

Introduction to Celtic Literatures

Types or Genres of Early Literature

1) Sagas / Tales / Stories

Prose compositions, originally recited from memory by professional storytellers. Often in interconnected cycles featuring central characters, such as the Irish Ulster Cycle and Finn Cycle, and the Arthurian material. Much of the content mythical, relating to divinities and supernatural events. Plots use common folktale motifs, also onomastic stories explaining place-names and landscape features. The Arthurian romances which became popular in Europe from the 12th century, draw on this earlier material.

Welsh examples: *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* / Four Branches of the Mabinogi
Culhwch ac Olwen (earliest Arthurian tale)

Irish examples: *Táin Bó Cúailnge* / The Cattle-drive of Cuailnge
Compert Con Culainn / The Conception of Cú Chulainn
Togail Bruidne Da Derga / The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel
Longes Mac N-Uislenn / The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu

2) 'Heroic' poetry and praise poetry

Eulogies and elegies celebrating the virtues of kings and princes, and the heroic deeds of warriors, ensuring everlasting fame for those who died in battle (the heroic ideal). Composed according to strict metrical rules by professional court poets and recited to musical accompaniment on ceremonial occasions. This is the earliest surviving literature in Welsh, dated (by some) from around 600, and the tradition continues strongly until the end of the Middle Ages, as it also does in Irish Bardic poetry.

- 'Heroic poems' attributed to Taliesin, in praise of Urien Rheged, and to Aneirin, in praise of the warriors of Gododdin.
- The later praise-poems of the Welsh 'Poets of the Princes' (12th and 13th century) and the 'Poets of the Gentry' (14th to 16th centuries)
- Praise-poetry also encompasses sub-genres of praise addressed to female patrons and churchmen.
- Elegies to deceased patrons are closely allied to praise poetry
- Some poems addressed to saints and to the Almighty also share features with secular praise poetry.

3) Lyric Poetry

The defining feature is the focus on personal feelings and experience, usually expressed in the first person or dramatic persona. This may be in response to the natural world, such as seasonal poems celebrating the coming of summer. Also love poetry, religious devotion and meditation, and expressions of personal loss (as opposed to more formal elegies).

Examples: Summer / May-time poems (see next half of the lecture)
‘Gorhoffedd’ poems
‘The Old Man’s Lament’ (Llywarch Hen) and ‘The Old Woman of Beare’ (laments on old age)
‘Suibhne the Wild Man in the Forest’
‘Stafell Gynddylan’ (Heledd’s lament for her brother)
Love poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, www.dafyddapgwilym.net
Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish Lyrics*
Nicolas Jacobs (ed.), *Early Welsh Gnostic and Nature Poetry*

The Cynddylan cycle can also be described as **saga poetry**, since it is thought to form part of a wider narrative tradition. Irish sagas were often expressed as a combination of prose and poetry, known as **prosimetrum**.

Religious poems are often considered a genre in themselves. There are other genres, too, that are beyond the scope of this introductory module, including **prophetic poetry, satire and poems of request and thanks**.