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Borsje, J.

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The second spell in the Stowe Missal

Jacqueline Borsje

Three healing texts are written on the last page of the Stowe Missal.¹ This manuscript was possibly written in the monastery of Tallaght in the period between 792 and 815, with a revision soon after this.² The missal was probably a private service-book of a travelling priest.³ It has been suggested that the three texts for healing ailments were added in the eleventh century or later.⁴ Edward Gwynn, however, argues that they are contemporary with the Irish tract on Mass in the Missal. If Gwynn's meticulous study is correct, the healing texts would date from the Old Irish period.⁵

The earliest editors called these texts for healing diseases 'spells', though none of them explain why they categorise them in such a way.⁶ The third text answers mostly to what we expect of a magical text: a rhythmic, repetitive text with a certain amount of obscure words with which people tried/try to influence reality in a supernatural way.⁷ The standard edition only gives a translation of the last line, which

¹ Dublin, RIA, D. II. 3 (1238), fol. 67b. The text is edited by G. F. Warner, *The Stowe Missal*, 2 vols (London: Henry Bradshaw Society 1906-1915). See further E. J. Gwynn, 'The Stowe Missal', *The Irish Church Quarterly* 9/34 (1916) 119-33 (with thanks to Jürgen Uhlich for sending me this article); J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical. An introduction and guide* (New York: Columbia University Press 1929; reprint Dublin: Four Courts Press 1997) s.v.; and Sven Meeder, 'The early Irish Stowe Missal's destination and function', *Early Medieval Europe* 13 (2005) 179-94. This study is part of my VIDI-research project 'The power of words in medieval Ireland', subsidized by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (N.W.O.). I thank my colleague Peter Forshaw for his comments and the correction of the English language of this contribution and Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies for her comments and information on early Irish medical matters.

² Kenney, *Sources*, 699. Pádraig Ó Néill ('The Old-Irish tract on the Mass in the Stowe Missal: some observations on its origins and textual history', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2000) 199-204, at p. 204) argues for an early eighth-century exemplar of the Old Irish tract on the Mass in the Stowe Missal.

³ *Ibid.* and see now Meeder, 'Stowe Missal's destination'.

⁴ This dating was done with diffidence on palaeographical grounds by Dr Kenyon (see W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibemicus*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1901-1903; reprint Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1987) Vol. II, xxvii-xxviii).

⁵ Gwynn, 'The Stowe Missal', 130-3; cf. Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, p. xxxix ('... my own impression of the whole MS. is that from first to last it contains nothing later than the ninth century'), and Kenney, *Sources*, 695. Cf. also W. Stokes, 'The Irish passages in the Stowe Missal', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen* 26, Neue Folge 6 (1883) 497-519, at p. 498, who despite the 'Middle Irish corruptions' suggests that the scribe may have copied from an Old Irish codex.

⁶ Stokes, 'Irish passages', 497, 513-14; Heinrich Zimmer, 'Zum Stowe Missal', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen* 28, Neue Folge 8 (1887) 376-81, at pp. 376, 378 (*zaubersprüche*); Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 250; Warner, *Stowe Missal*, II, ix, xxxix, 39. Zimmer generally calls these texts 'spells' (*zaubersprüche*), but twice he calls the second one a 'blessing' (*segen*; Zimmer, 'Zum Stowe Missal', 378; Zimmer, 'Keltische Studien. 13. Ein altirischer Zauberspruch aus der Vikingerzeit', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 33 (1895) 141-53, at p. 144 n. 1).

⁷ For the neutral umbrella term 'words of power' for such texts as spells, prayers, blessings etc., see J. Borsje, 'Druids, deer and "words of power": Coming to terms with evil in medieval Ireland', in Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to religion and mythology in Celtic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2008) 122-49.

appears to be a ritual prescription.⁸ I give here a provisional, highly tentative translation, for which I am deeply indebted to suggestions made by David Stifter.⁹ The references to dripping, flowing and streaming liquid or bodily fluids may reflect the problems connected with urinary diseases, because of which too little flows.

Ar galar fuel
Suil suiles¹⁰ camull
lind lindas gaine
reth rehte srothe¹¹
telc tuisc
lotar teora mucca inanáis (?)¹²
bethade nethar
suil naro suil
taber do fual inai
tonert¹³ 7 toslane
roticca ic slane.¹⁴

Against urinary disease
Let flow/drip how/like a camel lets flow/drip.¹⁵
Give/yield milk/liquid like a *gaine* (?) gives/yields milk/liquid [i.e. let flow
how/like a *gaine* lets flow]¹⁶
Run how/like streams run¹⁷
Let your water go (?)¹⁸

⁸ Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, 39, who gives the translation of Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 250: 'For disease of the urine... .. [*Suil suiles* ... *suil naro suil* go untranslated] put thy urine in ... thy ... and thy health. May a cure of health heal thee!'

⁹ David Stifter and I intend to write an article on this third spell in the near future.

¹⁰ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 250 read: *Fuil fuiles*, but suggest *Suil suiles* in note *m*. Warner (*Stowe Missal* II, 39, n. 19) comments: 'There is certainly no cross-stroke'.

¹¹ The first three lines following the heading appear to have the same structure. Cf. D. Stifter, 'Gono míl und gweint míl mawrem', forthcoming in Velizar Sadovski and David Stifter (eds), *Iranistische und indogermanistische Beiträge in memoriam Jochem Schindler (1944-1994)* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2012) about the occurrence of sets of three similarly structured phrases in medieval Irish incantations.

¹² Warner adds that the last two letters are doubtful.

¹³ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 250 read: *inaitoneitt* (cf. Zimmer, 'Zum Stowe Missal', 379, who reads *toneitt*), but mention Gwynn in note *n*, who reads: *to nert*, which is also the reading of Warner. What we see in the image of the manuscript on Irish Script on Screen is an r which is written as R in this spell.

¹⁴ Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, 39.

¹⁵ We tentatively take *suil* as 2 sg. imperative and *suiles* as 3 sg. rel. of **suilid*, 'to make flow, to let flow', which is perhaps the regular causative formation of *silid*, 'drops, flows, drips; sheds, pours out, causes to flow' (see DIL s.vv. *silid*, *suilid*).

¹⁶ We tentatively take the first two forms to be 2 sg. imperative and 3 sg. rel. of a verb **lindaid*, 'to give/yield milk/liquid'; cf. DIL s.v. *linnad*. Alternatively, but less likely (because the structure would be different from the preceding and following lines): 'A pool/liquid/humour that fills/floods (?)', tentatively taking *lindas* as *línas* (see DIL s.v. *línaid*). The meaning of *gaine* is unknown. DIL s.v. *gaine*, 'excellence, a fine thing', or s.v. *gainne*, 'want, scarcity', does not seem to make sense in this context. Could it be a corrupt form of *gannach*, 'a cow with a year-old calf'?

¹⁷ We take *reth* as 2 sg. imperative and *rehte* as 3 pl. indic. praes. rel. of *reithid*, 'runs, hastens, speeds', and *srothe* as *srotha*, nom. pl. of *sruth*, 'stream'.

¹⁸ David Stifter suggests to emendate *teilc t'uisce*, which would make a lot of sense if the disease has the symptom of having difficulty to urinate.

Three pigs went/came into their age [i.e. grew older] (?)¹⁹

...

Let flow what has not let flow [before].²⁰

Make your urine (i.e. urinate) in a (the?) place (?)²¹

(of) your strength(s) and (of) your health

May the cure of health heal you.²²

The first text, which is a prescription against an eye ailment, might be positioned at the other end of the spectrum.²³ Although not everything is clear in this text, partly due to stains in the manuscript, it is obviously a combination of an invocation of a saint in Irish with a *historiola*, ‘a small (hi)story’, in Latin, consisting of a quotation from the Gospel of John (9:6-7). The text not only invokes Saint Íbar but also mentions God and Christ as recourse for healing power.²⁴ The Christian frame of reference clearly pertains to this first text, whereas there is no obvious trace of Christian elements discernible in the third, other than its location in a missal.

Spells were condemned in Jewish and Christian orthodoxy; nevertheless, various examples are extant in medieval manuscripts, especially in medical contexts.²⁵ Despite the interdictions, Jews and Christians used spells to cope with the

¹⁹ In an earlier publication, Stokes (‘The Irish passages’, 519) translated *lotar teora mucca*, ‘three pigs went’. This seems to be a reference to a *historiola*; cf. the first spell in the Stowe Missal that quotes Joh. 9:7, which I interpret as a *historiola* reference as well. The last word of the line is difficult to read. With thanks to Liz Gabay, who pointed out a possible parallel phrase in Modern Irish: *teacht i n-aois*, ‘to go into age, to come into age, to grow older’.

²⁰ We take *suil* as 2 sg imperative of **suilid*, followed by the subordinating negative *ná*, the perfective particle *ro* and 3 sg. pret. of **suilid*.

²¹ Adding a *t* to *ai* was suggested by Stokes and Zimmer: Zimmer (‘Ein altirischer zauberspruch’, 145) gives *taber dofual inai[t]*, ‘gib deinen urin an den ort’ (put your urine in the place); cf. Stokes (‘The Irish passages’, 519): *taber do fual in-ai(t)*, ‘put thy urine in a place’. Cf. the St Gall incantation against a urinary disease that ends: *Focertar inso dogrés imaign hitabair thúal*, ‘This is always put in (or: cast on; JB) the place in which thou makest thy urine’ (Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 248). Just as in this last example, *taber do fual* should be translated ‘make your urine/urinate’. Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha kindly provided the following examples for this expression: *amail adeir Geraldus de Solo co fuiled tri neithe o toirmisctear in fual do tabairt*, ‘as Geraldus de Solo says there are three things by which passing/emission of urine is hindered/obstructed’ (Dublin, National Library of Ireland, G11, p. 203b 27-29) and *oir ní cuimnid in fual do tabairt*, ‘for they forget (lit.: do not remember) to urinate’ (ibid. p. 204a 27-28). The place where one urinates is presumably exorcised by the St Gall (counter) incantation; it is uncertain whether our spell similarly refers to such a place. We do not know either whether the next line (‘your strength(s) and your health’, perhaps in a genitive relation) is to be linked with this one. Is this a prescription to urinate in a specific place, on a specific object, in a specific way? According to David Stifter, the emendation *ait* is unlikely; he tentatively suggests taking *inai* either as *i n-ai*, ‘into a liver’, or as *in nai*, ‘into a vessel’, extrapolating this latter meaning from Old Irish *nau/nó*, ‘boat, ship’.

²² Cf. this last line with *raticamo . helæ*, ‘May my *éle* heal you’, stemming from an Irish spell in an Old English medical manuscript (Bald’s Leechbook = London, British Library, Royal 12 D. xvii); for more about this, see Borsje, ‘A spell called *éle*’, forthcoming in Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (eds), *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the third international conference on the Ulster cycle of tales*, and the literature there cited.

²³ For a preliminary study of this text, see J. Borsje, ‘The power of words and the performative context’, forthcoming in Jan Bremmer, Ernst van de Hemel & Asja Szafraniec, *Words. Situating Religion in Language* (New York: Fordham University Press).

²⁴ It should be noted that St Íbar is also mentioned in the Litany of Saints in the Stowe Missal (Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, 15); this Missal, moreover, contains extracts from the Gospel of John and a miniature of this apostle.

²⁵ These texts are often indicated by the term *epaid*, ‘spell, charm’, in Ireland; see for instance, the collection in James and Maura Carney, ‘A collection of Irish charms’, *Saga och Sed* (1960) 144-52.

difficulties of life. These texts often appear to be a kind of *bricolage*, composed from parts of other texts, such as sacred and liturgical texts. It is also possible that the composers borrowed texts from other, earlier or foreign cultures and adapted these to their own religious views.²⁶ In this way, seemingly non-Christian spells may have acquired a Christian reading and thus become useful in a Christian context.

I propose to show here how the second, so-called spell from the Stowe Missal, which has no immediately obvious Christian characteristic in its contents, may have been read in a Christian context. It may have its roots in the pre- or non-Christian culture but it may also very well be a Christian composition, which fitted the genre of magical texts by its repetitive, rhythmic, alliterative and symbolic language, in which we may find allusions to Christian concepts. The origin of texts like this one is outside our grasp, but by a close reading we may attempt to approach some dimensions of its use and function in daily life.

The text of the second spell produced here is slightly different from the standard edition because of recent insights. This ‘new’ text demanded a fresh translation, which is given below:

1. ar delc
2. Macc²⁷ saele án tofasci delc
3. nip hon
4. nip anim
5. nip at[t]²⁸
6. nip galar
7. nip crú cruach²⁹
8. nip loch liach
9. mo³⁰ aupaith líí grene
10. frisben att
11. benith galar³¹

1. Against a thorn
2. The splendid son of spittle who/that squeezes out a thorn.
3. Let it not be a blemish.
4. Let it not be a disfigurement.
5. Let it not be a swelling.
6. Let it not be a disease.
7. Let it not be bloody gore.
8. Let it not be a grievous hole.

²⁶ For example, the Irish used the Cabbalistic AGLA formula with the letters of this notarikon surrounded by crosses in a healing text against horse plague (*Ar echbad*; R. I. Best, ‘Some Irish charms’, *Ériu* 16 (1952) 27-32 at p. 28; cf. Borsje, ‘The power of words’).

²⁷ Dennis King (<http://nimill.blogspot.com/2009/06/ortha-na-deilge.html>) suggests that the manuscript reads here *mo*, ‘my’, instead of *mc*. Because it is very difficult to see this on Irish Script on Screen, Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha kindly studied the manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy and established the reading *mc*.

²⁸ Warner rightly points out that the second *t*, given in the edition of Stokes and Strachan, is not present in the manuscript.

²⁹ The *r* is above line (Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, 39).

³⁰ Dennis King (<http://nimill.blogspot.com/2009/06/ortha-na-deilge.html>) correctly points out that the manuscript reads *mo* here (Warner reads *nio*; Stokes and Strachan *nip*).

³¹ Warner, *Stowe Missal* II, 39.

9. The brightness/glory of the sun [is] my charm (*epaid*).
10. It heals (or: strikes against) a swelling.
11. It strikes a disease.³²

In the following discussion, I first deal with the structural elements and the overall structure of the text. Secondly, I discuss the text as a form of verbal power and, thirdly, I explore possible Christian dimensions of the text.

1. The structure of the text

We see assonance and alliteration in the text, for instance in the ‘negative list’: *on...anim...att, crú cruach* and *loch liach*. Furthermore, there is repetition: *delc...delc, nip...nip...nip* (six times), *att... galar ... att... galar*, and *frisben...benith*. The whole text is in the present tense, as we would expect from speech acts.³³

The overall structure is as follows: line 1 is the heading; line 2 and line 9 refer to the healing entity;³⁴ line 10-11 to the healing, and in between, in lines 3-8, we find the negative list. These smaller units are interconnected. The ailment – *delc* – is mentioned in lines 1-2, followed by the list in lines 3-8 incanting the wish that the ailment is not identical with these disorders. Two of them – *att* and *galar* – are repeated in the last lines on the healing. This structural repetition makes it possible to see the listed ailments in pairs:

- 3-4: *on* and *anim*
- 5-6: *att* and *galar*
- 7-8: *crú cruach* and *loch liach*
- (10-11: *att* and *galar*).

The negative list gives a climactic rhythm with first two pairs of single words, followed by the pair of two-word expressions (noun with adjective). This comes to a closure in the final lines which literally echo the pair from lines 5-6. The negative verb of the list (*nip...nip...nip*) is in these last lines replaced with two affirmative, aggressive verbs, which repeat the syllable *ben-*.

Lines 2 and 9 are structurally and thematically related. They refer to a healing entity (person or object) indicated by two nouns in a genitive relation (the X of Y) and give a phrase that indicates the healing, in line 2 by the removal of the *delc* and in line 9 by referring to a term that is generally used in Irish manuscripts for healing spells: *epaid*, ‘charm, spell’. The adjective of the first pair of nouns (*macc saele*), *án*, ‘fiery, bright, glowing; brilliant, splendid, glorious’, is thematically related to the second pair, *líi grene*, ‘the brightness/glory of the sun’. Interestingly, the combination of *án* with *grían* is frequently used for persons;³⁵ for instance, Saint Patrick is called ‘the flame of a splendid sun’ (*lassar gréne áne*) and Saint Moling ‘the splendid sun over

³² My translation, based on Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 250.

³³ For spells as speech acts, see Catherine McKenna, ‘Vision and revision, iteration and reiteration, in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*,’ in J. F. Nagy and L. E. Jones (ed.), *Heroic poets and poetic heroes in Celtic tradition: a Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, CSANA Yearbook 3-4 (Dublin, Ireland, and Portland, Oregon: Four Courts Press 2005) 269-82.

³⁴ It should be noted that the line references do not pertain to the manuscript but to the units as I distinguish them above, when giving the transcription and translation of the text.

³⁵ DIL s.v. *án*.

population groups (*túatha*)'.³⁶ The word *lí* parallels *án*, which opens a possibility to explore the connection between *macc saele* and *grían* (see below). Lines 2 and 9-11 give three (sets of) nouns for healing entities (the splendid son of spittle, the brightness/glory of the sun, and the charm/spell) and three verbs for healing (to squeeze out, to strike against=to heal, and to strike). There are two personal references which link lines 2 and 9 once more: the son and the speaker's self reference *mo* in 'my charm'. Finally, there is one positive reference to bodily matter: spittle or saliva, which is in contrast with the bodily ailments, listed in the negative enumeration.

2. The text as a form of verbal power

The following analysis of the text first discusses the ailment for which it may have been used. Secondly, we look at the treatment hinted at in the text. Finally, we focus on the performer of the treatment who uses these words of power.

A heading consisting of a preposition (here *ar*, 'against') followed by an ailment describes the aim of the text. Such a heading is a common characteristic in 'words of power', especially in healing texts. The two accompanying texts in the Stowe Missal are also preceded by such headings. The first text is intended to heal an eye, for the heading reads *arond d ... suil*, 'against the ... eye', and the third 'against a urinary disease' (*ar galar fuel*).³⁷ In this case, the owner, who may have been an itinerant priest, could have easily found what he needed, because the prescriptions for diseases are all on the last leaf of the manuscript. Moreover, there are only three of them. In larger collections of healing texts, however, such headings will have aided the performers in finding what they needed.

The ailment to be treated is called a *delg*, 'a thorn; pin, brooch; peg, spike, nail, pointed implement'. This seems to imply something sharp that has wounded the skin. This *delg* may even still be located in the skin, for the second line refers to a healer (person or object) being able to remove such a sharp thing from its unwanted location. Such ailments are potentially dangerous without access to antibiotics, and if the sharp particle is located in the eye, even such an important medicine might not help.

Hence, it is not surprising that this is not the only Irish healing text concerning this affliction. The aim of the first charm/spell (*epaid*) in the collection of St. Gall incantations is the removal of a *delg* from a person.³⁸ There is a narrative example in *The Life of Saint Moling*, whose eye becomes injured when a splinter (*slisiu*) of wood flies into it.³⁹ The text gives a prayer (*oráit*) with which the eye is healed (§37). A variant version of this prayer is prayer (*oráit*) number II in the charms collection of James and Maura Carney.⁴⁰ There are two further prayers for healing eyes in this collection (nos V a and V b) that are attributed to Saint Moling and that mention something sharp in the eye (in V a: *brod*, 'straw, splinter, speck, spot; particle (of dust, dirt, etc.)'; in V b: *brod, calg*, 'anything pointed').⁴¹ There is also a charm/spell (*epaid*) in this collection against things that may damage the eye, such as a *brod, bir*, 'stake,

³⁶ W. Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé. The martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society 1905) 82, March 17 and 141, June 17.

³⁷ On the latter, see above; for more on the former, see Borsje, 'The power of words'.

³⁸ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 248.

³⁹ W. Stokes, *The birth and life of St Moling*, Specimens of Middle-Irish literature 1 (London: Harrison and Sons 1907) 26-9.

⁴⁰ James and Maura Carney, 'A collection of Irish charms', *Saga och Sed* (1960) 144-52, at pp. 146-8.

⁴¹ Carney, 'A collection', 149-50.

spit; point; spear; spike’, and *colg* (= *calg*).⁴² A Middle Irish wisdom text gives a curse concerning an eye and a *brod*: *fot shūil condech brod*, ‘may a thorn get into your eye’.⁴³

Before Saint Moling’s eye is healed by the prayer, a spell (*epaid*) is uttered to it (*fria*), because of which the affliction becomes worse.⁴⁴ This spell consists of aggressive words directed at the eye and reads like a satire.⁴⁵ Another satire consisting of aggressive words is the well-known satire (*áer*) through a spell (*bricht*) directed at King Caíar, and the glosses on a ritual for composing a satire (*áer*) described in the same manuscript context prescribe the recital of a specific kind of satire (*glám dícenn*) while piercing a clay image with thorns (*co ndelgaib*).⁴⁶ Alternatively, poets who utter this type of satire (*glám dícenn*) in a ritual context are said to hold a thorn (*delg*) in their hands.⁴⁷ This use of thorns in destructive supernatural arts makes us aware that we should keep open the possibility that the second spell may not only have been used against ‘thorns’ immediately harming body parts but also against thorns used in such destructive supernatural rituals, performed from a distance.

Finally, we can deduce from the ‘negative list’ as well that the text may not deal with ‘just’ a ‘simple’ thorn or splinter. Lines 3-4 refer to esthetic disfigurement as a consequence of the wound and lines 5-8 mention complications which seem to be connected with serious infections. Worries about such complications may have accompanied the diagnosis of suffering from a *delg*.

The second point to discuss in this section is the treatment of ailments which are here implied by this word *delg*. There appear to be three healing entities mentioned within the text: the splendid son of spittle, the brightness/glory of the sun and ‘my’ charm/spell. Moreover, we may consider the text as a whole to be a treatment through the use of verbal power. Deeper, symbolic dimensions of the three healing entities will be discussed below; here, we look at the surface meaning.

Saliva is a well-known medicine used in traditional healings. The prayer used to heal the eye of Saint Moling refers to the saliva of a supernatural entity (God) and a sacral intervener (Mary), together with other healing entities.⁴⁸ Two incantations in the collection of the Carneys refer to either saying powerful words with a sip of water in one’s mouth (hence, mixing the words with water and saliva) or casting the words into three sips of pure fresh water, which may refer to the casting of the spell or to putting a piece of parchment with the words into the water.⁴⁹ The St. Gall incantation

⁴² Carney, ‘A collection’, 148 (charm no III).

⁴³ T. O’Donoghue, ‘Cert cech rīg co réil’, in O. Bergin and C. Marstrander, *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer* (Halle a. S.: Max Niemeyer 1912) 258-77, at pp. 270-1, §45.

⁴⁴ Stokes, *The birth*, 28-9.

⁴⁵ *Mol muilind fot súil/ cráeb cuilind fot súil, / cach immedh it grúaidh / grip ingnech fot súil*, ‘A millshaft under thine eye/ a holly branch under thine eye/ every trouble in thy cheek/ a taloned griffin under thine eye’ (Stokes, *The birth*, 28-9; cf. Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish satire* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 2008) 18).

⁴⁶ Liam Breatnach, *Uraicecht na riar: The poetic grades in early Irish law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1987) 114-15.

⁴⁷ Breatnach, *Uraicecht*, 140.

⁴⁸ Stokes, *The birth*, 28-9, §37. The phrase *ro beta go slána*, translated by Stokes as ‘which will be with health’ is interpreted by the Carneys as referring to a *rubeta*, a poisonous toad or frog, in their commentary on the variant version of this text (Carney, ‘A collection’, 146-7). More research is needed but the matter is beyond the scope of the present contribution.

⁴⁹ Carney, ‘A collection’, 148 (the spell against a particle (*brod*) in one’s eye) and 149-50 (the second prayer attributed to Moling).

prescribes similarly enchanted butter for the removal of a *delg*. We may thus compare the saliva in our spell with the supernatural saliva, human saliva with water and supernaturally transformed fresh water.

Even though *mac saele án* literally means ‘the splendid son of spittle’, and appears to refer to a person, scholars have interpreted this group of three words as a salve. Stokes at first read *aele án*, which he interpreted as *ele án*, ‘splendid salve’.⁵⁰ Zimmer corrected this reading into *M(ac)c saele án* and suggested that ‘the son of spittle’ might mean ‘salve’, because similarly *mac imlisen*, ‘the son of the iris of an eye’, means ‘pupil’; *mac alla*, ‘the son of a rock’, signifies an ‘echo’, and *mac órna*, ‘the son of barley’, indicates ‘whiskey’. He furthermore referred to the preceding *historiola* from the Gospel of John (9:6) on Jesus healing a blind man with clay made from earth and his spittle, and the saliva used in the third St Gall spell.⁵¹ If this is the correct interpretation, the second and first spell in the Stowe Missal would be connected through the *historiola* from the Gospel of John with the ‘salve’ taking its components from the there-mentioned earth and saliva. I will suggest an alternative interpretation below.

Stokes added the text of the *éle*, ‘charm, prayer’, from Leabhar Breac to his discussion of the spells of the Stowe Missal. His reason for this was the presence of the invocation-form *admuiniur* that not only occurs in the first spell from the Stowe Missal but also in the Leabhar Breac *éle* and possibly also because he connected the term *éle* with his interpretation *ele án*, ‘splendid salve’.⁵² This healing text called *éle* from the eighth century is found in the margin of *The Martyrology of Óengus*, where it is marked with a cross. We are dealing here with a healing text for various ailments, including piercing thorns. It contains a negative list, similar to the second Stowe Missal spell (the order given here is that of the Leabhar Breac *éle*):

LB:	Stowe Missal:
Níp on hi nduine	nip hon
Nip loch	nip loch liach
nip cru	nip crú cruach
nip att	nip at[t]
nip aillsiu	
	nip anim
	nip galar
anni frisi·cuirither mo éle	mo aupaith líi grene
Benaim galar	benith galar
benaim crecht	
suidim att	frisben att
fris·benaim galar.	

What we see here are repetitive formulaic lists, formed by negative wishes expressed by *nip...nip...nip* and aggressive language applied for the attacking and healing of

⁵⁰ Stokes, ‘The Irish passages’, 514, 518.

⁵¹ Zimmer, ‘Zum Stowe Missal’, 378; cf. Julius Pokorny, ‘Das nicht-indogermanische Substrat im Irischen’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* (ZCP) 16 (1927) 95-144, 231-66, 363-94, at p. 369.

⁵² For the text of the Leabhar Breac spell, see John Carey, ‘Téacsanna draíochta in Éirinn sa mheánaois luath’ (Magical texts in early medieval Ireland), *Breis faoinár nDúchas Spioradálta: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 30 (2000) 98-117. For John Carey’s English translation and more on *éle* and *ele*, see Borsje, ‘A spell called *éle*’, forthcoming in Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (eds), *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the third international conference on the Ulster cycle of tales*.

diseases. The sound of these lists is like a constant beating and the content of the lists is supposed to function as a verbal warding off or expelling of evils. There are similar enumerative procedures in ritual binding formulae in legal texts,⁵³ such as, for instance, in an Old Irish law text on defects of cows and sheep, which deals with the acquisition of cattle. The following formulaic utterance concerns sheep:

Nip brisc a croiceann, nip forfind no forofinn, ma dub no lachtna; nip toich, nip gungablac, nip congalfinnach, nip daintach, nip ancrad, nip ladrach, nip lethairlach, nip romeidleach; ropai uaitiu a cairach indraicso æs 7 coland 7 oland.

May her skin not be brittle, may she not be white-backed or white-bellied, if she is black or dun-coloured; may she not be — (?), may she not have a misshapen posterior; may she not be cluster-haired, may she not be full-mouthed, may she not be ill-shapen, may she not have defective hoofs, may she not have uneven tufts, may she not be greatly bleating, may it (the payment) be given by you for this sheep, proper with regard to age and body and wool.⁵⁴

Enumerative lists of evils, body parts to be protected and supernatural entities to be invoked are found in the genre of protective texts known as *lorica*, ‘breastplate’.⁵⁵ It is as if the texts try to be as elaborate and precise as possible: all risks should be verbally expressed and thus possibly exorcised. The list form also makes contextual improvisation, expansion and adaptation possible in the performance.

The aggressive language is also found in other healing texts, in which a metaphorical battle is fought with the disease. Thus, the healer speaks aggressive sentences in order to stop the blood from flowing in a charm (*epaid*) for staunching blood, ending similar to the thorn spell: *benaim galar*, ‘I strike a disease’.⁵⁶ Comparable combative lines are found in the *Leabhar Breac éle* (and elsewhere):

Benaim galar,
benaim crecht,
suidim att,
fris-benaim galar,
ar choin gaibes,
ar dhelg goines,

⁵³ See Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark speech: The performance of law in early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007) 122-3. This work brilliantly demonstrates how jurisdiction was performed in medieval Ireland through the utterance of (sometimes obscure) words in a ritual context. It also shows how legal texts sometimes can be identified as ‘words of power’ and how they may overlap with other genres of verbal power. Instead of *nip* we may find *cen...cen... cen...* or *ar... ar...ar...*, or, in Latin, *ab... ab... ab...* and *a...a... a...*

⁵⁴ Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish farming: a study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1997) 507-8.

⁵⁵ For more on this genre, see Louis Gougaud, ‘Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur les prières qui s’en rapprochent’, *Bulletin d’ancienne littérature et d’archéologie chrétiennes* 1 (1911): 265-81, ‘Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur les prières qui s’en rapprochent (Suite)’, *Bulletin d’ancienne littérature et d’archéologie chrétiennes* 2 (1912): 33-41, 101-27, and Michael Herren, *The Hisperica Famina II: related poems* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1987) 23-31. In *loricae* and in healing texts, we often note the repetition of *ar...ar...ar...*, ‘against... against... against...’.

⁵⁶ Carney, ‘A collection’, 150; cf. David Stifter, ‘A charm for staunching blood’, *Celtica* 25 (2007) 251-4.

ar iarn benas.⁵⁷

I strike a disease,
I strike a wounding,
I halt a swelling,
I heal/strike against a disease.
Against the hound which seizes.
Against the thorn which pierces.
Against the iron which strikes.⁵⁸

These lines read as exorcistic, enumerative, verbal banishing of or battling with diseases, wounds and their causes.

I conclude that the treatment suggested in the spell consists of powerful words uttered by a performer who may use saliva, which might have been seen as a salve, and the healing power of the rays of the sun.

The written reflection of the fact that these spells are uttered by a performer is the use of verbal forms in the first person singular. We may compare this with a similar custom in liturgical formulaic speech acts, such as baptismal and exorcistic formulae that are present in the Stowe Missal as well. In our text, there is no literal reference to 'I', but we do have the possessive pronoun in the first person singular: 'my' in 'my charm'. Each time when the written text is voiced, the written 'I' (and in this case 'my') becomes embodied: it receives the personality of the performer.⁵⁹ Moreover, because this utterance takes place in a ritual context, the identity of the 'I' also transcends the historical individual who utters the words. The performer draws supernatural power onto/into him or her by embodying this empty textual 'I' in uttering the powerful words or by invoking the power of a supernatural entity. It may even be so that the performer and the supernatural entity to a certain extent merge in the ritual process because of the use of ambiguous expressions.

It is my view that we also find a reference to the performer in the first sentence. Although the standard translation reads: 'A splendid salve which binds a thorn',⁶⁰ I suggest that the more literal translation – 'the splendid son of spittle' – may refer to the healer, whose saliva is among his tools to heal ailments. I exemplify this in the last part of this contribution on a Christian reading of the text.

3. The spell as a Christian text

The text as we have it was written one day in the Stowe Missal. The priest who used the Missal was apparently also sometimes asked for help when people were ill. Although our text seems to be a straightforward healing text with no obvious Christian characteristics, a Christian reading is possible and this way of looking at the text opens up possible deeper, symbolical layers. The binding element in this Christian reading is Jesus Christ, as I argue now from the following clues: 1) Jesus as

⁵⁷ Carey, 'Téacsanna', 116; cf. Stokes, 'The Irish passages', 519; Kuno Meyer, 'Ein altirischer Heilsegen', *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil.-hist. Klasse (1916) 420-2, at p. 420.

⁵⁸ I adapted John Carey's unpublished English translation slightly so that the similarities between the Irish texts would also come out in the English.

⁵⁹ See also Henni Ilomäki, 'The self of a charm', in J. Roper (ed.), *Charms and charming in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2004) 47-58.

⁶⁰ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus II*, 250.

the splendid son of spittle; 2) saliva; 3) thorns; 4) the combination of *macc*, ‘son’, and *grían*, ‘sun’; 5) the combination of *án*, ‘splendid, brilliant’, and *lí*, ‘beauty, lustre, glory, splendour’; 6) *epaid*, ‘spell, charm’, and 7) the aggressive language used against the illness.

It is possible that ‘the splendid son of spittle’ refers to Jesus Christ (1). A similar way of speaking is found in the Gospels, where Jesus often refers to himself in the third person singular as ‘the son of man’.⁶¹ It may, therefore, be that ‘the splendid son of spittle’ also refers to the Son from the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who was known to have used saliva when healing people, and was represented as such in the *historiola* in the preceding spell (2). The human healer may identify both Jesus and himself as a splendid son of spittle, which results in a merging of the identity of Jesus the healer as a model and as the supernatural entity involved with that of the performer in the ritual process. The saliva in the designation of the healer is perhaps also used in the healing performance, when the thorn is being removed from the skin or as part of the warding off of supernatural arts involving a thorn.

It should also be noted that there are other spells against thorns that supposedly employ the supernatural power of Jesus (3).⁶² Again, there is a *historiola* in the background, in that Jesus suffered from thorns in the passion narrative when they were used for his ‘crown’.⁶³ *Delg* may also mean ‘spike, nail, pointed implement’, and could thus also allude to the nails with which Jesus was nailed in hands and feet to the cross. I suggest the following deeper layer of meaning in line 2 of the text: the fiery/bright/glowing/brilliant/splendid/glorious Son [of God and Mary] of spittle [who used saliva in healing people and who was spat upon in the passion narrative] who suffered from *de(i)lge/delgi* [a crown of thorns on his head, nails in his hands and feet] is the one who will now aid in the removal of (the influence of) a thorn that is threatening the well-being of a person. The performer refers to this Son while being himself a son as well who may use saliva while squeezing out the thorn⁶⁴ or banishing its supernatural influence.

As argued above, the fiery/bright/glowing/brilliant/splendid/glorious Son of spittle of line 2 may be structurally and thematically related to the beauty/luster/glory/splendour of the sun in line 9. It is not difficult to interpret the son (*macc*) as the sun (*grían*) if we apply it to Jesus. Solar symbolism for Jesus Christ is found in many medieval Irish texts. An example from the *Confessio* (§§59-60) of Saint Patrick will suffice:

... quia sine ulla dubitatione in die illa resurgemus in claritate solis, hoc est in gloria Christi Iesu redemptoris nostri, ... quoniam ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso

⁶¹ For this expression, stemming from Aramaic usage when ‘the speaker refers to himself as the *son of man* out of awe, reserve, or humility’, see Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A historian’s reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins/Fontana 1973, repr. 1980) 160-91, at p. 186.

⁶² For instance, the above-mentioned St Gall spell against a thorn employs the holy words that Christ spoke from the cross as words of power to remove a thorn (Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* II, 248). An example from recent times to extract a thorn goes as follows: ‘The briar that spreads, the thorn that grows, the sharp spike that pierced the brow of Christ, give you power to draw this thorn from the flesh, or let it perish inside; in the name of the Trinity. Amen’; Lady Wilde, *Legends, charms, and superstitions of Ireland* (London: Chatto and Windus 1919 (new edition of the 1887 publication); reprint: Mineola: Dover Publications 2006) 190-1.

⁶³ Mt 27:29; Mk 15:17; John 19:2.

⁶⁴ We could compare this affirmative statement on the efficacy with similar phrases in charms, such as: *foirimse do suile ... roic*, ‘I help your eyes. ... It cured’ in Charm II and *coiscid*, ‘it checks (it)’, i.e. the blood from flowing in Charm VIII (Carney and Carney, ‘A collection’, 147, 151).

regnaturi sumus. Nam sol iste quem uidemus <ipso> iubente propter nos cotidie oritur, sed numquam regnabit neque permanebit splendor eius, sed et omnes qui adorant eum in poenam miseri male deuenient; nos autem, qui credimus et adoramus solem uerum Christum, qui numquam interibit, neque qui fecerit uoluntatem ipsius, sed manebit in aeternum quomodo et Christus manet in aeternum⁶⁵

... because without any doubt on that day we shall rise again in **the brightness of the sun**, this is, in **the glory (gloria) of Christ Jesus our Redeemer** (...); since from Him and through Him and in Him we are going to reign. For **this sun** which we see rises daily on our account, with Himself ordering it, but it will never reign, nor will **its splendor** remain forever, but even all who adore it will come badly to the punishment of the pitiable. We, however,⁶⁶ who believe and adore **the true sun Christ**, who will never die, nor he who will have done his [i.e. Christ's] will, but he will remain for eternity, in the same fashion as Christ also remains for eternity⁶⁷

Solar and light phenomena symbolising the divine go back to the Hebrew Bible (the Tenach or Old Testament), and this symbolism is connected with Jesus in the New Testament. This solar/light symbolism is sometimes connected with another concept related to the divine, namely the Glory of God. When God is said to be present or appear in some form (e.g., as the Pillar of Cloud and Fire in the desert or in the form of a man), the Bible and non-canonical biblical texts refer to this form as God's divine Glory (Hebrew *kābôd*, Greek *doxa*, and Latin *gloria*) which consists of light or brightness.⁶⁸ The sun is one of the Old Testament and non-canonical symbols of God's Glory.⁶⁹ A crucial text is a prophecy in Malachi 4. The Day of God is announced as a scorching fire that will burn all the proud and evil ones (Mal. 4:1). For those who fear God's name, however, the sun of justice will arise, with health (*sanitas*) in its wings (Mal. 4:2). The emphasis is here on God in solar form, who will burn the wicked. Patristic interpretation of this text identified Jesus as 'the sun of justice'.⁷⁰ Jesus is sometimes depicted as God's Glory in the New Testament.⁷¹ Moreover, the Late Antique cult of the Sun God Helios offers further clues for connecting Jesus with the sun. He is depicted as Helios in third-century iconography, which derives from the imperial cult of *Sol Invictus*, the 'Invincible Sun'. Further solar imagery is represented by the adoption of Sunday as a holy day and the birthday of *Sol Invictus* on 25

⁶⁵ Ludwig Bieler, *Libri epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi: Introduction, text and commentary* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy 1993) 89-90.

⁶⁶ David Howlett (*Liber epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi: The book of letters of Saint Patrick the bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1994) translates 'moreover', but Patrick creates a contrast, which is aptly indicated with *autem*.

⁶⁷ Howlett, *Liber epistolarum*, 91; emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ See J. E. Fossum, 'Glory', in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking & Pieter W. van der Horst (ed.), *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill 1999) 348-52.

⁶⁹ For references, see E. Lipiński, 'Shemesh', in *Dictionary of deities*, 764-8, at p. 766.

⁷⁰ R. L. Gordon ('Helios', in *Dictionary of deities*, 394-401, at p. 400) refers to Jerome (In Amos 3, 6:12/15; CCSL 76, 312), but the references are numerous. See Brepol's on-line Library of Latin Texts, s.v. *sol iustitiae*.

⁷¹ See Fossum, *Dictionary of deities*, 351-2.

December, transferred to Jesus.⁷² Although the Glory of God does not need to coincide with either the sun or Jesus Christ, there are several textual witnesses that do identify these entities as being identical.

In Patrick's reference to the Glory of Christ quoted above, we see how 'glory' corresponds with 'brightness' and 'sun' with 'Christ'. It does not seem unlikely that similarly *án*, 'fiery/bright/glowing/brilliant/splendid/glorious' (line 2) corresponds with *lí*, 'beauty/luster/glory/splendour' (line 9) and son (of spittle; line 2) corresponds with the sun in line 9 in the spell. There is a surface layer concerning natural healing entities: a performer (son) who heals with saliva and the sun in the sky whose healing power is well-known. There may also be a deeper layer where the brightness and glory in these two lines may be associated with the bright Glory of God (5) who may be identified with the Son who healed with saliva and who is symbolized as the (true) sun (4).

The beauty/luster/glory/splendour of the sun is furthermore designated as 'my charm' (*mo epaid*; 6), which follows the negative list. If we interpret this natural sun as also referring to the 'true sun' in the form of Jesus Christ, then a parallel structure in the Leabhar Breac *éle* becomes apparent. This text similarly concludes the negative list with a reference to the efficacy of verbal power in the phrase *anni frisi-cuirither mo éle*, 'upon which my *éle* is cast'. Another *éle* in an Old English medical manuscript juxtaposes *ratica mo . helæ*, 'May my *éle* heal you' with *icas cristi ta hæle*, '[It is] Christ in whom is (*i ta*) healing', after a list referring to gore, wounding, and snake poison, preceded by a repetitive *ar*.⁷³ The healing power is located both in the words of the *éle* and in the supernatural power of Christ, just as in our thorn spell the healing power is in saliva, the sun/son/Son and in the words as given in the *epaid*, 'spell, charm'.

The aggressive language to expel or heal the illness (7) should be seen in a broader scope where the concepts of exorcism, protection and healing overlap.⁷⁴ Because sin and disease were sometimes closely connected in the views of our ancestors, Scott James Gwara points out: 'Supplications or incantations to expel disease from the body may therefore be veiled prayers of exorcism'.⁷⁵ Original sin was supposed to have brought death and disease into the world, and hence, the priest could be seen as a physician, penance as medicine, and Christ came to be portrayed as a *medicus* on the basis of his identity as the ultimate Saviour of sin and healer of disease.⁷⁶ The aggressive language suits the context of exorcism very well; one would expect this type of language from a healer who cures disease by exorcising it and the concomitant influence of harmful supernatural beings or arts.

⁷² Gordon, *Dictionary of deities*, 398-401. See also Bieler (*Libri epistolarum* II, 145-6) on this Late Antique connection between Helios and Jesus Christ.

⁷³ E. Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon remedies, charms, and prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press 2001) II, 22; cf. T. O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms, wortcunning and starcraft of early England*, with a new Introduction by C. Singer (London: the Holland Press, 1961; revised edition of the original publication from 1864-1866, 3 vols) II, 112-13; for a translation, see Borsje, 'A spell'.

⁷⁴ See also J. Borsje, 'The vision of Mac Con Glinne and the power of words', forthcoming in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Ailbhe Ó Corráin and Jan Erik Rekdal (eds), Volume on *The vision of Mac Conglinne* (Uppsala: The University of Uppsala Press 2012).

⁷⁵ S. J. Gwara, 'Gluttony, lust and penance in the B-Text of Aisline Meic Conglinne', *Celtica* 20 (1988) 53-72, at p. 65.

⁷⁶ Gwara, 'Gluttony', 66, with reference to Kathleen Hughes, 'Some aspects of Irish influence on early English private prayer', *Studia Celtica* 5 (1970) 48-61.

Conclusion

If the term *epaid* is also self-referential in the text, which I think is the case, then the editors were right in calling the second healing text in the Stowe Missal a ‘spell’. An *epaid* is to be seen as the Irish equivalent of Greek *pharmakon* (φάρμακον), a supernatural instrument that can destroy, poison, create and heal and that may be accompanied by or consist of words of power.⁷⁷

The text was used for extracting a sharp object from a body and healing its effects. I furthermore argued on the basis of the occurrence of *delg* in rituals involving supernatural arts connected with dangerous words, such as satire, that the text may also have been used as an exorcistic instrument, banishing unwanted supernatural influence. If this is correct, then the text may be considered to be both a healing spell and a counter spell.

⁷⁷ ‘Miraculous magic in medieval Ireland: the *epaid* (spell). Part 1’, 17 March 2006, key-note address at the Twenty-Eighth Annual University of California Celtic Studies Conference, held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Celtic Studies Association of North America, UCLA, Los Angeles. Cf. Heinrich Zimmer, *Keltische Studien*, Erstes Heft: Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch von E. Windisch (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1881) 123.