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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	<i>Canaid a chéle ferdord dó</i>	Then he chanted a low melody to him
C	<i>Canaithe a cheliu for[dor](d) ndo;</i>	
LU	<i>contuli friss</i>	which lulled him to sleep
C	<i>contaili fris co medon lai ara barach</i>	[which lulled him to sleep until midday the next day]
LU	<i>co n-accae nách crecht and ropo glan.</i>	until Lug saw that every wound he bore was quite healed.
C	<i>con faca nach [crecht] ron both pa hoghslan.</i>	
LU	<i>Is and asbert Lug</i>	Then Lug spoke
C	<i>Is ann ismbert Lugh (...)</i>	
LU	marginal note: <i>.r. Éli Loga inso síis</i>	The Incantation (<i>Éli</i>) of Lug
C	<i>[Is] ann asmbert ind ograich ins[o]</i>	[Then the warrior spoke]

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 O’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.

LU	<i>Atraí a meic mórUladh</i>	‘Arise, O son of mighty Ulster
C	<i>Atraie a meic morUladh</i>	
LU	<i>fót sláncrechtaib cuiretha</i>	now that your wounds are healed
C	<i>fot sláncrechtaí cuirethor</i>	
LU	<i>fri náimtiu fer melladarath</i>	
C	<i>fri naimde fer mellarath</i>	
LU	<i>móradaig todonathar</i>	
C	<i>moradigh dodanathor</i>	
LU	<i>dia ferragaib sligethar</i>	
C	<i>dia ferradaib sluigethor</i>	
LU	<i>slúaig immenard nerethar</i>	
C	<i>sluaigh imbe nard nérrador</i>	
LU	<i>fortacht a síd sóerfudut</i>	Help from the fairy mound will set you free
C	<i>fortacht a siodh saorfuidid</i>	
LU	<i>issin mruig ar conathaib</i>	
C	<i>isin mbrug ar conaitib</i>	
LU	<i>cot anmuim³ arfucherthar</i>	
C	<i>cot anmain arfuigertor</i>	
LU	<i>fóchiallathar óengillae</i>	A single lad is on his guard
C	<i>fociallathor aongilliu</i>	
LU	<i>arclith ar búaiab báifedae</i>	
C	<i>arclitha ar buaib bufettai</i>	
LU	<i>slig delb silsa riut.</i>	Strike and I shall strike with you.
C	<i>sligh delu silsai riut</i>	
LU	—	
C	<i>cot erccitt doib a ndiis</i>	
LU	—	
C	<i>imfe ... t cosair seisir</i>	
LU	<i>⁴Ni fil leó do nertsægul</i>	They have no strong length of life,
C	<i>ni fil leo don soeghul</i>	
LU	<i>fer do baraind bruthaigte</i>	so wreak your furious anger
C	<i>fer [do] baraind bruthnaicti</i>	
LU	<i>co niurt for do lochtnamtib</i>	mightily on your vile (?) enemies.
C	<i>co nirt ar do lochnaim[tib]</i>	
LU	<i>cingith carpat comglinni</i>	Mount your safe chariot,
C	<i>cingat carput comglinde</i>	
LU	<i>is iar sin atraí.</i>	so then arise’. (...)
C	<i>is iar sin atraie.</i>	

³ Best & Bergin (1929, 195, fn. 4) note that the facsimile reads: *anmuí* (with an *n*-stroke).

⁴ The rest of *éli Loga* in *LU* is written *in ras.* by scribe H. Ann Dooley (2006, 95) translates this passage: ‘They have no power over your life strength; let loose your boiling anger strongly on your flawed enemies; step into your strong chariot and after that rise up’. For an analysis see *ibid.*

LU	<i>atrai. a. m. (...)</i>	
C	<i>Atrae.</i> ⁵	
LU	<i>Is and sin fochedr in láech síde</i>	Then the warrior from the fairy mound put
C	<i>‘Is ann s[in] foqert in loech sídhiu</i>	
LU	<i>lossa 7 lubi íci 7 slánsén</i>	plants and healing herbs and a curing charm
C	<i>luibhiu ice 7 slaint(i)</i>	
LU	<i>i cneadaib 7 i créchtaib i n-aladaib</i>	in the wounds and cuts, in the gashes
C	<i>a cnethaib 7 a crechtu[ib] a n-alaiþ</i>	
LU	<i>7 i n-ilgonaib Con Culaind</i>	and many injuries of Cú Chulainn
C	<i>7 i n-iolgonaib Con Culaind</i>	
LU	<i>co ternó Cú Chulaind ina chotlud</i>	so that he recovered during his sleep
C	<i>co terno ina cotlud</i>	
LU	<i>cen ráthugud dó etir.</i> ⁷	without his perceiving it at all. ⁸
C	<i>cen rathugud ndo it[ir].</i> ⁹	

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 *éle*, translated ‘prayer, charm, incantation’ in the Dictionary of the Irish Language (henceforth *DIL*; see www.dil.ie).

What is an *éle*¹¹ 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 consecutively 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 meaning 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: *Atraí am(a)c mhoir alaidh fódoshlancrehtaibh cuirētha frinaimdiu fer mēll daráth mór adhaigh dotenathar dia.ferraghaibh sligh ethar fortacht sluaigh innen dia nerethar f(or)tacht asidh sár f(or)udud isin bhruigh arcona thaibh gotanmhain arfochertar fóchiallathar ænghilla arclith arbuaibh baifedhæ slighdelbh silsa reud. Ní ful léo donert shéghul fer dobharaind bhruithaighthe goniurt f(or)dho locht naimdibh cingidh carbad comhglind isíarsin nithatraí. atraí* (Nettlau 1894, 74, §123). For a translation of Recension III see Ó Béarra (1996).

⁶ The following lines precede the rhetoric in C.

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

⁸ O’Rahilly 1976, 183–4.

⁹ Ó Fiannachta 1966, 34, ll. 1203–5; 35, ll. 1218–37, 1215–18.

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 *éle*

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 *éle* 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 *éle* in *LU*. According to O'Rahilly (1976, xxi, 268), the scribe of *LU* put the *éli* in the wrong place; she would have preferred it if the *éli* 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 *éle*. O'Rahilly sees the function of the *éle* 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 *éli* 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.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 ‘*éli*’ 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.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 (*lossa síde 7 lubi ícci 7 slánsén*; O’Rahilly 1967, 58–60, 198–9, see esp. 59, ll. 2163–6).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 ícci 7 legis*) take care of the wounds with herbs, healing plants and a curing charm (*lubi 7 lossa ícci 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 *síde* 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 sídi 7 luibi ice 7 slainte*; O’Rahilly 1961, 70–1, ll. 2203–6).

Dáig ní ní aile ra chumgetar dóib ra hacbéile a cned 7 a créchta, a n-álta 7 a n-ilgona acht iptha 7 éle 7 arthana do chur riu do thairmesc a fola 7 a fulliugu¹⁵ 7 a ngae cró (O’Rahilly 1967, 87, ll. 3166–9).

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)¹⁶ (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 Cuimín 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 2324–40 (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 Brigitt bhennachtach | Crabadh búan nar’bó benta
 Longaire ocus mocheirge | Féile re feraibh ferta.
 [In margin:] alij legunt¹⁹ [é]ile, 7 féur a ferta.*

Blessed Brigit loved lasting devotion which was not prescribed,
 shepherding and early rising, hospitality to wonder-working men.
 [In margin:] Some read: chanting (*éile*) and the grass of her tomb (Stokes 1897b, 62–3, ll. 9–12).

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

¹⁵ O’Rahilly suggests reading *fuiligthe*.

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 fêr a ferta*’, where *éile* is supposed to rhyme with *-éirghe* (Stokes 1897b, 60).

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 *éli 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	† <i>Trééle</i> ²² [MS <i>Treuele</i>] <i>treibeoil</i> :	† A threefold charm (<i>éle</i>) from a threefold mouth:
2	<i>a neim hi naithir</i> ,	its poison in a snake,
3	<i>a chontan hi coin</i> ,	its rabies ²³ 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 *-uele* and *fhele* later in the text to reflect *éle*, ‘charm’, with *-u-* and *fh-* inserted to mark hiatus. I wonder whether *trééle* 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 nathrach Néde*, ‘the snake charm of Néde’, where snake may be a metaphor for the venomous power of the satire. 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 *glám díceann*) 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 *contan* ‘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’.

4	<i>a daig hi n-umæ.</i>	its flame in bronze. ²⁴
5	<i>Níp on [MS nífon] hi nduine.</i>	May it not be a blemish in a man. ²⁵
6	<i>Trëéle [MS Treuele] treibeoil:</i>	A threefold charm (<i>éle</i>) from a threefold mouth:
7	<i>fuil chon,</i>	blood of a hound,
8	<i>fuil hilchon,</i>	blood of many hounds,
9	<i>fuil fletha Flithais.</i>	blood of the feast of Flidais.
10	<i>Níp loch,</i>	May it not be a hole,
11	<i>níp c[h]ru,</i>	may it not be gore, ²⁶
12	<i>níp att,</i>	may it not be a swelling,
13	<i>níp aillsiu [MS nífallsiu]</i>	may it not be a sore,
14	<i>anni frisi-cuirther mo éle [MS mofhele].</i>	on which my charm (<i>éle</i>) is cast.
15	<i>Ad-muiniur teora ingena Flithais.</i>	I invoke the three daughters of Flidais.
16	<i>A naithir, hicc a n-att!</i>	Snake, heal the swelling!
17	<i>Benaím galar,</i>	I smite sickness,
18	<i>benaím crecht,</i>	I smite wounding,
19	<i>suidim att,</i>	I halt swelling,
20	<i>fris-benaím galar,</i>	I heal sickness.
21	<i>ar choin gaibes,</i>	Against ²⁷ the hound which seizes.
22	<i>ar dhelg goines,</i>	Against the thorn which pierces.
23	<i>ar iarn benas.</i>	Against the iron which strikes.
24	<i>Bendacht forin ngalur-sa,</i>	A blessing on this sickness,
25	<i>bennacht forin corp hi-ta,</i>	a blessing on the body in which it is,
26	<i>bennacht forin [n]héle-sea,</i>	a blessing on this <i>éle</i> (charm),
27	<i>bennacht for[in] cách rod-lá [MS rotla].</i>	a blessing on whoever casts it. ²⁸
28	<i>Matheus, Marcus, Lucas, Hiohannis,</i>	Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John;
29	<i>7 Pater prius 7 post</i> (Carey 2000b, 116; cf. Stokes 1883, 519; Meyer 1916, 420).	and an 'Our Father' before and after. ²⁹

²⁴ Because of the accusative case in *umæ*, Meyer (1916, 422) interprets this as 'its poison should return to the adder' etc. (Meyer translates *nathair* with *Natter*, 'adder').

²⁵ The translation 'human being' is also possible.

²⁶ Carey translates 'a wound'; I replace this by 'gore' in order to translate it the same way as *crú* in the Irish charm in the Old English remedy (see below). Cf. also the occurrence of the same term in 'their spears of gore' (*a ngae cró*) in the quotation from *TBC II* above.

²⁷ Carey translates 'from', but (with Meyer) I prefer to translate *ar* as 'against' in order to bring out the similarity with other Irish magical texts in the English translation. I read the lines as exorcistic, enumerative, verbal banishing of or battling with dangers.

²⁸ The manuscript reading means literally: 'a blessing on each person who may/has cast you/it'.

²⁹ The translation stems from the unpublished English version of Carey 2000b. The purpose of this paper is to find out more about the identity and function of words of power called *éle*; an extensive analysis of this text is beyond its scope.

Four times the text refers to itself as an *éle* (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).³⁰ 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 éle*. We see further parallelism in the aggressive formulations against the ailment:

LB:	Stowe Missal: ³¹
<i>Níp on hi nduine</i>	<i>níp hon</i>
<i>Níp loch</i>	<i>níp loch liach</i>
<i>níp c[h]ru,</i>	<i>níp crú cruach</i>
<i>níp att</i>	<i>níp att</i>
<i>níp aillsiu</i>	
	<i>níp anim</i>
	<i>níp galar</i>
<i>Benaím galar,</i>	<i>benith galar</i>
<i>benaím crecht,</i>	
<i>suidim att,</i>	<i>frisben att</i>
<i>fris-benaím galar.</i>	

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 *éle*, ‘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 battling 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

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. Macc saele án tofasci delc níp hon níp anim nípatt níp galar níp crú cruach níp loch liach níp [read: mo] aupaith líi 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:

<i>Obaid ar galar fiacail</i> (MS. fiaċ)	A spell against the teeth disease
<i>Adsuidiu mo cetar det deg i mc cind</i>	I bind my fourteen teeth in my head
<i>Ar toitem</i>	Against falling out
<i>Ar tilebrad ...</i>	Against ??? ...
	(Carney & Carney 1960, 152, no. X). ³³

The same use of *ar* is found in *loricae*, ‘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:

<i>Crist dom imdegail indiu</i>	May Christ protect me today
<i>ar neim,</i>	Against poison,
<i>ar loscud,</i>	Against burning,
<i>ar bádud,</i>	Against drowning,
<i>ar guin.</i>	Against wounding.
	(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: *Epaid coisce fola. Ar-gairim fuil tri grinni fir. Do-léicim [or: do-legaim] trácht, ar-gairim fuil, sruth ainces anfad dían 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 *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 *Zauberspruch*, 'spell, charm', is too strong a rendering of *éle*, on the basis of the reference to Christ in the text.

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).³⁶ 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:

Wiþ 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: . Acræ³⁷ . ærcræ³⁸ . ær nem . nadre . ærcuna hel . ær nem . ni þærn . ær . asan . bui þine . adrice . ær nem . meodre . ær nem . æþern . ær nem . allū³⁹ . honor . ucus . idar . ad cert . cunolari . raticamo . helæ . icas cristi ta (MS xpīta) . hæle . to bært . tera . fueli . cui . robater . plana . uili .
Þæt deah to ælcum 7 huru to deopum dolgum (Pettit 2001, ii, 22; cf. Cockayne 1961, 112–3).

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 (*acra(e)*)⁴⁰
- 2 against gore (*ar crú*),⁴¹
- 3 against the poison (*ar nem*) of a snake⁴²

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 7 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 *ærcræ*.

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 díuscoilt crú ceiti méim méinni*); Stowe Missal 2 (*nip crú cruach*; Stokes & Strachan 1903, 249, 250); the above-quoted *Leabhar Breac éle* (*nip crú*) and the above-quoted reference in *TBC II* to the healing of various wounds (*a ngae cró*). According to Meroney (1945, 179), *cron ær crio*, ‘prohibition against bleeding’ (another instance of Old Irish in Old English charms) corresponds with this *acræ ær cre*.

⁴² Meroney (1945, 176) points at the resemblance of *nadre* with OE *nædre*, ‘snake’, but compares it furthermore with *fo neim nathrach* (Meyer 1919a, 20 §40). *Nem nathrach*, ‘the poison of a snake/of

- 4 against wounding (*ar guin*)⁴³ [is] his *éle*
 5 against the poison of a snake⁴⁴
 6 *æ r . asan . bui þine . adcrice*⁴⁵
 7 against the poison of a snake⁴⁶
 8 against the poison of a snake (or: against venomous poison).⁴⁷
 9 against poison
 10 *allū . honor . and (ucus =ocus) water (idar)*⁴⁸
 11 *ad cert* with the drink (*cu n-ol*) against them (? *ari=airi*)⁴⁹
 12 May my *éle* heal you. [It is] Christ in whom is (*i ta*) healing.⁵⁰

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 *iā*-stem with an old nominative in *-ī*, which he bases upon *W. neidr* (<**natri*). Could the reading of the spell be based on an older form of *ar nem nathrach*?

⁴³ Meroney (1945, 176) restores '*arcuin*, answering to OIr. *orguin, orcuin* (Mlr. 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 bādud ar guin*), in *Sanctán's Hymn* (*ar guin, ar gūasacht, 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 imdeglae*) upon him (*ar guin, ar bāduth, ar thein[id], 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 *lúirech* (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).

⁴⁴ For *niþærn* as a corrupt form of OE *nædre* see Meroney (1945, 176).

⁴⁵ 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*).

⁴⁶ For *meodre* as a corrupt form of OE *nædre* see Meroney (1945, 176).

⁴⁷ Cf. OE *ættren, 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 'tt' to a 'thorn' based on a multilingual play with the word snake that seems to slither throughout the charm. In Northumbrian glosses, *ættren/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).

⁴⁸ Meroney (1945, 177, and n. 2) points at an Old Irish gloss: '*eder ab idra .i. aqua*, Hesperic Latin from Greek ὕδωρ'. For this gloss see *O'Mulconry's Glossary* 373 (Stokes 1900a, 251), and cf. *idor* (=ὑδωρ), 'water', in the *Hisperica Famina* (Herren 1974, 82–3, l. 259).

⁴⁹ Meroney (1945, 177) suggests this; he also offers an alternative translation: '*ad cert* (from OIr. *aith-cuir*- 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.

⁵⁰ 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 *éle* heal you, [that] which Christ heals, may the *éle* 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; *tobæx*) 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*] (*tobæxt*)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) *x̄r*, *es heile der zauberspruch* (hæle?). Zimmer puts the abbreviation stroke above both letters (chi and rho, transcribed by Zimmer as *xr*) but it is only above the latter in the manuscript.

⁵¹ 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).

⁵² This is based upon Zimmer (1895, 145): *es wurden* (*robater*; read *ro batar*) *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 inaitoneitt 7 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.

⁵³ Meroney (1945, 176, n. 3) sees *tobæxt* as either the infinitive or the singular preterite of Old Irish *do-beir*; in the latter case he reads the verbal form as *t-a-bæxt* (OI pret. sg 1 with infix pron. obj.).

⁵⁴ This is based upon Meroney (1945, 176); for *cuirobater* as a possible misreading of *currobater* see *ibid.* n. 4. My tentative translation of the charm is deeply indebted to the work of Zimmer 1895 and Meroney 1945.

⁵⁵ See charms I, II and VIII in the collection of Carney & Carney 1960.

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 *þæt wyrngæaldor*, ‘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:

Acre arce arnem nona ærnem beoðor ærnem. nidren. arcun cunað ele harassan fidine
(Pettit 2001, i, 32, ll. 255–6).

- 1 The urging of a claim
- 2 Against gore
- 3 Against poison *nona*⁵⁹
- 4 Against poison they struck (?)⁶⁰
- 5 Against the poison of a snake
- 6a Against wounding with a *nath* ‘poem’ *éle* (*cunað* = *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), *ele* 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

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 *beoðor*, stemming from Irish *benaid*, ‘strikes’. He bases this upon variant readings in other versions of the charm: *nonabiud ær* (Pettit 2001, i, 14, l. 86); *nonabaioth* (*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 þine* 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:

ærcuna hel, ‘against wounding [is] his *éle*’ (Bald’s *Leechbook*)
arcun cunad ele, ‘against wounding with the poem of a satire/reproach’ (*Lacnunga*)
*arcum*⁶⁴ *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 *éle* 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 *éle* 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 *briht nathrach Néde*, ‘the snake charm of Néde’.

The function and meaning of éle

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

Eli ab oleo .i. ðn im (*Cormac’s Glossary* 541, from YBL; Meyer 1912c, 45)
Eli from [Latin] *oleum*, ‘oil’, that is: from the [word for]⁶⁶ butter.
 Cf. *Olo* [= *ola*, ‘oil’] *ab oleo* (*Cormac’s Glossary* 1024 from YBL; Meyer 1912c, 88), ‘Oil’ from [Latin] *oleum* ‘oil’.
Ele .i. elon [ἔλαιον] *graece oleum Latine* (H.3.18, 81^b; Binchy 1978, ii, 630.24; cf. O’Donovan & Stokes 1868, 67).
Ele that is: *elon*, ‘oil’, in Greek; *oleum*, ‘oil’, in Latin.
Ele graeco elon olium (= *graece ἔλαιον oleum*), *ar is de dognither* (O’Mulconry’s Glossary 378; Stokes 1900a, 252)
Ele, in Greek *elon* [ἔλαιον], [in Latin] *olium* [*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

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.

⁶⁶ See Breatnach (1990).

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 murmuring may

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 *éli* was part of the healing treatment, just as were the *ferdord* and the *slánsén*.⁷⁰ 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 *éli* 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.⁷¹ Lug's *éli* 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 *síd* 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 *éle* is to heal wounds, gore, poisoning, swellings and infections, where does the word come from? According to Heinrich Zimmer (1895, 147–53), *éle* is a loan from Old Norse, whereas Stokes (1897b, 72) suggests a Celtic origin. *DIL* suggests that *éle* is possibly taken from Mt 27:46.⁷² This is part of the Aramaic cry of Jesus on the cross, recorded in two gospels as: *Ēli ēli* (or: *Elōi elōi*) *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.

'*Ēli*, '*Ēli* means 'My God, my God' in Hebrew and Aramaic. If this is where our term *éle/éli* 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 *paiteir*, *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 *éle* in *Leabhar Breac*.⁷³ The prayer lists names

⁷⁰ Cf. also Dooley (2006, 129): 'a martial poem ... which is simultaneously a healing lullaby and a warrior incitement.'

⁷¹ At an earlier stage, O'Rahilly (1967, 312) also interpreted the scene as Lug singing his rhetoric over his sleeping son.

⁷² *DIL* refers also in comparison to *Heliam*, *Heliām*, 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.

⁷³ 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).

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 *éle* 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 'Ēlī, 'my God', but it is also an *éle*: 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 *Éli 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 *éle*. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out *Eli, eli, 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 *éli*, 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

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 *éle*', 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 *éle*.

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 *Éli 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 *síd* 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.