

# THE HISTORICAL IRISH HARP: MYTHS DEMYSTIFIED

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## 0. Introduction

This article presents the work of three scholars from three disciplinary areas, surveying the history of the Irish harp through the lenses of organology and musicology, supported by literary and mythological studies.

The historical Irish harp, also known as *Cláirseach* or Early Gaelic harp, is simultaneously one of the world's most famous and least known musical instruments. We see it on various romanticised “Irish” flags, on the State arms of Ireland (and indeed, representing Ireland, on those of the UK and Canada), on the Irish Presidential standard and the flag of the Irish province of Leinster, on Irish Euro coins, and painted on the tails of aeroplanes. The Guinness brewing company exports millions of images of the harp, labelling the bottles of its most famous product. But we h e a r it far less often, and our knowledge of its technical workings is clouded by a mist of repeated half-truths and patriotically inspired legends.

The popular vision of ancient harpers is surrounded by an aura of romantic mysticism, but it is generally assumed that they not only enjoyed the privileges of freemen, but could influence listeners' emotions with mysterious power. “The only entertainer with independent legal status (*soíre*) is the harpist... He is expected to be able to play music to bring on tears (*goltraige*), to bring on joy (*gentraige*) and to bring on sleep (*súantraige*)”<sup>1</sup>

Now that the political tensions surrounding such a national symbol have declined, there is a new opportunity for rigorous, international research with full use of modern methodologies. The first step in this renewed research effort should be to abandon any preconceptions, to re-examine some musicological folklore and debunk some cherished myths.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Distinctions of date: *cruit*, *cithara*, *cláirseach*, Celtic harp

Medieval names for instruments are highly problematic, and familiar-looking names may be false friends. Jacopo Bisagni has warned harp-scholars to be cautious when

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<sup>1</sup> Cit. from *Uraicecht Becc* ‘A Short Introduction’ (Anon., late 8<sup>th</sup> cent., with commentaries from 11<sup>th</sup> cent. or later), translated in Kelly 1995: 64.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks are due to Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Maura Ó Cróinín, Karen Loomis and Simon Chadwick for their generous help in providing information and comments on drafts of this paper.

trying to link historical instrument names from literary sources to iconography or archaeological finds.<sup>3</sup> Page (1987: 141) similarly notes “important distinctions: of language... of date... and of usage”, but nevertheless concludes that “when we assemble the sources that reveal the names which specific instrument-types bore in the Middle Ages we find evidence of considerable consistency of usage” (ibid.).

### 1.1 *Cruit*

The Old Irish words *cruit* and *crott* are cognate with *rotte* (6<sup>th</sup>-cent. Latin), *rota* (11<sup>th</sup>-cent. Spanish), *rote* (12<sup>th</sup>-cent. French), *crwth* (13<sup>th</sup>-cent. Welsh), *crowd* (14<sup>th</sup>-cent. Middle English), and *rotta* (Italian, 14<sup>th</sup> cent. and probably earlier). Those European words do not refer to a triangular harp, but to the four-sided lyre. The sides can be more or less rounded, and there is a characteristic gap between the soundbox and the top section with the tuning pegs. Surviving lyres from Trossingen (c. 580 AD, see ill. 1) and Sutton Hoo (early 7<sup>th</sup> century) have six strings. Traces of gut and horse-hair were found with the 8<sup>th</sup>-cent. Cologne lyre. The Old High German word *lira* is assumed to refer to these instruments (Kluge 1891: 211). It is plausible that Old Irish *cruit* might have meant a four-sided lyre.

10<sup>th</sup>-cent. Irish crosses show lyre-shaped instruments of this type, which in Europe had musical and social functions similar to those of the later Irish harp, and were similarly linked to story-telling. But the lyre is organologically distinct from any kind of harp. It has four sides, and the strings are parallel to the soundboard (as on guitars) rather than angled away from the soundboard (as on harps).

It would seem that Old Irish *cruit* did n o t signify a triangular harp, which probably did not exist in Ireland in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Scottish crosses from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> cent. (their precise dating is disputed) show triangular frame-harps, but we do not see evidence of triangular harps in Ireland earlier than the 11<sup>th</sup>-cent. gilded silver plate representation on the Shrine of St Mogue, *Breac Maedóic* (Rimmer 1984: 15, 26). It is disputed whether this piece and the metal-work design on the c. 1350 Shrine of St Patrick’s Tooth<sup>4</sup> represent wire-strung or gut-strung harps.

### 1.2 *Cithara*

Medieval European names cognate with *harpa* seem to have changed their meaning, referring before the 8<sup>th</sup> cent. to the four-sided lyre, but gradually becoming associated with the triangular harp. By the 13<sup>th</sup> cent., the French word *harpe* clearly means harp (Page 1987: 148).

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<sup>3</sup> Bisagni at Scoil 2013. Once the available period terms have been collected, Bisagni recommends thorough analysis of their etymology and of the textual context, before using organological hints (taxonomy, sound characteristics, performance practices, detailed descriptions) to map old names to actual instruments. He warns that some ancient writers may not have intended any such connection.

<sup>4</sup> The *Fiacail Phádraig* reliquary, displayed at the National Museum of Ireland. Sanger (2012) identifies it as Norman and provides an illustration.

Similarly, Latin *cithara* shifts in meaning from four-sided lyre to triangular harp, though the word can also mean a finger-board instrument such as *gittern* or *citole* (vernacular names derived from *cithara*), or any string instrument in general (Page 1987: 149). The 8<sup>th</sup>-cent. Würzburg glosses link *cithara* with Old Irish *crott*.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with the hypothesis that in this period *cithara* = *harpa* = *cruít/crott* = four-sided lyre. But it does not rule out the alternative, less specific interpretation, that *cithara* and *crott* are generic words for any kind of stringed instrument.

An 11<sup>th</sup>-cent. Latin poem by the second bishop of Dublin refers to a six-string *cithara* and to *psalterium cytarasque novas*, 'psaltery and new *citharae*',<sup>6</sup> suggesting that a shift from the six-string *cithara* (i.e. lyre) to a many-stringed 'new *cithara*' (i.e. harp) might still be on-going. But some representations of European triangular harps show as few as six strings – and we do not know whether these sources can be relied on for such fine details. Even the assumption that representations on Irish stone crosses correspond to real-world musical instruments remains unproven.

Writing in Latin in the late 12<sup>th</sup> cent., Gerald of Wales provides a detailed description of music-making in Ireland, where two instruments are used, *cithara* and *tympanum*. *Cithara*, played also in Wales and Scotland, is assumed to mean harp, and *tympanum* (played also in Scotland) is cognate with Middle Irish *tiompán* (variously identified by modern scholars as a psaltery, hammered dulcimer, string drum, metal-strung lyre etc.)

Gerald states that metal strings are used (but it is not clear if only in Ireland or also in other countries) instead of (or in variant sources, more than) gut; but he does not specify for which instrument.<sup>7</sup> The identification of *cithara* with harp is highly plausible, but for Ireland unproven. No-one knows for sure what a *tiompán* was.

<sup>5</sup> Wb. 12 c 42 cited in LEIA C-248 entry on *crott*.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Rimmer 1984: 25.

<sup>7</sup> In Gerald of Wales *Topographia Hiberniae* Distinctio III Capitulum XI, edited in Dimock (1867), where *cithara* and *tympanum* are interpreted as 'harp' and 'tabor'. Gerald is widely cited in the secondary literature; the best discussion of this crucial passage is in Page (1987: 229). Page points out that it is unclear which of the three nations uses metal strings; we consider it most plausible that Gerald was thinking of Ireland when he wrote that '*Aenis quoque utuntur chordis, non de corio factis*' (Moreover they [...] play upon 'bronze' strings rather than strings made of gut) (quoted after Page 1987: 230). We may be the first to note that even if Ireland is meant, Gerald is also unspecific as to which instrument (*cithara* or *tympanum* or both) has those metal strings. Complete consideration of Gerald's intended meaning would require comparative analysis of all available MS sources and is beyond the scope of this article. Dimock dates Gerald's 'first edition' to 1188 and comments that 'there are so many manuscripts... and these so widely scattered that I have found it impossible to attempt to collate all'. Nevertheless, across the sixteen MSS he does collate, this sentence shows only the one variant reading mentioned above: '*Aenis quoque magis utuntur chordis quam de corio factis.*'

But with all due caution, we can see evidence of some consistency here. Latin *cithara* and European *harpa* both gradually shift in meaning. Around the 8<sup>th</sup> cent., these words signify the four-sided lyre; by the 12<sup>th</sup> cent., they point to the triangular harp. The archaeological evidence shows the same change in representations of instruments during these four centuries. The triangular harp seems to have come to Scotland earlier in this period, and later to Ireland.

It might be suggested that *cruit* also changed its meaning, in parallel with *cithara* and *harpa*. However, European names cognate with *cruit* did n o t change their meaning. More investigation is needed.

### 1.3 *Cláirseach*

What we do know is that Latin and European languages re-assigned an old name to the new instrument, whereas in Irish, a new word *cláirseach*, appears to mean ‘a triangular harp with wire strings’ (see below). But here we must be very cautious: there is a long gap between the first representation of a triangular harp in Ireland (11<sup>th</sup> cent.) and the first occurrence of the name *cláirseach* in the 14<sup>th</sup> cent. In the intervening years, it is possible that the word *cruit* may have been associated with the triangular harp, but this is by no means certain. Scribes may just have copied that old word, without needing to assign any particular meaning to it in their contemporary real world.

Keith Sanger (2012) emphasises the significance of Norman influences and notes the presence of gut-strung harps in Ireland until the early 16<sup>th</sup> cent. Might the wire-strung harp have first appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> cent., when we see the first appearance of its name, *cláirseach*? Might it then have gradually displaced both the gut-strung harp and the *tiompán* (which Sanger takes to be a lyre with six metal strings)? Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> cent., *cruit* – in parallel to *cithara* – might then have had both a specific meaning (i.e. gut-strung harp), and a more generic one (i.e. any stringed instrument).

### 1.4 Summary

It would be fascinating to know for certain what *cruit* meant in the 8<sup>th</sup> cent., and from the 11<sup>th</sup> until the 14<sup>th</sup>. But such a philological, organological and musical investigation is beyond the scope of this article. For now, references to *cruit* and *cithara* should be treated with caution; we do not have enough information to translate these words with certainty. What evidence there is casts doubt on widely held assumptions of the antiquity of wire-strung harps. The simplest explanation of the available data is that the wire-strung *cláirseach* did not appear until the late 14<sup>th</sup> cent.

We can now revisit all those sagas that assign to a musical instrument high status and otherworldly powers. For the 8<sup>th</sup> cent., we may be confident that the *cruit* and *crott* are used interchangeably and mean some kind of string instrument: almost certainly not a triangular harp; perhaps a four-sided lyre.

'Let thy *cruit*-players play for us,' says Ailill to Fraech. 'Let them play indeed!' says Fraech. A *crott*-bag of the skins of otters<sup>8</sup> about them with their adornment of ruby (or coral), beneath their adornment of gold and silver... Cloaks of linen as white as the tunic of a swan around their strings. *Crota* of gold and silver and bronze,<sup>9</sup> with figures of serpents and birds, and hounds of gold and silver.<sup>10</sup>

In the 8<sup>th</sup>-cent. reference to the three kinds of music – *goltraige*, *gentraige* and *súantraige* – mentioned above, the elite performer is a *cruit*-player (not a harpist). We should also revise Kelly's commentary on the 9<sup>th</sup>-cent. proverbial saying *cáid cach ceól co cruit*,<sup>11</sup> 'every music is sweet until [compared with] the *cruit*'. The early Irish esteemed the *cruit* (not the harp) beyond all other musical instruments.

We can translate more carefully the 10<sup>th</sup>-cent. *Orgain Denna Ríg* "Ní ceilt céis ceól do chruit Chraiptini co corastar for sluagu suanbás" (Greene 1955: 20, lines 384-5) 'Music was revealed by Craiptine's *cruit*, which put the hosts into a deadly slumber'. In this story, Craiptine repeatedly plays *suantraige* on his stringed instrument, which is always referred to as *cruit*. Although we can be confident that *cruit* is some kind of stringed instrument, we cannot be sure precisely what type of instrument is meant, during this period of transition between four-sided lyre and triangular harp.

When an 11<sup>th</sup>- or 12<sup>th</sup>-cent. writer transcribes a 9<sup>th</sup>-cent. source,<sup>12</sup> we can only speculate whether there was any intention to relate specific names to contemporary reality, and if so, how.

Then Lug and the Dagda and Ogma went after the Fomoiré, because they had taken the Dagda's *cruit*-player, Úaithne. Eventually they reached the banqueting hall where Bres mac Elathan and Elatha mac Delbaíth were. There was the *crot* on the wall. That is the *cruit* in which the Dagda had bound the melodies so that they did not make a sound until he summoned them, saying: Come Daur Dá Bláo / Come Cóir Cetharchai, / Come summer, come winter / Mouths of *crot* and bags and pipes!

<sup>8</sup> Traces of beaver hair were found with the Sutton Hoo lyre, assumed to be from a beaver-skin instrument-bag. Otter- and beaver-skin are soft and beautiful, of course, and also water-repellent. Might these materials have been chosen to protect an instrument from a damp environment? Gut strings are highly sensitive to humidity, horse-hair strings less so, metal strings behave well in high humidity.

<sup>9</sup> Instruments constructed from precious metals seem unlikely. An instrument could have been decorated with precious metals, or strung with metal strings. But we cannot assume that a literal description of a real-world instrument is intended.

<sup>10</sup> *Táin Bó Fraích*, 8<sup>th</sup> cent., ed. Meid (1974: 4, lines 89-96) translation adapted by ALK. 'Sennat do **chruittiri** dún', ol Ailill ri Fráech. 'Sennat ém', ol Fráech. **Crottbolg** di chrocnib doborchon impu cona n-imdénam do phartaing foa n-imdénam di ór 7 argut... Bruit lín gilidir fúan ngéssa imna téta. Crota di ór 7 arccut 7 findruine co ndelbaib nathrach 7 én 7 milchon di ór 7 arccut.

<sup>11</sup> *Tecosca Cormaic*, §31.21, cited by Kelly 1995: 64.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. *Cath Maige Tuired*, from which the following excerpt is taken, see Murphy (1953-5: 191-8).

(Now that *cruit* had two names, Daur Dá Bláo and Cóir Cetharchair.)<sup>13</sup> Then the *crot* came away from the wall, and it killed nine men and came to the Dagda; and he played for them the three things by which a *cruit*-player is known: sleep music, joyful music, and sorrowful music. He played sorrowful music for them so that their tearful women wept. He played joyful music for them so that their women and boys laughed. He played sleep music for them so that the hosts slept. So the three of them escaped from them unharmed – although they wanted to kill them.

(Gray 1982: 71, lines 793-810)<sup>14</sup>

Might the late-medieval redactor have imagined *cruit* as a triangular harp, whereas the 9<sup>th</sup>-cent. writer thought of a four-sided lyre? We simply do not know, though we can be sure that both wished to ascribe otherworldly powers to some kind of stringed instrument. And it is highly plausible that from the 14<sup>th</sup> cent. onwards, *cláirseach* players were happy to believe that their renaissance harps were the inheritors of the high status and otherworldly powers of the ancient *cruit*. Heymann cites a mid-17<sup>th</sup>-cent. poem of praise for the instrument: “No noble or lord ever got as good a *cruit* for playing / the golden-stringed, useful woman...”.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, the equation of the ancient word *cruit* with the surviving historical Irish harp was made explicit during the revival of the harp in the 19<sup>th</sup> cent., and it is still widely accepted today. However, this romantically inspired equation now needs rigorous examination.

## 1.5 Celtic harp

Harps remain highly visible in the Irish folk-music scene today. The folk-harp most often played in modern Ireland certainly is a harp, but its origins are not Irish.

<sup>13</sup> Two-Headed Oak – we know no other evidence of harps being made from oak – and Four-Cornered Song: Maura Ó Cróinín suggests (private correspondence) that medieval readers might have seen a link between Irish *coir cetharchair* and Latin *çithara*.

<sup>14</sup> *Loutar a ndiaid na Fomore dano Lug ⁊ an Daghdou ⁊ Ogma, ar cruitire an Dagda ro-n-ucsad leo, Úaitniu a ainm. Rosaghad íerum a flettech a mboí Bres mac Elathan ⁊ Elathan mac Delbaíth. Is ann bó in crot forin fraighid. Is sí in cruit sin ara naiseic na céola conarofhograidhsetor tria gairm co ndegart in Dagda in tan atbert ann so síis, “Tair Daur Dá Bláo, Tair Cóir Cethairchuir, Tair sam, tair gam, Béola crot ⁊ bolg ⁊ buinne! (Dá n-ainm dano bátar foran cruit-sin .i. Dur Dá Blá ⁊ Cóir Cethairchuir.)*

*Doluid an crot assan froig íerum, ⁊ marbais nonbór ⁊ tánuicc docum an Daghda; ⁊ sepainn-sie a trédhi fora nemhigthir cruitiri dóib .i. súantraigi ⁊ genntraigi ⁊ golltraigi. Sephainn golltraigi dóib co ngolsad a mná déracha. Sephainn genntraigi dóib co tibsíot a mná ⁊ a macraíth. Sephainn súantraigi dóib contuilset ant slúaiigh. Is de sen diérlátar a triur slán úaidib—cíamadh áil a ngoin* (Gray 1982: 70).

<sup>15</sup> Heymann (2003-4) citing a c. 1640-50 poem in *Dánta Phiarais Feiritéir*, ed. Pádraig Ó Duinnín (1934) as ‘In Praise of a Harp’ (sic).

As the historical Irish harp faced extinction in the early 19<sup>th</sup> cent., one of the more successful attempts to revive it linked academic investigations of 'ancient bardic music' to the social fashion for upper-class women to play the French harp. In 1820, harp-maker John Egan began to sell his Royal Portable Harps, built like a French harp, with gut strings like a French harp, tuned in Eb like a French harp, but smaller and equipped with ditals, little finger-levers at the pillar, instead of the foot-pedals of a French harp.

Pedals or ditals provide chromatic semitones – the equivalent of the black keys on a piano. These semitones are not found on the historical Irish harp, but they were an essential element of 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. musical style.<sup>16</sup> Shaped to suggest an 'ancient bardic instrument', painted in patriotic green and decorated with golden shamrocks,<sup>17</sup> Egan's instruments were a great success (he made several hundred Royal Portables), and contributed to national pride and the preservation of national culture (see ill. 3).

### 1.5.1 Modern Celtic harp

The twentieth-century successor to Egan's harps is the modern Celtic harp, also known as the Neo-Irish harp, and often referred to as the 'lever harp'. This is a small, light-weight, simplified version of a modern orchestral harp, strung like orchestral harps with a mix of nylon (or gut) in the treble and wound strings (steel core with silk inlay and alloy windings) in the bass. Instead of French pedals at the base, or Egan's ditals on the pillar, levers on the neck provide semitone alterations. The tuning is usually in Eb, a relic of the tuning of 18<sup>th</sup>-cent. French harps.

The playing technique for the modern Celtic harp is a light version of classical orchestral harp technique, with elbows high, thumbs up, and a powerful snap to the plucking action. The fingers contact the strings well away from the soundboard, towards the middle of the string length. When playing strongly, one or both hands fly away from the harp in an elegant 'angel-wings' gesture. Such harps are often used as trainers for elementary students of classical harp, but they are increasingly recognised as fully-fledged instruments in their own right.

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<sup>16</sup> Musicians categorise notes as diatonic (e.g. the white keys of a piano, seven in each octave) or chromatic (e.g. the black keys, five in each octave). Some melodies are diatonic (i.e. they can be played on the white keys only). With rare exceptions (discussed below), historical Irish harps have only seven notes per octave. Historical Irish music uses modes, which are subtly different from modern scales. Many ancient Irish melodies use fewer than seven notes per octave – this feature is often described as a 'gapped scale'. Some Irish melodies, categorised as pentatonic, use only five notes per octave. But more than seven notes per octave are frequently encountered in mainstream 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. music, including romantic arrangements of old Irish tunes.

<sup>17</sup> Black or blue were other options. Two Royal Portables survive with the pillar and neck carved into the figure of a winged-maiden representing Hibernia or Erin (Hurrell 2003; 2012).

## 2. Historical Irish harp

Perhaps the most powerful tool for demystifying myths is careful attention to distinctions of date. We should be ready to interrogate modern ‘traditions’ to determine what is genuinely historical, and from which period it derives. We should establish as precisely as possible a chronology for all those tunes, texts, artefacts and cultural practices described in 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. accounts as ‘ancient’ or ‘very old’. For the Early Modern period, during which the surviving historical Irish harps were made and played, both the Old Irish *cruit* and the modern Celtic harp are irrelevant. Those are different instruments, chronologically and organologically distinct from the historical Irish harp. They are visually different from the familiar outline of the national symbol, even if there has been some cross-over of status and symbolism between all three.

We can identify the historical Irish harp from a great variety of sources and artefacts throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these clearly link names and images: e.g. Praetorius (1620: 67) distinguishes between the common gut-strung European harp, the Irish harp and the hammer dulcimer, with detailed illustrations of each. Nevertheless, the historical name ‘Irish harp’ is problematic today: this type of instrument was played also in Scotland, England and across Europe. ‘Irish harp’ thus resembles ‘French Horn’ as an accepted name that is not as geographically restricted as one might think. In particular, the Irish harp is very strongly associated with Scotland, encouraging some scholars to prefer the modern name ‘Early Gaelic harp’. In the Gaelic languages, the instrument is called *cláirseach* (Irish) and *clàrsach* (Scottish).<sup>18</sup>

### 2.1 Physical characteristics

Historical Irish harps have their sound-box carved from a single large log, as one might make a dug-out canoe. The pillar is a massive wooden spring that resists the tension of the strings and compensates for any distortion of the frame caused by changes of temperature and humidity. Over the centuries, its cross-section gradually became T-shaped, for optimal strength-to-weight ratio. The sturdy neck is also distinctively shaped, and metal bands along the peg holes help protect the wood.

On the soundboard, a metal ‘shoe’ at each string-hole similarly protects the wood – otherwise the metal string would gradually cut through it. Those strings are thick wires of brass, sometimes silver, perhaps even gold. Brass wires

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<sup>18</sup> Chadwick 2004-2014 shows use of the name *cláirseach* in 1385 by Godfrey Finn O’Daly in *A Chláirsíoch Chnuic i Chosgair* cited by Rev. Duncan Campbell. In Scotland, ‘*Klerschach*’ in 1434, ‘*Clarscheouch*’ in 1438, and ‘*Erse clareschaw*’ in 1491 refer to players of the instrument (see DSL-DOST entry for *Clarschach*).



are well documented,<sup>19</sup> and traces have been found on the oldest surviving instruments. There are 18<sup>th</sup>-cent. accounts of silver strings on the Trinity harp.<sup>20</sup>

Ann Heymann (2003-4) suggests cautiously that some literary references to gold strings might provide evidence that historical harps were actually strung with gold. However, these references are linked to the instrument names *tiompán* and *cruit*, which are (as we have seen) problematic. And what should we make of a 15<sup>th</sup>-cent. source of a 12<sup>th</sup>-cent. tale that mentions a *cruit* of “three strings... a string of iron, a string of noble bronze, and one of entire silver”?<sup>21</sup> We don't know what a *cruit* was in the 12<sup>th</sup> cent., and a 15<sup>th</sup>-cent. harp with only three strings is utterly implausible; the imagery is almost certainly metaphorical. It is difficult to extract precise information from such beautifully suggestive writing; which is not to reject such references, but rather to read them with considerable caution, and in their original context.

The three parts of the harp's wooden frame are held together (without glue) by the tension of the strings. The back of the harp is a fourth piece of wood, which contributes significantly to the sound of the instrument. It is also held in place without glue. The strings pull the soundboard upwards, which in turn pulls the sides of the sound-box inwards, gripping the inset backboard tightly. Players replace strings by threading them in through the string-holes at the front, without opening the back: this is preferred, since removing the backboard significantly disturbs the instrument.

Compared to the common European harp of the same period (which would be strung in gut), historical Irish harps are heavier and have more strings.<sup>22</sup> They also had distinctive musical and social functions,<sup>23</sup> and (until the 17<sup>th</sup> cent.) their own distinctive repertoire of Gaelic music, preserved by aural transmission.

### 3. Surviving instruments<sup>24</sup>

A particular aspect of our research is the close visual examination of surviving instruments. Physical marks, rarely analysed by previous researchers, are of great significance when interpreted in the light of detailed knowledge of historical techniques of harp-building and harp-playing. On the exterior surfaces,

<sup>19</sup> E.g. William Good in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, cited by Rimmer (1984: 39), Praetorius (1620: 67).

<sup>20</sup> A letter written by Ralph Ouseley in 1783, describing the harp around 1756 (see BL MS Egerton 74, fol. 84 cited by Chadwick, 2004-2014).

<sup>21</sup> *Agallamh na Seanórach* ('Colloquy of the Ancients') from the *Book of Lismore*, cited by Heymann (2003-4).

<sup>22</sup> From the 16<sup>th</sup> cent. onwards, some European harps were built with two or three rows of strings, tuned chromatically. Such harps had a greater number of strings, but were relatively unusual – the 'common' European harp was a single-strung, diatonic instrument (Praetorius 1620).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Rimmer 1984: 39-41.

<sup>24</sup> A list (complete, according to current knowledge and regularly updated) of surviving Irish harps with detailed information about instruments and historical players can be accessed online, see Chadwick 2004-2014 which updates and expands Chadwick 2008.

wear-marks produced by the player's hands support the evidence of period iconography that the historical playing technique was with elbows low, the chin near the top of the harp, hands well separated from each other. Both hands were close to the soundboard, and the fingers contacting the strings close to the sound-board (what a classical harpist would call *près de la table*). This contradicts the practice of many modern players who play the strings nearer the middle of their length, as on classical and modern Celtic harp, or who play with 'coupled hands'.<sup>25</sup>

Close examination is needed for all the 18 surviving Irish harps. As Chadwick (2004-2014) notes: "Few if any of these instruments have received close academic study; there is therefore very little currently known about details of their construction, stringing or tuning, or in many cases even where and when they were made".

Looking more closely at the frame and inside the sound-box, subtle details of the woodwork, in particular the marks of each chisel cut, provide a wealth of information. Often makers left the inside of the harp roughly finished, so that every scrape of the chisel can be examined. Once thought to be decorative patterns of religious or symbolic significance, chisel marks are the result of balancing three practical factors – the instinctive movements of the maker's hand, the need to keep enough wood for structural stability, and the desire to remove enough wood to create a responsive and resonant sound-box. To the trained eye, a chisel mark is the harp-builder's signature, 'handwriting' which can be read, understood and distinguished from other hands. Close examination of chisel work is a new field that offers exciting opportunities for comparing and dating instruments, even for identifying makers.

### 3.1 Willow

Perhaps the most cherished illusion is that ancient Irish harps were made of willow. In the last few decades, builders of historically informed copies of Irish harps have gone to great trouble to source suitable pieces of willow to make large instruments. Willow does not grow very large, and it often rots from the inside. Fast-growing willow has the grain too far apart for the timber to be structurally stable. Faced with such problems, modern harp-builders often use poplar – attractive, but similarly considered unsuitable for most musical instruments.

But none of the elements of the Trinity harp (the oldest surviving instrument) is willow. None of the surviving historical harps in Ireland has been

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<sup>25</sup> E.g. Rowland 1961, cited by Loomis at Scoil 2013. Similar methods have been used to establish the historical playing position for 18<sup>th</sup>-cent. Welsh harps (hands close to the soundboard) and 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. guitars and theorbos – long-necked lutes – (with the right hand resting on, or even beyond, the bridge.) Iconographical sources support the evidence from surviving instruments. And as with the Irish harp, historical evidence is at odds with the accepted consensus amongst modern players!

scientifically proved to be willow.<sup>26</sup> Most surviving harps appear from expert visual inspection to be sycamore, alder or lime, timber typical of instrument-building in general. Modern high-tech analysis of each surviving harp is needed.<sup>27</sup>

Willow is of course a legendary symbol of weeping. In Psalm 137, the Israelites 'hang their harps' 'on the willow trees by the waters of Babylon' (*super flumina Babylonis... in salicibus in medio ejus suspendimus organa nostra*). The botanical name for the weeping willow is *Salix Babylonica*.

There are therefore abundant literary references linking willows and music.<sup>28</sup> And the springy qualities of willow timber (the same qualities that make it ideal for cricket bats) have some apparent advantages in coping with the high tension of thick metal strings. But hard evidence shows that this soft, springy wood was very little used for historical harps. Indeed the unstable springiness of willow and poplar may contribute to the notorious difficulty of maintaining accurate tuning on 20<sup>th</sup>-cent. reproductions of Irish harps.

There are legends of harps of yew, but this is another poetic metaphor, here for an instrument made or played with bad intentions. Just as yew wood is poisonous, so the music of a yew instrument would poison the soul. There is also the 'Story of the Cruel Sister' and a harp made of bones, strung with the victim's hair. There are no surviving instruments, and no evidence to suggest that in Ireland actual instruments were ever made from yew<sup>29</sup> or bone, or strung with human hair.

### 3.2 Left hand

Traditionally, Irish harps are played with the left hand in the treble, the right hand in the bass, (European harps are conventionally played with the right hand in the treble). Some modern exponents of Historical Irish harp place great importance on the symbolic implications of left-orientation.

In 1961, harpist Mary Rowland placed her hands on the wear marks of the newly restored Trinity harp (see below), and the resulting photographs are consistent with the historical *près de la table* position and traditional orientation with the left-hand in the treble.<sup>30</sup>

But some surviving Irish harps show evidence of having been played with right-orientation: for example the neck of the so-called O'Neill harp at Belfast Museum was cut away, very roughly, in order to give the player's right hand access to the high strings.<sup>31</sup> There is a corresponding wear mark for the right

<sup>26</sup> The soundbox of the Scottish 15<sup>th</sup>-cent. 'Queen Mary' harp (see below) was long thought to be hornbeam, but Loomis (2012) has conclusively identified it as willow.

<sup>27</sup> It is to be hoped that Loomis will extend her investigation to the Trinity and other harps in Ireland.

<sup>28</sup> Most famously, the *Willow Song* of Desdemona's mother's maid, Barbara in Shakespeare's *Othello* Act 4 Scene 3.

<sup>29</sup> Billinge and Shaljean (1987) suggest that the neck of the Dalway harp (see below) is made of yew.

<sup>30</sup> Cited by Loomis at Scoil 2013.

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/historic/belfast\\_harp/belfast\\_oneill.html](http://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/historic/belfast_harp/belfast_oneill.html)

hand high on the sound-board. More investigation is needed to establish how each surviving harp was played during its long life.

It is difficult to establish from period prints which hand played in the treble, because of the reversals inherent in the printing process. This combines with deliberate or accidental reversals of images, by scholars convinced that Irish harps must be played left-handed.

When the instruments were played left-handed, the reasons might be less philosophical than practical. There is a popular belief that left-handedness is more prevalent in Ireland than elsewhere, although this is not borne out by rigorous modern analysis. However, there is very little historical data from the Early Modern period, and no comparison with 15<sup>th</sup>-cent. Ireland is possible.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the incidence of left-handedness varies markedly within the population. It is more common amongst certain groups: e.g. males, high-achievers, musicians and swordsmen. And the advanced Irish harp students at Scoil 2012 (admittedly a very small sample) were nearly all left-handers. There is some evidence to link left-handedness to artistic talent, based on the left-brain/right-brain hypothesis.

### 3.3 Small and large

In parallel to European harps, Irish harps became gradually larger until the 17<sup>th</sup> cent., and then taller and thinner into the 18<sup>th</sup>. These changes provided longer bass strings, and therefore a more powerful bass register, part of a general European trend from medieval monophony through renaissance polyphony to the eighteenth-century polarisation of treble and bass.<sup>33</sup> The change of shape from 'low-headed' (close to an equilateral triangle) to high-headed (tall and thin) brought about minor changes in construction to accommodate a more acute angle between neck and pillar (see also the Otway harp, below) (Chadwick 2008).

The angle between strings and sound-board is also crucial for sound-quality, and relates to the tension of the strings. A wider angle usually implies higher string-tension and a tone-spectrum with fewer high harmonics.<sup>34</sup> This string-angle varies a lot in surviving instruments. More research is required to see if there is any pattern of historical change.

<sup>32</sup> UK 12.24%, Ireland 11.65% (McManus 2009: 46).

<sup>33</sup> Early medieval music is monophonic – a single melodic line, such as plainchant or unaccompanied song. European renaissance music is polyphonic – several independent melodies (known as voices, whether performed vocally or instrumentally) combine to produce harmonies. Baroque music presents a treble melody over an independent bass. That bass defines harmonies which can be realised by keyboard instruments, lutes, guitars, harps etc. in the improvising practice of *basso continuo*.

<sup>34</sup> A musical tone is compounded of the fundamental pitch and various higher 'harmonics'. These are usually not heard as separate notes, but determine the perceived tone-quality: many high harmonics produce a bright, reedy sound; few high harmonics produce a fat, dull sound.

### 3.4 The 'Brian Boru' harp

Myths still surround the so-called 'Brian Boru' harp, preserved at Trinity College, Dublin (see illus. 5). It is very similar to the 'Queen Mary' harp in Edinburgh, and its decoration suggests that it too might have been made in Scotland. Dated approximately to the late 15<sup>th</sup> cent., the instrument has no connection to Brian Boru (c. 1000), neither is it one harp. Its modern name, the 'Trinity' harp, is particularly apt, for this seems to be an assemblage of body-parts from three instruments.

There are 30 string holes in the sound-box (of which 27 are currently visible), but the neck originally had only 29 tuning pins; a 30<sup>th</sup> pin was added later. The pillar does not match either part, and the angles of the triangular frame do not match at the joints. The body is rotten at the bottom, and was probably considerably longer in its original state.

The position of the gem-stone decoration on the pillar suggests that the pillar was also once considerably longer, but the angle at the pillar's lower end matches neither the current nor the conjectural original length of the sound-box. The pillar seems to be from a considerably larger harp.

The decoration of the three parts is somewhat similar, but not matching, and is by different hands. The neck has traces of blue and gold paint; there are traces of red on the body. The instrument was restored ineptly in the 19<sup>th</sup> cent., but received more sensitive conservation in 1961.

### 3.5 The 'Guinness' harp

The stylised image on bottles of Guinness is derived from the Trinity harp, but the company also owns a historical instrument, a *cláirseach* that once belonged to Denis O'Hampsey, also known as Denis Hempson (1695-1807). O'Hampsey attended the great meeting of harpers in Belfast in 1792, and was the only one there still to play with the old fingernail-technique. His playing, as transcribed by Edward Bunting (1840: 73), informed the Irish harp revival in the early 19<sup>th</sup> cent., and remains the focus of modern investigations of period performance practice e.g. by members of the Historical Harp Society of Ireland.

His instrument, made by Cormac O'Kelly in 1702, is nowadays known as the Downhill harp, and can be viewed at the Guinness Brewery in Dublin. One of Bunting's manuscript note-books details the precise tuning of this harp from low CC (the lowest note of a cello) to high d'' (just over four octaves), and with two strings, the 'sisters' or *na comhluighe* for one note, G (the lowest note of a violin).<sup>35</sup>

According to Bunting (1840: 78) the Downhill is built out of 'white willow' (willow), but Maura Scannell examined the harp in 1963, and following microscopic analysis, the wood was identified as European alder, *alnus glutinosa*,

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<sup>35</sup> Bunting MS 29: 153.

a medium hard-wood used nowadays in the bodies of electric guitars.<sup>36</sup> Many modern copies of this instrument have been made in poplar or willow, as part of an instrument-building program promoted by HHSI (see ‘3.1 Willow’ above).

### 3.6 The Otway harp

The low-headed Otway harp (kept in storage at Trinity College but not on display to the public) is an intriguing puzzle. Chadwick (2008) suggests that this low-headed instrument might be dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Rimmer (1984) declares it to be 17<sup>th</sup>-cent., without adducing evidence. Armstrong (1904: 78) noticed that the decorative sound-hole rosettes are similar to those on the high-headed Downhill harp, made by Cormac O’Kelly in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (see above). Antonenko notes similarities in the chisel-work, too.

What may be Cormac’s name is roughly carved into the back of the pillar, together with distinct figures that have usually been transcribed as 1410. That date is utterly implausible, of course. But viewed upside-down and left-handed, the inscription reads convincingly as 1710. The form of the 7 and its cross-bar (unsatisfactory as a 4) corresponds to the 7 carved on the Downhill.

Armstrong (1904) suggests that Cormac O’Kelly might have rebuilt an older harp: it might also be a composite, since the pillar and neck are beautifully decorated, whereas the box is plain, apart from the rosettes. Bunting (1840: 76) states that the harp is built out of ‘red sallow from the bog’ (willow). There has so far been no modern analysis, so we do not know if this suggestion is any more reliable than his off-target guess for the Downhill.

## 4. Beyond Ireland

In Scotland from at least the 15<sup>th</sup> cent. onwards, two types of harp co-existed – wire-strung *clarsha* and gut-strung *harp* – alongside lutes and other renaissance instruments. Armstrong (1904: 142-54) transcribes payroll entries of the Scottish court, from which it can be seen that *clarsha*-players are fewer in number, but better paid than mere *harpists*. During the 17<sup>th</sup> cent., musicians in Scotland still enjoyed aristocratic patronage. *Clarsha*-players are professionals, sighted, and presumably able to read music.

In Ireland, however, the Penal Laws enacted against Catholics destroyed the great families that had previously maintained positions for musicians. Laws even targeted musicians themselves. Irish *cláirseach*-players were forced to become itinerant, providing popular music and general entertainment in return

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<sup>36</sup> The report is mentioned in a letter dated 24 April 1963 from William O’Sullivan (Keeper, Art and Industrial Division) to Leslie Luke Esq. of Guinness (Guinness Archive, file GDB/CO04.04/0014) but the whereabouts of this report, or whether it even still exists, is not presently known. The letter states: “She [Maura Scannell] identified the wood as Alder (*Alnus*) all through on the soundbox, forepillar and harmonic curve”. More recent analysis confirms her finding, see Billinge 2010.

for food, wine, whiskey, clothes and somewhere to lodge for a few weeks. Families aware of the old traditions offered a warm welcome to the best harpists, but payroll records mostly show payments in kind, whereas other musicians are paid in hard cash. Inevitably, the old Gaelic harp repertoire was gradually lost, replaced by lighter music: popular tunes and dance rhythms.

#### 4.1.1 Peter Holman's survey

Peter Holman's survey (1987) of 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. harp-players in England – members of the court ensemble variously known as the Private Musick, the Consorte, or the Lutes and Voices – traces an unbroken line of teachers and pupils back to the Irish harpist Cormack McDermott, who died in 1618. Not until the Restoration in 1660 does His Majesty appoint a 'harper for the Italian harp'.<sup>37</sup>

McDermott was sighted, and seems to have read music, freeing him from the limitations of the traditional aural repertoire of Gaelic variation formulas, and allowing him to join with the other members of the Private Musick in courtly chamber music. It was for McDermott's successors that court composer William Lawes wrote a large collection of pieces for the 'harp consort' – a quartet of violin, viola da gamba, theorbo and Irish harp<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, one of McDermott's compositions is taken as the theme for Lawes' variations.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.1.2 English courtly ensembles

A similar combination of instruments – gamba, lute and Irish harp – accompanied singing at a Whitehall banquet for the French Ambassador in 1619: Nicholas Lanier both sang and played lute 'excellently'.<sup>40</sup> We may reasonably assume that Lanier performed some of his own compositions, courtly songs modelled on Italian monody.<sup>41</sup>

As part of *The Irish Masque at Court* (1613) a dozen gentlemen performed 'a dance in their Irish mantles to a solemn music of harps', and a bard sings a song to two harps<sup>42</sup>. In this masque, the Irish harp is cast in a character role, as an emblem of Irish culture. But in other masques, an Irish harp appears amongst large numbers of viols, lutes and voices, as a fully naturalised member of English courtly ensembles.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Italian harp was known in England in the 1630s. Harp-virtuoso Jean le Felle, harpist to Charles I's French wife, Henrietta, played the Italian triple harp *en perfection* (Mersenne 1636) and appeared as Orpheus in Davenant's *Temple of Love* (1635).

<sup>38</sup> The complete harp consorts are edited in Achtman 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Holman's contention that the Lawes Consorts were originally played on Irish harp (rather than gut-strung Italian triple harp) is still disputed by players of gut-strung harp. But see Cunningham 2008: 148: "the triple harp idea does not hold up to scholarly scrutiny".

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Sir Gerrard Herbert to Sir Dudley Carleton (24 May 1619), cited in Cunningham 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Lanier's complete works are edited in Callon 1994.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Irish Masque at Court* 1613, edited in Orgel 1975.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. harpist Thomas Bedoes in *The Triumph of Peace* (1634), see Sabol 1966, 1982.

### 4.1.3 Denmark

A 1622 painting of musicians at the court of Christian IV in Denmark shows another quartet, with flute, gamba, large lute and Irish harp. The harpist is Darby Scott, one of many foreign musicians including lutenist John Dowland, brought to Christian's artistic and cosmopolitan court.

### 4.1.4 Chromatic Harps

To play all this courtly music, some solution must have been found for the chromatic notes, not usually found on Irish harps. In particular, Lawes' consorts are highly chromatic. In Germany, Praetorius' 1620 encyclopaedia of musical instruments, *Theatrum Instrumentorum*, gives a chromatic tuning for Irish harp.<sup>44</sup>

### 4.1.5 Cloyne harp

The surviving fragments of the Dalway harp, now known as the Cloyne harp, made in 1621 by Donnchadh Fitz Teigh for Sir John Fitzedmond Fitzgerald of Cloyne,<sup>45</sup> have extra tuning pins on the neck, perhaps for chromatic strings. Billinge and Shaljean (1987) suggest a chromatic tuning for this instrument, and a fully chromatic conjectural reconstruction was built – in willow! – by Tim Hobrough and used for Andrew Lawrence-King's recording of Lawes' music with the ensemble, *The Harp Consort* (Lawrence-King 1995).<sup>46</sup>

## 4.2 Priceless relics?

While any museum artefact carries fascinating information, we should resist the temptation to regard every surviving harp as a masterpiece of its own time, no matter how interesting they are to us now. We have already seen that the oldest surviving instrument in Ireland has been assembled from what may be unrelated parts. In general, surviving instruments are atypical – most of the old harps did not survive. Those that do come down to us might have been kept for their beautiful decorations, or survived because they were more strongly built, very little played, or quickly broken and then forgotten: none of these factors imply high quality of sound.

During the intervening centuries, the wood has shrunk and warped, and damage has been repaired, sometimes expertly, often ineptly. Many instruments have been re-assembled or re-constructed with varying degrees of accuracy. Surviving harps are therefore problematical, as sources of information from which to construct modern replicas. They must be studied, but carefully, and with all the resources of modern technology and scholarship.

<sup>44</sup> Praetorius (ibid). The tuning given is somewhat problematic, but at least partially chromatic.

<sup>45</sup> Chadwick 2004-2014. The harp has the inscription EGO SUM REGINA CITHARARUM (I am the Queen of Harps), confirming the use of *cithara* for *cláirseach* i.e. Irish harp in 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. Ireland.

<sup>46</sup> An excerpt from this recording can be accessed at <http://www.theharpc Consort.com/#!myths-demystified/cld6k>. A seminar on the Dalway/Cloyne harp at Scoil 2014 is reported in Lawrence-King 2014 *Regina Cithararum*.



#### 4.2.1 Two earliest harps in Scotland

The two earliest harps in Scotland, the Queen Mary harp and the Lamont harp, have been examined more closely than any other surviving Irish harps. Reviewing the evidence emerging from Karen Loomis' on-going, high-technical investigation,<sup>47</sup> Antonenko considers that the Lamont might almost be seen as a perfect example of how n o t to make a Gaelic harp. The timber has been badly selected, so that the grain runs in the wrong direction almost everywhere. In particular, the box was hollowed out of the wrong side of the log, leaving very weak wood to support the tension of the strings. Predictive angles, meant to soak up the tension at the three main joints, were applied in the wrong sense and the resulting gaps were packed with dried grass. The box seems to have been made from fresh, unseasoned wood, as evidenced by the depth to which string stoppers bit into the soft material, and by the particular way in which a piece of broken string remained stuck in a string-hole.

However interesting this might be for researchers, the result was disastrous for the harp-builder. The harp collapsed catastrophically, probably soon after the strings were first tensioned. It was very roughly repaired, and then broke again several times in different places. At first glance, the harp is well finished, but closer examination reveals its chequered history: it is full of metal plates and bolts, some of which have caused further problems. Inside the box, Loomis found the date 1451, which is consistent with the accepted chronology of similar instruments (Loomis 2013).

#### 4.2.2 'Queen Mary' harp

Edinburgh's so-called 'Queen Mary' harp (there is no solid historical evidence to support the traditional connection to Mary Queen of Scots) is outwardly similar to Dublin's Trinity harp. Closer inspection shows that it also combines elements of different originals, and the number of strings at the neck does not match the number of holes in the soundbox. But in this case, it seems that the new parts were replacements for broken elements, and the harp was played in its final state. Cautiously, but very plausibly, Loomis (2013) suggests a date circa 1489, by comparison of decorative features with a stone cross.

Loomis' analysis of CT (three-dimensional x-ray), x-ray fluorescence and scanning electron microscopy – energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy scans and close visual inspection continues to provide fascinating information, which now needs to be combined with detailed knowledge of building methods and playing techniques to develop a rounded understanding of these instruments.

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<sup>47</sup> Loomis' early findings were reported at Scoil 2011 and written up in Loomis 2012. Subsequent findings were reported at Scoil 2013, and will be published in her forthcoming PhD dissertation.

### 4.3 Europe

Research on Irish harps outside Scotland and Ireland has scarcely begun, but the instrument was known throughout continental Europe. In Germany, several dictionaries around the year 1700 give the principal definition of *Harfe* as an Irish harp, relegating what we today consider to be the ‘normal’ gut-strung harp – known in this period as *Davidsharfe* – into third place, behind the psaltery-like *arpanetta* or *Spitzharfe*. This trend shows a marked change from 1620, when Praetorius defined the gut-strung instrument as the *gemeine Harfe* – the normal, common harp.

#### 4.3.1 Rembrandt’s Saul and David

Rembrandt’s first (1630) version of his famous painting of King Saul shows David playing an Irish harp, distinguishable by its particular shape and style of construction. We observe the characteristically wide angle between the strings and the soundboard; ribs on the soundboard for extra strength; metal shoes to protect the soundboard against the metal strings (gut-strung harps have wooden string pegs instead); the soundboard narrower at the bottom than at the top; a reinforced head and the typical metal plates for the tuning pins and pillar joints. In the 1660s, Rembrandt painted a second account of this biblical harp story. This later version shows a small, diatonic gut-strung harp: lightweight and slender in build, designed for the lower tension of its gut strings. More research is needed to understand the changing use of Irish and gut-strung harps in different countries.

### 5. Research-based craftsmanship

Only the two Scottish harps have been investigated with modern technology. The Trinity was last examined in 1961. The best investigation of most other Irish harps dates back to Armstrong (1904). They all await close examination with the rigour expected of modern research. Identification of wood types, analysis of chisel marks and wear marks will yield rich data, debunking prevalent myths, and establishing a reliable evidence base for a new understanding of the Irish harp.

With the benefit of such increased knowledge, it would be fascinating to make a more accurate reconstruction of the type of instrument played by Ireland’s most famous harper of all time, Turlough O’Carolan (1670-1738). Hobrough’s reconstruction, heard on the 1996 CD *Carolan’s Harp*, represents the state of knowledge at that time.<sup>48</sup> For more recent recordings (Savall/Lawrence-King 2009, 2011), this replica has been restrung according to Chadwick’s advice, and re-voiced by Antonenko with delicate adjustments to the interior carving. But it does not match the dimensions and number of strings of

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<sup>48</sup> See Lawrence-King 1996. This recording illustrates many of the ideas mentioned below, and the booklet discusses performance practice for Carolan in greater depth.

its historical model, and of course – like most reconstructions so far – it is built anachronistically in springy, bendy willow, instead of stable hardwood. We can only imagine the change in sound characteristics...

More experimentally, Trinity College's trinity of early harp fragments could provide sufficient information for a conjectural reconstruction of two or three 15<sup>th</sup>-cent. Irish harps, restoring to us from out of the mists of time the sound-world of the ancient Gaelic harpers. There are many recent and well-intentioned reconstructions of the assemblage currently displayed in Dublin. But these are mostly in willow and poplar, and they copy what we now consider to be a problematic original.

Musicians – specialists in historically informed performance – are eagerly awaiting instruments with which to present these ancient repertoires in their original sound-worlds. Having abandoned some cherished myths, we now know the historical Irish harp rather better. And if we link careful examination to expert knowledge and skilled craftsmanship, we would be able to build m u c h better.

## 6. The sound world of the Irish harp

Probably most players of the historical Irish harp, or even of the modern Celtic harp, are tempted to imagine themselves as re-embodying Tristan, Brian Boru and the mythical bards of ancient tradition, playing a primeval and mystical repertoire of Gaelic melodies preserved unchanged from a far-distant golden age. There certainly was such a repertoire, but apart from a few tantalising hints, it is now almost entirely lost to us, for it was handed down aurally, many of the harpists being blind anyway.

Speculation about ancient Gaelic repertoire has focused around related sources from outside Ireland and for other instruments: the Welsh *Ap Huw* manuscript (for harp with gut or horse-hair strings) with its decorative variations on modal sequences;<sup>49</sup> the Scottish pibroch style (for bagpipes) of decorative variations on slow tunes; harp tunes appearing in Scottish and English lute and viola da gamba sources. All of these suggest a performing style with quick, short articulations decorating a slow melody. The 'animated manner' of Irish harpers has been noticed from the 12<sup>th</sup>-cent. – Gerald of Wales' 'not slow and solemn... but rapid and lively'<sup>50</sup> – to the 19<sup>th</sup> – Bunting's 'spirited, lively and energetic [...] more [...] than [...] languid and tedious'.<sup>51;52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> British Museum Additional MS 14905, see Greenhill (1995-2000).

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Page 1987: 229 *Non... tarda et morose... verum velox et praeceps*.

<sup>51</sup> Bunting (1840: 19) reporting on the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival.

<sup>52</sup> See music example 1: Pibroch-style on Irish harp. All music examples are found at <http://www.theharpcsort.com/#!myths-demystified/c1d6k>.

## 6.1 Harp meetings in Belfast c. 1800

The period from which we begin to have reasonable amounts of hard information is around the year 1800, with the great harp meetings in Belfast, and with Bunting and other researchers collecting tunes from itinerant harpers, recording them in manuscript note books and publishing them in romantic arrangements. But by this date only one player survived to demonstrate the old fingernail-technique – Denis O’Hampsey, a centagenarian – and the repertoire itself had also changed dramatically.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.2.1 Turlough O’Carolan

The best-known historical player of the Irish harp is undoubtedly Turlough O’Carolan, celebrated as the godfather of Irish traditional music. Like a famous painter, his name has attracted the attribution of many pieces that he probably did not compose, of several that he certainly did not compose, and of a handful that he most likely never heard! But as a personal friend of Jonathan Swift and Dr Delaney, and a welcome house guest throughout half the island of Ireland, Carolan, the poet, prankster and player of the Irish harp was a celebrity, a legend in his own times.<sup>54</sup>

### 6.2.2 Sullivan’s edition of Carolan’s compositions

Flourishing around the cusp of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Carolan’s career spans a crucial period in the history of music for the Irish harp, during which the old Gaelic repertoire died away, and the new baroque style developed within an aural, essentially unwritten, tradition. But the lack of contemporary sources, and the desire to characterise his music as ‘ancient’ and ‘bardic’ has led to considerable misunderstanding of the appropriate performance practice.

Sullivan’s pioneering complete edition of Carolan’s compositions was published in 1958, at a time when the instrument’s identity as a national symbol made it a focus of political tension. Today, in more peaceful times, an updated edition of the music is long overdue, to complement Sullivan’s fine assessment of the documentary and literary sources. Editorial standards for 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. music have changed drastically in the half-century since Sullivan’s work; a new generation of historically informed performers demands more period information and less editorial intervention; and most early music specialists today would prefer a facsimile of the original sources, illuminated by an informed commentary.

Sullivan’s preferred sources for Carolan’s music were the manuscript collections of the early 19<sup>th</sup> cent., noted down by such researchers as Bunting and Forde from the playing of fiddlers, flautists and a few old harpists.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See music example 2: Gaelic Repertoire in Bunting 1840.

<sup>54</sup> See music example 3: Carolan’s Farewell.

<sup>55</sup> Bunting (1796, 1809, 1840) published Irish harp music in romanticised arrangements for pianoforte, but the original material shows through more clearly in his field note-books. MS29 is a

Those 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. collectors were well-intentioned, but some hundred years had passed since Carolan's heyday, and his tunes had inevitably changed as they were passed from one player to another in the aural tradition. Forde collated many variants of individual tunes, showing how different musicians might play the 'same melody' in duple or triple metre, in major or minor mode, with the first interval leading upwards or downwards. Virtually nothing was reliably fixed, but the general tendency – in line with the broad trends of the aesthetic of the time – was to simplify and make more symmetrical the quirky irregularities of Carolan's 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. style.

We can observe clearly the change in performing style by examining a few pieces by Carolan which were published in the 18<sup>th</sup> cent., relatively soon after his death.<sup>56</sup> These early prints are noticeably different from the variants recorded in 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. manuscripts – they are remarkably consistent and they include bass lines, whereas the versions noted down from fiddlers and flautists vary enormously and are melody-only.

### 6.2.3 Carolan's bass lines

As his contemporaries remarked,<sup>57</sup> Carolan's bass lines are highly idiosyncratic, utterly different from the conventional style of European baroque music in the age of George Friderik Handel. In Handel's style, bass lines move independently of the melody: to move in parallel would be a grave error of musical grammar. But Carolan's harp basses move almost entirely in 'forbidden' parallels: the rest of time they make highly 'illegal' clashes against the melody.

Not surprisingly, Sullivan rejected the 18<sup>th</sup>-cent. prints with their strange bass-lines as 'corrupt'. It hardly helped that several of them were published in England, a country regarded by many Irishmen in 1958 as untrustworthy and unsympathetic to Irish ideals. But today we have the opportunity to reassess those 18<sup>th</sup>-cent. sources on their own terms. Their parallel bass-lines are a relic of the medieval technique of 'heterophony', in which several instruments (or in this case, the harpist's left and right hands) would play the same melody, but in slightly different ways, all at the same time. You can still hear this effect, in the playing of a traditional Irish band. So it is that Carolan's bass-line mostly parallels the melody, with the two lines clashing sharply where they differ.<sup>58</sup>

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particularly rich source of unfiltered information, offering a direct view of musical sketches that are presented with more polish, but also with considerable adaptation, in the publications.

<sup>56</sup> The most intriguing printed collection has 23 compositions, but the title page is missing, encouraging speculative identification with various lost publications. HHSI now refers to it as the 'Carolan Fragment' and the watermark dates the paper it is printed on to 1842.

<sup>57</sup> Sullivan (1958) traces many sources of anecdotes of Carolan's life and times. Bunting (1840) prints similar anecdotes for many other historical harpists, but with less rigorous analysis. All of this material requires re-evaluation according to modern standards of research methodology.

<sup>58</sup> See music example 4: Melody and Bass in the Carolan Fragment c. 1842.

### 6.2.4 Carolan's legacy

The changing circumstances of harpers in Ireland, already mentioned, go a long way towards explaining the change in musical style from the bardic mysteries of Gaelic variations to the light, charmingly melodic and enticingly rhythmic appeal of Carolan's popular tunes. Although the harpers embodied the ancient Gaelic tradition, they actually earned their living by entertaining middle-class patrons on both sides of the religious/ethnic divide. The grand old Catholic aristocracy was by now in irreversible decline.

Carolan himself was only of mediocre abilities as a harpist – his real talent lay in witty poetry and improvised bon mots, in sparkling repartee and catchy tunes, spontaneously invented or unhesitatingly renamed in honour of the hosts of the day.<sup>59</sup> Harpers and poets alike were forced to go down-market, in order to survive in the harsh environment of the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. Penal Laws.

We can trace the influence of ancient Gaelic music in the gapped scales and modal harmonies of 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. harp tunes. But Carolan's rhythms are unmistakably French, with the elegant swing of Louis XIV's minuets, the dominant international style of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile some of his melodies are fashionably Italian, the emerging style of the early 18<sup>th</sup> cent., with all the energy of an Italian violinist's *giga*. So the Irish jig itself and the irresistible mirth and merriment of Carolan's *planxties*, far from being relics of Gaelic antiquity, are an international amalgam of French dancing and Italian fiddling, dating clearly from around the year 1700, but with some fascinating hints of the older, indigenous style.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus whilst we can no longer support the romantic view of Carolan as the font and origin of 'ancient Gaelic harp music', we can justly celebrate his achievement in uniting French and Italian styles; art-music and popular appeal; an ancient instrument, a medieval performance-style and baroque ornamentation. And we can still hear the echoes of Carolan's musical melting-pot, in the internationally popular and instantly recognisable lilt of today's Irish music.

Much still remains to be done. Modern studies of rhythm and tempo in French and Italian baroque music should be re-examined for their relevance to Carolan's borrowing of those national styles for his harp music. The latest insights into instrument construction, summarised above, will lead to the building of better harps. Deeper understanding of period harp technique (from detailed studies of seventeenth-century Italian and eighteenth-century French harp methods) will help us play more appropriately. Increasing knowledge of

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<sup>59</sup> Sullivan (1958) documents several examples of Carolan's practical joking and verbal humour.

historical emotions, in particular from studies of baroque acting and historical medical science, will help us find the expressive heart of this old music.<sup>60</sup>

A recently published modern tutor (Brown 2012) for Irish harp brings together the practical experience of some of the leading players of our time.<sup>61</sup> To this should be added the historical evidence now emerging about Irish harp construction and historical harp-playing techniques, in order to develop teaching methods that are not only practically effective, but demonstrably rooted in period practice.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, we should continue to create conjectural reconstructions of ancient Gaelic music, supported by better academic information and better reproductions of historical Irish harps. We will never know for sure precisely how this lost repertoire originally sounded, but we should certainly continue to experiment, combining artistic sensitivity with intellectual rigour.

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### Abbreviations

<b>DSL-DOST</b>	<i>Dictionary of the Scots Language – Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue</i> ( <a href="http://www.dsl.ac.uk">http://www.dsl.ac.uk</a> )
<b>HHSI</b>	Historical Harp Society of Ireland
<b>HIP</b>	Historically Informed Performance (also known as Early Music, formerly known as 'authentic' performance)

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<sup>60</sup> Studies of the History of Emotions offer a particular lens through which to view many aspects of period culture. This new, interdisciplinary approach is particularly fruitful for period performance practice.

<sup>61</sup> But note that musical, documentary and iconographical evidence roundly contradicts the 'coupled hands' approach favoured by some modern wire-harp players. The historical trend is rather that treble and bass – already contrasted, by Gerald of Wales in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Page 1987: 229) – became ever more separated until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. 'Coupled hands' is a modern solution to the beginner-harpist's problem of playing fast 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. tunes on a medieval instrument. Historical sources do mention occasional crossing of the hands, as a special effect.

<sup>62</sup> See Lawrence-King 2014 *Historical Technique for Early Irish Harps*.

<b>LEIA</b>	<i>Lexique Étymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien</i> (Vendryes 1987)
<b>NLI</b>	National Library of Ireland
<b>Scoil</b>	<i>Scoil na gCláirseach: The Annual Summer School of HHSI</i>

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For further information see **Historical Harp Society of Ireland** (<http://www.irishharp.org/>) and **wirestrungharp.com** (<http://www.wirestrungharp.com>).

### Music Examples

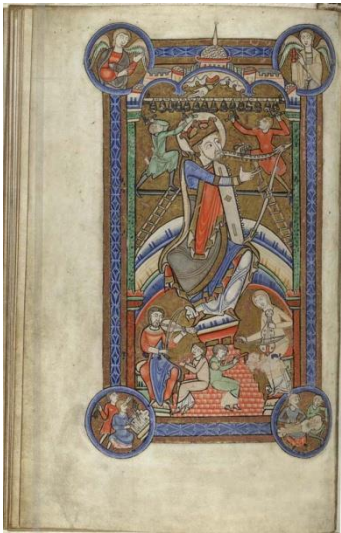
The music examples for this article can be accessed at <http://www.theharpconsort.com/#!/myths-demystified/c1d6k>

Further excerpts from *Carolan's Harp* (Lawrence-King 1996) can be heard at and individual tracks downloaded from <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/carolans-harp/id261754865>

## Appendix: Illustrations



Illus. 1. The 'Trossingen Lyre' found in a warrior's grave, Germany 6<sup>th</sup>. cent. (Archäologisches Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg): Old Irish *cruit* might mean an instrument of this type.



Illus. 2. King David tuning what is assumed to be a gut-strung harp, from the Hunterian Psalter, folio 21v, England c. 1170 (University of Glasgow): 12<sup>th</sup>-cent. Latin *cithara* might mean an instrument of this type.



Illus. 3. 'Winged Maiden' Portable Irish Harp by John Eagan of Dublin, c.1821 (Royal Academy of Music Museum, London): note the ditals on the fore-pillar.



Illus. 4. Modern Celtic Harp. 'Fianna' by Rainer Thureau, Germany 2014: note the semitone levers on the neck.



Illus. 5. *Cláirseach*. Trinity College 'Brian Boru' harp, 15<sup>th</sup> cent. (Trinity College Library, Dublin): such instruments might first have appeared in Ireland in the late 14<sup>th</sup> cent.