Cé a bhog mo cháis? The Celtic Origins of Early Irish Cheese-making

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Abstract: Irish cheese-making has a remarkable history. Before the current renaissance and the preceding disruption of tradition in the context of British imperialism and Atlantic World trade lay a long period during which Ireland possessed an exceptionally complex culture of dairy production which included multiple distinct cheese-types, as demonstrated by Ó Sé (1948) in his seminal article on the subject.

The generic word for 'cheese' in Irish, *cáis*, so used already in Middle Irish, is derived from Latin *caseus* and this borrowing occurs also in Brittonic Celtic (Welsh *caws*) and all the West-Germanic languages (English *cheese*, Dutch *kaas*). There is strong evidence that the success of *caseus* among West-Germanic peoples reflected the introduction of a new kind of dairy product—aged cheese produced with rennet—in the context of Roman imperial expansion. We might then well ask if the same process accounted for the success of *caseus* among the Celts of Britain and Ireland.

Building on my recent research on prehistoric cheese-making among the Continental Celts, I argue that, unlike the West-Germans, the Insular Celts were not introduced to rennet-made aged cheese by the Romans but rather that Celtic speakers moving into the British Isles brought with them native traditions of such cheese-making; success of the word *caseus* in Insular Celtic was essentially a lexical innovation initiated in the context not of Roman imperialism but of early Christian monasticism. Crucial evidence is adduced from my analysis of the earliest Irish cheese-related terminology, key elements of which clearly predate any Roman influence.

In memory of my grandfather, William Gallagher

The first half of the title of this paper is drawn from that of an American business-oriented self-help book *Who moved my cheese?* by Spencer Johnson, which was published in 1998 and enjoyed enormous national and international success for a number of years. The rather mundane central message of the book can be boiled down to this: when faced with changing circumstances, one must be fearless in accepting that change and strike out boldly in search of a new and better situation. The allegorical conceit of the work revolves around a pair of mice and a pair of little people who live in a maze and consume cheese which magically appears for them. The grand lesson of the fable comes through the differing reactions of mice and men when confronted with the problem of a sudden change of the location of the cheese in the maze, hence the title.

Whatever the value of this work might be for readers seeking improvement in their lives, there is to be sure much material here for the anthropologist to examine with regard to what the book's success says about contemporary American and first-world culture. For example, the choice of cheese as the symbol for success is laden with meaning, reflecting in part the great obsession with cheese in post-war American culinary culture which in turn points to one of the grandest marketing successes of the corporate dominated food industry in the U.S.

Turning to the subject at hand, I myself, for better or worse, am not a consumer of self-help books but the title of Johnson's fable came to mind as, in the course of researching Ireland's rôle in the system of Atlantic World trade in the early modern period, I became aware of the massive disruption—indeed, near-extinction—of Ireland's rich and variegated tradition of cheese-making in pre-modern times. In some respects, that chapter in the history of animal husbandry and dairy production in Ireland is an inverted counterpart to the tremendous increase in cheese production and consumption in late twentieth century America. It is also something of a real-world instance of socioeconomic and political forces resulting in Ireland's cheese 'being moved', an event with deep and interesting effects on the country's modern culinary culture right up to today's remarkable renaissance in the field of cheese-making.

Surely, some students of Ireland's early history had been aware of the fact that before the early-modern disruption, cheese-making in Ireland was both sophisticated and widely practised in pre-modern times but it was, to my knowledge, only with the publication of Michael Ó Sé's seminal article in 1948 on "Old Irish cheeses and other milk products" that the basic facts of the subject to be gleaned from early Irish texts were brought together, cogently analysed, and presented to a non-specialist audience. Ó Sé's findings are now often cited (even if he himself is not always mentioned) and he deserves much credit for the growing awareness and appreciation of the complex tradition of cheese-making that was largely lost in the British colonial period, for indeed, one of the most pernicious effects of colonialism extends beyond its devaluation and disruption of native traditions to the suppression even of knowledge of what went before. Fortunately, a good deal of the glories of early Irish literature survives and affords us an opportunity to rewrite history in a more accurate way.

From the material assembled by Ó Sé there arises naturally not only the question of how the early modern disruption of cheese-making came about, something which

I will discuss further elsewhere, but also the question of how far back medieval Ireland's culture of cheese-making goes. In this latter regard I examine here some of the earliest attested Irish terminology of cheese-making and consider it in light of my own recent research on the linguistic evidence for the beginnings of cheese-making among the Continental Celts (Buccini 2022). Although the thorny question of precisely when the population bearing Celtic language and culture first crossed the Irish Sea is ultimately of relevance to this subject, a narrow date is not required for present purposes, as our goal here is to show that a) the practice of cheese-making in Ireland surely predates the arrival of Romano-British influences and Christianity and b) lexico-semantic ties between cheese-related terminology in Irish and Gaulish strongly point to cheese-making having been a shared innovation on the continent which Celtic (pre-Irish) speakers brought with them when they moved westward to their new island home.

Irish cáis 'cheese' in its European Context

From an historical perspective, the distinct words with the generic meaning of 'cheese' in the modern standard languages of western Europe are few in number. Within the Romance-speaking lands, there are but two: In French, Italian and Catalan, reflexes of Medieval Latin *formaticum* (*fromage, formaggio, formatge* respectively) obtain, while in the bulk of Iberia, reflexes of Classical Latin *caseus* are found in Spanish (*queso*) and Portuguese (*queijo*). Considering also regional varieties or dialects, the situation in Italy is, however, more complicated, in that it is clear that before more or less recent times, central and southern Italy also used local reflexes of *caseus* (e.g. Tuscan *cacio*, Neapolitan *caso*) in a generic sense. We note, moreover, that in an area comprising part of eastern and southern France and adjoining Romance territories in western Switzerland and north-western Italy, we find another word in the dialects which appears very much to be old and likely once was used in a generic sense for 'cheese'; this term, *toma* for simplicity's sake (Provençal *toumo*, French *tomme*, etc.), will be discussed in the final section below. Without doubt, we must regard *formaticum* as a post-antiquity innovation, almost certainly arising in the western Alps, which first supplanted *caseus* in France and northern Italy, as well as the aforementioned *toma* in its area of distribution, and then much later began to supplant the reflexes of *caseus* in its generic sense in central and southern Italy.

It is quite striking that, whereas *caseus* has been ousted or displaced in its function as the generic 'cheese' term in a large portion of western Romance territory, it was borrowed into both West Germanic and Insular Celtic languages and has thriven there in that rôle. In all of the West Germanic languages and their dialects, reflexes of *caseus*—Eng. *cheese,* Dutch *kaas*, German *Käse*, etc.—are the only term attested with the sense 'cheese' and we find no traces even in our oldest texts of a native term which might have been supplanted by the borrowing from Latin. This borrowing seems to have occurred at an early date in the history of Romano-Germanic contact, at a time when the West Germanic dialects were still little differentiated, and to have spread widely enough to have reached those North Sea and Jutlandic tribes on the continent who ultimately crossed the sea to settle in Britain, starting in the mid-fifth century. Archaeological and textual evidence from Roman writers makes it clear that among these peoples animal husbandry was well known and further that dairy products were an important part of their alimentation, but their dairy consumption, like so many of their cultural traits, was an indication of their profound barbarism in Roman eyes, for they drank fresh milk in considerable quantities and ate only fresh milk products, whereas the Romans themselves for the most part did not drink fresh milk and were keen producers and consumers of a variety of both fresh and aged cheeses.

In short, the evidence strongly indicates that the success of the Latin word *caseus* among the West Germanic peoples was a function of it being the name of a new *thing* for them, the term being borrowed as the natural referent to a novel item introduced to them by Latin speakers. The historical context for this introduction were the Germani's contacts with Roman (and perhaps also Latin-speaking Gaulish) merchants, as well as sustained contacts with the Roman military and with Roman settlers in and around the imperial border zone in the Low Countries and Germany. In other words, it seems clear that the Germani first became familiar with aged, transportable cheeses and ultimately the means of producing such cheeses through their contacts with the Romans.

While the Latin term *caseus* had similar success among the Insular Celtic peoples, being borrowed into Brittonic (Welsh *caws*, older Breton *keuz*) and ultimately Goidelic (Irish *cáis*, Scots Gaelic *càis*) in a very roughly similar period and becoming the generic term for 'cheese', there are excellent reasons to believe that the context of the borrowing on the British Isles differed fundamentally from that in continental Germania. To begin, whereas early Roman and Greek observers never speak of the Germani as producers of *caseus*, we do find some early commentaries describing the Celtic inhabitants of Britain as such. Indeed, the initiator of the first sustained contacts between Romans and Britons (ca. 50 B.C.), Julius Caesar, says of his new foes that "a large portion of their food consists of milk, cheese, and flesh"—*maiorque pars eorum victus in lacte, caseo, carne consistit* (*Gallic War*, VI.22, 346–347). Writing within seventy-five years of Caesar's experiences in Britain, the Greek geographer Strabo likens the Britons to the continental Celts with regard to their "habits" but adds that they are "more simple and barbaric– so much so that on account of their inexperience, some of them, although well supplied with milk, make no cheese (τυροποιειν)" (*Geography* 4.5.2, 254–255), with the clear implication that some Britons—perhaps most—*did* know how to make

cheese. Knowledge of cheese-making among the Britons is also implied by the general likening of their habits to those of the continental Celts, for there is strong evidence from Roman and Greek texts that already at the time the Romans first expanded into Celtic territory in northern Italy (Cisalpine Gaul) and France (Transalpine Gaul) in the course of the second century B.C., the Gauls possessed a well-developed culture of dairy production and cheese-making, such that by the imperial period, the Romans were keen importers and consumers of their products; that Gaulish cheeses were so transportable and in some cases of such great size makes it clear that the Gauls' methods of cheese-making involved the use of rennet and extensive cooking and pressing of the curd; in other words, Celtic cheese-making on the continent was quite sophisticated from an early date (Kindstedt 2012, 105ff., Buccini 2022).

Whether the Britons or Irish of Caesar's time had developed sophisticated methods of cheese-making is a question for which we lack direct evidence and for the Irish, we even lack any broad observations of the sort on the Britons cited above. It remains then also an open question whether the Irish were in a situation akin to that of the Germani, who borrowed the name *caseus* at the same time that they were introduced to the thing it denoted or whether their situation resembled more that of the Britons, who also ultimately borrowed the word *caseus* but did so perhaps with some particular motivation, given that they clearly practised cheese-making before any sustained contact with Latin speakers.

The Irish loanword *caseus* is attested already in the Old Irish period as *cáise* (ModIr. *cáis*) and exhibits certain features which help us to date the time when the word entered the language. The dating of early loanwords in Irish has been a much discussed issue, of great import not only for the historical development of the language but also for its implications for the process of Christianisation of the nation. Consequently, the 'orthodox' distinction between the earliest layer of so-called 'Cothriche' loanwords and the later 'Pátraic' loanwords is well known to scholars in multiple fields of study. On this matter, I follow McManus (1983, 1984) in rejecting a simple, distinct two-period division for Latin loanwords in Irish: borrowing from Latin was an on-going, uninterrupted (albeit intensifying) process starting before the first introduction of Christianity to Ireland. I also follow McManus' position regarding the primary source of early Latin loanwords in Irish being spoken Latin (*à la Britonique*) itself, as opposed to the theory that the earliest ('Cothriche') borrowings were from Latin but the subsequent ('Pátraic') borrowings through the intermediary of the British language.

Indeed, the word *cáise* is one of a significant number of forms which do not fit into the distinct two-stage model of borrowing, in that, of the relevant linguistic features *cáise* exhibits, one would assign its borrowing to the 'Cothriche' group, the other to the 'Pátraic' group. The former involves the final *-e* in Old Irish, which here reflects the Latin ending *-eus*, which in spoken Latin in the relevant period was surely pronounced as /-yus/. As McManus (1984) argues, these early Latin loanwords were not borrowed with their actual Latin grammatical endings but rather they were adapted to the Irish nominal morphology of the time; at this point in its history, Irish nominal inflexion—like that of Latin and the shared Indo-European ancestral language—involved primarily the addition of endings to indicate case/number/gender. Consequently, the Latin borrowings could be and were, in effect, assigned to the roughly analogous declensions in Irish and developed subsequently as native Irish words did. In this case, Latin *caseus* was adapted phonologically and morphologically into Irish as */kās-iyah/, a masculine *-yo*-stem noun.

Subsequent to the borrowing of *cáise* and many other Latin words, there developed in Irish a sound-change with far reaching consequences for the grammar of the language, namely the loss of final syllables (apocope). With that change, the nominal morphology of Irish passed from being of the sort found in Latin and generally in the older Indo-European languages, relying principally on the addition of endings, to the radically different sort still seen in modern Irish, where case/number/gender are marked primarily through consonantal mutations at the edges of the word. When Latin words were borrowed after apocope had taken place in Irish, when a great many of the old endings had been obliterated, their morphological adaptation generally entailed the elimination of the Latin endings and the integration of these forms into the new patterns of declination. An example would be the treatment of the name used for the two orthodox groups of borrowings: Whereas the attested OIr. *Cothriche* 'Patrick' is derived from the pre-apocope adaptation of Lat. /patrikyus/ as */kʷatrikiyah/, the post-apocope reborrowing *Pátraic* derives from the adaptation of British-Latin */pādrigyus/ as */pādrig′/. The borrowing of *caseus* then clearly belongs to the pre-apocope ('Primitive Irish') period of the language.

OIr. *cáise* exhibits signs of the operation of some other important early sound changes, namely: a) the first palatalisation of consonants, occurring when there immediately followed an */i/ or */ī/ (hence the palatalised *-s′-* /š/ in ModIr. *cáis*); b) the subsequent *a/o*-affection in unstressed syllables by which the **-i-* in */kās′iyah/ (after having palatalised the preceding **-s-*) was lowered to **-e-*, yielding */kās′eyah/ (McManus 1983, 58). There is, however, one important early sound change that the borrowed form of *caseus* in Irish does not appear to have undergone, namely lenition, a sound change that characterises the orthodox 'Cothriche' group. Lenition was, in effect a weakening of the articulation of intervocalic consonants, whereby, for example, the stops *t, k, b, d, g* became fricatives (*θ, χ, β, ð, γ*); lenition also affected **-s-*, yielding **-h-*, which in this position would have been lost, leaving */kāiyah/, which obviously would not have given the attested OIr. *cáise*. Taken at face value

then, it appears that *caseus* was borrowed into Irish after lenition but before apocope.[1] The dating of these two linguistic developments in the mainstream literature sets ca. 450 A.D. for lenition and ca. 500 A.D. for the apocope of final syllables; given that *cáise* reflects the operation of both first palatalisation and *a/o*-affection in unstressed syllables by the chronology posited by Jackson (1954, 142–143; cf. McManus 1983, 40), we would have to say that *caseus* was borrowed into Irish shortly after 450 A.D. Of course, such pin-point dating is unrealistic, especially if we allow for the existence of synchronic variation along various parameters, such as differences of co-occurring speech-styles (e.g. monitored vs. casual), of sociolinguistic varieties (elite vs. non elite) and of regional dialects. Nonetheless, the data give a very plausible broader timeframe for this borrowing, roughly from the early fifth to early sixth century A.D.

Some tentative historical conclusions may thus be drawn about the borrowing of *caseus*: 1) it probably was not borrowed as a trade item in the context of contacts between Roman Britain and Ireland (ca. 50–400 A.D.) preceding the introduction of Christianity to the latter, as were several words, including some related to the trade in wine (McManus 1983, 43); 2) it seems not to have been among the very first of Latin words borrowed in the initial (pre-lenition) period of Christianisation; 3) it then most likely was borrowed in the early period of the establishment of the Church and early Christian communities in Ireland. Unfortunately, we cannot say for certain whether the borrowing occurred in the specific context of Christianisation, i.e. the interaction between Continental and British missionaries with Irish bilinguals, as it could still have been introduced through trade during this stage. In this regard, however, one cannot but wonder about the likelihood that cheese was at this time an item commonly imported into Ireland.

Old Irish ass 7 grus

> *Virtually everyone in that society was preoccupied with cows… Everything these people, in their several capacities in their different times, have written in annals, law texts, lives of saints, historical narratives, eulogistic poems, and in tales and anecdotes in prose and verse teems with allusions to cows. And it must be emphasised that these thousands of allusions are not to cattle in general but specifically to cows and more specifically to cows as yielders of milk.* (Lucas 1989, 3–4)

The preoccupation with cows that one inevitably observes in all forms of early Irish writing is a natural reflexion of the centrality of dairy products to the alimentation of Ireland's population. In turn, this centrality of dairy products must be attributed in part to the environmental conditions of the place, which allow for the production of grains to varying degrees in different parts of the island but are particularly suitable for the rearing of domestic animals almost everywhere. Cultural factors play a rôle as well and, though we have little direct information on the pre-Celtic population of Ireland, it is clear that domestic animals were important to it, and there is ample evidence that the Celts who moved to Ireland brought with them strong pastoral traditions. Indeed, early Irish reliance on dairy products for sustenance is unrivalled in western Europe except in the Alps and perhaps parts of the Low Countries and Scandinavia.

The evidence to be drawn for Irish foodways in the textual record from the early Middle Ages to the eve of the period of the great disruptions wrought by Ireland's colonisation and inclusion in the Atlantic World trade-system bears unmistakable witness not only to the importance of dairy products in general but also to a highly sophisticated and complex approach to processing milk into a variety of foods, both fresh and preservable to varying degrees, both liquid and solid (and states in between), and surely also with a range of flavour profiles. In Ó Sé's aforementioned work, as well as in subsequent contributions which complement his discussion, (Lucas 1960, 19–31, Kelly 1997, 322–330, Downey and Stuijts 2013, 112–116), an impressive number of names of distinct kinds of cheese made in medieval Ireland have been identified and, although our information on the making and nature of these cheeses is extremely limited, some general characteristics can be inferred by their names and/or brief comments concerning them in early texts. We note, for example:

- *máethal*: The name derives from the adjective *máeth* (DIL 'soft, tender, yielding') but it seems (at least sometimes) to have been firm enough to be carried in a cloak (Kelly 1997, 328).
- *tanag* (*tanach*): The name appears to derive from the adjective *tana* (DIL 'thin, slender') and is plausibly taken by Ó Sé (1948, 82–83) as a reference to it being made with skim-milk, which would accord with the infamously hard nature of this cheese and thence its appearance in the tale of Queen Maeve's demise, who was struck in the head by a piece of *tanag* launched with a sling. That *tanag* was glossed with the Latin term *formella* (cf. MLat. *forma, formaticum* 'pressed, formed cheese') is noteworthy.
- *fáiscre grotha*: Literally 'compression of curds', this term was glossed with other Irish terms for cheese (*cáise, mulchán*) (DIL, 293) and Latin *caseus* (Kelly 1997, 329).

The coining of these etymologically transparent names could well have been fairly late (i.e. not long before they are attested) but are not necessarily so. Nonetheless, they contrast with another term included in all of the scholarly discussions of early Irish cheeses but which receives little focus, namely *grus*. In this case, the etymology is opaque to the non-specialist (and was already so in the Old Irish period), aside from an apparent relationship of some sort with the word *gruth* (as noted by Kelly 1997, 328), which has been the primary word in Irish throughout its recorded

history for 'curds'. A further reason for the limited discussion of *grus* is surely that it appears only in old law texts (and a glossary) and thus we have no further information on its nature such as we have from more colourful texts with commentary on other, early Irish cheeses. Of *grus*, Ó Sé says only that it was "glossed as *tanag* or *tanoch*" and that it must therefore have been "some form of hard-pressed cheese" (1948, 83).

Though I concur with the aforementioned writers that *grus* must have referred to 'cheese', I believe a closer look at its use is warranted. Here I focus on its occurrence in the *Críth Gablach*, a law tract attested only in much later manuscripts but the original text is fairly securely dated to about 700 A.D. (Binchy 1979, xii-xvi). The work is primarily concerned with legal aspects of the divisions of rank in society and in this context, repeated mention is made of formal rules of hospitality and the foods which were legally due certain social categories. With regard to the rank of *fer midboth* (lowest ranked commoner), the *Críth Gablach* indicates: *A bíathad [a] óenur, ass* 7 *grús* [sic] *nó arbur; ní dlig imb* "his food provision is for himself alone, milk and cheese or grain; he is not entitled to butter."[2]

An important implication of this phrase that has to my knowledge not been fully explored in the literature is the broad sense of the terms *ass*, generally translated simply as 'milk', and *grús*, translated in the aforementioned studies of early Irish dairy products as 'cheese'.[3] Here they stand together as the correlate of *arbur* 'grain', which is specified neither for type of grain (wheat, barley, etc.) nor form of preparation (bread, porridge, etc.). Of course, together *ass* 7 *grus* can be categorised as 'dairy products' but it seems most likely to me that they individually represent here broader categories than simply 'milk and cheese', namely 'potable dairy foods' and 'edible dairy foods'. In other words, *ass* in this context surely refers not just to fresh milk but also sour milk, buttermilk, whey, thick (soured) milk, beestings, etc. (v. Ó Sé 1948, 86–87); *grus* stands here then for cheese in the narrow sense but likely also for all kinds of curd products and thus has a generic sense approaching colloquial English uses of 'cheese' (cottage cheese, ricotta cheese, etc.). In a law text produced in a society in which dairy products were so important and so varied, with laws which must apply in various times and places, it makes perfect sense that such a system of categorisation arose.

That OIr. *ass* had (or could have) this far-broader meaning of 'potable dairy foods' is supported by several pieces of evidence. First, within the *Críth Gablach* there appears a further occurrence of *ass* that elucidates the broad sense: line 74–75 (Binchy 1979, 3) *ian ól aiss trib asaib—óchtar* 7 *lemlacht* 7 *draumce nó bláthach*, which in the DIL (p.53) is translated "a vessel holding an *ól* measure of milk with three kinds of milk." The three kinds of *ass* are specified as 'cream and fresh-milk and *draumce* or buttermilk'.[4] Second, though the word *ass* seems not to be current in Modern Irish, it survived into the early modern period and did so in Scots Gaelic as well, where at some point it had undergone a semantic extension to be applied also to beer and ale, another potable form of sustenance (Dwelly 1993, 48).

Finally, there is the etymology of *ass*. It seems to me very likely that, like OIr. *áss* (ModIr. *fás*) 'growth' (Irslinger 2002, 420), *ass* goes back to the Indo-European root $*peh_2$-. The precise original meaning of this root is difficult to pinpoint but there is an obvious connexion to pastoralism across the range of reflexes in the Indo-European branches; from these reflexes, Mallory and Adams (2006, 257) conclude that $*peh_2$- "generally indicates what a herdsman does." Indeed, one large number of reflexes have to do with 'guarding, watching over' but then also 'grazing' and presumably from this last sense there arose a number of formations with meanings having more generally to do with 'feeding' and 'food', such as in Germanic (e.g. Eng. *food, fodder*) and in Italic (e.g. Latin *pastus* 'feeding', *pābulum* 'fodder, food' and possibly *pānis* 'bread'; De Vaan 2008, 448–449, 443). On the face of things, it looks as though OIr. *ass* 'milk, liquid dairy foods' might reflect a zero-grade of $*peh_2$- but the morphology of the formation needs to be investigated.

Alongside *ass* in the legal formula *ass* 7 *grus nó arbur*, *grus* must have had a similar semantic value of 'edible (i.e. not liquid) dairy products', which is to say that it indicated not a specific style of cheese but rather 'cheese' in a very broad and generic sense. As with *ass*, the etymology of *grus* fully supports such an interpretation and provides us with further clues regarding the antiquity of Irish cheese-making.

The starting point for an etymology of *grus* is its apparent semantic and formal relationship to *gruth*, the basic Old and Modern Irish word for 'curds'. In the specialised literature, the older view that connects *gruth* with Eng. *curd(s)* and *crowd* has been increasingly doubted and supplanted by a view, with which I concur, that it is instead to be regarded as a derivative of the IE root $*g^{wh}er$- 'to heat', which was, I believe, first argued by Irslinger (2002, 104–105; cf. Zair 2012, 138). Briefly, from an IE standpoint, *gruth* can be seen as a verbal noun with the suffix *-tu-* built from the zero-grade of $*g^{wh}er$- (i.e.$*g^{wh}r$-), thus $*g^{wh}ṛ$-*tu*-, even if in reality this formation belonged not to the IE period but rather later to Proto-Celtic. By regular sound changes, $*g^{wh}ṛ$-*tus* (nom.) would yield Proto- or Common Celtic $*g^{w}ritus$ and ultimately OIr. *gruth*. With regard to the semantics, we note that "a common function of the PIE *-tu-* suffix was to designate the result of a verbal action" (McCone 1998, 10).[5] In this instance, $*g^{w}ritus$ meant literally '(the) result of heating', and in the specialised context of dairy production 'curds', it was associated with the intended result of the cooking of milk (especially with addition of an acidic or enzymic agent).

That *grus* was in origin a derivative of *gruth* seems all but certain, though the relationship has been obscured perhaps by Binchy's (1979) rendering of the word with a long vowel (*grús*); Irslinger (2002, 440) mentions *grús* briefly but concludes that "Die Herkunft des Wortes ist

unklar." That the vowel was, however, short was shown by Kelly (1997, 326) and accepted by Stifter (2005, 170) and recognition of this fact allows for a more straightforward identification of the relationship; Stifter sees in *grus* "eine Umbildung mittels Suffixersatzes von **g^{w}ritus* → **g^{w}ristus*." My own inclination is to see *grus* as likely being the result of the addition of an adjectival dental suffix to **g^{w}rit-*, perhaps **-st-*, thus **g^{w}rit-st-* with the cluster ultimately yielding *-s(s)-*. This suggestion is tentative but worth exploring further on semantic grounds. As we have seen, OIr. *grus* can be reasonably glossed as 'cheese' (as it was with other words for 'cheese' by later Irish glossators) but also as 'solid dairy products', i.e. things made from curds. We might then surmise that *grus* originally was a nominalised adjective meaning 'that which is made of curds'. Unrelated etymologically but likely bearing a close semantic parallel is Lat *caseus* 'cheese' which can be analysed as a nominalised adjective in *-eus* of the sort where *X-eus* meant 'made of X', as in Lat. *argentum* 'silver' → *argenteus* 'of silver' (Weiss 2020, 293). Though no word **cas-* meaning 'curds' is attested in Latin, there are good reasons to believe that in a much earlier stage of the language the ancestral form of *cas-* (meaning 'curds') did exist.[6]

Of great importance here is the fact that these formations, both *gruth* and *grus*, cannot be assigned to the Primitive or Old Irish period but go back far earlier. With regard to the dating of the formation of *grus*, eminent Celticist David Stifter (2005, 170) says "[a]ufgrund lautlicher und morphologischer Schwierigkeiten wird man das Wort nicht über das Keltische hinaufführen wollen, sondern irgendwann zwischen urkeltischer und uririscher Zeit…": That is, we should date this form to sometime between the Proto-Celtic and the Proto-Irish periods, which to my mind puts us likely in the range of somewhere in the second or first millennium B.C.

Some Further Chronological Considerations and Continental Connexions

Though this evidence does not allow us to conclude with certainty that the pre-Irish Celts were making aged cheeses in the Bronze Age, it at least certainly allows for it and when we consider the textual evidence for the sophistication and breadth of early dairy production in Ireland, it seems clear that cheese-making existed already before Christianisation and the borrowing of Lat. *caseus*. This claim gains support if we consider the timeline of attested early words for 'cheese' in Irish:

- 5th/6th century: borrowing of *caseus*
- 6th/7th century: *grus* still current (at least in legal terminology)
- 9th century (?) and later: glossators feel *grus* needs to be explained with *tanach*

Given the well-known conservative tendencies of legal language and the formulaic nature of the phrase *ass* 7 *grus*, as well as the etymological evidence for the age of *grus*, it is clear Irish possessed a generic term for 'cheese' before the borrowing of Lat. *caseus*. Given that, the logical inference for the motivation of the borrowing, which almost certainly occurred in the context of early Christian monastic communities, was that *at most* it denoted a particular new style of cheese introduced from the continent by clerics from Britain or Gaul; it is also quite possible that the borrowing was purely sociolinguistically motivated within the Christian community and the word's spread to the general Irish-speaking population was gradual and came at the expense of the increasingly obsolescent *grus*. By all appearances, *grus* was dying out in the later Old Irish or Middle Irish period, as the glossators felt the need to explain it with the ostensibly well-known *tanach*; I do not know if the specific glosses of *grus* are at all dateable but following Kelly's (1988, 226) general indication of the age of such glosses ("some glossing goes back to the 9th century, but in general it dates from the 12th–16th centuries"), it looks as though that by the ninth century or so, *grus* was felt to be sufficiently obscure to warrant elucidation.

As for how far back the cheese-making traditions of Ireland go, the dating for the coining of *grus* suggested above, as broad as it is, points back to a time when the Celtic forbears of Irish were still on the continent and part of a continuum of Celtic dialects there. My own research (Buccini 2022) into some of the terminology of cheese-making on the continent and more specifically in the region of the Western Alps (i.e., the stretch of the Alps in western Switzerland and extending thence southward to the Mediterranean in south-eastern France and north-western Italy) has led me to the conclusion that the beginnings of cheese-making in that area probably dates back to the early to mid-second millennium B.C. and thus to a time perhaps roughly contemporaneous with the coining of the ancestor of *grus*. There are three pieces of linguistic evidence that I believe might lend support to the theories that Celtic cheese-making dates to a very early time and that Irish cheese-making traditions go back to pre-migration times on the continent.

The first piece of evidence comes from a publication by Hubschmied in 1936 which has, however, been largely neglected in the relevant literature. It concerns the etymology of a word for a kind of cheese (in a broad sense) known in both Germanic and Romance speaking areas in and near the Alps; in southern and Alpine German dialects it is known as *Ziger/Zieger* and in Romansch dialects as *tschigrun/tschagrun* etc.; variants also occur in some Gallo-Romance dialects (Liver 2012, 67). Ziger is made in a variety of ways and the basis seems traditionally to have been whey and sour buttermilk which was cooked at a relatively high temperature. It is eaten fresh but there are aged variants, including a very hard sort used for grating (*Schabziger*). Hubschmied's (1936, 94ff.) etymology, which both requires and deserves further investigation, derives *ziger* from a posited Gaulish compound **dwi-gr-os* where

**dwi-* is the compounding form of 'two' and **-gr-* represents presumably the zero-grade of IE **g^{w}h^{e}r-* 'to heat', thus 'twice-cooked', a logical name for a whey cheese (cf. It. *ricotta*). Of interest here is the possible connexion to the etymologies of OIr. *gruth* and *grus*, of which Hubschmied was apparently unaware.

The second is a semantic connexion between what I believe was an early Western Alpine word for rennet and its Irish counterpart, *binid*. Unsurprisingly, Gaulish dairy terminology is not directly attested in the very limited corpus that survives but I have argued that a problematic loanword in Greek for rennet, τάμισος, can best be explained as ultimately Celtic in origin, given its extremely close semantic and formal relationship with a Gaulish loanword in Gallo-Romance, namely the word for 'sieve', French/Provençal *tamis*, which can be reconstructed as Gaulish **tamisyon*. I propose (Buccini 2022) that these rennet and sieve words reflect the IE root **temh$_1$-* 'to cut, to separate' (LIV, p.625)). If my analysis is correct, the Continental Celtic rennet word focussed on the achievement of separation of the curds from whey rather than on the initial gel formation that the use of rennet brings about. This Celtic conceptualisation of the action of rennet contrasts markedly with what we find in the other languages of western Europe, with their focus on gel formation, as in Germanic (*rennet–run* 'run together'), Romance (Fr. *présure–prendre* 'take') and Latin (*coagulum–coagulare* 'drive together'). The Irish *binid* (OIr. *binit*) is derived from an IE root **b^{h}eyH-* (LIV, p.72) with a basic meaning of 'to strike' and in Irish this sense continued, but in some contexts in early Irish it also had the sense of 'to cut, to separate', as one must surmise from its use in the word *imdibthe* 'circumcised' (Lewis and Pedersen 1989, 311; cf. Thurneysen 1980, 537). From an areal-linguistic perspective, it seems unlikely that this apparent odd semantic agreement of Irish and Alpine Gaulish is a coincidence.

In conjunction with my aforementioned analysis of τάμισος and *tamis*, I have proposed that the Western Alpine word for 'cheese', *toma*, with meanings in the dialects ranging from 'curds (to be used for cheese-making)' to various local fresh and aged cheeses, is also Gaulish in origin and very old; I see it as another derivative of IE **temh$_1$-* 'to cut, to separate' and a parallel formation to Greek τομή 'a cutting, thing cut off', thus with the sense 'that which has been separated', i.e. 'curds'. There is a Scots Gaelic word *tomhlachd* which bears the meaning 'thick/thickened milk' or 'curds'. The second element of this compound is clearly to be identified with Modern and Old Irish *lacht*, which could represent a borrowing of Lat. *lac–lactis* 'milk' (alongside *caseus*?) but is more likely an inherited, native word (cf. O'Rahilly 1942, 161–162, Irslinger 2002, 166–167). Perhaps the first element of *tomh-lacht* is a direct cognate of my proposed Gaulish source of Gallo-Romance *toma*. If so, a Proto-Irish **toma-laχt-*, with lenition and syncope, would have given *tomhlacht* and the semantics of the compound, 'curd-milk' fits perfectly with the attested sense of 'thick milk'. Pending further investigation into the Scots Gaelic facts, this linguistic relic could represent definitive proof of the Common Celtic origins of cheese-making in both the Western Alps and Ireland.

Notes

1. There are other possible ways to account for the maintenance of *-s-* in *cáise*; see, e.g. McManus 1983, 58, n.105 and 49, n.73.

   From the side of the source language, Latin/Romance, rendering of *caseus* by Irish-speakers with Irish *-ss-* has no motivation, as neither in Gallo-Romance nor Italo-Romance did **-sy-* develop to *-ssy-*, thus 'vulgar' pronunciations of Latin from the continent are not a plausible factor here. On the side of the recipient language, Irish, adaptation of the *-s-* in *caseus* with native *-ss-* would make sense *if* lenition was already weakening or had weakened native *-s-* and thus the Latin intervocalic sibilant was identified by Irish bilinguals with native *-ss-*, which is tantamount to saying that the borrowing was, in effect, post-lenition.

   A particular rôle of Latin as pronounced by British-speakers needs, of course, always to be considered but in this case does not change matters, if Jackson's (1953, 560–561) dating of lenition in Brittonic (mid-fifth/beginning sixth century) is correct. Indeed, Jackson (1953, 522) proposes for Brittonic what I propose here for Irish: "The preservation of internal *-s-* in Latin loanwords is not relevant to the present problem [of stages in the lenition of internal *-s-* in Brittonic], *since the British sound was in any case Σ* [i.e. lenited -s-], if not lost already, by the time they entered the language" [emphasis added].
2. Text cited from Binchy 1979, 2. See also Peters 2016, 86 for extensive discussion of this passage from a different perspective.
3. Regarding the length of the vowel in *grus*, see below. MacNeill (1923, 284) translates *grus* with 'curds' and the whole line thus: "Food provision for himself alone, milk and curds or corn. He is not entitled to butter."
4. MacNeill's translation is quite different: "a drinking vessel of milk three palms (high), cream and new milk and *draumce*, or buttermilk." Note that *draumce* (DIL, 248: 'skim-milk, sour milk (?)') is poorly attested and of uncertain meaning, though in this passage it could be taken as an archaic word synonymous with *bláthach* 'buttermilk' or rather as some other liquid product regarded as a reasonable substitute for or near-equivalent of buttermilk. Ó Sé (1948, 86) suggests it was 'thickened sour skim-milk'.
5. McCone (1998, 10) continues: "That being said, Celtib. [Celtiberian] *Retu-*, Gaul. *Rectu-*, OIr. *recht* 'law', O/MW [Old/Middle Welsh] *cym-/cyf-reith* 'law', Bret. *reiz* 'arrangement' are to be derived from a PC [Proto-

Celtic] **reχ-tu-* displaying the same basic semantic and formal (generalized weak form of the root) relationship with its verbal base **rēg-/reg-* 'direct order' (OIr. *rigid* etc.) as that found in various other Celtic *-tu-* formations: e.g. OIr. *mlicht*, MW *blith* 'milk, dairy produce' < PC **mliχ-tu-* '(result of milking,) milk' < **mḷk-tu* in relation to **mēlg-/mḷg-* 'milk' (OIr. *mligid* 'milks')..."

6. Further discussion of this topic I must leave to a paper and monograph in preparation.

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