Echoes of Antiquity in the Early Irish *Song of Amergin*

Lloyd D. Graham

The purpose of this brief paper is to highlight similarities between the 'first poem spoken in Ireland'[1,2] and certain classical and scriptural motifs, some of which may hitherto have gone unnoticed. The poem is an invocation uttered by Amergin Glúingel, the Milesian Druid, as he set his right foot upon Ireland; its text is recorded in the eleventh-century *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, usually known in English as the *Book of Invasions*.[3]

Peter Ellis describes the chant as an 'extraordinary invocation to Ireland … in which Amairgen subsumes everything into his own being, with a philosophical outlook that parallels the Hindu *Bhagavadgita*'.[4] Others have remarked that the pantheistic hymn carries overtones of a challenge to the Tuatha de Danann,[2] the then occupants of Ireland with whom the Milesians were about to do battle.

There are many variant translations of the poem, including some seemingly fanciful embellishments, but below I present my preferred composite alongside the original Irish.[5]

Am gáeth i m-muir,	I am a wind on the sea,
Am tond trethan,	I am a wave of the ocean,
Am fuaim mara,	I am the roar of the sea,
Am dam secht ndírend,	I am a bull of seven battles,
Am séig i n-aill,	I am a hawk on the cliff,
Am dér gréne,	I am a teardrop of sunlight,
Am cain lubai,	I am a gentle herb,
Am torc ar gail,	I am a boar enraged,
Am he i l-lind,	I am a salmon in a pool,
Am loch i m-maig,	I am a lake in a plain,
Am brí a ndai	I am the vigour of man
Am brí dánae,	I am the meaning of poetry,
Am gae i fodb (feras feochtu),	I am a spear on the attack (pouring forth combat),
Am dé delbas do chind codnu.	I am the god who fires your mind.
Coiche nod gleith clochur slébe?	Who lights the mountain's stony places?
Cia on co tagair aesa éscai?	Who announces the ages of the moon?
Cia du i l-laig fuiniud gréne?	Who tells the place where the sun will set?
Cia beir buar o thig Tethrach?	Who calls the cattle from the Sea King's house?
Cia buar Tethrach tibi?	On whom do the cattle of the Sea King smile?
Cia dám, cia dé delbas faebru a ndind ailsiu?	Which troop, which god takes a knife through gangrene?
Cáinte im gai - cainte gaithe?	Penalties in a spear - enchantments of wind?

Macalister suggests that the 'cattle of the Sea King' may be a metaphor for stars rising out of the sea, and conjectures that the last two lines of the poem – which most scholars do not even try to translate – refer to ancient spells for healing poisoned wounds and securing favourable winds.[5]

Many of the poems in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* are thought to date back to the ninth century CE. For Amergin's ballad, Macalister goes further, proposing that 'the irregular metrical construction of this rhapsody is due to its having been reduced to its present form from a very ancient spell composed in the highly inflectional Proto-Goidelic of which the Ogham inscriptions preserve a few fragments.'[5] Proto-Goidelic was spoken in Ireland at the beginning of the Christian era, and probably earlier, and the bulk of Ogham inscriptions date from the fifth and sixth centuries CE.[6] Indeed, it seems to me that the first part of Amergin's invocation shares the tenor of even more ancient spells, such as the Furies' sung curse in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*[7] of 458 BCE:

Now by the altar
Over the victim
Ripe for our ritual,
Sing this enchantment:
A song without music,
A sword in the senses,
A storm in the heart
And fire in the brain;
A clamour of Furies
To paralyse reason,
A tune full of terror,
A drought in the soul!

The subsequent 'rhetorical question' section of Amergin's poem is similar in form and meaning to lines that appear in the Old Testament pseudepigraphal *Book of Enoch*, composed in 200-100 BCE. The passage 1 En 90:11-14 reads: 'Who can think His thoughts ... And who is there of all men that could know what is the breadth and the length of the earth ... Or is there any one who could discern the length of the heaven and how great is its height, and upon what it is founded, and how great is the number of the stars, and where all the luminaries rest?'[8]

The self-proclamatory 'I am' style of the first part of Amergin's poem also has an ancient precedent. It dates back at least to the aretalogy of the Egyptian goddess Isis, a hymn[9] from the Ptolomaic period (305 BCE - 30 BCE) which contains claims such as:

I separated the earth from the heaven
I showed the paths of the stars
I regulated the course of the sun and the moon
I devised the activities of seamanship
I made what is right strong

The format recurs in subsequent centuries. A fine example is *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, a Gnostic hymn from the Nag Hammadi library.[10] This was originally composed in Greek well before 350 CE, the approximate date of the Coptic manuscript found at Nag Hammadi.[11] The numerous (and mostly antithetical) 'I am' declarations begin:

> For I am the first and the last.
> I am the honored and the scorned,
> I am the harlot and the holy one.
> I am the wife and the virgin.
> I am the m[oth]er and the daughter.
> I am the members of my mother.

It is interesting that both Isis and the unnamed divinity speaking in *Thunder* are godesses. Indeed, the self-proclamatory formula seems to be particularly associated with the feminine, in that all of the 'I am' monologues[12] contemporary to *Thunder* are uttered by female divinities or spirits.[13,14] In the Nag Hammadi corpus, the speaker is the heavenly Eve, the Trimorphic Protennoia and the Pronoia, all feminine; while in the Mandaean Ginza, it is the she-spirit Ewath in the *Book of Dinanukht* (Ginza R, Book VI).[12] As has been observed previously,[15] the language in Amergin's poem is gender-neutral. While the Druid's rhapsody contains bellicose elements not found in the early prototypes, we should recall that the major Irish war-deity – the Mórrígán – is female.[16] Thus, despite the bias of Christian redactors and Macalister's 'Who is He who announceth the ages of the Moon?'[5], I suspect that the entity speaking through Amergin is female.

In addition to self-proclamatations, *Thunder* contains second-person addresses which resemble the philosophical sermons and monologues of biblical Wisdom (e.g., Prov 8, Sir 24, Wis 7-8, 1 En 42).[11] The presence of Enochian elements in the latter part of Amergin's invocation has already been mentioned above.

While quite different to that in the Gnostic *Thunder*, the imagery in the first part of Amergin's poem also has a somewhat Gnostic flavour. In particular, it recalls the words of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* (60-140 CE): 'I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all has reached. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.'[17]

Before leaving the topic of scriptural sources, it is worth mentioning that the *Song of Amergin* is not the only early Irish incantation to have parallels in Semitic or Indo-European mythological and religious texts. Another instance is the cure invoked by Miach son of Dian Cecht to heal the severed arm of Nuadu Airgetlám, leader of the Tuatha de Danann. The spell is reported in *Cath Maige Tuired* as 'Alt fri alt ocus féith fri féith!', or 'Joint to joint and sinew to sinew!'[18,19], and less directly in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* as 'Miach son of Dian Cecht set joint to joint and vein to vein of his own hand upon him, and in thrice nine days it was healed'.[20] A similar formula occurs in the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, which was written principally in the twelfth century BCE. Speaking of the creation of man, the god Marduk says:[21]

Blood to blood
I join
Blood to bone
I form an original thing
Its name is MAN.

Likewise, the Judaeo-Christian account of the creation of woman in Genesis 2:23 (NRSV) has Adam rejoice that

This at last is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh

Returning from creation to healing, the Hindu Atharva Veda – which dates from the twelfth to tenth century BCE – contains a spell to mend a broken bone, which reads:[22]

> Let marrow close with marrow, let skin grow united with the skin.
> Let blood and bone grow strong in thee, flesh grow together with the flesh.
> Join thou together hair with hair, join thou together skin with skin.
> Let blood and bone grow strong in thee.

Rolf Ködderitzsch gives versions of the formula that stretch through time and space from this Indian prototype to versions collected from Norway and Shetland.[23]

It would be remiss to conclude an essay on *The Song of Amergin* without mentioning the similar verses composed by the Welsh Druid, Taliesin.[24,25] The *Book of Taliesin* dates from the fifteenth century CE, but many of the poems within it are taken to have originated in the tenth century CE, not far removed from the time in which *The Song of Amergin* probably took final form. Taliesin's *The Hostile Confederacy* contains a 'rhetorical question' section reminiscent of the latter part of Amergin's song, and subsequently has a section which recalls Amergin's self-proclamations, although it speaks of past rather than present identities:[26]

When was drawn the bird of wrath,
The bird of wrath when it was drawn.
When the earth is green.
Who chaunted songs?
Songs who chaunted?
If true, who has considered them?
It has been considered in books,
How many winds, how many streams,
How many streams, how many winds.
How many rivers in their courses,
How many rivers there are.
The earth, what its breadth;

Or what its thickness.
[…]
A second time was I formed.
I have been a blue salmon.
I have been a dog; I have been a stag;
I have been a roebuck on the mountain.
I have been a stock, I have been a spade
I have been an axe in the hand;
I have been a pin in a forceps,
A year and a half;
I have been a speckled white cock
Upon hens in Eiddyn.
I have been a stallion over a stud.
I have been a violent bull,
I have been a buck of yellow hue,
As it is feeding.

A similar 'I have been' section is found in *The Battle of the Trees*:[27]

I have been a tear in the air,
I have been the dullest of stars.
I have been a word among letters,
I have been a book in the origin.
I have been the light of lanterns,
A year and a half.
I have been a continuing bridge,
Over three score Abers.
I have been a course, I have been an eagle.
I have been a coracle in the seas:
I have been compliant in the banquet.
I have been a drop in a shower;
I have been a sword in the grasp of the hand
I have been a shield in battle.
I have been a string in a harp,
Disguised for nine years.
in water, in foam.
I have been sponge in the fire,
I have been wood in the covert.

While both Taliesin and Amergin use evocative nature-based imagery, the former's lists at times appear endless. Being Irish, it may be that I am biased, but it seems to me that Amergin's poem benefits both from its brevity and from the immediacy of the 'I am', a powerful formula whose antiquity we have already explored.

References

1. Perera, Sylvia P. (2003) Celtic ways between worlds. *Psychological Perspectives* 46 (1), 38- 58.
2. Ó Tuathail, Seán. (1993) Excellence of the ancient word: Druid rhetorics from ancient Irish tales. Online at http://www.mythicalireland.com/mythology/excellence.html; retrieved Jan 2010.
3. For background and orientation, see my article 'The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* at a Glance: an Overview of the 11th Century Irish *Book of Invasions*' hosted by Jones' Celtic Encyclopedia, online at http://www.maryjones.us/jce/jce_index.html.
4. Ellis, Peter B. (1991) *Dictionary of Irish Mythology.* Oxford University Press, p.29-30.
5. Poem LXIX. Macalister, R.A. Stewart (ed.) (1956) *Lebor Gabála Érenn:* The Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part V. Irish Texts Society/Educational Company of Ireland, Dublin, p.111-113.
6. Fortson, Benjamin W. IV (2004) *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction.* Blackwell Publishing, MA, p.282.
7. Vellacott, Philip (trans.) (1956) *The Oresteian Trilogy: Agamemnon, the Choephori, the Eumenides*. Penguin Classics (vol. 67), p.158-9. The excerpt given corresponds to lines 327-339, repeated in lines 335-346.
8. Charles, R.H. (trans.) (2003) *The Book of Enoch the Prophet*. Weiser, p.112-3.
9. Online at http://www.philae.nu/philae/aretalogy.html; retrieved Jan 2010.
10. I thank Dr. John Armstrong of Cambridge, MA, for bringing this example to my attention.
11. *Thunder* translation by Anne McGuire, with notes and bibliography, online at http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/thunder.shtml; retrieved Jan 2010.
12. Robinson, James M. (1988) *The Nag Hammadi Library in English.* Brill, Leiden / Harper, San Francisco, p.295. Source texts for the 'I am' parallels from Nag Hammadi are: heavenly Eve, p.181; Trimorphic Protennoia, p. 513-4; Pronoia, p.122.
13. Buckley, Jorunn J. (1980) Two Female Gnostic Revealers. *History of Religions* 19 (3), 259-269.
14. King, Karen L. (2000) *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity*. Continuum International, p.97-98.
15. Chet Raymo (2009) The fire in the head. Online at http://www.sciencemusings.com/blog/2009/07/fire-in-head.html; retrieved Jan 2010.
16. Ellis, Peter B. (1991) *Dictionary of Irish Mythology.* Oxford University Press, p. p.173
17. v.77; Meyer, Marvin (1992) *The Gospel of Thomas*. Harper, San Francisco, p.53.
18. Online at http://www.sengoidelc.com/node/275; retrieved Jan 2010.
19. Section 33. Gray, Elizabeth A. (trans., Irish Texts Society), quoted in: Blamires, Steve (1992) *The Irish Celtic Magical Tradition.* Thorsons / Harper Collins, London, p.115.
20. Section 329. Macalister, R.A. Stewart (ed.) (1941) *Lebor Gabála Érenn:* The Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part IV. Irish Texts Society, London, p.149.

21. Sandars, Nancy K. (1971) *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*. Penguin, New York. Online at http://jewishchristianlit.com//Resources/Ane/enumaA.html.
22. Book IV.12. Griffith, Ralph T.H. (1895) *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*. Online at http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av/av04012.htm.
23. Rolf Ködderitzsch (1974) Der Zweite Merseburger Zauberspruch und seine Parallelen. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 33, 45-57
24. Nash, D.W. (2003) *Taliesin, or, Bards and Druids of Britain*. Kessinger.
25. Matthews, John & Caitlin (2002) *Taliesin: the Last Celtic Shaman.* Inner Traditions / Bear & Company.
26. *Book of Taliesin*, VII. Online at http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/t07.html; retrieved Jan 2010.
27. *Book of Taliesin*, VIII. Online at http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/t08.html; retrieved Jan 2010.

--

© Lloyd D. Graham, 2010. v02_23.11.15