An Archaic Survival? Initial $h$- in Scottish Gaelic $thig$, $thug$, $thàinig$, $fhuair$ Revisited

1. The alternation between initial $th-$ $h$- and $d$- $d$- ($\acute{d}$), with the latter usually spelt as $t$, in independent and dependent irregular verbal forms respectively in Scottish Gaelic is well known, e.g. $thig$: $tig$, $thèid$: $tèid$, $thàinig$: $tàinig$, $thug$: $tug$, $thubhairt$/ $thuirt$: $tubhairt$/ $tuirt$, to which we may also add $fhuair$ $h$: $d'$ $fhuair$. This pattern is also found in Manx, e.g. $hig$: $jig$, $haink$: $daink$, $harragh$: $darragh$, $hug$: $dug$, $hem$ (1 sg.): $jem$ (1 sg.), $boor$: $door$ (Broderick 1984–86, i: 88–92, §§126–131); it does not extend, however, to $dooyrt$ in Manx (Broderick 1984–86, i: 92, §132). O’Rahilly (1931: 117, 118) explained the development of $th-$ $h$- in the present-future forms $thig$ and $thèid$ and the past tense forms $thubhairt$/ $thuirt$ (also their, theirinn, etc.) and $fhuair$ as being due to analogy with non-present forms $thug$, $thàinig$, $thiginn$, etc. based on the $th$- $d$- pattern they came to display in independent and dependent forms respectively. This is a credible and attractive explanation. The purpose of this brief paper is to suggest that some of the $h$-initial verbal forms found in Scottish Gaelic, and perhaps also in Manx, may have an older and different origin, and that O’Rahilly’s explanation may hold for some, but perhaps not all, of the relevant verbal forms.

2. In Old Gaelic main clauses, the unexpected non-lenition following pretonic preverbs such as $to$/ $do$, $fo$ and $ar$, which originally ended in a vowel, has been well documented and discussed (e.g. Dillon 1943, Boling 1972, Cowgill 1975, McCone 1979). As examples, we may note Old Gaelic $do$-coïd (‘went’), $do$-beir (‘brings, gives’), $fo$-ceird (‘puts’), with non-lenited $c$, $b$- and $c$- respectively; such verbal forms did later develop lenition due to the presence of a petrified neuter infixed leniting object pronoun (GOI 153, §243.2; McCone 1979: 2, n. 7). The implication of Thurneysen’s (GOI 150–53) discussion of ‘gemination’ is that non-leniting preverbs in main clauses prefixed $b$- to vowels, although he provides no examples due no doubt to the ambiguous nature of Old Gaelic orthography in this respect (GOI 19–20, §25). O’Brien (1932: 166) clearly indicates that he believed $fo$- prefixed $b$- to vowels in his reference to ‘the regular [Old Gaelic] pres[ent] ind[icative] 3 sg. [. . .] $fo$-upair–with a spoken $b$ sound between $fo$ and $upair$. ’
3. McCone (1979: 2) argues that:

Although *h* is of no phonetic significance in Old Irish orthography, which is consequently quite inconclusive in the matter, the evidence of the later language strongly suggests that by the end of the Old Irish period at latest a pretonic preverb in category (1) [to / do, fo, etc.] prefixed *h* to the rest of the verb if it began with a vowel, so that what was written *ro·ort* or *ro·hort* represented /ro-ˈhort/ ‘has slain’ in main clauses. This prefixing of *h* would be every bit as irregular historically as the failure of such preverbs to lenite a following consonant, and in some ways more significant.

He argues persuasively that *h*-provection developed through analogy with non-leniting proclitics that regularly prefixed *h*- to a following vowel and that it could have occurred at any time between the early eighth and early ninth centuries, and certainly by the time of the Milan Glosses. In his own words:

The prefixing of *h* in main clauses was presumably a later analogical development. [. . .] Pretonic preverbs and particles like *do, ro* and *fo* in main clauses would be anomalous [. . .] since they did not lenite a following consonant and failed to prefix *h* to a following vowel, and would be liable to be brought into line with one or other of the above categories [i.e. proclitics ending in a vowel, -V*H* and -V*S*]. The introduction of lenition of a following consonant was out of the question as it would have eradicated the crucial distinction between main and leniting relative clauses, and so the only possibility was to introduce the prefixing *h* to vowels. This would be useful as a hiatus filler in any unelided main clause forms (notably passives), and in the case of *ro* as a perfectivising particle, which was never elided, the introduction of *h*- would serve to differentiate main and leniting relative clauses. [. . .] The development of *h*- in hiatus could have started at any time after the elision in the early eighth century, but there is no compelling reason to assume it had begun or attained any significance by the time of Wb. [. . .] [W]e have a major morphological innovation in the verbal system between Wb. and Ml., one which is unfortunately obscured by the ambiguities of Old Irish orthography. However, for present purposes the chief significance of the above investigation lies in the demonstration that *h* was not prefixed by pretonic preverbs to
vowels at the beginning of the Old Irish period, but only arose later in the course of that period by analogy. (McCone 1979: 9–10).

The full implications of the analogical development of *b-* following proclitic preverbs such as *do* and *fo* has not hitherto been considered. The purpose of the remainder of this brief paper is to consider the possible implications for the historical development of certain irregular verbs, particularly in, although not limited to, Scottish Gaelic.

4. Thurneysen notes for preverbal particles that ‘except after *na*, prevocalic *h* (which was sounded, though not written, in O[ld] Ir[ish]) was retained in M[id]Ir[ish] before passive verbal forms only; in the active, lenition had been generalised from forms with infixed neuter pronouns’ (GOI 153, §243.2; cf. McCone 1979: 2). *b*-provection in verbal forms survives in Modern Irish dialects in three contexts:

(a) in all dialects with *ná* used with the imperative (O’Rahilly [1932] 1976: 39), e.g. *ná b-abair* (Kerry) (Ó Sé 2000: 329); *ná b-ól* (Galway) (de Bhaldraithe [1953] 1977: 291, §545); *ná bóil* (Mayo) (Mhac an Fhailigh [1968] 1980: 176, §492(d); *ná bith* (Donegal) (Ó Baoill 1996: 40; Hamilton 1974: 177)

(b) in Munster following *ná* with other tenses and moods, e.g. *ná b-ólann* (O’Rahilly [1932] 1976: 39), *ná b-itear* (Ó Sé 2000: 327, §600)


In Scottish Gaelic, this *b-* has been lost in imperatives, e.g. *na ith e* (Borgstrøm 1940: 66, §62.1) and impersonal / passive forms, where lenition has spread by
analogy, e.g. *chuireadhb* (e.g. Oftedal 1956: 235, §291). Although not previously noted as such, Scottish Gaelic *mana*¹, *murd*³ / *mara*¹ provides yet another example, e.g. *mana h-itheadh* (Oftedal 1956: 238, §295), *mara h-itheadh* (Borgstrom 1940: 193, §277). Given the survival of *h*-provocation in certain verbal phrases in Irish and Scottish Gaelic, it is worth considering if prefixed *h*- may have survived elsewhere in the verbal system.

5. The original deuterotonic forms of *thig*, *thàinig* and *thug* were *do-icc*, *do-án(a)ic* and *do-ucc* respectively. It follows from the above discussion that these forms would have been pronounced with *h*- before the end of the Old Gaelic period, i.e. *do-hicc*, *do-hán(a)ic*, *do-hucc*. Had such forms survived into the modern period (and we cannot of course be certain that they did), they would have survived as *hig*, *hàinig* and *hug*. If such forms survived in vernacular Scottish Gaelic, they would provide an alternative source to that proposed by O’Rahilly for the *h*: *d* alternations in the Scottish Gaelic verbal system. Similarly, they would provide an alternative contributory factor to the spread of lenition to past tense forms such as *tug* > *thug* and *táinig* > *thàinig* once *th* had been reduced to *h* at the vernacular level of language at least.

6. We may note as a possible parallel the northern Irish form *hobair* with short *o*, which contrasts with the more southern form *d(b)óbair* with long *ó*. M. A. O’Brien suggested that the long *ó* form ‘goes back to a contracted form [of *fo-upair*] with long *ó*’ but that the more northern form with short *o* represented ‘a stereotyped archaic form’, i.e. the original deuterotonic form. In his own words:

*Fóbair* comes from *fo-uss-ber-*, and in O[ld] Ir[ish] the regular pres[ent] indic[ative] 3 sg. would be *fo-upair*–with a spoken *h* sound between *fo* and *upair*. This would regularly give Mid[dle] Ir[ish] *do-hubair* and Mod[ern] Ir[ish] (Donegal) *bobwir*. (O’Brien 1932: 166).

O’Brien had referred to ‘Donegal’ *hobair* and ‘Munster’ *dbó Bair*. Forms with short *o* are, however, more widespread than he thought as Table 1 illustrates.
Table 1 shows that forms with short o are found predominantly in northern dialects in Ulster and Connacht, in Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Tyrone but once in Kerry (point 18). It also shows that short o forms in Ulster and Connacht always appear with initial b-. It may be no coincidence that b- + short vowel survives in northern dialects precisely where b- is best retained in the (impersonal / passive) verb, which provides some corroborative evidence for O’Brien’s derivation.

Long ó forms are characteristic of Munster dialects (Waterford, Cork, Kerry) but are also occasionally found in Connacht, e.g. in southern Galway and North-West Mayo. The Kerry form doïnair (point 18) is exceptional for
Munster in having a short vowel; it is also exceptional in having initial d-with short o. The Kerry form suggests that vowel shortening is a possible explanation for short vowel forms, which, if true for northern dialects, would suggest as an alternative explanation that Connacht and Ulster *hobair* could derive from *fóbair* with *f > b* and shortening of the long vowel *o*. It is conceivable, however, that Kerry *dobair* is a mixed form based on southern *dó Bair* and northern *hobair*. Similarly, southern Galway *bó Bair* is likely to be a mixed form based on the main southern and northern forms.

7. O’Rahilly (1931: 118) explained the change *f > b* in *fuair* (now spelt *fhuair*) as an analogical development based on the pattern *thb h*: *d* in independent and dependent forms respectively and on the dependent form *d'(fh)uair* in the same way that *thubhairt* and *theair* had developed based on the forms *dubhairt* and *deir*. That may be so but it is worth considering the possibility that initial *b*- in *fuair* may go back to an analogical form * fo-húair* with infixed *b*-.

8. In the present context it is perhaps not out of place to suggest tentatively that Scottish Gaelic *theagamh* (‘perhaps’) (Dieckhoff 1932: 163; Holmer 1957: 8, §11; Ó Murchú 1989: 414) may derive from the subjunctive *do-ecaim* with infixed *b-*, i.e. *do-beccaim* (see eDIL s.v. *do-ecmaing*). This may be supported by the Wester Ross form *a theagamh*, recorded by Roy Wentworth in a song, *Uilleam an Fhàin*, by Murdo Campbell (Leac na Saighhead): *Thuir [sic] e gun d’ chaill e na bb’ aige ’S a theagamh* gu faigheadh e bás (‘He said he’d lost all he had and perhaps he might die’) (Wentworth 2003: s.v. *perhaps*). Similarly,
we might suggest that Scottish Gaelic \textit{theab} (‘almost’) could derive from an older dueterotonic preterite form *\textit{do-eipi} with infixed \textit{h}-, i.e. *\textit{do-beipi} (\textit{eDIL} s.v. \textit{do-eipen}). For examples, see \textit{theab}, \textit{theabadh} (‘had almost’) (Dieckhoff 1932: 163); \textit{theab} (‘nearly did’) (MacBain [1896] 1982: 365); \textit{theab} (‘came within a little of’) (Calder [1923]: 233, §160.4); \textit{theab} (‘had nearly’) (Borgstrøm 1937: 236); \textit{theab} (‘had nearly, was on the point of’) (Borgstrøm 1940: 135, §168.2); \textit{theab} (Borgstrøm 1941: 113, §98); \textit{theabas} (Ó Murchú 1989: 414).

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\section*{Endnotes}

1 Greene (1956) rejects Thurneysen’s doctrine on the gemmination of consonants.

2 Passives such as \textit{h-óladh} derive from \textit{do h-óladh} < \textit{ro h-óladh} (cf. McCone 1979: 2, n. 7).

3 In fact, O’Rahilly ([1932] 1976: 46) states erroneously that ‘\textit{muna} (a compound of \textit{má}, ‘if’, and \textit{ní}) originally lenited, but now eclipses in Irish.’ \textit{Muna} was, however, originally a ‘geminating’ particle as indeed was \textit{ní} itself, upon which \textit{muna} is based (\textit{GOI} 152, §243.2).

4 \textit{Mura bhei\textit{l}} and \textit{mur’ eil} also occur in Scottish Gaelic; see \textit{DASG-CnaG} for examples. I hope to discuss \textit{mura} and other conjunctions elsewhere.

5 Table 1 is based on \textit{LASID} ii–iv, q. 442. Sandhi before non-palatalised consonants has frequently resulted in the final palatalised \textit{r} being realised as non-palatalised; such instances are represented in Table 1 by \textit{-a(i)r}.

6 Numbers in this column refer to \textit{LASID} dialect points.

7 ‘\textgreater\textgreater\textgreater’ indicates ‘occurs more frequently than’.

8 cf. Quiggin (1906: 70, §181), Ó Searcaigh (1925: 11).


10 On the change \textit{f} > \textit{h}, see Ó Sé (1990).

11 McCone (1987: 217, §5.5.1) suggests that ‘since pretonic preverbs had come to lenite in Middle Irish main clauses [. . .], the \textit{f} in such cases was presumably purely graphic and not pronounced as such’. Given the development of prosthetic \textit{f} in other contexts and its survival in the modern languages (e.g. \textit{fuar} (‘cold’), \textit{faca} (‘saw’)), and the possibility that prosthetic \textit{f} may have developed in some compound verbs before the widespread adoption of lenition in main clause
compound verbs, based on the pattern do-f- (non-relative) vs do-fh- (relative), we cannot rule out the possibility that the f may have been pronounced in some speech varieties in the likes of do-fic (LL), das-ficfad (LL), ra-ficsat (LL) (Breatnach 1994: 235, §3.21); examples from Lebor na hUidre (LU) include dosfic (l. 1215), dafic (l. 5050), dofic (l. 7923), doficsat (l. 1906).

12 The development of prosthetic f in the likes of do-fic and do-fuc (e.g. LL 23397) is presumably analogical (whether pronounced or not; see previous footnote). However, the possibility of a phonological development h > f is possible, especially before the round vowel u, i.e. do-huc > do-fuc.

13 cf. the dissimilation in the following example from Tyrone: an fiafruí, pronounced as an hiafruí (Ó Tuathail [1933] 2015: 321).

14 There are many examples of a theagamh recorded in Corpas na Gàidhlig (DASG-CnaG), some of which suggest the first element can be a preposition (de > a) or a possessive pronoun (a). It is unclear whether such instances represent the true origin of theagamh or a reinterpretation of the older verbal form suggested here.

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