

Chapter 4

Of Bede's 'five languages and four nations': the earliest writing from Ireland, Scotland and Wales

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As is clear from his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [*An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*], which he completed in 731, Bede considered the activities of neighbouring peoples to have been an important part of the particular version of English history he wished to relate. Contact between them must have been continuous, and constant interaction occasioned much opportunity for mutual influence and exchange of ideas across a wide area.¹ Notwithstanding this, the written traditions of the British, Irish and Picts – the three groups which alongside the English constituted for Bede his 'four nations' (*HE*, I.1) – are varied in both the extent and nature of the material that has survived. The cultures shared common concerns yet were moulded by local developments. Overlapping strands in their narratives, however important, form but a part of individual literary histories, each located in a particular time and place.

For Bede their Christian strand was most significant and in this regard the Irish in particular are praised. He applauded their conversion tactics, specifically the mission of Aidan, later bishop of Lindisfarne, and Columba, founder and first abbot of Iona, to the Picts and to his own territory of Northumbria. The Irish succeeded admirably where native Britons had failed. Newly converted Anglo-Saxons travelled in large numbers to Irish monasteries to avail themselves of scholarship presumably lacking at home (*HE*, III.7, 25, 27). Among them was Aldfrith, king of Northumbria (d. 704), whose sojourn among the Irish before he succeeded to the kingship had ensured that he became *in scripturis doctissimus* [*HE*, IV.26; most learned in the Scriptures] and during which he may even have acquired an Irish name (Flann Fína).²

¹ See Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Légend hÉirenn'.

² Ireland (ed. and trans.), *Old Irish Wisdom Texts*.

Dealings with Irish leaders may also date from this period and it was on political business that Aldfrith was first visited by Adomnán, abbot of Iona, who sought out the Northumbrian king to plead for the release of Irish hostages who had been captured in a Saxon raid on Brega in the Irish midlands in 685.³ Writing half a century or so later, Bede deemed these Irish contacts to have been of key importance; Irish influence in English ecclesiastical history is for him a major theme.⁴

Bede considers the English and the Irish alongside the other island peoples, the Britons and the Picts. Turned back from Ireland's shore by the Scoti (Irish), the Picts were advised by them to settle in the northern parts of Britain, since the native inhabitants occupied the southern parts. In time they were joined by migrating Irish who occupied Pictish territory. Bede is familiar with the term *Dál Riata* and rightly comments: 'nam lingua eorum daal partem significat' [*HE*, 1.1; for in their language *Dál* signifies a part]. Moreover, he notes the linguistic distinctiveness of Britons and Picts, noting also, however, that the latter were united with their English, British and Irish counterparts in their study of God's truth and that a fifth language, Latin, 'quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis' [though the contemplation of the Scriptures is in general use among them all].⁵ In Bede's world, therefore, such disparate peoples were brought together by their common Christianity, and his concern with neighbouring regions is an important part of the account of the growth of the English Church he is seeking to impart.

As Bede's tantalizing glimpses of these peoples reveal, their influence on the English could be enduring and profound; they in turn were affected by the English in continuing, various ways. That evidence for such mutual interaction should be attested in the intellectual sphere which was controlled and directed by their common denominator, the Church, is only to be expected. Having the benefit of a mutually comprehensible learned language in Latin, scholars moved between ecclesiastical establishments, bringing with them books. That they exchanged ideas, as well as artistic and scribal techniques, both formally and informally, is evident. Indeed, such is the degree of

3 Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *Annals of Ulster*, pp. 148–51 (685.2 and 687.5). On Adomnán's visit, see *HE*, III.26 and Adomnán, *Life of Columba*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, II.46. Moisl has interpreted the visit as one episode in a long, complex relationship between Bernician royalty and the northern Irish dynasty Uí Néill ('Bernician Royal Dynasty', pp. 120–4). See also T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 429–38.

4 For an overview of ecclesiastical contacts between Ireland and England in the seventh and eighth centuries, see K. Hughes, 'Evidence for Contacts'.

5 *HE*, 1.1; see also Forsyth, 'Literacy in Pictland', pp. 41–2.

homogeneity assumed between certain centres of production that debate now rages as to the precise place of origin of such illuminated Latin Gospel books as the late seventh-century Book of Durrow, the Lindisfarne Gospels of about 700, and the eighth-century masterpiece the Book of Kells.⁶ Particular cultural features may well be apparent in some scriptoria stretching from parts of Ireland to Iona and further southwards to Northumbria; then as now, literary fashion may have ensured that certain traits became relatively widespread at a given time. Nonetheless, neither a shared academic endeavour nor regular contact could eliminate difference, even if to do so was considered desirable, an approach for which no evidence survives. Varying resources, as well as varied needs and interests, ensured that learned establishments placed their emphases in different spheres. Notwithstanding the overarching arm of a common Christian Church, in the world of literature and learning variety prevailed.

Comparison between different cultural regions, however, is often difficult to make, since survival of sources varies considerably from place to place. In terms of both range of date and sheer breadth of material, Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland are most closely comparable. By contrast, Scotland, in the sense of the territory now so defined, is relatively barren, despite the fact that the territory closest to Ireland, identified correctly by Bede as Dál Riata, formed a cultural continuum with its nearest neighbour, its people sharing a common language and heritage with the Irish.⁷ Straddling both Irish and Scottish Dál Riata is the figure of one of Bede's heroes, St Columba, whose heartland was the island of Iona where he went on his departure from Ireland in 563.⁸ The ties of the important monastery he founded there remained for some time with his homeland, and Colum Cille, as he is known in the vernacular, symbolizes the close cultural connections across the Northern Sea. His obscure elegy, *Amrae Coluim Chille* [*Columba's Eulogy*], attributed to Dallán Forgaill, was long considered to be the earliest datable poem in Irish to have survived.⁹ While the core of the text may be from the late sixth or early seventh century, Jacopo Bisagni has shown that it was revised and enlarged in the ninth century.¹⁰ Whatever its date, however, it is

6 For a brief summary, see O'Sullivan, 'Manuscripts'.

7 The argument that the close links reflected Irish migration to Dál Riata has been challenged by Ewan Campbell, who views the inhabitants of the latter territory as people who had always lived in what later became Scotland, sharing a language with their Irish neighbours (*Saints and Sea-Kings*, and 'Were the Scots Irish?').

8 Mac Airt (ed. and trans.), *Annals of Inisfallen*, pp. 74–5.

9 Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille'.

10 Bisagni, 'Language and Date'.

specific about Columba's qualities as a scholar, noting his familiarity with patristic authors such as John Cassian, as well as his knowledge of legal, scriptural and astrological matters.¹¹ His 'serc léigind' [love of learning] is also deemed paramount in a pair of poems in praise of him ascribed to a later kinsman, Bécán mac Luigdech, which are likely to be seventh century in date.¹² On account of this learned zeal, 'léiciss coicthiu, léiciss caithri' [he abandoned battles, he abandoned fortresses].¹³ His late seventh-century biographer, Adomnán, similarly alluded to his scholarly prowess¹⁴ and he has been cited as the author of the polished abecedarian seventh-century hymn on Creation, *Altus Prosator* [*The High Creator*].¹⁵ The attribution became established and forms part of the vernacular prefaces to the poem in the two copies preserved in the eleventh-century manuscript *Liber Hymnorum*.¹⁶ That the poem is highly unlikely to have been composed by Columba, as Jane Stevenson has shown,¹⁷ does not negate the fact that he had acquired a considerable scholarly reputation already in the century or so after his death. As the founder of a key centre of learning, Iona, it is not surprising that his name should be associated with some of the monastery's significant literary products even after his death.

A near contemporary copy of Columba's *Vita* by Admonán has survived in the hand of the early eighth-century scribe and abbot of Iona, Dorbéne.¹⁸ It owes its survival, like many other (mainly Irish) manuscripts, to the fact that it was brought to the continent in the medieval period; it was in Reichenau in the thirteenth century and at an unknown period came to

11 'By his wisdom he made glosses clear. He fixed the Psalms, he made the books of Law known, those books Cassian loved. He won battles with gluttony. The books of Solomon, he followed them. Seasons and calculations he set in motion. He separated the elements according to figures among the books of the Law. He read mysteries and distributed the Scriptures among the schools, and he put together the harmony concerning the course of the moon, the course which it ran with the rayed sun, and the course of the sea' (T. O. Clancy (ed.), *Triumph Tree*, p. 104). See also Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', pp. 253–9.

12 F. Kelly (ed. and trans.), 'Poem in Praise of Columb Cille' (the attribution to Bécán occurs in glosses to the text; in the title it is said to be the work of the better-known Dallán Forgaill: p. 2), and 'Tiughraind Bhécáin'. The reference to 'serc léigind' is in the latter poem, §18, p. 84.

13 F. Kelly (ed. and trans.), 'Tiughraind Bhécáin', §17, p. 84; earlier the poet claims that 'to-gó dánu' [he chose learning], §16, p. 84.

14 Adomnán, *Life of Columba*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, II.8, 9, 44.

15 *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

16 Bernard and Atkinson (eds. and trans.), *Liber Hymnorum*, vol. 1, pp. 68–83.

17 J. Stevenson, 'Altus Prosator'.

18 On the evidence concerning Dorbéne's abbacy, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p. 58. Dorbéne died in 713, five months after obtaining the abbacy, according to Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *Annals of Ulster*, pp. 168–9 (713.5).

Schaffhausen where it is still housed.¹⁹ More remarkable still is the preservation of a Latin Gospel book, the Book of Deer, produced further east in Old Deer, Aberdeenshire, probably in the tenth century.²⁰ Best known for its twelfth-century additions in Latin and the vernacular,²¹ the latter, concerned directly with the monastery of Deer, were written in a number of different hands and constitute the earliest direct evidence for Gaelic in Scotland.²² The lack of companion codices led Kathleen Hughes to ask 'Where are the writings of early Scotland?' and in response to her own question she suggested that in this case absence of evidence really does imply evidence of absence and that little was written down.²³ This view has rightly been challenged, Patrick Sims-Williams noting that Scottish manuscripts were more likely to have been brought to Ireland where they could easily have perished, rather than to the continent. In addition, he adduces evidence suggesting that in the Anglo-Norman environment of the twelfth-century Scottish Church, 'Scottish writings may simply have ceased to be copied' and hence did not survive.²⁴ Bede, as we have seen, perceived no difference between the Picts, on the one hand, and the English, British and Irish on the other, in their study of Christian writings.²⁵ We may assume, therefore, that they too must have had books. The same author referred to King Nechtan 'admonitus ecclesiasticarum frequenti meditatione scripturarum' [having been convinced by his assiduous contemplation of ecclesiastical writings], as Katherine Forsyth has noted.²⁶ The texts that this eighth-century Pictish ruler examined in detail, in their Scottish guise at least, must since have been lost.

Other traces of the writing produced by the inhabitants of the territories of what were once Dál Riata and Pictland are in fact extant. Annalistic texts, predominantly in Latin, the production of which was a preoccupation of the monastery of Iona from at least the middle of the seventh century, owe their survival to the fact that an 'Iona Chronicle' was brought to Ireland in the 740s and incorporated into the 'Chronicle of Ireland' from which many of the

19 Adomnán, *Life of Columba*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, p. liv.

20 Cambridge, University Library, MS li.6.32; on various aspects of the manuscript, see the articles in Forsyth (ed.), *Studies on the Book of Deer*.

21 Jackson, *Gaelic Notes*; Ó Maolalaigh, 'Scotticisation of Gaelic'.

22 Both 'Irish' and 'Gaelic' are terms used to describe the common literary language of early medieval Ireland and Scotland, with the former often used to denote texts of Irish provenance.

23 K. Hughes, 'Where Are the Writings of Early Scotland?'

24 Sims-Williams, 'Uses of Writing', p. 20.

25 *HE*, I.1 (this is noted by Forsyth, 'Literacy in Pictland', pp. 41–2).

26 *HE*, v.21 (Forsyth, 'Literacy in Pictland', p. 42).

extant Irish chronicles are derived.²⁷ Occasional later copies of earlier works have also survived. A late seventh-century date for the first draft of the political tract known as *Senchas Fer nAlban* has been postulated.²⁸ A genealogical survey of sorts, listing various peoples, its precise administrative purpose is not entirely clear and it has no known parallel.²⁹ Generically more familiar is a Pictish origin legend, *Do Bunad Cruithnech*: assigned a possible date range from the mid-ninth century to the mid-eleventh, it is difficult to determine the period to which its detailed division of the Pictish kingdom refers.³⁰ To these Latin and vernacular texts may be added a further linguistic layer towards the end of our period, since Norse appears to have become the language of Orkney and Shetland by the mid-ninth century.³¹ Norse texts pertaining to these Scottish territories are late, however, and their provenance mainly Scandinavian.³² Moreover, since Pictish itself has survived only in place names, the complex linguistic situation is not fully reflected in the few extant texts.

A further linguistic complexity lies in the fact that southern Scotland was Brittonic-speaking and that what some scholars would claim to be one of the oldest poems in Welsh, *Y Gododdin*, emanates from this precise territory.³³ A heroic elegy to the three hundred or so men from Manaw Gododdin, the area around the Firth of Forth, this poem, attributed to Aneirin, survives in a single thirteenth-century manuscript and is difficult to date.³⁴ This kingdom was one of a number of interconnected dynasties forming 'Yr Hen Ogledd' (The Old North), whose Brittonic dialect of Cumbric was closely related to what later became Welsh. Early material emanating from Gododdin and from the neighbouring regions of Rheged and Strathclyde may well have been transferred to Wales. The long, complex composition ascribed to Aneirin, as well as thematically related verse attributed to his sixth-century contemporary,

27 K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 115–22, building on Bannerman, 'Notes on the Scottish Entries'. This bald statement greatly oversimplifies a complex process, for which see Charles-Edwards (trans.), *Chronicle of Ireland*, vol. 1, pp. 1–59; and N. Evans, *The Present and the Past*.

28 Edited by Bannerman in *Studies*, pp. 27–156; see also Dumville, 'Ireland and North Britain'.

29 A. Woolf has termed it 'in part a sort of census document' (*From Pictland to Alba*, p. 7).

30 See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 10–11; and Broun, 'Alba'.

31 Barnes, *Norn Language*.

32 For translations of a number of these, see T. O. Clancy (ed.), *Triumph Tree*, pp. 146–51, 164–76, 190–211, 215–35.

33 This is provocatively encapsulated by Jackson in his translation entitled *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem*.

34 See further Chapter 26 below.

Taliesin, bear the hallmarks of later work.³⁵ This is not to deny that literature was being produced in this area at an early period. *Historia Brittonum* [*The History of the Britons*], originally written in the ninth century, contains a well-known passage referring to a flowering of poetry in the time of King Ida of Northumbria in the middle of the sixth century. Among the five poets named are Aneirin and Taliesin, who ‘simul uno tempore in poemate brittannico claruerunt’ [at one and the same time were renowned in British poetry].³⁶ Their precise connection with the powerful heroic verse bearing their names extant in later Welsh manuscripts must perforce remain unclear.

King Ida’s contemporary, Gildas, also makes indirect reference to vernacular Welsh literature, objecting in his accustomed polemical tone to the fact that Maelgwn, king of Gwynedd, was the subject of panegyric. His concern is with eulogy of secular rulers, rather than with the language in which such flattery is given,³⁷ and his incidental comments constitute valuable evidence for the production of praise poetry in Welsh in his time. Whether such verse was written down is another matter, but Welsh was certainly being committed to vellum when the *Historia Brittonum* was first composed. A series of important marginalia in both Latin and Welsh has been preserved in a Gospel book which was at Llandeilo Fawr in the early ninth century but was transferred to Lichfield perhaps a century or two later, a move to which the manuscript owes its survival.³⁸ Among the eight marginal texts, the most significant is the ‘Surexit’ memorandum (so called after the Latin verb with which it begins), which is ‘a record of the settlement of a dispute about the right to land’,³⁹ comprising a sanction clause and witness list. A continuous piece of syntactical Welsh (with occasional words in Latin), its significance cannot be overestimated. Closely connected with another marginal note in Latin commemorating the gift of the Gospel book at Teilo’s church, its writing has been placed at Llandeilo in the second quarter of the ninth century.⁴⁰ A slightly later Welsh manuscript, dating from the second half of the ninth century, also survived by virtue of its having been brought from Wales to

35 See Isaac, ‘*Gweith Gwen Ystrat*’, and ‘Readings’.

36 [Pseudo-]Nennius, *British History*, §62, pp. 37, 38. Aneirin’s name is given in its earlier Old Welsh form, ‘Neirin’.

37 See Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas’, p. 177.

38 Called the Book of St Chad after Lichfield’s patron, the place of writing of this Gospel book has been debated; for a summary of the arguments, see Jenkins and Owen, ‘Welsh Marginalia, Part I’, pp. 42–8.

39 Jenkins and Owen, ‘Welsh Marginalia, Part II’, p. 109.

40 Jenkins and Owen, ‘Welsh Marginalia, Part I’, pp. 56–61.

England, in the early eleventh century.⁴¹ Containing a Latin summary of the Gospels by the Christian poet Juvencus, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.4.42 (1285) is heavily glossed and contains a series of stanzas in *englyn* form.⁴² Three of these are also ninth century in date, while a further nine have been placed a century later.⁴³ The three bear a thematic resemblance to *Y Gododdin* in that there is a reference to the drinking of mead, perhaps by warriors. The tone appears nostalgic, a lord complaining that ‘mitelu nit gurmaur’ [my retinue is not very large], ‘namercit mi nep leguenid henoid’ [let no one ask me for merriment tonight].⁴⁴

Literature was clearly being written in Wales before 900. However, though more numerous than those of Scottish Dál Riata and Pictland, early manuscript sources from this region too are remarkably thin.⁴⁵ Just as early literary production in Scotland had a strong Irish dimension, most notably in the context of Iona, Irish influence has also been detected in Wales to varying degrees. Palaeographically, the two regions have been seen as close at least from the ninth century.⁴⁶ This connection is personified in Náuadu, the main scribe of the Cambridge Juvencus, whose Irish name may betray his ethnic origin, though he was working in a Welsh scriptorium, as we have seen, and a colophon in his hand, ‘araut dinuadu’ [a prayer for Náuadu], is also in Welsh.⁴⁷ Of greater significance in this regard is the presence of Old Irish glosses in the manuscript, alongside others in Latin and Welsh. And while many of the vernacular glosses were copied, not composed, by the manuscript’s numerous scribes, it is likely that some at least of those involved in the production were Irish rather than Welsh.⁴⁸

The attraction for Irish scribes of a Welsh scriptorium suggests a productive literary tradition east of the Irish Sea and one with which they would have felt

41 McKee has tentatively suggested that it may have been originally produced in south-east Wales, ‘perhaps at Llanancarfan or Llanilltud Fawr’ (*Cambridge Juvencus Manuscript*, p. 75).

42 For a detailed description of the syllabic metrical form known as *englyn*, see Rowland (ed. and trans.), *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, pp. 305–89.

43 Williams, *Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, p. 100.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

45 For a description of extant Welsh manuscripts, see Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*; Sims-Williams lists the majority of the works available in Wales before the middle of the twelfth century (‘Uses of Writing’, pp. 23–4). Inscriptions have survived from all three areas: for those of Scotland, see Forsyth, ‘Literacy in Pictland’. Epigraphic evidence from Wales is gathered in Nash-Williams (ed.), *Early Christian Monuments*; an important example, a stone commemorating a seventh-century king of Gwynedd, Cadfan, has been discussed by Williams, *Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, pp. 25–40.

46 See, e.g., Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography*, p. 89.

47 For a discussion of this scribe, see McKee, *Cambridge Juvencus Manuscript*, pp. 9–12.

48 This is discussed in detail by Harvey, ‘Cambridge Juvencus Glosses’; and McKee, *Cambridge Juvencus Manuscript*, pp. 67–75.

a certain familiarity. In this interdependent cultural context it is inherently unlikely that native Welshmen were first inspired to write their own language by such Irish visitors, as David Greene suggested they were, noting the earlier attestation of vernacular glosses and annotations in Latin manuscripts in Ireland.⁴⁹ While Welsh scholars, like their Anglo-Saxon colleagues mentioned by Bede, journeyed to Ireland, the Irish themselves ventured further afield, going to the continent, and to a lesser extent England, presumably with manuscript-filled satchels in hand. In any event, it has been estimated that over fifty Irish manuscripts dating from the first millennium survive as a result, brought to what transpired to be the safer confines of learned centres overseas.⁵⁰ And while the vernacular material is secondary in what are first and foremost Latin documents, not surprisingly it bears witness to a wider range of texts than survives in the far more restricted number of extant early Welsh manuscripts.⁵¹

Notwithstanding the numerical superiority of the Irish documents, they contain no administrative material comparable with the 'Surexit' memorandum and related texts in the Lichfield Gospels. Wales has its closest parallel in Anglo-Saxon England in this regard. The cultural contacts between these two regions are personified by Bishop Asser who lived at the very end of our period and who as biographer of King Alfred achieved lasting fame. Educated in Wales, his agreement with his royal patron allowed him the liberty to return to St David's for lengthy periods. His command of a range of classical sources indicates a conventional learned background. Alfred undoubtedly sought out a scholar with whom he could identify; Asser, for his part, as far as we can tell, felt comfortable in Alfred's Wessex court. This Anglo-Cambrian partnership was productive; moreover, in producing a text to please a foreign paymaster, the Welshman simultaneously designed a text for an audience back home. While so doing he may have encountered a trio of Irishmen, Dub Sláine, Mac Bethad and Máel Inmain, whose journey with neither oar nor rudder across the Irish Sea is related in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 891; having safely reached the English coast, they made directly for the court of Alfred the Great.⁵²

49 Greene, 'Linguistic Considerations'; Sims-Williams has highlighted the flaws in this argument ('Uses of Writing', pp. 31–2).

50 The figure is from Kenney, *Sources*, p. 9, and has been commented upon by Sims-Williams, 'Uses of Writing', pp. 20–1 (with further references).

51 The content of extant manuscripts containing seventh-, eighth- and ninth-century material in Irish is described in Stokes and Strachan (eds. and trans.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, vol. 1, pp. xiii–xxvi, vol. II, pp. ix–xl.

52 Asser, *Alfred the Great*, ed. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 113–14. See also Dumville, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 61–2.

Given the focus of that king's intellectual programme, they would have encountered there vernacular learning alongside its Latin counterpart in a bilingual situation that can only have made the three Irishmen feel at home. Contemporary annalistic records in Old Irish and Old English survive from Alfred's time and earlier, as do vernacular martyrologies⁵³ and a number of prose compositions, the subject matter of which is, in the case of the Irish material in particular, remarkably diverse.⁵⁴ Early poetry has also survived in the two languages: an appropriate Irish equivalent of the book of vernacular verse which Asser claims was given to Alfred by his mother would have been a copy of *Audacht Morainn* [*The Testament of Morann*], a metrical *speculum principum* to which a composition date of c. 700 has plausibly been assigned.⁵⁵ The rich corpus of Old Irish law tracts contains poetry as well as prose, falling in date somewhere between the law code of the sixth-century Kentish King Æthelberht and the ninth-century laws of Alfred the Great.⁵⁶

This great repository of Irish literature is attested only in manuscripts of the late eleventh century and later. Yet in the case of Ireland, the quantity of glossarial and marginal material in the vernacular found in contemporary Latin manuscripts has ensured that the linguistic contours of Classical Old Irish, a relatively stable learned language in use in the eighth and ninth centuries, are fairly secure. Linguistic dating of texts remains an inexact science; nonetheless, a predominance of Old Irish forms in a text preserved solely in later manuscripts is strongly suggestive of an earlier exemplar. Furthermore, scribes often indicate the source from which copies of a particular text were made. Accordingly, the titles of early vernacular manuscripts are preserved long after the physical codices themselves have been lost. Furthermore, the frequency of the citation of certain manuscript sources allows us to deduce in part what they may have contained. One such heavily quarried manuscript was *Cín Dromma Snechtai* [*The Book of Drumsnat*]. Specifically referred to on five separate occasions in the earliest extant vernacular manuscript, *Lebor na hUidre* [*The Book of the Dun Cow*], a late eleventh-

53 For connections between English and Irish martyrologies, see Ó Riain, *Anglo-Saxon Ireland* and the references therein, particularly to earlier work by John Hennig. A revised version of this article appears as 'Northumbrian Urtext' in his *Feastdays of the Saints*.

54 For a general account, see Ó Cathasaigh, 'Literature of Medieval Ireland to c. 800'; and Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Literature of Medieval Ireland, 800–1200'.

55 F. Kelly (ed. and trans.), *Audacht Morainn*.

56 Irish legal material has been elucidated by F. Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*; for a detailed analysis of the contents of the tracts, see L. Breatnach, *Companion*. A more sustained comparison of Old Irish and Old English writing can be found in Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Legend hÉrenn'.

century codex from Clonmacnoise,⁵⁷ as well as in other contexts, a putative table of contents for this lost 'Book' has been compiled.⁵⁸ Encompassing both prose and poetry, it included a generically diverse collection of texts. Seventh- and eighth-century material was included⁵⁹ and the original compilation may well be eighth century in date.⁶⁰ Exclusively in the vernacular, as far as can be ascertained, *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, even in its absence, is suggestive of a comprehensive literary tradition in Irish at a very early date.

The support of the Church in the production of this literature was crucial: eleventh- and twelfth-century extant vernacular manuscripts whose subject matter is primarily secular came into being in ecclesiastical establishments whose personnel were intimately associated with political rulers upon whose patronage and protection the Church relied.⁶¹ It was in monastic scriptoria that earlier lost manuscripts were also given form, as can be inferred from the link with the monastery of Drumsnat (Co. Monaghan) evident in the title of the lost *Cín* [Book]. The act of writing was a complex, expensive business and ecclesiastical scriptoria served a wider community; the interdependence of king and cleric ensured that scribes applied their skills to the production of texts directed at political rulers, as well as religious material for the edification of the Christian soul. An important social institution, the Church was the provider of education, which undoubtedly involved instruction in reading and writing in Latin. Rhetoric and scriptural

57 See Ó Concheanainn, 'Textual and Historical Associations', esp. pp. 84–6, and 'Further Textual Associations'.

58 Carey, 'Interrelationship', pp. 71–2, building on work by Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, p. 17.

59 Carey, 'Interrelationship', p. 91 gives a summary of the dates of the texts.

60 By contrast, Mac Mathúna has argued, in his edition of *Immram Brain*, pp. 425–58, for a tenth-century date on the basis of his reading of the linguistic evidence of one of the tales contained in the manuscript, *Immram Brain* [*The Voyage of Bran*]; McCone's analysis of the textual transmission of this text and its sister narrative, *Echtrae Chonnlaí* [*The Adventure of Connlae*], leads him to conclude that 'an eighth-century date for the tantalising *Cín* remains perfectly possible although a tenth-century one cannot be excluded', in McCone (ed.), *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, p. 67.

61 *Lebor na hUidre* (Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25) is associated with Clonmacnoise, and one of its three scribes may have been the son of a bishop there: see Best and Bergin (eds.), *Lebor na hUidre*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B502 is linked with Leinster, either Killeshin or Glendalough, where it was put together by a single anonymous scribe c. 1120: see, e.g., Bhreathnach, 'Killeshin', p. 43; and the debate concerning its identification with the Book of Glendalough, conducted by Ó Riain and C. Breatnach, to which the most recent contribution is by the latter, 'Manuscript Sources' (with references to the earlier articles). The precise provenance of the late twelfth-century codex, the Book of Leinster (Dublin, Trinity College, MS H. 2. 18), is difficult to determine; however, its scribes were ecclesiastical functionaries, including Áed mac Crimthainn, coarb of Terryglass, and Bishop Finn, who may have been a bishop of Kildare who died in 1160: see Best *et al.* (eds.), *Book of Leinster*.

learning were important parts of the curriculum, as was grammar. The common exegetical tools for analysis of texts (*locus, tempus, persona, causa scribendi*) were frequently employed.⁶²

Ecclesiastically trained scholars applied their rigorous learning to a variety of topics. Towards the end of our period, Máel Muru of the monastery of Fahan, Co. Donegal, composed a pseudo-historical poem, *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel* [*Whence the Origins of the Irish?*] in which the biblical wanderings of the Irish and their eventual conquest of Ireland are described at length.⁶³ He was accorded the title ‘rígfile Érenn’ [royal poet of Ireland] on his death in 887. The term *file* (pl. *filid*) signified a privileged, learned person, whose status is discussed in detail in two eighth-century legal texts, *Uraicecht Becc* [*Small Primer*]⁶⁴ and *Uraicecht na Ríar* [*The Primer of Stipulations*].⁶⁵ As Liam Breatnach has demonstrated, the seven main grades and four sub-grades into which this category is divided, according to the latter tract, deliberately mirror the grades of the Church.⁶⁶ Such parallel hierarchies underline the extent to which the work of all learned practitioners and the Church was intertwined. This view was propounded by the learned practitioners themselves in their occasional accounts of how their cultural world operated on the ground. An eighth-century author composed a prologue to an earlier collection of legal tracts known as the *Senchas Már* [*Great Lore*], in which he relates how a consortium of nine men was chosen to arrange the laws in book form.⁶⁷ Representing what were regarded as the key strands of medieval Irish cultural life, three bishops, three kings and three men of learning are said to have undertaken the task,⁶⁸ producing a work whose ingenious, deliberately ambiguous title *Nófis* [*New/Nine-Knowledge*] was designed to emphasize the synergy which characterized the creation of the *Senchas Már*.⁶⁹

These same three strands become one in some of those engaged in learning. These include Cormac mac Cuilennáin who first came to attention on his succession to the kingship of Ireland’s southernmost kingdom, Munster, at

62 For a sensitive discussion of the early Irish educational system, see T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Context and Uses of Literacy’.

63 Best *et al.* (eds.), *Book of Leinster*, vol. III, pp. 516–23.

64 Binchy, ‘Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*’.

65 Breatnach (ed. and trans.), *Uraicecht na Ríar*.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Carey (ed. and trans.), ‘Pseudo-Historical Prologue’. For a discussion of the date, see McCone, ‘Dubthach’; and Carey, ‘Two Laws’.

68 Carey (ed. and trans.), ‘Pseudo-Historical Prologue’, §8, pp. 12, 19.

69 *Nó-fis* derives from *noí-fis*, literally ‘nine-knowledge’, a fanciful etymology of *nós* [custom, law] of a type commonly concocted in medieval Irish texts: see *ibid.*, p. 26.

the very end of our period in 901.⁷⁰ In his mid-sixties at that stage, he already had an episcopal career behind him. His relatively short seven-year rule as political leader was spent mainly campaigning against his northern counterpart, Flann mac Maíl Shechnaill.⁷¹ In 908 he died fighting him in battle in what was a sharp, swift end to his secular career.⁷² While it is as a distinguished king he is celebrated in his obituaries, some chroniclers recall other sides of his multi-faceted life, describing him as ‘scriba optimus, atque episcopus, et ancorita, et sapientissimus Gaoidiol’ [a most excellent scribe and bishop and anchorite, and the wisest of the Irish].⁷³ Later authors build on this reputation⁷⁴ and a number of eleventh- and twelfth-century poems are ascribed to him.⁷⁵ He has long been associated with a ninth-century learned compendium, *Sanas Cormaic* [*Cormac’s Glossary*], as its title suggests, and a case for his authorship of *Amra Senáin*, an obscure poetic eulogy of St Senán, has also been made.⁷⁶ A stanza from this work is attributed to Cormac in *Trefhocul*,⁷⁷ a tenth-century metrical tract which similarly attributes other stanzas to Cormac, some of which are also preserved in the Glossary bearing his name.

Whatever the precise extent of his own oeuvre, in his life and work Cormac neatly epitomizes the nature of Ireland’s elite intellectual culture around the year 900. An ecclesiastic who functioned at a high level also in the secular sphere, his learning reflects the integrated world in which contemporary writing took form. Producing texts in the vernacular, his background was nonetheless Latinate, and he personifies the bilingualism which was a dominant feature of this literary age. More significantly, in sophistication and learning he exemplifies a well-established written culture, confident in demeanour and ambitious in its aims. Well supported by royalty and religious, the art of writing had become a mainstay of society’s upper echelons,

70 Mac Airt (ed. and trans.), *Annals of Inisfallen*, pp. 140–1 (901).

71 See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 142–3 (907).

72 He was slain in the Battle of Mag nAilbi, also known as the Battle of Belach Mugna: *ibid.*, pp. 144–5 (908).

73 Hennessy (ed. and trans.), *Chronicum Scotorum*, pp. 180–1. In a three-stanza vernacular poem on the battle with which the annalist concludes (pp. 182–3), Cormac is termed ‘in tepscop, an tanmchara’ [the bishop, the confessor], as well as ‘an suí ba sochla fordarc’ [the renowned, illustrious sage].

74 In an eleventh-century compilation, the Fragmentary Annals of Ireland, he is exalted as ‘an duine naoimh as móo eangnamh táinig ocus tiocfa d’fearaibh Eireann go bráth’ [the wisest holy man who has come and who will ever come from the men of Ireland]: Radner (ed. and trans.), *Fragmentary Annals*, §423.

75 For a discussion of Cormac and his literary oeuvre, see Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Cormac mac Cuilennáin’.

76 Breatnach (ed. and trans.), ‘*Amra Senáin*’, pp. 20–3.

77 The particular stanza (7) is *ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

king-bishops like Cormac demonstrating how ecclesiastical and secular were closely interlinked.

Cultural interdependence between secular and religious had long since been a feature of Ireland's intellectual life. Some three hundred years before Cormac mac Cuilennáin died, another scholar who straddled both spheres composed poetry which now constitutes some of the earliest extant Irish verse. Its author, Colmán mac Lénéni, is best known as the founder of the monastery of Cloyne, in modern-day Co. Cork.⁷⁸ He also engaged with royalty: a poem expressing gratitude for the gift of a sword to Domnall, son of the Uí Néill king Áed mac Ainmirech, has survived. While a cleric, he expressed condemnation of the death of another northern king, Áed Sláine, who was murdered in 604, a mere two years or so before Colmán's own demise.⁷⁹ Acknowledging the duality of his role, learned successors termed Colmán *athláech* (literally 'an ex-layman'), recognizing his career both as *láech* (Latin *laicus*) and a cleric. He was not unique in this regard: the eighth- or ninth-century text labelling him in this way alleges that he was one of a trio of such men, and a fourth *athláech* is named elsewhere in the same work.⁸⁰ All are prominent clerics associated with the early stages of conversion in Ireland. In Colmán and his associates, St Énna of Aran, Mochammóc of Scattery Island and Bishop Erc of Slane, learned authors saw the founding fathers of their cultural world.

As the birth of literature was placed in the hands of Christian clerics, the origin of their language, Irish, was set in the wider context of a Latinate, learned world. This is expressed most eloquently in an eighth-century poetic manual, *Auraicept na nÉces* [*The Poets' Primer*]. Taking the widespread doctrine of the three sacred languages, Hebrew, Latin and Greek, as his starting point, the author of the *Auraicept* skilfully placed his own tongue among them by describing how it was invented ten years after the dispersal at the Tower by Fénius Farsaid who was asked to create a language out of many languages.⁸¹ This he did: 'a mba ferr iarum do cach bérlu ocus a mba lethu ocus a mba cáimiu, is ed do-reped isin nGóidilc' [what was best then of every language and what was widest and finest was cut out into Irish].⁸² His cultural confidence is further reflected in the Greek derivation he assigns to this master-language: 'Goídelc . . . ó Goídiul mac Angin . . . do Grécaib' [Goídelc (Irish) . . .

78 His work is discussed by Thurneysen, 'Colmán mac Lēnēni'.

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 201–2.

80 Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Conall Corc', p. 60 (lines 19–20, 21).

81 Ahlqvist (ed. and trans.), *Early Irish Linguist*, p. 47.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

named after Góidél son of Angen . . . of the Greeks].⁸³ Moreover, it permeates his sustained comparison between Latin and Irish in which the vernacular is seen to be equal in status with its classical counterpart.⁸⁴

This scholarly sophistication bespeaks an intense engagement with Irish as a literary language, as well as an intimate acquaintance with Latin. Contact between them more than three hundred years previously had brought the earliest form of Irish writing, ogam, into being, the inventors of which were familiar not merely with the Latin alphabet but with the works of fourth-century Latin grammarians as well.⁸⁵ While undoubtedly indebted to Latin, these earlier creators of what was an epigraphic script display something of the attitude of the *Auraicept* author, Damian McManus having underlined their 'independence of mind' which ensured that ogam was the perfect vehicle for the phonemic inventory of their own tongue.⁸⁶ They brought it with them: ogam inscriptions have been preserved in many parts of Wales where the Irish are known to have settled. Significantly, many of these monuments are bilingual, commemoration in ogam being combined with a Latin dedication, addressing a dual audience of fellow Irishman and Briton neighbour at the same time. By contrast, the epigraphic tradition of Wales was both Latinate and Latin, displaying Romano-British influence, though as Patrick Sims-Williams has noted, it is found throughout western, central and northern Wales, as well as the romanized south-eastern region.⁸⁷ Roman alphabet and ogam inscriptions also survive in Pictland, with the latter in the majority.⁸⁸ While many of these are obscure and consist in the main of personal names (like their Irish counterparts), occasional formulas such as 'MAQQ' [son of] link them closely with the more numerous ogam inscriptions in the southern half of Ireland. These too, then, were vernacular documents, for the most part in stone and stand alongside the numerous Pictish symbol stones which communicated in a different, though by no means less eloquent, way.⁸⁹

Continuity between Pictish carving in whatever form and later written documents is difficult to trace. In Ireland, however, owing to the wealth of extant evidence in Primitive Irish, the language of the framers of ogam, in

83 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

85 See McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, pp. 27–31.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

87 Sims-Williams, 'Uses of Writing', p. 18.

88 Forsyth has estimated that there are 'three-and-a-half times as many ogam as roman inscriptions' there ('Literacy in Pictland', p. 54).

89 Forsyth views these symbol stones also as a kind of script ('Some Thoughts').

the form of the inscriptions themselves, as well as in Archaic Irish (600–700) and Old Irish (700–900) in early manuscript sources, it is clear that those drafting the later seventh-century ogam inscriptions and the early manuscript scribes ‘must have been one and the same people’.⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, therefore, reverence for ogam is evident in a variety of texts.⁹¹ Chief among these is *Auraicept na nÉces*, since it is with the *beithe-luis-nin* or alphabet of ogam that Latin is frequently compared.⁹² Yet by the time this text was composed, ogam was no longer being used in inscriptions, though the script was occasionally employed in manuscripts to provide an illustration of how it appeared, and it is found in authorial inscriptions⁹³ and in short functional texts on other kinds of material as well.⁹⁴ However, neither these scholastic ogams, as they are termed, nor the ogam inscriptions themselves record anything comparable with the section of *The Dream of the Rood* carved in eighth-century runes on the Ruthwell Cross, significantly located in Dumfriesshire which was taken over by the English of Northumbria c. 700. Poetic compositions in Ireland, as in England for the most part, belonged on the manuscript page.

A significant number of such pages contained early poetry, as far as Ireland is concerned, though this too has mainly been preserved only in later manuscripts. Nonetheless, on linguistic grounds, James Carney has estimated that about 15,000 lines of verse survive from the period down to c. 900.⁹⁵ The dating of some of the items in question is controversial: for example, the versified biblical history *Saltair na Rann* [*The Psalter of the Quatrains*] most likely belongs to the tenth century rather than to the ninth to which Carney assigned it.⁹⁶ Notwithstanding this uncertainty in the case of particular poems, a large corpus of material of early date remains. Moreover, its variety is striking. The dual secular and religious nature of Colmán mac Lénéni’s verse sets the pattern. From the seventh century, genealogical poetry pertaining to the eastern territory of Leinster has

90 McManus, ‘Ogam’, p. 13; see also Harvey, ‘Early Literacy’.

91 See McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, pp. 148–66.

92 Ahlqvist (ed. and trans.), *Early Irish Linguist*, p. 48. The term *beithe-luis-nin* derives from the names designating three letters of the ogam alphabet: *beithe* [birch], *luis* [herb], *nin* [fork].

93 Sims-Williams has drawn attention to the use of an ogam authorial inscription in a copy of a late tenth-century book by Byrthferth of Ramsey (‘Byrthferth’s Ogam Signature’).

94 See McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, pp. 129–40.

95 Carney, ‘Early Irish Verse’, pp. 177–8 (list), 181–7 (discussion of dating).

96 It is uncertain, however, as to whether these one hundred and fifty quatrains were the work of Airbertach mac Coisse Dobráin (d. 988), as Mac Eoin suggested in ‘Date and Authorship’; see also Carney, ‘Early Irish Verse’, pp. 207–16.

survived.⁹⁷ Fragmentary material concerning some of the characters celebrated in the later narrative, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* [*The Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge*], similarly comes down to us from this time. Queen Medb is the focus of one such relatively obscure poem,⁹⁸ while another, a prophecy, is put into the mouth of Scáthach, Cú Chulainn's female weapon-instructor.⁹⁹ Both of these compositions employ an accentual metre termed *rosca*, the main characteristics of which are a particular number of stressed words per line coupled with linking alliteration. The majority of these poems, however, are composed in a range of syllabic metres, a fixed number of syllables per line being the primary feature, and having end-rhyme and other types of rhyme. The metre of Latin hymns, it was also adopted in vernacular eulogies to saints, such as Columba and Brigit, to both of whom a number of hymns survive.¹⁰⁰ Stanzaic, syllabic poetry is also used for biblical material, as evidenced by a vibrant, vital poetic version of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas which was composed in the early eighth century.¹⁰¹ A versified, lengthy biography of Christ attributed to a named author, Blathmacc, whose father, Cú Brettan, was alive in 750, is extant. In it Christ is an Irish hero, betrayed by Judas in an act which is described in very specific legal terms as *finjal* [kinslaying] and keened by his mother Mary in a particularly Irish way.¹⁰²

Blathmacc's work comes down to us remarkably unchanged in a seventeenth-century manuscript, its somewhat modernized orthography disguising but not destroying its eighth-century form. It can be profitably compared with the few important poems that have survived in contemporary manuscripts, often marginal, but nonetheless diverse in content and tone. Their creative playfulness is illustrated in one famous example from an eighth- or ninth-century manuscript, Codex sancti Pauli, an artistic homage to a cat.¹⁰³ Irony has also been mastered, a ninth-century weary pilgrim

97 Ó Corráin, 'Irish Origin Legends', pp. 57–65; the evidence does not warrant the very early fifth-century date James Carney assigned to some of this and other material: see his 'Archaic Irish Verse' and his edition 'Three Old Irish Accentual Poems'.

98 P. L. Henry (ed. and trans.), 'Conailla Medb Míchuru' [Medb Enjoined the Evil Contracts].

99 P. L. Henry (ed. and trans.), 'Verba Scáthaige' ['The Words of Scáthach']. This poem was contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*.

100 F. Kelly (ed. and trans.), 'Poem in Praise of Columb Cille', and 'Tiughraind Bhécáin'; Stokes and Strachan (eds. and trans.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, vol. II, pp. 325–6 (*Brigit Bé Bithmaith* [Brigit, Ever Excellent Woman]).

101 Carney (ed. and trans.), *Poems of Blathmacc*, pp. 90–105; McNamara et al. (eds.), *Apocrypha Hiberniae*, pp. xiii, 455–83.

102 Carney (ed. and trans.), *Poems of Blathmacc*, p. 36 (reference to *finjal*).

103 Stokes and Strachan (eds. and trans.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, vol. II, pp. xxxii–xxxiv, 293–6. The poem on the celebrated cat, Pangur Bán, has been much anthologized: see,

suggesting that a journey to Rome amounts to ‘mór saído, becc torbai’ [a lot of work (for) little profit], continuing ‘in Rí chondaigi hi foss / mani mbera latt ní fogbai’ [the King you seek here – if you don’t bring him with you, you won’t find him].¹⁰⁴ The kind of pilgrimage our clever poet castigates ensured that manuscripts which were brought abroad were not in fact lost. Such journeys continued to the end of our period, learned authors like Sedulius Scottus (fl. 850)¹⁰⁵ and Johannes Scottus Eriugena (810–77) having productive careers at the court of Charles the Bald. Eriugena, in particular, in part because of his striking originality, has often been studied as a scholar apart.¹⁰⁶ Yet, he and his fellow exiles continued to influence thinking in their homeland, not least through contact with travellers who may have returned to Ireland bearing gifts from abroad.

For various reasons, however, the lure of the continent may have been temporarily waning, as indicated by the aspersions cast on the once revered trip to Rome. The focus of one group of eighth-century monks who called themselves ‘céli Dé’ [God’s companions] was an austere life of fasting and prayer at home.¹⁰⁷ What is striking about their writing is their wholesale use of the vernacular in devotional works, which has been linked with their desire to communicate with the laity in their attempt to promote a purer, ascetic, more spiritual way of life.¹⁰⁸ Blathmac has been claimed to be of their number,¹⁰⁹ though this is far from certain; Óengus mac Óengobann, the author of *Félire Óengusso* [*The Calendar of Óengus*], a ninth-century vernacular martyrology, is more likely to have been.¹¹⁰ Not only does he call himself ‘céle Dé’ but he was taught by the pre-eminent ecclesiastic among them, Máel Rúain, founder of the monastery of Tallaght. A shift towards the vernacular is noticeable in other genres also from the ninth century. Óengus’s *Félire* served as a companion piece to hagiography, the earliest predominantly vernacular example of which, *Bethu Brigte* [*The Life of Brigit*], is also ninth century in date and is in

e.g., Murphy (ed. and trans.), *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp. 2–3 (no. 1) and Greene and O’Connor (eds. and trans.), *Golden Treasury*, pp. 81–3 (no. 17). For commentary, see Toner, ‘Messe ocus Pangur Bán’.

104 Stokes and Strachan (eds. and trans.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, vol. II, pp. xxiv, 296.

105 His considerable body of Latin poetry is discussed by Doherty, ‘Latin Writing in Ireland’, pp. 117–23, 139–40.

106 His best-known work is *De divisione naturae* [*On the Divisions of Nature*] or *Periphyseon*, which brings Neoplatonic and Christian ideas together in a distinctive way.

107 Carey (trans.), *King of Mysteries*, introduces them briefly and translates some of their writings (pp. 14–15, 246–58).

108 See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

109 Lambkin, ‘Blathmac’.

110 Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Félire*.

fact a bilingual text, of which roughly one quarter is in Latin.¹¹¹ That most central of curriculum subjects, biblical commentary, is similarly attested in the vernacular from this time.¹¹² Annalistic writing in which secular as well as ecclesiastical events are recorded was previously mainly in Latin; Irish is used in chronicles with increasing frequency from the ninth century and this linguistic change may be linked with more detailed recording which is also noticeable from this time.¹¹³

Needless to say, complex cultural changes too must underlie this spread in use of the vernacular, three or four hundred years after Christianity first came. It is a feature of some genres more than others; with the exception of canon law, legal material was written in Irish and in large quantity already in the seventh and eighth centuries. About fifty texts dating from this period form a collection, the *Senchas Mór*, including material on clientship, marriage and kinship, as well as bees, cats and dogs. Neighbourly relations are regulated for, as is sick-maintenance of all kinds; arrangements for the proper conduct of society are pursued.¹¹⁴ Having northern associations, the *Senchas Mór* is complemented by a smaller group of texts emanating from Munster in the south which appears to have been more restricted in range.¹¹⁵ The southern sources may also be stylistically distinguishable from the *Senchas Mór* material, containing a greater proportion of the alliterative, stress-counting metre, *rosca*, which we have already encountered. Thus, they are often deemed the products of a poetico-legal school.

Written in a similar style and also in the vernacular is *Audacht Morainn*, poetic advice to an aspiring king.¹¹⁶ The same constituency, as well as their subjects presumably, were addressed in a prophetic king-list, *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* [*The Vision of Conn Chétchathach* (of the hundred battles)], which was composed about the same time.¹¹⁷ Elaborate, stylized Irish is a feature of other king tales: legal dialogue in *rosca* forms the central part of the

111 Ó hAodha (ed. and trans.), *Bethu Brigte*.

112 Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Hibernica minora*.

113 This is clearly an oversimplification since the degree of use of the vernacular depended above all on the practice of a given annalist, and a shift can be seen to have taken place in individual compilations at somewhat different times: see Dumville, 'Latin and Irish', which includes a brief comparison of Irish and English vernacular annalistic writing (pp. 333–4).

114 See F. Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*.

115 It includes *Cáin Fhuithirbe* [*The Law of Fuithirbe*], the earliest datable law text, composed about 680: see L. Breatnach, 'Ecclesiastical Element'.

116 F. Kelly (ed. and trans.), *Audacht Morainn*.

117 It too was contained in *Cín Dromma Snechtai*; it was in the late seventh century that the last ruler mentioned in the text, Finnechta Fledach, reigned: see G. Murphy, 'Dates of Two Sources', pp. 145–51.

seventh- or eighth-century narrative, *Immathchor nAilella ocus Airt* [*The Mutual Restitution between Ailill and Art*].¹¹⁸ A powerful eighth-century poem put into the mouth of the Ulster king, Conchobar mac Nessa, on his hearing of the Crucifixion, has survived as part of *Aided Conchobair* [*Conchobar's Death-tale*].¹¹⁹

This narrative is in fact the story of Conchobar's conversion, a topic which continued to concern the Irish for some time after the coming of St Patrick in the fifth century. Patrick himself is presented as emerging triumphant, dramatically defeating the pagan king Láegaire and his druids in one seventh-century version of his Life.¹²⁰ His forceful persona in this Latin hagiography stands in stark contrast to the more thoughtful spirituality of his own writings, the significance of which lies further in the fact that his 'Confession' and 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus' constitute Ireland's earliest written texts.¹²¹ The theme is explored more sensitively in a pair of interconnected eighth-century voyage tales, *Echtrae Chonnlai* [*The Expedition of Connlai*] and *Immram Brain* [*The Voyage of Bran*].¹²² Featuring supernatural women who lure unsuspecting men to an otherworld of unparalleled pleasures, expectations are spectacularly subverted in *Echtrae Chonnlai*, since the woman herself is the harbinger of Christianity, and heaven is her natural home.¹²³ The coming of Christ is foretold in Bran's voyage tale by the god of the sea, Manannán mac Lir. Exploring the issues of perception and reality skilfully, the author invokes an omnipresent, all-powerful God who is a less benevolent figure than in *Echtrae Chonnlai*. After the first flush of conversion, the complexities of Christian living come to the fore. *Apgitir Chrábaid* [*The Alphabet of Piety*], a didactic, religious text which is ascribed to the abbot Colmán moccu Beognae (died 611), but which may have been written a century or so after his death, addresses some of the difficulties in ornate rhythmical vernacular prose. A spiritual primer, with its polished manner it gets its moral message effectively across.¹²⁴

Bede, the moral didact, would certainly have approved; his positive view of the Irish, had he been in a position to read *Apgitir Chrábaid*, would only

118 Corthals (ed. and trans.), 'Affiliation of Children'.

119 Corthals (ed. and trans.), 'Rhetoric'.

120 *Vita Patricii* by Muirchú, in Bieler (ed. and trans.), *Patrician Texts*, pp. 84–99.

121 Patrick, *Libri epistolarum*; the 'Confession' in Chapter 5 below.

122 McCone (ed. and trans.), *Echtrae Chonnlai*; and Mac Mathúna (ed. and trans.), *Immram Brain*. On their date, see the former, pp. 29–47.

123 McCone (ed. and trans.), *Echtrae Chonnlai*, §11, pp. 122, 178.

124 For the text, see Vernam Hull (ed. and trans.), 'Apgitir Chrábaid'. Its date continues to be debated: see, e.g., Ó Néill, 'Date and Authorship'; and McCone, 'Prehistoric', pp. 34–5.

have been enforced. Literary exchanges undoubtedly formed part of the intense contact between Ireland and England in Bede's own time and later and it may be that their eastern neighbours learned much from the confident control the Irish had of their own written tongue. Literary evidence from Wales in our period is scanty and that from what we now know as Scotland scarcely visible; nonetheless the indications are that writing was an important activity in these regions. If our picture of the early literature of Wales and Scotland resembles somewhat faded etchings, that of literary production in Ireland is made of vibrant, multicoloured paint. A complex picture emerges: contemporary manuscript evidence suggests a dominance of Latin which is mediated somewhat by consideration of material which has survived only in later copies; yet intense cultivation of the vernacular was characteristic of Irish learning from an early period and is indicative of the close co-operation between ecclesiastical and secular spheres which is the defining feature of early Irish cultural life. While production of texts of all kinds was firmly ensconced in an ecclesiastical embrace, it seems likely that (pseudo-)historical material was written for, and indeed may have been specifically commissioned by, political rulers. It was in the vernacular, therefore, that such material was written from a very early date. There was payback for the Church; it played an increasingly important role in the inauguration of kings, as our period progressed. Its involvement in legal writing ensured influence in the matter of regulating society. This active collaboration between Church and 'state', eloquently described in one law text as 'comúaim n-ealsa fri túaith' [the sewing together of Church and secular authority], benefited all.¹²⁵ How typical the Irish situation was of other areas of Britain is difficult to gauge in the absence of comparable evidence from Wales, Scotland and even Anglo-Saxon England. Nonetheless, following Bede in viewing the 'five languages and four nations' of Britain side by side ensures that the varying pieces of evidence of 'English, British, Irish and Picts' can illuminate each other (*HE*, I.1). In presenting here the earliest literary evidence from Ireland, Scotland and Wales, I hope to have cast the texts of their nearest neighbours, the Anglo-Saxons, in a somewhat different light.

¹²⁵ This is the phrase used in the eighth-century law tract *Córus Béscnai* [*The Prescribed Arrangement of Custom*]: Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici*, 529.4; see McCone, *Pagan Past*, pp. 25–6. It is echoed in the pseudo-historical Prologue (McCone, 'Dubthach', pp. 21–3).