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Autor: Tranter, Stephen N.
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Chapter 1. *Clavis metrica*

Þeir ortu báðir saman Háttalykil inn forna ok létu vera fimm vísur með hverjum hætti. En þá þótti of langt kveðit, ok eru nú tvær kveðnar með hverjum hætti. (*Orkneyinga saga* ch. 81)¹

'Together, they composed the poem *Háttalykill inn forni* 'the old *clavis metrica*', and had five stanzas in each form, but that seemed too long, so there are now only two of each form recited.'

The extract quoted above refers to a meeting supposed to have taken place in the Orkney Islands soon after the year 1140 between the reigning Earl Rögnvaldr, himself a gifted skald, and his Icelandic visitor, Hallr Þórarinnsson. The title of their poem alludes to the fact that each of the stanzas exemplifies a distinct metre, the whole thus containing all the metres, or at least the most significant metres used by the skalds of the period.

A poem of this name is preserved in two separate manuscripts, both fragmentary, transcribed by Jón Rugman in the 1660s. As Rugman states, it is impossible to identify the preserved text beyond any doubt with the oral performance of the two poets in the Orkneys.² Jón Helgason has nonetheless put forward a case on linguistic grounds for the text in the West Norwegian dialect area (consonant with Orcadian provenance) some time soon after 1140;³ on these grounds we may assume that the saga account is not entirely fictitious.

More or less simultaneously with the composition of *Háttalykill*, a short *clavis metrica* was being committed to writing in Ireland. We have no account of its composition; it first occurs in written form in the 12th century Book of Leinster,⁴ prefaced by the rubric *Cellach Hua Ruan [...] cecinit*, and is thus ascribed to a poet generally identified as that Cellach Hua Ruanada, *ardollam Ereinn*⁶ whose death is recorded in the annals of Ulster and of Tigernach *sub anno* 1079. This

¹ ÍF 34, p. 185, my translation.

² Helgason 1941 pp. 6, 13, 142.

³ *ibid.* p. 140.

⁴ Trinity College Dublin MS H 2 18, ed. R.I. Best, Osborn Bergin, M.A. O'Brien, Vol. 1, 1954, p. 173. The poem is part of a section of the compilation devoted to metrics and allied matters.

⁵ "abbrev.-stroke illeg.", *ibid.* p. 173, n. 1.

⁶ The appellation could be translated as 'high poet of Ireland', cf. *ardrí* 'high king'.

poem consists of fourteen four-line stanzas.⁷ Each stanza (with the exception of the opening and the conclusion) is composed in a different form. I propose to preface my comparison of metrical prescription in the two countries by examining these two nearly-contemporary products of the prescriptive system. The purpose of this is to provide an empirically established base for analysis, which should ideally be independent both of mediaeval tractarians and of modern theory. In practice, this is well-nigh impossible; nonetheless, at the risk of repeating commonplaces and stating the apparently well-known, it seems desirable to attempt to start *tabula rasa*.

The examination is divided into two parts:

1. the social and cultural context conveyed by the text
2. the metrical system as deduced from the text.

1.1 *Háttalykill*

1.1.1 Social and cultural context

1a)

Skyldr at skemta
þykkik skotnum vera
þeims vilja nýt mól nema,
forn fræði lætk
framm of borin,
ef ér vilið heyrt hafa.⁸

'I consider myself obliged to entertain nobles who wish to receive useful speech.
I cause ancient wisdom to be borne forth, if ye wish to have it heard.'

This first stanza is the only reference in the poem as transmitted to the function of the poet within a social context. The poet is seen as subordinate to his aristocratic audience; his function is to entertain and to commemorate. These functions are reflected in the choice of material for the *clavis* proper, in which the deeds of kings and heroes are re-told. The poet does not present himself as an instructor in person, but as a medium for conveying instructive information. The instruction is in dynastic history, not in the art of metrics, and even then, little is said of each hero or king other than that he fought bravely and was generous to his retainers,

⁷ "Lines" in this case being determined by regular occurrence of end-rhyme. Stanzas are indicated in LL by enlarged initials, the mid-point either by the beginning of a new line or by the use of the *virgulum*.

⁸ All quotations from *Háttalykill* are taken from the normalised text in Jónsson 1912-15 B I, pp. 487-508.

the topical virtues of the king within his comitatus. Specific feats, even names of conquests, are rarely mentioned, stanza 4a being atypical in this respect, mentioning the name of an opponent (Fáfnir) within the *kenningar* and a specific geographical location (the Rhine) in plain text.

1.1.2 Empirical determination of metrical form and system

The construction of *Háttalykill*, with a pair of stanzas exemplifying each metre, allows us to form conclusions on three planes.

Filter 1: By comparing the two examples of each form, we can rule out chance recurrences and determine the requirements of that specific form.

Filter 2: By extracting the features common to all forms of the *clavis* we may determine the overall metrical system under which the poem was composed.

Filter 3: By comparing the first stanza of each pair with the second of each pair we may be in a position to ascertain the degree to which this system is able to tolerate metrical irregularity and complexity.

In the following section I give a short selective analysis considering the first two of the above points.

1.1.2.1 Empirical determination Filter 1 - the individual form

21a) *sextánmælt*

Hringr brast, hjoggusk drengir,
 hjalmr gnast, bitu malmar,
 rønd skar, rekkar týndusk,
 ruðusk sverð, hnigu ferðir;
 brandr reið, blæddu undir,
 ben sullu, spjör gullu,
 brast hjørr, brynjur lestusk,
 beit skjómi, dreif sveiti.

'sixteenspoken

Hringr [or "sword"?]⁹ cracked, warriors hewed each other, the helmet resounded, metals bit, [shield]-rims split, warriors perished, swords reddened, soldiers sank, the dagger reddened, wounds bled, wounds swelled, spears sang, blades cracked, the cleaver bit, blood spurted.'

Here we notice the following regularities; they may be compared with those given in Ch. 0.3 above.

- 1: Syllable count: six syllables in every line except line 4.
- 2: Word boundary: regular occurrence of word boundary after the first syllable, with the exception of line 4 *ruðusk*, and before the penultimate syllable, without exception.
- 3: Caesura: regularly following the second syllable if it is uninflected, or the third if an inflection is present.
- 4: Ictus: each line contains four syllables capable of bearing ictus (nuclei of nouns or non-auxiliary verbs).
- 5: Alliteration: occurs regularly at the beginning of each line and after the caesura in the odd-numbered lines.
- 6: Rhyme:
 - a) tonic rhyme of penultimate syllable with syllable 1 or 2 of the same line in even numbered lines (syllable 3 in 1.4);
 - b) consonantal rhyme of equivalent syllables in odd-numbered lines;
 - c) full-rhyme between second syllables of 1l.1 & 2, and between syllables 2/3 & 5/6 of 1.6.
- 7: Syntax: each line contains one noun-subject and one verb either side of the caesura, either in the order SV or reversed.

In the parallel stanza we find the following:

21b)

Sverð ruðusk, sæfðusk ferðir,
svall ben, valr lá fallinn,
und hraut, almar bendusk,
or fló, beitt varð hjörvi,
herr fell, geirar gullu,
gnast hlífð, hrafn brá fōstu,
oddr beit, ernir sōddusk,
ulfr fyldisk, vé skulfu.

'swords reddened, warriors sank,
scar opened, corpse lay felled,
wound gaped, darts displayed,
arrow flew, with swords was beaten,
host fell, spears resounded
shield cracked, raven fell to,

⁹ cf. Helgason 1941 p. 70 on the possibility that Sigurðr hringr's nickname was confused with the sword-*heiti* and that the verb *brast* was substituted accordingly.

point bit, eagles were sated,
wolf was filled, banners trembled.'

- 1: Six syllables in all but the first line.
- 2: Word boundary constant before the penultimate syllable and after the first.
- 3: Caesura after the second syllable unless an inflection is present, in which case caesura occurs after the third syllable.
- 4: Four words per line capable of carrying ictus.
- 5: Alliteration on the first syllable of each even line, and of all odd lines except 5, alliteration on the first syllable after the caesura throughout. Ab-ab alliteration in line 3; both alliterants occurring after the caesura in line 5; to abstract these patterns it is necessary to assume zero-consonant alliteration in lines 3-4, 7-8.
- 6: Full tonic-syllable rhyme in ll.1,2,4,8, consonantal tonic-syllable rhyme in ll.3,5,6,7.
(The closeness of the vowels in l.7 suggest that these might have been regarded as members of an equivalence group.)

Notes

Line 1: The word *ruðusk* induces a heptasyllabic line on both occasions it occurs; this suggests that the metrical position does not necessarily coincide with the syllable.

Line 5: Ab-ab alliteration is not required by the form; the position of the alliteration in l.5 of the b) stanza suggests that variation in positioning is allowed in the odd lines, but there is no evidence of this in the even lines.

Line 6: Occurrences of full-rhyme or of interlinear tonic-syllable rhyme appear to be optional or coincidental.

Line 7: The syntactic structure of one subject and one predicate in each half-line is maintained, but not in the strict pattern of one main verb in the preterite per half-line, compound tenses being admitted.

The common features of the two stanzas can be assumed, with the caution that the small size of the available sample dictates, to be metrically prescribed, and to constitute the distinguishing characteristics of the named form.

1.1.2.2 Empirical determination Filter 2 - a metrical system for *Háttalykill* as a whole

The second stage of filtering involves comparing stanzas in clearly different forms and extracting the common features, in order to determine an underlying metrical system for the poem as a whole. In view of the prescriptive nature of the poem, we

may assume that its composers believed this system to have had general validity for the time and milieu of composition.

In the section below I have attempted to take the most disparate stanzaic forms as possible as an indication of how this system would appear.

As the next example I take verse 26a), which, as its title *Háttlausa* 'formless' indicates, is one of the less demanding forms of the canon.

26a) *Háttlausa*

Ák frá Eiríks mildi
elds brjótöndum hranna,
þess'r hét enn sigr-sæli,
segja einkar gegnum;
þvít gollskati gagni,
gram þann lofa ýtar,
réð, sás ríkstr var heitinn,
í randa gný hverjum.

'Especially in front of *warriors*¹⁰ { *gold's* (wave's fire's) breakers } I must talk about the generosity of Eiríkr, who is called victory-blessed; for the *king* (gold-treasure), who was called the mightiest, produced gain in every *battle* (clash of edges); - men praise that ruler.'

The following regularities can be observed in this stanza:

Syllable-count: regular hexasyllables.

Word-boundary: regularly before the penultimate (boundary between elements of composite adjective in 1.3).

Ictus: three syllables per line capable of bearing ictus, syllabic position of first two varies, third always on penultimate.

Alliteration: On first ictus-bearing syllable of even lines, on any two ictus of odd lines.

None of the other features listed in the analysis of the metre *sextánmælt* above appear in this form. The only common features would appear to be regularity of syllable-count, word-boundary at the penultimate syllable and the distribution of alliteration. To what extent this can be considered the basic pattern on which the metrical system of this *clavis* is founded, to what extent, as the name suggests, it is an exception with less regularity than convention demands, remains to be seen.

¹⁰ Original "wave's fire's breakers"; brackets and italics here and subsequently indicate the "solution" of the *kenningar*.

25a) Halfnefst

Heyja réð hjörþey
 Hjalmarr vígsnarr,
 auðar vǫru óleið
 ǫrbrjót geirmót;
 vekja frákvítt mjök
 vápnþing dǫgling,
 fella spurðak forsnjöll
 fira kyn víghlyn.

'Hjalmarr the battle-swift caused *battle* (sword-wind) to be joined; spearmoots were not loathesome to the destroyer of riches, I learned [that] the prince arous[ed] [the] weaponmoot very widely; I discovered [that] the *warrior* (battle-maple) fell[ed the] valiant kin of men.'

Regularities:

Syllable count: odd lines 5 or 6, even lines 4 or 5.

Word boundary: regularly after second and before penultimate syllable.

Caesura: none.

Ictus: two per line, see syntax.

Alliteration: as in previous example.

Rhyme:

- 1: odd lines, consonantal tonic rhyme between initial and final syllable (in line 1, <y> takes the place of a syllable-final consonant; cf. Árnason 1991 pp. 13-14);
- 2: even lines, full rhyme between second and final.

Syntax:

- 1: odd lines consist of the combination: infinitive (1.3 noun) + auxiliary + adverbial (1.1 noun-object, 1.3 pred. adj.);
- 2: even lines consist of: compound noun + compound noun (1.2 compound adjective, 1.6 simplex noun (disyllabic)).

9a) *Enn dýri hátt*

As the title 'precious metre' suggests, this is one of the more demanding forms of the poem.

Björn orn bræddi, fjornis
 beit reit firum hneitir
 brátt, þrátt, brynju neytir
 barg margfrekum vargi;
 ypt lypt átti at skipta
 egg legg í tvau seggja,
 hrátt, brátt, hafði at slíta
 hrafn tafn af því jafnan.

'Björn often fed the eagle; the sword hastily bit the *head* (enclosure of Fjörnir) of men; quickly the *warrior* (user of armour) fed the very fierce wolf; the swung edge was lifted to split hastily the legs of men in two; the raven constantly had raw victims to tear as a result.'

Syllable-count: regular hexasyllables; except for lines 5 and 7, where we may assume elision between syllables 4 and 5, resp. 5 and 6.¹¹

Word-boundary: regular after positions 1,2, (except 1.4, element-boundary of composite), 4.

Caesura: none discernible.

Ictus: on positions 1,2,5, throughout.

Alliteration: positions 1+3 (odd lines) and 1 (even lines).

Rhyme:

1: even lines: full tonic-syllable rhyme on positions 1,2,5 throughout;

2: odd lines: full tonic-syllable rhyme on positions 1,2 throughout, full or consonantal rhyme on position 5.

Syntax: no regularity discernible.

¹¹ At this stage it becomes evident that the idea of one-to-one assignment of syllable to metrical position (cf. Ch. 0.3) must be modified on empirical grounds.

37a) Konungslag

The title of the form: 'King's metre' suggests the connection between metrical intricacy and prestige.

Óláfr náði eggjar rjóða
 enskra þjóða vǫrmu blóði,
 hneigiborða háði skerðir
 hjörva þeyja Viðris meýja;
 bǫðvar hauka búðar snáka
 beiti-Nirðir ógnar girði
 rjóða nǫmu, rekkar kómu
 randar Freyju þing at heyja.

'Óláfr managed to redden edges in the warm blood of English peoples; the *warrior* {slicer of the *shields* (tilting boards of *valkyries* [Viðrir's maidens])} started the *battle* (winds of swords); the *warriors* {*handlers* (baiting-gods) of the *spears* (hawks of battle)} took to reddening the *swords* {snakes of the *helmet* (fenced-booth of fear)}; champions came to inaugurate the *battle* (shield-moot of Freyja).'

Syllable-count: regular octosyllables.

Word-boundary: regular before the penultimate syllable, present with one exception (l.8, with tmesis) after the fourth syllable.

Caesura: none discernible.

Ictus: regular trochaic.

Alliteration: on the first syllable of each line and the fifth of each odd line.

Rhyme: tonic; consonant rhyme on the third and seventh of each odd-numbered line, full-rhyme on the equivalent syllables in the even numbered lines.

Syntax: no regularity discernible.

28a) Refrún en meiri

Metres of the *refrún* group (the title could be translated freely as 'cunning') involve the juxtaposition of lexical antitheses; the degree of frequency is indicated by the elements *meiri* (greater) and *minni* (lesser).

Golli Gautrekr þótti
 góðr illr kyni þjóðar,
 saddr varð svanr, en hræddisk
 seint, skjótt, konungr, Þróttar;
 frá allvald, þanns óðisk,
 opt, sjaldan, styr valda;
 vǫrðr gekk fróns, né færðisk,
 framm, aptr, í bǫð ramma.

'Gautrekr seemed evil to gold, good to [the] kin of men. [The] *raven* (swan of Þróttr {Óðinn}) was quickly sated, but the king was slow to fear. I learned [that the] potentate, he who was seldom afraid, controlled war frequently. [The] guardian of the land went forth into a heavy battle, he did not turn back.'

Syllable count: regular hexasyllables.

Word boundary: before penultimate syllable.

Ictus: irregular, especially in even lines, but basically three ictus per line.

Alliteration: on first syllable of even lines, on any two ictus of odd lines.

Rhyme: tonic-syllable rhyme (consonantal in odd lines, full in even lines) between position 5 and any of the first three metrical positions of the same line.

Syntax: so arranged that each even line begins with a semantically opposed pair of adjectives or adverbs.

20a) Refrún en minni

Harald frá gunni gerva,
 geri varð, þars lið barðisk,
 mār kom sigs til sára
 svangr, fullr, þars spjǫr gullu;
 þegn grástóði gríðar,
 gnast hlífð, en, brá fǫstu,
 hjaldrǫgl nutu hildar,
 hvít, svǫrt, í dyn rítar.

'I found out that Harald roused battle; the wolf became full, where the host fought; *The raven* (victory's gull) came hungry to wounds, where spears resounded; the thane

broke the fast of the *wolf* (grey steed of a giantess); the white shield creaked in the din of battle; but the black battlegeese made use of the fighting.'

This form is identical to that above, with the sole exception that the semantic opposition occurs only once every four lines.

35a) "*Titulum deest*"

This form combines the lexical regulation (prescribed antitheses) of the *refrún* metres with the syntactic regulation of *sextánmælt* and the fixed rhyme-positions of *enn dýri hátt*.

Knútr sásk, herr hjósk,
hlífð gnast, rønd brast,
guðr svall, folk fell,
fátt, mart, hvít, svørt;
bargsk ǫld, beit skjöld,
benskóð rauð þjóð,
hart flugu hjalmreyr,
hó, lóg, breið, mjó.

'Knútr feared little, the army hewed, the *helmet* (white shelter) clanged, the *shield* (black rim) cracked, battle swelled; many people fell, high and low people protected themselves, the shield split, the thin nation reddened the weapon (broad woundcutter), the arrows (helmet-reeds) flew fast.'

Syllable-count: tetrasyllabic, extra syllable (resolution?) in l.7.

Word boundary: before final syllable except l.7, before penultimate, after first syllable except l.6.

Caesura: before penultimate in all lines.

Ictus: all syllables are capable of bearing ictus except the two syllables of *flugu* in l.7.

Alliteration: in the first half stanza it falls on the penultimate, and final syllables of the odd line and initial syllable of the succeeding even line; in the second half stanza it falls on the initial of each line and the penultimate of the odd lines.

Rhyme: monosyllabic rhyme of second and fourth syllable, consonantal in odd lines, full in even lines except l.8, in which the rhyme falls on the first and fourth syllable (l.7 irregular).

Syntax: ll.1-3 & 5 conform to the pattern of *sextánmælt*, ll.4 & 8 each contain two pairs of semantically opposed adjectives.

30a) *Langlokum*

The title 'long-bonded' refers to the fact that the subject of the main sentence is split between the first and the last words of the stanza.

Haraldr kunni gný gerva
gekk hilmis lið vekja
(-menn ruðu geir at gunni-)
gráp smíðaðra vápna;
háði herr við prýði
hjóring með döglingi,
hinn'r skyndi byr branda,
bendags enn hárfagri.

'Haraldr the fine-haired knew how to provoke the *battle* (clash of the wound-day); the helmsman's host went to rouse the *battle* (hail of forged weapons); - men reddened the spear in battle; with the king, he who hastened the *battle* (breeze of daggers), the host convened the *battle* (sword-moot) with pomp.'

Syllable count: hexasyllabic, 7 syllables in lines 1,3,6.

Word-boundary: before penultimate (all but ll.6,8¹²), before third-last (all but l.4).

Ictus: three per line (assuming compounds *hjöringi*, *hárfagri* to carry ictus on each element of the compound).

Alliteration: on first syllable of even lines and any two ictus-bearing syllables of odd lines.

Rhyme: tonic syllable rhyme of penultimate with any other previous syllable within the line except the fourth, full in even lines, consonantal in odd lines.

Syntax: the subject of the main sentence, *Haraldr enn hárfagri* 'Haraldr the fine haired' is split between the first and last words of the poem.

¹² In l.8 there is a boundary between elements of a composite in this position, in l.6 a morpheme boundary between the stem (a dynastic name) and the suffix indicating descent.

32a) *Flagðalag*

Hauðr frá Hákön síðan
 harðgeðjaðastan varða;
 þjóð sá ræsi rjóða
 ráðvandaðastan branda;
 seimfærir klauf sverði
 snarpeggjuðustu leggi;
 getk, at gramr fekk vitni
 gráleituðustum sveita.

'I heard that Hákon, most resolute in spirit, defended the land later; the people saw the most upright king redden swords; the *king* (giver of gold) cleft the leg with the most bitingly-edged sword; I recount that the ruler took blood to the most grey-faced wolf.'

Syllable count: Alternate hexasyllables and heptasyllables (the latter resulting from resolution in pentasyllabic words).

Word boundary: before the penultimate syllable in each line.

Ictus: three syllables per line.

Alliteration: on any two ictus-bearing syllables of the odd lines and the first syllable of the even lines.

Rhyme: tonic, any of the first three syllables rhyming with the penultimate, consonantal in the odd lines, full in the even lines.

1.1.3 *Háttalykill*: summary

From the short sample from *Háttalykill* given above we can extract the recurrences and arrange them in order of frequency.

a) Alliteration

In none of the stanzas in the poem is there any departure from a basic pattern of alliteration involving two alliterating initials in the odd line and one in the even line. The latter is invariably the initial of the first stressed syllable.

b) Stanza length

In all but the first stanza, a stanzaic length of eight metrically definable lines is adhered to.

c) Rhyme

Rhyme of varying types is to be found in all the stanzas above, with the exception of 1a) and 26a). End-rhyme is not used. The most frequent form is tonic-syllable rhyme. In all metres, rhyme involving consonants only (Icel. *skothending*) alternates with rhyme involving tonic vowel and subsequent consonant (Icel. *aðalhending*). Full rhyme in the customarily accepted sense, involving identity of all phonemes from the tonic vowel to the next word-boundary, can be found internally (st. 25) but not at the line-ending.

d) Syllable count

All stanzas in the sample can be divided metrically, though not necessarily syntactically, into two units of four lines. These units invariably contain identical or equivalent syllable counts.¹³ These halves can themselves be subdivided into quarter-stanzas, these in turn having identical syllable-counts; in the majority of cases they are also identical in metrical ornament. Within the quarter-stanza, the individual lines are frequently identical in syllable count but always vary in metrical recurrence.¹⁴

e) Word-boundary

All forms show regularity of word-boundary towards the line-ending. Since the language stresses the initial syllable, this regularity has the effect of forcing regular cadences at the line-endings.¹⁵ In all forms quoted above, this cadence is identical throughout the form. The majority of forms contain line-endings in a disyllabic word with prototonic stress. The remainder end in a stressed monosyllable. No line ends in two consecutive short syllables, or an unstressed monosyllable. The cadence is regular enough to serve as a line-end marker.

f) Syntax

A form such as *refrún* is clear evidence of how indistinctly the boundary between metrical and non-metrical, recurrent and non-recurrent features is drawn in skaldic poetry. Here the interweaving of syntax visible to varying degrees in most poems of the sample is heightened to the point of producing four sets of apparent paradoxes. At the level of form, but not of the system as a whole, this can be defined as a recurrence. In terms of the overall system we can observe a tendency towards interwoven syntax, though the pattern of the interweaving varies from form to form and from stanza to stanza. The form *sextánmælt*, on the other hand, with its parallelistic placing of alternate subject and predicate, is evidence of syntax which is tightly controlled, but the opposite of interwoven. Thus the most we can assume for the overall system is that it provided for strict syntactic control.

¹³ Slight variations may be observed due to the phenomena of elision and slurring, cf. Ch. 8. See Kristján Árnason 1980 p. 107; 1991 p. 67.

¹⁴ These patterns seem to hold good for the scaldic metres as a whole, and may be contrasted with the degree of variation within Irish; a metre such as *deibide baisse fri tóin* (varying between heptasyllable and monosyllable; see Ó hAodha 1991 p. 240) would be unthinkable in the skaldic context.

¹⁵ cf. Árnason 1981 p. 105.

1.2 Cellach's *Dagaisti*

1.2.1 Social and cultural context

In Cellach's *Dagaisti* we find a variety of information on metrics in its widest sense; not only rules governing the abstract metrical scheme or its realisation as text, but also social and aesthetic norms governing the production of such texts.

The LL text is introduced with the rubric *Cellach Hua Ruan(ada) cecinit*, 'Cellach descendant of Ruanada sang,' which can be seen as an invocation of the poet as authority. His obituary appears in the Annals of Ulster¹⁶ as follows:

Cellach H Ruanadha ardollam Erenn, Cu Midhe m.m. Lorcan ri fernmuighi, m. Gilla Digde H. Lorcan secnap Ard Macha, m.Cuinn cenn bocht Cluana M. Nois quieverunt in pace.

'Ceallach Úa Ruanadha, high *ollamh* of Ireland, Cú Midhe grandson of Lorcán king of Fernmag, son of Gilla Digde ua Lorcán, prior of Ard Macha, the son of Conn, almoner of Clonmacnoise, rested in peace.'

in the Annals of Tigernach:

Cell húa Ruanadha ollam Erenn quievit.

'Ceall[ach] Úa Ruanadha *ollamh* of Ireland rested.'

and in the Annals of the Four Masters:

Ceallach úa Ruanadha, ardollam Ereann ina aimsir, d'ecc.

'Ceallach Úa Ruanadha, high *ollamh* of Ireland in his time, died.'

In effect, these entries all say the same; that the poet to whom the *clavis* is ascribed had an acknowledged status as the highest *ollamh* in Ireland, the term *ollamh*, apparently meaning 'greatest',¹⁷ having by then taken on the specialized meaning of 'highest grade of poet'.¹⁸ By naming the poet, the compiler is indicating the status of the poem, or possibly justifying its inclusion.¹⁹ A similar attitude cannot be deduced anywhere from *Háttalykill*, or from the saga account of its composition.

¹⁶ ed. S. Mac Airt, G. Mac Niocaill, 1983, *sub anno* 1079 (p. 514). For the transmission and dating of these annals and their relationship to the annal sources quoted below, as well as for references to further literature, see *ibid.* pp. vii-xii.

¹⁷ cf. DIL sv *oll*, *ollamh*. The quotations given under the latter entry illustrate the gradual shift of applications away from the domain of the poets towards what we would now refer to as natural sciences, to the point that it now denotes a university professor.

¹⁸ Specifically, highest grade of *fili*, that is of the poetic caste associated with the preservation of ancient wisdom.

¹⁹ cf. McGrath 1979 pp. 143-4.

Cellach's poem sets out expressly to exemplify those metres which form the basis of the poetic art:

Sluindfet duib dagaisti in dana
 bid diglaim ratha do raith
 eter isel *ocus uasal*
 co rrabat i cluasaib caich.²⁰

I will expound to you the chief metres of the art-
 it will be an entirely beneficial collection-
 both the low and the high
 so that they may be in the ears of all.²¹

Whereas the title of the poem suggests that the evaluation of a poem can depend on the status of the poet whose name it bears, the first stanza conveys another socio-cultural distinction: the form itself determines the position of a poem within an established scale of values. A certain group of metres, as implied by the first line, is set apart as *dagaisti*, lit. 'good metres', and the distinction is amplified by the use of the alliterating pair *isel ocus uasal*,²² lit. 'humble and exalted'. A further characteristic symptom is conveyed by the number of metres presented, i.e. twelve; a selection has been made from well over a hundred metres mentioned in the metrical tracts. The number twelve is clearly no accident; apart from its biblical significances (but probably deriving from them), twelve is the number set by the Second Metrical Tract for the years of study required of an *ollamh*, and for the divisions of poetry. It is not clear from the opening words who is being addressed; the pronoun is second person plural. Moreover, the exact significance of the second line is uncertain. Thurneysen's translation "eine Sammlung in Vertretung eines Bürgen" involves assuming that the scribe omitted a mark of length on *ratha* and that this form can be used as a genitive of *ráth*.²³ The interpretation on which his translation rests is presumably that of the poet as *ardollam* conscious of his duty to act as a guarantor for poetic standards, leaving a fixed text to ensure that standards are adhered to in his absence. The poem is thus addressed to the company of lesser initiates for whom the master poet feels responsible,²⁴ possibly

²⁰ LL p. 173. In this edition, following the MS, marks of length are indicated very sporadically. The MS followed by Thurneysen in *Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern*, Trinity College Dublin H 1 15 is closer to modern practice in this respect.

²¹ My translations from this poem are based on the text given by R. Thurneysen in *Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern*, vol. 1, pp. 73-7, a copy of which was kindly made available to me by Donncha Ó hAodha of Galway; I am also indebted to Gearóid Mac Eoin for suggested translations.

²² /iːʃəl/, /uəsəl/

²³ It is attested thus in Middle Irish, see DIL sv. *ráth*, a fact to which Gearóid Mac Eoin drew my attention.

²⁴ For a poem based on a similar relationship between *ollam* and *miclein* (lit. 'sons of learning', hence 'disciples', now 'students') see the poem *Duan in choiced ceist* ed. and trans. in Tristram 1985 pp. 285-93.

the *cléir* 'retinue' mentioned in the following stanza.²⁵ However attractive this interpretation might appear, it must be pointed out that the line can be translated in a far less convoluted fashion by accepting *ratha* as genitive of *rath* 'benefit' and of accepting *do ráith* as a phrase meaning 'completely'.²⁶

Each of the following twelve stanzas then presents a different metre.

There are twelve metres mentioned in all; the name of each metre is incorporated in the stanza by which it is exemplified, beginning with *Sétrad fata* "Long S." (the metre in which the introductory and concluding stanzas are also written) as follows:

Sétrad fata ferr a fégað.²⁷
aiste drumchla dana dein.
rind airchetail rabuic riagla
gabait na cliara do cheim.

'Long *sétrad*, the best in appearance, the metre (which is the) foundation of the swift art, the summit of performance, flexible and regular, which the poets (or 'retinue'²⁸) receive (or 'chant, recite'²⁹) from long ago.'

This stanza sets a pattern for the rest of the poem, one which I consider to be symptomatic of an attitude to the poetic art which is typical of the period which produced the earlier Irish stanzaic-syllabic poetry.

We note at once the classificatory style of naming applied to the metre, by category and subcategory, reminiscent of the botanical system. The stanza itself then contains information on three levels. The first level is aesthetic, here exemplified by the phrase *ferr a fégað* lit. 'best its appearance'³⁰ and possibly *rabuic riagla* lit.

²⁵ This interpretation would place the poem within the tradition represented by the problematical "Testament of Aithirne" contained in the "Tract on the Privileges and Responsibilities of the Poets". In the section of the tract thus named, the poet Aithirne, otherwise known as the chief among satirists, a contemporary of Conchobar and thus inhabitant of the world of the Ulster Cycle, lays down standards for future generations of poets in the form of a "Testament", beginning with the words *Tiomnaim dhaoibh, fíleda saoir [...]* 'I bequeath to you, free poets [...]' (Gwynn 1942 p. 18).

²⁶ DIL, loc. cit., this translation another suggestion of Gearóid Mac Eoin's.

²⁷ *punctum delens* above f of *fégað*.

²⁸ The etymological meaning is apparently that of *clerus*, while the term came to be applied within the broad semantic field including 'retinue, in particular that of a poet', and 'choir' (DIL sv.). Thurneysen's translation 'Scharen' does not make this clear. Cf. the antithetical *laech*, etymologically related to *laicus* (DIL sv.) but coming to mean specifically a warrior.

²⁹ cf. DIL sv.

³⁰ This phrase presents problems both metrical and semantic. From the metrical structure of *sétnad fata* we would expect alliteration between *ferr* and *fégað*. This can only be the case if *sétnad* is taken to be feminine, so that there is no lenition after the possessive *a* (*f* is generally, but not always, an exception to the rule that consonants alliterate irrespective of mutation). Elsewhere in the poem *sétnad* is treated as a neuter, which suggests either inconsistency in the ascription of gender, irregularity in the use of alliteration within the three stanzas in *sétnad fata*, or inclusion of *f* in the

'very soft of rule'.³¹ The second and third levels are hierarchical. In the second level, an attempt is made to position the metre on a scale of rank; it is characterized as *rind airchetail* 'summit of performance'. The positioning of the metre on a scale of rank anticipates the third level of categorization, the positioning of the metre on a scale of social function. Two aspects combine to determine this position, as will be seen when the whole poem is examined. On the one hand, it is determined by the type of poem for which the metre is considered appropriate; on the other, it is set by the rank of poet to which the privilege of composing or reciting poems in the given metre is assigned. A form which can only be recited by the *ollam* enjoys the highest prestige. This becomes clear in the last line of the stanza, the prescriptive *gabait na cliara do cheim*, which we can translate, staying within the semantic field of metrical organization as much as possible, 'which the poets recite from the past'. This is less specific than is the case in later stanzas of the poem, but suggests that the subject of the poem should be tradition, 'from the past', and that members of the appropriate group *cléir*³² should recite it.

The term *airchetail* is a reference to the aural component of a poem. The phrase *ferr a fégad*, on the other hand, is a clear reference to visual effect, *fégad* being the verbal noun of *fégaid*, 'scrutinize, closely examine'. The phrase thus tends to suggest that the form is one that will bear close scrutiny, or that is best when closely examined. However one chooses to interpret the phrase exactly, the underlying meaning seems to suggest close visual analysis, i.e. the form of analysis only possible once a metrical form has been committed to writing. Thus here we have an indication of a tension between the aural component of verse and the tradition of theoretical written analysis which underlies it.

The pattern set by this first stanza is as follows:

- i) classificatory name (built into the stanza)
- ii) judgement of aesthetic value
- iii) position of the metre in the hierarchies a) of metre and b) of social function.

All subsequent stanzas contain i) and either ii) or iii) or both.

general scheme of consonantal alliteration which disregards mutation. I find the third choice the most appropriate to a didactic poem on metrics.

The semantic problem lies in the range of meanings of *fégad*, which I take in the sense "looking at" (DIL sv. *fégad* a) or even "looks" (ibid. b). It cannot be ruled out, however, that the sense intended is that of "considering, taking into account" (ibid. c), a sense that does not bear the interpretation I put on the passage. It would however appear that the primary applications of the word are visual; cf. DIL sv. *féig*.

³¹ cf. Thurneysen *ad loc.* and DIL sv. *bucac*.

³² I cannot ascertain how specific a reference this is; the word *cléir* does not occur in any list of the ranks of the poets known to me. It is conceivable that the reference is to performing artists rather than composing poets; cf. DIL sv. *clíar* b.

Taking the remainder of the poem as a whole we can thus observe the following:

i) Classificatory title of the metre

Of the twelve metres exemplified, eight are grouped in four pairs in which a basic term is modified by an adjective referring to a metrical attribute. The basic terms themselves are a comment on form.³³ *Sétrad* and *dechnad* appear to contain the element *nath* 'poem' as their second element,³⁴ *sét* 'object of value', 'half the value of a milch-cow' then possibly referring to the value of the poem, *dech* possibly being a form of *deach*, 'syllable'. *Rannaigeacht* and *deibide* both contain specific information about the form of the stanza, though what this information is cannot be determined empirically from this *clavis*; according to the tracts the term *Rannaigeacht* (the translation 'stanza-form' would not be inappropriate)³⁵ informs us that the rhyme pattern xa-xa cements the whole into a unified stanza *rann*; *deibide*, by contrast (my translation 'divided' is both semantically and etymologically appropriate), informs us that there is no metrical linkage between the two halves of what is conventionally printed as a four-line stanza rhyming aabb.

Three of the pairs are subdivided by terms involving length; *deibide*, on the other hand, is here subdivided according to rhyme, *scaílte* 'scattered' referring in the tracts to the infrequency of rhyme, there being no internal rhyme prescribed for the form, though Cellach appears to use it,³⁶ whereas *imrind* 'rhymed around' refers to the aa-aa rhyme-scheme that characterizes this variant of the form. The terms of length all refer to syllable-count per line, the contrasting pair *mór/becc*³⁷ being understood by the tracts in this purely metrical fashion and not, as the surrounding information of the poem might lead one to believe, as a form of hierarchal value-judgement.³⁸ The finer implications of this terminology cannot be

³³ For more detailed comments on these metrical terms see Ch. 5.

³⁴ *Sétrad* is attested as *sétnad* in MV. These forms probably represent alternative orthographies for the same word; the evidence of the Icelandic form *Hlymrek* for the place-name *Luimneach* (Limerick) suggests that in certain consonant clusters the substitution of /r/ for /n/ familiar to students of modern Irish dialects was already under way by the date of the compilation of the *Sturlubók* text of the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, (cf. Benediktsson 1968 [ÍF 1.i] p. lxxv) if not already in the lifetime of the early-11th century Viking whom this text names Hrafn Hlymreksfari (ed. cit. p. 162), which would put the change well within the period of the poem being analysed. Cf. the variant *meirtrech*, for *meirtnech* 'weariness' in *Lebor na hUidre* 9098. Scribe M, to whom this portion of LU is ascribed, is generally identified with Mael Muire, who died in 1106; cf. Best, LU, 1929 p. xii. (My thanks to Prof. G. Mac Eoin for drawing my attention to this form.)

³⁵ cf. Ch. 5.

³⁶ cf. EIM, pp. 65-7.

³⁷ In this specific instance the terms refer to the contrast between monosyllabic and disyllabic endings; elsewhere the opposition can be one of line-length without reference to the final cadence; see the examples of *ochtthoclach becc* and *ochtthoclach mór* in MV 3 and Murphy EIM pp. 70-1, 78-9.

³⁸ This of course cannot be ascertained empirically from the text of the poem; it is however hardly conceivable that the terminology can have diverged in this respect from the usage of the MV, pp. 7 & 10.

empirically determined at this stage, but it is clear that the *clavis* refers to a fully developed system of categorization with an appropriate system of nomenclature.

ii) Aesthetic value

In this category we can place the following unambiguous utterances:

súairc a dath 'cheerful its colour' (st. 3)
fégaid már attá a áeb 'behold how beautiful it is' (st. 4)
is cáem 'it is beautiful' (st. 4)
at millsí a laide 'its lays are sweet' (st. 6)
is aisti rathmar 'it is graceful metre' (st. 8)
bágaim conid bairdni bind 'I maintain that it is sweet bardistry' (st. 8)
ind aiste blaith brass 'the smooth, strong metre' (st. 9)
maith maisse cech raind 'good the fineness of each stanza' (st. 10)
milbríathraig 'sweet-worded' (st. 10)
chumaide 'shapely' (st. 12).

The exact function of other, more metaphorical utterances apparently forming an aesthetic judgement,³⁹ such as st. 5 *can mangairecht can mebail* 'without flaw, without shame', is open to interpretation.

iii) a) Rank in metrical hierarchy

This category is the hardest to separate out distinctly, as it overlaps with aesthetic evaluation on one end of the scale and with assignment of function at the other. A case can be made for including the following:

grés saer 'noble craft' (st. 3)
romtha a rath 'proven its virtue' (st. 3)
aiste is ferr i nHere 'the best form in Éire' (st. 6)
aiste amra 'excellent form' (st. 7)
bairdni 'bardistry' (st. 8)⁴⁰
anamain irdairc uasal 'anamain (the name of a metre)⁴¹ renowned, noble' (st. 13).

³⁹ It is extremely unwise to write off any epithets in this poem as merely poetical embellishment, however fanciful they may seem to modern readers. For some indication of the abundance of metaphor in Irish legal texts, including those delineating the privileges of poets, see the portions edited and translated by L. Breatnach in UR.

⁴⁰ Here we see the difficulty of sharply separating social and metrical hierarchies. The bards were assigned less prestigious classes of metre than the *filid* and were paid for them on a lower scale. To class a *metre* as 'bardistry' is thus an indication both of its function and of its prestige, hence ultimately of its monetary value. On the other hand, since bards were debarred from practising in certain classes of metre, the term *bairdne* is also an indication of metrical form: 'composed in a "bard-metre" rather than a "fili-metre"'. (The case is rather similar to the use of a designation such as *dance music*, which can be a designation of form, but also a value judgement based on social function.)

⁴¹ For the etymology and significance of this term see Calvert Watkins 1963 p. 217. 'The term *anamain*, whatever its later meaning as a purely "secular" technical term in metrics, is most likely to be a derivative of the verb *anaid* in its original sense

iii) b) Social function

Here mention is made either of the matter suitable for conveying in the metre, or of the person expected to use it:

a) Matter conveyed

panegyric (*ni fuil [...] nach molfa* 'there is no-one it will not praise' st. 3)

dúan 'song' (*is cáem do denam na ndúan* 'it is beautiful for the making of songs' st. 4)

satire (*i n-airib* 'in satire' st. 5)

gnomics (*is eicsiu athlam indlim* 'it is handy knowledge I arrange' st. 8)

historical narrative (*ind aiste [...] i ngnathaighther in senchass* 'the metre in which history-telling is customarily practised' st. 9).

b) Rank of practitioner

*clí*⁴² (st. 10)

ollom (st. 13) and since the rank of a practising poet is inextricably linked with his right to payment for his craft and to the metre in which he is expected to practise it:

dentar limsa dúas [...] do chnuas na cno 'a price is set with me in hazels' (st. 11)

noco chóir a cammfige dar cend n-oir iss indile 'it is not fair to compose it irregularly in exchange for gold and property' (st. 12).

We can sum up the social and cultural context of the text as follows:

The poem presents instruction in metrics in a wide sense, involving not only abstract metrical or aesthetic considerations, but also considerations of hierarchy of form and function with a practical significance for the society in which the texts are composed. It depicts a strictly hierarchal society in which the poetic art was highly regulated. This led to a need for a system of metrical categorization in which forms could be arranged in a hierarchy matching the organization of the poets themselves.⁴³ This need was fulfilled by the adoption of a system of classification that appears to have been taken from a tradition of written theory.

"breathes" as in *anál* "breath". It provides yet another version of the metaphor for "in-spiration".

⁴² The third highest of the *filid*. The word appears to have the primary meanings of 'house-pillar', 'post', and hence of a 'pillar of society', a champion (DIL sv. *clí* 1). This reading is adopted from the TCD MS H 1 15.

⁴³ It is of course debatable to what extent this hierarchal organization as depicted in metrical and legal texts was ever more than an ideal construct of the scholars and lawgivers. See UR pp. 98-100 and the literature referred to there, as well as Tristram/ Ní Chonghaile 1991 pp. 249-51.

1.2.2 Cellach's *Dagaisti* - the metrical system

Filter 1: Analysis of form

Cellach's *Dagaisti* was composed as a form of metrical instruction, and the stanzas which it comprises are evidently intended as patterns. We can thus assume that it conforms to a recognized metrical standard. On the other hand, we are to some extent at a disadvantage compared with the target audience of the poem, if we wish to use the patterns it sets to form empirically deduced conclusions. In particular, we have no way of differentiating between coincidence and one-off ornament on the one hand, and metrically prescribed features on the other, as only one example of each form is given.⁴⁴

The pitfalls of this form of analysis can be seen by comparing the introductory and concluding stanzas, both apparently written in the same form⁴⁵ as the first stanza of the *clavis* proper, designated *sétnad fata*⁴⁶ in the tracts.⁴⁷ Faced with the first stanza alone, one would be unable to ascertain which were the compulsory metrical features contained by the line *eter ísel ocus uasal*. Each word starts with a vowel, the last syllables of *ísel* and *uasal* rhyme in Middle Irish, following the reduction of unstressed vowels, and the medial consonant is in each case a sibilant, the first being palatalized, the second not. From the stanza alone it would be possible to argue that the prescribed form involved a pattern //vcv//, or even //v-sibilant-v-liquid//. Comparison with the two other examples suggests, however, that in all probability the prescribed metrical feature was alliteration of the last two stressed initial syllables in each line, realized in this case as vowel alliter-

⁴⁴ Of the two most famous Icelandic *clavis* poems, *Háttalykill* and Snorri's *Háttatal*, each overcomes the problem in its own particular fashion. *Háttalykill* has two stanzas of each metre, thus increasing the possibility of establishing the distinction between the metrically prescribed and the voluntary within the framework of empirical analysis, while *Háttatal* embeds the metres in a theoretical commentary, so that the theoretical method can supplement the empirical.

⁴⁵ The form here designated *sétnad mór* is apparently that elsewhere termed *sétrad fata*; cf. MV p. 20 and Murphy EIM p. 49. Deduction of a common form from these three stanzas can serve as a rough starting-point only. Unlike in *Háttalykill*, where the existence of pairs of verses in each metre *within* the *clavis* itself allow cross-checking, we have no internal evidence from *Dagaisti* that identity of forms is intended, though in the case of the first and last stanzas of the poem their verbal parallelism seems to support the suggestion.

⁴⁶ Otherwise known as *sétrad fata*.

⁴⁷ Even in this modest attempt to establish absolutely empirical criteria, I must admit that it would be impossible to arrive at an analysis agreeing exactly with that of the theoreticians, whether Middle Irish or Modern, relying entirely on factors found in all three of the stanzas. Except in the most mechanical of versifying, variations are bound to occur where theory would demand regularity; to work out the limits of tolerance of any given system on an empirical basis requires a far larger sample per form than could fit into any practicable *clavis metrica*. The composers of *Háttalykill*, if the saga account is to be trusted, seem to have been aware of the problem; with five stanzas per form they might have secured a greater chance of making the limits of tolerance in each form clearer, but the work would on the other hand have been of *langt kveðit*.

ation. The remaining features were ornamental, being the result of employing a formulaic phrase of a type common in Irish, in which phonemically related pairs, often rhyming polysyllabically, express antithetical concepts (e.g. *saoithiúill*, *dathúil*, *saer*, *daer* etc.⁴⁸).

Cross-checking of the example named as *sétrad fata*

Sétrad fata, ferr a fegad,
aiste drumchla dana dein.
rind airchetail rabuic riagla
gabait na cliara do cheim

with the two frame stanzas

Sluindfet duib dagaisti in dana
bid diglaim ratha do raith
eter isel oculus uasal
co rratat i cluasaib caich

and

Is iat sain ardaiste in dána
fognas na llaíde nar loing.
do Dia bermait buide ar mberla,
cia duine. segda nach sloind.

reveals the following common points:

Alliteration: the two final ictus-bearing words in each line usually alliterate, in some cases a preceding word also alliterates.

Syllable count: regular alternation of octosyllabic and heptasyllabic.

Ictus varies irregularly between four and two per line.

Rhyme, interlinear: the even-numbered lines in each stanza are connected by rhyme involving identity of vowels and slight variation of consonants (n:n, th:ch, ng:nd). This suggests that some form of equivalence-group rhyme is involved.

Rhyme, end-internal: between the final word of the third line and the penultimate ictus-bearing word of the fourth there is rhyme involving identity of tonic, equivalence of following vowels and variety of consonants gl:r, s-l:s-b,⁴⁹ rl:gd. There is

⁴⁸ cf. Kalyguine 1993 pp. 52-4 on such pairs. Kalyguine argues that they have their roots in a system of poetic verbal obscuration.

⁴⁹ Following LL; Thurneysen's reading would give full rhyme here.

no means of telling whether the equivalence categories involved in this set of rhymes are the same as those determining the end-rhymes.

Word-boundary/cadence: Word boundary occurs regularly, alternating between the penultimate and the ultimate syllable. The prototonic word-stress ensures that this word-boundary will produce regularly alternating disyllabic and monosyllabic cadence.

This suggests that in the form exemplified, regular line-lengths, two-element alliteration, end-rhyme and end-internal rhyme are prescribed features; regularity of ictus, and three-element alliteration are not, though the latter may feature as ornament.

An examination of the complete *clavis* on these lines leads to the following empirical observations:

Filter 2: Analysis of system

a) Alliteration

Each stanza in the poem has at least two line-endings⁵⁰ in which the last two stressed syllables alliterate. This is probably the metrical feature which strikes the modern reader's eye most clearly,⁵¹ and yet, for reasons which I examine in Chapter 4, it appears to have been disregarded as a basis of analysis at the time.

b) Syllable count

All stanzas in the poem can be divided syntactically into two halves.⁵² In each stanza the two halves contain equal numbers of syllables.⁵³ This enables us empirically to determine that syllable-count is a feature of the metrical system. This observation can be confirmed by observation of the individual lines of verse, which will show that in all cases the number of syllables per half-stanza is divided in the same proportion in the first and second half of the stanza.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Establishable by rhyme, and not merely the result of the vagaries of scribe or printer.

⁵¹ It is worth stressing this point in view of the fact that the metres depicted here, with the exception of *anamain*, are all included among those commonly termed *syllabic* as a means of differentiating them from the earlier class of metre, for which there is no universally accepted term, but which are frequently referred to as *alliterative*.

⁵² The extent to which this is true varies; whereas some stanzas fall into two separate sentences, the boundary is one of clauses in others, and in the weakest case, st. 1, the boundary is merely that of phrases in parataxis.

⁵³ For this purpose contiguous vowels at the word boundary are consistently elided, except when the word-boundary coincides with a syntactic boundary or line-ending. For details see Ch. 8.

⁵⁴ This is an empirical finding based on the twelve metres here exemplified and cannot be applied to Irish syllabic poetry in general.

Example st. 3

Sétrad ngarit, grés saer, sorch,
 súairc a dath
 ní-fuil co n-anmain nach-moltha
 romtha a rath.

Shortened *sétrad*, a noble bright form, its colour cheerful, there is no-one who is not flattered by it, its grace is proven.

total syllables 22

syllables per half-stanza 11

line endings establishable by rhyme after:

sorch (syllable 8)

dath (syllable 11)

moltha (syllable 19)⁵⁵

rath (syllable 22) (assuming elision)

syllable structure 8,3,8,3.

c) Rhyme

Rhyme of varying strictness can be found in all stanzas. Rhyme in the accepted modern sense of phonemic identity is rare. More usual is the form of restricted half-rhyme based on consonant classes generally known as Irish rhyme. This occurs regularly in all forms at the line-ending. Within the line rhyme and its less restricted variants assonance and consonance are also apparent. The status of these, prescribed or optional, is not open to empirical determination since each stanza represents an individual form.

d) Cadence

In all forms, the words ending lines 1 & 3 contain equal numbers of syllables, as do those ending lines 2 & 4. The fact that this holds good for the form *deibide scailte*, causing rhyme between stressed and unstressed syllables, suggests syllabic regularity of cadence was not merely a concomitant of tonic-syllable rhyme, but was a matter of separate metrical prescription.

1.2.3 Summary

Cellach's *Dagaisti* is symptomatic of a metrical system based on stanza form (in rhyme-delineated lines) involving syllable-count, rhyme, cadence and alliteration. The primary structure, the symmetrical stanza-form, is defined by syllable-count; the sub-structure, division into regular lines, is defined by rhyme and cadence;

⁵⁵ Irish rhyme, here involving //o-liquid-tenuis-aspiration-a// in each case. The form *moltha* is irregular (*metri causa?*), one would expect *molfa*, as in LL.

alliteration operates on the level of regularized ornament. The system is capable of producing a considerable number of separable, recognizably dissimilar forms, and permits theoretical analysis and prescription of elements of dissimilarity. Empirical analysis of the poem itself reveals that the dissimilarities by which the forms are distinguished consist of variation in syllable count and in treatment of end-rhyme. Alliteration, where it occurs, usually involves the two final stressed syllables.

Recognizably poetic diction is only apparent in the form of terminology applied to metrics and the practice of the metrical art in the broad sense: this is a consequence of the subject-matter of the poem.

On the social level, the poem suggests a tendency to think in hierarchal categories and sub-categories, both of practitioners of the art and of the forms produced. This suggests that teaching and control of the art were organised by recognized authorities along the lines of the hierarchal system to which they themselves belong. There is every reason to suspect the influence of written learning in the formulation of categories and the definition of hierarchies.

1.3 *Clavis metrica* as prescriptive text: some first conclusions

1.3.1 Common factors

The existence of the two poems in *clavis metrica* form compared above is in itself significant, suggesting that there are attitudes to poetic composition which are shared by both Icelandic and Irish in the period under examination. As a result we can make the following assumptions:

a) In both countries a wide range of metrical forms is available for the composition of poetic texts.

Availability here does not merely mean that the linguistic structures were present which enabled these forms to be used, but that they enjoyed social recognition. This can be established in the case of *Dagaisti* by the value-judgement and assessment of function by the authoritative figure of the *ardollam* whose name is given in the title. It can be established less securely in the case of *Háttalykill* by inference from the subject-matter: panegyric of established heroes or historical kings is hardly likely to have been carried out in anything other than forms considered acceptable, if not even actually prestigious, by the intended audience of the poems.

b) Patrons and practitioners of the metrical art existed who could appreciate and analyse metrical form sufficiently to perceive each individual metre exemplified in the *clavis* as having its own distinguishing characteristics.

The categorization in metrical form in both poems both relies on a consensus of what is to be considered relevant for the system. This can be seen in the fact that certain features are given metrical relevance in one poem and not in the other. The clearest case is the use of syntactic restriction as a means of establishing distinction between forms in the Icelandic *clavis*. The selection of different criteria in each *clavis* is clearly not the result of linguistic compulsion, and cannot be explained on any other grounds than those of consensus within the culture.

c) The choice of a given form is a conscious decision, and thus there is a value attached to form as well as to content.

This proceeds from a) and b) above. It is more explicit in the Irish poem, by virtue of the value-judgements passed within the text.

We may contrast the situation symptomatized by these two poems with that to be found in Old English. In Old English vernacular literature there was only one form available; the stichic, alliterating *Langzeile*; to which category a) above does not apply; b) and c) are therefore criteria which in Old English can only apply to those whose knowledge of metrical form is supplemented from outside the culture. The proportion of surviving Old English verse not composed in some variation of the *Langzeile* is extremely slight. Even the end-rhyme of the *Rhyming Poem* is superimposed on the *Langzeile*.

Since the Irish poem of Cellach Hua Ruan[ada] is a didactic work containing metrical instruction as part of its text, we can make from it the following deductions, which do not necessarily apply in the case of Iceland:

d) There is a sense, irrespective of considerations of metrical correctness or incorrectness, of the appropriateness of a given metrical form for a given social situation.

e) There is an accepted hierarchy of authority in a position to prescribe the activity of a given practitioner. This is most apparent in st. 13 of *Dagaisti*, in which *anamain* seems to be reserved for the highest grade of practitioner.

f) There is a demand for formal instruction in the prescribed forms of composition.

The existence of a poem in *clavis* form need not *per se* prove demand for instruction; it is just as conceivable that a poet composes in this form to display his own ability, or even for pure self-satisfaction. However, it seems most likely that an exemplary poem such as *Dagaisti*, in which title and form are inextricably linked, and information contained in the text is non-narrative and relevant only for the study of metrical form, was conceived as a form of instruction.

The above points are indications that in one culture at least, if not both, metrical form and instruction have a social dimension of considerable significance.

1.3.2 Differences between the two systems as exemplified

The two poems seem at first glance to be similar in purpose; they provide examples of stanzaic metres, and are based on the concept of a repertoire of forms, which a poet has to master if he wishes to be regarded as qualified. They may be regarded as symptomatic of their cultures. Both in Iceland and Ireland, the stanzaic metre had become an established vehicle for vernacular poetry long before this was the case on the European mainland or the British Isles.⁵⁶

However, the analysis of the two poems in *clavis* form given above, to a certain extent an analysis of the two systems of versification in microcosm, reveals the difficulties involved in any such comparative analysis. It will have become evident that the similarities between the two poems are relatively superficial: both use the *clavis* form, both involve stanzaic form (differently perceived in each case), syllable count (but with different preferred line-lengths), alliteration (with completely different rules governing positioning) and rhyme (end-based with additional internal rhyme in Irish, tonic and intralinear with occasional end-rhyme in Icelandic). The rôle of ictus appears to be different in each system, whereas the only feature that appears to be identical in both is that of regulated cadence.

These common features operate on the level of abstract metrics. The semantic contents of the poems show further divergences. This is to be expected if we assume a different intention and target audience for each. It is possible, however, that this also symptomatizes more fundamental differences in social and cultural context of versification.

Descending to the level of the poem as a series of stanzas in varying forms, we also note significant differences in the concept of metrical relevance between the two countries. In particular, we have observed that skaldic poetry includes within the class of features prescribed in metrical form aspects which appear irrelevant in the Irish example. In particular we may note the form-defining function of strict syntactic regulation.

It would appear, then, that the two *clavis* poems briefly examined in this chapter present metrical systems which are superficially similar, but which diverge notably. In the rest of the book I intend to compare two major prescriptive texts, the Irish tract MV 1 and Snorri's *Háttatal*, within their respective cultural backgrounds, along the lines suggested in this chapter. A more detailed account of the premises and approach involved will be found in Chapter 2.

⁵⁶ This meant that two systems of versification were practised concurrently in both countries; see below, Ch. 3.