



Flutes, pipes, or bagpipes? Observations on the terminology of woodwind instruments in Old and Middle Irish

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‘Flutes, pipes, or bagpipes? Observations on the Terminology of Woodwind Instruments in Old and Middle Irish’

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ABSTRACT

Old and Middle Irish sources offer a rich array of terms referring to woodwind instruments. However, terms like *buinne*, *cúisech*, *cuisle*, *fetán*, *pípa*, etc. are variously translated as ‘flute’, ‘whistle’, ‘pipe’, ‘bagpipe’ and the like, seemingly without much consideration for the organological reality underlying these lexical items. This article will look at the linguistic and textual evidence relating to some of these terms, with the aim of achieving a more precise identification of the musical instruments in question.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well known fact that no Irish written musical record exists prior to the twelfth century.¹ It is for this reason that, as eloquently put by Ann Buckley, ‘it has become a commonplace to introduce this topic with a litany of apologetic negatives, expressions of regret for what is lost and what may once have existed as evidence for the practice of music in medieval Ireland’.² Nonetheless, once we have accepted the idea that we shall probably never know which melodies were played and sung in Early Medieval Ireland, it is equally true that the evidence for other aspects of Medieval Irish music is in fact quite plentiful.

In a nutshell, if we want to know anything at all about music in Ireland before *ca.* AD 1200, we must rely on evidence of three kinds: (1) archaeological (usually consisting in the recovery of musical instruments or parts thereof); (2) iconographic (i.e. depictions of musical instruments and musicians); (3) textual (musical terminology found in Old and Middle Irish sources, anecdotal description of musical performances, etc.). Given that the first is rather scarce (at least for the period under scrutiny here, approximately AD 600-1200), and the second often poses considerable interpretative problems, it is clear that the third type will necessarily have an important role to play in this context.

While textual evidence has been explored in some detail in respect to string instruments by virtue of the prominent place which they occupied in Medieval Irish society (as well as in narrative literature), the same cannot be said for woodwinds. The present article is meant to be a contribution towards the fulfilment of this *desideratum*,

¹ Cf. Buckley (2000), 165; Buckley (2005), 782–3.

² Cit. from Buckley (1995), 13.

with a particular focus on the terminology pertaining to this class of musical instruments.

II. WOODWINDS

Before discussing the terminology of woodwinds in Old and Middle Irish sources, it will be useful to provide some basic information concerning this type of instruments.

In modern organological taxonomy, woodwinds are essentially flutes and reed instruments.³ From a purely mechanical point of view, the sound of flutes is produced by an airflow which is directed against a sharp edge, while in reed instruments, the airflow is forced through a vibrating resonator, i.e. the reed. Ancient, Medieval and many traditional instruments typically use single or double reeds. In the former, the airflow triggers a rapid vibration of a single blade against a larger component. In double reeds, instead, the airflow moves through two tightly-bound blades which, if subject to a certain air pressure, start vibrating against each other.⁴

While double reeds certainly existed in Graeco-Roman antiquity,⁵ there is on the contrary lack of evidence that they were used at all in Western Europe during the Early Middle Ages. It is usually posited that double reeds were re-introduced in Western Europe through contact with the Middle East at some stage during the High or even Late Middle Ages:⁶ a convenient *terminus ante quem* is provided by the unambiguous depiction of double reeds on fols 10r and 399r of the fourteenth-century German manuscript Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Pal. germ. 848 (the famous *Codex Manesse*). It is also believed that the bore (i.e. the interior chamber of woodwinds) was predominantly cylindrical during the Early Middle Ages, while the use of conical bores

³ More precisely, the instruments which I will discuss in this article are edge-blown and reed aerophones, according to the well-known Hornbostel-Sachs classification of musical instruments (cf. von Hornbostel & Sachs (1914), 583–8; cf. also Baines (1967), 25–7). For more details on the classification of flutes, cf. Veenstra (1964).

⁴ For more details, see Baines (1967), 29–32, 76–90; Campbell, Greated & Myers (2004), 75–82, 116–21.

⁵ Descriptions of (double?) reeds can be found in the writings of Theophrastus (*Historia Plantarum*, 4.2.1–7, ed. and transl. by A. Hort, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1916)) and Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 16.169–72, ed. and transl. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1940)); cf. also Baines (1967), 198–9; West (1992), 83–4; Mathiesen (1999), 198–218; Moore (2012), 36–41.

⁶ Cf. Campbell, Greated & Myers (2004), 83; Montagu (2007), 75–6; Cabiran (2010), 26, 29.

may be a somewhat later development.⁷ The same applies to side-blown or transverse flutes, which seem to have come to Europe through contacts with Asia around the eleventh or twelfth century.⁸ Thus, in the lack of evidence to the contrary, a working hypothesis which can be formulated for Pre-Norman Ireland is that woodwinds may have belonged to three main categories: (1) duct flutes, where a ‘block’ (sometimes called ‘fipple’) creates a narrow passage for the airflow, which is directed against a sharp edge;⁹ (2) panpipes, formed by a series of end-blown flutes of different length tied together or drilled in the same block of wood;¹⁰ (3) reed-pipes which, as we have seen, were most likely cylindrical and fitted with single reeds.

This last category offers many possible variants: a musician may play just one reed pipe, or, as it is often the case, two or three pipes may be played simultaneously. In some cases the same notes are played on both pipes, like in the North-African *zummarā*. In other cases, different notes are played at the same time: for instance, one of the pipes may play a single note, giving a drone, like in the Sardinian *benas* (FIG. 1), while other instruments may have the potential for more complex polyphonic techniques (e.g., the Sardinian *launeddas*, or the Graeco-Roman *aulos* / *tibia*).¹¹

⁷ Munrow (1976), 8; Montagu (2007), 78. Graeco-Roman reed-pipes normally had cylindrical bores (cf. West (1992), 83), although one should note the combination of double reed and conical bore which characterises the *calamaula* depicted on a Roman inscription (dated to the 1st or 2nd century AD) preserved in the Museo Nazionale Atestino at Este, in North Italy (cf. Gioielli (1999); Guizzi (2001–2002); I owe these references to Paolo Simonazzi). It is also worth mentioning here a possible Irish exception: the 7th-century ‘horn’ discovered in 1791 in Began, Co. Mayo, has a long conical bore (193 cm), and may have been played with a reed (cf. O’Dwyer (2004), 111, 132–9). It is now hard to tell whether this instrument was played with a single or a double reed (if indeed it was a reed instrument): conical pipes with single reeds are rare, but not unattested, cf. e.g. Baines (1960), 87–9.

⁸ Cf. Baines (1967), 222; West (1992), 113; Montagu (2007), 60–1.

⁹ Cf. Baines (1967), 221; Montagu (2007), 53–4.

¹⁰ Cf. Baines (1967), 223–4; West (1992), 109–12.

¹¹ For the various possible combinations of reed-pipes, cf. Baines (1967), 194–208. For a description of the *zummarā*, cf. Baines (1960), 33–6. For thorough descriptions of the *launeddas* and other Sardinian reed instruments, cf. Bentzon (1969), Spanu (1994). For the different types of Greek *aulos* / Roman *tibia* and their functioning, cf. West (1992), 89–94; Mathiesen (1999), 177–222; Hagel (2010), 327–64.

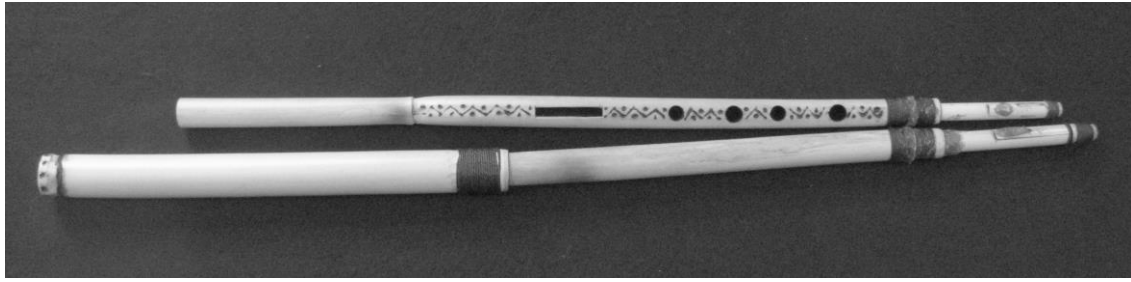


FIG. 1. SARDINIAN *BENAS*, FITTED WITH SINGLE REEDS.

Some of these organological types are actually attested in the Irish archaeological record: in particular, wooden and bone whistles were found in Dublin in 13th-century sites.¹² Unfortunately, no reed-pipes have yet emerged from archaeological excavations in Ireland, but there is considerable comparative evidence from Continental Europe. For instance, single and double pipes were found in 1975 at Charavines, on the shores of the Lac de Paladru, in South-Eastern France.¹³ Early Medieval cylindrical reed-pipes (made of wood and bone) were also discovered in the Netherlands and Hungary.¹⁴ Given the considerable diffusion of such instruments throughout Early Medieval Europe and their relative organological uniformity, it is reasonable to assume that analogous woodwinds also existed in pre-Norman Ireland.¹⁵

¹² Cf. Buckley (1990), 45, 51; Buckley (2000), 173; Buckley (2005), 775.

¹³ Cf. Bec (1992), 22; Homo-Lechner (1993); Cabiran & Dieu, (2003); Cabiran (2010), 25–6.

¹⁴ Crane (1972), 44 (§432.1), 45 (§433.1), 46 (§434.1); in the same context, cf. also Buckley (1990), 45–6. Some of these reed instruments may have been part of horn-pipes, bladder-pipes, or bagpipes (cf. next footnote and Zloch (2006)).

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning here that a bagpipe could of course be obtained simply by fitting one or several reed-pipes into a skin-bag (cf. Collinson (1975), 1). However, there is no direct evidence for the existence of bagpipes in Pre-Norman Ireland, and even in Continental Europe bagpipes began to appear regularly in iconography only from the High Middle Ages onwards (cf. Collinson (1975), 76–7; Donnelly (2001), 1–2, 5–6; Matte (2010), 9). The existence of bagpipes in Ancient Rome has been inferred largely on the basis of quasi-*hapax* like *utricularius* (Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum: Nero*, §54, ed. by M. Ihm, Bibliotheca Teubneriana (Leipzig, 1908)) and *ascaules* (Martial, *Epigrammata*, 10.3.8, ed. by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Bibliotheca Teubneriana (Stuttgart, 1990)), which apparently meant ‘bagpiper’. Such terms are, however, both rare and controversial (cf. Baines (1960), 63–7; Collinson (1975), 42–7; West (1992), 107–9). As to the Early Middle Ages, evidence is basically non-existent (cf. Baines (1960), 67–8; for the problem of the bagpipe-like instrument named *chorus*, mentioned in the Pseudo-Jerome *Epistula ad Dardanum*, see *infra*).

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Numerous mentions of musical instruments broadly identifiable as woodwinds occur in Old and Middle Irish sources; however, as I have pointed out in the introduction, while this terminology has attracted some scholarly interest,¹⁶ it has never been thoroughly analysed, and a number of important research questions remain open. Some of them are purely organological: for instance, can the study of terminology reveal anything about the actual shape, functioning, and playing technique of these instruments? Can we obtain even more information by investigating the possible relationship between Irish terms and designations found in contemporary Hiberno-Latin writings, or in literatures produced outside Ireland? Moreover, what is the relationship between the linguistic evidence and the actual material objects discovered by archaeologists or depicted in Early Irish art? In broader terms, could a linguistic and textual approach help us understand which social connotations were ascribed to specific types of musical instruments and the musicians who played them? And finally, could this kind of study facilitate the reconstruction of aspects of the acoustic landscape – or ‘soundscape’ – of Early Medieval Ireland?

As already mentioned in the introduction, if we want to try and answer any of these questions we must certainly rely on archaeology and iconography, but also on linguistics and philology. As Ann Buckley conveniently summarised, Medieval Irish literature

‘abounds in allusions to musicians, instruments and occasions of music-making, and reveals a rich and detailed vocabulary to describe all manner of sounds. The Irish soundscape is well attested also in poetry and, not unrelatedly, the range of linguistic terminology and elaborate description in respect of ‘musical’ (and non-‘musical’) timbres, forms and instruments is considerable and varied’.¹⁷

Although not very common, a linguistic approach to Medieval organology is not unprecedented: of particular importance is, for instance, the innovative research carried out by the Romance philologist Pierre Bec concerning the Medieval Romance terminology of bowed instruments and bagpipes¹⁸ (my own approach in this paper owes much to his methods).

¹⁶ Cf., e.g., Herbert (1976), 21–30; Buckley (1990), 23–4; Buckley (2005), 749, 751–3.

¹⁷ Cit. from Buckley (1995), 14; cf. also Buckley (1990), 13–4.

¹⁸ Bec (1992); Bec (1996). In his works, Pierre Bec defines his methodology as ‘philologie organologique’; in particular, in his book dedicated to the Medieval Romance designations of the bagpipe,

If we want to obtain a coherent understanding of the textual evidence available to us for what concerns Medieval Irish woodwinds, I suggest we should proceed as follows.

To begin with, all Old and Middle Irish terms pertaining to woodwinds must be collected (i.e., names of instruments and terms used to designate or describe their sound, as well as the musicians who played them). Thankfully, this work is nowadays much facilitated by the availability of searchable on-line resources such as the *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language (e-DIL)*.¹⁹

It will then be necessary to provide a reliable and up-to-date account of the etymology of these terms,²⁰ as well as a contextual analysis of all their occurrences in texts dating from the Old and Middle Irish period. In particular, three types of occurrences are likely to yield the most interesting data from the organological point of view.

(1) First of all, the names of instruments and musicians often appear in lists, a fact which also applies to continental Medieval literatures.²¹ In the absence of texts

he provides an illuminating description of his methodological approach, which is worth citing here (Bec (1996), 13): ‘Cette enquête sur la cornemuse et ses désignations [...] correspond [...] à une double approche de l’instrument: d’une part, une étude linguistique, philologique et littéraire [...], les désignations d’instruments de musique, actuels ou révolus, n’étant qu’un aspect particulier d’une problématique plus générale qui intéresse le linguiste en tant que tel (plan du signifiant); mais aussi, parallèlement, en partant des signifiants, une approche organologique portant sur ces mêmes instruments [...] : leur typologie [...], leur spécificité acoustique, leur technique de jeu, leur présence dans les textes (théoriques et littéraires), leur impact socio-culturel, leur hiérarchie dans les représentations iconographiques et éventuellement dans l’ensemble de l’*instrumentarium* d’une époque donnée (plan du signifié)’ (the same programmatic statement can be found in Bec (1992), 8–9).

¹⁹ A very useful repertoire of relevant sources can moreover be found in Fletcher (2001), and, although outdated in its conclusions, Eugene O’Curry’s *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (O’Curry (1873)) remains fundamental as a collection of interesting Old and Middle Irish passages pertaining to music and musical instruments.

²⁰ The existing secondary literature is unfortunately not exempt from mistakes and misunderstandings in this field: cf., for instance, the erroneous derivation of Irish *fetán* from Latin *fistula* in Buckley (1990), 14.

²¹ Lists occur especially when an author wishes to convey impressions of completeness: for instance, the (often unrealistic) presence of all sorts of musical instruments at a royal court can become a symbol of a king’s power, the mention of numerous instruments played by the same individual signifies the high level of that musician’s artistic accomplishments, etc.. For numerous examples of instrumental lists in various Medieval literary traditions, as well as for an analysis of the reasons for this phenomenon, cf. Bec (1992), 45–8, 119–51.

providing us with an explicit classification of the Irish *instrumentarium*,²² lists of instrumental designations may at least offer some indirect evidence for Medieval taxonomic principles,²³ which of course do not necessarily correspond to modern forms of classification (even our category of ‘woodwinds’ may well have been completely irrelevant in Medieval Ireland).

(2) Any passage providing a description of the sound of an instrument, or any information concerning the actual playing technique and/or performance practices will obviously have to be considered carefully.

(3) Finally, the most precious witness of all will of course be any text providing an actual description of a musical instrument, in terms of shape, structure, functioning etc. Unfortunately, as we shall see, textual evidence of the third kind is exceedingly rare in early Irish literature.

A number of potential difficulties associated with this methodological approach also need to be acknowledged and discussed. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that etymology, however important, may sometimes be completely irrelevant for the identification of a ‘real-world’ extra-linguistic referent synchronically designated by a given lexeme: in other words, etymology may be neither the only nor the best way to

²² I am here referring to actual categorisations of the *instruments* themselves, rather than social hierarchies of *musicians* such as the one found in the *Tech Midchúarta*, on which see below.

²³ Medieval Irish *literati* were undoubtedly familiar with the ‘subdivision of music’ (*diuisio musicae*) found in Isidore, *Etymologiae* III, xx–xxii (ed. by W. M. Lindsay, *OCT* (Oxford, 1911) [cf. also the English translation in Barney, Lewis, Beach & Berghof (2006), 96–8]), according to which music is subdivided into three categories: *harmonica* (music produced by the human voice), *organica* (music made with all types of wind instruments), and *rythmica* (music produced by string instruments and percussions). As one may expect, Isidore’s taxonomy owes much to Classical and Late Antique musical theory, such as the classification adopted by Cassiodorus (*tensibilia*, i.e. string instruments, *inflatilia*, i.e. wind instruments, *percussionalia*, i.e. percussions; cf. Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* II, v, §6, ed. by R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1937), 144). However, it is unclear whether such writings had any major impact outside the ecclesiastic milieu, e.g. among secular musicians. There is no direct evidence that the dichotomy between loud (*haut*) and soft (*bas*) instruments ever had in pre-Norman Ireland a role comparable to that which it had in Medieval France (on these notions, cf. Bowles (1954); Bowles (1958); Charles-Dominique (2006), 23–41). On the relative and culture-related nature of organological taxonomies, cf. Kartomi (1990), 3–15.

understand which specific object was designated by a certain term at a particular stage of the history of the Irish language.²⁴

The next problem affects all research dealing with Ancient and Medieval terminology of musical instruments. As pointed out by Pierre Bec, given that pre-modern terminology of musical instruments was generally far from being uniform or standardised (and it is most likely that Ireland was no different in this respect), such terms are almost invariably characterised by a high degree of *polysemy* and *polymorphism*:²⁵ the former notion refers to the fact that one term may have been applied to a variety of instruments, while the latter involves the opposite process, whereby the same instrument may have been designated by several different names.

In addition to this, naming practices and conventions may have differed from place to place, and may have also changed over time. Finally, we cannot exclude that some authors may have not been interested in providing accurate descriptions of contemporary instruments, while some others may have been simply ignorant as to music and organology (as we shall see, this last problem also directly concerns iconography).

IV. *FETÁN, CÚISECH, CUISLE(NN)*

It is obviously impossible to give a full account of all Old and Middle Irish terms pertaining to woodwinds in this relatively short contribution. Thus, I have chosen to

²⁴ This methodological principle has been stated in very clear terms by Liam Breatnach in the context of a discussion of the origins and meaning of the Old Irish term *file* ‘poet’: ‘an elementary principle which seems to have been overlooked is that the Indo-European etymology of an OIr. word is not the same as a definition of its meaning in OIr., and it is worth recalling here the careful distinction drawn by Thurneysen ((1921), 66) between an original etymological meaning [of the word *file*] “seer” and the actual meaning in the historical period of “educated and learned poet” (Breatnach (1996), 76). This same problem has also been addressed by Pierre Bec in the specific context of Medieval organology: ‘l’évolution des signifiants [...] n’est jamais absolument parallèle à celle des signifiés. L’instrument évolue, devient autre et peut garder le même nom’ (Bec (1992), 17).

²⁵ Cf. Bec (1992), 28–34; Bec (1996), 30–2. Bec points out how these phenomena were due, in some cases at least, to the presence of conflicting terminologies: in particular, the Latin terminology inherited from Classical and Late Antiquity may have co-existed with local vernacular terms (cf. Bec (1992), 32: ‘il y a une différence fondamentale entre la terminologie latine et la terminologie “populaire”: la première est plus vague, plus emblématique, plus polysémique aussi, la seconde plus technique et plus précise. Au surplus, la terminologie populaire [...] est en relation avec la *pratique* musicale, alors que la terminologie savante en latin l’est beaucoup plus avec la *théorie*’).

present here some of the evidence available for three terms which offer much material for discussion: *fetán*, *cúisech* and *cuisle(nn)*.

Before looking at these terms one by one, it is worth noting on a more general level that, at least within the confines of Western Europe, broad cross-cultural tendencies can be observed in respect to the linguistic designation of musical instruments, and sometimes the designating criteria (Bec's 'critères dénominatifs') remain semantically transparent for several generations of speakers of a given language. For example, some names may refer to the acoustic quality of an instrument (e.g. English *whistle*, Italian *pianoforte*); some other names refer to the shape or structure of an instrument (e.g. English *bagpipe*, French *flûte à bec*); in some cases (somewhat less frequently) names are based on the material out of which the instrument is made (e.g. English *woodwind* or *brass*, Occitan *cabreta* / *chabreta* 'bagpipe', but literally 'little goat').²⁶ On the contrary, some terms may be purely traditional and no longer etymologically transparent (cf. English *guitar*, ultimately deriving from Lat. *cithara* < Gr. κίθρα).

The term *fetán* seems to belong to the former category, i.e. nouns whose designating criterion remains semantically transparent. *Fetán* (translated as 'musical pipe' in *DIL*, s.v. *fetán*, col. F-100.79) is simply a diminutive of *fet*, an Old Irish term most likely deriving from Proto-Celtic **winto-* < PIE **h₂weh₁-nt-o-* (the same Indo-European form which underlies Latin *uentus* and English *wind*).²⁷ Interestingly, *fet* was used in the Saint Gall Priscian glosses as a translation of Latin *sibili hominum*,²⁸ suggesting that this term designated a hissing or whistling sound. This is confirmed by numerous occurrences in early Irish literature, where *fet* can designate, for instance, the hissing of snakes, a decoy signal used by fishermen,²⁹ the tweeting of birds,³⁰ the sougling of wind,³¹ and even the sound of a sword cleaving the air.³²

²⁶ Cf. Bec (1992), 51–8; Bec (1996), 32–3. Occitan *cabreta* / *chabreta* is especially interesting, since here we can see how different criteria of designation may co-exist and interact: while the practice of referring to the bagpipe as 'little goat' (already attested in Medieval France) was probably motivated by the actual animal skin out of which the bag is usually made, the term may have also been understood as an allusion to the sound of the instrument (cf. Bec (1996), 44–9).

²⁷ Cf. McCone (1996), 63, 107; Isaac (2007), 66; de Vaan (2008), 662–3; Matasović (2009), 423. For a different but less convincing etymology, cf. de Bernardo Stempel (1999), 273, fn. 107.

²⁸ Sg. 3a7 = *Thes.* II, 50.33.

²⁹ The last two designations are found in the following entry from O'Mulconry's Glossary (ed. Stokes (1898), 259, §527; cf. also <<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/>> at *OM*¹ §532): *Fet .i. quia euitat* [probably for *inuitat*] [.i.] *doocurethar* [for *do-cuirethar*] .i. *is bes dond nathruig, foceird fit isin tracht*

Given that the term *fet* was used in both Old and Middle Irish to designate this type of sound, it is most likely that the semantic link between *fet* and its lexicalised diminutive *fetán* would have been transparent, thereby helping to maintain a close linguistic association between the instrument named *fetán* and its sound: in other words, we can reasonably assume that the name *fetán* would have been exclusively or predominantly attributed to musical instruments capable of producing a *fet*.³³

As rightly pointed out by Ann Buckley, the terminology of sounds in early Irish sources is non-specific, and is regulated by ‘cognitive codes now out of our reach. References are descriptive rather than analytical, and usually emotive, metaphorical – but rarely technical or systematic’.³⁴ Nonetheless, the presence of extra-linguistic referents among the sounds designated by means of the term *fet* (i.e., the sound of birds, swords moving through the air, wind blowing, human whistling etc.) allows us to conclude, at least intuitively, that *fetán* was used in most cases as the name of a flute rather than a reed-pipe. This view may receive some support from the fact that the *fetán*

frissin n-escmogin [probably for *escongain*], *⁊ is femen a cenél sin uile, ⁊ dotheit docum na nathrach cotalaig, ⁊ focerdar ind iascaire fit friusom condagaibett* ‘*Fet*, because *inuitat*, i.e. ‘it invites’, i.e. it is a habit for the snake, it casts a hissing/whistling sound on the strand towards the eel (?), and all of that kind is female, and it goes towards the snake to lie with it; and the fishermen cast whistles to them in order to catch them’ (many thanks to Dr Pádraic Moran for letting me use his unpublished working translation of this passage). This curious entry seems to be a conflation of information on the viper (*uípera*) and the moray eel (*murena*), ultimately derived from Ambrose, *Hexameron*, V, vii, 18 (ed. by C. Schenkl in *CSEL* 32/1, 153) and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XII, vi, 43: all the elements mentioned in O’Mulconry’s Glossary can be found in these two sources, including the reference to the alluring whistle used by snakes and fishermen. It is particularly interesting that the word used by both Ambrose and Isidore to refer to this sound is Lat. *sibilus*, which, as we have seen, is translated as OIr. *fet* also in the Saint Gall glosses.

³⁰ This attribution is found, for instance, in a quatrain attested in the *Lebor Brecc* (edited in Meyer (1919), 66, §151), whose last line describes as follows the sound of a blackbird (*lon*): *is bind boc síthamail th’fet* ‘your whistling is sweet, gentle, peaceful’ (my translation).

³¹ Cf. *fet gáithe*, ‘whistling of wind’, in the Middle Irish *Aígidecht Aithirni* (‘The Guesting of Athirne’, ed. Meyer (1914), 4–5).

³² This sense is found, for instance, in a quatrain of *Cath Cairnd Chonaill* where Diarmait mac Áeda Sláni’s sword is praised with the words *is for rígaib fo-cheird feit* ‘it is on kings that [Diarmait’s sword] makes a whistling sound’ (ed. Stokes (1901), 214–5); for more examples, cf. *DIL* s.v. *fet*, col. F-99.42–4.

³³ The meaning ‘pipe’ or ‘tube’, listed in *DIL* s.v. *fetán*, col. F-100.75–9 and col. F-101.1–10, is then clearly secondary and derivative (a flute being a tube-like object).

³⁴ Cit. from Buckley (1995), 15.

is described as *fogur-binn* ('sweet-sounding') in this passage from *Acallam na Senórach*:

in ceol sirrechtach síde 7 an timpan téitbhinn 7 an fedán fogurbinn

'... the beguiling music of the *síd* and the sweet-stringed dulcimer and the sweet, melodious pipes'.³⁵

Interestingly, *prima facie* the association with the 'sweet-stringed *timpán*' in this passage would seem to associate the *fetán* with a fairly high social status.³⁶ However, other texts indicate the contrary. In a Middle Irish gloss to *Uraicecht Becc*, a legal tract on status, players of *fetán* are listed among various practitioners of *fo-dána* 'base arts' or 'subordinate professions', that is performers whose honour-price depends on that of their patrons.³⁷ Moreover, *fetánaig* is used as a downright insult in a satirical quatrain recently edited by Roisín McLaughlin.³⁸ Thus, while things probably varied according to time and place, it is likely that players of *fetán* had a relatively low social status, undoubtedly lower than the position enjoyed by harpists: as we shall see, this condition probably applied to players of wind instruments in general.

Now, if on the one hand we can argue fairly confidently that *fetán* meant 'flute' or 'whistle', on the other hand its exact relationship to the term *cúisech*, which could also have meant 'flute', is far from being clear.

According to the *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien (LEIA C-279)*, the etymology of *cúisech* is unknown, but I suggest to understand this term as an adjective

³⁵ Ed. Stokes (1900), 49, ll. 1717–20; transl. Dooley & Roe (1999), 53 (as we have seen, *fedán* should rather be translated as 'flute' here).

³⁶ For the *timpán*, cf. Buckley (1978); Buckley (2005), 750–1. For the high social status enjoyed by the players of string instruments (especially harpists) in Medieval Ireland, cf., e.g., Kelly (1988), 64–5; Buckley (2000), 170–1.

³⁷ The passage reads as follows (the main text of *Uraicecht Becc* is here in boldface): *āes ciuil .i. crōnānaig 7 airfidid .i. fedānaig* 'musicians, i.e. performers of *crónán* and minstrels, i.e. players of *fetán* (ed. *AL* v, 108 = *CIH* vi 2281.30, cf. also Fletcher (2001), 148, 493–4). On *Uraicecht Becc*, cf. Kelly (1988), 64, 267, and Breatnach (2005), 315–8. In the *Uraicecht Becc* the only entertainer who has his own honour-price is the harper (cf. Kelly (1988), 64). The dichotomy between high-status harpers and lower kinds of entertainers (belonging to the *fo-dána*) seems to correspond broadly to the continental opposition between *musici* and *histriones / ioculatores* (cf. Marchesin (2000), 96–8).

³⁸ The quatrain reads: *A fetánaig, / a chornaire, a chléraige, / a fis fon tír, / a chris cen scín, a scélaige*. McLaughlin's translation is 'You piper, / you horn-player, you wandering musician, / you enquiry throughout the land, / you belt without a knife, you storyteller' (ed. and transl. McLaughlin (2008), 154–5, §50); as we have seen, though, *fetánach* is likely to mean 'flute-player' rather than 'piper'.

derived from *cúas* ‘hollow, cavity’: *cúisech* would thus have originally meant something like ‘hollowed (object)’.³⁹ Whereas the semantic development from ‘hollowed object’ to ‘flute / (musical) pipe’ is obvious enough,⁴⁰ the phonological and morphological details are less straightforward.

The alternance between palatal and non-palatal quality in the final consonant of the nominal base (*cúas* : *cúisech*) is not particularly worrying, given that considerable analogical confusion originated from the existence of pairs like *gábud* : *gáibthech*, where the palatalisation visible in the adjective is regular (*gábud* < **gābitu-*, therefore *gáibthech* < **gābit-ākos* or **gābit-ikos*):⁴¹ eventually, this situation produced historically ‘irregular’ fluctuations such as *delgu* : *delgnach* / *delgnech*.⁴²

The difference in the vocalism of the first syllable of the base and its adjective (-*úa* : -*ú*-) is more puzzling. One may wonder whether this phenomenon could be related to the fluctuation between *úa* and *ú* recorded in *DIL* for the noun *cúasal* ‘hollow, cavity’ (cf. *DIL* s.v. *cúasal*, col. C-577.61), this being perhaps due to the apparent confusion between the nominative and dative in the forms of *cúas* (cf. *DIL* s.v. *cúas*, col. C-577.17). However, the fact that ***cúaisech* is never attested makes this explanation difficult to accept. Given that the earliest attestations of *cúisech* seem to occur in texts not older than the Early Middle Irish phase (i.e. in the tenth-century *Cath Almaine* and in *Esnada Tige Buchet*), *cúisech* may reflect the Middle Irish sporadic raising of *ó* to *ú* between *c-* and a palatal consonant observable in OIr. *cóis* ‘cause’, *cóic* ‘five’ > Mlr. *cúis*, *cúig*,⁴³ in which case we could posit an OIr. form **cóisech*.⁴⁴ Here, the difference

³⁹ Cf. Russell (1990), 93: ‘In general terms, [in *-ach* / *-ech* adjectives] the meaning of the derivative is determined by the meaning of the base. Nominally-derived bases normally mean ‘having X’ etc.’. Thus, if indeed *cúisech* < *cúas* + *-ech*, the original meaning was ‘having a cavity’. Notice that *-cúisech* and *fetchúisech* are actually recorded by Russell in his list of adjectives in *-ach* / *-ech* (cf. Russell (1990), 205).

⁴⁰ This semantic *rapprochement* is also supported by the actual occurrence of *cúas* in a description of *fetáin* in *Togail na Tebe*: *fetāna cūas-mōra cēolbindi* ‘great-hollowed sweet-noted whistles’ (ed. and transl. Calder (1922), 142–3, line 2225).

⁴¹ The block to palatalisation constituted by the presence of *ā* before the relevant consonant is removed whenever the palatal vowel following the consonant is liable to syncope (cf. McCone (1996), 117).

⁴² Cf. Russell (1990), 97–8, 100.

⁴³ Cf. Breatnach (1994), 233, §3.10.

in vocalism between the adjective and its base could simply be due to the well-known fluctuation between *ó* and *úa* in Old Irish: while the exact circumstances under which *ó* changed to *úa* are still somewhat unclear, it has been pointed out by McCone that ‘it would be tempting to suppose that this breaking, like that of *é* to *ía*, originally occurred before a non-palatal consonant but, if so, there had already been considerable analogical confusion both ways by the time of Old Irish’.⁴⁵ Given that an adjective *cúasach* ‘hollow, having cavities’ is also attested (cf. *DIL* s.v. 1 *cúasach*), it is possible to imagine a situation where the two co-existing variants *cúasach* / **cóisech* > *cúisech* (where the distribution of *úa* / *ó* may have been originally conditioned by the quality of the following *s*) eventually generate a semantic distinction, the latter being lexicalised with the specific meaning of ‘(musical) pipe’.⁴⁶

If this etymology is right, the term *cúisech* originally designated a tube- or pipe-like object: obviously, such a shape-based designation could have applied basically to any kind of wind instrument, and for this reason it is extremely difficult to associate *cúisech* with a specific instrumental type. Interestingly, in the *Dindshenchas* poem known as ‘The Fair of Carmun’, which presents an idealised account of an ancient royal *óenach*, the *cúisech* is associated with high-status instruments and musicians:

Is iad a ada olla / stuic cruitti cuirn chróes-tholla, / cúisig timpaig cen tríamna, / filid 7 fáen-chlíara.

‘These are the Fair’s great privileges: / trumpets, fiddles, hollow-throated horns, / pipers, timpanists unwearied, / poets and meek musicians’.⁴⁷

In another stanza from the same poem, *pipat* ‘pipes’ and *cuslennaig* ‘players of *cuislenn*’ (on which see below), have a clearly much lower social status:

⁴⁴ If not due to a scribal error, this spelling may actually be attested in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Stowe D.4.2, fol. 52v, in the story ‘King Eochaid has horse’s ears’ (ed. and transl. Meyer (1903), 47: MS *fetchoisig*, most likely standing for *fetchōisig*), on which see below.

⁴⁵ Cit. from McCone (1996), 134.

⁴⁶ The fact that *cúisech* appears to behave as a feminine *ā*-stem suggests that the lexicalisation may have proceeded from a collocation where the adjective qualified a feminine noun, such as, for instance, **cráeb chóisech* ‘hollow branch’, or the like.

⁴⁷ Ed. and transl. Gwynn (1913), 18–9; *cruitti* should rather be translated as ‘harps’; moreover, Gwynn translates *cúisig* as ‘pipers’, but this term is much more likely to refer to the instruments rather than the players. As we have just seen, it is hard to tell whether *cúisech* meant ‘flute’ or ‘(reed-)pipe’ (or whether in fact this was intended as a generic term, akin to English ‘wind instruments’ or ‘woodwinds’). **For a discussion of this passage from the *Dindshenchas*, cf. O’Sullivan (2004), 80–3.**

Pípai, fidli, fir cengail, / cnámfhir 7 cuslennaig, / slúag étig engach éghair / béccaig 7 búridaig.

‘Pipes, fiddles, gleemen, / bones-players and bag-pipers, / a crowd hideous, noisy, profane, / shriekers and shouters’.⁴⁸

Thus, whichever instrument the term *cúisech* may refer to in this poem, it would seem to be played by musicians of fairly high standing. However, the inherently vague semantic nature of the term *cúisech* makes it impossible to provide a definitive answer on this matter. Indeed, to complicate the picture even further, in Middle Irish texts the term *fet* is occasionally prefixed to *cúisech* in order to create what appears to be a more specific instrumental designation: *fet-chúisech* ‘whistling pipe’. For instance, in the tenth-century story edited by Kuno Meyer with the title ‘King Eochaid has horse’s ears’ (about which more will be said below), the young nobleman Mac Díchoíme, son of the brother of Eochaid, king of Uí Failgi, entertains the royal household with *fetchoisig 7 timpānacht*, i.e. ‘by playing the whistling pipe and the *timpán*’.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ed. and transl. Gwynn (1913), 20; Gwynn’s translation of *cuslennaig* as ‘bag-pipers’ is questionable. Interestingly, this passage appears to contain the earliest attestation of the term *píp(a)* (> Modern Irish *píob*), which is of course a loan-word (cf. Herbert (1976), 27), as indicated by its initial *p*. This term belongs to a long series of terms designating pipes and bagpipes in various European languages (Engl. and French *pipe*, Northern Ital. *piva*, Germ. (*Sack*)*pfeife*, etc.), all ultimately derived from Vulgar Latin / Proto-Romance **pīpa*, a noun formed from the Latin verbs *pīpāre* and *pīpīre* ‘to chirp, to peep’: the term would have originally referred to a ‘chirping instrument’, thus most likely a flute; it later became a much wider cover term for woodwinds, as well as for various objects characterised by a long narrow cavity (cf. Bec (1996), 82–9; *LEIA* P-9). Interestingly, the Modern Irish form *píob* points to a pronunciation /pīb(ə)/ for Middle Irish *píp(a)*: the voicing of the intervocalic *p* of Vulgar Latin **pīpa* suggests that the term may have reached Ireland via Wales (either through British Latin **pīpa* = /pība/, or directly from Welsh *pib*); we could then speculate that the term may have come to Ireland from Britain together with the import of a new instrument, which, considering the time of composition of ‘The Fair of Carmun’ (eleventh century), may well be the bagpipe (for a discussion of Middle Irish *pīpa*, cf. also Donnelly (2001), 1–5).

⁴⁹ Ed. Meyer (1903), 47; the translation here is my own, while Meyer’s (on p. 50) reads ‘by piping and timpan-playing’. The term seems to refer here to the playing of the instrument, rather than to the instrument itself. The same occasionally applies to the term *cúisech* (not in composition with *fet*), cf. the poem on the beheading of John the Baptist by Mog Ruith (ed. and transl. Scarre (1910), 174, §8): *Do[g]nīdh Neiptis, ceōl fa bloidh, cúiseach bind asa bēalaibh* ‘Neiptis used to make – a famous music! – sweet piping from her lips’ (cf. the similar phrasing at p. 180, §34); it is actually unclear whether the term *cúisech* refers here to the music made with that instrument, or whether it is intended as an implicit comparison between Neiptis’ whistling (or singing?) and the music usually made on a *cúisech*. This passage corresponds to a section of the Lebor Brecc homily on the Passion of John the Baptist (*Pais Eoin*

Is this the same instrument also designated by the term *fetán* or not? This is hard to tell, but the composition with *fet* suggests at least that we may be dealing once again with a term referring to some kind of flute. As we shall see, this seems to be confirmed by a number of passages where *cúisech* appears in opposition to *cuisle(nn)*.

This last term occurs very frequently in Old and Middle Irish text, and I believe that an interdisciplinary approach combining philology, iconography, and ethnomusicology can bring us closer to the identification of the instrumental type which was most commonly designated as *cuisle(nn)*.

This noun is characterised by allomorphy between *cuisle*, inflected as an *n*-stem, and *cuislenn*, inflected as an *ā*-stem. Karin Stüber has argued (convincingly, in my opinion) that the term was originally an *ā*-stem which later adopted the *n*-stem inflection, a view which is especially based on the fact that the term already occurs as nom. sg. *cuislen* in the Old Irish glosses on Phylargirius⁵⁰. In the following pages I will then treat *cuislenn* as the older form, and *cuisle* as a Middle Irish derivative.⁵¹

In 1860, Whitley Stokes suggested to understand this term (which also means ‘vein, blood-vessel, pulse’) as a loanword from Latin *pulsus*.⁵² This etymology is somewhat cautiously accepted in *LEIA* C-280 s.v. *cuisle*: ‘On doit certainement accepter

Bauptaist) where we find a description of the various arts practiced by the two daughters of Herodias, here named as Saluisa and Neptis (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23.P.16, p. 188b); the latter, in particular, is expert *oc ambrán* [sic] *7 oc luindiucc 7 oc féthcusib* [sic] *7 ciúil examail ar-chena* ‘at singing, and playing tunes, and whistle-playing, and other types of music too’ (ed. Atkinson (1887), 66, ll. 889–90; my translation).

⁵⁰ Cf. Stüber (1998), 180 (Stüber’s argument overturns what is maintained in *LEIA* C-279 s.v. *cuisle*: ‘f. th. à nas., plus tard aussi *cuislen* f. th. en *-ā*’). In the Phylargirius glosses (*Thes.* II, 48.17; cf. also *ibid.* 363.16, where the manuscript presents the garbled reading *ciüs lenus*), *cuislen* occurs as a translation of Lat. *stipula*, from Virgil, *Eclogue* III, 25–7: *cantando tu illum? aut umquam tibi fistula cera / vincta fuit? non tu in triviis, indocte, solebas / stridenti miserum stipula disperdere carmen?* ‘You beat him at music? Have you ever owned a set / of reed-pipes waxed together? You amateur, puffing a scrannel / tune on a squeaky straw at the crossroads is more your mark!’ (ed. Geymonat (1973), 13; transl. Day Lewis (1999), 11). Thus, *cuislen* was here identified by the glossator as the appropriate term for a humble, rustic wind instrument (a ‘squeaky straw’!).

⁵¹ Although *cuislen* (with single *-n*) is the spelling found in the Phylargirius glosses, the unlenited quality of the nasal must be assumed on the basis of MacNeill’s Law: I will therefore consistently write this term as *cuislenn* (as it is indeed more often attested) rather than *cuislen*.

⁵² Cf. Stokes (1860), 47: ‘Cuisle is a fem. stem in *n*, and perhaps derived (by the frequent change of *p* into *c*) from Lat. *pulsus*’.

l'emprunt au lat. *pulsus* au moins pour une partie des sens, car il est possible que deux mots se soient ici confondus'.

Now, while it would in fact be rather unproblematic to derive *cuislenn* from *pulsus* from the semantic point of view ('pulse' > 'vein, blood-vessel' > 'tube-like object' > (musical) pipe'), this etymology is however highly questionable in terms of its phonology and morphology. In particular, it is unclear how the palatal cluster *-sl-* would result from the obviously non-palatalising environment of Lat. *pulsus*; the inflectional class of *cuislenn* would also be puzzling in this context, irrespective of whether one considers it as an original *n-* or *ā-*stem.⁵³

I would like to suggest here an alternative etymology. First of all, the lack of assimilation of *-sl-* to *-ll-* indicates that this word was created / introduced in Celtic after the Proto-Celtic phase,⁵⁴ or, alternatively, that the consonantal cluster in *cuislenn* may be the outcome either of Irish syncope or of a metathesis *-ls-* > *-sl-*. If we proceed on the basis of this last working hypothesis, *cuislenn* could be the regular outcome of Proto-Irish forms like **kulsinā* / **kulsīnā* or **kolsinā* / **kolsīnā*. The former seems particularly appropriate, given that we could recognise in **kulsinā* / **kulsīnā* an ultimate reflex of the zero-grade of PIE **keh₂ul-* 'stalk, stem (of a plant)' (i.e. **kh₂ul-* > Proto-Celtic **kul-*).⁵⁵ A suffix *-īnā* forming denominative nouns is attested in Celtic (cf. OIr. *buiden* '(armed) company' < **budīnā*);⁵⁶ **kuls-īnā* could then be based on a noun formed with an *s*-suffix, i.e. **kul-s-o-s* or **kul-s-ā*.⁵⁷ We would then have a regular

⁵³ Although some Latin loanwords are inflected as *ā*-stems 'even where they have a different flexion in Latin' (Thurneysen (1946), 574, §925), analogical pressure is usually the likely cause for the shift (cf. *croch*, fem. *ā*-stem in spite of being from Lat. *crux*, probably due to analogy on nouns like *cloch* 'stone', as suggested by Thurneysen, *ibid.*). Moreover, the ending *-enn* in *cuislenn* would in any case remain unexplained.

⁵⁴ For Proto-Celtic *-sl-* > *-ll-*, cf. McCone (1994), 68, §3.5; Schrijver (1995), 433; McCone (1996), 46.

⁵⁵ Cf. Schrijver (1991), 268–9; Matasović (2009), 196. PIE **keh₂ul-* > Proto-Celtic **kaw₁lā* survives in OIr. *cúal* 'faggot, bundle of sticks' and *cúalne* > *cúaille* 'stake, pole' (singulative of *cúal*, cf. de Bernardo Stempel (1999), 364).

⁵⁶ Cf. LEIA B-114 s.v. *buiden*; de Bernardo Stempel (1999), 459.

⁵⁷ The zero-grade of the root is not particularly problematic, in view of forms such as **b^hr-s-o-s* > OIr. *barr* 'top, end' (cf. de Bernardo Stempel (1999), 260, fn. 4). As for intervocalic *-ls-*, according to Pedersen ((1909–1913), I, 429) this cluster assimilated to *-ll-* 'in sehr alter Zeit'; however, he did not provide any example of this sound change from Celtic, and Jackson ((1953), 540, §127) pointed out that 'good examples are lacking from British'. In the lack of clear evidence pointing to the contrary, it is

development **kul-s-īnā* > **kuls'ina* > **kuls'ena* > **kuls'en* > OIr. *cuislenn* (by metathesis + MacNeill's Law) > MIr. *cuisle* (by transfer to *n*-stems).⁵⁸ Although some aspects of this derivation are necessarily *ad hoc*, **kulsīnā* is nevertheless attractive from the semantic point of view, given that reeds and simple reed-pipes are indeed often made from the stalk of certain plants.⁵⁹ If this etymology is correct, then the meanings 'vein' and 'pulse' must be secondary ('pipe made from a stalk' > 'pipe-like object' > 'vein, blood-vessel' > 'pulse').

In any case, it is most likely that the designating motivation underlying *cuislenn* would have been no longer transparent in Old Irish (unlike the already discussed *fetán*): for this reason, even this new etymology of *cuislenn* does not reveal much about the specific instrumental type which was designated by this term during the period 600–1200. Early Irish literature, however, provides us with relatively abundant evidence concerning this musical instrument and the musicians who played it: in particular, several Old and Middle Irish texts inform us on the social status of the *cuislennaig* ('players of *cuislenn*').

In a description of the physical (and consequently social) collocation of individuals of various ranks and conditions within a royal hall, the 8th-century legal tract *Críth Gablach* prescribes the relatively low status of the *cuislennaig* by placing them in the south-east corner of the hall, together with other low-ranking entertainers (horn-players

possible that *-ls-* did not, in fact, assimilate in Celtic (for the preservation of this cluster – perhaps due to analogy – in several Greek forms, cf. Sihler (1995), 218, §229). In forms like *mell* 'error' < **melsos*, the final *-ll* could be the result of a simplification of the post-apocope cluster *-ls*, inadmissible in auslaut in Old Irish (the geminated spelling would then simply indicate the unlenited nature of the liquid). It is worth noting that the outcome of both **kul-s-o-s* and **kul-s-ā* would have been indistinguishable from *coll* 'hazel-tree' < Primitive Irish **kollah* < Proto-Celtic **koslos* (on which cf. McCone (1996), 46; Matasović (2009), 218) after the Irish apocope (**kulsos*, **kulsā* > **kulsah*, **kulsa* > **kols* > *coll*).

⁵⁸ An alternative explanation may entail a derivation of *cuislenn* from an adjective **kul-s-i-no-s* / *-nā*, possibly based on a hypothetical *i*-stem **kul-s-i-* (cf. de Bernardo Stempel (1999), 459).

⁵⁹ Several interesting typological parallels can be found in Latin, Romance, and Old Irish: for instance, the name of the above-mentioned Sardinian instrument known as *benas* derives from Lat. *auēnās* (acc. pl.), literally meaning 'oats' (the stalk of this plant can be easily fashioned into a pipe; cf. Spanu (1994), 132–3); indeed, *auēna* can already be found in the sense of 'reed-pipe' in Latin literature (most famously in Virgil, *Eclogue* I, 2); cf. also the use of Lat. *stipula* 'stalk, straw' mentioned at fn. 50 above. Moreover, OIr. *buinne* 'sprig, stalk, sapling' is used twice in the Old Irish glosses to translate Latin terms for woodwinds: *tibia* (literally 'shin-bone') at *Thes.* I, 577.19 (Wb. 12c41), and *cicuta* (literally 'hemlock') at *Thes.* II, 46.24 (Philargyrius).

and acrobats), and further away from the king than the *cruitti* ('harpers').⁶⁰ A similar seating arrangement can be found in the short Old Irish tract on status *Lánellach tigi rích ocus ruirech*, where the *cuislennaig* are placed together with horn-players and charioteers.⁶¹ In a similar context, players of *cuislenn* are also mentioned among various other performers in a series of Middle Irish texts describing the *Tech Midchúarta*, the ancient banqueting hall of Tara. In these texts, the banqueting hall effectively becomes an idealised allegorical representation of the structure of Medieval Irish society, social ranks being indicated by the combination of two factors, i.e. the seating arrangement in the hall and the cut of meat assigned to each individual.⁶² The texts which are most relevant in the present context are: (1) the poem *Suidigud Tige Midchúarta*;⁶³ (2) a diagram representing the seating-plans of the *Tech Midchúarta*;⁶⁴ (3) a section of the *Dindshenchas* poem *Temair toga na tulach*.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Cf. *Críth Gablach* §46 (ed. Binchy (1941), 23.590): *cu[i]slennaig, cornairi, clesamnaig i n-airthiur foitsi* 'players of *cuislenn*, horn-players, acrobats in the south-east' (my translation). Significantly, on the other side of the hall (i.e. in the north-eastern corner), in a position corresponding symmetrically to that of the entertainers, we find forfeited hostages in fetters. The placement of *cuislennaig* together with horn-players and acrobats matches perfectly (with the addition of players of *pipaí*) a Middle Irish gloss to a quotation from an Old Irish legal tract found in Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337 (H.3.18), p. 874: *Daernemid tra .i. fodana na graid si tuas 7 comeneclainni iat 7 na pipairedha 7 na clesamnaigh 7 na cornaireda 7 na cuislennaig* 'These are the base, that is, inferior professions, and they are entitled to the same amount of honour-price as the pipers and the jugglers/tricksters/acrobats and the horn players and the *cuisle* players' (ed. Fletcher (2001), 152; transl. Fletcher (2001), 496); cf. the above-mentioned inclusion of the *fetánaig* among practitioners of the *fo-dána* 'inferior professions'.

⁶¹ Cf. *Lánellach tigi rích ocus ruirech*, §14 (ed. and transl. O Daly (1962), 83–4): *Ar-sesatar cornairi áraith cuslennaich airthiur* 'The horn-blowers, charioteers, and flute-players sat in the front part (of the house)' (O Daly's translation of *cuslennaich* as 'flute-players' must of course be taken *cum grano salis*, and *airthiur* can also mean 'in the east').

⁶² The complex relationship between the texts belonging to the *Tech Midchúarta* tradition has been recently reassessed in Downey (2010). For an overview of various Medieval traditions (including the Irish) where the dining table functions as a symbolic representation of human society, cf. Montanari (2012), 217–37. Cf. also Herbert (1976), 27–8; Sayers (1988), 373–4; Buckley (1995), 36–8; Buckley (2000), 170–1; O'Sullivan (2004), 88–95.

⁶³ The poem is found in four manuscripts: (1) Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster), p. 29b; (2) Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan), cols 245.37–247.4; (3) London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782, fols 45v–46r; (4) Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS B.iv.2, fols 130v–132r. I have used the edition of the poem from the Yellow Book of Lecan, found in Petrie (1839), 199–204, and the diplomatic edition from the Book of Leinster, found in Best, Bergin, & O'Brien

In the poem *Suidigud Tige Midchúarta*, the quatrain mentioning the players of *cuislenn* reads as follows:

Cuslennaig féil fidchellaig / i n-airidiu airthir / is colptha cóir cia firt gleis / fora meis scuirther

‘Good players of *cuislenn*, chess-players, / in the eastern *airide*. / A proper shank is given for their skill, / is put for them on their dish’.⁶⁶

First of all, it is worth noticing the correspondence between the eastern placement of the *cuislennaig* in this poem and the analogous collocation found in the Old Irish poem *Lánellach tigi rích ocus ruirech* (cf. fn. 61 above): this suggests that the Middle Irish *Tech Midchúarta* tradition may present partial re-elaborations of earlier texts. In other quatrains of the same poem, the same portion which is here assigned to *cuislennaig* and chess-players (*colptha*, i.e. ‘shank’)⁶⁷ is given to jugglers (*clessamnaig*) and buffoons (*fuirseóiri*),⁶⁸ and also to the druid and the *aire déso* ‘lord of vassalry’.⁶⁹ While *prima facie* it may seem surprising that humble entertainers receive the same portion as a lord, things become clearer if we look at the diagrams showing the actual seating plans: in both manuscript versions of the diagram, guests are seated in four rows,

(1954–1967), 117–20, ll. 3702–89. For more details, cf. Fletcher (2001), 469–70, 593–4; Downey (2010), 8–9.

⁶⁴ Two copies of the diagram exist, differing from each other in many details: (1) Book of Leinster, p. 29a (ed. Petrie (1839), 205–11, reproduced in plate 8; Best, Bergin, & O’Brien (1954–1967), 116); (2) Yellow Book of Lecan, cols 243–4 (reproduced in Petrie (1839), plate 9). For more details, cf. Fletcher (2001), 467–9, 592–3; Downey (2010), 16–8.

⁶⁵ This poem is labelled ‘Temair III’ in Gwynn’s edition (Gwynn (1903), 14–45). The relevant section of the poem consists in eight quatrains listing the guests who attend the *Tech Midchúarta* of Tara (Gwynn (1903), 24–7, ll. 149–80; cf. also Fletcher (2001), 197, 521; Downey (2010), 19–24.

⁶⁶ Book of Leinster copy, ed. Best, Bergin, & O’Brien (1954–1967), 119, ll. 3762–5; transl. (slightly adapted) from Petrie (1839), 202–3. The term *airide* seems to refer to a group of seats.

⁶⁷ In his discussion of the distribution of portions in the *Tech Midchúarta*, Fergus Kelly (1997, 358) writes: ‘The most important guests are entitled to the best cuts [of pork], such as the *loarg* ‘haunch’ or the *lónchrúachait* ‘tenderloin steak’. Those of somewhat lower status get the *colpthae* ‘shank’ or the *leschrúachait*, which is probably to be identified with the centre-cut loin steak. Low-ranking persons get such inferior cuts as the *milgetan* ‘belly’, the *dronn* ‘chine’, or *remur n-imda* ‘shoulder fat’.

⁶⁸ The quatrain mentioning jugglers and buffoons is not found in the Book of Leinster version of the poem.

⁶⁹ Cf. Kelly (1988), 27: ‘The law-texts distinguish a number of grades of lord, and differ slightly in their arrangement of them. There is, however, agreement in placing the *aire déso* at the bottom of the list. He is clearly the typical lord – his title simply means ‘lord of vassalry’ (*déis*)’.

two on each side of the fire which is in the middle of the hall. As pointed out by Máirín O Daly, low-ranking individuals are mostly placed in the inner rows, so that, being nearer to the fire, they ‘were liable in stormy weather to suffer from their proximity to the smoke-hole above the fire’.⁷⁰ Thus, while in the Book of Leinster version of the diagram a shank is equally assigned to *cuislennaig*, chess-players (*fidchellaig*), jugglers (*clessa[m]naig*), seers (*fádi*), druids (*druid*), conjurers (*commilid*, cf. *DIL* s.v. 2 *comal*, col. C-348.37–8), lords of vassalry (*airi desa*) and poets of the fifth grade (*doss*, cf. *DIL* s.v. 2 *dos*, col. D-370), these categories are nonetheless set apart by their seating position: the first three categories sit in the inner rows, while the remaining five sit in the outer rows, being of higher rank.⁷¹

The *dindshenchas* poem *Temair toga na tulach* does not contradict this arrangement:

*Drúth, fidchellach, fuirseóir fáen, / cuislendach, clesamnach cláen, / colpa a cuit feóla
iar fír, / in tan tigdís i tech ríge.*

‘Jester, chess-player, sprawling buffoon, / piper, cheating juggler, / the shank was their share of meat in truth, / when they came into the king’s house’.⁷²

In a nutshell, whenever we find a mention of the *cuislennaig*, both legal tracts and texts belonging to the *Tech Midchúarta* tradition agree in classifying this category of musicians among low-ranking entertainers.⁷³ It seems then worth asking why that was the case: could it be that the low status attributed to the *cuislennaig* was a direct consequence of some specific feature of their instrument, or of its playing technique?

⁷⁰ Cit. from O Daly (1962), 82 (also cited in Downey (2010), 18).

⁷¹ A similar situation can be found in the Yellow Book of Lecan version of the diagram: among those who receive a *colptha*, players of *cuislenn*, chess-players and buffoons (*fuirseoire*) sit in the inner rows, while seers, druids, conjurers sit in the outer rows (poets of the fifth grade and lords of vassalry receive here different cuts of meat).

⁷² Ed. and transl. Gwynn (1903), 26–7, ll. 165–8 (nobody else receives the shank in this poem). Cf. also the interesting discussion of the terms *caisleóir* and *bonnaire* (occurring at ll. 170–1) in Downey (2010), 22–3 (I wish to thank Clodagh Downey for providing me with her unpublished notes on the term *buinnire*).

⁷³ In both versions of the diagram, among entertainers sitting in the inner rows only the *braigetóiri* (‘farters’) receive a cut of meat of quality clearly lower than the shank (i.e., *remur n-imda* ‘shoulder fat’). Of course, practices may have occasionally varied: as pointed out by Fergus Kelly ((1988), 64, fn. 198), ‘*Bretha Nemed déidenach* (CIH 1117.41 = *Ériu* 13 (1942) 23.2) disagrees with *U[raicecht] B[ecc]* in including the piper among the professionals who have their own honour-price (*eneclann*)’.

Interestingly, in several different cultural and historical contexts, a distinctive feature which is often associated with players of wind instruments, especially if reed-sounded, is the facial distortion caused by the need to blow air into them at a high pressure: this is especially prominent in the case of folk reed-pipes, which are often played with the technique known as ‘circular breath’, whereby the musician creates a small air reservoir in the mouth by puffing out his or her cheeks, as this allows to blow air into the instrument while at the same time breathing in new air through the nose (the result of this being a potentially endless uninterrupted sound – very much like what happens in a bagpipe).⁷⁴ Such a facial distortion has sometimes been perceived as grotesque and undesirable: in particular, according to a well-known Classical story, Athena threw away the wind instrument she had just invented, after seeing in the water a reflection of her own distorted face.⁷⁵ To give yet another example, in seventeenth-century France the perceived ugly appearance of musicians who played mouth-blown bagpipes eventually drove pipe-makers to introduce a new system, whereby the bag of the instrument was inflated by means of a bellows placed under the player’s arm.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Cf., e.g., Montagu (2007), 75; Moore (2012), 42–5.

⁷⁵ Cf. e.g. Ovid, *Fasti*, VI.697–702: *prima, terebrato per rara foramina buxo, / ut daret, effeci, tibia longa sonos. / uox placuit: faciem liquidis referentibus undis / uidi uirgineas intumuisse genas. / ‘ars mihi non tanti est; ualeas, mea tibia’ dixi: / excipit abiectam caespite ripa suo* ‘I [Athena] was the first, by piercing boxwood with holes wide apart, to produce the music of the long flute. The sound was pleasing; but in the water that reflected my face I saw my virgin cheeks puffed up. ‘I value not the art so high; farewell, my flute!’ said I, and threw it away; it fell on the turf of the river-bank’ (ed. and transl. by J. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA & London, 1931 [2nd ed.: 1989]), 372–3; the Latin term *tibia*, here translated as ‘flute’, is more likely to correspond to Greek *aulos*, a reed instrument).

⁷⁶ Cf. Charles-Emmanuel Borjon de Scellery, *Traité de la Musette* (Lyon, 1672), 5: *comme il falloit souffler pour joüer de cet Instrument, & que cette fatigue estoit accompagnée d’une tres-mauvaise grace, afin de le rendre autant commode qu’agreable, on a trouvé le secret depuis 40 ou 50 années, d’y ajoüter un soufflet que l’on a emprunté des orgues, par le moyen duquel on le remplit d’autant d’air que l’on veut* ‘since blowing was necessary to play this instrument, and given that this effort was accompanied by a very bad appearance, in order to make its playing comfortable as well as pleasant, the secret has been known for forty or fifty years, which consists in adding a bellows, borrowed from organs, by means of which the instrument can be filled with air as much as one wants’ (my translation). Cf. also Charles-Dominique (2006), 186.

Given the well-known Medieval Irish tendency to correlate physique and rank (especially in regard to kingship),⁷⁷ it is not unreasonable to think that the puffed-out cheeks of a piper may have been regarded as indicators of low status. Some early Irish texts seem to support this view: in the legal tract *Miadslechte* it is stated, in respect to the entertainer referred to as *réimm* ('contortionist'), that 'every man who brings distortion on his body and face is not entitled to honour-price, because he goes out of his proper form before hosts and crowds'.⁷⁸ Moreover, a passage found in both the *Irish Triads* and *Bretha Nemed Toísech* specifies 'three things which confer status on a *crossán* ('jester'): distending his cheek, distending his bag, distending his belly'.⁷⁹ It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that players of triple pipes are often represented with prominent puffed-out cheeks in Medieval Irish art.⁸⁰

If the distended cheeks of the performer were indeed at least one of the reasons why the *cuislennach* was considered as a low-ranking entertainer, this element may suggest that the term *cuislenn* predominantly designated a reed instrument. This supposition receives some support from a number of Middle Irish texts which present interesting organological hints.

In a story found in the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, the king Fergal mac Maíle Dúin decides to test his two sons, who had come to visit him, by spying on their behaviour during the night. While the younger son, Níall, spends the night with nobility and restraint, listening to *cruitireacht ciúin bind* ('sweet, quiet harp playing') and songs of praise to the Lord, the elder son, Áed, is entertained in a rather different fashion:

Rá bhattur fuirseoiri 7 cainteadaha 7 eachlacha 7 oblóiri 7 bachlaigh ag beceadhoig 7 acc buireadhaigh ann. Dream ag ól, 7 dream 'na ccodladh, 7 dream og sgeathraigh, dream

⁷⁷ Cf. Kelly (1988), 19: 'A king is expected to have a perfect body, free from blemish or disability. The sagas provide a number of instances of a king losing his kingship through some disfigurement'; cf. also Kelly (1988), 94: 'Physical disabilities may also limit a person's legal capacity or responsibility'.

⁷⁸ Ed. *AL* iv, 354: *nach fer dobeir remmad fo corp 7 a enech ni dligh dire uair teit asa richt ar beluib slúagh 7 sochaidhe* (transl. from Fletcher (2001), 497; on *Miadslechte*, cf. Kelly (1988), 267; Breatnach (2005), 264–5).

⁷⁹ Ed. Meyer (1906), 16, §116 (= *CIH* 2220.2): *Tréde neimthigedar crossán: rige óile, rige théighe, rige bronn* (transl. from Kelly (1988), 64–5; cf. also Fletcher (2001), 157, 460, 500; Harrison (1988), 300–1). It is unclear what the word 'bag' means here: Fergus Kelly has suggested that 'tíag 'bag' (Latin *theca*) may refer to the inflated bladder brandished by the jester, or possible to his testicles – he may distend his scrotum for comic effect' (Kelly (1988), 65, fn. 203).

⁸⁰ Cf., e.g., Buckley (1990), 46; Ramsey (2002), 29, 34; Buckley (2008), 26–8, 37.

occ cusleannaigh, dream oc featcuisigh. Timpanaigh 7 cruithiri og seanmaimh; dream og imarbhaghadh 7 oc reasbagaibh.

‘There were buffoons and satirists and horseboys and jugglers and oafs, roaring and bellowing there. Some were drinking, some sleeping, some vomiting, some piping, some whistling. *Timpán*-players and harpers were playing; a group was boasting and arguing’.⁸¹

Rather than being the realistic depiction of a musical performance, the list of musicians found in this passage is probably rather aimed at conveying an impression of loud noise and chaos: many kinds of instruments and sounds can be here heard simultaneously, without any order or sense.⁸² However, by compiling this list, the author also provided us implicitly with a series of instrumental categories. In particular, it is clear that both wind and string instruments are played at the feast. Within the former category, the terms *cusleannaigh* and *featcuisigh* (here used as verbal nouns, cf. fn. 49 above) represent a minimal example of contrastive taxonomy:⁸³ in other words, they are likely to refer to the playing of different instruments and, as a consequence, perhaps also to different types of sound. Given that, as we have seen, *fet-chúisech* almost certainly designated some kind of flute, it is tempting to take this terminological opposition as an additional indication that, conversely, the *cuislenn* may have been a reed-pipe.

The same opposition can be found in the 10th-century *Cath Almaine*, the story of the battle of Allen which occurs, like the previous source, in the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*. The night before the battle, king Fergal asks Donn Bó (a Connachta man of great nobility and skill, loved and respected by all the people of Ireland) to entertain the troops:

‘Déna airfideadh dúin, a Doinnbó, fo bith as tú as deach airfidhidh fail i nEirinn, .i. i cúisigh agus i cuisleandoibh 7 i cruitibh 7 randaibh 7 raidseachoibh 7 righshgealaibh Eireann, 7 isin madin si imbarach do beram-ne cath do Laignib’.

⁸¹ Ed. and transl. (slightly adapted) from Radner (1978), 60–61, §177 (AD 721); Radner translated the term *timpanaigh* as ‘drummers’; the *timpán* was, however, a string instrument (cf. fn. 36 above). This story is also discussed in Buckley (1995), 46–7.

⁸² The literary *topos* of the ‘instrumental series’ as a means of evoking ‘l’euphorie collective d’une grande fête’ is discussed in Bec (1992), 70–3.

⁸³ I borrow this notion from Pierre Bec’s ‘typologie contrastive’ (cf. Bec (1992), 297–304)

‘Entertain us, Donn Bó, for you are the best musician in Ireland, with flutes and piping, and with harps and poems and talk and royal stories of Ireland, and tomorrow morning we give battle to the Laigin’.⁸⁴

The completeness of Donn Bó’s artistic accomplishments is here shown by the accumulation of instruments and other forms of entertainment. What is especially interesting in the present context, though, is that once again *cúisig* and *cuislenna* clearly belong to two distinct categories. At this point, one may legitimately wonder whether we could posit a terminological dichotomy reflecting a basic instrumental taxonomy whereby the *fetán* / (*fet*)*c(h)úisech* (‘flute, whistle’) was distinguished from the *cuislenn* (‘reed-pipe’?).

Some further indications in favour of this interpretation can be found in a Middle Irish text which has attracted very little scholarly interest so far, in spite of being unusually rich in organological details: the already-mentioned story of Mac Díchoíme, which is found, to my knowledge, in a single manuscript, i.e. Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D.iv.2, fols 52v1 – 53v2. The story was edited in two separate articles: the first half was published by Kuno Meyer in 1903 with an English translation, while the second half was edited and translated into German by Rudolf Thurneysen in 1933; both editors agreed in dating this text to the 10th century.

The part of the tale edited by Meyer centres on the young nobleman (and able musician) Angus Mac Díchoíme, who falls into a wasting sickness caused by the heavy secret that he must keep: indeed, he has come to discover that his uncle Eochaid, king of Offaly, has horses’ ears (a blemish which, if revealed, would make Eochaid unsuitable for kingship). One day, while crossing a desolate moor, Mac Díchoíme falls upon his face: three streams of blood flow from his lips and nostrils, so that the secret flows out of him, and he is immediately cured. After a year, while crossing the same moor, Mac Díchoíme finds out that three saplings have grown from the three streams of blood. Some time after that, a famous harper, who was travelling from Munster to come and see king Eochaid, overhears the three saplings talking to each other, saying ‘Eochaid, the man of the shield, has two horses’ ears’. As one may expect, the harper later reveals the secret in front of the king’s court, but, curiously enough, the people of Offaly decide not to reject their king, and the king spares the harper’s life. Mac Díchoíme then makes a double pipe (*cuislenn dégabail*) from the three saplings, and

⁸⁴ Ed. and transl. from Radner (1978), 68–71, §178 (AD 722) (cf. also Ó Riain (1978), §6).

later becomes king after Eochaid's death. Significantly, this part of the tale closes with the important remark that 'though he had become king he did not part from his pipe',⁸⁵ suggesting that this was perceived as an unusual behaviour (after all, as we have seen, *cuislennaig* had a low social status).

In the part of the story published by Thurneysen, Mac Díchoíme, who in the meantime has become a good and just king, never parts from his pipe (here interchangeably referred to as *cuisle(nn)* or *buinne dégabail*), which possesses magical virtues (it can be heard from a great distance, and animals which hear its sound triplicate the amount of milk that they yield).⁸⁶ One day, however, he kidnaps a girl who was a servant of 'the old Brigit', daughter of Domma (*Sen-Brigid ingen Domma*), and refuses to release her. The old Brigit then begs Saint Brigit to help her recover the girl: thus, the Saint cunningly asks the king to liberate the girl, or, alternatively, to give her his double pipe, secretly knowing that Mac Díchoíme won't survive nine days without his beloved musical instrument. Of course, everything happens as foretold: the king dies of anguish, so that Saint Brigit obtains both the girl and the pipe. At this point, we come to the most interesting section of the text, that is a description of the pipe and its destiny:

Is [s]i tra cathbuadach noem-Brigdi in chuissle sin Meic Dichoeme, do-ronadh don run. At-berat araile dano conad buinne tregabail do-ronadh donaib chuisslennaib tredaib, ro-fassatar triasin run. Coros-raind Brigit Cille Dara: benn dia bennaibh na cuislinne do Shen-Brigit ingen Domma ina haineach ⁊ ina sarugud, benn aile do Mac Tail dia hanmcarait Brigdi. In tresbenn dana ⁊ cois na cuislinne sin Meic Dichoeme fo-rfaccuib Brightit aicce feisin. Conidh i in sin cathbuadach boi fri hidhacht ⁊ fri hadhart noem-Brigde, in tan do-luid a dochum richidh; ⁊ is amlaid boi: a cathbuadach 'na laim oc eitsecht tri comurtha a grad n-epscoip; ar ni mó is bachall ind oencendach crom oldass an debennach diriuch cenn.

'Thus, this pipe of Mac Díchoíme, which had been made from the secret, is Saint Brigit's 'victorious one'. Some others, then, say that it was a three-forked pipe that was made from the three saplings which had grown on account of the secret. And Brigit of Kildare separated them: [she gave] one of the pipes of the *cuislenn* to the old Brigit, daughter of Domma, the second pipe to Mac Tail, confessor of Brigit. Then, as for the third pipe and

⁸⁵ Cf. Meyer (1903), 50, 54: *gabais iar sin rīghe i ndegaid Eochach ⁊ cīa rogab rīge, nī roscar fria chuisslind.*

⁸⁶ A similar increase in milk-yield in relation to music can be found in *Longes mac nUislenn*, cf. Kelly (1997), 39.

the foot of that *cuisle* of Mac Díchoíme, Brigit kept that for herself. So, this is ‘the victorious one’ which was there at the point of death and on the death-bed of Saint Brigit, when she went to the Kingdom [of Heaven], and it is so that it happened: her ‘victorious one’ in her hand when she died, as a mark of her rank of bishop; for the single-headed crooked staff is no more a crosier than the double-pointed straight one’.⁸⁷

Undoubtedly this is one of the most detailed descriptions of a woodwind instrument to be found in an early Irish text.⁸⁸ Interestingly, this passage is introduced as a sort of ‘textual variant’ apparently driven by the wish to rationalise a potentially puzzling aspect of the story: since three saplings had grown from Mac Díchoíme’s blood, the compiler seems to wonder why he should have made a *double* pipe out of them, whereas a *triple* pipe would provide a much more logical solution. While on the one hand it would be easy to dismiss this as an example of somewhat pedantic aetiology, on the other hand this passage presents a number of striking features.

First of all, Saint Brigit’s use of the third pipe as a crosier does not pose any problem from the organological point of view. Many Medieval Irish crosiers have survived and have been studied by archaeologists and art historians: one of their most notable characteristics is that they tend to be considerably shorter than their contemporary continental counterparts. One of the longest, the Kells crosier (also known as British Museum crosier), only measures approximately one meter and thirty centimeters, and many Irish crosiers are in fact even shorter.⁸⁹ This length is perfectly compatible with reed-pipes found in some living musical traditions: in some types of Sardinian *launeddas* the drone-pipe (called *tumbu*) can be as long as 150 centimetres, and the drone-pipe of the Egyptian *arghul* can also reach a considerable length.⁹⁰

This passage is most interesting especially by virtue of its detailed terminology. The term *buinne / cuisle(nn) tregabail*, literally meaning ‘three-forked pipe’, clearly refers here to the instrument as a whole, while *benn* (a term whose broad semantic range

⁸⁷ Ed. Thurneysen (1933), 120, §13; the translation is mine.

⁸⁸ To my knowledge, this passage has not attracted much scholarly interest, apart from a brief discussion in Ramsey (2002), 31.

⁸⁹ Cf. Johnson (2000), 118: ‘Irish crosiers were of two lengths, the shorter of which measured approximately 1m, as evidenced by a crosier found in the River Bann in Co. Antrim. The longer crosiers are represented by two other complete specimens both of which measure approximately 1.3m in length (the British Museum crosier and the Prosperous crosier)’.

⁹⁰ For the *launeddas*, cf. Spanu (1994), 141; for the *arghul*, cf. Braun (2002), 219–20.

shows that it referred to any pointed shape)⁹¹ indicates a single pipe, i.e. a single component of the instrument. This *cuislenn* appears to be constituted by three detachable pipes, thus supporting the typological comparison with instruments such as the above-mentioned *launeddas*. Moreover, one of the most intriguing terms pertains to the component that Brigit keeps for herself, described as *in tresbenn ocus cois na cuislinne*, ‘the third pipe and the ‘foot’ of the *cuislenn*’. What does the ‘foot’ refer to? As indicated in *DIL* (s.v. *cos*, col. C-488.78), *cos* can mean ‘stem, support, handle, shaft of various objects’; we may then wonder whether this term could designate here some kind of stand on which the instrument was placed: after all, a vertical stand can be seen supporting a long single pipe played by one of the musicians accompanying king David in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C.vi (‘Tiberius Psalter’, an 11th-century manuscript from Winchester), fol. 30v. This interpretation, however, seems problematic: first of all, representations of such a stand seem exceedingly rare in Medieval iconography (indeed, the one visible in the Tiberius Psalter is the only example that I am aware of); moreover, in the passage from the story of Mac Díchoíme, the ‘foot’ seems to be an integral component of the part of the instrument which eventually becomes Brigit’s crosier. This piece is clearly described as *debennach diriuch*, that is it has two pointed ends, and it is straight. Although this is impossible to prove, the term *cos* might refer here to a detachable component, possibly used to lengthen one of the pipes: indeed, the longest pipe (usually the drone) of the already mentioned *arghul*, *benas*, and *launeddas* is never made in one piece, but the desired length is rather obtained by addition of a detachable piece which lowers the pipe’s pitch (clearly visible in FIGURE 1 above).⁹²

V. THE PROBLEM OF ICONOGRAPHY AND THE *EPISTULA AD DARDANUM*

Although the interpretation of the organological details may be speculative, the rich technical terminology found in this passage from the story of Mac Díchoíme suggests at

⁹¹ Cf. *DIL* s.v. *benn*, providing meanings such as ‘mountain, peak, point, pinnacle, corner, horn, point (of various forked and pointed objects)’ etc.

⁹² Alternatively, the *cos* might designate a detachable section in which the reed was inserted, similar to the system used in the Graeco-Roman *aulos*, cf. West (1992), 85: ‘The stem of the mouthpiece reed fitted into a bulbous section of the pipe. Vase-paintings often show two of these bulbs, one socketed into the other, or occasionally, as it appears, even three. In other instances the instrument has continuous straight outlines but is crossed by bands at the corresponding places, indicating joints between separate pieces’.

least that its author may have possessed some knowledge of the shape and structure of a *cuislenn*. After all, triple reed-pipes are attested not only from living musical traditions (e.g. the *launeddas*), but they also feature in Medieval manuscript iconography: for instance, in Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter U.3.2 (229) (a 12th-century manuscript from Northern England also known as ‘Hunterian Psalter’), fol. 21v, we see David playing the harp, accompanied by musicians; at the bottom of the page, two young boys (perhaps students of music)⁹³ play woodwinds: one seems to play a sort of rudimentary bagpipe, or a bladder-pipe, while the other plays what appears to be a set of triple pipes. A famous realistic depiction of ‘*launeddas*-like’ triple pipes can moreover be found in the 13th-century Escorial copy of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (El Escorial, MS B.I.2, ‘codex E’, fol. 79r).

As is well known, depictions of players of triple pipes also occur on Early Medieval monuments in both Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, for instance on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice, St Martin’s Cross on Iona, or the cross slab of Ardchattan (Argyll). This fact poses a number of fundamental but challenging questions: what is the relationship between the textual evidence presented above and such iconographic evidence? Can we find a precise correspondence between linguistic designations and the instruments depicted on the Gaelic crosses? Can we take these images as reliable representations of real musical instruments played, say, in 9th- or 10th-century Ireland and Scotland?

The main reason why it is so difficult to provide convincing answers to these questions is of course that the use of iconography as a basis for Medieval organology presents many problems of its own. First of all, it is essentially impossible to know whether these depictions relied upon the artists’ direct acquaintance with actual instruments, or whether they were in fact copied from models and exemplars which are no longer extant (not to mention the possibility that they may have been based on pure fantasy). Quite clearly, this problem bears directly on the legitimacy of iconography as a source of organological data. A concrete example of this is the representation of a siren playing a set of triple pipes found in a 12th- or 13th-century English bestiary

⁹³ For an analysis of this scene as a representation of musical instruction, cf. Marchesin (2000), 93–4 (she interprets the ‘triple pipe’ as a syrinx).

(Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 602, fol. 10r):⁹⁴ the instrument itself is fairly detailed, and its organology is realistic; the puffed-out cheeks of the siren (who is accompanied by two other sirens, one playing the harp, and one possibly singing) add further plausibility to the representation (cf. FIG. 2). An almost identical scene can be found in a 13th- or 14th-century bestiary contained in the miscellaneous codex Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 88, fol. 138v (cf. FIG. 3): although much cruder in its execution, this image matches perfectly the one in Bodley 602, to the point that it may well have been directly copied from it (or from a very similar common exemplar). However, the two images differ as to one important detail: the woodwind instrument visible in Douce 88 is a double pipe. If, for argument's sake, Bodley 602 had not survived, we may have been misled into considering the image in Douce 88 as the depiction – however careless – of a real instrument, while in fact this set of double

⁹⁴ For a brief discussion of this image cf. Buckley (1991), 180–2. The fact that the three sirens are respectively represented as singing, playing pipes, and playing the harp, is not fortuitous, as this configuration is found in several Late Antique and Early Medieval sources, such as Isidore's *Etymologiae* XI, iii, 30: *Sirenas tres fingunt fuisse ex parte virgins, ex parte volucres, habentes alas et ungulas: quarum una voce, altera tibiis, tertia lyra canebant. Quae inlectos navigantes sub cantu in naufragium trahebant* ('People imagine three Sirens who were part maidens, part birds, having wings and talons; one of them would make music with her voice, the second with a flute, and the third with a lyre. They would draw sailors, enticed by the song, into shipwreck'; transl. from Barney, Lewis, Beach & Berghof (2006), 245; in turn, Isidore's account derives from a passage in Servius's commentary on Vergil, cf. Holford-Strevens (2006), 24). As noted in Leach (2006), 197–8, the musical activities of the three sirens correspond perfectly to the traditional threefold division of *musica instrumentalis*, as found in Isidore's *Etymologiae* (III, xix): *Ad omnem autem sonum, quae materies cantilenarum est, triformem constat esse naturam. Prima est harmonica, quae ex vocum cantibus constat. Secunda organica, quae ex flatu consistit. Tertia rhythmica, quae pulsu digitorum numeros recipit. Nam aut voce editur sonus, sicut per fauces, aut flatu, sicut per tubam vel tibiam, aut pulsu, sicut per citharam, aut per quodlibet aliud, quod percutiendo canorum est* ('It is accepted that all sound that is the material of song has three forms by its nature. The first division is the *harmonicus*, which consists of vocal song. The second division is the *organicus*, which is composed of blowing. The third is the rhythmic, which takes its measures from the plucking of fingers. For sound is emitted either by the voice, as through the throat, or by blowing, as through a trumpet or a flute, or by plucking, as with the cithara, or any other sort of instrument that is melodious when plucked'; transl. from Barney, Lewis, Beach & Berghof (2006), 96). Thus, the hybridity of the sirens consists not only in their woman/bird nature, but also in the 'mismatch between positive musical features (attractive song, singer, and sound) and negative ethical features (sweetness as a form of gluttony or lechery)' (Leach (2006), 187).

pipes is in all likelihood nothing other than the result of the work of an inaccurate copyist.



FIG. 2. OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY, MS BODLEY 602, FOL. 10R.



FIG. 3. OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY, MS DOUCE 88, FOL. 138V.

Perhaps even more importantly, several scholars have argued that the instruments found in Medieval iconography should not be *necessarily* or *automatically* understood as direct or indirect reproductions of organological realities: in particular, their nature and function may vary from case to case, and may be partially or exclusively symbolic, especially in the light of the plainly Biblical and Christian context in which they are often found.⁹⁵ Indeed, much has been written over the past century concerning the

⁹⁵ Cf. Buckley (1990), 14–5: '[in Medieval Irish art] musical instruments are usually depicted as one element of a scene in religious carvings: not for the purpose of conveying information of a musicological nature but to preach the Christian message, portraying scenes of adoration and ritual of which music was a component. As in the case of literary references the purpose was not to convey accurate depictions of instruments; many illustrations are stylised, unrealistic copies of foreign works of art (e.g. manuscript illuminations, carvings) whose details may well have been ill-understood by native craftsmen, and even

exegetical interest shown by Late Antique and Medieval writers for the symbolic meaning of the musical instruments mentioned in the Bible (especially in the Psalms): allegorical interpretations of musical instruments can be found, for instance, in the writings of Augustine, Jerome, Cassiodorus and Isidore; it is more than likely that religious iconography would have been strongly influenced by these *auctoritates*.

One text which undoubtedly had a deep and long-lasting impact on the visual representation of Biblical instruments is a short letter falsely attributed to Jerome, known as *Epistula ad Dardanum de diversis generibus musicorum*. In the *Epistula*, the anonymous author provides fanciful organological descriptions and allegorical interpretations of the musical instruments mentioned in the Bible. This text, or excerpts from it, survives in no less than sixty-one copies dating from the ninth century onwards,⁹⁶ many of which are accompanied by drawings and diagrams attempting to visualise the Biblical instruments. The extraordinary number of extant copies is a clear indication of the wide diffusion of the *Epistula* throughout Medieval Europe; regrettably, in spite of the text's obvious importance, no modern critical edition is yet available. The version found in a tenth-century manuscript preserved in Munich was edited by Reinhold Hammerstein in 1959,⁹⁷ but this copy is often at variance with the version edited in *Patrologia Latina (PL)*, which was ultimately based on an edition

at times by the makers of the original. Musical instruments are particularly vulnerable to inaccurate artistic representation'. Cf. also McKinnon (1968), 15: 'when an artist illustrates the psalms which mention instruments it is not immediately apparent whether his intent is allegorical or literal. He depicts men playing instruments whether he means simply to represent ancient Israelites playing instruments or whether he means to represent these instrumentalists as symbols of Christian mystical instrument-playing'. Marchesin (2000), 25–6, proposes a classification of Medieval depictions of musical instruments into three broad types: (1) more or less accurate copies from earlier depictions; (2) more or less imaginary 'reconstructions' of ancient Biblical instruments; (3) depictions based on real-life contemporary instruments.

⁹⁶ Cf. Lambert (1969–1972), vol. III.A, 108, no. 323; McNamara (1986), 55 = McNamara (2000), 215; Markovits (2003), 445. The earliest copy is found in the mid-9th-century manuscript Angers, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 18 (14), fols 12v–13r (cf. van Schaik (1992), 71–2). For a discussion of the influence which the *Epistula* had on Medieval iconography of musical instruments, cf. especially Page (1977).

⁹⁷ Cf. Hammerstein (1959); the manuscript in question is Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm 14523, fols 49v–52r.

published in the early eighteenth century by the Maurist scholar Jean Martianay.⁹⁸ Most scholars consider the *Epistula* as a Carolingian composition of uncertain provenance: a convenient *terminus ante quem* for its composition is given by the fact that Rabanus Maurus seems to have used it as a source for his work *De Universo*, written around 843 (if the *Epistula* was not based on Rabanus' text, as believed by Hammerstein – but, as we shall see, there is strong evidence against this view).⁹⁹

The possibility that the *Epistula* influenced the representation of musical instruments in early Irish art has been taken into account by Ann Buckley, who, in particular, wrote the following in respect to the occurrence of triangular and quadrangular chordophones on Medieval Irish crosses and pillars:

‘their lack of specificity in detail suggests comparison with the panoply of representations of David’s biblical instrument, and illustrations in sources of the so-called Dardanus letter. In other words, they were never intended to represent contemporary stringed instruments, or indeed any particular organological type: rather they conform to another kind of typology, that of Late Antique and Early Christian iconography of David of the Old Testament, the sacred Other, preserving a distance from the contemporary world and from activities of secular musicians’.¹⁰⁰

Most interestingly, in his brief discussion of the *Epistula ad Dardanum*, Martin McNamara pointed out that

‘there is a long citation from it (agreeing verbatim with the text printed in Migne) in the St Gall manuscript of the Irish *Eclogae tractatorum in Psalterium* (late eighth century), containing a description of the organ, and carrying AG. (presumably Agustinus) as marginal ascription. Substantially the same text on the organ is found in the Irish ‘Bibelwerk’ (likewise late eighth century), where it is ascribed to ORIG. presumably Origen [...]. This evidence tells against Rabanus’ authorship of the work and the presumed Carolingian date of composition. The same letter is the source of some of the

⁹⁸ Cf. *PL* 30, cols 213–5; *PL* reproduces the edition by Domenico Vallarsi contained in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri Opera* (Verona, 1734–1742; 2nd ed.: Venice, 1766–1772); this was in turn based on the edition prepared by Jean Martianay for his *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri Opera* (Paris, 1693–1706). It is not clear which manuscript(s) Martianay used for his edition of the *Epistula*.

⁹⁹ Cf. Hammerstein (1959), 117–8; Seebass (1973), 141–4; Page (1977), 301–3; van Schaik (1992), 64–5; Marchesin (2000), 25–6.

¹⁰⁰ Cit. from Buckley (1991), 165.

glosses in [Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana] Pal. lat. 68 [...], a fact which obliges us to push the date of composition back further still'.¹⁰¹

The remarkable Irish affiliations of the *Epistula* pose a serious question as to whether we could consider this text as the product of Irish exegesis, or perhaps as a Carolingian re-elaboration of earlier material of Irish provenance. I believe strong support to this view can be found by analysing the section of the *Epistula* dealing with the Biblical instrument named *sambuca* (apparently a wind instrument of some kind).

Here is the relevant passage as presented in Hammerstein's edition, which I have integrated with variants and additions from the version published in *PL* (in square brackets);¹⁰² the passage is followed by my own tentative translation (which occasionally follows the readings of the *PL* version):

Sambuca itaque etiam apud peritissimos Hebreorum ignota res est. Antiquis autem temporibus apud Caldeos fuisse repperitur. Sicut scriptum est: 'cum audieritis uocem tubae, fistulae, citharae, et sambucae'. 'Buca' uero tuba apud Hebreos, deinde per diminutionem bucina dicitur. 'Sam' autem sol apud Hebreos interpretatur, unde dicitur 'Samson sol eorum'. Propter hoc 'sambuca' apud eos scribitur, quia multa [PL: multi] corticem alicuius arboris putant esse, et per sobilitatem [PL: soliditatem] mellis lignei ac nobilitatem [PL: ac uenti mutabilitatem] quasi in modum tubae de ramis arboris moueri potest. [PL adds here: ideo sambuca dicitur, quia aestatis tempore fieri potest, et usque ad frigoris tempus durare potest]. Arescit enim secundum communem consuetudinem, tipus eorum qui in bonis suis [PL: in bonis operibus] Dominum laudant, et in tempore frigoris, id est in tempore tribulationis et persecutionis, eum laudare non possunt, propter infidelem uitam abundantiae [PL: propter infidelitatem uitae et abundantiam] diuitiarum suarum.

'The *sambuca* is also unknown among the most learned of the Hebrews [or perhaps: 'the most learned on Hebrew things?'], but it can be found to have existed in the ancient times among the Chaldeans. Thus it is written: 'As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, flute, lyre, and *sambuca*' [Daniel 3, 5]. Indeed, *buca* in Hebrew means 'trumpet', and the term *bucina* is its diminutive. *Sam*, instead, in Hebrew means 'sun', and from this it is

¹⁰¹ Cit. from McNamara (1986), 54–5 = McNamara (2000), 215–6. The passage from the *Eclogae* mentioned by McNamara is in St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 261, p. 148 (material on the Biblical musical instruments can also be found at pp. 149–50); the passage from the 'Bibelwerk' is in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm 14276, fol. 34r-v. Against Rabanus' authorship of the *Epistula* (or sections thereof) cf. also Robbins Bittermann (1929), 399, fn. 1; Dekkers (1995), 221, §633 (openly agreeing with McNamara).

¹⁰² Cf. Hammerstein (1959), 129, and *PL* 30, cols 214d–215a.

said ‘Samson, i.e. their sun’. This is why, then, *sambuca* is written among them, because many believe it to be the bark of a certain tree, and it can be produced (?) from the branches of this tree thanks to the solidity and flexibility of [its] pliable wood (?), almost in the manner of a trumpet. [*PL*: ‘For this reason it is called *sambuca*, because it can be made in summer-time, and it can last until winter-time’].¹⁰³ Indeed, it dries up according to the common custom, [and it is] an allegory of those who praise the Lord in their good [times?], and cannot praise Him in winter-time, i.e. in the time of tribulation and persecution, because of their faithless life and the abundance of their wealth’.

This passage contains of course numerous textual problems which cannot be discussed here. Nonetheless, it is clear that the core of this allegory is based on the (pseudo-)etymology of *sambuca* from Hebrew *sam* ‘sun’, allegedly the same element found in the name of Samson.

This etymology ultimately derives from Jerome’s *Hebrew Names*, where we read:

Samson ‘sol eorum’ uel ‘solis fortitudo’.

‘Samson, [i.e.] ‘their sun’ or ‘the sun’s strength’’.¹⁰⁴

The same explanation of the name Samson can also be found in Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*¹⁰⁵ and Isidore’s *Etymologiae*.¹⁰⁶ Even more explicit references to the Hebrew word for ‘sun’ actually occur in several other entries of Jerome’s *Hebrew Names*, where the term variously spelt as *samis*, *sames*, *semsi* does indeed correspond to Hebrew *šameš* ‘sun’.¹⁰⁷ This term was known in seventh- and eighth-century Ireland (most likely through the intermediary of Jerome and / or Isidore), as shown by its occurrence in Hiberno-Latin computistical writing: for instance, in the Munich Computus *simpisia*, indicated as the Hebrew term for ‘sun’, is clearly a corruption of Jerome’s *semsi*,¹⁰⁸ the same term (spelt *simpisia*) can moreover be found in

¹⁰³ This passage about summer-time is found in *PL* but is completely absent from the Munich copy, where it may have been omitted due to homoeoteleuton, given that both this and the previous sentence end with the same verb *potest* (I owe this observation to Mark Stansbury).

¹⁰⁴ Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* (ed. by P. de Lagarde, *CCSL* 72), 33.23; cf. also *ibid.*, 78.14 *Samson ‘sol eorum’*.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 80, §14 (ed. by E. Dekkers & J. Fraipont, *CCSL* 38-40): *unde Samson noster, qui etiam interpretatur ‘sol ipsorum’*.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VII, vi, 56: *Samson ‘sol eorum’ uel ‘solis fortitudo’*.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum*, 25.27, 30.19, 36.21, 41.6 (cf. also Thiel (1973), 149).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Warntjes (2010), 100, §37: *Sol dictus est [...] gamse in Hebreo uel simpisia, elios in Graeco, panath cum philosophis, foebe cum Syris, titan cum Chaldeis*.

De Ratione Computandi and in the computistical glosses contained in Angers, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 477 (461).¹⁰⁹

Notice that in the Irish *computi*, as well as in Jerome, the Hebrew word is always disyllabic. On the contrary, the *Epistula* only mentions monosyllabic *sam*. Now, the exact same form occurs in a list of words meaning ‘sun’ in various languages (just like in the Munich *Computus*), found in the exegetical tract on Genesis contained in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Lat. 11561, fol. 65vb (belonging to the Irish ‘Reference Bible’ tradition, according to Bischoff):

Sam in Ebraico, eleos in Greco, panib(us?) in philosophia, Febus apud Syrus, Tytan apud Aegyptius, sol apud Latinos.

‘[The sun is called] *sam* in Hebrew, *eleos* in Greek, *panibus* in philosophy, *Febus* among the Syrians, *Tytan* among the Egyptians, *sol* among the Latins’.¹¹⁰

Perhaps even more interestingly, the ‘Hebrew’ form *sam* can be found in *Sanas Cormaic*, together with the above-mentioned traditional etymology of the name Samson. Significantly, the short form *sam* is here used to etymologise the Old Irish word for ‘summer’, *samrad* (which can also occur simply as *sam* in Old Irish):

Samrad .i. sam quasi Ebra söl quasi Laitin. unde dicitur ‘Samhson sol eorum’. samrad didiu .i. riad rithes grian. is and is mou doaitne a sollsi 7 a hairde.

‘*Samrad*, i.e. almost as *sam* in Hebrew, *sol* in Latin [‘sun’]; from this it is said ‘Samson, i.e. their sun’. *Samrad* [‘summer’], thus, i.e. the course that the sun runs; it is then that its light shines more, and its height is greater’.¹¹¹

It seems then reasonable to assume that the Hebrew form often cited by Jerome as *samis* / *sames* / *semsi* was shortened to *sam* in Irish sources such as *Sanas Cormaic* precisely in order to obtain a closer match with Old Irish *samrad* (this modification may of course have been facilitated by a segmentation of *Samson* into *Sam-son*). This etymologising technique has been well described by Pádraic Moran in an article on Hebrew in Medieval Irish glossaries published in 2010; for example, Moran shows how Irish *bás* ‘death’ was explained in O’Mulconry’s Glossary as if matching perfectly a

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Walsh & Ó Cróinín (1988), 115–6, §1 (see the apparatus too for more examples); Warntjes (2010), 100 (cf. the apparatus); cf. also Howlett (1997), 127.

¹¹⁰ A transcription of this passage can be found in Bischoff (1976), 102; the translation is mine. Cf. also Thiel (1973), 31, fn. 113.

¹¹¹ Transcribed from Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 16 (*Lebor Brecc*), p. 271b, available at www.isos.dias.ie (my translation); cf. also Stokes (1862), 40; Meyer (1913), 101, §1154.

Hebrew word of analogous meaning. The relevant entry in the Irish glossary reads as follows:

Bás ebraice, tribulatio uel angustiae uel mors latine.

‘*Bás*, ‘death’, in Hebrew, ‘affliction’ or ‘difficulties’ or ‘death’ in Latin’.¹¹²

The Hebrew word occurring in Jerome’s *Hebrew Names* is actually *bosra*,¹¹³ but, as Moran pointed out,

‘the compiler [of O’Mulconry’s Glossary] not only jettisons the final syllable of the Hebrew word, but exacerbates its significance from acute (‘anguish or difficulties’) to terminal (‘death’)’.¹¹⁴

Needless to say, this process is in essence identical to the modification of *sames* (and variants thereof) into *sam* so that the Hebrew form may correspond to Irish *sam(rad)*.

In this context, it is also highly significant that, at least according to the *PL* version of the *Epistula ad Dardanum*, the musical instrument in question is said to be called *sambuca* precisely ‘because it can be made in summer-time’ (*quia aestatis tempore fieri potest*): the rationale behind such a pseudo-etymology can then be recognised much more clearly if this whole explanation is assumed to rely on an implicit equivalence between ‘Hebrew’ *sam* ‘sun’ and Irish *sam(rad)* ‘summer’.

On balance, the textual affiliations pointed out by McNamara, combined with the remarkably ‘Irish’ etymology of *sambuca*, strongly suggest that the *Epistula* was written either in Ireland, or by a continental compiler who relied at least in part on sources of Irish provenance.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Stokes (1898), 240, §129 (my translation).

¹¹³ Cf. Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum*, 3.26: *Bosra in tribulatione uel angustia*; 49.22: *Bosra in tribulatione*.

¹¹⁴ Cit. from Moran (2010), 13.

¹¹⁵ A text such as the *Epistula* can be understood as growing out of the existing explanations on Biblical instruments contained in Hiberno-Latin exegetical commentaries (especially to the Psalms); cf., e.g., the subtle distinction between *psalterium* and *cithara* in the Introduction to the Psalter from the ‘Irish Reference Bible’ (cf. McNamara (1973), 297), or the mention of *saltirium*, *cithara*, *tympanum*, *chorus*, *organum* and *cimbali* in a passage from the ‘*Catena on the Psalms*’ found in *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, MS Pal. lat. 68 (cf. McNamara (1973), 283). In turn, these Early Medieval accounts would have been based on patristic sources such as the *Expositio Psalmorum* by Cassiodorus (cf., e.g., *praefatio*, cap. 4; for further references, cf. van Schaik (1992), 71, 153–4; Marchesin (2000), 31 (fn. 54 and 55), 124 (fn. 32)).

Given that speculation concerning the shape and allegorical meaning of the musical instruments mentioned in the Bible may have been part of Irish exegesis already in the eighth century, we may now try and look at the representation of instruments on the Irish High Crosses under a different light. For example, in the *Epistula*, the *psalterium* is described as follows:¹¹⁶

*Psalterium [...] non quasi in modum cytharae sed quasi in modum clipei quadrati confirmatur*¹¹⁷ *cum cordis, sicut scriptum est: 'In psalterio X cordarum psallite illi [PL: psallam tibi]' [Ps. 143, 9]. [...] Psalterium itaque cum X cordis, ecclesia cum X uerbis legis contrariis contra omnem heresim [PL: cum decem uerbis legis contritis contra omnem haeresim], quadrata per quattuor Euangelia intellegitur [PL: potest intelligi].*

‘The psalterium [...] is not shaped in the manner of a *cythara*, but rather more like a square shield with strings, as it is written: ‘On the ten-stringed psalterium make music to Him’. [...] Therefore, the ten-stringed psalterium can be understood [to symbolise] the Church, with ten words of the Law that oppose every heresy, and square-shaped by virtue of the four Gospels’.

A square *psalterium* is indeed represented on the earliest available copy of the *Epistula*, a mid-9th century manuscript preserved in Angers (Angers, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 18 (14), fol. 13r), as well as in other copies of the same text. Therefore, as pointed out above, the *Epistula ad Dardanum* (or a text of similar nature), rather than real contemporary instruments, could be the main source underlying the depiction of quadrangular string instruments on some Irish High Crosses, such as the crosses of Castledermot, Ullard etc.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Cf. Hammerstein (1959), 127 and *PL* 30, cols 215a–b (my translation).

¹¹⁷ Manuscript variants cited in Hammerstein (1959), 127, present here remarkably different readings (*formatur* and *in modum quadrati formati*). The form attested in the Munich MS should probably be emended to *conformatur*, and I have followed this conjectural emendation in my translation of the passage.

¹¹⁸ Cf. the detailed discussions in, e.g., Buckley (1990), 15–23 (see esp. p. 18); Buckley (1991), 141–5, 164–5. For a description of the crosses of Castledermot and Ullard in particular, cf. Harbison (1992), vol. 1, 37–41 (§§36–7), 183–4 (§231); cf. also pp. 213–4 for a brief account of the representation of David as harper on the Irish High Crosses, mentioning the parallel with the Angers manuscript. Interesting parallels between early Irish depictions of David playing the harp and the Angers manuscript had also been pointed out in Henry (1960–1961), 29–30, 32. For a list of manuscript examples of the *psalterium quadratum*, cf. Seebass (1973), 47–50.

Likewise, the triangular chordophones played by king David, represented on monuments such as Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice (cf. FIG. 4), corresponds to the Biblical *cythara*, also described in the *Epistula*.¹¹⁹

Cythara [...] propriae consuetudinis apud Hebraeos quae cum chordis XXIII quasi in modum deltae litterae sicut peritissimi tradunt, utique componitur [...]. Cythara autem de qua sermo est, ecclesiam spiritualiter [PL: ecclesia est spiritualiter] quae cum XXIII seniorum dogmatibus trinam formam habens quasi in modum deltae litterae per fidem sanctae Trinitatis manifestissimo [PL: manifestissime sine dubio] utique significat, et per manus Petri apostolici [PL: per manus uiri Petri apostoli] qui praedicator illius est, in diuersos modulos Veteris et Noui Testamenti, aliter in littera, aliter in sensu figuraliter concitatur [PL: concutitur].

‘The *cythara* is formed according to the custom proper to the Hebrew, with twenty-four strings, as if in the shape of a letter *delta*.¹²⁰ [...] The *cythara* in question spiritually signifies the Church, with the doctrine of the twenty-four Elders, and having three-fold shape by virtue of the faith in the holy Trinity, and it is plucked by the hand of the Apostle Peter, who is the preacher of that faith, according to the different interpretative modes of the Old and New Testament, sometimes according to the literal sense, sometimes according to the figurative sense’.

That the depiction of David on the East face of Muiredach's Cross owes much to traditional iconographic models is demonstrated by the presence of a bird, symbolising divine inspiration or the Word of God, perched upon the king's instrument: the same motif can be found on the Irish shrine of Saint Máedoc (where David's instrument is however much richer in realistic organological details),¹²¹ and also in several English and continental manuscripts, such as Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.5.26 (an 11th-century manuscript from Canterbury), fol. 1r, or Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Hammerstein (1959), 125 and *PL* 30, cols 214c–d (my translation).

¹²⁰ The theme of the *cythara* (or sometimes the *psalterium*) shaped like a letter *delta* is an exegetical *topos* found, e.g., in the writings of Cassiodorus, who attributed this piece of information – perhaps mistakenly – to Jerome (cf. the detailed discussion of the origins and development of this theme in van Schaik (1992), 70–6, 152). The same theme can be found in a passage from the Hiberno-Latin Introduction to the Psalter in the ‘Irish Reference Bible’ (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm 14276, fol. 98v), cf. McNamara (1973), 297 = McNamara (2000), 140–1. For additional examples of the *delta*-shaped instrument, cf. Seebass (1973), 50–3.

¹²¹ Cf. Rimmer (1977), 26.

1.23 (the ‘Cambridge Psalter’, an 11th-century manuscript from Winchcombe).¹²² Rather than being interested in fixing on stone a realistic representation of a Medieval Irish harp, it is quite clear that the sculptor of the Last Judgement scene on Muiredach’s Cross (or whoever designed its iconographic contents) was primarily concerned with providing a coherent and spiritually instructive visualisation of Christian motifs, whose foundations can be found in the Bible as well as in exegetical works.

Indeed, the scene corresponds perfectly to the description of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25: 31-46, where Christ separates ‘the sheep from the goats’: to his right, the blessed souls who will go to Heaven; to his left, the cursed ones who will fall into the eternal flames of Hell. In this context, the presence of the figure of David is justified by the fact that the Biblical king corresponds allegorically to Jesus Christ according to both the literal sense – as both came from the same stock, the *stirps Jesse* – and the figurative sense (David constitutes the prefiguration of Christ himself, being the one who foretold the coming of the Lord in the Psalms, hence the traditional formula *David rex et propheta*).¹²³



FIG. 4. THE LAST JUDGEMENT SCENE ON MUIREDACH’S CROSS (MONASTERBOICE).

¹²² Cf. Marchesin (2000), 50. The theme of the bird perched on David’s harp is discussed in Buckley (1991), 145–6, 166; Buckley (2008), 25. For the possibility that this iconographic motif may have been influenced also by Classical models, cf. Roe (1949), 55–6.

¹²³ For more details on the representation of David as *figura Christi* cf. van Schaik (1992), 96–8; Marchesin (2000), 21–2, 74, 136.

The whole scene can thus be said to encompass visually the whole history of Salvation: the Old and the New Testament, the Crucifixion and the Last Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Moreover, in agreement with the above-mentioned passage from Matthew's Gospel, the figures are clearly organised on the basis of a strong right/left dynamic, especially marked by (1) the opposition between the inward look of the blessed souls, oriented towards Jesus, and the outward movement of the damned souls, who are driven away from him; (2) the appearance of the bird standing on Christ's head (presumably the Holy Spirit), with its wing open in a welcoming gesture directed to its right-hand side.

In view of the carefully structured symbolic coherence of this scene, I am inclined to concur with the interpretation suggested by Ann Buckley and other scholars, according to which the presence of a player of triple pipes standing to the left of Christ may possess a negative or even demonic connotation (a symbolic association which, after all, is repeatedly found across numerous European cultures);¹²⁴ the Monasterboice piper (who, it should be noted, sits just beside a devil with a fork) would thus constitute an evil mirror-image of David the harper, who is instead accompanied by celestial

¹²⁴ Cf. Rimmer (1977), 20; Buckley (1991), 190–1; Ramsey (2002), 31–3 (in Buckley (2008), 26, we find a different interpretation of the Monasterboice triple piper: 'since he faces Christ he is presumably one of the Just and a member of the musical ensemble'; however, I find this argument much less convincing). The profane, sinister or demonic connotations often attributed to pipes and bagpipes are discussed in detail from an anthropological point of view in Charles-Dominique (2006), 113–93 (see especially 171–89); cf. also Bec (1996), 27–30; Charles-Dominique (2010). The specific contents of the symbolic meaning attributed to the triple pipes may of course vary from one monument to another: what applies to the Last Judgement scene on Muiredach's Cross is not necessarily relevant to other High Crosses in Ireland or Scotland. Nonetheless, it is striking that on several monuments the pipes appear together with, or perhaps in opposition to, the harp or the lyre. For instance, as pointed out in Ramsey (2002), 33, on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise a player of triple pipes is placed on a side panel of the shaft, while 'the panel on the opposite side has David playing a stringed instrument', so that this juxtaposition may represent a 'symbolic pair', such as the dichotomy between good and evil, sacred and profane, Christian and pagan etc. (cf. also Buckley (1990), 17; Buckley (2008), 28); on the (possibly 10th-century) Lethendy Slab (Perthshire), a harpist and a player of triple pipes face each other (cf. Fisher & Greenhill (1974), 239–40; Buckley (1991), 159–60), and it is not clear whether the scene should be interpreted as if the two musicians were actually playing together, or whether they should be seen as standing in opposition to each other as purely symbolic figures (possibly the embodiment of sacred and profane music respectively?).

musicians (one playing a wind instrument, unfortunately difficult to identify, and at least two singers).

Some explicit representations of the opposition between Heavenly music and music of the Devil, or between sacred and profane music, are indeed known from Medieval iconography: a famous example can be found in Cambridge, St John's College, MS B.18 (the so-called *Psalterium Triplex*, a 12th-century manuscript possibly from Rheims), fol. 1r (cf. FIG. 5).¹²⁵ What is particularly interesting about this image is that, while the superior panel contains some of the most typical instruments associated with divine harmony (e.g. the bells, the organ, the harp, the monochord etc.), the inferior panel presents in accompaniment to various forms of 'disorderly behaviour' (such as dancing and making acrobatic moves) also a very realistic musical instrument: a rebec. Far from being a speculative Biblical instrument, in 12th-century France the rebec would have been an instrument of fairly recent adoption,¹²⁶ and is here clearly associated with profane music for dancing and secular entertainment.

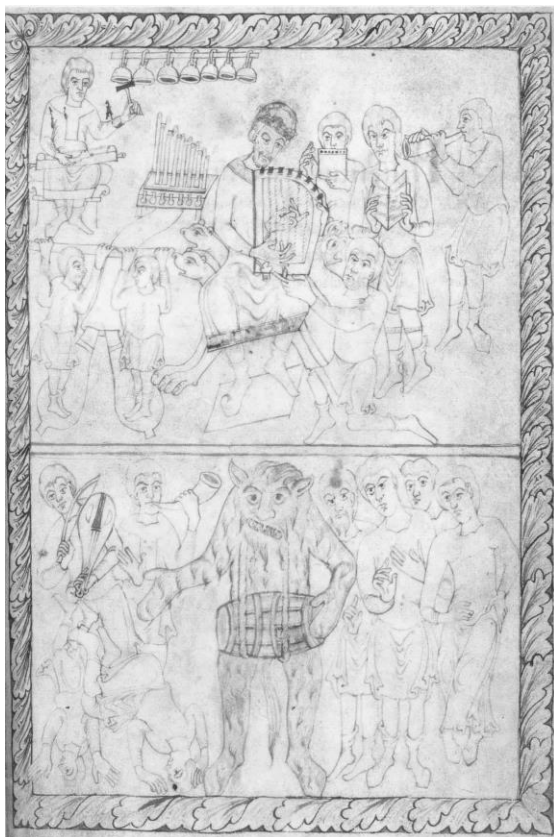


FIG. 5. CAMBRIDGE, ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, MS B.18, FOL. 1R.

¹²⁵ For a detailed discussion of this image, cf. Marchesin (2000), 95–8.

¹²⁶ Bowed instruments seem to have been introduced in Western Europe through contact with the Arab world, perhaps around the eleventh century, cf. Bec (1992), 18–22, 278–80.

This example makes it clear, thus, that purely symbolic instruments based on textual authorities such as the *Epistula ad Dardanum* can co-exist with realistic and organologically accurate representations within the same iconographic context.¹²⁷

Examples of this phenomenon may be easily multiplied. For instance, we could consider the depiction of David and his four accompanying musicians in the 11th-century ‘Polirone Psalter’ (Mantova, Biblioteca Comunale, MS 340, fol. 1v):¹²⁸ as pointed out by Christopher Page ((1977), 307–8), while one of the musicians is represented in the act of playing an entirely realistic rebec, another one can be seen to be blowing into a sort of rudimentary bagpipe which matches perfectly the description of the Biblical *chorus* found in the *Epistula ad Dardanum*.¹²⁹

To mention yet another example of reliable organology found in an otherwise conventional iconographic context, some scholars have noted a remarkable similarity between, on the one hand, the horns played by two clerics visible on the right-hand side of the full-page depiction of king David and his musicians in the 8th-century Anglo-Saxon ‘Vespasian Psalter’ (London, British Library, MS Cott. Vesp. A.I, fol. 30v), and, on the other hand, the Early Medieval horn found in 1956 in the river Erne (Co. Fermanagh).¹³⁰

Given that the triple pipes sculpted on the Irish High Crosses do not correspond to any of the instruments described in exegetical tracts like the *Epistula*,¹³¹ it is at least possible that their source may rather have been real instrumental practice. This view

¹²⁷ This can of course happen in texts too: as pointed out by Bec (in (1992), 83), ‘le lettré médiéval écrivant sur la musique, ou l’utilisant à des fins littéraires, est en quelques sorte partagé entre une terminologie antiquisante (ou biblique), [...] et, d’autre part, un monde organologique contemporain qui est celui de son entourage immédiat et concret, inconnu des Anciens’.

¹²⁸ For an in-depth iconographic analysis of the traditional representation of David in the Polirone Psalter and other manuscripts, cf. Walther (2010). For the representation of David in early Irish art, cf. Roe (1949), especially 54–9.

¹²⁹ Cf. Hammerstein (1959), 131.

¹³⁰ Cf. Waterman (1969); Purser (2002); O’Dwyer (2004), 103–7 and 109–11.

¹³¹ The only possible exception to this is the description of the *tuba* (cf. Hammerstein (1959), 122), where it is said that *tribus fistulis aereis in capite angusto inspiratur* (‘it is blown through three bronze pipes in [its] narrow head’). However, the next sentence of this passage specifies that *in capite lato per iii voceductas aereas, quae per aereum fundamentum ceteras voces producunt* (‘[it is blown] in [its] broad head through four bronze resonating ducts, which produce other sounds through a bronze base (?)’). Moreover, the depictions of the *tuba* which can be seen in the various illustrated copies of the *Epistula* look very different from the usual Medieval iconography of the triple pipes.

may receive some support from the close match between these instruments and the *cuislenn tregabail* from the roughly contemporary story of Mac Díchoíme. After all, if it is true that the pipes on the High Crosses were meant to constitute a symbol of profane or diabolic music, we can then reasonably assume that the artists would have most likely chosen an instrument actually employed in the context of lowly secular entertainment, one perhaps even frowned upon by the ecclesiastical order (the above-mentioned story of the two sons of king Fergal mac Maíle Dúin is an obvious case in point).¹³² In this context, it seems particularly significant that the final action of Saint Brigit in the story of Mac Díchoíme consists precisely in making the *cuislenn* unusable for music by breaking it into three pieces, one of which is later ‘Christianised’ by being turned into a crosier.¹³³

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be useful to present a brief summary of some of the main points discussed in this contribution. In particular, I hope to have shown that:

- (1) in Old and Middle Irish the term *fetán* most likely referred to a flute;
- (2) the Old / Middle Irish term *cuisle(nn)* may have derived from Proto-Irish **kulsīnā* (roughly meaning ‘[instrument made from the] stalk of a plant’), and probably designated reed-pipes (more specifically double and triple reed-pipes, in the case of the story of Mac Díchoíme);
- (3) the term *cúisech* could be etymologically related to *cúas* ‘cavity’, and seems to have originated as a fairly general cover-term for ‘pipes’ in general (thus including both flutes and reed-pipes), although its frequent occurrence in opposition to *cuisle(nn)* might indicate that it came to be used more frequently in reference to flutes (as suggested also by the existence of the compound *fet-chúisech* ‘whistling pipe’);
- (4) as shown by Old and Middle Irish legal tracts, as well as by texts belonging to the *Tech Midchúarta* tradition, professional players of woodwinds were in most cases associated with a fairly low social status (although Middle Irish narrative texts occasionally present high-status woodwind players);

¹³² For a brief discussion concerning ‘the Irish Church’s candid detestation for the men of art’, cf. O’Sullivan (2004), 38–9.

¹³³ It may be worth mentioning here also the story of the anchorite Cornán, player of *cuislenn*, who receives a clear refusal from Saint Máel Rúain of Tallaght when proposing to play a tune for him (ed. Gwynn & Purton (1911–1912), 131, §10; the story is briefly discussed in Buckley (1995), 48).

(5) the so-called *Epistula ad Dardanum* was probably written in 8th-century Ireland, or may at least be a Carolingian composition based on earlier sources of Irish provenance;

(6) the representation of musical instruments in Early Irish art probably owes much to exegetical texts (such as the *Epistula*) describing the nature and symbolic meaning of the instruments mentioned in the Bible; nonetheless, such text-based iconographic *topoi* can be shown to co-exist occasionally with depictions which, on the contrary, almost certainly rely on real contemporary musical practices. In particular, the triple pipes which occur on several Irish and Scottish monuments (e.g. the High Crosses of Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise) may be examples of the latter iconographic type, and may have been intended – at least in some cases – as symbols of profane or even diabolic music;

(7) the similarity between the sculpted triple pipes and the *cuislenn* described in the story of Mac Díchoíme is at least suggestive that they may in fact be one and the same musical instrument; if this is indeed the case, we might have here a precious one-to-one match between the artistic interpretation of a real-world musical object and (one of) its linguistic signifier(s), i.e. *buinne / cuisle(nn) tregabail* ‘three-forked pipe’.

In more general terms, although I am aware that in the present article I have only been able to scratch the surface of a complex and infinitely rich domain of investigation, and although some of the above conclusions may still be seen as somewhat speculative, I am nonetheless convinced that an approach integrating historical linguistics, textual analysis, archaeology, iconography, organology and ethnomusicology, can lead us to a better understanding of music and musical instruments in pre-Norman Ireland. Given the complete lack of contemporary musical written sources, it is obvious that we shall never know what music was played on a double or a triple pipe in an Early Medieval Irish royal hall. However, a thorough multi-disciplinary analysis of the available evidence may enable us to hear at least a faint distant echo of this otherwise lost musical world.

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