

History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland

History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland explores medieval Irish conceptions of salvation history, using Latin and vernacular sources from *c.* 700 to *c.* 1200 CE that adapt biblical history for audiences both secular and ecclesiastical.

This book examines medieval Irish sources on the cities of Jerusalem and Babylon; reworkings of narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures; literature influenced by the psalms; and texts indebted to Late Antique historiography. It argues that the conceptual framework of salvation history, and the related theory of the divinely ordained movement of political power through history, had a formative influence on early Irish culture, society and identity. Primarily through analysis of previously untranslated sources, this study teases out some of the intricate connections between the local and the universal in order to situate medieval Irish historiography within the context of that of the wider world. Using an overarching biblical chronology, beginning with the lives of the Jewish Patriarchs and ending with the Christian apostolic missions, this study shows how one culture understood the histories of others and has important implications for issues such as kingship, religion and literary production in medieval Ireland.

This book will appeal to scholars and students of medieval Ireland, as well as those interested in religious and cultural history.

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History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland

Elizabeth Boyle

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**in memory of my father, Patrick White
(1944–2020)**

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Note on terminology, biblical quotations and abbreviations

Throughout this study, I use ‘Old Irish’ to describe the vernacular language and literature of Ireland from *c.* 600 to *c.* 900 CE, with ‘late Old Irish’ to denote literature roughly datable to the ninth century. I use ‘Middle Irish’ to refer to the vernacular language and literature of Ireland from *c.* 900 to *c.* 1200 CE: ‘early Middle Irish’ denotes literature roughly datable on linguistic grounds to the tenth century; ‘late Middle Irish’ refers to that roughly datable to the twelfth century, with ‘Early Modern Irish’ developing from the thirteenth century onwards. Linguistic dating can be a blunt tool in the absence of any other (internal or external) dating criteria, such as an identifiable author or a contemporary manuscript witness, and I frequently venture no opinion more precise than a possible century of composition.

I use the term *senchas*, which denotes ‘information, history, knowledge’; given the adaptable and developing nature of the knowledge that falls within its horizons, one might even conceive of it as ‘discourse’. I also frequently use the term *dindsenchas*, which by extension we might think of as ‘discourse on toponymy’, or, to use the late Tim Robinson’s phrase (from his *Experiments on Reality*), ‘exegesis of placenames’. I also use the term *dúnad*, which usually refers to the device of ending a poem with the word or phrase with which it begins. However, in longer narrative verse, we often see the use of more than one *dúnad*, where it is used to demarcate the beginning and end of a distinct section of the poem.

There were various translations of the Hebrew and Greek books of the Christian Bible circulating in early medieval Ireland (these are discussed in relation to the psalms, for example, in Chapter 3). For the most part, although the Vulgate superseded the *Vetus Latina* as the ‘authoritative’ translation in the early centuries of Christianity in Ireland, our evidence seems to point in practice to the use of so-called ‘mixed texts’, which predominantly reflected the Vulgate translation but retained the occasional reading here and there from the *Vetus Latina*. Biblical quotations in Latin throughout this study are from the open-access online Vulgate (<http://www.drbo.org/lvb/>) and in English from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate (<http://www.drbo.org/>).

I use the following abbreviations:

- AI The Annals of Inisfallen, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt (Dublin, 1944), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100004/index.html>
- Book of Ballymote Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 34 P 12 (Cat. no. 536)
- Book of Leinster Dublin, Trinity College Library MS 1441 (E 4. 2)
- Book of Uí Mhaine Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS D ii 1 (Cat. no. 1225)
- CIH Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D. A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978)
- Clavis* Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ed., *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium: Medieval Irish Books and Texts (c. 400–c. 1600)*, 3 vols (Turnhout, 2017)
- CMCS *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* (vols 1–25); *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* (vols 26–)
- eDIL Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language, <http://www.dil.ie>
- FTN Frankish Table of Nations
- Irish SAM The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*
- ISOS Irish Script on Screen, <https://www.isos.dias.ie>
- JRSAI *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*
- Lebor na hUidre*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25 (Cat. no. 1229)
- LGÉ *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister, 5 vols (Dublin, 1932–42)
- LH *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, ed. and trans. J. H. Barnard and R. Atkinson, 2 vols (London, 1898)
- Rawlinson B502 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B. 502
- RIA Royal Irish Academy
- SnR Saltair na Rann*, ed. and trans. David Greene, <https://www.dias.ie/celt/celt-publications-2/celt-saltair-na-rann/>
- TBC1 *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension 1*, ed. and trans. Cecile O’Rahilly (Dublin, 1976)
- Thes Pal Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1901–3)
- VSH *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1910)
- YBL Yellow Book of Lecan. Dublin, Trinity College Library MS 1318 (H 2. 16)
- ZCP *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

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Introduction

Conversion to Christianity began in Ireland – sporadic and piecemeal – probably in the late fourth century. In 431, Palladius was sent from Rome to serve as bishop to an Irish Christian community. Although relatively little is known of his career, he is thought to have been active in the Leinster area. At around the same time, or perhaps a little later, Patrick, a Briton and former slave, was engaged in missionary work, seemingly in the north or west of the island. The exact nature of the process of Christianisation is unclear, but contact with the Roman Empire through Britain, Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula is likely to have provided the primary impetus, whether at the lowest echelons of society (for example, via British slaves in Ireland) or the highest (that is, through emulation of neighbouring élites).¹ As Colmán Etchingham observed in a recent essay, there is nothing new that can be said at present about the conversion process in Ireland. No fresh historical evidence can be conjured up, and the meagre documentary sources have been chewed over and endlessly analysed. In Etchingham's words, 'the point at which Christianity first arrived and the determining factors, time-scale, and extent of conversion over the course of the fifth century and the comparably obscure sixth are largely the subjects of no more than reasonable inference and conjecture. Much ink has been spent on the initial process of conversion, much of it to little profit'.²

Crucially, the period of Christianisation saw the beginnings of literacy in Ireland, not only in Latin but also in Irish. Prior to this, Ireland had been an entirely nonliterate culture, and thus we have no written sources surviving from the pre-Christian era. In the context of contact with speakers of Latin, and strongly influenced by Latin phonology, an Irish alphabet known as ogam was developed for incising monumental inscriptions, and perhaps for writing on degradable items such as wood.³ However, the Roman alphabet quickly became the dominant mode for longer pieces of writing in Irish. Although we have a few important written sources from the fifth and sixth centuries, not least the personal testimony of St Patrick himself, these are fraught with textual difficulties and lack contextual information, and it is only from the seventh century that extensive sources

¹ Colmán Etchingham, 'Conversion in Ireland', in *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World*, ed. Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 181–207.

² Etchingham, 'Conversion in Ireland', p. 181.

³ Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991).

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in both Latin and Irish survive.⁴ Indeed, the contrast could hardly be greater: the historical record of the fifth and sixth centuries is fragmentary, to say the least, but we have an abundance of legal, grammatical, scientific, historical and hagiographical sources from the seventh. By this time, we can see that the Christian Church was already the dominant cultural force on the island of Ireland and was a wealthy, powerful, ambitious and all-encompassing institution. A self-confident, highly-educated and articulate intellectual élite was engaged in the task of forming a Christian identity for Ireland that encompassed the island's past as well as its present and future. In so doing, that intellectual élite advanced their own social status and expanded the wealth and influence of their own institutions. They sought to modify the behaviour of everyone in society and to remould Ireland's history, culture and self-perception along biblical lines.

We might ask to what extent it is possible for an élite group within a society to reinvent that society entirely, to provide it with a new history, a new narrative for itself, a new hierarchy and social organisation, a new reality. How transformative can cultural transformation actually be? When that élite controls the means of textual production, the provision of education, and the composition and dissemination of laws and prescriptive texts, it is perhaps more possible than one might initially think. The acquisition of literacy in early medieval Ireland was inextricably linked to the Church – as elsewhere in Europe, education was provided by ecclesiastical institutions – and those who produced our surviving sources occupied an entirely Christian intellectual world. John V. Kelleher wrote in regard to the first centuries of Irish Christianity that 'so extensive was the revision of historical evidence that we have as much chance of recovering the whole truth about early Christian Ireland as a historian five hundred years from now would have if he were trying to reconstruct the history of Russia in the twentieth century from broken sets of different editions of the Soviet Encyclopedia'.⁵ In other words, what was produced in Ireland from the seventh century onwards was a form of conscious myth-creation and, in Kelleher's view, a deliberate erasure from history of what had actually happened in Ireland in the centuries on either side of conversion. It is one of the contentions of the present study that the sources composed in early Christian Ireland, for all intents and purposes, reinvented Ireland: they fabricated a new historical narrative, new origin legends and new mythologies; produced an imagined pre-history for Ireland; and developed new social institutions and hierarchies, which fashioned Ireland according to predominantly Old Testament models and placed the Irish firmly within the scheme of salvation history as 'God's chosen people.' From kingship and law to education and poetry, from sexual morality and family structures to science and medicine, no aspect of society was unaffected by the thoroughgoing reinvention of Ireland in the

⁴ For a comprehensive annotated bibliography of the extant sources from medieval Ireland, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis Litterarum Hiberniensium: Medieval Irish Books and Texts (c. 400–c. 1600)*, 3 vols (Turnhout, 2017) [henceforth *Clavis*]. For editions and translations of Patrick's own writings as well as the earliest Patrician hagiography, see the Royal Irish Academy's St Patrick's *Confessio* Hypertext Stack Project: www.confessio.ie.

⁵ John V. Kelleher, 'Early Irish History and Pseudo-History', *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963), 113–27, p. 122.

seventh century. As Colmán Etchingham wrote in 1999, ‘the work of the ecclesiastical intelligentsia ... endeavoured to generate an all-embracing ideological underpinning of Irish mores and institutions,’⁶ and our surviving written sources reflect their success in that enterprise. Recent archaeological assessments seem to point to enormous, radical social change in settlement patterns and agricultural practice in Ireland *c.* 400–*c.* 600: while it is tempting to ascribe these changes to Christianisation and thus link them to other sorts of cultural and intellectual transformation, this is impossible to prove at present, and so we must begin the study with the seventh-century written sources, whether or not the new society they represent may have its roots a century or more earlier in the conversion era.⁷

The extent to which the creation of this ‘Old Testament Ireland’ was accepted by society at large is entirely unknowable, as all that survives are the views represented in the extant sources produced by the abovementioned élite. We cannot know anything of the social identity or religious beliefs of a slave in eighth-century Leinster or of a laywoman in ninth-century Munster because their voices are lost to the historical record. But we can reconstruct the ideas about Ireland and Irishness that were developed by ecclesiastically-educated authors throughout the island from the seventh century onwards. We can reconstruct their moral standards, their worldview and their conceptions of society, history and culture. Although some remnants of pre-Christian culture may have been incorporated into the new world order, they were incorporated only if they were consonant with – or could be remoulded to fit – the Christian worldview, and it is therefore impossible to disentangle ancient survivals from more recent creations. Consequently, it is more productive to focus our attention on understanding how our extant sources operated within the society that created them, rather than speculating on which elements, if any, might represent some ‘genuine’ pre-Christian fossil.

Education

As noted above, the development of literacy in Ireland went hand in hand with Christianisation. All our evidence points to the Church being solely responsible for the provision of elementary education (this could be skewed by the nature of the surviving sources, but the surviving sources are all we have to go on). Upon the completion of basic schooling, it would seem that male students then had a choice either to enter clerical or monastic orders; to remain a layman but pursue scholarship in an ecclesiastical setting, living under a form of religious rule but remaining free to marry and have children; or otherwise to return to lay life and pursue other professions in a non-ecclesiastical context.⁸ Economic factors, such as an ability to pay school fees, and so on, would have played a decisive role in

⁶ Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland, A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999), p. 1.

⁷ Aidan O’Sullivan, *et al.*, *Early Medieval Ireland A.D. 400–1100: the Evidence from Archaeological Excavations* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 64–77.

⁸ These options are most clearly (and entertainingly) laid out in an eleventh-century Irish poem written to a male student who was completing his elementary education: Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., ‘*Cinnus Atá Do Thinnrem*: A Poem to Máel Brigte on His Coming of Age’, *Ériu* 58 (2008), 1–35.

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many cases. Advancement in lay professions, such as law and poetry, depended as much (if not more) on hereditary considerations as on talent and educational qualifications: only the sons of poets could rise to the highest ranks in poetry.⁹ The situation regarding female students is less well documented, but it would seem that those who were given to female monastic communities to be educated at a young age only had the choice of becoming a nun or returning to lay life and marriage: the intermediary ‘half-lay’ scholarly career does not seem to have been an option for women.¹⁰ Both men and women could also enter into religious life at a more advanced age, for example after being widowed, but it is not clear to what extent such individuals would receive education.

The elementary curriculum offered by the Church in Ireland had much in common with the schooling offered elsewhere in Europe. As Paul Remley has written, ‘The books of the Old and New Testament supplied the basic subject-matter of all early medieval pedagogy from the elementary to the intermediate level’.¹¹ This is as true for Ireland as elsewhere. Young pupils began their education with the psalms, whose central role in early Irish intellectual culture will be explored in detail in Chapter 3. They then progressed into other areas of learning in a thoroughly bilingual context, with many authors exhibiting a high standard of education in both Latin and Irish. A certain degree of ability across disciplines was required: the highest grade of poet, the *ollam*, for example, was expected not only to know the plots of 350 tales, but also to be ‘knowledgeable in all historical science’ and ‘in the jurisprudence of Irish law’.¹² The sevenfold division of the poetic hierarchy was itself modelled on the seven ecclesiastical grades, and the ability to attain the status of *ollam* also depended on exhibiting moral and sexual purity, having never committed a crime and observing sexual continence at regulated times (e.g. at Lent, or while his wife was menstruating, and so on).¹³ Similarly, there was a sevenfold hierarchy of ecclesiastical scholars, although in practice many of these scholars were also poets, and there was clearly a considerable degree of overlap between all three categories: poets, clerics and scholars.¹⁴ This means that literate people in medieval Ireland can be assumed to possess certain shared educational foundations, a common pool of basic knowledge, which comprised the introductory elements of grammar, computus and exegesis in Latin, as well as *senchas* (‘knowledge, information, history’) in Irish. These core subjects were supplemented by disciplines such as music, law and

⁹ Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Uraicecht na Riar: the Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 102–7.

¹⁰ Thomas O. Clancy, ‘Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland: Stating the Case’, in *The Fragility of Her Sex? Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. Christine Meek and Katharine Simms (Dublin, 1996), pp. 43–72.

¹¹ Paul G. Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse: Studies in Genesis, Exodus and Daniel* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 44.

¹² Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Uraicecht na Riar*, pp. 102–3, §2: *is éola i cach coimgniu, ⁊ is éola i mbrithemnacht f[h]énechais.*

¹³ Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Uraicecht na Riar*, pp. 104–5, §6.

¹⁴ See Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 196–202, for statistics on poets and jurists who are identified in medieval Irish annals as being members of monastic communities and/or holding ecclesiastical office.

geography, but only insofar as they formed part of a broader conception of ‘salvation history’. This is not necessarily to accept Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s hypothesis of a ‘single mandarin caste’ responsible for all textual output in early medieval Ireland. A common pool of elementary knowledge conveyed within a single ecclesiastical educational system can still – rather like a modern national school curriculum – produce great variety in advanced or higher education, simply due to the fact that certain schools will be stronger in some disciplines than in others. The Old Irish ‘Triads of Ireland’, for example, characterise the foundation at Cloyne as particularly strong in jurisprudence, Ros Ailithir in Latin learning and Emly in *senchas*.¹⁵ We need to be conscious of local variation in learning, even as we recognise that theoretical boundaries between law, literature, theology and history were porous in practice – not only in terms of the personnel who practised these disciplines, but in terms of fundamental medieval Christian approaches to intellectual enquiry.

Geography and ethnic diversity

There are many ways in which we can seek to understand how medieval Irish intellectuals understood their place in the world. We might begin with geographical location. In simple terms, medieval Irish geographers followed a common Christian tradition that divided the world into three parts – Asia, Europe and Africa (the latter sometimes also called Libya) – associating each part with one of the sons of Noah. Thus, Asia was the land of the descendants of Shem; Europe, the land of the descendants of Japheth; and Africa, the land of the descendants of Cham. At the geographical centre of the world lay the city of Jerusalem. Within these broad continental divisions were many kingdoms inhabited by diverse peoples. There was an awareness that Ireland was not included in biblical lists of the peoples of the earth and sometimes not even included in the Classical sources that supplemented biblical geography. The Irish scientist Dicuil (*fl.* 820s) noted that written authorities were not always accurate in their understanding of the archipelago of which Ireland was a part, but he corrected Classical and Late Antique testimony with his own observations:

Circum nostram insulam Hiberniam sunt insulae, sed aliae paruae atque aliae minimae. Iuxta insulam Britanniam multae, aliae magnae, aliae paruae, aliaeque mediae. Sunt aliae in australi mari et aliae in occidentali, sed magis in parte circii et septentrionis illius abundant. In aliquibus ipsarum habitauī, alias intraui, alias tantum uidi, alias legi.

There are islands around our own island Hibernia, some small and some very small. Near the island Britannia are many islands, some large, some small, and some medium-sized. Some are in the sea to her south and some in the sea to her west, but they abound mostly to the north-west and north. Among

¹⁵ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *The Triads of Ireland* (London, 1906), pp. 2–3: *Féinechas Hérenn Clúain Húama ... Senchas Hérenn Imblech Imair ... Légend Hérenn Ross Ailithre*.

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these, I have lived in some, and have visited others; some I have only glimpsed, while others I have read about.¹⁶

However, even Dicuil was profoundly aware that the location of his North Atlantic archipelago was at the edge of the known world. He cites as an authority, Julianus Solinus (mid-third century), who stated that the Gallic shore would have been the ‘end of the world’ if it were not for the island of *Britannia* lying beyond it, and that there are many islands around Britain, of which *Hibernia* is the largest.¹⁷ Two hundred years earlier, another Irishman, Columbanus, had referred to his compatriots as ‘inhabitants of the world’s edge’, in ‘the Western regions of earth’s farther strand’,¹⁸ and the perception that Ireland was located on the periphery, far from the centre at Jerusalem, is a recurring trope in medieval Irish texts.

As noted, each of the three continents had been inhabited by the descendants of one of the sons of Noah. As part – albeit a peripheral part – of Europe, Ireland and its neighbours identified their descent as being from Japheth. For those peoples who were not mentioned in the Bible, extra sons of Japheth could be grafted onto the biblical genealogies and identified as ancestor figures. We can see this, for example, in relation to the kingdoms of western Europe, whose peoples traced descent from an Alaneus, who was cast as a descendant of Japheth. The Frankish Table of Nations (FTN) is thought to have its origins in the first decades of the sixth century. Its textual traditions consist of two variant versions, known as the ‘Transalpine’ and the ‘Italian’ versions. The so-called ‘Italian’ text of the FTN stated that:

Alaneus dictus est homo qui genuit tres filios, id est, Hisisione, Ermenone et Niguelo. De Hisisione nate sunt generationes quattuor, id est: Romanos, Francos, Alamannos et Brittones. De Ermenone nate sunt generationes V: Gothi, Walagothi, Cybedi, Burgundio et Langobardos. De Niguelo nate sunt generationes quattuor, id est: Wandalos, Saxones, Baioarios et Toringus. Ista XIII generationes omnino non separantur.

A man named Alaneus produced three sons, that is, Hisisione, Ermenone, and Niguelo. Four peoples were brought forth from Hisisione, that is: Romans, Franks, Alemanns, and Britons. Five people were brought forth from Ermenone: Goths, Walagoths, Gepids, Burgundians, and Lombards. Four peoples were brought forth from Niguelo, that is: Vandals, Saxons, Bavarians, and Thuringians. These thirteen peoples have not been entirely separated.¹⁹

A text of this Italian type was known in North Wales by the early ninth century, at which point its information was incorporated into the *Historia Brittonum*, an

¹⁶ J. J. Tierney, ed. and trans., *Dicuili, Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Dublin, 1967), pp. 72–4, §6.

¹⁷ Tierney, ed. and trans., *Dicuili, Liber de Mensura*, pp. 94–7, §§20–1.

¹⁸ G. S. M. Walker, ed. and trans., *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 38–9, 48–9.

¹⁹ Edited and translated by Patrick Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations in Insular Historiography’, *CMCS* 72 (2016), 1–31, at p. 2.

influential Latin history of the peoples of Britain. This ‘ensured that the FTN reached a far broader audience than it ever did as an independent entity’.²⁰ This audience included Irish scholars, who first read the *Historia Brittonum* in its original Latin, subsequently translating and adapting it into Irish in the eleventh century as the *Lebor Bretnach*.²¹ The author of the *Historia Brittonum* made Alaneus a descendant of Japheth son of Noah, thus locating ‘the nations of Western Europe in the universal genealogy of mankind’.²²

Thus geography – the idea of being an inhabitant of Europe, for example – was intimately linked to a form of biblical genealogy – being a descendent of Japheth – and this informed the way that ethnic identity was perceived in the early Middle Ages. However, ethnic identity was – then as now – an intensely complex issue: it was also shaped by such diverse indicators of identity as language, clothing, kinship, religion and power. Medieval Irish views of the origins of the Gaelic-speaking population of Ireland were intensely complex and frequently contradictory, and the current state of scholarship is such that it is unclear whether these contradictions indicate that there were once entirely distinct origin legends, circulating in different parts of the island or amongst different parts of society. We can roughly divide the accounts of Irish origins into stories about Egyptian ancestry, Spanish ancestry and Greek ancestry, but in sources such as the knotty family of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* texts (henceforth *LGÉ*), which were written from the eleventh century onwards, those divergent origins had already intermingled with each other and can be found side by side.²³ The *LGÉ* texts require a great deal of further study, particularly in the way that different versions present their information, but for present purposes the key point is the possibility of diverse perceptions of the origins of Ireland’s inhabitants, tracing back in different ways to a scheme (or schemes) fundamentally shaped by ‘salvation history’.

As for the island of Ireland itself, its political and social geography could be regarded in various ways. One was the division of the island into two halves – *Leth Cuinn* (‘Conn’s Half,’ the northern half) and *Leth Moga* (‘Mug’s Half,’ the southern half of the island). In literal terms, these names can be translated as the ‘leader’s half’ and the ‘slave’s half’, respectively, which already hints at the superiority asserted on behalf of the most powerful northern kings over their southern rivals. We can see that this division was in place as early as *c.* 700, as the Airgialla charter poem asserts the rights of the kingdom of the Airgialla in relation to the ‘king of the Uí Néill’, who is also referred to as ‘the king of Leth Cuinn’.²⁴ We find frequent references in annals and narrative literature to this

²⁰ Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations’, p. 3.

²¹ A. G. van Hamel, ed., *Lebor Bretnach: the Irish Version of the Historia Britonum Ascribed to Nennius* (Dublin, 1932).

²² Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations’, p. 5.

²³ Bart Jaski, ‘“We are of the Greeks in our Origin”: New Perspectives on the Irish Origin Legend’, *CMCS* 46 (2003), 1–53.

²⁴ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 476.

twofold division throughout the period.²⁵ In a twelfth-century text relating to the kingship of Ireland, it is stated that a high king of Ireland ‘with opposition’ was defined as a king of Leth Cuinn who also possessed at least one province of Leth Moga, or alternatively a king of Leth Moga who also held the kingship of Tara along with one of the provinces of Leth Cuinn.²⁶ Holding the kingship of Tara was key to perceived political supremacy, and from the seventh century until the turn of the first millennium, that kingship was entirely dominated by members of various dynasties of the Uí Néill.²⁷

In conjunction with the twofold division into north and south was a fivefold division of the island into provinces. This was articulated and explained in a variety of ways by different authors. For example, in the Middle Irish *Suidigud Tellaig Temra* (‘Settling of the Manor of Tara’), the nobles of Ireland gathered at Uisnech and, along with the supernaturally long-lived Fintan mac Bóchra, they erected a ‘pillar-stone of five ridges’ to demarcate the five provinces of Ireland. The five boundary points between the provinces were the Drowes River, the Boyne, Waterford Harbour, *Belach Con Glais* (?) and the Shannon Estuary.²⁸ In sources that form part of the *LGÉ* family of texts, a different explanation is given for a fivefold division of Ireland, namely, that it was the result of the invasion of Ireland by the Fir Bolg, one of the legendary prehistoric peoples who held a place within the historiographical scheme of medieval Ireland. Different versions of *LGÉ* give different details and different boundary points, and some of them link two of the provinces not with the members of the Fir Bolg but with legendary Gaelic figures, namely, Conchobar, who is associated with *cóiced Rudraige* (from the Drowes to the Boyne), and Ailill and Medb, who are associated with *cóiced Genonn* (from the Shannon Estuary to the Drowes). Other different, but related, texts associate the fivefold division entirely with legendary Gaelic royal figures.²⁹ The concept of Ireland comprising five provinces is embedded in the term *cóiced* (‘province’), which literally means a fifth. However, the major political boundaries in early medieval Ireland do not map neatly onto a static fivefold provincial division. The territory of the Connachta, for example, expanded and contracted as the power of their ruling dynasties ebbed and flowed: perhaps it experienced more ebb than flow, however, since Francis John Byrne memorably characterised Connacht as ‘a backwater whose affairs impinged little on the main course of Irish history until the spectacular and totally unexpected career of Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair as high king of Ireland in the twelfth century’.³⁰ Of course, those living within the shifting boundaries of Connacht in the early Middle Ages

²⁵ For example, the early Middle Irish tale, *Cath Almaine* (‘The Battle of Allen’), depicts the Leinstermen as inhabiting an intermediary war zone, subject to violence on the part of the kings of both Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga: Pádraig Ó Riain, ed., *Cath Almaine* (Dublin, 1978).

²⁶ R. A. S. Macalister, ed. and trans., *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: the Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part V* (Dublin, 1956), pp. 404–9.

²⁷ Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Temoria: Caput Scottorum?’, *Ériu* 47 (1996), 67–88.

²⁸ Cited and discussed in Liam Breatnach, ‘An Early Text on the Provinces of Ireland’, forthcoming.

²⁹ All of these are discussed in Breatnach, ‘An Early Text’.

³⁰ Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973; 2nd edn, Dublin, 2001), p. 230.

experienced as much ‘history’ as anyone else, and Byrne’s observation reminds us that our surviving sources are skewed by historiographical and geographical biases as much as socioeconomic ones.

The Gaelic population of Ireland could also be presented as being divided into three *prímchenéla* (‘chief kindreds’): the Ulaid (‘Ulstermen’), the Laigin (‘Leinstermen’) and the Féni (who comprised the men of Connacht, the Uí Néill and the Eóganachta). We see this threefold division of Ireland particularly in law texts. Many of the laws of early Ireland are expressly depicted as being the law of the Féni, but aspire to have jurisdiction over all of the ‘men of Ireland’. The seventh-century law text, the *Senchas Már*, includes references to legendary jurists of the Ulaid and the Féni, Sencha and Brig, respectively (the latter being a woman, who is often shown to have superior wisdom to her Ulster counterpart), and one of its constituent tracts, on beekeeping, refers to a ‘judgement which was passed by the *Ulaid* and the *Féni*’.³¹ Cumulatively, the evidence of the *Senchas Már* suggests that the Féni were asserting their legal jurisdiction over the Ulaid, but it is unclear whether that can be extrapolated to an island-wide legal jurisdiction: *la Féniu* (‘according to the Féni’) is often translated by modern scholars as ‘according to the Irish’ or ‘in Irish law’ and is assumed to apply to all of the free population of Ireland, but whether or not this assumption is an accurate one is uncertain. For present purposes, the key point is that this threefold division of Ireland can here be read alongside the twofold division into north and south, and the fivefold provincial division, simply in order to illustrate some of the complexities of geographical and political identity in early medieval Ireland.

Language

The dominant understanding of language in early medieval Ireland was that Hebrew was the original human language that had been spoken after Creation. In accordance with the biblical account, it was taught that other world languages had been created at the confusion of tongues following the construction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Of these, Greek and Latin were regarded alongside Hebrew as being of particular importance, not least because those were the three alphabets used to inscribe ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’ at the head of Christ’s cross (John 19:19–20; Aramaic and Hebrew use the same alphabet). Accounts of the ‘invention’ of the Irish language, which were probably developed in response to the fact that Irish is not among the languages mentioned in the Bible, stated that it was an artificial and composite language, created from bits of all the other languages of the world, in the aftermath of the dispersal of peoples from the Tower of Babel. This concept was elucidated in the earliest ‘core’

³¹ Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly, ed. and trans., *Bechbretha: an Old Irish Law-Tract on Bee-Keeping* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 70–1, §33 (for judgement passed by Ulaid and Féni), pp. 133–4 (for other references to the Féni, although I would dispute their assertion there that ‘*Fénechas* is the traditional oral law of the Irish’; my suspicion is that it was originally something more geographically limited in scope).

section of the Old Irish grammatical tract *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Scholars' Primer'), which states:

ar-a:ránic Fénius Farsaid ocin tur Nemruaid cinn deich mblíadnae iar scaíliud ón tur γ is cach combérlaid do:chuaid a suidiu dochum a chríche γ ni cach comcheniúil, amal ro:gab Cai Caínbrethach, dalta Fénius Farsaid, in dara descipul sechtmogat na scole: ba do Ebraib a bunadus γ ba co Éigipt ro:foíded γ is and ro:an Fénius feissin ocin tur γ is and ad:rothreb conid and-sin con:atgetar cuici in scol bérla do thepiu dóib asna ilbérlaib acht combad leo a n-óenur no:beth no la nech fo:glennad leo. Is and-sin do-reped a mbérla asna ilbérlaib γ do:aiselbad do óen díb, conid a ainm-side for:tá a mbérla-sa, conid Goídelc de-s[h]in ó Goídiul mac Angin mic Glúnf[h]ind mic Láimf[h]ind mic Agnumain do Grécaib.

Fénius Farsaid invented it at Nimrod's tower at the end of ten years after the dispersion from the tower and it is every one speaking the same language that went from there to his territory and not every one of the same kindred, as for instance Cai Caínbrethach, [pupil of Fénius Farsaid, one of the 72 students] of the school: he was of the Hebrews and it was to Egypt that he was sent and it is there Fénius himself stayed, at the tower, and it is there he lived, until the school asked him to extract a language out of the many languages such that they only would speak it or anyone who might learn it from them. It is there that the language was cut out of the many languages and it was assigned to one of them, so that it is his name by which the language is called, so that Goídelc [Irish] is hence from Góedel mac A. mic G. mic L. mic A. of the Greeks.³²

There is a lot going on in this passage, not the least the interesting idea that the dispersal of peoples was arranged according to linguistic identity rather than by 'kindred'. The intensely academic origin of the language – the invention of Irish is presented as a scholastic exercise – is noteworthy. We might also observe the Greek origin ascribed to Goídel, after whom the Irish language (Goídelc) was said to be named, which complements the ideas noted briefly above about Irish descent from Greeks. Perhaps the most important element, though, is the idea that Irish was 'cut out of' all the other languages, something that offered justification for the etymologising techniques, derived from Isidore of Seville, which were applied by medieval scholars to their language and thereby gave meaning not only to Irish words themselves but also to the concepts that those words expressed.³³ Early in the history of *Auraicept na nÉces*, the legend of Fénius was developed further, and Early Middle Irish commentary on the text states

³² Anders Ahlqvist, ed. and trans., *The Early Irish Linguist* (Helsinki, 1983), p. 47, §§1,2-1,11 (translation slightly adapted, as indicated by square brackets).

³³ Paul Russell, 'Read it in a Glossary': *Glossaries and Learned Discourse in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2008).

that he ‘discovered’ no fewer than four alphabets: Latin, Greek, Hebrew and ogam.³⁴ However, as we have already seen above with varying explanations for Irish geography and ethnicity, there was not one universally accepted account of how the three sacred languages were discovered and first written. The presence of alternative explanations and competing versions can be seen, for example, in the Middle Irish *Lebor Ollaman*, which cites, but subsequently refutes, the statement that Fénius invented them. According to the author of the *Lebor Ollaman*, Hebrew was ‘devised’ by Adam and first written by Moses, while the Greek alphabet was invented by the Phoenicians and brought to the Greeks by Cadmus:

‘Is he in fer cetna Fenius ar-ranaic na cetheora haipgitre at-rubramar romaind’. Michorp sin ar in aipcítir Ebraide cetamus ní hé Fenius ar-ranaic hí ar ní hé ro tinnscain an Ebra acht mad Adamh. Aipgítir Grecca dano ní he Fenius ar-ranaic sin acht madh Fainices, tuath do Grecaib fuil re muir atuaid. Is iat [ar-]ranaic ind aipgítir Grecca 7 Cathmus mac Agenoris, oglach amra do Grecaibh, is e do-rat uaidib í co Grecaib. Aipgítir Ebraide dano, ní he Fenius ar-riachta acht is he Maisi mac Amra ar-riachta dia ro scriph Dia recht do Maisi. Aipgítir Gaidelce immorro is he Fenius ar-riachtaí la taob na suad n-aíll. *Sudet qui legat.*

‘It is the same man, Fénius Farsaid, who discovered the four alphabets we have spoken of above’. That is an incorrect text, for as regards the Hebrew alphabet first of all, it is not Fénius who discovered it, for it is not he who devised Hebrew but Adam. As for the Greek alphabet, it is not Fénius who discovered it, moreover, but the Phoenicians, a Greek race to the north of the sea. It is they who invented the Greek alphabet and Cadmus, son of Agenor, a wonderful Greek youth, brought it from them to the Greeks. As for the Hebrew alphabet, it is not Fénius who discovered it but Moses, son of Amrae, who discovered it when God wrote the law for Moses. As for the Irish alphabet, however, it is Fénius who invented it along with the other sages. *Let him who reads sweat.*³⁵

It is worth noting here the distinction that the author of the *Lebor Ollaman* makes between a language and its alphabet. This is significant, in part because Irish was a language that had two alphabets – ogam and Roman – but also because the ability to read and write an alphabet, as opposed to speaking a language, was a skill possessed by a minority in the Middle Ages. (Incidentally, it is not a given that everyone who could read in medieval Ireland could also write – it seems likely that far fewer people were taught to write than to read, which is a concept that can seem alien to modern audiences for whom reading and writing are usually taught together.) The study of Latin was widespread across Ireland by the seventh century at the latest, and schoolrooms and scriptoria were bilingual environments.

³⁴ George Calder, ed. and trans., *Auraicept na nÉces: the Scholars’ Primer* (Edinburgh, 1917, repr. Dublin, 1995), pp. 88–9, l. 1132–5. For the dating of this passage, see Roisin McLaughlin, ‘Fénius Farsaid and the Alphabets’, *Ériu* 59 (2009), 1–24, p. 2.

³⁵ Text and translation in McLaughlin, ‘Fénius Farsaid and the Alphabets’, p. 9.

By contrast, while Irish interest in Greek and Hebrew was clearly extensive, the standard of training offered in Irish ecclesiastical schools in either of those languages has been subject to much debate. Recent assessments of the evidence point to a capacity, at least in some centres, to offer relatively advanced training in Greek, whereas knowledge of Hebrew was more rudimentary and derived primarily from the limited testimony of Jerome's *Hebrew Names*.³⁶

Elsewhere in the *Lebor Ollaman*, we see a slightly different assertion relating to other world languages – Enoch is identified as the first to write Hebrew, which then had to be rediscovered, as it were, by Cham after the Flood. Abraham is identified as having invented the Chaldean and Assyrian alphabets, and Carmentis the nymph as having invented the Latin alphabet, but it is still Fénius Farsaid to whom the ogam alphabet is ascribed:

Enoch tra in sechtmad fer ó Adamh ar-ranaic litri na nEbraide prius. Cam mac Nai iar ndilinn. Apraham dano ar-ranaic cairechtairi saine do litribh Asarda 7 Callacdhā et it inunda iar n-uimir 7 ese 7 litri na nEbraide. Maisi dono beos fuair litre na nEbraide arna sribend do laim De i Sleib Sina ic tidnacol rechta do Maisi. Estras immorro iar Maisi. Faenices cined do Grecaib fil for bru Mara Ruaid ar-ainic litri na nGrec archena. Cathmus mac Aigenoris tuc iat a Faenice. Carmentis nimpa ar-ranic litri Laitne. Fenius Farsaid ar-ranaic bethe luis nion an Ogaim do reir senchaidechta na nGaidel ...

Enoch, moreover, the seventh descendant from Adam, invented the letters of the Hebrews in the first instance. Ham son of Noah after the flood. It is Abraham, then, who discovered special characters for Assyrian and Chaldean letters and they are identical to Hebrew letters with regard to number and nature. Moses, then, got the letters of the Hebrews after they had been written by the hand of God on Mount Sinai while bestowing the law on Moses. Estras, then, came after Moses. The Phoenicians, a Greek race on the shore of the Red Sea, invented the letters of the Greeks, moreover. Cadmus son of Agenor, brought them from Phoenicia. Carmentis the nymph invented Latin letters. Fénius Farsaid invented the *beithe-luis-nin* of Ogam according to the tradition of the Gaels ...³⁷

Other texts give yet other accounts of the 'discoverers and inventors of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets'.³⁸ We shall return to the Tower of Babel in Chapter 4, in a consideration of the 'Matter of Babylon', but for now it is enough to note the way that Irish was fundamentally understood as a scholastic construct, 'cut out' from other languages after the dispersal of the peoples described in Genesis 11:9, and that it therefore occupied a place within the broader narrative

³⁶ Pádraic Moran, 'Hebrew in Early Irish Glossaries', *CMCS* 60 (2010), 1–21; idem, 'A Living Speech? The Pronunciation of Greek in Early Medieval Ireland', *Ériu* 61 (2011), 29–57; idem, 'Greek in Early Medieval Ireland', in *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman Worlds*, ed. Alex Mullen and Patrick James (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 172–92.

³⁷ Text and translation in McLaughlin, 'Fénius Farsaid', pp. 9–10.

³⁸ McLaughlin, 'Fénius Farsaid', p. 13.

of salvation history, worthy of consideration alongside the sacred languages of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Indeed, as Roisin McLaughlin has suggested, perhaps the account in *Auracaípt na nÉces* became the dominant one in medieval Irish intellectual culture precisely because of the audacity of its claim that ‘what was best ... [and] widest ... and finest’ of every language was used to construct Irish, a confidence in Ireland’s vernacular, which is mirrored elsewhere in the description of Irish as one of the ‘four chief languages’, along with Hebrew, Greek and Latin.³⁹

Law

The various accounts of Féníus Farsaid and his pupils provide a good example of how this fundamental ‘knowledge’, an edifice whose foundations situated Ireland within the biblical scheme, transcended disciplines and could be used to trace all aspects of early Irish society back to Old Testament roots. We see the same framework used to explain the nature of early Irish law. The relevant narrative is lengthy but it is worth citing Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s translation extensively as it exemplifies many of the same features that we saw above in accounts of the history of languages.

The first author that ever was in Ireland was Aimirgin Glúingéal the poet. He was a foster-son of Caí Caínbrethach, one of the 72 disciples of the school of Féníus Farsaid. It was that Caí who learned the law of Moses before he came from the east and he gave judgements according to the law [of Moses], and thus that matter is related. When Féníus sent his 72 disciples to learn the many languages throughout the world. It was Caí who went to Egypt, though he was a Hebrew by origin, and he learned the Egyptian language. He told Pharaoh about the dispersal of the school throughout the world and it was with Caí that the messengers came from Pharaoh asking Féníus to come to him. And the reward he gave them was that Scotia, daughter of Pharaoh, was given as wife to Nél son of Féníus. Hence the Irish are called Scotti. When the school and their teacher had come to Pharaoh they learned Egyptian with Caí. This is the time when the great signs were wrought in Egypt, i.e. the plague *et alia quae in lege scripta sunt et cetera*. When Féníus and all the scholars saw the great judgements which were performed *per seruos Dei* they went to learn with them for they considered that it was through knowledge and application that the Israelites outdid the Egyptian druids and performed the many signs. When the Israelites went in flight, Caí went with Moses. The school fled in terror of the signs already mentioned, did not go on the hosting with Pharaoh, and for fear of Pharaoh and his reproach on his return, Féníus put to sea. Caí remained in the company of Moses at this time and he was with him while crossing the desert and he parted from them

³⁹ McLaughlin, ‘Féníus Farsaid’, pp. 20–21. For the ‘best ... and widest ... and finest,’ see Ahlqvist, ed. and trans., *The Early Irish Linguist*, p. 48, §1,13. The reference to Irish as one of the ‘four chief languages’ can be found in *CIH* 926.21-2.

[the Israelites] after he had learned the law of Moses. He did not go to the Promised Land but to Greece and he lived in Thrace ... Caí came with the fleet which came from Thrace to meet his own people and he showed them his achievements since they parted, viz. the Law of God for men and His judgements. After that Caí was judge for the whole fleet.⁴⁰

This Middle Irish aetiological account of the Mosaic origins of early Irish law is clearly related to an earlier iteration, which we find in *Sanas Cormaic* ('Cormac's Glossary'):

Aliter, quod uerius est: Cai Cainbrethach, dalta Feniusa, iss e in descibul rosiacht Maccu Israheil fri fogloinn n-ebra, ⁊ is he ba brithem la longus Mac Miled. ⁊ is aire asberar Cai Cainbrethach de, fobith it bretha recta nobeired ⁊ is aire it imda issin berla.

Caí Cáinbrethach, the pupil of Féníus, he is the disciple who went to the Sons of Israel to learn Hebrew, and he was the judge with the fleet of the Sons of Míl. And the reason why he is called Caí Cáinbrethach [C. of the good judgements] is that he gave judgements of the [Mosaic] law and that is why they are abundant in Irish.⁴¹

This brief account, which focuses its narrative – as we would expect from a glossary-text like *Sanas Cormaic* – on the etymology of Caí's epithet, Cáinbrethach, has the same underlying concern as the longer, later account above, that is, attempting to explain the extensive influence of Mosaic law on early Irish law.

The idea that the laws of Hebrew Scripture had a significant influence on early Irish law is not simply an early medieval fabrication; rather, it is a recognition on the part of medieval commentators of a very real feature of the Old Irish law tracts. While the conceptual framework of Féníus and his pupils is an early medieval invention, the cultural phenomenon that the framework seeks to explain is genuine. It has long been established that the jurisprudential underpinnings of early medieval Ireland, and in particular the ideology of the great body of law comprising the so-called *Senchas Már*, owed a huge debt to both biblical and canon law. In a landmark article published in the early 1980s, Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Aidan Breen and Liam Breatnach showed in immense detail the range of ways that biblical law – particularly Levitical law – was adapted, translated and recast in early Irish vernacular law tracts.⁴² Since then, Breatnach has made a very strong case for the date of composition of the *Senchas Már* being sometime in the third quarter of the seventh century, and a plausible (though necessarily less

⁴⁰ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish Vernacular Law and the Old Testament', in *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 284–307, at pp. 288–9; cf. *CIH*, 1653–4.

⁴¹ Kuno Meyer, ed., '*Sanas Cormaic: An Old-Irish Glossary*', in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, ed. Osborn Bergin, et al. (Halle, 1912), IV, 1–128, at p. 14, §144.

⁴² Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Aidan Breen and Liam Breatnach, 'The Law of the Irish', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 382–438.

certain) case for it having been produced in Armagh.⁴³ Not long after it was composed, a copy of the *Senchas Már* was already circulating in the south of Ireland, as a layer of Old Irish glossing and commentary on the text was added in Munster, probably in the late eighth century.⁴⁴ Whatever the extent of the jurisdiction of our extant early Irish law, it certainly had the ambition to represent island-wide law. Furthermore, as Patrick Wadden has argued, soon after it was written, legal scholars sought to represent this law as the national product of a royal assembly. The ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ to the *Senchas Már*, composed within a century or so of the writing of the *Senchas Már* itself, presents a fictional narrative in which Irish law was agreed upon by a council of clerics, poets and scholars, including St Patrick, at the court of Lóegaire, Uí Néill king of Tara, in the fifth century. Indeed, the way that the ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ links the *Senchas Már* with Patrick is a further piece of evidence that hints at a seventh-century Armagh context for the latter’s composition, but we shall return to that in due course. One of the aspects of the ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ that Wadden has drawn attention to is the repeated use of the term *fir Éirenn* (‘men of Ireland’): ‘John Carey’s edition of the text runs to two-and-a-half pages, and within that short space the “men of Ireland” appear eleven times’.⁴⁵ Terms such as *flaithi Éirenn* (‘princes of Ireland’), *inis Éirenn* (‘island of Ireland’), and *rí Héirenn* (‘king of Ireland’) also recur. As Wadden argues, ‘through sheer force of repetition, the author is insisting on the unity of the island and its inhabitants both in Patrick’s time and his own’.⁴⁶ The ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ also presents the law of *Senchas Már* both as a form of Mosaic lawgiving and simultaneously as the product of a triumphant Christianity in ways that we will explore further in Chapters 1 and 5.

By the time we get to the twelfth century, we can see an acknowledgement of the fact that the Scandinavian population of Ireland did not (always) recognise Irish law. In the comedic Middle Irish tale *Araile Felmac Féig Don Mumain*, the main character, a student poet named Máel, arrives in the Scandinavian-ruled city of Limerick. He tries to exercise his privileges as a poet, stating that ‘there was a single treaty throughout Ireland’, but is told by the ruler of the city that ‘it is not in our law’, indicating that a different legal system may have applied among the urban communities of Ireland, at least when they were under Scandinavian rule.⁴⁷ In spite of the expansive ambitions of the *Senchas Már*, whether what we define as ‘early Irish law’ ever had jurisdiction over the entirety of the island at any time in history must remain a moot point. As with medieval Irish accounts of history and language, however, it certainly aspired to such national status.

⁴³ Liam Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text Senchas Már and the Question of Its Date* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁴⁴ Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 2005), p. 344.

⁴⁵ Parick Wadden, ‘The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már* and Royal Legislation in Early Ireland’, *Peritia* 27 (2016), 141–58, at p. 147.

⁴⁶ Wadden, ‘The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már*’, p. 147.

⁴⁷ Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., ‘*Araile Felmac Féig Don Mumain*: Unruly Pupils and the Limitations of Satire’, *Ériu* 59 (2009), 111–36, pp. 124–5, §3: *At-bert pa haoncairdiu fon Eilg ... “Nis fil inar mpescnai-niu.”*

History

This whirlwind tour of various pillars of early medieval Irish learning brings us to the fundamental topic of the present study: salvation history. In the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin computistical tract, *De ratione computandi*, its author (claiming Augustine as his authority) lays out four key pillars of learning: ‘divine scriptures, by which the future life is described and foretold; history, by which deeds are told; number, by which future events and divine rituals are calculated; and grammar, by which the wisdom of words is understood’.⁴⁸ An analogous vernacular scheme is incorporated in one manuscript copy of *LGÉ*, in which *stair* (‘history’) is again listed as ‘one of the four divisions’ (*cethri randa*) of Irish scholarship, along with *canóin* (‘canonical texts’, in this case referring to the law), *rím* (‘computus’ or ‘metrics’) and *gramadach* (‘grammar’).⁴⁹ As we have seen in relation other disciplines, the study of history was fundamentally rooted in the study of scripture.

Biblical history provided the fundamental chronological framework within which all medieval Irish historiography was conceived. The myths of Creation and the Flood and the accounts of the Jewish Exodus and Babylonian Captivity were believed to be literally true and gave all of world history its order and shape. However, in medieval Irish writings on history, biblical history cannot easily be excavated and examined in isolation from non-biblical material, since it is thoroughly interwoven and juxtaposed with narratives of Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman history and pre-history along with medieval conceptions of Irish and British history and pre-history, forming a body of material that is often characterised as ‘synthetic world history’, that is, the synthesising of a vast range of historical sources underpinned by a biblical scheme. The most influential historians for the Irish were Eusebius of Caesarea (whose works were available in Latin through the translations of Rufinus and Jerome), Augustine of Hippo and Paulus Orosius, and their conceptions of history were vital for providing the ‘global’ salvation narrative within which Ireland sought to carve out space for itself.

The theory of ‘salvation history’ (often referred to in scholarship using the German term *Heilsgeschichte*) was developed by scholars of the Old Testament in the mid-twentieth century. As one theologian has noted, ‘The image of a “God who acts in history” predominated in the theology’ of the generation after World War II.⁵⁰ Rather than being viewed as a ‘static repository of theological truths, the Bible came alive as the record of a people’s developing relationship with God’.⁵¹ This twentieth-century theology has direct parallels with the way that biblical narrative and the course of history were viewed by medieval intellectuals. In the

⁴⁸ Cited in Deborah Hayden, ‘The Book of Ballymote and the Grammar of Irish’, in *Book of Ballymote*, ed. Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin, 2018), pp. 77–100, at p. 80: *Canon diuinus, in quo narrator et praedicatur uita future; historia, in qua narrantur gesta rerum; numerus, in quo facta futurorum et solemnitates diuine enumerantur; grammatical, in qua scientia uerborum intelligitur.*

⁴⁹ Hayden, ‘The Book of Ballymote,’ pp. 77–9.

⁵⁰ Robert Gnuse, ‘New Directions in Biblical Theology: the Impact of Contemporary Scholarship in the Hebrew Bible’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62:3 (1994), 893–918, at p. 893.

⁵¹ Gnuse, ‘New Directions in Biblical Theology’, p. 893.

words of Constantinos Patrides, ‘the God of Israel is not an impersonal abstraction, dwelling beyond the confines of the universe and utterly incommunicable. On the contrary, as the Bible repeatedly insists, he is a “living God”, and, because living, concerned actively with the affairs of his creatures, always preoccupied with their fortunes, constantly interfering in the course of human events, whether to chastise or reward, to punish or commend, to destroy or to save.’⁵² As Ernst Breisach has shown, the change from pagan Roman historiography to Christian historiography ‘came in asserting the Old Testament view that God worked his ways in history’.⁵³ We can see an explicit statement of that in Psalm 73:12, which declares:

Deus autem rex noster ante saecula,
operatus est salutem in medio terrae.

But God is our king before ages:
he hath wrought salvation in the midst of the earth.

This verse encapsulates many of the themes of what follows, since I argue that the idea of salvation history – God having wrought salvation in the midst of the earth – is, in medieval Irish sources, bound up with a view of history, influenced by the biblical book of Daniel, as a series of successive empires or ‘world kingdoms’, their rise and fall revealing a secular power that was entirely subject to divine grace, and that amidst these shifting dynamics of global power lies the history of God’s chosen people. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s chosen people were the Jews, but in the eyes of early medieval Christians, they had forfeited their right to that status through their rejection of Christ as Messiah; as we shall see, medieval Irish writers believed that the people of Ireland could pick up that mantle and, through the use of typology, analogy and the reshaping of historical narrative, create for themselves a central place in the salvation scheme.⁵⁴

The whole spectrum of Christian history falls under the rubric of ‘salvation history’, that is, past, present and future, culminating in the eschatological resolution of all human history at Judgement Day. This is a history with a beginning (Creation), a ‘central event’ (the Incarnation) and an ‘ultimate goal’ (the Eschaton).⁵⁵ Within the overarching concept of ‘salvation history’ a number of different historical and chronological schemes operated within medieval Ireland: we might roughly – and perhaps rather simplistically – characterise them as Augustinian, Orosian and Eusebian. Although in some of his writings Augustine used the historical scheme of the period ‘before the law’ (i.e. pre-Mosaic), the period ‘under the law’ (i.e. from Moses to the Incarnation) and the period of ‘grace’ (from the Incarnation to Judgement Day), the predominant scheme that he used was that of

⁵² Constantinos A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* (London, 1972), p. 3.

⁵³ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 3rd edn (Chicago, 2007), p. 77.

⁵⁴ For an eschatologically-oriented exploration of how the framework of salvation history can be used to understand a corpus of medieval Irish texts, see Gregory Toner, ‘History and Salvation in *Lebor na hUidre*’, in *Lebor na hUidre*, ed. Ruairi Ó hUiginn (Dublin, 2015), pp. 131–53.

⁵⁵ Breisach, *Historiography*, p. 78.

the ‘Six Ages of the World’. This scheme provided the fundamental framework for the eleventh-century Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*, as well as many other related texts on chronology.⁵⁶ Eusebius provided a more detailed chronological scheme, synthesising in his *Chronicon* the events of biblical history with Assyrian, Persian and Mediterranean history. We see the influence of this in some of the detail of the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*, for example, and also in the synthetic histories and ‘synchronisms’ that place Ireland’s imagined pre-history into a Eusebian paradigm. The Orosian model was indebted to both Eusebius and Augustine, but for Augustine, ‘neither meaning nor stability could be found in the Earthly City, a sphere of incessant change. Every state or empire had vanished forever after it had fulfilled its historical role’.⁵⁷ Orosius, by contrast, in his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, saw a typological function for the histories of fallen empires. In the words of Ernst Breisach, medieval chroniclers ‘took note of Orosius’s use of typological interpretations for the postbiblical world. The biblical past shed light on events of the present and future ... it mattered that Orosius emphasized Daniel’s scheme of four monarchies or empires rather than Augustine’s six ages’.⁵⁸

Eusebian, Augustinian and Orosian forms of historiography were all influential in medieval Ireland, and all played a part in the development of Irish world history, as we shall see in relation to sources of ‘world history’, such as the Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*; in the narration and interpretation of biblical history, such as in *Saltair na Rann* and *Scél Saltrach na Rann*; in the understanding of British history and its relationship with Irish history, as found in the *Lebor Bretnach*; and in the development of the medieval conception of Irish pre-history as exemplified by *LGÉ* and related texts.⁵⁹ Indeed, *LGÉ* has been characterised as ‘a national myth which sought to put Ireland on the same footing as Israel and Rome’.⁶⁰ The centrality of salvation history to medieval Irish intellectual thought is evidenced in the fact that one or more of the aforementioned texts is found in almost every single vernacular Irish manuscript of the pre-modern era. We do not know the original foliation and full contents of our earliest surviving manuscript written entirely in the vernacular, *Lebor na hUidre*, but it seems very likely that its now-fragmentary copy of the *Sex Aetates Mundi* opened the codex, followed by a copy of the *Lebor Bretnach*.⁶¹ The twelfth-century Rawlinson B502 contains a copy of the *Sex Aetates Mundi* as well as *Saltair na Rann*.⁶² Its rough contemporary, the Book of

⁵⁶ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi* (Dublin, 1983); Hildegard L. C. Tristram, ed. and trans., *Sex Aetates Mundi. Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren. Untersuchungen und Texte* (Heidelberg, 1985).

⁵⁷ Breisach, *Historiography*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Breisach, *Historiography*, p. 86.

⁵⁹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*; David Greene, ed. and trans., *Saltair na Rann* (unpublished, available online at the website of the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies); Myles Dillon, ed. and trans., ‘*Scél Saltrach na Rann*’, *Celtica* 4 (1958), 1–43; van Hamel, ed., *Lebor Bretnach*; Macalister, ed. and trans., *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. All of these sources will be discussed in detail in the chapters which follow.

⁶⁰ John Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 1.

⁶¹ RIA MS 23 E 25 (cat. 1229), Clonmacnoise, c. 1100.

⁶² Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B 502, Leinster, s. xii.

Leinster, contains a copy of *LGÉ*.⁶³ The later Book of Ballymote contains the *Sex Aetates Mundi*; texts on the ages of the world related to the *Historia Brittonum*, *Lebor Bretnach* and *LGÉ*.⁶⁴ Its contemporary, the Book of Uí Mhaine, contains genealogical material related to *LGÉ* and a copy of the *Lebor Bretnach*.⁶⁵ Another manuscript produced at around the same time, the Book of Lecan, contains *LGÉ* and the *Lebor Bretnach*.⁶⁶ The historical framework set out in these sources thus continued to be fundamental to the worldview of the manuscripts' compilers.

Outline of study

In what follows, I use a range of sources, Latin and vernacular, dating from the seventh century to the twelfth, but with a focus on the Middle Irish period (c. 900–1200 CE) to trace the development of medieval Irish articulations of two interrelated concepts: history and salvation. In Chapter 1, we shall examine early Irish writings on the history of the Jewish people and some of the ways that the people of Ireland were typologically presented as the inheritors of the mantle of God's chosen people. I shall focus in particular on the way that St Patrick was modelled as a Moses-like figure, a lawgiver who brought Ireland to the promised land of salvation. In Chapter 2, we turn our attention to the figure of King David as a paradigm of kingship and as a prefiguration of Christ and therefore of the Christian Church. The discussion will centre on five tenth-century narratives about David and his relationships with his sons, Absalom and Solomon, and these will be used as focal points from which to explore wider questions of good kingship, sexual morality and the legal prerogatives of kings. In Chapter 3, we will explore David's songs, the psalms, and investigate their central role in education, ideology and literary culture, using sources ranging from Psalters, commentaries and exegesis through to figurative poetry, humorous anecdotes and narrative prose. In Chapter 4, our attention shifts to idolatrous peoples, particularly to the history of Babylon and to the ways that writing about the 'Matter of Babylon' formed part of an emerging interest in imperial and urban power, which I argue was partly a response to the arrival of another *gens*, the Scandinavians, on the island of Ireland, and their incorporation into the political, economic and ecclesiastical landscape. Finally, in Chapter 5, I investigate representations of Christianity as a salvific force that will bring about the end of idol worship. In exploring this movement from Hebrew Scriptural history into Greek New Testament history, we will consider ideas regarding conversion, martyrdom and the apostolic missions as forces of opposition to idolatry, as well as the 'fulfilment' of salvation history. I argue that Patrick, in conjunction with his image as another Moses, was also presented as an apostle, engaged in a mission that brought the light of truth to Ireland, and that Patrick's mission was seen as evidence of God having wrought salvation at the very ends of the earth.

⁶³ TCD MS H 2. 18 (cat. 1339), Terryglass, Co. Tipperary? Later Oughaval, Co. Laois?, s. xii².

⁶⁴ RIA MS 23 P 12 (cat. 536), Ballymote, Co. Sligo, 1390/1.

⁶⁵ RIA MS D ii 1 (cat. 1225), Co. Galway, 1394.

⁶⁶ RIA MS 23 P 2 (cat. 535), Co. Sligo, 1397–1418.

1 In the Egypt of this our island

Reflections on Jewish history

Although the New Testament was considered by Christians to have fulfilled and superseded the Old, the Hebrew Scriptures remained central to all of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The history of the world and of humanity as it is described in the Hebrew Scriptures was believed by early Christians to be historical truth. In the Hebrew Bible, Jews are consistently portrayed as God's chosen people, and yet Christians held Jews to be collectively responsible for the death of Christ, whom they believed to be God made flesh. This presented a difficult set of problems. As Tristan Major has argued, the 'canonization and adoption' of Hebrew Scripture on the part of Christians led to a need to reconfigure the relationship between certain non-Jewish communities and Jewish identity, and 'this reconfiguration was complex, for it entailed a rejection of contemporary Jewish identity in conjunction with an adoption of past Jewish identity'.¹ In other words, Christians adopted Jewish scriptural history as their own while simultaneously rejecting the faith and cultural practices of their Jewish contemporaries.

This tension is revealed in a wide range of sources surviving from medieval Ireland, which, on the one hand, use a variety of historiographical, literary and interpretive strategies to appropriate Jewish history in order to create Irish pre-history even as, on the other hand, they invoke antisemitic rhetoric to condemn Jews for what Irish authors regarded as kin-slaying, infidelity and a failure to recognise the true Messiah.² Intermingled with these multifaceted approaches to Jewish culture are geographical considerations, not least the concept of the city of Jerusalem as the centre of the world, as a prefiguration of the heavenly city and as a place with which many medieval Irish intellectuals engaged imagina-

¹ Tristan Major, *Undoing Babel: the Tower of Babel in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Toronto, 2018), p. 50.

² I follow the approach of Andrew P. Scheil who has argued that, 'Absent from Anglo-Saxon England in any real physical sense, Jews were nevertheless present as imaginative, textual constructs, manifest only in the distorted shadow cast by the Christian tradition. "Jews" and "Judaism" will thus stand (sans quotation marks hereafter) for, in essence, a nexus of rhetorical effects, a variety of representational strategies built into the very structure of medieval Christianity'. *The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2004), p. 3. As I hope the evidence discussed in this chapter will show, this framework for understanding the Christian appropriation of Jewish history is as applicable to sources from early medieval Ireland as to those from England in the same period.

tively from their distant and peripheral homeland. In this chapter, then, we shall examine a wide range of medieval Irish texts that draw on or elucidate aspects of Jewish history, with a view to uncovering how authors negotiated the tensions between their interest in, and hostility towards, the Jewish people and their central role in salvation history. As we shall see, many of these sources engaged in an act of reshaping Irish history along Old Testament lines, or reshaping Old Testament history along Gaelicised lines, with a view of locating Ireland fully within the discourse of Christian salvation. In some cases, engagement with Jewish history was part of a genuine attempt to communicate knowledge about the wider world; in others, medieval Irish accounts of Jewish history were something more akin to a hall of mirrors – sometimes distorting, sometimes deceptive – through which writers could see reflections of their own history, echoing through the ages to provide moral and political lessons for their contemporary society.

Although the ways in which Jewish history informed the writing of Irish history has not, to the best of my knowledge, been the subject of systematic study, previous commentators have looked at a range of ways in which the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures determined various aspects of early medieval Irish society. Raymund Kottje, in his foundational study of the influence of the Pentateuch on early Irish canon law and penitentials, argued that one of the defining characteristics of the early Irish Church was ‘a preference for the Old Testament’ over the New.³ This fundamental observation was supplemented by the groundbreaking work of Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Aidan Breen and Liam Breatnach, who showed that this influence was not limited to Latin canon law in Ireland but was also at the very heart of vernacular law.⁴ Back in the realm of canon law, Rob Meens undertook a comparative study of the *Collectio Vetus Gallica* (from Lyon, c. 600) and the early eighth-century Irish *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, and demonstrated a ‘remarkable difference in attitude’ between the two collections ‘not only in view of the actual use of the Old Testament but also with regard to the adoption of Old Testament attitudes towards questions of purity and impurity’.⁵

These important studies on legal and penitential sources had been preceded by a hugely significant article by John Hennig, who explored multiple literary references to Moses in early Ireland across a wide variety of genres. While the influence of Levitical law on Latin and vernacular legal texts in Ireland is profound and undeniable, it cannot be isolated from a wider ideological framework, which Hennig had already begun to trace.⁶ The idea that this ‘preference for the Old Testament’ had all-encompassing social and intellectual consequences was picked up on and developed by subsequent scholars: Donnchadh Ó Corráin recognised further ways in which the Hebrew Scriptures shaped vital parts of early Irish society in

³ Raymund Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters (6. – 8. Jahrhundert)* (Bonn, 1964): ‘eine Vorliebe für das Alte Testament’.

⁴ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, ‘The Laws of the Irish’.

⁵ Rob Meens, ‘The Uses of the Old Testament in Early Medieval Canon Law: the *Collectio Vetus Gallica* and the *Collectio Hibernensis*’ in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 67–77, at p. 75.

⁶ John Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses in Ireland’, *Traditio* 7 (1949–51), 233–61.

a 1987 study that looked beyond legal texts to *LGÉ, Sanas Cormaic* ('Cormac's Glossary'), aetiological tales and the concept of the Levitical 'city of refuge'.⁷ Kim McCone examined potential Old Testament sources for medieval Irish literary narratives, hagiography and poetry.⁸ In a stimulating monograph based on her Aberdeen PhD thesis, Varese Layzer 'juxtaposed' medieval Irish tales with narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures, thereby drawing out suggestive comparisons in literary construction, characterisation and the communication of moral values through story.⁹ In 1996, Michael Herren asked a decisive but controversial question – did the early Irish Church possess fundamental 'Judaizing tendencies'?¹⁰ Herren offered only a brief and preliminary response to that question, albeit one that offered yet more examples of the influence of Hebrew Scriptures on early Irish literature and concluded with an invitation to scholars to pursue the question further.

One key aspect of Herren's conclusion demands repetition here: 'What appears as "Judaizing" in Irish religious culture can be explained as a series of choices from the available Christian menu of biblical studies'.¹¹ This is a vitally important point and one which renders the term (and indeed the concept of) 'Judaizing' a potentially unhelpful one, not least because it inevitably carries with it resonances of the abhorrent antisemitism that has been directed at Jewish people over many centuries. Although the term 'Judaizer' was used by the Irish monk Columbanus (d. 615), as we shall see below, it was for him an entirely pejorative term – he vociferously denied that any Irish Christian had ever been a 'Judaizer'. The phenomenon we are seeking to explore here – and indeed the phenomena explored by Hennig, Kottje, Ó Corráin, McCone and Herren – is not a question of whether Irish Christianity was more or less 'Jewish' than Christianity elsewhere. As per Herren's statement, the issue should be framed differently: taking the Christian concept of salvation history in its entirety, from Creation to Judgment Day, many Irish ecclesiasts, jurists, poets and historians chose to draw more heavily from the Old Testament, a choice that lent a particular character to early medieval Ireland's laws, literature and perception of history. This would not have been understood by them as in any way contrary to the teachings of the New Testament or in any way at odds with their self-identity as members of the Catholic Church. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is claimed that Jesus stated that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Matt. 5:17). Or, as the seventh-century Irish author, Cumman, wrote: *Lex loquitur; apostolus probat* – 'the (Old Testament) Law speaks, the Apostle proves'.¹² For medieval religious and intellectual élites to draw more heavily from the Old Testament did not make them less Christian. What is of interest to us here is how and why Irish writers cast themselves as the

⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Irish Vernacular Law and the Old Testament'.

⁸ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990).

⁹ Varese Layzer, *Signs of Weakness: Juxtaposing Irish Tales and the Bible* (Sheffield, 2001).

¹⁰ Michael Herren, 'The "Judaizing Tendencies" of the Early Irish Church', *Filologia Mediolatina* 3 (1996), 73–80.

¹¹ Herren, 'The "Judaizing Tendencies"', p. 80.

¹² Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Cumman's Letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 60–1, l. 47–8.

natural inheritors of a divinely ordained history and law that, in their eyes, Jews had forfeited with Christ's Passion.

This phenomenon was hardly exclusive to Ireland: a comparable 'pronounced ... preference for Old Testament sources' has also been identified in the literature of early medieval England.¹³ As we shall with medieval Irish writers, so early English writers made use of Old Testament narratives 'in order to make sense of their own political and religious situation'.¹⁴ Samantha Zacher has laid out the following argument in relation to Old English biblical poetry:

On the surface, the aim of these texts is the conservation and recuperation of the cultural and religious world of the Israelites as depicted in the biblical texts. The poets valorize the faith, observance, and laws of the Hebrews and uniformly present a positive view of righteous Old Testament Hebrews, and of their rituals and practices. They also accentuate and exaggerate the ethnogenetic myths that lie at the heart of the Pentateuch to support their own politico-theological perspectives. Yet in each case the project of recuperation is balanced by opposing tensions. The poems invariably present the Israelites in paradoxical terms – on the one hand, as the chosen people of God, and on the other hand, as a nation to be superseded by Christians.¹⁵

I suggest that this reading of the Old English evidence has much to offer for our understanding of medieval Irish Old Testament adaptations, not least in relation to this innate tension between the depiction of the Jews of Hebrew scripture as God's chosen people and their simultaneous depiction as having sacrificed that status as a consequence of Christ's Crucifixion. Just as early English authors cast their people as the natural inheritors of Jewish history, so too did authors from Ireland.

'A carnal race ignorant of truth': early Irish antisemitism

It is of primary importance that medieval Irish conceptions and appropriations of Jewish history be understood within their ideological context, and this necessitates some discussion of antisemitism in early medieval Ireland. It is hard to overestimate the pervasiveness of antisemitic rhetoric in early Irish thought, although it ranges in degree from the formulaic to the virulent. One cannot help be reminded of Mr Deasy's observation in James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

... Ireland, they say, has the honour of being the only country which never persecuted the jews. Do you know that? No. And do you know why? ... Because she never let them in.¹⁶

¹³ Samantha Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament in Anglo-Saxon Verse: Becoming the Chosen People* (London, 2013), p. 14.

¹⁴ Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, p. xiii; see also Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel*, pp. 143–91, on the uses of the idea of the *populus Israel* in Old English and Anglo-Latin literature.

¹⁵ Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, p. xiv.

¹⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922; repr. London, 2000), p. 44.

Joyce was not far wrong in relation to the early Middle Ages. There is only one historical reference that attests to the presence of Jews in pre-Norman Ireland, namely an entry in the *Annals of Innisfallen* for 1079 that states in characteristically laconic style that five Jews came from overseas bearing gifts for Tairdelbach Ua Briain (d. 1086), king of Munster, and were sent away again.¹⁷ It is unclear whether this embassy represented attempts by a Continental city to forge a trading link with Ireland or whether these five Jews had been amongst the members of the Rouen community who had been invited to England by William the Conqueror in 1070. Aside from the formality of the presentation of gifts to Tairdelbach, there is no indication that this was an opportunity for cultural exchange and it remains that, in the pre-Norman period, knowledge of Jewish history and culture in Ireland was almost entirely based on information – both accurate and inaccurate – derived from written authorities, supplemented only by a few eyewitness accounts of the Holy Land from travellers, traders and pilgrims. Indeed, Rob Meens has argued that this very lack of Jewish communities in Ireland might be one reason why early Irish ecclesiasts were so willing to adopt aspects of Old Testament law: ‘maybe the Irish church leaders could do this more easily, because there was no threat from a Jewish population’.¹⁸ The absence of Jews in early medieval Ireland may have facilitated the adoption of aspects of Old Testament ideology and practice, but it did not prevent Irish writers from being virulently antisemitic.¹⁹

Most of the generic, or formulaic, antisemitism that we encounter amongst medieval Irish writers is in the form of references to Jews being responsible for Christ’s death, in spite of the fact that, for Christians, his death was necessary for the salvation of mankind. However, some instances of antisemitic rhetoric go much further. Columbanus, who is more likely than most early medieval Irishmen to have encountered Jews during his high-profile career in Continental Europe, expressed some of the strongest criticism of the Jewish people. For example, in one of his letters on the dating of Easter, he wrote, in reference to the idea that Easter should not fall on the same day as Passover:

numquid Iudaei reprobi Pascha facere credendi sunt nunc, utpote sine templo, extra Ierusalem, Christo tunc figurato ab eis crucifixo?

¹⁷ AI, s.a. 1079: *Coicer Iudaide do thichtain dar muir , aisceda leo do Thairdelbach, , a n-díchor doridisi dar muir.*

¹⁸ Meens, ‘The Uses of the Old Testament’, p. 76.

¹⁹ On one level, the absence or presence of Jewish communities did not alter the continual fascination with both historic and contemporary Judaism amongst medieval Christians. David Nirenberg expressed this well when he observed that ‘from a statistical point of view, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that before 1800 the number of Jews inhabiting the vast region from Galway to Gibraltar and through the German-speaking lands, expressed as a percentage of the population, was close to zero. And yet throughout those regions, Christians thought constantly about Jews and Judaism’: ‘In Orange-Tawny Bonnets’, *London Review of Books* 40:3, 8 February 2018, pp. 19–21, at p. 21. See also Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel*, p. 7.

Must we now believe that the reprobate Jews keep Easter, inasmuch as they are without a temple, outside Jerusalem, the crucified Christ being prefigured by them?²⁰

He seems almost to revel in the misfortunes of the Jewish people, as, in his view, the loss of their holy city must surely signal God's displeasure. A few lines later, he argues that the feast of Passover belongs to God, not Jews. Elsewhere, he groups 'Jews and heretics and gentile heathens' together as 'enemies' of the Church.²¹ In another letter still, Columbanus contrasted the heresies (in particular, Arianism) that were then afflicting the Church in Italy with what he characterises as the doctrinal orthodoxy of Ireland. He writes:

Nos enim sanctorum Petri et Pauli et omnium discipulorum divinum canonem spiritu sancto scribentium discipuli sumus, toti Iberi, ultimi habitatores mundi, nihil extra evangelicam et apostolicam doctrinam recipientes; nullus hereticus, nullus Iudaeus, nullus schismaticus fuit; sed fides catholica, sicut a vobis primum, sanctorum videlicet apostolorum successoribus, tradita est, inconcussa tenetur.

For all we Irish, inhabitants of the world's edge, are disciples of Saints Peter and Paul and of all the disciples who wrote the sacred canon by the Holy Ghost, and we accept nothing outside the evangelical and apostolic teaching; none has been a heretic, none a Judaizer, none a schismatic; but the Catholic Faith, as it was delivered by you first, who are the successor of the holy apostles, is maintained unbroken.²²

We noted above Columbanus's claim that no Irish Christian had ever been a 'Judaizer' and the problematic nature of that term for modern analysis of the influence of the Hebrew Scriptures on early Irish society: it is more helpful to think in terms of a preference for, or greater emphasis on, the authority of the Old Testament. That being said, Columbanus's use of the term is striking, particularly given that the appropriation of Jewish history and identity that can be seen in medieval Ireland, and in particular the adoption by the early Irish legal system of many aspects of Levitical law, has been regarded by critics as distinctive to Ireland in pre-Carolingian Europe.²³ In this case, the immediate context for Columbanus's comments on 'Judaizing' amongst the Irish was the controversy over the relationship between the dates of the Jewish feast of Passover and the Christian feast of Easter, but we might consider whether it had a broader backdrop. Columbanus was writing at least fifty years before the composition of the most substantial early Irish law tract, the *Senchas Már*, which shows extensive

²⁰ Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera*, letter 1, p. 6; Robert Stanton, trans., 'Columbanus: Letter 1: Translation and Commentary', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993), 149–68, at p. 153.

²¹ Walker, ed. and trans., *Sancti Columbani*, letter 2, pp. 18–9.

²² Walker, ed. and trans., *Sancti Columbani*, letter 5, pp. 38–9.

²³ Meens, 'The Uses of the Old Testament', pp. 67–8.

debts to Levitical law, and before Muirchú wrote his Old Testament-influenced ‘Life of Patrick’ (see below, pp. 41–5), but perhaps some of Columbanus’s defensiveness was in part a response to a preexisting intellectual emphasis on the Old Testament over the New in sixth-century Ireland, at least in certain ecclesiastical centres. We do not have the evidence to push this speculation any further, and it may be the case that Columbanus’s depiction of Ireland as an example of orthodoxy on the ‘periphery’ in the face of heresy at the ‘centre’ is a rhetorical pose shaped solely by the Easter debate and the contemporary struggles of the papacy. What is important for our purposes is to note that medieval Irish interest in, and adaptation of, Jewish history and identity took place in the face of this sort of pervasive antisemitism: to be a ‘Judaizer’ was a negative quality, comparable to being a heretic, schismatic or pagan. At its heart was the idea that, as a result of their perceived responsibility for Christ’s death – an act of kin-slaying – Jews had forfeited their status as God’s chosen people, and the Irish had the potential to take on the mantle of the people of God. As such, the history of Ireland could be shaped to reflect the idea that its people were the inheritors of an Israelite past.

Another Irishman who left his homeland for a career in Continental Europe was John Scottus Eriugena (d. c. 877), and his poetry also evinces strong elements of antisemitism. For example, he wrote:

Est antiqua domus mortis noctisque profundae:
 Iudaicum pectus, uitiorum plena uorago,
 Fraudis et inuidiae semper possessio larga,
 Luminis exosi radios irata repellens.
 Illic sola potens ypocrisis perfida regnat;
 Illa putet nimium nimiaque putredine corda
 Carnalis populi corrumpit nescia ueri:

There is an ancient domicile of death and deepest night –
 The heart of the Jew! – a whirlpool filled with vice,
 Ever a broad estate of fraud and envy,
 Rejecting with rage the rays of the hated light.
 There faithless hypocrisy rules unrivalled;
 It stinks to high heaven and corrupts with its foulness
 The hearts of a carnal race ignorant of truth.²⁴

However, it was not only exiles from Ireland who could engage in extended and explicit antisemitic rhetoric: we cannot dismiss the antisemitism of Columbanus and Eriugena as rhetoric for a non-Irish audience. In the eighth-century poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan, for example, Blathmac describes Jews as ‘envious’

²⁴ Michael W. Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 92–3, l. 63–9. Elsewhere, Eriugena refers to the ‘Jewish magpie’, whom he groups together with the ‘southern Saracen’ and the ‘savage pagan’ from the north, as enemies of Christ to be conquered: *ibid.*, pp. 96–7, l. 1–4.

of Christ and states that it was a ‘hideous deed’ that his maternal kin should have crucified ‘the man who had come to save them’.²⁵ He expresses dismay that the earth did not swallow the ‘miserable pack who committed a great crime’ and that the ‘hasty people led by Annas and Caiphas’ were not turned to ashes.²⁶ Blathmac then goes on to list everything that God had done for the Jewish people: leading them out of Egypt, providing them with manna in the desert, bringing them to the Promised Land, liberating them from the Babylonian Captivity.²⁷ In the face of such divine benevolence, Jews were ‘of shameless countenance and wolf-like’, and guilty of kin-slaying:

Cach feb tecomnacht in rí
do Iudib ara célsini,
batar moíni do mogaib;
ro-coillset a cobfolaid.

Co dod-rindnacht recht doäib
ra-soíbsat co soíbgoäib;
ba noeb do chonaib gortaib,
margarét do méthtorcaib.

Every advantage that the King had bestowed upon the Jews in return for their clientship was “wealth to slaves”; they violated their counter-obligations.

Though he had granted them a law they twisted it with perverse lies; it was a holy thing to hungry dogs, a pearl to fat swine.²⁸

Blathmac states that, although God did not punish the Jewish people immediately for their act, he waited patiently and served revenge in the form of their persecution under Titus and Vespasian.²⁹ As we shall see in due course, the persecution of Jews under Vespasian would become part of the myth of Patrick’s role in the conversion of Ireland to Christianity in a rather unexpected manner, as Patrick ultimately came to be represented as an Israelite whose ancestors came to Britain as a result of that persecution (see below pp. 45–8). This idea of Patrick as directly descended from Jews shows how the sort of antisemitic rhetoric articulated by Columbanus, Eriugena and Blathmac interacted in complex ways with the appropriation of Jewish history and identity in medieval Ireland.

²⁵ James Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan* (Dublin, 1964), pp. 16–17, §§44, 47.

²⁶ Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 24–5, §69.

²⁷ Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 26–35, §§77–102.

²⁸ Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 36–7, §§106–7.

²⁹ Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 38–9, §114.

The world's navel

As noted in the Introduction, early Irish geography located Jerusalem at the centre of the world, with Ireland at its periphery. Just as it did elsewhere in Christendom, Jerusalem held a primary place in medieval Irish thought: I will explore some of the exegetical and spiritual significance of Jerusalem in contrast to the city of Babylon in Chapter 4. Here, it is sufficient to note the historical significance of Jerusalem insofar as it relates to Irish interest in Jewish history. Adomnán of Iona (d. 704), in his influential treatise *De Locis Sanctis* ('On the Holy Places'), noted the 'magnitude and character of the honour which this chosen and famous city has in the sight of the eternal father',³⁰ and he described the topography and ecclesiastical architecture of the city in great detail. He 'proves' that Jerusalem is at the centre of the world because there is a column in the city that casts no shadow at midday on the solstice. This observation he supplements with the authority of the psalms, as he states:

Deus autem rex noster ante saeculum operatus est salutem in medio terrae, hoc est in Hierusalem, quae mediterranea et umbilicus terrae dicitur.

'God our king before the ages hath wrought our salvation in the centre of the earth', that is Jerusalem, which is said to be in the centre of the earth and its navel.³¹

We have already encountered this passage from the psalms in considering the framework of salvation history (see Introduction). Here, Adomnán uses a Christological reading of Psalm 73:12 to inform the reader that the psalmist was predicting Christ's Passion and Resurrection when he spoke of the salvation that God had wrought in Jerusalem, the 'navel' of the world. As well as looking to both Old and New Testament history in his descriptions of Jerusalem, Adomnán was alive to the historical changes that the city had undergone in its more recent history, and he writes – at a time when Jerusalem was ruled by the Umayyad Caliphate – that:

Ceterum in illo famoso loco ubi quondam templum magnifice constructum fuerat in uicinia muri ab oriente locatum nunc Saracini quadrangulam orationis domum ...

However, in the celebrated place where once the temple (situated towards the east near the wall) arose in its magnificence, the Saracens now have a quadrangular prayer house.³²

³⁰ Denis Meehan, ed. and trans., *Adomnan's De Locis Sanctis* (Dublin, 1958), pp. 42–3, I.1.13: *Hinc ergo non neglegenter annotandum est quanti uel qualis honoris haec electa et praedicabilis ciuitas in conspectu aeterni genitoris habeatur ...*

³¹ Meehan, ed. and trans., *Adomnan's De Locis Sanctis*, pp. 56–7, XI.1–4.

³² Meehan, ed. and trans., *Adomnan's De Locis Sanctis*, pp. 42–3, I.1.14.

Adomnán based some of his account on written sources, particularly the works of Jerome, but he claimed also to have the eyewitness testimony of Arculf, a Frankish bishop who is alleged to have been shipwrecked on Iona and to have described and drawn the major pilgrim sites of the Holy Land for Adomnán. Although some scholars have downplayed the role of Arculf and even suggested that he was a literary fiction of Adomnán's creation, it is clear that Adomnán did have access to some very recent information – most likely conveyed by an oral informant – about the politics, geography and architecture of Palestine under the Caliphate.³³ *De Locis Sanctis* exemplifies the central place, both literally and figuratively, that the city of Jerusalem held in the scheme of salvation history. Although it is a particularly important example, it is far from the only evidence for the significance of Jerusalem to medieval Irish Christians, and indeed, it has been argued that this influence extended beyond the textual sphere into the ecclesiastical landscape. Tomás Ó Carragáin has convincingly demonstrated that the sacred architecture of Jerusalem had a profound influence on the building of churches, and the specific arrangement of major ecclesiastical sites, in Ireland:

The concentric enclosures of Irish ecclesiastical sites identify them as places of sanctuary characterised by a hierarchy of sacred space: they were modelled on the biblical cities of refuge and Jerusalem itself. Excavation evidence and its ubiquity in the landscape suggest that this layout, and probably the ideas underpinning it, have their origins in the fifth or sixth century, though the earliest surviving documentary sources outlining these ideas date from the seventh. The mortared churches built at major sites during the eighth and ninth centuries were, it seems, intended to make more specific references to sacred cities, especially Rome and Jerusalem.³⁴

Although the present study is primarily concerned with written sources, it is worth bearing in mind those visual cues in the built environment of medieval Ireland, which also served to encourage Christians to make cognitive connections between Ireland and the Holy Land.

Ó Carragáin has argued that the 'sacred topography' of Jerusalem had a stronger influence on the layout of the monastery of Iona than on that of Armagh, where Rome more strongly resonated in the ecclesiastical architecture.³⁵ But Armagh was the home of our only extant visual representation of the 'new Jerusalem' from medieval Ireland, that is, a plan of the eschatological city of Jerusalem preserved on f. 171r of the Book of Armagh (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 52), dating

³³ Robert G. Hoyland and Sarah Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* and the Seventh-Century Near East', *English Historical Review* 129 (2014), 787–807, offers an analysis of Adomnán's many references to the 'Saracens' in the context of the geopolitics of the region in the seventh century.

³⁴ Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory* (New Haven, 2010), p. 85.

³⁵ Ó Carragáin, *Churches*, p. 80.

from 807.³⁶ This visual representation of Jerusalem in its eschatological form – as a future ideal city, a counterpoint to Babylon (see Chapter 4 below) and a location that is mystical rather than geographical – was strongly influenced by exegesis on the Apocalypse, which itself drew heavily on earlier Jewish vision literature, most notably Ezekiel 48:1–28.³⁷ The gates of the city are represented on the map as spaces between the four walls of the square city. The map gives the names of the twelve apostles (based on Matt. 10:2–4, replacing Judas with Matthias, as per Acts 1:26), interpreted as the New Testament equivalent to the twelve tribes of Israel, who are also represented on the plan (see Chapter 5 for extensive discussion of the apostolic missions).³⁸ However, this is an imagined, exegetical city rather than a physical reality. Other sources offer claims of firsthand testimony of the historical Holy Land, which again have strong connections with Iona.

The Irish scientist Dicuil (*fl.* 820s), in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* ('Book on the Measurement of the Earth'), indicated that when he was a student at Iona, presumably in the late eighth century, a Brother Fidelis had recounted the details of a trip to Jerusalem.³⁹ Later in his book, Dicuil states that this same brother had travelled down the Nile to the entrance to the Red Sea. Obviously this presents a geographical problem, as the Nile does not flow into the Red Sea, but perhaps he had travelled from Jerusalem to the Gulf of Aqaba or was entering the Red Sea at the Gulf of Suez. Alternatively, it is possible that Fidelis travelled along the historic Nile-Red Sea canal, which, according to the ninth-century Egyptian historian Ibn Abd al-Hakam (d. 871), was reopened in the 640s and closed up again (due to rebellion by the Hijāz against the Abbasid Caliphate) in the late eighth century.⁴⁰ He claims to have seen *en route* the storehouses that Joseph had built to store the grain in the time of plenty in preparation for Egypt's famine. He informed Dicuil's teacher, Suibne, that when he arrived at a harbour at the entrance to the Red Sea, it had been:

ad orientalem pagam usque ad Moysi uiam per Rubrum mare paruum est spacium. Ille mensurator lateris horrei ire usque ad portum in quo introiuit Moyses cum populo suo in mare uoluit, non solum ut intresset portum, sed ut in eo uestigia curruum et rotarum orbitas Pharaonis cerneret. Nautae illi non consenserunt. Latitudo maris in eodem loco quasi .VI. sibi uisa est.

Inde in occidentali parte Rubri maris, hoc est in sinu extendente se longe in septentrionalem partem, ueliuola festinatione nauigauerunt. Illud est mare

³⁶ Digitised at https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/#folder_id=1827&pidtopage=MS52_007&entry_point=349 [accessed 12 Feb. 2020].

³⁷ Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Plan of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Armagh', *CMCS* 39 (2000), 23–38.

³⁸ O'Loughlin, 'The Plan of the New Jerusalem', pp. 32–3; see also the appendices giving the names and order of the twelve tribes (p. 37) and the names of the apostles (p. 38).

³⁹ Tierney, ed. and trans., *Diculi, Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, pp. 62–3, §12.

⁴⁰ John P. Cooper, 'Egypt's Nile-Red Sea Canals: Chronology, Location, Seasonality and Function', in *Connected Hinterlands: Proceedings of the Red Sea Project IV*, eds. L. K. Blue et al. (Oxford, 2009), pp. 195–210, at p. 198.

quod murmirantem populum Israel in deserto coartavit, ne in terram Aegypti regredi potuisset.

a small journey eastwards to the passage of Moses across the Red Sea. He who measured the side of the barn wished to go as far as the harbour where Moses with his people entered the sea, not only to enter the harbour, but in order to see in it the tracks of the chariots and the ruts of Pharaoh's wheels; but the sailors would not oblige. The width of the sea at that place seemed to him to be about six miles.

From thence they made a fast voyage in the western part of the Red Sea, that is, in the gulf which extends far towards the north. That is the sea which prevented the people of Israel, when murmuring in the desert, from being able to return to the land of Egypt.⁴¹

Dicuil seems to have been convinced by this account, since he states that he subsequently identified 'a branch of the Nile described as flowing into the Red Sea beside the town Oliva and the camp of Moses' in 'the *Cosmography* which was made in the consulate of Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius'.⁴² Whatever the practical realities of Fidelis's journey, if indeed it ever took place, the importance of Dicuil's account of it for our purposes is multifaceted. We may note how history is literally inscribed in the landscape: Fidelis believed that he would be able to see 'the tracks of the chariots and the ruts of Pharaoh's wheels' on the shore of the Red Sea. The idea of history being made manifest in the landscape is a common feature of medieval Irish literature, in which characters frequently leave lasting imprints on the mountains, plains and forests amidst which the narratives unfold.⁴³ For Fidelis, sacred history will be visible on the earth itself. Furthermore, Fidelis, much like Adomnán's Arculf, is clearly depicted as undertaking some sort of biblical 'Grand Tour', visiting the locations of the highlights of salvation history on his journey through the Holy Land. For Christians, Moses's crossing of the Red Sea was of huge liturgical significance, in part because it was one of the biblical readings for Holy Week. Moses's liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt was seen as prefiguring Christ's resurrection, which liberated mankind from damnation. Thus, the landscape of the Holy Land, with its supposed physical remains of the Exodus, finds its imaginative echo in the liturgy, where the narrative of salvation continued to be inscribed in the minds of all those who celebrated the Christian year.

Of course, one did not need to travel as far as the Holy Land to encounter sources of information about Jerusalem and its history. In his letter on the Easter

⁴¹ Tierney, ed. and trans., *Dicuili, Liber de Mensura*, pp. 62–3, §§17–18.

⁴² Tierney, ed. and trans., *Dicuili, Liber de Mensura*, pp. 64–5, §20.

⁴³ See, for example, the famous passage in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* where Fergus redirects his wrath and slices off the tops of hills, thereby creating the *téora máela Midi* ('three flat-topped hills of Meath'): Cecile O'Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), pp. 122 (ed.), 235 (trans.), l. 4070–4.

dating controversy, Cummian wrote (c. 631) that a delegation of Irish ecclesiastics had previously been sent to Rome:

Et in uno hospicio cum Greco, et Hebreo, Scitha et Aegiptiaco in aecclesia sancti Petri simul in pascha, in quo mense integro disiuncti sumus, fuerunt.

And they were in one lodging in the church of St Peter with a Greek, a Hebrew, a Scythian and an Egyptian at the same time at Easter, in which we differed by a whole month.⁴⁴

Cummian's multicultural guesthouse is as much a rhetorical construct as Columbanus's depiction of Ireland as the pinnacle of orthodoxy – Cummian is drawing on the widest possible geography to make the point that the recipients of his letter are alone amongst the peoples of the world in celebrating Easter at the wrong time – but it is a useful reminder that Rome was a centre for international travellers, and that pilgrims and delegations to Rome would have been important sources of knowledge about places yet further afield. The delegation returned to Ireland 'in the third year' of their journey, and no doubt they would have brought back news and eyewitness testimony of more than simply the most up-to-date practices for the calculation of the date of Easter.⁴⁵

It is unclear how many travellers from Ireland actually made it as far as the Holy Land. Irish engagement with continental Europe was extensive in the early Middle Ages but is only sporadically – or sometimes, only indirectly – documented. The Irish presence in continental Europe has been much studied, at least in terms of élite scholarly and ecclesiastical connections (much more work remains to be done in relation to trade).⁴⁶ Pilgrimage to Rome seems, from the annalistic record at least, to have become more common in the tenth and eleventh centuries than it had been previously, although one could argue conversely that perhaps it was so ubiquitous in earlier centuries that it was deemed less worthy of notice. Furthermore, royal pilgrimage to Rome seems to have been more notable (and therefore more likely to be recorded in annals) than pilgrimage by ecclesiastics. But the extent of travel to Jerusalem and its environs is unknown. Thomas Clancy has argued that it is within the context of an increase in foreign pilgrimage in the eleventh century that we should read the Middle Irish poem 'Mochen, Mochen, A Brénaid', which imagines the famed literary travels of St Brendan not as a westward sea-voyage over a supernaturally-inhabited ocean, but as an eastern pilgrimage to the Holy Land:

I tír thall Taprofáne,
dianid áge crand gréne,

⁴⁴ Walsh and Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Cummian's Letter*, pp. 94–5, l. 281–3.

⁴⁵ Walsh and Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Cummian's Letter*, pp. 92–3.

⁴⁶ See, most recently, Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder, eds., *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity Culture and Religion* (New York, 2016); Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion* (Dublin, 2017); Alexander O'Hara, *Columbanus and the Peoples of Post-Roman Europe* (Oxford, 2018).

ic Iordanán co n-úare,
ropsat deoradán Féne.

Ro fhégais fhót [in crochda,
ce] {théig} nimhá do shechna,
dar shliab Síon roscuchtha,
do thraigthe luchra lethna.

In the land of Taprobanê over there,
where the tree of the sun is a post,
at the chilly Jordan,
you were a pilgrim of the Irish.

You have seen the sod of the crucifixion,
(though you go, I cannot avoid you)
across Mount Sion have been moved
your bright broad feet.⁴⁷

Clancy suggested that the literary conceit of the use of the character of Brendan in the poem is intended to mask the real addressee of the poem whom Clancy proposes may have been a secular nobleman such as Máel Rúanaid úa Maíl Doraid, king of Cenél Conaill, who went on an overseas pilgrimage in 1026, or Flathbertach Ua Néill, king of Ailech, who went on pilgrimage to Rome in 1030.⁴⁸ Whether or not the true subject of the poem can be identified precisely, it does seem to fit within the context of a wider imaginative engagement with the Middle East in the tenth and eleventh centuries, thus rendering this reorientation of Brendan's journey from north and west to south and east less surprising. The Latin sermon by an Irishman named 'Dermatius' (Diarmait), written in 1117, calls on his audience to go to Jerusalem, but he seems to have been addressing a non-Irish audience and in any case describes a spiritual, rather than a physical, Jerusalem (for further discussion see Chapter 4).⁴⁹ It is unclear whether reality on the ground correlates with our written sources, but whether or not many Irishmen were actually travelling to Palestine by the tenth and eleventh centuries, certainly a significant number of them seem to have been thinking and writing about the history of Jerusalem and the Jewish people, and it is to these imaginative engagements that our attention now turns.

⁴⁷ Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Brendan's European Tour: the Middle Irish Poem *Mochen, Mochen, A Brénaid*, and the Changing Nature of Pilgrimage in the Eleventh Century', in *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, eds. Glyn S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden, 2006), pp. 35–52, edited and translated at pp. 46–9, §§4–5. Cf. Hans Oskamp, ed. and trans., 'Mochen, mochen, a Brénaid', *Éigse* 13 (1969–70), 92–8.

⁴⁸ Clancy, 'Brendan's European Tour', p. 41.

⁴⁹ J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, 217 vols (Paris, 1844–64), CLV, 485–90.

The Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

If we take the example of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – we can begin to see how subtle differences in medieval Irish accounts of Jewish history might reflect the particular interests and concerns of any given author. The Book of Uí Mhaine version of *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, a prose account of sections of Old Testament narrative, which Myles Dillon dated to c. 1100, opens with the following description of Abraham:

Abraham mac Nara (*sic.*) meic Nachoir iss é cétna firén tánic i ndomun iar ndíleind , iss é duine ropu dochu ri Dia i talmandaib ara méit do adradh do Dia , do firinne, , ara méit no imgabhadh geinte , adartha idal. Int Abram hísín ro thecht-saide sétich ro tusmiudh claimne , iartaige. Ba sí int shéitig sin Sara noichteacht ingen Aráin meic Thara, ingen a derbráthar fadesin.

Abraham son of Thare son of Nachor was the first righteous man that came into the world after the Flood, and he was the man most pleasing to God of the people of the earth on account of his devotion to God and to the truth, and for his avoiding of heathens and the adoration of idols. This Abraham had a wife for begetting of children and descendants. That wife was the ninety-year-old Sarah, daughter of Aran son of Thare, that is to say his own brother's daughter.⁵⁰

Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, was an important figure in medieval Irish culture, just as elsewhere in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic worlds. Here he is singled out for his faithfulness to God, that is, his monotheism, a theme to which we will return in Chapter 5. Other aspects of the description of Abraham in *Scél Saltrach na Rann* are notable, not least the emphasis on his wife also being his niece. In the late eleventh century, Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury had sent letters to Irish kings criticising what he perceived as certain problematic issues pertaining to marriage in Ireland, namely, the ease with which divorce could be obtained and the practice of marrying within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity.⁵¹ Opening *Scél Saltrach na Rann* with this display of Old Testament precedent for engaging in what would be regarded in the eleventh century as an incestuous union could thus be read as a defence of a widespread Irish marriage practice in the face of criticism from external – and possibly also domestic – authorities.

The author then moves on to Abraham's son, Isaac. Again, marriage practices are to the fore:

Hi cind céit bliadan aísse Abraim iss and ro tuismead mac dó .i. Ísaac a ainm. Int Ísaac hísín tuc sein mnaí in huair théchta dó .i. Rabeca ingen Bathuail.

⁵⁰ Dillon, ed. and trans., 'Scél Saltrach na Rann', pp. 8–9.

⁵¹ Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, eds. and trans., *The Letters of Lanfranc Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford, 1979), letters 9 (Lanfranc to Gofraid mac Amlaib, king of Dublin) and 10 (Lanfranc to Tairdelbach ua Briain). Lanfranc wrote in response to a letter he himself had received from Pope Gregory VII in July 1073 (letter 8).

Is [s]í cét-ben dia tucadh tindscrea isin domun. Isin tescatmaid bliadain áeisi Ísaic, ruc Rabeca claind .i. Iacób ⁊ Essau, ⁊ do óntairr ro focait a ndís. Acht ba toísechu gein ⁊ prímeinnecht Isau. Isau ba annso la Ísac ⁊ Iacób ba dochu lia máthair.

When Abraham was a hundred years old, a son was born to him, Isaac by name. This Isaac took a wife at the fitting time, Rebecca daughter of Bathuel, She was the first woman in the world for whom a bride-price was paid. In the sixtieth year of Isaac's age, Rebecca bore children, Jacob and Esau, and they were born at one birth, but first was the birth and primogeniture of Esau. Esau was dearer to Isaac, and Jacob was more pleasing to his mother.⁵²

Here the focus of the author is on the payment of a bride-price for Rebecca and on the fact that Esau being born slightly before his twin brother conferred upon him a right of primogeniture. The scene in which Jacob disguises himself – at Rebecca's suggestion – as his brother, is described in some detail before Isaac gives his blessing to Jacob, who will become the ancestor of the Israelites. Since it was clearly God's will that Jacob received Isaac's blessing, and not Esau, we may read here some implicit criticism of primogeniture. Again, the emphasis on the marriage between Isaac and Rebecca 'at the fitting time', the payment of the bride-price and inheritance of the younger son, may be a defence of Irish marriage practices in the face of criticism from reformers, whether internal or external.⁵³ We are then told that Jacob fled at the age of fourteen to the house of Laban, 'his mother's brother' (*bráthair a máthar*), and that he then 'took the two daughters of Laban and had them as wives, and one of the daughters, namely Lia, bore him six sons. ... The other daughter, Rachel, bore him two sons, and Joseph and Benjamin were their names. Each of the girls had a female slave ... They bore four sons to Jacob'.⁵⁴ As with Abraham, Jacob's marriages take place within what would be considered by eleventh-century reformers as an unacceptable degree of consanguinity, and furthermore, he uses his household slaves as concubines, highlighting two other issues – slavery and concubinage – that were controversial in late eleventh-century Ireland. In arguing that the marriages and

⁵² Dillon, ed. and trans., 'Scél Saltrach na Rann', pp. 8–9.

⁵³ It is important not to overstate difference in practice between Ireland and, say, Norman England. Primogeniture seems to have been taking root in England in the century following the Conquest of 1066, but the change was neither instantaneous nor absolute, and cases of partible inheritance, or at least inheritance by the eldest two or three sons, continued well into the twelfth century (see David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900-1300* (Harlow, 2005), esp. pp. 116–21). However, we can still see a contrast between such systems and the Irish practice of (usually equitable) division between all legally-recognised sons; the cumulative effect of *Scél Saltrach na Rann*'s interest in marriage, legitimacy and inheritance at least hints at a defence of that practice.

⁵⁴ Dillon, ed. and trans., 'Scél Saltrach na Rann', pp. 10–11. *Tugastair di [i]ngin Labáin co rabatar do mnáib occa, co rugastar indara ingen sé macco dó .i. Lia ... Rug ind ingen aile dá mac .i. Rachel a hainm, ⁊ Ioséph ⁊ Beniamín a nn-anmand. Cumal dano la cechtarde in dá ingen ... Rucsat cethri macco du Iacób.* I have replaced Dillon's translation of *cumal* as 'handmaid' with 'female slave', which is more accurate and less euphemistic.

family structures of the Patriarchs are a key theme for the author of the ‘first recension’ of *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, it is important to note that these issues are not highlighted in this way in the author’s main source for this text, namely *Saltair na Rann*.

Saltair na Rann (henceforth *SnR*), composed about a century before *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, is a verse account of salvation history, primarily derived from the Bible, but incorporating other para-biblical sources. It is an immense work of literature, comprising some 8392 lines, and is sorely in need of sustained scholarly attention.⁵⁵ The depiction of Abraham in *SnR* shares some features with that in *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, namely the idea that Abraham was chosen by God for his monotheism and his avoidance of idolatry:

Rī do-raíga Abrām n-án
ar fhírinni a oenurán,
sech slúag sīl Ādaim na ngal
bātar ic adrad ídal.

The King chose noble Abraham alone for his truth beyond the host of the seed of Adam of the battles – they were worshipping idols.⁵⁶

However, the details of Abraham’s marriage to Sarah are not discussed by the author of *SnR*. Indeed, she merits only a fleeting mention:

Rī as-bert fri Sarrai slān
no bērad mac do Abrām,
for-bērtais a chlainn iar tain
comtis lir fiadgainemain.

The King who told healthy Sara that she would bear a son to Abraham, that his children would increase until they were as numerous as desert sand.⁵⁷

There is here none of the interest that we witness in *Scél Saltrach na Rann* in the nature of Abraham’s relationship with Sarah. Similarly, while Rebecca’s role in helping Jacob to disguise himself as his brother Esau is described in great detail, the poet has no interest in the circumstances of her marriage to Isaac.⁵⁸ There is no mention of the payment of a bride-price and no reference to the principle of primogeniture. In other respects, the episode where Jacob convinces his father

⁵⁵ Brian Murdoch has been producing extensive commentary on *SnR* over many years, but there remains much more to be said: see, for example, his *The Irish Adam and Eve Story from Saltair na Rann, Volume II: Commentary* (Dublin, 1976); ‘From the Flood to the Tower of Babel: Some Notes on *Saltair na Rann* XIII-XXIV’, *Ériu* 40 (1989), 69–92; ‘*Saltair na Rann* XXV-XXXIV: from Abraham to Joseph’, *Ériu* 46 (1995), 93–119.

⁵⁶ Greene, ed. and trans., ‘*Saltair na Rann*’, l. 2785–8.

⁵⁷ Greene, ed. and trans., ‘*Saltair na Rann*’, l. 2805–8.

⁵⁸ Greene, ed. and trans., ‘*Saltair na Rann*’, l. 2837–56.

that he is Esau is very similar in *SnR* and *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, and the latter's debt to the former is clearly visible here.⁵⁹ When we get to the section concerning Jacob and his wives, the familial relationship between Jacob and Laban, through Rebecca, is outlined in *SnR* much as it is in *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, as is the fact that Jacob takes both of Laban's daughters and their female slaves as his wives and concubines.⁶⁰ Therefore, we can see that while the author of *Scél Saltrach na Rann* remains close to his main source in his depiction of Jacob, he has already established marriage customs as a theme in his text by adding information about the marriages of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebecca, which are not found in *SnR*. This strengthens the argument that the particular depiction of the Patriarchs in *Scél Saltrach na Rann* is designed to emphasise Old Testament marriage practices – and implicitly to comment on medieval Irish marriage practices – which would have been controversial at the end of the eleventh century or beginning of the twelfth, but somewhat less so a century earlier when *SnR* was composed.

The eleventh-century Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* (henceforth *SAM*) is likely to have been composed closer in time to *Scél Saltrach na Rann* than to *SnR*. It too evinces some interest in the relationships of the Patriarchs, suggesting a concern with the degree of consanguinity between husbands and wives, with the practice of concubinage and with sexual relationships between men and their household servants. The author of *SAM* notes that Abraham and his brother took wives who were 'the two daughters of their own brother'.⁶¹ He later notes that Isaac's wife was 'Rebecca, the daughter of Bathuel, son of Nachor, son of Thare, i.e. Laban's sister', and then reiterates that Laban was Jacob's 'mother's brother' when Jacob 'took to himself the two daughters of Laban, i.e. Lia and Rachel, and he had children by them, and by their handmaids also, i.e. by Bala, Rachel's handmaid, and by Zelpha, Lia's handmaid'.⁶² In between this information on the Patriarchs, we are also told that Abraham's brother, Nachor, had a concubine, Roma, who bore him four children.⁶³ Later it is noted that Abraham bore sons, including Ishmael, to concubines, but the author is careful to note that it was Abraham's legitimate son, Isaac, who received 'all his patrimony, both of land and stock', whereas the 'sons of the concubines' received lesser gifts.⁶⁴ This accords with the regulations in early Irish law in relation to the inheritance of illegitimate sons compared to their legitimate half-brothers. Thus, even in this brief consideration of the portrayal of the Patriarchs in three sources – *SnR*, *SAM* and *Scél Saltrach na*

⁵⁹ Greene, ed. and trans., 'Saltair na Rann', l. 2857–916

⁶⁰ Greene, ed. and trans., 'Saltair na Rann', l. 2933–3004.

⁶¹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 81 (text), 120 (trans.), §38.

⁶² Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 82 (text), 121 (trans.), §41. *Rabecca, ingen Bathuel meic Nachoir meic Thara .i. siur Labain ...; 'Do-chuaid Iacób co tír Messopotamiae, co bráthair a máthar, co Laban ... co tuc dí ingen Labain .i. Lia , Rachel , coro-chlannaig friu , coro-clannaig fria n-inailtib .i. Bala, inail Racheli, , Selpha, inail Lia.*

⁶³ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 81 (text), 120 (trans.), §38.

⁶⁴ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 85 (text), 123 (trans.), §45. *Do-rat Abrám a chomarbus huili etir iri , indile do Isaac. Do-rat haitem ascada do maccaib na caratben ...*

Rann – we can see how different authors could focus on certain details or emphasise certain themes, even though they were adapting the same material. This indicates a fundamentally interpretive approach to the reading of divine history, that is, we should regard biblical history in medieval Ireland not simply as a ‘neutral’ narrative that replicates a Latin translation of a Hebrew text in the Irish vernacular. Rather, it is – without lessening its perceived status as the word of God – an infinitely adaptable exemplum, a moral and ethical history from which the social and religious concerns of any given author can be selected and amplified.

The Patriarchs were used as examples for moral behaviour in other ways. For example, Katja Ritari has argued that God’s instructions to Abraham to ‘go forth out of thy country, and from thy father’s house, and come into the land which I shall show thee’ (Genesis 12:1) was highly influential in the development of the ideology of pilgrimage and exile that characterises some strands of early Irish religious thought.⁶⁵ In sources ranging from Jonas’s *Life of Columbanus* to the twelfth-century Irish *Life of Columba*, the idea of Abrahamic pilgrimage provided an important biblical framework for the experience of pursuing religious vocations overseas. Abraham was frequently presented as a *peregrinator fidelissimus* (most faithful pilgrim).⁶⁶ Abraham also functioned not only as a moral *exemplum* but also as a historical anchor. For example, in the poem on Ninus son of Belus, discussed in detail in Chapter 4, Ninus’s reign is repeatedly located in time in relation to the life of Abraham. In the so-called medieval Irish ‘synchronisms’, which, influenced by the historiographical approach of Eusebius, juxtapose events from world history, Abraham again provides a key anchoring point in relation to the events of Ninus’s reign.⁶⁷ In this respect, medieval Irish authors were following in the footsteps of the Gospel of Matthew where, in the genealogy of Christ, Abraham is a central point of chronological reference: ‘So all the generations, from Abraham to David are fourteen generations. And from David to the transmigration of Babylon, are fourteen generations: and from the transmigration of Babylon to Christ are fourteen generations’ (Matt. 1: 17). However, as we shall see in medieval Irish sources, the role of Abraham and the other Patriarchs is overshadowed by another figure who is presented as being yet more central to the framework of salvation history, namely, Moses.

‘Appoint, O Lord, a lawgiver over them’

For twentieth-century political leaders, such as those of the American civil rights movement, Moses was a revolutionary who had liberated his people from the oppression of Egyptian rule and led them on the long walk to freedom.

⁶⁵ Katja Ritari, *Pilgrimage to Heaven: Eschatology and Monastic Spirituality in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout, 2016), p. 51.

⁶⁶ For example, in a note on the *Altus Prosator* in the *Leabhar Breac*, cited in Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 256. Cf. also the *Vita Tripartita* of St Patrick, and the Irish Lives of Barre and Berach, cited at *ibid.*, pp. 256–7.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Boyle, ‘Biblical History in the Book of Ballymote’, in *Book of Ballymote*, ed. Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin, 2018), pp. 51–75, at pp. 65–6.

But amongst many early medieval writers, Moses was less a liberator than a founding father: he led his people on a journey to establish a nation, and one of the most important steps in the founding of a nation, from this perspective, was the creation of a body of law. Isidore of Seville, whose writings were so influential in medieval Ireland, argued that a ‘people’, as a distinct ethnic and political group, should possess their own laws.⁶⁸ Thus, the salvation history of Ireland required a comparable exodus, a journey through the wilderness towards a promised land, and it also required a lawgiver. The lawgiver – the Moses of the Irish – was Saint Patrick.

The Old Irish ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ to the *Senchas Már* presents that great collection of law as comparable to the law given to the Israelites by Moses. The ‘Pseudohistorical Prologue’ begins with the triumph of Christianity:

Ó desid óge na cretme la firu Érenn, ro pritchad soscéla Críst doib uili, ro sáraiged Loegaire cona druídib tre firtu, mírbaile dermára dorigne Pátraic i fiadnaise fer nÉrenn, conid iarom ro creit, foruísestar ógréir Pátraic, asrochongrad iarom ó Loegaire formna fer nÉrenn do thudecht i n-oenmagine fri hoentaid n-immacallma im chórus a mbéscnai, a rechtgai. Docuas uadib co Pátraic co tudchised don dáil.

When the faith in its fullness had been established among the men of Ireland, and Christ’s gospel had been preached to them all, and Loegaire with his druids had been bested by the miracles and great wonders which Patrick had wrought in the presence of the men of Ireland, so that thereafter he believed and submitted to all of Patrick’s will – then the best of the men of Ireland were commanded by Loegaire to assemble for a conference regarding the proper order of their usages and laws. A message was sent by them to Patrick, that he should come to the assembly.⁶⁹

This passage, first, shifts the completion of the Christianisation of Ireland back a century or so into the conversion era. Patrick’s mission, far from being part of the piecemeal process of conversion that I described in the Introduction, is from the outset characterised as something that brought about a total transformation of society. As depicted in Muirchú’s seventh-century Life of the saint, Patrick had defeated Lóegaire’s magicians just as Moses had defeated the Pharaoh’s in Exodus, by performing ‘miracles and great wonders’. At the assembly that Lóegaire calls, and that Patrick Wadden has shown serves to frame the *Senchas Már* as law that is both royal and national,⁷⁰ it is decided that ‘whatever did not go against God’s word in the law of scripture and in the New Testament, or against the

⁶⁸ Wadden, ‘The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már*’, p. 150.

⁶⁹ John Carey, ed. and trans., ‘An Edition of the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*’, *Ériu* 45 (1994), 1–32, at pp. 11, 17, §1.

⁷⁰ Wadden, ‘The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már*’.

consciences of the faithful' would be retained as Irish law.⁷¹ In this regard, the account echoes the so-called *Canones Hibernenses*, which state that:

Iethro socer Moysi elegere .lxx. principes qui iudicarent populum cum Moysi, et hoc iudicium est, quia si inuenerimus iudicia gentium bona, que natura bona illis docet et Deo non displicet, seruabimus.

Jethro the kinsman of Moses told Moses to choose seventy leading men who would judge the people with Moses; and this is a judgement, (to the effect) that if we find judgements of the heathen good, which their good nature teaches them, and it is not displeasing to God, we shall keep them.⁷²

The idea runs through both Latin and vernacular law in Ireland, then, that such law is a continuation of Old Testament law insofar as that law was deemed in accordance with the new Christian order, just as Mosaic law was itself a continuation of pre-Mosaic 'natural law' insofar as that was pleasing to God. As Michael Herren has stated, 'In Ireland the "laws of the Hebrews" were not merely the starting-point of scriptural studies and of personal piety: they also retained much of their original social force'.⁷³ However, the linking of the law-giving of Moses to the law-giving of Patrick discussed above was about more than just legislative authority: it was also about the shaping of a national identity. To place the Patrick of the *Senchas Már* in the role of the Moses of the *Canones Hibernenses* was part of a much wider strategy of fashioning Irish law, history and identity along Old Testament lines. Patrick Wadden has convincingly shown that 'With Patrick standing in the guise of Moses, the identity of the men of Ireland was implicitly compared with that of the Hebrews as a single people united in their adherence to a single law in the past, present and future.'⁷⁴ The arguments of Herren and Wadden thus confirm and extend the observation made by John Hennig in his groundbreaking study published some seventy years ago:

It seems that nowhere else in the Christian world has the significance of Moses as *legis divinae lator, susceptor et auctor* ever been taken more seriously than in Ireland ... The authority of the legislation on ecclesiastical and secular affairs which goes under the name of St Patrick was largely based on this parallelism ...⁷⁵

Looking beyond the law, we can begin to examine some other ways in which Patrick's image, in literary, historical and hagiographical sources, was shaped as that of the Moses of Ireland.

⁷¹ Carey, ed. and trans., 'An Edition of the Pseudo-Historical Prologue', pp. 12, 18–19, §7: *Ni didiu nád tudchaid fri bréthir nDé i recht litre , núff[h]iadaise , fri cuibse na crésion ...*

⁷² Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin, 1963), pp. 168–9.

⁷³ Herren, 'The "Judaizing Tendencies"', p. 79.

⁷⁴ Wadden, 'The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már*', p. 151.

⁷⁵ Hennig, 'The Literary Tradition of Moses', p. 253.

Toisech popuil

In his study of the literary depiction of Moses in early medieval Ireland, Hennig argued that the portrayal of Patrick as an Irish Moses ‘transcended the establishing of mere spiritual analogies’ and was ‘detailed, concrete and specific’.⁷⁶ He acknowledged that he was not the first to identify the conscious parallels that were drawn by Irish writers between the two figures, but his interpretation went further than that of any previous commentator:

While Dr [J. F.] Kenney regarded this whole ‘pre-conception of a parallel between Patrick and Moses as an effect of ecclesiastical handling of the original legend of St Patrick in the later sources’, I venture to suggest that right from the earliest biographical sources on St Patrick, it was backed by the extensive literary tradition of Moses in Ireland.⁷⁷

The evidence that Hennig presented showed that Tírechán, Patrick’s earliest biographer, was from the beginning casting Patrick in a Moses-like form, for example, by stating that Patrick fasted on *Mons Aigli* for forty days and forty nights ‘following the example of Moses’.⁷⁸ Furthermore, in the ‘Notes Supplementary to Tírechán’ in the Book of Armagh (c. 807), we are told that:

In quattuor rebus similis fuit Moysi Patricius:

- i. primo angelum de rubo audiuit;
- ii. quadraginta diebus et quadraginta noctibus ieiunauit;
- iii. quia annos centum uiginti peregit in uita praesenti;
- iv. Ubi sunt ossa eius nemo nouit.

In four things Patrick was similar to Moses:

- i. first, he heard an angel (speaking) out of a thorn-bush;
- ii. he fasted for forty days and forty nights;
- iii. he spent one hundred and twenty years in this present life;
- iv. nobody knows where his bones rest.⁷⁹

Muirchú’s seventh-century Life of Patrick took Old Testament imagery and ran with it, crafting numerous scenes that suggested – often without subtlety – that Patrick had come to the ‘Egypt of this our island’ in the manner of a Jewish leader: in a single paragraph alone, we see numerous passing references that draw out these parallels (‘rather like Jonas’, ‘as did Moses’, ‘as the Jews had done’,

⁷⁶ Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 261.

⁷⁷ Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 251.

⁷⁸ Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 249; see Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 152–3: ... *Moysaicum tenens disciplinam*.

⁷⁹ Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 164–5, §54.

‘he invoked Elijah twice’).⁸⁰ Lóegaire, the king of the Uí Néill, is presented as Pharaoh to Patrick’s Moses but he is also simultaneously a Nebuchadnezzar-type figure (see Chapter 4 for further discussion on Babylonian rulers in Irish sources). The dense, layered, multifarious Old Testament typologies within Muirchú’s work operate within the context of his deep indebtedness to the rhetoric and imagery of Hebrew Scripture. The Moses strand of Muirchú’s richly textured narrative was taken up by the ninth-century author of the *Vita Tripartita* of Patrick, who wrote that Patrick went ‘into the wilderness’ like Moses, Elijah and Christ, fasting for forty days and nights ‘even as Moses fasted on Mount Sinai when the law was delivered unto him. For they, Moses and Patrick, were alike in many ways’.⁸¹ The ways in which the author of the *Vita Tripartita* sees Moses and Patrick as being alike overlaps in part with the list in the Book of Armagh, cited above: they both lived for 120 years, they both fasted for forty days and nights, they both have uncertain burial places, but the fourth similarity that the later author lists is that each was a *toisech popuil* – a leader of a nation.

By drawing extensive and detailed parallels between Patrick and Moses, Irish writers were also, by implication, drawing parallels between Patrick and Christ. Eriugena, for example, drew out the typological connections between Moses and Christ in one of his poems:

Mysticus est Moyses Christus, rex atque sacerdos,
Qui nos Aegypto liberat edomita.

Christ is Moses in the mystical sense: king and priest,
who liberates us from conquered Egypt.⁸²

If Patrick was an Irish Moses then he must, by typological extension, also be an Irish Christ. In this sense we may note how, in the historiography of medieval Ireland, Patrick’s mission to Ireland is usually portrayed as *the* pivotal moment in Irish history – from the pre-Christian to the Christian, from the age of natural law to the age of divine law – in the same way that Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection provide the central events upon which salvation history turns: from Old Testament to New Testament, from the age of Judaism to the age of Christianity. We shall explore this aspect of Patrick’s identity as a New Testament-style figure, and specifically the imagery of Patrick as apostle, in Chapter 5. For now, it is important to bear in mind that the interpretation of history through typology and prefiguration in early Irish exegesis was so complex and layered that for Patrick to be the Irish Moses did not mean that he was only that; rather, it was one option upon which a great many authors drew in their characterisation of Patrick. They could simultaneously view Patrick as Moses-like, as Christ-like

⁸⁰ Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 68–9, §1.2; see also pp. 82–3, §I.13.1: ... *in nostra Aegypto huius insolae* ...

⁸¹ Leabhar Breac version, cited in Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 250; Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, with Other Documents Relating to that Saint*, 2 vols (London, 1887).

⁸² Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina*, pp. 64–5, l. 33–4.

and as an apostle, just as Lóegaire could be Pharaoh at the same time as he was Nebuchadnezzar.

At the root of these sorts of literary strategies is an exegetical mindset, and it is therefore no coincidence that, as Hennig noted, ‘there are few proper names which occur more frequently in the Irish biblical glosses than that of Moses’.⁸³ The development from close reading of the Bible to the production of new Irish texts that used typology and prefiguration as literary strategies required exegesis as an intermediary stage. Exegesis is also a necessary intermediary for the adaptation of biblical narrative: the way that Moses himself was portrayed in medieval Irish sources was – as we saw above in the case of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – not a ‘neutral’ retelling, but the selection of particular aspects of Moses’s character that were vital to the purpose of any given author. Just as Patrick was made more Moses-like, so Moses could be made more Patrick-like (we shall also see this phenomenon in action in Chapter 2 in relation to the depictions of King David and Cú Chulainn).

In his poetry, Eriugena chose to depict Moses as a terrifying war leader and the Passover as a mode of bloody warfare. He employed images of smiting, fear, rage and the ‘savage horde’ of Egyptians running in pursuit of their ‘prey’:

Moyses, dux populi, celebrauit pascha secundum,
Bis quina plaga percutiens ICIDAA.
Transiuit dominus signatos sanguine postes,
Dum primogenitos planxerat ipsa suos.
Israhelites festinus uescitur agnum:
Ossibus illaesis mystica cena fuit.
It populus gaudens, Aegyptus perfida luget:
Insanit rabie; quem timet insequitur.
Anxius Erythreas tunc Moyses aspicit undas:
Inscia uirtutis territa pleps dubitat.
Nubibus obscuris Pharaonis turma retenta,
Ne praedam caperet, feruida saeua stupet.

Moses, the head of his people, observed the next Pasch,
By smiting Isis with twice-five blows.
The Lord passed over the doorposts signed with blood,
while Egypt grieved for her first-born sons.
The Israelites fed upon lamb in haste;
the bones were unharmed – it was a mystical meal.
The people depart with rejoicing; perfidious Egypt mourns;
The latter go mad with rage, they pursue the people they fear.
Then Moses, grown anxious, beholds the red waves;
the frightened people hold back, forgetting the power of God.
Pharao’s host is restrained by obscuring mists;
the savage horde is amazed not to capture its prey.⁸⁴

⁸³ Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, p. 254.

⁸⁴ Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina*, pp. 68–9, l. 25–36.

This more violent version of Moses is equally seeped in exegesis, however, as Eriugena makes clear when he refers to the Passover lamb as having been pre-figured by Isaac:

Hic fuerat aries speculo prouisus ad aram,
 Dum typicus Isaach ducitur ad iugulum.
 Festinans populus Aegypto hunc sumpserat agnum,
 Sanguine conspergens limina nota domus.

This ram had been foreseen in a mirror
 when Isaac, his prototype, was led to the altar for slaughter.
 The people hastening out of Egypt chose this lamb
 and sprinkled their doorposts with its blood as a sign.⁸⁵

Other Irish authors, by contrast, characterised Moses as ‘gentle and compassionate’ and ‘forgiving of heart’, but by far the most important characterisation of him was, as I have already suggested, as *rechtaidh cedach* (‘a lawgiver to thousands’), for it is in this aspect that the figure of Patrick was most moulded to resemble him.⁸⁶ However, although Patrick provides the most fully worked out Mosaic figure in Irish historiography, he is far from the only person to be modelled in the image of Moses. The description of Moses as *rechtaidh cedach* is found in the Irish Life of St Brendan, and there are numerous other instances where that saint is also cast as a Moses-like figure.

‘Another Moses’: St Brendan

Giovanni Orlandi noted in a 2006 study that in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (Voyage of St Brendan), one can find a ‘mass of links ... between incidents in Brendan’s voyage and episodes of the life of Moses’.⁸⁷ Orlandi noted that references to the life of Moses occur commonly in Irish hagiography, with allusions to the parting of the Red Sea, the fasting on Mount Sinai, the burning bush on Mount Horeb and the miracle of water springing from a rock in the desert being found in a range of saints’ Lives.⁸⁸ In the thirteenth-century Latin Life of St Abbán, Abbán is described as ‘a pious and gentle chief, like Moses, who shall lead you from this desert to the real land of the promise’.⁸⁹ But it is Brendan who offers some of the more sustained comparisons with Moses across a range of texts. In the *Vita Brendani* (Life of Brendan), the author repeatedly describes Brendan as ‘another Moses’, whether because God had illuminated his face so brightly that

⁸⁵ Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina*, pp. 76–7, l. 25–8.

⁸⁶ Irish Life of St Carthage (‘gentle and compassionate’); *Vita Tripartita* (‘forgiving of heart’); Irish Life of Brendan (‘lawgiver to thousands’), all cited Hennig, ‘The Literary Tradition of Moses’, pp. 257, 256, 252.

⁸⁷ Giovanni Orlandi, ‘Brendan and Moses’, in *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, eds. Glyn S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden, 2006), pp. 221–40, at p. 230.

⁸⁸ Orlandi, ‘Brendan and Moses’, p. 231.

⁸⁹ Cited in Orlandi, ‘Brendan and Moses’, p. 232.

the people could not look at him or because he was standing, arms aloft, confronting his enemy.⁹⁰ This provides one biblical context (although it is far from the only one) within which the *Navigatio* functions. Although Moses is never mentioned by name in the *Navigatio*, it is clear that certain places, events and episodes are intended to evoke the Exodus story: the *terra spatiosa* ('spacious land') of Brendan's Paradise is a verbal echo of the description of Canaan in Exodus 3:7–8; the sacrifice of the *agnus immaculata* ('spotless lamb') on the Island of Sheep recalls Exodus 12:3–5; and the provision of *panes subcinericii* ('bread baked under the ashes', 'unleavened bread') echoes Exodus 12:39. Furthermore, Brendan fasts for forty days before leaving Clonfert in a manner that evokes Moses's fast on Mount Sinai.⁹¹ Orlandi also argued that the passage in Numbers 20: 17–19, when Moses had to ask permission from the king of Edom for the Israelites to drink the water from his wells, provided the source for the episode in the *Navigatio* when Brendan forbids his monks from drinking the water of the land without permission, lest they be accused of 'plundering' (*rapīna*).⁹² Orlandi offered many other striking examples of situational analogies, close verbal echoes and near-verbatim quotation from the story of Moses in the *Navigatio*, and these led him to conclude that, by the end of Brendan's voyage-tale, the characters of Brendan and Moses have almost fully converged: 'Brendan, like Moses, will soon sleep beside his ancestors after fulfilling a mission fundamental for his people's future'.⁹³ We shall return to Brendan in Chapter 3, in relation to the psalm known as the *Beati*, but for present purposes it is sufficient to note that it was not only Patrick who was cast as a Moses of Ireland.

Patrick the Israelite

The sources we have examined thus far frequently used a typological approach to draw parallels (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) between the history of the Jewish people and that of early medieval Ireland: Patrick was cast as Moses, leading his people out of 'the Egypt of this our island', to use Muirchú's phrase, into the Promised Land and providing them with a divinely approved law. However, another approach was widely adopted alongside this, and that is the synchronistic approach, whereby an imagined Irish pre-history was creatively grafted onto biblical chronology so that Irish history before the arrival of Patrick could also be claimed to be both derived from, and simultaneous with, key events in salvation history. It is through this synchronistic approach that the pre-history that was invented for Ireland could be fashioned as a kind of Irish Old Testament.

Even though we do not see complex and extended iterations of the Irish historical scheme until the writing of *LGÉ* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it is clear that its overarching structure was already in place in Ireland by the seventh century. To simplify greatly, *LGÉ* outlines a successive series of invasions of

⁹⁰ Plummer, ed., *VSHI*, 'Vita Brendani', §5 (p. 100), §6 (p. 101).

⁹¹ Orlandi, 'Brendan and Moses', pp. 232–3.

⁹² Orlandi, 'Brendan and Moses', p. 235.

⁹³ Orlandi, 'Brendan and Moses', p. 239.

Ireland by both supernatural and human groups of immigrants. The first settlers were led by Cessair, an apocryphal granddaughter of Noah, who travelled to Ireland in the hope of escaping the Flood. The second wave was led by Partholón: that this is an Irish rendering of the Hebrew name, Bartholomew, is evidence of the Christian origins of at least part of the scheme. Partholón and his followers died of plague and were succeeded by Nemed and his retinue, who in turn were followed by the Fir Bolg, who eventually dispersed to lands in the north, east and south, displaced by the Túatha Dé Danaan, a race of supernatural beings. Finally, the Túatha Dé Danaan were defeated by the Sons of Míl, that is, the Gaelic-speaking people descended from Míl Espáine (a Gaelicisation of the Latin *miles Hispaniae*, ‘soldier of Spain’, again indicating the scheme’s origins in literate, Christian circles), himself descended from Goídel, eponymous ancestor of the Gaels, whose offspring are depicted as leaving Egypt at the same time as the Israelites and experiencing their own ‘Exodus’ on their long journey via Scythia and the Mediterranean to Spain (see Introduction, pp. 7–8).⁹⁴

Some scholars have tried to separate out different strands of this historical fabrication, identifying some parts as ‘native tradition’, predating Christianity, and others as ‘scholarly constructs’ of the Christian era.⁹⁵ However, this is necessarily based on *a priori* assumptions rather than historical evidence, and even the earliest extant iterations of this scheme are presented within a thoroughly Christian context.⁹⁶ We shall return to a more detailed consideration of synchronistic history in Chapter 4, and its influence on perceptions of Irish pre-history, but for now we can note that this presentation of Irish pre-history as being innately bound up with the experiences of the Jewish people, provides a more concrete ‘historical’ (though obviously fabricated) link between Ireland and the ‘Promised Land’. Although these connections – via Cessair and Goídel – are well-known and have been discussed elsewhere, what is much less well-known is a later fabrication of ‘historical’ Jewish ancestry, in this case in relation to St Patrick.

On f. 53r of the Book of Uí Mhaine, a remarkable note states:

Do macaib Israithēl imorro do Pātraicc, acht diara heasraíneadh maicni Israithēl o Thit, o Uepsian fo cheathairde in domain fo dañri a ndīgail fhola Christ, as ann do-rōcht a bunud co Bretnaib.

Is ar bunud Pādraicc do macaib Israthēl do-rad Dia tigermus baisde, creidmi a nĒirind indarbad demun dō-sum eisde.

Patrick was of the sons of Israel, but when the sons of Israel were dispersed by Titus and Vespasian throughout the four corners of the world in servitude in vengeance for the blood of Christ, it is then that his stock reached the Britons.

⁹⁴ Though it is extremely problematic, the standard edition is still Macalister, ed. and trans., *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, but see also John Carey, *A New Introduction to Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland* (London, 1993).

⁹⁵ Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ John Carey, ed. and trans., ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, *Ériu* 35 (1984), 93–111.

It is on account of the stock of Patrick [being] of the sons of Israel that God gave the power of baptism and faith in Ireland and the expulsion of demons from her [i.e. Ireland] to him.⁹⁷

This note is intriguing on a number of levels: first within its general context as further evidence of a particular Irish interest in Jewish history and the fate of the ‘children of Israel’, but more broadly in its startling assertion that St Patrick was of Jewish ‘stock’. In some respects, we might view the assertion of Patrick’s Jewishness as the culmination of the long process of casting Patrick in increasingly Mosaic terms. We can potentially trace its origins in Patrick’s own writings, in the narrative of exile and return with which he shapes his account of his life. But it is extended and emphasised to an extraordinary degree in the seventh-century Patrician hagiography, as discussed above. This note in the Book of Uí Mhaine on Patrick’s descent from one of the tribes of Israel takes the typological parallels that we have been discussing and transforms them into a literal one: Patrick is not simply *like* Moses, he is *of* Moses. What is particularly noteworthy is that this note states that it is because of Patrick’s Jewishness that God granted him the ‘power of baptism and faith in Ireland’ and the capacity to expel Ireland’s demons. On the one hand, we can understand this in the context of Herren’s argument that the early Irish Church ‘either inherited or invented an unusually positive (but by no means heretical) image of *historical* (i.e. Old Testamental) Judaism that was to inform their religious life in manifold ways’.⁹⁸ Within this context, we might suggest that the pinnacle of ‘an unusually positive’ image of Old Testament Judaism would be to create Jewish ancestry for Patrick himself.⁹⁹

However, it seems just as likely to me that something more immediately political, rather than theological, is at work here. Ireland was converted from Britain, but Patrick’s Britishness is drastically downplayed here. ‘His stock reached the Britons’ because of the persecution of Jews following the First Jewish-Roman War, and thus for the author of the note, Patrick’s family must have been living in Britain for several centuries, but Patrick is not regarded by the author of the note as British *per se*. The result of the note is twofold: the role of Rome in the conversion of Ireland is downplayed (instead Rome is responsible for the persecution of Patrick’s Jewish ancestors), as is the role of Britain. One possible explanation is that this might be a Gaelic reaction to the cultivation of the cult of Patrick by Anglo-Norman hagiographers, most notably William of Malmesbury, who was writing for the monastery at Glastonbury, and Jocelin of Furness, writing under

⁹⁷ My text and translation, but see also Pádraig Ó Riain, ed., *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 1–2, 125.

⁹⁸ Herren, ‘The “Judaizing Tendency”’, p. 80.

⁹⁹ By contrast, we might consider the Old English version of the *Vindicta Salvatoris*, where the persecution of the Jews under Titus and Vespasian is also seen as vengeance for the Crucifixion, as in our Irish note, but where it would be hard to imagine an early English author stating within that context that a prominent Anglo-Saxon saint was descended from Jewish refugees to Britain: see Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel*, pp. 265–7.

the patronage of John de Courcy.¹⁰⁰ I would suggest, however, that this assertion of St Patrick's Jewish origins and identity does not emerge *sui generis* amidst the political tensions of twelfth- or thirteenth-century Ireland, but must be viewed as part of the wider process that we have traced in this chapter, whereby strategies of typology, prefiguration and synchronism cumulatively link Ireland's history with that of the 'Children of Israel', with Noah, with Moses, with the Patriarchs, with the experience of the Jewish people under Egyptian oppression, with their Exodus and, in this case, with their late persecution under the Roman Empire.

Christ's idolatrous ancestors

The reign of King David and his sons, Absalom and Solomon, is sufficiently prominent in medieval Irish sources as to require separate discussion, so we shall deal with that in the next chapter. But before moving on, it is worth briefly considering some sources that deal with the subsequent history of the House of David. Medieval Irish interest in the peoples of Hebrew scriptural narrative could be encyclopaedic in its inclusivity, and some sources cover aspects of biblical history that may seem rather obscure from a modern perspective but make sense in terms of the intellectual interests of historians in medieval Ireland. One late Middle Irish poem, preserved in the Book of Uí Mhaine, the same manuscript in which we can find the assertion of St Patrick's Jewish ancestry, deals with part of the history of the kings of Judah as recounted in 2 Kings. After the death of David's son, King Solomon, the united kingdom of Israel and Judah was divided. The subsequent kings of northern Israel descended from Jeroboam I, who had previously been a senior administrator under Solomon, and included Ahab, famous for his idolatry instituted through the influence of his wife, Jezebel. The kings of Judah, by contrast, descended from Solomon's son, Rehoboam. The two lines were united again when Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, married Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. The line of the kings of Judah would have been well known to scholars in medieval Ireland, not only through Old Testament narrative but also from Christ's pedigree as given in Matthew 1:1–16 (indeed, a pedigree of Christ is given on f. 50r of the Book of Uí Mhaine, demonstrating the interest in this issue on the part of the manuscript's compilers). The relevant section of the pedigree for our purposes is Matthew 1:7–9:

Salomon autem genuit Roboam. Roboam autem genuit Abiam. Abias autem genuit Asa. Asa autem genuit Josophat. Josophat autem genuit Joram. Joram autem genuit Oziam. Ozias autem genuit Joatham. Joatham autem genuit Achaz. Achaz autem genuit Ezechiam.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Elizabeth Boyle and Liam Breatnach, 'Senchas Gall Átha Cliath: Aspects of the Cult of St Patrick in the Twelfth Century', in *Sacred Histories: a Festschrift for Máire Herbert*, eds. John Carey et al. (Dublin, 2015), pp. 22–55; Helen Birkett, *The Saints' Lives of Jocelin of Furness: Hagiography, Patronage and Ecclesiastical Politics* (Woodbridge, 2010).

And Solomon begot Roboam [Rehoboam]. And Roboam begot Abia. And Abia begot Asa. And Asa begot Josaphat. And Josaphat begot Joram. And Joram begot Ozias. And Ozias begot Joatham. And Joatham begot Achaz. And Achaz begot Ezechias.

Thus the Matthean pedigree jumps straight from Joram (Jehoram) to Ozias (Uzziah), thereby omitting three successive Judean kings: Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah. Given the extensive production of genealogical texts in medieval Ireland, and the historical scholarship which underlay such compositions, we should not be surprised that medieval Irish scholars observed the problem that Matthew's account of Christ's pedigree contradicted the account in 2 Kings. It is presumably as a result of this observation that one poet in the Middle Irish period composed a brief poetic account of the careers of Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah. Indeed, he states in the opening stanza that these kings were 'omitted ... in the pedigree of noble Jesus'. The poem, which is possibly a product of the twelfth century, is preserved on f. 73vb 1–11 of the Book of Uí Mhaine. Marc Schneiders published an edition and translation in 1990, but I offer my own text and translation here, which has some different readings:¹⁰¹

Ochozias, Ios co cass,
int ardrī Amazias:
ro-dearmata – nī cam clū –
i ngenelaid aird Īssu.

Otholia do-comart co bert
a uu iacht – is airdircc –
Ios in amma cen gair cuil
do-ceil i n-ucht [in] tempail.

Ioas ĩar-sin ro alt
la Zabeth cen connart,
– a mberta ba rind co glē –
for achair macc nĪode.

Tri cuirp lēo – clū cen locht –
tri cind fil for cheac n-ōencorp;
nōnbur fo thrī cona mbūaid,
do-mēlait beathaid bithbūain.
Annach Ioras – nīrbo cleith –

i n-ōentaiddh Achaib cuiligh:
dogress ro-melt derb nī fand
fora mōrmacc Acoziam.

Ochosias, Ios etcetera.

¹⁰¹ Marc Schneiders, 'On the Use of the Label *Apocryphon* in Some Recent Studies of Medieval Irish Texts', *Bijdragen: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 51:3 (1990), 314–23.

Ahaziah, Jehoash, intricately,
the high-king Amaziah:
they were omitted – it is no false report –
in the pedigree of noble Jesus.

Athaliah killed ...
her grandchildren – it is well known – except for
Jehoash of the hand without a trace of wrong,
he hid in the bosom of the temple.

Jehoash then was raised
by Jehosheba without great strength,
– their deeds shone like a star –
alongside the sons of Judah.

They had three bodies¹⁰² – report without fault –
three heads¹⁰³ on every single body;
as nine men thrice, with their victory
they will spend ever-lasting life.

The wickedness of Jehoram – it has not been concealed –
in union with sinful Ahab
it is great injury inflicted – certainly it is not weak –
on their grandson Uzziah.

Ahaziah, Jehoash, etc.

The poem presents some difficulties, both in text and translation, but it represents an admirable attempt to condense some extremely complex and convoluted events into five stanzas. Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah, appointed herself queen after her son's death and ordered the execution of the entire royal family. However, Jehosheba took the baby Jehoash 'out of the bedchamber with his nurse' (2 Kings 11:2) and hid him for six years in the temple. This episode is recounted in stanza 2 of the poem. Stanzas 3 and 4 recount how Jehoash obtained his kingship with the support of the military. At one point, the army is divided into three by the priest Joiada in order to protect the new king: 'Let a third part of you go in on the sabbath, and keep watch of the king's house. And let a third part be at the gate of Sur: and let a third part be at the gate behind the dwelling of the shieldbearers: and you shall keep the watch of the house of Messa' (2 Kings 11:6), and it is this division which is recounted in stanza 4. This brief verse account not only supplies the missing generations from Matthew's pedigree of Christ, but also complements other themes that are relevant to the present study. Through Athaliah, the lineage recounted in the poem is linked to Ahab, the idolatrous king, who caused God's chosen people to stray from monotheism for a time. An interest in idolatrous

¹⁰² i.e. divisions.

¹⁰³ i.e. leaders.

peoples, and their encounters with monotheism, is a recurring feature in a number of early Irish texts, and we shall return to it in Chapter 5.

‘The journeys and battles of the Children of Israel’

Other Old Testament figures also held prominent places in medieval Irish culture: Abel, for example, was commemorated as the ‘first martyr’ and Aaron as the ‘first priest’. We can see in a medieval Irish litany, edited by Charles Plummer as the ‘Litany of Confession’, that the person who utters it asks for forgiveness from a series of key figures from the Hebrew Scriptures:

A Abel cet-mairtír,
A Nóe naem-airci,
A Abraim hirisig,
A Moyssi min-cendais,
A Aroin cet-shagairt,
A Daud ordnigi,
A Solaim shíansaighi,
A uilliu phetarlaici,
A dluthad nu-fiadnuse ...
... O Abel, first martyr,
O Noah of the sacred ark,
O faithful Abraham,
O meek and gentle Moses,
O Aaron, first priest,
O noble David,
O mystic Solomon,
O corner (stone) of the Old Testament,
O compacting of the New Testament ...¹⁰⁴

Such figures, and their stories, were familiar to audiences not only from liturgical readings or bible study but from a whole host of genres of written sources – vernacular adaptations of biblical narrative, historical verse, prayers, litanies, *specula principum*, hagiography, legal texts and so on – as well as from iconographical representations on high crosses. As such, the capacity for the leading figures of Hebrew Scripture to function as *exempla* and as literary inspiration for other authors was immense. The author of *Scél Saltrach na Rann*, discussed above, stated that he was writing about ‘the journeys and battles of the Children of Israel’, and his terminology – *imtheachta* and *cathaigeachta* – link his narrative to the genres of journey-tales and battle-tales in medieval Irish literature, with such texts as *Imtheachta Aeniasa* (‘The Wanderings of Aeneas’, the Irish reworking of Virgil’s *Aeneid*) and *Cath Almaine* (‘The Battle of Allen’), *Cath*

¹⁰⁴ Charles Plummer, ed. and trans., *Irish Litanies: Text and Translation* (London, 1925), pp. 4–5.

Maige Tuired ('The Second Battle of Moytura') or *In Cath Catharda* ('The Civil War', the Irish reworking of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*). In summarising the span of his 'story' (*scél*), he uses Abraham and Elisha as his beginning and end points, but even here we can see evidence of a 'Gaelicising' of the narrative, when he uses Abraham's patronymic (*mac Tara*) and describes Elisha as the *dalta* ('pupil' but also primarily 'foster-son') of Elijah:

Tucsam lenn dano imtheachta ⁊ cathaigeachta mac nÍsraél ⁊ a fáithi ⁊ a toisige
⁊ a sacarddu ó Abraham mac Tara conus toracht Heliseus fáith, dalta Héile.
Et Scél Saltrach na Rand ainm in scéoil seo annuas.

We have told the adventures and battles of the Children of Israel, and their prophets, leaders and priests from Abraham son of Thare to Eliseus [i.e. Elisha] the prophet, fosterson of Elias [i.e. Elijah]. And the title of this story is The Story of Saltair na Rann.¹⁰⁵

We shall explore further the strategies by which the stories of the 'Children of Israel' were 'Gaelicised' in the next chapter. Here, although I have only been able to discuss a fraction of the total corpus of extant sources, almost all of which are in urgent need of further study, I hope I have shown something of the breadth and depth of interest in Jewish history amongst early medieval Irish writers. This interest coexisted, as we have seen, with an antisemitic rhetoric that could range from the formulaic to the viscerally hateful. Underlying this was a belief that, through the Crucifixion of Christ, Jewish people had lost their status as God's 'chosen people' and that this position should be inherited by Christians, and specifically Irish Christians. Irish authors used a range of sophisticated strategies to make their case: casting Patrick as the Irish Moses; depicting Ireland as a 'Promised Land'; adapting the Hebrew Scriptures in order to highlight political and social issues in their contemporary societies; studying, interpreting and subtly reshaping biblical narrative to communicate the message that Ireland's Christians were now – or at least could be – God's elect. To create the Promised Land in Ireland, however, would require the efforts not just of ecclesiastically educated writers but also of secular political élites, and in order to consider a central paradigm of Christian kingship in early medieval Ireland, we must turn to depictions of King David.

¹⁰⁵ Dillon, ed. and trans., 'Scél Saltrach na Rann', pp. 42–3.

2 Absalom, Absalom!

Rewriting the David story

In the commentary to his translation of the Books of Samuel, Robert Alter observed that the modern American novelist William Faulkner had perhaps understood the psychological complexity and political ambiguity of King David better than generations of biblical scholars and exegetes.¹ With the relocation of the David narrative to the Civil War-era American South, and the translation of David himself into the shocking but compelling figure of Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner created his 1936 masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel profoundly influenced by the plot and characterisation of the biblical narrative and yet something entirely new. Faulkner's work conveys truth without fidelity. Unlike Alter's translation of the Books of Samuel, which is a translation in the narrow, modern sense – an accurate, lucid rendering of the original Hebrew text into English – Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* can be understood as a translation in a broader sense, a transfer from one cultural setting to another, with the capacity for reinterpretation of the David story within that new cultural setting. Translation as a cultural transfer, used as a vehicle for conveying specific ideological constructs, is at the heart of this chapter. Motivations for such reinterpretations can be posited (some more confidently than others) based on close analysis of the changes made to the source text. The end result must also be appreciated as a cultural product in its own right, however. It is certainly the case that one could read, enjoy and appreciate *Absalom, Absalom!* without knowing the biblical story of David at all.

More difficult to identify with any degree of certainty are less sustained allusions to, influences from and inversions of any particular source. Influence is harder to pin down than adaptation. In the Old Irish narrative *Longes mac nUislienn* ('The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu'), a young woman, Derdriu, who has been raised since birth to be the concubine of Conchobar, king of Ulster, escapes to Britain with her lover, Noísiu, his brothers and their retainers. Noísiu and his brothers become mercenaries for the king of Alba and live for a time under his protection. However, the king falls in love with Derdriu and desires her for himself. He cannot directly kill Noísiu and his brothers, because they are under

¹ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York, 1999), pp. 259–60.

his protection, but he sends them ‘into dangers, battles and hazards in order that they might be killed’.² This strategy fails and the plot of the story moves on, but the idea of a king who sends a soldier into battle in the hope that he will be killed so that the king can take his wife is inescapably reminiscent of the story of David, Uriah and Bathsheba, a reference that is all the more suggestive in a story that is fundamentally about both lust and kingship. *Longes mac nUislenn* is a beautifully constructed tale. The author begins with poetic prophecies, rich in colour, which predict the bloodshed that Derdriu’s beauty will cause; he ends with a poetic lament, equally rich in colour, which looks back on Noisiu’s beauty and the circumstances through which his blood was shed. As an exemplary tale of bad kingship – notably that of Conchobar – and of the consequences of raising women, isolated from society for the purpose of sexual gratification, the narrative works on numerous levels.³ Not every reader or listener for whom the tale was intended would necessarily have recognised or understood the Davidic reference to the king sending his soldier into danger in order to take the soldier’s wife as a lover, nor would they need to recognise the reference to appreciate the brilliance of the story. And yet for the informed reader it is surely there to be found, offering an extra layer to an already rich saga, a biblical allusion woven into an Irish narrative about universal themes: power, lust, jealousy, honour and vengeance.

A series of medieval Irish prose narratives on David translate and reinterpret the story of David in a variety of complex and potentially illuminating ways. In some cases, the narratives radically rewrite aspects of the biblical account of David’s life, but at the heart of each them is a sophisticated conception of the complexity of David’s character as presented in Latin translations of the Hebrew Bible. As did Faulkner, the Irish author (or authors) of these David narratives possessed a profound understanding of the biblical portrayal of David’s charismatic but flawed personality: his emergence from obscurity through his heroic boyhood deeds; his rise to power and his fall from grace; his relationships with his father, Jesse, with Saul, his predecessor as king, and with his military comrades, his wives and his sons. Even as the narrative account of his life was reshaped and his typological significance was emphasised, certain fundamental exegetical ‘truths’ of David’s character were preserved. These five narratives, all of which are early Middle Irish and roughly datable to the tenth century, are preserved together in the Yellow Book of Lecan (henceforth YBL), although individual copies of some of

² Vernam Hull, ed. and trans., *Longes mac nUislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* (New York, 1949), §12, *i ngábthaib ocus i cathaib ocus i ndrobélaib ar dáig coro-mmarbtais*.

³ The character of Derdriu has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. For a study that rightly shifts the critical focus to the theme of kingship, see Elva Johnston, ‘Kingship Made Real? Power and the Public Word in *Longes mac nUislenn*’, in *Tome: Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards*, ed. Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 193–206.

the narratives can be found in other medieval and early modern manuscripts.⁴ The first narrative recounts David's slaying of Goliath; the second gives a portrayal of David's fraught relationship with his rebellious son, Absalom; the third tells of the death of Absalom; the fourth is a loose variation on the Classical 'sword of Damocles' anecdote, recast as a dialogue between David and Solomon; and the fifth, 'David and the Beggar', is an aetiological tale for a point of early Irish law. This latter story has the most complex textual history of the five narratives, but the earliest and longest version of the tale is preserved in YBL. In this chapter, we will use these narratives as case studies through which we can explore ideas about kingship, the role of David as royal exemplum and the possible audiences for, and functions of, adapted biblical narrative in early medieval Ireland.

The boyhood deeds of David son of Jesse

The first of the YBL narratives about David tells the story of his combat with Goliath. I suggest that it is reworked with the aim of casting it as a 'boyhood deeds' narrative comparable to the *macgnímrada* of Cú Chulainn in Recension 1 of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (henceforth *TBC1*).⁵ We shall see how the author achieves this in due course. Before giving the text in full, it is necessary to preface it with a few words on the relationship of the text to its biblical source. In some places, the Irish account is extremely close to the account in Samuel. For example, if we compare the physical description of Goliath with 1 Samuel 17:4–6, the biblical account states:

Et egressus est vir spurius de castris Philisthinorum nomine Goliath, de Geth, altitudinis sex cubitorum et palmi: et cassis aerea super caput ejus,

⁴ YBL, cols 772–6: (i) 'David and Goliath' – no other copies identified as yet (not related to the 'David and Goliath' narrative in King's Inns MS 10), ed. Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP* 13 (1921), 175–7; (ii) 'David and Absalom' – also found in Rawlinson B512 and the *Book of Fermoy* (incomplete copy), ed. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', p. 177; (iii) 'The Death of Absalom' – no other copies identified as yet, ed. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', p. 178; (iv) 'David and Solomon' – also in BL Egerton 92, Rawlinson B512, the *Leabhar Breac* (as part of a homily) and the *Book of Lismore*; ed. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', p. 179 (v) 'David and the Beggar' *Long version*: Y: *Yellow Book of Lecan*, early Middle Irish (exemplar: s. x?), unedited; E1: London, British Library MS Egerton 92, early Middle Irish (exemplar: s. x?), ed. Paul Grosjean, 'King David and the Beggar', in *Irish Texts 4*, ed. J. Fraser, et al. (London, 1934), pp. 118–9; ed. and trans. Standish Hayes O'Grady, 'Le Roi David et le Mendiant', *Mélanges* 4 (1889), cols 163–6; L: *Book of Lismore* (see also RIA Cat. no. 477 and 478 – transcripts of the *Book of Lismore*), O'Grady gives variants from L in his edition from E1 and suggests that the two versions are closely related; D: RIA MS D iii 1 (Cat. no. 671), early Middle Irish (exemplar: s. x?), unedited; sometimes agrees with Y, sometimes agrees with E1; R: Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B512 (fragmentary), unedited; *Abbreviated version 1*: M: *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (RIA 24 P 25), late Middle Irish (exemplar: s. xii?), ed. Kuno Meyer, 'King David and the Beggar', in *Archiv für celtische Lexicographie* 3 (1907), p. 322; *Abbreviated version 2*: F: *Book of Fermoy*, Early Modern Irish (exemplar: s. xiii–xiv?), ed. Meyer, 'King David and the Beggar', pp. 321–2; E2: London, British Library MS Egerton 1781, unedited, McNamara, *The Apocrypha*, states that it is closely related to F; B: RIA MS B iv 1 (Cat. no. 236), unedited.

⁵ O'Rahilly, ed. and trans., *TBC1*, l. 398ff.

et lorica squamata induebatur. Porro pondus loricae eius, quinque millia siclorum aeris erat: et ocreas aereas habebat in cruribus: et clypeus aereus tegebat humeros eius.

And there went out a man baseborn from the camp of the Philistines named Goliath, of Geth, whose height was six cubits and a span: And he had a helmet of brass upon his head, and he was clothed with a coat of mail with scales, and the weight of his coat of mail was five thousand sicles of brass: And he had greaves of brass on his legs and a buckler of brass covered his shoulders.

The Irish narrative states:

Ba hamnus ĩarum cathugud frisin nGōlaii .i. secht cuba[i]d a mēit, cathbarr cĭrach for a chind, lūirech ĩaraind imbi, cōica cēt di ungaib indĭ, ĩallacrand umai imma chosaib, claideb n-ĩaraind ina lāim.

Fighting against Goliath was rough, then, i.e. seven cubits his size, a crested helmet upon his head, an iron breastplate around him – five thousand ounces in it – bronze greaves around his legs, an iron sword in his hand.

We can see that, on a detailed level, the author can remain close to the biblical account. We cannot necessarily assume that the medieval Irish author would have had access to the Vulgate or any other translation of the Books of Samuel because we have no surviving copies of those biblical books from early medieval Ireland, but the ability of the author to remain very close to the biblical account at times suggests that he did know the narrative well and it is very likely that there were copies of the Books of Samuel circulating in medieval Ireland that are now lost.⁶ I suggest that any departure from the biblical source should be regarded as deliberate, particularly given that the cumulative evidence strongly suggests that these departures work collectively to frame the life of David in a very particular way. An analysis of the choices made by the author – whether to remain faithful to the original, or to depart radically from it – provides us with an insight into possible authorial intentions and thereby allows us to suggest possible functions and audiences for each text.

Since the narrative is relatively brief and, as far as I am aware, has never been translated before, I give Meyer's edition and my translation from YBL here in full:

Dauĭd mac hIsse, rĭ is ferr tarraid talam intĭ Dauĭd. Is ē dorōne na trĭ cōeca[i] t do molad Crĭst, as ē romarb Gōla trēnfer do Fĭlistĭnĭb ĩ n-aimsir Saūil maic Ciss rĭ[g] thūaithi Dē mac nIsraēl. Ba hamnus ĩarum cathugud frisin nGōlaii .i. secht cuba[i]d a mēit, cathbarr cĭrach for a chind, lūirech ĩaraind imbi, cōica cēt di ungaib indĭ, ĩallacrand umai imma chosaib, claideb n-ĩaraind

⁶ Exegetical texts and biblical commentaries offer further indirect evidence that copies of the Books of Samuel were available in early medieval Ireland.

ina lāim. Cōica fer cach lāi nomarbad do thūaith Dē ar galaib ōinfir. Hesse didiu athair Dauīd, is ē robo comairlid do Šaaūl. Nothēigtis tarum rechtaire Saūil do chuindchid thrēnfir ar cind nGōlai. Gilla and siden in Daūid oc a chāirib. ‘Cid nothēigid?’ ar Dauīd frisna rechtaire.

‘Do chuindchid ōc ar cind in trēnfir.’

‘Nī man deochabair dō’, or Dauīd. ‘Nī fil fir nDē nā dōine lib. Mad misi ronīsad, nomairfind-se ar bēlaib fer ndomain.’

‘Is ed so adrubairt mac Esse’, ar in rechtaire fri Saūl.

‘Mac bōeth’, ar sē ‘₇ ōinmit. Is airi doradus-sa dom chāirib do theasaire in gilla sin ōn dūad sin. Tēit neach ar a chend.’ Tēit nōnbur chuici.

‘Tair do acallaim ind rīg! Mina thīs ar āis, rega ar ēigin.’ La sin dadascara a nōnbur ₇ dobeir lomain forru. ‘Tair lindi ₇ is buidi lind.’

‘Regaid-se am āenur’, or sē. Tēit leo.

‘In rega’, ar Saūl, ‘ar cind in trēnfir?’

‘Regait immorro’, or sē.

‘Cīa hegnam dorignis rīam?’ or Saūl.

‘Domarraid leo mōr’, or sē, ‘feachtus isin dīthrub. Rogai b chāierig dona cāerchaib. Roreatha[s]-sa chugai co ndeachad for a druim ₇ coretarscarus a charpat fri alaile corice a brāgait.’

‘Deigengnam!’, ar Saūl. ‘Cindus norega i n-agaid in trēnfir?’

‘Com thabhaill ₇ com chammōic.’

‘Drocharm i n-agaid trēnfir’, ar a athair.

Tēit tarum ar a chend isin n-āth. Dobeir Dauīd cloich ina thabaiill, ruslēic ‘sin n-aēr. Roacht in cloch a torand oc teacht sūas. Dēchaid Gōla sūas. Rolā in cathbarr dia chind, dochuredhar in cloch ina ētan co mbāi a medōn a cloicne. Imrid tar sin in camōic for a chend co nderna brūar de. Cētchomlonn Dauīd sin. Íar sin rofoerad ō Saūl co ndeachad for loinges airt robūi Saūl a mbeathaid, conid tar n-ēgaib Saūil rogab son rīghi mac nIsraēl. Finit.

David son of Jesse; the best king who ever came into the world was the same David. It is he who made the three fifties to praise Christ; it is he who killed Goliath, champion of the Philistines, in the time of Saul, son of Kish, king of the people of God, of the children of Israel. Fighting against Goliath was challenging then, i.e. seven cubits his size, a crested helmet upon his head, an iron breastplate around him – five thousand ounces in it – bronze greaves around his legs, an iron sword in his hand. Each day he used to kill fifty men of the people of God in single combat. Jesse, then, the father of David, it is he who was a counsellor to Saul. Saul’s stewards, then, were going to seek a champion against Goliath. At that time, David was a lad shepherding. ‘Where are you going?’ said David to the stewards.

‘To seek warriors against the champion.’

‘Would that you did not go there’, said David. ‘The truth of God or of men is not with you. If it was I who came, I would kill him before the men of the world.’

‘This is what the son of Jesse said’, said the steward to Saul.

‘Silly boy’, he said, ‘and a fool. The reason I put him to my sheep was to save that boy from that challenge.⁷ Let someone go to him.’ Nine men go to him.

‘Come to speak with the king! If you do not come willingly, you will go by force.’ With that, he cast the nine of them down and he ties them up. ‘Come with us and we’ll be grateful.’

‘I will go of my own accord’, he said. He goes with them. ‘Will you go’, said Saul, ‘against the champion?’

‘I will go indeed’, he said.

‘What valorous deed have you ever done?’, said Saul.

‘A great lion came to me’, he said, ‘one time in the desert. It took a sheep from the flock. I ran to it so that I went onto its back and so that I ripped its jaws apart as far as its throat.’

‘A fine feat!’ said Saul. ‘How will you go against the champion?’

‘With my sling and my crook.’

‘A bad weapon against a champion’, said his father.

He [i.e. David] goes then against him in the ford. David puts a stone in his sling; he shot it into the air. The stone made its noise while going up. Goliath looks up. His helmet came away from his head; the stone struck his forehead so that it was in the middle of his skull. After that he [i.e. David] plies the crook upon his [i.e. Goliath’s] head so that he made fragments of it. That was David’s first combat. After that he was proscribed by Saul so that he went into exile as long as Saul was alive, so that it is after the death of Saul that he took the kingship of the children of Israel. Finit.⁸

As noted, it is my contention that this narrative frames David’s combat with Goliath in such a way as to draw parallels with the ‘boyhood deeds’ of Cú Chulainn and in particular the episode in which Cú Chulainn received his name after killing the hound of Culann. Perhaps the most significant change, however, is the relocation of the action from the Valley of Elah to a ford (*áth*), which recalls the site of many of the adolescent Cú Chulainn’s combats in *TBC1*. It is worth noting that the account of Cú Chulainn’s killing of the hound of Culann itself echoes the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, thereby suggesting a more complex phenomenon of indebtedness of early Irish saga narrative to biblical narrative and the subsequent influence of Irish saga narrative on vernacular biblical adaptations. These shared narrative techniques reflect the common educational background and literary worldview of the authors of both vernacular biblical adaptations and vernacular sagas.⁹

⁷ Or this sentence could be spoken by Jesse (David’s father).

⁸ Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, pp. 175–7, but I have silently corrected minor misreadings by Meyer; my translation.

⁹ As Kim McCone noted in relation to shared themes in vernacular Irish sagas and hagiography, the direction of influence is perhaps less significant than the fact of a common literary culture and worldview among the authors of both genres: McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 188.

To support these observations, a brief comparison of the David and Goliath narrative and the ‘boyhood deeds’ in *TBC1* is in order. In the David and Goliath story, we are told from the outset that ‘David son of Jesse’ is the main character of the story, but we are quickly also introduced to the fearsome Goliath. We are told that David’s father, Jesse, was an advisor to King Saul – this is a departure from the biblical account but, as we shall see, it is in keeping with the kings-fathers-sons matrix within which all of these YBL narratives operate (compare, for example, the narrative on David and Absalom that follows, where the prophet Nathan is written out of the story, just as the prophet Samuel is erased in this instance).¹⁰ Saul’s stewards go to find a warrior to fight Goliath and they encounter David who, the author notes, is still a little boy, shepherding. When the stewards tell him that they are looking for someone to fight Goliath, the young David replies with braggadocio that he would ‘kill him before the men of the world’. The stewards report this to Jesse, who ridicules the little boy and sends nine men to stop him from fighting, but, in a display of the superhuman strength and petulant and precocious behaviour so characteristic of the young Cú Chulainn, David overpowers them, ties them all up and forces them to plead with him to go to speak to Saul.¹¹

David tells Saul that he will fight Goliath alone, and this brings us to the narrative’s depictions of single combat. There are two distinct instances of single combat in this account: the first is when David describes killing the lion that tried to steal his father’s sheep while David was shepherding (cf. 1 Samuel 17:35); the second is the encounter with Goliath himself (cf. 1 Samuel 17:48–51). In both cases, the Irish author makes subtle but significant changes to the detail of the narrative. First, where in the biblical account David describes killing lions and bears, it states:

et persequerbar eos, et percutiebam, eruebamque de ore eorum: et illi conurgebant adversum me, et apprehendebam mentum eorum, et suffocabam, interficiebamque eos.

And I pursued after them, and struck them, and delivered it [the sheep] out of their mouth: and they rose up against me, and I caught them by the throat, and I strangled and killed them.

The Irish account adds further detail:

Roreatha[s]-sa chugai co ndeachad for a druim ₇ coretarscarus a charpat fri alaile corice a brāgait.

¹⁰ For the influence of the Saul narrative on medieval Irish saga literature, see Ralph O’Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013).

¹¹ We might particularly note the nine boys who run away from the young Cú Chulainn while Fergus and Conchobar are playing *fidchell*: *TBC1*, pp. 14 (text), 137 (trans.), and the nine men of the Isles of Faiche that Cú Chulainn kills at the age of five: *TBC1*, pp. 17 (text), 140 (trans.).

I ran to it so that I went onto its back and so that I ripped its jaws apart (literally, ‘I separated its one gum/palate from the other’) as far as its throat.

The description of David mounting the lion’s back in order to tear apart its jaws is particularly significant because this detail appears to be found in medieval Irish iconographical representations of David. As Helen Roe noted in the 1940s, ‘on Irish crosses David crouches on the lion’s back and with both hands wrenches the beast’s jaws apart’.¹² Examples of these can be found on the Kells Market Cross, the Kells South Cross, the Monasterboice West Cross and elsewhere.¹³ Thus, we can see a relationship between a vernacular textual representation of David killing the lion and iconographical representations that were visible in the ecclesiastical landscape. One would not wish to push the point too far, but it seems possible that craftsmen may have encountered vernacular biblical adaptations such as this David and Goliath narrative, whether they were read publicly as entertainment, embedded in sermons or presented to them as potential source material by patrons. Thus, the narrative may have functioned as an iconographic source. Alternatively, the author, in adapting his biblical source, may have drawn on familiar iconographical representations in the landscape in order to flesh out his depiction of David killing the lion. In some respects, the direction of borrowing is less interesting than the fact that the textual and the iconographic participate in a shared reading of this passage of the David story.

The depictions of combat are also interesting because of the way that they echo Cú Chulainn’s fight with the hound, and in this regard, we should note that *TBC1* also presents us with two instances of single combat. In the case of *TBC1*, they are presented as two alternative versions of how Cú Chulainn defeats the hound:

In tan didiu dolluid in cú chucai-seom, focheird-seom úad a líathróit, a loirg,
 7 frisindle in coin cona díb lámaib .i. dobeir indara láim dó fri ubull bráгат in
 chon; dobeir araile fria chúl. Bentai frisín corthe inna fárrad co sescaind cach
 ball de a lethe. Mad iar n-arailiu slicht immorro is a líathróit ro lá-som inna
 beólu co r-ruc a inathar thrít.

Now when the hound came towards the boy, he cast aside his ball and his hurley, and he tackled the dog with both hands, that is, he put one hand on the apple of the hound’s throat and the other at the back of his head, and dashed him against the pillar-stone that was beside him so that all the hound’s limbs sprang apart. According to another version, however, he threw his ball into the hound’s mouth and it drove his entrails out through him.¹⁴

¹² Helen Roe, ‘The David Cycle in Medieval Irish Art’, *JRSAI* 79 (1949), 39–59, at p. 43.

¹³ These are all discussed, with figures, in Roe, ‘The David Cycle’, pp. 43–5. However, not all medieval Irish representations of David killing the lion show him on the lion’s back: for alternative representations, such as David kneeling in front of the lion, see Roe, ‘The David Cycle’, pp. 46–7. We should also add a note of caution in interpreting some iconographic scenes, and it is possible that some that have been identified as David killing the lion may be Samson slaying the lion or even Hercules killing the Nemean lion.

¹⁴ O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *TBC1*, pp. 18 (text), 141 (trans.).

Significantly, we get a first version of the hound of Culann episode that recalls David killing the lion by wrenching the beast’s jaws apart (‘one hand on the apple of the hound’s throat and the other at the back of his head’), and a second version that recalls the killing of Goliath himself, driving the ball into the hound’s mouth, just as David fired the stone into Goliath’s head. Furthermore, the reference to David ripping the lion’s jaws apart (separating one jaw from another as far as the throat) evokes Cú Chulainn’s rage-induced physical transformation:

Doéirig dia glainíni co ríci a h-óu. Asoilg a beólu coa inairddriuch combo écna a inchróes.

He laid bare from his jaw to his ear and opened his mouth rib-wide so that his internal organs were visible.¹⁵

As if to cement the parallels between David and Cú Chulainn, lest anyone be in doubt, in the YBL narrative of David and Goliath, rather than decapitate Goliath as in 1 Samuel 17, David takes his crook (recalling Cú Chulainn’s hurley) and uses it to smash Goliath’s head ‘so that he made fragments of it’. That, we are told, ‘was David’s first combat’.¹⁶

The sins of the father

All of the other David narratives in YBL centre on David’s relationships with his sons, Absalom and Solomon. The second narrative in the series lays the groundwork for the troubled relationship between David and Absalom, which will culminate in Absalom’s failed attempt to usurp his father’s kingship. The narrative also functions as an aetiological tale for the composition of the Penitential Psalm 50, the *Miserere mei*.

Da mac amra la Dauīd .i. Solam 7 Aibisilōn. Intī Aibisilōn, ēsaide dealb duine as deach tāraill talmáin. Is ar tōrmach a fuilte dobertis a trī chomthrom do dergōr cecha blādna, fobīth ba hāilliu i cortharaib na rīg oldās ōr. Is hē marcach is deach robāi isin domun. Rogab fearann iarum ō Dauīd. Adcobrastar iarum Dauīd mnāi a mīlead do chomruc ria .i. bean a fīr chumtha robūi for a leathlāim 7 cōeca ban ngrādaigthi leis. Foīdis didiu co a mac Dauīd, co hAibisolōn, in mīlid 7 rīgogum ina scīath do thabairt chatha do thūaith frīstaīt Dauīd. Is ed rucad isin scīath acht co roindlithi in cath, Aibisolōn do ēlud as 7 in mīlid do fāgbāil, ar nī theichdis itir na mīlid. Dognīther ōn. Doberar in cath. Maidid for Aibisolōn. Fācabair in mīlid. Tic Aibisolōn co scēlaib in chatha. Is and robūi Dauīd oc saigid[eht] dar mūr na cathrach immach.

¹⁵ O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *TBC1*, pp. 14 (text), 137 (trans.).

¹⁶ Compare the episode in *TBC1* where Cú Chulainn drives his fist through the skull of the man who tries to wake him up (O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *TBC1*, pp. 15 [text], 138 [trans.]), or the way that Cú Chulainn beats the men of the Isle of Faiche with his hurley (pp. 17 [text], 140 [trans.]).

‘Scēla leat, a gilla?’ or Dauīd.

‘Romemaid foraind ₇ forfācbad in mīlid and.’

‘Olc sin’, ol Dauīth.

‘Atchondarc scēl ingnad innossa.’

‘Maith?’ or Dauīd.

‘Dias aitheach oc ingairi cārech. Oenchāera lasindara n-ōī, cōica lia chēle. Dochūaid fer in chōecait cārech co romarbad fer na hēnchōerach. Cid īarum is choir do dēnam fris?’

‘A c[h]lochad immorro’, ar Dauīd ‘₇ a bās ind’.

‘Romidhis fort fēn’, or in gilla, ‘.i. cōeca ban lat ₇ do mīlid do marbad in a oīnmnāi.’

Robāi immorro in gilla for a eoch. Sōid in gilla ūad in n-each. La sin doslēigi Dauīd saigid isin choirthi. Is and noslēic in gilla for scāth choirthi cloichi co tarla in saighid isin coirthi. Is ann sin tra donānic athrigi. Mūchaid a agaid fri talmain co mbūi samlaid trī lā ₇ tēora aidchi. Is and sin rochachain .i. *Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam*. Cach oēn didiu nogaba īar n-imarbus, dīlaigfider dō a c[h]inaid. Finit.

David had two renowned sons, i.e. Solomon and Absalom. The same Absalom, he was the best human form that came into the world. It is in exchange for the growth of his hair that three times its equivalence in red gold used to be given every year, because it was lovelier as the fringing of royal garments than gold. He was the best horseman who was in the world. He received an estate after that from David. David desired, after that, to copulate with the wife of his soldier, i.e. the wife of his comrade who was his right-hand man, although he [i.e. David] had fifty beloved women. David then sent the soldier to his son, to Absalom, and [instructions in] royal ogam in his shield to engage in battle with a people who oppose David. What was put into the shield was, as soon as the battle had got going, for Absalom to escape from it and the soldier to be left, for the soldiers used not to flee at all. That is done. The battle is given. It goes against Absalom. The soldier is left. Absalom comes with news of the battle. It is then that David was engaged in archery out across the wall of the city.

‘You have news, o lad?’ said David.

‘We were defeated¹⁷ and the soldier was left there.’

‘That’s bad’, said David.

‘I’ve just seen a strange event.’

‘Well?’ said David.

‘Two peasants were tending sheep. One of them had one sheep, the other had fifty. The man with fifty sheep went to kill the man with one sheep. What then is the right thing to do with him?’

¹⁷ Literally, ‘it broke on us’.

‘Stoning him, indeed,’ said David, ‘and his death for it’.

‘You have passed judgement upon yourself’, said the lad, ‘i.e. you have fifty women, and yet you killed your soldier for his one woman.’

The lad, moreover, was upon his horse. The lad turns the horse away. With that, David shoots an arrow into the pillar. It is then the lad threw himself under the shelter of a pillar of stone so that the arrow hit the pillar. It is at that time, then, repentance came to him [i.e. David]. He pressed his face to the ground so that he was thus for three days and three nights. It is then that he sang, i.e. *Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam*. Each one, then, who may recite it after transgression, his offences will be forgiven him. Finit.¹⁸

We will explore the role of the psalms in early medieval Ireland in the next chapter, as well as discussing some broader context for the specific psalm in question here, the *Miserere mei*. This particular story about the composition of Psalm 50 links to the ‘David and Goliath’ narrative preceding it, which stated that:

Is é doróna na trí cócaicit do molad Críost.

It is he who made the three fifties [i.e. the psalms] to praise Christ.

Note that David is said to have composed the psalms to praise Christ, not God, a statement that draws on the kind of Christological readings of the psalms that we will go on to discuss. As we shall see, even the idea of David as sole author of the psalms is something on which there was a range of opinions in medieval Ireland (see Chapter 3). For now, our concern is the adaptation of biblical narrative and the author’s possible intention in presenting David and Absalom in this particular manner. Our Irish narrative, then, tells us that David had ordered the death of Uriah, husband of Bathsheba, because David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and wanted to eliminate Uriah in order to be able to marry her. However, unlike the account of the biblical source material, here we are told that it was David’s son, Absalom, who was leading the troops and who sent Uriah to his death. Absalom then returns to David’s court and reports the death of Uriah, but he then proceeds to tell David a story:

Two peasants were tending sheep. One of them had one sheep, the other had fifty. The man with fifty sheep went and killed the man with one sheep. What is the right thing to do with him?

As we have seen, David replies that the man should be stoned to death, to which Absalom says: ‘you have passed judgement upon yourself: you have fifty concubines and yet you killed your soldier for his one woman’. Enraged, David tries to kill Absalom, but he is then overcome with repentance and the Irish author tells us that it is then that David sang (*Is and sin rochachain*): *Miserere mei Deus*, that is, Psalm 50. By contrast, the biblical understanding of that psalm is that David composed it after he had been rebuked by the prophet Nathan. Thus, Absalom

¹⁸ Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, p. 177; my translation.

in the Irish narrative absorbs the roles played by a variety of other characters in the biblical account. But we can observe an ideological and exegetical consistency with the other tenth-century Irish narratives about David and Absalom (see below), which recasts the subsequent death of Absalom as God's punishment to David for his having had Uriah killed.

There are further authorial strategies that integrate this story within the wider corpus of YBL David stories, such as the fleeting mention at the outset of Solomon, which points forward to the final two narratives, and the ironic references to Absalom's abundant and beautiful hair and his renowned horsemanship, both of which will be factors in his death as described in the next narrative. There is also a more implicit nod back to the previous David and Goliath narrative in that David's attempt on the life of Absalom in this second narrative closely echoes Saul's attempt on David's life in 1 Samuel 18:10–11. Although Saul's attack is not mentioned in the YBL David and Goliath story, the fraught relationship between Saul and David is alluded to in the statement that Saul proscribed David and that David went into exile (see above, pp. 57–8). The author of this David and Absalom story engages in other types of cultural transfer, for example with the reference to the 'royal ogam' in which David writes his message to Absalom, thus creating an Old Testament narrative that is in some formal respects indistinguishable from medieval Irish saga narrative.¹⁹ Here, then, we have a group of narratives that are deeply embedded in the style and structure of medieval Irish saga literature but which are equally immersed in biblical exegesis and commentary. The focus in these narratives on David, his kingship, and his relationships with his sons, Absalom and Solomon, suggest that the intended audience for these narratives may have been secular and potentially royal, although of course it is impossible to say for certain. That the texts we are discussing here were written in the vernacular is, I would argue, because their intended audiences were either young clerical students or secular aristocrats: both groups who would require elementary moral and biblical instruction in Irish rather than Latin. The elimination and adaptation of priestly and prophetic characters, to direct the spotlight onto secular male relationships and particularly father-son relationships, is our strongest hint that the intended audience for these stories was noble and male.

Entangled

The third David narrative in YBL continues the story of David's relationship with Absalom. This anecdote tells an adapted and abbreviated version of the account of Absalom's rebellion against his father and his subsequent death. The author's source is the long narrative of 2 Samuel 14–18, which recounts how, after being readmitted into David's court (after having fled following his murder of Ammon to avenge the rape of Tamar), Absalom rebels against David, forcing David's court into exile. We are told that David leaves ten of his concubines behind to take care of David's house. On the advice of Achitophel, Absalom sleeps with

¹⁹ For example, Cú Chulainn writes messages in ogam in *TBC1*, which his fellow warriors are depicted as being able to read.

David's concubines, so that 'when all Israel hears that thou hast disgraced thy father, their hands may be strengthened with thee' (2 Samuel 16:21). Achitophel then advises Absalom to ready his army, but Chusai the Arachite sends intelligence to David to warn him. David's army is therefore ready to face Absalom's forces, and Absalom is defeated. After the battle, Absalom meets the 'servants of David' while he is riding on a mule and, as the mule passes beneath a tree, Absalom, who was renowned for his beautiful, long hair, gets caught up in the tree. The mule continues on without him and he is left, hanging by his hair in the tree. One of David's servants reports this to Joab, the leader of David's army, who asks why the servant had not killed Absalom. The servant replies that he did not dare lay a hand on the king's son, reminding Joab that David had specifically demanded that his son not be hurt, but Joab 'took three lances in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom: and whilst he yet panted for life, sticking on the oak, ten young men, armourbearers of Joab, ran up, and striking him slew him' (2 Samuel 18:14–15). Joab then has Absalom's body cast into a pit in the forest and covered with a heap of stones. There follows a brief onomastic note about a pillar called the 'Hand of Absalom' and then we are told that Joab sent Chusai to tell David that his armies had been successful but his son was dead. Upon hearing this news, David weeps and utters his famous words of grief: 'My son Absalom, Absalom my son: would to God that I might die for thee, Absalom my son, my son Absalom' (2 Samuel 18:33).²⁰

The tenth-century Irish author of the YBL narrative reworked his source material quite significantly and tells a rather different version of Absalom's rebellion and death:

Dober Aibisolōn idna catha dia athair .i. do Dauīd, do gait rīgi, con[d]ar-ruc asa chathraig for teched, co ndeachaid isin slīab remi 7 roergaib indarra comairlid do Dauīd. 'Maith tra', ar in comairlid aile fri Dauīd, 'cadeat t'imtheachta afeachtsa? Doregai in gillai inar ndiaid isin slīab, mani tairmischer de 7 nochascēra frit co ndechais ēg lais. Regad-sa dia thairmesc īarum 7 cuindig-siu ōcu collēic.'

'Maith', or Dauīd. Luid īarum in comairlid cucu. 'Bam ferr-sa di suidiu', or Aibisolōn. 'Bīat-so *immorro* ifechtsa ōr atām-ni ar ndīs imut.' 'Tabraid for comairle afeachtsa', or Aibisolōn.

'Is ī ar comairle', ar in comairlid tōiseach, 'techt i ndīaid Dauīd [isin sliab] conadruca muir nō tene ūain nocothaith l[ind]'. 'Ni si] mo chomairli' [or in ti] dēidenach, 'atāt noi mna²¹ grādaigthi do Dauīd isin chathraig acht comrac duid-siu riu co maitin innocht 7 gairm rīgi duit isin rīgsuidiu, ar is solad duit anocht.'

²⁰ *Fili mi Absalom, Absalom fili mi: quis mihi tribuat ut ego moriar pro te, Absalom fili mi, fili mi Absalom.*

²¹ Meyer gives 'inna' here; there is an erasure in the manuscript, but I think the scribe intended 'mna'. This alters the meaning from 'nine of the beloveds' to 'nine beloved women', which is in any case a relatively minor difference.

‘Is dechcomairli’, or Aibisolōn. Is ed ōn dognīther and. Trāth terti arabārach tānic *didiu* co n-idnu chatha co mbūi isind faichdi. Cath for a mac rofūacair .i. cath Gilba, is ē doradad ann.

‘Maith’, or Dauīd, ‘cipithair mo mac inn, nī romarbthar, ar is līach.’ ‘Maith’, or Aibisolōn, ‘cipithair Dauīd, nā tucthar chucam-sa i mbethu.’ Con-dregar tarum in cath.

Lia anfir *didiu* maidhidh forin ngilla. Ech maith iarom fo suidiu. Roreith dochum na fidbaidi. Robūi omna ar a chind. Dochuiredar a moing im gēasca robūi isin crund, ar is figthi robūi, conidfāraicab int ech immo gēasca. Dofarraid mīlid do Dauīd. ‘Gad mo moing dīm’, or sē. ‘Nāthō!’, or in gilla, ‘in sās ina tard Dīa, nī gat-sa dīt.’

Asbert side re thigerna{. Ronic sidi}. ‘M’anacul!’, or Aibisolōn. ‘Nota sunt’ or in mīlid. {‘}Adrubairst Dauīd nā rodmarbthar. {‘} ‘Gad dīm mo moing’, or sē. ‘Rodbia ōn’, or a chēli. Dober builli dar a munēl co n-ecmaid and a cheand de. Dober ina chris.

Taiselbthar in cendail do Dauīd. ‘In ērla’, or sē, ‘mo mac-sa?’

‘Forfacaib comartha leam-sa’, or in mīlid. ‘Acso in comartha , in dīgal dom fīr chumtha romarbais-[s]eo imma mnāi.’

Dorochoir tra *didiu* intī Aibisolōn di anfir. Finit.

Absalom brings an army to his father,²² that is, to David, to seize kingship; so that he [i.e. David] took himself out of his city in flight, so that he went ahead into the mountain, and he [i.e. Absalom] captured one of David’s two counsellors.²³ ‘Well then’, said the other counsellor²⁴ to David, ‘how are you going to proceed now? The lad [i.e. Absalom] will come after us into the mountain, if he is not prevented from it, and he will not stop until he has you killed.²⁵ I will go to prevent him, then, and you seek warriors meanwhile.’

‘Fine’, said David. The counsellor went then to them. ‘I will be better as a result of that’, said Absalom. ‘You will be, moreover, now because both of us are by your side.’²⁶ ‘Give your counsel now’, said Absalom.

‘This is our counsel’, said the first counsellor, ‘to go after David into the mountains until sea or fire takes him until he falls at our hands’. ‘That is not my advice’, said the latter one, ‘there are nine of David’s beloved women in the city, just copulate with them tonight until morning,²⁷ and the proclamation of kingship for you in the royal seat, for it is lucky for you tonight.’

‘It is good counsel’, said Absalom. It is that which is done then. The hour of terce the following day,²⁸ he came then with an army, so that he was in the

²² i.e. he declares war on him.

²³ Achitophel.

²⁴ Chusai.

²⁵ Literally: ‘he will not cease from you until you may have gone to death by him’.

²⁶ Literally: ‘because we are, the two of us, around you’.

²⁷ Literally: ‘copulating by you with them until morning tonight’.

²⁸ i.e. at 9am.

field. A battle against his son which he declared, i.e. the battle of Gilboa, it is that which was given there.

‘Well’, said David, ‘whoever comes across my son, let him not be killed, for it is a cause of grief.’ ‘Well,’ said Absalom, ‘whoever comes across David, let him not be brought to me alive.’ The battle begins after that.²⁹

Because of his unrighteousness, then, the lad is defeated. A good horse then under that one [i.e. Absalom]. It ran to the wood. There was an oak ahead of him. His hair got entangled in a branch in the tree,³⁰ for it was interwoven, so that the horse left him entangled in the branch.³¹ One of David’s soldiers came upon him. ‘Remove my hair from me!’, he said. ‘No!’, said the lad, ‘the trap in which God placed you, I won’t remove it from you’.

The latter told his lord. The latter comes to him. ‘My deliverance!’, said Absalom. ‘You have it here’, said the soldier, ‘David said that you were not to be killed’. ‘Remove from me my hair!’, he said. ‘You will have that’, said his companion. He gives a blow across his neck so that he cuts his head from him. He puts it into his belt.

The heads [of the defeated enemy] are presented to David. ‘Did my son escape?’, he said. ‘He left a sign with me’, said the soldier. ‘Here is the sign and it is vengeance for my comrade³² whom you killed in order to get his wife.’³³

The aforementioned Absalom then indeed fell because of injustice. *Finit.*³⁴

Some key aspects of the biblical narrative are retained here, not least the striking image of Absalom hanging by his hair from the tree, which was understood by exegetes to be a prefiguration of the Crucifixion. But there are other exegetical strands at work within the text and the way that the biblical narrative is reshaped, because the Irish story explicitly makes Absalom’s death a punishment for David’s role in the killing of Uriah the Hittite. It is worth exploring this YBL narrative in more detail to understand what the author is doing in this instance. He begins by stripping the narrative down to only two named characters, David and Absalom; two unnamed advisors, who we can assume are Achitophel and Chusai; and two unnamed soldiers, one of whom may or may not be Joab. The author begins with Absalom’s armed uprising and attempt to usurp David’s kingship. Achitophel’s duplicitous behaviour is greatly compressed, as is the rape of David’s concubines. With remarkable brevity, the author manages to convey the key elements of the story largely through the use of a spare style of third-person

²⁹ Literally: ‘the battle is joined after that’.

³⁰ Literally: ‘It put his hair around a branch which was in the tree’.

³¹ Literally: ‘around the branch’.

³² i.e. Uriah.

³³ i.e. Bathsheba.

³⁴ Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, p. 178 with some significant corrections. I indicate with square brackets the text that Meyer omitted entirely (he was working from the facsimile, which is of markedly lesser quality than what is visible in the manuscript); other misreadings have been silently corrected; my translation.

narrative interspersed with direct speech. And the speech of the characters conveys a huge amount of meaning, as we can see from the brief statements of David and Absalom before the battle:

‘Well’, said David, ‘whoever comes across my son, let him not be killed, for it is a cause of grief.’ ‘Well,’ said Absalom, ‘whoever comes across David, let him not be brought to me alive.’

David does not name Absalom, but uses the affectionate ‘my son’ as he pleads with his soldiers to spare Absalom’s life. Absalom, by contrast coldly calls his father ‘David’ as he states, ‘let him not be brought to me alive’, a deliberate foil to David’s ‘let him not be killed’. Given that we are not in fact shown David’s famous grief scene in the YBL story, in part because it has been temporally relocated and altered for the purpose of the previous narrative on the composition of the *Miserere mei*, it is all the more significant that the author here signals the profound ‘cause of grief’ with which the narrative will conclude.

What is perhaps most astonishing, though, is the way that the author allows a moment of ironic humour to intrude in this most tragic episode. For rather than Joab thrusting a lance into Absalom’s heart and the armourbearers finishing the deed while Absalom begged for his life, we are told that Absalom asked David’s soldier to cut his hair in order to free him from the branches:

‘Remove from me my hair!’, he said. ‘You will have that’, said his companion. He gives a blow across his neck so that he cuts his head from him. He puts it into his belt.

This moment of dark humour, in which the ‘haircut’ that Absalom has asked for turns out to be a decapitation, is a significant swerve away from the biblical source and it allows for the dramatic climax of the narrative in which the heads of David’s defeated enemies are presented to him and David asks about the well-being of his son. The soldier (possibly Joab) retorts, brandishing the head of Absalom, ‘Here is the sign and it is vengeance for my comrade whom you killed in order to get his wife’. The soldier’s wording is significant. Contrary to other possible exegetical interpretations, such as that God had abandoned David in this moment because of his adultery with Bathsheba, the author here emphasises that David’s unforgivable crime was not adultery, but treachery. His sin was the betrayal of one of his own soldiers, Uriah, not the sexual relationship he had with Uriah’s wife.³⁵

One cannot also help being reminded here of a scene in *Scéla mucce Meic Dathó* ‘The Tale of Mac Dathó’s Pig’. In that Old Irish saga, the warriors of Ulster and Connacht are arguing over their respective military achievements, again with a serving of ironic speech, in order to decide who should be allowed to carve the

³⁵ This accords with Robert Alter’s reading of the Hebrew story: ‘What follows in the story makes it clear that bloodshed, far more than adultery, is David’s indelible transgression’: *The David Story*, p. 253.

pig at the meal hosted by Mac Dathó. At the climax of that scene, the Connacht warrior, Cet, remarks that his side would be triumphant if only their hero Ánlúan were there, to which the Ulster warrior, Conall, replies ‘he is!’ and brandishes the decapitated head of Ánlúan, which he then throws at Cet, who admits defeat, allowing Conall to carve the pig.³⁶ The fact that Absalom is depicted as being decapitated, his head brandished at his father, David, by an angry soldier, is also intriguing because, as we saw above in the ‘David and Goliath’ story, in another departure from the biblical source, David is not depicted as decapitating and brandishing the head of Goliath. Rather, he is said to have smashed Goliath’s skull to fragments using his crook. The decapitation is temporally relocated to another narrative, this story of the death of Absalom, for dramatic purposes, which raises the possibility that they can all be read together as a coherent proto-cycle.³⁷

Sword of Damocles, hand of God

The fourth YBL narrative about David switches its focus to another of his sons, Solomon. The cluster of narratives is clearly arranged in biographical order, following the broad outline of the events of David’s life, supporting this idea that in YBL, they function as a proto-cycle of short David stories, although this narrative is also preserved in other contexts, including in a sermon in the *Leabhar Breac*. We might find a basis for this particular narrative in the biblical statement that ‘David was king over all Israel, and it was David’s practice to mete out true justice to all his people’ (2 Samuel 8:15). However, the actual plot of the fourth narrative is not to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, what we have here is a short, didactic story on good judgement, with loose connections to the Classical anecdote of the ‘sword of Damocles’. The story begins with David sitting in judgement and a young Solomon (David calls him *maccoim*, ‘boy, lad’) impatiently asking his father why he takes so long to make his rulings and declaring that if he were in his seat, he would make a hundred judgements before nightfall. David invites Solomon to sit in the seat of judgement and to look up. Solomon does so and falls silent. When David humorously goads him, asking why he is taking so long to speak, Solomon replies that he cannot judge because the hand of God is above him, ready to strike him down if he judges falsely. The anecdote is a brief one:

Nab̄id Daūid fut in šamlāi oc breith na hēnbrethi .i. cōica brethemon ic a imrādud i tosaich, conid ĩar sin do-beread-som forcend fuirri. ‘Cid so, a Daūid,’ ar Solum, ‘a dolma nombii? Dia mbad mise nobeth isint suidhiu brethemon, nobēraind cēt mbreth chaidchi.’

‘Maith, a maccāim’, ar Daūid arnabārach fri Solam, ‘tair-siu colēic isan suidhi sea 7 ber na bretha lūatha ūd do chāch!’

³⁶ Rudolph Thurneysen, ed., *Scéla mucce Meic Dathó* (Dublin, 1935), §16, p. 16.

³⁷ On the formation of literary cycles in medieval Irish literature, see Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism* (Cambridge, 2008).

‘Rodbā-su ōn’, or Solam. Gaibid co häit na breithi. ‘Bat faitech tra nombē!’ ar Dauīd. ‘Dēcha ūasad!’ Rodēchai ĩarom sūas , robāi sīst inna thast. ‘Is mall atāi’, or Dauīd. ‘Atā sochaidi isin tich diand adl(a)ic bretha.’

‘Nathō, a maccāin’, or sē, ‘ni rucaim.’

‘Cid so?’ ar Dauīd.

‘Nī hansa’, ar sē. ‘A trī mēir in Dūileamain, is amlaid atāt ōs mo mul-lach , a derno for mo chind dom dingi triasin talam im erchomair dia rucar gūbreith.’

‘Robo maith lim’ ar Dauīd ‘an cētbreth do breith duit.’

‘Nithō’, ol sē Solam, ‘tair-seo isin suidiu.’

Is aire sin *didu* nad cōir dona breithemnaib acht fīr da rād, dāig na boise bīs for a cind .i. bos in Choimdead bis ann. Finit.

David used to be for the length of a summer’s day engaged in adjudicating a single case, that is, fifty judges deliberating it, so that it was after that that he used to finalise it. ‘Why is this, oh David’, said Solomon, ‘that you are so slow? If it were me who were in the judge’s seat, I would have passed one hundred judgements by nightfall.’

‘Well, dear boy,’ said David to Solomon the next morning, ‘come for a while into this seat and give those swift judgements to everyone!’

‘You will have that’, said Solomon. He goes to the place of the judging. ‘You should be careful then!’³⁸ said David. ‘Look above you!’ He looked up then and he was silent for a while.³⁹

‘It is slow that you are’, said David. ‘There is a crowd in the house to whom judgement is desirable’.

‘No, o dear lad’,⁴⁰ he said. ‘I cannot judge’.

‘Why is this?’, said David.

‘Not difficult,’ he said. ‘The three fingers of the Creator, it is they that are above the crown of my head, and his palm upon my head ready to push me into the earth, if I may have made a false judgement.’

‘I would like’, said David, ‘you to give the first judgement’.⁴¹

‘No’, said he, Solomon, ‘*you* come into the seat’.

It is for that reason, then, it is only fitting for the judges to utter truth, because of the palm which is over their heads, that is, the palm of the Lord which is there. Finit.⁴²

This narrative, then, uses the characters of David and Solomon to make a didactic point about the judicial role of the king and the importance of right judgement. But in its ironic speech (specifically David’s call to Solomon to get on with it

³⁸ Literally: ‘let it be careful then that you may be’.

³⁹ Literally: ‘he was for a while in his silence’.

⁴⁰ A term of endearment, literally ‘dear/little lad’, but can also be used by a junior to a senior, e.g. by a daughter to her father: see *eDIL*, s.v. mac(c)án. This is clearly the sense in which Solomon is using it to address David.

⁴¹ Literally: ‘It would be good in my opinion ... the first judgement for judging by you’.

⁴² Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, p. 179; my translation.

because the court is waiting), its use of affectionate language between David and Solomon, and its deployment of the ‘sword of Damocles’-type motif, there is a lot more going in this brief story than merely a pedagogical and moral anecdote about judges. Of particular relevance in situating the narrative within a wider context is its close relationship to another tenth-century narrative, preserved in the Book of Leinster, which sometimes goes under the title ‘The King Who Never Smiled’.

I give here the text of ‘The King Who Never Smiled’, adapted from the diplomatic edition.⁴³ I have added capitalisation, punctuation and paragraph breaks to indicate my interpretation of the text. Expansion of abbreviations by the editors is marked in italics; my own expansions or alterations are in square brackets. This is followed by my translation of the text:

Ri irissech ro boí do Grecaib. Mór a thabartche γ a dearc. Ond úair gabais flaithefnas nochon fácces gen gáre fora beolu. Cia dobertais airfite in domain chuire. Epscop na farrad iss é ro boí i farrad a athar i flaithefnas. Doberedside im[murgu] affaing ndergóir cacha dige no ibed dond epscop. Nocho tabrad im[murgu] in gilla, acht cecha tabrad remi γ iarum.

‘Maith’, or in t-epscof, ‘ingnad imradimse formo menmain. Atusa .i. mbliadna it chomaitecht γ ni erbart frit béus.’

‘Raidsiu’, or in rí, ‘is cet duit.’

‘Ni handsa. Ro buí remutsu sund t’athair féin. Fer amra. Ropo maith frim-sa. Rop é a mathius frim *conna* ibed dig *co* tardad affaing ndergóir cecha hoendige dam. Tussu im[murgu] cidit maith from riam γ iaram, noco tabrai dam a n-irdaltasin. γ ni accim arbad messu do flaithefnasu oldás flathius t’athar acht másu ferr cid etir do flaithefnas. Cid nossaira latsu iarum fo bith is fir flatha congeib na toirthe?’

‘Atbérsa fritsu ón. Is é mo dóchus[-s]a de. Rochuala niconro atlaigestar m’athairse a chuit riam acht ór dobered ara anmain. Messe im[murgu] dober-sa mo chobais o gabusa flaithefnas nicon esbiusa dig riam nach atlaigind. Is suachnid di[diu] is ferr la Dia atlugud oldá ór. Sech dogensa in n-atlugud, rot biasu dano ind affaing cacha dige no íbsa.’

‘Maith’, or in t-epscof, ‘ γ anaill forácbusa cen rád fritso.’

‘Maith’, or in rí.

‘Is duit’, ar in clerech, ‘is lia *cach* coemna γ *cach* airfithiud forsin talmain. Is ingnad lenni nad accamar gen gári fordu déta riam’.

‘Ní beraso dano din chursa’, or se.

‘Maith’, or in clerech.

Fecht and di[diu] ro buiseom .i. in rí fora dergud. A da maccóem fora bé-laib. ‘Maith tra a datuicán’, or na maicc. ‘Is ingnad lenni *amal* atá do sércso linni γ ar sercni latso .i. naro thibisiu rinni riam. Dogenamni tra tromdacht fritso co n-erbara’, la tabairt da lám imma bragit.

‘Maith’, or se. Tic cách issa tech.

⁴³ R. I. Best, et al., ed., *Lebor na Nuachongbála, formerly the Book of Leinster*, 6 vols (Dublin, 1954–83), V, lines 36278–319.

‘Maith’, or in rí, ‘tabar slabrad forna gilla ucút.’

‘Cid so?’, or cách.

‘Niba adas a cóemna ros baiseom anallana. Ragait im[*murgu*] bás innoassa. Tucthar crocha dóib.’

‘Is drochscél’, or cách, ‘na rrigdomnai , na maccaém do marbad.’

‘Bertar immach’, or in rí. Bertair. ‘Inba *for* crochad dogentar no far claidbed dogentar a gillu?’

‘Is ferr lind ar claidbed’, ol seat.

‘Gaibid claidbiu dóib’. Ro gabtha dá chlaideb uasa cind. ‘Na tabraidsi builli dóib co n-erborsa frib’, or se. ‘Maith a gillu in maith far *menma* lib innoassa?’

‘Ni maith’, or in gillai.

‘Cid na tibid innoassa?’

‘Ní accor lend’, or na gillai.

‘Is andsu a gillu in claideb fil uasmo chindsa: claideb Ríg na ndúile dia dáil im mullach anúas día ndernur uabur no esba. Ní tharddaidsi formsa iarum , ni rabaid oca chungid. Tailcid na gillu suas ni sirsan dóib a lloft.’

Conid airesin dí[*diu*] napo chóir do neoch uabur na hespa do denam, ar atá in claideb cétna os chind each oen.

There once was a devout king of the Greeks. Great his bounty and his charity. From the time he assumed kingship there was not seen a smile of laughter on his mouth, even if the entertainers of the world were brought to him. The bishop who was with him, it was he who had been with his father in kingship.⁴⁴ The latter used to give to the bishop, moreover, a penny of red gold for every drink which he used to drink. The boy [i.e. the present king], however, used to give only what he gave otherwise.⁴⁵

‘Well’, said the bishop. ‘It is a wondrous thing that I am pondering in my mind. I am for seven years in your company and I haven’t said it to you yet.’

‘Speak’, said the king. ‘You have permission.’

‘Alright then. Your own father was here before you. A wonderful man. He was good to me. Such was his goodness towards me that he used not to drink a drink without giving to me a penny of red gold for every drink. You, however, although you are good to me otherwise,⁴⁶ you do not give to me the equivalent of that. And I do not see that your kingship is worse than the kingship of your father; if anything, your kingship may be better. What exempts them [i.e. the pennies] in your opinion, since it is the sovereign’s truth which maintains fruitfulness?’

‘I’ll tell you that. This is my belief concerning it. I have heard that my father did not ever give thanks for his food, but it was gold that he used to give for his soul. I, however, will give my conscience [i.e. I swear] that since I assumed kingship I have not ever drunk a drink that I did not give thanks

⁴⁴ i.e. when the father was king.

⁴⁵ Literally: ‘what he gave before and after’, i.e. not the payment for drink, but all the other payments that the previous king used to give.

⁴⁶ Again, literally ‘before and after’.

for. It is evident, then, that God prefers thanksgiving to gold. Not only will I perform thanksgiving but you also will have the penny for every drink I will drink.'

'Well', said the bishop, 'and [there's] another thing I haven't mentioned to you.'⁴⁷

'Well?', said the king.

'It is you', said the cleric, 'who has more luxury and more entertainment than anyone else on earth.'⁴⁸ We think it strange that we have not seen a smile of laughter on your face'⁴⁹ ever.'

'You won't this time either', he said.

'Fine', said the cleric.

One time, then, he, i.e. the king, was on his bed, his two dear boys⁵⁰ before him. 'Well then, daddy,'⁵¹ said the boys. 'We think it strange, since we have love for you and you have love for us, that you have never smiled at us. We are going to persecute you until you tell us', grabbing him by the neck.

'Fine', he said. Everyone comes in to the house. 'Well', said the king, 'let a chain be put on those lads.'

'What's this?', said everyone.

'Not fitting was the pleasure that they had so far. They will die now. Let gallows be brought for them.'

'It is a bad story', said everyone, 'killing the royal heirs and the dear boys.'

'Let them be brought out', said the king. They are brought out. 'Will you be hanged or will you be put to the sword, o boys?'

'We prefer to be put to the sword', they said.

'Take swords to them'. Two swords were brought above their heads. 'Do not give a blow to them until I tell you', he said. 'Well, lads, is your mental state good now in your opinion?'

'It is not good', said the boys.

'Why are you not smiling now?'

'We don't want to', said the boys.

'More difficult, oh boys, is the sword which is above my head, that is, the sword of the King of Creation, to be sent down into the crown of my head if I engage in pride or wantonness. You are not to bring it upon me then and you're not to be seeking it.'⁵² Let the boys up: it would be unfortunate to destroy them.'

So that it is for that reason, then, that it is not proper for anyone to engage in pride or wantonness because the same sword is above everyone.

⁴⁷ Literally: 'which I have left without saying to you'.

⁴⁸ Literally: 'it is to you that every luxury and entertainment is most numerous on the earth'.

⁴⁹ Literally: 'on your teeth'.

⁵⁰ *Maccóem* has a range of meanings implying youth and affection, such as 'dear boys, young nobles, foster-sons, courtiers': see Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Irish *maccóem*, Welsh *makwyf*', *Ériu* 42 (1991), 27–36.

⁵¹ Term of endearment, but can also be used by a foster-son to his foster-father, or by a student to his teacher.

⁵² i.e. don't provoke me into committing either of those sins.

We can see the clear relationships between this story and that of David and Solomon: the father-son royal relationships at the heart of both narratives; the use of ironic speech and affectionate language; the moral at the end of the story; and the use of a ‘sword of Damocles’-type motif – a literal sword over the heads of the king’s sons to teach them a lesson about the figurative sword of judgement above the head of their father, the hand of God in the case of David and Solomon. Although in the ‘King Who Never Smiled’ narrative, we have a (rather corrupt) clerical figure in the form of the king’s bishop, it is the payments made to him by the king’s father that are key to the bishop’s role in the narrative.⁵³ The bishop also serves in part in the ‘Damocles’ role, since he is the one who observes that the king has all the wealth and luxury imaginable but does not enjoy himself: this set-up in the first half of the narrative allows the king to convey the lesson about the sword of judgement to his sons in the second half. Again, though, the foregrounding of royal male figures might suggest that such men were the intended audience.

In the YBL David and Solomon story, David is depicted as passing on the capacity for careful judgement to his son, Solomon, through the use of a ‘sword of Damocles’-type lesson. It is a lesson that suggests, as does the ‘King Who Never Smiled’ narrative, that the judicial role of kings was an important one in tenth-century Ireland. As we shall see now, however, the respective characterisations of David and Solomon are inverted in the final narrative of the cluster, where Solomon has full possession of that capacity for right judgement, whereas David shows himself incapable of judgement at all.

‘You, David, are the Church’

The final narrative in the cluster is the story known as ‘David and the Beggar’. Versions of this story survive in numerous manuscripts, in different recensions. Five of the manuscripts (YBL, Egerton 92, the Book of Lismore, RIA MS D iii 1, and Rawlinson B512) preserve a longer narrative, which I would argue on linguistic grounds dates from the tenth century. YBL preserves a few earlier linguistic forms than does Egerton 92, but the two witnesses are very closely related in terms of form and content, and I will cite the Egerton 92 version here, as edited by Grosjean.⁵⁴ There are also two abbreviated versions of the story, one of which, in RIA MS 24 P 25 (*Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*), is late Middle Irish, probably dating from the twelfth century.⁵⁵ The second abbreviated version is found in the Book of Fermoy⁵⁶ and is Early Modern Irish, perhaps from the thirteenth century, and by this time, the earlier text had been transformed radically. The transmission and transformation of the text, as revealed by these four witnesses, allows

⁵³ For corrupt clerics as an important feature of tenth-century humorous, pedagogical narratives, see Elizabeth Boyle, ‘Lay Morality, Clerical Immorality and Pilgrimage in Tenth-Century Ireland: *Cethrur macclérech* and *Epscop do Gáedelaib*’, *Studia Hibernica* 39 (2013), 9–48.

⁵⁴ Grosjean, ed., ‘King David and the Beggar’.

⁵⁵ Meyer, ed. ‘David and the Beggar’, p. 322.

⁵⁶ Meyer, ed. ‘David and the Beggar’, pp. 321–2.

us to see significant changes over time in the narrative, its purpose, message and potential audience. It begins as a story exemplifying a point of Irish law and ends by becoming an edificatory religious anecdote in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* and a rather confused and illogical narrative in the Book of Fermoy. Through its position in YBL, of course, it is also presented and can be read as the final story in a David proto-cycle. Before unravelling these processes, we can begin by discussing the tenth-century version of the story:

Dia Cascc is and no dāiled Dáuid mac Iessé a dechmada do bochtaib ₇ aidil-
cnechaib in Coimded. Ba hirdálta leó iarum anísín. Tic bachlach trúag fecht
n-ann in tan búí oc fodail a almsan co mbuí for brú na seiched forsa mbuí in
indmus: ‘Ní damsá, a Dáuid,’ ol sé.

‘Cid ara tibrind ní duit?’ ol Dáuid.

‘Atú muindtir sesir.’ ol se. ‘₇ nim t[h]a a mbreith a galad accorais.’

‘Ní thiber,’ ol Dáuid, ‘nídat mairtir, nídat losc, nídat dall, nídat truag, nídat
clam. Norersta do eascait oc denum neich ar do lenbu.’

Donic didiu dia bliadna. ‘Ní damsá, a Dáuid,’ ol se, ‘nít comard damsá fri
cach.’

‘Is tu fil ann,’ ol Dáuid. ‘Nítbía failti. Bidat marb dia tis doridisi.’

Dia bliadna co n-acca chuice doridisi in fer cetna. ‘Tanacais,’ ol Dáuid.

‘Tanac didiu,’ ol se.

‘Nosberid amach dia c[h]rochad.’ ol Dáuid.

Is and do dechaid Solam mac Dáuid isin tech. Mac ón is amru ro genair
forsin talmain inti Solam. If frisin Solam sin adrubairt Crist co fuigbed ani
connicfed uad, conid ead ro guidsim, eca ₇ eolas do thabairt dō, do etirgleod
chest ₇ caingen ₇ imresna in popail iter saidbir ₇ daidbir. ‘Cid so?’ or Solam
fria athair.

‘Do crochad in firsi frim aigidse,’ ol Dáuid.

‘Is cōru ní do thabairt dō,’ or Solam.

‘Do-rairngert nach tibrind,’ or Dáuid.

‘Tabair do bennachtain dō didiu,’ or Solam.

‘Tabair-si didiu,’ or Dáuid.

‘Dobēr acht co tarda-su,’ or Solam. ‘Tabair do ucht illē, a bachlaig,’ or
Solam. Do-beir Dáuid bennachtain ina ucht. Do-rat didiu Solam bennachtain
aili dō. ‘Beir h’ucht, a bachlaig,’ or Solam, ‘₇ ní ro oslaice do ucht co ris do
thech.’

Tēit as iarum. Trom leis didiu a ucht .i. Diabul do-chōid ina ucht
d’erchōitiugud dō. Ro súid ina súidiu do oslucud a ochta. ‘Timna na ndega-
daíne ām,’ ol se, ‘asbertatar frim naro oslaicind mo ucht co risind mo thech.
Dogenaitir[?] urru, ní hoslecthar.’

Ranic a thech iarum. ‘In tucais ní lat?’ ol in bannscal.

‘Tucas ben<n>achtain <Dáuid> ₇ a meic,’ ol se.

‘Ciasa maith indile ām,’ ol <in bans>cāl, ‘is ferr a mbennacht-sum. Croth
in <ceirt isin c>uili ₇ im na lenbu,’ ol si. Dongnīter ón.

‘<Negar in ceirt damh,>’ ol se, ‘asin uisci.’ Aband <mhór a ndorus an
tighi.> Neghar in ceirt indti. Na bainne do chua<tar> asin ceirt lasan sruth

doronsat ēic<ne fīr->eisc dib, conar fetas in ceirt do mescad <isind> abaind lasna bratanu. Ēgthir and.

‘<Maith>,’ or araile fer frisium, ‘tri fichit unga ua<im-si> duit a tri cubat isin abaind.’

‘Dobersa <amail> sin,’ or cech fer fris. Ba lán didiu bruit ₇ bid a tech ria fescur. Dobeir in cheirt for abai<ll> chrin bui isin lis. Ro bui side fo lan-torud isin trath arnam<arach> ₇ ba mētithir <fri dorn> cach uball bai fuirri. Ro batur tri hubaill derg-oir for a h<ind> ₇ ba mētithir cend is mou ro bui <isin tir> cech ubaill dīb.

Rucad iarum torud na hablu do Daid ₇ ructha na tri hubaill oir. Slōg <mór> ime-sium oc dul a ndail in rig co n-ētaigib rigda ₇ co tlachtaib cech datha. ‘Is tu fil ann,’ or Daid.

‘A aiti inmain, is me,’ ol se.

‘Ferr oldas a marbad,’ ol Solam, ‘Ata sund torud na mbennachtan. Atlo-chumar do Día. Is mōrud anma don Choimdid,’ ol se.

‘Maith,’ ol Daid fri cách, ‘d[á?] bennachtain tučsum-ne don bachlach, itt ē-side na da uball. ₇ in tres uball-sa, cid do-rat-side?’

‘Cindus ám roindfithir na hubla?’ or Solam.

‘Amail bus maith latsa,’ or Daid.

‘Ro rand Dia duinn chena,’ or Solam, ‘.i. trian don eclais, duit-siu, ar is tu in eclas, a trian n-aill damsá, a n-airem flatha, a trian n-aill don fine.’

Is aire iarum do raindte na tri hubaill óir, co rabat uball cecha rainne. Ar is amlaid roindfithir cech ndībud co bráth .i. trian don eclais ocus trian do flaithe ocus trian do fine. Is dō sin didiu ro rann Día eturru i tri .i. itir eclais ₇ flaithe ₇ fine.

Conid he sin torud ro fās do bendachtain in rig ₇ a meic. Finit.

Passover:⁵⁷ it is then that David, son of Jesse, used to distribute his tithes to the poor and needy of the Lord. They had fixed that as a regular arrangement. A wretched church-peasant came one time, then, when he was distributing his alms, so that he was on the end of the animal-hide upon which was the wealth: “Something for me, oh David”, he said.

“Why should I give something to you?” said David.

“I am one of a family of six,” he said, “and I do not have enough to take them out of hunger-rations.”

“I will not give [anything],” said David. “You are not a martyr[?], you are not lame, you are not blind, you are not wretched, you are not a leper. You would stretch your haunch doing something for your children.”⁵⁸

He comes to him, then, a year later. “Something for me, oh David,” he said. “You are not the same to me as to everyone else.”

“It’s you again,”⁵⁹ said David. “You will not have welcome. You will die if you come again.”

⁵⁷ Would also be understood as ‘Easter Sunday’.

⁵⁸ i.e. ‘you should get off your backside to help your own family!’.

⁵⁹ Literally: ‘It is you who is there’.

A year later he saw [coming] towards him again the same man. "You came," said David.

"I came indeed," he said.

"Take him out to hang him," said David.

It was then that Solomon, son of David, came into the house. That Solomon was the most wonderful young man that was born on earth. It is to that Solomon that Christ said that he would get the thing which he would seek of him, so that it is this which he requested: wisdom and knowledge to be given to him, to adjudicate difficulties and cases and disputes of the people, both rich and poor. "What's this?" said Solomon to his father.

"To hang this man in front of me," said David.

"It is more fitting to give something to him," said Solomon.

"I promised that I would not give [anything to him]," said David

"Give your blessing to him then," said Solomon.

"You give it then," said David

"I will only if you do,"⁶⁰ said Solomon. "Give your breastfold hither, oh church-peasant," said Solomon. David gives a blessing on his breastfold. Solomon then gave another blessing to him. "Take your breastfold, o church-peasant," said Solomon, "and you are not to open your breastfold until you reach home."

He goes off then. He thought his breastfold was heavy then, i.e. a devil which had gone into his breastfold to do harm to him. He sat down⁶¹ to open his breastfold. "The commandment of the good people indeed," he said, "they told me that I shouldn't open my breastfold until I reach my house. It will be done as they advised; it will not be opened."

He reached his house then. "Did you bring anything with you?" said the wife.

"I brought the blessing of David and of his son," he said.

"Although wealth is good indeed," said the wife, "their blessing is better. Shake the cloth in the kitchen and around the children," she said. That is done.

"Let the cloth be washed for me," he said, "in the water." A great river in front of the house. The cloth is washed in it. The drops which went out of the cloth with the stream, they became salmon, so that one was not able to dip the cloth in the river on account of the salmon. A cry is raised then.

"Well," said a certain man to him, "sixty ounces from me to you, for three cubits in the river."

"I will give the same," said everyone else to him. His house before evening was full then of food and clothing. He puts the cloth on a withered apple-tree which was in the enclosure. That was in full fruit by the same time the next day, and every apple which was on it was as big as a fist. There were three apples of red-gold upon its extremity, and each of those apples was as big as the biggest head that was in the land.

⁶⁰ Literally: 'I will give [it] only if you give'.

⁶¹ Literally: 'he sat in his sitting'.

The fruit of the apple-tree was brought to David then, and the three gold apples were brought. A great crowd about him going to meet the king, with royal clothes and with garments of every colour. "It's you again," said David.

"Oh, dear foster-father, it is me," he said.

"Better than killing him," said Solomon. "Here is the fruit of the blessings. We give thanks to God. It is a magnifying of the name of the Lord," he said.⁶²

"Well," said David to everyone, "the two blessings which we gave to the church-peasant, they are the two apples; and this third apple – what has produced that?"

"How indeed will the apples be divided?" said Solomon.

"As you like it," said David.

"God has divided for us already," said Solomon, "i.e. a third to the Church, for you, for you are the Church; the other third to me, as a lord's share; the other third to the kin."

So the reason why the three golden apples were divided is so that there might be an apple for each share. For it is thus that every inheritance will be divided forever, i.e. a third to the Church and a third to the lord and a third to the kin. It is for that indeed that God divided between them into three, i.e. between Church and lord and kin.

So that that is the fruit which grew from the blessing of the king and his son. Finit.

Thus the story functions as an aetiological tale for the division of inheritances between the Church, the lord and the kin.⁶³ The intended audience may have been legal students, ecclesiastical or otherwise, but given the focus of the other YBL David texts, we could just as easily see it as being intended for young noblemen who need to learn about their entitlements and the division of property. Solomon's interpretation of the respective characters is intriguing, however: David represents the Church, rather than lordship, which is perhaps unexpected given his character presentation in the previous narratives, though less so if we consider his fundamental association with the psalms, which were so central to ecclesiastical life (see Chapter 3). Solomon represents lordship, which is perhaps fitting given his reputation for being both wise in judgement and extremely wealthy.

In the oldest versions of 'David and the Beggar', the opening words of the narrative are ambiguous: *Dia Cascc*, heard without context or explanation in medieval Ireland, would immediately be understood as 'Easter'. It is only in the words that follow, when David son of Jesse is introduced as the main character, that the audience would become aware of the author's ambiguity, since in the context of the Old Testament, the term clearly denotes 'Passover'. The double meaning is deliberate: the typological significance of David's character is, as we have seen,

⁶² In theory, it could be the church-peasant speaking here, but it seems to fit better with Solomon's character.

⁶³ For discussion of the legal principle itself in vernacular law and Latin canon law, see Liam Breatnach, 'The First Third of *Bretha Nemed Toisech*', *Ériu* 40 (1989), 1–40, at pp. 16, 28.

made explicit at the end of the narrative, and therefore we can assume that the interplay between Jewish and Christian terms throughout the text is intrinsic to any understanding of its meaning. The author here makes use of the rhetorical technique of *ambiguum* (the use of words in more than one sense),⁶⁴ but elsewhere in the text explicitly Christian vocabulary anachronistically displaces that of the Old Testament, offering a further indication of the text's typological function. For example, we are told that when Solomon was offered the granting of a wish, it was Christ, not God, who granted it.

The deliberate use of terms with a strong Christian meaning in Old Testament vernacular adaptations can also be witnessed in Old English biblical verse. One comparable example to the insertion of Christ into our Irish Davidic narrative can be found in the Old English *Judith*, where the poet revises Judith's prayer from the biblical model to include an entreaty to the 'Trinity'. As Samantha Zacher has noted, one of the purposes of this change 'seems to have been to adjust the forms of praying to models that were familiar to his Anglo-Saxon audience'.⁶⁵ In another example, the Jewish vessels taken by the Babylonians from the Ark of the Covenant in the Old English *Daniel* poem 'are called *huslfætu*, which in most other contexts would be translated as "Eucharistic vessels." Although the simplex *husl* originally meant "holy," the word is far more commonly associated specifically with the "eucharist." Bede uses the terms *huslfætu* at least twice to represent the vessels of the mass in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (book I.16 and V.18). For the *Daniel*-poet, such aspects of Jewish ritual are easily reimagined within a broader Christian framework.'⁶⁶ The ambiguous use of 'Easter/Passover' and the anachronistic use (in terms of biblical chronology) of Christ in the Irish David narrative perhaps also serves to render the unfamiliar Old Testament world more 'familiar' to an Irish audience. However, it seems most likely that it is this 'reimagining' of the Old Testament world 'within a broader Christian framework' that most closely reflects the process visible in 'David and the Beggar'. This can perhaps be connected with the Christological exegesis that we will discuss in Chapter 3.

There seems to be a rich and intriguing seam of anticlerical social commentary in the 'David and the Beggar' anecdote, or at least an implicit criticism of the hypocritical attitudes of some clerics towards the poor. There is no space to do full justice to it here, but we might note a few key examples. It is interesting that the word used to describe the beggar is *bachlach*, a term meaning 'serf', but that, in many early attestations, had a specific meaning in an ecclesiastical context, suggesting that we are justified in reading it here as 'peasant living on Church lands'.⁶⁷ That such an individual is explicitly described as *trúag* ('wretched', 'pit-eous') and declares himself unable to support his family can be read as a criticism

⁶⁴ A similar technique is used by the authors of Old English Old Testament poetry: see Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, p. 146.

⁶⁶ Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, p. 64.

⁶⁷ *eDIL*, s.v. *bachlach* suggests 'lay brother, monk (perhaps derogatory?)', but I think it is more likely to mean a slave or servant on Church lands in the contexts cited under that definition.

of the conditions endured by the poorest members of wealthy ecclesiastical estates. The initial exchange between David and the wretched peasant is striking:

‘Something for me, oh David,’ he said.

‘Why should I give something to you?’ said David.

‘I am one of a family of six,’ he said, ‘and I do not have enough to take them out of hunger-rations.’

‘I will not give [anything],’ said David. ‘You are not a martyr[?], you are not lame, you are not blind, you are not wretched, you are not a leper. You would stretch your haunch doing something for your children.’

David’s reasoning for not giving alms to the peasant is inherently flawed: he states, among other things, that the peasant is not *trúag* (‘wretched’), despite the narrator having informed us just a few sentences earlier that he was. His pitiless, unchristian response (the medieval Irish equivalent of ‘you should get off your backside and support your own family’) is undermined by the subsequent narrative. And this is one of two ways in which Solomon’s later statement to David – *is tu in eclas* (‘you are the Church’) – is rendered radical in its social commentary: if David is the Church, then his miserly and uncharitable treatment of the poor church-peasant is perhaps to be understood as a criticism of the attitudes of some clerics towards the poor. To use the parlance of more modern social debate, David appears to believe that a distinction exists between the ‘deserving poor’ and the ‘undeserving poor’, and he regards the peasant as belonging to the latter group, when the narrator has explicitly told us that – if such a distinction can be made – he belongs to the former. David’s flawed judgement is revealed even more starkly later in the narrative when he fails to interpret the significance of the three apples correctly, a task that falls instead to Solomon. In light of the narrative’s position within YBL, we are invited to conclude that Solomon learned well the lesson about careful judgement given to him by his father in the previous narrative. And perhaps we might also speculate that, in this final narrative, David’s critical faculties are failing with old age.

The character of the peasant’s wife undergoes a radical transformation during the course of the text’s transmission. In the oldest version of the text preserved in YBL and Egerton 92, when the peasant arrives home from his third meeting with King David, his wife asks what he has brought back with him. The peasant replies that he has brought nothing but the blessings of David and Solomon. His wife responds wisely:

‘Ciasa maith *indile* ām,’ ol <in bans>cāl, ‘is ferr a mbenmacht-sum. Croth in <ceirt isin c>uili , im na lenbu,’ ol si. Dongnīter ón.

‘Although wealth is good indeed,’ said the wife, ‘their blessing is better. Shake the cloth in the kitchen and around the children,’ she said. That is done.

This is all we hear of the pious wife, but her brief appearance in the narrative is morally pure and, in terms of what happens subsequently, very sensible. Although

her character may seem minor, it is central both to the narrative and the meaning of the text. However, in the abbreviated version of the text preserved in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, the wife's reaction could not be more different:

‘Bec tarba co se in turus dacuadais’, ol in ben.

‘Of little profit so far is the journey you have gone on’, said the woman.

In these few words, we witness an astonishing reversal in the wife's character, from a wise and pious paragon of virtue, to a materialistic and dissatisfied haridan. The precise formulation of the wife's response evokes – whether consciously or coincidentally – the well-known Old Irish quatrain *Teicht do Róim*, in which the journey to Rome is described as being of ‘little profit’ (*becc torbai*) if one does not already carry Christ in one's heart.⁶⁸ One wonders whether this depiction of the wife in the version of the ‘David and the Beggar’ narrative that can be dated roughly on linguistic grounds to the twelfth century might be reflecting a broader trend of misogyny that seems to be particularly apparent in some twelfth-century Irish narratives.⁶⁹ It is ironic that this version is preserved in a manuscript prepared for a female patron as a collection of texts to inspire pious devotion.⁷⁰ By the time we get to the Early Modern Irish version of the anecdote, preserved in the Book of Fermoy, the wife has been written out of the narrative altogether. In the words of William Faulkner, ‘Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish’:⁷¹ such was the fate of the beggar's wife in our Irish anecdote. We can look at the Book of Fermoy version of the tale in a little more detail to see the cumulative alterations to the story:

Aroile duine trūagh bocht 7 mōirseisir cloinde aigi tāinic cum Dabīth do chuincidh almsaine fair ocus is annsin tairrnic la Dabīth a almsaine do roinn 7 nocha roibhe aigi nī doberadh dō 7 adubairt an duine do chrochad, acht rothoirmesc Solam é 7 adubairt an duine trūagh: ‘Ō nach fuil agut nī dobertá damh, tabair do bendacht damh a n-ucht mo luimne co rugur lem dom thigh hí.’ Tic iar sin Dabīth a beannacht a n-ucht an duine trūaigh 7 rotimsaigh an duine a ucht uimpe co riacht da thigh 7 dobí a eire innti ag a himchur. Ronigh iar sin an duine a lumaind a lochtobur mór búi ’na garrdha corba lān ē do fīriasc 7 dorecadh-san ant iasc tar cenn innmhuis dofulachta, corbo toictech é 7 rocuir iar sin an duine a lumainn dia tirmugud ar abhail crīn co roibe fo lāntorud d’ublaibh 7 nār mhó cúadh nā gach ubhall dībh 7 trī hubla mōra dermhaile dergōir ar ūachtur na habla 7 ruc an duine iar sin an torad leis .i. na hubla cumhra gusna hublaibh ōir do Dabīth a n-aiscidh 7 do innis an scél

⁶⁸ Rudolf Thurneysen, ed., *Old Irish Reader* (Dublin, 1981), p. 41.

⁶⁹ Thus, for example, the even greater misogyny in the depiction of Medb in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster recension of the *Táin*, as compared to *TBC1*: Cecile O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Táin Bó Cúalnge, from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967).

⁷⁰ Máire Ní Mháille, wife of Ruaidhrí Mac Suibhne Fánad, commissioned this part of the manuscript in 1513–4.

⁷¹ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, 1936), p. 8.

sin do Dabíth 7 do Šolam 7 adubairt Solam: ‘As ferr sin nā do chrochad amail rotriallad’. Roroind Dabíth iar sin na hubla .i. ubhall dó fēin 7 ubhall do Šolam 7 ubhall don duine bocht.

Finit.

A certain wretched poor person, who had a family of seven, came to David to seek alms from him, and it is then that David had finished dividing his alms and he did not have anything to give to him. And he said that person should be hanged, but Solomon stopped him and the wretched man said: ‘Since you do not have anything which you might give to me, give your blessing to me in the breastfold of my cloak, so that I might bring it with me to my house’. David gives his blessing after that in the breast of the wretched man and the man wraps his breastfold round him until he reached his house, and his load was being carried in it. After that the man washed his cloak in a large brimming-well that was in his yard, until it was full of salmon and he used to sell the fish in return for wealth beyond measure, so that he became rich. And after that the man put his cloak to dry on a withered apple-tree until it was fully laden with apples, and so that no goblet was bigger than each apple of them, and three huge great apples of red-gold on the top of the apple-tree. And the man then took the fruit with him i.e. the edible apples along with the golden apples, to David as a gift, and told that story to David and to Solomon, and Solomon said: ‘That is better than hanging you as was attempted’. David divided the apples after that, i.e. an apple for himself, and an apple for Solomon, and an apple for the poor man.

The legal principle underlying the tenth-century version of the tale, that is, the division of property between the lord, the church and the kin, has been lost entirely. The story has been so abbreviated that much of the subtle humour has been lost: David’s threat to hang the beggar comes out of nowhere and is no longer part of a ‘comic triple’ as in the earlier version where the beggar comes three times to ask David for alms. The character of the wife, as we have noted, has disappeared, as has the typological interpretation of David as personifying the church and Solomon personifying lordship. In the oldest version of the story, in spite of David being handed three of the red-gold apples, he only divides them between two, requiring Solomon to step in and solve the division of the apples. In this later version, David does divide the apples correctly, although we are not told his reasoning, leaving Solomon in the role of sarcastic bystander. Much has been lost and, if we only had this Early Modern Irish version of the tale surviving, we would have no idea of the rich narrative underlying it.

‘Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions’

We have focused in this chapter on the David narratives in YBL, but they are far from the only depictions of David in medieval Irish sources. He provided a dominant paradigm of kingship and masculinity, as well as being a key touchstone for ecclesiastical life on account of his association with the psalms. Depictions of

David as martial hero, gentle psalmist or adulterous king are manifold and reveal an awareness among medieval Irish writers that his character was complex and capable of being understood in a variety of ways. Much more remains to be said. In *Saltair na Rann* (*SnR*), the tenth-century verse epic account of salvation history, roughly contemporaneous with the YBL narratives, the story of David takes up a disproportionate amount of the poem: in the region of fifteen per cent of the entire text. Comparing the account of David's killing in *SnR* with that in our YBL narrative would undoubtedly offer us a very different set of narrative priorities and thematic interests, which might point to differing functions and audiences. A reading of *SnR*'s 1,300-line rendering of the David story suggests that it is a more faithful translation of the biblical narrative than are our YBL texts, but there is much still to be explored in the way that David's character is presented. In *SnR* he is David 'of the dark face', the founder of Jerusalem, a 'holy champion' who committed 'many transgressions', a 'law-breaker' who, after the death of Absalom, was 'cast down in sorrow so that he nearly died for sorrow'.⁷² From the same period, David's kingship also features, for example, in Airbertach mac Cosse's poem on the kings of Judea.⁷³

In the cluster of YBL narratives that have formed the heart of this chapter, the range and possibilities of David's character were explored and utilised in order to convey lessons pertaining to judgement, kingship and legal prerogatives. But these remarkable short narratives are not simply pedagogical anecdotes: they are rich and illuminating examples of cultural translation, literary adaptation and exegesis in practice. They offer rich psychological insights into the truths of David's character. The young David was presented as a martial hero reminiscent of Cú Chulainn. The mature David struggled with his beloved, wayward son Absalom, and paid the price for his responsibility for the murder of Uriah in the form of Absalom's tragic death. His other son, Solomon, learned the importance of careful judgement from his father and then went on to exceed his father in that capacity for judgement. Eventually, David comes to represent the Church, an institution capable of corruption and heartlessness towards the poor people it claims to protect. The typological connection that we witnessed in 'David and the Beggar' between David, great king of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah, and the entire edifice of the Christian Church can be explained by David's position as supposed author of the psalms. As we shall see in the next chapter, the psalms lay at the very heart of medieval Irish religious life.

⁷² Greene, ed. and trans., *Saltair na Rann*, lines 6610, 6660, 6799–800, 6861, 6921–4.

⁷³ Gearóid Mac Eoin, ed. and trans., 'A Poem by Airbertach Mac Cosse', *Ériu* 20 (1966), 112–39, esp. §§3–4.

3 More than honey to my mouth

The psalms

The Hebrew psalms are one of the most powerful and influential collections of verse ever written, and they occupied a central place in the literary, cultural and religious life of medieval Ireland. The name ‘psalms’ comes from the Greek *psalmoi*, meaning ‘hymns of praise’, but that title hardly even begins to do justice to their immense poetic range. Their diversity of modes – from the penitential to the bellicose, the despairing to the triumphant – made them ripe for application to a vast range of human experiences and for adaptation to a variety of devotional, pedagogic and political purposes. Intense scholarly study of the psalms over centuries has failed to uncover a singular context for their original composition, and it is likely, on the basis of language, form and rhetoric, that they were written at different times, with different functions, for different occasions, over many centuries: some may be as early as the time of David (or even earlier), others date to the postexilic period. That being said, their present arrangement is not random, and reading the psalms in order provides an overarching movement from lament to thanksgiving, from the failure of human kingship to a rejoicing in God’s eternal kingship.¹ There are 150 psalms, and these are divided into five groups (1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106 and 107–150, according to the Masoretic [Hebrew] numbering), each of which ends with a liturgical formula of praise to God. However, in medieval Ireland, the division of the psalms was not fivefold but threefold: the psalms were known as the ‘three fifties’, and the division of the psalms for reading and recitation purposes was 1–50, 51–100 and 101–150.² So engrained was this division in the minds of authors that ‘three fifties’ was a standard and ubiquitous formula for enumeration: sagas are littered with references to ‘three fifties of warriors’ or ‘three fifties of spears’ and so on. There were four different families of Latin translations of the psalms that circulated in early medieval Europe: these translations are known as the *Vetus Latina*, or Old Latin version; the *Psalterium Romanum*, or Roman version; the *Gallicanum*, or Gallican version; and the *Hebraicum*, or Hebrew version. Citations from the psalms deriving from all of these differing translations can be found in Irish or Irish-related manuscripts

¹ For a brief but incisive overview of modern scholarly approaches to the psalms, see James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001).

² This was not an Irish innovation: we can observe a tripartite division of the psalms in the commentaries of Cassiodorus, Augustine and Hilary of Poitiers.

from the early Middle Ages, and sometimes different versions were laid out side by side in a single manuscript for the purpose of textual and exegetical analysis. Nevertheless, it is overwhelmingly clear, from c. 600 onwards that the Gallican version was the one most commonly in use for the liturgy, religious devotion and study in medieval Ireland.

Reading the psalms was the beginning of elementary education in medieval Ireland, and their daily recitation formed part of the core of monastic life. It is reasonable to assert that the vast majority of literate people in medieval Ireland would have known the psalms by heart. Our earliest manuscripts and associated material culture surviving from medieval Ireland attest to this centrality of the psalms to ecclesiastical life and to education. The Springmount Bog wax tablets, dating from the sixth or early seventh century and now kept in the National Museum of Ireland, are wax tablets set in pieces of yew wood. The tablets contain extracts from Psalms 30 and 31 written into the wax with a metal stylus, and their fortuitous preservation in Springmount Bog, Co. Antrim, provides us with remarkable physical evidence of the way that the copying and studying of the psalms in early medieval Ireland was not at all restricted to impressive and ornate display manuscripts, but rather was rooted in a far humbler medium. The Springmount Bog wax tablets offer us a glimpse into the quotidian reality of the early medieval classroom. Equally fortuitous was the 2006 discovery in the bucket of a peat-harvesting machine in the bog at Faddan More, near Birr, of what was subsequently revealed – following painstaking and sophisticated conservation work at the National Museum of Ireland – to be an eighth-century Psalter. As is common in early Irish Psalters, the initial letters of Psalms 1, 51 and 101 were decorated, thus reflecting the aforementioned division of the psalms into ‘three fifties’. Although we may rightly be astonished at the circumstances in which the Faddan More Psalter was discovered, and equally astonished by the remarkable work done by the conservators at the National Museum of Ireland, we should not be at all surprised that the first medieval Irish book to be newly discovered for two hundred years was a Psalter. The psalms were the most widely read and widely studied text in Ireland throughout the Middle Ages, and therefore we might expect that the majority of books produced in medieval Ireland were Psalters.

‘In what is concealed make wisdom known to me’

Learning the psalms formed the beginning of elementary education in medieval Ireland: children, starting to learn to read around the age of seven, began with the psalms, which they were eventually expected to memorise.³ But the psalms were not only to be read, memorised and recited; they also had to be studied and interpreted in order to be understood. Elementary education began with the psalms in order to teach Latin grammar and simultaneously as a means to explicate Christian doctrine as a whole.⁴ Our earliest manuscript evidence attests to

³ Martin McNamara, *The Psalms in the Early Irish Church* (Sheffield, 2000), pp. 20–2, 359.

⁴ M. J. Toswell, *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter* (Turnhout, 2014), p. 5.

both the devotional and educational value of the psalms in medieval Ireland, and a few examples will suffice to exemplify the range of scholarly methods that could be brought to bear on the psalms in different pedagogical contexts. Roughly contemporaneous with the Springmount Bog wax tablets, the late sixth- or early seventh-century ‘Cathach of St Columba’, now in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, is a fragmentary Psalter: fifty-eight out of an original *c.* 110 folios survive, and the extant text ranges from Psalm 30:10–Psalm 105:13. The text is the *Gallicanum*, which, as we have noted, was the most common translation of the psalms circulating in medieval Ireland; the use of textual apparatus such as obeli, however, shows a later revision against the text of the *Hebraicum*.⁵ The ‘Cathach’ contains rubrics that outline a Christological interpretation of each of the psalms, offering an important example of one interpretative strand in early Irish exegesis. On account of the manuscript’s supposed connections with St Columba, the family of psalm headings exemplified by the ‘Cathach’ are known as the ‘Columba series’. Martin McNamara has discussed the Christological orientation of the ‘Columba series’, noting that ‘most of the psalms are understood as spoken by Christ, by the Church or by the apostles ... Only 24 psalms are placed on the lips of the psalmist-prophet himself and even then for the greater part only to announce the work of Christ’.⁶ It is not clear whether the ‘Columba series’ of psalm headings originated in Ireland, or whether the headings in the ‘Cathach’ were copied from an exemplar imported from elsewhere. They are indebted to the work of authorities such as Tertullian, Origen and Augustine, but the ‘Cathach’ is the earliest surviving witness to their precise form. As McNamara has argued, if these headings were indeed composed in Ireland, then the intellectual and theological sophistication of Irish religious culture in the sixth century was far greater than we have hitherto recognised.⁷ Interpreting the psalms through the lens of Christian prophecy or typology, placing them in the mouth of Christ and his followers, was one important way of explaining the centrality of this corpus of Hebrew poetry to Christian liturgical, and particularly monastic, life. However, most Irish commentators used a variety of interpretative strategies, and we can see examples of various types of historical and allegorical exegesis, some of which sit alongside the sort of Christological interpretation of which the ‘Cathach’ is such an exemplary specimen.

As we have seen in previous chapters, one of the most interesting features of the Church in early medieval Ireland was its thorough-going bilingualism: from our earliest evidence, we can observe close interconnections between Latin and the Irish language, with an evident high regard for the status and intellectual possibilities of the vernacular, and in this the study of the psalms was no different. This is

⁵ McNamara, *The Psalms*, pp. 28, 108. For the text of the *Gallicanum*, see the *Liber Psalmorum ex recensione sancti Hieronymi* (Rome, 1953); for the *Hebraicum*, see H. de Sainte-Marie, ed., *Sancti Hieronymi Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos* (Rome, 1954). Although St Patrick (*fl.* mid fifth century?) used the Old Latin version of the psalms in his writings, all extant evidence would suggest that the *Gallicanum* had superseded the *Vetus Latina* by *c.* 600 and that the *Hebraicum* was also circulating in Ireland by that time.

⁶ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 35.

⁷ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 262.

not to say that there was any deficiency in Latin learning in medieval Ireland: all of the vernacular exegesis evinces deep engagement with the Latin translations of the psalms, and the exegetical approaches are also derived from, and indebted to, Latin exegesis and biblical commentary. And yet scholars who were proficient in Latin often chose to switch into, or write entirely in, Irish, whether it was for the purposes of lexical precision, grammatical or semantic explication, or adaptation of material for a monolingual audience.⁸ One of our most important sources for the Old Irish language is a glossed Latin commentary on the psalms. This manuscript, now preserved in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, probably dates from the early ninth century. The manuscript is heavily annotated throughout in both Latin and Old Irish, and the Old Irish glosses have been heavily studied for their linguistic value. Indeed, along with two other manuscripts now preserved on the continent – the ‘Würzburg’ glossed copy of the Pauline Epistles and the ‘St Gall’ glossed copy of Priscian’s Latin grammar – the Milan glosses form the basis of our knowledge of the Old Irish language.⁹ These important linguistic sources, essential for our understanding of the Old Irish language, have often been studied in isolation from their manuscript context, and the meaning of the glosses more often interpreted by philological, rather than theological, means. But it is important to remember their manuscript context, and for our purposes, it is significant that the main text of the Milan manuscript, that is, a Latin commentary on the psalms, was interpreted with these brief interlinear notes in Old Irish, since this represents an intermediary stage between the reading of the psalms in Latin and the composition of new interpretive texts about the psalms in the vernacular.

Psalter exegesis in the form of glosses and commentaries provides a window into the multiple ways in which the psalms could be understood in medieval Ireland.¹⁰ Alderik Blom has described glossing as ‘a prototypical aspect of literary practice’ in the Middle Ages and has commented on the ‘interconnectedness of psalters, commentaries and glossaries on the psalms’,¹¹ containing, as they frequently do, related source material and cumulative layers of interpretative text. When we see a manuscript of the psalms that contains marginal and interlinear glosses, it is important not to assume that this represents a personal response on the part of a scribe to the text before them. It is worth quoting Blom at length in

⁸ Jacopo Bisagni, ‘Prolegomena to the Study of Code-Switching in the Old Irish Glosses’, *Peritia* 24–5 (2013–2014), 1–58; Nike Stam, *A Typology of Code-Switching in the Commentary to the Féilire Óengusso* (Utrecht, 2017).

⁹ Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin, 1946; repr. 1975), is based primarily on the testimony of the glosses, because they survive in manuscripts that date from the Old Irish period. Texts surviving in later manuscripts can then be compared against the linguistic testimony of the glosses. This is fine for morphology, but can be somewhat problematic in terms of syntax, given that the Old Irish is continually acting in relationship with the Latin base text that is being glossed.

¹⁰ For comparable evidence from Anglo-Saxon England, see Rebecca Rushforth, ‘Annotated Psalters and Psalm Study in Late Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Rethinking and Recontextualising Glosses: New Perspectives in the Study of Late Anglo-Saxon Glossography*, ed. Patrizia Lendinara, et al. (Porto, 2011), pp. 39–66.

¹¹ Alderik Blom, *Glossing the Psalms: the Emergence of the Written Vernaculars in Western Europe from the Seventh to the Twelfth Centuries* (Berlin, 2017), pp. 9, 7.

order to appreciate the complex textual relationships that can be represented in a glossed Psalter:

... glossing activity did not merely result from “spontaneous” interaction with a given text in the form of interlinear or marginal additions, but constituted a carefully planned activity reflected in the layout of the manuscript page, for example, by deliberately leaving space for glosses and commentaries. Such manuscripts were not only mediators of a specific text or texts, but were meant to constitute “reservoirs of knowledge” ... resulting from a continuous dynamic interaction with the principal text. Such manuscripts are scholarly collections as much as they are educational tools, and they generate new learning as much as they teach old learning.¹²

Thus any given manuscript provides a snapshot of the repository of knowledge that was open to the scholars of the foundation at which the manuscript was produced: the written authorities, glossed exemplars, glossaries, florilegia and teacher-pupil interactions to which scholars had access at the time(s) the glossing took place. Our Milan manuscript therefore represents the interpretation of the psalms as it was being taught in the ecclesiastical classroom, possibly at Bangor – or a church or monastery associated with Bangor – in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹³ The manuscript evinces an interest in textual criticism, and the glossator notes textual errors and sometimes emends his text or offers alternative readings.¹⁴ On the whole, the Milan glosses emphasise a historical interpretation of the psalms. Indeed, at one point the glossator even states that it is ‘most desirable for us to understand’ the historical interpretation, and notes that he would leave the figurative and moral interpretation of the psalms to others.¹⁵

The texts of the psalms continued to be copied and glossed in this manner throughout the Middle Ages, accumulating authoritative knowledge and juxtaposing different (though not mutually exclusive) interpretations. The Southampton Psalter, now held in St John’s College, Cambridge, provides us with a case study that is almost two centuries later than the Milan manuscript. The Psalter is named after its donor, the Earl of Southampton, and was kept in the library of St Martin’s Priory, Dover, from at least the late fourteenth century and perhaps in Canterbury before that, maybe from as early as the mid-twelfth century. In spite of this English provenance, it is an Irish manuscript: Pádraig Ó Néill has tentatively suggested that it may come from the north of Ireland, with some

¹² Blom, *Glossing the Psalms*, p. 14.

¹³ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 48.

¹⁴ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 106. Irish interest in textual criticism of the psalms is visible throughout the early and central Middle Ages. McNamara briefly discusses the particularly interesting testimony of a ninth-century *Scottus* in Milan, who also talks about issues of translating from Greek to Latin, in addition to techniques of textual criticism: McNamara, *The Psalms*, pp. 64–66.

¹⁵ *Thes. Pal.*, i, 13, gloss 14d 7, *is ed asdulem dún doengnu-instoir*, and 14d 10, *issamlid léicfimini doibsom aisndis dintsens 7 dinmoralus*.

evidence hinting at a possible Armagh origin, and he has dated it to *c.* 1000.¹⁶ The Southampton Psalter is a copy of the *Gallicanum* and, as we have already seen with other Irish Psalters, the psalms are grouped into ‘three fifties’, with a series of canticles and collects integrated at the end of Psalms 50, 100 and 150, and Psalms 1, 51 and 101 being marked out with particular decoration. The full-page illustrations are of David killing the lion (Psalm 1, f. 4v), the Crucifixion (Psalm 50, f. 38v) and David killing Goliath (Psalm 101, f. 71v). As Pádraig Ó Néill has stated, the Southampton Psalter is ‘one of the finest and best-preserved Irish illuminated manuscripts from the pre-Norman period’, and these three figure-illuminations are particularly attractive examples of the exegetical function of much medieval Irish manuscript art, depicting both Davidic and Christological elements of Psalter interpretation. Facing each of the figures is a large decorated initial reminiscent of the style of earlier Insular manuscripts, reflecting the way that the Psalter is a ‘mixture of old and new’ in terms of its design, part of a group of so-called ‘transitional manuscripts’ of the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁷ This Psalter contains a large amount of paratext, in particular glosses and *argumenta*. That being said, Ó Néill has argued that it was not originally intended as a scholar’s book: he suggests that it was originally a *de luxe* production, and the way that the glosses often ‘spill into the right margin’ or that *argumenta* are ‘awkwardly located in relation to their psalms’ suggest that the manuscript was not originally planned to host such supplementary interpretive material.¹⁸ Indeed, the punctuation in the Psalter suggests that it was originally designed with performance or recitation, rather than academic study, in mind.¹⁹

The interpretive material in the Southampton Psalter is very rich. The main source for the *argumenta* is the pseudo-Bedan *Argumenta in Psalmos*, and the overarching structure of them is to provide first a historical, followed by a Christological, followed by a moral or allegorical, interpretation of each psalm. Significantly, the interpretations offered in the *argumenta* are not then followed in the glosses. Indeed, the interpretation in the glossing ‘normally differs from that proposed in the corresponding *argumentum*’.²⁰ Ó Néill has identified two strata of glosses: the first covering the full text of the Psalter, and a second, later layer that is focused on Psalms 41–91, with a major concentration on Psalms 67, 68, 73, 74 and 77. The first layer is allegorical or figurative in orientation, whereas the second is historical.²¹ As we saw in Alderik Blom’s general characterisation of glossing traditions above, the glosses on the Southampton Psalter do not represent spontaneous engagement with the text, but rather have been copied by the scribes from an earlier source (with occasional misplacements or copying errors). The glosses in this manuscript are overwhelmingly in Latin, but there are some fifty-two Irish words or phrases amongst them, in no particular distribution

¹⁶ Pádraig P. Ó Néill, ed., *Psalterium Suthantoniense* (Turnhout, 2012), pp. xi–xii (English provenance); pp. xxxv–xxxvii (date and place of origin).

¹⁷ Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, p. xxix.

¹⁸ Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, p. xxxiv.

¹⁹ Blom, *Glossing the Psalms*, p. 57.

²⁰ Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, p. xlvi.

²¹ Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, p. xlvi.

pattern, which are integrated syntactically within the Latin glosses in which they are embedded.²² Ó Néill has argued that the glosses as a whole were originally composed as a running commentary by a single author, perhaps working in the middle of the ninth century, from which commentary the glosses were subsequently extracted.²³

One final example of a glossed Psalter will suffice, namely that of the Psalter of St Caimín, now in University College Dublin (MS Franciscan A1). Dating probably from the eleventh or possibly the twelfth century, all that remains of what is thought to have once been a complete Psalter is a glossed copy of the majority of Psalm 118 (119), that is, the *Beati*. We shall return to the *Beati* in due course as a psalm that had a particular significance for early Irish writers and exegetes (see below, pp. 99–107).²⁴ For now, we are simply concerned with the heavily glossed and commentated nature of the manuscript. Again, there are glosses in both Latin and Irish and, just as with the Southampton Psalter, the scribe appears to be deriving his glosses from a much older commentary – perhaps in this case one composed in Ireland in the seventh century. The main text of the Psalter of St Caimín is, as we might expect, the *Gallicanum* version of Psalm 118, but at the top of each page, the scribe gives the *Hebraicum* version of the same passage. The scribe also uses asterisks and obeli in the main text to facilitate comparison between the two versions. At the beginning of each eight-verse section of the psalm is a paragraph, which Ó Néill has termed the *explanatio*, that ‘begins with a translation of the name of the Hebrew letter for the section that it introduces, followed by comments which attempt to apply the translated term to the verses of its section by means of allegorical interpretations’.²⁵ The source for the *explanatio* is another pseudo-Bedan work; in this case, it is the *Explanationes in Psalmos*, which was also a source for ‘The Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ (see below). Taken in its entirety, the Psalter of St Caimín, with its main text, variant version, marginal and interlinear glosses and other interpretive material, is laid out and decorated in a manner that connects it with a range of other eleventh- and twelfth-century Irish manuscripts, such as the *Liber Hymnorum* (for comparable *mise-en-page* and hierarchies of script; for further discussion of the *Liber Hymnorum*, see Chapter 5) and *Lebor na hUidre* (for comparable script and decoration). The glosses on the left-hand side of each folio of the Psalter of St Caimín offer historical interpretations of the *Beati*, and the glosses on the right-hand side offer allegorical and Christological interpretations, usually derived from Cassiodorus’s *Expositio Psalmorum*. The interlinear and supralinear glosses in the centre of the page offer moral interpretations, many of which derive from a

²² These are listed in Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, pp. lxii–lxvii.

²³ Ó Néill, *Psalterium Suthantoniense*, p. lxxxv.

²⁴ Indeed, given the stature of the *Beati* above all other psalms in medieval Ireland, Martin McNamara had suggested that the Psalter of St Caimín may only ever have been a glossed copy of that single psalm, but it has more recently been convincingly argued that it was once a complete Psalter: see Pádraig P. Ó Néill, ‘The Glosses to the Psalter of St Caimín: a Preliminary Investigation of their Sources and Function’, in *Léann Lámhscríbhinní Lobháin: the Louvain Manuscript Heritage*, ed. Pádraig A. Breatnach, et al. (Dublin, 2007), pp. 21–31.

²⁵ Ó Néill, ‘The Glosses to the Psalter’, p. 25.

commentary by Prosper of Aquitaine.²⁶ This surviving fragment therefore represents part of what must once have been a magnificent scholarly achievement: a manuscript which, in its complete form, would have extended to more than two hundred folios, allowing comparison of the *Gallicanum* and *Hebraicum*, with paratext arranged in a manner that facilitated the reader's engagement with the psalms on a number of different levels, using script hierarchy and page layout as sophisticated visual aids.

This brief overview of a few exemplary codices has served to illustrate the sorts of exegetical and interpretive glosses and scholia that could be added to medieval Irish Psalters, and the ways in which older, more authoritative sources, continued to be copied, reworked and adapted throughout the Middle Irish period. There are many other important manuscripts that have not been included in this discussion, such as the 'Rouen Psalter' (also known as the 'Double-Psalter of Saint-Ouen'), the 'Cotton Psalter' (also known as the 'Muiredach Psalter'), the fragments of Psalters preserved in Trinity College Dublin MS 1337 (H.3.18) and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale MS français 2452 and so on.²⁷ Much work remains to be done on these and other manuscripts. For present purposes, we may simply note the range of uses, beyond the devotional and liturgical, to which early Irish Psalters were put. On the one hand, we have the fairly minimal interpretation of the Cathach of St Columba – though no less interesting for its minimalism – where the copy of the Psalter is itself a clean copy, but the headings offer Christological interpretations of each psalm. On the other hand, we have the heavy glossing of the Milan glossed commentary on the psalms, where the psalms themselves are only abbreviated lemmata for indicating the passage to which the commentary refers. Somewhere in between, we have manuscripts such as the Southampton Psalter and the Psalter of St Caimín, where we can see classroom or scholarly uses of these Psalters being an important facet of their purpose in addition to, or alongside, their devotional function. Finally, but vitally important, we have the Springmount Bog wax tablets and the Faddan More Psalter, which serve as potent reminders of the fragility of our historical evidence, the large numbers of books that have been destroyed and the more transient media on which an incalculable quantity of ecclesiastical scholarship would have been inscribed, erased and permanently lost to us.

'The Lord's teaching is his desire'

One step removed from Psalters and their glosses are the free-standing exegetical and interpretive texts that were written about the psalms in medieval Ireland. These provide us with further insights into how the psalms were read and understood, while also opening a window to the kinds of questions that might be asked and answered in the early medieval classroom. We shall examine just two

²⁶ Ó Néill, 'The Glosses to the Psalter', pp. 27–8.

²⁷ For discussion, see Elizabeth Duncan, 'Contextualising "The Rouen Psalter": Palaeography, Codicology, and Form', *Journal of Celtic Studies* 5 (2005), 17–60; Ludwig Bieler and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Fragment of an Irish Double Psalter with Glosses', *Celtica* 5 (1960), 28–39.

examples as case studies here, namely, ‘The Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ and Airbertach mac Cosse’s poem on the Psalter.

One of our most important early sources for the study of the psalms in medieval Ireland is ‘The Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ (henceforth *OIT*), which can be dated on linguistic grounds to the early ninth century. Sadly, what survives of this fascinating text is apparently only a fragment of what was originally intended as a more comprehensive work. *OIT* comprises just 474 lines, which provides a general introduction to the Psalter and the opening of the commentary on Psalm 1. But even this small surviving section of *OIT* is rich and fascinating fare, which shows the early Irish exegete at work, drawing on a range of authoritative sources, including Jerome, Isidore of Seville and Bede.²⁸ In his general introduction to the psalms, the author of *OIT* takes us through such questions as who wrote the psalms and why they are arranged in the manner in which they are, the classification of the psalms among the books of the Old Testament and how the psalms should be interpreted. This introductory discussion takes the form of twenty-one separate questions and answers: in typical medieval Irish fashion, each topic begins with the word *ceist* (‘question’), with the answer beginning with *ní ansae* (‘it is not difficult’).²⁹ We might take particular note of the question of authorship of the psalms, since the author of *OIT* offers a complex and multifaceted exposition of their authorship. He states that they were written at the time of David and that their author ‘is plural’: he states that 113 of the psalms were written by King David, but that other psalms were written by Moses, Solomon and other more minor Old Testament figures such as Jeduthun the Levite. The reason why they are often ascribed to David alone is the figure of speech known as *pars pro toto*: the part for the whole.³⁰ The author of *OIT* took this from one tradition of Latin commentary on the psalms but, as we shall see, this was by no means the only interpretation.

We might also note *OIT*’s particular understanding of the prophetic meaning of the psalms. The author asks:

Ceist. Cid dia tirchan fáitsine inna salm?

Ní anse.

Di gein Chríst ocus dia baithis ocus dia chésad ocus dia esérgiu ocus dia fhresgabáil ocus dia shuidiu for deiss Dé athar i nim; de thocuired gente i n-iris, de indarbu Iuda i n-amiris; de mórath cecha firinne, de dínsim cecha clóine, de maldachad pecthach, de thuidecht Chríst do messemnacht for bíu ocus marbu.

Question: Of what did the prophecy of the Psalms foretell?

Not difficult.

²⁸ See Pádraig P. Ó Néill, ‘An Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter and its Hiberno-Latin Background’, *Ériu* 30 (1979), 148–64.

²⁹ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *Hibernica minora, being a Fragment of an Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter* (Oxford, 1894).

³⁰ Meyer, ed. and trans., *Hibernica minora*, lines 99–147.

Of the birth of Christ and of His baptism, and of His passion, and of His resurrection, and of His ascension, and of His sitting on the right hand of God the Father in Heaven, of the invitation of the heathen to faith, of the thrusting of Judah into unbelief, of the increase of every justice, of the spurning of every injustice, of the malediction of sinners, of the coming of Christ to judge the quick and the dead.³¹

This understanding of the psalms as Christological prophecy echoes the interpretation we saw above in the ‘Columba series’ of psalm headings, exemplified by the late sixth- or early seventh-century ‘Cathach’.³² Another noteworthy feature of *OIT* is its outlining of a fourfold exegesis of the psalms, that is, understanding the psalms to have possessed four levels of meaning, which the author of *OIT* defines as the ‘first historical meaning’, which refers to the immediate events that led to the composition of any given psalm, or the immediate events being described within that psalm (for example, events in the life of David); the ‘second historical meaning’, which refers to the wider context of Jewish history within which the psalm operates (for example, the Babylonian exile); the ‘allegorical meaning’; and the ‘moral meaning’.

These latter, more figurative, ways of understanding the psalms can be illustrated by the beautiful architectural metaphors that the author uses to explain the relationship between individual psalms and the Psalter as a whole:

Is úathata tra ocus is ilda ind lebor sa .i. forgnúis óinlibuir dianechtair, ocus ilshailm himmedón, fo chosmailius nacha cathrach donimmchella óinmúr dianechtair, ocus iltegdaise immedón indi. Is foa n-indas sin rogab in saltair .i. forgnúis óinlibuir dianechtair ocus ilshailm himmedón, fo chosmailius nacha tegdaise adamra co scrínaib ilardaib co n-itsudaib mreचनाigdigib, co n-eochraib saingnústaib do erslocud each ái.

This book is one and is manifold, to wit, the form of one book without, and many psalms within, like some city which one wall surrounds without, and many buildings within it. In such wise is the Psalter, to wit, the form of one book without, and many psalms within, like some glorious building with many shrines, with various treasure-houses, with special keys to open each one of them.³³

The psalms as architectural space, a walled city, recalls some of the depictions of the New Jerusalem discussed in Chapter 1. Ideas of the Word as an idealised physical space and Scripture as an ecclesial building is also found in some allegorical poetry from the eleventh century,³⁴ but this ninth-century image of psalms

³¹ Meyer, ed. and trans., *Hibernica minora*, lines 320–328.

³² McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 35.

³³ Meyer, ed. and trans., *Hibernica minora*, lines 216–18.

³⁴ Elizabeth Boyle, ‘Aspects of Philosophical Discourse in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Ireland: Metaphor, Morality and the Mind’, in *Philosophy in Ireland: Past Actualities and Present Challenges*, ed. Susan Gottlöber (Newcastle, 2019), pp. 2–26.

as ‘glorious’ buildings filled with ‘treasure-houses’ of meanings is a long way from the urban imaginings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that we shall explore in the next chapter. As of yet, these are still idealised *civitates*, not real cities.

In the words of Pádraig Ó Néill, ‘*OIT* merits attention as the first extant work on biblical exegesis written completely in the Irish language. Although only a fragment has survived there are indications that the work, if ever completed, was a long and ambitious one. It marks a significant departure ... from the practice of glossing Latin commentaries with Irish words ... Yet despite its innovative character, a study of its non-patristic elements shows how closely the *OIT* is bound to a Hiberno-Latin tradition of exegesis. It is basically a translation into Irish of material both exegetical and grammatical (the distinction is a modern one) which was originally composed in Latin’.³⁵ Thus, part of its significance lies in its relationship to, and yet degree of progression from, the bilingual glossing activity that we discussed above. It is a free-standing work of theology in the vernacular. But it is also of interest because we have further evidence of how it continued to be read in the centuries after its composition, in the form of Airbertach mac Cosse’s adaptation of *OIT* into Middle Irish poetry.

Airbertach Mac Cosse was the *fer léigind* or *lector* at the ecclesiastical foundation of Ros Ailithir, near Roscarbery in present-day County Cork. Airbertach composed a number of Middle Irish poems on biblical history and geography. Airbertach was captured by the Scandinavians of Waterford in the year 990 and was subsequently ransomed by King Brian Boru. He died in the year 1016. One of Airbertach’s poems was on the subject of the Psalter and, if we accept a dating clause within the poem, we can identify its date of composition precisely as 21 December 982.³⁶ Airbertach’s main source for his poem was *OIT*: indeed, Airbertach’s poem could be described as a verse reworking of *OIT*, although, as we shall see, that would be a slight oversimplification, since Airbertach makes alterations to, and omits things from, his source text, which reflect his own particular purposes in writing. Intriguingly, it would seem that *OIT* may already have been incomplete even in the tenth century, since Airbertach only draws on the general introduction to the psalms from *OIT*, suggesting that he only had access to the same fragmentary text that survives to us today – it is, however, unclear whether that means that the author of *OIT* never completed his monumental task, or whether the rest of the treatise was simply lost in the first century or so after its composition.

In a close study of Airbertach’s poem and its relationship with *OIT*, Pádraig Ó Néill has drawn attention to the originality that Airbertach brought to his work: this is not a slavish rewriting of *OIT* into poetic form; rather, he modernised the language from Old to Middle Irish; he simplified aspects of the exegesis (perhaps for pedagogical purposes), focusing on historical interpretation rather than the complex grammatical investigations and etymologising of *OIT*, and he

³⁵ Pádraig Ó Néill, ed. and trans., ‘Airbertach mac Cosse’s Poem on the Psalter’, *Éigse* 17 (1977), 19–46.

³⁶ Pádraig P. Ó Néill, ed. and trans., ‘Airbertach mac Cosse’s Poem’, p. 39.

emphasised liturgical and devotional aspects of the psalms. Ó Néill particularly notes some lovely instances where Airbertach speaks directly to his audience and renders the technicalities of Psalter exegesis familiar to them. For example, at one point in his poem, he is drawing on the section of *OIT* that explains how the Septuagint text became the basis of the Latin Psalter. Airbertach then states, *is é side seichtmitne* ('it is that one we follow'), by which he means the *Gallicanum* Psalter, which his probable audience of Irish ecclesiastical students would know from their daily recitations of the psalms. One significant feature is his statement that only David was the author of the psalms; something that is, as we have seen, less complex than the statements regarding multiple authorship of the psalms in *OIT*.³⁷ In Airbertach's composition, we seem to be seeing a poem targeted at a more elementary stage in the educational process than *OIT*.

Airbertach particularly emphasises the salvific and devotional qualities of the psalms and states:

Aurnaighi dúthrachtach dil
airéim ria foichidib
deprecáit fri DÍA – dían mod –
escoine co tairchitol
i salmaib sein – séol as lía –
cibé nos-gaba each día.

Whoever sings them every day [shall find] in those Psalms – most numerous course – a beloved earnest prayer, an appeal against tribulation, an entreaty to God – a difficult task – a curse as well as a prophecy.³⁸

We shall explore the idea that the psalms have salvific and imprecatory powers shortly, but here we should simply note Ó Néill's observation that Airbertach's references to the devotional and prophetic powers of the psalms seem to suggest him envisaging the psalms being recited in nonliturgical as well as liturgical settings.³⁹ They are both private and public prayer. The public element is also noted, as Ó Néill has shown, in Airbertach's discussion of the choral and performative elements of the psalms, something that he emphasises more than the rather 'scholarly and exegetical' *OIT*.⁴⁰ In the passage above, Airbertach talks of singing the psalms every day, but he also identifies in them prayers, appeals and entreaties: the psalms are not only for the Divine Office but, as we shall see, have other

³⁷ Pádraig P. Ó Néill, 'Old Wine in New Bottles: the Reprise of Early Irish Psalter Exegesis in Airbertach mac Cosse's Poem on the Psalter', in *Authorities and Adaptations: the Transmission and Reworking of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden (Dublin, 2014), pp. 121–40, at p. 126. The tendency to link authorship of the psalms to David in Jewish tradition dates from the postexilic period during which time also the authorship of the Pentateuch was linked to Moses, the Wisdom literature to Solomon and certain prophetic texts to Isaiah: Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, p. 5.

³⁸ Ó Néill, ed. and trans., 'Airbertach mac Cosse's Poem', p. 36.

³⁹ Ó Néill, 'Old Wine in New Bottles', p. 133.

⁴⁰ Ó Néill, 'Old Wine in New Bottles', p. 133.

(private and public) uses. First, however, there is one further feature to explore, referred to briefly above in relation to *OIT* and also developed in Airbertach's poem, and that is the role of the psalms within salvation history.

As noted, the author of *OIT* outlined a fourfold exegetical scheme for understanding the psalms that involved two so-called 'historical' readings. The first historical sense was the set of circumstances within which the psalm was composed, for example, in the life of David – we have looked at the narrative of David's life, and the ways in which it was read and understood in medieval Ireland, in the previous chapter and will briefly discuss it further in relation to the Penitential Psalm 50, the *Miserere mei*, below. The second historical sense was a set of circumstances within the broader scope of Jewish history to which the psalm also referred, such as the Babylonian Captivity (see also Chapter 4). Pádraig Ó Néill has argued that parts of Airbertach's poem, which might initially appear to be awkward interpolations with no direct parallel in *OIT*, such as the stanzas on Hebrew prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel), on kings of Judah after David and the Babylonian Captivity, actually represent 'an elaboration of Old Testament events and personae that Airbertach (without direct prompting from his source) deemed appropriate subjects for the "second historical interpretation" of the psalms'.⁴¹ Ó Néill identifies an overarching concern with the span of salvation history that radiates from David's composition of the psalms, to the 'second historical meaning' within Jewish history, to the broad span of salvation history 'culminating with Christ's passion and ending with Airbertach anxiously awaiting the millennium. The effect is to situate both David, the author of the psalms, and Airbertach, the author of the present poem on David and the psalms, within the context of Salvation History'.⁴²

The exegetically ambitious *OIT* was thus reconfigured by Airbertach as a tenth-century poem – conforming to the metrical rules of medieval Irish poetry, and therefore embedded in another branch of medieval Irish learning – which can be used in the classroom to explain the historical meaning and spiritual significance of the psalms to young ecclesiastical scholars. Airbertach's simplifications and omissions of more difficult material show how he was communicating in the classroom at Ros Ailithir, offering a more basic interpretation, with only essential information, for those who were perhaps not yet ready to attend to the complexity and sophistication of exegetical works such as *OIT*. Airbertach's poem on the Psalter provides us with a hint of a yet further stage of progression away from psalms and their glosses, namely, the movement from exegetical interpretation into the poetic and literary spheres. The influence of the psalms and of Psalter exegesis extended far beyond the world of the intellectual theologian or exegete, into the classroom in texts aimed at young students and then beyond into the world of poetry and narrative literature aimed at secular audiences. This was

⁴¹ Ó Néill, 'Old Wine in New Bottles', p. 136, in relation to stanzas 18–25 of the poem. Another 'problematic' section, based on sources related to the Irish *SAM* and *SnR*, has similar integrity in relation to the second historical meaning (pp. 136–7), and the section on Thomas relates to the 'cursing' function of psalms in medieval Ireland (pp. 137–8), on which, see also below.

⁴² Ó Néill, 'Old Wine in New Bottles', p. 139.

not, however, a chronological development: Psalters continued to be glossed and commented throughout the period; new poetry and prose texts were composed throughout the Old and Middle Irish periods; and the theological and literary worlds continued to be inextricably linked. Early medieval Irish ecclesiastical scholars were endlessly inventive in finding new ways to express what for them was the fundamental truth, namely, the inseparability of Scripture and salvation. As M. J. Toswell has noted, ‘In a reading culture, in which information can be accessed and found, reread, and rediscovered, it is difficult to understand a memory culture, one in which every monk and nun engaged in a process of rumination that would have every word of every psalm always and habitually at the tip of the tongue’.⁴³ As noted at the start of this chapter, it is reasonable to assert that almost every literate person in medieval Ireland knew the psalms by heart: if they remained in religious life beyond their formative education, they would have continued to recite and to hear the psalms sung every day of their life. I cannot hope to address the full implications of this fact for all of medieval Irish literature, but we can begin to explore some of the literary manifestations of the psalms, which show a wide variety of ways in which the psalms could shape, influence and inspire authors in medieval Ireland.

‘Wash me, that I be whiter than snow’

There are seven psalms which are known collectively as the ‘Penitential Psalms’. In the Vulgate numbering, these are Psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142. The origin of the idea that these seven psalms possess a particular penitential efficacy are unclear, but we find our first explicit reference to this group of ‘penitents’ psalms’ in Cassiodorus’s *Expositio Psalmorum*. Cassiodorus appears to be referring to an existing tradition rather than an innovation, and thus the development is likely to predate the sixth century.⁴⁴ We have already seen that the threefold division of the psalms in early medieval Ireland meant that Psalms 50 and 101 had developed a significance of their own, since Psalm 50 ended the first of the ‘three fifties’ and Psalm 101 began the last of them, but we also find evidence for ‘Penitential Psalms’ being valued precisely for their penitential function and not simply for their place within the overarching threefold division. We can see this most clearly with Psalm 50, the *Miserere mei*.

In the previous chapter, we saw how one of the tenth-century Irish narratives about King David in YBL also served as an aetiological tale for the *Miserere mei*. This psalm had long been linked with David’s repentance for his ordering the death of Uriah the Hittite as a result of his lust for Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. The title of Psalm 50 announces that it is a psalm that David composed after Nathan, the prophet, had denounced him for the wickedness of having slept with Bathsheba (Psalms 50:1–2). This refers the reader to the story in 2 Samuel 12, in which Nathan tells David a parable about a rich man with many sheep and oxen,

⁴³ Toswell, *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ For an overview, see Clare Costley King’oo, *Miserere Mei: the Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, 2012), pp. 3–19.

and a poor man who had only a single ewe. Nathan tells David that the rich man stole the poor man's ewe, prompting David to respond that the rich man was a 'son of death' who should have to compensate the poor man fourfold.⁴⁵ Nathan retorts that David is the rich man of the parable, because he had many wives and concubines, and yet stole Uriah's only wife. The tradition of Psalm 50 asserts that, at this point, David sought God's forgiveness for his transgression through the composition of the psalm. The *Miserere mei* was not, in fact, composed by David at all: as James Crenshaw has noted, verse 20 'rules out Davidic authorship, for its reference to the broken walls of Jerusalem demands a date after 587 BCE'.⁴⁶ This anachronism did not deter our tenth-century Irish author, who not only accepted Davidic authorship, but actually engaged in a creative process of adapting and transforming the Davidic association with Psalm 50 into a story centred not on Nathan the prophet, but on David's relationship with his own son, Absalom.

In a study of one Old English manifestation of the adaptive possibilities of Psalm 50, Sarah Larratt Keefer has noted the rich penitential value of the *Miserere mei*, which she ascribes in part to the complexity of David's sinfulness: he can be viewed as being guilty of many things, including, but not limited to, murder and adultery.

Given such a complex range of crime, implicit in the various versions of the title to psalm 50, it is important to remember that, for the early Church, this psalm was thought to represent an exemplar of successful penitential prayer. Because of the contrition he showed, David was restored to the favor of the Lord (2 Samuel 12:13) despite the enormity of his sins. Therefore because of these customary titles appended to it, psalm 50 became associated with Christian penance, and early on must have assumed the liturgical role of a penitential formula to be used by those atoning for personal sin.⁴⁷

Larratt Keefer's case study for a different type of adaptation of the *Miserere mei* is the 'Kentish Psalm 50', an Old English poetic reworking of the psalm that – like our YBL narrative – can possibly be dated to the tenth century. The literary complexity of the 'Kentish Psalm 50' has been lucidly explicated by Larratt Keefer: she has demonstrated that its author, although he based his adaptation on a primarily *Romanum* version of the psalms, demonstrates his knowledge of the *Hebraicum* through his lexical choices.⁴⁸ Thus, he is a product of an education comparable to that of the Irish scholars we noted above who, while generally

⁴⁵ For the adoption of the term 'sons of death' in medieval Ireland, where it is attested both in Latin and in Irish, in narrative, historical and hagiographical sources and is applied to men engaging in violent disorder, see Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech*, and the Devil's Men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), 75–92; McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 219.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Sarah Larratt Keefer, *Psalm-Poem and Psalter-Glosses: the Latin and Old English Psalter-Text Background to "Kentish Psalm 50"* (New York, 1991), p. 15.

⁴⁸ Keefer, *Psalm-Poem*, pp. 29, 52; Sarah Larratt Keefer and D. R. Burrows, 'Hebrew and the *Hebraicum* in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 19 (1990), 67–80.

reliant on the *Gallicanum* for liturgical purposes and the Divine Office, were closely familiar with other versions for pedagogical and exegetical purposes. The poet keeps the Latin original close to the heart of his composition, but he also ‘moves out from the psalm into a meditation which seems intensely personal to the character of King David, in whose mouth it is placed’.⁴⁹ Indeed, the first thirty lines of the ‘Kentish Psalm 50’ create a narrative framework into which the psalm is placed. David is portrayed sympathetically, and, as Keefer argues, the poet uses this framework to give ‘dramatic immediacy to the setting of the psalm, creating a “character” for the penitent king, with whom any reciter of Psalm 50 might readily identify’.⁵⁰ It was not simply our medieval Irish authors who engaged closely with the emotional and moral difficulties of the David story, but as we can see from the example of the ‘Kentish Psalm 50’, early English authors were, at the same time, engaging with similar narrative adaptations of David and his songs.

‘Seven times a day I have given praise to you’

Psalm 118 (119) is widely known as the *Beati* from its opening words in the Latin Vulgate translation: *Beati immaculati in via* (‘Blessed are the undefiled in the way’), but understanding its structure and composition requires some basic understanding of its original Hebrew form, because the psalm is an alphabetic acrostic. The opening word is *’ashrey*, whose first letter, *aleph*, begins the Hebrew alphabet: the first words of the first eight lines all begin with *aleph*, the first words of the next eight lines begin with *beth*, and so on through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, resulting in a total of 176 verses. As such, it is the longest psalm in the bible. Although the alphabetic nature of the *Beati* was not carried over into the Latin translations that were read in medieval Ireland, Irish commentators were well aware of this feature of the Hebrew psalm.

The ninth-century text known as ‘The Monastery of Tallaght’ opens with an ex-layman (that is, a man who, after a secular career, retired into religious life) saying to his monastic companion that he does not understand the monk’s ‘continual singing of the *Beati*’. The monk replies that ‘As a man, being now at the foot of the gallows, would pour out praise and lamentation to the king, to gain his deliverance; in like manner we pour forth lamentation to the King of Heaven in the *Beati*, to gain our deliverance’.⁵¹ Unlike some of the more bellicose, celebratory or grief-stricken psalms, the *Beati* does not immediately strike the casual reader as a beautiful work of literature. If one were to ‘pour forth lamentation’, there would be more powerful psalms to choose from. And yet it is clear that in medieval Ireland, the *Beati* was held to possess exceptional salvific power.

⁴⁹ Keefer, *Psalm-Poem*, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Keefer, *Psalm-Poem*, p. 15.

⁵¹ E. J. Gwynn and Walter J. Purton, ed. and trans., ‘The Monastery of Tallaght’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29C (1911–12), 115–79, at p. 127: *Fer indorsa fri bun cruche ind molad ocus ind nemeli noferfad frisind rig immo saorad. is foion iondas sin fermaidni nemeli fri rig nime isind bíaid immo ar saorad.*

In his commentary on the psalms, Cassiodorus described the Psalter as an entry into divine law, and it is perhaps this legal and prescriptive aspect – the idea that the psalms reflect in microcosm the divine law of the Pentateuch – rather than any particular literary qualities that might go some way towards explaining the remarkable popularity and potency of Psalm 118 (119), the *Beati*, in medieval Ireland. The psalm is filled with the language of ‘precepts’ and ‘commandments’, ‘discipline’ and ‘judgements’, and in this sense, it resonates with the regulations of monastic life.

As we might expect, there is a rich tradition of glossing, commentating and interpreting the *Beati* in medieval Ireland. We have already discussed at the beginning of this chapter Psalters such as the Cathach and the Psalter of St Caimín, of the latter of which only the *Beati* survives. The Milan commentary on the psalms – the glosses on which are such a key source of our knowledge of Old Irish – relates the *Beati* to the Jewish people in their Babylonian Captivity, and the glossing on the Psalter of St Caimín simultaneously refers to Saul, Absalom and Achitophel (the first historical meaning) and to the Chaldeans and Babylon (the second historical meaning).⁵² Another relevant eighth- or ninth-century Insular manuscript, glossed both in Old Irish and Old English, is Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Pal. lat. 68, discussed in detail by Martin McNamara.⁵³ The manuscript contains a commentary on the psalms that is related to numerous other Irish sources, including the Psalter of St Caimín. Its heading for the *Beati* states: *Vox David de iustis qui rapti sunt in Babiloniam*, again linking David (first historical meaning) with the Babylonian Captivity (second).⁵⁴ By contrast, the Christological ‘Columba series’ of psalm headings understands the *Beati* somewhat differently, albeit in a way that gives us another hint as to why it was perceived as such a powerfully important psalm in early medieval Ireland. Significantly, this is adverted to in the heading of a different psalm, namely Psalm 18, which begins *Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei* (The heavens shew forth the glory of the Lord). Its heading in the ‘Columba series’ reads: *De aduentu Christi per quem reseratur psalmus CXVIII, ibi coniungitur nouum et uetus testamentum* (Concerning the coming of Christ, by which Psalm 118 is unlocked; there the New and the Old Testament are joined together).⁵⁵ Thus, according to the heading for Psalm 18, the *Beati* could hold a central role in understanding salvation history – it was the voice of David, referring to the Babylonian Captivity, and yet simultaneously ‘there’, in the *Beati*, the New and Old Testaments were ‘joined together’. The ‘Columba series’ heading for the *Beati* itself seems to echo this perception of it being a key to unlocking the entirety of salvation history:

Uox Christi ad Patrem et apostolorum de aduersario et de Judeis, et de passione sua et de aduentu suo et iudicio eius et regno.

⁵² McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 82.

⁵³ McNamara, *The Psalms*, esp. pp. 165ff.

⁵⁴ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 198.

⁵⁵ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 344.

The voice of Christ to the Father and of the apostles concerning the Adversary and the Jews and his Passion and his Coming and his Judgement and kingdom.⁵⁶

This reading of the *Beati* would indeed regard it as containing an eschatological prophecy concerning the culmination of salvation history (Judgement) as well as the pivotal moment within salvation history (the Passion), sweeping Satan along with the Jewish people into its broad ambit. And there was still more: the references to ‘precepts’ and ‘judgements’ that we have already noted as a feature of the *Beati* meant that, as well as encapsulating the entirety of salvation history, it could also function as almost like a textual amulet, a *lorica*, a protection from vice. To understand this particular quality requires an exploration of the some of the more figurative discussions of the *Beati* in Middle Irish sources.

Poetry could be used in a more figurative fashion to frame interpretation of the psalms than the sort of historical approach we witnessed in Airbertach’s poem. For example, the poem *Aislinge Augustín áin* is a late Middle Irish, that is, probably late-twelfth-century poem, which begins by recounting a vision (*aislinge*) placed into the mind or sight of Augustine of Hippo:

Aislinge Augustín áin
ar ngabáil psalm ’sin tiugnáir
co faca a bith ar in moig
oc teiched re hocht conaib.

Luid dochum feda bláith bic
ar teiched na con croibglic,
nocha fuair a dítin ann
ar in ochtar con craescham.

Ar sin do-luid, andar leis,
co fid romór do-ridis,
ní fhuair a dín thair na thall
co ráinic cosin aenchrann.

Luid isin crann dá chobair
oc teiched résna conaib,
dá géic ar fhichit úra
ar slis in chroinn chaemchumra.

Croithit in crann cas
cíarsa gním n-uathmar n-amnas;
do-s-roichtsium fras, andar leis,
dóib a n-ochtar rop andeis.

Tuitit na hocht mbainne anuas
as cach rogéic co roluas
i cenna na con nglas ngarb
i cétóir condat romarb.

⁵⁶ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 345 (my translation).

Noble Augustine had a vision after he had recited the psalms at matins; he saw himself on a plain in flight before eight wolves.

Fleeing from the swift paws of the wolves he went to a small pleasant wood; he found no protection there from the eight rapacious wolves.

Then he came again, as he thought, to a very great wood; he found no shelter in one place or another until he came to one particular tree.

Fleeing before the wolves he went [up] into the tree for help; there were twenty-two fresh branches on the side of the fair fragrant tree.

The wolves shook the branching tree though it was a harsh and dreadful deed; a shower fell on them, as he thought – it was unfortunate for all eight of them.

Eight drops fell swiftly down from each great branch on to the heads of the rough fierce wolves so that they died straight away.⁵⁷

Aside from the reference to Augustine having recited the psalms at Matins, the connection between this poem and the psalms might not be immediately apparent. But the second half of the poem is devoted to interpreting the vision described in the first half, and it does so thus:

Scribaid Augustín ord nglé
berar uaid co Ciríne;
beirid Ciríne a breith fir
is berar uaid d'Augustín.

Bertha a buaid, buan a blad,
re Mac uasal an Athar
a thernam a craesaib con
ar n-éirge dó as a chodlad.

Is iat na coin, cruaid a cath,
ocht n-airig na ndualach;
a-tát i ndiaid each duine
ar in talmain tonnbuie.

Is í in chaill bec, buan a blad,
in urnaigthe glan grésach;
is í in chaill mór co mbloid
na psailm 'm in biait mbennachtaig.

Dá géic ar fhichit cen ail
asin chrann, caelach cubaid,
– ní huathad fil 'cá forgel –
is é lín na caemchoiptel.

Is iat na hocht mbainne anuas
as each rogéic co roluas

⁵⁷ Brian Ó Cuiv, ed. and trans., 'Three Middle Irish Poems', *Éigse* 16 (1975–6), 1–17, at pp. 3–4.

fersa na coiptel co rath
oc toirnem na ndualach.

Cipé gabas in mbiait binn
cech lá is cech n-aidche láingrinn
is tinól ruithne co rath
is innarbad dualach.

Is díchur uaid demuín déin,
is cuiread don rí g roléir,
is lúirech anma oculus cuirp,
is sciath ar scáth cach aenuilc.

Rom-ain in crann gécach glan
ar in ochtar ndualach;
Críst etrom 's a gaire glas
nacham tair i tiugradas.

Augustine writes a clear account which is brought from him to Jerome; Jerome gives his true interpretation and it is brought from him to Augustine.

Thanks should be given to the noble Son of the Father – lasting is his fame – that he [*sc.* Augustine] escaped from the jaws of the wolves after rising from his sleep.

The wolves are the eight principal vices – their attack is fierce – they pursue every person on the yellow-surfaced earth.

The little wood is pure constant prayer, lasting its fame – the great renowned wood stands for the psalms including the blessed *Beati*.

The twenty-two blameless branches growing from the tree, fitting withes, are the number of the fair chapters [of the *Beati*] – many bear witness to this.

The verses of the chapters successfully overcoming the vices are the eight drops falling very swiftly from each branch.

Whoever recites the sweet *Beati* every day and every night with full care, it is [for him] a gathering of glory and grace and a banishment of vices.

It is a warding off [from him] of the fierce demon, it is an invitation to the truly-manifest King, it is a lorica for soul and body, it is a shield against every single evil.

May the pure branching tree protect me against the eight vices; may Christ be between me and the fierce crowd of them so that they may not reach me in the final reckoning.⁵⁸

This clever poem plays on the fact that the historical Augustine and Jerome corresponded with each other to imagine them in the roles of visionary and interpreter. The vision is revealed to be symbolic both of the substance of the *Beati* (its twenty-two chapters, the eight verses in each chapter) and of its power to

⁵⁸ Ó Cuiv, ed. and trans., 'Three Middle Irish Poems', pp. 4–5.

protect against vice. The poet describes the *Beati* as a *lúirech* ‘lorica’, a prayer of protection, and as a ‘shield against every single evil’. In this case, the ‘real’ enemies referred to in the psalm-heading (Satan and the Jewish people) are metaphysical ones: sins or vices. *Aislinge Augustín áin* is not an allegorical interpretation of the *Beati*, *per se*, but rather an allegorical interpretation of a story about Augustine’s vision of being chased by wolves and his finding shelter in the forest. With *Aislinge Augustín áin* we are moving into the narrative sphere, at a further remove from the psalms themselves, but this literary output is still absolutely embedded in a worldview derived from the techniques of biblical exegesis.

We have plenty of other evidence of figurative interpretation of the *Beati* in medieval Ireland, in glosses and commentaries, of course, but also in more unexpected places, such as the Irish *SAM*. In the Rawlinson B 502 version of the Irish *SAM*, there is what appears to be an interpolated section on the *Beati*, dating from the tenth or eleventh century.⁵⁹ The prose and brief poem offer a mystical interpretation of the *Beati*’s structure and meaning, and the poem is itself glossed with explanations of some of its statements. It is significant that the poem comes after a lengthy section on Babylon (see Chapter 4), and it is introduced with the statement that:

Cestnaighthir beus hi sunn cia lín huide ro-baé do macaib Israhél ó Babilóin co Hierusálem. Ní annsa: cóic huidi sescat ar trí cét. Ar iss ed-sain fil ón Babilóin siansaídi .i. ó ifurn, hi fail cach cummasc₇ cach mbuadrech, cosin nHierusálem nemda, hi fail cach síd₇ cach sónmigi.

It is asked here, moreover, how many days’ journey there was for the children of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem. Not difficult! Three hundred and sixty-five days’ journey, for that is the distance between the mystical Babylon, i.e. from hell, wherein is all confusion and tribulation, to the heavenly Jerusalem, wherein is all peace and happiness.⁶⁰

Speaking of this one-year distance between Babylon (i.e. hell) and Jerusalem (i.e. heaven), the poet then describes ‘176 paces in every journey’ (which the glosses explain is the number of lines or verses in the *Beati*) and speaks of different kinds of pace in each journey (which the gloss explains is the different meanings a text can have, both literal and mystical).⁶¹ This is followed by a prose explanation:

Is sé-seo trá huidi beres ind anim hi céin bíthir ic gabáil na biaiti .i. céim cacha fersa .i. sechtmoga sé ar chét. Ocus atá tothucht na dá lebur ar fichit in cach fers isin bia[i]t, conid aire do-beir in biat anmain a hiffurn hi cind bliadna, ar is sí chuibdigthir sech cech n-airnaigthe frisna dá lebur ar fichit na fetarlaice .i. a comlánius uili in cach oénfers₇ dá coibtel ar fichit inti fo numir apgitrech na nÉbraide.

⁵⁹ The question of whether sections including the poem are original to the text or are interpolations is a vexed one. For a clear and convincing assessment see Máire Herbert, ‘The Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi*: First Editions’, *CMCS* 11 (1986), 97–112.

⁶⁰ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, §60, pp. 93 (text), 129 (trans.).

⁶¹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, §61, pp. 94 (text and glosses), 129 (trans.).

This then is the journey the soul takes while the *Beati* is being recited, i.e. one step to every verse, i.e. one hundred and seventy-six, and the import of the twenty-two books [of the Old Testament] is in every verse of the *Beati*. So that is why the *Beati* brings a soul out of hell after a year, for more than any other prayer it is in harmony with the twenty-two books of the Old Testament, i.e. the fullness of them all is in each single verse, and there are twenty-two chapters in it according to the number of the Hebrew alphabet.⁶²

This concludes the ‘Fifth Age’ of the Rawlinson B 502 version of the Irish *SAM*, and it alludes to a different quality of the *Beati* than that outlined in *Aislinge Augustín áin*. Whereas the latter poem regarded the power of the *Beati* to lie in its protective power against vice, the Irish *SAM* reflects the idea that daily recitation of the *Beati* could rescue a soul from hell. The 365 days of praying the *Beati* was a metaphorical year-long journey from ‘Babylon’ to ‘Jerusalem’: thus, the salvific power of the *Beati* was real and unrivalled.

This same belief is seen in early Middle Irish anecdotes that play on the extraordinary power of the *Beati* in ways both serious and more playful. A tenth-century Irish anecdote, preserved in the ‘Book of Leinster’, recounts a story about the sister of Saint Mo Laisse (Laisrén) of Leighlin, Co. Carlow, a saint already known in Old Irish literature as a visionary of the afterlife.⁶³ This tenth-century tale tells how Mo Laisse’s sister was studying with, and serving, Mo Laisse at Leighlin when she fell pregnant by a clerical student. Knowing that her sexual transgression would incur the wrath of her brother, Mo Laisse’s unnamed sister encouraged the clerical student to flee, offering to face the consequences of her actions alone. The clerical student promised to say masses for the soul of the young nun, saying ‘If I live ... you shall not be in hell’ (*Dia m-ba beo-sa ... ní bia i n-ífern*). When Mo Laisse heard that his sister was in labour, he condemned her, saying ‘May that be a labour of swift death’ (*Ropsat idain dian-báis ám*). Indeed, the young woman did die in childbirth and was denied the last rites. The author juxtaposes a series of statements that demonstrate his theological understanding of the relationship of the sacraments and the burial of the body to the postmortem fate of the soul. He states: ‘She did not receive communion. She died and went to hell. The cleric [i.e. Mo Laisse] did not allow her burial in the cemetery, and so she was buried in the bog below the church’. This is severe punishment of a transgressor: the denial of last rites is a cause of her damnation just as her burial outside consecrated ground is a physical manifestation of that damnation. However, the unforgiving stance of Mo Laisse towards his own sister is striking, and we might wonder at the attitude of the author, given the generally sympathetic portrayal of both Mo Laisse’s sister and her faithful lover over the course of the narrative.

⁶² Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, §62, pp. 95 (text), 130 (trans.). See also Osborn Bergin, ed. and trans., ‘A Mystical Interpretation of the *Beati*’, *Ériu* 11 (1932), 103–6.

⁶³ Julius Pokorny, ed. and trans., ‘Eine altirische Legende aus dem Buch von Leinster’, in *Miscellany Presented to Kuno Meyer*, ed. Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (Halle a. S., 1912), pp. 207–15; English translation of Pokorny’s text by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV*, ed. Angela Bourke, et al. (Cork, 2002), pp. 118–9.

In the meantime, the clerical student had fled to Armagh, where news reached him of the death of the young woman. He began to recite the psalms in their entirety three times daily while performing prostrations and to recite the *Beati* seven times per day. He travelled back to Leighlin and requested from Mo Laisse a site outside the grounds of the church, where he built a little hut ‘close to the grave’ of his lover. After a year engaged in prayer, the ghost of the woman appeared before him and described herself as ‘almost redeemed’. When he asked her what had redeemed her the most, she replied that it was the recitation of the *Beati*. Subsequently, another well-known seventh-century Irish saint, Fursa, arrived at Leighlin and saw angels coming to the woman’s grave. Fursa asked Mo Laisse who was the ‘saint’ buried in that grave. Mo Laisse described his sister as ‘a demon’ (*idal*, literally ‘an idol’) and ‘a diabolical nun’ (*demon callige*), but Fursa showed him the angels rising from her grave towards heaven; thus, her redemption was complete. The woman’s body was then moved into the church’s cemetery while the clerical student left under the care of Fursa, and we are told that the student too ‘became a saint and went to heaven’. The narrative concludes that ‘the *Beati* is better than all prayers’.

There is much that is of interest in this brief narrative, not least the apparent tension between two visionary saints: Fursa (whose vision of heaven and hell is found in the *Vita Fursei* and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) and Mo Laisse. Mo Laisse’s implacable stance at the outset, his exclusion of his sister from the Christian rites of death, is mirrored at the end of the narrative by his inability to perceive her redemption, which needs to be pointed out by the visiting holy man, Fursa. For our purposes, however, what is of greatest significance the narrative’s central focus, which is the salvific power of the *Beati*, and again we see the idea of a year-long journey from hell. The woman’s sexual transgression was punished by the death in childbirth that her brother wished upon her. The denial of the last rites and the subsequent treatment of her corpse are powerful expressions in this world of the condemnation of her soul in the next. The words of the *Beati*, as recited by her ardent lover, however, have the capacity to save her soul; the translation of her corpse into the cemetery at the end of the narrative functions as a tangible expression of her redemption and her eventual inclusion among the elect.

‘The Two Clerical Students and the Next Life’ is another tenth-century anecdote, more humorous than the rather tragic ‘St Mo Laisse and his Sister’, which tells of a pair of clerical students who make an agreement with each other that the first one of them to die will come back a month later and tell the other what the afterlife is like.⁶⁴ There is a rich vein of irony running through this story, which I see as being used to entertain as well as instruct ecclesiastical students.⁶⁵ This is immediately apparent in this particular narrative, because one thing that clerical students should not be doing is speculating on the nature of the afterlife and making bargains with each other to come back in the form of a ghost or spirit to report to the other on their eschatological adventures. The idea that these clerical

⁶⁴ John Carey, ed. and trans., ‘The Two Clerical Students and the Next Life’, in *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology*, ed. John Carey, et al., 2 vols (Aberystwyth, 2014), I, 139–43.

⁶⁵ I suggest that it is part of a genre of ironic pedagogical anecdotes aimed at students. For other examples and discussion, see Boyle, ‘Lay Morality, Clerical Immorality and Pilgrimage’.

students are up to no good is perhaps confirmed when the author tells us that not long afterwards, one of them does indeed die. The story continues:

... 7 gebid in fer n-aile a egnairc 7 bai oca frithailem co cenn misi 7 ni tanic a cele a llo na 'n-aidhche cuige 7 bai aca ecnach 7 ac ecnach na Trinoide ...

And the other recited his requiem, and was waiting for him until the end of a month. And his comrade did not come to him, by day or night, and he was reviling him and reviling the Trinity.⁶⁶

Reproaching the Trinity for not letting you chat with your dead friend is certainly not behaviour becoming of a clerical student, and so we should not be surprised that this young man gets his comeuppance in rather slapstick circumstances. We are told that he is in his cell performing genuflections and prostrations when he smacked his head on the crossbeam of his cell, knocked himself out and died. This was surely intended to elicit laughter from an audience of clerical students. The second cleric's soul departs from his body and as he looks down at his body being taken for a requiem Mass, he starts to berate people, but they cannot see or hear him, and so he is ignored. But at this point, he sees his dead comrade and rebukes him for not having observed his part of the bargain. His friend replies that he did in fact keep his part of the bargain, and that he had stood at his friend's pillow many nights shouting at him, but that he had not heard him. The problem was that the living cannot see or hear such spirits, unless God intends that they should be able to do so: it is unregulated attempts at communication with the dead that are being mocked and thus criticised here.

The first of the pair to die reports that he is suffering in hell, but that the second of them can yet return to his body, be restored to life, and devote himself to reciting the *Beati* every day for a year in order to release the first comrade from hell and to ensure his own salvation. This he does, and the text concludes that the *Beati* is the prayer beyond all others. The lesson that the audience is meant to take from this tale, however, is not simply about the salvific power of the *Beati*, which – as we have seen – is a concept found in other medieval Irish sources; but it is also about the behaviour of clerical students. They should stick to reciting their psalms and ensuring their salvation and the salvations of others rather than engaging in speculation and séances. But this worthy message is couched in entertaining terms: it amuses as it instructs, and thus we can imagine the pedagogical use to which such a tale would be put, enlivening the ecclesiastical classroom with some instructive humour. It is also significant that it is written in the typical narrative prose style of tenth-century Ireland: as we saw with the David stories in YBL, the plot is driven by brief and direct statements in between passages of direct speech, characterisation is expressed by direct speech and there is minimal descriptive narrative. This text, on the importance of daily recitation of the *Beati*, has moved us far from the register of biblical exegesis and into a world of ironic speech and quotidian phraseology, but it is indicative of the reach of the psalms, their words and their power, into all aspects of literary culture in medieval Ireland.

⁶⁶ Carey, ed. and trans., 'The Two Clerical Students and the Next Life', I, 140–1, §2.

‘Their throat is an open sepulchre’

The idea that the psalms were possessed of a potent salvific power is mirrored by its opposite phenomenon: namely, that of the psalms of malediction (*salm escaine*). This was a series of psalms that could be uttered, one per day, over the course of twenty days, while a saint was invoked alongside the psalm, finally resulting in the damnation of the person against whom the maledictory psalms were being recited. The psalms and their corresponding saints in its earliest formulation are Psalms 2 (Peter), 3 (John), 5 (Philip), 7 (Bartholomew), 13 (Thomas), 21 (Matthew), 25 (James), 35 (Simon), 37 (Thaddeus), 38 (Matthias), 49 (Mark), 51 (Luke), 52 (Stephen), 67 (Ambrose), 68 (Gregory), 78 (Martin), 82 (Old Paul), 108 (George), the *Audite Caeli* passage from Deut. 32 (with no associated saint) and finally, a text beginning *Non nobis, Domine*, which may be Psalm 115 or perhaps Psalm 113:9–26 (again, with no associated saint). In its later, eleventh-century iteration, the readings are the same until the final three days, at which point we find Psalms 93 and 108, concluding with the *Audite caeli* of Deut. 32. The eleventh-century poem has a saint associated with every reading (the additional names are Paul, near the start of the series, and Anthony towards the end).⁶⁷ As Dan Wiley has noted in his detailed study of this phenomenon, by invoking a holy man in association with each psalm, ‘the cleric binds himself and his psalmodic pleas to the communion of saints. His concerns become their concerns, and he is thus able to bring the full weight of the Roman church to bear on the object of his displeasure’.⁶⁸ The psalms are the natural source texts for such rituals of vengeance: in the words of Erich Zenger, ‘hatred, enmity, violence, retaliation, and even revenge are not sub-motifs in the Psalter: they are substantive parts of it’.⁶⁹ The central role of the apostles and martyrs in the list of saintly figures associated with this psalmic process is a feature of the early Irish Church that we will return to in Chapter 5. The poem on the maledictory psalms begins:

Sreth a salmaib suad slán
feib ro-horddaig Adamnán,
do escaini – mod cen cleith –
ónd eclais for each mbidbaid.

A series from the psalms of noble sages
As Adomnán has arranged,
For the Church – a conspicuous task –
To curse every enemy.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Patrick O’Neill [= Pádraig P. Ó Néill], ‘A Middle Irish Poem on the Maledictory Psalms’, *Journal of Celtic Studies* 3 (1981), 40–58.

⁶⁸ Dan M. Wiley, ‘The Maledictory Psalms’, *Peritia* 15 (2001), 261–79, at p. 266.

⁶⁹ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, 1996), p. 13.

⁷⁰ O’Neill, ed., ‘A Middle Irish Poem’, p. 53; revision of O’Neill’s translation suggested by Wiley, ‘The Maledictory Psalms’, p. 267.

The association with Adomnán is also found in the scheme's earlier iteration, where it forms part of *Cáin Adomnáin* ('The Law of Adomnán'), which was first promulgated in 697. As Dan Wiley notes, the later poem was probably composed as a mnemonic to help practitioners recall the ritual of malediction at an apposite moment.⁷¹ But what was an apposite moment for a cleric to curse an enemy?

Wiley reads the psalms of malediction as comparable to the medieval Irish poetic practice of satire, whereby a poet had to give notice of his intention to produce a shaming satire against someone, and the secular legal practice of distraint, whereby notice also had to be given before distraint could be exercised. He sees the psalms of malediction as a cleric's threat equivalent to the poet's satire and the layman's distraint, and therefore as a process of last resort that should ideally reach a resolution before the ultimate sanction is carried out. By performing the maledictory process over the course of twenty days, the cleric 'provides the defendant with ample opportunity to reach a settlement and avoid any lasting consequences'.⁷² This interpretation is supported by legal texts in both Latin and the vernacular. The eighth-century *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* contains a section on cursing, which, though allusive and not entirely clear, seems to suggest that the only appropriate form that *maledictio* can take is prayer: the rest thereafter should be left in the hands of God.⁷³ This accords with the nature of the psalms' requests to God to destroy the psalmists' enemies: as James Crenshaw has stated, 'By praying that God eradicate the wicked, the psalmists place everything in Yahweh's hands while at the same time voicing a longing for God to speak the last word'.⁷⁴ By speaking the psalmists' words of vengeance rather than their own, medieval Irish clerics were enjoining divine justice rather than acting contrary to their faith. Indeed, a vernacular legal text states that the way of 'bell and psalm' is the rightful manner open to the clergy to avenge wrongs against them.⁷⁵ The end result – should it be reached – was to deprive the target individual of the benefits of salvation: the malediction shortened earthly life and excluded the subject, and potentially even his descendants, from heaven. Thus, these psalms, sung in the aforementioned order with the invocation of the appropriate saints, were possessed of a diametrically opposed power to a salvific prayer such as the *Beati* (Psalm 118 [119]) or indeed hymns such as the *Hymnum dicat*.

'My lips shall utter a hymn'

Belief in the extraordinary salvific power of the *Beati*, and indeed the imprecatory power of the psalms of malediction, cannot be viewed in isolation from wider beliefs about prayer and its function more broadly. To take one further example from the genre of tenth-century humorous pedagogical anecdotes, we can illustrate this idea of particular hymns, including the psalms, possessing particular

⁷¹ Wiley, 'The Maledictory Psalms', p. 268.

⁷² Wiley, 'The Maledictory Psalms', pp. 268–71, with the quotation at p. 270.

⁷³ Discussed by Wiley, 'The Maledictory Psalms', p. 273.

⁷⁴ Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, p. 66.

⁷⁵ Liam Breatnach, 'An aoir sa ré luath', *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 18 (1988), pp. 11–9, at p. 16.

powers in relation to the *Hymnum dicat*, a Latin hymn attributed to Hilary of Poitiers. I offer below a text and translation of ‘Three Junior Clerics and their Kitten’ from the Book of Leinster.⁷⁶ This humorous and didactic tale tells of three clerical students leaving Ireland in a boat in order to exile themselves for the sake of God. They cast away their oars and allow divine providence to take them where it will. They end up on an island, where they erect a church. However, their attempts at asceticism are undermined by their pet kitten, who has a talent for catching implausibly large quantities of salmon. They decide very devoutly not to eat the fish caught by the kitten, and Christ miraculously provides food for them on the altar in the form of loaves and fishes. They offer devotions to Christ: one man recites the psalms daily, along with celebrating Mass and the canonical hours; another recites 150 prayers daily, along with celebrating Mass and the canonical hours; but the third man recites the *Hymnum dicat* 150 times a day, along with celebrating Mass and the canonical hours. As each man dies, the remaining clerics take on the work of the others, until there is one left, reciting all the psalms, prayers and hymns, saying Mass (three times per day) and observing the canonical hours. He feels resentful at this heavy burden, thinks God has favoured the other two over him and begins a hunger strike against God. An angel visits him and shows him that, to the contrary, he is blessed above his two companions, since simply reciting the psalms each day – a bare minimum in devotional terms – would grant one entry to the kingdom of heaven, but would give only a short life; reciting the prayers was enough to give a natural life-span, neither longer nor shorter than one would expect; but it is the recitation of the *Hymnum dicat* that granted the third man not only entry into the kingdom of heaven, but also an extended life in this world. Thus, we are told, the third man lives on into great old age until he encounters St Brendan (an intertextual reference to the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*), who gives him the *viaticum* and the last rites, and the man enters heaven:

Ttriar macclerech do fêraib Herend dochotar inna n-ailithre. Ba dichra ₇ ba cridechair dochoas and. Ni rucad and do loon for muir acht teora bargin.

‘Beratsa in cattíne’, or fer díb.

O rosiachtatar didiu formna na farge: ‘i n-anmair Crist trá lecam ar ráma úan isa muir. ₇ foncerddam i lleth ar Tigernai’. Dorónad ón. Nirbo chian iar sin la fortacht Crist conda rraile dochum indsi. Alaind ind inis. Usce ₇ connud imda inti.

‘Denam tra eclais dún for lár na indsi’. Dognither ón.

Téit a cattine dosrengai bratán fíréisc dóib conice tri bratanu cech ae a thratha.

⁷⁶ Another version of this story, in the Book of Lismore, was edited by Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890), pp. viii–x. The Book of Leinster version has not previously been translated into English, although there is a French translation by Henri Gaidoz in *Mélusine* 4 (1889), cols 6–11. It is similar to the Book of Lismore version, except that the Book of Leinster version preserves numerous older linguistic forms that reflect the late Old Irish or early Middle Irish date of the text.

‘Ní ailithre ar n-ailithre hi fechtsa. Tucsam ar loon lend .i. ar cattine diar n-airbiathad. Ní chaithfem torad in caitt.’

Batar iar sin sé thráth cen túara. conda tanic timthrecht o Christ. co mhuí forsind altóir .i. lethbargen chruithnechta cech fir ₇ ordu éisc.

‘Maith tra finnad cách úaind a mod dond fir ardonbiatha’.

‘Gébatsa chetus’, or fer díb, ‘na tri cóicdu cech dia la celebrad mo thráth ₇ la aiffren cech dia’.

‘Gebaitsa dano’, or araile, ‘tri cóictu ernaigthe la celebrad mo thráth ₇ la aiffrend cech dia’.

‘Gebait dano’, or in tres fer, ‘tri coictu ymnum dicat cech dia la celebrad mo tráth ₇ la offrend cech dia’. Dognither ón tra, co ré fata. Marb iarum in tres fer. Ro gabad a écnairc ₇ ro hadnacht.

‘Maith tra na tesbad in t-ord assind eclais. Rannam etraind ord ar cocéli’ .i. fer na tri coicat is hé atbath and ar tús. Rannait eturru iarum mod in tres fir. Nirbo chian tra iar sin corbu marb araile. Adnaichtherside dano .i. fer na tri coicat aurnaigthe. Trummute lassin n-oenfer di suidiu. Ba saethar mór immurgu dósom na tri .l. salm & na tri .l. urnaigthe & na tri .l. ymnum dicat. lasna tri offrennaib cach dia ₇ la celebrad na tráth.

‘Fir,’ or seseom ‘moo serc na desse út la Tigerna indúsa. Rosuc cucai. fomrácaibse. Dogentar troscud frisseom ón or nach ferr a n-airli. ud andúsa’.

Donic in t-angel. ‘Is bairnech do Thigerna fritso’, or in t-angel, ‘do thros-cud indligthech fair ar ní bá cen airchisecht úad’.

‘Ced laisseom didiu cen mo brithse la muntir?’

‘Is tu dorroega,’ or in t-angel ‘.i. Ro randsaid for n-urddu. In fer immurgu dorroega na tri cóicait is duthain. ₇ nime. nusmenicedar is aire fosroití i to-saig. Fer na trí cóicat ernaigthe. Ní thimdibend saegul. ni thabair saegul. Aní dorroegaiseo .i. ymnum dicat. sirsægul doberside ₇ flaithe nime.’

‘Bendacht forsín Tigerna o tucad. am buidechsa de’.

Buí didiu ina indse co háis ₇ chríne conid tarraid Brenaind forsind fairgge conid eside rod mbeir ₇ dorat commain ₇ sacarbaic dó co ndecheid dochum nime. Conid tor angel fil uastib do grés ₇ a n-inis. ₇ conid hé Brenaind adfét in scel sin.

Three junior clerics of the men of Ireland went on their pilgrimage. It was undertaken fervently and heartily then. Only three loaves were taken to sea as sustenance.

‘I will take the kitten’, said one of them.

When they reached, then, the open sea: ‘In the name of Christ, then, let us cast our oars away from us into the sea and let us throw ourselves on the mercy of our Lord’. That was done. It was not long after that with the help of Christ that they happened upon an island. The island was beautiful; plentiful water and firewood in it.

‘Let us build a church for ourselves in the middle of the island’. That is done.

Their kitten goes off. It catches salmon⁷⁷ for them, up to three salmon for each of them each canonical hour.

⁷⁷ Literally: ‘salmon of true fish’, a common phrase used to describe salmon.

‘Our pilgrimage is not a pilgrimage any more! We have brought our sustenance with us, i.e. our kitten to supply us with food! We will not consume the produce of the cat’.

They were then six canonical hours without food, until there came to them a ministration from Christ so that there was upon the altar a half-loaf of wheat-bread and a fish finger for each man.⁷⁸

‘Well, then, let each of us discover his work for the man who supplies us with food.’

‘I will recite first,’ said one of them, ‘the three fifties [i.e. the psalms] every day along with celebrating my canonical hours and with Mass every day.’

‘I will recite, moreover’, said the second, ‘three fifties of prayers, along with celebrating my canonical hours and with Mass every day’.

‘I will recite, moreover’, said the third man, ‘three fifties of *Hymnum Dicats* every day along with celebrating my canonical hours and with Mass every day’. That is done then, for a long time. One of the three men died then. His requiem was recited and he was buried.

‘Well, then, let not the arrangement in the church be lacking anything. Let us divide between us the arrangement of our companion’, i.e. the man of the three fifties [psalms], it is he who died there first. They divide between them, then, the work of the third man. It was not long after that until another one of them died. He too is buried, i.e. the man of the three fifties of prayers. The one man found it all the heavier as a result. The three fifties of psalms and the three fifties of prayers and the three fifties of *Hymnum Dicats* with the three Masses every day and with celebrating the canonical hours were a great burden, moreover, for him.

‘In truth’, said he, ‘the Lord has greater love for that pair yonder than for me. He has taken them unto himself. He has left me behind. Fasting will be undertaken against him then for their behaviour is not better than mine.’

An angel comes to him. ‘Your Lord is angry with you’, said the angel, ‘because of unlawful fasting against him, for you were not without mercy from him’.

‘Why then did he not take me with his household?’

‘It is you who chose’, said the angel, ‘i.e. you divided your arrangements. The man, moreover, who chose the three fifties is short-lived and destined to go to heaven.⁷⁹ [...] This is why he was [chosen] first.⁸⁰ The man of the three fifties of prayers: it does not shorten life, it does not confer [i.e. lengthen] life. The thing which you chose, i.e. the *Hymnum Dicat*, it is long life which it confers and the kingdom of heaven.

‘A blessing on the Lord by whom it was given. I am grateful to him’.

⁷⁸ Literally: ‘a thumb of fish’.

⁷⁹ Literally: ‘of heaven’.

⁸⁰ This passage is unclear. There seems to be something missing after *nusmenicedar* (which is itself omitted in the Book of Lismore version of this text). The *fosroiti* is also problematic, so I have used the reading from Lismore to translate this sentence.

He was then on his island until old and decrepit, until Brendan came upon him on the sea so that he [i.e. Brendan] took him and gave him communion and the sacrament, so that he went to heaven. And it is a host of angels that is always above them and their island, and it is Brendan who narrates that story.⁸¹

In this case, we can see that the recitation of the psalms is regarded as such a basic requirement of religious life that it – in the view of this author – does not even extend one’s natural life, unlike the *Hymnam dicat*. Here we see the same combination of the humorous, the pedagogical and the reflection of the deep importance of the psalms to everyday life for students, clerics and those in monastic communities. As with the narrative of ‘St Mo Laisse and his Sister’, this brief story intersects with early Irish literary culture in sophisticated and intertextual ways, in this case with the appearance of Brendan, thus presupposing a knowledge of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* on the part of the reader (see Chapter 1 for discussion of Brendan’s sea voyage being cast in the light of Moses’ journey through the desert).

It would require a book-length study to elucidate all the ways that the psalms influence and shape medieval Irish literary culture. Much remains to be said about the influence of the psalms on poetic diction, for example, and on the art of poetry itself. Kim McCone noted many of the ‘broadly psalmodic traits’ in the rhetorical techniques of medieval Irish poetry (such as the use of chiasm, antithesis and parallelism).⁸² As he noted, medieval Irish commentators observed the way that *dúnad*, ending a poem with the word or phrase with which it begins, imitated the so-called ‘envelope structure’ of Hebrew poetry.⁸³ Just a couple of examples of poetry that seems to be infused with the language and register of the psalms will have to suffice here, one in Latin and another in Irish. One of the most famous, and earliest, examples of poetry from an Irish author is the *Altus Prosator*, attributed to St Columba. It is a long Latin poem, deeply indebted to biblical narrative and learning, but we might also note its abecedarian style – with each stanza beginning with successive letters of the Latin alphabet – which recalls the abecedarian style of the *Beati* in its original Hebrew. Indeed, the *Liber Hymnorum*, in which the poem is preserved, notes in the preface to the poem that its style is *more Hebraeorum*, ‘in the style of the Hebrews’.⁸⁴ There are sections of the poem that read as strongly psalm-like:

Quis ad conductum Domini montem ascendit Sinai?
 quis audivit tonitrua ultra modum sonantia
 quis clangorem perstreperere inornitatis buccinae?

⁸¹ The text is slightly adapted from the diplomatic edition: Best, *et al.*, ed., *The Book of Leinster*, V, 1233–4. I have expanded *didiu* and *immurgu*, and made very minor changes in word division and transcription (e.g. *conda rraile* for the diplomatic edition’s *co ndarraile*). I have added punctuation to reflect my reading of the text; the translation is my own.

⁸² McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 46.

⁸³ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 41

⁸⁴ Thomas O. Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, ed. and trans., *Iona: the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 40–1.

quis quoque vidit fulgura in gyro coruscantia
 quis lampades et iacula saxaque collidentia
 praeter Israhelitici Moysen iudicem populi?

Who has climbed Sinai, the appointed mountain of the Lord?
 Who has heard the immeasurable thunders sounding?
 Who has heard the clamour of the mighty war-trumpet echoing?
 Who has seen the lightning flashing all around?
 Who has seen the flashes and thunderbolts and crashing rocks,
 except Moses, the judge of the people of Israel?⁸⁵

Similarly, there is an intangible psalm-like quality to the vernacular ‘Litany of Confession’, which speaks of sins as though they were enemies in a way that recalls the exegesis of *Aislinge Augustín áin*:

A rim, a Ríg, ni cumaing,
 Airc me impo, a Dé.
 Bris, buail, baig iat;
 Crech, crom, crin iat;
 Digaib, dingaid, díleg iat;
 Eirg, esreig, esbadaig iat;
 Féch, faisc, fasaig iat;
 Gáel, gair, gortaig iat;
 Leirc, loisc, letair iat;
 Marb, meith, is mill iat;
 Pian, pairt, púr iat;
 Reib, ruaig, reidig iat;
 Scar, scail, scoilt iat;
 Troeth, traig, toirn iat.

O King, they cannot be numbered;
 Despoil me of them, O God;
 Break, smite, and war against them;
 Ravage, bend, and wither them;
 Take away, repel, destroy them;
 Arise, scatter, defeat them;
 See, repress, waste them;
 Destroy, summon, starve them;
 Prostrate, burn, mangle them;
 Kill, slay, and ruin them;
 Torture, divide, and purify them;
 Tear, expel, and raze them;
 Remove, scatter, and cleave them;
 Subdue, exhaust, and lay them low.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Clancy and Márkus, ed. and trans., *Iona*, pp. 50–1.

⁸⁶ Plummer, ed. and trans., *Irish Litanies*, pp. 8–9.

It is inevitable that those who read, recited and meditated on the psalms every day would find the language, timbre and mentality of those ‘hymns of praise’ emanating from their own compositions. There is much work still to be done in exploring the full effect of the psalms on literary and intellectual life in medieval Ireland.

‘The bed wherein I lie’

One of the most exquisite poems from the Middle Irish period, *A Chrínóc*, appears on the surface to be a love poem to a woman but, as James Carney argued, the ‘woman’ is an allegorical representation of a Psalter. Carney suggested that the poem was composed by Máel Ísu Úa Brolcháin (d. 1086), but there is no evidence to support this identification and, as we have already seen, there are other anonymous poems of the same period that take an allegorical approach to the psalms: we have no reason to connect them with any particular known poets.⁸⁷ The author of *A Chrínóc* drops a number of clues as to the true identity of his beloved throughout the poem, beginning with the description of her ‘melody’ or ‘music’ as being ‘measured, harmonious’ (*cubaid do cheól*), followed by a reference to his first encounter with her when he was a seven-year-old boy, which, as we have already observed, was when children would begin their study of the psalms. His lover is faultless and full of wise counsel, but old in body:

Fo deóid dom ruachtais do-rís
íar cúartaib scís, gleó co ngaeis;
do-dechaid temel tart gnúis,
cen drúis is dered dot aeis.

And now you come, your final pilgrimage,
wearied with toil and travel, grimed with dust,
wise still but body not immaculate:
time it is that ravished you, not lust.⁸⁸

The poet states that his lover is never silent, but ‘brings the word of God/to all who in the present world abide’, echoing the characterisation elsewhere of the psalms as a distillation of Christian doctrine, and he ends by hoping that God will have mercy on all who abide by his word, returning them to beauty and glory after they have left their earthly bodies:

Do-rata Día dellraid dúin
a ré frit a menmain mín
rop rolainn frinn gnúis Ríg réil

⁸⁷ James Carney, ‘A Chrínóc, cubaid do cheól’, *Éigse* 4 (1943/4), 280–3; repr. in his *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (Berkeley, 1967).

⁸⁸ Carney, ed. and trans., *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, pp. 76–7. Carney’s text and translation are sufficient to illustrate my point, but there are problems in the first couplet of the stanza cited here. These have been discussed by Liam Breatnach, ‘St Patrick’s Oath’, in *Language and Power in the Celtic World: Papers from the Seventh Australian Conference of Celtic Studies*, ed. Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O’Neill (Sydney, 2011), pp. 13–35.

íar n-ar léimm ór colainn chrín.

May the King give us beauty back again
 who ever did his will with quiet mind,
 may he look on us with eagerness and love,
 our old and perished bodies left behind.⁸⁹

The poet reminds us once again of the perceived salvific power of the psalms and how a grounding in biblical exegesis could facilitate the composition of new works of literature in the allegorical mode. The flowering of allegorical interpretations of the erotic Song of Songs in western European exegesis from the twelfth century would ensure that the image of a Psalter (or indeed the Church) as a lover would resonate powerfully for centuries to come.

The psalms lay at the heart of medieval Irish intellectual culture. With roots in the practices of reading, daily recitation and memorisation, and branches consisting of detailed commentary and exegesis, their influence spread like an unruly vine until they bore fruit in very different types of literature, from functional and didactic texts to poetry and narrative prose. We have examined some of the pedagogical, exegetical and literary uses to which the psalms could be put in early medieval Ireland and the ways in which these connected to an overarching conception of salvation history. However, we should not lose sight of the most common and familiar way in which medieval Irish authors (and audiences) would have been exposed to the psalms, and that was in their daily recitation as part of the Divine Office. There was no uniformity of practice in early medieval Ireland, but the average monk would probably have recited three psalms at each of the services at prime, terce, sext, nones and vespers, for a total of 15 psalms per day, every day.⁹⁰ Those who self-identified as being amongst the spiritual élite, such as the *céli Dé*, were required to recite the entire psalter every day (something that could take in the region of five hours, depending on speed of recitation). Even those who did not pursue a career within the Church would have had acquired an in-depth knowledge of the psalms in childhood. It is almost impossible to overestimate the extent to which the psalms would have been heard, read and known by the educated élite in early medieval Ireland.

‘The Monastery of Tallaght’ states that one school of thought in medieval Ireland advocated reciting the psalms by reading from a physical Psalter rather than simply reciting them from memory. The reason given for the insistence on the written word was its capacity to act as a tool for concentration:

... atat tri foglaide oc mo fogail mo suil 7 mo tengæ 7 mo menme dosnaircelæ hule int saltair.

There are three adversaries busy attacking me, my eye, my tongue, and my thoughts: the psalter restrains them all.

⁸⁹ Carney, ed. and trans., *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, pp. 78–9.

⁹⁰ McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 363.

However, Máel Ruain clearly differed in his view, since the author records his opinion as being that it makes no difference to concentration levels whether or not the person reciting the psalms has the physical object of the Psalter in their hands:

... ni lugæ mbis ind menme hisin cheill dia gabail ind tsailm de memur indas cid fri saltair.

The thought is no less occupied with the meaning when one is reciting the psalm by rote than it is when he is reading it with the psalter.⁹¹

This reminds us that the majority of medieval Irish engagement with the psalms is now irretrievably lost to us: spoken words; minds struggling to tame their stray thoughts as they recited psalm after psalm, day after day; introspection as each individual mulled over each psalm's meaning; and probably a good few doubts about their alleged salvific efficacy. All that remains is the material evidence of the Psalters themselves and the literary evidence of the inspiration that the psalms provided for medieval Irish authors. As the Hiberno-Latin text known as the 'Reference Bible', or *das Bibelwerk*, states, channelling Cassiodorus, the psalms were a 'truly glittering book, radiant speech, remedy of the wounded heart, honeycomb of the interior man, the image of things spiritual, language of virtue; it bows down the proud and raises up the lowly'.⁹² In early medieval Ireland, the psalms had the power to curse enemies, rescue the damned from hell, redeem the penitent and ensure the salvation of the righteous. These, perhaps more than any others, were the words of God's chosen people, and when read and interpreted correctly, they could reveal the mysteries of the entire Christian faith.

⁹¹ Gwynn and Purton, ed. and trans., 'The Monastery of Tallaght', §39.

⁹² Cited in McNamara, *The Psalms*, p. 361.

4 The green-grassed land of the Assyrians

Constructing the history of Babylon

Babylon held a central place in the scheme of salvation history. In the Middle Ages, the concept of ‘Babylon’ denoted not only the ancient city itself, but also encompassed a range of interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements. As defined by Andrew Scheil, ‘the Matter of Babylon tradition comprises places (the Tower of Babel, the plain of Shinar, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Babylon, and Ninevah); peoples, usually blurred together indiscriminately (Chaldeans, Babylonians, Assyrians); characters (Nimrod, Ninus, Semiramis, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, the Whore of Babylon); events (the foundation of empires and the conquest of cities; the subjugation, dispersion, and emancipation of nations)’.¹ The Matter of Babylon was of interest to medieval Irish writers as much as to their contemporaries elsewhere in western Europe, and this chapter will examine just a few of the many sources from medieval Ireland that drew, and sometimes expanded creatively, upon this material in order to demonstrate the range and sophistication of early Irish imaginings of the Babylonian world. Sources of knowledge about Babylonian history that were available to medieval Irish writers included the bible; classical and late antique historians such as Josephus, Eusebius and Orosius; and Patristic authorities, such as Augustine. As with many of the sources pertaining to the history of the Jewish people, medieval Irish ‘knowledge’ about Babylon would not now be considered historically accurate; this knowledge was, however, regarded by medieval readers not only as historically accurate, but as divinely ordained and as evidence of God’s plan for mankind. We should therefore begin with a consideration of the range of meanings that Babylon held for authors and their audiences in medieval Ireland.

The city and the city

We have already seen in Chapter 1 how medieval Irish engagement with the city of Jerusalem was predominantly an imaginative one; supplemented by written authorities and oral testimonies, but fundamentally shaped by the sheer physical

¹ Andrew P. Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes: A Study of Allusion and Myth* (Toronto, 2016), p. 4. In all quotations from English translations that follow, I have silently standardised spellings of people and places (Nebuchadnezzar, Shinar, etc.) for the sake of consistency.

distance between the two locations. This was even more the case in regards to Babylon because, not only was it yet more distant from Ireland, but it had effectively been abandoned since the third century BCE and – far from its position as one of the most populous cities in the world until the sixth century BCE – by the time our medieval Irish sources were being written, it lay in ruins. Babylon embodied the transience of secular power: the once-mighty city had been brought low, and the ravages of time ensured that it was by necessity a city of the imagination. In the medieval Christian imagination, however, the city of Babylon was conceptualised not only in reference to itself, it was simultaneously and metaphorically two other theologically-charged spaces, namely, both a type of Rome and the anti-Jerusalem. As the centre of a fallen empire, it was a constant reminder of the transient nature of worldly power, a power that was embodied by Rome in the medieval Latin West. As the archetypal ‘earthly city’, it was the antithesis of the ‘heavenly city’, represented on earth by Jerusalem. As Scheil has observed, ‘in the Western tradition, particularly in the Middle Ages, it is difficult to talk about Babylon without considering its bright opposite, Jerusalem’.² In Chapter 1, we briefly noted the early twelfth-century sermon by Dermatus Hibernensis, in which he urged his audience to depart from Babylon and embark on a journey to Jerusalem. However, he explicitly states that by ‘Babylon’ he means the world and by ‘Jerusalem’ he means the heavenly kingdom.³ Dermatus’s spiritual journey from Babylon to Jerusalem echoes the mystical interpretation of the *Beati*, which we encountered in the Rawlinson B 502 version of the Irish *SAM* in Chapter 3. His sermon is a good example of the way that physical journeys could be subordinated to exegetical ones. The cultural resonances of Babylon, then, encompassed not-Jerusalem and also prefiguration-of-Rome. A medieval author, or reader, could hold these multiple political and spiritual connotations in their mind at once, even as they might emphasise one understanding of Babylon over another at any given moment.

Much thinking about Babylon, both as physical and imaginative space, originated in biblical exegesis. As we saw in Chapter 3, many of the psalms were interpreted as referring to the Babylonian Captivity (an approach supported by the fact that the Captivity is mentioned explicitly in some psalms, such as Psalm 137), and thus Babylon’s place in the narrative of Jewish history was also an important and recurrent point of reference in psalm exegesis. But Babylon was also a feature of other biblical books: for example, the Book of Lamentations is a poetic response to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonian soldiers in 587/6 BCE, an act that marked the beginning of the Captivity. The king responsible for this destruction was Nebuchadnezzar II, who is a central character in the Book of Daniel. His reign is also described in 2 Kings and the Book of Jeremiah. In Isaiah, Cyrus the Great’s capture of Babylon and his role in liberating the Jewish people

² Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 9.

³ Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, CLV, 485–90. Sustained study of Dermatus’s sermon is a *desideratum*. It would benefit from a new edition and translation, as well as a close comparison with the material on Babylon and Jerusalem in the Irish *SAM*.

from their Captivity is prophesied, and there Cyrus is called ‘anointed one’, *messiah*, the only gentile to be so called in the bible. In all these cases, the city of Babylon and its rulers appear in biblical narrative, or provide the inspiration for biblical poetry, only insofar as they shape the course of Jewish history. The interest in Babylon is not for its own sake but for Babylon’s role in salvation history.

In late antique and early medieval Europe, Babylon was ‘linked to a second fundamental urban symbol: the Tower of Babel’.⁴ The name of the city of Babylon was etymologised as meaning *confusio*, that is, as pertaining to the ‘confusion’ of languages at the collapse of the Tower. This is in itself a confusion, in the sense that ancient scholars had fundamentally conflated ‘Babel’ with ‘Babylon’ (the latter sometimes denoting the city itself and at other times referring to the kingdom in general),⁵ and this conflation was transmitted to medieval Ireland. Thus, the eleventh-century author of the *SAM* wrote:

Babilonia, id est confusio .i. commasc, iarsindí ro-cummasctha na bérlae isind luc sin.

Babilonia, i.e. ‘confusio’, i.e. confusion, because of the fact that it was in that spot that languages were confounded.⁶

In the *Leabhar Breac* version of *Sanas Cormaic* (‘Cormac’s Glossary’), we find an entry on the Irish place name Bablúan, which states:

Bablúan, .i. *nomen mulieris quasi Babilón id est confusio* .i. do chumasc in ænberla a Mig[h] Shennáir oc an tur a n-ílberlaib (that is, confusing the single language into the many languages at the Tower on the Plain of Shinar).⁷

We will return to this idea that Bablúan was ‘*quasi Babilón*’ because it was the name of a woman, but at the moment, it is this etymologising of Babylon as *confusio*, which is of significance: it demonstrates Irish knowledge and transmission of a standard Latin understanding of the name of the city and its association with the Tower of Babel.⁸

The importance of the narrative of the Tower of Babel and the subsequent dispersal of populations based on language has already been noted in the Introduction for its central role in medieval Irish conceptions of the history of the

⁴ Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 10. The foundational scholarly work on the medieval European reception of the Tower of Babel myth is Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 4 vols (Stuttgart, 1957–63).

⁵ Major, *Undoing Babel*.

⁶ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 76 (text), 117 (translation), §29.

⁷ Paul Russell, et al., *Early Irish Glossaries Database*, s.v. Bablúan, and note also the related entry in *Dúil Dromma Cetta*: <https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/search.php?sText=babluan> [last accessed 30 March 2020]; my translation.

⁸ Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 11.

Irish language. Fénius Farsaid is said, in *Auraicept na nÉces* and elsewhere, to have invented Irish ten years after the confusion of tongues at Babel, as a scholastic construction, created from parts of every other language that was created there. The idea of Babel had other resonances, both theological and linguistic: for some early medieval exegetes, most notably Bede, the Babel story was not simply about the dispersal of languages and the resulting creation of nations, but could also be understood allegorically in an ecclesial sense as a narrative about heretics destroying the unity of the Church through their pride and error.⁹ For Ælfric, another early English ecclesiast, the story of the Tower of Babel was also about error, but on another level for him, it was about the problem of idolatry.¹⁰ Ælfric, in common with many exegetes, also saw the narrative of Babel as a prefiguration to that of Pentecost, and this leads us to another way in which the Babel myth had implications at the intersection of theology and linguistic thought in the early Middle Ages. The narrative of Pentecost, as recounted in Acts 2:1–31, shows the apostles gathered together in the aftermath of Christ's ascension into heaven, being visited by the Holy Spirit:

et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto, et coeperunt loqui variis linguis, prout Spiritus Sanctus dabat eloqui illis. Erant autem in Jerusalem habitantes Judaei, viri religiosi ex omni natione, que sub caelo est. Facta autem hac voce, convenit multitudo, et mente confusa est, quoniam audiebat unusquisque lingua sua illos loquentes.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak with divers tongues, according as the Holy Spirit gave them to speak. Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. And when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded in mind, because every man heard them speak in his own tongue.

(Acts 2:4–6)

By understanding the confusion and dispersal of languages at the Tower of Babel as a prefiguration of this Pentecost narrative, exegetes viewed the Babel story (and its typological companion) as sanctioning the use of vernacular languages in preaching. As Major has observed, the story of Pentecost functioned as a 'consecration of linguistic diversity'.¹¹ Viewing Babel as a prefiguration of Pentecost and thus linking a narrative of idolatry and error to one of the beginning of the apostolic missions foreshadows the analysis in the next chapter of the relationship, articulated in numerous medieval Irish sources, between the darkness of idolatry and the Pentecostal light of Christian faith, the night of ignorance and the day of truth, the one quite literally foreshadowing the other.

⁹ Major, *Undoing Babel*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Major, *Undoing Babel*, p. 190.

¹¹ Major, *Undoing Babel*, p. 138.

Urban myths

Aside from exegesis, another key influence on medieval Irish conceptions of the Matter of Babylon was classical and late antique historiography. Babylon was one of the great cities of the ancient world and the subject of much historical writing. Scheil has noted how

... basic classical tropes of Babylon – the size of the city walls, the power and rich prosperity of the empire, the marvellous, almost decadent, opulence of the city – formed a composite image that was replicated again and again in the geographical and historical traditions of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, through a host of intermediary texts and authors ...¹²

Many early medieval Irish authors shared this interest in the city of Babylon as urban space. Several sources, which we will discuss in detail below, describe, and seem to revel in, the opulent material splendour of Babylon during its construction and its subsequent imperial heyday. It is unclear, however, the extent to which imaginative engagement in Babylon as urban space related to any real experience of urbanism on the ground in Ireland.

Undoubtedly, early Irish ecclesiastics understood the concept of a city, in theory, but before the Scandinavian settlements of the ninth century onwards, Ireland had no cities of its own. Indeed, there was ‘minimal urbanisation and minimal trend towards urbanisation’ prior to the establishment of, most notably, the international port and trading town of Dublin, as well as smaller urban centres such as Waterford, Limerick and Wexford.¹³ In the Old Irish period, *civitas* and its Irish equivalent, *cathair*, were primarily used to denote major multifunctional ecclesiastical centres, such as Armagh and Kildare, even though they were not urban. There has been much scholarly debate surrounding the concept of the ‘monastic town’, and some historians and archaeologists have argued that places like Clonmacnoise or Armagh already met some of the criteria for being designated ‘towns’ before the arrival of Scandinavian settlers: a concentrated population, the presence of specialist craftsmen and the agricultural surplus required to support them.¹⁴ More recently, however, it has been shown that the ecclesiastical centres themselves did not house a concentrated population; rather, the churches’ extensive lands were farmed by a lay tenant population living in dispersed, rather than nucleated, settlements, perhaps only coming to the ecclesiastical precinct itself

¹² Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 22.

¹³ Colmán Etchingham, *The Irish Monastic Town: Is This a Valid Concept?* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹⁴ The main proponent of the ‘monastic town’ theory is Charles Doherty: see, for example, ‘The Monastic Town in Ireland’ in *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe: Ireland, Wales, Denmark, Germany, Poland and Russia from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Howard Clarke and Annegret Simms (Oxford, 1985), pp. 35–63. There have been refinements of, and objections to, the theory from numerous scholars, including John Bradley, Mary Valante and Colmán Etchingham. For full review of scholarship and references, see Etchingham, *The Irish Monastic Town*.

on important feast days such as Easter.¹⁵ As such, what constituted the *civitas*, the city within the walls, was usually some combination of ecclesiastical buildings: a church (sometimes with episcopal status), male and sometimes female monastic communities, smaller chapels, a cemetery, individual monastic cells, a guest-house, a scriptorium and/or school and so on.¹⁶ Thus, prior to the establishment of urban centres by Norse-speaking immigrants, a ‘city’ in Ireland was understood in wholly sacred terms, as a profoundly holy place to which the lay population would only rarely be granted (controlled) access, and to the centre of which – the *sanctum sanctorum* – they would not be granted access at all. It is in this context that we should understand Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s theory that the major Irish ecclesiastical centres were modelled on the Old Testament Levitical cities of refuge and Ó Carragáin’s argument that the architecture and arrangement of those sites was consciously echoing that of the sacred spaces of Jerusalem and Rome.¹⁷

In the Old Irish period, we witness – unsurprisingly – a considerable interest in Jerusalem and Rome on the part of theologians, hagiographers and poets. Interest in Babylon was primarily in its role as the *locus* of the Captivity of the Jewish people and the exegetical implications of that period of salvation history, and secondarily, in the Tower of Babel myth and its perceived role in the creation of the Irish language. However, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, we can observe the emergence and growth of an interest in the city of Babylon as city. This is not simply an interest in Babylon’s place in the scheme of salvation history – although that is one facet of the phenomenon – but also a preoccupation with the very fabric of urbanism: the construction of Babylon, its size and dimensions, its architecture and furnishings, the materials with which the city was built, the craftsmen who built it and the people who inhabited it, drawing in large part on classical and late antique authorities but also expanding on those sources in creative ways. I suggest that this may be linked to the growth of urban centres in Ireland at that time, and particularly of Dublin, an international port city with its diverse population, its markets and its ever-increasing number of streets, houses and churches.

The tenth-century poet and scholar, Eochaid Úa Flainn (d. 1004), head of the church at Clonfeacle, near Dungannon in modern-day Co. Tyrone, composed a poem entitled *Éitset Áes Ecna Aibind*, in which he characterised the prehistoric arrival of the Gaelic-speaking peoples – the Goídil – in Ireland as a civilising phenomenon. As Peter Smith has argued, Eochaid characterised the pre-Gaelic population of Ireland as ‘innately chaotic’ and regarded Gaelic culture as bringing political, moral and technological order to the island.¹⁸ The poem traces the divi-

¹⁵ Etchingham, *The Irish Monastic Town*.

¹⁶ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*.

¹⁷ See Chapter 1 above, pp. 2 and 9, for discussion and references.

¹⁸ Peter Smith, ‘Eochaid úa Flainn’s *Éitset áes ecna aibind* and Medieval Irish Poetics’, in *Adapting Texts and Styles in a Celtic Context: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Processes of Literary Transfer in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Erich Poppe*, ed. Axel Harlos and Neele Harlos (Münster, 2016), pp. 21–52, at p. 36.

sion of the landscape into territorial units; the preparation of land for cultivation; the construction of defensive fortresses and royal villas; and the introduction of an infrastructure of causeways and roads, and of water-wells and sea-walls.¹⁹ The result is a technologically sophisticated, economically productive and militarily capable island, but the pinnacle of Gaelic achievement – according to Eochaid – is its kingship, a centralised kingship, based at Tara, which is, in Peter Smith’s words, ‘a symbol of both enlightenment and civic progress’.²⁰ It is a kingship bound up with, and reinforced by, legal authority, which is a key source of sovereignty. The political realities of Irish high-kingship around the year 1000 must have had an impact on the ideological ambitions of Eochaid’s poem. The emphasis on the centralised kingship of Tara, for example, must take into account the threat to Uí Néill hegemony posed by the newly emergent Munster kingship of Brian Boru (d. 1014). It is also hard, given the circumstances of composition, not to see the assertions of superiority on the part of the wave of Gaelic immigrants as implicitly measuring Gaelic culture against the more newly-arrived Scandinavian immigrants: Eochaid seems to need to emphasise that the intellectual, economic and political foundations of Ireland were laid by Gaels and not by the most recent wave of incomers. The interest in developments in transport infrastructure in a tenth-century poem may also be connected to the establishment of – and overland links between – Ireland’s new urban centres.

A year after Eochaid’s death, we can see a new element in the discourse of sovereignty in Ireland, as Máel Suthain, confessor to Brian Boru, wrote in the Book of Armagh in 1005 that Brian was *imperator Scottorum*, ‘emperor of the Irish’.²¹ As has been noted by many previous scholars, the title given to Brian was probably modelled on that of Otto III, *imperator Romanorum*, Holy Roman Emperor, and perhaps also influenced, as Seán Duffy has suggested, by the ‘quasi-imperial tendencies’ of Edgar, king of the English until 975.²² Whatever the source or sources of Brian’s imperial title, we can take it as a point of departure for a new intellectual and literary engagement with empire, which would develop over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This shift towards thinking about empire was inextricably bound up with new historiographical endeavours, which began in late tenth-century Ireland and continued throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. One of these was the translation and adaptation of classical literature into Middle Irish, a phenomenon that has been the subject of extensive illuminating scholarly discourse over the past decade.²³ Engagement in the Middle Irish period with the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires and their rule over

¹⁹ Smith, ‘Eochaid úa Flainn’, p. 25

²⁰ Smith, ‘Eochaid úa Flainn’, p. 25.

²¹ Book of Armagh, f. 16v.

²² Seán Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2013), p. 130.

²³ Key studies include Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2011); and the essays in Ralph O’Connor, ed., *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative* (Woodbridge, 2014).

the city of Babylon cannot be separated from the wider trend of interest in world empires, which included most abundantly those of the Greeks and Romans.

It is necessary to examine in detail some sources that exemplify these intersecting interests in cities, infrastructure, trade, urban architecture and empire. We have already encountered the eleventh-century Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* (*SAM*) in previous chapters. It was clearly a hugely significant text, not least because many of our extant medieval Irish vernacular manuscripts contain a copy of it, usually at the beginning of the manuscript.²⁴ The Irish *SAM* purports to be a text whose subject matter is a vast span of human experience:

Do ardgábálaib in domuin ⁊ do chroébaib coibniusa in domain ⁊ dia hilchenélaib ⁊ do numir a mbérla ⁊ do aíssib a n-airech ⁊ dia n-anmannaib ⁊ do aéssaib in domuin ⁊ do numir cachá áesse.

Concerning the chief branches of the world and the conquests of the world, concerning its many peoples and the number of their languages, concerning the ages [i.e. reigns] of their princes and their names, concerning also the Ages of the World and the duration of each Age.²⁵

However, on closer inspection, the interests of the author are more selective than that and, although he begins with the sort of encyclopaedic approach that his opening suggests, as his narrative progresses, it is inexorably drawn towards Babylonian history. This is particularly the case in the Rawlinson B 502 version, which contains considerable additional material on Babylon and related matters not found in other manuscript witnesses. The Irish *SAM* follows a biblical narrative outline, tracing the lives of Adam, Noah, Abraham and so on, up to the beginning of the so-called ‘Fourth Age’ of the world. However, the focus of the author’s attention is less on the narrative of salvation history *per se* and more on the dispersal of the seed of Adam, and particularly the dividing up of the territories of the world among the sons of Noah: the descendants of Shem in Asia, the descendants of Cham in Africa and the descendants of Japheth in Europe. He begins the Fourth Age with some brief comments on David’s reign, but this is a far cry from the Davidic focus of *SnR*, which we noted at the end of Chapter 2. Rather, he moves swiftly to the beginnings of the Macedonian empire and thence to the foundation of the city of Rome. He then returns to the fate of the Israelites, but this is merely a lead-up to Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of the temple and the bringing of the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon. The author ends his discussion of the Fourth Age by discussing the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and begins the Fifth Age with the destruction of Babylon by Cyrus

²⁴ *Lebor na hUidre*; Rawlinson B 502; *The Book of Ballymote*. Other manuscripts (*The Book of Leinster*, *the Book of Uí Mhaine*, *the Book of Lecan*) contain related material on the ages of the world and the dispersal of the sons of Noah, such as *LGÉ*, *the Lebor Bretnach* and genealogical texts.

²⁵ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 64 (text), 109 (translation), §1.

the Great. He states that it is a wonder that Cyrus was able to destroy Babylon ‘because of its strength and because of the size of its construction’, which he elucidates in detail.

Is amlaid seo do-rónad múr na Babilóine .i. do aél berbthi 7 do bitumain, iarna cummasc, ro-chomdlúthad in múr. Cethrochair cutrumslesta a sudigud. Coíca cubat tigi a mmúir. Dá chét cubat a arde. Cccclxxx. stadi <no sesca míli> inna tacmng. Cét ndorus n-umaide furri.

Is ed at-ber[ar] i llebraib *antiquitatum*,²⁶ fiche cetharriad for héraimm do thuidecht etir dá sreith do thigib for mulluch a mmúir, ar thiget. Sruth nEo-frait dara lár .i. fo stuagdórsib cloch.

Conid amlaid tánic Cir 7 rámann leis i lláim cech oénfir, coro-fodlaiset in sruth i minsruthu cen fis do lucht na cathrach. Co tánic sluaig Cir iar conair int srotha co rabatar ar lár na cathrach cen forclosin do lucht na cathrach. Conid amlaid-sin ro-toglad Babilóin.

The wall of Babylon was constructed thus, i.e. the wall was compact with baked lime and bitumen in the form of a square with symmetrical walls. Its wall was fifty cubits thick, two hundred cubits high, and four hundred and eighty stadia (or sixty miles) in its circumference. There were a hundred bronze doors set into it.

It says in the Book of Antiquities that such was the thickness of its wall that twenty four-wheeled chariots could course between the rows of houses on the top of its wall. The river Euphrates passed through it under stone archways.

Cyrus, therefore, came, each man having a spade in his hand so that they divided the river into little streams without the inhabitants knowing. So Cyrus’s host came by way of the river-course until they were in the centre of the city, and thus was Babylon destroyed.²⁷

There follows a long excursus on Babylonian history: indeed, the history of Babylon is the subject of the greatest proportion of the total text, and even more so in the twelfth-century Rawlinson B 502 version of the text, which at this point adds a mystical interpretation of the relationship between Babylon and Jerusalem.²⁸ Part of this additional material includes a twenty-two stanza poem on Babylon, which repeats in verse much of the architectural information about the city’s size and construction and the circumstances of Cyrus’s destruction of the city.²⁹ The Book of Ballymote version of the Irish *SAM* supplies different additional material on Cyrus not found in other manuscript witnesses (see below pp. 146–7).

The poem on Babylon in the Rawlinson B 502 version of the Irish *SAM* begins by stating that the city was built by Ninus son of Belus and that it was ‘a city

²⁶ A reference to Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

²⁷ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 90 (text), 127 (translation), §57.

²⁸ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 93–4 (text), 129–30 (translation), §§60–1.

²⁹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 90–3 (text), 127–9 (translation), §58.

unparalleled and vast' (*cathir dírecra dímór*). The poet describes a city with a circumference of sixty miles, surrounded by walls that were fifty cubits wide and two hundred cubits in height. Whatever the poet's immediate sources, it is clear that he is ultimately indebted to Orosius:

... haec campi planitie undique conspicua, natura loci laetissima, castrorum facie moenibus paribus per quadrum disposita. murorum eius uix credibilis relatu firmitas et magnitudo, id est latitudine cubitorum quinquaginta, altitudine quater tanta. ceterum ambitus eius quadringentis octoginta stadiis circumuenitur. murus coctili latere atque interfuso bitumine compactus, fossa extrinsecus late patens uice amnis circumfluit. a fronte murorum centum portae aerae. ipsa autem latitudo in consummatione pinnarum utroque latere habitaculis defensorum aequè dispositis, media intercapedine sui citas quadrigas capit....

[Babylon] lay, conspicuous from all sides, on a flat plain. Its land was naturally very fertile, and, like a fort, it was square in shape and walled on each side. When they are described, the solidity and size of these walls hardly sounds credible, for they were 50 cubits thick and four times as high again. Its circumference was 480 stades. This enceinte was made of baked bricks joined together with bitumen. Outside it ran a broad ditch like a river. 100 bronze gates were built into the walls. The thickness of the walls accommodated equally spaced turrets for defenders on either side of the wall at the top of the rampart and in the central space there was room for swift four-horse chariots to pass.³⁰

If we compare Orosius's account with the opening six stanzas of the Irish poem (which is marked as a discrete unit within the poem through the use of *dínad*), we can see how the poet has incorporated and embellished his raw material:

Babilóin, ro-cloş hí céin,
dind ro-chumtaig Nín mac Béil
ar sírecla slait na slóg,
cathir dírecra dímór.

Cethrochair in chathir chain,
dona flathib fót n-ortain;
suairc solus, sét co nglaine,
co cét ndorus n-umaide.

Sesca mórmíli imma-cuaird,
rob hé a tomus, nírbu duairc,
do chémendaib uird ellaig,
iar rémendaib ro-thennaib.

³⁰ C. Zangemeister, ed., *Paulus Orosius: Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*, 2.6.8–10, available online at <http://www.attalus.org/latin/orosius.html> [last accessed 30 March 2020]; A. T. Fear, trans., *Orosius: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Liverpool, 2010).

Coíca cubat tigi a mmúir,
 annsa a thogail do nach dúil;
 dá cét cubat, cumul nglé,
 suas i n-aër i n-hairdde.

Fichi cetharriad, coém dúib,
 talldais for mulluch a mmúir;
 gním cen nach cleith cumuing lib –
 etir dá sreith do thigib.

Ní dernad riam tiar ná tair
 etir selbaib síl Ádaim,
 focclaim, ar is cangen chóir,
 dún dangen mar Babilóin.

Babylon, it has been heard far away was the citadel that Ninus son of Belus built because of constant dread of the plundering hosts; a city unparalleled and vast.

The fair city was square in shape, a sacred sod to the chiefs. It was pleasant and bright, a sparking jewel, with a hundred doors of bronze.

It was a full sixty miles in circumference, that was its measurement, it was not grim; in close sequence of paces and in very strong courses.

Its wall was fifty cubits in girth – it were very difficult for any mortal to destroy it! It was two hundred cubits in height, a clear construction, reaching up to the sky.

Twenty four-horsed chariots, it is fine for you, used to fit on the summit of its walls between two rows of houses; it is a feat without narrow concealment for you.

There was never built, in the east or the west, among all the dwelling-places of the descendants of Adam a stronghold to compare with Babylon; I assert this for it is a perfect and fitting claim.³¹

The key details are present – the square shape of the city, its one hundred bronze gates, the thickness of its walls and the room along the tops of the walls for four-horse chariots to pass each other – alongside some attractive poetic embellishment. The poet continues by telling us that the river Euphrates flowed through the centre of the city, and that Cyrus the Great conquered the city and thereby released the Jewish people from their captivity. In stanza 17, the poet moves to Cyrus's attainment of imperial status among the Achaemenids and his death at the hands of the queen of Scythia (for further discussion of Cyrus, see below, pp. 144–7). In stanza 19, he then switches to an Orosian account of *translatio imperii*: the poem concludes with an invocation of the four world empires – the Assyrians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and the Romans – and a final stanza that connects Babylon with the 'famous' tower of Nimrod on the plain of Shinar.

³¹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 90–1 (text), 127–8 (translation), §58.

Flathius na nAsarda n-án
co tánic Cir, mó cech mál;
flathius Med is Pers, ba glicc,
conas-tánic mac Pilipp.

Flathius na nGréc, gríbda a ngáir,
conas-táncatar Rómáin;
Rómáin, ráid hi rrígi iar sain
cotici déad in domuin.

Inad in Tuir Nemruaid náir:
ar lár in Maige Sennáir
sluind, im sruth nEofrait co nglóir
ro-cumtacht in Babilóin.

The empire of the famed Assyrians
until Cyrus came, greater than any prince;
the empire of the Medes and Persians, it was skilled,
until there came to them the son of Philip [i.e. Alexander]

The empire of the Greeks, fierce was their battle-cry,
until there came to them the Romans.
The Romans were then in power,
up to the end of the world.

The location of the famous tower of Nimrod
is on the plain of Shinar – name it!
Around the river Euphrates with glory
Babylon was constructed.³²

The interest in the history of Babylon – as urban space and imperial centre – that we witness in the Irish *SAM* is evidenced in other Middle Irish sources. There is a twelfth-century poem that begins *Babilón Baile Búadach* ('Babylon, Victorious City'), preserved in the Book of Uí Mhaine, that also speaks of the construction of Babylon. It opens with an explanation of how the city of Babylon got its name, creating a narrative in which the city is named after the daughter of its first king, on which see the discussion below (pp. 140–2). After this *dindsenchas*, which is marked off by the use of *dúnad*, we get an extensive description of the construction of Babylon, which is noteworthy for its own sake as a fascinating description of urban architecture and craftsmanship, but is also striking in the way that it differs from the account of the city that we have seen in the Irish *SAM*. It is worth quoting a lengthy passage:

Ofrait ainm don abainn fuair
Babiloin in chathair chuair.
Nin mac Pail an righ co rath
Naugudon ainm a bhrathar.

³² Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 92–3 (text), 128–9 (translation), §58.

Nae xx.id troiged trenfir.
a hairdi suas os nellaib
tri mili xx.ed a fad.
xxx. troiged a tigead.

Fen fo mbidis da dam .x.ec
as docha a fhir nas a brec
as deimhin no ticdis tall
ar gach sgeimhil na timcheall.

Cloch na chnaim na crand co fir
nir cured ana comgnim
acht lind luaigi , uma
as cruan , credhuma.

Ceart mar thairnic an chathair
gurbh urlum hi acht a caithim
dorignedh teach ara lar
ac rig in domain dreachnar.

Nocho dearnad roime riam
nocho dinginter na diaig
nochor dealbad fo grein ngil
teach a macsamla ar talmain.

D'or , d'airged nar dubh
do chruan as do charrmogul.
do gloin d'edach datha dhil
do chluim do lind do leasdraib.

Do gloin ghorm do bhabaill bhan.
do scroll , do shinnath.
do lig loghmair gloin gan grain.
's do chlaraib feadha leamhain.

Teach Nin na primdhorus tall
barc breacsholus bhelfhairsing.
sæir is cearda an talman tuaigh.
ga chumdach is ga chomuaim.

Ced dorus ara tigh thai.
do lic logmair fa hardgnai
comhla ghloin arna tomhus
do bi re gach n-endorus.

Euphrates the name of the cool river,
Babylon the circular city
Ninus son of Belus the prosperous king
Naugudon the name of his brother.

One hundred and eighty full feet
its height above the clouds,
twenty-three miles its length
thirty feet its thickness.

Neither stone nor bone nor wood, truly,
were used in its construction,
only molten lead and copper
and enamel and bronze.

Just as the city was completed,
so that it was ready only to be enjoyed,
a house was built in the middle of it,
by the noble-countenanced king of the world.

There was not made ever before
there will not be built afterwards
there was never constructed under the bright sun
a house like it on earth.

Of gold and of silver that was not tarnished
of enamel and of carbuncle,
of crystal, of precious coloured cloth,
of down, of drink from vessels.

Of blue crystal, of white horn,
of satin and of tapestry,
of pure precious stone without flaw,
and of wooden planks of elm.

The main entrance of the house of Ninus there
a bright-ornamented, wide-mouthed structure,
the wrights and craftsmen of the northern world
adorning it and constructing it.

One hundred doorways for his silent house
of precious stones of noble beauty
a fitted crystal door
was before every entrance.³³

We can note the very different dimensions of the city and in particular the fact that it is described as 'circular' as opposed to the standard depiction of the city as square. We still see the 'one hundred doorways' but they are described here as crystal rather than bronze. This fits with the almost hyperbolic exoticism of the poem: silks, tapestry, enamel, silver, gold and horn. One cannot help but be reminded of the abundant materiality of descriptions of supernatural locations in medieval Irish literature, whether that be the luxurious 'otherworld' of saga

³³ Book of Uí Mhaine, f. 114rb (qq. 7–16).

narrative, the crystalline islands of voyage literature or the heavenly city of vision texts.³⁴ This makes it all the more astonishing that the subject of the poem is not, say, Jerusalem, but Babylon, the epitome of all that is worldly and profane.

Like *Babilón Baile Búadach*, the twelfth-century poem *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath* ('History of the Foreigners of Dublin') begins with a *dindshenchas*, in this case of Dublin, which – as with Babylon in *Babilón Baile Búadach* – is said to be named after the daughter of a king of the city. The poem is a piece of economic propaganda, arguing that the city of Dublin owes taxes to Armagh, and what follows the *dindshenchas* (which establishes Armagh's ecclesiastical sovereignty over Dublin as a result of a Patrician miracle) is a remarkable depiction of Dublin as urban space:

Cach long cendaig thic tar sál
co Áth Clíath cétach coms[h]lán;
dlegar can f[h]ochand don chlaind
cohall ó cach stúrasluing.

Every merchant vessel that comes across the sea,
to populous, teeming Dublin;
there is due without dispute from the crew
a cowl from every cargo ship.³⁵

Dublin is described as 'populous' and 'teeming'; there are churches in the middle of the city, there are packhorses for transporting goods such as malt and preserved meat, there are luxurious imported fabrics such as silk, it is 'the royal city of Gaídil and Foreigners', there are domestic gardens, there are combmakers, shoemakers, moneyers and artisans; one stanza speaks of Dublin's churches, homes and commerce, and, in the quatrain cited above, there are cargo ships arriving, presumably from trading ports such as Chester and Bristol, as well as from further afield.³⁶ This image of Dublin in *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath* as a bustling city full of craftsmen and artisans bears comparison with the image in *Babilón Baile Búadach* of Babylon as a place where craftsmen from all over the world – smiths, wrights, carpenters and so on – have been gathered together to engage in the task of constructing that magnificent city. In both poems, the perfunctory *dindshenchas*, which in each instance involves the city being named after the daughter of its king, swiftly gives way to literary portraits of those cities, their architecture, their inhabitants and their skilled trades, albeit these images are deployed to

³⁴ See, for example, the descriptions of the otherworld in the Middle Irish *Serglige Con Culainn*: Myles Dillon, ed., *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1953); the supernatural islands described in the 'Voyage of Máel Duin', in H. P. A. Oskamp, ed., *Immrama* (Dublin, 1941), pp. 26–77; and the description of heaven in *Fis Adomnáin*: John Carey, ed. and trans., 'Fis Adomnáin', in *Apocrypha Hiberniae II: Apocalypctica II*, ed. Martin McNamara, et al. (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 17–169.

³⁵ Boyle and Breatnach, ed. and trans., 'Senchas Gall Átha Cliath: Aspects of the Cult of St Patrick in the Twelfth Century', in *Sacred Histories: A Festschrift for Máire Herbert*, ed. John Carey, et al. (Dublin, 2015), pp. 22–55, at pp. 38 (text), 43 (translation).

³⁶ Boyle and Breatnach, ed. and trans., 'Senchas Gall Átha Cliath'.

different ends: economic in the case of *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath*, historiographical in the case of *Babilón Baile Búadach*. Far from the representations of Babylon in earlier Irish sources, where we find it restricted to exegetical settings in which Babylon is typologically opposed to the holy city of Jerusalem, or where it is primarily of interest as the site of the Captivity of God's chosen people, here we have positive portrayal of its urban space: populous, impressive, busy, wealthy and successful for a particular span of historical time because God had willed it as such.

This is a striking development in Middle Irish literary culture, and it is part of a wider shift from an intellectual focus on kingship, which dominated Irish political and historical discourse up to the late tenth century, to one on empire, which emerged over the course of the eleventh century and was well-established by the twelfth. I suggest that, amongst other factors, the political embeddedness of another *gens* on the island of Ireland, that is, the Scandinavian populations of Dublin, Limerick, Waterford and so on, gave Irish élites cause to reconceptualise power in imperial rather than royal terms, and we see this shift reflected in the literary and cultural record. In Scheil's study of the imagery of Babylon in the Western literary tradition, he states that 'Babylon displays a tendency towards metaphoric expression as it accrues a set of political meanings'.³⁷ Further study is required before we can pinpoint the extent to which medieval Irish interest in Babylon is a form of 'metaphoric expression' that mediates thinking about modes of power and relationships with urban spaces closer to home, and to what extent it represents a more literal interest in Babylonian history for its own sake (perhaps related to pedagogical shifts in the teaching of 'world history' in Irish ecclesiastical schools). The two are not mutually exclusive, of course, and ideas of Babylon in its mimetic and metaphorical forms undoubtedly interact to varying degrees in any given source.

'A griffin with a blue eye'

About a century before the composition of either *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath* or *Babilón Baile Búadach*, the ecclesiastical scholar and poet Flann Mainistrech, based at Monasterboice in modern-day Co. Louth, had embarked on an enormous poetic endeavour, composing a vast poem, or series of poems, on 'world kingship', that is, on the theory of *translatio imperii*, which, as we have seen, regarded imperial power as having moved through history from the Assyrians, to the Medes and Persians, ultimately westwards via the Macedonians and the Greeks to the Romans. Drawing primarily on the authority of the Chronicle of Eusebius-Jerome, perhaps supplemented by other late antique historiographers such as Orosius and Josephus, Flann's poem identified the mythical Ninus son of Belus as the wellspring of the 'well-known sovereignty' of the Assyrian dynasty. He was the first to hold the kingship of all of Asia except India.³⁸ In Flann's historiography,

³⁷ Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 27.

³⁸ Seán Mac Airt, ed. and trans., 'Middle Irish Poems on World-Kingship', *Études Celtiques* 6 (1953–4), 255–80, at pp. 257–8, §5.

there is little room for David or indeed for the kingdom of Israel: the fate of God's chosen people only intersects with his narrative when the mighty emperor Nebuchadnezzar destroys the first temple at Jerusalem and brings the Jews into captivity in Babylon and later when Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, destroys Babylon, bringing freedom to the Jewish people.³⁹ About a century after Flann, an Irish poet produced a composition that begins *Nin mac Bél*, in which he also identified Ninus as the original source of imperial power: Ninus was the first 'king of the world' *co díles* ('lawfully, legitimately, by right'). The poet praises Ninus's 'illustrious fame' and his 'branching splendour' and goes on to map Irish legendary pre-history onto the chronology of the reigns of Ninus's successors.⁴⁰ Both Flann tracing global imperial dominance through history, and the anonymous author of *Nin mac Bél* juxtaposing the Assyrian empire and Irish pre-history, depended upon the scholastic process of synchronism. Medieval Irish synchronistic texts have been characterised by Michael Clarke as identifying 'systematic correspondences between events in Ireland and simultaneous events close to the centre of the world in the eastern Mediterranean', and these correspondences are fundamental to Middle Irish historiography.⁴¹

The argument that representations of Babylon as a magnificent urban space (e.g. in *Babilón Baile Búadach*) can and should be read alongside, and in relation to, representations of Irish urban spaces (e.g. in *Senchas Gall Átha Clíath*) is strengthened by synchronistic endeavours such as Flann's. The idea that Assyrian history, for example, could be juxtaposed with and used to chronologically anchor Irish legendary pre-history implies that they are histories and societies that are in some way comparable. From the juxtaposition one can infer relationship, and that relationship invites comparisons and contrasts between the two civilisations. Drawing on this approach, the author of the twelfth-century Irish poem *Nin mac Bél* situates the reigns of Assyrian emperors alongside an account of the successive invasions of prehistoric Ireland, which form the narrative backbone of the *LGÉ* family of texts.⁴² The poem begins with Ninus son of Belus and proceeds to enumerate a series of Assyrian emperors, who are described with brief epithets and reign-lengths, alongside the synchronous legendary invasions of Ireland. The poem is clearly the kind of literary product that could result from the pedagogical activity of linking the events of Irish legendary pre-history to the chronologies of other world cultures.

³⁹ Sean Mac Airt, 'Middle Irish Poems on World-Kingship (*suite*)', *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955–6), 18–45, at pp. 23–4 (Nebuchadnezzar and the burning of the Temple), 27–8 (Cyrus and the end of the Babylonian Captivity).

⁴⁰ Boyle, ed. and trans., 'Biblical History', pp. 70–1.

⁴¹ Michael Clarke, 'The Leabhar Gabála and Carolingian Origin Legends', in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, ed. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 441–79, at p. 442.

⁴² See also the eleventh-century poem beginning *Annálad anall uile* by Gilla Cóemáin, which uses a comparable approach albeit with differing chronological scheme: Peter J. Smith, ed. and trans., *Three Historical Poems Ascribed to Gilla Cóemáin: A Critical Edition of the Work of an Eleventh-Century Irish Scholar* (Münster, 2007), pp. 180–203.

Nin mac Bél exploits its own synchronistic structure to move beyond mere juxtaposition to the use of explicit pairing and comparison. For example, the poet states that Partholón, leader of the poem's first wave of invaders of Ireland, died in the same year as Ninus's son and successor, Ninyus, a synchronicity that would in any context invite comparison of the two figures, but he also goes further, characterising them together as a 'vigorous pair' (*dias brígmair*).⁴³ Manchaleus is identified as the Assyrian emperor whose reign coincided with the arrival in Ireland of Nemed and his followers, and Armamithres is said to be emperor at the coming of the Fir Bolg. The poet then moves on to the reign of Belocus at the time of the arrival of the supernatural Túatha Dé Danann in Ireland:

Ag techt Túaithe Dē Danann
go Banba dā būantadall,
Belocus, ba trom tarba,
ōs fonn fhōdglas Asarda.

At the coming of the Túath Dé Danann,
to Ireland to stay permanently,
Belocus – it was a heavy advantage –
over the green-grassed land of the Assyrians.⁴⁴

This passing reference to the 'green-grassed land of the Assyrians' shows how *Nin mac Bél* is concerned with the full breadth of territories subject to the Assyrian empire, in contrast to the narrower, more urban focus on the city of Babylon that we have seen in *Babilón Baile Búadach*. Elsewhere in *Nin mac Bél*, the poet writes of the extent of Assyrian authority, noting of Mamylus that 'every assembly was ... under him', and of Ascatades that he placed 'every path' under his dynasty's rule.⁴⁵ Another important feature of the poem, however, and this is true of a great many synchronistic compositions, is the poet's need to reiterate that his account is based on the testimony of written authorities and that his calculations are accurate. In the poem, we see lines that could easily be dismissed as fillers, phrases added to complete the syllabic and line requirements of each quatrain, but which cumulatively assert the poem's authority and accuracy: *na lebair ga lánderbad* ('the books fully verifying it'); *is bechta* ('it is certified'); *ní cor áirmi re fōgra* ('it's not padding out a statement with numbers'; or more literally 'it is not the adding of enumeration to a proclamation').⁴⁶

⁴³ Boyle, ed. and trans., 'Biblical History', pp. 70–1, §6. A well-known example of the use of synchronous juxtaposition to invite moral and political comparison is found in the A version of the 'Death of Conchobar,' in which it is stated that Conchobar and Christ share the same birthday: Chantal Kobel, ed. and trans., 'A Critical Edition of *Aided Chonchobair* "The Violent Death of Conchobar"', with Translation, Textual Notes and Bibliography', unpublished PhD thesis (TCD, 2015), pp. 221 (text), 223 (translation), §11.

⁴⁴ Boyle, ed. and trans., 'Biblical History', pp. 74–5, §17.

⁴⁵ Boyle, ed. and trans., 'Biblical History', pp. 72–3, §§9, 13.

⁴⁶ Boyle, ed. and trans., 'Biblical History', pp. 70–3, §§2, 9, 14.

The arrival of the Gaelic-speaking people, the Sons of Míl, is the final invasion of the poem, and indeed of the *LGÉ* scheme. This is linked to the reign of Metarailius:

Metarailnius ba lus ard ādh
ag techt mac Míled mbithnār,
grīb co nglasūil ba bregda,
do sīl Asūir oiregda.

Secht cēt trī bliadna bladāig,
fice o prīmtecht Parthalāin,
gan gabāil re slōgart sleag,
gu gabāil mōrmac Míled.

Metarailius, he was a noble scion of valorous deeds
at the coming of the ever-noble sons of Míl,
A griffin with a blue eye who was splendid,
of the seed of noble Asser.

Seven hundred, three years of famous valour,
twenty, since the first coming of Partholón,
without being conquered by a hero of hosts with spears
until being conquered by the great sons of Míl.⁴⁷

I argued above that a proliferation of depictions of the construction of the city of Babylon in Middle Irish literature was linked to the growth of the Hiberno-Scandinavian city of Dublin. Likewise, I suggest that the exploration of the history of ancient empires such as that of the Assyrians was also connected to political developments in Ireland. The idea that the arrival of the Gaelic-speaking people represented the ‘final’ invasion of Ireland, and that Gaelic-speaking people held an inalienable sovereignty over the island, must have been severely challenged by more recent arrivals, and there seems to be a defensive or reactionary element in the need to associate the legendary pre-history of Ireland with that of powerful, ‘global’ empires. As I suggested above, in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland, an Irish high-king had a very real chance of becoming an ‘emperor’, claiming conquest over the ‘foreigners’ of Ireland’s urban centres. Of course there were other factors at play here in driving the interest in empires, aside from the political situation within Ireland: we might also point to a general interest in Middle Eastern exotica, in part as a result of the First Crusade, which we can see manifested, for example, in the gift from Edgar, king of Scotland, to Muirchertach Ua Briain, high-king of Ireland, of a camel, which, as observed in a bilingual entry in the *Annals of Inisfallen*, was an animal of prodigious size.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Boyle, ed. and trans., ‘Biblical History’, pp. 74–5, §§19–20.

⁴⁸ AI s.a. 1105. *Isin bliadain sin tucad in camall, quod est animal mirae magnitudinis, o ríg Alban do Muircertach Ua Briain.*

Another source of inspiration for the eleventh- and twelfth-century Irish interest in imperial history may have been the family of Irish Benedictine houses in continental Europe, known as the *Schottenklöster*, with their motherhouse at Regensburg and daughter houses in Vienna, Würzburg, Erfurt, Eichstätt, Konstanz and elsewhere across central Europe.⁴⁹ The necrologies, martyrologies and literature of these Benedictine houses suggest that they not only continued to recruit their members from Ireland long after their foundation, but also that they retained close political and ecclesiastical connections with their homeland, providing another channel through which imperial ideologies could filter back to Ireland.⁵⁰ Perhaps, then, we should see this imperial interest as the result of a combination of factors, not only the situation on the ground in Ireland, but also the influence of contact with Norman England, knowledge of the Crusades and information coming from ecclesiastical emigrants to Salian Germany. Or, alternatively, we might suggest that these continental influences gave Irish intellectuals a framework within which the political situation on the ground could be reconceptualised. All of these factors combined to add imperial fuel to the historiographical fires that were raging in the classrooms of eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland.⁵¹

‘The first king of the world’

There is a particular concentration of Middle Irish texts concerned with Babylon in the Book of Ballymote.⁵² For example, the text beginning *Prima etas mundi* uses the Assyrian empire as a central chronological anchor for world history:

Coic righ trichat robadar oc Asardaibh. Cethorcha bliadan ar dib cetaibh ar mili robai a flaithus. O forba flathusa Asardha gusin cet nAenach nOlimp la Gregu, tri bliadna cethorchat. O’n cetna Olimp gu daire deichtrebhe, sé bliadna coicat 7 cet. O daire deightrebe go loscud in Tempoill, sé bliadna trichat. Da bliadain cethorchat ar cethri cetaibh robai in Tempoill iar n-a cumdach go a loscadh. O loscudh in Tempaill co forcenn flatha Med, tricha annorum. Ocht ri rofaldasais o Meadhaibh; nóe mbliadna coicat ar cet doibh. O forcend flatha Meadh co tochur as Daire Babilonda 7 go hathnuigheadhugh in

⁴⁹ Helmut Flachenecker, *Schottenklöster: Irische Benediktinerkonvente im hochmittelalterlichen Deutschland* (Paderborn, 1995).

⁵⁰ Another key node was Cologne: see Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel, ‘New Light on the Beginnings of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin’, in *Medieval Dublin XVII*, ed. Seán Duffy (Dublin, 2019), pp. 63–80.

⁵¹ For another important example of historiographical interest in empires, see the late Middle Irish poem (c. 1200), preserved in the Book of Uí Mhaine, which synchronises the reigns of Irish kings with those of the emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire, from the early fifth to the mid-eighth century: Peter J. Smith, ed. and trans., ‘Irish Synchronistic Poem on Emperors and Kings’, *Peritia* 22–3 (2011–2), 107–48.

⁵² For a wider study of the manuscript, see the essays in Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ed., *Book of Ballymote* (Dublin, 2018).

Tempaill, cethorcha bliadan. O athnuigheadhugh in Tempaill gu deireadh flatha na Pers, tri cet [bliadan]: .i. da righ dhec ro[fh]olla[m]nasdair o Persaibh. Bliadain ar trichait ar da cetaibh robai a flaitheus.

The Assyrians had thirty-five kings: 1240 years was their rule. From the end of the sovereignty of the Assyrians until the first Olympic Games by the Greeks: forty-three years. From the first Olympiad to the Captivity of the Ten Tribes: 156 years. From the Captivity of the Ten Tribes until the burning of the Temple: thirty-six years. 442 years the Temple was, after being built until it was burnt. From the burning of the Temple until the end of the sovereignty of the Medes: thirty years. Eight kings ruled from the Medes: 159 years for them. From the end of the sovereignty of the Medes until the release from the Babylonian Captivity and the renewing of the Temple: forty years. From the renewing of the Temple until the end of the sovereignty of the Persians: three hundred [years]: that is, twelve kings ruled from the Persians. 231 years was their sovereignty.⁵³

We can see the centrality of Babylonian rule – embodied first by the Assyrians, and then by the Medes and the Persians – to the text’s historiographical framework. Other events circulate around that central point: the Olympic Games, and even the building, burning and renewing of the Temple is subordinated to the rise and fall of the Assyrian and Persian empires.

The beginning of Assyrian rule was marked by the reign of the mythical king Ninus son of Belus. In another Book of Ballymote synchronistic text, beginning *Adam primus pater fuit*, Belus is – contrary to modern speculation that he is simply a euhemerisation of that Babylonian god, Bel – genealogically linked to Asshur, eponymous ancestor of the Babylonians, and thence to Shem, son of Noah, and thus to the biblical historical framework:

Cam, mac Naei, ceithri meic lais: .i. Cus ₇ Measram ocus Futh ₇ Candan. As uaidib sidhe Afraccaig. Sem, mac Naei, coic meic lais, .i. Alamh ₇ Asur ₇ Arafaxad, Luíd is Aram. Ealam, is uad atait Elamida, .i. Persa, .i. in flatus. Asur, as uad atat Asardha, .i. in cethflaithus in domain. Arafaxad, as uad atat Calladha ocus Eaberda, .i. Eber, mac Saile, mic Airefaxad. Iachtan, mac Eber, .iii. meic deg occa. As uaidib rosilsad isanuídía.

Sem, mac do side Asur; mac do shide Bel; mac do sidhe Nin. Is eside ceitri in domain. Isin aenmad bliadain deg iar ngen Nin, mic Beil, bas Caim ocus Iafedh. Ocus in bliadain da nd-eisí, Nín, mac Beil, do gabail rige, .i. isin⁵⁴ aen [bliadain] fichet do rige Nin, géin Abratham. Ocht [mbliadna] cethorchat ar noi cétaib o Adam go gein Abrathaim – Samíraímís, ben Nín, da [bliadain] cethorchat. As le doronad mur Baibiloinia. Ocus tucastair a mac fein cuíce d’fír, .i. Nínias, ₇ adbath iar sin.

⁵³ Boyle, ‘Biblical History’, pp. 60–1.

⁵⁴ MS: ísí.

Cham son of Noah, he had four sons: that is, Cush and Mizraim and Phut and Canaan. From those [are descended] the Africans. Shem son of Noah, he had five sons, that is: Elam and Asshur and Arphaxad, Lud and Aram. Elam, it is from him are the Elamites, that is the Persians, i.e. the kingdom. Asshur, it is from him are the Assyrians, that is, the first sovereignty of the world. Arphaxad, it is from him are the Chaldeans and Hebrews, i.e. Eber son of Salah son of Arphaxad. Yoktan, son of Eber, he had thirteen sons. From them are descended the *isanuídia*.⁵⁵

Shem: Asshur was a son of his; Belus was a son of his; Ninus was a son of the latter. The last was the first king of the world. In the eleventh year after the birth of Ninus son of Belus was the death of Cham and Japheth. In the year after them, Ninus son of Belus assuming kingship; that is, in the twenty-first year of the kingship of Ninus, the birth of Abraham. 948 years from Adam to the birth of Abraham. – Semiramis, wife of Ninus: forty-two years. By her the wall of Babylon was made. And she took her own son to her as a husband, that is, Ninyus, and she died after that.⁵⁶

In this passage from *Adam primus pater fuit*, we encounter a cluster of characters who are central not only to this particular synchronistic author but also to the authors of other historiographical texts in the Book of Ballymote, including the Irish *SAM*. These characters are Ninus, his son Ninyas, and wife to both of them as well as mother of Ninyas, Semiramis. The primary significance of Ninus son of Belus for these Irish authors is in the first instance, as we have seen, that he is regarded as the first emperor, that is, the founder of the first ‘world-kingship’, that of the Assyrians. However, he is also notable because he is regarded, particularly in the Irish *SAM*, as having instigated the rebuilding of the city of Babylon (the original foundation of the city being ascribed to Nimrod). Alternatively, as we have just seen, in other texts his wife, Semiramis, is credited with building the walls of Babylon (for further discussion of the characterisation of Semiramis see below, pp. 143–4). In these ways, the incestuous trio of Ninus, Semiramis and Nenyus are woven into biblical history and chronology through the significant roles they are accorded in synchronisms, prose narratives and poems on the city of Babylon: by such methods, these mythical characters become as central to the narrative of salvation history as more reliably attested figures such as Nebuchadnezzar II, Cyrus or Darius the Great.

Aside from genealogical inventiveness and historiographical elaboration, another way in which scholars linked the early history of the Assyrian empire to biblical history was in the use of biblical chronology as the fundamental basis for the calculation of historical time. We have already seen in *Adam primus pater fuit* how Ninus’s reign is aligned with the birth of Abraham: ‘In the eleventh year after the birth of Ninus son of Belus was the death of Cham and Japheth. In the year after them, Ninus son of Belus assuming kingship; that is, in the twenty-first

⁵⁵ This seems to be corrupted, and something seems to be missing before *isanuídia*, which should itself be read as *isin India* (cf. Ó Cróinin 1983, §32).

⁵⁶ Boyle, ‘Biblical History’, pp. 65–6.

year of the kingship of Ninus, the birth of Abraham. 948 years from Adam to the birth of Abraham'. This continual juxtaposing of the life of Abraham (the first Jewish Patriarch) with that of Ninus (the first Assyrian emperor) is also seen in the poem *Nin mac Béil*. We have already seen above how the poem synchronised the reigns of Assyrian kings with the invented Irish pre-history of the *LGÉ* family of texts: I have argued for a political reading of this juxtaposition of Assyrian and Irish history. But the chronological anchoring of the poem to biblical history through the life of Abraham serves another function, that is, to link both Assyrian and Irish 'secular' history back into an overarching sacred scheme of salvation history. The figures from Irish pre-history: Partholón (Bartholomew); Nemed; the Fir Bolg; the Túatha Dé Danann; and the Gaelic people themselves, the sons of Míl, are given not only an added historical authority but also a divine legitimacy through the synchronisation of their times to those of Old Testament figures. The authors of such historiographical sources were concerned with Ireland's place within history and God's intervention in history to bring salvation to the island of Ireland. The historical and chronological texts we are discussing here can be seen as 'interpreting the rise and fall of civilisations as evidence of God's presence in history' in a universal sense,⁵⁷ but they also have a specifically Irish function, that is, locating evidence of Ireland's incorporation in salvation history. As Constantinos Patrides observed, medieval historians 'were both particular and universal. They were universal because they attempted to be all-encompassing, thereby upholding the total jurisdiction of Providence throughout the created order. They were particular because each believed his nation to be God's ultimate concern'.⁵⁸ This is as true of Ireland as of anywhere else in the Latin West. In this respect, medieval Irish interest in the Matter of Babylon can be seen as complementary to the appropriation of aspects of Jewish history and identity that we discussed in Chapter 1.

'Babylon, the fair girl'

We saw above the entry from *Sanas Cormaic* in which the Irish place-name Bablúan was said to be the name of a woman, *quasi* Babylon.⁵⁹ The idea that Babylon itself was a woman's name may have some origins in exegetical traditions about the mysterious but evil woman Babylon, 'the mother of the fornications', as mentioned in Apocalypse 17:5. However, in the late Middle Irish poem that begins *Babilóin Baile Búadach* (see above pp. 129–31), we witness a different conception of Babylon as a woman's name, in the form of a *dindsenchas* in which the city receives its name from the daughter of the king who had the city built (the

⁵⁷ Patrides, *The Grand Design of God*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Patrides, *The Grand Design of God*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ On the particular force and function of the use of *quasi* in medieval Irish glossaries, see Paul Russell, 'Quasi: Bridging the Etymological Gap in Early Irish Glossaries', in *A Companion in Linguistics: A Festschrift for Anders Ahlqvist on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Bernadette Smelik, et al. (Nijmegen, 2005), pp. 49–62.

king is not named, but there is a later reference in the poem to Ninus son of Belus, implicitly suggesting that he might be understood to be the king referred to in this section). The first six quatrains of the poem form a distinct narrative unit (marked by a *dúnad*), which tells the story:

Babilon baili buadhach
a raibi an ri rouallach
*ce*tri ro gab bith gan bron
leis dorigned baibilon.

Cathair dorignead gun righ
daingen difoghlaid re *rim*.
.l. *dorus* aisdi amach
sruth ar ceartlar na cathrach.

Ingen aca righ gu rath.
gasta glegeal *grianaine*chh.
do *chu*indig ara haithair
a hainm aran ardchathraig.

Cuma *lim* gerod leana
*thá*inic do saegul *cheana*;
tainic do lini is do la
ni bia ad beathaid *acht* aenla.

Marb an *ingen* do naire
re ndearna an sluag d'ílghaire
sluaig in talman *imasech*
do bi ac dealbhad na cathrach.

Baibilon an *ingen* fhind
innsid leabair leighind
a hainm ara cathraig coir
o sin cu brath Babiloin.

Babylon, victorious city,
in which was the very proud king;
the first king who took the world without sorrow,
he had Babylon built.

The city which was built by the king,
an unassailable fortress as is recounted.
Fifty gateways leading out of it,
a stream in the very centre of the city.

Its prosperous king had a daughter,
lively, shining-bright, sunny-faced,
she sought from her father
for her name to be on the noble city.

'I don't care if it's named after you,
 your lifespan has already come to an end,
 your line and your day have come to an end,
 you'll only live one more day.'

The girl died of shame
 as a result of the great laughter of the host –
 each of the hosts of the earth
 who were constructing the city.

Babylon, the fair girl,
 the books of learning relate,
 her name on her fitting city
 from then until the betrayal of Babylon.⁶⁰

Despite the poet's claim to be stating what the 'the books of learning relate', I have not yet been able to find a source for this idea that Babylon was the name of a daughter of Ninus and that her name was given to the city after she died of shame at the laughter of the hosts at her father's dismissive prediction. The derisive and shaming function of laughter in medieval Irish literature has been explored by Philip O'Leary, who stated that 'laughter was almost never a spontaneous outburst of inclusive amusement, but rather a conscious condemnation of unacceptable behaviour'. While O'Leary does not seem to have been aware of this particular example, it fits well with his argument, which he supported using instances from Irish saga narratives.⁶¹ This suggests the possibility that the story may be the poet's own creation, albeit with the obvious caveat that this may be subject to correction if a source is identified.

For present purposes, we can note simply that the city of Babylon is subject to the creation of novel *dindsenchas*, either by the poet or his source. As Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has noted recently in a different context, 'places formed a key constituent element in the writing of history and the creation of onomastic aetiology formed an important part of the portrayal of Ireland's landscape of the past'.⁶² This is indeed true, but we can extend the statement in a few directions in this instance to note first that *dindsenchas*, this discourse of place, was not confined to writing about places in Ireland: a foreign city such as Babylon could also be subject to the creation of Irish onomastic aetiologies. Furthermore, onomastic stories created for a city such as Babylon, just as with Irish place-names, could be multiple and could change over time: as we have seen, both *Sanas Cormaic* and the Irish *SAM* explain the name of Babylon in a more conventional manner, deriving it as meaning

⁶⁰ Book of Uí Mhaine, f. 114rb (qq. 1–6). The *brath* 'betrayal' in the last line could be a scribal error for *brat* 'captivity', referring to the Babylonian Captivity.

⁶¹ Philip O'Leary, 'Jeers and Judgment: Laughter in Early Irish Literature', *CMCS* 22 (1991), 15–29, at pp. 15–6. See also his statement that '...almost all [Early] Irish laughter is meant to mock and ridicule' (p. 16).

⁶² Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'The Peripheral Centre: Writing History on the Western "Fringe"', *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures* 4 (2018), 59–84, at p. 74.

confusio, from the confusion of tongues that happened at the Tower of Babel. In the twelfth-century *Babilón Baile Búadach*, however, a new and different narrative seems to have been created; the ‘tradition’ (if we may use that troublesome term) is not static.⁶³ The final point to make here is that this *dindshenchas* of Babylon shows – contrary to much of the modern scholarship on *dindshenchas*, which has tended towards the romantic and mythological – that historical discourse of place-names in medieval Ireland could be concerned with urban spaces (as we saw also with the Dublin *dindshenchas* in *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath*). Indeed, we can potentially see the development of the literature of cities in Ireland, discussed above, as being concomitant to the development of the interest in empires.

A key female figure in Babylonian history was Semiramis, already mentioned briefly above, the wife of Ninus son of Belus and subsequently wife of her own son, Ninyus. Semiramis received different treatments in different Irish sources. The incestuous nature of the relationship between Semiramis and Ninyus may have fuelled the kind of speculation that we see in the Middle Irish *Leabhar Breac* ‘Gospel History’, that ‘the Medes and Persians and Chaldeans’ used to have sexual relationships with their mothers. As Erich Poppe has shown, the ‘Gospel History’ derives its information from Jerome’s *Aduersus Iouinianum*, which states that the Persians and Medes used to have intercourse with their mothers and grandmothers, but the particular wording of the *Leabhar Breac* statement – that ‘his mother is with the son as wife there’ (*Bíd trá a máthair do mnaí hicon mac ann*) – seems to evoke the story of Semiramis and her son.⁶⁴ In his mid-eleventh-century ‘Poems on World-Kingship’, Flann Mainistrech describes Semiramis as an extremely successful ruler in her own right after the death of Ninus but before the succession of her son, Ninyus. He writes that:

Is sí iar lín laech ba lia
cētna-rotraet in [n]Innia,
lē con-rotecht co ngart glōr
in cathair balc Babilōn.

’Twas she directing a warrior company most numerous, who first vanquished India; and by her was built with liberal clamour the mighty city of Babylon.⁶⁵

This seems to accord with a more general interest in female rulers and warriors on Flann’s part, since he also dedicates an extensive section of his poem to the history of the Amazons.⁶⁶ By contrast, in the late Middle Irish poem on Ninus son of Belus, the poet does not regard Semiramis as a ruler in her own right (or at least considers

⁶³ On the dynamic nature of ‘traditions’, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Legend as Critic’, in *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork, 1987), pp. 23–38.

⁶⁴ Erich Poppe, ‘Exotic and Monstrous Races in the *Leabhar Breac*’s Gospel History’, in *Lochlann: Festschrift til Jan Erik Rekdal på 60-Årsdagen*, ed. Cathinka Hambro and Lars Ivar Widerøe (Oslo, 2013), pp. 39–56, at pp. 50–1.

⁶⁵ Mac Airt, ed. and trans., ‘Middle Irish Poems’, pp. 259–60, §8.

⁶⁶ Mac Airt, ed. and trans., ‘Middle Irish Poems’, pp. 275–80, §§47–59.

her surplus to his chronological requirements) and moves straight from Ninus to Ninyus without mentioning her. The Irish *SAM* states that the city of Babylon was founded by Nimrod and was ‘rebuilt by Ninus son of Belus . . . and by Ninus’s wife thereafter, i.e. Semiramis’, thus subordinating Semiramis’s role in comparison to that of her husband. Rather than crediting Semiramis with conquering India, the author states only that she was descended from an Indian king.⁶⁷ Information circulating about female rulers such as Semiramis and warriors like the Amazons may have provided inspiration for the portrayal of female characters such as Medb, Scáthach and Aife in medieval Irish narrative: the depiction of these characters in Middle Irish narratives, including the Book of Leinster recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or the Middle Irish version of *Tochmarc Emire*, in light of the characterisation of powerful women from world history, would repay further investigation.⁶⁸ The author of the poem on Babylon preserved in the Rawlinson B 502 version of the Irish *SAM* also states that it was a Scythian queen who killed Cyrus, the mighty Achaemenid emperor, and it is to the figure of Cyrus that we now turn.

‘Unconquered Cyrus’

The Rawlinson B 502 poem on Babylon is a good point of departure for thinking about the characterisation of Cyrus the Great in Middle Irish sources. He is primarily recorded as the liberator of the Jewish people from their Babylonian Captivity, but passing references to other aspects of his life and career offer tantalising glimpses into other reasons for his popularity amongst medieval Irish authors. Following the opening description of the construction of the city of Babylon, the poet turns his attention to the reign of the Chaldean king, Nebuchadnezzar II, who destroyed Jerusalem and took the Jews into their captivity in Babylon:

Ruc brait móir a cathraig nDé
 ocus ro-mill a aidme;
 ro-siachtatar lais dia thaig
 laéchaib, cléirchib, mnáib, maccaib.

He took a great plunder from God’s city and he destroyed its buildings. They came with him to his house, warriors and clerics, women and children.⁶⁹

The poet states that the Jews were in their Captivity for seventy years until Cyrus came to release them. Cyrus frees the Jewish people and bids them to return to Jerusalem:

Éirgid dia bar tír feissin
 ocus imthigid co tenn
 co rissid Hierusálem.

⁶⁷ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, §57.

⁶⁸ O’Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Táin Bó Cúailnge, from the Book of Leinster*; on the Middle Irish version of *Tochmarc Emire*, see Ruairí Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, Law and Tochmarc Emire* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁶⁹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 92 (text), 128 (translation), §58 (13).

Rise up and go to your own country and travel vigorously until you reach Jerusalem.⁷⁰

The Jews set off to rebuild Jerusalem and Cyrus, who was ‘greater than any prince’ (*mó cech mál*), claimed his imperial title in Babylon:

Iar sain insaigis Cir cain
ríge for feraib domuin;
trícha bliadan baí a glóir
’sa hardrígi i mBaibilóin.

Then the fair Cyrus sought the kingship of the people of the world. His glory lasted for thirty years, in the high-kingship in Babylon.⁷¹

The poet then tells us, as noted above, that Cyrus was killed by the queen of Scythia (*ro-marb rígan na Scithia*) when he went to seek tribute in more distant lands. This alludes to the story – ultimately derived from Herodotus, but mediated through numerous Latin writers – that Cyrus was killed by Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae in Central Asia. In spite of Cyrus’s death, the empire of the Medes and the Persians was to last ‘until there came to them the son of Philip’ (*conas-tánic mac Pilipp*), that is, Alexander the Great. Although the only independent copy of this poem is in the Rawlinson B502 version of the Irish *SAM* (it is also in the seventeenth-century NLI MS G 131 version, but this is probably a copy of Rawlinson B502 rather than an independent witness), it is clear that all of the manuscript copies of the Irish *SAM* share an interest in Cyrus and his career, as indeed did many other eleventh- and twelfth-century Irish poets and historians. It is not difficult to see the attraction of Cyrus as a character: narratives of his career anticipate those of Alexander the Great in terms of their dramatic scope. The way in which Cyrus brought about the destruction of Babylon, by setting his men to dig channels to divert the flow of the Euphrates, is recounted or alluded to in many Irish sources.

In his ‘Poems on World Kingship’, Flann explicitly characterises Cyrus’s destruction of Babylon as fulfilling the prophecy of the Book of Daniel:

Ro fírad co fedba fēig
fāithsine delbda Danēil
la Cir na comrath cen chlōd;
la[i]s ro toglad Babilōn.

Babilonia ros’bris Cir,
ro chlis fora comaithe[h]ib,
ro gab in tīr naro char,
ro marb in rīg Ballasar.

⁷⁰ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 92 (text), 128 (translation), §58 (15).

⁷¹ Ó Cróinín, ed. and trans., *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi*, pp. 92 (text), 128 (translation), §58 (17).

Daniel's prophecy from these forms was splendidly and acutely fulfilled by unconquered Cyrus of the many gifts: by him Babylon was destroyed.

Cyrus smashed Babylon: he overran its neighbours, seized the land he loved not, (and) slew Belshazzar.⁷²

The pairing here is between Cyrus and Belshazzar, the Chaldean king who represents the injustice of the Captivity of the Jews and who was reigning in Babylon at the time of Cyrus's attack. Elsewhere, Cyrus is implicitly paired with Nebuchadnezzar, who brought the Jews into their Captivity in the first place: Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem reflected in, and avenged by, Cyrus's destruction of Babylon. In the unique material on Cyrus in the Book of Ballymore version of the Irish *SAM*, it is also the prophet Daniel who provides the touchstone for the author:

Amail ro tharngir Daniel faidh:
 Is amlaidh ticfa cath Cir:
 7 laige i llaim gach fhir,
 leicfidit na sloigh ar sain
 in sruth mor na minsrotaibh.

Et is amlaid ro bui suidiugud in dorais tresa tigeadh in sruth 7 lega do margreg. Is ed ba fordorus doib 7 aigned suighte fil indti sen 7 gac long 7 gac slugh da ticed isna dorsibh sin ro suighdis na clocha sin iat co mbidis a lenmain dib. Conidh eadh dognidis lucht na cathrach in tan da shichtis na doirsi sin clair do suidiugud osna longaib co suightis na lega na clair sin co scibdis na longaib seacu sin cathraigh.

As Daniel the Prophet prophesied:
 It is thus that the battalion of Cyrus will come:
 with a spade in the hand of every man,
 the hosts will then release
 the great stream into its small streams.

And it is thus was the layout of the gateway through which the river used to come: with stones of pearls. It was pearl that the lintel was, and it is a magnetic nature that is in that, and every ship and every host of those that came into those entrances those stones used to attract them, so that they used to be sticking to them. So that what the people of the city used to do when they used to come to those gates [was] to place boards above the ships so that the stones used to attract those boards so that the ships could dart past them into the city.⁷³

Quite aside from the marvellous account of the magnetic pearl gates of Babylon, the quatrain that is placed in the mouth of Daniel here is interesting. It appears to

⁷² Mac Airt, ed. and trans., 'Middle Irish Poems (*suite*)', pp. 26–7, II. §§19–20.

⁷³ Boyle, 'Biblical History', pp. 61–2.

be extracted from a longer narrative poem about Cyrus that is no longer extant, a useful reminder that what survives must only be a fraction of what originally existed. But we have evidence of other lost verse accounts of the reign of Cyrus: a single stanza about Cyrus embedded in a Middle Irish metrical tract also seems to have been extracted from a longer text about him.⁷⁴ This latter stanza is written in an unusual metre and is therefore almost certainly from a different poem than the Daniel prophecy. This episode in the Book of Ballymote version of the Irish *SAM* continues with a story (found in Classical sources such as Herodotus and Seneca) of the drowning of Cyrus's horse.⁷⁵

Conclusion: from Darius to Salmoneus

In Chapters 2 and 3, we examined numerous short early Middle Irish (tenth-century) narratives on David and his sons, on the powers of the *Beati* and other prayers and on other moral (and immoral) themes. Another narrative of the same genre tells how a king of the Greeks named Salmoneus attended a feast hosted by one of his subject kings. Salmoneus was concerned for his safety, but asked three trusted members of his retinue – a Greek, a Roman and a Jew – to guard his chamber overnight. This they did, while consuming large quantities of wine and engaging in a debate as to what was the most powerful force on earth: wine, kings or women. The Greek argued that it was wine, the Roman that it was kingship and the Jew that it was women. The following morning, Salmoneus was sitting at court with his wife by his side and the three attendants reported the results of their debate. At this point, Salmoneus's wife knocked Salmoneus's crown from his head: his courtiers were shocked and demanded that she be executed for her assault against the head (both literally and figuratively) of the body politic, but the wife smiled at Salmoneus and Salmoneus smiled back at her and declared that not a hair on her head should be harmed. The author of this narrative concluded by stating that women should not be held responsible for the evil that they do, for they each carry a guardian demon upon their brow.⁷⁶ The relevance of this narrative to the present discussion may not immediately be apparent unless one realises that the story is a witty but misogynistic reworking of an episode from 1 Esdras, a noncanonical biblical text that, in its original form, has as its subject the Persian emperor, Darius the Great (not to be confused with Darius the Mede, who is described as a king of Babylon in the Book of Daniel but is not otherwise attested).

In the version of the story in the noncanonical book of Esdras, Darius has gathered his satraps and officials 'from India to Ethiopia' to a feast. Three of his personal bodyguard debated what was the greatest power on earth, in the hope of impressing Darius with their answer and thereby winning rich rewards. The first argued that it was wine; the second that it was the emperor; and the third

⁷⁴ Brian Ó Cuív, 'An Ornamental Device in Irish Verse', *Éigse* 23 (1989), 45–56, at p. 55.

⁷⁵ For edition, translation and discussion, see Boyle, 'Biblical History', pp. 62–5.

⁷⁶ Best, *et al.*, ed., *The Book of Leinster*, V, 1231–2; Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara, trans., *Irish Biblical Apocrypha* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 22–3.

began by arguing that it was women, citing as evidence the case of the emperor's concubine, Apame.

While sitting at the emperor's right, she took the crown off his head, put it on her own, and then slapped his face with her left hand. All the emperor did was look at her with his mouth open. Whenever she smiles at him, he smiles back; and when she gets angry with him, he flatters her and teases her until she is in a good mood again.

(1 Esdras 4:29–31)

This is the point in our Middle Irish narrative where the story concludes, but the earlier version in Esdras continues to a more religious, transcendent conclusion: after the three members of Darius's bodyguard (not the ethnically diverse trio of the Irish tale) have debated whether wine, women or kings are the strongest power on earth, Zerubbabel – who had begun by arguing the case for women – states that in fact the greatest power is Truth. He concludes a long speech asserting the power of Truth above all things by saying that 'Truth is strong, royal, powerful, and majestic forever. Let all things praise the God of Truth' (1 Esdras 4:40). In return for this display of wisdom, Darius offers Zerubbabel anything he desires; he responds by reminding Darius of his duty to help rebuild the city of Jerusalem and Darius grants him letters and support to fulfil this. This raises questions about our tenth-century Irish reworking of this narrative: why is the action moved from the court of Darius to that of the Greek Salmoneus? Why is the bodyguard characterised as being comprised of a Greek, Roman and Jew? Why does the narrative end with the sexual power of women and omit the edifying conclusion about divine Truth transcending all other power? The preceding discussion has shown us that medieval Irish authors would have no trouble identifying Darius the Great and locating a narrative at his court, just as they did with Nimrod, Belshazzar, Cyrus and other figures from Assyrian and Achaemenid history. The relocation of the narrative in this instance away from Persia to the court of Salmoneus must be the result of other considerations, perhaps in this case bringing the anecdote into line with other similar texts set amongst kings 'of the Greeks'.⁷⁷ It offers us yet another glimpse of the less tangible instances of influence from, allusion to and inversion of biblical narratives in the corpus of medieval Irish literature, some of which can only be identified as such when we know the source text, as with this Darius narrative. Much remains to be uncovered, but much must be lost: the brief snippets of poetry on Cyrus, for example, hint at medieval Irish epic accounts of Achaemenid and Babylonian history that do not survive.

⁷⁷ For example, the story beginning with *Rí iriscech ro bóí do Grecaib* (Best, et al., ed., *The Book of Leinster*, V, 1223) and the story known as *Iartaige na hingine colaige do Grécaib* (Best, et al., *The Book of Leinster*, V, 1224). The latter is translated as 'The Fate of the Sinful Greek Girl' by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 4, ed. Angela Bourke, et al. (Cork, 2002), pp. 119–21.

I have argued that medieval Irish engagement with the Matter of Babylon was sustained, dynamic and creative. Its precise character and nature could change in the moment in response to specific demands of genre, authorial intent and political context, as well as more broadly over time as an integral part, I have argued, of an increasingly ‘imperial’ political ideology in eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland. From the exegetical focus on the Babylonian Captivity in some of the earliest extant manuscripts from Ireland, through the linguistic speculations of the seventh- and eighth-century grammarians, to the historiographical writings of the Middle Irish period, we see an important role for the Matter of Babylon across numerous branches of learning. This interest was not only typological, although any mention of Babylon in medieval Irish literature could trigger cognitive associations with Rome and Jerusalem (and perhaps by extension with Tara or latterly even Dublin) in the minds of educated audiences. Discussion of Babylon could also be for its own sake, and encompass the geographical, the architectural, the commercial and the aesthetic. We have seen a combination of mimetic and metaphorical discussions of Babylon, just as Andrew Scheil has argued can be witnessed elsewhere in Western literary traditions.⁷⁸ And as in other literary traditions, we cannot escape the political dimensions of interest in Babylonian history. Augustine wrote in his *De Civitate Dei* that

mankind everywhere is generally divided against itself, and when one part is the stronger, it oppresses another ... Thus – and this does not happen without the providence of God, in whose power it lies to determine who in war shall be subjugated and who shall subjugate them – certain peoples have been entrusted with kingdoms, while some have been placed under the rule of others.⁷⁹

As Irish provincial overkings struggled against each other for political dominance of the island and increasingly sought to bring another *gens* – the Scandinavian-speaking ‘foreigners’ of Ireland – under their rule, their learned élites developed an increasingly sophisticated discourse of empire and imperial power, which encompassed the study of historic empires, their cities and their rulers, and juxtaposed the histories of those empires with the pre-history of Ireland. The Gaelic-speaking peoples were increasingly cast – whether implicitly or explicitly – as the rightful rulers of Ireland, and the subjugation of other peoples on the island articulated as a divinely-ordained part of salvation history. The ambitions of Ireland’s proto-emperors were about to be abruptly terminated by their own encounter with the Angevin Empire, but right up to the end of the Middle Irish period, the long-term subjection of Ireland to English rule was by no means inevitable. It lay in God’s power to decide ‘who in war shall be subjugated and who shall subjugate them’. It is in this light that we should consider the medieval Irish interest in the ‘idoltrous’ Assyrian and Achaemenid empires, who were,

⁷⁸ Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*.

⁷⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XVIII.2, cited in Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 50.

according to the dominant medieval Christian worldview, temporarily accorded the divine right to subjugate others. In the next chapter, we will explore attitudes towards idolatry and idolatrous peoples, and the inevitable approach of Christianity, which, in the eyes of its adherents, had come to supersede, and ultimately triumph over, everything which had gone before.

PROOF

5 Twilight of the idols

We have seen the centrality of the psalms to religious life in medieval Ireland, something that resulted in part from their perceived capacity to instruct the faithful in all aspects of correct Christian doctrine. Conversely, the psalms also do much to identify and articulate the ‘other’, the ‘idolatrous’ and the ‘enemy’. In the preceding chapter, we analysed some of the complex ways in which medieval Irish authors responded to the conceptual geography of Babylon, not only as a city that existed in contrast to the holy city of Jerusalem, but also as a site of origin for earthly, imperial power. Babylon, and its idolatrous rulers, were essential to the development of both salvation history and political theory. In this chapter, we will explore the concept of idolatry and the idea that Christianity was the true faith that would ultimately triumph over the global practice of idol-worship. The process of Christianisation, which spread from the Holy Land to the ‘ends of the earth’ by means of the apostolic missions, was one which was widely characterised as a divinely ordained endeavour to bring the light of truth to the darkest corners of the world. We have already seen how Ireland was understood as being situated at the global periphery in contrast to Jerusalem at its centre. I will argue here that various depictions of St Patrick as the first, only or most important missionary in Ireland were part of a construct through which he became an honorary apostle, his mission deliberately presented as analogous to those of Christ’s own disciples elsewhere in Europe, Asia and Africa. The exegetical worldview of medieval Irish authors meant that this construct was not in competition with the idea of Patrick as another Moses (outlined in Chapter 1), but rather was complementary to it: Patrick could simultaneously be understood as the Moses of Ireland and as another apostle. Both images of Patrick are interwoven in different ways through a variety of sources. I will argue further that depicting Ireland as the site of an ‘apostolic mission’ was yet another strand in the project of writing the island into the narrative of salvation, casting Ireland as a place whose idolatrous peoples were equal to those of Babylon or Egypt, and whose defeat by, and conversion to, Christianity was of vital significance to the teleological movement of history. In order to do this, we need to begin by thinking about idolatry and the ways in which idol-worship would have been understood by medieval Irish authors and audiences.

Psalm 134 states that:

Simulacra gentium argentum et aurum,
opera manuum hominum.
Os habent, et non loquitur;
oculos habent, et non videbunt.
Aures habent, et non audient;
neque enim est spiritus in ore ipsorum.

the idols of the gentiles are silver and gold,
the work of men's hands,
they have a mouth but speak not:
they have eyes but they see not.
They have ears but they hear not:
neither is their breath in their mouths.

(Psalm 134:15–17)

The Old Irish glosses on the Milan commentary on this passage state that one significant reading of Psalm 134 involves understanding that while idols are shaped in the physical likeness of humans, they are in no way human. The human body is formed by God in his own likeness, whereas the body of an idol is formed by men in imitation of themselves. The body of man is nobler than the body of an idol because God imbues the human body with a soul: idols, as human constructions, have no soul.¹ The imagery of Psalm 134 is echoed and inverted in the Acts of the Apostles in a manner that serves to cast the apostolic missions as the end of the era of idolatry:

Incrassatum est enim cor populi huius, et auribus graviter audierunt, et oculos suos compresserunt: ne forte videant oculis, et auribus audiant, et corde intelligant, et convertantur, et sanem eos.

For the heart of this people is grown gross, and with their ears they have heard heavily, and their eyes they have shut; lest perhaps they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

(Acts 28:27)

This passage extends the unhearing, unseeing, unknowing nature of the idols to those who worship them. But conversion to Christianity promised to bring with it the use of one's senses and the full clarity of understanding. This mode of discourse, characterising knowledge of Christianity specifically as enabling the end of idolatry through the use of physical senses and intellectual processes – all of which are denied literally to idols and figuratively to their worshippers – is

¹ *Thes. Pal.*, i, 470, glosses 138c 1, 3 and 4.

found in many medieval Irish texts.² However, there appears to be another interconnected strand of thought that regarded idols as animate insofar as they were possessed or inhabited by a demon. This was articulated succinctly by Augustine when he wrote that:

our forefathers erred very far with respect to the knowledge of the gods, through incredulity and through want of attention to their worship and service, they invented this art of making gods; and this art once invented, they associated with it a suitable virtue borrowed from universal nature, and being incapable of making souls, they evoked those of demons or of angels, and united them with these holy images and divine mysteries, in order that through these souls the images might have power to do good or harm to men.³

Thus, some writers regarded idols as lesser gods of some sort, containing an evil spirit that needed to be expelled in order for those who were worshipping them to see their true nature. Rather than simply dumb, senseless statues, there were cases where idols did have the capacity to speak, having been imbued with a demonic spirit by their human makers, and it required the divinely ordained power of Christianity to render them mute and powerless.⁴

A further biblical touchstone for the concept of fashioning idols after the likeness of men is found in the account of the creation of the first idol in Wisdom 14. This tells how a man whose son died had a statue of him created, and the statue was subsequently worshipped:

Acerbo enim luctu dolens pater, cito sibi rapti filii fecit imaginem; et illum qui tunc quasi homo mortuus fuerat, nunc tamquam deum colere coepit, et constituit inter servos suos sacra et sacrificia.

For a father being afflicted with bitter grief, made to himself the image of his son who was quickly taken away: and him who then had died as a man, he began now to worship as a god, and appointed him rites and sacrifices among his servants.

(Wisdom 14:15)

The biblical narrative goes on to say how the skill and diligence of the artist, who sought to create the best representation of the lost son in order to satisfy his patron, was in part to blame for the reaction of the people who were ‘carried away

² See, for example, the relationships between the physical senses and intellectual processes as manifested in the sources discussed in Boyle, ‘Aspects of Philosophical Discourse’; and ‘The Twelfth-Century English Transmission of a Poem on the Threefold Division of the Mind, Attributed to Patrick of Dublin (d. 1084)’ in *A Fantastic and Abstruse Latinity? Hiberno-Continental Cultural and Literary Interactions in the Middle Ages*, ed. Wolfram Keller and Dagmar Schlüter (Münster, 2017), pp. 102–16.

³ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 8:24, 26.

⁴ Aideen M. O’Leary, *Trials and Translations: The Latin Origins of the Irish Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Aberdeen, 2013), p. 120.

by the beauty of the work' (Wisdom 14:20). It was the resemblance of the statue to the dead boy that was in part responsible for the people's desire to worship it. Thereafter, we are told, men 'serving either their affection, or their kings, gave incommunicable names to stones and wood' (Wisdom 14:21), and this in turn led to awful consequences, such as bloodshed, theft, perjury, adultery, corruption and unfaithfulness (Wisdom 14:24–6).

This episode in the Book of Wisdom provides the narrative basis for an eleventh-century Irish poem that draws together the themes of idolatry and the apostolic missions, and we shall discuss this poem, which was edited by Kuno Meyer more than a century ago but to the best of my knowledge has never been translated and has only rarely been mentioned in secondary literature, in due course.⁵ I shall use the poem as a thematic focal point in this chapter, but I seek to place it within a wider context of medieval Irish discourse on, and attitudes towards, idolatry and the conversion of idolatrous peoples to Christianity. This necessarily touches on aspects of attitudes towards non-Christians. The focus of the poem on the apostolic missions as bringing about the end of idol-worship also necessitates some discussion of those missions and how they relate to perceptions of religious conversion and missionary work more broadly. The fate of the apostles in their various mission fields invites consideration of attitudes towards religious martyrdom and the vexed question of martyrdom (or the lack thereof) in late antique and early medieval Ireland. These are significant issues, and in some places my discussion is necessarily superficial or preliminary, but I hope it will be an invitation to further study.

'Your blood be upon your own heads'

Put simply, two broad schools of interpretation exist for the role of the Church in early Irish society: one, which we might term the 'minimalist' school, advocated most notably in recent years by Colmán Etchingham, suggests that the depth of Christianisation in Ireland was minimal and superficial, that pastoral care was administered only to a para-monastic ecclesiastical élite and that the majority of the population was left mired in its own sinfulness without the possibility of salvation.⁶ By this reckoning, it might be possible to glean evidence of continued 'idolatrous' behaviour by those outside the immediate ecclesiastical ambit, albeit with the caveat that our written evidence was preserved by church-educated elites and therefore represents their view of such non-Christian activity, necessarily filtered through a Christian lens. By contrast, the 'maximalist' school, whose leading advocates included the late Richard Sharpe, see the Church in Ireland as providing pastoral care to the entire population who, whatever the vagaries of individual belief and morality, would have regarded themselves as Christian, with as good a chance as any of gaining entry to heaven. This would seem to be

⁵ Published as 'Heidnischer Götzendienst und die Sendung der Apostel', in Meyer, ed., 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', pp. 15–6.

⁶ Colmán Etchingham, 'Bishops, Church and People: How Christian Was "Early Christian Ireland"?' in *L'irlanda e gli irlandesi nell'alto medioevo*, Atti delle Settimane (Spoleto, 2010), pp. 325–48.

supported by the archaeological evidence, which suggests a radical social transformation in fifth- and sixth-century Ireland coinciding with the conversion era (see Introduction). Again there is a caveat, which is that the arrival of significant numbers of non-Christian Scandinavians in the ninth century would have complicated matters in parts of Ireland for about a century or so, but on the whole, where we may have some limited evidence for superstitious ‘folk’ practices, these were operating within an entirely Christian context and would not have been seen as ‘pagan’ or in any way at odds with Christian belief by those who practised them. Thus, the use of a charm for healing purposes, for example, was not a ‘pagan survival’, preserving knowledge that was beyond, or contrary to, the Christian Church, but rather something that can be entirely understood within a Christian social and educational context. For my part, I subscribe to the ‘maximalist’ interpretation, a position that has been strengthened by the publication of Liam Breatnach’s edition and translation of *Córus Bésgnai*, a late seventh-century law tract on the relationship between church and laity, which clearly indicates that the entire lay population had access to pastoral care, and by the work of archaeologist Tomás Ó Carragáin on the ubiquity of parish churches in early medieval Ireland.⁷ On a societal level, no one need be beyond the reach of the Church. I therefore suggest that early Irish writers from the seventh century and later had no direct experience or knowledge of indigenous pagan activity and their depictions of idolatrous behaviour was shaped entirely by their study of biblical and classical texts, by their knowledge of non-Christian communities overseas and by their contact with Scandinavian immigrants from the ninth century.

The ninth century saw significant Gaelic engagement with non-Christians within a thoroughly Christian environment. One might envisage individual instances of conversion to ‘heathenism’ among the Christian populace, perhaps particularly in cases of intermarriage with non-Christians, but on the whole the surviving sources clearly suggest that the institutional edifice of Christianity was unshaken and, in any case, by the tenth century, there is evidence for the conversion of the Scandinavian population of Ireland to the island’s longstanding, dominant religion. This was cemented in the eleventh century by the appointment of bishops in Hiberno-Scandinavian urban centres, such as Dublin and Waterford.⁸ We have little direct evidence before the thirteenth century for Irish interactions with other non-Christian communities who might be regarded as ‘idolatrous’, such as Jews and Muslims, but as we have seen in previous chapters, international travel and trade make it unlikely that Irish élites were ignorant, for example, of the dominance of the Umayyad Caliphate in the seventh and eighth centuries or of the events of the First Crusade in the eleventh. In terms of first-hand experience of religious conversion in Ireland, we can say almost nothing with certainty

⁷ Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Córus Bésgnai: An Old Irish Law Tract on the Church and Society* (Dublin, 2017); Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*.

⁸ Lesley Abrams, ‘The Conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 20 (1998), 1–29; Clare Downham, ‘Religious and Cultural Boundaries between Vikings and Irish: The Evidence of Conversion’, in *The March in the Islands of the Medieval West*, ed. J. Ní Ghraidaigh and E. O’Byrne (Leiden, 2012), pp. 15–34; Boyle and Breatnach, ‘Senchas Gall Átha Cliáth’.

about the initial conversion of the Gaelic-speaking populations to Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, but the fact that early medieval Ireland witnessed another (more limited) period of conversion in the ninth and tenth centuries is worth bearing in mind when we read sources from that period. Furthermore, Irish missionary activity abroad from the sixth century onwards brought some Irish traveling ecclesiastics into direct contact with various Anglo-Saxon and Continental communities who were regarded as idolatrous.

The idea of ‘defeating’ idolatry was intimately bound up with the act of martyrdom. Even in spiritual warfare, there will be losses on both sides. In spite of the lack of evidence for Ireland’s initial conversion, it is a truism of medieval Irish scholarship that opportunities for martyrdom in early Christian Ireland were few and far between.⁹ That is so much the case that one of the frequently cited elements of the theological output of early medieval Ireland is the idea of colours of martyrdom: because the prospect of ‘red martyrdom’, that is a martyrdom of blood, was so remote, one could instead attain a ‘white’ or ‘blue’ martyrdom through exile from one’s homeland for the sake of God and ascetic practices, respectively.¹⁰ This grows out of a strand of thinking found also in the writings of Gregory of Tours, who stated in his *Liber in Gloriam Martyrum* that ‘people could be considered martyrs for resisting vice’, thereby, in the words of James Palmer, ‘minimising the importance of the spectacular death’.¹¹ Rather than receiving a bloody martyrdom after a hostile encounter with idolatrous peoples, one could martyr oneself by battling personal demons such as lust or gluttony (see Chapter 3, where we saw how ‘enemies’ in the psalms could be literal enemies or could be taken figuratively to represent internal struggles with vices). This idea, even though it is only fully articulated in Irish in the seventh-century Cambrai Homily, has generally been taken as representative of a widespread belief in Ireland and used to explain the endeavours of well-known *peregrini* and missionaries, such as Saints Fursey and Columbanus. One, perhaps unintended, consequence of this is that the principle and most fundamental form of martyrdom – red martyrdom – is quickly forgotten, taking a backseat in scholarly discussions, which focus on these bloodless alternatives to the exclusion of any consideration of the ongoing role of ‘red’ martyrdom in early Irish religious discourse. The place of blood martyrdom in the early medieval Irish thought-world would repay further consideration and I hope to offer some possible avenues for future exploration here, not least by rehabilitating the

⁹ Thus, for example, Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Communities and Their Landscapes’, in *The Cambridge History of Ireland, Volume I: 600–1550*, ed. Brendan Smith (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 15–46, sees Christianisation in Ireland as a peaceful and largely bloodless fusing of the pre-Christian and Christian, in spite of the lack of reliable written evidence either way and the archaeological evidence suggesting radical social transformation in the fifth and sixth centuries.

¹⁰ Clare Stancliffe, ‘Red, White and Blue Martyrdom’, in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, *et al.* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 21–46.

¹¹ James Palmer, ‘Martyrdom and the Rise of Missionary Hagiography in the Later Merovingian World’, in *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World*, ed. Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 157–80, at p. 169.

role of the original martyrs, that is, the apostles, in the intellectual and literary life of Christianity in medieval Ireland.

As Palmer has noted, martyrdom was just one possibility within the repertoire of sanctity,¹² but it is a strand with a strong, visible presence in medieval Ireland in liturgy, hagiography, martyrologies, religious poetry and the homiletic corpus. Martyrdom was itself embedded within a wider discourse of religious violence. The violent deaths of the apostles (John was the only one not to be executed for his faith) were fitting mirrors for reflecting the violence of Christ's own sacrifice on the cross. In his poetry, the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena characterised the Crucifixion in blood-soaked, triumphant and heroic terms:

Ast nobis Christum, deuicto principe mundi,
Sanguine perfusum psallere dulce sonat.

But to us it sounds sweet to chant a hymn about Christ
covered in blood as he conquered the Prince of the World.¹³

But Eriugena also envisaged Christ's death as a blood sacrifice, a Eucharistic combination of flesh, blood and water, which cleansed the world of its sins and offered eternal redemption. In his poem, which cites the antiphon for the adoration of the Cross, *Ecce lignum crucis* ('See the wood of the Cross'), and which therefore may have been intended for reading on Good Friday, Eriugena states:

Ecce crucis lignum quadratum continet orbem,
In quo pendeat sponte sua dominus
Et uerbum patris dignatum sumere carnem,
In qua pro nobis hostia grata fuit.
Aspice confossas palmas humerosque pedesque.
Spinarum sermo tempora cincta fero.
In medio lateris, reserato fonte salutis,
Vires haustus, sanguis et unda, fluunt.
Vnda lauat totum ueteri peccamine mundum,
Sanguis mortales nos facit esse deos.

See the wood of the cross that embraces the four-cornered world:
of his own accord did our Lord hang upon it.
And the Word of the Father deigned to receive the flesh,
in which for our sake he became a victim who pleased.
Behold the pierced palms, the shoulders and feet,
the temples girt with the cruel wreath of thorns.
From the midst of his side, the unlocked fount of salvation,
flow living draughts of water and blood.
The water washes the whole world clean of its sin of old;

¹² Palmer, 'Martyrdom and the Rise of Missionary Hagiography'.

¹³ Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina*, pp. 58–9, l. 7–8.

the blood makes us mortals divine.¹⁴

For Eriugena, Christ's blood brought humans closer to sanctity because it was the sacrifice that offered salvation to mankind. Consumption of that salvific blood mixed with the cleansing water at every Eucharist ensures that this founding sacrifice is continually recalled in the mind of every Christian. Eriugena fixed on the moment of the Crucifixion in agonising detail – the willing 'victim' hanging on the cross, 'the pierced palms', 'the cruel wreath of thorns' – and invited his audience to 'behold' Christ's suffering.¹⁵ Given Christ's slow, painful death, it is thus fitting that his immediate followers were depicted as imitating that ultimate sacrifice with violent, sacrificial deaths of their own, thereby placing martyrdom at the heart of early Christianity and marrying Christ's bloody sacrifice with Christianity's bloody triumph.

Similarly, a century earlier, Blathmac son of Cú Brettan depicted Christ's Crucifixion in bloody and violent terms, which employed Eucharistic imagery. The Crucifixion scene is long and detailed in Blathmac's poem, but the following excerpts give a sense of the gruesome yet triumphant scene:

Do:breth coronn – ba ró tinn –
delcæa timchell a choímchinn.
Bíthi cloī tria chossa,
alaili tria bánbossa. ...

... Ó fo:rorcbath a chríde,
maic rí g na secht nóebnime,
do: rórtad fin fu róemu,
fuilt Christ tría geltóebu.

... Ar:rócaib guth caín cathach
oc attuch a nóebathar:
'Cair rom:léicis, a Dé bí,
dom doíri, dom dochraiti?' ...

... To:fich sruth folo – ró tinn –
combu derg snob cech óenchruinn.
Buí crú for bruinnib betho
i mbarraib cech prímfedo. ...

A crown was placed – it was severe excess –
of thorns around his beautiful head.
Nails were driven through his feet,
others through his white palms. ...

¹⁴ Herren, ed. and trans., *Johannis Scotti Eriugena Carmina*, pp. 58–9, l. 19–28.

¹⁵ For the wider intellectual and material context for such imagery, see, for example, the essays in Juliet Mullins, et al., ed., *Envisioning Christ on the Cross: Ireland and the Early Medieval West* (Dublin, 2013).

... When his heart had been pierced,
of the son of the king of the seven holy heavens,
wine was spilled upon the pathways,
the blood of Christ through his bright sides. ...

... He raised a beautiful, warlike voice
invoking his holy Father:
‘Why have you forsaken me, living God,
to my servitude, to my distress?’ ...

... A stream of blood gushed forth – too severe –
so that the bark of every tree became red.
There was gore on the surfaces of the world,
in the treetops of every chief forest.¹⁶

The blood and gore interlock with Christ’s ‘warlike voice’ on the one hand and the ‘wine’ that is the ‘blood of Christ’ on the other to form an image of Christ as wounded warrior, whose gushing blood will wash away the sins of the world.

Such imagery is employed in a range of medieval Irish sources, such as the ‘Litany of Confession’, where the depiction of Christ as warrior is developed through alliterative language:

A clochaig, cathaig, cétaigh,
A coim coronaig, coscoraigh, comramhaig, coimdeis
O rock-like warrior of a hundred hosts;
O fair crowned one, victorious, skilled in battle¹⁷

In the ‘Litany of Jesus 1’, even the deaths of the babies slaughtered by Herod are regarded as a form of martyrdom:

Ateoch frit hule noeb-noidenu in domuin ule, ro damutar croich , marttra
forut, imon cethrachait ar cet ar dib milib macán ro horta la Hiruath i mBethil
Iuda, im Chiric maccan.

I entreat Thee by all the holy infants of the whole world who endured the
cross and martyrdom for Thy sake, with the two thousand one hundred and
forty children who were slain by Herod in Bethlehem of Judah and with the
child Cyricus.¹⁸

Thus, in many cases it is difficult to entangle the specific vocabulary of martyrdom from that of other instances of divinely ordained violence and blood

¹⁶ Siobhán Barrett, ‘A Study of the Lexicon of the Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan’, unpublished PhD thesis (Maynooth, 2017), pp. 203–4, §§51, 56, 60, 64. Cf. Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac*.

¹⁷ Plummer, ed. and trans., *Irish Litanies*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁸ Plummer, ed. and trans., *Irish Litanies*, pp. 34–5.

sacrifice, particularly the Crucifixion, which could itself be regarded as martyrdom for the sake of humankind.

One medieval Irish literary depiction of martyrdom offers imagery comparable to that used by Blathmac and Eriugena to envision the Crucifixion, namely, *Aided Chonchobair* ('The Death of Conchobar'). As we have already seen in Chapter 1, this tale survives in a number of different versions, and we need to be alert to the fact that some of these versions draw out ideas about martyrdom more explicitly than others. However, all of the versions act as a frame-tale, encompassing a central piece of *rosc*, possibly dating from the early eighth century (perhaps just a few decades after the composition of the Cambrai Homily), in which the speaker – Conchobar, king of Ulster, in the surviving versions – expresses his anger at Christ's Crucifixion, his wish to defend Christ and his willingness to lose his own life in the process:

Dia ráith no-regainn hi mbás asmu flaith
fo-leicib fachel n-éco. Niba ní.
Nemthuir necht remi-téisid do chomrath
mo chride a clóas im Artrach at[h]gubai.

Because of Him I would have gone into death out of (?) my lordship, I will let down apprehension of death. It will be worth nothing.

In hearing about the lamentation of the High-King my heart should have hastened to precede the pure heavenly hero.¹⁹

This expresses an ideal of royal martyrdom, the holy violence of the ideal Christian warrior-king. The B version of *Aided Chonchobair* moves Conchobar's martyrdom from ambition to actuality, as we are told, immediately after the utterance of the *rosc*:

Is far sin cot-n-oscrastar amal bid oc techt hi roí catha ar bélaib Críst co sescainn asa chiunn a n-inchinn Meisse Gegrai 7 condid-epalt ind ór sin. Is ed as-berr dee iarum, is é cét-geintlíde do-choid i flaith nime, fo bíth robo baithis dó ind fuil don-escmart 7 ro creiti do Chríst. Finit Amen.

After that he jumped upwards, as if he were going into the battlefield in front of Christ, so that the brain of Mess Gegrai sprang out of his head and he died at that time. This is what one says of him then, he is the first pagan who had gone into the kingdom of Heaven, because the blood which he had shed was a baptism to him, and (because) he had believed in Christ. Finit. Amen.²⁰

Here the salvific blood is not Christ's, serving a Eucharistic function, but rather Conchobar's own, serving as baptismal water. This tale is often read within the

¹⁹ Johan Corthals, ed. and trans., 'The *Retoirc* in *Aided Chonchobuir*', *Ériu* 40 (1989), 41–59, §§11–12.

²⁰ Kobel, ed. and trans., 'A Critical Edition of *Aided Chonchobair*', pp. 346–7.

context of other narratives concerning the characters of the so-called ‘Ulster Cycle’, and the depiction of Conchobar can be understood as a representation of penitential kingship, with his sitting in a state of moderation, chastity and passivity as a form of atonement for the acts of political and sexual violence he is depicted as committing in other sagas.²¹ But in its different manifestations, *Aided Chonchobair* is also a martyrdom narrative – in the words of Johan Corthals, a ‘red martyrdom by intention’²² – and thus can and should be read in light of depictions of the deeds of other early martyrs. As we shall see below, it was the martyrdoms of the apostles that had the strongest influence on religious understanding of holy violence and the clash between Christianity and idolatry in early medieval Ireland.

The martyrdoms of the apostles resulted ultimately from the events of Pentecost. On Pentecost, the apostles were filled with a divinely inspired linguistic diversity that enabled them to spread their message across the world. In his sermon on Pentecost, Augustine of Hippo wrote:

Sicut enim post diluivium superba impietas hominum turrim contra Dominum aedificavit excelsam, quando per linguas diversas dividi meruit genus humanum, ut unaquaeque gens lingua propria loqueretur, ne ab aliis intelligeretur: sic humilis fidelium pietas earum linguarum diversitatem Ecclesiae contulit unitati; ut quod discordia dissipaverat, colligeret caritas, et humani generis tanquam unius corporis membra dispersa ad unum caput Christum compaginata redigerentur, et in sancti corporis unitatem dilectionis igne conflarentur.²³

For just as after the Flood the proud impiety of men built, against God, a tower to the heavens, when mankind deserved to become divided through diverse languages in order that each people would speak its own language but not be able to understand the other languages; so the humble piety of the faithful gathered the diversity of their languages into the unity of the Church in order that what discord had dispersed, love would gather; and that the dispersed members of each race, as if of one body, would be brought back together and rejoined to the one head, Christ, and would be refined by the fire of love into the unity of the holy body.

Thus, Augustine expanded on the typological and exegetical connections between the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel and the events of Pentecost as described in Acts (see also discussion in Chapter 4). As Tristan Major has argued, ‘especially after Augustine, Latin Christian authors were able to connect Christ’s seventy-two disciples with the seventy-two original nations thought to be preserved in the Table of Nations’ and therefore, ‘the linguistic diversity created at Babel was overcome by the apostolic ability to speak in whatever language was

²¹ See, for example, the negative assessment of Conchobar’s character in Johnston, ‘Kingship Made Real?’.

²² Corthals, ‘*The Retoiric*’, p. 53.

²³ Augustine, *Sermo CCLXXI: In die Pentecostes*, V, in Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, 38, col. 1245.

needed to preach the gospel across ethnic and linguistic boundaries'.²⁴ We have already seen the importance of the Babel narrative, and its New Testament parallel, the Pentecost narrative, in an Irish context for the development of linguistic thought (see Introduction and Chapter 1), but as noted, it was also the key catalyst for the apostolic missions. Equipped with the ability to communicate their message in the world's many tongues, the apostles set out to conquer it. Some of their supposed experiences are sketched out in the later books of the New Testament, particularly Acts and some of the Epistles, but considerably more detail is offered in the many apocryphal texts that were composed in the late antique period.

Building on the biblical precedent of apostolic journeys, such as Paul's sea voyage to Rome (Acts 27), Latin translations of biblical apocrypha frequently contain passages that describe 'long journeys to remote foreign lands, often interrupted by encounters with barbarous populations and endangered by thirst, attacks by hostile people, etc. This kind of tale sometimes includes voyages, such as the crossing recounted in the *Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud Anthropopagos*, in which the apostle Andrew and his companions, starting from Palestine, reached Mermedonia, the centre of the barbarian land where they were bound to meet their martyrdom'.²⁵ Such voyages may have provided some of the inspiration and impetus for episodes in – and perhaps even some of the structure of – the Christian voyage literature that is attested in early medieval Ireland. It is certainly the case that narratives that described the fates of the apostles once they reached their final destinations had a deep cultural impact on many genres of medieval Irish literature, religious and otherwise, and we shall use the Middle Irish poem on idolatry and the apostolic missions as a focal point in order to explore the ways that this influence manifested itself.

'Consenting unto his death'

The complex interweaving of idolatry, martyrdom and the apostolic missions to the ends of the earth is perhaps best exemplified in the Middle Irish poem beginning *Ídail, ó ro hairgit-sum* ('Idols, when they were invented'). Probably composed in the eleventh century, it has largely been ignored by scholarship. It survives in two Royal Irish Academy manuscripts, RIA MS 23 N 10 and RIA MS B iv 2. The poem was edited, primarily from 23 N 10 but with some readings from B iv 2, by Kuno Meyer in 1921 and has rarely been discussed since.²⁶ It has not been translated or commented on in any detail. This is in spite of the inherent interest of the poem's subject-matter, its language, imagery and sophisticated metrical features, and the significance of its theological-historical approach. It is hardly surprising, however: compared to the lyric and so-called 'secular' narrative poetry that survives from early medieval Ireland, the vast corpus of early Irish religious poetry – which includes doctrinal and devotional verse, poetic adaptations of biblical narrative and apocrypha, pedagogical verse and hagiographical

²⁴ Major, *Undoing Babel*, p. 24.

²⁵ Orlandi, 'Brendan and Moses', p. 221.

²⁶ Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', pp. 15–6.

poems – has been relatively little studied. A full critical edition with textual apparatus remains a *desideratum*; here I simply offer the text of the poem, primarily based on Meyer’s edition, but with some of my own readings supplied where I think they improve upon Meyer’s, along with an English translation and some preliminary groundwork in terms of commentary and analysis. Much will remain to be said by future scholars.

The poem’s thematic complexity is inherently bound up with its theological-historical approach. The subject matter of the poem is split between its two halves: the first half is concerned with the origins and spread of idol-worship; the second with the fate of the apostolic missions. The poem thus possesses an ‘Old Testament’ first half on idolatry (based on Wisdom and apocryphal sources) and a ‘New Testament’ second half on the apostles (based on Acts and apocryphal sources). But the two themes are intricately connected: the poem concludes with the statement that the apostles drove out the ‘tempestuous force of every idol’. The poet cleverly weaves together the spread of mankind after the expulsion from paradise, the spread of idolatry and the spread of the apostolic missions, each mirroring the other, as salvation history gradually works its way from the world’s navel to its edges.

The poem is Middle Irish, as attested by the presence of Middle Irish verbal forms (*ro ansatar* in 20a, for example, or *ro indarbsat* in 24a), but there are, for example, no independent pronouns or other features of later Middle Irish, suggesting a date of composition in the eleventh century. It is written in a complex metre known as *ái fhreisligi*. The syllable count for each stanza is 7³, 7², 7³, 7². Rhyme is between lines b + d, with additional *aicill* rhyme between the trisyllabic word at the end of line c and the penultimate word in line d. There is also, in most stanzas, alliteration in every line, linking alliteration between lines a + b (known as *lurgae*), and, less consistently, linking alliteration (*fidrad freccomail*) between stanzas. While it is common enough to see Middle Irish poetry written in complex metres, it is frequently the case that poets will not maintain that complexity in every stanza, and such is the case here. As far as I am aware, this is the only surviving example of an early Irish poem in *ái fhreisligi* with *aicill* rhyme.²⁷

I give here the text and translation of this twenty-four stanza poem: we can see the transition in theme at stanza 12:

1. *Ída[i]l, ō ro hairgit-sum*
ro hairged cach olc amlaidh
a[c] clainn Ádhaim illdānaigh
bādaig immānaig adbuil.
2. *Is hē ro oirg īdula –*
adbul in ciste cinadh –
Zero-faneis foirglide,
gērb oirdnidhe, nīrb idan.

²⁷ The metre is mentioned in the metrical tracts. For some discussion of it, see Breatnach, ‘Araile felmac féig don Mumain’.

3. Mac ro bōi `con bile-sin,
ba bāeth a ed `s a aister,
inmuin leis in lāechadbar
do gāethfognam re gaisced.
4. Acht gēr gasta in gēigbile,
gēr[bo] gaot, nīrbo gāine,
marb in mac cin maithmide,
gan aithrigi, gan aīne.
5. Ro iād re ed n-ōinūaire
ba adbul arna iādud,
a c[h]uma ina c[h]ride-sium,
gēr duine-sium ba dīabul.
6. Ro tinōil tre t[h]rebuire,
ba trom int adbur d'īdal,
a innmas in fhī[sh]lait-sin,
ind rīgmaic-sin dia rīgad.
7. Ba maīnech a airechas,
cērba mōr tall a meisce,
gērbo ferr a fhōirithin,
ind fhōirithin ba meiste.
8. Do-rōnad delb duineta
dō go tenn da cach tinde
d'argut is d'ōr Arābi.
Ba mōr glanāille in gille.
9. Do-cūaid dīabul dobertach
san deilb arna dēnam;
romill rēimm na rīgruide
ra sīrluige ra fēgad.
10. Ro hadrad int arracht-sin
acan oirecht gan aichne,
ach gerb fhōil a adbur-sum,
adbul-sum asa haithle.
11. I ndAisia is i nĒoruiþ,
`s i nAfraic nārbo sochar,
bōi īdol cach airechta,
robo doluchta in dochur.
12. Gur cuired na coīmapstail
co claind Eba ocus Ādaim,
co ndernsat fīr forcetuil

- do dġn coirppecaid²⁸ Ādaimh.
13. I ndAntġaig ro ordned-sim,
re hed is Rġim fa rġaguil,
Petar mac Eġin²⁹ oirdnidi,
treġir fa foirglidi oc fġaduim.
14. Doc[ġ]aid³⁰ Andrias ingantach
dar Eoruip sġar co sġile,
co riacht Muir nIcht n-oigreta,
ba gnġm coimdetau cġaide.³¹
15. Dagmaic [?] Petuir³² [pġrġmapstail?]³³
Pġl ġ bu mġn cach labra,
nġi mblġadna i nGrġ[i]c nglanarmaig,
rob anaraidh gerb amra.
16. Pilip apstul airechda,
gġr derg in thir, nġr tġamda,
tuc rġaguil do Riffecdaib
is do Scithecdaib scġamda.
17. Ioin ġg idan Eiffisi,
nġrb imda ġg³⁴ a urdail,
a nderna³⁵ Eoin d'ingantaib³⁶
treoir d'imforcraid cach ugdair.
18. Symmġn, Iudas Ebraide,
ġebda a n-aicned frġa n-adrad.
Rġncatar tġr nAssarda,
ba mġn lassarda a labra[d].³⁷
19. Partholġn thir trġnsġlus,
Tġmas foirgleta fġadain.

²⁸ MS: *coirphecad*.

²⁹ In his edition, Meyer thought that this was an error, presumably because he thought that the poet was saying that Peter was the son of John (the Apostle). However, the poet is correctly identifying Peter as the son of Jonah.

³⁰ Both manuscripts have *docaid* for *docġaid*, perhaps suggesting a common exemplar.

³¹ B iv 2: *ga gnġomh coimdetau ucaidhe*. Despite the misdivision of words in B vi 2, both manuscripts preserve the unusual spelling *coimdetau*, further suggesting a common exemplar.

³² B iv 2: *Dagħmic Pedoir Pġl*.

³³ The line is very problematic, but this is my best suggestion.

³⁴ B iv 2: *ġgh*. The repetition of *ġg* in this stanza serves to emphasise John's status as the youngest disciple.

³⁵ This is a Middle Irish feature, i.e. *a* + nasal + dependent. Old Irish would take the relative.

³⁶ B iv 2: *ingantaib*; 23 N 10: *iggantaib*.

³⁷ Both 23 N 10 (*labra*) and B iv 2 (*labhro*) have the same mistake, suggesting a common exemplar. I have emended the text to *labrad*.

Ro airdarcaigset d'Indecdaib
dā rindegnaid cach rīagail.³⁸

20. Dā Iacōb ro ansatar
'na n-atharda, nīrb ēcōir,
cen brōn, cen brīg n-ainbt[h]ine
a tīr tairngire³⁹ fo c[h]ētōir.
21. Madīan togda togaide
inat Iudais ro comlīn
apstol āebda Arābi,⁴⁰
nōiba in glanaige gormrīg.
22. Matha mac Ailp Ebraide,
āedba a aigned re adrad,
in māl mōr mīn Affraice,
a achraici is airdaire.⁴¹
23. Barnabus breō bithbūadach,
fursanta in lōcha[i]rn⁴² rolēir,
fūair a guin in gēcbile
ar Muir tēiglige⁴³ Torrēin.
24. Na apstail ro indarbsat
nīrb oirecht dis dībaid,
na fir a tīr tarngaire
brīg anbfine cech īdail.

Īdail

1. Idols, when they were invented
every evil was thus invented
by the many-skilled descendants of Adam,
contentious, wandering, vast.
2. He who invented idols was –

³⁸ 23 N 10: *rīagla*; I have emended to *rīagail* to restore the rhyme with *fiadáin*. The line is missing in B iv 2.

³⁹ 23 N 10: *tarngaire*. I have preferred the reading from B iv 2 as it provides the rhyme with *n-ainbthine*.

⁴⁰ 23 N 10: *Arobi*; B iv 2: *Arāpi*.

⁴¹ As they stand, lines b and d do not rhyme. The *adrad* may be the mistake (based on similarity to line 18b) but so may be the *airdaire*: *eDIL*, s.v. *airdirc* offers the variant spelling *airderc*, which is slightly better though still not a good rhyme, and the form *ardarc*, which is closest but still imperfect. It seems likeliest to me that the *adrad* is a mistake in the common exemplar.

⁴² *eDIL*, s.v. *lōcharn*, cites B iv 2: *fursanti in lochrainn*. In both manuscripts we also see the loss of final lenited *d*: cf. *eDIL*, s.v. *fursaintid*.

⁴³ 23 N 10: *dēiglige*; B iv 2: *tēiglidhe*. The latter must be the superior reading as it provides the necessary alliteration.

vast the treasury of wrongdoing –
famous Sarofanes,
although he was distinguished, he was not pure.

3. A son whom that scion had,
foolish was his time and his labour,
he dearly wished that the trainee warrior
should skilfully serve at weapons.
4. Even though the branching tree was dextrous,
although he was skilful, it was not an excellent thing,
the boy died without forgiveness,
without repentance, without fasting.
5. There closed in, in the space of a moment,
it was vast after its closing,
grief for him in his heart,
although he was a man he became a devil.
6. He gathered prudently –
it was substantial material for an idol –
the wealth of that plunder,
of that royal son, to crown him.
7. His attention was lavish⁴⁴
although his confusion there was great,
the greater the remedy,
the worse the remedy.
8. A human image was made
of him solidly out of every ingot
of the silver and of the gold of Arabia.
Great was the clear beauty of the boy.
9. A devil of evil deeds went
into the image after it was made,
it destroyed the succession of kings
by oath-swearing, by gazing at it.
10. That idolatrous image was adored
by the élite unthinkingly,
save that its substance was slight
it became vast afterwards.
11. In Asia and in Europe
and in Africa, which was no profit,
there was an idol for every assembly
it was [...] the loss.

⁴⁴ Or: his status was wealthy?

12. Until the dear Apostles were sent
to the descendants of Eve and Adam,
so that they taught what was true
to defend [against] the carnal sin of Adam.
13. In Antioch he was ordained,
since Rome for a time was under its rule,
noble Peter son of Jonah,
conduct which could be attested by a witness.
14. Wondrous Andrew went
across Europe westwards to the sea,
as far as the icy North Sea⁴⁵
it was a noble deed of holiness.
15. Good successor [?] of Peter [of the principle apostle]
Paul from whom every speech was gentle,
nine years in pure-weaponed Greece,
he was not harsh, although he was renowned.
16. Lordly Philip the apostle,
though the hero was bloodied, he was not weak
he brought a rule to the Phrygians
and to the ornamented Scythians.
17. Young, pure John of Ephesus
not many young men were like him,
what John did of wonders
would be too much for any author to describe.⁴⁶
18. Simon, Jude the Hebrew,
one should follow their splendid example.⁴⁷
They reached the land of the Assyrians,
gentle and ardent was their speech.
19. Bartholomew, strong bright hero,
Thomas, a true eye-witness.⁴⁸
The two pre-eminent sages made
known to the Indians every rule.
20. The two Jameses remained forthwith
in their fatherland, it was not unfitting,
without sorrow, without tempestuous force,

⁴⁵ *Muir nIcht* is frequently used to denote the sea between France and England, i.e. the English Channel, but the adjective *aigretta* ('icy, frozen') and the possible hint of the early cult of St Andrew in Scotland has led me to translate this as North Sea.

⁴⁶ Literally 'an activity too much for any author'.

⁴⁷ Literally 'splendid their nature with regard to following them'.

⁴⁸ Literally 'a witness that can be attested'.

in the Promised Land forthwith.⁴⁹

21. Chosen, choice Matthias
he filled the place of Judas,
the splendid apostle of Arabia,
saintly the august,⁵⁰ pure pillar.
22. Matthew son of Alpheus of the Hebrews,
one should follow his splendid nature.⁵¹
The great gentle leader of Africa,
his heavenly reward is renowned.
23. Barnabas, ever-victorious flame,
the illuminator of the very bright torch.
The branching tree was martyred
on the tranquil Tyrrhenian Sea.
24. The apostles drove out –
they were not a minor élite who died out,
the men from the Promised Land –
the tempestuous force of every idol.

Idol

As mentioned above, there has been no detailed discussion of this poem in any secondary literature and indeed, as far as I am aware, the only mention of it at all in secondary scholarship is the brief outline of the poem offered by Aideen O’Leary in her book on the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In accordance with the subject of her book, she directs her interest to the second half of the poem. Since to my knowledge it represents the entirety of the secondary literature on the poem, it is worth quoting her characterisation in full:

A poem opening with the words *Ídail ó ro-hairgid-som* (of twenty-four stanzas) concerns the areas of the world in which the apostles journeyed on their missions. It is divided by theme into two halves: the first on idolatry, the second on the apostles’ missions offering protection against that widespread evil. Matthias and Barnabas are included in this text as well as the eleven apostles. For the most part each apostle’s mission is described over one (whole) stanza (stanzas 13–23); there is narrative material and eulogy of the apostles intertwined with the main theme. The mission-fields given for most of the apostles correspond with those in their *passiones* (and, interestingly, Simon and Jude are treated as a joint mission), but one of those for Philip (*do*

⁴⁹ Literally ‘immediately’.

⁵⁰ Literally ‘blue/purple king’, the colour being associated with imperial imagery and thus by extension comes to mean ‘illustrious’. ‘August’ attempts to capture both meanings.

⁵¹ Literally ‘splendid his nature with regard to following him’, a repetition of the line in stanza 18.

Riffeccaib) and that for Matthew (Africa) are unusual. In the final stanza we have a general eulogy of the apostles.⁵²

While this description is accurate, there is a lot more that remains to be said about this poem, not least in the relationship between the first half, on the first idol, and the second, on the apostolic missions, and the historical-theological view that led the poet to combine these two strands in a single composition.

The first half of the poem participates in the well-established medieval Irish literature of precedents. We have already encountered these, for example, in the sources that discuss the invention of languages and alphabets (see Introduction for Adam being the first to speak Hebrew, Moses being the first to write Hebrew and so on) and in the rewritings of Jewish history in which Abel is characterised as the ‘first martyr’, Abraham is described as the ‘first righteous man after the Flood’ and his son Isaac’s wife, Rebecca, is described as the being the first woman for whom a bride-price was paid (see Chapter 1). The tendency of medieval Irish pedagogy towards encyclopaedic thinking seems to have included a requirement to know significant ‘firsts’ in history. The poem’s elucidation of the first idol, then, can be understood within that context. This literature of precedents is part of a wider concern with origins, and we can see the way that knowledge about origins is connected with significant ‘firsts’ in this Middle Irish passage preserved in the Book of Ballymote:

Assia ingen Neir ₇ na baindia dianaid ainm Doridis is uaithi i ro-hainmniged in Assia ₇ is amlaid so forcaemnacair sin Neptún tug grad di conid he log ro-geall di .i. treas rann in domain do ainmneochadh uaithi i llog a hoigi do milleadh.

Afracra ab Afer .i. o Afer ₇ de clannaib Abraim do-side .i. sluaigedh la Afer in Aifraic co ro-bris cath for lucht na hAfraice ₇ co tarrasatir fein teas iar sin ₇ conadh de sin ro-hainmnigedh in Afraic uadh.

Eorapus ri na Sceithia is uadh ainmigthir in nEoraip.

Measrom mac Cain meic Noe is les doronadh altoir ar tus iar ndilinn. Athalus is e .c. asdrolacda ro-baí riam. Troch(c)ilus is les tossac doronadh carbad ar tus riam. Cicrops is e tossach ro-idbair dam do Ioib conadh as sin ainmmigther Ioibh. Saraphanes is e toisec doroinde idal, .i. fuath doroinde da mac iarna eg ₇ ro-liged deaman isan arracht co roibe ig agallaim daine ass conidh é sin .c. arracht ro-bi riam is ar a uiris do-chuaid cach ar-sin. Tailles Misileus is e .c. fiseacdaí ro-bai riam. Romullus is e .c. toisech ro-gabh amsaigh ar tus ríamh. Ismahelita ab Hismal. Saracine a Sarra. Agarene ab Agar. Nabeti a Nabeot. Cannanee o Channan mac Caim meic Nae. Assiri a Asur mac Seim meic Nae. Siri o Assur mac Dadain meic Iaxain meic Abraim. Elamite ab Elaim mac Sem meic Nae. Ebrei o Eber mac Sala. Cas-tei o Chaseth mac Nachor qui nunc Callei uocantur. Finit.

⁵² O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 59.

Assia daughter of Neir and of the goddess whose name is Doridis, it is from her that Asia was named, and it is thus that that came about: Neptune fell in love with her, and this is the reward that he promised her, i.e. naming one of the three parts of the world after her as the reward for the loss of her virginity.

Africa *from Afer*, i.e. after Afer, and he was one of the descendants of Abraham, i.e. a hosting by Afer into Africa so that he defeated the people of Africa in battle and so that he himself settled in the south then, and so that it is as a result of that that Africa was named after him.

Europas king of Scythia: it is after him that Europe is named.

Mesraim son of Cham son of Noah, it was he who first had an altar made after the Flood. Athalus, he is the first astrologer who ever was. Trochilus, it is he who first had a chariot made. Cicrops, he was the person who sacrificed an ox to Jupiter, so that it is from that that Jupiter is named. Sarophanes, he is the first who made an idol, i.e. an image that he made of his son after his death, and a demon was released into the image so that it [i.e. the demon] was speaking to people out of it [i.e. the image] so that that is the first idol that ever was. It is to visit it that everyone went after that. Tales Misileus, he is the first physician that ever was. Romulus, he is the first person who ever employed a mercenary troop. *The Ismaelites from Ismael, the Saracine from Sarah, the Hagarenes from Hagar, the Nabataeans from Nabaioth, the Canaanites from Canaan son of Cham son of Noah; the Assyrians from Assur son of Shem son of Noah; the Syrians from Assur son of Dadan son of Iaxan son of Abraham; the Elamites from Elam son of Shem son of Noah; the Hebrews from Heber son of Sale; the Castei from Caset son of Nachor who are now called Callei. Finit.*⁵³

The man who is described here as having built the first idol, ‘Sarophanes’, is the same as the *Zerofaneis* named in stanza 3 of *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum*. Furthermore, the Ballymote prose text clearly outlines a related narrative to that in the poem: he had an image of his dead son made for him; the image was possessed by a demon, which spoke to the people, and crowds flocked from all over to worship it (cf. stanzas 8–10). In Ballymote, however, the text is not a free-standing narrative but is embedded within information about other precedents: the first astrologer, the first physician, the first to employ mercenaries and, the precedent immediately before Sarophanes’ idol, the first to sacrifice an animal to Jupiter.

In *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum*, the creation of the first idol unleashes what will become a global phenomenon. As in the Ballymote text, Sarophanes was acting out of grief for his son: far from being a man deserving of sympathy, this grief is presented as misguided emotion, an unhealthy excess of attachment that led to terrible consequences. Indeed, we are told that the greater the wealth and effort the father invested in his memorial, the worse the consequences became (§7). The statue, crafted from ‘the silver and the gold of Arabia’ (§8), was possessed by a

⁵³ Based on edition by Tristram, ed., *Sex Aetates Mundi: die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren*, but corrected with readings from the Book of Ballymote (RIA MS 23 P 12), f. 5va; my translation.

‘devil of evil deeds’ (§9) after it had been completed. The poet states that, although the substance of the idol was slight, ‘it became vast afterwards’ (§10). The vastness of the evil unleashed by that first act of misplaced grief was such that, by the next stanza, it began to spread and multiply exponentially: we are told that ‘there was an idol for every assembly’ (*boi idol cach airechta*) in ‘Asia and in Europe and in Africa’ (§11). In this manner, the practice of idolatry spread across the world, and this is mirrored in the second half of the poem as the apostles themselves travel throughout the three continents in order to defeat the force of evil that those idols represent (§24). The thematic coherence of the entire poem is thus revealed.

The second half of the poem, on the apostolic missions, constitutes a world tour beginning in Rome with Peter, and spiralling outwards in a roughly clockwise direction, following with Andrew’s mission, which is characterised as being in northwest Europe, then Paul in Greece, Philip amongst the Phrygians (Balkans) and the Scythians (central Asia), John in Ephesus, Simon and Jude amongst the Assyrians, Bartholomew and Thomas in India, the two Jameses in Jerusalem, Matthias in Arabia, Matthew in Africa and finally, ending close to where the poet started, Barnabas at the edge of the Tyrrhenian Sea, on the western coast of Italy. For the most part, the locations of these missions correspond with those given in the apocryphal *passiones* for those apostles, as well as in their Middle Irish vernacular adaptations. There are five vernacular translations surviving from Ireland of the Latin *passiones*, namely those of Andrew, Bartholomew, James the Greater, Peter and Paul (treated together in a single text), and Philip, and it seems likely that these represent the chance survival of what was originally a larger corpus of vernacular apostolic *passiones*.⁵⁴ These translations, which are fairly homogeneous in language and style and so probably produced by the same scholar or at least at the same centre, were made no later than the twelfth century. Indeed, on the basis of language, they are likely to be contemporaneous with our poem, thus attesting to a flurry of interest in the apostles in eleventh-century Ireland. There are other, as yet unedited, texts that may also be from around the same date: the prose text, preserved in the *Leabhar Breac*, entitled *Airecc na n-aspal* (‘The Finding of the Apostles’), comprising a short account of each apostle, may also be an eleventh-century composition.

This interest is also witnessed in the late eleventh-century Irish *Liber Hymnorum* (preserved in two manuscripts: TCD MS 1441 and UCD MS Franciscan A 2), where we find, for example, a Latin poem attributed to Cummine, which uses a comparable terminology of praise to our Irish poem. In some cases, the precise imagery associated with a particular apostle differs between the two poems. In the case of Philip, where the Irish poet praised him for his heroic strength – ‘though the hero was bloodied, he was not weak’ – the Latin poet praises his eloquence:

Oris lampadis eloquentis Pilippi
opem oremus prole cum perugilii.

⁵⁴ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 9, 13.

Let us pray for the help of Philip, eloquent mouth of the lamp, with fruit of the vigil.⁵⁵

But other qualities associated with particular apostles are found in both poems. In *Ídail, ó ro hairgit-sum*, Thomas is, along with Bartholomew, one of the ‘two pre-eminent sages’ who brought Christianity to India. Likewise, in the Latin poem attributed to Cummine, he is associated with learning and is described as possessing ‘depth of knowledge’ as he preached:

Tomae tendentis partes inter Parthiae
nos illuminet abyssus scientiae.

May the depth of knowledge of Thomas holding forth in the territories of Parthia enlighten us.⁵⁶

The precise identities of the apostles discussed differs between the poems. Most notably, the apostle called ‘Jude’ in the Irish poem is called by his other name, Thaddeus, in the Latin:

Tatheí tota famosi per tellura
Abgaro mis<S>i Iesu cum epistola

(In memory of) Thaddeus renowned throughout the whole world, sent to Abgar with Jesus’s letter.⁵⁷

But medieval Irish scholars were well aware that the two different names – Jude and Thaddeus – could be used for the same saint and a note in the *Leabhar Breac* clarifies that they ‘were one and the same’.⁵⁸ The fact that Simon and Jude (or Thaddeus) are discussed as a pair in stanza 18 of our poem links it to other Insular poetic sources: for example, in Cynewulf’s Old English *Fates of the Apostles*, which predates our Irish poem by at least a century, Simon and Thaddeus are similarly paired.⁵⁹ Cynewulf also treats Peter and Paul together, which, as we noted above, is also the case in the vernacular Irish *passio* for the two saints, although they merit separate stanzas in our poem.⁶⁰ These connections hint at the liturgical celebrations that underlie both the Irish and English sources, as Simon and Jude were commemorated together, as were Peter and Paul. Aside from the locations

⁵⁵ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 49.

⁵⁶ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 50.

⁵⁷ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 43.

⁵⁹ J. E. Cross, ‘Cynewulf’s Traditions about the Apostles in *Fates of the Apostles*’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), 163–75, at p. 164; repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (New York, 1996), pp. 79–94. On the question of date, opinions have ranged from c. 750 to the tenth century: see Patrick W. Connor, ‘On Dating Cynewulf’, in *Cynewulf*, ed. Bjork, pp. 23–55. I am grateful to Francis Leneghan for this reference.

⁶⁰ Cross, ‘Cynewulf’s Traditions’, pp. 174–5.

of the apostles' missions and their personal qualities, another interest for both of our Irish poets, as with the English Cynewulf, is their ultimate fates. Both the Irish and Latin poems are subtle in their articulation of this and, unlike some other sources, they do not particularly revel in the bloody details of martyrdom. The Latin poem attributed to Cumminé notes:

Simonis dicti suapte Cannanei
stolam qui tinxit agni Dei sanguine.

(In memory of) Simon called the Canaanite, who of his own accord stained his garment with the blood of the Lamb of God.⁶¹

In *Idail, ó ro hairgit-sum*, Barnabas's 'martyrdom' is briefly mentioned in striking contrast to the tranquillity of the Tyrrhenian Sea near which his death took place, but there is little by way of the focus on wounds and pain that we witnessed in the poetry of Blathmac or Eriugena. By contrast, in a quatrain preserved in the bottom margin of p. 177 of the *Leabhar Breac*, we are told:

Etig oigid – crig cin brón
do-ratad er Partholón
a chor beo fo thalmain tind,
ocus fennad a chrocind.

An awful death – power without sorrow –
was inflicted on Bartholomew
burying him alive under the hard earth,
and flaying him.⁶²

The idea that Bartholomew was flayed alive was a widespread tradition across Christendom, but the author of *Idail, ó ro hairgit-sum* prefers not to dwell on that and describes Bartholomew only as a 'strong, bright hero', a 'pre-eminent sage' along with Thomas. The Latin poem attributed to Cumminé is glossed in the *Liber Hymnorum*, however, and the glossator seemed to possess a greater interest in the violence of the apostles' ultimate fates. The lines on Philip, for example, are glossed: *incertum est autem utrum gladio an cruce occisus est* ('it is, however, uncertain whether he was killed by the sword or on the cross').⁶³ The Latin poem on the apostles attributed to Cumminé is far from the only evidence for interest in the apostolic missions in the *Liber Hymnorum*. Elsewhere we find a hymn in praise of Peter and Paul (preserved only in the UCD manuscript) where, again, the 'main concern was to eulogise the two apostles and not to relay the details of their lives or deaths', a prayer of John the Evangelist, which functioned as a lorica 'against poisonous liquids', and a hymn about Philip, which is unrelated to his *passio* and is more likely to be derived from apocryphal sources related to *In*

⁶¹ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 50.

⁶² Cf. O'Rahilly, *et al.*, *Catalogue*, XXVII. 3390; my translation.

⁶³ *LHI*. 19.

Tenga Bithnua ('The Ever-new Tongue').⁶⁴ This starts to give us some indication of the depth and breadth of interest in the lives, deaths and reputations of the apostles in eleventh-century sources and beyond.

Aside from *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum*, there are at least eleven other extant vernacular 'listings' from medieval Ireland that give the names of the apostles and some details about them. In Aideen O'Leary's discussion of them, she notes that they display an interest in aspects of their 'physical (mainly facial) features, their ages, the houses of Israel to which they belonged, the areas in which they preached, the manners of their deaths, their burial places and the dates of their feasts'.⁶⁵ O'Leary argues that these were composed as reference works, rather than for public reading or private devotion, although the stylistic complexity of *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum* argues against that in this particular case. Indeed O'Leary's utilitarian view of such compositions seems to underplay their literary value more broadly. Regarding the poem on the physical appearances of the apostles, she suggests that the descriptions of their less tangible qualities are 'mentioned by way of eulogy (and filling the line)', but I suggest that the descriptions of Bartholomew as 'sweet-prayered' (*Partholón paterbind*) or of James's 'pure voice' (*Iacob ... go ngud glan*) are not without significance.⁶⁶ Even a half-decent poet could fill the line with something that possessed innate meaning, rather than plucking random words from thin air that happened to fulfil the requirements of syllable count and rhyme.

These rich medieval Irish textual traditions attest to a variety of information about the fates of the apostles deriving from different apocryphal sources. A late Middle or Early Modern Irish poem on the graves of the apostles is used to conclude the Early Modern Irish *Udhacht Mhuire* ('Testament of Mary'). The author of *Udhacht Mhuire* states that 'it is to bear witness to this dispersal of the apostles that the learned man recited these quatrains'.⁶⁷ The poem that follows notes that all except John died as martyrs and that the rest were widely dispersed across the known world, with Peter and Paul dying in Rome, the two Jameses in Jerusalem and Thomas in India, as in *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum*, but many of the other apostles met their ends in slightly different locations: Bartholomew and Matthew in Armenia, for example, rather than in India and Africa, respectively.⁶⁸

As noted above, the international journeys of the apostles are presented in *Īdail, ō ro hairgit-sum* as mirroring the international spread of idolatry. The New Testament completes and fulfils the Old: just as the grief of Sarophanes at the

⁶⁴ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 44–5, 47.

⁶⁵ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 55.

⁶⁶ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 56–7.

⁶⁷ Caoimhín Breatnach, ed. and trans., 'Udhacht Mhuire', in *Apocrypha Hiberniae II: Apocalyptica II*, ed. Martin McNamara, et al. (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 276–355, at pp. 352–3: *is d'forgell in scaí-lti-so na n-apstal do chan in t-eolach na raind-so síis*.

⁶⁸ Breatnach, 'Udhacht Mhuire', pp. 352–5. The poem was previously edited separately by Kuno Meyer under the title 'The Graves of the Apostles': Kuno Meyer, ed., 'Miscellanea Hibernica', *Revue celtique* 30 (1909), 292–4, at pp. 292–3, from Laud Misc. 610, f. 38a; 8 quatrains, beginning *Reilgi muintiri maic Dé*.

death of his son (developed in apocryphal sources from the account of the anonymous father in Wisdom 14:15) unleashed global idol-worship, so the martyrdoms of the apostles would contain and defeat it. As we have seen elsewhere, the linguistic diversity endowed upon the apostles at Pentecost, which permitted them to preach across the world, mirrored the linguistic diversity created at Babel, as described in Genesis. This consciousness of Old Testament prefiguration of the apostolic missions is seen in other sources. For example, the vernacular *passio* of James ‘includes several quotations (in Irish) from Old-Testament prophets. Those quotations are put into the mouth of the apostle himself in order to answer the Jews’ queries and to illustrate elements of his preaching’.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, a four-stanza poem links each of the apostles to one of the twelve tribes of Israel: thus, Peter is said to be of the tribe of Judah; Jude/Thaddeus of the tribe of Dan; Simon the Canaanite of the tribe of Asher; and so on.⁷⁰ This uniting of Old and New Testament thought is comparable to that witnessed, for example, in the plan of the eschatological Jerusalem in the Book of Armagh (see Chapter 1). And, as we shall see, it was used to sophisticated effect in the fashioning of St Patrick as a figure who was not only the Moses of Ireland, but also the island’s own apostle.

Apostle of the Irish

In Chapter 1, we saw how Patrick was cast as a Moses-like figure who brought divinely approved law to Ireland. Here, I want to explore another aspect of the characterisation of Patrick, and that is as the ‘apostle of the Irish’, drawing out the ways in which he was very specifically cast as an equivalent to the apostles of Christ, as someone who drove out the darkness of idolatry and brought Ireland into the light of truth. Darkness and light provide us with a widespread and rather obvious metaphorical vocabulary for discussing and contrasting ignorance and truth. However, Irish authors developed the metaphor in very particular ways, which encompass the specifics of idols and idolatry.

Patrick claimed to have preached the word of God at the limits of the known world, in the ‘remote parts’ of Ireland ‘where no-one lived any further’.⁷¹ As Thomas Charles-Edwards has argued, Patrick was ‘acutely aware of the New Testament passages about the task of the missionary, and especially of the idea that the end of the world would not come until the Faith had been preached to the outermost limits’.⁷² Charles-Edwards has analysed the significance of Patrick’s own words, seeing in them a kind of self-fashioning as ‘a successor of the apostles’ who ‘had taken the Faith to the uttermost western limits of the inhabited world’.⁷³ There was an apocalyptic significance to this, and Patrick took seriously

⁶⁹ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften’, *ZCP* 8 (1912), 102–20, at p. 107: ‘Abstammung der zwölf Apostel’, from Laud Misc. 610, f. 9b; 4 quatrains, beginning *Petor co treib Iuda ain*.

⁷¹ *Confessio*, §51.

⁷² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 233.

⁷³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 215.

the statement in the Gospel of Matthew 24:14 that ‘this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come’. As Charles-Edwards observes, ‘So far as the West was concerned that apocalyptic moment had now been reached – in the work of Patrick’.⁷⁴

Charles-Edwards also notes that Patrick’s mission was unusual in a broader European context of conversion. He outlines the two most common models: first, that of a pagan people conquering an already Christian community ‘in circumstances that made it necessary or politic to leave the existing structures of authority largely intact’. As a result, pagan kings ‘dealt with bishops already well established as leaders of their cities’. The second is that of a pagan king expressing ‘an interest in conversion to Christianity and therefore in guaranteeing the security of any missionary’, as in the example of some of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. In both cases, the safety of the missionary was largely assured – in the first model through their own status, and in the second through that of their patron – and therefore Patrick’s mission ‘stood outside the norm’ because he was proselytizing among a pagan population whose kings were apparently not predisposed to conversion.⁷⁵ It is within this context that Patrick’s statements about the risks to his own life should be understood.

We cannot know how trustworthy Patrick’s account of the threats to his own life were, nor do we know whether others were martyred in Ireland for the cause of conversion to Christianity. It seemed at least fathomable to commentators a few centuries later that martyrdom happened: according to the notes following Tírechán’s *Collectanea* in the Book of Armagh, Palladius ‘suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Irish, as holy old men say’.⁷⁶ The role of Palladius and other pre-Patrician missionaries has been obscured, perhaps deliberately (see Introduction): ‘Columbanus, born in Leinster in the middle of the sixth century, still remembered Palladius as the first great missionary of Ireland.’⁷⁷ But in the course of the seventh century, a radical revision of Ireland’s historiography seems to have taken place, erasing or obscuring the roles played by numerous key figures. For Charles-Edwards, this is in part due to the rise of the Patrician cult and in part because of the significance of Brigit, whose reputation superseded that of Palladius in Leinster: ‘Patrick saw himself not as the apostle of Ireland, but as the apostle of the western extremities of Ireland. The role of the Palladian mission came to be obscured, however, when Patrick came to be championed, already by c. 600, as the apostle of Ireland. Moreover, the memory of Palladius was also threatened by the vigorous promotion of another cult, that of Brigit of Kildare. In the course of the seventh century, if not earlier, she became the pre-eminent saint of Leinster’.⁷⁸

The championing of Patrick as ‘apostle of Ireland’, which, as Charles-Edwards noted, is already evident from the beginning of the seventh century, is

⁷⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 215.

⁷⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 222–3.

⁷⁶ Bieler, ed., *Patrician Texts*, pp. 164–6.

⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 239.

⁷⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 237.

intimately bound up with the political ambitions of the Uí Néill. As John V. Kelleher famously wrote, the Uí Néill ‘emerge into history like a school of cuttlefish from a large ink-cloud of their own manufacture; and clouds and ink continue to be manufactured by them or for them throughout their long career’.⁷⁹ Those who manufactured ink-clouds for the Uí Néill also did so for the cult of Patrick and in so doing obscured forever our knowledge and understanding of martyrdom and its role in early Irish conversion, just as it obscured our understanding of the precise forms that ‘idolatry’ might have taken in the fourth and fifth century. If martyrdom was later erased from (or had never entered) the narrative of conversion in late antique Ireland, where does Ireland fit into this nexus of idolatry, the apostolic missions and the triumph of Christianity?

Thomas Charles-Edwards has argued that Patrick’s ‘strong religious faith and warm appreciation of celibacy owe something, perhaps, not just to his identification of himself with Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, but also to a reaction against his father and grandfather. Their hereditary clerical office – priest and deacon – had permitted Patrick to grow up an unbeliever. Although he never says so, it is highly likely that Patrick was himself a celibate: his wish to visit monastic centres in Gaul is characteristic of the aspiring monk. His assumption that monastic vows were compatible with pastoral work suggests a comparison with St Martin, of whom he may have known. Finally, his willingness to annoy the owners of slavewomen by encouraging monastic vows even among the unfree presumably owes something to his own experience of emerging religious faith during the time when he was a slave.’⁸⁰ Charles-Edwards develops this argument on the basis of Patrick’s own writings and the two spiritual touchstones of his *Confessio* are indeed St Paul and St Martin. But those key elements in Patrick’s conception of himself are not the spiritual strands that are drawn out in later sources, which depict Patrick in a slightly different light. In Muirchú’s influential *Life of Patrick* it is Peter, rather than Paul, who is a key apostolic touchstone. Aideen O’Leary has argued that the scene in Muirchú’s *Life* where Patrick faces the wizard, Lochru, is a conscious recasting of the clash between Peter and Simon Magus.

In my view, Muirchú created this contest-episode in its entirety to portray the apostle-hero of his own composition as an Irish equivalent of St Peter; he communicated this to his readers by reference to the apostolic apocryphal stories. By likening Patrick in the wizard-episode to the apostle Peter, the first head of the church of Rome, and by dwelling on Patrick’s affection for Armagh, Muirchú implied that the church of Armagh was the Rome of the

⁷⁹ Kelleher, ‘Irish History and Pseudo-History’, p. 125. Kelleher viewed the radical rewriting of Irish history in the seventh century as fundamentally about Uí Néill claims to political supremacy, but if such revisionism did take place (and I am inclined to agree that it may well have done, given the near-total destruction of fifth- and sixth-century sources, in stark contrast to the abundance of complex sources from c. 650 onwards), it was surely as much for ecclesiastical as political reasons.

⁸⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 224.

Irish, with the Irish national apostle at its helm. Muirchú's description of the confrontation with the wizard portrays Patrick as standing for the *romanitas* of Armagh, and Lochru for the evils which this *romanitas* was trying to suppress ...⁸¹

Against this central parallel of Patrick as Peter, O'Leary argues that there is a complex backdrop of allusions to many of the apostolic *passiones*. Thus, she suggests, the character of Dubthach recalls those of Philetus in the *passio* of St James, Polymius in that of St Bartholomew and Exuos in Gregory of Tours' compilation on St Andrew.⁸² Likewise, the confrontation between Patrick and Luchtmael is fashioned after that between St John the Evangelist and Aristodinus.⁸³ Indeed, in contrast to Charles-Edwards's observations about the possible influence of St Martin on Patrick's own self-fashioning, O'Leary notes the absence of Sulpicius's Life of St Martin as an influence on Muirchú's Life of Patrick. She argues that Muirchú deliberately opted for an apostolic model instead of the monastic model that Sulpicius's Martin offered.⁸⁴ Arguably, then, by the seventh century, commentators were deliberately fashioning the image of Patrick the apostle, rather than, say, Patrick the monk. As noted, this was not in opposition to the figure of Patrick as Mosaic law-giver, but rather interwoven with it in the same sources.

The complex, bilingual late Old Irish *Vita Tripartita* 'Tripartite Life of Patrick' (also known as *Bethu Phátraic* 'The Life of Patrick') and its Middle Irish homiletic abridgement perhaps best exemplify this development of Patrick's character as both a law-giver in the mode of the Hebrew Scriptures and an apostle in the mode of the Greek New Testament. The 'Tripartite Life' begins with a quotation from Isaiah 9:2 in Latin with translation into Irish:

Populus qui sedebat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam .i. in popal deissid indorchaib atondaire soillsi mooir. (The people that sat in darkness beheld a great light.) *Et sedentibus in regione et in umbra mortis lux orta eis* .i. ocus inlucht robatar hiferand ocus hifoscudh báis fóúaratar soillsi díatanic assoillsigud. (They that were in the land and in the shadow of death found a light whence came their illumination.)⁸⁵

This immediately indicates the theme, which is developed throughout the text: the darkness of ignorance and idolatry in which the people of Ireland were residing, deliberately evoked with an Old Testament quotation, was about to be obliterated by the 'great light' that was the Christianity of Patrick. The author draws

⁸¹ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 152.

⁸² O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 154–5.

⁸³ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 152–3.

⁸⁴ O'Leary, *Trials and Translations*, p. 155.

⁸⁵ Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, with Other Documents Relating to That Saint*, 2 vols (London, 1887), I. 2–3.

out this dual temporal significance by noting that the same Holy Spirit inspired both the Mosaic ‘Old Law’ and the apostolic ‘New Testament’:

The Holy Spirit, the spirit which is nobler than every spirit, the spirit which inspired both churches of the Old Law and of the New Testament with the grace of wisdom and prophecy, it was that spirit which spake those words through the mouth of the chief prophet Isaiah son of Amoz; *de cuius laude dicitur quod non tam dicendus esset propheta quam evangelista*. To praise him, St. Jerome said that it were meet to call him an evangelist than a prophet, because of the clearness and the fitness for the New Testament wherewith he told the tidings of Christ. *Ita enim universa Christi ecclesiaeque mysteria ad lucidum prosecutus est ut non eum putes de futuro vaticinari sed de praeterito historiam texere*. For such was the clearness wherewith he told all the mysteries of Christ and the Holy Church that one would not think that it was a prophecy of things to come he was making, but a declaration of things already foregone after they had been done completely.⁸⁶

The idea that Isaiah was so accurate as to make him an ‘evangelist’ rather than a prophet again marries the Old Testament with the New. And, of course, the idea that prophecies ‘of things to come’ were so accurate as to be ‘a declaration of things already foregone’ is common stock in Patrician writings. Already in the seventh century, Muirchú had cast Christianity as a phenomenon whose arrival had been predicted by pagan magicians playing the role of Old Testament seers:

et hii duo ex sua arte magica crebrius profetabant morem quendam exterum futurum in modum regni cum ignota quadam doctrina molesta longinquo trans maria aduectum, a paucis dictatum, a multis susceptum, ab omnibus honorandum, regna subuersurum, resistentes reges occisurum, turbas seducturum, omnes eorum deos destructurum, et iectis omnibus illorum artis operibus in saecula regnaturum.

and these two, by their magical art, prophesied frequently that a foreign way of life was about to come to them, a kingdom, as it were, with an unheard-of and burdensome teaching, brought from afar over the seas, enjoined by few, received by many; it would be honoured by all, would overthrow kingdoms, kill the kings who offered resistance, seduce the crowds, destroy all their gods, banish all the works of their craft, and reign for ever.⁸⁷

This triumphal image of Christianity as something that would ‘overthrow kingdoms’ and ‘destroy all their gods’ is echoed some four centuries later by the poet who composed our Middle Irish poem on idolatry, but there it was the apostles who destroyed the gods of the idolators and banished ‘all the works of their craft’. Significant scholarship on the writings of Patrick and seventh-century Patrician

⁸⁶ Stokes, ed. and trans., *The Tripartite Life*, I. 2–3.

⁸⁷ Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Patrician Texts*, I: 10(9), (4).

hagiography has shown how, from the earliest surviving sources for Irish Christianity, an image was already being crafted. This image was one of great subtlety and depth, with implications for the subsequent self-perception of Ireland's intellectual élite and for their understanding of Ireland's place within the scheme of salvation history. Patrick and his biographers drew on biblical sources in a variety of ways to produce this image of St Patrick who was an amalgam of John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, even Christ himself and – perhaps more than anything – Moses.

This interplay of past, present and future, of history as prophecy and prophecy as salvation history, is absolutely key to understanding how medieval Irish authors understood and framed their own past. The totality of salvation history could be brought into play in the narrative of Patrick's mission precisely because Patrick's mission was, for Ireland, the turning point, the central event, of Ireland's own role in history. All of Irish history was subsequently divided into 'before Patrick' and 'after Patrick', Ireland's 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament'. It is worth quoting a passage of the abbreviated Middle Irish version of this text at length in order to see the virtuosic interweaving of our key themes: darkness and light; ignorance and truth; past, present and future; history and prophecy; the powerful, earthly empires of history and their hand in directing the history of God's chosen people:

Now one of his manifest prophecies is what is here set forth through a narrative of what is past. *Populus qui sedebat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam*. The people that sat in darkness beheld a great light. Now the prophet has a parallel passage as far as the place where previously in the same story he said *primo tempore allevata terra Zabulon et terra Neptalim*, there came with ... of time, great glory and renown to the tribe of Zabulon and to the tribe of Naphtali. *Inde dicitur*, after these words he said, *Populus qui sedebat in tenebris*. The people who sat in darkness if [we go] according to history, this was the people of Israel who were biding in the gloom of slavery by the Assyrians. They beheld the light of their redemption from that captivity, to wit, Hesdras and Nehemias, Jeshua and Zerubbabel. But if [we go] according to the spiritual sense, the people mentioned here are the people of the gentiles who were in the darkness of ignorance, adoring idols and images until the true Light arose, to wit, Jesus Christ with his apostles. *Nox enim erat in mundo usque dum Christus, qui sol justitiae est, radios suos aspersit in mundum*. For there was great darkness and dimness over the hearts of the heathen until the Sun of righteousness, Jesus Christ, scattered his splendors throughout the four quarters of the world to enlighten it.

Now one of the splendours which the Sun of righteousness shed upon the world was the splendour, and the flame, the precious stone and shining lamp which enlightened the west of the world, *Sanctus Patricius Episcopus*, to wit, holy Patrick, high bishop of the west of the world, father of the baptism and belief of the men of Ireland.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., *Three Middle Irish Homilies* (Calcutta, 1877), pp. 3–4.

We can see how both the historical and the spiritual exegetical approaches discussed in Chapter 3 are deployed here. The exegesis underlying this homily and its source, the *Vita Tripartita*, make clear that Ireland too was residing ‘in the darkness of ignorance, adoring idols and images’ until the arrival of Patrick, with Patrick’s light being a refraction or extension of the ‘true Light’ of Christ. It is in this apostolic light that we should view the foreign journeys that Patrick is depicted as taking in the ‘Tripartite Life’: his time studying in Gaul and his voyage on the Tyrrhenian Sea make him resemble yet further the apostles as depicted in Acts and apocryphal texts (see above, p. 162). Patrick is denied the martyrdom that awaited his apostolic forebears, and one cannot help recalling the Middle Irish poem on the graves of the apostles (above, p. 175), which noted that John too was spared martyrdom because of God’s great love for him (*Docúadar martra uili/act Eoin ar a inmaine*). In any case, after Patrick’s apostolic career, he is brought full circle to the Mosaic identity we discussed in Chapter 1 and it is a burning bush that he sees, and which speaks to him, before his death.⁸⁹ In this approach to prophecy as history, the author was echoing Muirchú, who likewise saw the prediction of Lóegaire’s magicians as something that had been fulfilled:

Quod sic postea euenerat; euersis enim in aduentu Patricii idulorum culturis fides Christi catholica nostra repleuit omnia. ...

And so it happened afterwards: when Patrick came the worship of idols was abolished and the catholic Christian faith spread over our whole country. ...

The triumph of Christianity is depicted as an abolition of idolatry. As we have seen, Aileen O’Leary has argued that Muirchú deliberately ‘chose the model of an apostle’ in constructing his image of Patrick, and that he was ‘thoroughly familiar with the idiom of the apostolic *acta*’.⁹⁰ I hope that in this chapter I have added to her demonstration of the apostolic *acta*’s ‘centrality in early mediaeval Irish ecclesiastical culture as models for the construction of sanctity’ (p. 156). The idea of Patrick as ‘the apostle of the Irish’ is not simply a propagandistic commonplace when it is used by medieval Irish writers, but rather a powerful tool through which Ireland earns its place in the narrative of salvation. It is not just a way of asserting Patrick’s reputation over other Irish saints and missionaries, but rather it draws Ireland firmly into world history. Through the construction of the image of Patrick as apostle, Ireland too could be shown to have been in the darkness of idolatry, under the yoke of ignorance, an earthly ‘Egypt’, until Christ sent Patrick to bring to Ireland the light of truth and thereby create the conditions necessary for a new Jerusalem.

It is certainly the case that, although the author of *Ídail, ó ro hairgit-sum* represented the apostolic missions as the triumph of Christianity over idolatry, accusations of idolatry would of course continue to be levied at a variety of individuals and communities up until the present day. And not all of those accused

⁸⁹ Stokes, ed. and trans., *Three Middle Irish Homilies*, p. 45.

⁹⁰ O’Leary, *Trials and Translations*, pp. 155–6.

by Christians of idolatry were non-Christians. Authors of hortatory and homiletic literature of the Old and Middle Irish periods would include idolatry among the spectrum of sins of which they accused their fellow Christians. Not pagans, but worse than pagans because they should know better.⁹¹ The place of idolatrous kings within Christ's own genealogy was clearly of interest to at least one poet of the Middle Irish period (see Chapter 1). This was not simply an issue of some distant Other, but rather something that was at the heart of the Christian community in a variety of ways. And the very human portrait of the grieving father who created the first idol touches on the complexity of the issue: of course, it is human nature to be attached to earthly things, it is natural for a father to grieve for his son, but our emotions must be contained; there must be limits to our grief, otherwise we risk turning our faces towards darkness and unleashing evil into the world. The nature of that evil would repay further study: more remains to be said about the ontology of idols, their nature, their function and their power. I hope I have demonstrated here that conceptualising them in their medieval Christian context can be more productive than futile quests for 'pagan survivals'.

Prose and poetic texts about the apostolic missions reminded medieval Irish audiences about those earliest witnesses to Christianity, who gave up their lives in their attempts to turn the darkness of idolatry into the light of faith. Thus, a red martyrdom of blood was always there in medieval Ireland, in the 'repertoire of sanctity', in the litanies and martyrologies and the hagiographies of some of the universal saints who were martyred. By focusing on the cults of native saints, to the exclusion of the apostles and martyrs, we risk distorting the model of sanctity that was presented to medieval Irish Christians. I hope that I have shown that taking a fresh look at attitudes towards martyrdom in early medieval Ireland is a worthwhile endeavour, but it involves painstaking work editing and translating sources that have generally been overlooked. These sources bring important new material to the table: there is little new that we can say at present about the end of 'paganism' in Ireland and the population's conversion to Christianity, and we have no new evidence of how many blood martyrs there may have been in fifth-century Ireland, but we can turn our attention to the seventh through to the twelfth centuries and discover huge amounts about changing medieval Irish attitudes towards conversion, martyrdom and Christianity's supposed triumph over idolatry.

⁹¹ See Elizabeth Boyle, 'The Rhetoric and Reality of Reform in Irish Eschatological Thought, c. 1000–1150', *History of Religions* 55 (2016), 269–88, for discussion.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to utilise a paradigm for understanding medieval Irish conceptions of history, namely that of ‘salvation history’, which I suggest was the primary lens through which Irish writers understood their own place within history and the world. In presenting my arguments, I have ranged across sources that primarily read, interpreted and adapted material derived from the Hebrew Scriptures, but that in the Christian worldview were always leading inexorably towards the ‘fulfilment’ of history in the Greek New Testament, as discussed in Chapter 5. The arc of salvation history also stretched forward towards Judgement Day and the eschaton, and, although that has not been the focus of this study, it is important not to forget that a teleological view of history as a process, moving in a particular direction towards a particular end, was fundamental to medieval Irish historiography.¹ I have focused on neglected sources from my own period of research specialism, that is, the Middle Irish period (c. 900–c. 1200), but I have also tried to demonstrate that this way of understanding the world had its roots in the earliest manifestations of Christianity in Ireland and was already being creatively developed in the Old Irish period, certainly from the seventh century and arguably even in the fifth and sixth centuries (for example, in the writings of Patrick himself and in what can be inferred about the earliest Irish study and exegesis of the psalms). I have sought to move the focus of attention away from the important but already well-known sources of evidence for Irish saints, Irish saga narratives and Irish history, and to recalibrate, as it were, by drawing attention to the large body of sources that deal with aspects of ‘universal’ history, particularly the histories of the Jewish people and of Babylon. In this respect, I hope that this contribution is complementary to the groundbreaking work that has been done in recent years on medieval Ireland’s engagement with the history and literatures of Greece and Rome.²

¹ See, for example, Boyle, ‘The Rhetoric and Reality of Reform’; Toner, ‘History and Salvation in *Lebor na hUidre*’. Jay Rubenstein has written eloquently about how medieval ideas about *translatio imperii* intersected with eschatological and apocalyptic thought in Crusade literature (*The Crusades, Apocalyptic Prophecy and the End of History* [Oxford, 2019]) and our Irish sources can be considered within a comparable historiographical framework.

² The literature is extensive but two key contributions are Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic*; O’Connor, ed., *Classical Literature and Learning*.

Much remains to be done, and I would point in particular to the need for more detailed studies of *SnR*; the Irish *SAM*; the poems on ‘world kingship’ attributed to Flann Mainistrech; the poems attributed to Airbertach mac Cosse; the *LGÉ* family of texts within the context of biblical history and narrative; medieval Irish texts on geography and ethnography; medieval Irish prayers, litanies and hymns; exegetical texts; and historical and pedagogical poetry.³ The influence of biblical verse epics on poets such as Blathmac, Airbertach and the author of *SnR* requires further analysis,⁴ as does the influence of biblical prose on saga narrative. I hope I have shown, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, the hitherto underappreciated value of brief anecdote-length narratives, a large corpus of which were composed in the tenth century, and at least some of which, I have suggested, may have been aimed at educating young aristocratic men about their moral duties, legal prerogatives and judicial responsibilities. Other texts of the same form aimed to explicate the power of prayer and offered lessons of a more ecclesiastical nature, perhaps to clerical students. I have also, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5, attempted to bring neglected poetic sources into view and have used them to demonstrate some of the ways in which writers in the Middle Irish period were thinking about the Matter of Babylon, the spread of idolatry and the apostolic missions. These sources reflect the way that medieval Irish writers viewed the world around them: they accepted the common idea that Jerusalem was at the centre of the world and they were aware of their own situation on the global ‘periphery’. However, this peripheral position did not make them marginal; rather, they actively engaged with world history and used the Scriptures, alongside authorities such as Orosius, Eusebius and Augustine, to think and write about Babylon and Jerusalem, not only as abstract theological *civitates* but also as real places with real histories and peoples, architectures and landscapes. Medieval Irish poets could be concerned with the ‘lime and wool and blood, clay and water and flax’ from which the Tower of Babel was constructed as well as the Tower’s role in salvation history, in the origins of human language and in the dispersal of peoples.⁵ For Augustine, the Matter of Babylon was a way ‘to understand both sacred history and the inner workings of the self’.⁶ As we have seen, Babylon was those things for medieval Irish writers too, but I have suggested that it may also have been a way of thinking about cities, urbanism and empires within the shifting social and political contexts of eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland.

Occasionally, in the course of this study, I have indicated places where I think that the sources under discussion have influenced or shaped better-known sources such as saga literature and hagiography. This has ranged from a reciprocal relationship between the depictions of David and Cú Chulainn, each gradually being recast in response to the other, to the fashioning of St Patrick in the image of

³ When one peruses the three volumes of the *Clavis*, it is striking the number of medieval Irish sources that have little or no secondary literature (and sometimes even no edition or translations) attached to them.

⁴ On Latin and Old English examples, see Patrick McBrine, *Biblical Epics in Late Antiquity and Anglo-Saxon England: Divina in Laude Voluntas* (Toronto, 2017).

⁵ McLaughlin, ‘Fénius Farsaid and the Alphabets’, p. 5: *ael ocus olann is fuil / cre is usce is lín...*

⁶ Scheil, *Babylon Under Western Eyes*, p. 15.

both the ‘Moses of Ireland’ and simultaneously the ‘apostle of Ireland’. I could only begin to explore the influence of the psalms on medieval Irish poetic composition and there is still much to be said on that matter. I discussed in Chapter 1 how the Hebrew Bible had influences that lay far beyond the literary and cited the scholarship of those who have argued that medieval Ireland’s legal system was influenced to an extraordinary degree by biblical, and especially Levitical, law. We briefly noted instances where the influence of Irish biblical interpretation might be seen in the specific iconography of inscribed stones (Chapter 3) and where, as Tomás Ó Carragáin has shown, exegesis clearly influenced ecclesiastical architecture. Thus, the implications of a worldview shaped by the idea of salvation history are wide-ranging and difficult to overestimate: they are architectural, artistic, judicial, political and ideological. Here I have, for the most part, limited myself to textual sources, but I argue that these reflect an ideology that, while it may have been the construct of a small intellectual élite, was one that had profound implications for the rest of society, from the enslaved and the impoverished to kings and military leaders. The control of education, literary production and the legal system by that small élite means that this is the only coherent and evidentiary worldview that can be uncovered from medieval Ireland – dissenting, marginalised or heretical voices are few and far between.

However, this should not be taken to mean that there was uniformity of thought across Ireland. We have seen variety of opinions – for example, in the use of conflicting information about the size and shape of the city of Babylon, or the role of David in composing the psalms – and, as indicated in the Introduction, there may have been some centres that specialised in particular branches of learning, resulting in different intellectual emphases. Some centres may have been more focused on the study of history, such as the school of Ros Ailithir during the time of Airbertach mac Cosse, whereas others might have been more invested in allegorical exegesis, which may in turn have resulted in the composition of more figurative literature. It has often been suggested that Ireland progressed in a linear fashion towards a more historical and historicising approach to exegesis, but I hope that I have demonstrated that a rich variety of interpretive modes – historical, moral, allegorical and Christological – continued to be employed throughout the Middle Irish period and coexisted in creative ways. And there were other kinds of competing voices in medieval Irish literature, particularly after the end of the Uí Néill hegemony around the year 1000. We should be mindful of the proportion of early medieval Irish literature that was written under the patronage of Uí Néill kings and/or for the church of Armagh. As we noted in Chapter 5, John V. Kelleher likened the emergence of the Uí Néill into the historical record to a school of cuttlefish emerging from a cloud of ink of its own making, and it is important to remember that Armagh – along with other major ecclesiastical centres – fell within its ambit.⁷ These inky clouds part somewhat in the eleventh century and we can see a greater diversity of voices in the sources: we have, quite simply, a greater amount of source material of all types from the Middle Irish period than from the Old Irish period. Middle Irish literature has often been seen as the poor

⁷ Kelleher, ‘Early Irish History and Pseudo-History’, p. 125.

cousin of Old Irish literature, the earliest sources portrayed as the result of the glorious flowering of the ‘island of saints and scholars’ and later literature as derivative and tedious, but I hope that this study has gone some way towards showing that literature composed in Ireland between the tenth and twelfth centuries is worthy of study in its own right.⁸

A subsidiary theme that came into view in Chapters 2 and 3 was the use of humour, and particularly irony, in our Middle Irish sources. As the great Marshall Berman wrote in relation to the nineteenth-century modernist authors, they could be ‘playful and ironic even in their moments of gravest seriousness and depth’.⁹ The same is true of the authors of our tenth-century narratives in particular, and the role of humour in pedagogy, ecclesiastical literature and saga narrative demands sustained critical attention.¹⁰ Humour is a common classroom tool in a range of cultures and its use in Irish church schools is ripe for further exploration. Indeed, the role of education more broadly deserves greater consideration, not least for the way that it provided all medieval Irish writers with a common pool of foundational knowledge. As noted in Chapter 3, it is likely that almost every literate person in medieval Ireland knew the psalms by heart. Furthermore, one does not need to have the *Patrologia Latina* at hand in order to write literature that is deeply indebted to biblical thought, patristic writings and exegetical texts. As Paul Remley has noted in relation to Old English biblical verse, ‘even if we doubt that Old English biblical poets commonly had direct access to voluminous copies of works by Augustine and others, there are plausible intermediary channels for the transmission of patristic traditions’, and these include classroom instruction, pastoral care and preaching.¹¹ Much groundbreaking work has been done in recent years on the influence of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* on education in Ireland, particularly the importance of the etymologising method of analysing language and literature.¹² This seems to have been significant, particularly at the more advanced level, but we must not lose sight of the fact, as we noted at the outset, that the bible ‘supplied the basic subject-matter of all early medieval pedagogy from the elementary to the intermediate level’.¹³ In some cases we have looked at sources where the identity of the author is known with some degree of certainty, but the vast majority of sources are anonymous, and I have deliberately avoided the use of gendered language in discussing their authors: the extent

⁸ The work of Liam Breatnach has gone a long way towards rehabilitating Middle Irish language and literature. The language was often seen as a period of chaos between the discipline of Old Irish and Classical Modern Irish, but see Breatnach’s monumental survey of the language: ‘An Mheán-Ghaeilge’, in *Stair na Gaeilge in ómós do Phádraig Ó Fiannachta*, ed. Kim McCone, *et al.* (Maynooth, 1994), pp. 221–333.

⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, 1982), p. 19.

¹⁰ An important starting point in relation to medieval Welsh literature is Joan Radnor, ‘Interpreting Irony in Medieval Celtic Narrative: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*’, *CMCS* 16 (1988), 41–59.

¹¹ Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse*, pp. 8–9.

¹² See, for example, the contributions on Irish sources in Deborah Hayden and Paul Russell, ed., *Grammatica, Gramadach and Gramadeg: Vernacular Grammar and Grammarians in Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Amsterdam, 2016); and Russell, *Read It in a Glossary*.

¹³ Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse*, p. 44.

of female literacy and the provision of education and production of literature in female monastic communities is uncertain. In most cases, the gender of the author cannot and should not be assumed.

I have argued that one of the intentions of historians in medieval Ireland was to write Ireland into the biblical scheme by casting them – as did many other medieval writers in relation to their own peoples – as the inheritors of the mantle of ‘God’s chosen people’.¹⁴ This must in part have been engendered through a defensiveness at not being mentioned in the bible at all. The Irish were far from being alone in this situation, and, as Tristan Major has shown, it gave rise to widespread European myths of origins:

The so-called *origines gentium* myths were one of the strategies employed to account for the growing discrepancies between the biblical texts and the awareness of ethnic diversity. By tracing back the ethnicities of an individual people, these myths were able to make tenuous connections to a name in the Table of Nations with a contemporary (or more well-known) people.¹⁵

Early medieval Irish historiographers wrote themselves into salvation history many times over, through the stories of Féníus Farsaid and the invention of the Irish language, through the narrative of *LGÉ* and other sources discussed in the Introduction. Within that broader framework, texts on David and the psalms, on Babylon and idolatry, provided opportunities to reinforce over and over again that Ireland’s own history, language, laws and literature were actively participating in the story of salvation. It is within that context, that is, the deep immersion in the narrative of salvation history, that we should understand statements that might otherwise seem outlandish, such as the idea that Patrick was ‘of the sons of Israel’ and that his ancestors had come to Britain as Jewish refugees from the persecution under Vespasian (see Chapter 1).

When reading medieval Irish sources, whether saga narrative or historiography, it can be impossible to determine where, in the mind of the writer, ‘protohistory ends and imagination begins’.¹⁶ We have seen some free renderings of biblical narrative, invented stories based on biblical characters and literary compositions grounded in exegesis and interpretation. None of these lessen the status of the books of the bible in medieval Ireland as the authoritative word of God. Rather, the exegetical approach allowed that the ‘truth’ could be expressed in a variety of ways, both literal and figurative, just as ‘history’ could be written as dramatic narrative.¹⁷ As noted in

¹⁴ We have looked particularly at the comparable example of early medieval England: Major, *Undoing Babel*; Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel*; Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse*; Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*.

¹⁵ Major, *Undoing Babel*, p. 54. See also Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations’.

¹⁶ Leyzer, *Signs of Weakness*, p. 109. For the Ulster Cycle as history, see Gregory Toner, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Historiography or Fiction?’ *CMCS* 40 (2000), 1–20.

¹⁷ Joan Radnor, ‘Writing History: Early Irish Historiography and the Significance of Form’, *Celtica* 23 (1999), 312–25, is full of important insights, although I would not accept the idea of a dichotomy between ‘native’ and ‘biblical’ elements: as I hope to have shown throughout this study, the two are for all intents and purposes indistinguishable.

Chapter 1, Varese Leyzer read many medieval Irish narratives alongside biblical stories (which would, of course, have been regarded as ‘history’ by medieval Irish audiences) with illuminating results. Her comparison of the character of Samson with that of Cú Chulainn, for example, her reading of *Tochmarc Becfhola* alongside the book of Esther and her reading of Cú Chulainn’s lament for Fer Diad in light of David’s lament for Jonathan show that there is much to be gained in thinking about less tangible biblical influences and the work they might have done in the creative process.¹⁸ I have suggested that in many cases, the audience would not have needed to understand or recognise the biblical echoes, allusions and inversions in medieval Irish literature – the best sagas are great literature in their own right – but rather our identification of them provides us with possible insights into the author’s education, intentions and creative process.

And in their literary freedom and creative techniques, these medieval Irish authors were participating in an ongoing human process of reinterpretation, adaptation and imagination. As Robert Alter noted in relation to the author of the Books of Samuel:

... these stories are not, strictly speaking, historiography, but rather the imaginative reenactment of history by a gifted writer who organizes his materials along certain thematic biases and according to his own remarkable intuition of the psychology of the characters. He feels entirely free, one should remember, to invent interior monologue for his characters; to ascribe feeling, intention or motive to them when he chooses; to supply verbatim dialogue ... for occasions when no one but the actors themselves could have had knowledge of exactly what was said. The author of the David stories stands in basically the same relation to Israelite history as Shakespeare stands to English history in the history plays.¹⁹

Whether it be David begging his troops in vain not to harm his son, Absalom; the tragic daughter, Babylon, wishing that her father’s city be named after her; Augustine, with his vision of trees and wolves, interpreted by his correspondent, Jerome; the grieving father unwittingly unleashing idolatry on the world through a statue of his son; or the lover of the sister of Mo Laisse, praying her soul out of hell, the medieval Irish sources that we have explored in this book are a series of ‘imaginative reenactments of history’. I have argued that close reading of those imaginative reenactments can greatly enhance our understanding of the people who produced them and our knowledge of the societies in which they lived, and can help us begin to appreciate the far-reaching implications of their profound engagement with Christian ideas of history and salvation.

¹⁸ Layzer, *Signs of Weakness*, p. 106 on Cú Chulainn and Samson, Chapter 5 for sustained reading of *Tochmarc Becfhola* and Book of Esther, pp. 212–3 on laments for Fer Diad and Jonathan.

¹⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), p. 35.

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