

**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:** 10: Conclusions  
**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:** 18.08.2025

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

## Chapter 10. Conclusions

### 10.1 Recapitulation

#### 10.1.0 Comparability

- 1) Both sets of tracts examine metrical systems comprising a diversity of specific forms.
- 2) The tracts themselves do not present a metrical system as a single indivisible entity.
- 3) The system is seen as being finite in each case, only a specific number of forms being sanctioned by tradition and regarded by the tracts as canonical.
- 4) The metrical system established in the tracts is an innovation which displaces an existing indigenous system.
- 5) Each system has at its disposition a sophisticated set of terminology including nomenclature by means of which the various forms may be identified and distinguished.
- 6) Length of line and stanza are defined by both sets of tracts in terms of syllable-count.
- 7) The stanza, not the line, is the dominant unit for distinguishing metrical form.
- 8) In each case rhyme is seen as a key feature in the distinguishing of specific metrical forms within the system.
- 9) Both sets of tracts completely ignore the feature of stress-accent, despite the fact that it affects other metrical features within the systems, notably the placement of alliteration and cadence.
- 10) Irish and Icelandic tracts are indebted to principles of metrical segmentation conveyed in the standard school-texts of antiquity.

The two systems are therefore comparable.

The following distinctions were observed within the comparable elements:

- 1) Irish tracts strive to present a greater number of forms than Snorri and the distinctions between individual forms are greater.
- 2) The nearest approach to the single-entity metrical system is that presented in *Dagaisti*. This is to be expected in view of the shortness of this *clavis* and its position in the development of Irish prescriptive metrics. MV 1 reflects two separate systems, one alliteration-based, the other not so; consistency is achieved within the tract simply by reducing metrical analysis to the lowest

common denominator of the two systems and thereby disregarding the distinctive features of the alliteration-based system. MV 2 & 3, which simply present metres without an analytical commentary of any kind, display a *mélange* of syllabic-stanzaic metres and those derived from the accentual-alliterative stichic system which preceded it.

- 3) There is complex social and legal regulation to define metrical form and its classification in Irish, which is not present in Icelandic.
- 4) In neither case is there a total breach with the pre-existing system, but the degree to which this system is incorporated within the scheme of prescriptive analysis differs, being far greater in Icelandic than in Irish.
- 5) Metrical terminology, in particular naming and categorization of individual forms, is more highly structured in Irish.
- 6) There is a stricter adherence to the equation *syllable = metrical position* in Irish.
- 7) The degree of variation within stanzaic form is higher in Irish tracts.
- 8) Rhyme is differently realized and has a different status in the hierarchy of form-distinguishing characteristics in each case.
- 9) Snorri imposes strict syllabicity, onto an already-existing set of metrically distinguishing factors and must define correspondence rules to account for irregularities. Both he and Óláfr Hvítaskáld regard alliteration and (tonic-syllable) rhyme as the basis of form. In the Irish texts, strict syllabicity is regarded as the basis of the metrical system. Only where syllable count cannot distinguish between two forms are other features brought into the analysis, in the order first cadence, then rhyme. Alliteration is left entirely out of the analysis. The strictness with which the syllabic principle was applied is confirmed in the tract *trefhocul*, in which poetic licence is established as the principle by means of which words can be bent to obtain the requisite syllable-count.
- 10) Stanzaic composition appears to pre-date the introduction of school-grammars in Icelandic and to post-date it in Irish.

The Icelandic tracts present a picture much more nearly corresponding to that of the single consistent metrical system postulated at the outset. Neither *Háttalykill*, nor *Háttatal* nor *Málskrúðsfræði* introduces any metrical form not based on the principle of alliteration as set out by Óláfr Hvítaskáld. Within *Háttatal*, we can see four subdivisions of this system:

- 1) those metres based solely on this principle: the Eddic metres,
- 2) those built on the Eddic principle with the added restrictions of syllabic regularity and internal tonic syllable rhyme, the "lesser metres",
- 3) those built on the same principle as these but with an underlying restriction to six metrical positions and the requirement of regular trochaic cadence, the *dróttkvætt* metres,
- 4) those built on the principles of alliteration and syllabic regularity with the added restriction of end-rhyme, the *runhenda* metres.

Snorri treats each of these as a separate system by devoting a separate section of his poem to each. Arguably, however, the only division which could be regarded as a significant secondary system is 4).

### 10.1.1 The *clavis* form

In Chapter 1 it was suggested that the two *claves*, *Dagaisti* and *Háttalykill*, were symptomatic of metrical systems as seen by the compilers of prescriptive metrical texts for their period. It should however be noted that there are divergences between the system portrayed in *Dagaisti* and that of MV 1, particularly in regard to the status of alliteration in the *rannaigeht* and *deibide* groups of metres. *Háttalykill*, on the other hand, is far less at variance with *Háttatal* and *Mál-skrúðsfræði*; it is less tightly structurally organized than its successor in the *clavis* form, there are differences in the application of terminology, and the system of categorisation is not as strictly thought-out, but the system presented is in essence the same.

The most significant distinction to draw between *Dagaisti* and *Háttalykill* lies not in the field of metrics as an abstract subject of analysis but in the view taken within each *clavis* of the social application of this analysis, Irish analysis being dominated by the underlying concept that form is linked to a hierarchal scale of values, a concept that is lacking in the Icelandic text. Also lacking in Icelandic is the concept of the poet as independent authority. These distinctions are maintained within the remaining tracts analysed; MV 1 is founded on the concept of the seven grades of poet, MV 2 on the idea of the self-regulating body of poets establishing a curriculum, MV 3 maintaining the authority of the *filid* to depose kings. By way of contrast, *Háttalykill* opens with a muted gesture of subservience; *Háttatal* closes with the same, and if *Mál-skrúðsfræði* seems to speak more with the voice of authority than of subservience, this can be attributed to the weight of the *auctores* it purports to interpret, Donatus and Priscian.

### 10.1.2 Approach

Previous attempts to compare Icelandic and Irish metrics tended to treat the poetic systems of each language as a single and indivisible whole. This was due in particular to the lack of material permitting a discriminating study of the development of Irish metrics. The Scandinavian-based scholars responsible for much comparative research were forced to fall back on generalizing introductions never intended as the basis for that kind of study. My examination has sought to obviate the problem by concentrating on prescriptive texts providing relatively homogeneous and consistent systems for comparison with their Icelandic equivalents. How pressing the need for a detailed account of Irish metrical systems in the totality of their development remains, can be seen from the results of the present analysis. From this it emerges that not even the apparently self-contained and consistent tract MV 1 presents one single metrical system.

### 10.1.3 Metrical transition

Both sets of tracts describe metrical systems which totally or partially displaced pre-existing ones. In both cases the change was from a more congenial system to one less congenial to the structures of the language; the stimulus for change must therefore be sought in each case outside the language itself.

The verse of Late Antiquity was responsible, directly or indirectly, for metrical change in both cultures. However, the paths by which this force for change is likely to have taken effect must have differed in each case, unless we refuse to accept general scholarly opinion on the chronology of metrical change in the two cultures.

At the stage when the stanzaic-syllabic form was developing in Irish, Latin literacy was already available. Ireland had been converted to Christianity, and the concomitant import of written culture was already under way. At the equivalent stage in the development of Icelandic verse, contact with literate Christianity was much less immediate. Whatever the exact path along which the impulse for change may have been transmitted, the method of transmission must ultimately have been oral.

### 10.1.4 Metrical tracts

The metrical tract as a genre, at least as manifested in the two cultures under examination, is a product of Latin literacy. It thus employs techniques of analysis that were designed for use in the Latin language and for application to a quantitative metrical system, and which are only partially suitable when transferred to languages in which quantity is by no means as significant metrically as was the case in the original systems.

Both Irish and Icelandic produced vernacular grammars incorporating phonetic analyses of the native tongue at a relatively early stage following the inception of literacy. In Ireland, this took place contemporaneously with, or by some estimates even before, the establishment of the stanzaic-syllabic form as the prestige-bearing vehicle for metrical composition. The assimilation of the standard grammars of late Antiquity was complete by the end of the seventh century; by this time the *Etymologies* of Isidor had also been received and assimilated. By the time such major poetical works were produced as Blathmac's poems to the Virgin or *Félire Oengusso*, the literate cleric had a comprehensive, written-based framework of analysis to support his concept of poetic form.

The earliest extant products of the skaldic corpus, among which we must number such works as Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* and Þjóðólfr's *Haustlǫng*, conventionally dated to the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth centuries respectively, were composed in a milieu in which no such support was present. The Conversion of Iceland is generally dated to the turn of the millennium; until this process was fully accomplished, there can be no question of the reception of any of the works of classical antiquity by the mainstream of practising skalds. The age in which the dissemination of Latin-based learning becomes widespread may be said to begin with the opening of the first monastery at Þingeyrar in 1133<sup>1</sup> and to have borne its first-fruits, as far as metrics-relevant studies are concerned, with the compilation of the First Grammatical Treatise shortly before 1150. Far from being able to exert any influence on the development of skaldic poetry, this advent of Latin learning came at a point when skaldic poetry, some three hundred years after its origins, was well past its prime. Where it could exert itself, on the other hand, was on the method of analysis to which the poetic system was subjected.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kristjánsson 1988 p. 117.

### **10.1.5 The analysis of the tracts - terminology and categorization**

In this aspect also, Irish and Icelandic tracts differ in degree rather than in substance: they all combine a vocabulary inherited from a presumably oral stage of analysis with one more liable to have been influenced by the principles of written analysis.

In terminology for specific metrical forms, however, there are notable differences between the systems of terminology employed in Iceland and Ireland; the degree of systematization is much higher in Ireland, and the terminology is generally more abstract.

The survival of the simpler, presumably oral-based terminology of the skalds suggests the continuing strength of a pre-literate tradition. One might suspect that Irish syllabic poetry was modelled on the precepts of the tracts; in Iceland, the tracts were adapted to the existing poetic tradition.

### **10.1.6 Rhyme**

Both sets of tracts treat rhyme as an integral part of the metrical system. The manifestation of rhyme in the examples follows completely different patterns in each culture. Irish rhyme, operating on the basis of consonant-classes, remains a word-ending feature and is primarily used as a line-ending marker, though internal rhyme of varying categories is a subsidiary ornament required of certain more complex metres and mentioned in the analysis of MV 1. The primary manifestation of rhyme in Icelandic is as internal tonic-syllable rhyme.

If we accept that both languages are prototonically stressed, then we must conclude that the tonic-syllable rhyme employed by Icelandic is more liable to be acoustically effective than is the line-ending rhyme employed by Irish. This leads us to the assumption that Irish rhyme was liable to have developed not as an acoustic feature alone, but with the support of written analysis, whereas this is less likely to have been the case in Icelandic.

### 10.1.7 Alliteration

Though in both languages the stanzaic-syllabic form was preceded by those in which alliteration played a major part, only the Icelandic texts include this feature in their analysis. Though all stanzas in *Dagaisti* include alliteration, it does not feature anywhere in the nomenclature of the purely-stanzaic metres.

In the Icelandic tracts, no examples of vernacular verse are cited in which there is no regular occurrence of alliteration. The picture in Irish is different. Here we can divide the forms empirically into two large groups. In the former, the *bairdne* metres, empirical observation suggests that alliteration was obligatory in practice, though not prescribed by the tract-writers. In the latter, the "clerical metres", it was employed only sporadically as an ornament. This suggests that the terms of analysis of the tract-writers and the practitioners of the clerical metres were the same, and that these forms might have had a different evolution than those in the *bairdne* group.

### 10.1.8 The syllable

The status of the syllable is clearly different in the two analyses. In Irish the syllable and the metrical position are in all cases identical, and the form is in most cases defined by syllable-count alone, further distinctions being categorized by cadence and, in rare cases, rhyme. There is no allowance for variations in syllable length or stress, all syllables being equal for the purposes of analysis.

The examples in the Icelandic tracts show that there could be no question of absolute identity of syllable with metrical position. Varying lengths of syllable could be compensated for, such that the syllable, depending on its type, could occupy between one half-position and two whole positions. In this process of compensation, length and accentual status of the syllable played the determining part. Similarly, the line-ending cadence was a function of syllable length and stress.

One is led to the conclusion that for the Irish analyst the syllable was primarily a visual unit on a written page, whereas for the Icелander it was also a unit of acoustic reception.

### 10.1.9 Aspects of realization

Both systems of stanzaic-syllabic versification, Icelandic and Irish, were used at some stage of their development for both secular panegyric and Christian lyric. The proportion of Christian lyrics in the Icelandic skaldic tradition is relatively slight, and late in the development of the genre. There is no evidence of the form's having been used for specifically pagan cultic purposes before the introduction of Christianity, unless one were to subsume under this heading the elegies for departed kings known as *erfidrápur*, which differ little from conventional panegyric.

A degree of syntactic regulation is required inherently by both sets of tracts, using as they both do forms in which stanzas are syntactically independent of those following and preceding them. A deliberate exception to this is found in *Háttatal* 15. The only tract in which syntactic form is regarded as metrically distinctive is *Háttatal*, but the syntactically regulated forms *áttmælt* and *sextánmælt* also occur in *Háttalykill*. MV 1 does not include syntax in its list of distinguishing criteria, although empirical analysis suggests that in not doing so, it is at odds with standard practice: the fourth group of metres, *dúanbairdne*, involves two groups of four forms, each of identical cadence and syllable count, which appear to be distinguishable only by syntactic structure and concomitant accentual regularities.

Icelandic differs from Irish in the existence of a special poetic register, which consists of a specialist lexis and a controlled use of syntax. Two aspects of lexis must be commented on; the use of simplex forms not occurring in standard prose (*heiti*) and the extensive formation of periphrastic compounds (*kenningar*). These both form an intrinsic part of the skaldic style, and are not aids in the construction of demanding metrical forms, but rather an essential means of securing semantic compression. The opposite is true of the Irish metrical filler, the *cheville*, which is to all intents and purposes semantically empty, while supplying regularities demanded by the metrical form. A poetic register in the Icelandic sense does not appear to exist in Early Irish stanzaic-syllabic verse.

## 10.2 Models of evolution

The following conclusions are based on the systems described by the tracts and on empirical observations drawn from the texts used as examples within these tracts. Considering the limited nature of the corpus they must be regarded as provisional.

### 10.2.1 Irish: a two-stage model of evolution

A model for the evolution of Irish verse from the period of the Conversion to the period of the Book of Leinster is presented diagrammatically in **Figure 1**:

imported	clerical	common	lay	native
Biblical and canonical texts	Latin hymnody for study: syllabic, rhyming, visual reception, written transmission		Latin hymnody in liturgy: rhymed, cadenced, acoustic reception, written transmission	<i>Rosc</i> style accentual alliterative verse: Acoustic reception, mnemonic transmission
grammarians: definition of phoneme, syllable. <i>Auraicept na nÉces</i>	First imposition → of written principles	Hib.lat. hymnody: syllabicity, rhyme, cadence	→ Operates on plane of analysis	oral organization (lists, triads, genealogy)
	"MV 1 classes" 6-7 <i>rannaigeacht-deibide</i> rhyming cadenced syllabic nonaccentual sacred school poetry	<i>Félire Oengusso</i> (sacred school poetry in <i>rinnaird</i> )	"MV 1 classes" 1-5 <i>bairdne</i> rhyming syllabic alliterative cadenced semi / non-accentual secular panegyric	continuing <i>roscad</i> tradition, conservative, archaizing
Isidore <i>artes metricae, libri centimetri</i> hierarchy, categorization	2nd. imposition of writing-based principles → on plane of analysis	MV 1 secular verse analysed into 7 classes: ecclesiastical influence	<i>filid</i> -based notions of law and hierarchy ← after ecclesiastical influence	
		<i>trefhocul Dagaisti dán dírech</i>		
				<i>amhrán</i>

According to this model, the apparently homogeneous metrical system presented in *Dagaisti* is the end product of a long process of accretion. The process begins with the import of Latin culture in the wake of the Conversion. At this moment in history we can assume two totally discrete metrical elements active in Ireland:

- a) the vernacular accentual-alliterative metres of the indigenous culture,
- b) the Latin syllable-based stanzaic verse, *metrum* or *rhythmus*, of the incoming religion.

We can assume that Latin versification affected the native culture on two distinct levels, which we may for convenience refer to as clergy and laity.

a) the clergy

The clergy underwent formal instruction in the canonical texts of the new religion; this involved learning to read and write Latin. As their course of instruction progressed, they came into contact with the tenets of Latin grammar and metrics. Musical and metrical texts were a regular feature of monastic liturgy, written down in psalters, missals and antiphoners, all of which are attested among the earliest preserved Irish manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The liturgy was the subject of written glosses and commentaries; clerics would be accustomed to dealing with metrical texts on a written basis.<sup>3</sup>

As a liturgy adapted to Ireland developed, hymnody specifically designed for the Irish situation was required. This was written in Latin following the patterns of written analysis laid down in the grammars. Ambrosian-style hymnody was syllabic-stanzaic, and Irish hymnodists naturally followed this pattern. Naturally, not arising *ex vacuo*, it adopted those features of vernacular metrics which were compatible with the Ambrosian pattern, but these were few. A certain *penchant* for sound-patterning present in the *arcana* of the secular oral tradition may have proved the motivation for the prolific use of such patterning in Hiberno-Latin hymnody. For the rest, the composition of this hymnody was a written discipline, subject to written analysis and comment. When clerics composed vernacular verse, which was likely to be liturgical or didactic, they adopted the same principles.

b) the laity

The second form of transmission would be carried out by practitioners trained in the vernacular system of oral composition, who nonetheless became involved in the liturgy of the new faith. In the course of this liturgy we assume that they will be exposed to metrical texts in the form of Hiberno-Latin hymnody, some of

<sup>2</sup> *Cathach* (Psalter), 7th century (560-660); *Antiphonary of Bangor* "not after 680-691"; *Stowe Missal* c. 800; datings as in Ó Neill 1984 pp. 61-4.

<sup>3</sup> The extent of comments and glosses accompanying the metrical texts in the 11th century *Liber Hymnorum* (which comprise both Latin and vernacular hymnody in texts probably dating as far back as the 6th-7th century) make it plain that the book was designed as more than a mere aid to those of weak memory akin to the modern church hymn-book. This does not constitute absolute proof that written hymn texts were the object of serious study in the 6th century, of course, but the continuity of tradition suggests that practice in the earliest period cannot have been substantially different.

which they will be prepared to memorize in order to participate more fully in the rite they are attending. It is conceivable that both vernacular and also Latin texts may have been memorized in this way.

There is no reason why such lay practitioners need not have continued to compose in their accustomed fashion despite exposure to a new metrical system. However, as ecclesiastical prestige increased, it is conceivable that the audible manifestations of liturgical metrics may have exerted pressure on the vernacular system to adopt the acoustically most perceptible features of the imported form. These features, we can imagine, would be the musically supported regularity of the stanza and the cadence, and the musically enhanced end-rhyme of vowels and of consonants in groups requiring similar musical articulation.

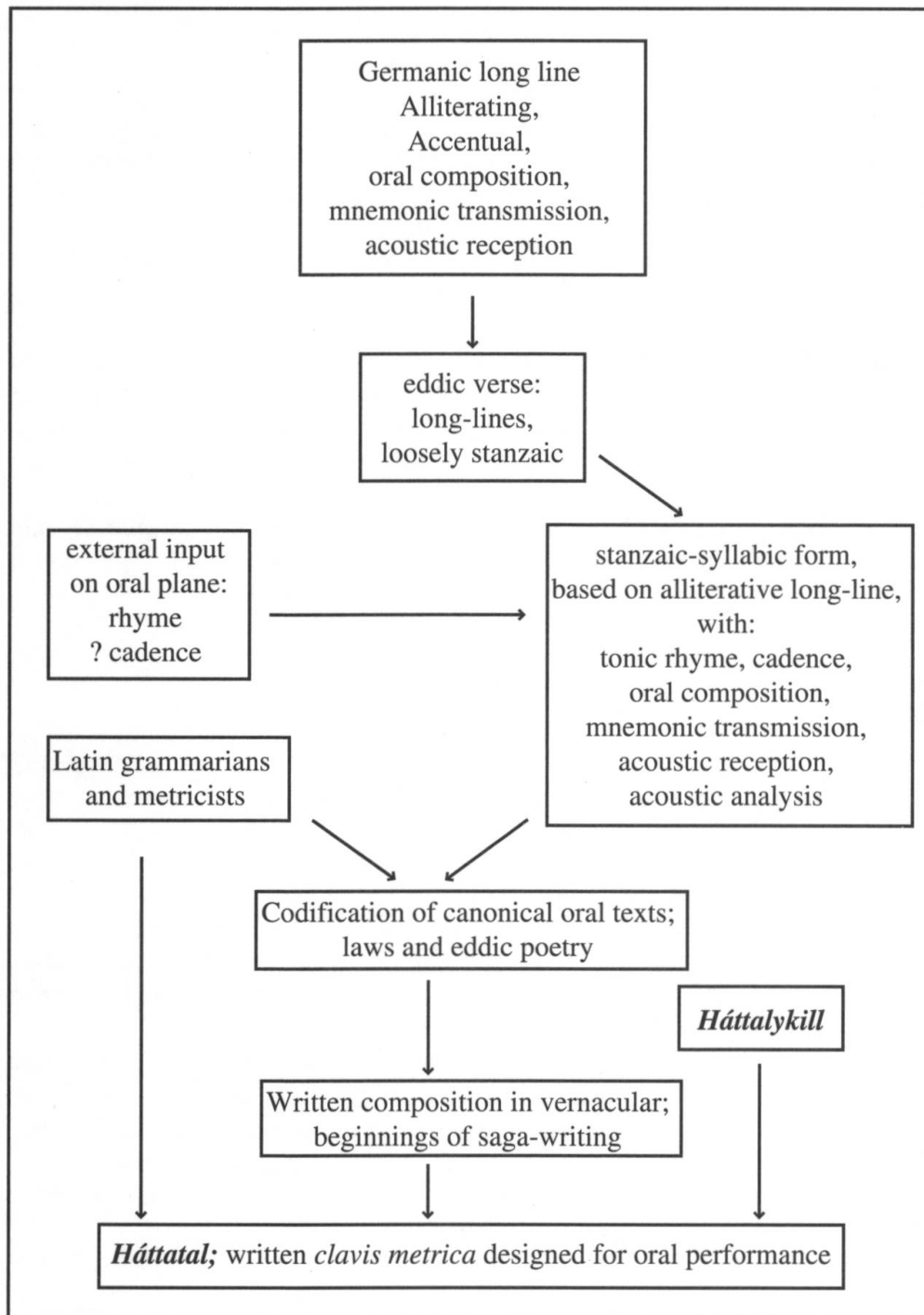
These two strands of transmission lead to a rough grouping of stanzaic-syllabic forms into two basic types, which we may refer to with some caution as "lay" and "clerical". "Clerical" metres continue to be composed with a view to study and written analysis, and as a means of preserving knowledge in a form readily memorized when there is no book at hand to support the memory. They demonstrate little in the way of ornamental floridity and prefer simpler metrical form, *deibide* becoming by far the most popular. "Lay" metres, on the other hand, evolve as syllabic-stanzaic forms which come gradually to displace earlier accentual metre as the vehicle for secular panegyric and related genres. While adopting the stanzaic-syllabic framework of the prestige-bearing ecclesiastical culture, they do not relinquish all characteristics of the earlier system, alliteration and in some cases even accentual regularity being retained.

When both sets of metres came to be subjected to written analysis, however, there appears to have been no vernacular-based framework for this to take place. The principles of oral organization were apparently seen to be insufficient as a basis for the stratification of metres demanded by a class of poets who were becoming increasingly conscious of degree and social hierarchy, this consciousness in itself having been sharpened by awareness of the hierarchical systems upon which ecclesiastical organization was based. Categorization, when it came to be undertaken, was based on principles adopted from the tracts of Latinity, notably Isidor of Seville. As the two strands of stanzaic composition, lay and clerical, are both subjected to a written based analysis which ignores those features of the lay metres specifically targeted on the acoustic recipient, they appear to be reduced to one system, and are treated as such by the tract-writer.

The above model assists us in accounting for the apparent division of the metres in MV 1 into two groups; in practice, however, it is artificial. The "lay" and "clerical" strands I have separated out should be regarded as opposite ends of a continuum with various degrees of shading in the middle. Thus we can say that clerical texts are liable to be written in less intricate metres and point to Blathmac's use of the simpler forms of *deibide* in his hymns to the Virgin, and the use of similar forms by the anonymous composer of *Saltair na Rann*. However, the use of the intricately-alliterating metre *rinnaird* (featuring in MV 1 as *lethdechnad* in the first group of metres, and thus belonging in my scheme most definitely in the "lay" sector) should warn against any over-rigid stratification.

If the above model can be accepted in principle, it would suggest that the development of *all* syllabic-stanzaic metres listed in MV 1 is due to the influence of imported culture.

**Figure 2. Development of stanzaic form in Iceland**



## 10.2.2 The evolution of stanzaic-syllabic form in Icelandic

The evolution of stanzaic-syllabic form and prescription in Iceland follows a markedly different pattern, one that is to all intents and purposes single-stranded. Rather than being the import of a new system, it sees an increase in the sophistication of existing compositional technique. A direct adoption of the principles of Late Latin versification through the medium of writing, such as happened in Ireland, was out of the question; writing was not available to the community of practising poets at the time the development was taking place.

*Háttalykill*, the earliest text examined, was composed some forty years after the first codification of the laws, thirty years after the first surviving vernacular prose, and roughly contemporary with the *First Grammatical Treatise*. By the time it was composed, the framework of the stanzaic system had already been established according to the principles of the oral aesthetic.

*Háttatal* is a development compared with *Háttalykill*, in that arrangement of the stanzas permits a closer observation of the principles of formal distinction; but these principles had been well established before the writing of the tract.

When we compare the two patterns of evolution, Icelandic and Irish, we note that the imposition of writing-based principles occurs twice in Irish, but only once in Icelandic. In Irish, a first imposition radically affects the level of form, whilst a second imposition then affects the criteria of analysis. In Icelandic, the first imposition, the direct influence of writing-based principles at the level of form, is entirely missing. For it we have to substitute a much more indefinite source of stimulus for change, one which must have been the product of oral transmission.

## 10.3 Consequences for the oral-written debate

### 10.3.1 Stanzaic form and the written aesthetic

Chronological considerations raised doubts from the start as to how comparable Icelandic and Irish versification were in terms of medium. It appeared clear at the outset that Icelandic would prove to differ demonstrably from Irish and allow the establishment of a clear dichotomy: Icelandic = oral development and aesthetics / Irish = written-based development and aesthetics.

In detailed analysis of metrical prescription it becomes clear that this picture is over-simplified. Even when masked by analysis in written texts, we see that stanzaic-syllabic form in Ireland does not present a homogeneous picture. The identification: stichic-accentual-alliterative = oral, stanzaic-syllabic = written-based, is an over-simplification. A more workable criterion seems to be that of acoustic ornament, so that we can suggest the following rule:

The more complex a form is in terms of acoustically perceptible ornament, the more likely it is to have its roots in the oral aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>

Here, however, we cannot talk of a strict dichotomy; it seems more suitable to discuss the phenomenon as forming a sliding scale.

It is easier to support the view of the single uncontaminated source of aesthetic standards for Iceland, referring in this case to the oral milieu. Nonetheless, here too, modifications to the over-simplistic analysis are called for, and a scale of values can be established. In this case we have to operate with the criterion of congeniality as a distinguishing factor.

Stanzaic verse in Iceland, unlike that in Ireland, preserves a high degree of linguistic congeniality, as testified to by the retention of alliteration and the establishment of the tonic syllable as the carrier of rhyme. It is this relatively high degree of linguistic congeniality that leads us to believe that it is markedly less influenced as a system by written-based principles of analysis than is stanzaic verse in Ireland. However, where this congeniality appears to be being abandoned, we must assume the pressure of written-based aesthetics.

This assumption is strikingly borne out by the use of end-rhyme metres in *Háttatal*. By abandoning the tonic-syllable principle Snorri is incurring a significant loss in congeniality; it is notable that it is precisely in this part of the tract that the organization of nomenclature and categorisation, i.e. the influence of the imported written aesthetics, are at their very strictest.

## 10.4 The origin of *dróttkvætt*

It was not the primary intention of this study to attempt to account for the origin of *dróttkvætt* or other skaldic metres. However, it is hoped that some of the work contained within it might serve as the basis for a re-examination of this question, and of the nature of Ireland's possible contribution, on the basis of a more stringent analysis of Irish metrical development than appears to have been the case hitherto. It thus seems appropriate at this stage to point to certain factors emerging from the present study which might be worthy of consideration in any such study in the future:

- a) Nothing that I have suggested in the foregoing chapters gives categorical proof for or against the borrowing of Irish forms into Norse.

---

<sup>4</sup> In later texts, of the period 1200-1600, I would suggest that this dichotomy survives; didactic verse reflects the clerical tradition and is more likely to be composed in the appropriate metres, in particular *deibide*, whereas panegyric, in which the immediate acoustic impact on the listening public was of paramount importance, is more likely to be composed in the more highly ornamented "lay" metres.

- b) If such borrowing took place, it must have done so on the oral plane. Under what circumstances this might have taken place is a matter on which one can at best speculate; the following possibilities were open:
- 1) borrowing by Norse in Irish-speaking areas as for example in:
    - i) participation of Norse traders as primesigned Christians at liturgical performances,
    - ii) attendance of Norse guests at secular celebrations in which panegyric was performed in Irish, or
    - iii) drunken revelry of traders and customers at the quayside.
 Of the three, the third is most likely and least susceptible of proof.

- 2) import by Irish into Norse-speaking areas as for example in
  - a) the presence of Irish hostages or prisoners in Norse court circles
  - b) the songs of slaves
  - c) bilingual areas or those of linguistic contiguity as for example the Western Isles or the Isle of Man.

Of these, the first is the most likely. There is no evidence to suggest that skaldic verse was produced in Man or the Western Isles any sooner or to any greater extent than it was in 9th-century Norway, nor that Vikings were unduly receptive to cultural impulses from their slaves, whereas the hostage was liable to be accorded a degree of deference due to his generally high social status and was generally housed in a milieu where interest in such things as foreign panegyric tradition is at least conceivable.

This borrowing, if it took place, is far more likely to have concentrated on the practical performance aspects of metrical form than on the theory of analysis underlying it. The formal analysis of Irish metres, being writing-based, was not susceptible of direct transfer to an oral-based culture. We can thus assume that those elements of the metrical system were transferred which were most readily available to the acoustic recipient, and that those metres which contained the highest proportion of audible recurrences would be those most likely to find favour with the host culture. As both languages seemed to share the common feature of pronounced initial accent, features which were congenial to this accentual system would be likely to be borrowed.

From the above, it will be clear that if any metre was to have been borrowed directly from Irish into Norse, it would be most likely to have been one of the secular panegyric metres, such as those exemplified in the first five groups of MV 1, and in particular, one of those in which accentual regularity is prescribed, as in MV-group 4. In other words, nothing of what I have so far written would invalidate Stokes' century-old suggestion that *dróttkvætt* was a direct borrowing from the Irish metre *rinnaird*, appearing in MV 1 in the group of metres assigned to the highest rank of bards under the name *lethdechnad*:

Día nime nim-dermait  
im éicsi n-aird n-amrai;  
hé fo-cheird cen dolmai  
néim n-óir deirg form labrai.<sup>5</sup>

However, correspondingly, nothing I have written invalidates the equally old objections to the borrowing theory, which can be summarized as follows:

The only common factors between *rinnaird* and *dróttkvætt* are stanzaic form (but of different lengths), syllable count and cadence. Alliteration and rhyme differ entirely. There is no objection to the difference in alliteration patterns, bearing in mind that *dróttkvætt* merely developed the common Germanic system; but the form of rhyme adopted by the skalds has yet to be explained in terms of this theory. Icelandic rhyme is after all diametrically opposed to that used in *rinnaird* and similar metres. *Rinnaird* uses end-rhymes in which vowel phonemes remain constant, consonants rhyme in equivalence groups, and all syllables following the tonic accent participate. *Dróttkvætt*, on the other hand, uses internal rhyme in which consonant phonemes remain constant, vowels rhyme with each other in a single equivalence group (in *skothending*) and no syllables following the tonic accent participate.

If we accept the general view that *dróttkvætt* is a metre regulating not only syllable count but also accent, this too has to be explained as a deviant from *rinnaird*, in which regularity of accent has not been observed. If we go as far as Árnason does, and assume that *dróttkvætt* is basically trochaic and that the isosyllabic structure is accidental,<sup>6</sup> then the only common factor apart from the general feature of stanzaic organization is that of regular cadence. This regularity has been explained by Árnason in terms of the trochaic metre without the need to adduce external influence.

The question remains as to what induced Icelandic poets to adopt a marked increase of stylisation in their panegyric poetry during a period starting somewhere around the middle of the ninth century. In Ireland, as we have seen, the impulse appears to have been given by the introduction of writing concomitant on the Conversion. In Iceland, a single cultural impulse of this magnitude seems to be ruled out.

It seems to me to be no coincidence that the generally accepted period for the beginnings of *dróttkvætt*, the "relevant period", in Perkins' terminology, coincides with the marked increase in mobility among the Scandinavian peoples that characterized the beginnings of the Viking Age, shortly before the first major settlements of Scandinavians overseas, notably in the British Isles and Ireland. This

<sup>5</sup> MV 1 p. 8, text as in Ó hAodha 1991 p. 226, where the stanza is translated as follows:

"God of Heaven does not forget me in my lofty marvellous poetry; it is he that puts without delay the lustre of red gold on my speech". It is uncertain whether we are to interpret these sentiments as the gratitude of the Christian poet or a self-accreditation of the eulogist conscious of divine inspiration similar to the Norse skald's boast that his poetical skill is the genuine Óðinn-inspired article.

<sup>6</sup> 1981 p. 106.

mobility meant that those involved in trading or less peaceable activities in the period were likely to be exposed more or less briefly to a multitude of cultures, without, as in a later period, being likely to settle permanently in any one of the regions being visited. Such impulses as they received in their travels would thus be re-imported to the seafarer's native country and might continue to exert their influence there.

In other words, it is most reasonable to assume that *dróttkvætt* had no single identifiable thoroughbred pedigree. It is an eclectic combination, influenced by untraceable factors, knit together on Scandinavian territory, and proof of little more than the Norseman's openness of mind.

## 10.5 A glance ahead

The following lines of inquiry suggest themselves as arising out of the study here presented:

### 1. The status of metrical forms in Ireland

As a result of work being undertaken at present in Freiburg,<sup>7</sup> it should soon be possible to refer to an established corpus of stanzaic-syllabic verse for the early period similar in status, but far larger in quantity, to that presented by Finnur Jónsson in *Skjaldedigtning*. On the basis of such a corpus, it would be desirable to establish which of the metres presented in the metrical tracts enjoyed popularity in poetical practice, and to what extent the other forms represented in these tracts were either invented in order to satisfy the tractarians' demands for symmetry in categorisation, rationalized from occasional emergency-devices of the practising poets, or represent esoteric forms current, though infrequent, in poetical practice preceding the writing of the tracts.

### 2. The development of Irish metrics

It has become clear during the course of the investigation that there is a crying need for a diachronic primer of Irish metrics. Existing primers, giving as they do a holistic picture of the bardic art from the inception of stanzaic-syllabic form to the end of the bardic period, have not outlived their usefulness as introductions to the subject. They need now to be supplemented by works dealing with the development of metrical form from the earliest written sources (relatively or absolutely datable) to the emergence of a standardized *dán díreach* at the end of the twelfth century, taking account of both accentual-alliterative and syllabic forms, and taking note of the fact that the group of transitional metres, or those adopting features from both systems, may, as Ó hAodha's work has already indicated, be far larger than has hitherto been generally supposed.

---

<sup>7</sup> At the time of going to press Gisbert Hemprich's catalogue is incomplete and the project supporting it is terminated.

### 3. The tracts

While I was working on this investigation, two significant pieces of editorial work became available to me; Donncha Ó hAodha's preliminary edition of the poems of MV 1 and Anthony Faulkes' definitive edition of *Háttatal*. In each case, working with the new edition after having had only the venerable works of the last century as one's guide gave the writer the impression of moving into another dimension. This highlights the need for further editions of metrical material in both languages. Though Icelandic is better served in this field, and the bulk of material is less, the metricist still requires modern editions of the third and fourth grammatical treatises. An edition of *Háttalykill* to a form and standard matching that of Faulkes' *Háttatal* is equally desirable.

In Irish the position is worse. It is to be hoped that Ó hAodha will soon be able to complete an edition of the whole text of MV 1. A re-edition of the remaining texts originally edited by Thurneysen is also desirable. Perhaps more urgent still is the need to edit complementary metrical texts. The availability of Thurneysen's editions has led to a tendency to assume that the tracts therein contained represent the sum of poetic knowledge. Valuable work in this direction has been done by L. Breatnach in his editions of texts pertaining to the poetic grades. We now require accessible commented texts of the remaining metrical material in the Book of Leinster. Of particular interest to Norse-Irish comparison is the section *trefhocul*, which needs editing in conjunction with the related passages in *Aurai-cept na nÉces*. The short section on *dían* raises questions of form and categorization that can only be resolved after an exhaustive comparison with metrical materials elsewhere. Finally, we require a re-edition with commentary, notes, and if accessibility to the world of comparative metrics is to be achieved, translation, of the *Tract on the Privileges and Responsibilities of the Poets*.

### 4. Specific questions

I am aware that this study leaves many questions unresolved or unsatisfactorily answered. In particular I would wish further work to be done on the questions of

- a) "clerical" vs. "lay" stanzaic metres in Irish, a concept which needs testing on the basis of a wide corpus
- b) the disparity between symmetry of categorization in the tracts of both languages and the interrelation of similarly named metrical forms in practice
- c) the metrical basis for the concrete, "sound or impression-depicting" terms for metres in Iceland
- d) inevitably, the origins of stanzaic form in both language and in particular, of *dróttkvætt*.

If this investigation provokes or assists in the investigation of these or any other related questions, I will consider it to have served its purpose.