

**Zeitschrift:** Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien  
**Band:** 25 (1997)  
  
**Artikel:** Clavis Metrica : Háttatal, Háttalykill and the Irish Metrical Tracts  
**Autor:** Tranter, Stephen N.  
**Kapitel:** 7: Alliteration and accent  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858270>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 09.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## **Chapter 7. Alliteration and accent**

### **7.1 Alliteration in Irish and Icelandic**

#### **7.1.1 Introductory remarks**

Rhyme is fundamental to both the Icelandic and the Irish stanzaic systems; both systems use it as the primary means of distinguishing metrical form. Alliteration, on the other hand, although it appears in both systems, is given radically different treatment in the tracts. In Icelandic, it is a central metrical feature, in Irish it is virtually ignored. This is remarkable, since Irish, like Icelandic, used an alliterative system before the inception of the stanzaic syllabic metres. It would appear that this is one respect in which the Irish tractarians appear to sever their links with the oral basis of the pre-stanzaic system of versification.

#### **7.1.2 The phonetic basis of alliteration**

##### **7.1.2.1 Common factors**

The difference between the deployment of alliteration in the two languages has been seen in the examples from pre-syllabic systems given in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, the basic conception of alliteration in either language is similar:

- a) In each case, it is the initial consonantal phonemes of stressed syllables that carry the alliteration.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This appears to be more exclusively the case in Icelandic than in Irish, where pre-verbal particles and prepositions incapable of bearing full stress nonetheless appear to be capable of carrying alliteration. For examples see Carney 1989 p. 43.

- b) The alliterating consonant may be zero; that is, any syllable beginning without a consonant may alliterate with any other syllable beginning without a consonant, provided the remaining metrical conditions (e.g. accent, position) are fulfilled.
- c) The phoneme /s/ forms a special case in both languages. Where a syllabic onset consists of /s/ + tenuis, it appears that alliteration takes place between the following *tenuis*;<sup>2</sup> that is, for the purposes of alliteration, /st/, /sk/ and /sp/ are generally<sup>3</sup> treated as single phonemes.

Zero-consonant alliteration is commented on by Snorri:

En ef hljóðstafr er hǫfuðstafrinn, þá skulu stuðlar vera ok hljóðstafir, ok er fegra at sinn hljóðstafr sé hverr þeira.<sup>4</sup>

'But if the primary alliterant is a vowel, then the secondary alliterants must also be vowels, and it is more beautiful if each of these vowels is different.'<sup>5</sup>

A similar system may be deduced for Irish; it is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the Irish tracts, but can be established empirically from the examples contained in them. It differs in its treatment of /j/ and /B/. In Irish, the former is not attested in initial position,<sup>6</sup> all diphthongs with i-initial being falling,<sup>7</sup> the latter being only attested as the product of a lenis or nasal mutation, and thus not being included in the inventory of sounds relevant for alliteration.<sup>8</sup> In *Háttatal*, on the other hand, the glide /j/ functions for the purposes of alliteration as a vowel.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Or, following Jakobson 1979 p. 192, alliteration takes place between the releasing phonemes of the clusters.

<sup>3</sup> For a collection of exceptions in Icelandic see Mackenzie 1981 p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Snorri appears to be making a false distinction here. In his own poetic practice he avoids identity of vowels in syllables headed by alliterating consonants. This lack of identity only assumes prominence in his writing-based analysis when the consonants concerned are zero and leads him to formulate as a rule for "vowel alliteration" what in fact is standard practice throughout the system as he applies it. In other words his practice as an orally conditioned practising skald is at variance with his writing-conditioned theoretical analysis. (Cf. Valfells 1979 p. 200.)

<sup>6</sup> Thurneysen, Grammar, p. 122; consonantal initial /j/, originally /ð/, is now to be found as the result of lenition of /d/; even if this change had taken place early enough to be relevant in the tracts, it would have no bearing on alliteration, for the reasons given below.

<sup>7</sup> Thurneysen 1946 p. 36, but this is scarcely conclusive. IE i + vowel gives zero + vowel in Irish, IE u + vowel gives /f/ + vowel.

<sup>8</sup> This problem is discussed in detail below.

<sup>9</sup> cf. stanzas 39, 51, 54, 55, in the *dróttkvætt* section. Whether this was universally so is a matter for investigation, as indicated by the following lines by Egill:

út með éla meitli  
andærr jǫtunn vandar (ÍF 2 p. 172)

The status of /β / is ambivalent. In the Edda it can be employed both as a consonant, that is alliterating with itself alone:

Vildo, at ec, Valfǫðr, vel fyrtelia<sup>10</sup>

or in the equivalence class of vowels,

Vesall maðr oc illa scapi<sup>11</sup>

The special treatment of /s/ is not mentioned in tracts, either in Irish or in Icelandic. It can be established empirically for *Háttatal*: thus in the example

Stinn sár róask stórum,  
sterk egg fròmum seggjum<sup>12</sup>

alliteration of /st/ with /s/ is ruled out as producing two superfluous alliterants. In the Irish tracts examples such as:

Míl scíth scéltana  
scoth ad-glein glasfhróech<sup>13</sup>

suggest a similar restriction, whereas

Tochra úait  
spáindelg Spelan Slebe Fúait,<sup>14</sup>

in which Ó hAodha indicates alliteration between *spáindelg* and *Spelan* only, is inconclusive; we have no means of telling whether a chain of two or three alliterants is intended from the information given in the tract.

### 7.1.2.2 Divergences

Comparison of the two systems is complicated by the part played by initial mutations in Irish. These are generally accepted as being the surviving reflexes of ter-

---

in which j cannot be taken as a vowel without producing a surplus alliteration, i.e. the metrical fault of *ofstuðult*.

<sup>10</sup> *Völuspá* 1/5, Neckel/Kuhn 1962 p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Hávamál* 22/1, Neckel/Kuhn 1962 p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ó hAodha 1991 p. 234, MV 1 st. 30.

<sup>14</sup> op. cit. p. 237, MV 1 st. 37.

minations lost or assimilated during the Primitive Old Irish period.<sup>15</sup> Assimilation of preceding vowel-endings causes lenition (Ir. *séimhiú*); assimilation of nasal endings causes nasalisation (Ir. *urú*).<sup>16</sup> *Séimhiú* mutates stops, voiced or unvoiced, to the respective fricatives, /t/ > /θ/,<sup>17</sup> /d/ > /ð/ etc., *urú* mutates voiceless stops to voiced, voiced stops to the respective nasals, /t/ > /d/, /d/ > /n/. This produces the following:<sup>18</sup>

radical	<i>séimhiú</i>	<i>urú</i>
/p/	/f/	/b/
/t/	/θ/	/d/
/k/	/χ/	/g/
/b/	/β/	/m/
/d/	/ð/	/n/
/g/	/ɣ/	/ŋ/
/f/	/Ø/	/β/
/m/	/μ/	/m/
/s/	/h/	/s/

Alliteration in Irish treats all mutated forms as if they had never existed. This means, taking /t/ for example, that the following rules apply:

/t/ (radical) alliterates with /θ/ when /θ/ = {/t/ + *séimhiú*} and with /d/ when /d/ = {/t/ + *urú*}

on the other hand:

/d/ (radical) cannot alliterate with /d/ = {/t/ + *urú*}

W. Meid<sup>19</sup> gives the following example:

<sup>15</sup> A. Martinet 1955 pp. 257-8, Jackson 1953 pp. 545-53.

<sup>16</sup> The Non-Celticist is apt to be confused by the fact that phenomena described by the same terms in Irish and Welsh have different manifestations; for a detailed description see Martinet 1955 pp. 266-70. There is also no standardization of terminology; Irish lenition (*séimhiú*) is sometimes referred to as aspiration, whereas in Welsh lenition and aspiration are two distinct phenomena. To avoid this confusion I will refer to the Irish phenomena by the Irish names.

<sup>17</sup> The phonetic values apply to the middle Irish pronunciation applicable at the time of the tracts, not to Modern Irish.

<sup>18</sup> For a concise exposition of the material presented schematically here, including the varying ways in which these mutations are represented graphematically (I have given phonetic transcriptions only, as the orthography varies widely) see Pokorný 1969 pp. 8-13.

<sup>19</sup> 1971 p. 16, my translation.

*bó* 'cow' can alliterate with *bán*, *bhán* and *mbán* 'white',<sup>20</sup> since the initials belong to the same morphophoneme; *mbán* (pronounced /ma:n/), however, cannot alliterate with *mór* 'large'.

The system appears to have three exceptions,<sup>21</sup> in which phonematic equivalence is permitted to link mutated and radical forms (i.e., on the level of written analysis, phonetic identity is preferred at the expense of graphematic). These are the alliterations of /s/ and /f/, which lenite to /h/ and /zero/ respectively, and /p/, which lenites to /f/. In the case of /s/ and /f/, alliteration only took place between radical and radical, *séimhiú* and *séimhiú* or *urú* and *urú* forms of the same consonant. In the case of /f/, where *séimhiú* produced *spiritus lenis*, radical alliterated with radical; if the following phoneme was a vowel, then the general ruling for vowel alliteration applied, e.g.:

Máel Fhabhail  
inmuin ócra árd álainn<sup>22</sup>

while where the following phoneme was a consonant, alliteration occurred with an equivalent initial consonant, e.g.:

A Fhlainn, at lúam [...] at laech a Fhlainn.<sup>23</sup>

How this system of alliteration arose and how it persisted are questions to which a final answer has yet to be found; the following theories have been proposed;

- a) that the system is likely to have originated at a period in which the effects of mutation were still slight enough for the relationship between radical and mutated form to be closer than that between mutated form and non-related radicals. It was perpetuated into the immediately pre-written period by *filid*, to whom the non-audibility of the feature was no hindrance; knowledge of the correct manner of forming alliteration was merely one more item in the store of *arcana* which was jealously guarded from one generation of a particular dynasty of *filid* to the next. The upkeep of the system beyond this period may have been in part due to a caste of professionals who were capable of phonemic analysis on the aural plane as has been suggested by Kalyguine.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> radical, + *séimhiu* and + *urú* respectively. [My note]

<sup>21</sup> The following rules are taken from those established by Eleanor Knott for Irish syllabic poetry as a whole, and reproduced in Murphy 1961 pp. 36-7. It is arguable that they were also applicable in the period under discussion, but as far as I am aware this has yet to be categorically proved.

<sup>22</sup> Ó hAodha 1991 p. 242, MV 1 st. 54.

<sup>23</sup> op. cit. p. 227, MV 1 st. 10.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Kalyguine 1991 pp. 194-5. Aural phonetic analysis is a prerequisite of the system of "anagrammatic" verse propounded by Kalyguine 1993 pp. 88-91.

- b) that alliteration of mutations with radicals is a form of equivalence-group recurrence similar to that involved in Irish rhyme, where groups of consonants sharing a given articulatory feature are classed as sufficiently close to constitute a metrical feature. Significantly, this argument has been put forward for Welsh.<sup>25</sup> An explanation of this nature seems to be ruled out in the case of Irish by the fact that phonetically equivalent radical and mutated forms cannot alliterate with each other;<sup>26</sup> it thus appears out of the question to postulate phonetic equivalence of any kind as a criterion of recurrence without explaining what further restriction on the non-phonetic plane rules out the alliteration of phonetically identical forms of differing grammatical/morphological status.
  
- c) that the system is based on phonetic equivalence of lexemes. This presupposes that the recipient is immediately aware, presumably because of the semantic content of the text preserved in verse, of the lexemes, in unmutated form, from which the alliteration is derived. This awareness has a sufficient psychological effect on the recipients to cause them to accept mutation forms in which initials of the lexemes correspond phonetically,<sup>27</sup> even though the acoustically received forms do not.<sup>28</sup>
  
- d) that the development and retention of this system was facilitated by the presence at an early stage of a Latin-based epigraphic alphabet, ogham,<sup>29</sup> study of which later became part of the traditional poetic syllabus, the creation of which had required reflection about the phonetic classes of sounds to be represented.

---

<sup>25</sup> R.M. Jones 1974 pp. 136-9, cited in Rowlands 1990 p. 338.

<sup>26</sup> The restrictions in Welsh may have been laxer; phonetically identical mutated and radical forms appear to participate in alliteration. However, the nature of the evidence is such that no certain conclusions can be drawn; cf. Rowlands 1990 pp. 340-1.

<sup>27</sup> It is an interesting point as to whether this theory does or does not contravene Jakobson's interpretation of E.H. Sturtevant's axiom "an obligatory feature of versification must in some way be audible". Jakobson accepts this "insofar as it means that there exists in a given language at least a latent possibility of making the feature audible" (1979 p. 195). In Irish versification, the alliteration of mutated form with the radical from which it derives can only be made audible a) in the context of the verse by using the radical for both in violation of morphological principle or b) by interrupting the verse in order to make audible both radical forms in a morphologically acceptable situation.

<sup>28</sup> This view is put forward by O. Bergin 1921 pp. 82-4.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Ch. 3.

### 7.1.3 Metrical deployment of alliteration

The use of alliteration in the stanzaic systems of each language differs on two levels: historically, in its relationship to the foregoing alliteration-based system, and metrically, in its function within the stanza.

Historically, Icelandic alliteration represents a continuation of the foregoing system; no syllabic-stanzaic metre in the Icelandic material fails to incorporate alliteration of the standard Germanic pattern:

Ek Hlewagastir Holtijar      horna tawidō<sup>30</sup>

In the stanzaic system this pattern is regularized, with stricter control of the metrical position at which alliteration may occur and its relationship with rhyme. Even where no further restriction or recurrence is specified, this pattern is adhered to, even in the metre named *Háttlausa*, 'formless'.

Viewed diachronically, the use of alliteration in stanzaic-syllabic verse in Iceland does not represent a break with preceding tradition; it remains as a fixed structure around which changes take place.<sup>31</sup>

#### 7.1.3.1 Irish

The concept of line-pairs as a higher unit, fundamental in Icelandic, seems not to exist in Irish stichic poetry, and is not reflected in the use of alliteration. Irish alliteration is deployed as a means of connecting adjacent accents. This is true of all periods from that of the earliest recorded verse to the end of the *dán díreach*.

Diachronically, however, the introduction of the syllabic-stanzaic principle appears to cause a shift in emphasis within this basic function. This becomes clear when we examine stichic alliterative poems of the early period, such as those mentioned in Chapter 3 above. This alliterative linking of adjacent accents, originally the mnemonic device of an oral system for guaranteeing fixity of laws, genealogies and other canonical texts, is taken over into stanzaic poetry,<sup>32</sup> but has lost its phrase-linking function; as we see from the metres of *Dagaisti* it is frequently found isolated at the line-end, and its use in metrical fillers (*chevilles*) runs exactly counter to the principle of syntactic linking found in stichic metre.

<sup>30</sup> Düwel 1983 p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> It should be pointed out that alliteration has retained its status throughout the tradition of Icelandic versification up to the present. Those Icelanders who still practice the art of improvising *vísur* (quatrains) will ensure correct placement of alliteration according to rules Snorri would have recognized; internal rhyme has given place to end-rhyme, as in *runhenda*.

<sup>32</sup> The workings of the system can be clearly observed in the examples given in the Irish Prefaces to *Féilire Oengusso*, though not expressly stated there; see Stokes 1880 pp. ii, vii, xi-xii.



This change is best explained by regarding alliteration in stanzaic verse as an optional reinforcement of rhyme as a line-end marker.<sup>33</sup>

Forms containing pair alliteration in every line:

- Group 1, *nathbairdne*  
1, 2, 4a, 5, 6a, b, 7 (7 of 9)
- Group 2, *ollbairdne*  
8, 9 (2 of 2)
- Group 3, *casbairdne*  
10, 11 (2 of 2)
- Group 4, *dúanbairdne*  
12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 (6 of 6)
- Group 5, *bairdne*  
18, 22, 23, 24 (4 of 7)
- Group 6, *rannaigeacht*  
not attested (0 of 7)
- Group 7, *deibide*  
33, 42 (2 of 14)

Although one might assume from *Dagaisti* that pair alliteration is an essential prerequisite of the stanzaic metrical system as such, none of the exemplified forms being entirely devoid of it, the position in MV 1 taken as a whole suggests rather that alliteration had the status of a desirable, but not entirely obligatory ornament. Taking Ó hAodha's edition of 46 core stanzas as a guide, we note only half of the exemplified forms feature pair alliteration in every line. The position becomes more interesting, however, when we examine the distribution of this form of alliteration. It is clear that to the writer of this tract, pair alliteration was not a feature essential to the metrical system as such. Presumably, then, it is to be ranked among the features of optional ornament by means of which one metre differs in intricacy, and thus in prestige, from another.

If this were to be so, we would expect a descending scale of intricacy, from the metres of the most highly rewarded bards to their inferior brethren, and we would expect this to be matched by a steadily decreasing employment of all ornament, alliteration included.

This is manifestly not so. Within this small sample, there is no progression observable in groups 1-4, all of which use pair-alliteration so often as to make it appear near-compulsory. The fifth group still retains pair alliteration of all line-endings in the quatrain for more than half the examples given. Within the last two groups, however, comprising twenty forms of a total of 44 considered by Ó hAodha to constitute the core of the text, only three forms involving consistent pair-alliteration of all lines can be observed.

<sup>33</sup> MacKenzie (1981 p. 338) has missed the point when she maintains that "One of the elements of alliteration in Irish syllabic poetry was its lack of regularity [...] the alliterative patterns were varied continuously to avoid repetition and regularity".

Empirically, then, the divide in this tract as far as pair-alliteration is concerned is not between four upper metres and three lower ones, but quite clearly between the lower two groups and the rest. It is in my mind no coincidence that these two groups are those one might with justification term the "clerical metres".

If we accept the above, we can summarize metrical deployment of alliteration in the Irish material as follows:

Whereas in the stichic poetry alliteration was the sole phonetic recurrence of structural significance, its position in stanzaic-syllabic forms has been weakened in relation to rhyme and cadence. This has resulted in a shift in its deployment. In much of the stichic verse, alliteration has had the vital function of bridging the syntactic gap at the end of the two-accent phrase. It is used as a link. In *Dagaisti* and the majority of the forms exemplified in MV 1, however, the opportunity presented by alliteration of exerting a linking influence between phrases is disregarded. Instead, it follows the tendency initiated by the adoption of rhyme, a word-final feature, to increase the significance of metrical features in the line-final position where rhyme is acoustically and visually (where the layout of the manuscript permits lineation) most perceptible. Alliteration used in this fashion has degenerated from being a primary linking phenomenon to being a tertiary line-end marker, ranking below rhyme and regularity of cadence in order of metrical significance.

### 7.1.3.2 Icelandic

There is no significant difference between the deployment of alliteration in the strictly stanzaic-syllabic metres exemplified in *Háttalykill* and *Háttatal* on the one hand and the less strictly organized metres of the Eddic variety on the other. Both Snorri and Óláfr Hvítaskáld state expressly that alliteration is the principle on which their versification is based, and the texts they respectively compose and quote bear them out fully. Nowhere is the primacy of alliteration in Norse poetry as a whole more categorically stated than in *Málskrúðsfræði*:

PAROMEON er þat, er mörg orð hafa einn upphafsstaf, sem hér:  
Sterkum stilli  
styrjar væni.

Þessi fígúra er mjök höfð í málsnildarlist, er *Retorika* heitir, ok er hon upphaf til þeirrar kveðendi, er saman heldr norrænum kveðskap, sem naglar skipi, er smiðr gjörir, ok ferr sundrlaust ella borð frá borði; svâ heldr ok þessi fígúra saman kveðendi í skáldskap, með stöfum þeim er stuðlar heita ok höfuðstafir. Hin fyrri fígúra<sup>34</sup> gjörir fegrð með hljóðsgreinum í skáldskap, svâ sem fellíng skipsborða, en þó eru fastir viðir saman neglðir at eigi sè felldir, sem kveðendi helzt í hendíngarlausum háttum.<sup>35</sup>

'It is paromoeon, when many words have the same initial letter, as here:

<sup>34</sup> By this Óláfr Hvítaskáld means rhyme.

<sup>35</sup> ed. arn. vol. 2 pp. 148, 150.

For the hardy hero  
hope of battle.

This figure is often to be found in that art of cunning speech known as Rhetoric, and it is the beginning of that metre, which holds Norse poetry together like nails in a ship that the wright has made such that there is no crack from one strake to the next. Thus this figure holds the metre together with those letters which are called *supports* and *head-letters*.<sup>36</sup> For whereas the former figure creates beauty with sound-patterning in poetry, as fettling<sup>37</sup> beautifies the strakes of a ship, still those boards are fastened together which are not fettled, just as form is still preserved in rhymeless metres.'

However, Óláfr Hvítaskáld's remarks are more a comment on status than on deployment. Strictly observed, to speak of any variety of Germanic alliteration as "the nails that hold the ship of verse together" is an exaggeration. The metrical structure is not held together in its entirety by this feature; two-accent phrases are grouped together in units of two.<sup>38</sup> No longer unit is held together by alliteration than the *Langzeile*.<sup>39</sup> The contrast with early Irish forms of alliteration-based stichic verse is evident. Indeed, the organization of alliterative verse in early Germanic as a whole leads to the assumption that it evolved according to the dictates of a completely different function than that found in early Ireland. There, the counterpointing of syntactic phrase and alliterative linkage seems designed to make a text, once composed, as resistant as possible to change. In Germanic generally, on the other hand, syntactic phrase and alliterative linkage go hand in hand. The deployment of alliteration used here is more suited to the flexibility required when improvising longer narrative than to the rigidity required of fixed-text legal pronouncements. It appears to allow far more scope for the formulaic than does stichic verse in Ireland.<sup>40</sup>

For Snorri, at least, the positioning of alliterations can form a means of distinguishing different forms:

<sup>36</sup> i.e. secondary and primary alliterants respectively.

<sup>37</sup> The boards are presumably fettled in the sense that they are trimmed to ensure as close a fit as possible before caulking; see now Quinn 1994 p. 83. Quite what form of fettling Óláfr had in mind seems uncertain; Quinn quotes a translation "joined by tongue and groove" (loc. cit., quoting Collings 1967), but I would be wary of being so specific, not only because I imagine that Óláfr was referring to a clinker-built vessel, but because such a process is more essential than implied by the term "gjörir fegrð". I would prefer to imagine that he means that the boat holds together (and can presumably be caulked) whether the planks have been smoothed off or not. (My thanks to Sigurður Haraldsson for assistance with this passage.)

<sup>38</sup> In standard *dróttkvætt*, rhyme plays no part in linking lines, as observed by Kuhn 1981 p. 293.

<sup>39</sup> See Árnason 1991 pp. 109-10 for a discussion of the relative importance of alliteration in Eddic and skaldic poetry in general. There the point is made that there may be a discrepancy between the value laid on alliteration by analysts such as Óláfr Hvítaskáld and Snorri, and skaldic practice. Kuhn 1981, on the other hand, sees no such discrepancy (pp. 294, 308-9). It should be borne in mind that to his contemporaries, Snorri's reputation was that of practising poet; Óláfr Hvítaskáld's sobriquet suggests the same. It is thus possibly unwise to assume too great a degree of academic detachment in their theoretical utterances.

<sup>40</sup> This problem will be dealt with more completely in Ch. 9.

Þetta heitir bragarbót. Hér skiptir háttum í fyrsta ok þriðja vísuorði. Hér standask sem first má stuðlar, en hendingar svá at ein samstafa er á milli. Þat greinir háttuna.<sup>41</sup>

'This is called poetic improvement. Here the metre changes in the first and third line. In these, the secondary alliterants stand as far apart as possible, whereas the rhymes are placed such that one syllable is between. This sets the metres apart.'<sup>42</sup>

Variations of this nature never affect the primary alliterant *höfuðstafr*, inextricably linked with the first stress-accent of the second line of each pair. Indeed, although alliteration seems to be so fundamental to Snorri's conception of stanzaic form, he seems never to attempt to define variations purely in terms of differing positions of the alliterative accents. In the above definition, both alliteration and rhyme are regulated, and both are mentioned. In the *alhent* 'fully rhymed' metres, alliteration also appears to be regulated, not merely rhyme as the name of the form suggests, but this fact is not mentioned in the commentary. In Snorri's example, the first and the last *fjórðungar* alliterate on the ultimate and penultimate accent of the first line, giving three adjacent alliterating accents;

Frama skotnar gram; gotnum  
(gjof sannask) røf spannar<sup>43</sup>

and the same is true in one of the tract's few examples of the use of an exemplary verse not by Snorri, Bishop Klæng's:

Bað ek sveit á glað Geitis,  
gøf er ið at fof tíðum.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, in the subsequent metre *stamhendr*, 'stammering metre', alliteration on three successive accents combines with *aðalhending* on two successive syllables throughout the stanza to invoke the stammering effect to which the name of the metre refers:

Lætr undin brot brotna  
bragningr fyrir sér hringa<sup>45</sup>

but the commentary nonetheless describes the rhyme alone, with no specific mention of alliteration:

---

<sup>41</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> ed. cit. p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>45</sup> loc. cit.

[Hér er í] fyrsta ok þ[riðja vísuorði tv]íkveðit at einni samstöfu ok haft þat til hendinga, ok fyrir því kollum vér þetta stamhent at tvíklypt er til hendingarinnar, ok standa svá hendingar í orðinu sem riðhendur.<sup>46</sup>

'Here in the first and third line one syllable is doubled and this syllable is taken as the rhyme, and we call it *stammhendr* (stammering metre) because the rhyme is repeated, and the rhymes are positioned in the line as in *riðhendr*.<sup>47</sup>

The nearest the commentary gets to acknowledging a regulation of alliteration here is by implying the fact; repetition of a syllable suggests repetition of its initial. However, the regulation of alliteration in the stanza is more specific than this would imply. The two adjacent syllables forming rhyme and alliteration are both fully accented. This means that the alliteration fulfils the requirement of *drótt-kvætt* for two *stuðlar* in the odd lines. There is not merely a repetition of a syllable, fortuitously bearing with it an extra alliteration; the repeated syllable forms one of the obligatory accents. In this form, as elsewhere, we are confronted with one of the fundamental problems facing Snorri, Óláfr Hvítaskáld and others of his period now lost in obscurity who might have been attempting to define the metrical system, that the terms imported from Western Latinity with which they attempted to do so did not include an adequate definition of the verse accent as applicable to Old Icelandic versification.

## 7.2 Accent

Standard Latin grammars did not discuss the phenomenon of stress-accent in verse; for the quantitative system of versification it was formally irrelevant. Our tractarians follow this tradition in not attempting to set up any metrically relevant distinction between different categories of syllable; neither on the basis of quantity, nor on the basis of stress. Nonetheless, our analysis of alliteration in the two languages shows that some such form of distinction is necessary to explain the constraints on the deployment of alliteration.

---

<sup>46</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> This is in fact not so, as comparison with the examples of *riðhent*, stanzas 32 & 55 make clear. *Riðhent* demands *hending* of adjacent *accents*, *stammhent* on adjacent *syllables*.

### 7.2.1 The accent in Icelandic tracts

An underlying categorization of syllable types is implied in the following passage from *Háttatal*:

Þá má ok hlýða at hljóðstafr standi fyrir optar í fjórðungi í fornǫfnum eða í málþylling þeirri er svá kveðr at: 'ek', eða svá: 'en, er, at, í, á, of, af, um', ok er þat leyfi en eigi rétt setning.<sup>48</sup>

'It may also make do when a vowel stands more often (sci. than permissible) in a *fjórðung* in pronouns or particles pronounced such as 'ek', or thus: 'en, er, at, etc.' but that is license and not strict metre.'

The sense of this definition is clear enough; an excess of vowel alliteration is to be avoided, but pronouns and particles with initial vowel sounds, though aesthetically displeasing, do not have the effect of destroying the metre. Clearly, although Snorri is obliged to define the words permissible in terms of grammatical function, as *fornǫfn* 'pronouns' or *málþylling* 'particles', the basis of his exception is phonetic. Inherent in the grammatical function is the fact that these word-classes cannot bear stress-accent.<sup>49</sup> His system of analysis does not have terminology capable of specifying theoretically the prescription which his examples serve to indicate empirically, namely that unaccented vowels in word-initial position<sup>50</sup> are not considered to be full participants in the alliterative system.

A similar lack of terminology seems to be evident in Snorri's opening remarks on the pronunciation of syllables:

<sup>48</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *ek*, in its frequent occurrences throughout the skaldic section of the poem, is invariably to be found in unstressed position immediately following the verb. Its lack of stress in this position is attested by the frequency in which it is involved in elision or slurring, and is also reflected by the treatment of postverbal pronouns in the modern language, in particular in such assimilated forms as *skaltu* (*skalt þú*)/*geturðu* (*getur þú*) in which the initial consonant is assimilated and the long vowel shortened in the unstressed position. The only occurrences of *ek* in the poem outside this postverbal position are in the Eddic stanza 101 *þá er ek reist/þá er ek renna gat* (Faulkes 1991 p. 39), in which the pronoun does not participate in alliteration and is presumably unstressed.

<sup>50</sup> cf. *Háttatal* st. 29 l.3 (Faulkes p. 16) in which Snorri alliterates *ásamt* with *sitja*. However, it is only in the case of monosyllables that the rule applies with any degree of absoluteness, as would at least appear from Egill's treatment of proclitics in *Sonatorrek*; in st. 6 we have alliteration of *ófullt* 'unfilled' with *opit* 'open', in the following *ofsnaður* 'too bereft', where the metre requires accentuation of both syllables, with *ástvinum* 'loving friends', which the metre requires to take prototonic stress. (Turville-Petre 1976 p. 32.)



[...] hljóð greinir þat at hafa samstöfur langar eða skammar, harðar eða linar [...] <sup>51</sup>

'sound is distinguished by having syllables longer or shorter, harder or softer [...]

Here Snorri seems to be pointing to two fundamental prosodic oppositions operating in the period of his writing, namely that of quantity, *langar eða skammar*, and of stress, *harðar eða linar*. This is, however, by no means certain.<sup>52</sup> And if the latter pair is really intended to denote a fundamental opposition of stressed/unstressed syllables, then nothing in the remainder of the tract suggests that this was used as a basis for analysis; the terms are not repeated.<sup>53</sup>

Óláfr Hvítaskáld uses similar terminology in *Málfræðinnar grundvöllr*. To begin with he introduces the Priscianian distinction of syllables according to musical accent:

Samstöfur hafa hæð í hljóðagrein, en breidd í anda, lengd í tíma; því at hver samstafa er annathvært hvöss eða þúng eða umbeygilig.<sup>54</sup>

'Syllables have height in tone, breadth in breath and length in time, for each syllable is either sharp, heavy or flexible.'

Later in the tract (Chapter 8) he elaborates on this, attempting to find Icelandic examples to illustrate the distinction. His definition is based on intonation, as for example in dealing with the circumflex accent:

Umbeygiliga hljóðsgrein hefir sú samstafa, er hefst af litlu hljóði ok dregst upp í hvassara hljóð, en niðr at lyktum í lægra, sem þessar samstöfur: *árs, sárs*.<sup>55</sup>

'Circumflex accents are found in those syllables which begin with a little sound and are drawn up into a more keen sound, and finally down to a lower, as in these syllables; *árs, sárs*.'

However, his examples make it clear that this apparent difference of intonation is a concomitant of the phonetic environment, and ultimately a function of length. His examples of the acute accent *vár, ár* consist of a short vowel followed by a single consonant in word-final position and thus devoiced; the grave accent is exemplified by syllables consisting of a long vowel (paradoxically marked in conventional orthography by an *acute* accent!) and a voiced consonant: *hára, sára*, and the circumflex by a long vowel followed by a double consonant.

<sup>51</sup> Faulkes 1991 p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> cf. Faulkes 1991 p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> The terms *seinn* 'slow' and *skjótr* 'fast' used in conjunction with st. 7 are almost certainly terms relating to quantity, not stress; cf. below, Ch. 8, Faulkes 1991 p. 7 and Glossary sv. *seinn*, Arnason 1991 p. 90.

<sup>54</sup> ed. arn. vol. 2 p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 88.

Nonetheless, as far as Óláfr Hvítaskáld is concerned, these distinctions are irrelevant for the analysis of skaldic verse:

En með því, at þesskonar greinir heyra lítt norrænu skáldskap at flestra manna ætlan, þá tala ek þar um ekki fleira að sinni.<sup>56</sup>

'But since this kind of distinction scarcely concerns Norse poetry in most people's opinion, I shall talk of it no further on this occasion.'

### 7.2.1.1 The nature of the Icelandic accent

Snorri appears to set up two oppositions, one of quantity, the other of quality (however interpreted). This would be consistent with the modern Icelandic oppositional pair length: (short/long) and stress: (weak/strong).

Clearly, to consider the rhythms of Icelandic, present-day or otherwise, in terms of an opposition of this nature is an over-simplification. Even in the relatively schematic terms of a metrical system, such a strict dichotomy is of only limited validity. This was as true for Óláfr Hvítaskáld as it is for the present-day metrist; having established a bipartite division of syllable quantity in terms of *morae*, he is then obliged to admit the existence of trimoraic syllables.<sup>57</sup>

In the case of accent, this problem is compounded by the fact that there is no certainty as to the exact nature of the opposition Snorri might have had in mind. The problem is stated by Hans Kuhn as follows:

Der einstige musikalische Akzent scheint [...] ganz oder doch nahezu ganz verloren gegangen zu sein. Doch hatte sich im Zeitraum der Skaldendichtung im Nordischen wahrscheinlich schon ein neuer zu entwickeln begonnen, wie er jetzt im Schwedischen und Norwegischen vorherrscht. Er hing mit dem ursprünglichen jedoch schwerlich zusammen. Es ist auch unsicher, ob er für die *Dróttkvætt*-Dichtung auch schon eine Bedeutung hatte.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, Kuhn follows common opinion in assuming that the accent that provided the conditions under which alliteration developed was still the prevalent feature in the period during which *dróttkvætt* was practised:

Es (sci. reduction and syncope of unstressed syllables) erlaubt den sicheren Schluss, dass der stark expiratorische Akzent, der in den meisten heutigen germanischen Sprachen herrscht, schon im Altgermanischen bestand. Der Stabreim [...] kommt nur bei einem starken dynamischen Akzent zur rechten Geltung und setzt darum mit grosser Wahrscheinlichkeit ebenfalls einen solchen voraus. Er gehört, vielleicht mit

<sup>56</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Ch. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Kuhn 1983 p. 33.



kleinen Einschränkungen, auch zu den wesentlichen Grundlagen der *Dróttkvætt*-Dichtung.<sup>59</sup>

For the purposes of the present analysis we may assume that Kuhn's analysis of the position represents Snorri's perception of the prosodic system of his language. It should however be borne in mind that Snorri was writing more than three centuries after the skaldic system may be presumed to have developed,<sup>60</sup> during a period in which changes were taking place that could be said to mark a transition between Old Norse and Early Modern Icelandic. Among these changes was a shift of the relative importance of quantity and stress-accent.<sup>61</sup>

This difficulty may be resolved if we adopt Árnason's model of *dróttkvætt* rhythm. This model assumes that the rhythm consisted at all stages, despite shifts in the quantitative-accentual nature of the language, of a regulation of *ictus*. These *ictus* are defined by Árnason simultaneously in terms of stress and of quantity;

The basic requirement for syllables carrying the ictus in *dróttkvætt* is that they be linguistically stressed and heavy.<sup>62</sup>

Following Árnason we may then say that in the course of its development, the relative importance of stress and of quantity in the determining of *ictus*-bearing syllables may have shifted, but that the basic principle remained intact.

The phenomenon of alliteration is closely bound up with that of *ictus*, and that in turn with the phenomenon of stress-accent. Whatever rôle we wish to assign to quantity and to musical accent, and however we wish to define the stress accent, it is clear that the concept of the stress accent is indispensable to an accurate description of the deployment of alliteration in the metrical system Snorri is exemplifying and Óláfr Hvítaskáld using as the basis of his treatises. Nonetheless, it is clear from both these works that they have no adequate terminology with which to define this phenomenon.

## 7.2.2 The accent in Irish

### 7.2.2.1 The accent in Irish tracts

Where in Icelandic we can see tractarians struggling to express the concept of metrical ictus or verse-accent without the necessary terminology, this seems not to have worried metrical tractarians in Ireland. Indeed, although the loan-word *aic-*

---

<sup>59</sup> op. cit. p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> We may for the purposes of this analysis accept Perkins' definition (1985 p. 203) of the "Relevant Period" as concluding around 850.

<sup>61</sup> cf. Árnason 1980.

<sup>62</sup> op. cit. pp. 41-2.

*cend* 'accent', attested in the 9th C. glosses to Priscian in St. Gall as a gloss to *accentum* also appears to be applicable to stress-accent,<sup>63</sup> the tractarians do not use it.

Similarly, there is no occasion in the metrical tracts where the author appears to be struggling to explain a phenomenon motivated by accent in other terms, as happens in Snorri. By way of contrast we can see in the grammar of O Molloy, written at the very end of the period of bardic poetry, how an author reacts when faced with the problem of explaining the rules determining the positioning of alliteration without invoking the concept of stress-accent. O Molloy, interestingly enough, avoids the problem in a manner resembling that of Snorri some four centuries previously, in that he invokes grammatical concepts. For him, alliteration is destroyed when any word intervenes between two would-be alliterants, unless this intervening word happens to be what he terms *adverbium*; and into this class it is clear that he relegates all words that can carry no lexical stress:

Adverte autem quod adverbium nunquam fecit concordiam, nec ipsum impedit. Similiter neque correspondentiam facit, de qua infra, neque impedit [...]<sup>64</sup>

O Molloy, evidently enough, is avoiding the concept of accent not because of a lack of terminology, but because of the dictates of an inherited mode of analysis. The tract-writers of the MV, on the other hand, were not faced with the problem of delineating alliteration at all. The phenomenon itself did not appear within their repertoire of analytical criteria, and thus needed neither definition nor analysis.

Ironically, however, the concept of the stress-accent is even more vital to the proper analysis of alliteration and its deployment in Irish than it is in Icelandic: In Icelandic, the accent creates alliteration. In Irish, it both creates and destroys it. In terms of deployment this has the following effect:

In Icelandic, the presence of stress-accent in a given metrical position means that this position can be occupied by alliteration. If this position is occupied by alliteration, then *any* preceding or succeeding stressed position within the longer metrical entity may also be occupied by alliteration. The limits of the longer metrical entities within which alliteration is felt to take effect is governed by the rules of metrical form alone.

In Irish, the starting-point is the same; the presence of stress-accent means that a given position may be occupied by alliteration. However, once a given position is occupied by alliteration, *only* the immediately preceding stressed position and the immediately following metrical position can alliterate. Conversely, and here the system differs radically from Icelandic, once a given stressed position is *not* occupied by alliteration, the immediately preceding and following stressed positions may *not* alliterate.

An example in English serves to demonstrate this fundamental opposition:

---

<sup>63</sup> DIL *sv. aiccend* and *forbaid*.

<sup>64</sup> de Jubainville p. 276.

Stress	1	2	3
	James	Joyce's	joke: Alliterates in Irish and Icelandic
	James	Joyce's	pun: " " "
	Poor	Joyce's	joke: " " "
<i>but</i>	James	Taylor's	joke: Alliterates in Icelandic only.

Thus accent in Icelandic serves to indicate where alliteration *may* be; in Irish it indicates both where it *may* be and where it may *not*.

### 7.2.2.2 The nature of the Irish accent

It is generally agreed that the accent operating at the time of the metrical tracts we are examining was dynamic and fixed on the first syllable. Pilch 1991 suggests that the concept of the dynamic accent is inapplicable in the case of Celtic metrics in general; the most sensitive apparatus available registers only a fluctuation in wave-frequency (*Tonhöhe*), not one of wave amplitude (*Intensität*).<sup>65</sup> The accent consists according to Pilch of a change of pitch combined with preservation of full vowel quantity and lexical stability.<sup>66</sup> Even if we accept this position the fundamental concept of the single prototonic accent remains unaffected. Pilch concedes for Irish that "im vorhandenen Wortschatz nur ein einziger Vokal (meist der erste) erhalten blieb".<sup>67</sup> This, in view of the above definition of accent *inter alia* in terms of vowel-quality, is tantamount to admitting the presence of a prototonic accent.

It should be remarked, on the other hand, that Modern Irish, like French, has a well-developed system of particles designed to convey differing degrees of emphasis; thus, in ascending scale, we have *mé*, *mise*, *mé féin*, *mise féin*. This system is generally explained as compensating for the fact that emphasis in the spoken language cannot be obtained, as in English or German, by an increase in the dynamic of the tonic syllable of the word to be emphasized. This system was already well-evolved by the Middle Irish period.<sup>68</sup> A system of emphatic particles of this sophistication existed neither in Old English nor in Old Icelandic, and this may serve as an indication that the nature and/or function of the accent in the two language-groups was not exactly comparable.

<sup>65</sup> Pilch 1991 p. 144.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *op. cit.* p. 152.

<sup>68</sup> cf. Meid in Tranter/Tristram 1989 pp. 192-3 and note.

### 7.3 Conclusions

The treatment of alliteration in the two sets of tracts is fundamentally different. To the Icelanders, Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Hvítaskáld, alliteration was seen as the foundation of the poetic system. To the Irish analysts, it was considered so unimportant as to remain unmentioned, whether as a general principle or as a distinctive feature of certain metrical forms.

This fundamental difference is not reflected in the examples included in the substance of the tracts. There the Icelandic examples include no single instance of a metre which does not involve alliteration. The Irish tracts are not as radical in their incorporation of the feature, but more than three-quarters of the examples included involve alliteration of such regularity that is scarcely likely not to have been considered an integral component by the composers and recipients. This raises the question as to why there should be such a radical difference in the approach of the two sets of tracts, given that the similarity in practice appears to be relatively close.

The first indications towards a solution appear to be presented by the dichotomy presented in the Irish examples between the metres of the *deibide* and *rannaigecht* groups on the one hand and the *bairdne* group with its five subdivisions on the other. This dichotomy, apparent in the differing schemes according to which the categories are subdivided in the tracts (Chapter 5) is also indicated by the relative infrequency with which alliteration is used in the examples of *rannaigecht* and *deibide* to be found in MV 1. It can be explained by assuming that these two metres are of largely clerical origin. Originally, we can assume, alliteration played no more substantial part in them than it did in the hymns of Ambrosius; it was a rhetorical figure that could delight when employed judiciously,<sup>69</sup> but did not constitute one of the prescribed regularities of the form. It was only when these two groups of metres came to be adopted by poets specializing in panegyric and therefore requiring audible evidence of complexity that alliteration became regularized for them as well, as suggested by Donncha Ó hAodha;

The assumption must be that the *filid* - having silently dropped the *rosc*-metres for want of demand - had taken up for themselves the rhyming syllabic metres that had proved to be the most popular. This may explain also why metres such as *rannaigecht* and *deibide*, which were so little regarded in the early period, came to be used with such polish in the later period of Irish syllabic verse.<sup>70</sup>

This process appears not to be complete in the time of the compilation of MV 1, hence the disparity in the use of alliteration mentioned above, but is clearly symptomatized by the regularity of pair-alliteration in Ceallach's *Dagaisti*.

The apparent "lack of polish" in earlier *deibide* and *rannaigecht* metres can be explained by the fact that they evolved in a clerical environment to fulfil needs of

<sup>69</sup> cf. Donatus *Ars grammatica* III 5 = Keil IV p. 398 and *Málscrúðsfræði*, ed. arn. vol. 2 p. 148.

<sup>70</sup> 1991 p. 212.

the clergy. The prime mode of analysis to which their composers expected them to be subjected was the model imported with Western Latinity. In this model there was no place either for accent or for alliteration, and consequently these were regarded as of no consequence.

*Bairdne* metres, on the other hand, were developments from an original accental-alliterative system which had been put under pressure by the increasing prestige of the written culture and the metrical forms and systems of analysis concomitant on the written word. They incorporated into the stanzaic-syllabic system as much of the earlier forms as was consonant with the form of written analysis to which they, too, were to be subjected. In practice, this meant that they retained alliteration, and in some cases preserved regularity of accent, but that the latter tended to be submerged as a result of the pressure towards syllabic regularity.

The picture presented by the phenomena of accent and alliteration in MV 1 as a whole is thus that of a metrical system under extreme pressure to conform to the written system of analysis. This conformity takes two shapes. In the first instance, entirely new forms are created according to the models provided by the incoming written culture; these form the basis of *rannaigeacht* and *deibide*. In the second, original forms are subjected to such a high degree of distortion by the pressure of the incoming forms that their original characteristics are submerged, being perceptible only as traces within a completely new system of analysis. This system is only capable of classifying metre in terms of the rhymed syllabic-stanzaic form with regular cadence. MV 1 and the tracts based on it can be regarded as symptoms of an *ars poetica* dominated by the concept of the written word.

If this is so, then the Icelandic use and analysis of alliteration and the concept of the stress-accent can be represented as the product of a process in which the written has failed to acquire the complete dominance over metrical concepts that it has done in Irish.

This failure of written culture to eradicate all traces of the foregoing oral standard can be seen in the following aspects of the use of alliteration:

- 1) Alliteration is retained as the chief constituent feature of the metrical system as a whole.
- 2) This alliteration is also accepted as a standard by learned analysts. It is rendered legitimate by citation of a rhetorical figure from Antiquity, even though this figure must be redefined to suit the purposes of the oral aesthetic.
- 3) Where Antiquity is unable to supply a viable concept for explanation of a native oral phenomenon, as in the case of the exclusion of unstressed syllables from alliteration, the phenomenon is not merely left without comment, a periphrasis involving the inherited terminology is sought.
- 4) The most significant prosodic feature determining metrical form is not the syllable, a unit that can be perceived both on paper and, arguably, in acoustic reception, but one that can only be analysed when realized in performance, the stress-accent. The function of the syllable in this analysis will be discussed in the following chapter.