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To this small island: Immigrants and immigration in early medieval Ireland

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Abstract

To date, relatively little attention has been paid to immigration as a feature of early medieval Irish society, or to the experience of immigrants in early medieval Ireland. This is in spite of the fact that immigrants and immigration are both well attested across a variety of extant sources from the period, including histories and chronicles, legal texts, sagas, hagiography, and the archaeological record. This article surveys these diverse sources to highlight the scope and significance of immigration in early Ireland. Within the limits imposed by the sources, it examines the different kinds of immigrants who came to Ireland in the early period in terms of their social status (before and after their migration), gender, and ethnicity, as well as the motives that brought them to Ireland, their experiences as immigrants, and local attitudes toward them. It demonstrates the considerable diversity that characterised both the immigrants themselves and their experiences.

Keywords: archaeology, early medieval Ireland, exiles, human trafficking, immigrants, immigration, migration, missionaries, mobility

Introduction

Early medieval Ireland was a place of comings and goings, to-ings and fro-ings. The stories of those who left Irish shores are generally better known, both within academia and beyond. This is in part a consequence of the fact that the *Scoti peregrini*—the 'saints and scholars' who left Ireland for Britain and the continent between the sixth and the ninth centuries—contributed so much to European culture.[1] Saints Columba, Columbanus and Cillian, for example, are among the most famous figures of the era on the European stage, and

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[1] As we have been reminded by the recent exhibition 'Words on the wave: Ireland and St Gallen in early medieval Europe' at the National Museum of Ireland. The exhibition catalogue gives a flavour of what was on display and its significance: Matthew Seaver, Diarmuid Ó Riain and Maeve Sikora (eds), *Words on the wave: Ireland and St Gallen in early medieval Europe* (Dublin, 2025).

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have rightly attracted considerable attention from both Irish and continental scholars. But those who migrated out of Ireland in the early medieval period are also better known because their stories and their experiences are sometimes seen as anticipating later waves of departures.[2] The prominence of emigration as a feature of Irish history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has thus enhanced, maybe exaggerated, the perceived significance of emigration as a feature of early Irish society (though not, it must be said, the impact of the individuals involved). Immigration, on the other hand, at least outside the colonial context, has until recently been a relatively minor feature of modern Irish history and society. Correspondingly, comparatively little attention has been paid to the phenomenon in the early medieval period to date,[3] and its significance as a feature of early Irish society is under-appreciated even among some in the field.[4]

My intention in this contribution is to demonstrate that immigration was a prominent feature of early Irish society and to offer some tentative insights regarding the identities and experiences of the immigrants whose individual or collective experiences we can illuminate: their social, gender and ethnic identities, for example; their lay or ecclesiastical background, and their geographical origins; as well as their motives for migrating and their experiences in Ireland.[5] My concern will be with the period beginning at the dawn of Irish history in the fifth century and continuing down to the decades immediately preceding the arrival in Ireland of large numbers of Scandinavian invaders and settlers during the ninth century in the context of the Viking Age. The scale and context of this Scandinavian colonisation differ to such an extent from what went before it that it warrants separate discussion. Beginning with Saint Patrick, I will discuss the histories of individuals and groups whose

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[2] This is a prominent feature of the wonderful documentary *From that small island: the story of the Irish*, directed by Rachael Moriarty and Peter Murphy, RTÉ 2025 (https://www.rte.ie/player/series/from-that-small-island/10001338-00-0000, accessed 22 January 2026).

[3] Important exceptions to this general trend include Christophe Archan and Olivier Viron, 'Insularité – altérité; la place de l'étranger dans l'Irlande du haut Moyen Âge', *Droit et Cultures* 76 (2018), 183–228 (https://doi.org/10.4000/droitcultures.4847, accessed 11 December 2025) and Elizabeth O'Brien, *Mapping death: burial in late Iron Age and early medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2020), chapter 7 'Mobility of Peoples', 171–81. Michael Richter dedicates a section of his book on *Ireland and her neighbours in the seventh century* (Dublin, 1999) to 'Foreigners in Ireland' (137–56).

[4] See, for example, Matthew Stout's problematic reflection that in the early Middle Ages, 'Ireland clearly did not lightly embrace foreigners': *Early medieval Ireland 431–1169* (Dublin, 2017), 212–13. The comment is made in relation to a record of the arrival of a group of Jews in Ireland in 1079 and their rapid departure.

[5] Migration has been attracting greater interest among medievalists in recent times. See, for instance, W. Mark Ormrod, Bart Lambert and Jonathan Mackman (eds), *Immigrant England, 1300–1550* (Manchester, 2019); W. Mark Ormrod, Joanna Story and Elizabeth Tyler (eds), *Migrants in medieval England,* c.*500*–c.*1500*, Proceedings of the British Academy 229 (Oxford, 2020).

migrations to Ireland, or at least whose presence in Ireland, are recorded in historical sources. Thereafter, I will shift focus to the Irish legal sources, to see what they tell us about the Gaelic Irish attitudes toward immigrants and their experiences. Finally, I will briefly discuss the archaeological evidence for foreign presence in early Ireland.

Before commencing in earnest, it is necessary to note that migration features prominently in a variety of narrative sources from early medieval Ireland, most famously *Lebor gabála Érenn* ('Book of the taking of Ireland', sometimes known as the 'Book of invasions').[6] *Lebor gabála* purports to provide an account of the prehistoric migration to Ireland of successive waves of invaders and settlers, the last of whom were the Gaels. The 'canonical' version of this text was compiled in the eleventh century and copied repeatedly thereafter, but the central narrative may have been in development from as early as the seventh.[7] *Lebor gabála* belongs to a genre of texts called 'origin legends', examples of which were produced by many of the peoples of early medieval Europe.[8] Some origin legends, such as those of the English, Franks and Goths, may reflect—however dimly—the reality of the so-called 'migration period', when groups of barbarians migrated into the western provinces of the Roman empire.[9] The idea that *Lebor gabála* likewise preserved some memory of actual migration patterns was espoused well into the modern period, with T.F. O'Rahilly the most learned of those who attempted to identify the real events that underpinned its account.[10] More recently, however, as a result of analysis of the sources and models that shaped the text, including the biblical Exodus, this view has been rejected.[11] Accounts of migration in *Lebor gabála* are now seen by most as literary tropes, and few believe that

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[6] A convenient translation by John Carey can be found in John T. Koch and John Carey (eds), *The Celtic heroic age: literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales*, Celtic Studies Publications 1 (Malden, MA, 1995), 213–66. For discussion, see John Carey, *The Irish national origin legend: synthetic pseudohistory*, Quiggin Pamphlet on the Sources of Medieval Gaelic History I (Cambridge, 1994).

[7] Carey, *Irish national origin legend*, 5–16.

[8] Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (eds), *Origin legends in early medieval Western Europe*, Reading Medieval Sources 6 (Leiden, 2023).

[9] For studies of the period in which the importance of migration is stressed, see Guy Halsall, *Barbarian migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007); Peter Heather, *Empires and barbarians: the fall of Rome and the birth of Europe* (Oxford, 2009).

[10] T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin, 1946).

[11] While much vital work has been done in more recent times, the crucial pioneering discussion was done by Eoin MacNeill more than a century ago: *Celtic Ireland* [Introduction and New Notes by Donnchadh Ó Corráin] (Dublin, 1981; first published 1921), chapter 3, 'The Irish Synthetic Historians'. For recent discussions, see Michael Clarke, 'The *Leabhar gabhála* and Carolingian origin legends', in Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (eds), *Early medieval Ireland and Europe: chronology, contacts, scholarship. A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, Studia Traditionis Theologiae 14 (Turnhout, 2015), 441–79; and Lindy Brady, *The origin legends of early medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2022).

they echo of real events. *Lebor gabála* and other similar sources will therefore not feature in the following discussion.

Enslaved foreigners in early Ireland

In the context of recent international migration crises and increased immigration into Ireland, much has been made of the fact that St Patrick was an immigrant.[12] In fact, as he tells us in his own surviving writings, Patrick came to Ireland twice: as a teenager, he was captured by raiders from his home in Britain and sold into slavery in Ireland; after a number of years tending sheep, he escaped and made his way home to his parents before subsequently returning to Ireland on what he believed was a divine commission to spread the Christian faith.[13] While victims of human trafficking are not migrants in the true sense, since they lack agency regarding their moves, nonetheless, since one of the goals of this study is to identify the different kinds of foreigners resident in early Ireland, I will use Patrick's experience as a means of discussing the evidence relating to both enslaved foreigners and immigrant missionaries.

Slavery was commonplace in early Ireland.[14] Not all enslaved people were foreigners; individuals were enslaved for a variety of reasons, including being captured in warfare or as a result of being unable to pay off a debt. But according to commentary on the eighth-century law tract *Uraicecht becc* ('Small primer'), enslaved foreigners were valued more highly than enslaved Irish people because they were less likely to abscond.[15] The market for enslaved foreigners was supplied by raiders, including those Patrick tells us captured him along 'with so many thousands of people' from fifth-century Britain.[16] Many of these were no doubt men and women of relatively low social status, but Patrick's case reminds us that individuals

[12] See, for example, Piaras Mac Éinrí, 'St Patrick the migrant for all migrants', *RTÉ Brainstorm* 15 March 2021 (https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/0316/947742-st-patrick-the-migrant-for-all-migrants/, accessed 2 April 2026); Christina Finn, 'Taoiseach: "St Patrick was a migrant to Ireland – a single, male, undocumented one"', *Thejournal.ie* 13 March 2024 (https://www.thejournal.ie/leo-varadkar-st-patrick-migrant-6325559-Mar2024/, accessed 18 December 2025); John Fitzgerald, 'St Patrick was an immigrant – and Ireland's economy continues to benefit from them', *Irish Times* 14 March 2025 (https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/2025/03/14/st-patrick-was-an-immigrant-and-ireland-continues-to-benefit-from-them/, accessed 18 December 2025).

[13] Patrick, *Confessio*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *Libri epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: introduction, text and commentary*, Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources, Ancillary Publications IV = Clavis Patricii II (Dublin, 1993). Editions and translations of Patrick's writings are available online at https://www.confessio.ie/ (accessed 22 January 2026).

[14] For an overview, see Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin, 1988, reprinted 1998) (hereafter *GEIL*), 95–7.

[15] D.A. Bincy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici* (6 vols, Dublin, 1978) (hereafter *CIH*), 1617.29–32. For an overview of the text, including a brief discussion of its date, see Liam Breatnach, *A companion to the* Corpus iuris Hibernici*,* Early Irish Law Series 5 (Dublin, 2005), 315–18.

[16] Patrick, *Confessio*, § 1, ed. Bieler, 56.

from well-off backgrounds—Patrick's family owned a villa and possessed their own servants[17]—were also susceptible to capture and enslavement. The foreign slaves of medieval Ireland were therefore likely diverse in terms of ethnic background and previous social status; they also undoubtedly included both men and women.

It goes without saying that enslaved people endured hardship and at times brutal treatment at the hands of their masters. Enslaved men generally did menial farmwork, such as herding livestock (as in Patrick's case) or chopping wood, while enslaved women did physically demanding domestic work, and seem to have been associated particularly with the back-breaking labour of grinding grain.[18] Enslaved women—foreign and local—were also subjected to violence, including sexual violence and rape.[19] This is clear from the fact that both Old Irish vernacular law and the *Penitential of Finnian* make provision for what to do in the case of a man impregnating an enslaved woman.[20] Saga texts, though not reporting accurate historical details, nonetheless reflect the social norms and expectations of the period to which they belong. It is telling, therefore, that the Old Irish text known as the 'Saga of Fergus mac Léti' states that Fergus whipped his female slave because she was too slow carrying out his command.[21] Another saga, the 'Adventures of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedón', tells us that the king, Eochaid, had five sons. His wife, Mongfhind, was the mother of the eldest four. His fifth son, Niall, was the son of an enslaved English woman called Cairenn. Mongfhind was so jealous of Cairenn that she forced her to do heavy work during her pregnancy 'in order that the child in her womb might perish'.[22] In this instance, an enslaved foreign woman was first raped by her owner and subsequently also had to deal with abuse by his jealous wife.

It is almost impossible to gain insight into the experience of enslaved people themselves, since sources from their perspective are extremely rare. We are fortunate in this regard that Patrick provides us with a unique record from a survivor of human-trafficking and enslavement in the early Middle Ages. Patrick's writings are complex and present unique challenges of interpretation. His *Confessio* and 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus' were both written during the period of his missionary work, many years after his enslavement. They are carefully crafted rhetorical works,

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[17] Patrick, *Epistola ad milites Corotici*, § 10, ed. Bieler, *Libri Epistolarum*, 96. One of the strengths of Roy Flechner's controversial recent biography of Patrick is the discussion of Patrick's social background: *Saint Patrick retold: the legend and history of Ireland's patron saint* (Princeton, 2019), 29–60.

[18] *GEIL*, 96, 438–40.

[19] Charlene Eska, 'Women and slavery in the early Irish laws', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 8 (2011), 29–39.

[20] *CIH*, 20.28: *mac donither do cumail i tothlu sech flaith*; *Penitentialis Vinniani*, §§ 39–40, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish penitentials*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 5 (Dublin, 1963, reprinted 2011), 88; *GEIL*, 96.

[21] D.A. Binchy (ed. and trans.), 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti', *Ériu* 16 (1952), 33–48: 38, 43.

[22] Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The death of Crimthann son of Fidach and the Adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903), 172–207: 190: *co n-eplead in lenap ina broind*. I have altered Stokes' translation.

written in response to specific stimuli and with specific agendas in mind that related primarily to his missionary endeavours. For instance, one of Patrick's concerns was to defend the motives underpinning his migration to Ireland. One way he did this was by comparing his obedience to God's will in spreading the faith to Ireland with the loss of status and freedom he experienced when enslaved.[23] Patrick's account of his enslavement must be read in light of this and other rhetorical agendas. Nonetheless, his writings still potentially offer some insight into the experience of captivity and slavery. As noted above, his experience herding sheep chimes with other sources. One potential further insight concerns Patrick's conversion during his enslavement in Ireland. Patrick's father and grandfather were both clerics, so when Patrick says he only came to know God during his captivity, we should understand this to refer to him committing himself to his faith with greater intensity and intentionality, rather than an initial adoption of Christianity.[24] We might wonder whether Patrick's embrace of the faith so central to his family's identity was a response to the trauma of sudden and violent separation from home and the loss of status, community, and freedom he experienced. In such circumstances, religion was one of the few features of familiar home life Patrick could carry with him, and we can imagine that it provided a small degree of comfort to feel linked with his family through religious belief and practice. This is only conjecture, of course; despite the existence of Patrick's writings, the experiences of the enslaved must remain largely unknown. On the other hand, as noted above, Patrick wrote his surviving letters during his second spell in Ireland and they have more to tell us about the experience of missionary immigrants.

Missionaries

Patrick was not the only foreign person enslaved in early Ireland; neither was he the only immigrant involved in its conversion. He was almost certainly preceded by Bishop Palladius, who was sent to 'the Irish believing in Christ' by Pope Celestine I in 431, and likely by others who left no trace on the written record.[25] Many of these came, like Patrick, from Britain, as is demonstrated by both the influence of British Latin on the Latin used in early Ireland and, potentially, by some features of early Irish Christianity.[26] The role of Britons in spreading the

[23] For example, Patrick, *Confessio*, § 43, ed. Bieler, 82.

[24] Patrick, *Confessio*, §§ 1–2, ed. Bieler, 56–8.

[25] Prosper, *Chronicle*, *s.a.* 431, ed. T. Mommsen, *Chronica minora saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, MGH AA 9 (3 vols, Berlin, 1982), vol. 1, 473: *Ad Scottos in Christum credentes ordinatus a papa Caelestino Palladius primus episcopus mittitur*. For discussion, see Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'Who was Palladius "first bishop of the Irish"?', *Peritia* 14 (2000), 205–37.

[26] Eoin MacNeill, 'Beginnings of Latin culture in Ireland', *Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review* vol. 20, no. 77 (1931), 39–48. MacNeill's assessment of the linguistics has been surpassed by, among others, Damian McManus, 'A chronology of the Latin loan-words in early Irish', *Ériu* 34 (1983), 21–71, but his discussion of the historical context remains of value. David N. Dumville, 'Some British aspects of the earliest Irish Christianity', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds), *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frümittelalter = Ireland and Europe: the early Church* (Stuttgart, 1984), 16–24.

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faith to Ireland was remembered throughout the medieval period, even if specific details were not recorded or reported accurately. As David Dumville noted, later hagiography 'allowed—in even in some measure celebrated—the significant British element in the origins and formation of Irish Christianity'.[27]

Yet, as in the case of those who experienced slavery, so in the case of the missionaries who worked in late-antique Ireland, Patrick is the only person to have left us a written record of his experience. We are therefore heavily reliant on Patrick again for our knowledge of the experience of migration shared by these early missionaries.[28] Missionaries were, by definition, individuals and groups who moved to Ireland to live and work among people whose religious beliefs and culture were fundamentally different from their own. As noted above, most came from Roman Britain or Gaul, and while recent research has emphasised the extent to which Ireland was in contact with the Roman world in the era before the coming of Christianity in the fifth century, there is still no doubt that pagan Ireland differed starkly from its Romanised neighbours. Indeed, Patrick says as much in his Letter, in which he expresses a sense of affinity with the Christian Romans of Gaul, whom he called his 'brothers', while depicting the inhabitants of Ireland as 'barbarian pagan peoples' among whom he lives as 'an immigrant and an exile'.[29] This culture shock was no doubt real.

Patrick's experience as a missionary in Ireland was shaped by his status as an immigrant, facing the twin challenges of separation from the comforts of home and operating in an unfamiliar cultural environment. He is explicit in stating his longing to see his home and parents, for instance.[30] This is hardly surprising in light of the insults, threats and persecution he reports enduring at

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[27] D.N. Dumville, 'British missionary activity in Ireland', in D.N. Dumville *et al.*, *Saint Patrick, a.d. 493–1993*, Studies in Celtic History 13 (Woodbridge, 1993, reprinted 1999), 133–45: 143.

[28] For more on the context to Irish conversion and the earliest Christians, see Elva Johnston, 'Religious change and frontier management: reassessing conversion in fourth- and fifth-century Ireland', *Eolas* 11 (2018), 104–19; Elva Johnston, 'Being Christian in late antique Ireland', in Katja Ritari, Jan R. Stenger and William van Andringa (eds), *Being pagan, being Christian in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages*, AHEAD. Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Helsinki, 2023), 235–54. See also Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (eds), *The introduction of Christianity into the early medieval Insular world: Converting the Isles I*, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 19 (Turnhout, 2016), especially Colmán Etchingham's chapter, 'Conversion in Ireland', 181–207; Nancy Edwards, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Roy Flechner (eds), *Transforming landscapes of belief in the early medieval Insular world and beyond: Converting the Isles II*, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 23 (Turnhout, 2017).

[29] Patrick, *Epistola*, § 1, ed. Bieler, 91.

[30] Patrick, *Confessio*, § 43, ed. Bieler, 82. For more on Patrick's sense of identity as a Roman citizen from Britain, see Patrick Wadden, 'British identity in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages: some aspects of continuity and change', in *Early Medieval Europe* 30.1 (2022), 1–28: 5–10.

the hands of certain of the pagan Irish.[31] While there are no records of missionaries being martyred in Ireland, we may accept that their efforts to effect major cultural change and to challenge existing social and cultural norms occasionally faced serious opposition. Even when not opposing his work directly, the locals' customs presented challenges to the outsider; Patrick expresses repugnance at the practice of sealing agreements by sucking a man's breast, presumably because it bore pagan connotations.[32] He also refers to the need to pay off local kings and their sons in order to pursue his mission, and to receiving unwanted gifts, none of which would have been familiar to those operating in a Roman context, and some of which got him in trouble with his peers and superiors within the Church.[33] While stressing the foreignness of Ireland was a rhetorical strategy for Patrick, intended to emphasise the suffering he endured in following God's will, we need not doubt the sincerity of his statements about missing home, about the threats and challenges faced by those engaged in spreading the new faith, and about the otherness of Ireland. Patrick's voluntary mission differed from his experience of human trafficking and enslavement, of course. But both were shaped by his status as an immigrant.

Royal immigrants

While the missionaries who operated in early Ireland were likely predominantly male, those trafficked into the country certainly included both men and women. The same is true of the next category of migrants we will discuss, namely, foreign royalty. From the seventh century, and no doubt earlier, male and female migrants from royal backgrounds were drawn to Ireland.[34] While there undoubtedly would have been other women, there is only one whose life is recorded in any detail. This is Máel Muire, daughter of Cináed mac Ailpín, king of the Picts.[35] She was married to Áed Findliath, the Northern Uí Néill king of Tara, at some date prior to his death in 879.[36] After Áed's death, she married his successor as king of Tara—the highest political office in Ireland, though it did not equate with the kingship of Ireland—Flann Sinna mac Maíl Sechnaill of the Southern

[31] Patrick, *Confessio*, §§ 37, 52, 55, ed. Bieler, 77–8, 86, 87–8.
[32] Patrick, *Confessio*, § 18, ed. Bieler, 67.
[33] Patrick, *Confessio*, § 37, 49, 52, ed. Bieler, 77–8, 85, 86.
[34] Tacitus noted that an exiled Irish king sought political refuge in first-century Britain (*Agricola*, § 24, quoted, translated, and discussed in Philip Freeman, *Ireland and the Classical World* (Austin, 2001), 56–62). Given the pattern in later centuries, there is every reason to believe that traffic in the other direction was also occurring.
[35] For Cináed's title, see Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, (eds and trans.), *The annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983) (hereafter *AU*), *s.a.* 858. Evidence for the relationships outlined here comes primarily from the Middle Irish *Bansenchas*, 'Tradition regarding women': Maighréad Dobbs (ed. and trans.), 'The *Ban-shenchas*', *Revue Celtique* 48 (1931), 163–234: 225. For some of the political background and potential context, see Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070*, New Edinburgh History of Scotland (Edinburgh, 2007), 115–16.
[36] *AU*, *s.a.* 879.

Uí Néill. Máel Muire died in 913 and her obit is reported in the annals.[37] Flann survived her by three years; when he died, he was succeeded by Máel Muire's son by her first marriage, Niall Glúndub, who reigned until 919 and whose illustrious descendants adopted the surname Ó Néill after him.[38] This immigrant princess, daughter of the king of the Picts, was thus the wife of two kings of Tara and the mother of another. It was very unusual for a woman to be commemorated in the annals in the ninth century and it was potentially due to the significance of her male relatives that Máel Muire's obit was recorded, though we should not rule out the prospect that she was a formidable person in her own right. It is possible that what attracted Flann Sinna to her was that she and her household officers would have gained valuable experience of the royal court during her marriage to Áed Findliath that would have helped smooth the transition to his kingship. Such marriages were not uncommon; indeed, prior to marrying Máel Muire, Áed had himself been married to Lann, the widow of his predecessor as king of Tara, Máel Sechnaill mac Maíl Ruanaid, Flann Sinna's father.[39] Why Áed Findliath had married Máel Muire is impossible to know for certain, though the marriage may reflect a political alliance between the Northern Uí Néill and the kingdom of the Picts. Whatever the precise context, and regardless of the fact that Máel Muire became a person of real significance in Ireland, there is a high likelihood that she had minimal agency in the decision to move from Pictland to Ireland. Her marriage to Áed Findliath, if it was her first marriage, would have been arranged between her father and her prospective husband.[40] In this regard, she had something in common with enslaved female victims of human trafficking, despite the difference in their social standing.

By way of contrast, royal men came to Ireland of their own volition, even if it was usually in flight from unfavourable political circumstances at home. We know of one Frankish royal who spent time in seventh-century Ireland—Dagobert II, later ruler of Austrasia. Dagobert seemingly spent about twenty years in Ireland before returning to claim his kingdom briefly in the 670s, though no details survive about his location or activities in Ireland.[41] There were undoubtedly British, or Welsh royal immigrants, too. Welsh tradition holds that

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[37] *AU*, *s.a.* 913.

[38] *AU, s.aa.* 916, 919.

[39] Dobbs, 'The *Ban-shenchas*', 225.

[40] For marriage in early Ireland, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Marriage in early Ireland', in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985), 5–24.

[41] For a brief discussion, see Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours*, 154–6. For greater detail, see Jean-Michel Picard, 'Church and politics in the seventh century: the Irish exile of King Dagobert II', *Ireland and Northern France AD 600–850* (Dublin, 1991), 27–52. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín has proposed on the evidence of a speculative etymology of the place name, that Dagobert resided at Rath Melsigi: '*Pater* Ecgberct of Rath Melsigi: the hero of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*?: Jennifer O'Reilly Memorial Lecture 2023', in Máirín MacCarron and Tom O'Reilly (eds), *Ireland and Britain in the age of Bede: the Jennifer O'Reilly lectures 2017–2024* (Cork, 2025), 208–14.

Cadwallon son of Cadfan (d. 634), king of Gwynedd, sought refuge in Ireland when his kingdom came under attack by Edwin of Northumbria, for example.[42] And it has been suggested that the British army active in Ireland between the 680s and the early 700s, apparently fighting both as mercenaries in the service of Irish kings and also on their own account, may have been the military retinue of a deposed ruler of the British kingdom of Rheged.[43] But most of our evidence for royal immigration into Ireland pertains to English political exiles.[44] The most famous of a number of documented cases involves the descendants of King Aethelfrith of Northumbria reported in detail by Bede. During the reign of Edwin (d.633), the first Northumbrian king to convert to Christianity, the sons of his predecessor, Aethelfrith, sought refuge among the Gaels and the Picts.[45] At least two of Aethelfrith's sons, Oswald and Oswiu, spent at least some of this time in Dál Riata, the Gaelic kingdom that spanned the channel between Ireland and northern Britain. Here they stayed for about sixteen years, before Oswald returned to Northumbria in the years after Edwin's death to reclaim their father's kingdom. Oswald was succeeded as king by his younger brother, Oswiu. Oswiu had been only about four years old when the brothers went into exile, so he must have been almost as much Irish as he was English by the time of his return. Bede asserts that he spoke Irish fluently and greatly admired Gaelic scholarship.[46] Oswald and Oswiu were kings of a flourishing English kingdom, then the most powerful political entity on the island of Britain. They were also returned migrants, whose lives—and reigns, as we shall see—were shaped by a formative period spent living among the Gaels.

Another king of Northumbria who spent an extended period living among the Irish was Oswiu's son, Aldfrith. A widely accepted tradition in the Irish genealogies holds that Oswiu married a woman of the Northern Uí Néill during his time among the Gaels, with whom he had a son. This son is known in

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[42] J.E. Lloyd, *A history of Wales from the earliest times to the Edwardian conquest* (London, 1911), 184–5; G.C.J. Thomas, 'A verse attributed to Cadwallon fab Cadfan', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 34 (1987), 67–9.

[43] *AU, s.aa.* 682, 697, 702, 703, 709; Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and holy men: Scotland AD 80–1000* (Edinburgh, 1984, reprinted 2003), 25–6. For an alternative interpretation, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), 433, note 75.

[44] The key study is Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *The kings depart: the prosopography of Anglo-Saxon royal exile in the sixth and seventh centuries*, Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Gaelic History 8 (Cambridge, 2007). For an earlier exploration of related themes by the same author, see *The first century of Anglo-Irish relations (AD 600–700)*, The 31st O'Donnell Lecture, 2003, delivered at the National University of Ireland, Galway (Dublin, 2004). Hermann Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty and the Irish in the seventh century', *Peritia* 2 (1983), 103–26, laid the groundwork for much later study of the topic.

[45] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, iii.1, ed. and trans., Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969, reprinted 1981), 212–13.

[46] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.25, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 296–7.

English sources as Aldfrith and in Irish as Flann Fína.[47] Aldfrith/Flann Fína was a noted Latin scholar and potentially also the author of surviving texts in Old Irish.[48] He and other returning migrants may have been partly responsible for adding a Gaelic flavour to early English vernacular poetry.[49] Perhaps intending a career in the Church, Aldfrith/Flann Fína seems to have spent his entire life in Ireland or Gaelic Scotland until the death of his half-brother Ecgfrith in 685, at which point he was recalled to Northumbria and elevated to the kingship.[50] He remained friends with the abbot of Iona, the famous Adomnán, author of the Life of Saint Columba, who visited him twice during his reign, on one occasion giving him a gift of one of his scholarly works.[51]

Aldfrith's career in Ireland as a scholar demonstrates one of the avenues open to political exiles. It seems unlikely that his experience was reflective of many of his peers', though. These were men of rank for whom warfare was a common occupation. They were also men with prospects. Irish kings and lords no doubt welcomed them in the hope that they would benefit politically should the exiles reestablish themselves in the kingdoms whence they had been expelled. During their time among the Irish, these royal exiles likely repaid their hosts' hospitality through military service. This may have been the case for the Northumbrian, Herring son of Hussa, who led the army of Dál Riata at the battle of Degsastan in 603.[52] Otherwise, it is difficult to know what their experience of migration would have been. No doubt they were honoured guests among their social peers, appreciated for their political and military usefulness. But they would also have been dependent upon their hosts for economic support and vulnerable to the vicissitudes of politics in the era. Theirs was likely not a comfortable or carefree existence.

Their period of residence among the Irish was clearly transformative for at least some of these royal migrants. The experience of the more politically successful among them in turn precipitated fundamental shifts and developments in

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[47] M.A. O'Brien (ed.) *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), 135: *Colmán Rímid athair Fína, máthair íside Flaind Fína meic Ossu Regi Saxonum*; Colin Ireland, 'Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish genealogies', *Celtica* 22 (1991), 64–78.

[48] Colin Ireland, *Old Irish wisdom attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: an edition of* Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 205 (Tempe, 1999); Colin Ireland, 'Where was King Aldfrith of Northumbria educated? An exploration of seventh-century Insular learning', *Traditio* 70 (2015), 29–74.

[49] Colin A. Ireland, *The Gaelic background of Old English poetry before Bede* (New York, 2022).

[50] The anonymous Life of St Cuthbert says that Aldfrith was on Iona shortly before Ecgfrith's death: *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), 104.

[51] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, v.15, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 504–7; Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ii.46, ed. and trans. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1991), 178–81.

[52] Michael Swanton (trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon chronicles* (London, 2000; first published 1996), 21. See also Ó Cróinín, '*Pater* Ecgberct', 189–90, 205–8.

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the history of early medieval England. Oswald converted to Christianity while living among the Gaels, for instance.[53] Famously, once established in Northumbria, Oswald requested that the monks of Iona send a bishop to help spread the faith within his kingdom.[54] Oswald's role in the conversion earned the praise of Bede, who called him 'the holiest and most victorious king of the Northumbrians', and he was later venerated as a saint.[55] The link he established between Northumbria and Iona launched a period of intense and far-reaching cultural exchange and interaction between the Gaelic world and early medieval England. This is often discussed in relation to the Irish influence in Northumbria. But it also resulted in considerable migration from England and the creation of immigrant communities in Ireland.

Immigrant churchmen

The great eighth-century Northumbrian monastic scholar, Bede, tells us that during the middle of the seventh century

> … many in England, both nobles and commons, … left their own country and retired to Ireland either for the sake of religious studies or to live a more ascetic life. In course of time some of these devoted themselves faithfully to the monastic life, while others preferred to travel round to the cells of various teachers and apply themselves to study. The Irish welcomed them all gladly, gave them their daily food, and also provided them with books to read and with instruction, without asking for any payment.[56]

Aldhelm of Malmesbury, writing in the late seventh century, looked at these events less favourably, bewailing the numbers of Englishmen travelling to Ireland to further their education.[57] It was not only the English who pursued study in Ireland; at least one Frank is known to have followed a similar career path. This is Agilbert, the future bishop of Dorchester and Paris, who spent time in Ireland prior to 664.[58] So great was the flow of foreign students into Ireland that one commentator has dubbed it a 'study abroad destination' in the seventh century.[59] Charles Plummer was a little more sceptical, and suggested that some of these migrations were driven by the same political instability that drove scions of competing royal dynasties into

[53] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.3, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 218–19.
[54] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.3, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 218–19.
[55] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.7, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 232–3. I have altered the translation slightly. For more on Oswald, see C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds), *Oswald: Northumbrian king to European saint* (Stamford, 1995).
[56] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.27, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 312–13.
[57] *Aldhelm, the prose works*, trans. M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge, 1979), 163.
[58] Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours*, 143–65.
[59] Colin Ireland, 'Seventh-century Ireland as a study abroad destination', *Frontiers: the Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 5.1 (1999), 61–80 (https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v5i1.72, accessed 25 November 2025).

exile, rather than by the pursuit of learning.[60] In any case, Bede claims that these students were warmly welcomed by the Irish, given free tuition, books, and accommodation. Colin Ireland has suggested that support for this claim can be read in the *Hisperica Famina*, which may have been written by students in Ireland.[61]

We know the names and fates of several of the Englishmen who migrated to Ireland from Bede, who tells us that some later returned to England, others moved on to the continent, while others still remained in Ireland until their deaths. The first of these groups included Ethelwin, who, after education in Ireland, 'returned to his native land and was made bishop in the kingdom of Lindsey, over which he ruled for a long time with great distinction'.[62] Chad likewise returned to Northumbria to take up the bishopric previously held by the Irishmen Áedán, Finnian and Colmán.[63] No doubt their episcopates had an Irish flavour. Of those who went from Ireland to the continent, the most famous was Willibrord, the Englishman who is the patron saint of Luxembourg.[64] Willibrord spent twelve years in Ireland before leading a mission to the Frisians. Eventually, he ended up founding the monastery of Echternach in Luxembourg, which became an important hub of English and Irish activity on the continent. Other Englishmen who went to spread the faith on the continent after a period spent in Ireland include Suidbert, who likewise went to work among the Frisians, as well as Hewald the Black and Hewald the White, who were martyred among the Saxons in 692.[65] Might their experiences as migrants in Ireland have prepared these men for the missionary life on the continent? Those with experience of living in foreign—but still Christian—Ireland might have been deemed better prepared for missionary activity among pagans than those who had remained at home.

Among the English who entered monastic life in Ireland, many undoubtedly joined what were predominantly Irish communities. Adomnán's reference to the presence of English monks at Iona during Columba's time—including a baker called Genereus and another Englishman called Pilu—likely reflects the reality of many institutions during the early medieval period.[66] If his role in the monastery can be taken as a reflection of his social class, then it is possible, as Ó Cróinín posited, that Genereus was one of the commoners, rather than the

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[60] Charles Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (2 vols, Oxford, 1896), vol. 2, 197. Ó Cróinín, '*Pater* Ecgberct', 189–93, supports this view.

[61] Ireland, 'Seventh-century Ireland as a study abroad destination'.

[62] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.27, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 312–13.

[63] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iv.3, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 344–5.

[64] The most recent study is Michel Summer, *Willibrord between Ireland, Britain and Merovingian Francia (690–739): beyond mission*, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Belief and Culture (Liverpool, 2024).

[65] These developments are discussed in Wilhelm Levison, *England and the continent in the eighth century* (Oxford, 1946).

[66] Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, iii.10, 22, ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson, 196–7, 214–15.

nobles, of Bede's account.[67] Their status as institutions of the universal Church, their use of Latin, and their commitment to providing hospitality made monasteries welcoming and accessible destinations for religious migrants. We should probably imagine that the presence of a few foreign monks within a monastic community in early medieval Ireland was unexceptional, as Adomnán's testimony suggests.[68]

In addition to the Englishmen who joined Irish monasteries, others established their own religious communities. Perhaps the most famous of these is Mayo, or *Mag nÉo na Saxan*, 'Mayo of the English', to give it its full Irish name. This monastery was established in the seventh century by a group of English monks who had come to Ireland after the synod of Whitby.[69] Travelling with Bishop Colmán, the last Irish bishop of Lindisfarne, they initially settled along with Colmán's Irish monks on Inishbofin. After a short interval, the English monks separated themselves from the Irish and established a new, all-English community at Mayo. Remarkably, Mayo remained an English monastery in terms of personnel and affiliation for generations. In the eighth century, Bede noted that the monastery was flourishing: 'This monastery is still occupied by Englishmen, from small beginnings it has now become very large … It now contains a remarkable body of English monks gathered from English provinces'.[70] Writing at the very end of the eighth century, Alcuin (d. 804), the great English scholar at the Carolingian court, wrote one letter 'to the monks of Mayo' and another to Leodfrith, 'bishop of the monastery of Mayo in Ireland'.[71] For at least a century and a half, therefore, there was an English immigrant community

[67] Ó Cróinín, *The kings depart*, 6.

[68] Compare Dáibhí Ó Cróinín's statement ('The earliest Echternach liturgical manuscript fragments: Irish or Anglo-Saxon?', in Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony, and Jane Maxwell (eds), *An Insular Odyssey: manuscript culture in early Christian Ireland and beyond* (Dublin, 2017), 55–75: 74): '[there] was nothing surprising to find Irish, English, British, and Pictish royalty and their ecclesiastical relations—with the occasional Frank added for good measure—living together in places like Iona and Lindisfarne, Mayo and Rath Melsigi, and several other monasteries'.

[69] For detailed studies, see Nora K. Chadwick, 'Bede, St Colmán and the Irish abbey of Mayo', in Kenneth Jackson and Nora K. Chadwick (eds), *Celt and Saxon: studies in the early British border* (Cambridge, 1963), 186–205; Vera Orschel, '*Mag nEó na Sacsan*: an English colony in Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries', *Peritia* 15 (2001), 81–107; Vera Orschel, 'The early history of Mayo of the Saxons', in Gerard Nolan and Nollaig Ó Muraíle (eds), *Mayo history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 2014), 77–99.

[70] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iv.4, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 348–9. I have altered the translation slightly since Colgrave and Mynors omit what seems to me a salient detail, namely that the English monks of Mayo came from multiple provinces within England.

[71] Ernst Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini aevi*, MGH Epistolae (4 vols, Berlin, 1895), vol. 2, 19 (no. 2) and 445–6 (no. 287): Stephen Allott (ed. and trans.), *Alcuin of York: his life and letters* (York, 1974), 43–5. For discussion, see Orschel, '*Mag nEó*', 98–100; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Of Saxons, a Viking and Normans: Colmán, Gerald and the monastery of

resident in Mayo. This would have necessitated that the community be replenished with a steady stream of recruits from England. Bede's statement that during his time the monks were from English 'provinces', in the plural, suggests that they were not all Northumbrians but were actually drawn from a much wider catchment area. This must have required some degree of institutional support, as well as frequent communication back and forth between Mayo and England.

In the early eighth century, Bishop Gerald of Mayo earned a reputation for holiness and his death was noted in the Irish annals.[72] He would later be venerated as a saint—Saint Gerald of Mayo. A Latin Life of Gerald, possibly written in the thirteenth century, survives in a manuscript associated with Saints' Island in Lough Ree.[73] Charles Plummer, following the Bollandists, described the Life as 'extremely fabulous' and it is of little or no use as a historical source for Gerald's career.[74] One of the things the Life gets right about Gerald, though, is that he was an Englishman. So, while it may be of little use as a source for eighth-century history, the Life does tell us that the memory of an English immigrant saint remained prominent over the course of several centuries.

Possibly the most important English community in Ireland was named by Bede as Rath Melsigi, which has been plausibly identified with modern Clonmelsh, County Carlow.[75] Though there is little to be seen on the site of Clonmelsh today, it was undoubtedly a place of great prestige in the seventh and eighth centuries. The impressive array of Englishmen who spent time there includes the aforementioned luminaries, Ethelwin, Chad, Willibrord, Suidbert, and the two Hewalds. Based on their personal names, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín has suggested that some of the Englishmen resident at Rath Melsigi were related to one another.[76] Family networks often play a role in determining migration patterns, so this would be an interesting parallel across time if it was in fact that case. Ó Cróinín has also argued that some of the earliest scholarly work to have survived from Echternach was originally produced in Rath Melsigi before being carried to the continent with Willibrord and others.[77]

Mayo', in James Graham-Campbell and Michael Ryan (eds), *Anglo-Saxon/Irish relations before the Vikings*, Proceedings of the British Academy 157 (Oxford, 2009), 411–26: 414.

[72] *AU, s.a.* 732.

[73] *Vita Sancti Geraldi abbatis de Magh Eo*, ed. Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (2 vols, Oxford, 1910; reprinted 1968), vol. 2, 107–15. The date was suggested by Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), 7. For a discussion of Gerald and his Life, see Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Of Saxons, a Viking and Normans', 411–26.

[74] Plummer, *Vitae*, vol. 1, lxxi. Plummer quotes the Bollandists' note that *plures, eosque gravissimos, errores quam paragraphos continent*.

[75] Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi, Willibrord, and the earliest Echternach manuscripts', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 17–42.

[76] Ó Cróinín, *The kings depart*, 17, 21; Ó Cróinín, '*Pater* Ecgberct', 195.

[77] Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi'. In addition to the Gospels of Willibrord and the *Evangeliarum Epternacense* discussed by Ó Cróinín, it has also been suggested that the so-called Durham Gospels were the product of an English house in Ireland: E.A. Lowe,

These works thus potentially reflect the culture of an immigrant religious community of Englishmen living in Ireland.

Another long-term resident of Rath Melsigi was Ecgbert.[78] He seems to have spent most of his life in Ireland; he was there for the outbreak of plague in 664, during which he promised God that if he made it through he would devote his remaining days to spiritual and physical exile.[79] He duly survived and spent more than five more decades at Rath Melsigi before moving to Iona in 716, where he died, presumably at a very advanced age, in 729.[80] In the late seventh century, Ecgbert was an influential figure in both Irish and Northumbrian circles. He was the driving force behind the mission to the Frisians headed by Willibrord, for example.[81] He attempted to dissuade King Ecgfrith of Northumbria from attacking Ireland in 684.[82] Ecgfrith's failure to heed Ecgbert's advice was one reason why God punished him with defeat and death in battle the next year, according to Bede.[83] The fact that Ecgbert, while resident in Rath Melsigi, knew in advance of King Ecgfrith's plans to attack Ireland and attempted to dissuade him is further evidence of the frequency of communication between migrant communities in Ireland and their homelands.[84] A decade later, Ecgbert can be found among the attesting witnesses to the promulgation at Birr in 697 of the *Lex innocentium*, an important law devised by Adomnán of Iona and intended to protect non-combatants.[85] But it was for his work in converting Iona to the 'Roman' method of dating Easter that Ecgbert won Bede's

Codices latini antiquiores (12 vols, Oxford, 1934–72), vol. 2, 149. Noting how few texts have been ascribed to English and British monasteries in Ireland, Donnchadh Ó Corráin rightfully queried whether scholars had really tried to identify them: *Clavis litterarum Hibernensium: medieval Irish books and texts (*c.*400–*c.*1600)*, Corpus Christianorum: Claves (3 vols, Turnhout, 2017), vol. 1, VIII–IX.

[78] For his career, see Ó Cróinín, '*Pater* Ecgberct'.

[79] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.27, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 312–13.

[80] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, v.22, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 552–5.

[81] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, v.9–10, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 474–85.

[82] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iv.26, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 427. The motives behind the attack are much debated. For the most recent discussion, see David A.E. Pelteret, 'The Northumbrian attack on Brega in AD 684', in A.J. Langlands and Ryan Lavell (eds), *The lands of the English kin: studies in Wessex and Anglo-Saxon England in honour of Professor Barbara Yorke*, Brill's Series on the Early Middle Ages 26 (Leiden, 2020), 214–30.

[83] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iv.26, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 428–9.

[84] According to the early-ninth-century poem *De abbatibus*, Ecgbert was also in a position to advise on the location of a new monastery in Northumbria while resident in Ireland. This episode is discussed by Ó Cróinín, '*Pater* Ecgberct', 195–6.

[85] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* 697', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 178-215: 180, 193–4.

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highest praise.[86] After his death, Ecgbert was commemorated as a saint in the Irish Church. His feast is listed in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* as falling on 24 April, where he is named as *Ecbricht Saxo*, 'Ecgbert the Englishman'.[87]

Mayo and Rath Melsigi were not the only English monasteries in Ireland. Others likely included *Tech Saxan* (modern parish of Tisaxon, barony of Kinsale, County Cork), *Tech Saxan* (townland of Tisaxon, parish of Monivea, County Galway),[88] and *Tulach Léis* (Tullylease, County Cork).[89] While there are no textual sources regarding the history of the first two of these places, an engraved stone cross slab at Tullylease requests prayers for a man bearing the English name Berechtuine, who was possibly the church's founder.[90] A man with a similar English name, Berrihert, is commemorated 70 kilometres east of Tullylease at St Berrihert's Kyle in the Glen of Aherlow (County Tipperary).[91] The similarity of the two men's names may reflect a family relationship between them.[92] Additionally, the *Martyrology of Gorman* records the feast of a certain 'Beretchert' on 6 December, who is potentially to

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[86] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, v.22, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 552–5.

[87] R.I. Best and H.J. Lawlor (eds), *The Martyrology of Tallaght; from the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100-4 in the Royal Library, Brussels*, Henry Bradshaw Society 68 (London, 1931), p. 36. The similarly named *Ichtbritt* is commemorated on 8 December in the Martyrology of Gorman (Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Félire hÚi Gormáin: the Martyrology of Gorman*, Henry Bradshaw Society 9 (London, 1895), 234–5). The discussion of the identity of this figure in the glossing to the Martyrology of Óengus suggest a degree of uncertainty regarding the specific identity of this Englishman and the community with which he was associated: Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé: the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, Henry Bradshaw Society 29 (London, 1905), 250–1, 296–9.

[88] Joseph Mannion has suggested that this monastery was a 'daughter house' of Mayo: '*Tech Saxan*: an Anglo-Saxon monastic settlement in early medieval east Galway', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 60 (2008), 9–21: 16.

[89] Mícheál Ó Mainnín has recently made the case for dating the origins of *Trían Saxan* in Armagh to the seventh century and identifying it, too, as an Anglo-Saxon community during the early period: 'The early medieval topography and toponymy of Armagh city: *Trían Saxan* and connections with Anglo-Saxon England', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 42 (2023), 180–211. The existence of *Trían Saxan* is not attested until the eleventh century, however, and evidence for its existence in the early medieval period is largely circumstantial.

[90] Isabel Henderson and Elisabeth Okasha, 'The early Christian inscribed and carved stones at Tullylease, Co. Cork', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 24 (1992), 1–36: 1–12, 15–17, 22–4; Elisabeth Okasha and Katherine Forsyth, *Early Christian inscriptions of Munster, a corpus of the inscribed stones* (Cork 2000), 120–3.

[91] The two figures have been equated in the past, though the names are clearly distinct. See Fiona Edmonds, 'The practicalities of communication between Northumbrian and Irish churches, *c*.635–735,' in Graham-Campbell and Ryan (eds), *Anglo-Saxon/Irish relations before the Vikings*, 129–47: 143–4.

[92] Ó Cróinín, *The kings depart*, 16–19.

be identified with the individual commemorated at St Berrihert's Kyle, though notes on the main text of the martyrology associate him with Tullylease.[93] This suggests that a group of potentially related English churchmen were active in the heart of early medieval Munster, in addition to those we have already met in Leinster and Connacht.

There were also British monks and clerics in Ireland.[94] These included individuals of considerable standing, such as Maucteus, 'disciple of Patrick', who is said by Adomnán to have prophesied the birth of Columba.[95] As Mochta, he was later associated with the monastery at Louth. Other British religious figures in Ireland were not so highly esteemed, at least not in official circles. The so-called 'First synod of St Patrick', or *Sinodus episcoporum*, the date of which is debated but which certainly belongs to our period, contains a list of canons established by an early Church council in Ireland. One of these states that 'a cleric who comes from the Britons without a letter, even if he lives in a community, is not allowed to minister'.[96] This canon attests to the presence on the ground of British clerics operating without episcopal authority. British names appear among the list of monks said by the *Martyrology of Tallaght* to have lived with St Fintan at Taghmon, in what is now County Wexford. On linguistic grounds, Charles-Edwards argues that some of these could have been present in Taghmon during the time of St Fintan in the seventh century.[97] An early Irish litany known as the 'Litany of pilgrim saints' refers to 50 Britons at the monastery of Land Léire, modern Dunleer, County Louth.[98] These cases suggest that, as in the case of the English churchmen resident in Ireland at the same time, some Britons lived in what were predominantly Irish communities. Indeed, it is likely that some Irish monasteries contained both Britons and English. Adomnán,

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[93] Stokes, (ed.), *Félire hÚi Gormáin*, 232–3. The Annals of the Four Masters (John O'Donovan (ed. and trans.), *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616* (7 vols, Dublin 1848–51; reprinted Dublin, 1990.)) *s.a.* 839 report the death of 'Berechtir'. It is not certain that this is the same person, or what source the Four Masters drew on for the date.

[94] T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Britons in Ireland, *c*.550–800', in John Carey, J.T. Koch and Pierre-Yves Lambert (eds), *Ildánach ildírech: a Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Aberystwyth, 1999), 15–26.

[95] Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, *Secunda praefatio*, ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson, 4–5; Richard Sharpe, 'Saint Mauchteus, *discipulus Patricii*', in Alfred Bammesberger and Alfred Wollmann (eds), *Britain 400–600: language and history,* Anglistische Forschungen 205 (Heidelberg, 1990), 85–93.

[96] *Synodus I S. Patricii*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 5 (Dublin, 1963, reprinted 2011), 58–9.

[97] Charles-Edwards, 'Britons in Ireland, *c*.550–800', 23–5.

[98] *Irish Litanies*, ed. Charles Plummer, Henry Bradshaw Society 62 (London, 1925), 66.

who, as noted above, provides evidence for the presence of English monks on Iona, also related that the first of Columba's monks to die on Iona was a Briton 'devoted to good works'.[99] It is possible that the fourth abbot of Iona, Virgno, was a Briton.[100]

Other British monks had their own communities in Ireland, as was also the case with their English counterparts, although the British monasteries were potentially older, in some cases possibly dating from the conversion era. Predominantly British monasteries in Ireland included *Gailinne na mBretan* (Gallen, County Offaly), *Tuilén* (Dulane, County Meath), *Dermag Britonum* (in Brega), and *Tech Bretan* (in County Dublin). *Tech na mBretan* at Kells (County Meath) seems to have been a house for British monks on the *termonn* lands of the primary foundation.[101] Although not as well documented as Mayo or Rath Melsigi, these monasteries must have maintained networks of communication with Britain and have recruited from among the Britons if they were to sustain themselves as British communities. Their presence in Ireland, alongside that of contemporary English communities, demonstrates the extent of the immigrant presence as well as the ethnic diversity that existed within ecclesiastical circles in early medieval Ireland.

There was certainly a high degree of diversity among the 'English' and 'British' monasteries in Ireland. While Mayo maintained an English identity and remained primarily English in terms of personnel over the course of many decades—it was the first 'New England'—this was likely not the case elsewhere, and it is probable that in most monasteries originally established by immigrants, Irish members gradually came to predominate. In another sense, however, these communities were very similar, since all were male communities. We know of no female members of this category of religious migrants. English women—primarily noble women and admittedly not in huge numbers—were involved in the continental missions of the seventh and eighth centuries. But they are not found travelling to Ireland. Certain of the Englishmen whose careers in Ireland were recorded impressed the locals to such an extent that they were venerated as saints. Gerald of Mayo and Beretchert/Berrihert of St Berrihert's Kyle/Tullylease were English men, but they are Irish saints in the sense that their cults originated and were centred in Ireland. Their status as immigrants was no barrier to this, as it had not been in the case of Patrick. Their experiences when they were alive, on the other hand, differed quite significantly from Patrick's, for reasons to do with the changing legal status of certain classes of immigrants in Irish law.

Immigrants in Old Irish law

The Old Irish laws, most of which were written in the seventh and eighth centuries, have quite a lot to say about immigrants and immigration. Though

[99] Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, iii.6, ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson, 190–1.
[100] Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), 39–40; Charles-Edwards, 'Britons in Ireland, *c*.550–800', 23.
[101] Charles-Edwards, 'Britons in Ireland, *c*.550–800', 23.

there is no single law tract dedicated to the topic, references to immigrants appear in a number of texts concerned with other topics, including inheritance, status and contracts. These scattered references and what they tell us about the laws' attitude toward immigrants have been examined and elucidated by Christophe Archan and Olivier Viron, upon whose work the current discussion draws extensively.[102] As Archan and Viron note, immigrants attracted the jurists' attention because they constituted a special legal class; their status as outsiders created quandaries associated with central pillars of the Old Irish laws, including its local application, the hierarchical nature of Irish society, and the centrality of kinship.

Although the Old Irish law texts claim to describe a legal system common to the entire island, individuals outside of the privileged classes such as poets and judges only enjoyed full legal rights and protections within their home kingdom/territory (*túath*).[103] Within their own *túath*, an individual was an *urrad*, a person of full legal standing. Any individual who came from outside the *túath*, unless coming from another *túath* with which his own had a formal alliance or treaty, would thus not have full legal status. Such an individual was a *deorad*, who stood in contrast with an *urrad* and who was identified primarily by his legal incapacity.[104] Of course, a *deorad* did not necessarily have to be an immigrant from overseas; the term could also be applied to a person who migrated from one *túath* to another within Ireland. The laws use a variety of terms to refer to migrants, only some of which clearly distinguish between those from overseas and those who moved between *túatha* within Ireland. For instance, the terms *deorad* and *ambue* often—but not always—refer to people who crossed borders within Ireland, while the terms *muirchuirthe* ('one thrown up by the sea') and *cú glas* ('wolf', literally 'grey dog') refer specifically to immigrants.[105] Their status as outsiders, without legal

[102] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité-altérité'. Another key influence on the present work is Charles-Edwards, 'Social background'.

[103] *GEIL*, 5; Elva Johnston, *Literacy and identity in early medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History 33 (Woodbridge, 2013), 72.

[104] *GEIL*, 5–6; *eDIL: an electronic dictionary of the Irish language, based on the contributions to* A dictionary of the Irish Language *(Dublin, 1913–1976)* (www.dil.ie) (hereafter *eDIL*), *svv*. aurrae/aurrud, deorad.

[105] *eDIL*, *svv*. murchuirthe, 1 cú (f). Kelly (*GEIL*, 6) notes the existence of a ninth-century gloss that explains that a *cú glas* is a *deorad loingsigh*; *CIH* 917.17–18. It is significant that this gloss appears in a text on the *fuidir*, the person of social rank below the free farmers: *GEIL*, 33–5. The hierarchy of foreignness reflected in the laws was a significant factor in shaping Irish attitudes toward pilgrimage, as Thomas Charles-Edwards has discussed: 'Social background'. Compare T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford, 1993), 576, *s.v*. alien. See also Elva Johnston, 'Exiles from the edge? The Irish contexts of *peregrinatio*', in Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (eds), *The Irish in early medieval Europe: identity, culture, and religion* (London, 2016), 38–52.

standing in Irish society, was thus one reason why immigrants attracted jurists' attention. Another reason was related to their lack of kin within the locale.

In the society described by the laws, kinship played a pivotal role.[106] Land was owned in common by members of kin-groups, who also shared legal responsibility for each other's crimes. Responsibility for paying compensation for a crime was shared between the culprit and their kin, for example, and the corollary was also true, that members of an individual's kin group were entitled to a share of any compensation paid for a legal offence committed against them. The fact that immigrants did not belong to a local kin-group thus also posed legal problems that necessitated consideration by the jurists.

Early medieval Ireland was also a very hierarchical society and the size of the fine due for any offence was determined in part by the social status of the victim. An individual's social rank was expressed in terms of their *lóg n-enech*, or 'honour price'.[107] In addition to determining the compensation due to them for certain crimes, an individual's honour price also determined his or her legal capacity, including their capacity to enter into certain contracts and the strength of their testimony in court. And since a person's honour price was most often determined by kinship, an individual without kin in the locality lacked full legal status and the protection of the law. Such a person could in theory be killed or injured with impunity.[108] It is particularly in relation to these topics—their status as outsiders, their lack of kin and the associated problem of status—that the laws have most to say about immigrants, who often appear in the laws alongside other categories of individuals who did not possess full legal capacity and who therefore require special consideration from the jurists.

The jurists seem to have been dissatisfied with the idea that crimes committed against immigrants would go unpunished due to their status as outsiders and demonstrated concern with how foreigners could be integrated into local society and into the legal system by acquiring an honour price.[109] There seem to have been three means by which this could be achieved. One, not frequently attested, was through the purchase of property. So, *Bretha étgid* states that a *deorad* who buys property becomes an *urrad*.[110] As noted above, the term *deorad* could refer to a migrant moving within Ireland as well as one who came from overseas. Among overseas immigrants, royal or noble exiles may have had the means to buy their legal status in this manner, though this option was likely only available to the few. Religious exiles might have been able to purchase land either on their own or with the assistance of a local patron, though as we shall see below, religious migrants were a special case. The other means by which an

[106] *GEIL*, 12–16.
[107] *GEIL*, 7–10.
[108] *GEIL*, 5–6.
[109] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 202.
[110] *CIH*, 1631.1.

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immigrant could integrate were through marriage or entering the service of a lord.

The laws make provision for marriages between immigrants and local women.[111] In the normal run of affairs, a woman's honour price was calculated as half of that of her husband. A marriage between a local woman and an immigrant man was one of the rare occasions when this was not the case. In this instance, the man's honour price was derived from and dependent on that of his wife. There was a generally negative view in the laws of men who relied upon their wives for their social status. In some tracts, such an individual is described as 'a man who follows the buttocks of his wife across the boundary', in what is clearly a derogatory term.[112] Marriages between immigrant men and local women were also unusual cases because the children of such a couple would be attached to their maternal kin, rather than that of their father, which was the norm. In this case, it was the mother's family that paid and received compensation for crimes committed by or against the child, though this was only the case when the maternal kin had consented to the marriage.[113]

Being married to an immigrant was thus a potentially disadvantageous position. So was being the child of an immigrant. Such a child was a *glasfine*, 'grey kinsman', derived from his father's status as a *cú glas*. According to the tract *Fodlai fine*, 'a grey kinsman is a son of a woman of your kindred whom she bears to a Briton; he gets only the inheritance of a sister's son or [the inheritance consisting] of a free gift to one who has parted from his kindred'.[114] It is interesting that the author of *Fodlai fine* assumed that an immigrant would be British. The Britons of Wales, Cornwall and Strathclyde were the closest overseas neighbours of the inhabitants of eastern Ireland, so it would make sense that they would be the foreigners most commonly arriving on Irish shores. In Late Antiquity, there were large-scale migrations of Britons out of Britain in the face of English conquest. Most of these fled to Armorica, where their settlement became known as Brittany, and others are documented as having travelled as

[111] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 203–4.

[112] *CIH*, 427.1–6: *Ar cach recht la Feniu acht oentriar, is lethlog a enech dia mnai: fer son cen seilb cen tothchus las-mbi bancomarba, a inchuib a mna di-renar side; 7 fer in-etet toin a mna tar crich, di-renar a inchuib a mna; 7 cu glas, di-renar side a inch(a)uib a mna 7 is si iccas a cinta, mad iarnu urnadmaim no aititen dia finib*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, 310–11.

[113] *CIH*, 442.13-18: *Ni aile maithre cuit i maccaib acht mac con glais* no mac ambui […]. a *.i. ín muircairthi* ; b *.i. ín deorad ; uair ís risin fíni uílí ied-sidhe*; Myles Dillon, 'The relationship of mother and son, of father and daughter, and the law of inheritance with regard to women', in R. Thurneysen *et al.*, *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin, 1936), 129–79: 132; Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 205.

[114] *CIH*, 431.30–31: *Glasfine mac mna dit finit beres do albanach ni gaib-saide acht orba niad no duthrachta dedlaid fri fine*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, 516 (§11).

far as northern Spain.[115] Perhaps some also settled in Ireland.[116] In any case, the 'grey kinsman' need not have been the son of a Briton specifically, but 'might be the son of any one of the categories of alien whose access to land is only through their wives'.[117] The point is that the immigrant's son does not get a full share of the land belonging to his (maternal) kindred; he is disadvantaged by comparison with the children of his mother's brothers who belong to the kin through the male line.

We do not possess historical records of examples of these laws in action. But the 'Saga of Fergus mac Léti', which has been called 'a legal teaching tale', shows how such a case could play out.[118] According to the saga, Dorn daughter of Buide had a son with a *deorad*. Some versions of the text name the son as Foitlinne and a gloss states that his father was a Briton. Along with his four uncles—Dorn's brothers—Foitlinne killed a man under the protection of Fergus mac Léti, king of Ulaid. Standard procedure, according to the laws, was for compensation to be paid for the crime, and Dorn's four brothers each contributed their share. In the normal run of things, Foitlinne and his paternal kin would also have been required to contribute, too. Since his father was a foreigner without kin, the requirement fell on his mother's kin. In this case, however, because Dorn had conceived her son with an immigrant without the consent of her family, Foitlinne's maternal kin were exempted from paying his share of the compensation. Since he could not pay, Foitlinne's life was therefore forfeit. His mother, Dorn, in order to save him, forfeited her own freedom and person instead, and was enslaved by Fergus.[119] Though Foitlinne's fate after his mother's enslavement is not discussed in the text, the disadvantages he suffered as a result of his father's status must have been exacerbated by his mother's absence.

A third way for an immigrant to gain an honour price, and with it full legal standing, was by entering the service of a lord. Being entirely dependent

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[115] Ben Guy, 'The Breton migration: a new synthesis', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 61.1 (2014), 101–56; Caroline Brett, with Fiona Edmunds and Paul Russell, *Brittany and the Atlantic archipelago, 450–1200: contact, myth and history* (Cambridge, 2021), especially chapters 1 and 2.

[116] David Dumville proposed that Gildas referred to British migration to Ireland in the *De excidio Britanniae*: 'The chronology of *De excidio Britanniae,* Book I', in Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (eds), *Gildas: new approaches*, Studies in Celtic History 5 (Woodbridge, 1984), 61–84: 73–5.

[117] Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, 312; Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 205–6.

[118] Neil McLeod, 'Fergus mac Léti and the law', *Ériu* 61 (2011), 1–28: 1. See also, Ariana Malthaner, 'The intersection of literature and law: the Saga of Fergus mac Léti', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 16 (2019), 90–106.

[119] Binchy, 'Saga of Fergus mac Léti' 39 (§ 2); Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 184–5, 196; McLeod, 'Fergus mac Léti and the law', 5; Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark speech: the performance of law in early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007), 69.

on his lord rather than his kin for status and support made such an immigrant a sub-class of *fuidir*, the semi-free individual with no separate legal standing.[120] Entering service would gain the immigrant an honour price that was calculated as a portion of that of the lord to whom he submitted. The immigrant's honour price was calculated as one third of that of his lord, though the proportion was reduced to one seventh if the lord in question was of royal status or equivalent.[121] As Archan and Viron point out, reducing the proportion of the lord's honour price attributed to the immigrant client in this way constrained the immigrant's honour price from becoming too elevated.[122] Such an immigrant could be of service to the lord in a number of ways, but perhaps particularly as a military retainer or mercenary. A number of references to foreigners serving as military retainers can be found in early texts. For instance, later commentary on the eighth-century tract *Uraicecht becc* refers to both the *amus urrad* and the *amus deorad*.[123] The Irish word *amus* refers to a military retainer or mercenary, so the distinction being drawn here is between the local mercenary or military retainer with full legal standing and his immigrant equivalent without.[124] This is clear from the fact that, according to the commentary, an individual who retains a foreign mercenary is entitled to collect all the compensation paid for crimes against that mercenary, but only half the compensation for a local mercenary, the rest presumably going to the local man's kin. The law tract *Anfuigell* also links the terms *deorad* and *amus* and associates the *deorad* with military service.[125] The rarely attested *francamus* ('Frankish mercenary'?) may have been a specific example of the immigrant soldier.[126] The possibility that royal exiles who fled to Ireland might have served in their hosts' armies was discussed above. Military service provided both legal protection for an immigrant and economic opportunity. Just as an enslaved foreigner was valued more than an Irish one because they were less likely to run away, so it may have been that immigrants were valued as mercenaries and bodyguards because they were less likely to have competing loyalties within Ireland.

The laws were concerned with the ways immigrants could be integrated into the legal system, as we have seen. Still, their attitude toward immigrants seems to have been shaped by a degree of suspicion that can be associated with their understanding of the motives behind migration. An assumption

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120 *GEIL*, 33–5; Charles-Edwards, 'Social background', 48.

121 *CIH*, 1915.26–28: *Trian logh[e] eneach caich dia murc[h]or[th]a acht righ cona comgradhaib, is .uii. mad loige a einech sen*.

122 Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 203.

123 *CIH*, 1607.21–31.

124 *eDIL*, *s.v.* amus.

125 Charlene Eska (ed. and trans.), *A raven's battle cry: the limits of judgment in the medieval Irish legal tract* Anfuigell, Medieval Law and its Practice 27 (Leiden, 2019), 238–41, 278–9.

126 R.I. Best, Osborn Bergin, M.A. O Brien, and Anne O'Sullivan (eds), *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála* (6 vols, Dublin, 1956), vol. 2, l. 12954.

underpinning much of what the laws have to say on this topic is that migration was not a voluntary act. The norm, as the laws perceive it, was that people would generally remain in the locale into which they were born and among their kin, from whom they would inherit land and status. Outside the special case of religious exiles, to which we will turn below, the only context the jurists conceived of within which migration occurred was forced exile. This likely derived from their understanding of why Irish people migrated. One of the most severe forms of punishment in Irish law, usually reserved for the perpetrators of such heinous crimes as kin-slaying and incest, was being cast away to sea—essentially ostracising the person from community and leaving their fate in God's hands.[127] The perception seems to have been that immigrants who ended up in Ireland came from the equivalent background elsewhere and were therefore of dubious morality and merit. This in part explains the different terms used by the jurists to refer to different categories of migrants. One the one hand, the *deorad* (or *ambue*) from another Irish *túath* was characterised primarily by his legal incapacity; on the other, the immigrant from overseas was characterised as a social outcast, a potentially dangerous 'wolf'.[128]

Not all immigrants suffered the same social disadvantages or were viewed with the same degree of suspicion. The exception to these rules was the religious exile, the *deorad Dé*, or 'exile for God'. Due to his status as a religious figure, this man had the same honour price as the lowest rank of king; he could also make contracts without sureties, a privilege reserved to the few, though according to the law tract *Anfuigell* he had to perform miracles to prove his status if he was to gain these benefits.[129] The special status accorded to the *deorad Dé* was obviously a new legal development since the time of St Patrick, who did not benefit from any such dispensation.[130]

The laws make provision for the arrival of migrant women into Ireland, too, though there is less discussion of it, either because it was less common or because it posed different social and legal questions.[131] For instance, it was normally the case that both parents were responsible for rearing their children.[132] The law tract on 'Categories of sons' (*Bretha for macṡ lechtaib*) lists twelve children who were not raised or educated by their mother. These include children born to enslaved women, to other victims of rape, to women with severe illness,

[127] For setting adrift as a punishment, see Mary E. Byrne, 'On the punishment of setting adrift', *Ériu* 11 (1932), 97–102; *GEIL*, 219–21; and Pamela O'Neill, 'Old Irish *muirchrech* "sea-boundary"', *Ériu* 67 (2017), 1–9.

[128] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 190–4, 203–4; Charles-Edward, 'Social background', 52.

[129] Charles-Edwards, 'Social background', 53; Eska, *A raven's battle cry*, 15, 94–5.

[130] Charles-Edwards, 'Social background', 53; Johnston, 'Exiles from the edge?'.

[131] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 196–7.

[132] Kathleen Mulchrone, 'The rights and duties of women with regard to the education of their children', in Thurneysen *et al.*, *Studies in early Irish law*, 191–2; *GEIL*, 85.

and to a female *muirchuirthe*.[133] In some of the cases listed, the implication seems to be that the woman is deemed unfit to rear the child herself because of illness, disability or finding herself in a situation where she has not the means to provide. The female *muirchuirthe* seems to belong to the latter group. As with men, so female immigrants are treated with a degree of suspicion associated with the fact that they, too, could be cast to sea for certain crimes. *Cáin Adomnán*, for example, states that a woman who commits murder, poisoning, or arson, 'is to be put into a boat of one paddle at a sea-marking out at sea, to [see whether she will] drift ashore with the winds.'[134] But generally, female migrants did not pose the same issues as male migrants since, for example, it was the norm for women to gain their honour price and to gain membership of a kin group through marriage, regardless of whether they were locals or immigrants.

Some of the attitudes and perspectives apparent in the Old Irish laws influenced also the canon law written in Ireland.[135] See, for instance, the discussion of sureties in the early eighth-century *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*. In a chapter 'Concerning sureties, and "paying sureties" [*ratis*], and "enforcing sureties" [*stipulatoribus*]', we find Latinised versions of Irish legal terms; Latin *rata* and *stipulator* represent Old Irish *ráth* and *naidm*, respectively.[136] The first sub-heading under this title, 'That a "paying surety", or surety who vouches on behalf of a stranger [*extraneus*], is liable to pay', supposes that a local individual could stand as a surety for a foreigner and, if they did, that they were bound to fulfil their duty. On the other hand, the discussion under this sub-heading suggests that doing so was problematic, perhaps disreputable: 'He who is surety for a stranger shall be afflicted with evil.' This chapter of the *Hibernensis* also lists those who are not fit to stand as a surety, among whom we find the 'stranger' (*peregrinus*) alongside others without independent legal standing, such as the slave, the son of a living father, and the servile resident of monastic land.[137] This is reminiscent of the contexts within which immigrants appear in the Old Irish laws.

On the other hand, some of the content of the Irish canons contrasts with the attitude reflected in the Old Irish laws regarding immigrants. For example, Chapter 21.10 'Concerning persons not to be admitted to judgement' affirms

[133] *CIH*, 1575.12–14: *Cis lir mac nad comalltar o maithrib la Feine? .Nī. a xii. Mac cumaili, mac forcair, mac sleithi, mac mna fogras fine, mac buidhre, mac daille, mac anfobrachta, mac banchainti, mac murcortha, mac mire, mac banamsa*.

[134] *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani*, ed. and trans. Pádraig P. Ó Néill and David N. Dumville, Basic Texts for Gaelic History 2 (Cambridge, 2003), 44–5 (§45).

[135] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 206.

[136] *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, §33, ed. and trans. Roy Flechner, *The Hibernensis*, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law 17 (2 vols, Washington, DC, 2019), vol. 1, 237, and vol. 2, 649. On the identification of the Latin terms with their Old Irish equivalents, see Thurneysen, 'Aus dem irischen Recht V', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 18 (1930), 353–408: 364–72; Flechner, *Hibernensis*, vol. 2, 863, note 307.

[137] *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, §33.3, ed. and trans. Flechner, vol. 1, 238, and vol. 2, 650.

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that a judge should '[j]udge in a just manner, whether he [i.e., the defendant or petitioner] be of your own country [*ciuis*] or a stranger [*peregrinus*]. So you shall hear the little as well as the great, because it is the judgement of God.'[138] This canon asserts at least a theoretical legal parity for locals and immigrants, something quite foreign to the vernacular legal tradition, as Flechner noted.[139] Are we to see in these contrasting views within the *Hibernensis* an acknowledgement that there existed a degree of conflict between the Old Irish legal tradition and scriptural injunctions to treat foreigners with compassion, and to grant them access to justice?[140]

The evidence of the Old Irish laws suggests that immigration outside of elite contexts was a common enough feature of early Irish society to warrant consideration. In general, the jurists were suspicious of immigrants and the reasons why they had come to Ireland. Nonetheless, their main concern seems frequently to have been with how to integrate this legally problematic class of individuals into Irish social and legal structures. There were multiple routes through which an immigrant could gain legal status and begin the process of integration, but it seems clear that at least in legal terms this integration was often partial and had continuing legal consequences for both the wife and children of the immigrant.[141]

The archaeology of immigration

The textual sources for the presence of immigrants in early Ireland discussed above can be augmented with archaeological evidence from the same period. The presence of imported goods at late-Iron-Age and early-medieval sites across the island demonstrates that Ireland was integrated into international trade networks.[142] The concentration of foreign material in certain specific areas has on occasion been cited as evidence of foreign settlement, though the link between the transmission of material and the movement of people is not always straightforward and alternative interpretations have also been offered. A good example of this from just outside the period covered in this study is the promontory at Drumanagh, just north of Rush in County Dublin. The abundance

[138] *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, 21.10, ed. and trans. Flechner, vol. 1, 124, and vol. 2, 565–6.

[139] Flechner, *The Hibernensis*, vol. 2, 854, footnote 197.

[140] See, for instance, Exodus, 23:9; Leviticus, 19:33–4; Deuteronomy 10:19, 27:19; Ezekiel, 47:22.

[141] Archan and Viron, 'Insularité – altérité', 206.

[142] For a brief overview, see Matthew Seaver, 'Words on the wave: contact and writing', in Seaver, Ó Riain, and Sikora (eds), *Words on the wave*, 36–46. For a more detailed study, see Christopher Loveluck and Aidan O'Sullivan, 'Travel, transport and communication to and from Ireland, *c*. 400–1100: an archaeological perspective', in Flechner and Meeder (eds), *The Irish in early medieval Europe*, 19–37. For a discussion of Irish exports in the same period, see R.I. Brody, 'Taking Ireland out of the periphery of the early medieval northern European economy, *c*.600–800', in Brendan Kane and Patrick Wadden (eds), *An Eoraip: Gaelic Ireland in medieval and early modern Europe*, Later Medieval Europe 30 (Leiden, 2025), 139–66.

of first-to-third-century Roman material discovered at this coastal site includes coins, Gallo-Roman Samian ware, large copper ingots, an enamelled seal box, an intact Roman pot, and a fig.[143] In the 1990s, this assemblage was taken by some scholars as evidence for Roman settlement, what Barry Raftery called 'an overwhelming Roman presence' on the site.[144] More recent analysis, some of it carried out as part of the projects 'Late Iron Age and "Roman" Ireland' and 'Digging Drumanagh', has shifted away from immigration as the explanatory framework.[145] Rather, noting the absence of 'Roman' forms of architecture on the site, as well as the presence alongside imported material of evidence for textile production based on local traditions, the residents of third-century Drumanagh are seen as having combined elements of Romano-British and Irish Iron-Age lifestyles.[146] The site is now seen as a hub of trade between Ireland and Britain, which potentially existed before the Roman period.[147] Roman merchants potentially visited the site, but the presence of their trade goods does not mean that the local residents were Romans.

Potentially clearer evidence of immigration has emerged from the application of new scientific methods to the analysis of medieval burials. Specifically, the use of isotopic analysis allows bioarchaeologists to identify where a person spent their youth based on the mineral content of their teeth after death. 'Tooth enamel is the most highly mineralised tissue in the human body and … [u]nlike bone, which is completely remodelled within the body over an approximately ten-year cycle, once complete mineralisation of enamel has taken place in humans (usually around the age of twelve) it does not alter later in life.'[148] The minerals in an individual's teeth are derived from the food they consume. And since the majority of an individual's food in the early medieval period would have been grown locally, a person's tooth enamel records the chemical signatures of the geological and climatic environment in which they spent their early years.

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[143] The most recent survey of the site and associated finds is Christine Baker, *Digging Drumanagh*, Archaeology Ireland Heritage Guide 107 (Dublin, 2024).

[144] Barry Raftery, 'Drumanagh and Roman Ireland', *Archaeology Ireland* 10.1 (1996), 17–19: 19. For a discussion of the sensationalist media response to these suggestions, which posited that Drumanagh was the beachhead of a Roman 'invasion' of Ireland, see Seán Daffy, 'Irish and Roman relations: a comparative analysis of the evidence for exchange, acculturation and clientship from southeast Ireland', unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2013, 60–6.

[145] Jacqueline Cahill Wilson, Christopher Standish and Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Investigating mobility and migration in the later Irish Iron Age', in *Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland*, Discovery Programme Reports 8 (Dublin, 2014), 127–49.

[146] Baker, *Digging Drumanagh*, 7; Ger Dowling, 'Geophysical investigations at Drumanagh and Loughshinny, north County Dublin', in *Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland*, 59–90: 88.

[147] Barry Cunliffe, *Facing the ocean: the Atlantic and its peoples, 8000 BC–AD 1500* (Oxford, 2001), 417; Jacqueline Cahill Wilson, 'Romans and Roman material in Ireland: a wider social perspective', in *Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland*, 11–58: 26.

[148] Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 'Investigating mobility', 131.

Measuring the ratios of various isotopes in tooth enamel—specifically strontium and oxygen isotopes—can therefore provide insight into the geographic origin of an individual.[149]

These new forms of analysis have been brought to bear on Irish evidence by scholars including Jacqueline Cahill Wilson, Christopher Standish and Elizabeth O'Brien. O'Brien brought together the evidence of 54 burials from twenty sites, all dateable to the early medieval period.[150] As well as demonstrating a considerable degree of mobility within Ireland, the results of strontium and oxygen isotopic analysis identified ten (seven male and three females) of these 54, or nearly twenty per cent, who were probably immigrants from overseas. A further nine were of uncertain origin, having potentially been born in either Ireland or Britain. The immigrants included an elderly man buried in Betaghstown, County Meath, in the sixth century, who was likely of either eastern European or Scandinavian origin.[151] Although he seems to have been of foreign origin, his burial was comparable to those of similar date in the cemetery, suggesting a degree of acculturation and acceptance. Another man buried in Betaghstown, whose burial was dated to the fourth–seventh centuries, was probably born in the western Mediterranean, either in North Africa or southern Spain.[152] Unlike the previous case discussed, this individual was buried using an alien burial rite—which suggests there were other immigrants present to arrange the burial—but within a burial zone alongside people of local origin. It has been suggested on the basis that Mediterranean-type pottery of similar date has been recovered throughout the region, that this individual may have been a merchant.[153] Other burials of immigrants at Betaghstown include a female who lived between the fourth and sixth centuries and whose origins lay in either Britain, Scandinavia, or continental Europe, and two male burials dated to the fifth–seventh centuries who originated in either Northumbria or continental Europe.[154] A man who originated in either eastern Scotland or Scandinavia was buried in the passage grave complex at Knowth between the seventh and ninth centuries.[155]

The placement of certain burials is suggestive of the status of the individuals during their lifetime. At an unenclosed cemetery at Ninch, County Meath,

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[149] For an accessible introduction, see Janet E. Kay, Alexandra Johnson, Eleanor Farber, Megan Hanna Fry and Sam Leggett, 'Biomolecular archaeology and Medieval Studies: a graphic article', *Speculum* 101.1 (2026), 286–301, especially 293. For a more detailed discussion focused on Ireland, see Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 'Investigating mobility', 131–5.

[150] O'Brien, *Mapping death*, 174–81.

[151] Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 'Investigating mobility', 130–40.

[152] Jacqueline Cahill Wilson and Christopher D. Standish, 'Mobility and migration in Late Iron Age and early medieval Ireland', *JAS: Reports* 6 (2016), 230–41.

[153] Amanda Kelly, 'The discovery of Phocaean Red Slip Ware (PRSW) form 3 and Bii ware (LRI amphorae) on sites in Ireland – an analysis within a broader framework', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 110C (2010), 49–52.

[154] O'Brien, *Mapping death*, 174.

[155] O'Brien, *Mapping death*, 176.

a centrally located penannular ring-ditch surrounded a single-family grave containing two adults and two juveniles. The adult male dated to the fourth–sixth centuries and appears to have originated in eastern Europe.[156] The woman with whom he was buried was of local origin. This burial therefore seems to represent a couple comprising an immigrant man and a local woman. The fact that their grave was separated from others in the cemetery by a ring-ditch marked them out as special in some way. At a cemetery in Ninch, County Louth, an immigrant male dated to the sixth–seventh centuries originated in central or eastern Europe, and a female dated to the seventh century originated in either eastern Europe or Britain.[157] The graves of these two individuals are indistinguishable from the others in the cemetery, which led O'Brien to speculate that either they had been accepted by the local community or they had been the founders of the community and cemetery.[158] As we have seen above, a male immigrant was a figure of low social status. Yet as O'Brien points out, some of the foreign men buried in Ireland appear to be figures of prominence within the local community. The fact that their burials appear to be foundational to the creation of new family cemeteries potentially means that they were the progenitors of family lines.[159] A wealthy foreign merchant settling in Ireland might have been able to purchase land, which, as noted above, was one way of establishing legal status.

O'Brien concluded from her study of these burials that '[a]lthough there is no evidence for organised migration into Ireland … inevitably some individuals, or groups, arrived and settled in the country, either as traders or immigrants, during the Iron Age and Early Medieval periods.'[160] This evidence corroborates some aspects of the image of immigration into early Ireland that emerged from our discussion of the textual evidence above. The archaeologists have identified both men and women among the foreigners buried in early Ireland, for instance, and while the sample size is small, it is telling that men outnumber the women two to one. There appears to be burial evidence for marriage between immigrant men and Irish women, too, and for integration of immigrants into the local culture, as represented by burial rites. Perhaps more surprising is the sheer number of immigrants identified among the burials examined and the geographical range from which they originated.

Conclusion

Immigration was clearly a prominent feature of early Irish society. While we know the names of only a small number of immigrants, most of them royal exiles or churchmen, the sources suggest that these represented only the tip of the iceberg and are not representative of the greater number of anonymous individuals

[156] Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 'Investigating mobility', 144–5.
[157] Cahill Wilson *et al.*, 'Investigating mobility', 144–5.
[158] O'Brien, *Mapping death*, 176.
[159] O'Brien, *Mapping death,* 173.
[160] O'Brien, *Mapping death*, 171.

who came to live in Ireland in the early medieval period. As in the modern world, individual experiences would have varied extensively depending on a variety of factors and we cannot speak of immigrants to early Ireland as a homogeneous group. They differed according to gender, ethnicity, geographical background, and social status. In general, it appears that there were fewer female than male migrants, at least among those who made the journey freely; the majority of foreign women in early Ireland, aside from a small number of royal wives, were likely enslaved. Some migrants made positive choices to move to Ireland to seek opportunities available there, particularly in the realm of education. For others, the priority was likely to escape trouble at home. Others still had no choice in the matter but were trafficked to Ireland against their will. In the cases of Mayo or Rath Melsigi, we may even talk about the roles of professional networks and institutional and familial support in shaping patterns of migration and settlement. Some foreign settlers flourished in their new home, others endured horrific hardship. In general, those who did not belong to the Church likely found their economic and social opportunities significantly limited. Those who were not enslaved likely needed to enter the service of a lord, either as a military retainer or in some other capacity. Some stayed for life, others departed after a spell, returning home or moving on to pastures new. Some pined for home and clung to the signs of difference. Others integrated, becoming so much a part of the local scene that only their teeth betray their origins. According to the Old Irish laws, the children of some classes of immigrants were disadvantaged. On the other hand, their descent from an enslaved foreign woman was apparently not seen as detrimental by the Uí Néill, who advertise the fact in the saga account of their origins. Few of these features are specific to either Ireland or to the early medieval period. Neither are the ways in which immigration impacted Irish society. Immigrants maintained contact with their homelands, thus augmenting the networks of communication between Ireland and its neighbours, for example. Immigrants brought new ideas and reshaped Irish culture, most notably through the introduction of Christianity. Migrants who returned home after a spell in Ireland also had a profound impact on the cultures and societies of the countries whence they came, as we see mostly clearly in the case of Northumbria. In all of these ways, we see the complexity and the significance of immigration as a feature of early Irish society.