A spell called Éle

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Jacqueline Borsje

A Spell Called Éle

Introduction

The armies that Medb has mustered in Táin Bó Cúailnge, ‘The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge’, are encountered by a single warrior, named Cú Chulainn.¹ He defends Ulster on his own. An important scene in Recension I of Táin Bó Cúailnge describes how one evening, after many fights, Cú Chulainn climbs the mound in Lerga and sees the multitude of his enemies below him (O’Rahilly 1976, 64–7, 182–5). While Cú Chulainn cries out in anger, his charioteer Láeg sees a man walking through the enemy camp towards them, seemingly unnoticed by all (ll. 2088–9). The man identifies himself as Lug mac Ethlend from the síde (i.e. the hollow hills or ‘fairy’ mounds), the father of Cú Chulainn. He offers his help. Cú Chulainn wants his grievous wounds to be healed, and Lug tells him to sleep for three days and nights at the mound, promising to replace Cú Chulainn in the fight with the enemies during this period. Then Lug performs some acts and utters certain words, as recorded in the two manuscripts that give this scene:²

LU Canaid a chéile ferdord dó
C Canaith a cheliu for[ dor](d) ndo;
LU contúi friss
C contaili fris co medon lai ara barach
LU co n-acca nách crecht and ropo glan.
C con faca nach [crecht] ron both pa hoghslan.
LU Is and asbert Lug
C Is ann ismbert Lugh (...)
LU marginal note: r. Éli Loga inso sis
C [Is] ann asmbert ind oglaich ins[o]

¹ For more information on this epic tradition see e.g. Mallory 1992; Mallory & Stockman 1994; Ó hUiginn & Ó Catháin 2009, and the literature there cited. Translations in this paper are mine unless indicated otherwise. This study is part of my VIDI-research project ‘The Power of Words in Medieval Ireland’, subsidized by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (www.nwo.nl/projecten.nsf/pages/2300134086).

² These are Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 23 E 25, also known as Lebor na hUidre (henceforth abbreviated as LU) from about 1100 (Best & Bergin 1929) and Maynooth, National University of Ireland, 3 a I, also known as Ó’Curry MS 1 (henceforth indicated by ‘C’), a paper manuscript from the late sixteenth century (Ó Fiannachta 1966). The order of LU is followed here.
Atraí a meic mórUlad
now that your wounds are healed

fót sláncréchtaib curetha

fri náimtiu fer m Mellarath

móradaig todonathar

Dia ferraígib sligéthar

slúaig immenard nerethar

fortacht a síd sóerfudut

Help from the fairy mound will set you free

issin mruig ar conathaib

fociallathar aongilliu

slig delb silsa riut.

A single lad is on his guard

cot anmuim arfucherthar

Arclith ar búaib báifedae

sligh delu silsai riut

Strike .... and I shall strike with you.

—

cot erccitt doib a ndiis

—

imfe ... t cosair seisir

4 Ni fil leó do nertsagul

fer do baraind bruthaigte

fer [do] baraind bruthnaicti

cot anmuim arfucherthar

Arclitha ar buaib bufeitai

cot anmain arfuigertor

fochiallathar öengillae

fociallathor aongilliu

slig delb silsa riut.

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Arclitha ar buaib bufeitai

sligh delu silsai riut

Strike .... and I shall strike with you.
Within the context of this episode, Lug performs three important acts: he chants a
ferdord,¹⁰ 'a male humming/intoning'; he utters a rhetoric and finally, he applies plants
and healing herbs while he casts a healing spell (slánsén). In the margin of LU, the rhetoric
is characterized as an éli. This paper focuses on the concept of the éli or élé, translated
'prayer, charm, incantation' in the Dictionary of the Irish Language (henceforth DIL; see
www.dil.ie).

What is an éle¹¹ and why did the scribe of LU use this term to qualify Lug’s speech?
In order to find an answer to these questions, three areas of investigation will be consec-
uously discussed. First, the examples of éle in narrative contexts are described. Second,
texts called éle are discussed. The third part of the paper attempts to delineate the mean-
ing and function of éle.

⁵ The later Recension III of Táin Bó Cúailnge is a witness of this rhetoric as well, introducing it as éle Logha and reading: Atrai am(a)ic mhoir alaidh fodoshlancrehtaibh cuirxtha frinaindiu fer mell darath mór adhaign donathanar dia.ferraghaidh sligh eorth fortacht sluaign innen ard nerethar f(or)tacht asidh sær f(or)udud isin bhruigh arcona thaihb gotanmhain arfochtar fóchíallathar xenghilla arclith arubaibh baifedhæ slighdhelbh silsa reud. Ní ful léo donert shághul fer dohharaind bhruthaiglthe gotiurt f(or)dho locht nai dibilit ci gith carbad comhglind isiasrin nithatraí. atrain (Nettlau 1894, 74, §123). For a translation of Recension III see ÓBéarra (1996).

⁶ The following lines precede the rhetoric in C.

⁷ Best & Bergin 1929, 195, ll. 6312–33; 196, ll. 6341–3.


¹⁰ C reads fordord (cf. Rec. III: f(or)dhord). O’Rahilly (1976, 268) prefers the form fordord (for- emphatic particle + dord, ‘murmuring, chanting’), although she refers to Zimmer, who translates ferdord as männerbass, ‘male bass (singer)’. She points out that the original reading may have been fodord, ‘muttering, murmuring, (generally in the sense of) complaining’. See further below, p. 209.

¹¹ For the sake of convenience, the headword in DIL is used to refer to the term central here.
Narrative contexts of élé

The healing process of Cú Chulainn as described in the LU version of Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I is complex. Lug utters the ferdord, which makes Cú Chulainn sleep during an unspecified time until his wounds are healed. Then Lug utters his élé or rhetoric, after which Cú Chulainn is said to sleep for three days and nights. The warrior from the síd applies the healing herbs and charm which heal Cú Chulainn during his sleep without his noticing anything. In the meantime, the aristocratic boys from Ulster fight with the enemy armies and die in the battle. The text returns to the scene at the mound in Lerga where, after the sleeping period of three nights and days, Cú Chulainn wakes up refreshed and healed and talks with the warrior from the síd. The warrior from the síd tells him of the battle and death of the boys, after which Cú Chulainn suggests that the two of them avenge their death. The warrior refuses: all honour would go to Cú Chulainn, and, moreover, Cú Chulainn is again capable of fighting the hosts on his own. We see a repetition of remarks concerning the cure and the sleeping period.

Cecile O’Rahilly (1976, 268) voiced the opinion that two versions of Cú Chulainn’s healing process were combined in LU: one in which Lug heals with herbs and Cú Chulainn sleeps during the healing; the other in which Lug makes Cú Chulainn sleep until he has been healed. The former version is, according to O’Rahilly, more unambiguously represented by the description of the healing of Cú Chulainn by the warrior from the síd in Recension II, extant in the Book of Leinster (henceforth LL). She detected another clue for this theory in the place of the élé in LU. According to O’Rahilly (1976, xxi, 268), the scribe of LU put the élé in the wrong place; she would have preferred it if the élé was pronounced just after Cú Chulainn’s waking up, which, she argues, is what happens in Manuscript C. Connected with her opinion on the proper order of the tale is her view of the meaning and function of the ferdord and the élé. O’Rahilly sees the function of the élé as rousing the warrior to action, whereas the ferdord puts him to sleep and heals him.

Manuscript C, however, employs a similar way of repeating as LU and the narrated order of events is not as straightforward as O’Rahilly posits. In C, Lug sings a fordord which makes Cú Chulainn sleep until midday on the next day when his wounds are healed (which contradicts the three-day period, as O’Rahilly 1976, 268 observes). Then Lug tells Cú Chulainn to sleep for three days and nights, which Cú Chulainn does. Lug applies the healing herbs and utters the rhetoric (called élé in LU). The battle and death of the boys is recounted, followed by the mention of Cú Chulainn’s sleep of three days and nights and his waking up in a refreshed and healed state (Ó Fiannachta 1966, 34–5). We observe that the rhetoric is uttered before Cú Chulainn wakes up and not after this, as O’Rahilly posits. Just as in LU, the mention of the three-day sleeping period is repeated and we read several references to the healing method. We also note that the rhetoric is not immediately followed by Cú Chulainn’s waking up. The reader’s attention is first drawn to the battle of the boys and then the reader is reminded of Cú Chulainn’s long sleep before being told that the warrior wakes up.

Repetitions, contradictions and different temporal layers of the language have been used by scholars to establish various sources from the Old and Middle Irish periods, which the scribes compiled into redactions of the texts that are now extant. O’Rahilly also employs this instructive and valid historical-critical method. It is, however, also possible
to try to make sense of the extant text as the scribes have handed it down to us.\(^\text{12}\) The repetitions have a function in that they manipulate the narrated time and shift the focus of the reader on events taking place contemporaneously. This way of repeating, looking forward and backward and describing contemporaneous events is also found in other medieval Irish texts, such as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, "The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel", and *Serglige Con Culainn*, 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn'.

While I admire O’Rahilly’s work, I cannot follow her in her method of deducing the meaning of *ferdord* and *éle* from her reconstructed, hypothetical order of the tale. First of all, I wonder whether it is necessary to postulate two versions of the healing of Cú Chulainn (healing with herbs and sleeping), because these two remedies seem to me to be common elements of a healing process that need not be separated. Secondly, in O’Rahilly’s interpretation *ferdord* and *éle* are two different chants with their own function, healing/sleep inducing and rousing to battle respectively. On the basis of the absence of the term *éle* in Manuscript C, however, we should keep the possibility in mind that the *fordord* mentioned in this manuscript version may refer to Lug’s rhetoric as well. Finally, we want to know why the scribe in *LU* called this rhetoric an ‘élí’ and we do not want to base our view upon a hypothetical reconstruction of the order of the tale but upon its content, the etymology of the term and parallel literary examples. Lug’s *éle* is obscure in many places, which is why O’Rahilly’s translation is incomplete; therefore, more research is needed into its content.\(^\text{13}\) This paper will mainly focus on further examples of *éle* in the literature and its medieval etymology.

Lug mac Ethlend is only mentioned in a marginal note in Recension II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the version in *LL* (O’Rahilly 1967, 63, ll. 2322–3). This is a quotation from Recension I as found in *LU* and C that according to other versions Lug fought side by side with Cú Chulainn in the battle of Sesrech Breslige (O’Rahilly 1976, 70, ll. 2316–7; cf. Ó Fiannachta 1966, 38, ll. 1346–7). The warrior from the *síd* who heals Cú Chulainn is anonymous in the main text of *LL*. He commiserates (ar-ceissi) with Cú Chulainn and tells him to sleep, but he neither hums nor murmurs, nor does he utter a rhetoric. The only thing he does is to take care of Cú Chulainn’s wounds by applying plants from the *síd*, healing herbs and a curing charm (*lubi ìcci slánsén*; O’Rahilly 1967, 58–60, 198–9, see esp. 59, ll. 2163–6).\(^\text{14}\)

The *LL* version uses the word *éle* later in the tale, in the context of the battle between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad. This scene is absent from Recension I. After a day of fighting, healers (*fiallach ìcci 7 legis*) take care of the wounds with herbs, healing plants and a curing charm (*lubi 7 lossa ìcci 7 slánsén*; O’Rahilly 1967, 86, ll. 3123–5). The next night, the herbs and plants can no longer be applied:

\(^{12}\) Cf. also Borsje 2002, where I apply this approach to the second recension of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. For a splendid application of this approach see Ralph O’Connor’s book about this tale (O’Connor 2013).

\(^{13}\) Bernard Mees’s (2009, 193) recent attempt to translate this complicated text is not satisfactory. It is unclear, for instance, how he arrives at the translation ‘two excellent men strike’ for *dia ferragaib sligethar* when the verb is clearly passive and the form preceding it is dative plural.

\(^{14}\) In Recension I, the word *síd* follows *láech* and thus qualifies the warrior instead of the plants (see the quotation above). The scene is similarly described in the Stowe version, although there the nameless warrior from the *síd* only applies plants and herbs to the wounds (*losa sidi 7 luibí ice 7 slainte*; O’Rahilly 1961, 70–1, ll. 2203–6).
Because of the dreadfulness of their wounds and gashes, of their cuts and many stabs, all they could do for them was to apply spells and incantations and charms to them to staunch their bleeding and their haemorrhage and their unhealed [=old] wounds (lit., their spears of gore)⁴⁶ (O’Rahilly 1967, 224).¹⁷

Éle is here used for staunching blood, and it is combined with other supernatural means, indicated by plural forms of epaid and ortha. I argued elsewhere that an epaid is like a pharmakon (φάρμακον), a supernatural instrument that can destroy, poison, create and heal and that may be accompanied by or consist of words of power.¹⁸ Ortha, an older derivative from Latin oratio than óráit, is an oration: a formal prayer or incantation. It is as if the healers no longer dare to touch the wounds with their hands or herbs but use words instead. Éle is in this context thus a healing formula, used for staunching blood.

The next example of éle in a narrative context is rather dubious. A Middle Irish poem consisting of thirty-seven quatrains describes in each stanza the things loved by an Irish saint. The poem is ascribed to Cuimmín of Condere (†659) but is dated to the eleventh or twelfth century (Stokes 1897b, 60). There are four manuscript witnesses of this poem; Whitley Stokes edited and translated the version in Brussels, Bibl. Roy., MS 3234–40 (Kenney 1929, 482, no. 274). He interprets the word ile, found in a variant tradition in the margin of this manuscript and as part of the quatrain in the version in Brussels, Bibl. Roy., MS 5100–4, as éile:

Carais Brigi bhennachtach | Crabadh bún nar’bó benta
longaire ocus mocheirge | Féile re feraibh ferta.

Blessed Brigit loved lasting devotion which was not prescribed, shepherding and early rising, hospitality to wonder-working men.

This example is not only uncertain but also offers little information. Stokes translates [e]ile as chanting: in his glossary, the term is explained as ‘a chant, charm or spell’ (Stokes

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¹⁵ O’Rahilly suggests reading fuilighe.
¹⁶ I have adapted the last part of O’Rahilly’s translation, which reads: ‘to staunch the bleeding and haemorrhage and to keep the dressings in place’. She argues elsewhere (O’Rahilly 1958–61, 183) ‘that ga cró in the literary language was the equivalent of ga cop in the medical, and that it meant originally a tent or probe to keep a wound open’; but see now Greene 1983, esp. 1, 4, 6–7.
¹⁷ The Stowe version only mentions luiphe ice and luib ice ⁷ cech lus slainte in the first instance, and only iptha ⁷ arthana in the second instance (O’Rahilly 1961, 94–5, ll. 2952–4, 2993–4).
¹⁸ ‘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.
¹⁹ This might refer to the above-mentioned version in Brussels, Bibl. Roy., MS 5100–4 of which the last line reads: ‘ile ocus fér a ferta’, where éile is supposed to rhyme with -éirghe (Stokes 1897b, 60).
A Spell Called Éle

1897b, 72). If this really is an example of éle, we might also interpret this as Brigit loving powerful words. We have several examples of Brigit using such powerful words such as, for instance, the epaid with which she restored the love of a wife to her husband.²⁰ None of her powerful words is, however, called éle.

Éle thus occurs in Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I as a rhetoric, uttered by Lug over the severely wounded and exhausted Cú Chulainn, and in the LL version as a verbal means to staunch the bloody wounds of Cú Chulainn and his opponent Fer Diad. Perhaps the chanting of an éle was beloved by Saint Brigit, but this remains dubious. Moreover, the poem does not disclose what the female saint wants to achieve with this genre of powerful words. To conclude: éle appears in a narrative context, in which wounded warriors are treated; perhaps, if O’Rahilly is right, the rhetoric is different and functions as rousing a warrior into action. We return to this view below.

Texts called éle

The élí Loga is not the only extant éle. Another powerful text called éle is found in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 1230 (olim 23 P 16), also known as Leabhar Breac (c. 1400). The text is Old Irish and dated to the eighth century (Carey 2000b, 108).²¹ The éle, found in the lower margin of The Martyrology of Óengus on page 99, is marked with a cross and goes as follows:

1 † Tréélë²² [MS Treuele] treibeoil: † A threefold charm (éle) from a threefold mouth:
2 a neim hi naithir, its poison in a snake,
3 a chontan hi coin, its rabies²³ in a hound,

²⁰ Edited and translated in Stokes 1890, 34–53 (text), 182–200 (translation); see 44, ll. 1478–87, 192. This Middle Irish Life dates to the twelfth century (Sharpe 1991, 210, 212); for more on this tradition see Borsje (2010, 2012a and 2013a).
²¹ I am very grateful to John Carey for sending me the unpublished English version of this article.
²² Carey (2000b, 117) takes both -uile and fhele later in the text to reflect éle, ‘charm’, with -u- and fh- inserted to mark hiatus. I wonder whether tréélë could be comparable to trébricht, ‘a threefold bricht’. This would refer to a threefold occurrence of the metrical unit of a bricht—a group of eight syllables—but alternatively, it may also refer to a threefold bricht in the sense of ‘charm’ or ‘spell’. Roisín McLaughlin (2008, 140–1, no. 22, 207–9) identifies a satire in the form of a threefold bricht in the latter sense. The wish to injure the cheeks and the fist of the victim is expressed; a thorn (delg) and a knife (scían) are mentioned as weapons. McLaughlin (ibid., 208) furthermore refers to another satire (no. 46) in the form of an incantation: bricht nathrách Néde, ‘the snake charm of Néde’, where snake may be a metaphor for the venomous power of the satirer. Cf. also the satire (áer) through a spell (tri bricht) ascribed to Néide in Uraicecht na Ríar (Breatnach 1987, 114–5, §23), listed as no. 21 in McLaughlin’s collection. The thorn and knife may be metaphors for harmful words; on the other hand, the glosses in Uraicecht na Ríar refer to a supernatural ritual in which a clay image of the victim is pierced with thorns, while a dangerous satire (the glámdícenn) is uttered (ibid., see the glosses and notes to §24). It should be noted that Lug’s éle can be characterized both as a charm in obscure language and as a syllabic poem (cf. Tristram 2010).
²³ Meyer (1916, 422) translates ‘Tollwut’, identifying the word as conten ‘strife’ (from Latin contentio) and adds that it may be a scribal error for confad, ‘rabies’. Carey (2000b, 117) suggests taking it ‘as a homonymous compound con-tan, lit. “hound-fire”, a term for rabies which may have fallen together with the Latin word due to an overlap in their connotations’.
a daig hi n-umæ.
Nip on [MS nifon] hi nдуuue.
Tréele [MS Treuele] treibeoil:

fuil chon,  
fuil hilchon,  
fuil fletha Flithais.
Nip loch,  
nip c[h]ru,  
nip att,  
nip aillisn [MS nifallsiu]  
nip an il  
nip a fans

fuil chon,  
fuil hilchon,  
fuil fletha Flithais.
Nip loch,  
nip c[h]ru,  
nip att,  
nip aillisn [MS nifallsiu]  
nip an il  
nip a fans

Ad·muiniur teora ingena Flithais.
A naithir, hicce a n-att!
Benaim galar,  
benaim crecht,  
suidim att,
fris·benaim galar,
ar choi goines,  
ar dhelg goines,
ar iarn benas.

Benacht forin ngalar-sa,  
benacht forin corp hi·ta,  
benacht forin [n]héle·sea,  
benacht for[n] cách rod·lá [MS rotla].

Matheus, Marcus, Lucas, Hiohannis,
7 Pater prius 7 post

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Ad·muiniur teora ingena Flithais.
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Benaim galar,  
benaim crecht,  
suidim att,
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ar choi goines,  
ar dhelg goines,
ar iarn benas.

Benacht forin ngalar-sa,  
benacht forin corp hi·ta,  
benacht forin [n]héle·sea,  
benacht for[n] cách rod·lá [MS rotla].

At·muiniur teora ingena Flithais.
At·muiniur teora ingena Flithais.
Four times the text refers to itself as an élé (lines 1, 6, 14, 26). The aim to heal is expressed in five different ways. First, the ailment is described in negative formulations: let it not be a blemish (on), a hole (loch), gore (crú), a swelling (att), and a sore (aillsiu; ll. 5, 10–13). These negative formulations are also found in other so-called spells. The formulations are quite similar to the second so-called spell in the Stowe Missal. This text appears to have been applied against a thorn (ar delc). I list the negative enumeration, following the order of the Leabhar Breac élé. We see further parallelism in the aggressive formulations against the ailment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LB</th>
<th>Stowe Missal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nip on hi nduine</td>
<td>nip hon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nip loch</td>
<td>nip loch liach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nip c[h]ru,</td>
<td>nip crú cruach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nip att</td>
<td>nip att</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nip aillsiu</td>
<td>nip anim</td>
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<td></td>
<td>nip galar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benaim galar,</td>
<td>benith galar</td>
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<tr>
<td>benaim crecht,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suidim att,</td>
<td>fris·benaim galar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The healer seems to try to avert dangerous developments of the ailment by expressing them verbally in a negative way, as if to ward them off with words.

Secondly, healing is requested in the invocation (ll. 15–16). Att, the word for ‘swelling, protuberance, tumour’, is specified. Att occurs most often in the text (three times) as a form of the ailment to be treated. As we can expect in a threefold élé, ‘three’ is a recurrent number in this text. The general term for ‘sickness, disease’—galar—is, for instance, also used thrice. Interestingly, the animal that causes swellings by its bite—a snake—is invoked to heal this ailment.

Thirdly, the text uses the metaphor of bailling against disease to express the wish for healing (ll. 17–20). Fighting is included in the semantic range of fris·ben, usually translated as ‘heals’ or ‘pays’, because it literally means ‘strikes against’. The two verbs

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30 The various ailments cover the following semantic range, according to DIL: on, ‘a blemish or disfigurement; in early sagas used of a blister (?) raised by a poet’s satire on the face of his victim, and hence fig. a blot or stain on one’s reputation, a social disgrace or dis-qualification’; loch, ‘a hollow’, hence ‘a hole’; crú, ‘gore, blood; violent death, serious wound’; att, ‘swelling, protuberance, tumour’, and aillsiu, ‘sore, tumour, abscess’.

31 The correct order is: Ar delc. Mac gill macc saele on tofasci delc nip hon nip anim nipatt nip galar nip crú cruach nip loch liach nip [read: mo] aupaith lúi grene frisben att benith galar (Stokes & Strachan 1903, 250), ‘Against a thorn. The splendid son of spittle who squeezes out a thorn. Let it not be a blemish. Let it not be a disfigurement. Let it not be a swelling. Let it not be a disease. Let it not be bloody gore. Let it not be a grievous hole. The glory/brightness of the sun [is] my charm (epaid). It heals (or: strikes against) a swelling. It strikes a disease.’ The range of afflictions argues for a broad healing spectrum. The text was apparently not only applied for ‘simple’ thorn wounds but perhaps also against supernatural aggressive rituals with thorns, such as mentioned in footnote 22 above. For more on this text see Borsje (forthcoming 2013b).
benaid and fris-ben are also used in the thorn spell in the Stowe Missal and in various other healing texts.³²

Then, fourthly, there are three lines starting with the preposition ar, ‘against’ (ll. 21–3). This preposition often occurs in headings to indicate the aim of powerful texts, such as, for instance, in the above-mentioned spell against a thorn (ar delc) in the Stowe Missal. This preposition is also found in enumerative lists in the body of charms in order to indicate the things people want to be protected against. Thus we read in the opening lines of a charm from Dublin, R.I.A., 24 B 3:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Obaid ar galar fiacail} & \text{A spell against the teeth disease} \\
\text{Adsuidiu mo cetar det deg i mc cind} & \text{I bind my fourteen teeth in my head} \\
\text{Ar toitem} & \text{Against falling out} \\
\text{Ar tilebrad ...} & \text{Against ??? ...} \\
\end{array}
\]

(Carney & Carney 1960, 152, no. X).³³

The same use of ar is found in loricæ, ‘breastplates’ or protective texts. The Old Irish Deer’s Cry, for instance, gives two lists of dangers preceded by ar. The second list runs as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Crist dom imdegail indiu} & \text{May Christ protect me today} \\
\text{ar neim,} & \text{Against poison,} \\
\text{ar loscud,} & \text{Against burning,} \\
\text{ar bádud,} & \text{Against drowning,} \\
\text{ar guin.} & \text{Against wounding.} \\
\end{array}
\]

(Carey 1998, 134)

The three-fold list preceded by ar in the éle in Leabhar Breac refers to wounds caused by dogs, thorns and weapons. The éle presumably was believed to heal these wounds, and the exorcistic enumerative list was part of its healing methods.³⁴

The fifth and last way to express the healing purpose of the Leabhar Breac éle is represented by the fourfold blessing (ll. 24–7). The ailment, the sick body, the éle and the performer are blessed. Blessing is believed to enhance the well-being of the person or object blessed and therefore supports the healing strived after by the previously discussed ways of healing.

The function of this éle is thus healing wounds, infections and related ailments. It appears that this éle has survived several centuries, because there is a variant version in the charms collection of Lady Jane Francesca Agnes Wilde. Perhaps she or her source were aware of the longevity of the text, because the heading qualifies it as ‘A very ancient

³² See, for instance, the last line in a possibly Old Irish spell (epaid) for staunching blood from Dublin RIA, 24 B 3, c. 1496: \textit{Epaid coisce fola. Ar-gairim fuil tri grinni fir. Do-léicim [or: do-legaim] trácht, \textit{ar-gairim fuil, south ainces anfad dian dogar. Ar-gairim fuil, benaim galar, ‘Charm for staunching blood. I hinder the blood through a man’s point (of a weapon), I let go (or: I destroy) the flowing, I hinder the blood, the stream of pain, the swift, sad storm. I hinder the blood, I slay (or: strike (benaim); JB) the disease’ (Stifter 2007a, 252–3; cf. Carney & Carney 1960, 144, 150–1, no. VI).}

³³ Carney & Carney do not translate the heading and they translate \textit{adsuidiu} as ‘I hold fast’.

³⁴ For more about the overlapping of the concepts of exorcism, protection and healing see Gwara 1988, 64–70; cf. Borsje forthcoming 2013c.
charm against wounds or poison’. The nineteenth-century version runs as follows:

The poison of a serpent,
the venom of the dog,
the sharpness of the spear,
doth not well in man.
The blood of one dog,
the blood of many dogs,
the blood of the hound of Fliethas—
these I invoke.
It is not a wart to which my spittle is applied.
I strike disease;
I strike wounds.
I strike the disease of the dog that bites,
of the thorn that wounds,
of the iron that strikes.
I invoke the three daughters of Fliethas against the serpent.
Benediction on this body to be healed;
benediction on the spittle;
benediction on him who casts out the disease.
In the name of God.
AMEN (Wilde 1887, 193).

There is some indication that this text stems from farmers on the west coast of Ireland or on the islands there situated. The text may have been uttered in Irish or in Hiberno-English (Wilde 1887, 188). The function of healing has remained. There is, however, no double invocation of the daughters of Flidais and the snake as in the *Leabhar Breac éle*, but the daughters of Flidais are invoked against the snake.

The danger of a poisonous serpent is also mentioned in an Irish charm in an Old English context. Heinrich Zimmer (1895) discovered this charm. Howard Meroney (1945, 174–7) identified three further variant versions of this Irish charm, and most recently Edward Pettit (2001, ii, 22–4) listed a total of seven variant versions. With its seven variant versions, this is the most frequently attested charm in extant Anglo-Saxon records (Pettit 2001, ii, 22). Most of these versions are used against some sort of swelling. Several of them prescribe the uttering of charms nine times. Three of them refer to the crosses of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (Pettit 2001, ii, 22–6). We have seen that the *éle* in *Leabhar Breac* is marked with a cross and ends with the names of the four evangelists.

For the purpose of this paper, two versions will be discussed, in which, according to Zimmer (1895, 145) and Meroney (1945, 175, 177), the term *éle* in the sense of ‘spell, charm’ occurs.\(^{35}\) The instance discovered by Zimmer stems from Bald’s *Leechbook* (London, British Library, Royal 12 D. xvii), an Old English collection of medical reference books, compiled possibly at the instigation of King Alfred the Great in the ninth century and written in its present manuscript form in the middle of the tenth century (Nokes 2004). The charm is part of chapter xlv of Book I, which is described in the medieval

\(^{35}\) According to Meroney (1945, 175, n. 2), Zimmer’s translation *Zauber spruch*, ‘spell, charm’, is too strong a rendering of *éle* on the basis of the reference to Christ in the text.
Jacqueline Borsje

table of contents as dedicated to remedies against poison (twenty in total), snake bite, the swallowing of a worm while drinking water and a remedy against binding charms. Two powerful texts are here announced: the prayer or charm against poison of John the Evangelist and the Irish incantation, either of them said to be effective against poison, 'flying poison' (infection), swelling and deep gashes (Cockayne 1961, ii, 10–11). The Latin prayer of St John, which immediately precedes the remedy with the Irish charm in Bald's Leechbook, is also part of the Irish Liber Hymnorum (Bernard & Atkinson 1898, i, 91). This Irish version ends with the names of the four evangelists.

The remedy from Bald's Leechbook that gives the Irish charm runs as follows:

*Wif fleogendum atre 7 ælcum æternum swile: on Frigedæge aþwer buteran þe sie gemolcen of anes bleos nytne odde hinde, 7 ne sie wiþ wætre gemenged; asing ofer nigon siþum letania, 7 nigon siþum 'Pater noster', 7 nigon siþum þis gealdor: Acræ . aercre . ærcræ . nadre . arcuna hel . ær nem . ni þærn . ær . asan . bui þine . adrice . ær nem . meodre . ær nem . æþern . ær nem . allū . honor . ucs . idar . ad cert . cunolari . raticamo . helæ . icas cristi ta (MS x pita) . hæle . to bært . tera . fueli . cui . robater . plana . uili .*  


Against flying poison and every poisonous swelling: on a Friday churn butter that has been milked from a cow of one colour or a hind, and do not let it be mixed with water; sing a litany over it nine times, and an Our Father nine times, and this incantation nine times (Pettit 2001, ii, 22–3, n. 29):

1. The urging of a claim (*acræ*)
2. against gore (*ar crú*)
3. against the poison (*ar nem*) of a snake

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36 Cockayne’s translation refers to three powerful texts: the prayer of St John, an incantation and the Irish incantation. The powerful text of St John is, however, in the chapter itself qualified as both prayer (*gebed*) and charm (*gealdor*), although Cockayne (1961, 112–3) only translates ‘prayer’. It seems likely that the table of contents also uses both words for the same text (*Iohannes gebed gealdor*). Moreover, there is no incantation present between St John’s prayer/charm and the Irish charm. The adjective qualifying the Irish charm in the table of contents is *gecost*, variously translated as ‘approved’ (Cockayne), *erprobt*, ‘tested’ (Zimmer), and ‘choice’ (Pettit).

37 Pettit reads *Acre*, but the reading in the facsimile (Wright 1955, f. 43a) is *Acræ* (conform Cockayne 1961, 112 and Meroney 1945, 175).

38 Pettit has the correct reading, contra Cockayne (1961, 112) and Meroney (1945, 175), who read *aercæ*.

39 Pettit reads *allū* contra the facsimile (Wright 1955, f. 43a), Cockayne (1961, 112) and Meroney (1945, 175).

40 Zimmer (1895, 146) interprets this verbal noun as a ‘spell against something’.

41 For spells against gore (*crú*) see Sankt Gallen 1 (*delg diuscolt crú cetti méim méinni*); Stowe Missal 2 (*nip crú cruach*; Stokes & Strachan 1903, 249, 250); the above-quoted Leabhar Breac élé (*nip crú*) and the above-quoted reference in *TBC* II to the healing of various wounds (*a ngæ cró*). According to Meroney (1945, 179), *cron ær crio*, ‘prohibition against bleeding’ (another instance of Old Irish in Old English charms) corresponds with this *acra ær cre*.

42 Meroney (1945, 176) points at the resemblance of *nadre* with OE *naedre*, ‘snake’, but compares it furthermore with *fo neim nathrach* (Meyer 1919a, 20 §40). *Nem nathrach*, ‘the poison of a snake/of
snakes’, furthermore glosses veninum aspidum, ‘the poison of vipers’, in the Milan glosses to the Psalms (Stokes & Strachan 1901, 78). According to Rudolf Thurneysen (1946, 185 §293, 204 §320), nathir was originally a feminine ia-stem with an old nominative in -i, which he bases upon W. neidr (<* natrī). Could the reading of the spell be based on an older form of ar nem nathrach?

Meroney (1945, 176) restores ’arcuin, answering to OIr. orguin, orcuin (MIr. with ar-), “slaying,” infinitive of orgaid’. I think, however, that we are dealing with yet another combination of the preposition ar with the verbal noun guin, ‘wounding, slaying’, i.e. another instance of a phenomenon to be averted, exorcised or healed. This combination occurs in several loricae, such as in the above-quoted Deer’s Cry (ar neim ar loscud ar básud ar guin), in Sanctán’s Hymn (ar guin, ar guíasacht, ar gābud, ‘against wounding, against danger, against peril’; Stokes & Strachan 1903, 353), and is furthermore mentioned among the dangers from which the druid-smith Olc Aiche wants to protect Cormac by casting five protective girdles (cresa imeglæ) upon him (ar guin, ar básuth, ar thein[idd], ar adgaire, ar chona[ib], ar cach n-olc, ‘against death by wounding, [against] drowning, [against] fire, [against] sorcery, [against] wolves, against every evil’; Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 121, 125, cf. 132). The sixth addition (against every evil) seems to be the safety clause, also found in loricae (Herren 1987, 28). Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 48–51) points out that the druid-smith may be uttering a protective spell while referring to these girdles as spiritual armour just as the lorica or liürech (breastplate) and sciath (shield). Such protective spiritual girdles are mentioned in the Klosterneuburg lorica, where they are connected with (possible) saints—Finnán (?), Finnian, John—and with a serpent (Stifter 2007b, 510, 514–5, 522–4; see also Borsje 2012b, 199–204). The text that seems to slither throughout the charm. In Northumbrian glosses, ætren/ættern is used as a substantive for ‘something poisonous, venomous’, and renders vipera, ‘viper, serpent’. One of the texts that uses this substantive form is the above-mentioned prayer of John the Evangelist in the Durham Collectar (also known as the Ritual Book of Durham; Lindelöf 1927, 125).

For nipern as a corrupt form of OE neðre see Meroney (1945, 176).

This line remains obscure. Inspired by the preceding Old English prescription in Bald’s Leechbook, Meroney (1945, 177 n. 6) ventures these suggestions: ‘milk’ (ass) and ‘cow’ (bū).

For meðre as a corrupt form of OE neðre see Meroney (1945, 176).

Cf. OE ætren, ættern ‘poisonous, venomous, noxious; infected with contagion, purulent, festering’ (Dictionary of Old English; www.doe.utoronto.ca/). Jennifer Reid kindly pointed out to me that the writer could easily have changed ‘it’ to a ‘thorn’ based on a multilingual play with the word snake that seems to slither throughout the charm. In Northumbrian glosses, ætren/ættern is used as a substantive for ‘something poisonous, venomous’, and renders vipera, ‘viper, serpent’. One of the texts that uses this substantive form is the above-mentioned prayer of John the Evangelist in the Durham Collectar (also known as the Ritual Book of Durham; Lindelöf 1927, 125).

Meroney (1945, 177, and n. 2) points at an Old Irish gloss: ‘eder ab idra .i. aqua, Hesperic Latin from Greek ὤδρα’. For this gloss see O’Murchóy’s Glossary 373 (Stokes 1900a, 251), and cf. idor (=ūdōp), ‘water’, in the Hesperic Famina (Herren 1974, 82–3, 1. 259).

Meroney (1945, 177) suggests this; he also offers an alternative translation: ‘ad cert (from OIr. aithcuir- return?) dog or mare (cu no lari)’, as in returning spells for strayed or stolen animals. This is hardly likely in the overall context of the charm. For cert see ibid. n. 3.

This is based on Meroney’s (1945, 176) reading. Alternatively, based on Zimmer’s (1895, 145) emendation of ita to ica, the reading might be: ‘May my él heal you, [that] which Christ heals, may the él heal [that]’, although it should be noted that Christ is the object of the phrase in Zimmer’s view, as in ‘that which heals Christ’ (‘Möge dich heilen (ratica) mein (mo) zauberspruch (helæ), welcher
13 Put (or: I will put; tobaar) the ttera of urine (fuel) in (i [n]) a place (for cui read ait).\[^51\]

They have all become healthy.\[^52\]

[Or:] I placed/uttered [it] (tober)\[^53\] upon (ter = OIr. tar) his (a) wounds (fueli for fuili) so that (cui = OIr. co?) they have all become healthy.\[^54\]

It is good for every wound—and especially for deep ones (Pettit 2001, ii, 23, n. 29).

I suggest that the charm proper comprises lines 1 to 9 and that the ritual prescription starts with line 10. This line is highly obscure but if idar is indeed water, this substance may have been part of the original Irish ritual prescription (if included, this would be opposed to the Old English prescription in which butter should not be mixed with water).

Meroney’s first attempt to make sense of line 11 might imply that this water should be drunk as a healing method against the preceding list of afflictions. The healing qualities of the éle appear to be unambiguously expressed in line 12, with a mention of Christ as an additional source of healing. The first half of line 13 is, according to Zimmer, ritual prescription, but Meroney’s translation seems more probable, especially in the light of the Old English conclusion of the remedy. The line as a whole would be a comment on the efficacy of the remedy; such a witness of ‘evidence’ is also found as a final line in other Irish charms.\[^55\] This interpretation is further confirmed by the above-mentioned table of contents of Bald’s Leechbook, where the charm is said to have been tested (gecost; cf. Zimmer 1895, 145). Thus, line 13 and the last Old English sentence would express the idea that the éle is good for healing wounds.

Three variant versions of this Irish charm are found in the Old English Lacnunga, ‘Remedies’ (Pettit 2001, ii, 23). This famous manuscript—BL, Harley 585—from the late tenth to mid-eleventh century contains not only the Lorica of Laidcenn but also various Old Irish words and charms (Pettit 2001, i, pp.xxix–xxxii). Meroney (1945, 177) noted a possible occurrence of the term éle in one version, which is a second version of the Irish éle in Old English remedies to be discussed here.

heilt (icas) \(\chi r\), es heile der zauberspruch (hæle’). Zimmer puts the abbreviation stroke above both letters (chi and rho, transcribed by Zimmer as \(x\)) but it is only above the latter in the manuscript.

According to Stokes (Stokes & Strachan 1903, 501), tera fueli should be read: teora saile; hence ‘put thrice saliva in a place’; but this emendation goes rather far (cf. also E.J. Gwynn’s suggestions in Bonser 1926, 287–8).

This is based upon Zimmer (1895, 145): es wurden (robarer; read ro bátar) gesund [for plana read: slana] alle (uili). Zimmer refers to the structure of six Old Irish spells (all four of the Sankt Gallen spells and 1 and 3 from the Stowe Missal): a ritual prescription in Irish either in the indicative or the imperative follows the spell proper. He especially compares the present charm with Stowe Missal spell 3: taber do fual inaitoneit \(\gamma\) toslane roticca ic slane (Stokes & Strachan 1903, 250), ‘Put your urine in the place (i n-ai[t]) to neirt?) of your strength (?) and of your health. May the cure of health heal you.’ See also Borsje forthcoming 2013b.

Meroney (1945, 176, n. 3) sees tobaert as either the infinitive or the singular preterite of Old Irish do-beir; in the latter case he reads the verbal form as \(\tau-a-bært\) (OI pret. sg \(i\) with infixed pron. obj.).

This is based upon Meroney (1945, 176); for cuirobarer as a possible misreading of currobarer see ibid. n. 4. My tentative translation of the charm is deeply indebted to the work of Zimmer 1895 and Meroney 1945.

Just as the previous example, the charm is part of an elaborate Old English prescription for butter to be made into an efficacious salve through the singing of words of power together with other ingredients (Pettit 2001, i, 30–38). The milk of an unblemished cow of one colour56 should be churned into butter and a bowl of consecrated water should be put into the butter.57 The butter is to be stirred with a four-pronged stick inscribed with the names of the four evangelists while singing Psalm 118 thrice, Gloria in excelsis Deo, the Credo, litanies, Deus meus et Pater, In principio (John 1:1),58 ðæt wyrmgealdor, ’the worm charm’, and the Irish incantation. The Irish incantation should be sung nine times, to be followed by applying spittle to and blowing on the butter. Then a priest should consecrate a large variety of plants. Various Latin lorica-like prayers are to be sung over them in order to consecrate and exorcise the herbs. The plants are to be laid by the bowl.

The Irish incantation goes as follows:

Acrearcrearnemnonaærnembeođorærnenidren.narcuncunađeleharassanfidine
(Pettit 2001, i, 32, ll. 255–6).

1  The urging of a claim
2  Against gore
3  Against poison nona59
4  Against poison they struck (?)60
5  Against the poison of a snake
6a Against wounding with a nath ‘poem’ éle (cunad = cu nath: co ‘with’ + nath ‘piece of verse’)
[Or:] 6b. Against wounding with another poem
[Or:] 6c. Against wounding with the poem (nath) of a satire (ail)61
7  harassan fidine.62

According to Meroney (1945, 177), éle in this version of the charm is either éle, ’charm, prayer, incantation’, or Middle Irish ele, ’(an)other’. Meroney’s first suggestion (6a) contradicts all our other examples in which an éle is used to heal wounds instead of inflicting

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56 For the significance of colour in charms see Bonser 1925 and Storms 1948, 102–4.
57 I cannot deduce from Pettit’s translation and commentary whether this bowl should be emptied into the butter and thus refer to the mixing of the water with the butter or whether the bowl with water as a whole should be placed in the butter.
58 According to Grattan & Singer (1952, 125 n. 3), these passages are from the Canon of Mass, but Deus meus et pater is more likely to be identified as the apocryphal prayer of John against poison that became an official blessing in Church liturgy at first in Germany in the early thirteenth century and later elsewhere (Franz 1909, i, 294–334: 301).
59 Could this be related to Latin nona, ‘the ninth’ (from nona hora, ‘the ninth hour’, nona pars, the ninth part), which might be connected with the nine repetitions of the charm? Cf. also the importance of the ninth hour in the Passion tale in the Gospels (see below).
60 Meroney (1945, 177 and n. 5) sees a possible connection between nona and beodor, stemming from Irish benaid, ’strikes’. He bases this upon variant readings in other versions of the charm: nonabiad ær (Pettit 2001, i, 14, l. 86); nonabaithe (ibid., ii, 23). He compares the forms no-biad and ro-beótar. A version not known to Meroney reads: hercleno(n). Abaioth ... (ibid.).
61 Meroney (1945, 177) translates ’slaying with another piece of verse’.
62 Cf. ær . asan . bui heine in the version in Bald’s Leechbook. My tentative translation is based upon Meroney 1945.
them. Because there is no earlier reference to a *nath*, ‘poem’, his second suggestion (6b) is unsatisfactory. Hence, I suggest translation 6c, reading *ele* as the genitive singular of *ail*, ‘disgrace, reproach’, and the name of a type of satire.63 ‘Wounding by satire’ seems more probable, because blemishing a face is a well-known feared effect of satire.

The variant versions of this ‘clause’ read as follows:

arcuṇa hel, ‘against wounding [is] his *} (Bald’s Leechbook)
arcun cunad ele, ‘against wounding with the poem of a satire/reproach’ (Lacnunga)
arcum64 cunad, ‘against wounding with a poem’ (Lacnunga)
arcu(m) cunat, ‘against wounding with a poem’ (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 163)
ArcocugtiA (Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 379/599; Pettit 2001, ii, 23–4).

If my translation (6c) is correct, then the word *ele* is absent from this version of the charm. The charm claims to be of use against gore, poison, and wounds. The reference to ‘snake’ may have been reduplicated by using the term *nath*, which evokes the association with *nathir*, ‘snake’, referred to in the *ele* in Bald’s Leechbook and in Leabhar Breac. On a metaphorical level, satire may also be equated with venom, as mentioned above (footnote 22) in an instance of satire called *bricht nathrach Néde*, ‘the snake charm of Néde’.

The function and meaning of *ele*

The Old English manuscripts mention the Irish charm in connection with butter used in a salve. The medieval etymology of the term *ele* (with a short initial *e*) is very interesting in this respect:65

El i ab oleo. i. on im (Cormac’s Glossary 541, from YBL; Meyer 1912c, 45)
Eli from [Latin] oleum, ‘oil’, that is: from the [word for]66 butter.
Eli that is: elon, ‘oil’, in Greek; oleum, ‘oil’, in Latin.
Ele graeco elon olijum (= graece ἔλαιον oleum), ar is de dogníther (O’Mulconry’s Glossary 378; Stokes 1900a, 252)
Eli, in Greek elon [ἔλαιον], [in Latin] olijum [oleum], for it is from this that it is made.

What we see here is the attempt to etymologize *ele* from *oleum*. Irish *ele* or *eli* is connected with the similar sounding Greek *elon* and explained as Latin *oleum* or *olium*. Behind this

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63 This type of satire may take the form of a permanent nickname or a rhymed or unrhymed verbal reproach. The rhymed satire would be longer lasting (McLaughlin 2008, 65).
64 The reshaping of this word to make it look like Latin was suggested by Meroney (1945, 176), who gives further instances (ibid. n. 6).
65 I am grateful to Sharon Arbuthnot for her advice on the glossary items.
may be the idea to envisage Latin oleum as a combination of the Irish word for ‘oil’ ola(e) and the word for butter, im.67

Ele, or eli according to Cormac’s Glossary 541, thus is explained as ‘oil’, and we may compare ele, ‘oil’, in Old English and eli, ‘ointment, salve’, in Welsh.68 DIL s.v. ele suggests ‘salve (?)’ as a translation and we now know what kind of salve this is. Although the Church uses oil for exorcism and anointing the sick, the Hisperica Famina teaches us that Irish oil is butter (Herren 1974, 86–7, l. 299; cf. Kelly 1997, 323, 359 n. 283). I suggest that butter was made into a salve (ele, eli) by treating it with powerful words. We have an example in the first Sankt Gallen spell, which is applied against a thorn (Stokes & Strachan 1903, 248). The spell (epaid) not only consists of Irish words but also refers to the words that Christ spoke from the cross. These words of power are followed by a ritual prescription:

Focertar indepaidse inim nadtét inuisce 7 fuslegar de immandelg immecuáirt (Stokes & Strachan 1903, 248)

This spell (epaid) is put/cast in/on butter which goes not into water, and (some) of it is smeared all round the thorn.

Just as in Bald’s Leechbook, the butter should not be mixed with water and the words should be spoken over or into the butter. Alternatively, a piece of manuscript containing the words should be stuck into it.

We return to the éli Loga. Why did the scribe use this term? We have seen O’Rahilly’s view on rousing Cú Chulainn into battle as the function of the éle; her argument was founded upon a reconstruction of a hypothetical correct order of the text, based on C. This version does not use the term éle, however, and its order is not that straightforward either. Moreover, the examples of éle here discussed were used for healing. The variety of terms indicating the verbal actions of Lug may refer to a complex healing process, indicated by partly overlapping concepts.

Lug chants a male humming/intoning (ferdord; LU), or he murmurs or chants (fordord; C), or he mutters, murmurs or complains (fodord; O’Rahilly’s suggestion of the possible original reading). Joseph Nagy (1987b, 174–82) established that dord, ‘buzzing, humming, droning, intoning’, appears to be a male way of singing, which may be sleep-inducing.69 This background thus argues against emending LU’s reading. The reading of C and the emendation of O’Rahilly are in line with the commiserating or complaining (airchissecht, ar-ceissi) that Lug initially performed for Cú Chulainn. The Old Irish Penitential (Gwynn 1913a, 162–3, §3) considers murmuring (fodord) as a sin, but if it is done out of compassion for someone then it is meritorious. Muttering or mumuring may

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67 For theories on mythological and ritual significance of butter, especially in relation to imbolc see Bernhardt-House 2002.
68 According to Stokes (1900a, 296), Irish ele may be borrowed from Welsh eli.
69 The only example of female droning leads to disaster (Nagy 1987b, 176, 182); Bowen (1978) has pointed out that this ascription of dord to mermaids may be a later development. See also de Vries (2008). See further Dooley (2006, 134, 153), who translates ferdord as ‘a man’s song’ and ‘man-chant’, and her analysis (ibid. 153–4) of the male relationship of father and son in a warrior context, initiated by Lug addressing his son with ferda sin, ‘that is manly’.
refer to forms of enchantment, for murmuring was thought to befit a magician (Bremmer
2002, 65–6), and St Patrick bestows powerful murmuring (fodord) upon his host Dobtha
(Plummer 1922, i 25 §10; ii 23–4). Enchantment for healing is referred to by the slánsén
that Lug applies together with the herbs.

Perhaps Lug’s élí was part of the healing treatment, just as were the ferdord and the
slánsén.\footnote{Cf. also Dooley (2006, 129): ‘a martial poem ... which is simultaneously a healing lullaby and a
warrior incitement.’} Maybe he continually repeated these incantations, just as the healing spells
in the Old English medical manuscripts abound in repetitions and are prescribed to be
repeated, sometimes nine times. The content of the élí is martial; we may compare it with
the obscure incantation (cétal) that Lug chants while hopping on one leg with one eye
closed around the men of Ireland to strengthen them in The Battle of Mag Tuired (Gray
1982, 58–9, §129). Lug mutters his martial text to his sleeping son, perhaps over and over,
to heal him and make him fit again for his specific function: fighting for Ulster.\footnote{At an
earlier stage, O’Rahilly (1967, 312) also interpreted the scene as Lug singing his rhetoric
over his sleeping son.} Lug’s élí is thus not a general healing text but a special one, made for Cú Chulainn only, which
we can deduce from several lines: ‘Help from the sid will set you free’ refers to Lug’s
healing acts; ‘a single lad is on his guard’ would refer to Cú Chulainn usually fighting
on his own, and ‘Strike ... and I shall strike with you’ appears to be a promise by Lug for
the near future. One may have felt it necessary for a healing text for a warrior to have a
martial tone in order to arouse him into battle when healthy again.

If the function of an élé is to heal wounds, gore, poisoning, swellings and infections,
where does the word come from? According to Heinrich Zimmer (1895, 147–53), élé is a
loan from Old Norse, whereas Stokes (1897b, 72) suggests a Celtic origin. DIL suggests
that élé is possibly taken from Mt 27:46.\footnote{DIL refers also in comparison to Heliam,
Heliam, the word of power from Patrick’s Confessio. I discuss the complexity of this multi-layered
prayer in my monograph in progress on saints and spells.} This is part of the Aramaic cry of Jesus on
the cross, recorded in two gospels as: Élí élí (or: Elói elóí) lema (or: lama) sabachthani
(or: zaphthani; Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34; cf. Brown 1993, ii, 1051–3). These suggestions deserve
more research; not being a linguist, I limit myself to the last one.

‘Élí, Élí means ‘My God, my God’ in Hebrew and Aramaic. If this is where our term
élé/élí stems from, the next question is: why would a healing text be designated My God?
A clue is found in ritual prescriptions accompanying charms: the demand to pray a pater
noster is often part of the ritual. The first words of the Latin translation of the well-
known prayer of Jesus—pater noster, ‘our Father’—have become the designation for this
particular prayer. From this stems Irish paiter, paidir, which word is also used as a general
term for ‘prayer’. But what does this imply for ‘My God’?

Translating this to Latin, I realized we have such a prayer and we have come across it
in this paper. The apocryphal prayer of St John against poison starts with Deus meus
(et pater), ‘My God (and Father)’, in Latin and the version in the Liber Hymnorum ends with
the names of the four evangelists, just as the élé in Leabhar Breac.\footnote{Manuscripts
containing this text are the Book of Nunnaminster c. 800; the Book of Cerne, 9th cent.;
the above-mentioned Durham Collectar, 9th cent.; Bald’s Leechbook; the Lacnunga; Cod.
Vat. 852 Reg. Christinae, 10th cent.; and the Irish Liber Hymnorum, 11th cent. (Barb
1953, 9–12; see also Franz 1909, i, 294–334, and Pettit 2001, ii, 77–82).} The prayer lists names
of venomous animals in a lorica-like fashion. The accompanying tale relates how John is offered a cup of poison, which he makes harmless by gesturing the sign of the cross and speaking the prayer into the liquid. St John’s Deus meus-prayer or spell precedes the prescription for holy butter which contains the Irish spell called élé in Bald’s Leechbook and it appears to be one of the texts to be sung while the butter is stirred in the Lacnunga. The full text of this prayer follows soon, in either the same or the next prescription in the latter manuscript (Pettit 2001, i, 36–9; cf. ii, 61–2).

Deus meus, therefore, not only literally equals Hebrew/Aramaic 'Ēlî, ‘my God’, but it is also an élé: a powerful healing text against poison.⁷⁴ We understand now the reason for the frequent references to ‘snake’, the poisonous animal par excellence. Perhaps the scribe of LU gave the readers a hint to this multidimensional reference in spelling Éle Loga as Êli Loga.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Originally the Irish may have applied ‘Irish oil’ or butter to wounds and swellings, making this into a salve by pronouncing an epaid, the more common term for healing spells. Under the influence of gospel and apocryphal traditions, this specific kind of spell became termed élé. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out Éli, éli, lama sabachthani, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, at the ninth hour. Soon thereafter, he is offered vinegary wine and then he dies. In some apocryphal traditions, however, Jesus was offered neim, ‘poison’, when hanging on the cross.⁷⁶ Another relevant apocryphon in this context is John’s prayer against poison (Deus meus et pater).

Last but not least: what do these findings signify for the episode in TBC I? Symbolism from the Passion of Christ has apparently been applied to Cú Chulainn’s suffering. His supernatural father arrives and makes him sleep for three days and nights at a mound,⁷⁷ and he speaks words and applies herbs to make him arise from this pseudo-death. The scribe of LU emphasized this symbolism by characterizing Lug’s rhetoric as an éllí, thereby qualifying it as a healing spell and making it resonate once more with the Passion tale.

The Passion symbolism does not, however, totally overshadow the episode. The description of Lug’s healing seems to be embedded in Christian symbolism, but the description of Lug’s help in battle poses problems. Before the healing, Lug says that he will replace his son in the fight, but there is no description of him doing so.⁷⁸ Instead, we read

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⁷⁴ According to Carey (1988b, 129 n. 38), ro guidh Eli in the Second Latin Life of Patrick (Bieler 1971, 71.21) should perhaps be translated ‘he prayed an élé’, which may equally well mean: ‘he prayed a “My God”’, which in this case functions as an echo of Christ’s cry on the cross (cf. my monograph in progress on saints and spells).

⁷⁵ DIL s.v. ele suggests on the basis of the spelling eli in Cormac’s Glossary 541 that this term may be a misunderstanding of élé.

⁷⁶ This tradition is found, for instance, in Leabhar Breac (Hull 1928, 102–3).

⁷⁷ This fert is a grave mound, according to Dooley (2006, 130–3). See further her insightful analysis of this part of TBC I (ibid. 125–55); her conclusion on the Christian context of the title Êli Loga is similar to mine, but her road towards it is different. I am grateful to Kevin Murray, who sent me an article by N. Lawless (1908–11, 126), in which two identifications of the fert in Lerga are offered while he pleads for further study. This nineteenth-century plea is still valid, as was confirmed to me by Kay Muhr (e-mail message, 25/11/2009).

⁷⁸ For a different view see Gray (1989–90, 40, 50), Carey (1999a, 194) and Dooley (2006, 129).
of the Ulster boys fighting in Cú Chulainn’s place and falling in battle. This is also what the warrior from the sid reports to Cú Chulainn when he wakes up. Within the Éli Loga, Lug appears to promise to fight along with Cú Chulainn once he is healed (‘Strike ... and I shall strike with you’). When Cú Chulainn is fit to fight again, however, Lug refuses to join the fight alongside him, for all honour would go to his son (O’Rahilly 1976, 66, 185).

What has become the canonical tradition on Lug’s help may, however, not have been the only tradition. There was an alternative tradition in which Lug did fight on Cú Chulainn’s side, mentioned in Recension I in LU and C (O’Rahilly 1976, 70, 189) and copied into the margin of LL.

Could it be that Lug’s omission and refusal to fight was related to the symbolism of the Father God from Christianity? Was it deemed unsuitable to have a (God the) father on the battle field? Is that why the sons of Ulster were replacing the son and were sacrificed? If so, then once more the subtlety of medieval Irish literature is impressive, because Lug’s refusal to fight is based upon the importance of honour, a concept central to the heroic ethos of the Irish sagas that will also lead to the sacrifice of Cú Chulainn’s own son.