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OLD AND NEW GODS IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: MIXED CONTENT TALES IN LEBOR NA HUIDRE

Eric Patterson

OLD AND NEW GODS IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: MIXED CONTENT
TALES IN *LEBOR NA HUIDRE*

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The thesis of Eric A. Patterson is hereby accepted:

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Reader – Paul V. Murphy   Date

_____   _____

Reader – Brenda Wirkus   Date

_____   _____

Advisor – Valerie McGowan-Doyle   Date

I certify that this is the original document

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Author – Eric A. Patterson   Date

No, not angelical, but of the old gods,

Who wander about the world to waken the heart,

The passionate, proud heart – that all the angels,

Leaving nine heavens empty, would rock to sleep.

- William Butler Yeats, *The Countess Cathleen*

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Terms and abbreviations:

LU: *Lebor na hUidre*.

A: The first scribal hand in LU, identity unknown.

M: Máel Muire mac Céilechair, the scribal hand in LU contemporaneous with A and presumably the overall editor of LU in its original composition.

H: The third through eighth hands in LU, known for the inclusion of homilies.

ICMD: *Immram curaig Máel Dúin*.

MD: Máel Dúin.

Introduction and Thesis

The medieval Irish manuscript *Lebor na hUidre* [hereafter, LU], more popularly

known as *The Book of the Dun Cow*, was written circa 1100 CE in central Ireland in the

midst of the Irish Church reform movement and following decades of increasing warfare

and societal violence. Given the facts surrounding when, where, and by whom it was

written, this manuscript provides a most unique insight, albeit indirectly, into the political

and social concerns of not only that era, but even more specifically of the mBocht family

of Clonmacnoise at the beginning of the twelfth century. Late eleventh and early twelfth

century Ireland was witness to a society which was, ever so briefly, wildly turbulent in

some very important ways and yet completely in stasis in other ways: the outer world in

the form of the Romans and then the Vikings had intruded and then withdrawn, a

particular strata of Irish society had become literate and classically educated, yet at the

same moment the ancient Gaelic dynastic power centers and traditions were declining, or

at least changing dramatically after centuries of relative stability. LU, as the professional

workbook and perhaps monastic textbook of a scribal family with notable religious and

political connections, representing as it does a deliberate admixture of literary material

that could prove useful in supporting a claim of authority based upon on a meaningful

and yet invented ecclesiastical lineage, can thus give us some insight into what issues and

themes resounded in a way worth recording in the scriptorium at Clonmacnoise.

This thesis will demonstrate that the mixed pagan and Christian content of LU, as

examined through two selected exemplar tales, provides evidence of the unique merger of

politics and religion in the localized setting of late eleventh century Clonmacnoise.

Further, and more specifically, we will see that the mBocht family, influenced by its

participation in the Céli Dé movement and seeking to protect the societal standing and holdings of themselves and their monastery, used portions of these tales to send subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, messages to the Irish Church, to chieftains and kings across Ireland, and specifically to the nobles of Munster.

One of the unique features of LU is that it is the earliest Irish manuscript containing secular material which is written entirely in Irish. To this, it should be added that there exists no direct and complete translation of the entirety of LU in any other language; while a large number of the individual tales contained in LU have been translated, not all have and certainly not as one self-contained publication. While much of the work related to LU and other medieval Irish manuscripts has previously and narrowly focused upon the paleographical work of hands, marginalia, folios, lacuna, etc., this paper will largely avoid this technical approach in favor of historical literary analysis; that is, of placing text into context, or, in other words, by way of philology minus the linguistics. While I may, at times, draw some secondary conclusions from the work of those who function as experts in the field of physical analysis of archival Irish texts, I will in no way be presuming to directly and personally derive observations from the perspective of paleography. Further, given that much of the current work in this specialty field focuses upon the later scribe/interpolator known as "H" (due to his proclivity for homilies), and given that H is believed to have worked on LU much later than 1100, I will also largely be excluding from consideration in this paper any parts of

the text known to have been added solely by H, and will instead focus upon the 'original'

works included by 'A' and 'M.'[1]

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[1] It is worth noting that recent scholarship, notably that of Elizabeth Duncan, has concluded that there may in fact be as many as eight different 'H' hands in LU.

I. Methodology: The Problem with Irish History

In 1968, T.W. Moody and Francis John Byrne reviewed the work of the previous thirty years by those engaged in the field of Irish history.[1] The first sentence of their article pointedly summarizes the authors' opinion: "It is a sad admission that the historical work of the past thirty years on the first seven centuries of Irish history [that is, the fifth through the twelfth centuries] can be very rapidly surveyed."[2] They contrast this state of affairs with the correspondingly greater amount of historiography of Anglo-Saxon England, noting that it is undoubtedly the relative ease of linguistic access to these other source materials which has created this disparity. While conceding that Old and Middle Irish are comparatively difficult even for the speaker of modern Irish, the authors lament that unnecessary barriers have been created by linguists such as Osborn Bergin who, they claim, successfully instilled the high academic standards of German philology into the field of Irish manuscript study, and "in the process…have erected a mystic barrier around it and to have over-persuaded prospective students of the difficulty of attaining an adequate knowledge of the early language…of those who persevered there were naturally only a few who were primarily interested in history rather than language or literature."[3] This led to the unique circumstance of those in various disciplines all too often working in the isolation of their own specialty, a "curious form of academic apartheid."[4] Working through the field of philologists, hagiographers, genealogists, historians, and archeologists, the authors, while offering occasional praise, more often lay

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[1] Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this work, there will be later literature reviews when entering into a new topical area.

[2] T. W. Moody and Francis John Byrne, "Ireland before the Norman Invasion," in *Irish Historical Studies*, (March, 1968): 1.

[3] Ibid., 2.

[4] Ibid.

various charges at the doorstep of scholars who are too narrowly focused, too uncritical, often due to partisan or nationalistic motivations, or who clearly possess a preoccupation with proving a previously assumed truth, even at the cost of ignoring plausible evidence to the contrary. In offering their various suggestions for remedies to this problem, the authors would seem to support the approach and methodology which I have outlined for this paper:

> …in the difficult terrain of Irish proto-history the linguist, the archaeologist and the historian must advance cautiously and as a team to work out possible or plausible correlations of significant phenomena in the areas under the survey…the time seems ripe for a more fruitful collaboration between [these groups]…[even] myth, legend, and pseudo-history cannot be ignored altogether, since in many cases they exercised a real influence upon the actions and ambitions of Irishmen in the middle ages and beyond.[5]

Moody and Byrne, then, are hopeful for a collaborative future even as they point out the overall dearth of work in the field of pre-Norman Irish history. Most important for this thesis is the noted role which Irish mythology potentially plays in influencing, or reflecting, contemporary thought and action during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Recognizing the necessity for integrated work in an area where extant primary source documents became available only in the last century or two of that era, Moody and Byrne call for a more integrated approach across the field of specialties. Recalling the conclusion to their article, I would underline the offered commentary that "anybody in the field, with a reasonable amount of imagination and enterprise, can make real discoveries, significant contributions."[6] It is exactly my aim with this thesis to attempt to place an archival text into an accurate and interdisciplinary historical context in order to

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[5] Ibid., 8, 10.
[6] Ibid., 14.

derive some possible motivations on the part of the scribes and compilers and, therefore, to intuit a sense of cultural perspective and contemporary issues which might thusly be considered a meaningful contribution to the field of Irish history.

II. The Context: Eleventh and Twelfth Century Irish History

As one moves forward from the historical intersection of pagan and Christian Ireland to the era of the creation of LU in the early twelfth century, we first note the official arrival of Christianity in Ireland sometime in the first few decades of the fifth century. While Christians had undoubtedly found their way to Ireland earlier, often forcibly as Roman slaves captured during raids in Briton, it was the arrival of Palladius[1] in approximately 432 CE which set the stage for literacy and writing in Ireland. Even prior to this arrival, however, the Roman Empire was coming under increasing pressure from various invaders in central Europe and had, by at least 410 CE, withdrawn its imperial presence from the isles.[2] It is important to observe, then, that in existing on the very fringe of the Roman Empire, the Irish gained access to trade, the seeds of monotheism, and literacy even as they maintained political and cultural autonomy. This pattern would largely repeat, although with some notable differences especially regarding cultural merger and assimilation, once the Vikings arrived several centuries later. In that interim, what few records exist would seem to indicate a period of relative stability from the perspective of major political and social trends.

The first Viking raid in Ireland is recorded as having taken place in 795 CE.[3] While initially limited in scale and duration, these raids grew over time, ventured further inland, and, ultimately, led to a lasting Viking presence on the island with the establishment of the first true towns at places such as Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford. Eventually, the

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[1] Palladius and the formal arrival of Christianity in Ireland will be discussed in greater detail later, specifically with regards to the legend and history of the later arrival of Patrick.

[2] I refer here to what might more popularly be known as the British Isles, although not known as such at that time and especially with regards to the distinction of the Roman-occupied island of Britannia and the island of Ireland which was never witness to any official Roman presence.

[3] Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*: *400-1200*, Pearson Education Limited (New York, 1995): 234.

Vikings established their enduring base of power at Dublin and would have a Viking king at that location over the course of the next three centuries. As had been the case with the Romans, however, the Vikings never came close to dominating or supplanting Gaelic culture and had, in fact, within a few generations begun to interact with the Irish in politics and trade, to intermarry, and even to adopt the indigenous Gaelic customs and language.[4] Popularly, the expulsion of the Vikings is often dated to the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 CE. In reality, Viking power in Ireland had been marginalized much earlier by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill [hereafter Máel Sechnaill] at the Battle of Tara in 980 CE, and yet would minimally persist for some time after even the later engagement at Clontarf.

More pointedly, though, it was the internal Irish political and military conflicts of the ninth through the eleventh centuries following the diminution of Roman influence upon Ireland and Viking presence in Ireland which would truly set the stage for a manuscript such as LU. Having established significant contact with mainland Europe through a shared religion, having effectively tapped into a wider network of commerce through the Viking establishment of towns, ports, and maritime trade, and yet having retained an independent culture which had not known real foreign domination since, perhaps, its pre-history as creatively portrayed in texts such as the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, the Irish existed in a unique microcosm in which traditional political and social structures and practices dating from pagan times persisted even as the rest of the western world moved into marginally more advanced and integrated societies and polities.[5]

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[4] Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A Popular History of Ireland: from the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics*, R. & T. Washbourne (Dublin, 1867): 123.
[5] As stated by McGee, 167, "…internal discord in a great house, as in a great state, is fatal to the peaceable transmission of power. That "acknowledged right of birth" to which a famous historian attributes "the

This juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary aspects of society, and the precarious traditions regarding the succession of what passed for supreme political authority in Ireland, was brought to the fore in the ninth century during the rule of the O'Neill High King[6] known as Flann Sinna.[7] In conjunction with, or even in spite of, the continuing depredations of Viking raiders in Ireland, internecine conflict in Ireland began to increase to a fever pitch in the time of Flann as the tradition of shared and alternating succession between the northern and the southern O'Neills, as the basis of what passed for political stability in Ireland, came under increasing challenge from outside the province of Ulster. Sinna, of the northern O'Neills, was named High King in 879 CE following an unusually bloody rise to power. The conflict associated with his assumption of power had eliminated many who would have been, eventually, the traditional leading contenders for succession, and would thus open the way for a subsequent violent free-for-all which would weaken O'Neill power to the point that the leading families of other provinces to the south would, for the first time in recorded history, step forward to challenge for the nominal authority of High Kingship. This, of course, led to an even greater level of internal conflict which would annually rage across all of Ireland, perhaps best symbolized by the competition and cooperation exhibited by and between Máel Sechnaill and Brian

peaceful successions" of modern Europe, was too little respected in those ages, in many countries of Christendom--and had no settled prescription in its favour among the Irish. Primogeniture and the whole scheme of feudal dependence seems to have been an essential preparative for modern civilization: but as Ireland had escaped the legions of Rome, so she existed without the circle of feudal organization. When that system did at length appear upon her soil it was embodied in an invading host, and patriot zeal could discern nothing good, nothing imitable in the laws and customs of an enemy, whose armed presence in the land was an insult to its inhabitants. Thus did our Island twice lose the discipline which elsewhere laid the foundation of great states: once in the Roman, and again in the Feudal era.

[6] Note that the term High King, or *Ard Ri*, is one of some degree of ongoing historical dispute in the field of Irish studies. While various kings and dynasties routinely claimed to have held the High Kingship during one or another reign, the claim appears to be largely, and at best, symbolic, contested in nearly all cases, and generally centered around the inclusion of dominion over the locale around the pagan site of Tara. For further details, especially with regards to the title High King with Opposition, see Ó Cróinín, 277.

[7] We will see later in this thesis the important and direct role played by Flann Sinna as a sponsor of the monastery at Clonmacnoise, specifically his partnership with Abbot Colman.

Boru at the turn of the eleventh century.   In his book *A Popular History of Ireland*,
Thomas McGee claims that it was Boru's goal, lost with his death at the pyrrhic victory of
Clontarf, to establish an effective centralized government which would have unified all
Irish tribes, to include even the Gaelicized Norsemen, thereby deliberately following the
examples set on the continent by Alfred and Charlemagne. In making this claim, the
author sets aside opposing claims that Boru was a usurper and revolutionary by arguing
that he had been elevated to power according to long-established customs.[8] Nothing
could be further from the truth and many more credible sources strongly indicate that
Boru's legacy was more so one of destabilizing whatever previous traditional degree of
political constancy may have existed, thereby leaving utter political chaos in the wake of
Clontarf where deaths across multiple generations of the ruling families on both sides of
the battle lines left power vacuums which would persist for decades to come.[9] This is
strongly supported by the more recent work of Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, who substantiates that
the level of loss on the part of the O'Briens at Clontarf completely upended their
expansion and centralization of control in southern Ireland, and in fact led to the re-
emergence of Máel Sechnaill and the southern O'Neills as a political power across
central Ireland.[10] As a result and if at all possible given the preceding few decades,
Ireland now experienced an increase in "...the same provincialized spirit, the same family
ambitions, feuds, hates, and coalitions, [that] with some exceptional passages,

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[8] McGee, 144.
[9] Ibid., 150. McGee writes, "...the extraordinary spectacle of a country without a constitution working out
the problem of its stormy destiny in despite of all internal and external dangers. Everything now depended
on individual genius and energy; nothing on system, usage, or prescription. Each leading family and each
province became, in turn, the head of the State. The supreme title seems to have been fatal for a generation
to the family that obtained it, for in no case is there a lineal descent of the crown...herein, we have the
origin of Irish disunion with all its consequences, good, bad, and indifferent."
[10] Ó Cróinín, 276-277.

characterize the whole history [of pre-Norman Gaelic Ireland following the O'Neill civil war]."[11]

While the details of the relationship, conflict, and occasional partnership between Máel Sechnaill and Boru have been well-documented elsewhere, it is pertinent to point out that Boru was, as a consequence of and as a contributor to this increasingly volatile political landscape, the representative of a family which only a few generations prior would have not dared of dreaming to challenge for anything beyond provincial kingship; in fact, he would likely not have dared to claim any significant seat of power at all if he had followed established tradition. However, the Irish political landscape was changing. The internecine political and military conflict of this era which resulted in such extraordinary dynastic turmoil was not yet complete, and came to a head in an extended war between Muirchertach O'Brien of Munster and Donal McLaughlin, of the O'Neills of Ulster, at the close of the eleventh century. In particular, Muirchertach would launch no less than ten invasions from central into northern Ireland between 1097 and 1113 CE.[12] This extended era of conflict, coming on the heels of those already described, would more than any other set the conditions for the allegorical content of a manuscript such as LU.

The Munster-Ulster War of 1090 to 1103

In 1090 CE, O'Brien was a sovereign under stress and who had, as of yet, largely failed to live up to his recent family legacy. He was grandson of Brian Boru, but was on the verge of losing everything which had been won by his ancestor. He had suffered many recent military defeats, and his territory had been repeatedly raided over previous

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[11] Ibid., 146-147.
[12] Ibid., 279-282.

years by political contenders on all sides. The McLaughlins, O'Brien's primary rivals from the province of Ulster, had even burnt the Boru family's traditional stronghold, and O'Brien had been forced to accept McLaughlin's supremacy. However, McLaughlin at this time actually had little interest in affairs outside the north. He was much more concerned with keeping in line potential rebels in and immediately around his territory in the aftermath of the recent O'Neill civil war.

Meanwhile, in the turbulent landscape of the remainder of Ireland, Rory O'Connor, the presumptive king of Connaught, was captured by his local rivals, the O'Flahertys. As was not atypical of the times, they blinded him so as to eliminate him as a political threat; according to ancient tradition, a physically marred king was no longer eligible to hold the throne. It was, however, the military and political power of O'Connor which had been largely holding O'Brien at bay in Connacht during the previous decade.[13] Sensing an opening for restoring and even increasing his power, O'Brien opened a new offensive by sailing up the Shannon and plundering the monastery at Clonmacnoise in 1092. Instead of taking submission as was traditional, he deposed the O'Connors entirely and crowned a new, small, unknown family from southern Connaught with absolutely no claim to kingship at any level. As we shall see later, the long-standing local ties of patronage between the O'Connors and Clonmacnoise would imply that this otherwise minor historical note would likely have been of earth-shattering importance to the primary LU scribe, Máel Muire, as he set about gathering the material which must have seemed most relevant to him in these troubled times.

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[13] Ibid., 278. See also McGee, 149, for further details on this north-south-west three-way power struggle of the late eleventh century.

O'Brien's string of victories gained him further submissions and allies. McLaughlin, sensing the growing threat from O'Brien, likewise sought improved alliances with the other Ulster kings. Together, McLaughlin and his new allies moved south in 1093 and, subduing areas recently conquered by O'Brien, accepted the submission of the King of Meath and the Viking king of Dublin, Godfrey. This combined army now moved directly into Munster. Thirty miles south of Dublin, they encountered O'Brien's army and routed him. With nothing standing in the way of further victory, McLaughlin surprisingly turned and moved north back to Ulster, most likely due to disagreements among the various coalition leaders. The chance to establish traditional power and restore some degree of stability had been within grasp, but not achieved.

O'Brien's army then moved north to take revenge upon McLaughlin's now-abandoned allies. Starting at the defenseless Dublin, and then moving onto Meath, O'Brien even moved into southern Ulster and began to partition and subdivide former O'Neill territory among small families which were loyal to him. Here, we see another localized example within close proximity to Clonmacnoise of the overturning of old orders and the establishment of new political families with no historical or lineal claims to power, and with a weak or nonexistent record of patronage to this most central of monasteries.

In the west, the O'Connors had begun to reestablish their power by 1095. The following year, O'Brien turned his army and his attention back to Connaught. He defeated and killed the heir of the O'Connors, encamping for months to follow so as to spread destruction and gather hostages. Taking a swath of southern Connaught for his own direct rule, he returned to Munster in the autumn of 1096. Redirecting his attention

to Ulster in the opening of 1097, O'Brien pushed north into eastern Ulster; the abbot of

Armagh, however, intervened and negotiated a truce. This was to be but a temporary

obstacle for O'Brien.

It was now, though, that an unexpected turn of fate intervened to everyone's surprise.

Irish internecine conflict quickly ceased when the King of Norway, Magnus Barelegs,[14]

arrived with an invasion fleet in 1098. Invoking the memories of old Norse threats,

Magnus conquered or re-occupied all the offshore islands in the Irish Sea before

unexpectedly turning north and sailing back to Norway in 1099. Taking advantage of the

disappearance of this Viking threat, O'Brien again went on the offensive in 1100 as he

invaded western Ulster, perhaps to avoid the sphere of influence of the Bishop of Armagh

who had stymied him several years earlier. His three-prong offensive, with an eastern

army, a western army, and a fleet off the western coast was a high-risk strategy which

unnecessarily dispersed and weakened his overall force. Faced with a major defensive

force opposing his passage through Connaught, he retired and ended his campaign having

achieved no real results.

In 1101, O'Brien launched his largest military offensive to date, combining his own

forces with allies from every province of Ireland except that of his target province of

Ulster. Again using the western invasion route to avoid bringing the Bishop of Armagh

into the issue, O'Brien forced his way into Ulster and rampaged across the region,

sacking villages, burning churches, and destroying fortresses wherever he found them. In

revenge for McLaughlin's earlier offense against his clan, O'Brien burned the O'Connor

family homestead to the ground. Still, McLaughlin would not submit, as would have

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[14] Ibid., 281. According to McGee, 155-157, Magnus, who reigned as King of Norway from 1093 to 1104, was called "Barefooted" or "Barelegs" because of his adoption of the Scottish kilt.

been a traditional option in earlier times. His army had not been totally destroyed, and the conflict would drag on into 1102.

Large-scale military violence would continue, but not in the way that O'Brien anticipated. Magnus Barelegs returned from Norway with his army and his fleet, again temporarily halting the internal conflict while O'Brien refocused to the south and east in anticipation of a Viking landing. Taking advantage of this distraction, McLaughlin sought to reconsolidate his power and to re-establish ties with his allies. Always the savvy political leader, McLaughlin sought the intervention of the Bishop of Armagh, who summoned O'Brien and forced him to agree to yet another truce. Magnus returned in 1103 to again attempt a full-blown military invasion of Ireland, centered most logically on the traditional Viking stronghold at Dublin. This, also logically, would have been seen as an advantage to McLaughlin who could count on O'Brien being otherwise occupied in eastern and southern Ireland. Magnus accomplished his landing, setting the stage for an inevitable conflict with O'Brien and the forces of Munster. Surprisingly, though, nothing of the sort occurred. Rather, these two kings negotiated a truce whereby they divided the Irish Sea region between them. This allowed Magnus to eventually return to his central power base in Norway while he left his nine-year old son, Sigurd, to rule in Dublin under the mentorship of O'Brien. The following year, the combined forces of Munster and Norway came together for a joint attack on Ulster.

Rather than waiting to be attacked, McLaughlin went on the offensive to subdue the border regions between the provinces of Ulster and Munster. The joint Irish-Nordic army of O'Brien and the Ulster army of McLaughlin met later in 1103 in eastern Ulster, where they stared at each other for more than a week before both withdrawing from the field.

Finally, in August McLaughlin's army surprised the forces of O'Brien in their camp, and a slaughter ensured. Later in the month, during a Viking naval raid into eastern Ulster, Magnus was killed. This effectively nullified the treaty so recently put into place with O'Brien and led to Sigurd fleeing Dublin and returning to Norway.

While this conflict between Munster and Ulster would drag on for many years to come, it would never again reach the intensity of these first few years of the twelfth century.[15] It was in this era of nearly unprecedented and continuous strife and turmoil, that our primary scribe of LU, Máel Muire, or 'M,' was gathering his material and putting quill to vellum. Before we directly examine the man and his work, however, we shall further explore some relevant historical context by examining the nature of the monastic and bardic orders of the day, and most particularly the way in which these two groups were joining forces at this particular time.

The Early Medieval Irish Church

Irish Churches in the centuries leading up to the reforms of the twelfth century differed in significant ways from their continental counterparts. While not exclusively monastic as nativist scholars might claim, the Irish Church did tend towards the monastic rather than diocesan model of organization. Second, they had developed as not only proprietary interests, but as hereditary holdings which could be passed down from father to son or other close relative. Finally, after an early initial tendency towards asceticism which marked them apart to some degree from the counterparts on the mainland, they had eventually very much become part of the political power structure in Ireland as the sons

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[15] Fin Dwyer, "The Great War of Ulster and Munster Part I (1090-1101) & Part II (1101-1103)," *Irish History Podcast*.

of the noble class who came to realize that it was not their fate to hold a crown recognized an equally viable path to authority in the holding of a crosier.

The Irish Church was also part of the political infrastructure experiencing significant change. However, even as that change began, it apparently took place with something of a uniquely Irish approach and one which neatly intertwined with the needs of the new members of the political class. As the ecclesiastical culture evolved and prepared to meet the pending reforms, it would be noted that "when contemporaries wrote about the changes they sought to effect in religious life and the institutions of the church, they rarely used words such as 'reform'… [rather, they used the term] 'renewal', a return to what were perceived to be the ideals of the past, was the most usual articulation."[16] This view dovetailed nicely with the requirements of the newly-established ruling families in so many parts of Ireland who had emerged from political chaos with a similar need to establish a new authority based upon a re-visiting of the past. They would be assisted in this endeavor by these clerics who, in conjunction with the bards as keepers and purveyors of the older aspects of the Irish past, invented lineages with ties to both the Old Testament and to legendary or mythological figures.

<u>Nobles, Clerics, and Bards</u>

Literacy arrived in Ireland with, presumably, slaves from Roman Britain, and then more formally via the earliest Christian clerics. From the very beginning, according to bits of legend and history which have reached us from those times, these first ecclesiastics were notably open-minded and flexible in merging Christian and pagan beliefs and holy sites, rather than simply and forcefully trying to supplant the old with the

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[16] Ibid., 247.

new. Robin Flower notes that in the first few centuries after the introduction of Christianity it was the monks and scribes, and not yet the bards and poets, who were literate, who had access to the tools of writing, and who thus were the first to leave a record of Irish history and literature. "All our existing early manuscripts were written in monasteries and they derive from earlier, lost manuscripts which, so far as we can trace their origin, also had a monastic source."[17] Donnchadh Ó Corráin built upon the idea that this first layer of the written record in Ireland was attributable solely to monks and religious scribes, particularly with regards to noticing literary parallels between the Irish myths and legends and those of the outside classical world when he wrote that "in the process [of reconciling Latin grammar with Scripture and pagan heritage], Irish grammarians discovered the wealth of the ancient world as it was transmitted through these Late Roman works."[18] This caused these scribes to seek, or at least to recognize, the equivalency of their own Irish sagas as heroic literature worth capturing and recording, and led them towards a closer working relationship with the traditional bards. Writing exclusively in Latin in the earliest of manuscripts, these scribes continued to garner a broader awareness and, perhaps, an appreciation for the idea of recording the oral tales of their society. After several generations of established presence, it is plausible to assume that native-born Irish began to join the monastic organizations, thus bringing their native awareness of the pagan myths and stories into the scriptorium. Eventually, it is equally plausible to imagine that this expanding cultural awareness would have brought the clerics, foreign or native, into sustained contact with the traditional bards of Ireland. Joseph Nagy supported this notion when he writes that

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[17] Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1947): 73.
[18] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Clerics, Lineage, and Literature," in *Royal Irish Academy Conference: Lebor na hUidre* (January 07, 2013). Conference recording podcast of the Royal Irish Academy.

"…the higher orders of poets appear to have joined forces with the church early on."[19]

He expounded on this merger of the clerical and bardic orders when he observed that

> …literarily inclined ecclesiastics in medieval Ireland often were poets, and that the gap in question [between the Christian holy man and the merely Christianized native performer of pagan tales] here existed more on an ideological level than a historical level…available evidence indicates that the Irish church and the higher poetic orders formed a working alliance early on.[20]

Beyond a general shared interest in literary works, what societal forces might bring these two groups together in the scriptorium? According to Flower, this partnership evolved due to shared patronage and the derived political imperatives, with the added influence of a third group to this early alliance: "The kings and the poets and the clerics worked together to this end [a guarantee of permanently recorded claims of status]."[21]

Over time, then, literacy expanded but remained largely confined to a narrow learned class which now also included the bards. This merged genre of ecclesiastical and pagan literature created the potential for the purposeful combination of radically different material which existed contemporaneously in medieval Ireland.[22] As we have seen above in the historical context of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries in Ireland, those newly-emerged families who had seized upon the political and social chaos to claim

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[19] Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland*, Cornell University Press (Cornell, 1997): 9.

[20] Ibid., 19-20.

[21] Flower, 4. Flower provides another dimension of this relationship when he shares an example of a King of Leinster who retired from the throne to go on 'pilgrimage.' At this time in Ireland to go on pilgrimage meant to enter into a religious institution and become holy prior to death. This example shows the direct and intimate linkage between the two classes, royal and ecclesiastical, and how one would easily cater to the other (22). Donnchadh Ó Corráinn, "Clerics, Lineage, and Literature," in *Royal Irish Academy Conference: Lebor na hUidre*, (2013), adds another dimension to this relationship when he writes "Commonly, discarded segments of ruling dynasties, pushed out by competitors, reprised themselves in church, and often retained power and property long after their secular kinsmen had lost theirs."

[22] In Flower's words, "The scholars working in the monasteries it must have been who built up all that curious fabric of the *senchas*, the genealogical and historical lore of Ireland which was henceforth to dominate the historical work of the schools…the result is a strange medley of poetic history, mythology, folklore, and biblical and classical reminiscence.." (74).

thrones which would never have previously been available to them now realized the need to establish, or even to fabricate, a lineage which tied them to both Ireland of legend as well as to the wider Classical and Christian world. Of course, lauding and upholding the position and authority of the king had long been a function of the Irish bard. Flower describes bardic poetry as "tending always to treat the chieftains…as an abstract compendium of princely qualities rather than as a being subject to the ebb and flow of more ordinary impulses."[23] In other words, the social function of the bard was to provide praise, even implausible praise, on behalf of key political figures. In doing this, these bards provided unequivocal and widespread evidence of the liberal use of imagination and poetic license. Now, with the assistance of clerical scribes, this imaginative tradition could be captured in writing and could be tied not only to pagan Irish myths and traditions but also to a broader Roman and Christian literature.

Nagy further described this now-combined literary style of revisionist writing when he shared that "…the texts…bear very subtle if not unreliable witness to the circumstances and motivations that led to their inception...the bearers of a literary tradition continually tinker with or even rewrite their history in order to establish, update, or renew the right of the texts they produce to be read."[24] Other sources further describe how Irish monks labored diligently to insert and synchronize the current and historical figures of Ireland into the larger world chronology dating back through biblical times to the beginning of the world, sometimes going so far as to even create time warps which brought historical Irish Church figures into direct contact with mythological characters

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[23] Ibid., 28.

[24] Nagy, *Conversing with Angels*, 12. Flower substantiates this motivation when he writes "The old Irish society was organized upon an intensely aristocratic basis, and, like all aristocratic societies, set great store by those memories of past achievement which feed the pride and enhance the prestige of a dominant class." (3).

who, if they had any real basis in history, had died at least many centuries before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.[25] Some of the best examples of this come to us from *The Spectral Chariot of Cu Chulainn*, wherein St. Patrick summons the Ulster hero to convince King Loegaire of the wisdom of converting to Christianity. We see this as well in the tale of the *Finding of the Tain* wherein Fergus mac Roig is summoned from the grave to recount the entire story of the famous cattle raid to the cleric Senchan Torpeist, and perhaps most famously in the *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, in which Cailte, one of the Fianna, relates the stories of his earlier era to St. Patrick. Flower broadly and accurately characterized these temporal displacements as a revisionary style when he said that "the use of the theme is plain, to authenticate the uncertain record of past things by the clear testimony of contemporaries called up from death to bear their witness."[26]

Medieval Irish manuscripts were undoubtedly crafted to deliberately function on many levels. These examples of 'time travel' serve equally to establish a palatable merger of pagan and Christian beliefs as they do to concurrently serve any contemporary political objective. [27] Flower gives another example of this when he observed that "the Ulster Cycle of Conchobor and Cu Chulainn was the product of the heroic age of Irish literature, that time between the seventh and ninth centuries when king and monk and poet cooperated in a passion of memory and creation to build up the legend of the Irish past."[28] All told, however, the inclusion of secular, pagan material in works authored, especially initially, under the supervision of monastic scribes, served to broadly demonstrate that

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[25] Flower, 5-6.
[26] Ibid., 9.
[27] Nagy, 14. "…the legitimation taking place…is graphically demonstrated in many of the stories…in which monuments to pagan power are transformed into memorials to saintly miracles."
[28] Flower, *The Irish Tradition*, 100.

> …Irish scholars had a self-conscious global view of themselves and their society's past and present: they sought to give Ireland's pagan prehistory, its subsequent flourishing Christian society, and its whole elaborate network of dynastic and genealogical history, created on the model of the Old Testament, a place within the universal framework of world history…[29]

However, as time went on, and especially as we move towards the twelfth century with its developing church reforms, the nature of manuscript authorship began to change. Beginning by at least the seventh century CE, only two hundred years following the introduction of Christianity, an increasing number of Irish manuscripts were being written by hereditary bards, rather than clerics, who were attached to specific noble families. While associated with the great clerical schools, especially early on but increasingly less so over time, these literary families assumed a progressively more important role in the production and maintenance of the manuscripts in Ireland under, of course, the sponsorship of noble patronage and never, even later, far removed from the influence of the ecclesiastics.[30] By the time of the twelfth century, this partnership of clerics and secular scribes continued, but also continued to evolve. As noted by Flower, "Down to the twelfth century…the manuscripts which survive, or of which we have any tradition, were written in, or in association with, the old monastic houses and by clerics. From that time onwards they are written by a special order of lay scribes."[31] It would appear that LU was written by just such an open-minded, evolving group of literati under the direction of a unique family of ecclesiastics at exactly the cusp of this changeover in tradition.

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[29] Ó Corráin, "Clerics, Lineage, and Liture." Flower supports this point when he writes "…the aesthetics behind medieval Irish literature dictated that the text or its author make a convincing show of having captured at least some token of the past within a textual form in order to speak authoritatively about contemporary matters."
[30] Flower, 79.
[31] Ibid., 84.

III. Medieval Irish Literature

In order to understand that LU is decidedly unique in both content and style, one must examine the broader landscape of what was being produced in scriptoriums of medieval Ireland. Most of the older surviving manuscripts from this time are written solely in Latin or, in some cases, in a mixture of Latin and Irish usually with the former as the primary text and the latter as marginalia and other notes. First demonstrating the shift away from the use of Latin and into the vernacular, the oldest extant manuscript written only in Irish is the *Cathach*, a psalm book which most scholars agree dates to the sixth century. Allegedly, it may have been written by Saint Columcille although this is unsubstantiated and unlikely. It served as battle standard and protective icon for the O'Donnells in battle during the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries before finally making its way to France. As a marker of the changing literary traditions in Ireland this manuscript signaled the coming of more diverse use of language and, eventually, content, but at this early stage all such work was still done in a religious environment and with a distinctly orthodox overtone. However, this narrowly strict "ecclesiastical dominance was not to last."[1] By the twelfth century, the Irish Church had collectively moved away from Latin and had begun to write in the vernacular. Consequently, the vernacular literary movement in due course completed its shift to the abode of "secular learned families who may themselves have had their origins in hereditary ecclesiastical families of previous generations."[2]

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[1] Máire Ní Mhaonaigh , "The literature of medieval Ireland, 800–1200: from the Vikings to the Normans," in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume I, to 1890*, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2006): 33.
[2] Ibid., 34.

Máire Ni Mhaonaigh focused primarily on these secular scholarly families who often descended from an ecclesiastical lineage. She especially noted how these scribes creatively mixed, and re-mixed, religious and secular material as they sought to both establish political authority where previously there had been none and to create a deep classical and biblical connection between the Irish and the wider world.[3] She also drew particular attention to the directed focus of these scribes when she wrote that

> Similarly worthy of consideration is what might be termed their inward look, manifested most clearly in the vivid allusions to other works which permeate the literature…each weaver had access to the same well-worn fabric of his forebears and cut his cloth with pre-existing garments in mind.[4]

She continued in this contextual placement by noting the importance of the goals of not only this class of scribes, but also and more importantly their patrons in the noble class, as she underscored the costly choices which would have gone into the decision to commit resources such as time, financial support, and raw materials to the production of a medieval manuscript. Ni Mhaonaigh further noted that

> the part played by aesthetic concerns in the choice of document to be transmitted to an expensive vellum folio should not be underestimated. Ultimately, however, the range of material included depended on the purpose to which the valuable, prestige-endowing manuscript would be put."[5]

While it was not necessarily new for religious scribes to serve the political will of an associated noble family (recall, for example, the earlier description of the *Cathach*), the literary record of Ireland would seem to suggest that it was a new development for this

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[3] Ibid., 32. She also writes of *Lebor Gabala* that ""As a complex compendium of myth and history intricately integrated in a chronological structure of biblical inspiration, *Lebor Gabala* exemplifies many of the themes that characterize medieval Irish literature in the period upon which we are focused" (45). The same can easily be said of the mixed content of LU.
[4] Ibid., 32.
[5] Ibid., 35.

class of scholars to deign to work with not just secular, but clearly pagan, material. In fact, beyond just working with this potentially questionable material, Ni Mhaonaigh believes that these two classes of scholars, the traditional religious scribes and the new and growing class of secular scribes, increasingly worked together on politically-motivated texts during this era, noting that "close cerebral ties between secular and religious are mirrored by the intimate cooperation of the two domains at a political and social level."[6] Ni Mhaonaigh, in describing the changing nature of these manuscripts and the merged class of scribes who compiled them, also suggests the usefulness of deliberately setting them into "their own intellectual setting and against the backdrop of historical developments of the time."[7]

Ni Mhaonaigh goes on to describe a literary taxonomy by which these scribes set out to reflect, in their conveniently fictional narratives, the social and political issues which concerned and motivated them. While her taxonomy is meant to address medieval mixed type literature in general, it will serve as a nearly perfect paradigm by which to study LU and we will thus briefly examine it. She describes these mixed type manuscripts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as consisting of texts concerning Kingship, The Otherworld, Heroism, Religion, and '*Fianaigecht*,' that is, the deliberate use of the increasingly popular tales of the Fenian Cycle in an apparent attempt to introduce a sense of chivalrous order to an ever more disordered society. What follows is a brief examination of each of these five types, to include some examples of each type.

Stories of kingship in the manuscripts of this era, according to Ni Mhaonaigh, served to establish linkages between contemporary and past legendary kings, if only to

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[6] Ibid., 37.
[7] Ibid., 37.

insinuate that the former is a descendant of the latter and is thus at least a dim reflection

of that past glory. These types of texts also sought to establish, or perhaps reinforce, the

relationship between the ruler and the supernatural, thereby establishing

> …key elements [which] recur throughout the texts articulating a
> conceptual framework within which this multi-faceted material must be
> read. Thus, the sacral nature of the office of king is underlined by
> controlling influence accorded to the Otherworld, whose representative on
> earth the rightful ruler was.[8]

It is especially interesting that Ni Mhaonaigh notes that a large number of these texts on

kingship seek to firmly re-establish the pagan notion that a flawed king, most usually

consisting of a permanent physical blemish, was no longer suitable to hold the throne.

Examples of such a flawed Irish sovereign would include, for example, Mythological

Cycle tales such as 'Nuada of the Silver Hand' and 'Bres the Beautiful.' The author

especially notes, though, that Bres is described as flawed more so because of his mixed

pedigree than for any physical blemish, as his Irish mother was essentially raped by his

foreign father who most definitely conveys some sense of an allusion to a Viking or a

Roman, given his arrival by boat and his home kingdom across the sea.[9]

Moving on to the second category, that of The Otherworld, the author posits that

for the Irish the division between the natural and the supernatural was not one of time and

space, but of perception.[10] This occurs at least several times in LU, but most noticeably

in texts such as *Fis Adomnain* and *Siaburchapat Con Culaind*. The latter story,

colloquially known as *The Phantom Chariot of Cuchualainn*, demonstrates the

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[8] Ibid., 48. For more on the sacral nature of the sovereign as tied to a supernatural origin, see my paper *Gessa: The Evolution of the Concept and Definition, and a Catalog of the Ulster Cycle*, at https://www.academia.edu/9599962/Gessa_The_Evolution_of_the_Concept_and_Definition_and_a_Catalog_of_the_Ulster_Cycle.
[9] Ibid., 49.
[10] Ibid., 50.

purposeful overlay of Christian morality upon a pagan backdrop, wherein the message to the reader is that the supernatural otherworld is a place of evil temptation ruled by demons and that conversion to Christianity is to be realized as the proper path by even the leading mythical heroes of the past. Ni Mhaonaigh indicates that that such revelations were made possible by the authors of these texts mainly by their positive representation of the earthly spiritual power of leading Irish clerics, in this case St. Patrick.[11]

The representation of heroism in Irish literature was not new to the genre and was essentially only the continuation of an existing historical, even pre-historical, theme into the present context and milieu. However, it is at least worth mentioning here that LU provides us with the oldest known version of the leading heroic tale, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. It was, however, the perceived direct or indirect linkage between genealogies and these heroic tales which, as previously mentioned, sought to establish that oldest form of sovereign authority in Ireland, that of sanctioned rule by way of descent from the mythic heroes of pre-Christian Ireland. In the hands of the ecclesiastical and secular scribes, this particular type of tale would also be used as a platform for allegory by which contemporary figures and situations could be indirectly examined and held up as a model for proper ordering of society.

Religious texts in medieval manuscripts of this era were presumably included in order to lend the additional support of ecclesiastical authority to both the overall text and to the goals of the sponsoring agent. Of specific interest to an examination of LU, Ni Mhaonaigh makes reference to the ascetic literature of the Céli Dé, a conservative clerical group who most often lived within or near a larger monastic community and who would

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[11] Ibid., 51.

become one of the target groups of the pending twelfth century church reform movement. Most notably, it is known that this group was firmly established with a strong presence at Clonmacnoise, and that most of their purely religious writings stem from the period immediately preceding the first arrival of the Vikings. Ni Mhaonaigh strongly implies in her chapter that it was they who opened the way for the standard literary use of vernacular.[12]

Finally, we have Ni Mhaonaigh's textual type of *Fianaigecht*. The inclusion of these tales in mixed medieval manuscripts of the era attests to the recently emerged and growing popularity of Fenian tales during the tenth century and beyond. The marked contrast with the Ulster Cycle tales, which typically reflect a richer court scene but, often, less chivalrous behavior on the parts of kings and heroes, may have offered the scribes a way to talk about some sensitive themes without having to involve direct allusions to their contemporary noble kin. Thus, perhaps, the Fiana, as a social institution, were held up as a way to reorganize a disorganized society.[13] This deliberate insertion of a sense of chivalry could perhaps be attributed to exposure to neighboring cultures, such as the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons, or even the continental Carolingians, whether by way of contrast or emulation.

In her conclusion, Ni Mhaonaigh offers that "lay learned families proved worthy successors to their predominantly ecclesiastical predecessors and secular literature continued to thrive."[14] She also supports the idea that their work was, in a temporal

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[12] Ibid., 53.
[13] Ibid., 57.
[14] Ibid., 59. The author adds that ""[These] authors were informed by, but also seeking to inform, the diverse currents of their own time. In their quest, they drew freely on all aspects of their rich and varied inheritance, native as well as foreign, old alongside new, producing complex literary constructs in the process directed at a significant body of the community. Indeed many of the most accomplished of these

sense, purposefully tapping into the past in order to secure the political aspirations of the

current moment. While acknowledging that others have suggested that the work of this

merged class of ecclesiastical and secular scribes may have been to purposefully preserve

the rich literary tradition of the Irish in a time of upheaval, Ni Mhaonaigh observes that

> …[other scholars presume that] the scribes' main motivating force being a
> desire to preserve as much as possible for posterity in the face of an
> increasingly uncertain future. However, evidence for this degree of
> historical foresight on the part of the learned class is lacking.[15]

Rather, we should not assume any great level of prescience on the part of this learned

class who, even as they existed and worked in a tumultuous and violent time, would have

thus primarily been very logically motivated to secure their own position in society by

carefully and purposefully supporting their own holdings and societal standing as well as

the political aims and objectives of those who both sponsored and protected them.

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texts were designed to function on a variety of levels….the political nuances and social commentary
encoded in certain compositions were directed at specific audiences; that did not necessarily preclude their
enjoyment by others less well informed."
[15] Ibid., 35.

IV. Clonmacnoise and the mBocht Family

The monastery at Clonmacnoise, where LU would be transcribed and which must logically serve as a geographical and historical lens through which the manuscript must be considered, was founded sometime between 543 to 549 CE, nearly a century after the establishment of the ecclesiastical centers at Armagh and Kildare. Regardless, it would soon rise to the level of, and arguably even surpass, both of these elder locations as a place of learning and literature. Sited at the intersection of the Shannon River and the east-west esker ridges produced by the retreat of glaciers, which prior to the establishment of roads are known to have served as routes of travel, the location lies at the confluence of natural lines of communication in addition to being nearly perfectly at the geographic center of the island. Also of no small importance, it sat on the border between the two provinces of Connacht and Meath, and with the borders of Leinster and Munster within relatively easy travelling distance.

This precise location may have played at least some small part in its selection by its founder, St. Ciaran, who would have likely considered both the ability to attract pilgrims as well as the capacity to tie into a wide array of political structures for support and patronage. This point is aptly demonstrated even in the legend of the act of the founding of Clonmacnoise, wherein Ciaran, having encountered Diarmait Uí Cerbaill of the noble Clann Cholmain family of Meath in the reeds along the river, partnered with the outcast young noble to found his church. In return, he prophesied that Diarmait would soon seize the throne to which he had a claim but which was currently held by another branch of the family. According to one version of the story, even if it was a deliberate

concoction designed at a later date to provide a sense of "historical respectability,"[1] Diarmait's foster brother was so inspired by this holy prediction that he shortly proceeded with a successful assassination of the current king, Tuathal, thus placing Diarmait on the throne in an act of ecclesiastically-inspired violence.[2] This is a point worth recalling later when we examine the text of *Máel Duin's Voyage*. In any event, it was this Diarmait who would be the first claimant to the notional title of High King, exemplifying only the beginning of a lasting relationship between the clerics of Clonmacnoise and the chiefs and kings of most of Ireland over the next few centuries.

It is especially worth noting what is known about Ciaran as a historical figure. Unlike most of his contemporary clerical peers, he was apparently not of noble birth. His father was from Ulster and his mother from Kerry, while he grew up in Roscommon and trained under Saint Finian at Clonard.[3] Ciaran's natural connections to the north and west of Ireland, and especially the connection to the primacy at Armagh by way of Finian, overlaid with the situation described just above to reinforce a naturally broad geographic support network and yet provided the potential for a slight variation on the standard notion of noble patronage given his own common origin. Again, these are points which will resonate in our later examination of the texts of LU. Ciaran died, ostensibly of the plague, at age thirty-eight only a few months after the founding of Clonmacnoise with most annals placing his demise in 549 CE.

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[1] Thomas Bradley, "The Monastic Town of Clonmacnoise," in *Clonmacnoise Studies, Volume I*, ed. Heather A. King, Duchas (Dublin, 1998): 42.
[2] Eugene O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of the Ancient Irish History: Delivered at the Catholic University of Ireland, During the Sessions of 1855 and 1856*, (HardPress Publishing, 2013): 58-59.
[3] Thomas Bodkin, "Clonmacnoise," in *The Furrow*, (1951): 585.

Within a relatively short time, Clonmacnoise had, by most accounts, blossomed as a center of learning not just within Ireland but also within the larger context of the continental church. Edel Bhreathnach describes it as comparable in importance to the continental monastic sites of Lorsch and Fulda, and its influence may have even overshadowed the authority of the local noble families:

> Politically, Clonmacnoise was in a region that faced changing circumstances throughout the early medieval period…[it] was in the small kingdom of Delbna Brethra, whose own small dynasty does not appear to have had much influence there…[but rather]…was dominated by [quoting F.J. Byrne] 'that cuckoo in their nest, the monastery of St. Ciaran at Clonmacnoise'…from its foundation, the church became a large entity in its own right and was endowed by competing provincial dynasties who were aspiring to dominate the midlands and the riverine traffic of the Shannon, if not also the kingship of Tara.[4]

As an archetype of a monastic learning center, then, Clonmacnoise had seen well to its placement and foundational patronage. As a final indicator of its prestige, it seems fairly well established that Alcuin, the mentor of Charlemagne, studied there under Colchu, who was the lector at Clonmacnoise in the latter part of the eighth century, and to whom Alcuin wrote a letter in 792 CE.[5] This status as one of the greatest monastic centers in Ireland would arguably continue unchallenged until the arrival of the twelfth century church reforms.[6]

How, though, was Clonmacnoise in any way unique from any other contemporary Irish monastery? Earlier scholars have noted that, in general, Irish monastic studies likely included both Latin and vernacular material, and to include both secular and

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[4] Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World, AD 400-1000: Landscape, Kingship and Religion*, Four Courts Press (Dublin, 2014): 184.

[5] Hugh Graham, *The Early Irish Monastic Schools; a Study of Ireland's Contributions to Early Medieval Culture*, Talbot Press (Dublin, 1923): 89-90. See also O'Curry, 60, and Bodkin, 585.

[6] Annette Kehnel, "The Lands of St. Ciaran," in *Clonmacnoise Studies Volume I*, ed. Heather A. King, Duchas (Dublin, 1994): 11.

religious material in either tongue, with specific notation that "native literature was not neglected."[7] However, more recent scholarship has refined this observation to include the distinction that Clonmacnoise was more uniquely a center of Gaelic learning, as opposed to the more Latinist centers of Bangor and Armagh.[8] This claim is likely made, although not specifically and solely supported as such, on the basis of the ratio of surviving Latin and Irish manuscripts from the medieval era. Still, if only by way of that metric of extant works, we can confidently state that Clonmacnoise is the indisputable source of the majority of the oldest recensions of nearly two score works in Middle Irish.

From its founding until approximately the start of the ninth century, the monastery maintained strong political ties with the kings of Connacht. At that point in time, the leadership of Clonmacnoise increasingly linked their organization to the kings of Meath, only to revert again to the patronage of the Connachta in the late eleventh century. At no time, however, did they alienate the nobles of Connacht, Meath, Leinster, or Ulster; Munster, however, was the exception to this, especially as we enter into the era of continental church reform. This broad-based noble support was essential both to generating donations and to engendering protective alliances: "Changing patterns of patronage make it clear that Clonmacnoise was not insulated from the political world as an earlier generation of scholarship might have implied, and the interest of leading dynasties brought significant donations to it in the eleventh and twelfth centuries."[9] Specifically, the *Registry of Clonmacnoise*, which as "an account of the various lands granted to the church of Clonmacnoise by the several provincial kings and principal

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[7] Graham, 121.
[8] Jan Beveridge, "The Manuscript." In *Children into Swans: Fairy Tales and Pagan Imagination*, ed. Jan Beveridge, McGill-Queen's University Press (Dublin, 2014): 21.
[9] King, vi.

chieftains, as a purchase for the right of themselves and their descendants to be interred in

a portion of the cemetery appropriated to their use,"[10] shows that the monastery enjoyed

the high level patronage of the Southern Ui Neill, the Ua Máelsechlainn of Mide, the Ua

Conchobair of Connacht, and several subkingdoms such as the Ua Ceallaigh of Ui Maine

and the Ua Ruairc of Breifne.[11] A more exhaustive list of all the noble families of Ireland

who donated land, or usage of land, or rents, etc., to Clonmacnoise in exchange for either

burial rights or some other symbolic representation on the monastic grounds includes,

over the era from its founding until the year 1320 CE, the following family names:

Clanna Neill, O'Molmoy, O'Connor, O'Ruarck, Mac Rannell, Mac Dermott, O'Kelly,

Mac Carthy, Geraldin, O'Coffey, O'Flynn, and O'Driscoll.[12] The skillful repetition of

the legend that anyone buried in the soil of St. Ciaran was guaranteed immediate passage

to heaven surely played no harmful role in engendering such valuable support.

Perhaps most poignantly representative of the deft political maneuvering by the

leadership of Clonmacnoise, especially in light of the military and political events of

eleventh and twelfth century Ireland, was its interactions with Máel Sechnaill and then

with his son, Flann Sinna. Máel Sechnaill was a key benefactor of Clonmacnoise and

was buried there in 862 CE. In order to retain the patronage of his son, the bishop of

Clonmacnoise, Cairpre Cromm, reported a dream "in which the spirit of Máel Sechnaill

and his anmchara (spiritual confessor) beseeched his prayers to escape the pains of

purgatory."[13] Cairpre and twelve of his priests prayed for their release for a full year.

Not long after, following his victory in 909 CE over Cormac mac Ciulennain, the bishop-

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[10] John O'Donovan, "The Registry of Clonmacnoise; With Notes and Introductory Remarks," in *The Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society*, (1857): 444.
[11] Kehnel, 13.
[12] O'Donovan, 449-460. See also Beveridge, 23.
[13] Bradley, 49.

king of Cashel, Flann Sinna commissioned a stone church at Clonmacnoise, an act which was commemorated in a panel of the Cross of Scriptures in the churchyard there showing Flann and Bishop Colman planting a cross together, a scene which is reminiscent of the founding of Clonmacnoise by St. Ciaran and Diarmait mac Cerbaill.[14] This continued high-level patronage led to the ecclesiastical leadership of Clonmacnoise seeing itself as playing a national leadership role superior to that of Armagh, Kells, and Kildare.

We can observe a striking similarity of political favoritism and exclusion when we examine the lineage of the abbots of Clonmacnoise. While the early abbots of Clonmacnoise came from all of the provinces, during the eighth century this trend shifted and nearly all further abbots had ties to the noble families of Connacht.[15] Over time, Clonmacnoise abbots increasingly and then exclusively came from the families of the kings of Connacht; it is perhaps even more important to note that after 638 CE virtually none of them came from Munster,[16] as this likely played some role in setting the stage for Clonmacnoise's targeting by Munster raids and later by its rapid descent following the arrival of the southern-supported continental church reforms.

As is only logical, this increasingly interwoven network of political connections to various noble families inevitably embroiled the ecclesiastical center into the violence of those same families' conflicts. Of course, such a statement does not even account for the Viking raids upon Irish monasteries, which by recorded accounts began in 795 CE, as noted above. Eventually realizing that there were indeed rich targets inland from the coasts, the Viking began to take advantage of navigable waterways to penetrate into the interior. The very same waterway which had undoubtedly attracted St. Ciaran to the site

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[14] Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 190.
[15] Ibid., 186-187.
[16] Bradley, 49.

now created the conditions for violence, death, and loss. In the years 833-36 CE, the

monastery suffered repeated attacks from both local Irish kings and Vikings, and in 845

CE a Viking fleet operating on the Shannon in the vicinity of Lough Ree attacked and

burned multiple monasteries, including Clonmacnoise.[17] According to Bhreathnach,

though, such attacks not infrequently lead to an era of "expansion and flourishing,"[18]

perhaps as the need to rebuild allowed for the opportunity to expand and to create more

grandiose architecture.

While Viking raids stand out in Irish memory, they had largely ended by the year

1000 CE, even including raids from permanently settled Vikings in areas such as Dublin,

Waterford, and Wexford. According to the annals, Clonmacnoise in particular seemed to

enjoy a long period of relative tranquility throughout the late tenth and early eleventh

centuries, as the "work of the monastery had revived, and the library was once more

being restored. Clonmacnoise was now a large religious settlement with streets and

houses surrounding the churches."[19] However, after this brief interregnum of relative

peace, the monastery at Clonmacnoise began to experience the turmoil associated with

the seismic political shifts, and occasional power vacuums, associated with the kingship

and tuaths in Ireland becoming more centralized and less numerous. The number of raids

by other Irishmen increased, and as "monasteries had both wealth and political alliances,

[they were] periodically attacked [during which] buildings were sacked and monks were

killed."[20] More specifically, Thomas Bodkin notes that even these earliest of raids

executed by fellow Irishmen tended to be the work of Munstermen, a trend which would

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[17] Ó Cróinín, 236-237 and 246.
[18] Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 189.
[19] Beveridge, 24.
[20] Ibid., 25.

re-emerge in later centuries and would reinforce the enmity between Clonmacnoise and Munster and which would contribute to internal tensions and politics as a part of the church reform movement.[21]

Specifically, a comparative analysis of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* and the *Annals of Tigernach* reveal several interesting trends. While attacks and raids by either 'foreign' Vikings, resident Vikings, or other Irishmen upon a wide range of Irish Church sites is noted from the earliest entries, and as recurring in nearly every year, Clonmacnoise was for the most part left unmolested on a regular basis until approximately the middle of the eleventh century. At that time, it then began to be attacked, mainly by fellow Irishmen, every year and sometimes several times per year. This is surely reflective of the monastery being embroiled in the sweeping political violence described in great detail earlier in this paper. However, unlike nearly all of the other entries concerning attacks upon other church sites, many of the entries describing attacks upon Clonmacnoise also include details about punitive raids upon the attackers by allies of the monastery, or even to describe holy retribution by way of the miraculous powers of the deceased, but watchful, St. Ciaran. An excerpt of selected entries with reference to Clonmacnoise, comprised of both direct quotations and my own summaries, can be found at Appendix A.

It also cannot go without mention that, even from some of the earliest such annalistic entries, it is abundantly clear that the clerics at Clonmacnoise were not infrequently active participants in the political violence in their locale to include direct attacks on other ecclesiastical centers. The earliest such entry describes an attack,

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[21] Bodkin, 586.

organized and launched from Clonmacnoise using what were apparently forces it had at

its own disposal, an attack on the monastery of Birr in 760 CE, and then upon the church

in Durrow in 764 CE.[22] Consequently, by the mid-tenth century most monasteries had

essentially become forts in order to ward off continued depredations, and church leaders

would routinely attempt to exact vengeance or compensation for infringements and

losses. Even when not directly involved in full-blown internecine military conflict, the

primary sources provide several documented examples of how the Irish Church had

become enamored of capital punishment by at least the eighth century. One specific

example provided tells of a Gilla Comgain who was handed over to the monastery at

Clonmacnoise in 1030 CE to be hanged for the theft of treasure from that place, and

another that the monks of Clonmacnoise on a separate occasion wanted to hang a man for

stealing a sheep.[23] All told, the record would seem to clearly indicate that Irish Churches

at some point during the ninth or tenth centuries had lost most of protected status which

they had formerly enjoyed and had routinely and actively begun to join in wars, violence,

and political machinations as they pursued temporal power and wealth.[24] If anything, this

new strategy of political power may have been eminently logical: if we accept the

popular idea that ecclesiastical dynasties were cast-off branches of royal families, but that

abbots would usually live longer lives than their royal cousins and that they were thus

able to enjoy their equally substantial wealth, then this approach would seem to imply

that the clerical path may have in many places and at times been actually more attractive

than that of the noble warrior.

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[22] Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Sagart Press
(Maynooth,1990): 9, and Moody and Byrne, 660.
[23] Ó Cróinín, 82.
[24] Kathleen Hughes, "The Irish Church, 800 – c. 1050," in *A New History of Ireland, Volume I*, ed. Dáibhí
Ó Cróinín, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 2006): 646.

Lastly, with regards to the annals, it is interesting to note that *Annals of Clonmacnoise* describe a period of time following the death of Máel Sechlainn Mor mac Donmaill in 1022 CE during which time there was no king in the area of Clonmacnoise for twenty-two years, but that instead the

> Realme was gouerned by two learned men, the one called Cwan o'Lochan, a well learned temporal man and cheefe poet of Ireland, the other Corcrann Cleireagh a devout & holy man, that was anchorite of all Ireland, whose most abideing was at Lismore. The land was Governed like a free state, & not like a monarchy by them.[25]

This most improbable of situations, even if only somewhat accurately described, would have occurred just prior to or during the early lifetime of Máel Muire, the primary scribe of LU, and provides an interesting secular bard/clerical scribe backdrop of local authority to the mixed content tales of the manuscript.

In response to this growing secularization, worldliness, and violence of the Irish Church, the Céli Dé, or 'Clients of God,' emerged as a native anchorite, ascetic, and potentially reformist movement which arose in objection to the growing wealth and power of clerical leaders.[26] They were not truly an order in the continental sense and had neither large-scale organization nor a universal doctrine. Rather, the Céli Dé would exist in small numbers co-located with, or in close proximity to, mainstream church centers in order to draw a stark comparison between their obedience to 'old practices' in contrast to these modern corruptions of the church. In conjunction with the rise of Céli Dé presence

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[25] Murphy, 173. Further information from footnotes to this annal entry includes that Cwan o'Lochan "was a native of Westmeath. The Annals of Ulster call him the chief poet of Ireland," and the notation that the surname Cleireagh translates to "the cleric." Wadden observes that "the demise of Mide was one of the most notable, and as yet unexplained, developments in Irish history during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. After the death of its great king, Mael Sechlainn Mor mac Domnaill, in 1022, Mide entered a period of decline from which it never recovered." Donnchadh Ó Corráin adds that "Each of the dominant powers appointed its own kings over Meath and that unfortunate kingdom became the theater of their rivalries and their warfare" (*Ireland Before the Normans*, 164).
[26] Byrne, 670.

at Clonmacnoise, and even as the monastery supported or participated in raids and wars, there emerged at that location an oppositional lineage descended from Gorman, a former abbot of Lough with strong ties to Armagh who died in the area on an extended pilgrimage.[27] His alleged descendant, according to the annals and following a lineage of penitents and long-term pilgrims in the Clonmacnoise sphere of influence, was Conn na mBocht, an ancestor of Máel Muire, primary scribe of LU,[28] as identified in the translation of the opening prayer of LU: "Pray for Máelmuire, the son of Ceilechair, that is, the son of the son of Conn-na-m-Bocht, who wrote and collected this book from various books."[29]

It was in the context of this violent ecclesiastical-noble alliance and the associated counter-cultural movement that Máel Muire's family had firmly established itself at Clonmacnoise. At Clonmacnoise, the abbatial succession apparently differed somewhat from the simple straight hereditary descent witnessed at other similar ecclesiastical centers of the time. Rather, at Clonmacnoise many of the abbots held the position for only a short time, implying that succession passed to the oldest member of the community rather than to a son of the current abbot. Other offices than that of abbot, though, were indeed hereditary, and this was the space filled by Máel Muire's Conn na mBocht family who continued for generations in that place, holding positions such as anchorite, scribe, and leader of the Céli Dé, but apparently never as the abbot.[30] Máel Muire's family roots at Clonmacnoise by some accounts extend as far back as the eighth

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[27] See also R.K., "The Old Irish Clergy No. 1," in *The Catholic Layman*, (1853): 52, for interesting detail on Mael Muire's supposed family connection to Armagh via Gorman.

[28] Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 187. See also Bhreathnach, "Learning and Literature in Medieval Clonmacnoise," in *Clonmacnoise Studies, Volume II*, ed. Heather A. King, Duchas (Dublin, 2003): 98-99.

[29] O'Curry, 182.

[30] Byrne, 679.

century;[31] once established as hereditary leaders at Clonmacnoise in about 955 CE, they continued in such roles for nearly two more centuries.[32] Older sources attest to the same fact, noting that the entire span of this family at this location extended through nearly three and a half centuries across at least twelve generations, with their Céli Dé association beginning as early as 1031 CE.[33] Eugene O'Curry, in particular, provides an over-arching description of the family as lay religious, as opposed to actual ordained clerics,[34] although this point seems to be still unsettled.

Ó Corráin, however, has recently provided some further insights into the likely realities of the mBocht family at Clonmacnoise, insights which are gleaned from a closer inspection of the annals and which are reflected, indirectly and in part, in the textual content of LU. Firstly, Ó Corráin reconfirms, following a period of argument and doubt by the likes of H.P.A. Oskamp and David Dumville during especially the 1960's and 1970's, that is was indeed likely that Máel Muire was the primary scribe of LU, and was a figure of such notable standing at Clonmacnoise that the record of his death in the cathedral there in 1106 simply records his name, with no title provided, as the record apparently did not require such an obvious statement of fact.[35] It is with regards to the lineage of the mBocht family, specifically the contrast of the record and the likely reality, that Ó Corráin provides a range of extremely relevant observations. Drawing upon the work of Heinrich Zimmer, he notes that the annals provide not just an unbroken lineage

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[31] Beveridge, 22.
[32] Hughes, 684.
[33] R.K., 51-52.
[34] O'Curry, 184.
[35] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Mael Muire, the Scribe: Family and Background," in *Lebor na hUidre: Codices Hibernenses Eximii*, Royal Irish Academy (Dublin, 2015): 1-2. O'Curry specifically translates from the annals that the death of Mael Muire took place "in the middle of the great stone church of Cluainmacnois, by a party of robbers," (184).

for this family from the seventh through the twelfth centuries, but that from the time of

Gorman in the mid-eighth century to that of Joseph in the mid-eleventh century this line

apparently produced exactly one son across eight successive generations.[36] Zimmer

observed that "for no other family in Ireland below the top ranks of royalty do we have

anything like this information."[37] This led Ó Corráin, with rightful skepticism, to

characterize this high degree of lineal prestige as "partly historical, partly legendary"[38]

and as being exactly what the primary architect Meic Cuinn na mBocht, M's grandfather,

desired as he and his descendants deliberately inserted various implausible details into the

annals associated with Clonmacnoise. Overall, this constructed fictional lineage appears

to have had two main objectives: first, to establish a hereditary connection to Gorman

and thus to the primatial see at Armagh, and second to solidify the family's personal land

holdings in the kingdom of Tethbae, specifically to the east of Lough Ree and centered

upon the estates of Inis Endaim and Isel Ciarain.[39] In addition to the wealth and income

represented by these land holdings, the church at Isel Ciarain held the relics of St.

Ciaran's brothers[40], and thus likely generated additional income by way of pilgrims.

Thus, Ó Corráin's ultimate description of M as belonging to a "family of ecclesiastical

aristocrats" who "grew wealthy on the emoluments of office and on their income from

church lands"[41] provides important context and possible motivation as we examine the

texts of LU and as we then consider the impact of the continental reform upon the

monastery at Clonmacnoise.

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[36] Ibid., 5.
[37] Ibid., 2.
[38] Ibid., 3.
[39] Ibid., 9, 10, 20
[40] Ibid., 23.
[41] Ibid., 25.

As we move into the likely timeframe of Máel Muire's life during the latter decades of the eleventh century, all of the various urgent political movements described thus far would have been combining into a desperate crescendo, and would have been threatening the holdings, wealth, and power accumulated by this ecclesiastical family. Internecine Irish conflict was becoming more frequent and of a larger scale, the number of petty tuaths were reducing annually as political power became more centralized in the hands of a relatively small number of regional kings and families, the Irish Church was becoming more closely wedded to these politics and violence as it sought protection, survival, wealth, and influence, and the first impressions of continental church reform would have begun to be known and felt. It was in this tumultuous and dramatic environment that Máel Muire was apparently travelling long distances across Ireland to visit other monasteries in order to view older manuscripts and to gather source material for the tales that he would eventually include in LU.[42]

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[42] Beveridge, 19.

V. The Text: *Lebor na hUidre*

We have now contextualized the politics and society of Ireland, and specifically at Clonmacnoise, at the time of the writing of *Lebor na hUidre.* The exact beginning and ending dates of the writing of the manuscript are not known with any degree of confidence, but it can safely be assumed that it was compiled in its original form within the span of 1090-1106.[1] As has been well documented since 1912, at least three scribes[2], A [likely an original subordinate scribe, hence the first letter of the alphabet], M [the previously mentioned Máel Muire of Clonmacnoise], and a later anonymous interpolator known as H due to his tendency towards homilies, all contributed to this manuscript. However, very recent palaeographical work has indicated the possibility of perhaps eight, or more, interpolating hands at work on the manuscript following the original composition by A and M.

While most of the manuscripts of medieval Ireland were purposefully compiled as treasured artifacts and family heirlooms, with rich illuminations and embellishments, it is very possible that such was not the case with LU which has been described as "a source book rather than a complete narration…a workmanlike book that has little in terms of decoration."[3] Modern research does seem to indicate that LU is a professional workbook and reference document, and perhaps even a textbook. Noted LU scholar Richard Best's observation that "it is strange that a volume of such importance should not have been mentioned in its turn as a source in any other medieval Irish manuscript"[4] can most

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[1] Michael Slavin, *The Ancient Books of Ireland*, McGill-Queen's University Press (Dublin, 2005): 2.
[2] Ibid., 6.
[3] Slavin, *Ancient Books*, 10.
[4] Best & Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, xii-xiii. See also Ó Cróinín, 181. In his chapter on "The First Christian Schools," and within the section on "Scribes and Calligraphers," Ó Cróinín notes just how much pride the

logically be explained by just such a conclusion, that LU was not a 'published'

manuscript but was rather intended as a reference work for M and future scribes, clerics,

and monastic students.

Passages in LU refer to the lost volumes of *Drum Sneachta* and the *Yellow Book of Slane* as sources, and Best observed that an entry in the *Annal of the Four Masters* not only names M as the author of LU, but describes that LU was written after having deliberately searched out other manuscripts in other locations around Ireland.[5] While a more modern author postulated that "preserving that endangered golden lode of lore, during what was to be the last free century of the Gaelic tradition [although they couldn't have known that] in many parts of the country, is what Máel Muire and his companions were all about and they did their work well in *Lebor na hUidre/Book of the Dun Cow*,"[6] this supposition may assume a bit too much about the prescient intent of M and his fellow scribes. This claim does, however, lend at least tangential support to the idea that LU was purposefully capturing material, both secular and religious, that was deemed to be of primary social, political, literary, and historical significance at the time, described as the source of "the majority of our best-known ancient Irish tales…literature that has helped form our ideas of what it means to be of Ireland."[7]

Oskamp in his *Notes on the History of Lebor na hUidre* not only provided a brief overview of the general history of characters and places involved in the production of LU, but also provided a basis for his own and subsequent modern interpretations and revisions of the palaeographical work which had thus far occurred. That his *Notes* were

scribes of this era took in the quality of their work. Given its relative lack of ornamentation, this would seem to support the idea that LU is a work book.
[5] Best & Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, x.
[6] Slavin, *Ancient Books*, 8.
[7] Ibid., 11.

at least somewhat necessary is perhaps implied by his opening statement that "about

Lebor na hUidre…not much is known."[8] Oskamp also apparently took exception with

what little contemporary work had been done regarding LU at that time and chose,

instead, to refer back to and to broadly support Best's introduction to the facsimile of LU

published by the Royal Irish Academy in 1929.

Oskamp demonstrates, in support of Best's earlier claim, that there were indeed

three main scribes[9] who contributed to LU and that the primary contributor, as opposed to

simply collator, was indeed Máel Muire (M) rather than the subsequent and more

anonymous H. Oskamp makes it clear that only three tracts in LU were written solely by

M, all of which are ecclesiastical texts. However, Ó Corráin , in his Royal Irish Academy

lecture on LU in January 2013, provides further detail in the breakdown of authorship

when he claims that A wrote 12%, mostly at the beginning, M wrote 60%, while H later

added an additional 28% of the overall content.[10] Specifically, though, Oskamp makes

the claim that the scribe known as A started the stories of *Fis Adamnan* and *Tain Bo*

Cuailgne within LU, but that each of these sections was completed by M. In a broader

sense, Oskamp goes on to demonstrate that it was M who altered A's original plan of a

work including A's original plan of a work primarily focused on hagiography, genealogy,

and poetry by adding much of the pre-Christian mythological content. The result is, in

Oskamp's words, "a manuscript without any theme, a compilation in a pejorative

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[8] H.P.A. Oskamp, "Notes on the History of Lebor na hUidre," in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Volume 65 (1966/1967): 117.
[9] A point of fact which has recently been challenged by current palaeographers, who now claim evidence of perhaps five, or seven, or even more hands present in LU. See specifically the Royal Irish Academy conference recordings from 07 January 2013, especially those of Elizabeth Duncan in her lecture on *The Palaeography of LU*.
[10] Ó Corráin, "Clerics, Lineage, and Literature."

sense."[11] This is true, of course, only if one assumes that M had no conscious motivation for his deliberate action of creating a text of mixed ecclesiastical and secular material.

Oskamp set a historical context for the document and drew some of his own implications for what that might mean concerning the text and its resultant message. He substantiates the widely held belief that M's father was "Celechar Mugdornach, bishop of Clonmacnois, who died in 1067."[12] After establishing the familial lineage and geographical location for the work of M, he subsequently goes on to explore the possibility that the entire LU manuscript may not have been written solely at Clonmacnoise as the manuscript directly mentions a number of older sources which may not have all been written or stored at that location.[13] Combined with other current sources of information, it is indeed possible to imagine that M traveled about Ireland, tapping into a network of other professional scholars, in order to access original or particular manuscripts which he felt necessary and relevant to the aim of his work. However, this in no way detracts from any sense of a geographical center of gravity for the perspective of LU, as the perspective would have been that of M and his connection to Clonmacnoise as opposed to any incident place of temporary nomadic copy work. In fact, Oskamp expressed confidence that M very likely did indeed finish his work on LU at Clonmacnoise.[14]

In addressing the intent of the scribe M and his possible rationale for the inclusion of certain aspects of the content of LU, Oskamp examined the pseudo-historical tract known as *Aided Nath I* which describes the burial of the last pagan king of Ireland.

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[11] Oskamp, "Notes," 117-118.
[12] Ibid., 120.
[13] Ibid., 120.
[14] Ibid., 130.

Oskamp postulates that M deliberately used this story to highlight the end of a cycle, and a break between the old and the new.[15] While Oskamp implies that the old is 'pagan,' and the new 'Christian,' it is not impossible to imagine an aim which extends beyond simply religion. Underscoring just such a societal shift would have been essential if one were, with a deliberately mixed manuscript, attempting to establish the historical, genealogical, and supernatural/divine claims to political authority on the part of the ecclesiastical elites of Clonmacnoise.

Even if not intentionally, Oskamp also underscores the importance of LU as a brief, unique insight into the nature of Irish society and identity in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. He stated that "after the Norman invasions most of the monasteries disappeared or were taken over by continental orders, so that the accent certainly shifted towards the more specifically religious, Latin texts."[16] With the coming of the Normans and the pending religious reforms which would bring the Irish Church more in line with the continental model, LU stands out as a singular example of the blended expression of the political, ecclesiastical, and literary classes of medieval Ireland.

In his conclusion, Oskamp stated certain essential facts which are important to keep in mind during any examination of LU.

> 1. In the last quarter of the eleventh century A, a professional scribe, sets about compiling a MS containing historical and religious matter. His sources seem to point towards connections with Meath.
> 2. Máel Muire (mac meic Cuind na mBocht) continues his work circa 1100 and completes the MS. Apparently he did not follow the original plan intended by A. On the other hand because of the activities of the

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[15] Ibid., 121.
[16] Ibid., 128.

> restorer and later binders we cannot be sure of the original order. M's
> work may have shown more method than it does now.[17]

While it would indeed be more helpful to have the current manuscript in the exact order

of compilation intended by M, this should not in any way detract from a content analysis.

What is important is that Oskamp, and others, have confidently established Máel Muire

as the primary contributor circa 1100 CE, operating from a central base at Clonmacnoise,

and with significant political and religious family connections. This sufficiently

establishes the context of authorship and compilation so as to allow for textual analysis

which is linked to a time and a place in such a way that we can begin to infer some

possible motivations.

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[17] Ibid., 135.

VI. Textual Analysis

As we commence to analyze the content of LU by way of several exemplar tales, it is important to reflect upon the evolution of the analysis of medieval Irish manuscripts over the past century. In eventual contradiction to the observations of Moody and Byrne regarding the dearth of integrated scholarship on medieval Irish manuscripts during the latter half of the previous century, there would seem to be a recently increased focus upon, in particular, the mixed pagan and Christian content of twelfth century manuscripts. This would include primarily the work of Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, Elva Johnston, Catherine McKenna, Edel Bhreathnach, and Kim McCone. Previously, the bifurcated and oppositional approaches of the medievalists and the nativists called for the adoption of one, or the other, narrow view. In the former case, it was the belief that medieval ecclesiastical scribes expressed an amazing degree of slavish tolerance and, simultaneously, a culture of academic open-mindedness by ensuring the preservation of a rapidly disappearing collection of pagan tales which were recorded with major alterations suitable to their Christian worldview. Earlier medieval scholars, such as Seán Ó Coileáin and Proinsias Mac Cana, accounted for the apparently vigorous and genuine work by these Irish monks in ecclesiastical Latin texts, and yet with the inclusion of vernacular traditional tales, as an approach of benign ecumenism. This perspective presumably endowed these scribes with "a suspiciously modern and disinterested desire to record the remnants of a moribund pagan tradition,"[1] acting as antiquarians who were assembling, as best they could, tales from a swiftly fragmenting past. Alternatively, the nativist scholars believed that it was the passionate interest of secular literati, specifically

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[1] McCone, 6.

in the form of the recently merged monastic *fili* and the lay bards resulting in the new

learned class of *aes dana*,[2] which captured, intact, the perfect forms of an ancient oral

tradition. This unnecessarily rigid partition created a pointless dichotomy and a "glaring

apparent discrepancy [which] has become an increasing source of disquiet for some

scholars both in the field and outside."[3]

Consequently, recent scholarship reflects an understanding of a more nuanced,

subtle, and deliberate blending of pagan and Christian material, designed to operate

simultaneously on several levels, and for a number of possible different contemporary

objectives. The roots of this modern approach were not without a small number of early

advocates, however, as Rudolf Thurneysen and James Carney first described the

monastic imprint upon nativist tales in early 1900's, while in the 1970's Ó Corráin

proposed that a remarkably unified political system of overkings employed "monastic

propagandists and genealogists" to ruthlessly "reshape the past in the interests of the

present."[4] Ó Cathasaigh and others have more recently demonstrated that early Irish

sagas were not just faithful recordings of pagan stories, but were indeed "geared to

contemporary concerns."[5]

Kim McCone, in particular, suggests that academic comfort with this more

blended perspective is warranted based upon the logic that even the Christian Old

Testament, with which the medieval Irish monks and scribes would have been intimately

familiar, is replete with multitudes of stories depicting notoriously pagan, or at least un-

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[2] Ibid., 27.
[3] Ibid., ix.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

Christian, behavior, and yet that these stories remain as part of Christian doctrine.[6] He

even directly compares the legendary figure of King Loegaire in *The Phantom Chariot of*

Cuchulainn to such biblical figures as Nebuchadnezzar and Herod, and suggests that

Ireland's monastic literati would have been equally comfortable with their conscience

and their worldview when tapping into pre-Christian sagas, characters, and themes by

simply viewing this as the Irish version of the Old Testament, with Patrick playing the

transformative role of Christ for the island.[7] While the point is valid, especially when

considering inclusion in LU of stand-alone traditional pre-Christian epics such as *Táin Bó*

Cúailnge, I would offer that the analogy is not quite complete when it comes to

deliberately mixed content tales such as *The Phantom Chariot*, *Immram Máel Duin*, and

others. The appearance of a figure such as Cuchulainn in a medieval Irish monastic

manuscript would be, perhaps, more equivalent to Gilgamesh, Hercules, or Perseus

appearing to Saul and knocking him from his horse on the road to Damascus in order to

assist with this disciple's conversion experience.[8] The outrageousness of such an image

helps to more precisely frame the true extent to which the scribes of Clonmacnoise of the

late eleventh and early twelfth centuries were in fact boldly venturing beyond anything

that had previously been written in the world of the Irish Church.

For what compelling reason might Irish scribes feel it necessary and justifiable to

include St. Patrick and Cuchulainn in the same time and place in one of their tales? As

touched upon already with regard to the detailed accounting of M's family and their

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[6] Ibid., 29-30.

[7] Ibid., 29-30, 33, and 77. See also McCone, 188-189.

[8] I make this comparison here not to suggest that these medieval Irish authors and scribes would have had access to Babylonian or Greek myths, but rather to suggest to the mind of the modern reader the opposite, that is, that without any such literary precedent it would seem that much more amazing for this group of otherwise ascetic Christians to dare to mix these two clearly, at least from a continental perspective, antithetical genres.

interests at Clonmacnoise, and as noted just above with reference to the perspectives of Ó

Corráin and Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, there can be little doubt that at least part of their intent

was contemporary self-interested propaganda by way of allegory, a form of writing

which may have later fallen out of style but which was in fact strongly popular in this

medieval era due to the influences of writers such as Pope Gregory the Great and Isidore

of Seville.[9] Just as it has been well-established that various provincial ruling families and

the extended branches of those families over time used ancient stories of lineage and

descent from mythical or legendary kings in order to establish or bolster their own current

claims to power and tribute, the same principle can be seen to apply here to monastic

dynasties and their syncretistic literature of allegory, typology, and etymology. Given the

connections between these two elite societal groups, it is not hard to imagine a deliberate

adoption of this practice of re-working the past for a present purpose, whereby "the past

usually serves as a paradigm for the present [and] political aspirations and claims to pre-

eminence are explained and legitimized in tales and anecdotes about 'historical'

events."[10] Pádraig Ó Fiannachta states that monastic Irish literature of the pre-reform era

was both "cleverly propagandist" and allegorical, using imported elements to deliver a

Christian message.[11] Dumville also emphasized the primary Christian theme of this type

of literature, with the secular material, characters, or themes included in order to

deliberately contrast with the intended ecclesiastical moral,[12] but in doing so he is

perhaps not clearly distinguishing between content and intent. While Bhreathnach

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[9]McCone, 56.

[10] Bart Jaski, "Kings over Overkings: Propaganda for Pre-eminence in Early Medieval Ireland," in *Academia*, (1996): 163.

[11] Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, "Migratory Legends in Medieval Irish Literature: Third Response to Daithi O Hogain's Paper," in *Legends and Fiction: Papers Presented at the Nordic-Celtic Legend Symposium*, (2013): 89-90.

[12] David N. Dumville, "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition," in *Eriu*, (1976): 77.

attributed this co-mingling of pagan and Christian content to the long process of conversion and to the attempt by the clergy to control a still-powerful pagan ethos,[13] McCone made what is perhaps the strongest and most persistent case for simple and blatant power politics on the part of the clerical leaders of this era, who, "usually in tandem with great dynasties… [were] concerned to extend their power and influence."[14] Specifically, McCone demonstrates that what occurred in these texts was a deliberate re-mythologizing by way of the modification of historical pre-Christian characters and themes in order to generate new myths, often by way of a special process of euhemerization known as sanctification by which it was "possible for pagan deities or heroes and their more desirable attributes to be appropriated by the Church through their transformation into saints."[15] So long as this was done artfully and subtly, he claimed, the use of traditional material strengthened the message of the current text by employing a known code of language and form which projected back into a pre-Christian past in order to express concerns that were "often secular rather than ecclesiastical, material rather than spiritual, local rather than national."[16]

Perhaps the most astute and useful observation on this notion of allegory and propaganda within medieval Irish literature comes to us from Johnston, who clarified that Irish society was clearly comfortable having stories, and histories, with "multiple origins" as opposed to "a simple hegemonistic narrative," which combined with a strong local culture called for a "pragmatic approach to potential rivals" thus allowing for "distinctive

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[13] Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 131 and 151.
[14] McCone, 9.
[15] Ibid., 79, 82, 149.
[16] Ibid., 202, 244, 256.

forms of local expression."[17] While agreeing with other modern scholars as to the allegorical nature of these tales, she cautions that, with a body of literature clearly intended to operate on so many different levels simultaneously, not every single point of every tale is meant to be clear allegory for a corresponding point in the society of the author or scribe.[18] It is with this tempered lens that we will now examine two exemplar tales of mixed pagan and Christian content in LU.

Siaburcharpat Con Culaind: Cuchulainn's Phantom Chariot

This tale involves three main characters, Patrick, King Loegaire, and Cuchulainn, and opens at Tara with the continued efforts of Patrick to convert the recalcitrant Loegaire to the Christian faith. Loegaire makes it clear that he will only believe in God if Patrick is able to demonstrate His power by calling up Cuchulainn so that Loegaire can see and speak to the ancient hero. Patrick, guided by a messenger from God, instructs Loegaire to wait upon the ramparts of the Rath of Tam. Loegaire does this, and reports to Patrick that while he did have a supernatural experience involving a cold wind, fog, ravens, and the appearance of a magnificent warrior in a chariot whom he suspected to be Cuchulainn, Loegaire did not actually converse with the hero and thus maintains his skepticism. Patrick assures Loegaire that the power of God is such that Cuchulainn will return and hold a conversation. As promised, Cuchulainn reappears and the tale recounts, in the true fashion and style of the pagan epics, all the wonderful details of his feats and accomplishments. Loegaire, still doubting, demands proof that the figure before him is truly Cuchulainn, who then proceeds through twenty-five quatrains reciting specific deeds of his life as proof of his identity. In the course of this description of his actions in

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[17] Elva Johnston, "Literacy and Conversion on Ireland's Roman Frontier," in *Academia*, (2015): 17.
[18] Ibid., personal conversation.

life, Cuchulainn emphasizes several times that he is not a spirit, but is truly a physical being brought back to earth by Patrick, that his magnificence as a warrior and the strength of all the Ulster cycle heroes are of no consequence compared to the power of the demons in Hell, and that only by way of Patrick's offer of salvation can either Cuchulainn or Loegaire ever hope to reach Heaven. Noting that Cuchulainn had by this time been dead for 450 years, the tale concludes with the statement that "earth came over Loegaire," and that Cuchulainn was allowed into Heaven as a consequence of the intervention of Patrick. However, there is some uncertainty as to the true outcome for Loegaire. As noted routinely throughout the tale, the phrase 'the earth will come over you' is clearly a threat of dying a pagan death and being condemned to Hell. The ending of the LU version contains the notation that earth did in fact come over Loegaire, but also that he had come to believe in Patrick as a consequence of the resurrection of Cuchulainn. This is further complicated by the fact that much of the original ending intended by M was over-written by one of the H interpolators, who included the observation that Loegaire had died "…through the curse of Patrick so that all the dogs who enter Tara shit on his head."[19]

It should be remembered that this is not the first meeting of Patrick and Loegaire in the narrative history of medieval Ireland. In previous tales from other sources, we understand that Loegaire was already extremely hostile to Patrick and in fact had tried to have him killed. As a result of this violent behavior towards the cleric, Patrick had actually cursed the king and had declared that his royal lineage would end with him.[20] This background of noble violence toward ecclesiastics is not unimportant, perhaps, as we consider the increasing levels of violence and robbery directed towards monasteries in

[19] Gregory Toner, "History and Salvation in Lebor na hUidre," in *Lebor na hUidre Codices Hibernenses Eximii*, Royal Irish Academy (Dublin, 2015): 142-143.
[20] McCone, 250.

general, and Clonmacnoise in particular, in the latter half of the eleventh century. It then becomes especially relevant not just that Patrick is extending an offer of salvation towards this violent contemporary king, but that he is doing so by demonstrating that even the great pagan heroes of the past, towards whom medieval Irish noble families had forcibly and fictionally directed the lineal roots of their own family trees, were in fact reliant upon the church for ultimate salvation. As stated by McCone, "The pathetic dependence of the once invincible main hero of the Ulster tales upon St. Patrick [demonstrates that] only the cleric's power can"[21] save the violent hero. If we take Cuchulainn to represent the traditional image of martial violence and glory, and Loegaire to represent the contemporary secular noble leaders who emulate that tradition, then this tale can, at the highest level, be taken as a twisting of the past which calls for submission to church authority, whereby "the martial glory of Cu Chulainn [sic] is best perfected through the guidance of the ecclesiastical elite."[22] Specifically, according to Johnston, the bringing together of these three characters "in a sacred time whose indeterminacy allows it to provide a model for present behavior [allowed the recorders of this narrative allegory] to focus on issues that were crucial to the organization of society."[23] Thus, myth and legend have been juxtaposed to draw attention, indirectly, to issues of contemporary concern whereby "the tension between Christian and pagan that was so pervasively productive in medieval Irish literary culture is certainly present."[24]

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[21] Ibid., 201.
[22] Elva Johnston, "The Salvation of the Individual and the Salvation of Society in Siaburcharpat Con Culaind," in *The Individual in Celtic Literatures*, (2001): 120.
[23] Ibid., 110.
[24] Catherine McKenna, "Angels and Demons in the Pages of Lebor na hUidre," in *Narrative in the Celtic Tradition: essays in honor of Edgar M. Slotkin*, Colgate University Press (Hamilton, NY, 2011): 158.

However, it is not simply this higher level observation about violence towards the Irish Church which can be drawn from this highly allegorical tale. Numerous moments in the tale draw out supporting and more specific observations providing what is very likely commentary on concerns about Irish society and politics of the era. First, we see early in the tale that following Loegaire's first brief encounter with Cuchulainn, he seeks Patrick's blessing upon his mouth, meaning upon his words, so that he can accurately relate the truth of what he has seen. Patrick refuses, instead providing his blessing upon the air that will carry Loegaire's words. On one hand, this may be seen as a simple exertion of authority by the cleric over the secular noble. However, we should also not discount the possibility that this is also evidence of the continuing influence of Pelagius upon Irish Church doctrine, whereby Patrick, as the cleric and the representation of the church, cannot personally offer or guarantee the path to salvation, but can simply provide the pathway by which it might occur should the individual make the proper moral choice. Ultimately, however, this act by Patrick would also seem to draw out the point that the church must serve as a proper interlocutor for the past and that "by analogy, the church as mediator of knowledge and the main controller of the tools of literacy offers order to Irish society."[25] By extension, then, it is only the literacy and knowledge of the church which can properly guide and save the conjoined secular and clerical elite of Irish society, as the tale makes clear that even the mighty Cuchulainn's "account of his earthly triumphs [turns into] a cautionary tale" regarding the inferiority of the strongest warrior when compared to the trials of Hell.[26] Thus, by distinguishing between the power of violence

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[25] Elva Johnston, "A Sailor on the Seas of Faith: The Individual and the Church in the Voyage of Mael Duin," in *European Encounters: Essays in Memory of Albert Lovett*, Dublin (University College Dublin Press, 2003): 116-117.
[26] Toner, 141-142.

and the power of literacy and knowledge, we are in fact witnessing a specific and localized playing out of Gelasian Theory of Two Swords[27] by way of the church's condemnation of violence as it sought not just what was best for society, but clearly what was also best for its own security, wealth, and position in society. It is perhaps not ironic that this same issue, as reflected in the text of LU, was playing out contemporaneously on the continent in the Investiture Controversy at the end of the eleventh century.

Finally, lest we mistakenly conclude that M and his fellow scribes were indeed outright heretics deliberately striving to create a merged pagan and Christian ethos solely for their own narrow interests, it is worth taking note of a piece of marginalia in another section of LU which, in the hand of M, states that

> this is a destructive apparition to Cu Chulainn by the folk of the sid. For great was the devilish power before faith and its extent was such that the demons used to fight bodily with the people and that they used to show delights and secrets to them as if they existed. It is thus that they used to be believed in, so that it is those apparitions that the ignorant call sids and folk of the sid.[28]

While M and others may have been willing to appropriate traditional pre-Christian characters, themes, and language to reinforce a range of intended messages, and while this activity may have contributed to a misperception of heresy on the part of the more orthodox continental church, we should not extend that logic to presume that there was no Christian intent of the part of these Irish clerics as they chose their characters, plots, and themes in LU.

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[27] In reference to Pope Gelasius' letter to Emperor Anastasius in 494 CE dealing with the proper balance between spiritual and temporal authority, wherein Gelasius argued for the supremacy of the spiritual and thus for the preeminence of the church over the nobility.
[28] McCone, 149.

This tale, then, is one which addresses the power structure of Irish society, especially the aspects of violence, order, truth, and salvation, and which ultimately holds the church to be a guide which should be deemed superior to kings. It calls for a return to order by holding up a re-imagined past which incorporates ancient and familiar characters in new, but neither unfamiliar nor uncomfortable, ways and which, in addressing the past, commits no specific offense in the present with regards to any particular secular figure of authority. This artful merger of past and present, of pagan and Christian, was clearly appropriate to the moment and to the internal audience. It is doubtful the personalities such as Gerald of Wales or Lanfranc or Anselm of Canterbury would have, if given the opportunity, viewed this merged content quite so generously.

Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin: The Voyage of Máel Duin's Boat

Barbara Hillers, writing specifically on the topic of *immrama*, states that "as is not infrequently the case with medieval Irish literature, the debate about origin [of this style of tale] has so far obscured individual textual analysis. Scholarship has been, on the whole, less than appreciative of either individual voyage tales, or the genre as a whole."[29] *Immram* (plural, *immrama*) translates literally as 'rowing around,' or more figuratively as 'voyage.' Thus, *Immram Curaig Maile Duin* [hereafter, ICMD, with Máel Duin hereafter as MD] is the *Voyage of Máel Duin's Boat*. Linguistic and manuscript evidence suggests that it was likely written in the eighth or ninth century,[30] and the record would suggest that it served as the prototype for a genre of similar tales. These later *immrama*, *Immram Brain Mac Febul*, *Immram Snedgussa ocus Mac Riagla*, and *Immram Ui Corra*, not only

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[29] Hillers, 71.
[30] Dumville, 88.

copied numerous aspects of this original extant model, but even routinely included direct

references such as '…and this was the same island visited by Máel Duin.' This would

clearly seem to suggest that ICMD, with its imagery and allegory, struck a chord among

the *aes dana* which continued to resonate over time and across Irish society.

The later *immrama* largely tended, as noted by Johnston, to be set in the Christian

era and centered upon heroic Christian figures.[31] However, with ICMD such a statement

is not entirely accurate: while clearly set in the Christian era, the main figure of MD is

perhaps more traditional and pagan at the opening of the tale, and it is his

transformational voyage to a more Christian identity which not only makes this tale

interesting but which makes it particularly relevant as we consider the context of

Clonmacnoise at the cusp of the twelfth century. This long and complex tale, with its

relatively impressive character development and plot integrity, is not as easily recounted

as was *Cuchulainn's Phantom Chariot*, and as a lengthy epic merits more detailed

description.

ICMD opens with the story of MD's father, Ailill Ochair or Ailill at the Edge of

Battle, and the recounting of a raid during which he raped a nun who would become

MD's mother. Immediately following this is the story of a second raid in which Ailill is

killed by sea raiders. MD is subsequently given over as a fosterling to a king and a

queen. As MD grows to manhood, he is clearly the emerging champion of his people and

he vanquishes all of his peers in the traditional Gaelic physical and mental games. As a

result of one of these victories, a sore loser reveals to MD that he is an orphan and

doesn't actually know the identity of his true father, as MD had up until this time

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[31] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."

believed that the king and queen were his parents. Thus, within the opening pages we see that this tale borrows many familiar themes from traditional pre-Christian tales: the hiding of the truth of lineage; the foster son who excels in all things; and the revelation of the protagonist's role as an outsider.

MD extracts the truth from his foster mother by fasting against her. He travels to and visits his real mother, the nun who is somewhat insane as the result of her trauma, and learns from her the truth about his father's identity. He thus goes to visit his father's people, the Eoganacht who are, ironically given what we know of the history of Clonmacnoise, a clan group from Munster. MD is accompanied on this journey by his three foster brothers, and he continues to excel as a champion and an emerging leader among his new people.   This trajectory towards traditional success and heroism is derailed during MD's encounter with Briccne, a clearly spiteful and vengeful priest who informs MD about the place and manner of his father's death. Most importantly, Briccne underscores that MD's father's death has not been properly avenged and that this brings dishonor upon MD.

Consequently, MD goes to visit the druid Nuca in Connacht. Nuca gives him specific guidance on the construction of a boat, when to sail, and how many companions to take with him. Setting sail as directed, MD is unexpectedly joined by his three foster-brothers who jump off a cliff into the sea in order to force their way onto the voyage. They very shortly find the island of MD's father's killers, but as they approach a storm quickly and mysteriously arises which blows them away. The storm lasts all night, during which time MD first blames his foster brothers for having fouled the proscriptions of the druid Nuca regarding the number to go on the voyage, but after which he has the

men put away their oars and put their trust in God. After this long and detailed setting of the stage, this moment effectively comprises the official beginning of the actual *immram*.

MD and his crew then proceed to visit thirty-three different islands, some of which are unique to this tale but many of which, as previously noted, reappear in later *immrama*. A brief recounting of the nature of each island is provided here:

First island – This first island is inhabited by giant ants which emerge to attack the boat. The crew fends off these monsters and sails away.

Second island - After what turns about to be a typical three-day interval between islands and which may represent an ascetic period of fasting, the crew encounters an island of birds which present no danger, and from whom they acquire the provisions of meat and eggs.

Third island - The crew observes, from a distance, a dancing beast which upon closer examination appears to be part horse and part dog. However, as they draw closer they come to realize that the animal is happy because it sees them as food and they sail away.

Fourth island – An otherwise uneventful approach and landing allows the crew to beach the boat and to rest and gather provisions. One of the foster brothers is selected to explore further inland. Taking a second foster brother with him, they see tracks which they come to realize are those of giant horses and they run back to the boat. As they are departing, they hear the sounds of giants and their horses preparing for a race.

Fifth island – This island provides a sanctuary and place of rest, as they encounter a house which is fully provisioned for them with food and beds. Most notably, it contains some sort of unique salmon trap, whereby salmon are swept in through a revolving door and then can't return to the sea.

Sixth island –The crew does not actually land on this island, which is sufficiently large that it requies three days to sail around. During the circumnavigation, MD breaks off a branch holding three apples which then feeds the entire crew for forty days.

Seventh island – This island is the home of some type of mythical, and clearly allegorical, beast which has a revolving body. Its movement seems to imply some sort disconnect between its inside and outside, as well as between its upper and lower halves. In fear of what they are seeing, the crew sails away.

Eighth island – As they approach this island, they observe a pack of large carnivorous, cannibalistic horses which are attacking and tearing each other apart. In fear, they sail away.

Ninth island – This island is populated by fruit trees, pigs which live underground and emerge at night to knock fruit from these trees in order to feed, and birds which clean up the remains of that fruit during the day. The ground on this island is fiery hot, and MD and the crew come to realize that this heat is generated by the pigs from their

underground lairs. Realizing that they need to come ashore at night, the men take some of the apples but this changes the natural order of things and the pigs begin to eat during the day. MD and the crew eventually depart.

Tenth island – This island contains the ruins of white-washed buildings, to include a great hall with a feast set as if for the crew. The walls of this hall are adorned with many rich treasures, and MD observes that there is a cat leaping from pillar to pillar within the hall. One of the foster brothers takes a necklace from the wall despite MD's warning. The cat, observing this, leaps through the chest of the foster brother like a fiery arrow and burns him to ashes. The crew cleans up the ashes, apologizes to the cat, puts the treasure back and departs.

Eleventh island – This island, as observed by the crew from their boat, is divided down the middle by a fence and is populated by a flock of sheep and their shepherd. On one side of the fence, the sheep are black and on the other side they are white. The crew watches as the shepherd lifts a white sheep and places it on the other side of the fence where it immediately turns black, and then does the same with a black sheep which turns white. For reasons that are not explained, and are thus likely highly allegorical and otherwise obvious to a contemporary audience, this terrifies this crew and they immediately sail away.

Twelfth island – The crew lands on this apparently innocuous island and begins to search for provisions. Two of the foster brothers explore inland, where they encounter a river of normal appearance but which burns a spear shaft when it is inserted into the water. Moving downstream, they observe some giant cattle, and eventually a giant herdsman who indicates that these are but calves and that the adult cattle are on the other side of the island. This terrifies the foster brothers, who run back to the beach and convince the crew to flee the island.

Thirteenth island – On this island, the crew observes a line of dejected people bringing grain to a mill. At the mill, they converse with a hideous miller who reveals that half of the people of the island are forced to provide the other half with all their food. The crew runs back to their boat in terror and departs the island.

Fourteenth island – this is the island of sorrow, where the population is dressed all in black and is constantly weeping. The foster brother who goes to explore joins them in their wailing; the rescue party sent to retrieve him also joins in their behavior. A second rescue party succeeds in recovering the members of the first rescue party by covering their mouths and avoiding the tainted air. However, the foster brother is lost and left behind.

Fifteenth island – In some ways, this island appears to thematically mimic that of the black and white sheep. However, here the island is divided into quarters by four different exotic fences. Each quarter is occupied by a distinct group: kings, queens, warriors, and maidens. One of the maidens gives them cheese, and then a drink which puts them to

sleep for three days, but not before the story hints at the implication of sexual favors from her to all the men. Afterwards, they wake up back out at sea in the boat.

Sixteenth island – This location is not so much an island as a fortress rising from the sea. This fortress consists of a bridge of glass leading to a fort with the bronze door. An otherworldly woman comes out of the fort each day to fill her bucket from a fountain. From her first appearance, the crew urges MD to seduce her. Hearing them, she jokingly rebukes MD and departs. This recurs for three days in a row, whereupon she promises him an answer the following day. MD and the crew then wake up back in the ship at sea. However, it is noteworthy that she made clear to them that the idea of original sin was not present and not understood in her world.

Seventeenth island – This island, where no action of note occurs, is occupied by psalm-singing birds.

Eighteenth island – On this island, the crew encounters both singing birds and a naked hairy hermit. The hermit tells how he was on his own immram, how his boat split apart and left him here, and that the birds are the souls of his kin. He further explains that the island grows by one foot of dirt and one new tree every year and that he must wait there till doomsday. For his sustenance, half a cake and two slices of fish are provided to him twice a day by angels. After three days on this island, the hermit offers a prophecy that all the crew will return home except for one, with the implication that this unfortunate soul with be the final remaining foster brother.

Nineteenth island – This island is also occupied by a hermit who subsists on a miraculous fountain.   On Wednesdays and Fridays this fountain provides water, on Sundays and feast days it gives milk, and on the Feast of the Apostles it gives wine.

Twentieth island – On this island, the crew detects the presence of blacksmiths before landing and they begin to back away slowly. They are then attacked by the blacksmiths, who throw a chunk of molten metal at the boat and boil the ocean around them. The crew gets away.

Twenty-first 'island' – Not exactly on island, per se, but rather a notable event whereby the crew, sailing upon a particularly glassy sea, is able to observe deeply down into the clear water.

Twenty-second 'island' – Again, not exactly an island, but here again the crew can look down into the deeps and see the roofs of houses, towns, mountains, forests, and finally a huge beast in a tree which attacks a herd of oxen. The crew is terrified that they will descend into this underwater land, and they finally pass beyond this area.

Twenty-third island –This large rocky island is inhabited by a large crowd of people. As the people see the boat approaching, they react violently and begin throwing nuts at the crew. The crew collects the nuts and sails away.

Twenty-fourth island – On this the crew observes a number of phenomena which essentially indicate that on this island gravity doesn't work as usual. There is a stream which emerges from the ground and flows into the sky like a fountain, and there are

salmon in the water which can be speared out of the sky. So many fish fall out of the river that the island smells of rotting fish.

Twenty-fifth 'island' - Again, MD and his crew encounter what is not exactly an island in the normal sense but a rather notable anomaly in the midst of the ocean. A four-sided pillar holds an island up out of the sea, and a giant silver net drapes over the pillar and down into the sea. The scale of the net is so large that the boat can sail between its links. One of the crew breaks off a piece of the net to take with them as proof of what they have seen. A voice of warning emerges from the pillar, whereupon the crew promises that the remnant of the net will be delivered to the altar at Armagh. They depart without incident.

Twenty-sixth 'island' – This is another island held above the sea by a pillar, so far above the surface of the ocean that the crew is unable to communicate with its inhabitants.

Twenty-seventh island – Here, the crew encounters an island of women. There is one woman and one bed for each crew member, with a queen for MD. This is clearly a place without age or sickness, very much like the Tir na Nog of pre-Christian Ireland. There is no sense of death or sin. The queen takes care of the administration of the entire island, and the crew never has to perform any work. They stay there over the three months of winter, but eventually the crew becomes bored and threatens to leave with or without MD. Relenting, MD takes the crew to the boat. They try to leave but are brought back to the island by the queen ensnaring them will a ball of yarn. Consequently, the crew ends up spending another full year on the island before they try to escape again. This time, a different member of the crew catches the ball of yarn; MD cuts off this crewmember's hand so that they can finally escape.

Twenty-eighth island – On this island, the crew recognizes a type of intoxicating berry. MD is chosen by lot to test the berries and sleeps for three days, with obvious connections to the notion of biblical resurrection.

Twenty-ninth island – Here, the crew encounters another example of resurrection and rebirth. First, they find a fortress with a great church, occupied by yet another hairy hermit. This hermit tells them that he set out with fourteen companions of which he is the sole survivor. Leaving him, they next see an ancient eagle appear on the plain outside the fortress. This eagle is covered in lice and is losing feathers; two other eagles appear and begin to groom him.   The first eagle has a branch of red berries and, reminiscent of what had just occurred to MD, the other two eagles feed him the berries. The old eagle bathes in the lake for two days and emerges like new, whereupon he circles the island three times and then flies away. One of the crew asks what would happen if a human were to swim in the lake; he jumps in and afterwards never shows any sign of aging nor baldness, and his vision remains ever afterwards as sharp as an eagle.

Thirtieth island – This island consists of great plain full of people laughing and playing. The third foster brother draws the unlucky lot, goes to explore, and never returns. The crew abandons him and eventually leaves.

Thirty-first island – This island is surrounded by a ring of fire. The crew can see through a gap to a beautiful, otherworldly island with castles and cultivated lands but they can't see a way to get in. They observe for a while and then leave.

Thirty-second island – On this island, the crew encounters another hairy hermit who tells them a story of sin and forgiveness. He relates how he used to be the cook at the monastery on Tory Island, but that he routinely stole food from the monastery in order to sell it for personal profit. One day, as he was burying a cadaver, he accidentally dug up a holy corpse who advised him that if he buried a sinner in this location he will be eternally damned. Suddenly, he found himself in a boat on the sea and was blown far out where he becomes becalmed. Next, he saw a man sitting on top of the waves, a rather direct reference to the pre-Christian Irish god Mannanan, who advised him that he is at that moment actually surrounded by demons, not waves, and that he will stay here until he rids himself of his earthly possessions. He does so, and is told that he can now move on but that where he lands is where he will stay. Afterwards, he lands upon a bare rock and is stranded there. An otter appears with a salmon in its mouth to feed him, but he won't eat it raw and so throws it into the sea. Three days later, two otters appear: one with a salmon, and the other with a burning branch to allow for cooking. This continues every day for the next seven years. Over time, the island grows and his food changes to cake and liquor. The hermit tells the crew that they will arrive home safely, but that they must abandon vengeance upon MD's father's killer and instead should grant them forgiveness.

Thirty-third island – Conscious that they are nearing Ireland, the crew observes and follows an Irish falcon back to the very first island of this immram. They again detect and approach the murderers of MD's father. Eavesdropping on them, they hear the killers wondering aloud what they would do if MD came back. The actual murderer of Ailill expresses that he would welcome MD, given how much MD has suffered on his voyage. MD knocks and is welcomed in an act of forgiveness and mercy.

Returning to Ireland, they place the silver net on the altar at Armagh and MD returns to his own district in Munster. Máel Muire, our scribe at Clonmacnoise, closes by naming the source author, a monk named Aed, and that this story was recorded purely for entertainment purposes. "Aed Find, chief sage of Ireland, arranged that story as it is here so that it might give mental pleasure to the kings and people of Ireland after him."[32] Such a deliberately inserted statement is meant to actually imply the opposite; that is, that there

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[32] Thomas Owen Clancy, "Subversion at Sea: Structure, Style, and Intent in the Immram," in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, Four Court Press (Dublin, 2000): 507.

is most assuredly a high degree of contemporary allegory and social commentary occurring here, as would seem obvious from even a casual reading.

There are many aspects of this tale which, while clearly allegorical, are also so very clearly meant to be obvious to a contemporary audience that we can make some logical guesses as to their meaning but which may, due to a lack of detail in the text, be forever somewhat uncertain to a modern audience. Most such examples of this type would appear to relate to social commentary, and specifically to the ordering of society: the island of the black and white sheep, the island of the four quarters of kings, queens, warriors, and maidens, and the island of the miller are perhaps some of the more obvious examples. We can sense the moral point in many of these instances, but the specific message and audience may unfortunately be lost in the shrouds of time.

However, with regard to ICMD in particular, Johnston notes that *immrama* "wove actuality together with urgent religious and social concerns [relating to]…the organization of Irish society, the role of the church within it and the duties of individuals and their kindreds towards the secular and the ecclesiastical," and more specifically that ICMD uses "oceans and ocean islands as a social laboratory" wherein concerns are voiced regarding the correct ordering of society, especially with regards to the roles of women, warriors, and the church.[33] Kathleen Hughes similarly notes the deliberately merged ecclesiastical and secular content of *immrama* in general, and within ICMD in particular, describing this style as "a new and original work of art."[34] Perhaps most pointedly for the purpose of this thesis, Johnston has made the critical observation that ICMD speaks specifically to the lawlessness of Munster in the late ninth and early tenth

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[33] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."
[34] Hughes, The Irish Church, 653-654.

centuries following the era of Viking attacks, but as then amplified by the failure of the

Eoganacht kings in dealing with the secessionist Osraige sub-kingdom and with the

resurgent Ui Neills, reflecting a "powerful image of a disintegrating society at

ecclesiastical and secular levels."[35] The obvious parallel between Munster at the turn of

the tenth century and Clonmacnoise's concerns about renewed Munster incursions in the

latter part of the tenth century would seem to provide the perfect allegorical context for

M.

When we recall the contextual historical reality of Ireland, Clonmancoise, and the

mBocht family as laid out earlier in this thesis, certain scenes and themes in this tale

come to the forefront and are worthy of deeper examination. First among these would be

the opening scene wherein we learn that MD was the offspring of a rape, specifically the

rape of a Christian nun by a traditional Irish warrior of Munster origin. The implied

message here is perhaps rather obvious. Hillers notes that all immram open with "a crime

that has been perpetrated," leading to the standard plot of a "penitential voyage…in

atonement for a criminal offense or simply to come closer to God."[36] She further

observes that in the case of ICMD, there is a double crime: the rape of Máel Duin's

mother by his father, and then the death of his father at the hands of a Viking. Johnson

observes that MD's parentage sets him apart from his fellows, but also highlights the

"opposition between secular and ecclesiastical…lay society is not openly condemned, but

the chaos resulting from an improper relationship between the warrior and the church

brings about the tragedy of rape and violent death…the author seems to suggest that only

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[35] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."
[36] Hillers, 68.

people living life together in a truly Christian community provide the solution."[37] From

the structural perspective of the story, the rape of the church by a violent lay society

necessitates a voyage of forgiveness in order to obtain peace.

MD's realization of his parentage, especially regarding the nature of his father's

death, leads to some unique commentary as to the nature of the broader Irish Church and

how that organization differs very little from druidic paganism, in effect, given how

complicit the church had become in the violence of lay nobles. In this, we likely see not

only Céli Dé influence but, more specifically, the Céli Dé influence at Clonmancoise

given its geographical placement at the crossroads of Ireland and its resulting ties with

kingdoms to the west, north, and east, but with its antagonisms with Munster to the south.

Thomas Clancy recounts the relevant stage-setting scenes of ICMD when he explains

how, in numerous Irish medieval Christian texts, druids are routinely described as violent

men associated with the act of revenge. However, in ICMD the first person to urge MD

to set out upon his voyage of revenge is Briccne, the Catholic priest of the Eogonacht

who makes MD fully aware of his burden of societal shame which can only be removed

through vengeance. MD then immediately seeks the guidance of Nuca, the druid,

creating some sense of an equivalency between these two spiritual figures who, together,

launch him on his mission of revenge. However, a poignant turning point in the story

occurs when the storm blows them away from the island of his father's killer, constituting

"a subversion of our expectations" leading to a "failure of the mission of vengeance" and

then to the "resulting tale of conversion."[38] As further developed by Johnston, we see

that "the old, long-established churches are shown to be as much in moral decline as lay

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[37] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."
[38] Clancy, 204-205.

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society…the church, rather than acting against these trends [of decline and decay], is seen as contributing to them."[39] It is notable that the cleric at the church site of Ailill's death is named Briccne, which is not accidentally similar to Bricriu the Poison-Tongued of the Ulster cycle tales who pitted the heroes of that era against each other for his own amusement. Thus, in a decidedly un-clerical manner, "Briccne seems to inhabit an anti-church."[40] Not that he was without his motivations. His own church had, we learn, been destroyed by Vikings, thus contributing to "his inciting of violence between lay warriors [which] may represent the universalization of his feud with lay society."[41] An implied condemnation here may be that "the Irish conversion to Christianity is shown to be just skin-deep. This is one of the clearest signs of the author's [that is, Aed's and then as transcribed by M] disaffection with the Irish church."[42]

Lest we take the overlay of pagan and Christian material and themes to imply equality in the minds of the scribes, one must recognize the steady and regular progression towards a predominant Christian motif in the tale. Just as it appears that the evil motivations of Briccne and Nuca are about to deliver to MD the vengeance which he seeks, the stealthy approach to the island fortress of Ailill's murderers is terminated by the storm which blows the boat out to sea and onto its *immram*. Subsequently, as the goal of easy revenge slips beyond his grasp, MD "unconsciously hits on the truth…[they] should hand themselves over to God's providence as opposed to seeking human-inspired revenge."[43] This theme of ever-increasing Christian religiosity on the part of MD and his crew is reinforced as the tale goes on, and especially in the latter half of the tale by way

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[39] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

of the number of hermits which the crew encounters. Symbolically, we can see that each

transit from one island to the next is in many ways a period of fasting and trial with

God's grace providing rest, safety, and sustenance after a suitable period of penance and

reflection. This seems to be especially so after any given encounter wherein the crew

fled from danger rather than seeking to pit violence against violence. Further, the role of

the various hermits brings a certain focus and clarity to the meaning of the voyage, and

these characters provide both a reflection of the Irish Church as well as an ostensibly

objective voice by which to comment upon the institution. Johnston observes that "the

theme that holds the tale together…is the role of the church in Irish society and here the

author shows himself to be both highly critical and deeply idealistic."[44] This point of

"shaded parallelism or opposition of characters"[45] stands out most clearly, perhaps, if we

contrast the roles in the tale played by the Hermit of Tory with his message of

forgiveness in contrast to the ready vengeance of both the wicked priest Briccne and the

druid Nuca.

Embedded within this underlying commentary on the proper interaction between

the Irish Church and, in particular, the warrior class and to include the implied advocacy

for the former's rightful authority over the latter, there is also a detectable influence of

the ascetic Céli Dé and their disdain for a mainstream institution which is too heavily

involved in the evil of the world. During the time of the supposed original writing of

ICMD by Aed, we know that the Céli Dé attempted to influence the Irish Church,

particularly across southern Ireland, to return to a more rigorously ascetic model. As

transcribed into LU one hundred years later by M, this conservative message apparently

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Clancy, 206.

still resonated with portions of the clerical class. Johnston notes that "the church attacked in Immram Máel Duin is…portrayed as lacking in moral authority."[46] She further observes that this prototypical *immram* "suggests that a conversion to greater asceticism in the church, perhaps on a Céli Dé model, a willingness to forgive old enemies and unite against the forces of social disorder, and an adherence to the authority of a paradigmatic royal court provide an answer"[47] to the violence which was plaguing society, both at the time of Aed's writing and again, perhaps even more so, at the time of M's transcription.

The apparent answer to the church's over-involvement in the affairs of their noble kin and to the violence which threatened both church holdings and a stable Irish society was one of spiritual rebirth and forgiveness. We see at the end of the tale how MD, and then the eagle, both undergo a three-day resurrection of their bodies. As the tale builds to its conclusion, the Hermit of Tory tells MD that he and all of the remaining crew will indeed return home to Ireland, and will locate the men who killed Ailill, but that MD must "slay him not, but forgive him, because God hath saved you from manifold great perils, and ye, too, are men deserving of death."[48] Recall from earlier how Clonmacnoise had not only suffered at the hands of armies and raiders, but how it and so many other monasteries had now begun to regularly engage in warfare and violence along with their lay patrons and kin. It is entirely likely that this message of forbearance and forgiveness was directed by M at more than a few different audiences across Irish society, to include the "implicit participation of churchmen in lay violence."[49]

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[46] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."
[47] Ibid.
[48] Whitley Stokes, "The Voyage of Mael Duin Part II," in *Revue Celtique*, (Paris, 1889): 91.
[49] Johnston, "Sailor on the Seas."

Concluding this analysis of ICMD, we see that "this monastic author, then, had very specific views of the tale which he adapts into a new style, views which are in concord with both his own monastic, exegetical outlook, and with the violent world in which he was situated."[50] It is extremely relevant and perhaps not just ironic that the original author of ICMD, Aed, from whom M is alleged to have transcribed this epic *immram*, was possibly Aed ua Raithnen, "a scholar of the monastery of Saigir [only a few miles from Clonmacnoise], in the south east midlands, who died in 923….Aed lived during a time in which the dominant families [the Osraige] in his locale, and the patrons of his monastery, were engaged in destructive internecine feuds."[51] Clancy goes on to describe how the divided Osraige family laid waste to the countryside in central Ireland at this time, to include destroying numerous churches, and how "the father of one of the main figures in these feuds had not long before been killed returning from a raid in which he destroyed a church of nuns and killed its priest."[52] Truth may not only be stranger than fiction, but actually may have provided a basis for the plot of ICMD. This rather complex and lengthy epic is clearly meant to be read on many levels, with perhaps the one over-arching message of the tale being that there is never only one simple truth.

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[50] Clancy, 209.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

VII. Eleventh and Twelfth Century Church Reform

As LU was being transcribed and the mBocht family at Clonmacnoise was attempting to clarify and solidify its social standing and its hold upon its power and lands even as they sought to deliver a culturally nuanced and intertwined Gaelic and Christian message to their adherents, forces across other parts of Ireland and the rest of Europe were working towards different doctrinal and socio-political aims. The church reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries would align continental powers, to include monastic orders, Anglo-Norman clerics, and papal legates, with native domestic forces such as kings of Munster and native clerical adherents to the reformist movement. In order to understand just how precisely the images and messages of the mixed content tales of LU would clash with this attempt to impose a more uniform orthodoxy on church structure and practices, and how the efforts of the mBocht family and M would actually and directly contribute to the dissipation of their power base at Clonmacnoise, it is necessary to examine how the Irish Church differed from the continental model of the era in particular but very important ways.

The Irish Church experienced a long period of relative, but not complete, isolation from continental and papal organization, doctrine, and practices during the retraction of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries and extending for several centuries afterward. By the time the continental church reform movement of the tenth through twelfth centuries reached Ireland in force at the latter end of that era, the Irish Church had firmly established some unique traits that presented distinctive challenges to would-be reformers. Eventually, the frustrations of reformist Popes and their supporters would

contribute, at least in part, to the decision to tacitly approve the Norman invasion of Ireland.

How, exactly, did this reforming effort make its way to Ireland, and what were its goals with regards to this rather unique society and culture which had experienced the introduction of the Roman Church, most likely initially via slaves captured in Roman Britain, but which had never witnessed Roman conquest and culture? As we reflect upon the contemporary issues at Clonmacnoise as expressed within the content of LU, it now becomes necessary to understand the methods by which the continental reform movement was transmitted to Ireland in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the existing early Irish ecclesiastical society which it encountered there, and the reform goals and resulting societal impact.

The Early Medieval Irish Church

Earlier, we briefly examined the early medieval Irish Church as part of the historical context of the overall history of eleventh and twelfth century Ireland, and specifically with regards to how its evolving place in society contributed to its natural alliances with the noble class as well as its merger with the bardic class. Here, within the context of the eleventh and twelfth century church reforms, we will now examine how the structure of the Irish Church and its resulting practices and culture placed it at odds, in many ways, with the continental reformers and their pursuit of both heresy and threats to a hierarchical church authority. In 429 a deacon named Palladius recommended that Pope Celestine send Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, as a legate to Britain to remedy the

Pelagian heresy occurring there.[1] Whether this proposed mission actually occurred is

unclear, but only two years later Palladius would find himself appointed as a bishop to

the Christians in Ireland with his brief and apparently unsuccessful mission followed up

shortly thereafter by, allegedly, the arrival of Patrick in 432.[2] In reality, and as alluded to

by Prosper of Aquitaine in his *Chronicle*, it is uncertain but likely that Christian

missionaries had arrived from Gaul even prior to these two figures, perhaps as early as

the late fourth century in response to the growing number of Christian slaves held by the

pagan Irish.[3] It is also likely that the historical figure of Patrick did not arrive in Ireland

until sometime closer to 500 CE.[4] Even as Patrick and his immediate successors set

about establishing a pervasive Christian church in Ireland the perimeter of the Roman

empire was diminishing, thus creating a sense of disconnect and distance between Ireland

and Rome during the fifth and sixth centuries. It was during this time that some of the

more unique features of the Irish Church came into existence.[5]

One can infer from later comparative and retrospective statements that the

original structure of the Irish Church, while perhaps not as neatly diocesan as might be

found on the continent, was at least not as overly monastic as previously believed. It was

not until the sixth century that Ireland witnessed

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[1] Pelagius was a monk, ostensibly British in origin, whose thinking ran counter to the Augustinian notion of divine grace. According to Pelagius, the natural goodness of man, even of a pagan, was sufficient to lead to salvation. For this belief, he was deemed a heretic.

[2] Patrick Corish, "The Irish Church and the Papacy," in *The Furrow*, (1979): 612. Also, from Joseph Kelly's "Augustine and the Irish" lecture, John Carroll University, 2016, it is not unimportant to note that Palladius was sent to Ireland by Prosper of Aquitaine, who was a follower of Augustine and who strongly disliked the 'heretical' notions put forward by Pelagius.

[3] R.F. Foster, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1989): 9.

[4] Kelly, "Augustine and the Irish."

[5] According to Kelly, "Augustine and the Irish," much of what was unique about Irish culture lent itself to being open to the notion of the continuing Pelagian heresy, which eventually came to be attributed by the orthodox church to the roots of pagan Irish culture. This merger of traditional culture and contested doctrine contributed to continuing tensions between the Irish and the Roman Churches.

> the rise of great monasteries in every part of Ireland…about the year 540 the movement towards monasticism began to proceed at a pace that St Patrick could not have foreseen. By 600 the multiplication of monasteries had left little room for the dioceses in the ordinary sense.[6]

Even the primatial see at Armagh, which claimed Patrick as its founder, experienced this shift to a monastic model. According to Tirechan's *Collectanea* and Muirchu's *Vita Patricii*, the church at Armagh was at its founding not monastic, but was "ruled by a bishop who claimed to be metropolitan of a province…despite this claim, there is no evidence that the Irish church was subject to a hierarchy or a canonically recognized metropolitan."[7]

As the early Irish Church slowly shifted from an amorphous diocesan model to one based more solidly on monasteries, so too did the clerical power structure change accordingly. It is here that many of the peculiarities of Irish Church structure had their origin. Eventually, there emerged three different church authority roles in Ireland, often within the same church center and sometimes within the same person, but this initial shift to a more monastic structure meant that greater authority was held at an increasingly lower level whereby real political power, if not actual clerical authority, fragmented. In this gradual slide of authority which essentially amounted to a devolved ecclesiastical bannum,

> …the number of priest-abbots grew, the number of bishop-abbots fell…[while] there was…no suggestion that the priest was equal to the bishop in power and function, still less that the priest was above the bishop in the ecclesiastical hierarchy…yet the priest-abbot exercised jurisdiction in his area, often wide, that belonged to his monastery.[8]

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[6] John Ryan, "The Early Irish Church and the Holy See," in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, (1960): 4-5.
[7] Foster, 16, drawing upon Machtheni, 7th century CE.
[8] Ryan, 5.

The eighth century *Riaghail Phatraic* states that "There shall be a chief bishop of each tuath to ordain their clergy, to consecrate their churches, to be confessor to rulers and superiors, and to sanctify and bless their children after baptism."[9] Herein we can see the source of a structural uncertainty and inconsistency, as in the early composition of Irish political society there was no rigid definition, whether in terms of people or area, as to the minimally sufficient size for the designation of a tuath which can translate to either of the vague options of 'a people' or 'the countryside.' Thus, the foundation for a more fluid Irish understanding of the necessary minimal size of a diocese can be seen to be linked to the fluid Irish notion of a tuath.

This more fluid and localized basis of social authority led, perhaps to a greater degree than on the continent, to the abuse of the tradition of hereditary and proprietary lay abbots. Just as elsewhere, this tradition offered an alternative pathway to prestige and power for either younger sons or for outlying branches of a family. In what likely amounted to a unique exploitation of this method, certain noble Irish families held these positions for hundreds of years, as noted by R.F. Foster when he wrote that "On occasion, we can trace their continuous occupation of a church over several centuries. This was true for Armagh, Cork, Trim, Killaloe … the offices of owner and abbot were sometimes combined, and more frequently in the ninth century and later."[10]

This does not suggest that the Irish Church was without any organizational discipline or was disconnected at any point from the continental church, nor that it, even at the height of its geo-temporal remove from Rome, did not acknowledge papal authority. As early as the seventh century, the Irish Church had amassed an extensive

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[9] Foster, 17.
[10] Ibid.

library of liturgical and canonical manuscripts from the continent.[11] A collection of

canons contained in the Book of Armagh compiled circa 700, and which attributes some

of its content directly to Patrick and his followers, provides that "If any questions [of

difficulty] arise, let them be referred to the Apostolic See."[12] In addition, the early

eighth-century *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* offers evidence of local and regional

clerical regulations as it provides day-to-day guidance for priests regarding their secular

duties within the parish and a sense of the astonishing punishments to be meted out for

clerical misbehavior.[13]

Thus, the early Irish Church of the fifth through the tenth centuries especially had

acquired some idiosyncrasies due to "distance, difference in organization, local dynasties

and powerful nobles rather than Frankish or Visigothic kings, and a tradition so settled

that issues of higher importance rarely occurred."[14] To this, I would specifically add the

gentle accommodation by the early church of certain pagan Irish social practices,

especially regarding marriage and succession, which survived not only beyond the

introduction of Christianity but even far beyond the later arrival of the Normans.

Consequently, in retrospect it is not surprising that various aspects of the Irish Church

were seen as, at best, unorthodox or, at worst, as heretical in the eyes of reformers

arriving from the continent.

One issue which the continental reformers did not encounter in Ireland, by all

accounts, was a lack of asceticism. In the middle of the eighth century, nearly equidistant

in time between the arrival of Patrick and the introduction of foreign religious orders in

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[11] Ibid., 12.
[12] Ryan, 3.
[13] Catherine Swift, "Early Irish Priests within their Own Localities," in *Academia*, (n.d.): 29.
[14] Ryan, 16.

Ireland, the Céli Dé, or Clients of God, emerged as an internal reform movement of sorts.

For quite some time, historians had persisted in the belief that this order, to use the term

very loosely, was dedicated to the reinvigoration of asceticism in Ireland, having arisen

"in response to a general lapse in ascetic discipline in Irish monasteries. This lapse had

in turn come about as the result of a rising secularity which was manifest in a variety of

ways, such as in the prevalence of lay-abbots, non-monastic laymen who presided over

religious communities."[15] As explained by Joseph Kelly,

> The Céli Dé, or Culdees, as the phrase has been Anglicized, have been
> understood by scholars as a monastic reform movement in the eighth- and
> ninth-century Irish church, a reform movement necessitated by the decline
> of Irish monasteries after the initial "golden age" and by the corruption in
> them introduced by local aristocratic families anxious to keep control of
> monastic lands.[16]

However, more recent theories have emerged to the effect that this group was more likely

engaged in reform for the purposes of introducing a minimum standard of theological

teaching and liturgical practice in order to ensure an appropriate level of pastoral

proficiency. These two perspectives should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, since

the widespread presence of lay leaders at the local level, as noted above, would

necessitate the need to establish some level of basic ecclesiastical expertise which could,

of course, also incorporate an emphasized asceticism as a means of distinguishing the

clergy from the laity. This perspective would seem to be supported by the fact that the

Céli Dé were not a formal order living together in community, but rather were an

"informal association of religious broadly intent upon rendering service and honour to

God, particularly through devotional practices, but they were not necessarily in

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[15] Westley Follett, *Celi De in Ireland: Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages*, Boydell
Press (Woodbridge, UK, 2006): 5.
[16] Joseph Kelly, "Theology and Religious Studies," in *Carroll Collected*, (2007): 828-829.

agreement on how to offer them."[17] As a result, there was no defined standard to the

order, and Céli Dé could be found residing alone, with other Céli Dé, and among monks

who were not committed to Céli Dé. This lack of standardization, and the lack of an

approved papal order, is typical of the nonconformity of the Irish Church which would

later confound reformers. At best, any semblance of conformity to continental practices

might be suggested by examples such as Máel Ruain, the head of a group of Céli Dé at

Tallaght, who was likely inspired by Chrodegang of Metz and his *Rule of the Common

Life*, given that this work came out about twenty-four years prior to the founding of the

Céli Dé at that location.[18]

   The existence and agenda of the Céli Dé, as an internal reform movement which

pre-dated the arrival of continental reform in Ireland, serves to highlight the problems,

and the sources of those problems, which would cause later reformers to focus heavily

upon certain very specific issues regarding the structure and practices of the Irish Church.

The Céli Dé may have reinvigorated a spirit of asceticism, or may have sought to

standardize clerical practices, or both, but generally failed to effect widespread reform

due to their own lack of bureaucratic organization and to the local opposition of lay

abbots and their noble kinsmen. This situation suggests why later externally-driven

reform efforts in Ireland focused, out of all the various reform agenda issues, most

heavily upon those of lay control and marriage.[19]

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[17] Follett, 8.
[18] Ibid., 11.
[19] Ibid., 17.

<u>Continental Church Reform</u>

A general description of the conditions leading to sustained church reform on the continent would begin with the agricultural and commercial growth of the ninth century, which in turn led to an increase in population possessing improving health and substantial excess resources. This occurred on the heels of the dissolution of the Carolingian dynasty, when governance devolved to a lower, more local level and the concurrent widespread adoption of the practice of primogeniture. As a result, continental society witnessed the emergence of large, unified land holdings and wealth. Inevitably, this contributed to the growing affluence and influence of churches and abbeys, which had traditionally been places of asceticism and relative poverty, but were now increasingly proprietary and with clerical leaders habitually linked via kinship to local noble families.

This growing climate of abbatial luxury, as well as *de facto* appointment of clerical leadership by local nobles, led to widespread reform efforts on the part of those committed to returning a sense of piety to the church, simultaneously bubbling up at locations such as Ghent, Gorze, Burgundy, and Cluny. The subsequent Cluniac reforms, in particular, sought to restore ecclesiastical autonomy to the abbots. This monastic reform eventually spilled over into the larger church structure, leading to the Investiture Controversy. Without delving overly deeply into that separate and larger topic, suffice it to say that this dispute resulted, in particular, in the targeting of the practices of simony, nicolaitism, asceticism, and lay control within the church as essential corrections required for proper piety and to the authority of clerical leaders, as opposed to local or regional nobility, and thus contributing to the breaking of the ancient alliance between priests and kings. Admittedly, this is a simplification of the continental church reform effort, but it is

a simplification which serves to highlight some of the key differences with regards to the subsidiary Irish Church reform efforts.

It must also be acknowledged that one should not regard the overall medieval church reform effort as homogenous, unified, consistent, or simultaneous. Rather, it would be more correct to think of this broad and lengthy campaign as consisting of concentric rings, with differing issues taking varying degrees of importance over time as one moved from the center to the periphery. According to one of the landmark modern scholars on the topic of medieval church reform,

> Canon law was itself in process of change in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and it is well to keep in mind the fact that Lanfranc and Anselm at Canterbury were (until Anselm was forced into exile and was thus brought into personal contact with the papal court of Urban II and his reforming cardinals) trained in a tradition of English custom and traditional law which was not in harmony with the full programme of Roman discipline as taught by popes such as Gregory VII and Urban II. As we shall see, the theology and law of the Irish reformers was even more old-fashioned.[20]

All of this contributed, as we shall see, in the emphasis of certain specific goals in the attempts to reform of the Irish Church.

Earlier academic perspectives of the early Irish Church and of the focus of continental reform efforts generally assume a scenario whereby an originally diocesan model, overseen by a bishop and aligned with local petty kingdoms, had eventually been overwhelmed by a monastic model and had consequently slipped into a state of degeneracy and heresy due to lack of proper authoritative structure through which papal authority could be exercised.[21] The current understanding based upon more recent

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[20] Aubrey Gwynn, *The Twelfth-century Reform*, Gill Press (Dublin, 1968): 13.
[21] Foster, 14. See also Swift, *Early Irish Priests within their Own Localities* n.d., 2.

scholarly work provides an understanding of a slightly different and more complex

situation, and merits a brief historiography to set the stage for the analysis to follow.

Perhaps the most significant development in the understanding of the pre-reform

Irish Church would be recognition of the position of *airchinnech*, essentially that of a lay

landlord/property manager, as an equal partner within a tripartite division of authority in

the pre-reform Irish Church. Thus, a given Irish Church center would be governed not

only by a bishop and an abbot, but also by this temporal landlord who controlled the

physical assets of the monastery. This structure may have existed as early as the seventh

century. It occasionally occurred that two, or even all three, functions were combined in

one person, thus contributing to the possibility that an external observer could easily

present an accusation of lay control and simony.[22]

It is important to note here the recent rejection of the commonly held historical

understanding that the Irish Church had fully evolved from an ecclesiastical to a monastic

model within the first few centuries of the introduction of Christianity to the island.

Actually, according to Catherine Swift and Marie Therese Flanagan, annalistic evidence

suggests the development of "complex ecclesiastical settlements with episcopal, abbatial,

and executive authority existing side by side,"[23] and that the actual effect of the twelfth

century synods was to merge the episcopal and the executive into a single office with the

bishop now controlling the physical wealth of his church.

Colman Etchingham, in a review of Flanagan, notes that

Flanagan…[focuses] on structural and institutional issues…[e.g.] synodal
enactments; episcopal authority and dioceses; Malachy; the triumph of
'reform' at Armagh and the introduction of new monastic orders; the

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[22] Marie Therese Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth and Thirteenth
Centuries,* Boydell Press (Woodbridge, UK, 2010): 36-37.
[23] Ibid., 38.

influence of Canterbury; the role of Ostman towns and 'reform-friendly' Irish kings; the relevance of the external 'reform' programme in matters such as papal authority, marriage law and political and familial control of the institutional church.[24]

Etchingham clearly supports this updated view of combined ecclesiastical and secular authority within the structure of the Irish Church, both as reviewed by other scholars and in his own writing:

> This revision [of the last thirty years work in this area] holds that episcopal authority and jurisdiction before the 'reform' was not negligible as previously imagined but crucial, that the major churches were not simply monastic or degenerate monastic but multi-functional, with pastoral clergy, true monks and an ecclesiastical estate structure or managers and 'para-monastic' servitors operating side by side, and that pastoral ministry and its limitations is key to the pre-'reform' church.[25]

Finally, as observed by one of Etchingham's reviewers,

> Whereas Hughes argued for a major change in the sixth and seventh centuries from a Church governed by bishops to one in which the abbots of the great monasteries were the dominant authorities, Etchingham argues for substantial continuity. For him, the early Irish Church was characterized by the leadership of major churches in which monastic elements were combined with others. He distinguishes between three models of authority, episcopal, abbatial, and 'coarbial'…the major churches were likely to employ all three models in varying combinations.[26]

Etchingham, from this perspective which he shares with Flanagan, asks a particularly relevant question which goes to the heart of any study of the twelfth century continental reform as it reached and impacted Ireland. If the modern understanding of the nature of authority within Irish Church structure is notably different from what scholars had previously thought, then how should we think differently about the goals and priorities of

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[24] Colman Etchingham, "Review Article: The 'reform' of the Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *Studia Hibernica* (2011): 216.
[25] Ibid.
[26] T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Review of 'Church Organisation in Ireland, AD 650-1000 by Colman Etchingham'," in *The English Historical Review*, (2001): 920.

the reform agenda? To this end, Etchingham urges that scholars in the fields should not take at face value the previous "'rhetoric of reform,' whether that of the eleventh- and twelfth-century actors themselves or of their modern apologists."[27] Following the suggested line of inquiry set out by Etchingham, one modern scholar has, for example, claimed that the statutes resulting from the Synod of Cashel in 1101, the first such of its type in Ireland, were

> in fact…a restatement of laws that are known to have already existed. Their restatement at Cashel may be considered reformative only in the sense that they may have, by that time, become unfamiliar or fallen out of use….to suggest..that [they] reflect the Gregorian reforms then under way on the continent…does not appear to be justified by the evidence.[28]

Thus, we must proceed with caution in the following examination, neither putting full faith in the potentially partisan or apologist sources nor assuming that the recorded introduction of a reformist agenda was necessarily the first such time that any given ecclesiastical or secular notion had been brought to Ireland.

<u>Methods – How Reform Came to the Irish Church</u>

<u>Pilgrims and Monks</u>

One of the most natural avenues for the introduction of reformist ideologies into Ireland would have been by way of the actual flow of people to and from the continent. In Ireland of the late first millennium, this routinely took the form of pilgrims, both noble and clerical, and of Irish monks situated in continental monasteries.

While Christianity was officially introduced into Ireland in the middle of the fifth century, it took many decades, if not centuries, for it to firmly and widely take root, and

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[27] Etchingham, 217.
[28] Martin Holland, "Were Early Irish Church Establishments under Lay Control?" in *Ireland and Europe in the Twelfth Century*, (2006): 128.

even then it was not until perhaps the early part of the seventh century that the monastic

model had decisively taken hold across the breadth of the land. Still, the historical record

of Irish pilgrims to France, Spain, and Italy would seem to have commenced at least as

early as the sixth and seventh centuries, with "several founders of the Irish monastic

schools [making pilgrimages]… to Rome…foremost among these Irish pilgrims was St.

Enda, who founded the monastery of the Aran Isles."[29] The volume of pilgrims, of whom

these abbots were but the vanguard, continued to grow throughout the remainder of the

Middle Ages, eventually necessitating the establishment at least ten Irish hospices in Italy

at locations including "Bobbio, Piacenza, Vercelli, Pavia, Lucca, San Martino in

Mensola, Fiesole, Serbiniano in the territory of Senigallia, Ravenna and Rome,"[30] with

the Irishman Donatus, bishop of Fiesole, directing in 850 that "if any peregrinus of my

people comes, I want and require that two or three shall stay and be taken care of there

under the protection of a provost employed for this work."[31] The unabated growth of

Irish pilgrimages during the Carolingian era eventually required legislation to regulate

these hospices so as to avoid a drain on local diocesan resources.

Several scholars have noted a later degree of relative decline in the volume of

Irish pilgrims, subject to changing political and security conditions along the pilgrimage

routes. Overall, the tenth and eleventh centuries were witness to a revival in Irish

pilgrimage following the disruptions of the Viking raids and invasions of the previous

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[29] Martin P. Harney, *Medieval Ties Between Italy and Ireland*, St. Paul Editions (Boston, 1963): 32.
[30] Ibid., 32-33.
[31] Flanagan, "Irish Church Reform in the Twelfth Century and Aed Ua Cellaide, Bishop of Louth: An Italian Dimension," in *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies*, eds. Michael Richter and Jean-Michael Picard, Four Courts Press (Dublin,2002): 98-99.

centuries.[32] Following this upswing, including especially royal pilgrimages beginning in 1028, the Norman invasion of England in 1066 contributed to a dramatic decline of Irish pilgrimage which did not substantially reverse until the formal introduction of the continental reform agenda at way of the Synod of Cashel in 1101.[33] Despite this relative decline in the eleventh century as pilgrimage routes became more uncertain, the overall flow of clerical and lay leaders between Irish power centers and pilgrimage sites on the continent would have inevitably contributed to the flow of many ideas, including those directly tied to continental church reform. As history has shown to be true everywhere, the movement of people is always accompanied by the movement of ideas.

This principle would have held equally true in the migration, or even self-exile, of Irish monks to continental ecclesiastic sites. The presence of Irish monks in Frankish abbeys, and even Carolingian courts, is well-recorded, with many royals of the time believing that their collection of learned men was not complete until an Irish monk was part of the assemblage. This migration began to occur quite soon following the universal establishment of the church in Ireland, with, for example, the Irish peregrinus Dungal being installed as head of the cathedral school of Pavia in 825 by royal decree of the Carolingian King Lothar. Similarly, the Annals of Innisfallen, as substantiated also in Vatican manuscript Lat. 387, note the establishment in 1095 of a community of Irish monks in Rome, recorded on the occasion of the death of Eogan who was described as the "head of the monks of the Gael in Rome."[34]

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[32] Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1996): 309.
[33] Gwynn, 1-2. See also Corish, 615-616.
[34] Ibid., 8.

Providing a concluding point on the role of Irish monks and pilgrims in opening the lines of communication for the eventual arrival of the continental reform agenda, Brett Martin notes that

> In the second half of the eleventh century the precise evidence for the travels of Irish scholars, or the nature of their contacts with Irish churchmen in Germany or Italy, remains, as I believe, elusive. Aubrey Gwynn, whose studies remain fundamental to any understanding of the period, believed these wider contacts would eventually prove to have been central to reform in Ireland, and it would be unreasonable to doubt that they existed or mattered. Nevertheless, the recorded antecedents of Cashel at present point towards the relation of the Ua Briain dynasty with England, and particularly with Canterbury.[35]

While undoubtedly true, especially with regards to the later and more directly substantial influence of Irish synods, Munster kings, and Norman interference, one must consider the different nature of various sources. Large scale official events, recorded by or sanctioned by the church and occurring following the establishment of church dioceses in nearby England, would naturally result in a more substantial and consolidated historical record than the longer-term, individualized experience of pilgrims and monks in exile. However, we can at least presume, based upon the available evidence, that these two earlier and more persistent avenues of communication at least laid the foundation for the initial transmission of the ideas associated with continental reform, perhaps if only by exposing continental church leaders to a perception of simony and heresy in Ireland.

Letters, Legates, Synods, and Foreign Monastic Orders

Following the Norman conquest and settlement of England, the institutional continental church began to make its influence actively felt in Ireland, first by way of correspondence with Irish kings, especially those of Munster, and later by way of the

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[35] Martin, 16-17.

conduct of three major synods which officially conveyed the reform agenda to the Irish

Church. In approximately 1076, Pope Gregory VII wrote a letter to 'Terdelvacus,' better

known as Toirdelbach Ua Briain, the father of Muirchertach who would later preside over

the Synod of Cashel, in which he urged all clergy and Christians in Ireland to exercise

justice and maintain peace.[36] Whether intentionally diplomatic or based upon an

incorrect presumption, this letter addressed Toirdelbach as the 'King of Ireland.'[37] It is

also worth noting that this letter was, so far as we can understand, unique and yet

necessary since the church had not yet re-established diocesan authority in Ireland and

had no archbishop or primate with whom to communicate. Thus, this letter necessarily

took the form of "a diplomatic gesture towards a country which was known to be loyal in

its devotion to the Holy See, but which lacked the full organization of hierarchical

government and the full observance of the Church's canon law."[38]

The letter campaign from continental, or at least non-Irish clerical authority

figures continued over the years as Lanfranc, an Italian clerical jurist who served as the

Archbishop of Canterbury from 1070 to 1089, also took Toirdelbach Ua Briain to task for

sinfulness of the merged use and application of Brehon Law with canonical law.

Subsequently, Anselm, a French Benedictine monk who was Lanfranc's successor as the

Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, wrote two similar letters to Toirdelbach's

son and successor, Muirchertach Ua Briain, berating him for his general noncompliance

with canon law.[39] In particular, we see that Anselm was especially concerned with two

faults: marriage practices…"It is said that men exchange their wives as freely and

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[36] Gwynn, 2.
[37] Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church*, 4.
[38] Gwynn, 2.
[39] Ibid., 4, 8.

publicly as a man might change his horse"… and the consecration of bishops 'sine titulo,' that is, without having a defined diocesan area allocated to their pastoral care.[40]

We are able to witness here, even recalling the quote just above from Gwynn regarding just how attuned Canterbury may, or may not, have been to the finer details of the goals of the papal reform agenda, the more routine, direct, and proximate interjection of external ecclesiastical authority than had perhaps been true at any previous point in Irish history. The truth of such a statement, and the apparent combination of pressure and proffered opportunity being brought to bear by Canterbury, is somewhat apparent in the fact that Muirchertach organized and provided royal support to the Synod of Cashel in 1101. While the official record indicates that "Maol Muire O'Doonan, 'chief bishop of Munster', presided over this council not merely in his capacity as 'chief bishop' but as 'chief legate…with authority from the pope himself,'"[41] the true authority responsible for authorizing the synod was Muirchertach. However, this would be the final Irish synod which required the presence and blessing of an Irish king. In accordance with the pattern seen elsewhere in Europe, Maol Muire O'Doonan and several subsequent papal legates would be indigenous to the local culture, but would eventually be replaced by trusted foreigners from closer to the papal center of power.

The Synod of Cashel occurred on land which had been the seat of the Munster kings for several centuries.[42] Muirchertach, perhaps seeking the favor of the papal legate, or perhaps of the archbishop of Canterbury or even of the pope himself, gifted the land to

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[40] Watt, 6.
[41] Watt, 8. See also Flanagan, "Hiberno-Papal Relations in the Late Twelfth Century," in *Archivium Hibernicum*, (1977): 55.
[42] The Rock of Cashel was at this time controlled by Muichertach, but it had historically been the center of power for the O'Briens. Thus, giving it away to the church was not simply noble benevolence on the part of the southern O'Neill ruler, but was likely a further way to reduce the prestige of their recent rivals. See Ó Cróinín, 281-282.

the Irish Church at the conclusion of the synod. The event was officially annotated in various contemporary chronicles, including the *Clonmacnoise Chronicle* which recorded that "an assembly of the men of Ireland, both laity and clergy, [gathered] around Muichertach Ua Briain at Cashel, and it was then that Muirchertach Ua Briain gave Cashel of the kings to the Lord."[43] It was what occurred prior to this generous donation, however, which set the stage for the official introduction of the continental reform agenda into Ireland. The clerical authorities present at Cashel directed the Irish Church to address a reform agenda which appears to be directly modeled upon the range of continental issues, including simony, the quality of the clergy, freedom of the church, clerical celibacy, clerical privilege, and matrimonial law.[44] In more exact detail, the eight decrees resulting from this first Irish synod included the following: Simony, put at that time as requiring "that for all time neither laicized cleric nor cleric should make traffic of God's church;" the church's right to be free of rent or tribute of any kind; the refusal of lay rule of monasteries; the condemnation of multiple bishops in the same church; the prohibition of clerical marriage; the refusal of sanctuary to murderers; the right of churchmen to be judged under canon, not civil, law; and the forbidden degrees of kinship in marriage.[45] The earlier quotation from Martin Holland (page 67) reflects the likelihood that these decrees were not wholly original introductions to Ireland, but were rather simply renewals or reinforcement of prior canonical law which had either been witness to laxity or which, according to the attendees at Cashel, were in need of further strengthening. As observed in more detail by John Watt,

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[43] Gwynn, 9.
[44] Watt 1972, 8, 9.
[45] Gwynn, 13-16.

> There were old and new elements in these canons [resulting from Cashel]. In certain respects the legislation was an attempt to consolidate and extend earlier legislation, notably the provisions freeing churches from subjection to lay lords and the correction of abuse of sanctuary. On the other hand, the decree on marriage marked the first step in a projected revolution, constituting a root and branch attack on the bases of Irish familial society…in this context, the reformers had an uphill task.[46]

At a minimum, this first Irish synod had officially introduced the continental reform agenda to Ireland. As noted here, however, it also set the stage for the particular points which would prove most stubbornly difficult for later reformers.

Gilla Espaic, or Gilbert of Limerick, was appointed as the first recorded Bishop of Limerick from 1106 to 1140. Within the intersecting framework of the continental reform agenda and the friction with Canterbury over the degree of independence of the Irish Church, history shows that "if any churchman may be said to have been the moving spirit in establishing the independence of the Irish church from Canterbury's claims…it was Gilbert."[47] Flanagan suggests that Gilbert's appointment as papal legate to Ireland was due to "the testimony of Bernard of Clairvaux."[48] Once appointed as papal legate in 1111 in order to preside over the Synod of Rathbreasail, the first of its kind in Ireland under clerical rather than royal authority, Gilbert was to hold the title of legate for twenty-eight years. During that time, and as a direct consequence of Rathbreasail and its agenda, Gilbert "began the all-important process of restructuring the Irish Episcopal system…the basic flaw in the constitutional structure of the Irish Church in the early twelfth century was that there were too many bishops and their powers were too weak."[49]

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[46] Watt 1972, 9.
[47] Martin, 29.
[48] Flanagan, "Irish Church Reform," 101.
[49] Watt 1972, 10.

Multiple primary sources relate that, at the synod itself, there were approximately 58

bishops, 348 priests, and another 3,000 ecclesiastics, presumably monks, present.

 As a result of this synod, Ireland was divided into a northern province (Armagh)

and a southern province (Cashel), with each province having one archbishop and twelve

bishops.[50] Notably, Clonmacnoise was not accorded the honor of its own diocese within

this reformed structure, but rather was subsumed within the authority of the ecclesiastical

center at Clonard. Overall, then, we can deduce that as a consequence of the Synod of

Cashel, the number of bishoprics in Ireland was reduced by more than half. Tying this

into the claim that Gilbert, through his structural reforms, did more than any other to

protect the Irish Church from dependence upon Canterbury, we are able to infer that this

must have been one of Canterbury's primary grievances with the historical church

structure in Ireland, whereby each 'tuath,' essentially each church, had its own bishop.

 If Gilbert's reforming work was focused internally upon church structure, then the

activity of the final native Irish legate was notable for the ways in which it directly

connected the Irish Church to continental church infrastructure and ideology. Máel

Máedóc Ua Morgair, or Malachy, was born of a noble family of Armagh in 1095.

Serving first as the vicar at Armagh and later as the *coarb* and then the abbot at Bangor,

he was appointed as the Archbishop of Armagh in 1132. Eight years later in 1140,

Malachy traveled to the continent where he visited the Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux.

This visit led to a deep and lasting friendship between Malachy and Bernard, and quickly

resulted in Malachy becoming "a devoted admirer of the Cistercian interpretation of the

rule of St Benedict…returning home [from Rome] by way of Clairvaux, he left four of

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[50] Gwynn, 29-30.

his companions with St Bernard to be trained as Cistercians in order to introduce the Order into Ireland."[51] While there were already a small number of Benedictine communities in Ireland, Malachy's visit to Clairvaux resulted in the establishment of ten Cistercian monasteries over the course of the next decade, with many dozens more to follow soon thereafter.

However, this trip to the mainland by Malachy in 1140 had not been solely for the purpose of visiting Clairvaux, but rather was Malachy's first mission to Rome in order to seek papal approval for his reforming work. As described by Bernard, "It seemed to him that one could not go on doing these things with sufficient security without the authority of the Apostolic See…but most of all because the metropolitan see [of Armagh] had lacked from the beginning, and still lacked, the use of the pallium, which is the fullness of honor."[52] Returning to Ireland to implement his approved reform efforts, and with the assistance of a growing number of Cistercians, Bernard described Malachy's work as follows:

> He extirpated barbarous rites and planted those of the Church; he abolished outworn superstitions (not a few of which he discovered), and every sort of malign influence sent by evil angels…He made regulations full of righteousness, moderation, and integrity. In all churches he ordained the observance of apostolic sanctions and the decrees of the holy fathers, and especially the customs of the holy Roman Church…when he began to administer his office, the man of God understood that he had not been sent to men, but to beasts. Never had he found men so shameless in morals, so dead in regard to religious rites, so impious in regard of faith, so barbarous in regard of laws…they were Christians in name, in fact they were pagans.[53]

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[51] Watt, 20.
[52] Gwynn, 47-48.
[53] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vita St. Malachiae* circa 1150 AD, as quoted in Gwynn, 41-42.

This statement of condemnation, while directed to the Irish Church at large, reflects more than a few adjectives which would likely, from the perspective of Bernard and Malachy, apply directly to the mixed content tales of LU as entered by Máel Muire: superstitious; impious; pagans in Christian guise; etc. Flanagan provides an accurate historical reading of Bernard's commentary when she wrote that

> St Bernard of Clairvaux…had no doubts about Malachy's sincerity as a
> reformer, but he depicted the state of the Irish church, by comparison with
> the rest of Christendom, as deplorable. Irish scholars have long taken into
> account Bernard's need to exaggerate, in order to highlight Malachy's
> achievements, and his lack of understanding of the local customs and
> traditions of a church which had developed in comparative isolation.[54]

While true, we should not forget that Malachy's rapid expansion of foreign monastic orders into Ireland would have brought increasing numbers of continental clerics who also possessed this same lack of understanding and tolerations for local traditions, especially, perhaps, those which had their roots in pagan culture, but who were now in a position to directly intervene to impose the desired points of reform.

This growth of independent and unilateral church reform on the part of native actors might best be evidenced by the Council of Inis Padraig in 1148. Summoned by Malachy, and attended by fifteen bishops and two hundred priests, this event is perhaps most notable for the fact that, whereas Cashel had been organized by a king and Rathbreasail by a cleric but with a king in attendance, there was no Irish king, regional or petty, present at Inis Padraig.[55] Malachy's reform work was cut short, however. The members of this 1148 synod called upon Malachy to return to Rome for another meeting with the Pope to seek the pallium which he had been denied in 1140, and specifically to

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[54] Flanagan, "Hiberno-Papal Relations in the Late Twelfth Century," 56.
[55] Gwynn, 51.

seek papal approval for the existing binary diocesan arrangement of Armagh and Cashel. Stopping enroute at Clairvaux to visit his friend Bernard, Malachy died there on November 2nd and was buried in the abbey, eventually being placed in a tomb with Bernard who died just a few years later.

Finally, we have the instance of the Synod of Kells-Mellifont and Papal Legate Cardinal Giovanni Paparoni, (d. 1153/54). Cardinal Paparoni, the first such non-Irishmen to be sent to Ireland as a legate, arrived in Ireland in 1151 and held a council in 1152 at Kells-Mellifont which continued to address the reform issues of simony, usury, and marriage law. Quite unexpectedly, however, Paparo delivered the pallium which had been sought by Malchy, but which established four, rather than two, diocesan provinces consisting of Armagh, Cashel, Tuam, and Dublin, with Armagh holding primacy and with Clonmacnoise now falling under the authority of Tuam.[56] By providing one diocesan center for each of the four provinces, Kell-Mellifont set in place the institutional structure which would guide the final years of the pre-Norman reform efforts.

Canterbury

The political logic of twelfth century Ireland would have, one might think, contributed to the sensible conclusion that the church provinces of Armagh and Cashel as proposed by Malachy were simply reflective of the dynastic influence of the kings of those regions, as the warfare of the previous century had left the O'Briens of Munster and the O'Neills of Ulster as the main contenders for the notional title of High King. However, it was more recent political activity extending beyond the shores of Ireland which led to the addition of the dioceses of Dublin and Tuam, reflecting as they did the

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[56] Watt 1972, 24.

"changed political realities that had resulted in the meantime from the emergence of the province of Connaught under its king, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair (1106-6)" who had recently exchanged correspondence with the pope, as well as "Diarmait Mac Murchada…and the increasing importance of the Hiberno-Norse towns of Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford"[57] who was in close contact with Canterbury.

Canterbury, which had sought or even presumed some degree of primacy over Ireland in the preceding decades, was governed by four subsequent bishops during what was the Norman era in England and the pre-Norman era in Ireland: Lanfranc (1070-89), Anselm (1093-1109), Ralph (1114-22), and Theobald (1139-61).[58] According to Gwynn, "from 1074 onwards the principles of the Roman reform were urged on Irish kings and bishops by two Italian archbishops of Canterbury: Lanfranc (1070-1089) and St Anselm (1093-1109)."[59] While it is true that the historical record would seem to justify this claim, we shall also see insinuations that Theobald may have played a critical political, if not ecclesiastical, role with regards to pre-Norman Ireland.

We have already seen how Lanfranc, an Italian jurist, chastised Irish kings via letters in the latter half of the eleventh century. In addition to his advocating for his British perspective on reform ideology, we can infer, if not clearly demonstrate, some attempt on his part to influence the diocesan structure of the two islands so as to reinforce both his primacy and his philosophy. The two most likely means of interpreting this interference on the part of Lanfranc are aptly demonstrated in the following quotes from modern scholars of slightly differing perspectives on the issue. Brett Martin argues:

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[57] Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church*, 35.
[58] Ibid., 6.
[59] Gwynn, 1.

> The extent [to which] he [Lanfranc] understood Ireland as being within his primatial sphere is much harder to judge. Among his correspondences is a letter of Gregory VII which is most naturally read as urging him to promote reform among the Irish; this may reflect no more than the pope's desire to use a trusted correspondent as an agent in an area effectively beyond his direct reach.[60]

While John Watt adds:

> Whatever the factors which forged the link between Dublin and Canterbury, it is certain that the consecration of Bishop Patrick by Lanfranc in 1074 began a connexion between the Norse-Irish episcopate and England…four, probably five, bishops-elect of Dublin, one of Waterford and one of Limerick were canonically examined and consecrated by archbishops of Canterbury and swore canonical obedience to them.[61]

Thus, just as Pope Innocent III would later intervene in European political affairs *ratione peccati*, we are able here to see Lanfranc potentially motivated to intervene in Irish ecclesiastical affairs for both pious and political ideals. This possibility for the reading of a two-fold intent continues across several different issues. The Norse-Irish episcopate of Dublin had, in the decades following the decline of significant Viking presence and power in Ireland, been largely a vassal of the increasingly powerful descendants of Brian Boru of Munster. Munster, as the sponsor of Cashel and as political opponents of the O'Neills, was resistant to the notion of the primacy of Armagh and put forward St. Brigid of Kildare as an equal contender for ecclesiastical supremacy in Ireland. Thus, the logical way for Canterbury, and perhaps even for the pope, to mitigate and even sidestep Irish politics would be to further fragment church institutional power beyond just the two provinces, Cashel and Armagh, which had been proposed by Malachy. This potentiality

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[60] Martin, 19.
[61] Watt, 2-3.

becomes even more plausible when we read, above, that the bishops of the Dublin province were appointed by and swore loyalty to Canterbury.

Looking back upon Malachy's visit to the pope in 1140, and in light of this understanding of the reform agenda as uniquely wielded by the bishops of Canterbury, one must wonder why Pope Innocent II denied Malachy full support by way of the requested pallium for the two province model in Ireland. It is, perhaps, not merely coincidence that Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, whom historians have described as eager to expand the authority of his see, had been to visit Rome just prior to Malachy.[62] In any event, the need for any subtle and indirect approach to the reform of the Irish Church and to interjection into Irish politics and society was about to be set aside by the Norman invasion in 1169.

Impact and Outcomes of Irish Church Reform

While the agenda of the Irish Church reform did not contain any elements which were originally different from the broader continental agenda, there were several items which seem to have merited special attention for reformers in Ireland. As we have seen, the tradition of austere asceticism had never died out in Irish Churches, and thus wasn't a focus of the reform movement.[63] Rather, the special focus of reformers in Ireland included lay control of church centers, with its associated elements of hereditary and proprietary succession, the introduction or, perhaps, re-introduction and strengthening of the diocesan structure, and the regulation of marriage practices among both clergy and laity. With the mBocht family at Clonmacnoise having been in positions of power, and

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[62] Gwynn, 50, 54.
[63] Ibid., 40.

having acquired and passed on growing land holdings to each successive generation, this issue of clerical marriage would not have been unimportant.

Just as we noted earlier that it would be an error to assume that continental church reform proceeded evenly in its goal and timing in all places, we must note that there was also the same uneven progress in Ireland. The synods at Cashel and Rathbreasil both occurred in Munster, and were largely attended by Munster clergy, since the northern half of Ireland had not yet come into contact with the reform movement and Armagh would be one of the last Irish Church centers to accede to reformist practices. The middle kingdoms, Meath and Connacht, were reluctant to recognize the papal legate Gilbert whose commission was addressed to a Munster king, given the recent sustained military conquests over them by the O'Briens. In reality, for much of the reform era in Ireland, Munster was both the source and the scene of much of the progress, and in all reality the decrees of Cashel, for example, likely had no immediate effect outside of Munster and Leinster.[64] Again, given the recent and recurring violence directed at Clonmacnoise from various chiefs and kings of Munster, a natural antipathy likely played a role in resistance to the reform agenda coming from the south.

Lay Control & Hereditary/Proprietary Succession

A unique feature of the administrative power structure of a pre-reform Irish Church was the position of *airchinnech*, essentially a landlord and property manager, who functioned as an equal to the bishop and the abbot. Gerald of Wales, writing in his *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, confirmed the presence of lay abbots and the negative effect on proper ecclesiastical practices, "…such defenders or rather destroyers of churches

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[64] Ibid., 12, 19.

cause themselves to be called abbots; and they thus dare to have assigned to themselves

the name as well as the thing that is not their due."[65] Bernard, writing about the

succession of bishops at Armagh in his *Vita St. Malachiae*, observed that

> a very evil custom had grown up, by the devilish ambition of certain
> powerful persons, that this holy see should be held in hereditary
> succession. For they suffered none to be bishops but those who were of
> their own tribe and family; and this execrable succession had lasted for no
> short time, but fifteen generations had already passed in this
> wickedness…in a word, there had already been eight bishops before
> Cellach, married men and without orders, albeit men of letters.[66]

This negative characterization of the lineal situation at Armagh is, of course, not

dissimilar to what we know to be equally true at Clonmacnoise where the mBocht family

held various positions of power for something like twelve generations over the course of

two centuries, and for various personalities to have held the position of *airchinnech*.

Whether at Armagh or Clonmacnoise, it was not uncommon, especially in the

eleventh and twelfth centuries, for two or even all three of these functions to reside within

the same person, and for the combination of *airchinnech* and abbot to routinely be held

by members of the laity. Clearly, this was unacceptable to outside observers and

reformers. To this end, Gilbert of Limerick, as part of his own contribution to the reform

effort, provided in his *De statu ecclesiae* a diagram, similar to those produced earlier on

the continent, of a parallel hierarchy of clergy and laymen, organized into those who

pray, those who plough, and those who fight. The necessity of explaining such a

structure may have seemed

> old-fashioned for its date [in comparison to documents and reforms made
> two centuries prior on the continent], but it had a revolutionary message
> for defenders of the old order in the Irish Church. What made its impact

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[65] Gerald of Wales, *Giraldi Cambrensis opera* circa 1200 AD, as cited in Holland, 129.
[66] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vita St. Malachiae* circa 1150 AD, as cited in Gwynn, 20-21.

forceful in the Irish context was the clear separation of diocese and monastery. Abbots were put firmly back in the cloister.[67]

Thus, Gilbert's diagrammatic and textual presentation of "episcopal authority over clearly differentiated monastic and secular clerical institutions is certainly a challenge to the undifferentiated multi-functional ecclesiastical institution of pre-'reform' Ireland."[68] In combination with the reintroduction of the stronger diocesan model under Malachy and Paparo, the reformers recombined the spiritual and temporal aspects of control within their institutions although now strictly under the auspices of a legitimate bishop with a defined diocese. These efforts to reassert clerical control over all aspects of the church and to eliminate proprietary and hereditary succession of monasteries were resisted. By way of example, "Hereditary succession to Armagh did not end without Clan Sinaich putting up a fight…for some three years, Malachy refused to challenge [them] until…Gilbert of Limerick called together the bishops and princes of the land...[whom he prepared] to use force" to make Malachy demand the compliance of those at Armagh.[69] Thus, we see that even a leading reformer such as Malachy, arguably the most influential of all such Irish reformers, was sufficiently hesitant to engage with the nobility, actual and ecclesiastical, of Armagh on this issue that he had to be offered to alternatives of diplomatic action or warfare before deciding to take action. In contrast, Clonmacnoise as the leading center of Gaelic learning and in its more centralized location closer to the reformist core in the south was simply excluded from the power structure and, cut off from its traditional linkage to Armagh, was left to wither on the vine.

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[67] Watt, 12.
[68] Swift, *Early Irish Priests within their Own Localities* n.d., 220.
[69] Watt, 18.

Diocesan Structure

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote sometime around 1150, that

> Malachy prayed that the constitution of the new metropolis [Cashel] be confirmed, and that palls be given for both sees [Armagh and Cashel]. The privilege of confirmation was given at once; but as for the palls the supreme pontiff told him that more formal action must be taken. 'You must call together the bishops and clerks and magnates of the land, and hold a general council; and so with the assent and common desire of all you shall then demand the palls by persons of good repute, and your request will be granted.[70]

Malachy delivered this message back to Ireland as a papal legate and eventually held the Synod of Innis Padraig . Not long after, returning to Rome at the request of the council members, Malachy passed away at Clairvaux. It was then Gilbert at Rathbreasail who organized Ireland into the two provinces of Cashel and Armagh. Eventually, this arrangement was deemed unsatisfactory and Paparo delivered the four-part diocesan structure, ostensibly approved by the pope himself, at the Synod of Kells-Mellifont in 1152. The desired structure, which essentially exists unchanged even today, was achieved but it did not, apparently, produce the full range of desired effects. The number of bishops had been reduced, priests and bishops had reasserted substantial authority over abbots and *airchinnechs*, and

> by the end of the twelfth century the Latin church could be defined as a single organism, in which even the remotest provinces could be imagined as ordered according to a single scheme – a hierarchy of provinces, dioceses and parishes notionally uniform in discipline, and directed by officers with similar titles and responsibilities.[71]

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[70] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vita St. Malachiae* circa 1150 AD, as cited in Watt, 23.
[71] Brett Martin, "Canterbury's Perspective on Church Reform and Ireland, 1070-1115," in *Ireland and Europe in the Twelfth Century*, (2006): 13.

However, the petty nobles and associated local clerics were still far too enmeshed in kinship ties, and a large number of both groups still engaged in questionable marriage practices. This, more than any other point within the reform agenda in Ireland, was a lingering aspect of failure that would have serious consequences.

Clerical and Lay Marriage

Marriage in traditional Irish society, even after the development of what we now know as Brehon law, was a very flexible affair which included polygamy, divorce, and marriage to close kin. In a culture which utilized the more broad-based succession protocols of tanistry[72] rather than primogeniture, establishing a large family of closely related offspring could be either a recipe for successful alliance or for utter domestic chaos. Polygamy, which "assured heirs and provided great lineages with plenty of manpower, remained an active aspect of Irish culture until the end of the Middle Ages, to the shock of reformers and outside observers alike."[73] Accordingly, we saw that two of the eight decrees of the Synod of Cashel dealt with the issue of marriage, namely the prohibition of clerical marriage and the definition of the forbidden degrees of kinship in marriage. However, all might not have truly been as clear cut as that. Several modern historians have offered further detailed analysis which demonstrates that, even in this moment of reformist confrontation, the reformers felt compelled to make accommodations for traditional practices. The canon resulting from the Cashel Synod actually allowed that clerics would indeed be permitted to marry so long as they were lesser in rank than sub-deacons. Additionally, the determination made at Cashel would,

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[72] Tanistry is the uniquely Gaelic practice of succession whereby eligibility for a throne was based upon broad patrilineal heritage extending down through three generations.
[73] Foster, 21.

essentially, not be retroactive but was instead intended only to enforce celibacy on future clerics of high rank. Regardless, it appears that this was in actuality "a bold aspiration, and probably doomed from the outset, given the pervasiveness of hereditary succession even among the ordained clergy under the 'reformed' dispensation,"[74] and historians widely recognize that reformers knew that they were engaging a "contested and intractable...topic."[75] In the end, the attempted reforms of both clerical and lay marriage practices witnessed arduous effort, but were not particularly productive.[76]

The reform of the Irish Church came to Ireland in largely the same way that it arrived in most other European kingdoms; through the support of one or more local kings, via the normal flow of people, lay and clerical, and through the appointment of, first, native legates and, eventually, foreign legates who attended to local and regional church affairs through councils, synods, and other less formal proceedings. Thus, so far as the methods by which the reform agenda was transmitted, Ireland was by no means unique except that, perhaps, it was one of the final outlying regions to be reached by the reform effort.

While the full spectrum of the reform agenda was indeed expressed in Ireland during the length of the reform movement, the Irish experience was unique in the apparent lack of need for calls for renewed asceticism; in this, the Irish monks excelled. The church reform effort, focusing as it mainly did in Ireland and other regions upon simony, lay control, hereditary succession, and proper organizational structure, may have also been somewhat exceptional in Ireland for the particular emphasis upon the

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[74] Catherine Swift, "Review of Marie Therese Flanagan: The transformation of the Irish church in the twelfth century," in *Academia*, (n.d.): 229.
[75] Martin, 14.
[76] Foster, 21. See also Swift, *Review of Marie Therese Flanagan*," 2.

apparently intractable issue of marriage practices and, in the clerical realm, upon the resultant issue of hereditary churches. As shown here, this shortcoming, more than any other, survived well beyond the Norman conquest and even into the early modern era. Whether taken as a singularly representative example of the shortcomings of Irish reform, or as indicative of residual underlying ecclesiastical and infrastructural issues for which it was only the most physically visible manifestation, various historians agree that papal, continental, and Norman frustration with the reform of the Irish Church very much contributed to the tacit approval of King Henry II's invasion of Ireland. Following the Synod of Kells, we are told that the

> Pope [Alexander III] 'lost hope of the Irish church pulling itself up by its own bootstraps': this led directly to the granting of the bull Laudabiliter in 1154, the logical consequence of which was Alexander III's wholehearted approval of Henry II's continued intervention in Ireland after 1172.[77]

The evidence for this disillusionment survives in the form of "three letters which Alexander III sent respectively to the Irish bishops, the Irish kings and to Henry II in 1172 in reply to the account which he had received of Henry's expedition to Ireland,"[78] which together demonstrate papal approval for the intervention of Henry II in the secular, if not the ecclesiastical, culture of Ireland, and that the papacy had come "to the conclusion that the religious prosperity of Ireland demanded its political subjection to the kings of England."[79] The reform of the Irish Church had attempted, and had indeed achieved, much. In the end, however, it is fair to say that the reformists had encountered particularly nettlesome areas of resistance stemming from a non-Romanized, Gaelic culture, as typified in part by the mixed pagan/Christian content of LU and which had

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[77] Flanagan, "Hiberno-Papal Relations in the Late Twelfth Century," 55.
[78] Ibid., 57.
[79] Watt 1972, 27.

experienced a too-long period of relative isolation from the continental church and its new orthodoxy, to satisfy a papacy which was at the height of both its spiritual and temporal power. It was ultimately easier to permit the Normans to attempt to remove the impenetrable Gaelic Irish culture and nobility while ensuring that the Irish Church remained independent of Canterbury and responsive directly to Rome, eventually making the implementation of the reform agenda a matter of internal affairs rather than one of cross-cultural negotiation.

VIII. Summary and conclusion

This, then, was the stage of society and politics, both secular and ecclesiastical, which swirled around Clonmacnoise in the years immediately prior to and just after Máel Muire and his fellow scribes compiled LU. It is interesting, even as a more legalistic and anti-heretical movement sought to standardize and purify the church as an organization, that the scribes of Clonmacnoise felt comfortable in recording tales which apparently insisted on maintaining the centrality of pre-Christian content in contrast to the anti-heretical focus of the pending reformist movement. It is equally interesting to note how quickly Clonmacnoise descended from being a leading center of church power and learning, with centuries of royal support from all corners of Ireland, to an abandoned ruins which had largely been set aside in the reformed church structure. Clonmacnoise was excluded as an episcopal see at the Synod of Rath Bressail, and the Synod of Uisneach in 1111 established it as the cathedral church of Westmeath.[1] According to John Bradley, who offers a secular political insight in addition to the narrower lens of church administration, this initial omission following the Synod of Rath Bressail likely indicated that while "the star of Clonmacnoise was beginning to wane early in the twelfth century…is more likely that is was simply a calculated move against his Ua Conchobair rivals by the patron of the synod, Muircheartach Ua Braian, who had in fact raided Clonmacnoise during that year."[2] In the final round of diocesan reorganization of this era, and as a result of Legate Paparo's proclamations at Kells-Melifont in 1152, Clonmacnoise was initially assigned to the see of Tuam but after a "tedious suit at Rome, between the archbishops of Armagh and Tuam, was in the end adjudged to the province

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[1] Bradley, 43.
[2] Bradley, 50.

of Armagh."[3] We see here evidence of Clonmacnoise's likely attempt to retain its place in the old power structure, directly subordinate to its traditional protectors in the primatial see at Armagh rather than relegated to a lesser place under a newly-appointed provincial center. Their attempts to retain a position of carefully balanced political and cultural centrality, especially their unique standing as the leading center of Gaelicized ecclesiasticism, would largely prove futile. If even the powerful center at Armagh could not resist the reformative efforts Malachy and were largely forced to abandon their tradition of proprietary church property, then how could Clonmacnoise, buffeted by the undoing of its traditional framework of political patrons and continually threatened by the nearby presence of a hostile Munster nobility who fully supported the reform, hope to resist for long? According to Ó Corráin, "the reformers destroyed the social, economic and cultural base of Irish learning" and the greater monasteries were "robbed of their resources and their status."[4] This trajectory was reinforced by the growing introduction of continental monastic orders, which the Irish monasteries must have viewed as a threat to both their unique culture and their position within society.[5] Interpolators such as H, operating in a new and changed environment, would have struggled to maintain some sense of this Gaelic flavor while altering the original texts to reflect a more palatable and doctrinaire position regarding the clear superiority of Christianity over paganism.

Following the final synod and the first wave of the Norman invasion, Hugh de Lacy attacked and plundered Clonmacnoise in 1178. The churches and many of the

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[3] O'Donovan, 446.
[4] Peter Harbison, "Church Reform and 'Irish Monasticism' in the Twelfth Century," in *Journal of Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, (2000): 3.
[5] Ibid.

administrative buildings were spared, but the scriptorium was destroyed.[6] Clonmacnoise

persisted as a monastery for another four hundred years, but it was a greatly reduced

shadow of its former self and it produced no further manuscripts as notable as that of LU.

In 1552, the English finally destroyed the place and it was abandoned.

 The LU manuscript survived by passing through the hands of various notable

families and antiquarian collectors before it finally came to reside at the Royal Irish

Academy. Its content, especially these mixed type tales which so creatively and

seamlessly blend pagan and Christian characters and themes, provide a shadowy glimpse

into a brief moment in Irish culture when the mBocht family at Clonmacnoise was a

powerful force, seeking to influence the violent tendencies of the warrior class and the

old Irish Church which had become to enmeshed in those affairs. Yet, we can also detect

some subtle attempt on the part of this family to protect its own societal standing and

power by promulgating the idea that the souls of kings and chieftains, and perhaps the

continued success of their lineage, rested largely upon the blessings and goodwill of the

clergy. And, of course, much of this mixed type content of LU simply provides rousing

good tales, for which we can only give thanks for whatever range of motivations may

have spurred the monks and scribes of the Clonmacnoise *aed dana* to invest their time

and resources into creating this oldest of Irish vernacular manuscripts, even if this

worldview did contribute to their eventual decline.

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[6] Beveridge, 26.

Appendix A

The following is a compilation of excerpts from *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* and *The Annals of Tigernach*. As these two documents further contain notations of annal entries from other sources, and since the dates indicated for these various entries are not universally consistent, I have tended here to use the year which seemed, in any one entry, to be that which most commonly recurred among the various sources. Further, this appendix is broken down by section, with various different annals being used to reflect different timeframes. Given this format, the first number indicated is the page number (as per the translation indicated in the bibliography), and the second is the year.

The Annals of Clonmacnoise

177 – 1044, "Clonvicknos was preyed by the Mounstermen in the absence of Donnogh mcBrian for which Donnogh granted to St. Queran & Clonvickenois perpertuall freedom & for forty Cowes at that present, and gave his malediction to any Mounstermen that would euer after abuse any belonging to st. Queran. Clonvickenois was preyed by the o'Ferals, of whome a certaine poet made this Latin verse: 'Haex urbs horrendis hodie vastata inimicis, Quae polis ante fuit Scotorum nobile culmen.' For which outrages committed upon the clergie of St. Queran God horribly plagued them, with a strange unknowen disease, that they died soe fast of that infection, that theire townes, howses, and Derie (footnote: their winterages for cattle, perhaps from the Irish dair, an enclosure) places were altogether wast without men or cattle in soe much that at least they were Driuen to graunt in honour of St. Queran the abbey lands of o'Roircks sonne and the 12 best sonnes of all the o'Ferals, and a certain sum of money for theire maintenance, which was paid by the Pole throughout that country for appeasing the Indignation of the saint conceaved against them."

178 – 1060, "They of Ely o'Karoll, and o'fforga (footnote: a tribe near Ardcroney) came to prey Clonvickenos, and tooke certaine captives from the place called (Crosse na Streaptra) and killed twoo there, a layman and a spirituall. Whereupon the clergie of Clone incensed these of Delvyn Beathra with their king Hugh o'Royrck in theire pursuit, who gave them an overthrow & quite discomfited them, & killed the prince of o'fforga that before killed the spirituall man, and alsoe brought their captives the next day back againe to the place from whence they were soe conveighed."
179 – 1066, "Celeagher Moyornogh bushopp of Clonvickenos, died." Battles continue annually now across Connaught and Munster.

180-181 – 1070, internal power struggles for the crown of Meath leads to the destruction of much of the countryside. King Terrence o'Brian of Munster "did violently take from

out of the church of Clonvickenos the head of Connor o'Melaghlin, king of Meath, that was buried therein, and conveighed it to Thomond." Relates how, due to the power of St. Queran, a mouse ran out of the skull, bit Terrence, and gave him a disease which made all his hair fall out, a condition which remained until he restored the skull and a payment of gold to Clonmacnoise.

181 – 1076, tells of famine and the continued persecution of the inhabitants of Clonmacnoise, specifically by "the people of Teaffa."

182 – 1079, "Gillesynata Magawley prince of Calrie was killed by Moyleseachlin o'Melaghlin for robbing or ravishing the goods of the church of Clonvickenos the precedent yeare."

182 – 1080, "a great part of Westmeath…were slain by [the] king of Meath…and alsoe the houses in the church yard of the nuns of Clonvickenos together with theire church was burnt."

186 – 1094, describes a major power struggle for dominance involving Leinster, Munster, and Meath, in the process of which "Clonvickenos was robbed and the spoyles taken by those of Brawny, & the o'Royrcks, on Monday in Shrovetide."

188 – 1100, describes a battle between two companies of kerne, or untrained militia, in Clonmacnoise, also describes how some repair work upon the great church was finished.

The Annals of Tigernach

From the fourth fragment, AD 973-1088, as contained in Rawl. B. 488:
Note the four sources contributing to the presumed actual year. I am using AU as the reliably indicated year:

361 – 1022, Kildare is plundered, a prince is killed by a rival on the ground of Clonmacnoise.
363 – 1023, "Clonmacnois was plundered by Gadra Hua Dunadaig, who took many hundred cows thereout."

375 – 1034, "The men of Munster stormed a house at Clonmacnois containing a party of the men of Teffa, where Becc, Hua Agdai's son, and other nobles fell."

377 – 1038, "A battle between the Delbna and the Hui Maini at the Feast of S. Ciaran (Sept. 9) in Clonmacnois, wherein multitudes fell, and the victory was gained by the Delbna."

384 – 1044, "Clonmacnoise was plundered by the Conmacni; but God and S. Ciaran inflicted vengeance for it upon them; and the greater part of their men and their cattle died."

390 – 1050, "Clonmacnois was thrice plundered in the same quarter of that year, once by the Sil Anmcada, and twice by the Calraige with the Foxes."

392-393 – 1053, "A slaughter of the Calraige, including their king, the son of Airechtach, by the Conmaicne, through the virtue of S. Ciaran's shrine."

401 – 1060, Kells and Leighlin are burnt, "The Eli and the Hui Focartai plundered Clonmacnois and took many prisoners out of Cross na screptra; and two persons were killed there, a student and another layman. So God and S. Ciaran commanded the Delbna to pursue them, and they left their slaughtered men, including the crownprince of the Hui Focarta, for he it was that had killed the student. Now on the morrow, at sunrise, their cattlespoil came (back) to Clonmacnois through S. Ciaran's miracles."

405 – 1065, Clonmacnoise and Clonfert are plundered by the Hui Maini. They were ultimately defeated and/or died "through S. Ciaran's miracles."

411 – 1073, describes the theft of Conchobar Hua MáelSechlainn's skull from Clonmacnoise by Toirdelbach Hua Briain.

412 – 1076, Clonmacnoise is burnt.

167 – 1092, "A fleet of the men of Munster plundered Clonmacnois."

169 – 1095, "Clonmacnois was plundered by the Conmacni, and the door of the temple was blocked up by stones."

170 – 1100, Gilla na noeb Hua hEidin, king of Connaught, died and was buried in Clonmacnois.

170 – 1101, also records the battle of two companies of infantry on the grounds of Clonmacnoise.

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