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*M'AIRIUCLÁN HI TÚAIM INBIR: SPEAKER AND SETTING*

*Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha*

The short Old Irish poem beginning *M'airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir* is one of the most frequently anthologized medieval Irish lyrics. The speaker, identified in the unique manuscript witness as Suibne *Geilt*, praises his *airiuclán* 'little oratory'. This paper will consider the setting of his *airiuclán*, and ask how this informs the reading of the poem, and our understanding of Suibne. Questions on which previous commentators and translators have held widely different views will be revisited, e.g. is the *airiuclán* a house or an ivied tree? Is Gobbán a historical person, the legendary Gobbán *Sáer* ('Wright'), or God? Is the poem a riddle or simply descriptive? This little poem has been in existence for some 1,200 years. I aim to show that its meaning has been obscured by the reading back into it of later traditions concerning Suibne, and that dispelling that obscurity serves a purpose. The poem can be appreciated for itself, but it is also a memorial of the cultural contribution of early medieval Ireland to continental Europe, the study of which has been one of the abiding interests of this volume's honorand, Professor Pádraig Breatnach.

For ease of reference, the poem will be cited here in full. Macrons and hyphens have been introduced, as well as an apostrophe in the manuscript-reading 'Mairiuclán', and capitals, line- and word-breaks are in accordance with modern conventions, but the text otherwise is as found in the manuscript. The translation which follows is mine, but much indebted to earlier ones.

*M'airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir  
nī lántechdais bes sēstu.  
cona rētglannaib a rēir  
cona grēin cona ēscu.*

*Gobbán du-rigni in sin  
co n-ēcestar dūib a stoir  
mu chridecān Dia du nim  
is hé tugatóir rod-toig.*

*Tech inna fera flechod  
maigen na áigder rindi  
soilsidir bid hi lugburt  
os ē cen udnucht n-imbi.*

'My little oratory in Túaim Inbir,  
a mansion would not be more well-appointed,  
with its stars in due order,  
with its sun, and its moon.

It is Gobbán who has made it  
(that its history may be told to you);  
my dearly beloved, God from heaven,

He is the thatcher who has thatched it.

A house in which rain does not fall,  
a place in which spear-points are not feared,  
as bright as though in a garden  
with no fence around it.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned, the poem survives in a unique copy, in a ninth-century manuscript written by a single hand which, since 1809, has been preserved in the Benedictine monastic library at Sankt Paul im Lavanttal, in the southern Austrian state of Carinthia.<sup>1</sup> Having previously been at Reichenau on Lake Constance, the manuscript is known both as the Reichenau Schoolbook (*Reichenauer Schulheft*) and the St Paul (Irish) Codex. It has long been held that the manuscript's contents indicate that the scribe was an Irish scholar from Leinster, and that he wrote it in a monastic centre on the continent. It used to be thought that this centre was probably located in southern Germany (or possibly northern Italy), with the manuscript perhaps having been in the general vicinity of Reichenau from the outset.<sup>2</sup> However Bernhard Bischoff contended that the hand is very similar to one witnessed in three other Irish manuscripts which were also formerly located at Reichenau but which had been written in western Francia, perhaps at Soissons or Laon.<sup>3</sup> He identified 855 (the death-year of an archbishop of Metz invoked as though living in one of the manuscripts) as the *terminus ante quem* for these three manuscripts as a group.<sup>4</sup> One may therefore expect the St Paul Codex to date from around the same time, roughly speaking.<sup>5</sup> The main texts in the other three manuscripts are, respectively, works by Priscian, Bede and Augustine.<sup>6</sup> This range of materials is noteworthy, given the miscellaneous nature of the materials in the St Paul Codex. Bischoff's views on the

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<sup>1</sup> Benediktinerstift St. Paul im Lavanttal, MS 86a/1. The most detailed discussion of the manuscript is that by Hildegard L.C. Tristram, 'Die irischen Gedichte im Reichenauer Schulheft', in *Studia Celtica et Indogermanica: Festschrift für Wolfgang Meid*, ed. Peter Anreiter and Erzsébet Jerem (Budapest 1999) 503-29. Digital images made available by Professor Tristram can be found at <http://hildegard.tristram.de/schulheft>

See also James F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical* (New York 1929) 677-8; Robin Flower, *The Irish tradition* (Oxford 1947) 24-35; Hans Oskamp, 'The Irish material in the St. Paul Irish Codex', *Éigse* 17 (1977-79) 385-391; Bernhard Bischoff, *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart 1966-81) III, 47-50; David N. Dumville, *Three men in a boat: scribe, language and culture in the church in Viking-Age Europe* (Cambridge 1997) 48-51.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kenney, *Sources* 678; Flower, *Irish tradition* 24.

<sup>3</sup> Bischoff, *Mittelalterliche Studien* III, 47-50. All three manuscripts are palimpsests and may have originated in Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> A similar date has been suggested for one of the poems in the Codex, that beginning 'Áed oll fri andud n-áne': cf. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The cult of St Moling and the making of *Buile Shuibhne*' in *Buile Shuibhne: perspectives and reassessments*, ed. John Carey (ITS Subsidiary Series 26, London 2014) 1-42 (at pp. 20-21). This recent volume comprises an introduction and six essays on Suibne and related literature. See also Joseph Falaky Nagy, *A new introduction to Buile Shuibhne / The Frenzy of Suibhne*, being *The adventures of Suibhne Geilt, a Middle Irish romance* (ITS Subsidiary Series 4, London 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus*, 2 vols (Cambridge 1901-10) II, xviii, xxiv (Priscian); x-xi (Bede); ix (Augustine). Also Kenney, *Sources*, 675 (no. 533 (iv)) (Priscian); 670-71 (no. 525) (Bede); 669-70 (no. 524) (Augustine).

provenance of all four manuscripts have found general acceptance, pending a more detailed examination of all the evidence.<sup>7</sup>

The materials in the St Paul Codex are mostly in Latin, and include Virgilian commentary and scholia, notes on grammar, geography, logic, astronomy, and metrics, and twenty-nine hymns. Materials in Greek occupy a smaller portion, and include paradigms of nouns, pronouns and particles, and Greek-Latin vocabulary. The Irish materials, which occupy a smaller portion again, occur on fol. 1v and fol. 8v.<sup>8</sup> They comprise four Old Irish poems, and an Old Irish incantation.<sup>9</sup> As James Kenney said, the manuscript testifies to ‘the intimate association that could exist between the native Gaelic culture of Ireland and the Latin ecclesiasticism of the monk.’<sup>10</sup>

In order of appearance, the five Old Irish texts are: (i) the incantation, and (ii) the poem beginning *Messe ocus Pangur Bán*, both on fol. 1v; and the poems beginning (iii) *M’airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir*, (iv) *Is én immo-n-iada sás*, and (v) *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*, all on fol. 8v.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript provides no direct evidence that the scribe was the author of any of these texts, but the possibility has been allowed by some commentators.<sup>12</sup> However, there is a tendency to regard *M’airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir* and *Is én immo-n-iada sás* as copies made by the scribe of earlier compositions. Both of these are provided with attributions in the manuscript: the first to *Suibne Geilt*, and the second to *Maling [sic]*, with both attributions apparently in the original hand. The colophon to *M’airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir* at the top of fol. 8r is actually in three parts: the name *Suibne Geilt* is written above the word *M’airiuclán* on the top left, *.cc.* is written above *rētglannaib* (the final word of the first line) on the top right, and the words *barr edin* appear in between.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to know which was written first,

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<sup>7</sup> See Oskamp, ‘The Irish material’ 385-6; Dumville, *Three men in a boat* 48-51; Tristram, ‘Die irischen Gedichte’ 511-12; Gregory Toner, ‘*Messe ocus Pangur Bán*: structure and cosmology’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 57 (Summer 2009) 1-22 (at p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> The fullest lists of contents are in L. C. Stern, ‘Über die irische Handschrift in St. Paul’, *ZCP* 6 (1908) 546-55, and Tristram, ‘Die irischen Gedichte’ 505-07. See also Oskamp, ‘The Irish material’ 386-8.

<sup>9</sup> Recent commentators have tended to speak of five poems, but the incantation shows no signs of lineation, by syllable-count, stress-count or other poetic features.

<sup>10</sup> Kenney, *Sources*, 678.

<sup>11</sup> For editions and translations of all five texts see Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, 293-5. On (i) see Oskamp, ‘The Irish material’ 387-90; John Carey, ‘Téacsanna draíochta in Éirinn sa mheánaois luath’, *Breis faoinár ndúchas spioradálta, Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 30 (2000) 98-117 (at pp. 104-07). On (ii) see Gerard Murphy (ed. and trans.), *Early Irish lyrics* (Oxford 1956) 2-3; Toner (ed. and trans.), ‘*Messe ocus Pangur Bán*’ 1-22; Anders Ahlqvist (ed. and trans.), ‘Pangur Bán’ in *Ollam: studies in Gaelic and related traditions in honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. Matthieu Boyd (Lanham MD, 2016) 227-36. On (iii) see Gerard Murphy (ed. and trans.), *Early Irish lyrics* 112-13. On (iv), see the edition and translation of the 8-quatrain poem which incorporates the two quatrains of (iv), and of the associated prose, in W. Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* (London 1905) 154-7. On (v) see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (ed. and trans.), ‘The making of a prince: *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*’ in *Rhetoric and reality in medieval Celtic literature: studies in honor of Daniel F. Melia*, CSANA Yearbook 11-12, ed. Georgia Henley and Paul Russell (Hamilton NY 2014) 137-54; Dagmar Bronner, ‘Drei Lesarten im Text von *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*’ *Zeitschrift für celtische Lexicographie* 61 (2014) 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> Flower, *The Irish tradition* 24: ‘As our Irish wanderer remembered the poetry of his native land, perhaps his own poetry...’; Oskamp, ‘The Irish material in the St Paul Codex’ 391 (speaking of *Messe ocus Pangur Bán*): ‘Its poet is unknown; he may have been the scribe of the manuscript...’; Toner, ‘*Messe ocus Pangur Bán*’ 2, n. 8 (speaking of *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*): ‘The dedication...to a Leinster chief indicates that the scribe is almost certainly of Leinster origin even though he may not necessarily be identified with the author of the poem...’.

<sup>13</sup> See the digital image of fol. 8v at

[http://hildegard.tristram.de/schulheft/pics/Reichenauer\\_Schulheft\\_8verso\\_oben.jpg](http://hildegard.tristram.de/schulheft/pics/Reichenauer_Schulheft_8verso_oben.jpg)

the attribution or the phrase *barr edin*.<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of the discussion hereafter, it may be noted here that ivy (*eiden(n)*) is a clambering and climbing woody plant, not a tree, and while *barr edin* connotes 'a covering or crop (*barr*) of ivy', the phrase does not of itself indicate that this was on a tree.

These two attributions to *Suibne Geilt* and *Maling* are our earliest evidence for the association of Suibne with the leading male saint of Leinster. This association generated a rich literature, amply evidenced in a series of texts in Old, Middle and Early Modern Irish.<sup>15</sup> The enduring strength of this tradition over many centuries in Ireland is one reason that scholars have tended to regard the poems *M'airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir* and *Is én immo-n-iada sás* as compositions that the scribe of the Codex acquired from pre-existing sources, rather than composed himself.<sup>16</sup> Another is that the two quatrains beginning *Is én immo-n-iada sás* are also found in the twelfth-/thirteenth-century Book of Leinster, where they appear as the first two quatrains of an eight-quatrain poem, attributed there to the Devil in conversation with Moling.<sup>17</sup> It is consequently assumed that the two quatrains in the St Paul Codex were extracted from a longer poem which was composed sometime earlier and remained extant in Ireland, its language eventually evolving into the form attested in the Book of Leinster version. The spelling *nem* (read *nēm*) for later *niam* ('brilliance') in quatrain 2*b* of the poem in the Codex is indeed suggestive of a date of composition well before 800.<sup>18</sup> However the language of our poem, *M'airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir*, is not incompatible with a date in the early ninth century, and other evidence that would categorically rule out its composition by the scribe of the St Paul Codex appears to be lacking.<sup>19</sup>

If one knew for certain that scribe and author were the same person, then the attribution to Suibne *Geilt* and the words *barr edin* could be regarded as authorial scholia provided to clarify the meaning of the poem - assuming the author did not intend to mislead. But even if the scribe was just a copyist, we would still have to allow that the attribution and words *barr edin* might have derived from the author, directly or indirectly, through oral or written sources. I have argued, on the basis of

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<sup>14</sup> Pádraig Ó Macháin has pointed out to me that the attribution is one of the earliest Gaelic attributions known, and suggested that *barr edin* (in the middle of the line, and in a more lightly coloured ink) may have been written first, and that this may account for the separation of *Suibne Geilt* and *.cc*. Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, 294, fail to note the *.cc*.

<sup>15</sup> For an outline of the series and a relative chronology see Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The cult of St Moling' 1-42.

<sup>16</sup> Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, xxxiii-xxxiv, suggested that the two quatrains attributed to Moling 'may actually have been written by that saint', and that the praise-poem 'may be safely ascribed to an earlier date' than the ninth century. However evidence in support of the attribution to Moling is lacking, and the subject of the praise-poem seems to have lived in the first half of the ninth century: see n. 5 above. Daniel Melia, dating *Messe ocus Pangur Bán* to some time after AD 800, suggested that the other poems 'show earlier forms and must have been composed in the eighth century', but he did not go into further detail: see his article 'On the form and function of the "Old-Irish Verse" in the *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* - how Patrick Ford opened my eyes to an important aspect of Early Irish poetry and some conclusions that I have come to as a result', in *Heroic poets and poetic heroes in Celtic tradition: a Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy and Leslie Ellen Jones (2005) 283-290 (at p. 288).

<sup>17</sup> *LL* 284<sup>b</sup>32 = R.I. Best, O. Bergin, M. A. O'Brien and A. O'Sullivan, *The Book of Leinster formerly Leabar na Núachongbála*, 6 vols. (1954-83) V, 1239-40. There are copies also in four later manuscripts; for details see Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, xxxiii-xxxiv.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *GOI* p. 36 §53 (a). See also Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, 294, n. k.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 225, speaks of 'a scribe not far removed in date from the poet, seeing that the active perfect *rod-toig* in quatrain 2 (for older deponent *rod-toigestar*) suggests that the poem can hardly be much earlier than A.D. 800'.

an examination of all the extant materials evidencing the association of Suibne with Moling, that this tradition originated in Leinster and remained strongest in that province.<sup>20</sup> When one adds to this the fact that the third poem on fol. 8v is a praise-poem for a Leinster royal, we would seem to have strong reason to regard our scribe as, at very least, a well-informed guide on how *M'airioclán hi Tuaim Inbir* was read in his day. On this basis the attribution to Suibne seems very likely to be consistent with the meaning of the poem.

This begs the question of which aspects of Suibne's character inform the poem. The main features commonly identified in profiles of Suibne *Geilt* are that he was a king of Dál nAraidi who became deranged in the Battle of Mag Roth (Moira, County Down) in A.D. 637, as a result of the curse of one saint Rónán whom he had offended, that he spent almost all his remaining years as a social outcast, living in woodland, naked or semi-naked, wavering in his responses to the natural world between complaint and appreciation, and that he was finally befriended by Saint Moling, who absolved him of his wrongdoing and granted him a happy death and a christian burial at Tech Moling. These features are largely derived from the late-twelfth/early thirteenth-century work *Buile Suibhne* (henceforth *BS*).<sup>21</sup> Suibne is seen as a figure of the Celtic 'Wild Man' type, of which Myrddin Wyllt (Merlin) of Wales and Lailoken of Scotland are regarded as other prominent representatives.<sup>22</sup> The 'Wild Man' legend as figured by Suibne does indeed find its most extended form in *BS*, and it has been argued that a version of this legend existed in Ireland from the eighth or ninth century and that the poem *M'airioclán hi Tuaim Inbir* is its earliest extant articulation.<sup>23</sup>

And so we come to the nub of the matter: are there aspects of Suibne's story as told in *BS* which find no support in the poem but which are identified with it nonetheless? Is the commonly perceived setting of the *airioclán* one such case? This was identified by Kenneth Jackson in 1935 as 'The Ivy Bower', and in 1951 'The Ivied Tree-Top';<sup>24</sup> by James Carney in 1950 and 1955 as 'the ivy-covered tree-top which is his usual dwelling-place';<sup>25</sup> by Gerard Murphy in 1956 as 'the ivied tree-top

<sup>20</sup> Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The cult of St Moling' 41-2.

<sup>21</sup> *BS* was edited twice by J. G. O'Keefe. All citations hereafter, and translations (unless otherwise stated), are from his second edition: *Buile Suibhne (The frenzy of Suibhne, being the adventures of Suibhne Geilt: a Middle Irish romance)* (ITS XII, London [1910] 1913). For ease of reference, I have numbered the quatrains when citing portions of the poems. On the date of *BS* see Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The cult of St Moling' 36. On its reception see Alexandra Bergholm, *From shaman to saint. Interpretive strategies in the study of Buile Shuibhne* (Helsinki 2012).

<sup>22</sup> On the traditions of the Wild Man in the literatures of the Celtic-speaking countries see Brian Frykenberg, 'Lailoken'; 'Myrddin'; 'Suibne Geilt'; and 'Wild Man in Celtic legend' in J. T. Koch, *Celtic culture: a historical encyclopedia* 5 vols (Santa Barbara 2006) iii, 1081-3; iv, 1322-6, 1633-5; v, 1790-99.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. 'This little lyric is all that remains of a ninth-century version of the story of Suibne, an Ulster king who went mad during the battle of Mag Rath in 639 [sic] and took refuge in the woods' (*A golden treasury of Irish poetry AD 600 - 1200*, ed. David Greene and Frank O'Connor (New York 1967) 100); 'There are various brief references to this tale in Irish literature, the earliest belonging to the ninth and tenth centuries' (Kenneth Jackson, 'The motive of the threefold death in the story of Suibne Geilt' in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin 1940) 535-50 (p. 536); 'Tradition traceable to the ninth century represents Suibne Geilt (Mad Suibne) as having lost his reason in the battle of Mag Rath' (Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 223).

<sup>24</sup> Jackson, *Studies in early Celtic nature poetry* (Cambridge 1935) 1, and *idem, A Celtic miscellany* (London 1951) 71.

<sup>25</sup> Carney, 'Suibne Geilt and *The Children of Lir*', *Éigse* 6, part 2 (Summer 1950) 83-110 (at p. 88). The paper was republished with minor changes in Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955) 129-64 (for the reference see p. 135).

in which he lived’;<sup>26</sup> and by Donnchadh Ó Corráin in 1989 as a ‘tree-top refuge’,<sup>27</sup> while in 1967 David Greene and Frank O’Connor opined that ‘Suibne’s “oratory” is the tree in which he has made his poem’.<sup>28</sup> Robin Flower was less definite, writing in 1947 that ‘[t]he poem is somewhat obscure, but it appears to refer to one of the woodland oratories in which the Irish hermits delighted to dwell’.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of anyone living in a tree-top is bizarre, even if a rationale for it is provided in *BS*, and before returning to the poem some close consideration must be given to this tale. It relates that before the battle of Mag Roth, Suibne had hurled his javelin at one of St Rónán’s psalm-singers and killed him. Rónán then cursed him, saying: ‘I pray the mighty Lord that high as went the spear-shaft into the air and among the clouds of Heaven may you go likewise even as any bird...’.<sup>30</sup> His lot thereafter (until he is absolved of his sins by Moling) is to be *like* the birds, and to live among them. When the din of battle deranges him, he is seized by ‘fury, and giddiness, and frenzy, and flight, unsteadiness, restlessnes and unquiet’, and in his *geltacht*, he becomes capable of moving with great speed, of making extraordinary leaps, into trees and onto great heights, even levitating on occasion. From that time forward he lives mostly in the wilderness (*díthreb*), and since such land in medieval Ireland was typically wooded, and since he has been cursed with bird-like characteristics, branches and tree-tops become his habitat.

This is not to say that he becomes a bird, or even that he shifts between human and bird form: in his interactions with human beings, he remains recognizably human, and he also expresses his many privations and few pleasures in human terms. However there are various references in *BS* to *clúm*, a word that can mean either ‘feathers’ or ‘fur’, and the potential for ambiguity remains in most of these.<sup>31</sup> For instance, in a verse-dialogue between Suibne and his former wife Eorann, she expresses the wish that she and Suibne might be together again ‘until *clúm* should grow on our bodies’ (*co tigeadh clumh ar ar ttaobh*).<sup>32</sup> In another verse-dialogue, Suibne declares that to be without a wife is ‘a garb of *clúm* to the skin’ (*cadadh clúimhe re cnes*).<sup>33</sup> In a poem spoken by Suibne, following a comment on all he has suffered since *clúm* grew on his body (*o rofhás clúm ar mo chorp*),<sup>34</sup> a further ambiguous instance occurs, perhaps to be understood in a general sense as ‘covering’.<sup>35</sup>

There is one instance where the extended context is more suggestive of ‘feathers’ than of any other meaning:

<sup>26</sup> Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 224.

<sup>27</sup> Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish hermit poetry?’, in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone (eds), *Sages, saints and storytellers. Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth 1989) 251-67.

<sup>28</sup> Greene and O’Connor, *A golden treasury* 100.

<sup>29</sup> Flower, *The Irish tradition* 34. In his *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin 1946) 526, T.F. O’Rahilly stated that ‘the house that Gobbán built appears to be the firmament of heaven’.

<sup>30</sup> ““*Guidhim-si an Coimde cumachtach,*” ar sé, “*an ccomhairde dochúaidh crann an fhogha isin aer 7 a nellaibh nimhe co ndeachair-si amail gach n-ethaid...*” (*BS* pp 10, 11 §9).

<sup>31</sup> In ‘The cult of St Moling’ 30, I stated that there are two references in the text to *clúm*. I have since identified others, all of which are cited below, apart from an example not relevant to the present discussion (cf. *BS* 19, 20 §26 q. 2).

<sup>32</sup> *BS* 48, 49 §32 q. 12. O’Keefe, *ibid.*, p. 49, translates ‘that feathers might grow on our bodies’.

<sup>33</sup> *BS* 54, 55 §36 q. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *BS* 118 §61 q. 3. O’Keefe, *ibid.*, p. 119, translates ‘since feathers have grown on my body’.

<sup>35</sup> ‘*Feis oidhche gan chluimh a coill/i mullach croinn dosaigh dhlúith,/gan coisteacht re guth ná glor./a mhic Dé, is mór an mhúich*’, ‘Sleeping of nights without covering in a wood/in the top of a thick, bushy tree,/without hearing voice or speech;/O Son of God, great is the misery!’ (*BS* 120, 121 §61 q. 10).

*Dosán eidhinn iomúallach  
fasas tre chrann chas,  
da mbeinn-si 'na certmhullach  
noaghsainn techt ass.*

*Teichim riasna huiseóga,  
as é an trenrioth tenn,  
lingim tar na guiseóga  
a mullaighibh benn.*

*Fer[a]n eidhinn iomuallach  
an tan eirghius duinn,  
goirid bhim da ttarrachtain  
o rofas mo chluimh.*

A proud ivy-bush  
which grows through a twisted tree –  
if I were right on its summit,  
I would fear to come out.

I flee before the skylarks –  
'tis a stern, great race –  
I leap over the stumps  
on the tops of the mountains.

When the proud turtle-dove  
rises for us,  
quickly do I overtake it  
since my feathers have grown.<sup>36</sup>

However, while there is an extensive Irish vocabulary for hair on the human head, and another, smaller one for body hair (where there is some overlap with terms for animal fur), it is significant that the only terms used exclusively of bird-feathers, *cleitte* and *eite*, are *not* used of Suibne in *BS*.<sup>37</sup> It seems then that the concept of Suibne as bird-like owes more to his propensity for taking flight, levitating and living in trees than to his being feathered.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *BS* 74, 75 §40, qq 38-40.

<sup>37</sup> It is noteworthy that *pilosi* ('hairy ones', Isaiah 13:21) is glossed *demonum genera, uel geltig* ('types of demons, or *gelt*-like creatures', assuming *geltig* is an adjectival form based on *gelt*), in a set of Old Irish glosses believed to be the work of John Scottus Eriugena (died *c.* 877): cf. Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* I, 2 (line 5). On the attribution to John Scottus see Pádraig Ó Néill, 'The Old-Irish words in Eriugena's biblical glosses', in G.-H. Allard (ed.), *Jean Scot Écrivain* (Paris 1986) 287-97 (at pp 287-90).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Nora K. Chadwick, in her seminal article 'Geilt', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 5 (1942) 106-153, at p. 109: 'He lives largely in the tree tops like a bird'. It is worth noting that the mid-thirteenth-century Old Norse text *Konungs Skuggsjá*, also known as *Speculum Regale*, which contains an account of Irish *gelta*, relates that they could not fly: 'It is also told that if these people live in the woods for twenty



However while these symptoms of *geltacht* were induced in him as punishment for his wrong-doing, his association with trees has a positive valency also in that it resonates with the association of hermits with woodland. In medieval Irish writing, woodland (*fid*, *caill*) is the characteristic wilderness (*díthreb*) of the hermit (*díthrebach*), which is hardly surprising in a country as extensively wooded as Ireland was.<sup>39</sup> Withdrawal from communal life is largely represented as withdrawal from open clearance to the seclusion of woodland, from light to shade, from cultivated spaces to wooded ones - even though withdrawal to rocky heights and islands was also important. The link between *díthreb* and *fid* is underlined in the ninth-century Triads where the 'three wildernesses of Ireland' (*tri díthruib Hérenn*) are identified as 'the Great Wood in Cúailnge, the Spy-Wood in Tuirtri, and the Wood of Mothar in Connacht'.<sup>40</sup> Where one finds woodland, one finds birds. B.K. Martin has emphasised the centrality of birds in so-called 'hermit poetry', and how it is conventional in some of the best-known poems to link the idea of poetic utterance to bird-calls.<sup>41</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin's argument that the life depicted in these poems is an idealized representation and not a record of actual experience is undeniable: they describe the natural world desired by the would-be hermit or penitent in terms of sensual pleasure, not deprivation.<sup>42</sup> What is significant for our purposes is that the poems explicitly identified with the *díthrebach* situate him among the trees. Thus Marbán, who is addressed as a *díthrebach*, speaks of his cool bothy (*úarboth*) 'in the wood',<sup>43</sup> while Manchán wishes for a 'hidden little hut in the wilderness' with 'a beautiful wood close by'.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, both Marbán and Manchán have a number of companions: what defines them as *díthrebaig* is not complete solitude but living in uncleared land.

One may suppose that there was a basis in reality to the linking in literature of woodland and hermit. The tradition that hermits occasionally made their homes within large hollow trees is suggestive of this. The Belgian saint, Bavo of Ghent (died c. 655), the Dutch saint, Gerlach of Houthem (died c. 1170), and the aptly named English saint, Simon Stock (died 1265), are all held to have spent time living as hermits in hollow trees. In medieval Ireland, the extensive woodland can be expected to have produced an abundance of ancient trees of great height or girth. The damp climate, which can rot even the hardest native tree, the yew, would have resulted in some ancient trees having hollowed out trunks. Today, there are still over twenty yew trees in Ireland with a recorded girth of over 5 metres, and an estimated age of

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years...feathers will grow on their bodies as on birds; these serve to protect them from frost and cold, but they have no large feathers to use in flight as birds have. But so great is their fleetness said to be that it is not possible for other men or even greyhounds to come near them; for those men can dash up into a tree almost as swiftly as apes or squirrels', L. Larson (trans.), *The King's Mirror. Speculum Regale - Konungs Skuggsjá* (New York 1917) 116. On the question of whether the Old Norse text drew on Irish oral sources, as argued by Kuno Meyer, or some version of *BS* as others have contended, see Bergholm, *From shaman to saint* 74-6.

<sup>39</sup> See Kenneth Nicholls, 'Woodland cover in pre-modern Ireland', in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (eds.), *Gaelic Ireland. Land, lordship and settlement c. 1250-c.1650* (Dublin 2001) 181-206. Nicholls rejects the minimalist view of woodland cover put forward by others.

<sup>40</sup> *Tri díthruib Hérenn: Fid Mór hi Cúailngni, Fid Déicsen hi Tuirtri, Fid Moithre hi Connachtaib'*: Kuno Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin 1906) 4 §43.

<sup>41</sup> Martin, 'Medieval Irish nature poetry', *Parergon* 21 (1978) 19-32, at 24-32.

<sup>42</sup> See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish hermit poetry?' 251-67.

<sup>43</sup> *A Marbáin, a díthrebaig ... Atá úarboth dam i caill'* (Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 10, qq 1a, 8a).

<sup>44</sup> *'bothán deirrit díthreba ... Fidbaid álainn immocus'* (Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 28, 30, qq 1c, 3a). Manchán is not represented as a solitary recluse: in qq 6-7 he wishes for 12 companions, 'ever praying to the King who makes the sun shine' (*'oc guidi tre bithu sir/ind Ríg ruithnes gréin'*).

between 700 and 1200 years old, and many of these are hollowed out by decay, as old yews tend to be.<sup>45</sup> None is as remarkable as the old ash tree described by Henry Phillips in the early 1800s, but there must have been many like it in medieval Ireland: ‘At Donirey, near Clare, in the county of Galway, is an old Ash, that at four feet from the ground measures 42 feet in circumference; at six feet high, thirty feet. The trunk has long been quite hollow, and a little school was kept in it.’<sup>46</sup>

There are references in medieval Irish sources to the use of hollow trees for shelter, by secular and ecclesiastic figures alike. A few examples of the latter may suffice here. St Caemgein is said to have withdrawn from his community for seven years, to live as a hermit at the Upper Lake in Glendalough, dividing his time between ‘a certain hollow tree’ and a compact cave.<sup>47</sup> In the Middle Irish Notes to *Féilire Óengusso*, an anecdote tells that relics were gathered overseas in anticipation of the eventual coming of St Ciarán to Clonmacnoise by St Patrick’s *clam*, Comlach, and that Comlach ‘brought the relics to the place where Bothcraind is to-day. A great elm tree was there then with a hollow in it’.<sup>48</sup> The fact that *both craind* ‘tree bothy’ has evidently developed into a placename here suggests that the original hollow tree was of remarkable proportions. An account (dated 1343) of efforts made in 1172 by Cistercian monks from Buildwas in Shropshire to found a Cistercian house on the eastern shore of Wexford Harbour relates: ‘we took care to appoint one of our converts, a lay-brother named Alan, provident and discrete, to these parts. Who, when he came there and found the place a solitary waste, made his quarters in a certain hollow oak tree and remained there throughout his stay, and lived a life of penury and hardship’.<sup>49</sup>

Some of the *bile*-trees venerated as sacred in pre-Christian and early Christian Ireland probably were champion trees.<sup>50</sup> A mass of evidence for venerated trees at inauguration sites and church sites, and for significantly large trees at residential sites

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<sup>45</sup> See Mark Twomey, Aubrey Fennell and Frances McHugh, ‘The Tree Register of Ireland’, *Irish Forestry* 59, nos. 1 and 2 (2002) 40-48 (at p. 45). Oliver Rackham, *Woodlands* (London 2010) 19, notes that ancient trees tend to be least affected by storms, and hollow trees are no more affected, and sometimes less so, than ‘healthy’ trees.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Phillips, *Sylva Florifera. The shrubbery historically and botanically treated*. 2 volumes (London 1823) I, 90. I have been unable to identify the place in question. In Rev. Charles Alexander Johns, *The forest trees of Britain* 2 volumes (London 1849) I, 154, the placename is rendered as ‘Doriney’, while in Joseph Lambert, *Observations on the rural affairs of Ireland; or, a practical treatise on farming, planting and gardening* (Dublin 1829) 218, it is referred to as ‘Donirey, near Clare-castle, in the County of Galway’ (but Clarecastle is in fact in County Clare).

<sup>47</sup> ‘*Huius in marginibus annis .vii. sine tecto et igne solitarius deguit. In parte aquilonali habitabat in concava quadam arbore; in australi vero margine, arctissimo specu*’, ‘*Vita S. Caemgeni*’, in W. W. Heist (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (Bruxelles 1965) 361-65, at 362 §5 (‘He spent seven years as a hermit on the margins of this [lake], without roof or fire. On the northern side he lived in a certain hollow tree; on the southern side in a very narrow cave’; my translation). I am grateful to Dr Catherine Swift for this reference.

<sup>48</sup> ‘*co tuc leis na taisi cusin inad i fil Bothcraind indiu. Lem mór bóí ann intan sin 7 cuas ann*’; cf. Whitley Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé* (London 1905) 204-5. As an alternative to treating ‘Bothcraind’ as a placename, as in his translation cited above, Stokes suggested one might translate it as a common noun, ‘a wooden bothy’ (ibid., p. 205, n. 4).

<sup>49</sup> ‘*Unum de conversis nostris, fratrem, Alanum nomine, laycum, providum et discretum, ad partes illas destinare curavimus. Qui cum illuc pervenisset et locum vaste solitudinis invenisset, hospitium suum in quadam quercu concavata suscepisset, et ibidem tempore incolatus sui moram fecisset, et vitam suam in penuria et erumpna deducisset*’; cf. J.T. Gilbert, *Chartularies of St Mary’s Abbey, Dublin*, 2 vols (London 1884) I, 357. The translation above is mine.

<sup>50</sup> The term ‘champion tree’ is used of the tallest or oldest or widest in girth of a particular species of tree in a given area.

with the designation of *bile rátha*, was gathered by A.T. Lucas.<sup>51</sup> Trees of this kind would have stood out very prominently on cleared land. The woodland to which hermits resorted can be expected to have afforded more privacy, but it was not necessarily forest: it is clear that many churches had woods attached to them which were managed as a source of fuel, building-materials and food. For instance, woodland is specifically mentioned in a list of the appurtenances of the ecclesiastical estate of Óchter nAchid in the *Additamenta* (c. A. D. 700) in the Book of Armagh: ‘Cummen and Brethán purchased Óchter Achid together with its (whole) estate, in wood, plain, and meadow, with its enclosure and its herb-garden’.<sup>52</sup> We may suppose that some of the Middle Irish records of grants of *crích ocus ferann* found in the Book of Kells comprised woodland as well as other types of land, even if woodland appears to be mentioned specifically only rarely.<sup>53</sup> Some woods associated with churches must have been quite large: for instance, the famous oak-wood of Daire Calgaig, later better known as Daire Coluim Chille, came to the attention of the annalists when 60 of its trees were felled by storm in 1146, and 120 in 1178.<sup>54</sup> The proximity of woodland to churches may explain how hermits focused on a contemplative rather than an active life (and their literary reflexes in so-called ‘hermit poetry’) came by items of food and drink normally associated with established centres of production.<sup>55</sup>

Turning from the hermits of history and lyric poetry back to *BS*, it may be easier to see that Suibne cuts a very strange figure, one that in most respects is essentially opposite to that of the hermit. This former king of Dál nAraidi was no voluntary hermit: he was condemned to live in the wilderness in atonement for his crimes. He does not remain in one place but wanders the land fugitive-like, occasionally pursued by figures whose names or demeanour marks them out as fugitive also: Loingsechán (‘Exile’), Loingsechán’s mother-in-law, Lonnóg daughter of Dub Díthrib (‘Irascible One, daughter of the Black One of the Wilderness’), Fer Caille (‘Man of the Wood’) who is also known as Alladán (‘Wild Man’), and the weirdly leaping Caillech an Mhuilinn (‘Hag of the Mill’). He is frightened of the natural world,<sup>56</sup> yet instinctively he runs with wolves and deer,<sup>57</sup> and takes flight like the birds. Frost, ice, snow and wind cause him great misery, which he laments almost constantly, praying for deliverance but simultaneously acknowledging that his state is fair, divinely-ordained punishment.<sup>58</sup> He mourns the loss of his kingship, and even returns to it temporarily,

<sup>51</sup> A.T. Lucas, ‘The sacred trees of Ireland’, *Journal of the Cork Archaeological and Historical Society* 68 (1963) 16-54; Fergus Kelly, ‘The Old Irish tree-list’, *Celtica* 11 (1976) 107-24; *idem*, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin 1997) 379-90; *idem*, ‘Trees in early Ireland’, *Irish forestry. Journal of the Society of Irish Foresters* 56, part 1 (1999) 39-57.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Dírrógel Cummen 7 Brethán Ochter nAchid cona seilb, iter fid 7 mag 7 lenu, cona llius 7 a llubgort’ (Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 174, 175 (= *Additamenta* VII 3 (2))).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais 1033-1161* (Dublin 1961) *passim*, and note ‘*ōgshaire na heclaise co brāth can chomaitches sliged nō chailed*’, *ibid.*, 36 (‘complete immunity to the church in perpetuity, without any claim by reason of neighbourship on woods or wayfares’; my translation).

<sup>54</sup> *AFM s.a.* 1146; *AU, AFM s.a.* 1178.

<sup>55</sup> On the contemplative, active and repentant categories, see Colmán Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Naas 1999) 47-104.

<sup>56</sup> ‘*is cuma noraghainn ar gealtacht ría slógaib na cruinne d’fhaicsin dom fhobairt a n-aoinfecht 7 re folúamain an dreolláin a áonar*’, ‘I would equally go into madness at seeing the united hosts of the universe threatening me as at the flight of a single wren’ (*BS* 133 §70).

<sup>57</sup> *BS* 120 §61 q. 9.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. *BS* 38-9 §27 q. 6; 126-7 §67 q. 3.

before relapsing again into *geltacht*.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the discipline-loving hermit, he has little control over mind or body. Even as a *geilt* he does not quite measure up: in beautiful Glenn Bolcáin, which was ‘ever a place of great delight for madmen’,<sup>60</sup> he foolishly settles on a branch of blackthorn in a dense thicket of briars, ‘but so slender was it that it bowed and bent under him, so that he fell heavily through the thicket to the ground, and there was not as much as an inch from his sole to the crown of his head that was not wounded and reddened.’<sup>61</sup> Similar mishaps befall him in other places, showing how ill-suited he is to living on the branches of trees.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the eremitical ideal, he is haunted by memories of domestic happiness, and twice revisits his wife.<sup>63</sup> In his *geilt*-state he suffers at the hands of other women: for instance at the church of Ros Beraigh in Glenn Bolcáin, the wife of the *oircheannach* tries to seduce him; and at the church of Ros Comáin, the wife of the *oircheannach* steals his watercress.<sup>64</sup> This last act brings him to the depths of misery because, in contrast to the hermit-poets who speak lyrically of the catalogue of fresh produce available to them, his diet is highly restricted: as a volatile *geilt*, he does not remain long enough in any one place to forage effectively.<sup>65</sup> He abandons Ireland, spending six weeks in the cave of the martyred Donnán of Eig, a further six on Ailsa Craig (Carraic Alastair), and time on mainland Northern Britain where he meets a British *geilt* named Fer Caille (‘Man of the Wood’) with whom he remains on good terms until Fer Caille dies, a year later. Suibne then returns to Ireland, and regains ‘a gleam of reason’,<sup>66</sup> but his desire to live among his own people is frustrated by St Rónán who visits a macabre vision on him of dismembered bodies, human and animal, causing him to relapse once again into *geltacht*.<sup>67</sup> His miserable existence in various parts of Ireland continues until finally he encounters Moling at Tech Moling, and in his loving care he is restored to sanity and grace, his death and burial at Tech Moling following soon thereafter.<sup>68</sup>

*BS* is a sustained depiction of misery and wretchedness, notwithstanding occasional positive references to nature, some of which clearly derive from pre-existing sources which have been subordinated by the author to his overall purpose.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>59</sup> *BS* 60 §37.

<sup>60</sup> ‘ionadh aoibhnesa móir an glenn sin do gheltaibh dogrés’ (*BS* 22 §17).

<sup>61</sup> ‘sdúaghais 7 lúbais an craobh chomhcháol robháoi faoi go ttarla beim n-asglainn de tresan muine go ttorchair go lár talman, co nach raibhe méd n-orlaigh ann o a bhonn go a bhathais gan fhuiúghudh, gan forrdergudh fair’ (*BS* 24 §18).

<sup>62</sup> E.g. *BS* 58-9 §37; 120-21 §61 q. 9.

<sup>63</sup> *BS* 44-9 §§30-32; 110-115 §§55-6.

<sup>64</sup> *BS* 48-51 §33; *BS* 82-91 §§42-3. The important role played by women in *BS* is well brought out in Joseph Falaky Nagy, *A new introduction to Buile Suibhne* 19-29.

<sup>65</sup> On rare occasions Suibne speaks of enjoying a great variety of forest food (e.g. *BS* 116 §58 qq 7-10). But this is at odds with his general situation, as depicted, for instance, in the following quatrain: ‘Dúairc an bhetha bheith gan teach,/as truagh an bhetha, a Chriosd chain,/sásadh biorair bairrghlais búain,/deogh uisge fhúair a glais ghlain’, ‘Wretched is the life of one homeless,/sad is the life, O fair Christ!/a meal of fresh, green-tufted watercress,/a drink of cold water from a clear stream’ (*BS* 120-21 §61 q. 8).

<sup>66</sup> ‘Taom da cheill’ (*BS* 122 §63).

<sup>67</sup> *BS* 122-31 §§64-7.

<sup>68</sup> *BS* 136-59 §§74-87. I have argued that although Moling’s cult originated in South Leinster, the Tech Moling in question is not St Mullins in County Carlow, but rather the Tech Moling/Timolin in County Kildare, and that there are various pointers in *BS* to its having been composed by a writer who was a member or an associate of the latter church or, conceivably, of another church in North Leinster, perhaps Glendalough or Kildare: see Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The cult of St Moling’ 4-19.

<sup>69</sup> A good example is the *laid* in which Suibne ‘eulogized aloud the trees of Ireland...recalling some of his own hardships and sorrows (7 *dorinni an laoidh 7 tuc testmolta crann Eirenn ós aird innte 7 ag*

This evidently was to portray the long punishment of an arrogant king and his eventual restoration to grace: in his dying words Suibhne tells that he has made ‘sincere repentance in this world/for each evil I have ever done’.<sup>70</sup> The author was not the originator of the tradition that exposure to the din of battle could drive a man to *geltacht*: this is attested much earlier, for instance in the tenth-century tale *Cath Almaine*.<sup>71</sup> Neither was he the originator of the tradition that the specific occasion of Suibhne’s *geltacht* was the battle of Mag Roth: this is witnessed in the earliest extant recension of *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, which has been dated by reference to political struggles in the Northern Half which occurred around the time of the battle of Mag Coba (near Dromore, County Down) in 1103.<sup>72</sup> What may be his original contribution is the intensely punitive imaging of life in the wilderness, which draws on the association of *gelta* with trees but which makes them in particular the site of punishment. Suibhne makes occasional forays to mountain-tops and glens, but his characteristic setting is in woodland, on the branches or tops of trees. Even when he approaches church-sites, he tends to perch in the associated *bile*.<sup>73</sup> He does so in order to hide himself, not to gain shelter: if anything, he is more exposed to the cold in this position than on the ground.<sup>74</sup> References to Suibhne being *i mbile* do not imply that he was lodged within the hollow of a tree: in Irish, the preposition *i* is used of being ‘on’ or ‘in’ a tree.<sup>75</sup> Suibhne’s suffering in the trees is even suggestive of that of Christ on the Cross, helped by the fact that, in Irish, *crann* is used interchangeably with *cross* of the Crucifixion Tree.

This emphasis on trees is notably absent from the five Middle Irish poems concerning Moling and Suibhne which are found in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5100-4.<sup>76</sup> These poems are earlier than the extant *BS* by half a century or thereabouts, and internal references indicate that they were very likely composed at the southern

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*foraithmheadh arail dia dheacruibh 7 dia imshniomh budhdhéin*, *BS* 62-3 §39). On this see Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The cult of St Moling’, 14-17. In other cases, praise of wild nature is inspired by Suibhne’s rejection of the sights and sounds of the tame world of the clergy: e.g. *BS* 32-3 §23 q. 1; 152-3 §83 qq 16-22.

<sup>70</sup> *aithrige iodhan abhus/in gach olc riamh doronus* (*BS* 154 §83 q. 26).

<sup>71</sup> Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Cath Almaine* (Dublin 1978) 7 line 90; 14 line 184. For discussion see *idem.*, ‘A study of the Irish legend of the Wild Man’, *Éigse* 14, part 3 (1972) 177-206, at 188-91; republished in Carey (ed.), *Buile Suibhne: perspectives and reassessments* 172-201, at 182-4. See also Chadwick, ‘Geilt’, *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> See Máire Herbert, ‘*Fled Dúin na nGéd*: a reappraisal’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 18 (Winter 1989) 75-87, at 84-7. I have argued that Suibhne’s association with the battle of Mag Roth goes back no further than the extant version of *Fled Dúin na nGéd* or now-lost versions thereof: see Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The cult of St Moling’ 26-42.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *Téit iarumh a mbile na cillí*, ‘Thereafter he went into the old tree of the church’ (*BS* 28-9 §20; at Cluain Cille); *dochóidh isin iobar robhúidh isin chill*, ‘he went into the yew-tree which was in the church’ (*BS* 48-9 §33, at Ros Beraigh); *tóet roimhe co rainic isin mbile ag Ros Earcáin*, ‘went on his way until he reached the old tree at Ros Earcáin’ (*BS* 50-51 §35); *robhúi Suibhne forsán mbili ina fiadhnuisi*, ‘Suibhne on the tree in front of her’ (*BS* 82-3 §42, at Ros Comáin); *Gabhaidh iaromh fos 7 comhnaidhe i nglai Bhile Tiobradáin i cCrích Gháille i n-oirther Connacht*, ‘he made his resting-place in the fork of Bile Tiobradáin in Crich Gaille in the east of Connaught’ (*BS* 118-19 §59). The frequency of *Ros* ‘wood’ in these placenames is noteworthy.

<sup>74</sup> *BS* 118-19 §59.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. *Mé Éba, ben Ádaim uill...cóir is mé do-chóid sa crann*, ‘I am Eve, great Adam’s wife...it is I that should have gone upon the Tree’ (Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 50-51 q. 1 lines *a, d*).

<sup>76</sup> Edited by Whitley Stokes, ‘Poems ascribed to S. Moling’, *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* 2 (1908) 20-41 (at 20-28). There are twenty poems in the collection published by Stokes but only the first five concern Moling and Suibhne, and these five are separated from the remaining poems by other, unrelated, poems.

Tech Moling (St Mullin's).<sup>77</sup> The element on which they focus, and that in a very positive way, is water, celebrating the river Barrow at various points close to Tech Moling: the stretch called the *Garb* ('Rough River') where the Barrow pounds over a rocky ledge known today as the Scar; also the estuary of *Inber Dubglaise* ('Mouth of the Black Stream'), believed to be the Glynn river, also known as the Aughavaud river, which joins the Barrow about a mile from *Tech Moling*; and the *Taidiu* or 'Watercourse', reputedly built by Moling himself.<sup>78</sup> The lack of emphasis on trees is all the more striking since the poems reference the old name of Tech Moling, *Ros (m)Bruic* ('Badger Wood'), and since the actual wood survived for centuries thereafter. It seems safe to conclude that a well-developed Suibne-tradition which did *not* foreground his association with trees existed at the southern Tech Moling, prior to the composition of *BS*.

Finally we return to the poem *M'airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir*, dated roughly to c. 800-850, some 300-400 years earlier than both the five Middle Irish poems and *BS*. The preceding preamble looked at later traditions which may have attached to it over time. What then does the poem itself say? Its speaker, let us assume it is Suibne, conveys that his oratory is a source of unmitigated joy: even a 'mansion' (*lántechdais*) would not be 'more well-appointed' (*sēstu*) in terms of aspect on the heavenly bodies.<sup>79</sup> Suibne would have us know its actual 'history' (*stoir*): it was built by Gobbán. It is noteworthy that traditions of the legendary master-builder Gobbán were of particular interest to Leinster writers. This Gobbán (also named *Gobbán Saor*, 'Gobbán the Wright') is regarded as a reflex of the divine Goibniu, whose name is a derivative of *goba* 'smith'; he has a Welsh counterpart in Gofannon.<sup>80</sup> A supposedly historical master-builder named Gobbán features in the Lives of saints Moling, Máedóc of Ferns (County Wexford), and Abbán of Adamstown (County Wexford).<sup>81</sup> But although Gobbán is represented as contemporary with all of these saints, they are of widely diverging date: Moling died in 697, Máedóc's obit is given variously as 620 and 625, and Abbán's *floruit* is apparently earlier still.<sup>82</sup> This, combined with the fact that the three saints are associated with the south-east, suggests a highly localized reflex of Goibniu. It may be that this was stimulated by the existence in south-east Leinster in the seventh century (or thereabouts) of a skilled historical builder named

<sup>77</sup> On the date of this collection of five poems see Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The cult of St Moling' 34-5. For recent discussion of all aspects of the fifth poem (*A ben Gráic, is gráda sain!*), together with a new edition and translation, see Brian Frykenberg, 'The "Death of the Wild-Man" in the legend of Suibhne Geilt', in Carey (ed.), *Buile Suibhne: perspectives and reassessments* 43-92. Frykenberg proposes a 'late eleventh- to twelfth-century date' for this poem (ibid. 78).

<sup>78</sup> See T. F. O'Sullivan, *Goodly Barrow. A voyage on an Irish river* (Dublin 2001) 178-80; 184; P. O'Leary, *St. Mullins illustrated: a local history and the Life of St. Moling* (Graig-na-Managh 1913).

<sup>79</sup> Can *sēstu*, which is not otherwise attested, be the comparative form of an adjective based on *sés* (originally *u*-stem? cf *eDIL* s.v.) 'sense, plan, arrangement' + suffix *-dae*? Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* 295, says 'adj. of doubtful meaning...conjectured to mean "more delightful"'.  
<sup>80</sup> See T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 525-7; John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic culture. A historical encyclopedia* 5 vols. (Santa Barbara 2006), IV, 826.

<sup>81</sup> He is an unnamed '*famosum artificem*' in the Latin Life of Moling (Carolus Plummer, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* 2 vols. (Oxford 1910) II 194-5 §xi); a married '*Gobban saer*' in the Irish Life of Moling (Whitley Stokes, 'The birth and life of St. Moling', *Revue celtique* 27 (1906) 257-312 (at pp 280-01 §34; 284-5 §41; pp 289-91 §§ 46-50). In the Latin Life of Abbán he is '*famosissimus artifex et peritissimus in omni arte lignorum et lapidum ... in Hibernia, nomine Gobanus*' (Plummer, *Vitae* I, p. 29 §xlii). In the Latin Life of Máedóc he is '*subtilissimus artifex*' and '*Gobbanus artifex*' (Plumer, *Vitae* II, p. 159 §46, §48).

<sup>82</sup> See Pádraig Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints* (Dublin 2011) 487-90 ('Moling Luachra'); 432-6 ('Maodhóg of Ferns'); 51-2 ('Abán of Adamstown').

Gobbán, but there is no clear evidence that this was the case.<sup>83</sup> At any rate, the use of unqualified ‘Gobbán’ in the poem suggests that the tradition of the legendary builder was well-established by the ninth century and is what is being referenced by the poet.

One can therefore expect Suibne’s oratory to be a built structure, and well-made, and it is clearly identified as such: ‘a house in which rain does not fall’ - no small asset in an Irish climate.<sup>84</sup> Its situation is peaceful: the description ‘a place (*maigen*) in which spear-points are not feared’ suggests the ‘inviolable precinct’ (*maigen dígona*, literally ‘place of non-wounding’) around a secular or ecclesiastic residence.<sup>85</sup> Its situation is also bright: ‘as bright as though in a garden/with no fence around it’. While such a garden, like the *maigen dígona*, might be found at either a secular settlement or a church, the particular association of horticultural expertise with the church, and the overall ecclesiasticism of the poem, points to the latter in this case.

The contrast with *BS* is striking. Here at Tuaim Inbir (perhaps a reference to the *Inber Dubglaise* mentioned in one of the five Middle Irish poems discussed above),<sup>86</sup> there is shelter, brightness, fraternity (signalled by Gobbán) and peace, and Suibne is moved to praise, not complaint. He finds God in the ivy, which is to say everywhere. He speaks guilelessly, calling God his dearly beloved (literally, ‘my dear little heart’), which may be to say he is a holy *geilt*: as the poem gives no basis for supposing him to be the kind of *geilt* we find in *BS*, a different explanation for his epithet may be sought. There is at least one other example of *geilt* used of a type of ‘holy fool’. It occurs in the Middle Irish poem beginning *A Chrínóc, cubaid do cheól* (‘Crínóc, lady of measured melody’) which was interpreted by its editor, James Carney, as an allegorized address by a male speaker to the rediscovered psalm-book of his school-days. The speaker describes his youthful love for the psalm-book, when he was all zeal and innocence, in the following terms: ‘my burning countenance full of love for you/like a *geilt*, unassailed by evil’.<sup>87</sup> The state described is somewhat akin to *baile* in the sense of ‘spiritual rapture’.<sup>88</sup> The term *óinmit* is more commonly used of the ‘holy fool’ than *geilt*: for instance it is applied repeatedly to Mac Dá Cherda and his clerical companion Conall Clocach in *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh* (‘The Adventures of the Holy Fools’). Interestingly, Mac Dá Cherda acknowledges his ‘affliction’ and even expresses gratitude for it:

Three people  
who are the most foolish in the wide world:  
an infatuated young woman – by strength of deed,  
a small child, and a fool.

I am the third one of these,  
I give thanks to the King:

<sup>83</sup> While there are various seculars and ecclesiastics named Gobbán in the annals and genealogies, none of them seems to fit the bill.

<sup>84</sup> In ‘The cult of Moling’ 20, I described Suibne’s oratory as ‘makeshift’, a term I would now disown.

<sup>85</sup> On this see Jean-Michel Picard, ‘Space organization in early Irish monasteries: the *platea*’, in *Glendalough. City of God*, ed. Charles Doherty, Linda Doran and Mary Kelly (Dublin 2011) 54-63 (at pp 61-3).

<sup>86</sup> [\[Ref. to be supplied here to the page on which footnote 78 occurs above\]](#)

<sup>87</sup> *mo lí lasrach lán dot séirc/amail geilt cen aslach uilc* (James Carney, *Medieval Irish lyrics* (Dublin 1967) 74. Translated ‘burning with love my flesh, still free from fault/as fool of God in smitten innocence’ *ibid.*, 75).

<sup>88</sup> On this see Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘On the meaning of *baile* (*buile*), and the interpretation of the poem beginning *Rop tú mo baile*’, *Éigse* 39 (2016) 231-42

God took away my reason without asking permission  
and condemned me to foolishness.<sup>89</sup>

The speaker of a Middle Irish poem, named in the colophon simply as *Suibhni* but apparently identifiable with Suibne *Geilt*, also tells of being divinely ‘struck’: ‘it is Jesus who struck me’ (*is hé Ísacān romben*).<sup>90</sup>

In *M’airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir* Suibne apparently lives a relatively solitary but blessed existence in some kind of prayer-house, and such a tradition seems to be carried over into *BS* itself, which has Suibne declare:

‘When I was Suibhne the sage,  
I used to live in a cool bothy;  
I have bartered my wonted place for a far-off one  
on sedgy land, on marsh, on mountain-side’.<sup>91</sup>

Assuming that he is housed, the words *barr edin* above our poem may then be understood as aimed at dispelling any possible suggestion that God might have served as a mere assistant to Gobbán, thatching the house that he built. Such a thought could occur, since medieval Irish poets were fond of imaging God not just as the Creator or Artífex of all things (*Dúilem, Cerd na nDúl*) but also as a craftsman in various fields.<sup>92</sup> But on reflexion, and certainly with the help of the gloss, a reader will quickly identify the poem’s subtle contrast between Gobbán who, however skilful, needs materials before he can build a house, and God who can create a thatch of ivy out of nothing.

The reading presented here allows one to take everything that is said in the manuscript at face value: the details in the poem, the ascription and the gloss. If so, the poem may be regarded as purely descriptive, and not a riddle, unlike the roughly contemporary poem in the Milan Codex which also describes a house of some kind, but in baffling detail which the reader is explicitly challenged to resolve.<sup>93</sup> Previous commentators on *M’airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir* felt obliged to jettison one or other detail when attempting to make sense of it. Writing in 1935, Kenneth Jackson argued that the poem was ‘on the internal evidence clearly a hermit poem’, and its content ‘typical of the clerical literature and the Lives of the Saints’, and consequently felt obliged to reject the ascription to Suibne: ‘The poem lacks anything which can belong

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<sup>89</sup> *Trī dhuine/is baeithe ar an mbioth mbuidhe,/ben òg baoídhe, tré bhrīgh mbeirt,/naoidhe beg 7 òinmeid. // Is misi an tres duine dībh,/beirem a buidhe don rīgh,/rug Dia mo chēill gen cor ched,/tug mē fēin re hōinmeideacht* (Royal Irish Academy, MS D. IV. I, fol. 32<sup>raz-rb3</sup>. I am indebted for this reference to Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin who is preparing an edition and translation of this text for publication).

<sup>90</sup> Ed. Kuno Meyer, ‘A poem ascribed to Suibne Geilt’, *Ériu* 2 (1905) 95. The first line is ‘I have found a bright inlet here’ (*Fūarus inber soirchi sunt*), making the identification with Suibne *Geilt* plausible.

<sup>91</sup> ‘*Antan ba-sum Suibhne sruith/arbhirinn bith a n-úarbhuith/i seisg, a sesgonn, i sléibh:/rorer m’eol ar eidirchéin*’ (*BS* 38 §27 q. 5). O’Keefe’s translation (*ibid.* p. 39), is ‘When I was Suibhne the sage,/I used to dwell in a lonely shieling,/on sedgy land, on a morass, on a mountain-side ;/I have bartered my home for a far-off land’.

<sup>92</sup> E.g. in the poem beginning *Aithbe damsá bés mora*, God is imaged as a fuller of cloth (Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, 78, q. 21); in *Suidigiud Tige Midchúarda* God is imaged as *dálem* ‘distributor (of food or drink)’, and *coic* ‘cook’ (Best, Bergin and O’Brien, *The Book of Leinster*, I, p. 120 line 3780).

<sup>93</sup> The poem, beginning *Tegdais adchondarc indiu*, is edited and translated in Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus* II, 292. On its riddling aspect see Liam Breatnach, ‘Varia IV: 3. *Domidethar* in the meaning “guesses, solves a riddle”’, *Ériu* 34 (1983) 194-5.



properly to the Wild Man theme or is characteristic of the Suibhne story'.<sup>94</sup> Writing fifteen years later, James Carney objected to the idea that Gobbán represented a personal name in the poem, proposing instead that it was a common noun meaning 'artisan' which referred to God: 'God is the *Gobbán* who built the tree as well as being the thatcher who covered it with ivy'.<sup>95</sup> This ingenious suggestion allowed him to retain the idea that Suibhne was perched in a tree. Gerard Murphy, writing in 1956, was willing to credit both the ascription to Suibhne and the traditional identity of Gobbán but as a result he felt obliged to reject the idea of a house or hut, saying: 'with Professor Carney [the present writer] thinks that an oratory whose roof is the sky ... seems more like a *barr edin* or 'ivied tree-top' than a genuine hermit's hut'.<sup>96</sup>

Their objections would hardly have arisen had they allowed that the *geltacht* exhibited by Suibhne in the poem need not be the same as that to which he is subject in *BS*. In the poem he is a joyful christian, a loving *geilt*, a hermit in the sense of being secluded, but not a fugitive, and (on the evidence of the ascription of the contiguous poem in the St Paul Codex to 'Maling') an associate of saint Moling, living or praying close to his foundation in a snug little house. This in my view is the primary identity on which the changes were rung by later writers, some of whose works we have, but many of which have been lost, though traces of them are evident yet in what remains. The anonymous Leinsterman who penned the poem may not have finished it out — it lacks a *dúnad* — but what he has left affords us an invaluable glimpse of a very early stage of that tradition.

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<sup>94</sup> K. H. Jackson, *Studies in early Celtic nature poetry* (Cambridge 1935) 122. In titling the poem 'The ivied tree-top' in *A Celtic miscellany* (p. 72), which was published in 1951, he was surely influenced by James Carney's work.

<sup>95</sup> Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* 135.

<sup>96</sup> Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* (1956) 225. It bears mention that 'ivied tree-top' is a rather forced translation of *barr edin* (see p. 3(?) above). Cp. Jackson's comment: 'The title, "The Ivy Bower" (*Barr edin*), is a scholiasm in the MS., and must refer to the ivy which grew over the cell in question' (*Early Celtic nature poetry* 35).