

**“Incubation, Inspiration, Incantation, or Invention?:
The *Imbas Forosnai* Ritual in *Sanas Cormaic* as Dream Divinatory Operation”**

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Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Three Irish Glossaries: Cormac’s Glossary, O’Davoren’s Glossary, A Glossary to the Calendar of Oengus the Culdee* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862), p. 25, available online at <http://archive.org/details/threeirishglossa00cormuoft> .

***Sanas Cormaic* §756**

imbas forosnai .i. dofuarascaib seicib cach ræt bid maith lasin filid 7 bud ádla[i]c dó do fhaillsiugud. isamlaid dognither sin .i. cocnaid (no concna) infili mír do charnna dhergmuice no chon no chaith 7 dosber iaram isin líg forachula na cómlad 7 canaid díchedul fair 7 hidbraid sin do dheib hídal. 7 gutagair dó iaram a hídal. 7 nisfaghaib din iarnamárach. 7 docha[i]n brichta for a dhí baiss. contagair beos a dhee hídal chuige arna toirmesctha a chodlad imbe. 7 dosber a dí boiss ima díb lecnib contuil ísuan. 7 bíther oca fhaire ar na roimprá 7 narothairmesca nech cotaispentar dó cach ní immbambí cocend nómaide no a dó no a tri no fot no mhessedh oc hídbert. et ideo himbas dicitur .i. dí boiss uime .i. bass ádiu 7 bas anall ima lecnib. 7 atrogell no atrarpe tra (Patraicc) innísín 7 anteinm lægda .i. roforgell na bud nime na talman nach æn dosgní uair is díultad do baithis. Díchedul do chendaib din forfhacbad (són) a dénum side hi córus cerdi ar issed (so as) fodera són ni hécean hidbairt demun uime acht faisnes do chendaib cnáime fócetoir.

[Based on the Leabhar Breac manuscript version of *Sanas Cormaic*. For the text of the Yellow Book of Lecan’s version, see Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Sanas Cormaic (Cormac’s Glossary) Compiled by Cormac Ua Cuilennain, King-Bishop of Cashel in the Tenth Century, Edited from the Copy in the Yellow Book of Lecan*, (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1994).]

John O'Donovan and Whitley Stokes (eds./trans.), *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary* (Calcutta: Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), pp. 94-95, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=rX8NAAAAQAAJ&dq=cormac's+glossary&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=NoFoCfN-MR&sig=iBLAQww8QwR4oHq6rRMv13Wl6NM#v=onepage&q=imbas&f=false> .

“Cormac's Glossary” §756

IMBAS FOROSNAI [‘knowledge that enlightens’] i.e. it discovers everything which the poet likes and which he desires to manifest. Thus it is done. The poet chews a piece of the flesh of a red pig, or of a dog or cat, and puts it afterwards on the flag¹ behind the door, and pronounces an incantation on it, and offers it to idol-gods, and afterwards calls his idols to him and then finds them not on the morrow,² and pronounces incantations on his two palms, and calls again unto him his idol-gods that his sleep may not be disturbed; and he lays his two palms on his two cheeks and (in this manner) he falls asleep; and he is watched in order that no one may interrupt nor disturb him till everything about which he is engaged is revealed to him, (which may be) a minute or two or three, or as long as he was supposed to be at (the) offering; *et ideo imbas dicitur*³ i.e. (his) two palms (*baiss*) upon (*im*) him, that is (one) palm over and another hither on his cheeks. Patrick abolished [banished?] this and the *teinm laegda*, and he adjudged [testified?] that whoever should practice them should have neither heaven nor earth, because it was renouncing baptism. *Dicetal do-chennaib*⁴ [‘ex-tempore recital’], then, was left, to be composed in right of (their) art; for this is the cause: it is not necessary in it to make an offering to demons, but there is a revelation at once from (the) ends of (the poet's) fingers.

*: A more modern translation is available in Patrick K. Ford (ed./trans.), *The Celtic Poets: Sogms and Tales from Early Ireland and Wales* (Belmont, MA: Ford & Bailie Publishers, 1999), pp. 46-47.

On this topic, see also Nora K. Chadwick, “Imbas Forosnai,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4 (1934), pp. 97-135. This article is available online (without pagination) at <http://searchingforimbas.blogspot.com/p/imbas-forosnai-by-nora-k-chadwick.html> .

¹ Which is to say, the “flagstone.”

² “[F]inds them not on the morrow” probably in reference to the offering of meat left for the “idols,” and not the “idols” themselves.

³ Roughly, “and this is why it is called *imbas*.”

⁴ *Dichetal do chennaib*, “speaking from heads,” which is the third of the “Three Things Required of a Poet,” and seems to mean extemporaneous or impromptu poetic speech. There are many tales of severed heads that continue to speak, often prophetically or poetically, long after they are removed from their bodies, in Irish lore and in other Insular Celtic lore sources as well, though it is also known elsewhere in European literature (e.g. Orpheus, etc.). There may be some complex metaphorical reference here, therefore, in addition to literally “speaking off the top of one’s head.” It is here being understood by the glossator in a manner similar to “having knowledge at one’s fingertips.”