Introduction

0.1   General Introduction

This book intends to compare prescriptive metrics at its inception in Ireland and Scandinavia, concentrating on stanzaic-syllabic verse.

It is no new idea to compare the metrical systems of the two countries. In this work I shall not attempt to compare the two systems empirically and *in toto*. Both systems produced verse for well over half a millennium, during which modification was inevitable. Where one of this century's most distinguished philologists has required a lifetime to produce an adequate study of this process of development in one culture alone,[1] only someone of extreme rashness or guaranteed longevity would undertake to perform the same task for two at once. The question facing any comparative study is how to obtain a manageable but yet representative corpus from each system, when many questions as to dating of texts as transmitted and of the general development of the metrical art remain unanswered.

Prescriptive texts delineate metrical requirements at the time of writing; they record the contemporary state of the art, rather than the full scope of its development. We are fortunate in possessing such texts for both Icelandic and Irish. From these texts we can abstract a system of regulation that was doubtless relevant for metrical practitioners at the time the texts were written. By using these abstracted systems one can reduce the risk of comparing the inappropriate.

My examination focuses on two specific texts in either language. In Icelandic, these are the 12th century *clavis metrica Háttalykill* of Rögnvaldr Earl of Orkney and his Icelandic skald-visitor Hallr Þórarinsson, and Snorri Sturluson's poem-cum-treatise *Háttatal*, dated approximately one century later. In Irish I concentrate on a short poem in *clavis* form attributed to the eleventh century poet Cellach Hua Ruanada and the First Metrical Tract, dated around the turn of the tenth century. These are respectively the first *claves metricae* and the first metrical treatises in each language.

My examination begins with a comparative examination of the two *claves metricae*. Poems in this form have the advantage of presenting a complete metrical system in empirically determinable form. The system that can be determined from

---

[1]   Hans Kuhn 1983.

each *clavis* is to function in some measure as an objective control on the analysis of the tractarians. The first chapter is thus concerned with establishing this control. Chapter Two contains a select outline of comparative scholarship in the field and an exposition of my approach. Chapter Three deals with the development of stanzaic-syllabic form in the two cultures, Chapter Four locates the tracts within the framework of theoretical teaching on metrics in the respective vernaculars and Chapter Five examines the systems of terminology and categorization by means of which the tracts are organized.

In the second section, Chapters Six to Nine examine the features of rhyme, alliteration, syllabicity and lexico-syntactic organization respectively, whilst Chapter Ten presents a recapitulation and conclusions.

0.2   Stanzaic-syllabic systems in Iceland and Ireland: essential definitions

The texts examined in this study were compiled in two discrete linguistic areas, Western Scandinavia, primarily Iceland, and Ireland. Depending on context I refer to these areas as *languages* or as *cultures*. Both terms are to be taken as neutral designations. If I use the term *language* I wish to suggest the shared linguistic features of the area concerned; if I use *culture* I am more likely to be concerned with a set of shared aesthetic values. In the majority of cases the choice of term is instinctive and possibly arbitrary; where this is not the case will be clear from the context.

Ireland and *Irish* are terms of convenience and do not rule out insular areas such as Man and the Western Isles, nor the Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland. The same applies in the case of the terms *Iceland* and *Icelandic*; the earliest attested skaldic poetry appears in Norway before the settlement of Iceland began, whilst *Háttalykill* was apparently composed on the Orkney Islands; the majority of known skalds, however, came from Iceland and composed in the medium of Icelandic, and I have chosen this as the generic term for the language of skaldic poetry.

The tracts and *clavis* texts under observation in each case appear to depict a system of versification which I refer to in this analysis as stanzaic-syllabic. In using this term I wish to indicate that the metrical scheme of each system can be depicted in terms of a grid with a fixed number of rows and columns.

The rows correspond to what are in written culture generally referred to as verse-lines. Where this term does not suggest an unduly typographic approach to metrical analysis I retain it; when a more neutral term is required I use the objective but cumbersome formulation *metrical unit*.

The columns in each case refer to *metrical positions*. In the forms of verse we are examining, these generally correspond to syllables. In my terminology, the metrical position is filled by a *syllable or its equivalent*. What can be considered

the equivalent of a syllable is determined by the metrical system of the language and/or poet and/or tractarian in question.

In the realm of phonemic recurrences, each system employs both identities and equivalences. Where *identity* is required, recurrence must consist of the repetition of a given phoneme and no other. Where *equivalence* is required, the recurrence consists of a given feature (e.g. point or manner of articulation) which is shared by a number of phonemes.[2]

0.3 Paradigms for comparison

The syllabic-stanzaic system as practised in either language can be seen in the following two examples, each broken down according to the generally accepted metrical analysis of the culture concerned.[3]

Icelandic stanzaic-syllabic verse:
dróttkvætt; Egill Skallagrímsson, *lausavísa*[4]

Position Line	1	2	3	4	5	6
A	Svá	skyld-	u	goð	gjald-	a
B	gram	reki	bǫnd	af	lǫnd-	um
C	reið	sé	rǫgn	ok	Óð-	inn
D	rán	míns	fé-	ar	hán-	um

Svá skyldu goð gjalda-
gram reki bǫnd af lǫndum,
reið sé rǫgn ok Óðinn-
rán míns féar hánum

---

[2] I owe the concept of metrical equivalence to Kristján Árnason's metrics seminars in Reykjavík. However, I use the terms slightly differently; for him *identity* is a sub-set of *equivalence;* for me the two constitute disparate sets. Cf. Árnason 1991 p. 5.

[3] The specific method of graphical presentation is that adopted by Prof. Heinz Klingenberg in his skaldic seminars. Syllables are split so as to ensure that all relevant consonants stay with rhyming vowels.

[4] *lausavísur* 'loose stanzas' are single skaldic stanzas embedded within saga texts. This particular example occurs in *Egils saga* ch. 56, ÍF 2 p. 163; text from Turville-Petre 1976 p. 22. The stanza forms a curse on the king Erik Bloodaxe, uttered after the latter had refused to recognize Egill's claim to his inherited lands in Norway.

'Thus may the gods repay him-
let the gods drive the tyrant from the lands,
let the gods and Óðinn be wrathful-
for the theft of my property.'[5]

In this half-stanza we note the following recurrences:

Alliteration: a primary alliterant (Icel. *hǫfuðstafr*) is obligatory on the first stress-accent of each even-numbered line, here B1, D1. It links with secondary alliterants (Icel. *stuðlar*, singular *stuðull*) on two accents of the preceding line, here A4, A5; C1, C3.

Tonic-syllable rhyme:
1) identity of vowel and following consonant in even-numbered lines, here B3,5; D1,5
2) equivalence of vowel,[6] identity of following consonant in odd-numbered lines, here A2,5; C1,5.

Stress: Position 5 always carries stress; two stresses are distributed among the preceding syllables, here A1,4; B1,3; C1,3; D1,3.

Cadence: Position 5 consists of a long stressed syllable, position 6 of a short unstressed syllable, forming a regular disyllabic cadence.

In addition to these recurrences we note that the syllable is not identical with the metrical position in B2, two short syllables occupying one metrical position.

For an Irish example we select a stanza in the metre *lethdechnad* otherwise known as *rinnard*.[7] The choice of this metre out of many possible Irish forms is influenced by the fact that it has repeatedly been postulated by scholars as a possible source of inspiration for *dróttkvætt*.

---

[5]   My translation, roughly following the syntax of the original; cf. Turville-Petre 1976 p. 22. I have not attempted to translate the three synonyms for 'god' used in the original.

[6]   The shared feature here is vocality; all vowels constitute one equivalence group.

[7]   Irish metrical terms, like quotations from Irish texts in general, show a high degree of variation, which I have not attempted to normalize; common variants of the term *rinnard* are *rindard* (as lemmatized in DIL) and *rinnaird*.

Irish stanzaic-syllabic verse; *lethdechnad* (MV 1 st. 8)

Position / Line	1	2	3	4	5	6
A	Día	ni-	me	nim=	der-	mait
B	im	éic-	si	*n*aird	*n*am-	rai
C	hé	fo=	cheird	cen	dol-	mai
D	néim	*n*óir	deirg	form	lab-	rai.

In the above table I use italics to indicate prefixed n- resulting from nasalisation and not relevant in alliteration, the equals sign = to indicate unstressed proclitics, leaving the hyphen free to indicate syllable boundaries in polysyllabic words. In modern Irish typographic convention we would expect the stanza to be laid out as follows:

> Día nime nim-dermait
> im éicsi n-aird n-amrai
> hé fo-cheird cen dolmai
> néim n-óir deirg form labrai.[8]

> 'God of Heaven does not forget me
> in my lofty marvellous poetry;
> it is he who puts without delay
> the lustre of red gold on my speech.'

Here the following recurrences can be noted:

Alliteration: B2,4,5 (alliteration of equivalence group, all vowels being equivalent, nasalizing *n* being disregarded).

End-rhyme: B5,6 with D5,6, indentity of tonic and subsequent vowels, equivalence of subsequent consonants.[9]

Interlinear rhyme: C3 with D3, identity of tonic vowel with equivalence of subsequent consonants.[10]

Consonance: C5,6, with B5,6 and D5,6; equivalence of each consonant in cluster; here also identity of succeeding unstressed vowel.

---

[8] Text from Ó hAodha 1991 p. 226, without adopting his typographical indications of metrical recurrences. Translation ibid., split up by me into lines corresponding to those of the original.

[9] For this equivalence group and its conventional analysis see Murphy 1973 p. 32. Both *b* and *m* were pronounced as bilabial voiced fricatives in word-medial position, *m* according to Murphy being slightly more nasalized than *b*, though this is not reflected in his phonetic transcription. Irish rhyme is in principle one of consonantal equivalence; see ch. 6.

[10] Shared features; voiced stops, distinguishing feature; point of articulation.

Stress: Fixed on position 5 of each line, otherwise free in number and position; stresses occur at A1,2; B2,4; C1,3; D1,2,3.

Cadence: disyllabic in each line defined by word-boundary and stress-accent, consisting of a stressed syllable (quantity immaterial) and a subsequent unstressed syllable.

All metrical positions are filled by single syllables (*Día*, A1, is a diphthong).

The above analysis has been presented according to received opinion, itself highly dependent on the mediaeval tracts I shall be examining. It shows that there are grounds for comparative analysis on a superficial level at least. Whether this reflects a resemblance at deeper level, or even a direct influence of one system on the other, is a question that will be considered during the remainder of my analysis.