

*Contextualising Saltair na Rann within the tradition of biblical paraphrase*

Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh

*Saltair na Rann* or ‘The Psalter of the Quatrains/Stanzas’, a metrical account of biblical history including much apocryphal material, is a remarkably long text of 162 cantos, which amount to 8393 lines in all. The ambitious intention was to create a work which encompasses all of time, with a particular focus on biblical chronology from creation to Judgement Day. Such an expansive work must have been created by a culture with an intense interest in Biblical scholarship and especially in the Old Testament, since a considerable proportion of the cantos are devoted to the latter. *Saltair na Rann* does not exist in a vacuum, however, it has been demonstrated that it is related to a wider tradition of Old and Middle-Irish verse adaptations of biblical or apocryphal themes. These Irish texts in turn, are to some extent medieval reflexes of the late-antique tradition of the biblical paraphrase, a genre which developed from the didactic exercise of paraphrasing seminal texts in Hellenistic culture. With the conversion to Christianity, instead of paraphrasing classical literature, the Bible became the key text for this exercise. The earliest surviving evidence for this new Christian literary genre is the poetic Gospel paraphrase *Evangeliorum libri quattuor* composed by Juvencus around the year around 330. Juvencus’ composition where he married Christian narrative with elegant Latin verse was immensely influential and inspired other such works. The biblical paraphrase genre came to maturity in the fifth century, most notably in the composition by Caelius Sedulius *Carmen Paschale*. Sedulius’ poem was even more influential than that of his predecessor and became a set text in monastic schools across medieval Europe. In the later Middle Ages, the polished Latin verse of the biblical paraphrases gave way to vernacular versification and the genre termed vernacular popular bibles by Brian Murdoch. *Saltair na Rann* must in some way be part of this development of vernacular versified paraphrases of the Bible but in many ways is atypical of the genre. This paper will attempt to situate the Irish material within the wider European context and to interrogate the question of influence.