

IRISH WORDS FOR 'ALPHABET'

In his *Liosta Focal as Ros Muc* (1974) Professor T. S. Ó Máille lists the word *aibiosaíos* [a:b'i:si:s] with the meaning *an aibítir* and occurring in the plural, as in the phrase *Níor fheolaim sé na háibiosaíos*. The existence of the word has not been recognized by the compilers of *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1978), edited by Niall Ó Domhnaill. There the word *aibítir* is given with two meanings: 1. alphabet, 2. ABC, rudiments; and the exemplary phrase '*aibítir chrábhaidh*, elements of piety', is appended. A cross-reference to *aibítir* is given under the head-word *aibidil* beside which the form *aibidir* is cited. Neither *aibítir* nor *aibidil* (*aibidir*) is given for 'rudiments' in de Bhaldraithe's *English-Irish Dictionary* (1959), and the only word given for 'alphabet' is *aibítir*. The Irish phrase given by de Bhaldraithe for 'rudiments of learning' is *uraiceacht léinn*, the first element of which is a modern reflex of earlier *airaiccecht* (with by-form *airaiccept*) which was coined in the Old Irish period by combining the native prefix *a(i)r-* with a word based on Latin *acceptum* or *accepta*.¹ Phrases containing *ABC* given by de Bhaldraithe are 'He is only in the ABC, níl sé ach sa mhiontosach', 'ABC (guide), eolaí aibítre', and 'As simple as ABC, chomh furasta lena bhfaca tú riamh'.²

In Mac Cionnaith's *Foclóir Béarla γ Gaedhilge* (1935) the forms given for 'alphabet' are *aibghitir*, for which Bergin's *Stories from Keating* was the source cited, and *aibítir*, which was given on the authority of the Oireachtas translation staff. When we go back to Dinneen's *Irish-English Dictionary* (1927) we find *aibghitir* 'the alphabet' with a cross-reference to *aibidil*. The entry for the latter is: *aibidil*, -dle, f., alphabet, *an a. léighinn*, the elements of learning, *aibidir*, -dreach, f., id.

Entries from a few earlier dictionaries may be noted here. Edward O'Reilly (2nd ed., 1864) has '*aibcitir*, *aibgitir*, *aiblitir*, the Irish alphabet' and '*aibidil*, the alphabet'. John O'Brien (1768) has '*aibghitir* or *aibchitir* rectius *abchitir* the alphabet, abecedarium' and '*aibidil*, the alphabet'. The Ó Beaglaoich-Mac Cuirtin *English-Irish Dictionary* (1732) gives *aibghitir* for both 'alphabet' and 'ABCE'. And Plunkett in his *Vocabularium* (1662) gives *aibghitir* and *aibidil* under *abecedarium*, and *aibgithir* and *aibidil* under *alphabetum*.

¹ As well as being used for 'primer' the word *airaiccept* seems to have been used in a wider sense in earlier times if we can judge from the heading 'Incipit auraicept Moraind no teccosca Moraind' (*ZCP*, xi, 80.4).

² According to *NED* the term *abc* was in use in English as far back as the thirteenth century. Its use for 'rudiments' in a general sense dates from the end of the fourteenth century. In French, too, *abc* was used in the thirteenth century.

The main purpose of the present article is to consider on a historical basis the words *aibítir* and *aibidil* given by Ó Domhnaill and, in the process, to supplement the information given on the fore-runners of these forms in the *RIA Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, henceforth referred to as *DIL*. However, as a preliminary I propose to say something about the old native term *beithe luis* or (*beithe luis nion*) which belongs to what we might call the Ogamic element of our linguistic terminology. The Ogamic terms are found alongside borrowed terms in *Auraicept na nÉces*, and many of them were retained in the schools of learning of the late medieval period, and some of them were understood even after the break-up of the schools. Adjacent passages in the *Auraicept*³ show us the two terminologies seemingly compartmentalized, one relating to writing with the letters of Latin, the other relating to Ogam script. First we find *Attaat da earnail forsin n-aibgiteir Laitindai .i. guttai ⁊ consain* (312–13) and this is followed by *Atat dano di ernail forsin beithi-luis-nin in oghaim .i. feadha ⁊ taebomnai* (392–3). In the subsequent commentary we find *beithe-luis-nin* shortened to *beithi-luis* (423) and still further to *beithi*⁴ (424).

Just as *aibgitir*, which goes back ultimately to Latin *abecedarium* or the like, is a collective term for all the letters of the Latin alphabet from *a* to *z*, so *beithe luis nin*, which comprises the first, second and fifth letters in the first series of the Ogam alphabet, is used as a term for the Ogam alphabet as a whole. We find statements on these matters in the *Auraicept*. Thus *ata ind aipgitir ina coimtinol no comcengal litrioch cona comfielus archena* (2720–1) 'the alphabet (*aipgitir*) is a collection or combination of letters with all their relations', *bethi-luis-nin ainm d' aipgitir ind ogaim, ar is do is ainm aipgitri don ní doinsgain o a. . . . Bethi-luis-nion ainm aipgitri an ogaim, ar is o beithe doinsgain in ogum* (2798–807) '*beithe luis nin* is the name for the Ogam alphabet, for the name alphabet is applied to what begins with *a*. . . . *beithe luis nin* is the name of the Ogam alphabet for Ogam begins with *b* (*beithe*)'.

In his tract 'De Scriptoribus Hibernicis', which Professor Carney published in *Celtica*, i, An Dubhaltach Mac Fir Bhisigh echoed a great deal of the nonsense about Nimrod's Tower and the origin of the Irish letters which is found in the commentary sections of the *Auraicept*. Referring to the terms *aibgidir*, *carachtaire*, *litir*, *gutha* and

³ I quote from Calder's edition (1917).

⁴ When this paper was presented at a symposium in the School of Celtic Studies in March 1979, Professor G. Mac Eoin put forward the view that *beithe luis nin*, seemingly the first, second and fifth letters of the Ogamic series, derives from an earlier term comprising all five letters of the series: *beithe luis fern sail nin*. If we substitute earlier *u* (= *v*) for *f* and write these according to Latin orthography—*blusn*—we can see how the middle three might be taken in error to be *luis*.

consoin, he said: *An mhéd atá don mhonadh-sin againn as ag teacht le Laidin ar ndul i terce don Ghaoidhelg tarla dúinn iad, ⁊ ní do anaosdocht ar ar tteangaidh* (ll. 279–81) ‘what we have of that sort were acquired with Latin when Irish was becoming impoverished and not because of the youthfulness of our language’. While we need not agree with Mac Fir Bhisigh, we may consider it reasonable to assume that the native scholars who used Ogam writing had a descriptive term for the symbols or letters used in it and, hence, that the term *beithe luis nin* or the like may be older than the Irish word *aibgitir* rather than modelled on it.

The word *fid* ‘wood, tree’ was used as a general term for ‘letter’ in the Ogam terminology, but in the passage I quoted from the *Auraicept* it obviously has the more restricted meaning ‘vowel’. Conversely the word *nin*, which is primarily a word for ‘ash-tree’ (more generally *uindis*, later *fuinseóg*) and secondarily the name for the letter *n* in the Ogam alphabet, is also used in a more general way for any letter; so in Cormac’s Glossary we find an entry *nin .i. liter*, and there are many more examples from the Middle Irish period. A late example quoted in *DIL* (NOP, col. 48) is in a scribal note in BLib. Add. 15582 which was written in 1563, *sin drochnin duit*, which O’Grady (*Cat.*, p. 267) took to mean ‘there’s bad handwriting for you’. From just a century later we can add the word *nionord* which Plunkett gave under the head-words *abecedarium* and *alphabetum*. In the first instance he has *nionord, ord na litreach mar a tá a. b. c. etc.* In the second he has *nionord, nionsgód, ord na litreach, mar a tá a. b. c. etc. diaigh a ndiaigh*. Despite Plunkett’s use of the Ogam term *nin*, his mention of the letters following in order as in a. b. c. shows that he was thinking in the classical or European tradition.

An instance of the combination of the two terminologies in an Early Modern Irish text is the passage in *IGT*, i, § 4, where the origins of the letters are discussed: *ón chúigear ar .xx. dob airde céim ⁊ dob oireaghdha do sgoil Féníus ainmnightheair litre na haibghitre oghuim . . . gonadh úatha atáid cóig aicme chúigir san bheithe luis* ‘the letters of the Ogam alphabet are named from the twenty-five men whose rank was the highest and who were the most illustrious in the school of Féníus so that it is from them that there are five classes of five in the alphabet’. In this connection I must mention an item which I published some years ago from the fourteenth-century Ádhamh Ó Cianáin manuscript in the National Library of Ireland, G 3. This is a list of verbal nouns⁵ which are described as being *Do rē̃r uird aibidreachi. persa nō dhō ar gach fidh* ‘in alphabetical order . . . that is, one or two verbs to each letter’. The list begins *breth, brudh, búdh, lochrughadh, faisgin, fásdodh . . . snim, snam, nochtadh . . .*, the order of the initial letters in

⁵ See *Éigse*, xi, 287–8.

the whole item being *blfsndtcmgraoueieouia*. It is obvious that the arrangement is according to the Ogam alphabet in which the first four series are B L V S N, H D T C Q, M G N G R Z, A O U E I. Since archaic *v* had developed into *f*, words beginning with *f* are listed in third place which V occupied in the Ogam alphabet. Ogam H N G and Z are, naturally enough, unrepresented in our list since the first two do not occur as initials while the third does not occur at all. Earlier C and Q are represented by Modern Irish *c*. Since *p* had no place in the Ogamic series, no words beginning with it are listed. The occurrence of two sets of examples with vocalic initials may seem puzzling. The explanation is that the compiler listed separately words which he regarded as beginning with one or other of the *foirfheada* which made up the fifth of the Ogamic series and which corresponded in Latin-style writing to digraphs or trigraphs, for which the bardic grammarians used the terms *de-fhoghrach* and *tre-fhoghrach*. So at the end of his list we find words with initial (i) *ea-*, (ii) *oi-*, (iii) *uai-*, (iv) *ia-*, *io-*, and (v) *ai-*, *ae-*, that is, front vowels preceding a velarized consonant, back vowels preceding a palatalized consonant, and the diphthongs *ua(i)*, *ia* and *ae (ao)*.

I turn now to the word from which Modern Irish *aibítir* is derived, that is *ab(b)gitir*, *apgitir*, etc. In view of the delight that medieval Irish scholars took in etymologies, it is not surprising that the word *aibgitir* is dealt with at some length in the commentary section of the *Auraicept* and that we get echoes in the law commentaries and in medieval glossaries.⁶ In the *Auraicept* we find: *Forsin n-aibgitir .i. forsind epe audair no forsind epe ic duar .i. ic foclaib no forsin epi ic tur : no ondi as apigitorium .i. in tinnscedul : no is ed aibgiges a mbescna do chach : no aipgitir .i. abcor : no is ed aipgiges a Gaedhelg, incipit a Laitin, apix a Greic, a be ce de dybum a Ebra* (349–53; cf. 2710–23), 'In the alphabet, i.e. in the author's selection, or in the selection of words, that is of vocables, or in the selection at [the] Tower, or from the word *apigitorium*, that is, the beginning, or it is that which ripens their speech for everyone, or alphabet, that is, placing *a b*, or it is that which ripens in Irish, *incipit* in Latin, *apix* in Greek, *a be ce de dybum* in Hebrew'.

We may disregard the fanciful etymologizing, but the supposed Latin form *apigitorium* merits some comment. I should add that the different manuscripts of the *Auraicept* have some interesting variants. Thus the Latin term has variant *aipcitorium*, and variants of the Irish word include *aipcítir* (gen. *aipcitre*), and *aipgidil*. Modern scholars, including Thurneysen, Pedersen and Vendryes, give *abecedarium* as the ultimate source of Irish *aibgitir*. After observing that post-vocalic

⁶ Thus in O'Davoran's Glossary we find *Aibgíter .i. tinscetall nó bunaidh, ut est .iiii.a aibgítre gaise .i. cethre bunaidh na hamainnsi*; see *Corp. Iur. Hib.*, 1466, 11–12.

stops in Latin loan-words become voiced spirants in Irish, Thurneysen observes (*Gramm.*, § 915) 'In *abbgitir* (pl. *apgitri*) "abecedarium, alphabet" (W. *egwyddor*) the isolative pronunciation *a-be-(ce)-de-* may have had some influence'. Latin sources seem to have a considerable variety of forms of the word: *abecedarius* m., *abecedarium* n., *abced-*, *abezed-*, *abcturium*, *abecturium*, and so on.⁷ Lewis and Short (*A Latin Dictionary*) give a feminine *abecedaria* with meaning 'elementary instruction' as distinct from *abecedarium* (neut.) 'the alphabet'. Their authority for *abecedaria* is the grammarian Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (obit A.D. 550). The meaning 'elements' is well attested for *aibgitir* in the earliest Irish sources. And this brings me back to *apigitorium* (*aipcitorium*) of the *Auraicept*.

In his account of the 'acta' of St. Patrick, Tírechán on three occasions uses forms which are similar to those cited from the *Auraicept*: *scripsit Patricius abgitorium* 37.3, *scripsit illi abgitorium* 47.2, and, in the earliest instance, a plural *abgatorias* 6.1. Elsewhere he uses the phrase *scripsit elementa* (or *elimenta*) 13.1, 33.1, 43.1, 45.2. Dr. Bieler, to the paragraphs of whose edition in *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (1979) the numbers above refer, has taken *abgitorium* to mean 'alphabet-tables'. In his 'Commentary' he describes the Hiberno-Latin *abgatoria* or *abgitorium* as 'a re-Latinization of Ir. *ab(b)gitir* . . . a loan-word from Latin *abecedarium*'. I must say that I am inclined to think that a Hiberno-Latin form, such as *abgitorium* or *abgatoria*, is more likely to have been the immediate source of Irish *aibgitir* than the reverse.

Tírechán's Latin phrases *scripsit abgitorium* and *scripsit elementa* are paralleled in the Irish life of Patrick by such phrases as *scríbhthir abgitir dó* (*Trip.*² 2230). An example of this idiom in a very different context is found in the Old Irish metrical version of the Gospel of Saint Thomas (*Poems of Blathmac*, p. 96). The narrative tells how Zaccharias took Jesus to school to teach him, and it goes on:

Ó ro scríb abbgitir dó as-bert: 'Epir Á'; cenid frecart mac ind rí ro fitir ba má.	When he had written an alphabet for him he said: 'Say A'. Though the son of the King did not answer he knew more.
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When Jesus did not repeat A, Zaccharias struck him and then Jesus replied:

'Air a for-roíchan do chách, a rro-scríbais dom, inna llitre do-rími-siu ro-fetor a son.'	'For, what you have taught to all, what you have written for me, the letters you reckon, I know their names' (<i>lit.</i> 'sound').
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⁷ See *Mittelateinisches Wörterbuch*, p. 19; du Cange, *Glossarium*, pp. 18, 19.

Do-rím Ísu a litre
doäib ar a súil,
cech aí diib co n-a dúil
ocus co n-a rúin.

Jesus recounted his letters for
them before their eyes, each of
them with its element and with
its secret.

As Professor Carney has pointed out in a textual note, this incident is found in the original apocryphal text and we need have no doubt that *abgitir* means 'alphabet table' in this instance.

In *DIL* the meanings given for *aibgitir* are (a) 'alphabet', (b) 'set of alphabetical symbols', and (c) 'Fig. beginnings, elements'. Seven occurrences are listed under (c), the first being the phrase *abgitir crabaith* which occurs in Wb. 33c13 in a gloss on Heb. *uos doceamini quae sint elementa exordii sermonum Dei*. The Old Irish text *Apgitir Crábaid*, dated to the seventh century, contains instruction on how to lead a devout life. In the introduction to his edition in *Celtica*, viii, Vernam Hull pointed out (p. 44) that the author employs the 'catechetical method of instruction'. It may be noted that the title *Apgitir Crábaid* is not found in all the manuscripts. A late example of the figurative use, in association with the primary meaning, is seen in the last section of Gearnon's *Parrthas an Anma* (Lobhain, 1645) where the term *aibghitir sbioradálta* is used in the question and answer *C. Créud as aibghitir sbioradálta ann? F. Nuimhir litreadh na haibghitre coitchinni gus an ccéill rúnda atá a bhfolach ionnta*. This passage is followed by a series of devotional exercises set out in alphabetical order, thus *Adhram . . .*, *Bim . . .*, *Coisreagaim . . .*, and so on, the last beginning *An Uair*. The alphabet consists of the eighteen letters normally used in the 'Irish' alphabet. The editor of the modern edition, Anselm Ó Fachtna, has pointed out (p. 214) that the spiritual alphabet was very much in vogue in the sixteenth century, especially in Spain. A Middle Irish example of the figurative use which could be added to the RIA collection occurs in a secular context in a poem relating to Leinster found in Rawlinson B 502 (83 b 3 ff.) which begins:

Dia ngaba apgitir Lagen
bad léir nos aisnéidfe dóib.

The word *apgitir* here does not seem to have any alphabetical significance as regards presentation, so we may suppose that the author had in mind some meaning such as 'If you recite the beginnings (or "basic information") of the Leinstermen you will tell them to them clearly'.

Before I pass on to the word *aibidil* I must discuss briefly the phonological aspects of *aibitir*. This form, with *i* in the second syllable, could come regularly from Ear. Mod. Ir. *aibghitir*, perhaps through an intermediate form **aibghitir*. However, a post-classical riming example in a poem by the eighteenth-century poet-scribe Seán Ó

Murchadha na Ráithíneach points to a short vowel in the second syllable: *aibghitribh* : *eagnaí* : *neartaigh gaois* : *blasta binn* (*Seán na Ráithíneach* (1954), p. 340).

The consonants represented in Old Irish spelling by *g* and *t* require some comment. The most common Ear. Mod. Ir. spelling, *aibghitir*, indicates that many scribes and scholars of that period took the first of these consonants to be a voiced spirant, /ɣ/, and the second as a voiceless plosive, /t/. However, the spelling *aipcitir*, which is found occasionally, such as in the YBL and BLib. Eg. 88 texts of the *Auraicept*, might be taken to point to /g/ for the first consonant. Spelling with *g* is sometimes used by late scribes. Thus Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin wrote *aibgitir* in NLib.Ire. G 159, p. 30, and *aibigitir* is found in a slightly earlier manuscript, NLib.Ire. G 70, p. 191. More important, perhaps, is the Mac Fir Bhisigh spelling *aibgidir* already referred to, for it has evidence on both the consonants under consideration, the velar and the dental, pointing to a voiced plosive for both.

Only one of the examples quoted in *DIL* shows *-idir*, namely *aibghidir* cited from *Keat.*, i, 66, 1. But others, such as the Mac Fir Bhisigh one, can be found. Thus the Lecan Glossary, where part of the *Auraicept* is quoted, has *aibgidir* (*Arch.*, i, 54, § 201). In a late poem in TCD 1355, 204, we see

Do shaoileas, a fhir na glíbe,	'I thought, o man of the long hair,
gur oirléig[h]is h'aibghidir;	that you recited your alphabet;
measa mar [a-]tā, a chnū chroidhe,	worse it is, o beloved, that <i>a</i> is
ā tar ū nach aithnighir.	not distinguished from <i>u</i> .'

The occurrence in later orthography of variant forms ending in *-itir* and *-idir* calls for a reconsideration of the phonetic value of the consonant written as *t* in this word in Old and Middle Irish. All things considered it seems likely that the consonant was voiced even in the Old Irish period, in which case the regular Ear. Mod. Ir. reflex would have been *aibghidir* which, after the loss of the *gh*, would have become *aibidir* or *aibidir*.⁸ In that case the Modern Irish ending in *-itir* would be irregular and might be explained as being due to the influence of the closely-related word *litir*.

The form *aibidir*, whose possible development has been outlined above, did exist in the Ear. Mod. Ir. period, and it will be considered, along with the form *aibidil*, in this final section. In his discussion of *abgiter* in his *Lexique Étymologique* Vendryes says 'Devenu plus tard *aibidel* f. gén. *aibidle* Contr. et *aibidir* f. gén. *aibidrech* Contr.'. In his *Contributions* Meyer had given only one example of *aibidil*, namely

⁸ It is worth noting that in Ó Kearnaigh's *Aibidil Gaoidheilge, et Caiticíosma* (1571), where the form *aibghitir* occurs six times and *aibghitir* once, the spelling *aibghider* is also found once (p. 10).

Aibidil Cuigni, cited from the Book of Lecan, and one of *aibidir*, namely the gen. *aibidrech*, cited from 'The Battle of Magh Rath'.⁹ We have already seen an earlier example of this last form in the phrase *Do rē r uird aibidreach* in the passage quoted above from the Ó Cianáin manuscript G 3. The form *aibidir* is ignored in *DIL*, but there are four examples of *aibidil*. The fact that the first two of these—from Haicéad and Mac Aingil—are readily recognizable as seventeenth century is liable to give readers a wrong impression of the age of this word-form. The fourth example, quoted from O'Grady's *Catalogue*, is found in a manuscript of 1589, while the third, taken from *Ir. Texts*, v, derives from a manuscript, RIA 23 F 19, which has been described in *RIA Cat.* as '15th century (?)'. This is a medical manuscript and the word *aibidil* occurs in an introductory note: *ammsa naindtidair do tairrnedh a hughduras Auicenna noch do scriobadh a nuniuersite na fisigechta a Sliab Písalain ⁊ arna corugad do reir uird aibidlech o tosach co deredh*. A scribal note which follows this gives the date 1352 as the date of compilation of the book, but this probably refers to the exemplar of 23 F 19.

Several interesting examples of *aibidil* can be added to those in *DIL*. An obvious one is *Aibidil Gaoidheilge, et Caiticiosma*, the title of the first Irish book to be printed in Ireland, Seaán Ó Kearnaigh's 'Catechism' of 1571. Prefixed to the 'catechism' is a section on Irish letters intended as an aid to reading the text. The running title here (pp. 6–10) is *aibghitir*, and both *aibghitir* and *aibidil* are used, without any obvious distinction between them, in the discussion; thus *Roinntear aibghitir na gaoidhelge mar gach aibidil ele* (p. 7), *Sin do naibidil gaoidhelge . . . gach aon chuid fó leth don aibghider*¹⁰ so (p. 10). We can also add the example quoted by Meyer as *Aibidil Cuigne*. This is from the title of a collection of gnomic sayings found in the Book of Lecan (f. 186 b) which was written about 1417–18. Meyer published this text in *Arch.*, iii, 226–30, under the heading 'Das Alphabet des Cuigne mac Emain'. Roland Smith, who published it a second time¹¹ in *ZCP*, xvii, 45–72, said: 'The name Cuigne mac Emain is not, to my knowledge, to be found anywhere else; it is obviously the name not of the original author of the sayings, but of the scribe who brought them together from various sources'. The fact is that the supposed author was Luigne mac Éremóin (for whom see *Corp. Gen. Hib.*, pp. 123, 124, 129), but both Meyer and Smith misinterpreted the heading which, being at the top of the page, has suffered at the hands of a binder. Of the actual

⁹ O'Donovan's edition was based on TCD H. 2. 16, a fifteenth-century manuscript. The version in RIA 24 P 9, written in the seventeenth century by Dáibhidh Ó Duibhgeannáin, has *abghidir* and *aibghidrioch* in the corresponding passages. The word occurs in a preliminary passage whose content relates to the early schools of poetry, but in using the word *aib(gh)idir* the author obviously thought of the Latin alphabet, for he cites *a* as the first letter, just as *Adam*, the name of the first man created, began with *a* (*MR*, p. 92).

¹⁰ For the possible significance of this spelling see p. 105 and n. 8.

¹¹ He wrongly cites YBL as the source instead of Lecan.

text Smith commented: 'The *Aibidil* is not a poem . . . or a manual of any systematic sort, as the title might lead one to suspect . . .'. I do not know on what grounds he associated the meaning 'manual' with the word *aibidil*, but since the text is not in alphabetical form we may assume that *aibidil* here means 'primary knowledge' or the like.

The oldest manuscript examples of *aibidil* that I have noted are in fourteenth-century manuscripts written by members of the Ó Cianáin family. The earliest of these is on f. 74 b of NLib.Ire. G 3 in a poem on the letters of the Ogam alphabet which begins:

A fhir atā ar slicht na suadh 'O you who are of the progeny of the poets
da-nī m'aibidil d'imluadh and who discuss my "alphabet"'.¹²

The others are in two items in an interpolated prose section¹² on f. 13 v of the Book of Magauran (NLib.Ire. G 1200). The first of these, which gives numerical values for letters of the alphabet from A to Y, is headed *Trachtad do reir Ellaisime ar an aibidil andso sis*. The second, which is headed *Trachtadh ele ar an aibidil andso*, deals with divination from the initial letter of personal names. The letters are arranged in groups: (i) a o u e i, (ii) b c d, (iii) p q t, (iv) s l m n r s,¹³ (v) x y z; but the letters f g h j k v w are not included. In all these examples the word *aibidil* seems clearly to mean 'alphabet' in the broad sense of 'collection of letters'. This is also true of another linguistic item in RIA C i 2 (39 a), a vellum manuscript which dates from the fifteenth or sixteenth century. This begins *Ca méd leitir ata san aibidil do reir na nGregach*. A late example in a purely literary context is seen in the following quatrain from one of the poems in O'Rahilly's *Dánta Grádha* (1926 ed., 59, 25–8):

A fhir luighfeas aicise,	'O you who will lie with her, my
mo chros a haithle ar marbhtha,	affliction after I have been mortally
ar litir dot aibidil	wounded, for one letter of your
do-bhéarainn maitheas Banbha.	alphabet I would exchange the
	wealth of Ireland.

It is likely that some meaning other than the literal one is to be attached to the phrase in the third line. The last occurrence of *aibidil* that I mention here is particularly significant for it is in *IGT*, ii, § 184, where it is listed alongside *caibidil* under the headword *fóirithin*, with gen. *-dle/-dleach*.

While *aibidil* is the only one of the various forms discussed above to be found in *IGT*, ii, it seems clear from the use of *aibghitir* (or occasionally, as in *IGT*, i, § 1, *aibghitear*) and *aibidir* in linguistic matter

¹² Lambert McKenna published this material in *Leabhar Méig Shamhradháin*, pp. 436–8. Douglas Hyde had already published the item on divination in *ZCP*, x, 223–4.

¹³ The first *s* is probably due to a scribal slip.

emanating from the bardic schools, that all three forms were accepted in literary Ear. Mod. Ir. We must, therefore, consider their relationship. Semantically there seems to be little difference between them. All three had the meaning 'alphabet', and both *aibghitir* and *aibidil* could, it seems, mean 'elements'. The three words were similar in declension, having alternative genitive forms in *-e* and *-each*. We may recall Vendryes's comment on *abgiter*: 'Devenu plus tard *aibidel* . . . et *aibidir*'. *DIL* says of *aibidil* 'late form of *aibgitir*'. There is, I think, no reason to believe that *aibgitir* is not the ultimate source of *aibidir* and *aibidil*, but a little more must be said about the development of the latter form.¹⁴ I have already argued that Ear. Mod. Ir. *aibidir* could have come regularly from Old Irish *aibgitir*. There are instances in Modern Irish of interchange of *r* and *l*, and so a further development from *aibidir* to *aibidil* would be possible. However, I believe that a contributory factor in the development was the existence of another word used in literary and linguistic terminology, the word *caibidil* which is listed after *aibidil*¹⁵ in *IGT*, ii. This word itself underwent irregular changes between the periods of Old Irish and Early Modern Irish. Borrowed from Latin *capitulum* it appears as *caiptel* in Féilire Oengusa (Prologue, 299, 319), and variant forms and spellings *coiptel*, *coibdel* and *caibtel* are found in the Mid. Ir. period. Trisyllabic *caipitil* (*caibidil*) is found with the meaning 'chapter(-meeting)' in annals for the thirteenth century, e.g. *ALC*, i, 256 (1217), *Ann. Conn.*, 76 (1242), and *AU*, ii, 336 (1265). What might be thought to be a much older example is seen in the text of the Old Irish table of penitential commutations published from RIA 3 B 23 in *Ériu*, xix, by Dr. D. A. Binchy. In § 25 we see *slechtain etar cich di chaibidil*. However, I suspect that the reading *coibdel*, as given by Meyer from Rawl. B. 512 (*RC*, xv, 491, § 32), is nearer the form used originally in the Old Irish tract. Further evidence of the influence of *caibidil* may be seen in forms such as *genidil*, *Corp. Iur. Hib.*, 1590.16 (= BB 335 a), 2255.13 (= NLib.Ire. G 3, 26 b), *ginitil*, *Auraic* 3611, and *geinitli*, *ibid.*, 4847, for earlier *genitiu* (gen. *geniten*) 'genitive case'.

The main purpose of this article has been to clarify the relationship between *aibítir*, *aibidir* and *aibidil* in historical terms. It is clear that the differentiation in form goes back over six hundred years and that it was recognized by the professional literary classes. I have shown that *aibítir* can be traced through Ear. Mod. Ir. *aibghitir* to Old Irish *aibgitir*, if we assume that the *-t-* of Old Irish represented a voiceless plosive. On the other hand unless we have recourse to an explanation

¹⁴ The spelling *aipgidil*, found in Ed. Adv. Lib. I vl. of *Auraic*. 421, shows another mixed form.

¹⁵ The possible connection between the two words was mentioned to me some years ago by Dr. Binchy.

based on some analogical influence, *aibidir*, which is a well-established Ear. Mod. Ir. form, can be explained only by assuming (i) that the Old Irish *-t-* represented a voiced plosive and (ii) that the spirant *-gh-* in the group *-bgh-* was lost. In view of the conservatism of the literary classes as regards retention of spirants, the acceptance of this last development in bardic usage is somewhat surprising. However, a few words showing loss of a spirant can be found in Classical Ear. Mod. Ir. One such is *arís* from earlier *a fhrithisse*. Another is *caoicdhí(o)s* which is found as well as *caoicdhighi(o)s*¹⁶ for earlier *cóicthiges*. In each of these words the loss of the spirant has been accompanied by lengthening of an adjacent vowel, but I have no early evidence of vowel lengthening in *aibidir*. We are left, then, with an exceptional development. Perhaps we should see in the likely connection between *caibidil* and *aibidil* and between *aibidil* and *aibgitir* a contributory factor in the development of *aibgitir* to *aibidir*. Further investigation of medieval technical vocabulary may throw more light on this matter.

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¹⁶ See *IGT*, i, § 84; ii, §§ 13, 38 and ex. 946 (*bhíos: calcdhíos*).