Mapping Literate Networks in Early Medieval Ireland

Quantitative Realities, Social Mythologies?

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Abstract

The medieval Irish chronicles are documentary sources of the highest importance. They provide contemporary records of major political events from the late sixth century AD. Each entry is anchored in a wealth of place-name references and, literally, thousands of death notices, providing a dataset whose scale is suitable for the application of network theory. This chapter will take one prominent group from the chronicles as a case study, the literate elite who produced most of our sources. It will explore how network theory can enhance our understanding of them, and will also consider the extent to which their networks are mirrored in the literary sources in which they feature. How are their social networks depicted in narrative texts? Do these appear to be realistic or are they idealized? By considering one definable group, the literate elite, this chapter aims to provide a framework through which network theory can be more widely and usefully employed.

I. Identifying the Dataset

The early medieval Irish chronicles, usually referred to as annals, are key documentary sources for Irish history (Grabowski and Dumville 1984; Mc Carthy 2008; Evans 2010). They provide contemporary year-by-year accounts of events from the late sixth century AD through to, and beyond, the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century. The typical entry is short, even laconic, noting a battle, an outbreak of disease or death. There is little in the way of explicit editorialising comment, making many entries seem spare. Yet, the chronicles are no mere dateline: they are replete with place-name references, geographically anchoring thousands of death notices. These death notices, called obits in the secondary literature, are a primary way in which information is encoded. The vast majority of them commemorate members of the Irish elites, ecclesiastical, professional and secular.

These obits have been cross-referenced, although not scientifically and only on a case-by-case basis, with the very substantial medieval Irish genealogical corpus. The published genealogies contain the names of more than 12,000 individuals who lived in Ireland before the twelfth century, a figure that is more than doubled when the unpublished tracts are also considered (O'Brien 1962; Ó Corráin 1998: 180–181). The most common genealogical structure is an agnatic patriline with women featuring rarely (Johnston 2013: 79–89), even though their irreplaceable role within kinship networks was well understood (Kelly 1988: 14–15; Charles-Edwards 1993: 76–77; Bitel 1996: 140–148). The chroniclers' bias mirrors the basic hierarchical and patriarchal nature of early medieval Irish society (Kelly 1988: 68–79). The women who do appear are frequently either saints or their ecclesiastical successors. Others are royal women, especially those accounted queens of Tara (Connon 2000: 99–101).

Thus, the chronicles, supplemented by the genealogies, provide a dataset whose scale makes it amenable to the application of quantitative methods and, indeed, network science. Each separate individual is a node whose direct and indirect links to other nodes can be mapped (Mac Carron and Kenna 2012; Mac Carron and Kenna: 2014). Some nodes seem isolated while others are embedded in a complex series of links and are heavily connected, depending on the degree to which their activities are recorded in the chronicles. Significantly, the chroniclers emphasize the connectivity of Irish society, expressed through the actions of particular individuals. These actions are constrained by factors such as dynastic membership, geographical powerbase and an ability to create alliances. In a society where kingship had a strong conceptual underpinning but a relatively weak bureaucratic footprint (Charles-Edwards 2000: 522–585; Doherty 2005), the alliances created through manipulation of ecclesiastical and political networks were paramount in maintaining and building power. They created a thick clustering around influential men, such as kings and heads of churches. It is the shifting nature of these aristocratic networks which sometimes makes early medieval Irish political history appear forbidding to the non-specialist. Its essential dynamic is expressed through a highly developed and nuanced connectivity; its public world is purposefully embedded in the personal, but is no less organized as a result.

The medieval Irish chronicles, then, are rich sources. However, they are not amenable to presentation in a single paper due to the attendant complexities. These

include the scale of the dataset as well as the different areas of concern emphasized by the monastic chroniclers, all of which need to be unpicked. For instance, the chroniclers show an obvious interest in secular and ecclesiastical politics; they also note natural phenomena such as outbreaks of disease in humans and animals, astronomical data and unusual weather events (Mc Carthy and Breen 1997; McCormick *et al* 2007). The result is a layering of data which can be cross-referenced and collated on a minute scale, something which would require a major project. This paper, therefore, will take one particular area and will argue that the application of network theory can greatly enhance our understanding of it, serving as a case study for a wider field of potential investigation. The focus will be on the literate elite, especially ecclesiastics, who produced the surviving sources and whose interests played a major role in the compilation of the early medieval chronicles. The chroniclers use a stock vocabulary to identify these literate professionals, including Latin terms such as *scriba* 'scribe', *sapiens* 'exegete' and *doctor* 'doctrinal expert' as well as the vernacular *fer léigind* 'master of monastic school' and *suí* 'scholar' (Johnston 2013: 92–130). The meaning of words fluctuated: for instance a *scriba* might be a scribe or a canon lawyer (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984: 398–399; Johnston 2013: 120–124), but there is broad consistency in chronicle usage which allows for comparisons between texts and across time. Moreover, the chronicles frequently identify the ecclesiastical and familial associations of their subjects, especially after 900 when entries become longer and more informative (Dumville 1982: 328–341). These elements, personal name, place of residence and family membership, are the basis of a social network. Not only can individuals be considered as nodes but so can their institutional bases, establishing a socio-geographical framework for situating their interactions. No such comprehensive study has ever been undertaken, although preliminary elements of it underpinned my monograph analyzing the role of literacy and its practitioners within early medieval Irish society (Johnston 2013). During its research, I compiled a database of the literate elite, based on annal entries extending from AD 797–1002, which will be the basis for much of the present study, although other relevant material will be considered when necessary. This consisted of 198 separate named individuals (Johnston 2013: 177–202). The paper will also consider the extent to which this network is mirrored in literary

sources which feature actual members of the literate elite. In these narrative texts how are their social networks depicted? Are they realistic or idealized (Mac Carron and Kenna 2012: 5–6)? Do they reflect the way these people imagined their own role in society?

II. The Early Medieval Irish Chronicles: Origins, Biases and Value

The starting point is an understanding of the early medieval Irish chronicles, their origins, functions and in-built biases. This will establish the evidential base from which further questions can be asked. There are several extant medieval Irish chronicles, none of which survive in a contemporary manuscript. Moreover, material has been lost in the process of redaction. Nevertheless, a degree of scholarly consensus has emerged concerning the origins and evolution of Irish chronicle writing. This consensus holds that a no-longer extant text, dubbed the Chronicle of Ireland, underlies all the early medieval Irish chronicles until the tenth century (Hughes 1972: 99–159; Evans 2010: 115–170). It is believed to have originated in Iona in the latter half of the sixth century before eventually being continued in an ecclesiastical centre in the midland kingdom of Brega from *c.* 740–911 (Charles-Edwards 2006 vol 1: 9–16). The chronicle was written in a combination of Irish and Latin, with Irish beginning to predominate from the ninth century (Dumville 1982). It has been long believed that the chronicle known as the Annals of Ulster is its best surviving witness. Fortunately, this text has been transmitted with such a high degree of accuracy that it provides valuable evidence for diachronic linguistic developments in Irish, despite the relatively late date of its most important surviving manuscript (Ó Catháin 1933; Dumville 1982). This accuracy is critical as, despite elements of retrospective revision and interpolation from other sources, the Chronicle of Ireland core is relatively easily distinguished. Thus, the Annals of Ulster afford a glimpse of unfolding events from the late sixth century. Literate networks can be examined as dynamic entities, evolving across several centuries.

The evidence diversifies considerably after AD 911–912. At this point a Clonmacnoise Chronicle or, perhaps, a set of related chronicles, diverged from the Chronicle of Ireland (Grabowski and Dumville 1984: 45–55; Evans 2010: 67–72).

This has several important witnesses, particularly the Annals of Tigernach. Unfortunately, the extant text is incomplete. For instance, it has a major lacuna extending from AD 766–974 and abbreviates much of the ecclesiastical material which must have been present in its original source (Grabowski and Dumville 1984: 163–164; Evans 2010: 57–62). This is frustrating as clerics formed a large proportion of the literate elite. Tigernach can be supplemented by other chronicles, especially *Chronicum Scotorum* with which it shares a common source (Evans 2010: 50–57) but it too has gaps, including one between AD 723–803. There are other less important texts drawing on the Clonmacnoise Chronicle, including the Annals of Roscrea, the English-language Annals of Clonmacnoise and the Fragmentary Annals of Ireland. The most significant chronicle, besides the Annals of Tigernach and *Chronicum Scotorum*, which forms part of this Clonmacnois group of texts is the Annals of Inisfallen. From the tenth century, when its entries become more detailed, it consistently references events in Munster and appears to incorporate unique sources from that region (Grabowski and Dumville 1984: 73). In broad outline then, the early medieval chronicle evidence becomes richer over time, especially following the break in the texts after 911. This clearly has implications for the depth and complexity of possible network modelling.

This picture has been considerably complicated and challenged by the work of Daniel Mc Carthy. He has suggested a somewhat earlier horizon for the beginning of chronicle writing (Mc Carthy 2008: 159–163). More fundamentally, he has disputed the centrality of the Annals of Ulster and has suggested that historians have been too reliant upon it for establishing their chronology of Irish history (Mc Carthy 1998). He has identified the Clonmacnoise Chronicle group as the key, arguing that the Iona Chronicle, which underpinned the Chronicle of Ireland, was continued in Moville from the 740s and in Clonmacnoise from 752 (Mc Carthy 2008:168–197). In addition, he has questioned the consensus which has identified 911 as the point at which the Chronicle of Ireland ends; on the contrary, he argues that the Annals of Ulster are dependent on the Clonmacnoise Chronicle up to the mid-tenth century (Mc Carthy 2008: 61–117). Mc Carthy's re-evaluation of the relationship between the early medieval chronicles has stimulated several recent studies devoted to reconsidering the Chronicle of Ireland hypothesis (Evans 2010: 67–72; Flechner: 2013). In the main,

these have reaffirmed its position as the base text for both the Annals of Ulster and the Clonmacnoise group up to 911, with the Annals of Ulster retaining its central position. On the other hand, Mc Carthy's convincing reconstruction of the chronological apparatus of the Annals of Tigernach and *Chronicum Scotorum*, one which shows it to be superior to that of the Annals of Ulster at several points, does indicate that relying on the latter alone is unwise (Mc Carthy 1998).

In any case, there are other reasons for not turning solely to that text, ones which relate to its definite geographical bias. All of the early medieval chronicles prioritize events within their own region, even though they share an implicit framework that ostensibly embraces the entire island. So, for example, the Annals of Ulster have a strong interest in Armagh and the midland kingdom of Brega, during the ninth and tenth centuries. This reflects the political influence of the powerful Patrician ecclesiastical federation, which looked to Armagh as its head, as well as pointing to the likelihood that the Chronicle of Ireland was being continued in an ecclesiastical centre in Brega during the period (Evans 2010: 17–44). This focus excludes centres that were key nodes in literate networks, skewing any potential mapping of the connections between them. Furthermore, Armagh is almost certainly over-represented. Of the 92 literate professionals recorded in the Annals of Ulster during the ninth and tenth centuries, 16% are directly associated with Armagh. This bias in the data can be partly offset through examining the other early medieval chronicles, especially after 911 when the Clonmacnoise group diverges from the Chronicle of Ireland core. These chronicles have a different, although overlapping, geographical slant to the Annals of Ulster. As a result, while they share many events and death notices, there is a far greater emphasis on the hinterland of Clonmacnoise (Evans 2010: 60–62). This major monastery dominated the Shannon basin and its influence stretched into the midlands, north Munster and Connacht (Kehnel 1995: 90–132; Ó Floinn 1998). This extensive influence is reflected in the Clonmacnoise group of chronicles. Unfortunately, the various breaks in these texts, combined with the abbreviated nature of the Annals of Inisfallen until the tenth century, does mean that the record lacks fullness. It can be supplemented by the Fragmentary Annals which are based, at least in part, on the Clonmacnoise Chronicle (Mac Niocaill 1975: 24; Radner 1999) and may well have originated in Clonenagh, a church which lay

within the Leinster border kingdom of Loígis (Radner 1999: 520–525; Downham 2004). Therefore, despite difficulties, this family of chronicles significantly extends the geographical range of early medieval Irish literate networks. For instance, a quarter of the entries devoted to the ecclesiastical literate elite feature churchmen based in Munster, a striking contrast with their paucity in the Annals of Ulster. Moreover, they show a far greater interest in the secular literate classes than the Annals of Ulster (Johnson 2013: 139–140), allowing for a deeper understanding of how these networks functioned.

Two concrete examples demonstrate these factors in operation. The first is a well-known professional *fili* or poet, Urard mac Coise († 990), who may be the author of the semi-autobiographical tale *Airec Menman Uraird Meic Coise* (Byrne 1908; Mac Cana 1980: 33–38). His prominence is such that he is one of only two poets commemorated in the Annals of the Ulster in the tenth century. Urard's death notice in this text simply states that he was the chief poet of Ireland. *Chronicum Scotorum* and the Annals of Tigernach add significant information, remarking that the *fili* died in penance at Clonmacnoise, immediately placing him in the proximity of an important ecclesiastical network. This proximity is further strengthened in *Airec Menman Uraird Meic Coise* where the poet is supported in his dealings with Domnall mac Muirchertaig († 980), Uí Néill overking of Tara, by Flann, *fer léigind* of Clonmacnoise. The *fer léigind* was a high-status literate professional associated with teaching (Johnston 2013: 124–128). It seems certain that this Flann is identical with Flann mac Maíle Michíl († 979) who was a contemporary of Urard and *fer léigind* at Clonmacnoise. The extra information in the Clonmacnoise Chronicle-derived texts allows a simple network to be constructed around Urard, one which links him directly with a high-ranked ecclesiastic and the most important king in Ireland. The latter, Domnall mac Muirchertaig, was the primary node at the centre of the extensive Uí Néill system of political alliances. In addition, according to *Chronicum Scotorum*, Flann was the head of the church of Cluain Deochra (Cloneogher) in modern County Longford, a region where Clonmacnoise exerted considerable sway. Urard personally connects two extensive geo-political networks, one secular and the other ecclesiastical. None of this could be argued with any certainty in the absence of the Clonmacnoise Chronicle evidence.

The second example is Snédgus († 888), an ecclesiastical scholar who is commemorated in *Chronicum Scotorum*, but not in the Annals of Ulster. *Chronicum Scotorum* states that Snédgus was a *sapiens*, an exegete (Ireland 1996; Johnston 2013: 102–112) based in Castledermot in northern Leinster. This church was a significant site whose foundation in 802 by Díarmait ua Áedo Róin († 825) was recorded by the Annals of Inisfallen. Furthermore, *Chronicum Scotorum* also notes that Snédgus was the *aite* 'foster-father' of Cormac mac Cuilennáin, a powerful king of Munster, as well as a bishop, who died at the Battle of Belach Mugna in 908 (Ó Corráin 1972: 111–114; Russell 2004: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6319). In this context, the term *aite* indicates that Snédgus was the mentor and teacher of the young Cormac. It is almost certain that this information was added to the entry, sometime after the death of Cormac, as the future king was likely a minor figure in 888. In fact, scholars have long speculated that he rose to prominence as a compromise candidate with his episcopal status playing a central role (Byrne 1973: 214). Cormac was a member of the ruling dynasty in Munster, but came from an obscure branch. The presence of clerical rulers in Munster during the ninth and tenth centuries has appeared *sui generis* (Byrne 1973: 211–215). However, it is likely explained by the inter-connections between the secular and ecclesiastic. Cormac was a well-placed node on both networks and this boosted his chance at kingship during a period of significant dynastic uncertainty. Moreover, Cormac's background helps explain his political trajectory, especially his interest in controlling Leinster which led, ultimately, to his death. After all, it is probable that he spent his formative years in a Leinster monastery.

Urard and Snédgus show the potential for considering the early medieval chronicles as, fundamentally, accounts of networks and their interactions. A final source remains to be considered, one which greatly expands the dataset but which also presents particular challenges. This is the Annals of the Four Masters, a seventeenth-century chronicle, composed in annalistic style, which looks back to its medieval forebears. The chronicle was the product of a major collaborative effort during the 1620s–1630s, organized by the Irish Franciscans, particularly Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. Bernadette Cunningham has shown that the chronicle is a work of total history, outlining the story of the Irish, of their saints and of their kings, from the

island's first habitation down to its seventeenth-century present. The chronicle is imbued with the politics of the Counter-Reformation and one of its aims was to situate Ireland among the European nations (Cunningham 2010: 31–33, 176–214). The resulting work is one of remarkable depth; it is far greater in extent and detail than any of the surviving medieval chronicles. Unlike the latter, the Annals of the Four Masters are retrospective, created in a specific short time-frame for particular reasons. As a chronicle, it provides an interpretative overview, not a rush of contemporary record. However, this retrospective nature is what makes it so useful for a study of the early medieval past. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh relied heavily on the early medieval chronicles, which he frequently cross-referenced with genealogies and king lists. An analysis of entries in the Annals of the Four Masters reveals the extent to which they systematically incorporate the extant sources. Moreover, Ó Cléirigh had access to better versions of the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of Tigernach than now survive as well as texts which are lost (McGowan 2004: 3–4; Cunningham 2010: 46–49). When Ó Cléirigh and his sources can be directly compared, the result is one of impressive fidelity (Johnston 2013: 178–196). The Annals of the Four Masters operate on the basis of accumulation and harmonisation rather than replacement or invention. The patterns of reinterpretation are also relatively consistent. For instance, Ó Cléirigh frequently replaced the early medieval use of *rí* and *rex* for a multitude of kings, ranging from the paltry to the powerful, with words such as *tigerna* 'lord' to create the impression of an ancient and unitary Irish kingdom (McGowan 2004: 7–11, 21–24). Similarly, the text applies semantically broad terms such as *ecnaid* 'wise man' or 'learned man' where the early medieval chronicles are more specific. It seems highly unlikely that the wide geographical span of the Annals of the Four Masters is a construct. Used carefully, in conjunction with the early medieval chronicles upon which it draws, the text greatly enhances the available dataset.

III. Evolving Networks of Literacy and Power

Having established that the medieval Irish chronicles, supplemented by the Annals of the Four Masters, are best understood as reflecting the actions of deeply connected political and ecclesiastical networks, it remains to consider, more fully, how these

intersected. As stated previously, the totality of the dataset is too large for a single paper; therefore, the focus will remain on the literate elite during the ninth and tenth centuries. Scholars have long appreciated that the relationship between church and society was a core aspect of how the early medieval Irish viewed their world. There has been a strong inclination to analyze this relationship through the medium of vernacular law (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984). While very useful, this has had the unintended consequence of downplaying the significance of other sources such as the chronicles. It is believed that the earliest legal texts date from the second half of the seventh century (Breatnach 2011), with most of the corpus redacted by the end of the ninth. However, the tradition was not static: it accumulated gloss and commentary, both of which allowed for the on-going development of legal ideas, albeit within schematic hierarchical structures. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the law tracts are not evolving documents in the same way as the chronicles. In some cases, such as the provision of sick maintenance, they preserve the memory of institutions which were already at vanishing point during the period of their redaction (Watkins 1976; Kelly 1988: 130–131) As a whole, these texts emphasize the high status of literate churchman within society, but in a general rather than individual manner. For example, the important eighth-century tract known as *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* states that the ecclesiastical scholar, judge and poet were the three officials necessary for any *tuath*, or petty kingdom (Gwynn 1940: 31). These *tuatha* were small scale and ubiquitous, with estimates suggesting that there may have been upwards of a hundred of them in existence (MacCotter 2008: 41–44). *Bretha Nemed*'s stipulation creates an idealized network, with scholar, judge and poet as nodes connected to the king of the *tuath*. This is similar to Urard mac Coise's network, but does not have the same potential for extrapolating the real links between different nodes. Nevertheless, the legal evidence underlines the fact that a wide geographical distribution of literacy was considered normative. On the surface, this finds support in the medieval chronicles: they record nearly 70 different ecclesiastical centres associated with literacy in the ninth and tenth centuries (Johnston 2013: 196–198). However, during the course of the latter part of the ninth century and especially the tenth, this changed, with large centres coming to dominate. This is more easily

traced through the chronicles than legal sources. The diachronic nature of the chronicles takes them beyond schematisation.

The key factors appear to be socio-political. From at least the end of the eighth century the Irish overkings had gradually accumulated more power (Ó Corráin 1978: 23–35; MacCotter 2008: 23), with the result that *tuatha* became less politically significant. There are a multitude of reasons for this, including economic developments and responses to Viking raiding, trading and settlement. These trends coincide with a noticeable concentration and consolidation of influence among a few major churches such as Armagh and Clonmacnoise (Johnston 2013: 67, 92–130). Furthermore, the rise to prominence of monastic schools, associated with *fir léigind*, ensured that high-ranking ecclesiastical literate professionals came to be increasingly linked with these institutions. Of course, such ecclesiastics had always been politically significant. The career of Adomnán († 704), abbot of Iona, is indicative (Ní Dhonnchadha 2004: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/110). Adomnán was so well-connected that he was able to call on an impressive number of royal and ecclesiastical supporters as guarantors for his *lex innocentium*, a legal ordinance aimed at protecting non-combatants during warfare (Ní Dhonnchadha 1982). How did later literate churchmen respond to new circumstances? Once again, network theory provides insight. The change in distribution of literate professionals can be visualized as a network. Its top layer is composed of a small number of major institutional nodes, such as Armagh and Clonmacnoise. These were connected to a second layer, made up of very many dependent churches. Basically, a horizontal network, composed of independent and semi-independent centres, had evolved into one which was both vertical and horizontal. Some foundations, such as Armagh, had developed a vertical pyramidal network at an early point but the trend certainly accelerated from the ninth century. The career of Flann mac Maíle Michíl, mentioned earlier, demonstrates the actualities. He was a literate professional, a *fer léigind*, at Clonmacnoise; he was also the titular head of one of that church's dependent foundations, Cluain Deochra. Flann was the mediator between two layers, with Clonmacnoise as the primary node.

Flann's unifying role was personal but far from unique. Another example, one which sheds even more light on the intersection of literate professionals with secular society, is Suairlech († 870) of Inan (Johnston 2013: 118). Suairlech's death is

commemorated in the early medieval chronicles, and is an example of an entry which originated in the Chronicle of Ireland core. His obit is packed with information, informing the reader that Suairlech was a bishop, the abbot of Clonard, an anchorite and a *doctor*. The latter is a term reserved for experts in Christian doctrine and is frequently associated with the Céli Dé, a loose yet influential group of clerics with common ascetic and liturgical interests (Follett 2006: 5–23; Haggart 2006–2007). In fact, Suairlech's connection with Inan securely aligns him with the Céli Dé, as it appears to have been a small anchoritic settlement tied into the Clonard ecclesiastical federation. Suairlech's ascetic commitments in no way militated against ecclesiastical promotion or political influence. As a bishop and abbot of the major monastery of Clonard he was a leading churchman. This is not mere speculation: Suairlech appears elsewhere in the chronicles. He is noted as being present at a *rígdál*, a type of formal royal conference, held in Armagh in 851. This was between Máel Sechnaill mac Maíle Ruanaid († 862), Uí Néill king of Ireland, Matudán († 857), king of Ulaid, Díarmait († 852) and Fethgna († 874), representing Armagh, and Suairlech, at the head of a midland clerical faction. The entry directly names five individuals, three clerics and two kings. These five were each linked into wider networks, whose impact can be traced in the annals. Moreover, Suairlech attended an even more important royal conference a few years later, in 859. This meeting was so significant that it receives a particularly full account in the chronicles. The entry from the Annals of Ulster is worth citing in full.

Righdhal mathe Erenn oc Raith Aedho meic Bricc im Mael Sechnaill rig Temhra, 7 im Fethghna comurba Patraicc, 7 im Suairlech comurba Finnio, ic denum sidha 7 caincomraicc fer nErenn, conid asin dail-sin du-rat Cerball, ri Osraighi, oghreir samtha Patraic 7 a comurba, 7 conidh and do-dechaidh Osraighi i ndilsi fri Leth Cuinn, 7 ad-rogaidh Mael Gualai, ri Muman, a dilsi.
A royal gathering of the nobles of Ireland at Rahugh, including Máel Sechnaill the king of Tara, Fethgna successor of Patrick, and Suairlech successor of Finnén, to make peace between the men of Ireland, and as a result of that gathering Cerball, the king of Osraige, gave his full dues to Patrick's congregation and to his successor, and Osraige was alienated to the Northern Half, and Máel Gualai, king of Munster, invoked sureties to guarantee the alienation.

The chronicler uses legalistic language to describe a major redrawing of Ireland's political map in favour of the Uí Néill. Osraige, a powerful regional kingdom in Munster, was removed from that province's sphere into that of Uí Néill, an action which suited Máel Sechnaill and Cerball († 888), king of Osraige (Downham 2004). It concomitantly weakened their Munster rival. The entry encapsulates networks in operation. Suairlech is a central node, just as he was in 851. In fact, three of the protagonists are the same: Máel Sechnaill, Suairlech and Fethgna. Díarmait and Matudán had died in the interim. It is surely telling that Máel Sechnaill's ambitions of suzerainty were underpinned by the support of a clerical party from his own powerbase as well as by the Church of Armagh. The practice of power was dependent on the common interests of ecclesiastical and secular leaders. Suairlech's own role is fascinatingly complex. As an anchorite he was plugged into the Céli Dé network; as a *doctor* he was part of the literate elite; as an ecclesiastical politician he worked closely with kings. Suairlech's network consists of several named individuals and they, in their turn, were connected with yet other identifiable figures. Furthermore, his ecclesiastical leadership was reinforced by the dominant institutional position acquired by centres such as Clonard. The complexity of interests swirling through Suairlech counter-balances the siren schematisation of *Bretha Nemed*. The application of network analysis would surely further enhance an appreciation of these dynamic systems, systems through which learning, power and patronage flowed.

IV. Literate Networks in Literary Sources

The final part of this chapter examines the depiction of literate networks in a different type of source, one which relates to the chronicle material, but at an angle; it also situates these networks within a broader cultural context, widening the focus to include material from the seventh century reinterpreted in the light of the ninth and tenth centuries. This is the context delineated in the vernacular narrative literature. Generally speaking, many early medieval Irish narratives share a legendary pre-Christian past, frequently extending back to the time of Christ and even further (Mac Cana 1980; Ní Bhrolcháin 2009). But this is not always the case. For example, there

is a subset of tales where Patrick and other saints, associated with the earliest horizon of christianisation, play major roles (Johnston 2001; Dooley 2004) Some of these narratives, as Joseph Nagy has shown, are deeply concerned with the relationship between the church, secular society and traditional culture (Nagy 1997). Yet others, which are set in the post-conversion era, feature protagonists who are commemorated in the medieval chronicles by their contemporaries. This is a crucial point: such stories, unlike those involving Patrick, fictionalize individuals who died after the practice of chronicle writing had begun. They belong, in a sense, to a definite historical past, rather than to that more distant time which essentially functioned as legend. Due to their often fragmentary nature, however, they have not received the level of attention accorded to those which celebrate great legendary heroes such as Cú Chulainn and Finn mac Cumaill. For instance, the *Táin*, a central text in the Ulster Cycle, has already been examined using the mathematical tools of network analysis (Mac Carron and Kenna 2014). Unlike the *Táin*, which is a long and involved tale with a large cast, these narratives are simpler and have far fewer characters. Because of their small scale it is arguably best to consider them as falling into broad groups which are defined by their shared protagonists, expanding the dataset. Most of them consist of short anecdotes such as those concerning the saint and abbot Mo Ling (†️ 697), found in the Book of Leinster (Best and O'Brien 1967: 1236-1242). Many are difficult to date securely and appear to have undergone revision at various points. A good example are those stories centring on the historical king of Connacht, Guaire Aidne (†️ 663) and his relationship with the legendary poet Senchán Torpéist (Ó Coileáin 1974). This narrative type contrasts with the medieval chronicles in several important ways. Three, in particular, are worth highlighting: the stories are retrospective, reflexive and reflective. In other words, they are written long after the deaths of their historical protagonists; the social relationships of the tales are shaped by the imagined past of the protagonists and by the present of the writers, past and present looping into each other; finally, these stories, like many others, idealize the proper shape of society, similar to the schematisation found in the legal material. In contrast, the dominant mode of early medieval chronicle writing is reportage. However, this reportage was determined by the hierarchical frame of Irish society, with all its biases, the same frame informing the tales. Therefore, despite genre

contrasts, it is useful to consider whether the actual networks of real people, who are recorded in the chronicles, match those of their fictional alter-egos. The group of stories surrounding Cuimmíne Fota († 662), a literate scholar, are particularly apt for this purpose.

The Cuimmíne of history was commemorated upon his death in 662. His obit in the Annals of Ulster, typical of this early stage of annalistic writing, is short, simply noting that Cuimmíne Fota was a *sapiens*, a scriptural scholar. Fortunately, other sources, including the genealogies, provide additional information. Cuimmíne was born into the west Munster dynasty, Eóganacht Locha Léin. He became abbot of Clonfert, an influential position within the Irish Church (Charles-Edwards 2004: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/51012), making him a significant node in the island's ecclesiatical network. However, things become more complicated once attention is turned from Cuimmíne to the works that he may have written. The reason lies in his name: Cuimmíne with its many variants, including Cumméne and Cummianus, was not uncommon. Historical examples include Cumméne Find († 669) of Iona and the eighth-century Cummian of Bobbio. There is a danger of conflating different individuals who happen to share the same name. Furthermore, Cuimmíne is sometimes confused with another Irish name, Caimín, in verncacular sources (Ó Coileáin 1974: 92). However, it is widely accepted that Cuimmíne Fota wrote the *Penitential of Cummean*, a major Hiberno-Latin text (Bieler 1963: 108–35; Ó Cróinín 1989: 271, 275). Moreover, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín has persuasively supported his authorship of the exegetical *De Figuris Apostolorum* (Ó Cróinín 1989). 'Celebra Iuda', a hymn in honour of the apostles, has also been ascribed to him (Kenney 1929: 266 no. 93). He was clearly a writer of some importance. Scholars have further debated whether Cuimmíne Fota is the same as the Cummian who wrote the Paschal Letter of 632, a crucial source for tracing the Easter Controversy in Ireland (Walsh and Ó Cróinín 1988). While some doubt remains (Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 78–80), a tentative consensus accepts the identity between Cuimmíne Fota and Cummian (Breen 2009: http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a2294). This identity serves to expand Cuimmíne's network further. The Paschal Letter is addressed to Ségéne († 652), abbot of Iona and the otherwise unknown Beccán the hermit. Moreover, the Letter arose out of a major synod of the Irish Church, held at

Mag Léne, near Durrow, around 630, placing Cuimmíne at the epicentre of an extensive ecclesiastical network. Indeed, the historical Cuimmíne Fota, even if he is not the same as Cummian, is a significant figure. As an author and high-status churchman he was someone worthy of commemoration by the chroniclers.

The literary Cuimmíne shares some of these characteristics; he is also the subject of a well-developed fictive biography. This Cuimmíne is depicted as being a child of incest and a man whose life colourfully intersected with kings and poets and fools (Ó Coileáin 1974: 92–95; Clancy 1993: 113–117). The dossier of texts in which he features is extensive, including a late Irish Life, a saga, several anecdotes of varying dates, genealogical quatrains and prose fragments (O'Keeffe 1911; Meyer 1902; Kenney 1929: 420–421; Ó Coileáin 1974: 92–101). The genealogical and fragmentary materials have been surveyed by Seán Ó Coileáin, who has argued that they originally formed part of a now incomplete cycle of West Munster tales championing the interests of Cuimmíne's family, Eóganacht Locha Léin (Ó Coileáin 1974). Whether a formal cycle of tales existed or not, there can be no doubt that the extant texts operate within a shared legendary history and through a common cast of stereotyped characters. The earliest narrative stratum seems to be ninth and tenth century but it continued to evolve long after, becoming ever more complex.

This complexity is as much one of relationships between characters as of redaction. The main protagonists are Cuimmíne, the *oínmit* 'fool' Comgán Mac Dá Cherda, Guaire, king of Connacht and, more tangentially, St Íte († 570/577), founder of Killeedy. Cuimmíne, Guaire and Íte are all genuine historical figures. What of Mac Dá Cherda? The death of a Comgán Mac Dá Cherda is recorded in *Chronicum Scotorum* and the Annals of Inisfallen, at 641 and 645 respectively. It has been speculated that he is the Comgán, abbot of Emly who appears elsewhere as one of the ecclesiastical guarantors of the so-called West Munster Synod (Byrne 1973: 216–217). If this is the case, he has certainly undergone a remarkable transformation; the Holy Fool of the stories bears no trace of Comgán's ecclesiastical career and the identification seems unlikely. In any case, Cuimmíne is closely linked to the other three. He is imagined to be the uterine brother of Guaire and the foster-brother, sometimes uterine sibling, of Mac Dá Cherda. Íte, adopting her traditional aspect as foster-mother of the Irish saints (Johnston 2000), rescues Cuimmíne as an infant and

raises him. It is noteworthy that the historical horizon of the narratives is generally consistent. Guaire, Mac Dá Cherda and Cuimmíne Fota were all contemporaries. Íte is the one outlier: her death in 570 or 577 makes her an exceptionally old foster-mother to a man who died in 662, although it is just about possible. Significantly, however, Íte is a central figure in the idealized networks connecting sixth- and seventh-century Irish saints. It seems obvious that she fulfils the maternal node which was a feature of actual kinship networks.

At this point it is worth asking if there are any commonalities between the fictional Cuimmíne and his historical inspiration. Indeed, are there any signs of this historical inspiration beyond his name and genealogical connections? One tale, in particular, is worth investigating. It has a coherent narrative trajectory and envisages the interaction of secular and ecclesiastical networks. Furthermore, a full appreciation of its dynamics requires a knowledge of the wider tradition into which it fits. This is the Old Irish saga *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir*. The text tells of the love between two poets and their choice of sexual renunciation, under the direction of Cuimmíne Fota, over consummation. Even Cuimmíne's guidance is not enough; Cuirithir is obliged to go into penitential exile to avoid Líadain's sexual temptations, at first in Ireland and then overseas. This invokes the well-known Irish practice of *peregrinatio* (Charles-Edwards 1976), normally associated with exile clerics such as Columbanus († 615). The tale ends with Líadain losing Cuirithir but winning her soul's salvation (Meyer 1902: 26–27). It is tempting to see Cuimmíne's portrayal as directly echoing his real reputation as an authority on penance. The same reputation appears to underlie the tradition that he gave the veil to Digde, the supposed author of the Old-Irish poem *Caillech Bérre*, a notably penitential production (Ó Coileáin 1974: 108–109). Mac Dá Cherda, who is described as being simultaneously chief-*fili* and fool of Ireland, plays a complementary part. Ostensibly helping Cuirithir, it is his verses which inspire the two poets to enter the religious life and seek out Cuimmíne (Meyer 1902: 12–18). Thomas Clancy, in a convincing analysis of the tale, highlights Mac Dá Cherda's actions as the catalyst which pushes the poets from the secular to the religious (Clancy 1993: 120–122).

The saga is a story of networks, their fluctuation, creation and destruction. *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir* presents its audience with two simple networks.

These are explicitly linked through Líadain and Cuirithir and implicitly through Cuimmíne's unstated, but well-known, relationship with Mac Dá Cherda. The tale opens in a world of poets, including the two would-be lovers, their retinues and Mac Dá Cherda. This is replaced, through Mac Dá Cherda's actions, with an ecclesiastical network consisting of Cuimmíne, Líadain and Cuirithir. This network too breaks apart: Líadain and Cuirithir only find salvation in isolation. However, the implicit network, the one which joins Mac Dá Cherda with Cuimmíne Fota, is what drives the action of the narrative. Their status as siblings or foster-brothers is never mentioned in the saga, but there was no need; it is the bedrock of their interactions in several stories. In effect, Mac Dá Cherda, acting as a proxy for Cuimmíne, prevents rather than enables the physical fulfilment of the poets' relationship. This may seem far removed from actual history but, as in the case of Urard mac Coise and Flann mac Maíle Michíl, the tale presents a network joining clerics and poets. Furthermore, when *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir* is situated within its wider story complex, the network expands to include the king of Connacht, the legendary poet Senchán Torpéist, and the churches of Clonfert and Ardfert (O'Keeffe 1911). Without a doubt, the Cuimmíne of these stories is not the Cuimmíne of history, although shadows of the original flit through the surviving texts. What he is, instead, is an individualized social myth. The fictional Cuimmíne and his connections form a template, the template of what the career of an ecclesiastical literate professional might resemble. He is the confidant of kings and of poets; he is equally at home in penitential austerity or at the royal court. The ideal trio of these stories consists of a poet, a king and a cleric, mirroring, in part, the scheme of the law tracts. However, this template is filled with names familiar from history, rounded out through characters and through plots which are driven by social expectations. This combination of factors means that the network of the tales does resemble that of the medieval chroniclers, although it also looks towards the society imagined in the vernacular laws. It is a glimpse of how the literate elite imagined their world. These narratives inhabit the space between the quantitative realities of the chronicles and the ideologies of law.

V. The Potentials of Network Theory

As this paper has shown, the world of the literate elite, their networks and connections, is richly represented in the extant texts. These come in a variety of genres and scales, ranging from medieval chronicles that commemorate thousands of individuals to short tales which name a handful. The focus has been largely on the medieval chronicles. Their sheer size makes them the best corpus of material for any quantitative analysis, including network theory. Moreover, they can be cross-referenced with other sources such as genealogies, fragmentary anecdotes, sagas and law tracts. The medieval chronicles provide a spine of contemporary reportage which documents the interactions of socio-political networks. However, it is useful to deepen contextualization by including other types of text, ones which provide reflective and reflexive insights into the nature of early medieval Irish society. The case study of Cuimmíne Fota is one example of how this might be done. Conceptually, network theory will give scholars a new tool for approaching these texts, allowing for an understanding of how the society as a whole functioned and how it perceived itself to function. Previously, this has been analyzed through an emphasis on the history of institutions with the result that individuals, their actions, and their links with other individuals, have been under-appreciated. By considering one definable group in a specific time frame, this paper has suggested a model of how network theory can be usefully employed, one which offers a fresh way of approaching the early medieval Irish past and the people who lived it and created it.

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