

Uimir a sé – the number „six“

The number six (Olr *uimir a sé*) played an important role in the temporal and spiritual understanding of the world and the universe in early Irish writing. The divine secrets of the number six were, however, accessible only to the literate scholars among the Irish people, as the learned discipline of “numerology” belonged to the higher level of education in the monastic schools. The study of arithmetic was of course essential for the calculation of the date of Easter. Beyond this factual knowledge, numbers were also understood to reveal the divine or mystical plan of creation. The entire creation was believed to be numerologically determined and the Bible was believed to reveal the key for unraveling the hidden numerological correspondences. Resorting to the exegetical method of “typology”, the Old Testament (OT) numbers were understood to “prefigure” the New Testament ones so as to guarantee the coherence of the Biblical events in both testaments as evidence of the divine plan involving creation – temptation – fall – redemption – salvation as the major events in time. Furthermore, the exegetical method of reading the Bible on a *literal* level of understanding as well as on an *allegorical* one, allocated the study of Biblical typology on the literal level, explaining the physical world in factual terms. Early Irish Biblical exegetes were particularly interested in the factual understanding of God's creation from the beginning of time to the end, more so than in allegorical understanding. They followed the so-called Antiochene method of *literal* exegesis as opposed to the so-called Alexandrian method of *figurative* exegesis of the Bible.

The typological power of the number six was believed to lie in the correspondence between the six days of the God's tremendous creational effort (Gm. “Weltwoche”) as revealed in the OT, the six ages of world history with the advent of the Saviour at the juncture between the fifth and the sixth age, and the six stone jars of the Marriage at Cana in Galilee (Jh 2,1-10). In their exegetical writings, the Church Fathers Eusebius (of Caesarea, c. AD 263–339) and Augustine (of Hippo, AD 354-450) related the six days of the creation week to the six ages of the world between creation and Judgment Day (Lat. *sex aetates mundi* (SAM), Gm. “Weltzeitalter”). This became Church doctrine. According to the Venerable Bede (AD 673-735), an Anglo-Saxon Church teacher, the first age lasted from creation to Noah, the second from Noah to Abraham, the third from Abraham to King David, the fourth from King David to the Babylonian Captivity, the fifth from the Babylonian Captivity to Christ and the sixth from Christ to Judgment Day. The six large stone jars filled with water which Christ turned into wine symbolize the advent of the new law preached by him as opposed to the old law of the Jewish faith. The new law revealed in the NT represents God's divine grace and love.

The relationship between the six days of creation, the six ages of the world and the six stone jars provided the medieval scholars with a set pattern of sacred world history and moral commitment. In early medieval Ireland, the *sex aetates mundi* formed the firm backbone of their understanding of universal history. This is evident both in the monks' Hiberno-Latin writings and in their writings in the vernacular. They followed Bede's standard version of the count of the six ages. In the sixth age, however, their own division of the history of the Irish people into a pre-Patrician era and the post-Patrician era (with the threshold of AD 431) overlapped with that of the six ages. The pre-Patrician era reached far back into the previous ages, as evidenced for instance by the *Lebor Gabála* "The Book of the Peopling (or invasions of Ireland)." Here six waves settlers are claimed to have reached Ireland after the fall of the Tower of Babel. The final wave was that of the Irish people, the Gaels. The Irish Annals (*Annals of Ulster*, *Annals of Inisfallen*, *Annals of Tigernach* etc.) followed the same pattern, the post-Patrician parts, however, changing considerably in type and details of content. A short fragment of a separate treatise called the *sex aetates sunt mundi* (SASM) survives in the *Lebor na hUidre* ("Book of the Dun Cow"), the oldest surviving Irish manuscript compilation of vernacular texts (beg. of 12c). Full versions of SASM also occur in later Middle Irish manuscripts. In the Ms Bodley Rawlinson B 502, also from the beginning of the 12c, SASM forms part of a compendium of texts attributed to one Dublittir Ua hUathgaile. This compendium begins and ends with synchronistic poems. The prose accounts of the major event during the respective ages are interspersed with long and short poems, but also with lists of names and other mnemonic material. Much of the prose subject matter is doubled in the poems. Subject matter from pre-Patrician native Irish tradition is occasionally added. This treatise clearly expresses the basic pattern of medieval Irish understanding of sacred world history, the place of Ireland in it, and seems to have served as an anchor for native historical teaching until at least as late as the 17th century, if not later.

The same Ms Bodley Rawlinson B 502 also contains a long anonymous compendium of poems concerning Biblical history. Its title is *Saltair na rann* (SR, "Psalter of Stanzas"). It consists of 150 cantos of varying lengths, plus 12 supplementary cantos, 162 cantos altogether, and deals with OT matter followed by the life of Christ. Much apocryphal matter was added to both the OT and NT matter. Canto 12 deals with the six ages of the world . It also mentions the date of AD 988 and synchronisms with Irish and non-Irish kings, thus firmly locating the text into the 10c. What is important in SR, however, is that the six ages form the basic grid of expressing time in this versified paraphrase of sacred world history from its creation to its very end at Judgment Day. Beside Dublittir Ua hUathgaile, the putative author of the SASM compendium, there are other named authors from the Middle Irish period, like Gilla Coémáin or Flann Mainistrech. They wrote so-called synchronistic, synthetic or pseudo-historical poems about world history filling the template of the six ages with the usual Biblical

and Irish subject matter. Copies of these poems were disseminated among the people until the 18c. Two further textual genres need to be mentioned which also resorted to the six ages for their underlying sacred time scale, i.e. the sermons and the saints' lives. Their manuscript evidence covers a time span of transmission of many centuries, beginning with the *Catechesis celtica* in the 8c and ending with 17c edifying prose.

Finally it should be mentioned that the great Irish heroic narrative of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* ("Cattle Raid of Cooley"), which by some scholars has been considered to be Ireland's "national" epic, a mixture of prose and verse like the SASM, was dated by the compilers of the medieval Irish annals at the threshold between the fifth and the sixth age. The great Ulster heroes like Cú Chulainn, Conchobar mac Nessa, Conall Cernach and Fergus Mac Roich were believed to have been contemporaries of Jesus Christ and so were Queen Medb and King Ailill of the Connachta. It is highly revealing that the salvational message of the *sex aetates mundi* was extended to embrace the pagan Irish heroes. This reminds one of St Patrick's fasting against God in the *Vita Tripartita* in order to be granted the favour of letting the Irish *ante credem* participate in the eternal joys of heaven.

Thus from the point of view of salvational progress, the number six was of fundamental importance, because it was considered to be both *temporal* (viz. *temporary*), setting the time scale for God's creation (with a beginning, an end and further subdivisions in between), and more importantly *spiritual* because of God's grace, i.e. his promise of eternity for the faithful.

References

Bernard Bischoff, "Turning Points in the History and of Latin Exegesis in the Early Middle Ages," in: Martin McNamara, ed., *Biblical Studies, the Medieval Irish Contribution*, Dublin: Dominican Publications 1976, 74-160.

Jean-Yves Guillaumin, *Le livre des nombres = Liber numerorum / Isidore de Séville*, édition, traduction et commentaire, Paris: Belles Lettres 2005.

Gisbert Hemprich, „Die frühen Fassungen von *Éri óg inis na náem*,“ in: Gisbert Hemprich, ed., *Festgabe für Hildegard L.C. Tristram, überreicht von Studenten, Kollegen und Freunden des ehemaligen Faches Keltologie der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg* (Bonner Beiträge zur Keltologie; 1), Berlin: curach bhán publications 2009, 289-383.

Robert E. McNally, ed., *Der irische ‚Liber de numeris‘. Eine Quellenanalyse des pseudo-isidorischen Liber de numeris*, Inauguraldissertation Munich 1957; *Patrologia latina* 83: 1293-1302.

Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ed., *The Irish "Sex aetates mundi"*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1983.

Hildegard L.C. Tristram, *Sex aetates mundi. Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren. Untersuchungen und Texte*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1985.

Hildegard L.C. Tristram, *Early Insular Preaching: Verbal Artistry and Method of Composition*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Veröffentlichungen der keltischen Kommission, Nr. 11) 1995.

Hildegard L.C. Tristram, "Narratology and Salvation: Aspects of 'Narrated Time' and the 'Time of Narrating' in *Tain 86 Cuailnge*," in: Ruairf Ó hUiginn & Brian Ó Cathain, eds., *Ulidia* 2 (2009), Maynooth: An Sagart, 31-45.