

Abstract
The early Irish legal institution of othrus (usually translated 'sick-maintenance') has often been dismissed as some sort of elaborate legal fiction, never likely to be followed in real life. Indeed, to the 21st-century Western eye, the proposition that someone who has been unlawfully injured should be nursed back to health by the perpetrator and his kin seems unlikely. This paper argues, however, that othrus was far from being a little-used, impracticable construct of the fevered imagination of lawyers out of touch with reality. Rather, it was a cleverly devised and carefully balanced remedy for a harm which extended beyond the victim's own body to the emotional and social wellbeing of the kin of victim and perpetrator and the community in which both lived. It may thus be seen as reflecting the principles of restorative justice. The paper also considers the troubled existence of othrus in the legal materials: from its preservation in the text Bretha Crólige, written in the second half of the seventh century, to its denial (Int othra ni fil andiu isin aimsir so: 'Othrus does not exist today in this time') in the text Críth Gablach, written around 700, and its interpretation in the glosses and commentary to Bretha Crólige.

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