

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY AND ECONOMIC CHANGE: CONSEQUENCE OR COINCIDENCE?

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At the same time as Christianity was establishing itself in Britain and Ireland in the early middle ages, these regions also underwent significant economic changes. By asking whether there might have been a causal link, one is afforded the opportunity of focusing attention on potential economic aspects of conversion and their social implications. Both are explored in this paper, which concentrates on non English-speaking parts of the insular world. It has developed from an online dialogue between the two authors, following WD's talk to the Cambridge conference of Converting the Isles, on 12 May 2012. The first part, then, is a revised version of that talk; the second a response by RF; and the third a final reflection.

I

For a world in which there was no state management, much less global interaction, issues of economic change cannot be handled as they are in modern times: assessing economic change and stimuli to change in the early middle ages is particularly problematic. There are multiple problems of evidence, even given the extremely important, and increasing, body of archaeological data, and significant quantification is near impossible. Trying to assess the impact of conversion is even more problematic since we have very uneven (or no) sense of what went before, and since it is exceptionally difficult to determine causal relationship: did things happen in the seventh and eighth centuries because of conversion or for entirely coincidental reasons (for example, the woodland clearance suggested by changes in vegetation indicated by pollen cores, as tree pollens dropped and those of herbs and cereals increased)?¹

Before we can start we need to be aware of significant differences in the solid geology, terrain, and productive capacity of the

¹ Cf. George Francis Mitchell, *The Irish Landscape* (London: Collins, 1976), especially pp. 136-37; Michael O'Connell, 'Ireland', in *Evaluation of Land Surfaces cleared from Forests in the Roman Iron Age and the Time of Migrating Germanic Tribes based on Regional Pollen Diagrams*, ed. by Burkhard Frenzel, *Paläoklimaforschung*, 12 (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1994), pp. 50-54 and maps on pp. 128-30; Della Hooke, 'Place-names and vegetation history as a key to understanding settlement in the Conwy valley', in *Landscape and Settlement in Medieval Wales*, ed. by Nancy Edwards, *Oxbow Monographs*, 81 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997), pp. 79-95. For longer discussion of the issues, see Wendy Davies, 'Economic change in early medieval Ireland: the case for growth', *Settimane di Studio di Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo*, 57 (2010), 111-33.

regions considered in this paper. Both Scotland and Wales have a land surface with significant amounts of mountain or high plateau, and difficulties of communication, except by sea. Although there are zones of workable lowland (Fife, south-east Wales, Anglesey, for example), they are relatively few. Ireland is different: it has areas of poor soils but not the extensive highland; it is easy to travel across, especially by water; and there is plenty of land suitable for settlement and for arable and other farming, especially in the centre, south, and east. Then there is climate. Again, there are significant differences: Ireland is milder and snow is rare. In contrast, in less temperate parts of Scotland and Wales the growing season is very short, because there are late frosts in spring and early frosts in autumn. For the early middle ages, the differences were exacerbated by a temperature drop at the start of our period (and some kind of event in the 540s), so that it became colder and wetter everywhere, limiting capacity to take a crop from marginal sites.² As a result there was cereal decline at some upland sites in Wales, for example in the Black Mountains.³ Climatic improvement did not start until the tenth century. There are also demographic issues. Overall production was almost certainly affected by demographic decline at the start of our period and upturn at the end, but there is no direct evidence of demographic change and therefore no means of assessing its rate and volume. Despite this range of real problems, one can make a case that conversion to Christianity had some kind of economic impact in some respects. I shall deal with three of these possibilities.

It must be broadly true to say that one dramatic effect of conversion, and clearly a change introduced by Christianity, was the acquisition and accumulation of landed property in the hands of ecclesiastical bodies – acquired especially by gift, but not entirely. This is not as well-evidenced in the insular world as it is in many other parts of Europe, and it is impossible to track the cycles of giving that there must have been, but there are, nevertheless, charters recording donation from all three regions.⁴ The Llandaff charters are the most

² See Hubert Horace Lamb, *Climate, Present, Past and Future* (2 vols, London: Methuen, 1972-77); Michael G. L. Baillie, 'A Dark Age indeed: a dendrochronologist looks at the evidence for a sixth-century catastrophe', *Medieval Life*, 14 (2000), 2-7; Petra Dark, *The Environment of Britain in the First Millennium AD* (London: Duckworth, 2000).

³ A. Ward, 'Transhumance and settlement on the Welsh uplands: a view from the Black Mountains', in *Landscape and Settlement*, ed. by Edwards, pp. 97-111. Cereal decline did not always happen, however: see Dark, *Environment of Britain*, pp. 149-50; Tim M. Mighall and Frank M. Chambers, 'Holocene vegetation history and human impact at Bryn y Castell, Snowdonia, north Wales', *The New Phytologist*, 130 (1995), 299-321.

⁴ See Wendy Davies, 'The Latin charter-tradition in western Britain, Brittany and Ireland in the early mediaeval period', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick and David Dumville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 258-80 (reprinted in Wendy Davies, *Welsh*

instructive collection, but there are whole charters from west Wales in the Lichfield Gospels (of the ninth century), from northern Ireland in the Book of Armagh (pre-807, probably of the seventh and eighth centuries), and from north-east Scotland in the Book of Deer (of the eleventh and twelfth centuries).⁵ And there are fragments of charters from many different locations embedded in narratives or in king lists or inscribed on stones, as in Ireland and Wales.⁶ When ecclesiastical reform movements impacted on these regions in the central Middle Ages, and new monastic houses were founded, there were plenty of existing property-holding religious bodies to be replaced, transformed, or raided, like the southern Welsh houses whose endowments were assigned to new foundations or, in advance of reform, the activities of the *familia* of Colum Cille in Ireland.⁷ The build-up of such endowments can only have happened because of the introduction of Christianity, and its importance cannot be overemphasized. It means that property shifted from some people to others (although moderated where families adopted religious functions). It means some accumulations on a very large scale and thereby the emergence of some exceptionally wealthy (corporate) proprietors - there thereby emerged a much steeper pyramid of wealth distribution. It means that property grew: they did not split, or go through a repeated process of splitting and reshaping as one generation succeeded another or as daughters were endowed.

Such accumulations supported non-labouring, or only partly labouring, communities, as well as the agricultural workforce, and so they clearly produced some surplus. Such evidence as we have (which is extremely uneven) suggests that ecclesiastical owners for the most part collected their surplus as rent, from rent-paying tenants or clients, although it is likely that there was some slave labour too.⁸ It is quite

History in the Early Middle Ages. Texts and Societies (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), Essay XI).

⁵ Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen, 'The Welsh marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels Part I', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 5 (1983), 37-66; 'The Welsh marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels Part II: the "surexit" memorandum', *ibid.*, 7 (1984), 91-120; *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. and trans. by Ludwig Bieler, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 10 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), pp. 166-79; Kenneth Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

⁶ For example, stones from Ogmere, Merthyr Mawr, Kilnasaggart; see Davies, 'Latin charter-tradition', p. 261.

⁷ The best discussion of the Welsh changes remains that in *Episcopal Acts and Cognate Documents relating to Welsh Dioceses 1066-1272*, ed. by James Conway Davies (2 vols, Cardiff: Historical Society of the Church in Wales, 1946-48). For the *familia* of Colum Cille: Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry. The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Blackrock: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 88-123.

⁸ Jacqui Mulville, of Cardiff University, made the interesting observation at a conference in Bangor (Wales) in April 2009 that the animal bone recovered from Llan-gors crannog indicates rent-paying rather than market choice, because the cuts of

impossible to quantify either mechanism. Beer, bread, meat, and honey are common elements in Welsh rents;⁹ there are more references to grain, vegetables, and milk products in Ireland.¹⁰ There is nothing to suggest the development of a 'manorial system' such as emerged in the Frankish heartland under the ownership of some big monasteries; in other words, direct landlord management of substantial areas of land, with tenants owing more or less onerous labour services in order to provide the necessary labour to work them.¹¹ This does not mean there were no service obligations in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland – but there were not entire economic systems based on service obligations. In so far as ecclesiastical corporations took tax or tribute from people other than tenants, that was a further mode of surplus extraction. For example, the relic circuits of the abbot of Armagh generated 300 cows in the year 1050, just from Cenél nEógain.¹² That was an important source of realizable wealth but it is unlikely to have affected any but the most powerful ecclesiastical bodies.

All of these landholding profits, of whatever kind, ultimately arose because of the introduction of Christianity. However, they were clearly long-term developments and were not an immediate consequence of conversion. It might be thought that lay interest in, and control of, ecclesiastical property had a moderating effect on ecclesiastical accumulation; but lay proprietorship of church property was characteristic of much of western Europe in the early middle ages and did not stop the process of ecclesiastical accumulation in other parts. Indeed, the very fact of lay proprietorship stimulated churches to free themselves of such interests in the central Middle Ages.¹³ There is little reason to suppose that the processes were substantially different in Ireland, Scotland, or Wales, but this question does need to be asked.

As a second example of potential impact, let us consider production for distribution. Some ecclesiastical bodies appear to have been producing at a scale which can only have been for distribution, even if the distribution was over a relatively short distance, regional rather than international. The best example of this, and the easiest to tie to early forms of Christianity, is the milling of grain with the technological assistance of a water mill. Rotary querns for grinding

meat were not the best: 'Provisioning Llan-gors crannog: herding and hunting in early Wales'.

⁹ See Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), pp. 164-66.

¹⁰ See Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: a Study based mainly on the Law-texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD*, Early Irish Law Series IV (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), p. 320.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Devroey, *Puissants et misérables. Système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (VI^e – IX^e siècles)* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2006).

¹² AU.

¹³ Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), *passim*.

grain for domestic consumption are found in all parts and one must presume that for most people the normal method of getting flour was by hand grinding with a quern stone. Grinding by water mill implies flour production of considerable volume. It is not enough, as used to be suggested, to suppose this was just to feed the members of a monastic community: it makes no sense to suggest that such a large investment of skill and resources was simply to manage the everyday provisioning of the home community (there is good evidence that even large monastic communities were fed through peasant household economies in the early middle ages, like the families bound to grind grain for the monastery of Celanova in southern Galicia, round about the year 1000).¹⁴ The very early appearance of water mills in Ireland (619-621 Nendrum, c. 630 Little Island, Co. Cork) locates the introduction of this kind of milling firmly in the conversion and immediate post-conversion period; the direct association of the tidal mill with the monastery at Nendrum makes the ecclesiastical association explicit.¹⁵ The peak in the construction of mills in the years 750-850 coincides with the flowering of some of Ireland's major monasteries (although the mills may not all have been ecclesiastical). And the number of early medieval mills found in Ireland is extremely unusual and very striking – thirty-nine at the last count.¹⁶

Now, the water mill is characteristically associated with Irish development and it is complemented by substantial clusters of corn-drying ovens, like those at Raystown where there was a very substantial complex of grain-processing features.¹⁷ Although it is true that fragments of millstones have been recovered in early medieval contexts from Whithorn in south-west Scotland, and that there are some corn-drying ovens (for example recent finds at South Hook, Pembrokeshire, together with querns and grains of oats and barley), the Welsh and Scottish evidence of grain processing at industrial scale is not remotely comparable.¹⁸ This really looks like differential

¹⁴ *O Tombo de Celanova: estudio introductorio, edición e índices (ss. ix-xii)*, ed. by José Miguel Andrade Cernadas with Marta Díaz Tie and Francisco Javier Pérez Rodríguez (2 vols, Santiago de Compostela: Consello da Cultura Galega, 1995), no. 158; the date of the text must be later than this edition suggests, given the number of generations specified in it.

¹⁵ See further, Davies, 'Economic change', pp. 118-19, 129-30.

¹⁶ See Wendy Davies, *Water Mills and Cattle Standards: Probing the Economic Comparison between Ireland and Spain in the Early Middle Ages*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures, 21 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2012), p. 10.

¹⁷ See further, Davies, *Water Mills and Cattle Standards*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ Peter Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian. The Excavation of a Monastic Town 1984-91* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1997), p. 29; Pete Crane and Ken Murphy, 'Early medieval settlement, iron smelting and crop processing at South Hook, Herbranstion, Pembrokeshire, 2004-05', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 159 (2010), 117-96 at 132-36, 152-55, 163-81, 187. Just possibly from Whitton in south-east Wales too; although the

development as between Ireland, on the one hand, and Scotland and Wales on the other. All areas, of course, had mixed farming regimes with pastoral as well as arable elements, but it is the change in the processing of grain (in Ireland) that suggests production for distribution.

Ireland also provides good evidence of fish-trapping on an industrial scale, like the huge early medieval traps in the Upper Fergus estuary or in Strangford Lough, where the flood fence of one was 147m long.¹⁹ One might query if the productive drive here was necessarily ecclesiastical (there are earlier fish traps) but the scale is suggestive, as is the Strangford Lough location (where the monastery of Nendrum lies and where there are fifteen medieval traps). It is also clear that south-east Welsh monasteries were showing concern to own and control weirs near Caerleon, at Caldicot, and elsewhere on the river Severn in the later ninth century,²⁰ and fisheries were explicitly noted in the late eighth century, near Ely in the Cardiff region.²¹ The weir at Poppit Sands in the Teifi estuary, near St Dogmaels, could be of early medieval origin, although it may well be later.²² In Scotland, although there are plenty of coastal fish traps, I am not aware of any evidence that would tie them to early medieval development.²³ Overall, then, ecclesiastical bodies stimulated and sought to control food production and distribution in some parts but not necessarily all.

A case can also be made for the production of artefacts for distribution, although, again, there is much more Irish material than survives elsewhere and although one could easily query the volume of distribution. The stimulus for production of much fine metalwork was explicitly religious – liturgical vessels, most obviously, and reliquaries. While some of it was clearly produced in ecclesiastical contexts (Armagh, Kells, Clonfad, Clonmacnois in Ireland; and Portmahomack in Scotland), many metal working sites appear to have been royal (Moynagh Lough in Ireland, Dunadd and Mote of Mark in Scotland) or secular aristocratic, and this means that production cannot be exclusively tied to ecclesiastical centres.²⁴ One might also want to argue that in-house production was for in-house use, although the

millstone is more likely to be Roman, it was found in the final demolition layer of the latest (fourth-century) building on the site; see Michael Grierson Jarrett and Stuart Wrathmell, *Whitton. An Iron Age and Roman Farmstead in South Glamorgan* (Cardiff: University of Wales press, 1981), pp. 64, 222-23, 225.

¹⁹ See further, Davies, 'Economic change', pp. 118, 130.

²⁰ *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâv*, ed. by John Gwenogvryn Evans and John Rhys (Oxford: private subscription, 1893), nos 225, 234, 235b.

²¹ *Book of Llan Dâv*, no. 204a.

²² Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, National Monuments of Wales record 24568; image available online at www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/24568/collection - catalogue no. C864793.

²³ Ian Simpson, *Inventory of Adult Fish Counters and Traps in Scotland 2003*, Fisheries Research Services Internal Report No 18/03; available online at www.scotland.gov.uk/Uploads/Documents/Int1803.pdf.

²⁴ [INSERT CROSS-REF.]

evident high skill levels must indicate specialization, from which distribution would almost certainly follow.

Stone sculpture is a comparable case: sculptured stones have explicitly Christian iconography and in some cases inscriptions, and there was a clear, although implied, Christian demand for much of the corpus. The workshops are often unknown but the large number of stones at somewhere like Portmahomack in northern Scotland (over 200 pieces in local sandstone) must imply production at the monastery for distribution.²⁵ A ninth-century Christian grave marker from St Davids is one of a west Pembrokeshire group of over twenty, which Nancy Edwards associated with production at the ecclesiastical centre of St Davids itself.²⁶ And then there were books: the book was a symbol of Christianity in this northern world but it was also an artefact, a product that depended on the fact and control of agricultural surplus for its existence and a product that travelled. We have known for a long time that books were made in monasteries, but the discovery of the eighth-century vellum preparation workshops at Portmahomack makes it clear that this was production on some scale for distribution, just as the early ninth-century reference to Ultán, the famous early eighth-century book illustrator, must imply the same.²⁷

Conversion to Christianity led to increased production (of several kinds), to more specialized production, and to some production for distribution. Some of this was clearly for clerical use and some was carried out in ecclesiastical or ecclesiastically controlled contexts. Again, these were long-term and not immediate effects and there is no reason to believe that production was exclusively ecclesiastical. At the moment it would be difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate the relative strength of ecclesiastical and secular initiatives, but the very close analysis of Irish medieval finds which is being undertaken in the context of the EMAP and other projects, and the very detailed work on food production and diet recently carried out at some English sites, suggest that reasonable estimates of relative strength may well be possible in the future.²⁸

²⁵ Martin Carver, *Portmahomack: Monastery of the Picts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2008), pp. 97-104.

²⁶ Nancy Edwards, *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales, Volume II, South-West Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 86, 433.

²⁷ Carver, *Portmahomack*, pp. 134-35; Martin Carver and Cecily Spall, 'Excavating a *parchmenerie*: archaeological correlates of making parchment at the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, Easter Ross', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 134 (2004), 183-200. Ultán: Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. and trans. by Alistair Campbell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), lines 206-69 (pp. 18-23).

²⁸ For EMAP see: <http://www.ucd.ie/archaeology/research/researcha-z/emap/>; the work of Gabor Thomas at Lyminge (a royal double monastery) is a good example of techniques that could be applied elsewhere: Gabor Thomas, 'Life before the minster: the social dynamics of the monastic foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent', *Antiquaries Journal*, 93 (2013), pp. 109-45.

For my last example of potential impact, I would propose an increase in the volume of exchange, although if the case were acceptable it would apply much more to Ireland than to Wales or Scotland. However, both Ireland and Wales used units of account, evidenced in pre-Viking contexts: in Ireland cattle standards, sack standards, cumals, *ungae*, and the *screpul*; and in Wales cattle, and very occasionally ounces, in eighth-century sales of land and churches.²⁹ Both the existence and the use of units of account presuppose some noticeable volume of exchange by the eighth century. It is more difficult to tie this to distinctively ecclesiastical contexts, especially as Ireland had such a developed vernacular terminology of gift, sale, and contract.³⁰ But the Welsh sales, although between lay parties, were explicitly for the purpose of gifting church bodies;³¹ and some of the earliest Irish texts, for example the seventh- and eighth-century *Additamenta* attached to Tírechán's *Collectanea* (a quasi-cartulary) detail sale, ultimately for the same purpose (for horses and silver).³² It is therefore thinkable that the need to endow Christian communities led to increasing mobility of property of all kinds, landed and movable, at local level.

Whether or not ecclesiastical bodies had any impact on long-distance exchange is a more difficult matter: just as good a case can be made for secular stimuli and the volume of such exchange was, in any case, clearly tiny. The suggestion that post-Roman imported ceramics were introduced in the context of liturgical needs is not a case for large-scale involvement in international trade, although the huge collection of imported glass and ceramics, of a wide range of types and origins, from the Whithorn (Period I) sixth- to seventh-century monastery is in itself suggestive.³³ Certainly (although this may well be for different reasons) by the end of the early middle ages south-east Welsh monasteries can be seen establishing a deliberate foothold in coastal landing places.³⁴ Overall it is reasonable to suggest that the establishment of Christian communities contributed to an increasing volume of exchange in the long run and that ecclesiastical bodies were developing interests in marketing by the central Middle Ages, but it would be difficult to make a case that they were solely responsible for any such increase; there are

²⁹ See Davies, *Water Mills and Cattle Standards*, pp. 13-16; Davies, *Wales*, pp. 52-54.

³⁰ See Davies, *Water Mills and Cattle Standards*, pp. 8-10.

³¹ *Book of Llan Dâv*, ed. by Evans anr Rhys, nos 185, 190b, 191, 201, 202, 203a, 203b, 204b, 209b.

³² *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. by Bieler, p. 174.

³³ Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian*, p. 28.

³⁴ *Book of Llan Dâv*, ed. by Evans anr Rhys, nos 249b, 251. See further Wendy Davies, 'Thinking about the Welsh environment a thousand years ago', in *Cymru a'r Cymry 2000. Wales and the Welsh 2000*, ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2001), pp. 1-18 at pp. 14-18.

plenty of other factors – environmental, demographic, political – to take into account.

A case can be made that conversion to Christianity had economic impact in the long term. This was not an immediate impact, and it was not a significant consequence of individual conversion, but it was a long-term effect of the establishment of Christian institutions, and especially of corporate bodies. In this, it is much easier to see impact in Ireland than in Wales or Scotland. That is partly because the available evidence is stronger but it must also be because the productive capacity, and presumably relative population levels, of Ireland were much greater: the number of finds of early medieval material of the last twenty years is extraordinary. In the 2002 investigations in advance of building the Irish Motorway, the M4, for example, there was more material from the early middle ages than from any other period.³⁵ Ireland seems to have been different: there was more accumulation of landed property, more agricultural production, more artefacts, more distribution, more local exchange, although it would be reasonable to argue that similar processes (at considerably lesser volume) were in train in Wales and Scotland.

It would be foolish to suggest that it was only ecclesiastical bodies that were responsible for growing economic inter-relationships, and complexity, but the introduction of Christianity clearly led in the end to the establishment of large property-holding corporations, which in their turn had an impact on production and on surplus. The fact that the effects of Christian impact are more evident in Ireland than in Wales or Scotland would suggest that it was not the impact of Christianity alone that made for change, but that environment, productive capacity, and population levels were necessary conditions of that development.

II

It should not be taken for granted that a church—of any kind, anywhere, at any time—would be interested in changing existing economic conditions rather than operating within them. A discussion of conversion to Christianity and economic change may therefore benefit from considering whether or not certain clergy can be shown to have had economic agendas.

The clearest expressions of the economic ideals of certain ecclesiastical authors may be found in four texts that can be classified as normative: the *Collectio Hibernensis*, *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, *Córus*

³⁵ Neil Carlin, 'The landscape of the M4', in *The Archaeology of Life and Death in the Boyne Floodplain. The Linear Landscape of the M4, Kinnegad-Enfield-Kilcock Motorway*, ed. by Neil Carlin, Linda Clarke, Fintan Walsh, National Roads Authority Scheme Monographs, 2 (Dublin: National Roads Authority, 2008), pp. 1-9. There is considerable detail of recent finds on the EMAP project website (see above, n. 28).

Béscnai and the so-called Monastery of Tallaght.³⁶ The first three can be dated broadly to around the year 700 and the latter to the first half of the ninth century. The *Hibernensis* and the Monastery of Tallaght are unique in that their place of compilation (or at least the ecclesiastical circles that they belonged to) has been identified with reasonable certainty. The Monastery of Tallaght describes the customs and daily routine in the *Céli Dé* house of the same name and the *Hibernensis* was argued to have been compiled by Cú Chuimne of Iona and Ruben of Dairinis, who are named in one of its manuscript copies.³⁷ The *Hibernensis* may therefore reflect the perspective of scholars established in the southern (Dairinis) and northern (Iona) extremes of the contemporary Irish-speaking ecclesiastical world. The possibility of associating the *Hibernensis* with Iona is of particular importance because of that monastery's documented influence, both spiritual and political, on Ireland, Britain, and Scotland.

The texts mentioned above contain a wide and varied range of matters of economic significance that their authors targeted for change. These include (in no particular order): divisions of inheritance; making contracts; collecting tithes; collecting tribute or tax; allocating funds for supporting the socially-disadvantaged (e.g. orphans and widows); payment for pastoral care (especially burials); regulating fishing; and prescribing dietary rules (an issue with potential economic implications). The variety suggests something about the extent of the involvement that the authors envisaged that the church would have in society at large. Especially noteworthy are areas in which there is infiltration into the traditional responsibilities of the kin, like social care and burial.³⁸

Frustratingly, however, in the absence of hard corroborative material evidence, none of these works can serve as reliable guides to actual economic changes. Nevertheless, there are certain matters for which the material evidence is more forthcoming than others, like

³⁶ *Collectio Hibernensis*, ed. by Hermann Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (2nd ed. Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1885); *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, ed. by Daniel A. Binchy, CIH, pp. 2211–2232; ed. and trans. by Liam Breatnach, 'The first third of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*', *Ériu*, 40 (1989), pp. 7–21; *Córus Béscnai*, ed. by Daniel A. Binchy, CIH, pp. 520 line 1–536 line 27, 903 line 37–905 line 9; 1812 line 33–1821 line 27 (trans. AL III, pp. 3–79); Monastery of Tallaght, ed. and trans. by Edward J. Gwynn and Walter J. Purton, 'The Monastery of Tallaght', *PRIA*, 29C (1911), pp. 115–70.

³⁷ James F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), p. 248. For a recent discussion of The Monastery of Tallaght, see Westley Follett, *Céli Dé in Ireland: Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages*, *Studies in Celtic History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 101–114.

³⁸ See, for example, the stipulation in *Córus Béscnai* (CIH p. 535 lines 1–2) that a church is entitled to a third of a man's acquired property if it tends to him in old age in lieu of an undutiful son who would normally be expected to carry out this duty. Discussed in Kelly, *Guide*, p. 103. Burial is discussed later in this essay.

burials and fish traps. These then, by default, are the ones that will be examined here.

The quantifiable data regarding burials are not *prima facie* very revealing. To say that only twelve of the 174 pre eighth-century cemeteries that have been excavated can unequivocally be associated with churches may be due more to the vagaries of the survival of evidence, than to the church's failure to change burial practices.³⁹ In fact, interpreting this figure is impossible unless we can establish that there were clergy who actually wanted to change burial practices. For most of the Latin West in the pre-Carolingian period, such information is lacking.⁴⁰ Irish normative texts are therefore an important exception. Both *Córus Béscnai* and the *Hibernensis* prescribe burial in church ground in return for payment as an alternative to burial in ancestral burial grounds, or *ferfa*.⁴¹ The relatively high rates of payment suggest that such burial would be reserved for social elites. Christians could, however, be buried elsewhere, even in *ferfa*, but it is impossible to distinguish archaeologically between their burials and those of non-Christians buried at the same sites.⁴² The use of *ferfa* continued into the eighth century but certain *ferfa* were abandoned then, perhaps, as some have suggested, in response to prescriptions such as the ones found in the *Hibernensis*.⁴³ That certain pre-Christian traditions nevertheless persisted into the ninth century is suggested by animal bone finds (predominantly horse or antler) in six cemeteries. In addition, the Monastery of Tallaght provides a clear attestation of syncretism in its forbidding of funerary feasting among Christians.⁴⁴

³⁹ For the most up-to-date figures see the *Mapping Death* database by Elizabeth O'Brien and Edel Bhreathnach, at <http://www.mappingdeathdb.ie/> [accessed 5 June 2013].

⁴⁰ See e.g. John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 58–9. The earliest Carolingian attempt to control burial appears to have been in the Capitulary for Saxony, clauses 7 and 22, in which cremation was banned and all Christians were commanded to be buried beside churches. See Alfred Boretius, ed., *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, MGH Legum II.1 (Hannover, 1883), p. 69.

⁴¹ For burial in contemporary written sources, and especially the *Hibernensis*, see Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Literary Insights into the Basis of Some Burial Practices in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries', *Aedificia Nova: Studies in Honor of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and Helen Damico (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), pp. 283–299. For burial charges in *Córus Béscnai* (CIH, p. 532 lines 1, 4–5, 8–12), see Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Laigin, 1999), pp. 270–77.

⁴² Literary examples for the ambiguity are Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* §II.2, and Tirechán, *Collectanea* §41, ed. and trans. by Ludwig Bieler, *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), pp. 114, 154–6.

⁴³ Elizabeth O'Brien and Edel Bhreathnach, 'Irish Boundary *Ferfa*, their Physical Manifestation and Historical Context', in *Tome: Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards*, ed. by Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell, *Studies in Celtic History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 53–64 (p. 58).

⁴⁴ Monastery of Tallaght §65, ed. and trans. by Gwynn and Purton, p. 153.

Admittedly burial is not an issue of great economic significance unlike the accumulation of wealth by the church by means of bequests. Nevertheless, when plotting a research agenda for studying conversion and economic change, it is a useful issue for highlighting the difficulties in reconciling textual and material evidence. But, more importantly, it is an issue that can potentially help to bridge the gap between an ideal expressed by ecclesiastical authors and actual change.

Another such issue is the use of fish traps. These are discussed in a text found in a manuscript of the so-called B-recension of the *Hibernensis*. The text recommends that, in places suitable for nets, weirs should be dismantled because they deplete the fishing stock, thereby preventing all those living alongside the river estuary from catching their fair share.⁴⁵ In places unsuitable for nets, however, the text describes how weirs should be erected in such a way that would allow a fair distribution of the catch. The text is undoubtedly of ecclesiastical origin, as evidenced by the biblical citations in it and its incorporation into a work commonly classified as a collection of canon law. It is the most detailed treatment of fish weirs by any contemporary text. By comparison, so-called Irish vernacular law tracts only make passing references to fishing by means of a weir (Old Irish *cora*).

Archaeological evidence for fish weirs (some on an impressive scale) in Ireland and Wales has already been considered above. The contribution of the text from the *Hibernensis* is in giving us an ecclesiastical author's view of how closely the church ought to be involved in managing fish weirs and their users. It is unclear from the text whether the users were also the owners, whether all those mentioned were envisaged as being tenants of the church, or whether they were a mix of both ecclesiastical tenants and peasants who were independent of the church.

Management is a crucial issue in the case of weirs, which required regular and intensive maintenance. A large and well-coordinated workforce would be best suited for the task, which is why Aidan O'Sullivan argued that the fish weirs on Strangford Lough were likely to have been operated by the *manaig* of Nendrum.⁴⁶ This led him to argue, further, that weirs were owned primarily by churches, though this argument is based partially on comparison with Anglo-Saxon examples and later medieval (eleventh- to thirteenth-century) ownership of weirs by churches.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Roy Flechner, 'Aspects of the Breton Transmission of the *Hibernensis*', *Pecia*, 12 (2008), pp. 27–44 (pp. 42–3).

⁴⁶ Aidan O'Sullivan, 'Place, Memory and Identity among Estuarine Fishing Communities: Interpreting Archaeology of Early Medieval Fish Weirs', *World Archaeology*, 35 (2003), pp. 449–468 (p. 463).

⁴⁷ O'Sullivan, 'Place, Memory', pp. 458, 462, 463. Note however that, according to the law tracts, fish weirs could be owned by individual aristocrats as well as jointly by a kin-group. The evidence is noted by Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 288 notes 126, 7.

Following on from the proposition regarding churches' potential to exercise direct management over relatively large labour forces, we may wish to ask whether conversion affected the exploitation of labour and, consequently, conceptions of freedom and unfreedom among the labour force. The so-called Irish law tracts of the seventh and eighth centuries are replete with references to social rank and legal status, offering elaborate, idealised, and often inconsistent schemes of differentiation.⁴⁸ The texts do, however, seem to be in agreement on a central major division: between the free who own land and the unfree who do not.⁴⁹ The best surviving source for enlightening us about the practical implications of freedom and unfreedom is the quasi-cartulary *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh.⁵⁰ Its clear ecclesiastical bias and its mention solely of peasants associated, or about to become associated, with Armagh, does not allow for a properly-balanced comparison with peasants who had no connexion with a church.

Nevertheless, the Book of Armagh is unique among contemporary sources in recording grants of land, sometimes consisting of wholesale alienation of kin-land, with both free and servile peasant inhabitants. As the land was granted away to the church, the peasants who previously held shares of the kin land became tenants of the church, or *manaig*.⁵¹ Consequently, one may expect a reduction in their legal status but this does not appear to have happened. It is not uncommon to find descriptions of *manaig* as freemen in contemporary normative sources, where they are sometimes portrayed as analogous to *céili*, clients of free status, with respect to their contractual relationship with the abbot or *airchinnech* and the food renders they owed. But they were not consistently conceptualised as free. For example, seventh- and early eighth-century lists of legal dependents paint an ambiguous picture of *manaig*, pairing them, on the one hand, with *mogae* 'slaves', and on the other with *céili* 'clients' who were

⁴⁸ The classic reference works are Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series II (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), pp. 26–38, 68–98; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 423–8, 438–62.

⁴⁹ This is not stated explicitly but can be inferred, for example, from stipulations restricting the legal capacity of landless people: *Uraicecht Becc* states that a freeman who sells his land becomes unfree (CIH, p. 638 line 10), and *Berrad Airechta* stipulates that a landless person is not entitled to make a contract independently (CIH, p. 593 lines 35–8 = Robin Stacey, trans., 'Berrad Airechta: an Old Irish Tract on Suretyship', in *Lawyers and Laymen*, ed. by Thomas Charles-Edwards, Morfydd Owen, and Dafydd Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1986), p. 215 §37). Control of land is nevertheless not absolute, except in the case of a king or a head of a kin group. Restrictions apply especially to one's ability to alienate land. For example, one's share in kin-land cannot be alienated without the permission of the head of the kindred. See Kelly, *Farming*, pp. 400–1, 423–5.

⁵⁰ Ed. and trans. by Bieler, *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, pp. 166–79.

⁵¹ On the legal status of *manaig* and its complexities, see Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 363–93.

free.⁵² There are a number of ways to account for this discrepancy: it is possible that some *manaig* were regarded as free while others were not, that some regarded *manaig* as free while others did not, or that *manaig* were free in some respects but not in others.⁵³ In any event, the concept of a free *manach* existed, and if the land transfers recorded in the Book of Armagh are indicative of a general rule of how land transfers happened, then these *manaig* were considered free despite having no land of their own (in the form of a share in kin land).⁵⁴ To cite Charles-Edwards: '*manaig* formed a class of men hereditarily subjected, with their land, to their lord, just as the *colonus* was tied to his land, and yet they were of free status like the *colonus*'.⁵⁵ The implication of this statement, if accepted, is that *manaig* heralded an ostensible shift in the basis for legal status in Ireland: ownership of land was no longer the primary criterion for having free status.

But one may wish to push the argument further by asking if it is possible to discern an attempt to gloss over the intricate taxonomy of the vernacular institution of legal status altogether, preserving only the binary of free/unfree, while allowing for the expansion of the ranks of the former by removing land as the decisive criterion for freedom.⁵⁶ At

⁵² Ten lists were collated and analysed by Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Church and Settlement', in *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, ed. by Michael Richter and Próinséas Ní Chatháin (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), pp. 167–75 (pp. 172–5). For the pairing of *manaig* with other categories of persons in the lists see CIH, pp. 47 line 1, 220 lines 1–2, 351 lines 24–5, 522 line 1, 536 lines 23–4, 593 line 37.

⁵³ The latter was raised by Charles-Edwards 'Church and settlement', p. 172, who argued that the contradiction one finds in the lists between a *mug*-like and *céile*-like *manach* is not real but apparent and that the *manach* resembled the *mug* only 'in legal capacity' but 'his resemblance to *céile* lay elsewhere'. It is noteworthy that *manaig* are never associated with both *mogae* and *céili* in the same list, but in different lists. For Etchingham's critique of Charles-Edwards see *Church Organisation*, pp. 364–80.

⁵⁴ *Addit.* 1.6 (a transfer of *regionem suam cum possessione sua et cum omnibus substantiis suis et cum omni progenie sua*), 2.2 (offering of *omnia quae adipti sunt de terra, de regionibus, aeclessiis*), 3.1 (Foirchernn granting away his inheritance), 5.1 (land being granted *cum seruis in eo sibi famulantibus*), 5.4 (land being given with consent of Ciarraige kings), 8.1 (a fifth of the kin land is granted with the consent of the king). The assumption that I make (and which Charles-Edwards made in 'The Church and Settlement') is that the attested transfers of land with its peasant inhabitants to the church entailed the dispossession of these peasants. In other words, where peasants previously worked their share of the kin land, after the transfer they became tenants of the church. I acknowledge, however, that other interpretations may be possible, especially given the ostensible heterogeneity of the *manaig*'s legal and economic standing as reflected in different early Irish normative texts (see discussion in Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 363–453). However, the proposition I arrive at by a syllogism combining the testimonies of the Book of Armagh and the lists of legal dependents, is that contemporaries appear to have recognised a category of *free* monastic tenant.

⁵⁵ Charles-Edwards, 'Church and settlement', p. 175.

⁵⁶ Slavery *per se* does not appear to have been contested. For example, the *Hibernensis* occasionally mentions slaves owned by churches and in 42.24 it even

least one contemporary text, *Bretha Crólige*, noted that church law, unlike customary law (*fénechas*), did not distinguish between the legal status of individuals, but rather assigned a single honour-price to all.⁵⁷ This distinction between the two legal traditions can be illustrated, for example, by contrasting the frequent references to honour-price in the vernacular law tracts with the absence of any explicit mention of honour-price in the *Hibernensis*. That the omission of honour-price was a deliberate choice on the part of the compilers of the *Hibernensis* rather than an oversight is suggested, for example, by the text's treatment of burial charges: where *Córus Béscnai* prescribes different rates corresponding to the deceased's honour-price, the *Hibernensis* does not link one's legal status to the rate of the burial-charge. Apart from omitting honour-price from their legal discourse, the compilers of the *Hibernensis* also cited a passage from Jerome's Commentary on Matthew which urges equality before the law.⁵⁸ What we may be witnessing here is an attempt by certain clergy to reform conceptions of social order, if not social order itself.

To conclude, if we leave aside our intuitive, and perhaps anachronistic, predilection for regarding the church as an institution that urges social or economic change along certain ideological lines, we must admit that there is really nothing obvious about ecclesiastics seeking to change or reform existing conditions, be they economic or social. The message of the Gospels can be interpreted both as necessitating change, for example, Matthew 19. 22 ('it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven') or advocating social and economic conservatism, for example, Matthew 20. 21 ('render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's'). But in the absence of an explicit statement on how such verses were understood by contemporaries, we should refrain from making assumptions about potential social or economic ideological motives of the clergy based on the bible and certainly not on the manner in which Christianity has been practised in later times. Rather, in developing a research agenda for investigating possible correspondences between conversion and economic change, we ought to restrict ourselves to the most conspicuous aspects of the intersection between certain economic changes associated with churches, their

entitles churches to enslave oblates, though presumably only ones who were admitted without an endowment.

⁵⁷ Honour-price is roughly the Irish equivalent of *wergeld*, for which the Old Irish words are *lóg n-enech*, *díre* and *eneclann*. For *Bretha Crólige*'s distinction between the two traditions, see Daniel Binchy, ed., '*Bretha Crólige*', *Ériu* 12 (1938), pp. 1–77 (p. 8 §5). It is discussed in Jean-Michel Picard, 'Christianisation et hiérarchie dans la société irlandaise des VIIe et VIIIe siècles', in *Hiérarchie et stratification sociale dans l'Occident médiéval (400–1100)*, ed. by François Bougard, Dominique Iogna-Prat, Régine LeJan (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 23–38.

⁵⁸ Jerome, *In Matt.* 26:57. See Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, p. 69 n aa (*sic*).

potential causes, and their social implications, as the foregoing discussion has attempted to do.

III

One might suppose that the introduction of Christianity led to the adoption of the celibate lifestyle and the freeing of slaves, as could be suggested by St Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola*. If either did happen on a significant scale, it would have had economic consequences: in the former case a demographic consequence that impacted adversely on levels of production; and in the latter an array of conceivable effects from looser management and declining production to increasing production because of heavier labour service demands or accelerated peasant entrepreneurship. Given the nature of the available source material, it is difficult to see how the complex of potential implications could be disentangled or indeed reliably tested. In the end it will probably be more useful to define a few particular aspects of change that are measurable rather than grapple with the sea of interlocking complexities that make for large-scale economic change.

All of this certainly makes the suggestions of long-term increase in scale of productive effort – huge fish traps, large milling operations – look significant; but this was very much long-term, one hundred and fifty to three hundred years after the early missions. The outcome is that a case can be made for long-term change as a consequence of conversion but it cannot be made for change which took place solely because of conversion. We cannot deal in mono-causal explanations. There is little reason to believe that Christian institutions were the only significant actors, although, as RF points out above, it is certainly clear that some clerics had ideas about social practice that had potential economic impact. The kind of highly focussed research programme carried out at Lyminge in Anglo-Saxon Kent shows that it is possible to infer environmental impact that was a consequence of the establishment of an ecclesiastical institution; and the detailed landscape research currently in hand in Ireland may well produce some comparable results, although we do not as yet know – when identifying the proximity of royal and church sites – if and when a spatial relationship reflects a working relationship. Current indications are that practice was extremely mixed. Identifying and differentiating the causal relationships may be the challenge for the next generation.