

Praying with Blathmac

Martyrdom and memory in early Irish devotional practice

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The mid-eighth-century Old Irish text known as the poems of Blathmac is a long devotional composition meditating on the mystery of Christ's cross and its significance for salvation history. Since the discovery and subsequent publication of the text nearly six decades ago, the work has garnered considerable scholarly interest for its linguistic and socio-historical value, but many aspects of its devotional orientation remain less systematically explored. This article examines the poems' devotional discourse by focusing on the intersections of martyrdom and memory in Blathmac's composition. Taking as a starting point the text's intended use as a prayer, the discussion considers how the text's overarching interest in exemplary acts of self-sacrifice relates to the practices of ritual commemoration, and how these strategies of collective memory work to convey and sustain a shared understanding of Christian identity.

Introduction

Some time in the mid-eighth century, an Irish monk known as Blathmac son of Cú Brettan composed two long poems on the life, death, resurrection and Second Coming of Christ as a 'devoted offering' (*dúthracht*) to the Virgin Mary and her Son.¹ Complementing the canonical bib-

lical narrative with details drawn from patristic commentaries and apocryphal material, Blathmac outlines in his work the most important events of salvation history from the Incarnation to the Last Judgement, inviting the audience to meditate upon and, through the practice of prayer actively engage with, the fundamental tenets of Christian faith.²

information concerning the author or his background is circumstantial (see Stifter 2015: 49–58). In this article I follow the scholarly convention of attributing authorship to this individual and, accordingly, referring to the work as 'the poems of Blathmac'.

- 2 The text survives in a single seventeenth-century manuscript (National Library of Ireland G50) with the final stanzas of the second poem in a fragmentary state as a result of the poor condition of the last two leaves. The manuscript has been fully digitised and is available online at the Irish Script on Screen website. In Carney's edition, the first poem includes stanzas 1–149 and the second stanzas 150–259. The remaining quatrains 260–303, left out of James Carney's version, have recently been published with an English translation and extensive linguistic notes by Siobhán Barrett and David Stifter (2019). An edition with translation and notes has also been published by Stifter on the Chronologicon Hibernicum Twitter account in 2017.

1 See the *Dictionary of the Irish Language, s.v.* 'dúthracht'. An electronic version is available online at dil.ie (henceforth eDIL). This identification of the poet is based on the manuscript evidence, but all the historical

In previous scholarship, the first poem, in which Blathmac expatiates on the humanity of Christ and the events leading up to his sacrificial death, has received relatively more attention than the second, which shifts the attention to his divinity and the eschatological events leading up to the Second Coming (for recent studies, see e.g. Bergholm 2015; Lambkin 2015; Ó Dochartaigh 2015; Barrett 2017, 2019; Ó Cathasaigh 2019). In Blathmac's devotional discourse, however, the two are essentially parts of a single unified narrative, as the atoning sacrifice of Christ is inextricably linked with the anticipation of the as yet unrealised fulfilment of a promise of the Lord's imminent return. This article seeks to bring together the symbolic and practical aspects of this dynamic by examining how Blathmac's understanding of righteous suffering intersects with broader conceptions of martyrdom, and partakes of the strategies of memory work related to the promulgation of Christian identity. I suggest that while the invocation of sacrificial imagery is in itself a pivotal dimension of Blathmac's devotional mode, it is the recapitulation of this memory in ritual practice that turns his composition into an experiential and embodied process of meaning-making.

Elizabeth Castelli (2014: 29) has noted that martyrdom has from the earliest times constituted an elemental part of Christian salvation history, which 'moves relentlessly and single-mindedly to culmination and fulfillment in [Christ's] promised return'. For the early Christian communities, the commemoration of the afflictions suffered by the martyrs entailed laying claim to a shared past, by forging links with the events of sacred history throughout time and space. The various practices of remembrance – in narrative, ritual and liturgical form – made the believers a part

of a greater mythical story that simultaneously provided them with 'a *unified* account of the past and a *unifying* account for the present and an imagined future' (Castelli 2014: 30; emphasis original; see also Rose 2009).³ The meaningfulness of the deaths of the martyrs derived from their exemplary character, but also from the assertion of posthumous vindication, which framed their martyrdom as part of God's plan for humankind. This gave the fates of these 'very special dead' a timeless and universal quality, which solidified Christianity's overarching meta-narrative of justice and triumph (Castelli 2004: 34–6; Louth 2011: 3–10; see also Perkins 1995; Moss 2013).⁴

The following discussion will illustrate how in Blathmac's work, the profound importance of preserving the testimony of the martyrs is likewise underscored by the affirmation of the spiritual significance of their suffering. This theme is developed in the first poem by reference to the willing self-oblation of Christ himself, and in the second, in relation to all the martyred servants of the Lord, who, emulating his virtue, bore witness to God's truth and were allowed to share in the splendour of his victory. For the faithful, the contemplation and commemoration of these exemplary acts of self-sacrifice, in private prayer and in liturgical celebration, were the primary means by which this tradition was conveyed and

3 Castelli's work builds on theories of collective memory, which emphasise the social and discursive dimension of all remembering. The concept is closely related to cultural and social memory, which have likewise been applied to processes that comprise collective memory work; see e.g. Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 2006.

4 The term 'very special dead' derives from Peter Brown's classic study of the cult of the saints (Brown 1981: 69–85).

sustained. By participating in the ritual acts of remembrance, the community also became part of a living Christian witness, sharing in the testimony of the truth of the Gospel (cf. Chazelle 2001; Rose 2009).

Blathmac and his audience

Blathmac's composition represents an example of a metrical biblical paraphrase, which was widely appropriated for devotional and didactic purposes in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Ó Dochartaigh 2015: 159–63; Stifter 2015: 60–5). When compared to some other Irish vernacular works composed in this mode, Blathmac appears to have treated his sources in a more idiosyncratic manner, often foregoing strict chronology in his narrative to emphasise the symbolic significance of individual episodes in relation to the central event of each poem, the passion and glorification of Christ.⁵ Commenting on Blathmac's use of a simple poetic metre and the poem's 'unpretentious' style, Carney (1964: xv) remarked that the author evidently did not have the same 'pretensions to learning' as some of his contemporaries, and proposed that his 'lengthy poem of simple piety' must have been primarily aimed at a 'popular audience'. With regard to the devotional function of the composition, this suggestion concerning the intended audience of the work merits further consideration, especially given how the formal and expressive features of the text constitute an instrumental part of its performative efficacy (see Bergholm 2015). In the first stanzas of his composition, Blathmac begins by addressing his words to the Virgin Mary and asking her to come

to him so that they could mourn the death of her son together:

Come to me, loving Mary, that I may
keen with you your very dear one.
Alas that your son should go to the
cross, he who was a great diadem, a
beautiful hero.

That with you I may beat my two hands
for the captivity of your beautiful son:
your womb has conceived Jesus – it
has not marred your virginity.

More difficult, more grievous (?)
was every tribulation of holy Christ,
greater than that of any renowned
captive; sad was it, Mary, the deep
wound of points upon your first-born.
(Blathmac §§1–3)⁶

The sense of intimacy created between the speaking subject and the Virgin in these stanzas suggests at the outset that the 'I' should be understood self-expressively, as an expression of the poet's subjective affective engagement with the subject matter of the poem. Although this has been the conventional way of approaching Blathmac's work, it is also possible to see the 'impassioned' or 'psalmic I' in this instance as a rhetorical strategy, used to create a scripted role 'to be inhabited and performed by those who requested and used the prayers'

5 Notable examples include the Old Irish metrical martyrology of Oengus (*Félire Óengusso*) and the Middle Irish 'Psalter of Quatrains' (*Saltair na Rann*).

6 All the following references to the primary text are from James Carney's edition and English translation, published by the Irish Texts Society in 1964 (Carney 1964; textual references are henceforth given as Blathmac). The numbering of the quatrains in the quotations follows Carney's edition. A provisional revised edition and translation has been produced by Siobhán Barrett as part of her Ph.D. project at Maynooth University (Barrett 2017).

(McNamer 2010: 17). The discursive space that is opened up in this manner allows anyone performing the prayer to adopt the position at the Virgin's side, to 'imagine themselves present at scenes of Christ's suffering and to perform compassion for that suffering victim in a private drama of the heart' (p. 1).⁷

While nothing certain can be known about the reception of Blathmac's work in his own time, the text clearly indicates that he envisaged it would be used by others. This can be gleaned from a section towards the end of the first poem, where Blathmac appeals to the Virgin for her intercession not only on his own behalf, but also on behalf of those who recite his poem with a devout attitude:

Let me have from you my three petitions, beautiful Mary, little bright-necked one; get them, sun of women, from your son who has them in his power.

That I be in the world till old with the Lord who rules starry Heaven, and that thereafter there be a welcome for me into the eternal ever-enduring kingdom.

7 It is noteworthy that Blathmac's work antedates the so-called 'affective turn' of late-medieval spirituality, which is usually associated with Anselm and the Cistercians. Affective devotional practices have a long history in Christian spirituality, and many features of the compassionate devotion to the suffering Christ and his Mother have been identified, for instance, in Byzantine traditions and Anglo-Saxon religious texts (see e.g. Sticca 1988; DeGregorio 2005; Edsall 2014). The influence of these ideas on early Irish spirituality remains to be systematically investigated.

Everyone who has this as a vigil-prayer at lying down and at rising for unblemished protection in the next world like a breast-plate with helmet;

Everyone, whatever he be, who shall say it fasting on Friday night, provided only that it be with copious tears, Mary, may he not be for Hell.

At the angry coming of your son with his cross on his reddened back, that at that time you save any friend who shall have keened him. (Blathmac §§138–42)

It is likely that the primary audience Blathmac had in mind for his poems was the other members of his own monastic community, to whom the sacred narrative of the Scriptures and the constant meditation upon its message were the bedrock of the lived, everyday experience of Christian faith (cf. Leclercq 1982: 212–13; Olsen 2015: 19).⁸ In this environment, the ultimate goal of the community's spiritual endeavours – becoming transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) – was the embodiment of the discipline of the Gospel, with the communal and the individual pursuit of contemplative life entirely structured around prayers offered up in the spirit of praise, thanksgiving, supplication and meditation (see Stewart 2008).

8 It has been suggested that Blathmac may have been a member of a community known as the *Céli Dé* or 'the clients of God'; see Lambkin 1999. Although the focus of this article remains on monastic devotional practice, it is possible, as Brian Lambkin (2015: 153) has proposed, that Blathmac's choice of writing his poem in Irish may have also been motivated by the desire to make it more accessible to Christians outside the monastic community as well.

Through the quotidian practice of worship, the participants became immersed in the hermeneutics of their own community, sharing a reality in which ‘biblical experience [was] inseparable from liturgical experience’ (Leclercq 1982: 213). This ‘monastic microculture’, then, to borrow Derek Olsen’s (2015) phrase, provides the predominant framework for Blathmac’s devotional discourse, and also shapes his mimetic and liturgical interpretation of the theme of martyrdom.

The martyrdom of Christ

One of the most distinctive features of Blathmac’s first poem, already alluded to above, is the manner in which he appropriates the register of a native funerary lament or a keen (*coine*) in his narrative of the Passion, to focus the attention on Christ’s exemplary life as well as the momentous tragedy of his violent death.⁹ This feature, which has been referred to as one of the foremost indications of the ‘determined, conscious and incorrigible Irishness’ of Blathmac’s work (Carney, as cited in Lambkin 1985–6: 67), also carries a rich spiritual resonance, as it harks back to the emotive ritual expressions of mourning associated with lamentation in the Christian tradition (see Olyan 2004).

The dominant image of Christ in Blathmac’s first poem centres on his humanity, which in the Incarnation was brought into perfect union with the divine:

You have conceived him without sin
with man, you have brought forth
without ailing wound; without grief
has he strengthened you (excellent the
grace!) at the time of his crucifixion.

9 See eDIL *s.v.* ‘*coine*’ (dil.ie/10337) and ‘*caine*’ (dil.ie/7822).

I ask: Have ye heard of a son being thus,
one who could do these three things?
Such has not come upon the thighs of
women, nor will such be born.

The first-born of God, the Father, in
Heaven, is your son, Mary, virgin;
he has begotten in a pure conception
through the grace of the Septiform
Spirit. (Blathmac §§4–6)

The human figure of Jesus is first and foremost the son of Mary, whose exceptional qualities and unique status were manifest from the beginning:

No father found, Mary, the like of your
renowned son: better he (your son)
than prophet, more knowledgeable
than any druid, a king who was bishop
and full sage.

More excellent his form than that of
any human being, more vigorous his
stout vigour than that of any wright;
wiser than any breast under heaven,
more just than any judge.

He was more beautiful, more pleasant
and bigger than other boys; from
the time when he was in his swaddling
clothes it was known what would come
of him, a being destined for the saving
of multitudes. (Blathmac §§7–9)

During his ministry, Jesus assumes his role as the leader of his select warrior-band of apostles and disciples, ‘a fair, bright, miracle-working lord’ who practises generous hospitality, and never denies anyone a favour or a privilege (§§26–43). Each of these attributes, while presenting a catalogue of virtues to emulate, also serves to highlight the uniqueness of Jesus among men, thereby effectively foregrounding the

fundamental injustice of the humiliation he had to endure at the hands of his persecutors. As the narrative moves on to the events surrounding the Passion, the heroic image of these stanzas is dramatically juxtaposed with the figure of Christ as a fragile and vulnerable victim, whose suffering and death were brought about by his mother's own kin:

Your people seized your son; Mary,
they flogged him. There struck him
the green reed and fists across ruddy
cheeks.

It was a hideous deed ... that was
done to him: that his very mother-kin
should crucify the man who had come
to save them.

Hands were laid upon the face (eye)
of the King who was severely chas-
tised. Hideous deed! – the face of the
Creator was spat upon.

When every outrage was committed
against him, when capture was com-
pleted, he took his cross upon his back
– he did not cease (?) being beaten.
(Blathmac §§46–9)

Although Blathmac's depiction of Christ's suffering is arguably not on a par with the excessively graphic imagery that is characteristic of later medieval devotional meditations on the Passion (see McNamer 2010), the affective impact of these scenes is nevertheless evident. In this instance, the response that the narrative seeks to elicit is not solely compassionate empathy and pity towards Christ, but also bitterness and hatred towards the Jews, whom Blathmac implicates for this hideous offence (cf. Cohen 2007). Dwelling on the Jews' iniquity, Blathmac temporarily suspends the

story of the Passion to insert a long section drawn from the Old Testament, which elaborates on the ingratitude of the Israelites and their repeated violations of the covenant (§§77–103). The outrage aroused by their actions is palpable:

Of shameless countenance and wolf-
like were the men who perpetrated
that kin-slaying; since his mother was
one of them it was treachery towards a
true kinsman.

Every advantage that the King had
bestowed upon the Jews in return for
their clientship was 'wealth to slaves';
they violated their counter-obligations.

Though he had granted them a law
they twisted it with perverse lies; it
was a holy thing to hungry dogs, a
pearl to fat swine. (Blathmac §§103,
106–7)

The profound sense of injustice evoked by the undeserved suffering of Christ takes centre-stage as Blathmac contemplates his redemptive act of self-sacrifice. Blathmac expresses anguish over the fact that Jesus was not lamented by his followers after his death, and that all those who have been made aware of his suffering on the cross are not universally moved to perpetual mourning:

Alas, for anyone who has seen the son
of the living God stretched fast on the
cross! Alas, the body possessing wisest
dignity that has plunged into gore!

The (slaying of the) hero of every indi-
vidual of the host of men and women
is mourned; no cry meeting cry was
raised over the body of Christ, the
bright and gentle one.

It were no matter for surprise that there should be at every single hour till doom a heavy tear of blood, a drop of gore, upon every cheek keening the captive. (Blathmac §§121, 125, 132)

By framing the ritual commemoration of Christ's death in this manner, Blathmac interweaves the notion of the legal and social obligation to honour the memory of the deceased in communal lamentation with the acknowledgment of the spiritual significance of his blood oblation (cf. Breatnach 2015: 108). The liturgy of the Mass and the Eucharist, which constitute the primary ritual context for the faithful to partake of the sacrificial effects of this offering, is symbolically represented by the profusion of Christ's blood, which gushes forth in streams from his pierced side, baptising the skull of Adam at the foot of the cross.¹⁰ The sacramental context comes more explicitly to the fore in the second part of the composition, in which the emphasis has shifted from the mourning of Christ's Passion to the celebration of his resurrection and ascension:

It is your son's body that comes to us when one goes to the Sacrament; the pure wine has been transmuted for us into the blood of the Son of the King.

10 'The flowing blood from the body of the dear Lord baptized the head of Adam, for the shaft of the cross of Christ had aimed at his mouth' (Blathmac §57). The inclusion of Adam's skull in the scene testifies to Blathmac's familiarity with traditions, which from at least the third century onwards had developed around the idea that Golgotha had received its name from Adam being buried there (see Ryan 2021).

It is your son's body (well that it came!) from which comes an eternal kingdom, eternally happy; and without doubt it is in his blood that every saint washes his bright garment.

The blood of the Son of the King red-dens a body of clay in the brightness of gore; the blood of your son, the son of the living God, from it is made its (i.e. the body's) resplendence.

Each one that eats his body in purity will not be weak; and he who drinks a draught of his blood – it is a full turning of the back upon the Devil. (Blathmac §§203–6)

When celebrating the Eucharist, the faithful are not only commemorating Christ's sacrifice at the crucifixion, but also sharing in its transformative power. The consumption of his body and blood thus 'confirms and strengthens the union created at baptism among the members of the ecclesiastical body, and between them and their head, assuring the church's unity with the crucified and heavenly Christ and its separation from sinners and unbelievers' (Chazelle 2001: 164).

The fundamental truth that the redemptive value of the cross lies in the willing self-sacrifice of one omnipotent being, fully human and fully divine, is in Blathmac's Passion narrative reflected in the fact that even in its most effusive form, the remembrance of the fragile humanity of Christ is balanced by the belief that Christ's suffering and death promised his triumphant return in glory (cf. Chazelle 2001: 71–3). The humility and virtuous endurance, which the faithful are expected to imitate, thus entail that those bearing witness to his martyrdom should persevere in waiting for their heavenly reward, and demonstrate the

same patience that God showed in refraining from punishment at the moment of the crucifixion.¹¹ At the time of the Second Coming, a final battle would be waged against the forces of evil, and all those who had suffered in Christ would be avenged. This eschatological vision also involves the martyrs in the salvific work of God, incorporating them into the scheme of salvation history as representatives of both the continuation and the completion of the divine plan.

The vindication of the martyrs

When Blathmac begins the narrative anew in the second poem, the human nature of Christ almost immediately recedes into the background, as the text directs the attention to his divinity and kingship (see Barrett 2019). Having first highlighted the complete submission of Mary at the Annunciation (§§151–64), and the obedience and ‘filial piety’ demonstrated by Jesus at his circumcision, baptism and temptation (§§165–73), Blathmac moves on to the events following the crucifixion: Christ’s descent into hell and the victorious delivery of the elect from the bondages of the devil.¹² Although Blathmac does not elaborate on the theme in this particular section, ‘the harmonious choir of the race of Adam’ (§182) that Christ leads to heaven may in this instance be understood as including the patriarchs, the prophets and other ancient just ones, who, despite not having heard the Gospel, had spent their

lives in faith and good works in expectation of the Lord’s Passion and resurrection (see Turner 1966). By staying firm in adversities and remaining true to their faith, this group of the righteous had set the example for those of the faithful who would later pay for their loyalty with their own blood. All of them were equally included among those to whom the eternal kingdom of God had been promised, and on whose behalf the Lord would wage war in the Last Days.

The freeing of the ancient elect from death marks one of the many passages in Blathmac’s composition where the use of apocryphal and patristic materials enabled him to elaborate on the scriptural narrative in order to highlight the manner in which the redeeming mission of Christ transcended the limits of historical time (see Lawrence 1995; Ó Dochartaigh 2015: 162–3). Again, Blathmac digresses from the main narrative, this time to demonstrate how every single prophecy had already come to pass in the figure of Jesus, apart from his promised return:

It is you and your son whom we speak about that Balaam of yore had prophesied: there would arise a great star of dignity from Jacob.

It is the kingdom of your strong son that the chief prophets have prophesied; though each speaks in his own way the intention of the prophecies is the same.

It is of your son (though you may correct him!) that great laws have been prophesied; all this has been fulfilled save the act of his [second] coming. (Blathmac §§230, 232–3)

The subsequent events, following the account of the book of Revelation, thus

11 ‘The King was patient at the crucifixion of his only-begotten, for had his good elements known, they would have keened sweetly’ (Blathmac §67).

12 Owing to the limitations of space, the longer text passages referred to in the discussion cannot be quoted in full. These sections can be viewed online in Barrett’s edition and translation (see footnote 7 above).

represent the anxiously anticipated culmination of God's involvement in history through Jesus Christ. The vivid description of the signs heralding the Apocalypse reaches its climax in the defeat of the forces of the Antichrist in a battle where the Lord gloriously strikes down those who have wronged his servants (§§236–44). Here we also meet the martyred apostles, standing among the other faithful, who, from the beginning of time, had endured tribulations for their faith. The theme of divine vengeance, centred on the majesty of Christ as a righteous judge, can be viewed as a direct reference to the cry of the souls of the martyrs heard at the opening of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9–11), but also against the backdrop of all the other passages in the Scriptures where the suffering and ultimate vindication of the faithful had been foretold. Within this scheme, the apostles represented only one, albeit crucially important, link in the long chain of persecution constituting the history of martyrdom, from the shedding of the innocent blood of Abel (Gen. 4:8) to the killing of Elijah and Enoch (Rev. 11:7).

Scholars have long been intrigued by this particular section of Blathmac's second poem and the long martyrological sequence included therein (§§245–58). The fact that Blathmac appears to depart from the information found in the canonical Gospels and other authoritative texts used in the liturgical commemoration of martyrs has been taken as an indication that he may have been drawing on a vernacular listing of the apostles' characteristics and their fates (O'Leary 2013: 67–8), or had access to some other, as yet unidentified, source. A relatively similar order, with seven out of eleven apostles mentioned in the same sequence, is found in a contemporary eighth-century Latin compendium of exegetical commentary known as the

'Irish Reference-Bible', but this series has similarly been characterised as 'unusually ordered' (O'Leary 2013: 92).¹³

Before his account of the martyred apostles, Blathmac first establishes the lineage of those who had suffered martyrdom before their time:

There will be avenged upon the Devil the opposition to his creator: the deception of Adam who was pitiful in dignity and the kin-slaying of Abel.

The persecution of patriarchs at every period, the destruction of chief prophets, the infants of Bethlehem (wretched deed!) being slain in the holy guise of Jesus.

The crucifixion of Christ who was most fair in fame, Jesus, our noble lord; the beheading of pure John, the Baptist, and the stoning of Stephen to the end. (Blathmac §§245–7)

The heroic example of these early witnesses is then followed by the apostolic group of Christ's followers:

The slaying by the sword of Matthew (famous well-known deed!) who has written the Gospel, the crucifixion of Peter, the slaying of Paul, and the clubbing of James.

13 It may be noted that studies on the early passionaries often comment upon the unsystematic manner in which the materials are presented in these collections (see e.g. O'Leary 2010, 2013). I wish to thank Dr O'Leary and Professor David Dumville for making these important publications available to me.

The Martyrdom of Andrew (fair his name!): he welcomed the beautiful cross, he who through vigour and valour did not suffer himself to be released alive.

The slaying of Phillip by the sword (famous deed!), the wound of an axe (?) upon James,¹⁴ Thomas by a spear (it is a tale of valour), Thaddeus, Bartholomeus.

Let Mark, Luke, and Simon be mentioned: that beautiful company has, indeed, suffered; pure Barnabas, beautiful Mathias, they suffered death by iron. (Blathmac §§248–51)

Compared with the listings of the apostles in the synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (Matt. 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16; Acts 1:13), or in the various extra-canonical treatments of their fates (see e.g. Rose 2009: 15–22), the arrangement of Blathmac's list does, indeed, appear unusual. Instead of presenting the apostles in the order they were called, for instance, Blathmac places Matthew first, possibly reflecting the importance of his Gospel in liturgical worship and the fact that he was considered 'a participant and a witness', who by transmitting knowledge about the redemptive work of Jesus 'ensur[ed] the spread of the Gospel and therefore the

kingship of Christ' (Olsen 2015: 22–3, 52; see also Rose 2009: 163–212). This primary notion of martyrdom as a form of 'witness' may hold a key to the underlying logic of the sequence as a whole, as one of the main common denominators among all the individuals included in §§248–50 is the personal testimony they bore to the glory of God in Jesus (cf. Louth 2011: 3–5). By this criterion, this group, chosen and appointed by Jesus himself, arguably stands apart from those mentioned in §251, who, with the exception of Simon the Zealot, were disciples not included in the Twelve. This would also seem to apply to Matthias, who, despite having followed Jesus since the latter's baptism, was only included among them after the Ascension to replace Judas.

What emerges from this sequence, then, is an arrangement conceived in broadly hierarchical order, reflecting the perceived status of each of the witnesses included in the renowned warrior-band of Jesus.¹⁵ Drawing upon previous scholars' observations concerning Blathmac's reliance on Irish legal concepts throughout his work (see Lambkin 1999; Breatnach 2015), the apostles can here be seen as a company not unlike the retinue of an early Irish nobleman, bound together by association and their allegiance to a common overlord (cf. Charles-Edwards 2000: 112–13). In a very literal understanding of being the 'soldiers' or 'clients' of God, Blathmac portrays the apostles as the most loyal followers of Christ, whose service advanced the completion of his work among men. In return for this service, they had received the assurance of their Lord's protection – a pledge, which finally reaches its fulfilment when

14 Barrett (2017: 223) renders this line as 'the killing of two wretched ones, the two Jameses'. This would suggest that the first James mentioned in §248 could be different from the two Jameses of §250. If this were the case, the poem could plausibly be referring to James son of Zebedee (the Greater), James son of Alphaeus (the Lesser), and James brother of the Lord (the Just), although not necessarily in that particular order.

15 'He called to him a stout band of people whose warrior qualities were renowned: twelve apostles to whom he was abbot, seventy-two disciples' (Blathmac §27).

all the martyrs of Christ take their place among the 'chosen, called, and faithful' (Rev. 19:14) in the Last Days.

The final section of this part of the text is perhaps the clearest indication of Blathmac's reliance on martyrological traditions that are used in liturgical practice, as it explicitly references the commemoration of their deaths on particular feast days. Blathmac makes clear that the few mentioned by name in these stanzas are a mere sample of vast multitude of saints too great to include in its entirety:

Giurgius was divided while living,
being torn into ten pieces; thousands
of martyrs led by two dear ones,
Cyprian and Cornelius.

The martyrdom of the seven sons
of Machabaeus whom loving smiling
mother fortified, the suffering of
Quiricus (harsh power!) before his
loving mother.

If I am to tell the true fundamental
account that I had of the death of mar-
tyrs, all the servants of Christ who suf-
fered martyrdom on their principal
feasts,

it passes reckoning to count it. Since
ancestral Adam held counsel there has
been with perverse kings a multitude
of the pure dear ones of Christ.

For what those men have suffered
in the torturing in their bodies they
shall have keenest vengeance; they are
not clients of (a lord of) bad oaths.
(Blathmac §§252–6)

By incorporating the apostles and other martyred saints into his narrative of the salvation history of humankind, Blathmac

accentuates the accomplishment of God's divine plan: the already witnessed events, which demonstrated the fulfilment of God's promise to his people, guaranteed the vindication of his followers, and the punishment of his enemies, also in the as yet unrealized future. In the wider context of Blathmac's devotional discourse, the ritual commemoration of those who had stood steadfast by Christ from the beginning of time forms an elemental part of the unity of the redeemed Church. The foundation of this belief rested on the premise that the participation in Christ's suffering was never disjointed from the triumphant glory of his resurrection, as the example of the martyrs testified. The cleansing baptism received by the martyrs through their suffering meant that their deaths held particular efficacy and power, making them the focus of private and communal acts of worship that united the earthly and heavenly community through prayer (Perham 1980: 9–11).

Conclusion

In her study on Christian martyrdom, Castelli (2004: 28) highlights the Christian tradition's pervasive interest in 'plotting events along a recognizable teleological trajectory, remembering events in light of a belief of the role of God in history, [and] generating pious models for imitation'. In Blathmac's account of the biblical history, a similar process of memory work is also at play, guiding the way in which the individual episodes of his narrative are mapped out to reveal God's ordering of events that points to the divine accomplishment of redemption. Even if Blathmac's primary concern was not to set forth a theological treatise or doctrinal commentary, his composition nevertheless bespeaks an intimate understanding of the truths at the heart of Christian faith. In all its formal simplicity, Blathmac's devotional discourse turns the

meditation on Jesus's selfless self-sacrifice on the cross and his triumph over sin and death into an experiential process of meaning-making, in which words that were uttered, heard or read were also felt.

Had we a chance to examine Blathmac's poem in its entirety, we would gain an even fuller understanding of the culmination of his apocalyptic vision in the dramatic scene of the Last Judgement and the establishment of the New Jerusalem (see Barrett and Stifter 2019). For Blathmac and his community, the reality of these events was even more real than the earthly life they lived, making the eschatological expectation of this consummation of Christ's salvific work a focal point of their hopes and fears. In preparing for his momentous occasion, each individual had to decide wherein their own loyalties lie, and whose example they were willing to follow. With his 'devoted offering' to the Virgin and her Son, Blathmac is hoping to demonstrate that his own choice in the matter is clear. ■

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