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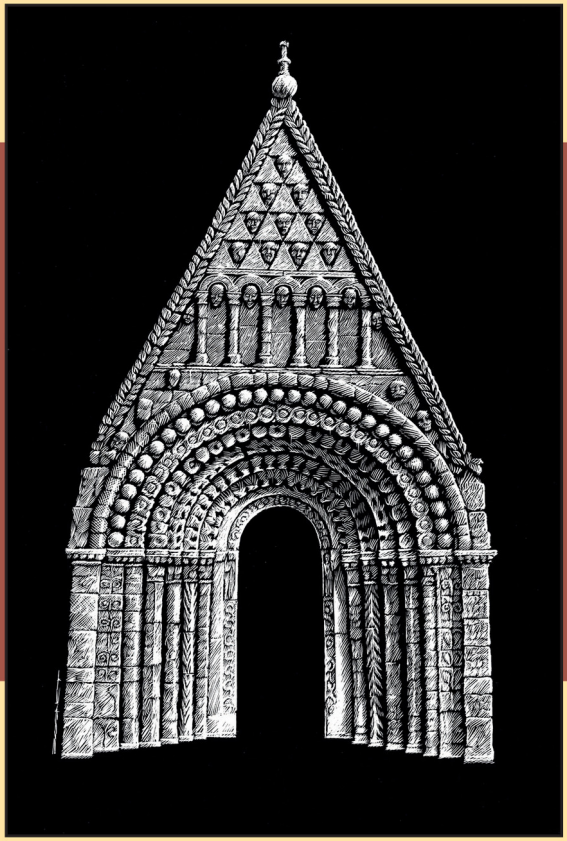

Medieval Ireland

Clare Downham

Medieval Ireland

Medieval Ireland is often described as a backward-looking nation in which change only came about as a result of foreign invasions. By examining the abundant but often unexplored evidence available, Downham challenges this popular notion and demonstrates the cultural richness and diversity of medieval Ireland. Starting in the fifth century, when St Patrick arrived on the island, and ending in the fifteenth century, when the English government sought to defend the lands that it ruled directly around Dublin by making the Pale, this up-to-date survey charts the internal changes in the island. Different chapters cover a wide range of areas, with particular focus on land use, economy, society, religion, politics and culture. This concise and accessible overview offers a fresh perspective on Ireland in the Middle Ages and seeks to overthrow some enduring stereotypes.

CLARE DOWNHAM is a senior lecturer in Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool. She did her MA in Medieval History at the University of St Andrews and then completed an MPhil and PhD in Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. In 2004, she was awarded a John O'Donovan scholarship medal in Celtic Studies from the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, and her first book, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ivarr to AD 1014*, was published in 2007. She has published more than fifty articles on British, Irish and Viking history.

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MEDIEVAL IRELAND

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ABBREVIATIONS

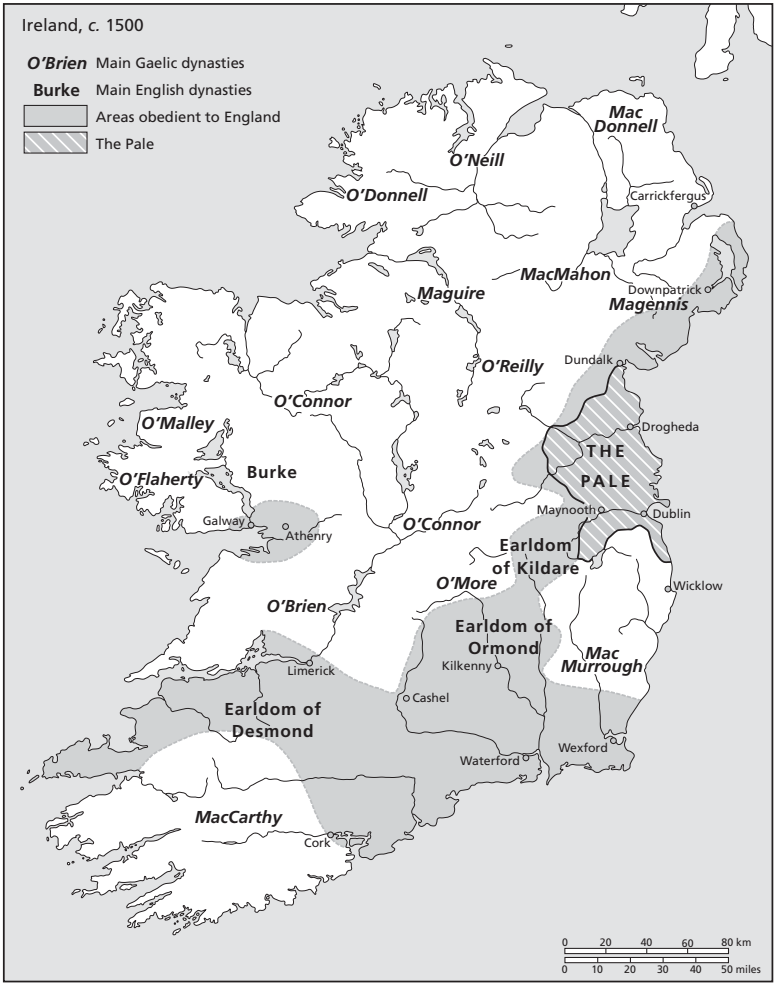
AClon	*The Annals of Clonmacnoise, being the annals of Ireland from the earliest period to* AD *1408 translated into English A.D. 1627 by Conell Mag*eoghagan, ed. Denis Murphy (Dublin: Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1896)
AFM	*Annala Rioghachta Eireann: annals of the* kingdom *of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616, ed. John O 'Donovan*, 7 vols (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1851)
AI	*The Annals of Inisfallen, Rawlinson B503*, ed. and trans. Seán MacAirt (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951)
AU	*Annala Uladh ('Annals of Ulster'), otherwise Annala Senait ('Annals of Senat'): a chronicle of Irish a*ffairs from AD 431 to AD 1540, eds and trans. W.M. Henessey and B. MacCarthy, 4 vols (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1887–1901)
CS	*Chronicon Scotorum: a chronicle of Irish affairs from the earliest times to* AD *1135, with a supplement containing the events from 1141 to 1150*, ed. and trans. W.M. Henessey, Rolls Series (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1866)
NHI1	*New History of Ireland. Vol. 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. D. Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
NHI2	*New History of Ireland. Vol. 2: Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

Map 1 Modern county boundaries. Drawn by David Cox.

Map 2 Early medieval politics. Drawn by David Cox (includes data provided in T. W. Moody et al. (eds) *A New History of Ireland, IX: Maps, Genealogies, Lists* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 18.

Map 3 Ireland: peoples and politics c. 1100. Drawn by David Cox (includes data provided in S. Duffy (gen ed.) *Atlas of Irish History*, third edition (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2012), p. 31.

Map 4 Ireland, c. 1300. Drawn by David Cox (includes data provided in S. Duffy (gen ed.) *Atlas of Irish History*, third edition (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2012), p. 41.



Map 5 Ireland, c. 1500. Drawn by David Cox.

INTRODUCTION

ANNALS OF ULSTER, *s.a.* 1041.1

'The events indeed are numerous, killings and deaths and raids and battles. No one can relate them all, but a few of the many are given so that the age in which the various people lived may be known through them'.

CHRONICON SCOTORUM, PROLOGUE

'[T]o make a short Abstract and Compendium of the History of the Gaels only in this copy, leaving out the lengthened details of the Books of History; wherefore it is that we entreat of you not to reproach us therefore'.

Through the history of medieval Ireland, the student can observe the origins of Irish identity, institutions, provinces and political divisions that have shaped modern Ireland. The challenge set by Cambridge University Press to cover 1,100 years of Irish history in a single volume is exacting. The last single-authored textbook to cover Ireland AD 400–1500 was Michael Richter's *Medieval Ireland: The Enduring Tradition*, published in 1988. Richter's book has proved enduringly popular to a general audience as witnessed by numerous reprints and online reviews. However, such a broad treatment did not gain general scholarly approval. It inevitably suffered from uneven coverage and misunderstandings. No author can have an impeccable knowledge of one thousand years of Irish history, and the present work will also

have its failings. Nevertheless, given the academic and lay interest in an up-to-date overview of Irish medieval history, this book attempts to provide one.

Scholarship on medieval Ireland has blossomed in the last thirty years. In historiographic terms, the Irish Middle Ages has been a battleground of different perspectives, both political (e.g. nationalist, unionist, postcolonial, postpeace process) and geographical (e.g. Insular, Atlantic-archipelago, European, global comparative). The contemporary relevance of interpretations of the past in Ireland (and across the Irish diaspora) means that debates can be heated and objective. Some decisions in this volume will be controversial. For example, I have chosen to write a history of the island of Ireland rather than writing a history of an ethnic group. As a result, this book contains little about what the Irish achieved abroad (which was considerable), nor do the following chapters maintain a sharp distinction between the activities of the Gaelic Irish and the vikings[1] or English who settled in Ireland.

This brief introduction will provide a map of the work that follows, and will touch on one of the constant elements in Irish history of this period – the physical landscape of mountains, rivers and bogs. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Ireland in the fifth century. The rest of the book is divided into two parts. The first part covers the early Middle Ages. Within this book, the early Middle Ages are defined as the years AD 500–1100. The second part covers the late Middle Ages, AD 1100–1500. The conventional divisions of Irish medieval history of Ireland at AD 800 or 1171 have been avoided. These watersheds are linked to external influences – the arrival of the vikings, and the English invasion. The divisions are to some extent linguistic. For example, Irish history before AD 1171 is often linked with Celtic Studies departments, with sources being predominantly in Irish. Irish history after this period is commonly taught within History departments, with a focus on texts in Latin, French and English. A chronological framework based on externally driven change is not unusual in the historiography of islands. However, it risks obscuring internal change and the roles of indigenous people in shaping events. It can also lead to an overselective use of sources. For example, until the late twentieth century, Gaelic sources were relatively neglected

[1] There is debate among scholars as to whether the term 'viking' should have a lower or upper case 'v' as it originally describes an activity rather than an ethnic group.

by scholars in the study of late medieval Irish history. The traditional division of Irish history into the years before and after 800 or 1171 also favours the analysis of history in terms of natives and colonists. We may do a disservice to historical figures if we judge them simply as foreigners or natives, without trying to empathise with the values of their times. One of the aims in this book has been to avoid the analysis of Irish history as a history of invasions and to show something of the internal dynamism and adaptability of Irish society across the centuries.

The themes of landscape and economy, society, politics, religion and the arts are covered in separate chapters for the early and later Middle Ages. Conventional wisdom states that events are shaped by kings and battles. However, visionaries, whether we agree with them or not, have often played a bigger role. This is true of St Patrick in the fifth century and St Malachy in the twelfth century, to name but two examples. Political narrative has a place in this book, but it is not the dominant element; religious matters are given equal attention, and chapters on art provide insight into the mental and cultural world of the Middle Ages. Leaders and visionaries can only succeed if they are in tune with the society that underpins their status. History is also determined by the way that the mass of people interconnected with each other and with their environment and how they sustained themselves through daily toil. To reflect these realities; sections on society, and on landscape and economy are included in this book. While this survey volume errs on the side of breadth rather than depth, I hope readers will use this overview as a portal to further reading and a greater understanding of the rich field of Irish medieval history.

GEOGRAPHY

Landscape has a continuous influence over historical events. Ireland has had a disproportionate impact on world history and culture given its relatively small size. The maximum length of the island from Malin Head to Cape Clear is 280 miles, and its maximum width from Belmullet in Mayo to Ards in County Down is 190 miles. There is a discontinuous rim of higher land around the Irish coasts and relatively isolated mountain ranges in the interior where older, harder rock types protrude through layers of more recently deposited limestone. The main geographical features of Ireland were sculpted by

glaciers in successive Ice Ages, the last of which ended 14,000 years ago. The advancing and retreating ice scoured the landscape north of a line running from County Clare to Wexford, leaving a large area of lowland. As glaciers melted, the loose materials that they bore – clays, loams, sands and gravels – were deposited unevenly across central Ireland. This created a series of ridges or eskers running west to east across the central and west midlands. Farther north, the melting ice retreated more rapidly, leaving soil deposits in egg-shaped ridges called drumlins in a belt of territory stretching from County Down to the islands of Clew Bay in County Mayo.

The widest expanse of good agricultural land in Ireland lies between Dublin and Dundalk and stretches as far as the Shannon. This area was accessible from the east through a breach in the highland rim of Ireland between the mountains of Leinster and Mourne. The wealth and accessibility of this zone made it the focus of interest for foreign traders and settlers in the Middle Ages. In the west, the rim of high land is broken by the bays of Galway, Donegal and Clew Bay, as well as the wide estuary of the River Shannon that drains much of the central plain of Ireland. The land here is liable to flooding, and the central lowlands are dotted with lakes and bogs. Beyond the east Midlands, good agricultural lands are found in several areas, including the Golden Vale of North Tipperary and County Limerick in the southwest and the Lagan Valley in the northeast. The northeast region is more mountainous but better drained, with much of the rainfall collecting in Ireland's biggest lake, Lough Neagh. The river valleys of this area drain into the seas adjoining north Britain. The distance from Fair Head in County Antrim to the Kintyre peninsula in Scotland is a mere 13 miles. The geographical proximity of Scotland and the orientation of river valleys encouraged contact and historical connections between northern Britain and Ireland.

Ireland is famous for its humid and mild climate. Its proximity to the Gulf Stream keeps the island more temperate than some other lands at the same latitude. The prevailing winds blow from west to east, bringing warm, damp air from the Atlantic, and leaving the east of Ireland drier and less prone to storms. The climate suits moisture-loving plants and grasses (the abundant greenery has given rise to Ireland's nickname 'the Emerald Isle'). However, the same conditions restrict the range of crops that can be cultivated. Much of Ireland is better suited to grazing than to arable farming. When people first settled Ireland around 7000 BC, most of Ireland was covered with

trees. The introduction of farming and the spread of blanket bog, a type of peatland, caused a decline in forest cover, but a major episode of tree clearance appears to coincide with the late Iron Age and early Christian period, and a further decline in woodlands is noted from the late twelfth century. Generally speaking the medieval landscape of Ireland was more thickly forested than today.

Part I

EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND AD 400–1100

1

IRELAND IN THE FIFTH CENTURY

The rhetoric of Ireland, particularly of western Ireland, as an archaic society shielded from foreign influence from the Iron Age until the modern era suited nineteenth-century nationalists and romantic thinkers who advocated the purity of Irish cultural identity. It also suited British imperialists who regarded Gaelic society as primitive. Popular presentations of a backward-looking 'Celtic' society often root themselves in the observation that Ireland lay beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire. However, this perspective obscures the dynamism of Irish society at the eve of the Middle Ages and downplays the impact of the Roman Empire as a massive power bloc on Ireland's doorstep with which goods, ideas and concepts were exchanged. The decline of the Roman Empire and environmental changes in the fourth and fifth centuries brought instabilities and opportunities for people in Ireland. As a result, the fifth century can be characterised as a period of radical social, technological and religious change.

Ireland's contact with the Roman Empire began as early as the first century AD, as witnessed by archaeological finds of imported goods and references in Latin texts. According to the writer Tacitus, an exiled king from Ireland joined the retinue of the Roman general Agricola who campaigned in Britain.[1] In the second century a geographer working in Alexandria in Egypt, called Ptolemy, charted a recognisable outline of Ireland's coasts and the positions of major river

[1] Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, pp. 56–7; J. Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 129.

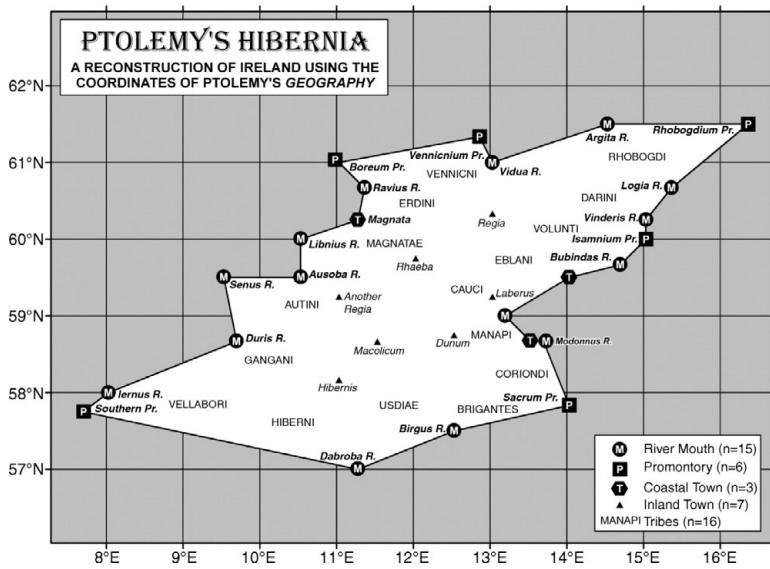


Figure 1.1 Ptolemy's map

mouths, promontories, settlements and islands (see Figure 1.1).[2] This shows that coastal Ireland was relatively well known to outsiders. The presence of a powerful and economically developed empire encouraged a flow of goods to and from the island. Ireland's early exports consisted primarily of raw materials, including hunting dogs, slaves, foodstuffs and perhaps copper.[3] Early imports comprised of manufactured goods including Roman coins, glassware, pottery (perhaps containing olive oil, wine and other foodstuffs) and jewellery. The deposition of Roman coins and jewellery at pagan ritual sites including Tara and Newgrange (Co. Meath) and accompanying furnished burials suggests that Roman exotica were highly valued in Irish society.[4] It may even hint at the imitation of Romano-British ritual practices. Access to Roman goods and culture may have enhanced the prestige of Irish leaders, creating a demand for imports and exchange.

The Irish economy changed significantly during the Roman era, partly in response to climatic change and in part through contacts

[2] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 20, cf. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 154.
[3] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 7, 147, 176.
[4] Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 155; Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 35, 39, 129–30, 175.

outside Ireland. Pollen records drawn from a range of archaeological sites indicate that agriculture was in decline from 200 BC–AD 200.[5] A handful of large hillforts flourished between the first century BC and the first century AD at Emain Macha (Navan fort, Co. Armagh), Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin, Co. Kildare), Cruachu (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon) and Tara (Co. Meath).[6] Their heyday corresponded chronologically with large-scale nucleated settlements or oppida in northern Europe. While Ireland did not boast large centres of population, the emergence of royal centres suggests that a process of political centralisation was taking place. The Iron Age royal sites are often represented as pagan provincial capitals. It is difficult to surmise too much in the absence of written evidence, but what is clear is that these sites had lost much of their practical status by the fifth century. Of the sixteen population groups named on Ptolemy's map in the second century, only six of these can be identified from early medieval records. While this might reflect problems in the transmission of names, it could also reflect fundamental changes in the political structures of Late Antique Ireland. As large power centres fell out of use, big political units may have fragmented. Certainly, by the time written records emerge in the sixth century, Ireland had a plethora of 150 or more petty kingdoms or *túatha*. These kingdoms tended to be focused around agricultural land, often having a plain (Old Irish *mag*) as their central focus.

From the third century, pollen diagrams record a spread in agriculture and woodland clearance across northern and eastern areas of Ireland. This development continued unabated until the sixth century.[7] Roman farming know-how and the voracious appetite of the late empire for raw materials have been credited with encouraging this period of resource exploitation. New strains of cereal and breeds of livestock were introduced in this period, along with domesticated fowl. A shift in cattle rearing from beef to dairy production allowed an estimated sevenfold increase in calorific output of a herd, allowing greater surpluses of wealth to be generated.[8] From the fourth century, finds of Roman goods appear farther inland and along the western coasts of Ireland, implying an expansion in trade and wider access to

[5] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 6.
[6] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 146.
[7] Edwards, 'Archaeology', p. 264.
[8] Halpin and Newman, *Ireland*, p. 2; McCormick, 'Cows', pp. 35–6.

imported exotica.[9] It appears that the island was drawn increasingly within the orbit of the European trading economy.

From the late fourth century, the Roman Empire was in crisis. At this time of instability, a number of Irishmen joined the imperial armies, while others became pirates and warriors who plundered the British coasts.[10] A series of forts were constructed around the western and southern coasts of Britain, which shows growing insecurity. In AD 367, Irish raiders joined Picts and Saxons in a 'barbarian conspiracy' that was aided by a revolt of the Roman garrison stationed on Hadrian's Wall, and the northern parts of Roman Britain were overwhelmed. A Roman relief force successfully defended Britain, but smaller-scale raiding continued. Two silver hoards dating from these troubled times have been recovered from Ireland.[11] The hoard from Balline (Co. Limerick) contains three pieces of silver plate, two complete ingots and parts of two more.[12] The hoard from Ballinrees (Co. Derry) was deposited around AD 425 and contains roughly 1,500 roman coins, 200 ounces of silver ingots, and fine dining ware. Archaeologists have debated whether these large accumulations of silver represent imperial pay for military services or peacekeeping or whether the hoards represent stolen booty.[13] The official stamps found on silver ingots from both hoards favour the view that they were acquired legitimately, but the question remains open.[14] Further evidence of military involvement in Britain, whether in support of or against the empire, can be seen in small items of military paraphernalia found in Ireland dating from the fourth and fifth centuries.[15]

There is direct evidence of Irish activity abroad through the medium of the written word. A Latin panegyric composed for the Roman general Stilicho around the turn of the fifth century recounts that all Ireland was hostile to Britain and 'the sea foamed to the beat of hostile oars'.[16] However, there were also peaceful Irish migrants. In the fifth century an Irishman, named Cunorix, died at Wroxeter

[9] Bateson, 'Roman material', p. 37; Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 24.
[10] Rance, 'Attacotti'. It should be noted that Rance's theory that the term 'Attacotti' derives from 'aithechthuatha' is linguistically flawed.
[11] Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, pp. 9–10.
[12] Ó Ríordáin, 'Roman material in Ireland', p. 45.
[13] Raftery, 'Iron Age Ireland', p. 179.
[14] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 176; Swift, *Ogam stones*, p. 5.
[15] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 35, 176.
[16] Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, p. 105.

(in Shropshire by the River Severn), and his name was commemorated in Latin script on a reused block of stone.[17] In the same period a Christian memorial was raised in Trier (Germany) by the wife of Scottus, a name which in the early Middle Ages referred to Gaelic speakers from Ireland and Scotland.[18] These inscriptions suggest that Irish migrants adopted some of the cultural mores and religious values of the late empire.

The practice of raising stones for named individuals was used throughout the Roman Empire. It was adopted by neighbouring peoples who developed their own scripts for this purpose; runes in Scandinavia, and ogam in Ireland and Northern Britain.[19] The ogam cipher, which was developed by the fourth century, is a series of dots and dashes that could be carved along the sharp edge of a monument or on an incised line (see Figure 1.2). This script was not a simple derivative of the Latin alphabet, but developed from knowledge of how Latin grammarians analysed the sounds of language.[20] Thus the development of ogam indicates thoroughgoing contact with the Roman world. An intriguing example is the fourth- or fifth-century ogam inscription of an Irishman 'Tebicatus' has been found on a column from a Roman building in Silchester (Hampshire). It is not clear if the inscription was added in situ as graffiti or as a mark of ownership, or whether the stone had been removed from its original context and reused as a funerary monument.[21] It does, however, provide evidence of assimilation between Irish and Roman culture.

Ogam monuments were raised in Ireland and western Britain from the late fourth to the seventh centuries. There are around 300 in Ireland, most of which are located in the southwestern counties of Kerry, Cork and Waterford. Around forty-five ogam inscriptions have been recovered in western Britain (clustering in south Wales, Cornwall and the Isle of Man) and twenty-seven have been found in Pictish Scotland.[22] While the inscriptions in Pictland may date after the sixth century, those in Wales, Cornwall and the Isle of Man witness Irish migration to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries.[23] The ruling line of Dyfed in south Wales proudly claimed its Irish roots in the early Middle Ages and the appearance of bilingual inscriptions in Latin and

[17] Wright and Jackson, 'A late inscription from Wroxeter'. [18] Swift, *Ogam*, p. 121.
[19] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 173. [20] Ibid., pp. 165–6.
[21] Fulford *et al.*, 'An early date for Ogham'. [22] McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, p. 44.
[23] For the argument that Dál Riata was not settled from Ireland in this period, see Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?'

Figure 1.2 Ogam stone at Kilmalkedar, Co. Kerry

Irish show the area to be a melting pot of Roman, British and Irish cultures.[24]

This raises questions regarding the circumstances that caused people to migrate across the Irish Sea. It is tempting to make comparisons

[24] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 171–2; Mytum, *Origins*, pp. 163–4; Rance, 'Attacotti', p. 252.

with later medieval migratory processes, including the Viking Age. The Viking Age took place following increased contacts between Scandinavia and more developed European trading economies, at a time of climatic improvement when surpluses in wealth could be generated. These factors encouraged competition among the elites for land and imported luxuries, and expeditions abroad provided a means to acquire both. Were the same processes happening in late fourth- and fifth-century Ireland?

Archaeological and linguistic evidence demonstrate that dramatic changes were taking place in Irish society in the fourth and fifth centuries. Pressure on land ownership may have prompted the emergence of enclosed settlement forms that could display possession of territory, exclusivity and status.[25] Ogam stones were also erected as territorial markers and to commemorate high-status individuals.[26] They commonly recorded a masculine personal name, a male ancestor (with the formula *macci* 'son of' or *avi* 'grandson/descendant of'), and often a group name.[27] The erection of the stones hints at the growing importance of lineages and individual landholders in Irish society.

The oldest surviving population-group names in Ireland tended to be plural or collective names. These might be linked with an animal eponym, occupation or deity. In the fifth century, population-group names beginning with *Cénel* 'kindred of' or *Uí* (a later form of *avi*) 'grandson/descendant of' come to light.[28] This is suggestive of an emergent trend towards territorially and dynastically based power that would continue in later centuries. This change corresponded with a decreasing emphasis on female eponyms from the fifth century. It may be that society in the fifth century was becoming more patriarchal, patrilineal and competitive.

Status was displayed in late fifth-century Ireland partly through access to prestige goods from abroad. Pottery imports came from around the Mediterranean, mainly comprising amphorae that may have carried olive oil, as well as red slipware dining ware. The distribution of these finds naturally focused along the southern and eastern seaways. One of the biggest assemblages of imported pottery from the

[25] O'Sullivan *et al.*, *Early medieval Ireland*, p. 65, fig. 3.7.
[26] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 175; Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 42.
[27] McManus, *Guide to ogam*, pp. 118–20; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 97–8.
[28] Mac Neill, 'Early Irish population groups', pp. 60–86.

late fifth century was recovered from a multivallate ringfort at Garranes (Co. Cork), along with evidence of glass imports and skilled craftwork.[29] The ringfort dwellers' importance was displayed through the complexity of their fort, their access to imported items, their control over the production of luxury items, and perhaps the ogam stone located nearby that might commemorate a family member.[30] The finds indicate that the occupants of Garranes enjoyed links with trading communities outside Ireland. More broadly the enthusiasm for imported goods in Ireland led to fashions from the Roman world being imitated and blended with native styles. From the fifth century the influence of Late Antique jewellery, weapons and dining ware can be seen on items made in Ireland.[31]

Among the high-status imports that came to Irish shores in the fifth century were British slaves. They may have been sought out for menial agricultural jobs to improve the agricultural surpluses that funded the lifestyles of the elite. They may also have been valued for their association with Roman culture. Slaves could bring know-how of Roman agricultural and commercial practices and the technology of writing to Ireland.[32] Some of the early Latin loanwords in the Irish language appear to reflect a British pronunciation of Latin. British slaves may have been one medium of transfer of these words, along with Irish travellers to Britain and missionaries.[33] Among the ideas that British slaves helped foster in Ireland was the Christian faith. The Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion in AD 314, and although many other religions continued to coexist within its boundaries, Christianity seems to have been well established among the Romano-British by the fifth century.

The most famous British slave who was transported to Ireland was St Patrick. We are lucky to have two written works by St Patrick. Patrick's 'Confession' outlines his experiences and justifies his missionary work in Ireland. His 'Letter to Coroticus' chastises a British warlord who had seized some of Patrick's recent converts. Patrick's raw emotional narratives reflect upon the unstable circumstances of

[29] Bennett, *Excavations 1990*, p. 163; Ó Ríordáin, 'Excavation of a large earthen ringfort at Garranes'.

[30] Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 146, cf. Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 163.

[31] Halpin and Newman, *Ireland: an archaeological guide*, p. 22; Earwood, 'Turned wooden vessels', pp. 155–6.

[32] For early finds associated with literacy, see Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 180–1.

[33] Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, p. 14.

the fifth century. He enumerates himself as one of 'thousands' who were taken into captivity from Britain to Ireland. However, his 'Letter to Coroticus' also demonstrates that British warlords were raiding for slaves in Ireland to take back to Britain. St Patrick was raised as a Christian in a small country estate, somewhere in western Britain. He was snatched as an adolescent and set to work in Ireland as a shepherd, an occupation that gave Patrick time to reflect on his depressed circumstances. Patrick chose to take solace in religion, praying fervently on a daily basis. His renewed faith gave him the courage to escape Ireland, but he soon returned in order to spread the message of Christianity to the pagan Irish. The date and location of Patrick's mission is much debated, but it is known from other sources that he was not the first Christian to enter Ireland.

In AD 431, a bishop called Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine 'to the Irish believing in Christ'.[34] This testifies to the existence of a Christian community in contact with Continental Europe. Palladius was probably the deacon of the same name who had encouraged the pope to send Bishop Germanus of Auxerre to Britain two years before to combat a heresy instigated by a scholar called Pelagius. Pelagius's views on original sin and whether people were predestined to heaven or hell conflicted with those of St Augustine of Hippo. Pelagius argued that divine grace was not necessary to fulfil God's commands, but that individuals had free will to obey the law of God. These views were condemned as heretical at the Synod of Carthage in AD 418. Palladius's appointment to Ireland might have reflected not only the growth in the size of the Christian community (whether of migrants or Irish converts). but also reflect concerns that the Pelagian heresy might spread from Britain to Ireland. There are traditions of pre-Patrician saints in both Munster and Leinster, although there is little credible evidence to support these claims. Nevertheless, Palladiusis seems to have been active in southern Ireland in areas that had direct links to Continental Europe and Britain.[35]

The 'Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine' provides a fixed date, 431, for Palladius's arrival in Ireland as a high-profile papal appointment. Scholars are in the dark, however, as to when Patrick arrived with a shipload of disconsolate slaves. Irish chronicles (that are not

[34] Prosper, *Chronicon*, *s.a.* 431.

[35] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 205; Hughes, 'Church in Irish society', p. 303.

contemporary accounts of the fifth century) provide a range of dates for his death, including 457, 461 and 493. The latest date may be the most reliable on text-historical grounds, but that does not mean it is accurate.[36] It looks as if attempts were made by chroniclers in the seventh century or later to push back the dates of Patrick's life so that he could claim to be the first successful apostle to Ireland, rather than Palladius, who became increasingly marginalised in medieval accounts of the conversion of Ireland.[37] Patrick's mission is usually linked with Armagh and Downpatrick in medieval hagiography. Only one place is mentioned in Patrick's 'Confession', and that is *silva vocluti quae est prope mare occidentale* or 'the wood of Fochloth which is near the western sea'. This wood has been identified as near Killala (Co. Mayo).[38] Patrick does not mention other Christian communities in Ireland, though he seems to have deliberately ventured into remote areas where his message might be unwelcome. Patrick reports the dangers that he faced including two brief periods of captivity. Despite these setbacks, he claimed to have converted thousands.

The reasons for St Patrick's success need to be addressed. Most of us have encountered street preachers and door-to-door proselytisers who are routinely shunned, so why did people listen to Patrick? Presumably he had personal charisma, but his message must have fitted the spirit of the times. The emphasis of Christianity on individual salvation appealed to different groups. Patrick ranked slaves among his converts and also nobles, in particular he gives an account of a noblewoman who rejected marriage in to devote her life to God. Christianity may have appealed to people who were without power, who suffered as Patrick 'like a stone lying deep in the mud', who had little investment in the existing religious system and may have gained a sense of self-worth through faith in a God who valued them individually. Patrick believed God 'pulled me up and lifted me out' from his misery.[39] Christianity could also appeal to people at the top of the social hierarchy, because it had prestigious connotations of *romanitas* and external links at a time when elites sought out material goods, technological know-how and trading contacts across the sea to boost their status.[40] Christianity had a clear hierarchy of authority, but it also

[36] Dumville *et al., Saint Patrick*, pp. 29–36.
[37] Hughes, 'Church in Irish society', pp. 306–7.
[38] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 217; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, p. 310.
[39] Patrick, *Confessio*, ed. Bieler, §12. [40] Mytum, *Origins*, pp. 44–5.

preached obedience to secular rulers. It may have seemed easier for Irish kings to oversee an emerging Christian hierarchy than to deal with druidic elites who wielded power in Iron Age Ireland. Above all, fifth-century Ireland witnessed radical change, and unsettled times may have encouraged people to innovate in social and cultural practices and to invest hope in a set of religious ideas that were growing in influence across neighbouring countries.

The conversion of Ireland did not happen within a few years or decades, but represented a shift in worldview, social conventions and beliefs that took centuries to embed. It is only in the seventh century that evidence emerges of a comprehensive ecclesiastical hierarchy in Ireland that was powerful enough to deny status to pagan ritualists.[41] The first generations of converts must have faced challenges in organising places of worship. Converts of higher status, such as the sons and daughters of lesser kings referred to by St Patrick, may have established churches near their homes. Those who chose to live a celibate life may have formed small communities based on the lives of the desert fathers, similar to those that flourished in contemporary Gaul and Italy.[42] The earliest phase of church building in Ireland is thought to be represented by place names with *domnach* (from Latin *dominicum*) that focus in the east, midlands and north of Ireland.[43] However, the fourth- and early fifth-century dates assigned to these churches should be questioned, as the name form appeared to have continued in use later.[44]

The new concepts and practices of Christianity necessitated a flow of vocabulary from Latin into Irish to describe them. Many of the fifth century loanwords into Irish were imported from a British dialect of Latin. The forms and practices of early church sites in the north, east and midlands of Ireland may have been influenced by British models.[45] Churches along the southern and western coasts may have also drawn inspiration from the continent. At Caherlehillan (Co. Kerry) a small wooden church was built in the late fifth or early sixth century overlooking the sea. The site included imported pottery, and a table altar with a drain feature for ritual ablutions after mass, which hint at links with the northwestern coasts of the Mediterranean.[46]

[41] See the later discussion.
[42] Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 171.
[43] Ibid., pp. 168–70.
[44] Stancliffe, 'Religion and society', pp. 403–4; Flanagan, 'Summary'.
[45] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 184.
[46] Sheehan, 'A Peacock's Tale', pp. 196–7.

Later features added to the site at Caherlehillan indicate that links across the Celtic Sea continued into the eighth century. The gradual process of Christianisation can be seen in the landscape of Ireland through the construction of churches, shifts in burial practices, the erection of cross-inscribed stones, and the use of wells for baptism.[47]

Christianity was part of a broader pattern of changes in fifth century. One of the major shifts that is often linked with the emergence of Christianity in Ireland was the rise of a political dynasty called Uí Néill, who would remain significant players in Irish politics throughout the Middle Ages. In early laws, Ireland was seen to be divided into multiple small kingdoms or *túatha*. The existence of these petty kingships in the fifth century is demonstrated in St Patrick's 'Confession' as he describes travelling the countryside with the sons of kings and refers to the conversion of many peoples.[48] Ogam inscriptions witness localised population groups. By the seventh century a hierarchy of kings is recorded: kings of *túatha* recognised the authority of a local over-king, who in turn recognised the power of a provincial ruler.

The term for provinces is *coiceda* or 'fifths', suggesting that Ireland was divided at an early stage into five units.[49] The names of provinces may have developed at different times. They were either plural names referring to the inhabitants (*Laigin* = the people of Leinster; *Ulaid* = the people of Ulster; *Connachta* = the people of Connacht) or represent regional names (*Mumu* = Munster; *Mide* = Meath 'midlands'). *Mide* comprised the most fertile and accessible lands of Ireland, which were hotly contested in the fifth and sixth centuries. Initially rulers from Leinster and Ulster[50] contended over the area. However, in the fifth century a new dynastic group, Uí Néill, appear to have expanded their influence east from Connacht to bid for control in the region.

The origins of Uí Néill are shrouded in myth. Later tales of the dynastic founder Niall of the Nine Hostages and his sons cannot be taken at face value. The claim that the sons of Niall were contemporaries of St Patrick may have some basis. However, the later stories that their personal dealings with the saint determined the success or failure of their descendents bear the hallmark of fiction. These legends

[47] Moss, ed. *Art*, pp. 9–11; Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, pp. 135–; O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian?'

[48] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 188–89.

[49] Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism', p. 135.

[50] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 453–4.

recorded from the seventh century elevated the status of St Patrick and bound sections of Uí Néill to the cult of the saint. When Uí Néill emerge into historical light in the sixth century, they were aggressively expanding their power base in the east midlands and northwest of Ireland.[51] The rise of this ambitious group may reflect a more general shift of power into the hands of royal dynasties in fifth- and sixth-century Ireland.

The rise of Uí Néill marks a shift in the politics of northern and midland Ireland. This appears to have been roughly contemporary with political upheaval in southwestern Ireland. On Ptolemy's map, a group called 'Iverni' occupy Munster; this name was rendered as 'Érainn' in the early Middle Ages. Many early population groups in Munster claimed to be affiliated with them, including Corcu Loígde and Múscraige (the power of these two groups was later identified with parts of Co. Cork and Co. Tipperary).[52] In the fifth and sixth centuries, groups called Eóganachta emerged, who claimed descent from a royal ancestor Eógan. They established several branches that came to dominate other groups in the province of Munster until the tenth century. The imposing Rock of Cashel (Co. Tipperary) was their most important royal site. Its name was derived from Latin word *castellum* ('fortress'), which further reveals the changing nature of political power in Ireland around the fifth century.[53]

The notion that early Irish society was archaic and immutable was a fiction peddled from the Middle Ages onwards to suit the interests of different elites. It appears that significant innovations in Irish society, culture, religion and politics were set in train from the third century in response to climatic change and contacts with the Roman Empire. These changes included growing overseas trade, increased cultivation of land and innovations in farming that fostered population growth and the accumulation of wealth. Society placed increasing worth on the territorialisation of power and the leadership of individuals and their dynasties. Growing competition for lands and status encouraged raids and migration into Britain. It also fuelled expressions of power within Ireland through the construction of ringforts, the erection of ogam monuments and the acquisition of prestige goods from abroad.

[51] *AU, s.aa.* 516, 563; cf. Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, p. 320.

[52] O'Rahilly, 'Origin of the names Érainn and Ériu', pp. 7–9. Cf. McManus, *Guide to ggam*, pp. 73–5.

[53] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 146.

More Irish people came into contact with Christianity, and the religion was embraced by many. The message and prestigious associations of Christianity may have been appealing in times of rapid social, economic and political change. The political dynamism of fifth-century Ireland is reflected in the rise of new political dynasties including Uí Néill and Eóganachta. The impact of these changes continued through the early medieval period. The themes from this chapter will be pursued in the analyses of early medieval Ireland that follow.

2

LAND USE AND ECONOMY AD 500–1100

The student of early medieval Ireland is lucky to have abundant information in early written sources and archaeology. Medieval chronicles are perhaps the best-known historical source from the early Middle Ages. Their focus is on political events, but they also reflect the economic concerns of contemporary society. Law texts surviving from the seventh and eighth centuries reveal much about the Irish landscape and economy, although their interests are arguably skewed towards the concerns of the elite. Saints Lives from the early Middle Ages cast incidental light on the day-to-day economic activities aside from the religious agenda of these writings. Ireland also has a very rich archaeological landscape. The building boom in Ireland that lasted from the 1990s until 2008 led to a massive increase in the number of excavations. Although many sites await publication and further analysis, knowledge on the early Irish economy has grown enormously over the last three decades.

Ireland in the early Middle Ages was not simply a land of self-sufficient farmers.[1] There were social and economic forces that generated surpluses, and there was a need for craftsmen who could produce items for everyday utility with greater efficiency and quality than could non-specialists. There was internal trade for obtaining goods that were bountiful in some areas and lacking in others. There was also a desire for luxuries that stimulated trade across long distances. New scientific techniques in archaeology have revealed that

[1] Kerr *et al.*, *Economy*, p. 69.

long-distance trade and travel were more common than scholars have tended to assume. From the ninth to the eleventh centuries, economic change is evident in the deposition of hoarded silver and from the development of towns. By AD 1000, coins were being minted in Dublin, and Irish kings were seeking ways to exploit the wealth of coastal towns and their kingdoms to fund their political ambitions. Ireland was integrated within a European trading economy but during the eleventh century, socioeconomic power shifted away from the Viking Age trading networks of the North Atlantic and Irish Sea towards the coasts of France and southern England. By the twelfth century, Ireland came to be regarded as marginal and underdeveloped by its neighbours.

CLIMATE, FAMINE AND DISEASE

A rich seam of data on weather events is provided by Irish chronicles, which can be compared with the record of tree-ring growth (dendrochronology) as well as records from neighbouring lands, such as Greenlandic ice cores. This evidence of climatic change can be compared with episodes of environmental crisis, but there is no simple pattern. Land use, small-scale fluctuations in weather and regional microclimates may qualify any generalisations.[2] Episodes of colder weather in Ireland have been identified circa AD 540, 690 and 780. These can be linked to occurrences of famine and periods of malnutrition and the consequent spread of epidemics as the population's immunity declined.[3] The Justinian plague of c. 540 affected large swathes of Europe. A series of plagues struck Ireland in the late seventh century, and a famine that lasted three years from AD 700 was said to be so bad that 'man ate man'. Further episodes of famine, pulmonary disease and 'bloody-flux' (a dysentery-like disease that may be linked to malnutrition and suppressed immunity) were recorded in the closing decades of the eighth century.[4] The late eighth century also witnessed a period of harsher winters and wetter summers.[5]

[2] Ludlow *et al.*, 'Medieval Irish chronicles'.

[3] Thurston and Plunkett, 'Dynamic sociology', p. 179; Baillie, 'Proposed re-dating'.

[4] Irish chronicles record famines in 538–9, 699–703, 778–9, 793, and 799 and epidemics in 545, 550, 554, 556, 664, 683, 684, 770, 773, 774, 777, 778, 783, and 786. See Charles-Edwards, trans., *The Chronicle of Ireland*.

[5] Kerr *et al.*, 'Making hay', p. 2871.