

Poetic knowledge and Christian exegesis in the Mongán tales: a metalanguage of multiple meanings



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POETIC KNOWLEDGE AND CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS IN THE MONGÁN TALES: A METALANGUAGE OF MULTIPLE MEANINGS¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines a group of *Cín Dromma Snechtai* texts which feature the character of Mongán mac Fiáchnai. Recurring attributes of his literary persona include his poetic credentials and connection to the Otherworld through his divine father Manannán as well as certain Christian allusions. It is argued that these elements constitute a metatext which can be read as a commentary on the theory of knowledge and signification which emerged from a synthesis of the methods of Christian exegesis, particularly the dichotomy between historical and spiritual sense, and the secular ideal of poetic inspiration that gives access to transcendent knowledge. The inner logic of the texts reflects the unfolding of the levels of meaning.

MONGÁN mac Fiáchnai, the prince of Dál nAraidí, did not leave an impressive historical legacy, having died before his more politically successful father.² However, Mongán the literary character has left a major impression in the written record. A group of eighth-century texts consistently portrays him as an extremely powerful figure, though not in the sense of military or political prowess. Mongán's power comes from his poetic ability and apparent connections to the Otherworld. At the same time, the texts display subtle but unmistakable Christian and Christological allusions which creates a discursive dynamic between secular and ecclesiastical modes of knowledge. Mongán's otherworldly perspective can be viewed as a metatext which, to a Christian reader, illustrates the familiar methodology of biblical exegesis. The emphasis on Mongán's poetic abilities reveals that the workings of poetic inspiration are not at odds with but, in fact, mirror the exegetical method with its interplay between history and higher sense. To describe this twofold view of the

¹This paper started as a presentation for Dr Nora White's Old Irish reading class on the Mongán tales at Maynooth University in Spring 2020. My gratitude to Dr White for encouraging me to write it up into an article and for reading an early version. I also thank Dr Daniel Watson (Aarhus) who kept his promise to be 'as mean as possible' in his feedback and, in doing so, helped define and refine my ideas in more ways than I can count. My thanks to Dr Elizabeth Boyle (Maynooth) who patiently read every iteration of this article and supported my work throughout. A special thanks to Dr Chantal Kobel (DIAS) for kindly letting me read her forthcoming work. My gratitude also extends to the anonymous reader, whose comments helped streamline my argument and provided me with further references, and to the editors of *Celtica* who guided me through the process of publishing my first article as a doctoral researcher. All errors and shortcomings remain my own.

²Mongán's death, and a rather unremarkable one at that, is recorded in the Annals of Ulster in an entry for the year AD 625. His father Fiáchnae mac Báetáin, on the other hand, was a powerful ruler and the king of Ulster from 588 until his death in battle in 626. He might have even claimed the high kingship of Tara. For a discussion, see White (2006: 58, 62–6).

world I introduce the term ‘double perspective’. This study seeks to show that the amalgam of the pagan setting and overt Christian themes should not be viewed as counterintuitive or egregious. Rather, the fusion of these elements in the Mongán tales is a reflection of the intellectual fusion of ecclesiastical and secular learning in early medieval Ireland.

IMMACALLAM CHOLUIM CHILLE AND PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON
METATEXTUALITY

We start with a rather enigmatic text called *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg* ‘The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth at Carn Eolairg’. Like the four core Mongán stories, it was part of the now lost *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (= *CDS*) manuscript compiled in the eighth century or copied from an eighth-century exemplar, presumably in the monastery of Druimm Snechtai or Bangor.³ John Carey (1995a: 82–3) argues that the *Immacallam* was not originally a part of the Mongán tradition but was artificially pulled into its orbit by means of a short addition to the title: *as-berat alaili bad é Mongán mac Fiachnai* ‘some say he was Mongán mac Fiachna’.⁴ James Carney (1976: 192) also suggested that the mysterious youth could be ‘a manifestation of Manannán mac Lir’. Whatever the case may be, the connection to Mongán is preserved in both surviving copies of the *Immacallam* and thus appears to be a deliberate decision on the part of the compiler(s).⁵ As such, it expands the canon of the Mongán tales. Therefore, I will treat the *Immacallam* on the same terms as other Mongán material as it was clearly intended to complement the overall narrative, at least in the context of *CDS*.

As the title suggests, the tale is a conversation between St Columba and a mysterious youth. It quickly becomes evident that the youth (whom, as noted, the manuscript compilers identified as Mongán) is a supernatural being whose knowledge is superior even to that of Colum Cille. The young man recounts his multiple former incarnations: a stag, a salmon, a seal, a wolf and finally a human. While literature may depict such transformations as befalling mortal humans who then act as witnesses to historical events,⁶ Mongán’s re-embodiments

³See Carey (1995a). For a brief overview of relevant scholarship, see White (2006: 35–7). Argument for the Bangor provenance is in Mac Cana (1972: 105–6) and Stifter (2017: 24–6). Séamus Mac Mathúna (1985: 421–69) has argued that many of the *CDS* texts cannot be shown to be earlier than the tenth century and suggested that *CDS* itself could have been a tenth-century manuscript. However, Liam Breatnach (1988) has contested the validity of this dating on the grounds of linguistic evidence. For a critique of Mac Mathúna, see also McCone (2000: 43–7); White (2006, 36–7).

⁴*Immacallam*, ll. 1–2. The text is edited and translated in Carey (2002: 60–1). References are to line numbers in Carey’s edition. A similar strategy is used in the Yellow Book of Lecan where several *tána bó* are linked to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* by means of additional lines inserted into the text. See Cleary (2018: 113).

⁵For diplomatic editions of the *Immacallam* copies in TCD MS H 2. 17 (1319) and TCD MS H 3. 18 (1337), see Carey (2002: 57–9). The normalised text and translation are in Carey (2002: 60–1).

⁶See, for example, the accounts of Tuán mac Cairill and Fintan mac Bóchra who live through multiple incarnations and pass on their knowledge of history. In their final human form both accept

are a corollary of his otherworldly descent, as will be seen from the texts discussed below. Mongán's youthful appearance creates a stark contrast to his sagely demeanour and abundant knowledge of the past and the Otherworld. St Columba himself, a holy man with a gift of prophecy and a trained poet,⁷ bows down before the youth's wisdom as he takes on the role of a student 'to ask him about heavenly and earthly mysteries' (*dia iarfaigid na rún nemdae 7 talmandae*).⁸ Unfortunately for the reader, the contents of this conversation are left, for the most part, undisclosed. Nevertheless, Columba's holiness in combination with his poetic credentials bridges the gap between ecclesiastical learning and *senchas* (Nagy 1988: 369–70; Johnston 2015: 421) to give him the spiritual insight required to receive Mongán's unspeakable mysteries — a privilege refused to the ordinary monks, who are also present in the story, and to the tale's audience. Moreover, Colum Cille's eagerness to learn from the otherworldly youth confirms the legitimacy of Mongán's knowledge within a Christian worldview.

I would like to propose that the *Immacallam* and other Mongán-centred texts lend themselves to a metatextual reading in which narrative dichotomies reflect the binaries of language and logic of composition such as juxtaposition of Irish and Latin, history and the spiritual sense. Elva Johnston has prepared the ground for such an argument in her incisive analysis of the *Immacallam*. She brings to light the use of code-switching in the text as a linguistic means to express the boundary between familiar and unfamiliar: the insertion of Latin as a professional code, though sparing, marks off certain information as exclusive. Latin tags are used three times to introduce characters' speech (two for *respondit iuuenis* and one for *respondit Colum Cille*) and, according to Johnston, they indicate that the conversation has moved from the level of casual comprehension into the realm of mysteries (Johnston 2015: 423). Latin as the code of the few and, more specifically, of those in whose knowledge ecclesiastical tradition puts its trust, is used similarly in *Echtrae Chonnlai*, another CDS text. Latin introduces statements of the otherworldly woman who appears

baptism. See editions and translations in Carey (1984); Best (1910). I thank Dr Daniel Watson for this suggestion. A brief comparison between Mongán's rebirths and those of Tuán and Fintan can be found in Watson (2020: 34–7).

⁷Prophetic and poetic gift are attributes that are firmly associated with the Columba of the literary tradition. He is said to be the author of several Latin hymns including *Altus prosator*, *Adiutor laborantium* and *Noli pater indulgere* although this attribution is likely false (on *Altus prosator*, see Carey 1998: 29; Stevenson 1999: 364–5; however, Clancy and Márkus (1995: 39–40, 69–70) are more open to Columban authorship of *Altus prosator* and *Adiutor laborantium*; on *Noli pater indulgere*, see Clancy and Márkus 1995: 81–2). However, the entire first book of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* is dedicated solely to the holy man's prophecies. Adomnán prefaces those narratives with an explanation: *ab annis iuuenilibus coepit etiam profetiae spiritu pollere, uentura praedicare, praesentibus absentia nuntiare, quia quamuis absens corpore praesens tamen spiritu longe acta peruidere poterat* 'he began from his youthful years to be strong also in the spirit of prophecy; to foretell future events; to declare absent things to those present, because although absent in the body he was present in spirit, and able to observe what took place far away' (*Vita Columbae*, 1.1 (10a)). The text is edited and translated in Anderson and Anderson (1961, here at 204–5). Joseph Nagy also points out that in Middle Irish tradition Columba is well versed in the techniques of *filidecht* and 'possesses solid credentials as a poet' (Nagy 1997: 147–8, 167).

⁸*Immacallam*, ll. 23–4.

to Connlae (*mulier respondit, dixit mulier*) thus underlining her wisdom and association with *ecclesia*.⁹

Beyond this, the *Immacallam*'s use of code-switching may also be an invitation for the reader to consider a different approach to interpreting the text. Johnston makes an intriguing suggestion that the fragment of the conversation captured in the *Immacallam*, namely the youth's descriptions of the otherworldly realms, seems to invite a layered interpretation along the lines of biblical exegesis with its fourfold sense: 'the historical, allegorical, typological and anagogical' (Johnston 2015: 425). While such a fourfold scheme does not, in the end, seem to fully map onto the text of the *Immacallam*,¹⁰ I do agree that there are certain prompts in the text that dispose the readers to consider at least a twofold signification. The main interplay is between a combination of the historical/literal meaning and mystical or spiritual sense which encompasses allegory and anagogy. On the narrative level it is reflected in the swift verbal (and mental) traversal back and forth between past and present, between this world and the Otherworld that is made possible by the youth's transcendent understanding of the world. On the metatextual level, it is a commentary on and an example of the practice of reading non-biblical texts with a Christian mindset: the world of the *Immacallam* is a text which Columba, and medieval Christian scholars who produced and read the *Immacallam*, are alike in wishing to understand; Mongán's ability to see the hidden parts of that world which belong to history or to a higher reality, shows the exegetical method at work.

EXEGESIS, *GRAMMATICA* AND CHRISTIAN READING PRACTICES

Christian textual culture has its foundation in the systematic study of language under the auspices of *grammatica*, a discipline which not only covered the formal analysis of normative language but also, on a more advanced level, concerned itself with problems of interpretation. This latter branch of the curriculum was known as *enarratio* in Latin and, of course, *exegesis* in Greek (Irvine 1994: 178–86). An integral part of *enarratio* was the grammatical theory of tropes which grew out of the semiotic works of Aristotle and the Stoics and made its way into the middle ages via late antique grammars and Isidore's *Etymologiae* (Irvine 1994: 225–32). Broadly speaking, any linguistic utterance can be classified as either *verba propria* 'literal expression' or as *verba translata* 'transferred expression'. One of the most important members of the latter category is allegory. These *verba translata*, or tropes, differ from *verba propria* in that their use requires the presence of two semantic levels: expression

⁹See Hollo (2011: 121). On the Christian metaphor in *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, with the mysterious woman as *ecclesia* and the blissful world of immortality as spiritual conversion, see McCone (1990: 79–83, 157–8; 2000: 100–4); Williams (2016: 49–56). *Echtrae Chonnlaí* is edited and translated in McCone (2000).

¹⁰See the following section for a more detailed discussion of the exegetical method and its possible application to the *Immacallam*.

with its primary reference and signification that points beyond it (Irvine 1994: 247–9).

Irish scholars of the early middle ages showed an almost unprecedented interest in the study of language, and their grammatical training inevitably influenced their reading of biblical and non-biblical texts alike. Sedulius Scottus, one of the most renowned Irish intellectuals of the ninth century, clearly stated the primacy of allegory as a hermeneutic tool in his commentary on Donatus' *Ars maior*:

Tamen ad allegoriam pro sui excellentia haec descriptio, quae aliis etiam tropis communis inuenitur, proprie refertur, quippe per allegoriam prae ceteris tropis plus et multiplicius aliud significatur quam dicitur (ed. Löfstedt 1977: 386, ll. 94–7).

'However, the description which is common to other tropes properly refers to allegory on account of its excellence: indeed, allegory, more so than other tropes, signifies something different than what is said in more varied ways' (my translation).

Similar philological considerations also lie at the heart of biblical exegesis. As Frances Young has suggested, the two traditions of exegesis which are traditionally depicted as rivals — the Antiochene school with its preference for literal/historical interpretation and the Alexandrian school as the proponents of the allegorical sense — in fact trace their methodologies to literary scholarship and differ only in their understanding of figurative language in Scripture (Young 2003). Likewise, Jerome's study of the Bible, particularly his work with the Hebrew text, is greatly indebted to the grammatical method of reading (Graves 2007: 13–75). Building on the foundation of *enarratio*, biblical exegesis shifted the balance away from the questions of normative linguistic usage and style towards problems of signification and layers of meaning. Patristic texts offer multiple variations on the idea of manifold sense of Scripture from which the common fourfold scheme eventually crystallised, comprising the historical, allegorical, moral and anagogical senses.¹¹

In early medieval Ireland, the theory of exegesis developed along similar lines. One fairly representative summary of it is found in the early ninth-century *Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter*:

Atá cetharde as toiscide isnaib salmaib .i. cétna stoir ocus stoir tánaise, síens ocus morolus. Cétna stoir fri Duíd ocus fri Solomon [...]. Stoir tánaise fri Ezechiam [...]. Síens fri Críst, frisin n-eclais talmandai ocus nemdai. Morolus fri cech nóib.

'There are four things that are necessary in the psalms, to wit, the first history, and the second history, the sense and the morality. The first history refers to David and to Solomon [...]. The second history to Hezekiah [...]. The meaning to Christ, to the earthly and

¹¹ One of the most influential studies of this process is Henri de Lubac's monumental *Exégèse médiévale* (1959–64; trans. 1998–2009). See also Evans (1984).

heavenly church. The morality to every saint' (ed. and trans. Meyer 1894: 30–1, ll. 312–20).¹²

This formula reflects an exegetical tradition which arose and developed in Ireland during the eighth century, and was often applied to Psalter study, with further examples found in the introduction to the Psalter in the late-eighth-century *Reference Bible* (or *das Bibelwerk*) and the early ninth-century Milan glosses.¹³ This fourfold order of signification is formally reminiscent of the more or less standard medieval schema but contains a few important differences. In the Irish version, the term *síans* (from Latin *sensus*) seems to conflate the Christological allegory and the eschatological dimension of anagogy; however, the centrepiece of the Irish schema are its two historical senses: one contemporaneous with the composition of the psalms and one referring to generations after David, not exceeding, however, the timeframe of the Old Testament.

This highlighting of the historical sense has often been interpreted as evidence that Irish exegesis developed under the influence of the Antiochene tradition.¹⁴ R. L. Ramsay (1912: 468) considered the Irish fourfold scheme with two historical senses to be 'the final fusion of the two schools of interpretation': the Antiochene and the Alexandrian. This process, however, is difficult to see as anything other than a natural development. If we go back to the scriptural roots of allegorical interpretation, we will find that the unity of history and allegory is at the core of Christian exegetical practices. Paul's exegesis *per allegoriam* in Galatians 4:21–31 defines Christian historical consciousness by establishing a 'relationship of meaning between prefiguration and fulfilment' (Ohly 1958: 10; trans. 2005: 25). The double historical sense in the passage from the *Old Irish Treatise* likewise presupposes a certain transference of meaning, as the 'second history' (*stoir tánaise*) acknowledges the prophetic nature of certain psalms (even if within the Old Testament itself) and creates an additional, nonliteral reference which necessitates a typological, if not an allegorical, reading.¹⁵

There are many indications that Irish scholars were not just aware of the multiple approaches to reading the Bible but were capable of using them with

¹²I have slightly adapted the translation, replacing Meyer's 'story' (*stoir*) with 'history'. On this text, see Ó Néill (1979).

¹³For the relevant passages in the Milan glosses see ML 14d7–10 (*Thes* i, 13). For the *Reference Bible* (unedited) see BnF MS Lat. 11561, fol. 56va4–23. On the connections between the *Old Irish Treatise* and the *Reference Bible*, see Ó Néill (1979: 159–62). The scheme is also repeated in a late-tenth century poem on the Psalter by Airbertach mac Cosse (Ó Néill 1977: 32).

¹⁴See Ramsay (1912: 453–76); McNamara and Sheehy (1973: 257–9); McNamara (2000: 91–7; 225–8, 385–93 *et passim*); Ó Néill (2002: 77). However, the writings of Jerome, one of the champions of the philological method, were well known in Ireland and might have influenced the literal/historical level of Irish exegesis, as hinted at by Daniel Watson (2018: 311, n. 1183). This suggests that the focus on history in Irish texts cannot be considered a purely 'Antiochene' phenomenon.

¹⁵The term 'typology', as distinct from allegory, is a modern creation and it emphasises the connection between the higher meaning and the historical reference. For a recent overview of relevant scholarship and the use of the term in patristic texts, see Martens (2008).

considerable flexibility. Some Hiberno-Latin commentaries demonstrate the familiarity of Irish exegetes with the more common fourfold model,¹⁶ although oftentimes authors would operate on no more than two hermeneutic levels, depending on the purpose of the work. Ailerán, for instance, opts for the allegorical and moral senses in his exposition of Hebrew names.¹⁷ But more often *historia* and the syncretic *sensus*, or *stoir* and *síans* in the vernacular tradition, are the exegetes' choice, as Bernhard Bischoff and other scholars have observed.¹⁸ The use of *sensus/síans* to refer to the mystical sense of the Bible seems to be a specifically Irish feature found in the *Old Irish Treatise*, the Milan glosses, the *Reference Bible* and *Eclogae tractatorum in Psalterium* — all Irish works that contrast history and the spiritual interpretation.¹⁹ The most common exegetical mode, then, seems to be twofold, with one meaning relating the word to a thing in the world and another, higher meaning which connects that thing to something beyond itself. The meaningful historical reference coexists with a sublime spiritual sense, the latter being hinted at in places where the letter of the narrative departs from what could be considered to be plausible or 'realistic'.²⁰

Within the Christian tradition, the dichotomy between the historical and the spiritual dimension of a narrative as an interpretative strategy was primarily intended for reading sacred scripture.²¹ However, it eventually found legitimate

¹⁶See, for instance, the anonymous commentary on the Gospel of Luke in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 997, especially on Luke 2:24: *Quid argenti color nisi eloquentiam diuinæ historiae significat? Per auri autem formam sensum triplicem spiritalem indicat idest tropologiam, anagogen, allegoriam* 'What does the colour of silver signify if not the eloquence of the divine history? Through the figure of gold, he indicates the triple spiritual sense, that is, tropology, anagogy, and allegory' (ed. Kelly 1974: 18, ll. 221–3; my translation). On this text, see also Bischoff (1966: 261–2). Another example of fourfold exegesis, with a historical, spiritual, moral and anagogical interpretation, can be found in the notes for a Pentecostal homily in the Book of Armagh (TCD MS 52, fol. 171va7–22).

¹⁷Edited and translated by Aidan Breen (1995).

¹⁸Bischoff (1966: 221). Martin McNamara (2000: 217–19) notes that in the Catena on the Psalms from Vatican, MS Pal. Lat. 68 historical sense is contrasted with the spiritual through the formulae *historialiter* and *spiritualiter*. A twofold approach, where both historical and mystical interpretation are valued, can be found in the introduction to the Psalter in the *Reference Bible* from Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14276, fol. 94v–99r. The text bases the authority of spiritual and historical exegesis on Ambrose and Jerome respectively (see the edited fragment in McNamara and Sheehy 1973: 292). Another example of a consistent twofold interpretation are the glosses in the Southampton Psalter. For a discussion, see the preface to Ó Néill's edition (2012: xlviii–lv).

¹⁹See McNamara (2000: 95). Concerning this point, Pierre-Yves Lambert (2016: 89) suggests that the use of *síans* as a technical term for the spiritual sense might indicate that Irish scholars were reading allegorical commentaries like those of Jerome, Augustine and Ambrose even before they had access to Theodore of Mopsuestia's work. Unfortunately, he does not substantiate this statement.

²⁰Isidore of Seville emphasised the importance of physical plausibility for identifying a narrative as historical: 'Histories (*historiae*) are true deeds that have happened, plausible narrations (*argumenta*) are things that, even if they have not happened, nevertheless could happen, and fables (*fabulae*) are things that have not happened and cannot happen, because they are contrary to nature' (*Etym.* 1.44.5). *Etymologiae* are edited in Lindsay (1911) and translated in Barney et al. (2006). References are to book, chapter and section numbers.

²¹But indeed, Christian allegorical exegesis had as its predecessor pagan allegoresis practised by the Stoics, often in the study of Homer, while Philo of Alexandria applied it to the Jewish Scripture. See Ramelli (2011: 336–41); Daniélou (1955: 178–91). Joseph Mazzeo puts forward the idea that Stoic and Christian allegorisation shared a common motivation with regard to morally or

use for non-biblical and even some explicitly pagan texts where it was sometimes considered the only applicable or 'ethical' interpretation (Ohly 1958: 18; Irvine 1994: 155–60; Wolff 2008: 60–1). This is important to emphasise since the subject of this study is a group of texts of exactly this category. Christianity did not pass up the opportunity to appropriate authoritative pagan texts to its own advantage: for example, the Christian readings of Virgil's 'messianic' fourth eclogue, Fulgentius' moral interpretation of the *Aeneid* or even Augustine's allegorisation of his own conversion through Virgil's epic.²² The Irish too participated in this tradition: an early-eighth century Hiberno-Latin set of scholia on Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* known as *Scholia Bernensia* offers Christian allegorical readings of the Poet's works.²³ Although the scholia rely, for the most part, on the Late Antique commentary ascribed to a certain Iulius Philagrius, the Irish scholiast occasionally supplies additional allegorical meanings independently (Irvine 1994: 148–55).

When it comes to vernacular literature, Irish ecclesiastics seem to be equally at home with adding a second, allegorical level of meaning to native tales while still acknowledging their historical veracity. *Echtrae Chonnlaí* has been mentioned already in light of the connection between the otherworldly woman and *ecclesia*. Apart from providing a commentary on the relationship between Christianity, paganism and kingship as social institutions,²⁴ seeing the otherworldly woman allegorically as *ecclesia* helps fuse the central message of Christian salvation with the tale's elegant narrative so that one enhances the other (Hollo 2011: 128).

Another example of the use of allegory in a native composition is the tale 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' (mid- to late-eighth century) which, as Kaarina Hollo's analysis reveals, can be read as an allegory of the crucifixion and the Eucharist.²⁵ She argues that the eponymous man in the tree represents Christ on the cross administering communion consisting of a nut, an apple and water to the representatives of *tria genera animalium*: a creature of the earth (deer), a creature of the air (bird) and a creature of water (fish) (Hollo 2012: 54–7). Overt typology which casts a native character as the type of a Biblical figure is a more delicate technique (Christological typology in particular may be questionable at

dogmatically problematic texts (such as Homer or the Jewish Scripture) and a desire 'to harmonize the conflict between the authoritative, ancient poetic books with the claims of philosophical reason or rationalized revelation' (Mazzeo 1978: 8). We might add, following Ramelli (2011: 340–1), that this use of allegory was not merely apologetic, that is attempting to 'redeem' texts of doubtful value, but aimed at integrating them into the prevailing paradigm in 'a broad cultural synthesis'.

²²For these texts respectively, see Courcelle (1957); Wolff (2008); Bennett (1988).

²³See Herren (1999: 55–6). The text is edited in Hagen (1867). The Old Irish glosses are partly edited in *Thes.* ii, 46–8, 360–3. At the same time, Carolingian tradition of glossing Virgil did not shy away from expounding pagan mythology for its own worth, without recourse to Christian morals. See O'Sullivan (2018).

²⁴On the depiction in *Echtrae Chonnlaí* of the relationship between the Church and secular rulership as well as allusions to Patrick's destruction of druidry, see McCone (2000: 102–6).

²⁵The text survives in one copy (TCD MS H 3. 18 (1337)) and is edited and translated in Meyer (1904a). The language of the tale displays Old Irish features, as discussed by Breatnach (1990: 139–40).

times) but it is used nonetheless: here, typological proximity between Cú Chulainn and Christ or David comes to mind,²⁶ or indeed an explicit link between Mongán and Christ in *Immram Brain* which will be addressed shortly.

‘DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE’ IN THE *IMMACALLAM* AND *IMMRAM BRAIN*

Undoubtedly, ecclesiastical education taught Irish scholars to skilfully manoeuvre between layers of historical interpretation and higher sense. It is necessary to read the *Immacallam*, where the juxtaposition of Christian and pre-Christian is not just the subtext but the text itself, with the above considerations in mind. Viewed in this light, the *Immacallam* offers a meta-commentary on the Christian method of reading — a motif reprised in *Immram Brain*.

The conversation between Columba and the young Mongán is portrayed as taking place on the shore of Lough Foyle in the north of Ireland. When Columba inquires about the lough’s history the youth tells him about the times long ago, when the lough used to be solid ground. Mongán constructs a tangible link between the past and the present by recounting his former incarnations. It seems that for him different timelines are running parallel on a metahistorical plane: one when the lough was a flowery meadow and Mongán himself was a stag and a wolf, another one when it became a lake and he became a salmon and a seal. The stories of the past finally coalesce with the present when Mongán is reborn as a human.²⁷ He uses parallel phrases to list them all, thus creating a repeating rhythm and emphasising their parallelism: *Ro giult-sa a mbasa os; ro senas a mbasa é, a mbasa rón; ro ráth a mbasa cú allaid; imma-rulod a mbasa duine* ‘I have grazed it when I was a stag; I have swum it when I was a salmon, when I was a seal; I have run upon it when I was a wolf; I have gone around it when I was a human’.²⁸ Historically, these events must lie far apart but within the narrative they acquire a certain unity through Mongán’s incarnations, and emerge as a typologically determined historical parallel reminiscent of the double historical sense of Irish exegetical tradition.

Next, Columba wants to know what lies under the sea and Mongán tells him about an otherworldly realm hidden underwater.²⁹ There is no lack in modern scholarship of interpretations of the Otherworld as a Christian earthly paradise with its pre-fall bliss.³⁰ There is, therefore, solid groundwork to view the Otherworld as a part of Irish ecclesiastical paradigm. Considered metatextually, the

²⁶Ralph O’Connor (2013: 245–6) presents a measured argument in favour of the allegory of Christ’s incarnation in Cú Chulainn’s birth tale, balancing between Kim McCone’s (1990: 197–9) and John Kelleher’s (1971: 121–2) optimism for ‘native’ typology and sceptical views as expressed, for instance, by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (2014: 213–14). Elizabeth Boyle (2021: 55–61) argues that a tenth-century narrative from the Yellow Book of Lecan portrays David’s fight with Goliath by using the imagery of Cú Chulainn killing the eponymous hound of Culann in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

²⁷*Immacallam*, ll. 9–12.

²⁸*Immacallam*, ll. 10–12.

²⁹*Immacallam*, ll. 16–21.

³⁰See, for example, Carney (1955: 281–7); Mac Cana (1972: 123; 1976: 95–9); Carey (1987; 1995b: 44–7); McCone (1990: 80–2).

mystery of this ethereal Otherworld coupled with its inaccessibility to regular sense-perception (an underwater environment is generally not very accommodating to humans) makes for a good representation of *sensus* or *síans* — the higher sense, the incorporeal meaning intelligible to the mind. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Columba chooses precisely this moment to lead the youth aside, away from the monks' ears, to ask him about 'the heavenly and earthly mysteries' (*rún nemdae 7 talmandae*).³¹ The phrasing may remind one of the *Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter* and its definition of *síans* as referring 'to Christ, to the earthly and heavenly church' (*fri Críst, frisín n-eclais talmandai ocus nemdai* (Meyer 1894: 30, ll. 319–20)). It appears that Columba's interruption of the dialogue right when Mongán starts describing the Otherworld pinpoints the moment when the conversation transitions from history to allegory.

The analogy between the *Immacallam*'s imagery and the categories of exegesis which we have traced, while it does not equate the two, is certainly pointing towards a connection that is entirely in accord with intellectual sensibilities of the period. Moreover, it provides a certain logical structure and epistemological purpose to the narrative, which is otherwise quite enigmatic. It also reveals that there is a deeper rationale at work in Mongán's shape-shifting abilities³² and in the mutual respect that he and St Columba display. Lastly, this perspective is not exclusive to the *Immacallam*. It is also applicable, with very similar results, to *Immram Brain*, which may suggest that the proposed metatextual reading was something of a programmatic element in these texts.

Immram Brain is yet another CDS text firmly connected to the four Mongán tales and to the *Immacallam*.³³ Composed in the eighth century,³⁴ it features Mongán only indirectly: his birth is prophesied but he does not appear in the tale as a character. The prophecy is delivered by Manannán mac Lir, Mongán's divine father himself. Manannán's verses in the *Immram* relating Mongán's birth fit well with the account given in the *Compert Mongáin*, in that in both texts Mongán's mother begets the child by Manannán while Fiachnae, Mongán's 'human father', accepts him as his son. Mongán's divine and human descent makes the parallel with Christ fairly transparent, even if its purpose is less so.³⁵ It is, moreover, reinforced by the deliberate juxtaposition within the poem of

³¹*Immacallam*, ll. 23–4.

³²For a more in-depth discussion of the reincarnation motif in the Mongán tradition and its interpretation as a manifestation of non-ecclesiastical but divinely inspired natural law see Watson (2020: 52–6).

³³See Carey (1995a: 91) where he suggests, following Carney's dating (1976: 180–1, n. 19, 192), that the *Immacallam*, being an earlier, seventh-century text, influenced *Immram Brain* and the Mongán tales. However, he has since hinted that the *Immacallam* and *Immram Brain* might be contemporary eighth-century compositions. See Carey (2002: 53, 56); White (2006: 46).

³⁴For the date and arguments against Mac Mathúna's (1985: 421–69) tenth-century dating, see Breatnach (1988); McCone (2000: 43–7).

³⁵Carney (1955: 282–90) regards the entire text of *Immram Brain* a sustained Christian allegory whereas Mac Cana (1972: 123–5) maintains that Christian interpretation should be limited to the verse portions. The Christological parallels are also noted by McCone (1990: 80–2) and Williams (2016: 65–8).

the birth of Christ and the birth of Mongán.³⁶ From this it necessarily follows that the two divine fathers are also typologically linked — a conclusion which elicited some reservations from Mark Williams (2016: 67) who noted that ‘typology was not normally applied to pagan myths.’ Although we have already seen that this is not exactly true for late antique and early medieval tradition in general, this particular sentiment seems to arise from ethical concerns, notably the erotic imagery associated with the native characters such as the physicality of Mongán’s conception (Williams 2016: 68). However, these objections do not pose an insurmountable problem in the way of a typological reading since typology does not stipulate exact identity between the type and its referent. Manannán is not identical to the God the Father, to be sure, and neither is Mongán identical to Christ. The connection between their human and divine descent still obtains and is deliberate.

The theological reading of Manannán’s verses can be further enhanced by considering the metatext. Like Mongán’s description of historical and supernatural worlds in the *Immacallam*, *Immram Brain* also prompts the audience to explore a two-level interpretation. After a dramatic appearance — Bran sees ‘a man in a chariot coming towards him over the sea’ (*conaccai a dochum in fer isin charput íarsin muir*)³⁷ — Manannán starts reciting the following verses:

- 33 Cáine amre lasin m-Bran
ina churchán tar muir nglan;
os mé im’ charput di chéin,
is mag scothach immaréid.
- 34 A n-as muir glan
don nóí broinig itá Bran,
is mag meld co n-immut scoth
dam-sa a carput dá roth.
- 35 Atchí Bran
lín tond tibri tar muir nglan:
atchíu cadéin i Maig Mon
scotha cennderga cen on.
- 36 Taitnet gabra lir i sam
sella roisc rosíri Bran,
bruindit scotha srúaim de mil,
i crích Manannáin maic Lir.
- 37 Lí na fairgge foratái,
geldod mora immerái,
rasert bude ocus glass,
is talam, nad écomrass.

³⁶See *Immram Brain*, §§48–51. Edited and translated in Meyer (1895, here at 22–5).

³⁷Ed. and trans. Meyer (1895: 16–17, §32).

- 33 'Bran deems it a marvellous beauty
In his coracle across the clear sea;
While to me in my chariot from afar,
It is a flowery plain on which he rides about.
- 34 What is a clear sea
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is,
That is a happy plain with profusion of flowers
To me from the chariot of two wheels.
- 35 Bran sees
Many smiling waves across the clear sea;
I myself see in Mag Mon
Red-headed flowers without fault.
- 36 Sea-horses glisten in summer —
The prospect which Bran can range over;
Flowers pour forth a stream of honey
In the land of Manannán son of Ler.
- 37 The sheen of the sea on which you are,
The white hue of the sea on which you row about:
Yellow and azure are spread out,
It is solid land.'³⁸

These stanzas offer a continuous interplay of two perspectives: what Bran's human eye sees as the sea to Manannán is a flowery plain. This double imagery might be inspired by Virgil's *maris aequor* 'the plain of the sea' ploughed by ships which is a recurring motif in the *Aeneid*.³⁹ Moreover, the tale's image of a sea-god in a chariot might itself allude to Virgil's description of Neptune.⁴⁰ The

³⁸Ed. and trans. Meyer (1895: 16–19, §§33–7). I have made several adjustments to Meyer's edition and translation. In the original text, I have used the spelling with nasalisation for the phrase *tar muir nglan* in §33 and §35, based on the majority of variant readings provided by Meyer himself (1895: 17, 19). In §36, line 3 Meyer (1895: 19) emends *scotha* 'flowers' attested in four manuscripts for *srotha* 'rivers'. This emendation breaks the observable pattern whereby the first couplet of each quatrain depicts Bran's vision and the second couplet contrasts it with Manannán's. Therefore, I restore the reading *scotha* (as does Mac Mathúna (1985: 39, l. 157)). I have also made minor alterations to the translation. I have substituted the obsolete 'thou art' and 'thou rowest' forms with 'you are' and 'you row', and the archaic 'main' (§37.1) with 'sea'. I have also changed the translation of the last line of §37 *is talam, nad écomrass* ('It is land, and it is not rough' in Meyer's version) by resolving a double negative (*nad écomrass* 'which is not non-solid' = 'which is solid') to bring out the contrast between sea and land (Mac Mathúna (1985: 52) arrives at the same translation). In addition, I have changed the translation of two difficult lines (§§35.2, 36.2) according to the suggestions made by Liam Breatnach in his review of Mac Mathúna's edition (Breatnach 1988: 185).

³⁹See for example, *Aeneid*, 2.780, 3.495; cf. 1.35, 10.197. Edited in Mynors (1969), translated in Ahl (2007). I thank Dr Elizabeth Boyle for this hint. There is evidence that the text of *Aeneid* was known and used in Ireland at least since the ninth century, along with Virgil's other works (see Hofman 1988; Herren 1999: 50–60).

⁴⁰*Aeneid*, 1.154–6, as proposed by Williams (2016: 62–3).

parallels, if intentional, add another — Classical — dimension to the already established synthesis of vernacular and Christian learning. Since the *Aeneid* was itself a frequent subject of allegorical readings — pagan (like the commentary by the Latin grammarian Servius) and Christian alike — there might also exist a typological relationship between Manannán and Neptune.⁴¹

There is an important intertextual link between *Immram Brain* and the *Immacallam* which puts them in the same historical setting, both in the modern sense and as regards the exegetical *historia*. James Carney (1976) persuasively reconstructed a missing link between Manannán's verses in the *Immram* and Mongán's account of the history of Lough Foyle in the *Immacallam*. He suggested that there existed a now lost tale tentatively called *Echtrae Brain*. In it, Bran, ill-advised by a wizard, brings about the destruction of his own kingdom which gets inundated and thus becomes Lough Foyle. It is precisely the place where St Columba has his supernatural encounter. Carney (1976: 184) suggested that *Echtrae Brain* was an earlier variant of the story told in the *Immram*, namely Bran's 'adventurous and perilous visit' to the Otherworld. Carney's argument is based in part on a second Lough Foyle colloquy, *Immacallam in Druad Brain 7 inna Banfátho Febuil ós Loch Febuil* 'The Conversation of Bran's Druid and Febul's Prophetess above Loch Febuil'.⁴² This text, also considered to be a part of *CDS*,⁴³ features a character — the prophetess — who juxtaposes dry land and water, past and present of the inundated kingdom (ed. and trans. Carey 2002: 76–7). The same contrast is also found in Mongán's speech in the *Immacallam*.

Though the counterpoint structure of Manannán's verses is virtually identical to the two *Immacallma*, there is no mention of the deluge in the *Immram*. Carey (1995a: 80) suggests that Manannán's 'omissions [...] parallel those of the *Immacallma*, suggesting that it was these texts which were his sources'. I am inclined to agree with Carey that the information about the inundation is implicit in Manannán's speech — it is indeed likely, considering that the motif of the Lough Foyle deluge recurs in two other *CDS* texts. In this case, even though Bran's journey precedes the deluge, the narrative seems to artistically build on the same theme or even to prophetically allude to what is about to happen to Bran's kingdom.

The dichotomy between the sea that Bran sees and Manannán's flowery plain may be understood as a metatextual representation of the different interpretative planes of a narrative. Manannán's superior vision plays the role of *sensus* to Bran's *historia*. At the same time, this *historia* presents something of a prefiguration narrative or a 'type' for the inundation which is to occur on the level of 'second history'. Bran himself cannot recognise the significance of such prefiguration. His inability to see what Manannán sees indicates that he

⁴¹For a discussion of Irish 'mirroring' of Graeco-Roman gods with varying degrees of explicitness, see Clarke (2014: 137–9).

⁴²The text is edited and translated in Carney (1976: 178–83) and Carey (2002: 73–7).

⁴³The copy of the *Immacallam in Druad Brain* in TCD MS H 4. 22 (1363) has notes like *asin l. c. nicc* 'from the same book' and *asin l.* 'from the book' which Carney (1976: 175) takes to refer to *CDS*.

does not have access to the realm of higher meanings. However, on the inter-textual level, where the disaster is a known fact, Bran's historical perspective acquires a flavour of foreshadowing.

The hierarchy of perspectives and meanings that emerges from Manannán's verses, then, is similar to Mongán's speeches in the *Immacallam*: there are two historical planes related to each other typologically and juxtaposed with a mystical meaning which is hidden from plain sight by the curtain of the Otherworld. Penetrating through it requires a certain spiritual competence. For the lack of a better term, I would like to call this motif running through the *Immram* and the *Immacallam* 'double perspective' — a narrative device whereby two realities are unfolding at the same time and can be accessed simultaneously by a supernatural character. It is hardly a coincidence that this ability belongs to Manannán and Mongán: like father, like son.

Importantly, the double perspective device appears to, in a way, break the fourth wall by reflecting on the different levels of interpretation available to a scholar, be it an ecclesiastic or a layman. Reading is a work of careful decoding and peeling back the layers of meaning. There is always a physical reference tied to history, but the exact same words can also conceal a whole other meaning which is only revealed to a reader with the necessary knowledge and spiritual insight to access it. This perspective allows us to see Bran's and Manannán's outlooks as two stages of cognition, both of which are available to a suitably trained person. The character who best represents such a person is Mongán whose mixed nature, human and divine, allows him to operate within both mindsets.

The foregoing analysis of this small group of *CDS* texts suggests that the compiler tended to select narratives that contain a Christian metaphor and double perspective. The present findings validate such a reading of the *Immacallam* and *Immram Brain* while the Christian metaphor of *Echtrae Chonnlaí* agrees with the two texts in its use of Christian allegory. However, a more thorough study of other *CDS* texts is needed to develop this idea further. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that an educated ecclesiastic familiar with exegetical techniques and multi-level signification or a secular professional trained by the Church would find the interplay between the historical and the spiritual entirely natural. Indeed, the same rhetorical techniques could be and were applied in constructing new texts as were found in deconstructing old ones.

Before proceeding to the four core Mongán tales, it might be worthwhile to consider two examples from Irish literature outside the Mongán tradition which use allegory in a way that transcends the level of text and transforms into a meta-commentary on scholarly textual practices. One such testimony is the tenth-century tale *Airec Menman Uaird maic Coise* 'The Strategem of Urard mac Coise'. It tells the story of the poet Urard mac Coise who convinces the king of Tara to make a judgement in his favour by narrating a tale which is essentially a thinly veiled allegory of the injustice done to Urard himself.⁴⁴ Rather than teaching a moral lesson to the king, the metatextual discourse of

⁴⁴This text has been edited by Mary Byrne (1908). A partial translation is available in an unpublished Master's thesis by Judith Schoen (2015). A new edition and translation are being prepared by

Airec Menman, so Erich Poppe argues, ‘legitimizes an allegorical — or at least a non-literal or non-historical — understanding of the events narrated’ (Poppe 1999: 47). The allegory here has an interesting feature: it masquerades as an alternative historical meaning while still maintaining the typological pattern of prefiguration and fulfilment in that the tale, as a heightened repetition of history, brings a firm resolution to the ambiguity of the historical situation. Urard’s ‘strategem’ thus offers a witty tableau of the exegetical discourse of prefiguration.

Another recurring motif in the texts considered so far is the allegorisation of otherworldly landscape. In the *Immacallam* and the *Immram* the Otherworld represents the *sensus* beyond the human *historia*. In *Echtrae Chonnlae* the Otherworld to which the woman takes Connlae is itself an allegory of an even higher reality, that is, the Christian church. This latter type of allegoresis in an undiluted form can be found in the Latin poem *Mentis in excessu* ‘In ecstasy of mind’, thought to have been composed by a bishop of Dublin named Patrick (d. 1084). The only surviving copy of the poem is accompanied by extensive glosses drawing out the allegorical reading, glosses which, as Elizabeth Boyle (2016: 25) suggests, were an integral part of the text and meant to be transmitted with it. The poem describes the author’s mental journey ‘in ecstasy of mind through pleasant places in a wide countryside’ (*mentis in excessu lati loca ruris amena*).⁴⁵ Already in this opening line the glossator reveals that ‘in ecstasy of mind’ means ‘in thought according to allegory’ (*in cogitatione secundum allegoriam*) while ‘the countryside’ represents Scripture.⁴⁶ The rest of the poem introduces many wondrous characters and sights which are ascribed a precise allegorical significance: the poet’s guide is a woman glossed as Studiousness (*Studiositas*); her three sisters are ‘Intellect’, ‘Memory’ and ‘Eloquence’; they also meet seven sisters representing liberal arts and other assorted personifications.⁴⁷ There is a detailed description of a walled city glossed as *ecclesia*.⁴⁸ An important passage reveals the poem’s interest in double meaning: the city’s inhabitants get their nourishment from fruits (*poma*) whose rind is *historia*, while the fruit itself is *sensus spiritualis*, spiritual sense — a familiar formula indeed.⁴⁹ The poem ends with the conclusion that all these ‘sights of mind’ (*spectacula mentis*) are an elaborate allegory for contemplating incorporeal things.⁵⁰ Bishop Patrick’s poem is an illuminating display of the allegorical mindset at work in narratives set in non-biblical environments. As Boyle points out, ‘any cosmological truth-value which [such texts] might be deemed by their authors to possess is not necessarily (or not only) to be found on the literal level’ (Boyle 2016: 24). A text that is not overtly Christian on the surface reveals, through an exegete’s careful work, a rich Christian signification which

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⁴⁵The poem is edited and translated in Gwynn (1955: 84–101, here at 84–5, l. 5).

⁴⁶Ed. and trans. Gwynn (1955: 84–5, glosses on l. 5).

⁴⁷Ed. and trans. Gwynn (1955: 84–91, ll. 8–95).

⁴⁸Ed. and trans. Gwynn (1955: 90–3, ll. 116–25).

⁴⁹Ed. and trans. Gwynn (1955: 90, glosses on l. 113).

⁵⁰Ed. and trans. Gwynn (1955: 100, gloss on l. 254).

emerges with full clarity from the metatext of the glosses, or indeed which can be decoded by a reader well-versed in the relevant literary tropes.

THE EARLY MONGÁN TALES: POETRY, THE OTHERWORLD AND HIGHER SENSE

Unlike the *Immacallam* and *Immram Brain*, the four core Mongán tales do not appear to display any explicitly allegorical (or explicitly Christian) tendencies. The story of Mongán's birth in *Compert Mongáin* 'The Conception of Mongán' lacks the Christological dimension which it has in *Immram Brain*. Remarkably, however, all four texts have a special interest in poetry. The epistemological implications of this are not dissimilar to what we have already seen with the exegetical reading of our other texts: poetic inspiration connects physical reality with the realm of transcendent knowledge. Therefore, in this final section I will argue that exegetical and poetic modes of knowledge essentially constitute a unified epistemological paradigm.

Let us briefly recount the role of poetry in the four early tales. In the *Compert*, Mongán composes a quatrain of verse for his mother when he leaves her to find his birth father Manannán. In *Scél asa-mberar combad hé Find mac Cumail Mongáin* 'A Story from Which It Is Inferred that Mongán Was Find mac Cumail', he enters and wins an argument with a *fili*; it is also revealed that he is, in some mysterious way, Finn mac Cumail. In *Scél Mongáin* 'The Story of Mongán', Mongán meets a student poet and sends him on an errand to the Otherworld. Finally, in *Tucait Baile Mongáin* 'The Cause of Mongán's Frenzy', he recites his adventures in a state of ecstasy while — again — on a visit to the Otherworld.⁵¹ We also should not forget that Manannán's speech in *Immram Brain* is set in verse.

From all of this we may infer that the Mongán of the *CDS* tradition was trained in the poetic art. This is confirmed in another tale, known as *Scéla Mongáin mac Fíachnai ocus Eochaid Rígeicis* 'The Story of Mongán mac Fíachnai and Eochaid Rígeices'. In the recent edition and reappraisal of the text, Chantal Kobel (2022 (forthcoming a)) has dated it to c. 850–950 on linguistic grounds, which makes it somewhat younger than the eighth-century *CDS* texts. It is likely, therefore, that *Scéla* presents a later development of the Mongán cycle. In this tale, the chief poet of Ireland, called Eochaid Rígeices, proclaims that Mongán, at that time a young man, 'is the most learned youth in Ireland' (*iss ē mac dīan līa eōlus i nĒrind*).⁵² Mongán's poetic skill eventually exposes Eochaid's own ignorance in a series of challenges where the chief poet is unable to provide correct *dindsenchas* for three different places or even decipher poetic clues which Mongán gives him. In retaliation for this insult, Eochaid takes away the young man's noble status. Apart from continuing the motif of Mongán's poetic education, the premise of the tale is suspiciously similar to *Scél asa-mberar* where Mongán also gets into a quarrel with a poet and proves his superior knowledge.

⁵¹ All four tales are edited and translated by Nora White (2006: 71–83).

⁵² Ed. and trans. Kobel (2022 (forthcoming a)). The older edition is in Knott (1916).

The key element of *Scél asa-mberar*, however, is the revelation that Mongán was in fact Finn mac Cumail, which brings to mind the reembodiments he is said to have had in the *Immacallam* and the *Immram*. This is also one of the earliest mentions of Finn in literature. In later sources, poetic training emerges as a stable part of Finn's own mythos. It is tempting to hypothesise that Mongán's and Finn's poetic connections underlie their association in *Scél asa-mberar*.

Several early texts firmly associate Finn with the poetic technique known as *imbas forosnai* 'the encircling knowledge which illuminates'. The concept is well-documented and regularly occurs in legal texts concerned with the poetic hierarchy such as *Bretha Nemed*, *Uraicecht na Ríar* or the Introduction to *Senchas Már* where it is listed among the qualifications of a *fili* (Carey 1997: 42–7). The exact nature of *imbas forosnai* is more clearly revealed in narrative literature and involves certain divinatory or prophetic abilities.⁵³ Finn is said to acquire or possess this ability in three early tales: 'Finn and the Man in the Tree', *Tucait Fagbála in Fessa do Finn 7 Marbad Cúlduib* 'How Finn Obtained Knowledge and the Slaying of Cúldub' and *Scéla Mošauluim 7 Maic Con 7 Luigdech* 'The Story of Mošaulum and Mac Con and Lugaid'.

The first tale, 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' is a part of an early commentary on *Senchas Már*.⁵⁴ The Finn story glosses the term *imbas forosnai* and consists of two separate episodes. In the first one, Finn chases a certain Cúldub, a supernatural being and a thief, to a *síd*. Just as he is about to enter, a woman of the *síd* shuts the door in front of him and his finger gets caught in the doorpost. Finn puts his injured finger into his mouth and when he takes it out, 'the *imbas* illumines him' (*fortnosmen an imbas*) as he recites a rhetoric in obscure language.⁵⁵ Thus the otherworldly source of *imbas forosnai* is established — it descends upon Finn after his brief tactile contact with the *síd*. The second episode has Finn use his divinatory abilities to reveal the identity of the mysterious man in the tree, who turns out to be his former servant Derg Corra. The illuminating *imbas* thus allows Finn to see beyond the physical appearances into the hidden meaning of things. Besides that, the second episode of the tale also functions within a Christian matrix: we briefly turned to this tale earlier to consider its Christological and Eucharistic imagery (see Hollo 2012). These two thematic strands confirm that poetic clairvoyance and exegetical allegory are complementary modes of knowledge. If the former is bestowed on famous heroes and supernatural beings, the latter allows every reader to attain the same heightened level of understanding. Both, however, have their source in divine grace.

The tale *Tucait Fagbála in Fessa do Finn 7 Marbad Cúlduib* 'How Finn Obtained Knowledge and the Slaying of Cúldub' is a version of the Cúldub episode from the previous text. The two texts are closely connected and belong to the

⁵³For an overview, see Chadwick (1935).

⁵⁴Hollo (2012: 50). See also n. 25 above. The text is discussed more broadly in Murray (2017: 79–82).

⁵⁵Ed. and trans. Meyer (1904a: 346–7, §1). Attempts to translate the rhetoric have been made by Hull (1967) and Carey (1996a: 26–7). See also a discussion of the Cúldub episode in Nagy (1981: 140–1).

earliest stratum of Finn stories dating from the eighth century which makes them contemporary with the Mongán material.⁵⁶ In *Marbad Cúlduib* too, after having his thumb jammed in the door to the *síd* he gains his *fis* ‘knowledge’ as well as the ability to hear and understand the *síd*-folk. He then recites another cryptic incantation.⁵⁷ Kevin Murray (2017: 79–80) draws attention to the parallelism of the *roscada* in *Marbad Cúlduib* and ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’. The curious detail in *Marbad Cúlduib* is the focus on otherworldly speech and the exceptional circumstances in which Finn learns to understand it. This happens seemingly by chance, after a hot pursuit which literally leads Finn straight to the door to the Otherworld. Even though he is an unwanted presence in the *síd*, his brief contact with it lifts the veil, as it were, from his eyes. Once exposed to the existence of a higher reality, his mind opens to this secret realm and to the language in which it expresses itself. We should add that Finn’s newly found ability to comprehend both the physical reality and a higher, unseen world is quite reminiscent of the double perspective motif discussed previously.

To the last tale, *Scéla Mošauluim 7 Maic Con 7 Luigdech*, Kuno Meyer gave an alternative title ‘Ailill Aulom, Mac Con and Find ua Báisce’, and he dated the tale to the ninth century.⁵⁸ Máirín O’Daly pinpointed archaic linguistic features and suggested that the text might date to c. 700.⁵⁹ Here Finn appears only briefly to warn Lugaid Mac Con about the person sent to kill him and to track down the killer afterwards. The approach of the assassin as well as his later whereabouts are revealed to Finn through the incantations of *imbas forosnai* which, as Nora Chadwick (1935: 115) noted, enabled him to see what was concealed from his physical vision. The divinatory power of *imbas forosnai* in all three stories seems to be associated with obscure incantations — *retoiric* or *roscad*.⁶⁰ Manipulating language to arrive at hidden meanings is not limited to poetry but is a significant trait of Irish learned tradition as a

⁵⁶Certain forms led Kuno Meyer (1910: xix) to date it to the ninth century while Vernam Hull (1941: 322–3) proposed a mid-eighth-century date. Kevin Murray (2017: 74) likewise suggests that it and ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’ can both be dated to the eighth century. For a brief discussion of the text and the poetic motif in early Finn tales, see Murray (2017: 77–9; 142–3).

⁵⁷The text is edited and translated in Hull (1941: 329–33). See also an earlier edition by Meyer (1893: 245–7). The passage described is in Hull (1941: 330, ll. 21–31).

⁵⁸See Meyer (1910: xxi). The text is edited and translated by Kuno Meyer (1910: 28–41) and by Máirín O’Daly (1975: 74–87; the Finn episode is on pp. 84–5).

⁵⁹O’Daly (1975: 18). This position is supported by Kevin Murray (2003: 200 n. 22; 2017: 89).

⁶⁰On *roscad* and *retoiric*, the varieties of unrhymed accentual verse which use intentionally obscure language, in Irish literature, see Carney (1955: 299–303), Murphy (1961: 2–7), Mac Cana (1966), Hull (1967), Breatnach (1991), Corthals (1996). On the significance of intentionally obscure discourse, see Carey (1996a), Stacey (2007), Kobel (forthcoming b).

whole, especially in the grammatical curriculum.⁶¹ Here, as in Christian exegesis, linguistic concerns specifically underlie the search for the most profound knowledge.

Finn's poetic ability and the access to supernatural knowledge that it grants has been explored by Maria Tymoczko in relation to *Cétamon* 'May Day', a poem on the coming of summer which Finn recites in the twelfth-century narrative *Macgnímrada Finn* 'The Boyhood Deeds of Finn'.⁶² The poem itself is presumed to be earlier than the rest of the text and probably goes back to the ninth century.⁶³ Tymoczko (1983: 25 *et passim*) convincingly argues that *Cétamon* is not so much an artistic description of a summer landscape as it is a manifestation of deeper poetic knowledge that encompasses all happenings of the season and which only the mind's eye can perceive simultaneously. By composing the poem, Finn proves his *éicse* — 'mental sight, prophetic powers, learning and poetic skill' (Tymoczko 1983: 33). The poet's omnipresence and omniscience are a result of supernatural inspiration.

Another nature poem, one that brings the tidings of winter, is ascribed to Finn in the Middle Irish scholia on *Amrae Coluimb Chille* 'The Elegy of Colum Cille'.⁶⁴ The well-known poem *Scél lem dúib* is dated to the ninth or tenth century and is prefaced in six of the seven surviving copies with the words *ut dixit Finn* 'as Finn said' or a variant thereof.⁶⁵ Tymoczko's conclusions regarding the poetic clairvoyance of nature verse can similarly be applied to *Scél lem dúib*. The placement of the poem in the scholarly apparatus of *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, a text stemming from St Columba's monastic *familia*, may not be a definitive link between Colum Cille, Mongán, Finn and their common poetic background but it is at least worth noting. It suggests that at the time the scholia were compiled or copied, the author thought it significant to acknowledge Finn's (supposed) authorship and thus bring his poetic authority to bear on the Columban tradition.

⁶¹Irish scholars were particularly fond of the etymological method as a means to arrive at the innermost meaning of words. The *Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter* often uses *inne* 'inner sense' to start an etymological explanation (Meyer 1894: 30, 34, ll. 297–8, 420–1, 434, 446–7). On Irish etymological method in general, see Russell (1988: 16–27); Baumgarten (1990; 2004); Rekdal (2018). Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, an enigmatic Irish grammarian of the seventh century, advanced the technique known as *scinderatio fonorum* 'the scrambling of words' which could be used to create complex meanings by putting together parts of different words or to conceal the meaning of utterances in order to protect the mystical matters from those unworthy of them (Law 1989: 164–6).

⁶²An edition and translation of *Macgnímrada* by Kuno Meyer were published separately: see Meyer (1882) and (1904b) respectively. A more recent translation can be found in Nagy (1985: 209–18). *Cétamon* has been edited and translated several times as a standalone poem. See Meyer (1903: 4–8); Murphy (1955; 1956: 156–9); Carney (1971: 41–3, 45–6). Additional translations can be found in Jackson (1935: 23–4); Tymoczko (1983: 23–4).

⁶³This dating was proposed by Gerard Murphy (1955: 87–8). James Carney optimistically dated the poem to the sixth or seventh century (Carney 1971: 37).

⁶⁴See the latest edition and extensive commentary by Jacopo Bisagni, with a brief discussion of the scholia (Bisagni 2019: 14–37).

⁶⁵See Gerard Murphy's edition, translation and editorial notes in Murphy (1956: 160–1, 235–6). Jacopo Bisagni (2008) has proposed a modified reading of the first stanza based on additional manuscript witnesses.

To sum up thus far, the early Finn stories and poems attributed to him present him as the model example of *imbas forosnai*, a technique usually ascribed to the *filid*.⁶⁶ It enables him to perceive the world on two different levels: its physical, historical aspect as well as the higher reality of the Otherworld which is the source of his superior knowledge and divinatory abilities. A profound link to poetry and spiritual insight therefore appear to be a focal feature of both Finn and Mongán which is to say, in the context of *Scél asa-mberar*, of Mongán's reincarnating essence.

This approach to knowledge through poetry did not conflict with the ecclesiastical worldview, seeing as poetry often plays so crucial a role in texts studied and copied by scholars who owe their education to the Church. Contrary to Tymoczko, who concludes her argument on the character of Irish nature poetry by identifying it as a product of 'native impulses rather than Christian ones' (Tymoczko 1983, 35), I align myself with the more balanced approach offered by Joseph Nagy. He points out that, while ecclesiastics should not be given full credit for inventing nature verse, the surviving poems, including the ones put in the mouths of non-Christian characters, were most likely the work of ecclesiastical, or at any rate, Christian scholars, 'who were schooled in traditional *filidecht* but were turning the poetic art in new directions' (Nagy 1985: 31).⁶⁷

Although dominated by the ecclesiastical paradigm, poetic modes of knowledge secured their rightful place in the intellectual landscape of early medieval Ireland.⁶⁸ There is a testimony to the fusion of the two paradigms in another eighth-century text known as *The Caldron of Poesy*. This cryptic composition is an extended metaphor for mental activity where different states of cognition are represented as cauldrons to be filled with different kinds of knowledge.⁶⁹ According to Liam Breatnach (1981: 51), the author of the text aimed to reconcile the views of the secular learned classes and the ecclesiastics on the sources of wisdom, and they did so by suggesting that the ability for learning may come both from the soul (the ecclesiastical view) and from the body, i.e. can be inherited (the secular attitude). Here the otherworldly *imbas* from the banks of the river Boyne⁷⁰ represents the highest degree of poetic mastery and is regarded as a distinct form of joy and inspiration, even if ultimately subordinate

⁶⁶As observed by Chadwick (1935: 127). On the qualifications of the poets, see Carey (1997). Finn is given a formal poetic training in the later *Macgnímrada Finn*. There we learn that he studied poetry for seven years with a certain Finnécs whose name might cryptically allude to Finn himself in the capacity of a poet (*éices*). Finnécs is trying to catch a very special salmon in the river Boyne because the salmon is said to give omniscience to whoever eats it. Sure enough, Finn ends up being the one to do it and thus acquires the three highest poetic qualifications, including *imbas forosnai*. For this episode, see Meyer's edition (1882: 201, §§18–19) and translation (1904b: 185–6).

⁶⁷Nagy also observes that apart from the Fenian heroes and madmen such as Suibne Geilt, there was another group of outcasts fond of nature verse — Christian hermits (Nagy 1985: 28–9). Donnchadh Ó Corráin's (1989) critical reappraisal of hermit poetry sees it as a product of the contemporary artistic tastes of the cultural élite. However, this does not negate Nagy's argument that surviving nature poetry was a product of the Christian intellectual effort.

⁶⁸On the relationship between poetical and clerical grades, see Breatnach (1987: 81–9). On the 'creative dialogue' between the *filid* and the clerical elite, see Johnston (2013: 20–1).

⁶⁹The text is edited and translated, with an insightful introduction, in Breatnach (1981).

⁷⁰This location also has special significance in *Macgnímrada Finn*. See n. 66 above.

to the divine grace.⁷¹ Interestingly, in his discussion of St Columba's prophetic power Thomas Charles-Edwards (2000: 193) concludes that Adomnán presents the saint's prophecies as 'an effectively Christian account' of *imbas forosnai*, 'no longer learned [...] from the teacher of the *filidecht* but conferred by the grace of God'. Given Mongán's own poetic links and apparent omniscience, it is possible that he also possessed something akin to the supernatural *imbas*. This neatly completes the circle started with the *Immacallam* and suggests that Mongán and Colum Cille's conversation is centred around otherworldly, yet divinely sanctioned, knowledge of the physical and spiritual world.

I should once again reiterate that there is no inherent conflict between an exegetical and poetic worldview in our texts. Poets and ecclesiastics are two coexisting and often overlapping groups whose epistemological paradigms are entirely compatible. We can see it not just from the mere fact of survival of the poetic narratives in a culture where book-production was all but monopolised by the Church but also from the subtle ways in which these narratives are woven into the Christian landscape. For more evidence, we can turn back to the *CDS* texts. Regarding the overall preference for poetic themes in the *CDS* material, David Stifter notes that the manuscript tradition often attracts additional material of poetic interest that tangentially belongs to the *CDS* network (Stifter 2017: 31). One text that is of particular relevance to us here is a narrative from *Sanas Cormaic* presented as an extended gloss on the word *prull* 'greatly'. The text, known simply as *Prull*, appears, among others, in one of the most important *CDS* witnesses — RIA MS 23 N 10.⁷² It tells a story of Senchán Torpeist, the *éices Érenn* 'poet of Ireland', and a hideous young man whom he allowed to join his retinue. The company travels to the Isle of Man and meets an impoverished old woman who challenges Senchán to complete a poetic stanza that she starts to recite. Senchán, dumbfounded, is saved by the young lad who completes two of the woman's challenges and, in doing so, reveals that she herself is a poetess (*banleiccerd*) and the daughter of Úa Dulsaine⁷³ and that her whereabouts were unknown after her father's death. Yet again, a supernatural being shows their superiority over a high-ranking but insufficiently skilled poet in a scenario that is reminiscent of *Scéla Mongáin mac Fíachnai ocus Echdach Rígéicis*.⁷⁴

⁷¹Ed. and trans. Breatnach (1981: 66–9, §§11–12).

⁷²Whitley Stokes based his edition of *Sanas Cormaic* on *Leabhar Breac* (Stokes 1862; the *Prull* narrative is on pp. 36–8). Kuno Meyer's printed the version of *Sanas Cormaic* found in the Yellow Book of Lecan (Meyer 1912; *Prull* is on pp. 90–4). In addition, he provides separate transcriptions of *Prull* from BL MS Harleian 5280 and RIA MS 23 N 10 (Meyer 1912: viii–xvii). Rudolf Thurneysen (1914) reconstructed the Urtext of *Prull* and provided a German translation. *Sanas Cormaic* was translated by John O'Donovan and Whitley Stokes (1868; *Prull* is on pp. 135–7). *Prull* has also been translated separately by Patrick Ford (1990: 31–4), Máirín Ní Dhoonchadha (2004: 165–7) and Paul Russell (2008: 40–3).

⁷³This makes her quite literally a descendant of satire, with *dulsaine* meaning 'mockery, satire' or 'a female satirist' (*eDIL*, s.v. *dulsaine* (accessed 12 September 2021); cf. Ford 1990: 31 n. 24).

⁷⁴Joseph Nagy also points out that in Fenian literature poetry is depicted as a skill of the marginalised figures, in contrast to the 'social' *filid* who occupy their proper place in the hierarchy and frequent royal courts. These marginal poets often prove to be more powerful than their counterparts, sourcing their knowledge directly from the Otherworld (Nagy 1985, 17–40, esp. 27–33). Mongán can also be included in this group since his extraordinary poetic abilities are not formally

Upon the company's return to Ireland, the unsightly young man transforms into a youth of 'the most noble and radiant appearance'. The story concludes with a Latin dictum which gives the whole narrative a special ecclesiastical sanction: *Dubium itaque non est quod ille poematis erat spiritus* 'And there is no doubt that he was the spirit of Poetry' (ed. Meyer 1912: 94; trans. Russell 2008: 43).⁷⁵

We can also trace the double perspective motif in *Prull*. Here it is employed to showcase the difference between the appearance of a person and their true identity: the poetess is introduced as a wretched old woman and her noble descent is only recognised through a poetic divination; the protagonist himself disguises his true, and clearly supernatural,⁷⁶ essence with exterior repulsiveness. The woman's humble appearance conceals a great poetic gift while the splendour of Senchán's social position hides his lack of competence. The hidden truth about either character is only unveiled through the skill of another character: the poetess exposes Senchán while her own true identity is revealed by the youth. Distinguishing the corporeal and the spiritual is depicted as a fundamental function of poetry.

If we now return to the Mongán tales, we will notice that Mongán's association with Finn also presupposes the use of double perspective in a way similar to how it was applied in the *Immacallam* when the youth recounted the history of Lough Foyle. In *Scél asa-mberar*, Caílte, Finn's nephew, appears at Mongán's court to corroborate the latter's account of the Larne battle and to prove Forgoll's competing version wrong. Caílte's retelling of the historical events allows Mongán to mentally relive the past as it is revealed that he himself was there as Finn. The secrecy of the situation is again an important concern, as it was in the *Immacallam*. In that story, it was St Columba who insisted on continuing the conversation in private, out of the earshot of ordinary monks, while in *Scél asa-mberar* Mongán himself is acting cautiously: *ba hé Find danó intí Mongán acht nand-léic a forndissiu* 'Moreover, Mongán was Find except he did not allow it to be told.'⁷⁷ In both cases, the need to protect the otherworldly knowledge might arise from its privileged status and concern that it might be misinterpreted by those who lack the necessary skill. This goes as much for the young monks in the *Immacallam* as for the quarrelsome poet Forgoll in *Scél asa-mberar* who exposed his inferior competence in the capacity of a *fili*. There seems to exist a certain threshold for accessing divine mysteries and it is delineated by the level of training and competence of the person wishing to understand them.

sanctioned by his ancestry (only descendants of poetic dynasties could reach the highest poetic grades. See *Uraicecht na Ríar* (ed. and trans. Bretnach 1987: 102–5, §§3–4); cf. Stifter 2017: 30–1).

⁷⁵ Another code-switch occurs when the word *sentuinne* 'old woman' receives an encyclopaedic aside and is clarified with a verse of poetry which is introduced with a Latin tag: *ut poeta dixit* 'as the poet said'. The verse itself definitively puts the narrative in a Christian environment by mentioning Christian service (*acht nochanfognat Mac Dē* 'provided that they do not serve the son of God' (ed. Meyer 1912: 92; trans. Russell 2008: 41)).

⁷⁶ Patrick Ford also views the poetess as 'a kind of *alma mater* of poets, a personification of the feminine genius of poetry' (Ford 1990: 35). It is not clear, however, how this interpretation coexists with the presence of another such personification in the form of the youth.

⁷⁷ Ed. and trans. White (2006: 74, 81, §15).

John Carey sees a parallel between Mongán's secretiveness in *Scél asa-mberar* and a similar reluctance to tell his wife about his adventures in *Tucait Baile Mongáin*. He also suggests that the *imthechta* related by Mongán at the end (though, again, not to the reader) are in fact the accounts of his prior existences (Carey 1987: 9–10). This is a compelling interpretation although we should keep in mind that in the *Immacallam* similar information is not withheld and the ordinary monks are still able to hear about Mongán's rebirths. It appears therefore that the recounting of the rebirths on its own does not yet cross over into the territory of the unspeakable. What could be implied in the *Tucait Baile Mongáin* is a more fundamental account of how Mongán's otherworldly nature relates to the mysteries of creation. Certainly, the contents of Mongán's *baile* are coded as privileged information. Multiple contrived conditions have to be fulfilled to reveal it: seven years have to expire before Mongán can share the *baile* with his wife, but before that, they have to travel to the hill of Uisnech where they get caught in a great storm; then, miraculously, they find themselves at a banquet in an otherworldly dwelling. And only then, and after getting intoxicated, does Mongán recite his much-anticipated *baile*. Its content, however, must remain unknown since it has been deliberately left out of the narrative, in the same way as in the *Immacallam*.

Generally, the term *baile* means 'vision, frenzy, madness (originally arising out of supernatural revelations).'⁷⁸ The term is often used in titles of tales (most famously, perhaps, in *Buile Shuibhne*) but, according to Kevin Murray (2004: 12), it does not so much denote a distinct genre as describe 'stories which contain a vision or a prophecy at their core and which do not readily fit into another category'. Other notable *baili* include the late-seventh-century *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* 'The Vision of Conn of the Hundred Battles' and the ninth-century *Baile in Scáil* 'The Phantom's Frenzy'.⁷⁹ Both texts (*Baile Chuinn* also being a part of *CDS*) bear significant resemblance to *Tucait Baile Mongáin* in that, among other things, they feature a character reciting a prophecy prompted by divine inspiration.⁸⁰ John Carey's (1995a: 75) rendering of *baile* as 'ecstatic utterance' seems fitting and, we might add, aptly alludes to the mental journey of *Mentis in excessu*. The visionary discourse, stimulated by otherworldly inspiration and intoxication, causes the speaker to enter an uninhibited, irrational (or supra-rational) state of mind, though perhaps not as a violent disruption of mental activity but rather in the sense of becoming free from conventional patterns of thought, as if the person experiencing a *baile* is able to perceive things in a way that is inaccessible under 'normal' circumstances and transcends the mundane

⁷⁸ *eDIL* s.v. *baile* (accessed 12 September 2021).

⁷⁹ *Baile Chuinn* has been edited by Thurneysen (1912), edited and translated by Hull (1952: 146–9) and Bhreathnach and Murray (2005). *Baile in Scáil* from BL MS Harleian 5280 is edited in Meyer (1901: 457–66), from Bodl. MS Rawlinson B 512 in Thurneysen (1936). The most recent edition and translation is in Murray (2004).

⁸⁰ See Carey 1995a: 74–7; 1996b: 191–4. The lack of any narrative frame in *Baile Chuinn* makes it difficult to compare to other texts but, according to Carey, there existed a now lost introduction to it on which both *Tucait Baile Mongáin* and *Baile in Scáil* were based.

mental activity.⁸¹ When Adomnán describes Colum Cille's prophetic gift, he says that visions came to him *sinu mentis mirabiliter laxato* '[when] the scope of his mind was miraculously enlarged' (*Vita Columbae* 1.1 (10b)). A not at all unexpected parallel to this sentiment can be found in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, so beloved by medieval Irish scholiasts.⁸² One of Isidore's suggestions for the origin of the word *carmen* 'song' or 'poem' is that 'the name was given to it [...] because they used to think that people who sang poems had lost their minds' (*cui datum nomen existimant [...] quod qui illa canerent carere mentem existimabantur*) (*Etym.* 1.39.4). Taking into account Mongán's poetic credentials, together with the fact that the *baile* in *Baile in Scáil* and *Baile Chuinn* take the form of poems, we can speculate that Mongán's 'ecstatic utterance' was similarly versified.⁸³

In *Baile in Scáil* the recital of the *baile* is performed by the god Lug. This detail, when viewed in conjunction with *Tuait Baile Mongáin*, once again reveals the intertextuality of double perspective. It is established that higher knowledge belongs to gods like Lug or Manannán. In this respect, Mongán is an ambivalent figure: he is a 'type' of Christ and an offspring of a native otherworldly being; these links sanction his access both the sublime mysteries of Christian interpretation and to the gift of poetic inspiration.⁸⁴ At the same time, his humanity grounds him in the physical world and makes him an ideal image of a learned intellectual.

A variation on the same motif is found in one final tale that remains to be discussed, simply called *Scél Mongáin*. The story is presented as just another day in the life of Mongán: he casually meets a poet apprentice, cheers him up with a quatrain of verse and sends him on an errand to the Otherworld. Unlike other stories, there is no central conflict or intrigue here. It appears to showcase yet again how poetic knowledge unlocks a whole new (conceptual) world. Curiously, *Scél Mongáin* opens with a seemingly throwaway mention of the poet Forgoll, the same person who unsuccessfully threatened Mongán in *Scél asa-mberar*. He is never mentioned in the story again. His name might purely provide continuity between the tales. However, it could also function as an additional affront to the hapless *fili*, seeing as how even a poor student is found more worthy of travelling into the Otherworld.⁸⁵ Mongán would not have chosen the

⁸¹This idea is similar to the metaphor for abstract thought in *Mentis in excessu* discussed above. See also Boyle (2016: 28). In her discussion of compositional and linguistic patterns of *Cétamon*, Maria Tymoczko also suggests that the language of a supernatural vision reflects its trance-like and uncontrollable nature. It is presented as a rapid disordered succession of images which 'seize the seer and can overwhelm the visionary' (Tymoczko 1983: 31–2).

⁸²Irish scholars started to read and extensively use *Etymologiae* soon after the work's completion in 636. Its only surviving seventh-century copy is preserved in an Irish manuscript (now part of St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 1339 a.1). See Hillgarth (1962: 182–3; 1984: 8–10), Bischoff (1961: 327–30), Herren (1980).

⁸³There is a comparison to be made of such ecstatic recitals to *roscad* and *retoiric* (see n. 60 above). Three early Finn tales discussed above have him recite a rhetoric through *imbais forosnai*.

⁸⁴Daniel Watson advances a similar argument but interprets Mongán's character as a reflection of secular leaders inspired by the Holy Spirit. See Watson (2020: 52–6).

⁸⁵But see Gregory Toner's discussion of *Scél asa-mberar* where he suggests that the tale did not aim to doubt Forgoll's poetic credentials or undermine the authority of high-ranking poets in

young apprentice for this journey unless he was a well-qualified or at least a promising poet. A certain level of poetic skill is construed as a prerequisite for entering the Otherworld in the Mongán tales. Initially, it grants the ability to see and observe the hidden things passively, which is what the apprentice does. But the superior gift is not just to enter the space of inspiration as an observer, but to be able to create divinatory discourse within it, as demonstrated in *Tucait Baile Mongáin*; and this is what separates Mongán from the student poet. In the end, the young man succeeds at his mission and brings back with him a precious stone and a pound of gold for Mongán and a pound of silver for himself. Extending our epistemological metaphor further, these artefacts could be interpreted as a tangible representation of the treasures of knowledge obtained from the realm of higher meanings. To be sure, the greater the poet's skill, the higher the reward for his wisdom.⁸⁶ Overall, John Carey's (1987: 12) observation sums it up well: 'inspiration and poetic ability [...] mediate between the worlds'.

We have seen in this section how different aspects of Irish intellectual culture converge on each other in more and less explicit ways: Christian Latinity and exegesis are not that far removed from the divinely inspired *imbas* to which St Columba himself was no stranger and which distinguished a well-trained poet like Finn or Mongán. The exegetical method and the art of poetry share a view of the world which presupposes and seeks a two-level signification. Knowledge of physical reality is fundamental and available to everyone. But right beside it, there also exists a world which is unseen to an untrained eye, or rather, an untrained mind. It is the world of deeper insight and higher meaning, the access to which is restricted. It can be gained only through mastering the arts of discourse to a degree which transcends ordinary language and is keyed to divine grace: mystical interpretation taught by the Bible and poetic inspiration.

CONCLUSION

The Otherworld is a crucial element in all texts of the Mongán tradition. When trying to reconcile this apparent native legacy with the Christian paradigm, modern scholars have often viewed it as a mysterious pre-historical paradise. While this remains a perfectly valid point of view, I would like suggest an additional interpretation: the Otherworld as a self-referential allegory for higher knowledge and its source. It is invisible to the uninitiated and only select individuals have access to it. This reading also helps explain the frequent connections between the Otherworld and poetic inspiration. Given how double perspective is available to an inspired poet and to a discerning exegete alike, it is only reasonable to assume that both phenomena spring from a common divine source which alone contains and dispenses higher knowledge.

general but rather was meant to 'expound on the dangers of confounding authority and fact' (Toner 2005: 76).

⁸⁶This reflects the legal implications of the poetic hierarchy as described in *Uraicecht na Ríar* (ed. and trans. Breatnach 1987: 102–15, §§1–22).

If we think about the Mongán texts in the *CDS* as a purposefully edited collection, one consistent theme emerges, couched in otherworldly imagery — that of a search for meanings and mysteries, with a particular interest in the way higher meanings can be revealed through lower ones. Two main paths lead to the *sensus*: poetic inspiration and biblical hermeneutics. Inspiration creates layered discourse while exegesis uncovers layers of meaning in already existing texts, both biblical and non-biblical, and helps the reader to navigate them. Mongán's divine descent and advanced poetic skill, as much as St Columba's ecclesiastical learning and prophetic ability, are the key to the hidden realm of signification.

The texts examined here not only demonstrate praiseworthy intellectual abilities of the characters; they also betray something about their own structure in a way that provides the audience with an effective reading method. The interplay between the in-narrative motifs and techniques of narrative creation outlines a consistent, and distinctly Irish, theory of knowledge where exegetical and poetic modes of thought coexist to create complex narratives and to reveal layers of signification behind text and reality.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Baile Chuinn</i>	<i>Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig</i>
<i>CDS</i>	<i>Cín Dromma Snechtai</i>
<i>Etym.</i>	Isidore of Seville, <i>Etymologiae</i>
<i>Immacallam</i>	<i>Immacallam Choluim Cille 7 ind Óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg</i>
<i>Scél asa-mberar</i>	<i>Scél asa-mberar combad hé Find mac Cumail Mongán</i>

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