A POSSIBLE DATE FOR ALDHELM’S ‘LETTER TO HEAHFRITH’

In an earlier issue of this journal I edited Aldhelm’s ‘Letter to Heahfrith’, a polemic composition designed to dissuade a young Englishman from study in Ireland by extolling Theodore and Hadrian and flamboyantly displaying the form of learning inculcated in their school at Canterbury. In implying that the new English learning superseded the older Irish tradition Aldhelm quoted respectfully at the beginning of the letter the diction of the finest Irish Latin poem, Altus Prosator, perhaps by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus. At the end of the letter in the words

Ut uersidicus ait: Digna:
Fiat fante Glingio
gurgo fugax fam culo

Aldhelm simultaneously parodied Irish Latin verse and prose, the rhyming heptasyllabic couplets composed by Irish poets of the seventh century and the words of the most famous and imaginative Irish grammarian of the seventh century, who had written

Verumtamen ne in illud Glengi incedam, quod cuidam conflictum fugienti dicere fidenter ausus est: gurgo inquit fugax famculo dignus est, pauca tibi tui negotii necessaria de pronomine profabor.

Long before Aldhelm a feature recurrent in the Hiberno-Latin tradi-
tion was the infixing of indications of dates of composition. In the
*Epistola de Controversia Paschali* written to Ségéne fifth abbot of
Iona and Béccán the hermit A.D. 633 about reckoning of the date of
Easter the computist Cummian enclosed his argument within a chi-
astic envelope, A-B-c-argument-c'-b'-A', in which the six outer parts
contain exactly 633 words.

In *Versus de Annis a Principio* the poet dates his work three
ways, first from the baptism of Christ to the death of Domnall King
of the Scots in A.D. 645, second from that date forward to the end of
the period of his reckoning, and third backward to Creation. The
number of the ages of the world squared equals the number of lines
in the poem (6 × 6 = 36), and the number of lines squared equals the
number of letters in the text (36 × 36 = 1296). The three categories
of the poet's reckoning doubled equal the number of ages of the
world, which, added to the doubled number of the year of composi-
tion, equals the number of letters (3 × 2 = 6 ; 645 × 2 = 1290 ;
6 + 1290 = 1296).

Laidcenn mac Baith Bannaig of Clúain-ferta Mo-Lúa signed his
*Lorica* in a central line, in which the central word is *centro*. Within
the verse is an anagram identical in metre and rhyme with the verse
in which it is embedded:

CÁPITÁLI CÉNTRO CÁRTILÁGINI
TÍ[BI] PRÁCTICA LORÍCA LÁITGENNI

for you an effective Lorica of Laidcenn.

Laidcenn may also have dated his poem.

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4. M. WALSH and D. Ó CRÓINÍN ed. and transl. *Cummian’s Letter ‘De controver-
sia paschali’ together with a related Irish computistical tract ‘De ratione computan-
to Ségéne and Béccán’ in *The Earliest Irish Writers at Home and Abroad*, *Peritía*
VIII (1994), pp. 10-17; ‘Afterthoughts on Foreskins in Cummian’s Letter’ in *Five

5. ‘Seven Studies’, pp. 1-6.

Experiments*, pp. 6-18; ‘A Possible Date for Laidcenn’s *Lorica*’ in *Seven Studies*,
pp. 68-9.
Suffragare Trinitatis Unitas,
Unitatis miserere Trinitas,
Suffragare queso mihi posito
Maris magni uelut in periculo,
Ut non secum trahat me mortalitas
Huius anni neque mundi uanitas.

Undertake support, Unity of Trinity,
be merciful, Trinity of Unity,
undertake support, I ask, for me placed
as if in the peril of a great sea,
so that the mortality of this year may not draw me with it
nor the vanity of the world.

The last syllable of *huius anni* is the fifty-ninth of the poem, representing perhaps the year of the century. The sixth line may represent the month of the year. The twenty-third word may represent the day of the month. In the year 659 the twenty-third day of June was the Second Sunday after Trinity, the twenty-second day from Whitsun inclusive, which occurred after the twenty-second week of that year. Laidcenn’s death is recorded in the Annals of Ulster *s.a.* 661.

In the Antiphonary of Bangor the *Memoria Abbatum Nostrorum*, which begins *Sancta sanctorum opera*, celebrates fifteen abbots of Bangor, of whom the last named, Cronanus, who ruled A.D. 680-91, is mentioned in the present and future tenses.⁷ The numbers of letters in the Prologue, the four alphabetic stanzas, and the refrain in the future tense about Crónán, 152 + 120 + 124 + 121 + 125 + 41, total 683, which may suggest the year of composition.

In the same manuscript the *Versiculi Familiae Benchuir*, which begin *Benchuir bona regula*,⁸ contain exactly 686 letters, which may suggest the year of composition.

Nearly a century after Cummian in the Hiberno-Latin tradition, a generation after Aldhelm in the Anglo-Latin tradition, the Venerable Bede published his Ecclesiastical History of the English People in A.D. 731, composing the Preface in one hundred lines, every one of which ends with a correct cursus rhythm.⁹ From *Historia*

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Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum and Praefatio to Explicit Praefatio inclusive there are exactly 731 words.

In his Breuiloquium de omnibus sanctis Wulfstan the Cantor of Winchester fixed the text with a Prologue in epanaleptic couplets, in which the first letters of the hexameter verses form the acrostic VVLFSTANVS. There are as many letters in the Prologue as there are lines in the rest of the poem, 696. The Epilogue exhibits an acrostic NVNC ET IN AEVVVM DEO GRATIAS AMEN and a telestich NVNC ET IN AEVVVM SIT DEO LAVS AMEN. The 994 letters of the Epilogue may suggest the year of composition.

In an earlier issue of this journal I edited Aldhelmi Carmen Rhythmicum, about a storm that destroyed a church in which Aldhelm was praying on Saint Paul’s Day, 29 June. Beginning from 1 January, 29 June is the 180th day of the year. There are 180 lines of verse before et nisi natalicia Pauli Sancti sollemnia. Beginning from et nisi natalicia there are eighteen words before nouies binos circiter. After Pauli Sancti sollemnia there are eighteen lines of verse to the end of the Epilogue. From sollemnia inclusive to the end of the Epilogue there are fifty-two words, one for each week of the year. From Pauli Sancti inclusive to the end of the Epilogue there are 365 letters, one for each day of the year. The number of letters in parts I and II is exactly ten times that amount, 3650.

Given the conventions of dating texts long before Aldhelm in the Hiberno-Latin tradition and after Aldhelm in the Anglo-Latin tradition, indeed in Aldhelm’s own poem, it is not unreasonable to look for indications of date in the ‘Letter to Heahfrith’. 10

Theodore and Hadrian began to teach in Canterbury from A.D. 670 and may have taken awhile to persuade someone like Aldhelm, who had been taught by the Irishman Maeldub, that their learning was superior to that of Irish scholars. As from A.D. 675 Aldhelm was

12. I owe thanks to Dr Dáibhí Ó Cróinín for suggesting the possibility of an infixed date in this composition.
abbot of Malmesbury, he is likely to have written this letter during the period between 670 and 675.

In the edition and analysis I presented evidence of composition on multiples of the number 8. Among eight parallel and chiastic patterns the centre of the first parallelism is at line 20, and the crux of the first chiasmus is at the same place.\(^{13}\)

\[
\text{Postquam uestram repedantem istuc ambrosiam} \quad 20 (19) \\
\text{ex Hiberniae brumosis circionis insulae climatibus.} \\
\text{Ubi ter bino circiter annum circulo.} \\
\text{uber sofiae sugens metabatur.} \\
\text{Territorii marginem Britannici sospitem applicuisse.} \\
\text{rumigerulis referentibus comperimus.} \quad 25 (24)
\]

Including the Salutation the sentence beginning *Postquam* is the twentieth line of the composition, though it is the nineteenth of the letter proper. The line that details Heahfrith’s sojourn in Ireland is *Ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo* ‘where in about a thrice-double cycle of years’. If one played loosely with the numerals *ter bino*, as 32, and multiplied them by the number of the line (21), \(32 \times 21\) would equal 672. Reckoning more precisely, from the beginning of the letter proper, from *Primitus pantorum procerum praetorumque* to *ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo* inclusive, there are 112 words, which, multiplied by 3 and 2, equal 672. The Irish among whom Heahfrith had been studying used to reckon Easter on an eighty-four-year cycle. That, multiplied by the number 8 on which composition of the letter is based, would equal 672.

Oxford

D. R. HOWLETT

Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources

Bodleian Library

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