INVESTIGATING 'PEASANT CONVERSION' IN IRELAND AND ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND: A PRELIMINARY ENQUIRY

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A well-known episode in Bede's Life of St Cuthbert tells of Tyneside peasants who jeered as they watched strong currents sweeping an unfortunate group of monks out to sea. Cuthbert, distressed by the sight, immediately took to praying, but the peasants remained unrepentant: 'At illi rustico et animo et ore stomachantes aduersus eum, Nullus inquiunt hominum pro eis roget, nullius eorum misereatur Deus, qui et ueteres culturas hominibus tulere, et nouas qualiter obseruare debeant nemo nouit' ('But they, rustic in both spirit and speech, declaimed against him: "let no man", they said, "pray for them, let God not pity any of them, for they denied men their old ways of worship (*culturas*) and nobody knows how the new ones ought to be observed"').[1]

Whether this is indeed a record of what John Blair described as a 'rare account of a negative response to pastoral care', or a mere literary creation, it is undoubtedly rare for its choice of protagonists: lowly peasants as opposed to the aristocrats whom one usually finds in conversion-related stories, which often feature missionaries who were aristocrats themselves.[2] The antipathy that Bede had for the boorish peasants is apparent in his derogatory use of the expressions *rustico et animo et ore* and (earlier in the passage) *uulgaris turba*.[3] Such lowly peasants are usually at the receiving end of the conventional hagiographical topos of top-down conversion, in which they seldom appear as discrete individuals but more often as the silent members of faceless crowds undergoing mass baptisms, either willingly or by means of coercion.[4]

It may not strike us as unusual that contemporary sources rarely report actual effects of conversion on ordinary folk, since some of these effects, like the episode

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[1]Bede, Life of St Cuthbert §3, ed. by Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), pp. 142–306 (at p. 164).
[2] John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 166.
[3] Bede, Life of St Cuthbert §3 (p. 162).
[4] Contrast the famous report of Pope Gregory on the peaceful mass baptism of 10,000 English on Christmas day 598 with Stephen's admission that, among the thousands baptized by Wilfrid in Sussex, some were coerced by Æthelwalh. See, respectively, Gregory the Great, Letter VIII.29, ed. by Norberg, p. 551; Stephen, Life of Wilfrid §41, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave, pp. 82-3.

involving the peasants on the banks of the Tyne, could have given the church a bad press. But it is somewhat surprising that we find very little in the way of propaganda bent on stressing positive changes that Christianity could bring, propaganda of the kind that Bishop Daniel of Winchester scripted for Boniface in the oft-cited letter in which he advised the missionary to lure converts by contrasting the economic prosperity of Christian communities with the backwardness of the non Christian.[5] Thanks to statements such as Daniel's we are able to gauge some of the sort of social and economic changes that contemporaries associated with Christianity and their potential to attract converts of all social levels.

The sources' widespread tendency to concentrate on aristocracies in accounts of religious conversion has had the effect of bringing to the fore certain political dynamics in which aristocrats were the central players, with their peasants following suit. Historiography has largely mirrored this tendency but on the rare occasions that 'peasant conversion' was the subject of more focused study, the issues considered were usually the practice of religion and the persistence of popular magic and folklore, themes of which one can only catch anecdotal glimpses, for example, in the literature emanating from the Gregorian mission or (occasionally) the Irish penitentials. Such themes, however, are fraught with interpretative difficulties owing to the multitude of conflicting contemporary opinions on what constituted Christian and what did not and, by implication, who was considered Christian and who was not.[6] These issues are usually explored through questions such as how far (if at all) folk magic was acceptable, what types of folklore could be admitted, whether traditional funerary rites could be administered alongside Christian burial rites, and so forth.[7]

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[5] Boniface, Letter 23, ed. by Tangl, p. 38.

[6] See, for example: Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*; Means, 'A Background to Augustine's Mission to Anglo-Saxon England'; Wood, 'Some Historical Re-Identifications and the Christianization of Kent'; Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 166–81; Flechner, 'An Insular Tradition of Ecclesiastical Law: Fifth to Eighth Century'.

[7] A forceful reminder of this ambiguity is Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 167–70. For burials see discussion in Davies and Flechner, this volume, pp. 000-000. On Funerary rites see O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian? Burial in Ireland During the 5th to 8th Centuries AD'; Hadley, 'Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism: Christianity and Anglo-Saxon Burial Practices'.

Alternatively, the theme of 'peasant conversion' received indirect attention from historians in discussions of long-term conversion processes, such as the ones considered in another chapter in this volume which examines long term economic consequences of conversion and some of their social implications.[8] However, especially when viewed over the *longue durée*, it is difficult to isolate the *direct* experience of those inhabiting the lower rungs of society and it is nearly impossible to recover the elusive 'conversion moment'.

Methodological problems notwithstanding, the present essay explores the potential of comparative research across Insular cultures to shed light on the more immediate social effects of 'peasant conversion'. In choosing to apply a comparative approach the intention is not only to overcome solipsism and challenge hypotheses, but also to open up new research avenues and, on occasion, to help to fill gaps in the evidential record, especially when certain kinds of sources (e.g. normative, diplomatic, hagiographical) are available in abundance for one place but not for another.[9]

The present investigation is concerned with both motivations and consequences: why would peasants convert; how were they converted; did they have agency as individuals; what changes could first and second generation converts expect to witness; were their lives changed dramatically or was continuity the order of the day? For the most part I shall compare peasant dependants of churches in both Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland. Dependants of churches make a promising focus group because of the potential contrast with peasants who were subject to secular lords.

This paper is formed of three parts. It begins by considering the evidence for an analogous class of peasant dependants in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. It then assesses the extent to which conversion played a role in the process through which peasants became dependants of churches, and considers the difference between peasants who were attached to churches and those who were not. The final part examines possible economic motivations for and consequences of conversion among peasants. Far from trying to pronounce the definitive word on peasant conversion in

[8] See Davies and Flechner, this volume, pp. 000-000.
[9] For the first two benefits, see Wickham, *Problems in Doing Comparative History*.

Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England, this essay merely explores new contexts for researching conversion and suggests directions for future inquiry.

PEASANTS AND CHURCHES

The peasantry in both Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England was a heterogeneous group, the different strands of which were distinguished from one another by economic, social, and legal criteria. Some peasants owned property while others merely held it of a lord, some formed part of village ruling elites while others were excluded from participation in local assemblies, and some were free while others were not.[10] For present purposes the catch-all expression 'peasant' (which can, in theory, refer to anyone and everyone in pre-industrial society) will be used primarily in opposition to 'aristocrat'.

My focus here is on what I have already referred to in general terms as peasants associated with churches. In the historiography concerning early medieval Ireland, such peasants are variably referred to as 'monastic clients', 'monastic tenants', or 'ecclesiastical tenants'.[11] These were peasants who are believed to have had a special relationship with churches (broadly defined), the nature of which I shall consider soon.[12] In Ireland we know a good deal about the way in which their relationship with churches was perceived by contemporaries thanks to a variety of detailed sources, but mainly normative texts in both Latin and the vernacular which survive in relative abundance.[13] The terms used to refer to these peasants in either language contain an

[10] For the peasantry in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland, the *loci classici* are, respectively, Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* and Kelly, *Early Irish Farming,* though neither focuses exclusively on peasants.

[11] For a recent caveat on whether or not one is justified in using the term 'monastery' at all in reference to ecclesiastical establishments in early medieval Ireland, see Etchingham, 'Bishops, Church and People: How Christian was "Early Christian Ireland"?'.

[12] The literature is too vast to be adequately summed up here. Much of it is surveyed in Etchingham, , *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, pp. 12–46. For Etchingham's own position see ibid., pp. 363–454.

[13] Among the key vernacular Old Irish texts are *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, ed. by Binchy; ed. and trans. by Breatnach; *Córus Béscnai*, ed. by Binchy, trans. AL iii, pp. 3–79; *Cáin Aicillne*, ed. Binchy, trans. AL ii, pp. 223–341; *Críth Gablach*, ed. by Binchy, trans. by Eoin MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law: the Law

inherent ambiguity that makes it easy to conflate them with monks who took vows, who themselves would have fallen short of the textbook image of early medieval monks, informed as it often is by the familiar ideal of the ninth-century reforms initiated by Benedict of Aniane. In Latin texts peasants of churches were designated *monachi*, and in vernacular texts *manaig* (singular *manach*). Like all peasants, *manaig* were not a homogeneous group: some were wealthy while others owned nothing, some were free while others were not, and among the free there were peasants of humble origins as well as members of distinguished kindreds. The possible effects of conversion on their legal and personal status is discussed elsewhere in this volume.[14]

The usual caveat about normative sources being of limited historical value due to their prescriptive rather than descriptive nature should not be endorsed too rigidly, for just as in other contemporary early medieval societies, Irish normative texts—be they penitentials, canonical rulings, or vernacular tracts of jurisprudence—also contain a formidable amount of background information that *is* descriptive.[15] To take a banal but illustrative example: whereas it is impossible to say whether there was ever enforcement of the rule that required men who impregnated slave-women to rear the child or whether penance was indeed imposed on those exploiting their slaves sexually (as the Penitential of Finnian stipulates), the mere reference to slavery and the frequency with which such references occur in the sources, suggest that slavery was rife.[16] Indeed, the abundance of peripheral information of this kind can furnish (and has furnished) the historian with sufficient material for studying early medieval Irish society and even farming practices in great detail.[17]

Unlike the Irish normative and hagiographical sources, which are replete with vivid descriptions of *manaig*, Anglo-Saxon sources rarely mention a distinct class of ecclesiastical peasants. Nevertheless, a number of historians, like Alan Thacker, John

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of Status or Franchise', *PRIA* 36C (1923), 265–316 (at pp. 281–306). The most important Latin text is *Collectio Hibernensis*, ed. by Wasserschleben.

[14] Davies and Flechner, this volume, pp. 000-000.

[15] For the caveat see, for example, Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 383–4.

[16] Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 95–6. The texts referred to are the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to *Senchas Már*, ed. and trans. by John Carey, 'An Edition of the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), pp. 1–32; Penitential of Finnian §§39–40, ed. and trans. by Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials,* pp. 88-9.

[17] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, *passim*.

Blair, and Sarah Foot, have shown that anecdotal evidence allows us to infer the existence of such peasants who, like *manaig*, were also designated in our sources by an ambiguous epithet: *fratres*.[18] Some such anecdotal references are conveniently listed by Blair.[19] First, there is the well-known reference to six-hundred *fratres* in Bede's *Historia Abbatum*, which is too large a number to allow for all of them to have been monks in the strict sense. Another familiar reference occurs in Æthelwulf's early ninth-century poem *De Abbatibus*, where we find a *frater* who was married with children and hence could not have been a monk who had taken vows. Another example is the warning in the canons of *Clofesho* that abbots and abbesses should guard against treating the members of their *familiae* as slaves rather than children.[20] Such exploitation is more likely to have been the lot of labourers rather than choir monks. Finally, Alan Thacker, in a seminal article on pastoral care in Anglo-Saxon England, drew attention to a reference in Bede's Homilies on the Gospels to 'a multitude of brothers' (*fratrum caterua*) which is said to have augmented the ranks of the monks of Wearmouth-Jarrow during major festivals like Easter.[21] Archaeology also provides clues to the existence of peasant dependants. Rosemary Cramp's excavations at Wearmouth uncovered a cemetery of men, women and children, clearly separated from an all-male cemetery, which is likely to be that of the monks. The relative proximity of the two cemeteries leaves no room for doubt that those interred in the mixed-sex cemetery were Christians, and one must posit a certain connection between them and the minster.[22] No comparable segregation has yet been observed in an excavated Irish cemetery, although a spatial separation between the

[18] Thacker, 'Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care in Early Anglo-Saxon England'; Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 255; Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c. 600–900*, p. 173.
[19] Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 255.
[20] Bede, *Historia Abbatum* §7, ed. by Plummer, i, pp. 364–87 (p. 382); Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. and trans. by Campbell, ll. 321–94 (pp. 27–33); Council of *Clofesho* §§4, 28, ed. by Haddan and Stubbs, pp. 364, 374.
[21] 'Et nos ergo, fratres carissimi, huius exemplo facti propinquante pascha die festo nostrae redemptionis adiuncta fratrum caterua dominum toto corde sequamur' ('And so, dearly beloved *fratres*, as Easter, the feast-day of our redemption, approahes, being joined by a multitude of *fraters*, let us follow the Lord with all our heart in the example of this deed [*sc.* preaching]'): Bede, *Homiliarum Euangelii Libri II*, ed. by Hurst, Book 2, Homily 2 (l. 10).
[22] Rosemary J. Cramp, 'Monastic Sites', in *Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by David Wilson (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 201–52; *Eadem*, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites* (2 vols, Swindon: English Heritage, 2005).

living religious (*familia ecclesiae*) and lay inhabitants (*uterque sexus*) of a church, was urged by the *Hibernensis*.[23]

Circumstantial evidence of this kind, both archaeological and documentary, is highly suggestive of the existence of Anglo-Saxon peasants who were attached to minsters, but, as we have seen, the exact nature of that attachment was complicated: in some respects they were a part of the community (e.g. buried in proximity to the monks, attended services, were referred to as *fratres*) but in others they were not (e.g. formally sequestered from the cemetery of the monks, not regularly attending services, labouring in the fields).

Can *fratres* and their Irish analogues, the *manaig*, be said to have differed from ordinary peasants?[24] It has long been recognised that, in so far as the sources allow us to distinguish between them, the most conspicuous difference—especially according to Irish normative texts—is the penitential regime that was imposed on ecclesiastical dependants. This regime is said to have consisted of periods of continence, periodic fasting, and a commitment to non-violence.[25] Nevertheless, the extension of the requirement to be continent at certain times to *filid* ('poets'/'scholars') and occasionally to *laici*, suggests that not all contemporary Christian authors envisaged the penitential regime as applying exclusively to ecclesiastical dependants.[26] One ought to be careful, however, not to oversimplify by reading too much into authorial intentions, and in an essay of the present kind it is possible only to draw attention to ambiguities, for which different explanations are available**.** For example, restrictions on the behaviour of individuals, such as

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[23] *Collectio Hibernensis* 17.4, ed. by Wasserschleben, p. 51.
[24] In an Irish context the question was considered systematically with recourse to hagiographical evidence, by Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History'.
[25] See, for example, Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 140–1; Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Laigin, 1999), pp. 290–9.
[26] On *filid*, see *Uraicecht na Ríar* §6, ed. and trans. by Breatnach, p. 104. On *laici*, see Penitential of Cummean, 2.22–31, ed. and trans. by Bieler, p. 116. One must be careful, however, not to draw too sharp a distinction between clerics and *filid*, as the latter could be associated with the church either directly (e.g. patronage ties) or indirectly, by modelling their professional hierarchy on the sacramental grades (e.g. *Uraicecht na Riar*, ed. And trans. by Breatnach, pp. 85–7, 98–100; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3 (Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, 1990), pp. 24–28). The term *laicus* in this case is ambiguous: it can mean either layman or, perhaps, ecclesiastical dependant, because the noun *monachus* is used by Cummean exclusively for those who took vows (Cummean 2.3–4, ed. by Bieler, p. 114).

continence, can be regarded as part and parcel of the laity's reciprocal relationship with the church, in return for which laymen and women could expect to receive pastoral care. Pastoral care broadly consisted of the sacraments (at the very least baptism and the eucharist), intercessory prayers, and also burial rites, though it is unclear how widespread the practice of burial in church grounds was among early Irish (or indeed Anglo-Saxon) Christian communities.[27]

However, it was not the penitential lifestyle alone that entitled *manaig* to pastoral care. They would, like ordinary members of the laity (variably referred to as *populus, plebs, túath*) owe food renders as a form of alms or tithes, a burial charge, and (in certain circumstances) services to the church. The reciprocal relationship between *manaig* and their church was framed by Irish vernacular normative texts in terms that were analogous to a contract between a lord and his clients. The *Hibernensis*, however, written in Latin and drawing on a mix of local and foreign (especially African and Gallic) traditions, does not echo this lord/client trope but uses instead a more pastoral idiom.[28] These different depictions of *manaig* are suggestive of conflicting attitudes towards ecclesiastical dependants, some drawing more closely on local social and political structures while others, like the *Hibernensis*, appear to deliberately depart from them.

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[27] The most recent comprehensive discussion of pastoral care in Ireland, which includes an assessment of previous scholarship, is Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, 239–89. On burial evidence from Ireland and its interpretation, see O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian? Burial in Ireland during the 5th to 8th Centuries AD; O'Brien and Bhreathnach, 'Irish Boundary *Ferta*, their Physical Manifestation and Historical Context'. In Anglo-Saxon England a certain shift among the elite towards burial in churches is discernible from the mid seventh century, and although from the eighth century rural communities begin to exhibit a predilection for shroud burial instead of grave-goods, the practice of burial in the minster churchyard appears to spread beyond the wealthy elites only from the ninth century, and gain wide currency only from the tenth, when soul scot is first mentioned: see Geake, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion Period England*; Gittos, 'Creating the Sacred: Anglo-Saxon Rites for Consecrating Cemeteries'; Tinti, 'The "Costs" of Pastoral Care: Church Dues in Late Anglo-Saxon England'; Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 228–45, 463–71; Welch, 'The Mid Saxon "Final Phase"'; Hadley, 'Late Anglo-Saxon Burial Practice'. On methodological issues of interpreting burial as a source for conversion, see Hadley, 'Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism: Christianity and Anglo-Saxon Burial Practices'.

[28] Charles-Edwards, 'The Pastoral Role of the Church in the Early Irish Laws', pp. 70–1; cf. Davies, 'Clerics as Rulers: Some Implications of the Terminology of Ecclesiastical Authority in Early Medieval Ireland'.

The extent to which pastoral care was widely available is still under debate, with some arguing that the *manaig* were its sole regular recipients.[29] Likewise, in Anglo-Saxon England we certainly encounter contemporary commentators, like Bede, who addressed the problems of the limited reach of pastoral care and sporadic episcopal visitations to remote settlements that nevertheless paid for pastoral care.[30] How prevalent pastoral care became in early Anglo-Saxon England and how much of it was administered by minsters or was subject to more active episcopal oversight, are hotly debated questions. As is the case with Ireland, some historians argue that ordinary laypeople were not the primary recipients of pastoral care.[31]

To my knowledge, there has not been an attempt to argue that *fratres* (who are all but invisible in our sources) attached to minsters were subject to a penitential regime. Whether or not they were, it appears that others were also expected to submit to a penitential regime. This transpires from two seventh-century texts. The first is the *Libellus Responsionum*, a reworking of correspondence from 601 between Pope Gregory and his emissary Augustine, and the second is the selection of canonical sayings attributed to Theodore, the influential late seventh-century archbishop of Canterbury (d. 690). In the *Libellus* Gregory famously prescribed periods of continence to the newly converted 'Ad eius uero concubitum uir suus accedere non debet, quoadusque qui gignitur ablactatur […] quippe quia et sine partus causa, cum in suetis menstruis detinentur, uiris suis misceri prohibentur' ('Her husband should not approach his bedfellow until her infant is weaned […] apart from child-birth, women are forbidden from intercourse with their husbands during their ordinary periods').[32]

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[29] Colmán Etchingham has made this claim in a number of publications, most recently in his 'Pastoral Provision in the First Millennium: A Two-Tier Service?'. Compare with the more robust system of pastoral care posited by Richard Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland: Towards a Pastoral Model'.

[30] Bede, Letter to Ecgberht §7, ed. by Plummer, p. 410.

[31] Questions regarding pastoral care in England are closely intertwined with an ongoing debate on the identity, development, and role of the minster. On the earlier phases of this debate, largely formed as a response to research by John Blair, see Cambridge and Rollason, 'Debate: The Pastoral Organisation of the Anglo-Saxon Church: A Review of the "Minster Hypothesis"'. For overviews on more recent contributions, see Pickles, 'Church Organisation and Pastoral Care' and Cubitt, 'Pastoral Care and Religious Belief'.

[32] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors i, 27 (pp. 90–93).

In the same vein, perhaps echoing these very same rulings by Gregory, Archbishop Theodore ruled that: 'Mulier tres menses debet se abstinere a uiro suo quando concepit ante partum et post tempore purgationis, hoc est XL diebus et noctibus, siue masculum siue feminam genuerit'[33] ('When she has conceived a woman ought to abstain from her husband for three months before the birth, and afterward in the time of purgation, that is, for forty days and nights, whether she has borne a male or female child.')[34]

Among the Irish sources we also find certain canonical rulings that prescribe periodic abstinence which are not addressed directly to *manaig*. However, it cannot be ruled out that *manaig* were specifically intended, especially given the monastic context evident in certain texts, as is clear from the final sentence of the text from the *Hibernensis* quoted below: the first part may be aimed at *manaig* and the end exclusively at those who took monatic vows.

[PRINTER: *INDENTED* QUOTATION FOLLOWS:]

De temporibus in quibus continere se debent coniugati. Sinodus Hibernensis: In tribus quadragesimis anni et in dominica die et in feriis quartis et in sextis feriis coniuges continere se debent. Item: In omnibus solemnitatibus et in illis diebus, quibus uxor praegnans, hoc est, a die quo filius in utero eius motum fecerit, usque ad partus sui diem. Item: A partu per XXXVI dies si masculus; si uero filia, XLVI dies. Item: Habitantibus illis in habitu religioso copulari non permittitur.

(Concerning the periods in which a married couple ought to be continent. A Hibernian synod: In the three forty-day periods of the year, and on Sunday, and on the fourth and sixth days, married couples ought to be continent. Likewise: On all feastdays, and in those days in which the wife is pregnant, namely from the time that the child moves in her womb and until its birth [they ought to be continent]. Likewise: For thirty-six

[33] On the possible dependency see Flechner, 'The Making of the Canons of Theodore'.
[34]: Canons of Theodore U.ii.xii.3, ed. by Finsterwalder, p. 326, trans. by McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance,* p. 208.

days from birth if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, forty-six days (cf. Leviticus 12. 4–5). Likewise: Those living the religious life are not permitted to have intercourse.)[35]

Dietary restrictions are yet another expression of intrusion into the more private and bodily sphere of the individual. In both Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England we find canonical rulings concerning certain prohibited foodstuffs, especially horse meat, but also suffocated animals, echoing the injunction in Acts 15. 20 about abstaining from eating the meat of strangled animals.[36] However, as was the case with the prescribed continence, the prohibitions are not explicitly said to have been aimed at *manaig* or *fratres*. Nevertheless, when such rulings are found in texts emanating from a distinct monastic milieu, the context itself is suggestive of a monastic (or paramonastic) target group.[37]

BECOMING AN ECCLESIASTICAL DEPENDANT

The foregoing discussion considered various distinctions between ecclesiastical dependants and peasants who were not attached to churches, revolving mainly around reception of pastoral care and a penitential lifestyle. However, when viewed from a more reductionist perspective, the distinction would simply be that ecclesiastical dependants were definitely Christian, while other peasants might not necessarily have been. Their Christian identity is not merely the baseline criterion on account of which I chose to concentrate on them for the present study, but a significant feature that begs an explanation: is it possible to detect a causal connection between becoming an ecclesiastical dependant and converting to Christianity, a connection that could explain how these people became Christian in the first place?

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[35]: *Collectio Hibernensis* 46.11, ed.by Wasserschleben, pp. 187–8.
[36] Examples abound, but typical cases include Book 54 of the *Hibernensis* (ed. By Wasserschleben, pp. 215–19), entitled *De carnibus edendis*, which also echoes the Anglo-Saxon Canons of Theodore U.ii.xi *De usu uel abiectione animalium* (ed. By Finsterwalder, pp. 325–6). Periods of fasting, ubiquitous to monastic communities, are prescribed, for example, in the early ninth-century Rule of Carthage, trans. by Ó Maidín, pp. 70–2. For references to editions see Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* §267 (p. 473).
[37] For example the Monastery of Tallaght §14 (on periodic continence) and §§ 49–52 (where dietary restrictions are addressed explicitly to those 'under spiritual guidance'), ed. and trans. by Gwynn and Purton, pp. 132, 145–7.

There were different paths by which one could become a peasant dependant in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland. For Anglo-Saxon England I cite two examples involving St Wilfrid. In the Life of St Wilfrid we encounter a child who was revived by the saint, baptised, and destined to be handed over to the church at Ripon at the age of seven:

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Resuscitatum itaque et baptizatum matri infantem reddidit, praecipiensque ei in nomine Domini, ut sibi filium suum in septima annorum aetate Deo ad serviendum redderet. Quod mulier, malivolo suadente marito, videns elegantem puerum, contempsit, fugiens de terra sua. Quem praefectus episcopi nomine Hocca latentem sub aliis Bryttonum quaesitum invenit et coacte abstraxit, ad episcopumque contulit. Erat autem puer cognomine Eodwald et agnomine Filius Episcopi, vivens in Dei servitio Inhripis, usquedum in mortalitate magna diem obiit.

(So he baptised the child which had been brought to life again and gave it into the charge of the mother, bidding her, in the name of the Lord, give back the child to himself at the age of seven, for the service of God. The mother, however, when she saw how handsome the boy was, listened to the evil counsel of her husband, made light of her promise, and fled from her country. The bishop's reeve, named Hocca, having sought and found him hidden among others of the British race, took him away by force and carried him off to the bishop. The boy's Christian name was Eodwald and his surname was Bishop's Son: he lived in Ripon serving God until he died during the great plague).[38]

Citing this example, John Blair suggests that the daily routine of work and prayer that an oblate of this kind could expect 'might in practice have assumed a character not wholly unlike labour-rent; it is conceivable that some people acquired the obligation of performing it not through their own choosing'.[39] Mayke De Jong sees this as a typical instance of 'shifting the balance of power inexorably towards the holy man',

[38] Stephen, Life of Wilfrid §18 (pp. 38–41).
[39] Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 255.

and away from the child's kin.[40] Whether the child was of humble or more lofty origins to begin with and whether his reception at Ripon entailed loss of independent legal status or only the renouncement of certain aristocratic trappings, are questions for which the Life does not provide clear answers. However, given that there is no mention of an endowment and that the hagiographer had no qualms about describing the child's forcible seizure, one may wonder whether he meant us to understand that the oblate became a labourer of unfree, servile status. (Such was indeed the case with a child mentioned in the Old Irish Life of St Berach, which will be discussed below.)

Wilfrid is the protagonist of another story that mentions the inauguration of peasant dependants. According to Bede, eighty-seven hides at Selsey, which King Æthelwalh of Sussex granted to Wilfrid for the foundation of a minster, came with two hundred and fifty slaves. These Wilfrid is said to have baptised and freed:

[PRINTER: *INDENTED* QUOTATION FOLLOWS:]

Et quoniam illis rex cum praefata loci possessione omnes quae ibidem erant facultates cum agris et hominibus donavit, omnes fide Christi institutos unda baptismatis abluit, inter quos servos et ancillas ducentos quinquaginta; quos omnes ut baptizando a servitute daemonica salvavit, etiam libertate donando humanae servitutis absolvit.' (Since the king had given them the land together with all the stock on it, along with fields and men, he instructed them all in the faith of Christ and washed them in the waters of baptism; among these were 250 male and female slaves, all of whom he released from the slavery of the devil, at the same time releasing them from the yoke of human slavery by granting them their liberty.)[41]

In a discussion of this episode Rosamond Faith asks, 'Did Wilfrid perhaps set up his converts on smallholdings to work for the Northumbrian monks he had brought with him', and John Blair also wonders, 'Did they become a workforce of monastic tenants?'[42] If the newly-converted slaves became smallholders, they would have been

[40] De Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West*, p. 210.
[41] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, iv, 13 (pp. 374–7).
[42] Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship*, p. 62. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 255 note 40.

liable to pay tax on their land. Freedom and Christianity would thus appear to have come at a price.

These Wilfridian episodes illustrate two ways of becoming a peasant dependant: through oblation, and through redemption from slavery. In both episodes baptism was a crucial factor in effecting the transition. Possibly we may be observing two distinct kinds of peasant dependants: one unfree, serving the monastery directly, and the other free, providing the monastery with the produce of their own small plots of land.

For the circumstances in which individuals or communities could become ecclesiastical dependants in Ireland, one may turn to hagiography, normative sources, and the quasi-cartulary *Additamenta* to Tírechán's *Collectanea.*[43] It is a commonplace of hagiography that 'an individual submits himself, his kin and progeny, to a saint, often with an express statement that the property of the kin-group is made over to the church'.[44] Hagiographical episodes of this kind may be about ordinary families committing themselves to existing churches (and losing status as a result) or aristocrats founding proprietary churches. Such churches, as shown by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, proliferated in early medieval Ireland and the degree of secularisation they had may be expected to have been high.[45] Some of the best known treatments of proprietary churches are by Vincent Hurley, Thomas Charles-Edwards and Colmán Etchingham.[46] The pattern of distribution of family churches in the Burren and in Counties Cork and Kerry was interpreted by Harold Mytum as attesting a 'bottom-up'

[43] Some normative and charter evidence, including Tírechán, is discussed by Davies and Flechner in this volume (pp. 000-000). For the hagiographical references see Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History', pp. 316–21.
[44] Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, p. 437.
[45] Ó Corráin, 'The Early Irish Churches: Some Aspects of Organisation'. His observation is based on the frequency with which genealogists link secular pedigrees with specific churches.
[46] Hurley, 'The Early Church in the South-West of Ireland: Settlement and Organisation'; Charles-Edwards, 'The Church and Settlement'; Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, pp. 394–454. On Irish proprietary churches in a comparative European perspective, see Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West*, pp. 140–7, especially her observation on p. 146, that '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'.

conversion, since they appear to have been established in 'marginal areas', at a distance from royal centres which can be argued to have been the last to convert.[47]

As in Anglo-Saxon England, the path to becoming an ecclesiastical dependant in Ireland could also pass through oblation, though in Ireland we have clear-cut (albeit non-contemporary) testimonies of oblation ending in monastic servitude. Take, for example, the following episode from the Life of Berach, in which a mother is said to have preferred to give away her child to a monastery during a famine, rather than kill it:

[PRINTER: *INDENTED* QUOTATION FOLLOWS:]

7 ro fhiarfaigh fochann bethad an meic, 7 ro innis a mathair gurab é Berach ro bhethaigh é; 7 go ro hedbradh a mhanchine dó. Ocus doluidh Laegachan go Berach cona oigh-réir dó, 7 ros cind manchine an meic go brath do Bherach.

(And he [Láegachán] asked how the child remained alive; and the mother told how Berach supported it, and that its *manchaine* ('service') had been offered to him. And Láegachán went to Berach and offered his full obedience to him, and confirmed to Berach the *manchaine* ('service') of his child for ever).[48]

The mother's poverty, which obliged her to renounce her son, leaves little room for doubt that the child was destined for a life of servitude. Monastic servitude through oblation is also endorsed by the *Hibernensis*: 'Filius allatus seruus est eiusdem nisi depretiatur' ('A child who has been given [to the church] is its slave, unless it is redeemed through payment').[49]

A child of this kind would have become an unfree *manach*, such as we find attested in vernacular Irish normative texts.[50] However, its opposite, the free *manach*,

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[47] Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 63, 80–86, 171–3.

[48] *Betha Beraigh* §81, ed. and trans. by Plummer, i, pp. 23–43 (p. 40); ii, pp. 22–43 (p. 40). I have altered the translation slightly in line with modern English usage. According to Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* §196 (p. 402) the Life of Berach is not of early medieval origin and the traditions underpinning it are undatable. The noun *manchaine* has, according to *DIL*, a broad semantic range encompassing the duty or calling of a monk, but also service due from a tenant to a lord and service more generally. ***[but see also Etchingham's discussion of it]***

[49] *Collectio Hibernensis*, ed. By Wasserschleben, 42.24.

[50] See Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, pp. 363–79.

could also enter a community as an oblate, as suggested by the medieval commentary on the early eighth-century Irish vernacular law tract *Córus Béscnai*:

[PRINTER: *INDENTED* QUOTATION FOLLOWS:]

Is cutruma beiris do dibuigh a athar iar negaib a athur 7 gac mac dligthech ata agin athair, 7 a bet fora ferunn fein amuich, 7 fognum saermanuig uada don eacluis.
(He obtains as much of the inheritance (*díbad*) of his father after the death of his father as every lawful son which the father has, and he is to be on his own land outside, and he shall render the service of a free *manach* (*saermanach*) to the church (*eclais*) . . .)[51]

The context in which this text occurs in *Córus Béscnai* is a discussion of firstborn children. In the idealised world of *Córus Béscnai* and also in the Irish canonical stipulations on tithes, the firstborn were to be offered to the church.[52] However, since this rule pertains to families that would be assumed to be Christian already, it cannot be used to infer actual instances of conversion.

Unlike the conversion of the Selsey peasants that we encountered earlier, Irish sources do not offer clear-cut examples of pagans suddenly turning (or being turned into) *manaig.* Terminology that seems suggestive of conversion, can in fact turn out to be a false friend. Take, for example, the noun *conuersus.* Richard Sharpe showed that the *conuersus* of hagiography was simply 'a layman or, more likely, a warrior, who has changed his way of life and entered religion'.[53] The usual route by which one made this transition was penance. Further analysis of hagiography by Colmán Etchingham reinforced the assertion that *conuersio* denoted a turning from a life of vice to repentance and stressed the difficulty of investigating paganism based on sources that were either hostile towards pagan practices, ignorant about them, or perhaps reflecting practices that were 'substantially modified in imitation of

[51]: *Córus Béscnai*, ed. by Binchy, CIH, p. 1814 ll. 22–24. Translation adapted from AL iii, p. 41.
[52] *Córus Béscnai*, ed. by Binchy, CIH, p. 531 ll. 3–7; *Synodus Sapientium de Decimis*, ed. and trans. by Bieler, pp. 166–7.
[53] Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech*, and the Devil's Men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), pp. 75–92 (at p. 80 note 26).

Christianity'.[54] When the penitents of hagiography are aristocrats or kings, they represent yet another way of becoming *manaig*—albeit of elite status and from a Christian background—by means of founding a monastery or joining themselves to a monastery accompanied by a substantial property endowment. We also encounter such people in the annals: I counted six repentant kings and two 'cleric-kings' before 911, which is the year in which the Chronicle of Ireland has been argued to end.[55] Aristocratic *fratres* are likewise accounted for in Anglo-Saxon England, where from the ninth century we find canonical provisions (echoing Frankish councils) that allow them to retain their property as *precaria* (conditional leases) upon entering minsters before it passes to the minster after their death.[56] However, here too the conversion is not from paganism but from a life of vice to one of Christian virtue (as Sharpe and Etchingham observed with regard to Hiberno-Latin *conuersus*).

It is evident, then, that certain members of the elite could choose to become penitent lay members of a religious community. Choice is otherwise rarely attributed to individuals in late antique or early medieval texts dealing with conversion, with the exception of didactic moralistic tales about persons who overcome sinful temptations, or tales of wealthy individuals who are said (or implied) to have relinquished their property on the occasion of their baptism.[57] Choice is especially lacking in accounts concerning individuals of low birth. Indeed, the concept of individual choice is one which contemporaries might not have recognised in a society in which one's freedom to change abode or transfer property was curtailed by such factors as legal status, gender, and position within the kindred. In studying conversion it is especially

[54] Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000*, p. 305.
[55] These are identified by rules of thumb, e.g. abbots or bishops who were previously kings. See the following entries in *The Chronicle of Ireland*, vol 1, trans. By Charles-Edwards: 639.4, 765.2, 848.3, 849.13, 867.1, 885.10, 908.3 (two Munster cleric-kings). For a background on the Chronicle and a discussion of historiographical hypotheses regarding its date and purpose, see the introduction to Charles-Edward's text and Roy Flechner, 'The Chronicle of Ireland: Then and Now'.
[56] Brooks, 'Was Cathedral Reform at Christ Church Canterbury in the Early Ninth Century of Continental Inspiration?'.
[57] See for example the noblewoman who chose to become a nun to the detriment of the elders, in Patrick's *Confessio* §42, ed. by Ludwig Bieler, *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi.* (2 vols, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1952), i, pp. 56–91 (at. pp. 81–2).

frustrating not to be able to gauge individual choice, an absence that also hampers our ability to examine spiritual or intellectual motives for conversion.[58]

ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Between the seventh and ninth centuries Ireland experienced a phase of unprecedented economic growth, for which the church was an (but not necessarily 'the') important stimulant.[59] The economic prosperity of certain churches could potentially have acted as a magnet for attracting new ecclesiastical tenants, who may or may not have been previously Christian. However, as they entered a religious community, individuals could lose free legal status and also threaten the integrity of the kin they had forsaken.[60] The social price might therefore be quite high. Nevertheless, the economic benefits could have outweighed any adverse social consequences. And these benefits have been argued to have been significant. As Charles Doherty eloquently put it in his famous eulogy of the church in early medieval Ireland:

[PRINTER: *INDENTED* QUOTATION FOLLOWS:]

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.[61]

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[58] The individual's experience occupies a central place in anthropological studies of conversion in the modern era. Among the best known treatments is Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion.*

[59] On the connection between the church and economic growth see especially Davies, 'Economic change in early medieval Ireland: the case for growth', and Davies and Flechner, this volume, pp. 000-000.

[60] See Davies and Flechner, this volume, pp. 000-000.

[61] Charles Doherty, 'The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland', p. 55).

If read out of context, this citation does not do justice to Doherty's acute awareness of the complex relationship between kingship and church governance (the two could sometimes be synonymous), but it does convey his understanding of the manner in which churches could challenge the monopoly that *túatha* or smaller kin groups had on social, economic and political organisation, especially when these churches bore a superficial semblance to towns owing to the permanent (as distinct from itinerant) character of their elite dwellers, their core community of non-labourers, their relatively high rate of craft-working, and perhaps occasional markets (though there was no noteworthy separation from an agricultural hinterland). This combination of variables is familiar to students of Irish history as constituting the 'monastic town', a concept as controversial as it is useful if drawn upon judiciously as a working hypothesis or (Weberian) 'ideal-type' model, in other words: a theoretical extreme with which to compare or contrast actual evidence for practice.[62] When taken as an 'ideal type' it can serve as a yardstick for measuring relative proximity to, or departure from, traditional kin-based models of rural habitation. Thus, the peasants who were drawn to church settlements, becoming its tenants and workforce, can be said to have been contributing to the creation of a viable alternative to those traditional kin-based models of rural habitation. One may choose to invoke parallels with conversion processes elsewhere, for example in the Abbasid Caliphate, where conversion to Islam could go hand in hand with a drift towards cities, where converts found safety in numbers, but also freedom from the social and religious constraints of the kin.[63]

Economic expediency, as suggested above and as Bishop Daniel of Winchester (mentioned earlier) asserted already in the eighth century, could be a compelling incentive to convert. Economic prosperity, always a powerful catalyst, can

[62] Among the more robust critiques of the hypothesis of the Irish monastic town and its reception in scholarship, are Valante, 'Reassessing the Irish Monastic Town' (which itself came under severe criticism). and Colmán Etchingham, *The Irish 'Monastic Town': Is This a Valid Concept?,* Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures 8 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 2010). Sadly, the debate so far circumvented theories of medieval towns altogether, ignoring, for example, two of the most influential 'ideal-type' definitions: Martin Biddle, 'Towns', in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by D. M. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 99–150 (at p. 100); Susan Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. ix–x.

[63] See, e.g. Richard W. Bulliet, 'Conversion Stories in Early Islam'.

thus also induce conversion. But is the opposite also true? In other words: can conversion alter economic conditions? A number of contributions in this volume consider this question (e.g. Davies and Flechner, Vésteinsson, Carver, Thomas) but for present purposes let us address a very specific aspect of this question, namely the extent to which religious ideology could be argued to have contributed to the emergence of certain farming regimes at the expense of others.

A change in farming practice that has come to be closely associated with the growth of the church in both Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England is the increase in cereal production (as noted also by Doherty in the quotation above). In Ireland this is a controversial issue, which is rehearsed in what may be called the 'cereal versus pastoral agriculture' debate. In simple terms, the debate hinges on the opposition between the church as the prominent cereal cultivator and the inhabitants of secular ringforts as pastoralists. However, the evidence for either view has been shown to be ambiguous, and recent contributions have, accordingly, tended to be more nuanced.[64] No comparable debate exists for Anglo-Saxon England, but the view that the church stimulated a changeover to cereal production has been raised in relation to two communities at least: Yarnton and Lyminge.

In a study of Yarnton in Oxfordshire, Gill Hey argued a case for the transformation of the local economy from pastoral-based to cereal-based.[65] She and Robin Fleming suggested in separate publications that the change may be due to ecclesiastical influence.[66] According to Fleming, the change in farming regime was closely related to changes in the local character of lordship and had social implications. This happened as Yarnton, which eventually became a minster, was transferred (probably in the eighth century), together with its peasants, to the nearby monastery of Eynsham, and subsequently the peasants were required to produce more

[64] Some of the central publications in this area to have appeared in recent years are: Hall, 'The Vegetation History of Monastic and Secular Sites in the Midlands of Ireland over the Last Two Millennia'; Comber, *The Economy of the Ringfort and Contemporary Settlement in Early Medieval Ireland;* Kelly, 'The Relative Importance of Cereals and Livestock in the Medieval Irish Economy: the Evidence of the Law-Texts'; McCormick et al., *The Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production in Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100.*
[65] Hey, *Yarnton: Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape.*
[66] Fleming, 'Land Use and People'.

intensively for an ecclesiastical elite settled permanently a few kilometres away, rather than for secular lords who had only occasionally resided in the neighbourhood.

A similar shift towards cereal agriculture can be observed at Lyminge, corresponding to its transition from a secular place to a minster.[67] Sites like Yarnton and Lyminge offer a unique diachronic picture that allows us to glimpse some economic realities of conversion more closely. But apart from adopting cereal agriculture, Lyminge experienced other changes: the introduction of fishing at sea and the farming of domesticated birds. How these changes may be tied with the transition from a secular to an ecclesiastical settlement at Lyminge, we are about to see.

Lyminge and other sites, like Jarrow and Hartlepool, have attracted attention for their potential to reveal a connection between the dietary regulations imposed by monastic rules and shifts in resource exploitation that can be detected in the material record.[68] The most robust claim for such a connection was made in a study of nine high and late medieval monasteries in Flanders by Anton Ervynck, which concluded that 'some first indications in the archaeozoological record of the sites studied do, however, point to the importance of fish in the food supply'.[69] He also laid down a valid caveat to the effect that archaeological confirmation of monastic dietary rules 'could only be found when it could be demonstrated that monastic sites consistently yield much higher frequencies of fish bones compared to contemporaneous non-monastic sites from the same region'.[70] This reservation is especially pertinent for Anglo-Saxon England, where the case for a direct and consistent correlation between rule and practice is undermined by excavations showing that meat was consumed regularly at certain minsters.[71]

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[67] Thomas, 'Life before the Minster: the Social Dynamics of Monastic Foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent'. See also his contribution to the present volume: 'Downland, Marsh and Weald: Monastic Foundation and Rural Intensification in Anglo-Saxon'.

[68] For Lyminge see Thomas, 'Life before the Minster: the Social Dynamics of Monastic Foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent'; for Jarrow, see Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites*, i, pp. 343–4. For Hartlepool I rely on Thomas's reference to an unpublished Leicester PhD by M. Holmes, 'Food, Status and Provisioning in Saxon and Scandinavian England' (2011), pp. 183–4.

[69] Ervynck, 'Following the Rule? Fish and Meat Consumption in Monastic Communities in Flanders (Belgium)', p. 79, table on p. 76.

[70] Ervynck, 'Following the Rule? Fish and Meat Consumption in Monastic Communities in Flanders (Belgium)', p. 75.

[71] Thomas, 'Life before the Minster: the Social Dynamics of Monastic Foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent', p. 138, and references cited in note 110.

But although the Insular pool of data is still too small and too geographically restricted to be statistically meaningful, some individual examples can nevertheless be telling. Here I shall concentrate on the most recent discussion of such a potential correlation between monastic rule and practice, drawing on evidence uncovered at Lyminge.[72] This site is located approximately seven kilometres from the coast, north of Folkestone in Kent. Excavations led by Gabor Thomas since 2006 continue to yield finds with important implications for conversion history. The site is formed of two parts: a pre sixth-century royal centre and a later monastic settlement. Both parts turned out large volumes of domestic refuse which contained an abundance of bioarchaeological evidence, including large quantities of bird and fishbone. Both offer an extraordinary insight into the changes in resource exploitation between the two phases of the site. With regard to fish, in the monastic phase there is a proliferation of cod and ling, both sea fish, in very large quantities, accounting for thirty-five percent of the hand-collected faunal assemblage. By contrast, the pre-monastic phase produced only small quantities of estuarine species, like herring and flatfish. As for birds, the exploitation of domesticated birds, like chicken, increases significantly from ten percent to thirty-three percent by the eighth to ninth century. Hence there is a clear difference in the exploitation of fish and fowl in terms of species, intensification of farming, and exploitation of resources between the pre-monastic and the monastic phases of the site.

These findings prompted Thomas to ask whether 'the relatively high proportions of fish and fowl might be a product of monastic food regulations and fasting'.[73] In other words, can religious ideology, as expressed in dietary restrictions imposed by monastic rules, have altered the agricultural regime? Thomas rightly qualifies this proposition by citing the reservations expressed by Ervynck and others already discussed, and noting that we are poorly informed about monastic rules in Anglo-Saxon England before the Benedictine Rule, the earliest attestation of which in the British Isles is contemporary with Bishop Wilfrid, whose *Vita* by Stephen of

[72] What follows is based on Thomas, , 'Life before the Minster: the Social Dynamics of Monastic Foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent'.
[73] Thomas, , 'Life before the Minster: the Social Dynamics of Monastic Foundation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent' p. 138.

Ripon credits him with introducing it to England.[74] England also boasts the earliest manuscript copy of the Rule, Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Hatton 48, dating roughly from the same period.[75] The Rule is not attested in Ireland in the early middle ages but, as already mentioned, we find clear expressions of monastic dietary restrictions in the Irish penitentials, and especially in the *Hibernensis*, whose book titled *De carnibus edendis* ('Concerning the eating of meats') praises the consumption of birds and fish above all other animals and, in one manuscript, there is a detailed description of how fishweirs should be built and positioned.[76] Hence, while the ideological basis for transforming agricultural regimes can clearly be seen to have existed, its actual effects on farming practices—as suggested by the Anglo-Saxon examples above—require further confirmation by a more comprehensive archaeological survey.

The mention of dietary restrictions brings us full circle back to the distinction between ecclesiastical and other peasants, who may in some cases have been subject to similar regulations. The proposition that diets or agricultural regimes could arguably have been influenced by religious ideology, invites consideration of certain far-reaching effects that the introduction of Christianity might have had on the lives of ordinary peasants, effects that range beyond the purely religious or ecclesiastical.

EPILOGUE

The proliferation of churches (broadly defined) in both Britain and Ireland from the mid seventh century challenged social and economic structures based around the kin. One of the most profound challenges was to kin-based identities, which would hitherto have been taken for granted, in contrast to identities that individuals and communities acquired through their association with a church as they became its

[74] Stephen, Life of Wilfrid §14 (p. 30).
[75] *Saec.* VII-VIII, according to *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, ed. Elias A. Lowe (12 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1972), II § 240 (p. 34).
[76] *Collectio Hibernensis* 54, ed. by Wasserschleben, pp. 215–19. For the text on weirs see Roy Flechner, 'Aspects of the Breton Transmission of the *Hibernensis*', in *La Bretagne carolingienne: Entre influences insulaires et continentales*, ed. by Jean-Luc Deuffic (Saint-Denis: Pecia, 2008), pp. 27–44 (pp. 42–3).

ecclesiastical dependants. Such challenges would be greater the further one goes from the proprietary church end of the spectrum, but the assumption underlying this essay from the outset has been that, whatever the case, the transition from one form of identity to the other did not occur randomly, but must have been undertaken actively and deliberately, for example by submitting to a penitential regime. This active transition in itself may be thought of as a form of conversion, with important implications for social organisation and conceptions of identity. The foregoing discussion has highlighted different motivations for such a transition, as well as practical aspects, which ultimately contributed to the creation of Christian communities centred around churches, which were characterised by a certain exclusivity that separated them from other environments in which Christians lived. Circumstantial evidence—like Wilfrid's baptizing of the pagan slaves that he freed and established as ecclesiastical dependants—implies a correlation between conversion and the creation of at least some such exclusive communities.

To the extent that the evidence emanating from either an Anglo-Saxon or Irish context can be said to be complementary, it was observed that the ostensible gap in the evidential record is not only due to absence of evidence on one side or the other, but also to the research priorities of scholars who study either place. For example, questions relating to the prevalence of cereal agriculture in churches have been explored much more extensively in relation to the Irish evidence, whereas possible ideological motivations for changing farming regimes have been examined more closely in regard to certain Anglo-Saxon minsters. And, as we have seen, when geographical boundaries are straddled, the conversion experience among the lower rungs of society comes into sharper focus and we are able to form a clearer picture of what it meant to be an ecclesiastical dependant in those relatively recently converted societies.

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