

THEORIES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND



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ABBREVIATIONS

- CMCS* *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* (volumes 1 (1981) to 25 (1993) published as *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*).
- CGH* *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, volume 1, ed. M. A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1962).
- MMIS* Medieval and Modern Irish Series
- ZCP* *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

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Despite the political disunity of early Irish society, theories and expressions of national identity abounded in the work of the learned classes of clerics, genealogists, poets and lawyers. This thesis examines texts from two crucial periods in the evolution of these theories.

Focusing initially on the seventh and eighth centuries, the first part of the thesis argues that Irish national identity was created as part of a campaign to assert the joint authority of the Uí Néill kings of Tara and their ecclesiastical allies in Armagh. Drawing inspiration from biblical and patristic sources, and possibly also from contemporary developments elsewhere in Europe, these ecclesiastico-political allies asserted the national unity of the Irish in linguistic, genetic and territorial terms in pursuit of their own particular objectives.

The influence of biblical and patristic beliefs on many of these early expressions of Irish identity highlights the outward-looking nature of the Irish scholarly tradition. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this international dimension intensified as the histories and identities of foreign peoples became subjects of study in Ireland, and new source materials filtered into the country from overseas. With reference to two texts composed during this period, the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* and a poem on national characteristics beginning *Cumtach na nLudaide n-ard* – the second part of this thesis discusses the influence of newly acquired sources on contemporary Irish scholarship. It also examines how the information contained in these sources was adapted and rationalised to conform to the basic assumptions of Irish society.

LONG ABSTRACT

Donnchadh Ó Corráin's 1978 article, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', demonstrated that the 'the Irish were profoundly conscious of themselves as a larger community of *natio*', and argued that 'their learned classes were preoccupied with this very notion'. The evidence of this preoccupation survives in the form of a large body of material written between the seventh and the twelfth centuries that focuses on theories of Irish nationality – linguistic, racial and territorial – as well as in the assumptions evident in certain genres, such as the Old Irish law tracts, that the Irish were a homogeneous cultural and legal unit. Scholarly interest in these topics culminated with the production of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* during the eleventh century. This text contained an origin legend of the Gaels that stressed their racial unity and provided a pseudo-historical account of the settlements of Ireland that projected the political unity of the country back into the prehistoric period. The same scholarly enterprise that produced *Lebor Gabála* also investigated the histories and identities of the other peoples of the British Isles; the English, the Britons and the men of Alba, as well as more general topics related the origins and characteristics of nations. The present thesis discusses a range of sources from two crucial periods in the development of Irish concepts of nationality. It begins with an examination of some of the earliest expressions of Irish identity in sources from the seventh and eighth centuries, before moving on to discuss compositions from the Middle Irish period (tenth to twelfth centuries) that focus on more general aspects of nationality.

Some of the earliest sources for the history of medieval Ireland recognised the presence on the island of three distinct *cenéla*, 'races', who

possessed identities that distinguished them from one another on racial or other grounds. One of the earliest attempts to define Irish identity, an origin legend in the late sixth- or early seventh-century grammatical text *Auraicept na nÉces*, recognised that the speakers of Old Irish were of diverse racial origins but asserted the primacy of their linguistic unity as the defining factor in their identity.

The distinct groups found in early Ireland were the Féni, the Laigin and the Ulaid. The Féni were members of a political alliance that included the Éoganachta of Munster, the Connachta, and the Uí Néill rulers of the midlands and the northwest. The Féni were the most powerful of these three *prímchenéla* and, in the form of the Uí Néill – effectively leaders of the Féni – they were expanding their authority and their territory at the expense of the Ulaid and the Laigin during the earliest phase of Irish history. During the second half of the seventh century, the Uí Néill were tightening their grip on the kingship of Tara, the most prestigious position in Irish politics. Though not generally a kingship of all Ireland, Tara seems to have been regarded, not just by the Féni but also by their enemies, as the seat of a particularly prestigious kingship, and late seventh-century texts suggest that the Uí Néill aspired to establish their authority over the entire island from that base.

While not explicitly political in its assertions, the linguistic theory of Irish nationality can be read as affirming the dominance of the Féni over the other peoples of Ireland. Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested that the uniformity of Old Irish – which is described in the *Auraicept* as *bérta Féne*, ‘the language of the Féni’ – might be explained by seeing it as having originated as the dialect of the Féni, or perhaps the Uí Néill, the leaders of the Féni, that was later raised to

the status of a national language on the back of their political success. Its status therefore reflected and asserted the dominance of the Féni.

Another, perhaps contemporary theory of Irish unity contradicted the *Auraicept's* stance regarding the heterogeneous origins of the Irish by depicting their ancestral unity as descendants of Míl of Spain. At the heart of the Milesian legend lies a genealogical schema that, in its structure, reflects the political dominance of the Uí Néill and their allies at the end of the seventh or during the eighth century. It may, in fact, originally have been constructed as a genealogy of the Féni and only later expanded to incorporate the other peoples of Ireland. Nonetheless, by subsuming the Laigin and the Ulaid within the Féni, the linguistic and genealogical definitions of Irish identity were attempting to forge a national unit that corresponded to the political ambitions of the Uí Néill.

The aspirations of the Uí Néill to establish their authority over all Ireland were matched by those of Armagh, which sought to assert its position at the head of the Irish Church in the late seventh century. It did so, first, by promoting the image of St Patrick as the national apostle in a series of propagandist texts, a corollary of which was the depiction of the inhabitants of Ireland as a single Christian nation. Armagh's claims to authority were restricted to the island of Ireland, the supposed theatre of Patrick's missionary activity, so its propaganda espoused a territorial definition of the Irish nation. Armagh augmented its propaganda campaign by forging an alliance with the Uí Néill and associating its claims with those of the kings of Tara. The linguistic, genetic and territorial expressions of Irish nationality, therefore, originated in the ecclesiastico-political alliance between the Uí Néill and Armagh who promoted Irish unity for their own specific goals.

This alliance might also have influenced the production of a written law in Ireland that claimed national jurisdiction. Given the political fragmentation of the country, the claims of the Old Irish law tracts to describe a national legal system are remarkable. They can possibly be explained, however, in the context of contemporary European developments. Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages constituted an 'age of law', during which many of the newly established ethnic kingdoms of Western Europe adopted written law codes. The production of written law in Ireland was thus part of a European trend and should be studied in its European context. Patrick Wormald has outlined the important ideological connotations associated with the production of written law on the continent and in England. By adopting *lex scripta*, he argued, barbarian kings were casting themselves in the guise of Roman emperors and were asserting the civility of their peoples. Moreover, the example of Moses instilled in churchmen the belief that peoples should possess written legal traditions of their own as a fundamental aspect of their identity.

The production of written law in Ireland carried similar ideological connotations, as the surviving tracts attest. Their archaic content and the story of their origin that connected them with the national past suggest, for instance, that the law tracts, and particularly the *Senchas Már*, were not just textbooks for aspiring legal practitioners. They were also 'vehicles of tradition' that emphasised the legal unity of Ireland and continuity with the national past. Some of the law tracts furnish evidence for the existence of the distinct *cenéla* in early Ireland and *Bechbretha* even suggests that the Ulaid and the Féni had distinct legal traditions in the early seventh century. Most frequently, however, the content of the laws is described as the law of (the men of) Ireland or as the law of

the Féni, which was evidently supposed to imply the same thing. The equation of these terms had the effect of subsuming the Ulaid and the Laigin within the Féni in legal terms in a manner comparable to how the *Auraicept* and the Milesian genealogy did in linguistic and genealogical terms. Finally, the legend of the origins of Irish law found in *Córus Bésnai* and expanded in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már* ascribed the national status of the law to the role of St Patrick and Lóegaire mac Néill in its compilation. The imagery and the terms used were comparable to those that described the promulgation of royal legislation known as *cánai* in the eighth century, thus associating the authority of the national law with the status of both Armagh and the Uí Néill kings of Tara.

Armagh's campaign to be recognised as the head of the Irish Church was motivated in part by the threats posed to its position by Kildare – the head of the southern, 'Roman', party within the Irish Church – and by the imperially-minded Northumbrian Church. The pretensions of Bishop Wilfrid of York to claim authority over the northern part of Ireland, combined with the expansionary policy of the Northumbrian King Ecgfrith, probably lay behind a Northumbrian attack on the province of Brega in 684. Despite the laconic record of this event in the Chronicle of Ireland – then being compiled on Iona where there seems to have been a different attitude towards the attack than was common in Ireland – it is apparent that the arrival of an Anglo-Saxon army on Irish soil had a significant impact throughout Ireland. References to the Northumbrian attack appear in Irish sources of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, suggesting that the event created a sense of panic amongst the learned men of the country. Although these references are not particularly numerous, when taken together

they give the impression that the image of Anglo-Saxon invaders was being used by propagandists to emphasise the unity of the men of Ireland.

Some of the sources that noted the attack depicted it as a threat to Ireland as a whole rather than to a single province, thus contrasting the men of Ireland with the image of the foreign invader; others made an explicit link between kingship and defence of Ireland against foreign attackers. *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* in particular seems to associate the ability to defend the country from the English with the kingship of Tara. In sources associated with Armagh, on the other hand, St Patrick was depicted as the defender of the men of Ireland against the threat of invasion. Thus, it will be argued, the Northumbrian attack of 684 provided ammunition for political and ecclesiastical propagandists pursuing the unification of the men of Ireland as a national unit. To a certain extent, this depiction of the English paved the way for the use eleventh- and twelfth-century propagandists – for instance the author of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib* – who used the Vikings as a foil for their depictions of heroic kings of Ireland.

By the eleventh century, the concept of the Ireland as a unified and long-standing political entity was gaining widespread acceptance among the learned classes. Indeed, national unity was the focus of much contemporary scholarship, the clearest manifestation of which was the composition of *Lebor Gabála*. Along with the project of establishing an authoritative history of the Gaels, there was also increased interest in the history and identity of foreign peoples and, more generally, in topics related to nationality. The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* was paramount amongst contemporary texts with a broader focus on the origins and identities of foreign nations. In order to describe the genealogical origins of the nations of the world, the text employed a range of sources, including the so-

called *fränkische Völkertafel* that was drawn from the *Lebor Bretnach*, an Irish translation of the *Historia Brittonum*. Irish scholars apparently found the *fränkische Völkertafel* very attractive, for it was copied, in full or in part, into a range of eleventh-century texts including *Lebor Gabála*, *Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim*, and *A eolchu Alban uile*. Although the text was only imported into Ireland in the eleventh century, the fact that it was so widely used is illustrative of the impact of new source materials on Irish scholarship of the period.

For the author of the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, the incorporation of the *fränkische Völkertafel* and other material into the universal genealogy of mankind presented him with a problem that Christian scholars had faced for centuries, namely the apparent superfluity of nations in contrast to the orthodox statement that there were seventy-two languages. To remedy this apparent contradiction, the author distinguished between two grades of nations, *prímchenéla*, 'primary nations', that were biological units and that possessed their own languages, and *fochenéla*, 'subordinate nations', that did not. This innovative distinction might have drawn on concepts of kinship with a long history in Ireland.

The Middle Irish poem *Cumtach na nludaide n-ard*, like the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, constitutes an example of the marriage of foreign and local elements that is so characteristic of this period of Irish history and scholarship. The poem consists of a list of national characteristics, for which the author drew upon a version of *De Proprietatibus Gentium*, a Latin tract composed in Oviedo c.900 and copied throughout medieval Europe. *Cumtach na nludaide n-ard* is best understood as a local manifestation of a widespread European tradition of national stereotyping; in form, however, the poem was part of a distinctly Irish

tradition of syllabic verse. Having examined the textual history of the poem and identified its sources, the final chapter of this thesis discusses some of the basic assumptions that underpin it. Historians of anthropology do not hold medieval ethnography in very high regard, but Irish scholars evidently developed a theory to explain the characteristics of different nations based on their assumption that nationality could be explained in terms of kinship writ large.

The thesis ends by proposing an avenue for further investigation into the origins of Irish identity in the context of European developments during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. This period was an age of nation building throughout Western Europe, and recent research into the origins of ethnic kingdoms by the disciples of Herwig Wolfram, it suggests, offers a useful paradigm within which to examine the process as it progressed in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

The original portion of the poem *Énna, Labraid, luad caich* is one of the oldest extant compositions in the Irish language, probably dating from the early decades of the seventh century.¹ It consists of a versified pedigree of Énna Chennselaig and of his father Labraid, two important figures in the genealogy of the Laigin, that traces their ancestry back as far as Lóegaire Lorcc. About a hundred years after the initial composition, another poet extended the poem considerably. To the original twenty-one stanzas he added a further thirty-three that continued Lóegaire Lorcc's genealogy upwards through several more generations, including important figures in Irish myth and pseudo-history such as Éremón and Míl, before grafting it onto the universal genealogy of mankind found in the Book of Genesis. Thus it became possible to trace a direct line of ascent from the Laigin dynasts mentioned in the original poem to Noah and, ultimately, Adam. Between Japheth and his father, Noah, there was inserted into this extended genealogy a list of the peoples of the world that had probably been adapted from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*.²

¹ The poem has been edited twice, once by M. A. O'Brien (*CGH*, pp. 4–7) and once by K. Meyer, (*Über die älteste irische Dichtung 1: Rhythmische Alliterierende Reimstrophien* (Berlin, 1913), pp. 26–31). All references will be to O'Brien's text. For the date of both portions of the text, see J. Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', *Ériu* 22 (1971), 65–73, especially, 72–73; *idem*, 'Aspects of archaic Irish', *Éigse* 17 (1978–9), 430–35; *idem*, 'The dating of early Irish verse texts', *Éigse* 19 (1982–83), 177–216; *idem*, 'The dating of archaic Irish verse', in S. N. Tranter and H. L. C. Tristram (eds.), *Early Irish literature – media and communication/Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in der frühen irischen Literatur* (Tübingen, 1989), pp. 49–53; D. Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy: recurrent aetiologies', in T. Nyberg, I. Piø, P. M. Sørensen and A. Trommer (eds.), *History and heroic tale: a symposium, Proceedings of the eighth international symposium organized by the Centre for the study of vernacular literature in the Middle Ages held at Odense University on 21–22 November, 1983* (Odense, 1985), pp. 60–67.

² *CGH*, p. 7; Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy', p. 66.

In the words of James Carney, *Énna, Labraid* is 'stylistically as poor a poem as exists in the Irish language',³ but what it lacks in style it more than compensates for with content. The importance of the genealogy included in the original portion of the poem as part of an early body of Leinster tradition will be discussed in the next chapter. The significance of the additional, eighth-century material resides in the fact that it is one of the earliest attestations of the existence of 'the theory of the unity of the men of Ireland through Míl and of the world through Adam'.⁴ Not only does it seem to refer to the Milesian theory of Gaelic unity, it also displays concern with establishing the place of the Gaels within the biblical framework of nations and with the origins of peoples more generally.⁵ These are themes that resonate through numerous texts produced in Ireland during the five centuries or so prior to the English invasion that began in the 1160s.

John Carey⁶ has traced the gradual expansion of the basic genealogical and narrative schema of the Milesian legend in *Auraicept na n-Éces* (c.700),⁷ the Cambro-Latin *Historia Brittonum* (c.830),⁸ the Irish poem *Can a mbunadas na*

³ Carney, 'Aspects of archaic Irish', 432.

⁴ *Idem*, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', 73.

⁵ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 112.

⁶ J. Carey, 'Lebor Gabála and the legendary history of Ireland', in H. Fulton (ed.) *Medieval Celtic literature and society* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 32–48. Cf. *idem*, *A new introduction to Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Irish texts Society supplement to vol. 34 (Dublin, 1993); *idem*, *The Irish national origin-legend: synthetic pseudohistory* (with a memoir of E.C. Quiggin by David N. Dumville) Quiggin pamphlets on the sources of mediaeval Gaelic history 1 (Cambridge, 1994).

⁷ *Auraicept na n-Éces*, ed. and trans. A. Ahlqvist, *The early Irish linguist: an edition of the canonical part of the Auraicept na n-Éces, with introduction, commentary and indices* (Helsinki, 1983).

⁸ *Historia Brittonum*, ed. and trans. J. Morris, *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals*, History from the sources: Arthurian period sources 8 (Chichester, 1980), pp. 20–1, 61–2. For the date, see D. N. Dumville, 'Some aspects of the chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*', *BBCS*, 25 (1972–4), 439–45.

nGaedel? ascribed to Máel Mura Othna (d. 887),⁹ *Scél Túain meic Chairill* (second half of the ninth century),¹⁰ the Middle Irish text *De Shuidigud Tellaig Temra*,¹¹ and the Life of St Cadróe written at Metz (early eleventh century).¹² This process culminated in the production of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, a project that seems to have involved many of the leading scholars in eleventh-century Ireland.¹³ In time, *Lebor Gabála* became

the primary point of reference for a full sweep of the imagined past. Bringing together a heterogeneous body of legends and speculations regarding the ancient history of the country and the origins of its people, and fitting them into a single comprehensive framework, *Lebor Gabála* provided a narrative extending from the creation of the world to the coming of Christianity, and beyond – a national myth which sought to put Ireland on the same footing as Israel and Rome.¹⁴

⁹ Máel Mura Othna, *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*, ed. R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien, *The Book of Leinster*, ll. 16024–27. J. H. Todd edited and translated the poem as an appendix to his edition of the Irish translation of the *Historia Brittonum: Leabhar Breathnach annso sis: the Irish version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius*, ed. and trans. J. H. Todd (Dublin, 1848), pp. 220–271.

¹⁰ J. Carey, 'Scél Tuáin meic Chairill', *Ériu* 35 (1984), 97.

¹¹ *De Shuidigud Tellaig Temra*, ed. and trans. R. I. Best, 'The settling of the manor of Tara', *Ériu* 4 (1910), 121–72. No attempt to date the text more narrowly appears to have been made to date. Noting the divergences between the version of the legend in this text and that in *Lebor Gabála* and its associated poems, Carey ('*Lebor Gabála* and the legendary history of Ireland', p. 39, note 24) has suggested that 'it was composed before these texts had come to exercise a pervasive influence'.

¹² P. Ó Riain, 'An Vita Cadroe an Leabhar Gabhála agus Corcaigh', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 113 (2008), 9–19; *idem*, 'Scottorum origines fabulosae: the Metz version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*', in *idem* (ed.), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: textual tradition and pseudohistory*, Irish Texts Society subsidiary series 20 (London, 2009), pp. 33–47.

¹³ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: the book of the taking of Ireland*, Irish Texts Society vols. 34, 35, 39, 41, 44 (5 vols., Dublin, 1938–56). For discussion of the text, its development and the theories it encapsulated, see note 6 above and R. M. Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part I: the growth of the text', *Ériu* 38 (1987), 82–142; *idem*, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part II'; *idem*, 'Mediaeval recensions of the *Lebor Gabála*', in J. Carey (ed.), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: textual tradition and pseudohistory*, Irish Texts Society subsidiary series 20 (London, 2009), pp. 1–20.

¹⁴ Carey, *The Irish national origin-legend*, p. 1.

Like *Énna, Labraid*, many of the later texts that expanded on the theory of Irish identity also display their authors' interest in situating the Irish within the broader context of a world of nations. Some of them, including *Lebor Gabála* and later additions to the *Auraicept*, reproduced versions of the list of peoples that had first been incorporated into *Énna, Labraid*.¹⁵ During the same period of intense scholarly concern with the Irish national origin legend in the eleventh century that produced *Lebor Gabála*, outward-looking Irish scholars also intensified their interest in the origins, histories and identities of foreign peoples.¹⁶ Evidence of this is to be found in the production of Irish translations of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*¹⁷ and of the 'Nennian' recension of the *Historia Brittonum*,¹⁸ in the composition of Middle Irish poems on national characteristics¹⁹ and in the production of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*.²⁰ Just as *Lebor Gabála* represented the culmination of centuries of learned theorising on the nature of Irish identity, the contemporary composition of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* might be seen as representing the latest and most detailed

¹⁵ CGH, p. 202; *Auraicept na nÉces*, ed. and trans. G. Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces, The scholars' Primer: being the texts of the Ogham tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan, and the text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster* (Edinburgh, 1917), pp. 16–19, 179; *Lebor Gabála*, vol. 2, pp. 78, 87, 148.

¹⁶ H. Tristram, 'Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in Old English and Old Irish: a comparison', in A. Bihrer (ed.), *Nova de veteribus: Mittel- und Neulateinische Studien für Paul Gerhard Schmidt* (Munich & Leipzig, 2004), p. 198.

¹⁷ 'A Middle Irish fragment of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*', ed. O. J. Bergin, in *idem* (ed.), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, 3 (Halle, 1910), pp. 63–76.

¹⁸ *Lebor Bretnach*, ed. A. G. van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach: the Irish version of the Historia Britonum Ascribed to Nennius* (Dublin, 1932). Charles-Edwards (*Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, p. 112) noted the similarity of the parallel between the interests of *Énna Labraid* and *Lebor Bretnach* in this regard.

¹⁹ K. Meyer, 'Two Middle Irish poems', *ZCP* 1 (1897), 112–13.

²⁰ *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. and trans. D. Ó Cróinín (Dublin, 1983); ed. H. Tristram, *Sex Aetates Mundi: die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren: Untersuchungen und Texte* (Heidelberg, 1985), pp. 209–38.

attempt by Irish scholars to find order in the world of peoples beyond Irish shores.²¹

Lebor Gabála and its precursors record many 'native traditions' but they are clearly 'inward-looking and outward-looking ... in a way which typifies the intellectual culture of early medieval Ireland'.²² The non-native element in this tradition was primarily shaped by the teachings of the Christian faith, so that, to paraphrase Donnchadh Ó Corráin, we are at a loss to know precisely what consciousness the Irish had of themselves or their neighbours outside the Christian context.²³

Adrian Hastings has discussed the importance of Christian teaching, especially the text of the Vulgate Bible, as a formative influence on theories of nationality in medieval Europe.²⁴ The Bible's depiction of the world as inhabited by distinct *gentes* or *nationes*, found in both the Old and New Testaments, was fundamental to the Christian worldview. Psalm 116:1, for example, commanded *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes: laudate eum universi populi*,²⁵ 'O praise the

²¹ This text will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

²² J. Carey, 'Native elements in Irish pseudo-history', in D. Edel (ed.), *Cultural identity and cultural integration: Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1995), p. 47.

²³ D. Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', in T. W. Moody (ed.), *Historical Studies XI: Nationality and the pursuit of national independence, papers read before the Conference held at Trinity College, Dublin, 26–31 May 1975* (Belfast, 1978), pp. 2–4. See also, M. T. Flanagan, 'Strategies of distinction: defining nations in medieval Ireland', in H. Tsurushima (ed.), *Nations in medieval Britain* (Donington, 2010), p. 106. Against this theory, Proinsias Mac Cana believed he could identify traces of the prehistoric sense of nationality that existed among the inhabitants of Ireland: P. MacCana, *The cult of the sacred centre: essays on Celtic ideology* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 211–307.

²⁴ A. Hastings, *The construction of nationhood: ethnicity, religion and nationalism*, The Wiles lectures 1996 (Cambridge, 1997).

²⁵ All biblical quotations are taken from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. B. Fischer, J. Gribomont, H. F. D. Sparks, W. Thiele and R. Weber (Stuttgart, 1969, repr. 1980).

Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye peoples’, and according to the Acts of the Apostles (2:4–5), at Pentecost Jerusalem was filled with *viri religiosi ex omni natione quae sub caelo sunt*, ‘devout men, out of every nation under heaven’. This image of the world was given the supreme endorsement in Matthew’s Gospel (28:19) which quoted Christ’s instruction to his apostles: *euntes ergo docete omnes gentes, baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, ‘Going therefore, teach ye all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’.²⁶

The Bible also provided an universal origin legend for mankind that explained the existence of these various *gentes* and *nationes* and that went some way to defining what, in fact, they were. According to Chapter Ten of the Book of Genesis, the origins of nations could be traced to the repopulation of the post-Diluvian world by the descendants of the three sons of Noah. This chapter described *familiæ Noe iuxta populos et nationes suas. Ab his divisæ sunt gentes in terra post diluvium*, ‘the families of Noah, according to their peoples and nations. From these were the nations divided on the earth after the flood’ (Gen 10:32). Noah’s three sons, Japheth, Shem and Cham were depicted as the progenitors of all the inhabitants of the world, who settled *in cognationibus, et linguis, et generationibus, terrisque et gentibus suis*, ‘in their kindreds and languages and generations and lands and nations’ (Gen 10:20; cf. 10:31). Later, it would be commonly held that each of these three brothers had been responsible for

²⁶ This was a critical text for St Patrick, who quoted it in his *Confessio* (ed. L. Bieler, Patrick, *Liber Epistolarum*, ed. L. Bieler, *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii*, 2 vols. Irish Manuscripts Commission (Dublin, 1952), § 40, p. 80) and alluded to it in the opening section of his *Epistola ad milites Corotici* (ed. Bieler, *Liber Epistolarum*, §1, pp. 191–92). See T. O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (London, 2005), pp. 72–4; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 215–16.

repopulating a different region of the world; Japheth in Europe, Cham in Africa and Shem in Asia.²⁷

These biblical theories found further expression and clarification in the writings of the Church Fathers. John Carey has said that, together with the Bible, Jerome and Orosius 'exercised a pervasive influence on the evolution of Ireland's legendary history',²⁸ and to this list we might add Isidore of Seville, 'the schoolmaster of the Middle Ages'.²⁹ In case his readers were in any doubt as to what constituted a *gens* or *natio*, Isidore provided suitably definitive etymologies of both terms: *Gens est multitudo ab uno principio orta, sive ab alia natione secundum propriam collectionem distincta, ... Gens autem appellata propter generationes familiarum, id est a gignendo, sicut natio a nascendo*, 'a *gens* is a multitude descended from a single origin, or distinct from other *nationes* according to its proper grouping/gathering, ... A *gens* is so called on account of the generations of families, that is, from *gignendo* (begetting), as *natio* comes from *nascendo* (being born)'.³⁰ The Christian image was one of a world inhabited by peoples defined in terms of 'kinship writ-large'.³¹ At the most basic level, the

²⁷ See, for example, Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, ed. and trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1961–65), vol. 1, 1.120–47.

²⁸ Carey, *Irish national origin legend*, p. 4.

²⁹ For the early reception of Isidore's writings in Ireland and his importance to medieval Irish scholarship, see J. N. Hillgarth, 'Visigothic Spain and early Christian Ireland', *PRIA* 67 (1962), C, 167–94; *eadem*, 'Ireland and Spain in the seventh century', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 1–16; M. Herren, 'On the earliest Irish acquaintance with Isidore of Seville', in E. James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: new approaches, papers read at the Visigothic Colloquy, held in University College, Dublin between 14 and 17 May 1975* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 243–50.

³⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Etymologiarum sive Originum*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911), 9.2.1.

³¹ P. Geary, 'Ethnic identity as a situational construct in the early middle ages', *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983), 18.

use of *cenél*, ‘race, kindred’, as the Irish equivalent of the Latin *gens* and *natio* illustrates the adherence to this idea by Irish scholars.³²

In theory, then, each nation was a large kin-group that ought to be able to trace its ancestry to one of the sons of Noah. Christian authors of the early medieval period often sought to do exactly that, to establish the place of their own peoples within the universal genealogy of mankind outlined in Genesis.³³ Isidore of Seville was one of the first to do so. Drawing upon Josephus’ claim that the Scythians were descended from Magog son of Japheth,³⁴ Isidore traced the ancestry of the Goths to Magog on the basis of the similarity of the two ethnonyms.³⁵ Isidore’s example was followed by, amongst others, the continuator of *Énna, Labraid*.³⁶ The eleventh-century author of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* was more ambitious. By drawing upon a broad range of sources, he attempted to construct a universal genealogy that included many of the European peoples absent from the biblical account. Some of the problems this posed him will be discussed in a later chapter.

As has been pointed out before, it is in the genealogies they created for themselves that it is most apparent that the Irish and the Welsh had no concept of being related to one another or of any sense of Celtic identity.³⁷ While the Irish saw themselves as descended from the Scythians or the Greeks, the Britons

³² E. G. Quin *et al*, (*Contributions to*) *A dictionary of the Irish language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* (Dublin, 1913–76; compacted edition, Dublin 1983), (henceforth, *DIL*), s.v..

³³ S. Reynolds, ‘Medieval *origines gentium* and the community of the realm’, *History* 68, no. 224 (1983), 375–80.

³⁴ *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 1, 1.123.

³⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 9.2.26–29; *idem*, *Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH Scriptores, Auctores Antiquissimi XI* (Berlin, 1894), p. 268, § 1.

³⁶ Carey, *The Irish national origin-legend*, p. 12.

³⁷ E. MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1919), p. 4.

traced their ancestry to the Trojans. Despite this, and although he cites no specific evidence to support his claim, Alfred Smyth has recently asserted that 'there was clearly a consciousness of a shared Celtic heritage' amongst the Irish and Welsh during the Middle Ages.³⁸ Smyth's proposition that peoples viewed different groups of outsiders as varying in the degree of their foreignness is undoubtedly correct, but that the Irish and the Welsh might have perceived each other as less foreign than, say, the Anglo-Saxons ought to be seen as a result of the greater familiarity they had with one another from a longer history of contact, not as a survival of some ancient racial memory. It is telling, for instance, that the typical overseas foreigner cited in the Old Irish laws is an *Albanach*, 'Briton', or a *Gall*, 'Gaul', but very infrequently a *Saxa*, 'Englishman'.³⁹

As Hastings pointed out, as well as a theory for the origin of peoples, the Bible also provided its readers with an image of the model *gens* in the form of Old Testament Israel. He characterised this ideal as 'a unity of people, language, religion, territory and government',⁴⁰ an image that resonates with the famous medieval definitions of what a people was found in the writings of the chronicler Regino of Prüm (d.915) and Bernard, bishop of St David's (d.1148). According to Regino, *diversae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere, moribus, lingua, legibus*, 'the various nations of peoples differ in descent, customs, language and

³⁸ A. P. Smyth, 'The emergence of English identity', in *idem* (ed.), *Medieval Europeans: studies in ethnic identity and national perspectives in medieval Europe* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 31. Smyth cites no evidence for this in his article, but in a footnote refers to the fact that some aspects of Welsh literature have 'much to do with Ireland' and even borrow episodes from Irish tales. This is not evidence for recognition of common ethno-linguistic heritage.

³⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 222.

⁴⁰ Hastings, *The construction of nationhood*, pp. 18, 195–6. Genesis 10:20 quoted above could be read as implying that each of the *gentes* descended from Noah's sons possessed its own *lingua* and *terra*.

law'.⁴¹ Bernard drew attention to the differences between the Welsh inhabitants of his diocese and the English in an effort to gain metropolitan status for St David's. His terms of reference show that he is operating in the same tradition as Regino. The Welsh, he says, differ *natione, lingua, legibus et moribus, iudiciis et consuetudinibus*, 'as a nation, in language, laws and habits, judgments and customs'.⁴² Based on this and other evidence, Susan Reynolds has argued that medieval scholars generally believed 'in the natural, *given* existence of collective groups with their own customs, laws and cultures'.⁴³

The Israelites' identity was not defined purely in synchronic terms. It was a narrative, the narrative of the Old Testament, that made them who they were, that described their origins, their covenant with God, their suffering in Egypt, their wanderings, the origins of the law of Moses and their settling in their promised land. It is hardly surprising, then, that medieval peoples discussed their identities through their histories, particularly in the form of *origines gentium*.

The Old Testament had a very direct influence on the history of the Gaels found in *Lebor Gabála*, which includes such obvious borrowings as parallel periods of captivity in Egypt.⁴⁴ In certain cases, however, especially when it was commonly known that a people lacked ancestral unity, a collective history could gain even greater significance in their self-identification. It was, for example, their common experience of migration and conversion, as much as their shared

⁴¹ Regino of Prüm, *Epistula ad Hothonem archiepiscopum*, ed. F. Kurze, *MGH SS Rer. Germ.* 50, p. XX.

⁴² Gerald of Wales, *De Invectionibus*, ed. W. S. Davies, *Y Cymmrodor* 30 (1920), 141–42.

⁴³ Reynolds, 'Medieval *origines gentium*', 389.

⁴⁴ *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, vol. 1, pp. 27–8; Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part II', 22–9.

language, that united the Jutes, Angles and Saxons into the *gens Anglorum* of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.⁴⁵ King Alfred later expanded on this theme, comparing the English experience of migration and their oppression by the Danes to the history of the Chosen People to bolster the unity of his kingdom.⁴⁶

The importance of its past, including its ancestry and/or shared history, to a people's identity is epitomised in the semantics of 'history' and 'meaning' in Welsh.⁴⁷ The Latin *historia* was borrowed into Welsh as *ystyr*, the usual meaning of which during the Middle Ages was, as it is now, 'meaning'. The native Welsh word for 'history' is *hanes*, the basic meaning of which was, according to Sims-Williams, 'derivation, origins, separating out'.⁴⁸ Origin legends of the type found in *Lebor Gabála*, in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and in the *Historia Brittonum* 'can be understood in light of the mentality in which history (*historia*) conferred meaning (*ystyr*), and in which history (*hanes*) was concerned with origins and derivations'.⁴⁹ Anthony Smith said that myths and memories constitute a *sine qua non* for modern nations: 'there can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth, and identity and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the very concept of a nation'.⁵⁰ This is just as true of medieval nations as of their modern equivalents.

⁴⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's ecclesiastical history of the English people* (Oxford, 1969).

⁴⁶ P. Wormald, *The making of English law: King Alfred to the twelfth century, volume 1: legislation and its limits* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 416–29

⁴⁷ For what follows, see P. Sims-Williams, 'Some functions of origin stories in early medieval Wales', in Nyberg *et al* (eds.), *History and heroic tale*, pp. 97–131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁰ A. D. Smith, *The ethnic origins of nations* (Oxford, 1986), p. 2.

Hastings also addressed what he called 'our historiographical schism'.⁵¹ Certain modern historians are of the belief that nations are modern entities, that they are dependent on modernity for their existence, and therefore they deny any relationship, historical or typological, between medieval and modern nations.⁵² The historical relationship between medieval and modern nations is not the concern of this thesis,⁵³ but the typological similarity between them is. To attempt to distinguish between 'nations' and 'ethnic groups' in terms of size, chronology or any other factor is to do an injustice to those deemed to belong to the 'lesser' category. It is better to accept, as this thesis does, that 'peoples' and 'nations' are very elastic entities, that the medieval manifestations of these phenomena were not so different from their modern versions⁵⁴ and that, in many cases, modernists' theories are just as aptly applied to medieval as to modern entities.⁵⁵ As far as this thesis is concerned, the interchangeable use of 'national' and 'ethnic' terminology to refer to the *gentes/nationes/populi/cenéla* of medieval sources is perfectly acceptable.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Hastings, *The construction of nationhood*, p. 9. Cf. K Stringer, 'Social and political communities in European history: some reflections on recent studies', in C. Bjørn, A Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds.), *Nations, nationalism and patriotism in the European past* (Copenhagen, 1994), pp. 9–34.

⁵² E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New perspectives on the past (Oxford, 1983); E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd edn., London, 1991).

⁵³ For an important discussion of this point, see A. D. Smith, *The ethnic origins of nations* (Oxford, 1986).

⁵⁴ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of nations', pp. 11–12.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Sarah Foot's use of modern theory in her discussion of the development of English identity: 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series, 6 (1996), 25–49.

⁵⁶ For some of the difficulties with this terminology, see A. C. Murray, 'Reinhard Wenskus on 'ethnogenesis', ethnicity, and the origin of the Franks', in A. Gillett, (ed.), *On barbarian identity: critical approaches to ethnicity in the early middle ages*, Studies in the early middle ages 4 (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 44–6.

The Christian belief in a world populated by named peoples formed the context for the discussion of national identity in early medieval Ireland. The current thesis will examine some of the texts and theories that were produced as part of this discussion. The first chapters will focus on the seventh and eighth centuries, the earliest period from when texts concerned with Irish nationality survive. The second section will concentrate on the eleventh century, when scholarly interest in the origins, histories and identities of the Irish and their neighbours was at its most intense. In the former discussion, the primary focus will be on examining the origins of Irish identity while the latter will concentrate on specific texts that are indicative of the scope of contemporary scholarly endeavour. The history of Ireland during both periods was characterised by high levels of communication with the rest of Europe and this will provide important background for the discussion of the transmission of certain ideas into Ireland.

Part 1

Donnchadh Ó Corráin's 1972 article, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', effectively ended what had been a long-running debate regarding the existence of a sense of nationality in early medieval Ireland.⁵⁷ As Proinsias MacCana would point out a few years later, 'one of the commonplace notions about the Celtic peoples, the Irish in particular, is that they were chronically incapable of unity of purpose and, as a corollary to this, that they lacked the sense of nationality (and *a fortiori* that of nationalism)'.⁵⁸ Such ideas found expression amongst students of medieval Ireland during the nineteenth and

⁵⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', pp. 1–35.

⁵⁸ P. MacCana, 'Early Irish ideology and the concept of unity', R. Kearney (ed.), *The Irish mind: exploring intellectual traditions* (Dublin, 1985), p. 64.

early twentieth centuries, including J. H. Round and Rev. E. A. D'Alton. Comparing the splintering of the Irish Parliamentary (Home Rule) Party in the post-Parnell era with the fragmented political situation in early Ireland prior to the arrival of Strongbow and Henry II, Round commented that 'we [the English] went to Ireland because her people were engaged in cutting one another's throats; we are there now because, if we left, they would all be breaking one another's heads'.⁵⁹ D'Alton was less explicit in comparing the medieval with the modern politics of Ireland, but he commented on the Gaelic Irish in the time of the English invasion that 'if they had ... any real genuine national spirit, they would have pushed "the pitiful handful of English into the sea". But they did not.'⁶⁰

These ideas found their most influential proponent within Irish historiography in the guise of Goddard Henry Orpen, whose work, *Ireland under the Normans*, is still required reading for any serious student of the history of Ireland between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.⁶¹ The heroes of Orpen's story were the conquerors, the settlers and most especially 'the new rulers', whom he saw as the founding fathers of the Ireland with which he identified.⁶² Their success was related to their unity and their propensity for state-building, two characteristics Orpen saw as sorely missing in the Gaelic

⁵⁹ J. H. Round, 'The Conquest of Ireland', in *idem*, *The commune of London and other studies, with a prefatory letter by Sir Walter Besant* (Westminster, 1899), p. 169.

⁶⁰ E. A. D'Alton, *History of Ireland from the earliest times to the present day*, 2 vols. (2nd ed., London, 1910), 1, pp. vii–viii.

⁶¹ G. H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1333*, 4 vols. (vols. 1 and 2, 1911; vols. 3 and 4 1920, London; reprinted as a single volume in Dublin, 2005).

⁶² Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, vol. 1, pp. 7–8; S. Duffy, 'Historical revisit: Goddard Henry Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1333* (1911–20)', *Irish Historical Studies* 32, no. 126 (2000), 246–59, (reprinted as the introduction to the 2005 edition of Orpen's work (*Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1333* (Dublin, 2005), pp. xi–xxiii)).

Irish.⁶³ The Irish, Orpen famously wrote, were ‘a weak ill-knit congeries of tribes’, each of which claimed the primary allegiance of its members.⁶⁴ They lacked ‘a strong state able to make and above all enforce the laws’,⁶⁵ with the result that ‘the Irishman’s country was the tuath or territory belonging to his tribe’ and there could therefore be no ‘national sense of country’.⁶⁶

Amongst later commentators, the state-centric view espoused by Orpen received backing from W. L. Warren and from D. A. Binchy. In the absence of political unity, Warren wrote, the people of early medieval Ireland belonged ‘not so much to a nation as to a cultural *association*’.⁶⁷ Binchy, who characterised early Irish society as ‘tribal, rural, hierarchical, and familiar’, denied the existence of a sense of nationality in Ireland prior to the Viking age.⁶⁸ ‘It would be an anachronism to say that the Norse invasions created a common sentiment of Irish nationality’, he wrote, ‘but they did evoke among the native population

⁶³ Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, vol. 1, p. 330, vol. 4, pp. 254–55. The idea that the Norman ‘race’ was especially geared toward conquest has been one of the most potent images of medieval history and historiography. In the Irish tradition, it lived on in the writings of Orpen’s intellectual heir, Edmund Curtis, for whom ‘the Normans were a race made to conquer’ (E. Curtis, *A history of Ireland* (6th edition, London, 1950, repr. 1957), p. 49. Cf. H. B. Clarke, ‘1066, 1169, and all that: the tyranny of historical turning points’, in J. Devlin and H. B. Clarke (eds.), *European encounters: essays in memory of Albert Lovett* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 28–9.

⁶⁴ Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, vol. 1, pp. 20–38, 330.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20, vol. 2, p. 182. Cf. Clarke, ‘1066, 1169, and all that’, pp. 25–28.

⁶⁷ W. L. Warren, ‘The interpretation of twelfth century Irish history’, in J. C. Beckett (ed.), *Historical Studies* 7 (London, 1969), p. 3.

⁶⁸ D. A. Binchy, ‘Secular institutions’, in M. Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish society*, Irish life and culture 8 (Dublin, 1954), p. 54; *idem*, ‘The passing of the old order’, in B. Ó Cuív (ed.), *The impact of the Scandinavian invasions on the Celtic-speaking peoples c.800–1100 A.D.: introductory papers read at plenary sessions of the International Congress of Celtic Studies held in Dublin, 6-10 July 1959* (Dublin, 1962, repr. 1975), p. 121.

that sense of “otherness” which lies at the basis of nationalism.’⁶⁹ The Viking Wars had also, he believed, heralded the increasing political unity of the country under the Uí Néill, a factor related to this emerging national consciousness.

As Stephen Harrison has pointed out, Eoin MacNeill’s second book, *Celtic Ireland* (1921), was in part a response to Orpen’s state-centric view of nationality.⁷⁰ In it, and even more markedly in *Early Irish laws and institutions*, MacNeill’s political convictions perhaps got the better of his historical sensibilities and he pursued the argument that the Irish state, centred on the high-kingship of the island, had existed from the early Christian era.⁷¹ This pursuit has been criticised by MacNeill’s successors.⁷² D. A. Binchy, for instance, in his studies of the early Irish laws, claimed that they contained no reference to kings of Ireland and, he concluded, if there was no national kingship there could have been no associated national institutions.⁷³

Elsewhere, however, particularly in his earlier book, *Phases of Irish history*, MacNeill pursued a more nuanced approach to the concept of

⁶⁹ *Idem*, ‘The passing of the old order’, p. 129.

⁷⁰ S. H. Harrison, ‘Re-fighting the battle of Down: Orpen, MacNeill and the Irish nation-state’, in M. Brown and S. H. Harrison (eds.), *The medieval world and the modern mind* (Dublin, 2000), p. 180.

⁷¹ E. Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland* (Dublin, 1921), pp. 12, 38; *idem*, *Early Irish laws and institutions* (Dublin, 1935), p. 109. It is here more than anywhere else that Binchy’s statement (‘Secular institutions’, p. 64) that Orpen and MacNeill ‘started from precisely the same suppressed premise, that law and order were impossible in any society where the state had not substantially the same functions as the late Victorian era in which they both grew up’ is proven correct.

⁷² D. A. Binchy, ‘The fair of Taltiu and the feast of Tara’, *Ériu* 18 (1958), 113–38; *idem*, ‘MacNeill’s study of the ancient Irish laws’, in F. X. Martin and F. J. Byrne (eds.) *The scholar revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the making of the new Ireland* (Shannon, 1973), pp. 46–47; F. J. Byrne, ‘MacNeill the historian’, in Martin and Byrne (eds.), *The scholar revolutionary*, pp. 32–3.

⁷³ D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, O’Donnell Lectures (Oxford, 1970), p. 33; *idem*, ‘The fair of Taltiu and the feast of Tara’, *Ériu* 18 (1958), 113–38.

nationality.⁷⁴ He prioritised the nation over the state, detaching the two entities and arguing for the existence of the former independent of the latter: 'A nation is a species of the genus civilization, a state is a species of the genus government. Nationality is the type of civilization which a people has developed, which has become that people's tradition, and is distinctive of that people.' It was different from nationalism, 'which is a political doctrine, meaning localised statism'.⁷⁵

MacNeill recognised that there were different forms of nations that were defined according to different characteristics. While the Romans and the English were primarily political nations, the Irish and the Greeks were primarily cultural. Moreover, he believed that nations only became nations at such time that they became conscious of being so: 'When a people possesses a form of civilization which is, for it, traditional and distinctive, and when it is conscious of the possession, such a people is a nation whether it be a state or no state'.⁷⁶

Such a consciousness had emerged early in the history of Ireland, MacNeill maintained. The blending of the Gaelic and the pre-Gaelic elements of the population in the pre-Patrician period, he argued, had created the Irish nation, but it was given its distinctive character by the admixture of Christianity.⁷⁷ 'A blending of the old native culture and the newly introduced Christian learning had taken place' and 'this blending of two traditions in Ireland brought forth almost a new nation, with a character and an individuality that

⁷⁴ MacNeill, *Phases*; D. McCartney, 'MacNeill and Irish-Ireland', in Martin and Byrne (eds.), *The scholar revolutionary*, pp. 82–3; Harrison, 'Re-fighting the battle', p. 178; F. J. Byrne, 'MacNeill the historian', p. 32.

⁷⁵ MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions*, pp. 53–4; Harrison, 'Re-fighting the battle of Down', pp. 179–81.

⁷⁶ E. MacNeill, 'The Irish nation and Irish culture', *Ireland-American Review* 1 (1938), 77–87, cited in McCartney, 'MacNeill and Irish-Ireland', p. 83.

⁷⁷ E. MacNeill, *Saint Patrick*, ed. J. Ryan (Dublin, 1946), pp. 41–2, 58–9.

gave it distinction in that age and in the after ages'.⁷⁸ The result was that 'there grew up the most intense national consciousness'.⁷⁹ The defining characteristic of this nation was its recognition of its own linguistic and cultural identity, as expressed in early Irish literature, in which could be found 'a positive conscious nationality', that was 'real and concrete'.⁸⁰

MacNeill's most devout follower was Alice Stopford Green. The equal of MacNeill in her nationalist fervour, Stopford Green was a distant second to him as an historian and her contribution to Irish history has generally received short shrift from later generations.⁸¹ She was deeply interested in the medieval Irish nation, and published two essays on the subject.⁸² Green depended heavily on MacNeill and others for access to primary sources – she never learned Irish – and for direction.⁸³ Nonetheless, her contribution ought not to be dismissed entirely. MacNeill was not Stopford Green's only source of inspiration. Before his death in 1883, Alice's husband, the Oxford medievalist John Richard Green, wrote in a letter to his wife of his belief that 'a state is accidental it can be made and unmade, and is no real thing to me. But a nation is very real to me—you cannot

⁷⁸ MacNeill, *Phases*, p. 224. Cf. p. 229, where he ascribes some credit to the Church for blending the different peoples.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 226–28.

⁸⁰ E. MacNeill, 'Some notes of our national literature', *New Ireland Review* 1 (May 1894), 138–49, cited in McCartney, 'MacNeill and Irish-Ireland', p. 84.

⁸¹ See, for example, F. J. Byrne, 'Thirty years' work in Irish history II: Ireland before the Norman invasion', *Irish Historical Studies* 16, no. 61 (1968), 1.

⁸² A. S. Green, *Irish nationality* (London, not dated, but c.1911); *eadem*, *Irish national tradition* (London, 1917).

⁸³ R. B. McDowell, *Alice Stopford Green, a passionate historian* (Dublin, 1967), p. 78. In a letter to MacNeill in January 1911 (Cited by McCartney, 'MacNeill and Irish-Ireland', p. 84, note 29.), Stopford Green acknowledged the 'extraordinary amount of trouble' he had taken in helping her with one of her essays on the Irish nation, and stated that 'it would be so much more honest for all this to come from you than from me'.

make it or destroy [it]'.⁸⁴ This distinction lay at the very heart of both MacNeill's and Alice Stopford Green's work,⁸⁵ so perhaps the intellectual pathway between the two was not so much a one-way-street as is often depicted. Stopford Green argued that the early Irish nation found its consciousness and expression in its language and literary culture,⁸⁶ and she made explicit what MacNeill had only implied by ascribing agency for the creation of the Irish nation to the *literati*. 'The learned classes might boast,' she wrote, 'that they had been the creators of a national outlook on life, and had united the races of Ireland in a literary tradition to confront the States built on other lines.'⁸⁷

Proinsias MacCana followed a path similar to MacNeill's in rebutting Binchy's theory that the Viking attacks had been the catalyst for the emergence of Irish nationality, for while he recognised the political fragmentation of early Irish society, he denied that it precluded the existence of a concept of unity.⁸⁸ Taking his cue from Binchy's contention that the Viking wars were of central importance to the process, MacCana noted that the 'dominating theme' of literature in which Norsemen appear 'is the security and integrity of the land of Ireland as a whole, not one or other of its constituent parts'.⁸⁹ He then went on, however, to counter Binchy's claim that the sense of nationalism that evolved in Ireland was dependent on the actions of the Viking raiders. 'The idea of Ireland as a single entity goes back much further in time ... indeed without its prior

⁸⁴ J. R. Green, private papers, cited in McDowell, *Alice Stopford Green*, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Green, *Irish national tradition*, pp. 3–13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7–9, 12–13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ MacCana, 'Early Irish ideology and the concept of unity', p. 64. These ideas have been expanded in MacCana's posthumous book, *The cult of the sacred centre: essays on Celtic ideology* (Dublin, 2011), which was, unfortunately, published too late to be incorporated fully into the current discussion.

⁸⁹ MacCana, 'Early Irish ideology and the concept of unity', p. 66.

existence the political exploitation of the “high-kingship” would not have been possible’.⁹⁰ The ‘sense of otherness’ that Binchy saw as emerging through conflict with the Vikings, MacCana argued, was ‘a step towards the secularisation and politicisation of a spiritual datum of long standing. In ideological terms the sense of national identity and the concept of unity were already old when the Vikings first drew up their long ships on the Irish shore.’⁹¹

Consciousness of cultural identity and commitment to its preservation is not overtly political, even among a professional elite, but they have profound political implications and a political potential which, when given the right circumstances – the threat of foreign domination for example – can easily be transformed into an active and even decisive force.⁹²

Ó Corráin’s ‘Nationality and kingship’ article belongs to the same tradition as the work of MacNeill and MacCana that stressed the cultural unity of early Ireland and, more importantly, the awareness of that unity expressed in early texts. As Ó Corráin noted, various early versions of the Milesian legend contradict one another in various ways.⁹³ He argued, though, that these inconsistencies only highlighted the fact that the extant texts were not the work of a single individual or the productions of a single scriptorium, but ‘are much more likely to represent variants on a broad historical construct in the making in the schools’.⁹⁴ Perhaps as early as the seventh century, scholars were composing alternative, even competing versions of the legend, a fact that suggested to Ó Corráin that ‘the Irish were profoundly conscious of themselves as a larger

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67–9.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹³ Ó Corráin, ‘Irish origin legends’, p. 64. For some of these discrepancies, see J. Carey, ‘The ancestry of Fénius Farsaid’, *Celtica* 21 (1990), 104–12, and B. Jaski, ‘“We are of the Greeks in our origin”: new perspectives on the Irish origin legend’, *CMCS* 46 (2003), 1–53.

⁹⁴ Ó Corráin, ‘Irish origin legends’, p. 64.

community or *natio*, [and] that their learned classes were preoccupied with this very notion'.⁹⁵ Like Stopford Green, Ó Corráin believed that a sense of national identity first emerged among the learned classes:

The jurists and the other learned classes, cleric and lay, were unrestrained by local boundaries and travelled freely to practise their craft where they wished, and for them, a highly self-aware and deeply respected élite, the whole island of Ireland was the field of their labours. It is scarcely surprising that the sense of nationality should first emerge amongst them and be cultivated by them.⁹⁶

Like McCana, Ó Corráin argued that this pre-existing concept of national unity became politicised at a later date. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, he believed, a real endeavour was made 'to turn that [national] consciousness to political advantage'.⁹⁷

In suggesting that nations could be formed and defined according to different criteria, MacNeill and his early followers anticipated ideas that have gained broad coverage and acceptance in recent decades. The modern discipline of history was born in the nineteenth century, during the heyday of theories of nationalism and scientific racialism and these topical concerns had significant influence on the scholarship produced during the discipline's formative era.⁹⁸ Not everybody would agree with Patrick Geary's dramatic assessment that nineteenth-century preoccupations transformed the common understanding of the European past into 'a toxic waste dump, filled with the poison of ethnic nationalism', but it is certain that history became both a tool and a victim of

⁹⁵ *Idem*, 'Nationality and kingship', p. 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*. Cf. F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), p. 14: the 'mandarin class of poets and pedants ... were largely responsible for the unity of the country'.

⁹⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', p. 5.

⁹⁸ Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism*; N. Stepan, *The idea of race in science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (Basingstoke, 1982).

contemporary preoccupations with races and nations.⁹⁹ National histories became the primary focus of historical research and were often more concerned with creating and defining nations than with studying them.¹⁰⁰ Historians claimed national homelands and languages, defined national and ethnic stereotypes, and fomented national animosities, not infrequently on the basis of medieval evidence.

Races were commonly perceived as natural and primordial divisions of human society that had endured through the ages. They were ‘full ethnic packages’, every feature of their physical, psychological, cultural and social character determined by their racial ancestry.¹⁰¹ In the words of Robert Knox, the infamous Scottish surgeon, scientist and sponsor of body-snatchers – and admittedly an extreme proponent of scientific racialism – ‘race [was] everything: literature, science, art, in a word, civilization depend on it’.¹⁰² Much of the scholarship produced during this period was imbued with racial undertones that continued to influence medieval historiography until quite recently.¹⁰³ See, for instance, the opinions of J. H. Round regarding the Irish national spirit. Round wrote in response to Standish Hayes O’Grady’s elucidation of political

⁹⁹ P. Geary, *The myth of nations: the medieval origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002), p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–40; T. Reuter, *Germany in the early middle ages, 800–1056* (Harlow, 1991), pp. 11–20.

¹⁰¹ The phrase is Matthew Hammond’s, ‘Ethnicity and the writing of medieval Scottish history’, *Scottish Historical Review* 85, part 1, no. 219 (2006), 1–27.

¹⁰² R. Knox, *The races of men: a fragment* (London, 1850), p. 15.

¹⁰³ For a discussion of the manner in which the racist theories of the nineteenth century continued to influence the writing of Scottish medieval history into the second half of the twentieth century see Hammond, ‘Ethnicity and the writing of medieval Scottish history’.

developments in Ireland during the eleventh and twelfth centuries,¹⁰⁴ on the usefulness of which Round had very clear ideas.

We may ... gladly admit that some knowledge of this dark period, lighted only by the lurid torch of rapine and internecine strife, is ... essential to a right understanding of the Anglo-Norman settlement ... It is not, however, for the Conquest only that this knowledge of the true state of Ireland ought to be acquired. The light it throws on the Irish people, their inherited and unchangeable tendencies, is of value from the parallel it presents to the latest modern developments. ... *Aevum non animum mutant*.¹⁰⁵

The association between nineteenth-century theories of race and nation and the heinous crimes of the Nazis temporarily turned historians off the study of peoples during the middle third of the twentieth century. This situation didn't last very long, though, and by the time Rees Davies gave the first of his Presidential Addresses to the Royal Historical Society in 1993 he could assert that 'peoples are back on the historian's agenda'.¹⁰⁶ The re-emergence of peoples into the historical limelight during the later decades of the twentieth century came about as a result of a paradigm-shift in thinking about nations and ethnic groups that began amongst social scientists, especially social anthropologists.¹⁰⁷ The new school of thought established during these years abandoned the old primordialist view of nations and races. Ethnicity and nationality are now recognised as social constructs rather than biologically determined entities. This means that the boundaries between groups are socially and discursively

¹⁰⁴ S. O'Grady, 'The last kings of Ireland', *English Historical Review* 4 (1889), 286–303.

¹⁰⁵ Round, 'The Conquest of Ireland', pp. 138, 169.

¹⁰⁶ R. R. Davies, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100–1400 I: identities', *Transactions of the Royal historical society*, 6th series, 5 (1994), p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ For what follows, see F. Barth, 'Introduction', in *idem* (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of cultural difference* (Oslo, 1969), pp. 9–38; D. L. Horowitz, 'Ethnic identity', in N. Glazer and D. P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: theory and experience* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), pp. 111–40; and J. M. Hall, *Ethnic identity in Greek antiquity* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 17–33.

constructed and there are no universal rules for how group identity is defined. The criteria important to one group may be of little relevance to another. Moreover, as ethnic and national identities are created and re-created over time, their defining criteria can change, thereby altering the boundaries of the group. These boundaries are therefore fluid and individuals can easily cross them. More generally, ethnic groups can be constructed and repeatedly recreated; they can also disappear as their usefulness comes to an end.

R. V. Comerford's recent book on Ireland in the series 'Inventing the Nation' follows this line of thought.¹⁰⁸ It traces the reinvention and the redefinition of the Irish nation and of Irish nationalities from the medieval to the modern period. At no point does the author suggest that there was any direct link between the medieval Irish nation and its various modern manifestations, but he recognises that the sense of collective identity expressed in medieval Irish texts was comparable to that of later ages. Comerford's approach is preferable to the sharp division drawn by some modernists.

Amongst medievalists, the recent paradigm shift in their perception of peoples has precipitated a reinterpretation and redefinition of medieval identities. Patrick Geary might have been guilty of exaggeration when he wrote that early medieval ethnicity

did not exist as an objective category but rather as a subjective and malleable category ... [and] should be viewed as a subjective process by which individuals and groups identified themselves or others within specific situations and for specific purposes.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ R. V. Comerford, *Ireland, Inventing the Nation* (London, 2003).

¹⁰⁹ Geary, 'Ethnic identity as a situational construct', 16.

Nonetheless, as Walter Pohl has discussed, there were no universal rules for distinguishing between nationalities, and a broad range of 'strategies of distinction' were utilised throughout medieval Europe.¹¹⁰

For instance, the *gens Anglorum* of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, did not share a single ancestry, the most common defining criterion of medieval nationality. Rather, the English *advenerant autem de tribus Germaniae populis fortioribus, id est Saxonibus, Anglis, Iutis*, 'had come from three of the more powerful peoples of *Germania*, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes'.¹¹¹ Apparently, linguistic identity was of greater importance to Bede in determining the boundaries between nations, to judge from his statement that Britain was home to *quinque gentium linguis*, 'five languages of nations', those of the English, the Britons, the Gaels, the Picts and Latin.¹¹² On the other hand, amongst the Franks linguistic identity was of little importance in defining ethnic identity from as soon as Frankish settlers in Gaul began to adopt Romance. In 842, two Frankish kings, Charles the bald and Louis the German, two sons of Louis the Pious, made a treaty. The chronicler Nithard reported that the followers of one

¹¹⁰ W. Pohl, 'Telling the difference: signs of ethnic identity', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds.), *Strategies of distinction: the construction of ethnic communities 300–800*, The transformation of the Roman world 2 (Boston, 1998). pp. 17–69.

¹¹¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.15, translation altered by current author. Cf. *Ibid.*, 5.9: *quarum in Germania plurimas noverat esse nationes, a quibus Angli vel Saxones, qui nunc Britanniam incolunt, genus et originem duxisse noscuntur; unde hactenus a uicina gente Brittonum corrupte Garmani nuncupantur. Sunt autem Fresones, Rugini, Danai, Hunni, Antiqui Saxones, Boructuari.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1.1. Modern commentators follow Bede in assigning great importance to the Anglo-Saxons' language as a unifying force. See T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The making of nations', in Britain and Ireland in the early middle ages', in R. Evans (ed.), *Lordship and learning: studies in memory of Trevor Aston* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 11–37; and B. Ward-Perkins, 'Why did the Anglo-Saxons not become more British?', *English Historical Review* 115 (2000), 513–33.

king spoke *teudisca lingua* while the others spoke *romana lingua*.¹¹³ This didn't make either group more or less Frankish than the other.¹¹⁴

Not only were the definitions of national identity during the Middle Ages far from universal, but the barriers between groups were extremely permeable. Robert Bartlett has pointed out that the 'while the language of race – *gens, natio*, "blood", "stock", etc. – is biological, its medieval reality was almost entirely cultural'.¹¹⁵ 'In contrast to descent', he pointed out, the cultural badges of ethnicity 'share a common characteristic: all ... are malleable. They can, indeed, with varying degrees of effect, be transformed not only from one generation to the next, but even within an individual lifetime'.¹¹⁶

Later medieval Ireland provides an excellent example of the creation of a new ethnic identity in the course of time. Many of the early English settlers in Ireland, particularly those who inhabited territories isolated from the main settler strongholds such as Dublin, adopted the manners, customs and language of the Gaelic Irish. By so doing, they lost the characteristics that identified them as belonging to the English *gens*. These *degeneres*, 'ones who had moved away from their *gens*', never became part of the Irish nation, but instead identified

¹¹³ Nithard, *Historiae*, ed. Ph. Lauer, *Histoire des fils de Louis le Pieux*, Classiques de l'histoire de France au Moyen Âge 7 (Paris, 1926), pp. 100–8.

¹¹⁴ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society among the Insular Celts 400–1000', in M. J. Green (ed.), *The Celtic world* (London, 1995), pp. 713–14. Cf. *idem*, 'The making of nations', pp. 12–13.

¹¹⁵ R. Bartlett, *The making of Europe: conquest colonization and cultural change, 950–1350* (London, 1993), p. 197.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*.

themselves – and were identified by both their Gaelic neighbours and the English of England – as a new ‘middle nation’.¹¹⁷

Moreover, and in spite of Bartlett’s caveat, descent was also a malleable concept during the Middle Ages.¹¹⁸ The construction and reconstruction of the genealogies of Gaelic dynasties was a common feature of medieval Irish *senchas*.¹¹⁹ The most common reason for doing so was to realign the ancestral relations between dynasties to reflect their contemporary political relationships. What appears to have been an instance of this learned revisionism involving a dynasty of foreign origin occurred during the eleventh century. A genealogy of Clann Eruilb apparently composed during that period claimed that the ‘Children of Erulb’ were the descendants of one Erulb mac Murchada, third in descent from Áed Allán, a famous eighth-century Cenél nÉogain king of Tara.¹²⁰ The genealogy is almost certainly not a reflection of biological fact. Erulb is most likely a Gaelic rendering of Old Norse Herjólf¹²¹ and while names need not, of course, denote ethnicity, it is extremely unlikely that an Irish dynast would have adopted a Norse name as early as the first half of the ninth century, Erulb/Herjólf’s likely

¹¹⁷ J. F. Lydon, ‘The middle nation’, in *idem* (ed.), *The English in medieval Ireland*, proceedings of the first joint meeting of the Royal Irish academy and the British academy, Dublin, 1982 (Dublin, 1984), pp. 1–26.

¹¹⁸ L. Genicot, *Les généalogies*, Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental 15 (Turnhout, 1975), pp. 27–28.

¹¹⁹ Ó Corráin, ‘Irish origin legends and genealogy’; *idem*, ‘Historical need and literary narrative’, in D. E. Evans, J. G. Griffith and E. M. Jope, *Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic studies held at Oxford, from 10th to 15th July, 1983* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 141–58; *idem*, ‘Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition (Carroll lecture 1992)’, *Peritia* 12 (1998), 177–208.

¹²⁰ D. E. Thornton, ‘Clann Eruilb: Irish or Scandinavian’, *Irish Historical Studies* 30, no. 118 (1996), 161.

¹²¹ Kuno Meyer (‘Altirische Erulb n. pr. m’, *ZCP* 13 (1919-21), 108) considered the name to represent Old English Herewulf, but considering the abundance of Old Norse derived names in later generations of the genealogy, this seems less likely than the theory of Old Norse origins.

floruit.¹²² The adoption of Old Norse names by Irish dynasties was uncommon prior to the eleventh century.¹²³

The fact that the genealogy also appears to be missing a generation or two further suggests its non-literal nature.¹²⁴ It 'is likely to be a telescoped historicist pedigree linking an Irish Viking kindred to a branch of the Northern Uí Néill' constructed during the eleventh century in response to contemporary political requirements.¹²⁵ In fact, there is good reason to associate the dynasty with Dublin rather than with the Northern Uí Néill.¹²⁶ Instead of reflecting genetic reality, then, this genealogical record demonstrates how, in certain circumstances – presumably, in this case, cultural assimilation – even a person's or a group's ancestry was malleable. By the eleventh century the Norse-derived names of members of Clann Eruilb no longer marked them out as foreigners and, to judge from references in twelfth-century genealogical tracts, their claims to Irish ancestry were apparently accepted.¹²⁷

The view expressed by MacNeill, Stopford Green and Ó Corráin that the Milesian theory of Irish unity was an invention intended to express a sense of

¹²² The early date of Eruilb's *floruit* presumed by the genealogy was one reason why some commentators have been loathe to consider the name to have been of Norse origin: Meyer, 'Altirische Eruilb'; D. Ó Corráin, 'Vikings in Scotland and Ireland in the ninth century', *Chronicon*, 2 (1998), note 46 (available at www.ucc.ie/chronicon/ocorr2.htm). By the time he republished this article in *Peritia* 12 (1998), and in light of Thornton's work (see note 119 above), Ó Corráin had revised his position on the matter: see note 125 below.

¹²³ B. Ó Cuív, 'Personal names as an indicator of relations between native Irish and settlers in the Viking period', in J. Bradley (ed.), *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland: studies presented to Francis Xavier Martin o.s.a.*, Studies in Irish Archaeology and History (Kilkenny, 1988), pp. 79–88.

¹²⁴ Thornton, 'Clann Eruilb', pp. 164–65.

¹²⁵ Ó Corráin, 'Vikings in Scotland and Ireland', 307. Cf. Thornton, 'Clann Eruilb', 164–66.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*.

¹²⁷ *CGH*, pp. 134–35.

nationality that had its true roots in cultural rather than biological reality has clear parallels with the 'social construct model'. Moreover, MacNeill's statement that the medieval nation, like its modern counterpart, was 'a brotherhood of adoption as well as of blood' into which any individual, regardless of his or her genetic origin, could be accepted as long as he or she ascribed to its cultural and linguistic identity, speaks to the very heart of modern theory.¹²⁸

Ó Corráin's refined version of MacNeill's thesis of cultural nationality has garnered almost universal acceptance and has been of singular influence on later studies. Since its publication, there have been few new contributions to the discussion of early Irish identity. The identity of the Gaelic Irish, and, indeed, the English settlers, in later medieval Ireland has been the focus of some research,¹²⁹ but many appear to have accepted 'Nationality and kingship' as the final word on the matter for the earlier period.¹³⁰

Recently, however, the contributions of a small number of scholars have added new dimensions to the discussion. Damian Bracken and Marie Therese Flanagan, for instance, have focused on the ecclesiastical element in the emergence of Irish nationality. Bracken has discussed what are some of the

¹²⁸ MacNeill, reported in *Claidheamh Soluis*, 5 October 1907, pp. 7–8, cited in D. McCartney, 'MacNeill and Irish-Ireland', p. 83.

¹²⁹ For the later period, see J. A. Watt, 'Gaelic polity and cultural identity', in Cosgrave (ed.), *New history of Ireland II: medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 314–51; J. F. Lydon, 'Nation and race in medieval Ireland', in Forde et al (eds.), *Concepts of national identity in the middle ages*, pp. 105–24; T. Finan, *A nation in medieval Ireland? Perspectives on Gaelic national identity in the middle ages*, British archaeological reports, British series 367 (Oxford, 2004).

¹³⁰ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp. 14–15; S. Duffy, 'National identities in early and medieval Ireland', S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2002), p. 396; M. Richter, 'National identity', in S. Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Ireland: an encyclopedia* (London, 2005), pp. 351–52; R. Jones, 'Foundation legends, *origines gentium*, and senses of ethnic identity: legitimising ideologies in medieval Celtic Britain', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 17 (1999), 691–703.

earliest extant sources that deal with the subject of Irish identity; ecclesiastical documents relevant to the seventh-century Paschal controversy.¹³¹ All of these sources concentrate on Ireland's geographic position as defining the inhabitants' identity. To Columbanus, a 'Hibernian' in terms of the Paschal controversy, the conversion of Ireland, the most westerly part of Europe, represented the point at which the Church 'achieved its mission to reach all nations'.¹³² To the Roman party, both Irish and foreign, Ireland's geographic remoteness corresponded to its isolation from doctrinal norms. In both cases, as Bracken illustrated, Irish identity was depicted in terminology and imagery borrowed from 'earlier literature that considers the significance of establishing Christianity in barbarian lands', 'the rhetoric of orthodoxy' and 'stereotypes of orthodoxy and heresy which the Insular writers knew well'.¹³³

Flanagan pointed out that Muirchú, author of a seventh-century Life of St Patrick, was aware that Christ had commanded his apostles to baptise *gentes* and that he was concerned to depict Patrick as having carried out that instruction with regard to the men of Ireland.¹³⁴ Patrick was, in Muirchú's account, the apostle of the Irish *gens*. In stressing Patrick's role in the conversion of the Irish, Muirchú 'promoted the notion of the Irish as a Christian nation ... [and] fashioned a unifying Christian identity that could operate in the secular world as

¹³¹ D. Bracken, 'Rome and the Isles: Ireland, England and the rhetoric of orthodoxy', in J. Graham-Campbell and M. Ryan (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon/Irish relations before the Vikings*, Proceedings of the British Academy 157 (Oxford, 2009), pp. 75–97.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 79. This belief was also central to St Patrick's concept of his missionary activity. See note 26 above.

¹³³ Bracken, 'Rome and the Isles', pp. 78, 97.

¹³⁴ Flanagan, 'Strategies of distinction', pp. 106–7.

an alternative to competing dynasties and population groups'.¹³⁵ Clearly the specific concerns of churchmen need to be considered in the statements of ecclesiastical provenance that depict Irish unity, and Muirchú's motives for promoting this concept will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Recent research by Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested another avenue to pursue in this discussion. He has questioned whether the Irish sense of unity might have been created rather than merely usurped by the political elite:

Early Irish culture seems all-embracing, and, on its own territory, unchallengeable. Yet this cultural unity may not have been, as it was perhaps intended to appear, an organic and ancient tradition but rather a deliberate creation ... The most urgent question about the early Irish sense of nationality is therefore this: was that sense of nationality created or merely usurped by the Uí Néill and their allies?¹³⁶

Following the path signposted by Charles-Edwards, this thesis will argue that emergence of Irish identity in the seventh and eighth centuries owed more to political concerns than has previously been recognised. The next chapter will examine Charles-Edwards' argument in more detail, and will suggest that the earliest expressions of Irish identity were shaped by the political aspirations of the Uí Néill and their ecclesiastical allies. In Chapter Two it will be argued that the national status of Irish law, one of the most obvious expressions of the unity of Ireland in the early historic period, might owe something to that same ecclesiastico-political background. Chapter Three will argue that propagandists interested in promoting the joint authority of the kingship of Tara and the church of Armagh over the whole of Ireland used a seventh-century Northumbrian

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*.

¹³⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', pp. 29–32 at p. 29; *idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 579–85.

attack on Brega to create an image of the English as an 'Other' in contrast to which the unity of the men of Ireland could be emphasised.

Part 2

Máire Herbert has argued that the late tenth and early eleventh centuries witnessed a resumption of learned activity after a lapse during the Viking Age.¹³⁷ Whether or not there was a gap in the tradition of scholarly discussion of the Irish national history and identity, there was certainly an intensification of interest in the topic that peaked with the production of *Lebor Gabála* around the middle of the eleventh century. The scholars who participated in this movement looked not just backwards, but also outwards. They cast their eyes beyond Irish shores, writing or translating texts including origin legends of the English and the Britons. The reason for Irish interest in these texts was, indubitably, as sources and comparanda for the history of the Irish. As Hildegard Tristram stated, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* 'served to fix the Irish conception of the world in time and space and thereby underscore the Irish view of themselves'.¹³⁸ To admit that much, however, is not to dismiss the fact that learned Irishmen had an interest in their neighbours, for there were very good historical reasons why scholars might have wanted to discuss the histories and identities of the peoples of Britain in the eleventh century.

Eleventh-century discussions of Irish unity included a more obvious political element than earlier texts. The same group of scholars that worked on the *Lebor Gabála* project – the synthetic historians as MacNeill christened them –

¹³⁷ M. Herbert, 'Crossing historical and literary boundaries: Irish written culture around the year 1000', *CMCS* 53–54 (2007), 87–101.

¹³⁸ Tristram, 'Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', p. 199.

also propagated the idea that Ireland had been an united kingdom under a succession of kings of Tara since the prehistoric period.¹³⁹ The impetus to construct such a paradigm seems to have been brought about in part by the success of Brian Bóruma in establishing his authority above even the Uí Néill and in part by the so-called 'interregnum' that occurred after the death of Máel Sechnaill Mór mac Domnaill in 1022. It was during this period that, in the words of Francis John Byrne, Irish men of learning 'developed the doctrine of an immemorial high-kingship of Ireland centred at Tara and held from the coming of Christianity until the usurpation of Brian Bóruma by the descendants of Niall Noígiallach'.¹⁴⁰

The image depicted by these pseudo-historians was not politically neutral, though. *Do Flathusaib hÉirenn*, part of the *Lebor Gabála* dossier, claimed to list the kings of Ireland from the time of the Milesian invasion down to the coming of Christianity. As Scowcroft has pointed out, its historical content corresponds to the period of Uí Néill dominance from the eighth to the early eleventh century and provides 'a charter for the Tara kingship [of Ireland] in historical times'.¹⁴¹ This theory of primordial political unity was given further weight by the work of Flann Mainistrech and his successors, particularly Gilla Cóemáin and Gilla Mo Dutu ua Casaide, on the authority of whose poetry 'the official doctrine of the

¹³⁹ MacNeill, *Celtic Ireland*, pp. 25–42; J. V. Kelleher, 'Early Irish history and pseudo-history', *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963), 120–27; Carey, *Irish national origin legend*, pp. 17–20; Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part II', 3–6, 49–52.

¹⁴⁰ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp. 269–70. For more on the Uí Néill bias of some of the texts produced during this period, see Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part II', 49–52.

¹⁴¹ Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála—part II', 6, 49–52.

monopoly of the high-kingship by the Uí Néill from the time of St Patrick to the usurpation of Brian Bóruma became accepted'.¹⁴²

'The antiquarian fiction' of the high-kingship, Byrne claimed,

served as a spur to novel ambitions. It was in pursuit of this chimerical high-kingship that the great provincial kings, Ua Briain, Ua Conchobair, Mac Lochlainn and Mac Murchada, marched and counter-marched until Ireland became, in the well-known words of the annalists, a 'trembling sod'.¹⁴³

In truth, the gradual concentration of political power into the hands of just a few provincial kings – and during the eleventh and twelfth centuries there were rarely ever more than two contenders at the very highest level – had been a long process, and though it is impossible to know for certain, it is unlikely that the scholarly musings on this topic were of great influence on men like Tairdelbach ua Briain or Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn. Whether or not pseudo-historical constructions influenced the ambitions of these would-be high-kings, it is certain that their activity influenced contemporary scholarship. Few of the great kings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries secured unopposed rule, leading to the creation of the term *rí Érenn co fressabra*, 'king of Ireland with opposition', to denote those candidates whose authority extended over most, though not quite all of the island. As Byrne pointed out, 'it was only in comparison with a pseudo-historical theory of their predecessors' powers that men like Muirchertach Ua Briain or Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair were 'kings with opposition'.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² F. J. Byrne, 'Ireland and her neighbours, c.1014–c.1072', in D. Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A new history of Ireland I: prehistoric and early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), p. 866.

¹⁴³ *Annála Ríoghachta Éirean: Annals of the kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters*, ed. J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1856), s.a. 1145: *Coccadh mór isin mbliadhainsi co mboí Ére ina fód crithaigh*. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp. 269–70; *idem*, 'The trembling sod: Ireland in 1169', in A. Cosgrave (ed.), *A new history of Ireland II: medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 1–42.

¹⁴⁴ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 270; *idem*, 'Ireland and her neighbours', p. 870.

Nonetheless, that did not stop contemporary scholars from attempting to define the exact remit of this term:

Rapa rí Herend co fressabra Diarmait mac Mael na mBó. Is amlaidse áirmiter i rréim rígraide na ríge co fressabra .i. Mad do Leith Chuind in rí 7 Leth Cuind ule 7 oenchoiced a lLeith Moga ace. is rí Temra 7 Herend co fressabra in fersain. Mad a lLeith Moga im bes ní eberthar rí Herend friss co raib Leth Moga uili 7 Temair cona Túathaib 7 indara cuiced a lLeith Chuind chucu. Rabo rí Herend amlaidsin mac Mael na mBó uair ra boí Leth Moga uile 7 Connachta 7 Fir Mide 7 Ulaid 7 Airgialla. ace.¹⁴⁵

Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó was king of Ireland with opposition. The kings with opposition are reckoned thus in the in the royal succession: that is, if the king be from Leth Cuinn and he has all of Leth Cuinn and one province of Leth Moga, then that man is a king of Tara and of Ireland with opposition. But if he be from Leth Moga he is not called king of Ireland until he has all of Leth Moga and Tara with its *tuatha* and and one of the two provinces of Leth Cuinn as well. Thus Mac Maíl na mBó was king of Ireland [with opposition] since he had all Leth Moga and the Connachta and the men of Mide and the Ulaid and the Airgialla.¹⁴⁶

And just as Irish politics could shape the concerns of the literati, so political developments on the international scene might have attracted their attention to issues of history and identity regarding the other peoples of the British Isles.

Beginning early in the tenth century, the ethnic make-up of the British Isles had undergone profound changes that caused some later commentators obvious distress. The disappearance of the Picts from the written record at the dawn of the tenth century, for example, evidently troubled Henry, archdeacon of Huntingdon, when he wrote in the middle of the twelfth century. After quoting Bede's statement from the opening chapter of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that there were five languages spoken in Britain, those of the Britons, the English, the Gaels, the Picts and Latin, Henry continued:

¹⁴⁵ *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Nuachongbála*, ed. R. I Best, O. Bergin, M. A. O'Brien and A. O'Sullivan (6 vols., Dublin, 1954–83), vol. 1, p. 98.

¹⁴⁶ Translation, with alterations, from Byrne, 'Ireland and her neighbours', p. 869.

Quamuis Picti iam uideantur deleti, et lingua eorum omnino destructa, ita ut iam fabula uideatur, quod in ueterem scriptis eorum mentio inuenitur. Cui autem non comparet amorem celestium et horrorem terrestrium, si cogitet non solum reges eorum et principes et populum deperiisse, uerum etiam stirpem omnem et linguam et mentionem simul defecisse? Et si de aliis mirum non esset, de lingua quam unam inter ceteras Deus ab exordio linguarum instituit, mirandum uidetur.

The Picts, however, appear to have been annihilated and their language utterly destroyed, so that the record of them in the writings of the ancients seems like fiction. Who will not espouse love of celestial things and dread of worldly things, if he considers not only that their kings and princes and people have perished, but also that at the same time their whole racial stock, their language and all remembrance of them have disappeared? And if there was nothing surprising in other respects, yet it must seem amazing as regards their language, which was one of those established by God at the very beginning of languages.¹⁴⁷

A not inconsiderable body of material about the origins and history of the Picts circulated in eleventh and twelfth century Ireland, often in conjunction with *Lebor Gabála* or *Lebor Bretnach*.¹⁴⁸ The poem *Cruithnig cid dosfarclam* that deals with this subject and that was modelled on Máel Mura Othna's *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*, was possibly composed by Flann Mainistrech.¹⁴⁹ *A eolcha Alban uile*, which treats of the history of Alba from the first settlement of Britain until the reign of Malcolm III (1057x1093) and which is better known as the *Duan Albanach*, has been associated with Flann's intellectual successor, Gilla Cóemáin.¹⁵⁰ It seems, then, that the disappearance of the Picts and the emergence of the Gaelic kingdom of Alba might have sparked the interest of some of the Irish pseudo-historians.

¹⁴⁷ Henry, archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. and trans. D. Greenway, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1996), pp. 24–5.

¹⁴⁸ G. MacEoin, 'On the Irish legend of the origin of the Picts', *Studia Hibernica* 4 (1964), 140–46.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139–40.

¹⁵⁰ K. Jackson, 'The poem *A eolcha Alban uile*', *Celtica* 3 (1956), 156; *idem*, 'The Duan Albanach', *SHR* 36 (1957), 127–28.

During the eleventh century, the ethnic make-up of Britain underwent another change with the arrival of the conquering Normans and their allies. Their chroniclers were notoriously concerned with creating what has been called the ‘Norman myth’, displaying an interest in their origins and history that almost matched that of contemporary Irish scholars.¹⁵¹ Irish sources display no awareness of the Normans’ distinct identity and tended almost invariably to refer to the conquerors of England as *Frainc*, but, particularly in literary texts, they do recognise the addition to the ethnic map of Britain in the second half of the eleventh century.¹⁵² It was a common topos in Irish literature for exiles to return to Ireland with armies made up of all the peoples of Britain. In texts dating from prior to the second half of the eleventh century, such as *Cath Maige Mucrama* and *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin*, these consist of the *Saxain*, *Bretain* and *fir Alban*.¹⁵³ In *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, however, which Máire Herbert has dated to the first years of the twelfth century,¹⁵⁴ the list has been extended to include the *Frainc*.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps the clearest example of such updating is to be found in the recension of *Orcuin Néill Noígíallaig* in the twelfth-century Bodleian manuscript Rawlinson B 502. According to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, the verse sections of this

¹⁵¹ R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their myth* (London, 1976); M. Chibnall, *The Normans* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 107–24; G. A. Loud, ‘The *gens Normannorum*: myth or reality?’ *ANS* 4 (1982), 104–16.

¹⁵² P. Wadden, ‘Some views of the Normans in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland’, in S. Duffy and S. Foran (eds.) *The English Isles: cultural transmission and political conflict in Britain and Ireland 1100–1500* (Dublin, forthcoming 2011).

¹⁵³ M. O Daly, *Cath Maige Mucrama, The battle of Mag Mucrama*, Irish Texts Society 50 (Dublin, 1975), pp. 46–8; *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin*, ed. D.A. Binchy, Medieval and Modern Irish series, 18 (Dublin, 1963), p. 16.

¹⁵⁴ M. Herbert, ‘*Fled Dúin na nGéd*: a reappraisal’, *CMCS* 18 (1989), 75–87.

¹⁵⁵ *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, ed. J. O Donovan, *The banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and the battle of Magh Rath* (Dublin, 1842), p. 82.

text can be dated to the ninth century, and the prose to the eleventh.¹⁵⁶ The poem explains Níall's epithet in the following terms:

<i>Ethais gíall cach cói[ci]d</i>	He seized a hostage from every province
<i>fo thír nÉrenn ardda,</i>	Throughout the noble land of Ireland.
<i>Tuc fri réir cen terbba</i>	He brought against their will(?), without
	deceit,
<i>cethri géill a hAlba.</i>	Four hostages from Alba. ¹⁵⁷

Conversely, the prose surrounding the poem explains that the appellation was earned because Níall held *cóic géill hÉrenn 7 gíall Alban 7 gíall Saxan 7 gíall Bretan 7 gíall Franc*, 'the five hostages of Ireland and a hostage of Alba and a hostage of the English and a hostage of the Britons and a hostage of the *Frainc*'.¹⁵⁸ The difference between these two statements reflects the change of meaning of Alba between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Originally the Gaelic name for the island of Britain, during the tenth century Alba came to be used in a more restricted sense to denote the Gaelic kingdom in northern Britain.¹⁵⁹ Both statements claim that Níall held four hostages of the men of Britain, therefore, but the later expression recognises the ethnic and political divisions of the eleventh century, including the presence there of the *Frainc*. Perhaps, then, the arrival of the Normans, the second major alteration of the ethnic make-up of Britain in a little over a century and a half, also spurred Irish interest in the histories and identities of their neighbours.

¹⁵⁶ M. Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Níall Noígíallach's death-tale', in J. Carey, M. Herbert and K. Murray (eds.), *Cín Chille Cúile: texts, saints and places: essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain* (Aberystwyth, 2004), pp. 178–91.

¹⁵⁷ *Orcuin Néill Noígíallaig*, ed. K. Meyer, 'Stories and songs from Irish manuscripts', *Otia Merseiana* 2 (1900–01), 87.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, *Cóir anmann* (ed. S. Arbuthnot, *Cóir anmann: a late Middle Irish treatise on personal names* (2 vols, London, 2005–07, ITS 59, 60), vol. 1, p. 113; vol. 2, pp. 33–4.) repeats both of these explanations.

¹⁵⁹ D. N. Dumville, 'Ireland and Britain in *Táin bó Fraích*', *Études Celtiques* 32 (1996), 175–87; *idem*, *The churches of North Britain in the first Viking-Age*, Whithorn Lecture (Whithorn, 1997), p. 3, note 7.

Moreover, the eleventh century witnessed considerable communication between Ireland and the rest of Europe. Ireland's isolation from international affairs during the Viking period, supposedly created by a thick coastal layer of Viking insulation, was never as total as has sometimes been implied, but the intensity of overseas contact that characterised the Golden Age of Irish pilgrimage certainly appears to have waned during the ninth and tenth centuries.¹⁶⁰ In the eleventh century, however, the former pattern picked up again to an extent, and Irishmen are once again found traversing the continent. Irish Benedictine monasteries, the *Schottenklöster*, were established in Germany.¹⁶¹ Pilgrimages to Rome, by kings and ecclesiastics alike, were recorded in the eleventh-century annals¹⁶² and the leading schools on the continent attracted Irish scholars.¹⁶³ Moreover, Ireland participated in the international Church reform movement.¹⁶⁴

Unlike during seventh century, though, Ireland's international relations during this period included a much more pronounced political element. In the aftermath of Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó's conquest of Dublin in 1052, Irish kings

¹⁶⁰ For the earlier period, see M. Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* (Dublin, 1999) and, for a survey of the later period, *idem*, 'The European dimension of Irish history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries', *Peritia* 4 (1985), 328–45.

¹⁶¹ A. Gwynn, 'Some notes on the history of the Irish Scottish Benedictine monasteries in Germany', *Innes Review* 5 (1954), 5–27; D. Ó Riain-Raedel, 'Irish Benedictine monasteries on the continent', in M. Browne and C. Ó Clabaigh (eds.), *The Irish Benedictines: a history* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 25–63; *eadem*, 'Cashel and Germany: the documentary evidence', in D. Bracken and D. Ó Riain-Raedel (eds.), *Ireland and Europe in the twelfth century: reform and renewal* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 176–217.

¹⁶² A. Gwynn, *The twelfth century reform*, *A History of Irish Catholicism* 2 (Dublin, 1968), pp. 8–9.

¹⁶³ P. Ó Néill, 'An Irishman at Chartres in the twelfth century – the evidence of Oxford Bodleian Library, manuscript Auct. F. III. 15', *Ériu* 48 (1997), 1–35.

¹⁶⁴ M. T. Flanagan, *The transformation of the Irish Church in the twelfth century*, *Studies in Celtic History* XXIX (Woodbridge, 2010).

became important political players on the international scene to a degree never witnessed before.¹⁶⁵ Over the course of the following seventy years or so, the most powerful kings in Ireland extended their influence into the Irish Sea World, interfering in succession disputes and attempting to impose their candidates in Hiberno-Norse, Welsh and even English kingdoms.¹⁶⁶

The intensification of international communication during this period might have stimulated interest amongst learned Irishmen in the histories and identities of their neighbours, especially at a time when they were already investing so much energy in investigating their own national past. It also provided Irish scholars with access to new sources relevant to the subject of national identity. The primary external influences on early theories regarding Irish identity were, as suggested above, the Vulgate Bible and Isidore of Seville. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, though, these were supplemented by new materials. These sources were, no doubt, encountered in Britain, in the *Schottenklöster* and wherever Irish ecclesiastics travelled in Europe, but they were also imported into Ireland. In the early twelfth century, the most powerful king in Ireland bragged about having imported books and having patronised scholarship. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* claims that during the reign of Brian Bóruma *ro cuiritt saoithe, ocus maighistreacha do theaccasscc eccna, ocus eolais,*

¹⁶⁵ S. Duffy, 'Irishmen and Islesmen in the kingdoms of Dublin and Man, 1052–1171', *Ériu* 43 (1992), 93–133; *idem*, 'Ostmen, Irish and Welsh in the eleventh century,' *Peritia* 9 (1995), 378–96.

¹⁶⁶ S. Duffy, "'The western world's tower of honour and dignity': the career of Muirchertach Ua Briain in context', in Bracken and Ó Riain-Raedel (eds.), *Ireland and Europe*, pp. 56–73; *idem*, 'Ireland, c.1000–c. 1100', in P. Stafford (ed.), *A companion to the early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500–c.1100*, Blackwell Companions to British History (Chichester, 2009), pp. 285–302; B. Hudson, 'The family of Harold Godwinsson and the Irish Sea province,' *JRSAL* 109 (1979), 92–100.

ocus do chendach leabhar tar muir, ocus tar mórfhairrge ... Brian imorro do beiredhsidhe luach foghlama ocus luach leabhar do gach aon foleith da tteighedh annsin, ‘wise men and masters were sent to teach wisdom and knowledge and [Brian] bought books over the sea and over the great ocean ... Moreover, Brian gave the price of learning and the price of books to every person who went there’.¹⁶⁷ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has argued that Brian in this text is a paradigm of his great grandson, Muirchertach Ua Briain, the most powerful king of Ireland in the early twelfth century, and that the traits attributed to Brian in the text reflect Muirchertach’s self-image, or at least that to which he aspired.¹⁶⁸

One eleventh-century import was the Nennian recension of *Historia Brittonum*, which was translated into Middle Irish as the *Lebor Bretnach*. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, this translation, and especially the short tract incorporated within it known as the *fränkische Völkertafel*, was to exert considerable influence on a range of texts produced in Ireland during this period, including the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*. Another import into Ireland at about this time was the short Latin tract *De Proprietatibus Gentium*, which was translated and adapted into verse form as the Middle Irish poem *Cumtach na nLudaide n-ard*. This poem on national characteristics will provide the focus for discussion for Chapter Five. In discussing both the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* and *Cumtach na nLudaide n-ard*, attention will be drawn to the blending of old and new, foreign and native elements in texts of the eleventh century.

¹⁶⁷ *Cogadh Gaedhal re Gallaibh*, ed. J. H. Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhal re Gallaibh: The war of the Irish with the Gaill* (London, 1867), p. 138.

¹⁶⁸ M. Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib: some dating considerations*’, *Peritia* 9 (1995), pp. 374–7.

Like *Énna, Labraid*, then, this thesis consists of two sections linked by their concern with medieval Irish concepts of nationality. It will discuss a range of texts that were produced in Ireland between the seventh and the eleventh centuries that expressed or attempted to define Irish unity, that sought to find a place for the Irish within the Christian world of nations and that discussed more general aspects of the concept of national identity. By bringing a fresh emphasis to the discussion of the origins of Irish identity in the seventh century and by examining some novelties of eleventh-century scholarship on the subject, it will shed new light on the preoccupation medieval Irish scholars had with the topic of nationality.

IRISH ETHNOGENESIS

The success of the Milesian legend as it developed from the seventh, and more especially from the eleventh century has overshadowed the fact that the earliest strata of Irish textual sources recognised the existence of distinct population groups in Ireland. Moreover, there survive from the seventh and eighth centuries brief snippets of information that indicate that these population groups possessed clear ideas about their distinct identities that differentiated them from one another. This chapter will briefly discuss the evidence for the existence of these distinct identities in early medieval Ireland before examining some of the ways in which the differences between them were glossed over in the process of creating a single Irish national identity.

Perhaps the earliest sources for the history of Ireland are the references to the island and its inhabitants in the writings of classical geographers. The use of the term 'Pretanic' to refer on occasion to both Ireland and Britain in these works and the occasional coincidence of population names such as the Dumnonii and Brigantes in both islands has led several scholars, perhaps most famously T. F. O'Rahilly, to investigate the non-Gaelic identity of some of the inhabitants of early medieval Ireland.¹ Much of this scholarship was infused with a latent belief in and acceptance of racial theory and assumed that behind the facade of Gaelicness constructed in the Middle Ages could be found lying these groups' 'true'

¹ T. F. O'Rahilly, *The Goidels and their predecessors*, Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture 1935 (London, 1936, also published in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 21 (1935) 323–72); *idem*, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin, 1946), pp. 43–146. See also, for example, E. MacNeill, 'The Pretanic Background in Britain and Ireland', *JRSAI* 7th series, 3, no. 1 (1933), 1–28; A. P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster: towards an historical geography of early Irish civilization, a.d. 500–1600* (Blackrock, 1982), pp. 7–14; J. Koch, 'New thoughts on Albion, Ierné and the Pretanic Isles (Part One)', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 6 (1986), 1–28.

racial identity. This is exemplified by John Ryan's opening questions regarding the early history of the Laigin in his 1948 article on the topic. 'Who exactly were the Laigin?', he asked, 'Were they of ancient pre-Celtic stock? Or were they Celts of the original Celtic invasion? Or were they Celts or non-Celts of a later era?''²

Whatever associations lay behind the apparent links between the Domnainn of Ireland and the Dumnonii of Britain, or the 'Pretanic' or 'Brigantian' peoples of both islands during the prehistoric period ought not to be ascribed any more racial veracity than the Gaelic identity later claimed for those peoples. Such identities should be recognised as stages on the process of constant redefinition rather than as providing a 'truth' to contrast to the Milesian legend. Neither should they be considered relevant to the development of Irish identity during the medieval period, for there is no evidence that such associations were recognised during the period for which Irish sources are available. Like the Celtic identity that links the Gaels and the Britons in popular and scholarly perceptions today, but which was unknown in the Middle Ages, any association that existed between the Pretanic peoples of Ireland and Britain is a learned recovery of modern times and as such not relevant to how the inhabitants of medieval Ireland viewed their own identity.

² J. Ryan, 'The early history of Leinster', *The Past: the organ of the Uí Cinsealaigh Historical Society* 4 (1948), 16. More recently, the Northern Irish Unionist politician, I. Adamson (*Cruthin: the ancient kindred* (Newtownards, 1974), especially the Prologue and p. 1) drew heavily on O'Rahilly's work to identify the 'native' element in the population of Ulster that had inhabited the province prior to the Gaelic invasion. His reference to 'unalterable ethnic affiliations' and his belief that he could trace the existence of 'the most ancient inhabitants of Britain and Ireland to whom a definite name can be given' to 'the present day' demonstrates the tenacity of nineteenth-century racist theories thought by many to have been abandoned.

Nonetheless, a small body of early evidence attests the existence of separate and distinct ethnic identities in seventh-century Ireland. Rather than recognising the men of Ireland as a single unit, the author of the ‘The saga of Fergus mac Léti’, which was probably composed in the eighth century but drawing upon a tradition from at least a century earlier, stated *batar tri primcenela in Erin .i. Féni 7 Ulaid 7 Gailni .i. Laigin*, ‘there were three primary-races in Ireland, that is, the Féni, the Ulaid and the Gaileóin, that is, the Laigin’.³ The term Féni more usually referred to the whole people of Ireland, but evidence from the Old Irish law tracts supports the idea that these were, in fact, distinct groups.⁴ In *Cethairslicht Athgabálae*, we read that *tri cenéla saera randsat in indsi so*, ‘three free *cenéla* divided this island’.⁵ These three *cenéla* are not named in this section of the text, but elsewhere an Old Irish gloss identifies them as the *Feini 7 Ulaid 7 Laigin*.⁶ These sources, then, claim that there were three distinct races, three distinct groups each thought to be unified by common descent in early Ireland.⁷

³ ‘The saga of Fergus mac Léti’, ed. and trans. D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* 16 (1952), 36–7, 45.

⁴ T. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly, *Bechbretha: and Old Irish law-tract on bee-keeping*, Early Irish Law Series 1 (Dublin, 1983), pp. 133–4; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 160 note 57, and pp. 579–81.

⁵ *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D. A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978), 356.6, 1879.28.

⁶ *CIH*, 883.33. L. Breatnach, *A companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, Early Irish Law Series 5 (Dublin, 2005), pp. 40, 338–43. Another, later glossator (356.15–16) mistakenly identified the *cenéla sóera* of his text as *Ulaid 7 Féni Temrach 7 Erna Dedad nó Ulaid 7 Gaileoin 7 Erna*. See *DIL*, s.v. *saer*, where it is suggested that ‘this distinction may have been racial, certain ruling tribes being s[*aer*], the inferior ones *daer*’.

⁷ See MacNeill’s opinion of these references, quoted without citation by Alice Stopford Green, *History of the Irish state to 1014* (London, 1925), p. 191: ‘Some of the passages in the laws seem to divide the free people of Ireland into three stocks or to put three chief stocks at the head of them, Féni, Ulaid, and Galians. The laws of Ireland were always known as “the laws of the Féni,” their archaic

As will be discussed in Chapter Four, the term *prímchenél* was endowed with a very specific meaning by the eleventh-century author of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*. He distinguished between the seventy-two ‘primary nations’ created by God that possessed their own languages as well as ancestral unity, and lesser *fo-chenéla* that, although they were racial units, lacked languages of their own. There is no evidence that the author of ‘the saga of Fergus’ was using the term in so precise a manner, and the evidence of the law tracts supports the usual translation of this passage as referring to the three ‘chief’ or ‘noble’ *cenéla*. On the other hand, it is also possible that this terminology implied the primacy of these races as the highest level of identity applicable to the peoples of Ireland, suggesting, that is, that there was no over-arching concept of unity at this stage.

At an earlier stage, it is probable that several of the population groups in Ireland had their own distinct origin legends.

There is some evidence that the earliest Irish dynasties regarded themselves as descended from the gods, but it is probable that such mythological statements of origin concerned themselves with individual dynasties rather than with the origin of the peoples of Ireland as a whole.⁸

Of these early origin legends very little has survived, but there is a small collection of early verse that attests the existence of a distinct sense of Laigin identity in the early seventh century. The original core of the poem *Énna, Labraid* (stanzas 1–21) was probably composed during the first decades of the seventh

language “the language of the Féni.” There is every indication that Féni is an older name than Góidil, which I take to be an old Cymric by-name for the Irish, meaning “wild men,” barbarian disturbers of the British heirs of Roman civilization. The Galians may well represent late Gallic immigrants. The Ulaid then may have been Picts or half-Picts, since they are distinguished from the Féni.’

⁸ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, p. 5. Cf. Carney, ‘The dating of archaic Irish verse’, pp. 51–3; D. Edel, ‘Identity and integration: Ireland in the early Middle Ages’, in *eadem, The Celtic West and Europe: studies in Celtic literature and the early Irish Church* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 19–34.

century.⁹ It belongs to a group of poems of roughly contemporary date that had as their subject matter the history and genealogy of the Laigin.¹⁰ In spite of Eoin MacNeill's statement that from the dawn of literacy in Ireland 'every Irish history is a history of Ireland – there is not one history of a tribal territory or of any grouping of tribal territories',¹¹ these texts focus solely on Leinster affairs, including records of the exploits of Labraid Loingsech, the principal Laigin ancestor; genealogies of their ruling dynasties; and king-lists.¹²

One of the shorter of these poems, *Moín, oín óba noíd* is essentially an origin legend for the Laigin.¹³ Previously, it says, the Laigin were known as the Galeóin, but because of their use of *laigne*, 'lances', they became known as the Laigin.¹⁴ Their occupation of territory in Ireland is depicted as the result of a conquest by their apical ancestor: *Glinnsit coicthe coda ler lerggae íath nÉremóin, iar loingis Lóchet fiann flaithi Góedel gabsus*, '[The Laigin] won wars as far as the lands of Éremón; after exile Lóchet [Labraid] of the warrior bands seized the sovereignty of the Gaels'.¹⁵

The reference to Éremón in this verse suggests that at least some portion of what would later be known as the Milesian legend was already in existence in

⁹ James Carney ('The dating of archaic Irish verse', pp. 43–8) argued on linguistic and stylistic grounds that the poems were earlier than this, but Ó Corráin ('Irish origin legends and genealogy', pp. 57–67), argued on the basis of a reassessment of the language and on historical grounds, for the later date.

¹⁰ *CGH*, pp. 1–9, 18–19.

¹¹ MacNeill, *Phases*, p. 246.

¹² Carey, '*Lebor Gabála* and the legendary history of Ireland', pp. 33–4.

¹³ Published from Rawlinson B 502 and from the Book of Leinster in *CGH*, pp. 1 and 334; ed. and trans. M. Dillon in 'The consecration of Irish kings', *Celtica* 10 (1973), 7; ed. and trans. Carney in 'The dating of archaic Irish verse', pp. 46–7.

¹⁴ This aspect of the poem is evocative of the pseudo-etymologising so characteristic of Isidore of Seville and so prevalent in Irish scholarship during later centuries, where it is ascribed to the influence of Isidore's teaching.

¹⁵ Carney 'The dating of archaic Irish verse', p. 47. Translation adapted by current author.

the early seventh century, although presumably not the personage of Míl himself who was a later creation.¹⁶ Éremón was later depicted as one of the foremost sons of Míl, the first of the Gaels to possess the kingship of Ireland and the ancestor of the inhabitants of the northern half of Ireland; the Connachta and their offshoot, the Uí Néill. In later tradition, including that encapsulated in the additions to *Énna, Labraid*, he is also presented as the ancestor of the Laigin, but it is far from clear that the author of the *Moín, oín* intended such a reading. In fact, this poem seems to depict the Laigin as distinct from the descendants of Éremón. Another of these early Leinster poems, *Dind Ríg ród tomm tenbath*¹⁷ – ‘possibly the oldest poem in the Irish language’ in Carney’s opinion – is also concerned with ‘the coming of the Gaileóin or Leinstermen to Ireland’.¹⁸ It depicts Labraid Loingsech Móen, grandson of Lóegaire Lorc, as a fierce warrior who killed the sons of Áugaine,¹⁹ presumably Áugaine Már whose descendants feature as Labraid’s adversaries in the later prose rendition of the same legend.²⁰

Áugaine, like Éremón, was an ancestor of the Connachta and the Uí Néill and the antipathy expressed toward both figures in these poems led John Carey to ask:

are the lands of Éremón the homeland of the Laigin, regained after exile, or the territory of their enemies? The intense rivalry between the Laigin and Uí Néill for control of the Midlands, and the claim of Leinster to the Tara

¹⁶ Carey, *Irish National Origin Legend*, pp. 5-8. For the learned creation of the name Éremón, see Scowcroft, ‘*Leabhar Gabhála*—part II’, 20. On the prominence of Spain for Irish pseudo-historians, see R. Baumgarten, ‘The geographical orientation of Ireland in Isidore and Orosius’, *Peritia* 3 (1984), 189–203.

¹⁷ *CGH*, p. 18; H. Wagner, ‘The archaic *Dind Ríg* poem and related problems’, *Ériu* 28 (1977), 1–2 for edited text and translation.

¹⁸ Carney, ‘The dating of archaic Irish verse’, p. 43.

¹⁹ *CGH*, p. 18; Wagner, ‘The archaic *Dind Ríg* poem’.

²⁰ *Orgain Denna Ríg*, ed. D. Greene, *Fingal Ronáin and other stories*, Medieval and modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin, 1955); O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, pp. 101–17

kingship which is articulated in various of these poems, may point to the latter of these alternatives.²¹

In fact, these poems seem to depict an origin legend for the Laigin. Like other origin legends, they explain the roots of the people's name, record their arrival in and conquest of their homeland and use the image of their enemies, the descendants of Éremón, to reinforce the unity of the group. James Carney had already suggested as much:

In the earlier Leinster verse the Godlike human, Labraid Móen, grandson of Lóegaire Lorc, is the invader of an *íath ainéoil*, 'an unknown land'; he seizes 'the headship of the Goídil', and slays 'the descendants of renowned Augaine' (*flaith Gaedel, gabsus, Corpus*, pp. 1, 334, *oirt Moen maccu áin Augaini*, p. 18). ... Politically, [these poems] will give a picture of a dynastic group in Leinster, the Laigin or Gailióin, exercising power as far as the borders of Ulster. They are conscious of being invaders and of different ethnic origins to the rest of the country.²²

Regardless of whether these tales of 'the invasion of Leinster by the ... Liginian tribes' reflect 'historical fact'²³ or not, these poems testify to the existence of a distinct Laigin identity in the first half of the seventh century that distinguished them from the other peoples of Ireland, especially the descendants of Éremón and Áugaine.

In light of this enmity towards the Uí Néill – for John Carey is indubitably correct to link the image of conflict between Lóegaire and Áugaine with the historical warfare between the Uí Néill and the Laigin in the sixth and seventh centuries – the use of the term Goídil in *Moín, oín* is interesting. It is commonly believed that the term Goídil, later the most common ethnonym of the Irish and

²¹ Carey, '*Lebor Gabála* and the legendary history of Ireland', p. 34.

²² Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', 73.

²³ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, p. 130.

the root of the modern ‘Gael’, was derived from Old Welsh *Gwyddel*.²⁴ The linguistic evidence for this borrowing suggests that it occurred at a relatively late date, after the change of |w-| to |gw-| in the parent language and late enough that oblique cases of the noun (*Goidelu*, *Goidelaib*) do not display the effects of syncope.²⁵ Although there is some debate regarding the matter, Thomas Charles-Edwards and Proinsias MacCana favour a date no earlier than c.600.²⁶ *Moín, oín* might therefore be one of the earliest instances of this usage. Old Welsh *Gwyddel* was derived from the word for forest and the term seems to have had negative connotations as depicting a ‘forest/wild man’, a suitably derogatory term to denote one’s enemies.

An extant snippet of archaic verse about Conchobar mac Nessa perhaps indicates that the Ulaid, like the Laigin, defined their identity in part in opposition to the Féni:

Ardmac rí / romac Nesa, / nenaisc íath / fer Féne.

‘The exalted son of a king, / the great-son of Ness, / he secured [under his rule] the lands / of the men of the Féni’.²⁷

²⁴ O’Rahilly, *The Goidels and their predecessors*, pp. 5–6; D. Greene, *The Irish language: an Ghaeilge*, Irish Life and Culture (Cork, 1966), p. 11; T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and society among the Insular Celts 400–1000’, in M. J. Green (ed.), *The Celtic world* (London, 1995), p. 723. P. Russell, ‘“What was best of every language”: the early history of the Irish language’, in Ó Cróinín (ed.), *New History of Ireland I*, p. 408.

²⁵ K. H. Jackson, *Language and history in early Britain: a chronological survey of the Brittonic languages 1st to 12th c. A.D.* (Edinburgh, 1953, reprinted with a new introduction by Professor William Gillies, Dublin, 1994), pp. 389–91; MacNeill, ‘The Pretanic Background in Britain and Ireland’, pp. 7–8.

²⁶ Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and Society’, p. 723. Cf. MacCana, *The cult of the sacred centre*, p. 293. For more on the debate, see Russell, ‘What was best’, p. 408, note 11.

²⁷ *CIH*, pp. 583.11–12, 676.31–2. Normalised reading and translation from L. Breatnach, ‘Varia VI: 1. The earlier form of *lour*, “enough”. 2. The preterite of *sichid/seichid* “says”. 3. *Ardri* as an Old Compound’, *Ériu* 37 (1986), 192–3 and *idem*, ‘The king in the Old Irish law text *Senchas Már*’, in F. Josephson (ed.) *Celtic language, law and letters: Proceedings of the tenth Symposium of the Societas*

This verse survives in the eighth-century legal tract *Míadsleхта*,²⁸ although Carney was of the opinion that the verse was earlier than the surrounding text.²⁹ In this tract, the poem is associated with the highest rank of king, the *tríath*. He is said to rule all Ireland and to receive the submission of all the provinces.³⁰ Apparently, then, the eighth-century compiler of *Míadsleхта* understood the reference to the Féni as an expression of Conchobar's kingship of all Ireland. Perhaps, though, it would be preferable to read it, like *Moín, oín*, as an expression of opposition to the Féni from the standpoint of the Ulaid. The poet's original intention might well have been to glorify Conchobar for conquering the lands of his enemies rather than as the leader of the men of Ireland.³¹

Auraicept na nÉces, which dates to about 700, includes an origin legend of the men of Ireland that recognised their heterogeneous racial origins – it is a 'notable enemy of racialism' in Charles-Edwards' words – and cites their linguistic unity as the defining feature of their identity.³² According to the *Auraicept*, Fénius Farsaid created *bérla Féne*, 'the language of the Féni',

Celtologica Nordica, Meijerbergs Arkiv för Svensk Ordforskning 38 (Göteborg, 2010), p.123. See also, K. Meyer, *Über die älteste irische Dichtung 2: Rhythmische Alliterierende reimlose Strophen* (Berlin, 1914), p. 28; Carney 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', p. 54; *Ancient laws of Ireland*, ed. and trans. W. N. Hancock, T. O'Mahony, A. G. Richey, W. M. Hennessy and R. Atkinson, (6 vols Dublin and London, 1865–1901), vol. 4, p. 346.

²⁸ E. MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law: the law of status or franchise', *PRIA* 36C (1923), 265–316; Breatnach, *A companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, pp. 264–5.

²⁹ Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', p. 54.

³⁰ Breatnach, 'The king in the Old Irish law text *Senchas Már*', 123.

³¹ In *Táin bó Cúailgne recension 1* (ed. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1976), p. 20), Cú Chulainn addresses Conchobar as *rí féne*, but this appears to be the genitive of *flan*, 'warrior troop', the nominative of which is frequently spelt *fén* in that text, rather than Féni. See O'Rahilly's translation (p. 143) and *DIL*, s.v. *flan*.

³² *Auraicept na nÉces*, ed. A. Ahlqvist, *The early Irish linguist: an edition of the canonical part of the Auraicept na nÉces, with introduction, commentary and indices* (Helsinki, 1983), p. 48; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 579–85 quoted at p. 580.

otherwise *Goídelc*, from *a mba ferr iarum do cach bérlu 7 a mba leithiu 7 a mba caímu*, ‘that which was best of every language and that which was broadest and that which was smoothest’.³³ This happened in a school run by Fénius ten years after God had confounded the languages of man to punish the sin of the Tower of Babel. Crucially, as the author of the *Auraicept* put it, *is cach combérlaid dochuaid a suidiu dochum a chríche 7 ní cach comcheniúil*, ‘it is everyone speaking the same language that went from there to his own territory and not everyone of the same race’. To reinforce the image of the racial diversity of the speakers of *bérta Féne*, the author related regarding Cai Caínbrethach, one of the students in Fénius’ school who learned the newly created language, that *ba do Ebraib a bunadas*, ‘his [genetic] origin was from the Hebrews’.³⁴

As the oldest extant grammar of a European vernacular, the *Auraicept* testifies to the high esteem with which the Irish regarded their own language.³⁵ As Charles-Edwards has stated, its business was ‘to raise Irish to the same level as Latin’, a goal achieved through frequent comparisons, implicit and explicit, between the grammar of the two languages.³⁶ Pride in the Irish language and expressions of that pride through elevation of Irish to a status comparable to that of Latin had very possibly been initiated in the Irish settlements in Britain.³⁷ Inscribed stones in what were formerly Irish-ruled parts of Wales sometimes carry inscriptions in Irish as well as Latin, suggesting the local, Irish-speaking rulers believed that their language was on a par with that of the Romans.

³³ *Auraicept na nÉces*, p. 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁵ Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and society’, pp. 405–6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 722.

³⁷ Jackson, *Language and history in early Britain*, pp. 156ff.; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 63–72.

Moreover, the total absence of comparable Welsh inscriptions suggests that there was a perceived hierarchy of languages, with that of the Britons farther down the scale than that of their Irish rulers.³⁸ Later, an addition to the *Auraicept* claimed that the reason why Latin, Greek and Hebrew were held in such high esteem, apart from the usual assertion that they were the languages of the inscription on Christ's cross,³⁹ was *ara med do eladhnaibh dorighnedh estib*, 'on account of the number of compositions that were made out of them'.⁴⁰ This opened the way for the elevation of Irish to a similarly elevated status simply by composing texts.

The example of another nation whose ancestry was recognisably diverse, but who were united by their common language was close at hand in early Ireland. As noted in the Introduction, one of the primary factors that identified the Angles, Saxons and Jutes as the *gens Anglorum* in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* was their linguistic unity.⁴¹ The main influence on the author of the *Auraicept* was not Bede, however, but Isidore of Seville. In the chapter of the *Etymologiae* revealingly entitled *De linguis gentium*, Isidore expressed one of his conflicting theories regarding the origins of *gentes*: *ex linguis gentes, non ex gentibus linguae exortae sunt*, 'peoples arise from languages, not languages from peoples'.⁴² According to the *Auraicept*'s Isidore-inspired theory, then, the linguistic unity of the Irish overrode their diverse racial backgrounds.

³⁸ Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society', pp. 715–18.

³⁹ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 9.1.3: *Tres sunt autem linguae linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellent. His enim tribus linguis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa eius scripta.*

⁴⁰ *Auraicept na n-Éces*, ed. and trans. Calder, p. 13.

⁴¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentes Anglorum*, 1.1.

⁴² Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 9.1.1, 14

In later centuries, language remained central to Irish conceptions of nationality. As Donnchadh Ó Corráin stated, the great works concerning *origines gentium* produced in Ireland during the eleventh century ‘display a curious interest in language’.⁴³ Indeed, the linguistic theory of Irish identity has lived on into the modern age and lies at the heart of the cultural nationalism theory of MacNeill and Ó Corráin. See, for instance, David Greene’s statement ‘that many different racial strains must have been combined in the solidly Irish-speaking population which we find in Ireland when written records begin’.⁴⁴

The *Auraicept*’s recognition of the heterogeneous origins claimed by the various peoples of Ireland did not survive, however, and was soon superseded by the Milesian theory of Irish ancestral unity that was probably under construction by the end of the seventh century.⁴⁵ According to the genealogists, the *gens Scottorum* was defined by its ancestry:

*Imprudens Scottorum gens, rerum suarum obliuiscens, acta quasi inaudita siue nullo modo facta uendicat, quominus tribuere litteris aliquid operum suorum praecurat, et ob hoc genealogias Scottigenas litteris tribuam: primo genealogis hÉremóin, secundo genealogis Ébir, tertio hÍr, quarto Lugdach meic Ítha.*⁴⁶

The foolish Irish race, forgetful of its history, boasts of incredible or completely fabulous deeds, since it has been careless about committing to writing any of its achievements. Therefore I propose to write down the genealogies of the Irish race: firstly the genealogy of Éremón, secondly the genealogy of Éber, thirdly that of Ír, and fourthly of Lugdach mac Ítha.

‘A notable feature of the distribution of genealogies,’ David Dumville remarked, ‘is that the farther west one goes, the more there are’, and there is ‘a

⁴³ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Greene, *An Ghaeilge*, pp. 7–8.

⁴⁵ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, pp. 5–6; Carney, ‘Three Old Irish accentual poems’, 65–73; Charles-Edwards, ‘The making of nations’, p. 30.

⁴⁶ *CGH*, p. 192.

massive corpus of medieval Irish genealogies'.⁴⁷ This material, as has been noted by John Kelleher, John Carey and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, is intimately associated with the pseudo-historical tradition of *Lebor Gabála* and its predecessors.⁴⁸ Genealogies are now recognised as more than just records of biological relationships between individuals. While the great majority of those portions of the genealogies covering the seventh and eighth centuries describe recognised lines of descent, their upper reaches, especially those portions concerned with legendary or mythological figures, are best read as aetiological texts. The blood relationships between individuals described in these texts were intended to reflect and to explain the relationships between their descendants at the time of composition.⁴⁹ As these relationships changed in the present, through the making and breaking of alliances or the rise and fall of dynasties, genealogies were reconstructed to reflect the new situation.⁵⁰ As Léopold Genicot has noted, genealogies were *textes vivantes* that were repeatedly recreated as new 'originals',⁵¹ and the survival of different strata within the corpus created many

⁴⁷ D. N. Dumville, 'Kingship, genealogies and regnal lists', in P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (eds.), *Early medieval kingship* (Leeds, 1997), p. 76–7.

⁴⁸ J. V. Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies', *Irish Historical Studies* 16, no. 62 (1968), 140; Carey, *Irish national origin-legend*, p. 10. Ó Corráin, 'Creating the past', p. 203.

⁴⁹ In general, see L. Genicot, *Les généalogies*, Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental 15 (Turnhout, 1975). For the Irish case, see Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies', 138–53; Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy', pp. 51–96; *idem*, 'Historical need and literary narrative', in D. E. Evans, J. G. Griffith and E. M. Jope (eds), *Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic studies held at Oxford, from 10th to 15th July, 1983* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 141–58; *idem*, 'Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition (Carroll lecture 1992)', *Peritia* 12 (1998), 177–208.

⁵⁰ Ó Corráin, 'Creating the past', 177–208

⁵¹ Genicot, *Les généalogies*, pp. 27–8.

'a good glaring contradiction' that, as John Kelleher noted, are so valuable to our understanding of their creation.⁵²

For the school of historians who, following MacNeill, see the origin of Irish identity in the cultural homogeneity of early Ireland, the Milesian genealogical schema was constructed to reflect the cultural unity of the men of Ireland.⁵³ More recently, however, it has been suggested that the basic structure of the genealogy of the descendants of Míl represented a proclamation of political alliances and overlordships in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. John Kelleher and Francis John Byrne noted that the partitioning of the island between Míl's two sons, Éber and Éremón, reflected the traditional division of Ireland into southern and northern halves; Leth Moga and Leth Cuinn.⁵⁴ The Éoganachta and the Connachta (by the seventh century primarily the Uí Néill) claimed authority over, respectively, Leth Moga and Leth Cuinn. As such, the extent of Síol Ébir (Leth Moga) and Síol Éremóin (Leth Cuinn) could be read as an expression of the limits of authority of their respective rulers. Based on such an interpretation, Kelleher asserted that the Milesian genealogy was constructed to reflect the political dominance of the Uí Néill:

it would seem probable that the scheme was devised at a time when the Uí Néill were definitely on top of the Irish pyramid or were within reaching distance of it: when, in other words, the Uí Néill kingship of Tara was in some manner, to some degree, an over-kingship of Ireland.⁵⁵

⁵² Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies', 142.

⁵³ MacNeill, *Phases*, pp. 96–7, 105–6.

⁵⁴ Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies'; F. J. Byrne, 'Senchas: the nature of Gaelic historical tradition', in J. G. Barry and W. L. Warren (eds.), *Historical Studies 9: Papers read before the Irish Conference of Historians, Cork, 29-31 May 1971* (Belfast 1974), pp. 143–44; D. Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400–800', in *idem*, *New history of Ireland I*, pp. 183–85.

⁵⁵ Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies', 143. The tradition that Éremón had accepted the *monarchia* of Ireland as well as the northern half, that he was

Charles-Edwards has taken Kelleher's argument a step farther by suggesting that the Milesian genealogy was less a reflection of the political dominance of the Uí Néill than an assertion of it.⁵⁶ For Charles-Edwards, at the heart of the issue was the ambiguity of the term Féni, which, as noted above, could denote either all the men of Ireland or one of the three *prímchenéla* that inhabited the island. The 'lesser' Féni included the Éoganachta,⁵⁷ the Connachta, and, once they had established an identity for themselves distinct from the Connachta, the Uí Néill. This alliance might perhaps have existed from the period in the sixth century when the Éoganachta attempted to assert their authority over the Corcu Loígde in Munster.⁵⁸ *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* is a text that survives in a form probably written in Munster in the eighth century but that almost certainly drew on earlier material.⁵⁹ Its account of an alliance between Éogan Már (ancestor of the Éoganachta) and Art mac Cuinn (ancestor of the Connachta and Uí Néill) against Mac Con mac Luigdech (ancestor of the Érainn of Munster) suggests just such a political association.⁶⁰ Not without periodical disruption, this alliance survived through the seventh and most of the eighth centuries, when the Uí Néill maintained peaceful relations with the Connachta and the

primus de Scotis omnem Hiberniam regnavit, further solidified the claims of the leaders of Leth Cuinn to authority over those of Leth Mogha: *CGH*, p. 123.

⁵⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of nations', pp. 30–2.

⁵⁷ Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*, p. 133: 'that the Éoganchta are Féni is shown by lawtracts of Munster origin (*Uraicecht Becc*: *CIH* 2256.13, 14; 2262.20; 2277.12; 2279.1; *Corus Bretha Nemed*: *CIH* 2211.3; *Ériu* xiii 14.20 = *CIH* 1112.11; 17.1, 6, 25 = 113.40, 1114.4, 18; 19.13 = 1115.24)'.

⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 490.

⁵⁹ *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* has been edited twice, once by T. Ó Cathasaigh (*The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 119–23) and once by M. O'Daly (*Cath Maige Mucrama*, Irish Texts Society 50 (Dublin, 1975), pp. 64–73); Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 489–90, 582.

⁶⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 580–83.

Éoganachta while focusing their military activity – when not absorbed in fighting one another – primarily against the Laigin.⁶¹

Charles-Edwards suggested that the earliest version of the Milesian genealogy ‘expressed the inner shape of the alliance led by the Uí Néill, formed by a clear link with the Connachta west of the Shannon and a looser one with the Éoganachta of Munster’.⁶² It was, in other words, a genealogy of the lesser Féni that excluded the Ulaid and the Laigin. Only in later versions of the legend were the Laigin and the Ulaid incorporated into the schema to give it its ‘national’ appearance.⁶³

The expansion of the Milesian legend over time to include groups not originally accounted for is most obvious in the proliferation of Míl’s sons in later versions of the legend,⁶⁴ but perhaps the clearest evidence that it was initially concerned with the politics of the Féni, Charles-Edwards suggested, was the fate of the Laigin.⁶⁵ The process of incorporating the Laigin into the Milesian legend was already underway, as noted above, when *Énna, Labraid* was expanded and the Leinster genealogy it contained was grafted onto the Milesian stem c.700. Despite the geographic position of their kingdom, the Laigin were made descendants of Éremón, ancestor of the peoples of Leth Cuinn, rather than Éber.

⁶¹ Some of the most notable episodes in the long-running warfare between the Uí Néill and the Laigin are recorded in *The Annals of Ulster (to a.d. 1131)*, ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983), s.a. 579, 626, 628, 738. For fuller accounts, see D. Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400–800’, pp. 188–200, and T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Irish warfare before 1100’, in T. Bartlett and K. Jeffrey (eds.), *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 33–40, especially 38–40.

⁶² Charles-Edwards, ‘The making of nations’, pp. 30–2, at p. 31, but Charles-Edwards mistakenly states that Éber was the ancestor of the Connachta and Éremón of the Éoganachta.

⁶³ Charles-Edwards, ‘The making of the nations’, pp. 30–2.

⁶⁴ Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400–800’, pp. 185–86.

⁶⁵ Charles-Edwards, ‘The making of the nations’, pp. 30–2; See also Kelleher, ‘The pre-Norman genealogies’, 142–45.

This suggests that the incorporation of the Laigin occurred when the Uí Néill were attempting to bring Leinster more firmly under their authority during the seventh and eighth centuries.⁶⁶ One might compare the adoption of genealogies that traced their ancestry to Woden among the royal dynasties of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the seventh or eighth centuries that, in the eyes of David Dumville, 'reflects a political link: in this case, subjection to Anglian (Northumbrian or Mercian) overlordship'.⁶⁷

The fate of the Laigin also highlights one of the difficulties that faced learned men who constructed and expanded the Milesian genealogy. As Kelleher noted, they

had to work with materials already widely disseminated in writing ... Doubtless they and their clients, the Uí Néill kings, would have preferred to drop all the older fictions and substitute new, self-coherent inventions that would exactly reflect the existing state of affairs. But ... that was no longer possible. To be sure, the king-list and prehistoric pedigrees did present a new doctrine, evidently at odds with what it was meant to supersede, but the compilers were forced to hedge, to blur, to leave lacunae, in order to conceal the underlying incoherence of their construction.⁶⁸

The genealogy of the Laigin depicted in their own seventh-century origin legend ended with Lóegaire Lorc, grandfather of Labraid Loingsech who was credited with conquering Leinster from the sons of Áugaine Már.⁶⁹ Presumably because these figures were known to have been contemporaries, the genealogy of the Laigin was joined to that of the Connachta at this point by making Lóegaire a son of his erstwhile enemy, Áugaine. Rather than refute this theory, the Laigin seem

⁶⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', pp. 30–2; *idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 570–1, 574–79; *idem*, 'Irish warfare', pp 3–4; Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400–800', pp. 188–91, 197–99.

⁶⁷ Dumville, 'Kingship, genealogies and regnal lists', p. 79.

⁶⁸ Kelleher, 'The pre-Norman genealogies', p. 144.

⁶⁹ Wagner, 'The archaic *Dind Ríg* poem', 1–2; Carney, 'The dating of archaic Irish verse', p. 48.

to have embraced it and reinterpreted it to their own advantage in later versions of their origin legend. In *Orgain Denna Ríg*, described by its twelfth-century editor as *cétna scél Lagen*, or ‘the first tale of the Laigin’,⁷⁰ Labraid Loingsech was depicted as an exile from Ireland who later returned rather than as a foreign invader, thus subsuming the origin legend of the Laigin within that of the Milesians.⁷¹

According to Charles-Edwards, then, the Milesian genealogy’s original purpose was to describe the relations between the dynasties that made up the Féni. As the political dominance of the Féni, led by the Uí Néill, expanded, the Laigin and, eventually, the Ulaid were incorporated into Milesian schema giving it its ‘national’ status. It became, in other words, an assertion of Irish identity that ‘justified the current political elite – the Uí Néill, their allies and principal clients’.⁷²

Moreover, the *Auraicept*’s expression of Irish linguistic identity might also, Charles-Edwards suggested, be read as an assertion of the authority of the Féni over their rivals. Old Irish is the only vernacular attested from pre-Viking Ireland.⁷³ Unlike Old English, Old Irish shows no signs of dialect variation. It is a remarkably uniform and standardised language, and although most linguists believe that dialects must have existed, they have been thwarted in their search

⁷⁰ *Orgain Denna Ríg*, p. 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; W. Stokes, ‘The destruction of Dind Ríg’, *ZCP* 3 (1901), 1–14; O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, pp. 101–30.

⁷² Charles-Edwards, ‘The making of nations’, p. 33.

⁷³ But see O’Rahilly, *The Goidels and their predecessors*, pp. 3–7; and *idem*, *Early Irish history and mythology*, pp. 85–91, for a suggestion that British was also spoken by some inhabitants of early Ireland.

for evidence.⁷⁴ Charles-Edwards suggested that the uniformity of Old Irish might be explained by seeing it as having originally been just one of a number of dialects spoken in the country.⁷⁵ Standard Old Irish, he suggested, might have originated as the dialect of the Féni, or perhaps some particular branch of that alliance, and gained its national status in association with the political hegemony of the Féni, and especially the Uí Néill.⁷⁶ The image of the students in Fénus' school learning Irish might not, he suggested, have been very far removed from the truth of seventh-century Ireland, where the political and cultural elite might have had to learn the standard form of the language. The *Auraicept's* description of Old Irish as *bérla Féni* and its claim that it was invented by Fénus – whose name represents a Latinised version of the group name Féni – despite apparently recognising the presence of distinct *cenéla* in Ireland, may betray the original status of Old Irish as a dialect belonging to the Féni. In that case, as Charles-Edwards put it, the *Auraicept* asserted not just the unity of the men of Ireland, but their participation 'in a language in which, and a culture by which, the power of the Uí Néill was confirmed and celebrated'.⁷⁷

By the end of the seventh century, by the time, that is, when the Laigin were being incorporated into the Féni on linguistic and genealogical terms, the Uí Néill were the most powerful dynasties in Ireland. John Kelleher has imaginatively described the emergence of the descendants of Níall Noígíallach into the

⁷⁴ A. Ahlqvist, 'Remarks on the question of dialects in Old Irish', in J. Fisak (ed.), *Historical dialectology, regional and social*, Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 37 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 23–38; Russell, 'What was best', pp. 439–43.

⁷⁵ For what follows, see Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society', pp. 727–9. For an important influence on Charles-Edwards' theory, see H. Gneuss, 'The origin of standard Old English and Aethelwold's school at Winchester', *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972), 63–83.

⁷⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', p. 32.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

historical record as akin to a school of cuttlefish appearing out of ‘a large ink-cloud of their own manufacture’.⁷⁸ Since Kelleher’s time, some historians have managed to penetrate the murkiness of their background while others have further muddied the water.

The most powerful branches of the Northern Uí Néill were Cenél Conaill and Cenél nÉogain, descendants, respectively, of Conall Gulban mac Néill and Éogan mac Néill. The descendants of Níall who dominated the midlands from the seventh century onwards were Síol nÁeda Sláne and Clann Colmáin. Áed Sláne and Colmán Már were believed to have been the sons of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, a mid-sixth-century king of Tara and descendant of another of Níall’s sons, Conall Cremthainne. Recently, sceptics of the simplicity of this genealogical scheme have challenged its accuracy. They consider the genealogical relations between the various branches to be fabrications of relatively late date, so that rather than being the descendants of a figure who lived in the middle of the fifth century, they argue that some of the connections between these groups were created possibly as late as the middle of the eighth century. Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin’s suggestion that the two sons of Níall named Conall were actually one and the same person is not implausible, although it does not fundamentally alter the image of the Uí Néill as a group of related dynasties ruling in both the north-west and the eastern midlands.⁷⁹ Brian Lacey’s contention that neither Cenél Conaill nor Cenél nÉogain were descended from Níall, but were, in fact, related to the

⁷⁸ J. V. Kelleher, ‘Early Irish history and pseudo-history’, *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963), 125.

⁷⁹ A. Mac Shamhráin, ‘*Nebulae discutiuntur?* The emergence of Clann Cholmáin, sixth-eighth centuries’, in A. P. Smyth (ed.) *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 83–97.

Ulaid, seems less plausible.⁸⁰ He accepts Mac Shamhráin's theory regarding the invention of the second Conall mac Néill, the ramification of which is that neither the southern dynasties that claimed descent from Níall nor the most important of their northern counterparts were 'in the "blood" sense, Uí Néill'.⁸¹ Despite Lacey's interpretation, it seems clear that the *Amrae Choluimb Chille* refers to the Connachta ancestry of Cenél Conaill and also, perhaps slightly less explicitly, links them to Níall.⁸² Nor is it at all clear that Adomnán's account of the battle of Móin Daire Lothair distinguishes the Cenél Conaill from the Uí Néill.⁸³

Although an origin in the east has been suggested for the Uí Néill,⁸⁴ it seems most probable that the tradition of their emergence from among the Connachta reflects the truth. It would appear that during the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Connachta forces under the leadership of Coirpre and Fíachu, two sons of Níall, began the conquest of the midlands from the Laigin.⁸⁵ A Laigin presence in Brega at an early date seems to be recorded on an ogam stone just seven miles from Tara that records the name of Mac Cairthinn of the Uí Enechglais, once a powerful Laigin dynasty who were displaced and greatly reduced in later

⁸⁰ B. Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal kingdoms AD 500–800* (Dublin, 2006).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸² *Amra Choluimb Chille*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, 'The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899), 30–55, 132–83, 248–87, 40–37. The crucial sections are at § 6, p. 156, and § 104, p. 276. B. Lacey, 'The *Amrae Coluimb Cille* and the Uí Néill', *JRSAI* 134 (2004), 169–72.

⁸³ Adamnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (London, 1961; rev. edn, Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford, 1991), i.7; Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, pp. 150–51.

⁸⁴ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, pp. 161–83, 193–208.

⁸⁵ A. P. Smyth, 'The hÚi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster, 431–516 a.d.', *Études Celtique* 14 (1974), 127, 134–42; Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400–800', pp. 188–91; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp. 133–34; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 441–68.

centuries.⁸⁶ Mac Cáirthinn's death is recorded in the annals in 446.⁸⁷ Although Coirpre and Fíachu seem to have led the conquest of the midlands, their descendants lost out to the ancestors of Síl nÁeda Sláne and Cland Cholmáin and these, from perhaps the middle of the sixth century, began to think of themselves as distinct from the rest of the Connachta by reason of their descent from Níall.

The prize possession of the Uí Néill was the kingship of Tara. Described by the late seventh-century Patrician hagiographer Muirchú moccu Machtheni as *caput Scottorum*, 'the capital of the Gaels,'⁸⁸ the Hill of Tara in modern County Meath is the site of impressive prehistoric remains, but had probably been abandoned by the dawn of the historic period. For nearly a century after the Battle of Mag Rath (Moira, modern County Down) in 637, the kingship of Tara alternated between Cenél Conaill of the Northern Uí Néill and Síl nÁeda Sláne of the Southern Uí Néill.⁸⁹ In the opening decades of the eighth century, however, the first signs appeared of a shift in the balance of power.⁹⁰ Amongst the Northern Uí Néill, the rise of Cenél nÉogain at the expense of Cenél Conaill was most notable during the highly successful military career of Áed Allán (d. 743), although his father, Fergal mac Maíle Dúin (d. 722), was the first member of that dynasty to claim the title 'king of Tara' during this period. In the midlands, internal divisions amongst Síl nÁeda Sláne precipitated a westward power-shift

⁸⁶ D. Ó Corráin, 'Topographical notes II: Mag Femen, Femen and some early annals', *Ériu* 22 (1971), 97–9.

⁸⁷ *AU* 446; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 453–57.

⁸⁸ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, ed. and trans. L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, Series: *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin, 1979), p. 74, §9.1: E. Bhreatnach, 'Temoria: caput Scotorum?', *Ériu* 47 (1996), 68–73.

⁸⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 571.

⁹⁰ For a detailed analysis, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695–743: the rise and fall of dynasties', *Peritia* 16 (2002), 396–418.

and the rise of the Cland Cholmáin kings of Mide.⁹¹ Almost without break, Cenél nÉogain and Cland Cholmáin kings alternated in the kingship of Tara until the end of the first millennium.⁹²

Later historians, both medieval and modern, conceived of the kingship of Tara as a high-kingship of Ireland, while to Daniel Binchy it represented no more than the high-kingship of the Uí Néill.⁹³ The reality was more ambiguous. The special status of Tara as a seat of kingship is evident from the fact that the Laigin and the Ulaid both claimed to have held the kingship in the past and from the deference shown to kings and the kingship of Tara in certain Munster texts. One of the seventh-century Leinster poems, *Nidu dír dermait* claims that kings of the Laigin had reigned in Tara in the past, a claim made credible by the evidence that the Laigin had held the midlands before the Connachta/Uí Néill conquests.⁹⁴ The Ulaid and their neighbours the Cruithni also recognised the special status of Tara and claimed to have held the kingship as recently as late sixth and early seventh centuries respectively.⁹⁵ The evidence for Báetán mac Cairill's kingship of Tara comes from a text written long after his death in 581 when he was simply called *rí Ulad* by the annals, but it may not be without merit.⁹⁶ The reign of Congal

⁹¹ *Idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 570–4.

⁹² It was because of these developments in the mid-eighth century, the revisers of the Uí Néill genealogy argue, that Cland Cholmáin propagandists rewrote the history and genealogy of their dynasty. In order to distance themselves from Cenél Conaill, whose star had fallen dramatically, they invented a second Conall son of Níall from whom they claimed descent; Mac Shamhráin, '*Nebulae discutiuntur?*'

⁹³ D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, O'Donnell Lectures (Oxford, 1970), pp. 36–8.

⁹⁴ *CGH*, pp. 8–9; Bhreatnach, '*Temoria*', pp. 83–4; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 453–58.

⁹⁵ Bhreathnach, '*Temoria*', 83–4.

⁹⁶ *AU 581* (Cf. *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes (*Revue Celtique* 16–18 (1895–7); repr. Felinbach, 1993, 2 vols), and *Chronicon Scotorum. A*

Cáech (d.637), on the other hand, seems well attested. He is referred to in passing as having been king of Tara in the seventh-century legal tract *Bechbretha*, and the divisions within the Uí Néill in the early seventh century seem to offer a plausible context within which this king of the Cruithni could have managed to impose himself.⁹⁷

Moreover, despite Ó Cróinín's claim that 'the men of Munster ... do not appear to have set much store by the activities of the Uí Néill', it is clear that the kingship of Tara was held in high regard in learned circles within Munster.⁹⁸ References to Tara and to legendary Connachta and Uí Néill kings of Tara in texts of Munster origin suggest that Tara had a special significance even in Leth Moga.⁹⁹ The Munster law tract *Cáin Fuithirbe*, which has been dated to 678x683,¹⁰⁰ records the story of the confrontation between St Patrick and Lóegaire mac Néill at Tara and implies the Lóegaire was entitled to be called *ardrí*.¹⁰¹ Another Munster law tract, *Bretha Nemed*, cites the celebration of *feis Temro*, the ceremonial feast of the king of Tara, as one of the things that constituted a *rí ruirech*, 'king of great kings'.¹⁰² More specifically, *Frithfolad Muman*, an eighth- or ninth-century tract on the rights and obligations of the kings of Munster towards their subject kingdoms, claims that the king of Tara

chronicle of Irish Affairs from the earliest times to 1135; and supplement containing the events from 1141-1150, ed. W. M. Hennessy. (London 1866)); Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 482–83.

⁹⁷ *Bechbretha*, § 32; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 494–95; Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400–800', pp. 216–17.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁹⁹ Bhreathnach, '*Temoria*', 85–7; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 490–91.

¹⁰⁰ D. A. Binchy, 'The date and provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*', *Ériu* 18 (1958), 53; L. Breatnach, 'The ecclesiastical element in the Old Irish legal tract *Cáin Fhuithirbe*', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 42–52.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49; Bhreathnach, '*Temoria*', 87.

¹⁰² *CIH* 2219.39–40; Bhreathnach, '*Temoria*', 82–6.

had a right to certain dues from Munster dynasties. It says that the Múscraige are entitled to one third of any valuables cast up on the shore *acht rand ríg Temrach*, 'except for the share of the king of Tara'.¹⁰³

There is a difference in nature between the references to Tara in the Munster legal tracts and those in the Leinster material that may be telling. The Munster material implies recognition of the special status of legendary Connachta and Uí Néill kings of Tara at a time when their descendants were securely in possession of that kingship. *Nidu dír dermait*, on the other hand, recognises Tara's special status for the Laigin without implying that the current holders of the kingship held any authority over them. The Laigin had held Tara in the past, they had lost it, but they did not necessarily owe any allegiance those who had taken it from them. The claims of the Uí Néill kings of Tara were clearly perceived in different terms in Munster and in Leinster. The Éoganachta seem to have recognised the status of Tara and to have acknowledged – at least nominally, though *Frithfolad Muman* suggests something more effective – the claims of the Uí Néill to authority. The Laigin, on the other hand, while apparently acknowledging the special status of Tara as the seat of a particularly important kingship, did not recognise the authority of the current incumbents. Recognition of their claims amongst the Laigin would have to be won by the Uí Néill.

A depiction of the kingship of Tara provided by Adamnán helps to elucidate this situation. He described the following encounter between Columba and Áed Sláne:

¹⁰³ *Frithfolad Muman*, ed. J. G. O'Keefe, 'Dal Caladbuig', §§ 9–18, in J. Fraser, P. Grosjean and J. G. O'Keefe, *Irish texts 1* (London, 1931), § 9, p. 20; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 490–91.

Alio in tempore cum uir beatus in Scotia per aliquot demoraretur dies ad supradictum Aidum ad se uenientem sic profetice locutus ait: 'Praecauere debes filii ne tibe a deo totius Euerniae regni praerogatiuam monarchiae praedestinata parricidali faciente peccato amittas. Nam si quandoque illud commiseris, non toto patris regno sed eius aliqua parte in gente tua breui frueris tempore.' Quae uerba sancti sic sunt expleta secundum eius uaticinationem. Nam post Suibneum filium Clumbani dolo ab eo interfectum, non plus ut fertur quam iiii. Annis et tribus mensibus regni concessa potitus est parte.

At another time, when the blessed man was staying for some days in Ireland, and the abovementioned Áed came to him, he spoke to him prophetically thus, saying: 'My son, you must take heed lest by reason of the sin of parricide you lose the prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of all Ireland, predestined for you by God. For if you ever commit that sin, you will enjoy not the whole kingdom of your father, but only some part of it, in your own *gens*, and for but a short time.' These words of the saint were fulfilled exactly according to his prediction. For after Áed had treacherously killed Suibne, Colman's son, he had dominion over the part of the kingdom that had been yielded to him for no more, as it is told, than four years and three months.¹⁰⁴

Adamnán's depiction suggests that Uí Néill kings of Tara could make their rule felt across all of Ireland and indeed he described Áed's father, Diarmait mac Cerbaill as *totius Scotiae regnatorem deo auctore ordinatum*, 'ordained by God's will ruler of all Ireland'.¹⁰⁵ But rule of all Ireland was only one possibility for an Uí Néill king of Tara, Adamnán says. Another was a more restricted rule over the king's own *gens*.¹⁰⁶ Charles-Edwards has suggested that this lesser kingship amounted to authority over the Connachta,¹⁰⁷ but in the normal pattern of affairs when the Connachta and the Éoganachta were in alliance, it might be preferable to see it as a kingship of the Féni. That, at least, might explain the attitude of the Munster texts cited above.

¹⁰⁴ Adamnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, i.14, pp. 38–9; Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', 74–5.

¹⁰⁵ Adamnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, i.36, pp. 64–5.

¹⁰⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 520–21.

¹⁰⁷ *Idem*, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 141–45.

The extension of the king's authority beyond his own *gens* depended, as Adamnán would have it, on his morality or his willingness to follow the direction of Columba and his successors. We might presume, however, that what really mattered was a king's success in gaining recognition from the other kings of Ireland.¹⁰⁸ As Edel Bhreathnach noted,

Politically, the title *rex Temro* in the seventh and eighth centuries denoted some form of supremacy in Ireland, which was dependent on the success of an individual king and not solely on the recognition by other Uí Néill dynasties.¹⁰⁹

An Uí Néill king of Tara might realistically aim to use the special status of his kingship to establish his authority throughout the island, but simply being the king of Tara did not guarantee success. As a result, while kings succeeded one another in Tara, only occasionally were any of them credited with the title 'king of Ireland'.¹¹⁰

Such an interpretation might also explain the law tracts' attitude toward the kingship of Ireland. Based on his belief that the law tracts concerned with status recognised no higher station than the king of a province, Binchy asserted that 'the claim of the king of Tara to be "king of Ireland" ... had no more basis in law than it had in fact'.¹¹¹ As noted above, though, the eighth-century tract *Míadslechta* does refer to the *tríath .i. rí, amal as-beir: tríath trom tremi-etha Érenn túatha ó thuinn co tuinn ... Cóic cóiced Érenn, tremi-etha a mámu uili*, 'tríath, that is, a king, as [the following] states: the mighty tríath, he goes through the túatha of Ireland from wave to wave [i.e. from coast to coast] ... The five

¹⁰⁸ Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', pp. 74–8.; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 507–12.

¹⁰⁹ Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', pp. 78.

¹¹⁰ *AU*, 642, 703.

¹¹¹ Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, p. 32.

provinces of Ireland, he goes through all their submissions'.¹¹² References in the greatest of the Old Irish lawbooks to kings whose honour-prices were higher than that of a provincial king have led Liam Breatnach to suggest that there 'is a strong indication that *Senchas Már* recognised a grade of king who was at least higher than the king of a province'.¹¹³ Furthermore, the kingship of Tara is given special precedence in tracts that refer to the encounter between St Patrick and Lóegaire mac Néill. In *Córus Bésgnai*, for instance, Corc mac Luigdach, king of Munster, is depicted as having been a hostage at Lóegaire's court in Tara; 'implying imperialistic notions of a Tara high-kingship of Ireland supposedly absent from the laws'.¹¹⁴ The scarcity of such references might be explained by recognising that although the king of Tara could enforce his authority over all of Ireland, this was not always the case: some kings of Tara were, in reality, little more than kings of their own *gens*, while others managed to enforce their authority over much of the island in the manner of the *tríath*.¹¹⁵ The linguistic and genealogical definitions of Irish identity reflected the dominance of the Uí Néill and their allies and, by incorporating the Laigin and the Ulaid within the Féni, created a nation to match the aspirations of the kings of Tara to rule all the Irish.

In their quest to establish national authority, the Uí Néill had the support of Armagh, whose propagandists were active in the late seventh century. In his *Vita Sancti Patricii*, Muirchú famously described Níall Noígiallach as *origo stirpis*

¹¹² *CIH* 583.7–9; Breatnach, 'The king in the Old Irish law text *Senchas Már*', p. 123.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹⁴ K. McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair and a matter of life and death in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 20; *CIH* 527.26. This episode will be discussed further in the next chapter.

¹¹⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 518–21.

regiae huius pene insolae, ‘the one from whom was descended the royal stock of almost the entire island’.¹¹⁶ Tírechán, a close contemporary of Muirchú and another Patrician hagiographer, depicted an encounter between Patrick and Conall Cremthainne, ancestor of the southern Uí Néill at which the saint is said to have *firmavit solium eius in aeternum*, ‘confirmed his [Conall’s] throne forever’.¹¹⁷ The kingdom alluded to was that of Tara, held when Tírechán was writing by Conall’s descendant, Fínsnechta Fledach of Síl nÁeda Sláne.

Tírechán’s promotion of the cause of Síl nÁeda Sláne highlights the fact that the Uí Néill were not a homogeneous group in terms of their political or ecclesiastical loyalties and goals.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, Armagh played the political game skilfully and managed usually to maintain relatively good relations with whichever branch of the dynasty was in power. So, while Tírechán aligned his cause with Síl nÁeda Sláne, the name of Flann Febla, bishop of Armagh, was found heading the guarantor list of *Cáin Adamnáin* alongside Loingsech mac Óengussa, the Cenél Conaill king of Tara, just a few years later.¹¹⁹ Moreover, after the demise of Síl nÁeda Sláne in the early eighth century, Armagh forged a close alliance with the newly ascendant Cenél nÉogain of the Northern Uí Néill.¹²⁰

Armagh had its own reasons for promoting the unity of the men of Ireland. From the middle of the seventh century, Armagh was attempting to

¹¹⁶ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, ed. Bieler, p. 74.

¹¹⁷ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, p. 164. If Mac Shamhráin’s assertion is correct, this Conall was the ancestor both of the southern Uí Néill dynasties and of Cenél Conaill. The context of the reference in the *Collectanea*, however, makes it clear that Tírechán associated him with the eastern midlands.

¹¹⁸ T. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Uí Néill 695–743: the rise and fall of dynasties’, *Peritia* 16 (2002), 396–418.

¹¹⁹ M. Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* 697’, *Peritia* 1 (1982), 185: *Fland Febla sui-episcop Aird Mhachae*; 196–7: *Loingseach mac Oenghusa ri Erenn*.

¹²⁰ Charles-Edwards, ‘The Uí Néill 695–743’, 410–12.

convert what has been called its 'primacy of honour' within Ireland into a more precise claim to be the seat of an archbishopric of Ireland.¹²¹ It sought to unite the men of Ireland as a Christian nation under its leadership. This pursuit was undertaken partly in response to threats to its position from Kildare. Kildare's claims rested on its status as head of the southern, 'Roman' group of Irish churches, and were expressed in Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*. Cogitosus claimed for Kildare the status of *caput pene omnium Hibernensium ecclesiarum et culmen praecellens omnia monasteria Scottorum cuius parochia, per totam Hibernensem terra diffusa, a mare usque ad mare extensa est*, 'head of almost all the Irish churches with supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish, and its *parochia* extends over the whole land of Ireland, from sea to sea', and that it was home to *archiepisopus Hibernensium episcoporum*, 'the archbishop of the bishops of the men of Ireland'.¹²²

Armagh's response involved taking a leadership role among the Hibernian party within the Irish Church, stating its claims in the *Liber Angeli* and launching a propaganda offensive that included the work of Muirchú and Tírechán. Armagh's claims to archiepiscopal status were based primarily on its perceived status as the primary foundation of St Patrick, whose role as national apostle Armagh espoused vigorously. In truth, the origins of the Patrician cult at Armagh are very obscure, as is the early period of Armagh's rise to prominence.¹²³ What is clear is that Patrick had attained a special status of honour independent of Armagh by the early decades of the seventh century –

¹²¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 416–40.

¹²² Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigidae*, AAAS Feb. 1, § 2, col. 135B; translation adapted from S. Connolly and J.-M. Picard, 'Cogitosus's *Life of St Brigit*', *JRSAI*, 117 (1987), §§ 4, 6, pp. 11–12.

¹²³ R. Sharpe, 'St Patrick and the See of Armagh', *CMCS* 4 (1982), 33–59.

this much is evident in Cummian's reference to *sanctus Patricius papa noster* in his Paschal letter of the early 630s.¹²⁴ By the 640s, Armagh was taking a position of leadership within the Hibernian party. In the letter sent by the pope-elect John IV in response to a question from the heads of some Irish churches, Bishop Tomméne of Armagh headed the list of those addressed.¹²⁵ As Richard Sharpe has pointed out,

the Pope's address probably rests on no more than the fact that the bishop of Armagh placed his own signature at the head of the list on the original letter to Rome. ... The order of the addressees, therefore, cannot be treated as independent evidence, free from Armagh's own viewpoint.¹²⁶

The letter is not evidence that Rome recognised the status of Armagh as the head of the Irish Church, therefore. If, however, Tomméne was the first signatory of the letter sent to Rome, that suggests that Armagh had won some recognition for her status amongst the other churches of Ireland, especially if the letter, like an earlier letter from the 'Roman' party, had resulted from a synod or meeting of church leaders led by Armagh.¹²⁷

The earliest of Armagh's propaganda texts to survive is the *Liber Angeli*. Probably written in the third quarter of the seventh century,¹²⁸ it claims to record the words of an angel addressing St Patrick but is essentially a statement

¹²⁴ Cummian, *De controversia Paschali*, ed. and trans. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's letter De controversia Paschali and the De ratione computandi*, Studies and Texts 6 (Toronto, 1998), p. 84.

¹²⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii. 19.

¹²⁶ Sharpe, 'St Patrick and the See of Armagh', 49.

¹²⁷ C. Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick and the politics of Armagh in the seventh century', in J.-M. Picard (ed.), *Ireland and northern France, ad 600–850 / Irlande et France du Nord vii^e-ix^e siècles* (Dublin, 1991), pp., p. 69; R. Sharpe, 'Armagh and Rome in the seventh century', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter/Ireland and Europe: the early Church* (Stuttgart, 1984), p. 66.

¹²⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 440; Sharpe, 'Armagh and Rome', pp. 60–6.

and justification of Armagh's status as the head of the Irish Church. The angel said to Patrick:

Missit me summus omnipotens ad te, id est ad animi tui consolationem, post conversionem Hibernensium per te ad se in findem ... Ac deinde donavit tibi Dominus Deus universas Scotorum gentes in modum paruchiae et huic urbi tuae, quae cognominatur Scotorum lingua Ardd Machae. ... Item omnis aeclesia libera et ciuitas ab episcopali gradu quae uidetur esse fundata in tota Scotorum insola, et omnis ubique locus qui dominicus appellatur, iuxta clementiam almpotentis Domini sancto doctori et iuxta uerbum angueli in speciali societate Patricii pontificis atque heredis cathedrae eius Aird Machae esse debuerat quia donavit illi Deus totam insolam, ut supra diximus.

The Most High Almighty has sent me to you, that is, for the consolation of your spirit after the conversion of the men of Ireland to the faith in Him by you ... And further the Lord God has given all the *gentes* of the Irish as a *paruchia* to you and to this city, which is named in Irish *Ardd Machae*. ... Further, every free church and every city in Ireland which is seen to have been founded by a bishop, and every church anywhere that is called *domnach* ought – in accordance with the mercy of the kind and mighty Lord towards the holy teacher and with the word of the angel – to belong to the special *societas* of Bishop Patrick and the heir of his see in Armagh, for as we have already said, God gave him the whole island.¹²⁹

The *Liber Angeli* further claimed that Armagh was the chief arbitrator of ecclesiastical disputes in Ireland and that only if Armagh failed to resolve an issue would it be referred to Rome.¹³⁰ Armagh's claim, then, was that as the church of St Patrick, it was the ultimate ecclesiastical authority in Ireland and its authority extended over the entire island.

Tírechán repeated and expanded many of the claims of the *Liber Angeli*: Patrick, he claimed, had vanquished *gentilitas Hiberniae tota*, 'all paganism in Ireland', and as a result,

¹²⁹ *Liber Angeli*, ed. L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin, 1979), p. 184–85, 188–89, §§ 4, 8, 21. For the translation of the second part of this quotation, see R. Sharpe, 'Some problems concerning the organization of the church in early medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 254–5.

¹³⁰ Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick', pp. 69-70.

si quaereret heres Patricii paruchiam illius, potest pene totam insulam sibi reddere in paruchiam, quia Deus dedit illi i. totam insulam cum hominibus per anguelem Domini ii. et legem domini docuit illis iii. et bapuzismo Dei bapuzavit illos iiii. et crucem Christi indicavit u. et resurrectionem eius nuntiauit.

if an heir of Patrick were to investigate his *paruchia* he could vindicate for him almost the whole island as his *paruchia* because i) God gave him the whole island with its people through an angel of the Lord, ii) and he taught them the Law of the Lord, iii) and he baptized them with God's baptism, iiii) and made known to them the cross of Christ and, v) preached his resurrection.¹³¹

Similarly, for Muirchú, Patrick was the apostle of all Ireland who would judge *Hibernenses omnes* on the day of reckoning.¹³² As Marie Therese Flanagan commented, in Muirchú's presentation of Patrick's mission,

everyone on the island of Ireland belonged to a single *gens*. And there was but one baptiser, Patrick, the apostle of the *gens*, and that apostle, Patrick, was also the heavenly protector of the Irish, such that on the last day of judgment the Irish would be met at the gates of heaven, not by the apostle Peter, but by their own apostle, Patrick. Muirchú elaborated the notion of Patrick as the apostle of the Irish, but he also concomitantly promoted the notion of the Irish as a Christian nation.¹³³

The Christian Irish nation described by Muirchú and the other Armagh propagandists differed from that defined by the *Auraicept* and the Milesian legend. The linguistic theory of Irish nationality explicitly rejected the notion of common descent that was the essence of the Milesian genealogical shema, perhaps reflecting the origins of these concepts in different schools or even in different centres of power within Irish society. The Milesian definition more closely reflected the concerns of royal dynasties, including the 'discard segments' that remained powerful as aristocrats and church families and who would have wished to clarify their relationships with one another. The *Auraicept*, on the

¹³¹ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, ed. Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, pp. 130, 138–39, § 8.4, 18.2–4.

¹³² Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, II.4, p. 116.

¹³³ Flanagan, 'Strategies of distinction', pp. 106–7.

other hand, reflected the perspective of the learned classes, the *áes dána*, amongst whom it might have originated. Nonetheless, the boundary of the nations depicted by these divergent theories overlapped. They were, essentially, definitions of Gaelic identity and included within the entities they delineated the peoples of Gaelic speech and ancestry inhabiting Britain.

Armagh's theory of Irish identity was different. It disagreed with both the linguistic and the racial concepts by defining the borders of the nation in territorial terms. Ireland, not Gaeldom, had been the theatre of Patrick's mission, and Armagh's claims to authority extended only as far as the limits of the island. To reflect this fact, the frequent references to *Hibernenses* in these texts should be translated as 'men of Ireland'.

Muirchú and Tírechán added a new dimension to Armagh's self-promotion by linking their claims to those of the Uí Néill. 'Armagh, aware of the rising power of the Uí Néill, ... was in the best position to play the political game to her advantage in the seventh and subsequent centuries'.¹³⁴ Muirchú, as noted above, depicted Níall as the ancestor of the rulers of nearly all Ireland and described Tara as *caput Scottorum*. As Charles Doherty noted, by beginning Patrick's mission at Tara, Muirchú 'was firmly allying [Armagh] with the Uí Néill dynasty'.¹³⁵ Tírechán was perhaps even more forthright in linking the fortunes of the Patrician Church with those of the Uí Néill in Tara and asserting the authority of both over all Ireland.

As Catherine Swift has noted, Tírechán was very careful in his use of royal terminology, restricting his use of *rex* – at least when referring to historical as

¹³⁴ Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick', p. 71.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

opposed to supernatural figures – to Uí Néill kings.¹³⁶ His use of derivative terms reinforces this picture, for they too are used only in very restricted situations. Lóegaire mac Néill is the only person in the text said to reign (*regnare*), the Uí Néill assembly at Tailtiu is described as *agon regale*, ‘royal games’, and, ‘most interesting of all, there are only four references to a *regnum* or kingdom’.¹³⁷ These four are associated with Coirpre Nia Fer, a Laigin king of Tara said by Tírechán to have lived a hundred years before Patrick’s coming; Lóegaire, who was king of Tara at the time of Patrick’s mission; Conall Cremthainne, ancestor of Síol nÁeda Sláine and implied heir of Lóegaire; and, finally, Benignus, Patrick’s successor in Armagh and ‘heir to Patrick’s kingdom’.¹³⁸ Of these, only Conall and Benignus are said to have had successors, meaning theirs were the only *regna* still relevant at the time when Tírechán wrote. ‘In Tírechán’s wording, the lordship associated with the Uí Néill kingdom and the lordship associated with the community of Patrick appear as comparable institutions, for both are described as *regnum*, kingdom.’¹³⁹ Patrick’s *regnum* extended over the whole island of Ireland – *Hibernia tota* or *insola tota* in the quotations above – and the implication of Swift’s interpretation is that Tírechán asserted the right of the Uí Néill to exercise authority over the same area.

Tírechán’s expression finds a parallel in the early eighth-century *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*. The author, Stephen, referred to Wilfrid’s *regnum ecclesiarum*, ‘kingdom of churches’, and associated it explicitly with the kingdom of Northumbria under its king, Ecgfrith:

¹³⁶ C. Swift, ‘Tírechán’s motives in compiling the *Collectanea*: and alternative interpretation’, *Ériu* 45 (1994), 70–1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Sicut ergo Ecgfritho rege religiosissimi regnum ad aquilanem et austrum per triumphos augebatur, ita beatae memoriae Wilfritho episcopo ad austrum super Saxones et ad aquilonem super Brittones et Scottos Pictosque regnum ecclesiarum multiplicabatur.

Thus that most pious king, Ecgfrith, found his kingdom extending both north and south by his triumphs, while at the same time the kingdom of churches of Saint Wilfrid of blessed memory increased to the south among the Saxons and to the north among the British, the *Scotti* and the Picts.¹⁴⁰

Not only were the fates of these two *regna* inextricably entwined, but Stephen depicted the king and bishop ruling in unison: *Rex Ecgfrithus cum pontifice Dei iustus et sanctus regensque*, 'King Ecgfrith ruling with the bishop of God in righteousness and holiness'.¹⁴¹

Armagh's alliance with the Uí Néill worked not only because they had similar goals, but because they shared a common enemy. Muirchú undertook his composition at the behest of Bishop Áed mac Broccáin of Sletty (d.688). According to a brief tract in the *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh, during the abbacy of Ségéne of Armagh *adopart Áed a idacht 7 a chenél 7 a eclis du Pátricc cu bráth*, 'Áed granted his testament and his kindred and his church to Patrick forever'.¹⁴² This was symbolic of the process by which Armagh was gaining ground within Leinster at the expense of Kildare.¹⁴³ Sletty was the main church of the Uí Bairrche in central and southern Leinster. Powerful in the sixth century, by the end of the seventh the Uí Bairrche were coming under increasing pressure from the Uí Chennselaig and the Uí Dúnlainge, the latter of whom were

¹⁴⁰ Stephen, *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), § 21, pp. 42–3.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, § 20, pp. 42–3.

¹⁴² *Additamenta*, §16, 1–2, p. 178; F. J. Byrne, 'Varia III', *Ériu* 33 (1982), 169; *idem*, 'A note on Trim and Sletty', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 318–19; Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick', pp. 75–6.

¹⁴³ Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick', pp. 76–8.

supporting the claims of Kildare to metropolitan status.¹⁴⁴ The Uí Dúnlainge then, were enemies of Armagh. Moreover, as kings of north Leinster they were frequently also at odds with the Uí Néill. This rivalry was reflected in Tírechán's famous depiction of Lóegaire mac Néill's desire to be buried in the manner of the pagans, with his weapons in his hands facing his Uí Dúnlainge enemies.¹⁴⁵

Armagh had its own reasons for pursuing Irish unity in ecclesiastical affairs and was willing to hitch its fortunes to those of the Uí Néill, whose desire to unite the Irish nation under their political leadership was expressed in genealogical and linguistic terms at about the same time. Moreover, there was good scholarly reasoning behind the alignment of political with other forms of national unit. Isidore's conception of the *gens* in his *Etymologiae* as a biological or a linguistic unit has been mentioned above and in the Introduction, but elsewhere in his work the *gens* has a political, legal and constitutional character associated with kingdoms.

The constitutional connotations of *populus* in Roman texts and the importance of this understanding of the term for St Augustine have been discussed by J. Y. duQuesnay Adams.¹⁴⁶ Adams has also tracked Isidore's conflation of ideas regarding the constitutional unity implied by the term *populus* with the genetic and linguistic unity implied by the terms *gens* and *natio*.¹⁴⁷ So,

¹⁴⁴ *Idem*, 'The monastic town in early medieval Ireland', in H. B. Clarke and A. Simms (eds.), *The comparative history of urban origins in non-Roman Europe: Ireland, Wales, Denmark, Germany, Poland and Russia from the ninth to the thirteenth century*, BAR International series 255 (Oxford, 1985), pp. 60–3.

¹⁴⁵ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §12.2, p. 133.

¹⁴⁶ J. Y. duQuesnay Adams, *The populus of Augustine and Jerome: a study in the patristic sense of community* (London, 1971).

¹⁴⁷ *Idem*, 'The political grammar of Isidore of Seville', *Arts libéraux et philosophie au moyen âge*, Actes du quatrième congrès international de philosophie médiévale (Montréal, 1969), pp. 763–75.

for instance, while, on the one hand *populus est humanae multitudinis, iuris consensu et concordia communione sociatus*, “*populus*” is [used] of a human multitude associated by juridical consensus and a community of agreement’,¹⁴⁸ on the other it could be used synonymously with *gens* and *natio*: *cuius regionem olim Bessorum populus Massagetae, Sarmatae, Scythiae et aliae plurimae nationes incoluerunt; ampla est enim, ideoque plurimas continuit gentes*, ‘the region the *populus* of the Bessians once inhabited, as have the *Massagatae*, the *Sarmatae*, the *Scythiae* and many other *nationes*, for it is spacious and so has held many *gentes*’.¹⁴⁹ On one occasion, Isidore even links a *populus*, rather than a *gens*, with a language when he described one form of Latin as *Romana, quae post reges exactos a populo Romano coepta est*, ‘*Romana* is the language which after the expulsion of the kings was used by the Roman *populus*’.¹⁵⁰ In the *Etymologiae*, then, a *gens/natio/populus* was a group sharing ancestral, linguistic and constitutional identity. And an even higher authority could be cited as supporting the concept of parallel political, genealogical, linguistic and religious unity. As discussed in the Introduction, the image of Old Testament Israel was a formative influence on theories of nationality throughout the medieval West and, as Vincent Comerford concisely stated it, ‘if Israel had a king, why not Ireland?’¹⁵¹

From the late seventh century then, the Patrician Church, and Armagh in particular, pursued a policy of alliance with the dominant Uí Néill dynasties. Their mutual goal was to create a nation to match their aspirations for joint authority over the Irish, an authority expressed by Tírechán in terms of twin

¹⁴⁸ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 9.4.5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.4.6.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.1.7.

¹⁵¹ R. V. Comerford, *Ireland, Inventing the Nation* (London, 2003), p. 19.

regna ruled from Armagh and Tara. A *regnum*, a kingdom, in Susan Reynolds' words 'was never thought of merely as the territory which happened to be ruled by a king. It comprised a "people" (*gens, natio, populus*), which was assumed to be a natural, inherited community of tradition, law, custom and descent'.¹⁵² From the seventh century, scholars working on the behalf of the Uí Néill and for Armagh set about constructing a 'people' to match their political and ecclesiastical aspirations.¹⁵³ Those scholars working for the Uí Néill initially favoured a Gaelic identity defined in either linguistic or genetic terms, while Armagh focused on the territorial aspect of Irish identity. These theories clearly did not coincide neatly, though the structure of the Milesian genealogical scheme shows concern with the traditional territorial division of Ireland. The ambiguity regarding the extent of the Irish nation remained throughout the medieval period,¹⁵⁴ but an important episode in the evolution of the concept occurred in the third quarter of the ninth century.

In 858, the annals record that Máel Sechnaill mac Máile Rúanaid, the Clann Cholmáin king of Tara, led an army of *fir Érenn*, 'the men of Ireland', on a campaign into Munster.¹⁵⁵ The following year, the same sources tells us that there occurred *righdhal mathe Erenn oc Raith Aedho m. Bricc im Mael Sechnaill rig Temhra, 7 im Fethghna comurba Patraicc, 7 im Suairlech comurba Finnio, ic denum sidha 7 caincomraicc fer n-Erenn*, 'a royal conference of the nobles of Ireland at Ráith Aeda Meic Bric, including Máel Sechnaill, king of Tara, and

¹⁵² S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and communities in western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984), p. 250.

¹⁵³ For the importance of economic and political considerations in the construction of ethnic identities in the modern world, see Barth, 'Introduction', in *idem* (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries*, pp. 9–38.

¹⁵⁴ See Conclusion.

¹⁵⁵ *AU*, 858, Cf. *CS*.

Féthgna, *comarba Phátraic* ... to make peace and amity between the men of Ireland'.¹⁵⁶ When, three years later, Máel Sechnaill died, the same chronicle gave him the title *ri hÉirenn uile*, 'king of all Ireland'.¹⁵⁷

As Máire Herbert noted, this is the first appearance of the term *fir Éirenn* in the annals and its meaning is closely associated with the status of Máel Sechnaill.¹⁵⁸ Máel Sechnaill was a particularly powerful king of Tara who had his authority recognised throughout most of the island. The 859 *rígdal* witnessed what the annalists called the 'alienation' of Osraige to Leth Cuinn, meaning that it came under the direct authority of Máel Sechnaill rather than the king of Munster, a development to which the king of Munster consented. The breadth of Máel Sechnaill's authority was reflected in the record of a campaign he led into the north in 860 with an army that included the men of Leinster, Munster and Connacht as well as the Southern Uí Néill.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Máel Sechnaill apparently perceived his position in terms similar to those depicted in the annals, for he had the title *rí Éirenn* inscribed on high crosses in the Irish midlands.¹⁶⁰

Herbert has argued that Máel Sechnaill's reign witnessed a redefinition of Irish identity in territorial terms that was a new departure, 'a first step towards

¹⁵⁶ *AU*, 859. Cf. *CS*.

¹⁵⁷ *AU*, *CS*, 862.

¹⁵⁸ M. Herbert, 'Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban: kingship and identity in the ninth and tenth centuries', in S. Taylor (ed.), *Kings, clerics and chronicles in Scotland 500–1297: essays in honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday* (Dublin, 2000), p. 64, pp. 64–9.

¹⁵⁹ *AU*, *CS*, 860.

¹⁶⁰ L. de Paor, 'The high-crosses of Tech Theille (Tihilly), Kinitty and related sculpture', in E. Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past: studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dún Laoghaire, 1987), pp. 136–43; Herbert, 'Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban', p. 64.

the definition of a national kingship and a territorially-based Irish realm'.¹⁶¹ The incorporation of non-Gaels into Máel Sechnaill's following,¹⁶² she contended, precipitated the development of a new term to denote his political following. *Fir Érenn* represented 'an omnibus term for a diverse royal following':

association with the island of Ireland bonded a heterogeneous royal following, and geography supplanted genealogy as a common identifier. ... The island name ... evidently provided a geographical common denominator for a politically-defined grouping which transcended other affiliations'.¹⁶³

Thus Máel Sechnaill was the king of Ireland because he was the leader of the multi-ethnic army of the men of Ireland.

Perhaps, though, it would be preferable to read the introduction of the *fir Érenn* into the annals as the culmination of Armagh's influence on the claims of the Uí Néill. Armagh's role in the events of the 850s and 860s was significant. Féthgna, *comarba Phátraic*, was present at the *rígdál* in 859 and the alienation of Osraige to Leth Cuinn was accompanied by the payment of dues to Armagh by the king of Osraige, suggesting that the alienation asserted the joint claims of Máel Sechnaill and of Armagh over that southern kingdom. Over a decade later, in his obit, Féthgna was described in the annals as *caput religionis totius Hiberniae*, 'head of religion in all Ireland', a title corresponding to Máel Sechnaill's.¹⁶⁴ The Chronicle of Ireland, the source that lies behind all the extant annal collections down to the year 911, was being compiled during the ninth century either in Armagh¹⁶⁵ or, as seems more likely, in a church in Brega with

¹⁶¹ Herbert, 'Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban', p. 72.

¹⁶² See, for example, AU 865: *Cocadh mor eter gennti 7 Mael Sechlainn co n-Gall-Ghoidhelaib leis*. Cf. CS.

¹⁶³ Herbert, 'Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban', pp. 64–9.

¹⁶⁴ AU, CS, 874.

¹⁶⁵ G. Mac Niocaill, *The Medieval Irish Annals* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 21 – 4.

strong Armagh sympathies.¹⁶⁶ The events of Máel Sechnaill's reign were described through an Armagh lens, therefore, and 'the men of Ireland' had featured in Armagh sources since the seventh century. The *Liber Angeli*, Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* and Tírechán's *Collectanea* depict Patrick as the apostle of the *Hibernenses*, a term that should be translated as 'the men of Ireland' in order to coincide with Armagh's claims to authority over the island of Ireland. And when Tírechán had linked the *regna* of the successors of Patrick and of Conall Cremthainne, the implication was that the latter also exercised authority over the island of Ireland and the men of Ireland.

Máel Sechnaill's reign was certainly an important milestone on the road to the evolution of the concept of Irish political unity, for he attained a level of authority throughout the island that was rarely matched before the eleventh century, but the territorial definition of Irish identity that was linked to his kingship of Ireland was not a new departure. The foundations had been laid by the alliance of Armagh and the Uí Néill in the late seventh century. Moreover, although the Irish term *fir Éirenn* was new to the annals in the third quarter of the ninth century, it appeared in the Old Irish laws at least a century and a half earlier. The next chapter will argue that the ecclesiastico-political aspirations of the Uí Néill and Armagh might also have influenced those texts.

¹⁶⁶ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland* (Liverpool, 2006), pp. 7–14.

**LEX SCRIPTA AND RECHT AICNID: THE PRODUCTION OF WRITTEN LAW IN
EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND.**

In a country characterised by extreme political fragmentation, it seems remarkable that the Old Irish laws tracts claim national jurisdiction. Despite incorporating what may be signs of local variation in legal practice, these texts claim to describe a judicial system common to all territories and population groups in Ireland.¹ For example, in *Bretha Crólige*, a law tract concerning sick-maintenance, it is stated that *direnar do cach a lanamnus a béscnu inse Érenn*, ‘everyone is paid *dire* for his [marital] union according to the custom of the island of Ireland’.² *Corus Bésgnai* describes the pre-Christian legal system as *breithemnus indse hErend*, ‘the jurisprudence of the island of Ireland’,³ and the archaic poem in which Dubthach maccu Lugair gives his judgment in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már* claims that that law book records the law as it was established *la firu Érenn* ‘among the men of Ireland’.⁴

Despite the claims of Orpen and Warren that the nature of the Irish legal system demonstrated the absence of a sense of nationality in early medieval

¹ D. A. Binchy, ‘The linguistic and historical value of the Irish law tracts’, in D. Jenkins (ed), *Celtic law papers introductory to Welsh medieval law and government*, studies presented to the international commission for the history of representative and parliamentary institutions (Brussels, 1973; first published in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 29 (1943), 195–227), pp. 88, 93; L. Breatnach, ‘Law and literature in early mediaeval Ireland’, in *L’Irlanda e gli irlandesi nell’alto medioevo. Spoleto, 16-21 aprile 2009. Atti delle Settimane LVII* (Spoleto 2010), 217–8; Mac Cana, *The cult of the sacred centre*, pp. 283–87.

² *Bretha Crólige*, ed. D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* 12 (1938), 44, §57.

³ *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D. A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978) (hereafter *CIH*), 528.19. For the contribution of Binchy’s work to Irish legal studies see T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Review article: The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*’, *Studia Hibernica* 20 (1980), 141–44. Navigating the mass of material in *CIH* has been made significantly more manageable by the publication of Liam Breatnach’s *A companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 2005).

⁴ K. McCone, ‘Dubthach maccu Lugair and a matter of life and death in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*’, *Peritia* 5 (1986), 8, 30 (§ xx).

Ireland, and was designed to prevent such a concept arising,⁵ it is clear that, in the words of Thomas Charles-Edwards, the Old Irish law was one of the 'central pillars of Irish nationality in the seventh and eighth centuries'.⁶ To MacNeill, as to the author of *Corus Bésgnai*, the national status of the law was primeval. MacNeill drew attention to Caesar's account of the juridical role of the druids in ancient Gaul.⁷ The independent states of Gaul, it was alleged, would submit themselves to the jurisdiction of the annual convention of druids drawn from throughout the territory. The implication that there existed a sense of legal compatibility and hence of common identity was paralleled, MacNeill believed, amongst the Gauls' Celtic counterparts in pre-historic and early medieval Ireland. The existence of an Irish nation united in and by its adherence to a national law pre-dated both the conversion of the country to Christianity and the writing down of the laws. In politically fragmented Ireland and Gaul the jurists formed a 'common society' for the entire island and practiced the same law throughout.⁸ Attractive as aspects of this theory are, Thomas Charles-Edwards has recently highlighted the difficulties inherent in attempting to reconstruct the pre-Christian legal system with any accuracy and the 'native' element of medieval Irish law, in terms both of content and of personnel, is now a matter of considerable debate.⁹

The previous chapter argued that political motivation underscored the initial attempts to create a sense of Irish national identity as it was expressed in

⁵ Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, vol. 1, pp. 19–21, 26–7, 105; Warren, 'The interpretation of twelfth century Irish history', pp. 3–7.

⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', p. 30. See also MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions* (Dublin, 1935), pp. 74–82, 89–91, 96; Green, *Irish nationality*, pp. 14–19; Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', p. 7.

⁷ MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions*, p. 74–5, 81–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–96.

⁹ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish law', in D. Ó Cróinín (ed.) *A new history of Ireland 1: prehistoric and early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 350–51.

linguistic, genealogical and territorial terms in the seventh and eighth centuries. This chapter will suggest that a similar background may underlie the national status of Irish law. Many law tracts, including *Bretha Crólige*, repeatedly back up their claim regarding the legal unity of Ireland by stating that the law they describe was that which was practised *la Féniu*, ‘amongst the Féni’.¹⁰ From the context in which it is presented, it is apparent that this phrase is most often intended to be synonymous with *la firu hÉrenn*, ‘amongst the men of Ireland’, and it is generally understood and translated in these terms.

Certain law tracts, however, recognised the existence in Ireland of the three distinct *prímchenéla* mentioned in the ‘Saga of Fergus mac Léti’; the Féni, the Ulaid and the Laigin.¹¹ These tracts include *Bechbretha*,¹² *Bretha Nemed Dédenach*,¹³ *Cethairslicht Athgabálae*¹⁴ and *Din Techtugud*.¹⁵ The main distinction drawn in these texts is between the Féni and the Ulaid. Indeed Charles-Edwards and Kelly consider interest in the relationship between these two *cenéla* to be characteristic of the *Senchas Már* collection as a whole.¹⁶

In *Bechbretha*, a mid-seventh-century tract on bee-keeping, the law of the Ulaid is distinguished from that of the Féni.¹⁷ In this instance, both the Ulaid and the Féni are said to have passed the same judgment concerning an event that

¹⁰ *Bretha Crólige*, ed. Binchy, 6 (§1), 10 (§10), 12 (§§13, 14) *et passim*. Cf. R. Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: the performance of law in early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 194–95.

¹¹ T. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly (ed.) *Bechbretha*, early Irish law series volume 1 (Dublin, 1983), pp. 133–34.

¹² *CIH* 444.12–457.10; Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*.

¹³ *CIH* 1111.1–1132.40; E. J. Gwynn, ‘An Old Irish tract of the privileges and responsibilities of poets’, *Ériu* 13, part 1, 1–60, part 2, 220–36; Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 184–88.

¹⁴ *CIH* 352.2–422.36, especially 380.14ff.; Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 286–87.

¹⁵ *CIH* 205.22–213.37; Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 292.

¹⁶ *Bechbretha*, p. 133.

¹⁷ *Bechbretha*, § 33, p. 70.

occurred in the 630s, shortly before the composition of the text. The laws of these two *cenéla* were therefore distinct, though, at least concerning the matter under discussion in *Bechbretha*, identical in the middle of the seventh century. And if there were differences between the legal traditions of the Féni and the Ulaid, the leading case with which the tract *Din Techtugud* opens leaves the reader in no doubt as to the superiority of that of the Féni.¹⁸ In this story Sencha mac Ailella, legendary jurist of the Ulaid, makes a judgment that is deemed unjust and has, therefore, to be corrected by Bríg, legendary jurist of the Féni. The result of this action is that the law as it was recorded in *Din Techtugud* is said to be that established by Bríg, with the implication that the authority of the jurist of the Féni – and hence their legal tradition – was superior to that of the Ulaid.

The majority of the law tracts, then, present Irish law as common to all the men of Ireland. According to these texts the Féni, the men of Ireland, had a single law. Beneath this veneer of homogeneity, however, lurked the infrequent recognition of the presence in Ireland of peoples other than the Féni who possessed their own laws. And while none of the extant tracts recognise the existence of differences between the laws of the Féni and those of the Ulaid at the time of writing, *Din Techtugud* at least implies that such diversity might have existed in the past.¹⁹

If *Bechbretha* recognised the difference between the Féni and the Ulaid and stated that each of these *cenéla* had its own legal tradition, why are other law texts so insistent on the legal unity of Ireland? Perhaps we are justified in perceiving in the law tracts an attempt not to describe national law so much as to

¹⁸ *CIH* 209.12–13, 22–23.

¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', p. 30.

establish it where it had not existed before; to impose an image of homogeneity on a heterogeneous legal reality. By removing the distinction between the laws of the Ulaid and those of the Féni, by incorporating the Ulaid and the Laigin into the Féni in legal terms as was being done simultaneously in genealogical terms, the authors of these texts were consciously attempting to forge a single nation where one had not existed previously. This process was underscored with ideological and political aspirations, that were intended to promote the authority of the Uí Néill as leaders of a single, unified Irish nation. These features are comparable to a large extent with the ideological intentions that underlay the production of written law throughout Europe in the early medieval period and reflect the fact that this process was part of a European trend.

The centuries after the collapse of Roman imperial power in the West constitute, as Robin Chapman Stacey has called it, an 'Age of Law'.²⁰ This period witnessed the adoption of written laws by almost every barbarian kingdom in Western Europe. The Visigoths were the great pioneers in this field.²¹ Isidore of Seville attributed a law code to Euric (reigned 466–84),²² the fragmentary extant remnants of which appear to cite laws made by Euric's father, Theodoric I (419–51).²³ Euric's son, Alaric II is famous for the production of the *Breviarum* of

²⁰ R. Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech*, p. 177.

²¹ For what follows, see R. Collins, *Early medieval Spain: unity and diversity, 400–1000* (London/New York, 1983), pp. 24–30, and P. Wormald, *The making of English law: King Alfred to the twelfth century*, volume 1: legislation and its limits (Oxford, 1999), pp. 37–8.

²² Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi* 11 (Berlin, 1894), p. 281: *sub hoc rege Gothi legum instituta scriptis habere coeperunt. Nam antea tantum moribus et consuetudine tenebantur.*

²³ *Legem Codicis Euriciani Fragmenta*, ed. K. Zeumer, *Leges Visigothorum, MGH Leges nationum Germanicarum* 1 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1902), pp. 5, 16.

Roman law.²⁴ The Visigoths' primacy amongst barbarian legislators was reaffirmed during the seventh century with the production of the 'uniquely exhaustive' (at least amongst the Germanic kingdoms) and distinctly Roman-looking code, the *Forum Iudiciorum*, assembled by Kings Chindaswinth and Reccaswinth (642–72) and revised and extended by Erwig (681).²⁵ This text is famous not just because it legislates for such a broad swathe of social life, but because it was the Visigothic kingdom's first territorial law code.²⁶ It united two peoples, Romans and Visigoths, who had formerly lived under separate laws as a single legal entity, a single nation. Unlike in Ireland, where a similar process might have occurred, there is a relative abundance of source material for the previous existence of the separate laws of the Romans and the Visigoths living in Spain in the form of the extant law codes of Visigothic kings.

The Visigoths having established legal precedent, others soon followed suit. The earliest of the many extant recensions of the Frankish *Pactus Legis Salicae*²⁷ was possibly written during the reign of Childeric (457–81),²⁸ and certainly dates from prior to Clovis' elimination of the Visigothic kingdom of

²⁴ *Lex Romana Visigothorum*, ed. G. F. Haenel (Leipzig, 1949).

²⁵ *Forum Iudiciorum*, ed. Zeumer, *Leges Visigothorum*, pp. 35–456; Wormald, *Making English law*, p. 38; Collins, *Early medieval Spain*, pp. 122–28.

²⁶ P. D. King, 'King Chindasvind and the first territorial law-code of the Visigothic kingdom', in E. James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain, new approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 131–57; P. Wormald, 'The *leges barbarorum*: law and ethnicity in the post-Roman West', in Goetz *et al* (eds.), *Regna and gentes*, p. 37.

²⁷ *Pactus legis Salicae "C"*, ed. K. A. Eckhardt, *MGH LL nat. Germ.* 4.1 (Hannover, 1962), pp. 2–235.

²⁸ T. Charles-Edwards, 'Law in the western kingdoms between the fifth and the seventh century', in A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume 14, Late antiquity: empire and successors A.D. 425–600* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 271–75.

Toulouse in 507.²⁹ It has been argued that the effect of the promulgation of this law code was the 'drawing together [the king's] fighting men into a Frankish people'.³⁰ Later Frankish kings reissued *PLS* regularly, and although it was sometimes added to with decrees, the primary text was rarely changed to take account of these additions.³¹

About one hundred years after the composition of the first Frankish laws, at the dawn of the seventh century, the first Anglo-Saxon law code was written. This occurred during the reign of the first Anglo-Saxon king to convert to Christianity, Æthelberht of Kent, Clovis' great-grandson-in-law.³² Notwithstanding Bede's claim that Æthelbert drew upon *exempla Romanorum*, the inspiration and models for Æthelberht's code were almost certainly Frankish.³³ This code was supplemented by further examples from Æthelberht's successors in the kingship of Kent,³⁴ and one by the West Saxon king, Ine (688–726), before the end of the seventh century.³⁵

²⁹ I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian kingdoms, 450–751* (London/New York, 1994), pp. 108–13.

³⁰ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The long-haired kings and other studies in Frankish history* (London, 1962), p. 181; Wormald, 'Lex scripta', p. 35;

³¹ Wormald, 'The *leges barbarorum*', pp. 37–8; *idem*, *Making English law*, pp. 44–5.

³² *Law code of Aethelberht*, ed. F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols. (Halle, 1898–1916), vol. 1, pp. 3–8; L. Oliver, *The beginnings of English law*, Toronto medieval texts and translations (Toronto, 2002), pp. 60–81.

³³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.5: *iuxta exempla Romanorum*. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic kingship in England and on the continent: the Ford lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary term 1970* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 32–44; Wormald, *Making English law*, p. 29, 97–101.

³⁴ The codes of Hlothere and Eadric and of Wihtraed are edited by Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, at pp. 9–11 and 12–14, with German translations, and by Oliver, *The beginnings of English law*, at pp. 126–33 and 152–63, with English translations.

³⁵ *Law code of Ine*, ed. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, pp. 88–123; translated by D. Whitelock, *English historical documents, 500–1042* (London, 1955), pp. 398–407.

The earliest extant Irish laws date from within a few decades of the first Anglo-Saxon code. In fact, almost all the Irish law tracts appear to have been written, and the lawbooks in which they were collected to have been compiled during the century from c.650 to c.750, by the end of which period they had attained their canonical form.³⁶ After this the texts of these laws remained unchanged and rarely added to. The period of the writing of the law tracts overlapped to a large extent with what Michael Richter has called the 'long seventh century', during which communication between Ireland and the rest of Europe was particularly intense.³⁷ Irish *peregrini* were active throughout Britain and the continent and numerous overseas visitors came to Ireland in search of learning. Jocelyn Hillgarth has drawn particular attention to the intimacy that existed in relations between Ireland and Spain, home of the pre-eminent legislators in Europe, during this period.³⁸ As Robin Chapman Stacey put it, 'it is difficult to imagine that ideas about law would not have travelled along some of these same routes'.³⁹ It is essential, therefore, to consider the emergence of Irish law within the European context and to ask what 'ideas about the law' were imported into Ireland. Charlene Eska has recently highlighted how the varieties and forms of legal writing in Ireland display continental influence from the

For the development of English law in general, see Wormald, *Making English law*, pp. 93–106.

³⁶ Binchy, 'Linguistic and historical value', p. 82; Charles-Edwards, 'The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*', 154; *idem*, 'Early Irish law', p. 331. For a discussion of why the period of composition might have been so short, see *ibid.*, pp. 366–69.

³⁷ M. Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours in the seventh century* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 14, 234, 235.

³⁸ Hillgarth, 'Visigothic Spain and early Christian Ireland'; *eadem*, 'Ireland and Spain in the seventh century'.

³⁹ Stacey, *Dark Speech*, p. 177.

earliest period.⁴⁰ Further continental influence might be perceived in the ideological connotations associated with the production of written law.

According to Patrick Wormald, the crucial factor in determining the nature of a kingdom's written law was its Roman inheritance, and in this regard he believed there existed a clear distinction between the legal traditions of southern and northern Europe.⁴¹ The greater resilience of Roman legislative and governmental practices and structures in the kingdoms of the south, especially Lombard Italy and Visigothic Spain, ensured that these areas remained throughout Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages *pays du droit écrit*. Their kings issued individual laws in response to specific problems, codified this legislation and abolished former laws when they became outdated. Their codes, as exemplified by the *Forum Iudiciorum*, were wide-ranging, well organised and of practical use in the curial setting.

In the northern kingdoms, where Roman legislative influence was less durable, the process worked differently. There were, in Wormald's words, 'warts on the face' of the northern codes that were suggestive of a gulf between the law as written and the law as practised. Unlike their southern counterparts, the northern law codes are restricted in their coverage and very poorly organised. Their contents appear at times archaic and out of date and include obvious inaccuracies and linguistic absurdities. They are, moreover, contradictory in

⁴⁰ C. Eska, 'Varieties of early Irish legal literature and the *Cáin Lánamna* fragments', *Viator* 40, no. 1 (2009), 1–16.

⁴¹ Wormald, 'The *leges barbarorum*'. The seminal study was P. Wormald, '*Lex scripta and verbum Regis: legislation and Germanic kingship from Euric to Cnut*', in *idem* (ed.), *Legal culture in the early medieval West: law as text, image ad experience* (London/Rio Grande, 1999, first published in P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (eds), *Early medieval kingship* (Leeds, 1977), pp. 105–38). The ideas and arguments first aired in this article were later refined in a succession of articles before appearing in their most distilled form in *Making English law*, pp. 29–108.

places and show little evidence of having been updated when new laws were issued.⁴² The evidence suggests, rather, that old codes were continuously copied even after their contents had become outdated. Furthermore, Wormald saw no evidence that the extant codes were ever cited in the records of individual cases.⁴³ All told, there was, he believed, ‘remarkably little evidence for their application’.⁴⁴ This suggested to Wormald that the law in the north was still entirely customary and oral in practice until after the legal revolution of the twelfth century. In contrast to their southern neighbours, the kingdoms of northern Europe, the Franks and Anglo-Saxons for example, were *pays du droit coutumier*.⁴⁵

What the southern and northern law codes had in common, though, were the ideological aspirations they encapsulated, and these too had Roman origins. Bede’s statement that Æthelberht had been ‘following the examples of the Romans’ when he wrote the first Anglo-Saxon law code, is equally true of his counterparts amongst the other kingdoms of Europe.⁴⁶ Indeed, the adoption of a legislative role and the codification of law were aspects of ‘a consciously Romanizing policy’ pursued by barbarian kings in the former Roman provinces, a policy pursued at least partly on the advice of the kings’ Roman subjects.⁴⁷ By

⁴² Wormald, ‘*Lex scripta*’, p. 11–17; *Making English law*, pp. 44–5; ‘The *leges barbarorum*’, pp. 39–45.

⁴³ This point has been contested by R. McKitterick, ‘Some Carolingian law-books and their function’, in P. Linehan and B. Tierney (eds), *Authority and power: studies on medieval law and government presented to Walter Ullman on his seventieth birthday* (Cambridge and New York, 1980), pp. 22–25.

⁴⁴ Wormald, ‘*Lex scripta*’, p. 22–5 quoted at p. 22; *Making English law*, pp. 70–92.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, *Making English law*, p. 92.

⁴⁶ See above, note 33.

⁴⁷ Wormald, ‘The *leges barbarorum*’, p. 35; *idem*, ‘*Lex scripta*’, pp. 27–31; *idem*, *Making of English law*, pp. 37–8; Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-haired kings*, pp. 179–80; Collins, *Early medieval Spain*, pp. 24–30

assuming the mantle of legislator and codifier of law in emulation of the Roman emperors, a barbarian king augmented his authority and power and raised his prestige. Moreover, by adopting a written law, his people asserted their respectability, establishing their presence alongside the Romans amongst the civilised peoples.⁴⁸ A similar motivation might have inspired Irish canonists to insist that land transactions were confirmed not just by witnesses and sureties, but also by a written document *more Romanorum*.⁴⁹ This may refer, as Charles-Edwards believes, to the Roman party within the Irish Church.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it might, like Bede's reference to Æthelberht's Roman *exempla*, refer to contemporary *Romani* or sub-Romans of Gaul or other parts of the continent.⁵¹ In any case, it seems clear that the reference represents an attempt 'to introduce continental practice into the Irish law of contract', to bring Irish practice in this regard into closer conformity with the rest of Western Europe.⁵²

Rome was not the only source of inspiration for ideas about the prestige of written law in the early medieval period. Particularly, but not only, in areas where Roman influence was less pervasive, the Old Testament depiction of the Israelites proved a seductive image for Christian kings and their ecclesiastical advisors. It was no coincidence that the production of the earliest Frankish and Anglo-Saxon law codes coincided with the conversion of the kings with whom they are associated. 'Barbarian *lex scripta* could emulate Moses, could testify to

⁴⁸ Wormald, 'The *leges barbarorum*', pp. 32–33.

⁴⁹ Patrick II. xxx, ed. L. Bieler, *The Irish penitentials*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 5 (Dublin, 1963), p. 196; *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, ed. H. Wasserschleben (2nd edition, Leipzig 1885), p. 130.

⁵⁰ Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish law', p. 333.

⁵¹ See note 38 above.

⁵² K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources*, *The Sources of History: Studies in the Uses of Historical Evidence* (London, 1972), p. 76.

the new status of kings as Christian rulers, and could identify their subjects as another holy people like the Israelites.⁵³ In fact, Wormald believed, it was this image that proved central to the national identity of the English cultivated in the laws of King Alfred.⁵⁴

Given the religious connotations associated with the production of a people's written law, it is not surprising that the Church played a central role in the production and preservation of *lex scripta*. Indeed, it seems to have frequently been the 'ideological spur' behind the process.⁵⁵ The prologues of many extant codes, including that of Ine of Wessex,⁵⁶ testify to the participation of bishops in the codification process, and the promulgation of the Visigothic codes, including the *Forum Iudiciorum*, is associated with the series of Church councils held at Toledo during the seventh century.⁵⁷ In fact, Bishop Braulio of Saragossa was almost certainly responsible for compiling that text in the form in which it survives.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Church's interest in the production and preservation of *lex scripta* is evident from the role it played as possessor of the law. From his study of Frankish capitularies, François-Louis Ganshof argued that the legal force behind new laws came from the oral pronouncement of the king, the *verbum regis*, rather than the written document, which he believed was merely the record of the pronouncement kept by royal *missi* and deposited in the

⁵³ Wormald, 'Lex scripta', p. 32–3.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, *Making English law*, pp. 416–29. See also P. Wormald, 'Aethelred the lawmaker', in D. Hill (ed.), *Ethelred the Unready: papers from the millenary conference*, B.A.R. 59 (Oxford, 1978), p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, *Making English law*, pp. 64–70.

⁵⁶ *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* 1, ed. Liebermann, pp. 88–9.

⁵⁷ Collins, *Early medieval Spain*, pp. 108–29.

⁵⁸ C. H. Lynch, *Saint Braulio, bishop of Saragossa (631–651): his life and writings* (Washington, 1938), pp. 137–40.

churches to which they belonged.⁵⁹ Wormald noted a similar pattern in the manuscript tradition of the codes of primary law in northern Europe, in which they were often closely associated with religious texts. This, he argued, was evidence that they had been preserved, and indeed were probably written in the first instance, by clerics.⁶⁰

Moreover, 'the Mosaic example had a great deal to do with the developing conviction in early medieval Europe that every people should have its own *lex*'.⁶¹ This belief found full expression in the granting of laws to their subject peoples by Merovingian kings of the Franks like Chlothar II in the seventh century,⁶² and in Regino of Prum's famous statement that: *diversae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere moribus lingua legibus*, 'the various nations differ in descent, customs, language and law'.⁶³

A story surviving in *Sanas Cormaic* suggests that a similar perception existed in tenth-century Ireland.⁶⁴ This text contains numerous vignettes telling of the origins of certain words and phrases in the Irish language. One of these is the story of the coming of the first lapdog to Ireland.⁶⁵ According to this

⁵⁹ F. L. Ganshof, 'Recherches sur les capitulaires', *Revue historique de Droit français et étranger*, série 4, 35 (1957), 33–87, 196–246.

⁶⁰ Wormald, 'Lex scripta', pp. 20, 36; *Making English law*, pp. 58–63.

⁶¹ *Idem*, 'Lex scripta', p. 33. See also, Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, pp. 197–220.

⁶² Wormald, 'The leges barbarorum', pp. 40–1;

⁶³ *Epistola Reginonis ad Hathonem Archiepiscopum Missa*, ed. F. Kurze, *Reginonis Abbatis Prumiensis Chronicon*, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum* (Hannover, 1890), p. xx.

⁶⁴ P. Russell, 'The sounds of silence: the growth of Cormac's Glossary', *CMCS* 15 (1988), 1–30.

⁶⁵ *Sanas Cormaic*, ed. K. Meyer in O. J. Bergin, R. I. Best, K. Meyer and J. G. O'Keefe (eds.), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* 4 (Halle/Dublin, 1912), § 883, pp. 75–6; W. Stokes, 'On the Bodleian fragment of Cormac's Glossary', *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1901), 164–66. See also the Early Irish Glossaries Database for diplomatic editions of the four extant versions (<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/>)

legend the Irish once held great power over the Britons such that they, the Irish, had divided the island of Britain amongst themselves. There were lapdogs in Britain at the time but not in Ireland and the Britons, presumably out of spite for having had their country conquered, had commanded that none were to be given to the Irish. The king of Ireland, Coirpre Músc, was visiting Britain when he was invited to a feast hosted by one of the Britons. His host happened to own a beautiful lapdog. Coirpre, desiring the dog, decided to acquire it by stealth. Coirpre was aware that *is hi trá cáin roboí ind inbaid sin la Bretnu: cech bibdu inna chinaid*, ‘at that time the Britons had a law: every criminal for his crime’. Coirpre rubbed grease on the handle of a precious knife and laid it on the floor, with the consequence that the dog gnawed on it throughout the feast leaving it tarnished. When Coirpre complained of the offence in the morning his host offered to compensate him, but Coirpre rejected his offer, saying *ní gebsa ... acht hi fil hi cáin Bretan .i. cach bibdu ina chinaid*, ‘I will only take ... what is in the law of the Britons: every criminal for his crime’.

The specific detail upon which the story hangs is that there was a *cáin Bretan*, ‘law of the Britons’, or as it was also put *la Bretnu*, ‘among the Britons’, echoing in the second case the frequent reference to the law *la Féniu* in Irish law tracts.⁶⁶ The terminology in *Sanas Cormaic* betrays a worldview in which legal variation is perceived in distinctly ethno-centric terms. And although dating to more than two centuries later than the early law tracts like *Bechbretha*, this view is perhaps not entirely irrelevant to the distinction made in that text between the legal traditions of the Féni and the Ulaid.

irishglossaries/concordances.php?main=8&cpFamily=sc&display=fulltext&ref=502#502).

⁶⁶ See above, p. 97, note 10.

Another feature of the manuscript tradition of European law codes identified by Wormald as highlighting their ideological importance, apart from their association with religious texts, is the tendency for legal material to survive in manuscripts primarily concerned with historical texts or royal propaganda, a common feature of the manuscript traditions of Anglo-Saxon and of Frankish laws. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill was the first to note that the contents of Germanic law codes legislated for only a small fraction of social life and could not, therefore, have been intended as full accounts of customary law. The inspiration for producing these snippets, he suggested, was 'to satisfy royal pride in legislation', and as such it was their existence as books that mattered most.⁶⁷ 'First and foremost', he claimed, they represented 'a form of kingly literature'.⁶⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, to find them accompanied by other forms of literature, both historical and royal. In the earliest manuscript in which it survives, Alfred's lawbook is bound with the Parker version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In the late-tenth century both texts were copied from this manuscript and appended to a translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Two collections of Frankish legal texts contain Einhard's *Life* of Charlemagne, and the preface to the *Edictus Rothari* contains not only a king-list, but also an account of the origins of the Lombards and their entry into Italy that alludes to the entry of the people of Israel into the Promised Land.⁶⁹ The association of these materials would

⁶⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic kingship*, pp. 36–46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ *Edictus Rothari* ed. F. Bluhme, *Leges Langobardorum*, MGH LL 4 (Hannover, 1968), *Prologus*, pp. 1–2; Wormald, 'Lex scripta', pp. 19–20, 34–6; *idem*, *Making English law*, pp. 58–63; Charles-Edwards, 'Law in the western kingdoms', p. 263.

suggest that, like accounts of its origins and its past, 'a people's *lex* could develop symbolic significance'.⁷⁰

The symbolic significance of law codes was connected, in part, to their historical nature as records of the ancient customs of the people. The law codes of northern Europe were 'vehicles of tradition' intended to encapsulate the law according to which those who produced them believed their predecessors had lived.⁷¹ The *Lex Salica*, for example, was legitimised as the law of the pre-conversion Franks from east of the Rhine, thereby maintaining its association with the ancestors of those who conquered Gaul.⁷² 'The *lex* of the Franks was *more* than Frankish law. It was the Frankish past. It was Frankish identity.'⁷³ It was for this reason, because it represented a distillation of Frankish identity, not because of its use in the practice of law, that it was copied almost unchanged for centuries. A similar sentiment undoubtedly underlay the decision of King Alfred of Wessex to append the laws of his predecessor, Ine, to his own law,⁷⁴ and Rothari's claim to have established his code *per subtilem inquisitionem de antiquas legis Langobardorum*, 'through careful investigation of the ancient laws of the Lombards'.⁷⁵ Written law extant from the northern kingdoms of Europe is, therefore,

⁷⁰ Wormald, '*Lex scripta*', p. 37.

⁷¹ *Idem*, '*The leges barbarorum*', pp. 32–33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 33; *idem*, *Making English law*, pp. 42–5. The prologue in which these claims are made was first affixed to the *Pactus Legis Salicae* for the C recension which dates, according to Eckhardt, to the late sixth century (Eckhardt, *Pactus Legis Salicae*, p. xl). It was possibly composed during the reign of Childebert II and its message of Frankish unity might relate to the fractured politics of that period, for which see E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 174–81.

⁷³ Wormald, *Making English law*, p. 49.

⁷⁴ *Law code of Ine*, ed. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, pp. 88–123

⁷⁵ *Edictus Rothari* ed. Bluhme, *Leges Langobardorum*, § 386, p. 89.

direct evidence for the image which Germanic kings and their advisers, Roman or clerical, wished to project of themselves and their people as heirs to the Roman emperors, as counterparts to the children of Israel, or as bound together in respect for the traditions of the tribal past.⁷⁶

Wormald's beliefs regarding how law codes were applied or 'used' was challenged from several quarters, including Rosalind McKitterick,⁷⁷ Dafydd Jenkins,⁷⁸ Robin Chapman Stacey⁷⁹ and, most recently, Alice Rio.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, his theory regarding the ideological connotations of written law is a potent one and may be of particular relevance to the question of the production of Old Irish law.

Many of the aspects of Germanic legislation identified by Wormald as 'warts' have long been recognised as features of the Irish law tracts. Texts of the *Bretha Nemed* school in particular are so laden with rhetoric that they are almost impenetrable in places.⁸¹ Some of their provisions are contradictory, including numerous passages relating to the legal capacity of women.⁸² Others are so formalistic as to defy belief—the listing of the possessions of the members of the

⁷⁶ Wormald, '*Lex scripta*', p. 38.

⁷⁷ McKitterick, 'Some Carolingian law-books', pp. 22–25; *eadem*, *The Carolingians and the written word* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 23–75.

⁷⁸ D. Jenkins, 'The medieval Welsh idea of law', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 49 (1981), 343–48.

⁷⁹ R. C. Stacey, 'Law and order in the very old west: England and Ireland in the early Middle Ages', in B. Hudson and V. Ziegler (eds), *Crossed paths: methodological approaches to the Celtic aspect of the European Middle Ages* (London, 1991), pp. 39–60.

⁸⁰ A. Rio, *Legal practice and the written word in the early Middle Ages, Frankish formulae, c. 500–1000* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 198–211.

⁸¹ Stacey, *Dark Speech*, pp. 100–102; D. A. Binchy, '*Bretha Nemed*', *Ériu* 17 (1955), 4–6; L. Breatnach, 'Canon law and secular law in early Ireland: the significance of *Bretha Nemed*', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 439–59; *idem*, 'The first third of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*', *Ériu* 40 (1989), 1–40.

⁸² D. A. Binchy, 'The legal capacity of women in regard to contracts', in R. Thurneysen, N. Power, M. Dillon, K. Mulchrone, D. A. Binchy, A. Knoch and J. Ryan, *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin, 1936), pp. 207–34.

various social grades in *Críth Gablach*, for example.⁸³ Even at the time of writing, the texts of the laws incorporated legal and linguistic archaisms.⁸⁴ Moreover, the act of writing the laws fossilised them and what Binchy called the ‘myth of immutability’ prevented later jurists from amending them to reflect social change. Over time, therefore, the laws became further detached from reality, as Binchy discussed in the case of sick maintenance.⁸⁵ This process may have begun very soon after the initial composition and compilation took place. Thurneysen suggested, on the basis that those responsible for the apparently eighth-century glossing of *Senchas Már* evidently found some parts of the text incomprehensible, that their work ‘can never have had any significance for the practical administration of the law’.⁸⁶ Yet the process of copying, annotating and studying the texts continued for centuries.

The Irish lawbooks, like the northern Germanic codes, were apparently never intended merely as a record of the law as practiced. That the nature of the Irish laws differs considerably from that of the Germanic kingdoms, however, has meant that this feature has never constituted the same problem for Irish historians as was raised by Wallace-Hadrill’s and Wormald’s insights into other European legal traditions. Irish law has never been considered to represent royal legislation like that of the Franks or Anglo-Saxons. Instead, it is recognised as the

⁸³ *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy, MMIS, vol. 11 (Dublin, 1941) pp. 5–6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2, l. 47: *Int othrus, ní fil indiu isind aimsir seo.*

⁸⁵ D. A. Binchy, ‘Ancient Irish law’, *The Irish jurist* 1, no. 1 (1966), 84–92; *idem*, ‘Linguistic and legal archaisms in the Celtic law-books’, *CLP*, pp. 109–120 (originally published in the *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1959), 14–24); *idem*, ‘Sick-maintenance in Irish law’, *Ériu* 12 (1934–38), 78–134.; R. Chapman Stacey, *The Road to judgment: from custom to court in medieval Ireland and Wales* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 16.

⁸⁶ R. Thurneysen, ‘Celtic law’, in D. Jenkins (ed.), *Celtic law papers* (originally published, in German, as ‘Das keltische recht’, *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 55 (1935), 81–104), p. 63.

product of a professional class of jurists whose role it was to act as both guardians and practitioners of the law.⁸⁷ Explanations of the apparent distance from reality at which the written Irish law existed have therefore been sought in terms of the role of these jurists rather than the aspirations, legislative or otherwise, of kings.

The jurists were high status professionals and regulated their own occupation through the operation of schools. The law tracts and law books were the textbooks of these schools;⁸⁸ intended to be the objects of study and instruction rather than reference books for use in the curial setting. The traditional explanation of the detached nature of the legal texts has been the conservatism of the legal profession, whose interest in maintaining the status quo, and their own exalted position within it, induced them to make the laws inaccessible to outsiders. See, for example, Proinsias Mac Cana's comments that 'the Irish legal system was stubborn and conservative, its position in Irish society solidly buttressed by time-old usage'.⁸⁹

The inadequacy of this explanation has recently been highlighted by Robin Chapman Stacey, who has offered a compelling reinterpretation of the nature of the texts heavily influenced by anthropological studies of law in traditional societies. The Irish lawbooks, she believes, and possibly their Anglo-

⁸⁷ This is the traditional understanding of the law books: Thurneysen, 'Celtic law'; Binchy, 'Linguistic and historical value'; *idem*, 'Ancient Irish law', 84–92.

⁸⁸ Contrary to this, see D. N. Dumville, 'Review of *Progress in medieval Irish studies*', *Peritia* 11 (1997), 457.

⁸⁹ P. Mac Cana, 'The three languages and the three laws', *Studia Celtica* 5 (1970), 70. See also *idem*, 'Early Irish ideology', pp. 57–8: 'The conservatism of early Ireland is a commonplace of historical commentary. ... Like extreme conservatism anywhere, the conservatism of the druids and *filí* (the fraternity of poet-seers and savants associated with the druids) discouraged change and innovation'.

Saxon and continental counterparts, were intended to convey the ‘principles and priorities that lay behind the process of justice’; a loose framework within which the social relationships that bound society together could be maintained rather than exact guidelines to be followed on a case-by-case basis.⁹⁰ This is a convincing argument, and represents a considerable breakthrough in the study of early Irish law. Despite the ‘warts on the face’ of Irish and Germanic laws, she suggests, they were all intended to be ‘used’, just not in the way that is generally understood.

This interpretation has found echoes in recent work by Alice Rio, whose study of Frankish formularies suggested to her that ‘written law was understood more as a guide to be customised than as a rule to be enforced’.⁹¹ It is also compatible with the belief that the writing of law incorporated an ideological element. Anglo-Saxon law, Stacey believes, was written with the same priorities as its Irish counterpart: to teach the principles rather than the letter of the law. Yet she also recognised that Anglo-Saxon law, particularly the Alfredian code, incorporated an important ideological element, as outlined by Wormald.⁹² Nor were the Irish lawbooks entirely free from ideological objectives. The archaisms of the laws were not included solely to illustrate principles, she suggested. The jurists who composed the tracts

were, as befits intellectuals and historians, as interested in archaic legal practices as they were in contemporary ones. They frequently juxtaposed the old and the new in a manner that suggests that their real priority was not so much to illuminate contemporary practice as to lend it a patina of historical legitimacy to which it could not aspire on its own.⁹³

⁹⁰ R. C. Stacey, ‘Law and order in the *very old west*’, pp. 44–8.

⁹¹ Rio, *Legal practice and the written word*, p. 207.

⁹² Stacey, ‘Law and order in the *very old west*’, pp. 42, 48–51.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Legitimising the contents of the law tracts was not the only purpose for which the jurists maintained their interest in the archaic, especially not in those instances where the contents of the law tracts were of little relevance to actual legal practice. As in the case of the Frankish laws discussed by Wormald, this convention was part of the process of distilling the traditions of the Irish, which itself was part of the greater process of 'nationalising' the law and 'legalising' the nation. Hence the justification of the legal system with reference to the past as found in the original prologue to the *Senchas Már*:

*Senchas fer n-Ereinn, cid conid-roiter? Comchuimne da sen, ti[n]dnacul cluaise di araili, dichetal filed, tormach o recht litre, nertad fri recht aicnid.*⁹⁴

The *Senchas* of the men of Ireland, what has established it? The joint memory of two ancients, its recounting from one ear to another, the chanting of *filid*, its augmentation from the law of scripture (*recht litre*), its strengthening from the law of nature.

This parallels the claim of the shorter prologue to the *Lex Salica*, which may date from as early as the 590s, that it too had its roots in the ancient, pre-Christian past:

Placuit atque convenit inter Francos atque eorum proceribus, ut pro seruandum inter se pacis studium omnia incrementa rixarum reseccare deberent, et quia ceteris gentibus iuxta se positis fortitudinis brachio prominebant, ita etiam eos legali auctoritate prae-cellerent, ... Extiterunt igitur inter eos electi de pluribus uiri quattuor his nominibus: Uuisogastus, Arogastus et Uuidogastus in villas quae ultra Rhenum sunt ... qui per tres mallos convenientes omnes causarum origines sollicite discutientes de singulis iudicium decreverunt.

It has been accepted and agreed among the Franks and their leaders that for the sake of keeping peace among themselves, all intensification of disputes should be curtailed, so that just as they stand out amongst their neighbours for the strength of their arm, so they may also excel them in authority of law, ... Hence, there came forward among them, chosen from many, four men by name Wisogast, Arogast, Salegast and Widogast in settlements beyond the Rhine ... who, assembling in three courts and

⁹⁴ R. Thurneysen, 'Aus dem irischen Recht IV', *ZCP* 16 (1927), 175.

carefully debating the origins of contentions/cases, gave judgement on each.⁹⁵

A similar desire to maintain a connection with the past lies behind the copying of the Irish law tracts without modification for centuries after they were first written down. Like the copying of the *Lex Salica* long after aspects had been superseded and like Alfred's decision to append Ine's law code to his own despite the contradictions that existed between the two, this preserved an unbroken link with the past, justifying not only the contents of the laws or the status of the jurists, but also the national tradition it encapsulated. Like the *Lex Salica*, to which were appended numerous capitularies over the following centuries, Alfred-Ine became the base to which later English kings added further decrees.

Written law represented more than just legal tradition.⁹⁶ It was also a form of literature and as such part of a greater entity; the broad range of traditional lore including genealogy, history, myth and much else besides that was known collectively as *senchas*.⁹⁷ The very name of the greatest of the Irish lawbooks, the *Senchas Már*, 'The Great Tradition', makes such a connection explicit and with this understanding in mind, the introduction to the *Senchas Már* quoted above takes on further connotations. That compilation did not just claim to record the law, but to represent a link with the oldest Irish traditions.

⁹⁵ *Pactis legis Salicae "C"*, Prol., ed. K. A. Eckhardt, MGH LL nationum Germanicarum 4,1 (Hannover, 1962), pp. 2–3; Wormald, *Making English law*, pp. 39–40; *idem*, 'The *leges barbarorum*', p. 28; Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, pp. 108–13. Cf. *Liber historiae Francorum* 4, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 2 (Hannover, 1888), p. 244.

⁹⁶ For a recent and thorough discussion of the relationship between law and literature in early medieval Ireland, see Breatnach, 'Law and literature in early mediaeval Ireland', 215–38.

⁹⁷ Byrne, '*Senchas*;', pp. 137–59.

There existed no hard and fast barriers between the different genres that made up *senchas*, and legal texts were also, therefore, literary and historical documents.⁹⁸ The jurists who wrote the law-texts were part of a ‘mandarin caste’ that also included historians and poets, and each may have held claim to more than one of these titles.⁹⁹ So much is evident in the overlap between genres and between characters. Modern scholars explain events in sagas and saints’ Lives with reference to law texts,¹⁰⁰ and *Sencha mac Ailella*, legendary judge of the Ulaid, features in both the laws and *Táin Bó Cúailgne*.¹⁰¹ In fact, the ‘Saga of Fergus mac Léti’ is just one of several legendary stories incorporated into the text of the law tracts.¹⁰² Those other seventh-century texts that propounded a national identity for the men of Ireland; *Auraicept na nÉces* and *Énna Labraid* were also, it should not be forgotten, the products of this tradition.

The connection between the legal tradition and other elements of *senchas* is also apparent from the extant manuscripts of the laws, for despite all the talk of Irish lawbooks and law schools, the law tracts are almost never found in isolation from other *senchas* material. As Liam Breatnach has discussed, in many manuscripts in which legal material is extant, it is far outweighed by non-legal

⁹⁸ Stacey, *Road to judgment*, p. 22.

⁹⁹ D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and A. Breen, ‘The laws of the Irish’, *Peritia* 3 (1984), 394.

¹⁰⁰ F. Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin, 1988), p. 2.

¹⁰¹ For a good example of how modern historians can use different genres of *senchas* to assist our understanding of the law, see Stacey, *Road to judgment*, pp. 92–3 and 98–111, where she draws upon the pseudo-historical poem on the relationship between the Airgialla and the Uí Néill to help elucidate the difference between different forms of hostage-suretyship.

¹⁰² *CIH* 882.4–883.22. Cf. ‘Finn and the man in the tree’, ed. K. Meyer, *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904), 344; *CIH* 879.23–880.22.

texts, and even those manuscripts which are predominantly legal in content are not exclusively so.¹⁰³

Only a tiny portion of legal material is extant from the period prior to the establishment of the later law schools from the thirteenth century onwards. This consists of two tracts, *Gúbretha Caratniad*, ‘The false judgments of Caratnia’, and *Cóic Conara Fugill*, ‘The five paths to judgement’.¹⁰⁴ These are found in Rawlinson B 502, an early twelfth-century manuscript that was possibly produced in the monastery of Glendalough.¹⁰⁵ Its ecclesiastical origins are reflected in the contents of the manuscript, that include *Amra Choluim Chille*, the genealogies of saints and *Saltair na Rann*, but it also contains *senchas* material such as *Orcuin Néill Noígiallaig*, *Gein Branduib mac Echach 7 Aedáin mac Gabráin*, the great genealogical collection that is based on *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and pseudo-historical lists of the kings of Ireland.¹⁰⁶ Even in the period of the later law schools, however, lawyers’ books—as opposed, to lawbooks—‘are not confined to legal matter; their general education and interests cover a much wider field’.¹⁰⁷

That the interests of the scribes responsible for Rawlinson B 502 included religious and other material reflects the close relationship between secular and ecclesiastical learning in early medieval Ireland, particularly in the field of law. The most hotly contested issue concerning Old Irish law over recent decades has

¹⁰³ Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 233–34, 262.

¹⁰⁵ See P. Ó Riain, ‘The Book of Glendalough: a continuing investigation’, *ZCP* 56 (2008), 71–88, for the latest statement of the case regarding this manuscript.

¹⁰⁶ B. Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian library at Oxford and Oxford college libraries*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 2001–03), vol. 1, pp. 163–200.

¹⁰⁷ W. O’Sullivan, ‘The Book of Domhnall Ó Duibhdábhoireann, provenance and codicology’, *Celtica* 23 (1999), 282–83.

been the degree of ecclesiastical influence on the origins of the law schools and the content of the law tracts.¹⁰⁸ In 1980 Thomas Charles-Edwards argued for the existence of secular law schools in seventh-century Ireland on the basis that education was available to non-monastic churchmen and even apparently to laymen and that the intended readership of the laws was probably not entirely ecclesiastical.¹⁰⁹ Since then, it has become increasingly apparent that the jurists who were responsible for large parts, if not all, of the extant corpus of Irish law were familiar with biblical, canonical and other ecclesiastical sources.¹¹⁰ Liam Breatnach has convincingly argued for ecclesiastical authorship of several texts as well as demonstrating the ability of churchmen to compose archaic looking *roscada*, a genre previously believed to reflect oral, pre-Christian origins.¹¹¹ On the basis of this and other evidence, Ó Corráin argued that

there is no reason to doubt that the law tracts, in Latin and in the vernacular, are the work of a single class of learned men who were as well versed in scripture as in the legal lore of their ancestors and founded their laws on a conscious and sophisticated compromise between the two.¹¹²

In Breatnach's opinion, the writing of the vernacular law in general 'was under the direction of the church.'¹¹³ The evidence is far from certain regarding this

¹⁰⁸ For arguments in favour of the existence of secular law schools independent of the Church, see Binchy, 'Linguistic and historical value', p. 84–6, 95–7; Charles-Edwards, 'The *Corpus iuris Hibernici*'. For those against, see any of the works cited by Liam Breatnach, especially, 'The ecclesiastical element in the Old Irish legal tract *Cáin Fhuithirbe*', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 36–52.

¹⁰⁹ Charles-Edwards, 'The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*', pp. 144–62.

¹¹⁰ D. Ó Corráin, 'Irish law and canon law', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds), *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter, Ireland and Europe: the early Church* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 157–66; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 382–438; Breatnach, 'Canon law and secular law in early Ireland', 439–59.

¹¹¹ *Idem*, 'Canon law and secular law in early Ireland', 439–59; *idem*, 'The ecclesiastical element', 36–52.

¹¹² Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'Laws of the Irish', 412.

¹¹³ Breatnach, 'The ecclesiastical element', 52.

point, however, and Charles-Edwards maintains his belief that the context within which the vernacular laws were written down was the overlap between two separate legal traditions rather than as an offshoot of a single ecclesiastical tradition.¹¹⁴ What is relatively certain is that the judges with the highest status were those who were experts in the ‘three laws’, that is the laws of the laity, the poets and the Church.¹¹⁵

The earliest securely datable historical introduction to a law tract is that in *Cáin Fhuithirbe*, which was composed and written between 678 and 683.¹¹⁶ Like the ‘genuine’ introduction to the *Senchas Már*, which may be half a century younger, it speaks of a compromise between two legal traditions while clearly being a clerical composition. Likewise *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, which was apparently composed by a trio of kinsmen, one of whom was a judge, another a poet and the third a bishop.¹¹⁷ The *Bretha Nemed* collection to which it belongs was apparently the production of ‘a mixed school of poetry and law, or rather a school in which *filidecht* still included law and “history” as well as poetry’,¹¹⁸ and many of its associate texts, including *Bretha Nemed déidenach* with which it forms ‘greater’ *Bretha Nemed*, are particularly concerned with the status and privileges of poets in society.¹¹⁹ Yet *Bretha Nemed Toísech* is also an ecclesiastical

¹¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, ‘Early Irish law’, pp. 360–69.

¹¹⁵ Mac Cana, ‘The three languages’; L. Breatnach, ‘Lawyers in early Ireland’, in D. Hogan and W. N. Osborough (eds), *Brehons, serjeants and attorneys: studies in the history of the Irish legal profession* (Blackrock, 1990), p. 7.

¹¹⁶ D. A. Binchy, ‘The date and provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*’, *Ériu* 18 (1958), 53; Breatnach, ‘The ecclesiastical element’, 42–52.

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, ‘Canon law and secular law’.

¹¹⁸ Binchy, ‘*Bretha Nemed*’, 5.

¹¹⁹ E. J. Gwynn, ‘An Old Irish tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets’, *Ériu* 13 (1942), 1–60, 220–36.

text, the first third of which is almost entirely concerned with the place of the Church in society and which includes translations of canon law.¹²⁰

The overall picture is one of cooperation and compromise between the two traditions but in which the Church had the final say in determining the form the laws took when they were put down on parchment. As the clerical author of *Cáin Fhuithirbe* described the process, a double assembly of ecclesiastics and laymen met to establish the law in what may have been a tempestuous affair, but the Church had the final say regarding what was recorded: *ro dilsiged la dub in dícubus*, 'that which is contrary to conscience has been made forfeit by ink'.¹²¹ It is tempting to see the whole process of the production of *lex scripta* in Ireland in these terms, with the Church having the final say in the form the laws took after a process of compromise between the two traditions. How the Church achieved this is not easy to explain, but one possibility is that it involved collaborating with Irish kings, particularly those of the Uí Néill.

That the ecclesiastical establishment in Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, was concerned with the promotion of the authority of Christian kings has been suggested by Donnchadh Ó Corráin on the basis of evidence from the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* and the early eighth-century *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*.¹²² The *Hibernensis* in particular lays a heavy emphasis on the judicial responsibilities of kings.¹²³ Ó Corráin has also demonstrated that the leading ecclesiastical families were 'drawn mainly and

¹²⁰ Breatnach, 'Canon law and secular law'.

¹²¹ *Idem*, 'The ecclesiastical element', 40–4. Prior to this (42) the composer says he is grateful for God's protection as he prepares to go 'under the tempest', *fon anfuth*, which he explains as a 'double assembly', *dedáil*. The councils at which Visigothic law was promulgated might also be called 'double assemblies'.

¹²² Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', p. 16–17.

¹²³ *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, pp. 76–82.

constantly recruited from the less successful segments of ruling houses', a fact that might have augmented the Church's support for Irish kings.¹²⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, prominent elements within the Irish Church had an interest in promoting the unity of the men of Ireland. This desire for unity might have impacted upon the compilation of canon law. The *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* can be dated by the names of those said to have been involved in its compilation, Ruben of Dairinis (a monastery on the Blackwater River, near Youghal in Munster), who died in 725, and Cú Chuimne of Iona, who died in 747.¹²⁵ These men were from communities at, respectively, the southernmost and northernmost ends of the Irish world and their collection drew upon the decisions of synods held by both the 'Roman' and 'Hibernian' parties within the Irish Church. It has been suggested on this basis that their work represents an attempt to re-establish the unity of the Irish Church, and particularly its legal system, after the deep divisions that characterised its history for much of the seventh century.¹²⁶

While it is hardly controversial to suggest that the ecclesiastical establishment in Ireland promoted strong Christian kingship, to suggest a role for kings in the production of written law in Ireland is to run counter to the traditional perception of the process as essentially non-royal.¹²⁷ This is the basis of the supposed difference between Irish law and that of the rest of Europe

¹²⁴ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 84; *idem*, 'Nationality and kinship', pp. 14–16, 18–19.

¹²⁵ R. Thurneysen, 'Zur irischen Kanonensammlung', *ZCP* 6 (1908), 1–5.

¹²⁶ Stacey, *Dark speech*, p. 179; B. Jaski, 'Cú Chuimne, Ruben and the compilation of the *Collectio canonum hibernensis*', *Peritia* 14 (2000), 60–3; Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish law', p. 349.

¹²⁷ Binchy, 'Linguistic and historical value', 93; Kelly, *Guide*, p. 21.

during this period.¹²⁸ As Stacey points out, the difference in the terminology used to describe the laws of the Irish and their Germanic contemporaries – Irish laws are written in ‘tracts’ or ‘books’, not ‘codes’ – underlines the fundamental differences in the nature of the sources perceived by scholars.¹²⁹ Indeed, the non-royal status of Irish law has often been perceived as prohibiting any royal participation in the provision of justice. Counter to the beliefs of MacNeill¹³⁰ and of Thurneysen,¹³¹ Binchy argued that the king had little or no role in the judicial process and this view attained widespread acceptance.¹³² Wilfred Lewis Warren even considered the law to have been intended to prevent the emergence of a strong monarchy. He considered the religious sanctioning of the laws as presented in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már* to have been designed to prevent kings from attaining legislative power.¹³³

More recently, the role of the king in the provision of justice has been revised. It is now recognised that Irish kings had a role in enforcing the law and in passing judgment.¹³⁴ According to the *Airecht*-text on court procedure¹³⁵ and *Gúbretha Caratniad*, ‘the false-judgments of Caratnia’,¹³⁶ the judgments of a judge had to be made in the presence of a king who had the authority to overturn or

¹²⁸ For a clearer discussion of the differences between the nature of these legal traditions than is usually provided, see Charles-Edwards, ‘Early Irish law’, pp. 341–42.

¹²⁹ Stacey, ‘Law and order’, p. 45.

¹³⁰ MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions*, pp. 97–9.

¹³¹ Thurneysen, ‘Celtic law’, pp. 68–9.

¹³² D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship* (Oxford, 1970), p. 16. Cf. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, pp. 20–4; Mac Cana, ‘The three languages’, p. 78; J. F. Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland* (Dublin, 1972), p. 15.

¹³³ Warren, ‘The interpretation of twelfth century Irish history’, pp. 3–7.

¹³⁴ Kelly, *Guide*, pp. 22–5; M. Gerriets, ‘The king as judge in early Ireland’, *Celtica* 20 (1988), 29–52.

¹³⁵ F. Kelly, ‘An Old Irish text on court procedure’, *Peritia* 5 (1986), 74–106.

¹³⁶ R. Thurneysen, ‘Aus dem irischen Recht II: Die falschen Urtheilssprüche Caratnia’s’, *ZCP* 15 (1925), 302–70.

confirm the decision. Robin Chapman Stacey has detected the hint of royal propaganda in one of the texts composed in the poetico-legal *Bretha Nemed* school. 'Uraicecht Becc's confident assertion that the "king of Munster is chief over kings"', she noted, 'might suggest that the question of royal image was not entirely irrelevant even to this tract's composition.'¹³⁷ More fundamentally, Stacey believes that there is evidence for the emergence of a 'curial perspective' in these and other law tracts, a desire to enhance the role of the king's court in the legal process. This 'curializing' tendency, she suggests, was largely an attempt on the part of the professional jurists to consolidate their authority and their status in society.¹³⁸ It was also, however, a sign of developing royal authority:

[T]he elaboration of curial procedure might be linked to the consolidation of kingship that is so marked a feature of the seventh and eighth centuries in Ireland. An increasing interest in channelling disputes into assemblies presided over by a king or his representative is certainly a phenomenon familiar to historians of England or continental traditions as a symptom of consolidating royal power. ... The possible appeal of a Roman or continental-style judicial assembly to the rulers of, for example, the Uí Néill or the Uí Briúin, both of whom were dramatically increasing the extent and depth of their rule in this period, ought not to be overlooked.¹³⁹

With specific reference to the Uí Néill in the seventh century, Catherine Swift has demonstrated how Tírechán's depiction of Lóegaire mac Néill's authority to make a judgment regarding the inheritance of dynasts from Connacht 'credits the Uí Néill kingdom with jurisdiction over the entire width of Ireland'.¹⁴⁰

As the role of Irish kings in the provision of justice has gained greater recognition in recent decades, the royal status of the earliest Germanic codes has

¹³⁷ Stacey, *The Road to judgment*, p. 13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 112–40, 146–57.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–36.

¹⁴⁰ Swift, 'Tírechán's motives', 73–4.

been revised.¹⁴¹ The earliest Anglo-Saxon law-code, although ascribed to Æthelberht by Bede, by his successors and by modern historians, actually bears no contemporary prologue or any other means of identifying who was responsible for its composition or promulgation.¹⁴² Furthermore, although the earliest recension of the *Lex Salica* has been ascribed to Clovis there is nothing royal about the text itself, which contains no ascription whatsoever.¹⁴³ When a prologue was added to the text, possibly in the 590s, it claimed that the composition was the work of four *electi*, 'chosen men'.¹⁴⁴ The longer prologue, which 'almost certainly' dates from the reign of King Pippin in the 760s, credits Clovis and his successors with amending the original law, but the *electi*, now called *rectores* are still described as the primary authors.¹⁴⁵ Even by the reign of Pippin, then, 'Frankish law was *barely* royal'.¹⁴⁶ Among the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks, then, it would appear that royal legislation was a later development not initially associated with the origins of their earliest law codes.

Ireland too seems to have witnessed innovation in the realm of royal legislation in the late seventh century. *Críth Gablach*, a law tract written c.700, is primarily concerned with issues of status.¹⁴⁷ It also contains a lengthy digression on the rights and responsibilities of kings and their peoples.¹⁴⁸ This latter section

¹⁴¹ Wormald, '*Lex scripta*', pp. 3–6.

¹⁴² *Idem*, *Making English law*, p. 93–101.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40; *idem*, '*The leges barbarorum*', p. 28; Wood, *The Merovingian kingdoms*, pp. 108–13.

¹⁴⁴ Above, pp. 115–16.

¹⁴⁵ *Lex Salica* "D/E", Prol., ed. Eckhardt, MGH LL nationum Germanicarum 4,2 (Hannover, 1969), pp. 4–5; Wormald, '*The leges barbarorum*', p. 29.

¹⁴⁶ Wormald, *Making English law*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁷ T. M. Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach* and the law of status', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 53–73.

¹⁴⁸ *Idem*, 'A contract between king and people in early medieval Ireland? *Críth Gablach* on kingship', *Peritia* 8 (1994), 107–19.

claims that there were certain exactions that a king might justifiably enforce upon his *túatha*, one of which was to gather for an *óenach*, a word usually translated as ‘fair’ or ‘assembly’.¹⁴⁹ At an *óenach*, the text continues, a king could pledge certain things upon his *túatha*, that is, he could take pledges, items of value, from the heads of kindreds to guarantee their compliance with certain instructions. The use of the plural noun *túatha* throughout most of this section of the text implies that we are dealing here with the rights and duties of overkings whose authority extended across more than a single *túath*. One of the things such a king could pledge upon his *túatha* at an *óenach* was what *Críth Gablach* calls a *rechtge*:

Ataat dano cetheoir rechtgi gellas rí fora thúatha. Cateat? Rechtge fénechais cétamus – it túatha dodegúiset, is rí nodedlútha; na teoir rechtgai aili is rí dodeimmairg: rechtgae iar cath do madmmaim forru co rodlútha a thúatha iarom arná ’mmacomba doib ocus rechtgae iar nduinebad; 7 rechtgae ríg amail rongab rechtgae ríg Caisil la Mumain. Ar ataat teoir rechtgai ata chórai do ríg do giull for a thúatha: rechtge do indarbbu echtarchinúil .i. fri Saxanu, 7 rechtge fri tuar toraid, 7 recht crettme adannai, amail rongab recht Adamnáin.¹⁵⁰

There are four *rechtgi* that a king pledges upon his *túatha*. What are they? The *rechtge fénechais* first – *túatha* adopt it, it pertains to a king to confirm it. The other three *rechtgi* are enforced by a king: a *rechtge* after a battle has been won against them, so that he then brings together his *túatha* that there be no mutual fighting among them; and a *rechtge* after a plague; and the king’s *rechtge* such as the *rechtge* of the king of *Cashel* among the Munstermen. There are three *rechtgi* which are right for a king to pledge upon his *túatha*: a *rechtge* to repel a foreign race, that is, against the English, and a *rechtge* to bring in the harvest, and a *rechtge* of faith which kindles (piety), such as *Recht Adomnán*.

¹⁴⁹ *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy, MMIS 11 (Dublin, 1979), ll. 502–08. Cf. ll. 277–82.

¹⁵⁰ *Críth Gablach*, ll. 514–524. What follows is heavily influenced by Charles-Edwards, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, Quiggin pamphlets on the sources of medieval Gaelic history 4 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 43–59. See also Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 559–69; Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 191–202.

A *rechtge*, then, was a royal edict. In the special case of the *rechtge fénechais*, presumably a *rechtge* concerned with the ancient legal tradition, his *túatha* might adopt the *rechtge*, but it was still the king's authority that confirmed and enforced it.¹⁵¹

The final example of the *rechtge ríge*, 'the king's *rechtge*', cited in *Críth Gablach* was *Recht Adamnáin*, 'The law of Adomnán', otherwise known as *Cáin Adomnáin* or *Lex innocentium*, the three titles illustrating the close relationship between the terms *recht*, *cáin* and *lex*. The promulgation of *Cáin Adamnáin* was recorded in the annals in 697.¹⁵² This marked the opening of a period of a century and a half during which the promulgation of a series of *cánai* was recorded in the annals, some being promulgated for individual provinces, others for the entire island of Ireland. All the examples of *cánai* recorded in the annals are in some way associated with the Church; that is not to say that they were ecclesiastical in their content or in terms of their jurisdiction, merely that all were either promulgated by churchmen, often in conjunction with kings, or were designated as being the *cáin* 'of' a saint or churchman.¹⁵³ *Cáin Adomnáin* cited above is one such example, others being *Cáin Phátraic* enacted in 737 and the *Leges* of Cíarán and of Bréannann promulgated in 744.¹⁵⁴

The evidence of the annals agrees with that of *Críth Gablach* that the *óenach* was an occasion for the promulgation of *rechtgai* or *cánai*. In both 788 and 814, for example, *Lex Ciarani* was promulgated at Crúachain, known to have

¹⁵¹ F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), p. 31.

¹⁵² *AU*, 697: *Adomnanus ad Hiberniam pergit 7 dedit Legem Innocentium populis*.

¹⁵³ Charles-Edwards, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, p. 53.

¹⁵⁴ *AU*, 737, 744; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 564.

been the site of an annual *óenach*.¹⁵⁵ These *óenaige* could be combined with an ecclesiastical assembly or synod to form a double assembly of the sort described in *Cáin Fhuithirbe*, particularly when an ecclesiastical *cáin* was to be promulgated.¹⁵⁶ But *óenaige* were not the only occasions on which *rechtgai* were promulgated. The evidence regarding *Cáin Adomnáin* suggests that the occasion on which it was given ‘to the peoples’ in 697 was a *rígdál*, a royal meeting, or perhaps a *rígdál* combined with a synod in another form of double assembly. The 737 *rígdál* between Áed Allán, king of Tara, and Cathal mac Finnguini, king of Munster, at Terryglass was probably the occasion for the promulgation of *Cáin Phátraic*, or at least its extension over all Ireland.¹⁵⁷ And the *rígdál* between Máel Sechnaill mac Maíle Ruanaid, the Clann Cholmáin king of Tara, and Matudán mac Muiredaig, king of the Ulaid, at Armagh in 851 also included the *samad*, ‘association’, of Patrick and the clergy of Mide, suggesting another double assembly took place.¹⁵⁸

In his detailed study of the *cánai*, Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested a distinction between ‘an all-Ireland *cáin* [that] was promulgated at what was sometimes called a *rígdál*, a meeting between kings’, and provincial *cánai* that ‘were promulgated at an *óenach*’.¹⁵⁹ Charles-Edwards went on to refine this picture, but the distinction will suffice for the current discussion. As he demonstrated, when a *cáin* was promoted on an all-Ireland basis, the king of Tara was ‘probably always a sponsor’ as Loingsech mac Óengussa had been for

¹⁵⁵ *AU*, 783, 814.

¹⁵⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 280–81.

¹⁵⁷ *AU*, 737; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 279–81, 564.

¹⁵⁸ *AU*, 851.

¹⁵⁹ *Idem*, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, p. 50; *idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 559–69.

Cáin Adomnáin in 697. Loingsech of course, was one of the kings to Tara to gain recognition as king of Ireland, in both the annals and in the contemporary, or near contemporary guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin*.¹⁶⁰

As *Críth Gablach* testifies, not all *cánai* were ecclesiastical. They were royal decrees dependent upon the power of secular rulers to enforce them. It was by harnessing royal authority that the Church secured the promulgation of ecclesiastical *cánai*.¹⁶¹ In return, secular lords received part of the fines paid by those who transgressed the *cáin*.¹⁶² In a seminal work, Daniel Binchy contrasted the role of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kings, especially with reference to their role in the legal process. Regarding Celtic, and specifically early medieval Irish kingship, he stated that

nowhere is the absence of executive government more conspicuous than in the domain of law. ... Comparative legal history shows that the first step on the road to the public administration of justice was taken when the state (normally represented by the king) received a certain proportion of the penalty in return for enforcing an arbitral or judicial degree. This stage has not yet been reached in an Irish *tuath* as pictured in the law tracts.¹⁶³

Yet, not only did kings receive a portion of the penalty for transgressing *cánai*, but according to the tract *Recholl Breth* that is part of the *Senchas Már, ní rí lasná biat géill i nglasaib, doná tabarr cís flatha, doná éirenetar féich cána*, 'he is not a king who does not have hostages in fetters, to whom no sovereign's tribute is given, to whom are not paid the fines of *cánai*'.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ AU 703; M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* 697', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 180, 196–7.

¹⁶¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 280–81.

¹⁶² Stacey, *Road to judgment*, pp. 94–5.

¹⁶³ D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, O'Donnell Lectures (Oxford, 1970), p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ *CIH* 1910.10–13, normalised by Breatnach, 'The king in the Old Irish law text *Senchas Már*', p. 113.

The promulgation of ecclesiastical *cánai* therefore ‘secured, as one of its effects, an enhancement of royal power’.¹⁶⁵ Note, for instance, how the emergence of Connacht as a political power on the Irish scene in the early ninth century under the leadership of Muirgius mac Tommaltaig and with considerable support from the Church, led to the promulgation of numerous *cánai* in Connacht and even to the promulgation of the *cáin* of a Connacht saint amongst the Uí Néill and amongst the Munstermen.¹⁶⁶ In many ways this royal legislation was not unlike the synodal pronouncements and capitulary-style legislation of early Frankish and Anglo-Saxon kings, as Robin Chapman Stacey has recently noted. The popularity of these examples of what she considers ‘royal lawmaking’, if not its advent altogether, should be connected, she believes, with the arrival in Ireland of Roman and European models of kingship and justice.¹⁶⁷ Charles-Edwards also discussed the possibility that the earliest Irish *cánai* were modelled on the written decrees of seventh-century Frankish and Visigothic councils.¹⁶⁸

Irish jurists distinguished *cáin* law from the traditional law such as that contained in the *Senchas Már*,¹⁶⁹ ‘the most important collection of Old Irish law-texts’.¹⁷⁰ It has become standard to say, following Thurneysen, that the *Senchas Már* was composed in the early eighth century and may belong to the ‘same spurt

¹⁶⁵ Charles-Edwards, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, p. 57–8; *idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 569–85.

¹⁶⁶ P. Ó Riain, ‘A misunderstood annal: a hitherto unnoticed *cáin*’, *Celtica* 21 (1990), 561–66; F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp. 251–52.

¹⁶⁷ R. Chapman Stacey, *Dark speech*, p. 174.

¹⁶⁸ Charles-Edwards, ‘Early Irish law’, pp. 335–36.

¹⁶⁹ *Bretha Crólige*, ed. Binchy, p. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Kelly, *Guide*, p. 242.

of compilatory activity' as the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*.¹⁷¹ Some of the individual tracts that were incorporated into the *Senchas Már* were certainly older than that, however.¹⁷² The national status of this traditional law was sanctioned, as Charles-Edwards points out, by the 'invocation of St Patrick's authority to confirm the validity of a single native law in a Christian Ireland'.¹⁷³ This Patrician legend has been described as 'a recurrent theme'¹⁷⁴ and 'essential', in the *Senchas Már*.¹⁷⁵ It appears in numerous tracts belonging to this compilation, including *Di Astud Chirt 7 Dligid* and *Bretha im Gatta*.¹⁷⁶ Amongst the original constituent tracts of the *Senchas Már*, the fullest version of the legend belongs to *Córus Bésnai*:

Rachta cach racht. Is a sund conarrachta in da recht. Recht aicnig robai la firu Erind co tiachtain creitme i naimsir Laegaire mic Neil. Is a naimsir-side tanic Patraic; is iar credem do feraib Erend do Patraicc coneirgedtha in da recht racht aicnig 7 racht litre. Doairfet Dubtach mac Ua Lugair in file racht naicnig. Is e Dubthach cetatarat airmitan feid do Patraic. Is e cetaneracht riam i Temair. Corc mac Lugdach cetaroslecht. Do bai side a ngiall la Laegaire. ... Roraide Dubthach mac ua Lugair in fili bretha fer nErend a racht aicnid 7 a racht faide. Arofallnastar faidsine a racht aicnid i mbreithemnus indse hErend 7 ina filedaib. Dotoircechnatar didhu faide leo donicfa berla ban biaid .i. recht litre. Ata mara a recht aicnid rosiachtatar nad rocht racht litre. Doairfein, didu, Dubtach do Patraic. Ni na tudcaid fri breithir nDe a racht litre 7 cuibse na creisen conairiged a nord mbretheman la heclais 7 filida. Robo coir racht acnid uile acht cretem 7 a coir 7 comuaim necalsa fri tuaithe.

Each law is bound. It is on this occasion that the two laws have been bound together. (It was) natural law that was with the men of Ireland until the coming of the faith in the time of Lóegaire mac Néill. It is in his time that Patrick came. It is after the men of Ireland believed in Patrick that the two

¹⁷¹ R. Thurneysen, 'Aus dem irischen Recht IV', *ZCP* 16 (1926), 186–7; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 385. Binchy also dated the *Senchas Már* to the first quarter of the eighth century: 'Linguistic and legal archaisms', 112–13.

¹⁷² Thurneysen, 'Celtic law', p. 56; Binchy, 'Linguistic and historical value', p. 86.

¹⁷³ Charles-Edwards, 'The making of the nations', p. 30.

¹⁷⁴ Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 313.

¹⁷⁵ Stacey, *Dark Speech*, p. 197.

¹⁷⁶ Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 313; *idem.*, 'Law and literature', 125–27.

laws were harmonized, natural law and the law of scripture. Dubthach maccu Lugair the poet displayed the law of nature. It is Dubthach who first paid respect to Patrick. It is he [Dubthach] who first rose before him [Patrick] in Tara. It is Corc mac Luigdach who first bowed before him. He was in hostageship with Lóegaire. ... Dubthach maccu Lugair the poet recounted the judgments of the men of Ireland according to the law of nature and the law of the seers (prophets?). For prophetic inspiration in the law of nature had ruled the jurisprudence of the island of Ireland and in her poets. Prophets among them, then, had foretold that the white language of the *beati* would come, namely the law of scripture. There are many things covered in the law of nature that have reached what the law of scripture has not reached. Dubthach, then, showed (this) to Patrick. That which did not conflict with the word of God in the law of scripture and the conscience of Christians has been fastened in the judicial order by church and poets. All of the law of nature was right except for (the claims of) faith and its entitlement and the joining of church to secular society.¹⁷⁷

The claim of the original prologue to the *Senchas Már* that Irish law was founded on a combination of the laws of the pagan Irish handed down orally and the laws of the Christian faith is here fleshed out. The process is set in a specific temporal and geographic setting and the *dramatis personae*, including St Patrick, Lóegaire mac Néill, Dubthach maccu Lugair and Corc mac Luigdach are introduced.

These details were further embellished at a slightly later date in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már* (PHP). As it is found in PHP, the story commences in the aftermath of Patrick's victory over Loegaire's druids: *asrochongrad iarom ó Loegaire formna fer nErenn do thudecht i n-oenmagin fri hoentaid n-immacallma im chórus a mbéscnai 7 a rechtgai. Docuas uadib co Pátraic co tudchised don dáil*, 'then the best of the men of Ireland were commanded by Loegaire to assemble for a conference regarding the proper ordering of their usages and laws. A message was sent by them to Patrick, that he

¹⁷⁷ *CIH* 527.14–529.4; McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 21–22; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 386; Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 313.

should come to the assembly'.¹⁷⁸ When asked by Loegaire, the men of Ireland claim that what is most difficult to accept of the new religion, at least as far as legal matters are concerned, is Christianity's insistence on forgiveness. To test Patrick's attachment to this concept, they decided to murder one of his followers. This angers the saint, who summons an earthquake. Loegaire and his followers remind Patrick that he has preached a message of forgiveness and ask him to make a judgment on the matter. Patrick refuses and instead calls upon Dubthach maccu Lugair, *rígfíled insi Érenn* 'royal poet of the island of Ireland', to make the judgment for him.¹⁷⁹ With the help of the Holy Spirit, Dubthach recites a poem in which he outlines his decision.¹⁸⁰ The poem is an 'ecclesiastical composition through and through'¹⁸¹ that contains a 'sophisticated justification of capital punishment' based on a complex theological argument that draws skilfully on patristic literature.¹⁸² It contains a settlement that appeases both those who wish to see the guilty party punished and those who subscribe to the Christian thesis of forgiveness. The murderer is to be killed for his crime, but his soul is to be granted access to heaven.

After the judgment, the men of Ireland spoke up:

'Recmait a les,' oldat fir Érenn, 'sudigud 7 ordugud cach rechta lind, cid cenmothá aní-seo.' 'Is ferr,' ol Pátraic, 'a dénam.' Is and sin trá tarcomlad cach oes dána la hÉrind co tairfen cách a cheird fiad Pátraic ar bélaib cacha flatha la hÉrind. Is ann ro herbad do Dubthach taisbéad breithemnusa 7 uile filidechta Érenn 7 nach rechta ro fallnasat la firu Érenn i recht aicnid 7 i

¹⁷⁸ J. Carey, 'An edition of the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Ériu* 45 (1994), § 1.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 17.

¹⁸⁰ For Dubthach's judgment, see McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 6–8 (translation), 29–30 (text).

¹⁸¹ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'Laws of the Irish', 387.

¹⁸² D. Bracken, 'Immortality and capital punishment: patristic concepts in Irish law', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 167–86, at 169.

recht fáide, i mbrethaib indse Érenn 7 i filedaib doaircechnatar donicfad béltra mbán mbiait .i. recht litre. Ar in Spirit Naem ro labrastar 7 doaircechain tria ginu na fer fíréon ceta-rabatar i n-inis Érenn amail donaircechain tria ginu inna prímfáide 7 inna n-uasalaithre i recht petarlaice; ar rosiacht recht aicnid már nád roacht recht litre. Ina bretha fíraicnid trá didiu ro labrastar in Spirit Naem tre ginu breithemon 7 filed fíréon fer nÉrenn ó congbad in insi-seo co cretem anall, dosairfen Dubthach uili do Pátraic. Ní didiu nád tudchaid fri bréthir nDé i recht litre 7 núfiadnaise 7 fri cuibse na crésion, conairged i n-ord brethemnachta la Pátraic 7 ecailsi 7 flaithi Érenn do neoch. Roba dír recht aicnid uile inge cretem 7 a cóir 7 a comuaim n-eclaise fri tuaith. Conid é Senchus Már in sin.

...

Nónbur trá doérglas dond ordugud-sin .i. Pátraic 7 Benignus 7 Cairnech, trí epscoip; Loegaire mac Néill rí Hérenn 7 Dáire rí Ulad 7 Corc mac Lugdach rí Muman, trí rí; Dubthach maccu Lugair 7 Fergus fili 7 Ros mac Trechim suí bérla Féne. ... Is í trá in chain Pátraic. Iss ed nád cumaic nach breithem doennae do Gaedelaib do thaithbiuch, nach ní fogaba i Senchas Már.

And then the men of Ireland said, 'It is needful for us to establish and arrange all our laws, as well as this matter.' 'It is better to do it,' said Patrick. Then all the people of skill in Ireland were convened, so that each exhibited his skill to Patrick, in the presence of all the princes in Ireland. Then it was entrusted to Dubthach to exhibit judgement, and all the poetry of Ireland, and every law which had held sway among the men of Ireland, in the law of nature and the law of the prophets, in the judgements of the island of Ireland and among the poets who had prophesied that the white language of the Beati would come, i.e. the law of scripture. For the Holy Spirit spoke and prophesied through the mouths of the righteous men who were first in the island of Ireland, as He prophesied through the mouths of the chief prophets and patriarchs in the law of the Old Testament; for the law of nature reached many things which the law of scripture did not reach. As for the judgements of true nature which the Holy Spirit uttered through the mouths of the righteous judges and poets of the men of Ireland, from the time when this island was settled until the coming of the faith: Dubthach revealed them all to Patrick. Whatever did not go against God's word in the law of scripture and in the New Testament, or against the consciences of the faithful, was fixed in the system of judgement by Patrick and the churches and the princes of Ireland. The whole law of nature was acceptable, save (in what concerns) the faith, and its proper dues, and the knitting together of church and kingdom. So that that is the *Senchas Már*.

...

Nine men were chosen to arrange [the laws]: Patrick and Benignus and Cairnech, three bishops; Loegaire mac Néill king of Ireland, Dáire king of the Ulaid and Corc mac Luigdech king of Munster, three kings; Dubthach maccu Lugair, Fergus *file* and Ros mac Trechim the sage in *bérla Féne*. ...

This, then, is *cáin Pátraic*. No human judge of the Gaels can undo anything which he may find in the *Senchas Már*.¹⁸³

The theory of law expressed in these retellings of the legend of the origins of the *Senchas Már*, like the introduction to the *Forum Iudiciorum*¹⁸⁴ and the preface to the Bavarian laws,¹⁸⁵ displays the influence of Isidore's *Etymologiae*. Isidore's reflections lacked consistency in places as he struggled to handle his terminology and definitions, but elements of them have close echoes in the Irish text. According to Isidore, *ius*, human law, as opposed to *fas*, divine law, is made up of *leges* and *mores*.¹⁸⁶ So the legal system of the pre-Christian Irish is said to comprise of *rechtgai* and *bésgnai*. *Ius naturale*, is said by Isidore to be the law that is not kept by any written *constitutio*.¹⁸⁷ Again, the distinction is reflected in *Córus Bésgnai* and PHP where *recht aicnid* is specifically depicted as oral and non-literary. In Isidore's theory, *ius naturale* corresponds closely with *consuetudo*, which he depicts as *ius* established by *mores* of ancient usage, *longa consuetudo*, in contrast to *lex*, which he derives from *legere*, and which is written law.¹⁸⁸ The Patrician legend's contrast between the ancient usage of Ireland and the written law of scripture is closely related to this theory. Perhaps most importantly, Isidore claims that, concerning topics where written law, *lex*, is lacking unwritten *consuetudo* can take its place (*pro lege suscipitur cum deficit lex*), thereby implying what *Córus Bésgnai* and PHP make explicit; that the law of ancient usage covered subjects that *recht litre* did not.¹⁸⁹ It is not surprising,

¹⁸³ Carey, 'An edition of the pseudo-historical prologue', §§ 7–8.

¹⁸⁴ *Lex Vis.* pp. 38–42; Wormald, 'The *leges barbarorum*', p. 37.

¹⁸⁵ Wormald, 'Lex scripta', p. 33.

¹⁸⁶ Isidore, *Etymologiae* 5.2.1–2, 5.3.1.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.4.1; for *constitutio* as written law see 5.3.2 and 5.10.1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.3.2–3.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.3.3.

therefore, to find *recht aicnid* in *Córus Bésgnai* and PHP associated with *béscnai* and *nós*. In his versified judgment, Dubthach twice refers to the law of Ireland as *nós*, a term that more usually means ‘custom’.¹⁹⁰ Isidore’s influence upon the terminology and the basic assumptions of the theory of law espoused by the legend of the Patrician revision is clear. The correspondence is not exact, but it is close enough to suggest that the authors drew substantially upon the Isidorian material.¹⁹¹

PHP has been the subject of quite intense study over the past few decades. Binchy’s interpretation of the text and its historical context in the mid-1970s was for many years considered authoritative.¹⁹² He argued that although it may have included some ‘genuinely ancient material’, particularly in Dubthach’s versified judgment, the text as it is extant was composed c.1100 in defence of Irish social practices then under attack from ecclesiastical reformers. Taking the story preserved in *Córus Bésgnai* as his basis, the composer constructed the legend of the Patrician sanction for Irish law as a means of showing that it was in line with church teaching.

Subsequent studies have demonstrated that, in fact, the text is considerably older than Binchy believed. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, although he

¹⁹⁰ McCone, ‘Dubthach maccu Lugair’, pp. 29, 33.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Isidore’s statement (*Etymologiae* 5.3.4) that ‘if *lex* is based on reason, then *lex* will be everything that is consistent with reason – provided that it agrees with religion, accords with *disciplina* and is conducive to well-being, *saluti proficiat*’, which may have influenced the image of Patrick bringing the law into line with the Christian conscience. R. Mark Scowcroft has argued that PHP displays Isidorian influence in its division of Irish law into three sections corresponding with the division of the Old Testament by Jerome: ‘*Recht fáide* and its gloss in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*’, *Ériu* 53 (2003), 143–50.

¹⁹² D. A. Binchy, ‘The pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*’, *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975–76), 15–28.

adhered to Binchy's belief in the eleventh-century context of the composition, dismissed the idea that there was a fundamental gulf between the verse judgment and the surrounding prose narrative. The judgment, he argued, was 'the heart of the aetiological legend which accounts for the resolution of the conflict of laws'.¹⁹³ Ó Corráin having argued that the two sections of the text were not of separate origins, Kim McCone later demonstrated that both were, in fact, in Old rather than Middle Irish.¹⁹⁴ The text in fact forms part of the early Old Irish glossing on the main text that was probably added to the original compilation shortly after its composition; according to Breatnach 'not very long' after the middle of the eighth century, a date to which McCone also ascribes.¹⁹⁵ Carey has suggested a slightly later dating, preferring the ninth-century, because he considers the glossator's misunderstanding of portions of the text to suggest a greater chronological distance between his activity and the initial composition.¹⁹⁶

There was clearly an evolution of the legend of the origin of the *Senchas Már* between the time of the composition of the original prologue and the writing of the extended, pseudo-historical-prologue. The original prologue contained the basic idea that *Senchas Már* represented a combination, or a compromise between native and ecclesiastical law; the memory of the ancients, *recht litre* and *recht aicnid*. *Córus Bésgnai* located that event at Tara during the reign of Lóegaire mac Néill, introduced the *dramatis personae*, and espoused the Pauline theory of the natural good to legitimise the use of the laws of the pagan Irish in the

¹⁹³ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 385–89.

¹⁹⁴ McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 18–21.

¹⁹⁵ Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 338–46, especially p. 344; McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 18–28;

¹⁹⁶ Carey, 'An edition of the pseudo-historical prologue', p. 10.

Christian society, an aspect of the legend not at all clear in the original prologue. PHP further augmented this justification with the complex theological argument Bracken identified in Dubthach's poem. Ó Corráin has argued that PHP, both the verse and the prose, was a clerical composition and, considering the complexity of the theological justifications it contains for the continued use of the pre-Christian Irish law, including capital punishment, that seems probable.¹⁹⁷ It appears, however, that the ecclesiastical element in the legend had increased gradually as it developed. So although the content and language of the legend is ecclesiastical, especially in its fuller version, the message it conveys is one of compromise. Essentially, the legend of the origins of the *Senchas Már* reflects 'a lengthy development, a compromise, arrived at only after protracted consideration, between the conflicting claims of rival legal systems'.¹⁹⁸ It is tempting to see in the origin legend of the *Senchas Már* a reflection of the historical process by which *Cáin Fhuithirbe* was composed; a process of compromise and consultation between different traditions given its final literary form by an ecclesiastical author.

The gradual expansion of the legend eventually led, it seems, to it taking on an independent existence as a literary tale. In his discussion of PHP, Binchy drew attention to the text *Comthóth Lóegaire co cretim*, which draws closely upon the early sections of one of the extant versions of PHP and occasionally preserves superior readings of the text.¹⁹⁹ The author of this saga was, to Binchy's mind,

¹⁹⁷ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 387.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁹⁹ Binchy, 'The pseudo-historical prologue', 21.

not a jurist, for he omits all reference to what was the kernel of the story from a jurist's standpoint, the trial of Nuadu [Derg mac Néill, brother of Lóegaire and named in this version as the killer of Patrick's charioteer] and the judgment of Dubthach.

As McCone pointed out, though, the same criticism—the omission of the judgment and the implications it carries for the compromise between new and old laws that is the crux of the story as far as jurists would be concerned—is also true of one of the three extant versions of PHP.²⁰⁰ In fact, while one other version includes a synopsis, only one of the three incorporates the text of the judgment itself. This is perhaps suggestive that the legal implications of the judgment were not always of paramount importance to those who copied the texts.²⁰¹ Rather the surrounding story and its ideological implications were what mattered most.

Despite McLeod's argument that pre-Christian law in Ireland was 'natural' because of its perceived physical impact on individuals and the environment, it is generally recognised that the discussion of *recht aicnid*, 'the law of nature', in *Córus Bésgnai* and PHP drew upon the Pauline theory of natural good as expressed in Romans 2:14: *Cum enim gentes, quae legem non habent, naturaliter, quae legis sunt, faciunt, eiusmodi legem non habentes, ipsi sibi sunt lex*, 'For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law; these having not the law, are a law unto themselves'.²⁰² Ó Corráin has noted, however, that although the theory is Pauline, the biblical references used to justify this stance are not. This, he believes, was because the general tenor of Paul's letter, which is considerably negative in its perception of Mosaic law, did not sit well with the exegetes and canon lawyers of seventh- and eighth-century

²⁰⁰ McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 4.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*.

²⁰² A. Colunga and L. Turrado (eds), *Bibla sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementinam novo editio* (4th ed., Madrid, 1965), p. 1096.

Ireland, for whom the Old Testament, and Mosaic law in particular, held special prominence. He has cited the fact that the canonists, in their discussion of similar subjects, refer to the example of Jethro rather than to Paul's letter for support.²⁰³

In the *Canones Hibernenses*, for example, the following account can be found:

Populus Israel debuerat constringui .x. mandatis legis dum causa ipsorum percussit Deus Egyptum .x. plagis; ideo decim mandata sunt. Ubi sunt in lege praecepta quae Deus non praecipit? Iethro socer Moysi elegere .lxx. qui iudicarent cum Moysi. Hoc iudicium est; quia si inuenerimus iudicia gentium bona, quae natura bona illis docet, et Deo non displicet, seruabimus.

The people of Israel had to be ruled by the Ten Commandments of the Law, since for the sake of them God smote the Egyptians with the ten plagues; therefore there are Ten Commandments. Where are the precepts in the [Mosaic] Law that God did not command? Jethro, father in law of Moses, told Moses to choose seventy *principes* who would judge the people with Moses, and this is a judgment [that is, a precedent]; if we find judgments of the gentiles good, which their nature teaches them, and it is not displeasing to God, we shall keep them.²⁰⁴

The depiction of Moses in this tract as reviewer of gentile law as well as legislator for the Jews has important parallels in the Patrician legend of the origins of the *Senchas Már*.

One of the primary concerns of this legend was to establish and justify the legal unity of Ireland. The authors of the original prologue to the *Senchas Már*, *Córus Bésgnai* and, especially, the PHP approached this aspect of his quest in several ways of considerably varying complexity. First, and most crudely, through abundant, perhaps excessive, repetition of the phrases *fir Érenn*, 'the men of Ireland', and *inis Érenn*, 'the island of Ireland', they make it abundantly clear that the oral law of the pre-Patrician period as well as the *Senchas Már* established by Patrick claimed jurisdiction over all the men of the island. PHP

²⁰³ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 391–4.

²⁰⁴ *De decimis disputant*, ed. L. Bieler, *The Irish penitentials*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 5 (Dublin, 1963), p. 168. See also Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', 392; Jaski, 'Cú Chuimne', 65–6.

expands on this by referring to Lóegaire as *rí Éirenn*, 'king of Ireland',²⁰⁵ and those present at Lóegaire's assembly included *cach oes dana la hErind*, 'all the *aes dána* of Ireland' *ar bélaib cacha flatha la hErind* 'in the presence of all the princes of Ireland'.²⁰⁶ Once established, the law was fixed *la Pátraic 7 ecailsi 7 flaithi Éirenn*, 'by Patrick and the churches and the princes of Ireland'.²⁰⁷

The role of Patrick, the national apostle, in blessing the *Senchas Már* enhanced its national status. But Patrick's presence in the text has further layers of complexity. McCone believes that the whole story of the Patrician revision of the laws is an analogy on the coming of Christ.²⁰⁸ *Recht aicnid*, the pre-Patrician oral law of the Irish, corresponds, he has argued, to Mosaic law, while Patrick, as Christ, brings the new law of forgiveness of the gospels. Such a reading is corroborated by the later introduction to *Cáin Fhuithirbe*, which explicitly compares Patrick's revision of that tract with Christ's allowing to remain *mor do recht rouairbai reime*, 'a great part of the law which had been before him'.²⁰⁹

Contrary to McCone's view, however, John Carey has argued that Patrick in PHP is presented as a Mosaic figure and that the *recht litre* he introduces to Ireland corresponds to Mosaic law.²¹⁰ As discussed by Carey, the Mosaic analogy is common in Irish traditions about Patrick. This interpretation also fits rather better with the evidence found in the Old Irish allegorical discussion of the liturgy in the Stowe Missal and the prayer *Scuap Chrábaid* attributed to Colcu

²⁰⁵ Carey, 'An edition of the pseudo-historical prologue', §§ 1, 8.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, § 7.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*.

²⁰⁸ McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', pp. 10–16.

²⁰⁹ *CIH* 688.15; Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 59–60.

²¹⁰ J. Carey, 'The two laws in Dubthach's judgment', *CMCS* 19 (1990), 1–18.

mac Duinechdai.²¹¹ In these texts the law of nature is considered to have been the law of the pre-Mosaic patriarchs, in relation to which Moses stood as reviser. It was with the pre-Mosaic natural law that the author of PHP wished to compare the pre-Patrician laws of the Irish and with Moses that he wished to compare Patrick. The similarity between the image of Moses revising the law of the gentiles in the *Canones Hibernienses* previously mentioned and that of Patrick in the origin legend of the *Senchas Már* further corroborates this argument. Patrick, then, is not just the apostle of the Irish; he is also, in Mosaic fashion, their lawgiver. The men of Ireland, then, were united in their observance of Patrick's law – the *Senchas Már* – as the Israelites, the proto-nation upon which medieval theories of identity were founded, were united in adherence to Mosaic law. Moses loomed large in the production of *lex scripta* in Ireland as elsewhere in Europe.

Perhaps the most forthright expression of the national status of the *Senchas Már*, however, is also that which makes it a royal text. For although the PHP makes no claim that the contents of the *Senchas Már* were royal legislation, it can be read as suggesting that the promulgation of the compilation was given national status through the agency of Lóegaire as king of Ireland. The depiction of the *óentu* at which the *Senchas Már* was created gives the impression of having been modelled on one of these law-giving assemblies of the period 697 to 842, exactly during the period, that is, when the *Senchas Már* was compiled and when PHP was composed. The occasion of the compilation of the *Senchas Már*, according to the PHP, was an assembly of all the men of Ireland, including men of learning and secular rulers, convened by Lóegaire mac Néill, who is designated

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

as king of Ireland in the text as it is extant. The presence of Patrick, representative of the national Church, gave the occasion the appearance of a double assembly involving all the men and all the clerics of Ireland. Dubthach, who recites the native law to Patrick represents the learned classes who are known to have had a role in the creation of *cánai*.²¹² Moreover, the author of PHP referred to the *Senchas Már* as *cáin Pátraic*, making an explicit comparison between this compilation and ecclesiastical *cánai*.²¹³

PHP's claim that the men of Ireland gathered at Loegaire's assembly desired to 'establish and arrange all our laws' suggests that the author might have drawn upon the example of the *rechtge fénechais* of *Críth Gablach*. Rather than being royal in origin, this was law that the king's peoples adopted, but which he confirmed. But *Críth Gablach* still places responsibility for enforcing such a law with the king. *Cáin Adamnáin* was not royal legislation, but it achieved its widespread acceptance drawing on the support and authority of Loingsech mac Óengussa. Likewise, the *Senchas Már* – or *cáin Pátraic* – though nowhere described as royal legislation, was promulgated on the authority of Lóegaire as king of Ireland. Coming from an entirely different angle, Robin Chapman Stacey concluded that 'the emphasis of the "Pseudo-Historical Prologue" is clearly on

²¹² See Wb. 28a1 (*Thesaurus palaeohibernicus: a collection of old-Irish glosses, scholia, prose, and verse*, ed. W. Stokes and J. Strachan, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1901), p. 679); *uolentes esse legis doctores* is glossed *conroibtis oc denum rechtche la riga*, 'so that they might be making edicts with kings'. Cf. Charles-Edwards, 'The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*', 156.

²¹³ Not to be confused with the *Cáin Pátraic* said in the annals of Ulster to have taken effect in Ireland in 737 (*AU* 737). This now lost text seems to have been concerned with offences against the clergy. See Kelly, *Guide*, pp. 281–82, and Charles-Edwards, *Early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, pp. 43–62. That the two are distinct texts is clear from the fact that citations from *Cáin Pátraic* occur in commentary on *Senchas Már* tracts: *CIH* 1.19, 413.6; Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 226.

strong royal power, exercised according to the will and discretion of the church'.²¹⁴ This is surely a most royal text. In the story of the Patrician revision of the law, then, the men of Ireland are united as subjects of a national law because of the Church's acceptance of that position in the form of Patrick's blessing and because they are inhabitants of Loegaire's kingdom. Like the law codes of the Franks and Anglo-Saxons studied by Wallace-Hadrill, the story of the origin of the *Senchas Már* was 'a form of kingly literature'.

As McCone has pointed out, the version of the legend of the Patrician sanction of the laws in *Corus Bésgnai* depicts Corc mac Luigdach, king of Munster, as a hostage at King Lóegaire's court in Tara; 'implying imperialistic notions of a Tara high-kingship of Ireland supposedly absent from the laws'.²¹⁵ PHP claims that Corc was joined at Loegaire's court by Dáire, king of the Ulaid. Breatnach, following Thurneysen, believes that the Old Irish glosses on the *Senchas Már*, including the PHP, display a Munster bias and were probably written in Munster.²¹⁶ If that was the case, then it suggests that the legend of the Patrician revision of the laws, and implicit recognition of Lóegaire's role in the process – and hence of the standing of the Uí Néill as the royal patrons of Irish law – had gained acceptance in Munster by the about the middle of the eighth century. In fact, it seems that the legend of the Patrician-Lóegaire origins of the Irish laws had gained currency in Munster before the end of the seventh century. The original text of *Cáin Fhuithirbe*, written c.680, apparently contained the legend of

²¹⁴ R. Chapman Stacey, *Dark speech*, pp. 146–71, at 168.

²¹⁵ McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair', 20; *CIH* 527.26.

²¹⁶ Breatnach, *Companion*, p. 344, 355; Thurneysen, *Irishes Recht*, *Abhandlungen der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, no. 2, (Berlin, 1931), 13, n. 9.

Patrick's conversion of Lóegaire.²¹⁷ It is unclear why the composer should have included this story, however, unless it originally also contained an account of Patrick's revision of the law. The later introduction to that tract certainly claimed that Patrick *robennaidh 7 roaentaig 7 rocomlin a canoin a esbaid uile 7 roscris a chlaen 7 a forbann rechta uile 7 a glor geintlighi*, 'blessed it and accepted it and supplied from canon law all that was lacking from it, and he erased all that was iniquitous in it, and all its excessive rules and pagan utterances'.²¹⁸

The subordinate status of Corc and Dáire might have been intended to explain how it was that Loegaire managed to impose the *cáin* he sponsored on the Ulaid and the Munstermen. Charles-Edwards has argued that the ecclesiastical *cánai* secured the enhancement of the power of the Uí Néill over the Ulaid and the Laigin.²¹⁹ He drew attention to the fact that in 780 an Uí Néill king could compel the synod of the Leinstermen to join the synod of the Uí Néill at Tara and to the absence from the annals of any record of Leinster or Ulster *cánai* to suggest that the Uí Néill could prevent the kings of those peoples from promulgating their own *cánai*.²²⁰ The PHP represents a literary reflection of the use of this legislative tool as a weapon in the assertion of Uí Néill authority and power.

Charles-Edwards has warned against accepting the PHP as 'evidence for how the lawyers were thinking when the constituent tracts of *Senchas Már* were being written, or even when they were brought together into a single law-book' because it was apparently given its current form later than the compilation of

²¹⁷ Breatnach, 'The ecclesiastical element', 49–51.

²¹⁸ *CIH*, 688. 13–14; Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 359–60.

²¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, p. 57–8; *idem*, 'Early Irish law', pp. 336–37.

²²⁰ *AU* 780; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 278.

Senchas Már.²²¹ Some of what has been suggested here might reflect the outlook of the mid rather than the early eighth century, therefore, although the aspects of the legend of the Patrician revision of the laws most relevant to this argument – the role of Lóegaire, Patrick and Dubthach for example – were present in *Córus Bésgnai*. Even at the time when that text was composed, then, the origins of the *Senchas Már* were associated with the joint authority of Armagh and the Uí Néill kingship of Tara.

In his introduction to the first volume of the *Ancient laws of Ireland*, Dr. W. Nielson Hancock suggested that St Patrick's role in the compilation of the *Senchas Már* was probably influenced by the example of Emperor Theodosius, whose famous *Codex* was published in 438 and about which, he believed, Patrick, as a Roman citizen, would have been 'certain to receive early intelligence'.²²² This suggestion has been rightly dismissed by the doyen of early Irish legal studies, Daniel Binchy.²²³ As Binchy pointed out, Hancock's proposal is based not only on a fundamental lack of knowledge of Irish history, but also on a failure to appreciate the true nature of the Irish text; just two of the many problems that plague the *Ancient laws*.²²⁴ Binchy was, of course, correct; PHP is not an historical account and has no merit as a source for Patrick's activity in the fifth century. However, its depiction of the composition and promulgation of law at a joint

²²¹ Charles-Edwards, *The early medieval Gaelic lawyer*, p. 38.

²²² *Ancient laws of Ireland*, 1, pp. xi–xii.

²²³ Binchy, 'The pseudo-historical prologue', 16–17. Of the introduction in which Hennessy's statement occurs, and those of the following volumes, Binchy had earlier stated that 'it is not unfair to call them worse than useless'; 'The linguistic and historical value', pp. 75, 87–8.

²²⁴ For just some of these serious criticisms, see MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions*, pp. 88–9; Binchy, 'The linguistic and historical value', pp. 74–7, 79–80; Charles-Edwards, 'The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*', 141–45.

assembly of secular and ecclesiastical scholars convened under royal authority has enough in common with the introduction to *Cáin Fhuithirbe* to suggest that it may perhaps reflect the historical process behind the production of *cánai*. And while Hancock's suggestion regarding Patrick's participation in the creation of the *Senchas Már* was ill-founded, the more general proposition; that the writing down of the Old Irish laws was influenced by contemporary developments on the continent, is both plausible and, indeed, likely. The 'ideas about the law' inherited by the Irish jurists from the continent were indubitably manifold, but one of the central ideas appears to have been that the production of a single written law under the auspices of the king was a fundamental step toward the creation of a single nation under a single king. The Irish 'saw the point', as Patrick Wormald himself put it.²²⁵

²²⁵ Wormald, '*Lex scripta*', p. 33.

THE ANGLO-SAXON 'OTHER' IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND¹

In June 684 Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria, sent an army across the Irish Sea to Ireland.

Bede provides the following detailed account of the event and its context in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*:

Anno dominicae incarnationis DCLXXXIII Ecgfrid rex Nordanhymbrorum misso Hiberniam cum exercitu duce Bercto, uastauit misere gentem innoxiam et nationi Anglorum semper amicissimam, ita ut ne ecclesiis quidem aut monasteriis manus parceret hostilis. At insulani et, quantum ualuere, armis arma repellebant, et inuocantes diuinae auxilium pietatis caelitus se uindicari continuis diu inprecationibus postulabant. Et quamuis maledici regnum Dei possidere non possint, creditum est tamen quod hi qui merito impietatis suae maledicebantur, ocius Domino uindice poenas sui reatus luerent. Siquidem anno post hunc proximo idem rex, cum temere exercitum ad uastandam Pictorum prouinciam duxisset, multum prohibentibus amicis et maxime beatae memoriae Cudbercto, qui nuper fuerat ordinatus episcopus, introductus est simulantibus fugam hostibus in angustias inaccessorum montium, et cum maxima parte copiarum, quas secum adduxerat, extinctus anno aetatis suae XLmo, regni autem XVmo, die tertio decimo kalendarum Iuniarum. Et quidem, ut dixi, prohibuerunt amici, ne hoc bellum iniret; sed quoniam anno praecedente noluerat audire reuerentissimum patrem Ecgberctum, ne Scottiam nil se laedentem inpugnaret, datum est illi ex poena peccati illius, ne nunc eos, qui ipsum ab interitu reuocare cupiebant, audiret.

Ex quo tempore spes coepit et uirtus regni Anglorum 'fluere ac retro sublapsa referri'. Nam et Picti terram possessionis suae quam tenuerunt Angli, et Scotti qui erant in Brittania, Brettonum quoque pars nonnulla libertatem receperunt; quam et hactenus habent per annos circiter XLVI. Ubi inter plurimos gentis Anglorum uel interemtis gladio uel seruitio addictos uel de terra Pictorum fuga lapsos, etiam reuerentissimus uir Domini Trumuini, qui in eos episcopatum acceperat, recessit cum sui, qui errant in monasterio Aebbercurnig, posito quidem in regione Anglorum sed in uicinia freti, quod Anglorum terras Pictorum disternat.

In the year of our Lord 684 Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria, sent an army to Ireland under his ealdorman Berht, who wretchedly devastated a harmless race that had always been most friendly to the English, and his hostile bands spared neither churches nor monasteries. The islanders resisted force by force so far as they were able, imploring the merciful aid of God and invoking His vengeance with unceasing imprecations. And although those who curse cannot inherit the kingdom of God, yet one may believe that those who were justly cursed for their wickedness quickly suffered the penalty of their guilt at the avenging hand of God. Indeed the very next

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as, P. Wadden, 'The first English invasion: Irish responses to the Northumbrian attack on Brega, 684', in *Ríocht na Midhe, Records of Meath Archaeological and Historical Society* 21 (2010), pp. 1–33.

year the king rashly took an army to ravage the kingdom of the Picts, against the urgent advice of his friends and particularly Cuthbert, of blessed memory, who had recently been made bishop. The enemy feigned flight and lured the king into some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains; there he was killed with the greater part of the forces he had taken with him, on 20 May, in the fortieth year of his age and the fifteenth of his reign. As I have said, his friends urged him not to undertake the campaign; but in the previous year he had refused to listen to the holy father Ecgbert, who had urged him not to attack the Irish who had done him no harm; and the punishment for his sins was that he would not now listen to those who sought to save him from his own destruction.

From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to 'ebb and fall away'. For the Picts recovered their own land which the English had formerly held, while those Irish who lived in Britain and some part of the British nation recovered their independence, which they have now enjoyed for about forty-six years. Many of the English were either slain by the sword or enslaved or escaped by flight from Pictish territory; among these latter was Trumwine, a reverend man of God who had been made bishop over them and who retired with his companions from the monastery of Abercorn, which was in the English territory but close to the firth which divides the lands of the English from that of the Picts.²

The accounts of the event in Irish chronicles, exemplified by that in the Annals of Ulster, are paltry in comparison, but do specify the target of the invasion: *Saxones Campum Breg uastant 7 aeclesias plurimas in mensi Iuni*, 'the English lay waste to the Plain of Brega, including many churches, in the month of June'.³ Notwithstanding the terse style of the annalist, this chapter will argue that the Northumbrian attack, a brief and atypical episode in contemporary Anglo-Irish relations, had a considerable impact in Ireland.

² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), iv.26, pp. 426–28. The 'Northern Recension' of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also has an account of the attack on Ireland, although it contains no additional information (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1961), E-text, s.a. 684) : 'Here in this year Ecgfrith sent a raiding-army among the Irish and his ealdorman Beorht with it, and they wretchedly abused and burned God's churches.'

³ *AU*, 685. Bede's dating of the invasion is to be preferred as in this case, as elsewhere from the late 670s to the early 690s, the Irish annals are one year out of date. For example, the comet recorded at 677 actually occurred in 676, the partial solar eclipse recorded at 689 actually occurred in 688 and the lunar eclipse dated to 11 November 692 actually took place on that date in the previous year. See Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, pp. 37, 39.

The attack occurred during a crucial period in the creation of Irish identity and provided those involved in this process with a convenient image of an 'Other' – a threatening foreign presence – in opposition to which the unity of the men of Ireland could be contrasted.

The laconic remark of the Irish annalist masks the fact that those involved in the 684 attack, the aggressors and the targets, were two of the most powerful kingdoms in the British Isles. In 684 Northumbria was the leading political and military power in the north of Britain, if not on the entire island.⁴ Formed by the unification of the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, its territory stretched from the Humber in the south to the Firth of Forth in the north. According to Bede, however, the power of seventh-century Northumbrian kings extended far beyond these limits. In the first half of the seventh century, Northumbria had dominated the southern English kingdoms, and although this period of supremacy in the south had been curtailed by defeat in battle against the Mercians in 679, this did not immediately affect the power of the Northumbrian kings elsewhere. In the west, the 'Menavian islands' – Man and Anglesey – had been subjected to Edwin's authority prior to his death in (d. 633), suggesting that he also controlled the coastline of Cumberland that had previously been part of the kingdom of Rheged.⁵ If the Northumbrian kings maintained control of Man after the 'rebellion' of Cadwallon, king

⁴ For what follows see D. W. Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100: the creation and destruction of a kingdom* (Cambridge, 2003). See also, F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971; first published 1943), pp. 74–95.

⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii.5, p. 148–50. The British kingdom of Rheged may have held out to the north of Solway Firth considerably longer. Pehthelm, the first Anglo-Saxon bishop of Whithorn, had only recently been appointed at the time Bede was writing, about 731, so the Northumbrian conquest of that area may have been relatively recent: *ibid.*, v.23, pp. 558–60.

of Gwynedd, and Penda, king of Mercia, in the early 630s, it would have provided a perfect launching pad for an attack on the east coast of Ireland.⁶

Beyond the Forth, the Northumbrians held the Picts, the Gaels of Dál Riata and the Britons of Dumbarton in subjection prior to Ecgrith's death in 685. In that year, undisturbed by the curses laid upon him by the Irish, Ecgrith gathered an army and marched into Pictish territory where he was defeated and killed and the Northumbrian hegemony in northern Britain was brought to an end. Despite its ultimate failure, this campaign illustrates the reach of Northumbria's military power. Bede does not name the site of the battle where Ecgrith fell, but the Irish annals called it *Dún Nechtain*, 'The fortress of Nechtan', and Simeon of Durham, writing in the twelfth century, designated it *stagnum Nechtani*, 'Nechtanes-mere'.⁷ Early in the nineteenth century, George Chalmers identified this as Dunnichen, in Angus, an area close to what was until recently believed to have been the core of the Pictish kingdom of Fortriu.⁸ This identification was universally accepted until Alex Woolf provided good reason to believe that Fortriu was actually situated in Moray, at the northern end of the Great Glen. He also argued that the battle of Dún Nechtain actually took place within or on the borders of this kingdom, at Dunachton on the western shore of Loch Insh in Badenoch (Inverness-shire).⁹ This site is much farther north than Dunnichen and if the identification is correct it illustrates the

⁶ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii.20, pp. 202–4.

⁷ *AU*, 686; Simeon of Durham, *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, ed. T. Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi opera omnia*, vol. 1 (London, 1882), p. 32. J. E. Fraser, *The Battle of Dunnichen 685* (Stroud, 2002) provides edited and translated extracts of the main sources for this battle in the appendices: For Simeon see Appendix 2, p. 128.

⁸ G. Chalmers, *Caledonia: or an account, historical and topographic, of North Britain, from the most ancient to the present times with a dictionary of places, chorographical and philological*, 3 vols. (London, 1810–24), vol. 1, pp. 210, 255.

⁹ A. Woolf, 'Dún Nechtain, Fortriu and the geography of the Picts', *SHR* 85, part 2, no. 220 (2006), 182–201. This article also provides an overview of the historiography of the topic.

Northumbrians' ability to campaign over great distances – even if it did ultimately end in disaster. This defeat did not occur until the year after the invasion of Brega, however. In 684, Northumbria was still the dominant force in northern Britain, still held the other peoples of the north in subjection, and was capable of campaigning over great distances.

Brega, the target of Ecgrith's attack, was situated in the eastern midlands and included the coastline north of Dublin as well as the good agricultural land stretching westwards from the sea to where it bordered the neighbouring kingdom of Mide.¹⁰ The coast of Brega was one of the most important gateways into and out of Ireland during prehistoric and early medieval times.¹¹ Moreover, Brega was the symbolic and political centre of Ireland; Tara was situated in Brega and several of the placenames that were used to represent Ireland as a whole had a local significance to the territory, suggesting that the region had a special importance as a microcosm of the whole of Ireland.¹² In the late seventh century, Brega was dominated by Síl nÁeda Sláne, at that time the most powerful branch of the Uí Néill. From the 640s to the 680s, Síl nÁeda Sláne kings campaigned against the Uí Fiachrach and Cenél Coirpri to their northwest,¹³ and by the latter end of this period they were also tightening their grip on eastern Brega at the expense of Ciannachta Breg.¹⁴ Síl nÁeda Sláne was not quite the dominant force in

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the extent of the kingdom, see E. Bhreathnach, 'The medieval kingdom of Brega', in *eadem* (ed.), *The kingship and landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 410–22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 411–12.

¹² T. Ó Concheanainn, 'Topographical notes – I. Cermna in Meath', *Ériu* 22 (1971), 92–5; M. A. O'Brien, 'Hibernica', *ZCP* 14 (1923), 329–32; *idem*, 'Varia IV', *Ériu* 11 (1930–32), 167–68; Bhreathnach, 'The medieval kingdom of Brega', p. 410.;

¹³ *AU* 649, 665, 683; Swift, 'Tírechán's motives', 79

¹⁴ Byrne, *Irish kings*, p. 118; M. Byrnes, 'The Árd Ciannachta in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: a reflection of Iona's attitude to the Síl nÁeda Sláne in the late seventh century', in A. P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology*,

Ireland that the Northumbrians were in Britain, but it was nonetheless the most powerful dynasty in the country. Síl nÁeda Sláne held the kingship of Tara for nearly four decades from the 650s to the 690s and at the time of the Northumbrian attack the king was Fínsnechta Fledach mac Dúinchada.¹⁵ Ecgfrith's attack, then, was a strike at what was both the symbolic and the political heartland of Ireland.

Such an act of aggression was drastically out of line with the pattern of relations between Northumbria and the Irish over the course of the seventh and early-eighth centuries.¹⁶ Anglo-Saxon military activity in Ireland was not unheard of during this period, but it was rare and, so far as the sources describe, was occasioned by the presence of individual Anglo-Saxons in the armies of Irish kings. The annals record, for instance, the death of Oisiric mac Albruit, *ríghomna Saxon*, at the battle of Fid Eoin in 628, but this Anglo-Saxon *ætheling* was most likely serving in the army of Connad Cerr, king of Dál Riata who also died in the battle.¹⁷ The events of 684 aside, relations between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the various kingdoms in Ireland were not generally

history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne (Dublin, 2000), pp. 128–31; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 551.

¹⁵ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 281.

¹⁶ See J. Graham-Campbell and M. Ryan (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon/Irish relations before the Vikings*, Proceedings of the British Academy 157 (Oxford, 2009), for discussions of the various facets of amicable relations between the Irish and their Anglo-Saxon neighbours. For Anglo-Irish relations within the broader context of Irish relations with the rest of Europe during this period, see Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours*.

¹⁷ *ATig*, CS, 629, *AClon*, 627; H. Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty and the Irish in the seventh century', *Peritia*, 2 (1983), 105–6, 109–23. Moisl's contention, that this or other instances of Anglo-Saxon military activity in Ireland informed a range of Irish literary sources rests on very weak ground. With the exception of *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, the texts he cites in support of this claim all list the *Saxain* as amongst the armies of kings who returned to Ireland from Britain that also included *Bretain* and *fir Alban*. This image was intended to imply the vast size of such armies by claiming that they included representatives of all the peoples in Britain.

antagonistic and certainly there are no other recorded instances of serious attacks by Anglo-Saxon armies on Irish soil.

More generally, Anglo-Irish relations during this period were characterised by ecclesiastical and scholarly cooperation. Irish ecclesiastics had played an important role in the conversion of Northumbria to Christianity in the early seventh century.¹⁸ The Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata in Britain had provided a place of refuge for exiled Northumbrians since as early as the end of the sixth century.¹⁹ It was as a result of this pattern of communication that the conversion of Northumbria was led by ecclesiastics from Iona. During the reign of their Deiran rival, Edwin, the sons of Edwin's Bernician predecessor, Æthelfrith, fled into exile amongst the Gaels. While there, Oswald son of Æthelfrith was baptised. Upon Edwin's death, Oswald returned to Northumbria, assumed the kingship, and sought a bishop from Iona to minister to the people of his kingdom.²⁰ Áedán was sent to become bishop of the English ruled by Oswald and set up his see at Lindisfarne, close to the royal fortress at Bamburgh.²¹ From that time until 664, the Northumbrian church was linked closely to Iona; its bishops were sent from the island monastery and were of Irish descent, as were the abbots of Iona who sometimes visited Lindisfarne. Such was the impact of the Irish mission that one commentator has described Anglo-Saxon England prior to 664 as 'a cultural province of Ireland'.²²

¹⁸ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971; first published 1943), pp. 119–29.

¹⁹ Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty', 105–6, 112.

²⁰ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii.1, pp. 212–4; Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, i.1, pp. 14–6.

²¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii.1–3, pp. 212–20.

²² T. J. Brown, 'An historical introduction to the use of classical Latin authors in the British Isles from the fifth to the eleventh centuries', in *idem*, *A palaeographer's view: the*

In 664, the Paschal controversy that was embroiling the Irish Church erupted in Northumbria. As an offshoot of the Columban Church, the Northumbrian Church followed the same method for calculating the date of Easter as the northern Irish and the British Churches, but in 664 a synod was held at Streanaeshalch (probably modern Whitby) to decide whether that practise should continue or whether the Northumbrians should adopt the Roman method.²³ The Roman party won the day and as a result Colmán, the last Irish bishop of the Northumbrians, retired to Ireland with a party of his followers, both Irish and Northumbrian.

The synod of Whitby severed the formal subjection of the Northumbrian Church to Iona, but it did not destroy the tradition of close communication between the Northumbrians and the Irish.²⁴ In the wake of the synod of Whitby a new, self-consciously English monastery was established in Mayo that, once it had accepted the Roman Easter, was to thrive under the spiritual leadership of York for centuries.²⁵ There may even have been individual Northumbrians still on Iona during this period if Adomnán's references in the *Vita Sancti Columbae* to *Pilu Saxo*, 'Pilu the Englishman', and *Generus Saxo*, 'Generus the Englishman', reflect his own time rather than that of his

selected writings of Julian Brown, ed. M. P. Brown and J. Roberts (London, 1993), p. 150, reprinted from *Settimane di studi del Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 23 (1979), 237–99.

²³ Bede, *HE*, iii.25, pp. 298–306.

²⁴ K. Hughes, 'Evidence for contacts between the Churches of the Irish and English from the Synod of Whitby to the Viking Age', in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (eds.), *England before the conquest: Studies in primary sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 49–67; Moreover, Irish connections with the Anglo-Saxon Church extended beyond the realm of the Northumbrians: K. Hughes, 'Some Aspects of Irish Influence on Early English Private Prayer', *Studia Celtica* 5 (1970), 48–61.

²⁵ N. K. Chadwick, 'Bede, St. Colmán and the Irish Abbey of Mayo', in K. Jackson, P. H. Blair, B. Colgrave, B. Dickins, J. Taylor, C. Brooke, N. K. Chadwick, *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 202–3.

subject.²⁶ In the years following the Northumbrian attack, Adomnán had friendly relations with Ceolfrith, abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow,²⁷ and visited Aldfrith, Ecgfrith's successor as king of Northumbria, on two occasions.²⁸ On one of these visits to the man he described as his *amicus*, 'friend', Adomnán presented the king with a copy of one of his scholarly works, *De Locis Sanctis*.²⁹ Later tradition claimed that Aldfrith, who was renowned for his learning amongst both the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons, had been Adomnán's student during his early life.³⁰

The examples of Mayo and the English monastery at Rath Melsigi – probably to be identified with Clonmelsh, in modern County Carlow³¹ – highlight the fact that communication between Ireland and the Anglo-Saxon Church was a two-way process. Certainly the origin of this contact was likely to have been Irish missionaries travelling to Britain, but soon Anglo-Saxons, both lay and ecclesiastic, began to travel to Ireland in search of further scholarly training.³² Bede says that the Irish provided free room and board to the Anglo-Saxon students who visited the country, but some evidently had their own establishments, of which Rath Melsigi was one of the most famous.³³ Some of

²⁶ Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, iii.10, 22; p. 196, 214.

²⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, v.21, p. 550.

²⁸ Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ii.46, pp. 178–80.

²⁹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, v.15, pp. 504–8; Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ii.46, p. 178.

³⁰ *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. J. N. Radner (Dublin, 1978), pp. 54.

³¹ Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi', 17–42.

³² Bede, *HE*, iii.27, p. 313. For a list of many of the Anglo-Saxons listed by Bede and other sources as active in Ireland during this period see D. Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi, Willibrord, and the earliest Echternach manuscripts' *Peritia* 3 (1984), 22, note 2.

³³ *Trián Saxan*, the 'Third/Portion of the *Saxain*' in Armagh appears in the annals in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (*ALC s.a.* 1092, and *AU, ALC s.a.* 1127). J. Hawkes has suggested that it may be possible to perceive expressions of the cultural identity of the members of these communities in the surviving art-work, specifically high-crosses, that display similarities with those in Iona and Northumbria; 'An iconography of identity? the cross-head from Mayo abbey', in C. Hourihane (ed.) *From Ireland coming: Irish art*

the *multi nobilium simul et mediocrium de gente Anglorum qui ... relictā insula patria, uel diuinae lectionis uel continentioris uitae gratia illo secesserant*, ‘many nobles and commons of the English nation who ... had left their own country and retired to Ireland for the sake of religious studies or to live a more ascetic life’,³⁴ built considerable reputations for themselves in Ireland for their piety and/or their scholarship. Egberht, who is believed to have converted Iona to the Roman observance of Easter, was apparently very highly regarded within Irish ecclesiastical circles.³⁵ Oswald, the king who had initiated the Irish mission to Northumbria, had a cult amongst the Gaels, to judge from the inclusion of his feast in *Félire Óengusso*.³⁶ Oswald’s nephew, Aldfrith son of Oswiu, king of Northumbria 685–705, whose Irish connections will be discussed in more detail below, was known in Irish as Flann Fína.³⁷ At his death, the Irish annals described him as *sapiens*, implying that he had a reputation for great learning.³⁸ Aldfrith is associated with a number of literary compositions of various genres, most famously the wisdom text *Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu*.³⁹ Whether this association reflects his authorship of the text or not, the tradition illustrates that this Anglo-Saxon king’s

from the early Christian to the late Gothic period and its European context (Princeton, 2001), p. 272. For a cross displaying similar influences standing close to what may have been the site of *Rath Melsigi*, see T. Fanning, ‘Some field monuments in the townlands of Clonmelsh and Garryhundon, Co. Carlow’, *Peritia* 3 (1984), 49.

³⁴ Bede, *HE*, iii.27, p. 313. Translation adapted by current author.

³⁵ See Chadwick, ‘Bede, St. Colmán and the Irish Abbey of Mayo’, pp. 202–3.

³⁶ *Félire Óengusso*, ed. W. Stokes, *Félire Óengusso Céili dé, The martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, Henry Bradshaw Society 29 (London, 1905), p. 174: *Osualt nóeb n-áilme / ardrí Saxan sóerdae*. Bede (*HE*, iii.13) also tells us that stories about Oswald were current in seventh-century Ireland. For the spread of the cult of Oswald, see C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian king to European saint* (Stamford, 1995).

³⁷ C. Ireland, ‘Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish genealogies’, *Celtica* 22 (1991), 65.

³⁸ *AU s.a.* 704. Aldfrith was also held in high esteem for his learning by the Anglo-Saxons. Bede referred to him as *vir in scripturis doctissimus*, ‘a man most learned in scripture’ (*HE*, iv.26).

³⁹ Ed. C. Ireland, *Old Irish wisdom attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: an edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu* (Tempe, Arizona, 1999).

reputation amongst the Irish endured long after his death. The great computist, chronicler and historian, Bede was also highly regarded in Ireland. He too was described as *sapiens* in his obit in the annals⁴⁰ and by the tenth century when his *Historia Ecclesiastica* was translated into Irish, he was described by the translator as *Béid huasalsacart ecnaid fer ratha De i n-ecna 7 i crabud*, 'Bede the noble priest, the sage, a man of God's grace in wisdom and in holiness', and *Béid noimh*, 'Holy/Saint Bede'.⁴¹

The Northumbrian attack on Brega was a clash of two of the great political powers of the age and represented a strike at the political core of Ireland. The fact that it was unprecedented must have added to the force of its impact on Irish minds. Yet, as James Fraser has said, 'the reasoning that lay behind this expedition ... has long been one of the great enigmas of Ecgrith's reign'.⁴² Presumably because of this, what scholarly attention has been paid to the attack has tended to focus on attempting to explain Ecgrith's motivation for sending his army across the Irish Sea. Conversely, as Michael Richter has noted, the rapid re-establishment of amicable relations between Northumbria and Iona during Aldfrith's reign has caused many historians to overlook the consequences of the invasion.⁴³ Before examining some of these consequences, it is necessary to survey briefly what has been said about Ecgrith's possible intentions.

⁴⁰ AU 735.

⁴¹ 'A Middle Irish Fragment of Bede's Ecclesiastical History', ed. O. J. Bergin, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 3 (Dublin, 1910), pp. 63–4.

⁴² Fraser, *Battle of Dunnichen*, p. 37.

⁴³ Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours*, p. 98. The tendency has been to make a brief statement to the effect that the attack caused some panic and fear without offering further discussion. See, for example, F. J. Byrne and P. Francis, 'Two Lives of Saint Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*', *JRSAI* 124 (1994), 8; Bhreathnach, '*Temoria*', 81; Charles-Edwards, 'The Making of the nations', p. 37 footnote 124; *idem*, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 435, n. 81.

Most of the theories developed to explain the attack consider Ecgfrith to have been reacting to Irish participation in an alliance ranged against Northumbria, or perhaps against his kingship, possibly the alliance that was victorious at Dún Nechtain in 685.⁴⁴ These ideas all seem to have been influenced by the account of the invasion in the Annals of Clonmacnoise: 'The Saxons, the plains of Moyebrey with divers churches wasted and destroyed in the month of June, for the alliance of the Irish with the Brittaines.'⁴⁵ The reliability of these annals, the only source to mention an alliance with the 'Brittaines', is extremely questionable, however. The text is a seventeenth-century English translation of a now lost Irish chronicle and when its assertions are unsupported by other sources, they must not be accorded too much weight.

The reason for this supposed Irish participation in an alliance against Ecgfrith, it is often suggested, was that his successor as king of Northumbria, Aldfrith, had significant Irish connections. Aldfrith was Ecgfrith's half-brother and, according to Bede, had been *in insulis Scottorum*, 'in the islands of the Irish', or *in regionibus Scottorum*, 'in the regions of the Irish' during Ecgfrith's reign.⁴⁶ The author of the anonymous Life of Saint Cuthbert specified that Aldfrith had been *in insula quam li nominant*, 'on the island which is called Iona', a year prior to the battle of Dún Nechtain.⁴⁷ Moreover, Irish genealogical sources claim that Aldfrith was the grandson of Colmán Rímid, king of Cenél nÉogain, who died in 604: *Colmán Rímid athair Fína, máthair íside Flaind Fína*

⁴⁴ A. P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster* (Blackrock, 1982), pp. 120-1; *idem*, *Warlords and holy men: Scotland ad 80-1000* (London, 1984), pp. 25-6; Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty', 123; J. E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, New Edinburgh History of Scotland 1 (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 200-16.

⁴⁵ *AClon*, s.a. 680 (*recte* 685).

⁴⁶ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 236, 238

⁴⁷ *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives*, p. 104.

meic Ossu regis Saxonum, 'Colmán Rímid [was the] father of Fína who was the mother of Flann Fína son of Oswiu, king of the English'.⁴⁸ From the eleventh century, Irish sources identified Flann Fína as Aldfrith's Irish name and although the lack of a contemporary record of this pseudonym is a cause for some concern,⁴⁹ it is difficult to imagine a motive for fabricating such a connection at a later date and it is generally accepted that some truth lies behind the tradition.⁵⁰ As Thomas Charles-Edwards has pointed out, however, the problem with positing Aldfrith's Irish connections as a motive for Ecgrith's action is not only that there is no evidence for Uí Néill participation in the battle at Dún Nechtain, but that if there was, it would presumably have related to the northern Uí Néill dynasty of Cenél nÉogain, to whom Aldfrith was related, rather than to Síol nÁeda Sláne, the target of the 684 attack.⁵¹

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Ecgrith considered Aldfrith a threat to his position within Northumbria. In fact, it appears from the anonymous Life of Saint Cuthbert that Aldfrith was not recognised as a factor on the Northumbrian political scene prior to his accession. The author of that text claimed that Cuthbert prophesied

⁴⁸ M. A. O'Brien (ed.) *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962) p. 135. See also C. Ireland, 'Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies,' *Celtica* 22 (1991), 64–78.

⁴⁹ D. N. Dumville, 'Two troublesome abbots,' *Celtica* 21 (1990), 149–52.

⁵⁰ There is an alternative version of this pedigree which claims that Aldfrith's grandfather was a certain Cenn Faeled (R. Atkinson, *The Book of Ballymote* (Dublin, 1887), p. 213 b 7–10: *Fina ingen Cindfaeladh mathair Floind mac Gosa*, 'Fina daughter of Cenn Faelad [was] mother of Flann son of Oswiu'), but it has been argued that this man may also have been a member of the Cenél nÉogain (Ireland, 'Aldfrith of Northumbria'). These varying accounts are obviously confused, and the generational gap between Colmán Rímid (d. 604) and Aldfrith (d. 705), while not insurmountable, certainly appears problematic. However Aldfrith's father, Oswiu, had spent some years of his exile amongst the Irish (616x633). This timeframe fits with the probable lifespan of a daughter of Colmán. Considering this, it is generally accepted that at least a grain of truth lies behind the claims regarding Aldfrith's ancestry: Ireland 'Aldfrith of Northumbria'; Moisl, 'Bernician Dynasty', 122–3.

⁵¹ Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 165.

Ecgrith's death a year before it occurred. When the king's sister, Ælfflaed, asked who would succeed to the kingship, Cuthbert replied: *Illum autem non minus tibi esse fratrem usurpaueris quam alterum*, 'You will find him to be a brother no less than the other one'. Ælfflaed failed to recognise the reference to Aldfrith until Cuthbert further explained that the future king was *in aliqua insula super hoc mare*, 'on some island beyond this sea'.⁵² Had Aldfrith held any ambitions regarding the Northumbrian kingship, presumably his sister would have recognised him as a potential successor to Ecgrith. The anonymous author clarified Cuthbert's assertion by saying that at the time the holy man made the prophecy, Aldfrith had been on Iona. This was a year prior to Ecgrith's death, almost exactly when the invasion of Brega occurred. Had Ecgrith seriously wanted to remove his brother from the political scene, an attack on Iona would have been more effective than launching a campaign across the Irish Sea. In fact, it is more likely, considering his early career, that Aldfrith intended to pursue a life in the Church and had no intention of rising to the kingship until after the death of his brother. The invasion of Ireland was not, therefore, a strike against an alliance backing Aldfrith's claims, nor was it a pre-emptive strike against Irish participants in an alliance ranged against Ecgrith.

Recently another source has been cited as evidence for Gaelic participation in the battle at Dún Nechtain. The poem that begins *Iniu feras Bruide cath*, 'Today Bruide fought a battle', survives only in the Fragmentary Annals of Ireland where it follows the record of Aldfrith's death.⁵³ It describes a victory won by a certain Bruide over *mac Ossa*, 'a son of Oswiu', who is described as having been killed in the battle. Although the

⁵² *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, ed. Colgrave, *Two Lives*, p. 104.

⁵³ *Fragmentary Annals*, ed. Radner, p. 54.

king of the Picts at the time of Aldfrith's death was named Bruide (son of Der Ilei) and antagonism between Northumbria and its northern neighbors continued during his reign, Aldfrith is not recorded as having died in battle against this foe. In fact, the Life of Saint Wilfrid records Aldfrith's death at the end of a long illness.⁵⁴ Bruide son of Bile, however, was the Pictish king who defeated and killed Ecgrith in 685 and it is believed, therefore, that this poem records the battle of Dún Nechtain but was misplaced in the annal record by a later copyist.

The language of the poem is far from clear and its references to the combatants are enigmatic. Nonetheless, James Fraser contends that its final lines imply that Bruide's victory was in some way revenge for the attack on Brega. The lines in question read; *cia do rada ait[h]irge, is h-í ind-hí iar n-assa ... ro cúala Críst ar guide roisaorbut Bride bregha*. As it stands, taking the verb in the final phrase as a third person plural future tense, this seems to mean 'even though he [the son of Oswiu] did penance, and that too late in Iona, ... Christ has heard our prayer that hills will save Bruide'. Alternatively, Radner translates the final phrase as 'Bruide would save the hills'.⁵⁵ These lines certainly assert an association between Ecgrith and Iona, but the reference to Brega is far more questionable. As it survives, a reading that would identify the final *brega* of the poem as the kingdom of Brega 'simply does not work linguistically', as Fraser himself recognised, and is dependent on postulating scribal error in the transmission of the text.⁵⁶ Gaelic interest in the battle at Dún Nechtain is not surprising, nor is the lack of

⁵⁴ Stephen, *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, pp. 126–8.

⁵⁵ *Fragmentary Annals*, trans. Radner, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Fraser, *Battle of Dunnichen*, pp. 127–8. Fraser (*Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 200–1, 254), suggests another link between Northumbria's campaigns against the Picts and against the Irish by linking (and sometimes equating) the Berht who led the attack on Brega with Bertred, son of the *subregulus* Beornhaeth. This father and son were both involved

sympathy for Ecgrith evident in the poem. Northumbria had, after all, held Dál Riata in subjection prior to 685. In fact, Dál Riata is a likely place of composition for the poem and any Gaelic involvement in the conflict described probably came from that quarter. Such Gaelic involvement is only speculation, however, and *Iniu feras Bruide cath* is certainly not evidence that Ecgrith's attack on Brega was in any way motivated by SílnÁeda Sláne participation in the campaign against him in northern Britain.

More generally, the attack on Brega fits the pattern of Northumbrian expansion during the seventh century identified by John Maddicott. Maddicott has argued that the process of expansion of Northumbrian power during this period was characterised by the promotion of the 'related interests of church and king in the new territories', including the appropriation of the principal native centres, both ecclesiastical and secular, as 'a means to the transfer of power'.⁵⁷ Brega was, as discussed above, the political heart of Ireland in 684. The prominence accorded in all sources to the wasting of religious centres by the invaders also suggests that churches were intentionally targeted by the attackers. Important churches belonging to both the Columban and the Patrician *paruchia* were situated in Brega, though the sources do not identify which foundations were targeted.

Charles-Edwards has offered an interpretation of the 684 attack that views it in terms compatible with Maddicott's theory, one which places greater emphasis on the

with Ecgrith's campaigns against the Picts. Cf. P. Hunter Blair, 'The Bernicians and their northern frontier', in N. K. Chadwick (ed.), *Studies in early British History* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 137–72.

⁵⁷ J. R. Maddicott, 'Two frontier states: Northumbria and Wessex, c.650–750', in J. R. Maddicott and D. M. Palliser (eds.), *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (London, 2000), pp. 27–28.

ecclesiastical context of the invasion.⁵⁸ For twenty years after the synod of Whitby, he argues, there existed an alliance between Northumbrian secular imperial ambition and the Romanising party within the Church. Possibly dating from as early as Oswiu's letter to Pope Vitalian in the aftermath of the synod, this alliance legitimised Oswiu's, and later Ecgfrith's, northward and westward expansion, culminating in the events of 684 and 685. While the synod of Whitby in 664 had resulted in a decisive victory for the Romanising party within the Northumbrian Church, the other peoples of northern Britain and northern Ireland continued to adhere to a method of dating Easter that the Roman Church considered heretical, or at least schismatic. This made the Churches of the northern Irish, the Picts and the Britons potential targets for that section of the Northumbrian Church which desired to enforce orthodoxy. The head of the Romanising party at Whitby and 'champion of all things Roman', was Wilfrid, sometime bishop of York.⁵⁹ According to his hagiographer, while at a council in Rome in 680 Wilfrid had declared his faith *pro omni aquilonali parte Brittanniae et Hiberniae insulisque quae ab Anglorum et Brittonum necnon Scottorum et Pictorum gentibus*, 'for all the northern part of Britain and of Ireland, and for the islands that were settled by the peoples of the English and the Britons and also of the Irish and the Picts'.⁶⁰ These claims, as well as the expansionist policies of the Northumbrian kings, could be legitimised as attempts to impose orthodoxy. The 684 attack, therefore, probably aimed to establish Northumbrian political dominance in the northern half of Ireland – perhaps on a model similar to that which existed in northern Britain – and possibly also to make real the claims of Wilfrid to ecclesiastical authority over the northern half of Ireland. In this case,

⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 417, 432–8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 706.

⁶⁰ Stephen, *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi*, p. 114.

the Annals of Clonmacnoise's reference to the alliance between the Irish and the Britons, if it has any historical value, might have referred to the association of the Irish and the British in support of the 'Celtic' Easter.

An interesting account of Northumbrian attack contained in the probably eleventh-century Fragmentary Annals of Ireland might suggest that, by the date of their composition, certain Irish scholars perceived a connection between the Paschal controversy and Ecgfrith's raid. The religious and moral failings of the seventh-century Irish Church are listed, including the irregularities regarding the dating of Easter and the impious actions of some clerics, and these are explicitly stated to have been the reason for a whole series of catastrophes which befell the country:

ttangattar uilc iomdha i nEirinn tríd sin, .i. an bóár mór, 7 gorta romhór, 7 teadhmana iomdha, 7 eachturchineadhóigh do lot na hEireann. Battur amhlaid sin go fada, .i. go h-aimsir Adhamhnain. Eisdhe an no madh abb ro ghabh la tar éis Coluim Cille. Brad mór do breith do Saxanaibh a hEireann. Adhamhnan do dhul do h-athchuingidh na braide.

many evils came to Ireland on account of that, that is, the great cattle murrain, and the vast famine, and many plagues, and foreigners destroying Ireland. It was like that for a long time, that is, until the time of Adomnán. He was the ninth abbot of Iona after Colum Cille. The *Saxain* took a great prey from Ireland. Adomnán went to redeem the hostages.⁶¹

⁶¹ *Fragmentary Annals*, p. 56. Compare the ninth-century *Cáin Domnaig* (ed. V. Hull, *Ériu* 20 (1966), p. 170), which claims that a transgression of the 'Law of Sunday' will lead to similar disasters: *Is ed beres for cúlu cech torath do-cuirethar muir 7 tír eter ith 7 mlicht 7 mes. 7 is ed do-gní íascratha ambriti. Is ed do-beir nauna 7 gortai 7 sína sóeba for tótha cloéna. Is ed do-beir cenéla echtranna co claidbib díglae dia mbrith hi fognam i tíre geinte. Is ed do-beir Catha 7 choicthiu eter na cenéla cona bíd síd na subae na cairde i cech dú,* 'This it is that sets back every produce that sea and earth bring forth, including corn, milk and mast. This it is that makes fisheries barren. This it is that brings famines, hungers and unseasonable weathers on perverse peoples. This it is that brings foreign races with avenging swords to bear them into bondage in pagan lands. This it is that brings battles and wars among the *cenéla* so that nowhere is there either peace or happiness or friendship.' The reference is probably to Vikings: M. Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Friend and foe: Vikings in ninth- and tenth-century Irish literature', in Clarke, H. B., Ní

This image of divine retribution for religious and moral irregularities arriving in the form of foreign invasion owes an obvious debt to Bede and, more especially, to Gildas, the sixth-century British cleric whose *De Excidio Britanniae* presents the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain as the result of the sinful lives of British kings.⁶² It is highly unlikely, however, that the author of the Fragmentary Annals had access to sources that made the link between the Easter question and the attack explicit.

Whatever the motives behind the invasion, its outcome was apparently not considered a success within Northumbria. Bede clearly condemned the attack on Brega and stated that it was the cause of Ecgfrith's downfall the following year. Moreover, in his *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, Stephen says that, after the expulsion of Wilfrid in 678, *usque ad mortem sine victoria regnabat*, '[Ecgfrith] gained no victory until the day of his death'.⁶³ Evidently neither commentator thought of the attack on Brega as a success. Despite this, the impact of the invasion in Ireland was very great. In its immediate aftermath both the ecclesiastical and secular establishments reacted by attempting to protect themselves from future recurrences. This is first evident in a text emanating from Armagh composed close to the date of the attack.

Immediately following Tírechán's *Collecanea* in the *Breviarium* that survives in the Book of Armagh, there are some brief notes concerning Patrick, the *Notae Suppletoriae*

Mhaonaigh, M., and Ó Floinn, R. (eds.), *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 388–89.

⁶² Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, ed. and tr. M. Winterbottom, *Gildas, the Ruin of Britain and other works* (London, 1978).

⁶³ Stephen, *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, p. 50.

ad Tirechanum.⁶⁴ Along with the closely associated *Additamenta* and *Notulae*, the *Breviarium* formed the ‘Composite Life’ that lies behind the later Latin *Vitae* and the Irish Tripartite Life of Patrick.⁶⁵ It has often been remarked that Tírechán’s work appears unfinished or incompletely copied.⁶⁶ Ludwig Bieler and Thomas Charles-Edwards have both suggested that the *Notae* do not seem to have been part of Tírechán’s original composition,⁶⁷ and Richard Sharpe has warned against accepting Tírechán’s authorship of them.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, it has been attractive to some to see in these notes a summary of the unfinished portion of Tírechán’s work. So, for instance, it seemed to Bieler that for at least some of the *Notae*, including that to be discussed presently, ‘Tírechán’s authorship was a distinct possibility’.⁶⁹

Amongst these notes were listed the three petitions of St Patrick. Later tradition held that these were petitions made by Patrick in conversation with an angel at Crúachain.⁷⁰ According to the text:

Hae sunt tres petitiones Patricii, ut nobis traditae sunt Hibernensibus, rogans i) ut suscipiatur unusquisque nostrum poenitentiam agens licet in extreme uitae suae die ut non claudetur in inferno, ii) ne barbarae gentes dominantur nobis in sempiternum ... iii) ut ne superuixerit aliqis nostrum, id est Hibernensium, ante septem annos ante diem iudicii, quia septem annis ante iudicium delebuntur equore

⁶⁴ *Notae Suppletoriae ad Tirechanum*, ed. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, pp. 164–65; R. Sharpe, ‘Palaeographical considerations in the study of the Patrician documents in the Book of Armagh’, *Scriptorium* 36 (1982), 16–19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16–19; L. Bieler, *Four Latin Lives of Saint Patrick* (Dublin, 1971), pp. 9, 33–4.

⁶⁶ Sharpe, ‘Palaeographic considerations’, 17, 26; Binchy, ‘Patrick and his biographers’, 64–5; Swift, ‘Tírechán’s motives’, 53.

⁶⁷ Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, p. 43, esp. fn. 4; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 10, fn. 13.

⁶⁸ Sharpe, ‘Palaeographical considerations’, 17, fn. 47, warns that ‘there seems to be no possibility of discussing whether or not these [isolated passages] are by [Tírechán]; we must behave as though his text ends at *hi Cassiul*’.

⁶⁹ Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, p. 44.

⁷⁰ *Vita Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, ed. Bieler, *Four Latin Lives*, pp. 180–81.

These are the three petitions of Patrick, as they have been handed down to us, the men of Ireland: he requested: I) That every one of us should be accepted if he did penance even on his last day when his life will be judged, so that he will not be imprisoned in hell, II) that no foreign nations should rule over us forever ... III) that none of us, that is the men of Ireland, should live longer than seven years before the day of judgement, because seven years before judgement, they will be destroyed by the sea.⁷¹

The use of *barbarus* in this context is interesting. Tírechán sometimes used the term to refer to Irishmen, including Christians in Patrick's retinue,⁷² but in this instance Bieler's translation as 'foreign' seems appropriate, especially considering the vehemence with which they are contrasted with 'us, that is the men of Ireland'. This interpretation is corroborated by the evidence of later Patrician hagiography which incorporated aspects of these *Notae*. The *Vita Tertia*, which has been variously dated to the eighth, ninth or, more vaguely, before the twelfth century,⁷³ rendered the *barbarae gentes* as *alienigenae*, 'foreigners'.⁷⁴

Of course, the term *barbarus* carried negative connotations, even if it was used with reference to Christians. A brief comparison with Bede's use of the term might prove enlightening. In his account of the 'rebellion' of Cadwallon and Penda against the Northumbrians, Bede tells us that Penda was a *paganus*, but Cadwallon was

barbarus erat pagano saeuior. ... Caedualla, quamuis nomen et professionem haberet Christiani, adeo tamen erat animo ac moribus barbarus, ut ne sexui quidem muliebri uel innocuae paruulorum parceret aetati, quin uniuersos atrocitate ferina morti per tormenta contraderet, multo tempore tota eorum prouincias debachando

⁷¹ *Notae Suppletoriae ad Tirechanum*, ed. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, pp. 164–65.

⁷² Tírechán, *Collectanea*, pp. 136, 140.

⁷³ Byrne and Francis, 'Two Lives', 8.

⁷⁴ *Vita Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, ed. L. Bieler, *Four Latin Lives of Saint Patrick* (Dublin, 1971), pp. 180–81: *rogavit ... ut alienigenae in hanc insulam non habitent usque in diem iudicii*, '(Patrick) asked...that no foreign peoples should inhabit this island until the day of Judgement.' Bieler followed the previous editor, Bury, in thinking that the reference was to Viking attackers, which is surprising considering he recognised Tírechán's reference to the Northumbrian invasion.

peruagatus, ac totam genus Anglorum Britanniae finibus erasurum se esse deliberans. Sed nec religione Christianae, quae apud eos exorta erat.

a *barbarus* who was even more cruel than the *paganus*. ... Cadwallon, although a Christian by name and profession, was nevertheless a barbarian in heart and disposition and spared neither women nor innocent children. With bestial cruelty he put all to death by torture and for a long time raged through all their land, meaning to wipe out the whole English nation from the land of Britain. Nor did he pay any respect to the Christian religion which had sprung up amongst them.⁷⁵

Bede's *barbarus*, then, was a cruel and brutal foreigner attacker whose antagonism was directed specifically towards the author's nation and who had no respect for the Church. This would seem to fit well with the *Nota's* juxtaposition of the *barbarae gentes* and the *Hibernenses* as well as the references in all the records of the Northumbrian attack to the targetting of churches.

There were, of course, other foreigners active in Ireland during the period of the Northumbrian attack. The annals record a series of battles and skirmishes involving British soldiers in Ireland over the course of more than a quarter of a century beginning in 682 when Britons attacked Mag Line, a kingdom of the Cruithni in the north-east.⁷⁶ Later entries record the involvement of Britons in alliance with the Ulaid in 697, in the killing of a contender for the kingship of Brega in 702, in defeat at the hands of the Ulaid during the following year and, finally, in alliance with the king of Leinster in 709, after which they disappear from the record.⁷⁷ It is difficult to see such a series of events as entirely unconnected from one another, but opinion has been divided about the meaning of this concentration of British activity in the context of the Northumbrian invasion. In Alfred Smyth's view, these were the 'Brittaines' depicted by the Annals of Clonmacnoise as having been instrumental in drawing down Ecgfrith's wrath down

⁷⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 11.20, pp. 202–5.

⁷⁶ *AU*, 682.

⁷⁷ *AU*, 697, 702, 703, 709.

upon the Irish of Brega. He believed that they were a band of warriors from amongst the military elite of Rheged who had sought refuge in Ireland in the face of a Northumbrian offensive against their kingdom.⁷⁸ Aldfrith's Irish connections, Smyth contended, were the first reason Ecgrith had for 'hating the Irish', the other being that 'they had taken in the most dangerous element in the kingdom of Rheged', the dispossessed warrior elite.⁷⁹ Conversely, Charles-Edwards suggested that the 682 attack might have been perpetrated by allies or subjects of Ecgrith and connected to the invasion three years later. 'This is quite likely,' he contended, 'because they probably came from the Isle of Man, subject to Northumbria since Edwin's reign, or Rheged, subject since at least c.650'.⁸⁰

It is not necessarily the case that the attack on Mag Line in 682 was related to the later British activity in Ireland; it was certainly the outlier of the group of recorded instances of British involvement in Irish affairs, separated from the next next by fifteen years. If it was an isolated episode, it might have been sponsored by Ecgrith in an attempt to spread panic in Ireland. Given their concentration over this relatively short period of time, however, it is more likely that the recorded instances of British military activity in Ireland were related and in this case it is unlikely that Ecgrith lay behind the 682 attack as the activities of these Britons in Ireland continued for nearly a quarter of a century after his death. It seems more plausible, as Alfred Smyth suggested, that the presence of these Britons in Ireland reflected unrest in one of the northern British kingdoms. This might have been Rheged or Man, because the more northerly kingdom of Dumbarton was probably that 'part of the British nation' that, according to Bede,

⁷⁸ Smyth, *Warlords and holy men*, pp. 25–6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, and *idem*, *Celtic Leinster*, pp. 118–21.

⁸⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 433, note 75.

'recovered their independence' after the death of Ecgrith in 685. It does not seem plausible, however, that Ecgrith would attack Brega because of the presence of British exiles in Ireland, especially since the only tenuous evidence that they were associated with Síl nÁeda Sláne dates from fifteen years after the Northumbrian invasion. In fact, the activities of these foreign soldiers seem entirely without any coherent political strategy, and their tendency to form and break alliances suggests they should be regarded as roving mercenaries, seeking service wherever it was available. Theirs was not a concerted effort at invasion or conquest but rather a search for service that involved them in the wars of their Irish allies and employers.

It is unlikely that the activities of these roving mercenaries created the same sense of panic and fear in Ireland as did the destruction that resulted from the attack by the Northumbrians, the most powerful kingdom in northern Britain. Other contemporary sources, as will be seen below, are explicit in their concern with the English, and later Patrician hagiography makes Patrick's petition more specific in this regard. The compiler of the Irish Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick, possibly writing in the tenth century, identified Tírechán's *barbarae gentes* as the English: Patrick asked *Saxain náró trebat Héirinn ar áiss nách ar éicinn céin mbéo-sa for nim* 'that the English should not inhabit Ireland, by consent or by force, so long as I am in heaven'.⁸¹ The *barbarae gentes* of Patrick's petition in the *Notae*, therefore, are almost certainly the Northumbrians.

Two further aspects of the phrasing of Patrick's petition in the *Notae* in the Book of Armagh are particularly noteworthy. The first is the contrast drawn between 'us' and 'them' and the emphasis on 'us' as *Hibernenses*, 'men of Ireland'. The implicit unity of the

⁸¹ *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, ed. ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939), p. 73. For some of the debate regarding the date, see Byrne and Francis, 'Two Lives', 7.

latter as Patrick's congregation is exactly what one would expect to read in Patrician text of this period. The juxtaposition of the *barbarae gentes* and *Hibernenses* only reinforces this image of unity, especially if the term carried some of the connotations Bede associated with it. The second point is that the text is not just concerned with protecting the men of Ireland from foreign attack, but explicitly with issues of leadership and rule; *dominor* is the verb used, which could carry negative connotations implying 'to rule as a despot' or 'to domineer'. This might perhaps tell us something about the perceived imperialistic motives behind the Northumbrian raid, both political and ecclesiastical. The author of the *Notae* was apparently concerned with protecting the Irish from foreign rule, plausibly in an ecclesiastical and secular sense. This concern with rulership corresponds to Tírechán's focus on the question of authority in his *Collectanea*. As has been discussed previously, one of his primary aims was to promote the combined authority of Armagh and Tara as joint ecclesiastical and political authorities over all Ireland.⁸² As Swift pointed out, Tírechán was very careful in his use of terminology, using *regnum* only to refer to the kingdoms enjoyed by the Uí Néill in Tara and the successors of Patrick in Armagh and using *regnare* only in reference to Lóegaire mac Néill.⁸³ If the *Notae* were written by Tírechán, or even if the author had read the *Collectanea*, the implied contrast between the *regna* of Patrick and Conall Cremthainne, on the one hand, and the implied *dominatio* of the *barbarae gentes*, on the other, could thus be read as a political statement: better the authority of Armagh and SílnÁeda Sláne than foreign rule.

⁸² See Chapter 1.

⁸³ Swift, 'Tírechán's motivation', 70–1.

A more secular reaction to the Northumbrian attack is expressed in *Críth Gablach*.⁸⁴ As previously discussed, this text includes guidelines for the enactment of *rechtgi*, ordinances that a king could pledge upon his peoples on certain occasions. The three *rechtgi ríge* listed by the text were: *rechtge do indarbhu echtarchinúil .i. fri Saxanu 7 rechtge fri tuar toraid, 7 recht crettme adannai, amail rongab recht Adamnán*, ‘a *rechtge* to repel a foreign race, that is, against the English, and a *rechtge* to bring in the harvest, and a *rechtge* of faith which kindles (piety), such as the law of Adomnán’.⁸⁵ The first of these *rechtgi* represents a response to the invasion of 684 and illustrates how the secular world made provision to defend itself in the case of future recurrences of English invasion by giving kings the power to organise armed resistance. Unfortunately, the text nowhere outlines how such resistance might have been coordinated in practise. Sea-borne attacks were extremely difficult to defend against for a society without a standing army, though in the case of the Northumbrian attack of 684 the possibility that the intended targets of the raid had forewarning might have assisted their preparations.⁸⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the development of royal edicts was likely an innovation in late seventh-century Ireland, one possibly inspired by continental practice and that enhanced royal authority. This section of *Críth Gablach* refers alternatively to kings who ruled a single *túath* and to others who ruled multiple *túatha*. In the case of the *rechtge ríge*, however, it seems clear that the rights of overkings,

⁸⁴ *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy (Dublin, 1941).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 522–23.

⁸⁶ If Bede’s report that Ecgbert attempted to dissuade Ecgrith from his planned attack is more than a literary topos, the holy man presumably heard news of the king’s plan while in Ireland. And if news could reach him in Ireland it could also, presumably have reached the ears of SílnÁeda Sláne.

specifically provincial kings such as the king of Cashel mentioned in the text, are under discussion. The right of a provincial king to enact an edict to repel a foreign invasion, an edict enforced by the handing over of pledges, might also have been an innovation of this period, one that extended the traditional right of a king to claim military services in the form of hosting that are also outlined in *Críth Gablach*.⁸⁷ A provincial king was presumably the only ruler with enough authority to muster a force that would be able to stand up to the level of threat posed by an attack from a powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

The reference to the king of Cashel as one who might enact a *rechtge* to expel the *Saxain* is interesting in light of the ecclesiastical connotations of the Northumbrian attack discussed above.⁸⁸ If the attack on Brega was related to the contemporary controversy regarding the dating of Easter then Munster, where the Roman practice had been followed for decades prior to the 680s, should not have feared attack. That a jurist made provision for defence against the English and associated this act with the king of Cashel suggests that the impact of the 684 attack on Brega was felt far beyond the boundaries of the kingdom of Brega. If the provision for royal *cánai* to defend against such an eventuality was a novel departure in the late seventh century, the Northumbrian attack might, therefore, have contributed to the expansion of the legislative authority of Irish kings.

Despite the paltry evidence of the annals, these other sources cast substantial light on the immediate impact of the 684 attack in Ireland. They illustrate clearly that, as earlier commentators suggested, the invasion aroused a sense of fear and panic in both the ecclesiastical and secular worlds. In reaction, Armagh was provided with a defence

⁸⁷ *Críth Gablach*, ll. 509–13.

⁸⁸ *Críth Gablach*'s origins are uncertain, but the reference to the king of Cashel might suggest that the text was compiled in Munster.

against the pretensions of the Northumbrian Church in the form of the most formidable weapon in its arsenal; a sanction from Saint Patrick. The jurists who produced *Críth Gablach* provided perhaps more practical measures by making provision for great kings to organise armed resistance in case of future incursions. These reactions are entirely in keeping with the dual-pronged nature of the invasion itself. They also mirror the reaction Bede ascribed to the Irish; they fought and they prayed.

According to the annals, Adamnán of Iona secured the release of captives taken by the Northumbrians just two years after the attack.⁸⁹ What is curious about this is the fact that, although he tells his readers that he visited Aldfrith's court twice during these years, Adamnán is completely silent about both the Northumbrian attack on Brega and the release of the captives. In her Jarrow Lecture, Clare Stancliffe described Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* as, 'a work of reconciliation' after decades of conflict between the Irish Church and the Romanising faction of the Northumbrian Church.⁹⁰ A similar statement could be made about Adamnán's *Vita Columbae*, although the abbot of Iona might have had more pragmatic motivations if, as Richard Sharpe has suggested, he hoped to use his relationship with Aldfrith to re-establish the links between Iona, Lindisfarne and the other churches associated with Áedán's mission, links which had been severed less than twenty-five years before Aldfrith's accession.⁹¹ By ignoring the impact of the attack on Brega and concentrating instead on the rapid re-

⁸⁹ AU 687: *Adomnanus captiuos reduxit ad Hiberniam .lx.*, 'Adomnán brought back sixty captives to Ireland'. The same tradition that claimed Aldfrith had been Adomnán's student also held that Fínsnechta Fledach had been Adomnán's patron during his youth and the abbot of Iona may even have acted as Fínsnechta's envoy in retrieving the captives: Radner (ed.), *Fragmentary Annals*, pp. 22–24; R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), p. 47.

⁹⁰ C. Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, Jarrow Lecture 2003 (Newcastle, 2003), p. 27.

⁹¹ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 48.

establishment of amicable relations between his monastery and the Northumbrians, however, Adomnán set the tone for modern historians who have continued to gloss over the effect of Ecgrith's invasion.

Nor is Adomnán's silence on the matter the only evidence of such a reconciliatory outlook within the Iona community. Pádraig Ó Riain has argued that the Martyrology of Tallaght underwent a stage of its development on Iona early in the eighth century.⁹² During this phase of its compilation, he argues, several additions were made to the Martyrology including, astonishingly, the listing of Ecgrith amongst those to be commemorated on 27 May, exactly a week later than the date of his death recorded by Bede. His name has been Gaelicised by the Iona scribe who also attached to it the diminutive ending of endearment: *Echbritan mac Ossu*.⁹³ Ó Riain explained Ecgrith's presence in the Martyrology with reference to the claim of Simeon of Durham, writing several centuries after the event, that after his death at Dún Nechtain Ecgrith was buried on Iona.⁹⁴ Furthermore, as noted above, the poem *Iniu feras Bruide cath* also refers to a link between the 'son of Oswiu' whose death it records and Iona. The possibility that Ecgrith might have ended up on Iona after the battle would have been facilitated by Aldfrith's presence on Iona and his friendship with Adomnán and, if true,

⁹² P. Ó Riain, *Anglo-Saxon Ireland: the evidence of the Martyrology of Tallaght*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures 3 (Cambridge, 1993); *idem*, *Feastdays of the Saints: a history of Irish martyrologies* (Bruxelles, 2006), pp. 55–75.

⁹³ *The Martyrology of Tallaght from the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100–4 in the Royal Library, Brussels*, ed. R. I. Best and H. J. Lawlor (London, 1931), p. 46. Considering the evidence of the Martyrology of Tallaght and the claim of *Iniu Feras Bruide Cath* that Ecgrith did penance on Iona prior to death, should the certainty with which historians date his death to 20 May be reviewed to recognise the possibility that he may have survived the battle of Dún Nechtain only to be transported to Iona where he died of his wounds a week later, after having done penance? Perhaps just as puzzling as Ecgrith's inclusion, as Ó Riain notes (*Feastdays*, p. 58), is the absence of Aldfrith from the Martyrology, especially considering his Iona connections.

⁹⁴ Simeon, *Historia Dunhelmensis Ecclesiae*, p. 32; Fraser, *Battle of Dunnichen*, p. 128.

this 'might have led to his name being added to the monastery's list of commemorations'.⁹⁵

Adamnán's silence regarding the Northumbrian attack on Brega and the inclusion of Ecgfrith in the Martyrology of Tallaght certainly suggests that there existed a different attitude towards the episode on Iona was attested in the sources discussed above. As well as the monastery's continuing good relations with Northumbria, the dynastic affiliations of the abbots of Iona might also have influenced their perspective on events. Cenél Conaill certainly had nothing to lose from Northumbrian attacks on Síl nÁeda Sláne and, in the context of their struggle for the kingship of Tara, might even have welcomed Ecgfrith's incursion. Moreover, Síl nÁeda Sláne was associated with the Patrician Church and, as Adamnán was aware, had seriously impinged upon the Columban Church's key supporters in Brega, the Ciannacht Breg, in the decades before the Northumbrian attack.⁹⁶ Adamnán and Iona, then, did not necessarily feel any sympathy for the fate of Síl nÁeda Sláne, though if the attack had been inspired in part by the Easter question one can only assume that their reaction would have been mixed at best.

While the community of Iona might have been willing to gloss over the Northumbrian attack for diplomatic reasons, in Ireland there was no such desire to downplay its impact and references to it continued to appear in eighth-century sources. *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* is a pseudo-prophetic list of kings in versified form.⁹⁷ The title attributes the prophecy to an important Irish dynastic figure, Conn Cétchathach,

⁹⁵ P. Ó Riain, *Feastdays*, p. 58.

⁹⁶ Byrnes, 'The Árd Ciannachta in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', pp. 127–36.

⁹⁷ *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*, ed. E. Bhreathnach and K. Murray, in Bhreathnach (ed.), *The kingship and landscape of Tara*, p. 86.

common ancestor of the Uí Néill and the Connachta and the text purports to list Conn's future successors from the time of his son down to the date of composition. As John Carey has highlighted, many of the kings named serve as the subjects of verbs with a third person, singular, feminine pronominal object: "Thus we find *áilfithus Fiechri* "F. will beseech her", *tus-nena ... ánChrimthand* "splendid C. will bind her", *gébthus Aíd* :A. will seize her", etc.⁹⁸ Other poems that share this feature, including *Nidu dír dermait* and *Áiliu iath nÉrenn* specify that the object referred to by the pronouns is *Fótle*, in the former case, and *Ériu*, in the latter. "These comparanda confirm the general view that the unexpressed object in *BCC* is also Ireland, or the sovereignty of Ireland' Carey argued.⁹⁹ Carey perhaps overstates his case here, but the similarities are certainly striking and the possibility that the kingship of Ireland rather than just Tara was at stake can not be dismissed.

The current, and most plausible theory concerning this poem is that it was composed in two stages; the first section originated during the reign of Fínsnechta Fledach and its content identifies the poet as a Síl nÁeda Sláne propagandist.¹⁰⁰ This section of the poem has no reference to the Northumbrian attack. This may have been because it was written early during Fínsnechta's reign, as Gerard Murphy suggested, or it may have been because the poet did not wish to tarnish Fínsnechta's reputation.¹⁰¹ The final portion of the text was composed about 720, some thirty-five years after the

⁹⁸ J. Carey, 'The narrative setting of *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*', *Études Celtiques* 32 (1996), 189.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189–90.

¹⁰⁰ Bhreathnach, 'Níell cáich úa Néill nasctar géill: the political context of *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*', in *eadem* (ed.), *The kingship and landscape of Tara*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ G. Murphy, 'On the dates of two sources used in Thurneysen's *Heldensage*', *Ériu* 16 (1952), 150.

Northumbrian attack.¹⁰² The *Saxain* appear in the final lines of the poem: *Saxain imchil, Immus- aue Coircc -ebla. Is é reithe Muman márlaithe i Temuir.*¹⁰³ The archaic language and use of kennings rather than real names makes it particularly difficult to interpret the meaning of this section of the text. The English are described as *imchil*, which may be translated as either ‘encircling’ or ‘of great faults’, hence ‘wicked’.¹⁰⁴ In either instance, the connotation is certainly threatening. The rest of the section reads ‘the descendant of Corcc will drive them out. He is the overlord of Munster of great princes in Tara.’

The meaning of these lines is less than transparent and interpretation of them is not helped by the fact that the early decades of the eighth century witnessed substantial political upheaval amongst the various branches of Síl nÁeda Sláne.¹⁰⁵ The most recent editors of the text, Edel Bhreathnach and Kevin Murray, believe that the reference to the English may have been an attempt to impugn the reputation of Fergal mac Maíle Dúin, Fínsnechta’s Genél nÉogain successor in the kingship of Tara, by transposing the attack to his reign. The reference to the attack of the *Saxain* might have been intended ‘as an indicator of a king’s misrule’ they suggested.¹⁰⁶ Fergal is elsewhere described as

¹⁰² Bhreathnach, ‘*Néill cáich úa Néill*’, p. 61.

¹⁰³ *Baile Chuinn*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁴ For different translations see; Bhreathnach and Murray, ‘*Baile Chuinn*’, p. 86; F. J. Byrne, *The Rise of the Uí Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland*, O’Donnell Lecture, 1969 (Dublin, 1969), p. 27, note 66; *idem*, ‘Seventh-century documents’, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 108 (1967), 168–9, note 19. Gerard Murphy’s translation taking the *aue* of the poem as the preposition ‘from’ rather than the noun ‘grandson/descendant’ is certainly an error; Murphy, ‘On the dates’, 149.

¹⁰⁵ Bhreathnach (‘*Temoria*’, 78–82; *eadem.*, ‘*Néill cáich úa Néill*’, pp. 49–68) believes that the context was the rise of the family of Níall son of Cernach Sotal amongst Síl nÁeda Sláne toward the end of the reign of Fínsnechta Fledach, the kennings at the end of the poem being used due to the uncertainty of this period of internecine warfare and the increasing dominance of the Northern Uí Néill.

¹⁰⁶ Bhreathnach and Murray, ‘*Baile Chuinn*’, p. 94.

anflaith, ‘unking’, indicating that the poet clearly didn’t favour him.¹⁰⁷ They also believed the clause concerning the ‘descendant of Corcc’ was unconnected to the reference to the English and instead expressed *Síl nÁeda Sláne* desire for the *Cenél nÉogain* to be driven out of the kingship of Tara.¹⁰⁸ It seems more likely, however, that those intended by the poet to be expelled were the immediately previously mentioned English. The descendant of Corcc supposed to do this was almost certainly Cathal mac Finngúine, king of Munster, who died in 742.¹⁰⁹ Later Munster propaganda sources depicted Cathal as one of the few kings of Munster to have become king of Tara.¹¹⁰ Cathal was probably never recognised as such during his own lifetime, but it is clear that he at the very least posed a considerable threat to the established *Uí Néill* hierarchy. In 721 he raided Brega, a feat he may have repeated in 733,¹¹¹ and in 737 he met Áed Allán, the *Cenél nÉogain* king of Tara, for a *rígdál* at Terryglass, on the border of their spheres of influence.¹¹² As on the continent, meetings on the borders between

¹⁰⁷ *Baile Chuinn*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁸ Bhreathnach and Murray, ‘*Baile Chuinn*’, p. 94.

¹⁰⁹ *AU*, 742.

¹¹⁰ For example, the poem *Teist Chathail meic Fhinguine* (*Book of Leinster*, formerly *Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. R. I. Best and M. A. O’Brien, 3 (Dublin, 1957), pp. 627–8) calls Cathal the king of Connacht, high-king of Ulster, king of Leinster, *ardrí Temrach*, ‘high-king of Tara’, and even *ardrí Herend*, ‘high-king of Ireland’. Another Munster text, the *Annals of Inisfallen* (*The Annals of Inisfallen*, ed. and tr. S. Mac Airt (Dublin, 1951)), retrospectively describes Cathal as king of Ireland both in 721 and at his death in 742.

¹¹¹ *AU*, 721: *Vastatio Maighi Breg du Cathal mac Finngúine ocus do Murchad mac Braini*; 733, *Coscraeth Cathail do Domnall a Tailtae ocus coscraeth Fallomuín do Cathail a Tlactghu*. See A. Mac Shamhráin and P. Byrne, ‘Prosopography 1: Kings named in *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* and *The Airgíalla Charter Poem*’, in Bhreathnach (ed.), *Kingship and Landscape*, p. 210; Bhreathnach, ‘*Níell cáich úa Néill*’, p. 61. For an opposing view of the events of 733, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 477–9.

¹¹² *AU*, 737: *Dal iter Aedh n-Alddan 7 Cathal oc Tir Da Glas*.

two kingdoms implied that the participants recognised one another as equals in stature.¹¹³

The secondary phase of the compilation of *Baile Chuinn*, when the reference to the threatening *Saxain* was added, occurred during the period of Cathal mac Finguine's prominence. Edel Bhreathnach has suggested that Cathal's raid on Brega in 721 might have revived memories of the Northumbrian incursion over thirty-five years earlier and that *Baile Chuinn* was drawing a parallel between the two events.¹¹⁴ Francis John Byrne had a different interpretation. In his opinion the final section of the poem presented 'tantalizing ambiguity: it seems to foretell either that the high-king shall extend his sway over Munster or that a Munster prince shall assume the kingship of Tara'.¹¹⁵ It seems entirely plausible that *Baile Chuinn* was updated for the benefit of Cathal mac Finguine and represented an expression of his claim on Tara, a claim he attempted to realise in 721 with his attack on Brega. If so, the author's choice of expressing Cathal's suitability for the kingship is particularly interesting, for it seems to imply that his ability to drive away the English threat qualifies him for the kingship of Tara or, as Carey's interpretation would suggest, of Ireland. As in the *Notae* associated with Tírechán's *Collectanea*, then, protecting Ireland from attacking *Saxain* was associated in *Baile Chuinn* with claims to kingship. A generation after the event, therefore, the Northumbrian invasion was still alive in the imagination of the Irish *literati* and was being put to propagandist use by those seeking to influence the highest levels of power in Ireland. This was not the first, nor the last time the image of the English invaders was to be used in this manner.

¹¹³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 280.

¹¹⁴ Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', 81

¹¹⁵ Byrne, 'Seventh-century documents', 168–9; *idem*, *Rise of the Uí Néill*, p. 18.

Nor was 684 the first time that the *Saxain* had attacked Ireland, at least according to the Irish annals. The Annals of Ulster record in 443 *cétna brat Saxan di Ere*, ‘the first plunder [was taken] by the English from Ireland’, after which a note has been added in the manuscript correcting the final phrase to *ind h-Eirinn*, ‘in Ireland’.¹¹⁶ In 471, the same annals record *praeda secunda Saxonum de Hibernia*, ‘the second plunder [was taken] by the English from Ireland’.¹¹⁷ Charles-Edwards’ translation of *Saxain* as ‘Saxons’ rather than the more usual ‘English’ implies that he thought that the *Saxain* of these entries were to be distinguished from the English of the seventh century – presumably as Saxon pirates.¹¹⁸ Although the occurrence of such raids is not impossible, it is doubtful that these accounts are of any historical value for events of the fifth century.

One person who did think that these references were of historical value was James Carney, although he did not think that they really contained references to the *Saxain*.¹¹⁹ The annals ascribe knowledge of the raid in 471 to Maucteus, a disciple of St Patrick.¹²⁰ In Carney’s opinion, Maucteus was a crucial preserver of historical information about Patrick and these two references recorded important episodes in Patrick’s career. In order for the annal entries to make sense as such, however, he argued that the extant record included a considerable scribal error. These were not raids perpetrated by the *Saxain*, but raids perpetrated against the *sancti*. Carney suggested that an abbreviation of *sanctorum* had been mistakenly expanded as, initially, *Saxanorum* (as the text of the

¹¹⁶ AU, 434.

¹¹⁷ AU, 471. Both entries are included in *The Chronicle of Ireland*, tr. T. M. Charles-Edwards.

¹¹⁸ Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 64, note 3.

¹¹⁹ J. Carney, *The problem of St. Patrick* (Dublin, 1961), pp. 115–17.

¹²⁰ AU 473; Charles-Edwards (trans.), *Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 73.

Annals of Inisfallen records¹²¹), that led to the misunderstanding. Originally, he argued, the 434 annal recorded the taking captive of Patrick and other *sancti* and their being brought brought into Ireland and the record for 471 depicted the raid on Ireland in which Coroticus took *sancti* out of Ireland into captivity. In the case of the 434 annal, then, he preferred the alternative reading provided in the Annals of Ulster.¹²²

Carney's theory was dismissed by Binchy as 'grossly improbable guesswork'.¹²³ He thought it more likely

that the entry in AI under 434 correctly reproduces the words of the original compilation and means exactly what it says: that Saxon pirates who (as we know from external sources) were active round the coasts of the British Isles at this period raided Irish territory for plunder, and that the same performance was repeated in 471.¹²⁴

Binchy qualified this belief by questioning 'whether the dates are even approximately correct', but it is not clear how such an understanding related to his earlier statement that he did not believe that the annals contained 'a single "genuine entry" throughout the whole of the fifth century' and that he had 'a strong suspicion that the annals of the fifth and sixth centuries represent a deliberate re-writing of history for the purpose of exalting the Uí Néill dynasties at the expense of their rivals'.¹²⁵ Binchy did point out the weakness of Carney's argument though; not only that it relies on absolutely no extant evidence, but that Carney, on another occasion, also tried to explain away an

¹²¹ AI 471.

¹²² Carney, *The problem of St. Patrick*, pp. 117–18. There is variation in the phrasing of this entry in other annal collections; see Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 64 note 3.

¹²³ D. A. Binchy 'Patrick and his biographers: ancient and modern', *Studia Hibernica* 2 (1962), 111.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71, 75; Kelleher, 'Early Irish history and pseudo-history', 113–27.

inconvenient reference to *Scotti* (in the genitive plural *Scottorum*) as another mistaken expansion of the abbreviated form of *sanctorum*.¹²⁶

A preferable interpretation of the references to fifth-century English raids is associated with Binchy's belief regarding the nature of the fifth-century material in the annals in general. Daniel Mc Carthy's recent proposition that contemporary annal-writing was being carried out in Ireland from the early fifth century ran counter to the established consensus regarding the early evolution of these texts, which has been reaffirmed by Nicholas Evans.¹²⁷ All the major annal collections share a common core until 911; a text no longer extant but commonly known as the Chronicle of Ireland.¹²⁸ The keeping of annals probably began on Iona toward the end of the sixth century, and the so-called Iona Chronicle that formed the basis of the Chronicle of Ireland was maintained there until c.740.¹²⁹ After that date there is a drastic reduction in the amount of material concerning Britain in the text and the change of focus suggests that the next phase of composition occurred in Ireland.

During the period from 740 to 911, when the common core of the surviving annals ends, the entries in the Chronicle display both a midlands perspective and an identification with the interests of Armagh. For instance, there is an abundance of obituary notices for the major office holders in Armagh and in great midland monasteries such as Clonard, but also records of the deaths of clerics from several other

¹²⁶ Binchy, 'Patrick and his biographers', 111; J. Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 405ff. In Binchy's opinion, this latter theory 'though equally unfounded in fact' was 'less indefensible from a palaeographic standpoint'.

¹²⁷ D. P. Mc Carthy, *The Irish annals, their genesis, evolution and history* (Dublin, 2008); N. Evans, *The present and the past in medieval Irish chronicles* (Woodbridge, 2010).

¹²⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, pp. 7–12.

¹²⁹ A. P. Smyth, 'The earliest Irish annals: their first contemporary entries and the earliest centres of recording', *PRIA* 72 C (1972), 1–48.

minor churches in the eastern midlands, a pattern not repeated for similar establishments elsewhere in the country. Different theories have been developed to explain this. Alfred Smyth and Gearóid Mac Niocaill considered Clonard, on the borders of Mide and Leinster, to have given the annals their midlands perspective and Mac Niocaill posited a separate, contemporary centre of compilation in Armagh.¹³⁰ Kathleen Hughes was the first to suggest that Brega was the site of the chronicle immediately after its removal from Iona, but she believed in a shift to Armagh by the end of the eighth century.¹³¹ From a survey of the obituaries of ecclesiastical scholars, Thomas Charles-Edwards, the translator of the Chronicle, has recently argued that the entire chronicle was kept in Brega throughout the period c.740–911. The identification with Armagh interests evident in the text reflects, he argues, the fact that the centre of recording in Brega had a close association with Armagh. ‘The simplest theory, therefore, seems to be the best, namely that the Chronicle of Ireland was written in a church in Brega with Armagh connections from c.740 to 911.’¹³²

The Iona Chronicle was probably being compiled before the end of the sixth century and provides the earliest contemporary records of Irish history in the annals.¹³³ The annalist on Iona may have provided some retrospective entries, but the majority of the early material does not belong to this phase. John Kelleher was the first to suggest that the early annals represented a recasting of history for the benefit of the Uí Néill, especially their desire to be linked with the origins of Irish Christianity, that is the

¹³⁰ Smyth, ‘The earliest Irish annals’, 23–30; Mac Niocaill, *The Medieval Irish annals*, pp. 21–3.

¹³¹ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 124–6.

¹³² Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 14.

¹³³ Smyth, ‘The earliest Irish annals’.

mission of St Patrick.¹³⁴ This manipulation of the record of the past appears to have occurred sooner rather than later after the departure of the Chronicle of Ireland from Iona. 'It is best', Thomas Charles-Edwards suggested, 'to date the fifth-century annals to the middle years of the eighth century and to locate them in Brega, where, after all, St Patrick was believed to have confronted Lóegaire, king of Tara.'¹³⁵ It is to this phase of compilation, possibly in one of the churches in Brega devastated during the Northumbrian invasion, that the entries depicting early English attacks belong.

At least two generations after the Northumbrian attack, these entries in the Chronicle of Ireland attest a continuing perception of the English as violent invaders. In fact, the image has been reinforced by projecting it back into the distant past, thus presenting the 684 attack as just the most recent episode in a long history of English aggression. Like the author of the *Notae* in the Book of Armagh who juxtaposed the *barbarae gentes* with the *Hibernenses*, the annalist who composed the retrospective entries depicted the English as a threat to Ireland in general rather than solely to Brega or any other single province. The territorial integrity of Ireland that he espoused was a key aspect of Armagh policy. The dates at which he claimed these raids had occurred are certainly suggestive of an intended association with the Patrician legend, although what exactly that might have been is unclear. What seems certain is that a chronicler with Armagh sympathies was again using the image of the English attackers to highlight the common interests of the men of Ireland. It was the Northumbrian attack of 684 that allowed for the English to be depicted in this manner and for their image to be utilised to this end.

¹³⁴ Kelleher, 'Early Irish history and pseudo-history', 113–27.

¹³⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, p. 58.

In the early ninth century, a new foreign threat arrived on the Irish scene. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has investigated the earliest depictions of Viking activity in Irish literature that began to appear in the early decades of the ninth century when Viking raids were frequent occurrences.¹³⁶ Unsurprisingly, the earliest references are to plundering pagans taking a booty of goods and persons. With the changing nature of Viking activity in Ireland in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the imagery in these sources changed to reflect the different patterns of interaction between Gael and Gall. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, the image of the Vikings as pagan invaders and raiders was resurrected and ‘the long-peaceful Norse’ became the ‘whipping-boy’ in the propaganda of would-be high-kings.¹³⁷ The clearest example of this phenomenon was in the suggestively named *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*.¹³⁸ The *Cogadh* was composed to bolster the claims of Muirchertach Ua Briain to the kingship of Ireland in part by depicting his great-grandfather Brian Bóruma as the king who brought the ‘Babylonian captivity’ of the Irish to an end by defeating the Vikings.¹³⁹ The following is its summary of the early Viking wars:

Buí dochraiti mór for feraib hErend co forlethan ó Lochlannaib ocus ó Danaraib dulgib dúchrídechaib fri ré cían ocus fri amsir fota ... Mór de dod ocus d’imned, de thár ocus de tharcassul ra fhulngetar fir hErend ri remes na rígsain o Lochlannaib ocus o Danaraib.

There was great oppression on the men of Ireland in general from the Norwegians and from the wanton, hard-hearted Danes for a very long time ... Great displeasure and sorrow, great insult and reproach were suffered by the men of

¹³⁶ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Friend and foe’, pp. 381–402.

¹³⁷ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, p. 34; *idem*, ‘Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil: history or propaganda?’, *Ériu* 25 (1974), 69.

¹³⁸ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: the War of the Gaedhil with the Gall*, ed. and trans. J. H. Todd (London, 1867).

¹³⁹ M. Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallabh*: some dating considerations’, *Peritia* 9 (1995), 374–7.

Ireland during the time of these (previously-mentioned) kings from the Norwegians and from the Danes.¹⁴⁰

Binchy long ago argued that it was the experience of the Viking wars that engendered in Irishmen 'that sense of "otherness" which lies at the basis of nationalism'.¹⁴¹ Where Binchy was more generally inclined to contrast Anglo-Saxon and early Irish kingship,¹⁴² in this instance he compared the experiences of the Uí Néill as the main leaders of resistance to the Vikings with that of the 'House of Wessex' in England. As a result of its leadership of Anglo-Saxon resistance against the Danes, the House of Wessex 'eventually became the nucleus of the national monarchy. In Ireland, too, by the close of the ninth century a similar process had begun.'¹⁴³ Binchy left his audience in no doubt about the origins of this sense of nationality amongst the Irish:

The modern political nationalist, then, has much reason to be thankful to the Norsemen. Their assaults jolted the country out of its old tribal framework; created, if not a modern sense of nationalism, at least a feeling of 'otherness' among peoples whose only loyalty had hitherto been to their local kings.¹⁴⁴

MacCana, responding to Binchy's argument, identified the 'dominating theme' of Irish literature in which Vikings appear as 'the security and integrity of the land of Ireland as a whole, not one or other of its constituent parts'.¹⁴⁵ The foregoing discussion has highlighted the fact that, though infrequently attested, similar imagery was utilised in reaction to the Northumbrian invasion. It is found in sources associated with Armagh and interested in projecting the image of Ireland's territorial integrity and the unity of

¹⁴⁰ Preference is here given to the reading in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster: *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaib*, ed. R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien, *The Book of Leinster, formerly Leabar na Núachongbála*, vol. 5 (Dublin, 1967), p. 1319.

¹⁴¹ Binchy, 'The passing of the old order', p. 129.

¹⁴² *Idem*, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, O'Donnell Lectures (Oxford, 1970).

¹⁴³ *Idem*, 'The passing of the old order', p. 129.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁵ MacCana, 'Early Irish ideology', p. 66.

her people. In the case of *Baile Chuinn*, it appears to have also been adopted by political propagandists whose focus was the kingship of Tara.

In fact, even with the onslaught of the Vikings, the image of the English threat did not fade entirely into the background. The longevity of the depiction of the English as invaders in Patrician hagiography has already been noted and, in a forthcoming publication, Fiona Edmonds argues that descriptions of the attack continued to circulate in later hagiographical texts including *Betha Adomnáin* and the longer Life of Saint Monenna by Conchubranus.¹⁴⁶ *Betha Adomnáin* contains the following account of the attack: *do-lotar Saxain Tuaiscirt dochum nÉrenn go roindirset Magh mBreg go Belach nDúin ocus berait bratgabháil móir do fheraibh ocus mnáibh leo*, ‘The English of the north came to Ireland and plundered Mag Breg as far as Belach Dúin and carried off a great number of captives, both men and women’.¹⁴⁷ The terms used to describe the Northumbrian attack are those often used to depict Viking raids in contemporary sources and the account has been interpreted as an analogy for a Viking attack in the same region during the tenth century when the text was composed.¹⁴⁸ At this time, then, the contemporary Viking threat could be compared to that believed to have been posed by the English in earlier times. This represents a brief period of overlap between the earlier depiction of the English ‘Other’ and the later trend to use the Vikings to fill this role. Indeed, in this manner the English appear to have paved the way for the incorporation of the Vikings into Irish literature several centuries later.

¹⁴⁶ F. Edmonds, ‘Irish hagiographical traditions concerning the Northumbrian attack on Brega, a.d. 684’, (forthcoming). I am very grateful to Dr. Edmonds for allowing me to read this article in draft form prior to its publication.

¹⁴⁷ *Betha Adamnáin*, ed. M. Herbert and P. Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnáin: The Irish Life of Adamnán* (London, 1988), p. 54.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

***PRÍM-CHENÉLA AND FO-CHENÉLA: NATIONS AND NATIONALITY IN THE IRISH SEX
AETATES MUNDI.***

The Milesian theory of Irish national unity, the political origins of which have been discussed in Chapter One, found its fullest expression in the hands of the eleventh-century pseudo-historians who produced *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. As Hans Oskamp noted, 'our general impression of the eleventh century is that historical and pseudo-historical matters were particularly *en vogue*'.¹ Peter Smith identified the following characteristics of contemporary approaches to the past in historical verse:

First, the synthesising of various strands of genealogical information which would allow the Irish to claim descent from Adam; second the linking up of the pedigrees of the kings of the great Irish dynasties to allow these dynasties to claim common descent from Míl and thereby justify their political hegemony; and third, the drawing up of typological parallels between the great Irish dynasties, and the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Macedonians as a means of fitting the Irish into the larger scheme of world-history and the time-frame of the Six Ages of the World.²

These practices were not new in the eleventh century, indeed they had been pursued in Irish scholarship since the issue of national identity arose during the seventh and eighth centuries. Nonetheless, it seems to have been the case that the project of synchronising Ireland's past with the recorded history of the ancient world and of establishing the place of the Gaels in the wider world of nations that had begun several centuries earlier was taken up with renewed vigour during this

¹ H. Oskamp, 'On the author of *Sex Aetates Mundi*', *Studia Celtica*, 3 (1968), 136. Cf. K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the sources* (London, 1972), p. 273; Herbert, 'Crossing historical and literary boundaries', 99–100.

² P. J. Smith, 'Early Irish historical verse: the evolution of a genre', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds.), *Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages: texts and transmission* (Dublin, 2002), p. 327.

era, producing what John Carey called ‘that efflorescence of scholarly activity to which we owe ... the early versions of *Lebor Gabála* [and] *Lebor Bretnach*’.³

Smith considers Gilla Cóemáin mac (or ua) Gilla Samthainne (*floruit* 1072) to have been a central figure in these scholarly developments and his poem *Annálad anall uile* to have ‘constituted the peak of the tradition of chronological and specifically synchronistic poetry in Irish scholarship’.⁴ In the development of Irish historical verse, Flann Mainistrech (d.1056) also deserves special mention. His compositions cover a range of historical topics, including synchronisms of the world kingship.⁵ Alongside the historical verse composed by these men, a sizeable body of historical and pseudo-historical prose was also written, including *Lebor Bretnach* and the Middle Irish translation of Bede’s *Historia*.⁶

The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* (henceforth *SAM*) has been described by one of its editors as ‘the ultimate example of the genre’ of Irish historical and synchronistic literature.⁷ *SAM* survives, in full or in part, in several medieval manuscripts, including *Lebor na hUidre* (*LU*) and Bodleian Library Manuscript Rawlinson B 502 (R). R also contains a copy of the poem *Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim* by Dublittir Ua

³ J. Carey, Review of *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. D. Ó Cróinín (Dublin, 1983), *Studia Hibernica* 24 (1988), 160. Herbert (‘Crossing historical and literary boundaries’, 87–101) has suggested that there occurred a revival of Irish scholarship around the turn of the first millennium after a significant interruption caused by Viking attacks.

⁴ Smith, ‘Early Irish historical verse’, p. 340. For an edition of this and two other of Gilla Cóemáin’s historical poems, see P. J. Smith, *Three historical poems ascribed to Gilla Coemáin: a critical edition of the work of an eleventh-century Irish scholar* (Münster, 2007).

⁵ S. MacAirt (ed.), ‘Middle Irish poems on world kingship’, *Études Celtiques* 6 (1953–4), 255–80; 7 (1955–6), 18–45; 8 (1958–9), 98–119, 284–97.

⁶ ‘A Middle Irish fragment of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History’, ed. Bergin; *Lebor Bretnach*, ed. van Hamel.

⁷ Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400–800’, p. 185.

hUathgaile, which, it will be argued below, is a versified synopsis of *SAM*.⁸ *Rédig dam* is also extant in another great twelfth-century vernacular Irish codex, the Book of Leinster (LL).⁹ Much of what is contained in these three manuscripts is centuries older than the codices themselves and there has been a tendency on the part of scholars to mine them for the antique gems preserved within; ‘literary archaeology’ Mark Scowcroft has called this practice.¹⁰ At times there has been a corresponding disinclination to acknowledge the importance of the manuscript tradition of texts, or what these manuscripts illustrate regarding the interests and preoccupations of their scribes. The importance of examining the contents of manuscripts in order to discern the preoccupations of the ‘contemporary world of learning in which they were produced’ should not be underestimated.¹¹ Despite the negative perception some modern scholars have of *SAM*,¹² its presence in both *LU* and *R*, and the presence of *Rédig dam* in *R* and *LL*, clearly demonstrates that the eleventh- and twelfth-century scribes who penned these manuscripts believed the message of these texts was important and valuable. What was this message?

In Dáibhí Ó Cróinín’s view, *SAM* sought to ‘recreate the mythical protohistory of the early Irish and synchronise it with the great events of world history’.¹³ Yet one

⁸ Dublittir Ua hUathgaile, *Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim*, ed. D. Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 97–108.

⁹ *The Book of Leinster*, vol. 3, ed. Best and Bergin, pp. 563–73.

¹⁰ M. Scowcroft, ‘*Leabhar Gabhála* – part 2’, 1.

¹¹ Herbert, ‘Crossing historical and literary boundaries’, 87–88.

¹² C. Donahue, ‘Grendel and the *clanna Cain*’, *Journal of Celtic Studies* 1 (1950), 172; Oskamp, ‘On the author’, 127.

¹³ Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400-800’, p. 185. This represents a change of mind on Ó Cróinín’s behalf. In his edition he had described the text as essentially an ‘historic homily on the story of Salvation’ in which ‘the devotional element is predominant throughout’ (*The Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 10). See criticism of this interpretation in

of the most striking features of *SAM* is the conspicuous absence of reference to Irish affairs. The only references to material specifically relevant to the Gaels can found in the introduction to the section regarding the descendants of Noah:

Ro thuisim Noé trí macu ria ndílinn, conid uadib-side génatar na dá cenél sechtmogat iar ndílinn. Is amlaid so hautem ro-sílsat na cenéla .i. secht cenéla fichet díb ó Sém, trícha immorro ó Chám, a cóic déc ó Iaféth; conid dá cenél sechtmogat sin uli 7 conid dá bérla sechtmogat tuctha dóib post ic tairmesc in Tuir Nemruaid. Conid hi cind deich mbliadan iar tain ro-thepestar Foénius Forsaid bérla na nGoédel asna díb bérlaib sechtmogat, coro-taselb dia daltu, do mac Agnomain.

Noah begot three sons before the Deluge, and it is from them that the seventy-two nations were begotten after the Deluge. This then, is how these nations generated: twenty-seven of them from Sem; thirty from Cham, fifteen from Japheth. So that they are seventy-two peoples in all, and they were given seventy-two languages afterwards, at the stopping of the (the building of) Nemrod's Tower. And at the end of ten years following that Fénius Farsaid fashioned the Irish language from the seventy-two languages, and gave it to his foster-son, to the son of Agnoman [= Goédel Glas].¹⁴

Shortly afterwards, Fénius' genealogy is given in brief.¹⁵ These are the only references in the text to material specifically relevant to the origin of the Gaels. Furthermore, in depicting the dispersal of the descendants of Japheth throughout Europe *SAM* says:

Ro selbsat sin feranna imdai isind Assia, ó Sléib Imai 7 ó Sléib Thúir co Sruth Danai 7 condici in Scithia; 7 ro-selbsat in nEoraip n-uili condici in n-acian muridi funita insi Bretan, 7 in nEspáin n-uilidi co huilinn talman.

They occupied many lands in Asia, from Mount Imai and from Mount Tur to the river Danube and as far as Scythia; and they occupied the whole of Europe

Carey, Review of *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, 162, and P. Ó Néill, 'The Ages of the world', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 437-45, at 444. Ó Corráin ('Nationality and kingship', p. 6) similarly described *Rédig dam* as an 'elaborate ethnicon into which [Dublittir] integrates the Irish and their language'.

¹⁴ *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

as far as the shore of the western ocean of the island of Britain, and the angled Spain with an angle of territory.¹⁶

The absence of Ireland from the list of countries settled is conspicuous. The purpose of the text was clearly not to synchronise Irish history with world events, nor to integrate the history of the Gaels with that of the rest of mankind. In fact, it appears that *SAM* was specifically omitting this information, providing the background and context for Irish history while excluding that material itself. This makes perfect sense if *SAM* is considered an accompanying and introductory text intended to set the stage for the discussion of the history of Ireland and the Irish in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*.

The Six Age theory of history is not the main subject of this text either. The germ of the idea that the history of the world was divided into Six Ages corresponding to the hexaemeron may have appeared as early as the third century. Later, Saint Augustine endorsed such a view and over succeeding centuries the theory gained broad acceptance.¹⁷ There was general agreement between scholars regarding which events marked the limits of each Age, but there was considerable debate regarding their duration. The tendency for computists to arrive at different results in their calculations was confounded by the existence of two distinct versions of the Bible, each with its own chronology.

Hildegard Tristram has examined the development of the Six Age theme in Irish and Anglo-Saxon literature. She found it used in a variety of genres, including annals and chronicles as well as more explicitly religious texts. The earliest of these,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–10.

in Hiberno-Latin, date from the seventh century, while the vernacular material emanates primarily from the Middle Irish period.¹⁸ Irish scholars in general, including the author of *SAM*, favoured the chronology of the Septuagint rather than any of the Vulgate-based versions.¹⁹

The importation of this theme into pseudo-historical, rather than more explicitly religious, literature was part of the project to authenticate and legitimise Irish history by providing it with a chronology, as discussed by Peter Smith.²⁰ The point, of course, is that not every text that utilised the Six Ages chronology ought to be defined by that feature of its content. As Charles Donahue recognised, *SAM* 'is a summary of world history, mainly biblical, *viewed within the framework provided by the theory of the six ages of the world*'.²¹ The author of *SAM* wasted little time discussing his chronology and rather seems to have accepted it as axiomatic.²² It was the material that he placed within this chronological framework that was his real subject matter.

Before identifying *SAM*'s central themes and concerns, it is first necessary to consider what constituted the original text. Two modern editions were published during the 1980s, both based on the text as it survives in R (and its copy, National Library of Ireland, MS G 131 (P), in Ó Cróinín's case).²³ The decision of both editors to base their editions on this version of the text has been criticised, most forcefully

¹⁸ H. Tristram, *Sex Aetates Mundi: Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren. Untersuchungen und Texte* (Heidelberg, 1985), pp. 32–4.

¹⁹ Ó Cróinín, *Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 138 (notes on § 2).

²⁰ Smith, 'Early Irish historical verse', pp. 333–5.

²¹ Donahue, 'Grendel and the *clanna Cain*', 168; italics added by current author.

²² *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 66.

²³ Ed. Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*; ed. Tristram, *Sex Aetates Mundi: Die Weltzeitalter*, pp. 209–46.

in Máire Herbert's review article.²⁴ As Herbert pointed out, Hildegard Tristram's justification for using R alone was based on a misapplication of Edgar Slotkin's theory regarding the lack of fixity of text in certain genres of Irish literature.²⁵ The nature of her work, however, absolves Tristram to a degree. In surveying sources concerned with the Six Ages theme in Irish and Anglo-Saxon literature, she can be excused for providing an edition of the earliest full text of *SAM*.

Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, however, ostensibly aimed to produce an authoritative edition of the canonical text. He did this in the light of a critical study of the manuscript tradition. Having carried out his research, Ó Cróinín decided to base his edition on R (and its copy, National Library of Ireland, MS G 131), not because it was the earliest complete text, but because he believed it was 'the best and most complete copy of *SAM*', 'the original and uninterpolated first recension of the text'.²⁶ The text of *SAM* as it survives in R is substantially longer than any of the other extant versions, a feature Ó Cróinín explained as the result of omissions from and truncation of the text that occurred during copying.²⁷

This explanation fails to take into consideration the notable tendency for Irish texts to attract additions and interpolations over the course of their

²⁴ M. Herbert, 'The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*: First editions', *CMCS*, 11 (1986), 97-112; Ó Néill, 'The Ages of the world'; Carey, Review of *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, 160-63. Caoimhín Breatnach has recently added his voice to those critical of Ó Cróinín's editorial conclusions, though his own focus is primarily on disproving the identification of Rawlinson B 502 as the 'Book of Glendalough': C. Breatnach, 'Aspects of the textual transmission of *Sex Aetates Mundi* and *Druimm Cetta céte na noem*', *Éigse* 35 (2005), 9-18.

²⁵ E. M. Slotkin, 'Medieval Irish scribes and fixed texts', *Éigse* 17 (1977-79), 437-50; Herbert, 'The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*', 101.

²⁶ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 12, 14, 20, 21, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 20-21, 38.

transmission. It has repeatedly been pointed out that the R text of *SAM* incorporated many such additions and interpolations that stood out from the surrounding text. In 1967, Hans Oskamp recognised the R text of *SAM* as one that 'had been worked on'.²⁸ The following year, he identified what he believed were some late additions to the text, including the two opening poems on the duration of the Six Ages.²⁹ One of these poems contradicts the chronological scheme of the rest of the text by outlining a chronology based on Bede's calculations from the Vulgate.³⁰ In a review of Ó Cróinín's work, Pádraig Ó Néill also recognised that the interspersed poetry contradicted the prose in places, suggesting an uncomfortable marriage.³¹ Ó Cróinín was taken to task most forcefully for his editorial decisions by Máire Herbert, who reiterated Oskamp's earlier argument that the R text of *SAM* had accumulated significant additions over time, becoming longer and less coherent in the process.³² Herbert's own study of the textual tradition of *SAM* illustrated that what Ó Cróinín considered R's 'completeness' in contrast with other witnesses more accurately represented 'the zeal on the part of its compiler to improve and extend his text wherever possible and with whatever type of material he considered relevant'.³³ One such interpolation was even flagged as such by the scribe of R, who wrote

²⁸ H. Oskamp, 'Notes on the history of *Lebor na hUidre*', *PRIA* 65, section C (1967), 119.

²⁹ *Idem*, 'On the author', 128, 133-5.

³⁰ Ó Cróinín, *Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 7 and 139 (notes on § 3).

³¹ Ó Néill, 'The Ages of the world', 437-45.

³² Herbert, 'The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*', 100.

³³ *Ibid.*, 106.

eteraisnéis dano sin anuas, ‘that above is an interpolation’, at the end of one section of the text.³⁴

Rather than giving preference to any single extant version, Herbert argued that the original text or *SAM* is ‘best represented by the shared witness of all manuscripts’.³⁵ ‘Comparison of all its manuscript witnesses’, she argued, ‘lays bare a common fixed core, based on identifiable sources, with additional material in particular recensions explicable in terms of scholarly glossing and expansion’.³⁶ This is not the place for a detailed comparison between the texts preserved in the various manuscripts,³⁷ but the basic outline of the ‘common fixed core’ of *SAM* can be identified with the help of the tabulated record of their contents on a chapter-by-chapter basis provided by Ó Cróinín in the introduction to his edition.³⁸ The first insight to emerge from such an examination is the sheer volume of material unique to the R text of *SAM*. Ó Cróinín’s edition comprises seventy chapters (sixty-nine plus *Réidig dam*), many of which have chapter headings in the manuscript (See Table 1). Of these seventy, chapters 2, 4a, 15, 16, 19, 21, 36, 37, 55, 58, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, and 68 are found only in R (and P). Number 55 is that identified by the scribe as an *eteraisnéis* while 4a is a marginal note. Other sections of the text, such as chapters 3, 59, 60 and 61 are found in other manuscripts, but not as part of *SAM* – they appear originally to have been independent compositions that were later appended to or interpolated into *SAM* rather than sections of *SAM* that were later extracted – and

³⁴ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 89.

³⁵ Herbert, ‘The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*’, 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁷ Herbert undertook to do so to a degree and demonstrated that the readings in *LU* were often superior to those of R: *ibid.*, 102–06.

³⁸ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 56–61.

while chapter 69 is found in several manuscript versions of the text, it is not always found in the same position and thus appears to have been an early interpolation rather than an original part of the work.

On the other hand, while R is clearly the version of *SAM* that has attracted most accretions, it lacks chapter 35a that is present in both the LU and the Book of Ballymote (B) texts and that would appear, therefore, to have been either an original part of the text or, perhaps more likely, an early addition to it. Other recensions of the text appear also to have gained and lost portions of text. The Book of Lecan (Lc) text omits chapter 18 in contrast to all other recensions, while B appears to have lacked chapters 31 and 32 in contrast to R, U and Rawlinson B 486 (C). C contains chapter 43, that otherwise appears only in R.

The above summary of the manuscript witnesses of *SAM* illustrates that the textual history of this text is far more complicated than Ó Cróinín supposed. It also suggests that the original text, identified as the material common to the various recensions, was considerably shorter than the recension extant in R. The extra material included in R was interpolated throughout the text, but was especially prevalent at the beginning and at the end. So, while the R text opens with two poems on the duration of the Six Ages of the world and a short Latin tract on the six ages of man, and closes with numerous notes on the history of the fifth and sixth Ages, the core text opens with a brief statement on the duration of the Six Ages followed by a list of questions related to the content of the rest of the text and it finishes with severely curtailed accounts of the latter Ages.

Table 1: The contents of SAM

The following table lists the names of the seventy chapters that make up Ó Cróinín's edition of *SAM* drawn from MS Rawlinson B 502. The chapters whose titles are in **bold** print are those that make up the common core of the text present in the various manuscripts in which *SAM* is extant.

Ch.	Title/Synopsis
1	<i>Panechte incipit</i>
2	Poem: <i>Do réir int Septín in so</i>
3	Poem: <i>Debi na Fírinni Ébraide frisin Sechtmogait Tintúdach in so síis</i>
4a	<i>De sex aetates homini</i>
4	<i>Sex aetates mundi sunt</i>
5	Opening questions
6	Further question
7	Poem: <i>Gairthigern ainm in bérlai</i>
8	Further questions
9	Introduction to first age including progeny of Adam
10	List of Adam's sons
11	Poem: <i>Ádam ocus Eua án</i>
12	Names Adam's sons who had offspring
13	<i>Adam primus pater fuit et Eua prima mater fuit</i>
14	<i>Is iat-so airig ne cétna-aéssi cona saéglai, iar Séth chétus</i>
15	Note on contemporaneity of Mathusala with Adam
16	Poem: <i>Teora bliadna cona mblaid</i>
17	Curse of Cain and production of monsters
18	Concerning the coming of the Flood
19	Note regarding dimensions of Ark
20	Note regarding dates of entering and leaving Ark
21	Poem: <i>Mathusálem, Noé cen lén</i>
22	<i>De secunda aetate incipit</i>
23	<i>Ro-bennach Dia do Noé cona maccaib</i>
24	<i>Do clannaib Noé in so síis</i>
25	<i>Do clannaib Iaféth meic Noé in so síis</i>
26	<i>Is annsin ro-rannad in domun i trib rannaib</i>
27	<i>Is iat-sin cóic primchenéla déc clainni Iaféth</i>
28	<i>Do clannaib Cáim meic Noé in so síis</i>
29	<i>Babilonia, id est confussio</i>
30	<i>Do clannaib Cannáin meic Cáim meic Noé in so síis</i>
31	<i>Do clannaib Séim meic Noé in so síis</i>
32	Concerning the progeny of Iachtan son of Heber
33	<i>Do senchus na fomorach ocus na luchorpán ocus na torothur in so síis</i>
34	Conclusion of same
35	<i>Is iat-so airig na háisi tánaisi iar líní geneloig Séim meic Noé</i>

Table 1: The Contents of SAM

36	Concerning the daughters of Lot
37	Poem: <i>Ingena Loith légtar lib</i>
38	Concerning progeny of Thare, including Abraham
39	<i>Din tress aís in domuin ocus dia airechaib in so síis</i>
40	Concerning the sons of Ismael, leaders of twelve tribes
41	<i>Do clannaib Isac meic Abráin in so síis</i>
42	<i>Is siat-so anmann mac Lia cétus</i>
43	Poem: <i>Dá mac de[ē]c Iácóib</i>
44	Lists sons of Jacob's sons
45	<i>Clanna Essau in so síis</i>
46	Concerning the death of Abraham and ancestry of Christ
47	<i>Is iat-so uasal-athraig na tressi aési</i>
48	<i>Is iat-so immorro Iudice na haéssi cétna</i>
49	Death of Saul, succession of David, close of third Age
50	<i>Aisnéis don chethramad aés in so síis</i>
51	<i>Roma condita est</i>
52	<i>Ríg mac nIsrahél in so fri ré na aéssi-se</i>
53	Babylonian captivity
54	Close of fourth Age
55	Tale of alliance between king of Judea and son of Nab.
56	<i>In chúiced aés in so síis</i>
57	Concerning the walls of Babylon
58	Poem: <i>Babilóin, ro-clos hi céin</i>
59	Concerning the deaths of the prophets
60	Concerning the length of journey from Babylon to Jerusalem
61	Poem: <i>Secht coícait huide co mbríg</i>
62	Concerning the number of steps a soul makes
63	<i>De sexta [a]jetate incipit</i>
64	Concerning the significance of the birth of Christ
65	<i>Haec sunt nomina Apostolorom</i>
66	<i>It hé immoro anmann na dá discipul sechtmogat bátar ic Íhesu Crist</i>
67	Enumeration of the persecutions
68	Brief history of Jesus and disciples
69	<i>Do anmannaib trí rann in domuin in so síis</i>
70	Poem: <i>Rédig dam a Dé do nim</i>

The chapters that can be identified as having originally belonged to this common core are, in Ó Cróinín's numbering, §§ 4–10, 12–14, 17, 18, 20, 22–35, 38–42, 44–54, 56–7 and 63.³⁹ With the extraneous material removed, *SAM* appears in a new light and with a more cohesive message. Herbert suggested that *SAM* was essentially

a factual exposition of the main events of the world ages. It stays close to the narrative of Genesis for its account of the first three ages, while the framework for the introduction of secular history beside sacred, in the fourth and fifth ages, is provided by a version of the Irish World Chronicle.⁴⁰

This is true, though it is possible to be more precise about the text's focus. When the extraneous material is discounted, it is apparent that the space dedicated by the author to the fourth, fifth and sixth ages is a very small proportion of the whole. In fact, the vast majority of the text is dedicated to discussing events of the first three ages and its main concern is with the origins of nations and languages during that period.

Table 1 lists the seventy chapters of Ó Cróinín's edition as well as identifying those that were part of the common core of the text. Where chapter headings are found in the text, they have been kept; where there are none, titles descriptive of the contents of those chapters have been provided. After the removal of the extraneous material, it becomes apparent that *SAM* comprises predominantly genealogical material. Note, for instance, the number of chapters in the text with titles that begin *Do clannaib X*, 'Concerning the descendants of X': apart from chapters 24 (*Do clannaib Noé*), 25 (*Do clannaib Iaféth*), 28 (*Do clannaib Cáim*), 30 (*Do clannaib*

³⁹ Herbert includes § 11 in the 'common core of the text' she identified ('The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*', 102). It is omitted here because it is not in the text in C or Lc.

⁴⁰ Herbert, 'The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*', 108.

Cannáin), 31 (*Do clannaib Séim*) and 41 (*Do clannaib Isac*), chapters 9, 10, 12, 13, 17, 27, 32, 33, 34, 38, 40, 42, 44 and 45 also contain significant amount of genealogical material.

This ought not to be terribly surprising. The author opened his text, after a brief outline of the chronological schema of the Six Ages, with a more substantial list of questions that were concerned largely with genealogy and ethno-linguistics:

Is físsi cia lín bliadan techtas cech aés cenmothá in n-aés ndédenaig, ar ní fil crích furri hi lleth frinni chétus. Et cateat airig cecha aíssi 7 cadeat a saégla na n-airech-sin? Et ciaso aés dona haéssaib sin inro-rannad in domun hi trí 7 cateat anmann na rann-sin 7 can assaro-gabsat anmann?

Cinnas ro-gablaigset clanna Noé, et cia lín cenél n-écsamail i tarrastar? Et cia lín bérla techtait, 7 cid arro-imdaigthe na bérlai, ar is oénbérla fo-gabam díb ar thús .i. Gairthigern a ainm in bérlae-sin .i. bérla frisín n-apar bérla na nÉbraide indiu ...

Ocus cia aimser inro-imdaigthe na bérlai? Ocus innat lia na cenéla oldát na bérlae? Cia lín cenél 7 citní cenéla ná fuillet numir cenél acht a ngabáil i fothechdas na cenél ata coibniusda dóib? Cia lín cenél 7 citní cenéla ro-claémchaset anmann secha cétairec?

It is to be enquired, how many years each Age contains, except the last Age, for it has no end in the first place as far as we are concerned. And who were the princes of every age and what are the reigns of those princes? And in which of those Ages was the world divided into three parts, and what are the names of those divisions? And whence did they derive their names?

How did the family of Noah divide, and in how many distinct nations did they remain? How many languages do they possess and why were the languages multiplied? For it is only one language that we find in the beginning: Gairthigern was the name of that language, that is, the language that is today called the language of the Hebrews ...

And in what Age were the languages multiplied, and are the nations more numerous than the languages? How many nations are there, and what are the nations that do not complete the enumeration of the nations but which are included in the nations that are related to them? How many nations are there, and which are the nations that changed their names compared with their original state?⁴¹

⁴¹ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 67. Carey, Review of Ó Cróinín, 162, also noted the importance of these questions.

These questions paved the way for a discussion of genealogy, *origines gentium* and the history of languages that were the author's main concerns. Medieval copyists of the text seem to have appreciated the centrality of these issues in *SAM*. The prologue in R inaccurately ascribes the text to Dublittir ua hUathgaile and mistakenly claims that it is a translation of the Pandect, that is a full copy of the bible, but is more precise in describing the contents of *SAM*:

Panecte incipit .i. tintúd Dublittrech huí huathgaile forsin Pandecht Cirine tria Goédeilg in so sí: Do ardgabálaib in domuin 7 do chroébaib coibniusa in domuin 7 dia hilchenélaib 7 do numir a mbérla 7 do aíssib a n-airech 7 dia n-anmannaib 7 do aéssaib in domuin 7 do numir cacha aése.

[Here] begins the Pandect, that is, Dublittir Ua hUathgaile's translation into Gaelic of Jerome's Pandect [follows] below: concerning the noble conquests of the world and the related [genealogical] branches of the world and concerning its many nations and the number of their languages and concerning the ages of their princes and concerning their names and concerning the Ages of the world and the duration of each Age.⁴²

Similarly, the scribe of C, whose source was evidently related to R's, introduced the text as follows:

Incipit Panecte. Tunnscaid na sencaide n-eolach for Penacte tre Gaeilg andso sí .i. do ardgabálaibh in domain 7 do craebhaibh cobneasa claende Nae 7 in uile cenealaib in domain, do numir bliadan na n-aes, de randaibh clande Nae fo in doman uili arceana.

[Here] begins the Pandect. The learned historians' undertaking (?) of the Pandect into Gaelic below, that is, concerning the noble conquests of the world and concerning the related [genealogical] branches of the family of Noah and all the nations of the world, concerning the number of years of the Ages, concerning the divisions of the family of Noah over the entire world besides.⁴³

The medieval scribes and readers of *SAM* evidently identified it as a text primarily concerned with the exposition of the origins of nations and their languages. It was

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28 and 43.

certainly based to a large extent on a historical and literal reading of Genesis, but its focus was quite specific. *SAM* was, in essence, a genealogical text concerned with *origines gentium*. John Carey has argued that ‘the most important aspect of the whole scheme [of *Lebor Gabála*] must always have been the genealogical system which it enshrined’.⁴⁴ The same is true of *SAM*. But while *Lebor Gabála* was concerned with linking the various strands of Irish genealogy together onto a Milesian schema, *SAM* was concerned with macro-genealogy, with establishing the places of the world’s nations in the universal genealogy of mankind, thus laying the foundation for *Lebor Gabála*, providing the background and the context for the discussion of Irish origins.

The author of *SAM* apparently aspired to provide as full and comprehensive a genealogy of the nations of the world as was possible and in the process to define exactly what a nation was. In order to do so, he drew on a vast range of source material. As Ó Néill stated, the abiding impression gained from reading *SAM* is admiration for the range of scholarship evident.⁴⁵ Considered by his reviewers to have been the ‘finest achievement’ of his study of *SAM*, Ó Cróinín identified most of these sources in the notes to his edition.⁴⁶ These included the Vulgate version of Genesis, Jerome’s Commentary on Genesis, Isidore’s *Etymologiae* and a version of the Irish World Chronicle, amongst others.⁴⁷ The basic schema of the universal

⁴⁴ Carey, *Irish national origin-legend*, p. 10. See also Ó Corráin, ‘Creating the past’, p. 203, where he describes the Milesian genealogical schema of *LG* as ‘the sheet anchor of the genealogical tracts’.

⁴⁵ Ó Néill, ‘Ages’, 444.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 442; Herbert, ‘Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*’, 104.

⁴⁷ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 138–80; Herbert (‘The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*’, 104, n. 20) thinks ‘that a version of the Irish World Chronicle within a six-

genealogy was, of course, biblical and patristic, including the commonplace depiction of the threefold division of the post-Diluvian world and the existence of seventy-two nations:⁴⁸

Ro-thuisin Noé trí macu ria ndílinn, conid uaidib-side génatar na dá cenél sechtmogat iar ndílinn. Is amlaid so hautem ro-sílsat ne cenéla .i. secht cenéla fichet díb ó Sém, trícha immorro ó Cham, a cóic déc ó Iaphéth: conid dá cenél sechtmogat sin uli ... Is annsin ro-rannad in domun i tríb rannaib .i. Eoraip, Affraic, Assia. Sém i nAssia, Cám i nAffraic, Iaféth i [n]Eoraip

Noah begot three sons before the Deluge, and it is from them that the seventy-two nations derived after the Deluge. This, then, is how those nations gave issue: twenty-seven of them from Sem, thirty from Cham, and fifteen from Japheth, so that they are seventy-two nations in all ... It is then that the world was divided into three divisions, that is, Europe, Africa, Asia: Shem in Asia, Cham in Africa, Japheth in Europe.

Onto this basic schema, the author attempted to graft a genealogy from biblical and other sources that would account for the origins of all the peoples of the world.

To an eleventh-century Irishman the most obvious omission from the biblical record must have been the peoples of Western Europe. In order to graft the Britons, Franks, Anglo-Saxons and the other neighbouring peoples of the Irish onto the universal stem, the author of *SAM* drew upon the so-called *fränkische Völkertafel*, 'Frankish table of nations' (FTN). The importance of this tract and its impact on Irish literature should not be underestimated. It is found in complete form not only in *SAM* but also in *LB* and Recensions 1 and 3 of *LG. Rédig dam*,⁴⁹ the *Míniugud* version

age framework is likelier to have been used than a copy of Eusebius-Jerome Chronicle itself, as suggested by Ó Cróinín'.

⁴⁸ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, pp. 73, 75, and see Ó Cróinín's notes, pp. 147–49.

⁴⁹ *Dublittir (Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim*, ed. D. Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 103–4) mentions Alán (Alanius) and his three sons; Arbon, Negua and Hissiccón, as well as a select few of their descendants; Saxus, Romanus, Francus, Albanus and Brittus.

of *LG*,⁵⁰ and the *Duan Albanach*⁵¹ also contain fragmentary versions of the tract. It evidently had great appeal for Irish scholars of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Before continuing, therefore, it is necessary to examine the history of FTN in Ireland.

The 'Frankish Table of Nations' in Ireland.

The so-called *fränkische Völkertafel*, 'Frankish table of nations' (FTN), purports to represent a genealogy of the nations of Western Europe. The text has been the subject of considerable commentary, most recently and most authoritatively by Walter Goffart, who argued that it had most likely originated in the Eastern Roman Empire during the sixth century.⁵² According to Tacitus' *Germania*, the Germans

celebrate their earth-born god, Tuisto. They assign to him a son, Mannus, the author of their race, and to Mannus three sons, their founders, after whose names the people nearest the ocean are called Ingaevones, those of the centre Herminones, the remainder Istaevones.⁵³

The compiler of FTN utilised this basic structure, allied to his knowledge of the political and ethnic geography of Western Europe to construct a genealogy linking the important European nations of his time.

⁵⁰ Ed. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, vol. 1, p. 106: Alanius and his sons are omitted here, as are many of their descendants, but the presentation of the *Frainc*, *Romain*, *Saxain*, *Brettain*, and *Albandai* as descendants of Ibath son of Magoch son of Japheth agrees with the structure of FTN in *LG1* and the other sources.

⁵¹ *A eolchu Alban uile* (ed. Jackson, 'The poem *A eolcha Alban uile*', 159; ed. and trans *idem*, 'The Duan Albanach', 128–9) mentions Albanus, eponym of Alba, his brother Briutus, eponym of Britain, and their father Isicón.

⁵² W. Goffart, 'The supposedly 'Frankish' table of nations: an edition and study', in *idem*, *Romes fall and after* (London, 1989), pp. 132–65 (originally published in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 17 (1983), 98–130).

⁵³ *Tuistonem deum terra editum et filium Mannum originem gentis, conditoresque Mannos tres filios adsignent, e quorum nominibus proximi Oceano Ingaevones, medii Herminones, ceteri Istaevones vocentur*: cited from Goffart, 'The supposedly 'Frankish' table of nations', p. 144.

In the tradition of medieval genealogy, FTN was aetiological and intended to explain the political map of Western Europe at the time when it was written.⁵⁴ As Goffart illustrated, the tract must have been transmitted to the Frankish kingdom in the sixth or seventh century, as its textual tradition 'is basically northern or Frankish'.⁵⁵ Hence, the 'earliest attainable version' of the text, as reconstructed by Goffart, while still illustrating the influence of its original compiler, also displays Frankish influence:

*Tres fuerunt fratres, primus Erminus, secundus Inguo, tertius Istio.
Inde adcreverunt gentes XIII.
Primus Erminus genuit Gothos, Walagothos, Wandalos, Gepedos, et Saxones.
Inguo genuit Burgundiones, Turingos, Langobardos, Baioarios.
Istio genuit Romanos, Brittones, Francos, Alamannos.*⁵⁶

The aetiological nature of the text is evident from the fact that the nations descended from Istio were the basic constituent peoples of the Frankish Empire at the time of composition and those descended from Erminus represent a grouping of 'Gothic nations' found in contemporary eastern literature.⁵⁷ The presence of the *Walagothi*, with the distinctive Germanic initial component of their name – they are 'Welsh' Goths – on the other hand, is evidence that the Table had been tinkered with

⁵⁴ Genicot, *Les généalogies*; Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy', pp. 51–96.

⁵⁵ Goffart, 'The supposedly 'Frankish' table of nations', p. 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150. Goffart believed it peculiar and possibly suggestive of its origin that the table listed the *Romani* amongst the largely Germanic list of peoples. It was not, however, uncommon for the *Romanni* to appear in such lists during the Middle Ages. See, for example, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 9.2, pp. 84–87, where the *Romani* appear alongside other peoples of Italy, and Haimo of Auxerre (cited in Pohl, 'Telling the difference', p. 26) who listed the *Romani* amongst the nations who spoke Romance along with *Itali* and others.

⁵⁷ Goffart, 'The supposedly 'Frankish' table of nations', pp. 155–9.

in a Germanic linguistic milieu prior to the date of Goffart's 'earliest attainable version'.

In his examination of this textual tradition, Goffart examined numerous versions of FTN. With minor variations, most of these followed the format of the 'earliest attainable version'.⁵⁸ He recognised a distinct recension, however, that was represented by a version of the tract in Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Reichenau CCXXIX, and by the version incorporated into *Historia Brittonum* (*HB*). The characteristic features of this recension are the inclusion of Alanus as the father of the three progenitors; Inguo has become Negue; the relative positions of the three brothers have been altered; and, finally, a number of the descendants of these three have become displaced. *HB* evidently borrowed from a version comparable to that in the Reichenau manuscript, which is believed to have had an Italian provenance.⁵⁹ As Goffart noted, amongst the examples he surveyed, the author of *HB* was the only scholar to include FTN within a broader context and as part of a larger scheme.⁶⁰ In doing so, the author of *HB* introduced a novelty into its structure by interpolating another generation between the sons of Alanus and the nations descended from him. This author introduced a list of the sons of Negua, Istio and Erimon, each the eponymous ancestor of one of the peoples listed in the Reichenau manuscript. So, where before the Walagothi were described as descendants of Armenon and the Vandali as descendants of Negue, in *HB* they were described respectively descendants of Walagothus son of Armenon and descendants of Vandalus son of

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141, n. 43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Negue. The inspiration for this emendation undoubtedly came from the biblical genealogy of nations into which the author of *HB* incorporated FTN.

All the Irish versions of FTN belong to the same branch of the tradition as that in *HB*. This much is clear from the fact that they all include the names of Alanus' grandsons, the sons of Negua, Isicon and Armon, as they appear in the Irish texts. As long ago as 1893, Heinrich Zimmer suggested that the use of this structure in *HB* was evidence of Irish influence on that text.⁶¹ This argument was refuted by Edmond Faral, who argued, correctly, that it was actually a 'Frankish' text of Reichenau type that provided the author of *HB* with his source.⁶² *SAM* was actually, Faral argued, dependent on *HB*: *le meme auteur de l'Historia Britonum ne doit absolument rien au De Sex Aetatibus irlandais, lequel, au contraire, l'a copié.*⁶³

Ferdinand Lot wholeheartedly accepted Faral's argument concerning the continental rather than Irish provenance for FTN as it appears in *HB*. He noted the existence of a number of discrepancies between the *HB* version of the text and those incorporated into *SAM* in *LU* and *BB*. To Lot's mind, a common continental source for both the *HB* version of the text and that in the Irish texts was more likely than the Irish text being the source for *HB*: *le recours à une source commune continental est plus vraisemblable que l'hypothèse d'un emprunt à une source irlandaise.* He further suggested that the Irish version of FTN in *SAM* was indebted to *HB*, citing as evidence the reference in *SAM* that Britain was named after Bruto: *La mention que*

⁶¹ H. Zimmer, *Nennius Vindictus* (Berlin, 1893), p. 237.

⁶² E. Faral, *La Légende Arthurienne: Études et Documents*, 1 (Paris, 1929), p. 84-5: *C'est cette tradition franque, offerte par le Tableau des Peuples, qu'a recueillie le premier auteur de l'Historia Britonum, et précisément sous la forme qu'elle affecte dans le manuscrit de Reichenau.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 85, n. 1.

*l'île doit son nom à Britus semble bien prouver que l'auteur irlandais a eu connaissance du chap. 18 (Brittones a Bruto, Brutus filius Hisitionis) ou encore de la partie interpolée de la description de l'île de Bretagne ... Le texte de Nennius, loin d'être un derive, serait une source.*⁶⁴

John Carey has argued that Faral and Lot 'go beyond the evidence, however, in assuming that Alanus's pedigree was therefore borrowed from Britain by the Irish'.⁶⁵ In fact, it can be demonstrated that the entire Irish tradition of FTN is based on the *HB* recension of the text. From a tabulated comparison between the forms of FTN in continental manuscripts, from various versions of *HB*, and from the text of *SAM* in *BB*, Faral made several important observations.⁶⁶ Concerning the Irish text, he concluded that it was dependent on a branch of the *HB* tradition that was distinguished by the fact that *Albanus* and the *Albani* had replaced *Alamannus* and the *Alamanni* amongst the descendants of Istio, and by listing one of the sons of Inguo/Negue as Burgandus rather than Burgundus. In order to assess these and further arguments, the following tables present the names of the nations and their ancestors listed in the various recensions of FTN in *HB* and various Irish texts. All the names on the table are found in the relevant texts, including those presented in brackets, which are the names of the nations said to descend from the eponymous grandsons of Alanus.

⁶⁴ F. Lot, *Nennius et l'Historia Brittonum: Étude critique* (Paris, 1934), p. 51, n. 5.

⁶⁵ Carey, 'The ancestry of Fénius Farsaid', 107, note 12.

⁶⁶ Faral, *La Légende arthurienne*, p. 294.

Table 2: The Frankish Table of Nations

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Goffart's 'earliest' attainable version ¹	Karlsruhe ²	'Harleian' HB ³	'Vatican' HB ⁴	'Chartres' HB ⁵	CCCC 139 ⁶
Erminus	Alaneus	Alanus	Alanus	Alanus	Alanus
Inguo	Hisione	Hessio	Hision	Hision	Isition
Istio	Ermenone	Armenon	Armenon	Armenon	Armenon
	Niguo	Negue	Neugio	Neugio	Neguao
Erminus	Hisione	Hessio	Hision	Hision	Hision
Gothos	Romanos	Francus (Franci)	Francum (Franci)	Francus (Franci)	Francus (Francus)
Walagothos	Francos	Romanus (Latini)	Romanum (Latini)	Romanus (Latini)	Romanus (Latini .i. Romani)
Wandalos	Alamannos	Britto (Albani)	Alamannum (Alamanni)	Almannus (Alamanni)	Alemannus (Alamanni)
Gepedeos	Brittones	Albanus (Britti)	Brutonem (Bryttones)	Brito (Britones)	Britto (Bruti .i. Britones)
Saxones					
Inguo	Ermenone	Armenon	Armenon	Armenon	Armenon
Burgundiones	Gothi	Gothus (Gothi)	Gothum (Gothi)	Gothus (Gothi)	Gothus (Gothi)
Turingos	Walagothi	Valagothus (Walagothi)	Ualagothum (Ualagothi)	Valagothus (Valagothi)	Walagothus (Walagothi)
Langobardos	Cybedi	Gebidus (Gebidi)	Gibidem (Cibidi)	Cebustus (Cebidi)	Cebidus (Cebidi)
Baioarios	Burgundio	Burgundus (Burgondi)	Burgundum (Burgundi)	Burgundus (Burgundi)	Burgundus (Burgundi)
	Langobardos	Langobardus (Langobardi)	Langobardum (Langobardi)	Longobardus (Longobardi)	Langobardus (Langobardi)
Istio	Niguo	Neugo	Neugio	Negue	Neguao
Romanos	Wandalos	Wandalus (Boguarii)	Uandalum (Bogari)	Uandalis (Bogari)	Wandalus (Bogari)
Brittones	Saxones	Saxo (Vandal)	Saxonem (Uandali)	Saxo (Vandali)	Saxo (Wandali)
Francos	Baioarios	Boguaros (Saxones)	Bogarum (Saxones)	Bogarus (Saxones)	Bogarus (Saxones)
Alamannos	Toringus	(Taringi)	(Tarinegi)	(Turingi)	Targus (Tarmci)

¹ Goffart, 'Table of nations', p. 150.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 145-7.

³ Ed. E. Fasal, *La légend arthurienne*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1929), p. 15.

⁴ Ed. D. N. Dumville, *The Historia Brittonum: The Vatican edition* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 72.

⁵ Ed. E. Fasal, *La légend arthurienne*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1929), p. 14.

⁶ CCCC 139 f. 168^v.

Table 2: The Frankish Table of Nations

LB ⁷	SAM (LU) ⁸	LG1 (LL) ⁹	LG3 A ¹⁰	LG3 B ¹¹
Alanius (Alanius, Lc)	Elonius vel Alanius	Elanius	Alanius	Elenus
Isicon (Hissicon, Lc)	Armón	Armen	Armeín	Armen
Armenon	Negua	Negua	Negua	Negua
Negua	Hiscón	Isacon	Isicón	Isicon
Isicon (Hiscicon, Lc)	Armon	Armen	Armón	Airmen
Frangus (Francus, TCD MS H.3.17)	Gothus	Gothus	Gotus	Gotus
Romanus	Uolegothus	Cibidus	Uiligotus	Cibidus
Britus	Cebidus	Uiligotus	Cebitus	Uiligothus
Albanus	Burgandus	Burgandus	Burgandus	Burgandus
	Longbardus	Longbardus	Longbardus	Longbardus
Armenon	Negua	Negua	Negua	Negua
Gotus (Gothus, Lc)	Uandalus	Saxus	Uandalus	Saxus
Ualegothus	Saxus	Boarus	Saxus	Boarus
Cebidus	Bogardus	Uandalus	Bogardus	Uandalus
Burgandus			Longbardus	
Longubarrdus				
Negua	Hiscón	Hiscion	Isicon	Hiscion
Uandalus	Francus	Romanus	Frangcus	Romanus
Saxo	Romanus	Francus	Romanus	Frangcus
Boarus	Albanus	Britus	Albanus	Britus
	Britus	Albanus	Albanactus	Albanus
			Britus	

⁷ Ed. A. G. van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach*, pp. 6–7; the readings from BB have been given primacy as these most often record the most conservative versions; variants are only provided where they offer a preferable reading.

⁸ Ed. R. I. Best and O. Bergin, *Lebor na hUídhre: the Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin, 1929), p. 1; Herbert, ‘The Irish SAM’, pp. 104–5 illustrates that the LU text is in many cases truer to its sources than the in R

⁹ Ed. R. I. Best, O. Bergin and M. A. O’Brien, *The Book of Leinster: formerly Lebar na Níachongbála*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1954), p. 3.

¹⁰ Ed. R. A. S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, vol. 1 (1938), p. 156.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160; two version of FTN were incorporated separately into this recension of LG. The text also includes the attribution of the monstrous progeny to Cham (p. 136), suggesting that SAM may have been one of the sources used.

The Reichenau version of FTN lists the descendants of Hissione as *Romanos*, *Francos Alamannos* and *Brittones*. When the author of *HB* adapted FTN to his purpose, he posited the existence of an eponymous ancestor for each of these nations, including Alamannus. Alamannus and his brothers featured in the text of each recension of *HB* except the Harleian version, where Albanus and the Albani have replaced Alamannus and the Alamanni. *Albani* is a less common variant term for those usually termed *Scotti* from the early tenth century. It is derivative of *Alba*, or rather its genitive, *Alban* (as in *fir Alban*, ‘the men of *Alba*’), originally the Gaelic term for the island of Britain, but from about the year 900 hundred used to refer to the Gaelic kingdom in northern Britain.⁶⁷ The most likely cause for this alteration was probably the emergence of the Gaelic kingdom of Alba in the early tenth century.⁶⁸ To the scribe responsible for the Harleian text of *HB*, it seems to have made sense that the ancestor of the Britons was a brother of the ancestor of the men of Alba, so he replaced the ancestor of the Alamans with Albanus.

All the Irish versions of FTN include Albanus rather than Alamannus, suggesting that they were ultimately derived from the Harleian recension of *HB*. Perhaps because the author of *SAM* was aware of the Gaelic identity of the men of Alba, however, he refuted any suggestion of a link with Albanus, instead connecting him with ‘the eastern Albania in great Asia’, *ind Albain airtherach isind Asia móir*.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ For the most recent discussions of these developments see A. Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070*, *The new Edinburgh history of Scotland*, volume 2 (Edinburgh, 2007), and an important review of this book; T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Picts and Scots’, *The Innes Review*, 59, no. 2 (2008), 168–88.

⁶⁸ This might provide a *terminus post quem* for the Harleian recension of *HB*.

⁶⁹ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 75.

Further evidence regarding the derivation of the Irish tradition of FTN from *HB*, concerns the fate of the *Toringi*/Thuringians. The Thuringians were represented in FTN from the time of the 'earliest attainable version', and when the author of *HB* created eponymous ancestors for each of the nations he also did so for these, as the presence of 'Targus' – presumably derived from an earlier 'Toringus' – in the version of the text in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 139 demonstrates. At an early stage in the textual history of *HB*, however, the omission of Toringus from among the sons of Negua gave the impression that the Toringi were without an eponymous ancestor. The presentation of the names of the grandsons of Alanus is separated from the list of the peoples descended from them by a short piece of text in *HB* and it is apparent that a scribe simply omitted a name from the first list, that of the sons of Neguo, without noticing his error when he included the Toringi in the list of nations. None of the Irish versions of the text contain reference to this secondary list of nations, satisfying themselves with an occasional statement of the sort: *Saxus ... is uad atát Saxain*, for example.⁷⁰ Neither does any Irish text contain reference to Toringus or his descendants. The translator of *Lebor Bretnach* copied only the list of Alanus' sons and grandsons and did not include the names of the peoples descended from them, the result being the loss of Toringus and of the Toringi from the Irish textual tradition of FTN.

The Irish transmission of the tract is, therefore, dependent on a version of *HB* in which the *Alamanni* had been replaced by the *Albani* and Toringus had been omitted from the list of the sons of Negue. A comparison of the various recensions

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*.

illustrates that there is only one contender; the Harleian recension. *Lebor Bretnach*, the Irish translation of *Historia Brittonum*, is known to belong to the so-called 'Nennian' recension of HB.⁷¹ No full Latin text of this recension is extant, but the text of HB in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 139, while it actually 'belonged to the secondary, Gildasian recension', has had 'material which ... constitutes the so-called "Nennian" recension ... added ... in interlinear or marginal positions'.⁷² The version of FTN in that manuscript, then, is not part of the Nennian recension and there is no necessity for it to match that of the Irish texts. Through comparison of the additional, Nennian, material in the manuscript, but without comment on FTN, Dumville 'the doyen of scholarship on the *Historia Brittonum*,'⁷³ was left with 'no room for doubt that the recension attributed to Ninnius was essentially of the Harleian type'.⁷⁴

The Irish transmission of FTN is, therefore, dependent entirely on a version of the Harleian recension of HB and LB is a translation of just such a text. Ó Cróinín contended that 'there is no textual evidence to suggest that SAM and LB are in any way interdependent. The only passage where the two texts overlap (§26) [*i.e.* FTN] could very easily have been independently derived by both works from the original source', though in a footnote he contradicted this by saying that he believed 'that the

⁷¹ D. N. Dumville, "'Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica* 10–11 (1975–6), 78–95.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 79–80.

⁷³ T. O. Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*', in S. Taylor (ed.), *Kings, clerics and chronicles in Scotland 500–1297: Essays in honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday* (Dublin, 2000), p. 87.

⁷⁴ Dumville, "'Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', 81.

text in *Lebor Bretnach* was taken from SAM'.⁷⁵ It is true that the versions of FTN in *SAM* and *LG* do not conform exactly to that in *LB*, but all the Irish versions of the tract display the same characteristic features in terms of the presence of Albanus and the absence of Toringus. Occam's Razor would suggest that it is most likely that the entire Irish tradition of FTN is dependent on the version of the tract translated from *HB* into *LB* from which text it was spread, with minor rearrangements, to *SAM* and *LG1*. Any other hypothesis would involve accepting that more than one Irish copyist of the *HB* text copied the list of Alanus' grandsons without noting the omission of the ancestor of the Toringi.

The author of *SAM* drew on FTN with in order to incorporate the European nations into his primarily biblical genealogical schema. The Franks, the Goths and the Romans were depicted as the descendants of eponymous ancestors; *Francus*, *Gothus* and *Romanus*⁷⁶ who might also have bequeathed their names to their descendants' national territories as in the case of Albanus, eponym of Albania, and Britus, *ó ráter inis Bretain*, 'from whom is named the island of Britain'.⁷⁷ The various nations are said to have been distinguished prior to the creation of the different languages at the Tower of Babel: *ro-thuisim Noé trí macu ria ndílinn, conid uadib-side géatar na dá cenél sechtmogat iar ndílinn ... conid dá cenél sechtmogat sin uli 7 conid dá bérla sechtmogat tuctha dóib post ic tairmesc in Tuir Nemruaid*, 'Noah begot three

⁷⁵ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 49

⁷⁶ The inclusion of the *Romani* as a *gens* alongside the likes of the Franks was not uncommon. Isidore (*Etymologiae*, 9.2, pp. 84–87), for example, listed the *Romani* alongside other peoples of Italy.

⁷⁷ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, pp. 75, 78.

sons before the Deluge, and it is from them that the seventy-two nations derived after the Deluge ... so that there were seventy-two nations in total, and they were given seventy-two languages afterwards at the stopping of [the building of] Nemrod's Tower'.⁷⁸

As Charles Donahue noted, the author of *SAM* was one of a group 'of historical rigorists'⁷⁹ and perhaps what marks out his presentation the origins and genealogies of nations is its desire for regularity and orthodoxy on all fronts. So, for instance, although the author had access to a version of the *Historia Brittonum* or, which is more likely, its Irish translation, *Lebor Bretnach*, he ignored the alternative origin legend of the Britons presented therein that ascribed to them a Trojan ancestry in favour of connecting them directly onto the biblical schema.⁸⁰ The *Historia Brittonum* also provided a genealogy of the English that traced their ancestry to Geta *qui fuit ut aiunt filius Dei*.⁸¹ This was not included in *Lebor Bretnach*, which linked the *Saxain* directly onto the larger biblical framework and was followed by *SAM*: *Saxus mac Negua meic Alani meic Íbath meic Magoch meic Iaféth meic Noé, is uad atát Saxain*, 'Saxus son of Negua son of Alanus son of Ibath son of Magoch son of Japheth son of Noah, it is from him that the *Saxain* are (descended)'.⁸² This statement also, of course, ignored Bede's statement that the English were descended *de tribus Germaniae populis fortioribus, id est Saxonibus, Anglis, Iutis*,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁹ Donahue, 'Grendel and the *clanna Cáin*', 172.

⁸⁰ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 75; *Lebor Bretnach*, ed. van Hamel, pp. 15–17.

⁸¹ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, pp. 42–3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 75. Compare *Lebor Bretnach*, ed. van Hamel, p. 43 where the pagan ancestry of Hors and Hengist given in *HB* is linked onto the biblical scheme via Saxus son of Negua son of Alanius, that is, via FTN.

‘from three of the more powerful peoples of *Germania*, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes’.⁸³ The slight alteration of this statement made by the Irish translator of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is suggestive of a similar keenness to fit the *gens Anglorum* into the more familiar picture of genetically distinct nations. He wrote *tri cinela Saxan tancatar assin Germain .i. Saxain 7 Angli 7 Iuti*, which can be translated as ‘three nations of *Saxain* came from Germany, that is *Saxain* and Angles and Jutes.’⁸⁴ On this reading the categorisation of *Saxain*, Angles and Jutes can be considered inferior to the all-encompassing title of *Saxain*. In other words, the Irish translator perceived the *Saxain* as encompassing all of the Germanic invaders of Britain at the time of their arrival. While *Saxa* could be an inferior categorisation like Angle or Jute, it was also a superior one, encapsulating the Irish author’s perception of the Anglo-Saxons as a single people.

The trouble with attempting to be so comprehensive in his inclusion of the various nations of the world quickly became apparent to the author of *SAM*. The list he compiled of nations descended from Japheth quickly expanded beyond the canonical number of fifteen he had quoted. This issue had been on the author’s mind from the outset, when he had asked: *Cia lín cenél 7 citni cenéla ná fuillet numir cenél acht a ngabáil i fothechdas na cenél ata coibniusda dóib? Cia lín cenél 7 citni cenéla ro-claémchaset anmann secha cétairec?* ‘How many nations are there, and what are the nations that do not complete the enumeration of the nations but which are included in subordination to nations that are related to them? How many nations

⁸³ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 1.15.

⁸⁴ ‘A Middle Irish fragment of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History’, ed. Bergin, p. 68.

are there, and which are the nations that changed their names compared with their original state?’⁸⁵

The apparent proliferation of nations had troubled diligent Christian scholars before. Bede had found a solution to the problem of in the writings of Arnobius Iunior, the fifth-century Gaulish priest or bishop. Citing Arnobius, Bede wrote:

*Shem primogenito pars facta est a Persida et Bactris usque in Indiam longe et usque Rhinocoruras, quae spatial terrarum habent linguas sermone barbarico uiginti et septem, in quibus linguis gentes sunt patriarum quadringentae sex non diversarum linguarum, sed, ut dixi, diversarum patriarum; uerbi gratia cum una lingua Latina sit, sub una lingua diuersae sunt patriae Bruttiorum, Lucanorum, Apulorum, Calabrorum, Picentium, Tuscorum, et his atque huiusmodi patriis similia si dicamus. Cham uero secundus filius Noe, a Rhinocoruras usque Gadira habens linguas sermone Punico a parte Garamantum, Latino a parte Boreae, barbarico a parte meridiani, Aethiopum et Aegyptiorum, ac barbaris interioribus uario sermone numero uiginti duabus linguis, in patriis trecentis nonaginta et quattuor. Iafeth autem flumen Tigridem, qui dividet Mediam et Babyloniam in patriis ducentis sermone uario, in linguis uiginti tribus. Fiunt ergo omnes simul linguae septuaginta duae, patriae autem generationem mille, quae in tripertito saeculo hoc ordine sitae sunt.*⁸⁶

To Shem, Noah’s first-born, was given the portion from Persia to Bactria all the way to India and to the Rhinocoruras. This expanse of land comprised twenty-seven barbaric languages. Within these languages the peoples form forty-six *patriae*, not of diverse languages but, as I said, of diverse *patriae*. For example, although Latin is a single language, there are under this single language diverse *patriae* of Brutti, Lucani, Apuli, Calabri, Picentes, Tusci and others of their ilk, if I may say so. Ham the second son [received] from the Rhinocoruras to Gadira, containing languages of Punic speech in the region of the Garamantes, Latin in the northern part, barbarian in the southern region of the Ethiopians and Egyptians, and of various speech in the barbarous interior: twenty-two languages in three-hundred and ninety-four *patriae*. Japheth [had] the Tigris River, which divides Media and Babylonia: two hundred *patriae* in twenty-three languages of different speech. Altogether these made seventy-two languages and a thousand *patriae generationem*, located in this order throughout the threefold world.

⁸⁵ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 67.

⁸⁶ Bede, *De Temporum Ratione*, ed. C. W. Jones, *Bedaе venerabilis opera*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 123 B (Turnhout, 1977), § 66, pp. 468–69.

Distinguishing between *linguae* and *patriae gentium* was one answer to the quandary presented by the abundance of *gentes* in the world, and though it was not dissimilar to the rationale developed by the author of *SAM* to confront this issue, it was different enough to suggest that the Irish author was not dependent on Bede (or Arnobius). In fact, the solution proposed in *SAM* is one of the most intriguing aspects of the work.

First of all, the author claimed that the multiplication of nations was more apparent than real. It was the result of the multiplication of names and confusion regarding the fate of certain groups. For example, Mesraim son of Cham is attributed with six sons from whom sprang the Philistines and the Capturini *7 ciniuda imda aile erili, 7 nídat cínte 7 nídat derba indiu, ar ro-cloémchoisset attreba 7 anmann* ‘and countless other peoples; and they are neither certain nor definite today, for they have altered their abodes and their names’.⁸⁷ Mesraim’s brother, Chuss, we are informed, was the ancestor of the Chussi, but *Etheopac dai a n-ainm-side indiu*, ‘they are called Ethiopians today’.⁸⁸

Even taking the multiplication of names under consideration, it was still clear to the author of *SAM* that the number of nations he had identified as descendants of Noah’s sons exceeded the canonical figures significantly. The answer he came up with to resolve this dilemma illustrates the importance of language as a defining characteristic of nationality in his mind. The seventy-two languages, he knew, had been presented to the seventy-two nations at the Tower of Babel, so the question

⁸⁷ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p, 77.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

arose *innat lín na cenéla oldát na bérlae?*, ‘are the nations more numerous than the languages?’⁸⁹ And the answer, of course, was no, or at least not really:⁹⁰

Iss ed ro-imdaig hautem numir na cenél sech numir na mbérta: ar itát isind Affraic ilchenéla im oénbérta 7 iss ed fot-era sein, ná rabatar acht dá cenél sechtmogat tall in tan ro-imdaigthe na bérlai 7 ciaro-imdaigset na cenéla post ní tharta i n-áirim cenél n-écsamail acht a lécut hi fothechdas na cenél n-aile ata coibniusta dóib; condat lia na cenéla iar tothucht indáit na bérlae, cian combat lia iar numir.

This, however, is what multiplied the number of the nations beyond the number of the languages, for there are in Africa many nations with the same language, and the cause of that was that there were only seventy-two nations there [at the Tower] when the languages were multiplied, and though the nations multiplied afterwards they are not listed in the enumeration of distinct nations, but are subordinated to the other nations that are related to them. Whence there are more nations, in effect, than there are languages, though they are no more numerous according to enumeration.

The inspiration for this passage was apparently Isidorean, for in the *Etymologiae* it was written *initio autem quot gentes tot linguae fuerunt, deinde plures gentes quam linguae; quia ex una lingua multae sunt gentes exortae*, ‘at the outset there were as many languages as there were nations, and then more nations than languages, because from one language sprang many nations’.⁹¹ The novelty introduced by the author of *SAM* was to distinguish between two groups of nations, those who had their own national languages, the seventy-two *cenéla écsamla*, ‘distinct nations’, and the remaining *cenéla* that are *i fothechdas*, ‘subordinate’, to members of the first group. Another section of text uses shorthand terms to refer to the distinction here outlined: *Is iat-sin cóic prímchenéla déc clainni Iaféth cona fochenélaib ... Do chlannaib Iaféth meic Noé condici so cona prímchenélaib 7 cona fochenélaib*, ‘Those

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73–4.

⁹¹ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 9.1.1.

are the fifteen primary-nations of the descendants of Japheth, with their subordinate-nations ... Concerning the family of Japheth, son of Noah, with their primary-nations and their subordinate-nations'.⁹² This statement also makes it clear that despite initially only mentioning the presence of *fo-chenéla* in Africa, the author of *SAM* considered them a feature of the European population too.

Fo-chenél is not a common word; *DIL*, which defines it as 'a sub-division of a tribe or race', cites only two examples, one from *SAM* and the other from *Rédigdam*.⁹³ *Prím-chenél* is not to be found in *DIL*, but is clearly a compound of *prím*, 'primary', and *cenél*. It is used in texts not related to *SAM*, notably in 'The Saga of Fergus mac Léti' that was discussed in Chapter 1. That eighth-century saga states *batar tri primcenela in Erin .i. Féni 7 Ulaid 7 Gailni .i. Laigin*, 'there were three primary-races in Ireland, that is, the Féni, the Ulaid and the Gaileóin, that is, the Laigin'.⁹⁴ In Chapter One it was argued that these three were to be equated with the *trí chenéla sóera*, 'three free races' referred to in certain law tracts.⁹⁵ The meaning of *prim-chenél* in the 'Saga of Fergus mac Léti' was not the same as that in *SAM*, that much seems clear. The Féni, Ulaid and Laigin were being distinguished as 'primary', 'free' or 'noble' kindreds in contrast to the 'base, 'unfree', or perhaps the 'rent-paying' *cenéla*. There was certainly no suggestion that they possessed their own languages, which was the basis of the definition of *prím-chenél* in *SAM*. It is nonetheless possible that the author of *SAM* was drawing on a stock of older

⁹² *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 75.

⁹³ *DIL*, s.v..

⁹⁴ Binchy, 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti', 36–7, 45.

⁹⁵ *CIH*, p. 356.6.

terminology, and an Irish concept of a hierarchy of types of *cenéla* to answer his intellectual quandary. It was suggested in Chapter One that the Féni, Laigin and Ulaid might have been 'primary' in the sense that there was no overarching identity that united them, a sense that would fit the context of its use in *SAM* quite well.

In brief then, according to *SAM* nations were originally defined according to their common ancestry and it was on that basis that they were assigned languages at the Tower of Babel, and although the number of *cenéla*, defined in genealogical terms, has increased since then, that increase is only illusory. The primary-nations, those that possess their own language, still numbered seventy-two, and the apparent increase was to be corrected by recognising the subordinate status of those nations that did not possess their own language. As Geary noted, medieval scholars 'were acutely aware of the fact that every *gens* did not have its own language'.⁹⁶ The situation with regards the *Saxain* in the Middle Irish translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* discussed previously provides an interesting example. The Angles, Jutes and Saxons were all *cenéla* in the eyes of the Irish translator, but the Angles and Jutes could also be classified as *Saxain*. Presumably, then, the Angles and Jutes were to be perceived as *fo-chenéla* that in the ultimate enumeration of the nations could be included within the linguistically-defined Saxon *prím-chenél*.

Another notable section of *SAM*'s genealogical exposition has been the subject of considerable commentary, the intriguing description of the origins of the monstrous races. The existence of monsters was recognised throughout the

⁹⁶ Geary, 'Ethnic identity', p. 20.

medieval world, and at least since the time of St Augustine they had been considered part of mankind:

Quisquis upsiam nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatam sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive qualibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno protoplasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit.

Whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.⁹⁷

The author of *SAM* toed this line, clearly describing the monstrous races as misshapen races of men. So did the author of the Middle Irish treatise on the hexaameron, *In Tenga Bithnua*, ‘The Ever-new Tongue’, who stated that he would describe *cech ni is ingnad*, ‘everything which is wondrous’, about the seventy-two nations descended from Adam, and went on to include details regarding only the most exotic Plinian monsters.⁹⁸

SAM includes two accounts of the origins of monsters, the first of which depicts them as the descendants of Cain:⁹⁹

Ro-forcongair Dia trá for clannaib séth náro-chummascdais fri clanna Caín 7 náro-clannaigdis friu 7 ná tucdais mná díb. Tarmi-deochatar dano clanna Séth in forcital-sin 7 tucsat ingena clainni Caín, ar ba mór a caémi, ro-clannaigset friu dar sárgud Dé conid de-sin ro-geinset torothuir in domuin .i. fomoraig 7 luchorpáin 7 cech n-écosc torothorda ndodelbda ro-buí for doínib. Ót-chonnairc

⁹⁷ St Augustine, *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, ed. and trans. E. M. Stanford and W. M. Green, *Saint Augustine: The City of God*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 5 (London, 1965), 16.8, pp. 43–6. For more on the subject, see J. B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (London, 1981), pp. 178–96.

⁹⁸ *In tenga bithnua*, ed. J. Carey, *In Tenga Bithnua, the Ever-new Tongue*, Apocrypha Hiberniae II, Apocryptica 1 (Turnhout, 2009), § 74, p. 192ff.

⁹⁹ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 71.

Dia hautem tíctain dóib dar a thimna ro-chinnistar na doíni do hiuli-dilgenn, conid [d]ó tucad in díliu darsin domun, do bádud clainni Caín.

God commanded, moreover, of the offspring of Seth that they consort not with the families of Cain, and that they should not beget children by them, and that they should not take wives from among them. The family of Seth, however, transgressed that instruction and they took to themselves the daughters of the family of Cain – for they were very beautiful – and they bore children by them in defiance of God so that it was through that that the monstrous creatures of the world were born, i.e. Fomoraig and Luchorpáin and every horrible, misshapen species of man. After God had seen them contravene his commandment, however, he determined to destroy completely the human race; so that it was for that reason the flood was sent over the earth, to drown the family of Cain.

The apocryphal claim that Cain was the ancestor of monstrous creatures is found in several Irish texts and may reflect knowledge of certain Jewish traditions.¹⁰⁰ This Irish belief might have influenced Anglo-Saxon literature's most famous poem, *Beowulf*.¹⁰¹ This belief presented the difficulty of how the monsters had survived the Flood, which had been sent specifically 'to drown the family of Cain'.¹⁰² The author of *SAM* was a member of a school that 'insisted upon rigid historical scruples'¹⁰³ so he provided a different, more orthodox account:

Do shenchus na fomorach 7 na luchorpán 7 na torothur in so síis., Fechtás ro-buí Noé inna thabernacuil ina chotlud iar n-ól fína meisc 7 sélomnocht, co tánic a mac 'na dochum .i. Cám 7 co faca amal ro-buí 7 co nderna gáire imme 7 coro-innis dia brat[h]rib .i. do laféth 7 do Séim, 7 do-deochatar-side 7 a ndrommann rempaib arnád faicidís féli a n-athar 7 in ball diaro-thusmit a colla saindílsi, 7 do-ratsat a étach thairis.

¹⁰⁰ K. Glaeske, 'The children of Adam and Eve in medieval Irish literature', *Ériu* 56 (2006), 6.

¹⁰¹ J. Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 102–14; Donahue, 'Grendel and *Clanna Cain*', 172–3.

¹⁰² For a recent discussion, see S. Rodway, 'Mermaids, Leprechauns, and Fomorians: a Middle Irish account of the descendants of Cain', *CMCS* 59 (2010), 1–17.

¹⁰³ Donahue, 'Grendel and *Clanna Cain*', 173–4.

At-ract post Noé asa chotlud 7 ro-failsiged dó Cám dia fochuitbiud 7 rom-mallach post 7 ro-bennach in diis n-aili. Conid hé Cám de-side cét[d]juine ro-mallachad iar ndílinn 7 conid hé comarba Caín iar ndílinn 7 conid huad ro-génatar luchorpáin 7 fomoraig 7 goborchinn 7 cech écosc dodelbda archena fil for doínib, 7 conid aire tucad dilgenn for Cannánaib, 7 tucad ferann do macaib Israhél hi comarthu na mallachtan cétna, ar ropa do síl Cáim do Channánaib.

Conid hé-sin bunad na torothur 7 ní do síl Chaín dóib, amal ad-fiadat Goídil, ar níro-mair ní dia síl-side iar ndílinn, ar rop hé fochonn na dílenn do bádud clainni Caín; 7 ro bate cid clanna Séth uli immale friu acht Noé cona trí maccaib 7 cona cethri mnáib, amal innises Moísi mac Amra in sein i nGenis rechta, 7 Dia féin do-rat in recht-sain do Moísi i Sléib Sína 7 is hé féin ro-scríb cona láim.¹⁰⁴

Concerning the history of the Fomoraig and the Lucharpáin and the monstrous creatures, this below. Once, as Noah was in his tabernacle sleeping, having drunk intoxicating wine, and he naked, his son came towards him, i.e. Cham, and he saw how he was and laughed at him and told his brothers, i.e. Japheth and Sem. They then came with their backs turned away, that they might not see their father's nakedness and the member whereby their very own bodies were begotten; and they put his mantle over him.

Noah arose from his sleep thereafter and it was revealed to him that Cham had mocked him; and he cursed him afterwards, but he blessed the other two. Thus it was Cham who was first to be cursed after the flood, and he was the *comarba* (heir/successor) of Cain after the flood. And from him sprang the Luchorpáin and the Fomoraig and the Goat-heads, and every kind of ill-shapen species of humanity, and it is for that reason the Chanaanites were destroyed and their land given to the Israelites, as a sign of the self-same curse, for the Chanaanites were of the race of Cham.

That, then, is the origin of the monsters, and they are not of the race of Cain, as the Gaels say, for none of his line survived the deluge, because the very purpose of the deluge was to drown the race of Cain; and even the whole race of Seth were drowned along with them, except Noah and his three sons and their four wives, as Moses son of Amra relates that in the Book of Genesis. And it was God himself who gave that Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, and it was he himself wrote it in his own hand.

Keith Glaeske has recently examined Irish traditions concerning the children of Adam and Eve. Amongst his findings he discussed the typological relationship between these and the children of Noah.¹⁰⁵ Their shared roles as progenitors of

¹⁰⁴ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, pp. 78–9.

¹⁰⁵ Glaeske, 'The children of Adam and Eve', 1-11.

mankind allowed both for explicit comparisons to be drawn between them and, apparently, for the transference of characteristics from one group to another. As *LG* stated, *is é Nóe in tAdam tánisi, cuse mbertar fir domain uile*, ‘Noah was the second Adam, to whom all of the men of the world are traced’.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the author of *SAM*, in correcting the mistaken belief of the Irish that Cain was the ancestor of the monsters, transferred them to Cham, who was, *SAM* claimed, *comarba Caín iar ndílinn*, ‘the heir of Cain after the Flood’.¹⁰⁷

As Donahue noted, the attribution to Cain rather than Cham was more common in Irish literature both prior to and after the period during which *SAM* was composed.¹⁰⁸ Another Middle Irish text, *Duan in choícat cest*, though it did not mention the monstrous races specifically, took a different approach to linking the descendants of Cham with those of Cain by creating a genealogical rather than just a typological connection between them. The text reads *cairdis mac Caim cuindghid suin do chlainn Chain miscadaigh* and a gloss specifies that Cham’s wife was the daughter of a woman of Cain’s line: *do clainn Cháin máthair mná Caim, conad aire ná ránic rígi o claind Chaim*.¹⁰⁹ Creating this genealogical link between Cain and Cham legitimated the Irish tradition that the monsters were descendants of Cain without transgressing biblical authority to the same degree as claiming direct descent.

¹⁰⁶ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. Macalister, 1, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ See above, note 69.

¹⁰⁸ Donahue, ‘Grendel and *Clanna Cain*’, 172–3.

¹⁰⁹ *Duan in choícat cest*, ed. K. Meyer, ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen handschriften’, *ZCP* 4 (1903), 236. For another mention of the origins of the monsters that compares with *SAM*, see the *Banshenchas*, ed. M. C. Dobbs, ‘The *Ban-shenchus*’, *Revue Celtique* 48 (1931), 164. For reference to Cain as the progenitor of the monsters, see *eadem*, ‘The *Ban-shenchus*’, *RC* 47 (1930), 290: *Oliba bean Chaim m. Nae ro gensad Fomoraig cona fo-chenelaib a nindsib na hAfraicthi*, ‘Oliba wife of Cham son of Noah conceived the Fomorians with their subordinate-nations in the islands of Africa’.

Despite its title, then, *SAM* was not primarily a chronological text. Nor was it a treatise on salvation, a general account of world history, or an attempt to synchronise Irish pseudo-history with world events. While the Six Age theme was an important element of the text, it was used as a framework intended to authenticate its contents rather than representing its central focus. The author's goal was, as the text's medieval copyists realised, to provide a comprehensive and authoritative genealogy for all of mankind. In order to accomplish this goal, the author collected and interwove information from a vast array of sources into his text, mostly biblical and patristic, but also the Frankish Table of Nations. This industrious scholar displayed a critical ability in altering the accepted theory regarding the ancestry of monsters, and devised a complex theory of a hierarchy of nations to account for their apparent multiplication.

The text established the world-view within which the origins of the Irish nation could be situated and provided the background setting for *Lebor Gabála*. For although the author claimed that the languages of the world were created to be given to the seventy-two nations that existed at the time of the building of the Tower of Babel, he was fully aware of one example of a nation that did not fit these criteria, and the single reference to the origins of the Gaels in the text was carefully chosen to highlight the uniqueness of their identity: *conid hi cind deich mbliadan iar tain ro-thepestar Foénus Forsaid bérla na nGoédel asna díb bérlaib sechtmogat, corotaselb dia daltu, do mac Agnomain* 'And at the end of ten years following that Fénius Forsaid fashioned the Irish language from the seventy-two languages, and gave it to

his foster-son, to the son of Agnoman [= Goédel Glas].¹¹⁰ In its emphasis on linguistic identity, *SAM* owes something to the tradition of *Auraicept na nÉces*.

In large parts it might appear derivative and repetitive, but Hans Oskamp's depiction of *SAM* as 'seemingly not very interesting' was surely unwarranted, as was Donahue's labelling of the author as a 'crank'.¹¹¹ To judge from its manuscript transmission, eleventh- and twelfth-century Irishmen had a much more positive opinion of the text and a more sympathetic modern reader might applaud the author's approach and dedication to orthodoxy that provided an authoritative account of the background and context to the Irish origin legend.

The Date and Authorship of *SAM*

The final issue to address is who the author of *SAM* was. Two copies of *SAM* contain incipits, possibly based on a common exemplar, that describe the text as an Irish translation of the Pandect. One of these incipits, C, describes the work as *Tunnscaid na sencaide n-eolach*, 'the learned historians' undertaking', but the other, R, instead ascribes the text, as noted above, to Dublittir Ua hUathgaile.¹¹² Dublittir was certainly the author of *Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim*. *Rédig dam* follows *SAM* immediately in R and is also extant in the LL. Superscriptions to the poem in both of those

¹¹⁰ *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p, 73.

¹¹¹ Oskamp, 'On the author', 127; Donahue, 'Grendel and the *clanna Cain*', 172.

¹¹² See above, note 40.

manuscripts name Dublittir as the poet¹¹³ and the following couplet from the final stanza confirms this:

<i>Missi don chuachmaig on chill</i>	I am from the cuckoo's plain, from the church,
<i>hua huathgail(e) a husenglind</i>	Ua hUathgaile from Glenn Uissen. ¹¹⁴

The genealogies describe the Uí Uathgaile as belonging to the Uí Breccáin branch of the Uí Bairrche, as did Diarmait mac Siabair, alias Modimóc, the founder of Glenn Uissen.¹¹⁵ In a charter recording a land transaction between the church of Glenn Uissen, modern Killeshin in county Laois, and the Columban house at Durrow dated to 1103x1116, Dublittir is named as the *fer léigind* of Glenn Uissen.¹¹⁶ The Uí Uathgaile were a learned family with a strong association with this monastery, which had an active scriptorium and which had been home to noted tenth-century poets.¹¹⁷

Based on his belief that the text extant in R most closely represented the original of *SAM* and that *Rédig dam* represented a 'mnemonic epitome of the prose' and 'an integral part of the SAM text', Ó Cróinín championed Dublittir's claim to be

¹¹³ *Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 97: *duan Dublitrrech inso forsín panechte*; R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1957), p. 563: *Dubliter hua uathgaile .cc..*

¹¹⁴ *Rédig dam*, pp. 108, 137.

¹¹⁵ E. Bhreathnach, 'Killeshin: an Irish monastery surveyed', *CMCS* 27 (1994), 42.

¹¹⁶ R. I. Best, 'An early monastic grant in the Book of Durrow', *Ériu* 10 (1926–8), 137. For the dating range here cited, see Wendy Davies, 'The Latin charter-tradition in western Britain, Brittany and Ireland in the early medieval period', in D. Whitelock, R. McKitterick and D. Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in early medieval Europe: studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 261, note 14. Ó Cróinín's suggestion that this charter may date from as late as 1124 (*The Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 42) seems without foundation.

¹¹⁷ *AFM*, 1082, records the death of Conchobar Ua Uathgaile, *fer leighinn Glinne h-Uissen*. Another individual bearing that surname was listed alongside Dublittir on the Durrow charter; see Best 'An early monastic grant', 138. For other poets linked with Glenn Uissen, see Bhreathnach, 'Killeshin', 38–44.

the author of *SAM*.¹¹⁸ Hans Oskamp had previously suggested that *Rédig dam* might have been a paraphrase of *SAM*, though he didn't commit to the idea.¹¹⁹ As he did not believe that Dublittir was the author of *SAM*, however, Oskamp believed that if *Rédig dam* was indeed based on the longer text, that its composition was independent of *SAM*'s and that it had only been attached to it by the scribe of R or his source.

The association between *SAM* and *Rédig dam* has been questioned by Ó Néill, Herbert and Carey, who have noted that the poem discusses only events of the first two of the Six Ages.¹²⁰ In fact, it covers only chapters four to thirty-two of the edited text of *SAM*, and it is not even a direct verse rendering of these. It also lacks any reference to the Six Age structure. As discussed above, however, the Six Ages theory is not *SAM*'s central concern and the text itself is more concerned with genealogy and the origins of peoples than with theories of chronology and computistics. The absence of these elements from *Rédig dam* may not be decisive, therefore. On the other hand, Dublittir's statement regarding the achievement of his poem – he claimed that he had 'woven together with great exactitude the genealogy of the family of Noah', *ros-figius féin co fírchert / craeb chaibniusa clanni Noé*¹²¹ – appears almost as a direct riposte to one of the questions with which *SAM* opens: *Cinnas ro-gablaigset clanna Noé, et cia lín cenél n-écsamail i tarrastar?*, 'How did the family of Noah divide, and how many distinct nations did they remain?'¹²² Dublittir's account of the division of the descendants of Noah is the same as that present in *SAM*,

¹¹⁸ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 22, 41-2, 44-8, 64.

¹¹⁹ Oskamp, 'On the author', 129.

¹²⁰ Ó Néill, 'The Ages of the world', 438; Herbert, 'The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi', 106-7; Carey, Review of *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, 162.

¹²¹ *Rédig dam*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 109.

¹²² *Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 67.

including an abbreviated version of FTN that names Alanius (Alán); his three sons; ‘Arbon, Negua, Hissicón’; Negua’s son Saxus *ótát Saxanaig*, ‘from whom the *Saxanaig* are [descended]’; and the four sons of ‘Issicón’: Romanus, Francus, Brittus and Albanus, *senathair na nAlbánna*, ‘ancestor of the Albanians’.¹²³ He also refers to the theory, propounded in *SAM*, of the existence of primary and subordinate nations:

<i>Sluind cóic príimchenéla déc</i>	Name the fifteen primary nations
<i>ó Iaféth, ní immarbréc;</i>	[descended] from Japheth – it is no deceit –
...	...
<i>i n-écmais a fochenél,</i>	in absence of their subordinate-nations. ¹²⁴

The influence of *SAM*’s discussion of the origins of the monstrous races is also evident in *Rédig dam*. Dublittir’s description of the monsters as descendants of Cham corresponds with *SAM*’s corrected version of their origins rather than the mistaken belief of the Gaels. But, like *SAM*, Dublittir also recognised typological comparisons between Cham and Cain, describing Cham as *Cain na ndoéne iar ndílinn*, ‘Cain of the people after the Flood’.¹²⁵

It is true that there are certain nuggets of information that are unique to *Rédig dam*, but these are few and far between. At least one of these additions is borrowed from Isidore’s *Etymologiae*¹²⁶ and another might have been taken from *LG*.¹²⁷ In general, however, there is substantial overlap in terms of sources and

¹²³ *Rédig dam*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 104.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹²⁶ Ó Cróinín’s, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 178 and Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, pp. 102–14. Apart from the examples listed below, see Ó Cróinín’s notes to lines 106–9, 118–20, and 220 (*The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 178–9).

¹²⁷ The name attributed to Noah’s wife, Cophia in R (*Sex Aetates Mundi*, ed. Ó Cróinín, p. 99) but Coba in LL (*Book of Leinster*, ed. Best et al, vol. 3, p. 564), is given as Cobba in LG1 (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. Macalister, vol. 1, p. 20; *Book of Leinster*, ed. Best et al, vol.1, p. 2).

presentation of material in the two texts. There can be little doubt, therefore, that Dublittir had access to *SAM* when he composed *Rédig dam*. Whether or not he had any role in the composition of *SAM* is quite another question, though.

Oskamp, despite initial enthusiasm for Dublittir's claims, came to read the superscription to *Rédig dam* in R as evidence that the *fer léigind* of Killeshin had not written *SAM*, for he believed 'it would be rather illogical that the man who is supposed to be responsible for the entire tract should be mentioned as the author of one poem only'.¹²⁸ Rather, Oskamp believed, Dublittir was not the author of *SAM* but 'probably only a poet who paraphrased an existing prose text'.¹²⁹ The ascription of the text to Dublittir in R was most likely, in the words of Edel Bhreathnach, 'the work of an enthusiastic copyist or compiler willingly ascribing more than his fair share to Dublittir, author of "Rédig dam" (but not of the *Sex Aetates*)'.¹³⁰

The date and authorship of *SAM*, Oskamp argued, ought be discussed in conjunction with *Lebor Bretnach* (*LB*) and *Lebor Gabála* (*LG*). *SAM*, *LB* and *LG* are generally thought to date from the middle or second half of the eleventh century.¹³¹ Fragments of *SAM* and *LB* are extant in *LU*, written in all probability at Clonmacnoise c.1100, although some commentators have argued for an initial phase of scribal activity in the 1060s or 1070s.¹³² The fragmentary nature of these texts in *LU* is due

¹²⁸ Oskamp, 'On the author', 130.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹³⁰ Bhreathnach, 'Killeshin', 45.

¹³¹ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, pp. 41–50; Oskamp, 'On the author', 136; Herbert, 'The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*', 108; Dumville, "'Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', 88; Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" recension', pp. 87–107; Carey, *The Irish national origin-legend*, p. 22.

¹³² The exact date of the manuscript and the identity of the scribes remains a matter of some debate. See R. I. Best and O. Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre: The Book of the*

to the loss of leaves at the beginning of the manuscript. Despite the early date of the manuscript in relation to the generally recognised date of composition of these texts, the *LU* versions of both texts contain readings inferior to those contained in later manuscripts, suggesting that the *LU* versions do not stand at the head of the textual tradition for either *SAM* or *LB*.¹³³

The leaves lost from the beginning of *LU* also seem to have originally contained a copy of *LG*. In Royal Irish Academy MS. D iv 3 ‘a copy of *Lebor Gabála* can be found with six marginal notes which mention *Lebor na hUidre* as the source of at least part of the text’.¹³⁴ Oskamp believed that this version of *LG* was previously held in the lost leaves either at the beginning of the manuscript or immediately after *LB*.¹³⁵ On the basis of the relationship between the contents of *SAM*, *LB* and *LG*, it seems more likely that *LG* would have followed rather than preceded the other texts. Oskamp suggested that *SAM* was a standard opening text in many eleventh- and twelfth-century synchronistic compilations. ‘Of these tracts [*SAM*, *LB* and *LG*]’, he said, ‘*Sex Aetates Mundi* undoubtedly came first in all synchronistic compilations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.’¹³⁶ In this case, *SAM*, *LB* and *LG* would have formed an internal dossier within *LU* dealing initially with the origins of mankind and the various branches of universal genealogy, then with the histories of the

Dun Cow (Dublin, 1929), pp. xiv-xvii; Oskamp, ‘Notes on the history of *Lebor na hUidre*’, 117–37; T. Ó Concheanainn, ‘The reviser of *Leabhar na hUidhre*’, *Éigse* 15 (1974), 277–88; Dumville, ‘The textual history of “*Lebor Bretnach*”: a preliminary study’, *Éigse* 16 (1976), 256.

¹³³ Oskamp, ‘On the history of *Lebor na hUidre*’, 119; *idem.*, ‘On the author’, 133-5; Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, 88.

¹³⁴ Oskamp, ‘Notes on the history of *Lebor na hUidre*’, 117–18.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁶ *Idem.*, ‘The Yellow Book of Lecan proper’, *Ériu* 26 (1975), 114.

inhabitants of Britain, and culminating with an account of the history of Ireland and the Irish.

Van Hamel noted that both the late-fourteenth-century Book of Ballymote (BB) and early-fifteenth century Book of Lecan (Lc) contained versions of *LB* from the same branch of the textual tradition as that in *LU*. Both also contain *SAM*, which suggested to him that these manuscripts shared a common ancestor that contained both texts. He labelled the postulated common source *P.¹³⁷ Oskamp expanded on van Hamel's theory. He noted that BB and Lc also contain versions of *LG*, and suggested that this text had also been present in *P.¹³⁸

Carey's understated estimation is that the textual tradition of *LG* 'is a bewildering textual labyrinth, a tangle of variants and inconsistencies'.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, serious efforts have been made by several scholars to identify the different recensions. The version of the text in BB and Lc is the same – that designated Redaction 3 by Macalister, C by van Hamel, and *c* by Scowcroft.¹⁴⁰ This version of the text was created at a relatively late date by incorporating aspects of two earlier versions; Redaction 1/A/a and Redaction 2/Ba/b. On the basis that the material designated as having been sourced from *LU* in the RIA manuscript can be identified as belonging to a specific branch of the textual tradition of *LG*, both Macalister and Scowcroft believed that the *LU* text belonged to Redaction 1/A/a.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ A. G. van Hamel, 'On *Lebor Gabála*', *ZCP* 10 (1915), 97–197.

¹³⁸ Oskamp, 'On the author', 137–8.

¹³⁹ Carey, *Irish national origin-legend*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁰ For the sigla see van Hamel, 'On *Lebor Gabála*'; Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1, pp. xvii–xviii; Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála – Part 1', 96–7.

¹⁴¹ Van Hamel, 'On *Lebor Gabála*', 148; Macalister, *Lebor Gabála*, 1, p. xvii, note 11; 4, p. 94; Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála – Part 1', 98–99.

In the earliest witness to their existence, then, *SAM* and *LB* appear to have been accompanied by *LG1*. These texts share other notable features. As discussed above, *SAM* and *LG1* – and *LG1*'s derivatives, *Mín* and *LG3* – contain versions of FTN that are dependent on the version of that text transmitted from the Harleian/Nennian version of *HB* via *LB*. The date and, it would appear, the authorship of *SAM* are entwined with the textual tradition of *LB*. Oskamp suggested that the scribe responsible for *P was Gilla Cóemáin, whose name has been associated with *LB* since the fourteenth century.¹⁴² Gilla Cóemáin's claims regarding this text rest upon ascriptions found in the Book of Uí Máine, in TCD MS H.2.17 and in Laud Misc. 610.¹⁴³ As Ó Cróinín pointed out, these texts belong to two distinct recensions of *LB* suggesting that the ascription goes back to an early common source.¹⁴⁴ The ascriptions' claim that Gilla Cóemáin was the translator of the text rather than the composer have a specificity that adds to their credibility.¹⁴⁵ Dumville has been sceptical about this ascription, but not entirely dismissive.¹⁴⁶ Clancy, however, has argued forcefully against this case. He believes that both the Nennian version of *HB* and its Irish translation should be attributed to the scriptorium of Abernethy in Scotland.¹⁴⁷ While his argument regarding the Latin text has much to commend it, the close association between *LB* and other distinctly Irish texts suggests that Ireland was the site of the translation and perhaps Gilla Cóemáin's claims deserve re-examination.

¹⁴² Oskamp, 'On the author', 138.

¹⁴³ Van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach*, pp. viii–ix.

¹⁴⁴ Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁵ See *Lebor Bretnach*, ed. van Hamel, pp. viii–ix for these texts.

¹⁴⁶ Dumville, "Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*, 88.

¹⁴⁷ Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" recension', pp. 87-107.

Gilla Cóemáin has proven enduringly enigmatic. Over a century ago Bartholomew MacCarthy had this to say of him:

Gilla Coemain (devotee of St. Coeman; of, perhaps, Russagh, co. Westmeath), flourished in the second half of the eleventh century. The other chronological poem composed by him [*Annálad anal uile*] ... is dated a.d. 1072. One of the additional verses in L [LL] calls him son (*mac*); the B [BB] copy, the grandson, or descendant (*ua*), of Gilla Samthainne – Devotee of (abbess) Samthann (ob. 739). He may have belonged to the Uí-Chairbre: a sept that inhabited the barony of Granard, co. Longford, in which the establishment of the saint in question is situated.¹⁴⁸

Although his floruit is securely dated by internal evidence in his poem, *Annálad anall uile*, the lack of an obit for him makes it impossible to know at what stage of Gilla Cóemáin's career he composed this work and the most recent editor of a collection of the poet's works, Peter Smith, admitted that 'little can be added'¹⁴⁹ to MacCarthy's comments.

A few points regarding Gilla Cóemáin's work are relevant to the current discussion. Gilla Cóemáin's poetry is predominantly concerned with matters of chronology, pseudo-history and synchronism, a range of interests that fits well with the postulated contents of *P. Clancy does not believe that Gilla Cóemáin was the translator of *LB*, partly because 'his canonical poetry shows little interest in the material contained in *Historia Brittonum*, or indeed in Britain'.¹⁵⁰ As Clancy noted, however, a poem on the history of the kingdom of Alba, *A eolcha Alban uile*, better

¹⁴⁸ B. MacCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus, No. 830*, Todd lecture series 3 (Dublin, 1892), p. 98. For an alternative suggestion regarding Gilla Cóemáin's geographical associations, see Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" recension', p. 103.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Three historical poems*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁰ Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" recension', p. 104.

known as the *Duan Albanach*, has also been ascribed to Gilla Cóemain.¹⁵¹ From internal evidence it appears that this poem was written in Ireland during the reign of Máel Coluim mac Donnchada (Malcolm III), king of Alba 1058–93, a date that coincides with Gilla Cóemáin’s known period of activity.¹⁵² Although this attribution is not universally accepted, it is noteworthy that the *Duan Albanach* draws upon FTN and the Pictish king-list associated with *LB*.

Oskamp accepted the ascription of *LB* to Gilla Cóemáin. He also noted an important textual link between *LB* and *SAM*. He believed it was significant that *LB* omitted the tract *De Sex Aetatibus Mundi* that was in *HB* and suggested that this was because of *LB*’s proximity to *SAM* in its original Irish incarnation.¹⁵³ Dumville believed that *SAM* ‘draws on a text of the *Historia Brittonum*’, but warned that ‘Oskamp’s conclusions must be treated with some reserve’.¹⁵⁴ Further support for Oskamp’s theory is to be found in analysis of the texts of *LG*, however. Peter Smith has observed that

similarities between the measurements of time in *Annálad* [*anal uile*], the *Mínugad* and Redaction 1 of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* suggests the possibility that the compilers of these early versions of *Lebor Gabála* may occasionally have drawn on the poem [*Annálad anall uile*], or indeed that Gilla Cóemain was active in the compilation of those recensions of *Lebor Gabála*.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Jackson, ‘The poem *A eolcha Alban uile*, 156; *idem*, ‘The *Duan Albanach*’, 127–28.

¹⁵² Jackson, ‘The *Duan Albanach*’, 125–37; *idem*, ‘The poem *A eolcha Alban uile*’, 149–67.

¹⁵³ Oskamp, ‘On the author’, 138.

¹⁵⁴ Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, 88, n. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, ‘Early Irish historical verse’, p. 340.

The Six Age format utilised by Gilla Cóemáin in *Annálad anall uile* and believed by Smith to have been imported from that text to *LG* was also that used in *SAM*.¹⁵⁶ In all three texts, the chronological framework of the Six Ages was intended to legitimise the content of the rest of the text, a common feature of Gilla Cóemáin's work. Mark Scowcroft, author of the most authoritative textual analysis of *LG* to date, has also recognised the impact Gilla Cóemáin made on the evolution of the text. He identified a source common to Redaction 1 and the abbreviated *Míniugud* version of *LG*, but not to Redaction 2, that he labelled μ . 'To ω [the material common to Redactions 1 and 2 as well as *Míniugud*] μ adds ... *Ériu ard inis na ríge* by Gilla Cóemáin ... and another work by the same poet, *Gaedel Glas ótáat Gaedil* ... the *floruit* of Gilla Cóemáin thus establishes an approximate date for the composition of μ .¹⁵⁷ Scowcroft also identified one of the specific novelties of μ as its 'obvious concern ... to provide the Irish with a pedigree back to Noah'.¹⁵⁸ FTN is present in both *LG1* and *Míniugud*, but not in *LG2*, suggesting that it was borrowed into the *LG* tradition from *LB* or *SAM* at μ . If Gilla Cóemáin was also responsible for that, then the links between the texts become even more intimate.

Scowcroft believes that Gilla Cóemáin, and other poets, composed their poems 'as companion-pieces to the prose-text' of *LG*.¹⁵⁹ John Carey was not originally in agreement with this. In his opinion, Gilla Cóemáin and his fellow poets provided 'a repository of information drawn upon by the eleventh-century author of

¹⁵⁶ *Annálad anall uile* ed. P. J. Smith, *Three Historical Poems*, pp. 188–92.

¹⁵⁷ Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála – Part 1', 96–7.

¹⁵⁸ *Idem*, 'Leabhar Gabhála – Part 2', 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

Lebor Gabála.¹⁶⁰ More recently Carey seems to have come around to the idea that Gilla Cóemáin's input was more direct. One of the sections of prose in *LG1* corresponds almost exactly with the text of one of Gilla Cóemáin's poems, a correspondence much more easily achieved by copying the poetry into prose rather than the reverse. Conversely, in other places he believes compositions of the same poet are reflections of the prose. Such a symbiotic relationship between Gilla Cóemáin's poetry of and the prose of *LG* is indicative of the intimacy of the poet's involvement with the production of the text.¹⁶¹

In its early manuscript tradition, in its use of the Six Age chronological framework and in its inclusion of FTN, *SAM*'s origins are intimately associated with *LB* and *LG1*/ Scowcroft's μ . Moreover, in terms of theme and content, *SAM* reads as an introduction to these other texts, providing the background, context and theoretical foundations for the discussion of the origins and histories of the peoples of the British Isles. The figure whose name is most closely associated with *LB* and *LG1*/ μ , Gilla Cóemáin, was also known to have had an interest in the features that linked these texts with *SAM*. And like these three texts, another contemporary composition that draws on FTN, the *Duan Albanach*, is also ascribed to Gilla Cóemáin. Gilla Cóemáin's authorship has not been proven beyond doubt for any of these texts, but nor has it been disproven. If more could be discovered about this enigmatic scholar it would provide a basis for further investigation into the exact date and authorship of all of these texts.

¹⁶⁰ Carey, *The Irish national origin-legend*, pp. 17–19.

¹⁶¹ *Idem*, 'Lebor Gabála and the legendary history of Ireland', pp. 44–5, n. 47.

CUMTACH NA NIUDAIDE N-ARD AND THE IRISH THEORY OF NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The ethnographic code developed in the Greek and Roman world ... was a formidable instrument to deal with a world of *gentes*. Unlike other codes that basically allowed to distinguish between 'us' and 'them', it also aimed at a distinction between 'them' and 'them'.¹

The most famous classical ethnographer was Herodotus who, as well as being 'the father of history', earned renown as the 'father of comparative anthropology' and 'father of ethnography' for the series of ethnographic descriptions that littered his account of the Greco-Persian wars.² The failure of medieval scholars to continue the classical ethnographic tradition epitomised by Herodotus is much lamented by modern anthropologists.³ Students of the history of ethnography and anthropology bemoan the degree to which medieval authors relied on stock images of ethnic stereotypes derived from older sources and indulged their imaginations with hackneyed depictions of monstrous races rather than accurately depicting peoples they were acquainted with at first hand.

Irish scholars were as guilty in this regard as their better-known contemporaries from elsewhere in Europe.⁴ *Atait da céinel .uii.m- do shil Adhaim*, 'there are seventy-two races of the seed of Adam', wrote the author of *In Tenga*

¹ W. Pohl, 'Telling the difference – signs of ethnic identity', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Strategies of distinction: the construction of ethnic communities, 300-800* (Leiden/New York/Köln 1998) p. 66.

² Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin Classics, revised edition with new introduction by A. R. Burn (London, 1972), p. 10; C. P. Jones, 'ἔθνος and γένος in Herodotus', *The Classical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1996), 315; J. L. Myres, *Herodotus: father of history* (Oxford, 1953); M. T. Hodgen, *Early anthropology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 20–30.

³ Hodgen, *Early anthropology*, pp. 49–77. For a more sympathetic discussion of medieval approaches to the subject, see R. Joseph, 'Anthropology in the middle ages', *Semiotica* 63, no. 1 (1987), 205–20.

⁴ Students of the history of anthropology tend to cite the likes of Sir John Mandeville. See Hodgen, *Early anthropology*, pp. 68–72; J. S. Slotkin (ed.), *Readings in early anthropology* (London, 1965, repr. 2004).

Bithnua, a Middle Irish treatise on the hexaemeron, *7 cach ni is ingnad dib indeostair daib-si iad*, ‘and everything which is wondrous of them will be related to you’.⁵ The author’s intent was rather to inspire awe in his readers at the wondrous elements of God’s creation than to provide solid anthropological information. The *cenéla* he sketched were seven monstrous races from the orient including such Plinian commonplaces as Pygmies and Blemmyae as well as giant, bright-eyed, whale-eating *curaid insi Emioin*, ‘warriors of the island of Emion’, and fire-breathing *daeine finda forlasorda a n-indsib Odania*, ‘white fiery people of the islands of Odania’. The immediate source for these descriptions was a version of *The Wonders of the East*, a text with a history already many centuries old before it reached the hands of this Irish author.⁶

To dismiss all medieval ethnography as uninquisitive and derivative of the worst elements of its classical forebear would be to do a severe injustice to Gerald of Wales (d.1223), a figure much better known to Irish and Welsh medievalists than to historians of anthropology. Robert Bartlett has discussed Gerald’s ethnographic achievement in the *Topographia Hiberniae* and, especially, his *Descriptio Cambriae* and has noted the extent to which Gerald had essentially to reinvent the genre:

His achievement is all the more striking in light of the fragmentation and, indeed, almost total disappearance of the classical ethnographic tradition. He found no formal models, such as the Germania could have provided ... Much of the classical anthropological and ethnographical tradition was lost for ever, and most of what had survived was not to receive general currency again in western Europe until the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries.

⁵ *In tenga bithnua*, ed. J. Carey, *In tenga bithnua, the ever-new tongue*, Apocrypha Hiberniae II, Apocalyptic 1 (Turnhout, 2009), § 74, p. 192. Carey’s translation has been altered by the current author.

⁶ Carey, *In tenga bithnua*, pp. 368–76.

Yet, even without the support of such a tradition, Gerald was able to write a detailed and coherent ethnographic monograph.⁷

Modern ethnographers might frown upon his prejudice towards, and intolerance of, the peoples he described,⁸ but medievalists set great store by the archdeacon of Brecon's depictions of even the more improbable aspects of contemporary Irish and Welsh life.⁹

Gerald's ethnographic achievement was unique for its time and dependent in part on the political context of late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman imperialism. He has no equivalent in contemporary Europe and certainly none in Ireland. To recognise that medieval scholars did not in general share in the classical ethnographic tradition, however, is not to deny that they were interested in the customs, habits and characteristics of foreign peoples. This interest often manifested itself in the composition of unadorned lists of stereotypical national characteristics that were part of the medieval world's inheritance from its Greek and Roman predecessors.¹⁰

Many examples of such lists can be found in the medieval manuscripts of the British Isles. They may be, as Rees Davies described them, 'clearly pre-packaged ... stock literary images',¹¹ but they also represent an aspect of the

⁷ R. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales: a voice of the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 2006), pp. 147–71, at 149.

⁸ For a discussion of how his work reflects his attitudes towards the Irish, see J. Stewart, 'Topographia Hiberniae', *Celtica* 21 (1990), 642–57. Cf. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 158–77.

⁹ See, for example, K. Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing political structure of Gaelic Ireland in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 21–4; M. Dillon, 'The consecration of Irish kings', *Celtica* 10 (1973), 3.

¹⁰ For numerous examples see H. Walther, 'Scherz und Ernst in der Völker- und Stämme-Charakteristik mittelleinischer Verse', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 41 (1959), 263–301.

¹¹ R. R. Davies, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland, 1100–1400 III: laws and customs', *TRHS*, 6th series, 7 (1996), 13.

'perceptions, myths and sentiments' that he asserted 'should surely be legitimate items for the historians agenda if we mean to reconstitute the experience of the past in the round and on its own terms'.¹² The intention of this chapter is to examine an Irish example of one such list as well as to discuss some of the basic assumptions that underpinned its composition. The Middle Irish poem *Cumtach na nludaide n-ard* (hereafter *Cumtach*) represents an Irish adaptation and translation of a continental Latin tract on the characteristics of peoples. The first portion of this chapter will examine its textual history, manuscript tradition, date, authorship and sources, after which the poem will provide a base from which to explore some of the underlying concepts regarding national characteristics.

Cumtach survives in two versions. One is extant in a single manuscript only; British Library MS Egerton 1782. This MS was mostly written in 1517 at Cluain Polcáin, in modern county Roscommon, home of the hereditary learned family of Ó Mhaoil Chonaire.¹³ It had been begun the previous year in Leinster, but the untimely death of the scribes' patron, Art Buidhe Mac Murchada Caomhánach – from whom the text is known to some as *Leabhar Airt Bhuidhe* – seems to have caused the scribes to move.¹⁴ The main scribe was an unnamed son of Seaán mac Torna Uí Mhaoil Chonaire who was aided in his project by his brother, Iarnán. The contents of the manuscript 'fall into groups distinguished to

¹² *Idem*, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland, 1100–1400 I: identities', *TRHS*, 6th series, 5 (1994), 3.

¹³ R. Flower, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. 2 (London, 1953), pp. 259–62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*. Cf., J. Carney, 'Literature in Irish, 1169–1534', in Cosgrave (ed.) *NHI* 2, p. 693.

some extent by their subject matter'.¹⁵ *Cumtach na nIudaide n-ard* is in a section of the manuscript that could be said to be generally historical in character. It is immediately preceded by the poem *Fritha gach da chosmuilius*, in which each of the major population groups in Ireland is compared to a foreign nation, and prior to that there is a series of poems concerned with biblical and Irish history. It is followed by a topographical poem attributed to Flann Fína and some fragmentary annals.

The other version of *Cumtach* is extant in three manuscripts: British Library Additional MS 30512, also known as *Leabhar na Carraigi*, 'The book of Carrick'; University College, Dublin, Additional Irish MS 14, Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh's autographed original of *Leabhar mór na ngenealach*; and Trinity College MS 1285. This latter MS was written in the middle of the eighteenth century by Aodh Ó Dálaigh. It 'consists almost entirely of copies from two MSS ... viz. Egerton 136 ... and Add. 30512', including *Cumtach na n-Iudaide n-ard*, and therefore has no independent value.¹⁶

Dubhaltach's version of the poem is also, as it turns out, a copy of that in *Leabhar na Carraigi*. Mac Fhirbhisigh did not ascribe the poem to any source, named or otherwise. The entire section prior to the poem, however, he described as *sliocht as senleabhair*, 'a tract from an old book'.¹⁷ This substantial tract (eighteen lines of prose and five quatrains in the modern edition), beginning *As í so saine ad-fhiadaid ro-eolaigh an tseanchusa im éaxamhlacht an dá chineadh n-éugsamhuil filedh in Éirinn*, 'This is the distinction that the great experts in history

¹⁵ Flower *British museum catalogue*, p. 263.

¹⁶ T. K. Abbott and E. J. Gwynn, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in Trinity College, Dublin* (Dublin, 1921), pp. 24–5.

¹⁷ D. Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar mór na ngenealach*, ed. N Ó Muraíle, *The great book of genealogies* (Dublin, 2003–4), p. 178.

declare about the different characteristics of the two peoples in Ireland', and ending with five quatrains beginning *Fionnadh seanchadha ffear fFail*, 'Let the historians of the men of Fál discover', seems to have been copied in its entirety from Add. 30512, where it appears on f. 11b.¹⁸ It seems probable, therefore, that Dubhaltach's version of *Cumtach* may also have come from the same source. There are some minor differences between the texts. Most of these are simply modernisations of the orthography, but Mac Fhirbhisigh has mistakenly turned the Saracens into Faracens and appears to have misread the third line of the penultimate stanza.¹⁹ The script in the Book of Carrick is quite clear in these instances, which might suggest either an intermediate stage of copying or the slightly careless reading of a man working under pressure. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Mac Fhirbhisigh's text came from the same ultimate source as that in Add. 30512 if not from that MS itself.

Apart from some material added in the sixteenth century, when it was in the possession of the earls of Desmond, Add. 30512 was written shortly before 1462 by the prolific scribe Uilliam Mac an Lega.²⁰

The manuscript falls naturally, apart from matter inserted later, into two sharply contrasted parts, which may originally have been independent manuscripts. The first part, in verse and prose, contains, with few exceptions, texts of the pre-twelfth century period, the second part, divided from the first by blank leaves and opening with an elaborate initial, contains prose only, in the main of the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century period, translated from Latin and, in two cases possibly from English originals.²¹

¹⁸ Flower, *British Museum catalogue*, p. 475. This poem also appears in TCD MS 1285, f. 119a, 9; Abbott and Gwynn, *Trinity College, Dublin, Catalogue*, p. 28.

¹⁹ For the text, see Appendix 1.

²⁰ Flower, *British Museum catalogue*, p. 470.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 473.

Cumtach belongs to the former part of the manuscript and its association with other early texts might suggest a date of composition prior to the twelfth century. As in the Egerton manuscript, it is associated with historical material – it follows two pseudo-annalistic historical tracts and a poem on the death of Congalach mac Maelmithig, king of Ireland, at the hands of the Dublin Norse, in 965.

This manuscript shares much of its history with Laud Miscellany 610, *Leabhar na Rátha*, ‘The Book of Pottlerath’, a manuscript in the Bodleian library, Oxford, written by Seán Buidhe Ó Cléirigh and Giolla na Naomh Mac Aodhagáin.²² Despite being from the hands of different scribes, both manuscripts appear to have been written for Edmond mac Richard Butler, nephew and deputy of James Butler, fifth earl of Ormond. After Edmond’s capture at the battle of Piltown in 1462, these two books were used to ransom him from Thomas FitzGerald, eighth earl of Desmond.²³ While in the hands of the Geraldines of Desmond, some additions were made to the manuscripts by Torna Óg mac Torna Uí Mhaoil Chonaire and by his nephew Sighraidh mac Seáin Uí Mhaoil Chonaire. Torna Óg was, presumably, the uncle of the scribes of Egerton 1782 and Siughraidh, it would appear, was either the main hand of that manuscript or a third brother of the same family. There is, therefore, a possible connection between the two manuscripts containing the different recensions of *Cumtach*. Nonetheless, the two recensions differ from one another to such an extent that it is very unlikely

²² B. Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian library at Oxford and the Oxford college libraries* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 62–9. See also, M. Dillon, ‘Laud Misc. 610’, in *Celtica* 5 (1960), 64–76 and 6 (1963), 135–55, and A. O’Sullivan, ‘Three notes on Laud Misc. 610’, in *Celtica* 9 (1971), 135–51.

²³ Flower, *British Museum catalogue*, pp. 470–72.

that one was copied from the other or even that they shared the same immediate source.

Egerton 1782 f. 56^r, b, ll. 23–32:²⁴ Add. 30512, f. 40^v b, l. 26 to f. 41^r a l. 3:

Cumtach na nIudaide nard,
ocus a format fírgarg.
Mét na nArménech cin feall,
is sonairti na Serrchenn.

Cumduch na nIuidi nard,
ocus a format fírgarg.
Met na nAirmianach cin fhell,
is sonairti a Soirrcenn.

Amuinsi a nGregcuib co ngail,
rodíumus hi rRómáncaib.
Dúre na Saxan snámach,
is burba na nEspánach.²⁵

Amainsi in nGregcuib co ngail,
rodiumus ic Romanchaibh.
Dure na Saxan snamach,
ocus burba Espanach.

Sant hi Frangcaib frecraid
ocus ferg hi fír Bretnaib.
Seólad crand dar muir co beacht,
cráes Gall is a cennaigeacht.

Santaigi i Francuib frecraid,
ocus ferg i firBretnaib.
Ic seolad na crand co cert,
craes Gall ocus cennuigeacht.

Mormenma Cruithnech cin ail,
cruth etrad in nGaóidelaib.
Genus na nGermánach nglan,
mochin, a Christ dan Cumtach. C.

Mormenma Cruithnech ni cel,
ailli ocus etrad Gaeidel.
Itber Gilla na Naem tria nath,
a Chríst rop cain a cumdach. Cumdach.

Meyer considered the language of the poem to be Middle Irish, which is compatible with a date between the tenth and twelfth centuries.²⁶ The alternation between ‘a’ and ‘i’ to denote the unstressed preposition *i*, ‘in’ in the Egerton text (for example, between the first line of the second quatrain and the second line of the following quatrain) suggests the merging of proclitic vowels that is symptomatic of Middle Irish.²⁷ The use of *ic* for Old Irish *oc*, ‘at’, in the

²⁴ Kuno Meyer has edited and translated the poem from this manuscript: ‘Two Middle Irish poems’, *ZCP* 1 (1897), 112–13.

²⁵ Meyer prints *burbu*, which is a mistake. The scribe frequently used an open-top ‘a’ in this section, most of which Meyer noted, but on this occasion he mistook one for a ‘u’.

²⁶ L. Breatnach, ‘An mheán-Ghaeilge’, in K. McCone, D. McManus, C. Ó Háinle N. Williams and L. Breatnach (eds.), *Stair na Gaeilge: in ómós do Pádraig Ó Fiannachta* (Maynooth, 1994), pp. 221–334.

²⁷ K. McCone, *A first Old Irish grammar and reader including an introduction to Middle Irish* (Maynooth, 2005), pp. 174–75.

Book of Carrick text is a further example of this. There is certainly no suggestion that the language is of any great antiquity and, in any case, the poet was drawing on a source composed on the continent c.900, so a date of composition prior to the first half of the tenth century would be impossible.

The poem consists of four quatrains in a form of the syllabic metre called *debide*, specifically in an older form of this metre designated as *deibide scaílte fota*.²⁸ The syllabic scheme of this metre is expressed as $7^x 7^{x+1}$ or $2 \cdot 7^x 7^{x+1}$ or 2 .²⁹ The first line of the third quatrain in the Egerton text is one syllable short, as Meyer noted, so the reading of *Leabhar na Carraigi* is to be preferred. In both manuscripts, the first line of the second quatrain appears to have one too many syllables, but this would have been remedied by elision of the unstressed vowel of the preposition *a/in*. Each quatrain is divided into two couplets, *a-b* and *c-d*. It is a defining feature of the metre that *a* rimes with *b* and *c* with *d*. *Scaílte*, 'scattered', denotes the fact that there is no link between the first and second couplets.³⁰ The combination of the rules regarding syllable-count and rime created in the *deibide* metres a unique form of end-rime known as *rinn ocus airdrinn*, in which the rime in the end-word in *a* will be in stressed position, but that in *b* in unstressed position.³¹ All the above features are exemplified in the first quatrain of *Cumtach*, including, for example, the rimes *ard:fírgarg* and *feall:Serrchenn*.

²⁸ E. Knott, *An introduction to Irish syllabic poetry of the period 1200–1600* (corrected reprint of second edition, Dublin, 1994).

²⁹ G. Murphy, *Early Irish metrics* (Dublin, 1961), p. 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31; B. Ó Cuív, 'Some developments in Irish metrics', *Éigse* 12 (1968), 277–78; Knott, *Irish syllabic poetry*, pp. 18–19.

Further features of this metre include (i) alliteration within each line, (ii) alliteration in line *d* between the last two stressed words in that line, (iii) internal perfect rime between each stressed word in line *c* (other than the last) with each stressed word in line *d* (other than the last).³² Some of these features are present in *Cumtach*. For instance, there is alliteration in every line. In some instances this is very clear, such as *format:fírgarg* or *sonairti:Serrchenn*, while in others it appears to bend the rules, such as in the instance of *burbu:Espánach* where alliteration occurs between the initial consonant of the first word and the first consonant of the second syllable of the second word.

During the classical period of Irish bardic poetry, from c.1200–c.1650, Irish poets distinguished between four styles of versification. The most complex and rigid of those was *dán díreach*, ‘strict versification’, in which all the rules for a particular metre had to be followed precisely throughout the entirety of the poem. Alongside this style, however, there also existed *óglachas*, which was either ‘a loose imitation of *dán díreach*’, or simply a freer alternative form.³³ It is generally accepted, because of the work of O’Brien and Ó Cuív, that the evolution of strict *dán díreach* occurred during the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as compositions became gradually more and more elaborate.³⁴ *Dán díreach* only developed toward the end of the twelfth century, but looser forms,

³² For a list of the ornate rules of the *dán díreach* style of *deibide* see Ó Cuív, ‘Some developments’, 273–90, and P. J. Smith, *Three historical poems ascribed to Gilla Cóemáin: a critical edition of the work of an eleventh-century Irish scholar* (Münster, 2007), p. 89.

³³ Knott, *Irish syllabic poetry*, p. 2; Ó Cuív, ‘Some developments’. See also C. Ní Dhomhnaill, *Duanaireacht: rialacha meadrachta fhilíocht na mbard* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 41–44.

³⁴ M. A. O’Brien, ‘A Middle Irish poem on the Christian kings of Leinster’, *Ériu* 17 (1955), 35–37; Ó Cuív, ‘Some developments’.

which would later be considered *óglachas*, were in existence long before that.³⁵ Ó Cuív and, more recently, Peter Smith have analysed the prevalence of certain metrical features in poems of this period to date them in relation to one another.³⁶ Such an analysis is less useful in the case of a poem as short as *Cumtach*, but some general observations can be made. It is clear, for example, that *Cumtach* is in a slightly looser form of the *deibide* metre than the poems by Flann Mainistrech and Gilla Cóemáin. *Cumtach* utilises alliteration and end-rime throughout and, in the case of alliteration, uses it proportionally more frequently than Flann or Gilla Cóemáin. On the other hand, Flann and Gilla Cóemáin made frequent use of internal perfect rime between *c* and *d*, which is entirely absent from *Cumtach* (the example of *crand:Gall* might have been accidental and, in any case, leaves other stressed words in the same couplet unaccounted for). Moreover, of the eight riming couplets in *Cumtach*, three are of the 7¹–7³ sort (*ngail:Rómáncaib; beacht:ceannaigecht; and, in the Egerton text, ail: Gaoidelaib*). This may be particularly relevant because the use of this sort of rime pattern is believed to have become increasingly infrequent over the course of the eleventh century.³⁷ In short, while the use of syllabic metres is not a reliable dating criterion by itself, the use of *deibide scaílte fota* in a loose or *óglachas* form and the level of ornamentation achieved by the poet are compatible with a date of composition for *Cumtach* not far removed from, though possibly a little earlier than the time when Flann Mainistrech (d. 1056) and Gilla Cóemáin (fl. 1072) were working.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*; Smith, *Three historical poems*, pp. 90–91.

³⁷ O'Brien, 'A Middle Irish poem', 35–37.

The most substantial difference between the two recensions of the poem is in the penultimate line where the Egerton text contains a description of the character of the Germans while that in *Leabhar na Carraigi* instead contains an ascription of the poem to 'Gilla na Naem'. There has been some speculation as to who this may have been. O'Curry didn't explicitly claim to identify the poet, but in his index he ascribed the composition to 'Gilla na Naomh O'Huidhrín'.³⁸ Giolla na Naomh Ó hUidhrín (d. 1420), was, in O'Curry's estimation, 'the author of several valuable historical poems and tracts. The most remarkable of them is his well known Irish topographical poem'.³⁹ This much, at least, is true. O'Curry continued, however, to also ascribe to this poet a collection of poems synchronising the reigns of the kings of the world with those of the kings of Ireland, which appears to be the collection now considered to have been the work of Flann Mainistrech.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding this, there seems little reason, other than the coincidence of name, to believe this Giolla na Naomh to have been the composer of *Cumtach*.

In Robin Flower's opinion, the 'Gilla na Naem' of the poem was 'possibly a mac Aodhagáin'.⁴¹ Whether he had a particular individual in mind or not is unclear, as this was a common name amongst members of this prominent hereditary learned family. The most famous Giolla na Naomh Mac Aodhagáin was probably the individual who died in 1309. He is described in the annals as *ollam Connacht re fenechas ocus sai coimdes coitchenn in cech cerd archena*, 'chief legal

³⁸ E. Ó Curry, *Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history* (Dublin, 1861, reprinted 1995), p. 692.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83; *Topographical poems by Seaán Mór Ó Dubhagáin and Giolla-na-naomh Ó hUidhrín*, ed. James Carney (Dublin, 1943).

⁴⁰ Seán Mac Airt (ed.). "Middle-Irish poem on world-kingship." *Études Celtiques*, 6 (1953/54), pp. 255–80; 7 (1955/56), 18–45; 8 (1958/59), 98–119, 284–97.

⁴¹ Flower, *Catalogue British Museum*, p. 283.

expert of Connacht and a well-versed general master in every other art'.⁴² There is no particular reason, however, to link this famous legal scholar with the poem. The most likely candidate is the Giolla na Naomh Mac Aodhagáin who was one of the scribes of Laud Misc. 610. There is no way of directly linking him with the poem but, as mentioned above, that MS and Add. 30512, which includes the earliest extant text of the poem that includes the attribution, are connected at least in so much as they were both in the possession of Edmond son of Richard Butler in the middle of the fifteenth century.

Apart from the fact that none of these individuals lived early enough to have composed *Cumtach*, there is good reason to doubt the originality of the ascription as it seems to have been a later addition to the original poem. The line containing the ascription is too long. It is the only line in the poem to contain eight syllables rather than seven. As mentioned above, other lines of the poem appear to include one syllable too many, but these are all explicable by recognising that an unstressed vowel immediately following another vowel would have been elided. The syllable count for the line containing the ascription to Gilla na Naem can not be explained in this manner and the fact that it is the only line in the poem to have an extra syllable is proof enough that it was not original to the composition.

Furthermore, although the line ascribing the poem to 'Giolla na Naem' displays alliteration between Naem and *nath*, the alternative line, *Genus na n-Germánach n-glan*, much more closely corresponds to the pattern of the rest of

⁴² *AConn* 1309. For his importance to Irish legal history see F. Kelly, 'Giolla na Naomh Mac Aodhagáin: a thirteenth-century legal innovator', in D. Greer and N. Dawson (ed.), *Mysteries and solutions in Irish legal history* (Dublin 2001), pp. 1-14.

the poem, repeating a strategy used by the poet earlier of using pairs of identical nasalised initial consonants, as in the instance of *Amuinsi a n-Gregcuib co n-gail*. Yet, in spite of all that, the couplet in which this line appears is the only one in the Egerton manuscript that lacks perfect end-rime. There is a chance, therefore, that this may not be the correct original reading either.

Nevertheless, the weight of the evidence suggests that the ascription is not original and as there no other grounds upon which to identify the composer, this question must remain unanswered. Another difference between the two recensions is in the penultimate line of the third quatrain. In this instance it is difficult to see which is the original text: while the Book of Carrick text has alliteration similar to the pattern in the rest of the poem, the end-rhyme of the Egerton text is superior.

The poem has been edited and translated on several occasions, once from Egerton 1782 and on three occasions from Mac Fhirbhisigh's manuscript. Eugene Ó Curry was the first to publish it when, in 1861, he included the introduction to the Book of Genealogies as an appendix to his *Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history*.⁴³ He also provided two alternative translations, one in parallel with the edition and a different one in the course of his tenth lecture. Over sixty years later, Toirdhealbhadh Ó Raithbheartaigh again published the opening section of Mac Fhirbhisigh's work with a parallel translation as the first of his three *Genealogical tracts*.⁴⁴ Finally, Nollaig Ó Muraíle edited and translated the entirety of *Leabhar mór na ngenealach* in

⁴³ Ó Curry, *Manuscript materials*, pp. 580–81.

⁴⁴ T. Ó Raithbheartaigh ed. and trans., *Genealogical Tracts I* (Dublin, 1932), pp. 24–25.

2004.⁴⁵ Kuno Meyer published an edition and translation of the Egerton recension in the first volume of *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* in 1897.⁴⁶ None of these translations, nor Paul Meyvaert's alternative version based upon Ó Raithbheartaigh's edition, are satisfactory.⁴⁷ That provided here is based upon the Egerton text and only for the final couplet has an alternative based upon the Book of Carrick been provided. The most problematic terms in the text have here been left un-translated:

The *cumtach* of the noble Jews,
and their truly fierce envy,
the large size of the Armenians without deceit,
and the strength of the Saracens.

Astuteness in Greeks with valour,
great pride in Romans,
the hardness of the floating *Saxain*,
and the stupidity/fierceness of the Spaniards.

Avarice in *Frainc frecraid*,
and anger in true-Britons,
sailing ships across the sea, certainly,
gluttony of the *Gaill* and their commerce.

The high spirits of the Picts without blemish,
beauty of shape and lust in Gaels.
The chastity of the pure Germans (Gilla na Naem says it through his verse).
Welcome, O Christ, from whom is *cumtach* (O Christ, fair was a *cumdach*).

Cumtach in the opening line has been rendered variously 'building' (O'Curry), 'architecture' (Meyer and Ó Raithbheartaigh) and 'artistry' (Meyvaert), but as the breadth of possible meanings of the word is so great, it is best to leave it

⁴⁵ Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar mór na ngenealach*, pp. 178–80.

⁴⁶ Meyer, 'Two Middle Irish poems', 112–13.

⁴⁷ P. Meyvaert, "'Rainaldus est malus scriptor Francigenus' — voicing national antipathy in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 66 (1991), 747–49.

untranslated.⁴⁸ *Freccraid* was translated alternatively as ‘revenge’ and ‘responsive’ by O’Curry and by the verbal form ‘tell ye’ by Ó Raithbheartaigh (who was followed by Meyvaert) while Meyer, perhaps wisely, chose not to attempt a translation. Finally, for reasons that will become apparent later, certain ethnonyms have also been left un-translated.

Cumtach na nIudaide n-ard, then, is a Middle Irish poem of possibly eleventh-century date that consists of a list of nations and their characteristics. In terms of content it is part of a contemporary European tradition of which many attestations are extant. Paul Meyvaert recognised that the poet who composed *Cumtach* drew heavily upon a continental Latin tract known as *De proprietatibus gentium* (hereafter *DPG*) for his subject matter.⁴⁹ *DPG* was written in Oviedo c.900 and was appended to Isidore of Seville’s *History of the Goths*. Building on a trend evident in book nine of Isidore’s *Etymologies*, it lists the characteristics of numerous nations:

De proprietatibus Gentium

Sapientia Grecorum.

Forcia Gothorum.

Consilia Caldeorum.

Superbia Romanorum.

Ferocitas Francorum

Ira Britanorum.

Libido Scottorum.

Duritia Saxonum.

Cupiditas Persarum.

Invidia Iudaeorum.

Pax Aethioporum.

*Commercia Gallorum.*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *DIL* lists amongst its meanings ‘the act of building or constructing’, ‘the act of covering, protecting, supporting, helping’, ‘cover, case shrine’, and ‘the act of adorning’.

⁴⁹ Meyvaert, “*Rainaldus est*”, 747–49.

⁵⁰ Ed. T. Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, 11 (Berlin, 1894), p. 389.

Undoubtedly aided by its Isidorean associations, *DPG* attained widespread popularity.⁵¹ A version had reached Anglo-Saxon England by the early eleventh century, about the same time it might have reached Ireland.⁵² *Cumtach's* debt to *DPG* is immediately evident; they share common descriptions of the wisdom of the Greeks, pride of the Romans, anger of the Britons, hardness of the Saxons, envy of the Jews and commerce of the Gauls. The *Franci* are also included in both, although their depiction differs.

During the dissemination of *DPG*, the tract was extended significantly and divided into twin complementary lists of positive and negative attributes known as *De vitiis gentium* and *De bonis naturis gentium* (henceforth *DVBNG*).⁵³ Like *DPG*, *DVBNG* was widely disseminated throughout Europe and by the twelfth century had made it to England where it was copied into Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 139 (CCCC 139). This manuscript, better known as the Sawley manuscript after the Cistercian monastery where it was written during the twelfth century, contains a fragmentary Latin text of the 'Nennian' recension of

⁵¹ For several examples not cited by Mommsen, see Walther, 'Scherz und Ernst', 263–301.

⁵² This is found in British Library MS Harley 3271 immediately following the Old English text known as the 'Tribal Hidage' on f. 6^v. This MS dates from the first half of the eleventh century. A facsimile of both texts is printed in D. N. Dumville, 'The Tribal Hidage: an introduction to its texts and their history', in S. Bassett (ed.), *The origins of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms* (London, 1989), at p. 226. This version is slightly different to that given in Mommsen's edition: *Victoria Aegiptiorum. Invidia Iudeorum. Sapientia Grecorum. Crudelitas Pictorum. Calliditas vel Fortitudo Romanorum. Largitas Longabardorum. Gula Gallorum. Superbia vel Ferocitas Francorum. Ira Brittanorum. Stultitia Saxorum vel Anglorum. Libido Iberniorum.*

⁵³ For the texts, see Appendix 2. The extension of the tract to include both negative and positive attributes may have been influenced by Salvian of Marseilles' *De gubernatione Dei*. Salvian attributed negative characteristics to the barbarians but also endowed them with virtues to illustrate that his contemporary Christians were even more depraved: see Meyvaert, "'Rainaldus est malus scriptor'", 746–47.

the *Historia Brittonum* that is the parent text of all other extant copies of that recension.⁵⁴ *Lebor Bretnach* was also based on the Nennian recension, however, and in discussing the transmission of this text to Ireland, David Dumville noted the presence of *DVBNG* in CCC 139 and its similarity to the content of *Cumtach*.⁵⁵

Thomas Clancy posited a more specific relationship between the Sawley text and the Irish poem. He has argued that the ‘Nennian’ recension of *Historia Brittonum* was composed in Abernethy in Scotland, from where it found its way to Sawley. As well as providing Sawley with this text, however, he has also argued that Abernethy was the site of the translation of this recension of *Historia Brittonum* into Irish. *Lebor Bretnach*, he believes, was only transported to Ireland after having been rendered into Middle Irish.⁵⁶ Clancy has posited a similar textual history for *DVBNG* and *Cumtach*. The Latin tract in CCC 139, he suggested, might have been procured by Sawley from Abernethy, where it was translated into Irish – as *Cumtach* – and later transported to Ireland in the same dossier as *Lebor Bretnach*.⁵⁷

Clancy’s suggestion can be dismissed, however, as the content of the Sawley *DVBNG* and of *Cumtach* does not correspond particularly closely.⁵⁸ The

⁵⁴ D. N. Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Studia Celtica*, 10–11 (1975–76), 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ T. O. Clancy, ‘Scotland, the “Nennian” recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*’, in Taylor (ed.), *Kings, clerics and chronicles*, p. 102.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Dumville and Clancy referred in their respective articles to the version of *DVBNG* on folio 166^v of CCC 139 where it appears next to the famous rubric ascribing *Historia Brittonum* to ‘Ninnius’, and where the separate parts bear the titles *De malis et perversis naturis gentium* and *De bonis naturis gentium*. On folio 179^r, however, another slightly garbled version appears. See Appendix 3 for both texts.

material common to both includes only characteristics, such as the envy of the Jews, wisdom of the Greeks, and anger of the Britons, that are amongst the most ubiquitous and stable characterisations found in these lists. Conversely, the Sawley text lacks reference to two of the most common and stable of the characteristics in other versions of the texts, the pride of the Romans and the lust of the Gaels, both of which feature in the Irish poem. So while *Cumtach* and the text from CCC 139 certainly belong to the same tradition, there is no specific link between them. Moreover, *Cumtach* is not associated in the manuscript tradition with the other materials believed by Clancy to have been part of the Abernethy dossier such as *Lebor Bretnach* or the Middle Irish translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

Cumtach is, in fact, more closely related to the shorter tract, *DPG*, than to any version of *DVBNG* and displays a level of continuity with its Latin source that was characteristic of the tradition of national stereotyping throughout Europe. It is fair to speak of some characterisations as widely accepted stereotypes. The anger of the Britons, the wisdom of the Greeks and the pride of the Romans might be called axioms of the Middle Ages.

That is not to say that the contents of these lists were always understood in the same way, though. It is very probable that the poet who composed *Cumtach* and his audience understood some characterisations in ways considerably different from how the author of *DPG* intended. For example, the Saxons of the Latin original certainly referred to the continental people of that name rather than the English who were more usually intended by *Saxain* in

Irish.⁵⁹ This contrast between the intention of the Latin author and the understanding of an Irish audience is even more pronounced in regard to the *Galli/Gaill*. Certainly for the Latin composer this title would have depicted the Gauls, the inhabitants of the former Roman province in what is now France. By the Middle Irish period when *Cumtach* was composed, however, the Irish term *Gall* had lost its original meaning of ‘Gaulish man’, and had come to mean ‘Foreigner’ generally or ‘Norse Foreigner’ more specifically.⁶⁰ *DPG*’s depiction of the commerce of the *Galli* – and their gluttony in other versions of the tract such as that in the eleventh-century English manuscript cited above – was hardly unsuitable as a description of the *Gaill* in eleventh-century Ireland.

While continuity within the tradition was one feature of the medieval lists of national stereotypes, there was also a tendency for characterisations to change to reflect the political and ethnic sympathies of the author or copyist of a tract.⁶¹ As Meyvaert put it, ‘to fully understand [lists of this sort] we would need to know the historical events of the period or the particular circumstances that

⁵⁹ The Saxons of the continent, when noted in Irish texts, tended to be called *Allsaxain*, ‘Farther/Foreign Saxons’ (See, for example, *AU* 1038), although there was certainly knowledge in Ireland of the continental origins of the Germanic peoples of Britain. See, for example, *The Book of Leinster*, vol. 1, p. 21 (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*) and ‘A Middle Irish fragment of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History’, ed. Bergin, pp. 63–76.

⁶⁰ K. Meyer, ‘The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*’, *Revue Celtique*, 11 (1890), 438. Cecile O’Rahilly’s suggestion that the change in the usage of this term was because ‘Gaulish merchants were for a long period the commonest foreigners on Irish soil’ (*Ireland and Wales: their historical and literary relations* (London, 1924), p. 24) appears to be the commonest explanation for this semantic shift, which remains considerably understudied. Some eleventh- and twelfth-century Irish texts continue to recognize *Gallia* as referring to Gaul, but these can largely be explained as being immediately based on classical sources. See, for example, Airbertach mac Cosse, *Ro-fessa i gcurp domain dúir*, ed. Thomas Olden, ‘On the geography of Ros Ailither’, in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 2nd Ser., 2 (1884), 219–252.

⁶¹ Geary, ‘Ethnic identity as a situational construct’, 15–26; Pohl, ‘Telling the difference’; Meyvaert.

underlie [their production]'.⁶² These were *textes vivantes* just as much as were genealogies.⁶³ The traits listed in each version of the tract were dependent not solely on its source, but also on the contemporary perceptions and prejudices of the society in which it was written.

It is possible that the poet who composed *Cumtach* altered the characterisation of one people listed in his source in order to reflect his own perceptions. In almost all extant versions of *DPG* and *DVBNG* the *Franci* are characterized in terms of their *ferocitas*. It is possible that the final word in the line concerning the *Frainc* in *Cumtach*, that is *frecraid*, may represent an attempted Gaelicisation of this term, and no satisfactory explanation of the forms in which it appears in the surviving manuscripts has been provided. Neither of O'Curry's two translations of this line; 'covetousness [is] in the responsive French' and 'for covetousness and revenge, the French', seems to be supported.⁶⁴ Ó Raithbheartaigh preferred 'Tell ye avarice in the Franks'.⁶⁵ Both of these translations were based upon the belief that the final word of the line describing the *Frainc* is related to the Old Irish verb *fris-gair*, 'answers, replies'. In the form in which the word appears in Egerton 1782, *frecraid*, it looks like a late form of the third person singular of the present tense of that verb, or perhaps a noun, attested only once according to DIL, denoting 'answerer'. Neither of those options seem to make syntactical sense in the context of the poem. Mac Fhirbhisigh's presumably modernised rendering of *frecraigh* does not appear to make any sense either. If the intention was to reflect the same meaning of the

⁶² Meyvaert, "*Rainaldus est*", 749.

⁶³ Genicot, *Les généalogies*, pp. 27–28.

⁶⁴ O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, pp. 224, 581.

⁶⁵ Ó Raithbheartaigh, *Genealogical tracts*, p. 25.

Latin *ferocitas* while maintaining an element of alliteration, it might have been expected that the poet would have used *fergach* or something similar, but the fact that *ferg* is used in the following line in relation to the Britons makes it unlikely that this was the case. The actual meaning of the word remains indecipherable.

The other characteristic attributed to the *Frainc*, however, is quite clear. This line in the Egerton text is one syllable short, as Meyer recognised, so the form *santaigi* of the Book of Carrick is preferable to *sant*.⁶⁶ Both words have the same meaning, though, so this is of no consequence in determining the sense of the text. *Sant* is used to gloss Latin *avaritia*, one of the seven deadly sins.⁶⁷ As a characteristic it carries considerable negative connotations.

There are two other poems dating from the middle decades of the eleventh century that contain comparable depictions of the *Frainc*. In the poem *A ngluind a n-éichta a n-oirgnui batar infir*, for instance, Flann Mainistrech presented an account of the history of the kingship of Ailech. MacNeill has dated the text to the late 1040s or early 1050s. Flann provided the following account of events of 717: *Selaig flaith féic for Bregmaig. Ní franc forbbaig acht is Conall Grant Úa Cernaig*, '[Fergal] cut down a fierce lord that ruled over the plain of Brega, not a *Franc forbbaig*, but Conall Grant grandson of Cernach'.⁶⁸ The *Franc* is here described as *forbbaig*, the genitive of *forbach*, and might be most accurately translated as 'of excessive exaction'. More specifically comparable to *Cumtach*,

⁶⁶ Meyer, 'Two Middle Irish poems', 113.

⁶⁷ For one such gloss, see 'Von den Todsünden', ed. K. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: II. Aus Rawlinson B. 512', *ZCP*, 3 (1901), 25–6.

⁶⁸ Flann Mainistrech, *A ngluind a n-éichta a n-oirgnui*, ed. J. MacNeill 'Poems by Flann Mainistrech on the dynasties of Ailech, Mide and Brega', *Archivium Hibernicum* 2 (1913) 37–99.

however, is a metrical tract dated by Thurneysen to 1059 or 1060 which contains the following stanzas:

*Cuirn maicc Donnchada
dlegait buidechas
buide benngela;*

*Francaig fognama
fine chuindgeda
sanntaig senmeda.*⁶⁹

The drinking horn of Donnchad's son,
(yellow and bright peaked),
deserves thanks.

Frainc in his service,
an avaricious kindred,
greedy for old mead.⁷⁰

The son of Donnchad here mentioned is Diarmait mac Máel na mBó, king of Leinster for about a quarter of a century before his death in 1072, and the poem has been cited as evidence for the presence of Norman soldiers in Ireland during his reign.⁷¹ Here the *Frainc* are *sanntaig senmeda*, 'greedy for old mead'. They are also described as a *fine chuindgeda*. *Cuindgeda* is the genitive form of *cuindgid*

⁶⁹ R. Thurneysen, 'Mittelirische Verslehren' in W. Stokes and E. Windisch, *Irische Texte* (3rd series, 2 vols, Leipzig, 1891), 1, p. 90; K. Meyer, *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands* (Berlin, 1919), p. 18, no. 36. For dating see R. Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern* (Berlin, 1912), p. 89.

⁷⁰ F. J. Byrne, 'The trembling sod: Ireland in 1169', in A. Cosgrove (ed.) *NHI* 2 (1987), p. 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*. It may seem incongruous that Diarmait would have had Norman soldiers in his employ at the same time that he was backing the Godwinssons in their power-struggle against those same people in England, but it is known that some of those *Frencisce menn* who fled Hereford in 1052 went to Scotland and others may have made the short journey across the Irish Sea. The Godwinssons would presumably have been happy to be rid of them, and Diarmait would hardly have turned down the offer of acquiring extra soldiers.

and literally means ‘of seeking’. It is also used on occasion to gloss *avaritia* and carried negative connotations not dissimilar to those associated with *sant*.⁷²

The negative depiction of the *Frainc* in these poems might have been intended to reflect the alliance between Diarmait mac Máel na mBó and the family of Godwin, earl of Wessex. Diarmait provided refuge and military aid both to Harold Godwinsson, the future king of England, in 1051 and to his sons in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings in 1066.⁷³ On both occasions, the archrivals of the refugees were the recently arrived Francophone settlers in England, depicted in the ‘Godwinist’ E-text of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle as *Frencisce menn*.⁷⁴ Perhaps, then, the poet who composed *Cumtach* was influenced by the same distaste for the Godwinssons’ Francophone rivals that shaped these other compositions, adapting the image depicted on the *Franci* in his source text to reflect contemporary perceptions in Leinster.

On the other hand, these other mid-eleventh-century poems might have drawn upon *Cumtach* for their impression of the *Frainc*.⁷⁵ The Irish poet who

⁷² These connotations are evident in a Würzburg gloss on the Pauline Epistles where *nibu archuingid forsét* is used to gloss *neque in occasione avaritiae*; W. Stokes and J. Strachan (eds.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus: a collection of Old-Irish glosses, scholia, prose and verse* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1901–03), 1, p. 655, ‘The Würzburg glosses and scholia on the Pauline epistles’, f. 24d7.

⁷³ B. Hudson, ‘The family of Harold Godwinsson and the Irish Sea province,’ *JRSAI* 109 (1979), 92–100.

⁷⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, E, 1052 (*Two of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles in parallel*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1892), p. 181); Wadden, ‘Perceptions of the Normans’.

⁷⁵ For an interesting take on the relevance of such stereotypes to the medieval poet’s trade, see Geoffroi de Vinsauf, *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*, ed. E. Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris, 1962), p. 291: *Locus ponitur pro eo quod est in loco, quando aliquid assignatur loco quod assignandum est ei quod est in loco. Verbi gratia, ‘Jocunda volucrum voce jocatur ager’, id est ‘volucres quae sunt in agro jocuntur’. Similiter ‘Murmurat iste locus’, id est ‘isti qui sunt in isto loco murmurant’. Simili ratione possumus appellare domum ‘litigiosam’ propter familiam domus litigiosam. Similiter dici potest ‘subtilis Anglia’, ‘hebes*

composed *Cumtach* might have been drawing on a version of *DPG* that was related to the text that survives in a twelfth-century manuscript from the Benedictine monastery of Einsiedeln in modern Switzerland in which the *Franci* are characterised by their *avaritia*.⁷⁶ The Einsiedeln monastery and its mother-house at Reichenau were close to the Schottenklöster, Irish Benedictine monasteries in southern Germany, both geographically and in terms of communication. Information was known to flow back and forth between these establishments and Ireland.⁷⁷ It is just as possible, of course, that the influence flowed from Ireland to Einsiedeln rather than vice-versa.

Whether this depiction of the *Frainc* was situational or a direct borrowing from a source akin to the Einsiedeln text, it is probable that, in Ireland as elsewhere in Europe, national characteristics were considered to be intrinsic aspects of nations' identities rather than malleable qualities. As such it was necessary to explain the origins of the divergent characters of different groups. How this might have been achieved in medieval Ireland, specifically during the Middle Irish period when *Cumtach* was composed, will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

Teutonia', 'textrix Flandria', 'muliebris Gallia', 'jactatrix Normannia', propter Anglicos subtiles, Theutonicos hebetes, Flandrenses textores, Gallos muliebres, Normannicos jactatores.

⁷⁶ See appendix 4.

⁷⁷ For Reichenau's early Irish associations see P. Ó Néill, 'Ireland and Germany: a survey of literary and cultural relations before 1700: part 1', *Studies* 71, no. 281 (1982), 49–50. For some examples of communication in the period under examination here, see D. Ó Riain-Raedel, 'The travels of Irish manuscripts: from the continent to Ireland', in T. Barnard, D. Ó Cróinín and K. Simms (eds), *A miracle of learning: studies in manuscripts and Irish learning. Essays in honour of William O'Sullivan* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 52–67; and *eadem*, 'Cashel and Germany', pp. 176–217.

In texts of the classical period, peoples' characters were often depicted as dependent upon or arising from their environment. Hippocrates, for example, gives primacy to environmental factors, particularly heat and cold.⁷⁸ Claudius Ptolemy was considerably more interested in the impact of the heavenly bodies on peoples' characters. The opening chapters of Book Two of his *Tetrabiblos* have been described by an editor as an 'astrological ethnography'.⁷⁹ Tacitus recognised the possibility that both genetics and environmental factors could influence national characteristics in his ethnography of the Britons. He says that the southern Britons are similar to the Gauls *seu durante originis ui, seu procurrentibus in diversa terris positio caeli corporibus habitum dedit*, 'either on account of the enduring force of descent, or the position of the sky in their lands extending forward in opposite directions [*i.e.* coming close together] determining the character of the bodies'.⁸⁰

A belief in the importance of the environment in determining the characters of nations continued into the Middle Ages. Gerald of Wales, for instance, believed that the weather and the mountains of Wales influenced the habits and psychological characteristics of the Welsh.⁸¹ Gerald also attached great significance to genetics in determining national characteristics, citing, for example, the Irish roots of the men of Scotland as an explanation for the

⁷⁸ Hippocrates, *Airs, waters, places* ed. and trans. W. H. S. Jones, *Hippocrates with an English translation* (Loeb classical library, London, 1923, repr. 1962), pp. 70–137.

⁷⁹ Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. and tr. F. E. Robbins (Loeb classical library, London, 1940). For Robbins' comment, see p. 121, note 4.

⁸⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola*, ed. R. M. Ogilvie and I. Richmond (Oxford, 1967), § 11.2, p. 100.

⁸¹ R. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales: a voice of the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 2006, originally published as *Gerald of Wales, 1146-1223*, (Oxford, 1982)), p. 164–71. For further medieval examples see Meyvaert, "*Rainaldus est*", 750–51.

similarities between their characters. In the *Topographica Hibernica* he wrote that *Scotia quoque pars insulae Britannicae dicitur aquilonaris quia gens originaliter ab his propagata terram illam habitare dignoscitur. Quod tam linguae quam cultus, tam armorum etiam quam morum, usque in hodiernum probat affinitas*, 'the northern part of Britain is also called Scotia, because it is inhabited by a people originally descended from these men [i.e. the Irish]. The affinity of language and dress, of arms and customs, even to this day, proves this.'⁸²

Isidore of Seville believed that environmental factors were crucial to the development of different national characteristics, and it might be expected that his influence would have shaped Irish scholarship in this regard:

*Secundum diversitatem enim caeli et facies hominum et colores et corporum quantitates et animorum diversitates existunt. Inde Romanos graves, Graecos leves, Afros versipelles, Gallos natura feroces atque acriores ingenio pervidemus, quod natura climatum facit.*⁸³

The diversity of the skies above them accounts for the diversity of human faces and colours and body and size, and also of temperament: the Romans are serious, the Greeks shallow, the Africans fickle, the Gauls by nature ferocious but also more keen of mind, because of the nature of their climate.

There is no comparable statement in medieval Irish scholarship, however, and this leaves open the question of how the poet who composed *Cumtach* might have rationalised his belief in the existence of national characteristics. Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh faced a similar quandary in the introduction to his great collection of genealogies. One of his primary concerns of this section of the work was to refute the claims of *aineolaigh*, 'ignorant people', that all the men of Ireland prior to the English invasion of the twelfth century claimed to trace their

⁸² Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica*, ed. J. F. Dimock, *Geraldi Cambrensis Opera*, vol. 5 (London, 1967), p. 147. I follow Bartlett (*Gerald of Wales*, p. 154) in translating *cultus* as 'dress'.

⁸³ Isidori, *Etymologiae*, 9.12.105.

ancestry to the sons of Míl.⁸⁴ As evidence for this he cited as an authority a poem by *an seanchaidh*, ‘the historian’, that claimed to distinguish between the descendants of the sons of Míl, those of the Túatha Dé Danann and those of the Fir Bolg on the basis of *a n-aigeantaibh agus crothaibh*, ‘their dispositions and appearances’. Dubhaltach conceded that, because of the later mixing, it was no longer possible to distinguish people on these bases, but that such had once been the case, as evidence of which he cited *Cumtach*.⁸⁵

To corroborate his assertion that nations differed in their appearance and behaviour, Dubhaltach cited *dligheadh i Seanchas Mór Pádraig*, ‘a law in the *Seanchas Mór* of Patrick’. This law, he claimed, stipulated that if a child’s paternity was unknown because the mother had slept with two men at the time of conception, that paternity could be proven, if no other means were available, by waiting three years until the child had developed its *fineachruth*, *fineaghuth* and *fineabeusa*. Paternity could then be assigned on the basis of which of the men the child resembled most closely in these regards.⁸⁶

The law referred to can be found in the tract *Bretha for macsleхтаib* that was part of the *Senchas Már* collection.⁸⁷ This portion of the text is extremely fragmentary, but the law to which Dubhaltach referred can be deciphered. The clearest statement of the text reads;

Mas dis rocomraig risin mnai a naimsir comperta, an lenam do beth aice fein co cenn tri mbliadan, ocus noco cumaing an lenam d’fastad co fir de na daine nad co .uii. cumalaib no co tuca teora hanna imciana arin re co roib ann

⁸⁴ Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar mór na ngeneleach*, p. 176.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 176–80.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180. Cf. D. A. Binchy in ‘*Fionna-chruth*’, *Éigse* 15 (1973–74), 319–22.

⁸⁷ Breatnach, *A companion*, p. 300; *idem*, ‘On the original extent of the *Senchas Már*’, *Ériu* 47 (1996), 30; Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, pp. 102, 207.

*fineguth ocus finecruth ocus finebes; ma tait a triur ann, gabaidh greim lanfira; mana bfuil acht aen no degha, ni gabait greim nach ni.*⁸⁸

If two men have intercourse with a woman at the time of conception, she is to keep the child until the end of three years, and the child cannot be assigned with the truth of God or of men or with seven *cumals* until three long years be completed for the period until *fineguth*, *finecruth* and *finebes* are present. If all three are present it has the force of full proof; if only one or two are present it has no force.

If the literary evidence is to be believed, a similar device could be utilized in the situation where although the woman had only slept with one man, she refused to identify him. Just such a situation arose in the text labelled by Vernam Hull 'The exile of Conall Corc'.⁸⁹ Having been exiled from Ireland, Conall sought refuge in Alba. While there he entered the entourage of, depending on the text, the king of either Alba or of Pictland, *Cruithentúath*.⁹⁰ Conall had, carved on his shield, an exhortation that he should marry the daughter of the king, but the king refused because, as a hired soldier from overseas, Conall was not worthy of the honour.⁹¹ Despite the king's prohibition, Conall and the king's daughter had intercourse and she became pregnant and bore him a son. She refused to identify the father of the child in order to protect Conall from her father's wrath. As a

⁸⁸ *CIH*, p. 981, ll. 22–26. Parallel, if slightly confused, versions of the also text occur at p. 107, ll. 9–15 and p. 2036, ll. 36–42; K. Mulchrone, 'The rights and duties of women with regard to the education of their children', in R. Thurneysen, N. Power, M. Dillon, K. Mulchrone, D. A. Binchy, A. Knoch and J. Ryan, *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin, 1936), p. 199.

⁸⁹ V. Hull, 'The exile of Conall Corc', *Publications of the modern language association of America*, 56, no. 4 (Dec. 1941), 937–50.

⁹⁰ 'The exile of Conall Corc' claims that this was the king of Alba, but a closely related text, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde' (ed. K. Meyer, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1920), pp. 57–63; trans. V. Hull, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', *PMLA*, 62, no. 4 (December, 1947), 887–909) uses the term *Cruithentúath*. The discrepancy is undoubtedly related to the changing meaning of Alba during the Middle Ages. For the most recent discussions of these developments see Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, and Charles-Edwards, 'Picts and Scots', 168–88.

⁹¹ 'The exile of Conall Corc', 941, 947.

result *tancatar fir Alban fón loscud. Ba bás i tosaig nach ingen do-gníd búis dar cenn aurnaidm no-breotha*, ‘the men of Alba came for the burning, for it was formerly a custom (*bés*) that any maiden who committed fornication without betrothal was burnt’.⁹² The men of Alba relented, however, and granted the girl a year’s respite to allow her son to assume the characteristics that would allow his paternity to be recognised: *ro-gadatar didiu fir Alban dáil don ingen co cend mbliadna co-rrucad a mmac i fini-chruth no i fine-guth no i fini-bés*, ‘then the men of Alba besought a respite for the girl until the end of a year, until her son had acquired his *fine-chruth* or *fine-guth* or *fine-bés*’.⁹³

Central place in these sources, both legal and literary, belongs to the triad of distinguishing features according to which paternity could be ascribed, the ‘three Fs’; *fineguth*, *finechruth* and *finebés*. The meaning of these terms is explained in two glosses on the same legal tract, *Bretha for Macslechtaib*, each of which is slightly different. The first reads: *dobeir cruth .i. finecrotha, ocus cuinelg .i. coibhdeiligi ceille no comaonta ceille, ocus comgnim .i. gaisced, ocus cosmailius berla .i. finegutha*, ‘he gives appearance, that is, of kin-appearance, and similarity, that is, kinship of mind or unity of mind, and similar actions, that is, martial action, and similarity of language, that is, of kin-speech’.⁹⁴ The second example is,

⁹² *Ibid.*, 941.

⁹³ *Ibid.*. The text reads *fini-tés*, but that is clearly a mistake, as Hull recognized. To judge from the conformity of the legal texts on this matter, it seems probable that the end of this sentence should read *fine-chruth and fine-guth and fine-bés* rather than ‘or’. In some genealogical tracts, Conall’s son is known as Cairpre *Cruithnechán*, ‘the little Pict’ (O’Brien, *CGH*, p. 195). For the importance of Cairpre’s foreignness in this story see M. Ní Mhaonaigh ‘The outward look: Britain and beyond in medieval Irish literature’, in P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (ed.), *The Medieval world* (London, 2001), pp. 385–88.

⁹⁴ *CIH*, p. 1300, ll. 35–37.

in the opinion of Liam Breatnach, a glossed fragment of the original text;⁹⁵ *dobeir craudh .i. dub no find. ocus condelg .i. conidh inund comcíall. ocus comgním .i. gaisced. ocus cosmailes belrai .i. truime no étruime no mine*, ‘he gives appearance, that is dark or light (appearance), and similarity, that is, so that shared mentality is the same, and similarity of action, that is, martial action, and similarity of language, that is, heaviness or un-heaviness or smoothness’.⁹⁶

While *fine* had a range of meanings from ‘friend’ and ‘friendship’ to ‘kinsman’ and ‘kinship’, in this instance the most common meaning, ‘kindred’, seems most appropriate.⁹⁷ This is particularly the case because this is the sense it has in most of its compounds such as *rinteda*, ‘kin-land’.⁹⁸ *Fine-chruth* and *fine-guth* are best translated, then, as ‘kin-appearance’ and ‘kin-voice’ respectively and reflect recognition that physical features were hereditary. The explanation of *fine-bés* is, perhaps, more complex. The meaning of *bés* as ‘custom’ or ‘habit’ is reflected in its use to gloss Latin terms such as *consuetudo* and *mos*.⁹⁹ It was used in the section of ‘The exile of Conall Corc’ cited above in just such a sense. *Fine-bés*, then, should be understood as ‘kin-habit’ or ‘kin-custom’, but the glosses reflect a more complex understanding of the term because, in both instances, they contain two elements; similarity of mind and similarity of action. This broad conception of *finebés* is comparable with Gerald of Wales’ concept of *mores* that ‘included a predominant external and a subordinate internal sense, and ranged in scope from “social practice” to “moral quality”’.¹⁰⁰ As Rees Davies said,

⁹⁵ Breatnach, ‘On the original extent of the *Senchas Már*’, 30–31.

⁹⁶ *CIH*, p. 1547, ll. 38–40.

⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, pp. 44–6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xv, 46–9.

⁹⁹ *DIL*, s.v..

¹⁰⁰ Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 156.

'customs (*consuetudines*) and manners (*mores*) were extraordinarily vague, unstructured and elastic concepts, catch-all phrases into which a whole jumble of unrelated observations and practices could be poured'.¹⁰¹

There is no shortage of evidence for Irish sources differentiating between nations using exactly those categories listed by the glossators as explanations of *fine-chruth*, *fine-ghuth* and *fine-bés*; physical appearance, language and both habits and psychological traits. For instance, one of the glossators of *Macislechta* has explained *finechruth* as *find no dub*, 'fair or dark'. *Finn*, 'white', 'fair', and *dub*, 'black', 'dark', are used in Irish texts to depict an individual's hair-colour and that was most likely the intention of the glossator in this instance.¹⁰² Hair colour and style were commonly cited factors determining national identity in medieval Europe.¹⁰³ In the Irish case, it has until recently been accepted by many that the native terms used to distinguish Norwegians and Danes were based upon distinctions between the predominant hair colour among each group.¹⁰⁴ The *finn-genti* and *finn-Gaill* were believed to have been the fair-haired Norwegians while the *dub-genti* and *dub-Gaill* were the dark-haired Danes.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Davies, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland, III', 16.

¹⁰² See *DIL* s.v. *find*, *dub* and *fol* for examples.

¹⁰³ For examples, see Pohl, 'Telling the difference', pp. 52–4, and for a fuller discussion see R. Bartlett, 'Symbolic meanings of hair in the middle ages', *TRHS*, Sixth Series 4 (1994), 43–60.

¹⁰⁴ J. H. Todd, *Cogadh*, pp. xxx–xxxii, *DIL*, s.v. *genti*; D. Ó Murchada, 'Nationality names in the Irish annals', *Nomina* 16 (1992–93), 65: 'In 851 (AU), *dubgennti* or 'dark (dark-haired) heathens' took over Dublin and drove out the *Finnngaill*, 'fair foreigners'... The dark-haired ones are generally thought of as coming from Denmark, and the fair heathens from Norway. There are frequent references to two distinct races thereafter'.

¹⁰⁵ D. Dumville, 'Old Dubliners and New Dubliners in Ireland and Britain: a Viking-Age story', in S. Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin VI* (Dublin, 2005), 92–93 contains a list of such references from insular chronicle sources. Note that the Irish usage was copied in Wales; *ibid.*, 83.

Alfred Smyth, however, argued that *finn* and *dub* were used in these cases in another sense, to designate 'old' and 'new' foreigners respectively.¹⁰⁶ It is unlikely, he and his followers believe, that Viking parties differed very much in composition during the ninth century, or that they could have been distinguished by physical appearance even if they did.¹⁰⁷ The earliest equation of the terms *finn-Gaill* and *dub-Gaill* with Norwegians and Danes respectively was not, as Smyth believed, in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib* but in the so-called 'Osraige Chronicle', believed to have been composed in the 1030s, which was one of the primary sources of the 'Fragmentary Annals of Ireland'.¹⁰⁸ Clare Downham has argued that this identification represented a reinterpretation of the terms used to depict ninth-century groups, who were not originally distinguished along ethnic lines, in light of contemporary political circumstances in the 1030s.¹⁰⁹ Downham is perhaps correct in suggesting a break between the ninth- and eleventh-century usage of this terminology, which probably did not originally distinguish Danes and Norwegians. Perhaps, though, the relevance of hair colour to the origins of the ninth-century terms *finn-* and *dub-genti* needs to be reasserted in the face of Smyth's argument. *Bretha for macslechtaib* illustrates that *finn* and *dub* were used as convenient terms to denote physical differences that need not necessarily have been as categorical as 'black' and 'white'. The predominance of fairer- or darker-haired individuals among early Viking raiding

¹⁰⁶ A. P. Smyth, 'The *Black* Foreigners of York and the *White* Foreigners of Dublin', *Saga-book of the Viking Society* 19 (1974–77), 101–17.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*; Dumville, 'Old Dubliners and New Dubliners', 78–93.

¹⁰⁸ Smyth, 'Black Foreigners', 102; C. Downham, 'The good, the bad, and the ugly: portrayals of vikings in "The fragmentary annals of Ireland"', in E. Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicler 3: proceedings of the third international conference on the medieval chronicle, Doorn/Utrecht 12–17 July, 2002* (Amsterdam, 2004), 27–39; *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. J. Radner (Dublin, 1978), pp. xxii–xxv.

¹⁰⁹ Downham, 'The good, the bad, and the ugly'.

parties, or particularly their leaders, might have been a convenient method of distinguishing between them if their political or territorial affiliations were uncertain.

As discussed in previous chapters, the role of language in determining identity was always of the greatest prominence in early Ireland and this was only reinforced during the Middle Irish period. The translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* listed the *quinque gentium linguae* in Britain as *cuic berla .i. Saxanberla 7 berla Brethnas 7 berla Cruithnech 7 Goedelg 7 Laten*.¹¹⁰ Moreover, in the eleventh-century text known as 'The Prophecy of Berchán', the Vikings' language is explicitly associated with their other defining characteristic, that is, their paganism:

*Biaid ab form chill-se, a Dé,
ní thacéra d'íarmairge
can phatir is can chréda
can Latin acht Gallbérla.*

There will be a [Viking] abbot over my church, O God,
he will not call to matins;
without *pater noster* and without *credo*,
without Latin but only *Gall-bérla*.¹¹¹

The glossator of *Bretha for macslechtaib* suggested martial feats as an example of a *bés* that distinguished a *fine*. Medieval ethnographers also commonly cited distinct arms and martial practices as defining characteristics of a national identity.¹¹² Gerald was one such commentator and his depiction of

¹¹⁰ 'A Middle Irish fragment of Bede's Ecclesiastical History', ed. O. J. Bergin, in *idem* (ed.), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, 3 (Halle, 1910), p. 65.

¹¹¹ *Boili Berchain*, ed. B. T. Hudson, *Prophecy of Berchán: Irish and Scottish High-Kings of the Middle Ages* (Westport, CT, 1996), pp. 23, 72.

¹¹² Isidore (*Etymologiae* 9.2, 27) famously claimed that nations differed according to their *variae armis, discolores habitu, linguis dissonae*. 'variety of arms, different colours of dress and dissonance of language'. For further discussion of this point, see Pohl, 'Telling the difference', pp. 27–40. For a

Welsh and Irish modes of warfare is an important strand in his ethnographic writing.¹¹³ Such a tendency was not unknown amongst the Irish either. In the great eleventh- and twelfth-century propagandist 'histories' of the Viking Wars; the Fragmentary Annals, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib*, and *Caithréim Cellacháin Caisil*, contrast is regularly drawn between Irish and Norse modes of warfare, with special mention for the Viking tendency to wear armour. For example, Brian Bóruma, in the *Cogadh*, was depicted as surveying the battle of Clontarf from afar. Toward the end of the contest he saw some strangers coming toward him. He asked his companion *Cionas daoine iad ale?*, 'What kind of people are they now?' His companion replied *Daeine glasa lomnachta*, 'Grey, bare (faced) people', which Brian interpreted as *Goill na luireach sin*, '(they are) the armoured foreigners'.¹¹⁴

As discussed above, however, *bésa*, like *mores*, could denote not just actions but also psychological attributes. Nations could be differentiated and identified according to their distinct mentalities as well as their practices. Clare Downham has explored the depiction of various Viking groups in the 'Fragmentary Annals of Ireland' and found that three groups, the *Lochlannaig*, *Danair* and *Gall-Goídil* were distinguished according to their 'levels of depravity'.¹¹⁵ The distinction should not be overemphasised, for all three groups are depicted in significantly negative guises, but Downham is certainly correct in identifying a preference for the *Danair*, whose meagre piety is depicted as far out-stripping that of the heathen *Lochlannaig*. These less pious Vikings, the

discussion in relation to Britain and Ireland during this period see Davies, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland III'.

¹¹³ For Gerald's discussion of arms see Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 158–64.

¹¹⁴ *Cogadh*, ed. Todd, p. 202.

¹¹⁵ Downham, 'The good, the bad and the ugly', 28-40.

compiler claims, were punished by God, who sent the more pious, or at least slightly less impious, *Danair* to take from them all they had stolen from Irish churches:

Ra gabsat tra na Danair ar sain mna, 7 ór, 7 uile mhaithius na Lochlannach; go rug an Coimdhe uatha amhlaidh sin gach maith rugsat a ceallaibh 7 nemeadaibh 7 sgrínib naomh Eireann ... Clas mór lán aca do ór 7 da airgead da thabhairt do Pádraicc. Uair as amhlaidh ra bhatar na Danair, 7 cinele crabhaidh aca, .i. gabhaid sealad fri fheóil 7 fri mhnáibh ar chrabhudh.

Then the Danes seized the women and the gold and all the goods of the Norwegians, and thus the Lord took from them all the wealth they had taken from the churches and holy places and shrines of the saints of Ireland ... [The Danes] had a huge ditch full of gold and of silver to give to Patrick. For the Danes were like that, and they had kinds of piety – that is, they abstained from meat and from women for a while, for the sake of piety.¹¹⁶

The actions of the Danes were important, but it was their piety that lay at the root of what made them distinct from the *Lochlannaig*.

By citing the legal tract *Bretha for macslechtaib* in order to rationalise national characteristics, Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh was implying that these were inherited traits within kin-groups and that nations were, or at least had been in the past, discrete biological entities. That this understanding of the origins of national characteristics was held at the time of *Cumtach's* compilation is suggested by the fact that the *Frainc* of the poem cited above were described as a *fine chuindgeda / sanntaig senmeda*, 'an avaricious kindred / greedy for old mead'. Perhaps the last two lines of this stanza as referring to the *fine-bés* of the *Frainc*.

Another Middle Irish poem concerned with national characteristics, *Fritha gach da chosmuilius*, which is found immediately preceding *Cumtach in Egerton 1782*, corroborates the theory that national characteristics were

¹¹⁶ *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, Radner, pp. 90–92.

perceived as inherited kin-attributes.¹¹⁷ The basic premise of the poem is that each of the population groups in Ireland had its parallel in a foreign nation. So, for instance, the Leinstermen were paralleled with the French, the Munstermen with the English and the Ulstermen with the Spanish. Significantly, the Uí Néill were compared with the men of Alba, who must presumably, have been considered a foreign nation. The second line of the first stanza claims that these parallels existed despite the fact that the Irish groups did not share a common kin-origin with their foreign counterparts, the implication being that these origins were generally considered the source of each group's character:

Fritha *gach* da *chosmuilius*,
gingob inann a *mbunadh*.
Hu[í] Neill *ocus* Albanuigh,
Saxain *ocus* fir Muman.

Huluidh *ocus* Espainigh,
Cuindme *cocciudh* im cricha.
Bretnuigh *ocus* Connachta.
Laigin la Francta fritha. F.

Each was found by his likeness,
though their [ancestral] origin be not the same,
The Uí Néill and the men of Alba,
The English and the men of Munster.

Ulstermen and Spaniards,
Hosts of battle around borders.
Britons and Connacht-men,
Leinstermen compare to the French.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Meyer, 'Two Middle-Irish poems', 112. A slightly different version is extant in British Library MS Harley 5280 f. 35^v ll. 36–39 and Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 610 f. 10^r ll. 29–32, but neither is fully legible.

¹¹⁸ British Library MS Egerton 1782, f. 56^r b ll. 17–22. Expanded contractions are marked in italics. Meyer's edition fails to display where contractions have been extended by the editor.

An eleventh-century scholar with a keen interest in peoples and their origins, Dublittir Úa hUathgaille also adhered to such a belief, to judge from his implication that the *bunad* of the *Frainc* personified their national character:

*Francus, ótát Frainc co fír,
ní dénad saint im saébgním.*

Francus, from whom are [descended] the *Frainc*,
he was not accustomed to be avaricious in doing a wicked deed.¹¹⁹

Medieval Irish scholars might not have been practitioners of the classical ethnographic code. They had, nonetheless, an interest in and an understanding of national characteristics. According to their theory – to use the terminology of modern social scientists – language, appearance, social practices and mental dispositions – *fine-guth*, *fine-cruth* and *fine-bés* in other words – were the indicia of ethnicity, that is, they were characteristics associated with membership of a particular nation or ethnic group. The criterion of ethnicity, the factor that defined the boundaries of the nation and that was believed, therefore, to be the origin of the indicia was descent from the national ancestor.¹²⁰ Nations were kin-groups, and kinship was too important to Irish society not to be regulated in the laws. The native beliefs encapsulated in these laws provided the conceptual framework for understanding national characteristics. *DPG* provided the content for the poet who composed *Cumtach*, but his understanding of the material was shaped by long-held Irish beliefs.

¹¹⁹ Dublittir ua hUathgaile, *Réidig dam a Dé do nim*, p. 104.

¹²⁰ Hall, *Ethnic identity in Greek antiquity*, pp. 20–1; Horowitz, 'Ethnic identity', p. 123.

Appendix 1

University College, Dublin, Library, Additional Irish MS 14; Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar Mór na nGeneleach*, p. 13, ll. 14–21.¹²¹

Cumdach na n-Iudaideadh n-ard,
ocus a fformad fiorgharg.
Mead na nÁirmianach gan *fheall*,
ocus(?) sonairte Faircenn.

Amhainsi i nGreugaibh go ngail,
roidhiumus ag Romhanchuibh.
Dúire na Saxan snámhach,
ocus burba easpánach.

Santaidhe i fFrangcaibh freacraigh,
ocus(?) ferg i ffirbhretnaibh.
Ag so eolus na *crann* go cert,
cras Gall *is* a ceannuidheacht.

Moirmhenma *Cruithnech* ní *cheal*,
Áille *ocus* eattrad Gaoidheal.
Ad.ber Giolla na Naomh tre *nath*,
A *Chríst* rob caoín an cumdach. C.

¹²¹ For previous editions, see Ó Curry, *Manuscript*, pp. 580–81; Ó Raithbheartaigh, *Genealogical Tracts*, pp. 24–25; Ó Mruaíle, *The great book of genealogies*, pp. 178–80.

Appendix 2

De vitiis gentium et De bonis naturis gentium, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH, AA*, 11, pp. 389–90.

DE VITIIS GENTIUM

Invidia Iudeorum
Perfidia Persarum
Astutia Aegyptiorum
Fallatia Grecorum
Sevitia Sarracenorum
Levitas Chaldeorum
Varietas Afrorum
Gula Gallorum
Vana gloria Langobardorum
Crudelitas Unorum
Inmunditia Suavorum
Ferocitas Francorum
Stultitia Saxonorum
Luxuria Guasconum
Libido Scottorum
Vinolentia Spanorum
Duritia Pictorum
Ira Brittanorum
Spurticia Sclavorum

DE BONIS NATURIS GENTIUM

Hebreorum prudentia
Persarum stabilitas
Aegyptiorum sollertia
Grecorum sapientia
Romanorum gravitas
largitas Longobardorum
sobrietas Gotthorum
Chaldeorum sagacitas
Afrorum ingenium
Gallorum firmitas
Francorum fortitudo
Saxonorum instantia
Wasconorum agilitas
Scottorum fidelitas
Pictorum magnanimitas
Spanorum argutia
Brittanorum hospitalitas

Appendix 3

CCCC MS 139, f 166v:

DE MALIS ET PERVERSIS NATURIS GENTIUM

Invidia Iudeorum
Perfidia Persarum
Fallatia Grecorum
Astutia Egiptiorum
Sevitia Saracenorum
Levitas Caldeorum
Varietas Affrorum
Gula Gallorum
Vana Gloria Longobardorum
Crudelitas Hunorum
Inmunditia Sabinorum
Ferocitas Francorum
*Stulticia Saxonum**
Hebetudo Bavariorum
Luxuria Wascanorum
Vi(n)olentia Hispanorum
Duricia Pictorum
Livido Scottorum
Ira Brittonum

Additions (small hand):

Spurcicia Sclavorum
Rapacitas Normannorum
Normanni nimis sunt animosi

Additions (large hand):

Libido Suevorum
Duricia verl superbia Pictavorum

DE BONIS NATURIS GENTIUM

Prudentia Hebreorum
Stabilitas Persarum
Add. (large hand) : *Sollercia Egiptiorum*
Sapientia Grecorum
Gravitas Romanorum
Largitas Longobardorum
Sobrietas Gotthorum
Sagacitas Caldeorum
Ingenium Affricorum
Firmitas Gallorum
*Fortitudo Francorum**
Instantia Saxonum
Agilitas Wascanorum
Magnanimitas Pittorum
Hospitalitas Brittonuorum
Argutia Hispanorum

Addition (large hand):

Communio Normannorum

<i>Invidia Iudeorum.</i>	<i>Ira Britonum</i>
<i>Perfidia Persarum</i>	<i>Spurcitia Sclavorum</i>
<i>Fallatia Grecorum.</i>	<i>Rapacitas Normanorum</i>
<i>Astutia Egiptorum.</i>	<i>Prudentia Hebreorum</i>
<i>Sevitia Saracenorum.</i>	<i>Stabilitas Persarum</i>
<i>Solertia Egiptiorum.</i>	<i>Levitas Caldeorum</i>
<i>Sapientia Grecorum.</i>	<i>Varietas Affrorum</i>
<i>Gravitas Romanorum.</i>	<i>Gula Gallorum</i>
<i>Largitas Longobardum.</i>	<i>Vana gloria Longobardum</i>
<i>Sobrietas Gottorum.</i>	<i>Crudelitas Hunorum</i>
<i>Sagacitas Caldeorum.</i>	<i>Inmunditia Sabinorum</i>
<i>Ingenium Affricorum.</i>	<i>Ferocitas Francorum</i>
<i>Firmitas Gallorum.</i>	<i>Stultitia Saxonum</i>
<i>Fortitudo Francorum.</i>	<i>Hebetudo Bavariorum</i>
<i>Instantia Saxonum.</i>	<i>Luxuria Uasconorum</i>
<i>Agilitas Wasconorum.</i>	<i>Vinolentia Hispaniarum</i>
<i>Magnanimitas Pictorum.</i>	<i>Duritia Pictorum</i>
<i>Hospitalitas Britonum.</i>	<i>Argutia Hispaniarum</i>
<i>Libido Suevorum.</i>	<i>Duritia vel superbia Pictaorum</i>

Appendix 4

Einsiedeln 321 (647), p. 136, ed. Walther, 'Scherz und Ernst', 276.

Invidia Iudeorum
Astutia Grecorum
Superbia Romanorum
Avaritia Francorum
Commercia Gallorum
Fortitudo Saxonum
Ira Britonum
Iactantia Pictonum
Libido Scotorum

¹²² The text is edited, with minor errors and omissions, by Walther, 'Scherz und Ernst', 278.

CONCLUSIONS

Irish men of learning dedicated themselves to exploring theories of national identity throughout the early medieval period. Some of the earliest extant Irish sources recognised the presence in Ireland of three distinct *cenéla*, the Féni, the Laigin and the Ulaid, each of which seems to have had a concept of its own separate identity. This heterogeneity was acknowledged in one of the earliest expressions of Irish nationality, when the author of *Auraicept na nÉces* asserted the linguistic unity of the speakers of Old Irish but also their diverse racial backgrounds. Other theories defined Irish nationality in legal, territorial and racial terms and the latter of these, the Milesian legend, became the orthodox account of Irish history and nationality for almost a millennium after its initial development in the seventh and eighth centuries.

This thesis has argued that early expressions of Irish unity were conceived as part of a politically-inspired process of nation-building. Following a suggestion made by Thomas Charles-Edwards, it has argued that both the linguistic and the genealogical formulations of Irish unity were intended to affirm the position of the Uí Néill and their allies as the dominant political force in Ireland. In doing so, they subsumed the Laigin and the Ulaid within the Féni so that the latter term became synonymous with other names for the Irish as a whole, *Scotti* and *Goídil*. Furthermore, the structure of the Milesian genealogical schema and the legend regarding the origins of the Old Irish laws supported the political claims of the Uí Néill to rule all of Ireland from Tara, a seat of kingship that was increasingly associated with them from the late seventh century. As Susan Reynolds has pointed out, medieval kingdoms were believed to consist of

peoples and the early efforts to formulate an Irish identity were concerned with creating a people to fit the political aspirations of the Uí Néill.

Simultaneously, Armagh was waging a campaign to gain recognition for its status as the head of the Irish Church. One aspect of this process was the promotion of the Patrician cult, specifically the image of St Patrick as the national apostle. A corollary of this depiction of St Patrick's mission was the creation of an image of the people of Ireland as a Christian nation under the ecclesiastical authority of Patrick's heirs. Armagh too, then, was attempting to forge an Irish nation for its own particular ends, and in the late seventh century formed an alliance with the Uí Néill in pursuit of their complementary ambitions. Armagh initially aligned itself with the Síol nÁeda Sláne rulers of Brega, as expressed most clearly by Tírechán, but later showed political acumen and adaptability to maintain a close link with Cenél nÉogain during a period when, it appears, the idea that the kingship of Tara should alternate between Cenél nÉogain and Clann Cholmáin gained a degree of acceptance.¹

The importance of political factors in the creation of ethnic identities in the early medieval period has been a topic of considerable debate among historians of Late Antique and early medieval Western Europe in recent decades. These historians, particularly the Vienna School, are interested in the emergence of ethnic kingdoms in former Roman provinces. Drawing on the work of Reinhard Wenskus² and particularly Herwig Wolfram,³ their focus is on the relationship between the creation of kingdoms and the creation of ethnic

¹ Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695–743', 415–18.

² R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Köln, 1961).

³ H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, translated from the German by T. J. Dunlap (London, 1988).

identities, two processes that they consider to have been intimately linked.⁴ See, for instance, Hans-Werner Goetz's 'Introduction' to the recent volume *Regna and gentes*, where he states that 'it is by no means clear whether existing *gentes* established kingdoms, ... or whether *gentes* resulted from the establishment of realms, or ... whether there was mutual influence'.⁵

The theory of ethnogenesis favoured by this school posits that successful war leaders attracted warriors to their service from a variety of backgrounds. If they continued to be successful in war, a heterogeneous army might adopt the identity of its leaders, the *Traditionskern* in Wolfram's phrase, thus becoming a single people and elevating their leader to the status of a *rex gentis*. See, for example, the case of the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, whose kings forged peoples from their heterogeneous armies by rewarding their followers generously.⁶ Wenskus' original argument that the origin-legends of the people thus created had some historical validity for the *Traditionskern* is one aspect of his theory that has come in for criticism in recent decades,⁷ but developed forms of this ethnogenesis theory dominate current discussions of the origins of ethnic kingdoms in the West.⁸

⁴ Some of the most important contributions to the discussion have been reprinted in T. F. Noble (ed.), *From Roman provinces to medieval kingdoms, Rewriting histories* (Abingdon, 2006).

⁵ H-W. Goetz, 'Introduction', in H-W. Goetz, J. Jarnut and W. Pohl (eds), *Regna and gentes: the relationship between late antique and early medieval peoples and kingdoms in the transformation of the Roman world* (Leiden/Boston, 2003), p. 3.

⁶ P. J. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 313–18.

⁷ C. R. Bowlus, 'Ethnogenesis models and the age of migrations: a critique', *Austrian History Yearbook* 26 (1995), 147–64; A. Gillett, 'Ethnogenesis: a contested model of early medieval Europe', in *History Compass* 4, no. 2 (2006), 241–60.

⁸ A. Gillett (ed.), *On barbarian identity: critical approaches to ethnicity in the early middle ages*, *Studies in the early middle ages* 4 (Turnhout, 2002); G. Halsall, *Barbarian migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 35–

This theory of ethnogenesis has made little impact on Irish scholarship.⁹ One of the reasons for this lack of engagement probably relates to the centrality of kings as the kernels around which new identities were forged. See, for instance, Christopher Wickham's synopsis that in order for heterogeneous armies 'to forget their disparate origins, and "become" Frankish or Gothic', being united under a single leader was 'an essential feature'.¹⁰ A theory that places such emphasis on the role of kings appears unsuitable to the Irish context and this is clearly not how the process of ethnogenesis worked in Ireland; the Uí Néill did not entice the Laigin or the Ulaid to adopt the identity of the Féni by leading them in successful conquests or rewarding them for their service in wars against others. Nonetheless, the emergence of the concept of Irish nationality, like the production of written law in Ireland, was part of a Europe-wide phenomenon, an age of nation-building, and the foregoing thesis has highlighted the extent to which the creation of an Irish identity was founded upon the political aspirations of kings and their ecclesiastical allies. I intend to pursue further research into placing Irish developments within their European context and into examining contrasts and similarities between the process of ethnogenesis in Ireland and elsewhere. It would also be interesting to examine the expansion of Gaelic identity in northern Britain in the ninth and tenth centuries within this framework and to see how it related, if at all, to the political motivation that lay behind the creation of Irish identity in Ireland.

62; C. Wickham, *The inheritance of Rome: illuminating the dark ages, 400–1000: a history of Europe from 400 to 1000* (New York, 2009), pp. 98–99.

⁹ Charles-Edwards has drawn on some of these ideas in his discussion of the origins of the Uí Néill: *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 464–68.

¹⁰ Wickham, *The inheritance of Rome*, pp. 98–99.

The theories of Irish unity that found expression in Armagh-Uí Néill propaganda were sometimes contradictory. The biological definition of the Irish nation as the descendants of Míl plainly contradicted the *Auraicept's* recognition of the diverse racial origins of the speakers of Old Irish. Nonetheless, both the linguistic and the biological definitions of Irish identity were pan-Gaelic and included within the fold those Gaels who lived in northern Britain. Armagh's focus, however, was on the island of Ireland as the theatre of Patrick's missionary activity and the Irish identity propounded in Armagh propagandist sources was frequently defined territorially as the *Hibernenses*, 'men of Ireland'.¹¹ As Reynolds has discussed, the biological, linguistic and other boundaries believed to define medieval nations 'often did not coincide at all well, but people seem to have *thought* that they normally did so'.¹² In the Irish case, the belief that the biological boundary of the Irish nation ought to coincide with the territorial border is perhaps reflected by the fact that the division of the Milesian genealogical schema into two branches to mirror the traditional partition of Ireland into a northern and a southern half. Nonetheless, the ambiguity regarding the boundary of the nation might have allowed for convenient adjustments according to political circumstances.

An important milestone in the pursuit of Armagh's and the Uí Néill's goals was reached in the third quarter of the ninth century when the *fir Éirenn* first appear in the annals as subjects of the joint authority of Máel Sechnaill mac Máil

¹¹ See above, pp. 84–5 for examples.

¹² Reynolds, 'Medieval *origines gentium*', 389. Compare Ernest Gellner's definition of nationalism (*Nations and Nationalism*, New perspectives on the past (Oxford, 1983), pp. 1, 52–61) as 'primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent'. Although Gellner contends that nations are purely modern entities (*ibid.*, pp. 8–13).

Rúanaid, *rí h-Ereenn uile*, and Féthgna mac Nechtain, *comurba Patraicc* and *caput relegionis totius Hiberniae*.¹³ Máel Sechnaill was succeeded, first, by Áed Findliath mac Néill of Cenél nÉogain and, after Áed's death in 879, by his own son Flann Sinna mac Máile Sechnaill. Like his father, Flann was wont to have himself depicted as *rí Éreenn* and had this title inscribed on the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise.¹⁴ Flann also commissioned a poem, *Flann for Érinn*, that depicted him as the successor to a kingship that could be traced back to the prehistoric period.¹⁵ As Herbert has pointed out, this kingship was personal rather than territorial in nature, but its borders were defined by the island of Ireland.¹⁶ Máel Mura Othna, the poet who composed *Flann for Érinn*, also composed *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*, an account of the origins and history of the Gaels that focused on their ancestral unity as the descendants of a series of eponymous ancestors:

*Féni ó Fhaenius asambertar,
clú cen dochta,
Gaedil ó Gaediul Glas garta,
Scuitt ó Scotta.*¹⁷

Féni are so called from Fenius,
– fame without reserve –
Gaels are (named) from generous Gaedel Glas,
Scots are (named) from Scotta.

While *Flann for Érinn* concentrated on the political and territorial unity of Ireland, whereas *Can a mbunadas* focused on the racial unity of the Gaels, the two should not be divorced from one another. They presented different facets of

¹³ *AU, CS*, 858, 859, 862, 874.

¹⁴ De Paor, 'The high-crosses of Tech Theille', pp. 152–53.

¹⁵ The poem is unpublished, but for some brief notes see O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, p. 154, and Herbert, 'Rí Éirinn, Rí Alban', 65–6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Máel Mura Othna, *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*, ed. R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien, *Book of Leinster*, 3, ll. 16025–26.

Irish unity that Flann sought to exploit. And while Flann does not appear to have had aspirations to rule the Gaels of northern Britain, by sustaining both images of Irish nationality he left the door open for later kings to do just that.

Máire Herbert has discussed the evolution of the relationship between the 'sea-divided Gaels' of Ireland and Alba during the centuries prior to the English invasion of Ireland and has made a strong case that Alba was very much part of the Irish political scene during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.¹⁸ Some of Flann's powerful successors as claimants to the kingship of Ireland during this period such as Brian Bóruma and Máel Sechnaill Mór mac Domhnaill apparently had aspirations to extend their authority over the Gaelic kingdom of Alba in an attempt to establish a form of Gaelic polity that might be implied by the title Brian gave himself in 1005, *imperator Scottorum*.¹⁹ *Saltair na Rann* and the synchronisms of Irish kings that date from about this period include Alba within their images of the Irish political sphere and, in the latter case at least, imply the subjection of those kings to the overlordship of kings of Ireland.²⁰ The preface to the *Amra Choluim Chille*, initially composed in 1007, proclaimed the authority of the Uí Néill kings of Tara – and in a slightly later recension the kings of Munster – over the kingdom of Alba.²¹

¹⁸ M. Herbert, 'Sea-divided Gaels? Constructing relationships between Irish and Scots c. 800–1169', in B. Smith, *Britain and Ireland 900–1300: insular responses to medieval European change* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 89–93.

¹⁹ A. Gwynn, 'Brian in Armagh, 1005', *Seanchas Ardmhacha* 9 (1978–79), 35–50.

²⁰ *Saltair na Rann*, ed. Stokes, *The Saltair na Rann: a collection of early Middle Irish poems*, Anecdota Oxoniensia (Oxford, 1883), p. 34, ll. 2349–76; R. Thurneysen, 'Synchronismen der irischen könige', *ZCP* 19 (1931), 81–99; A. Boyle, 'The Edinburgh synchronisms of Irish kings', *Celtica* 9 (1971), 169–79.

²¹ M. Herbert, 'The preface to the *Amra Choluim Chille*', in D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, and K. McCone (eds.), *Sages saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 67–75.

These political claims coincided with, and were no doubt connected to, the contemporary claims by Armagh to ecclesiastical authority in Alba. By the second half of the tenth century, Herbert has argued, the Columban monasteries in Alba were probably only nominally associated with the authority of the *comarba Choluim Chille*, who was normally resident in Ireland.²² In the latter half of the century a link was apparently re-established, for the Annals of Ulster record the death in 980 of Mughrón, *comarba Coluim Cille eter Erinn 7 Albain*, ‘*comarba Chluim Chille* of both Ireland and Alba’.²³ When Dub dá Leithe, *comarba Phátraic*, assumed the headship of the Columban *familia* in 989, he did so, the same annals tell us, *a comurle fer nErenn 7 Alban*, ‘with the consent of the men of Ireland and Alba’, and initiated nearly two decades of institutional connection between Armagh and the Columban churches.²⁴ These developments might have provided the context for the statement of Armagh’s authority over Alba found in the Tripartite Life of Patrick.²⁵ This text depicts a meeting between Patrick and Fergus mac Eirc, founding father of Scottish Dál Riata, in which Patrick predicted the success of Fergus’ descendants in conquering the Pictish kingdom of Fortriu to form the kingdom of Alba.²⁶ ‘The writer of the Tripartite Life thus seeks to incorporate the new kingdom of Alba within the political sphere of Gaeldom (and the ecclesiastical hegemony of Armagh) by including it along with kingdoms in Ireland whose dynastic rulers were favoured by Patrick’.²⁷

²² Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 82–3.

²³ *AU*, 980.

²⁴ *AU*, 989. T. Ó Fiaich, ‘The church of Armagh under lay control’, *Seanchas Ardmhacha* 5 (1969), 90–1. Herbert, ‘The preface’, pp. 67–9.

²⁵ Herbert, ‘Sea-divided Gaels?’, p. 89.

²⁶ *Bethu Phátraic*, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939), p. 97, ll. 1884–91.

²⁷ Herbert, ‘Sea-divided Gaels?’, pp. 89–90.

Gradually, during the middle decades of the eleventh century, the Gaels of Alba drifted beyond the boundaries of the Irish political nation and the attention of the eleventh-century pseudo-historians was firmly focused on giving the kingdom of Ireland a legitimising antiquity.²⁸ The process was complex and the situation of the *fir Alban* ambiguous, as we have seen. While *Fritha gach* could depict the *Albanaigh* as foreigners, their Gaelic identity, their membership, that is, of the biologically and linguistically defined Gaelic nation, continued to be recognised.²⁹ Insight into how one eleventh-century Irishman might have viewed the relationship between the *fir Alban* and the *fir Érenn* is found in the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*.

Irish scholarship of the eleventh century was characterised by its outward as well as its backward look. This international outlook is indicative of the cosmopolitanism of Irish society during this period. From the reign of Diarmait mac Máil na mBó at the latest, Irish kings began to forge political alliances with some of the most powerful potentates in the British Isles, including Anglo-Saxons, Britons and, later, Normans.³⁰ By the early twelfth century, the most powerful Irish kings were modelling their image on that of the Norman rulers of Britain. In *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, the Uí Briain are described as *Frainc na Fotla fondairdi, ar glicus ocus ar glangaisced .i. meic aibda, ailli, uasli, illbuadacha, Israeil nath Érend illataigthi, ar cadi, ocus ar cunlacht, ar firinni, ocus ar inracus*, ‘the *Frainc* of ancient Ireland, in intelligence and bright martial ability, i.e. the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–5.

²⁹ AU 1165: *Mael Coluim Cennmor, mac Eanric, ardri Alban, in cristaidhe as ferr do bai do Gaidhelaibh re muir anair, ar deirc 7 aínech 7 crabudh, do éc.*

³⁰ S. Duffy, ‘Ireland, c.1000–c. 1100’, in P. Stafford (ed.), *A companion to the early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500–c.1100*, Blackwell Companions to British History (Chichester, 2009), pp. 285–302; M. Richter, ‘The European dimension of Irish history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries’, *Peritia* 4 (1985), 328–45.

comely, beautiful, noble, ever-victorious sons of Israel of multi-coloured Ireland, for virtue, for generosity, for truth and for worth'.³¹ The Church reform movement aimed to bring the Irish Church into closer conformity with the European norms and precipitated communication between Ireland and leading figures in the European Church.³² The associated development of Hiberno-Romanesque architecture provided a material manifestation of this sense of cosmopolitanism.³³

In the realm of scholarship, Ireland's openness to international influence provided her learned men with access to a range of new sources including the *fränkische Völkertafel* and *De proprietatibus gentium* that were embraced with enthusiasm. The *fränkische Völkertafel* originated, according to Goffart, in the Byzantine Empire from where it was disseminated, via Francia, to Britain before making its impact in eleventh-century Ireland. The route taken by *De proprietatibus gentium's* from Oviedo, where it was composed c.900, to Ireland is far from clear, but it may have travelled via the Irish communities in Germany, the Schottenklöster.

The *fränkische Völkertafel* evidently appealed to Irish scholars for it was incorporated, in part or in full, into a variety of eleventh-century sources concerned with the origins of peoples. Having been translated into Irish as part of *Lebor Bretnach*, it was subsequently copied into *Lebor Gabála*, the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*, Dublittir ua hUathgaille's *Rédig dam a Dé do nim* and *A eolchu*

³¹ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, p. 160; Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', p. 35; R. Bartlett, *The making of Europe: conquest colonization and cultural change, 950–1350* (London, 1993), p. 105; Wadden, 'Some views of the Normans'.

³² M. T. Flanagan, *Irish society, Anglo-Norman settlers, Angevin kingship: interactions in Ireland in the late twelfth century* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 7–55.

³³ T. O'Keefe, *Romanesque Ireland: architecture and ideology in the twelfth century* (Dublin, 2003).

Alban uile. By combining this and other sources, the author of the *Sex Aetates Mundi* set about constructing an authoritative universal genealogy of mankind. In an effort to settle a quandary regarding the number of nations and languages, he made an innovative distinction between primary and subordinate nations that might have drawn on an older Irish concept of a hierarchy of *cenéla*. Although he did not say as much, the author of the *Sex Aetates Mundi* might have had the relationship between the men of Alba and of Ireland in mind. Linguistically and genetically Gaels, but territorially and, increasingly, politically distinct, the *fir Alban* might perhaps have fallen into the category of *fo-chenél* to the *prím-chenél* of the Gaelic Irish. The great, twelfth-century Irish genealogical collections include the genealogies of the kings of Alba, but their place at the end of the collection, beside those of the *Fomoiré*, emphasises the ambiguity of their position as part of the Gaelic race but not really part of the increasingly-political nation.³⁴ Memory of the racial unity of the Gaels lived on, though, and was famously revived at the dawn of the fourteenth century in the service of the political aspirations of Robert Bruce, who wrote a letter to the kings of Ireland referring to *nostra natio* and the need for united action against the English.³⁵

Like the author of the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, the poet who wrote *Cumtach na nludaide n-ard* drew on what must have been a recently-imported Latin tract for the content of his poem. In composing a list of national characteristics he was partaking in a long tradition of national stereotyping that was common throughout medieval Europe. In form, however, *Cumtach* was part of a distinctly

³⁴ *CGH*, pp. 328–33. Herbert, ‘Sea-divided Gaels?’, p. 95.

³⁵ *The acts of Robert I, king of Scotland 1306–1329*, ed. A. A. M. Duncan, *Regesta regum Scottorum, 1153–1424*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh, 1988), no. 564; S. Duffy, ‘The Bruce brothers and the Irish Sea world, 1306–29’, *CMCS* 21 (1991), 55–86, at 64.

Irish tradition of syllabic poetry. Moreover, it appears that Irish scholars rationalised the theory of national characteristics with reference to native assumptions regarding kinship that were enshrined in Irish law. This mix of native and foreign could be said to represent the whole tradition of Irish scholarship on the topic of national identity. Local and cosmopolitan, political and scholarly, the obsession the learned men of Ireland had with nations and nationalism has bequeathed to historians an array of intriguing sources. This thesis has, I hope, elucidated aspects of some of them.

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