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NOTES ON THE DECORATION IN THE *DUANAIRE* OF
CÚ CHONNACHT MÁG UIDHIR

Among bardic poem-books or *duanaireadha*, that dedicated to Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir, lord of Fermanagh 1566–89, is noteworthy as being the only such book to survive that contains poems exclusively dedicated to one individual.¹ This distinguishes it from *duanaireadha* of the miscellaneous variety and from the family *duanaire*.² It is also set apart from contemporary and earlier poem-books by other features, one of which will be dealt with in this paper. For example, it has been noted that the cumulative metrical situation presented by the poems preserved in this manuscript is at variance with the metrical statistics in similar manuscripts and in the general area of surviving bardic poetry, particularly with regard to the prominence of poems in the *casbhairdne* metre, and that this may have been a reflection of the patron's personal taste.³

The manuscript is orderly in its presentation of material, though the quality of the vellum is questionable in places, particularly where palimpsests occur (e.g. 5v and 10v), and where bleed-through is evident (9v). The text has been subjected to extensive re-inking throughout. With regard to ruling, there are twin bounding-lines left and right, with single bounding-lines top and bottom, sometimes ruled on both sides of the vellum leaf, delineating a text-grid that accommodates a range of 36–41 lines through twenty vellum leaves. The book is also regular in its layout of the poetry, the *litterae notabiliores* rubricated throughout, and each half-quatrain occupying a line of manuscript. The *ceann fo eite* (of the spiral variety also found in the Book of O'Hara and elsewhere) is limited to use as a mechanism for the justification of the text on many of the leaves (e.g. ff 1–2r, 7v, 8v), in addition to the usual method of stretching the final letter (e.g. ff 7r34, 9r33), the historic use of the device as a return sign being evident only in one of the *casbhairdne* poems (f. 16r–v). Other features are also in keeping with the modalities of Irish scribal production: the different requirements of scribal correction, for example, are met with caret (11v31), *vel* (9r) and a–b (6v), while a whole quatrain has been erased at f. 4r28–9.

¹ Det kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen, Ny kgl. Samling 268b 2^o. Available online at www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/777/eng/ (consulted August 2014).

² Brian Ó Cuív, *The Irish bardic duanaire or 'poem-book'* (Dublin 1973) 27.

³ Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'Maghnus Ó Conchubhair, Rí Connacht (1288–1293): *blagh dá dhuanair*' in *Séimhfhear suairc: aistí in ómós don Ollamh Breandán Ó Conchúir*, eag. Seán Ó Coileáin, Liam P. Ó Murchú and Pádraigín Riggs (An Daingean 2013) 679–704: 682–3.

Notable is the treatment of three sets of *ranna iargcomhairc*, or supplementary closing quatrains. Those that conclude Poem XIX at f.15v are squeezed into the bottom of the text-grid by a reduction in the size of the script and an increase in the amount of contractions, enabling the scribe to accommodate the three quatrains within three manuscript lines. In the two other cases, however, at ff 2r (Poem I) and 3r (Poem II), the quatrains (numbering three and four respectively) are written transversely in the right hand margin, as though they had not been available at the time the scribe finished the poems and began the following ones. This interpretation is supported by the fact that supplementary quatrains to two other poems (IX and X) are presented in the conventional way, as part of the poems proper, on ff 8r and 9r respectively.

Poems I and II are part of a sequence of five poems addressed by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird to Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir that form the opening gathering (ff 1–4) of the Mág Uidhir *duanaire*. The scribe's (and presumably the patron's) high regard for the poet is evident, not just in the position of the poems in the manuscript, but also in the heading to the fourth poem: 'Athtoga duaine an Feargail cedna' ('another great poem by the same Fearghal'). This compliment refers to the second poem, because, in reality, Poem III occurs as an addition at the bottom of f. 3r, in a non-scribal hand, the heading ('an fear cedna') resting on the lower bounding-line, and the three quatrains written from one margin to the other outside of the text-grid. This poem is among Fearghal Óg's shortest compositions,⁴ and is a three-quatrain note of thanks to Mág Uidhir. The coincidence of this addition with that of the marginal *ranna iargcomhairc* on the same page and on the preceding folio is tantalising, suggesting that the three additions may have been supplied by the poet himself, and Poem III possibly inscribed by him. On the latter point, however, it should be noted that the script does not correspond to other putative examples of the poet's hand.⁵ Fearghal Óg's extended patronymic, now unfortunately only partly distinct on the opening folio, may also be indicative of scribal familiarity with the author.⁶

⁴ Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'Three early poems by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, with notes on the *duanaire* of Domhnall Mac Suibhne' *Celtica* 27 (2013) 38–54: 39.

⁵ Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'An elegy for Seaán Óg Ó Dochartaigh' *Celtica* 26 (2010) 89–110: 91.

⁶ Ó Macháin, 'Three early poems', 48.

Decoration

Discounting the addition of Poem III, and an eighteenth-century addition of 21 paper folios at the end, the Mág Uidhir *duanaire* is the work of a single scribe. He signs his name once, in the first set of *ranna iargcomhair*e where they are entered in the margin of f. 2r and where he identifies himself as Cú Mumhan Ó Cléirigh. Not a lot more is known about Cú Mumhan, or whether he is connected to others on record as bearing that name,⁷ but he is to be reckoned among a distinguished list of Í Chléirigh scribes whose work is found in manuscripts from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and indeed down to the early nineteenth century when Seán Ó Cléirigh brought the residue of family manuscripts from Cavan to Ringsend.⁸

As is evident from the manuscript itself, and from David Greene's edition of its contents, Cú Mumhan's work is distinguished by clarity and precision. There is an aspect of the manuscript, however, for which it is doubtful that he was responsible, one that adds to the exceptional character of this book. This is the matter of the inscription and decoration of the initials to the poems. Apart from a brief mention in descriptions of the manuscript,⁹ the subject of the decoration of this manuscript is one that has received no detailed attention to date. Yet, it is, without doubt, one of the remarkable features of the book.

Of the twenty-four poems in the manuscript, twenty-one contain decorated initials at the head of their first lines. Of the three poems without decorated initials, two (Poems VI and XVI) are acephalous due to chasms in the manuscript after ff 4 and 12, and the third is Poem III, which, as explained above, is a non-scribal addition at the bottom of f. 3r. There are no examples of capital F, I, N, O, or P, but the other letters of the Irish alphabet are represented, in some cases twice or thrice. These initials present a variety of styles, frequently in combination with each other, a variety that is remarkable in what survives of Irish manuscripts from the vellum era. Furthermore, of the twenty-one initials in question, only two confine themselves to the space left for them by the scribe; the remainder are bigger than the available space and so are generally off-set, to some degree, in the margins (see further

⁷ David Greene (ed.), *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir: the poembook of Cú Chomnacht Mág Uidhir, Lord of Fermanagh 1566–1589* (Dublin 1972) xv; Brendan Jennings, *Michael Ó Cleirigh chief of the Four Masters and his associates* (Dublin and Cork 1936) 53.

⁸ John O'Donovan (ed.), *The genealogies, tribes and customs of Hy-Fiachrach* (Dublin 1844) 397.

⁹ Ludwig Stern, 'Ueber eine Sammlung irischer Gedichte in Kopenhagen' *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 2 (1899) 323–72: 325; Greene, *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, xiv; Pádraig Ó Macháin, *Téacs agus údar i bhfilíocht na scol* (Dublin 1998) 44.

below). This discrepancy in alignment of text and decoration supports the view that Cú Mumhan Ó Cléirigh may not have been responsible for inserting the initials. One should also add that it is probable that the rubricator of the quatrain-initials and the limner of the poem-initials were one and the same person.¹⁰

The dominant motifs in these decorated initials are foliage and ribbon-interlace, with or without zoomorphic terminals of head or claw; six of the initials (at ff 10r, 11r, 11v, 12v, 16r, 16v) present with no foliage. Despite the variety of the presentation, which will be dealt with below, the combination of motifs and other shared features lead to the conclusion that these initials are the work of one person. The evidence of the different styles of decoration shows that this limner was operating within the tradition of Irish manuscript decoration familiar to us particularly from the twelfth century on, but that he was also influenced by decorative features of late-medieval and Renaissance manuscripts of the European tradition.

These initial letters do not represent a complete break from tradition. Elements, or traces of elements of what will be noted below as occurring in the Mág Uidhir *duanaire* are to be found from time to time in ornamented initials in Irish manuscripts. Scrolls, for instance, have long been present as a decorative item in European and Irish lettering:¹¹ they are detectable, for example, in the curled terminals of the interlace in many letters in Rawlinson B 502 (e.g. f. 25r.b11), and in different iterations such as the double scroll along the top of the *G* in the Book of Magauran (NLI MS G 1200, f. 15r.b5); in the majestic *A* on the opening leaf of the gathering written for Bishop Ó Ceallaigh in the Book of Í Mhaine (RIA MS 1225 (D ii 1) f. 48r); in the *Q* of the Yellow Book of Lecan (TCD MS 1318, column 465); and in the *S* of Laud 610 (f. 59r). Some of these may be throw-backs to the half-palmettes identified by Henry and Marsh-Micheli as a diagnostic element in a sub-group of manuscripts that combine animal and foliage decoration in the late eleventh- and early twelfth-century, and which might be attributed to influence from Scandinavian or continental art.¹² The sustained decora-

¹⁰ On f. 9r23–4 (Greene, *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, lines 1304–7) the scribe slipped and made the second line of the quatrain the first, the first being then placed at the very end with an accompanying scribal comment in the margin (not noted by Greene): ‘Ag sin an .c. ceatramha don rann’. The initial of that misplaced first line was duly rubricated, and the initial of the second line coloured in the same blue ink used in the poem-initial elsewhere on the page.

¹¹ J. J. G. Alexander, *The decorated letter* (London 1978) 13.

¹² Françoise Henry and G. L. Marsh-Micheli, ‘A century of Irish illumination (1070–1170)’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 62 C (1961–3) 101–66: 126–36.

tion of the Mág Uidhir *duanaire*, however, where acanthus and vine- or ivy-leaves are present as a central motif, is exceptional. See further the commentary in the description of f. 2r below.

The same observation applies to the use of foliage in general. The dense, narrow interlace that practically chokes some of the letters in Rawlinson B 502 appears, by the late medieval period, to have lost its foliate connotations. But some decorative continuity may be observed in later manuscripts from the light foliage terminations of twelfth-century letters, or the ‘finely lobed little leaves’,¹³ which Henry and Marsh-Micheli see as an original element of the late twelfth-century ‘Cormac Psalter’ (British Library Additional MS 36,929). Thus different varieties of trailing sprigs in the Book of Leinster (TCD MS 1339) p. 152a6, and Rawlinson B 502 f. 62v.a34 have echoes in similar features in Í Mhaine ff 10v and 41v, and, stretching the argument somewhat, in the terminal decorations in *fleurs de lis* that are to be found as late as the seventeenth century: see RIA 778 (E i 3) p. 1. Even though some continuity may be in evidence, however, stylistic fusion does not appear in other manuscripts of the period in the way that it does in the Mág Uidhir *duanaire*. But that such was well within the compass of Irish scribes is hinted at in particular by a letter in RIA 670 (D v 2), a legal manuscript possibly of the fourteenth century. Here, on f. 1v, we find a zoomorphic *C* with foliate interlace (incorporating two external bows of the type described at 8r and 10r below), where a flower, a leaf and three acorns form a central element of the decoration.

The page-border documented below for f. 2r is noteworthy as being without direct antecedents in the Gaelic decorative tradition. Foliage of the type on display here is not found among the examples of page-borders that survive elsewhere among Irish manuscripts. Four-sided page-borders occur in early gospel books (e.g. the Book of Durrow, the Stowe Missal, the Book of Deer, etc.) and in psalters (e.g. the Cormac Psalter), and they are found in such notable later exceptions as King’s Inns MS 17, f. 1r, TCD MS 1299, p. 1, and RIA MS 466 (C iv 2) f. 1v; a three-sided border created from floating fish is found in RIA MS 464 (23 O 6) p. 9.¹⁴ Even single-sided borders are rare, and appear confined to de facto formations from elaborated descenders of ‘IN Principio’ or other letters such as initial *A* (e.g. RIA MS 456 (23 P 10) iii, p. 1) or *F* (NLI MS G 5, f. 1r). The ‘INCipitt’ on f. 43v of the Book of Pottlerath

¹³ *ibid.* 164.

¹⁴ Scribe identified by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha as Donnchadh Ó Bolgaidhe (*Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland* 1 (Dublin 1967) 69, reference from Dr Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha).

(part of Laud 610) is interesting with regard to this point, as the convoluted zoomorphic *IN* monogram, containing what appears to be a white-vine insert in its central compartment,¹⁵ extends down the margin for the length of fifteen of the forty-seven lines on the page, and is then further extended for a length of eleven lines by the addition of a plant with trumpet flowers, quatrefoils and hook-shaped leaves. Similarly, the zoomorphic monogram of the ‘*Incipit*’ in Corpus Christi College (Oxford) MS 129, f. 42r is decorated with three acanthus leaves in the compartment, and a shaded, letter-length border displaying a trumpet-flower and two *fleurs de lis*.¹⁶

Description

In the following descriptive list I propose to take the letters in the sequence in which they appear in the manuscript; measurements refer to letter-height.

1. 1r1. L [Poem I] 9 cm. Set in 10-line x 16-letter space, extending into left and upper margin. Cadel letter. The foot of the letter terminates on the right in a large *fleur de lis*, in faded gold, and on the left in a human face. Letter outline rubricated, and decorated with cadels in heavy black. Set in elaborate surround of leaves and fruit, floating and attached, extending to upper and left edge of page. The space allowed by the scribe for the insertion is the largest in the book. This large initial that commences the first of Fearghal Óg’s poems announces the beginning of the *duanaire*.

Cadel letters, or *cadeaux*, are a feature of English and continental manuscripts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and earlier.¹⁷ Though popular in municipal documents (see below), they are practically unknown in manuscripts of the Gaelic tradition: the only examples encountered by me so far are in RIA MS 1222 (D ii 2), a sixteenth-century manuscript containing a copy of the Dindsheanchus, and written – perhaps significantly – by another Ó Cléirigh scribe, Muiris Ó Cléirigh, possibly a son or nephew of the scribe of Rawlinson B 514,¹⁸ and also, one presumes, related to the Giolla Riabhach whose

¹⁵ Cf. also f. 34ra, and for this decorative feature see Christopher De Hamel, *A history of illuminated manuscripts* (Oxford 1986) 220.

¹⁶ Plate 54 in Brian Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and Oxford College Libraries II* (Dublin 2003).

¹⁷ Alexander, *The decorated letter*, 27; see the three sixteenth-century examples – two of which are of *L* – reproduced as Plate 34 in *Medieval ornamental alphabets and numerals* (London n.d.).

¹⁸ Cf. genealogy in Paul Walsh, *The Ó Cléirigh family of Tír Conaill* (Dublin 1938); *AFM* s.a. 1573.

work is represented (Poem VII)¹⁹ in the *Mág Uidhir duanaire*. The decorated initials in MS 1222 are extraordinary for a number of reasons; initial *T* (f. 1v) and *S* (f. 45v) are executed in cadel style, but are not as elaborate as here, and are without the spraywork surround.

2. 2r7. **C** [Poem II] 4.5 cm. Entire letter set in 7-line x 16-letter space. Constructed from intertwining ribbon (coloured in brown and red) culminating in two dog-head terminals forming the jaws of the letter and separated by a sprig of foliage extending from the tongue of the lower head. Two animal legs extend left beyond letter to provide connection with an acanthus border (uncoloured) filling entire left-hand margin from upper to lower edge. The leaves are arranged in a sequence of three quaterfoils with other leaves or fruit emerging left and right where the leaves conjoin. Atop this arrangement is a miscellany of acanthus and smaller leaves and fruit, including a *fleur de lis*, extending from the upper end of the letter to the top edge.

Initials with zoomorphic interlace are a commonplace of decoration in Irish manuscripts, the dog-heads here resembling those, for example, in the decoration in the Book of Ballymote (RIA MS 536 (23 P 12)) f. 8r, or in MS 1222 passim. Facing animal heads at the terminals of initial *C* are found again on f. 6r of the *duanaire*, and are also found elsewhere, for instance in National Library of Scotland MS Adv. 72.1.2, f. 6r and NLI MS G 10, p. 12, both sixteenth-century; the feature also has parallels in European medieval manuscripts.²⁰ The sprig emerging from a mouth is found in early manuscripts: see, for example, St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 904, p. 174a. In the *Mág Uidhir duanaire*, however, one's attention is drawn away from the letter to the elaborate, uncoloured border. Acanthus decoration, with its profusion of curling leaf-scrolls is a development from European tradition, and continued there throughout the medieval period particularly in the context of foliate initials.²¹ It makes its appearance early in English manuscripts and achieves great popularity in the fifteenth century.²²

The only comparable instance in Gaelic manuscripts of sustained acanthus decoration known to me is that in the surround – 'a curved

¹⁹ See Greene, *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, xii.

²⁰ For an example from late eleventh-century Provence see Émile-A. Van Moë, *The decorated letter from the VIIIth to the XIIth century* (Paris 1950) 29.

²¹ Compare, for example, Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, *Scriptoria in medieval Saxony: St. Pancras in Hamersleben* (Wiesbaden 2004) 56, et passim.

²² Kathleen L. Scott, *Dated and datable manuscript borders c. 1395–1499* (London 2002) 12–13, 121.

frame of scrolls of foliage²³ – used in the full-page representation of St Colum Cille in the well-known frontispiece to Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's Life of that saint in Rawlinson B 514, f. iii *verso*. Again, the fact that this manuscript is the work of an Ó Cléirigh scribe, Giolla Riabhach (referred to above), may be of significance. It is noteworthy that the opening initial *T* which was never entered in the half column space reserved for it on f. 1r of that manuscript, facing the frontispiece, was to be constructed on a base of acanthus scrolls, the outline of which survives.

3. 3v1. **B** [Poem IV] 6 cm. Centred on bounding-lines, partly set in 6-line x 6-letter space, extending into left and upper margin. Bowl formed from thick three-dimensional ribbon, rubricated, terminating in oversized grotesque upturned claw extending outside of letter to right. Interior of bowl filled with interlace, connecting, at bottom, with exterior v-shaped base of plaited ribbon, in which letter sits; this, in turn, is framed with two acanthus leaves and fruit. The plaited shaft, surrounded by sprays, extends to the upper edge, where cropping has given it a truncated appearance, and has presumably removed the animal-head terminal which should complement the claw.

The pointed base of the letter here is reminiscent of the design of the *B* in the late fifteenth-century UCD-OFM MS A 7, f. 35v. The feature of the claw is a variation on the lower terminating claw found in many initials in Irish manuscripts, and represented in the *duanaire* by the *R* at 13r16. In its deployment here, it is related in a general way to some of the convulsed initials found in the MS 1222, already mentioned (e.g. f. 6r).

4. 4v5. **M** [Poem V] 4.5 cm. Centred on bounding-lines, partly set in 7-line x 9 letter space, extending into left margin. Plain ribbon lettering, rubricated, and possibly retouched in black by the (eighteenth-century?) re-inking hand in evidence on the same page. The lines of the central *v* converge, intersect and revert to re-unite in a central knot; the two outer legs of the letter are formed from the lines of the central *v*-turning inwards at the top, then sharply down and back to bisect the *v*-lines, tapering to a point before reverting to wrap around the *v*-lines again with a ribbon knot. The letter is fixed in an uncoloured surround of acanthus, fruit and vine.

²³ Françoise Henry and Geneviève Marsh-Micheli, 'Manuscripts and illuminations, 1169–1603', in *Medieval Ireland 1169–1534, A new history of Ireland II*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Oxford 1976) 781–815: 808.

The angularity of this letter, reminiscent in its pointed extremities of the lettering in the early section of the Book of Ballymote, is at variance with the letters that precede and follow. Continuity is provided by the recurring foliage motif. The outer legs being shorter than the central *v*, it is not difficult to understand why the letter might be interpreted as a *U*.²⁴

5. 5r30. **D** [Poem VII] 4 cm. Set to left of 5-line x 11-letter space and centred on the margin; traces of faded rubrication evident; plain ribbon outline filled with vines; head-stroke faded and indistinct; bowl filled with lozenge (in acanthus surround), the four quadrants of which are occupied by trefoils.

This is the first initial in the sequence to ignore the space provided and to be set almost entirely in the margin. It is also the only one of the foliate letters not to have a surround but to have the foliage internalised in the ribbon outline and in the bowl of the letter.

6. 6r25. **C** [Poem VIII] 5.5 cm. Set to left of 5-line x 10-letter space, centred on the margin. Plain ribbon, with faded reticulation pattern and rubrication. Cat-head terminals (cf. *C* on f. 2r above). In square, woodcut-style; rinceaux surround, with a straight rule marking lower border.

The vine pattern is at its richest in the surround to this letter; the square design, differing in its decoration from the box-lettering of European medieval manuscripts, leaves no doubt as to the influence of the woodcut; another letter in woodcut style is on f. 9r. Henry and Marsh-Micheli have argued for woodcut influence on the panels in the Book of the De Burgos (TCD MS 1440).²⁵ One might also argue that it is in evidence in the large Carolingian *A*, surrounded by foliage and framed in a square of Greek keys, at the beginning of ‘Agallamh na Seanórach’ in UCD-OFM MS A 4, p. 1. Interplay between manuscript and woodcut has also been observed in the wider European tradition.²⁶

More than any other source, however, comparison in the matter of woodcut-style letters is invited with a manuscript of the ‘Meditationes Vitae Christi’ written by three scribes in Fermanagh c. 1574, probably under the patronage of Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir. This manuscript, NLI MS G 14, is by no means the deluxe enterprise that the *duanaire*

²⁴ Greene, *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, 46.

²⁵ Henry and Marsh-Micheli, ‘Manuscripts and illuminations’, 810.

²⁶ J. Henry Middleton, *Illuminated manuscripts in classical and medieval times, their art and their technique* (Cambridge 1892) 147.

was, but it is worthy of note nonetheless that in a manuscript where blank letter-spaces proliferate, in the contribution of the third scribe (unsigned) there occurs a sequence of fourteen uncoloured initials (between pp 134 and 150), all but two of which are in a woodcut style. These letters in G 14 might form a study in themselves for their idiosyncratic decoration, some of which appear to be influenced by the technique of white-vine initials. The point to note here, however, is that, while they provide parallels for woodcut initials created in Fermanagh at a time contemporary with the Mág Uidhir *duanaire*, in their execution they are in no way comparable with, and lack the diversity of the initials in that *duanaire*. That said, the two letters *C* that occur, devoid of the mesh surround, on pp 146 and 147 of G 14 are well-designed and show that these strange letters were not made without artistry.

7. 7r20. **B** [Poem IX] 3 cm. Occupies 5-line x 10-letter space. Outline only; ribbon in red (slightly faded) with reticulated pattern; top terminating in thin double scroll, similar to those in the Nugent *duanaire* (NLI MS G 992). This appears to be an underdrawing, unfinished. Generous space has been allowed on all sides, presumably for insertion of a decorative surround.

8. 8r15. **E** [Poem X] 3.5 cm. Set slightly to left of 5-line x 7-letter space and centred on bounding-lines; ribbon, uncoloured; back of letter framed with two acanthus leaves; top terminal and that of central bar finished with bird- and dog-head respectively; upper and lower compartment filled with interlace looped across central bar, and also across back of letter from lower compartment to form bow at back, the two small compartments of which are shaded.

This letter presents as somewhat primitive, despite the presence of interlace and acanthus, and, like the letter *B* on 7r, may be unfinished as regards decoration; this is the first of two letters (the other being on 10r) to display the feature of a bow to the rear, a feature found elsewhere in Irish tradition (see introduction above), for example in the Rennes manuscript (Bibliothèque de Rennes Métropole, MS 598) ff 4r, 12v. Note that Greene (edition line 1140) emends the text from ‘E’ to ‘A’, but that ‘E’ is preserved in the second *dínadh* (line 1275).

9. 9r9. **T** [Poem XI] 4 cm. Set in margin, to left of 5-line x 5-letter space, extending to left edge. Body rubricated; decorative green wrap around centre of letter, and three green laces wrapped around towards

lower end of letter, which terminates in an arm and a raised clenched fist curling back into compartment of letter; upper end of ribbon tapers to coalesce with blue leaf forming curved horizontal head-stroke, terminating on right in dog-head and on left in downward-facing trumpet flower. Framed in elaborate surround of leaves, flowers and fruit, filling compartment, coloured red and blue, presenting as continuous spray, and squared off, woodcut-style, with red bar top and right. This is the most colourful and decoratively varied of the letters, and, as noted already (cf. 6r), is the second of two woodcut-style letters.

10. 10r1. **T** [Poem XII] 4 cm. Set in 4-line x 6-letter space, centred on bounding-lines. Ribbon, rubricated, filled with interlace looped over and knotted above head-stroke; extending three times beyond back of letter: once at top where it follows left under the head-stroke, and at middle and lower portion of body where two bows are formed. Head-stroke terminates right in dog-head, jaws opening around first letter of indented text; terminates left in downward-facing tassel-tail.

This is a more traditionally executed letter, and begins a sequence of four letters without any foliage ornamentation; the tassel tail (also in evidence in 11v and 16v) and the bows at rear (cf. 8r) associate it with other letters in the series.

11. 11r1. **S** [Poem XIII] 3.5 cm. Set in 4-line x 4-letter space, centred on bounding-lines; ribbon, rubricated in lower section only; both upper and lower terminals develop into interlace that fills upper and lower compartments respectively. Striation on interlace in lower compartment and hachuring on interlace in upper compartment creates three-dimensional appearance. Presents as figure-of-eight reversed *S*, possibly echoing commonplace medieval *x*-shaped *S*.

12. 11v26. **M** [Poem XIV] 2.5 cm. Set in 5-line x 6-letter space, centred on bounding-lines; conventional ribbon-*M* with angular left arm; rubricated; space between two legs filled with interlace, extending into left compartment, terminating in upturned dog-head that forms base for right leg; left leg terminates in band and tassel similar to that in 10r.

13. 12v20. **L** [Poem XV] 3 cm. Set in 3-line x 4-letter space, centred left of bounding-lines. Simple curved ribbon, rubricated, with staggered serrations on sides, terminating in long-beaked bird-head at top, facing left, and, at bottom, in hand raised in benediction, of a 'dextra domini' type. This letter may be an instance of playfulness on the part of the decorator, the hand being substituted for the expected

(see next letter) animal terminal, or, looked at the other way, the bird-head substituted for a human head,²⁷ which contrasts with the design of the *L* on f. 17v.

14. 13r16. **R** [Poem XVII] 7.5 cm. Set to left of 7-line x 11-letter space, centred left of bounding-lines. Rubricated. Shaft of letter extends for length of five lines below termination of right foot; shaft terminates at top in left-turned long-beaked bird-head (as on 12v) inclined downwards, and at bottom in large bird-claw; right foot of letter terminates in similar bird-head, upturned. Bowl and lower compartment filled with dense interlace, turned at two points outside top band, and once in joint of bowl and leg. Lower interlace linked to pair of acanthus leaves to left of shaft.

With the *T* at 10r, this presents as the most traditional of the letters in the book, the combination of rich interlace with zoomorphic terminals reminiscent of the letters of the Franciscan copy of the *Liber Hymnorum* (UCD-OFM MS A 2) or those of Rawlinson B 502. In this aspect, the letter comes closest to Henry and Marsh-Micheli's description of the traditional ribbon initial, 'where the letter is made of the body of an elongated animal'.²⁸ Yet the twin acanthus back links it with many of the other letters in the *duanaire*, and with a tradition not exclusively Gaelic.

15. 14r11. **T** [Poem XVIII] 3.5 cm. Set in 5-line x 10-letter space, centred on bounding-lines, extending into left-hand margin. Ribbon letter presenting as continuous interlace, with striated rubrication, turning into and filling interior from bottom of letter, looping over head-stroke and returning to conclude in fist holding knife pointing down below lower band. Head-stroke terminates on right in dog-head with two acanthus leaves emerging from open mouth and drooping to bottom of letter; head-stroke terminates on left in elbow and right-handed closed fist facing down. This letter is similar in general design to the *G* on 15r, and the right-angled finish to the left terminal of the head-stroke can be paralleled in earlier manuscripts, e.g. RIA MS 1227 (3 B 23) p. 27.

16. 15r15. **G** [Poem XIX] 6.5 cm. Right terminal of head-stroke set in 5-line x 11-letter space, remainder of letter positioned in margin and extending to edge. Ribbon interlace, with striated rubrication, looped

²⁷ Compare the human face and hand on the head and tail of *L* in the Book of Leinster, TCD MS 1339, p. 160a37.

²⁸ Henry and Marsh-Micheli, 'Manuscripts and illuminations', 783.

around and suspended from right arm of cross-stroke, filling upper-right compartment; bowl also filled with interlace, emanating from lower terminal of letter, and terminating in two open hands below lower band, one passing through band, the other passing under. Head-stroke terminates on right in dog-head with spray of foliage emerging from mouth and extending downwards to fill scribal space; the left terminal of the cross-stroke turns down at a right-angle and forms a single acanthus leaf, extending to gutter and drooping to just below bowl. In design, particularly in regard to the head-stroke, this letter is clearly influenced by the preceding *T* on f. 14r.

17. 16r1. **U** [Poem XX] 3 cm. Set to left of 3-line x 11-letter space, centred on bounding-lines, creating floating effect as though it had been intended to fill space to right of letter with further ornamentation. Conventional rounded *U* in ribbon with striated rubrication, set in red nimbus; space between ascenders filled with interlace connected to both upper terminals.

18. 16v33. **D** [Poem XXI] 4 cm. Set to left of 5-line x 9-letter space, centred on double bounding-lines. Plain ribbon, striated rubrication, with staggered serrations on sides; oblique head-stroke terminating in band and tassel. Bowl filled with interlace looped around head-stroke, ending outside bowl, bottom right, in small bird-head. This and the following, being set just above the last line of the page, are the lowest positioned letters in the collection.

19. 17v37. **L** [Poem XXII] 6.5 cm. Set in margin to left of and ignoring 3-line x 3-letter space; rising for length of eight lines above beginning of poem. Light outline rubrication and reticulated pattern on shaft; deer-head terminal at top, turned to left, with spray of foliage emanating from tip of left ear and extending downwards to right for length of shaft; shaft itself represents neck of deer (with serrated border), while foot of letter is represented by leg, three-dimensional, turning sharply and terminating in hoof. Similar in general design to the *L* on 12v, the execution of the head, joint²⁹ and hoof constitute the most realistic of the zoomorphic representations in the manuscript.

20. 19r1. **A** [Poem XXIII] 4.5 cm. Set in 4-line x 7-letter space, centred on bounding-lines, and extending into left margin and up to top edge. Triangular with small trumpet flower at apex; striated rubrication,

²⁹ Compare the leg and joint in the letter *S* in Rawl. B 502, f. 24ra.

staggered serrations on shoulders, lower side turning into bowl and transforming into interlace which ends in small tail outside left side of letter. Right side terminates at bottom in upturned dog-head with tongue extended.

21. 19v28. **G** [Poem XXIV] 5 cm. Right arm of head-stroke set in 5-line x 7-letter space, remainder of letter in margin. Right arm of head-stroke terminates in bird-head with beak downturned. Much of letter destroyed by damp: interlace pattern – suspended from right arm of head-stroke – appears loosely similar to that of *G* on 15r, save that fragment of elaborate bow is visible above head-stroke.

Conclusion

As suggested above, it seems fair to propose, despite the variety of lettering on display in this manuscript, that we are dealing with a single, individual decorator. The pervasive use of ‘the foreign leaf motif’³⁰ and of more native or long-assimilated motifs such as animal terminals and interlace, points to this conclusion. It is unlikely, however, that the decorator of the *Mág Uidhir duanaire* drew his inspiration from a single source. Rather, the variety of his lettering and decoration suggests that he was being deliberately eclectic, applying, perhaps, his full repertoire of styles to what was clearly understood to be a unique book, in honour of that book’s patron, Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir.

An amount of planning and preparation must have gone into the provision of these letters.³¹ It may initially have involved consultation with the scribe, Cú Mumhan, but if so, assuming, for sake of argument, that the letters were executed in sequence, which need not have been the case, by f. 5r it must have become apparent to the limner that the spaces reserved by the scribe for his letters were not going to be adequate in all cases. Two of the letters are centred in the space provided (ff 2r, 7r); some, such as the majestic opening letter on f. 1r, or the initial *G* on 15r, make use of the scribal space while still locating

³⁰ *ibid.* 788.

³¹ For the general process involved, see Timothy O’Neill, ‘Columba the scribe’, in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin 1997) 69–79: 76–7; Jonathan J. G. Alexander, *Medieval illuminators and their methods of work* (New Haven and London 1992) 35–51. Initials were not always necessarily executed after writing: those in the Book of the O’Conor Don were inserted before the text was written, and from the late medieval period see the elaborate initials in RIA 456 (23 P 10 iii) which were clearly executed, in outline initially perhaps, before writing commenced of the section in which they occur (cf. p. 10, for example).

most of the letter in the margin; some letters are either centred in the margins or use the twin bounding-lines to mark the right-hand boundary of the letter (5r, 6r, 9r, 12v, 13r, 17v, 19v); most of the initials, however, are centred on the bounding-lines (3v, 4v, 8r, 10r, 11r, 11v, 14r, 16r, 16v and 19r). At the same time, it must be observed that the inadequacy of the scribal space cannot be said to account for all cases of non-alignment of the letters. Thus, six initials (1r, 3v, 10r, 11r, 16r and 19r) occur on the first line of the page, where there is ample room in the upper margin to accommodate large letter-height; yet, with the exception of the opening letter of the *duanaire*, all these are centred on the bounding-lines, resulting, in the case of initial *U* on 16r, in the floating effect observed above.

Repeat letters in particular afforded the decorator scope to demonstrate his versatility. Thus, in its three occurrences on ff 9r, 10r, and 14r, the letter *T* ranges from a quaint vegetative woodcut style, to interlace, to interlace with acanthus. Similarly, *L* is presented as a large cadel letter on f. 1r, as an almost comic anthropomorphic letter on f. 12v, and as a realistic representation of a deer on f. 17v.

While incorporating features from the earlier Irish tradition, it should be clear from the above that in its overall decorative style the Mág Uidhir *duanaire* stands apart from that tradition in many respects. It also stands apart from contemporary and near-contemporary *duanaireadha*, which mostly display a dearth of decoration. Family poem-books such as those of Mac Suibhne (RIA MS 475 (24 P 25)) or Ó hEadhra (NLI MS G 1303) have no decoration of poem initials, though in many cases letter-spaces have been left that were never filled in. In the case of the Nugent anthology (NLI MS G 992), some effort has been made by an unskilled hand to supply initials with a minimum of decoration. On the other hand, the scribe of the Tinnakill anthology of religious bardic poetry (TCD MS 1340) makes no attempt to supply any large initials whatsoever, the book being severely functional in appearance on that account, with the exception of the autograph poem by Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig on p. 57, which bears a large uncoloured ribbon *T*. Even the Í Dhomhnaill anthology that follows the Life of Colum Cille in Rawlinson B 514 is un-ornamented in its initials, in contrast to the unfulfilled ambition evident in the multiple letter-spaces of the Life itself.

This is not to say that all *duanaireadha* are devoid of decorative emphasis. The religious *duanaire* that is section A of RIA MS 1235 (C ii 2) and the poem-book of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn in the Yellow Book of Lecan are enough to counter that assertion. Nor was it that decoration

in general was becoming a rarity or an exception in Irish manuscripts in the sixteenth century: one may cite manuscripts such as UCD-OFM MS A 5, or the books of Domhnall Ó Duibh Dá Bhoireann (e.g. RIA 1242 (23 Q 6) section D). Yet, so great is the contrast between the Mág Uidhir book and so many other contemporary bardic manuscripts that it seems undeniable that *duanaireadha* of the late sixteenth century in particular are poorly served by their decorative content. Assuming that poets were the main generators of such manuscripts, just as medical men wrote their own specialist manuscripts and lawyers theirs, it might be that decoration was less of a consideration to poets in the recording of their work and that of their colleagues.

In the pre-Norman tradition of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Henry and Marsh-Micheli detected influences on Irish manuscripts from English and continental sources.³² In the Mág Uidhir *duanaire*, the use of imported decorative features such as acanthus and rinceaux decoration recalls the emphasis placed by the same authors on 'the dual aspect of Irish manuscript writing in the medieval period',³³ that is, in the post-Norman period, the continuing Gaelic tradition and also the parallel generation of religious and administrative manuscript material in non-Irish script and with non-Irish decoration. The religious material was generated within the houses of the new orders, some, such as the Franciscans, carrying on both traditions at times (as witness the Rennes manuscript and TCD MS 667); the administrative documents emanate from the urban confines of cities such as Dublin and Waterford.

As representatives of the former group one may cite the celebrated and varied set of manuscripts associated with the Augustinian canons of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin,³⁴ while the calligraphic artistry to be found in municipal archives is exemplified in collections such as those of Kilkenny City.³⁵ A reminder of the imagination on display in civic records, even at a late date, is to hand in the extraordinary initial *G* in the list of civic officials for 1632 in the Council Book of the Town of Galway: the letter is a tour de force, containing cadels, interlace, foliage and acorns, and birds and animals of many species.³⁶

³² 'A century of Irish illumination', 161, 164.

³³ Henry and Marsh-Micheli, 'Manuscripts and illuminations', 784.

³⁴ See, for example, Alan J. Fletcher, 'The de Derby Psalter of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin', in Raymond Gillespie and Raymond Refaussé (eds), *The medieval manuscripts of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin* (Dublin 2006) 81–102.

³⁵ John Bradley, *Treasures of Kilkenny: charters and civic records of Kilkenny City* (Kilkenny 2003) 70, 73, 80, 83.

³⁶ John Gilbert, *Facsimiles of national manuscripts of Ireland IV/2* (Dublin 1884) Plate XLIX.

Referring to religious and civic records such as these, Henry and Marsh-Micheli conclude:

That the scribes working in the native tradition knew about these books is obvious. Occasionally they have borrowed from them an initial or a flourish; but on the whole, contaminations are few and far between until the sixteenth century.³⁷

As examples of this ‘contamination’ they adduce the evidence of King’s Inns MS 17, the Colum Cille frontispiece in Rawlinson B 514, and particularly that of the full page illustrations in the Book of the De Burgos. To this list may now be added the evidence of the *duanaire* of Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir.³⁸

PÁDRAIG Ó MACHÁIN

University College Cork

³⁷ ‘Manuscripts and illuminations’, 787.

³⁸ Thanks are due to Timothy O’Neill, Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha and Karen Ralph for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper. Most of the manuscripts referred to here for comparative purposes are available on the Irish Script on Screen website (www.isos.dias.ie).