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Medieval scholars and modern nativists

1. In addition to a very substantial Latin literature early Christian Ireland boasts by far the most extensive and diverse vernacular literature in medieval Europe. The period from the fifth to the twelfth century A.D. abounds in Latin, Old or Middle Irish and bilingual texts in prose, poetry or a mixture of both covering a wide range of genres such as liturgy, homiletics, biblical exegesis and paraphrase, hymnody and eulogy, hagiography, Latin and Irish grammar, etymology, onomastics, topography, annals, genealogy, legal tracts concerning the Church and lay society, gnomic literature, prophecy, vision and voyage narratives, saga and history.

The whole of this literature was undoubtedly produced either in monasteries or by people who had received an essentially monastic education. In many cases this is evident from the genre itself or from the use of Latin in whole or part of a given text. Even in works composed almost entirely in medieval Irish casual snatches of Latin or the sudden switch to a more substantial passage in the language of the Western Church often betray a clerical author writing for readers likewise familiar with Latin as a result of a monastic training. Moreover, all of the comparatively few manuscripts that have come down to us from the pre-Norman period are quite clearly of monastic provenance, including those three great twelfth-century repositories of saga, genealogical and ecclesiastical material in Irish *Lebor na hUidre*, Rawlinson B 502 and the Book of Leinster. The recorded titles of lost manuscripts known to have contained saga material in Irish, e.g. *Cín/Lebor Dromma Snechta* or 'The Book of Drumsnat' (a monastery in Monaghan, cf. Thurneysen, 1921, 15-8) and *Lebor Buide Sláne* or 'The Yellow Book of Slane' (a major monastery in Meath, cf. Dillon, 1953, 12), are equally significant in this respect, and early Christian Ireland would in any case have been quite abnormal by medieval western European standards if literacy in Latin or the vernacular had existed there on any scale outside the sphere of her monasteries and their alumni.

Formidable linguistic difficulties associated with the vast corpus of Old and Middle Irish texts, most of them preserved in manuscripts written in or after the fourteenth century, have tended to restrict the number of scholars working upon this material since the serious revival of interest around the middle of the nineteenth-century. Because the pioneers of the new discipline rightly concentrated their efforts upon improving the linguistic analysis indispensable for a proper understanding of

the material and upon making texts, translations and synopses available to a wider scholarly audience, broader questions of interpretation were, by and large, postponed until a later and fairly recent stage. Hence the paradox that Europe's most abundantly documented early medieval culture, particularly where vernacular sources are concerned, remains among the least thoroughly researched. Rich seams of information have yet to be tapped, and these can be expected to enhance our appreciation of early medieval European literature and civilization as a whole.

2. For the last three or four decades the most influential and fashionable approach to the evaluation of early Irish literature has, at least until quite recently, been the one aptly dubbed 'nativist' by its major and for a long time largely isolated critic, James Carney (1955, 276). Scholars such as Myles Dillon, D.A. Binchy, Kenneth Jackson, Proinsias Mac Cana and Seán Ó Coileáin have in various different ways discussed medieval Irish society, law and letters from a broadly common standpoint stressing the conservatism of the 'tradition', its fundamentally oral transmission and continuity with a pagan past rooted in Celtic and Indo-European antiquity. While the role of Christianity and literacy in this process could hardly be ignored, the tendency was to minimise their impact upon 'secular' genres. The two major props of this interpretation were the Indo-European hypothesis and theories about the oral composition and backward looking nature of various epic literatures such as the Homeric poems of ancient Greece.

Increasingly intensive European involvement with India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a handful of western missionaries and administrators acquiring some knowledge of the sacred language of the Hindus, Sanskrit, and being struck by the notable similarities between it and the learned languages of Europe, Latin and Greek. The most influential and accurate early observation along these lines was made by Sir William Jones in 1786: "the *Sanskrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothick* and the *Celtic*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the *Sanskrit*; and the old *Persian* might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of *Persia*" (e.g. Muller, 1986, 1-2). This notion of a genetic relationship between Sanskrit and various European languages was taken up with enthusiasm in Germany, where the nascent romantic movement was stimulating interest and pride in tracing linguistic and cultural origins as far back as possible. In the course of the nineteenth century the inventory of related languages was established with ever greater precision and methods for comparison between them and reconstruction of the forms of the unattested parent language, termed *Indogermanisch* in German but *Indo-European* or the like otherwise, were steadily refined. By the end of the century the major languages or language groups recognised as Indo-European were *Indo-Iranian* (Sanskrit, Avestan, Old Persian etc.), *Greek*, *Italic* (Latin and less well attested languages such as Oscan and Umbrian), *Germanic* (Gothic, Scandinavian, German, English etc.), *Celtic* (Irish,

the three British languages Welsh, Cornish and Breton, plus fragmentarily attested Continental Celtic, notably Gaulish), *Slavic* (Old Church Slavonic, Russian, Polish etc.), *Baltic* (Lithuanian, Latvian, Old Prussian), *Armenian* and *Albanian*. The early twentieth century saw the significant additions of *Tocharian* (6th-8th centuries A.D.) from Chinese Turkestan and *Anatolian* (notably Hittite with texts from the second millennium B.C.) from Asia Minor to the canon.

It can, then, be rigorously demonstrated that the linguistic affinities of Irish are firstly with other languages of the Celtic group and that this in turn is part of a much wider family descended from a hypothetical common parent termed Indo-European. The details hardly require exposition here but some importance attaches to the fact that a shared language is usually held to imply cultural community or penetration on a broader scale. From this it would follow that Ireland's Celtic and Indo-European heritage extended beyond the strictly linguistic sphere to other facets of culture such as law, institutions, mythology or oral literary techniques. In the field of ideology a particularly influential theory has been the one elaborated over the years since the late thirties by Georges Dumézil, who has identified a tripartite scheme of socio-mythological functions in ancient India, namely *sovereignty* in its twin magico-religious and contractual aspects, *warfare* and *fecundity*, and has sought to establish its Indo-European provenance by isolating evidence for similar structures in other branches, including Celtic (cf. Littleton, 1973). Aided by a nativist enthusiasm for things Indian to be discussed below, the impact of this approach upon medieval Irish studies has been considerable of late and is, perhaps, most apparent in the work of Alwyn and Brinley Rees (1961). However, comparisons between Ireland and India alone hardly suffice to put the Indo-European provenance of various motifs and institutions beyond reasonable doubt, and the Dumézilian approach may be criticised for setting too much store by the Indian evidence. Where possible, a wider range of Indo-European literatures should be compared simultaneously in the interests of more balanced socio-mythological reconstruction, and it has recently been argued that the results call for significant modification of Dumézil's model (McCone, 1987). The importance of tripartition in early Irish ideology will emerge at various points in this book, but one should beware of facile assumptions about Indo-European origins and correlations with the Dumézilian system.

3. Studies by Albert Lord (1960) and Denys Page (1959) in the late fifties had a major impact upon attitudes to the Homeric poems and led to emphasis upon formulaic oral composition and transmission, the secondary and essentially uncreative later role of writing in their survival, and the ability of such a strictly regulated oral tradition to preserve a reasonably accurate, if patchy, record of earlier social and political conditions over a long period. This approach was applied to early Irish saga by Jackson in a small but influential book published in 1964, page 4 of which states the basic hypothesis succinctly as follows: "the immediate setting of the oldest hero tales, that is to say the state of endemic warfare between Ulster and the rest of Ireland and various other features of the Irish political construction, material civilization, and way of life, which are very archaic in appearance, very circumstantial, and on the whole very consistent, belong to a period some centuries older than the time when they were first written down – belong in fact to a *prehistoric Ireland*".

If the premise is granted, this basic picture can only have been preserved orally until it entered an apparently equally reactionary written record, but recent anthropological studies of oral traditions have tended to stress the decisive role of contemporary social and political factors in shaping them. Thus according to Jack Goody "it seems probable, at least, that the form in which non-literate societies conceive the world of the past is itself influenced by the process of transmission described. The Tiv have their genealogies, others their sacred tales about the origin of the world and the way in which man acquired his culture. But all their conceptualizations of the past cannot help being governed by the concerns of the present, merely because there is no body of chronologically ordered statements to which reference can be made. The Tiv do not recognize any contradiction between what they say now and what they said fifty years ago, since no enduring record exists for them to set beside their present views. Myth and history merge into one: the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed; and as the individuals of each generation acquire their vocabulary, their genealogies, and their myths, they are unaware that various words, proper names and stories have dropped out, or that others have changed their meanings or been replaced" (1968, 34). In the same vein Jan Vansina states: "oral traditions are conditioned by the society in which they flourish. It follows therefore that no oral tradition can transcend the boundaries of the social system in which it exists" (1973, 172). Finally, Ruth Finnegan makes a poignant protest along similar lines: "because primitive tribes were supposed to be preoccupied with tradition rather than innovation, 'traditional' tales were sought and 'new' ones ignored or explained away. Because interest was focused on broad evolutionary stages, few questions were asked about the idiosyncratic history, culture, or literary conventions of a particular people. Finally because origins and early history assumed such importance in people's minds, there was little emphasis on the *contemporary* relevance of a piece of literature" (1970, 37).

As a representative of what Joseph Nagy has called "the emerging new school of Celticists who share an 'oral traditionalist' appreciation of medieval Irish literature" (1983, 130), Edgar Slotkin has put the nub of the matter thus: "was Celtic literature which originated in the pre-Christian period preserved meaninglessly? I think not. It had an audience which appreciated and understood it at some level other than pre-Christian myth. Our perfectly legitimate interests in the pre-Christian codes have tended to blind us to the codes tales carried at the time they were written down" (1983, 222). This type of approach has recently been applied by N.B. Aitchison to extant 'Ulster Cycle' tales, his conclusion being "that these sources are neither the literary transcriptions of Iron Age oral traditions, nor do they offer a 'window' on Iron Age society. Instead, the study of the processes behind the composition and transmission of this literature represents a remarkable potential addition to our knowledge of secular and religious affairs in north-eastern Ireland during the second half of the first millennium A.D." (1987, 87). It can now be regarded as axiomatic that, assumed oral origins for some of its constituents notwithstanding, the proper frame of reference for early Irish literature is early Christian Ireland rather than the preceding pagan period.

Nevertheless, the attractions of orality to nativist scholars have been such that it has been accorded pride of place even in the evaluation of written material without attested oral parallels, as when Gerard Murphy states that "though our knowledge

of ancient Irish storytelling comes mainly from manuscript versions of the tales, there can be little doubt that Irish narrative tradition has on the whole been essentially oral" (1961, 5-6). Moreover, "when we think of the well-constructed narratives which even the unlearned peasant narrator to-day can produce, and when we judge of the greater power of Old Irish story-tellers by consideration of certain passages scattered through the inartistic manuscript versions of their tales which have been preserved, we can be fairly certain that the tales, as really told to assembled kings and noblemen at an ancient *óenach*, were very different from the poorly-narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature" (ibid., 8). Mac Cana confidently refers to "official tradition, whether oral or written (though in the insular Celtic context it remained mainly oral even after the introduction of writing)" (1971, 109) after making substantially the same claim in scholastic guise: "the more closely one studies these early tales in their written form, the more one is persuaded that they are in substance, if not always in the accidents of style, a fair reflection of the oral narrative of pre-literate tradition" (ibid., 97-8). Referring to the story of Cenn Fáelad's pioneering literary activities in the seventh century, Ó Coileáin asserts that "in some such way oral learning came to be launched on its uncertain journey through time, some of it to reach the twentieth century out of a past that has no real beginning. Nor should the writing of a text of whatever kind be seen as somehow marking the end of an oral tradition; rather, it has captured it, however imperfectly, at a given point in its life cycle" (1985, 526b).

Prior to the acquisition of the Roman alphabet along with organised Christianity in the fifth century Ireland was to all intents and purposes a non-literate society. Consequently oral tradition is the sole possibility for the preceding period and is hardly likely to have been eradicated by the introduction of limited, if expanding, clerical and monastic literacy from the fifth century onwards. The fact remains, however, that we have no direct knowledge of this presumed oral tradition and that what have come down to us from the period in question are exclusively the written products of the monastically educated. To deny that these were influenced by and drew upon an oral tradition with pagan roots would be as fatuous as the unprovable and unsupported nativist assumptions about the dominant role of orality and paganism in the creation of the so-called 'secular' genres of this monastic literature. *A priori* arguments about the role of an unattested oral tradition in the constitution of an abundantly documented literary record evidently put the cart before the horse as far as methodology is concerned, and all too often substitute vague speculation for solid inferences founded upon scrutiny of the texts themselves.

The main objection to nativist attitudes towards early Irish literature is that they preclude the appreciation of this vast material in its own terms by treating it as a more or less haphazard, imperfect and unthinkingly antiquarian inky precipitation out of an infinitely richer and more extensive oral solution. As Donnchadh Ó Corráin has pointedly remarked of late, "far too often, the modern critics – on generally unspoken grounds of aesthetics, good order, propriety or some such – are prepared to be harsh in their judgements on the scholars who transmitted their texts to them. We hear and read a great deal about scribal clumsiness, late and corrupt texts (as if there were once a gleaming fault-free archetype), careless and contradictory patchwork and the awkward merging of different recensions which should, indeed, have been kept apart. The implication is that those who transmitted, re-

edited, re-wrote or merely copied a text were, to a greater or lesser degree, mindless conduits of a Great Tradition whose intelligence and taste was, of course, much inferior both to that of their modern critics and to that of the founders of the tradition itself" (1986, 141).

These views tie in well with recent trends in other disciplines, such as the reaction in biblical studies to the atomistic tendencies of the so-called 'higher criticism' in vogue since the nineteenth century. As Robert Alter and Frank Kermode have put it, "the characteristic move was to infer the existence of some book that preceded the one we have – the lost documents that were compiled to make Genesis as it has come down to us, the lost Aramaic Gospel, the lost "sayings source" used by Matthew and Luke and so on. The effect of this practice was curious: one spoke of the existing books primarily as evidence of what must once have been available in an original closer to what actually happened. That was their real value – as substitutes for what had unfortunately been lost" (1987, 3). Thus "the biblical texts were valued less for what they actually were than for what they told us about other putative texts or events to which there was no direct access. What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated" (ibid., 4). Similarly Northrop Frye maintains "that textual scholarship has never really developed the 'higher' criticism that made such a noise in the nineteenth century. Instead of emerging from lower criticism, or textual study, most of it dug itself into a still lower, or sub-basement, criticism, criticism in which disintegrating the text became an end in itself. As a result its essential discoveries were made quite early, and were followed by a good deal of straw-thrashing. There are any number of books, for example, telling us that the account of creation with which the Book of Genesis opens comes from the priestly narrative, much the latest of the four or five documents that make up the book. A genuine higher criticism, I should think, would observe that this account of creation stands at the beginning of Genesis, despite its late date, because it belongs at the beginning of Genesis. That would lead to an integrated study of the Book of Genesis, and eventually the whole Bible, as it now stands, concerning itself with the question of why the Bible as we know it emerged in that particular form" (1982, xvii). There are encouraging signs that the study of medieval Irish texts is likewise emerging from a troglodyte phase.

4. In view of the overwhelming evidence that the so-called medieval Irish 'ecclesiastical' genres, whether in Latin or the vernacular, provide for vigorous and wide ranging intellectual activity from at least the sixth century onwards, the passive approach allegedly adopted by the same monastic learned class towards the native oral tradition obviously required some explanation. One response was to endow them with a suspiciously modern and disinterested desire to record the remnants of a moribund pagan tradition. Thus Murphy castigates "poorly narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature" above, Ó Coileáin speaks of "antiquarians assembling, as best they could, pieces of a rapidly fragmenting past" (1985, 521b), and according to Mac Cana "it is well known that early Irish churchmen were remarkably liberal and sympathetic in their attitude to pagan tradition and that were it not for their goodwill and enthusiasm it would have gone the way of most oral tradition in a changing and literate world. But this is not to say that the monastic recording of native tradition was free of censorship, and there is in fact clear indication of such censorship in

the absence of material whose former existence is implicit in the extant literature" (1971, 99).

Statements such as these are all the more surprising in view of good evidence that the attitude of early Irish clerics to paganism was unenthusiastic, to say the least. For instance, Patrick's later seventh-century biographer Tírechán links a number of native expressions and customs with paganism, contrasts these with monastic usage and describes the suppression of undesirable pagan practices by the saint (e.g. 12, 26 (17-21), 32 in Bieler, 1979). Equally noteworthy is the consistent condemnation of contemporary druidism and associated lifestyles with pagan connotations as diabolical practices in our sources, of which more in chapter nine. Moreover, the triumphalist author of *Félire Oengusso* around 800 A.D. notes with grim satisfaction that "the great kings of the pagans wail ever in burning: the hosts of Jesus without a fall, they are joyous after triumph" (Prol. 61-4) and illustrates his claim that even in Ireland "the Faith has grown, it will abide until the Day of Judgement: guilty pagans are carried off, their forts are not inhabited" (173-6) by contrasting the desolate pagan royal sites of Tara, Crúachu, Ailenn and Emain with the bustling monasteries of Armagh, Clonmacnoise, Kildare and Glendalough. Such by no means untypical attitudes do not square easily with a desire to preserve a written record of the pagan past for its own sake. There is no sign here of the 'benign ecumenism' towards certain pagan beliefs that Mac Cana (1976, 95-8) ascribes to the Christian authors of the extant versions of *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai*, and Carney has rightly insisted that "there can be no question of regarding these stories as semi-sacred compositions, transmitted for centuries in an almost unvarying form and finally 'written down' by an enthusiastic antiquarian with the scientific approach and attitude of a modern student of ethnography" (1955, 277).

As far as T.F. O'Rahilly was concerned, the monastic recorders of these pagan traditions, far from being broad-minded conservationists, had insidiously subversive aims. Thus "our Irish pseudo-historians were thoroughgoing euhemerists; so, too, were the inventors of the pre-Christian parts of our genealogies. By thus humanizing and mortalizing the divinities of pagan Ireland, they hoped to eradicate the pagan beliefs that still lingered on among many of their countrymen" (1946, 261). By way of illustration in the field of saga, "*Esnada Tige Buchet* is thus one of the most striking examples we have in Irish of how a tale, originally mythic, can in the course of time be stripped of all its pagan characteristics. All trace of the supernatural and the mysterious has been eliminated; and indeed the story is told in the most prosaic and matter-of-fact way. In harmony with the period of pseudo-history in which the action is made to take place, no element of Christianity is permitted to intrude" (1952, 19). Since, however, supernatural beings and features occur abundantly in the sagas, as will become clear later, these early Irish clerks are scarcely more convincing as totalitarians than as liberals. Moreover, one might well ask supporters of both views why monastic writers should have gone to the trouble of saving the debris of a pagan tradition from imminent extinction and then imposed a distinctly haphazard censorship, whether "of selective silence" (Mac Cana, 1979, 460) or worse, in order to hasten the demise of those very beliefs and practices.

Clearly we need a better explanation for this monastic activity than either of these flawed approaches can provide, but the quest for this will be left until the next two chapters. A further desideratum in line with Ó Corráin's strictures above is the avoidance of patronising assumptions that in various fields of vernacular litera-

ture the artistic and intellectual aspirations of early Christian Irish scribes hardly went beyond the more or less garbled reproduction of alleged oral pagan originals. All too often such attitudes have led to cavalier treatments geared to restoring an assumed older or oral 'original' rather than to interpreting what is actually attested in writing, but fortunately the main trend of late has been to attach increasing value to the contemporary import and structural integrity of extant texts. As the following chapters should show, the results speak for themselves and point to a profoundly literary tradition that had developed its own momentum in the monasteries from an early period, regardless of the probable or possible pre-Christian roots of many of its constituents (cf. Aitchison, 1987, 93-103).

5. A major nativist tenet closely connected with insistence upon orally transmitted pagan survivals is that early medieval Irish society and literature were remarkably archaic and conservative until rudely roused from their naturally supine state by foreign intruders, notably the Vikings in the ninth and the Normans in the twelfth century. The classic statement of this view regarding the impact of the Vikings on the Irish body politic is Binchy's 'The Passing of the Old Order' (1962). This celebrated article depicts a pre-ninth-century Ireland in which "the political and administrative unit had been the tribal state, or *túath*, a very small territory ruled by a king (*rí*), whose status and functions had remained strikingly similar to those which modern anthropologists attribute to the old Indo-European tribal king" (122). Such monarchs "had very limited 'governmental' functions within the territory" (123) on an island that was, politically speaking, merely "a congerie of tribal states tenuously linked together in five larger groups" (126). Happily, however, this political fragmentation did not lead to constant internecine conflicts because "in pre-Norse times, all wars, inter-tribal and inter-provincial alike, followed a curiously ritual pattern. They were hedged around with taboos: one did not continue the fight after one's king had been slain; one did not annex the enemy's territory or confiscate any of their lands; one did not dethrone the 'sacred' tribal dynasty; one refrained from attacking a number of 'neutral zones' on enemy soil – the monastic settlements, the property of the learned castes (*áes dána*), and so on" (128). It was the refusal of the unsporting Northmen to play by the local rules that led to the disintegration of this cosy system by setting the natives a bad example.

It is dangerous to extrapolate from legal ideals to actual practice in this manner. After all, the notion that rules are made to be broken is a familiar one and it would, for instance, be unwise to deduce from a law prohibiting homicide that murder was unknown or even merely rare in the society in question. The annals provide far better evidence for what was going on in the real world and have been duly used by Ó Corráin to show "that in the eighth century and possibly earlier the independent legal position of the *túath* or petty tribal kingdom was being steadily eroded by the greater overlords" (1972, 29) and "that long before the Viking attacks the dominant dynasties ruthlessly expelled and extruded less powerful peoples, and intervened to their advantage in the domestic struggles of their inferiors" (ibid., 30). It thus appears "that the *túath* and its king, the tribal kingdom with its privileges and the sacred tribal king with his taboos, had become things of the past long before the year 800. Ireland had become (if in reality it was ever otherwise, I doubt) a land of dynastic overlordship in which the kings of the paramount dynasties extended their authority and their kindred in every direction which their resources allowed"

(ibid., 31). More recently Patrick Wormald has lodged an incisive protest against the 'outlandish' notion that "an early Irish king was a priestly vegetable; he tells more of the distant past than of the historical development of European monarchy" (1986, 153).

Various points to be made in subsequent chapters should chime in well with these substantial arguments that early medieval Irish kingship was a good deal more normal and up to date by contemporary European standards than nativists like to admit. Meanwhile two examples of the considerable authority wielded by a provincial monarch over his sub-kings even in the later seventh and early eighth centuries must suffice.

Críth Gablach, par. 38, lists various types of *rechtgae* or 'legal ordinance' a king can impose upon his *túatha* in the wake of military defeat or pestilence. The plural *túatha* "kingdoms" clearly points to an overking, as does the third category "a king's ordinance (*rechtgae rí*), as is the ordinance of the king of Cashel (*rechtgae rí Caisil*) in Munster. For there are three ordinances that are proper for a king to pledge on his *túatha*: an ordinance for expulsion of a foreign race, i.e. against the Saxons, an ordinance for the preparation of crops, a law of the faith that enkindles, as is the law of Adomnán". As Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha's meticulous study of the guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* itself shows (1982), great provincial kings, supported by various of their more important sub-kings, played a crucial role in the promulgation of ecclesiastical *cána* (cf. Herbert, 1988, 51), as when the exiled abbot Artrí of Armagh "proceeded to proclaim the *Cáin Phátraic* in Munster in 823 (*AU*) with the support of king Feidlimid mac Crimthainn of Cashel and again in 'the three Connachts' in 825 (*AU*)" (McCone, 1984, 317).

St. Brigit's hagiographer Cogitosus provides the following social context, which was evidently meant to seem plausible to his readers, for one of her posthumous miracles (par. 33 in Bollandus, 1658, 140; par. 30 in Connolly and Picard, 1987, 23-4). The king of Brigit's home province (*patria*) of Leinster issued "an edict throughout the petty kingdoms and sub-provinces which were under his authority and yoke (*edictum per plebes* [= OIr. *túatha*?] *et provincias* [= OIr. *mór-thúatha*?] *quae sub eius erant ditio et iugo*)" for the building of a major road. "When many peoples came by kindreds and families (*conuenientibus multis populis* [= OIr. *túatha*?] *per cognationes* [= OIr. *cenéla*?] *et familias* [= OIr. *fini*?]), they divided the work up among themselves. Here, surely, we see the *túath* and smaller subdivisions within it functioning as subordinate links in an efficient chain of provincial command rather than as loosely federated independent units owing little more than nominal allegiance to an over-king.

Early Christian Irish society was intensely competitive in the upper echelons, both lay and clerical, about which we are best informed. Great monasteries as well as, and usually in tandem with, great dynasties were concerned to extend their power and influence (see ch. 10, 5), and warfare, far from being "rather like a ritual game" (Binchy, 1970, 17), was a deadly serious instrument for furthering political ambitions. For example, the Annals of Ulster (*AU*) record battles fought by Clonmacnoise against the monastery of Birr in 760 and the Columban house of Durrow in 764. We are told that on the latter occasion Durrow lost no less than two hundred members of its community. Internal monastic conflicts could be savage enough on occasion and might have wider repercussions. Thus the Annals of Tigernach (*AT*) record "the slaying of bishop Echthigern by a priest at the altar of Brigit, as a result

of which a priest does not perform mass in the presence of a bishop in Kildare" in 760 and state that the "battle of Emain Machae between the Ulaid and the Southern Uí Néill" in 759 was caused by a dispute between a priest of Armagh and his abbot. Whether secular, monastic or mixed, such conflicts can hardly be described as "nothing more than punitive expeditions by an over-king to levy by force tribute which had been withheld by a subordinate" or as "just examples of the *crech*, the armed raid for booty, chiefly livestock" (Binchy, 1954, 65).

Indeed, political motivation is apparent in many of the wars and battles that figure so prominently in the annals, both before and after the coming of the Vikings, and clearly involved considerable casualties on occasion. Thus the Annals of Ulster record "an encounter between the Munstermen and the Uí Néill, and Donnchad (of Clann Cholmáin, soon to be king of Tara) did great devastation in the territories of the Munstermen and many of the Munstermen fell" as well as "a battle in (the monastery of) Clonard between Donnchad and the community of Clonard" in 775, while in 793 we learn of "the outraging of Fáendelach by Gormgal son of Dindanach and the entry and invasion of Armagh and slaughter of people there by the Uí Chremthain (of the Clogher area). The reception of Fáendelach into Armagh again" (cf. McCone, 1984, 311-9). The notice of the battle of Allen in 722 records the deaths of a number of lesser kings on both sides as well as that of the defeated Cenél nÉogain king of Tara, Fergal mac Máele Dúin, whose designs upon Leinster were thus thwarted. Fergal's son and successor in the Tara kingship, Áed Allán, defeated the Cenél Conaill in 732 and fought them again in 733 and 734 in what was evidently a struggle for paramountcy among the Northern Uí Néill that went the Cenél nÉogain's way. Having secured his western flank, Áed turned his attentions eastwards to the Ulaid, whom he defeated in 735. In the same year there was a battle between Munster and the Laigin or Leinstermen "in which many of the Laigin and almost countless Munstermen perished". At last Áed was ready for the final stroke of a carefully laid strategy and fought the battle of Áth Senaig against the Laigin in 738. After the death of the king of the Leinstermen the wounded Áed's followers "were granted an enormous victory when they put their Leinster rivals to flight, trample, prostrate, overthrow and destroy them in extraordinary manner so that almost the whole enemy army is annihilated."

One wonders what those involved in this and similar actions recorded in the pre-Viking annals would have made of Mac Cana's recent suggestion that "one might almost describe the endemic warfare of early Ireland as 'harmless', for, while it could be barbarous, its primary aim was like that of the modern riot weapon: to sting and to stun but not to kill" (1982, 207). On the whole, it seems unlikely that the Irish of this period had much to learn from the Vikings about military ruthlessness, political aggrandisement or attacking monasteries. Far from being populated by primitive savages, whether noble or otherwise, early medieval Ireland had developed what Patrick J. Corish has termed "an integrated and confident Christian culture" (1972, 7) that was, to be sure, not without its peculiarities but seems to have enjoyed reasonably normal levels of intrigue and violence by the standards of the time and in some important respects to have stood in the vanguard of western Europe's emergence from the Dark Ages. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the field of monastic learning.

6. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, iv-v, informs us that around the middle of the

seventh century St. Columba's foundation of Iona was at the head of an extensive monastic federation or *paruchia* with houses in Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria. Apart from Iona itself in the Inner Hebrides this included such major centres as Durrow in the Irish Midlands and Lindisfarne just off the coast of northeast England, a situation that has now been thoroughly discussed along with subsequent vicissitudes down to the twelfth century by Máire Herbert (1988, 9-126). Bede III, xix, tells of the Irish saint Fursae's foundation of the monastery of Cnobheresburg in East Anglia in the first half of the sixth century. This he left in the hands of his brother Fáelán before proceeding to the north of Clovis's kingdom, present-day Belgium, to found the monastery in which he died. His remains were subsequently translated to Péronne, where his brothers Fáelán and Ultán apparently held the abbacy (Kenney, 1929, 501-5). When in the aftermath of the Synod of Whitby in 664 the Irish presence under abbot Colmán was withdrawn from Lindisfarne, Bede IV, iv, records that about thirty English religious followed him back to Ireland, where Colmán founded the monastery of Inishboffin off the Mayo coast. Subsequent tensions between the Irish and English contingents caused Colmán to relocate the latter in a new foundation, Mag nÉo (Mayo), which had become a notable monastery with English occupants by the first half of the eighth century. Indeed, Bede III, xxvii, states categorically of later seventh-century Ireland that "there were many aristocrats and commoners of the English race there at that time who, having left their native island in the time of bishops Finian and Colmán, had departed thither for the sake of sacred reading or a more continent life. And, indeed, certain of them soon bound themselves faithfully to the monastic way of life, while others rather took pleasure in attention to reading by wandering around the churches of teachers. All of these the Irish received gladly and gave daily sustenance as well as seeing to the provision of books for reading and free tuition".

Particularly good evidence of Irish cultural attainments and impact abroad in the late sixth and early seventh centuries is provided by the career and writings of St. Columbanus, a monk of Bangor in northeast Ireland who spent the last twenty-five years or so of his life on the Continent with Irish followers. During this eventful part of his career he founded monasteries in Alsace before losing the Merovingian monarch's favour, travelled through Switzerland, where his disciple St. Gall stayed to establish the monastery bearing his name, and finally established the major monastery of Bobbio in the Lombard kingdom of northern Italy shortly before his death in 615. Columbanus' writings, which have been edited and translated with introduction by G.S.M. Walker (1957), comprise impressive, if at times rather florid, Latin prose and poetry, reveal an extremely forceful and uncompromising personality, and display deep scriptural erudition along with a good knowledge of patristic literature and major classical authors. It seems virtually certain that these accomplishments were acquired in his native country, and it is hard to resist quoting a passage from the fourth paragraph of his first letter to Pope Gregory the Great (reigned 590-604) that illustrates his wit, style, knowledge of Scripture, confidence in Irish learning and lack of bashfulness. Defending Irish practices, by now at variance with those of the Continent, regarding calculation of the date of Easter, Columbanus derives a delicious and barely translatable pun upon Pope Leo's name from Ecclesiastes 9:4 (*melior est canis vivus leone mortuo*, "a living dog is better than a dead lion"): "perhaps, while you fear to incur the stamp of Hermagorean innovation, you are content with the authority of your predecessors and especially

of Pope Leo (*antecessorum et maxime papae Leonis auctoritate contentus es*). Do not, I beg, yield yourself on such an issue to diffidence or propriety, which are often deceived: in this problem a living dog is perhaps better than a leonine corpse (*melior forte est canis vivus in hoc problemate leone mortuo*). For a living saint can correct things that have not been corrected by another earlier. For you should know that Victorius has not been accepted by our teachers and Irish scholars of old and computists most learned in making calculation”.

The works of Isidore of Seville (+ 636), particularly the famous *Etymologiae sive Origines* compiled as a kind of encyclopaedia of current knowledge during the last years of his life, are known to have exercised a major influence throughout medieval western Europe. This esteem was particularly marked in early Christian Ireland, where the Etymologies were known as the *Cu(i)lmen(n)* or ‘summit’ of learning and were supposedly acquired in exchange for the most highly regarded native literary product, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, according to an account surviving in different versions in the Book of Leinster (LL 32878-32909, trans. Kinsella, 1970, 1-2) and elsewhere (Thurneysen, 1921, 251-4). J.N. Hilgarth has pointed out that, whereas use of Isidore outside Spain is scarcely attested in other parts of Europe before the early eighth century, “there is a long series of Irish Latin seventh-century authors, many of whom cite Isidore” (1984, 7), surely an eloquent testimony to the Christian Irish establishment’s openness to external influences and interest in the latest scholarly trends at this time. Cosmopolitan and up to date as it was for the period, early medieval Irish scholarship enjoyed a high international reputation that goes a long way towards explaining the demand for recipients of an Irish monastic education in Carolingian Europe during the eighth and ninth centuries and beyond (Tierney, 1967, 1-17) and the substantial corpus of Latin literature produced by Irish men of letters both at home and abroad during this long period (Kenney, 1929, 486-621; Lapidge and Sharpe, 1985, 77-221). Indeed, at various times and in various concentrations Irish connections with Britain, France, the Low Countries, Southern Germany, Switzerland, Bohemia, Northern Italy and Spain can be established between the late sixth and late ninth centuries of our era (cf. the map in L. and M. de Paor, 1978, 69).

In view of these bracing perspectives it comes as something as a shock to be told that during this period Ireland as a whole was an isolated cultural backwater clinging unquestioningly to remarkably archaic practices and perceptions disturbed only by the occasional intrusion of more advanced foreigners. Binchy, for instance, claims that “the conservatism which philologists have often noted as a feature of the Irish language is paralleled in Irish law, and largely for the same reason. Between the Goedelic conquest and the Norse invasions Ireland remained insulated from the impact of foreign peoples, in other words from the most powerful factors making for legal change” (1943, 21). In still more general terms the Celts have been viewed as “peoples of the periphery whose achievements lay more in the spiritual and ideological than in the material and political fields, quintessential conservatives who maintained a tradition that was more Indo than European and who, when they innovated through borrowing, so transformed their borrowings as to make them hardly distinguishable from native idiom” (Mac Cana, 1982, 205). Thus “it would”, in Ó Coileáin’s words, “be difficult to overstate the inherently conservative nature of Irish medieval literature” (1985, 527b). Still more recently Gearóid Mac Eoin has invoked modern philistinism as a means of summarily dismissing the

incontrovertible evidence for medieval Irish scholars’ major achievements in Latin letters: “the Romans never found time to invade Ireland, which is certainly the most important non-event in Irish history. Nonetheless, the Latin language made its appearance, spoken first by Christian missionaries and later by native churchmen who were probably no better at it than their twentieth-century successors who have breathed a great sigh of relief at its disappearance from the liturgy and the educational system” (1988, 595).

Given the phenomenal success of the Irish church in establishing within a mere hundred years or so of Patrick’s fifth-century mission a forceful and flourishing monastic culture capable of importing and adapting the latest trends in scholarship from abroad and of exporting its own personnel and products to Britain and Europe, one can only ask with Wormald “whether (and if so, why) a civilization whose representatives have widely been believed to have changed the cultural destinies of north-western Europe can itself have been relatively impervious to its own message” (1986, 151). In a recent book that is at least useful as a compendium of nativist misapprehensions Michael Richter concedes that a “feature that marked Ireland very strongly was the openness of society to intellectual and cultural influences from outside” but envisages an effective counter to this in “the existence of a non-Latin intellectual tradition in Ireland from prehistoric times”. This leads to claims of a type often made (e.g. by Mac Cana, 1982, 215) but never substantiated: “in the face of an incoming Latin civilisation, as it was then current in the Church, this tradition continued unbroken . . . All this was made possible by the existence of a socially respected and privileged intellectual élite which had developed from an archaic stage of culture in prehistoric times. The survival of this élite in Christian times is partly due to the fact that classical Roman civilisation could not, as elsewhere, eclipse and largely destroy things non-Roman and pre-Roman. Because of this, the archaic features of Irish society could become dynamic in the Middle Ages . . . Should all this be so, then the history of Ireland in the Middle Ages shows that there was a viable alternative development to that of the rest of Europe, dominated by Christian Latin culture” (Richter, 1988, 192-3).

It should emerge below and in subsequent chapters that the apparent discrepancy between Irish clerical attitudes at home and abroad is, as Wormald suspects, the child of modern fancy rather than medieval fact, but first we must turn our attention to the Orient.

7. Ancient India has long held a powerful fascination for scholars with nativist leanings as a favourite source of cultural and literary comparisons with early medieval Ireland aimed at demonstrating the impressive and surprisingly pristine condition of the latter’s Indo-European heritage. Versed as he was in Sanskrit as well as Irish, Dillon made several classic presentations of this position, including lectures published with such significant titles as ‘The Archaism of Irish Tradition’ (1947) and ‘Celt and Hindu’ (1973). The basic aim of the former appears on page 9: “M. Vendryes referred to features of morphology and vocabulary which Celtic shares with Sanskrit, and drew the conclusion that they indicate the archaic character of these languages and the survival east and west of ancient religious institutions. It is the theory which I am here attempting to confirm and to extend; and I would merely add that in the light of other evidence those points of agreement between Sanskrit and Celtic have an importance rather greater than Vendryes would

seem to attach to them, for they are part of a much wider measure of common tradition". On page 4 of the later work a theoretical framework was posited with reference to attempts in the field of dialect geography to identify "central areas, lateral areas and isolated areas, of which the first are sources of innovation and the last two are refuges of archaism", the basic claim being "that this method can be applied not merely to language, to the names of institutions, but to the institutions themselves; and the model has an obvious use when we are observing Ireland and India, at opposite ends of the Indo-European areas, when we are comparing Celtic with Vedic Sanskrit, Celt and Hindu".

This methodological approach has found considerable favour. For example, Binchy states of the Old Irish law tracts that he is "more than ever convinced of their importance as a record of archaic society" because "the Irish as well as the Hindu jurists were 'backward-looking' – men with a profound respect for antiquity" (1970, 1). Consequently in an Indo-European context there is a contrast "between Hindu and Irish law on the one hand and the dynamic legal systems, the Welsh as well as the Roman and the English, on the other" and "it is the Hindu and Irish jurists who, precisely owing to their lack of legal realism, can now give much more valuable information to social anthropologists" (ibid., 2). Mac Cana speaks of "Indian tradition, which otherwise preserves so many close analogues of items in insular Celtic tradition" (1972, 137) and has probably gone further down this particular path than anyone else. Richter similarly avers that "the reference to India is not arbitrary, nor are the parallels coincidental; remains of Indo-European civilisation have been preserved on the eastern fringes of the region influenced by Indo-European culture and, on the outer western fringes, in Ireland; they were preserved into historical times" (1988, 24).

However, the foundations of this 'Indo-Celtic' theory appear rather shaky on closer inspection. To begin with, dialect geography deals with areas such as present-day France where local speech variants are part of a continuum of mutual intelligibility at a given point in time, whereas the major attested Indo-European languages or language families meet neither criterion: the dates of their earliest adequate documentation vary enormously (e.g. Hittite c. 1600 B.C., Greek c. 1400 B.C., Vedic Sanskrit c. 1000 B.C., Latin c. 300 B.C., Gothic c. 350 A.D., Old Irish c. 650 A.D.) and there is no question of mutual comprehension. One can hardly, for instance, apply insights of dialect geography to two languages and cultures such as those of early Christian Ireland and Vedic India separated from each other spatially by numerous other language areas, some Indo-European and others not, and temporally by over one and a half millennia. Such notions would only be relevant to a hypothetical period of Indo-European linguistic unity, and we have no reason to suppose that the precursors of Celtic or Indo-Iranian had either begun to separate out as dialects or were in any sense peripheral at that stage. Moreover, the Celts first emerge into the light of history from the cultural melting pot of central Europe and may well not have reached Ireland more than two or three centuries B.C. (cf. Greene, 1983; Piggott, 1983). There is nothing very 'marginal' or 'isolated' about this formative phase of Celtic prehistory.

It is, moreover, doubtful whether Celtic or Old Irish can be meaningfully regarded as 'archaic' Indo-European dialects. Recent linguistic researches suggest that Celtic, like Indo-Iranian, can be accounted for in terms of a perfectly mainstream Indo-European prototype (e.g. Rix, 1977; McCone, 1986). Where a

given feature such as the Old Irish reduplicated future and the Old Indic reduplicated desiderative (McCone, 1986, 248-55) is peculiar to both and is too circumstantial to have arisen independently, it can be ascribed with confidence to the parent language, Indo-European, for the simple reason that there is no plausible later point of common origin. In other words, it is the nature of the evidence and not the allegedly intrinsic archaism of peripheral areas that validates such conclusions. A concrete example in the sphere of vocabulary is the word for 'king' appearing in Celtic as Gaulish and (probably) Celtiberian *-rix*, Old Irish *rí* (gen. *ríg*) and Welsh *rhi*, in Latin as *rex* and in Sanskrit as *rāj-ā*. Allowing for regular sound changes established for the relevant languages (e.g. IE **ē* > Skt. *ā*, Celt. *ī*), these precise correspondences point ineluctably to an Indo-European stem **rēg-* (nom. sg. **rēk-s*), broadly meaning 'king' (cf. Binchy, 1970, 3), that is so far attested only towards the eastern and western extremes of the Indo-European world. Survival in this context merely implies phonetic continuity with a reconstructed prototype and by no means rules out change, which may be considerable as in Old Irish *én* 'bird' < **petnos*. Indeed, it is only an appreciation of the systematic changes involved that makes firm equations of this sort possible. The fact that changes in semantics and institutions cannot be formulated with the same precision is no excuse for ignoring them, and only makes the fullest possible documentation of the facts relevant to a comparison at this level all the more essential.

The survival of words relatively intact does not necessarily imply a corresponding stability in what they signify and conversely changes of designation do not always involve significant conceptual or institutional alterations. Consequently it would be rash to argue from the preservation of reflexes of **rēg-* that Celtic, Roman and Indian kingship was more archaic than that of other Indo-European peoples that have substituted other words or that the substitution of, say, *fian* for inherited *cuire* < IE **koryos* to designate the early Irish 'Männerbund' or society of unmarried young warrior-hunters significantly affected the institution itself (McCone, 1987, 110-18). Furthermore, relatively few precise cognates are attested anything like ubiquitously among the major recorded Indo-European languages, and one usually has to be content with a more limited distribution. All manner of permutations between two or three daughter languages are found, and it will hardly do to single out Indic (Italic) and Celtic for special treatment, especially when new discoveries can radically alter the picture and show just how fortuitous the quirks of attestation may be. For instance, the Greek word *kheir* 'hand' had only one known cognate, Armenian *jeṛn*, at the beginning of the present century, and these two languages are arguably too closely related for the reconstruction of an Indo-European form on that basis despite reasonable assurance that the Indo-Europeans, who were manifestly blessed with palms (Lat. *palma*, Gk. *palāmē*, OEng. *folm* 'palm', OIr. *lám*, W. *llaw* 'hand' < **plhmā* 'palm'), had actually had hands and a word for them. As Hermann Hirt put it, "are we to assume that the Indo-Europeans had known snow and feet but not rain and hands? That, of course, is nonsense, and must cause us to exercise great caution in concluding anything from the absence of correspondences" (1927, 76). Indeed, the subsequent discovery of *kessar(as)* 'hand' in Hittite and *tsar*, *ṣar* 'hand' in Tocharian A and B respectively put the existence of Indo-European **g^hesr-* 'hand', from which the forms in all four of these languages derive, beyond doubt. Needless to say, one would hardly wish to argue on this basis that the Greeks, Armenians, Hittites and Tocharians bore a greater

manual affinity to their Indo-European forbears than the Indo-Iranians, Celts and so on or, indeed, that Celtic use of a derivative of **p̥lhmā* for the whole hand reflects any widespread loss of fingers amongst them.

The truth is that there is no precise and necessary correlation between linguistic and broader cultural facts. Even if there were, a balanced appraisal of early Christian Ireland's linguistic heritage does not provide an encouraging analogy for those scholars inclined to stress her intense social and cultural conservatism. In comparison with Sanskrit, Greek or even Latin, the Irish language had by the time of the earliest substantial records in about the seventh century A.D. evolved very far indeed from the ancestral Indo-European prototype inferred by the comparative method. Profound changes in phonology, morphology and syntax had made Old Irish in some ways typologically closer to genetically unrelated verb-initial languages like Hebrew than to its ancient Celtic and Indo-European antecedents. Moreover, ecclesiastical influence can be detected in the shape of a not inconsiderable Latin input into the early medieval Irish vocabulary. In large measure this involved direct borrowings appropriately adapted to vernacular patterns of sound and inflection, e.g. OIr. *epscop* 'bishop' < Lat. *episcopus*, *scúap* 'broom' < *scopa*, *cásc* 'Easter' < *pascha*, *corcur* 'purple colour' < *purpura*, *eclais* 'church' < *ecclesia*, *senester* 'window' < *fenestra*, *póc* 'kiss' < *pacem* '(kiss of) peace', *léigend* 'reading, learning' < *legendum*, *penn* 'pen' < *penna* and so on. Recent studies by Damian McManus (e.g. 1983) have shown that this influx of Latin loanwords must have continued without serious interruption over a long period of time. It was, moreover, accompanied by a more subtle approach, correspondingly harder to detect, whereby native words were invested with latinized meanings either individually or in new combinations known as 'calques'. For instance, despite an Old Persian cognate *naiba* 'splendid' proving pagan Indo-European and Celtic antecedents Old Irish *noib* has been fully assimilated to Latin *sanctus* 'holy, saint' in the Christian sense, while a native word partly equivalent in meaning to a Latin counterpart might undergo expansion of its semantic range to make the match more complete, e.g. OIr. *briathar* 'word' and then also 'verb' under the influence of Lat. *verbum* 'word, verb' or OIr. *cenél* 'race, kind' and then also 'gender' through assimilation to Lat. *genus* 'race, kind, gender'. The following are a few typical instances of the process of calquing, which entailed the fusion of two or occasionally three native words into a new larger unit capable of rendering a Latin term in vernacular guise: *con:éic-nigedar* 'compels' (Lat. *com-pellit*), *con:éirig* 'arises (to attack)' (*con-surgit*), *rem-déicsiu* 'fore-sight, providence' (*pro-videntia*), *etar-guide* 'intercession' (*intercessio*), *tairm-chruthud* 'transfiguration, transformation' (*trans-figuratio*, *transformatio*), *rem-epérthae* 'afore-said' (*prae-dictus*), *imm:díben* 'circumcises' (*circum-cidit*). It was even possible to calque Latin loans from Greek if the original etymology was known from Isidore or some other source. Thus Latin *Evangelium* 'Gospel' had been borrowed directly from Greek and Isidore duly states that "Evangelium, however, is interpreted as 'good news' (*bona adnuntatio*), for in Greek good is called *eû* and news *angelía*" (*Etym.* VI, ii 43). Armed with this etymological information, early medieval Irish men of letters came up with the erudite calque *soi-scélae*, literally 'good news', for 'Gospel', and this subsequently entered into common usage. Some learned creations of this type did not gain general acceptance, e.g. alongside common *epscop* the rare calque *for-décsam* 'bishop' (*CIH* 2213.22) inspired by Isidore's (*Etym.* VII, x 11-3) etymology

of originally Greek *episcopus* in Latin as 'over-seer, super-intendent' or the like.

Although at best a very approximate index of wider cultural processes, these linguistic considerations do lead us to expect something rather different from the reactionary milieu depicted by nativist studies of much vernacular Irish literature. Continuity with the pre-Christian past by no means precludes significant changes on the way, and Christian or ecclesiastical influence can operate beneath as well as upon the surface. Thus we may assume that native or native-looking elements could acquire new meanings relevant to the Church's teaching and practice in ideology or literature as well as in language either by varying degrees of reinterpretation or by rearrangement into new larger patterns.

8. Nativist failure to detect major clerical influence upon much of the 'secular' literature studied by them has been due above all to a tendency to acknowledge only the most obvious or superficial manifestations of this type and to discount the likelihood of a more profound or allusive use of scriptural and other ecclesiastical elements. Thus Mac Cana cautions "that the extant texts provide only a very incomplete index of a rich and complex oral tradition and that one should therefore be wary of too readily assuming borrowing on the part of the Irish monastic *literati* in those cases where items in native narrative can be matched by analogues in classical or ecclesiastical literature. By the very nature of the subject, absolute certainty in these matters is difficult to achieve, but the interests of sound methodology at the very least require that the analogous items be subjected to two checks before borrowing can reasonably be assumed and its extent adequately defined. The first is to determine, so far as is possible, whether the compared items occur in traditions other than Irish and classical/ecclesiastical, and if so, how extensively; the second, whether these items stand rootless and relatively isolated in Irish tradition or whether they mesh closely with the extant remains of the tradition, for, obviously, if they relate easily and incidentally to other themes and narratives in native literature the argument for borrowing becomes correspondingly less cogent" (1972, 141).

This approach is predicated on the unverifiable assumption that the bulk of so-called 'native literature' is rooted in an extensive oral tradition, and the onus is placed upon critics to offer indisputable proof that written ecclesiastical sources were involved in any given instance. This undertaking is, however, made as difficult as possible, since the hypothesis that the monastic authors of extant early Irish texts drew to any extent upon such demonstrably familiar sources as the Bible and related literature is apparently to be rejected if analogues can be found in other more remote traditions or if the features in question are at all widespread in or well integrated into the extant vernacular material. In effect, the central issue is thereby prejudged: there can have been no extensive or profound ecclesiastical influence upon these narratives because anything widely or deeply rooted there is regarded as by definition most unlikely to have emanated from the Church. Were one to ask why, the vicious circle would presumably be closed with reference to the fundamentally oral nature and origins of most vernacular literature recorded by monastic scribes.

In the article just cited Mac Cana discusses a tale in which Mongán mac Fiachna displays precocious wisdom as a youth and shows himself more knowledgeable than a prominent poet. This is compared with the boy Ambrosius' worsting of the king's *magi* in prophecy in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, a British Latin compilation of

obvious clerical provenance, the inference being "that insular Celtic oral tradition knew a version of the birth of the hero theme in which the wise wonder-child bested the druids of the king" (1972, 135). It is further claimed that "Indian tradition provides a particularly striking analogy" (ibid.) in the form of an elaborate and relatively late cosmogonic narrative revolving round the precocious wisdom of Vishnu, but "it is not so evident that the writer of the Ambrosius episode in the *Historia Brittonum* saw the parallel with the account of the child Jesus in the temple in Luke II, 41-52; but, whether he did or not, the brief biblical story has not affected the Welsh narrative, which is quite independent and, as we have noted, is probably related collaterally to extant elements in the Mongán cycle" (ibid., 141-2).

Since, as Mac Cana rightly insists, certainty cannot be achieved in such matters, the only methodologically sound approach is to apply Ockham's razor and look for the most economical explanation compatible with the facts in any given instance. The question here is whether isolated attestations of a 'wonder-child' motif in two otherwise quite different literary narratives from Ireland and Wales justify the reconstruction of a common 'insular Celtic oral tradition' going a thousand or more years further back and whether vague similarities with a highly evolved Indian theological exposition point to an Indo-European prototype two or more millenia older still. These are large claims to base upon such flimsy evidence. Youthful precocity is an obvious and widely exploited means of foreshadowing a hero's future greatness the world over, and a far more detailed dossier of correspondences between these narratives would be required in order to make a genetic connection preferable to independent development as an explanation. Furthermore, since both the Mongán tale and the Nennius passage emanate from clerical pens, the young Jesus' remarkable display of erudition and insight in St. Luke's Gospel could surely have provided the impulse for both of these creations separately.

Moreover, it might reasonably be urged that inconclusive speculations about sources and origins should not be allowed to distract attention from the primary need to study the structure, contents and context of extant works with a view to establishing their contemporary import. It would have been surprising indeed if pioneers such as Zeuss and Thurneysen had chosen to concentrate upon the Celtic and Indo-European origins of various Old Irish forms while largely ignoring the language's actual grammatical system, and yet nativist scholarship has displayed just such a preoccupation in the field of early Irish literature and history. Once the perspective is shifted from archaic survivals to contemporary factors, it can be confidently asserted that medieval Irish *literati* were quite unaware of their Celtic and Indo-European roots, whereas the Bible and other Christian works played a central and indispensable role in monastic life and letters. Once it is conceded that monastic writers were capable of moulding their material creatively, it must be regarded as highly likely that ecclesiastical literature in general and the Bible in particular provided vital conceptual and narrative models capable of modifying inherited patterns where necessary or appropriate. At the very least, such scribes would have been very much alive to parallels from the Bible that they studied so intensively.

Telling arguments along these lines were advanced by Carney as long ago as 1955 with reference to some examples of saga and voyage literature, and recent studies by Ó Corráin, Breatnach and others are making the profound influence of the Bible and other clerical material upon the greatest of all nativist bastions, the Old Irish law tracts, increasingly apparent (cf. Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984;

Breatnach, 1984; Ó Corráin, 1987). As Walter Baetke's concise account of trends in the scholarly study of Norse sagas points out, a debate along these lines has already taken place with reference to a narrative literature generally held to have much in common with Irish sagas despite its rather later date. It may be helpful to quote some of his key statements in translation from the original German. Noting that "critical saga research begins with doubts about the reliability of the Icelandic sagas as historical documents" (1974, viii) around the middle of the nineteenth century, Baetke goes on to document the rise of various types of theory stressing the role of oral composition in their transmission but concludes that this approach has inevitably reached a dead end: "all in all it is true of the free-prose theory that it is less concerned with the sagas themselves than with their prehistory. The crux for this type of research resides in the fact that we are not acquainted with the oral tradition that is its object and are scarcely in a position to get through to it. Consequently it was and is impossible to get beyond speculations that will always remain doubtful. What we do know are the sagas that have come down to us in parchment and paper manuscripts. Only these can constitute an object of exact literary-historical investigation" (ibid., xi). Moreover, "because adherents of the book-prose theory basically break with the historical approach, they also have a different attitude to the tradition. They do not deny that there were oral traditions from the period of settlement and the following centuries and that part of these has issued into the sagas, but their main interest is in the written works" (ibid., xii-xiii). The latest stage has seen an increasing appreciation of the Christian and medieval western context of Icelandic saga literature: "there was little secular literature in Iceland at the beginning of the thirteenth century. As a result scholarly attention has recently been directed more intensively upon the ecclesiastical writings that constituted the greater part of the written literature at the time. Legends, saints' lives, homilies, Gregory's dialogues and other edifying and instructive works had already reached Iceland in the twelfth century and were translated in part. They cannot have failed to affect the authors of sagas, particularly since it can be confidently posited that not a few of these were clerics. At first sporadic discoveries revealed that the Icelandic sagas have adopted and adapted motifs from sermon illustrations, the 'Disciplina Clericalis' and other sources. More recent researches have unearthed in addition a mass of Christian concepts as well as illustrations of Christian morality and outlook on life, which lurk in them. These had previously been almost entirely overlooked because under the spell of the traditional theory people regarded these tales as documents from Iceland's pre-Christian period and looked for evidence of pagan religion and custom in them" (ibid., xvii-xviii). Surely there is a lesson here for students of the vast literary output of Irish monasteries in the early Middle Ages?

9. If so, it has been steadfastly ignored by nativists, who have countered threats to the 'purity' of early Irish tradition as transmitted in our texts by representing the authorial role of monastic writers in relation to key native genres as little more than scribal. The truly artistic cultivation and transmission of such material was, by contrast, supposedly the preserve of an independent, influential and highly organized learned class of poets or *filid* and judges or *brithemain* stubbornly clinging to inherited oral techniques and determined to resist all but the most superficial concessions to Christian imports. These in turn were seen as heirs of the pagan Celtic druid, whose continuation of an ancient Indo-European priestly function could be

asserted by comparing the Indian brahmins and Roman pontiffs. In this way an impressive human pipeline was created to channel the 'tradition' from its dim and distant Indo-European source through Celtic and Irish oral and pagan prehistory into early medieval Irish literature with a minimum of adulteration from foreign elements such as Christianity.

Dillon, for example, makes the following statement: "it was pointed out by Vendryes that India, Rome, and Celtic Gaul had one notable tradition in common, namely, the recognition of a privileged caste of priests, brahman, pontiff, and druid; and he so explained certain facts of vocabulary to which I shall return. If we examine more closely what is known of druidic practices in Gaul and what can be gleaned from Irish evidence, it appears that the brahman and the druid preserved more than a common ancient vocabulary: they preserved common Indo-European traditions of practice and belief, some of which survived in the Gaelic world down to the eighteenth century and have survived in India to the present day" (1947, 2). Mac Cana has claimed that "much of the traditional teaching and practice of the druids was maintained without interruption by the *filid*" (1971, 86) and in a recent lecture entitled '*Regnum and sacerdotium*' has gone so far as to identify a priestly dichotomy in early Christian Ireland between clerics and "a well-organized class of learned men, independent of the Church, who controlled and maintained the structures and ideology of native kingship. In the ninth century this class was known as the *filid*. They were a fellowship of learned poets, but, as the original literal meaning of their name, 'seers', indicates, they were very much more than that . . . By the ninth century they were known as *filid*, but if . . . we could somehow translate ourselves to fourth- or fifth-century Ireland, we should probably find them identified primarily as druids" (1979, 445). Moreover, "the fact that the *sacerdotium* was shared by clerics and *filid* since the fifth century adds a complication to Church and State relations which is not paralleled in Europe. There are indeed those – or at least there have been those – who might quarrel with my applying the terms *sacerdos* to the druids, not to mention the *filid*, but this is surely little more than a pedantic quibble. If one accepts that the Indian brahman is a priest, and there are very few who do not, then I fail to see how one can describe the druid otherwise. It is true that as a result of what Dr Eleanor Knott has called 'the protective metamorphosis' of the *filid* the priestly functions which they inherited from the druids were very much attenuated, but so much still remains and so much of their peculiar status and influence is explicable only in terms of their pre-Christian role that they are best seen in the perspective of history as a residual priesthood" (ibid., 455). As "the mediator and the manipulator of the supernatural powers which affected the king and through him his kingdom" the chief poet's relationship with the 'sacral king' in early medieval Ireland earns him a comparison with India: "in the Vedic text *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* (viii. 25) the king's priest, the *purohita*, who has so much else in common with the druid/*fili*, is referred to explicitly as *rāṣṭragopa* 'protector of the realm' because he preserves both the king and his kingdom by means of his spells and rites. In other words, both in India and in Ireland the king was the champion and benefactor of his people, but only so long as he himself was protected by the spiritual expertise of his priest" (ibid., 456). Being later arrivals on the scene, "the clergy were the Christian pendant to the (culturally) pagan *filid* and in many things seem to have adopted them as their model" (ibid., 478) and it is concluded "that the basic configuration of the relations between king and priest had already been

firmly established before the advent of Christianity and that it was never wholly superseded by subsequent change" (ibid., 479). So much so, indeed, that even the court poet of the post-Norman period can be considered "not merely as poet . . . but rather as residual priest and successor to the druids and to as much of their religious and ideological repertoire as survived the transition to Christianity" and "the correspondence here is between the Celtic *sacerdos* (poet/druid) and the Indian brahman and *purohita*" (Mac Cana, 1988, 84).

If only a significant fraction of these and other similar assertions were to be substantiated, it would be a moot point whether, despite a plethora of flourishing, influential and outward looking monasteries, early medieval Ireland could reasonably be termed a predominantly Christian country. Thus Mac Cana himself envisages merely skin-deep penetration "in a society which was now publicly Christian, but which was still strongly attached to traditional beliefs and practices, still had a rich and learned oral tradition running alongside the written vernacular tradition, and still betrayed a certain nostalgia for the less complicated life that existed before Christianity" (1986, 41-2), so much so that even the monastic *literati* supposedly drew "mainly on native tradition, as handed on by the lower orders of poets and storytellers" (ibid., 35). Richter too has boldly ventured where others had feared to tread by suggesting in a section of his book entitled 'Ireland – a Christian Country?' that "the most important evidence for the limited influence of Christianity in Ireland is the continued existence of the pre-Christian group of poets or seers (*filid*). It is difficult to say whether the *filid* and their culture should be regarded as being hostile to Christianity and in competition with it; or whether they were simply upholding among Christians a tradition untouched by Christianity . . . The continued existence of the *filid* and their further activity in the leading social classes shows that Christianity had a vigorous competitor in the cultural area" (1988, 65).

It seems strange indeed that the author of *Féilire Óengusso*, writing close to 800 A.D., could have been so mistaken about the contemporary situation when he capped his famous contrast between Ireland's desolate royal forts and bustling monasteries with the following confidently triumphalist generalization: "the old cities of the pagans (*sen-chathraig na ngente*), concerning which prescriptive right has been effected, they are empty without worship like Lugaid's site. The small monastic sites that have been occupied by twos and threes, they are monastic Romes (*rúama*) with assemblies, with hundreds, with thousands. Paganism (*in gentlecht*) has been ruined, although it was illustrious and widespread. The kingdom of God the Father has filled heaven, earth and sea" (*Prol.*, 205-16).

As Patrick Sims-Williams points out in a fascinating recent article, the durable romantic myth of a 'Celtic twilight' was born shortly after the middle of the last century in France and England, where "Renan and Arnold were the first to present a wide European public with a synthetic, generalized picture of the various Celtic-speaking peoples and their literatures. Both were properly modest about their qualifications for the task; but their ignorance was an aid to generalization, and their picture of the Celts appealed at a more fundamental level than that of the niceties of scholarship. Their work, as René Galand, Malcolm Chapman, and others have shown, was founded upon a structural opposition between the Celts and the better-known European 'races'. Renan and Arnold set up the spiritual, impractical, rural, natural, and poetic Celtic peoples as the antithesis to materialism, 'Saxon'

philistinism, utilitarianism, excessive rationalism, artificiality, industrial urbanization, and all the other failings of the modern European world . . . If we are tempted to smile at the crudity of this racial myth, it may be salutary to recall the heady 1960s and the role then played by the Orient, particularly India and Nepal, in the thought-world of Western seekers after 'alternatives', in the days when 'far out' became a term of admiration. In both cases geography was an important part of the myth. The geographical position of the modern Celtic-speaking peoples, on the Western peripheries of Europe, was a historical explanation as well as a symbol for Renan, and all the more powerful for being both: . . . 'Never has a human family lived more apart from the world, and been purer from all alien admixture. Confined by conquest within forgotten islands and peninsulas, it has reared an impassable barrier against external influences; it has drawn all from itself; it has lived solely on its own capital . . . Roman civilization scarcely reached them, and left among them but few traces. The Teutonic invasion drove them back, but did not penetrate them. At the present hour they are still constant in resistance to an invasion dangerous in an altogether different way, - that of modern civilization'." (1986, 72-3).

10. The detailed picture of the interrelated activities of clerics, jurists, poets and the like to emerge from the early Irish sources themselves stands in marked contrast to the romantic nativist dualism illustrated above. Four categories of learned person seem to have chiefly interested the monastic compilers of annalistic obits in the pre-Norman period, namely the scholar in *ecnae* or scripturally based Latin learning, the *brithem* or jurist, the *senchaid* or genealogist-cum-historian, and the *fili* or poet-cum-storyteller. The legal tract *Uraicecht Becc* declares that many professions or *dánae* could be practised in either lay or monastic society without any change in the status or rewards due to them (*CIH* 1616.37f.), and notices in the annals duly bring monastic scholars, lawyers, historians and poets to light (cf. Ó Corráin, 1978, 14-6).

As the highest ranking practitioner of *ecnae* or *léigind* the *suí litre* or top Latin scholar, regularly termed *sapiens* in Hiberno-Latin and later called *fer léigind* in Irish, enjoyed status equal to that of a king, hospitaller, bishop or chief poet, this quintet of top-ranking equals being explicitly mentioned in the so-called 'genuine' prologue to the *Senchus Már* (*CIH* 348.24-349.25). During the two centuries following the obit of Cumméne Fota the *sapiens* in 662 A.D. the annals record the deaths of at least sixty one such top scholars in Latin and Scripture: thirty four are given a specific monastic affiliation and of these twenty one are described as holders of ecclesiastical positions, the high office of abbot in no less than eighteen cases. In a notice of a Viking attack upon Bangor in 823 (*AI*) particular mention is made of the community's scholars and bishops, *a suid 7 a hepscoip*, being put to the sword, and the record of a similar attack upon Louth in 840 (*AU*) likewise singles out the bishops, priests and scholars taken prisoner: *episcopos 7 praespiteros 7 sapientes captivos duxerunt*. Of the sixteen jurists, termed *brithem* in Irish and *iudex* in Latin, that are awarded annalistic obituaries in the pre-Norman period, no less than eleven are explicitly affiliated to monasteries, nine as holders of high ecclesiastical office, usually that of abbot or *airchinnech*. The profession of *senchaid* or historian rates twenty obits from the eighth to the twelfth century, fourteen with declared monastic affiliations including the odd abbot, *airchinnech* or the like. Of the fifty or so *filid* or poets mentioned in the annals of the pre-Norman period, nine are explicitly attached to monasteries (McCone, 1986b, 12). It must be stressed that absence of a

stated monastic affiliation in this material by no means demonstrates on its own that the individual concerned was not so connected. For example, it can be confidently assumed that most, if not all, of the scholars of Latin and Scripture appearing in the annals held monastic positions, although this is only specified in just over half of the obits in question. The very name of the "Augustin Ua Cuinn, chief judge of the Leinstermen" who died in 1095 according to *AFM*, surely indicates a cleric, and the monastic connections of "Máel Mura, chief poet of Ireland (*ríg-fili Érenn*)" (obit *AU* 887) and the "most excellent poet (*poeta optimus*)" Ruman mac Colmáin (obit *AU* 747) will be considered later.

In his recent edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar* Liam Breatnach quotes the following highly illuminating passage from a short Middle Irish legal tract on the ecclesiastical grades: "as for the bishop of Armagh, he has twenty one *cumal*'s, and furthermore his man of ecclesiastical learning and his chief judge and poet (*a fer léigind 7 a ollam bretheman 7 filed*) have the same honour-price as him; and it is thus even for every man of ecclesiastical learning and poet and judge of every other monastery (*do cach fir léigind 7 filid 7 brethemaíijn cacha cathrach remuind*), he has the same honour-price as his bishop" (1987, 91). This is, of course, a clear indication that any monastery of note was expected to have its own leading Latin scholar, professor of *filedacht* and chief judge, and it would be surprising if such pinnacles of their professions were not accompanied by various subordinate grades and pupils, thus constituting monastic schools.

The death of Cenn Fáelad, the *sapiens* or head of a monastic Latin school, in 679 A.D. is recorded in a presumably trustworthy *AU* obit, and a profound interest in the Church and her learning is displayed by a couple of arcane poetic compositions in Old Irish ascribed to him in the legal tracts *Míadslechte* and *Bretha Nemed* (*CIH* 586.14-5 and 2212.3f.), which were hardly compiled more than about half a century after his death. Clearly the tradition that he combined the disciplines of the Latin scholar, the poet and the jurist can be traced much further back than the extant Middle Irish versions of the well known and much discussed story of the destruction of his 'brain of forgetfulness' in the Battle of Mag Raith in 637 A.D. (e.g. *CIH* 250.33f.). According to this Cenn Fáelad was taken for convalescence to Bricín's establishment of Túaim Dreacain, where there were three schools for Latin learning, native law and poets respectively (*scol léigind 7 scol fénechais 7 scol filed*), the teachings of which Cenn Fáelad is supposed to have memorized by day and written up at night in poetic form. Failure to recognise that Túaim Dreacain was a monastery (cf. Gwynn and Hadcock, 1970, 407: Tomregan) led Mac Neill (1911) and consequently Mac Cana to posit secular schools of law and poetry here as well as a unique honorific and non-monastic application of the designation *sapiens* to what Mac Cana terms a "cultivated man of the world as Cenn Fáelad is reputed to have been" (1970, 71), while Richter ignores the text itself and fantasizes that "a doctor from the school of the druids operated on him" (1988, 85). Túaim Dreacain's obscurity is such that the location of Cenn Fáelad's epoch-making endeavours there instead of in a greater monastery has the ring of historical truth detected by Mac Neill rather than being the mere idealized fiction envisaged by Mac Cana. For present purposes, however, this hardly matters. Whatever the proportion of fact and fiction in this narrative, it was clearly intended as the charter for a literate monastic legal tradition applied to society as a whole and believed to combine poetic teaching and practice with ecclesiastical doctrine and techniques. It is, in fact, an aetiology of the state of

affairs described by *Uraicecht Becc*: "truth is based upon maxims and precedents and true scriptural testimonies (*for roscadaib 7 fásaigib 7 teistemnaib fíraib*) . . . Any judgement of a cleric that exists is based on the truth and entitlement of Scripture. A poet's judgement, however, is based on maxims. A ruler's judgement, however, is based on them all, on maxims and precedents and scriptural testimonies".

The story about Cenn Fáelad is thus likely to involve the projection of relevant contemporary conditions into the more distant past for authoritative justification, and this suggests that alongside the central *scol léigind* schools of law and *filedacht* or *senchus* were a common enough feature in pre-Norman Irish monasteries. The annalistic evidence just considered is corroborated by the Old Irish Triads, which single out five different monasteries as the main centres in Ireland for Latin learning, history and three branches of native law: Róss Carberry for *léigend*, Emly for *senchus*, Cloyne for *féinechas*, Cork for *bérta Féine* and Slane for *brethemnas* (Meyer, 1906, nos. 17, 15, 12, 16, 21).

11. Far from describing their learning and its transmission in the dualistic terms so beloved of modern nativists, early medieval Irish writers tend to view it as a seamless garment, so to speak. Thus the boundaries between Latin learning and jurisprudence, poetry and history are blurred, to say the least, in the relevant accounts and there is evidence for a great deal of overlap both in theory and in practice.

To begin with, expertise in two or more of these interdependent fields is sometimes ascribed to monastic types in annalistic obits, as when the Annals of Ulster record the deaths of "Ailill mac Cormaic, abbot of Slane, Latin scholar and most excellent judge (*sapiens et iudex optimus*)" in 802, of "Cú Roí mac Aldniad, abbot of Inis Clothrann and Fochlaid Midi, Latin scholar and most expert in Irish histories (*sapiens et peritissimus historiarum Scotticarum*)" in 871, of "Eochaid Ua Flannacáin, erenagh of Lis Oiged and Clúain Fiachna, master of poetry and history (*suí filidechta 7 senchusa*)" in 1004, and of "Flann Mainistrech, chief Latin scholar and professor of Irish history (*ardfer léigind 7 suí senchusa Érenn*)" in 1056. Indeed, the Annals of Tigernach are still more generous to Flann, calling him "expert of the Gael in Latin learning and history and poetry and versification (*etir léigend 7 senchus 7 filidecht 7 aircheta*)". The earliest historically reliable obits of poets in *AU* are "Ruman mac Colmáin, most excellent poet (*poeta optimus*)" in 747 and "Máel Mura, chief poet of Ireland (*rígfili Érenn*)" in 887. The latter can be identified as the famous Máel Mura Othna and accordingly connected with the monastery of Othain and its patron Mura. He is also called a *senchaid* or historian in a poem appended to his obit, and is accredited in the Book of Leinster with authorship of the pseudohistorical poem entitled *Can a mbunadus na nGáedel?*, 'Whence the origin of the Gael?' (*LL 15990f.*), probably the earliest extant Irish version of the biblically inspired account of the wanderings of Gáedel Glas and his descendants from Pharaoh's Egypt to their promised land of Ireland. The admittedly late but often well informed Annals of the Four Masters (742; O'Donovan, 1854) describe Ruman more fully as "an expert in Latin learning, in chronology and in poetry (*saoi in ecna i ccroinic 7 i filidhecht*)" and saints' genealogies recently edited by Pádraig Ó Riain describe him as the father of two bishops, ancestor of the Síol Romain in Trim, one of the three greatest poets in the world beside Homer and Vergil, and brother of Cormac or Colmán "bishop in Trim" (cf. Byrne, 1984, xvii-xix; Ó Riain,

1985, 126 and 177). Neither of these gentlemen, to say nothing of Eochaid Ua Flannacáin, Flann Mainistrech and their ilk, give grounds for belief in the so-called '(culturally) pagan *filid*' of pre-Norman Ireland.

Even more significant than such individual examples of the incorporation of the *fili* and his profession into the ecclesiastical network are more general assertions of the Church's input into and control over the mainstream of early medieval Irish culture. A powerful symbol of this was the tradition that the great legal compilation called *Senchus Már* was the joint work of a commission of three bishops, three kings and three poets or judges under St. Patrick's leadership, while Patrick's seventh-century biographer Muirchú deliberately singles out from the generally hostile druids and other members of the *áes dáno* a judge, Erc of Slane, and a poet, Dubthach maccu Lugair with his pupil Fiacc of Sletty, to submit willingly to the apostle's authority and accept Christianity before it was, so to speak, either profitable or popular to do so (see ch. 4, 3). The close relationship between the seven grades of the Church and the seven grades of *filid* has been demonstrated by Breatnach (1987, 81-9), and it is noteworthy that poet and priest alike were forbidden to have more than one spouse in a society otherwise characterized by a marked preference for polygamy, which monastic jurists justified with reference to the Old Testament. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1986) has recently drawn attention to the functional equivalence of saint's curse and poet's satire, and the logical conclusion of this longstanding symbiosis was the freeing of clerics and *filid* from secular courts at the Synod of Cashel in 1101 (Gwynn, 1968, 15). The 'pseudohistorical' prologue to the *Senchus Már* claims that "until Patrick came, then, pronouncement used to be granted to a trio only in Ireland, the historian (*fer comgne*) for narration and storytelling, the poet (*fer cerda*) for praising and satirizing, the judge (*breithem*) for judgement according to maxims and precedents. Since Patrick came, however, each of these pronouncements is subject to the man of the white language, i.e. of Scripture (*do fiur in bérta báin, .i. ina canóine*)" (*CIH 342.22-5*). Beryl Smalley points out that in Western Europe "the Bible was the most studied book of the middle ages. Bible study represented the highest branch of learning . . . Such knowledge was not confined to the specialist: both the language and the content of Scripture permeate medieval thought" (1952, xi). That early Christian Ireland was no exception emerges clearly from the following statement in *Míadslechtá*: "so that it is identically that the grades of scriptural Latin learning and the Church (*gráda ecna 7 ecalsa*) correspond reciprocally to the grades of poets and landowners (*gráda file[d] 7 féne*), but scriptural Latin learning (*ecna*) is the mother of each of these professions so that it is out of her palm that they all drink" (*CIH 586.27-9*).

The wealth, manpower and political importance of major Irish monasteries from at least the seventh century emerge clearly and repeatedly from contemporary legal, hagiographical and other sources. This ties in with the fact that early Christian Ireland had a reasonably typical medieval western European social structure in which Church and State were inextricably linked, a typical statement to this effect being provided by the Old Irish law tract *Córus Béscnai*: "everything which did not contradict either the word of God in the Law of the letter or the conscience of Christians was sewn together into the order of judges by the Church and poets (*filid*). All the law of nature was proper, allowing for (the claims of) faith and its propriety, and (there was) sewing together of Church and State (*comúaim n-ecalsa fri túaith*) and the due of both from each other and to each other. For there are claims of

Church upon State and claims of State upon Church. The claims of State upon Church, when it is in its propriety and fair entitlement, (are) the request for rights from the Church, namely baptism, communion, hymns for the soul, mass from every church to everyone according to his proper faith with exposition of the word of God to everyone who should listen to it and fulfil it . . . The entitlement of Church from State: tithes and first-fruits and firstlings (are) the claim of the Church from its members" (*CIH* 529.1f.). The cultural implications of this interdependence are clearly expressed by the following passage from an early tract on poets: "a kingdom (*túath*) shall not be a kingdom without scholar (*ecna*), without cleric (*eclais*), without poet (*fili*), without king (*rí*) who extends contract and treaty for kingdoms. A scholar shall not be a scholar, whom Scripture does not guide aright. A cleric shall not be a cleric without mass. A king shall not be a king without substance. A poet shall not be poet without composition (*fuirmed* 'setting down') if he be of proper foundation, of the offspring of a poet. They are entitled to reward from kings and nobles who are at the head of a kingdom" (Gwynn, 1940, 31.10-7). Unambiguous statements of this kind in "law tracts of the eighth century" that allegedly "only take passing notice of the Christianization of society" (Richter, 1988, 60) surely give the lie to the statement that "an established Church of the kind that had influenced the shaping of Christianity in the Empire since the fourth century did not, therefore, have an equivalent in Ireland" (*ibid.*).

This and other passages represent kings and aristocrats as important patrons of the *filid*, who could obviously ply their craft either in the monasteries or among the laity in the normal fashion. The crucial question is where the class as a whole received its education, what kind of curriculum was involved and how this was related to that of other disciplines like law, history and Latin learning. Evidence has already been advanced to demonstrate the existence of schools of *ecnae* or *léigend*, of branches of law such as *brithemnas*, *féinechas* and *bétrae féne*, of *senchusa* and of *filedacht* in the early Irish monasteries. The existence of secular counterparts in the pre-Norman period remains to be proved but, even if there were such schools also, the monastic provenance of the literary output in each of these fields is hardly open to doubt. Moreover, an examination of the qualifications expected in the upper reaches of these disciplines points to something like a monastic core curriculum in which they were all rooted. Thus the third highest ranking ecclesiastical scholar in *Míadslecht*a was expected to be competent in poetry (*filidecht*) and history (*comgne*) as well as Latin learning (*léigend*), and Breatnach (1986, 46-7) has recently made a very strong case for identifying the Banbán responsible for writing the vernacular legal tract *Cáin Fuithirbe* around 680 A.D. with the *sapiens/scriba/fer léigind* (of Kildare?) of that name whose death in 686 A.D. is recorded in various annals and who is probably the same as the Banbannus mentioned in the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin commentary on the Catholic Epistles. Conversely the eighth- or ninth-century *Uraicecht Becc* insists upon the indispensability of poetry and Latin learning as qualifications of the highest ranking judge, the *brithem teora mbreth .i. breth féni 7 breth filed 7 breth bérla báin bias* "the judge of three judgements, namely a judgement of the *Féni*, a judgement of poets and a judgement of white language that shall be", glossed as native law (*féinechas*), poetry (*filidecht*) and Latin learning (*léigend*) respectively (*CIH* 1612.23-6, cf. 1614.32-3).

Uraicecht na Ríar demands of the *ollam* or chief poet knowledge of three hundred and fifty tales, of history (*coimgne*) and of judgement by native law (*brithemnacht*

fénechais). The first two of these recur in the preface to saga list A, while list B is introduced by a passage in which Urard mac Coise, functioning as the typical *fili*, boasts a knowledge of histories (*coimgneda*), tales (*sceóil*), items of ancient lore (*senchusa*) and the takings of Ireland (*gabála Érenn*) (ed. Mac Cana, 1980, 50). This representation of a poet fully versed in the biblically inspired scheme of invasions chimes in well with the already discussed poem on the origins of the Gael ascribed to the ninth-century *fili* Máel Mura but is less easy to square with Mac Cana's unsubstantiated claim that "until approximately the end of the eleventh century the monastic scholar was distinguished from his *fili* counterpart by his study and promotion of the 'synthetic' history which reached its fullest development in the twelfth-century compilation of *Lebor Gabála*, 'the Book of Conquest'" (1974, 138).

12. Nativist assumptions about the pre-Norman *filid* are all too often based upon the evidence and practices of post-Norman bardic poets or, worse still, upon "the most detailed description of these schools" (Richter, 1988, 183) provided in the 1722 *Memoir of the Marquis of Clanricarde* by Thomas O'Sullivan, who not only wrote after they had ceased to exist but is now also seriously suspected of having been a fraud and a forger of earlier records (Ó Murchadha, 1983). However, it cannot be safely assumed that the post-Norman poets represent a straightforward continuation of the attitudes and practices of the pre-Norman *filid*, particularly when there is evidence for hostility between poets and churchmen "at least as early as the fourteenth century" (Williams, 1980, 341) but nothing comparable in the pre-Norman period.

It is no surprise that these later poets only occasionally call themselves *bard* and generally prefer the more prestigious title of *file*, but the name used in the annals of the period is, as my wife Katharine Simms informs me, almost invariably *fer dána*. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries are generally recognised as a watershed in which the success of newly established continental monastic orders forced the vernacular learning of the older monasteries into an increasingly secular milieu, and it looks as if the earlier rigid distinctions between the monastically oriented *fili* and the humbler secular *bard* gradually disappeared around that time to bring into being a merged class of *fir dhána* with a major input of previously bardic personnel and practices. Gerard Murphy's (1940, 206) surmise about the 'underground' existence of bardic panegyric in pre-Norman Ireland is corroborated by an actual reference to oral composition in the Old Irish tract on poets in *Ériu* 13: "although knowledge of letters and metrics is not required of the bards, it is required of them to perceive and recognise their proper measure by ear and nature. It is thus that the free bards make their bardic poetry" (Gwynn, 1940, 43-4). Another text states clearly that the study of letters, metrics and inflections set the *fili* apart from the humbler *bard* (Thurneysen, 1891, 6) and that the poet's long course of study included grammar, numerous ogams and texts such as *Bretha Nemed* and *Auraicept na hÉicsine* (*ibid.*, 32,36). The latter was also known as *Auraicept na nÉces* 'The Poets' Primer' and has been aptly described by Mac Cana as "a fairly typical product of Latino-Gaelic learning" (1974, 136). In the likely event that the authors of these poetic texts were *filid*, their occasional use of Latin evinces a familiarity with that language born of a monastic education. If, on the other hand, they were ecclesiastical scholars rather than *filid* proper, their very subject matter proves a deep monastic interest in and acquaintance with the education and usages of poets. Most likely, of course, they

were both. Nevertheless, some scholars have sought to distinguish between “monastic *literati* or *nua-litridi*” and “the learned *filid*” (so Mac Cana, 1971, 117, cf. 106) on the strength of a single passage (Thurneysen, 1891, 23) describing bardic metres also used by *filid* in addition to their own peculiar measures as *núachrotha* or ‘new forms’ because “it is *núalitridi* who discovered them”. However, the other two attestations in the St. Gall glosses (5^b11, 90^b4) on Priscian make it quite clear that *núalitridi* simply meant ‘recent authors’ as opposed to older writers and so implies no contrast with allegedly oral *filid*.

It seems, then, that literacy was an indispensable attribute of the medieval Irish *filid*, and it should be emphasised that the attested requirement that *filid* be able to recite memorized poems and tales to aristocratic audiences is quite irrelevant to the question of oral versus written composition. There is no good evidence for the loose claim, apparently based upon a well worn passage from the Clanricarde Memoir mentioned above, that in early Christian Ireland “the recitations of genealogies and prescribed stories were learned in darkened rooms” (Richter, 1988, 20). As Oskamp has remarked, “the *fili* of this period is in no way comparable with the *scéalaighe*, the storyteller by the fireside. He is the scholar-layman who is educated in a monastery and fulfils a high position either in a royal court or in a monastic school” (1970, 14). The notion of a clear divide between ecclesiastical scholars on the one hand and high-ranking categories of the so-called ‘secular’ *áes dáno* such as poets or judges on the other is central to the illusion of a ‘native tradition’ hermetically, not to say cryogenically, sealed by its practitioners from suspicious foreign elements and innovations imported by the Church, but this purist view is untenable for the simple reason that it is seriously at variance with the evidence of the contemporary texts themselves.

This was already apparent to Rudolf Thurneysen over sixty years ago, when he observed that “very soon after the introduction of Christianity these *filid* entered into a close connection with monastic learning” (1921, 66-7) and that “the first written copies hardly came about through a monastic denizen asking a *fili* for his tales, but we should rather assume that some *filid* acquired the art of reading and writing and themselves wrote down what seemed worthy of recollection to them and presumably also their own compositions” (ibid., 72). Although mostly dismissed as uncongenial by the majority of the postwar generation of Irish scholars, this approach has recently been taken up, further developed and corroborated by Ó Corráin: “one fundamentally important point must be kept in mind in dealing with all Irish literary, legal and historical materials: they are the products of a highly trained, highly self-aware mandarin class. One must note that the worlds of native and ecclesiastical learning had merged long before the bulk of the surviving texts were redacted – a matter which is of very considerable consequence” (1986, 142). Indeed it is, and the following chapters should help to highlight various aspects of a situation radically different from that depicted by the nativist school.