KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 20

ELIZABETH BOYLE

THE MORAL ECONOMY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND

DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College, and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon, 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982.

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. The lecture was originally hosted in Hughes Hall in conjunction with the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, and is now hosted by the Department. The lecture is published as a pamphlet each year by the Department.

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The Moral Economy in Early Medieval Ireland

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFM	*Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. and trans. John O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, 7 vols (Dublin, 1848–51)
AU	*Annals of Ulster*, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983)
CMCS	*Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* (vols 1–25); *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* (vols 26– present)
CS	*Chronicon Scotorum*, ed. and trans. W. M. Hennessy, *Chronicon Scotorum: a Chronicle of Irish Affairs, from the Earliest Times to AD 1135* (London, 1866)
DIB	*Dictionary of Irish Biography*: https://www.dib.ie/
eDIL	*Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*: https://dil.ie/
Frag. Ann.	*The Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. and trans. Joan Newlon Radner (Dublin, 1978)
KBR	Bibliothèque royale de Belgique / Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België
PHCC	*Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*
ZCP	*Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture 2023

THE MORAL ECONOMY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND

Elizabeth Boyle
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In his 1997 novel, *Underworld*, Don DeLillo wrote that 'Prayer is a practical strategy, the gaming of temporal advantage in the capital markets of Sin and Remission'.[1] This line encapsulates the relationship between religion and economy that is the subject of my lecture. It is widely known and widely stated that the Christian Church as institution in early medieval Ireland was extremely powerful and that some, though not all, ecclesiastical sites were very wealthy, accruing vast landholdings with many tenants. Kathleen Hughes's own scholarship contributed greatly to our understanding of the workings of the early Irish Church, and it is a mark of her skill as a historian that, even though some of her interpretations and paradigms have not stood the test of time in the nearly five decades since her death, the questions she asked in her scholarship are still key issues for historians of early medieval Ireland.[2] The untimeliness of her death leaves me wondering how her ideas on early medieval Irish society might have evolved had she lived longer, and it is an honour to be able to offer some of my

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[1] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York, 1997), p. 237. I am grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, for the invitation to deliver the 2023 Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture, and to Prof. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Dr Seán Ó Hoireabhárd for their comments on a draft of this paper as I was preparing it for publication.
[2] Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966) has been particularly influential, even though her 'monastic church' model has been thoroughly refuted: key objections to Hughes's paradigm can be found in Richard Sharpe, 'Some Problems concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 230–70; idem, 'Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland: towards a Pastoral Model', in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, ed. Richard Sharpe and John Blair (Leicester, 1992), pp. 81–109; Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland, AD 650–1000* (Maynooth, 1999).

own thoughts on the medieval Irish Church in memory of such a rigorous and consequential thinker. As a small tribute to her impactful work on the role of the Church in early Irish society, I want to consider one ideological strand which I think has been comparatively neglected in the intellectual history of medieval Ireland, and that is the concept of the 'moral economy', which I define as the inextricable link between moral and economic systems in any given society. The moral economy, in the words of Rosamond Faith, involves a 'structure of values and obligations which governed whether behaviour was judged right or wrong', but those obligations and values involve economic transactions of various kinds which can serve both to bind communities together and to reinforce social inequality between individuals of differing social status or rank.[3]

Early medieval Ireland was a highly inegalitarian society: status and social hierarchy were absolutely integral to its legal systems, to its institutions, including the Church, and to the rhythms and obligations of daily life.[4] While there have been many important contributions in recent years to the study of these various hierarchies, there has been relatively little consideration of their wider economic relationship to the literary productions of ecclesiastically-trained authors, and thus to the innate connections between the writings of the Church and the economic ties that bound this unequal society together. In recent years, developments in our understanding of the economy of early medieval Ireland have been driven largely by archaeologists rather than historians, on the basis of excavation evidence from the past few decades. This has improved our knowledge of medieval Ireland's domestic and international economic relations, from the role of the Church in driving change in agricultural production through

[3] Rosamond Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside: Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman England* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 2.
[4] Though dated in places now, Fergus Kelly's *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin, 1988) remains the starting point for understanding status and social hierarchies as delineated in early Irish vernacular law.

to trade relationships with continental Europe and further afield.[5] Historians have on occasion been guilty of over-simplifying the economy of early medieval Ireland, characterizing it as being determined by possession of land and cattle, with little acknowledgement of more complex forms of wealth and power. An important corrective to this was a 2014 article by Liam Breatnach, entitled 'Forms of Payment in the Early Irish Law Tracts', which built on work done by Marilyn Gerriets in the 1980s on wealth in early medieval Ireland. Breatnach offered new insights from close reading of early Irish law to show the variety and complexity of forms of wealth and exchange in seventh- to ninth-century Ireland.[6] But much remains to be done in examining the ways that literary evidence might reflect such economic complexity and, indeed, may have worked to shape societal views on the morality of various economic transactions in early medieval Ireland.

My interest here, therefore, is not in an isolated concept of 'the economy' and its reflection in textual sources. Rather, I am concerned with that inseparable connection between economic and moral frameworks. In this, I am influenced by, among others, the late anthropologist David Graeber, who rejected the notion that there is 'something called "the economy" which operate[s] by its own rules, separate from moral or political life'.[7] I would like to suggest that early medieval Ireland's 'moral economy' was driven by the mutual interests of ecclesiastical and secular powers, which leveraged notions of 'mutual obligation', 'reciprocity', 'hospitality', and of course the promise of ultimate salvation and the eternal life of the post-mortem soul, to drive an extractive and exploitative economic system,

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[5] Aidan O'Sullivan, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr and Lorcan Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100: the Evidence from Archaeological Excavations*, 2nd edn (Dublin, 2021), provides a definitive overview of the key findings and developments.

[6] Liam Breatnach, 'Forms of Payment in the Early Irish Law Tracts', *CMCS* 68 (2014), 1-20; Marilyn Gerriets, 'Economy and Society: Clientship According to the Irish Laws', *CMCS* 6 (1983), 43-61; eadem, 'Kingship and Exchange in pre-Viking Ireland', *CMCS* 13 (1987), 39-72.

[7] David Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years* (New York, 2011), p. 29.

in which wealth gained through violent or unjust means caused particular ethical headaches for the Church, in ways that we can see being worked through in some of our literary sources.

I acknowledge my conceptual debt to Peter Brown's thinking about wealth in the late antique Christian world, particularly his monumental 2012 work, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*, and its slimmer, but no less stimulating, 2015 companion piece, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*.[8] He addressed the fundamental problem that the wealth of the Church was, as Brown put it, a 'strange form of wealth without wealth … nominally "the wealth of the poor". It was wealth held in trust'. Bishops, Brown argued, based themselves on 'counterfactual power joined to counterfactual wealth … What exactly did contemporaries mean when they spoke of the estates of the church as the "patrimonies of the poor"? In this, we are dealing with the construction of a model of society that carried a considerable imaginative charge, derived from very real preoccupations in society at large. These preoccupations were shared by both those who administered the wealth of the Church and those who contributed to that wealth as donors'.[9] In early medieval Ireland, the wealth of the Church derived in part from donations of land and portable wealth, but also from tithes and first-fruits, and from the Church's share in the profits of justice, as evidenced by repeated statements in the law texts that various forms of wealth,

[8] A rather different approach is taken by Ian Wood in his *The Christian Economy in the Early Medieval West: Towards a Temple Economy* (Binghampton NY, 2022), where he creates a framework using comparative anthropological studies of 'temple economies'. Some insights from this approach may well be valuable for early medieval Ireland (which receives no attention in Wood's study), but see also the reservations of James T. Palmer in his review in *Early Medieval Europe* 31:2 (2023), 350–2.

[9] Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton NJ, 2012), p. 507.

including inheritance, should be divided equally between the lord, the Church and the kin.[10]

The moral economy was all-encompassing, affecting every member of society of any status. The patronage of kings and their wives, and the men and women of powerful, noble dynasties is of course central to the wealth of an ecclesiastical site, but that is simply the top layer of a broader economic system.[11] The moral economy of early medieval Ireland was one in which the tithes of the least of a church's parishioners could, in theory, be rewarded with the hope of salvation as much as the greatest donations of the powerful.[12] Ecclesiastical wealth as the 'patrimonies of the poor' would have been most visibly manifested in alms-giving, which, if a church honoured its obligations, would have been a regular occurrence. In the opposite direction, tithes and first-fruits would have been regularly paid by ecclesiastical tenants.[13] However, interactions with the poor and those of middling circumstances were not sufficiently remarkable to appear in the historical record; indeed, even when it comes to high value donations, only a fraction of them are noted in our extant sources. While more substantial donations would often have been recorded in-house, it is in the nature of our sources that only a very few exceptional instances of élite gift-giving made it into the annals,

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[10] See, for example, the elucidation of this principle of threefold division of the 'profits of justice' in the story of 'David and the Beggar': Elizabeth Boyle, *History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland* (Abingdon, 2021), pp. 75–8. See also Liam Breatnach, 'The Lord's Share in the Profits of Justice and a Passage in *Cath Maige Tuired*', *Celtica* 27 (2013), 1–17. For first-fruits, tithes, etc., see idem, ed. and trans., *Córus Bésgnai: An Old Irish Law Tract on Law and Society*, Early Irish Law Series 7 (Dublin, 2017).

[11] An important recent study of élite female patronage is Seán Ó Hoireabhárd, 'Derbforgaill: Twelfth-Century Abductee, Patron and Wife', *Irish Historical Studies* 46 (2022), 1–24.

[12] A caveat, however, is that while the poor could certainly attain salvation with modest alms-giving, there is a whole genre of medieval visions of heaven and hell which emphasise that the prime spots in heaven were reserved for the wealthy: kings who endowed churches, and so on. Social inequalities in this world were depicted as being replicated in the next. For an overview, see Elizabeth Boyle, 'The Afterlife in the Medieval Celtic-Speaking World', in *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, ed. Richard Matthew Pollard (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 62–78.

[13] Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Córus Bésgnai*.

thereby skewing our picture of the circulation or transfer of wealth towards the very top of the social hierarchy.

Much of the scholarship on moral economies, particularly those of pre-modern societies, focuses on ideas of reciprocity and mutual obligation. Where the Church created its reciprocal bonds of mutual obligation through the promise of pastoral care and, ultimately, salvation, in return for first-fruits and tithes, lay relations in early medieval Ireland required different ideas of reciprocity. Kings and nobles extracted their wealth in numerous different ways, as we shall see in what follows. Kings did this in part through the concept of clientship. Clientship, of which there were two broad kinds – 'noble clientship' and 'base clientship' – involved a lord giving his client a stock of goods, usually cattle, and in return the client making yearly payments of other goods, often the dairy produce created by means of those cattle. The client also owed services to their lord, including military service and, in the case of 'base' clients, skilled manual labour, such as making repairs to the lord's estate. In return the lord offered protection to the client.[14] Such is the institution as expressed in reciprocal terms. As Rosamond Faith has written in relation to England, 'Early medieval people rated very highly the idea of reciprocity: that every action requires its appropriate response and the idea of "what is owed in return" permeated ordinary life. The elaborate compensation tariffs of the wergeld system expressed this principle: wergeld was what a free man could honourably accept in return for an afront. That is not to say that reciprocity implied, or enjoined, social equality or economic parity between the participants: higher status brought an entitlement to receive higher payments'.[15] Compensation payments in early Irish law generally worked in the same way: the higher the status of the person against whom an offence is

[14] For a more detailed discussion, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), especially pp. 68–79.
[15] Faith, *The Moral Economy*, p. 49.

committed, the higher their compensation. To treat people *fairly* in early Irish law is not to treat them *equally*, but to treat them in accordance with their rank. The honour-price of a king far outweighed that of a base client, but it was still expressed in the kind of reciprocal terms that Faith discusses – appropriate responses to actions; ideas of 'what is owed in return'. And so, in early Irish society, the terminology of clientship serves to bind people of unequal status in an economic relationship which is expressed in moral terms. The grant given by a lord to a client was called a *rath*, 'fief', and the term for the payments made in return, *somoíne*, has not only the technical sense of the regular payment due to a lord, but also the more general sense of 'wealth' or 'profit'. The client is explicitly sending wealth up the social hierarchy, and the lord's power and status expand the more clients he has.

However, to think about it in these terms is to imagine something individual and intimate, between one lord and one free farmer, analogous to the way that ecclesiastical reciprocity envisaged the payment of tithes in return for pastoral care for the individual soul. Yet, as Marilyn Gerriets showed, the terminology of clientship, of grant in return for profit, of protection in return for service, could apply to entire peoples and kingdoms. For example, the Airgialla were shown to be in a relationship of clientship to their Uí Néill overlords. Kings, but also kingdoms, could be in a relationship of clientship to more powerful overkings, and payments and profits sent yet further up the chain. Gerriets's study demonstrated that 'the political texts and the sagas show that the terminology of … clientship could be used to describe alliances between peoples'.[16] The intimate rhetoric of reciprocity and mutual dependence was being used to shape not only individual power relations but also economic relations between entire kingdoms.

[16] Gerriets, 'Kingship and Exchange', p. 50. See also Nerys Thomas Patterson, 'Material and Symbolic Exchange in Early Irish Clientship', *PHCC* 1 (1981), 53–61; Riitta Latvio, 'Status and Exchange in Early Irish Laws', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 2 (2005), 67–96.

The dynamic of lord and client is applied to the largest political units on the island, and we shall see an example of this being played out in narrative form in what follows. I begin, however, by considering a more microcosmic transaction, between an individual king and an individual cleric, which casts light on the broader issue of the royal donation to the Church of portable wealth obtained by ethically dubious means.

MÁEL SECHNAILL AND COIRPRE CROM

There is an early Middle Irish anecdote, which I would date to the early tenth century, on the basis of both language and content, that offers a multi-faceted consideration of the connections between wealth and morality. The anecdote was edited and translated by Dan Wiley in 2013, and is preserved in three manuscripts including the early fifteenth-century religious miscellany known as the *Leabhar Breac*.[17] Wiley's introduction to his edition focuses on the text as a 'ghost story', due to one of the two central characters being the post-mortem spirit of a former Irish king; however, the eschatological considerations of the tale are inextricably bound up with specific economic and moral transactions which took place during the king's lifetime and it will be useful to explore those here.[18]

[17] Dan M. Wiley, 'A Medieval Irish Ghost Story', *ZCP* 60 (2013), 239–74. Wiley's edition is based primarily on the copy in the *Leabhar Breac*. Another edition and translation, based on the copy in London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 92, can be found in John Carey, ed. and trans., 'The Story of Mael Sechnaill son of Mael Ruanaid', in *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology*, ed. John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, 2 vols (Aberystwyth, 2014), I, 465–73. Carey (p. 467) suggests a date of composition in the eleventh century but states that he remains open to an earlier date, which the linguistic evidence alone does not preclude.

[18] Wiley has some brief but useful discussion in his introduction ('A Medieval Irish Ghost Story', pp. 246–9), although it places the tale within the religious context of the *céli Dé*, rather that of relations between Máel Sechnaill and Clonmacnoise. See further Westley Follett, *Céli Dé in Ireland: Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in Celtic History 23 (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 88–99.

The story tells of a ghost who appears before Coirpre Crom, the bishop of Clonmacnoise, while he was praying. The ghost appears in the form of a dark man, wearing a tunic with one sleeve, and with a ring of light shining around his neck. Coirpre, the bishop, asks him who he is and he replies that he is the former king, Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Rúanaid, who died in 862.[19] He tells Coirpre that he is suffering torments and being plagued by demons, on account of sins that he had committed while alive. The reason why he is wearing a tunic with only one sleeve is because, while he was away from his home, some poor students had come looking for a donation of a cloak, but his wife had given them one of the king's old and worn cloaks rather than a new one. The quality of the alms that the king had given in life determined his post-mortem reward, or punishment, and in this instance he is being punished for having given meanly, albeit unintentionally. The reason why his skin is darkened, according to the ghostly king, is because his soul had been stained by sin during his lifetime, and the circle of light around his neck represents a golden torc which he had given to a cleric of Clonmacnoise, his spiritual director, in return for his prayers – a relationship of mutual obligation, to which we shall return below.[20] Even as the ghost-king speaks, the cleric too is being tormented in hell for having accepted the golden torc, either because this was wealth that was tainted by violence and bloodshed or perhaps because the cleric took the torc as personal wealth for his own gain rather than adding it to the communal wealth of his church.

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[19] See Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin's brief overview of his life and career in the *DIB*: https://www.dib.ie/biography/mael-sechnaill-a5318.

[20] Carey, 'The Story of Cairpre Cromm', translates *fail* as 'ring' rather than Wiley's 'torque'. Indeed, eDIL, s.v. *fail* shows that 'ring', 'arm-ring' or 'bracelet' are the most commonly attested definitions. The precise nature of the gold object is perhaps less important than the fact that it is seemingly a gold item intended for personal adornment rather than a religious or devotional object, but the fact that the priest's post-mortem torment is fire around his neck suggests that a torc is intended by the author.

The king, Máel Sechnaill, offers Coirpre great wealth in return for his praying for his tormented soul: the king states that he had taken vast amounts of gold from a raid on the Scandinavians of Dublin and that it can all be Coirpre's as payment for his prayers:[21]

> Fecht ríam, ol in ríg, lod-sa co hÁth Clíath do thomaithium for gallaib, co tucus .c. n-uingi di ór úadib la .x.c. n-ungi argait 7 ro-fhoilgius 7 óengilla dam 'maille frim 7 ro-marbus in gilla innsin 7 ní ḟitir nech in folach sin cusandiú 7 indisfither det-siu airm hi tá 7 tabair th'aradain fén fair.
>
> "Some time ago", the king said, "I went to Dublin to threaten the foreigners, and I took from them a hundred ounces of gold together with ten hundred ounces of silver, and along with a single servant of mine, I hid [that treasure], and then I killed the servant, and up till today, no one knows that hiding place, and you will be told where it is, and dispose of it as you wish".[22]

This could potentially have created another problematic relationship of mutual obligation, but Coirpre responds that he will not take a penny of the king's wealth, and that he will pray for the king's soul without expectation of payment. He gathers twelve of the clerics of his community and they pray for the cleric who is burning in hell for having accepted the gold torc. After six months, the ghost of Máel Sechnaill appears again before Coirpre, but this time, instead of being dark, he is speckled. He announces that he is, in the immortal words of Bon Jovi,

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[21] For an example of the kind of scenario that the author of our anecdote might be envisaging, see Máel Sechnaill's encounter with the Foreigners of Dublin recorded in *Frag. Ann.*, §235 (= 852), pp. 94–5.
[22] Wiley, ed. and trans., 'A Medieval Irish Ghost Story', pp. 264–5 (§7).

'halfway there; living on a prayer'.[23] After another six months, we are told that Máel Sechnaill and, a day later, the anonymous priest, both enter into heaven, their souls having been saved by the community of Clonmacnoise.

There is a lot to this short story, not least the fact that it was very likely written during the reign of Máel Sechnaill's son, Flann Sinna, who held the high-kingship of Ireland from 879 to 916.[24] Although Máel Sechnaill's wife is not named in the tale, the author could be understood to be claiming that it was Flann's own mother, Land ingen Dúngaile, who was responsible for having given the deficient cloak to the poor student, which resulted in Máel Sechnaill's single-sleeved apparel in the afterlife. The story certainly implies that the high-king's father would still be tormented by demons were it not for the spiritual intervention of the community at Clonmacnoise. A further intriguing note is struck by the obit for Coirpre in the Clonmacnoise compilation *Chronicon Scotorum*, which states:

> Cairpre Cam episcopus Cluana M Nois quieuit. As do tuargaib spirit Maoilseclainn meic Maoilruanaidh cenn.
>
> Coirpre Cam, bishop of Clonmacnoise, rested. It was to him that the spirit of Máel Sechnaill son of Máel Ruanaid appeared.[25]

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[23] Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora and Desmond Child, 'Livin' on a Prayer', *Slippery When Wet* (New York, 1986).

[24] For a brief overview of Flann's life and career, see the entry by Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin in the *DIB*: https://www.dib.ie/biography/flann-sinna-a3274.

[25] *CS* s.a. 904 (translation lightly adapted for orthographical consistency). The epithet *cam*, 'crooked', given to Coirpre here is almost synonymous with *crom*, 'bent, stooped', which is given to him in our anecdote. See the almost identical annal entry in *AFM* 899.4. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, the principal compiler of the latter collection, certainly knew the anecdote about Coirpre and Máel Sechnaill, as evidenced by the copy of it in his own hand in Brussels, KBR, Manuscript 5100–4, ff. 76b–78a. Ó Cléirigh's younger contemporary, Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh, was the scribe of the earliest extant copy of *CS*, which he copied from a now-lost exemplar. The comment about Coirpre having seen the spirit of Máel Sechnaill could therefore have been added to the annalistic record at any point between c. 900 and the early seventeenth century.

The ‘historicization’ of this story, through its inclusion in the annal entry recording Coirpre’s death, may, if it represents an early record rather than a seventeenth-century addition, have solidified the Clonmacnoise claim to credit for Máel Sechnaill’s salvation.

Kathleen Hughes certainly saw the annalistic claim and its associated story in that way, positing a direct relationship between Coirpre’s intercession for Máel Sechnaill and his son Flann’s patronage of Clonmacnoise:

> Here was a demonstration of the spiritual benefits which [St] Ciarán and his heirs could confer which Flann mac Maelsechlainn was not slow to grasp. It was he who, with Abbot Colmán, built the stone church at Clonmacnoise, and Abbot Colmán erected a cross in honour of Flann.[26]

The story and the annal entry are no doubt in some way connected with Flann’s patronage of Clonmacnoise, though not precisely in the way that Hughes envisaged. The idea that Colmán, abbot of Clonmacnoise, erected a cross in honour of Flann Sinna is based on a nineteenth-century reading of the partially-legible inscription on the four-metre high ‘Cross of the Scriptures’ at Clonmacnoise. However, this reading was subsequently rejected by Peter Harbison in the 1970s, who argued that the fragmentary name previously read as ‘Colmán’ was in fact ‘Ronan’, and that the Flann mentioned in the inscription was not Máel Sechnaill’s son, but rather a vice-abbot of Clonmacnoise named Flann

[26] Kathleen Hughes, ‘The Distribution of Irish Scriptoria and Centres of Learning from 730 to 1111’, in *Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. Nora K. Chadwick, Kathleen Hughes, Christopher Brooke and Kenneth Jackson (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 243–72, at p. 255.

son of Flaithbertach (d. 823), thus relocating the construction of the cross to the first half of the ninth century rather than the first years of the tenth.[27]

Even if we eliminate the 'Cross of the Scriptures' from consideration, there remains a clear connection between Flann and Clonmacnoise: less than a decade after Coirpre's death, Flann Sinna patronized the building of a stone church at Clonmacnoise, during the abbacy of the aforementioned Colmán:

> Damliag Cluana M Nois do denam la Flann mac Maoileclainn et la Colman Conaillech.
>
> The oratory of Cluain moccu Nóis was built by Flann son of Máel Sechnaill and Colmán Conaillech.[28]

The idea that Flann's father owed his salvation to Clonmacnoise was a potent one in this context. Did Flann offer his patronage to Clonmacnoise precisely because they claimed to have rescued his father from post-mortem punishment?

Another key issue in the anecdote is the source of Máel Sechnaill's generosity to Clonmacnoise during his lifetime. We are presented with two clerics from Clonmacnoise: the priest being tormented in the afterlife for accepting the golden torc, and the bishop, Coirpre, who turns down Máel Sechnaill's offer of gold and silver plundered from the Scandinavians of Dublin. These are two responses to the same problem, namely, the idea of a churchman accepting blood money, the spoils of war; the profits of violence rather than of justice. Rory Naismith writes in a chapter on 'Monastic Economies in Late Anglo-Saxon England' that

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[27] Peter Harbison, 'The Inscriptions on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnois, County Offaly', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 79C (1979), 177–88. For a full description of the cross, see idem, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 3 vols (Bonn, 1992), I, 48–52.
[28] *CS* s.a. 909.

monastic communities in England in the late tenth century attempted to practise 'an engaged yet moralistic approach to material resources'.[29] He cites a letter from the 990s from the abbot of Glastonbury to Sigeric, archbishop of Canterbury, urging him to be 'generous in dispensing alms and prudent in accepting them'.[30] Our medieval Irish story centres on the second half of that advice: prudence in accepting alms was clearly something not exercised by the anonymous priest who received the golden torc, but is exercised in an exemplary manner by Coirpre, the bishop.

The 890s were a turbulent time in Irish history, and Coirpre sometimes found himself caught up in events. Five years before he died, for example, he was at an ecclesiastical assembly on Inis Aingin, that is, Hare Island on Lough Ree in modern-day County Westmeath. Annal entries relate that the shrine of St Ciarán had been brought to the assembly, but an army of Connacht men, from the west of Ireland, raided into the west of Mide, and 'Inis Aingin was profaned, and one man was slain in the middle of it'.[31] In that same year, the church of Kildare was plundered by Scandinavian raiders. We are also told that it was a year of exceptionally heavy rainfall and that there was a shortage of bread. The year before, the king of the Ulaid had been killed treacherously by his own people, and Flann Sinna had engaged in battle against his own son, Máel Ruanaid, leading, we are told, to many deaths.[32] All of this raiding and killing, plundering and profaning, of places both sacred and secular, enriched the victorious, and this

[29] Rory Naismith, 'Monastic Economies in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *Cultivating the Earth, Nurturing the Body and Soul: Daily Life in Early Medieval England. Essays in Honour of Debby Banham*, ed. Christine Voth, Studies in the History of Daily Life (AD 800 – 1600) 12 (Turnhout, 2025), pp. 33–64, at p. 34.
[30] Naismith, 'Monastic Economies', p. 33.
[31] *CS* s.a. 899: *Saruccadh Innsi Aingin et duini do guin for a lar 7 scrin Ciaran inte 7 senudh sruith im Cairpre Crom episcopus Cluana M Nois*.
[32] *CS* s.a. 898.

could be passed on to favoured churches in the form of patronage, financial support of building projects, and gifts of gold and silver.

With the story of his father's posthumous salvation, was Flann being told that he could engage in violence against other churches as long as he left Clonmacnoise alone?[33] Did the moral economy allow for sacrilege in one church as long as you paid through prayer in another? Was there, in reality, any need for money to be washed clean of blood or could the Church itself provide the laundering? In the anecdote, the cleric may have been punished for accepting the torc, but Máel Sechnaill (with the white circle around his neck) was still rewarded for having given it, suggesting that the ethical flaw in this transaction was that of the churchman and not the king. In theory, at least, the spoils of war were not to be given to the Church in early medieval Ireland: the *Canones Adomnani*, for example, a Hiberno-Latin text from early medieval Ireland, state that cattle seized during inter-territorial raiding should be rejected by all Christians *aelimosinam namque praedonis inuassi fletus extinguat* ('for the weeping of the robbers' victim makes void the alms'), that is, the initial suffering which brought wealth into a person's possession outweighs the good that can be done by distributing that wealth to the poor.[34] In this case, perhaps the story of Máel Sechnaill was a kind of warning or rebuke to his son, reminding him that churches hold the keys to heaven and can withhold them if he fails to make amends. Flann Sinna's patronage of Clonmacnoise may have been gratitude for the saving of his father's soul but could equally have been penance for his own violence at ecclesiastical sites, not least the attack at the assembly on Hare Island in the presence of the relics of St Ciarán.

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[33] For this argument to hold we would have to place the composition of the tale within the span of Flann's reign and therefore before 916. For my part, I am inclined towards the possibility that it could have been written in the aftermath of Coirpre's death, i.e. in or shortly after 904.
[34] Pádraig P. Ó Néill and David N. Dumville, ed. and trans., *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani*, Basic Texts for Gaelic History 2, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2003), II, 12–13.

DÍARMAIT AND MO LAISE

In considering the presentation of royal gifts to the Church we might draw on the tale of *Tochmarc Becfhola*, which has been dated by its most recent editor, Máire Bhreathnach, to the early Middle Irish period, probably the tenth century, and thus perhaps composed within a few decades or so of our story of Coipre and Máel Sechnaill.[35] It is an intriguing and multi-layered tale, and yet has been subject to relatively little critical study. There are, as Bhreathnach noted, a number of different themes running through the text: James Carney suggested that the tale was composed to inculcate ideas about Sunday observance, since there are various points in the tale in which the issue of travelling – or rather not travelling – on a Sunday is highlighted. Carney also read *Tochmarc Becfhola* in relation to the international development of the Tristan legend.[36] More recently, Joanne Findon has examined the tale through the lens of its female protagonist, Becfhola, and her various sexual relationships.[37] Here I would like to consider the conclusion of the tale which seems to me to be concerned, amongst other things, with relationships between royal and religious wealth and, again, the distribution among élites of the spoils of war.

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[35] Máire Bhreathnach, 'A New Edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*', *Ériu* 35 (1984), 59–91. The discussion here focuses on the earlier 'Version 1'. There is a later reworking of the text, dating to the late twelfth or thirteenth century, an edition and translation of which is included in Bhreathnach's article, but this is outside the chronological scope of the present study.

[36] James Carney, *Studies in Irish History and Literature* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 229–30.

[37] Joanne Findon, 'Looking for "Mr Right" in *Tochmarc Becfhola*', in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, 2013), pp. 57–73; eadem, *Bound and Free: Voices of Mortal and Otherworld Women in Medieval Irish Literature* (Toronto, 2024), esp. pp. 99–106. A forthcoming paper by Lydia Hursh considers the tale through the lens of speech acts and the deployment of 'politeness' as a tool of female agency: 'Politeness in *Tochmarc Becfhola*', in *Rewriting Irish Narrative Texts from the Thirteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nina Cnockaert-Guillou (Dublin, forthcoming).

The tale begins with the king Díarmait, son of Áed Sláine, encountering a woman who does not give her name or specify from where she has come. After some highly euphemistic dialogue between them, he offers to sleep with her, which she agrees to in return for a bride price. What he offers her is a small brooch, a highly inappropriate and inadequate exchange according to the financial regulation of marriage in early medieval Ireland. Indeed, when he returns to Tara, his own people express dismay that he has married a woman without making proper enquiries about her identity and that he gave such a worthless bride-price. The woman is thus named 'Becfhola' , that is, 'a thing of little value'. This inauspicious transaction sets the tone for their marriage and it is quickly revealed that Becfhola is actually enamoured with Díarmait's foster-son, Crimthann. She forces him into agreeing to an elopement, although his retinue sensibly intervenes and prevents him from going to meet with her. It is another, rather interesting, feature of this tale that 'the people', whether it be Díarmait's household or Crimthann's retinue, act rather like a Greek chorus, offering wise moral commentary on the rash actions of the kings. Becfhola meanwhile is on her way to the elopement meeting place, travelling, inauspiciously and against her husband's wishes, on a Sunday. She goes astray and encounters a warrior, Flann, who is described in very attractive terms and, needless to say, she instantly forgets her love for Crimthann and pursues Flann. What is important for our purposes is that the description of Flann denotes the wealth which he is displaying about his person.[38] The text states:

> Inar sirecdai ime co nglanchorthair 7 co circlaib óir 7 arcait; cennbarr di ór 7 argut 7 glaine ima chenn; mocoil 7 fithisi óir im cach ndúal dia fult co braine a dá imdai; dá uball óir for dégabal a mongi; mét ferdornn ceachtar n-aí; a chlaideb órduirnn ara chris 7 a dá shleg cóicrindi i ttarrlethor a scéith

[38] For the purposes of plot, the description of Flann also indicates his suitability as a partner for Becfhola, since their respective adornments reflect their equality of rank.

> co cobruid fhindruine fair; brat ildathach leis; a dí láim lána di fhailgib óir 7 arcait co a dí uilinn.
>
> He was clad in a silken tunic with a bright border, embroidered with circular designs of gold and silver. A helmet of gold, silver and crystal was on his head; clusters and loops of gold around every lock of his hair, which hung down to his shoulder-blades. Two golden balls were at the parting of his braids, each one of them the size of a man's fist. His golden-hilted sword was on his belt. His two five-barbed spears lay on his shield of belly-leather, which was embossed in white bronze. A cloak of many hues lay beside him. His two arms were laden to the elbows with gold and silver bracelets.[39]

This conspicuous display of wealth is key to the conclusion of the story, as we shall see. Flann reveals that he and his three – presumably equally wealthy – brothers are fighting their four – presumably equally wealthy – cousins for possession of an island, Inis Fedaig maic in Daill, possibly in modern-day County Wicklow. Flann promises Becfhola that, if he succeeds in his mission to take possession of the island, he will return for her. She goes back to her husband, Díarmait, who has been oblivious to her absence. A year later, an injured but victorious Flann arrives, and Díarmait agrees to a termination of his marriage to Becfhola who goes off with Flann, never to be seen again. At this point, four clerics arrive, saying that they are there on the orders of their superior, Mo Laise. They reveal that Flann's brothers and cousins all died in the battle over possession of the island, and the treasure collected from their bodies, presumably seven times what we saw described of Flann's weapons and adornments, is currently at Mo Laise's church. The clerics report that:

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[39] Bhreathnach, ed. and trans., 'A New Edition', §6, p. 73 (text), p. 78 (trans.).

> ‘For-fácaibset immurgu di ór 7 arcut airi desi úan-ni, .i. do neoch ro buí fo mbrotaib 7 ima mbráigdib 7 ima scíathaib 7 imma ngóar 7 imma claidbiu 7 ima láma 7 ima n-innara, co fesara-su do chuit dind n-ór 7 dinad n-argad sin.’
>
> ‘They left behind as much gold and silver as two of us could carry, of all that was beneath their cloaks and about their necks and on their shields and on their spears and about their swords and on their arms and on their tunics. We come that you may know of your share in that gold and silver.’[40]

The author thus brings us back to the themes of wealth, patrimony and entitlements which run through the tale: here it is Díarmait who is offered his entitlement to share in the wealth stripped from the bodies of the dead warriors. Where in the story of Máel Sechnaill we had a king offering plundered wealth to a cleric, in this instance it is clerics who are offering it to the king.[41] As the bishop, Cairpre, refused the wealth offered by Máel Sechnaill, in *Tochmarc Becfhola*, the king, Díarmait, refuses the wealth offered by Mo Laise’s clerics, saying *‘Nátó ... a ndo-rad Día dó-som, nícon chuitib-sa fris. Dénaither a fethla laiseom de’* (‘I will not share in what God has given to him. Let his sacred emblems be made with it’).[42] And so, we are told, the gold and silver was melted down in order to make ecclesiastical artefacts for Mo Laise:

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[40] Bhreathnach, ed. and trans., ‘A New Edition’, §12, p. 76 (text), p. 80 (trans.).

[41] This wealth could also represent Díarmait’s entitlement to payment on termination of his marriage contract with Becfhola. Flann’s kin – in the form of his dead siblings and cousins – are providing Díarmait, as Becfhola’s male guardian, with a bride price more befitting of Becfhola’s status, marking her divorce from Díarmait and marriage to Flann. That Díarmait foregoes these riches would thus be further evidence of his virtue, on top of his Sunday observance.

[42] Bhreathnach, ed. and trans., ‘A New Edition’, §12, p. 76 (text), p. 80 (trans.).

> Is dind n-argud sin immurgu 7 don ór ro cumdaiged minna Mo Laisi, .i. a scrín 7 a menister 7 a bachall.
>
> It is from this silver and gold that the sacred reliquaries of Mo Laise were made, that is, his shrine and his service-set, and his crozier.[43]

Here we have an instance of Peter Brown's wealth that is non-wealth, or 'counterfactual wealth' because, although this wealth goes to the church of Mo Laise, it does not enrich an individual; rather, it becomes communal wealth or institutional wealth held in trust. The shrine and the service-set and the crozier were the accoutrements of individual office but they did not 'belong' to a churchman and indeed such objects gained salvific power and devotional value after the death of those with whom they were associated. Thus, whatever else is going on in *Tochmarc Becfhola* in relation to themes of Sunday observance and complex sexual entanglements, we also have embedded within it what purports to be an origin story for the sacred gold and silver objects associated with St Mo Laise, and in this tale their origins are in the consequences of secular violence and royal generosity. In this instance not only is wealth moving as a result of violence from secular into ecclesiastical hands, but the king himself refuses his entitlement to a share of the profits of war. As Naismith notes in relation to his discussion of early medieval English evidence, 'The difficulty of negotiating the temptations of day-to-day life was precisely what made good economic conduct so virtuous.'[44] In this case Díarmait is a model of virtue in a way that perhaps redeems him from his economic mis-step at the opening of the story, where he paid an inadequate bride-price for Becfhola, leading to a doomed marriage. *Tochmarc Becfhola* enmeshes a whole series of complex emotional, moral (or immoral) and economic relationships, between husband and wife, between king

[43] Bhreathnach, ed. and trans., 'A New Edition', §20, p. 76 (text), p. 80 (trans.).
[44] Naismith, 'Monastic Economies', p. 35.

and people, between foster-son and foster-father, between lovers, and between church and state. The moral cannot be extracted from the economic and examined in isolation, and *vice versa*.

Common to many economies across the Christian world was the donation of the precious metals required to make ecclesiastical objects: shrines, reliquaries, chalices, patens, croziers, and so on. The donation of silver and gold was integral to the formation of bonds of mutual obligation: wealth in return for spiritual direction, the sacraments, God's favour, and post-mortem intercessory prayer. Following his disastrous marriage, Díarmait may have felt in need of a little divine favour, hence his relinquishing of any claim over the precious metals scavenged from the bodies of the dead warriors, to the benefit of Mo Laise's church. Unlike the anecdote of Coirpre and Máel Sechnaill, however, there seems to have been quite considerable chronological distance between the composition of *Tochmarc Becfhola* and the lives of the historical figures who appear in it, such that it is difficult to ascertain any historical specificities that the author may have been attempting to reconstruct in this tale. The king, Díarmait son of Áed Sláine, a member of the Southern Uí Néill, is a historically attested individual, entering the annalistic record in the first half of the seventh century.[45] He died of the so-called 'yellow plague' (*buide conaill*) during the epidemic of the mid-660s.[46] The *Banshenchas* records him as having been married three times during his lifetime, to the very human Muirend, Mugain and Temair, and there is no other literary reference to his marriage to the supernatural Becfhola beyond *Tochmarc Becfhola* itself.[47] His foster-son in the tale, Crimthann, appears to have been a Leinsterman

[45] *AU* s.a. 643. He is also mentioned in a text on the kingship of Tara, *Baile Chuind*, which may date to as early as the late seventh century: Edel Bhreathnach and Kevin Murray, ed. and trans., '*Baile Chuinn Chétchaithaig*: Edition', in *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, ed. Edel Bhreathnach (Dublin, 2005), pp. 73–94.
[46] *AU* s.a. 665.
[47] Bhreathnach, 'A New Edition', p. 61, citing Margaret Dobbs's editions of the prose and verse *Banshenchas*.

and is briefly mentioned in the annalistic record.[48] If *Tochmarc Becfhola* is intended to function partly as an aetiological tale for the creation of ecclesiastical artefacts associated with Mo Laise, however, it fails on chronological grounds, because the Mo Laise mentioned in the story, the founder of the ecclesiastical community at Daminis (Devenish Island, Lough Erne, in modern-day County Fermanagh), was not a contemporary of Díarmait son of Áed Sláine. He was instead a contemporary of Díarmait's grandfather, Díarmait mac Cerbaill, who died in the mid sixth century. Mo Laise's obit is found in the year 564, thus ruling out any historical reality underpinning our narrative. That being said, Mo Laise certainly had many material objects posthumously associated with him: his hagiographers claim that he travelled to Rome, from where he supposedly brought relics, a bell and a gospel-book.[49] Although no gospel-book associated with Mo Laise survives, a book-shrine named after him, the *Soiscél Molaise*, commissioned by Cenn Fáelad, abbot of Daminis in the first decades of the eleventh century, is now preserved in the National Museum of Ireland.

One can see, then, why Mo Laise might be an attractive subject for a story about the creation of a shrine, crozier and service-set, but, as Bhreathnach notes, there is another saint of the same name, Mo Laise of Leighlin, whose death-date of *c.* 640 places him firmly within the chronology of Díarmait's life.[50] This Mo Laise (who, to avoid confusion, I shall refer to using the full form of his name, Laisrén) is also the subject of a tenth-century narrative, comparable in form to our story of

[48] *AU* s.a. 632; Bhreathnach, 'A New Edition', p. 61.
[49] See the overview by Aidan Breen in the *DIB*, with references there cited: https://www.dib.ie/biography/mo-laisse-a5853.
[50] Mo Laise is a hypocoristic form of the name Laisrén and both forms are used for both individuals: on this phenomenon see Paul Russell, 'Patterns of Hypocorism in Early Irish Hagiography', in *Saints and Scholars: Studies in Irish Hagiography*, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin, 2001), pp. 237–49. For an overview of the life of Laisrén (Mo Laise) of Leighlin, see the *DIB* entry by Aidan Breen: https://www.dib.ie/biography/laisren-mo-laisse-a4642.

Coirpre and Máel Sechnaill.[51] Laisrén is said to have been a member of the royal dynasty of Dál Riata, brought up in what is now Scotland, and a proponent of accepting the so-called 'Roman' method of Easter dating, having attended major Irish synods on the subject in 630 and 631. Like his earlier namesake, he is also said to have travelled to Rome and to have brought biblical manuscripts back with him to Ireland. However, as Breen noted, he does seem to get conflated with Mo Laise in later traditions and perhaps that is what has happened in the case of *Tochmarc Becfhola*: we seem to be looking at the material richness and geographical setting of Mo Laise of Devenish relocated to the chronology of the lifetime of Laisrén of Leighlin.

There is another moral-economic facet to the story of *Tochmarc Becfhola* worth considering, and that relates to the theme of Sunday observance. I have written elsewhere about what I have termed the 'Irish Sunday Legislation', a dossier of inter-related ninth-century documents: the *Epistil Ísu* ('Letter of Jesus'), *Cáin Domnaig* ('Law of Sunday'), and three narratives recounting miracles of punishment for the transgression of Sunday observance.[52] There, I referred to *Tochmarc Becfhola* as part of a group of texts that were composed and transmitted independently of the 'Irish Sunday Legislation', but which worked to reinforce its ideology.[53] It should be remembered in the present context that the observance of Sunday as a holy day of rest was (and still is) a choice that rests on factors both moral and economic. The 'Irish Sunday Legislation', especially *Cáin Domnaig*, emphasises that Sunday should not be an economically productive day, even for the enslaved, precisely because it should be a morally productive day – storing up treasure in heaven through prayer and the observance of God's law. Fines and

[51] Boyle, *History and Salvation*, pp. 105–7.
[52] Elizabeth Boyle, 'Eschatology and Reform in Early Irish Law: the Evidence of Sunday Legislation', in *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Matthew Gabriele and James T. Palmer (Abingdon, 2018), pp. 121–38.
[53] Boyle, 'Eschatology and Reform', p. 127.

the forfeiture of the economic fruits of working on a Sunday lie at the heart of the administration and enforcement of the 'Irish Sunday Legislation', and financial incentives are offered to those who report their neighbours for violations of the law. But the law's rewards and punishments also extend into the next life: those who transgress the law, or those who protect others who transgress the law, will not receive intercession from St Patrick at Judgement Day; those who prosecute the law – even against their own parents – will receive blessings in heaven.[54] At the conclusion of *Tochmarc Becfhola*, Díarmait expresses his shock that the clerics of Daminis have come to him on a Sunday; they reply that their travel is legitimate, and are rewarded with Díarmait's magnanimous generosity. Thus, throughout the many layers of *Tochmarc Becfhola*, we see the entanglement of moral and economic choices and their far-reaching consequences.

FERGAL AND COLM CILLE, CATHAL AND MO LAGA

As Naismith notes, royal patronage could be 'a liability as well as an opportunity', and 'even a well-meaning ruler could be a drain on monastic resources'.[55] We see plenty of examples in Irish literary sources of rulers also being a drain on secular resources, particularly in relation to obligations of hospitality. Perhaps the most famous example is that from Recension 1 of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), in which the smith Culann, whose dog is about to be killed by the young Cú Chulainn, hosts a feast for the Ulster king, Conchobar: *asbert Cauland íarom nábad sochaide no bertha chucai áir nípu du thír ná ferund dó a fuirec dorigni acht do thorud a dá lám 7 a tharnaguir* ('He asked Conchobar

[54] For more detailed discussion, see Boyle, 'Eschatology and Reform', pp. 129–30, and references therein.
[55] Naismith, 'Monastic Economies', pp. 43–4. See also Levi Roach, 'Hosting the King: Hospitality and the Royal *iter* in Tenth-Century England', *Journal of Medieval History* 37:1 (2011), 34–46.

not to bring a great crowd with him for the feast he had made was not provided by his possession of land or estate but was gained by the work of his hands and his tongs').[56] We see in this passing remark a reflection of tensions about hospitality obligations in which kings could often bring extremely large retinues to the houses of their clients and demand sustenance, which clients were legally obliged to provide. Although dating to the very end of the period under consideration here, the text *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* ('The Vision of Mac Con Glinne'), preserved (alongside our story of the ghost of Máel Sechnaill) in the *Leabhar Breac*, is a narrative that plays out on a large scale anxieties about consumption and the demands that kings placed on their subjects. In that tale, the king, Cathal mac Finguine, is possessed by a demon of gluttony, and his subjects are at breaking point from the insatiable hospitality that he demands.[57] It is perhaps significant, then, that there is some disagreement within the legal sources from early medieval Ireland about the exact size of retinues that kings, bishops and other nobles are entitled to bring with them on their travels and the concomitant amount of hospitality that they can expect. Whereas *Tochmarc Becfhola* seems to offer an exemplary case study on royal restraint and generosity, the *Táin* and *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* offer glimpses of the effects of royal excess.[58]

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[56] Cecile O'Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), p. 17 (text), p. 140 (trans.), lines 545–7.

[57] Kenneth H. Jackson, ed., *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (Dublin, 1990); Lahney Preston-Matto, trans., *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: the Vision of Mac Conglinne* (Syracuse NY, 2010). For the text as a critique of royal consumption in the context of ecclesiastical reform, see Máire Herbert, '*Aislinge Meic Conglinne*: Contextual Considerations', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 110 (2005), 65–72.

[58] I am grateful to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for the observation that another tale, *Esnada Tige Buchet* ('The Melodies of Buchet's House), is contemporaneous with the examples discussed here and offers another reflection on the consequences of unrestrained royal consumption: see David Greene, ed., *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin, 1955), pp. 27–44; Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Songs of Buchet's House', *Revue celtique* 25 (1904), 18–38, 225–7.

My examples thus far have focused on tenth-century narrative accounts of primarily individual exchanges of wealth between historically-attested kings and ecclesiastics, as aspects of relationships of mutual obligation which offer intercessory prayer and ultimate salvation in return for silver and gold. These tales have been focused on élites: kings, bishops and monastic founders. My third case study is slightly different, although it is also a tenth-century narrative which has its ultimate roots in historically-attested individuals and events, that are again presented through a supernaturally-oriented narrative lens. Rather than the ghosts and otherworldly women of the previous tales, here we have warrior-saints and decapitated heads that speak.[59] But the relationships in this case between secular individuals and ecclesiastics are slightly different, and the overarching narrative centres on unjust economic relationships between overkings and their subject peoples, in which the church's role, although still central to the plot, is embedded in a broader set of economic transactions and relations.

Cath Almaine is set in the early eighth century, during a period of ongoing conflict between Fergal son of Máel Duin, who held overkingship of the northern half of Ireland, *Leth Cuinn*, and Cathal mac Finguine, king of the southern half, *Leth Moga*. We have already briefly encountered Cathal above, in noting the royal exploitation of rules of hospitality and refection in the story of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, where he is the king possessed by the demon of gluttony and ravaging his own peoples with his insatiable demands for food. In *Cath Almaine*, however, Cathal takes a back seat for most of the story, because the conflict between Cathal and Fergal simply provides the context and backdrop for a conflict between *Leth Cuinn* and a third party, frequently a contested region of Ireland in the Middle Ages, namely, the kingdom of Leinster. During a period of truce between Cathal

[59] Pádraig Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 25 (Dublin, 1978); in what follows, translations of the text are my own but are greatly indebted to Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Battle of Allen', *Revue celtique* 24 (1903), 44–67, and to Ó Riain's textual notes on his edition.

and Fergal, Fergal gathers up the army of the north and marches into Leinster to demand a payment of taxation which is clearly regarded as unjust by the Leinstermen. This event is recorded in the annals, where it is stated: *Innred Laighen la Fergal 7 maidm inna Boraime 7 naidm na ggiallne Laghen fri Fergal mc. Maile Duin* ('An invasion of Leinster by Fergal and the cattle-tribute imposed and the hostages of the Leinstermen secured for Fergal son of Máel Duin').[60] According to the annals, it was in the following year, 722, that the Battle of Allen took place, in which Fergal was killed. *Cath Almaine* provides us with a fictionalized version of the retribution that the Leinstermen took for this financial burden imposed by Fergal, one which centres our themes of morality, of wealth, and of the intertwining of the interests of secular and ecclesiastical powers.[61]

Before the Battle of Allen itself, when the northern soldiers enter Leinster territory, they arrive at a church and profane it. We are told that there is a leper living at the church and that Fergal's army destroy the roof of his house; deal him a spear-blow that goes through his mantle; and kill, roast and eat his only cow. In return, the leper curses the men of the north, threatening that God will wreak vengeance upon them, as indeed He does, since few survive the eventual battle. This episode is a sidelight on the quotidian destruction of small ecclesiastical sites as a general consequence of inter-territorial violence, of the sort that would not have attracted the notice of annalists in the way that the profaning of major sites by kings such as Máel Sechnaill and Flann Sinna, as discussed above, would. It

[60] *AU* s.a. 721.

[61] In a brief but perceptive reading of *Cath Almaine*, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has highlighted the role of public speech, and the power of sound and silence, in the tale: 'Sound and Sense in *Cath Almaine*', *Ériu* 54 (2004), 41–7. He writes that the tale 'asserts the primacy of the pledged word as an instrument of social order' and that the 'central message of *Cath Almaine* has to do with the futility of warfare … What *Cath Almaine* shows us is that war has no victor but war itself.' (p. 47). I find his reading persuasive, and my observations here are intended to supplement rather than challenge his commentary on the tale.

is an inversion of the relationship of mutual obligation: rather than prayer in return for donations, here we have cursing as revenge for destruction.[62]

The army moves on, and eventually battle commences and continues for some time with a great many deaths, but in a literary depiction – simultaneously clunky and surreal – of the support churches gave to the violence of their patrons, manifestations of St Colm Cille (Columba) and St Brigit appear over the heads of the Northern and Leinster armies respectively:

> Ní roan trá 7 nír thairis menma Coluim Cilli ar Uíb Néill isin cath-sin la faicsin mBrigdi ós cath Laigen ac fubdad slóig Lethi Cuind, conad la faicsin Brigdi amlaid-sin romebaid in cath ar Fergal 7 ar Leth Cuind ria nÁed .i. rí Descirt Laigen.
>
> Now, the mind of Colm Cille did not rest or stay on the Uí Néill in that battle, for above the battalion of Leinster he saw Brigit terrifying the army of the Northern Half, as a result of which Fergal and the Northern Half were routed by Áed, the king of the Southern Leinstermen.[63]

Thus the Leinster victory over *Leth Cuinn* is presented as a victory of Brigit over Colm Cille, and therefore of Kildare and the Brigidine churches over the Columban *familia*. It is the reciprocal relationships of secular and ecclesiastical powers, presented here through the saints' supernatural appearance over the battlefield, that work to bring victory to the men of Leinster and defeat to the army of Fergal, exactor of unjust tribute and despoiler of churches. Colm Cille is not without power in the story, though, as he plays a key role in another striking

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[62] On the 'maledictory psalms' as the inversion of intercessory prayer see Boyle, *History of Salvation*, pp. 108–9.
[63] Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine*, p. 21, §10 (= Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Battle of Allen', pp. 152–3, §11).

episode. A central protagonist of *Cath Almaine* is an unusual young man named Donn Bó, who is renowned for his beauty and for his song-craft, but who, at the time when he is called into Fergal's army, has never spent a night away from his mother. Before letting her beloved son go to war, Donn Bó's mother had made Fergal give legal guarantees, in the name of Colm Cille, that her son would return safely.[64] Despite Donn Bó being decapitated during the battle, and after a surreal yet moving scene in which his disembodied head issues forth a sound which moves the victors to tears of lament, the power of Colm Cille intervenes in order to miraculously reconnect Donn Bó's head to his body and send him back to his mammy, as promised. Rather than relying on prayer alone, Donn Bó's mother had deployed a legal mechanism at the intersection of the ecclesiastical and the secular, obtaining a binding contract with a saint as guarantor in order to ensure that her son came back from a battle caused by Fergal's financial policies. Fergal may have been unwise in imposing taxation on the men of Leinster, but the power of the Church was such that the saints could intervene miraculously to ensure that he did not break a contract made in Colm Cille's name.

The final scene of *Cath Almaine* also evokes our themes of reciprocity and dependence, as well as another important aspect of the moral economy which we have not yet touched upon, that is, gift-giving.[65] It emerges that Cathal mac Finguine, the king of the southern part of Ireland is angry that the Leinstermen engaged in battle against Fergal without his knowledge or approval, in violation of the truce that he had established with Fergal. The Leinstermen, we are told,

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[64] The author uses the legal terms *ráth* ('surety') and *cor* ('bond' or 'guarantee') to describe the agreement that Fergal makes with Donn Bó's mother for the safe return of her son: Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine*, p. 18, §3).

[65] There is a substantial literature on gift-giving in the Middle Ages. See, for example, Lars Kjaer, *The Medieval Gift and Classical Tradition: Ideals and the Practice of Generosity in Medieval England, 1100–1300* (Cambridge, 2019), and the various contributions in Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, eds, *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2011). See also n. 68 below.

hear of Cathal's displeasure and they decide to placate him with a gift, in the form of Fergal's disembodied head. We are told:

> Dofoliced rofigedh roslemanchírad do chind Fergail iar sin la Cathal 7 do-bretha bréid sróill uime iar sin, 7 do-bretha secht ndoim 7 secht muilt 7 secht tindi 7 siad uili fonaigthi ar bélaib cind Fergail; rohimdergad iar sin imon ceand a fiadnaisi fer Muman uili 7 dofoslaic a s[h]uili ria Dia do altugad na hairmiden 7 na hanóra móiri-sin tucad dó. Rofodlad iar sin la Cathal in biad-sin do bochtaib na cell comf[h]ocus baí dóib, .i. Átha Chros Mo-Laga 7 Tualch Min Molaga. Luid iar sin Cathal co gléri tinóil fer Muman les d'idnocol chind Fergail como-tarad fén d'Uíb Néill. 7 co tarad rígi Úa Néill do Flaithbertach mac Áeda …
>
> Then Cathal had Fergal's head washed and plaited and combed smooth, and a cloth of velvet was put around it, and seven oxen, seven wethers, and seven salted pigs – all of them cooked – were brought before Fergal's head. Then the head blushed in the presence of all the men of Munster and it opened its eyes to God to give thanks for the respect and great honour that had been shown to it. Then Cathal had the food distributed to the poor of the neighbouring churches, that is, to Aghacross and Labbamolaga.[66] After that Cathal went with a chosen gathering of the men of Munster to bury Fergal's head, and he himself gave it to the Uí Néill, and he conferred the kingship of the Uí Néill on Flaithbertach son of Áed. …[67]

[66] I am unable to identify with certainty the location of 'Tulach Min Molaga' (literally 'the smooth hill of Mo Laga'), but the best candidate is probably Labbamolaga, Co. Cork, which is an ecclesiastical site dedicated to Mo Laga in close proximity to the other named site, Aghacross, Co. Cork.

[67] Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine*, p. 30, §§22–3 (= Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Battle of Allen', pp. 64–5, §§26–7).

The head of Fergal, then, becomes a gift from a subject people to their overking, and a form of apology for their having acted independently of him at a time of supposed truce between Cathal and Fergal. Cathal's treatment of the head – its adornment and its surrounding with cooked meats – is a public and ritualized royal act, which is then cemented by royal alms-giving, in the form of Cathal's donation of the food 'to the poor' (*do bochtaib*) at churches associated with St Mo Laga. This act of beneficence is followed by the magnanimous return of Fergal's head to his own people: all actions which surely cemented Cathal's dominant position and which bolstered his ability to confer the kingship of the Uí Néill on his preferred candidate.[68]

Unfortunately, in spite of the gift-giving by the Leinstermen to Cathal, and the alms-giving by Cathal to the poor, and the return of Fergal's head to the men of the north, the whole cycle of violence starts again shortly afterwards, as we are told that war breaks out between Cathal and the Leinstermen, and the Leinstermen, so victorious just a short time before, are defeated. We are left to consider the cost of the renewed hostilities, as we remember the mothers of the dead on the battlefield at the battle of Allen who, the author states, were grief-stricken, *ig gul 7 ig golgairi ac caínead na sáercland* ... ('wailing and lamenting, keening for the noble children').[69] The violence is not abstract; the losses are real.

[68] This phenomenon of 'taking while giving', or antagonistic gift-giving, as a display of the superiority of the gift-giver, has been much studied by anthropologists. The fundamental starting point is Marcel Mauss's 1923 study, 'Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', translated into English by W. D. Halls as *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London, 2001). See also Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, translated by Nora Scott (Chicago IL, 1996).

[69] Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine*, p. 21, §9 (= Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Battle of Allen', pp. 52–3, §10); Ó Cathasaigh, 'Sound and Sense', p. 47.

CONCLUSION

The late Donnchadh Ó Corráin once, memorably and forcefully, described the narrative literature of medieval Ireland as the products of:

> … a small artistic and intellectual cadre, supported and patronised by a much larger and powerful extractive elite that lords it over a wretched mass of toilers, some free, many slaves, all exploited, the sweated and bloodied underbelly of a profoundly unequal society.[70]

Ó Corráin's words are a useful reminder of the complex moral-economic system in which medieval Irish literary texts were composed. There can be a distinct tendency to read medieval Irish literature in isolation from the material circumstances that permitted its creation, and to ignore its élite orientation. Or, alternatively, it can be read too simplistically as 'propaganda' for a particular royal dynasty or ecclesiastical foundation.[71] The reality is more complex, and requires consideration on a text-by-text basis, as I have sought to demonstrate here. We have to look carefully in order to see the evidence of non-élite transactions, and the economic sacrifices that agricultural workers, base clients, and so on, would have made for both their temporal and spiritual lords. The *Liber de ordine creaturarum*, composed in Ireland in the seventh century, provides us with an idealized picture:

> Ecce in gazaphilacio templi pauperis uiduulae aeris exiguum munus multorum diuitum auro copioso praefertur, et in aurato tabernaculo, ubi

[70] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Island of Saints and Scholars: Myth or Reality?', in *Irish Catholic Identities*, ed. Oliver Rafferty (Manchester, 2013), pp. 32–61, at p. 34.
[71] On this, see the forthcoming volume edited by Ben Guy and Patrick Wadden on *Propaganda and History in the Medieval Celtic Lands: Interrogating a Paradigm* (Dublin, 2026).

> aurum argentumque et gemmarum pretiosarum, bissi et purpurae et hiacinthi et cocci dona conferuntur, etiam eorum qui pelles caprarum deferunt diligentia non dispicitur.
>
> See, in the treasure of the temple, the tiny brass coin of the poor widow is placed above the plentiful gold of many wealthy people, and in the gilded tabernacle, where are brought together gold and silver and offerings of precious stones, of linen, of purple, of hyacinth and of scarlet, even the zeal of those who bring but goat skins is not despised.[72]

The 'temple', or church, as a locus for economic activity has been considered in relatively isolated ways, such as monasteries as proto-urban centres, churches as places used for safe storage of royal gold and silver, and the use of Gospel Books for property records.[73] Indeed, there can be few better examples of the embeddedness of both secular and ecclesiastical institutions in the moral economy than the practice in some Irish centres of noting property transactions and other economic data into Gospel Books; the so-called *notitiae* which record various land grants of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the Book of Kells being the best-known examples.[74] This practice can be seen elsewhere, in Britain, including England, and in various parts of continental Europe.[75] That information about rent or donations of property or the manumission of previously enslaved

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[72] Marina Smyth, trans., *The Liber de ordine creaturarum*, Brepols Library of Christian Sources 5 (Turnhout, 2023), p. 120 (reprinted edition by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz), p. 121 (trans.), §15.13.
[73] For discussion of the question of urban economic development at ecclesiastical centres, see, for example, Colmán Etchingham's contribution to this lecture series: *The Irish Monastic Town: Is this a Valid Concept?*, Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures 9 (Cambridge, 2010). For churches as sites of 'sanctuary of property', where gold, silver and other precious objects could be stored, see A. T. Lucas, 'The Plundering and Burning of Churches in Ireland, 7th to 10th Century', in *North Munster Studies: Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney*, ed. Etienne Rynne (Limerick, 1967), pp. 172–229, at pp. 194–208.
[74] Denis Casey, *Tigernán Ua Ruairc and a Twelfth-Century Royal Grant in the Book of Kells*, Maynooth Studies in Local History (Dublin, 2020).
[75] Naismith, 'Monastic Economies', pp. 53–5.

people could be bound within the pages of the divine word embodies the continual interaction between the economic and the ideological, the practical and the symbolic, that is the heart of this essay. These disparate strands of Irish economic-ecclesiastic practice need to be drawn together into a more coherent whole, since the literary texts under consideration here could not have been created without the land, gold, and tithes that enriched the churches in which the writers of medieval Ireland were educated and composed their works.

The details of how moral bonds were formed within communities varied significantly from place to place, and it is important that Ireland be included in the broader conversation on medieval economies. Its legal system, though it borrowed in places from Roman law, Canon law and Biblical law, had local particularities which impacted the ways in which the moral economy developed in different kingdoms and provinces, as did other factors such as landscape, environment and infrastructure.[76] It is unfortunate that we have punishingly little evidence in the way of estate records, charters and the like for the pre-Invasion period, but I hope the foregoing has shown that literary narratives are a hitherto underutilized source which can be quarried carefully for evidence of moral-economic thought.

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[76] Despite the paucity of primarily 'economic' sources from before the English Invasion, there could be few better case studies than the major ecclesiastical site of Clonard (in modern-day County Meath), which is described in the 'Triads of Ireland' as *ana Éirenn*, that is, as the 'wealth', 'riches', or, as in Kelly's recent translation, 'prosperity' of Ireland, hinting at the economic significance of this ecclesiastical site in the ninth century (Fergus Kelly, ed. and trans., *The Triads of Ireland: An Old Irish Wisdom Text*, Early Irish Texts Series 2 (Dublin, 2025), pp. 68–9, §3; for the date of the text see pp. 28, 63). Clonard was in a strategic geopolitical location in early medieval Ireland, at the intersection of various major kingdoms, and it promises to yield fruit as a localized case study of the development of the moral economy. Research already undertaken on Clonard by Niamh Wycherley, Tiago Veloso Silva and Seán Ó Hoireabhárd shows that secular patronage and donations, both royal and otherwise, was one vital factor in the waxing and waning of the church's fortunes, alongside other issues such as episcopal status and shifting political boundaries: Niamh Wycherley (PI), *et al*., 'Power and Patronage in Medieval Ireland: Clonard from the Sixth to Twelfth Centuries' (Research Ireland Pathway project, Maynooth University, 2022–26).

I deployed the concept of 'moral economies' in order to read three literary texts from the tenth century – the story of the ghost of Máel Sechnaill, *Tochmarc Becfhola*, and *Cath Almaine* – to illustrate some of the ways that the moral economy underpinned the interactions between ecclesiastical and lay figures within each text, in terms of articulating concepts of reciprocity, relationships of mutual obligation, and exchanges of wealth, particularly wealth moving from kings to clerics and *vice versa*. In these texts, kings extract wealth in a variety of ways: the stories of Coirpre Crom and Máel Sechnaill, and Díarmait and Becfhola, reflected the way in which the spoils of war provided one major source of royal wealth; another, as shown in *Cath Almaine*, was tributary taxation of subject kingdoms. We have noted also that the kings' shares in the 'profits of justice', and their exploitation of laws of hospitality, were other methods by which they could enrich themselves. The subjection of other kingdoms is a phenomenon that is also expressed in moral terms of 'reciprocity' and 'mutual dependency', even though it manifestly results in a 'trickle-up economics', drawing profits up the social hierarchy, and entrenching social inequalities.

Understanding the way that the moral economy worked in a highly inequitable and hierarchical society such as that of early medieval Ireland is a valuable exercise for its own sake, as historical enquiry, but we might also hope that a better understanding of the past might help us to build fairer, less extractive and less exploitative economic communities in the future. The regular generosity of those who have very little can be lost to history, unless we are mindful of it, overshadowed as it often is by large donations from the very rich. That the rich often acquire their wealth through violence towards, or exploitation of, others was a moral problem that the early medieval Irish Church needed to address. I have argued here that medieval Irish narrative literature provided a fictive space in which economic transactions attributed to historically-attested individuals could

be considered, judged and transformed into textual exemplars of Christian behaviour, thus contributing to broader conversations on the ethics of wealth in the Middle Ages.

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