the medieval Irish instead drew on Jerome's translation of the *Chronicon*, given limited Irish knowledge of Greek, as mentioned above.³⁷

Other medieval Irish texts also position Samson in relation to Hercules and/or to Trojan heroes. The poem *Luid Iasón ina luing loir* ('Jason went in his spacious ship') names *Samson*, *Treolus gan tár*, *Echtair*, *Ercoil*, *Aichil án*, *.v. iur is chalma ro-bí ar tuind talman togaidi*, 'Samson, Troilus without reproach, Hector, Hercules, noble Achilles, the five bravest men who were ever on the surface of the excellent earth'.³⁸ The poem, which likely accompanied a prose version of *Togail Troí*, probably dates from the twelfth century, although a later manuscript attributes it to the poet Flann Mainistrech (d. 1056).³⁹ A late twelfth-century (or even later) text, *Don Tres Troí*, places Samson's death before Hector's son Astyanax rebuilds Troy.⁴⁰ An eleventh-century poem by Gilla Chomdid úa Chormaic, *A Rí richid, réidig dam* ('O King of heaven, clarify to me'), synchronizes Samson with Aeneas.⁴¹

If the author(s) of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* were thinking of Samson as a contemporary of Aeneas in addition to Hercules, it might explain the inclusion of the shipwreck that lands Samson's messengers in the kingdom of the Gesteda as a reference to the storm that washes Aeneas ashore on the Libyan coast in Vergil's *Aeneid*, I.81–222. It might also explain the sexual encounter between Proiss and Tabuile during a hunting trip in the first half of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, which is vaguely reminiscent of the encounter between Dido and Aeneas in the cave during a hunt in *Aeneid*, IV.129–72 (although Vergil's version does not include rape). While Vergilian allusions are certainly possible, Samson's character in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* shows few other similarities to Aeneas, and Proiss's backstory bears far more resemblance to another Classical myth: the story of Philomela.

³⁶Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, PG 21, col. 805–6.

³⁷The use of synchronisms to speculate on whether biblical characters could have fought at Troy was not unique to medieval Ireland. Agnese Fontana, 'Presenza della grecità antica nella Chronographia di Giovanni Malala', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Genoa (2020), 203 discusses an episode in John Malalas's *Chronographia* where the biblical King David is synchronized with the Trojan War. In 'What if King David had fought at Troy? The Trojan narrative in Byzantine world chronicles (VI–XII century): religious, historical and political issues', a paper delivered at the *Enchanted Reception: Religion and the Supernatural in Medieval Troy Narratives* conference at Ghent University, 4 June 2021, Fontana argued that this synchronism may have produced the Byzantine tradition where Priam asks David to fight at Troy, which is found in two chronicle fragments attributed to John of Antioch (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS Hist. Gr. 99, fol. 11v1–5 and Excerpta Salmasiana, ii, 27) and in Constantine Manasses's *Breviarium historicum*.

³⁸Gearóid S. Mac Eoin (ed. and trans.), 'Dán ar chogadh na Traoi', *Studia Hibernica* 1 (1961), 19–55, at 41 (edition), 54 (translation).

³⁹Ibid., 21, 49.

⁴⁰Brent Miles (ed. and trans.), *Don Tres Troí*, ITS 68 (Dublin, 2020), ll. 14–15.

⁴¹*LL*, iii, 574–87, at 578.

SOURCES: PROISS AND PHILOMELA

In the tale of Philomela, as recounted by Ovid, Philomela's sister Procne marries Tereus, the king of Thrace.⁴² Tereus desires Philomela and when she refuses him, he rapes her in a house in the woods, cutting out her tongue so that no one may learn of his crime. Philomela weaves a picture of the assault and shows it to her sister Procne. In vengeance, the two sisters kill Procne's son by Tereus and feed him to his father. Philomela, Procne, and Tereus are subsequently turned into birds.

The similarities between Philomela and *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* include a king raping a close female in-law alone in the woods and violent revenge when the truth is revealed, involving the murder of the king's son(s). Furthermore, several geographical details are comparable. In Ovid, Tereus is the king of Thrace.⁴³ In *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, Proiss's wife Algdha is the daughter of the king of Thrace.⁴⁴ Proiss is the (former) high king and chief priest of India.⁴⁵ The action of the Philomela story does not take place in India, but Ovid compares Procne to a tigress of the Ganges when she kills her son.⁴⁶ Hyginus tells the story too, but without the Ganges detail found in Ovid that may have inspired an Irish redactor to link the setting to India.⁴⁷ The medieval Irish author(s) certainly could have known that the Ganges was in India, as *In Cath Catharda* mentions this fact.⁴⁸

These parallels may not be as close as those between the various versions of Hercules and Busiris and *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. Proiss's back-story differs in several ways from that of Ovid's Philomela: Algdha and Tabuile are mother and daughter, rather than sisters; Proiss does not cut out Tabuile's tongue; Algdha merely kills Proiss's sons, rather than feeding them to him; no one becomes a bird. However there is another good reason for linking this story and the myth of Hercules and Busiris. The passage of Orosius, quoted above, discusses Philomela directly after Busiris, as another example of bloodshed and moral depravity in earlier pagan eras:

[...] tunc etiam Terei Procnae et Philomelae incesto parricidium adiunctum atque execrabilibus utroque conuiuium per infandos cibos additum, cum propter sororis pudicitiam ereptam praecisamque linguam filium paruulum mater occidit, pater comedit.⁴⁹

⁴²Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI.401–674.

⁴³Ibid., VI.424.

⁴⁴Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', I. 17.

⁴⁵Ibid., I. 14.

⁴⁶Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI.636–7.

⁴⁷Hyginus, *Fabulae*, §§54–5.

⁴⁸Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'In Cath Catharda: the Civil War of the Romans, an Irish version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*', in Whitley Stokes and Ernest Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1909), IV.2, 1–581, at ll. 1574–7.

⁴⁹Orosius, *Historiae*, I, 58–9.

‘[...] then patricide also joined the incest of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela and more execrable than either was the meal augmented by unmentionable food, for when [Tereus] had raped [Procne’s] sister and cut out her tongue, the mother [Procne] killed her own little son, and the father [Tereus] ate him’.

This would have provided an obvious link between the tales in the mind of any medieval reader of Orosius. In both the case of Hercules and Philomela, Orosius alone would not have been enough to construct the full narratives without recourse to a more detailed source, such as Ovid or Hyginus. That the link between Busiris and Philomela made in Orosius may have inspired *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* reveals the education and intellectual creativity of the Irish text’s authors and redactors, who were able to draw inspiration from one text, and fill in narrative details from others.

Orosius was a major source for medieval Irish historiographical writing and Classical adaptation, and, along with Eusebius and Jerome’s biblical synchronism noted above, played a large role in the development of the pseudohistorical methodology found in works such as the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*.⁵⁰ *Scéla Alaxandair* also draws heavily on Orosius and *Don Tres Troí* names Orosius as one of its sources, alongside Bede, Servius, Augustine, and Varro.⁵¹ The potential use of Orosius thus also ties *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* to larger Irish and indeed western European methods of synchronizing biblical and Classical material, and building new original narratives.

BIBLICAL SOURCES AND PARALLELS

In addition to adapting multiple Classical mythological and historiographical sources, *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* is very willing to draw from, and playfully adapt biblical material, most notably in its choice of hero. There are basic similarities between descriptions in the Irish text and the account of Samson’s life in Judg. 12–16, although these similarities are at the level of individual details, rather than informing the plot arc. Samson, like his biblical counterpart, fights with a jawbone, although the Irish Samson’s jawbone comes from a camel instead of an ass.⁵² This detail is also present in the *LB Biblical Tract* introduced above.⁵³ In *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, Samson does not kill a lion, but he is described as leaping up *co leomunda*, ‘lionlike’.⁵⁴ In the Irish

⁵⁰Michael Clarke and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘The ages of the world and the ages of man: Irish and European learning in the twelfth century’, *Speculum* 95.2 (2020), 467–99, at 476.

⁵¹Miles, *Heroic Saga*, 55–7, 61–2. For further discussion of the influence of Orosius on *Scéla Alaxandair* see Hildegard Tristram, ‘Der insulare Alexander’, in Willi Erzgräber (ed.), *Kontinuität und Transformation der Antike im Mittelalter* (Thorbecke, 1989), 129–55, and her ‘More Talk of Alexander’, *Celtica* 21 (1990), 658–63.

⁵²*a chromchuarcholtur do lecaín camail* ‘his crooked, bent coultter of the jawbone of a camel’. Marstrander (ed. and trans.), ‘How Samson Slew the Gesteda’, ll. 200–1. Cf. Judg. 15:15–16. All biblical quotations are from the Clementine Vulgate.

⁵³*LB*, fol. 127b7–8.

⁵⁴Marstrander (ed. and trans.), ‘How Samson Slew the Gesteda’, l. 203.

text, Samson's eyes shoot *da columain teinntighi*, 'two columns of flames'.⁵⁵ This may be a fanciful re-imagination of Judg. 16:25–6 where Samson knocks down *duas columnas*, 'two columns' after being blinded. *Columna* 'column' is the same Latin word as that which *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* uses for the 'two columns of flames,' having been loaned into Irish as *columa*.⁵⁶

How Samson Slew the Gesteda re-orders two of the major elements of the biblical Samson story: his destruction of the Philistines' building, causing his and their demise at the end of Judg. 16, and the appearance of water out of the ass's jawbone in Judg. 15. In *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, Samson's destruction of the palace of the Gesteda precedes the reappearance of the waters. The collapsing house episode bears close similarities to Judg. 16:30, although in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* this feat is accomplished merely by Samson jumping on the floor, and comes with the added detail that, *co trochair na sgeith 7 na slega 7 na cloidemthi 7 na hairm airchena dia naidhlenn*, '(and) the shields and the spears and the swords, and the other weapons, fell from off their rack'.⁵⁷ The *aidlenn* (weapon-rack) is a detail concomitant with an Irish narrative setting.⁵⁸ The return of the water after Samson has slain the Gesteda now comes at the end of the Irish narrative and has its parallel in Judg. 15:18–19 when Samson tires after killing a host of Philistines with his ass's jawbone and prays to God to send him water, which bursts out of one of the teeth of the jawbone, quenching his thirst. This clever inversion invokes well-known elements of the biblical story while fitting the Irish narrative into the Hercules myth, in which the waters return after the death of the murderous king.

The minor characters involved in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* are also noteworthy. Samson takes his wife, Lilia, and the priest, Nehemias, with him to fight the Gesteda, despite their protestations. Lilia, *ingin righ Glenda Soilia a crichaib na Filistine*, 'daughter of the king of Glendasolia [the valley of Soilia] in the lands of the Philistines' is presumably the biblical Delilah.⁵⁹ Marstrander takes *Glenda Soilia* to be the valley of Sorek, Delilah's home in Judg. 16:4. Nehemias the priest is a more out-of-place character. In name, he resembles the priest Nehemiah from the Book of Nehemiah, which takes place during the Second Temple period, significantly later than Samson in the Old Testament. As mentioned above, Samson's servant Gerson, while also present in the *LB Biblical Tract*, appears to be an original character, unless we are meant to assume that Levi's son from Numbers has time-travelled forward to Judges.

Samson's ivory ship may be another biblical allusion.⁶⁰ In Ezek. 27:6, Tyre is compared to a ship, *et transtra tua fecerunt tibi ex ebore indico*, 'and they made for you your crossbeams from Indian ivory'. In *How Samson Slew the*

⁵⁵Ibid., I. 201; my translation.

⁵⁶A *columa ignis* 'column of fire' also appears in Exod. 13:21–2 to light the Israelites' way out of Egypt, which is referenced in later books of the Bible, including Neh. 9:12, 19. This does not seem to be as close a parallel as the columns and loss of Samson's eyes in Judg. 16, but may have additionally been in the mind of the Irish author(s).

⁵⁷Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', II. 205–6.

⁵⁸See *eDIL*, s.v. *aidlenn* for further attestations of this word in medieval Irish literature.

⁵⁹Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', II. 169–70. Cf. Judg. 16:4.

⁶⁰Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', II. 166–7.

Gesteda, Samson acquired the ship from Ascalapius, king of Ascalon.⁶¹ While Ascalon and Tyre are separate cities along the Mediterranean coast, they are within a hundred miles of each other and may have blurred in the minds of Irish scholars. Note that the ivory on the ship in Ezekiel is specifically from India, bringing to mind Proiss's country of origin and the ivory horsewhips with which Algdha beats Proiss.⁶²

Another ivory vessel appears in Rev. 18:12 among the lost merchandise of Babylon, including *et omnia vasa eboris*, 'and all the ivory vessels'. *Vas* means 'vessel' in the sense of 'cup' in Classical Latin, but in medieval Latin, its meaning expanded to 'ship'. Although more tenuous, this could be seen as a clever linguistic pun, especially if a medieval Irish audience read Ezekiel's lament for Tyre as typologically similar to ruined Babylon in Revelation, *qui habebant naves in mari de pretiis*,⁶³ 'which had ships in the sea for riches'. Furthermore, the other wealth of Babylon mentioned directly before the *vasa eboris* in Revelation includes *merces auri, et argenti, et lapidis pretiosi*,⁶⁴ 'rewards of gold and silver and precious stones'. These appear in exactly the same order as *a breith fein do ór 7 do airget 7 do sedaib loghmuraib*, 'will give his own award of gold and silver and precious jewels', which is given to Proiss by the king of the *Gesteda* in return for his assistance ending the drought.⁶⁵ This is circumstantial evidence supporting borrowing from Revelation and/or Ezekiel on the part of the author of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, but in the absence of any other obvious analogues for Samson's ivory ship in biblical, Classical, or Irish tradition, it merits bearing in mind as another possible example of biblical adaptation in the text.

A more solid biblical perspective worth considering is Samson as a type for Christ. Augustine and Isidore, as well as the (possibly Irish) Pseudo-Jerome, among other late antique and early medieval sources, compare Samson and Christ.⁶⁶ Isidore explicitly states, *Samson autem, quondam Domini Nazaraeus, habet quiddam in typo gestum Christi*,⁶⁷ 'Samson, moreover, formerly a Nazarite of the Lord, has a certain bearing as a type of Christ' and *Samson Salvatoris nostri mortem et victoriam figuravit*,⁶⁸ 'Samson prefigured the death and victory of our Saviour'. This identification seems largely to rest on

⁶¹Ibid., ll. 167–9. Compare Samson's slaughter at Ascalon in Judg. 14:19.

⁶²Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', ll. 41–2.

⁶³Rev. 18:19. For general approaches to wordplay and allegory in medieval Irish literature, see Jan Erik Rekdal, 'Etymology, wordplay and allegorical reading in some medieval Irish texts', in Mikael Males (ed.), *Etymology and Wordplay in Medieval Literature*, Disputatio 30 (Turnhout, 2018), 169–90.

⁶⁴Rev. 18:12.

⁶⁵Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', ll. 62–3.

⁶⁶Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* §§80, 88, PL 37, col. 1039–41, 1126; Isidore, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, PL 83, col. 389B–90C; *Allegoriae Quaedam Sacrae Scripturae*, PL 83, col. 111C–12A; *Expositio evangelii secundum Marcum*, in M. Cahill (ed.), CCSL 82, Scriptores Celtigenae 2 (Turnhout, 1997), 71.

⁶⁷Isidore, *Quaestiones*, PL 83, col. 389B.

⁶⁸Isidore, *Allegoriae*, PL 83, col. 111C.

etymologies relating Samson's name to the sun,⁶⁹ and to the miraculous nature of Samson's birth, announced by an angel after his mother's barrenness.⁷⁰ It may not particularly matter to the author of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* that Samson typologically represented Christ, and the text does not comment on either his name or birth, but it likely resonated on some level with a medieval Irish audience, as Christological typology seems to have been a well-accepted approach to Samson in the wider western European medieval world.⁷¹ This typological relationship may also account for the fact that twelve of Samson's men are killed every day by the Gesteda before he arrives, in a gesture to the number of Christ's apostles.⁷²

The *LB Biblical Tract* seems more interested in seeing Samson as a type for Christ, or at least following more conventional etymological lines of exegesis. The comparison between Christ's and Samson's miraculous births may be behind the assertion in the *LB Biblical Tract* that Samson was *Mac[...] amra ro-genir for talmain in fersa*,⁷³ 'the most wonderful son ever born upon the earth'. The etymology linking Samson's name to the sun seems to also be obliquely referenced:

Ar it eat so coicer ba coemiu monga ocus fuilt isin bith .i. Adam 7
Ábel a mac ocus Áron mac Amraim brathair Móyse ocus Sámson
mongach fessin. ocus Apisolón mac. D[avi]d. iarisin. nicon lamtis
tra doeine décsiú na silliuð for foltaib na fear so cen chloieine na
suilib acht amal nobetis fri grein ina bruth.⁷⁴

'For these are the five who had the most beautiful manes and hair in the world, that is Adam and Abel his son and Aaron son of Amram brother of Moses and longhaired Samson himself and Absalom son of David after that. Then people did not used to dare to look or gaze upon the hair of these men without squinting with the eyes as though they were comparable to the sun in its glow.'

These men's hair shines like the sun, so brightly that no one can stand to look at it without squinting. This seems to extend the idea that Samson himself is somehow intrinsically sun-like due to the sun element in his name. He appears to be in strange company at first, but the other four individuals mentioned, Adam, Abel, Aaron, and Absalom, could also plausibly be considered types for Christ. Adam and Abel are the first men whose sin and death Christ redeems. Aaron is explicitly compared to Christ in Heb. 5:4–5. Absalom as the murdered son of a

⁶⁹Isidore, *Etymologiae*, in Wallace Lindsay (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum Sive Originum Libri XX* (Oxford, 1911), VII.vi.56; *Quaestiones*, PL 83, col. 389C. This etymology was certainly known to the Irish as it appears in *Sanas Cormaic*, see Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Three Irish Glossaries* (London, 1862), 40, 42–4.

⁷⁰Isidore, *Quaestiones*, PL 83, col. 389B–90C. Cf. Judg. 13.

⁷¹For contemporaneous continental approaches to Samson, see Greti Dinkova-Bruun, 'Biblical thematics: the story of Samson in medieval literary discourse', in Ralph Hexter and David Townsend (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature* (Oxford, 2012), 356–75.

⁷²Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', l. 112.

⁷³*LB*, fol. 127a22.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, fol. 127b37–43.

grieving father is another potential type for Christ and his death is brought about when he is trapped in a tree by his head (presumably, by the hair on his head, although the Vulgate has only *caput*), strengthening the hair comparison.⁷⁵

The fact that *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* eschews obvious Christological parallels followed in other medieval Irish texts in favour of retelling a Classical story about Hercules likely illustrates the redactor's own narrative choices. This seems especially the case as the narratives in the *LB Biblical Tract* and *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* are related to the extent that they share the same name for Samson's otherwise unattested servant and the detail that Samson's jawbone is from a camel rather than an ass (either through mutual influence or similar source material).⁷⁶ However, they diverge in their focus and interests, indicating a significant degree of authorial freedom. In *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, Classical and biblical sources are combined and built upon to form a new work of literary pseudohistory. This is in keeping with the broader context of medieval Irish pseudohistorical writing, as Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has discussed similar phenomena of linking Classical and biblical characters in medieval Irish portrayals of Brian Boru.⁷⁷ Medieval Irish authors were adept at shaping and reshaping the biblical and Classical past, with individual texts and authors displaying unique stylistic choices within a larger cultural approach to producing pseudohistorical works.

STYLE AND CONTENT

We shall now turn to questions of style and literary devices within *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. Medieval Irish etymologies, found throughout literature and in glossaries such as *Sanas Cormaic*, focused extensively on names and word-play.⁷⁸ Thus, given the elaborate incorporation of Classical and biblical detail and etymology in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, it is worth starting with an examination of the names of some of its characters. Ascalapius probably takes his name from the city he rules, Ascalon.⁷⁹ It is possible that the name is also meant to allude to Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, as a pagan deity meant to represent an enemy of Samson, but there is nothing besides the similarities of

⁷⁵ 2 Sam. 18. Absalom's hair is also praised in detail in a short narrative about David and Absalom preserved in the Yellow Book of Lecan, col. 772–6, Rawlinson B 512, and the Book of Fermoy; see Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP* 12 (1921), 3–30, 166–84, at 177 for text, and Elizabeth Boyle, *History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland* (London, 2021), 62–3 for translation.

⁷⁶ Note that Cain slays Abel with a camel's bone in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, recension A. See R. A. S. Macalister (ed. and trans.), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, ITS 34, 35, 39, 41, 44 (Dublin, 1932–42), i, 18. See George Henderson, 'Cain's jaw-bone', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24 (1961), 108–14 for comparisons between Cain's and Samson's weapons.

⁷⁷ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Glorious by association: the Clontarf obituary of Brian Boru', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin XVI: Proceedings of Clontarf 1014–2014, National Conference Marking the Millennium of the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2017), 170–87.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Rekdal, 'Etymology', 169–90, and Paul Russell, 'The sounds of a silence: the growth of *Cormac's Glossary*', *CMCS* 15 (1988), 1–30.

⁷⁹ Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', I. 168.

the names to suggest this identification is the case, nor are the pagan gods of the Gesteda ever named. Dabilla, the daughter of the king of the Gesteda, shares her name with the pet dog of Boand, the personification of the river Boyne, in the metrical *dindsenchas*.⁸⁰ When Boand drowns, the dog is swept away by the sea and smashed in half, becoming two rocks known as Cnoc Dabilla. The Dabilla in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* also has a connection to water, and her death (together with that of the rest of her people) at Samson's hands releases the waters, ending the drought. If the author(s) knew the *dindsenchas* poem, which is possible given that a version appears in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster, this might be an attempt at low humour: the king's daughter described as *genmnaidh grian-tsolusta* ('chaste, bright') is really a lapdog.⁸¹

The name of Cainnill, the king of the Gesteda, offers more parodic possibilities. It may be a reference to Cain, or, perhaps more likely, based on Irish *caindel* 'candle; paragon, hero'. Of course Cainnill is anything but a shining hero in the story, but this may be fitting for a narrative in which he welcomes Proiss and promptly offers him rewards after hearing the priest's confession of rape and incest. Surely Cainnill's behaviour is somewhat tongue-in-cheek and perhaps so is his name. Parodic or even humorous elements reoccur throughout the text, as potentially seen above in the name of Dabilla. The druids and seers and learned people of the Gesteda respond to Proiss's suggestion that they be sacrificed with the laconic *nar budh coir in comairli sin*, 'that advice was not proper'.⁸² Similarly, Lilia and Nehemias are rather unimpressed by Samson's suggestion that they accompany him to the land of the Gesteda:

Atbert iarsin in ben 7 in sacart anaenfecht nat roibi a toisc na ndis leisin isin tír ngentlighi neimchreitmidh acht dodhisigh sloigh 7 miledha mac nIsrael imailli fris no ticsaidh fein 7 a ghilla no na ticsidh. Atbert iarsin Samson friu: 'Ticfaidhthisi ann gidh ail gin cob áil'. 'Ragmaidni ann' ar in sacart 'uair is eicin dunn'.⁸³

'But the woman and the priest both said that neither of them had any wish to accompany him to that unbelieving pagan country, but that he might arm the hosts and warriors of the Children of Israel to go with him, or set out by himself with his servant or not set out. Then Samson said to them: "You shall come there whether it please you or not." "We shall go then", said the priest, "since we must."'

This is hardly proper behaviour for a loyal wife (although Delilah does not prove to be such in the Bible) or a priest tasked with recording the events afterwards

⁸⁰E. J. Gwynn (ed. and trans.), *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, RIA Todd Lecture Series 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 (Dublin, 1903–35), i, 38, 3.33. The lapdog Dabilla is also mentioned in *A Rí richid, réidig dam*; see *LL*, iii, 580.

⁸¹Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', ll. 70–1.

⁸²*Ibid.*, ll. 77–8; my translation.

⁸³*Ibid.*, ll. 171–7.

(and who rebuilds Jerusalem in the *Book of Nehemiah*). It is also never explained why Samson brings either character with him as they contribute nothing to the ensuing conflict.

Proiss's own name could represent ironic wordplay on *fras/fros* 'shower, gush', given his role in failing to resolve the drought.⁸⁴ This may be an alternative explanation to the derivation based on Thrassius presented above, or a backformation meant to provide an Irish etymology for the preexisting name of the character from Classical tradition. I am unaware of the origins of the names Algdha and Tabuile and it seems probable that the author(s) of the text made them up or drew them from now-lost sources. The first element of Algdha may be *elg* 'noble', which is also a literary name for Ireland, and reflect her moral superiority to Proiss.⁸⁵

How Samson Slew the Gesteda engages in wordplay beyond names. After Proiss rapes Tabuile, he attempts to soothe her, *roghabus oca cendsugud iarsin o briathraib áilghinaib*, 'afterwards I began to soothe her with sweet words'.⁸⁶ He clearly fails since she subsequently weeps and tells her mother what has occurred. The same verb *cennsaigid* 'soothes, placates, appeases' appears later in the text as the word used to describe placating the gods, when Cainnill promises to give rewards and treasure to the one *rofoirfedh sinn 7 rocendsochadh na dee*, 'who will help us and appease the gods'.⁸⁷ Proiss ultimately fails to placate the gods as well, a fact which is foreshadowed by his inability to soothe Tabuile earlier in the tale, using the same verb. The use of *cennsaigid* also ties the text to more conventional medieval Irish modes of depicting paganism. In *Togail na Tebe*, the same verb is used when Amphiaras falls into Hades and soothes an angry Orcus.⁸⁸ This links *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* with the ways in which other Classical adaptations verbally depict placating gods and its gods, while unnamed, are fitted into modes of human-divine interaction from the wider genre.⁸⁹ Short as the text is, it represents an equally valid and interesting approach to adaptation as the longer Classical adaptations such as *Togail Troí* or *Togail na Tebe*, or other biblically-inspired works such as *Saltair na Rann*.

⁸⁴*eDIL*, s.v. 1 *fras, fros*. The variant *frois*, with palatal final -s is attested in *IGT* ii §§14, 39, and would be explainable as an accusative-dative form replacing the nominative, as can happen in a-stems. *Prois* with initial *P-* could be considered the equivalent without initial lenition. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for these suggestions.

⁸⁵*eDIL*, s.v. 2 *elg*, s.v. *Elg*.

⁸⁶Marstrander (ed. and trans.), 'How Samson Slew the Gesteda', I. 36.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, II. 63–4.

⁸⁸George Calder (ed. and trans.), *Togail na Tebe: The Thebaid of Statius* (Cambridge, 1922), II. 2950–60.

⁸⁹Borsje, 'Human sacrifice', 45 presents *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* alongside the ninth-century *Epistil Ísu* (Letter of Jesus), which includes abduction and sacrifice by pagans to their gods as a punishment for those who fail to uphold the law of Sunday, but she does not argue for any connection between the two texts. While it is possible that the *Epistil Ísu* influenced aspects of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, or reflected similar grisly fascination with pagan sacrifice and conceptions of blood-thirsty pagan divinities, to my mind the biblical and Classical materials discussed in this article constitute stronger and more obvious sources. See Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts*, *Instrumenta Patristica* 29 (Turnhout, 1996), 177–316 for analysis of the *Epistil Ísu* more generally.

WIDER CONTEXTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Togail Troí makes a good contrast with *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*. The latter tale recasts Classical mythology, giving it a biblical character. This is precisely an inversion of the type of adaptation we see at the beginning of the second recension of *Togail Troí*, where the biblical story of Moses is rewritten to star Jove:

Ra tharngirset fádi do Šatuirn a mac do thictain ris. conid airesein no ithed cach mac rucad dó ria nÍóib. Ra foilged Ioib fair. 7 ra cured i curach oenšeiched for sruth Níl. 7 gabur blicht ceḡalta isin churuch conid edsain ras bethaig. Co fuaratar iascaireda srotha Níl hé cona thlacht ríḡ immi. Co tucsat i cind .uii. mbliadan he don ríḡ. Is í bréc thucad immisium don breithsin. cloch do thabairt i mmesc na fulcí co ndúaid Satuirnd in cloichsin.⁹⁰

‘Prophets prophesied to Saturn that his son would come against him and because of that he used to eat every son born to him before Jove. Jove was hidden from him and was put into a boat [made] of one hide upon the river Nile, and a goat for milk bound in the boat so that it would nourish him. Fishermen of the river Nile found him with his royal garment about him. At the end of seven years, they brought him to the king. This is the lie that was told concerning him about that birth: a stone was brought to him in a lump of swaddling clothes so that Saturn ate that stone’.

In *Togail Troí*’s euhemerizing account of Classical theogony, Jove is the one who floats down the Nile in a basket instead of Moses. As a parallel to Samson’s assumption of Hercules’s role in *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, this illustrates the range of medieval Irish creativity when dealing with both Classical and biblical material. In the medieval Irish narrative imagination, biblical stories and characters are evidently just as malleable as their Classical counterparts, offering multiple sources for the creation of new synthetic and pseudohistorical texts.

As a text, *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* is aware both of itself as an (often parodic) work of literature, and of other conventions and narratives in both Classical and non-Classical Irish literature, as one final example may serve to illustrate. Proiss’s origins in India may be parodic in their own right if read in the context of wider medieval literature. In the sections of *Scéla Alaxandair* based upon the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo rege Bragmanorum*, India emerges in a very positive light as a nearly-divine kingdom without the troubles of Alexander’s earthly, pagan realm.⁹¹ Isidore also depicted India as a land of plenty where honey grew on trees and as a source of many gems and spices.⁹²

⁹⁰LL, ll. 30827–34.

⁹¹See Erik Peters (ed.), ‘Die irische Alexandersage’, ZCP 30 (1967), 71–264, at 139–53 for the Irish version of the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo rege Bragmanorum*.

⁹²Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIV.iii.5, XX.ii.36.

These associations of India with purity and plenty appear in the late medieval text *Altram Tige Dá Medar*, when Ethne, a former member of the medieval Irish pantheon, the Túatha Dé Dannan, can only survive on milk from Indian cows after she starts to slide from the Túatha Dé's Otherworld towards the Christian world of the narrative present.⁹³ This fifteenth-century text significantly postdates *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, but may testify to the continuing associations of India with righteousness and purity in wider medieval Irish tradition. India also appears several times in the late medieval *Duanaire Finn* poems, collected in a seventeenth-century manuscript, as a land of wealth conquered by the legendary hero Finn mac Cumhaill's grandson Oscar.⁹⁴

If these associations of India with moral reputation and wealth were on the mind of the author(s) of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* (either from *Scéla Alaxandair*, the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo rege Bragmanorum*, and Isidore, or non-extant sources that contributed to depictions of India in later Irish narratives), then the text must poke fun at such conventions since Proiss is about as far from a righteous, chaste, godly leader as one can get. His punishment at the hands of his wife may restore India within the narrative to a former moral status based on Isidore or the Alexander material (either in Latin or Irish). Notably, India features only in the passing tigress simile in Ovid's version of the myth of Philomela, so the author(s) of *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* are likely to have picked it as a setting on purpose, as an appropriately exotic-sounding location by way of Ovid, and/or in light of wider cultural associations.

To quote Greti Dinkova-Bruun on the use of Samson in continental medieval Europe, the 'relationship [of medieval writers] to the truth and mystery of the Bible was not dogmatic and uniform; rather, it was an impetus for intellectual curiosity and an inspiration for literary creativity'.⁹⁵ In medieval Ireland, this creativity took particularly dynamic forms. *How Samson Slew the Gesteda* is an intricate, erudite production, drawing liberally from biblical and Classical sources, incorporating Irish motifs, and likely parodying both itself and genre conventions. It is a testament to the highly-educated, scholarly milieu in which it was composed — a milieu in which historiography and literary writing were closely linked and ingenuity could flourish.

⁹³Lilian Duncan (ed. and trans.), 'Altram Tige Dá Medar', *Ériu* 11 (1932), 184–225, at 195. Several scholars have commented on India as a land of righteousness in *Altram Tige Dá Medar*, including Cathinka Hambro, 'Waiting for Christian fish on milk from India: a textual and contextual analysis of *Altram Tige Dá Medar* ("The Nourishment of the House of Two Milk Vessels")', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2013, 132; Séamus Mac Mathúna, 'Sacred landscape and water mythology in early Ireland and ancient India', in M. Fomin et al. (eds), *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series: Sacred Topology in Early Ireland and Ancient India*, Religious Paradigm Shift 57 (Washington, DC, 2010), 3–53, at 27; Charles William MacQuarrie, *The Biography of the Irish God of the Sea from The Voyage of Bran (700 A.D.) to Finnegan's Wake (1939): The Waves of Manannán*, *Studies in Irish Literature* 13 (Lampeter, 2004), 119–20. However, to the best of my knowledge, no one has drawn a connection with the Dindamus text or Isidore.

⁹⁴E. MacNeill and G. Murphy (eds and trans.), *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, *ITS* 7, 28, 43 (London, 1908–53), i, 71, 181; ii, 208–9, 214–15.

⁹⁵Dinkova-Bruun, 'Biblical thematics', 372–3.

ABBREVIATIONS

LB	The Leabhar Breac (RIA MS 23 P 16 (1230))
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
PG	Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , 161 vols (Paris, 1857–66).
PL	Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia Latine</i> , 217 vols (Paris, 1841–55).
TTr	<i>Togail Troí</i>

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