

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND

by Roy Flechner

It is a historiographical commonplace to stress Ireland's situation outside the borders of the Roman Empire and, by implication, outside the ambit of late antique ecclesiastical networks.¹ Consequently, Ireland was not in a position to be directly affected by the Empire's conversion nor does it appear to have received Christianity directly from any of the well-established churches of continental Europe despite legendary accounts that assert the contrary, like the hagiographical topos of St Patrick's family ties with St Martin of Tours. Nevertheless, Christianity appears to have reached Ireland at a relatively early stage, perhaps as early as the fourth century. By the seventh century Ireland was indisputably regarded as Christian by both Irish and foreign sources. Although the conversion of Ireland can hardly be described as rapid, it is nevertheless remarkable for being the earliest conversion of a European culture, which lay beyond the *limes* of the former Empire. By comparison, Germanic peoples such as the Frisians and Saxons remained pagan until Christianity was brought to them—sometimes by force—through waves of Frankish political expansion. Not so in Ireland, whose inhabitants are not known to have been subjected to any external political dominion, nor do they appear to have experienced the classic Germanic top-down pattern of conversion, which saw communities converting in tow with their aristocracies.² Rather, the Christianisation of Ireland was a protracted process stimulated by different forces and personalities. The question of the different processes through which Christianity took root in Ireland from late antiquity and up until the end of the early Viking age in the tenth century, is the subject of the present chapter.

NATIVISM AND OTHER GRAND NARRATIVES

Much of the historiography on the conversion of Ireland has tended to concentrate on the foreign-born 'apostles' Palladius and Patrick, and especially on their biographies rather than their achievements as missionaries.³ Apart from simplified recurrent etiologies derived from their biographical accounts there has never emerged a standard scholarly narrative for the conversion of Ireland, neither in the pre-Viking nor the Viking period. And even though the subject of conversion was broached in articles and book chapters, there is no monograph wholly devoted to it, unlike, for comparison, the history of the conversion to Christianity of Britain, which has four modern monographs.⁴

¹ E.g. Máire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 25; Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 35. For a reassessment of the evidence of religious change stemming from Ireland's interaction with the Roman world, see Johnston, 'Religious change and frontier management'.

² The standard studies of missions in Europe are by Richard Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, and Ian Wood, *Missionary Life*.

³ In what follows I incorporate some material from historiographical discussions in my contributions to *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World*, *Converting the Isles I*, ed. Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (Turnhout, 2016), 1–12, 41–60.

⁴ The monographs are by Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity* (1972), Yorke, *Conversion of Britain* (2006), Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons* (2009), Lambert, *Christians and Pagans* (2010). Recent examples of general books about Ireland that treat the subject of conversion are Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*; Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*; Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*.

Historians would often treat conversion indirectly, as an aspect of the debate over church organisation in Ireland (x-ref in this volume). Some of the most influential contributions in this area have been by Kathleen Hughes, Thomas Charles-Edwards, Richard Sharpe, and Colmán Etchingham.⁵ The central question in the debate has been (to put it crudely) whether the character of the church was primarily monastic or episcopal. The implications for conversion history are significant because they help us in framing the ‘end-result’ of conversion, as gauged from an institutional perspective. Some associated issues that arise include: the economic motivations for and consequences of conversion (discussed separately in this chapter), the persistence of the cult of ancestors that arguably morphed into the cults of certain saintly founders of proprietary churches, and the relative contemporary importance of a hierarchical church vis-à-vis a proliferation of local churches and local practices that exhibited fluid (or at the very least non-uniform) applications of Christianity.⁶

Two competing grand narratives can be seen to have framed the debate on church organisation: the so-called (mainly by its critics) ‘nativist’ and its rival, the ‘revisionist’ or ‘anti-nativist’. The first would, predictably, stress the uniqueness of Irish church organisation, while the second stresses the external influences, be they European or beyond. This is of course a simplified representation of a debate that has wide implications for framing the story of conversion in Ireland, with one side emphasising the endurance of pre-Christian legacies and the other giving pride of place to Christian influence.⁷ In retrospect, it is all too easy to deride views held by staunch proponents of either side of the ‘nativist’/‘revisionist’ divide and portray them as polar and irreconcilable, but in reality neither side ever attempted to exclude the other entirely. Rather, the debate—to put it crudely again—has been about the relative weight that either view should be given. For a long time a source of professional as well as personal animosity, in recent years the ‘nativist’ debate has mellowed, and gradually a wider spectrum of more nuanced views has been coming to light.⁸ Indeed, there are constructive lessons to be learned from the debate and, as is often the case, centralist positions emerged that offer new compelling insights. Dubbed by one commentator ‘post revisionist’, such positions reject the binaries of pagan/Christian or secular/religious in favour of a model of constant dialectical motion between poles.⁹

The revisionists would also stress the fact that Ireland was never isolated and certainly not immune to Roman influence from an early date. Elsewhere in this volume Thomas Charles-Edwards (x-ref) discusses in detail evidence for early contacts between Rome, Roman Britain, and Ireland. Palladius, who was sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine in 431, is of course the most obvious example for a direct

⁵ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*; Charles-Edwards, ‘The Church and Settlement’; Richard Sharpe, ‘Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church’; *Idem*, ‘Churches and Communities’; Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation*.

⁶ On the cult of ancestors see, e.g. Ó Riain, ‘Traces of Lug’, 147–151, 155; Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 143.

⁷ Some of the best treatments of the debate and its history are Kim McCone, *Pagan Past*, pp. 2–19; Elva Johnston, ‘Early Irish History’.

⁸ McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 2, traces the origin of the debate to James Carney’s coining of the term ‘nativist’ in his 1955 *Studies in Irish Literature*. Among the ‘nativists’ he challenged were such giants of Celtic studies as Myles Dillon, Daniel Binchy, Kenneth Jackson, Proinsias Mac Cana and Seán Ó Coileáin.

⁹ Johnston, ‘Early Irish History’, p. 342.

involvement by Rome in Ireland's nascent Christianity. I will return to him. But Roman influence is also manifest in the material record. In fact, for a place that has never been under imperial occupation, Ireland can boast an impressive array of Roman finds (also discussed by Charles-Edwards) attesting trade, raids and perhaps even infrequent military links, though contrary to what some have believed, the evidence for Irishmen serving in the imperial army is scant.¹⁰ For present purposes the finds most worthy of mention are such that may attest religious practices. An example are the gold Roman coins and Roman jewellery, dating between the third and fifth centuries AD, found at the prehistoric cult site at Newgrange (Co. Meath). The coins, depicting the Christian convert Emperor Constantine and his Christian son Constantius, are suggestive of familiarity with Christianity (albeit perhaps localised and on a small scale) in Ireland from a relatively early stage in the Empire's adoption of Christianity as a privileged religion.¹¹ However, despite being evocative of Christianity, the coins and other Roman objects from the site are commonly regarded as reflecting votive offerings either by Romans or locals influenced by the Roman practice of making offerings at shrines and other sacred places.¹² We may therefore be witnessing a curious combination of evidence, whereby artifacts from a Christian source, which might even have been brought by Christians, were deposited in what may be interpreted as a ritualistic fashion evocative of pre-Christian Roman custom.

It must be stressed, however, that Ireland itself falls outside the traditional grand narrative of the conversion of the Empire and of fourth/fifth-century migrating peoples, because it lacks the signature themes of persecution, imperial acceptance of the new faith, integration of the clergy into the Roman government, establishment of clearly-defined ecclesiastical hierarchies and jurisdictions, doctrinal debates at ecumenical church councils, demarcation of heresy versus orthodoxy, rise of clerical ruling elites governing from towns, and so on.¹³ Ireland could nevertheless be argued to have been indirectly touched by phenomena that affected the late Empire and its newcomers, but no more than that.

Apart from Roman religious and other influences, other major themes rehearsed in the 'nativist' debate have been the origins of learning in Ireland and conceptions of kingship. Both are pertinent to conversion. Whereas the character of kingship in Ireland still awaits a fresh and comprehensive reappraisal, the subject of Irish learning and literacy received a new and long-awaited treatment in a recent monograph by Elva Johnston.¹⁴ The book urges us to adopt the middle ground between 'nativist' and 'revisionist' and ask to what extent the church's effects on literate culture should be

¹⁰ The pros and cons, with references to literature, are discussed by Catherine Swift, *Ogam Stones*, 6–7. In the Roman period and early post-Roman period, Ireland can be conceptualised as an imperial frontier zone, on which see Johnston, 'Ireland in late antiquity'.

¹¹ On Roman objects in prehistoric sites in Ireland and their interpretation as votive offerings, see Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, p. 180; Lloyd Laing, *Archaeology of Celtic Britain Ireland*, pp. 271–6.

¹² See, e.g., J. D. Bateson, 'Roman Material in Ireland: A Reconsideration', p. 31; Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, p. 297; Swift, *Ogam Stones*, p. 20.

¹³ See, e.g., Ramsay Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*; Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*; Mark Edwards, 'Synods and Councils'.

¹⁴ The classic reference works on kingship are Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, and Bart Jaski, *Irish Kingship and Succession*, published, respectively, in 1973 and 2000. Each was groundbreaking for its time, but a new treatment is needed. For literacy, see Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*.

framed as conversion, or should they simply be said to have modified an existing culture, perhaps by giving it more tools of expression, some with a Christian slant.¹⁵ The identification of oral with native and literate with clerical culture had for a long time ceased to hold currency in scholarship, while influential hypotheses on the monopolisation of literate activity by a discrete class comprising a mix of learned men trained both by secular and ecclesiastical scholars, continue to be debated.¹⁶ Insofar as the very concept of conversion is concerned, the middle position between ‘nativist’ and ‘revisionist’ can be seen to challenge conventional notions of linear transition from one kind of belief or practice to another and instead stress the simultaneity of pagan and Christian and the ongoing cross fertilisation between them. This has the advantage of reducing the risk of teleology and bringing us closer to the perspective of contemporaries, who could not have been aware of any long-term process of change.

The absence of a simple and one-directional pattern of development is especially conspicuous in a literary tradition that is arguably unique on a European scale. The Irish normative tradition, the literature of which is often referred to simply as ‘Irish law’ or ‘vernacular law’, boasts the highest survival rate of texts in comparison with other vernacular normative traditions elsewhere in Europe (see x-ref Breatnach in this volume). With a corpus of sources that includes texts of jurisprudence, laws enacted by kings or assemblies, penitentials, and texts commonly classified as canon law (the latter two usually in Latin), it is a highly sophisticated tradition that continues to be of considerable value for the study of conversion.¹⁷ The church’s contribution to the articulation of native rules and customs has long been recognised, and so has the influence of pre-Christian traditions on clerical conceptions of justice and law.¹⁸ In certain cases this can be seen to have given rise to what are best described as hybrid native/Christian traditions, though the role of clerics in the articulation of ‘native’ legal precepts calls to question the validity of a simple-minded native/Christian binary. Nevertheless, on certain occasions we find contemporaries drawing distinctions between approaches to law that are more ‘native’ in character and others that are more Christian. As observed by Jean-Michel Picard, at 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.¹⁹ In the long run, Irish normative texts in Latin exerted a strong and enduring influence on the formation of texts of canon law in

¹⁵ Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, pp. 16–19. Similar conceptual questions can be asked in regard to the vicissitudes of kingship but also of changing perception of the landscape, two areas that exhibit a clear mix of native and Christian traditions.

¹⁶ For a critique of scholarly assumptions on oral traditions, see McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 17. assumptions The influential idea of a ‘mandarin caste’, first proposed by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and Kingship’, pp. 19, 35, was modified by Charles-Edwards, ‘The Context and Uses of Literacy’, 70–74, who prefers to speak of a ‘complex aristocracy’ instead. A more recent challenge to the concept of a ‘mandarin caste’ is Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, 22–3.

¹⁷ To get a sense of the extent of the corpus of legal texts, see Fergus Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 264–80; Richard Sharpe and Michael Lapidge, *Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature*, pp. 152–7.

¹⁸ The *locus classicus* is Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Aidan Breen, ‘The Laws of the Irish’.

¹⁹ 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’, 26.

continental Europe, texts that were sometimes rejected and sometimes embraced by clerics, from local priests to popes.²⁰ Little did these clerics know that the laws they embraced or dismissed were conceived in the context of an ethical debate that was part and parcel of a wider process of cultural change that affected a society undergoing religious conversion. This process of conversion, as has already been argued, can be pictured without a single vector of motion between two poles, but as constant movement to and fro.²¹

WHAT WENT BEFORE

The logical place to begin a discussion of a process of change is not with the outcome, but with the state of affairs that prevailed before. In this case, rather than starting with the dawn of the new religion, one would like to be able to say something about the beliefs or religious practices that are often designated by the catch-all ‘paganism’. In doing so, we must distinguish between paganism that existed before Christianity was known in Ireland and paganism that continued into the Christian era. The evidence for either is scant, but understanding the latter is compounded by the additional challenge that that form of paganism could itself have been informed by Christianity and would therefore render the use of the expression ‘pre-Christian religions’ untenable.²² It is common to view pagan religions of Germanic and Celtic Europe as animistic, characterised by a lack of separation between the natural and supernatural or between what is religious and what is profane (or simply mundane).²³ Christianity, on the other hand, has variably been classified as ‘prophetic’, ‘world rejecting’, or ‘doctrinal’, in contrast with ‘natural’/‘animistic’, ‘world accepting’, or ‘imagistic’.²⁴ Schematic distinctions of these kinds, expressed as they are in binary oppositions, can of course be argued to gloss over important nuances and offer a measure of difference too crude to serve as a useful analytical criterion.²⁵ It is not only their simplistic character but also their grounding in what is essentially a modern theoretical discourse, that has made such conceptions difficult to work with for medievalists, who continue to wrestle with the challenges of developing a meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue.²⁶ Likewise, models for expressing the essence of transition from paganism to Christianity in early medieval Europe vary significantly and, as we have seen, the mere notion of ‘transition’ is challenged by perspectives that stress an ongoing to-ing and fro-ing between what is Christian and what is not. This can be

²⁰ See, for example, Roger Reynolds, ‘Unity and Diversity’; Flechner, ‘*Libelli et commentarii aliorum*’.

²¹ On conversion as a motion ‘to and fro’ see Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

²² This issue was discussed, for example, in regard to Britain, Scandinavia and Central Europe. See Ian Wood, ‘Some Historical Re-Identification’, p. 30; Robert Bartlett, ‘From Paganism to Christianity’, p. 59; John Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, p. 248; Wood, ‘Pagans and the Other’, pp. 18–19.

²³ On early medieval pagan Europe more generally, see James Palmer, ‘Defining Paganism’; Wood, ‘Northern Frontier’; Lesley Abrams, ‘Germanic Christianities’.

²⁴ These binaries were coined by, respectively, Cornelius Tiele and Nathan Söderblom, *Kompendium der Religionsgeschichte*; Max Weber, ‘Religious Rejections’; Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.

²⁵ A more sophisticated approach is Ninian Smart’s in *Worldviews*, which breaks the binary pattern and proposes a bundle of criteria including doctrinal or philosophical, mythic or narrative, ethical or legal, ritual or practical-experiential, emotional, social, and Institutional.

²⁶ Recent books dealing with conversion that have been more theory-aware are Dunn, *Christianization*, and Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*. Both reflect pioneer yet still largely uncritical attempts to bridge the medieval evidence and social or cognitive theory emerging from a modern discourse.

pictured as simply a motion between two absolute poles, but very often it was a more complex motion between constantly shifting goalposts; which is to say that what was considered harmless ‘folk magic’ in the eyes of some at one time, could be seen as dangerous idolatry in the eyes of others at another time.²⁷ No convenient catch-phrase has yet been coined to describe this fluid reality, but there is a relatively fixed jargon for the more conventional models for conceptualising change and transition. These speak of ‘assimilation’ (a word often used to describe the outcome of top-down conversion), ‘conversion’ (sometimes understood as a more personal and deliberate act), ‘Christianisation’ (a long-term and not always intentional act, e.g. the Christianisation of a society over generations due to a higher birth rate among Christians), ‘acculturation’ (the acceptance of Christian norms through contact with a Christian population by a process that is not always conscious and whose effects can be mutual), or its unruly twin ‘syncretism’ (a contested expression, usually meaning the integration of contradictory forms of belief without attempting to rationally reconcile them).²⁸

Any discussion of pre-Christian religions in Germanic Europe and Ireland is bound to be largely hypothetical, because no contemporary descriptions by pagan practitioners survive. The best we can aim for are educated guesses informed by theory, be it from the social sciences or comparative religion, although, as we have seen, the application of such theory is still in its infancy. To try to compensate for the evidential deficit by drawing on Classical depictions of religion among the continental Celts is of little value unless one posits continuity from continental to insular Celtic cultures. Such a hypothesis of continuity, championed by earlier generations of modern scholars, would have us equate, for example, druids mentioned in medieval texts from Ireland with the druids of antiquity found in the writings of Diodorus Siculus (fl. mid 1st century BC), Posidonius (d. 51 BC), Caesar (d. 44 BC), or Strabo (d. AD 21).²⁹ Connections of this kind would nowadays be regarded as tenuous, not only because of the uncertainty about continuities, but also because none of these authors plainly depicted religious practices from observation, but to some extent constructed them under the influence of their own religious conceptions and the conventions of the learned discourses with which they engaged.³⁰

Medieval accounts of paganism are invariably written by Christian clerics, and consequently carry the predictable baggage of biases and dismissive attitudes. Most accounts also date from periods in which paganism and Christianity coexisted and can

²⁷ The classical reference work is Valerie Flint, *Rise of Magic*, but more up-to-date perspectives are offered by Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, and Yitzhak Hen, ‘Magic in the Early Medieval West’.

²⁸ A single expression can be used in different senses by different authors. For some more-or-less recent discussions and definitions, see Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*; William Kilbride, ‘Why I feel Cheated by the Term “Christianisation”’; Wood, *Missionary Life*, p. 3; Abrams, ‘Conversion and the Church’; John Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 44–51; Wickham, ‘The Comparative Method and Early Medieval Religious Conversion’. Some of the better known models for gradual transition were proposed by Fridtjov Birkely, *Norske Steinkors*, and Ludo Milis, ‘La conversion’.

²⁹ An account of the history of the reception of classical sources among early modern and modern scholars is John Collis, *The Celts*, esp. pp. 13–92.

³⁰ On the tenuous nature of such connections, see MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, 20–22. There is a substantial body of scholarship on Celtic identity. Two recent publications that touch on classical and modern constructs of Celtic identity and contain bibliographies for further reading, are Bernhard Maier, *The Celts*, pp. 55–89, 97–111; McCone, *The Celtic Question*.

therefore be assumed to have affected one another. Indeed, in Ireland it is from roughly the seventh century and later, when the island was firmly Christian, that we begin to find mention of deities and demi-gods. From the ninth century one may observe attempts to weave more coherent narratives from different traditions and commit them to writing. These narratives can be said to have been initially related to the well-attested Irish practice of tracing, or inventing, genealogies.³¹ The most celebrated Irish origin legend, *Lébor Gabála Éirenn*, is based on genealogies that combine biblical figures, classical heroes, and modified versions of local deities. Although the form in which it survives dates from the eleventh-century, it is generally assumed to echo earlier traditions.³² Among them is the record of the *Túatha Dé Danann*, races of demi-gods sometimes distinguished from humans by their extraordinary powers, exceptional longevity, or possibly even immortality.³³ They nevertheless belong to the created order and are therefore, by definition, inferior to the Christian god.³⁴ The *Túatha Dé Danann* constitute the earliest known written record of groupings of supernatural beings which may preserve the vestiges of an early Irish pantheon, although we must not necessarily think of it as a cogently-ordered pantheon in the Greek or Roman pattern, and we should resist the temptation of drawing analogies between figures from the *Túatha Dé Danann* and Greek or Roman deities, a practice known as *interpretatio Romana*.³⁵

Mentions of such quasi-pantheons or aspects thereof become more common later in the Middle Irish period. They are, however, as unreliable for early periods as the pantheon in Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century Prose Edda is for early medieval Germanic paganism.³⁶ Nevertheless, in the same manner that later Scandinavian myths give details (or at the very least name deities) that can be traced back to earlier times, perhaps even attesting some practices from pre-Christian cults among Germanic peoples, it may be argued that, on occasion, medieval Irish narratives preserve traces of earlier lore. This cannot be proved, but a hypothesis to this effect can nevertheless be made on the evidence of literary mythologies, like the Middle Irish Ulster or Finn Cycles, retaining echoes from earlier medieval sources. Such echoes consist primarily of place names and personal names, like Ethne and Fedelm, the two of which are mentioned both in the Ulster cycle (Medb's sister and a prophet, respectively) and in seventh-century hagiography written at Armagh (both appearing as daughters of king Lóegaire).³⁷ It is, of course, impossible to say whether such figures were interpreted in exactly the same way in the early and the later medieval

³¹ For a recent brief account of the Irish 'national' origin legend as a dialogue between Christian and pre-Christian traditions, see Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 5–8.

³² John Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*.

³³ The latest on Irish literary mythologies and pantheons, in particular the *Túatha Dé Danann*, is Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, 128–93.

³⁴ But by other Irish accounts non-humans possessing of supernatural powers and living exceedingly long lives were considered (or demoted to) demons. See *Liber de ordine creaturarum* c. 8.

³⁵ On the hazards thereof, see Ian Wood, 'Pagan Religion', p. 254.

³⁶ A good introduction to the adaptation of pre-Christian lore to a Christian society at the time of church reform in Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, is John Carey, *King of Mysteries*, pp. 9–26. For a caveat concerning the hazards of imposing an artificial mythological pattern on Irish paganism, see MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 136.

³⁷ The two are mentioned, for example, in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly, pp. 1, 6–7; Tírechán, *Collectanea* §26, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, p. 144. Echoes of an early version of the *Táin* story have been argued to be found in other seventh-century Armagh hagiography. See John Carey, 'Muirchú and the Ulster Cycle'.

accounts, in which they may have been modified to suit more coherent, yet artificially-constructed, pantheons.

The depiction of pre-Christian beliefs in early medieval hagiography comes with the usual caveats about the hazards of inferring too much about the workings of paganism from texts that exhibit clear clerical biases and lampooning of non-Christians. Nevertheless, a judicious reading can be rewarding, as is evident from scholarly interpretations of the so-called Patrician hagiography from Armagh (mentioned above), which contains a good deal of non-Christian elements, ranging from names and placenames to vivid accounts of the transformation of landscapes of pagan cult into Christian landscapes.³⁸ A good example is the transition from the family cemetery, *fert*, to the Christian cemetery, Tírechán's *relic*.³⁹

The appropriation by the church of elements of pre-Christian cults may be understood as a form of acculturation. Acculturation of this kind is often studied in relation to saints. The most famous saint who might have had a pre-Christian incarnation is probably St Brigit of Kildare, who is believed by some to be connected with the deity Brigantia, and whose medieval veneration arguably exhibits pre-Christian aspects.⁴⁰ Names of saints containing a pagan element, like Lug or Corp, may also attest a pagan substratum.⁴¹ Likewise, placenames, like Tara (a cult site from pre-Christian into Christian times⁴²), can sometimes bear the vestiges of cult practices, and they have therefore been tapped as sources for pre-Christian religious activity.⁴³ Such placenames fall primarily into two categories, which can overlap: those preserved in the actual landscape and those preserved in the so-called 'placename lore' or *dindshenchas*, the earliest recension of which is found in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster.⁴⁴ There is also a separate category of placename introduced under Christian influence, exhibiting elements such as *domnach*, *cell*, or *dísert*.⁴⁵ The question of how best to conceptualise the assimilation of folklore or pagan traditions into the newly-formed Christian culture still awaits an analysis that is more informed by recent developments in social-scientific discourse, though some progress in this direction can already be observed.⁴⁶

³⁸ For a recent contribution focused on kingship, see *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*, ed. Roseanne Schot *et al.*

³⁹ Elizabeth O'Brien and Edel Bhreathnach, 'Irish Boundary *Ferta*'.

⁴⁰ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp. 34–5. A preliminary reassessment of the commonplace view that Brigit is the namesake of a pagan goddess, is Catherine McKenna, 'Between Two Worlds: Saint Brigit and pre-Christian Religion'; Pádraig Ó Riain, *Dictionary of Irish Saints*, pp. 123–5.

⁴¹ See Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Traces of Lug', esp. pp. 147–51; index to Ó Riain, *Dictionary of Irish Saints*.

⁴² Edel Bhreathnach, ed., *Kingship and Landscape of Tara*.

⁴³ Edel Bhreathnach, *Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, p. xiii, argues that the placename Temair is etymologically related to the Indo-European root *tem-*, meaning 'to cut', echoed in the Greek *temenos* ('sanctuary') and the Latin *templum*. According to her, Temair would thus have been a site 'cut off or demarcated for sacred purposes'. Scholarship on Irish placenames is rife. For a recent review of the state of the art see Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'Irish Placenames'.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Hughes, *Sources*, pp. 166–7; Charles Bowen, 'A historical inventory of the Dindshenchas'.

⁴⁵ Flanagan, 'Christian Impact on Early Ireland'.

⁴⁶ Some passing references to anthropology and comparative religion can be found in the discussion of correspondence between literary, and especially hagiographical representations of paganism (e.g. of burial customs, holy springs, votive offerings) and the actual landscape in Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, pp. 133–48.

Linguistic analysis does not only figure in relation to placenames and personal names, but also in relation to Latin loanwords in Irish, the reception of which has been argued to attest British cultural influence, and perhaps proselytising influence, in Ireland. In a hypothesis that conveniently answers the two most rudimentary questions about conversion in Ireland—when, and by whom—Kenneth Jackson argued that Latin loanwords, especially church-related vocabulary, entered Irish after they had already been phonologically affected by the British language.⁴⁷ They were then assimilated into Irish, as can be shown by the subsequent changes they underwent. These, as some see it, ‘prove conclusively that the main base for the Christian missionaries in Ireland was Britain, not Gaul, still less any other part of the Empire’.⁴⁸ Though pioneering for its time, Jackson’s hypothesis has benefitted from much revision over the years in line with progress in linguistic methodology.⁴⁹ Linguists would be especially sceptical about attempts to map the relative chronological progression suggested by the phonological changes onto an absolute timeline.

An important source of evidence for another linguistically-driven hypothesis, which has been used to date the dawn of Christianity in Ireland, is the ogam inscription. Inscriptions in ogam rendered the Irish language, but the script was influenced by Latin.⁵⁰ The majority of inscriptions are commemorative. There are over 300 surviving inscriptions in Ireland, with new inscriptions continuing to come to light. Around 40 inscriptions are found in Wales, and a handful in Argyll, the Isle of Man, Devon, and Cornwall.⁵¹ The Irish inscriptions stand out not only for their large number but also for the fact that nearly all are in the vernacular. By contrast, inscriptions in Britain tend to be bilingual, comprising both Latin and the vernacular.⁵² The dating of the earliest inscriptions continues to be a vexed issue, but one with important implications for the history of conversion because of its potential to shed light on the question of whether or not Christianity was connected with the introduction of literacy into Ireland. Traditionally, the earliest inscriptions have been dated (mainly on linguistic grounds) to the fifth century, though a date in the late fourth for some of them has also been envisaged.⁵³ Once more, an important caveat is that linguistic dating is at its most reliable when used to establish a relative chronology, to which absolute dates are often affixed only tentatively.⁵⁴ The inscriptions are, however, generally believed to be a phenomenon of the Christian

⁴⁷ Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, pp. 122–48. See also Damian McManus, ‘The Chronology of Latin Loan Words’.

⁴⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 184.

⁴⁹ The hypothesis was refined by Damian MacManus, ‘A Chronology of Latin Loan-Words’. An assessment of the history of scholarship in light of more recent views, is provided by Paul Russell, ‘Latin and British in Roman and Post-Roman Britain’, esp. pp. 139–41.

⁵⁰ For a continuously updated bibliography see ‘Ogham in 3D’ project of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. [<http://ogham.celt.dias.ie/menu.php?lang=en&menuitem=80>] Accessed 19 March 2014.

⁵¹ Damian McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, p. 44.

⁵² See the magisterial chapter on inscriptions in Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 116–73.

⁵³ McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, p. 93. On some of the challenges of dating ogam inscriptions, see Anthony Harvey, ‘Problems of Dating the Origin of the Ogham Script’.

⁵⁴ McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, p. 78; Swift, *Ogam Stones*, p. 126.

era.⁵⁵ This view has occasionally been challenged, most recently in a study by Anthony Harvey, who argues that ogham script need not necessarily be thought of as a fourth- or fifth-century development that came with the establishment of an early church in Ireland.⁵⁶ Rather, he believes that on linguistic grounds it is possible to backdate the script as early as the second century AD, perhaps even before Christianity was known. It follows that Christianity might not have been the primary source for introducing literacy into Ireland.⁵⁷

Another type of evidence that has traditionally been quarried as a source for dating the dawn of Christianity is burials. Burials have always been regarded as important for conversion studies because of the religious significance that scholars have been prone to attach (sometimes unjustifiably) to changes in burial practices as reflected in the material record. The interpretation of burial evidence in Europe has undergone reform in recent years as archaeologists have become more aware of the ambiguities of the evidence and more open to the use of theory, especially anthropological or sociological theory which deals with social memory and ritual.⁵⁸ For example, the absence or reduction of burial goods is no longer interpreted as a definite sign for transition from pagan to Christian burial, and the act of burial itself is seen not only as a religious ritual, but as a complex combination of variables including expressions of social norms, reflections of status, and interactions with the landscape. In Ireland, cemetery archaeology yielded some important finds with implications for conversion. The *Mapping Death* database, covering 174 pre eighth-century cemeteries, provides for the first time data that is statistically significant regarding the proximity of burials to churches, the incidence of shrouded burial (a reasonable marker of Christian burial), and the correlation between either of these two factors and features that are not usually taken as expressions of Christianity (but don't necessarily conflict with it), such as grave goods and evidence of funerary feasting. Burial evidence is also important because it can be correlated with textual references, especially in hagiography and canon law.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, although burials continue to excite the imagination of those seeking to date the arrival of Christianity into Ireland, the evidence they provide remains ambiguous not only for the difficulty in dating graves accurately (especially when the sole criterion is C14 dating), but also for the fact that we simply do not know how early the church began to concern itself with regulating burial practices. The earliest clear reference of this is found in the late seventh- or early eighth-century *Hibernensis*, but this is solidly already within the Christian era and therefore not evidence for conversion.⁶⁰ Archaeology also provides unequivocal evidence for the continuation of 'traditional' burial in family cemeteries into Christian times. But rather than interpreting this as the persistence of a pagan practice, it is more likely to disinterest indifference on the part of the church or its preference not to risk antagonising the population on matters that have contentious social implications.

⁵⁵ McManus, *Guide to Ogham*, p. 60; Swift, *Ogham Stones*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Anthony Harvey, 'Languages and Literacy'.

⁵⁷ Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Assessments of the state of the art are Dawn Hadley, 'Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism', and David Petts, *Pagan and Christian*, 99–114.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Literary Insights into the Basis of Some Burial Practices'.

⁶⁰ See Books 15 and 18 of the *Hibernensis*, titled, respectively, *De cura pro mortuis* and *De iure sepulturae* (ed. Flechner, pp. 77–82, 104–11).

The late antique and early medieval sources for missions to Ireland can be divided into four categories: [i] contemporary and directly involved, [ii] contemporary and foreign, [iii] later and local, and [iv] later and foreign. The first category comprises two sources: St Patrick's Letter and *Confessio*.⁶¹ Both differ in respect to their objectives and intended audiences. They applied their rhetorical strategies accordingly, and as a consequence their coverage of issues relating to conversion varies. On the whole, the *Confessio* has more to say about the practicalities of mission and conversion, whereas the Letter only mentions conversion incidentally, in the context of the abduction of a group of Patrick's catechumens. Nevertheless, the mere mention of the catechumenate, the period during which the newly converted would undergo learning and training before baptism (usually administered at Easter), reveals something about the process of conversion in Patrick's time. The *Confessio*, however, is more detailed, and depicts a classic top-down conversion model that interestingly begins with the sons of kings and bypasses their fathers. This calls to mind the 'double insurance policy' adduced by Henry Mayr-Harting in a study of the conversion of the Mercians and Carinthians of southeast Bavaria (with parallels in the modern South Pacific), whereby a ruler would have his sons baptised (or acquiesce in their conversion) but not convert himself so as not to sever the connection with the old deities and consequently offend either them or his subjects.⁶² In the *Confessio* Patrick portrays himself as a committed and tireless missionary who baptised thousands (§§14, 50), often operating in hostile environments (§§37, 52), and concerned with laying solid foundations for a lasting church by appointing clerical successors (§40). Though himself a bishop (albeit self-proclaimed), Patrick's praise of celibacy and the monastic life (the earliest attested in Europe apart from St Martin's at Tours) was taken to mean that 'for him the appearance of monastic life among his converts was the culmination of his mission'.⁶³

Patrick's two writings are among our only surviving textual witnesses to late fourth- and early fifth-century Britain and Ireland. Yet neither text was written as a historical account: the *Confessio* is Patrick's apologetic coda written towards the end of his life as a vindication for posterity, prompted—in part—by his wish to respond to certain detractors. The Letter, on the other hand, is a public condemnation of the British chieftain Coroticus who attacked a group of Patrick's converts, killing some and enslaving others. Details from either text are impossible to corroborate because of the absence of any other surviving contemporary source from the region. Biographical episodes are especially difficult to confirm because, as some have argued, the texts may titivate unflattering details.⁶⁴ An analogous example from more recent times is the legacy of the nineteenth-century missionary and adventurer David Livingstone. The colourful autobiographical accounts of his time in Africa were judged as misleading by some of his biographers, but others have stressed the importance of

⁶¹ Respectively, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *Libri Epistularum*, i, pp. 91–102, 56–91. A comprehensive bibliography of literature on Patrick is the Royal Irish Academy's project at http://www.confessio.ie/more/bibliography_full (accessed 2 July 2014).

⁶² Henry Mayr-Harting, *Two Conversions to Christianity*, pp. 13–16.

⁶³ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 223.

⁶⁴ The latest biography, which contains discussions of the state of the art on Patrick, is my *Saint Patrick Retold*.

considering them within the contemporary conventions of their genre.⁶⁵ In the same vein Patrick should not be thought of either as honest, nor dishonest, because accuracy and comprehensiveness were not the main objectives of his accounts. Although certain modern historians of earlier generations regarded Patrick as the prime instigator of Christianity in Ireland, with some going as far as to style his mission ‘the national conversion of Ireland’, it is nowadays clear that whatever Patrick’s actual achievement was, he could not singlehandedly have effected a ‘national conversion’.⁶⁶

Unlike Patrick, his contemporary or near-contemporary Palladius left no surviving writings. Palladius’s date of departure to Ireland, which is attested in what I styled above a ‘contemporary and foreign’ source, is nevertheless more secure than Patrick’s. The Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine famously says that in 431 Pope Celestine dispatched Palladius as bishop *ad Scottos in Christum credentes* ‘to the Irish who believe in Christ’.⁶⁷ Although scholarship commonly appends the epithet ‘missionary’ to him, Palladius can arguably be said to have been sent to preach to the converted, suggesting that not only was there a Christian community in Ireland by the early fifth century, but that the existence of that community was known as far as Rome. The context of Palladius’s mission, which is likely to have been the surge of the Pelagian heresy in Britain, is discussed further by Charles-Edwards in this volume (x-ref). The connection between the two islands is made by Prosper, who said of Pope Celestine that *dum Romanam insulam studet servare catholicam, fecit etiam barbaram Christianam* ‘as he strives to make the Roman island Catholic, he has also made the Brabarian [island] Christian’.⁶⁸ This is as good a testimony as one has that, in Rome at least, Palladius’s Irish venture was crowned a success. Nothing else is known of the activities of Palladius, whose legacy has been all but muted in Ireland. Unlike Patrick, he never enjoyed his own cult in Ireland, and in fact he may have been deliberately written out of history by the earliest hagiographers of Patrick, the seventh-century Armagh propagandists Muirchú and Tírechán, who sought to give their protagonist sole credit for the conversion of Ireland.⁶⁹ Muirchú even went as far as to portray Palladius’s mission as a failure that ended in tragedy when he died in Britain on his way back to Rome.⁷⁰ Possibly, a cult of Palladius flourished in seventh-century Gaul at monastic centres associated with Luxeuil, while Patrick’s continental veneration could trace its origins to Fosses, Nivelles, and Peronne, where verses dedicated to Patrick were inscribed in a chapel from (perhaps) as early as seventh century.⁷¹

The hagiographers Muirchú and Tírechán bring us to the next form of evidence in the order of this discussion, ‘later and local’, with all the attendant problems of using hagiography as historical sources.⁷² Both authors drew partly on the writings of

⁶⁵ Contrast (respectively) Tim Jeal, *Livingstone*, with Meriel Buxton, *David Livingstone*.

⁶⁶ Quotation from George Stokes, *Ireland and the Celtic Church*, p. 23.

⁶⁷ Ed. Mommsen, i, p. 473.

⁶⁸ Prosper, *De gratia Dei et libero arbitrio contra Collatorem*, PL 51.271C.

⁶⁹ The Lives of Patrick by both were edited by Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 62–166.

⁷⁰ Muirchú, Life of Patrick, I.8, ed Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, p. 72.

⁷¹ On the hypothesis of the cult of Palladius, see Wood, ‘The *Vita Columbani* and Merovingian hagiography’, 69–70. The exact date of the inscription, attributed to Cellán of Péronne, continues to be debated, but it cannot be later than the eighth century. The best review of the evidence is by Charles Wright, at http://www.bede.net/saslc/samples/c/cellanus_of_peronne.pdf

⁷² An overview is Kim McCone, ‘An Introduction to Irish Saints’ Lives’.

Patrick, but their main concern was to bolster the prestige, authority, and property interests of Armagh, by claiming dominion over a network of churches purportedly founded by Patrick as daughter houses of Armagh.⁷³ Another type of source that belongs to this category is the chronicle, which is equally unreliable for the ‘missionary’ period because contemporary chronicling did not begin in the Gaelic-speaking world until the 560s.⁷⁴ It is to the Chronicle of Ireland that we owe the traditional date for the commencement of Patrick’s activities in Ireland, 432, as well as his conflicting obits in 457 and 493.⁷⁵ Apart from terse entries relating to Patrick, chronicles are entirely silent about conversion episodes. This silence is an issue in itself, and I shall return to it towards the end of this chapter in the discussion of conversion among the Vikings.

The earliest text to belong to the final category of evidence, ‘later and foreign’, is Bede’s Ecclesiastical History. It stands in stark contrast to the sources belonging to the ‘later and local’ type because it credits Palladius with converting the Irish while omitting Patrick altogether, even though Patrick’s cult was flourishing by Bede’s time.⁷⁶ This suppression can be attributed to Bede’s Romano-centred narrative that credited Rome with introducing (or in the case of Kent, re-introducing) Christianity to Britain and Ireland. Consequently, rival sources for Christianity were marginalised, and so were the British clergy of present-day Wales, who practiced Christianity continually since Roman times but were presented by Bede as potential heretics, intransigently opposed to the unblemished orthodoxy of the Roman missionaries and their followers.⁷⁷

The heuristic of examining the missionary history of Ireland through its representation in a number of categories of sources separated from each other by time and space, is that it underscores the contradictory nature of the evidence and defeats the expectation that sources written in Ireland or closer in time to the events would be more informative or reliable. It also stresses the need to seek sources beyond narrative texts, or even to look beyond written texts altogether. The concerns of such sources, be they domestic or foreign, are usually with social elites, powerful and often aristocratic missionaries, and events of a higher political order. They are much less useful to historians writing a social or economic history of conversion to Christianity. For this we must turn to other types of evidence, some of which, as we shall see, may be interpreted in conjunction with written sources of the kind discussed above.

ECONOMIC MOTIVES AND CONSEQUENCES

In an oft-cited letter by Bishop Daniel of Winchester to his friend St Boniface, he advised the missionary to lure converts by contrasting the economic prosperity of Christian communities with the backwardness of non Christians.⁷⁸ For Daniel, who was probably articulating a sentiment held by many of his contemporaries, economic

⁷³ The classic starting point remains Richard Sharpe, ‘Armagh and Rome’.

⁷⁴ An overview is Flechner, ‘The Chronicle of Ireland: Then and Now’.

⁷⁵ These have provoked a good deal of debate, on which see David Dumville *et al.*, *Saint Patrick*, pp. 29–33, 59–64.

⁷⁶ *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, I.13; V.24, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 46, 562.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘Bede, the Irish and the Britons’.

⁷⁸ Letter 23, ed. Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, MGH, Epist. Select. 1 (Berlin, 1916), p. 38.

prosperity was a conspicuous, if not *the* most conspicuous expression of a successful conversion, simultaneously complementing and vindicating the spiritual message of Christianity. It was conspicuous in several ways, but especially in the church's accumulation of landed wealth (usually gifted by aristocracies), its building enterprises, its farming technology, and its labour force. Most of these aspects belong to what may be called 'long term consequences of conversion', although the extent to which any of these is a direct consequence of conversion is debatable. For example, although certain sources make a connection (often cast in hagiographical idiom) between mission and economic change, like Bishop Wilfrid's teaching the South Saxons how to fish with nets, the relative prosperity of the great monasteries in Ireland probably owes more to effective exercise of lordship than religion.⁷⁹ Why is it that certain churches could be more effective than secular lords at managing their estates is a question that has been debated recently in studies about seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England and later medieval Belgium, but no clear connection was established between religion *per se* and the efficacy of economic regimes.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the notion that wealth could be an incentive for conversion is much less controversial and has also been noted for Ireland. How attractive the economic prosperity of churches in Ireland could have been in comparison with secular lords, is expressed in the following eloquent eulogy of the early medieval church by Charles Doherty:

'The church in Ireland was in a unique position. It was an institution in a way that early medieval kingship could never be. It had a virtual monopoly of literacy. It had control of manpower that must have been the envy of kings. It had established centres that exercised a strong gravitational pull (by contrast kingship was peripatetic). It was in a position to exploit fully technical innovations such as the heavy plough and the horizontal watermill. It was thus the only organization that could produce a surplus, particularly of grain'.⁸¹

This quotation highlights three of the economic criteria that made churches unique institutions with the power to draw converts and the capacity to receive them: land, labour, and technology. I shall take them in turn, beginning with land. To 'have' land is a peculiar type of possession for a number of reasons: first, it is a finite resource (unlike livestock), secondly, it is not man made (whereas even livestock may be considered man made because its breeding can be controlled), it is not perishable (although its fertility can suffer), and it is not movable. All these factors complicate the notion of 'having' land. Different models were devised to grasp this notion in different times and different societies.⁸² One such model is the legal concept of

⁷⁹ For Wilfrid see Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, IV.13, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 374.

⁸⁰ Gabor Thomas, 'Life before the Minster'; Anton Ervynck, 'Following the Rule'.

⁸¹ Charles Doherty, 'The Monastic Town', p. 55. For a critique of the influential hypothesis of the Irish monastic town and its reception in scholarship, see Mary Valante, 'Reassessing the Irish Monastic Town'.

⁸² For example in a society of nomadic pastoralists and stationary agriculturalists. More generally, in theories of moral philosophy, land is debated among themes relating to the just distribution of resources but its distinct attributes in comparison with other natural resources have, surprisingly, received little attention. Discussions of land as property have a long pedigree in political science, with rent constituting one of the most contentious issues, especially for Marxists. In twentieth-century non-Marxist thought land figured primarily in the debate between liberals and libertarians as represented, respectively, by John Rawls (*Theory of Justice*) and Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*).

‘ownership’ of land, which gives the owner exclusive rights over land, including the right to sell it or alienate it by other means. The spread of the notion of ownership in Europe signals a major shift in people’s relationship with the land. But it is only with the advent of the church that the idea of ownership begins to take hold among those peoples of Europe that had not been subject to the Roman Empire and were therefore not directly affected by its legislation on property. The church accumulated landed wealth on a massive scale throughout Europe, usually received in the form of gift motivated by the donors’ hope for salvation or as part and parcel of their property-ownership strategies, taking advantage of the fact that church land was indivisible (unlike kin land, in principle at least). It is a commonplace of historiography that early medieval insular societies began to recognise land as a transferable and alienable resource under the influence of the church:⁸³ the church needed land and so the monopoly that kin groups had over land was gradually eroded, with land initially being handed over to the church and later to individuals. Such is believed to have been the transition in Ireland and it marks one of the most important watersheds in the growth of church power. As Dáibhí Ó Cróinín put it: ‘As in Roman law, the written will was an attempt to override the normal rules of inheritance by making separate provisions for individuals or institutions not normally entitled to benefit. In the Irish situation this often (perhaps exclusively) meant the church as beneficiary. By encouraging whole families to go over to the religious life, the church circumvented the difficulties involved in alienating land belonging to the kindred’.⁸⁴ This outcome, of entire families or branches within a certain kin group going over to the religious life, constitutes what is commonly called the ‘proprietary church’, a system that enabled land to be alienated to the church while at the same time allowing the founding kin to retain a stake in it, for example by reserving the right to appoint the head of the church. Family churches were common enough throughout Europe but in Ireland families’ control over churches (broadly defined) has been argued by the most recent authoritative study of proprietary churches to have been more direct: ‘the outcome was hereditary abbacies or coarbships more tenacious than anywhere else in the West... these were “family monasteries” in the sense that the abbacy belonged to one or more linked lineages; not in the sense that any outside lord or lay family controlled the office and through it the monastery’s resources of revenue and influence’.⁸⁵ Family churches figure in a much overlooked but thought-provoking argument for bottom-up conversion by Harold Mytum. He argued, based on the pattern of distribution of family churches in the Burren and in Counties Cork and Kerry, that the churches appear to have been established in what he termed ‘marginal areas’, at a distance from royal centres which he believed were converted later.⁸⁶ This hypothesis, if accepted, suggests that economic factors were as powerful—and could sometimes be more powerful—than political top-down conversion initiatives.

The earliest records of land transfers to the church are found in the quasi-charter material from the second half of the seventh century copied into the Book of Armagh.⁸⁷ The Book of Armagh records the transfer of kinland to the church,

⁸³ E.g. Rosamond Faith, *English Peasantry*, 159–60; Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 404–6.

⁸⁴ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 165.

⁸⁵ Susan Wood, *Proprietary Church*, p. 146.

⁸⁶ Harold Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 63, 80–86, 171–3.

⁸⁷ *Additamenta to Tirechán’s Collectanea* (ed. and trans. Bieler, pp. 166–79).

sometimes together with its peasant inhabitants.⁸⁸ Such records bring us to the next social-economic criterion: labour. Insofar as conversion history is concerned, labour is a crucial issue because it appears that conversion to Christianity was a prerequisite for becoming a peasant dependant of the church. In other words, the prospect of enjoying the fruits of the church's economic prosperity could have been an incentive to become a peasant dependant of a church, and subsequently to convert. But the intensity of labour that peasants of this kind could expect might have been greater than under secular lords, because of the permanent—as distinct from itinerant—character of the church as lord (as mentioned in Doherty's quotation above). Levels of exploitation of peasants have been examined in relation to the question of the legal status of peasants attached to churches, who are known by the ambiguous Old Irish word *manach* (sgl)/*manaig* (pl) and its Latin equivalent *monachus* (sgl)/*monachi* (pl). The central issue with respect to their legal status is to what extent they were free or servile in comparison with peasants attached to secular lords.⁸⁹ The ambiguity was not only in the words used to describe them, but also in the actual social implications of the prerogatives of legal freedom and *manchaine*, a word that would eventually come to describe any form of service by a subject to a lord. To cite Charles-Edwards's comparison between the *manach* and the Frankish *colonus*: '*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*'.⁹⁰ The sources describe them as being free in certain respects and servile in others.⁹¹ However, it has been argued that—in hagiography at least—the rhetoric exalting free *manaig* for their unremitting labour should, in fact, be understood as a way of euphemising servitude.⁹² In other words, these might have been for all intents and purposes slaves, but they were not formally designated as such. Hence, the question of whether the church increased freedom or rather servitude is one for which there is no simple answer because the sources can be interpreted in different ways.

Finally, we come to farming, resource exploitation, and the technology associated with either. Farming in Ireland was mixed, consisting of both arable and pastoral. There is also evidence for fishing on a large scale, especially of estuarine species by means of fish weirs. Farming is of interest to conversion history for the evidence it affords for long-term economic consequences of conversion which may be linked with changing farming practices. A recurring question in the area of the economics of conversion is whether arable farming can be associated with the church more than pastoral farming. This question, which is at the heart of what may be called the 'cereal versus pastoral agriculture' debate, hinges on the presumed contrast between the church as prominent cereal cultivator and the inhabitants of secular ringforts as pastoralists. Technology figures prominently in this debate, with certain scholars (like Doherty, above) noting the presence of early horizontal watermills at sites like Little Island (Co. Cork) and the horizontal tidal mill at Nendrum (Co. Down), as evidence

⁸⁸ For example: *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, aecllesiis*), 3.1 (Foirtchernn 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).

⁸⁹ Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Church and settlement'; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 363–453; Flechner, 'Identifying Monks'.

⁹⁰ Charles-Edwards, 'Church and settlement', p. 175.

⁹¹ Charles-Edwards, 'Church and settlement', pp. 172.

⁹² Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, p. 419.

for superior ecclesiastical technology.⁹³ However, there are important exceptions, for example the farming settlement at Raystown (Co. Meath), which contained eight water mills and is not known to have had a church, hence no definite correlation can be asserted between cereal agriculture practised with mills and ecclesiastical lordship. The debate is closely related to the question of the geographical distribution of churches in comparison with the distribution of ringforts, which are interpreted as secular dwellings and associated with cattle rearing. Scholars of recent years who made important inroads in investigating the density of church sites and their distribution are Paul MacCotter, Tomás Ó Carragáin, and Matthew Stout.⁹⁴ Much of the ‘cereal versus pastoral’ debate revolves around problems of identifying sites by morphological criteria, but other problems include their dating and function, for example: when can one say of an ecclesiastical site that it had a fully-fledged church, and when was it simply a family chapel staffed only on solemnities by itinerant priests? Distribution maps showing a preponderance of churches in the east and south of the island in contrast with a preponderance of ringforts in the west and north, continue to invite speculation from those mapping the geographical spread of Christianity in the early medieval period. Such distribution maps, however, remain controversial.⁹⁵ Another technological advancement associated primarily with the church is the fish weir. Although the earliest weirs are not directly linked with churches, the largest ones definitely are. On Strangford Lough, for example, a flood fence was discovered which was 147-meters long. This is suggestive of fishing on a large scale, probably even for commercial purposes.⁹⁶ Management is a crucial issue in the case of weirs because they required regular and intensive maintenance. And management brings us back to the issue of labour: a large and well-coordinated workforce would be best suited for the task of maintaining weirs, which is why Aidan O’Sullivan argued that the fishweirs on Strangford Lough were likely to have been operated by the *manaig* of Nendrum.⁹⁷ This further led him to argue 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.⁹⁸

CONVERSION OF THE SCANDINAVIANS OF IRELAND

The final topic to be treated in this chapter is also the latest in chronological order. The conversion of the Scandinavians in Ireland remains an understudied topic, which is not surprising for a conversion process whose dates are obscure and whose

⁹³ The following are the latest on the debate: Wendy Davies, ‘Economic Change’; *Eadem*, *Water Mills and Cattle Standards*; Valerie Hall, ‘Vegetation History’; Michelle Comber, *Economy of the Ringfort*; Fergus Kelly, ‘The Relative Importance of Cereals and Livestock’; Finbar McCormick *et al.*, *Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production*.

⁹⁴ Some key publications are: Paul MacCotter, *Medieval Ireland*; Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Cemetery settlements and local churches in pre-Viking Ireland in light of comparisons with England and Wales’; Matthew Stout, ‘The Distribution of Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites’.

⁹⁵ See critique by Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Ecclesiastical and Secular Settlements in Early Medieval Ireland: Densities, Distributions, Interactions’.

⁹⁶ Davies, ‘Economic Change’, pp. 118, 130.

⁹⁷ Aidan O’Sullivan, ‘Place, Memory and Identity’, p. 463.

⁹⁸ O’Sullivan, ‘Place, Memory’, pp. 458, 462, 463. Note however that according to the law tracts fishweirs could be owned by individual aristocrats as well as jointly by a kin-group. The evidence is given by Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 288 nn 126, 7.

protagonists are the subject of guesswork.⁹⁹ One must not envisage all Scandinavians in Ireland being converted at the same time, at the same pace, or in the same way. Nevertheless, it may be inferred by analogy with Anglo-Saxon England or Francia that political motives played an important part in the conversion of the Scandinavians, especially of their political elites. In both England and Francia—in which several incidents of conversion of Scandinavian kings and chieftains are recorded by the chronicles—the hallmark of Viking conversion was the acceptance of baptism by a Scandinavian king as part and parcel of a pact of submission to (or alliance with) a king who stood as his baptismal patron. The most famous example is Guthrum's acceptance of baptism with King Alfred as godfather. In Ireland, however, the chronicles say nothing of such events. But rather than interpreting this silence as evidencing that no such baptisms took place, we may instead choose to ascribe it to the chroniclers' general disinterest in conversion, which simply did not figure among the staple topics that Irish chronicles traditionally covered.¹⁰⁰

The evidence from ninth-century Viking burials in Dublin and the absence of any positive indication of conversion has usually been used to support the view that most Vikings who raided and settled in that period clung to their paganism.¹⁰¹ Dublin itself may nevertheless have seen its share of interaction between Christian Irish and pagan Norse residents, as may be suggested by a cluster of houses that are not typically Scandinavian.¹⁰² The earliest Christian burials in the Dublin area, at the churches of St Brigit and (as it is currently known) St Michael le Pole, may date from as early as the eighth century but, as Howard Clarke notes, they lay outside Dublin's defensive enclosure and can therefore not be taken as evidence of religious practice in Dublin itself, even though burial continued there into the tenth century and later.¹⁰³ Burial evidence from other sites has been interpreted as evidencing Christian–pagan interaction, which could—in theory at least—have led to conversion: 'far more men were buried in the cemetery [near Kilmainham] than women, and it is therefore possible that only a few women accompanied their menfolk from Norway and native wives may have retained their Christian faith and been either buried elsewhere or interred without gravegoods'.¹⁰⁴ More recently, however, both historical and genetic studies have attempted to show that Scandinavian women actually did travel with their Viking menfolk: the former concentrating on ninth-century Norse settlers in eastern England, and the latter mainly on (indirect) migration from Norway to Iceland.¹⁰⁵ Neither study, however, investigated Ireland among the destinations of Viking settlement.

⁹⁹ Only three modern studies address the topic directly: Lesley Abrams, 'Conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin'; *Eadem*, 'Conversion and the Church in Viking-Age Ireland'; Clare Downham, 'Religious and Cultural Boundaries'. An example of Viking conversion being treated as a satellite theme to the Viking settlement is Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 96.

¹⁰⁰ See Flechner, 'The Chronicle of Ireland: Then and Now'.

¹⁰¹ Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 181.

¹⁰² Clarke, 'The Christianisation of the Dublin Vikings', 42, quoting Linzi Simpson, *Director's Findings: Temple Bar West* (Dublin, 1999), 1, 17, 20, 25.

¹⁰³ Clarke, 'The Christianisation of the Dublin Vikings', 41.

¹⁰⁴ Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 182. On the siting of the Viking cemetery on top of the monastic cemetery of Cell Maignenn, see Elizabeth O' Brien, 'The Location and Context of Viking Burials at Kilmainham and Islandbridge', pp. 219–20.

¹⁰⁵ Shane McLeod, 'Warriors and Women'; M. Krzewińska, G. Bjørnstad, *et al.*, 'Mitochondrial DNA Variation in the Viking Age'.

Another way of digging below the upper crust of the Scandinavian elite in Ireland and retrieving something about other rungs of Viking society has been to examine the patterns of change in annalistic epithets ascribed to Vikings. For example, the disappearance of the Old Irish epithet *geinti* ‘heathens’ from the Irish annals after the 860s may, in theory, suggest that the Norse adopted Christianity. However, Lesley Abrams demonstrated how ambiguous the use of terminology is—with *geinti*, *Gaill* ‘foreigners’, and other epithets being interchangeable—and argued that a more plausible explanation than conversion would be the assimilation of the Scandinavians into Ireland’s political landscape.¹⁰⁶

As we proceed into the tenth century, more evidence becomes available, but not much more. Indeed, the historiography of the conversion of the Vikings in Ireland has tended to concentrate on what is sometimes called the second Viking settlement in Dublin, established in 917 after their expulsion in 902.¹⁰⁷ The settlers both before and after the watershed year of 902 are assumed to have been primarily Norse, in contrast with the Danes who settled in England.¹⁰⁸ They were closely connected with the Norse in York, and from the early 920s until the fall of Viking York in 954 the kingship of both towns was held jointly.

The Norse of Dublin drew more attention from scholarship than those who settled elsewhere in Ireland, notably in the towns they founded at Wexford, Waterford, Cork, and Limerick. This imbalance owes much to the vagaries of evidence as does the tendency to focus on prominent leaders commemorated in the written record. As always, at the forefront of written sources have been the chronicles, both Irish and English, all of which contain their fair share of contemporary entries.¹⁰⁹ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records in 943 the baptism of Olaf (Old Irish *Amlaíb*) Cuarán, king of York and (from 945) of Dublin. However, although it is not impossible that Olaf’s was the first conversion of a Viking from Dublin, it is hard to believe that none of the Norse converted before this relatively late date, which is over sixty years after a mass conversion of Danes in England under Guthrum. To compensate for the dearth of explicit references to events that attest conversion, one must settle for suggestive clues. For example, a marriage alliance in 926 in which Æthelstan gave his sister to Sitric Cáech, king of Dublin and York, has been interpreted from as early as the 1140s as evidencing conversion, because a Christian English royal was deemed unlikely to marry a pagan.¹¹⁰

The causes for conversion are another area of uncertainty and speculation. Apart from the straightforward explanation of political alliances or submissions, two other causes for Norse conversion have been adduced by Clare Downham, and I paraphrase them here.¹¹¹ First, the Vikings as traders would have valued the fact that Christianity

¹⁰⁶ Abrams, ‘Conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin’, p. 10. See also, *Eadem*, ‘Conversion and the Church in Viking-Age Ireland’.

¹⁰⁷ For example Mary Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁸ The standard textbook narratives of the Vikings’ activities and settlements in Britain, Ireland and Francia, are rehearsed in Simon Coupland, ‘Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England’; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘The Vikings in Ireland’; Barbara Crawford, ‘Vikings [in Britain and Ireland]’.

¹⁰⁹ The most prominent among them are the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Annals of Ulster.

¹¹⁰ This is mentioned in an interpolation dated to the 1140s in the Chronicle of John of Worcester. See discussion in Downham, ‘Religious and Cultural Boundaries’, p. 19, and references to scholarship therein.

¹¹¹ Downham, ‘Religious and Cultural Boundaries’, pp. 30–34.

could allow them to widen their trade networks by both tapping into networks that were the preserve of peoples, who have long been Christian, and by reducing the level of mistrust that Christians might have harbored towards pagans. Secondly, urbanism facilitated conversion because traditional Norse religion was rural-based and engaged closely with the landscape in the ‘animistic’ pattern described earlier. Urbanism came later to the Scandinavian homelands, which may suggest why they were slower to convert than some of the overseas settlements.

If we allow for the likely scenario that the conversion of the Scandinavian population of Ireland was not the consequence of the conversion of a single leader, but a more protracted and complicated process that was strongly (though not exclusively) politically motivated, then we may wish to examine other forms of evidence that could allow us to look behind the aristocratic bias of our written sources. We have already seen briefly how burials and annalistic epithets have been interpreted, but other forms of evidence include stone sculpture, numismatics, naming patterns, and devotion to saints. Not all this evidence is always available for Ireland, but it has been common to make inferences (or educated guesses) about the fate of the Norse in Ireland by analogy with evidence collected elsewhere in the region, for example in the Isle of Man, Cumbria, and York, all of which were settled by Scandinavians, who maintained close contacts with their brethren in Ireland. Here I shall mention briefly the testimony of naming patterns and numismatics. The adoption by the Norse of names that denote devotion to saints is an example of a more convincing expression of conversion. Such veneration of saints are recorded from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, for example Gilla Pátraic or Gilla Ciarain.¹¹² Especially interesting is the veneration of relatively obscure Irish saints by the descendants of Scandinavians who migrated from Dublin.¹¹³ And then there are coins. The minting of coins with Christian symbols by joint kings of Dublin and York can of course be interpreted as a way of propagating the ruler’s religious affiliation and perhaps the acceptance of the Christian religion by subjects, who would have identified with such symbols. However, the interpretation of numismatic evidence is complicated by the fact that some coins (for example Sitric’s) contain mixed iconography consisting of crosses and symbols associated with Norse religion, like Thor’s Hammer. This duality need not necessarily express syncretism, but can be explained as a means of asserting different facets of kingship simultaneously: religious, ethnic, or political-ethnic. However, a much more narrow, but not implausible, interpretation would be that crosses were imprinted primarily as the consequence of the church’s oversight of minting coins.¹¹⁴

The inevitable conclusion from the foregoing is that studying the conversion of the Norse in Dublin is replete with methodological difficulties which may in fact mirror an equally complex reality for which no neat narrative of conversion can be offered. The same can be said for the conversion of the Irish in the pre-Viking period, which does not conform exactly to any known pattern of conversion of European peoples. It is important to stress that in both periods we witnessed analogies with conversion processes elsewhere, but the unique political reality in Ireland has meant

¹¹² Downham, ‘Religious and Cultural Boundaries’, p. 27.

¹¹³ Fiona Edmonds, ‘Hiberno-Saxon’, i, p. 211 (cited in Downham, ‘Religious and Cultural Boundaries’, p. 33).

¹¹⁴ Hadley, *Vikings in England*, pp. 44–50 (esp. p. 50).

that the evolution of Christianity owes just as much to local conditions as it may to wider processes that affected the rest of Europe.

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