Textual Structure, Dialogue and the Layout of the Manuscripts of *Acallam na Senórach*

NINA CNOCKAERT-GUILLOU

Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

In the medieval Irish frame narrative *Acallam na Senórach* 'The Colloquy of the Ancients', the ancient Irish warriors Caílte and Oisín meet Saint Patrick and take him on a tour of Ireland, telling him hundreds of stories about the late Finn mac Cumaill. The nature of the text has led scholars to see *Acallam na Senórach* as episodic; yet, no research has been done into the manuscript evidence relating to how scribes and medieval readers may have conceived of the narrative as containing different parts, such as how the text is displayed on the page and which initials are coloured or indented in the margins. This article draws on the concepts of 'grammar of legibility' (Parkes 1992: 23) and 'lisibilité du texte' 'legibility of the text' (Bergeron & Ornato 1990: 151–152) to address this desideratum. The present study focusses on the five manuscripts (s. xv–xvii) in which *Acallam na Senórach* survives, and demonstrates that layout, colours, *litterae notabiliores* and paragraphs are used as a way to mark dialogue and the textual structure of the narrative.

Keywords: Acallam na Senórach; manuscripts; grammar of legibility; textual structure; layout; *litterae notabiliores*

Acallam na Senórach 'The Colloquy of the Ancients' (AS) was probably composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but it is only extant in five manuscripts from the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[1] These are Oxford, Bodleian Library MSS Laud Misc. 610 (s. xv) and Rawlinson B 487 (s. xv), Cork, University College, MS 204, The Book of Lismore (s. xv), and Dublin, University College, Franciscan MSS A 4 (s. xv or xvi) and A 20 (s. xvii). All versions of AS break off unfinished, have lacunae within the text, and sometimes differ significantly from each other (Stokes 1900: xii; Murray 2022: 30–33; Breatnach 2019: 202–218).

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1   For a discussion of the historical context in which AS was probably composed, see
    Dooley (2004) and Connon (2014). For the date of the language, see Nuner (1958–
    1959), but note Mac Eoin's criticism (1961), and more recently Breatnach (2019: 218)
    and Toner (2022).

AS is a highly complex frame narrative.[2] It is structured around the conversation and travels of St Patrick and Caílte; the latter shares with Patrick tales of what are presented as the ancient heroic deeds of Finn mac Cumaill and his *fían*. The narrative is thus composed of a frame in the 'present' time of Caílte and Patrick, and the circa two hundred stories, or embedded tales, told by Caílte. Consequently, and although the frame and the embedded tales are artfully woven together both thematically and textually, AS is episodic in nature (Parsons 2008; Nagy 1989). Stokes may have contributed to our view of the text as such, as he provides a (very useful) index of the stories told in AS (Stokes 1900: iii–viii). Still, the length of the texts—over 200 pages in Stokes' edition (based on different manuscripts), or forty-one folios in the Book of Lismore, for example—invites its users to identify stopping points or to divide the text into sections. Modern editors and translators have done that, Stokes by providing the index of stories, Dooley & Roe by splitting their translation into chapters. Yet, little research has been done into the manuscript evidence relating to how scribes and medieval readers may have conceived of the narrative as containing different parts, such as how the text is displayed on the page and which initials are coloured or indented in the margins.[3]

This type of evidence fits within the concept of 'grammar of legibility', defined by Parkes (1992: 23) as 'the rules governing the relationships between this complex of graphic conventions and the message of a text conveyed in the written medium'. This is what Bergeron & Ornato call 'la lisibilité du texte' 'the legibility of the text'. In their study, which focusses on later medieval manuscripts, they point out that the book is a functional object above all else, which, on the one hand, is destined to transmit a message to a potential reader, and on the other, is meant to conserve this message for as long as possible, since, especially for medieval manuscripts, every cultural product speaks to its contemporaries as well as to future generations (Bergeron & Ornato 1990: 151–152). These concepts of 'grammar of legibility' and 'lisibilité du texte' are indeed central to one's experience of reading a manuscript. Parkes and Bergeron & Ornato include many types of evidence in their studies, but this article will focus on manuscript layout and *litterae notabiliores* 'more noticeable letters' (Parkes 1992: 305).

2　A frame narrative is a type of text which contains a framing (intradiegetic) part which embeds framed (hypodiegetic) stories (Pier 2014: 548). For a discussion of the frame-narrative structure of AS, see Parsons 2008 and Cnockaert-Guillou 2024.

3　See however Thanisch's study of marginalia in the Laud Misc. 610 version (2014), discussed further below, and also the brief mention in O'Connor (2023: 39–40).

There have been few studies of medieval Irish texts using the manuscripts' visual layout and symbols to aid analysis of the scribes' attitude towards the text.[4] Cleary (2020) and Burnyeat (2009)'s work on the use of critical signs and headings goes some way to address how medieval Irish scribes engaged with texts. However, to my knowledge, the only use of the manuscript layout within a literary analysis of a medieval Irish text is that in O'Connor's study of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' (TBDD). In his analysis of the 'watchman device', a long descriptive sequence, O'Connor points out that its 'length and its formulaic nature have made it probably the greatest single obstacle to literary appreciation of the *Togail*' (O'Connor 2013: 154). He demonstrates that the scribes and compilers responsible for the surviving copies of TBDD considered this part of the narrative as 'distinct from the rest', using an 'unusual degree of visual demarcation for this saga, clearer even than that accorded to some of its verses' (O'Connor 2013: 154–155). Large initial letters coloured in red, new columns and paragraphs indicate an engagement with the structure of this part of the narrative in which Ingcél describes each occupant of Da Derga's hostel (O'Connor 2013: 155–159).[5] Though O'Connor does not mention the concept of 'grammar of legibility', it is clearly what is at stake here. The scribes of TBDD used a particular layout of the text to convey its meaning in a clear fashion. O'Connor's remark that the length and repetitive nature of this sequence has impeded modern appreciation of it is also reminiscent of criticism of AS (Parsons 2008: 11–12).

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4   Kobel's recent analysis of the *Leabhar Breac* using the concept of 'grammar of legibility' is an exception (Kobel 2023). Though I had already written the present analysis by the time of Dr Kobel's presentation, she drew my attention to Parkes' and Bergeron & Ornato's studies which greatly enhanced this article, and I am grateful to her for this. See also Boyle & Hayden (2014: xxxviii). In the field of Norse studies, note an interesting study of paratextual features which offer 'non-verbal commentary' on the text, by Arthur (2018: 240, 245–248). Though she does not mention Parkes' or Bergeron & Ornato's theories, these 'paratextual features' echo the same concept. In the field of medieval French, Busby's comments on the role of illustrations and decorated letters in manuscripts of the romances by Chrétien de Troyes also echo the observations discussed below (Busby 2005: 72–73). See also Pratt et al. (2017: 19–20).

5   This is reminiscent of a section of *Táin Bó Cúalgne* in Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339, the Book of Leinster, pp. 94a34–94cz, in which a long list of names is marked with coloured capitals. However, in this instance, the names are just enumerated and their layout is similar to the genealogies in this same manuscript (e.g. p. 346); whereas in TBDD, each paragraph marks a new description of each occupant of the hostel.

As mentioned above, AS is a lengthy text, structured as a frame narrative with embedded stories, therefore it is particularly well suited for a study of the links between manuscript layout and textual structure. In this article, I will thus discuss such indications in each of the surviving manuscript versions in turn, focussing on one section of the narrative as a case-study.

This section occurs towards the end of AS, and consists of the four embedded tales about the three men and the dog of Irúath, which are interspersed with other tales (Dooley & Roe 1999: 152–157, 171–176). In Tale 1 about *Ráithín na nIngnad* 'The little fort of the wonders', three strangers and their magic dog come to join Finn mac Cumaill's *fían*. In Tale 2, about Donn and Dubán, the three men cause trouble because of their strange demeanour and kill two members of the warrior-band.[6] In Tale 3 about *Daire in Chocair* 'The oakwood of the conspiracy', the *fían* tries to banish them, but in Tale 4 about *Ráithín na Sénaigechta* 'The little fort of the incantation', they redeem themselves by helping the *fían* get rid of three other invaders. After this, AS does not mention the three men and their dog again (see Table 1).

Table 1 below indicates the line numbers for these tales in the edition of AS by Stokes (1900), but it is important to note that this edition is based partly on the Book of Lismore and on MS Laud Misc. 610, with some variant readings from the other manuscripts, and therefore it does not reflect exactly the text of any one witness of the narrative. In the present study, references are given to the text and translation of AS in the following format: AS: ll. x, pp. y. The line numbers refer to Stokes' edition (1900), and the page numbers to Dooley & Roe's translation (1999), though the reader should also note that Dooley & Roe's text is not a direct translation of Stokes' text. For these reasons, references to the edition and translation of AS in the following discussion are given for the reader's convenience only, and all transcriptions and translations cited in this paper are my own.

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6 Tale 2 about Donn and Dubán is the only one of the four tales not to be prompted by a specific place-name, but rather by a question about two great mounds which turn out to be Donn and Dubán's graves (AS: l. 5555, p. 155). For this reason, I use the names of the warriors as the 'title' of the tale.

Title & Lines (Stokes)		BLismore	Laud 610	Rawl. B 487	A 4	A 20
Tale 1: Ráithín na nIngnad	ll. 5441–5514	232vb14–233ra40	136rb21–136va37	45va28–46ra25	62b5–63a24	96v17–98r8
Tale 2: Donn and Dubán	ll. 5555–5624	233va4–233vb28	136vb19–137ra33	46va2–46vb18	63b15–64.12	98v26–99v30
Tale 3: Daire in Chocair	ll. 6083–6141	235vb29–**lacuna** after end of fol. 235 (l. 6095)	139ra55–139rb53	49va31–49vb31	70a35–b54	110v19–111v21
Tale 4: Ráithín na énaigechta	ll. 6142–6269	n/a **Lacuna** of text between fol. 235 and fol. 236 (l. 6399)[7]	139rb54–139vb52	49vb31–50va26	71a1–end of p. 71 (l. 6233). **Lacuna** of text between p. 71 and p. 72 (l. 6565)	111v22–end of fol. 112v (l. 6213). **Lacuna** of text & leaves, next fol. 115

Table 1: Folio and page numbers of all versions of 'Three Men and the Dog of Irúath' in AS manuscripts.

1. The Book of Lismore (s. xv)

The Book of Lismore (BLism.) was compiled for the Mac Cárthaigh Riabhach family. The manuscript was discovered unbound, and its current order is not original. Most of it was written by one unnamed scribe who is responsible for almost all of AS, including 'Three Men'. Aonghus Ó Callanáin, the second main scribe, wrote fols. 132–134 and fols. 194–201, including a colophon in which he mentions his patron Fínghin (d. 1505). AS starts on fol. 201r in Ó Callanáin's hand and breaks off on fol. 242v. BLism. is characterised by very large, decorated letters at the start of each long text (Ó Macháin 2014: 145). However, there are usually no other coloured letters or initials within the texts; the scribes seemed to favour slightly larger letters, sometimes in the margin, if they needed to start a new paragraph or poem. Thus the poems present in AS are set out with these

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7   This lacuna was observed by Ó Cuív (1983: 274). It is not reflected by the pagination, suggesting that the scribe's exemplar was faulty or that leaves were lost. The scribe also seems to have been aware of text missing between the end of fol. 236ra and the beginning of column b of the same folio.

litterae notabiliores usually placed in the margin, as is common in other Irish manuscripts.

An example is the poem beginning 'Maraid aniú Rāit*h* Ci*n*d Co*n*' 'Ráith Chinn Chon ["the fort of the dog's head"] survives today', recited by Caílte (BLism., fols. 233vb11–21) (AS: ll. 5600–5616, p. 157).[8] This marks the end of a series of embedded tales including the story of the graves of Donn and Dubán (Tale 2). Donn and Dubán are mentioned in the third verse of 'Maraid aniú' in BLism. The first word of the poem and especially its initial are enlarged, and the initials of the first word of each verse are also slightly bigger than the rest of the script, standing out in the margin.[9] They are in the same ink as the rest of the text, although the strokes are slightly thicker. The paragraph which follows the poem on fol. 233vb22 is marked out in a similar way, with the first word, enlarged, starting in the margin ('Dāla' 'as regards').[10] The next clearly marked paragraph also starts with 'Dāla' (fol. 233vb35), but it only consists of four lines, as a new paragraph then starts with 'Fecht n-ōe*n*' (fol. 233vb39), an equivalent narratorial phrase to 'once upon a time'.

This folio (233) is interesting because it consists of a transition between embedded tales within AS, and contains the last mention of the three men until fol. 235. 'Maraid aniú' marks the end of a sequence composed of several short embedded tales told by Caílte at the instigation of the king of Munster after his story about *Ráithín na nIngnad* (Tale 1), which ends on fol. 233ra40: the stories of *Ráith Chinn Chon* 'the Fort of the Dog's Head', *Lis in Bantrachta* 'the Enclosure of the Company of Women', *Caindelbra in Bantrachta* 'the Candelstick of the Company of Women', which are followed by the story of the two graves of Donn and Dubán (Tale 2), then by yet another short tale about a high pole in a fort, and finally, 'Maraid aniú' serves as a conclusion before the narrative moves on (AS: ll. 5515–5616, pp. 154–157). While these embedded tales seem unrelated because they feature different characters, there is almost no *littera notabilior* in the manuscript which offers a clear separation between each short story. When Tale 1 ends on fol. 233ra40, column b of the same folio starts with an enlarged

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8   In my transcriptions, italics indicate expansions of compendia, lenition marks, and other unambiguous abbreviations (n-stroke, m-stroke, con, spiritus asper etc.). Underlined letters indicate any expansions of suspension strokes that involve editorial interpretation (e.g. it<u>ir</u>, bl<u>ía</u>dan, tāncat<u>ar</u>) no matter how trivial that interpretation is, any instance where letters have been supplied, or anywhere where there is a possibility of having different grammatical cases (e.g., m<u>a</u>c, m<u>ei</u>c). Length marks are supplied silently in expansions of suspension strokes, even if they are not indicated in the manuscript; macrons are added elsewhere when needed, except on ligatures. Hairstrokes indicating minims are silently omitted.

9   The present analyses can be best followed by viewing the manuscripts online. ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCC/UCC_TheBookOfLismore.html#388 (accessed 17/08/2023).

10   On the role of *dála* in medieval Irish narrative structure, see Poppe (2005: 217–220).

'IS andsin' 'Then', and the text continues until fol. 233vb12 with barely any enlarged letters to indicate change between speakers, or between embedded tale and frame tale. The poem 'Maraid aniú' refers to all of the embedded tales told since Tale 1, thus providing an end-point to this 'part' of AS; and by so doing, it might signify that this group of embedded tales are to be read together. The manuscript layout also reflects this by marking out paragraphs after the poem, starting with *Dála*, which explain what happens to the characters afterwards. The first paragraph deals with 'past' characters, i.e. the three men, Finn and the other warriors, while the second paragraph explains where Patrick and his retinue went in the 'present' time of the frame. Then, the paragraph starting with 'Fecht n-ōe*n*' (fol. 233vb39) marks the beginning of the next embedded tale, told by Caílte in response to another question (fol. 233vb37–38), though the rest of this story is missing in BLism. as fol. 234 has not survived.

A similar pattern consisting of poem, transition then embedded tale can be seen on fol. 232vb, on which Tale 1 starts (AS: ll. 5425–5469, pp. 152–153). The poem starting 'IN cloch-sa' 'This stone' (fol. 232vb1), marked by *litterae notabiliores*, is followed by a paragraph starting 'Adræ b*úaid* 7 b*ennachtain*' 'May you have victory and blessing' (fol. 232vb14).[11] This phrase is common in salutations and occurs often in AS in the mouth of Patrick when he thanks Caílte for his stories (leg. *eDIL* s.v. 1 *búaid* (c)). It serves as a transition within the frame tale to the next embedded tale, starting 'Lait*h*i n-æ*n*' 'Once upon a time' with a *littera notabilior* in the margin (fol. 232vb26), and a *ceann fa eite* symbol (fol. 232vb25) to allow this paragraph to start on a new line. Therefore, the textual pattern of poems concluding embedded tales is visually reflected in BLism., which clearly separates the following paragraphs depending on their narratorial function, i.e. a transition within the frame tale, or the beginning of another embedded tale. That no such distinction is visible within the group of embedded tales on fol. 233rb–vb12 suggests that these stories were read as a full narrative unit by the scribe of BLism., or that such a presentation existed already in his exemplar.[12]

In BLism., the tale of *Ráithín na nIngnad* (Tale 1) is clearly marked by an introductory paragraph (fol. 232vb26) and ends on fol. 233ra40, the next column beginning with enlarged words. The story of the graves of Donn and Dubán (Tale 2) is not as well delineated, though the text itself does not seem to distinguish between the several very short embedded tales on fols. 233rb–vb12. Indeed, the concluding poem beginning 'Maraid aniú' refers to all the short tales told by Caílte since Tale 1. The scribe may have grouped these tales together 'visually and used the poem as a conclusion to evidence the textual structure of this part of

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11 See ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCC/UCC_TheBookOfLismore.html#388 (accessed 17/08/2023).

12 On this passage, see also Cnockaert-Guillou (2024: 25–27).

the narrative. Tales 3 and 4, which in other manuscripts of AS feature the three men as well, are not extant in BLism. (see Table 1 above).

2. Laud Misc. 610 (s. xv)

Laud Misc. 610 was commissioned by Sir Edmund Butler and written in 1453–1454, which is apparently also when folios from a slightly earlier manuscript were incorporated into the codex (fols. 59–72 and 123–146) (Dillon 1960: 67–68). These are distinguishable by the superior quality of the vellum, script and decorations, as well as by the fact that the two texts they contain, *Félire Óengusso* 'The Martyrology of Óengus' and AS, are in the same hand (O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan 1971: 137; Dillon 1960: 65).[13] The scribe remains anonymous, and must have worked sometime between 1410 and 1452 (O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan 1971: 135; Ó Cuív 2001: 62), as this part of the codex was made for James Butler, known as the White Earl, fourth Earl of Ormond and uncle of the aforementioned Edmund Butler (Dillon 1963: 144–145).

The decorated initials are particularly splendid in *Félire Óengusso* (fols. 59r–72r), but letters in the same style and colours are found throughout AS (e.g. fol. 124rb and Figure 1).[14] Indeed, Ó Cuív (2001: 66) noticed a 'hierarchical system of decoration, with letters varying in size between large, medium and small' in AS, and he counted 128 large or medium-sized initials (*litterae notabiliores*). I have identified four types of coloured initials on the folios containing the 'Three Men' tales; colours are used interchangeably between types, with no particular pattern.

Type 1 are the largest initials, found at the start of poems and of the main paragraphs. They are always set in the margins, as seen in Figure 1 for the initial letter of the poem beginning 'IN cloc*h*-so' 'This stone' (Figure 1, l. 1), the initial letter of the paragraph beginning 'Adræ būaid 7 ben*nacht*ain' 'May you have victory and blessing' (Figure 1, l. 15), and the initial letter of the paragraph beginning 'IS an*n*sin ro f*hīar*faig' 'It is then that he inquired' (Figure 1, l. 23).[15] As is the case for this paragraph beginning 'IS an*n*sin', the following letters are often slightly larger and thicker than the rest of the text, gradually diminishing in size on the first line. Type 1 initials almost always have a particular descender with two lines drawn from the bottom of the letter, but not coloured, with round ends and an empty, curved middle (Figure 1, ll. 5–7, 18–20 and 28–30); this must be

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13 Two other fragments in the same hand were also identified (Best 1956: 338–339; Ó Concheanainn 1973: 210).

14 Copyright © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 2015. Source: Digitial Bodleian, under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-NC 4.0; https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/cb909a51-5acd-4fee-95ec-51ff09b87676/surfaces/0f4d0a49-2893-4dd3-9702-473edcdaf068/ (accessed 17/08/2023).

15 This section (Figure 1) corresponds to AS: ll. 5425–5461, p. 152.

a zoomorphic claw with nail (or at least inspired by one).[16] These can be observed throughout AS with very few variations. Type 2 consist of large initials, always in the margin, and seem to be about twice as big as the main text, as seen in Figure 1, the red initial of 'Lait*he* n-æ*n*' 'Once upon a time' (l. 28).

Type 3 and Type 4 initials can be confused. Type 3 seem slightly bigger than the main text, and are found more often at the beginning of a line; for example when used as initials of verses, as in Figure 1, 'INgnad' 'A wonder' (l. 26). Type 4 are coloured initials, but of the same size as the main text and they can occur anywhere in a line (see Figure 1, Type 4 decorated letters on the bottom of the image). Although Type 4 initials can extend slightly below the base-line or above the top-line (e.g. Figure 1, ll. 32–35), they would not be as noticeable as Type 3 were it not for their colour. I also include in Type 4 the *ceann fa eite* symbols (McLaughlin 2021: 79–81); e.g. Figure 1, ll. 3, 5, 7, 14, etc.

While these *litterae notabiliores* may have already been present in the scribe's exemplar, the use of Type 4 initials especially bears witness to an engagement with the meaning of the text, rather than just with the overall structure of poems and paragraphs of text which usually start with *Is annsin* 'Then' and are easily recognisable. Type 4 initials are not used consistently; for example, there are very few on fol. 139ra, just before Tale 3 begins on fol. 139ra55.[17] Yet, they always seem to be used meaningfully, as seen on fol. 139va (Figure 2).[18] This is the beginning of Tale 4, in which three invaders seek compensation from Finn.[19] This paragraph only contains Type 4 initials, which are at the beginning of direct speech by a character. Thus, when Finn asks 'Canas tāngabair, a f*h*iru?' 'Whence have you come, men?' (Figure 2, l. 3), the initial *C* is coloured in red; he then asks for their names. The men answer in the next line, 'T*r*ī m*ei*c Ūair m*ei*c I*n*daist si*n*d' 'We are the three sons of Úar mac Indaist', with the initial *T* coloured in yellow (Figure 2, l. 4). The entire conversation between Finn and the three invaders is thus marked throughout the paragraph. Of course, considering that AS, as its name indicates, is composed of *acallma* 'conversations', not all the initials of the first word uttered by someone are decorated; for example '"7 cá hócla*ch* do*m*' mui*n*tir-si", *ar* Fi*n*d' '"And which warrior of my household", said Finn' (Figure 2, l. 11). However, the

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16   I would like to thank the anonymous readers for pointing this out to me. I have found similar descenders on zoomorphic initials in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12, The Book of Ballymote (s. xiv), e.g. fols. 147va39–46 and 150rb21–24.

17   This passage on fol. 139ra is the end of the tale of Bé Binn, in which, besides Caílte as narrator, only Finn and Bé Binn speak (AS: ll. 6025–6082, pp. 169–171).

18   Copyright © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 2015. Source: Digitial Bodleian, under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-NC 4.0; https://digital.bodleian. ox.ac.uk/objects/cb909a51-5acd-4fee-95ec-51ff09b87676/surfaces/93b7988c-d2a7-4566-82fb-a0653f6d9cb1/ (accessed 17/08/2023).

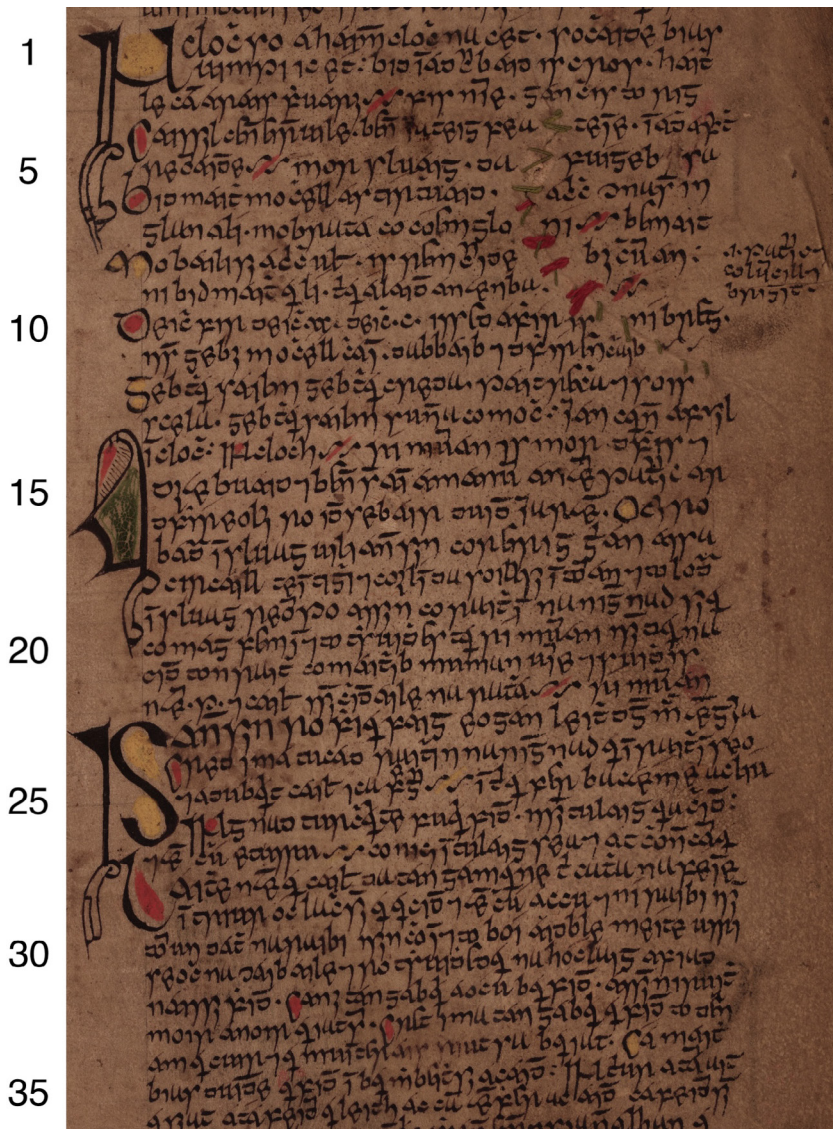19   Figure 2 corresponds to AS: ll. 6148–6184, p. 173.

Figure 1: fol. 136rb, Laud Misc. 610,
Copyright © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 2015.
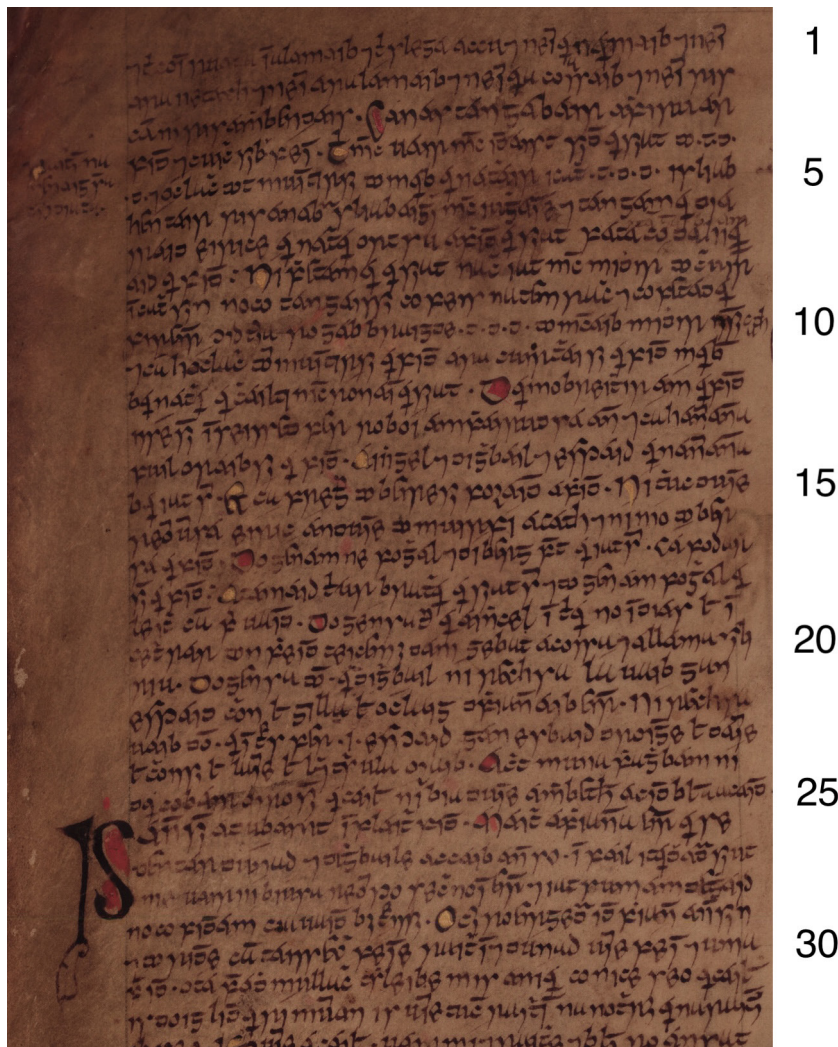Source: Digitial Bodleian, under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-NC 4.0.

Figure 2: fol. 139va, Laud Misc. 610,
Copyright © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 2015.
Source: Digitial Bodleian, under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-NC 4.0.

care that the scribe took in colouring some initials, thus marking direct speech between characters, bears witness to their understanding of the text.

The same type of engagement with the text also appears on fol. 136va (Figure 3),[20] at the end of Tale 1.[21] In this paragraph, Finn has to give poets
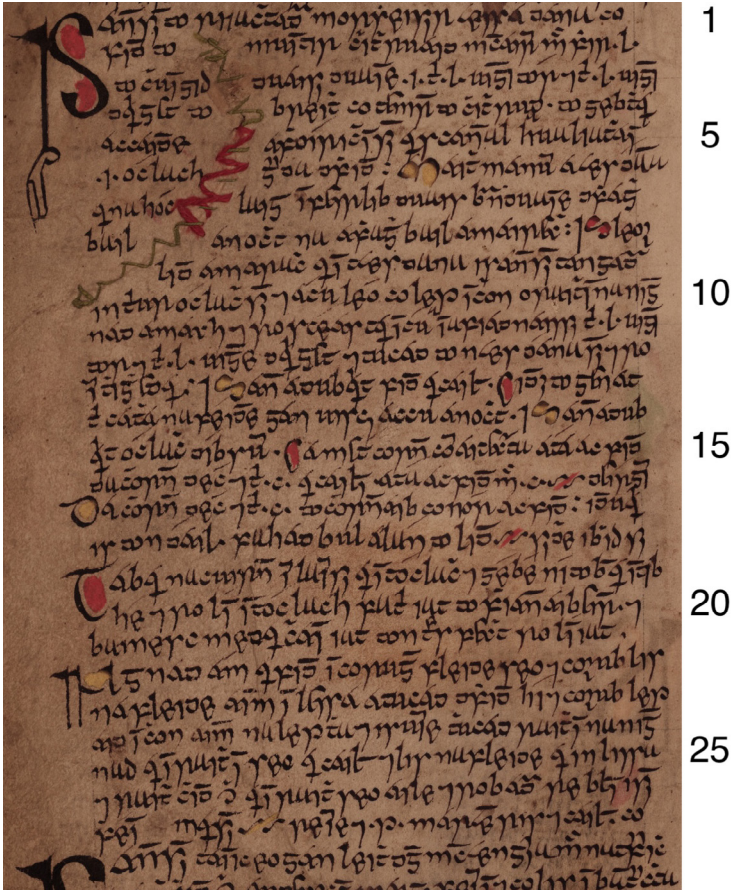

Figure 3: fol. 136va, Laud Misc. 610,
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21   Figure 3 corresponds to AS: ll. 5487–5515, p. 154.

a reward for their poem. Type 4 initials are also used here to mark direct speech, although, as in fol. 139va, they are not used consistently. The most obvious parallel in the use of Type 4 initials in these two passages is the number of characters speaking. In both cases, Finn and Caílte are conversing with new characters which the audience has just encountered. There is a variety of people speaking in turn, which may be confusing for a reader. The use of decoration for direct speech may thus have been to aid the understanding of the text and could have acted almost as punctuation marks.[22] It is also tempting to suggest that it aimed to help the performance or reading aloud of these passages, though there is no further evidence to support this.

Yet, there is a lack of consistency in the use of colours. Some letters within the main body of the text seem to have been intended to be coloured (see Figure 1, l. 35, 'IN *tr*īur atā*m*ait' 'The three of us'), but it is difficult to assert whether or not the scribe had planned all the decorations in advance, as Type 4 initials are usually of the same size as the rest of the script. One may account for this inconsistency by suggesting that Type 4 letters served as reading marks, and may thus have been added by someone else than the scribe, over some time and in an unplanned manner, as they do not seem to mark the overall structure of the narrative. Indeed, Type 4 initials are simply coloured in and would not have required special decoration skills.

The apparent focus on direct speech which Type 4 initials evidence may also suggest another reason for the inconsistency in their use. If they were marks to help the performance of the text, the absence of such decoration in other parts of AS may indicate that only some tales were read aloud from this manuscript, and that the users of the book had favourite stories that they liked to read or listen to—these stories usually being the ones containing a lot of dialogue.

Another proof of the careful planning of the scribe of Laud (or of their exemplar) for the layout of the text is their use of *ceann fa eite* symbols in prose, so that they could start a new paragraph with a Type 1 initial at the beginning of the line; for example on fol. 136rb (Figure 1, ll. 22–23) and on fol. 136va (Figure 3, ll. 27–28). The use of colours and paragraphs as a mark of interest in the narrative is supported by the marginalia left by the scribe who treats AS as 'comprised of distinct components' (Thanisch 2014: 43), and thus constitutes evidence of the scribe's high level of engagement with the structure and meaning of AS. This corresponds exactly to Parkes' 'grammar of legibility' and echoes the use of paragraphs and larger letters as seen in BLism.

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22 I understand punctuation according to the Oxford English Dictionary: 'The practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts, in order to aid interpretation; division of text into sentences, clauses, etc., by means of such marks' (OED s.v. punctuation (n.) (2.a.), June 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4183793935 (accessed 8/11/2024)). See also Parkes (1992: 1–3, 34), as well as Busby's observations on French manuscripts (2005: 73), which echo my own here.

3. Rawlinson B 487 (s. xv)

Rawlinson B 487 (Rawl.) is a composite vellum and paper codex. AS is found in the second vellum section (fols. 12–52) written by one main scribe, Domhnall Óg, although there is evidence of other scribes (Ó Cuív 2001: 136). This version of AS omits many poems (Stokes 1900: x). The few marginal entries on the folios containing the 'Three Men' section are to be dated to much later, and are often illegible (Ó Cuív 2001: 136–137).

No colours are used in this manuscript, and initial letters at the start of paragraphs are only slightly larger than the main text; they do not stand out on the page as well as the ones in BLism (see Figure 4).[23] However, a number of capital letters are noticeable when reading the text, especially the letters *R* and *N*, whose capital forms are different than the minuscules. For example, just before Tale 1, the text reads: 'Ro b*h*ad*ur* an*n* i*n* ag<u>aig</u>-si*n*' 'They were there that night' (Figure 4, fol. 45va30).[24] The *R* is capitalised and slightly larger than the rest of the script. Several capital letters mark the start of the sentences which follow, including 'Lodsad i*n* sl<u>úag</u> uile' 'The entire host went' (Figure 4, fol. 45va32) in the middle of a line, and 'Ro | ts*h*uid*h* rí Mu*man*' 'The king of Munster sat' with *Ro* at the end of the line (fol. 45va33–34). The start of Caílte's tale is marked by a larger *L* at the end of a line as well, 'Laithe | n-æ*n*' 'Once upon a time' (Figure 4, fol. 45vb3–4).

Due to the absence of colours and the fact that letters like *c* and *a* are formed in the same way whether they are capital or minuscule, it is sometimes difficult to assert whether or not a letter was written slightly larger on purpose. However, at the start of Tale 1, the scribe seems to have marked direct speech with slightly enlarged letters in a similar fashion to the use of colours in the Laud manuscript. For example, when the three men answer 'An t*h*r̄ı*ar* ōg<u>lach</u> at<u>āmaid</u>' 'The three warriors that we are' (Figure 4, fol. 45vb12), the initial *A* is very clearly enlarged, twice as tall as the rest of the letters. In what follows, there are other instances of a capital or slightly enlarged letter used at the start of direct speech, for example 'G<u>a</u>c mór t*h*soifir' 'Every great urgent thing' (Figure 4, fol. 45vb18), 'Cr*é*d í*a*rr*fus* sib oru*m*' 'What will you ask of me' (Figure 4, fol. 45vb23), 'Atā a ád*hb*ur again*n*' 'We have a reason' (Figure 4, fol. 45vb31), and most obviously '"Ní s*h*ireab*h* ón", *ar* Fin*n*' '"I will not ask that", said Finn' (fol. 45vb34), as the capital *N* is distinctive from its minuscule counterpart. This is part of the initial conversation in Tale 1 when Finn first meets the three men.

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23 I would like to thank the Bodleian Library for allowing me to consult the manuscript in person, and for permitting the use of an image from the manuscript (Copyright © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Creative Commons licence CC-BY-NC 4.0).

24 The text in Rawl. does not correspond well to the edition in Stokes or Dooley and Roe's translation; for Tale 1 see AS: ll. 5440–5514, pp. 152–154.

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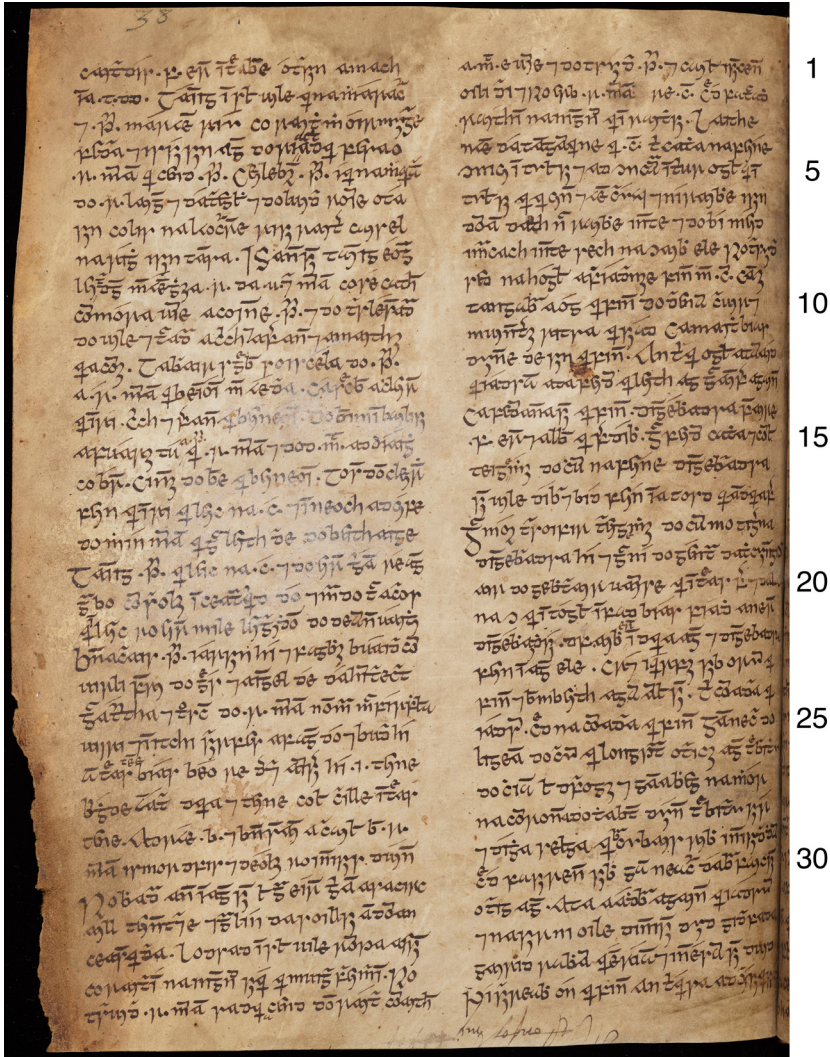Figure 4: fol. 45v, Rawlinson B 487,
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In the rest of the 'Three Men' tales, capital letters (*litterae notabiliores*) continue to be used in the same way, though not consistently, and often mark direct speech, for example at the start of Tale 3 (fols. 49va31–vb5), or a new sentence, as seen at the start of Tale 1 above. As in the other versions of AS, Rawl. also uses large *IARSIN* or *ARSIN* 'After that' (e.g. fol. 46ra25) to indicate new parts of the narrative, though these are most often in the middle of a line, contrary to BLism. and Laud. In the 'Three Men' section of Rawl., *ceann fa eite* symbols are not used to create new paragraphs (contrary to Laud; see above), and the text is written continuously with larger letters where suitable, though these are obviously more recognisable at the start of a line.

The scribes of Rawl. thus appeared to have engaged with the narrative in a similar way to the scribes of Laud and BLism. This version of AS is known for abbreviating the narrative and omitting poems; the 'Three Men' sequence is indeed shorter in Rawl. and none of the poems present in the other manuscripts are included. However, the use of *litterae notabiliores* throughout the text shows that the scribes were just as interested in the structure of the text as those of the longer versions of AS.

4. Franciscan A 4 (ss. xv–xvi)

The main scribe of Franciscan A 4 remains unidentified, although there are many signatures and marginalia in other hands in the manuscript (Dillon, Mooney & de Brún 1969: 10). The 'Three Men' sequence breaks off unfinished during Tale 4 (p. 71b54; AS: l. 6238). Some folios are cut, although no text seems to be lost in these instances, and the upper margins are often very small; the first few lines of the page can be hard to read because of the wear on the upper part of the folios (e.g. pp. 64–65). The scribe used coloured letters rather than large initials set in the margin to organise the text (pp. 62–64). Red and green are the main colours used on the pages containing the 'Three Men' tales, but some faded initials look like they were coloured in yellow (e.g. pp. 62b18 and 62b23, two letters look faded but must have been coloured).[25]

Although the decorated letters are not present throughout the text, they seem to mark direct speech in the instances in which they are used. On p. 62b, at the beginning of Tale 1, Finn asks questions of the three strangers whom he just met; the first letter of these questions is marked by colour: 'Canas a tangab*uir*, a firu' 'Whence have you come, men' (p. 62b18–19), 'Crēd b*ar* toisc' 'What do you want' (p. 62b20), 'Caide a soch*ur* sin da*m*-sa' 'What benefit will I get from that' (p. 62b22), 'Caide na fed*m*a' 'What are the skills' (p. 62b23). The start of other characters' speech is also coloured on pp. 62b24, 62b30 and 62b36 (Finn

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25   ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_A_4.html#65 (accessed 17/08/2023).

is speaking again on p. 62b35).[26] This entire paragraph consists of the first discussion between Finn and the three men; and many initial letters marking direct speech are left uncoloured. The coloured letters do not only mark questions (e.g. p. 62b30), and some letters also mark the narrative voice announcing speech, for example on the next page, 'IS an*n*sin ro f*ī*ar*f*a̲i̲g̲ ócl*a̲c̲h̲* dīb-si*n*' 'Then one of those warriors asked' (p. 63a12, slightly faded green).

Coloured letters in the margin do not appear to have any particular significance compared to those in the middle of the line on p. 62b, as they are not especially large and mark a continuous dialogue between Finn and the three men. On p. 63, on the other hand, they are used to delineate the end of Tale 1.[27] The *litterae notabiliores IS* set in the margin on p. 63a25 are quite noticeable, especially as a *ceann fa eite* symbol is used in the previous line in order for this *IS andsin* to start on a new line. This marks the end of Tale 1 as the king of Munster, Patrick and Caílte move on to the fort of *Ráith Chinn Chon*. The use of a *ceann fa eite* to start a new embedded tale or to return to the frame tale in a new paragraph can also be seen on p. 63b15–16, in which the decorated initial of 'Crēd' 'What' stands out especially because it is at the start of a line. As seen previously, the scribe of A 4 clearly had no trouble colouring in letters in the middle of lines, usually marking direct speech; but this shows that they also paid attention to the overall structure of AS and that they were careful to mark the start of new tales on new lines, using *ceann fa eite* symbols with prose in a similar fashion to the scribe of Laud and BLism. (as discussed above). 'Crēd' (p. 63b16) marks the start of the question by the king of Munster about the graves of Donn and Dubán (Tale 2). Since A 4 omits the poem beginning 'Mairid aniú', which seems to have worked as a conclusion to the series of short tales told before and after Tale 2 in the other manuscripts, one may suggest that the scribe interpreted this particular tale as separate from the others, contrary to the scribe of BLism. who kept all these tales together in a block of text, only visually broken by the poem as a conclusion.

Although their style is less lavish, it is clear that the scribe of A 4 engaged with the narrative and its structure in a similar way to the scribe of Laud, marking direct speech with decorated initial letters no matter where they fell on the line, and using new paragraphs for new embedded tales or returning to the frame tale. To a lesser extent, as no colour was used, this also echoes the practice in Rawl. and BLism.

26   ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_A_4.html#65 (accessed 17/08/2023).

27   ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_A_4.html#66 (accessed 17/08/2023).

5. Franciscan A 20 (s. xvii)

Franciscan A 20 contains a version of AS that is known to be a copy of the one in A 4 (Dillon, Mooney & de Brún 1969: 41).[28] A 20 was commissioned by Captain Somhairle Mac Domhnaill and written in Louvain and Ostend in 1626–1627. Marginal notes indicate that two main scribes worked on the manuscript (Mac Néill 1908: xviii–xix). Niall Gruamdha Ó Catháin wrote most of AS (fols. 1–98 and 101–105r), the rest being completed by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh (fols. 99r–100 and 110–129r) and a third unidentified hand (Dillon, Mooney & de Brún 1969: 40).

While Tale 4 in A 4 breaks off at the end of p. 71 (AS: l. 6238; the text starting on A 4, p. 72 corresponds to circa l. 6565), the story breaks off slightly earlier in A 20 due to missing leaves, on fol. 112v (AS: l. 6211), and resumes on fol. 115r (AS: l. 6624); therefore no text survives in this section of A 20 to help supply the missing fragments of the end of the 'Three Men' tales from A 4.

The text in A 20 is written in a single column with large margins. Interestingly, the 'Three Men' tales are alternatively written by the two main scribes: Niall Gruamdha is responsible for Tale 1 (fols. 96v17–98r8), as well as the beginning of Tale 2, which starts on fol. 98v26; this is completed by Aodh (fols. 99r1–99v31). Niall Gruamdha and the third hand intervene between fols. 101 and 110; Aodh takes over again for 'Three Men' Tales 3 and 4 (fol. 110v20 onwards, but Tale 4 breaks off at the end of fol. 112v). There are no decorated letters in A 20, although larger initials are sometimes set in the margin to indicate a new paragraph or a poem (e.g. fols. 96v and 110v), and one can also spot larger letters marking new sentences within paragraphs. I will briefly compare the layout of the 'Three Men' tales in A 4 and A 20 to provide some insights as to the engagement of the scribes of A 20 with AS.

At the start of Tale 1 (A 4, p. 62b; A 20, fol. 96v), the first clear difference between the manuscripts is the layout of the page.[29] While A 4 is economical, A 20 leaves a lot of space between each line; this is obviously because A 20 uses paper rather than vellum. Nonetheless, Niall Gruamdha, who is responsible for this particular folio, chose to lay out the text differently from A 4. The beginning of the last paragraph in A 20 (fol. 96v17), 'IS an*nsin* táinic P*á*traic' 'Then came Patrick', corresponds to the middle of the fourth line of a single paragraph in A 4, 'IS ands*in* táinic P*á*traic' (p. 62b9). This sentence announces that Patrick, Caílte and the king of Munster arrive at *Ráithín na nIngnad*, and therefore marks the start of Tale 1, while in the preceding passage the king of Munster thanks

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28   See also Ó hUiginn (2012: 161). For a comparison of the texts of A 4 and A 20, see Breatnach (2019: 197–200) and Murray (2022: 30–32).

29   A 4, ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_A_4.html#65 (accessed 17/08/2023); A 20, ISOS, https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_A_20.html#178 (accessed 17/08/2023).

Patrick for his poem beginning 'In cloch-sa'. That the scribe of A 4 understood the sentence beginning 'IS ands*in* táinic P*átraic*' as the start of a new story, or of a new part of the narrative, is evidenced by the green colouring on *IS*. Yet they did not lay out this beginning at the start of a line, although they did so in the case of other tales (as seen above). When Niall Gruamdha was copying A 4, he must have noticed the decoration and understood this sentence as the start of a new tale, deciding then to mark it by a new paragraph in the margin. It thus seems that he was using space and new paragraphs in the way that the scribe of A 4 was using colours. Niall Gruamdha paid attention to the layout of A 4, as is shown by the slightly bigger *IS* in both manuscripts. The other folios containing the 'Three Men' tales appear to follow the same pattern, as the scribe (Niall Gruamdha or Aodh) mostly follows A 4 in enlarging an initial slightly or using a capital letter to indicate direct speech, new actions or different embedded tales (e.g. Tale 3 in A 20, fol. 110v).

A 4 and A 20 thus allow for an interesting comparison of how AS was read in the fifteenth/sixteenth and in the seventeenth centuries. The decorated letters in A 4 show that the scribe was engaging with the narrative and its meaning, and because we have the exemplar, the layout of A 20 gives particularly interesting clues as to how its scribes understood the text they were copying.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the surviving manuscripts of the complex medieval Irish narrative *Acallam na Senórach* contain fascinating evidence of the scribes' engagement with the text. This research has also highlighted the complexity of the textual structure of AS (see also Cnockaert-Guillou 2024). The four tales in which the three men and the dog of Irúath appear in AS are a perfect case study for the treatment of embedded tales, frame tale, direct speech and characters within each manuscript, which indicates that scribes and readers were keen to engage with the story, or stories of AS. The structure of AS was evidently important to medieval scribes and compilers, and as a result, I argue that modern scholars should take the manuscript evidence into account when discussing the narrative and its construction. Through the use of colours, larger letters (*litterae notabiliores*) and *ceann fa eite* symbols, scribes broke up the narrative into different parts, marked dialogue and made the structure of the text more legible. These practices are particularly interesting in light of the theories of Parkes and of Bergeron & Ornato, and echo O'Connor's remarks on the layout of the manuscripts of *TBDD*.[30] Further study of the layout of Irish manuscripts, especially for narrative tales, is thus a desideratum. Should similar practices be found in Irish manuscripts throughout

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30   These were discussed in the introduction of this paper.

the medieval period, the rules and conventions of the Irish 'grammar of legibility' may then come to light.[31]

List of Abbreviations

AS	*Acallam na Senórach* 'The Colloquy of the Ancients'
BLism.	The Book of Lismore
ISOS	*Irish Script on Screen*
Rawl.	MS Rawlinson B 487
TBDD	*Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'

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Cork, University College, MS 204, The Book of Lismore (s. xv).
Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12, The Book of Ballymote (s. xiv).
Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339, The Book of Leinster (s. xii).
Dublin, University College, Franciscan MS A 4 (s. xv or xvi).
Dublin, University College, Franciscan MS A 20 (s. xvii).
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31   This article is based on my doctoral thesis (Cnockaert-Guillou 2023), and I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, for her comments and advice, as well as my examiners, Dr Sharon Arbuthnot and Dr Geraldine Parsons, for encouraging me to publish this particular section. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers for their comments. I am responsible for any remaining errors.

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