

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 25 (1997)

Artikel: Clavis Metrica : Háttatal, Háttalykill and the Irish Metrical Tracts
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Kapitel: 4: Regulation of the metrical art and its practice : metrical and legal tracts
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858270>

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Chapter 4. Regulation of the metrical art and its practice: metrical and legal tracts

Tracts dealing with metrics may be divided into two basic categories of regulation, *artistic* and *cultural*, while each of these two may be further subdivided into *descriptive* and *prescriptive* texts. Artistic regulation concerns metrical form purely as artefact. It regulates the formal structure of this artefact in terms of the prevailing metrical system of the culture. Cultural regulation concerns itself with the artefact, its creators and its performers as they impinge on the society in which the artefact is produced and received. Descriptive regulation provides an objective account of the state of the art at a given point in time, and possibly of its development hitherto. Prescriptive regulation provides by rule or example or a combination of the two a standard which is enjoined on future practitioners of the art, and thus implies value-judgement.

4.1 Metrical tracts in Irish - a brief survey

In Irish we can distinguish between metrical tracts proper (artistic regulation) and legal tracts relating to metrics (cultural regulation) as follows:

- a) As metrical tracts proper we can designate those texts that describe (and prescribe) metrical form in such a way that the forms can be constructed from the information given, or the examples emulated (or avoided, where faults are exemplified). They have thus tended to provide the basis for modern studies on mediaeval Irish metrics.
- b) Legal tracts relating to metrics refer to metrical form without permitting reconstruction, assuming prior knowledge of any form referred to by name.

4.1.1 Metrical tracts

Within this category we can assume that by the time our first surviving manuscript material was committed to the page the following were extant:

- 1) The "metrical section" of the Book of Leinster, (LL)¹ consisting of the following:
 - i) LL 37a)-38a) *trefhocul*:² a catalogue of faults to be avoided and licenses permitted, followed by a series of stanzas exemplifying each point,³
 - ii) LL38a) Cellach's *dagaisti*,⁴
 - iii) LL 38a)-b) The seven varieties of the metre *dían*, named and exemplified.⁵

The section concludes with a brief exposition of the *ogham* alphabet (*de dulib feda*) and a short remark on the privileges of the *filid*, and is complemented by a brief list of the accomplishments of a *fili*, *cethri srotha déc éicsi* "fourteen streams of wisdom" on p. 30.⁶

2) *Mittelirische Verslehren* 1-3

Three substantial tracts contained as a unit in the Book of Ballymote:

- i) *do corus bard cona bardni*,⁷ exemplifying the metres to be practised by the bards, as opposed to the *filid*, in categories of metres correlated with the seven orders of bardistry,
- ii) *duodecim partes poeticae*, a curriculum for the education of poets (*filid*) extending over a period of twelve years,
- iii) *dona haistib*, a classification of metres according to the frequency of their use, purporting to exemplify 365 metres, containing in fact only 210.

These tracts can be dated to before the compilation of the Book of Leinster⁸ and appear to represent a state of the art as practised in the tenth and early eleventh century; the material quoted is never ascribed to poets later than this date.

¹ The whole metrical section has not been edited separately, but is to be found in Best 1954 vol. 1 pp. 165-78.

² The word can be translated as 'triads', referring to the fact that for each "fault" a "correct" and a "licensed" solution is given. Cf. Snorri's tripartite division between *setning*, *leyfi* and *fyrirboðning* at the opening of *Háttatal*, Faulkes 1991 p. 3.

³ cf. Calder 1917 pp. 258-69, Thurneysen 1928 pp. 290-303, 1932 p. 128.

⁴ ed. in Thurneysen 1891 p. 106, 1912 pp. 73-7, 1913 pp. 22-3, now in De Bernardo-Stempel/Ködderitsch 1991 pp. 445, 658-62, 703-4.

⁵ Six of these stanzas are to be found in MV 2 pp. 32-3, and the final one in MV 3 p. 71. These references are supplied in Best 1954 vol. 1 p. xxiii, but erroneously ascribed to the preceding poem.

⁶ A further tract from LL, *do nemthigud filed* "on the validation of poets" delineates the sagas in a poet's repertoire and is thus related in concept to MV 2; it does not cover specifically metrical material.

⁷ The titles of tracts 1 & 3 come from the H version, of 2 from the Laud version.

⁸ Ó hAodha 1991 pp. 207-9, Ó Macháin 1991 p. 274.

Further metrical tracts contained in the Book of Ballymote and later MSS represent the art as practised during the period of bardic supremacy from the Norman invasion to the sixteenth century. They lie outside the scope of this examination.⁹

4.1.2 Legal tracts

The most relevant area of legislation for our purposes is that concerning the establishment of grades of poets, each with their own claims on hospitality, propinquity to the king at formal assemblies and honour-price in the case of injury. These depended in law on rank in the poetic hierarchy, and this, in turn, on mastery of a specific set of metrical forms. The *clavis metrica* in Irish is therefore a document of legal relevance.

Significant texts in this area are:

- i) *Bretha Nemed*¹⁰
- ii) *Uraicecht Becc*¹¹
- iii) *Uraicecht na Ríar*¹²
- iv) portions of the *Tract on the Privileges and Responsibilities of the Poets*¹³
- v) The Caldron of Poesy.¹⁴

4.2 Metrical and related tracts in Icelandic

4.2.1 Metrical tracts

During the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth¹⁵ the following were produced:

- i) *Háttalykill*

The work as preserved may be regarded as a metrical tract as defined in 4.1 above inasmuch as it is possible for us to reconstruct the metres exemplified from the material given, the more so as the scheme involves two specimens of each metre.

⁹ For a survey of texts, editions and secondary literature see Ó Macháin 1991 pp. 273-6.

¹⁰ For details of MSS and editions see Breatnach 1987 p. 20.

¹¹ cf. *ibid.* p. 3.

¹² ed. L. Breatnach 1987 with extracts from related texts and with translations.

¹³ ed. E.J. Gwynn 1942.

¹⁴ ed. L. Breatnach 1981, P.L. Henry 1980.

¹⁵ i.e. between the Settlement in 872 and the acceptance of Norwegian rule in 1262-4.

ii) *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*

Snorri's *Edda* is a prose handbook of poetics in tripartite form with a prologue. Of these, only the final section *Háttatal* deserves the term metrical tract as defined above;¹⁶ commentary and text together provide a fully adequate means of reconstructing metrical forms and of determining the criteria of distinction between the forms delineated.

iii) *Málskrúðsfræði*

Málskrúðsfræði is the second and larger section of the Third Grammatical Treatise¹⁷ ascribed to Snorri's nephew¹⁸ Óláfr Hvítaskáld, like Snorri a practising poet.¹⁹ It throws light on native metrics where it attempts to reconcile the principles of classical rhetoric of its model Donatus with the practices of native versification. It does not contain sufficient information to permit the reconstruction of complete forms, but does deal with phenomena of metrical recurrence.

iv) *Málfræðinnar grundvöllr*

The first section of the Third Grammatical Treatise contains a brief section in which the basic alliterative framework of the *dróttkvætt* form is delineated.²⁰

4.2.2 Legal tracts

i) *Um skáldskap*,

a section of the legal compilation *Grágás*, now surviving in two manuscripts of the late thirteenth century.²¹ To what extent this reflects the first codification of the laws in 1117 is uncertain. The section in question is entirely concerned with sanctions against those who use metrical form as a means of injuring others. It is

¹⁶ By far the longest section of the tripartite text is the second, *Skáldskaparmál*, a tract on the kenning. This is an indication of the central importance attached to this stylistic feature by Snorri, himself a practising skald, and presumably by the majority of practitioners of the art (cf. Ch. 9 below). Bearing in mind that the main application of the first section *Gylfaginning* 'the Deluding of Gylfi', an exposition of pagan Germanic cosmology and aetiology, is to give the poet a basic grasp of mythology in order for him to manipulate and comprehend the mythological basis of the kenning-system, one is justified in saying that the work is a handbook on the theory and practice of poetic allusion with a brief metrical tract appended; *Háttatal* forms a little less than one sixth of the written text as a whole.

¹⁷ ed. arn. pp. 62-188.

¹⁸ For the exact relationship see Genealogical Table 19 in Jóhannesson et al. 1946 (Appendix to vol. 2, no page number).

¹⁹ He is mentioned as having composed a *drápa* in honour of St. Þorlák in *Sturlunga saga* (Jóhannesson et al. 1946 vol. 1 p. 402).

²⁰ ed. arn. pp. 62-92.

²¹ Finsen 1852 vol. 2 pp. 183-5 (§ 238).

thus completely at variance with the principles of Irish legislation.²² Two main classes of poem are proscribed, satire and love-poetry.

4.3 Cultural regulation

Despite the scarcity of material, particularly in Icelandic, certain trends can be observed by comparison of regulatory texts in either culture.

The legislation contained in *Grágás* suggests a difference of quality, and not merely of quantity, in the cultural regulation of the poetic art, when compared with the elaborate provisions of Irish legal material; this is as much apparent from what is not stated, as from what provisions are made.

i) Hierarchy and organization

There is no provision in *Grágás* or elsewhere in Icelandic texts for the establishment of a hierarchy of poets, or of metres to suit, nor are there any traces of a requirement for formal schooling, as symptomatized in Ireland by the existence of a defined curriculum of study.²³

There is no concept of reward for poetry in *Grágás*. Where this is found elsewhere, as for example in saga sources, it is on an informal basis,²⁴ rather than according to any preset scale of values.

ii) Social appropriateness

Irish legal sources indicate mutual dependence of king and poet.²⁵ I am not aware of any similar provision in Scandinavian law.

²² For a comparison of the two see Tranter 1991.

²³ The more prestigious class of *fili* is distinguished in theory from that of *bard* by the fact that the former must follow a prescribed course of study; cf. MV 1 p. 6, Ó hAodha 1991 p. 220.

²⁴ The payment to which a skald was entitled to for a well-received poem, *bragarlaun*, appears to have been left to the recipient's discretion, and normally the latter knew how to reward according to convention. Even Ethelred of England is assumed to know the appropriate reward, as in *Gunnlaugs saga* ch. 7 (ÍF 3, p. 71), when for a poem presumably of *drápa* form (only the *stef* is quoted) he gives a fur-lined, gold-trimmed cloak and a place in his bodyguard. Interestingly enough, Olaf Silkbeard of Dublin is less familiar with the system, and when Gunnlaugr recites him a *drápa* he is tempted to commit an act of gross over-tipping, asking his steward *féhirðir*, presumably an official similar to the Irish *reachtair*, whom he would consult if offered panegyrics by the *filid*, whether a gift of two ships would be appropriate. This latter warns his king that this is over-munificent, and Gunnlaugr is once more given a fur-lined and gold-trimmed cloak, and a gold arm-ring in addition (ÍF 3, pp. 75-6).

²⁵ L. Breatnach 1987 pp. 89-94.

4.4 Metrical tracts: principles of organization and analysis

Organization on patterns derived from written learning is more marked in metrical tracts proper. It manifests itself in three forms; binary categorization,²⁶ categorization by repeated subdivision,²⁷ not necessarily binary, and organization according to symbolic or otherwise significant numbers.

4.4.1 Irish tracts

The common purpose of the metrical tracts in Irish seems to be that of establishing a hierarchal classification of metres in accordance with the legal principles set out above. Even the third tract, dealing with metres apparently without reference to their attribution to different grades or different stages of the poetic curriculum, still uses as its overriding structural principle not metrical criteria, but the social criterion of frequency in performance.

4.4.1.1 MV 1

The overall structure is determined by the significant number seven,²⁸ the number of grades of practising bards. Poetry itself is first divided socially into two domains, those of the *filid*, not to be examined in the tract, and those of the bards, about whose metres the tract is written. The bards themselves are divided into two orders *soerbaird* 'noble bards' and *doerbaird* 'base bards', and these in turn subdivided into sets of eight, giving seven practising and one non-practising category in each order, thus allowing the organization of the analysis of metres on the basis of the significant number seven:

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of the use of the binary principle in the Latin *artes grammaticae* see Ax 1986, esp. pp. 11, 15-58, and the tabular summaries on pp. 52-5; my thanks to Prof. Gregor Vogt-Spira, Greifswald, for the references.

²⁷ For a summary of the use of this principle, which he names *la division à l'infini*, in the authors of antiquity, see Holtz 1982 pp. 51-61.

²⁸ cf. the structure of Servius' *De Centum Metris*, with the in itself significant number 100 subdivided into seven, at the cost of relegating a considerable number of metres to an appendix; cf. Tranter 1991 p. 267. For the significances of the number seven see Meyer/Suntrup, *Lexikon der mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, München 1987 cols. 497-565.

Cis lir Baird docuissin? Ní [handsa]:²⁹ a se deac *id est* ocht soerbaird ocus ocht ndóerbaird.³⁰

'What number of Bards are there?

Not difficult: sixteen of them, that is eight noble bards and eight base bards.'

The metres of the bards are defined by a binary divide:

Ceist: cid i ndeochraigetar *ocus* i noentadaigetar? Ni ansae: oéntaduigit céamus, fo bíth is oéndán cen tomus téchtaí fil leu uile, .i. in bairdni: *ocus* nos-deochraigitt i n-écsamlus na n-ilfhodal fil forsin mbairdni.³¹

'Question: In what do they differ and in what do they form a unity?

Not difficult: They form a unity in the first instance because it is a single art without prescribed measure which they all possess, i.e. bardic composition; and they differ from each other in the variety of the many divisions of bardic composition.'

and the bards themselves are divided into an upper order of four and a lower order of three according to the metres allotted to them. This allocation of a *trivium* and a *quadrivium* suggests that the tract is seeking to follow the patterns of learning inculcated by the Church.³²

Ceist: cis lir fodlai filet forsin mbairdne? ní handsa: .l. fodal³³ *id est* cethora prim-fodla filet forsin mbairdni, *ocus* is as-sin fodailter a aisdi coir do cach bard.³⁴

'Question, what number of forms are there in bardistry?

Not difficult; there are four prime forms in bardistry and it is from them that a fitting metre is assigned to each bard.'

In its details the tract is organised according to the principle of multiple subdivision. First the *primfodla* 'prime metres' are enumerated:

nathbairdni *ocus* ollbairdni *ocus* casbairdni *ocus* duanbairdni³⁵

²⁹ The text is built up on the customary catechetical pattern; a peculiarity of Irish catechisms appears to be that the respondent does not merely supply the answer, but ensures the catechist that he has no difficulty in doing so, preceding every response with *ní handsa* 'it is not difficult'.

³⁰ MV p. 5.

³¹ MV p. 6, text and translation as in Ó hAodha 1991 p. 215.

³² For the division of the number seven into 3 (1st uneven indivisible plural number) + 4 (1st even divisible plural number) and the symbolic interpretations attached thereto in Augustine, Gregory and Bede see Meyer 1975 pp. 133, 138-9. It seems particularly appropriate that the septiform division of the poetic art mirrors the septiform gifts of the Holy Spirit.

³³ The usual expansion of .l. would be 50. To avoid the contradiction I read '*vel fodal*' and omit the phrase in the translation, following MS Ba; my thanks to Prof. Mac Eoin for the suggestion.

³⁴ MV p. 6, my translations here and in the following quotations from MV where not otherwise ascribed.

³⁵ MV p. 6.

and the process of subdivision continued in each major category:

Ceist: cit lir fodlai for nathbairdne? Ní *handsa*: dechnad mór *ocus* lethdechnad *ocus* dechnad cumaisc *ocus* dechnad brectfelesach *ocus* dechnad becc *ocus* dechnad do-brechta.³⁶

'Question: What number of metres in *nathbairdne*? Not difficult.'

That the choice of seven major categories follows an imposed structure rather than arising out of differences between the metres themselves is shown by empirical observation: the divisions by means of which seven groups of metres are found to fit seven groups of bards are inconsistent and artificial. Thus for example the third grade of noble bards is allocated metres of the category *casbairdne*, the fourth category the category *duan*. According to the tract, these categories are distinguished by the fact that the latter category closes with a monosyllabic cadence, the latter with a trisyllabic:

Casbairdne *dano*, arreccaiter .iiii. randa indide *ocus* cloindbinnus í cach raind. *ocus* oentaigit fri duain i toimsib *id est* cloindbinnus i cehtar de, .uiii. ndialt .xx. it son i cehtar de *dano*; acht is i ndialt forcenda duan, i nfarcomrac *imorro* forcenda casbairdne.³⁷

'Casbairdne now, there are four lines seen therein and a heptasyllable in each line. And it is united with *duan* in measure, that is heptasyllable in each, 28 syllables in each, but *duan* is concluded in a monosyllable, whereas *casbairdne* is concluded in a trisyllable.'

Here the tract separates two classes on the basis of the number of syllables in the cadences, a relatively slight distinction,³⁸ that in other instances is used merely to separate two varieties of metres subsumed under the same class. Thus the second class of metre, *ollbairdne*, consists of two varieties, both with alternating octosyllables and tetrasyllables, *ollbairdne Romainn* with disyllabic cadences throughout and *ollbairdne íarcomarcach*, which alternates between monosyllabic and trisyllabic cadences.

Where one might expect the most significant distinction between classes of metres is between the fourth and the fifth groups. This after all marks the boundary between the *primfodlai* singled out by the tract-writer as the province of the four most highly-ranking bardic orders and the three "trivial" classes. However, the only significant distinction in the tract-writer's terms (i.e. in terms of syllable-count, rhyme and cadence) is that in the fifth group *bairdne* pentasyllabic lines predominate (they are by no means unknown in the other groups) whereas in the *dúanbairdne* group the metres are all heptasyllabic.

³⁶ MV p. 6.

³⁷ MV p. 11.

³⁸ Especially bearing in mind that the metres of the *duan* group ending in disyllabic cadences outnumber those with, as the tract specifies, monosyllabic cadences.

If we contrast these distinctions between classes with that between the sixth and seventh orders, *rannaigeacht* and *deibide*, we can see that in the latter case we are dealing with a completely different order of magnitude. The tract leaves us to draw the distinction empirically, there being no theoretical remarks on how the metres are constructed. However, as is to be expected from the etymologies of the two terms, there is a fundamental difference in the construction of the stanzas. The root *rann* 'quatrain' focusses attention on the stanza as a unit; *deibide* 'divided, split into two' on the stanza as a form containing two parts,³⁹ and this distinction is mirrored in the rhyme-scheme; the basic rhyme pattern for *rannaigeacht* is xaxa, for *deibide* aabb. In addition, *rannaigeacht* forms generally end in cadences of equal length in all four lines, whereas one of the basic principles of the *deibide* metres, so distinctive that it has come to be known in modern descriptions as *deibide*-rhyme, is alternation between stressed and unstressed rhyme. These are differences so fundamental that, still following the tract-writers principle of analysis according to syllable-count, cadence and rhyme, they would appear to mark out *deibide* as separate from any other metre, and to make the distinction between groups six and seven far wider than that between groups four and five.⁴⁰ This distinction appears to have been overlooked in the demand for a categorisation that accorded with the principle of division by significant numbers.

Within the basic classification into seven categories (the metres of the base bards are listed but neither defined nor exemplified) metres are further subdivided, their subdivisions being reflected by their names in a manner reminiscent of botanical classification.⁴¹ The system of significant numbers breaks down here, there being no attempt to produce equal numbers of subdivisions within each of the main categories. This can be seen by comparing the summaries preceding the enumeration of metres in the divisions *duanbairdne* and *deibide*:

Duanbairdne dano *id est* duan fadesin ocus duan cenélach ocus forduan ocus taebcasad ocus tulchasad ocus srethbairdne.⁴²

'Duanbairdne next, that is duan itself and generic duan and forduan and taebcassad⁴³ and tulchasad and srethbairdne.'

Do deibidib dano inso sí *id est* deibide nimrind fota ocus deibide nimrinn garit ocus deibide scailti garit ocus deibide smittach ocus deibide bais[e] fri toin ocus dechubaid

³⁹ I am as yet unable to say whether there is any greater tendency for a strong syntactic break within *deibide* than within *rannaigeacht*, or whether we should consider the term 'divided' to apply on a purely metrical level only.

⁴⁰ In the empirical analysis, there appears to be a case for marking out both *rannaigeacht* and *deibide* as metres based on different fundamental principles from those governing the first five categories. In particular, it appears likely that in the first five groups of metres, pair-alliteration, though not specifically stated as a condition by the tract-writer, was a constituent factor of the metre. In the latter two groups, this was not the case. This aspect, with its implications for the supposed oral or written origin of the metres, is examined in detail in Ch. 7.

⁴¹ This system is examined in detail in the following chapter.

⁴² MV p. 12.

⁴³ lit. side-complex, cf. the Icelandic term *hjástælt*.

fota *ocus* dechubaid ngarit *ocus* debide cenelach *ocus* debidi guilbnech dealtach *ocus* debide guilbnech recomarcach et debide cumaisc *ocus* debide docheil a cubaid.⁴⁴

'Of deibide metres next below, that is deibide nimrind fota etc [...]

A comparison of these two passages shows two further features of the system of categorisation: the extent of subdivision and the use of attributives as fixed technical terms. The former is most marked in the section on *rannaigeacht*,⁴⁵ where subdivision extends to the fourth degree, in the distinction between *randaigeacht cetarclubaid garit dialtach*:

Andarlíum
Conchobar nithuichret frim
Sech domelfed arascath
Tacerad fria cach domchind⁴⁶

and *randaigeacht cetharclubaid garit recomarcach*.⁴⁷

Ferg féne
Demuintir echac éle
nípa meisi aben gleisium
nípa seisium mochele.⁴⁸

The system of classification employed to produce this nomenclature is examined in further detail in Ch. 5.2.

The use of fixed terms is noticeable above all in the standardisation of names for line-lengths and cadences, exemplified in the use of the terms *dialtach* and *recomarcach* above, to which a separate section is devoted at the end of the tract giving the names of the various units:

Dialt cetomus:

Bran find
fíí drong
derg rind
ríí glonn

⁴⁴ MV p. 17.

⁴⁵ This is the form given in DIL as *lemma*; as in all such terminology, there are numerous variant spellings, which I have not attempted to normalize here.

⁴⁶ MV p. 15.

⁴⁷ The most complex nomenclature of this sort is that applied to the category *dían* in MV 3, which produces the following: *Dian midseng cendtrom corranach aicclech bredda*: 'Dían mid-slender head-heavy augmented interlinear (sci. rhymed) intralinear (sci. rhymed)' (MV 3 p. 72).

⁴⁸ MV p. 15.

Dialt i ncec foccal don raind seo, recomrac i ncec cethramain, feles i cechtar a da lethi, bricht uile a meit.⁴⁹

'A monosyllable in each word of this stanza, a disyllable in each quarter, a tetrasyllable in each of its two halves, and its whole measure an octosyllable.'

(The tract continues by giving metrical examples of line-units from one to eight syllables, each unit being exemplified in a complete stanza.)

Moreover, as well as establishing strict terms in the above manner, the text sets particular restricted meanings to words of common currency; *fota*, *garit*, *bec*, *mór*, for example take on the meanings "long" (one or more lines longer than in a standard pattern), "short" (one line noticeably shorter than the others or the standard form), "lesser" (usually applied to variants with less than seven syllables per line but the same rhyme-scheme as the standard form) and "greater" (with respectively disyllabic and monosyllabic cadence – the usage here in MV 1 – or, as in MV 3, referring like the *fata* and *gairit*-forms, to variations in syllabic length of the line).

This tract is inconsistent in its organization. It starts as a catechism and abandons the form soon after the commencement. At the outset metres are defined accurately in terms of syllable count; by the end of the tract they are simply named and exemplified.

It is nonetheless the most highly analytical of the early metrical tracts. However, this analysis takes place on only a small proportion of the possible planes of regularity afforded by the forms quoted. The only distinctions regarded as significant are those of syllabic line-length,⁵⁰ cadence and end-rhyme, the last of these three playing a very subordinate part.

Empirical analysis shows that, as in *Dagaisti*, alliteration, as well as internal and interlinear rhyme, consonance and assonance, must have played a significant part in definition of form; and some of these elements are reflected as attributives in the names of the metres themselves. The fact that they are left unmentioned in the tract is symptomatic of the metrical tracts as a whole.

4.4.1.2 MV 2

As the titles in the manuscripts suggest, ("duodecim partes poeticae hae sunt" and "XII ernail na filideachta annso sis") the major part of this text is arranged on the

⁴⁹ MV p. 20.

⁵⁰ cf. Thurneysen 1928 p. 303, zu *Auraicept*: 'Die schwierigste Aufgabe, die Auflösung der Wörter in einzelne Laute [...] hatte schon der Erfinder des Ogom gelöst [...] Die lateinische Grammatik brachte den Begriff der Silbe (*sillab*, *dialt*) hinzu und ermöglichte so die Entstehung einer silbenzählenden irischen Metrik.'

basis of the significant number twelve,⁵¹ in this case corresponding to twelve years of study required for progress from the lowest to the highest grade of *fili*:

Is he aughtartas filideachta na nGóedel *ocus* is hé a hord: dí raínd déc ínte *ocus* accept bliadna i ncech raind.⁵²

'This is the authority of the poetry of the Gael and this is its arrangement; twelve sections in it and a year's study in each section.'

Each year's course of study comprises both memorization of texts, narrative and instructive, and mastery of metres.⁵³ The metres to be learnt comprise both syllabic-stanzaic forms, classified according to the principles set out in MV 1, and texts in accentual-alliterative forms as exemplified in Ch. 3 above.

The *duodecim partes poeticae* are themselves preceded in the Book of Ballymote by an introduction setting out *vi ernaili deg na filideachta* "sixteen parts of poetry". The number sixteen is reminiscent of the sixteenfold division of bardic orders at the commencement of MV 1. The term *ernail* refers here not to parts of a curriculum, as in the vernacular title of the *duodecim partes*, but to specific accomplishments to be mastered by the poet, some stylistic, some metrical. Thus three types of *dunad*⁵⁴ are specified, (repetition of a complete word, a closed and an open initial syllable),⁵⁵ *uaim* 'stitching', the linkage of lines by alliteration, *sreth immais* 'spreading of knowledge', alliteration of every accented word in a given line, *fidrad freccomail* 'letters of joining', inter-strophic linkage. The list points to the fact, noted in connection with MV 1 above, that traditional criteria of analysis, presumably first developed in conjunction with the original accentual-alliterative measures, were recognized by these tracts as belonging to an existing tradition of poetic accomplishment, but were nonetheless not applied to analysis of stanzaic-syllabic metres.

⁵¹ cf. Meyer/Suntrup 1987 columns 620-8.

⁵² MV p. 31.

⁵³ The contents of this poetic syllabus are comprehensively summarised in MV pp. 110-23.

⁵⁴ 'closure', involving repetition of the opening words of a poem in the final line. For further details see Ch. 9.

⁵⁵ Cellach's *Dagaisti* thus concludes with a *dunad* of the second order.

4.4.1.3 MV 3

The tract is based on the significant number 365, the number of metres it purports to exemplify;⁵⁶

Cia lín na naisti didu? Ní [handsa]. a cuíc sescat ar trí cetaib.⁵⁷

'Now what is the full number of metres? It is not difficult; three hundred and sixty five of them.'

The classic example of a work in vernacular Irish governed by the 365 day principle is *Féilire Oengusso*, the Calendar of Oengus, in which there is a stanza for every day of the year in which that day's saints are commemorated. It is in accordance with the transference of the numerical arrangements of ecclesiastical life to the secular sphere that we have noted in 4.1 above that the poet should be expected to have a metre for each day of the year.

MV 3 is subdivided into four, proceeding from the 'customary metres' *gnáthaisti* via the *gnátha medónnda* 'moderately customary' to the *anaichint*⁵⁸ 'unknown'. The final section is intitled *Incipit dona [he]coitchennaib*, 'Beginning of the [un]common [metres]';⁵⁹ it contains texts of poems apparently used for occult purposes, the majority in accentual-alliterative metre, as are also those of the preceding section.

⁵⁶ On the significance of this number to the learned Irish poet see the passage quoted by Thurneysen (MV p. 122) from BB p. 331b, l. 30 et seq.:

Ar comiditer alta uad fri haltaib ín duine. Ar itat v alta lx ar ccc í nduine, v lx ar ccc aisti archetail *ocus* v laité lx ar ccc isin bliadain, *ocus* v lx ar ccc du luibib tre talmain.

'For the components of poetry are measured as the components of the human being. For the human has 365 parts, poetry 365 metres, the year 365 days and the earth 365 plantss.'

⁵⁷ MV p. 67.

⁵⁸ Thus Thurneysen MV p. 124. On the other hand the text preserves elsewhere (p. 96) a distinction between the forms *imgarb* 'very rough' and *anaichnid* 'unrecognizable' as two divisions of the order *druimne suithe* 'pinnacle (or ridge?) of poetry'. It is thus conceivable that the term *anaichnid* has a more specific meaning than that assumed by Thurneysen, though his interpretation has the advantage of adhering to the principle of dividing by frequency which appears to have been set by the first two terms *gnáthaisti* and *gnátha medónnda*.

⁵⁹ Emended by Thurneysen; the MS reads *coitchennaib* 'common' (MV 3 p. 99).

4.4.1.4 MV 4 (Cellach's *Dagaisti*)

Like MV 2, this short *clavis* appears to be based on the significant number twelve, the number of metres delineated. Whether the total number of stanzas, (14, i.e. 2 x 7) is also to be seen as a conscious choice of significant number is hard to determine.

4.4.1.5 Conclusions

The organization of all tracts is based on strict numerical principles; the number seems on occasion to be more important than consistency of categorization. The simultaneous use of three systems of numerical organization, i.e. binary division, multiple subdivision and repeated subdivision is striking; it raises the question as to whether indigenous or imported influence is at work.

The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri xx*) were available in Ireland soon after their completion.⁶⁰ In this one (immensely popular) work alone, models can be found of all systems employed by Irish metrical analysts. A few examples must suffice here:

1) The principle of binary division

cf. Bk. 3 (*De Mathematica*)

De prima divisione parium et imparium. Numerus dividitur in paribus et imparibus. (III v 1)⁶¹

De secunda divisione totius numeri. Omnis numerus (1) aut secundum se consideratur, (2) aut ad aliquid. (1) Iste dividitur sic: alii enim sunt aequales, alii inaequales. (2) Iste dividitur sic: alii sunt maiores, alii sunt minores. (III vi 1)

The section continues according to the principle of repeated subdivision.

2) The principle of repeated subdivision

cf. Bk. 11 (*De homini et portentis*)

The description of man opens with a binary divide:

Duplex est autem homo: interior et exterior. Interior homo anima, exterior homo corpus. (XI i 6)

⁶⁰ Bernhard Bischoff 1966 pp. 174-91, cf. Löfstedt 1965 pp. 50-1, Brown 1982 p. 104 & note, McCone 1990 1.12, Hilgarth 1984 p. 7.

⁶¹ This and all following quotations from Isidore following the numeration of Lindsay's (unpaginated) edition of 1911.

The description of the body proceeds by repeated subdivision:

Prima pars corporis caput; (XI i 25)

Facies dicta ab effigie. Ibi est enim tota figura hominis et uniuscuiusque personae cognitio. (ibid. 33)

Oculi vocati, sive quia eos ciliorum tegmina occulant, [...] sive quia occultum humanum habeant [...] (ibid. 36)

Pupilla est medius punctus oculi, in quo vis est videndi (ibid. 37)

3) Organization by significant number

Typical of this form of organization is the ordering of the first portion of the Etymologies according to the Seven Liberal Arts:

Disciplina liberalium artium septem sunt. Prima grammatica [...] Secunda rhetorica [...] Tertia dialectica [...] Quarta arithmetica [...] Quinta musica [...] Sexta geographica [...] Septima astronomia. (I ii 1-3)

Isidore follows this scheme for the first three books and then stops, and in doing so also gave the Irish metrist a precedent, if he should require one, for setting a programme and then not carrying it out; only six of the liberal arts being dealt with in this portion of the tract. (Isidore returned to the missing portion [geographia] in Bk. XIV [de terra et partibus].)

Isidore does not, however, supply a model for the peculiarly precise system of naming by which the principle of subdivision is applied to Irish metres. For these, one need look no further than the metricists of late antiquity, Servius' *De Centum Metris* being a prime example.⁶²

The suspicion that outside influences are being followed is confirmed by the contrast between the sophistication of the overall structure of the tracts and the superficial treatment of metrical features.⁶³ Metrical analysis of form, where present, is not congenial to the verse described; disregarding the following features which our examination of *Dagaisti* suggests to have been part of the system.

- 1) Accent.⁶⁴ Although the number of accents in a line varies, it was seen to have a function in determining the placing of alliteration; the differentiation

⁶² H. Keil, *Grammatici Latini* IV, Hildesheim 1961 pp. 456-67.

⁶³ Servius, for example, is only concerned with number and type of feet, no other recurrences being standardized in the systems he is describing.

⁶⁴ Arguably it is implicit in the definition of line-endings by cadence, since it is the position of the last stressed syllable in the line that defines the type of cadence. As the stress is generally prototonic, one could argue on the other hand that a completely writing-based definition of cadence based on word-boundary (the writers having enough grammatical training to detach preverbal and other particles despite a graphematical convention tending to join these to the following verb) was not inconceivable and would obviate any necessity of recognizing any rôle for stress-accent within the metrical system being described.

between types of cadence in MV 1 (cf. 4a, p. 14) is also meaningless without it.

- 2) Alliteration. This appeared to be an integral component in *Dagaisti*; it is mentioned once, devoid of context, in the introduction to MV 2, and never applied to stanzaic forms, even though stanzas quoted use it extensively.
- 3) Rhyme. Though various forms of internal and end-rhyme appear in *Dagaisti* and can be seen again in the tracts, and although terms for rhyme are found as attributes to the names of metres, it is not defined.

The system of analysis given is congenial for the metrics of a syllable-time language, which Irish was not. The system would, however, be congenial for verse in Latin in the period after the breakdown of the quantitative system and before the beginnings of versification by accentual foot-substitution.

4.4.2 Icelandic metrical tracts

4.4.2.1 *Háttatal* and its commentary

Like the Irish tracts examined above, *Háttatal* shows signs of having been influenced by the models of Western Latinity. This is above all to be noted in the structure of the Commentary.

The term commentary usually applied to the prose text in *Háttatal* suggests a reversal of priorities here compared with the texts of MV 1-3. In *Háttatal* the primary text is the verse; in MV it is the prose.

Like MV 1, the *Háttatal* commentary is organised as a catechism, a form which it maintains up to the beginning of the ninth stanza. It is based on the principle of binary and multiple subdivision:⁶⁵

⁶⁵ For a diagrammatic representation of this scheme see Möbius 1881 p. 39.

Hvat eru hættir skáldskaparins?

Þrent.

Hverir?

Setning, leyfi, fyrirboðning.

Hvat er setning háttanna?

Tvent.

Hver?

Rétt ok breytt.

Hvernig er rétt setning háttanna?

Tvenn.

Hver?

Tala ok grein.

Hvat er tala setningar háttanna?

Þrenn.⁶⁶

'What are the standards of versification? Threefold. Which? Regularity, license, interdiction. What is the regularity of metre? Twofold. Which? Strict and varied. How is strictness observed? Doubly. How? In number and in manner. What are the numbers of regular form? Threefold.'

However, it soon becomes apparent that the order thus imposed is superficial: in the development of the section quoted above, having established that strictness can be observed "in number and in manner", the commentator proceeds to subdivide, in approved classical manner, the category "number".

Sú er ein tala, hversu margir hættir hafa fundizk í kveðskap höfuðskálda. Önnur tala er þat, hversu mörg vísuorð standa í einu eyrindi í hverjum hætti. In þriðja tala er sú, hversu margar samstofur eru settar í hvert vísuorð í hverjum hætti.⁶⁷

'This is the first number, how many metres have been found in the poetry of the chief *skáld*; the second number is how many lines are in one verse of each metre, while the third number is how many syllables are set in each line in each metre.'

Clearly enough, the first of the three criteria is historical, the latter two metrical. A similar lack of consistency appears in the development of the second element in the above division, "manner".

Hver er grein setningar háttanna?

Tvenn.

Hver?

Málsgrein ok hljóðsgrein.

Hvat er málsgrein?

⁶⁶ Faulkes 1991 p. 3. The translations of this text are my own except where otherwise indicated.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

Stafasetning greinir mál allt, en hljóð greinir þat at hafa samstöfur langar eða skammar, harðar eða linar, ok þat er setning hljóðsgreina er vér kōllum hendingar.⁶⁸

'What are the divisions of the composition of metres? Twofold: distinction of speech and distinction of sound.

The positioning of letters creates all speech, but distinction of sound involves having longer or shorter, harder or softer syllables; what we call *hendingar* involves regulating distinctions of sound.'

The commentator is trying here to include a metrical feature, rhyme, for which there is no pattern in his sources. His initial binary division "sound and speech" could have been taken from any of the school grammars with which he was acquainted; it was stated in the Second Grammatical Treatise as follows:

Nú hafa þessir lutir hljóð, sumir rödd ok sumir mál⁶⁹

'Now these objects have sounds, some voice and some speech'

and was to be restated more precisely by the compiler of the Third Grammatical Treatise:

Af samkvámu ræirilegra luta ok úræirilega verðr hljóð [...]

Af lífligum lutum, þeim er líkama hafa, verðr annat hljóð, þat er rödd heitir, en annat þat sem eigi er rödd, sem fótastapp eða handaklapp ok annat þvílíkt [...]. En Priscianus kallar rödd vera hið greiniligsta loptsins högg ok eiginliga skiljanligt.⁷⁰

'Sound results from the contact of moveable and immoveable objects [...] From living objects, which have bodies, comes either the sound that is called voice, or that which is not voice, such as footsteps, clapping and suchlike [...] But Priscian says that voice is the most distinct percussion of air and the only comprehensible one.'

Snorri departs from the standard pattern, as exemplified by the grammatical treatises, in two respects. The first concerns his use of opposition *hljóð* and *mál*, which appears in neither of the tracts quoted. Where the Second Grammatical Treatise uses *rödd/mál*, the Third Grammatical Treatise uses *rödd* as the basis for a multiple subdivision. In each tract, *hljóð* is the overall term from which the diaeresis proceeds.

Whereas *mál* refers in the tracts to comprehensible speech as a whole, in Snorri it is used to denote semantic, as opposed to phonemic, patterns of regularity, as becomes clear later in the tract:

⁶⁸ ibid.

⁶⁹ ed. arn. vol. 2, p. 46.

⁷⁰ ed. arn. vol. 2, pp. 64, 66.

Hvernig er breytt setning háttanna?
 Tvá vega.
 Hvernig?
 Með máli ok hljóðum.
 Hvernig skal með máli skipta?
 Tvá vega.
 Hvernig?
 Halda eða skipta háttunum.
 Hvernig skal breyta háttunum ok halda sama hætti?
 Svá: at kenna eða styðja eða reka eða sannkenna eða yrkja at nýgjörvingum.⁷¹

'How can the composition of metres be changed? In two ways. Which? With style and with sound. How many ways are there of changing by style? Two, to keep to or to change the metre. How can one *vary the metre and still keep to the form*? By using the *kenning*, the *rekit kenning*, the *sannkenning* and the *nýgjörving*.' [Three types of *kenningar*].

The second innovation is hinted at in the above quotation, and can be seen clearly in its subsequent development. The two categories, phonemic and semantic, which Snorri refers to by means of his *hljóð/mál* opposition are treated as parallel elements within the same metrical system. This is at variance with standard Late Latin practice of determining metrics as the correct observation of phonemic structures, with the realization as definitely subordinate.

In short, where the structure of this commentary has to choose between adherence to the classical pattern and congeniality to the metrical system described, it follows the opposite course to that followed in MV 1; it opts for congeniality at the price of deserting the structure of its classical forbears.

The congeniality in the structure of the commentary is mirrored by the metrical features used as part of the analysis. On the level of abstract metrics, the following criteria of analysis may be found:

syllable count
 alliteration
 line-internal full rhyme = phonemic identity of vowel + consonant groups
 line-internal half rhyme = phonemic identity of consonant groups
 full end rhyme

A form is characteristically described by stating the number of syllables per line and the position of rhymes and alliteration, as for example:

í hrynhendum háttum eru optast átta samstöfur í vísuorði, en hendingar ok stafaskipti fara sem í dróttkvæðum hætti.⁷²

⁷¹ Faulkes 1991 p. 5.

⁷² Möbius 1881 p. 24.

'In the *hrynhent* metres there are most frequently eight syllables in the line, but the rhymes and placing of alliterations follow the pattern of *dróttkvætt*.'

Accent is not mentioned, and therefore, neither is cadence. This has led to the widely-held assumption that skaldic metres, in particular *dróttkvætt*, are strictly syllabic, challenged most recently by Árnason as mentioned in Ch. 2.

The generally accepted view of *dróttkvætt* is that it is based on accent. Snorri, in disregarding accent, is therefore adopting an uncongenial analysis at a basic level. Accent determines the position of alliteration in both Icelandic and in Irish.

Despite the similar disregard for accent, alliteration, completely ignored in MV 1, and mentioned only in passing in MV 2, is given absolute priority in *Háttatal*:⁷³

Í qðru vísuorði er settr sá stafr fyrst í vísuorðinu, er vér kōllum hōfuðstafr; sá stafr ræðr kveðandi. En í fyrsta vísuorði mun sá stafr finnast tysvar standa fyrir samstōfur. Þá stafi kōllum vér stuðla.⁷⁴

'In the second line the letter placed first is the one we call *hōfuðstafr*;⁷⁵ this letter controls the metre. In the first line, however, that letter must come twice at the beginning of a syllable; these letters we call *stuðlar*.'⁷⁶

Rhyme as used in the *dróttkvætt* metre is not merely mentioned, as in MV 1, but adequately defined:

Skal í fyrra vísuorði þannig greina þá setning:

Jōrð kann frelsa fyrðum.

Hér er svá: 'jōrð ... fyrð-'. Þat er ein samstafa í hvárum stað ok sinn hljóðstafr fylgir hvárri ok svá upphafsstafr en einir stafir eru] eptir hljóðstafr í báðum orðum. Þessa setning hljóðfalls kōllum vér skothending. En í qðru vísuorði er svá:

Friðrofs konungr ofsa.

Svá er hér: '-rofs... ofs-'. Þar er einn hljóðstafr ok svá allir þeir er eptir fara í báðum orðum, en upphafsstafir greina orðin. Þetta heita aðalhendingar.⁷⁷

'In the first line the positioning shall be determined thus:
jōrð etc.

Here, in *jōrð*, *fyrð*, there is one syllable in each case, and in each a different vowel follows a different initial letter, but the same letters come after the vowel in both words. This positioning of sounds we call *skothending*. But in the second line there is the following:
friðrofs etc.

⁷³ This high priority afforded to alliteration is paradoxical in view of the nonexistent treatment of stress-accent, its phonological basis.

⁷⁴ Möbius 1881 p. 2.

⁷⁵ lit. 'headstave, head-letter'.

⁷⁶ lit. 'supports'.

⁷⁷ Faulkes 1991 p. 4.

Here, in *rofs*, *ofs*-, there is the same vowel, and all the letters that follow it are the same in both words, and the initial letters distinguish the words. This is called *aðalhending*.'

Snorri's intermediate position between the literate world of the classical grammars and native practice, originally oral, is shown clearly in the treatment both of internal rhyme and of alliteration. In dealing with them in the first place, he is following the dictates of the native oral practice, unlike the Irish tracts, which leave such features unmentioned. In his manner of treatment, however, he is showing the influence of the written culture, in that he analyses, like the Irish tracts, in terms of visually perceptible elements, not merely syllables, as in MV 1, but written letters, *stafir*.⁷⁸ The apparent paradox of his treatment of alliteration, recognizing its vital importance but denying its essential foundation in stress-accent, is a clear consequence of his use of writing-based analysis.

Like the Irish texts, Snorri's tract assigns each stanzaic form its own specific name. However, a composite, "botanical" system of nomenclature is little in evidence. The majority of names consist of two-element composites, in which the second element invariably refers to a specifically metrical feature.⁷⁹ These composites are further modified in one way only, by the prefixing of the adjectives *meiri/mest* 'greater/greatest', *minni* 'lesser'. The modifying adjectives do not refer, as they do in Irish, to the syllabic length of the stanza and its individual lines, but to the degree of intricacy which the stanza demands. This intricacy need not be purely metrical, but can also be syntactical or semantic, and the division into greater and lesser is made on the basis of the frequency with which the particular feature of intricacy demanded appears within the stanza.⁸⁰

It thus appears that Snorri is not in a position to define the *ars poetica* of his native Iceland in purely metrical terms, but feels obliged to adduce semantic and syntactic features. This, I would suggest, shows the extent to which the poetic tradition is still imbued with an oral aesthetic based on the principle that differences of form must be immediately perceptible to aural reception by those we might define as "interested lay patrons". The composer of poems in the strict metres will be compelled to organize semantic units in such a way as to fulfil the abstract demands of the form, a process that may produce syntactical structures considerably divergent from those of non-metrical speech; the recipient is faced with the problem of reassembling these units at the time of delivery into a form familiar enough to be understood. The codification of forms, with traditional names, estab-

⁷⁸ This analysis by written letter is of course more accurate in the case of Icelandic, where grapheme/phoneme correspondence is relatively complete, than it would be in English or French, for example. It does however fail to take into account pairs of vowels felt by the *skáld* to be so nearly approximate that they constituted *aðalhending*, where by Snorri's definition they should have produced *skothending*; cf. Árnason 1991 p. 16.

⁷⁹ The neuter *hent* is found when the term occurs independently, the feminine *henda* in conjunction, actual or implicit, with the term *háttir* 'metre'.

⁸⁰ Thus in the *runhent* group the criterion is the frequency with which end-rhyme is used, in *refhvørf* it is the degree of paradox, in *kimblabønd* it is the number of additional rhymes used.

lishes a convention that assists both composer and recipient by establishing a shared convention according to which the composer can diverge from prose syntax and still be reasonably sure that the semantic sequence can be reassembled by his recipient. In this situation, titles for given metres can provide a means giving the recipient advance warning of the manner in which prose syntax is likely to be distorted, thus hinting at the particular difficulties that the form is likely to present.

The title of the metre *sextánmælt*,⁸¹ for example, informs the discerning recipient of one area in which he can allow his concentration to relax, as can be seen by comparing the first line of this form,

Vex iðn. Vellir roðna⁸²

with that of stanza 12 (*stælt*)

Hákun veldr ok hǫlðum.⁸³

In the first example, the recipient familiar with the scaldic idiom, on recognizing that the first noun-verb combination *vex iðn* is followed by a second nominative, might assume that the first sentence has been suspended to make room for a parenthesis, and will expect its continuation at some point later in the *helming*. This procedure would have been justified in the case of the second example, in which the noun-verb combination 'Hákun rules' must be linked to the fourth line

teitr þjóðkonungs heiti⁸⁴

and the ensuing text construed as parenthetical. The name *sextánmælt* can serve, if the performer so wish, as an advance notice that in this case no such parenthetical structures need be expected, since the form will consist of sixteen complete "utterances" unbroken by any parenthesis. Even if the name of the form is not indicated in performance, the initiate, on hearing the first two lines and noting the pattern of complete utterances, will be in a position to assume that this pattern will continue.⁸⁵

⁸¹ The literal translation of the title would be 'sixteenspoken'; for further details see Tranter 1991 p. 251.

⁸² 'Battle grows, the fields redden', Faulkes 1991 p. 9.

⁸³ 'H. rules and men', Faulkes 1991 p. 10.

⁸⁴ 'the glad, the name of the king', producing in combination with line 1 the *zeugma* 'H. the glad rules (i.e. upholds) the name of the king and (rules) men.'

⁸⁵ Further sophistication of the principle is to be found in metres in which not merely the syntactical element is regulated, but also the positioning of semantic elements, as in the metres *refhvörf* and *hjástælt*. The former demands apparent paradox, in that two antithetical semantic units, each belonging to a different clause, are juxtaposed in an apparent contradiction, the latter, that a parenthetical phrase should consist of an old saying.

We can sum up the relationship of Snorri's tract to received ideas of Latin scholarship on the one hand, and the indigenous metrics on the other, by saying that although the superficial structure of the tract is dictated by the received patterns of Latinate scholarship, this does not extend so far as to significantly impede or influence the analysis of the native metrical system. On the contrary, many features are included solely because of the dictates of the indigenous system and its presumably oral composition and transmission. In this respect the analysis differs significantly from that of the Irish tracts.