



This publication originates in research undertaken in the project *Chronological Hibernicum* (*ChronHib*) at Maynooth University. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 647351).

Proceedings of the Thurneysen Fanclub: issue 31

Records of the discussions in the Conference Room on 12-02-2018

In attendance: David Stifter (chair), Theodorus Fransen, Romanas Bulatovas, Lars Nooij (scribe)

Apologies: Siobhán Barrett, Bernhard Bauer, Elliott Lash, Fangzhe Qiu

Practicalities

We have to add the project logo and the reference to the ERC-grant in our proceedings from now on; especially when they are published officially on the project website, etc. David will produce such a template for future use; and we will then have to 'update' all previous proceedings to that format.

Joe Eska left a very interesting comment on academia.edu, which supports our thoughts on the vowel-colouring potential of velars for phonetic reasons. He also made note of an *ogam*-inscription, the name GOSSUCTTIAS (MacAlister 190). This name occurs in two other inscriptions, in both cases spelled GOSSOCT-... but with different endings. This is in fact the Old Irish word *gúasacht* 'danger, threat', an abstract noun derived from *gúas* 'danger, trap' + the suffix *-acht* < **-āktā*. The fact that the first *ā* of this suffix is spelled consistently with *u/o* appears to be strong evidence for the rounding effect a velar might have, even on a long vowel. That it occurs in *ogam* may be regarded as further evidence that this is really a matter of vowel quality, rather than a graphic representation of consonant quality, as *ogam* is well-known for absolutely ignoring that most salient of consonant-qualities – palatalisation – in its spelling system.

It is objected that this might also reflect a forward-rounding effect of the stressed vowel (*ō*) in this particular instance. However, forward-rounding is rather rare in Irish.

That this rounding is not reflected in Old Irish *-acht* is not necessarily problematic. The change would have been subphonemic (it's one of those proposed rounded schwa's) and might therefore well not have been represented (or underrepresented) in the orthography.

It is asked whether *ucht* 'bosom, lap' also reflects this. The etymology of this word is controversial. David prefers deriving it from *pectus* > **peχtu-*, although the cluster *-χt-* should prevent *u*-infection. This might then also feature a rounding/velarizing effect of the velar. However, the labializing **p* might also play into it. Or perhaps it never was a full-grade /e/ in the first place? At any rate, the development cannot be fully regular, we have *ech* 'horse' and not ***uch* after all. Unless, of course, we are in fact dealing with the effects of dialect...

There is certainly a parallel for the effects of a velar in later Irish, e.g. *echu* > *eochu*.¹

Glides before unstressed, final vowels: *ea, eo, iu* (§97)

We now turn to the grammar once more. We might rather say ‘absolute final vowels’, but this is a minor point.

“After palatal consonants final *a o u* are generally written *ea eo iu*, i.e. a palatal glide is inserted; e.g. **aithrea** (with ρ^i) acc. pl. ‘fathers’; **toimseo** (with s^i), gen. sg. of **tomus** ‘measure’; **ailichthiu** (with th^i) acc. pl. ‘changes’.” This is correct. But it is really weird when you think about it. Almost the entirety of Old Irish orthography is open to variation and ambiguity, but scribes were remarkably consistent in writing a glide between a palatalised consonant and a final, broad vowel. This glide was furthermore consistently written *e* before *a* and *o*, but *i* before *u*. Why do we not find ***aithria** for **aithrea**; or even ***aithra** for that matter? Are we forced to conclude that this consistency in spelling must reflect the presence of a phonetically real glide vowel in this position? We would really rather not allow for this.

“But the glide may be omitted, particularly when the final syllable is separated from the stress by at least one other syllable; e.g. **íarfaigtho** ‘of questioning’ Ml. 24^b10 beside **íarfaichtheo** 35^c29; **esséirgu** Wb. 13^b26 beside **esséirgiu** 4^a27 (with γ^i), dat. of **esséirge** ‘resurrection’; **didu** beside **didiu** ‘therefore’ Wb.” It looks like Thurneysen believed there to have been a real vowel here, which was lost in specific contexts. Did it arise automatically out of the preceding palatal consonant? Might we perhaps be dealing with metathesis of the syncopated vowel; e.g. **aithrea** / $a\theta r\ddot{a}h$ / < $*a\theta \ddot{r}āh$? The latter solution could also be claimed for any real *i*-glide in the stressed syllable, e.g. **aithrea** / $a\ddot{t}h rā$ / < $*a\theta \ddot{r}āh$. Of course, one cannot claim it to explain both of the proposed sounds, i.e. / $a\ddot{t}h r\ddot{a}h$ / < $*a\theta \ddot{r}āh$, that would be a case of having one’s cake and eating it.

Romanas argues strongly in favour of the consistency with which these particular final syllable glides are written as evidence for the direct borrowing of this orthographic practice from another language, arguing that since we do not have any evidence of scribal experimentation leading up to this, it must be borrowed. Counterarguments are offered: the experimental stage may simply be unattested and there are no good donor-languages. Romanas suggest Old English, with its diphthong <*eo*>. But we fail to envisage how this could have been borrowed from said language. Would there have been sufficient numbers of Irish scribes who were also literate in Old English (rather than in the shared habits of the Latin language) to decide to import part of its orthography for the use of writing Old Irish at an early enough stage to give us the attested Old Irish orthography? We consider this doubtful. Moreover, the distribution of these *-eo* spellings in Old Irish are restricted to final syllables, whereas in Old English the diphthong must have been (mostly?) found in stressed syllables – it is therefore not a directly comparable practice.

If we were to accept the consistency with which the glide is written as indicative of the presence of a real vowel we would actually be able to explain the distinction between *i* being written before *u* and *e* before *a, o* as being a matter of raising/lowering. We would then operate with a short / \ddot{t} /-like vowel, which is lowered before *a* and *o* and kept high before *u*.

Romanas suggests that one could also operate with the breaking of these originally long vowels in absolute final position from $\bar{o}, \bar{a}, \bar{u}$ > *e.o, e.a, i.u* by means of assimilation of the 1st mora of such a long vowel to the palatal quality of the consonant. Could work, in theory.

It is noted that this foray into the underlying phonetics of Old Irish is turning very messy – it strikes us as very difficult to conclusively decide whether any one of these theories (which are just conjectures, thinking out loud) would be correct, or incorrect. In the end, we can only say that we do not have any real explanation for this problem.

¹ David brings up a wonderfully forbidding word in Nuxalk, a Salishan language, in a little aside. The word is: $xlp'X^w t^h l p^h t:sk^w h ts'$ and apparently means “then he had had in his possession a bunchberry-plant”. Wonderful.

We turn briefly to the word *danó*, which has a very few early attestations in which it is written *daneu*. What does the *-eu* represent? And how does it tie into the whole matter?

It would be helpful to have a word in which a stressed, long, final, broad vowel follows on a palatal consonant, but we cannot think of any such word. Can such a word even exist within the Old Irish system? We think of *immallé*, which has final stress, but words of such structure are very rare indeed and in this instance we note that there is no syncope here, which seems to rule out the rise of a palatal consonant even if we can find a word that would otherwise fit the bill? H3-verbs are also mentioned, but the stress-break is probably too strong for it to be relevant in this instance.

Pages read in this session: c. 0,5.

Paragraphs discussed: §97.