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Note

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of three articles and one responding piece that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are "*The Comic Latin Grammar* in Victorian England" by Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne (pp. 2–31) and "Reading and (Re)Writing the *Auctores*: Poliziano and the Ancient Roman Miscellany" by Scott J. DiGiulio (pp. 33–58). The response piece is "Playfulness, Pedagogy, and Patrician Values" by Catherine Conybeare (pp. 81–87).

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The Hisperica Famina as an Ars Poetica
An Interpretation of the A-Text

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ABSTRACT

Hitherto the group of seventh-century texts and fragments known as *Hisperica famina* has defied interpretation. Following suggestions made by, amongst others, Andy Orchard, I propose to read the A-text as an ambitious piece of literature, in which linguistic competition, hilarious though it may be, is seen as a tool to cope with the anxieties of living in an inhospitable world. After offering a new perspective on the text's dialogic structure, suggesting that the main narrator is an Englishman recalling his student years in Ireland, I read the descriptions of sea and fire as metapoetical symbols and the final section on a cattle raid as an allegory. Subsequently, I pay attention to irony and self-mockery, to conclude that the text is not only about words and grammar but has literary, social, and existential value as well.

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1 The Origins of the *Hisperica Famina*

The *Hisperica famina*, a small corpus of Latin texts presumably written in the second half of the seventh century by scholars educated in Ireland, constitute one of the weirdest manifestations of Latinate culture that I know of. The corpus consists of four or five separate texts transmitted in different manuscripts dating from the ninth and tenth centuries. Divergent though they may be in form and scope, the similarity in subject matter, syntax and, particularly, vocabulary is sufficient to assume a common origin in Irish schools.[1] In this article, I will focus on

[1] Paul Grosjean, "Confusa caligo. Remarques sur les *Hisperica famina*," *Celtica* 3 (1956): 65-67; Michael Herren, ed. *The Hisperica Famina: I. The A-Text* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies,

the so-called A-text, usually considered the most coherent specimen of the Hisperic corpus.[2] It is my aim to demonstrate the text's literary, social, and perhaps even existential value.

Both Aldhelm (ca. 640–709), abbot of Malmesbury, and the Venerable Bede (ca. 672–735) refer to a trend among seventh-century English youngsters to spend a few years in Ireland in order to study liberal arts and theology.[3] When, sometime at the end of the seventh century, Aldhelm welcomes home his young friend Heahfrið, who had spent six years in Ireland, he expresses his irritation at Heahfrið's educational route with a parody of what he believes to be the Irish way of writing Latin. His letter opens with a preposterous broadside of alliterations in which Greek, or Greekish, words abound, dazzling the reader to the extent that one has to peruse the sentence for a few minutes at least in order to see Aldhelm is merely saying "praise the Lord."[4] While paying due respect to Irish scholarship, he emphasizes the recent flourishing of intellectual culture in England, suggesting that the verbal and dialectical prowess of Theodore and Hadrian equals or even outstrips the pedantry of Irish scholars.[5] In gently bullying Heahfrið, Aldhelm displays his own compositional virtuosity, thereby establishing an alliance between himself and the young man, warning him to be cautious in displaying the

1974), 38. The word *Hispericus* seems to be a misspelling of *Hespericus* (a word not extant in classical Latin), derived from *Hesperia* (Occident). Accordingly, "Hisperica famina" could be translated as "words from the West." When using the word themselves, the interlocutors may suggest that their way of speaking Latin is the only correct one, as Hesperia is an ancient name of Italy.

2 John Carey, "The Obscurantists and the Sea-Monster. Reflections on the *Hisperica Famina*," *Peritia* 17–18 (2003–2004): 42, gives an overview over the corpus, referring to Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 7–10. The B-text seems to be a variant of the A-text, in which particularly the final narrative is completely different; the D-text offers fragments of the so-called essays; the transmission of both B and D is lacunose; the C-text is only a glossary. In addition, some scholars include a fifth fragment (E) in the corpus.

3 Aldhelm, *Epistula* 5, in *Aldhelmi opera*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald (Berlin: Monumenta Germaniae Historica 15, 1919), 486-94. Beda Venerabilis, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 192 (ch. 3.25). More recently, Aldhelm's letter was edited and extensively commented upon by Scott Gwara, in "A Record of Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy: Aldhelm's *Epistola ad Heahfridum* and its Gloss," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 6 (1996): 84–134. Aldhelm's prose style is intricate and learned in itself, but the opening of the letter to Heahfrið is an extreme instance, which confirms its parodic nature.

4 "Primitus pantorum procerum praetorumque pio potissimum paternoque praesertim privilegio panagericum poemataque passim prosatori sub polo promulgantes stridula vocum simphonia et melodiae cantilenaeque carmine modulaturi ymnizemus…" Aldhelm, *Epistula* 5, 488; this is about one third of the first sentence. Gwara, "A Record," 122, suggests that the alliteration of the *p* may be a joke at the expense of the Irish, seeing that Old Irish lacks the phoneme /p/: "Words beginning in /p/ would have been garbled by an Irishman." As to the Greek vocabulary, Gwara believes Aldhelm's knowledge of that language to have been very restricted.

5 Theodore (602–690), from Tarsus, and Hadrian (ca. 635–710), from Northern Africa, both arrived in Canterbury in 668. Theodore became bishop, Hadrian abbot. Apart from being familiar with the Latin tradition, these scholars also knew Greek.

linguistic skills and theological views he acquired in Ireland. Anxious not to offend Heahfrið, however, he explicitly stresses the humorous intent of his words.[6]

Adducing Aldhelm's letter has become usage among scholars discussing the date and the provenance of the so-called *Hisperica famina*.[7] Apart from the evidence found in Aldhelm and Bede, several arguments have been brought in to prove the *Hisperica famina* must have an Irish background. Macalister considered their lingo one of the "secret languages of Ireland."[8] A seminal article by Grosjean pointed to paleographic errors typical of Irish scribes.[9] Smyth saw similarities in cosmography between the *Hisperica famina* and a few texts indubitably hailing from seventh-century Ireland.[10] Seeing that one *collecta* in the *Bangor Antiphonary* bears a resemblance to the B-text of the *Hisperica famina*, Stevenson suggested Bangor as a possible place of composition.[11] Of course, Michael Herren's monumental edition of the A-text should take away any hesitation in attributing this elusive poem, if it is a poem indeed, to scholars situated in or connected with an Hibernian milieu.[12] In what follows I will concentrate on the A-text (henceforth *HF*-A).

2 *HF*-A: Status and Synopsis

As becomes clear when comparing the four texts known as *Hisperica famina*, *HF*-A is only one version of what must have been a wildly protean work. Apparently, the 'faminators'[13] felt free to adapt existing material to specific purposes, depending on the demands of their audiences. Every version may have had its own specific communicative context, in which the readers or listeners experienced it as a more or less independent work, although it is difficult to say anything definitive about Hisperic literature in general, given the lacunose transmission of the texts.[14]

In oral literature, the simultaneous circulation of divergent versions of what we are accustomed to call a "work" is a perfectly normal situation, as may be

6 Aldhelm, *Epistula* 5, 493, lines 12–17.

7 Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 36, quotes part of Aldhelm's letter. Following suggestions by Stevenson, I restrict the denomination "Hisperic" to the corpus of texts known as *Hisperica famina* A-E.; Jane Stevenson, "Bangor and the *Hisperica Famina*," *Peritia* 6–7 (1987–88): 203–6.

8 Robert S. Macalister, *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (Cambridge: University Press, 1937), 62–89.

9 Grosjean, "Confusa caligo," 51–53.

10 Marina Smyth, *Understanding the Universe in Seventh-Century Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1996), passim.

11 Stevenson, "Bangor," 208–13. While her arguments to situate the narratives of *HF*-A and B in a coastal area of Ireland are convincing, the connection to Bangor is based on little textual evidence.

12 Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 39–45. In "Hisperic Latin: 'Luxuriant Culture-Fungus of Decay'," *Traditio* 30 (1974): 411–19, Herren offers additional arguments for situating Hisperic Latin in an Irish context, referring to local traditions of polemic exchanges of songs by *filid* (416–17).

13 This word is a modern coinage often used to refer to the authors, scholars, or scribes who created the corpus.

14 Herren, "Hisperic Latin," 419: "The *Famina* themselves do not seem to be finished examples of this *genre*, but rather experimental models."

illustrated by numerous Homeric hexameters transmitted through quotations and on scraps of papyrus that have not been incorporated in the canonical texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.[15] Across the Greek world, every rhapsode, schoolmaster, or scholar cherished his own version of Homer. The *Iliad* we read in our modern editions may be a superb redaction prepared by Hellenistic scholars, but it would be inaccurate to see it exclusively as the real thing and discard the other versions as spurious. The same holds for many medieval literary texts, which often give the impression of having gone through the hands of numerous scribes, who deliberately made alterations at their own discretion, presumably thinking they improved the available material. Wikipedia operates in a similar way.

Accordingly, we cannot consider *HF*-A the most "complete" version of the *Hisperica famina*, since any version might have boasted a particular completeness in its own context. However, *HF*-A is transmitted in a form that appears to have been considered complete by the scribes, given the *explicit* "HISPERICA FINIUNT FAMINA AMHN";[16] moreover, the Vatican manuscript "gives a clear, very readable text, with but a few corrections."[17] Complete or not, *HF*-A presents itself as a more or less coherent text. Assuming that its first audiences experienced it as a thematically connected series of episodes or essays, we may at least try to interpret it as a unity, and see what happens.

Before discussing crucial passages in detail, it may be helpful to offer a succinct synopsis of *HF*-A.[18] The general make-up is clear. In the opening passage, we hear an expert in Hisperic Latin calling attention to the arrival of a group of new students. Subsequently (from line 20), he engages in a comic debate with at least one of the newcomers, who is satirically derided as a boorish nitwit (1–115). We may have trouble to determine exactly which lines are spoken by whom, but it seems plausible to suppose an exchange of speeches at least in the lines 87–115, while 53–60 must be a response to the first speaker. The next passage (116–32), captioned in the manuscript as "the twelve offences against Ausonian diction," may be the final part of the debate.[19] An extensive narrative follows in which the daily occupations of the students are described, embedded in an evocation of the cyclic rhythms of nature and agriculture (133–357). Lively dialogue is an important aspect of this passage.

While the first half of *HF*-A is concerned with the dealings of the scholarly community, the second half consists of seemingly loosely connected pieces

[15] The Center for Hellenic Studies of Harvard University hosts a website supervised by Gregory Nagy, titled *The Homer Multitext* (www.homermultitext.org), which intends to make available the entire textual tradition.

[16] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 112.

[17] Ibid., 11.

[18] I use and cite Herren's text, leaving out his capitals and typographical markers of textual problems, while adding capitals to geographical adjectives like "Hispericus" and "Ausonicus." Elucidation of lexical and morphological particularities may be found in his commentary and appendices.

[19] *Ausonicus* (i.e. Italian) appears to be a synonym of *Hispericus*.

demonstrating the art of description, called "essays" in modern scholarship.[20] Nine chapters are devoted to heaven, sea, fire, the fields, wind, the equipment of the students, a bookcase, a writing tablet, and a chapel (358–560), while the tenth section is a short prayer (561–70). *HF*-A is concluded by a story with the truly Irish theme of a cattle raid (571–612).[21]

Over the last sixty years, some interesting interpretations of *HF*-A have been propounded. Despite many disagreements on details of style and narrative structure, there seems to have grown a consensus as to the communities in which the *Hisperica famina* must have circulated. Most scholars believe the texts to be products of insular schools, either written by teachers or by students.[22] This is obvious by the content of *HF*-A, half of which concerns the pedantic debates and logistical worries of a band of scholars or students somewhere in a coastal region of Ireland. The lexical inaccessibility of the *Hisperica famina* precludes their dissemination among non-initiates.

3 Literary Value

Scholarship has been reluctant in attributing literary value to *HF*-A, chiefly because of its scholastic character. To be sure, there are good reasons to assume *HF*-A was conceived as a textbook to instruct beginners in esoteric Latin, and particularly in outlandish vocabulary, given the propensity to simple syntax.[23] In numerous instances, one piece of content is successively expressed in different ways, apparently to show off a virtuosity in finding or coining synonyms (in rhetoric known as *copia verborum*).[24] In addition, the supposed lack of meaningful

[20] In the rhetorical treatises of (Late) Antiquity students are instructed in the art of description, traditionally called *ecphrasis*. Gabriele Knappe, "On Rhetoric and Grammar in the *Hisperica famina*," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 4 (1994): 145–53, believing *HF*-A to be school text about rhetoric, argues that the essays may have been a series of exercises in ecphrasis modelled on Priscianus' *Praeexercitamina*. Although Knappe's attempt to connect *HF*-A with Priscianus in particular is not convincing, the descriptive nature of the essays is obvious and may well have its origins in the tradition of rhetorical schools. In responding to Knappe's proposals, Giuseppe Pipitone, "Costruzione retorica e 'intratestuale' degli *Hisperica Famina*," *Latomus* 76 (2017): 199, mistakenly has her comparing the essays in *HF*-A with instructions given by Donatus.

[21] Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 41–55, on the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.

[22] Discussion in Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 6–7, 39–44.

[23] Grosjean, "Confusa caligo," 55, thinks *HF*-A comprises "des modèles à graver dans la mémoire, des manuels scolaires." Phillip W. Damon, "The Meaning of the *Hisperica Famina*," *American Journal of Philology* 74, no. 4 (1953): 398–406, sees connections with the *suasoriae* of Roman schools. Michael Winterbottom, "On the *Hisperica Famina*," *Celtica* 8 (1967): 127–39, also situates *HF*-A in an educational context. Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 13–19, after having discussed earlier views, cautiously concludes that much is "still unexplained." See also Knappe, mentioned above (note 20). Carey, "Obscurantists," 43–44, argues that the authors must have been teachers.

[24] Stevenson, "Bangor," 205–6, offers an extreme view: "within the category 'an item of clothing', almost any word is equivalent to any other word, and the same garment may be referred to by any of them. [...] not only registers such as poetic, archaic or whatever but also any kind of fine distinction are all

information found in the so-called essays (*HF*-A 358–612) is adduced as indication of the faminators' limited ambitions.[25] Moreover, the impossibility to categorize *HF*-A as belonging to a particular literary genre should testify to the authors' big-hearted inclination to inclusiveness: by putting into practice a host of different genres, ranging from dialogue and epic narrative to satire and ecphrasis, they provide their students with multiple types of models, irrespective of their compatibility.[26] In sum, most scholars tend to emphasize the poor quality of *HF*-A as literature, no matter whether it be poetry or prose.[27]

Let us attempt to refute these arguments. First, the presumed educational purpose of the text does not *eo ipso* prove the faminators waived all literary pretentions. Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*,[28] Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis*, and Fulgentius's *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae* are examples of sophisticated creative writing, notwithstanding their instructional aims.[29] Second, the far-fetched nature of Hisperic vocabulary as well as its tendency to repetitiveness, synonymy, and semantic overabundance are features shared by texts as divergent as Homer's epics, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, and, again, Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis*, although we must concede that *HF*-A is an extreme case. Third, *Kreuzung der Gattungen* is highly appreciated in experimental literature. The combination of narrative with didactic, so typical of *HF*-A, is found in Vergil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, while the *Pentateuch* and Boethius's *Consolation* virtually cover the entire gamut of literary genres, from laudatory lyric to philosophical instruction. Fourth, most scholars do not even try to interpret the essays as literary creations. Marina Smyth, for one, used them in her survey of Irish cosmology in the seventh century, only to conclude that the faminators had little scientific competence,[30] which may be true —but it sounds like blaming James Joyce for his muddled account of Dublin infrastructure. Finally, literary value depends on taste and may change over the centuries. Eighteenth-century continental classicists despised Shakespeare for his negligence in observing the Aristotelian rules of unity. Today, no sane critic would deny *Hamlet* its classical status. It is not my intention, of course, to claim that *HF*-A should be rated among the Great Books, but I truly believe it will be worthwhile to take it seriously as a piece of creative writing.

cast aside. It could almost be described as an anti-poetic technique." On *copia verborum* see e.g. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.15.

[25] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 13–14.

[26] Ibid., 11–13.

[27] Grosjean, "*Confusa caligo*," 57–58; Stevenson, "Bangor," 202, 205–6. And see Herren, "Hisperic Latin," 411, referring to Eóin MacNeill.

[28] Gerbrandy, Piet. "Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* as a Literary Work." *Hermes* 148, no. 1 (2020): 38–52.

[29] Needless to say, I do not claim that the faminators knew these texts. The similarity is a typological one.

[30] Smyth, *Understanding the Universe*, passim.

The first to endeavour a serious interpretation of *HF*-A as a literary text was Andy Orchard in an important article in *The Journal of Medieval Latin*.[31] Orchard calls attention to the central metaphor of scholarship as warfare, to a pair of Homeric similes possibly deriving from Vergil's *Aeneid*, and to the careful evocation of daybreak and nightfall. He convincingly demonstrates the verbal echoes structuring the order of the essays, suggesting, for instance, the close coherence of the four parts successively dedicated to heaven ("De caelo," 358–80), sea ("De mari," 381–425), fire ("De igne," 426–51), and earth (452–76), seen as representing the four elements.[32] Given the fluidity of the Hisperic tradition it is tricky to attribute too much significance to the structure of this particular text, which may well be due to an aleatory process of composition, but Orchard is certainly right in trying to extract as much meaning as possible from the impalpable material.

I partly disagree with Orchard's view of the text's structure. Taking the subheadings in the manuscript as point of departure, Orchard sets apart the opening dialogue followed by the exposition on the twelve offences against grammar (1–132), and considers the remaining part (133–612) a collection of twelve essays, the first and final of which are narratives. An additional argument for this arrangement seems to be the text's predilection for the number twelve, which certainly does turn up in several lines.[33] It seems quite arbitrary, however, to exclude the paragraph on stylistic errors (116–32) from the series of essays, since it too is preceded by a heading in the manuscript. Moreover, the narrative nature of the concluding section (571–612), which may be interpreted allegorically (as I hope to demonstrate), makes it a perfect counterpart to the opening half of *HF*-A (1–357), while a prayer (561–70) would be a suitable copestone to the succession of essays. In Table 1, I offer my view of the text's structure (see p. 76).

Orchard's largely successful approach has been followed by later scholars. John Carey,[34] focussing on the (completely different) final narratives of both *HF*-A and the B-text, pays attention to parallels with Vergil's *Aeneid* and Caelius Sedulius's *Carmen Paschale*,[35] as well as with similar tales in classical, biblical, and Old Irish literature. Danuta Shanzer, evaluating earlier scholarship, thinks it hard to indicate direct connections with specific classical authors, but certainly agrees that particularly *HF*-A shows the faminators' familiarity with topoi well-known from

[31] Andy Orchard, "The *Hisperica famina* as Literature," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 10 (2001): 1–45. Orchard could refer to few earlier initiatives in literary approaches, e.g. Michael Herren, "The Sighting of the Host in *Táin Bo Fraích* and the *Hisperica Famina*," *Peritia* 5 (1986): 397–99, mentioned by Orchard on page 2, note 9.

[32] Orchard, "*Hisperica famina*," 13–20. In the manuscript, the essay on the earth lacks a subheading.

[33] Ibid., 12, 39–42.

[34] Carey, "Obsurantists."

[35] The case for Sedulius was already made by Neil Wright, "The *Hisperica Famina* and Caelius Sedulius," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (Winter 1982): 61–76.

different literary and rhetorical traditions.[36] Sarah Corrigan follows Orchard's suggestion to search for connections with insular *enigmata*, stating that in order to solve the riddles it is necessary to know which sources the faminators had in mind.[37] Unfortunately, the parallels with Pliny the Elder she adduces are far from compelling. Finally, Giuseppe Pipitone, after having summarized Orchard's article extensively, rightly points to the fact that *HF*-A's enigmatic aspects could be compared with similar trends in poems by Optatianus and Ennodius, as well as the prologue to the *Anthologia Latina*.[38] However, as Pipitone agrees, it is impossible to prove that these texts where known in seventh-century Ireland and England.

In my contribution to the ongoing debate, I will first concentrate on some aspects of the dialogues, next explore the possibility to interpret the description of natural phenomena as metapoetical symbols and then propose to read the concluding passage as an allegory. Finally, I will probe into the text's humour and irony. My analysis may shed light on the literary status, the seriousness, and the social functions of the *Hisperica famina*.

4 Dialogue and Polyphony

The dialogical nature of the first half of *HF*-A has always been evident, but to distinguish the individual interlocutors is difficult.[39] Even so, we should attempt to assess the effects of the polyphonic structure.

In the first place, while the geographical setting must be Irish and marine,[40] the narrator does not speak Irish and, consequently, cannot be an Irishman.[41] For instance, he asks his companions to address the locals, since "Ausonica me subligat catena, ob hoc Scottigenum haud cripitundo eulogium" ("the Ausonian chain [i.e. Latin] binds me, therefore I do not thunder Irish eloquence" 273–4);[42] and he talks about the "condiment of Irish oil" (*Scottigeni conditura olei* 299), an

[36] Danuta Shanzer, "Hisperic Faminations," in *Through a Classical Eye. Transcultural and Transhistorical Visions in Medieval English, Italian, and Latin Literature in Honour of Winthrop Wetherbee*, ed. Andrew Galloway and R.F. Yeager (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press 2009), 48–50.

[37] Sarah Corrigan, "Hisperic Enigma Machine: Sea Creatures and Sources in the *Hisperica Famina*," *Peritia* 24–25 (2013–2014): 59–73.

[38] Pipitone, "Costruzione retorica," 185–202.

[39] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 12–13, discussing interpretations by Jenkinson, Damon, and Winterbottom. Francis J.H. Jenkinson, ed. *The Hisperica Famina* (Cambridge: University Press, 1908); Damon, "The Meaning"; Winterbottom, "*Hisperica Famina.*"

[40] Orchard, "*Hisperica famina*," 4–6. *HF*-A 294 (salt water), 381–425 (intimate knowledge of the sea); see Stevenson, "Bangor," 212–13, and Smyth, *Understanding the Universe*, 252–65.

[41] By "narrator" I do not mean the author but, following narratological usage, the main "voice" relating the story; in its turn, the main narrator may adopt different voices in order to present the story from different perspectives. In my view, the main narrator coincides with one of the text's speakers, *in casu* one of the newcomers from England. Accordingly, he is a character in his own story.

[42] Winterbottom, "*Hisperica Famina*," 129, referring to the so-called "Colloquia Hisperica" (ca. 1000), suggests to connect the "ban on speaking anything other than Latin" featuring in one of the colloquies to the *Ausonica catena* in *HF*-A 58 and 273. However, this obligation must be meant to function within the community of students, not when dealing with their non-academic neighbours.

expression someone living in Ireland would not use. Probably, he comes from England, like Aldhelm's friend Heahfrið. Since, on the other hand, the first speaker addresses the bunch of tyros as an authority on Hisperic Latin (1–52), this man must be an Irish scholar. Challenged by this *miles gloriosus*, one of the newcomers gives a rather modest retort (52–60) which, nevertheless, already shows advanced skills in Hisperic stylistics, as he uses three Greek words (*cyclo* 52, *scemico*, *logum* 55), two morphologically different versions of the Latin word for "temporal" (*temporei* 52, *temporalis* 57), and two synonyms for this particular brand of Latin (*Hispericum* 54, *Ausonica* 58). He also masters Hisperic word order, which places adjectives at the beginning of a sentence, verbs in the middle, and nouns at the ending. And he flaunts Hisperic's penchant for lexical variation in semantically similar phrases: "sonoreus faminis per guttura popularet haustus" ("a draught of sonorous wording from my throat would be devastating [you]" 59)[43] is more or less repeated in: "inmensus urbani tenoris manasset faucibus tollus" ("an enormous torrent of urban style would have flown from my gullet" 60). In other words, the newcomer knows how to play the game, so the tone of his utterance must be ironic. And if he does not take himself seriously, how could he be impressed by his blustering senior? Indubitably, the non-Irish narrator, who may be identical to the newcomer, has a playful outlook on Hisperic life and conversation, which certainly implies a large measure of self-mockery.

This is not to deny the dialogue its competitive quality. Two types of models, or rather parallels, spring to mind. The first is Vergil's pastoral poetry, in which shepherds vie with each other in erotic as well as poetic competence. In *Eclogue* 7, to give only one example, the (apparently Mantua-based) Arcadians Corydon and Thyrsis alternately sing verses of each four lines, not only to recommend their own dwellings as fit for making love but to rival in descriptional inventiveness.[44] Unfortunately, it is doubtful if Vergil's bucolics featured in seventh-century school curricula in Ireland and England.[45]

A more obvious parallel is found in the vernacular literature of Ireland, where vehement exchanges in verbal virtuosity between heroes or heroines is far from unusual. What makes this a plausible model is the prowess displayed by the speakers in devising or reproducing successions of far-fetched metaphors, similar to the

[43] Here, I take *populare* to have its classical meaning of "devastate"; Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 129, believes it is derived from *populus* and *pullulare*, and gives as translation "to populate" or "to produce, germinate," which works well in line 301.

[44] Vergil, *Ecloga* 7.21-68.

[45] Orchard, "*Hisperica famina*," 3-4, 34-35, has little doubt the authors of *HF*-A knew (at least part of) the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*. Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 24-26, thinks they had some knowledge of the *Eclogues* as well; in "Hisperic Latin," 417, Herren suggests that at least part of *HF*-A 87-115 could be seen as amoebaean. On Irish learning in general see Michael Herren, "Classical and Secular Learning among the Irish before the Carolingian Renaissance," *Florilegium* 3 (1981): 118-57; on the English connection: Rosalind Love, "Insular Latin Literature to 900," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), 120-57.

kennings known from the Old-Norse *Edda*.[46] A beautiful instance is the sequence of near-poetic speeches made by the three ladies from Ulster in *Fled Bricrend* ("Bricriu's Feast"), a stunning tale of heroic rivalry probably dating from the eighth century.[47] In heavily alliterating lines, Fedelm, Lendabair, and Emer not only boast of their royal kin and dazzling beauty, but in particular extol the martial skills of their husbands. While Lendabair takes nine lines to commend Conall, Emer's praise of Cuchulainn is a masterpiece of self-indulgent oratorical power thrice as long as Lendabair's, culminating in a riddle-like enumeration of the hero's feats. To quote only a couple of lines, in Henderson's translation:[48]

> Springing in air like a salmon when he springeth the spring of the heroes,
> Rarest of feats he performeth, the leap that is birdlike he leapeth,
> Bounding o'er pools of water, he performeth the feat cless nonbair;[49]
> Battles of bloody battallions, the world's proud armies he heweth,
> Beating down kings in their fury, mowing the hosts of the foemen.

Similarly, in *HF*-A the bantering dialogue between the first speaker and the newcomer reaches its climax in a succession of six speeches replete with robust imagery, including the exposition on the twelve offenses against correct diction (87–132). In my view, the structure of this passage is amoebaean. Although we do not have an external clue as to which lines are spoken by whom, it seems clear that two scholars try to outdo each other. I would structure the dialogue as follows (see also Table 1, p. 76):

(I) The first speaker, having branded his junior a cuckolded bumpkin (67–86), bursts out in a Homeric simile comparing his verbal energy to a devastating torrent (87–92). (II) The newcomer responds with an equally violent comparison which represents his eloquence as a blaze sweeping away his puny opponents (93–97). (III) The senior scholar, now, in a simile introduced by the same conjunctive particle as was the first one (*ceu* 87, 98), compares his elocutionary powers to the lethal aggression of a serpent specialised in killing cattle (98–102). (IV) Next, his adversary, changing his tack, comes up with a series of *adynata* meant to stress the absurdity of the first speaker's claims (103–9): that he would have the resources "to pour forth an Hisperic flood from his eager gullet" is supposed to be

[46] Andy Orchard, ed. *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore* (London etc.: Penguin, 2011), xxxii–xxxiii. As noted above, several scholars associate the Hisperic texts with Latin or Anglo-Saxon enigma-literature (e.g. Orchard, "*Hisperica famina*," 12–13, and Corrigan, "Hisperic Enigma Machine").

[47] George Henderson, ed. *Fled Bricrend. The Feast of Bricriu* (London: David Nut, 1899), 22–29. The speeches cannot properly be termed poetry, since a regular metrical pattern is lacking, but in form they are clearly distinct from the narrative parts of the story. The characteristics are: alliteration, "short jerky sentences," and "a certain laconic and somewhat oracular diction" (157). These characteristics are typical of *Hisperica famina* as well. Henderson's rendition, though, is not as jerky as he claims the Irish text to be.

[48] The passage may be compared to *HF*-A 23–36.

[49] Henderson, *Fled Bricrend*, 29: "feat of nine."

as unlikely as touching the stars, counting all the grains of sand, and living on the bottom of the ocean. (V) This statement is countered by a set of four analogies illustrating the vast gap separating the talents of the two rivals (110–15): the senior scholar simply eclipses his opponent as the sun wipes out the stars and the racket of soldiers in battle obscures the buzz of honeybees.[50] (VI) The next section, notorious for its complexity, has usually been interpreted as an enumeration of grammatical blunders (116–32). Maybe the scribe is right in separating these lines from the preceding combat, but the tone still sounds derogatory, while four snake metaphors emphasize the fatal effects of bad Latin (*uipereo* 119, *toxico* 124, *uenenoso* 126, *reguloso* 128).[51] I will return to this passage later.

Although the next section (133–357), subheaded *incipit lex diei* in the manuscript, includes many amusing pieces of dialogue, the atmosphere is different from the first part. If lines 1–132 are spoken by two interlocutors, in *lex diei* a third voice is introduced. Since this epic (or should we say "bucolic," or even "georgic"?) narrator is not an Irishman, he may well be identical to the junior student of the first section. It is evident that the report of the students' daily occupations participates in different generic conventions. Most conspicuous are the extensive descriptions of sunrise (133–45) and the awakening of birds, cattle, sheep, swine, horses, dolphins, and farmers (146–89).[52] It is hard to prove the faminators knew more than a few lines of Vergil culled from grammatical treatises, but it is tempting to see this part of *HF*-A as an imitation of similar passages in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*.[53]

Anyway, the polyphonous nature of our text is clear. Satirical dialogue, evocation of the countryside, and narrative of the scholars' foraging make way for a series of essays in, again, different voices. This alternation of generic affiliations reminds one of multi-voiced compositions like the Bible-book *Numeri*, Roman satire, Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis*, and, of course, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.[54] A literary work does not have to be generically homogeneous in order to make up a convincing whole. Polyphony and heterogeneity may, on the contrary, testify to the authors' versatility, encyclopedically demonstrating their prowess in representing as many facets of the world as possible.

[50] The bee is frequently used in poetical contexts, e.g. Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 10.53–54, Horace, *Carmen* 4.2.27–31. In *HF*-A the humble insects turn up in lines 41–43 and 112–113, in both cases as an image for the recently arrived students.

[51] *Reguloso*: presumably to be interpreted as a translation from Greek βασιλίσκος, "the royal viper"; Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 133.

[52] The passage is mirrored by a (much shorter) description of nightfall (303–18). See Orchard, "*Hisperica famina*," 10–12.

[53] Herren, "The Sighting of the Host," 397–99, also compares *HF*-A 1–6 and 44–48 to similar scenes in the Irish story, suggesting the faminators consciously parodied literary texts.

[54] Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is mentioned by Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 5, referring to remarks made by E.K. Rand.

5 Metapoetical Symbols and Allegories

The essay on the sea (381–425) covers many well-known aspects of the marine element, ranging from its cosmological position to storm and shipwreck and from the workings of the tide to the life of fish and dolphins, possibly also referring to salt production.[55] Notwithstanding the concrete and tangible nature of the description, the opening lines (381–89) strongly suggest a metapoetical import as well:

de hoc amplo Anfitridis licumine
loquelosum cudere nitor tornum.
hoc spumans mundanas obuallat pelagus oras,
terrestres anniosis fluctibus cudit margines,
saxeas undosis molibus irruit aulonas,
infimas bomboso uortice miscet glarias,
astrifero spargit spumas sulco.
sonoreis frequenter quatitur flabris
ac garrula fatigat notus flustra.[56]

While in the first Homeric simile Hisperic eloquence was compared to a violent torrent (87–92), the sea may carry programmatic meaning too. Both passages emphasize the water's noisy power, both mention the whirling of pebbles (*uortice glarias* 91, 386). Liquidity and loquacity are linked by alliteration (381–82). The forging (*cudere* 382) of a wheel of words is analogous to the ocean's beating (*cudit* 384) of the beaches, while this circular object (*tornum* 382) corresponds to the encircling movement (*obuallat* 383) of the sea.[57] The verb *spargit* (387) recalls the nouns *sparsio* (37) and *sparginem* (40), both denotating a spraying of words. Finally, the waves are *garrula* (389), an adjective frequently attached to streams in classical poetry, which draws attention to the water's speechlike quality.[58] The sea being a mighty natural force enclosing the domain of civilisation, speech may wield enormous power as well, encompassing the entirety of human strivings. At the same time language may be as unwieldy as the ocean. This is, in my view, a central topic in *Hisperica famina* at large.[59]

[55] Salt production may be referred to in 399-402 and 422; Smyth, *Understanding the Universe*, 252–65.

[56] "Concerning the vast liquid of Amphitrite, I strive to hammer a loquacious wheel. This spuming ocean surrounds the world's shores, with aged billows it hammers the terrestrial margins, with watery masses it assails the rocky hollows, with thundering eddies it churns the deepest pebbles, it sprays its foam up to the starry furrow. Often it is beaten by sonorous gusts and the southern wind wears out the garrulous waves."

[57] *Anniosis*, derived from *annus* and translated as "aged" by Herren, may hint to *anulus*, "ring."

[58] E.g. Ovid, *Fasti* 2.316; Calpurnius Siculus, *Ecloga* 4.2.

[59] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, 41–42, quoting Macalister, refers to an eighth-century text in Irish that distinguishes classes of scholars according to the sweeping quality of their eloquence: one type is named *ansruth* (big river), another *sruth do aill* (mountain torrent). In classical Latin, Horace's poem on Pindar (*Carmen* 4.2), whose poetry descends like a torrent, is an obvious parallel; and see Quintilian's

Similar arguments can be used to make plausible the metapoetical meaning of fire, first by juxtaposing the second Homeric simile to the essay on the subject. This is the simile (93–97):

> ueluti rosea aestiui laris ueternas cremat pira rubigine amurcas,
> ac aruca fauellosis minorat robora tumulis,
> ciboneus torridum spirat clibanus ructum,
> fragosas flectit per laquearia flammas,
> aequali doctoreas torreo feruore cateruas.[60]

There are numerous lexical correspondences between this passage and the essay *De igne* (426–51).[61] Both sections stress fire's destructive energy.[62] The essay, however, also deals with technical applications of the dangerous element. It performs (*plasmat* 433) many services,[63] e.g. in cooking, forging,[64] heating damp dwellings and dispelling darkness. Moreover, the firemaker's dexterity is referred to as *sollerti* (441), "ingenious" or "skilled," in classical Latin an epithet often used in connection with the verbal arts.[65] Again, a potentially harmful force of nature serves as a metaphor for the powers of speech.

HF-A is concluded by the section subheaded *De gesta re* (571–612). It relates the story of a band of brigands successfully raiding a foreign country and killing its inhabitants. In contrast to the rest of the text, here the narrator, in a different voice again, adopts a detached point of view, neither referring to himself nor addressing the reader or an interlocutor. I propose to construe this chapter as an allegory on the life of the faminators. Needless to say, allegorizing does not rule out the possibility to read the story as what it is in the first place. After all, tales of cattle raids are familiar in Irish literature. As the story constitutes the final part

comparison of Homer to the ocean (*Institutio oratoria* 10.1.46). Gregory Hays, "Flumen orationis," in *Insignis sophiae arcator. Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Michael Herren on his 65th Birthday*, ed. Gernot R. Wieland, Carin Ruff and Ross G. Arthur (Turnhout: Brepols 2006), 1–27, discussing the use of water metaphors (streams and springs in particular) in rhetorical and poetical contexts, offers a wealth of material from Greek and both classical and medieval Latin sources (including the Bible); he refers to *HF*-A 5, 56–60, and 87–92 (at 1, 9, 27).

60 "Just like the red fire of a summer's blaze burns the aged olive trees with its blight [or: redness] and reduces the dry oaks to mounds of ashes, [like] a fiery furnace exhales its torrid eructation and directs its crashing flames through the ceiling, with equal fervour do I scorch the learned throngs."

61 *Rosea* (93), *roseus* (426); *laris* (93, 439), *laricomi* (426); *cremat* (93), *concremaret* (451); *pira* (93, 446; Greek: πῦρ); *rubigine* (93, 428); *ciboneus* (95, 433; possibly derived from Hebrew *gey ben hinnom* (*gehenna*)); *torridum* (95), *torret* (429), *torrida* (449); *clibanus* (95, 448); *ructum* (95), *ructu* (451).

62 In 432 the verb *spargit* is used again.

63 The verb *plasmare* and its cognate *plasmamen* occurs fourteen times in *HF*-A; in four instances, all preceding the essay on fire, the word refers to linguistic skills (6, 23, 40, 61).

64 See *cudere* in the essay *De mari* (382, 384).

65 E.g. Horace, *Ars poetica* 407; Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 20.1.33.

of *HF*-A, however, this would be an anticlimax. A book on how to speak and to write Hisperic Latin deserves a satisfying ending.[66]

It is certainly possible to note verbal echoes linking the story to the first part of *HF*-A, but that would be a little beside the point.[67] Allegory does not need lexical support. More relevant is what happens. Here, we have a barely cultivated country inhabited by fiery farmers who try but dramatically fail to chase away a band of armed raiders, eventually succumbing to the enemies' superior strength. So, it is the invaders who win. After having defeated the locals, they go back home (611–12):

> hinc reduci tramite paternum remeantes in solum
> fabulosam exprimunt accolae soriam.[68]

The main booty being a saga of heroic exploits, we may surmise this band of robbers is essentially the same as the levy of students arriving in the first lines of *HF*-A. Having been ridiculed by the Irish scholars as a sorry pack of intruders, they fight their way into the cultural community and, in the end, triumphantly live to tell the tale. *HF*-A is the upshot of their story. Full of irony as it is, it may count as the English newcomers' revenge on their arrogant seniors. Of course, this irony implicates the narrator himself, who industriously struggled to be "one of the guys."

6 Irony and Self-Mockery

Many details point to the playful atmosphere of *HF*-A. First of all, the description, in the *lex diei* section, of the scholars' activities hardly refers to intellectual occupations. Armed with shillelaghs, they roam about in search of alms and food, apparently not bothering the loss of time due for Hisperic studies, not to mention the complete lack of liturgical obligations. To be sure, by day one group of students is bound to stay at home, possibly to study their textbooks (213–21), but what they actually do is not clear at all. And some students make complaints about their being knocked up in the morning, claiming they spent part of the night "in lectorial sentry" (207), which gives the impression of being a feeble excuse not to rise. However, when night falls and tasks are allocated, again one party of students is supposed to lucubrate (354). But if both day and night only one third of the community studies things Hisperic, the institute seems to fall short of academic efficiency.

[66] In a similar way, the B-text is concluded by a great narrative titled *De gesta re*, which is more than twice as long as the one in *HF*-A. A new edition of this passage is offered in Carey, "Obscurantists," 56–59.

[67] Most notable *caterua* (8, 497); *cidones* (35, 601); *gigantes* (606), which may recall *ciclopes* (27); and *toxicus* (124, 608).

[68] Then by backward paths returning to their paternal soil the inhabitants express a heap of stories.

Six of the essays conclude in laconically breaking off the argument, purportedly in order not to annoy the reader (379–80, 474–76, 509–12, 529–30, 545–46, 559–60), which, given the bulk of impracticable information the writer has already offered by then, does not sound credible. After all, what the reader expects is nothing but useless eloquence. The section on the book satchel, for instance, comes to an end with this sentence (529–30):

> caetera non explico famine scemata,
> ne doctoreis suscitauero fastidium castris.[69]

If no less than sixteen lines are devoted to the dullest details of the satchel's construction, there seems to be no reason why the description might not continue for some time. The smartly varied formula of dismissal is one more example of the faminators' staggering impudence.

The pinnacle of effrontery is reached in the section on the twelve offences against Ausonian diction (116–32), which Gabriele Knappe convincingly proved to be an enigmatic summary of three chapters from Donatus' *Ars grammatica* (3.1–3).[70] The passage could be paraphrased as follows:

> Now I will explore the twelve grammatical faults. Two of them are particularly harmful: barbarism and soloecism.[71] Barbarism occurs on two levels (in speaking and writing) and manifests itself in four different ways: by the addition, deletion, substitution, or transposition of letters. The other one, soloecism, is equally dangerous. But there are ten more crimes against the Italian gold. Which of these offences can you detect in my speech?[72]

Read as the climax of the amoebaean exchange between the senior and the junior scholar, the latter invites his opponent to demonstrate in detail where his diction falls short of Hisperic usage, suggesting of course that it does not. However, a snake may be lurking in the grass. To begin with, four times the apprentice compares faulty Latinity with the mortal attacks of venomous serpents, as I mentioned above: "facinora quae uerbalem sauciant uipereo tactu struem" ("crimes that wound the verbal construction with a viperous touch" 119–20); "statutum toxico rapit scriptum dampno" ("it [i.e. barbarism] carries off an established letter with toxic damage" 124); "stabilem picturae uenenoso obice transmutat tenorem" ("it transforms the steady course of writing with venomous obstruction" 126); "quo Hispericum reguloso ictu uiolatur eulogium" ("[the fault] that violates

[69] "I do not explain in words the remaining formations, lest I arouse nausea in the scholars' barracks."

[70] Knappe, "On Rhetoric and Grammar."

[71] Barbarism is an incorrect combination of letters within a word, soloecism inaccurately combines words within a phrase.

[72] In my view, it is impossible to have *in hac assertione* (132) referring to anything else than what the speaker just said himself.

Hisperic eloquence by an adder's strike" 128).[73] The same speaker had used serpentine imagery before to make clear the devastating force of his speech (98–102),[74] but now this violence seems to be turned against language itself.

To understand what the faminator is doing, we have to consult the pages in Donatus to which he obscurely alludes.[75] Of the twelve *uitia* our speaker only mentions barbarism and soloecism, apparently pleading not guilty of these charges. But what about the ten faults that are so conspicuously suppressed? At least four of them appear to be typical of the ways in which classical Latin is wilfully transformed into Hisperic usage. It would not be difficult to demonstrate how the faminators turn vices into virtues by systematically applying *acyrologia* (*impropria dictio*: choosing the wrong word), *pleonasmos* (*adiectio uerbi superuacui*: adding a superfluous word), *perissologia* (*superuacua uerborum adiectio sine ulla ui rerum*: superfluous addition of words without any new information), and *macrologia* (*longa sententia res non necessarias comprehendens*: a long sentence comprising unnecessary elements). Possibly, our interlocutor is serious in defending the correctness of his speech, but the ironic narrator certainly wants us to remember Donatus' criticism of grammatical mistakes.[76]

7 *Ars poetica*

If *HF*-A is a polyphonous mock-didactic text about speaking and writing artificial Latin, an obvious parallel is Horace's *Ars poetica*.[77] The structure of this mercurial classic seems to defy outrageously its own tenets of unity, simplicity, and well-considered composition, rambling from one subject to another and dilating upon problems largely irrelevant to Roman literature.[78] Subverting self-imposed poetical rules, though, is a serious matter, since it compels the reader to reflect upon the conventions of composition and interpretation. Accordingly, I propose to read *HF*-A as a seventh-century *ars poetica*.

In the first place, the text cheerfully indulges in lexical and morphological virtuosity just to demonstrate the infinite potential of the Latin language to transform itself. "Make it new," to quote Ezra Pound.[79] Second, Hisperic Latin has

[73] See n. 51 on *reguloso*, which may be a pun on the rules (*regulae*) of grammar.

[74] The first speaker had used this metaphor as well: *pitheum rostrum* (35): the python's beak.

[75] Donatus, *Ars grammatica* 3.1–3, in *Grammatici Latini* 4, ed. Heinrich Keil (Hildesheim: Georg Olms 1961 [1864]), 392–95.

[76] If, as I contend, the junior scholar speaking these words is identical with (or: a younger version of) the main narrator, it adds to the passage's irony.

[77] There is no reason to believe that Horace's poetry was known in seventh-century Ireland and Britain. The similarity is a typological one, based on the assumption that scholars and professionals in literature may sometimes feel the urge to take an ironical distance from their own concerns, realising that outsiders might see them as lost in esoteric games.

[78] Scholarship on Horace's *Ars* is immense. An accessible overview of modern literature is given by Andrew Laird, "The *Ars Poetica*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Horace*, ed. Stephen Harrison (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 132–43.

[79] Pound, Ezra, "Canto 53," in *The Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 265.

also a sociological aspect, since its preposterous difficulty must be meant to help forge a community of like-minded intellectuals excluding those not initiated. An obvious parallel may be found in the playful *mores* of modern students' unions.

Third, the patently humorous aspects of the text do not rule out the possibility that it has an existential meaning as well. As we have seen, the power of words is central to *HF*-A: the "wheel of words" encircles the land like the ocean does (381–3) and fire, possibly a metaphor for language, performs innumerous services (*innumera ciboneus plasmat seruitia aestus* 433). Both the power of language as such and the social cohesion of an in-crowd of Latinate intellectuals in an environment of poverty, lurking anarchy, and permanent warfare may count as effective tools to cope with the challenges of life. Imagine this faminator, perhaps a greying monk somewhere in England, recalling with a smile his student days in Ulster.[80] He fully grasped the existential importance of literature.

[80] Of course, the fact that the *narrator* of *HF*-A is not an Irishman does not prove that the *author* cannot have been one. It would even enhance the text's irony.

Table 1: *Hisperica famina* A: structure, with subheadings from the manuscript in italics.

I	**1–357**	**Dialogue and narrative: the Hisperic way of life**
A	1–132	Dialogue between expert and newcomer
	1–53	Interlocutor 1 (expert): arrival of new scholars; verbal attack
	54–60	Interlocutor 2 (newcomer): modest response
	61–86	Interlocutor 1: go home
	87–115	Amoebaeic exchange
	87–92	Interlocutor 1: my is speech like a torrent
	93–97	Interlocutor 2: my speech is like fire
	98–102	Interlocutor 1: my speech is like a viper
	103–9	Interlocutor 2: your claims are absurd (*adynata*)
	110–15	Interlocutor 1: your claims are absurd
	116–32	Interlocutor 2: *De duodecim uitiis ausonicae palathi* (the dangers of grammatical faults)
B	133–357	*Lex diei*: the faminators' daily life as told by one of them; descriptive and narrative passages; some dialogue
II	**358–570**	**Ten models of *ecphrasis***
	358–80	*De caelo* (heaven)
	381–425	*De mari* (sea)
	426–51	*De igne (fire)*
	452–76	The fields
	477–96	*De uento* (wind)
	497–512	*De plurimis* (clothing, equipment, weapons)
	513–30	*De taberna* (book container)
	531–46	*De tabula* (writing tablet)
	547–60	*De oratorio* (chapel)
	561–70	*De oratione* (prayer)
III	**571–612**	***De gesta re*: narrative of a cattle raid**

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