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## Irish Influence in the Consonantal Spellings of Old English

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### Abstract

The consonantal spellings of Old English (OE) were significantly influenced by the consonantal spellings of Old Irish (OI). 1) <th/p> vs. (post-vocalic) <d/ð>: though OE did not have a distinction between /θ/ and /ð/, OI did, spelling this as <th> vs. (post-vocalic) <d>. 2) <h> vs. <ch>: though OE did not have a distinction between /h/ and /x/, OI did, spelling the latter as <ch>. 3) <ch> and <th>: both spellings appear to be from Irish. 4) <cg>: spellings of the “mixed voice” type, including “cg”, occur in OI, where they can spell either single or geminate voiced plosives. 5) <bb> (and <cg>): almost certainly in final position <bb, cg> in OE represent singles, not geminates, as they can in OI. 6) Spelling rules referring to post-vocalic position: all cases show OE spelling having had, like OI spelling, rules referring to post-vocalic position, which appear to be additionally evidenced by “illogical doubling” in Northumbrian. 7) The meaning of <g> before front Vs: in OE spelling as in OI spelling, but not as in Roman Latin spelling, <g> before front Vs spells a palatal approximant rather than a palatal affricate. The overall conclusion is that the OE spelling system was developed by Irish missionary linguists.

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### 1. Introduction

Since Old English (OE) is written in the Irish hand (Hogg 1992, 10), it has always been known that there is significant Irish influence in the *writing* system of OE, which is to say the way the letters are formed. Given that writing and spelling necessarily go hand in hand, this raises the possibility that there is also significant Irish influence in the *spelling* system of OE, or more precisely in the spelling/pronunciation system of OE. (From here on, “spelling system” will be used, in order to reduce awkward verbiage.) Yet this possibility has not, it seems, been taken very seriously. Perhaps open-minded investigation of the question was in effect precluded by the raging Germanophilia that dominated the period around 1900, when the conventional wisdom was established, largely by German Germanicists. Be that as it may, the conventional wisdom, if this may be taken as

expressed by Campbell (1959, 23) seems to be that the spelling system of OE was developed by English monks, using the spelling system of “Latin” as the model, with some sporadic and marginal intrusions from the spelling system of Irish. (It is often convenient here to use “Irish” to mean “Old Irish” and “English” to mean “Old English”, when context makes this meaning clear.) On the other hand, the trend of more recent works, such as Hogg (1992, 10–52), seems to be to retreat from the idea that Irish conventions had any relevance at all to OE spelling (as opposed to OE writing). But even if we may take Campbell’s relatively pro-Irish view as a starting point for treating the whole question, there are two problems.

First, due to poor communications and low educational standards there was not really any such thing as a monolithic “Latin” in those days (and places), when only what will be called Roman Latin (essentially the Latin of non-northern Italy) was pronounced in more or less the manner of later Catholic Latin. Since the English clearly learned their Latin from the Irish, it would seem reasonable then to posit, as O’Neill does (2009, 4), that the OE spelling system was based on “the pronunciation of Latin as taught (...) by Irish monks”, that is to say *Irish* Latin, which was significantly different in its pronunciation from Roman Latin.

But the ways that Irish Latin was different from Roman Latin need not detain us here, because of the second problem: there is no need to refer to the spelling system of *Irish Latin*, as this contains nothing (of relevance to OE spelling) that was not also found in the spelling system of *Irish itself*. On the other hand, the spelling system of Irish contains some usages (which will be seen below) that do not occur in Irish Latin (or non-Irish Latin). As might be expected, Irish Latin in its spelling system occupies an intermediate position between Roman Latin and Irish. The OE spelling system can, it seems, be seen as a mix of the systems employed in Roman Latin and in Irish, and nothing of any importance is gained by dragging Irish Latin into the picture. The main question, one that should be answered without prejudice, is what is from Roman Latin and what is from Irish. It cannot be assumed that the system of Roman Latin, or for that matter the system of Irish, was primary, with the other being secondary, or even that either one was primary.

Obviously the first step in reaching any conclusion is to examine whether the spelling system of OE is more similar to the spelling system of Roman Latin or to the spelling system of Irish. On the one hand, OE spelling is like Irish spelling, as was pointed out long ago (to little avail) by Daunt (1939), in using short diphthongs to produce what may be called “under-moraic” spellings. For example, it is not controversial that <aib> in OI <gaib> ‘take’ represents two moras rather than the expected three, just as <eor> in OE <beorn> represents two moras rather than the expected three. Nothing of the sort could possibly be said to occur in the spelling of Latin (unless we manage to forget that <ae> had long since become regarded as a meaningless variant spelling for short /e/). Nor is it controversial that Irish spelling uses vowels as diacritics (without any

moraic value) to spell phonemically front and back consonants, as in OI <gaib>, where <i> indicates that the following <b> spells a front C. Since the traditional interpretation of graphic short diphthongs in Irish, accepted here, is that they do not represent phonemic short diphthongs, the implication of Daunt's observation (fully acknowledged and substantially developed in the original article) was that OE did not have short diphthongs: <eor> in OE <beorn> was originally intended, by Irish missionary linguists, to spell /er<sup>v</sup>/, and so on. Whether this is true or not is a vast matter in itself, largely tangential, which cannot be treated here. It will be assumed, in keeping with previous work by the present author (White 2015), that it is. For the purposes of the present article, it is enough to note that both Irish and English employ under-moraic spellings, something not easily regarded as due to either (spoken) language contact, involving phonemes of a type not demonstrable in living languages, or coincidence. The argument of Schrijver (2009) that the missing link between Irish and English, in terms of language contact, is to be found in Brittonic (also Irish and English) having had short diphthongs is not, to the present author, convincing. So it is score one for Irish.

## 2. Some background on spelling

At this point matters become complex enough that it is not possible say much that is sensible without first establishing some background on the spelling of Roman Latin and of Irish during the early medieval period. This in turn requires some prefatory statement on conventions. In a language with long affricates it seems best (at least to a linguist who does not believe in “the phoneme of length”) to use the conventions of Indic, where voiced and voiceless palatal affricates are represented as “j” and “c”, and the palatal approximant as “y”, and “long” sounds are represented by mere repetition: “cc” rather than “c:”. (These are also the conventions employed by the present author in previous published work on related matters, and it seems best to be consistent.) Though Irish had a distinction between front and back consonants, so that technically it had (for example) no phoneme /d/, only /di/ and /dv/, practically speaking it seems best, in order to avoid very awkward presentation, to ignore the subtypes and use only “/d/”, etc. In cases where it is necessary to refer to broad types of consonantal phonemes, dentals will be used as the type case “T” for voiceless plosives, etc. Also, “E” will be used for any front vowel.

As for the spelling system of early medieval Latin, only a simple account, glossing over many details not of relevance here, will be provided. The general rule is that during the this period Latin (in the west) was pronounced in accordance with whatever sound changes had occurred in the area in question. (The Byzantines were much better-informed about earlier conditions.) The area of western Latin includes the British Isles, where by about 500 Latin had apparently become a dead

or at least artificial language. In Britain, Latin was pronounced with the sound changes that had occurred in Brittonic (Jackson 1953, 70–72), which probably got into Latin by way of Brittonic names in Latin legal documents.

Only two of the sound changes that affected western Latin are of much importance here. First, in all of the west except non-northern Italy there had occurred the change that will be called “lenition”: intervocalic /p, t, k/ and /b, d, g/ had become respectively /b, d, g/ and /v, ð, ɣ/, which is to say that intervocalic /T, D/ had become /D, Ð/. (Lenition of /b/ did occur in non-northern Italy (Jackson 1953, 88)). As the same changes had occurred in Brittonic, practically speaking it is as if they had occurred in a living British Latin, though other considerations make it fairly clear that no such thing existed. Second, outside of the British Isles, /k, g/ before /e, i/ had been affricated to /c, j/. Probably lenited /j/ had become /ž/, though since there was never a distinct spelling for this it is not easy to tell. Together these changes produced three zones: the British Isles, home of Celtic Latin, where lenition had occurred but affrication had not, non-northern Italy, home of Roman Latin, where lenition had not occurred but affrication had, and the rest of the West, where both lenition and affrication had occurred. This intermediate area is of little importance here, since in the British Isles there was never any reason that primacy would not be given to either Celtic Latin or Roman Latin. The two changes each produced a corresponding spelling rule: a lenition rule about how plosives between vowels were to be spelled, and an affrication rule about how affricates were to be spelled. (Each of these rules can of course be seen as a “pronunciation rule” for how the spellings in question were to be pronounced; but for simplicity it seems best to use “spelling rule” for both meanings.) As the Roman Church extended its authority into the British Isles during the 600s, the main collision would have been between Celtic Latin, which in the meantime had spread to Ireland, and Roman Latin.

As for the spelling system of Irish, this was (since the Irish were converted and “literacized” by the British) originally based on the spelling system of British Latin. Apparently Irish was first written (in Roman letters) a little before 600 (O’Croinin 1995, 189), though the earliest surviving texts are from around 700. But Irish spelling soon developed two important features not found in Celtic Latin. First, apocope caused Irish to develop phonemic front and back consonants, which were (often, though hardly always) spelled by using front or back Vs as diacritics (except in cases where this would have been redundant), as has been noted above in connection with graphic short diphthongs in cases like <gaib>. Note that this allowed Irish-style spelling conventions to capture the difference between velars and palatals in OE, regardless of whether these had yet (in certain cases) become affricates: to Irish eyes any velar next to a front V would be a front velar or “palatal”. Though the system of using front and back Vs as diacritics was quite imperfectly applied in OI, all spellers of OI (many no doubt recalling their annoyance as young learners) would be able to apply it more systematically

to any foreign tongue, such as OE, that they found themselves setting out to spell. Second, apocope meant that the lenition rule that had originally referred to *inter-vocalic* position was best seen as referring to *post-vocalic* position. Thus post-vocalic <b> in <gaib> spells not /b/ but /vʲ/, as <b> would in inter-vocalic position in Celtic Latin. Irish spelling became full of spelling rules referring to post-vocalic position, a state of affairs utterly alien on the continent. Accordingly one kind of clue indicating that OE spelling was modeled on Irish spelling would be finding post-vocalic spelling rules in OE, and a fair number of such cases will be noted below.

Of course, OE spelling uses post-vocalic <T>, like other <T>, to spell /T/ (counting affricates as plosives) as in Roman Latin, rather than having a rule that post-vocalic <T> spells /D/ as in Irish. A roughly parallel version of the same assertion, more complex in irrelevant detail, could be made in the case of <D> spelling /D/. At first glance, this appears to be score one for Roman Latin.

But there is a big caveat. It is not as if the spelling system of Roman Latin would have been unknown (regardless of whether it was accepted) by Irish monks of the middle 600s, for at that point the Roman Church had been extending its authority (over Ireland) for a few decades. Though it is usual for histories of England to present the impression that in the middle 600s the Irish church was “Celtic”, refusing to conform to various Roman usages, this was true only of the northern Irish: the southern Irish had conformed a generation or so earlier (Chadwick 1970, 207). Evidence first noted by Thurneysen (1933, 208) appears to indicate that during the middle 600s Irish briefly had two spelling systems, a southern/Roman one spelling post-vocalic obstruents *in the Roman manner*, and a northern/Celtic one spelling post-vocalic obstruents in the Celtic manner. Though O’Neill (2009, 17) regards the southern/Roman usage as a continuation of *ogham* usage, it seems more probable that the pro-Roman southern Irish had begun to adopt the Roman manner of spelling post-vocalic obstruents just as, for want of a better term, a friendly gesture. Of course this would raise serious problems, not solvable within the limits of the system as it existed at that time, as to how /Ð/ (i.e. voiced fricatives) were to be spelled, so it is not surprising that the idea was abandoned, so thoroughly that we are lucky to have even the tiniest hints that it ever existed. It is quite possible then, perhaps even probable, that the OE spelling system was developed (at least in part) by Irish monks of the southern/Roman persuasion, who would of course use <T, D> in the Roman manner. This is all the more true given that doing so in English, where [Ð] was not contrastive, would not raise the problems it did in Irish, where [Ð] *was* contrastive. Accordingly, the fact that OE spelling uses <T, D> in the Roman manner has little probative value.

A good question at this point is whether the spelling system of OE was not only *based on* the spelling system of Irish but also, more to the point, *developed by* the Irish. O’Neill (2009, 21), assuming for no good reason (as will be seen below, section 3) that Irish influences in Southumbrian spelling could not possibly

originate in Southumbria, attempts to explain evidence of Irish influences in Southumbrian spelling by positing that the this system was developed by English monks in Ireland. It is beyond dispute, and indeed has long been known, that there were English monks (apparently in significant numbers) in Ireland. But since the language of the monasteries (at least when the Irish were not speaking among themselves) should have been Latin, English monks in Ireland would have had little reason to learn Irish (which in its Old phase was hardly an easy language to learn in any event). Even if they did, this would not explain one case where it seems clear that English was misperceived in terms of Irish, as follows.

Under one reasonable (if at the moment unfashionable) interpretation (Quinn 1975, 5), Irish had an across the board distinction between front and back Cs (without short diphthongs). The outlines of how this distinction was spelled, using front or back Vs as diacritics, have been seen. If OE did not have phonemic short diphthongs (and no living language has yet been identified that provides a true analogue), then the parallelism between short and long graphic diphthongs, as for example in <Eoh> vs. <Éoh> (earlier <Eoch> vs. <Éoch>), must have originally been intended to spell not short diphthong /Eo/ vs. long diphthong /Eo/, but rather /Exʷ/ vs. /EEʷxʷ/ (where “x” has been used for what might be regarded as /h/). OE /Eox/ must have struck Irish ears as /EEʷxʷ/, a sequence that existed, *and had a spelling*, in their own language. In other words, English /Eox/ was mis-perceived by the Irish as /EEʷxʷ/, which would be spelled as <Éoch>. (The later change of <ch> to <h> in OE is beside the point.) The phonetics are not problematic, since phonetically /xʷ/ would just as well be represented (especially when moraic) as /ʷx/. Perhaps the potential for misperception will be more readily understood if the situation is put as /Eox/ being mis-perceived as /EEʷxʷ/. The ultimate culprit here is the peculiar lowering (and probably reduction) of original /-u/ that is characteristic of OE. This apparently caused the second element of OE diphthongs (when followed by a consonant) to strike Irish ears as a velarization cue for the following consonant. Of course this could not happen in cases where /-o/ was not followed by a consonant, which originally must have been spelled originally with <-u>. But the native English, as soon as they were no longer under Irish tutelage, would extend spellings with <-o> to such cases (White 2015, 14). Since <Eoh> (or <Eoch>) would be the expected native spelling of /Eox/, later Germanicists, too uncritically accepting the concept of short diphthongs and too casually dismissing the possibility of Irish influence, would have no reason to think that any foreign misperception was ever involved. Misperceiving OE as having front Vs followed by back Cs would give Irish missionary linguists reason to think that they were hearing a sequence that existed, and had a spelling, in Irish but not in Latin, which would give them reason to think that the OE spelling system was best based on Irish. But to return to the main point, this case appears to show that the spelling system of OE involves at least one Irish misperception of English, which as far as it goes indicates that the OE spelling system was developed by the Irish.

Another consideration, which will be treated in more detail below (section 4.3), points to the same conclusion. Irish had some phonemes, specifically /θ, x/, and spellings for these, specifically <th, ch>, that Roman Latin did not. Campbell (1959, 23) is quite right to say that the spelling of [θ, x] as <th, ch> in early OE is from Irish. Campbell does not note that in Irish (unlike in English) [θ, x] were phonemes in contrast with their voiced equivalents, so that Irish monks, but not English monks, would be expected to seek distinct spellings for both.

On balance, it is clear why Irish monks would use the spelling system of Irish as a model for a spelling system for English: they thought, not without reason, that English had sounds that existed, and had spellings, in Irish, but that did not exist, and did not have spellings, in Roman Latin. The evidence appears to make sense if the spelling system of OE was developed by the Irish, with the spelling system of OI as its basis, but does not make sense if it was developed by the English, regardless of what spelling system (or mix of systems) we posit as the model.

### 3. Some background on history

As of yet we have seen little historical context for the developments that evidently occurred. Since the first person to posit that the spelling system of OE was modeled on Irish, Marjorie Daunt, saw her article (to the extent it was not simply ignored) dismissed as at best no more than interesting, the cause of posthumous justice may perhaps be served by making reference to quotations from this article. In roughly chronological order, these are as follows. “The Irish had early established a school and tradition for writing of their vernacular” (1939, 115). “[T]he main points of Old Irish orthography are definitely established at a date early enough to have preceded any surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscripts” (1939, 116). “We know that Northumbrians and Mercians were first taught to write Latin letters by Irishmen” (1939, 111). “[T]he Anglo-Saxons were taught their script (...) by missionaries whose pronunciation, from the Roman point of view, might well be provincial” (1939, 135). “[T]he similarity between Old Irish and Anglo-Saxon orthography in many points is too similar to be ignored” (1939, 116). “It is not taking too much for granted as a foundation [for the first spelling system of OE] a Northumbrian early school of writing of Irish-Latin tradition” (1939, 111). Only the last of these assertions can be regarded as having much chance of being wrong, and reasons will be given below (section 3) to think that it too is right.

Technically speaking, the history of OE writing and spelling began not long after 600 with the laws of Aethelberht, which surely employed no writings or spellings of Irish type, there being at that point no motivation for any such thing. But this beginning was a dead end, most conveniently treated from here on as non-existent. Practically speaking, OE writing and spelling *as a continuing*

*tradition* began with the Irish mission later in the mid 600s. By the time we first see it, around 700, the OE spelling system appears to be in transition from an earlier/Northumbrian system to a later/Southumbrian system, familiar from later OE. As O’Neill (2009, 9–10) notes, “the early Northumbrian texts (...) reflect the same spelling system for the OE consonants as the early Canterbury glossaries”. It seems probable that the change in spelling fashions was due to a change in prestige, since in the years around 700 Northumbrian prestige was slowly (and rather unsurely) yielding to Mercian (i.e. Southumbrian) prestige.

It is in effect traditional, due to the traditional over-reliance on Bede, to assume that Irish influences in OE spelling could have only one possible source, Aidan’s mission in Northumbria, which began sometime around 635 (Mayr-Harting 1991, 94). Since the Irish maintained an influential presence in Northumbria for about 20 years, it is not possible to be very precise about when the process of developing a spelling system for OE would have begun there, though chances are it was early, there being no reason for delay. Both Daunt (as has just been seen) and O’Neill seem to assume that Irish influences in Southumbria would have been historically impossible. But a significant Irish presence in Southumbria is not to be regarded as non-existent merely because Southumbria had no Bede to tell us of it, and dimly glimpsed (or often ignored) historical notices show us that Aldhelm had an Irish teacher Maeldubh (Mayr-Harting 1991, 192, 196). The place was Malmesbury in far southern Mercia (very close to the border with Wessex), and the time was during the 660s. (Given that Aldhelm would have been around 25 in 665, a bit old for a student monk, the time was perhaps a few years earlier.) For propriety it should be noted that the possibility that Maeldubh was the source of apparent Irish influences in Southumbrian OE was first suggested (though apparently not taken very seriously) by Pfeiffer (1987, 44). As for why Aldhelm is important, he is said by William of Malmesbury ([1125] 2002, 226–227) to have been the first person to write OE. As has been seen, this is wrong: the first writer of OE must have been some lost figure much earlier in Kent. Furthermore, common sense would suggest that there must have been at least one earlier writer of OE among the monks of Northumbria, since Aidan was a generation earlier than Maeldubh in crossing over to England. But Aldhelm may well have been the first writer of OE in *Southumbria*, and so may well have been the first speller of OE to use the Southumbrian system.

Though Aidan and his followers were, famously, adherents of the so-called Celtic church, there is no reason to think that the same was true of Maeldubh. As has been seen, the southern Irish submitted to Rome sometime during the 630s, and indirect considerations (those noted by Thurneysen (1946, 208)) suggest that as part of their pro-Roman sensibilities they tried, without lasting success, to get rid of the peculiar positional spelling rules for obstruents in Irish. In what follows it is posited that Maeldubh was not an adherent of the Celtic church, in part because this appears to be the best way (again as has been seen) to explain how spellings

found in Roman Latin but not in Irish would ever get into an Irish system for spelling OE, and in part because there is no reason to think otherwise. On balance it seems probable that the earlier/Northumbrian spelling system was associated with Aidan (or possibly his successors), and the later/Southumbrian system with Maeldubh. (How much of an entourage, if any, Maeldubh had, being a mere teacher rather than a bishop, is not clear.) The Southumbrian system is (roughly speaking) just as Irish as the Northumbrian system. Though a Southumbrian system not of Irish origin might be expected, for political reasons that have been seen, to use the Roman hand, both systems use the Irish hand, and both systems use Irish-style under-moraic spellings, not to mention Roman-style voiceless values for <p, t, c>. Reasons will be given below (section 4.6) to think that this was not originally true of the Northumbrian system. The systems are so similar that it seems improbable that they developed in complete isolation from each other. In this connection it is worth noting that a possible conduit for influences back and forth may have been Aldfrith of Northumbria, who reportedly spent some time at Malmesbury with Aldhelm (Stenton [1971] 1989, 89). In one striking way, the Southumbrian system shows a greater degree of resemblance to Irish (as will be seen in more detail below, section 4.5) than does the Northumbrian system: using <cg> instead of <gg> to spell palatal reflexes of /gg/ (Campbell 1959, 27). It seems probable (White 2015, 18, 14, 12) that the Southumbrian system originally had “velar umlaut” as a spelling rule, but that this won only local acceptance until Northumbrian hegemony was replaced by Mercian hegemony around 700.

## 4. The individual cases

### 4.1. The distribution of <th> and later <þ> vs. <d> and <ð>

OE spelling shows, broadly speaking, two usages with regard to the spelling of /θ/ (including [ð]): an early/Northumbrian usage with <d> in post-vocalic position and <th> elsewhere, and a later/Southumbrian usage with <ð> in post-vocalic position and <þ> elsewhere (Campbell 1959, 24–5; Hogg 1992, 33). Frequent deviations in the overall pattern (which could hardly remain unaffected by various analogical currents) do not mean that it does not exist. The second usage is, obviously, merely a substitution of newer symbols, themselves of no relevance here, into the older usage. It appears that <th> fell out of favor (along with its associated digraph <ch>), and the resulting orthographic gap was filled by bringing in <þ> from Runic. Using <ð> (obscure in origin) would solve the problem of post-vocalic <d> being ambiguous between /d/ and /θ/. But none of these essentially graphic matters is of great importance here. It is most convenient to refer to either the earlier or the later pattern, not both, and referring to the earlier pattern will be preferred. What *is* of great importance is that if the spelling system of OE was

developed by natives to represent native perception, the distributional pattern is neither phonemically nor phonetically appropriate. If the spelling was phonemic, then since there was only one phoneme involved, there should have been only one symbol involved. If the spelling was phonetic (which is itself improbable just on general principles), final cases should have been spelled with <th> like initial cases, not like intervocalic cases with <d>.

A first conclusion is that the spelling system of OE was not (at least in this one case) developed by natives to represent native perception. Other reasons to think that this is true have been seen above, and more will be seen below (section 4.2). Matters fall into place if we consider how the situation would have seemed to Irish missionary linguists. Irish had a distinction between /θ/ and /ð/ (Stifter 2006, 16), and employed <th> to spell /θ/ and <d> to spell /ð/ (Thurneysen 1946, 22), which due to accidents of origin could only (not counting mutations) occur in post-vocalic position. Since post-vocalic /d/ was spelled as <t>, there was no (significant) problem with ambiguity. It makes sense then to think that Irish missionary linguists would spell OE [θ], which they heard as /θ/, as <th>, and OE [ð], which they heard as /ð/, as <d>. By mere fortunate accident, [ð] in OE typically occurred in intervocalic position, and since intervocalic position was always also post-vocalic position, in this case the spelling conventions of Irish could be applied with only one problem: inter-vocalic <d> would also be the spelling of /d/. But it is possible, for reasons that will be seen below (section 4.6), that in early/Northumbrian intervocalic /d/ was originally spelled in the Irish manner as <t>, before a later reform replaced <t> with <d>.

An important question is why we do not find <th> (later “thorn”) in final position. Indeed if the conventional wisdom that final /θ/ in OE was always voiceless [θ] is correct, a satisfactory explanation for final <d> (later “edh”) is difficult. One possibility, somewhat strained, is that an original pattern that may be represented as <th> - <d> - <th> was replaced by <th> - <d> - <d> just to produce a spelling rule of the Irish kind referring to post-vocalic position. If so, that is evidence of Irish influence of one kind. Another possibility is that, since Irish had a change of /θ/ to /ð/ after unstressed Vs (Thurneysen 1946, 82–83), final <th> and <d> were regarded by the Irish as equivalent in English, as they were in Irish, and that <d> was eventually preferred just because of its post-vocalic position. A third possibility, rather more interesting and radical, is that in OE itself some cases of final /θ/, originally pronounced as [θ], had become pronounced [ð], which would of course strike Irish ears as /ð/, to be spelled as <d>. If so, it is not hard to see which cases those must have been: cases after unstressed Vs, most notably in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person endings of verbs. It is well known that at some point in English fricatives after unstressed Vs became voiced, most notably in the case of /s/ > /z/. The change was never recognized in spelling, essentially because Latin had no voiced fricatives and therefore no spellings for voiced fricatives, and so its chronology is not clear. Final <d> after unstressed vowels could then be generalized after

all vowels, again due to a tendency to think in terms of post-vocalic position. Whatever the truth of the matter is, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that post-vocalic position was regarded as significant, one way or another.

#### 4.2 <h> vs. <ch>

If it is true, as the conventional wisdom would have us think, 1) that the spelling system of OE was developed by the English and represented native perception, and 2) that [h] and [x] in OE belonged to the same phoneme, which seems best referred to as /h-x/, it is far from clear why early/Northumbrian OE spelling could use <h> for [h] and <ch> (or even <c>, before <t>) for [x] (Campbell 1959, 23–24). The problem of where the idea that <ch> could mean /x/ came from will be treated below (section 4.3). For the moment, it must be stressed that phonetic spelling, however strong its appeal to traditionalist, is no more probable in this case than in any other.

Again, matters fall into place once we realize that the spelling system of OE might well have been developed by the Irish and represented Irish perception: since Irish had a distinction between /h/ and /x/ (Thurneysen 1946, 20–21), and usually spelled /x/ as <ch> (or even as <c> before <t>) (Thurneysen 1946, 21), it is entirely to be expected that OE [x] would be perceived as /x/ and spelled as <ch>.

One remaining mystery, something of a tangent here but seemingly worthy of a paragraph, would be where the idea that <h> could be used to spell /h/ came from. Since /h/ had been lost in Latin, knowledge that <h> meant /h/ was inevitably (given the nature of the times) lost too, throughout the western world. One consequence of this is that in Irish <h> had no (normal) linguistic value at all (Thurneysen 1946, 19), despite the fact that Irish had /h/. The knowledge that <h> originally meant /h/ could have come from Greeks in either Italy (those parts under Byzantine rule) or Ireland. Greeks in Ireland may seem somewhat improbable, but the fact that it is not is indicated by the tale of Columbanus learning the *computus* from “a certain learned Greek” in Bangor sometime before 600 (O’Croinin 1995, 177). For better or worse, another possibility is that the English, once exposed to the Roman alphabet, realized from the obvious similarity between Roman and Runic versions of <H> that Roman <h> had originally been intended to spell /h/, which would make a lot more sense than the prevailing view (of the time and area in question) that (simplifying a bit) <h> was just randomly prefixed to some V-initial words. In any event, since neither Roman Latin nor Irish would provide a model for <h> spelling /h/ in OE, and there is another possible explanation involving neither, the matter is not worth pursuing here.

To English eyes, once the Irish faded away into irrelevance, the distribution of <h> vs. <ch> could be seen as resulting from a spelling rule referring to

post-vocalic position: /h-x/ was to be spelled as <ch> in post-vocalic position, otherwise as <h>. As <ch> began to fall out of favor, replacing it with <h> (and so destroying evidence of Irish influence) would be trivial.

### 4.3 <ch> and <th> spelling /x/ and /θ/

The preceding two cases have something in common that is worth treating: the idea that voiceless fricatives could be spelled with following <h>, abstractly <Th>. It is a fair question where this idea came from. The question is often glossed over, as if the idea was derived from the pronunciation of Greek loan words in Roman Latin. This need not long detain us: it has long been known (e.g. Jackson 1953, 53, 412, 401; Campbell 1959, 23 fn. 2) that neither the aspirates of Classical Greek nor the voiceless fricatives that these later (during the early centuries A.D.) became were ever nativized in Latin, which merely substituted /k, t/. During the Dark Ages, the occasional appearance of <ch, th> in written Latin as apparently random variants for <c, t>, mostly in certain religious words, was utterly mysterious to all but a privileged few acquainted with Greek (most of them being Greeks).

As has been noted, knowledge of how Greeks pronounced Latin, including Greek loan words in Latin, could have been brought to Ireland before 600, at least a generation before it was brought to England. This appears to be the simplest scenario for how Irish spellers got the idea that /x, θ/ could be spelled as <ch, th>. At least among the Irish, knowledge that <ch, th> were supposed to mean /x, θ/, however acquired, would have stuck, since /x, θ/ at least existed in Irish. Though the knowledge in question could in theory have been brought to England by Theodore and his entourage, who arrived in 669 (Stenton [1971] 1989, 132), this makes a poor match with historical considerations suggesting that Theodore's arrival in England post-dates the development of both the Northumbrian and Southumbrian systems. Furthermore, positing that Theodore was the source of the idea that <th> could spell /θ/ would not explain why the English would not use <th> for all /θ/, when in fact, as has been noted, post-vocalic cases were generally *not* spelled with <th>. Overall, it seems to make more sense to think that the idea that <ch, th> could be used to spell /x, θ/ in OE came from the Irish, who had earlier gotten it from a wandering Greek or two (such as the one who brought the *computes*, referred to above). Whether or not the proposition that the use of <ch, th> in the spelling of OE is derived from its analogue in the spelling of OI is part of the conventional wisdom is less than clear. Though Campbell (1959, 23) makes the connection (without supporting argument), Hogg (1992, 33–34) does not. But it should be clear from what has been said above that Campbell was right.

#### 4.4 <cg> spelling palatal /gg/

The view taken here will be that <cg> meant /j(j)/, which is to say either /jj/ or /j/: /jj/ in intervocalic position (e.g. <hycgan> ‘to think’) and /j/ in final post-vocalic position (e.g. <ecg> ‘edge’). It is worth noting that both positions were of course post-vocalic. If there had been no distinction between <cg> and <gg>, as argued by Campbell (1959, 27), the distribution of <cg> and <gg> would be random, heavily favoring <cg> in all cases, when in fact <gg> is disproportionately common in cases from original /gg/. Probably what happened was that cases of /gg/ were so rare that an original spelling rule calling for them to be spelled as <gg>, having little application, was in effect forgotten. Be that as it may, Campbell’s assertion (1959, 27 fn. 1) that <cg> is a case of “Celtic” (apparently intended to mean “Irish”) influence must be correct. Campbell is clearly referring to the fact that Irish spelling uses post-vocalic <c> to mean /g/. But this observation misses a much more important point: spellings of the mixed voice or <TD> type, including <cg>, both 1) occur in the spelling of OI (Thurneysen 1946, 23) and 2) actually make sense. As for how they make sense, we may consider <nepbuisti> ‘not being’, where <pb> means /b/, <ne> means ‘not’, and <buisti> means ‘being’. Though <pb> is quite eye-popping, the alternatives are arguably worse: <nebuisti> would imply medial /v/, and <nepuisti> would not include the morpheme <buisti>. Parallel considerations apply anywhere morpheme boundaries are involved, for example with <cg> in <ecguisti> ‘wishes’, which is a prepositional verb of the familiar IE type. Since Irish spelling had no sure way to distinguish between singles and geminates in such cases, it is possible that in some cases spellings of the <TD> type may mean /DD/. But that is a detail: the larger point is that Irish spelling did employ spellings of the “mixed voice” or <TD> type, *across morpheme boundaries*, with (as would be expected) a non-literal meaning, whereas Roman Latin did nothing of the kind. Accordingly when we see <cg> in OE spelling, it is a strong point for Irish and against Roman Latin as the original model for the OE spelling system.

It makes some sense that Irish missionary linguists, presented with two kinds of geminate /gg/ (back/velar and front/palatal) and two possible spellings for these, <gg> and <cg>, might hit upon the idea of using one for one and one for the other. The usual non-distinction employed in spelling the singles was, as the need to employ diacritic dots in modern works shows, less than perfect. But it was only in the case of (original) geminates that the existence of digraphs created an additional option. The main remaining question is why Irish missionary linguists would use <cg> for the palatal and <gg> for the velar rather than the other way around. The answer must come from a combination of two things: 1) that in Irish spelling the <TD> type was, as has been seen, associated with morpheme boundaries, and 2) that in OE /jj/ was often (particularly in verbs, e.g. <hycgan> ‘to think’) associated with morpheme boundaries. Therefore it

would be better (all things being equal) to use <cg> for /j(j)/ and <gg> for /g(g)/. Since, as Campbell (1959, 27) notes, <cg> appears to be specifically Southumbrian, and does not seem likely to be the kind of thing that two Irish monks would independently hit on, we can take a less than wild guess about who invented it: Maeldubh.

In Irish, geminate spellings did not necessarily represent geminate phonemes. Since post-vocalic <T> and <D> ordinarily meant /D/ and /Ð/, postvocalic /T/ could only be spelled distinctly as <TT> (Stifter 2006, 19), which was also the only way that /TT/ could have been spelled. And though post-vocalic /D/ was usually spelled as <T>, it could also be spelled as <DD> (Thurneysen 1946, 23), which was also the only way that /DD/ could have been spelled. Thus the only spellings that Irish had for /DD/, the <DD> type and the <TD> type, were potentially ambiguous. For Irish monks developing an Irish based spelling system for OE, this would have been convenient: <cg> could be used to mean either /jj/ (as in <hycgan>) or /j/ (as in <ecg>) without the principles of the Irish spelling system being violated.

Finally it may be noted that <cg> in OE was originally restricted to post-vocalic position (Hogg 1992, 37), notwithstanding that /j/ in OE was not restricted to post-vocalic position: it could occur after /n/. But even though for most of the OE period <cg> would seem to be a possible spelling for /j/ after /n/, <cg> is not generally employed to spell /j/ in positions that are not post-vocalic till later OE: most OE uses <hringe> spelling /hrinje/ ‘ring’, when “hrincg” would have been more straightforward. Evidence is consistent then with the proposition that OE spellers originally followed a rule that /j(j)/ was to be spelled <cg> *in post-vocalic position*, which is, as has been seen, is a rule of a type that existed in Irish but not in Latin.

#### 4.5 <cg> and <bb> spelling single consonants

With both <bb> and <cg> there is a problem: though they are traditionally supposed to have meant /bb/ and /jj/ (at least in the beginning) in all positions, with later reduction in final position, /bb/ and /jj/ are not in contrast (in any position) with single /b/ or /j/. There would have been pressure (quite literally) to reduce /bb/ and /jj/ to /b/ and /j/, in both intervocalic position and final position. If this happened in intervocalic position, the argument is too complex and indirect to be made here. But at least in final position it seems clear that reduction did occur. It would make no sense to think that /nn/ in /mann/ ‘man’ was reduced, but /bb/ in /sib/ ‘relative’ was not: surely final /nn/ 1) would have been more easily implemented than final /bb/, and 2) was in contrast with a corresponding single, which would have given some motivation for non-reduction, while /bb/ was not. Though it is obvious that graphic reduction of <cg>, turning <ecg> ‘edge’ into <ec> or <eg>,

would not be expected, graphic recognition of reduction of final <bb>, turning <sib> ‘relative’ into <sib> *would* (all things being equal) be expected. But /sib/ was generally spelled not as <sib>, but rather as <sibb>.

So the question is why graphic reduction of final <bb> did not (as a rule) occur. There appears to be only one good possibility: that OE spellers were originally trained in a rule that /b/ in post-vocalic position was to be spelled as <bb>. This in turn does not make sense unless there was also a rule that <b> post-vocalic position meant /v/, which persisted long enough for <bb> to become entrenched as the spelling of post-vocalic /b/. For reasons that have been seen, rules of this type could come only from Irish, not from Roman Latin. Though by Irish standards post-vocalic <d> meant /ð/ and post-vocalic <dd> meant /d/, in this case English had a contrastive geminate to be represented by <dd>, and in any event post-vocalic <d> would cease to spell /ð/ once this began to be spelled as <ð>. The conclusion is that use of final post-vocalic <bb> in OE to spell either /bb/ or //b/ is a relic of Irish influence.

#### 4.6 A forest in the trees: sensitivity to post-vocalic position

All four of the cases treated above that by their nature *could* provide evidence for the proposition that the spelling system of OE was originally sensitive to post-vocalic position (the cases of <cg>, <bb>, <h> vs. <ch>, and <þ> vs. <ð>), *do* provide such evidence. Though the spelling system of OE had no native reason to develop any such sensitivity, the spelling system of OI both had a native reason to do so, and did. Reasons to think that the Southumbrian system never employed positional rules of the Celtic type (<T> spelling /D/, <D> spelling /Ð/) to spell single obstruents have been given above. The Northumbrian system too shows no direct evidence of ever having employed such rules. But it may show some indirect evidence, as follows.

According to Campbell (1959, 27) “illogical doubling” of consonants is a feature of Northumbrian. But the examples given show “illogical doubling” only of *obstruents*. Granted that the spelling system of OI also engages “illogical” doubling of obstruents (which is not really illogical in Irish, as has been seen), the apparent coincidence must arouse suspicion. If Northumbrian originally had no way to spell post-vocalic /T/ except as <TT>, because <T> spelled /D/, then as it moved away from this system it might well begin to spell post-vocalic /D/ as <DD> in order to avoid the ambiguity of <T>, which during the transition between the old and new systems might be taken as spelling either /D/ or /T/. If that is not why “illogical doubling” appears in Northumbrian, it is less than clear (at least to the present author) what else could be.

#### 4.7 The spelling of /y/ and the meaning of <g> followed by <e, i>

On this subject, more research is needed, and the “conclusions” offered are little more than suggestions. In Roman Latin spelling, <g> followed by a front vowel meant /j/. What syllable-initial <i> before a vowel meant is not entirely clear, but since by the time Italian emerges it has become /j/, and the roughly parallel strengthening of /w/ happened in ancient times (Jackson 1953, 88), it had probably ceased to mean /y/. A seemingly reasonable guess is that it meant /ʒ/, which may also have been, in intervocalic cases, the meaning of <g> followed by a front V. Since neither Latin nor Italian ever developed a spelling for /ʒ/, and Latin was somewhat late in yielding to Italian as a written language, it is difficult to tell. In Irish spelling, <g> followed by a front vowel meant either /y/ in post-vocalic position or /g<sup>i</sup>/ elsewhere (Stifter 2006, 19), and nothing meant /j/, since Irish did not have /j/.

So in attempting to determine whether the spelling system of OE was modeled more on Irish or on Roman Latin, we can look at 1) how /y/ is spelled, and 2) what <g> followed by a front vowel means. Of course /y/ in OE is typically spelled as <g> followed by a front vowel, not <i>, and <g> followed by a front vowel in OE typically means /y/, not /j/. Clearly the OE spellings are more similar to Irish spellings than to Roman Latin spellings. Irish had no distinct way to spell /y/ in initial position, since apart from cases of lenition, which in most cases (including the present one) was not marked in Irish spelling (Stifter 2006, 30), /y/ did not occur in initial position (Stifter 2006, 16). To Irish missionary linguists it would have been clear that post-vocalic /y/ was to be spelled as <g> followed by a front V. This may well explain why medial /y/ that was not post-vocalic, as in /neryan/ ‘to save’, was not spelled as <g>, so that instead of <nergean> we (for most part) find <nerian>. To Irish eyes, all /y/ that was not post-vocalic would have to be spelled as something else, no doubt <i> from Latin, which was the only remaining possibility, and there are hints that in early times <i> was also used in initial cases like <Iaruman> (Campbell 1959, 25). It is clear that at some (fairly early) point the spelling of /y/ in post-vocalic position as <g> followed by a front vowel was extended to initial position, and since we have seen other reasons to think that early/late differences are also Northumbrian/Southumbrian differences, we may well suspect that this difference was too. It may be noted that this is one case where OE does not in the long run *retain* a post-vocalic spelling rule from Irish, though it apparently did *adopt* such a rule (at least partially) in the beginning.

## 5. Conclusion

There are tests we can employ to see whether OE spelling was modeled more on Irish spelling or on Roman Latin spelling, by asking the following questions. 1) Does OE spelling seem to be designed, like OI spelling, for a language with

a distinction between /θ/ and /ð/? 2) Does (early) OE spelling seem to be designed, like OI spelling, for a language with a distinction between /h/ and /x/? 3) Does (early) OE spelling, like OI spelling, use <ch, th> for voiceless non-sibilant fricatives? 4) Does OE spelling, like OI spelling, use <TD> spellings? 4) Can OE spelling, like OI spelling, use <bb> and <cg> to spell non-geminates? 5) Does OE spelling show signs of having had, like OI spelling, spelling rules for post-vocalic position? 6) Does OE spelling, like OI spelling, use <g> followed by a front V to spell /y/? 7) Finally (not related to consonantal spellings), does OE spelling, like OI spelling, use graphic short diphthongs? The answer to all of these questions is yes, and in each case what it means is that OE patterns with OI and not with Roman Latin. Unless some countervailing evidence pointing the other way can be adduced, the conclusion favoring Irish must stand. But it appears that the only question of this sort that would give a conclusion favoring Roman Latin is whether OE spells post-vocalic plosives in the manner of Irish, and this phenomenon is explicable as resulting from the strong Romanizing movement of the later 600s, which temporarily brought Roman-style usages into Irish spelling. Furthermore, “illogical doubling” in Northumbrian seems to point back to a time when OE spelling (in Northumbria) did indeed spell post-vocalic plosives in the manner of Irish. By contrast, none of the evidence against Roman Latin as the model for OE spelling appears to have any good explanation.

Two of the cases treated above involve OE appearing to spell a phonemic distinction that it did not have: /x/ vs. /h/ and /θ/ vs. /ð/. Under ordinary circumstances phonetic spelling is hardly expected, since in practical terms the very essence of the distinction between what is phonemic and what is merely phonetic is lack of awareness (and control). The explanation must be that in each case the phonemic distinction in question existed in a foreign model that was the model for OE spelling. Irish had such distinctions, but Roman Latin did not. Nor is there any historical evidence to suggest that Roman missionaries, able to act as linguists, had any presence in England at the time in question.

Lurking behind these two cases is a much larger and more important example of what appears to be the same syndrome. If OE developed phonemic short diphthongs, this could only be by “phonemic split” from earlier short front vowels. It is not controversial (within the traditional mentality) that phonemic split requires a second sound change to come along and render allophones created by a first change no longer predictable. For example, if /uCi/ becomes pronounced as [üCi], there is still no /ü/ until /i/ becomes /e/ (or something else not predicting [ü]), motivating reanalysis of [ü] as /ü/. If, as appears to be the conventional wisdom, early OE spelling as used by Aldhelm employed short diphthongs (ea, eo, io>) that were not in contrast with the short front Vs that they derived from (/æ, e, i/), as no second sound change (loss of umlaut conditioners, metathesis, reduction of final geminates) had yet come along to create contrast, then early OE spelling marked “glides” that were predictable and therefore not phonemic, which is hardly

expected. But this too would be a case of OE for some strange reason spelling distinctions that were phonemic in Irish but not in English: in OE, as in modern languages, “glides” must have been instrumental in implementing the distinction between front and back consonants (Laver 1994, 323–325). So we can add another question to our list: why do all cases of apparent phonetic spelling in OE involve phonetic differences that were phonemic in Irish? Daunt (1939, 115) provides the beginnings of an answer: “Irish teachers, listening as foreigners to a strange tongue and trying to write it down (...) would hear shades of pronunciation which the English speakers would not have heard”. But “Irish teachers” would not really be expected to hear all “shades of pronunciation”, only those that were involved in phonemic distinctions in Irish. Unless the apparently phonetic spellings of OE represent a truly extraordinary coincidence, the spelling system of OE must have been developed by Irish missionary linguists who “over-heard” English as having the phonemic distinctions of Irish.

The conclusion, however unexpected, is clear: the spelling system of OE was not developed by *English* monks with Roman (or non-Roman) *Latin* as its model, but rather by *Irish* monks with *Irish* as its model. This should, upon reflection, be no cause for surprise: it is quite common for first spelling systems to be developed by foreigners, especially (as seen in recent times) by missionary linguists. More specifically, it appears that the earlier Northumbrian system had northern Irish (with Celtic spellings of obstruents) as its model, while the later Southumbrian system had southern Irish (with Roman spellings of obstruents) as its model. In later days, the Celtic-style system won out in Ireland and the Roman-style system won out in England, in each case erasing almost all evidence of the earlier state of affairs. The Irish origin of the OE system is, as Daunt pointed out long ago, the explanation for why both systems employ “under-moraic” spellings in the form of short diphthongs. Though Campbell and O’Neill are both right to point out evidence of Irish influences in the spelling system of OE, each makes, in the view of the present author, a critical error. Campbell seems to assume that Irish influences in OE spelling could only be marginal, and O’Neill assumes that Irish influences in the Southumbrian system could not originate in Southumbria. Closer examination reveals that neither assumption is warranted. Each is connected with perhaps the main error here: ignoring the existence and probable significance of Maeldubh, through his very influential student Aldhelm. Once this error is rectified, much about OE spelling that in the past has not made sense finally does.

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