LEABHARLANN CHOLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH | TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DUBLIN
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Terms and Conditions of Use of Digitised Theses from Trinity College Library Dublin

Copyright statement

All material supplied by Trinity College Library is protected by copyright (under the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 as amended) and other relevant Intellectual Property Rights. By accessing and using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you acknowledge that all Intellectual Property Rights in any Works supplied are the sole and exclusive property of the copyright and/or other IPR holder. Specific copyright holders may not be explicitly identified. Use of materials from other sources within a thesis should not be construed as a claim over them.

A non-exclusive, non-transferable licence is hereby granted to those using or reproducing, in whole or in part, the material for valid purposes, providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. Where specific permission to use material is required, this is identified and such permission must be sought from the copyright holder or agency cited.

Liability statement

By using a Digitised Thesis, I accept that Trinity College Dublin bears no legal responsibility for the accuracy, legality or comprehensiveness of materials contained within the thesis, and that Trinity College Dublin accepts no liability for indirect, consequential, or incidental, damages or losses arising from use of the thesis for whatever reason. Information located in a thesis may be subject to specific use constraints, details of which may not be explicitly described. It is the responsibility of potential and actual users to be aware of such constraints and to abide by them. By making use of material from a digitised thesis, you accept these copyright and disclaimer provisions. Where it is brought to the attention of Trinity College Library that there may be a breach of copyright or other restraint, it is the policy to withdraw or take down access to a thesis while the issue is being resolved.

Access Agreement

By using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement: All material supplied via a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of a thesis is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone. This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

Entertainment in Early Ireland

TRINITY COLLEGE
11 JUN 2002

A.B. Gleason

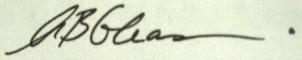
Ph.D
University of Dublin

March 2002
Department of Medieval History

TRINITY COLLEGE
11 JUN 2002
LIBRARY DUBLIN
Thesis
6769

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any other university. The Library may lend it or copy it upon request.



A.B.Gleason 25 March 2002

Summary

The role of entertainment in any society offers an important window onto its values, customs, culture and traditions. The socio-economic and political importance of play and entertainment is demonstrated by its inclusion of all classes, ages and genders. The discussion of its role and consequence within a society offers a comprehensive social tool, encompassing how, why, when and where a culture celebrates and enjoys play.

The following examination is an inquiry into the various forms of entertainment in pre-Norman Ireland. All available source material has been explored and applied, though principal attention has been given to the early literature and legal material of the Old and Middle Irish periods. Subsequent discussion and examination of extant archaeological and artefactual evidence is also emphasised.

Several early legal texts with translation have been added as an appendix to this study. Hitherto untranslated, the texts provide useful insight into the legal stipulations and considerations of various sports. Additionally, they provide important classifications of sport and game according to the age of participant, the inherent danger of the game and the liability for injuries incurred.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		7
List of Illustrations		8
Abbreviations		10
Introduction		11
Chapter 1	Music	24
1.1	Vocal Types	26
1.2	Minstrels and Minstrelsy	30
1.3	Music Strains	34
2	Wind Instruments	38
2.1	*Cuisle*	38
2.2	*Fedán*	45
2.3	*Corn*	45
2.4	*Stoc* and *Storgán*	51
3	Stringed Instruments	53
3.1	*Crott*	55
3.2	*Cruitire*	68
3.3	*Timpán*	73
3.4	*Timpánach*	83
Chapter 2	Professional Entertainers and Fools	86
1	Professional Entertainers	86
1.1	*Clessamnach*	87
1.2	*Fuirseoire*	93
1.3	*Creccaire*	97
1.4	*Braigetoire*	98
1.5	*Monach*	99
2	Performing Fools	101
2.1	*Drúth*	101
2.2	*Mer*	116
2.3	*Dásachtach*	118
2.4	*Óinmit*	120
2.5	*Reim*	124
2.6	*Oblaire*	125
2.7	*Crosán*	128
Chapter 3	Horse and Chariot Racing	132
1	Horse in Early Irish Society	132
1.1	Physical Attributes, terminology and breeds	132

1.2	Function	139
2	Material Evidence	146
3	Horse-racing	151
4	Chariot-racing	157
Chapter 4	Feasts, Festivals and Fairs	168
1	Background	168
2	*Feis*	170
3	*Fled*	179
4	*Oenach*	186
4.1	*Oenach Tailten*	191
4.2	*Oenach Carman*	196
4.3	Entertainment at fairs	199
Chapter 5	Boardgames and Gaming	204
1	Archaeological Evidence	204
2	Written Evidence	207
2.1	Descriptions of Terms, Games, Pieces	207
2.2	Players	215
2.3	Textual Themes	228
3	Strategy and Layout	234
4	Comparative Boardgames of the Period	241
5	Gaming and Dice	244
Chapter 6	Field-Games and Sports	250
1	Background	250
1.1	Terminology	252
2	Equipment and Settings	259
3	Strategy and Layout	266
4	Participants	274
5	Injuries	279
Chapter 7	Children's Entertainments	285
1	Background	285
1.1	Games	286
2	Injuries in Games	299
3	Toys and Pet Animals	302
Chapter 8	Conclusions	308
Guide to Appendices		312
Appendix 1	CIH 945.20-40 *Bretha Étgid*	313
	Translation	314
Appendix 2	CIH 1347.32-40 Misc. Old Irish Citation	316

	Translation	316
Appendix 3	CIH 1339.30-1341.16 *Mellbretha*	318
	Translation	322
Appendix 4	CIH 1347.23-5 Misc. Old Irish Citation	327
	Translation	327
Works Cited: Primary Sources		328
Works Cited: Secondary Sources		335

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe my sincere gratitude for this endeavour. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Katharine Simms who has provided unfailing support and guidance throughout my years at Trinity College. Her care and attention to detail have been vital in preparing this work and invaluable in providing a model for research.

I would also like to offer my express thanks to Prof. Fergus Kelly of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. His initial enthusiasm for the topic has been matched only by his constant guidance and assistance. His knowledge of early Irish law and the society it describes has provided a generous and well-tapped resource in preparing this work.

My thanks also to the Irish Department at Trinity College. In particular I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to Prof. Liam Breatnach for his tireless assistance with the Irish material. His patient supervision through advice, materials and most importantly time are inestimable and I offer my profound thanks for his generosity. Many thanks also to Prof. Damian McManus for introducing me to Old and Middle Irish with the patience, direction and humour of educator and friend.

The suggestions, advice, and critical analysis of Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards of Jesus College, Oxford have also been extremely helpful in bringing this work to a close. I thank him for his careful consideration of the material and more importantly for the overwhelmingly positive and encouraging way it was offered.

I extend thanks of a different kind to the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and its governing board for granting me a scholarship to its School of Celtic Studies. The Institute has been invaluable in furnishing not only an ideal research environment, but also in providing me with the funding necessary for me to remain in Dublin. The School is a rare and model example of academic patronage. I hope it continues its generous support and assistance to scholars for many years to come.

Lastly I would like to thank my parents and grandparents, who I hope by now know why.

Illustrations

1.	**Piper**. Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig. 960).	38
2.	**Bronze Age Horns**. (Waddell, John 1998, p 234).	46
3.	**River Erne Horn**. (Waterman, D.A. 1969, plate 4).	47
4.	**Musicians**. Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.940).	49
5.	**Harp Player**. Illustration from Giraldus Cambrensis MS (O'Meara, John J. 1951, p 103).	53
6.	**Musicians**. High-Cross at Durrow, Co. Offaly. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.939).	54
7.	**Seated Musician 1**. High-Cross at Ulard, Co. Kilkenny. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.642).	56
8.	**Seated Musician 2**. South Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.888).	56
9.	**Seated Musician 3**. North Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.719).	57
10.	**Horse and Rider**. Illustration from *Book of Kells* (Meehan, Bernard 1994, p.75, fig. 98).	141
11.	**Horse and Rider**. Stone Shaft at Banagher, Co. Offaly. (Harbison, Peter 1992, fig.65).	148
12.	**Chariot Reconstruction**. (Greene, David 1972, p 65).	158
13.	**Ballinderry Board**. (Hencken H. O'Neill 1935-7, plate 25).	205
14.	**Ballinderry Game Board Handle 1. Bear Head**.(Hencken, H. O'Neill 1935-7, p180).	205
15.	**Ballinderry Game Board Handle 1. Human Head**. (Hencken, H. O'Neill 1935-7, p 179).	206
16.	**Waterford Board**. (Hurley, Maurice F. *et al* 1992, p 593).	206
17.	**Knockanboy Board**. (Simpson, W.G. 1972, plate 7).	206

18. **Viking Age Figurine**. (Lang, James 1988, p 50). 242

19. **Gaming Die from Ballinderry Crannóg 2**. (Hencken, H. O'Neill 1942, fig 22.45). 246

20. **Burials 10-11 at Knowth, Co. Meath**. (Eogan, George 1967-8, p 74). 248

21. **Grave Slab. *Cammán* and Ball**. (O'Sullivan, Aidan 1998, p 33). 256

Abbreviations

AFM	**Annals of the Four Masters**. O'Donovan, John 1848-51 *Annála ríoghachta Éireann: annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the four masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616*, 7 vols. Dublin.
AI	**Annals of Inisfallen**. MacAirt, Seán 1951 *Annals of Inisfallen*. Dublin.
AL	**Ancient Laws of Ireland**. 1865-1901 *Ancient Laws of Ireland*. 6 Vols. Dublin.
ALC	**Annals of Loch Cé**. 1871 Hennessy, William H. *Annals of Loch Cé; A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 1014 to AD 1590*. London.
ATig	**Annals of Tigernach**. Stokes, Whitley 1895-7 "The Annals of Tigernach" *Revue Celtique* 16, pp 374-419; 17, pp 6-33, 116-263, 337-420; 18, pp 9-58, 150-303, 374-91.
AU	**Annals of Ulster**. MacAirt, Seán and Gearóid MacNiocail 1983 *The Annals of Ulster: to A.D. 1131*. Dublin.
AU²	**Annals of Ulster**. Hennessy, William H. and Bartholomew MacCarthy 1887-1901 *Annala Uladh: Annals of Ulster. A Chronicle of Irish Affairs*. 4 vols. Dublin.
CIH	***Corpus Iuris Hibernici***. 1978 Binchy, D.A. 6 Vols. Dublin.
CG	***Críth Gablach***. 1941 (repr.1970) Binchy, D.A. Medieval and Modern Irish Series Vol. 11. Dublin.
CS	**Chronicum Scotorum**. Hennessy, William H. 1866 *Chronicum Scorotum; A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from the Earliest Times to AD 1135.*. London.
FA	**Fragmentary Annals of Ireland**. Radner, Joan 1978 Dublin.
GOI	**Grammar of Old Irish**. Thurneysen, Rudolf 1946 (repr. 1993). Dublin.
GPC	***Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language***. Thomas, R.J. *et al.* (ed.) 1950- Caerdydd.
LL	**Book of Leinster**. Best, R.I., and Osborne Bergin, M.A. O'Brien, and A. O'Sullivan. 1954-83 *The Bookof Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, 6 Vols. Dublin.
LU	***Leabhar na hUidre.*** Best, R.I. and Osborne Bergin 1929 *Lebor na hUidre*, Book of the Dun Cow. Dublin.

Introduction

> What then is the right way of living? Life must be lived as a play, playing certain games, making sacrifice, singing and dancing, then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win the contest.
> Plato, *The Republic*.

Entertainment is one of the least examined aspects of social history. How and why a society plays, celebrates, and entertains is an inquiry into its values, *mores*, conventions and religion. It is equally a signpost for the society's wealth, economy and political structure. Cultures throughout history have utilised formal amusement for both inherent and vicarious objectives. The Greeks used sport and entertainment ostensibly to please the gods, though more pragmatically to develop a socio-political infrastructure among city-states. Their inception of the Olympic games achieved both on an unprecedented scale. In more recent times concerted revivals of traditional games and celebrations, most notably in Ireland and the Basque country, have furnished powerful political symbols and tools for their respective national interests. Entertainment and sport indeed mirror the politics of the society in which they are found. The democratic Roman world encouraged any free born child, male or female, to receive instruction in various athletic pursuits. By contrast, the inegalitarian Mesoamerican society of the Aztecs limited participation in its complex and highly regulated sports to the noble and warrior classes only. Modern parallels are patent. The entertainment and sports industries of today manipulate all aspects of society. They are perhaps the very impetus for the burgeoning of entertainment and sport as academic fields of inquiry.

If a society demonstrates formal entertainment and play it portrays the important socio-economic development of leisure, the concerted manipulation and

utilisation of free time. More importantly, if a society documents its play, it gives permanence to the details and aspect of its amusement. Inquiry into how a society manifests play provides valuable examples of intricacies and insights of everyday life. This is perhaps best attested by the attention given to play by the ancients. Classical philosophers comment extensively on both the innate efficacy of play and its crucial role within the society. Early historians and chroniclers include descriptions of entertainment and play in their detailed, though highly suspect, accounts of neighbouring civilisations.

The following examination is an inquiry into the various forms of entertainment and play in early Ireland. While evidence for entertainment is abundant throughout the medieval period in Ireland, I have limited my research to a pre-Norman timeframe. This temporal boundary has less to do with the necessary and logistic constraints of a detailed study and more to do with the comprehensive and permanent societal influence of Anglo-Norman settlements of the twelfth-century and later. While earlier foreign influence such as that of the Norse was assuredly substantial, the societal impact of the twelfth-century invasion and the subsequent occupation of Ireland was particularly effectual.

The importance of entertainment in the understanding of any given society has already been discussed. A comprehensive inquiry into the most popular forms of entertainment in early Irish society is otherwise lacking. While discussions of individual topics are found, most represent the findings of specialists in disciplines such as art history, linguistics, musicology, mythology, theology etc. In such cases, even when otherwise under-utilised vernacular sources are employed, the socio-historical importance of the entertainment, including discussions of participants, settings, equipment, occasions etc., is consequently often left unsaid. As such, while

the aim of the following is an investigation of all available sources, a particular emphasis has been placed on an in-depth explication of the early saga-literature and legal material.

Source Material for Early Ireland:

Any inquiry into early Irish society involves an extensive examination of the available sources. It is both surprising and advantageous that Ireland's corpus of source material for the pre-Norman period rivals and perhaps surpasses corresponding evidence for later periods such as Gaelic and even post-medieval Ireland. A comprehensive examination into the time period involves an analysis of information provided by the wealth of Ireland's early evidence, most prominently furnished by its art, saga-literature, legal material, and the archaeological record.

The art of early Ireland manifests itself in various forms. The historian benefits most regularly from the detail of carved scenes on high-crosses, secular depictions on votive objects such as bell- and book-shrines, and valuable illustrations in illuminated manuscripts such as *The Book of Kells*. Archaeologically, Ireland is rich in extant evidence spanning from well before and after the limited timeframe of this examination. While Ireland's damp climate limits the survival of many materials, a sizeable proportion of early objects have been recovered in its vast boglands. Similarly, the care and attention given to the excavation of urban sites, and more recently rural lake-settlements, has produced a valuable and important window onto life in early medieval Ireland. Archaeological periods discussed in this work represent four periods. I give the standard and approximate dates here: Bronze Age Ireland, ca.

2500-600 BC; Iron Age Ireland, ca. 600 BC - 400 AD; Early Historic Ireland, ca. 400-800 AD; and Viking Age Ireland, ca. 800-1100 AD.[1]

Beyond the material evidence, Ireland enjoys Europe's largest and best preserved collection of literature of the early medieval period. The value, importance and sheer breadth of the material is repeatedly discussed. The vast opportunities the corpus of literature provides in comparison to the scant treatment it has received is perhaps best summarised by Kim McCone;

> Formidable linguistic difficulties associated with the vast corpus of Old and Middle Irish texts, most of them preserved in manuscripts written in or after the fourteenth century, have tended to restrict the number of scholars working upon this material since the serious revival of interest around the middle of the nineteenth-century. Because the pioneers of the new discipline rightly concentrated their efforts upon improving the linguistic analysis for a proper understanding of the material and upon making texts, translations and synopses available to a wider scholarly audience, broader questions of interpretation were, by and large, postponed until a later and fairly recent stage. Hence the paradox that Europe's most abundantly documented early medieval culture, particularly where vernacular sources are concerned, remains among the least thoroughly researched. Rich seams of information have yet to be tapped... [2]

This said, the surviving literature of early Ireland is a mine-field for anyone seeking historical actuality or fact. The verbosity of the Middle Irish legal commentary is matched only by the embellishment and fancy of the saga literature. Temperance seems the key. The law texts, however verbose, have at their core a pragmatic application to a social structure. Similarly, the saga literature, properly distilled, provides a wealth of practical detail, belying its mythical intent.

While the examination is based on research gathered from all extant sources, the focus of the written material is based on texts written in the vernacular. Latin literature of early Ireland is likewise abundant, though stamped with a more obvious

---

[1] Occasionally I refer to archaeological and artefactual evidence which is 'pre-Christian'. This term is reserved for items which are not conclusively of Bronze or Iron Age provenance.
[2] McCone, Kim (1990) pp 1-2.

and inherent Christian bias. While it is a mistake to categorically associate Latin with the Christian elite and vernacular with the native, the emphasis of this study has been placed on those materials which portray a comprehensive image of society. Vernacular sources, particularly the laws, in part because a significant portion is not yet available in translation, are indeed a surprisingly under-utilised and widely overlooked resource for the historian of early Ireland.

Reflecting the pre-Norman timeframe, the majority of the written material discussed here stems from the Old and Middle Irish periods, roughly the seventh-ninth and tenth-twelfth centuries, respectively. Occasionally I have included examples and quotations from texts outside the stated timeframe. I have limited these assertions to those which provide valuable support for earlier evidence or those which portray an historical continuum in practice, method or manner of an individual entertainment or entertainer.

The saga-literature spans all periods of the Irish language. The majority of the texts is written in Middle Irish, though Old Irish is also well represented and often interspersed within later Middle Irish tales. When reliable translations are available I have provided both text and translation. The saga-literature has been and continues to be explored by manifold research fields. While the material is indeed both generous and informative, the dangers inherent in basing any type of historical conjecture upon narrative and legend need not be mentioned. Of any societal aspect, the realm of entertainment, perhaps rivalled only by that of war, is uniquely susceptible to legendary aggrandisement and exaggeration. I have attempted to judge all references and evidence accordingly.

The legal material, likewise ample, offers firmer ground. Much has been written on the application and efficacy of the early law tracts. The collection of texts,

the majority of which is found in legal manuscripts of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, is generally an amalgam of Old Irish main text with considerable Middle Irish gloss and commentary. An obvious and understandable favouritism is given to the older, ostensibly more pristine Old Irish main text. By contrast, the Middle Irish gloss and commentary receives relative discordant treatment, often indirectly proportional to how much information it wields. Rudolf Thurneysen's capitulation of the later commentary as "*Grübeleien von Stubengelehrten*" is matched only by D.A. Binchy's rather trenchant summation of the material as "...a crazy pattern of rabbinical distinctions, schematic constructions, academic casuistry, and arithmetical calculations, none of which has any value for the student of Irish legal history".[3] Binchy's latter distinction is perhaps an occupational regret rather than a comprehensive criticism. While the legal material is indeed often fettered by the understandings, explanations, and interpretation of later commentators, the commentators were nonetheless privy to texts, a legal traditional and legacy much less removed from the tracts they studied than are we.

Early Welsh law, which enjoys similar breadth in both surviving material and subject matter, has been employed whenever fitting to indicate societal similarities in objects, themes and terminology. The legal material as an entirety offers a wealth and comparatively untapped resource for the historian, one which I hope has been put to effective use in the following examination. Various legal extracts are provided in the discussion to each chapter. With few exceptions, the legal quotations presented here are extracted from and follow the editorial method of D.A. Binchy's six volume *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, henceforth CIH.[4]

---

[3] Binchy, D.A. (1943) p 226.
[4] Editorial method is explained in the Guide to the Appendices, p 314.

The legal material and saga-literature, while not exhaustive, represent the vast majority of written evidence used in this examination. Whenever possible I have used the earliest versions of all texts. Occasionally, as will be seen with terms such as *fidchell*, *cammán*, *ruidles-cluiche* etc., inaccurate and often anachronistic modern translations have created comprehensive misinterpretations in both terminology and subject matter. In several cases I offer suggested translations and interpretations, based on a wider examination of the source material. All divergent renderings of terms or phrases from published editions of the literature and laws have been indicated. As this work is by no means intended as the last word on any or all these topics, each suggestion remains exactly that. As the individual terms and phrases are an important guide to the linguistic and historical development of the subjects, attestations provided in brackets represent the term as found in the stated individual text. Terms used in discussion are primarily represented by their headword in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, henceforth DIL.

Source Material by Chapter:

Research has been divided into seven chapters, each discussing a specific and well attested aspect of early Irish entertainment. As topics are manifold and independent, each chapter represents a unique and necessary blend of the available sources. Several chapters benefit from supporting archaeological and artefactual evidence. Others, while devoid of material backing, are assisted by extensive legal text and commentary. While the source material is indeed vast, it is also repetitive. Several chapters discuss and refer to identical themes, texts, and passages. When duplication is unavoidable I have endeavoured to relate only that information which is necessary and applicable.

The examination of music in early Ireland is largely dependent on archaeological, artefactual and literary evidence. Extant instruments from pre-Christian burials and Viking Age settlements comprise the most valuable physical material, while references from the saga literature and hagiography are ample. The legal material is of moderate assistance, primarily providing names of both instrument and musician, though little detail of manner or method is offered. Ireland's best known instrument, the harp, accounts for the majority of historical mention, though its identification as a 'harp' in the traditional sense is by no means secure. As musical notation was not implemented until well after the Norman invasion, physical evidence for songs and melodies is lacking. Quite obvious and well-supported, however, is the variety in the music of early Ireland, encompassing manifold instruments and an impressive variety in the use of the human voice. While foreign influence and standard progression in music should be taken into account, it is immediately apparent that Ireland's modern reputation for musical propensity and improvisation is indeed securely based.

Modern scholarship investigating music in early Ireland is almost exclusively the work of musicologists. The most prolific and prominent musicologist in this regard is Ann Buckley, who has written and researched extensively on the identification of the *timpán*, an early stringed instrument. Her extensive utilisation of the early literature and laws is a rare and fruitful exercise. While valuable and advantageous, her work and others like it is most often a discussion of the evolution of instruments and voices in mapping predecessors of modern Irish music. As such, the role of music and musicians in early Irish society is unfortunately seldom discussed.

Evidence for boardgames and gaming in early Ireland is again found in various types of the source material. The preponderance of archaeological evidence derives from the well tapped pre-Christian and Viking Age excavations. These two epochs should not be understood as especially representative of gaming, only particularly well-examined archaeologically. Beyond settlement and stratum-dating, pre-Roman number arrangements on dice indicate a particularly early existence of various, though unidentified, games of chance. The Norse invaders brought with them a well-evidenced penchant for boardgames. Boards, game-pieces and counters found in Viking Age settlements correspond to analogous objects found throughout the Viking world. The early literature is an abundant source of detail on boardgames and gaming. Often described as the particular pursuit of heroes and kings, valuable practical evidence is extracted from otherwise exaggerated and mythical narrative. The legal material likewise provides important and practical explanations of participants, physical materials, primarily in reference to the value and legal stipulations of individual objects.

Evidence for field-sports in the early source material is limited to the literature and laws. While references to playing-sticks, balls and other equipment are common in the written material no extant and identified archaeological or artefactual evidence has yet been found. The examination of early field-sports in Ireland is made particularly difficult by the extent to which nineteenth and twentieth century 'Gaelic' sports became increasingly popular. The modern hurley has been a prevailing political symbol in Ireland for nearly two centuries. The revival of the Tailteann games in the early part of the last century was a direct reaction to the political upheaval and subsequent simmering of native sentiment. The Gaelic Athletic Association has made a concerted and rather successful effort in affording ancient status to the modern game

of hurling. Modern scholarship has shown a similar predisposition through a similar dearth of evidence. 'Nativism' is perhaps at fault, though equally likely is a reliance upon faulty translations and inaccurate renderings of otherwise well-attested terms. The preponderance of references in the written sources consists simply of terms, names and, in the case of the legal material, allusions to injuries. While it is unfortunate that many details of the early field-games of Ireland remain uncertain, it is doubtless because they are not essential to the literature in which they are found. A modern novel is equally unlikely to cover pitch specifications or the offsides rule in a passive reference to football. What is gained from an examination of the sources, however, is a satisfactory register of equipment, participants and settings for the various pursuits.

As is expected, the most extensive evidence concerning entertainers is afforded by the saga-literature and legal material. As the entertainers are most often treated as professionals, the laws provide occasional discussions of payment, honour-price and status. As many of the entertainers described in the laws and literature represent society's more wayward individuals, the written evidence often reveals an evident Christian disapproval and bias. The majority of the entertainers mentioned in the sources represent traditional and common medieval figures. Several, as is the case with the *monach* and *creccaire*, however, appear to have faded quite early within the historic period, perhaps a direct result of Christian censure. As such, Middle Irish legal commentators are often as much at odds with their descriptions as modern translators, offering what are at best etymological glosses and vague guesses. In many cases external evidence and linguistic attestations allow reasonable assumptions as to both entertainment and entertainer.

Evidence for horse and chariot racing spans the breadth of the available evidence, both written and material. The archaeological record provides ample artefacts and objects doubtless belonging to equine equipment and tack. Unfortunately, as is often the case with boardgames and gaming pieces, the label of 'horse-trapping' is often employed when an item is otherwise in doubt. Equally difficult in a survey of the archaeological evidence is the broad and necessarily pragmatic application of the horse in early Irish society. Remarkably, though rather fortunately, hints given in the literature regarding bridles and their decoration are substantiated in extant finds. Contemporary depictions of seated riders are also valuable in determining equipment and relative sizes of horses, though artistic impressions must be regarded with considerable scrutiny. Written evidence for horse and chariot racing is abundant. Racing seems to have been both popular and widespread throughout the historic period, and likely well before. The saga-literature represents racing in both highly mythical and more factual accounts. Both the literature and the legal material represent racing as the spectacle of fairs and festivals. The laws provide valuable commentary on participants, injuries and settings for the races, again almost exclusively in reference to fairs.

Evidence for fairs and festivals, much like that of professional entertainers, is limited to the literature and legal material. Beyond frequent descriptions in saga-texts and the laws, annalistic entries provide useful assistance in determining when, where and why fairs and other assemblies took place. The contemporary political importance of fairs and festivals to a large degree represents the grounds for their frequent mention in the early sources. Communal assemblies, as today, were an integral part of early society. Feasts and fairs, such as those at Tara and Tailtiu, are perhaps the most authoritative representatives of how and why the vast majority of early Irish society

celebrated, sported and entertained. Equally important were the political, economical and pragmatic factors of such occasions, best evidenced by references to inauguration ceremonies, marriage-rites, legislation and domestic trade. The entertainment provided at the fairs and festivals was clearly central. The literature and legal material contain considerable commentary on the amusement at gatherings. Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poems provide the most detailed information. While not as extensive, the laws furnish valuable logistics on subjects including proper arenas, time of year, personal raiment and injuries sustained during the festivities. Interestingly, while the saga-literature is characteristically verbose, its descriptions of early fairs and festivals are noticeably devoid of exaggeration and embellishment.

The majority of references to children's entertainments is provided by the legal material. As children were generally considered possessions of the parents or kin-group, the laws are proportionately silent on their general legal status and interests. Surprisingly, however, several texts discuss various elements of children's sports and games, principally in consideration of potential injury or damage to equipment or property. The abundance of texts concerning injuries is an unequivocal indication as to the prominence of sports among children and adolescents. The most detailed source in this respect is the law-tract *Mellbretha*, often translated 'sports judgements'. This tract, a list of games and activities classified by relevant age and potential injury is invaluable to an understanding of early Ireland's sporting pursuits. As the names of several games are characteristically contrived by rhyme, alliteration and content, many individual activities remain uncertain. Reasonable guesses, however, are possible through an examination of linguistic terminology and legal classification.

It is my intention that the following examination of entertainment, sport, amusement and celebration provides an effectual window onto the society of early Ireland. It is further my hope that a better understanding of the subject will foster subsequent exploration of Ireland's early literature, particularly the legal material, of which so much is yet to be examined and discussed.

To borrow once again from Plato, the words which inspired my initial interest in the historical role of entertainment and sport:

> You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of discourse.
> Plato, *The Republic*.

Chapter 1 Music and Musical Instruments

1. Music:

> It is only in the case of musical instruments that I find any commendable diligence in the people. They seem to me to be incomparably more skilled in these than any other people that I have seen...They glide so subtly from one mode to another, and the grace notes so freely sport with such abandon and bewitching charm around the steady tone of the heavier sound, that the perfection of their art seems to lie in their concealing it, as if 'it were the better for being hidden. An art revealed brings shame'.[1]
>
> - Giraldus Cambrensis.

What continues to be admired today as a native aptitude and gift, Ireland's reputation for musical achievement was noted by foreigners as early as Giraldus Cambrensis. Admiring little else in the population of Ireland, Giraldus extols the range and talent of Irish musicians, commenting specifically on their distinct melodies, harmonies, composition and comparing their skill to that of their British, i.e., Welsh and Scottish counterparts:

> The movement is not, as in the British instrument to which we are accustomed, slow and easy, but rather quick and lively, while at the same time the melody is sweet and pleasant. It is remarkable how, in spite of the great speed of the fingers, the musical proportion is maintained. The melody is kept perfect and full with unimpaired art through everything - through quivering measures and the involved use of several instruments - with a rapidity that charms, a rhythmic pattern that is varied, and a concord achieved through elements discordant. They harmonise at intervals of the octave and the fifth, but they always begin with B flat and with B flat end, so that everything may be rounded with the sweetness of charming sonority...One should note that both Scotland and Wales, the former because of her affinity and intercourse, the latter as it were by grafting, try to imitate Ireland in music and strive in emulation.[2]

---

[1] Translation by O'Meara, John J. (1962) pp 103-4. For the Latin text, see Dimock, James (1867) pp 153-4.

[2] *Ibid.*

The most common term for musical entertainment in early Ireland is *airfitiud.* The word is a compound of the preposition *ar-*, 'before' or 'in front of', and the verb *séitid*, 'to blow' or 'blow out'. Combined with the agentive suffix *-ach*, the term *airfitech* describes the common musician or minstrel. The etymology of the term suggests that wind instruments, or in fact mere humming or whistling, were principal among early musical entertainment. As will be discussed, extant musical instruments have been shown to emit louder, clearer and more precise tones when played to produce a drone or hum, rather than the standard technique of producing individual aspirated notes. Indeed, the existence of manifold terms for droning and humming sounds, coupled with the etymology of *airfitiud*, suggests musical instruments may have been played in such a manner. Additionally, a curious abundance of terms in the early literature attest to the popularity of formal humming or lilting, a recognised feature of Irish music which survives to the modern day.

While the sources of early Ireland present a wealth of musical terms and descriptions, few are explicit. Ann Buckley, discussing the problems arising from such ambiguities, writes:

> ...similar terms are used over and over again to describe the sound of instruments, of singing, and chanting, as well as those less-than-intentional sounds produced by non-human nature (i.e., animals, the elements), often, it seems, with keener awareness of aural than of visual experience...The problem for historical enquiry is the non-specificity of these terms, their cognitive codes now out of our reach. References are descriptive rather than analytical...their primary function being to counterpoint other matters...Thus we have a variety of accounts of the ubiquity and importance of music, particularly in secular and ecclesiastical institutions; but detailed information on repertoires, methods of instruction, etc. is simply not preserved, and was probably never recorded.[3]

This said, styles, voices and melodies may still be defined more closely by the frequency and context in which the terms are found.

---

[3] Buckley, Anne (1995) p 15.

1.1. Vocal Types:

Dord, and its apparent antonym *andord*, describes not only the humming, buzzing and chirping of animals and birds, but also various voices and strains in music.[4] Primarily described as a low-voiced humming or drone, *dord* is also found in the well-attested phrase *dord Fíansa*, denoting some type of noise typical of the Fíana. The sound is described in various ways, from a sleep-sound to a chant accompanied by the clashing of spears to a sound made with pursed lips.[5] *Dord* is also frequently used for the bellowing of a bull or stag, a possible explanation for its association with the Fíana. In later language the term is used to describe the sound made by phantoms, again perhaps owing to the reputation of the *fíana* warbands. In the late-Middle Irish *Battle of Allen* a *fían* warrior raises his spear, said to emit a noise "...piteous on high." The assembled company weep and wail at the piteousness of the music.[6]

The term *andord* is used more frequently to describe the voice or timbre of a singer. In the Middle Irish *Loinges mac n-Uislenn* the hero Noisiu profits his entire province with the sound of his singing, described as *andord*:

> *Ba bind im*mmurgu *a n-andord mac n-Usnig. Cech bó ocus cech míl ro-chluined , no-mbligtis dā trian blechta d'immarcraid ūadib. Cech duine rod-chluined, ba lór síthchaire ocus airfitiud dóib. Ba maith a ngaisced da*no.
>
> Melodious, however, was the *andord* of the Sons of Uisliu. Each cow and each animal that heard [it], two thirds of surplus milk always was milked from them. Each person who heard it always had a sufficient peaceful disposition and musical entertainment. Good also were their arms.[7]

Later in the same tale *andord* is used to describe the pleasing voice of the character Aindle, in contrast to his brother's deeper timbre, described as *coblach*.[8] If indeed an

---

[4] *Cf.* Welsh *dwrdd, godwrdd*, 'clamour, din, noise'.
[5] The various references are summarised at Murphy, Gerard (1953) p 256. See also DIL D-357.12-40.
[6] O'Riain, Padraig (1978) p 12, §18.

antonym to *dord*, often a low and deep humming, *andord* is conceivably a higher pitch, perhaps tenor.[9] In the Middle Irish *Esnada Tige Buchet*, *andord* is used for the music of fifty golden-haired maidens.[10] The term is listed between the terms *sían*, a high-pitched humming or whistling, and *esnad*, a roaring or loud humming. Its position presumably denotes a compromise between the two, for which 'tenor' seems apposite.

Cronán, a further term for humming, is likely the root of the Modern English 'croon'. It is used throughout the early literature for musical humming, the purring of animals, and occasionally as a given name, most notably of two abbots within the ninth-century *Félire Oengusso*.[11] The sound is defined in the Middle Irish extended version of *Auraicept na n-Eces* as "...the small music, i.e. *cronán* or the little humming sound."[12] In the Middle Irish preface to *Amra Choluimb Cille* an explication of the term *aidbsiu*, 'reciting', maintains that *cronán* was a particularly popular and native skill, one which effected pangs of pride for the exiled Colum Cille;

> '*aidbsi*' *da*no *ainm in chíuil* nó *in chronáin dognitis irmor fer nErenn intan sin cid hed do s-corad immalle*, *7* con*id triasin ceol sin ro gab miad men*m*an Colum Cille*.
>
> *Aidbse* then, is the name of the music or the murmur (*chronáin*) which most of the men of Ireland used to make at that time, whatever was set to them together; and through this music pride of mind seized Colum Cille.[13]

That *cronán* was indeed performed as an entertainment is indicated by the law tract *Uraicecht Becc*. In a list of entertainers expected at an assembly, the 'men of music'

---

[7] Hull, Vernam (1949) p 45; transl. p 63. Hull tentatively translates *andord* 'tenor'.
[8] *Ibid.*, p 49; transl. p 67.
[9] The *an-* in the term *andord* is likely the standard negative prefix. See GOI, §§ 869ff.
[10] Stokes, Whitley (1904b) pp 31-3. Fair hair is a common description among musicians and minstrels. This is discussed below.
[11] For the purring or bellowing of animals, see Carney, James (1967) pp 67-8; Stokes, Whitley (1904a) pp 234-5, §241; O'Keeffe, J.G. (1913) pp 58-9; for the use of Crónán as a name, see *e.g.* Stokes, Whitley (1862) pp 141, 232. Crónán was also the name of the patron saint of Roscrea.
[12] Calder, George (1917) pp 114-5.

(*aes ciuil*) are glossed '*cronanaig*'.[14] The humming's specific pitch may also be indicated by an early legal passage. In an extensive list of questions and answers the law tract *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* lists *cronánacht* and *fétanacht*, 'piping', as examples of nurturing voices (*guth alta*).[15]

As seen in *Esnada Tige Buchet*, a further musical humming is indicated by the term *sían*. This music, apparently higher, shriller and more akin to whistling, is once again used to describe both sound and voice. Its higher pitch is borne out by the various sounds it is used to describe, including the whirring or whistling of the wind and of flying objects, a plaintive cry, the shrieking or screaming of Otherworld creatures, and the flutter of angels' wings.[16] In Derdriu's lament in *Loinges mac n-Uislenn*, the *sían* sung by the exiled Sons of Uisliu is deemed more melodious than the music of the pipers and hornblowers brought to her by the king.[17] In the *Táin*, the *sían caurad*, 'warrior's cry', is listed as one of Cú Chulainn's various feats and skills.[18] A similar martial theme is found in the *Félire Óengusso* where *gloraigh*, a loud or boisterous noise, is explained as 'the *sían* of the spears or of the boys' (*sían nagaithi no namacraighi*).[19] Again, the reference to the shouts of boys and the acute cracks and rings of spears implies high-pitched noises.

Esnad, the third of the three 'hummings' sung in Buchet's house, is well-attested in the early literature, often simply glossed *céol*, 'music', or *amhran*, 'song'. The term is frequently used to denote louder, more repetitive sounds in the natural

---

[13] Stokes, Whitley (1899) pp 182-3. The text is taken from the Middle Irish preface and redaction of the sixth-century original. For a discussion, see Herbert, Máire (1989) pp 67-75.
[14] CIH 2281.30.
[15] CIH 1127.2, 1127.17-8. See also Gwynn, E.J. (1942) p 36. I understand *alta* as participle of the verb *ailid*, 'to nurture, foster'.
[16] For examples, see DIL, S-207.52-208.42. *Sían* is also used in the legal material to describe the 'melodious *sían*'' (*bindide sian*), denoting the cow who is allowed to have her calf with her. See CIH 1605.8.
[17] Hull, Vernam (1949) p 49, transl. p 67.
[18] *Táin* LU, l. 1717.
[19] Stokes, Whitley (1862) p 137.

world, such as the roar of the wind or the rush of waterfalls.[20] Interestingly, the term is found in several Old and Middle Irish glossaries. The entry for *esnad* in the Middle Irish *O'Mulconry's Glossary* states that *esnad* is not in fact a poetical composition, but rather a song or melody (*ni nath acht is duchann*).[21] A similar though extended entry in the Old Irish *Sanais Cormac* describes *esnad* as the name of the music performed by the *fiana* around their cooking-fires.[22] This may be compared to the *dord Fíansa*, discussed above. The entry for *esna* in an unnamed Middle Irish glossary defines it simply as 'a sound or music' (*esna .i. fogar uel ceol*).[23] A final entry, from the Middle Irish *O'Davoren's Glossary*, relates that *esnad* is a type of song which is sung by everyone.[24] This entry, as well as that found in *Sanas Cormaic*, confirms the music's apparent loud and boisterous nature.

A final vocal variation in music of the period is described by the term *coblach*, previously seen in the passage from *Loinges mac n-Uislenn*. The sense of the term suggests deep, resonant or rich sounds. *Coblach* is used in a particularly evocative episode in the *Táin* to describe the deep timbre of Cú Chulainn's voice on his way to battle.[25] The description is presumably fashioned to match the thunderous din and clamour of his horses and chariot. Elsewhere in the *Táin* the music of horns is described as richer (*coblach*) when heard in numbers.[26] *Coblach* is also used in a lengthy gloss within *Amra Coluim Cille*, comparing a church without an abbot to a

---

[20] See *e.g.*, Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 8, pp 42-3; Carney, James (1967) pp 67-8; Stokes, Whitley (1862) p 81.
[21] Stokes, Whitley (1900a) p 255, §431. The glossator presumably understands *esnad* as a compound of '*nath*'.
[22] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 46, §562.
[23] CIH 1553.12. A discussion of the glossary is found at Russell, Paul (1988) p 7.
[24] Stokes, Whitley (1862) p 81.
[25] *Táin*, LL l. 2855; transl. p 217. Compare this to his skill at the '*sían curaud*', discussed above.
[26] *Ibid.*, l. 2039; transl. p 195.

crott without a bass string. The gloss further declares that the *céis*, described as the 'bass strings', are also known as *coblaigib*, or 'deep strings'.[27]

1.2. Minstrels and Minstrelsy:

As previously discussed, *airfitech* is the most common term used for the artist involved in vocal and instrumental performances. Most often translated 'minstrel', the *airfitech* is a regular feature of the saga literature, though much less well-attested in the legal material. This absence seems less to do with the *airfitech*'s dearth in society than with the fact that minstrels and musicians were not an essential part society's economic structure. Although often described as being paid for their service, they do not seem to have possessed land, were often itinerant and, apart from the *cruitire*, quite clearly derived their legal status from whomever they accompanied.[28] As early Irish law focussed mainly on land and possession-based contingencies of society, entertainers and entertainment in general did not factor highly. It seems reasonable and in fact probable that amateur performers were also quite common, making the general class of professional musicians and minstrels relatively small. This may have necessitated a migratory existence, necessarily cancelling out any potential legal status.

In the legal material the *airfitech* is most commonly mentioned in commentary, primarily concerning stipulations as to his professional status. He is included in the extensive list of professional entertainers found in the law tract *Uraicecht Becc*.[29] Further testimony to the professional nature of *airfitiud* is found in commentary to the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*, regarding the rights of the

---

[27] Stokes, Whitley (1899) p 164.

[28] The status and honour-price of individual musicians, when specified, is discussed in each musician's appropriate section, below. '*Cruitire*' denotes the player of the *crott*, an instrument often translated as, but not necessarily equivalent to a standard harp. This is discussed in section 3.2, below.

mentally incompetent. The passage declares that the penalty for failing to provide maintenance for the *mer*, most often referring to a female mental incompetent, is greater than that of the *drúth* as the *mer* does not have minstrelsy and does not possess land (*ar ni hairfidigh in mer 7 ni bi ferann aici*).[30]

Support for the professional and itinerant nature of the *airfitech* found in the saga literature. In the late-Middle Irish *Acallamh na Senorach*, the king at Tara declares his satisfaction from the performances of several minstrels by announcing that he will provide them with 'half-due'. This payment is to accompany the full compensation they would already receive from Finn, with whom they were travelling.[31] Similarly, in rhetorical praise of a king's generous nature, a *dindsenchas* poem asks, "...whither are gone his riches?". The reply declares that his wealth is spent on ale and minstrelsy (*airfitiud*).[32]

The *airfitech* is frequently listed alongside the *aes cíuil*, or 'men of music'.[33] The distinction between the *airfitech* and the *aes cíuil* seems to rest in the *airfitech*'s versatility. He is described in various pursuits including the playing musical instruments, singing, reciting, and story-telling. Not surprisingly, the most common setting for the *airfitech* in the early literature is the banquet or feast, particularly those associated with festivals or assemblies. Several minstrels of various skill are often described at the same event. In a passage from the *Acallamh*, slightly earlier than the example seen above, Finn's favoured minstrels (*airfitig*) at the Feast of Tara include a reciter of old-tales (*senscélaide*) and a *timpán*-player.[34]

---

[29] CIH 2281.30. See chapter 2, section 1.
[30] CIH 372.34. This passage is discussed in detail in chapter 2, sections 2.1-2.
[31] Stokes, Whitley (1900c) p 145, ll 5299-5301.
[32] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol 11, pp 370-1.
[33] The *aes cíuil* are widely attested in the early literature and legal material. Their descriptions are largely conventional and need not be discussed in detail here.
[34] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 202; transl. p 229. The *timpán* is discussed in section 3.3, below.

The Old Irish *Tecosca Cormaic*, a text concerned with the proper behaviour of warriors and kings, declares, perhaps rather optimistically, that every king should be an *airfitech* of a gathering and an assembly.[35] While this statement is doubtless metaphor, the *airfitech* is indeed commonly associated with kings. In the *Táin*, Conchobor and his household are said to spend one third of the day relaxing while minstrels (*airfitid*) and musicians (*áes cíuil*) lull them to sleep.[36] Similarly, in the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* a bed is prepared for the king so that musicians *(aes cíuil*) and minstrels (*airfitig*) may entertain him from noon until night.[37] In *Loinges mac n-Uislenn* the king's minstrels (*airfiti*) are brought to Derdriu in an unsuccessful attempt at alleviating her lovesickness.[38]

Minstrelsy is also often associated with the Otherworld. The Tuatha Dé Danann are well known for their musical abilities, best described in a passage from the Middle Irish "First Battle of Moytura";

> *Do hindised immorro d'Fheraib Bolg in dam sin do thorachtain a nErind. Isi sin dam is sochraide 7 is aille, is ferr delb 7 errad 7 ededh, ciuil 7 airfided, indtlais menman 7 aigenta tainig a nErinn riamh. Isi sin dam is mo grain 7 gaisced, egla 7 adfuath ar cach, uair do derscnaigedur Tuatha Dé Danann do feraib in betha indigaind cacha eladna.*
>
> Now it was reported to the Fir Bolg that that company [the Tuatha Dé Danann] had arrived in Ireland. That was the most handsome and delightful company, the fairest of form, the most distinguished in their equipment and apparel, and their skill in music and playing, the most gifted in mind and temperament that ever came to Ireland…for the Tuatha Dé Danann excelled all peoples of the world in their proficiency in every art.[39]

In the *Acallamh,* Finn's finest minstrel (*ténairfítech*) is described as four fists in height. He is described as so well skilled the fellow musicians of the Tuatha Dé

---

[35] Meyer, Kuno (1909) pp 14-5, §39.
[36] *Táin*, LL l. 746; transl. p 158. O'Rahilly offers reverse translations for the two terms.
[37] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) pp 106-7.
[38] Hull, Vernam (1949) p 48; transl. p 66.
[39] Fraser, J.P. (1916) pp 20-1.

Danann grow jealous of him, ultimately causing his death.[40] Elsewhere in the *Acallamh*, Fethnaid, daughter of Fidach, is named as the 'she-minstrel' (*banairfitech*) of the Tuatha Dé Danann.[41] In the *Táin*, a mysterious group of *cruitire* arrive at Ess Ruaid to perform their minstrelsy (*airfitiud*) for Ailill and Medb. Suspected of being spies for the Ulstermen, the musicians are followed to the pillar-stones at Lía Mór. Arriving at the stones, they transform themselves into deer, being in actuality druids with 'great occult knowledge'.[42]

Similar reactions to pagan associations are found in several texts in the early literature. One such example, found in the *Acallamh*, depicts Patrick's firm yet surprisingly tolerant verdict on the appropriateness of minstrelsy. After listening to the music and story-telling of a local performer, Patrick is asked "...if there be music in Heaven, why should there not on earth?" Patrick's rather diplomatic answer asserts, "...neither say I any such thing, but merely inculcate that we must not be inordinately addicted to it."[43]

A final theme and characteristic of the early musician and minstrel as represented in the early literature is his appearance. As seen in passages concerning the musicians and minstrels of the Tuatha Dé Danann, physical appearance appears to have been an important aspect of an artist's performance. Descriptions of both physical stature and attire often accompany portrayals of various performers, as seen with various professional entertainers such as the *crosán* and *drúth*.[44] Two scenes in the *Acallamh* describe minstrels whose appearance is part of their overall reputation. In the first scene, Cascorach, minstrel (*airfidech*) of the Tuatha Dé Danann, is praised for his good looks. Responding to such praise, Cailte, the minstrel's master, replies

---

[40] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 107; transl. p 115.
[41] *Ibid.*, p 198; transl. p 224.
[42] *Táin*, LU ll 941-5; transl. p 151: *Táin* LL, ll 1267-71; transl. p 173.
[43] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 170; transl. p 191.

that as good as his looks may be, his minstrelsy (*airfided*) is indeed better.[45] Earlier in the tale, in Patrick's judgement of musical entertainment, Cnú Dheireoil, a diminutive *timpán*-player, is described with "...long light-yellow hair down to his loins".(*folt fada fionnbuide co clár a dhá les fair*).[46]

1.3. Music Strains:

Unfortunately, musical notation in Ireland does not appear until well after the Norman invasion. While it is impossible to propose individual songs and melodies of the period, three strains of music are mentioned frequently in the early literature. Each strain is identified by the effect it is has on its audience, i.e. *golltraige*, 'weeping-strain', *gentraige*, 'laughing-strain' and *súantraige*, 'sleeping-strain'. The three are most commonly associated with the music of stringed instruments and are listed in the *Triads* as the skills which qualify a *cruitire* (*tréde neimthigedar cruitire*).[47]

Sanais Cormac contains entries for *goltraige* and *gentraige*, though not for *suantraige*. Interestingly, the entry for *gentraige* is individually glossed 'three things which cause laughing' (*treidi imefuilnge gen*).[48] In this case *treidi*, 'three things', is presumably offered as an etymological gloss, or perhaps simply a confusion of the compound element *-treide*, 'accomplishment'. Alternatively, it is perhaps the result of a misunderstanding of the wording of the triad. The entry for *golltraige* is defined as 'the melodious strain which causes weeping' (*adhband trirech imefuilnge gol*).[49]

Sleep-inducing music is a common element in the saga literature and early hagiography, a product of various objects including musical instruments, birds,

---

[44] See chapter 2, sections 2.1, 2.7.
[45] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 227; transl. p 258.
[46] *Ibid.*, p 107, transl. p 116.
[47] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 17, §122. The triad also appears in commentary to the Old Irish text *Félire Oengusso*. This is discussed in section 3.1, below.
[48] O'Donovan, John (1868) p 90.

angels, mermaids, and trees.[50] Kings represent the most regular victims of sleep-music. In the *Táin* Conchobor is said to spend the last third of his day being entertained by musicians (*aes cíuil*) and minstrels (*airfitig*), who in turn lull him to sleep.[51] In *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* a downy quilt is prepared each day for a king whose musicians and players entertain him throughout the afternoon and evening with sleep-music.[52]

References to the three strains are most commonly found in descriptions of feasts and banquets. Stringed instruments, particularly the *timpán* and *crott*, as portrayed in the triad, are the most common agents of the respective strains. The tenth-century *Esnada Tige Buchet* mentions several lays by various members of the household, one of which is the 'song of fifty *cruit*', described as a sleep-strain, 'with its soothing'.[53] A Middle Irish poem from the *Duanaire Finn* names the three strings of the Dagdae's 'harp' according to the three strains of music they produce:

Anmanna na ttéd nar ṫrom, gentaṙgless golltaṙgless oll
súantaṙgles in gles oile, fa a ndendír cáċ cíaṁaire
Da seinnti in golltaṙgless grinn, do ríogaiḃ in beṫa binn
gaċ a ccluinfeḋ gan dóġra, do beiṫdír fo biotḋógra
Día réinnte in gentaṙgless glan, do ríoġaib troma in talṁan
gaċ ccluinfeḋ gan táire, do beittír ag síoṙġáire
Dia seinntiin súantargles slán, do ríoġaiḃ in ḃeaṫa báin
gaċ a ccluinfeḋ mor in moḋ, do ḃeittír na síorcodlaḋ.

The names of the strings that were not heavy, Geantarghléas, great Goltarghléas, Suantarghléas the third fitting, whereat all made mournfulness.

If the deft *goltarghléas* were played for the kings of the melodious world, all that might hear, though sorrowless, would feel a lasting sorrow.

If the clear *geantarghléas* were played for the grave kings of the earth,

---

[49] *Ibid.*, p 89. Translation by Stokes. O'Donovan suggests "the yearning strain which causes weeping".
[50] See *e.g.*, O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 349; Gray, Elizabeth (1982) §184; Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 489; (1894) pp 433-4. See also, Plummer, Charles (1910) clxxii, fn 10.
[51] *Táin* LL, l. 746; transl. p 158.
[52] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) pp 106-7.
[53] Greene, David (1955) l. 553.

all that might hear without contempt would be for ever laughing.

If the full *suantarghléas* were played for the kings of the bright world,
all that might hear (a wondrous way) would fall into a lasting sleep.[54]

Interestingly, the three strains also occur in the Middle Irish *Táin Bó Fraích* as the names for the sons of Boand and Uaithne, the *cruitire* of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Each son receives his name corresponding to the travail of his mother's labour. The first, Goltraiges, is named after the weeping and sorrow from the pain of a difficult delivery. The second, Gentraiges, is named for the laughter and joy at the arrival of a second son. The third, Súantraiges, receives his name for his mother's weariness and exhaustion after three births. When she awakes from her exhaustion Boand offers the sons to their father, proclaiming that they will make music to ease women and cattle in labour. In contrast, men who hear their music will die.[55]

As expected, descriptions of the three strains in the saga literature frequently portray exaggerated responses. The sleep-strain played on the Dagdae's harp in the poem from the *Duanaire Finn* induces its audience into a sleep which lasts throughout the evening, night and well into the next day.[56] This is echoed in a scene from the Middle Irish "Second Battle of Moytura" where a sleep-strain entrances an assembly for a night and a day.[57] The 'weeping-strain' described in *Táin Bó Fraích* is said to cause the death of twelve men, from 'weeping and sadness'.[58] Later in the tale, thirty men meet the same fate at the hands of horn-players.[59] In the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Mucrama* the laughing-strain is said to have inspired such laughter from members of

[54] MacNeill, Eoin (1908) pp 43-4; transl. p 147.
[55] Meid, Wolfgang (1967) §10. For translation, see Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1937) pp 4-5.
[56] MacNeill, Eoin (1908) pp 43-4; transl. p 147.
[57] Stokes, Whitley (1891) p 81, §73.
[58] Meid, Wolfgang (1967) §9. For translation, see Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1937) p 4.
[59] *Ibid.*, §20. Translation, p 8.

the audience that their lungs were nearly seen.[60] Such heightened responses often involve tricks and ruses upon unwitting victims. A separate passage from "The Second Battle of Moytura" describes the narrow escape of three champions of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Lugh, the Dagdae and Ogma from the Fomorians. The three had followed the Fomorians to their banqueting house to recover Uaithne, the Dagdae's harp.[61] After killing nine men with a harp taken from the wall, the Dagdae proceeds to play each of the three strains. His performance ends with *súantraige*, lulling everyone to sleep and allowing himself and his companions to make a bloodless escape.[62] In the Middle Irish *Orgain Denne Ríg* the *cruitire* Craiftine is asked to play the three strains to encourage the mute Labraid Loingsech to speak.[63] A slightly different account of the same story relates that the king's daughter asks Craiftine to play the sleeping-strain (*súantraighe*) outside her bedroom door so that her lover, again Labraid Loingsech, could sneak past her vigilant mother.[64] In a later tale Cú Chulainn is enchanted into releasing a musician he had decided to keep because of his skilful music. When the musician realises his plight, he plays 'sleep-music' upon his *timpán*, by which Cú Chulainn is lulled into a deep slumber, sleeping "from one hour to the other."[65]

---

[60] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) pp 40-1, §8; Stokes, Whitley (1892) p 439.
[61] As seen, Uaithne is elsewhere described as a *cruitire* of the Tuatha Dé Danann. The term *uaithne* has several different meanings, including childbirth. See DIL, U-20.26-21.58. By the Early Modern Irish period the term is used in poetry to describe metrical consonance. See Murphy, Gerard (1961) p 33.
[62] Stokes, Whitley (1891a) p 109.
[63] Greene, David (1955) pp 20-1. Labraid Loingsech is the legendary ancestor of the kings of Leinster. He is credited with having brought the Laigin to Ireland from Gaul.
[64] Stokes, Whitley (1901) p 11, §13.
[65] Meyer, Kuno (1883-5b) p 184. Meyer translates *timpán*, 'harp'.

2. Wind Instruments:

2.1 *Cuisle*:

Comparatively little is known of the musical instrument *cuisle*, 'pipe'. *Cuisle* is used in Old and Middle Irish to describe various objects. Apart from the musical instrument the term is used for a tube, stem or stalk, a vein, artery, or pulse. The etymology of *cuisle* is uncertain, though a likely derivation is the Latin *pulsus*, 'pulse' or 'vein'. The consistency in meanings of 'vein' and 'pulse' support such an origin, though the derivation assumes both the initial change from *p-* to *c-*, as well as metathesis.[66] In Modern Irish *cuisle* survives describing an artery, vein, or pulse, and, by extension, the forearm or wrist.



Illustration 1

Cuisle is frequently translated 'bagpipe'. Bagpipes admit air through several means. One method is achieved by holding the airbag at the waist and using the wrist or forearm for depression. The *uilleann* pipes of modern Ireland are so named as the airbag is held between the ribs and elbow (*uillinn*). It has been suggested that *cuisle* received its name accordingly, i.e. by depressing the airbag with the forearm, or '*cuisle*'. This is unlikely as *cuisle* is not attested in the sense of forearm or wrist until a later period. While the *cuisle* was clearly a wind instrument, played by forcing air through a tube, there is no evidence to determine whether or not the instrument should be understood as a straight pipe, a bagpipe or both.

[66] Vendryes, Joseph, *et al.* (1959-) C, pp 279-80.

A chief material of the instrument seems to have been wood. Unlike other instruments such as the harp or horn, embellished descriptions of the *cuisle* are not found. The instrument was likely a simple one, crafted from hardened reeds, shoots or thin branches. Two holed-flutes of elderwood have been excavated in Dublin, belonging to early thirteenth-century contexts.[67] The entry for *cuisle* in the Middle Irish *Lecan Glossary* refers to the instrument as the 'musical tree' (*cuisle .i. crann ciuil*).[68] The *crann ciuil* appears elsewhere as a gloss on stringed instruments and presumably denotes any musical instrument of wood.

More significantly in relation to wood, *crann* also survives as a technical term in piping. The term, now 'cran' or 'cranning', is the only native Irish term to have survived into modern piping. It is suggested the scarcity of Irish terms extant in piping is due to its survival in these islands in more urban areas, where English was more widely used. The term is used in Modern English to denote a rhythmic pattern played on the lowest and second lowest notes of two particular chanters.[69] 'Cran' in this sense seems to derive ultimately from *cranngal*, a term well-attested for a wooden shaft or handle. Musically, the term may in fact be a compound of *crann* 'wood' and *gal* 'fury' or 'valour'.[70]

Further evidence for wood as a material for pipes is found in a tenth-century tale concerning Mac Díochoeme;

> *Luid immorro* [*Mac*] *Diochoeme cosna flescaibh iar dain co ndergenai cuislind ndegabail dib...Ba cuislenn tra ratha romoir in cuisli sea.*
>
> Mac Díchoeme ging aber später zu den Ruten und machte aus ihnen eine zweigegabelte Flöte (eine Doppelflöte)...Diese Flöte war eben eine

[67] Buckley, Ann (1988) pp 148, 151.
[68] CIH 948.15. For a discussion of the *Glossary*, see Russell, Paul (1988) p 7.
[69] Donnelly, Séan (1988) p 132.
[70] *Ibid.*, p 139. Donnelly suggests that originally *gal* indicated noise as well as action. I have not found evidence to confirm this. For a discussion of *gal*, see Dillon, Myles (1970) pp 567-9.

Flöte von sehr grosser Gnade.[71]

While wood was doubtless the most common material, others such as bone, horn and metal are likely. *Tinne*, a term for a musical instrument played by the piper (*cuislennach*), is twice attested in the early sources.[72] The standard definition of *tinne* is a rod or bar of metal. The musical instrument referred to is perhaps an extension of this meaning, denoting a pipe of metal rather than wood. The term is also found in a *dindsenchas* poem as a musician's proper name (Fer Tuinne).[73]

Pipes, flutes and whistles crafted of bone are frequently found in excavations of medieval and late-medieval Britain. Such instruments are occasionally found in Irish excavations, mainly in Viking contexts, and for the most part represent pipes created from the bones of birds and fowl.[74] A crude whistle of sheep bone was found in Dublin excavations, dating to the late-twelfth century.[75] Several birdbone whistles have also been found in Dublin, belonging to thirteenth-century layers.[76] A whistle and a three-holed pipe were excavated in Waterford, both of bird bone and belonging to a late-eleventh to early-twelfth century context.[77]

Several accounts in the early literature suggest multi-tuned pipes. Mac Díochoeme's pipe, mentioned in the passage above, is described as double-forked (*cuislind ndegabail*).[78] In a story within the Middle Irish *Fianaigecht* a piper plays sleep-music upon two golden pipes (*dá chuislinn órda*).[79] A passage from *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* describes the 'Room of the Pipers' (*imda na cuslennach*), as

---

[71] Thurneysen, Rudolf (1933) pp 118-9.
[72] See Knott, Eleanor (1936) l. 705; Stokes, Whitley (1902) p 71, §84. For a note on possible cognates of *tinne*, see p 193.
[73] See Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, pp 368-9.
[74] See Megaw, J.V.S. (1990) pp 718-23. Megaw estimates thirty percent of whistles and flutes in medieval Europe were crafted from bones of bird and domestic fowl.
[75] Walsh, Claire (1997) p 142.
[76] Buckley, Ann (1988) pp 150-3.
[77] Hurley, Maurice F. *et al.*, (1992) p 665, illus. p 669.
[78] Thurneysen, Rudolf (1933) p 118.
[79] Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 58-9.

boasting nine skilled musicians on four-tuned pipes (*tinne cetharchóire*).[80] Such multi-tuned pipes are reminiscent of pan-pipes. Pan-pipes are occasionally illustrated in early manuscripts as markers for marginal notes.[81] The pipes are also depicted in religious scenes on several Irish high crosses.[82] Similar scenes are found on standing stones dating to the Early Historic period (ca. 400-800) in Scotland.[83] Whether or not these accurately reflect *cuisle*, or in fact any other popular contemporary Irish instrument, is uncertain.

The particular sound of the *cuisle* is seldom mentioned. Pipes tuned to various keys are suggested in an entry in the *O'Davoren's Glossary*. The *Glossary*'s entry for '*indell*' states that harps must be tuned and pipes be arranged accordingly (*glésaighther na crota 7 coraighther na cusleanna*).[84] This suggests that a range of pipes accompany the more versatile *crott*. The law-tract *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* describes the accompaniment of stringed instruments by pipe-players as the proper arrangement in playing music.[85] Earlier in the same text pipe-players (*cuislennach*) are included in a list of artists of high status (*airechus ard*), alongside poets, engravers, scribes, leeches, and smiths.[86] Pipes are elsewhere described accompanying various musical instruments, including horns, *timpáns*, fiddles and drums.[87] A passage

---

[80] Stokes, Whitley (1902) pp 70-1. *Imda*, more likely 'couch' or 'booth', is discussed in chapter 2, fn 26.

[81] Well-preserved examples are found at TCD MS H.2.18 (LL) p 135a; TCD MS H.2.15A, p 19[b]. I would like to thank Prof. Fergus Kelly for bringing these to my attention.

[82] Examples include scenes on the north face of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly; the east face of the Sandstone Cross at Durrow, Co. Offaly; and the east face of the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. See Harbison, Peter (1992) p 53 (fig. 960); pp 79-80 (figs 248, 939); pp 141-2 (figs 940, 473), respectively. See illus. 1.

[83] Pipers are depicted on several stones, most plainly the Hilton of Cadboll and Lethendy stones. See Hughson, Irene (1997) pp 30-2.

[84] Stokes, Whitley (1904a) p 388, §1085. Pipe-players (*cuislenna*) also accompany the harp in a passage from the tale "*Cetharnach Úi Dhomnaill*". O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 277. O'Grady's translation (p 313) reads "...the dulcet pulses of the harp."

[85] CIH 1129.34.

[86] *Ibid.* 1117.39-41.

[87] See *e.g.*, Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol 10, pp 18-21; Hull, Vernam (1949) pp 48, l. 225; O'Daly, Máirín (1962b) pp 83-4, §14.

from the *Acallamh* suggests an intense and high pitch for the instrument, describing the sound as fierce and overpowering (*féige forbartacha*).[88]

While the precise music of any instrument of the period is never disclosed, *suantraige*, or the 'sleeping-strain', is commonly associated with the pipe. A particularly evocative example is found in a tale from the Middle Irish *Fianaigecht*;

> *7 dochūamur-ne hi mucha lāi arnamārach gusin duma sealga cétna ocus fúaramar aithech dub dodhealb*[d]*a dí*[f]*recra dímor isin dumha ar ar gcind ina suidhi 7 dorinne coimérghi romuinn 7 ro fer fáilti rinn 7 tug a láim ina chuim ocus tug dá chuisl*inn *órda as 7 do sin*n *slithi senma cuir ocus puirt 7 adhbuinn dúinn, innus co coiteōl*ad *aés gonta nō láeich léonta frisin ceól soinemail dorinne.*
>
> And in the early morning we went to the same hunting-mound and found a black, misshapen, enormous, huge churl sitting on the mound before us, who rose up before us and greeted us. And putting his hand into his bosom he brought out two golden pipes and played a tuneful, harmonious strain of melody for us, so that wounded men or women in travail or a host in sickness, or wounded warriors or lacerated heroes would have fallen asleep at the exquisite music which he made.[89]

Similarly, in *Cath Finntrága* Fergus journeys to the king of the world (*righ an domhain*) to ask his support in battle. Fergus arrives to find the king napping on his couch to the sleep-music of pipes (*cuisleanna cíuil*).[90]

As expected, pipes frequently appear at fairs, festivals, banquets and feasts. A passage from *Cath Maige Tuired* faults Bres for his inhospitable nature, declaring that pipe-players (*cuslendaib*), among other musicians, are absent from his household and his banquets.[91] An entry in the Fragmentary Annals describes a disreputable house wherein various entertainers amuse assembled guests. Among their various activities the text states "...some were drinking, some sleeping, some vomiting, some piping

---

[88] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 4, l. 7056. O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) translates "shrill and dominant", p 250.
[89] Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 58-9.
[90] Meyer, Kuno (1885) p 33.
[91] Grey, Elizabeth (1982) pp 32-3.

(*occ cusleannaigh*), some whistling."[92] A Middle Irish poem celebrating the fair at Carman lists pipe-players (*cuslennaig*) and bones-players among the musicians expected at the fair.[93] Interestingly, the poem includes a separate style of pipe (*pipai*) as well as fiddles (*fidli*) among the instruments present.[94] The reference to these instruments is particularly noteworthy as the term *pipa* is rare and does not occur until late in the Middle Irish period. Likewise, the term '*fidli*' is elsewhere unattested in Old and Middle Irish. The instruments, or perhaps simply the individual terms, were presumably newly introduced, perhaps a result of Norman influence. Moreover, the references to both *cuisle* and *pipa* suggests that by the late-Middle Irish period at least two different types of pipe were familiar.

While the *cruitire*, as will be seen, clearly retained a high status among artisans, the pipe-player (*cuislennach*) is grouped among entertainers and musicians of lower status. A late-Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem describes the rightful and proper portions of meat distributed at the feast of Tara. According to the poem the *cuislennach* receives the rather meatless shank. His portion and status are shared by other such entertainers as the 'cheating juggler' (*clessamnach claen*) and the 'sprawling buffoon' (*fuirseóire fáen*).[95] The portion described in the poem is likely based on a similar poem from the *Book of Leinster*, once again describing the seating of the banquet hall at Tara. According to the poem, the pipe-players are placed in the east section of the hall and once again receive the *colptha*, or 'shank' as their portion, which they share with the 'skilled *fidchell*-players'.[96] Similar indications of status and

---

[92] Radner, Joan Newlon (1978) p 61.

[93] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. III, pp 18-19. The exact nature of the 'bones-players', or literally 'bone-men' (*cnámfir*), is unclear. Their place alongside the pipe-players suggests that they were musicians, perhaps players of bone-pipes, though this is purely speculation. Alternatively, they may have been gamblers.

[94] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol 10, pp pp 20-1.

[95] *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, p 27. These entertainers are discussed in chapter 2, sections 1.1 and 1.2, respectively.

[96] Petrie, George (1839) p 202. For an illustration of the arrangement, taken from the manuscript, see Best, R.I., O. Bergin and M.A. Vol. 1, pp 166-7.

rank are given elsewhere in accounts of the seating arrangements of a king's household. The Old Irish *Lánellach Tigi Rích & Ruirech* declares pipe-players (*cuislendach*), horn-players and charioteers are to sit at the front of the house, near the door.[97] Similarly, the law tract *Críth Gablach* places the pipe-players (*cuslennaig*) in the south-east, or front-right corner of the house.[98] In each case the position is secondary to higher-grade artists such as poets and *cruitire*.

Individual pipers are also mentioned in the early literature. The *dindsenchas* poem for Sliab n-Echtga refers to a coveted dwelling which had once housed the piper (*cuslennach*) Crochan. The apparent intention of the reference to the piper is to enhance the dwelling's already recognised status.[99] A passage from the late-Old Irish "Monastery of Tallaght" describes a neighbouring pipe-player as an anchorite and a man of grace, though his art is hardly condoned. Wanting to send a gift of a tune on his pipe to the bishop Maelruain, the musician is refused as the bishop's ears "...are not lent to earthly music that they may be lent to the music of Heaven."[100] The description of the 'Room of the Pipers' in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, discussed above, offers names for each of its nine pipers, dubbed the best pipers in the world. The names translate roughly as Bind (melodious), Robind (very melodious), Riarbind (sweet of sound), Sibe (?), Dibe (churlish), Deichrind (ten starred), Umal (humble), Cumal (bondwoman), and Ciallglind (firm-minded).[101]

---

[97] O'Daly, Máirín (1962b) pp 83-4, §14.
[98] CG, l. 590.
[99] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 305.
[100] Gwynn, E.J. and W.J. Preston (1911-2) §10.
[101] Stokes, Whitley (1902) pp 70-1. The translations offered are my own. They are merely suggested and are by no means certain.

2.2. *Fedán*:

Fedán, the diminutive of *fet*, 'a whistling or hissing sound', is undoubtedly a whistle or flute. The term, though not well attested, is used for both the musical instrument as well as the sound. A typical example is found in a Middle Irish homily where *fetán* is used to describe the hiss of a serpent.[102] In an Early Modern Irish tale a "...twisted, bony, rough-throated dun hag" produces a whistle (*fedán*) to communicate with nearby birds.[103] The soothing tone of the instrument or sound is suggested in a passage from the legal material. In an extensive list of questions found in the law tract *Bretha Nemed Déidenach*, examples are requested for various musical sounds. For a 'nurturing sound' (*guth alta*) examples of whistling (*fetánacht*) and, as discussed above, humming (*crónanacht*) are suggested.[104] In an uncharacteristic association with war, found in a passage from the *Acallamh*, Finn is told to prepare for battle when he hears the melody of the 'sweet-stringed *timpán*' and the 'sweet-sounding *fedán*'.[105] Later in the same passage Finn celebrates the restoration of Tara's grandeur by pointing out that while Tara had been burnt, a musician with his pipe (*fetan*) and his *timpán* had been saved.[106] In a Middle Irish translation of the *Aeneid*, Polyphemus carries with him a fir staff and a shepherd's pipe, termed *fedan*.[107]

2.3. *Corn*:

The *corn*, 'horn', is well-attested in both the early literature and the archaeological record. The term itself derives from the Latin *cornu*, 'horn', and is applied to both the musical instrument and the drinking horn. As will also be seen

---

[102] Atkinson, Robert (1887) p 270.
[103] MacSweeney, Patrick (1904) pp 134-5. Similar descriptions of entertainers and musicians are found in the early literature. See sections 3.2 and 3.4, below
[104] CIH 1127.2, 17-8. See also Gwynn, E.J. (1942) p 36.
[105] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 131; transl. p 144. O'Grady translates 'dulcet-breathing tube'.
[106] *Ibid.*, p 132; transl. p 145.

concerning the instrument *stoc*, 'trumpet', the evidence for the *corn* in early Ireland is divided between instruments created and played for musical entertainment and instruments created for ceremonial or military use.

A relative wealth of Bronze Age horns survives, including several examples which are still capable of producing notes.[108] Interestingly, a noticeable variation in style is observed between Bronze Age horns found in the south-west and north-east regions of Ireland. Horns found in the north-east are generally shorter, wide-mouthed horns, often with grooves into which mouth-pieces were fitted. Horns in the south-west are generally longer, thinner horns with blow-holes at either the side or end. Several horns of this type have grooved ends to accommodate mouth-pieces, though individual examples of mouth-pieces have not been found.[109] The majority of the horns found in the south-west of Ireland have been shown to belong to a particular school of bronze-working, in part accounting for the geographic discrepancy.

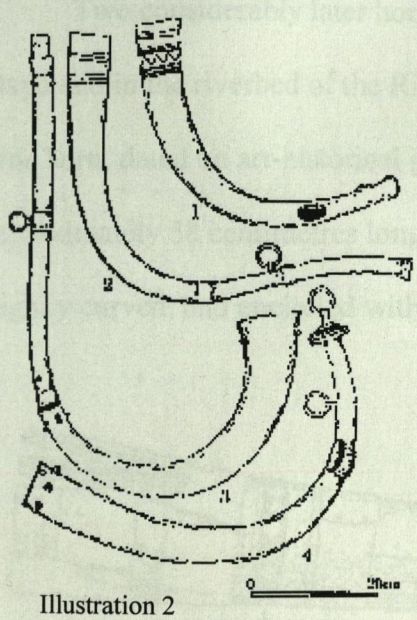


Illustration 2

Traditionally, the extant Bronze Age horns were thought to represent simple wind instruments, played like their modern counterparts. After considerable experimentation, however, the instruments have been shown to emit louder, clearer and more accurate notes when played with alternative blowing techniques.[110] One

---

[107] Calder, George (1907) pp 12-13.

[108] See illus. 2. The Bronze Age horns represent instruments that are older than the scope of this examination. Literary evidence is not contemporaneous to such a period, though it often professes to be. The evidence is included as it may nonetheless represent precursors to later instruments.

[109] The two types are generally classified as Class I and Class II, respectively. A distribution map is found at Waddell, John (1998) p 235. Illustrations of the various horns found can be found at O'Curry, Eugene (1873) pp 627, 629; Waddell, John (1998) 234; Ó Duibhir, Siomon (1988) p 135.

[110] Several extant Irish horns have been tested for musical capacity. For discussions, see Waddell, John, *ibid.*, pp 234-6; Ó Duibhir, Siomon, *ibid.*, pp 135-6. In a rather famous example of archaeological zeal,

such experiment was performed mimicking the more liberal lip movement used in playing the ancient Australian aboriginal instrument, the didjeridoo. Rather than single notes, this technique produced a drone quality with greater rhythmic and harmonic variation.[111] If horns such as the ones experimented on were indeed used for musical entertainment, as opposed to military or ceremonial use, it is likely they featured as accompanying or backing instruments.

Two considerably later horns, both of wood, have been found at Becon, Co. Mayo and in the riverbed of the River Erne, near Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh.[112] The Erne horn, dated on art-historical grounds to the Early Christian period, is approximately 58 centimetres long. Crafted from a solid piece of yew, the horn is very slightly curved, and encircled with several bronze mounts.

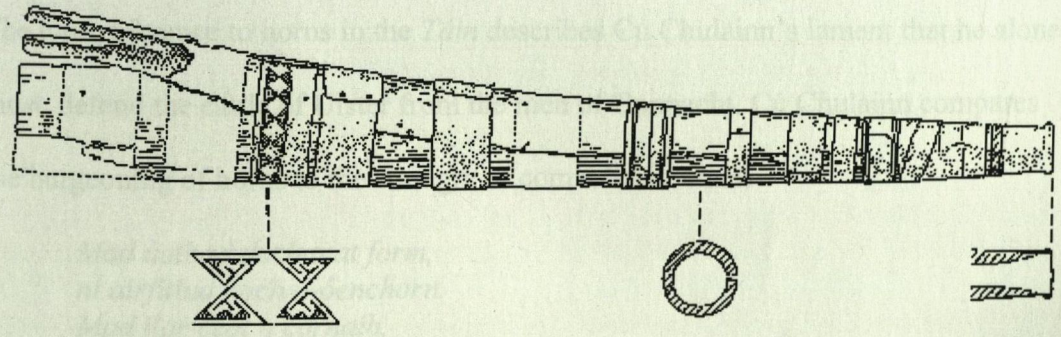


Illustration 3

The Becan horn, more than three times the length of the Erne horn, seems also to have been made of a single piece of wood, in this case willow. The Becan horn is much narrower than the Erne horn and encircled with a spiral of bronze, originally of five separate pieces. The presumed function of the mounts and bronze spiral is to add strength and durability. Little has been determined regarding the musical capacity of

---

the Dublin antiquarian Dr. Robert Ball lost his life to such an experiment. In attempting a particular sound on a Bronze Age horn, Dr. Ball died after bursting a blood-vessel.

[111] See Ó Duibhir, Siomon, *ibid.*

[112] Both horns are described in Waterman, D.M. (1969) pp 101-4. For the River Erne Horn, see illus. 3.

the two horns, though the rough material and comparatively inexpensive manufacture suggests a more familiar use than that of the more ancient Bronze Age horns. It is indeed tempting to suggest they were the possessions of professional musicians.

The surviving horns, though surprisingly abundant, offer little testimony to musical entertainment in early Ireland. Evidence from the saga literature, composed to depict the bygone eras in which many of the horns were made, primarily describes horns and trumpets in battle scenes. The horns are portrayed heralding battle and announcing the return of triumphant victors. In the Early Modern Irish tale *In Cath Catharda* horns (*cuirn*), trumpets (*sturgana*) and warning-horns (*n-adurca furfocra*) are described as played "...at one-time and in one movement".[113] A battle scene in an Old Irish poem concerning the Hill of Allen describes warrior bands against "...the dark blue battle-array; the sound of horns (*gloim a corn*) above hundreds of heads."[114] The lone reference to horns in the *Táin* describes Cú Chulainn's lament that he alone must defend the cattle of Ulster from the men of Connacht. Cú Chulainn compares the burgeoning of horns to the strength of comrades in arms;

> *Mad úathad dochanat form,*
> *ní airfitiud nach n-óenchorn.*
> *Mad ilar ceól a cornaib,*
> *iss ed is binniu din choblaig.*
>
> If but few sing here for me, a single horn (*oénchorn*) rejoices not.
> But if many horns (*cornaib*) make music, then the sound is sweeter.[115]

References to horns in hagiography and religious narratives are typically found in biblical scenes. Numerous biblical scenes on high crosses depict horns

---

[113] Stokes, Whitley (1909) pp 266-7. Battle-pipes (*cuislendai cathaí*) are also included in the description. See also pp 36-7. The term *adarc* is used infrequently to describe musical horns. See DIL A-34.65-9. The *storgan* is discussed below.

[114] Meyer, Kuno (1894) p 65. The poem presumably describes the battle of the Hill of Allen, recorded as fought in 722 between the king of Ireland and the king of Leinster over the *bóroma* tribute.

[115] *Táin* LL, ll 2038-9; transl. p 55. I take *ní airfitiud* as 'does not entertain'.

played by angels, shepherds or heralds.[116] These horns, most often slender, straight-horns, similar to a modern bugle, do not resemble the surviving Bronze Age horns and are presumably based on either contemporary tenth- and eleventh-century instruments or, more likely, the iconography of existing text-based illustrations. If they are accurate representatives of the former, they are perhaps examples of early trumpets (*stoc*), discussed below.

Despite the lack of detailed evidence for horns in musical entertainment, the hornblower (*cornaire*) is a common figure of the early sources. He is listed in the law tract *Críth Gablach* as an entertainer expected in the banquet hall of a king.[117] He is included alongside the pipers and seated in the south-east corner of the hall. Similarly, in the Middle Irish poem *Suidiugad Tigi Midchuarta*, describing the seating of the banquet hall at Tara, the *cornaire* is seated in the south-east and given mead as his rightful portion.[118] Seven *cornaire* in the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Ferbe* accompany Mani on his journey to Cruachan. In the lengthy description of the rather numerous company, hornblowers and *cruitire* are the only musicians mentioned. The seven *cornaire* are described wearing multi-coloured garments and playing horns fashioned of gold and silver (*cornaib óir 7 argit*).[119] A similar description is found in *Táin Bó Fraích* where seven yellow-haired hornblowers (*cornaire*) dressed in multi-coloured clothes and carrying horns of gold and silver (*cornaib órdaib 7 argdidib*) accompany the warrior Fróech.[120] Later in the same tale the seven precede Fróech to Ailill's fort, where they play so skilfully that

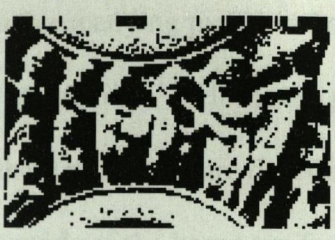


Illustration 4

[116] Examples include scenes on the west face of the cross at Kilcullen, Co. Kildare; the east face of the Cross of Saints Patrick and Columba at Kells, Co. Meath; and the east faces of the Cross of Muiredach and the Tall Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. See Harbison, Peter (1992) figs. 534, 348, 738, 756, respectively. See illus. 4.

[117] CG, l. 590 = CIH 570.21.

[118] Petrie, George (1839) p 202.

"...thirty of Ailill's finest men died of rapture."[121] Hornblowers (*cornaire*) are also included in *Cath Maige Tuired* in the list of musicians absent from Bres's banquet-hall, adding to his reputation as an inhospitable host.[122]

As previously discussed, musical horns are most often described as backing instruments, primarily with stringed instruments, though also accompanying pipes. The *dindsenchas* poem for Carman describes several concerted instruments, including "hollow-throated horns" (*cuirn chroés-tholla*).[123] Hornblowers are described accompanying pipers in *Loinges mac n-Uislenn*. The resulting music is deemed 'melodious'.[124] Horns are perhaps the instruments described in the *Acallamh* where three musicians are described playing 'concertedly' and facing each other.[125] The sounds of the horns are frequently and characteristically described as harsh, loud and overpowering. Cú Chulainn's lament, discussed above, suggests the music of horns was indeed better appreciated when manifold. A passage from *Auraicept na n-Eces* states that the music of the horn (*cornairecht*) is considered the 'loud' type, often overpowering the 'low' and 'sweeter' kind of music, that of the *crott*.[126] A late Middle Irish poem contains a lament in which the "...sweeter belling of a stag" is preferred to the bold sound of the horn (*cornairecht*).[127] The most convincing description of the horns' harsh sound is found in an entry from *O'Davoren's Glossary*, comparing it to the cry of ravens;

> *Grace .i. corne .i. fiach comradh .i. guth fiaich leo 7 is anadarcaib dognidis .i. amail esene fiach.*

---

[119] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 3.2, pp 466-7.
[120] Meid, Wolfgang (1967) §3. For translation, see Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1937) p 2.
[121] *Ibid.*, §20; transl. p 8.
[122] Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 32-3.
[123] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 18-9.
[124] Hull, Vernam (1949) p 66.
[125] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 217; transl. p 246. The instruments are not named. As the *Acallamh* generally names the *crott* and *timpán*, two stringed-instruments, the reference here is possibly to horns, described elsewhere as playing in such a manner.
[126] Calder, George (1917) p 115, ll 1475-8.
[127] O'Keefe, J.G. (1913) p 78.

> *Grace*, i.e. horns, i.e. raven conversation, i.e. they had the voice of a raven and it is in horns they produced them, i.e. like the young of ravens.[128]

Whatever the particular sound, the overal evidence suggests that of the various early Irish horns, i.e. the *stoc, storgan* etc., the *corn* was the most likely instrument for musical entertainment. Likewise, the *cornaire* is the only hornblower mentioned specifically in descriptions of entertainers and musicians.

2.4. *Stoc* and *storgán*:

References in the early literature to *stoc*, generally translated 'trumpet', are primarily confined to scenes of battle and heraldry. The etymology of the term is uncertain. While *corn* is clearly a Latin loan-word, *stoc* is likely a native Celtic word for horn, perhaps the term used for the Bronze Age instruments. *Stoc* survives in the modern language to describe a bugle or trumpet, though primarily in poetic use. As the overwhelming majority of references to *stoc* concerns horns used in war, the instrument is perhaps best understood as a bugle or war-trumpet.

The earliest reference to *stoc* is found in a fragment of an Old Irish treatise on the Psalter. The passage describes bugles (*stuic*) and buglers (*stocairi*) announcing the approach of a host onto the green of a fort.[129] A similar description is found in the early-Middle Irish *Saltair na Rann* where seven bugles (*stuic*) announce a host.[130] Descriptions of bugles and war-trumpets sounded before and during battle are indeed the most common references to the instrument in the early literature. A particular frequency is found in Middle and Early Modern Irish texts translated from Latin

[128] O'Donovan, John (1868) p 91.
[129] Meyer, Kuno (1894) pp 65-7.
[130] Stokes, Whitley (1883) p 74, l. 5061.

originals.[131] The choice of the term *stoc* for such an instrument further attests to its precise use and understanding as a military horn, as Latin loan-words such as *corn* or *organ* would be expected for ordinary horns.

A further, though less well-attested use of the term *stoc* is found in religious texts describing horns sounded by angels. A Middle Irish homily describes the archangel Michael sounding his horn (*stoc*) to summon souls from their graves.[132] A passage from the Codex Palatino-Vaticanus tells of Adam hearing a bugle call for the angels Michael and Gabriel.[133] Once again, the texts are Irish translations, and often merely renditions, of Latin originals.

The lone inference for the sound of the *stoc* is found in a passage from *Auraicept na n-Eces*, previously discussed. Compared to the music of harp, regarded as 'silent, sweet and low', the sound of the *stoc* is described as overpowering the sound of the harp, "...higher is its mournful cry."[134]

Interestingly, by the Early Modern Irish period, a conflation of the terms *stoc* and *orgán* seem to have produced *storgán*, also describing a war-horn.[135] As there are no informative descriptions of the instrument itself, it is unclear whether the term *storgán* signifies simply a replacement in terminology or a new and distinct instrument. In his monumental work *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, Eugene O'Curry asserts that *storgán* should be identified with the early Roman

---

[131] For examples found in early translations of Latin texts, see *e.g.* Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 2.1, l. 1774; *ibid.*, Vol. 2.2, ll 688, 494-5; *ibid.*, Vol. 4.2, pp 36-7, and pp 50, 108 where the instrument is qualified as a war instrument (*stoc catha*); See also Calder, George (1907) ll 989, 2787, 1273-4, 1790, 1940; Calder, George (1922) pp 84-5, ll 1328-35.

[132] Atkinson, Robert (1887) l. 7283.

[133] MacCarthy, B. (1892) p 56.

[134] Calder, George (1917) p 115, ll 1483-6. Earlier in the same passage bugling (*stocairech*), along with hornblowing, is again described as overpowering the softer music of the harp. See ll 1475-8.

[135] See *e.g.* McKinnon, Donald (1906-7) pp 306-7; Stokes, Whitley (1909) pp 266-7.

instrument *lituus*, 'clarion' or 'trumpet'.[136] O'Curry bases his argument on a citation from *Rees' Encyclopaedia* which explains the *lituus* as;

> ...almost straight, but crooked at the extremity, in the form of the augur's staff, whence its name, was a species of clarion or octave trumpet, made of metal and extremely loud and shrill, used for horse as the straight trumpet was for foot."[137]

While this description favours several extant instruments, including some which date from the Bronze Age, there is indeed little to connect these instruments with the Irish *storgán*. As references to the *storgán* are never more than cursory allusions, the precise identification of the instrument remains uncertain.

3. Stringed Instruments:

Ireland uses and delights in two instruments only, the harp, namely, and the timpanum. Scotland uses three, the harp, timpanum and the crowd. Wales uses the harp, pipes, and the crowd. They [the Irish] also use strings made of bronze, and not from leather.[138]



Illustration 5

Stringed instruments dominate any study of music in early Ireland. Evidence for instruments suggesting a pre-cursor to the modern Irish harp is both abundant and diverse. Other stringed instruments, likely those resembling the psaltery or lyre are also well documented. As common religious symbols, illustrations of the instruments survive in many forms, both figurative and material. Difficulties with subjective translation and interpretation in the literature create stumbling blocks in determining exact instruments. Concurrent Irish translations of Latin texts use several terms for the same instruments, compounding an already convoluted situation.

---

[136] O'Curry, Eugene (1873)Vol. 3, pp 341-2.
[137] O'Curry does not fully identify his source.
[138] O'Meara, John J. (1951) p 104. For the Latin text, see Dimock, James (1867) p 154.

A particularly contentious issue regarding stringed instruments in early Ireland involves the extensive variation in material illustration. As archaeological evidence for stringed instruments of the period does not survive, material evidence is limited to artistic representation. Depictions of stringed instruments are most commonly found on high crosses, yet also occur in contemporary art such as bell shrines and similar votive objects. As will be seen, musicologists and iconographers are often at odds as to the authenticity of the representations.

The earliest depictions of stringed instruments in Ireland are found on high crosses dated to the eighth and ninth centuries.[139] As representations belong exclusively to religious scenes, the veracity of the evidence is at the very least questionable. Iconography of the period enjoyed a wide currency throughout Christendom, creating recognisable models and archetypes in Biblical scenes. Depictions of stringed instruments on Irish crosses occur generally on the east face, representing and celebrating the risen Christ.[140] In such scenes, David is most often interpreted as the intended musician.[141] Occasionally, as previously discussed, pipes and horns accompany the stringed instruments, generally depicted behind or in secondary position to the latter.



Illustration 6

[139] Clear depictions of stringed instruments appear on the following high crosses (page numbers and figures refer to Harbison, Peter, 1992); the North Cross at Graiguenamagh, Co. Kilkenny, p 96, fig. 311; cross-fragment at Ullard, Co Kilkenny, p 183, fig. 642; North Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare, p 38, fig. 719; South Cross at Castledermot, p 40, fig. 888; Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, p 50, fig. 720; Sandstone Cross at Durrow, Co. Offaly, p 80, fig. 939 (see illus. 6); Cross of Saints Patrick and Colum Cille at Kells, Co Meath, p 109, fig. 718; Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth, p 141, fig. 473; cross fragment at Castlebernard, Co. Offaly, p 36, fig. 711. See illus. 6.

[140] Buckley, Ann (1990) p 16.

[141] For a discussion of the iconography of David as musician, see Harbison, Peter (1992) pp 213-4.

3.1. *Crott*[142]:

> Few people have troubled to ask what instrument the harper would actually have played, though some harpers will know that even in the eighteenth century their predecessors normally used metal strings sounded with long fingernails rather than gut strings struck with the fingertips as is usual today. But in the eighth century it may not even have been a harp. The scholar of language or literature seldom bothers with accurate definitions of musical instruments…There is no reason, therefore, to assume that because *cruit* in the seventeenth century meant the triangular frame-harp, *crott* in the seventh century necessarily meant anything very similar.[143]

Alan Bruford's rather controversial statement outlines the principal difficulty in the examination of stringed instruments in early Ireland. While traditionally the term 'harp' is and continues to be the preferred translation in references to all stringed instruments mentioned in the sources, there is little to confirm such a translation. While the crux of the problem is the general and unspecific nature of the sources, the historical and political symbolism of the term 'harp' further compounds the tendency.

The etymology of the Irish term *crott* is uncertain. Generally translated 'harp', it is often used interchangeably with the Latin *cithara*, as in the Middle Irish gloss '*hic citharista .i. cruitire*'.[144] The precise identification of the Irish instrument, however, does not always equal its intended counterpart. It has been suggested that *crott*, cognate to Welsh *crwth*, shares an origin with the German *rotte* or *rote*, a stringed instrument of the lyre family. Such an association is tempting, though the loss of the initial *c*, as well as the retention of the final *-tt*, renders it unlikely.[145] While a precise etymology of Old Irish *crott* remains uncertain, the most conceivable derivation involves the Indo-European stem **krŭt*, explained as 'chest, bosom, belly',

---

[142] Apart from textual quotations, the oldest form of the term (*crott*) will be used throughout this discussion.

[143] Bruford, Alan (1990) p 64.

[144] Stokes, Whitley (1860) l. 5.

[145] Bruford, Alan (1990) p 65. Bruford's tentative suggestion involves an intermediate Germanic **hrott* or equivalent.

producing the Common Celtic *crotta*.[146] Valuable support as to the common origins of the instrument is offered in a Latin poem by Fortunatus, a sixth-century bishop of Poitiers.

> *Romanusque lyra, plaudat tibi barbarus harpa,*
> *Graechus Achilliaca, crotta Britanna canat.*
>
> The Roman praises thee with the lyre, the barbarian with the harp,
> The Greek with the Achillean lyre, to you the British *crotta* sings.[147]

Whatever the precise identification of the instrument, it was certainly played by inhabitants of these islands by the sixth century, known by its Celtic name and distinguished from similar instruments of the Roman world.

A harp is traditionally defined as a triangular-framed stringed instrument with a soundbox perpendicular to its strings.[148] While *crott* is generally regarded as the 'harp' of early Ireland, there is little early evidence to equate it with the traditional triangular model. The majority of scenes on high crosses portray a semi-quadrangular shaped instrument, usually perched upon the player's knee.[149] The shapes of the frames vary considerably. Trapezoidal frames occur occasionally,[150] while standard lyre shapes (◭ or ☐) are most commonly represented, often with open two-sided frames.[151] A *crott* belonging to the mythical figure the Dagda, mentioned in the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Tuired*, derives its name from its shape. The instrument is named *Coir Ceathairchuir*, or 'four-sided tribute'.[152] Strings for the *crott* are often

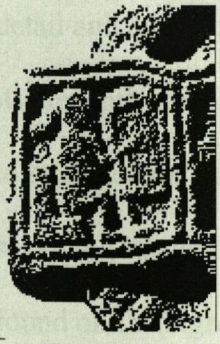


Illustration 7



Illustration 8

[146] See Pokorny, Julius (1959) p 624; Vendryes, Joseph *et al*, (1959-) C-248. The stem is again uncertain, though it may offer a tenuous connection with the Germanic *rotte*, outlined above.
[147] Rimmer, Joan (1969) p 22.
[148] See Sadie, Stanley (1986) Vol. 2, p 131.
[149] See Harbison, Peter (1992) figs. 311, 473, 718, 719 (see illus. 9), 720, 888 (see illus. 8), and 939. See illus 7-9.
[150] *Ibid.*, fig. 473.
[151] *Ibid.* figs. 642 (see illus. 7), 719, 888, 939. See illus. 7-9.
[152] Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 70-1.

indicated in the material evidence, though technical detail must not be expected as manifold numbers of strings are represented. Strings are also represented with thicknesses equalling that of the supporting frames, an obvious limitation of the artistic medium.[153]

Additional material evidence of the period is found on a plaque affixed to the *Breac Maedóic*, a book shrine dated to the eleventh-century.[154] The plaque depicts a seated musician holding a sizeable triangular-framed instrument on his knee. The instrument has several strings, upon which the musician rests his right hand. The strings run between a soundbox and arched neck, which are in turn framed with a slightly bowed forepillar. This fulfils the musicological criteria for a standard harp. The detail and accuracy of the image, particularly in respect to its eleventh century provenance, is encouraging in relation to evidence for 'harps' in early Ireland. The depiction, however, represents the lone surviving image in Ireland of a triangular stringed instrument, outside scant depictions found on the high crosses, until the late fourteenth-century *Fiacail Phádraig*, or 'Shrine of St. Patrick's Tooth'. The image on the *Fiacail Phádraig* is similar to the one found on the *Breac Maedóic*, representing a seated figure plucking, with both hands, a 23-stringed instrument. The strings are once again represented as attached and perpendicular to the soundbox, which is framed between a bowed forepillar and arched neck.[155] The instrument resembles the extant fourteenth-century 'Trinity College Harp', also called the 'Brian Boru harp', displayed in the Long Room of the Old Library, Trinity College Dublin. Similarly, the 'Queen Mary Harp', of Scottish



Illustration 9

[153] For examples, see Harbison, Peter (1992) figs. 311, 718, 888, 939.
[154] See Buckley, Anne (1990) plate 16. For commentary, see pp 21-2; Rimmer, Joan (1969) 26-7.
[155] *Ibid.*, plate 17.

provenance, is dated to the fifteenth century.[156] Both frames of the instruments are crafted entirely of wood, willow used in the Trinity College harp, hornbeam in the Queen Mary's harp.

Interestingly, the triangular frame dominates material evidence for stringed instruments in Scotland for an earlier period. While crosses and standing-stones in Scotland dated to before the ninth century show a preponderance of quadrangular framed instruments, triangular framed instruments become standard as early as the end of the ninth century.[157] The change in representation may well have been based on genuine practice, perhaps actuated by the political takeover of Pictland by the Dál Riata in the mid-ninth century.[158] Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century commentary indicates such a break in an implied musical fosterage between Ireland and Scotland, particularly in stringed instruments;

> Ireland uses and delights in two instruments, the harp (*cithara*), namely, and the timpanum. Scotland uses three, the harp (*cithara*), the timpanum and the crowd...Scotland has by now not only caught up on Ireland, her instructor, but already far outdistances and excels her in musical skill. Therefore people now look to that country as to the fountain of art.[159]

While Giraldus intimates a break in musical tradition nearer his own contemporary period, the grounds for it may have originated in a variation in instruments, dating back to the ninth and tenth centuries, as seen with the imagery on high crosses and standing stones. An eleventh-century poem by Patrick, Bishop of Dublin, attests to a 'new harps' (*cytarasque novas*), found at the feasts and assemblies of a festive city. Earlier in the same poem he describes his own instruction on a six-stringed harp (*cithara*). He poignantly remarks that while he plays for the enjoyment of his people,

---

[156] A likeness of the Trinity College harp is used on the reverse of standard Irish coinage and is the famous harp on the Guiness label. See, *e.g.* www.irishcoinage.com. The Queen Mary harp, though first recorded in Scotland is likely of Irish origin. See Rimmer, Joan (1969) plates 11,12.
[157] See Allen, J. Romilly (1903) pp 319-21.
[158] Bannerman, John (1991) p 5.
[159] O'Meara, John J. (1951) p 104. For the Latin text, see Dimock, James (1867) p 154.

he plays foremost for himself.[160] The reference to the 'new harp' is presumably an allusion to a change or modification in the standard instrument. Likewise, the eleventh-century date offers support for the marked variation in material evidence from the mid-ninth and tenth centuries.

The contradiction between the traditional definition of the harp and the instrument portrayed on high crosses dating from the ninth century necessarily begs the question as to the suitability of the accepted translation of *crott* as 'harp'. Unfortunately, the dearth in reliable iconographical evidence for stringed instruments of the period is not aided by the archaeological record. This is possibly the result of the nature of the materials, i.e. wood frames, pegs, etc. It is nonetheless surprising such a total lack of archaeological evidence for stringed instruments exists. As seen with other instruments such as horns and pipes, individual fragments of wood and bone have survived. Wooden framing pegs and bows survive, while fragments of frames or strings have not been identified. There seems no reasonable explanation for the lack of evidence, other than sheer mischance.

Furthermore, the etymology of *crott*, as discussed, is uncertain and in no way does the term unequivocally suggest what is accepted as a standard harp. Whether or not the *crott* in fact represented a harp, or indeed what has come to be known as the standard Irish harp, the instrument, its musician and the manner and settings in which it was played can be better understood through an examination of the early literature and legal material.

The *crott* held an obvious prominence above all musical instruments. A late-Old Irish triad considers a tune on a harp (*adbann a cruit*) one of the three

[160] Gwynn, Aubrey (1955) pp 90-1, ll 93-5.

accomplishments of Ireland.[161] Equally laudatory, a passage from *Tecosca Cormac* states that all music is holy until compared to the *crott* (*cáid cach ceól co cruit*).[162]

Interestingly, parallels in Welsh law reveal much the same precedence given to stringed instruments. In the tenth-century *Law of Hywel Dda*, the harp (*crwth*) is considered one of the three indispensibles of a freeman's household.[163] Elsewhere in the same text the harp is included in various triads. The three legal harps, which are asociated with the most prestigious members of society and presumably a symbol of office, are identified as the king's harp, the chief-poet's harp and the freeman's harp.[164] A harp must also be supplied to the king's bard for the three special feasts.[165] A clue as to the material of Welsh strings is also afforded by the text, stating that the chief-poet is entitled to twenty-four pence if his apprentice decides to give up his horsehair harp and proceed to a higher level of tuition.[166] The value of the various harps is also summarised, along with the value of each harp's respective 'tuning horn' (*cyweirgorn*).[167] While the Welsh evidence is less revealing about the harper than the Irish sources, the harp itself was undoubtedly chief among musical instruments.

Returning to the Irish instrument, music issued from the *crott* was also considered the ideal. A legal passage from *Bretha Nemed Deidenach* declares the proper musical arrangement as that of a *crott* accompanied by pipes (*aile senm sernar n-iomhus. indeall crot, cuisleanna cóire*).[168] An excerpt from *Auraicept na n-Eces* considers the best music to be that of the *crott*, as its particular sound is the sweetest

---

[161] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 11, §89.
[162] Meyer, Kuno (1909) p 47, §31.
[163] A blanket and a cauldron round out the triad. Jenkins, Dafydd (1986) p 39. While the text is found in manuscripts as early as the thirteenth century, its laws are purported to have been in place in the tenth. As with *crott*, the precise identity of the Welsh *cwrth* is debatable. The English 'harp' is usually used to translate the Welsh *telyn*, a similar though distinct instrument.
[164] *Ibid.*, p 40.
[165] *Ibid.* ,p 9.
[166] *Ibid.*, p 38.
[167] *Ibid.*, pp 191-2. While there is no linguistic parallel, the *cyweirgorn* seems to offer a contextual parallel to the Irish *céis*.

and lowest (*as bindiu is tuiu*) of the musical instruments.[169] Similarly, in an anecdote from the *Fragmentary Annals*, a king's two sons enjoy strikingly different evenings. The first son delights in the pleasures of a 'foul' and 'lively' house wherein various musicians and buffoons entertain a drunken, ribald audience. The second son enjoys a more spiritual evening, listening to the sweet, quiet sounds of singing and *cruitireacht*.[170] The descriptions of 'sweet' and 'quiet' are indeed characteristic to stringed instruments in general, and occur throughout the literature.[171]

Few literary descriptions of the period offer any type of technical or structural detail. Instruments are most often described as fashioned of gold or silver, though frames of wood must be presumed. The *crott* belonging to the Dagda in *Cath Maige Tuired* is named *Daur Dá Bláo*, or 'Oak of Two Meadows'. The allusion to oak presumably refers to the material of the instrument.[172] A poem within the Early Modern Irish "Burning of Finn's House" describes Daire's harp as a valuable casualty of the fire.[173] As seen, extant instruments of a period slightly later to the poem are crafted of wood. Ostensibly the immediate ancestors of these instruments, and likely those more distant, shared a continuum in both craft and material.

Various passages from the literature refer to individual components of instruments. One such component, the *céis*, is uncertain though often referred to in relation to the instrument's musical dependence upon it. The Middle Irish preface to the *Amra Choluimb Cille* compares a church without an abbot to a *crot* without a *ceis* (*is crott cen cheis, is cell cen abbaid*). The passage continues by glossing *céis* with

---

[168] Gwynn, E.J. (1942) p 40.
[169] Calder, George (1917) p 115, ll 1483-6.
[170] Radner, Joan (1978) *s.a.* 721, pp 60-1.
[171] See *e.g.* Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 225; Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 186; Carney, James (1971) p 42, transl. p 45; O'Daly, Máirín (1962a) pp 78-9, §8.
[172] Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 70-1. Practically speaking, oak would not be the best material for such an instrument. It likely owes its inclusion to its high status among woods. See Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 381-2. Surviving instruments of later periods are fashioned mainly of yew and willow.
[173] Gwynn, E.J. (1904) pp 26-7, ll 149-52.

various descriptions. Firstly, the *céis* is described as that which holds the strings (*astuda a tét*). Secondly, the term is identified as a small *crot* accompanying a larger one in concert (*ainm do chruit bic bis í comaitecht cruiti móre him chomseinm*). Echoing the first gloss, *céis* is then described as a small pin by which the bronze strings are fastened to the instrument. Lastly, by extension, no doubt referring to the bronze strings, *céis* is defined as the name of the deep chords (*coblaigib*), or the heavy strings (*tromthét*).[174] The role of the *céis* in relation to the music of the *crot* is further supported in a passage from the Middle Irish tale "The Destruction of Dind Ríg", where the *céis* is said to 'conceal not' the music of Craiphtine's instrument (*Ni ceilt céis céol do chruit Chraptine*).[175] Judging from the available evidence, the function of the *céis* seems to have been some type of intensification or regulation of sound. Often considered a tuning-peg or key, for which other terms exist, the *céis* might also be understood as some type of modifier, affixed to either the strings or frame to amplify or dampen sound.

The phrase *cruit cen céis* seems to have been relatively idiomatic, occurring particularly in religious contexts and in relation to Colum Cille. In an account of his death the saint is said to leave his followers like a tune on a *cruit* without its *céis*.[176] The Middle Irish "Advice to a Prince" uses the standard phrase to describe tribes who have lost their king.[177] *Ceis* is also used in conjunction with descriptions of some type of 'hollow-headed' (*cendtoll*) instrument. Interestingly the instrument is used in reference to music played to harken or augur death or destruction. In the late-Middle Irish *Togail Bruidne Dá Chóca*, Craiphtine, a mythical *cruitire* mentioned in several texts, plays the hollow-headed *ceis* (*ceis cendtuill*) to predict the ruin of Da Choca's

[174] Stokes, Whitley (1899) pp 164-7.
[175] Stokes, Whitley (1901) p 6; transl. p 11.
[176] See, *e.g.* AFM, *s.a.* 593; O'Kellegher, A. and Gertrud Schoepperle (1918) pp 416-7.
[177] O'Donoghue, Tadgh (1921-3) p 48; transl. p 53.

reign.[178] Similarly, in "The Destruction of Dind Ríg", Craiphtine plays his instrument (*céis centoll*) to lull his host into a deathsleep (*suanbás*), and later a melody to predict the destruction of the household.[179]

Further accoutrements to the *crott* include plectra, tuning pegs and framing pegs (*carra*). What have been identified as framing pegs survive from late eleventh-century layers in Dublin excavations. The pegs, crafted mainly of yew, resemble lyre-type pegs, and are similar to contemporary finds of north-west Europe.[180] Yew pegs have also been found in Cork, belonging to thirteenth-century contexts. An examination of the pegs shows distinctly different sizes, suggesting some were used for smaller, lighter framed-instruments such as lyres, while others suited larger instruments, perhaps forerunners of the harps surviving from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[181] As the majority of descriptions from the literature are included merely as embellishment, it is often difficult to discern whether actual tuning-pegs or more simply framing-pegs are intended. That stringed instruments were tuned must be presumed. The passage from *O'Davoren's Glossary* concerning the rightful accompaniment for the *crott*, specifies that the instrument must in fact be 'tuned' (*glésaighther na crota*).[182] An annal entry for the year 1226 names Aedh, *airchinnech* of Cunga, as a master of singing (*sai canntaireachta*) and of harp-tuning (*crotglesa*).[183] Several attestations to instrument pegs are found, more commonly in relation to the *timpán*, though doubtlessly appropriate to both instruments. In a

[178] Stokes, Whitley (1900b) pp 154-5.
[179] Stokes, Whitley (1901) p 6; transl. p 11. *Ibid.*, p 7; transl. p 12.
[180] Buckley, Ann (1988) pp 156-7.
[181] Hurley, Maurice (1982) pp 306-9.
[182] Stokes, Whitley (1904a) p 388, §1085.
[183] Hennessy, William H. (1871) pp 290-1. Hennessy translates *crotglesa* 'harp-making'. For *glesa*, 'tuning', see DIL, G-104.3-14.

passage from the Old Irish *Scéla Moshauluim* pegs of gold (*carra óir*) are mentioned gracing a *crott*, complimented by strings of silver (*téta argait*).[184]

Plectra are also mentioned in the legal material. Extensive commentary within the law tract *Bretha Étgid* concerns bodily injuries requiring compensation due to vocational disability. The text declares that a *timpán*-player receives a 'wing-nail' (*ingu eiti*) if one of his fingernails is removed or cut. The 'wing-nail' presumably refers to either a quill plectrum or one which is wing- or fan-shaped.[185] Elsewhere, the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* declares that the *crand glesta*, literally 'tuning stick', must be furnished in the time of minstrelsy (*in aimsir airfitid*).[186] This may refer to either a type of tuning peg, usually termed *carra*, as above, or a wooden plectrum.

Strings (*tétaib*) are also well attested in the literature and legal material, though mainly in descriptions relating the type of music they produce. As indicated by the material evidence, various numbers of strings are illustrated. In general, the *crott* seems to have held considerably more strings than its popular counterpart, the *timpán*. A passage from an Old Irish religious text contains an allegorical account of a ten-stringed *crott*:

> *Nabla didiu crott deichde .i. cotairissedar ó deich tétaib, sennair ó deich méraib, immacomraccat inna deich timmna fuiri. Anúas bíd a bolg di sidiu, ocus is annúas sennair. Nodforndither a ceól inde.*
>
> *Nebel*, however, is a ten-fold harp, to wit, it consists of ten strings, it is played with ten fingers, the ten commandments unite on it. Its belly is downward, and it is played from above. Its music is denoted in that.[187]

---

[184] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) pp 80-1, §9; Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 33-4.
[185] CIH 303.35. As the term is elsewhere unattested it is possibly idiomatic. Interestingly, Ingen and Ette appear as the names of two birds in the Middle Irish "*Da Chophur in da Muccida*", a text found in the *Book of Leinster*. See Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windish (1884-1909) Vol. 3, p 243.
[186] CIH 368.19.
[187] Meyer, Kuno (1894) pp 20-1.

It is difficult to discern whether the instrument here is manipulated to fit the allegory, or vice-versa. A further attestation in the saga literature to a specific number is found in the *Acallamh*, where musicians entertain their guests with 'sweet-stringed *timpán*s' (*timpana téitbinde*) and 'sweet nine-stringed *crott*s' (*cruite nuabinde náethétacha*).[188] The compound *tétbind*, 'sweet-stringed', is found in several Middle Irish texts and is used to describe the melodious sounds of various stringed instruments.[189] As seen, physical descriptions of the strings are also often embellished to enhance the value and splendour of the instruments. A verse from the Middle Irish *Duanaire Finn* describes a *crott* 'of three strings':

> *An cruit cáom sin na ttri ttéad*
> *gid isséin be lór a méd*
> *ted airgid ted uma áin*
> *7 ted iaruinn iomláin.*
>
> That lovely harp of the three strings, though such as it was, enough was their number, a string of silver, a string of bright brass, and a string of iron whole.[190]

While strings fashioned of gold, silver and other precious metals are common enhancements, it is indeed likely metal strings were employed. Gut strings, used on modern harps, are played with the pads of the fingers rather than the nail. Metal strings, traditionally crafted of bronze or brass, must be played with a nail or plectrum. References to nails and plectrums, outlined above, indeed offer support for the use of metal strings. Their use is undoubtedly implied in Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century commentary, where he mentions the 'tinkling' (*tinnitus*) of the upper strings.[191] As Joan Rimmer has noted, the fourteenth-century Trinity College harp, strung with modern brass strings, has been played using the more traditional fingernail

---

[188] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1885-1909) Vol. 4.1, p 13, ll 449-50.
[189] See DIL, T-160.56-64. This is also discussed in relation to the *timpán* in section 3.3, below.
[190] Murphy, Gerard (1953) p 43; transl. p 147.
[191] Dimock, James (1867) p 154.

method, producing bell-like sounds, reminiscent of Cambrensis' description.[192] The material value of the strings is intimated in a legal heptad. The reference is found in commentary concerning women who forfeit certain legal rights by asking an unreasonable bride-price (*coibche*). An example of such an exorbitant request is a bedful of *timpán*-strings (*tolg do thetaib timpain*).[193] The obvious importance of each individual string is attested by a legal citation:

> *Diciallath*ar *coir a crotaibh conbongar aontét...Taithmith*er *coir a coiceat*ail (?) *.i. dichlith*er *coir int sen*n*ma o brister aontét is*in *cruit.*
>
> The tuning of the *crotaibh* is impaired when a single string is broken. The tuning releases the melody, i.e. the tuning of the music is impaired when a single string in the *crott* is broken.[194]

A final accessory of the *crott* mentioned in the early literature is the *bolg* or *crottbolg*, describing the bag in which the instrument was carried. *Táin Bó Fraích* contains a lengthy description of the object:

> *'Sennat do chruittiri dún', ol Ailill ri Fráech. 'Sennat ém', ol Fráech. Crottbolg di chrocnib doborchon impu cona n-imdénam do phartaiṅg foa n-imdénam di ór 7 argut. Bíann n-erbbad impu a mmedón; be gilidir snechta. Sella dubglassa inna medón aide. Bruit lín gilidir fúan ṅgéssa imna téta.*
>
> 'Let thy harpers play to us,' said Ailill to Fróech, 'Let them play, in sooth,' said Fróech. They had harp-bags of otter-skins covering them, with red ornament overworked with gold and silver. Deer-skin around them in the middle as white as snow, with dark grey spots in the centre. Coverings of linen, white as the plumage of swans around the strings.[195]

Similar bags are found in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*. In the tale's description of the 'Room of the *Cruitire*', nine bags hang on the wall to accommodate the nine instruments of the king's *cruitire*. The bags are described as decorated with 'nine

---

[192] Rimmer, Joan (1969) p 33.
[193] CIH 42.39. Or perhaps 'a bed from *timpán* strings'.
[194] CIH 1929.33-6. Translation is my own.
[195] Meid, Wolfgang (1967) §9. For translation, see Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1937) p 4.

golden faces' (*nói mbuilc co n-inchaib órdaib*).[196] Bags are also mentioned in *Cath Maige Tuired* in a short appeal made by Uaithne, *cruitire* to the Tuatha Dé Danann, in summoning the melodies from his instrument:

> *Tair Daur Dá Bláo*
> *Tair Cóir Cetharchuir,*
> *Tair sam, tair gam,*
> *Béola* crott *7 bolg 7 buinne*!
>
> Come Daur Dá Bláo
> Come Cóir Cetharchair,
> Come summer, come winter,
> Mouths of harps and bags and pipes![197]

If relative proportions found in early depictions on high crosses and votive objects can be relied upon, stringed instruments seem to have rivalled the size of their later fourteenth-century counterparts. While descriptions of the *crottbolg* in the literature are doubtless aesthetic in aim, they are presumably based on function. Such large and unwieldy objects needed appropriate transport. The proportionate burden of the instrument, as well as the status of the successful *cruitire* and apprenticeship of his craft are intimated in the Middle Irish "Advice to a Prince":

> *Mac in chruittiri fón cruit*: *issed nachassluitt malle.*
>
> Let the *cruitire*'s son carry the *crott*: that does not harm either of them.[198]

Decorative bags used to carry, protect and complement various respective objects are mentioned elsewhere in the literature, most notably those of *fidchell*-boards and pieces.[199]

---

[196] Stokes, Whitley (1902) p 114. Several passages in the literature describe stringed instruments suspended on walls. The significance of this is uncertain. For examples, see Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 70-1; O'Grady, Standish Hayes, p 223; transl. p 252. In a further example, instruments are hung on trees after their musicians are slain. See *ibid.*, p 7; transl. p 7.

[197] Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 70-1. The reference to *buinne* here is curious. *Béola* and *bolg* certainly refer to the *crott*, Uaithne's instrument. It is unclear to what *buinne* in this case relates. Its inclusion is perhaps to secure assonance.

[198] O'Donoghue, Tadgh (1921-3) p 49, §30.

3.2.*Cruitire*:[200]

Given the high-status of the *crott* itself, it is not surprising that of all musicians the *cruitire*, '*crott*-player', is best attested in the early sources. His status and renown are particularly evident within the legal material. As noted, a legal triad identifies the three strains of music which qualify a *cruitire* as a weeping-tune, a laughing-tune and a sleeping-tune (*tréde neimthigedar cruitire: golltraige, gentraige, súantraige*).[201] These three strains, discussed above, dominate references to music in the early literature, particularly that of stringed instruments, sharing what was likely a specific relationship with the *crott*.

Additional references in the legal material generally concern the status of the *cruitire*. In *Uraicecht Becc*, the *cruitire* is considered the only musician with honour-price and independent legal status. He possesses the honour-price equal to a chief-*bóaire* or freeman farmer, a price fixed generally at five *séts*.

> *Cruite, iss e oendan ciuil andsin, dligeas saire ceni himtheid la hordain, saire boairig tuisse do.*
>
> A *cruitire*, (his) is the only music which is entitled to status, although he does not proceed with a person of high rank, he has the status of a chief-*bóaire*.[202]

The contextual meaning of the verb *imm-tét*, best attested in the sense of 'proceeds' or 'journeys', is unclear. It is uncertain whether the term implies 'travelling', suggesting an itinerant nature or simply 'proceeding', in the sense of 'carrying on' or 'performing' his art. Similarly, a passage from the law tract *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* names the *cruitire* as a musician who is entitled to full honour-price.

---

[199] See chapter 5, section 2.3. The *timpán* also shares a notable connection in the literature with the *fidchell*-board. See section 3.3, below.

[200] Old Irish *'cruit'* is also used to described the player of the *crott*. The term, comprised of *crott* with the agent suffix *-ith*, is often misunderstood as simply the accusative or dative plural of *crott*. See Kelly, Fergus (1990) p 230; Binchy, D.A. (1958) p 47.

[201] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 16, §122.

[202] CIH 1616.31-4; 2281.10-13. Translation is my own. The text here is Old Irish. Each clause in the passage is glossed by later commentary. Parts of the commentary are discussed below.

Dána iolardha eccsamhla atáid siosan, 7 eneclann ar gach dán diobh. cana, cicht…cruit…

Many different men of art here below, and honour-price according to each man of art [is due] them. Poet, engraver,…*cruit*…etc. [203]

The legal distinction and high status afforded the *cruitire* finds further support in the annals. While entertainers find occasional mention in the annalistic sources, references to musicians are strictly limited to players of stringed instruments.[204] The *Annals of the Four Masters* report the death in 1169 of Amhlaeibh Mac Innaighneorach, described as the chief-*ollamh* of Ireland in the playing of the *crott* (*ard ollaim Ereann i ccruitnecht*).[205] Similarly, the *Annals of Ulster* record for the year 1110 the death of Ferdomnach the Blind, identified as the lector of Cell Dara and a master of *cruitireacht* (*sui cruitirechta*).[206] Similar annal entries exist for the *timpán*-player, though none is earlier than the late twelfth-century.[207]

Returning to references in the legal material, the law tract *Críth Gablach*, in its description of the seating arrangement of a king's banquet hall, names the *cruitire* as one of three specific musicians.[208] According to the text the king is seated along the eastern wall, facing the entrance, which is located at the western end. The *cru*[i]*tti* are described as seated along the south wall, to the left of the king, next to the poets, guests and envoys. The remaining musicians in the list, pipers (*cuslennaigh*) and horn-players (*cornaire*), are arranged in the south-east corner of the hall, behind the seated company, accompanying the jugglers (*clesamnaig*).[209] Enjoying a position alongside the king's poets and envoys, the *cruitire* clearly enjoys a status above that

---

[203] Gwynn, E.J. (1942) p 22-3. Translation is my own.

[204] The earliest potential reference to *cruitire* in the annals, an entry in the *Annals of Ulster* (AU) for the year 633, reports the death of Ailill Cruidire. The second element of the name is often translated 'harper'. If the entry is indeed contemporary, and the 'd' in Cruidire is genuine, it is unlikely the element denotes a vocational name deriving from *crott* as 'Cruitire' would be expected.

[205] AFM *s.a.* 1169, pp 1170-1.

[206] AU *s.a.* 1110, pp 550-1.

[207] These are discussed in section 3.4, below.

[208] CG p 23, l. 589 = CIH 570.13-26.

of other musicians and entertainers. In a similar description of the seating arrangement of the banquet hall at Tara, the *cruitire*, 'with whom the champions are ranked' (*do narcnai segann*), are placed in front of the assembled host (*ar belaib na n-uili*).[210] Their position is presumably to provide entertainment to the gathering. Their rightful portion at the feast is the pig's shoulder (*muc formuin*), described as a 'distinguished share' (*cuibrenn eroll*).

Beyond the legal and annalistic sources, manifold references to the *cruitire* are found in the early literature. As expected, the majority of references offers little more than off-hand allusions to musicians and entertainers. While comparatively little is revealed regarding their music, method or technique, much is said of their physical appearance. The *cruitire*'s high-status, so consistently demonstrated in the legal material, finds significant though perhaps inadvertent support in characteristic embellishments. Yellow-hair, seen adorning various musicians throughout the sources, is once again evidenced with the *cruitire*. In a passage from the *Acallamh* a yellow-haired woman of the *sídh* plays the *cruit* for Finn and Caeilte.[211] Earlier in the same tale, Cnú Dheireoil, Finn's *cruitire*, is described with 'long light-yellow hair' (*folt fada fionnbuide*) down to his loins.[212]

Attire and jewelry are also frequently detailed. *Cruitire* in *Táin Bó Fraích* are described dressed in 'kingly attire' (*écosg ríg*).[213] *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* offers a highly descriptive, though musically uninformative, account of the king's nine *cruitire*:

> *Imdúi na Crutiri*
> *Atcondarc nónbur n-aile friu anair. Nói monga cráebacha cassa foraib.*

---

[209] CG *ibid.*, ll 588-90.
[210] Petrie, George (1839) p 200. Petrie translates *segann* 'huntsmen', though it more well-attested in the sense of 'champion' or 'skilled person'. See DIL, S-142.20-60.
[211] Stokes, Whitley (1900c) ll 5027-30.
[212] *Ibid.*, p 108; transl. p 116.
[213] Meid, Wolfgang (1967) p 2, §3.

Nói mbroit glassa luascaig impu. Nói ndelce óir ina mbrataib . Nói failge glano immá láma. Ordnasc óir im ordain cach ae. Auchuimriuch n-óir 'm o chach fir. Muince aircit im brágit cach ae. Nói mbuilc co n-inchaib órdaib uasaib hi fraig .i. nói flesca findarcit inna lamaib.

Ro[s]*feturs a sin, ol se. Noi crutiri ind rig insin. Side 7 Dide, Dulothe 7 Deichrinni, Caumul 7 Cellgen, Ól 7 Ólene 7 Olchói.*

Room of the Harpers
To the east of them I beheld another ennead. Nine branchy, curly manes upon them. Nine grey, floating (?) mantels about them: nine pins of gold in their mantles. Nine rings of crystal around their arms. A thumbring of gold around each man's thumb: an ear-tie of gold round each man's ear: a torque of silver round each man's throat. Nine bags with golden faces above them on the wall. Nine rods of white silver in their hands. Liken thou (them).

'I know those', quoth he (Fer Rogain). 'They are the king's nine harpers, with their nine harps above them: Side and Dide, Dulothe and Deichrinne, Caumul and Cellgen, Ól and Ólene and Olchói.' [214]

Several passages in the literature portray players of stringed instruments, especially the *crott*, receiving precious gifts from respective hosts. These gifts are often in the form of jewellery, portraying what were likely symbols of the musician's standing and skill. In the *Acallamh*, bracelets are given to the *cruitire* Daighre by the king of Spain's daughter.[215] A passage from a later text, the early-Modern *Bruiden Bheag na Almhan*, describes a generous leader who pays his poet, his 'skilled rhymer' and his *cruitire* with gold, silver and jewels.[216]

Interestingly, and ostensibly for dramatic effect, many of the *cruitire* in the literature are represented by society's more aberrant individuals. Dwarves and fools are most frequently described, including the celebrated *cruitire* Cnú Dheireoil, whose description and acquisition by Finn is related in a poem within the *Acallamh*;

A bac do fuair Fionn ferda, do bí d'febus a mhebra
gach a cluinedh tiar is tair, do bíodh aige do mebair
Cnú deróil a ainmin fhir, i nEirinn nír anaithnid
inmain leinbín fa glic nglóir, dar ba comainm Cnú deróil...

---

[214] Stokes, Whitley (1902) p 114.
[215] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 214; transl. p 242.
[216] *Ibid.*, p 338; transl. p 380. Further examples are found in section 3.4, below.

Cetra duirn i náirde in fhir, trí duirn ina chruit chaeimdhil
mór tairm na bláithe buige, binn fogar na caemchruite.

A dwarf it was that stalwart Finn obtained: such was the excellence of his memory that he retained by heart all whatsoever in both east and west he chanced to hear. Cnú Deireoil was the man's name; in Ireland he was not unknown; beloved was the wee urchin that was expert of speech, whose cognomen was Cnú Deireoil...Four fists were in the stature of the man, three in his harp so mild and dear: full-volumed was the sound of the soft delicate instrument, sweet the outpourings of his little harp.[217]

Cnú Deireoil is mentioned in several stories within the tale, as well as in a tale from the *Duanaire Finn*, suggesting that he was likely a popular saga character, and well known before the composition of the *Acallamh*.[218] His name, literally 'little nut', demonstrates his diminutive stature. Elsewhere in the *Acallamh* he is designated 'the dwarf' (*int abach*).[219] Similarly, the *timpán*-player in *Cath Maige Mucrama* is described as a small man (*fer bec*).[220] Interestingly, the Middle English term *cruit*, or *croot*, denotes the smallest pig in a litter, and, by extension, a small child or dwarf. Similarly, Modern Welsh *crwt* describes a small boy or stripling and Breton *krot*, an infant or small child.[221] Each of the terms appears to be a borrowing, though the linguistic and chronological development is uncertain. It is tempting to suggest that the Welsh and English terms, attested from the fourteenth century onwards, are connected to Irish *crott* through the recurrent description of diminutive players, typified by the figure Cnú Deireoil.

Women are also portrayed as *cruitire*, occasionally in a professional manner, performing for reward.[222] In these examples, as in the majority of references from the saga literature, *cruitire* are described as members of the Otherworld, particularly in

---

[217] *Ibid.*, p 108; transl. p 116. For an alternative translation, see Dooley, Ann and Harry Roe (1999) p 21.
[218] See Murphy, Gerard (1933) pp 82-3.
[219] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 203; transl. p 230.
[220] O'Daly, Maírín (1975) pp 5-6
[221] GPC, p 616; Hemon, Roparz (1959-79) Vol. 19, p 1914.
[222] See *e.g.*, Stokes, Whitley (1904b) pp 31-2; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 197; transl. p 223.

connection with the Tuatha Dé Danann. In *Cath Maige Tuired* Abcón mac Bicelmois is described as the *cruitire* "...whom the three gods chose in the *síd*-mounds."[223] In the *dindsenchas* poem for Crotta Cliach, Cliach of the 'sweet-sounding *crot*' (*na cruite céol-míne*) is named as a man of the fairies.[224]

Elsewhere, *cruitire* are portrayed with quasi-druidic effect. A passage from *Táin Bó Cuailnge* describes the *cruitire* of Cáinbile as 'men of great knowledge and prophecy and magic'. When rightly suspected of being spies for the Ulstermen, the *cruitire* are hunted down, escaping by turning themselves into deer.[225] As seen, miraculous powers of a more Christian nature are seen in the preface to the *Amra Choluimb Cille*, where a *cruitire* procures words from an otherwise mute Labraid Loingsech.[226]

3.3 *Timpán*:

The *timpán* is as well attested in the early Irish sources as the *crott*, though equally ambiguous.[227] Outwardly, the etymology of the term *timpán* appears connected to the Latin *tympanum*, 'drum' or, occasionally, 'tambourine'. The *timpán*, however, was clearly a stringed instrument. As such, any confusion with the instrument represented by the Latin term can be dismissed. The lone etymological account of the term in the early sources is found in *Sanas Cormaic*:

> *Timpān .i. tim* [*.i.bocc*] *.i. sail 7 bān .i. umae bīs inti. Uel quasi simpān a simphonia .i. ōn bindius.*

---

[223] Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 38-9, § 60.
[224] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 225. Crotta Cliach are identified as the Galtee Mountains, Co. Tipperary. See Hogan, Edmund (1910) p 309.
[225] *Táin* LU, ll 941-5; transl p 151. *Táin* LL, ll 267-71; transl. p 173.
[226] Stokes, Whitley (1899) pp 249-250.
[227] I retain the original term *timpán* in this discussion as there is inadequate evidence to provide a satisfactory term in English. Extensive research on the *timpán* has been conducted by the musicologist Ann Buckley. Much of what is said in this section reiterates what she has previously concluded. It is my hope that the social historical perspective of this work adds new insight to the exisiting musicological understanding.

> Timpan, i.e. pliant [i.e. soft], i.e. willow and white, i.e. bronze which is in it. Or it is as a *simpan* or symphonia, i.e. from the sweetness.[228]

As will be shown, evidence suggests the *timpán* was likely fashioned mainly of wood, while strings are often described as bronze or brass. The reference to willow is particularly apt as the wood is strong though easily worked.[229] The allusions to Latin *simpan* and *symphonia*, 'concerted music', suggest the glossator was equally puzzled as to the etymology of the term, if not the instrument itself.

As compared to the *crott*, very little is said of the *timpán* in the legal material. The *timpán* is used as a gloss in the passage from *Uraicecht Becc* describing the independent legal status and honour-price accorded the *crott*.

> *Cruit .i. cruit ar timpan sin, ł cruiti uirri bodein.*
>
> *Crott*, i.e. *cruit* standing for timpán, or *cruit*, in its proper sense. [230]

As with the majority of later legal commentary it is unclear whether the gloss represents an accurate historical reflection on the Old Irish passage. Judging from the source material as an entirety, however, the *timpán* is as well attested as the *crott*. If such evidence indeed reflects reality, it is likely the *timpán* enjoyed the same popularity and legal standing as the *crott*.

While the paucity of references to the *timpán* in the law tracts presents a limited legal understanding, the saga literature abounds in accounts and descriptions of the instrument. The majority of references to the *timpán* describe it as an instrument of precious materials, clearly in part a result of literary embellishment. As Ann Buckley points out, while many descriptions in the early literature suggest *timpán*s of gold, silver and bronze, these materials more likely describe the decoration

---

[228] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 109, §1258 = CIH 627.4-5. Translation is my own. While the glossary is attributed to the ninth-century, the entry for *timpán* is only found in two fourteenth-century manuscript copies.

[229] Willow is well known for its pliability and strength. For a short discussion of its use in early Ireland, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 384.

and ornamentation of the instruments, or in fact the material of the strings.[231] Adornment of musical instruments finds support in a late sixteenth-century description of musicians on the Western Isles of Scotland:

> ...their grand ambition is to adorn their harps with great quantities of silver and gems; those who are too poor to afford jewels substitute crystals in their stead.[232]

Such ornamentation brings to mind descriptions, found throughout the sources, of precious metals and jewels afforded musicians as both payment and reward. The finest example of this is seen in the *Acallamh* where the musician Cascorach plays his *timpán* at a banquet. He plays so wonderfully the king rewards him with 'jewels and wealth' (*seóit 7 máine*), which he generously distributes to his companions.[233] If such descriptions reflect actual practice, it is likely the reputation, status and cost of a musician was portrayed by the ornamentation of his instrument.

Interestingly, allusions to the *timpán* are also frequently found alongside those of *fidchell*-boards. *Fidchell*-boards, clearly items of personal as well as monetary value, are also described as adorned with precious metals and gems.[234] References to the objects in tandem are most often found in descriptions of banquet halls and the entertainment provided within. In a passage from the Old Irish *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin* several of the king's servant-boys carry *fidchell*-boards on their backs and *timpán*s in their right hands.[235] In a late-Middle Irish story concerning the Battle of Magh Lena, the king of Munster is told he can once again relax within the sunhouse where he used to play *fidchell*, accompanied by the music of 'sweet-stringed' *timpán*s

---

[230] CIH 1616.31; 2333.17. Translation is my own.
[231] Buckley, Ann (1978) p 59.
[232] Bannerman, John (1991) p 9.
[233] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 188; transl. p 213.
[234] See chapter 5, sections 2.1 and 3.
[235] Binchy, D.A. (1963) p 2. Binchy dates the tale to the latter half of the ninth century.

(*timpán téd-bind*).[236] Finally, in the Middle Irish *Loinges Mac Dúil Dermaid* Cú Chulainn arrives at a house with one hundred and fifty couches, upon each of which is hung a *fidchell*-board, a *brandub*-board, and a *timpán*.[237]

Returning to the *timpán*, while descriptions of gold and silver likely represent instrument ornamentation, simple literary embellishment or a combination of the two, the *timpán créda*, or 'bronze *timpán*', is a regular feature of the saga literature. In *Cath Maige Mucrama* the daughter of the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann plays the *timpán creda*.[238] Bronze *timpán*s are also mentioned in the passage above from *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin*.[239] The value of such an instrument is related in *Togail Bruidne Dá Chóca*, where a *timpán creda* is described as a 'treasure'(*maín*).[240]

While descriptions of bronze *timpán*s are complimented by additional accounts of gold and silver instruments, a more plausible image can be gathered from a critical examination of the source material. As suggested in *Sanas Cormaic* it is likely the instrument was crafted primarily of wood. Soundboxes of harps and other stringed instruments throughout the world are crafted primarily of wood.[241] The same can be reasonably assumed for the early Irish *timpán*. Instruments of wood are indirectly implied in an Irish proverb on dangers in affairs of the heart:

Mairg do loisfeadh a thiompán leat.

Pity him who would burn his *tiompán* for you.[242]

Ann Buckley discusses a further reference which points to the likelihood of wood frames for *timpán*s.[243] The passage, taken from the *Irish Grammatical Tracts*, consists of a couplet dated to the end of the twelfth century:

---

[236] Jackson, Kenneth M. (1938) p 30, l. 741.
[237] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol 2.1, p 179, ll 147-8.
[238] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) p 38.
[239] Binchy, D.A. (1963) p 2.
[240] Stokes, Whitley (1900b) p 154.
[241] See Sadie, Stanley (1986) Vol. 2, p 131.

Imirt sgéith Lagha ar do láimh. ar chléith tana do thiompáin.

Play spewings of Lug from your hand. From the thin frame of your timpán.[244]

The term *chléith*, the genitive singular of *clíath*, 'wattle' or 'hurdle' is well attested as a building and crafting material, most often in relation to fences or palisades.[245] Thin branches or limbs represent a suitable material for an instrument's frame, particularly that of the *timpán*, which, as will be seen, was generally smaller in size than the *crott*.

The strings represent the most well-attested component of the *timpán*. As seen in descriptions of the frame, the materials of the strings are also frequently described as silver and bronze. References to the latter, however, are likely based in fact. Giraldus Cambrensis specifies that bronze and not leather strings were used for both the Irish *cithara* and *timpán*.[246] Historically, bronze and brass, of which there is little differentiation in early Irish terminology, are common materials for strings and enjoy a continuum up until the eighteenth century.[247] That strings were valuable, difficult to procure and required skill to create is demonstrated by the intentionally exaggerated legal passage declaring 'a bedful of *timpán* strings' as an impossible bride-price.[248] As previously seen, bronze strings (*umae bís inti*) are implied in the entry from *Sanais Cormac*. A poem written in the late thirteenth-century describes a 'sweet-stringed *timpán*' (*timpán tédbind*) whose 'bronze thread' (*snáth uma*) puts its host to sleep.[249]

---

[242] O'Rahilly, Thomas (1922) p 110, §314. The proverb is likely based on a Scottish folktale.
[243] Buckley, Ann (1978) p 60.
[244] Bergin, Osborn (1921-3) p 81. The translation supplied is discussed in Buckley, Ann, *ibid.* The term *chléith*, genitive singular of *clíath*, 'wattle' or 'hurdle' indicates that thin branches or limbs were likely used in the frame of the instrument.
[245] See DIL, C-239.44-240.4.
[246] O'Meara, John J. (1951) p 104. For the Latin text, see Dimock, James (1867) p 154.
[247] Several different terms are often deemed 'bronze'. *Umae* more commonly denotes 'copper' though the alloy bronze is more likely in practical application of instrument strings. See DIL, U-79.20-80.5. *Créda*, from *cré*, 'clay', is best attested in the sense of 'earthen' or 'clayey'. See DIL, C-516.10-28. Its attestation as 'bronze' is likely a result of the similarity in colour. *Crédumae*, a compound of *cré*, 'clay', and *umae*, 'copper' is the standard and technical term for bronze or brass. See DIL, C-517.11-26.
[248] CIH 1616.31.
[249] McKenna, Lambert (1947) poem 11, §28.

Bronze as a material seems to have been common enough a material as to stand for the string itself. A line from a poem within *Mesce Chúanach* reports the "...cry of the bronze (*uma*) from the bosom of the instrument."[250]

Additional specified materials for the strings include various references to 'coloured' metals. Strings of red gold (*ór derg*) compliment a silver *timpán* (*timpán aircit*) in an Early Modern Irish story within the *Book of Lismore*.[251] *Finnruinne*, elsewhere *findbruine*, is also mentioned as a material for strings in the *Acallamh*:

> *Timpān bec ro bói ac na mnáib*
> *cona leithrind airgit báin*
> *cona deilgnib ōir buidhe*
> *cona thétaib findruine.*
>
> A small *timpán* which was in the possession of the women
> with its *leithrind* of white silver
> with its pegs of yellow gold
> with its strings of *findruine*.[252]

Findruine seems to have been a type of alloy of either copper or gold with silver. In terms of value it is ranked less precious than gold though more precious than bronze.[253] The element *find*, 'white', is indeed common in such alloys. *Findairget*, 'white silver' and *finnuma*, 'white copper' are attested in the early literature and legal material.[254] While such an alloy would be suitable for strings, in this example *findruine* is likely to insure rhyme.

While physical descriptions of strings are relatively common, the distinct sound made by the strings appears indispensable to any account of the instrument itself. *Binn*, 'melodious' or 'sweet' is unequivocally linked to the *timpán*. While the term is used to describe various music and instruments, it retains a particular association with the *timpán*. The early-Middle Irish *Saltair na Rann* describes David

---

[250] O'Daly, Máirín (1962a) pp 78-9, §8.
[251] Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise (1926) p 10, §4.
[252] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol 4.1, p 154, ll 5610-1.
[253] See DIL, F-138.86-7.

playing his 'sweet-stringed *timpán*' (*a thimpáin téidbind*).[255] In a late thirteenth-century pseudo-historical text, the second-century Munster king Eoghan Mór is invited by his fairy mistress to a place where he is told he once heard the 'sweet-stringed *timpán*' (*timpán téd-bind*).[256] Similarly, the fairy king in the late-Middle Irish *Aidedh Ferghusa* describes his *timpán* as equipped with 'melodious strings' (*mo thimpán co téidbinne*).[257] In the *Acallamh* a festive banquet includes 'sweet-stringed *timpáns*' (*timpána téithbinne*) alongside 'dulcet-chorded *cruit*'.[258] The point is perhaps belaboured in a further passage from the *Acallamh*:

> *Ocus tuc a thimpan cuice 7 ra gles hí, 7 do tṡéind hí co tucaster cairchi cíuil urrí, 7 ní chualadar riam reime a chombind acht mád adhmolad na canóine coimdeta 7 edarmolad Ríg nime 7 talman.*
>
> And he took up his *tiompán* and tuned it, and played on it a gentle sweet melody, and never before was such sweet music heard except perhaps in the belauding of the [divine scripture] and in the praises of the King of heaven and earth.[259]

In a similar comparison to heaven, the silver *timpán* within "The Siege of Druim Damhghaire" is described as producing music "...more melodious than every music under heaven" (*binne iná gach ceol fo nimh*).[260] Finally, in what is likely the earliest reference to the *timpán* in the saga literature, the ninth-century *Aisling Oengusso* describes a *timpán* as, '...the sweetest that ever was' (*as binem boíe*).[261]

When indicated, the number of strings recorded for the *timpán* is generally three. A passage within *Cath Maige Mucrama* describes a small man seated in the

---

[254] See DIL, F-142.64-6, 143.34-7. See also Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 585-7.
[255] Stokes, Whitley (1883) p. 89, l. 6060.
[256] Jackson, Kenneth M. (1938) p 30, l. 741.
[257] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 248; transl. p 281.
[258] *Ibid.*, p 177; transl. p 208.
[259] Stokes, Whitley (1900c) ll 3465-7. Translation at Buckley, Ann (1978) p 66. Buckley tentatively suggests 'dominical canons' for *canóine coimdeta*. Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested (pers. com.) taking this 'divine scripture'.
[260] Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise (1926) p 10, §4.
[261] Shaw, Francis (1934) p 44.

fork of a yew tree, playing a three-stringed *timpán* (*trí thét ina thimpán*).[262] As Ann Buckley points out, a three-stringed *timpán* is also mentioned in two seventeenth-century political poems;

> *Trí téada nach binn dáin*
> *do chím ar lár do thiompáin*
> *beag a mrígh, searbh a nglór,*
> *ní dearbadh ar an láimh lán mhór.*
>
> Three strings whose artistry is not sweet
> I see in the middle of your tiompán;
> small their meaning, harsh their sound;
> they are no proof for [ownership of] the mighty great hand [i.e. of Ulster].[263]

and, from *The* (*Red*) *Book of Clanranald*;

> *Trí téad is laige táin*
> *do chím a lar do thiompáin.*
> Three strings (which are) of little repute
> I see in (on) the middle of your tiompán.[264]

Interestingly, the reference to the *timpán* in this case is used as political propaganda. The poems themselves represent a reaction to an earlier poem asserting the rightful ownership of the Ulster armorial emblem, the Red Hand. The lack of artistry and skill at the three-stringed instrument seems a slight aimed at diminishing the rightful, ancestral and, most importantly, national claim to the symbol.

A three-stringed instrument further supports the overall evidence that the *timpán* was smaller in size than the *crott*. As previously seen, several allusions to the *timpán* describe it as 'small'.[265] This is further supported by several references in the literature which refer to the instrument as 'handheld'. This description, by and large unique to the *timpán*, suggests it was roughly the size of the hand. The *timpán* in the

---

[262] O'Daly, Maírín (1975) pp 5-6.
[263] Royal Irish Academy MS 23 H. 25, f. 12. Translation by Buckley, Ann (1978) p 62.
[264] Cameron, Alexander (1894) p 293, ll 9-10.
[265] A passage from the Middle Irish "Advice to a Prince" seems to offer indirect evidence. Three musical instruments are mentioned in the text, the *crott*, the horn, and the *timpán*. The first two instruments are mentioned in relation to their perhaps awkward transport, i.e 'let the hornblower's son carry the horn' and 'let the *cruitire*'s son carry the *crott*'. By contrast, the *timpánach*'s son is only responsible for singing 'dainty compositions'. See O'Donoghue, Tadhg (1921-3) p 49, §§29-31.

ninth-century *Aisling Oengusso* is described as held in the hand of Aengus' mistress (*inna láim*).[266] Elsewhere a silver *timpán* is portrayed as such, as is a bronze timpán in *Cath Maige Mucrama* (*ina láim*).[267] In a passage from the Old Irish *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin* several boys hold leashed greyhounds in their left hands, bronze *timpán*s in their right.[268]

In relative contrast to the *crott*, the manner and method in which the *timpán* was played is well-attested. If evidence concerning the size of the *timpán* is accurate, the instrument was doubtless held in one hand and played with the other. Evidence from the legal material suggests that fingernails and plectra were used in plucking the strings. The passage in question, from commentary on the law tract *Bretha Étgid*, mentioned above, states;

> *Mas o duban suas robenad de a ingu, eiric bainbeime ann, 7 ingu eiti don timpanach ar son aithgena masa de dobenad.*
>
> If it is from the hook upwards that the nail was cut from him, (a penalty of) body-fine of a white (bloodless)-blow there, and a wing-nail for the *timpánach* on account of restitution, if it was from him it was cut.[269]

The 'wing nail' is presumably some type of plectrum, perhaps fashioned from a quill or perhaps a bone from a bird's wing. Compensation for occupational injuries are well documented in the legal material. The loss in this case of a fingernail, while relatively innocuous, would clearly have affected the player's performance, thus requiring suitable restitution. Evidence for plucking with the fingers is also seen in a poem from *Aidedh Ferghusa*, where a fairy king praises his treasured *timpán*, described as so valuable no finger need touch it as it plays itself;

> *Uch is binn a baegalán, ocus is caem a chédail;*
> *mar sinnios a haenerán, gan mér ar théid dá thédaib.*

---

[266] Shaw, Francis (1934) p 44.
[267] Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise (1926) p 10, §4. O'Daly, Maírín (1975) p 38.
[268] Binchy, D.A. (1963) p 2.
[269] CIH 303.35. Translation is my own.

> Ah, how melodious is its martial strain, and its low cadence, ah how sweet! all of itself too how it plays, without a finger on a single string of all its strings.[270]

A twelfth-century tale concerning Cú Chulainn describes a musician who uses his finger to play the three music-strains on his *timpán*, "He plied his finger over it until Cu Chulainn was weeping heavily at the sad tune." (*Atnaigh-sium a mher tharse co m-boi Cúchulaind oc sirchíu lásin n-golltraighes*).[271] Finally, in the late-Middle Irish tale "The Banquet of Dún na n-Gedh" the main character Congal is lulled to sleep by a *timpán* played with every part of the finger;

> *...ocus re forcad fáidemal, fuasáidech, fir-truag na téd ocus na timpán 'ga tadall d'aigtib ocus d'formnadaib eand ocus ingen na ruad 'ga sar-seinm.*
>
> ...and by the warbling vibrations and melancholy notes of the strings and tympans struck by the tops, sides and nails of the fingers of the minstrels, who so exquisitely performed on them.[272]

Such musicianship was perhaps taxing upon its performers, as implied in the *dindsenchas* poem describing the fair at Carman where *timpán*-players are described as playing 'without weariness'.[273]

The *timpán* may also have been played with a bow. A passage from the Middle Irish prose annotations to *Félire Oengusso* seems to indicate a keen competition between the players of the *crott* and *timpán*, centring around the divergent methods by which the two instruments are played;

> *Treide nemtigth*er *cruit, goltraiges gentraiges suantraiges flescach ocus emnad ocus cairched acon timpanach imarcraigh cruiterechta 'con cruit*iri *indiu na naguid sin imforc*raidh *timpanachta acon timpanuig indiu na nag*uid *sin.*
>
> Three things exalt a harper: weeping music, laughing music and sleeping music; bowing and playing and *cairched*(?) on the part of the *timpán*-player. Nowadays, in addition to those the *harper* has further

[270] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 248; transl. p 281.
[271] Meyer, Kuno (1883-5b) pp 490-1.
[272] O'Donovan, John (1842) pp 168-9.
[273] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 3, pp 18-9.

skills proper to playing the *timpán* in addition to those.[274]

According to musicologists the bow, as used for stringed instruments, does not seem to have appeared in Western Europe much before the eleventh century.[275] This has implications on the translation of *fleascach* as 'bow' as *Félire Oengusso* is textually and linguistically dated to the ninth century. Alternatively *fleascach* may be interpreted as 'beating' or striking' and perhaps refers to a particular manner of plucking the strings or perhaps the striking of the frame. A more reliable, though significantly later reference to a bow (*fleasc*) is found in a verse within "The Siege of Druim Damhghaire", where Aengus is said to make 'sweet music' on his *timpán* with a 'bow made of hair' (*fleasc gu cairche*).[276]

Finally, tuning of the *timpán* is also mentioned in the literature. In the *Acallamh* Caeilte tunes (*do ghlés*) his instrument before he plays for Patrick.[277] In the passage previously discussed from *Aidedh Oengusso*, the fairy king declares that after tuning (*a rann glésta*) his *timpán* even a man wholly unfamiliar with the instrument will be able to produce music equal to that made by a minstrel.[278] While the terms *glés* and *glésaid* are used to describe 'tuning', tuning pegs for the *timpán* are not mentioned in the source material.

3.4. *Timpánach*:

Unlike the *cruitire*, mentioned repeatedly in the early legal material and literature, the *timpánach* features relatively late in the Middle Irish sources.[279] The term, comprised of the term *timpán* with the standard agentive suffix *-ach*, is also

---

[274] The text is found at Trinity College Dublin MS H.3.18, f. 87a. The translation has been kidly suggested to me by Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards.
[275] This is discussed by Ann Buckley, *ibid.*
[276] Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise (1926) p 10, §4.
[277] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 170; transl. p 191.
[278] *Ibid.*, p 248; transl. p 281.
[279] As will be seen, the *timpánach* is indeed found in early texts, though, as compared to the *cruitire*, only infrequently.

seldom accompanied by detailed descriptions of aspect and appearance, so frequently found with the *cruitire*. The earliest reference to the *timpánach*, and the lone example from the legal material is that within *Bretha Étgid*, describing compensation for the loss of a fingernail. The term also appears in *Tochmarc Emire*, a tale within the *Leabhar na hUidre*, describing a festive banquet where music is played by both a *timpánach* and *cruitire*.[280] A final reference from the literature is seen in the late-Middle Irish "Advice to a Prince", where the son of the *timpánach* is responsible for singing 'dainty compositions'.[281]

Apart from these references, the remaining literary evidence for the *timpánach* is found in the annals. Three entries in the *Annals of Ulster* record the deaths of *timpán*-players. The earliest of these is found for the year 1177. The entry reports that the *timpánach* of the Ua Coinnecen, described as chief-*ollamh* of the North of Ireland, was killed by the Cenél Conaill.[282] Nearly two centuries pass before the next entry for the *timpánach* is found, recording the death of Maelruanaigh in the year 1328;

> *In caec Mac Cerbaill, idon, Maelruanaig, aen raga timpanac Erenn 7 Alban 7 in domain uile 7 ni derbtar a leiteid do tect riam o tus domain risin eladain sin, a marbad fein...*
>
> The Blind Mac Cerbaill, namely, Maelruanaigh, the most choice timpanist (*aen raga timpanac*) of Ireland and of Scotland and of the whole world - and it is not verified that an equal to him in that art ever came from the beginning of the world - was killed...[283]

Interestingly, several passages from the literature suggest that the *timpán* was also known by the Irish to have been played in Scotland. In the *Acallamh* one of Finn's minstrels is described as "...the sweetest that in Ireland or Scotland ever handled a

---

[280] Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (1929) l. 10134. For translation, see Meyer, Kuno (1898) p 55.
[281] See O'Donoghue, Tadhg (1921-3) p 49, §31. Possible implications of this passage are discussed in fn. 267, above.
[282] AU^2 *s.a.* 1177. This is the lone annal entry for the *timpánach* until the fourteenth century. A contemporary annal entry is found for the *cruitire* in AFM, *s.a.* 1169, where the death is recorded for a chief-*ollamh* in Ireland of *cruitireacht*.

timpán" (*is é as binne do ghab timpán ina láim i nEirinn ná i nAlbain*).[284] The house described in *Loinges Mac Duil Dermaid*, where Cú Chulainn is shown one hundred and fifty couches each with its own *timpán*, is reported to be situated off the western coast of Scotland.[285] As seen, in what is the clearest account of the instrument's prevalence in Scotland, Giraldus Cambrensis considers the *timpán* one of Scotland's three instruments, alongside the *cithara* and the crowd.[286]

A final annal entry, similar to the one above and also found in the *Annals of Ulster*, reports the death in the year 1360 of Gilla na Naem O'Conmide. He is described as '*ollamh* in *timpánacht* of Thomond' (*ollam tuad-muman .i. re timpanacht*). Judging from the evidence, it is perhaps surprising that while the *timpán* itself is well attested in the source material, entries concerning the *timpánach* in the annals are limited to the twelfth century and later. This may in fact derive from a concerted effort to distinguish the *timpán*, clearly a native instrument, from the *crott*, also a native instrument, though one which had undergone considerable post-Norman change and influence.

---

[283] AU[2] *s.a.* 1328. Compare the like entry in the *Annals of Connacht*, *s.a.* 1328, where he is described as 'king of music-making' (*ri na senma*), "...and no one knows if there ever was or ever will be so good a player on the timpe". For translation, see Freeman, A. Martin (1944) p 265.

[284] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 203; transl. pp 229-30. This again shows the tendency to describe the instrument as 'in hand'.

[285] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol 2.1, p 179, ll 147-8.

[286] O'Meara, John J. (1951) p 104. For the Latin, see Dimock, James (1867) p 154.

Chapter 2 Professional Entertainers and Fools

1. Entertainers

The most comprehensive evidence concerning professional entertainers in early Ireland is found within the law text *Uraicecht Becc*. The text lists eleven members of society who retain an honour-price and are paid restitution for crimes against them according to a percentage of their employer's honour-price. The individuals listed are ostensibly those expected among the retinue of a high-ranking and affluent host. This implies that any individual who was able to retain entertainers might include them among his retinue. The text states: [1]

> *AES CIUIL .i. cronanaig 7 AIRFIDID .i. fedanaig OILCENA .i. uili cena .I. MONAIG .i.bid ar monaib a neach isna hænaigib OCUS ARAID .i. doniad in aruigecht*[2] *.i. in indus cedna, na gilli urraith LUAMAIN .i. luamairet na hetair*[3] *7 COMAIL .i. doniad in cerd comaind 7 DAIME .i. marbaid na sitcaire*[4] *7 CRECCOIRE .i. doniad crecad glas arna roscaib*[5] *7 CLEASAMNAIG.i. cuirid na goo-clis a nairde*[6] *7 FUIRSEOIRE .i. donia in fuirseoracht asa mbelaib 7 BRUIGEDOIRE .i. doniad in bruigedoracht asa tonaib 7 FODANA OLCEANA .i. drochdana uili cena IS A HINCAIB AGA MBIAD .i. is a hincaib an caich aga mbi siat ata enic*lann *doib IS AS DIRENAITER .i. is as-sin eirniter enec*lann *doib cena fo leth a dualgas a ndana...*[7]
>
> PEOPLE OF MUSIC, i.e. crooners and MINSTRELS, i.e. pipe-players; OTHERS, i.e. all others besides, I.E. FEATSTERS, i.e. who perform feats upon horses in the fairs; AND CHARIOTEERS, i.e. who perform the chariot-driving, i.e. in the same way, the young charioteers; STEERSMEN, i.e. they steer the boats; and MAGICIANS, i.e. who perform the art of magic; and COMPANIES, i.e. who kill the fairies; and SCARIFIERS (?) i.e. who make a green sore (tattoo?) on the eyes; and JUGGLERS, i.e. who let loose spear-feats aloft; and

---

[1] CIH 1617. 11-21. Translation is my own. The passage is not found in all surviving texts of *Uraicecht Becc.* It is found in RIA MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote), p 348a, shown here; and National Library of Ireland MS G 3, f.45b. Several glosses offer variant readings in National Library MS G 3. I have included these in the corresponding footnotes, below.

[2] *Cf.* CIH 2281.32, *ARAIDH .i. doniat na carbaid (?) .i. na gilli urraid.*

[3] *Cf. ibid., LUAMAIN .i. doniat in luamairecht.*

[4] *Cf.* CIH 2281.33, *DAMAI .i. marbait na sithaige.*

[5] *Cf.* CIH 2281.34, *CREACOIRE .i. doniat in crechad i snaidm no i sttlus... (*several letters illegible).

[6] *Cf.* CIH 2281.35, *CLEASAMNAIG.i.daleiget na goa-clis a nairde.*

[7] CIH 1617.11-18. Translation is my own. The passage is briefly discussed in Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 64-5.

> BUFFOONS, i.e. who perform *fuirseoracht* out of their mouths; and FARTERS, i.e. who perform *bruigedoracht* out of their rears; and THE OTHER SUB-ARTISANS besides, i.e. low-artisans besides. THEIR STATUS IS [derived] FROM WHOM THEY ARE WITH i.e., their status is [derived] from whomever they are with, they are the honour-prices for them. IT IS ON THAT BASIS THAT THEIR HONOUR-PRICE IS PAID i.e., it is from them the honour-price is granted so that it is not individually by virtue of their arts.

While various entertainers are named, little is revealed as to the specific nature of each individual entertainment. Examining the terms independently, many are found elsewhere in the legal material and the saga-literature.

1.1. *Clesamnach*:

The most widely attested entertainer in the passage from *Uraicecht Becc* is the *clesamnach*. The term itself derives from the root *cles*, 'trick' or 'feat'. As such, the *clesamnach* is most often translated 'juggler'.[8] While the legal material clearly describes a performance consistent with juggling, the saga-literature presents a character whose antics often incorporate much more, including jesting, contortions and basic buffoonery. The *clesamnach*, perhaps better described as the early Irish representative of the medieval jester, is the best attested and best understood entertainer from the early sources.

As seen in *Uraicecht Becc* the status and honour-price of the *clesamnach* is dependent upon his employer. The glossator describes his performance as a type of spear-juggling. A gloss from a separate version of the tract re-iterates the description, declaring the *clessamnach* 'multiplies the spear-feats aloft' (*.i. daleiget na goa-clis a nairde*).[9] In the law tract *Bretha Étgid*, rules governing the *clesamnach*'s profession are contained in extensive commentary concerning various inadvertent injuries. The injuries listed are predominantly those of the workplace, while domestic injuries,

injuries from animals and injuries in battle are also included. While several of the cases discussed concern the broad spectrum of entertainment, for example injuries at horseraces or fairs, the *clesamnach* is the only individual entertainer identified and discussed. The commentary, typically detailed and extensive, is nonetheless pertinent and valuable to the understanding of the entertainer's craft;

> *BLA CLESAMNAIG CLES .i. Slan donti eamnas na go clis in nairdi, no na hubla clis in nairdi Masa clesa neamaicbeile iat, is fiach fiancluichi indtu i laithrind 7 fiach cola cluiche indtu a .uii.arlaithrind Masa clesa aicbeile iat, is fiach cola cluichi indtu, cid a laithrind cid a .uii. arlaithrind. IS ed is clesa aicbeili ann cach cles ara mbia rind no faebur. IS ed is clesa nemaicbeile ann: cach cles arna bia rind na faebur. IS ed is laithrind and: a tuitim ime ima cuaird i baile i mbi. IS ed is .vii. arlaithrind and: a ndul uad imach i ciana.*
>
> Exemption of feats of a featster .i. Immunity for him who multiplies the spears of performance aloft, or the balls of performance aloft. If they be non-dangerous feats, there is a penalty of *fian*-games for them in a proper place and a penalty of *col*-games for them outside of the proper place. If they be dangerous feats, there is a penalty of *col*-games for them, whether it be in the proper place or outside of the proper place. These are the dangerous feats: any feat where there is a tip or a sharp edge. These are the non-dangerous feats: any feat where there is no tip or sharp edge. This constitutes the proper place: their falling about him around the place in which he is. This constitutes outside of the proper place: their going from him outwards at a distance. [10]

The distinction between *fian*-games and *col*-games is often dependent upon context.[11] Generally speaking, *fian*-games are those in which injury is likely to occur, though inadvertently and moderate, while *col*-games are those in which injury is either common or advertent, and often serious. In the case of the *clesamnach*'s individual performance the distinction is clearly defined. *Fian*-games are those which present little danger to the participant or onlooker, in this case juggles of objects with no sharp point or edge, falling inside a given area. *Col*-games, by contrast, are those

---

[8] DIL C-231.15-82; 232.34-56.
[9] CIH 2281.32.
[10] CIH 288.7-14. Translation is my own.
[11] The terms are discussed in chapter 7.

which contain elements which may be dangerous to the participant or onlooker, i.e. juggles with sharp objects, which tend or have the potential to fall outside a given area. The currency of the amusement is indicated by its position within the text itself. The *clessamnach* and his craft are listed between commentaries on damages from improperly stored grain and damage to iron implements used in slaughter. The recognition of the entertainer as a professional is supported by his inclusion alongside such figures as smiths, millers, and soldiers. Additionally, injuries occurring from his craft share currency with injuries by cats and jealous women, demonstrating that his position in society was both common and accepted.[12]

That the performance of a *clesamnach* may have included musical entertainment is suggested in a fragment from the legal text *Dliged Raith Fine*, concerned, among other things, with the dues and services of clientship. The text states that the appropriate services of the racing hound (*milchon*) are due at assemblies and gatherings, in the same way as the services of the musician who is also a *clesamnach* (*fer airbite do clesamnach*).[13] A further legal fragment finds the *clesamnach* couched in a list of the four *daer nemid*, or 'base professions'. The list includes the *clesamnach*, the hornplayer, the piper and the *cuislennach*.[14]

A similar description and illustration is provided in the Middle Irish *Suidigud Tige Midhchúarta*, a text within the *Book of Leinster*. The text is primarily concerned with the allocation of meat to members of the king's household and retinue. The *clesamnach* receives the same portion as the *cuislennach* and, interestingly, is seated alongside both the *cuislennaig* and the hornplayers, opposite other such entertainers as

---

[12] CIH 289.31-5; 290.32-6.

[13] CIH 921.1f. The *do* is likely an example of the *genetivus generis* use of *de*. See DIL, D-149.11ff. The sense of the phrase is then 'the *airfite* who is also a *clesamnach*.'

[14] CIH 1108.23. (*na pipairedha 7 na clesammnaigh 7 na cornairda 7 na cuislennaig*) The *cuislennach* played a type of pipe-instrument. All three musicians are discussed in chapter 1.

the *druith* and *creccaire*.[15] The poem intimates that the *clessamnach* included vocal antics as part of his entertainment,

> *Clessamnaig, sceo fuirseoire,*
> *soinmech a n-grad n-gloir,*
> *niss coimtig aga bad ferr,*
> *do ber colptha doib.*
>
> Jugglers and buffoons, pleasant their noisy calling, not to them is fitting a better joint, a shank is given to them.[16]

The apparent relationship with musicians is also portrayed in a passage from the law tract *Críth Gablach* which describes the proper seating arrangement for a banquet hall. The *clesamnach* is to sit behind the harpers, who sit behind the poets, who in turn are seated behind the king's guests. Seated alongside the *clesamnach* are once again the *cuislenaig* and the *cornaire*, 'hornplayers'.[17] Musical accompaniment is further alluded to in the Middle Irish *Serglige Con Culainn*. After hearing that the fair of the Ulstermen will not begin until Cú Chulainn's foster-father and brother arrive, it is suggested that boardgames be played while songs are sung and *clesamnach*s perform.[18]

The *clesamnach* was clearly a regular performer at festivals, banquets and feasts. A description of Bres's feast in the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* recounts the customary entertainers for such an occasion, including harpers, pipers, hornplayers, *clesamnaig* and fools.[19] A later reference, from the mid fourteenth-century poem *Filidh Éireann Go Haointeach*, describes entertainers invited to a feast

---

[15] See Petrie, George (1839) pp 201-3; plate 8. *Cf.* Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 8, pp 26-7.
[16] Petrie, George (1839) p 203. I have altered Petrie's translation of the last two lines, from "no better share than theirs, a *colptha* is given to them".
[17] CG ll 589-90, p 23; CIH 570.20-2. To avoid excessive use of Irish terms *cruitire* is translated 'harpist' in this example and in several examples below. The instrument played by the *cruitire* was a stringed-instrument, though not necessarily a harp. This has been discussed in chapter 1, section 3.1.
[18] Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (1929) ll 3241-2. See also Dillon, Myles (1949) p 147; transl. (1951) p 48.
[19] Grey, Elizabeth (1982) p 33.

at Christmas. The group includes poets, brehons, bards, harpers, gamesters and *chleasoigheadh.*[20]

Outside *Uraicecht Becc* no reference to payment for the *clesamnach*, nor for any of the professional entertainers, is afforded by the law tracts.[21] The liability for the injury of onlookers, however, discussed in the passage from *Bretha Étgid*, clearly implies a professional nature. A passage from the mid sixteenth-century tale *Ceithernach Uí Dhomhnaill* relates that a *clesamnach* was paid five marks (*cuig marga*) per trick, each time in the form of a wager, that he could not repeat the performance.[22] While comparatively late, the reference confirms the continuum of the profession, whether or not the payment described was a recent development. The inclusion of the *clesamnach* among the retinue of the king, seen above in *Suidigud Tige Midhchúarta*, also suggests a professional nature, though presumably merely for board, sustenance and protection.

The saga-literature contains references to the *clesamnach* in several different guises, often suggesting magic and trickery. This has prompted modern translations of 'druid' and 'conjurer'. In the Middle Irish tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* the *drúth* Tulchaine is further described as a *clesamnach.* His art and semblance are well illustrated;

> *Atcondarc and borróclaech arbélaib na imdae cetnae fór lár in tige. Athis máili fair. Finnithir canach slébe cach finna ásas trána chend. Unasca óir immá ó. Brat breclígda imbi. Nói claidíb ina láim 7 nói scéith airgdidi 7* nói *n-ubla óir. Focheird cech ai díb i n-ardae, 7 ní thuit ní díb for lár, 7 ní bí acht óen díb for a bois, 7 is cumma* ocus *timthirecht bech il-ló ánli cach ae sech araile súas* [*7 anúas*].

[20] Knott, Eleanor (1911) p 59.
[21] i.e. non-musicians.
[22] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 285; transl. p 320. For a discussion of the date and transmission of the text, see O'Rahilly, Thomas (1912-13) pp 206-8.

> There I beheld a great champion, in front of the same room, on the floor of the house. The shame of baldness is on him. White as a mountain cotton-grass is each hair that grows through his head.[23] Earrings of gold around his ears. A mantle speckled, coloured, he wore. Nine swords in his hand, and nine silvern shields, and nine apples of gold.[24] He throws each of them upwards, and none of them falls on the ground, and there is only one of them on his palm; each of them rising and falling past another is just like the movement to and fro of bees on a day of beauty.[25]

The passage continues, describing the performer's first ever failure in his craft. In response to questioning about the failure, Tulchaine states that his performance was disturbed when he was looked at by an evil eye, forecasting evil approaching the front of the house.

Later in the same tale the 'room of the *clesamnaig*' (*imdai na clesamnach*)[26] is described as holding three of the king's *clesamnach*s (*clessamnaig ind ríg*), dressed in bedrobes and holding four-cornered, gold embossed shields. Also included in the description are silver balls (*ubla airgit*) and small, decorated spears, doubtless the juggling gear.[27] The performers' names, Cless, Clissíne and Clessamun, all derive from the root *cles-*, suggesting their talents and performance centred around trickery and deception, rather than mere juggling. Tricks of the *clessamnach* in the tale *Ceithearnach Uí Dhomnaill*, discussed above, include both practical and universal examples such as wiggling one ear, as well as the outlandish, such as attaching a silk thread to a cloud.[28] Feats (*cles*) of skill and dexterity are common features of the saga-literature. Young heroes, most significantly Cú Chulainn, are typically described

---

[23] The hair was an important feature of entertainers, particularly the *crosán*. See section 2.7, below.
[24] Stokes translates *ubla óir,* 'apples of gold', though the items are more likely 'golden balls'. *Ubull* as a ball or other round object is elsewhere attested, and more suitable here. See DIL, U-46.81-6; 47.15-23. For the use of *ubull* in a law tract concerning field-sports, see chapter 6, section 1 and chapter 7, section 1.1.
[25] Stokes, Whitley (1902) pp 106-7.
[26] *Imdai* is used throughout the tale to describe various 'rooms' of entertainers and musicians. The term itself more specifically refers to a couch, or a compartment containing a couch upon which people relax while being entertained. See DIL, I-82.35-73.
[27] *Ibid.*, p 115. Stokes translates *ubla airgat* 'apples of silver'. Again, 'balls' are more apposite.
[28] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 286; transl. p 321.

performing *clessa* of mythical proportions.[29] It is interesting to consider whether the feats created for heroes of the sagas were at the very least inspired by the feats of the contemporary *clesamnach.*

1.2. *Fuirseoire*:

The *fuirseoire* is also named among the entertainers in the passage from *Uraicecht Becc.* Once again the gloss provides the only useful information on the specific performance, describing the artists as those '...who make *fuirseoiracht* out of their mouths'(*.i. doniat in fuirseoract asa mbelaib*).[30] There are several possibilities for *fuirseoiracht*, though physical contortions and comedy are likely principle elements. The *fuirseoire* was clearly a court entertainer, probably a semi-independent professional, whose craft was the amusement of his assembled audience through physical antics such as mockery, contortions, mimicry and scarifying. Judging from the available evidence 'buffoonery' seems to offer the best general description. The entertainment performed may well have been vocal as well as physical, as suggested by their 'noisy calling' in *Suidigud Tige Midhchúarta.*[31]

The most informative evidence for the *fuirseoire* appears in the legal text *Miadślechta.*[32] The text states that the *réimm*, glossed '*drúth no fuirseoire*', is not entitled to honour-price, a legal assessment based in part on physical appearance. The legal implication is straightforward, those who advertently disfigure and distort their faces and/or bodies are not entitled to the compensation normally afforded to such disfigurement. It is not clear whether the entertainer in question permanently

[29] See *e.g. Táin* LU, p 173; Ní Shéadhgha, Nessa (1967) pp 35-9.
[30] CIH 1617.17. It could be argued the gloss implies vocal entertainment. While this is indeed possible, manifold terms exist for vocal entertainment (see chapter 1, section 1.1), none of which is specifically identified with the *fuirseoire.*
[31] Petrie, George (1839) p 203.
[32] CIH 585.25ff.

disfigured himself, or was an entertainer as the result of such a disfigurement, though the performance and entertainment is clear. In the example from the *Miadślechta* the *fuirseoire* is mentioned as a gloss to clarify the *reimm*, ostensibly some type of performing fool or contortionist. Surprisingly, the *reimm* is included in *Miadślechta* as twenty-third in a list of twenty-six titles of dignity. Though hard to justify, the inclusion suggests that this particular contortionist or entertainer possessed a recognised status, likely based on his professional nature. The inclusion of the *fuirseoire* in the gloss suggests similar standing. As *reimm* does not appear elsewhere in the laws, however, the specific nature of the entertainment and status is uncertain.

The *fuirseoire* also appears in the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*, again as a gloss on the main text.[33] The passage deals with the legal responsibility for the crimes of an *oblaire*. The text groups the *oblaire* with other such legal dependants as children, foreigners, idiots etc. Based on outside evidence it is unlikely the *oblaire* represents a full mental incompetent, though his status here deems him someone for whom a guardian must take responsibility.[34] In reference to the *fuirseoire*, it seems likely the Middle Irish glossator misinterpreted *oblaire*, accounting for the figure who by his own time had developed into the well-attested and familiar low-grade poet and entertainer.[35] The main text of the passage in *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* clearly deals with those not responsible for their actions. *Fuirseoire*, as evidenced by references throughout the legal material and saga-literature, does not fit. The inclusion of *fuirseoire* as a gloss appears the result of the semantic shift of *oblaire*, rather than a legitimate statement as to the legal standing and status of the *fuirseoire*.

---

[33] CIH 382.26

[34] The *oblaire* is discussed in section 2.6, below.

[35] The *oblaire* appears in various law texts, including *Uraicecht Becc* (CIH 1605.20), where he is described as the poet with 'seven stories'. In the literature he is a common figure, often translated "jester". See O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 274; *Táin* LL, p 166; Best, R.I. (1910) p 125.

The last legal reference to the *fuirseoire*, found in *Córus Bésgnai*, reveals more about the figure's reputation than his profession.[36] He is included in a list of *drochduine*, or 'base men', found at a *fled demonda*, or 'demon feast'.[37] While the text has an unmistakable religious bias, a general opinion of the *fuirseoire* is revealed by an examination of others expected at the gathering. According to the text, those attending such a feast include satirists, robbers, harlots, pagans, and *braigetoire*, or 'farters', discussed below.

More is revealed of the *fuirseoire*'s individual craft in an examination of the saga-literature. The inclusion of the *fuirseoire* among an individual's retinue, as described in *Uraicecht Becc*, is supported throughout the literature, mainly as the entertainer in a king's household. In a further depiction of the various entertainments in Da Derga's house, a passage in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* depicts the *imdai na fursiri*, or 'room of the *fuirseoire*'.

> *Atcondarc and triar forchuitbidi hi cind* [in] *tened. Tri bruit odra impu. O no betís fir Herend i n-óenmagin, 7 cé no beth colaind a mathar* nó *athar arbélaib cach fir díb, ni foelsad nech díb cen gári impu. Cói hi fil in triochoit cét isin tig ní ermada*[ir] *nech díb a suidi nách a lige lasin tríar cuitbidi sin. Nách tan tosn-aidle súil ind ríg tibid la cach ndéscin.*
>
> There I beheld a trio of jesters hard by the fire. Three dun mantles they wore. If the men of Erin were in one place, even thought the corpse of his mother or his father were in front of each, not one could refrain from laughing at them. [A guesting on the occasion of which a *trioched céd* was in the house], not one of them attains his seat on his bed because of that trio of jesters. Whenever the king's eye visits them it smiles at every glance.[38]

Clues as to the comedy and semblance of the three *fuirseoire* are further intimated by their names, given as Máel (Bald), Mlithi (Spoiler) and Ádmlithi (Triumphant Spoiler).[39]

---

[36] CIH 526.15-19.
[37] The *fled demonda* is discussed in chapter 4, section 3.
[38] Stokes, Whitley (1902) p 132, §138. The translation in brackets has been suggested to me by Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards. A *trícha cét* is a military group of '30-hundred'.

Appropriate to their professional status, the *fuirseoire* are often described as entertainers for banquets and feasts. The *fuirseoire*'s place at a gathering of Conchobor's household is described in the Old Irish *Lanellach Tigi Rích 7 Ruirech.* The *fuirseoire* are seated near the doorposts, alongside satirists and other *daernemed*, or 'base-professionals'.[40] The presence of a *fuirseoire* at a gathering or banquet is firmly supported by a triad concerning the three principal entertainers of a gathering (*dál*). The three are named as the *drúth*, the *fuirsire*, and the lap-dog (*oirce*).[41] In the previously mentioned poem concerned with the share of the meat in the king's household at Tara, the *fuirseoire* shares his portion of the feast along with performers such as the *drúth*, piper, and *clesamnach*.[42] Finally, in a passage from the *Fragmentary Annals*, a small and disreputable house is visited by the rather intemperate son of a king. Inside the house the son is entertained by satirists, horseboys, jugglers (*oblairaib*), and buffoons (*fuirseoiri*), "...roaring and bellowing there."[43]

A predictably critical opinion of the art by the clergy is revealed in the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*.[44] Upon reaching Dún Coba, MacConglinne disguises himself as an entertainer, donning numerous garments in a comical manner, each shirt slightly smaller than the last, each pair of trousers slightly longer. In this guise MacConglinne performs *fuirseoracht* and satire and *braigitiracht* for his host on the

---

[39] *Ibid.* I understand the latter two names as derivatives of *millid*, 'to destroy, ruin, spoil'. In comparison the names are reminiscent of today's professional wrestlers, whose similar physical antics and bodily disfigurement entertain modern audiences.

[40] O'Daly, Máirín (1962b) pp 83-4.

[41] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 33, §241.

[42] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 8, p 27. In the poem he is called '*fuirseóir fáen*' to rhyme with '*clesamnach cláen*' in the preceding line. Gwynn translates 'sprawling buffoon'.

[43] Radner, Joan Newlon (1978) *s.a.* 721, pp 60-1.

[44] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) pp 42-3.

floor of the royal house. Not surprisingly, the Middle Irish author judges this kind of behaviour 'unsuitable for his person' (*ní nārba comadais dia p*[h]*ersaind*).[45]

1.3. *Creccaire*:

The *creccaire*, also discussed in the passage from *Uraicecht Becc*, is perhaps the most oblique of the terms for entertainers in the list. A Middle Irish glossator describes him as one '...who makes the green branding upon the eyes'(*.i. doniad crecad glas arna roscaib*). This gloss differs slightly from one appearing elsewhere, one which is unfortunately both obscure and incomplete due to illegible text.[46] The terms 'scarifier' and 'mummer' are both used to translate *creccaire*, yet neither is wholly satisfactory. In a discussion of the *creccaire* Fergus Kelly suggests that the name is onomatopoeic in origin, producing the element *crecc-*, comparable to our words crack, creak, croak etc.[47] Based on this interpretation he suggests that the entertainment provided is then "raucous chatter".[48] The green sore or spot around the eyes, suggested by the gloss, is hard to reconcile, but may have been a disguise or commonly accepted and recognisable tattoo, totem, etc.[49]

The *creccaire*'s comparatively low-status is revealed in *Suidiugad Tigi Midchuarta*, describing the seating arrangement of the banquet hall at Tara. The *creccaire* is seated in an inner division at the front right of the hall, alongside the *braigetoire* and 'king's fools' (*rí drúth*). More revealing, however, is his assigned

---

[45] *Ibid.* Meyer translates *fuirseoracht*, 'juggling'. *Persa* is generally used to describe a member associated with the church. See DIL, P-182.65-183.34.

[46] CIH 2281.34 (National Library of Ireland MS G 3) *.i. doniat in creachad i snaidm no i sttlus*...(?). In his footnote Binchy remarks that due to a rubbed margin approximately four letters are illegible.

[47] Kelly, Fergus (1986) pp 185-6.

[48] The presence of *béccaig*, 'shouters' and *búridaig*, 'bellowers' are mentioned alongside musicians at a fair in the *dindsenchas* poem on Carman. Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 20.

[49] The Latin *Life of Colmán Elo* relates that Colmán's brother dyes his eyelids blue. Unfortunately, little else is said. See Heist, William W. (1965) p 217, §24.

portion at the feast, described as the 'crooked bone' (*cam-chnaim*).[50] Unfortunately, the dearth of evidence surrounding the *creccaire*, perhaps a result of his unsavoury craft, prevents a fuller understanding.

1.4. *Braigetoire*:

The *braigetoir* is a perhaps surprising yet unambiguous entertainer. He is the early Irish representation of the widespread and apparently popular medieval entertainer the 'farter'. The gloss from *Uraicecht Becc* offers the clearest, most unequivocal definition stating that these performers render their craft *asa tonaib*, or 'out of their rears'. This type of entertainer was common in the medieval period. A skilled French performer was entertaining local audiences as late as the nineteenth century. A well known and much reproduced woodcut from Derricke's sixteenth-century *Image of Ireland* shows what is likely a later performance of the entertainment in question.[51] Two men, bending over with their trousers at their knees, perform in front of the main table at a feast. Their proximity to the fire may have produced added effect. Other entertainers illustrated include a harpist and reciter. Interestingly, the only member seated at the table who is depicted not watching the two men is a cleric. The church's opinion of such an entertainment is patent. MacConglinne's motley dress, antics and performance, described in the passage from *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, includes *bragitíracht*, needless to say odious to the assembled clergy.[52]

While represented in *Uraicecht Becc* as a legitimate entertainer claiming honour-price, the *braigetoir* is also included in the passage from the law tract *Córus*

[50] Petrie, George (1839) p 203.
[51] Small, J. (1883), plate 4.
[52] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) p 42.

Bésgnai, concerned with those expected at the 'demon feast'.[53] The association exposes at least a partial distaste for the *braigetoir* in general. As evidenced by every time and age there is often a marked hypocrisy between a society's acceptance of the entertainment and its acceptance of the given entertainer.

1.5. *Monach*:

The remaining entertainer from the passage in *Uraicecht Becc* is the *monach*. This is the lone attestation of the term in the legal material. The use of the term as a substantive is infrequent. The term is best attested as a sobriquet, as with Forgull Monach, who's description in the Middle Irish *Cóir Anmann* offers a useful definition of the entertainment in question:

> *Forgull Monach .i. cleasuch robhói, ab eo quod est mon .i. cleas, ar*[ba] *fer cum*acht*ach eissium, co téigh*ed*h a n-ilre*cht*aibh. ar cach fer dogníth cleas bat monach a ainm…*
>
> Forgall Monach, that is 'he was featful'. From *mon* 'a feat', for he was a man with magical power, and he used to shift into many shapes. For every man who used to perform a feat was named *monach*…[54]

The etymology of the term, as suggested here, is clear. *Mon* in Old and Middle Irish is a synonym for *cles*, the root of *clesamnach*, and is generally translated 'feat' or 'trick'. The general agent suffix *-ach* is added for the substantive.[55] In this sense the *monach* seems to be a trickster or featster. The description in *Cóir Anmann* further suggests magic and contortioning. The gloss in *Uraicecht Becc* states that the monach performs his feats on horses. As the description finds no support elsewhere for such equestrian acrobatics, it is most likely an attempt at an etymology. This said, the glossator is perhaps relating contemporary and regional experience. The popularity of

---

[53] CIH 1988.24; 526.16.
[54] Stokes, Whitley (1897) pp 372-3, §205. *Cf.* Best, R.I., Osborn Begin *et al* (1954-83) p 583.
[55] See DIL M-163.46-59. For a discussion of the standard agent suffix and its use see Russell, Paul (1990) pp 86-97.

horses and horseraces at assemblies, fairs and feasts is clear. The suggestion and possibility of feats and tricks performed on horses, as in modern circus acts, should not be entirely dismissed.

Several other professionals are named in the *Uraicecht Becc* passage. *Airfite*, or 'musicians' are discussed in the previous chapter. *Araid*, or 'charioteers' are discussed in chapter 3. The more practical professionals such as the *araide* and the *luamain*, or 'steersmen', are likely included as typical of a host's standard retinue.[56] The *comail* are poorly attested and seem to represent magicians or conjurors. They appear in the Middle Irish *O'Davoren's Glossary*, glossed, as in *Uraicecht Becc*, as those '...who perform the art of magic' (*.i.* [*doniat*] *an ceird cumainn*). In a considerably later reference, in a tale from the Yellow Book of Lecan, they are mentioned entertaining alongside druids (*faithi druide 7 comail*).[57]

A final professional group listed in the passage are the *daime*, literally 'the companies', glossed as those "...who kill the fairies". The term is elsewhere unattested as a specific and distinct group. It is likely the glossator misinterpreted the term as a derivative of the verb *daimid*, 'to subdue or tame'.[58] The gloss is then an explanation of the act of taming, in this case probably animals, by killing the 'fairies', or spirits within them. If this is in fact the case, the *daime* were either entertainers who dealt with the supernatural, or perhaps simply those in charge of breaking untamed animals.

---

[56] *Luamain* are also accounted for in *Suidigud Tige Midhchúarta*, where they are described as those "...who sail over the clear sea". They are seated beside the *creccaire* and receive the animal's stomach as their portion. Petrie, George (1839) p 203; plate 8.

[57] Atkinson (1896) p 418, l. 29.

2. Performing fools.

The most widely attested and best understood entertainer of early Ireland is the performing fool.[59] *Drúth, oinmit, crosán, oblaire, reimm, mer*, and *dásachtach* are all designated terms used to describe such a person. The fools described in the saga-literature and the legal material appear as both professional performers and congenital idiots. The laws provide detailed distinctions between the two, though it is often difficult to determine which fools performed professionally and which were simply legal and mental incompetents. The saga-literature most often portrays performing fools, though again it is often difficult to decide whether the entertainer was playing the part or exploited because of his mental deficiency. An explication of the sources reveals a wealth of each type, as well as distinct verbal developments in the terms used to describe them.

2.1. *Drúth*:

Throughout the early source material the *drúth* is markedly the most common term for the fool, both as entertainer and as mental incompetent. How to discern which individual is meant depends largely upon context. The early saga-literature reveals a figure portrayed almost exclusively as a type of entertaining fool An investigation of the laws, however, reveals that in legal discussions the *drúth* was treated primarily as the mental, and therefore legal incompetent, and only infrequently as the professional entertainer. As the semantic confusion of the term has significant implications on the understanding of the figure himself, it is important to discuss

---

[58] For examples of *–e* agentive endings from verbs, see Breatnach, Liam (1983) pp 194-5.
[59] Non-musician.

references to the *drúth* in both capacities, as mental incompetent and as entertaining fool.

The entertaining fool is used in various contexts throughout the saga-literature, though, unlike counterparts such as the *clesamnach* and the *fuirseoire*, his specific antics are rarely discussed. The term *drúth* is likely a substantive derived from the adjective *drúth*, 'wanton, unchaste'. As will be seen in passages from both the saga-literature and the legal material, the *drúth*'s activity and reputation warrant such a derivation.[60] His place at feasts, banquets, fairs and assemblies is clear, best attested by a triad, seen above, listing him alongside the *fuirseoire* and lap-dog as one of three entertainers (*airfite*) of a gathering.[61]

The *drúth*'s distinction from other entertainers is seen in the Middle Irish *Lānellach Tigi Rīch 7 Ruirech*, a description of the seating of Conchobor's household. His proper place is described as between two candelabra at the front of the house, as opposed to all other *daernemed*, who are seated by the doorposts.[62] The *drúth* is also occasionally seen in stately dress, as in a passage from the Middle Irish *Táin Bó Fraích* where he is described as wearing a silver, gem-inlaid headpiece, holding an engraved and ornamented shield and staff.[63] On occasion, *drúth* is used in a generic sense to describe an entertainer who is later specified by name or craft. In a description from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* of the room of 'Tulchinne the *drúth*' (*Imda*

---

[60] DIL, D-416.20, 6-9. The adjective *drúth* is used to describe the *mer*, another mental incompetent, in a Middle Irish extract from the *Book of Leinster*; *Drúth cech mer*; *mianach cech baeth* ("Wanton is every *mer*, desirous is every *baeth*".) See O'Donoghue, Tadhg (1921-3) p 53. O'Donoghue translates "Vehement is every madman, desirous is every capricious one". The overall implication of the maxim itself, however, seems to contrast the *baeth*'s lack of self-control with the unpredictability of the *mer*. The *mer* is discussed in section 2.2, below.

[61] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 33 §241. For examples of the *drúth* at feasts, etc., see *e.g.* Stokes, Whitley (1902) p 61; Best, R.I. (1910) p 125; O'Keefe, J.G. (1911) p 26; Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 8, p 27.

[62] O'Daly, Maírín (1962b) pp 83-4.

[63] Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1933) §3; transl. (1937) p 2.

Tulchinne Druith), Tulchinne is initially described as a *drúth* though soon after named and identified as a *clesamnach*.[64]

A prevailing theme in the saga-literature concerning the *drúth* is his frequent role as martyr, particularly for kings. The most widely attested example concerns Da Déra, MacCon's *drúth*, killed by Cairpre at the battle of Cenn Febrat.[65] The event is described in several Middle Irish texts, two of which include a lament to the fallen *drúth*, "No laugh escapes since Da Déra died because I have reasons for grief at the loss of the little jester (*druth*) of the Dáirine."[66] In the *Táin* the *drúth* Taman disguises himself as king Ailill in order to deceive Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn is indeed well fooled, striking and killing the *drúth* with a stone. According to the text Taman is rewarded for his sacrifice, securing two placenames in Ulster.[67] Elsewhere in the *Táin* the battlefield is once again the scene of death for the *drúth*, when Cú Chulainn meets and kills in single combat two female thieves (*banteolaid*), ten cupbearers (*deogbaire*) and ten *drúith*.[68] In a passage from the pseudo-historical *Fragmentary Annals* the *drúth* of Baetan's son Fiachna asks for and meets the same fate after imploring Fiachna to allow him to die in battle.[69] Mael Fothartaig's *drúth* MacGlass, guilty only by association, is duped and killed alongside his master in the Middle Irish *Fingal Ronáin*. As the two lay dying Mael Fothartaig laments the rather undignified way in which the *drúth* meets his end, "Gather your bowels in, though you know no

---

[64] Stokes, Whitley (1902) pp 106-7. A similar situation is described in the Middle Irish *Fingal Ronáin*. See Meyer, Kuno (1892c) p 383.
[65] See Dillon, Myles (1946) p 164, text attributed to Cormac mac Cuilenáin (†920); Meyer, Kuno (1910) p 34-7; O'Daly, Máirín (1975) pp 56-7; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 312; transl. p 349.
[66] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) pp 56-7; See also Meyer, Kuno (1910) p 35.
[67] Áth Tamuin and Tuga im Thamun. *Táin* LU, p 193; *Táin* LL, p 207. For the placenames, see Hogan, Edmund (1993) pp 70, 654.
[68] *Táin* LU, p 168. Interestingly, the *drúth* is also mentioned alongside cupbearers in the Middle Irish tale *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, where the two are instructed to serve portions to the warriors and reavers. See Best, R.I. (1910) p 125.
[69] *s.a.* 626. See O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 397; transl. p 427.

shame, churls are laughing at you".[70] In an entry in the Old Irish *Sanais Cormac* a story is told of the martrydom of Finn's *drúth* Lomna.[71] Lomna is beheaded after seeing Finn cuckolded by Coirpre, and threatening to tell his master. When Finn reaches Coirpre's camp, Lomna's head, firmly rooted on a stake, commences to tell Finn of the transgression. Enraged by the news and moved by the *drúth*'s loyalty, Finn carries out his revenge.[72] Finally, in a passage from the Middle Irish *Bethu Phátraic*, a party of ill-fated *drúthaib* are involved in an unexpected and far less voluntary martyrdom. Instructed by Patrick to eat tainted food, the fools oblige, upon which the earth immediately swallows them whole.[73]

True to his name the *drúth* is also frequently portrayed as licentious and impious. In an early-Middle Irish tale from the legal material Conchobor's *drúth* Cotreibe is described as desirous of the daughter of a local poet.[74] Cotreibe successfully kidnaps the daughter, which the story relates as partly through force and partly through her own will. While the tale itself is used to introduce a long and detailed commentary on the legal contingencies and penalties for absconding, the reference to the *drúth* most likely derives from the reputation of his wanton and unpredictable nature. A similar example is found in the Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem for Crechmael. The area is said to derive its name from Enna Cendselach's *drúth*, who absconds with the daughter of a king;[75]

> *Roduscar in drúth iarsain:*
> *rongab lúth 'ma lán-aicsin:*
> *romídair gia thálgud túaid*
> *a sárgud ica sáer-búaib.*

---

[70] Meyer, Kuno (1892c) p 386.
[71] Lomna appears as '*drúth* Lemna' in a Middle Irish poem from the verse tracts. See Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 3, §63.
[72] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) pp 86-9; for translation, see O'Donovan, John (1868) pp 129-31.
[73] Mulchrone, Kathleen (1939) ll 2379-80.
[74] Dillon, Myles (1932) p 56.
[75] Crechmael is listed in Edmund Hogan's *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (1993) as a woodland in Leinster.

> Then the buffoon was smitten with love and lusted to sate the sight of her: to appease his desire, he devised to ravish her among her noble kine in the north.[76]

Possessing such a reputation the *drúth* is often vilified in religious texts. The *drúth*'s rightful place in hell is confirmed in an anecdote from the Middle Irish *Life of Saint Molaise*, where Molaise journeys to hell to retrieve a certain *drúth*, Manann the Leper.[77] Following Molaise's merciful and compassionate deed, God agrees to call up a further fifty of Manann's peers. In the conclusion to the early twelfth-century *Life of Colmán mac Luacháin* God is said on the day of Judgement to take no monk or nun into hell, save one in every hundred, and then only provided he be a *drúth*, a marauder (*díbergach*) or a son of malediction (*mac mallachta*).[78] Elsewhere in the same text the miraculous Colmán is portrayed turning both Cinead, king of Offaly, guilty of falling in love with the wife of the king of Tara, and his 'clever royal *drúth*' (*an rís a rígdrúth*) into stags.[79] Apart from the obvious triumph of Christian over pagan, the role of the *drúth* in the tale is undoubtedly to add depravity and influence to the king's already immoral desire.

The *drúth*'s role as the professional fool is solidly supported by the saga-literature. He accompanies kings and heroes, performs at feasts and fairs, and is frequently portrayed taking his last breath alongside his master. Predictably, the evidence from the legal material reveals a different, though not always contradictory, role.

The clearest evidence from the legal material designating the *drúth* as a professional entertainer is found in an unglossed Old Irish text entitled *Do drúthaib 7 meraibh 7 dásachataibh*, tentatively translated 'Concerning fools and idiots and

---

[76] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, pp 24-5.
[77] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 21; transl. p 22.
[78] Meyer, Kuno (1911c) p 107.
[79] *Ibid.*, p 87.

lunatics'.[80] The text outlines various categories of *drúth*, commenting on the legal rights and status of each. What is revealed as the most likely candidate for the professional *drúth* as described in the saga-literature is the *rí drúth*, listed in the text as one of seven types of *drúth*. It is safely assumed, and supported by the literature, that this performer was originalled called *rí drúth* as he was in some way attached to or employed by the king. The text's commentary to his title, however, states that the *rí drúth*'s honour-price and the responsibility for his crimes rests upon whoever 'chooses' him (*a c*[h]*in side 7 a c*[h]*oland eric do gach at go*). It seems likely, therefore, that the term is used simply to describe a performing fool. The commentary also states that if the *ri drúth* is incited, the inciter is responsible for all consequences. This contingency is echoed several times in the law texts concerning fools in general, and in this case suggests that the *rí drúth* might have been unstable and not always a professional acting the part.

A further legal text which mentions the *ri drúth* is one concerning acceptable sureties.[81] In this text, entitled "The Advice to Doidin", the *ri drúth* appears as one of a range of fools and mental incompetents who must not be chosen or accepted as guarantors to a contract;

> *7 ni bi raith friut bobre .i. epertaigh na mbo. na buice .i. an ceo do buaic .i. in fer lethcuin*n. *na boicmell .i. foa mbit na mill buic fo bragaid. ar ní tualaing incoiscet a cuimni .i. nocha cuimnech iat um teagosc caich. 7 inann in bobre 7 in buicmeall 7 in meallach suirig 7 in righdhruth 7 in rinnainech 7 in druth go rath .i. druth go rath sin. inann in buicne 7 in caoptha 7 in fineloighi baoth gaoth 7 in fer leth-cuinn .i. fer lethcuinn sin Inann in slach druth 7 an mer gin rath, 7 mer gin rath.*[82]

And let not be surety for you a *bobre*, i.e. having the behaviour of

---

[80] CIH 1276.18. Roland Smith (1932) translates "Of fools and madmen and lunatics". The text, most valuable in an examination of the types of legal and mental incomptent, is discussed further in sections 2.1-3, below.

[81] CIH 1381.4ff; 1122.3ff. Smith edits and translates the text, ibid. 73-78.

[82] CIH 1381.18-24. The text in CIH improves upon the one found at Smith, Roland (1932) p 73. Binchy suggests the last phrase, '*7 mer gin rath*' , is dittography.

> a cow, or a *buice*, i.e. (who has) the mist in his head, i.e. the man of half-sense, or a *boicmell*, i.e. under whose neck are the soft lumps,[83] for their memories are not reliable, i.e. they are not mindful concerning the instruction of anyone. And the *bobre* and the *boicmell* and the *mellach suirig* and the king-fool and the *rindainech* and the fool with a talent, i.e. that one (is) a fool with a talent, are equal. The *buicne* and the *caeptha* and the *fineloighi* (?) half-foolish (and) half-wise and the man of half-sense, i.e. that one (is) a man of half-sense, are equal. The *salach drúth* and the madwoman without a talent are equal.[84]

An important clue as to the nature and legal status of the *ri drúth* is revealed by the group in which he is listed, that of the *bobre*, *boicmell*, *mellach suirig*, *rindainech* and the *druth co rath*. There are various possibilities for these fools, based mainly on what can be determined by the name. Unfortunately, each term is rarely attested, and in every case without additional clues or commentary. Given their semi-independence, suggested by their classification '*co rath*', they can generally be described as buffoons or clowns, rather than mental and therefore legal incompetents.[85] This group is contrasted with the group *'cen rath'*, comprised of the *buicne*, *caeptha*, *finelogh baeth* and *gaeth*, *fer lethcuinn*, *salach drúth* and the *mer cen rath*. These individuals are clearly legally dependent and mentally incompetent. The *salach drúth* offers additional insight into the unsavoury reputation of the *drúth* in general. *Salach*, 'dirty', is well attested in both the literal and figurative sense of the word.[86] According to the text, and consistent with similar 'fools', his crimes and any trespass he might make are the responsibility of his family.[87]

Interestingly, the *rí drúth* is found among a similar group as above in an independent Middle Irish legal citation concerned with the classification of twelve types of *drúth*. The text divides the twelve-fold *drúith* into three groups;

---

[83] The phrase is obscure. Other possible translations include, 'he is a he-goat in madness with the lumps of horn'. See also DIL, M-95.62-3 where 'cretin' is suggested for the subject of the phrase.
[84] Translation by Smith (1932) pp 76-7. I have included his translation though I disagree with some classifications and terms, as discussed below. *Mellach suirig* may be translated 'pleasantly foolish'.
[85] The phrases '*co rath*' and '*cen rath*' are vital to the understanding of the various terms for fools. They are discussed below.

Tri druith fil and, 7 da ainm decc fil orro. in bobreith 7 in bocmbell 7 in mellach suirig, in righdruth 7 in rindinech 7 in druth go rath; se hanmanna sin arin druth co rath. in caeptha, 7 in finelogh baeth 7 gaeth, 7 in fer lethchuind,, .iiii.re hanmanna sin arin fer lethcuind. in salach d[r]*uth 7 in mer gan rath, da ainm sin arin mer gan rath.*[88]

> There are three (kinds of) fools, and there are twelve names for them. The *bobreith* and the *bocmbell* and the *mellach suirig*, the king-fool and the *rindinech* and the fool with a talent: these are the six names for the fool with a talent. [The *buicne* and] the *caeptha* and the *finelogh* half-foolish and half-wise and the man of half sense. These are the four names of the man of half-sense. The *salach drúth* and the madman without a talent: these are two names for the madman without a talent.[89]

Upon examination, the first group again appears to contain those who are capable of at least semi-independence and perhaps a professional nature. By contrast, the second group comprises those who are fully and legally dependent. The *ri drúth* is listed among those in the first group, sharing his group with the five mentioned in the "Advice to Doidin". The first group is contrasted with the members of the second and third groups, a sundry of mental incompetents ranging from the half-wise (*finelogh gaeth*) and the half-foolish (*finelogh baeth*) to the 'dirty fool' (*salach drúth*).

In general then, the *ri drúth* is an entertainer, and is likely the most unambiguous representation of a *drúth* as a performing fool. He is most often described as a professional, albeit dependent on king or respective host, doubtless receiving his honour-price accordingly. Nonetheless, it is often unclear whether his 'foolishness' was based on a performance, or whether he was a congenital fool who unwittingly amused his audience. Judging from the legal material he was both. It is understandable that texts differ as to the *rí drúth*'s precise status and ability. Regional

---

[86] DIL, S-41.9-22.
[87] CIH 1277.3. Smith, Roland (1928) pp 69, 71.
[88] CIH 955.25ff. The passage is found among several other Old Irish passages, covering topics such as sureties, offences by animals, sick-maintenance, and considerations of contracts.
[89] Translation by Smith, Roland (1932) pp 80-1. Suggestions and variant translations of particular terms and phrases are discussed below.

differences, legal developments over time, semantic developments, and simple variation in cases all prevent a standard elucidation and definition. This certainly applies to the general term *drúth*, yet in most cases the difference between the legal incompetent and the entertainer can be distinguished, even though often misinterpreted by the medieval glossator and modern scholar alike.

While much of the legal commentary on the standard *drúth* discusses immunity and exemptions from legal standards, several texts hint at a professional or at least semi-independent nature. A passage from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* concerns restitution or compensation for the crime of a *drúth*.[90] The passage states that full-restitution must be paid for the crime of a *drúth*, while half-compensation must be paid for the crime of a *baeth*. *Baeth* is a general term for any legal incompetent, often applied to children, though sometimes referring specifically to an idiot, sometimes in contrast to one. The distinction between the *drúth* and the *baeth* may imply that a *drúth* is to be held accountable for his crime, while the *baeth* is not. Additionally, the reference may imply the *drúth* has the resources, or wherewithal to compensate for his offence. The commentary, written by the principal scribe, immediately follows the main text which states there are four chief-divisions of compensation; full compensation, half-compensation, one-third compensation, and one-quarter compensation. This commentary seems at odds with the general culpability of the *drúth* described elsewhere in the law tracts. As it is relatively late linguistically, it may be the interpretation of a commentator in a period in which the *drúth* was exclusively the performer or entertainer.

The *drúth* is also mentioned among the *drochdainib*, or 'base men', in the passage from *Corús Bésgnai* listing those who are expected to attend a 'demon feast'.

---

[90] CIH 411.5ff.

Others mentioned include entertainers such as satirists (*caintib*), jesters (*oblairaib*), *fuirseoraib,* and *bruidiraib*.[91] Interestingly, in a later version of the text the *drúth* is excluded.[92] This suggests that by a later period the *drúth* may have taken on a meaning contrary to those who expected at a demon feast.

A further clue in identifying the performance of the *drúth* is offered in the passage from *Miadslechta* where *drúth* and *fuirseoire* are used to gloss *reimm*, listed as one of twenty-six titles of dignity.[93] As discussed above, the subsequent commentary states that the *reimm* does not receive body-fine as he intnetionally distorts himself in front of crowds and hosts (*nach fer dobeir remmad fo corp 7 a enech ni dligh dire, uair teit asa richt ar beluib sluagh 7 a sochaide*).[94] According to the glossator, the *drúth* and *fuirseoire* are entertainers of similar rank and amusement.

The law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* mentions the *drúth* in various legal contexts. The first concerns the maintenance of a *drúth*. The text states:

> *IM GAIRE NDRUITH IM GAIRE MIR 7RL- .i. Cuic bai smacht nemdenma .g. (gaire) in druith co norbo 7 co nobloirecht, is aire is bec in smacht. Deich mbai smacht nemdenmha gaire cach mire; is aire is mo smacht ina smacht in drúth; ar ni hairfidigh in mer 7 ni bi ferann aici. Muine roib orba no obloirecht acin drúth, is commor smacht a gaire risin mer cin rath.*
>
> CONCERNING THE MAINTENANCE OF A *DRÚTH*, CONCERNING THE MAINTENANCE OF A MADPERSON, ETC.. i.e. Five cows is the penalty for not providing the maintenance of a *drúth* who has land and amusement, it is on account of this that it is small. Ten cows is the penalty for not providing the maintenance of every madwoman; it is on account of this that the penalty is greater than the penalty of the *drúth*; for there is no entertainment with the madwoman and there is no land with her. If there is not land or amusement with the *drúth*, it is the penalty equal to the madwoman without *rath*.[95]

---

[91] CIH 526.15-19.
[92] CIH 1988.21-5.
[93] CIH 585.25.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] CIH 372.26, 31-6. Translation is my own. The *mer* is discussed below.

The main text, shown in capitals, is Old Irish while the considerable gloss and commentary are later Middle Irish additions. As described, the maintenance of a *drúth* is contrasted to the maintenance of a *mer*. Unlike the term *drúth*, there is little confusion with the meaning of *mer*. *Mer*, discussed in more detail below, denotes a mad person, usually and almost exclusively in the later period one who is female. The *mer* is clearly a legal incompetent having no legal capacity, and very little legal amenability.[96]

Associated with the *mer* in this passage, the *drúth* must likewise represent a legal incompetent, or at the very least a legal dependent. The *drúth* here is perhaps understood simply as the male counterpart of the *mer*, or, as is suggested by other references, a member of society who was only partially mentally incapacitated, and therefore partially legally competent.

What is most revealing in a discussion of the *drúth* as entertainer is the legal stipulation making the penalty for failing to maintain him lower than that of failing to maintain the *mer*. The commentary states that the penalty for failure to provide for a *drúth* is five cows if he has *orbu* and *oblairecht. Orba* is well attested as 'land' or 'inheritance', while *obloirecht* is literally 'the craft of an *oblaire*', commonly translated 'juggling' or more generally 'amusement'.[97] Taken jointly the two reveal that a *drúth*, at least by the commentator's time, was able to possess and inherit land and/or perform for some type of compensation or remuneration. This indicates a professional nature. The commentary further states that if the *drúth* possesses neither *orbu* nor *oblairecht*, the penalty for failing to provide his maintenance rises to ten

[96] See for example CIH 372.21 (also from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*) where the rights of a *mer* 'precede all rights', because she is both mentally incompetent and a female; *cf.* CIH 375.8, which discusses the removal of a child from a *mer* as she was obviously unfit to provide care; also CIH 522.1 (*Córus Bésgnai*) where *mer* glosses *dochuin* as one whose contracts are not binding unless a guarantor is present.

[97] For *orba*, see DIL, O-152.61-84; for *oblairecht*, see *ibid.*, O-82.18-21.

cows. This penalty matches that for the failure to provide for the *mer*, a penalty fixed at ten cows. The *mer*, a full legal incompetent and a female, clearly would possess neither land nor profession. The grounds for the greater penalty are confirmed in the tract *Do drúthaib 7 meraib 7 dásachtaib*, above, where the text states, "...the fine for not maintaining a *mer*, or madwoman, is greater because she has no property to support her."[98]

It should be stated that the Old Irish main text in the passage from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* presents very little for the definition of the *drúth*. Incorporating the later commentary allows assumptions as to the status and legal position of the *drúth*, but only for a later period, and only in so far as one is willing to accept such commentary at face value. What is most evident in both periods is that the *drúth* was a member of society who was expected to be at least partially maintained.

A similar passage is found in the miscellaneous legal text *De Druthbrethaib*, or 'Concerning *drúth*-judgements'.[99] The text is again concerned with maintenance of the *drúth* depending on whether or not he has *orbu* and/or *oblairecht*. The penalty for failing to maintain him if he has neither *orbu* or *oblairecht* is ten cows. If he possesses either but not both the penalty drops to eight cows. Finally, the penalty drops to five cows if he indeed has both. The *drúth*'s ability to possess and inherit land is alluded to in several texts in the legal material. The appropriate caution in such a matter is expressed in a triad concerned with the allocation of inheritances.[100] The triad names the inheritances (*orbai*) of the *drúth*, lunatic (*dásachtach*) and elderly (*sin*) as the three which must be divided in the presence of heirs.

Apart from his ability to posses land, the *drúth* is distinguished from all other mental incompetents through his recurrent gloss *co rath*, 'with *rath*'. The gloss is the

[98] Smith, Roland (1932) pp 68, 70.
[99] CIH 2107.21-35.

standard gloss for *drúth*, as *cen rath*, 'without *rath*' is the standard gloss for the *mer*. What is intended by *rath* is subject to debate. The editors of the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* interpret *rath* as an ability to do work.[101] Roland Smith, similarly, translates *co rath* 'with a talent'.[102] Whitley Stokes, Kuno Meyer and D.A. Binchy assume a different view and usually translate the phrase as 'having grace', presumably the 'grace of God', and therefore 'having sense'.[103] Interestingly, the phrase *co rath de* appears as a gloss to *drúth* in a legal passage from *Bretha Crólige*, where Binchy translates it as 'the grace of God'.[104] This is indeed the standard translation for the phrase *co rath de*, which itself is well attested. Elsewhere in the legal texts, for example in the pseudo-historical introduction to the *Senchas Mór*, *'co rath in spiruta naoimh...'* appears, where the sense of *rath* as 'grace' is indisputable. As clerical scribes were often copying the material, however, it is reasonable that such a scribe would write '*co rath de*' when merely '*co rath*' was intended, either through the influence of repetition or perhaps the stronger influence of predisposition.[105] Of the many instances of the gloss '*co rath'* for *drúth* , this is the lone example where '*de'* is added to the standard phrase.[106]

This said, of the myriad proposed meanings for the phrase '*co rath*' there is none which conveys the essence alluded to concerning the *drúth* in his legal capacity. While translations in the *Ancient Laws* are often flawed, the translation 'able to do work', taken in context and in accordance with the many other references to *drúth*, seems more accurate than the translation 'with grace'. Passages in which the gloss is

---

[100] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 26.
[101] See, *e.g.*, AL Vol. 1, pp 52, 136, 156; Vol. 2, p 46, etc. In one instance, at Vol. 3, p 10, the editors translate *co rath* "having sense."
[102] Smith, Roland (1932) p 77.
[103] Binchy, D.A. (1938) pp 13, 49, 53.
[104] *Ibid.* p 13
[105] For a discussion of the authorship and transmission of legal texts by clerics, see Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 233-6.

found often concern exemptions or exceptions to legal principles stemming from the difficulties of the *drúth*'s pecuniary and punitive liability. The gloss often seems to assert that in case there is confusion, the *drúth* with at least partial accountability is intended.[107] I suggest that the gloss *co rath* be translated 'with wherewithal', to denote one who possesses both mental and physical competence and potential, however limited. This translation further allows the implication that though an individual is dependent, he is likewise not fully incapacitated. That the *drúth* was treated individually according to ability is suggested by commentary to a heptad.[108] The text discusses the liability for the wounding of a *drúth*. Several types of mental incompetent are listed, including the *drúth co sundradach*, or 'the *drúth* in particular'. According to the commentary, this *drúth* is recognised by the fact that "...every ninth word he utters requires verification" (*cach noma briathar atbeir do firad*).[109] While the gloss is both peculiar and suspect, the description confirms the rather wide classification for the *drúth*, necessitating the various criteria which define them. Modern society holds untold examples of individuals who, though not fully independent, are capable of at least some type of independent status and livelihood. The *drúth co rath*, particularly in his role as entertainer, seems a clear example.

While the *rí drúth* and *drúth* are often portrayed in the legal material, and exclusively in the saga-literature, as members of society with semi-independence, it is important to emphasise that not all references depict such circumstances. Judging from examples found in the legal material the role and definition of the *drúth* evolved over time. While later gloss and commentary tend to portray the *drúth* as a

---

[106] Linguistically, '*de*' might also be taken as a preposition with suffixed third person singular masculine or neuter pronoun, i.e. 'from him' or 'from it'.

[107] See *e.g.* CIH 351.26, 352.2-3, where the *drúth* is glossed '*co rath .i. fer oinmit*'. The *rath* in this sense seems applicable to the occupation of the *oinmit*, who is often described as a type of performing fool. See section 2.4, below.

[108] CIH 7.9-11; 7.26-8.

professional entertainer, passages in Old Irish texts depict the semi- or full mental incompetent. The *drúth* is mentioned in several Old Irish texts as immune from any damage or crime committed if having been incited. Responsibility for the crime is generally placed upon the individual's guardian.[110] Interestingly, this guardian may have acted as an owner or manager of the *drúth*, exploiting his madness for profit. The law tract *Cáin Lánamna*, a text concerned with the legal responsibility for the offspring of sexual unions, describes such a case. One of the potential sexual unions listed in the text is described as *lánamnus genaige,* or 'coupling for amusement'. This was apparently sexual intercourse in front of onlookers as a form of entertainment.[111] The Old Irish main text lists the possible pairings for such a union as a *drúth* with a female lunatic (*dásachtaig*) or a male lunatic (*dásachtach*) with a *mer*. The child of such a union is described as the responsibility of the person who arranged the union, as well as the onlooker. A later Middle Irish version of the text contains no reference to the *drúth*. This may indicate, as with the example seen earlier from *Corus Bésgnai*, that by the commentator's time the connotation and role of the *drúth* had changed and was now averse to such a context.[112] Interestingly, the text also suggests that as early as the Old Irish period the *drúth* was understood as tacitly male. This is supported by a passage involving sick-maintenance, found in the law tract *Bretha Crólige*. The Old Irish text names twelve men and twelve women in the territory who are excluded from sick-maintenance.[113] The *drúth* is listed as one of the twelve men, though not included in the list of twelve women. By comparison, the *dásachtach*, or 'lunatic', is listed in both groups, as is the *mer*. The absence from the list of women, while similar mental

[109] CIH 7.27. In the *Táin* Ailill's *drúth* disguises himself as the king but is recognised by his speech. *Táin* LU, ll 1599-1600; transl. p 169.
[110] See *e.g.* CIH 7.9-11; 1885.19-22; 1826.22-7; 1828.30-1829.4.
[111] CIH 505.23; 519.23-35. For translation see Thurneysen, Rudolph (1936a) pp 1-75.
[112] CIH 1812.20-32.
[113] Binchy, D.A. (1938) p 10, §12 ≈ CIH 2289.6-16; p 26, §31 ≈ CIH 2294.35-2295.4.

incompetents are represented in both, suggests that *drúth* was a term reserved for the male.

While the clearest evidence for an understanding of the *drúth* is supplied by the laws, it can be generally assumed that the semantic shift of the term *drúth* can also be applied to the term as found elsewhere in the source material. Originally, as seen in Old Irish legal texts, the *drúth* was quite clearly the congenital idiot, and legal dependent. As his behaviour was both exploited and impersonated by entertainers, the term logically developed to encompass a fool in general, whether his behaviour was genuine or for the amusement of onlookers. This shift may have affected the definitions of other terms, as seen in *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* with *oblaire*'s gloss of *fuirseoire* in a context clearly contrary to any type of entertainer. The literature of the Middle Irish period often lionised the fool, portraying him as unlikely hero and hapless martyr. This seems to have further affected the semantic shift.

2.2. *Mer*:

Listed second in the Old Irish text *Do Druthaibh 7 meraibh 7 dásachtach*, the *mer* is a less ambiguous figure than the *drúth*. The term itself is the substantive of the adjective *mer*, meaning 'mad, crazy, demented' etc.[114] Unlike the *drúth* the *mer* is seldom seen in the role of the entertainer, and if so the amusement is customarily an exploitation of mental incompetence. The *mer* is also generally understood as female, a clear semantic development which, by the late-Middle Irish period, is nearly exclusive. Both of these elements are attested in the passage from *Cáin Lánamna*, discussed above, concerning a sexual union for 'amusement'.[115] The *mer* is listed

[114] See DIL, M-105.34-67. *Mer* is used rather oddly to gloss the *fer rocollach*, or 'obese man' at CIH 1883.33.
[115] CIH 505.3; 519.23-4.

along with the *dásachtach*, or male lunatic, as a potential pair for the union.[116] As the text is interested in the offspring of such unions, the *mer* is unquestionably female. The amusement of the activity is likely derived from the unpredictability and frenzy of the participants. As will be seen, the *dásachtach* is most often portrayed as volatile and capricious, while the *mer* seems to have been more placid, though equally mad.

The responsibility for offspring of the *mer* is a recurrent theme in the legal material. In a passage from the *Heptads*, concerning seven women who do not co-nurse with men, the *mac mire*, or 'child of the *mer*' is listed as the responsibility of the father alone. In one version the Middle Irish commentary to the main text states that an exception is made if the father did not know the mother was a *mer* at the time of conception.[117] In this case the mother's family is presumably responsible for the child.[118] Similarly, a passage from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* relates that the child of a *mer* is to be removed from her care. The *mer* is listed among several other women deemed unfit to raise a child, including a woman who is diseased (*declaim*), blind (*daill*), deaf (*buidir*), maimed (*baclaim*), a leper (*claim*), or a lunatic (*dásachtaig*).[119]

Elsewhere in *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*, and discussed above, failure to provide maintenance for the *mer* results in a fine of ten cows. Directly following the passage is a parallel text, restating the penalty and offering grounds for the fine, namely that the case concerning the *mer* is special as 'her rights precede rights' (*ar dofet a cert certaib*).[120] This presumably indicates that as both a mental incompetent and a female she is entirely at the mercy of those in charge of her care. The gloss rather unnecessarily reiterates that the *mer* in question is female and that she is without

---

[116] *Dásachtach* is opposed to the *dásachtach* (acc. *dásachtaig*) , or 'female lunatic' in the next pair.
[117] CIH 20.29; 546.3; 1894.8. Commentary found at 546.14. *Cf.* 1835.35-6 where *mac mire* does not occur.
[118] Both parents are usually responsible for a child's upbringing. See Kelly, Fergus (1986) pp 85-6.
[119] CIH 375.8-16. Each individual is glossed with the emphasiser '*ben...*', *e.g.* the *mer* is glossed '*in ben mer*'. The qualifier is gratuitious as the passage already concerns seven women.

'wherewithal' (*.i. ben mer .i. gin rath*). The gloss *cen rath*, as previously discussed, is the standard gloss for *mer* and recurrent throughout the legal material. The *mer* was indisputably mentally and legally incompetent, without legal capacity or claim. A gloss from *Corus Bésgnai* confirms the overall legal incapacity of the *mer*, classifying her alongside the *mic becca*, or 'small children'.[121]

Hints as to the semantic shift in the term to describe females exclusively are best seen in comparisons of Old Irish legal texts to later gloss and commentary. One such example occurs in *Bretha Étgid*, concerning a *mer* in an alehouse (*Bla mer cuirmtech*).[122] The Old Irish main text is fragmentary and brief. The impropriety of the *mer* at an alehouse seems confirmed by the citation alone. In the subsequent extensive gloss and commentary, in essence stating that responsibility for damage and/or injury depends on whether the individual was incited, *mer* is replaced in every instance by the term *drúth*.[123] The motivation for the replacement of terms is likely either a decline in currency for the term *mer*, or the indication that a female mental incompetent, which by the commentator's time the *mer* seems to have become, might not have been expected in an alehouse in the first place.

2.3. *Dásachtach*:

The *dásachtach* is the unequivocal representative of the mentally insane. The term, a substantive derived from the adjective denoting 'madness, fury, or panic', is mentioned throughout the legal material but only rarely in the saga-literature. In the laws it is found in both masculine and feminine forms, a distinction which seems both

---

[120] CIH 372.21.

[121] CIH 522.1. The text concerns those individuals whose contracts are not binding unless a guarantor is present. The terms appear as glosses on *dochuinn*.

[122] CIH 269.23; 939.10; 1254.21

[123] The commentary occurs at 269.23-270.14; 939.10-940.10; 1254.22-1256.2.

deliberate and fundamental to the principle and application of the respective discussions.

Any entertainment provided by the *dásachtach* was clearly an exploitation of his/her insanity. *Cáin Lánamna* lists the *dásachtach* in both possible pairings for its sexual 'amusement'.[124] As previously discussed, the frenetic nature of the *dásachtach* is likely the reasoning for double billing in the activity. Madness would ostensibly have added entertainment to any such display. Frenzied behaviour is indicated in a passage from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*.[125] The text relates that no delay is tolerated in the delivery of distrained goods apart from a list of several urgencies in which all individuals are obliged to take part. The restraint and subduing of a *dásachtach* is listed as one such activity. Other established exemptions include seeking a midwife for a woman about to give birth and struggling with an epileptic. While each of the three activities is perhaps infrequent, none is altogether unheard of. The physical restraint, in this case fettering, of a *dásachtach* was likely an accepted and customary act.

Not surprisingly, the *dásachtach* retains little legal right or efficacy. The *dásachtach* is deemed unfit to care for any offspring, may not be distrained against, may not take part in or act as guarantor to contracts, and is both excluded and debarred from sick-maintenance.[126] Like the *mer* and the *drúth*, the legal guardian of the *dásachtach* is responsible for his crimes. Commentary from the law tract *Di Choimét Dligthech* indicates that the guardian is also responsible for the *dásachtach*'s '*rath*'.[127] As it is unlikely the *dásachtach* could inherit land or possessions, the *rath* in

[124] CIH 505.23, 505.33-4; 519.23-35. *Dásachtach* is listed in both masculine and feminine forms.
[125] CIH 420.30-421-25.
[126] For passages on the *mer* deemed unfit to care for offspring, see CIH 375.8-16; for distraint, see CIH 1459.8-10, 182.10,; for contracts, see CIH 522.1-15; for sick-maintenance, see Binchy, D.A. (1938) p 10, §12 ≈ 2289.6ff; p 24, §30 ≈ CIH 2294.20ff; p 26, §31 ≈ CIH 2294.35ff; p 48, §61 ≈ CIH 2302.35ff.
[127] CIH 1459.8-9.

this case may represent his personal possessions, any legal redress and/or anything which is received through the utilisation of the *dásachtach*'s condition, as in the case from *Cáin Lánamna*.

The standard and regular gloss for the *dásachtach*, '*fo tabarr in dlai fulla*', indicates the comprehensiveness of the mental illness.[128] The gloss, accompanying nearly every reference in the legal material, translates literally 'who is brought under the magic wisp'. This parallels the modern phrase 'touched', describing similar individuals.

2.4. *Óinmit*:

Sanais Cormac offers an early etymology of the term *óinmit*, maintaining the term is comprised of the elements *onna,* 'foolish, simple' and *muit*, 'dumb'(*onmit .i. muit-onna .i. amlabar 7 baeth*).[129] While certainly relevant, the gloss is nonetheless unlikely. Until recently, *óinmit* was also understood as cognate to the Welsh *ynfyd*, 'foolish'. As T. F. O'Rahilly points out, however, the change from *yn-* to *óin-* is doubtful. O'Rahilly suggests the more plausible etymology that *óinmit* is based on the well attested use of **ón*, 'lamb' (Old Irish *úan*) in a sense of dull-wittedness or foolishness.[130]

As with *drúth*, the 'foolish' quality of the *oinmit* is often ambiguous. Well-attested in the early sources, the *oinmit* in the saga-literature is primarily portrayed as an entertaining fool. In the legal material he is portrayed exclusively as a mental incompetent. Interestingly, in the Middle Irish texts concerning the characters Mac Dá

[128] The gloss accompanies all but one example from fn. 129, above. See also CIH 421.7.
[129] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) §1028.
[130] O'Rahilly, Thomas F. (1938) pp 150-1. For a discussion of the possibility of *úan* used in the name of a children's game, see chapter 7, section 1.1.

Cherda and Cummaine Foda the former, also known as Comghan, Ireland's chief-*oinmit*, is depicted in both roles;

> *Primóinmid Erenn 7 iarthair domain intí Comgán, 7 fer lán do thuicsiu 7 do rath in spiruta nóim. Ar bui do med a ratha co mba réil dó neam 7 talam gusna hilib filet indib. Ar intan nobid Comgan for ceill noberad breatha firu d'feraib in beatha 7 ni chaemsadis filid 7 breitheamain 7 oes screptra a taithmech nách a táithcheód.*
> *Intan ba hóinmid* immorro *tiagadh na muire 7 na huisci cosaib tirmaib 7 nochodlud fóithib 7 ni erchóidiged nach ní dib-sin dó, 7 nobidis eisc 7 ilpiasta ichtair in aiceoin for a bais 7 for a lama intan nochodlud fana muirib 7 fana huiscib 7 ni techdis reime.*
> *Ni techdis im*morro *na heoin dia conair reime 7 intan ba doinend no snechta ann 7 nochodlud Comgan amuig isna dithrebaib fásaig, ticdis eathaidi 7 eoin na ndithreb chuici, co leathdiss a n-eiteada 7 a sciathu tairis dia diden ar fuacht 7 dearrdan.*
>
> Chief fool of Ireland and the western world was this Comgan; likewise a man of full understanding and of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Such was his grace that Heaven and earth and the multitudes therein were manifest to him. For when Comgan was in possession of his senses he would deliver true judgements to the men of the world, and neither poets nor judges nor literary folk could revolve or contradict them.
> But when he was a fool he would go dryshod in seas and waters, and he would sleep beneath them...and when there would be a tempest or snow and Comgan would sleep out of doors in the desert places, the feathered things and birds of the wilderness would come to him and spread their wings and pinions over him to shelter him from cold and storm.[131]

Mac Dá Cherda, appropriately 'son of two arts', is elsewhere depicted as the wise fool. In one such text he is put to numerous challenges, in each case successful through humorously naïve yet effective simplicity.[132]

A further text devoted to Mac Dá Cherda suggests that the *óinmit* was a professional with a wage.[133] When Mac Dá Cherda's father's *óinmit* dies, the court druid (*druad*) asks the king what he shall give him for the loss of the *óinmit*. The king replies that he will give the druid the *óinmit*'s *log*, which refers either to his wage or

---

[131] O'Keeffe, J.G. (1912) pp 20-1. The dichotomous description supports the translation of the *rath* as 'sense'.
[132] *Ibid.* pp 27-34. This is a separate text found within the same manuscript.

his overall worth. This suggests not only that the *óinmit* received payment for his craft, but that he was also 'managed' by a member of the king's employ, in this case the druid.

A king's *óinmit* is also the subject of a valuable description in the Middle Irish text *Mesca Ulaid.*

> *Unsea riu sain anair anechtair, ar Crom deroil, atconarcra and budin da daercarslúag; oenfer eturru. Suasmael dubrintac fair, mocolsúli móra oengela ina cind. Aged etiopacda slemangorm aci. Bratt ríbáin i forcipul immi; frithcuman umaidi ina brutt uar a braini; sithbacc creduma ina láim. Clucin ceolbind ina comaitect. Bentaid a eclasc bar in slúag co t'arcend suba 7 sogra do'nd ardríg 7 do'nd tslúag uili...Cia sút, bar Ailill. Ni anse, bar Cúrui. Róimid rígóinmit sin ar Cúrúi. 'Onmit Conchobair. Nirabi d'erbaid nach do cumaid ar duni d'Ultaib riam ar a tucad da ari acht cofacced Róimid rígónmit.*
>
> Here, before them to the east, outside' said Crom Deróil, 'I saw a band of their rabble. One man in their midst, with a black, pointed, thick head of hair, having large, subtle, all-white eyes in his head, and a smooth-blue Ethiopian countenance; a ribbed garment in folds about him; a brazen clasp in his garment over his breast; a long bronze wand in his hand and a melodious little bell beside him, which he touched with his wand before the host so that it gives pleasure and delight to the Arch-King, and to the whole host.'
> 'Who is he' asked Ailill. 'Not hard...' answered Curoi. 'That is the royal fool Róimid, Conchobor's fool. There never was fatigue or sorrow on any man of the Ultonians that he would heed, if he only saw the royal fool Róimid.'[134]

The entertainment provided by the *rígóinmit* is consistent with general jesting or buffoonery, and matches descriptions found of the *rí drúth*, best seen in the passage from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, above. His title '*rígóinmit*', like the *rídrúth*, is likely an indication of his professional status rather than his relationship to a given king. The

---

[133] *Ibid.* pp 34-5.

[134] Hennessy, W.M. (1889) pp 34-7. Interestingly, the account strongly suggests both by name (*ethiopacdae sleman-gorm aci*; LL) and description that the *oinmit* in question was of African descent. References to Africans, while more common in religious texts, are absent from the legal material and infrequent in the saga-literature. The example here is likely the result of influence from a classical Latin text.

óinmit's role as an entertainer at assemblies is attested in the *Cath Maige Tuired* where he is included in a lengthy list of musicians and performers.[135]

While the majority of references to the *óinmit* in the saga-literature depict professional and entertaining fools, occasional references describe him as a mental incompetent. A passage from *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* describes advice given to MacConglinne by a phantom. Concerning things he should avoid, the hero is advised not to tell a secret to a foolish woman and not to take counsel from an *óinmit*.[136] A later text mentions that the king of Thessaly's son is sent home under the conditions of an *óinmit*. Earlier in the same text the son describes his adversary's speech as that of an *óinmit* or an *amadáin*.[137] Such descriptions of a fool or mental incompetent are consistent with the portrayal of the *óinmit* in the legal material.

The law tracts often distinguish whether the male or the female *óinmit* is intended. As with similar mental incompetents, this has specific bearing on the extent of legal dependence and liability. The genuine introduction to the *Senchas Már* states that the contracts of a *drúth* or *mer* may be dissolved.[138] This is expected as a mental incompetent would not be capable or held responsible for the contracts into which he may have entered. Interestingly, the *drúth*'s standard gloss '*co rath*' is expanded to define him more specifically as the male *óinmit* (*co rath .i. fer oinmit*). The distinction can be incorporated into the overall sense of *rath* as 'wherewithal'. The female *oinmit* would clearly have been associated with those who were fully legally incompetent, while the male *oinmit*, who was perhaps capable of at least semi-independence, would have been classified as having partial legal amenability.

---

[135] Grey, Elizabeth (1982) p 33.
[136] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) p 72.
[137] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 295; transl. p 331: also p 290; transl p 325. The *ammatán* is usually rendered 'fool, halfwit, simpleton'. It is a likely a derivative of *ammait*, originally a hag or spectre. See DIL A, 308.46-65; 309.3-9.
[138] CIH 351.26

The *óinmit* is again characterised by his sex in commentary to the passage from *Do Choimét Dligthech*.[139] The Old Irish text concerns individuals who may not be distrained. The *óinmit* in this case is glossed as female (*.i. femen*). This is apparently the commentator's own distinction between the *óinmit* and the *óin*, who directly precedes *óinmit* in the main text, and is glossed 'the male idiot' (*onan fir*).[140] It is uncertain whether the terms in the main text represent individuals with different mental disabilities or whether they indeed represent different sexes.

A final legal reference to the *óinmit* is found in the legal text *Miadslechta*, discussed above.[141] Surprisingly, the *óinmit* is ranked twenty-first in a list of twenty-six honour-grades. The commentary to the passage is obscure, though the final clause of the section clearly states that the individual in question, if in fact still referring to the *óinmit*, does not receive honour-price (*ni dligh dire in fer-sin*).[142] Other figures mentioned in the commentary include the *mer*, *drochmnai*, or 'base women', and *ona*, a term which is likely linguistically related to *óinmit.* Unfortunately, many of the linking terms are both obscure and otherwise unattested, precluding even a doubtful definition.

While the specific nature and characteristics of the *óinmit* are uncertain, it is reasonably clear that his 'foolishness' was both a mental deficiency and the mockery of it. The two may have been contemporary, though it is likely the reputed performing fool of the sagas, particularly the *rígóinmit*, based his performance on the genuine antics of the congenital fool.

2.5. *Reimm*:

---

[139] CIH 1459.8-10.

[140] The commentary is doubtful. *Onan* is poorly attested, though doubtless related to the first element of *óinmit*. See DIL O, 143.85-144.2; 145.38-9; 147.50-9.

[141] Gerald Manning discusses the text and content of *Miadslechta* in his forthcoming edition of the text.

The *reimm* shares much the same obscurity as the *óinmit*, and is even less attested. He is included in the *Miadslechta* as the twenty-third of twenty-six honour-grades.[143] His later gloss extends his identity to *drúth* or *fuirseoire* and states that he is not entitled to honour-price as he distorts his body and face in front of crowds.[144] As seen with the *fuirseoire*, this is a practical legal consideration as those who deliberately distort themselves waive their rights to compensation for disfigurement or blemish.[145] The description is reiterated in the entry for *reimm* in *Sanais Cormac*;

> *Remm nomen do fuirseōir fobīth cach rīastardae dobeir for a agaid.*
>
> *Reim*, a name for a *fuirseoire* because of every distortion which he brings upon his face."[146]

Without corroborating evidence it is difficult to establish whether this definition is in fact accurate, or, as is sometimes the case, the misguided zeal of a later commentator to fill in the gaps.

2.6. *Oblaire*:

The *oblaire* is a further figure whose individual entertainment is uncertain. Clearly an entertainer, the amusement he provides is ambiguous, depending upon the particular text. His name presumably derives from *ubull*, 'apple', and hence 'ball', intimating that his entertainment (*oblairecht*) originally included juggling or jesting.[147] Evidence from the legal material, particularly in later gloss and commentary, depicts the *oblaire* as a low grade poet. Interestingly, in the saga-

---

[142] CIH 582.32, 585.21.
[143] CIH 582.35.
[144] CIH 585.25
[145] For the legal implications of honour-price owing to wounding or blemish, see Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 130-4.
[146] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 95, §1080. Translation is my own. This passage, as discussed, is most likely a borrowing from *Miadslechta*, generally accepted as an eighth-century text. For a discussion on the relationship between legal texts and glossaries, see Russell, Paul (1998).
[147] DIL, O-81.68-83; 82.29-37.

literature the *oblaire* is more often paired with commoners and household attendants than with professional entertainers. In a description of a banquet in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* Ibar is described as sitting "...merely among the messengers (*echlachu*) and *oblaire*."[148] In the Middle Irish *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra* the *obloraib*, along with the charioteers, rabble and commoners, are given the heads and feet of the slaughtered animal as their portion of meat.[149] In a poem within the *Acallamh* the *oblaire* is paired with the household pet (*eisrecht*).[150] Unfortunately, though the *oblaire* seems to have been a well recognised entertainer, his amusement is left unsaid.

Evidence from the legal material is more specific regarding the *oblaire*'s profession and status. Curiously, the majority of available evidence is not concerned with the purported juggling activity suggested by his name. The genuine introduction to the *Senchas Mór* ranks the *oblaire* as the lowest and least prolific storyteller in a list of ten.[151] The Old Irish *Uraicecht na Ríar*, dated to the second half of the eighth century, regards the oblaire as one of the three sub-grades of poets. He is described as having five compositions and an honour-price of half a scruple.[152] The later gloss describes him as a *fuirseoire* without skill, and his craft as follows;

> *...dan doearbann meabhraigheas, am*ail *ita: ata form mina tarrda biadh im dord da-gian t'égnach, nocho chel is indisfead da drochsgel; no dadhán,*
>
> ...it is the poem of a base bard which he memorises, as is 'It is my intention, if you do not put food in my fist, I will revile you, I will not conceal it, and I will give bad reports of you'.[153]

The glossator further criticises his low honour-price, and presumably his reputation in general, with the claim, "...it seems that he is unworthy".[154]

---

[148] *Táin* LL, l. 1041, transl. p 166. The *echlach* is also identified as a prostitute. See DIL, E-30.8-32.
[149] Best, R.I. (1910) p 125.
[150] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909), Vol. 4, p 90.
[151] CIH 349.10.
[152] By comparison, the *ollam*, the highest ranking poet, has three hundred and fifty compositions and an honour-price of forty *séts*. See Breatnach, Liam (1987) pp 102-3..

A passage from *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* depicts the *oblaire* as a semi-independent figure, stating that his guardian is distrained for three days for any crime that his *oblaire* commits.[155] Judging from outside evidence the guardian in this case may represent the *oblaire*'s employer rather than legal warden. The glossator equates the *oblaire* with the *fuirseoire*, reinforcing the idea that the *oblaire* was an entertainer and not a mental incompetent.

The craft of the *oblaire* is also mentioned in the legal material, primarily to indicate his professional nature. The *oblaire*, as seen, is used in at least two legal texts as a gloss for the semi-professional *drúth*. As discussed, the penalty in *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* for failing to provide for a *drúth* is half the standard penalty if he possesses land and *obloirecht*.[156] *Obloirecht* is also mentioned in *Caín Aicillne* as liable for all damages and losses, unless the *obloirecht* was knowingly and deliberately requested by the injured party.[157] The sense here seems general trickery or deception, potentially ending in lost wagers or forfeited possessions. A modern parallel might be a magician absconding with an unwitting audience member's watch. The linguistic correspondence with *ubull* may also denote juggling, as seen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*'s description of the *clessamnach* juggling nine silver apples.

The overall picture of the *oblaire* seems a low-grade story-teller or reciter with complementary clowning skills. His recitations may have been accompanied with juggling, jesting or perhaps physical distortions, as suggested by his association with the *fuirseoire* in the glosses. Unlike various other performing fools, there is no reason to believe he was in any way mentally incompetent.

---

[153] *Ibid.*, pp 112-3. Earlier in the text the competence of the poets in relation to grade and honour-price is discussed, 'from small to great'. 'Small' is glossed '*.i. oblaire*'. See pp 102-3.
[154] *Ibid.*, pp 112-3.
[155] CIH 382.18-21.
[156] CIH 372.21-7; A similar passage occurs in the text *De Drutbrethaib* at CIH 2107.21.
[157] CIH 494.33; 2237.27.

2.7. *Crosán*:

A final entertaining fool appearing in both the law tracts and the saga-literature is the *crosán*. The figure has been discussed in detail, though mainly in his post-Norman role as satirist and poet, by Alan Harrison in his book *The Irish Trickster*.[158] There is considerable debate as to the etymology of the term *crosán*.[159] The word is doubtless comprised of the element *cros-* or *cross-*, combined with the diminutive ending *-an*. *Cros* is the Old and Middle Irish representative of Latin *crux*, or 'cross' By extension, *cros* is further translated 'prohibition' or 'hindrance', presumably a semantic development from the power and role of the Christian cross.[160] If this is indeed the element in *crosán*, the entertainer may have originally been associated with religious processions or a mockery of them.

While the derivation of his name is uncertain, the entertainer and his performance is well attested. In the early literature he appears in several guises, sometimes resembling the clown, sometimes a story-teller. Generally, and specifically in later texts, however, he appears as a low-grade but formidable satirist and lampooner. References to the *crosán* in the early saga-literature and religious texts portray a buffoon or clownlike figure, often reminiscent of other such entertainers as the *drúth* and *clesamnach*. In the Middle Irish *Voyage of the Uí Corra* a *crosán* who asks to join a group on a sea-faring pilgrimage in search of God is asked to strip off his clothes and join the group naked.[161] He is asked to leave his clothes ashore as they do not belong to him. This suggests that the clothes, likely suited to his profession, in

---

[158] Harrison, Alan (1989)

[159] See *ibid.*, pp 37-41; Ó Sheadha, M. (1947); Todd, J.H. (1848) p 182. The various views are discussed in Harrison's commentary. Harrison rightly denies Ó Sheadha's suggestion that the word is a derivative from Irish *craes*. The derivation is linguistically impossible.

[160] DIL, C-548.55-549.53. For a discussion, see Harrison, Alan (1989) pp 37-8.

[161] Stokes, Whitley (1893) p 39.

fact belong to the group with whom the *crosán* had been travelling. As seen, primarily with travelling courts and retinues, itinerancy was likely a common feature of a professional entertainer.[162] The *crosán*'s gesture further symbolises his willingness to give up his sinful occupation, one which is most manifestly evident through his costume. Interestingly, the *crosán*'s performance could not have been entirely frowned upon as he is later seen entertaining his fellow voyagers with his *oirfideadh*, or 'minstrelsy'.[163]

The *crosán* is more frequently mentioned in literature of the late-Middle and Early Modern Irish period. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, in the entry for the year 1137, describe Moyle Issa, a king and arch-poet of Ireland, as a *crosán*, "...in that metre called *crosánacht*".[164] In a late-Middle Irish verse concerning portions at a feast, the *crosán* gets the *cruchait*, or 'rumpsteak'. This compares favourably to the buffoons, who receive the kidneys.[165] In a valuable though comparatively late text on Latin declension, *crosán* is used to gloss the Latin *scurra*, a 'buffoon' or 'jester'.[166] This perhaps indicates that either the *crosán*'s antics continued down to the time of the glossator, or that his earlier reputation had endured.

The *crosán* is mentioned twice in the legal material.[167] The first reference, found in *Bretha Étgid*, discusses the penalty for shaving or cutting of the *crosán*'s hair.[168] Interestingly, the same penalty applies for shaving a *scolóc*'s hair, as well as the hair of the *ingin mael*. The *scolóc* is a pupil, usually one of a monastery, and the

---

[162] Musicians were also often itinerant professionals, as discussed in chapter 1.
[163] *Ibid.* p 41.
[164] Murphy, Dennis (1896) *s.a.* 1137.
[165] O'Sullivan, Anne (1968) pp 120-1.
[166] Stokes, Whitley (1860) p 4, l. 14.
[167] The *crosán*'s art, *crosánacht*, is also mentioned in the law tract *Uraicecht na Ríar*. The reference occurs as a gloss on members of a household who are led astray by an *ollam*'s recitations, prompting them to such acts as plundering (*gaeid*) , stealing (*braeid*) or *crosánacht*. See Breatnach, Liam (1987) pp 102-3. The reputation and character can be compared to the *creccaire*.
[168] CIH 304.11-12. The line does not occur in the parallel text at CIH 1623.17ff.

ingin mael, or 'cropped daughter' likely refers to a novice nun.[169] The tonsure of these two individuals would have been particularly important. It is therefore understandable that shaving of their heads would incur a penalty. Likewise, it seems for the *crosán*. Literary references to performing fools often depict them with long or particularly outrageous hair.[170] In context with the *scoloc* and *ingin mael*, the penalty here seems appropriate as it is the result of an injury to one's status. The *crosán* would have depended upon his hair as part of his identification and entertainment. The shaving of it would therefore certainly have affected both his position and performance.

The second reference in the legal material is found in a triad within *Bretha Nemed Toisech*, concerning the three things which constitute a *crosán*'s status. The three are identified as "distending his cheek, distending his bag, and distending his belly" (*tréde neimthigedar crossán: rige óile, rige théighe, rige bronn*).[171] The comic effect of expanding the cheek and belly is clear. The reference to 'bag' however, is ambiguous. The medieval jester is often portrayed with staff or ball, often the ball is an inflated animal bladder. This may be the 'bag' alluded to. Fergus Kelly suggests that the bag in question may refer to the testicles.[172] This would remain in accordance with the other said body parts. The comic effect of the private parts is a particular feature of mimes, jesters and clowns particularly in Roman times, continuing down through the medieval period. An example from Welsh law supports this. According to the *Law of Hywel Dda*, the king's groom is entitled to payment for each of the horses under his care, excepting three.[173] The three horses he does not receive payment for are described as the horse of the bishop, the horse of the chief falconer and the horse

---

[169] DIL, S-56-68.

[170] See *e.g.*, O'Keefe, J.G. (1911) p 23; Hennessy, W.M. (1889) p 37; O'Sullivan, Anne (1968) p 121; Harrison, Alan (1984) p 144. Musicians are also often described by their hair. See chapter 1, sections 3.1-4.

[171] CIH 2220.2. Translated by Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 17, §116.

[172] Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 64-5, fn 203.

of the *croesan*, the Welsh cognate to Irish *crosán*. The reason stated that the groom can not expect payment for the *croesan's* horse is that it is customary for the *croesan* to tie the end of the horse's halter to his testicles as he exits the court. It is uncertain why this excuses payment to the king's groom, but it supports the idea that the *croesan*'s testicles were part of his performance. Returning to the Irish legal triad, the distension of the three body parts suggests an entertainer resembling a jester or buffoon. As the *crosán* later becomes a low-ranking poet, references such as these represent an earlier reflection of the *crosán*. Perhaps more simply, the references may suggest that physical antics were part of his verbal performance in his more well known reputation as satirist or lampooner.

Interestingly, a further allusion to the *crosán* in relation to horses is found in *O'Mulconry's Glossary*. The entry for *grellach*, which appears a substantive of the antecedent entry *grell*, is defined 'the horse of a *crosán*' (*ech crosāin*). The preceding entry for *grell* describes an animal which walks backward (*animal retroambulans*), declaring further 'this is why it is called a bad horse' (*is aire itberar drochech*).[174] Judging from the two passages, the horse was either a poorly trained animal or in fact a trick-horse. While entries such as these are at the very least suspect, it is conceivable to imagine an animal whose unusual behaviour and antics, such as walking backwards, were trained to accompany the professional *crosán*.

---

[173] Jenkins, Dafydd (1986) p 18.
[174] Stokes, Whitley (1900a) p 264, §§642-3.

Chapter 3 Horse and Chariot-Racing

1. The Horse in Early Irish Society:

1.1 Physical attributes, terminology, breeds:

Evidence for the domestic horse in Ireland dates back to 2000 B.C. Horse bones from this period and later are found in domestic sites throughout Ireland, most commonly in crannogs. Judging from the relative quantities of bones from other domestic livestock such as cattle and sheep, horses seem to have been comparatively less common. Archaeological evidence for horse trappings and draught equipment is not found until the first millenium B.C., suggesting horses up until this period were primarily kept as a domestic food source.

Archaeological evidence reveals that horses in Ireland were consumed by humans up until the early Christian period and perhaps later. Butchered horse bones have been found at two early Christian ecclesiastical sites, in Counties Kerry and Mayo, and at an early medieval site at Dunshauglin, Co. Meath.[1] The relative scarcity of horse bones in the later periods is likely attributed to a particularly strong taboo against the consumption of horse flesh. References to the taboo are found throughout the saga-literature, particularly regarding the hero Cú Chulainn.[2] While the references imply a pre-Christian context, the taboo is also found in several religious texts, mainly in early hagiography and penitential material.

A clear ecclesiastical reference to the taboo is found in Adamnán's *Vita Columbae*, a Latin Life of the late seventh century. In it Colum Cille prophecies that a

---

[1] Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 88-90, 352.
[2] See *e.g.* van Hamel, A.G. (1956) pp

particularly sanctimonious penitent will someday "chew the flesh of a stolen mare." The prophecy is eventually fulfilled when a former penitent is found among thieves, eating the flesh of horses from a wooden griddle.[3] Elsewhere, within the ninth-century Old Irish Penitential, a penance of three and one half years is prescribed for anyone who eats the flesh of a horse.[4] References in religious texts attest to the consumption of horse flesh, as well as the taboo against it, well into the Christian period.

Horses in early Ireland seem to have been smaller than the standard breeds of today, had longer hair and more closely resembled the modern pony. This said, horses were clearly large enough to perform all military and agricultural tasks, as well as providing transportation both as mounts and as draught animals.[5] It should also be noted that the horse, unlike most domestic animals, did not decrease in size during the early stages of its domestication. While the physical dimensions of animals such as cattle and sheep were adversely affected by controlled grazing, following their domestication horses seem to have increased in size.[6] There is no material evidence for native feral horses anywhere on these islands. Wild horses are, however, mentioned in the early literature. If this indeed reflects reality, the horses were likely the result of domestic horses turning wild.[7]

Aesthetically, colour often seems to have been a key factor in determining a horse's merit and worth. A fragment within a Middle Irish treatise rates eleven different horses according to colour and markings. There is little ostensible logic or pattern to the judgement, which, among other descriptions, claims, "Brown horses

---

[3] Anderson, A.O. and M.A., (repr. 1991) Book 1, Chapter 21. This anecdote is paralleled in a passage from the *Life of Enda of Aran* when a man is told, "You shall eat the flesh of a horse which you shall have stolen, and while eating (it) you will be killed." Plummer (1910) Vol. 2, p 73; Ní Chatháin, Proinséas (1991) p 123.

[4] Binchy, D.A. (1963b) pp 258-9, §2.

[5] Evidence from Pictish sculptured stones indicate horses approximately fourteen hands high, in comparison to the modern average of sixteen to seventeen hands. While substantially smaller, this horse could very easily have supported the average adult. See Hughson, Irene (1997) p 32.

[6] *Ibid.*, p 29.

with white heads are the best colour…red horses are bad and the yellow is worse."[8] Horses belonging to heroes in the saga-literature are often described and named by their colour. In *Táin Bó Cualgne* Cú Chulainn's famous chariot pair are named *Liath Macha*, 'Macha's Grey', and *Dub Saiglen*, 'the Black of Saigliu'. White horses, particularly mares, are often described as racers, as are black steeds. The famous black racer of Díl swept the prizes at several assemblies in texts from the saga-literature,[9] while in a late thirteenth-century poem to the Ó Connor of Connaught, Teigue's horse is described as "…the horserace lover's white horse" (*ech gel Taidhg ghil ghraifnig*).[10] Horses of early Welsh literature are also described and named primarily by their colour. Sioned Davies draws a direct comparison to the way in which Welsh heroes and horses are often described, i.e. 'the hoary-headed man', 'the yellow-haired youth', as compared to 'Grey Fetlock', 'Long-Necked Chestnut' etc.[11] This is also a recurring device within the Irish sagas and could indicate a subtle yet recognisable theme in which specific traits of heroes and horses are implied by the colour of their hair.

Beyond colour, size and speed are the two most common factors in determining a horse's worth. The legal text *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* relates that every horse should be judged according to its size, shape, colour and speed.[12] An Old Irish legal passage outlines what the buyer of a horse should look for in a quality animal. Many of the features listed are patent and suggest that the average animal was expected to be both spirited enough for a fast and efficient riding horse, yet docile enough to suffer the daily toil of the workhorse. Desirable traits include;

---

[7] *Ibid.*, p 33. For a reference to *fiadgraig*, 'wild horses', see Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás (1977) p 121.
[8] Ó Cuiv, Brian (1985) p 119, §15.
[9] Stokes, Whitley (1886) p 206. O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 128; transl. p 140.
[10] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1926) p 487-8.
[11] Davies, Sioned (1997) p 125. See also Bromwich, Rachel (1997) p 107.
[12] CIH 1131.6. For translation, see Gwynn, E.J. (1942) p 41.

Each mor slan og urasa, .i. im leigsin a marcaidh fuirri. an ardceandach airreachtach, beocraide bruindleathan bairneach, suiligh sleamain seimchosach socineoil, ...slan goisti...socomail i laim...nibu calaceimneach, nib roisil, nibi roard,...nib robeil...nib imleimneach...forlim slan soimrime somul.

A large healthy young docile horse, i.e with regard to allowing its rider to mount it; swift, high-headed, mettlesome; lively-hearted, broad-chested, fiery; gentle, calm, narrow-legged, of good stock;... healthy with regard to halter...easy in the hand; it does not walk stiffly; it should not be too low; it should not be too tall;...it should not have an excessively large mouth...it should not be in the habit of leaping about; ...sound leaping, a fleet [horse] of good riding. [13]

Two specific attributes listed, those concerning the importance of narrow legs and a small mouth, suggest the definite influence of continental breeds. These two traits are atypical to northern European breeds. They are found more commonly in southern and eastern continental breeds of horse such as the Arabian. As will be discussed, foreign imports were clearly of high value, and while the most common of these was clearly the Welsh horse, there is evidence that horses were also imported from France and Spain.

As seen, horses were not classified by specific breed but by appearance, performance and function. Descriptions of horses throughout the source material are pragmatically based, focussing on what the horses accomplish and for what they are used. The particular exception to this is the foreign horse, most commonly termed *ech Bretnach*. The term *ech Bretnach* is found in souces as early as the Old Irish period and ostensibly describes a horse from Britain though Wales is almost certainly meant. In his twelfth-century *Itinerarium Kambriæ*, Giraldus Cambrensis describes the well-known stud farms of Powys, kept by Robert de Bellême, Earl of Shrewsbury. The horses were greatly prized, described as handsome, with magnificent proportions and

[13] Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 555-9.

incomparable speed.[14] The Earl, sent into exile in 1102 by Henry I, is described as having imported many of the original studs from Spain.[15]

It is perhaps safest to say that the *ech Bretnach* is a horse imported across the Irish Sea and most likely from Wales. This said, Welsh law, in direct comparison to a relative silence in early Anglo-Norman and English sources, shows a marked preponderance in references to horses. It is both tempting and reasonable to call the *ech Bretnach* a Welsh horse. While it is impossible to be certain exactly whence these horses were imported, based on the sources and the evidence available, all references to *ech Bretnach* in the present discussion will be deemed "Welsh horse."

The *ech Bretnach* is well-attested throughout the early sources, though appearing almost exclusively in contexts concerning its understandably high value. The best evidence is found in the legal material. The law tract *Di Astud Chirt 7 Dligid* lists the Welsh horse as a particularly valuable pledge, one which may act as collateral to avoid a debtors death. The passage is concerned with which contracts the *macc beoathar*, 'son of a living father', may legally dissolve without the express permission of the father. The text states that one of these contracts is one in which the father has agreed to offer highly valuable personal items as pledges. These items include,

> *…in .s. is fir-thog*aide *dona .s.aib is cuimgech gell*ad *de cona rabasaigt*er *he, .i. in fail oir no int ech bretnach, do comsclaedh uadh .i. in .s. as fir-thogaidaide bis aco.*
>
> …the choicest of the chattels, which is a sufficient pledge from him to save him [the son] from being put to death, i.e. to deprive him [the son] of the gold ring or the Welsh horse, i.e. the choicest property which he has.[16]

According to the passage, items such as a gold ring or the *ech Bretnach* are also deemed valuable enough to stand pledge for a man whose life is legally forfeit.

---

[14] Dimock, James F (1868) Bk 2, Chapter 12, p 143.
[15] *Ibid.*, also Thorpe, Lewis (1978) p 201.
[16] CIH 227.15-7. Translation is my own.

A further legal reference to the *ech Bretnach*, found in the *Heptads* and again concerning pledges, deals with the seven stocks which are difficult to return with full restitution and profit, i.e., pledges which are hard to replace. One of the seven pledges is described as 'foreign curiosities' (*gaillite tacair*), explained as;

> *.i. na gall-seoit tar muir tocait*er *.i. cno gnae 7 cuirn buabuill. doilig a naithg*in, *doilig a ndiabl*ad *.i. lartatacha bretnacha.*
>
> i.e., the foreign goods from beyond the sea which are introduced, i.e., beautiful nuts and drinking horns. difficult [is] their restoration, difficult [is] their doubling. i.e., the Welsh horses.[17]

The commentary here corresponds to the entry for *gailliti*, again 'foreign curiosities', in *O'Davoren's Glossary*. The Welsh mares (*laire breathnacha*) are listed first among examples.[18]

A separate entry in *O'Davoren's Glossary* offers a curious reference to *ech Bretnach*, occuring as a gloss to the headword *cullach*. The term *cullach* derives from the common Celtic root for 'testicle', and is most commonly used to describe both the fertile male horse and pig. [19] The term survives in Modern Irish as the word *collach*, 'wild-boar'. The passage in the glossary reads;

> *Cullach .i. ech bretnach, ut est no cullach allmuire .i. in cullach ech tar oll in mara.*"
>
> the stallion, i.e. the Welsh horse, that is, or the imported stallion, i.e. the stallion-horse from across the expanse of the sea. [20]

Of the various references to *cullach* in respect to horses, I am aware of only one which does not describe the animal as a foreign one. As *cullach* is a term for the fertile stallion and used almost exclusively to describe a foreign one, it is reasonable

---

[17] CIH 26.38-27.1. Translation is my own. Interestingly, the passage is reminiscent of a scene in Middle Irish *Voyage of Mael Dúin*, where Mael Dúin and his men, upon landing at a foreign island, see a horse-racing green with "...vast hoofmarks upon of horses upon it...They saw moreover the shells of huge nuts..." Stokes, Whitley (1888-9) p 466.

[18] CIH 1507.34-5.

[19] Kelly, Patricia (1997) p 53.

[20] CIH 1484.30-1. Translation is my own.

to conclude that the *cullach* was imported first and foremost for breeding, likely due to its larger size and strength. The Roman occupation of Britain brought both the larger work and war horses from the continent. Over time casual as well as selective breeding would have produced the larger stronger horses clearly highly sought after and valued.

A final reference to the *ech Bretnach* is found in the saga-literature and once again indicates the horse's high value. The reference, from the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, relates that Píchan, the son of a king, is asked what he will offer in payment for protection provided by the tale's hero, MacConglinne. Píchan replies that he will give both 'a golden ring and a Welsh horse' (*falaig n-óir 7 ech Bretnach*).[21] While the Welsh horse was undoubtedly the most common import, evidence is found for other foreign horses. Foreign horses are discussed in the law tract *Bretha Déin Chécht* concerning compensation for wounds and blemishes. The Old Irish main text states that a permanent blemish on a leg warrants compensation of one *cumal* together with 'choice foreign steeds' (*formnaib ech nallmuiri*). The gloss to the main text, clearly etymological, states that a 'mighty horse' (*ech ollmor*) or in fact one that is imported from 'across the mighty sea' (*daran ollmhuir*) is to be awarded for a blow to the shoulder. According to the glossator, this ruling is exclusive to *Bretha Déin Chécht*.[22]

Two references in Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poems mention horses from overseas. The first, in relation to the placename Carn Fraich, states that Fraich was the son of the king of Spain, and as such he was famed for his horses.[23] The second relates that the placename Odba derives from a proud king by the same name, "...one that loved wisdom, an oak of strength...who frequented the hill with his docile yoke

[21] Meyer, Kuno, (1892a) p. 44.
[22] Binchy, D.A. (1966) pp 40-1, §30.

of foreign-horses (*gall-echaib*)".[24] The emphasis of the description seems to lie in illustrating Odba's power and wealth, having not one but two foreign steeds for his chariot. Two final references to foreign horses are found in the Middle Irish *Lebor na Cert*. In both cases the horses in question are deemed valuable and costly objects. The first passage relates that the king of Munster must give the king of Uí Liatháin "...a horse and its tack from across the high sea".[25] Similarly, the second passage states that the king of Tara owes the king of Uí Briúin "...a French horse of true honor"(*each Frangcach fir miadach*).[26]

1.2 Function:

Apart from their origin and physical attributes, horses were also identified and ranked by the function they provided. Three horses receive particular attention in the early legal material and literature; the workhorse, the riding horse and the racehorse. Pragmatically the three would have been largely interchangable. Linguistically, however, the three are exclusive and separate. The workhorse is most frequently referred to as *capall*, or more literally, *ech fognama*, 'horse of service'. The riding horse is normally deemed *ech imrimme* or *ech sliasta*, literally 'horse of the thigh'. Lastly, the racehorse is most commonly referred to as *ech aige*, literally 'driven' or 'impelled horse'.[27]

The clearest evidence for the value and distinction of the three individual horses is found in the law tract *Críth Gablach*.[28] The tract lists the personal effects

---

[23] Gwynn, E.J., (1903-35) Vol. 10, p. 361.
[24] *Ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 175.
[25] Dillon, Myles (1962) ll 544-7. The Ui Liathain occupied an area near modern Castlelyons, Co.Cork.
[26] *Ibid.*, ll 1934-5.
[27] From the verb *aigid*, 'to drive, impel'. DIL, A-110.16ff., also A-108.26ff.
[28] Binchy, D.A. (1941) Translations by MacNeill, Eoin (1923).

which establish each grade of lord and freeman farmer.[29] According to the text the highest ranking lord, the *aire tuísea*, or 'lord of precedence', owns 'two workhorses for harrowing' (*dá chapal fo foirtsi[u]d*).[30] Ranking just below the *aire tuísea* is the *aire désa*, or common lord, who is expected to own a 'suitable saddle-horse with a silver bridle'(*ech slíasta comadas co srian arggait*).[31] Below the *aire desa* begin the various grades of the *bóaire*, or freeman farmer. The highest ranking *bóaire*, the *bóaire febsa*, owns a 'horse for working and a steed for riding' (*capal*[l] *fognama 7 ech immrimme*).[32] The standard *bóaire* is expected to own one *ech slíasta*, again 'horse of the thigh'.[33] Finally, the *ócaire*, the lowest grade of independent farmer, is expected to farm with one horse, used both for working and riding (*capal iter fognum 7 imrim*).[34]

The most definite of the three horses, the *ech imrimme*, is easily identified. The qualifier *imrimme*, verbal noun of *imm-reid*, 'to ride around, to travel', implies that it is the proper riding horse, and most likely the horse used for long journeys.[35] The *ech imrimme* is also the term most frequently used in contexts concerning horseraces, discussed below.[36]

In his review of D.A. Binchy's edition of *Críth Gablach,* Joseph Vendryes defines the *ech slíasta* as the "*cheval de travail"* and the *ech imrimme* as the "*cheval de selle*".[37] This delineation may assume too much. The semantic difference between

---

[29] For a discussion of each of the following grades, see Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 26-33; and (1997) pp 445-8.; CG, pp 69-109.

[30] CG, p 16.410. This differs from MacNeill translation of "Two work-horses on the road". *Foirsid,* 'harrows' , and its verbal noun, *foirsed,* are well attested, see DIL, F-260.6-18. Horses were not used for ploughing and tillage until the late thirteenth century, the result of Norman influence. See Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 95.

[31] CG, p 14.345. Mac Neill, *ibid.*, p 297. Embellishments such as this are common in the legal material. Bridles and their components are referred to as being made of materials such as silver and gold. In a practical sense the metals would have had no function other than ornamental. Materials and evidence for bridles and other horse trappings are discussed below.

[32] CG, p 6.158. MacNeill, *ibid.*, p 290.

[33] CG, p 8.196.

[34] CG., p 4.191. MacNeill, *ibid.*, p 286.

[35] DIL I-150.32ff.

[36] See section 3.

[37] Vendryes, Joseph (1949-51) p 424.

the two terms might indeed be a pragmatic one, i.e. a horse which uses a type of saddle for riding (*ech imrimme* = *cheval de selle*) and one which does not (*ech slíasta*). Evidence for saddles in pre-Norman Ireland, however, is inconclusive.[38] A saddle-cloth (*diallait*) was certainly used, though there is little evidence for the standard raised saddle.

Accordingly, the distinction in terms may also suggest a difference in breed or size. Some horses are by nature better suited to being ridden, particularly over long distances. Additionally, the element *slíasta* may also be a term of measurement, describing a horse whose back reaches only to a man's thigh. Depictions of mounted horses in early gospel books such as the *Book of Kells* portray such a scale.[39] The images, however, are purely decorative and clearly not created to reflect reality. The term *ech slíasta* is found in the Old Irish *Amra Choluimb Chille*. It appears alongside the standard term *ech* in the context of horses which should proceed to a fair (*oenach*).[40] *Ech slíasta* is also found in a thirteenth-century poem within the *Book of Fenagh* where it is used as part of the tribute given to a king.[41] While references to the *ech slíasta* are found throughout the early sources, proving the term's currency and familiarity, the lack of detail precludes any further definition of the animal or its specific attributes, if any.[42]



Illustration 10

The *capall* is on steadier linguistic ground. *Capall* is explained in *Sanais Cormac* as a compound of *cap*, 'car', and *pell*, 'steed'.[43] Clearly an etymological gloss, the entry seems little more than a convoluted attempt to make

[38] For a discussion of horse equipment, see section 2, below.
[39] See illus. 10.
[40] Stokes, Whitley (1899) p 142.28. Stokes translates *ech slíasta* 'riding horse', and *ech* 'steed'.
[41] Hennessy, W.M. and D.H. Kelly (1875) p 140.

the name fit the function. As seen in *Críth Gablach*, the lowest grade of independent farmer is expected to own one horse, a *capal*, which is to function as both his workhorse and riding horse. The highest grade of freeman, the *aire túise* owns two of these horses, to be used for 'harrowing', the lighter task in preparing the soil for planting.[44] The *capall* is clearly the standard workhorse. The term shares a common root with Middle Welsh *ceffyl* and *cafall*. The term also shares a root with Latin *caballus*, though is not generally addressed as a loan word from Latin into Irish.[45] As Patricia Kelly demonstrates, linguistically the Middle and Modern Welsh term *ceffyl* can not be a borrowing from the Latin. Adding to this the evidence for the Gaulish personal name *Ro-cabalus*, 'great-horse', the Latin *caballus* may in fact be a borrowing from the Celtic. This further suggests that both Irish and Welsh, as separate branches of the common Celtic family, inherited the word independently.[46]

Capal and *ech* seem to have retained their distinction into the later period. This is best attested in an annal reference for the year 1336, where Conor McDermott is described as conducting a raid upon Tireragh, carrying away "...many spoils, many horses (*capall*) and a few steeds (*beaccan deachaib*)".[47]

Other terms for horses in Old and Middle Irish include *graig,* a collective which is generally translated 'steeds' or 'stallions'. The term most often describes particularly fast horses and is found almost exclusively in the contexts of races.[48] *Gabor*, a term treated in *Sanais Cormac* and found frequently in the saga-literature,

---

[42] The use of *slíasta*, 'thigh' with horses is also often found merely as idiom. See, for example, *Betha Colmáin Maic Lúachain*, where the tithes to Colman include 'a horse for every thigh'. Meyer, Kuno (1911c), p 51.
[43] Stokes, Whitley (1862) p 10.
[44] Horses were not used for ploughing until the late thirteenth century, the result of Norman influence. See Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 95.
[45] It is absent from Vendryes major study *De Hibernicis Vocabulis quae a Latina Lingua Originem Duxerunt* (1902).
[46] Kelly, Patricia (1997) 47-9.
[47] AFM, *s.a.* 1336, pp 558-9.
[48] DIL, G-145.11-34.

generally denotes mares, particularly white ones.[49] It is also found in the Old Irish *Tecosca Cormac* in a passage which appears to relate to horse-breeding. The passage relates that bridled mares (*sríangabrach*) should not be kept without a suitable stud (*nírba sríangabrach cen eochu*).[50] Interestingly Old Irish has two terms for the foal, each occurring mainly in the legal material. *Lurchaire*, or *lurrán*, is used for the animal newly born and not yet weaned. *Serrach* is used when the animal is physically and therefore legally independent from its mother.[51]

Several hints as to the value of individual horses are found within the legal material. The value of a riding horse is suggested in a gloss within *Cáin Iarraith*.[52] The passage concerns the instruction given to a foster-son by a foster-father. The Old Irish main text states that horses must be provided for the foster-sons *i naimsir imrimme*, literally 'in the time of riding'. Based on the currency of *ech imrimme* in contexts of racing, particularly at fairs, the phrase has also been translated 'in the time of races'.[53] The occasion of the *oenach* is usually rendered as such, i.e., *i naimsir óenaige*. While the context of providing a horse in time for a fair or assembly is conceivable, the temporal emphasis is more pertinent to the age of the son rather than a specific occasion. 'In the time of riding' is the more likely interpretation and does not stray from the intention that a horse must be provided for the foster-son so that he may be instructed in *marcuigecht*, 'horsemanship'.

Returning to the passage's indication of a horse's value, the Middle Irish commentary to the Old Irish main text states that at the age of seven a boy is expected

---

[49] The entry in Cormac's glossary reads, "*Gabur...Gour din cach solas. inde dicitur gabur don each geal 7 araile.Gabur din ainm da cach each cipead dath.*" Stokes (1862) p 22. O'Donovan (1868) translates, "*Gour* then is everything that is white. *inde dicitur gobur* to the white horse etc. *Gobur* also (became) a name for any horse, whatsoever his colour may be...".

[50] Meyer, Kuno (1909) p 19. Meyer translates "do not keep bridled steeds without (a stud) of horses", The meaning seems more likely "do not keep bridled mares without a stud of horses", i.e. if you own mares, also keep a stud horse to breed them.

[51] Kelly, Patricia (1997) p 56. See also Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 92.

[52] CIH 1761.3.

to be taught his *marcuigecht*. In the manuscript a glossator adds, *dá ba*, 'two cows', just above the phrase *'in aimsir imrimme'*. This undoubtedly refers to the value of the horse. According to the glossator, the horse provided for the boy is expected to be worth at least two cows. The remaining commentary is typically contradictory. One passage declares that after the boy reaches the age of seven the foster-father must provide the horse. Elsewhere it is stated that if the blood-father does not provide the horse the foster-father is not responsible for instructing the son. Whichever the case, 'horsemanship' was expected to be taught at an early age to sons of higher ranking members of society, on a horse of a particular standard.

Marcuigecht, along with similar terms such as *marcach* and *marcachais*, reveal the common Celtic stem **marko-*. *March* is the term most frequently used for a standard horse in Middle Welsh. It survives in the modern language, though is less common than the standard *ceffyl*. *Marc* is attested in Old Irish though the term apparently fell out of popular use at an early stage, becoming a word generally reserved for poetry. David Greene suggests Old Irish *marcach*, 'horseman', is a calque on the Welsh *marchawg*. He bases his view on the relative silence in the Irish saga-literature concerning the riding of horses.[54] While accurate for the early sagas, the argument is not supported by the legal material. As seen, *Crith Gablach* refers to the riding horse (*ech imrimme*, *ech slíasta*), while *Cáin Iarraith* refers to the instruction (*marcuigecht*) of riding. Likewise, as previously discussed, a law tract concerning desirable horse qualities stresses the importance of docility in a young horse with regard to allowing its rider to mount.[55]

Marchachais is well attested in the saga litertaure. Not surprisingly, Cú Chulainn is skilled at such horsemanship. Among manifold talents and abilities

---

[53] AL 2, p 154.15.
[54] Greene, David (1972) p 61. See also Kelly, Patricia (1997) p 46.

described in *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, including beauty, physique, and form, the young hero possesses the gift of *marchachais*.[56] An additional and amusing anecdote is found within the Middle Irish story of *Suibne Gelt*, where an old and rather squat hag is described as attempting to leap upon a horse.[57] Her companion doubts her ability to mount the animal intimating that if she in facts gets up she will be unable to get down. Her rather angry response declares that if she does not come back down it is only a sign of her superior horsemanship (*marchachais*).

A possible reference to a different variety of horsemanship appears in the law tract *Uraicecht Becc*. The passage in question concerns the payment and responsibility for certain entertainers.[58] The *monach* is listed alongside such other performers as musicians, fools and jugglers. The *monach* appears to be some type of trickster or featster. A later glossator defines the *monach* as 'one who performs his feats on the backs of horses in the fairs' (*bite for monaib na neach isna haenaigib*).[59] The term *monach* is relatively uncommon yet in every attestation denotes an entertainer. The commentary in *Uraicecht Becc* provides the only description of the *monach*'s individual entertainment. While the gloss is clearly etymological, explained as a compound of *món,* 'trick', with *ech*, 'horse', it is possibly a manipulation of terms and context to fit an accurate description of the entertainment involved.[60]

A final reference to the versatility and importance of the horse in early Irish society survives in the form of a charm. The text, Middle Irish, concerns protection

---

[55] Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 555.
[56] *Táin* LL, l. 550; transl. p 152.
[57] Murphy, Gerard (1956) p 130.
[58] CIH 2281.31. This discussed in p 99, above.
[59] The term also appears in the sobriquet of the trickster Forgall Monach. See DIL M-163.59-67. In this case there seems a confusion of the terms *mon* 'trick' and *muin* 'back'.
[60] The substantive and agentive suffix *-ach* is common. There seems little need for a glossator to account for such a well recognised suffix, even in a forced etymology. The inclusion of *ech* is perhaps corroboration for the entertainment itself.

achieved by reciting prayer in front of a charm and touching the charm to different parts of a horse. The charm states;

> *A* cur *a cru eich na rith 7 ni tuitfe. A* cur *i ndruim eich 7 ra( )id do cach ech. A* cur *a cethri cruithib eich 7 ni getar. A* cur *a cosaib eich 7 gudeochaid a tosca…*
>
> Place it [the charm] on a horse's hoof when trotting and he will not fall; Put it on a horse's back and he will go past every horse. Place it on a horse's four shoes and he will not be stolen. Place it on a horse's legs and and he will go on (?) his errand…[61]

The charm reveals much about the early horse and its features. According to the passage, horses of the period were shod. Archaeological evidence suggests that the practice of shoeing horses in these islands seems to have disappeared with the Romans, only to reappear in the late ninth century, likely through Norse influence. This accords with the text's Middle Irish provenance. The reference to the horse's 'errand', particularly in reference to placing the charm upon the its legs, suggests the animal's importance for transportation and work. Finally, the horse which '…will go past every horse' is clearly a reference to the racer.

2. Material Evidence:

Apart from the written source material, an understanding of the role of horses in early Irish society is advanced by the archaeological evidence. As discussed, there is confirmation for the domesticated horse in Ireland from about 2000 B.C. It is not until a much later period, however, that conclusive support for riding comes to light. Fragments of equine jaw bones worn from metal bits, as well as metal harness pieces and odd horse trappings begin to turn up in the second millennium B.C.[62] In his twelfth-century *Topographia Hibernica* Giraldus Cambrensis discusses many of the the differences he marked in the Irish style of riding. He notes that the Irish did not

use saddles, perhaps referring to the Norman type to which he was accustomed, and that they wore neither leggings nor spurs. He adds that horses were fitted with reins attached to a bridled bit, though one which did not prevent horses from grazing. Lastly, he implies that the Irish controlled the horses through the use of a goad rather than pressure on the reins.[63] As is customary with Cambrensis, it is difficult to determine how much of the commentary is indeed an accurate reflection of society and how much is suspect.

The early Irish certainly used a horsecloth or coverlet (*díllat*, *díallait*) which may or may not have been padded for greater comfort and support of the back.[64] The modern saddle in Ireland seems to have been introduced by the Norse, as the Irish term *sadall* is a borrowing from Old Norse *söðull*. Interestingly, while the permanent Norse settlements were established in Ireland by the mid-ninth century, the Irish did not seem to make common use of the innovation until after the twelfth-century Norman conquest.[65] Physical evidence for saddles has not survived, though this is perhaps a result of perishable materials such as wood, leather and fabric.

Evidence for reins is found throughout the early literature, particularly in embellished accounts. The literary references are supported by substantial archaeological evidence for bridles and harnesses.[66] Horse-bits in particular form the largest group of metal finds from the Bronze Age period in Ireland.[67] A well preserved ninth-century high cross at Banagher, Co. Offaly, depicts a horse and rider.

---

[61] Best, R.I. (1952) p 29.
[62] Raftery, Barry (1991) p 50.
[63] Dimock, James (1868) Vol. 5, p 150.
[64] The term *díllat* is more commonly used for a covering garment or raimant, a covering for cradle or bed, and, less frequently, swaddling-clothes. The exension of the term to describe a covering for the horse's back is natural. For examples see DIL, D-108.44-81; 59.81-5.
[65] See Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 98.
[66] The use of bridles and reins as valuable pledges is common in the legal material. See, for example CIH 475.4; also, CIH 371.13f., where reins and a bridle are listed in a poem concerning the seven valuables of a noble chief.
[67] Raftery, Barry (1974) p 8.

The horse is equipped with bridle and reins but no saddle.[68] A puzzling description of the *srían crúain*, tentatively described as a bridle coated in 'red enamel', is found in the law tract *Críth Gablach*.[69] The object in question seems to find support in several horsebits and trappings from Iron Age Ireland, decorated with a red enamel known as *champlevé*.[70] Fragments of the red enamel decoration remain in several examples, often in a series of closely drilled holes which were later filled with the red enamel. Two tenth-century horse trappings of unknown use, found in Navan, Co. Meath and Killua, Co. Westmeath, retain fragments of red enamel decoration.[71] In this case in particular, the specific term of the legal passage may indeed offer an accurate description. A passage in the Middle Irish *Boyish Exploits of Finn* echoes the description. According to the tale Midir, in playing a game of *fidchell*, wagers fifty horses along with their fifty enamelled reins (*cona caecaib n-all cruanmoithni*).[72]



Illustration 11

Red enamel and similar decoration may have been particularly associated with horses and their accoutrements, perhaps owing to their military capacity. Decoration of a chariot in red is suggested by a passage in *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniæ*;

> *Bátir cadain for chlár chlíu,*
> *clár ndess, géissi for suidiu;*
> *ba derg ar carpat uile*
> *ba lán cenn ar n-etruide.*
>
> There were wild geese on the left side (of the chariot), swans on the right side; our chariot was all red, the space between our seats was full of heads."[73]

---

[68] See illus. 11. For similar depictions, see Harbison, Peter (1992) Vol. 2, figs. 73, 166, 474-5.
[69] CG, p 8.196.
[70] Raftery, Barry (1991) p 51.
[71] Armstrong, E.C.R. (1921) pp 6-12.
[72] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) p 174.
[73] O'Brien, M.A. (1962) p 281. Translation by Greene, David (1972) p 73.

The red of the chariot in this passage indicates the carnage and bloodshed of the victory. Similar descriptions suggests that red decoration surviving on metal horsebits and other trappings was also applied to the chariot itself. A parallel description is offered in a verse from the Old Irish *Fled Bricrenn*, "...a charging along (??) of wild birds, from the copper-red frame of the chariot" (*anbluth n-én n-etegnaith, úasa creit chóncharpait*).[74] The blood soaked chariot is a recurrent theme in the saga-literature, particularly common in the exploits of Cú Chulainn within the *Táin*. In one such example blood is described dripping from fallen warriors onto the framework of the chariots.[75] Such a description is suggestive of the drilled holes, filled with red enamel, found on bits and other trappings.

While bits and bridle tack dominate the archaeological evidence for riding equipment, the horse-whip, or more precisely the horse-rod (*echlasc*) is frequently mentioned in the literature and legal material, most often in contexts of horse-racing. A story within the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster,* describes Lug, mythical king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, as having introduced to Ireland the boardgame *fidchell*, the fair, the ball and the horsewhip (*eachlasc*).[76] In the Middle Irish *Voyage of Mael Dúin* a vast horse race is described;

> *Ocus luaithiu gaeth gach ech, 7 ba mor a nuall 7 a ṅgair 7 a ḟogur, bemenda na n-eachclasc ocon aenach...*
>
> And swifter was the wind was each horse, and great was the shouting (of the multitude) and their outcry and noise...and the strokes of their horse-rods at the assembly were heard...[77]

A supernatural horse race is described in the late Middle Irish story of *Aedh Baclamh* where 50 seals are turned into horses and raced on Tara's green. The horses, plied with whips (*fleascadh dá neachlascaib dhóibh*), become frantic and run to the sea

---

[74] Watkins, Calvert (1963) p 232.
[75] *Táin* LL, ll. 570-3; 575-7; transl. p 153.
[76] Best, R.I., Osborn Bergin *et al.*, (1954-83) p 36.1147.

where they revert back to seals.[78] The frenzy caused by the whips is echoed in a passage from the law tract *Bretha Étgid*. The passage declares horses competing at fairs are exempt from all injuries they cause if driven into a frenzy or driven beyond their strength.[79] *Echlasc*, the term most frequently used for the whip or goad, seems also to have been a political symbol, as the secular counterpart to the religious crozier. According to a law tract discussing various forms of distraint, the *echlasc* of both the poet and leech was to be seized immediately upon legal distraint against him.[80]

Beyond the terms and equipment for horses in the early Irish period, there are scant references to specific areas of the country known for horsebreeding and horseraces. The largest and best attested fairs and assemblies of early Ireland take place in Leinster, most in or near the Liffey valley and plains.[81] These regions account for a large proportion of the specific references to horseraces and horse breeding. The Ossraige, who gave their name to modern Ossory, were particularly renowned for both their racehorses and their horseraces, mainly in connection with established fairs and assemblies. The last race of each fair at Carman is specified in at least two sources as *echthress Ossraige*, 'the horserace of the Ossraige'.[82] A further geographical location is mentioned for Liamuin in its Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem. The name of the site is said to derive from Liamain, daughter of the king of the Desi of Brega. The territory of the king is outlined as "...everything as far as the horse-rearing regions of the estuaries" (*leis co ech-brug na n-inber*).[83]

---

[77] Stokes, Whitley (1888-9) p 467.
[78] O'Grady, S.H. (1892) p 68; transl. p 72.
[79] CIH 265.41-266.12. This passage is discussed in detail in section 3, below.
[80] Binchy, D.A. (1973) pp 78-9.
[81] See chapter 4.

3. Horse-racing

The evidence for horse-racing in the early sources is abundant. Much of the specific information on horse-racing is found in connection to fairs and assemblies. Descriptions of fairs are numerous and appear in all branches of the written sources. Perhaps the most illuminating is found in the Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem concerning *oenach Carmain*, 'the fair at Carman'.[84] The poem describes large numbers of people gathered for seven days on the fair's grounds. Markets of food and livestock, cloth and crafts are described. Specific mention is given to areas arranged for horses, for cooking and for the embroidery of the women (*fán na n-ech, fán na fuine, fán na mban*).[85] The poem further states that at Carman countless stories were told, poems sung, music enjoyed. Kings feasted each day and night. Disputes, quarrels and bloodshed were prohibited. Laws were discussed, enactments passed, dues levied. Most notably, the poem indicates that the business and legal side of the festivities was to be put aside during the horse-races, as well as all quarreling and misconduct, presumably to prevent the very bloodshed the fair prohibited.[86]

The description of the fair at Carman is often used as the archetype of the early Irish *oenach*. More well known fairs include *oenach Tailten*, held near modern Teltown, Co. Meath, and *oenach Colmáin*, a Leinster fair associated with St. Colmán Elo.[87] The most consistent feature of fairs and assemblies within the early sources is horse-racing. It is difficult to find a reference to fairs without it including some type of horserace. References to races and horses dominates a lengthy description of an assembly in the Middle Irish *Nóinden Ulad*;

---

[82] Both references are found within Middle Irish *dindsenchas*. Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10 p 23; Stokes, Whitley (1894) p 314.
[83] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 67.
[84] *Ibid.*, Vol. 10 pp 1-25.
[85] Ibid. p 25.309-12. This is reminiscent of a description of fosterage tuition in the law tract *Cáin Iarraith*. For a discussion, see chapter 4, section 4.3.

Do-llotar Ulaid dond óenuch...Ba hán int óenach etir doíni et eochu ocus étaige. Agaitir graifne 7 tresa 7 díbraicthi et rémenn et tochmenn isind óenuch.

The Ulidians came to the assembly...The assembly was splendid, including people and horses and costumes. At the assembly were held horse-races, combats, casting and shooting matches, chariot-races and processions.[88]

The etymological entry for *oenach* in *Sanais Cormac* explains the word as *úne each*, 'contest of horses'.[89] A similar reference is found in a poem dated to the mid-eighth century. The poem states that human joy has four divisions, one of which is the arrival of *imbas*, or 'poetic inspiration', which comes "...swifter than a race horse (*ech aige*) in the middle of June every seventh year regularly".[90] This is undoubtedly a reference to the races at the fairs. A Middle Irish glossator adds that *imbas* is "...as swift as the horse which is driven at the fair in the middle month of summer."[91]

The saga-literature in particular is laden with stories of famous races at fairs, as well as famous horses. The evidence supplied by the early sagas is by its nature suspect, as descriptions most often depict races and horses of mythical proportions. Fortunately, the legal material paints a more reasonable and plausible picture, one which illuminates the nature of what one could expect at races and the auspices under which they were held.

Horse races were likely the principle event at fairs. A relatively lengthy passage in the law tract *Bretha Étgid* lists the responsibility for injuries from horses at fairs. Injuries from racehorses dominate the list;

BLA ECH AENACH .i. islan donti beires int ech leis isin naenach. Mas ar ein tuarig ni fes a bithbinche aici, islan don fir dosfuc ar ein acht na ruca aici fein .uii. traighi dec do chul no do thaib, 7 ma ruc aca im,

---

[86] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 18-19, ll 221-4.
[87] These and other fairs are discussed in chapter 4.
[88] Hull, Vernam (1968) p 28; transl. p 37.
[89] Stokes, Whitley (1862) p 33.
[90] Breatnach, Liam (1981) p 61.
[91] *Ibid.*

munar indis, is ic a cinaid isin tetnais fair.

> An *oenach* is an immunity of horses, i.e. it is exempt for he who brings the horse with him into the fair. If it is with him through loan (and) he does not know of its innate viciousness, it is exempt for the man who has brought it through loan, so long as he himself has not brought it seventeen feet backwards or sideways, and if he has brought it with him, unless leading it, compensation is paid for offenses from its fury.[92]

According to the commentary, horses were apparently borrowed or rented for transportation to or perhaps performance at fairs. Furthermore, injuries caused by particularly vicious horses are liable only if the horse's temperament is known to the borrower. The passage continues;

> *.i. Slan donti berus int ech isin naenach, slan do ce bristir int ech, acht narab tre borblachas, narab rigi tar tracht co fis a etracht; 7 mad ed on, is fiach fon fath air. Slan d'fir inn eich ce fuachaid(?) int ech risium, acht nara bedg no redg no lua saebleim no cor fo laim ł cenn a ngabal; 7 mad ead on, is lethfiach fo bithbinci uirre, 7 meracht a herma do scor in lethe aile di.*
>
> *Slan d'fir in eich na huile neiche dara taircebar, secht a riagail re fiancluichi in codnaig uil uirre: othrus comlan co bas i nesbach, lethdire na cneidi 7 othrus comlan co bas a torbach; lethdiri la cechtar de re taeb aithgena iar mbas, cid a torbach cid a nesbach.*
>
> Immunity for him who brings the horse into the fair, exempt for him even if the horse is injured, unless it be through boisterous driving, (or) it be ridden beyond its strength with knowledge of its want of strength; and if it be that, he pays a penalty for it. Immunity for the owner of the horse even if the horse causes injury there, unless it be a start or jerk or kick or false-leap or throw or twist under hand[93] or head in a fork.; and if it be that, half-penalty on account of viciousness is incurred, and madness of the gallop accounts for the other half.
>
> Immunity for the owner of the horse for everything which the horse will inflict, excepting for him the rule regarding *fian*-games of a sensible adult: full sick-maintenance until death for an authorised person; half-penalty for each of them regarding restitution until death, whether it be an authorised or an unauthorised person.[94]

---

[92] CIH 265.41-266.3. Translation is my own.

[93] Seemingly in the sense of twisting a lead, i.e. tugging at the lead.

[94] CIH 266.4-12. Translation is my own. The interpretation of *torbach*, 'authorised person', and *esbach*, 'unauthorised person' is explained in Appendix 3.

Clearly any type of sudden movement, spring or kick from a horse was liable to penalty. Apart from these injuries and a recognised bad temperament, injuries both to and from the horse caused through exhaustion, over-driving, or violent driving are only half-liable. Such activities are clearly indicative of competitive racing and driving.

Injuries from horses in races are often described in the early literature.That such injuries did in fact occur at fairs and other celebrations, and that society's higher ranking members competed in the races is suggested in an annal entry for the year 800. The entry reports that Ailill, son of the king of Brega, was killed in being thrown from a horse at the Feast of MacCuilinn of Lusca.[95] A similar entry for the year 940 relates that Faelan, son of Muiredheach, the king of Leinster died of a fall at Aenach Colmáin.[96]

Horse-racing and racehorses are treated extensively in the early legal material. According to a tract concerning animals liable to distraint, a 'prize horse' (*ech buada*) at the time of the races is one which can not be legally distrained, and according to the commentator it "...does not even bear liability for its own offence".[97] This supports the passage from *Bretha Étgid*, discussed above, where a horse is exempt from injuries caused if overdriven. The distinction of 'prize horse' suggests the horse must be known as such. Interestingly, the commentary from *Bretha Etgid* goes on to state that a horse "...striving for the honour of the territory" and a horse brought from overseas are likewise not to be distrained. The two animals are without doubt racehorses. As discussed, the greater size and strength of foreign horses makes it reasonable and in fact probable that racehorses were imported for their speed.

---

[95] AU *s.a.* 800.
[96] AFM. *s.a.* 940.
[97] Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 523 (§§ 1, 15).

Celebrated horses of the sagas are often characterized by their speed, bearing names such as '*Side*' (whirlwind) and '*Grip*' (swift).[98]

As seen, a foreign horse, particularly the *ech Bretnach,* was not to be used as a pledge. According to the law tract *Bretha Fuillem Gell*, the racehorse (*ech aige*) has a pledge-value equivalent to any other standard horse at all times excepting Lughnasad or when there is a meeting of the territory.[99] The passage further declares that if a race is held during such an occasion the horse is to be returned to its owner, presumably even if distrained, with double compensation.

Similarly, the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* declares that the racehorse is not to be distrained beyond one day. While the Old Irish main text does not indicate a specific time period, the Middle Irish glossator specifies that the distraint is not to be imposed 'in the time of the races, i.e. to go to a fair' (*i naimsir imrime .i. fri hindsaig aenaig*).[100] Interestingly, an item listed prior to the racehorse is the raiment for a fair, which is also not to be distrained beyond one day.

Horse-racing is also often mentioned in relation to kings and kingship. *Bretha Étgid* lists various penalties and liabilities for injuries incurred upon a king's racecourse (*ceite*) and green (*faiche*).[101] The passage begins by discussing the king's liability for injuries which are caused by dangerous faults in or structures upon the green. According to the commentary, such racecourses were to be inspected and groomed to prevent injury to horse and rider.[102] The text continues its discussion outlining standard legal conditions concerning the age and mental capacity of the rider, as well as the temperament of the horse.[103] Finally, the passage discusses

---

[98] *Ibid.*, p 92.
[99] CIH 471.22
[100] CIH 368.8
[101] CIH 281.15-283.2.
[102] CIH 281.18f.
[103] CIH 281.24-6.

liability for injuries caused and sustained by youths, culminating in whether the horse is ridden for amusement or profit.[104] A further reference to horse-racing in relation to kings is found in *Críth Gablach.* The text lists the seven fitting occupations for a king, a single activity representing the appropriate concern of the king for each day of the week. According to the text the king should spend his Fridays racing horses (*aín díden do reath*[i]*b ech*).[105]

As discussed, references to horse-racing in the saga-literature are numerous, but for the most part the descriptions are fantasy. Several passages, however, add to the overall understanding of the races and their settings. Horse-racing in the sagas often concerns the exploits of young heroes. Alongside such feats as his first slaying, his first poem, his first avenging and his first sexual experience, Finn macCumaill is said, at the age of seven, to have entered and won his first horse race.[106] For the subject of his first poem, woven into many peripheral stories of the Finn Cycle, he chooses to extol May Day;

> *Greit mer* [f]*ort imrimm ech*
> *imma-sernar sreth slúag…*
>
> A season surpassing, when a wild longing is on you to race horses,
> a ranked host is arranged around.[107]

A further reference to horse-racing by youthful heroes concerns Mael Dúin. According to the text the boy was beautiful in form and flesh and, "In his play he outdid all his comrades both in throwing balls, and running and leaping and putting stones and racing horses (*imrimm ech*). He had in sooth the victory in all these

---

[104] CIH 281.27-283.2.
[105] CG p 21.546-7.
[106] Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 186. The age of seven is generally considered the age at which foster-sons receive training in horse-riding, weaponry etc. It is furthermore the age at which sons become partially legally culpable.
[107] *Ibid.*, *cf.* Carney, James (1971) p 43; transl. p 46. See also Murphy, Gerard (1956) p 159.

games."[108] This is nearly identical to the description of Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.[109] Clearly the ability successfully to race horses was a necessary attribute of all young heroes.

Two final references for horse-racing stem from a considerably later period but perhaps throw light on the dwindling popularity of the races after the Elizabethan conquest and the significance and calamity of the loss of a native institution. The first example was written as a lament in the early seventeenth century concerning the Ulster plantations. Written in Early Modern Irish, the poem focusses on the pleasures of the native Irish and how these pleasures will be lost in the approaching years;

> Fairs are held in places of the chase; the open green is crossed by girdles of twisting fences, and they [the foreigners] practise not to gather together their horses for the race."[110]

According to the author the 'foreigners' clearly did not share the natives' pleasure in racing horses. The second example, found in the famous early seventeenth-century *Flight of the Earls*, expresses a similar sentiment. The passage declares that since flight there is in Ireland "...no gaming, no banqueting, no pastimes, no commerce or horse-racing or deeds of daring."[111]

4. Chariot-racing

The biggest obstacle in the study of chariots in Ireland is that none has been found. While several depictions of horse-drawn chariots on high crosses offer indications of size, structure and form, there has not been a confirmed find of any

[108] Stokes, Whitley (1888-9) p. 455.
[109] *Táin* LL, l 550; transl. p 152
[110] O'Grady, S.H. (1926) p 374.
[111] Knott, Eleanor (1916) p 194.

type, piece or part of an early Irish chariot.[112] Even so, there is little doubt that the early Irish travelled, transported goods, waged war, and raced in wheeled chariots. As discussed, horse-bits, bridles and other trappings comprise a large percentage of the archaeological evidence for the early Irish period. This said, there is relatively scant evidence for casual riding or transportation on horseback. A substantial proportion of the material evidence from Iron Age Ireland and later shows assymetrical wear and decoration on articles such as bits and bridle fastenings. This demonstrates animals were often used in paired draught.[113] Chariots and similar wheeled carts are the likliest explanation. Interestingly, this contrasts with Welsh evidence of the same period where references to riding are plenty while chariots and chariot-racing are infrequently mentioned.[114] Ireland's early literature and legal material abounds with references to both chariots and chariot-racing.

Likely the oldest though least attested term for the chariot is early Ireland is the *drub*. The term is found rarely in the saga-literature and, as far as I am aware, is unattested in the legal material. It is found in a Middle Irish poem to secure a rhyme,[115] and appears once in the *Life of Maedoc of Ferns* to describe a peacetime journey from Ferns to Kildare.[116] Finally, and perhaps most revealing, it is found in *Scél Baili Binnbérlaig*, a classical Irish text deliberately and contemporaneously imbued with obscure, archaic and foreign words for the use of the student.[117]

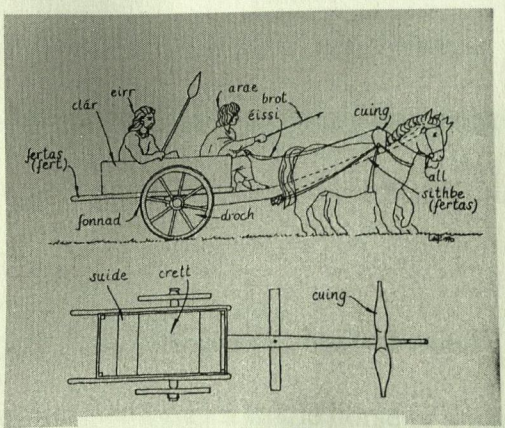


Illustration 12

[112] These are discussed below.
[113] Raftery, Barry (1991) p 52.
[114] Kelly, Patricia (1997) p 46.
[115] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1897) p 37, §21.
[116] Plummer, Charles (1922) p 278.
[117] Meyer, Kuno (1892b) p 224.

The chariot is more commonly referred to in Old and Middle Irish as *carpat*. What is perhaps most remarkable in the study of early chariots is a widespread misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the object itself. The term *carpad*, while ostensibly denoting no more than a two-wheeled cart, is often regarded as a 'war-chariot'. The description is often found when there is little or no contextual detail to suggest such a description.[118]

In an article aimed at resolving the physical descriptions of the early Irish chariot David Greene discusses the Old Irish *carpat*.[119] The term shares the same root from which Latin borrowed its words *carpentum* and *carrus*. Comparatively, it is the same root for Modern English 'carpenter', 'car', etc. The Latin terms *carpentum* and *carrus* refer to common vehicles used for ordinary peaceful purposes, and, as Greene states;

> …it must be noted, so often is the Irish *carpat*; we may translate it as "chariot" if we wish, but to translate it as "war–chariot" is to impose a restriction not justified by the evidence.[120]

Indeed in many instances throughout the literature 'war-chariot' is substituted for the much simpler and less evocative 'chariot', in some cases adding martial elements which are both unnecessary and contrary to the plot. As with horse-racing, chariot-races and chariot-contests were a focal part of assemblies and fairs. These were most likely simple races of speed, though it is possible that chariot contests were also staged to knock riders out of chariots and similar pursuits.

The early Irish chariot was ostensibly a two-wheeled vehicle, built of wood with either one or two principle shafts, and propelled by either a single horse or a pair. A reference in the Middle Irish commentary to the law tract *Uraicecht Becc* reveals

---

[118] See Piggott, Stuart (1983) pp 236-8. This is best attested by DIL, which lists "war-chariot" as its head word for *carpat*. No reference in the given examples is understood as such. DIL C-76.81.
[119] Greene, David (1972) pp 59-73. In his article he offers a possible reconstruction of an early Irish chariot. See illus. 12.

the value of a wooden chariot. The text states that the master carpenter (*ollam sair*) receives two cows for every chariot (*da ba ar cairpthi*).[121] The value compares rather favourably to other items listed, such as a stone church or wooden oratory, worth twelve cows; a mill, worth six cows; and various ships and boats, worth four cows. [122] An additional, though less reliable reference to a chariot's value is found in the *Táin*, where Medb describes her bride-price as having included a 'chariot worth twenty-seven *cumals*" (*carpat trí secht cumal*).[123]

In an article comparing images of the Celtic chariot to the chariot of the Old Irish period, Peter Harbison suggests that the Irish version be considered a 'cart-chariot' as descriptions referring to a double shaft and single base suggest a simpler, cart-like vehicle more suited for simple transport.[124] Several panels of early high crosses depict chariots and riders.[125] A particularly well-preserved scene, found on a panel of the North Cross at Ahenny in Co. Tipperary, illustrates a high-platformed chariot carrying two riders.[126] The chariot's wheels contain eight spokes and are depicted as high as the backs of the horses, though the relative scale of such panels is often unreliable. Descriptions from the sagas suggest chariots were made of wood, with wooden wheels. Supporting the images found on high crosses, the wheels were most likely spoked. Two separate passages in the Middle Irish *Togail Bruidne da Derga* relate that the wheels of a chariot could be seen through.[127]

Descriptions of chariots in the saga literature also include allusions to what was deemed *fonnad*. Various references to the *fonnad* illustrate that it was not the

---

[120] *Ibid.*, p 62.
[121] CIH 1613.4.
[122] CIH 1612.35-39.
[123] *Táin* LL, l. 41; transl. p 138.
[124] Harbison, Peter (1971) p 174.
[125] Panels can be found on the High Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice, Co. Louth; the Cross at Killamery, Co. Kilkenny; the Cross of King Flann at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly; and the South Cross at Kells, Co. Meath.
[126] See Harbison, Peter (1992) p 174.

wheel but was associated with it; that it touched the ground and left a track; and that it made a noise and was frequently washed.[128] The importance of the *fonnad* is best seen in its metaphorical use within the seventh-century Old Irish text *Audacht Morainn*. The passage compares the qualities expected of a king in leading his people to the *fonnad* of a chariot;

> *Ar nícon chotli are senfhonnith: remi-déci, iarmo-déci...desiul scéo túaithbiul, im-dích, im-díthnatar, arna bó co foill ná co forrán fonna fod-rethat.*
>
> For the driver of an old *fonnad* does not sleep; he looks ahead and behind, right and left; he protects, he engages himself, so that he may not break, either by negligence or over-driving the *fonna* which run under him.[129]

While the term is not entirely unambiguous, the *fonnad* seem most certainly to have been some type of wheel rim or metal tyre attached to the outer surface of the wheel.

The noise of a chariot is mentioned frequently in the sagas, both in warfare and in peace. In the *dindsenchas* poem concerning Tailtiu, the fair is anticipated, "...with games, with music of chariots (*ceól charput*)."[130] In a particularly evocative description in the *Táin* a chariot is heard approaching by, "...the trampling of the horses, the clatter of the chariot, the whistling of the cords, the creaking of the wheels, the violence of the warrior, the screaming of the weapons." This passage, though clearly literary device, is characteristic of the many allusions to the clatter and creak of the chariot in motion.[131]

As expected, the occupants of chariots in the saga-literature are primarily young warriors and their charioteers. The most common term for charioteer in Old and Middle Irish is *arae* (genitive, *arad*). As this term is often found alongside the

---

[127] Knott, Eleanor (1963) p 18, l. 590; 19, l. 644.
[128] DIL, F-291.61-9.
[129] Kelly, Fergus (1976) p 9. For translation and discussion, see Greene, David (1972) p 66.
[130] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, p 151.
[131] See, *e.g. Táin* LU, ll. 2854-5; transl p 217; Watkins, Calvert (1963) p 231.

term for the chariot-fighter, *eirr* (genitive, *erred*), the two are explained as related compounds of prepositions plus the verbal root *sed*. The charioteer (*arae)* is thus the rider who sits in front *(*are-sed-s*), and the chariot-fighter (*eirr*) he who sits behind (**ēr-sed-s*).[132] An interesting depiction of charioteer and chariot-fighter is found in the LU text of the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn and his charioteer Lóeg are described approaching in a chariot. Lóeg is depicted as sitting in the front of the chariot with his back to the horses, facing Cú Chulainn and engaged in a game of *fidchell*.[133] This is doubtless meant to convey both the nonchalance of the famous pair en route to battle, as well as the superior driving skill of the famous charioteer.

Three important references to chariots survive in the legal material. A passage from *Bretha Déin Chécht* , a law tract concerning fines for advertent and inadvertent wounding, states that a physician retains half the fine paid for a wound caused by a chariot on a fair green.

> *Ata*at *.uii. fuile cena dia mber liaig leth guin...fuil carpat f*or *blai.*[1]
> [1]*.i. an fuil ferus in carbat f*or *nec f*or *baili an aenaigh, uair doid a brisid co tren.*
>
> There are seven wounds besides from which a leech takes half...
> a wound caused by chariots on a [fair]-green.[1]
> [1] i.e., the wound which the chariot inflicts on a person in the place of an assembly for it is likely to be seriously smashed.[134]

It is unclear why the physician retains such a fee. It may stem from the more well known distinction between licit and illicit participation and activity within such sports. In a case such as this, where chariots provide entertainment at an assembly, the wound is inadvertent and occurs within proscribed play. As the injured party is a willing participant, he perhaps waives his right to collect the full penalty for his

---

[132] O'Brien, M.A. (1956) p 170. See also Vendryes, *et al*, (1959-) A-84.
[133] *Táin* LU, ll. 3855-58; transl. p 229. The description begins, "*Ara ara bélaib*", indicating the etymology of *ara*, 'charioteer'.
[134] Binchy, D.A. (1966) pp 24-5, §4.

wound, and the physician collects the difference. Interestingly, this passage can be compared to one within *Bretha Étgid*, where the same wound is rendered immune;

> *BLA CARBAT AENACH .i. Slan donti beires in carbat isin naenach; slan do ce bristir in carbat isinn aenach acht narab tre borblachas, 7 mad ed on is fiach fo aicned a fatha air; 7 slan d'fir in carbait ce foglaid in carbat risium acht na raib fis crine na etallais na haicbeile, 7 da raib is fiach fo aicned a fatha air.*
>
> Exemption of the chariot of a fair, i.e., immunity for he who brings the chariot into the fair; immunity for him if it the chariot is broken in the fair unless through boisterous driving, and if it be that, there is a penalty according to the nature of its cause, and immunity for the man of the chariot if the chariot causes injury, only if he did not know the decrepitude or instability or dangerous nature (of the chariot), but if he did know there is a penalty according to the nature of its cause.[135]

Similar to the passage concerning injuries to and from horses at fairs, discussed above, the passage states that the individual who brings a chariot into the assemblies is immune from all injuries inflicted so long as he does not drive madly or boisterously. It also adds, presumably if the owner is not the driver, that the charioteer is also exempt from penalty for all wounds he causes, so long as the wound is not caused by a previously known defect in the chariot or its use. Interestingly the text is only concerned with chariots and their activities at assemblies. This perhaps indicates that the chariots were used outside of fairs in more practical uses. More importantly, the text offers direct testimony to the setting, popularity, and accepted violence of the sport involved.

A final reference to chariots in the legal material concerns the charioteers themselves. Charioteers (*araid*) are listed in the passage from *Uraicecht Becc*, discussed above and in chapter 2, concerning entertainers at a gathering.The charioteers are mentioned directly after the *monach*, who may or may not have been equestrian acrobats, and are another party for whom the text delegates payment and

[135] CIH 282.28-31. Translation is my own.

responsibility. The *araid* are glossed *'doniat na carbaid'*. The phrase is problematic as it may be translated in several ways, including 'those who make the chariots', 'those who perform with chariots', and, perhaps most likely, 'those who drive the chariots'. What is most interesting is that the *araid* are grouped among the *aes dána*, 'men of art', including entertainers such as musicians, buffoons and professional fools. That the charioteers would have been part of a retinue is understandable. Their payment and responsibility would thus be accounted for as part of such a retinue and seemingly not on the same level as an itinerant entertainer. It poses the question as to whether charioteers may have been hired professionals, as were entertainers and similar 'men of art'.

References to chariots in the saga-literature are markedly more descriptive, and, accordingly, more suspicious. Such scepticism is substantiated by a reference to four-wheeled chariots in the "Battle of Ross na Ree", a text found in the twelfth-century *Leabhar na hUidre*. In the tale Cú Chulainn is asked by Conchobor to catch the horses[136] of a nearby plain and harness them to four-wheeled chariots to collect the nobles of Lothlainn. The four wheels could in fact represent a true physical description, but, in keeping with the sagas, as well as the absence of the concept in general, are more likely an exaggeration. Four-wheeled chariots are not mentioned in the legal material.

As with horse-racing, the great majority of references in the sagas to chariot-racing are found within descriptions of fairs and assemblies. While many references are limited specifically to horses, several texts highlight the presence of both horse-racing and chariot-racing, distinguishing the two as distinct endeavours.[137] Annal entries suggest that the chariot, both as transportation to the fair and entertainment

---

[136] *gabra*, literally 'mares'.
[137] See for example Hull, Vernam (1968) pp 28-9; Murphy, Gerald (1956) p 74.

within, was indicative to the fair itself. In an entry for the year 811 the *Annals of Ulster* relate a boycott of the fair at Tailtiu. The fair was prevented from being held by the religious community of Tallaght, after the Uí Neill king had violated the sacred grounds of Mael Ruin. The annalist emphasises that neither 'horse nor chariot' (*ech na carpat*) arrived at the fair.[138] The entry for the same event in the *Annals of the Four Masters* stresses the loss of the entertainment provided as neither horse nor chariot was run (*each na carpat*).[139] In the *dindsenchas* poem concerning Tailtiu, the fairground is said to lie deserted for 80 years, testified by the fact that Cormac's assembly was without a chariot (*céte Cormaic cen charpot*).[140] As discussed, the fair is also described as one, "...with gold, with silver, with games, with music of chariots" (*co céol charput*).[141] Similarly, in its entry for *orc tréith*, *Sanais Cormac* lists the features of the fair as, '...horses and chariots, hounds and toys besides' (*eich 7 carpait, milchoin 7 eisrechta olchena*).[142]

What is least clear concerning the chariots of early Ireland is the manner in which they were raced. Unfortunately, the reality of a chariot-race has been forever corrupted by Hollywood renderings of the Roman type. Judging from the recorded sites of assemblies and fairs, the chariot races of the Irish likely consisted of men in wheeled vehicles racing along a relatively flat plain. Winners were presumably judged by the first to finish a length or course. Horseraces appear to have been the same. Apart from contests of speed, it is likely chariots were used in games of agility and strength, perhaps mock military manoeuvres. An indication of a chariot-feat is found in *O'Mulconry's Glossary*;

IS léim alboilcc .i. suainem tar blái foa ndichet carpat nó léim

---

[138] AU *s.a.* 811.
[139] AFM *s.a.* 806.
[140] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, pp 160-1.
[141] *Ibid.*, pp 150-1.
[142] O'Donovan, John (1868) p 129.

dar ais dond aroid for rith.

It is a leap beyond the cab, i.e. a rope above a green under which a chariot runs or a leap by the charioteer while (the chariot is) running.[143]

This passage compares to the parallel text from Trinity College MS H.3.18;

.i. leim do thabairt tar builc in charpait bis ina ladhair cin a brisid.

i.e., to give a leap over the *builc* of the chariot which is in front of him without breaking it.[144]

The feat seems to represent a leap by the charioteer, while the chariot is in motion, over a fixed rope or band. Lóeg, Cú Chulainn's charioteer, is credited with being particularly skilful at such a leap (*léim dar boilg*).[145] Such contests and feats were likely performed in front an assembled audience, particularly at fairs. Onlookers are mentioned in several of the legal texts and, as seen in Finn's poem celebrating the beginning of summer, an arranged host is expected at a celebration of May-day.

Apart from the standard horse race and chariot race, occasional references to horses in the literature suggest further forms of entertainment. By the late eighth century Norse invasions and settlements in Ireland had introduced many new influences. As mentioned, the saddle seems to have been brought to Ireland by the Norse. The Norse reliance upon the horse in both farming and warfare is attested by the number of burials which include either the animal or its accoutrements.[146] A standard entertainment in the Norse world was the horse-fight, wherein two trained stallions fought to the death.[147] This sport was popular in Iceland up until the

---

[143] Stokes, Whitley (1900a) p 268, §759. Translation is my own. I have translated *bolg* 'cab', i.e. the rider's compartment. *Bolg* is attested in many senses, including 'belly', 'bubble', 'boss'. The cab of the chariot would be apposite to such a description. The meaning also fits the term in the text from MS H.3.18.

[144] MacNeill, Eoin (1932) p 121.

[145] *Táin* LU, l 2212. The feat is often interpreted 'leap over a gap', understanding *bolg* as feminine. Masculine *bolg*, 'bubble', 'belly', 'blister' is used in both cases here. The feat is also listed in the Middle Irish *Mesca Ulad*, see Watson, J. Carmichael (1941) p 247. For discussion, see Sayers, William (1981) pp 164-5.

[146] Kavanagh, Rhoda (1988) p 98.

[147] *Ibid.*, p 96.

sixteenth century. It may have been a popular entertainment in and around the Norse settlements in Ireland. The law tract *Bretha Étgid* outlines the responsibility for injuries to horses in a 'horse-contest'.

> *BLA EACH ECHTRES .i. Slan dona hechaib in tres echda doniat etaru budein.*
>
> A horse-contest is an exemption of horses, i.e., immunity for the horses in the horse-competition which they make between themselves. [148]

Echtres, the term used here, suggests 'contention' or 'strife' among horses. The term is used for the 'horse-contest' of the Osraige, in the *dindsenchas* poem outlined above.[149] While the *echtres* was certainly a horserace, the emphasis of the legal passage seems to indicate that the contest is between the horses themselves, i.e. they are not being ridden or driven. As organised dogfights were a common spectacle in early Ireland, it is possible the same sport was arranged for horses and alluded to by the Middle Irish glossator here. The sport was perhaps a native one, though more likely influenced by the Norse. It should be said, however, that the text does not specify whether the fight is one which is staged or simply a spontaneous fight among proximate animals.

[148] CIH 290.24-6. Translation is my own.
[149] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 23.; Stokes, Whitley (1894) p 314.

Chapter 4 Feasts, Festival and Fairs

1. Background

> *Cú Chulainn immorro baí ina súantairthim cotulta co cend teóra láa 7 teóra n-aidchi hicond ferta i lLergaib. Atracht Cú Chulaind iar sin asa chotlud 7 dobert láim dara agid 7 dorigni rothmúal corcra de ó mullach co talmain, a ba nert leiss a menma 7 tíasad i n-óenach nó i tochim nó bandáil nó i cormthech nó i prímóenach do prímóenaigib Érend.*
>
> Cú Chulainn, however, lay in a deep sleep at the mound in Lerga until the end of three days and three nights. Then he rose up from his sleep and passed his hand over his face and blushed crimson from head to foot. His spirits were as high as if he were going to an assembly or a march or a tryst or a feast or to one of the great assemblies of Ireland.[1]

Fairs and festivals represent an important and well evidenced aspect of early Ireland. All types of assemblies, gatherings, fairs and festivals are described in the legal material, the annals and quite extensively in the saga-literature. As a topos they represent how and why the inhabitants of early Ireland congregated, celebrated and entertained. Evidence from the annals reveals that they are also a peripheral signpost in political developments up to and including the Norman invasion. In the case of the restoration of the Tailteann Games in the beginning of the last century, their political import extends into the modern era. Indeed, their historical and political significance seems to a large degree the very reason such an abundance of evidence for their existence has survived.

Evidence suggests that in keeping with much of pre-Christian Europe, the pre-Christian inhabitants of Ireland held several festivals annually, each one celebrating a turn of the seasons. *Imbolc*, celebrated the first of February, *Beltaine*, the first of May, *Lugnasad*, the first of August, and *Samhain*, the first of November are the best known

festivals, each typified by a particular observance. Apart from *Imbolc*, each festival in turn gave its name to the month it which it was celebrated, names which survive in Modern Irish.

The difference between the various terms for assembled gatherings in the early source material is often a fine one. Established and storied celebrations of the same gathering are often variously described as *oenach*, *dál*, *feis*, etc. Hence the ancient celebrations and meetings at Tara are most commonly referred to as *feis Temra*, or 'feast of Tara', while elsewhere described as the assembly (*dál*) at Tara, the banquet (*fled*) at Tara, the gathering (*airecht*) at Tara etc. As will be seen, the linguistic variation often belies what are in effect comprehensive contextual similarities. It is unclear whether the breadth and variation in terms represents distinctly independent traditions or indeed an historical and linguistic progression of the same event. That a feast, a festival, a fair and an assembly were very similar is clear. Descriptions of the events are often comparable and occasionally, clearly a result of oral transmission or textual borrowing, word for word. In several cases 'festivals' seem to have become 'feasts' with the advent of Christianity. While name, auspices and duration were changed, the overall effect on the entertainments provided was apparently little. Feasts and fairs are also often interchangeable, depending merely on the language of the source material. Fortunately, the wealth of source material from early Ireland allows an examination of each individual term.[2]

---

[1] *Táin* LU, ll 2154-9; transl p 184. See also *Táin* LL, ll 2176-2181; transl. p 199.

[2] As with the various English words used to translate them, the terms discussed below are often dependent merely upon each individual author's description. The definitions and translations offered are therefore only as conclusive as the context in which they are found.

2. *Feis*:

The term *feis*, generally translated 'feast' or 'festival', is best attested in association with the ancient inaugural and political festival held at Tara. The etymology of *feis*, a term with various attested meanings, is explained as the verbal noun of *foaid*, 'to sleep' or 'spend the night'.[3] As such *feis* is often connected with sexual inauguration rites and, more pragmatically, marriage rites. Descriptions of *feis* and their relevant entertainments are frequently elaborated. While the descriptions are quite variously distributed throughout the source material, they are surprisingly analogous.

The most notable gatherings of Ireland are listed in various groupings, of which the *feis Temra* is almost invariably a part. The three *feis* of Ireland are declared in the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* as the Feast of Emain (*feis Eamna*), the Feast of Tara (*feis Temra*) and the Feast of Cruachan (*fes Cruachna*).[4] Little background evidence is found concerning the feasts of Emain and Cruachan, though their status is doubtless derived from both their historic and legendary positions as centres of the Ulaid and Connachta kingdoms, respectively. Elsewhere the three assemblies (*airechais*) of Ireland are considered the great gathering of Uisnech (*mór-dháil Uisnig*), the fair of Tailtiu (*aonach Tailten*) and the feast of Tara (*feis na Temrach*).[5] Similarly, the late-Middle Irish *Aided Dhiarmada* lists the three names and occasions of the 'high gatherings' (*ard dála*) of Ireland as the *dál* of Uisnech at Beltaine, the *oenach* of Tailtiu at Lughnasa and the *feis* of Tara at Samhain.[6] Departing from the

[3] See Vendryes, Joseph (1914) pp 89-90; Loth, J. (1920-1) p 297; Carney, James (repr. 1979) p 334.
[4] Marstrander, Carl (1911) p 232.
[5] Jackson, Kenneth (1938) p 43, l. 1116.
[6] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 73; transl. p 77. Uisnech and Tara are also linked in a late-Middle Irish poem. See Ó Cuív, Brian (1983) p 170, §34.

standard triadic form, Ireland's two principal gatherings (*chomthinól*) are related in the Middle Irish *Genemáin Áeda Sláine* as the *feis Temra* and the *oenach Tailten*.[7]

When indicated in the surviving sources, *feis Temra* is most often mentioned as celebrated at Samhain, the traditional pre-Christian observance symbolising the beginning of the dark half of the Celtic year. The passage from *Genemain Áeda Sláne* declares that the Feast of Tara is held every year at Samhain (*fessi Temrach ar cech Samhain*).[8] A passage from the late-Middle Irish *Acallamh* relates that the *timpán*-player Aillén mac Midhna comes to Tara every year at Samhain to play his instrument for the enjoyment of the assembled guests.[9] In *Scél Baili Binnbérlaig*, again late-Middle Irish, Art mac Conn, legendary king of Tara, is described celebrating the feast at Samhain.[10] The Middle Irish prose *dindsenchas* for Loch Garman describes the assemblage of Leinster kings for the *feis Temra* at Samhain.[11] Finally, in what must be seen as obvious political motive, the *dindsenchas* poem for Slemain Mide describes the 'Feast of Samhain' (*fes na Samhna*), held perpetually by the king of Meath, as the principal event within the larger Feast of Tara (*fes Teamhrach*), held by the king of Ireland. The apparent implication is that the Feast of Tara is rightfully celebrated by the king of Meath, i.e. the king of Ireland.[12]

Despite the evidence from the literature, D.A. Binchy doubts the traditional association with Samhain, concentrating on the Feast's connections with inauguration rites and the 'sacred marriage' between ruler and kingdom;

> Hence, despite the virtually uniform testimony of the later legendary sources, it [*fes Temrach*] is unlikely to have had any connexion with the festival of Samhain and the dying year; on the contrary one would expect

---

[7] Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (1929) p 133, l. 4210.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 130; transl. p 142.
[10] Meyer, Kuno (1892b) p 223, ll 49-50; transl. p 225.
[11] Stokes, Whitley (1894) pp 429-30.
[12] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, p 297.

> it to be held, like similar rites the world over, at seed-time. There seems no reason to doubt that all kings in Ireland, great and small, were 'dedicated' by a ceremony of this kind, though the details may have varied from tribe to tribe.[13]

The temporal gap between when the Feast of Tara was actively celebrated and when many of the 'later legendary sources' were written is indeed considerable. As such, there would have been considerable effort to incorporate such traditional feasts into recognisable and, in many instances, fixed Christian observances.

The occasion of the Feast of Tara was certainly the inauguration ritual of the king of Tara with his earthly kingdom. As well as observing the reign of the king it was also celebrated to secure plenitude and prosperity for the following year. As such the Feast is likely to have been celebrated at the beginning of the dark half of the year, i.e. Samhain, to celebrate the prosperity and culmination of the first half of the year, and to safeguard a successful passing of the following year. A passage from the late-Middle Irish *Cath Crionna* suggests such auspices in its explanation of both the duration and grounds for the Feast:

> *...is ann búi tech Cormaic i Temraig in tan sin. ocus tech gach áirdríg in Eirinn ar daigin feise Temrach do dénom .i. caeicdiges ria samfuin. ocus laithe na samna. ocus caiecdiges iarum. is aire no thinóldais cacha samna ár is ann ba haipche mes ocus toirthe dóib. is aire dogníthe feis Temrach. uair smacht dognítis fir Eirenn ann ní lámtha techt tairis nó go comraictís i cionn bliadna doridisi. ocus in tí no ticed thairis ba herfuacarthach ó fheraib Eirenn.*
>
> Where Cormac's mansion was then was in Tara; and that of every king in Ireland as well, for the purpose of holding Tara's Feast: for a fortnight before *samhain* that is to say, on *samhain*-day itself, and for a fortnight after. And the reason for which they practised to gather themselves together at every *samhain*-tide was this: because at such season it was that mast and other products were the best matured. Here too is the reason for which the Feast of Tara was made at all: [the regulation which the men of Ireland used to make then, until they should meet again at the end of a year], none might dare to transgress; and he that perchance did so was outlawed from the men of Ireland.[14]

---

[13] Binchy, D.A. (1958) pp 134-5.

Mast, an important fodder for pigs, appeared in September and October.[15] A properly matured harvest of this and similar crops indeed coincides with Samhain. [16]

As revealed in the passage from *Crith Crionna*, above, the discussion of legal matters was an important element of *feis Temra*. Evidence for the promulgation of laws at the Feast is also found in the *dindsenchas* poem for Loch Garman:

> *Feis Temra cech tres blíadna*
> *do chomull recht is ríagla*
> *dongíthi in tan-sin co tend*
> *ic rígaib allib hErend.*
>
> The Feast of Tara every third year, for accomplishment of law and justice was held at that time punctually by the noble kings of Erin.[17]

It must be remembered that these and all similar accounts in the literature which illustrate such a well organised and established high-kingship are by their nature suspect. The descriptions likely reflect the experiences or indeed expectations contemporary to the eleventh and twelfth century texts, rather than the earlier society concurrent with the Feast. As will be seen with *oenach Tailten* such occasions are highly unlikely to have witnessed a 'national' assembly as suggested. While perhaps not the all-inclusive events they purport to be, it is reasonable to suggest the grounds for occasion and the descriptions of the entertainments provided may still be relied upon as reasonably accurate though generic accounts of assemblies in the historic period.

As revealed by the etymology of the term itself, the earliest *feis* were likely heavily invested with marriage rites. By the historical period *feis* are often described

---

[14] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 319; transl. p 360. Translation in brackets offered by Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards (pers. com.).

[15] See Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 82-3.

[16] While Middle Irish references such as these indicate Samhain as the observance of the onset of winter, it should be noted that the older word for May-day, Cétamain, has been shown to derive from Indo-European **kintu-samoni*, hence *cét-samain*, 'first of summer'. The observance of May-day is noted on the ancient *Coligny Calendar* as *Samoni-*, in contrast to Hallowe'en, which is labelled *Giamoni-*, 'the beginning of winter'. See McCone, Kim (1980) pp 139-41. The argument and its contents have been kindly summarised and paraphrased to me by Dr. Katharine Simms.

involving the practical and financial matters of secular marriages. Interestingly, in what must be seen as a result of the Christianisation of both society and the written sources, evidence from the saga-literature reveals those attending the *feis Temra*, particularly the king, were obliged to be married. This theme is perhaps best described in the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Étaíne* where the newly enthroned king Eochaid holds the *feis Temra* in order to assess his prospective taxes and tributes. His invited guests include kings of the five provinces of Ireland, each of whom refuses to attend until Eochaid secures a wife as, "...they would not convene the Feast of Tara for a king that had no queen" (*ni theclomdais feis Temra do rig cen rigain lais*).[18] The importance of the matter is reiterated in the Middle Irish *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*;

> *Ni théigid rí cen rígain ná ségaind cen banségaind ná féndid cen il-íaraind ná midlach cen drúithsig ná brigiu cen bantuile ná gilla cen lennait ná hingen cen lendán ná duine cen dán.*
>
> No king used to go [to Tara] without a queen, or chieftain without a chieftainess or warrior without ... or fop without a harlot, or hospitaller without a consort, or youth without a love, or maiden without a lover or man without an art.[19]

Similarly, in the Middle Irish *Mesca Ulaid*, a text found in the *Leabhar na hUidre*, the Ulstermen are said to arrive at the feast, each hospitaller with his wife, each king with his queen, each musician with his spouse, etc. The couples are appropriately received in "...exquisite, ornamented perfectly formed sleeping-houses".[20] This echoes a legal passage from *Críth Gablach* where the *aire ardd* and *aire túise* are free to bring as retinue twenty and thirty married couples, respectively, to a feast known as *cóe*, held between New Year's Day and Shrovetide.[21]

---

[17] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 170-1, ll 49-52.
[18] Bergin, Osborn and Best, R.I. (1938) pp 162-3, §2. A similar account is given in the tale *Scéla Ailill 7 Étáine*. See Müller, Eduard (1876-8) p 350; transl. p 355.
[19] Best, R.I. (1910) pp 124-5.
[20] Koch, John T. (1997) p 99, §18. Translation based on text at Watson, J. Carmichael (1941) p 9.
[21] CG ll 384 (*aire ardd*), 399 (*aire túise*). For *cóe*, see p 81.

Far clearer than the impetus and occasion of the feasts are the entertainments provided. Descriptions of the types of amusement expected at such feasts are well attested, particularly in the saga-literature, and reasonably consistent. As discussed in chapter 3, the highlight of almost any assembly in early Ireland seems to have been horse and chariot racing.[22] Accounts of the *feis Temra* are no exception. A passage from the late-Middle Irish *Cath Boinde* relates that the *feis Temra* was concluded only after the last races (*graifne*) were run.[23] Several texts concerning the Feast of Tara also allude to the propitious location of the *feis*, often in direct relation to its spacious plains, highly suitable for races. An entry in the Old Irish *Sanas Cormaic* characterises Tara's useful vantage point as an attribution for its name;

> *Temair didiu cech locc as mbī aurgnam dēicsi iter mag 7 tech.*
>
> *Temair*, then, every place from which there is an effectual view including both plain and house[24]

According to *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, in what must be described as an ancient archetype of a modern dilemma, the organisers of the *feis Temra* convene to discuss the unprofitable arrangement of the expansive plains reserved principally for the feast's races. While it is suggested the land would be better served by dwelling or cultivation, the feast and its races are judged too hallowed to be influenced by domestic affairs.[25]

Professional and musical entertainment is also often mentioned. Several passages in the *Acallamh* describe musicians and minstrels at feasts. As described in the *Acallamh*, the *timpán*-player Ailill mac Midhna was accustomed to amusing the guests every year at *feis Temra*.[26] Later in the same tale Cormac mac Airt again holds

---

[22] This is discussed in detail in chapter 4.
[23] O'Neill, Joseph (1905) p 179.
[24] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 105, §1212. Translation is my own.
[25] See, *e.g.*, Best, R.I. (1910) pp 124-5.
[26] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 130; transl. p 142.

the feast, encouraging all to 'drink at the feast of Tara' (*d'ol feisse na Temrach*). Those attending include Finn's minstrels (*áirfitig*) include several storytellers (*scélaide*) and the renowned *timpán*-player Cnú Dheiróil.[27] Similarly, in *Scél Baili Binnbérlaig* the feast is again held by Cormac mac Airt, where 'poets and men of every art' (*fil 7 aes cacha danai*) perform, "...as was the custom".[28]

A particularly full compliment of entertainment is illustrated in the late-Middle Irish tale "The Violent Deaths of Goll and Garb". The generous hospitaller Conall holds a feast with,

> *...glámma 7 clíara. Fiallach cíuil 7 airfitid. Fir denma drecht 7 nath 7 admolta Ulad. Senchaide 7 brithemain 7 echlachta 7 óblaire 7 forbfir 7 ónmiti 7 grácberthaig.*
>
> ...companies and trains, musicians and minstrels: makers of the songs and poems and eulogies of Ulaid: historians and judges and messengers and jugglers and servants and fools and criers.[29]

Eulogies (*admolad*) seem to have been important at such feasts, particularly Tara. They are portrayed in the Middle Irish "Destruction of Dind Ríg", a story within the *Book of Leinster*, as seated upon the floor "...lauding the king and queens, the princes and nobles" (*oc admolad ind ríg 7 na rígna 7 na flaithi 7 na n-octhigern*).[30] The overwhelming importance of a proper and highly laudatory eulogy at an inaugural ritual or assembly is clear. While seldom mentioned attending fairs and general assemblies, the eulogist's performance at a feast such as the *feis Temra* was likely central. The poets, likely eulogists, mentioned in *Scél Baile Bínnbérlaig* are described as bringing with them to the *feis* 'their tablets' (*a taibli*).[31] The practical and symbolic influence of the written word in Irish society can not be underestimated. It is worth considering that inaugural feasts of Christian kings included eulogies read from

---

[27] *Ibid.*, p 203; transl. pp 229-30. The storytellers are literally 'reciters of old tales' (*senscélaide*).
[28] Meyer, Kuno (1892b) p 223; tranl. p 225.
[29] Stokes, Whitley (1893b) pp 412-15. The *obláire* and *óinmit* are discussed in chapter 2.
[30] Stokes, Whitley (1901) p 9.

tablets rather than the more traditional practice of oral recitation. Such a performance would have successfully merged Christian and traditional ceremony.

Alongside descriptions of professional entertainment and music are often detailed reports of food and drink. As discussed in previous chapters, the seating of a banquet hall was carefully arranged, as was the proper portion for each attendant. A lengthy passage in *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, describes a possible scene for the banquet hall *feis Temra*;

> *Nochóraigdis and ind ríg 7 ind ollamuin im Diarmait mac Cerbaill*[32] *.i. na ríg 7 na hollamain aróen, na fianna 7 na díbercae immalle. In gillanraid 7 ind ingenrad 7 int áes b'aeth borrfadach isna himdadhaib im na doirse, 7 doratad a chuit chóir do cechóen díb .i. mínmesraid 7 daim 7 tuircc 7 tinni do ríghaib 7 do ollamnaib 7 do sruithib slánaib sochenélachaib fer nÉrend olchena, rechtairi 7 banrechtairi ic roind 7 ic dáil dóib side. Féoil derg dano do beraib íaraind 7 firbrocóit 7 núa corma 7 assen do fiandaib 7 díbergachaib, 7 druith 7 deogbairi ic roind 7 ic dáil dóib. Cend-chossach and dano 7 imchosail cecha hindile do aradhaib 7 do oblóraib 7 da drabarslúag 7 da dáescordáinib, 7 araid dano 7 úan 7 orcc 7 in sechtmad dál riamid an-echtair do gillanraid 7 do ingenraid dáig nosoerfeted a medar eated ocus nobíd a n-ortán ica n-idnaidi. Sóeramais 7 banamais ic roind 7 ic dáil dóib.*
>
> The kings and ollaves used to be placed around Diarmait son of Cerball, that is, kings and ollaves together, warriors and reavers together. The youths and maidens and the proud foolish folk in the chambers around the doors; and his proper portion was given to each one, that is, choice fruit and oxen and boars and flitches for kings and ollaves, and for the free noble elders of the men of Ireland likewise: stewards and stewardesses carving and serving for them. Then red meat from spits of iron, and bragget and new ale and milk water (?)[33] for warriors and reavers: and jesters and cup-bearers carving and serving for them. heads-and-feet (?) next and...of all [kinds of] cattle to charioteers and jugglers and for the rabble and common people, with charioteers and jugglers and doorkeepers carving and carving and dispensing for them. Veal then and lamb and pork and the seventh portion...outside for young men and maidens, because their mirth used to entertain them...and their nobility(?) used to be awaiting them(?). Free mercenaries and female hirelings carving and dispensing for them.[34]

---

[31] Meyer, Kuno (1892b) p 223; tranl. p 225.

[32] This is the Southern Uí Néill king mentioned in the annal entries above, concerning the holding of the *feis Temra* in AU 558, 560; AI 560; CS 560; and ATig 559. For a discussion of his origins and reign, see Byrne, Francis John (1973) pp 88-90.

What appears central to the author's description is the appropriate item and server of each individual portion. Attention to status at such a feast would have been both fundamental and well recognised. Similar portions of food and drink are mentioned in several texts, with particular emphasis usually placed upon the dispensing of meat and ale. It is indeed surprising that within the extensive description there is only one allusion to ale, in this case 'new ale' (*núa corma*). Beer and other alcoholic drinks such as wine and mead are often the focus of feasts.[35] A legal passage from *Córus Besgnai* qualifies the *fled doena*, or 'human banquet' as the *feis* a lord supplies in his alehouse (*cuirmtige*).[36] As seen in the *Acallamh*'s description of the 'drinking feast of Tara' (*d'ol feisse na Temrach*), *ól*, 'drinking' or 'a drink' is often used to describe the feasts.[37] In a late-Middle Irish poem composed for an Ua Conchobair chief, the feast of Tara is described as the *feis ól*, or 'drinking feast'.[38] Beer (*cuirm*) and ale (*laith*) have a particular connection with kingship. The standard measure of the generosity and hospitality of a king was often gauged through his ability to provide ale at a gathering. This is best evidenced by a passage from the law tract *Críth Gablach* declaring, 'he is no proper lord who does not promise ale for every Sunday' (*ar ní flaith téchta*[e] *nád ingella laith ar cach ndomnach*).[39] The symbolic and practical importance of an inaugural gathering such as the *feis Temra* likely offered the greatest opportunity for a king to display his munificence.

A final entertainment associated with the feasts, particularly *feis Temra*, is the boardgame *fidchell*. Fidchell, as discussed in chapter 5, is unequivocally connected

---

[33] *Assen*, which Best renders 'milk water' is perhaps better understood as *a sen*, 'its old', referring back to *corma*, 'ale', i.e. 'new and old ale'. It seems highly unlikely warriors would be given milk water at such a banquet. For similar uses of *sen*, see DIL, S-171.19-22.

[34] Best, R.I. (1910) pp 124-5.

[35] For the importance and popularity of beer in the early Irish diet, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 332-5. Beer was an important feature of all major gatherings. It is discussed in sections 2 and 3, below.

[36] CIH 525.5-6. This passage is discussed in detail in section 2, below.

[37] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 203; transl. pp 229-30.

[38] Ó Cuív, Brian (1983) p 170.

with kings and kingship. Its place at a *feis* is therefore to be expected. In the Middle Irish *Lebor na Cert*, a text dated to the eleventh century, tributes of *fidchell*-boards are mentioned repeatedly in relation to Tara and the *feis Temra*.[40] In the twelfth-century "Will of Cathair Mór" the Munster king gives a stipend to the king of Ireland at Tara, "...one-hundred horses who grow not weary and thirty sets of *fidchell* for the feast" (*cet n-each ní scíthad a seithe feidm, la tríchaid ficthill ac fleid*).[41] At such feasts and banquets *fidchell*-boards are frequently mentioned alongside decorated drinking horns and cups. As feasts were clearly events at which copious amounts of drink were consumed, the two articles were undoubtedly linked by occasion as well as physical value.

3. *Fled*:

While *feis* is used nearly exclusively to describe the inaugural feast at Tara, the term *fled* more generally describes any assembled banquet or feast. The term is cognate with the Welsh *gwledd*, 'banquet, feast, revelry', sharing a Common Celtic **ulidā*.[42] Unlike *feis* and *oenach* the term *fled* is not commonly used as an appellation describing specific or well known gatherings. A passage from the law tract *Córus Bésgnai*, however, shows a curious triadic description, with an obvious Christian influence;

> *CAIR CIS LIR FLEDA DOCUISIN .NĪ, A .III. FLED DEODA FLED DOENA FLED DEMANDA.*[43]
>
> How many banquets are there? Not difficult. Three banquets, a divine banquet, a human banquet, a demon banquet.

---

[39] CG ll 543-4, §41 = CIH 569.29-30.
[40] Dillon, Myles (1962) pp 4, 10, 126, 128.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp 111-12.
[42] See Thomas, R.J. *et al.* (1950-) p 1682.
[43] CIH 524.18-19. Translations of this and the following citations are my own. I have retained capital letters to indicate that the passage is Old Irish main text.

CAITE IN FLED DEODA DAN DO DIA DAN DOMNAIG DE .UII.MAINE URTACH SOLLOMAIN BIATHAD DISERTAIG DAN DO ECLAIS BIATHAD GRINDE[44] *FUIRIRED NAIGED DE DIDNAD DO TRUAGAIB COSRECAD TEMPUILL PUIPIR DO BIATHAD BOICHT DO DIDNADAIB FODACOMILSET.*[45]

What is the divine banquet? A gift to God, a gift of the Sunday on the seventh day, celebrating a festival, refection for a hermit, a gift for a church, food for a company, refection for a visitor of God, comfort for the wretched, consecrating a temple, food for the poor, succour for the poor, which may be able to maintain them.

CAITE IN FLED DOENA FLED CUIRMTIGE CAICH DIA FLAITH AMAIL BES A DLIGED DIA NCESET *A AIRILLTNIB FEIS FUIRIRIUD DITHIT.*[46]

What is the human banquet? A banquet of every ale-house for the lord, the same which is rightful, so that he receives his warranted refection of repast.

FLED DEMONDA .I. FLED DOBERAR DO MACAIB BAIS 7DROCH-DAINIB .I. DO DRUTHAIB 7 CAINTIB 7 OBLAIRAIB 7 BRUIDIRAIB 7 FUIRSEORAIB 7 MERLECHAIB 7 GEINTAIB 7 MERDRECHAIB 7 DROCHDAINAIB ARCENA DO NEOCH NA TABAIR AR COMAIN TALMANDA 7 NA TABAIR AR FOCHRIC NEMDA IS DILIS IARUM DO DEMAN IN FLED SIN.[47]

Demon banquet, i.e. a banquet which is given to the sons of death and base people, i.e. to *druith* and satirists and *oblaire* and *bruidire* and buffoons and robbers and pagans and prostitutes and base people of all types, for that which is not given of earthly return and is not given of heavenly reward, this feast is therefore rightful for a demon.

A similar passage is found in *O'Davoren's Glossary*;

Fledh deoda, fledh doenda, fledh domunda, dethbir etarru sin. Fled deoda .i. inní tidnactar ar dia mar ata biadh in domnaig 7 na sollaman 7 in ailithrigh 7 biadh in baisteda 7 in biadh faire 7 a lethéti sin 7 in fecht féle. Fledh doenda .i. biad ceilsine. Fled domunda .i. bruith saill dam, combruithinn saill duit.

A godly feast, a human feast, a worldly feast, (there is) a difference among them. 'A godly feast' is that which is given for God's sake, such as the food on Sunday and of the solemn festivals, and of the pilgrim, and the food of the

[44] A glossator inserts a 'c' above *grinde*, suggesting the term should read *crinne*, presumably 'an elderly person'. Either term would be apposite.
[45] CIH 524.22-5.
[46] CIH 525.5-6.
[47] CIH 526.15-19.

> baptism, and the food of the wake, and the like, and the expedition for a feast. 'A human feast', i.e. food of clientship. 'A worldly feast', i.e. boil fat for me, I would equally boil fat for thee.[48]

The express emphasis in the preceding passages is the occasion for each banquet. The tripartite division is likely didactic in scope, though banquets of each kind are described in the source material. The *fled doena*, or 'human banquet' is a common feature of the legal material as the food and drink provided at the banquet appear as social and legal obligations from a client to his lord. This type presumably represents the most common and most likely of secular banquets. Refection for such a gathering is mentioned throughout the legal material, almost exclusively in relation to the binding contractof clientship. The requisite food and drink is discussed in detail in the law-tract *Do Choimét Dligthech*, particularly concerning the 'lawful banquet' (*fled techta*).[49] In the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* preventing the refection required for the lord's banquet is considered a situation in which distraint may be levied for one day only.[50]

The author or redactor of the *Córus Bésgnai* tract is of an obvious Christian bent as the *fled demonda*, or 'demon banquet' is named and elaborated with particular contempt. Judging from the list of entertainers and guests, however, it is perhaps an accurate description of the typical amusement at a secular banquet. Descriptions in the saga-literature are less likely to mention society's robbers and prostitutes, though buffoons, fools and other entertainers are common entertainers at banquets and feasts.[51] The divergent description of the *fled demonda* in *O'Davoren's Glossary* is clearly a result of the glossator's understanding of the second element as *domonda*, 'earthly'. The gloss, rendered in direct speech, seems a contemporary aphorism or

---

[48] Stokes, Whitley (1904a) pp 360-1, §954.
[49] CIH 1731.39-1732.14.
[50] CIH 368.6.
[51] A discussion of each individual entertainer and his art is found in chapter 2.

proverb intimating a banquet with communal or reciprocal preparation.[52] Stokes' translation of *saill*, 'fat', is better rendered 'salt meat'.

Physical descriptions of banquets and banquet halls are found in several saga texts. As many of the sources were composed centuries after the periods they claim to represent, narrations are likely based on a combination of both legendary and contemporary examples. A lengthy description of a festive banquet is found in the Middle Irish *Mesca Ulad*;

> *Do-ríachtatar Ulaid do thochastul na fledi conach baí fer lethbali i nUltaib na toracht* and...*Ro bátar gríanána álli ardda essarda do aín 7 do úrlúachair, 7 slúagthigi sithfhata; cuchtarthigi lethna luchtmara 7 bruiden brec bélfhairsiuṅg ìssí lethan luchtmar lánmór...Ra doirtea airigthi bíd 7 lenna dóib cu ríacht praind cét de biud 7 de lind cach nónbair díb.*
>
> *Ár sain ra hairecrad a óltech la Conchobar, ar gnímaib ar irranaib 7 cenélaib, ar grádaib 7 dánaib 7 ar cháinbésaib im chóemchostud na fledi. Táncatar rannaire ra raind 7 deogbairi ri dáil 7 doridsi ro dorseóracht. Ro canta a céoil 7 a n-airfiti 7 a n-intlasi. Gabtha a ndúana 7 a ndréchta 7 a n-admolta doib. Ra fodáilte séoit 7 maíni 7 innmassa dóib.*[53]
>
> The Ulstermen came as called to the feast so that there was not a man left in even any half-sized settlement in Ulster that did not come there...There were beautiful elevated sun-rooms spread with rushes and fresh reeds, and long host-lodgings; broad well-stocked cooking-houses and a multi-coloured feasting building with a broad entryway; [this building] was broad, full of great store, great and brimming...The best of food and drink was served them, so that the food and drink for a hundred reached each nine of them.
>
> After that, the drinking house was put in order by Conchobor according to the deeds and divisions and kindreds, according to the social ranks and arts and refined manners, for the sake of the decorous ordering of the feast. Food servers came to serve portions and drink-bearers to pour, and door-keepers for doorkeeping. Their music and their songs and their entertainments were sung. Their poems and their compositions and their panegyrics were recited. Valuables and riches and treasures were shared out amongst them.[54]

Unlike the *feis*, the *fled* seems to have been a short-lived affair. Nearly all descriptions of the *fled* portray a banquet arranged and celebrated over a period of one day and

---

[52] Glosses rendered in direct speech are found elsewhere in the legal material. For examples, see CIH 18.14-35.

[53] Watson, J. Carmichael (1941) pp 9-10, ll 194-5, 199-204, 206-216.

night. Several passages from the saga-literature portray banquets prepared and held the night before battle. As such, kings and warriors are given highest status, and accordingly, the best cuts of meat and the premium drink.

Meat and drink indeed seem to have been the characteristic elements of a *fled*. The numerous descriptions in the source material of seating arrangements and appropriate portions served at banquets focus on the type of drink and the cut of meat afforded each guest. The best known example of this is the Middle Irish *Suidigud Tigi Midchúarda*, found with an accompanying illustration in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*.[55] A similar description is found of the banquet of Conchobor's household in the Old Irish *Lānellach Tigi Rīch 7 Ruirech*.[56] The status and grade of each individual guest is determined by the quality of meat and drink he is served. As discussed in chapter 2, professional entertainers and musicians at banquets, regardless of status, were not excluded from their rightful portions of meat and drink.

As expected, beer (*cuirm*), wine (*fín*) and mead (*míd*) are the most common beverages mentioned in relation to banquets. As seen in the passage from *Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, a distinction is often made between old (*sen*) and new (*núa*) beer. While both seem to have been plentiful and popular, the latter (*núa corma*) is warned against in the Old Irish *Tecosca Cormac* for its harmful effects on the body.[57] What must be seen as biased and suspect gloss and commentary is added to the description in *Córus Bésgnai*, above. While the *fled doenda* is held in the 'ale-house' (*cuirmtige*), its feast (*feis*) is held at night and without alcoholic drink.[58] The term *ól*, 'drinking' or 'to drink', commonly associated with the *feis*, is equally linked with the *fled*. In the

---

[54] Koch, John T. and John Carey(1995) pp 99-100.
[55] Petrie, George (1839) and Gilbert, John T. (1874-84) vol. 2, plate 53.
[56] See O'Daly, Máirín (1962), pp 81-6.
[57] Meyer, Kuno (1909) pp 38-9, §21.
[58] CIH 525.5-10. The gloss in question states, 'without drink at night' (*.i. cen lind i naidche*).

Middle Irish *Fled Bricrenn* the occasion is deemed the 'drinking banquet' (*ól fleide*).[59] A similar passage, though opposite in sentiment, is found in a Middle Irish homily from the *Leabhar Breac*, where the 'drinking banquet' (*fleda d'ól*) is listed as a temptation no longer present in the body [60] In *Cath Ruis na Ríg*, also Middle Irish, the banquet hall is deemed the 'drinking house' (*tech n-óil*).[61] The *tech n-ól* or *óltech* is in fact a common description found throughout the literature.[62]

A consistent description of a banquet hall, as seen in the passage from *Mesca Ulad*, is one of large rooms with long tables and broad entryways. A banquet hall is also commonly described having floors strewn with fresh rushes and reeds. In *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, Conchobor is invited to a banquet hosted by Culann the smith, after whom the hero Cú Chulainn takes his name. According to the tale;

> *Ro fritháiled in rí, 7 ro fiadaiged ar grádaib 7 dánaib 7 dligedaib 7 úaslecht 7 cáinbésaib. Ro hecrait aíne 7 úrlúachair fóthu. Gabsat for ól 7 for aíbnius.*
>
> The king was served, and they were honoured according to rank and profession and rights and nobility and accomplishments. Reeds and fresh rushes were strewn beneath them. They began to drink and make merry.[63]

The passage in *Mesca Ulad* is similar, where the floor of the banquet room, in this case a sunroom (*grían*), is newly covered in rushes and fresh reeds (*aín 7 úrlúachair*).[64] A particularly descriptive account of hall, arrangement and decoration is given in an Early Modern Irish tale within the *Fianaigecht*;

> *Ocus is amlaid ro būi Máillén 7 fled mōrchāin móradhbal aici d'Finn 7 d'fianaib hĒrenn uile. Do hesradh 7 do húrlúachradh in tech n-óla ara gcind ocus ro tógbad buird altacha órdacha ann 7 do suidhigedh na slūaig fo mēd i n-ūaisli 7 i n-inmi 7 i n-onóra ar dánuib 7 ar gráduib isin bruidin 7 do folchad na buird do srōl 7 do sída 7 do sicir 7 do sindsnáth 7 do*

---

[59] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 1, p 6.
[60] Atkinson, Robert (1887) p 267, l. 8127; transl. p 508.
[61] Hogan, Edmund (1892) pp 16-17, §11.
[62] For further examples, see DIL, O-131.70-4.
[63] *Táin*, LL l. 858; transl. p 161.
[64] Watson, J. Carmichael (1941) p 9, ll 201-2.

*sgóraidib scíamglana 7 d'ēdaigib líghda lánáilli 7 do fresl*ad *7 do frithoiled íad do rogha gacha sóidh 7 do tócbad aco annsin beldedha buáiltecha buis 7 bánairgit 7 cuirn cáema cumdaighe clochbúadha.*

> And in expectation of them Maillen had a splendid feast prepared for Finn and all the *fiana* of Ireland. The banqueting-hall had been strewn with fresh rushes, and jointed tables pieced together had been set up in it. And the hosts were seated in the hostel in conformity with their nobility and wealth and honour, according to professions and degrees. And the boards were covered with satin and silk and serge and sendal, and with shining bright napery and delightful coloured cloths, and they were served and waited upon with every choice dainty. And then they raised embossed goblets of crystal and white silver, and beautiful ornamented horns set with precious stones.[65]

Though composed in the Early Modern period, the description is remarkably consistent with earlier accounts. Drinking horns are often portrayed as prized possessions of kings and heroes. As discussed in relation to the *feis*, they are frequently described alongside *fidchell*-boards at banquets and assemblies.

Specific entertainment and amusement described offered at banquets is largely identical to that offered at feasts and assemblies in general. Apart from the particular emphasis on the consumption of alcoholic beverages, there is no characteristic diversion particularly associated with the *fled*. When mentioned, entertainers generally include musicians, poets, and minstrels. Judging from the various texts describing seating arrangements and status, additional professional entertainers such as buffoons, clowns, and contortionists are also likely. The most specific evidence for the *fled* itself, though heavily biased, is found in the legal classification of the *fled demonda*, found in the passage from *Córus Bésgnai*, discussed above. According to the text the banquet was likely to draw such disreputables as *druith*, buffoons, *oblaire* and satirists.[66] As the more tangible and presumably more common secular banquets were part of the legal contract between lord and client, food and drink must be assumed as the principal grounds and recreation for such a gathering.

---

[65] Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 54-7, §4.
[66] CIH 526.16.

4. *Oenach*:

The origin and etymology of the term *oenach* is uncertain, though it is likely a noun derived from *oen*, 'one', corresponding to the derivation of 'union' from *unus*, 'one'. *Sanas Cormaic* contains a creative etymology for *oenach*, employing its marked association with horseracing; *Ōenach .i. úne ech*, 'Oenach, i.e. driving of horses'.[67] As discussed in the previous chapter, horseracing appears to have been the greatest spectacle of early fairs. While terms such as *dál*, *céite* and *airechtas* are used to describe similar assemblies and meetings, the term *oenach* is used almost exclusively in association with large and seasonal fairs. The term survives (*aonach*) into the Modern language with the same meaning. It is likely early Ireland held several large and nationally recognised fairs, as well as dozens of smaller ones. The *Onomasticon Goedelicum* lists no less than seventy-five placename entries beginning with the element *oenach*.[68] The term is widely attested in every branch of the written sources. Countless stipulations and contingencies are found in the early legal material concerning activities and injuries at fairs. Named and specific examples of the fairs, such as *Oenach Tailten*, *Oenach Colmáin* and *Oenach Carman*, are common features of the saga-literature and annals.

The *oenach* in early Ireland appears to have been most commonly celebrated as a harvest festival. As will be seen, *Oenach Tailten* was especially associated with Lughnasad, a harvest observance named after the pagan deity Lug.[69] Regional and national fairs, as in modern times, presented a central location for the trade, barter and purchase of produce and livestock. Pragmatically, fairs were also the most effective

[67] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 86, §1002.
[68] Hogan, Edmund (1910) pp 558-9.

means to deliver and distribute food-rent and obligatory refection between client and lord. Legal material dating from as early as the seventh century describes a system in which land was owned both privately and in association with a primary lord.[70] The latter required food-rent due at various stages throughout the year, though it can be safely assumed the principal instalments were due subsequent to the autumnal harvest. A further hint as to the established association between autumn and the rightful *oenach* is found in the Middle Irish *Mesca Ulad*, where Cú Chulainn relates to his travelling companions that the "...present, rough wintry season is no season of tribal assembly" (*ní hinbaid óenaig ind inbaid garb gemretta so*).[71]

Two religious texts give additional evidence as to the regularity of festivals celebrated at harvest, as well as an apparent distaste at their existence. The first example, from the late-Old Irish "Monastery of Tallaght", describes Colum Cille's forbearance in allowing his monks to break their required fast and celebrate the local harvest festival with 'great festivity and merrymaking' (*erdath 7 ba lith mór*). According to the rather disgruntled author, a member of the Tallaght community, this was not in accordance with Mael Ruain's teaching.[72] A second example, from the Middle Irish *Betha Colmáin Maic Lúacháin*, describes the disappointment of Colmán's followers in not being able to attend the *oenach* at Tailtiu;

> [A]*raile fe*ch*tt dano robātar a manaigh ac būain cruth[*nechta] *ic Croiss na Truma ro airig-sim brōn forro .i. an laa rognīatt aenach Taillten.*
>
> Again, on a certain occasion when his monks were reaping wheat at Cross na Truma, he noticed they were sad, for it was the day on which the fair of Teltown is being held.[73]

---

[69] Máire MacNeill offers a detailed and comprehensive discussion of Lughnasad as celebrated in Ireland from pre-history to the modern period in her book *The Festival of Lughnasad* (1962). While she discusses early references, her focus is the medieval and early modern periods.
[70] For a discussion, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 360, 398-408, 423, *etc.*
[71] Watson, J. Carmichael (1941) p 15; for translation, see Koch, John T. and John Carey (1995) p 102.
[72] Gwynn, E.J. and W.J. Purton (1911-12) pp 155-6, §68.
[73] Meyer, Kuno (1911c) pp 84-5, §84.

While not allowing his disciples to attend the fair, Colmán seems to have taken their interests to heart. He is described as praying to the angels to run three races for the entertainment of the reapers. From this time on the location was known as *aenach Laindi*.[74] This said, comprehensive evidence suggests the *oenach* in the Christian period, particularly *oenach Tailten*, was closely associated and heavily invested with church interest, best evidenced by the locations and occasions of fairs concurrent and in proximity to established synods.[75]

While the harvest and its produce were perhaps the most practical auspices, legal matters and legislation also seem to have been principal interests of an *oenach*. The Middle Irish *Genemain Áeda Sláne*, a text within the *Lebor na hUidre*, describes the *oenach* at Tailtiu as the occasion for the arrangement of every penalty (*smacht*) and every law (*recht*) by the men of Ireland.[76] *Lebor na Cert* relates that the king of Ailech, when he is not the king of Ireland, has the right to sit beside the latter at an *oenach*, and to precede him in laws (*coraib*), councils (*comairlib*) and intercessions (*impidib*).[77] The prose *dindsenchas* for Carman describes the activities at the famous *oenach* as "...seven horseraces and a week for promulgating judgements and laws of the province for a year" (*secht ngraifne and 7 sechtmain fri agad bretha 7 cocerta a cuigid fri bliadain*).[78] Interestingly, the verse *dindsenchas* for both Carman and Tailtiu emphasise the recreational elements of the fairs, in each case indicating the absence of legal process. Concerning Tailitu, the poem relates;

> *Óenach cen guin, cen gait neich,*
> *cen cheist, cen changin, cen chreich,*
> *cen chron, cen aidbriud, cen d'ail,*
> *cen élud, cen ergabáil.*

---

[74] *Ibid.*, pp 85-6. For *oenach Colmáin*, see section 3.2, below.
[75] For a discussion, see Doherty, Charles (1980) pp 81-3; Charles-Edwards, Thomas (2000) p 476; Swift, Catherine (1999) pp 115-8.
[76] Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (1929) p 133, ll 4211-2.
[77] Dillon, Myles (1984) p 64. Dillon translates *coraib* 'transactions' and *impidib* 'intercessions'.
[78] Stokes, Whitley (1894) p 312; transl. p 314.

> A fair without wounding or robbing of any man, without trouble, without dispute, without reaving, without challenge of property, without suing, without law-sessions, without evasion, without arrest.[79]

Similarly, the poem concerning the *oenach* at Carman states that the following are avoided;

> *Acra, tobuch frithir fiach,*
> *écnach, écraite, anríad*
> *ní lamar la graifne in gáid*
> *élud, aithne, athgabáil.*
>
> Suing, harsh levying of debts, satirising, quarrelling, misconduct is not dared during the races...evasion, injunction, nor distraint.[80]

The emphasis concerning legal activity in this poem seems to be placed upon the occasion of the horseraces. The races were central to the fairs and may have been contentious and consequential enough to warrant a temporary cessation of legal proceedings to avoid unnecessary conflict. Similarly, three 'immunities of violence' are listed in the Old Irish *Audacht Morainn* describing potentially hazardous activities at fairs. The three are specified as violence occurring during horseraces, violence during a hosting, and violence at an alehouse where, "...foolish and wise, familiars and strangers are intoxicated."[81]

While most festivals were indeed centred around the harvest and celebrated at *Lughnasad*, occasional passages from the literature suggest various times of year, though mainly in relation to one of the seasonal observances, outlined above. A passage from the Middle Irish *Serglige Con Culainn* contains a lengthy description of an *oenach* conducted at Samhain;

> *Oenach dognithe la Ulta cecha blía*(dna) *.i. t*(rí la) *ria samfuin 7 tri lá iarma 7 laithe na samna feisne. Iss ead aireat no bítis Ulaid insin i mMaig Muirthemne oc ferthain óenaig na samnae cecha blídna, 7 ní raibe isin bith ní dogneithe an eret sin léu acht cluiche 7 c*(éti) *7 áinius 7 aíbinnius 7 longad*

[79] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 150-1.
[80] *Ibid.*, pp 18-19, ll 221-4.
[81] Kelly, Fergus (1978) §28.

7 tomailt conid ed sin atát na treine samnae seachnón na Hérenn.

> The Ulstermen used to hold a fair every year: three days before Samuin and three days after it, and the day of Samuin itself. That is the time that the Ulstermen used to be there in Mag Muirthemni holding the fair of Samuin every year, and nothing at all was done by them during that time save games and gatherings and pleasure and delight and eating and feasting, so that from that is come the triple feast of Samuin throughout Ireland.[82]

The preponderance of the festivals, best evidenced by the prolific influence of the term *oenach* in placenames, allows little doubt that each individual seasonal observance produced various local fairs and festivals.

As with the *feis Temra*, fair and assembly sites in Ireland are most often described as taking place on a hill or elevated plain. Plains were indeed logistically important for the various encampments, gatherings and races. With its level and relatively dry expanse, Tailtiu, modern Teltown, Co. Meath, was perfectly suited for such an event. *Oenach Carman*, although its exact whereabouts is uncertain, seems to have been celebrated on elevated plains near the Curragh, in modern County Kildare. Several other fairs are mentioned held in the Liffey Valley and environs.[83]

That fairgrounds were carefully chosen, landscaped and tended to is evidenced by both the saga-literature and legal material. An Old Irish tale from the law tract *Bretha Nemed Toísech* declares Ualand, a hill in Fir Chualann, identified as south of Dublin along the River Dodder, as a meeting place for gatherings and fairs (*dála ocus aénaigh*). It is described as such as neither heather nor furze nor forest grew upon it (*Nichon ro fhás fraéch na aiten na fidh fuirre*).[84] In the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Ailill demands as compensation twelve plains, which are to be cleared of shrub and wood, so that they may be used for games (*cluiche*), assemblies (*ceiti*) and gatherings

---

[82] Dillon, Myles (1949) p 147; transl. (1951) p 48.

[83] See, *e.g.*, Orpen, Goddard (1906) pp 21-30; Stokes, Whitley (1886) p 206-7, 290-1; Dillon, Myles (1932) pp 61-2; Stokes, Whitley (1902) pp 14-15; Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 38-9. These are discuused in greater detail below.

[84] Dillon, Myles (1930-1) p 50.

(*dála*).[85] Routine care and clearing of the fair greens is mentioned in the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála*;

> *CARTAD RAITE .i. i naimsir cua 7 aenaig .i. a naimsir cuae, a ndrisi 7 a ndraigne do beim dib.*
> *CARTAD AENAIG .i. fri bruinde aige…*
>
> Clearing of the roads, i.e. in the guesting season[86] and a fair, i.e. in the guesting season, their brambles and blackthorns to be cut away from them. Clearing of the fair, i.e. just before the holding (of the fair).[87]

Recent study in the archaeology of lake settlements has also highlighted their suitability for regional fairs and gatherings. Lakeshores were frequently well recognised territorial boundaries. As such they may have provided undisputed territory and neutral ground on which to trade, conduct business and legislate.[88] Occasional references are found in saga texts regarding fairs near lakes and lakeshores. In the Middle Irish *Aided Fergus MacRóich* an encampment is made on the shores of Mag nAi, where games (*cluichi*) and gatherings (*céti*) are held.[89] In the *dindsenchas* poem for Ard Macha, a rich landowner journeys eastward with his prized racehorses to Conchobor's appointed *oenach*. He is described as arriving by water.[90]

4.1. *Oenach Tailten*:

The best known fair of early Ireland is *oenach Tailten*.[91] While the historicity of the fair is certain, the political implications of the fair both during and subsequent

---

[85] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) pp 150-1.
[86] For *aimser chue*, see Binchy, D.A. (1940) pp 18-22.
[87] CIH 368.31-3. Translation is my own. The care and specifications of racing greens and are discussed in detail in chapter 3.
[88] For a discussion, see O'Sullivan , Aidan (1998) pp 93-4.
[89] Meyer, Kuno (1906b) p 33, §2.
[90] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, p 127.
[91] The title is found in various forms. The modern name, Teltown, may in fact derive from the genitive use of Tailtiu in the phrase *oenach Tailten*. Equally possible is the use of the dative singular in prepositional phrases, i.e *do Tailtinn*, *di Tailtein*, etc. The supplanting of the nominative by the dative singular is a common linguistic development in Irish placenames. *Cf.*, *cell/cill*, *tech/tigh*, etc.

to its own period are subject to considerable debate.[92] The conventional legendary account of the fair's origins suggests it began as the funeral games of the mythological queen Tailtiu, foster-mother to Lug. Traditionally, it is stated, Lug commemorated the fair to the memory of Tailtiu, and held the fair at her burial site. The most extensive version of the story is found in *Lebor Gabála*, a text found in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*;

> *Talltiu ingen Mag Mōir rīg Espāine ban-rīgan Fer mBolgc, tāinic īar cur ind āir for Firu Bolgc sin chēt chath sin Muige Tuiredh co Caill Cuan; 7 slāigter le in chaill, comba magh fo scothsemair ria chind bliadna. Issī in Tailltiu-si trā ba ben Echach meic Eircc rīg Hērenn, co ro marbsat Tūatha Dē Danann, ...Conerbailt Tailltiu hi Tailltin, conid a haimn* rosglen, *7 conidē a fert fil ōn Forud Tailten sāertūaidh. Condēntai a cluiche cacha bliadna 7 a guba chāinte la Lugh. Ba congesib 7 airmbertaib nognīthi, .i. cōicthigis ria Lughnasad 7 cōicthigis ria īarom; unde dicitur Lugnasad, .i. aurdach nō sollomain Loga.*
>
> Tailltiu, daughter of Mag Mor king of Spain, queen of the Fir Bolg, came after the slaughter was inflicted upon the Fir Bolg in that first battle of Mag Tuired to Coill Cuan: and the wood was cut down by her, so it was a plain under clover-flower before the end of a year. This is that Tailltiu who was wife of Eochu son of Erc king of Ireland until the Tuatha De Danann slew him...So Tailltiu died in Tailltiu, and her name clave thereto and her grave is from the Seat of Tailltiu north-eastward. Her games were performed every year and her song of lamentation by Lug. With *gessa* and prohibitions were they performed, a fortnight before Lugnasad and a fortnight after: *unde dicitur* Lugnasad, that is, the celebration (?) or the festival of Lug.[93]

The legend factors into several *dindsenchas* poems and is also found in the entry for *Lúgnasad* in the Old Irish *Sanas Cormaic*.[94] While the legend's explanation of Lughnasad, literally 'Lug's funeral games', is plausible, the background to its site at Tailtiu is less convincing.[95]

---

[92] The most substantial recent discussions of the political and symbolic importance of the fair are found at Binchy, D.A. (1958b) pp 115-127 and Swift, Catherine (1999) pp 109-120.

[93] Macalister, R.A.S. (1941) pp 115-9.

[94] For the *dindsenchas* poems, see Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol 10, pp 50-1; *ibid.*, pp 148-51. For the entry in *Sanas Cormaic*, see Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 66, §796.

[95] For a suggested etymology of Tailtiu based on Indo-European **teletiw*, see Thurneysen, Rudolf (1936b) p 369.

As seen, *oenach Tailten* is listed repeatedly in triads and other groupings of Ireland's established assemblies.[96] Its association with Lughnasad alone indicates a pre-Christian existence.[97] The games and amusement often described at the *oenach* find particular affiliation with Lug, who enjoys a specific affiliation with early Irish recreation and sport. As will be seen in chapter 6, Lug is often portrayed leading the Túatha Dé Danann against the Fomoire in various ball-games. More significantly, in a text from the *Book of Leinster* Lug is credited with introducing the ball, the horse-whip, and the boardgame *fidchell* to Ireland.[98] Each of three objects represents a well attested amusement at gatherings and fairs.

Evidence from the annals gives the clearest and most reliable accounts of the occasion of the fair. Considerable attention is also given to Patrick's alleged visit to the fair in the early fifth century, though written accounts were composed several centuries after the purported event.[99] Even if Patrick's visit indeed contains fragments of truth, it is difficult to know whether or not it was in fact held consistently from the fifth century or earlier as there is little annalistic mention of the fair until the ninth century. Traditionally the *oenach* was held by the king of Tara, who, depending upon the particular source was the reigning Uí Néill king, the king of Leinster, the high-king of Ireland, or any combination of the three.[100] While annal entries offer no consistency in the frequency of the *oenach*, it is described in several saga texts as

---

[96] See *eg.*, Best, R.I. and Osborn Bergin (1929) p 133, ll 4206-14; Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 13, p 5, §35; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 73; transl. p 77.

[97] For comprehensive register of Tailtiu in relation to Lughnasad, see MacNeill, Máire (1962). All relevant citations are referenced in the index to the volume.

[98] Best, R.I., et al. (1954-83) p. 36.1147.

[99] Debate regarding the visit generally concerns the episode found in *Bethú Patraic*, composed in the early tenth century. See Mulchrone, Kathleen (1939) pp 43-8. For the date of the text see Byrne, F.J. and P. Francis (1994) pp 6-7. For a discussion, see Charles-Edwards, Thomas (2000) p 17-19, 556; Swift, Catherine (1999) pp 109-15.

[100] It is beyond the scope of the present examination to discuss the historical details of Tara and its connection to early Irish kingship. For a detailed discussion of the implications between *oenach Tailtiu* and the various political figures associated with it, see Swift, Catherine (1999) pp 109-120.

having been held every seven years. There is little evidence to support this and much to deny it.

The earliest annal entry concerning *oenach Tailten* concerns a sixth-century event, though the text was composed many centuries later.[101] A few entries concerning Tailtiu and its fair are found for the eighth century, though mainly in relation to the site as the location of combat and conflict, activity generally shunned at such fairs, as outlined above[102] Annal entries for the ninth and tenth centuries, however, are generally more extensive and show a significanct increase in their interest of the occasion of the fair.[103]

When *oenach Tailten* is mentioned in the annals of the ninth century and later it is because it either did or did not happen, in each case in contrast to the norm. The *Annals of Ulste*r are particularly consistent in their entries concerning *oenach Tailten* from the year 873. Beginning with this entry, the entries for the years 876, 878, 888 and 889 all state that the fair was '..without just and worthy cause' (*sine causa iusta 7 digna*).[104] A similar sentiment, though describing an event occurring a generation later, is found for the year 916;

> *Niall m. aedha irrighe Temrach 7 Oenach Tailten do aigh*[e] *lais, quod*h *multis temporibus pretermisum est.*
>
> Niall son of Aed became king of Temair and held the Fair of Tailtiu, which had been neglected for a long time.[105]

Neglected indeed though only through a particularly chaotic political period. This turmoil, though perhaps not 'just and worthy', is at the very least an understandable

---

[101] AFM *s.a.* 539.
[102] See AU *s.a.* 733, 791; AFM *s.a.*715.
[103] For a discussion, see Charles-Edwards, Thomas (2000) pp 476-7, 479. Swift, Catherine (1999) 118-19.
[104] AU *s.a.* 873, 876, 878.
[105] AU *s.a.* 916. *Cf.* AFM *s.a.* 915.

impediment and likely cause as to the obstruction of the fair at Tailtiu. Entries such as these make it impossible to underestimate the importance of the fair at Tailtiu in the political framework of the period.

The blessing and support of the church seems also to have been particularly important to the celebrant of *oenach Tailten*. Entries in the *Annals of Ulster* and *Annals of the Four Masters* indicate a boycott of the fair at the beginning of the ninth century by the members of the monastic community at Tallaght. The background to the incident involves the reigning Uí Néill king, Aed Oirdnide, who had violated the sanctuary of Tallaght by plundering termon lands around the monastery and its environs. The incident is summarised in the *Annals of Ulster* in its entry for the year 811;

> *Derbaid aige Dia Sathairnn oinigh Tailten conna recht ech na carpat la Aedh m. Neill, id est muinnter Tamlachta dod rorbai iar saraugad termainn Tamlachtai Maele Ruain du U Neill, 7 postea familiae Tamlachtae multa munera reddita sunt.*
>
> The fair of Tailtiu was prevented from being held on Saturday under the aegis of Aed son of Niall, neither horse nor chariot arriving there. It was the community of Tamlacht who caused the boycott after the Uí Néill had violated the sanctuary of Tamlacht of Mael Ruain; and many gifts were subsequently made to the community of Tamlacht.[106]

The immediate and substantial appeasement by the Uí Néill king indicates the considerable political influence of the monastic community as well as the importance of the fair in the civic affirmation of a king's reign. The final annal entry concerning *oenach Tailten* is found in the *Annals of the Four Masters* for the year 1168. The entry describes the fair as celebrated by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, high-king of Ireland, along with Tigernán Ua Ruairc, king of Breifne. The holding of the fair is likely to have witnessed the alliance of the two leaders, along with the entire northern half of Ireland (*Leth Cuinn*), in an effort to procure the valuable province of Meath. The

annal entry closes with a description of an impressive formation of horses and cavalry at the fair stretching from Mullach Aiti to Mullach Taiten, a distance of approximately six miles.

4.2. *Oenach Carman*:

The second principle fair of Ireland, both in mention and historical veracity, is *oenach Carman*. Carman is yet to be positively identified, though was certainly in Leinster, and almost certainly somewhere in the Liffey valley in modern County Kildare. Thought for centuries to have given its name to Loch Garman, the modern town of Wexford, Carman has been identified with reasonable certainty as located on what is known as the Curragh, between the ancient Hill of Allen and the River Liffey.[107] The identification of the site is based on several factors, primarily in association with kings of northern Leinster and an ancient site deemed 'Carman', located somewhere in the Liffey valley.[108] Accordingly, the references in the saga-literature to *oenach Life* likely represent *oenach Carman*.

It should be mentioned that *oenach Carman* has been suggested as the pre-Christian appellation for another of Ireland's fairs, *oenach Colmáin*. *Oenach Colmáin* is mentioned in a ninth-century triad as one of Ireland's three principle fairs, alongside Tailtiu and Cruachan.[109] Goddard Orpen suggests *oenach Carman* was re-named *oenach Colmáin* after the Meath saint Colmán Elo, credited with having

---

[106] AU *s.a.* 811. *Cf.* AFM *s.a.* 806.

[107] See Orpen, Goddard (1906) pp 11-41. For accordance with Orpen's identification, see Binchy, D.A. (1958b) p 125. Alfred Smyth, however, suggests an area at the junction of the river Barrow with a tributary at the Burren, near Carlow. He gives no evidence. (1982) p 35.

[108] Colmán Elo is not to be misunderstood with Colmán Mac Lúachan, a Leinster saint, sometimes associated with horse racing. Orpen suggests *oenach Carman* is the pre-Christian name for the fair, taken over by the term *oenach Colmán*

[109] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) p 5, §35. For a discussion of the fair at Crúachan in relation to promulgation of law, see Charles-Edwards, Thomas (2000) pp 562-3.

Christianised an ancient fair.[110] *Oenach Colmáin,* while doubtless associated with Colmán Elo of Lann Elo (Lynally), was likely its own fair, independent of *oenach Carman*. Thomas Charles-Edwards suggests *oenach Colmáin* was likely celebrated between the saint's feast day, September 26 and the feast of his nativity, October 3. As Charles-Edwards indicates, these dates agree with an annal entry for the year 827 where a disturbance at *oenach Colmáin* is reported following a previous and similar disturbance at *oenach Tailtiu*.[111]

Returning to *oenach Carman*, the explanation of its origin, like that of *oenach Tailten*, is wholly mythical. According to legend, Carman was a mother of three rampaging sons who, along with her progeny wreaked havoc and destruction on the inhabitants of Ireland. The sons names, Dian 'violent', Dothur 'evil' and Dubh 'black' attest to their legendary malevolence. After considerable struggle the mythical and heroic Túatha Dé Danann defeat the invaders, driving the sons from the country while imprisoning the mother. The mother soon dies of grief, though not before requesting her sons to organise lengthy and well attended funeral games at her burial. According to tradition, the games were then celebrated annually, and, like Tailtiu, developed into the fair which took her name.[112] The similarity between this and the origin legend of Tailtiu is striking. Ritual death and burial, often through human sacrifice, is universally associated with harvest festivals.[113] It is tempting to suggest the legendary origins of the fairs have at their core elements of genuine practice blended with mythological narrative.

---

[110] Colmán Elo, while having founded Lann Elo, hailed from Ulster. See Doherty, Charles (1991) pp 89-91.

[111] *Ibid.* p 557. The annal entry is found in AU, *s.a.* 827.

[112] See Crowe, J. O'Beirne (1872-3) pp 26-49; Stokes, Whitley (1894) pp 428-30, 311-15, §18. In the prose *dindsenchas* an alternative origin is offered, describing the pursuit by Old German (Sen-Germain) of the stolen cattle of Eochaid Yellowmouth. Germain is killed in his attempt to recover the animals. His dying wish to celebrate an annual fair at his burial site is granted, hence Garman, i.e Carman. See Stokes, Whitley, *ibid.*, pp 311-14.

[113] See *e.g.* Frazer, J.G. (1921) Vol 5.1, pp 236-69.

Unlike *oenach Tailten*, and indeed *feis Temra*, however, the fair at Carman is not unequivocally linked with a specific seasonal celebration. While there is evidence *oenach Carman* was a harvest festival, allusions to the fair in both the literature and the annals do not invariably link it with the occasion. Only the *dindsechas* accounts of *oenach Carman* specify Lughnasad. The verse *dindsenchas* describes the fair as held at harvest time, later alluding to the first day of August (*hi kalaind Auguist*). The alternative origin explanation in the prose *dindsenchas* offers the most specific reference, relating that the fair commenced on the kalends of August and was completed on the sixth of the ides, i.e August 8 (*Hi kall*aind *aug*uist *notéigdes ind, 7 hi sexid aug*uist *noticdis as*).[114]

Evidence for the *oenach Carman* in the annals is limited. The most extensive, and likewise most political annal entry for the fair is found for the year 1033. The entry states *aenach Carman* was celebrated by Donnchadh MacGillaphadraig in assuming the kingship of Leinster. MacGillaphadraig hailed from Osraige, roughly modern County Kilkenny, an area which had sporadically contested the kingship of Leinster for the previous century.[115] Significant in the annal entry is its emphasis on the comprehensive support MacGillaphadraig received in his assumption of the kingship. In celebrating the fair, he is described as hosting the chiefs, laity and clergy of Leinster and Osraighe (*do go maithibh laoch 7 cléreach Laighen 7 Osraige mar aen ris*).[116] Lastly, as seen in chapter 3, MacGillaphadraig's Osraige is particularly linked with horseracing, an association likewise shared by *oenach Carman*.

[114] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) p 1, l. 15; Stokes, Whitley (1894) p 312.
[115] Background information is found at Ó Corráin, Donncha (1972) pp 131-6; Duffy, Seán (1997) pp 31-3; Byrne, Francis John (1973) pp 257-8.
[116] AFM *s.a.* 1033.

4.3. Entertainment at fairs:

Entertainment offered at an *oenach* in early Ireland is likely to have been quite similar to entertainment enjoyed at fairs up until the nineteenth century. When forms of entertainment are indicated, horseracing is most often highlighted. Music, feasting and minstrelsy are also prevalent, followed by boardgames, ball-games and similar pursuits. Many of these activities are treated in their appropriate chapters and sections of this examination as a whole. The following is a discussion of the above activities in their distinct role and relation to fairs.

What can be gathered concerning specific entertainment and activities of *oenach Tailten*, *oenach Carman* and others like them is owed primarily to descriptions in their Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poems.[117] The descriptions of the fairs themselves are lengthy, a substantial portion of which is dedicated to the customary recreation at such a gathering. Both the Carman and Tailtu *dindsenchas* poems portray large numbers of people gathered for several days, encamped upon the fair's grounds. In keeping with their commercial capacity of the fairs, markets of food and livestock, cloth and crafts are described.

Special mention is made in the poem for Carman describing separate areas designated for cooking, for horses, and the embroidery of the women (*fán na n-ech, f'an na fuine, fán na mban, dál fri druine*). While perhaps coincidence, it is interesting to compare these pursuits to evidence from *Cáin Iarraith*, an Old Irish law tract on fosterage. In its list of what must be taught to foster-daughters in their rightful period of fosterage, cooking and embroidery are mentioned exclusively.[118] Accordingly,

---

[117] Unless otherwise stated, examples in the following paragraphs refer to Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 1-25 (Carman) ; and Vol. 11, pp 147-63 (Tailtiu).

[118] CIH 1760.22; 1760.34. The first passage lists the process of bread making, i.e. grinding, kneading and sifting (*bro 7 losut 7 criathrud*); the second lists sewing, cutting, and embroidery (*uaim 7 cumu 7 druinuchus*).

boys are to be taught, among other skills, horsemanship (*marcuigecht*).[119] The correspondence in fosterage tuition and the highlights of fairs suggests that activities, events and offerings at fairs would likely have incorporated representatives of every age group.

The status and occasion of fairs is often intimated by descriptions of designated clothing and dress. Several verses in the *dindsenchas* poems allude to personal adornment and attire. In its description of objects and entertainments expected at an *oenach* an entry from *Sanas Cormaic* describes precious raiment (*ēdach lōghmar*) as a requisite of fairs.[120] *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* declares clothes for an *oenach* among items which are not legally distrained beyond one day.[121] Similarly, a passage from *Bretha im Fuillema Gell* relates that dress for a festival is considered a rightful pledge, to be returned twofold.[122] A verse within the *Amra Choluimb Cille* suggests particular attire for the *oenach*, perhaps specifically to those arriving on horseback;

> *Ech do sliasta...*
> *ocus ech cech soerchlainne*
> *cot herrind tabar immach*
> *amal no thiasta in n-oenach.*
>
> Thy riding horse...and a steed of every noble kindred, with thy raiment which is put aside as thou wouldst go to the assembly.[123]

Finally, in keeping with Cú Chulainn's emotions seen in the chapter's opening quotation, the hero's fair raiment in the *Táin* is described in minute detail;

> *Gabaid-som dano a díllut óenaig immi in láa sin. Baí dá étug immi*
> *.i. fúan caín cóir corcra cortharach cóicdíabuil. Delgg find findarggait*
> *arna ecor d'ór intlaisse úasa bánbruinni gel immar bad lócharnn*
> *lánsolusta nád chumgaitis súli dóeni d'escin ar gleórdacht 7 ar glainidecht.*
> *Cliabinar siric fri*[a] *chness arna imthacmang massi de chimsaib 7 chres-*

---

[119] CIH 1761.24, 31-5.
[120] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) pp 86-7, §1018.
[121] CIH 368.5, 8-9.
[122] CIH 469.7, 14.
[123] Stokes, Whitley (1899) pp 142-3.

saib 7 chorrtharaib óir 7 argit 7 findruni condriced go barrúachtur a dondfúathbróci donderggi míleta imme de sról ríg.

> Then he [Cú Chulainn] puts on his dress for assembly that day. Of that raiment was a fair mantle, well-fitting, purple, fringed, five-folded. A white brooch of white silver inset with inlaid gold over his white breast, as it were a bright lantern that men's eyes could not look at for its brilliance and splendour. A tunic of silk next to his skin, bordered with edges and braidings and fringes of gold and of silver and of white bronze, reaching to the top of his dark apron, dark-red, soldierly, of royal satin.[124]

Such raiment most likely adorned the entertainers themselves. Descriptions of the fairs throughout the source material allude to various types of professional entertainment, including clowning, acrobatics, buffoonery, storytelling, recitation of poems, singing and music. Jugglers (*clesamnach*), fools (*druth*), buffoons (*fuirseoire*) and the like are mentioned in various texts.[125] Musical instruments mentioned include pipes (*pípai*, *cuisle*), fiddles (*fidli*), horns (*cuirn*), the *timpán* and *crott*.[126] In a pre-Norman timeframe the references to *pípai* and *fidli* are suspect, though the remaining instruments would clearly have been expected fairs of the period.[127]

As previously discussed, the chief spectacle of the fairs was horseracing. Horses were apparently borrowed and/or rented from their owners to perform at fairs.[128] As discussed above, a passage from the Old Irish *Audacht Morainn* states that horseracing is the first of three legal immunities of violence at an *oenach*.[129] That society's higher ranking members and even royalty competed in the races is frequently suggested in the literature and substantiated in an annal for the year 800, where Ailill, son of Fergus, a king of Brega, was thrown from a horse in a circuit (*in circio*), presumably the racecourse, at the festival of MacCuilinn.[130] A similar entry is

---

[124] *Táin* LL, ll 2357-64; transl. p 204.
[125] For a discussion, see chapter 2.
[126] Each instrument is discussed in detail in chapter 1.
[127] Pipes are discussed in chapter 1, section 2.1.
[128] CIH 265.41-266.5.
[129] Kelly, Fergus (1978) §28.
[130] AU *s.a.* 800.

found for the year 940 which relates that Faelan, the son of Muiredheach, the king of Leinster died of a fall from a horse at *aenach Colmáin.*[131]

Similar injuries seem to have been prevalent among chariot-races, also a highlight of the fairs. A passage from *Bretha Déin Chécht* relates that the physician attending to a wound caused by chariots at an *oenach* receives half the penalty fine, as the injury is likely to be severe.[132] Elsewhere, in a passage from the law tract *Di Astud Chirt 7 Dligid*, the *oenach* is considered one of the inherent and established rights of a territory;

> *CIS LIR ROSUIDIGEAD RODILSE CACHA TUAITHE ADA COMDILSI DA CACH RECHT…AENACH NAIDITAN, .i. do denam graithfne and .i. aenach naititn, cia tiasa dia cluithi ind.*
>
> How many immunities have been established for every *túath* which are jointly immune for every class of person?…an established *oenach*, i.e. for organising horse-races there, i.e. an established *oenach*,though someone should go into it for their games.[133]

In the Heptads, an *oenach* is listed as one of the seven times in which a battle must not be fought.[134] Also in the Heptads special prescriptive rights are proclaimed for the land which is given to a king on which a fair is to be held.[135] Interestingly, these rights last only one day, or presumably, as long as the fair is held. As discussed above *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* provides that certain times of the year must be set aside for clearing and servicing of the roads and fields around the *oenach*, These presumably refer to the site, the racing greens and the roads leading to the fair.[136]

Perhaps the most famous, and indeed fabulous, description of horseraces at an *oenach* is found in the Middle Irish *Noinden Ulad.*[137] The tale describes an *oenach*

---

[131] AFM *s.a.* 940.
[132] Binchy, D.A. (1966) p 25.
[133] CIH 241.19-20, 27, 242.6-7.
[134] CIH 50.28-9, 33-7.
[135] CIH 54.12, 18.
[136] CIH 368.31-4.
[137] Hull, Vernam (1968) pp 28-38. The story of the tale is woven into various later texts. See *e.g.* Meyer, Kuno (1910) pp 48ff.

attended by a local widower, Crunnchu, only recently re-married. Events at the *oenach* include "...horse-races, combats, casting and shooting matches, chariot-races and processions" (*Agaitir graifne 7 tresa 7 díbraicthi et rémenn et tochmenn*).[138] To begin the races at the fair, two horses are brought to the king, which according to eulogists, are the fastest pair in Ireland. Wanting to boast of his new bride, Crunnchu wagers the king that his wife is faster than the steeds. Unbeknownst to Crunnchu, his wife is in actuality a creature of the Otherworld, the goddess Machae. In the description that follows the wife, newly pregnant, races the horses in front of the assembled host. Reaching the finish line before the speedy pair, she gives birth to a son amidst piteous and deafening screams of childbirth. To punish the Ulidians for both occasioning and observing her shame, she inflicts a curse upon them that whenever difficulty arises, they will have no more strength than that of a woman in labour, hence *Nóinden Ulad*, 'the debility of the Ulidians'.

[138] Hull, Vernam (1968) p 28, §4; transl. p 37.

Chapter 5 Boardgames and Gaming

> "...it is fair to state that the subject of boardgames has proved unattractive to Celtic researchers."[1]

1. Archaeological Evidence:

The overall archaeological evidence for gaming in early Ireland is extensive, yet stratified. The majority of the archaeological finds, i.e gaming-pieces, dice, gaming counters, and gameboards, belong to one of two contexts; Iron Age pre-Christian settlements, and Viking settlements of the middle- and late-Viking periods, roughly the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. Gaming pieces in Christian era contexts, i.e. fifth century and later, are found mainly in the Viking urban centres of Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford. This predominance can be accounted for in part by the fact that a high proportion of archaeological digs have been made in known Viking settlements. It is nonetheless tempting to suggest that because evidence for board games and their like survives predominantly in Viking contexts, the pre-Viking Irish did not play board games. Fortunately, as seen, such a suggestion can be dismissed through the abundance of the vernacular literature and legal material of the period.

Several references in the saga-literature allude to two-sided boards, boards with a different game upon each side.[2] Two Viking-Age gameboards attest to such a description, the Wimose and Gokstad boards.[3] Interestingly, the Gokstad board, the earliest reliably dated board, circa 900, affords us a glimpse at what was presumably

---

[1] Lewis, Frank (1941) p 185

[2] Evidence from the saga-literature supports this. See section 3, below.

[3] See Nicolaysen, Nicolay (1971) p 48, plate 8 (Gokstad); Hildebrand, Emil (1903) p 160; and Lewis, Frank (1941) p 200 (Wimose);

its most frequent setting, found alongside such objects as drinking vessels, plates and ale flasks.[4]

As supported by the Welsh and Irish legal material, the archaeological records show that wood and bone seem to have been the most common materials for gameboards of the period. Irish gaming boards such as the Knockanboy, Waterford and Ballinderry boards are of wood.[5] Yew, as used in the Ballinderry board, is likely as a wood source as it rarely warps or cracks and is easily worked.[6] Extant examples suggest the boards were more or less the size of a standard board game of today.[7] An entry in *O'Mulconry's Glossary*, however, indicates that boards may have reached rather cumbersome proportions. The glossary's entry for *bertrach* defines it as 'a heavy load or a *fidchell*' (*oire tromm nó fi*[d]*chell*).[8] Boards were suited for either pegged playing pieces or sliding-counters. Ireland's most well-preserved and well-known gameboard, the Ballinderry board, is fitted for pegs or pins.

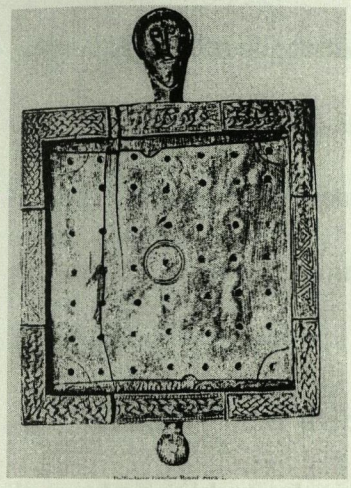


Illustration 13

The Ballinderry board is of wood, with forty-nine bored holes in a 7 x 7 arrangement.[9] The centre hole and corner holes are set apart by grooves scored into the wood around them, remiscent of descriptions in the literature. The centre hole is encircled with double lines, while the corners display single arcs. Interestingly, the ornate artistry of the frame contrasts with the relative

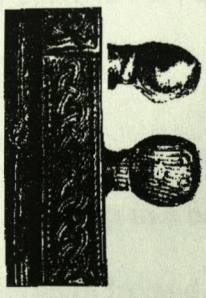


Illustration 14

[4] Nicolaysen, Nicolay (1971) p 43.
[5] Simpson, W.G. (1972) pp 63-4. (Knockanboy); Hurley, Maurice *et al.* (1982) pp 592-3. (Waterford);
[6] Hencken, H. O'Neill (1935-7) p 186.
[7] The three boards named above measure approx. 7 x 7 inches; 29 x 32 cm; and 25 x 24 cm respectively.
[8] Stokes, Whitley (1900a) p 242, §178.

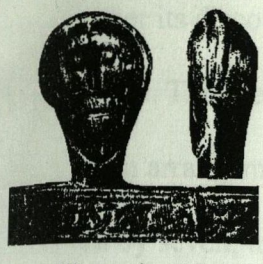


Illustration 15

sloppiness of the holes. Two handles project from opposite sides of the board, both carved in the shape of heads, one representing a bear, the other a human.[10] The handles were presumably used to hold the board between opponents and may have signified the status of each player, i.e. attacker or defender.[11] Several games have been suggested for the board.[12] Too little is known of *fidchell* or any other early Irish boardgame to argue definitively for its use, though considering the scant rules portrayed in the literature concerning capture and the board's physical layout, *fidchell* is a possibility for the Ballinderry board.

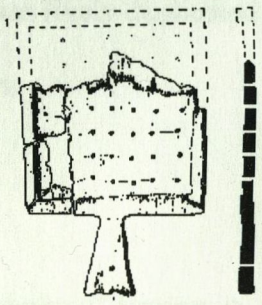


Illustration 16

The two other Irish Viking-Age gameboards have a layout identical with the Ballinderry board. The first, a board found in Waterford in a twelfth century context, is of an unspecified wood with no apparent decoration.[13] A large handle survives, and was presumably duplicate in the original board. The peg-holes are once again roughly placed. The board is approximately half the size of the Ballinderry board with a raised frame surrounding the surface of play. The layout, as with the Ballinderry board is 7 x 7 and presumably represents the same game.

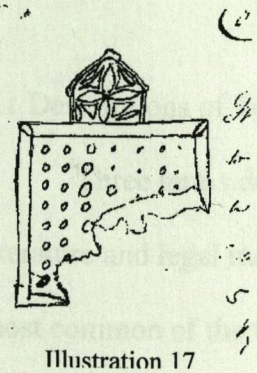


Illustration 17

The second board of Irish provenance, the Knockanboy board, was found buried five feet deep in a bog in a remote townland of County Antrim, Northern Ireland. The board no longer survives, yet a crude drawing was made

---

[9] See illus. 13.
[10] See illus. 14-15.
[11] This is discussed in section 3, below.
[12] See Hencken, H. O'Neill (1935-7) pp 175-90; Lewis, Frank (1941) pp 201-2; Purcell, Emer (1995) pp 35-9.
[13] See Hurley, Maurice *et al.* (1982) pp 592-3. See illus. 16.

shortly after its discovery.[14] The board was found as a fragment, roughly half its original size. The sketch artist seems to have paid more attention to art than detail and suggests an arrangement of seven by six. This however is almost certainly a mistake for seven by seven, the arrangement of the Ballinderry and Waterford boards. As all that remains is a rough sketch, the board can not be accurately dated. The marigold motif depicted on the handle, appearing in art as early as the Iron Age and continuing throughout the medieval period, offers no assistance in determining a date.[15] The handle itself is relatively large and gable-shaped. It again was likely duplicated at the opposite end and used to hold the board between opponents.

2. Written Evidence:

While the archaeological record offers physical evidence of gaming, it provides no direct clues as to names, types and strategy of early Irish boardgames. The early source material, particularly the saga-literature and laws, abounds in references to boardgames, their pieces, arrangement and, occasionally, their rules. Recurrent textual themes concerning the games and their participants also add to the overall understanding of their role and popularity in early Irish society.

2.1 Descriptions of Terms, Games and Pieces:

Three terms describing boardgames are well attested in the early Irish saga-literature and legal material; *fidchell*, *brandub*, and *buanbach*. *Fidchell* is by far the most common of the three. The term survives in Modern Irish as the word for chess. As such, references to *fidchell* in the early source material have been regularly translated into modern English as 'chess'. This is clearly an impossibility as chess

[14] Simpson, W.G. (1972) pp 63-4. See illus. 17.
[15] *Ibid.*

would not reach Ireland until at least the twelfth century, perhaps not until the thirteenth.[16] A similar misinterpretation occurs with *brandub*, which is consistently translated 'backgammon', presumably because 'chess' was already earmarked for *fidchell*.

More is known of *fidchell* than any other early Irish game. The word itself is cognate to the Welsh *gwyddbwyll*, which suggests a particularly early origin.[17] References to the Welsh *gwyddbywll* are found in several middle-Welsh texts, but little is known of the rules or strategy.[18] Comparatively little is known of the boardgame *brandub* and references to it most often contain a coupling with *fidchell*. The word itself is comprised of the two elements *bran* + *dub*, giving the literal translation 'raven-black'. Occasional references, as with the entry for *fidchell* in the Old Irish *Sanas Cormaic*, suggest dark or even black playing pieces, though *dub* is more likely used as characteristic trait of the raven itself.[19] It is tempting to make verbal comparisons of *bran* to a corresponding playing piece in modern and medieval chess, the rook. The rook is also the term for a large black bird, and frequently synonymous with the raven. Rook, however, seems to be a calque on *rukh*, the original Persian term for the piece. Interestingly, the corresponding playing piece in the Icelandic boardgame *tafl* is *hrokur*, which shares its name with a rare Icelandic bird.[20]

Descriptions of gameboards and their playing pieces are found throughout the early sources. The value of the board and its men as possessions is indicated by two separate passages within the legal material. The first reference, found in the law-tract

[16] There is debate concerning whether chess reached Ireland from Britain or Iceland. See *e.g.* Murray, H.J.R. (1913) p 52; MacGregor, A. (1985) p 137.

[17] DIL, F-128.57-8; Pedersen, Holger (1909-13) Vol. 2, p 3; Guyonvarc'h, Christian-J. (1973) pp 325-6.

[18] Evans, J.G (1906) p 11; Jones, Gwyn and Thomas Jones (1949) pp 207-8; Lewis, Henry (1942) pp 160-2.

Di Cetharslicht Athgabála, deals with the restitution which must be paid for the loss of certain items of value.[21] The text addresses the restitution paid for the loss of the *fidchell*-board of a lord's household. The preceding list of items is extensive, though the reference to the *fidchell*-board is found within a group of articles which have a particular importance for their environment. The board is listed alongside such items as the salt of the brewery, a ferry-boat upon a river, and the branch-light of a house. Contextually, the *fidchell*-board is likewise considered an indispensable item within a lord's household. An annal entry seem to confirm this. A *fidchell*-board is found among the various valuables bequeathed to the church by Toirdelbach Húa Conchobair in 1156.[22]

The second reference within the legal material is found in the *Sechtae*, or *Heptads*, listing the *fidchell*-board as one of seven items which must not be considered as a pledge.[23] As with many of the *Heptads*, the reasoning behind the assertion is vague, though it seems that the items listed are in a sense family possessions and therefore retain more than simple face value. Other items in the list include a child's playthings, the family lapdog, a whale's tooth, etc.[24] The household's *fidchell*-board was possibly an heirloom which could not be considered a pledge as it was something which must stay within the possession of the members of the household. The item clearly it derived its value as such, presumably value which was for the most part sentimental. Though clearly an important and valuable personal

---

[19] The entry in *Sanas Cormaic* is discussed in section 2.1, below.
[20] Fiske, Willard (1905) pp 4, 54.
[21] CIH 375.20; 1684.40-1.
[22] ATig, p 182. The reference is discussed in section 2.1, below.
[23] CIH 35.20; 1843.24-5. This compares to a passage from the *Acallamh* where the pieces of the *fidchell*-board are described as consisting of eight of red gold and five of white silver. See fn. 27, below.
[24] *Ibid.*, l. 21. These items are consistently glossed *'etarbaighe'*, a term usually denoting uselessness or unprofitability (See DIL, E-214.1-6). Dismissing the items as unprofitable, however is circular, as a useless or unprofitable pledge would not have been accepted in the first place. The sense here seems to be that the worth of the item is relative to its owner.

possession, it was perhaps a difficult and potentially problematic pledge if not returned.

Evidence from the Welsh legal material offers comparable support concerning gameboards as proper possessions of kings and members of the royal household. The Welsh *Law of Hywel Dda*, dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century, lists the entitlement of a *tawlbwrdd*, or 'throwboard' to various court members. Upon entering office, the court justice and court bard each receive a *tawlbwrdd* of whalebone from the king.[25] The *cynghellor* also receives a throwboard when accepting his position, though the material of the throwboard is not specified.[26] The value of the king's own *tawlbwrdd* is described in detail, said to be worth 120 pence in total, to be broken down in the following manner;

> ...sixty pence for the white forces, and sixty pence for the king and his forces; and this is how that is shared: thirty pence for the king and thirty pence for his forces, and that again is shared out for the separate men at three pence and three farthings for every man, and as much likewise for each of the white forces.[27]

The text continues, declaring that the *uchelwr*, a freeman of high status, is to possess a *tawlbwrdd* worth half that of the king's, though slightly later the text states that the *uchelwr*'s board is worth sixty pence only if it is made of whalebone. It is otherwise worth twenty-four pence if from hart's antler, twelve pence if from steer's horn, and four pence if from wood.[28] Whether or not these refer to boards for the game of *gwyddbwyll*, the Welsh cognate to *fidchell*, is not clear. Their descriptions, however, indicate the materials of contemporary gameboards and pieces, and who might be expected to own them.

---

[25] Jenkins, Dafydd (1986) pp 16, 20, 142. Whalebone, a common material of Scandinavian and Viking-Age artefacts, was also a prized and well-attested material of the pre-Viking Irish. See Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 284-5.

[26] *Ibid.*, p 123. The *cynghellor* was a court member who, though not an official officer of the king, was entitled a seat at the king's banquet when the king and his retinue visited. See pp 331-2.

Descriptions of gameboards and gaming pieces from the Irish saga-literature are common, though dubious at best, owing to frequent embellishment and hyperbole. The actual physical dimensions and materials of the board vary. A particularly illustrative passage concerning gameboards appears within the eighth-century Old Irish *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*, a poem within the *Fianaigecht*. The poem, a lament by Fothaid over the loss of his possessions upon his death, devotes eleven verses to the *fidchell* board. The board's inlay is of pearl. Half its playing pieces are fashioned of yellow gold, the other half of white bronze, all of which are kept in a gold-embroidered, locked bag. The board and bag are described as kept within a case crafted of coils of red gold, with decorations of white bronze. According to Fothaid, "Smiths never made any work to which it can be compared; earth never has hidden with a king a jewel that is so marvellous".[29] Although remarkable artefacts of gold, silver, bronze and in fact ivory survive from the early Irish period, the brilliance of the board, as with all such descriptions, is clearly literary license. The reference to the craftsmanship of a smith (*cerd*), later named in the poem as Dínoll the goldsmith, does, however, offer the more credible suggestion that the boards and playing pieces were often the products of professional artisans.[30] Gold and silver-plating of such objects is certainly plausible and is supported by an amusing passage from the Middle Irish *Bóruma* saga. The story relates that the king of Ossory, Feradach Fionn mac Duach, was,

> *...fer sanntach díchuibsech atacomnaicside ocus cin co cluined acht mad aenscrepul óir nó airgit ac duine ina thír dobeired ar éicin chuice féin co cuired i cumtaigib corn ocus crannóc ocus claideb ocus fidchell.*
>
> "...a covetous and unconscionable man, who, though it were but a

---

[27] *Ibid.*, pp 191-2. Broken down mathematically the king's force is then equal to eight pieces. This corresponds to a reference from the Middle Irish *Acallamh*. See text at fn.154, below.
[28] *Ibid.* p 192.
[29] Meyer, Kuno (1910a) pp 14-5.
[30] *Ibid.*, l. 36.

solitary scruple whether of gold or silver that he heard of as possessed by any in his country, would by force make his own of it, that he might apply it to the decoration of drinking-horns, baskets, swords and *fidchell*."[31]

Several descriptions from the *Táin*, though similar in their embellishment, offer information as to dimension and appearance of boards and playing pieces. In the LU version of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn laments his slain foster-brother Fer Diad, praising his two greatest possessions as "...your ring of white silver on your noble hand, your *fidchell*-board of great worth" (*t'fithchell ba fiu móir*).[32] The corresponding passage in the LL text varies slightly but retains the *fidchell* reference, "...your shield with its golden rim and your *fidchell*-board worth much treasure"(*th'fidchell ba fiu maín*).[33] Elsewhere in the *Táin,* in one of many games against his charioteer Láeg, Cú Chulainn plays with *fidchell*-pieces of yellow and white gold. In this passage a particularly valuable clue is revealed as to the gameboard. Cú Chulainn's thighs, on which the board rests, held between the two players (*fithchell for scarad eturra*), are described as touching another boardgame, a *buanbach.* The board is thus two-sided, one face arranged for *fidchell*, the opposite face arranged for *buanbach.*[34] As seen above, extant gameboards such as Wimose and Gokstad boards confirm this.[35]

Midir's board in the Middle Irish *Tochmairc Étáine* is described as made of silver and gold, each corner decorated with a precious stone. The corners seem to have been highly tactical positions on the board, a factor which may have encouraged their decoration, so frequently alluded to in the literature.[36] The playing pieces of Midir's board are fashioned of gold and the bag in which they are kept is described as

---

[31] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 379; transl. p 416. O'Grady translates *fidchell*, 'chess-board and men'.
[32] *Táin* LU, l. 3116; transl. p 208.
[33] *Táin* LL, l. 3481; transl. p 232.
[34] *ibid.*, ll 3855-8; transl. p 229. *Buanbach* is discussed below.
[35] For illustraions, see Nicolaysen, Nicolay (1971) plate 8 (Gokstad); Lewis, Frank (1941) p 200 (Wimose).
[36] This is discussed in section 3, below.

crafted from plaited links of bronze.[37] In a passage from the LU version of the *Táin* Cú Chulainn's *fidchell* men are half of white gold, half of yellow gold. Elsewhere in the *Táin* Fergus and Ailill are described playing *fidchell* with gold and silver pieces on a bronze board.[38] The board brought to Mongán in *Compert Mongáin 7 Serc Duibe-Lacha do Mongan* is described as gilded.[39] In *Cath Maige Mucrama*, also Middle Irish, the hero Lugaid plays *fidchell* against the king of Scotland with playing pieces of silver and gold.[40] Perhaps the most fanciful description of a *fidchell*-board and pieces comes from the whimsical Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, where the hero is presented with a game-board of butter (*fidchille imme*), "...its men smooth, speckled, peaked."[41]

In the Middle Irish *Táin Bó Fraich* the *fidchell*-board Medb and Ailill use is described as made of tinned bronze with four corners, literally 'ears and elbows' of gold (*auaib 7 uilneib oir*). The playing pieces are made of gold and silver.[42] In the *Metrical Dindshenchas* Guaire's *fidchell*-board is described as having three hundred jewels in its board, whereby "...no treasure under heaven could surpass it."[43] This passage, coupled with Guaire's reputation and renown as a skilled *fidchell*-player, suggests not only that players possessed their own boards, but that boards were likely as well-known as their owners and celebrated both as treasures and perhaps as talismans.

A particularly well-known board mentioned throughout the saga-literature is that of Crimthann. The legendary board is said to have been given to Crimthann by

---

[37] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) p 175.
[38] *Táin* LU, l. 1089-90; transl. p 155.
[39] Meyer, Kuno (1895) p 80.
[40] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) p 45.
[41] Meyer, Kuno (1892) pp 68-9.
[42] Byrne, and Dillon, ll. 88-94. A similar reference to corners of the board as 'ears' is suggested by Vernum Hull (1962-4, pp 183-6) in his discussion of a stanza in "*Reicne Fothaid Canainne*". This is discussed in section 3, below.
[43] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 121.

his mistress Nár, a *bean-sí*. The board is typically described as crafted of gold and in one example it is described as holding one hundred clear gems.[44] The Middle Irish commentary on *Amra Choluimb Chille* offers a valuable description of the board,

> *Fidchell Crimthann Níad Náir nis-beir mac bec dia lethláim*
> *leth a fairni d'or buidi in leth aili d'findruine*
> *oenfer dia fairinn namma. dos cicher secht lánamna.*
>
> The draughtboard of Crimthann, Nár's champion, a small boy carries it not in one hand. Half its set of yellow gold, the other half of white bronze: one man only of its set will purchase seven couples (of slaves).[45]

Another *fidchell*-board receiving frequent mention in the sagas is '*Ceannchaomh*', most often described belonging to Conchobor. The *Táin* mentions the board in the passage describing Cú Chulainn's pursuit of his young rivals across the playing-field at Emain Macha. In chasing the boy-troop, Cú Chulainn leaps across the *Ceannchaomh* as Fergus and Conchobor are playing a game of *fidchell* on the mound of Emain (*ic imbirt fidchilli .i. na Cendcháeme*).[46] The legend of the board seems particularly enduring as it is mentioned in the Early Modern Irish tale *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*. In the tale Naoise and Deirdre sit down to a game of *fidchell* upon "*Cheannchaomh Chonchobair*", later explained as "...the king's *fidchell*-board."[47]

As seen in the legal material, boards were valuable personal possessions. Descriptions in the saga-literature support this in relation to boards attained as gifts, tributes and spoils of war. The eleventh-century *Lebor na Cert*, or 'Book of Rights', a fictional account of tributes and stipends of the kings of Ireland, consistently lists *fidchell*-boards as 'submission gifts' from provincial kings to their subordinate tribal

---

[44] AFM *s.a.* 9. For descriptions of Crimthann's board, see *e.g.* Vendryes, Joseph (1953) p 8; Meyer, Kuno (1910a) p 51; Stokes, Whitley (1894) p 332.
[45] Stokes, Whitley (1899) p 283.
[46] *Táin* LL, l. 790; transl. p 159.
[47] MacGiolla Léith, Caoimhín (1993) pp 92-3.

kings.[48] Interestingly, the references to *fidchell*, while not mentioned in every case, are frequently paired in exact number to bracelets.[49] Most *fidchell*-boards as gifts are mentioned in small numbers, frequently two, six and ten, though the king of Cashel in particular is said to make gifts of twenty sets to the Cenél Conaill king, and thirty to the king of Tara, when he is, "...at the feast".[50] Interestingly, a poem within *Lebor na Cert* further mentions that the king of Tara gives the king of Raith Mór Maige Line, a dynasty within the Dál nAraidi, both a *fidchell* and a white *brandub*-board (*fidchell 7 brandub bán*).[51]

While the descriptions of tributes are clearly intent on portraying the wealth of each individual king, the need for more than one board within a household or residence is hinted at in a passage within the *Acallamh*, concerning a field-game played by the youngsters of the *sídh*. The on-field youngsters are said to be playing a stick and ball game in front of an audience of the assembled Tuatha Dé Danann. As the game lasts the entire day, the onlookers are provided with alternative entertainment. The text states that every sixth man is given a *fidchell*, every fifth man a *brandub*.[52]

2.2. Players:

Fidchell's frequent billing within the saga-literature most often represents it as a game played by warriors, heroes and kings. Boardgames are a common activity among royalty in the sagas, representing both serious and friendly competition. In the

[48] Dillon, Myles (1962) pp 4, 5, 28, 30, 56, 78, 108. For a discussion of the date of the text and its political importance, see Dillon, Myles (1966) p 239.
[49] *Ibid.*, (1962) see *e.g.*, pp 28, 30, 108.
[50] Tara is frequently mentioned in relation to *fidchell* and other boardgames. See *e.g.* Gray, Elizabeth (1982) pp 40-1; Best, R.I. (1907) pp 162-3; Dillon, Myles (1962) pp 5, 78, 108.
[51] Dillon, Myles (1958) p 129.

Táin, Ailill offers Fergus a game before heading to battle. After summoning Fergus, Ailill states,

> *Suid sís trá...co n-imberam fidchell. Is fo chen do thíchtu. Imbeir fidchill sceó búanbach ar bélaib ríg sceó rígnae.*
>
> "Sit down then, so that we may play a game of *fidchell*. Your arrival here is welcome. Play *fidchell* and *buanfach* before a king and a queen."[53]

Elsewhere in the *Táin*, as mentioned above, Fergus plays a friendly game with Conchobor at Emain on the celebrated board '*Ceannchaomh*'.[54] Also in the *Táin*, in a not so friendly match against Bricriu Fergus ends the game by striking Bricriu with both his fist and one of the playing pieces.[55]

In the Middle Irish death tale of Celtchair mac Uthechair, Conchobor and Cú Chulainn play before an audience. Blái the Hospitaller appears to have been an apt onlooker as, after receiving a spear through the back, he lands directly on the *fidchell*-board.[56] Perhaps a particular *fidchell* enthusiast, Conchobor is described in the *Táin* as dividing his day into thirds, one of which he spends playing *fidchell* (*oc imbirt fidchille*).[57] This compares to a legal passage from *Críth Gablach*, where a king's proper weekly activities include Tuesday spent playing *fidchell* (*Mairt oic fidchill*).[58] In the Middle Irish *Aidedh Fergusa*, Fergus keeps a retreat in the north wherein "...good company is there that knows no stint: against man or woman that seeks to enter it the retreat is never closed." The retreat is moreover distinguished as every man there is a *fichellach*.[59]

---

[52] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 220; transl. p 250.
[53] *Táin* LU, ll. 1079-82.; transl. p 134. O'Rahilly translates "*fidchell scéo buanbach*", 'chess and draughts'. Though the phrase is unique, its imperative character seems to mark it as a common expression.
[54] *Ibid.* ll. 437ff; *Táin* LL, ll. 790ff.
[55] *Ibid.* LU, ll 4129f.; LL, ll. 4864-7.
[56] Meyer, Kuno (1906b) pp 24-5.
[57] *Táin* LU, ll 402-4; LL, ll. 743-6, where Conchobor plays '*brandub 7 fidchell*'.
[58] CIH 569.31.
[59] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 245; transl. p 277.

Evidence for royal participation in boardgames is further evidenced by annalistic entries. As mentioned above, the *Annals of Tigernach* record the death of Toirdelbach Húa Conchobair, described as,"...king of all Ireland and the Augustus of the west of Europe". His bequest to God and the churches of Ireland include *fidchell* and *brandub* boards and playing-pieces.[60] The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* report that in the year 936 Muirchertach mac Néill, king of Ulster, carried the bones of the fallen king of Leinster to the north and with them crafted a game-board and playing pieces.[61] A final annal reference, from the pseudo-historical section of the *Annals of the Four Masters* and based on their account of *Leabhar Gabhála*, states that in the year 9 Crimthann died on an expedition to the underworld of Dún-Crimthainn in Howth. He is said to have brought back with him a golden *fidchell* decorated with one hundred gems.[62] A similar and earlier account is found in a separate recension of *Leabhar Gabhála*, where the *fidchell* is once again described as fashioned of gold.[63]

Young heroes are often described in the saga litertaure as possessing exceptional skill at boardgames, particularly *fidchell*. In a passage within the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Mucrama*, the hero Lugaid and his men, exiled in Scotland, impress the Scottish king with their superior martial skills. The king remarks on their prowess, "...both in winning of battles and conflicts and combat and in surpassing all in fair games and sporting contests and in the playing of *brandub* and *buanbach* and *fidchell* (*imbeirt [m]brandub 7 búanbaig 7 fhithchille*).[64] Elsewhere, in the Middle Irish "Boyish Exploits of Finn", Finn is summoned by the king for a game of *fidchell*. The youth wins each of seven games, prompting both the king's annoyance and

---

[60] ATig, *s.a.* 1156, p 182.
[61] Murphy, Denis (1896) p 153.
[62] O'Donovan, John (1848-51) p 93.
[63] See Macalister, R.A.S. (1938-56) Vol. 5, p 303; See also Best, R.I., Osborn Bergin *et al.* (1954-83) l. 2900.
[64] O'Daly, Máirín (1975) p 45.

admiration.[65] The young Mael Dúin is also described as highly skilled in various pursuits. He is said to be victorious at all challenges, whether on land, on water, or on the *fidchell*-board.[66] The *Táin*, as seen, mentions the game repeatedly, most often in relation to Cú Chulainn's great skill. In a lengthy list of Cú Chulainn's talents, he is said to posses the gifts of playing *fidchell* and *brandub* (*búaid fidchilli 7 branduib*). The skill is listed alongside other martial skills such as horsemanship, fighting, battle, counsel, conflict and laying-waste.[67]

While Cú Chulainn repeatedly challenges both warriors and kings, the only person capable of defeating him at the game-board is his charioteer, Láeg, who manages to win every second game.[68] Descriptions of the two at boardgames are frequent in the *Táin*. Interestingly, they are often described as playing boardgames in the chariot itself, Láeg sitting with his back to the horses, acting as sentry. In three such descriptions in the LL version of the *Táin* they are engaged at *buanbach*, a game mentioned only rarely in the saga-literature outside the *Táin*.[69]

Elsewhere in the *Táin*, after slaying his foster-brother Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn laments that no one among the Connachtmen will now compare in "...the wielding of shields and bucklers, of spears and swords, in the playing of *brandub* and *fidchell*, in the driving of horses and chariots".[70] The importance of the game in determining a warrior's overall prowess is further intimated in the Old Irish poem "The Hosts of the Faery". The poem asserts that the relevant hosts are "...good at man-slaying, melodious in the ale-house, masterly at making songs, skilled at playing *fidchell*."[71]

---

[65] Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 184.
[66] Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 457.
[67] *Táin* LL, ll. 550ff; transl. p 152.
[68] *Táin* LU, ll. 2703ff; transl. p 198. LL, ll. 1575-8; transl. p 182. This theme is discussed further in section 3, below.
[69] *Táin* LL, ll 1299ff; transl. p 174: ll 1575-8; transl. p 182: ll 3855-8; transl. p 242.
[70] *Táin* LL, ll. 3427-9; transl. p 231. The reference does not occur in LU version of the *Táin*.
[71] Meyer, Kuno (1911a) p 19.

Skill at *fidchell* and other board games is often directly associated with military skill, and the games themselves are frequently used as metaphors for battle. Triumphant and successful kings are often compared to its pieces. *Brannán*, the diminutive of *bran,* 'raven', seems to represent the chief playing-piece of both *fidchell* and *brandub*. The term is often used as an epithet to describe worthy and successful kings. The *Annals of Ulster* record that Brandub mac Echach of the Uí Cheinnselaig defeated the Uí Néill king Áed mac Ainmerech at the battle of Dún Bolg in 598.[72] This defeat was later worked into the story of the *Bóroma*, or "Cattle Tribute", where Brandub became the king responsible for temporarily eliminating the heavy tribute imposed upon the Leinster kingdoms. Brandub's military triumphs are also highlighted in poems preserved in the *Book of Leinster*, which speak of his "seven blows against Brega". There is no written confirmation that Brandub's name in fact derives from the boardgame, though it is to be expected that a successful military leader would take his name from a game so often used to symbolise military accomplishment.[73] Another Brandubh, the son of Maelcobha, king of Ulster, is reported in the annals to have been murdered in the year 630.[74]

Bran itself is often used figuratively for battle, usually signifying carnage or heavy bloodshed.[75] The entry for *bran* in *Sanas Cormaic* extends the term to *branorgain*, with the accompanying gloss, 'that which the ravens kills' (*ní oirges fiach*).[76] The theme is also confirmed in a thirteenth-century poem addressed to Muircheartach Ó Brien, lamenting the Norman conquest of Ireland. The poem

---

[72] Byrne, F.J. (1972) pp 142-5.

[73] For annal entries of Brandubh mac Eochaid, king of Leinster see, AU *s.a.* 590, 597, 598, †605; CS s.a. 597, 601, †605; AI s.a. 600, †608. For the *Bóruma* saga, see *e.g.* FA *s.a.* 722; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) pp 385-8; transl. pp 421-4. For the historical background of Brandubh mac Eochaid and the *Bóruma*, see, *e.g.* Byrne, F.J. (1972) pp 142-5, 148-51.

[74] AU, CS.

[75] See DIL, B-157.34-55.

[76] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 11. DIL tentatively translates the passage 'carrion for ravens', see B-157.69f.

declares, "The war of the Gaeidhil with the foreigners, Was playing for a check at foreign chessmen (*gall-brannuib*); The foreign pawns checked our chess king (*mbranáin*), We cannot now escape defeat."[77] With the terms *gall-brannuib* the poet seems to suggest the two sides were playing two different versions of the same game, likely a metaphor for two styles of warfare, or perhaps an unbalanced side.

The *brannán* is well defined in a passage from a poem entitled "*Abair riom a Éire ógh*". The passage compares Tara's castle to the centre square or position of a gameboard. The poet advises the king of Brega to seek such a position;

> *Imlecán mhuighe Fáil finn, ráth Temhrach, tulach aoibhinn*
> *sí ar certlár an mhuighe amuigh, mar snuighe ar bhrecclár bhrannuimh.*
> *Gluais chuige, budh céim bisidh, ling suas ar an suidhisin* [*snuidhisin*?]
> *riot, a rí, as cubhaidh an clár, as tí bhunaidh do bhranán*
> *Do bhraithfinn dhuit, adhéd bhán, saoirthíthe bhunaidh branán*
> *...suighter duit orra Teamhair, Caiseal, Cruacha, Nás, Oileach*
> *Branán óir guna fedhuin, tú is do chethra cóigedhuigh*
> *tú, a rígh Bhredh, ar an ttí thall, as fer ar gach tí ad tiomchall.*
>
> The centre of the fair plain of Fál is Tara's castle, delighful hill; out in the exact centre of the plain, like a mark on a multi-coloured *brannumh* board. Advance thither, it will be a profitable step; leap up on that square which is proper for the *branán*, the board is fittingly thine. I would draw thy attention, O white of tooth, to the noble squares proper for the *branán* (Tara, Cashel, Croghan, Naas, Oileach) let them be occupied by thee. A golden *brannán* with his band art thou with thy five provincials; thou, O king of Brega, on yonder square, and a man on each square around thee. [78]

In the obvious comparisons of the *brannán*-piece to the king of Brega and the appropriate square on the gameboard to the kingdom of Tara, the author intimates the possession of Tara both facilitates and ensures possessions of the neighbouring squares and their occupants.

---

[77] O'Donovan, John (1849) pp 150-1. The poem is attributed in the Book of O'Conor Don to the mid-fourteenth century poet Maol Babach Mag Raith. For a discussion, see Nic Ghiollamhaith, Aoife (1981) pp 80-1.

[78] Knott, Eleanor (1922) Vol. 23, pp 198-9. Knott includes the poem and translation in the notes to the main volume. She does not suggest a date for the poem, though the language precludes an Old or early-Middle Irish provenance. The poem is discussed further in section 3, concerning strategy and layout. Knott translates *suidhisin*, 'square'. It is perhaps better rendered 'seat', from *suide*, in the sense of 'royal seat', more consistent with the poem's metaphor.

Further and much later examples of the *brannán* as a symbol of kingship are found in bardic poems from the sixteenth century. In one example the poet encourages his patron, Hugh O'Donnell, to muster troops and alliances throughout Ulster in preparation for large-scale battle. He advises O'Donnell to "...display to them their great ties with us, thou golden king amongst chessmen" (*a bhranáin óir ós fidhchill).*[79] In a further example the poet, praising a king for his sagacity and military success, addresses him as "...my *brandub* king, with all thy might."[80]

The *fidchellach* is a common figure of both the saga-literature and the laws. In *Bretha Crólige*, a legal text concerned mainly with the details and responsibility of sick-maintenance, the *fidchellach*, as well as the *brannaighi* or '*brandub*-player', appears as a gloss on the 'household pet' (*dretoll tegluigh*).[81] The player is further mentioned as a member of the household who must not be taken away from the residence on sick-maintenance. Instead, a fee must be sent to cover his care.[82] This presumably is to insure that his position as an 'on-call' game-opponent is not interfered with. Such players are alluded to in the saga-literature, particularly for the royal household. A passage within the *Metrical Dindsenchas* offers a hint as to the status of the *fidchellach* in a description of the distribution of meat in the king of Tara's household. The *fidchellach*, along with such other entertainers as the jester, buffoon, piper, and juggler, is granted the rather meatless shank.[83] In a version of the *Battle of Mag Rath*, king Domnall sends for his army's *fidchell*-player for a game to help him relax before battle.[84] Interestingly, the game is watched by a dwarf, who is described as 'sharp' in eyes and wits. The allusion may indicate a particular reputation

---

[79] *Ibid.*, Vol. 22, p 11; transl. Vol. 23, p 7. Knott gives further examples in bardic poetry of the term *brannán* as epithet. See Vol. 23, p 198.
[80] Bergin, Osborn (1921-3b) p 171.
[81] CIH 2300.24-33. See also Binchy, D.A. (1938) §54.
[82] *Ibid.*, 2301.10.
[83] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 8, p 27.

of dwarves as skilled players. In the *Acallamh* Oisín describes a dwarf, three hands high, who is reported to be the best *fidchellach* and *bran*-player (*brannaidhe*) in all Ireland.[85]

Apart from descriptions of a permanent member of a household, the term *fidchellach* also appears as the description of one who is skilled at the game. In the *Acallamh* a momentous match is played between Guaire Goll, Finn's *ghilla na fidchille* or 'lad of the *fidchell*', and Finn Bane, son of the king of Leinster. Finn Bane is described as the third best *fidchellach* of the Fianna, ranking behind Finn mac Cumaill and Diarmaid ua Duibhne, but before such players as Flaithes Faebrach, or 'Flaithes sharp-edged', and Guaire Goll himself. The match lasts three days, ending both in conflict and Guaire's death.[86] Guaire's reputation as a skilled *fidchellach* finds evidence elsewhere in a description of his prized board, "...there was not found under heaven a treasure to surpass it, wherein are three hundred gems."[87] In what appears to be an isolated instance, *fidchellach* is also used as the sobriquet of a seventh-century Uí Maine king, Fidhghellach mac Flainn.[88]

Although characterised as a game of heroes and kings, women are also described in the saga-literature as frequent and keen participants of boardgames. Queens are common competitors, best evidenced by Medb in her matches against Fróech and her husband Ailill in the Middle Irish *Táin Bó Fraích*. Medb's success at the game, or in fact Fróech's humility, is suspect, however, as Fróech relates that for three days he has let her win every game so that her honour would remain intact.[89] In the Early Modern Irish tale "The Adventures of Art, son of Conn", Bécuma

---

[84] Marstrander, Carl (1911) p 237.
[85] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 234; transl. p 264
[86] *Ibid.*, p 123; transl. p 133.
[87] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 120-1.
[88] AU *s.a.* 691; also CS *s.a.*687; FA *s.a.* 691.
[89] Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1933) §11; transl. (1937) p 5.

challenges Art to two games, the first of which she loses, the second of which she cedes to Art after men from the *sídh*-mounds are seen stealing Art's pieces.[90] In the late-Middle Irish story of St. Cellach of Killala king Blathmac's daughter shows her superior skill in *fidchell* by prompting her father to a move which allows her lover Cú Chongeilt to win the game.[91]

Elsewhere, in a lengthy passage from the *Acallamh*, the adventures of the warrior Cáillte are described after he chances upon nine women in *Carn na Finghaile* or 'the cave of fratricide'. The nine women are described as forever playing *fidchell*, taking a drink of mead after every game. Cáillte meets his match playing Echna, daughter of the king of Connacht and one of the nine, and is not able to beat her though the match lasts days.[92] In a separate story within the *Acallamh* a poet tells the women of Finn's *fianna* to play *fidchell* amongst themselves but not to play with old men such as himself. In what appears as a contemporary attempt at chivalry, the poet declares that a proper warrior should never compete in anything against a woman, "...I have passed my word of a good warrior that never would I strive with womankind....O womenfolk of Almha's Finn, so long as I live and have my memory, women, I will not play with you!"[93] In a similar passage from *Compert Mongáin 7 Serc Duibe-Lacha do Mongan*, Mongan is chastised by a cleric for playing *fidchell* with his wife when he should have been avenging his father's death.[94] Later in the same tale Mongan again sits down to play *fidchell* against a girl who chastises him for acting weakly. Her own behaviour proves not altogether blameless however, as she bares her breasts to Mongan to distract his attention from a game she was losing.[95]

---

[90] Best, R.I. (1907) p 155.
[91] Mulchrone, Kathleen (1933) p 21, ll 679-82.
[92] *Ibid.* p 227; transl. p 257.
[93] *Ibid.* pp 124-5; transl. pp 135-6; *cf.* Dooley, Ann and Harry Roe (1999) pp 43-5.
[94] Meyer, Kuno (1895) Vol 1, p 74.
[95] *Ibid.*, p 80.

Mael-Fothartaig and his foster-brothers are joined at the *fidchell*-board by a young woman in the Middle Irish *Fingal Rónáin.* Finally, in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*", Naoise challenges Deirdre to a game on Conchobor's famous *fidchell*-board, *Ceannchaomh.*[96]

Women seem also to have owned and kept their own boards. In an embellished poem within the *Acallamh* Berrach Brec, the daughter of Cas Cuailgne, keeps three hundred *brandub* and *fidchell* boards (*trí céd brannuibh is fidcheall*) in her home. In *Tochmairc Étaíne* Eochaid Airem, king of Tara, hesitates agreeing to a challenge from Midir as the *fidchell*-board belongs to his wife the queen and is in her house, where she is asleep.[97]

Children are also portrayed as eager and well-trained participants in boardgames. The law-tract *Cáin Íarraith*, a text concerning the laws of fosterage, lists instruction in the playing of *fidchell* and *brandub* as skills which must be taught to a foster-son.[98] Other skills in the same list include horsemanship, shooting, and swimming. The skills are highly reminiscent of the above descriptions of Cú Chulainn, Mael Duin and Finn. As fosterage in early Ireland generally began at an early age and lasted until the child reached his mid-to late-teens, it is likely that instruction in *fidchell* began at an early age, and that the instruction was at least in part a type of military preparation. *Fidchell* and *brandub* are also mentioned in the law tract *Mellbretha* as belonging to *ruidles-cluiche*, a class of games with total legal immunity, most often associated with children.[99] In the passage previously discussed from "The Boyish Exploits of Finn", the young Finn is called to play against the king,

---

[96] Mac Giolla Léith, Caoimhín (1993) pp 92-3.
[97] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) pp 174-5.
[98] CIH 1760.33ff.
[99] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 149-50. The distinctions of *ruidles-cluiche* are discussed in chapter 7.

whom he bests in seven consecutive games. His skill promps the king to ask both his identification and by whom he was taught to play.[100]

Fidchell as a standard and customary form of entertainment for members within a household is evidenced throughout the sources. A rather vague reference to *fidchell* appears in the legal text *Di Astud Chirt 7 Dligid*. The text states that one of the inherent rights of a territory is the right to play *fidchell* in the house of a chieftain.[101] It seems unlikely that any random individual could sit down to a game of *fidchell* in the chieftain's house, and this reference, if at all reliable, presumably refers to members of the lord's household or military cohorts.[102] The popularity of the game is revealed in the Middle Irish *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, listing the items characteristic and native to each of Ireland's four geographic divisions. The text intimates that the south of Ireland lays claim to nearly every form of entertainment, including musicianship, melody, minstrelsy, poesy, fairs and *fidchell* playing.[103] In the story *Altram Tige Dá Medar* the description of the hall of a high king includes feasting, music and "...the pleasure of maidens over stately needlework and the sound of *fidchell* being skilfully played."[104]

Boardgames as a standard entertainment at feasts and fairs is also represented in the literature. A gloss for an entry in *Sanas Cormaic* reveals not only the close association between *fidchell* and *brandub*, but also their expected role at fairs and assemblies. The entry, *orc tréith*, explained as a name for a king's son (*ainm do mac rígh*), offers an extended gloss with commentary for the *oenach n-uirc tréith*, or 'fair of a king's son'. The gloss lists what is expected at such a fair, i.e. food and clothing,

---

[100] Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 184.
[101] CIH 241.28ff.
[102] Wealthy freemen and magnates are also likely included. Earlier in the same text, landowners and kinheads are described as representing the territory as a whole. See CIH 227-8. For discussion, see Simms, Katharine (1998) pp 33-7.
[103] Best, R.I. (1910) p 149

ale and meat, *brandub* and *fidchell* , horses and chariots, greyhounds and other playthings.[105] In the Middle Irish tale *Airne Fíngéin* Crimthann's famous *fidchell* is taken to *oenach Find*, presumably for its value as both entertainment and treasure.[106]

A final examination of the participants of board games reveals a noticeable though somewhat ambiguously negative opinion by the church. While this attitude is hardly surprising owing to the tendency for gambling and the nature of the games' reliance upon chance, the saga-literature portrays an ambivalence which is perhaps best reflected by the church's willingness to accept gameboards as bequests.[107] The *Bóruma* saga offers the best example of the church's obvious and concerted disapproval of such idle amusement. In the *Bóruma* tale the ecclesiastic Adamnán summons a meeting with his kinsman Finnachta, who had recently remitted the tribute imposed upon the Leinstermen. Finnachta refuses to join the cleric as he has presently started a game of *fidchell*. Adamnán, understandably annoyed at the king's impudence, summons Finnachta three additional times, on each occasion promising a progressively harsher consequence if Finnachta continues his refusal. In each instance but the last, where the promise of eternal life in Heaven is at stake, Finnachta rather casually waves off the request and resumes his play. The obvious snub to the cleric is by design exacerbated by the king's insistence on what appears to be, particularly under the circumstances, such idle and frivolous play.[108]

A similar occasion is found in *Compert Mongáin* where the king Mongan and his wife are at a game of *fidchell*. The two are interrupted by "...a dark, black-tufted little cleric" who reproaches Mongan, claiming that such inactivity is both

---

[104] Duncan, Lillian (1932) p 208. The text is late, found in the fifteenth-century *Book of Fermoy*, though is likely based on earlier tales. See Dobbs, M.E. (1930) p 189.
[105] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) pp 86-7.
[106] Vendryes, Joseph (1953) p 8. For a discussion of the date of the text, see p xxi.
[107] See, *e.g.* the passage from the *Annals of Tigernach* s.a. 1156, discussed above, where Toirdelbach Húa Conchobair bequeaths his *fidchell* boards and men.

inappropriate and unbecoming a king of Ulster.[109] The source of such an attitude is betrayed by the otherwise accepted and customary royal participation in such amusement. The distinction between the pursuits of amusement and piety is hinted at in a poem within a Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem, found in the *Book of Leinster*, concerning Cell Chorbáin, modern Kilcorban, Co. Offaly. Describing the habits of the bellicose Cerball, king of Leinster, the passage states,"...after Mass, it was his wont to show his skill in *fidchell*."[110] A further, though more restrained example of the church's position is portrayed in the late-Middle Irish tale *Mac Dá Cherda 7 Cummaine Foda*. In a series of simple challenges by his host, the cleric Cummaine Foda is asked to play a game of *fidchell*. Cummaine is entirely unfamiliar with the game and must be taught both its pieces and rules. Cummaine's total ignorance of the game does not hinder his successful play, however, as the game lasts the day, his expert host unable to defeat him.[111]

The entry for *fidchell* in *Sanas Cormaic*, a glossary occasioned by the tenth-century king and bishop Cormac mac Cuilennáin, offers perhaps the most interesting association of the boardgame with the early Irish church. The entry, a mixture of Middle Irish and Latin text and commentary, explains the etymology of the term as a combination of *fuath* and *cell*, suggesting the meaning 'likeness of the church'. The entry continues with the rather surprising explication,

> *.i. cethrachair cétamus ind fit*[h]*chill 7 it dirge a títhe, 7 find 7 dub fuirre, 7 is* [s]*ainmuinter cachlafechtus béus beres a tochell.* Sic [et] ecclesia per singula, per quator terra[e] partess iiii euangeli[i]s pasta (*.i. is marsin an eclais ic sássad cethri rann sundradach in betha ó soscelaib*). *Is díriuch immessaib lasna tíi na screp*[t]*ra, .i.* nigri (*.i. dub*) *7* alb*i* (*.i. gel*)*.i.* boni et mali habitant in eclesia.

---

[108] See FA, pp 27-9; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) pp 386-7; transl. pp 421-3.
[109] Meyer, Kuno (1895) p 74.
[110] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, p 347. Gwynn translates *fithchill*, 'chess'.
[111] O'Keeffe, J.G. (1911) pp 30-3.

> i.e. the *fithchill* (board) is four-sided in the first place, and its rows are straight, and (there are) black and white on it, and it is a different person who wins (?) every other time.[112] So also the church in its particulars: fed by four gospels in the four quarters of the earth (i.e. it is thus in the church filling the four respective parts of the world with the Gospels); it is straight in judgements with the rows of Scripture; i.e. black and white, i.e. good and bad live in the church.[113]

The deliberate association of the game with the external and internal elements of the church is both informative and puzzling. The comparisons of black and white, good and evil can perhaps be extended to include secular and lay, a contrast which would have been particularly fitting for the purported author, a leader in both worlds. Interestingly, the game described may in fact be a game other than the standard *fidchell*. Other boardgames such as *ludus latrunculorum* and *alea evangelii* were well known in the Christian church.[114] Little is known of the latter, though its name suggests connections with the description in Cormac's glossary. If a game more familiar to the members of the church is in fact represented, the importance of the term *fidchell* is explained through the ease by which its second element '*-chell*' is associated with the *cell*, 'church'.

2.3. Textual themes:

An examination of the boardgames of early Ireland reveals several recurrent themes. Violence or death resulting from play, the most prevalent theme, is a natural and expected result of any type of competition or contention. The particular popularity of the games among warriors, kings and heroes, however, adds to an already popular motif. The theme is perhaps best represented in a passage from the *Acallamh* where a game is played between two of the *fianna*'s best *fidchell*-players,

---

[112] This phrase is perhaps better read in its more literal sense, 'and it is a different household (i.e. player) on yet every occasion (game) who takes the stakes.'

[113] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) p 50. Translation by MacWhite, Eóin (1935) p 26. The description of the layout is discussed further, below.

Guaire Goll and Finn Bane. The challenge of a game is posed by Guaire who, when asked by Finn Bane to name a stake, suggests three ounces of gold (*trí uinge d'ór*). The two play for three days, Guaire unable to win a single game. In his frustration Guaire heaps insults upon the successful Finn Bane, accusing him of poor *gilla*-service, inability as a warrior, and lack of skill as a man-at-arms. For his abuse Guaire receives a fatal blow to the jaw, knocking out his front teeth and landing him upon the *fidchell* board. An account of the story is reported to the hero Finn, who quickly orders both Finn Bane and his companions killed. Before Finn's orders can be carried out, however, Oisín directs the matter to the judgement of the elders Caeilte, Diarmait and Fergus 'True-lips'. The three decide to compensate Finn with gold as well as offering Finn Bane's gilla as the incident's whipping-boy. The story relates that whoever of Finn's men might encounter the unfortunate gilla is entitled to give him a similar blow with his fist.[115]

Death upon the *fidchell*-board itself is once again portrayed in the death tale of Celtchair mac Uthechair. Celtchair kills Blaí the Hospitaller in his own house and over his own *fidchell*-board after Blaí had slept with Celtchair's wife. While Blaí is otherwise occupied watching a game of *fidchell* between Cú Chulainn and Conchobor, Celtchair drives a spear through his back, across the *fidchell*-board and into the wall opposite. Blaí's body and a single drop of his blood fall upon the *fidchell*-board. In an interesting solution as to who will avenge Blaí's death, the matter is decided by which player the drop of blood lies closest to, in this case Conchobor.[116]

A particularly prevalent theme within confrontations at boardgames is the use of the playing-pieces as missiles. In an episode from the *Táin,* Bricriu proves true to

---

[114] These games are discussed in section 3, below.
[115] *Ibid.*, pp 123f.; transl. pp 133-4.

his epithet 'Poison-tongue' as his taunts and insults provoke Fergus to violence. Striking Bricriu first with his fist, Fergus subsequently takes a *fidchell*-piece still in his hand and, driving it at his head, breaks Bricriu's skull.[117] Later in the *Táin* Bricriu is said to have convalesced in the west from his near fatal wounds.[118]

A similar incident is reported in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* where Naoise, busy at the *fidchell*-board, is attacked by Tréandora, whose father Naoise had recently killed. According to the story Naoise happened to have one of the playing pieces (*d'fhearaibh na fichle*) in his hand, which he cast at Tréandora, hitting him in the eye. Blinded, but not killed, Tréandora continued to fight, though his eye is described as having falling onto his cheek.[119] A similar account is given in the Middle Irish *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, where the themes of both death at the gameboard and playing pieces used as missiles are evidenced.

> *Tic in ríg forsin faichthi 7 dál mór ime do fheraib Érenn 7 sé oc imbirt fidchille itir na slógu. Ocus tíagsa isin dáil cen cheadugad do neach co tardus forgum don gái Gearr Congail buí im láim a n-ucht in ríg… In tan íarum ro buí an ríg oc Blaísecht báis dorad erchur don fhir fidchille buí 'na láim damsa gura bris in súil cláein buí am chindsa.*
>
> The king came onto the green and around him was a large company of the men of Ireland. He was playing *fidchell* among the crowds. And I went into the assembly without permission of anyone and gave a thrust of the spear, Gerr Congail, that was in my hand, into the king's breast…when the king was tasting death, he gave a cast of the *fidchell*-man that was in his hand so that he broke the squinting eye that was in my head.[120]

A further episode describing playing pieces used as missiles in found in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, where the hero Lugaid, exiled in Scotland, is playing chess with the Scottish king. Angered when he overhears the plight of bondage his people in Ireland

---

[116] Meyer, Kuno (1906b) pp 24-5.
[117] *Táin* LL, ll 4864-7; transl. p 270.
[118] *Táin* LU, ll 4129-30; transl. p 237.
[119] MacGiolla Léith, Caomhín (1993) pp 119-21.
[120] Lehmann, Ruth text (1964) p 11; transl. (1969) p 149. Lehmann translates *fidchell*-piece 'chessman'.

are suffering, Lugaid, having playing pieces of silver and gold (*fir óir ocus argait*) in his hand, sends six of them into the wall in front of him.[121]

In a final example, found in a passage from the *Acallamh*, three *fidchell*-pieces are used as missiles, though not as a result of contentious play. The passage describes the annual appearance of three ravens which, descending upon a playing-field of the boys of the *sídh,* swoop down and carry off three of the youths. The warriors Cascorach, Fermaisc and Caeillte, gathered among the Tuatha Dé Danann to watch the boys, each in his turn takes a *fidchell*-piece (*fer d'feraib na fidchle*) and throws it at the ravens, killing them one by one.[122]

Finally, in what is an otherwise obscure reference to *fidchell*, an Old Irish Triad warns of three 'sons', or vices, born to passion and anger;

Tri maic beres drús do lonnus: *tuilféth, fidchell, dulsaine.*

Three sons which passion bears to anger: sexual arousal, *fidchell* and satire.[123] The reference to *fidchell* here is perhaps an indication that challenges to the boardgame were frequently the results of knee-jerk responses given in anger. The overall negative connotation is likely due to the reputation the game had for argument, gambling and recklessness.

A further motif concerning boardgames is the frequency by which the games are played on the battlefield and prior to battle. The theme is particularly recurrent in the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn and his charioteer Láeg are seen occupying themselves with games of *fidchell* and *buanbach* on the eve of Cú Chulainn's momentous encounter

---

[121] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 312; transl. p 351. For an alternative interpretation of this scene see O'Daly, Máirín (1975) pp 44-5.

[122] *Ibid.* p 220; transl. p 250.

[123] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) pp 18-9. Translation is my own. Meyer translates, "Three sons whom folly bears to anger: frowning, ..., mockery (?)." *Tuilféth* is well-attested as 'penis' though in this sense seems to denote physical sexual arousal. See DIL, T-221.81-4, T-375.31-5. In a footnote Meyer states "*fidchell*, the well-known game gives no sense here."

with his foster-brother FerDiad.[124] In what is obviously a portrayal of their skill in both the game and charioteering, the two also play on their journey to Ulster in Conchobor's muster of support for his inevitable battle against Ailill.[125] Cú Chulainn's games of *fidchell* before battle are further evidenced in the story of the raid upon Cuailgne, where, in his nightly reprieves from single-handed warfare against the men of Ireland, he is portrayed playing *buanbach* and *fidchell* with Láeg.[126] A pre-battle game is arranged and played in the same story by Ailill and Medb after having pitched their camp at the borders of Cuailgne.[127] Outside the *Táin,* the theme is best supported by a passage in a version of *Cath Maige Rath* where, on the eve of battle Domnall, king of Tara, summons a soldier to his tent for a game of *fidchell.*[128]

Secret advice and assistance given by onlookers to boardgames is a further theme within the saga-literature. Such outside advice is often auspicious not only to the individual game's outcome but portentous within the storyline itself. The most well-known occasion for an outside observer's advice is found in the Middle Irish pursuit-tale *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmaid agus Ghráinne.*[129] The passage relates that Diarmaid and Ghráinne, chased by Fionn, climb a quicken tree to gather its berries. The berries are delivered to Fionn in hopes of compensation for his father's death. Fionn, after recognising by scent who had picked the berries, sets off for the quicken tree, wherein Diarmaid and Ghráinne are then trapped. Settling himself under the tree Fionn asks Oisín to a game of *fidchell.* They sit down to the board, Fionn on one side, Oisín and three of his men on the other. Though each player is described as playing

---

[124] *Táin* LU, ll 2703-4; transl. p 198.
[125] *Ibid.*, ll 3855-8; transl. p 229.
[126] *Ibid.*, ll 1299-1300; transl. p 161; also *Táin* LL, ll 1575-8; transl. p 182.
[127] *Ibid.*, ll 1082f.; transl. p 155.
[128] Marstrander, Carl (1911) p 237.
[129] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) pp 68-75.

with great skill and cleverness (*go fáthach fír-ghlic*), Fionn arranges his pieces so that Oisín is left only one move with which to win the game, a move which he defies any of Oisín's men to relate. Hearing his friend's dilemma, Diarmaid comes to Oisín's aid and drops a quicken berry onto the piece which must be moved to save the game. Oisín moves the piece, setting the game even. The sequence occurs two additional times, each time Diarmaid dropping a berry onto the appropriate playing piece (*fhear do budh*) to save the game. In the third instance, however, Oisín's successful move prompts Fionn to declare his lack of surprise, accusing Oisín of having not only the advice of his companions, but also the direct advice of Diarmaid above in the tree. With this revelation, Diarmaid admits to his location, surrendering both himself and Gráinne to Fionn's army.

In a similar passage from the story late-Middle Irish *Caithréim Cellaig*, advice is once again given against the more successful player, ensuring his loss.[130] The story describes a game of *fidchell* between Blathmac and Cuchongeilt, a suitor of Blathmac's daughter Aoife. As the game begins to favour Blathmac, Aoife, standing over her father, clandestinely prompts Cuchongeilt to a move disadvantageous to her father. Cuchongeilt takes full advantage of the advice and wins the game. Suspecting foul-play, Blathmac confronts his daughter, accusing her of the underhanded activity. After questioning Aoife admits to having given the advice. Apparently moved by the situation, Blathmac grants Cuchongeilt Aoife's hand in marriage. Elsewhere, in the Middle Irish *Cogadh Gael re Gallaibh*, advice is given in a match between two young warriors, Murchadh son of Brian and Conaing. Murcadh had only recently fallen out with the Leinster king Maelmordha, who subsequently advises Conaing to a move by which the game goes against Murchadh.[131]

---

[130] Mulchrone, Kathleen (1933) p 19, ll 604-19.
[131] Todd, J.H. (1867) pp 143-5.

A final example of outside assistance on the gameboard portrays activity less subtle than mere furtive advice to favoured players, rather the theft of playing pieces themselves. The passage, from the early-Modern Irish *Adventures of Art Son of Conn* describes a game between Art and his step-mother Bécuma.[132] Bécuma, observing Art playing *fidchell* on a nearby green, challenges to Art to a game, imposing a *geis* on Art unless he plays with her for stakes (*gelltaib*). Art accepts and the two agree to a game at Tara. Bécuma begins to win the game, though Art quickly discovers that Bécuma's skill is not the cause of her success, but that the men of the *sídh* are stealing the playing pieces (*foirne*) from the board. Art accuses Bécuma of cheating, to which she confesses, and the game is abandoned.

3. Strategy and Layout:

While the evidence for boardgames and other games of chance in the archaeological and written record is extensive, little is known of their actual strategy and arrangement. This is perhaps best explained by the currency of the game itself. It would be unnecessary for an author, compiler or glossator of the period to explain in detail elements of a game which was both well-known and common. Fortunately, however, occasional fragments of information concerning physical layout and hints as to the movements of pieces can be found for what is the best attested of the games, *fidchell.*

The most detailed evidence for the layout for *fidchell* is given in its appropriate entry within *Sanas Cormaic*. The description, previously discussed, compares the arrangement of the board to the physical and spiritual constitution of the

[132] Best, R.I. (1907) pp 162-3.

church. The board is described as four-sided (*cethrachair*) with straight lines (*dírge a títhe*), while its playing pieces are black and white (*find 7 dub fuirre*).[133]

The physical layout of the game is suggested by detailed information concerning the game's strategy in *Mac Dá Cherda 7 Cummaine Foda*. In the story the cleric Cummaine Foda is challenged to a game by Guaire, after he has been introduced to Guaire as the 'champion' (*segund*) of Ireland.[134] Cummaine, unfamiliar with *fidchell*, asks how the game is played. Guaire initially explains that the game is difficult to learn, and, in rightfully questioning his opponent's mental abilities, asks Cummaine to recite several poems. Cummaine successfully recites the material, upon which Guaire explains the game;

> *Ni anse, dias dub dam-sa im óinfer find duid-seo forsin n-óintí oc imchosnam ni saigti thall.*
>
> It is not difficult, a black pair of mine about a white man of yours on the same line, disputing the approach from the other side.[135]

This indicates a common chase-game tactic, one player, attempting to gain a particular position on the board, eliminates his opponent's pieces if able to flank them by two of his own. Guaire extols Cummaine's 'champion-like' play as he is unable to capture a single one of Cummaine's pieces, though the game lasts the day. Forfeited playing-pieces are indeed mentioned in several texts, often accounting for the missile motif discussed above.[136]

As Kim McCone suggests, the flanking manoeuvre is perhaps also implied in an Old Irish charm found in the ninth-century *Codex Sancti Pauli*. The charm states,

> *Adgúisiu fid nallabrach 7 arggatbrain etir tenid 7 graig.*
> *Adgúisiu na tri turcu tercu. tairi siabair mochondáil ith 7 mlicht neich arindchuiriur.*
> *ma rom thoicthersa inso rop ith 7 mlicht adcear manim rothcaither*

---

[133] Meyer, Kuno (1912) p 50.
[134] O'Keefe, J.G. (1911) pp 31-4.
[135] *Ibid.*, p 33.
[136] See *e.g.*, Best, R.I. (1907) p 163; MacGiolla Léith, Caoimhín (1993) pp 119-21.

ropat choin altai 7 ois 7 imthecht slebe 7 oaic féne adcear.

> I wish for the wood of notice and of silver raven between fire and wall. I wish for the three thin boars. May a fairy attend my encounter with cereal and dairy produce of whatever I move it for. If I be granted good luck here may it be cereal and dairy produce that I see. If I be not granted good luck let it be wolves (lit. wild dogs) and deer and traversing of mountains and young warriors of the *fían* that I see.[137]

The charm's initial references to wood (*fid*) and the silver raven (*arggatbrain*) certainly suggest comparisons to the boardgames *fidchell* and *brandub*. The reference to the silver raven, which in keeping with the theme is probably, as McCone suggests, the *branán* or chief-playing piece. Its position as 'between fire and wall', i.e. cornered or without escape, further intimates boardgame tactics. The tactic in question is brought to mind by the charm's reference to 'three thin boars' (*tri turcu tercu*), perhaps a line of three playing pieces, one on each side of an opposing piece.

A further possibility for the description of the 'three thin boars' is offered in an obscure letter written in 1833 from James Macquinn of Enniskillen to Robert Macadam. The letter originally accompanied two gameboards sent by Macquinn to Macadam, one incomplete and one "...as yet safe", for which he tentatively suggests ancient games. For one of the boards Macquinn proposes a game described to him as *ceaslen cam*, which he describes as, "...played by taking three of both kinds in one of the boards, and if you get any of them in a line (I mean OOO thus) in any direction, you have the game. They are the oldest articles in the Kingdom".[138] Regrettably, with this final statement, the letter ends. It is likely Macquinn's *ceaslen cam* is not as ancient as he suspects.

Returning to strategy, *fidchell* was clearly a game played by two opponents. Descriptions of games in the saga-literature are exclusive to two players, sitting

[137] Text at Stokes, Whitley and John Strachan (19013) Vol. 2, p 293. Translation by McCone, Kim (1990) pp 207-9.
[138] MacAirt, Seán (1956) p 270.

opposite one another, often holding the board between them on their laps.[139] In the *Táin*, as seen, Cú Chulainn is specifically mentioned as holding the board upon his thighs (*foa díb slíastaib*), while in the *Acallamh* Caeilte holds one side of the board in his lap (*ina ucht*).[140] As seen in the archaeological evidence, gameboards often had two handles, likely used to support the board during play. As discussed, the Ballinderry board, the best preserved example of an early Irish gameboard, has one large and one small handle.[141] The handles are carved in the shape of heads, one of a man, the other of an animal, possibly a bear. I suggest this is possibly to represent which player is the attacker and which the defender.[142] A later parallel is offered in the fifteenth-century text, *Don tSamhain Beos*, where a *fidchell*-board is described with two heads, one the shape of a hag, the other the shape of a girl.[143]

In references from the saga-literature play at the *fidchell*-board often lasts several games, particularly when a stake is involved.[144] Cú Chulainn, though undoubtedly a master player, bests all his opponents with the exception of his charioteer Láeg. Láeg is described as equally skilled at the game, and, in his frequent contests with Cú Chulainn wins every other game. Chase-type games, such as *fidchell*, where a player with a smaller number of pieces is attacked by a player with a larger number of pieces, are, all elements being equal, usually won by the attacker.[145] Skilled *fidchell* players would accordingly switch roles to encourage fair results. This is perhaps the rationale behind both the description of alternating wins for Cú

---

[139] Onlookers, as discussed above, are frequently present, though the game is without exception played by two players only. The game is most often described as held 'between' two players.
[140] *Táin* LU, ll 3857-8; transl. p 229; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 227; transl. p 257.
[141] See illus. 14-15. Detailed physical descriptions of the handles can be found in Hencken, H. O'Neill (1935-7) pp 175-90; Purcell, Emer (1995) pp 66-79; Johnson, Ruth (1999) pp 51-4.
[142] Judging from the available evidence, *fidchell* was a chase-game where one player defended a central piece against the attacking pieces of his opponent. This is discussed further, below.
[143] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 4.1 pp 268f.
[144] See, *e.g.*, *Táin* LU, ll 2703f.; Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 184; Best, R.I. (1907) p 163; O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 124; transl. p 134.

Chulainn and Láeg, as well as the frequent portrayal of multiple games at one sitting. The handles on the Ballinderry board, one large in the shape of a man's head, the other small in the shape of an animal's head, are perhaps then representative of a hunt-motif and indicate which player is attacker (or chaser) and which player is attacked.[146]

Further strategy for *fidchell* is hinted at in a poem, previously discussed, concerning the *branán* and his proper location on the gameboard. The poem states that the *branán*, symbolising the king of Brega, should occupy his proper square on the board, which, following the metaphor, is Tara. Around the *branán* should further be assembled his supporting pieces, symbolised politically as the kings of Cashel, Croghan, Naas and Oileach. [147] This configuration represents a common layout in chase and attack games, used in other medieval games such as *tablut* and *hnefetafl*, as well as the modern game 'fox-and-geese'.[148] Four corners ruled by their axis or centre is further intimated by a passage from *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, where the Hill of Tara represents the hub from which the four provinces of Ireland are governed. The attributes of the five areas are described thus, "...knowledge in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, kingship in the centre."[149]

As Eoin MacWhite points out, a clue as to the strategy of *fidchell* might also be found in the verse of a poem in the Middle Irish *Serglige Con Culaind*. The verse states;

> *déca a chairbthi cinnit glend,*
> *déca a rretha fian fithchell.*

---

[145] For discussion, see Murray, H.J.R. (1917), p 30; Lewis, Frank (1941) p 202-3.; MacWhite, Eoin (1935), p 35.

[146] It must be remembered, however, that no game can is definitively assigned to the Ballinderry board. The suggestion is offered as a possible explanation for the artistry of the handles, not as a proof for the game of the board itself.

[147] Knott, Eleanor (1922) pp 198-9.

[148] *Tablut* and *hnefetafl* are discussed below.

[149] Best, R.I. (1910) p 147.

"...behold his chariots, they climb the valley; behold their courses, (like) men in *fidchell*.[150]

In a game where a piece is removed when it is flanked by two opposing pieces on the same line, it is understandable that a line of chariots, climbing a valley in a sweeping line, could be compared to a successful *fidchell* tactic. The verse is moreover an added example of *fidchell* used as a metaphor for warfare.

Additional accounts of the layout of the *fidchell*-board can be deduced from cryptic passages in the saga-literature. Rather than offering faithful physical descriptions, the accounts are often results of metaphor and hyperbole. A well-documented feature of the boards is its corners. In a passage from *Táin Bo Fraích* a *fidchell* is described as made of white-bronze (*findruine*) with four 'ears and elbows and gold' (*cetheoraib auaib 7 uilneib óir*).[151] A similar example may be found in the poem *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*. Vernam Hull suggests the final syllable '*au*' in the poem's otherwise unattested word *roidhmethau* is another example of 'ears' being used for the corners of a *fidchell*. The poem speaks of four candles, "...not feebly do they illuminate its board". As Hull estimates, the candles were probably placed within apertures in the boards corners, or 'ears'.[152] A further reference to corners is found in the early-Modern Irish poem beginning "*Aigneadh m'fhir chomtha chridhe...*", in what is possibly an additional example of two-sided gameboards. While the type of gameboard is never specified the author extols the cleverness of his subject's play, describing him as capable of, "A trick at every corner of the two boards," (*Beart le gach beinn don dhá chlár*).[153] The reference to two separate boards is unlikely, rather two games on opposite faces of the same four-cornered board seems intended.

---

[150] Text at Dillon, Myles (1949) p 160, ll 10-11. Translation at MacWhite, Eoin (1935) p 27
[151] Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon (1933) ll 88-93.
[152] Hull, Vernam (1962-4) pp 183-6.
[153] O'Keefe, J.G. (1912) pp 242-3.

Apart from the specific evidence for *fidchell*, strategy for other boardgames in early Ireland can be gleaned from an examination of the written as well archaeological record. A useful passage concerning *brandub*'s playing pieces is found in a poem within the *Acallamh*. In the poem, addressed to Patrick, Cáillte states, "My famed *brandub* is in the mountain above Letterbrone, five voiceless men of white silver and eight of red gold."[154] In chase-games, as seen, the chaser's pieces generally outnumber the pieces of his opponent. The reference here to five men of white silver compares favourably to the passage, previously discussed, "A golden *branán* with his band art thou; ...O king of Brega, on yonder square, and a man on each square around thee."[155] Hence, on a chequered board, the king would be surrounded by four pieces, these four, plus king, making five. Eight chasing pieces, as in the example above, 'eight men of red gold', would exactly double the number protecting the king and make a logical chase group if two chasers are needed to eliminate each opposing piece, as seen in Guaire's guidelines for *fidchell*.

Also mentioned in the sources, though comparatively infrequently, is the boardgame *buanbach*. The translation 'long-lasting beating' has been suggested for the term, but so little is known of the game it is indeed dangerous to hazard a guess.[156] References to *buanbach* are rare and most often occur within *Táin Bó Cuailgne*.[157] Outside of the *Táin,* references to *buanbach* are found exclusively in association with *fidchell* or *brandub*, and nothing is revealed of the game itself.[158] As far as I am aware there is no reference to *buanbach* within the legal material. The general scarcity of the

---

[154] Stokes, Whitley (1884-1909) Vol. 4, p 113. See also MacWhite, Eoin (1935) p 30.
[155] Knott, Eleanor (1922) pp 198-9.
[156] "dauerndes schlagen", Thurneysen, Rudolf (1921) p 84.
[157] *Táin* LU, ll 1082, 1300, 3858; *Táin* LL 1576.
[158] This prompts Heinrich Zimmer, in gathering the available references to *buanbach* to declare, "Da nun im vorgehenden immer drei synonyma gehäuft werden und da *fidchell* eine art schachspiel bezeichnet, so muss *brandub* und *buanfach* dasselbe oder ein ähnliches spiel bezeichnen." (1888) p 79.

references in the sources, as well their near exclusivity to one text suggests that *buanbach* was a far less popular game than its counterparts, *fidchell* and *brandub.*

4. Comparative Boardgames of the Period:

As *fidchell* and its counterparts can not be matched conclusively to any of the surviving archaeological evidence, it is necessary to look at analogous boardgames of the period. The most commonly attested boardgames of this period in northern Europe belong to the group known simply as *tafl,* or 'tables'. *Tafl* is a game known to have been played by Germanic peoples as far back as the second century A.D. *Tafl* is the only board game known to have been played by the Saxons, and a similar version *hnefetafl* was played in Scandinavia as early as A.D. 400.[159] The element *hnefa-* represents the name of the principle or "king" piece. The meaning of the element *hnefa* is uncertain but could be cognate with Old English *nafa*, and the Modern English word *nave,* which describes the hub of a spoked wheel through which the axle is inserted and from which the spokes emanate. This is of course parallel to the position of the *hnefa-* on the board, where his defenders spread out from him much like the spokes of a wheel. The arrangement compares to the descriptions of *fidchell* and *brandub* whereby a principal piece is surrounded by defenders.

Hnefetafl was played in Scandinavia as early as 400 A.D. and was probably played on one the games of the Wimose board as well as the board found on the Gokstad ship.[160] These boards, however, display a layout of 18 x 18 and 13 x 13 rows, respectively, a much larger arrangement than the Ballinderry and Knockanboy boards. Other *hnefetafl* boards, mostly later, are equal in size or larger and also accommodate sliding pieces rather than pegs. *Hnefetafl* boards have been found throughout the

[159] Murray, H.J.R. (1952) p 53; Biddle, Martin (1990) pp 695-6.

Viking world and were clearly a regular amusement. Viking gaming-pieces found in Dublin and Waterford, especially those depicting a "king" piece were likely used with this game. Several pegged antler gaming pieces were found in Waterford in a late eleventh-century context. They are clearly Viking gaming pieces and in all probability *hnefetafl* pieces.[161]

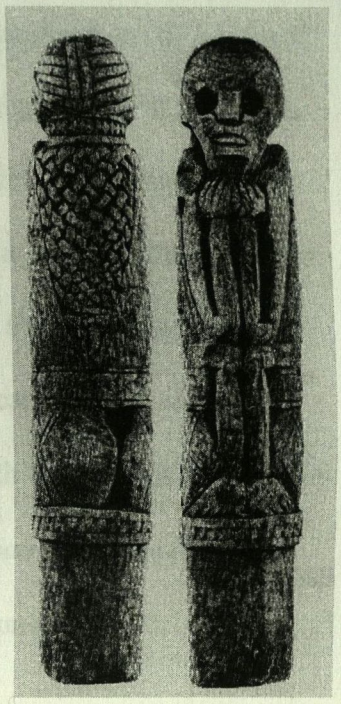


Illustration 18

If there is a reliable continuum with *hnefetafl*, we are able to guess at its layout and strategy from its longevity as a popular boardgame in Iceland.[162] *Hnefetafl* is mentioned frequently in the Icelandic sagas. The element *hnefe-* distinguishes the game from other forms of *tafl* and indicates Scandinavian or Viking influence. A metaphorical description of what is likely *hnefetafl* shows up in a British manuscript in an early tenth century context and under the guise of a Christian allegory.[163] The description is of a game taken away from Aethelstan, king of the English, by Dubinsi, bishop of Bangor. Aethelstan is recorded to have reigned from 925-940, while Bishop Dubinsi, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters* died in 951. The game is in all probability a form of *tafl,* most likely the Scandinavian *hnefetafl*, but is described to the bishop and his monks in the way of a Christian parable, called *alea evangelii* or 'game of the Gospels'. The board is arranged in a series of lines, eighteen by eighteen, with small holes at intersections, suggesting the use of pegs rather than sliding pieces. A central piece is surrounded symmetrically by twenty-four defenders, and opposed by forty-eight attackers, again

---

[160] The opposite side of the Gokstad board, dated to *ca.* 900, seems to represent the layout for nine men's morris. See Nicolaysen, Nicolay (1971) p 46, plate 8.

[161] Hurley, Maurice F. *et al.*, (1982) pp 592; 669, figs. 10-14.

[162] Willard Fiske's *Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic Literature* (1905) is the standard reference.

symmetrically placed about the perimeters of the board. The totals of the playing pieces (24 and 48) are treated allegorically, though rather weakly, i.e. four evangelists, four gospels, ten canons, etc.

References to games which are similar and perhaps later versions of *hnefetafl* exist throughout northern Europe, particularly within the Viking sphere of influence. A Welsh manuscript of the sixteenth century describes a *tawlbwrdd* or 'throw-board' whose layout and design correspond to *hnefetafl*.[164] There is again a central piece who is defended by twelve men, and attacked by twenty-four. On this board the second, fourth, sixth and eighth rows out of eleven are shaded. This can be compared to the Gokstad ship board, where the second, fifth, ninth and twelfth rows out of thirteen are shaded.[165] If the game described here is an accurate description of *tawlbwrdd* as it appeared in earlier centuries, the references to *tawlbwrdd* found in the Welsh Law tracts and literature become clearer.

As previously discussed, a *tawlbwrdd* was one of several items owned by a Welsh king and several members of his court. The board was crafted from several possible materials, including whalebone, wood, antler and bone, as well as the rather dubious elements of gold, silver and bronze. That gambling was often involved is suggested by a passage from the Welsh laws, which states that property lost through *tawlbwrdd* can not be recovered, as "...*tawlbwrdd* is more like an illegal than a legal thing; nevertheless it is the person's will either to take it as lawful or unlawful; for a man's degradation by his own will is no illegality for him".[166]

---

[163] The description is found on folios 6a-b of the Corpus Christi College, Oxford MS no. 122. Preceding the description is a diagram (fo. 5b), which depicts small holes at the juncture of lines, suggesting pegs were used.
[164] Peniarth MS 158, National Library of Wales.
[165] For the Gokstad board, see Nicolaysen, Nicolay (1971) plate 8.
[166] Owen, Aneurin (1841) p 591.

As discussed, a further Welsh boardgame was *gywddbwyll*, cognate to Irish *fidchell*. Translations and comparisons of *gwyddbwyll* to other boardgames both contemporary and later suffer the same consequences as with the Irish counterparts, as it is frequently deemed 'chess', 'backgammon', 'tables', etc. References to *gwyddbwyll* appear in several early Welsh texts. Like *fidchell*, the game is most often represented as a game played by warriors and kings.[167] Unfortunately, little is revealed as to the strategy or arrangement of the board. Once again, this may be accounted for by a general contemporary familiarity with the game and its rules.

5. Gaming and Dice:

Apart from boardgames the majority of evidence for gaming in early Ireland involves dice. Unlike boardgames where physical evidence is supported by references in the written sources, the evidence for dice-games and other games of chance is limited almost exclusively to archaeology. Once again the archaeological evidence is divided. Dice in Ireland show up quite frequently in Iron age and pre-Christian contexts and generally in burials.[168] Dice in later contexts, particularly Viking, are occasionally found in burials but also and more generally in living areas.[169] Dice in the Viking period are generally of bone, with a few exceptions of wood.[170] This, however is slightly misleading, as it is quite likely that wood was a common material for such articles, owing to both its quantity as a source and the ease with which it is worked. Linguistic support for gaming pieces is found in the Old and Middle Irish

[167] See, *e.g.*, Evans, J.G (1906) p 11; Jones, Gwyn and Thomas Jones (1949) pp 207-8; Lewis, Henry (1942) pp 160-2.
[168] See Eogan, George (1967-8) pp 366, 372 and (1974) pp 73-4, 76-8; National Museum of Ireland (1970) p 156.
[169] See Hencken, H. O'Neill (1950-1) pp 196, 203; MacGregor, A. (1985) pp 129, 135; Hurley, Maurice *et al.*, (1992) pp 583, 586f, 636, 666-8;
[170] See *e.g.* Lang, James (1988) pp 7, 32, 50, 84.

word for casting lots, *crannchor*, or 'wood-throw'.[171] As well as simple gaming and gambling, the early Irish legal material, as well as the saga-literature, demonstrate that legal and hereditary issues were often solved through the casting of lots, or *crannchor*.[172]

Historically there are two basic shapes for dice found in Ireland, cubical and parallelepiped. Cubical dice resemble our modern dice, though, depending on materials and artistry, are often very crude, begging the question as to what types of games of chance could be played with such lopsided and irregular objects. Cubical dice generally use one of two numbering systems, Roman and non-Roman.[173] Roman dice are patterned like modern dice, where the sum of opposite sides is always seven, i.e. five opposite two, etc. Non-Roman dice may be patterned randomly, though the majority are numbered so that one is opposite two, three opposite four, and five opposite six. Most cubical dice found in Britain are of the Roman type. This is to be expected as many dice games in early Britain were introduced by the Romans. Games existing prior to Roman occupation would most likely have been supplanted by Roman dice.[174] Of the thirteen representatives of dice found in Viking Dublin, only three are of the Roman type.[175] This is presumably due to the lesser Roman influence on Ireland.

Parallelepiped dice are long thin dice, shaped generally from leg and rib bones of animals. In the Christian era parallelepiped dice seem to disappear quite quickly in Romanized areas such as Britain and France, yet show up frequently in excavations in Ireland up until the late-Viking period, with no real correspondence between Viking

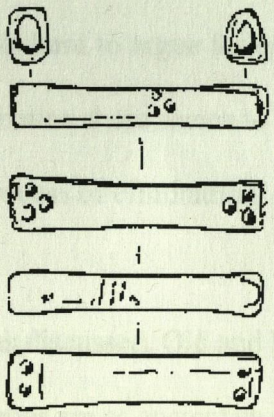
---

[171] DIL, C-510.33-74.
[172] See Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 208-9; Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) p 182; Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 485.
[173] MacGregor, A. (1985) pp 129-32; Biddle, Martin (1990) pp 692-5.
[174] *Ibid.*, see also Mann, J.E. (1982) pp 13-4; Coad, J.C. and A.D. Streeten (1979) pp 252-3.
[175] National Museum of Ireland (1976) p 13.

or non-Viking sites.[176] The dice are numbered in no consistent manner and, because of their elongated oblong shape, most can only account for four numbers, usually the numbers three, four, five, and six. Numbers one and two are often either not accounted for or perhaps reckoned through the marks of the other numbers.

The most interesting of the parallelepiped dice in Irish contexts was found at Ballinderry Crannóg 2. The object is a standard parallelepiped die in an Iron Age context, and is numbered on its four elongated sides with the numbers three, four, five and six.[177] What is curious, however, is that the artist seems to have chosen to use an ogam symbol to represent the number five. The symbol consists of three vertical strokes which may or may not be capped by a faint horizontal stroke. This symbol represents the letter "v" in the ogam alphabet, presumably corresponding to the Roman numeral five.

Illustration 19



The origins of ogam are unclear but it was an established monument script in Ireland by the fifth century, and possibly the fourth. In his book *A Guide to Ogam* Damian McManus states,

> The distribution of inscriptions in the Ogam character suggests that it was at home in the south of Ireland, and as it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that the alphabet was designed for the Irish language it is likely that its framers were Irish and probable that they resided in the south of the country, possibly in the fourth century. That they were familiar with the Latin alphabet and had at least a rudimentary training in Latin grammar is evident."[178]

---

[176] See *e.g.*, Clarke, D.V. (1970) pp 217-8; MacGregor, A. (1985) pp 129-31; Carson, R.A.G. and Claire O'Kelly (1977) p 51; Eogan, George (1974) pp 73, 75-6; Raftery, Joseph (1963) p 125.
[177] Hencken, H. O'Neill (1942) pp 54-5. See illus. 19.
[178] McManus, Damian (1997) p 1.

This said, the fact that the Ballinderry die is contextually dated to the second century presents several problems. While non-orthodox uses of ogam on objects such as dice etc. have been found on objects up until the nineteenth century, a use on a find this early is suspicious. Secondly, it is not positively the ogam letter 'v'. If in fact it does represent the ogam 'v', and correspondingly the number five, and the second-century dating is correct, it shows Latin learning in a very early context by someone also acquainted with ogam in a time in which there is no corroborating evidence for the existence of ogam. Unfortunately, the contextual dating is hard to argue for or against as the excavation was completed fifty years ago.[179] Moreover, there seems to be no other logical way to account for the marks, which, by process of elimination, must represent the number five.

What was played with the dice? Unfortunately, as discussed, Old and Middle Irish literature offers no support regarding dice. Dice games are as ancient as games themselves and equally universal. The Celtic and Germanic peoples seem to have had a particular propensity for throwing and gambling. The first-century historian Tacitus writes,

> Gambling, one may be surprised to find, they practise in all seriousness in their sober hours, with such recklessness in winning and losing that when all else has failed, they stake personal liberty on the last and final throw.[180]

Attempts at descriptions of individual games from merely the available archaeological evidence is impossible. The archaeological evidence does, however, supply limited clues. As seen, the dice were often crude and far from symmetrical. This being the case, it would hardly seem logical to roll a die which would continually favour a particular side. Some dice are in fact so lopsided it would appear nearly impossible to

[179] The dating of the crannóg as well as two neighbouring crannógs, excavated contemporaneously, are the subject of debate. For modern discussions, see Johnson, Ruth (1999) pp 23-69; Lynn, C.J. (1985-6) pp 69-73; Warner, R.B. (1985-6) pp 75-7.

roll certain numbers. Given also the need for a flat and level surface for a successful roll, it seems reasonable that the dice were tossed rather than rolled.

Dice are also often found alongside gaming-pieces, gaming-counters, glass and stone beads etc. While dice were without doubt used on their own they were also likely used with boardgames and other entertainments. Comparatively, the counters and beads may have been actual gaming pieces or they may have represented wagers, like modern gambling chips. An interesting burial excavated at Knowth contained two male skeletons, approximately thirty years of age at death, decapitated and buried head to toe.[181] In and around the skeletons were various gaming pieces, dice and small beadlike objects, of glass and stone. The skeletons seem to have been thrown or roughly placed together. Could this represent the fate of crooked gamesters? Another excavation of a crannóg site at Lagore, Co. Meath portrays a similar state of affairs.[182] Several bone dice were found in an area at the edge of the principal crannóg. Scattered along with the dice were human bones, which the archaeologist described as "...evidently the result of a massacre", adding, "...one wonders whether this indicates the fate of the dice players."[183] Little support from the literature is available, though 'bone-players' (*cnámfir*) are mentioned in the *dindsenchas* poem concerning Carman, and 'bone-

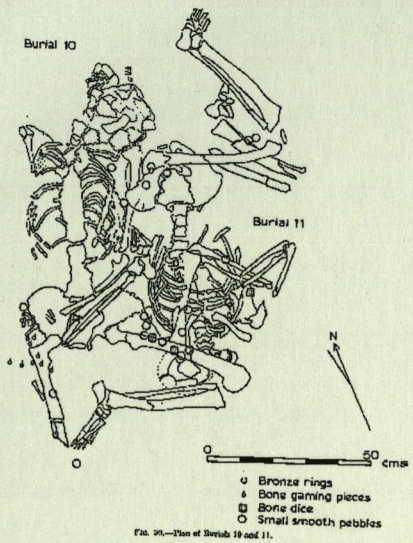


Illustration 20

[180] Peterson, William (1963) pp 296-9.
[181] Eogan, George (1974) 73-5, 78. In a study of a game-pieces from Anglo-Saxon burials in England it has been found that, when sex can be determined, gaming-pieces are most often found among burials and cremations of males. See Young, S. (1983) p 861.
[182] Hencken, H.O'Neill (1950-1) pp 195-6, 203. See illus. 20.
[183] *Ibid.*

games' (*cluiche cnáma*) in the list of boys' feats in an untitled late Middle Irish tale.[184] There is ample room for coincidence, though it is certainly not unthinkable that corrupt, or perhaps merely unlucky gamblers would meet such an end.

[184] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 21; Meyer, Kuno (1903) p 468, §9.

Chapter 6 Field-Games and Sports

1. Background

References to field-games, particularly stick and ball games, are found throughout Ireland's early source material. Clues as to the equipment and strategy of the games are offered in several Old Irish legal texts, confirming an existence as early as the seventh century, and very likely earlier. The saga-literature of the Middle Irish period abounds with references to games. As many of the surviving tales are clearly based on earlier texts and versions, we can assume that the games themselves are considerably older than the texts in which they are found.

The Norman invasion of Ireland in the second half of the twelfth century brought with it the customary cultural influences of an invasion and occupation. The sporting and gaming spheres were not immune. Stick and ball games were current in Britain both before and after the twelfth century invasion. The modern British game of hockey probably dates back to Roman or even pre-Roman Britain. The universal nature of simple stick and ball games, however, makes it difficult to ascertain whether games were borrowed or in fact merely similar though culturally independent.

An early example of what seems to resemble hockey is depicted on a Greek frieze from the fifth century BC. Two figures holding curved playing-sticks are depicted vying for a ball, while several other athletes, also holding playing-sticks, stand to each side, watching the game.[1] Ancient Rome certainly had similar stick and ball games, likely the same as those which are portrayed on artefacts from the time of Rome's occupation of Britain. One such item, a small clay mould found in Northampton, England and dated to the second century depicts a figure holding a

[1] Gardiner, E.N. (1930), plate 2.

curved stick and what appears to be two balls. An additional ball is carved at the figure's knee.[2] While this represents the earliest and most tangible physical evidence of field-sports in these islands, much can be procured from Ireland's vast source material.

A study of field-games in early Ireland presupposes a discussion of the origins of the modern Irish game of hurling. It should be noted that the earliest attestation to the term hurling (*horlinge*) is found in a statute issued at Kilkenny in 1366.[3] The statute, issued in the reign of Edward III, outlaws *horlinge*, deeming it a distraction and diversion from more constructive pursuits such as archery and military training. The game is described as being played "...with great clubs at ball upon the ground" (*oue graundz bastons a pillot sur la terre*).[4] Despite modern arguments to the contrary, the general anti-Gaelic nature of the statute as a whole seems to ensure that the offending game is a native one.[5,6] Evidence for early Scottish stick and ball games, particularly '*camanachd*', is also extensive although the majority of the references is found from a later period.[7] While the oldest of the references from Scotland's sources are often based entirely on the stories of Ireland, the extension of a Scottish game played on similar occasions in a similar manner by similar participants certainly suggests a continuum from an earlier period.

---

[2] Hawkes, C.F.C. (1940), plate 1.
[3] Berry, H.F. (1907) pp 430-69.
[4] *Ibid.*, p 439.
[5] Most notably, the statute takes a firm stance against Irish entertainers performing for an English audience. Included among those who are not to be patronised are, "...tympanours, pipers, story tellers, babblers, rhymers, harpers or any other Irish minstrels". See Berry, H.F. (1907) p 447.
[6] J.A. Watt argues the game described in the statute is not a reference to a native Irish game. His argument is based upon two observations; firstly that the 'ground game' implied in the Kilkenny statute does not resemble the modern game, secondly that a much later statute in the Statutes of Galway (1527) again bans a stick and ball game, calling it 'hockie'. The first argument presuppose solid evidence for a predominace of air play in early native Irish games, of which there is none. The second argument assumes that the English, after three centuries in Ireland, would have used only native words to describe native games. See also Cosgrove, Art (1987) p 389fn.
[7] For discussions, see Caimbeaul, Muirne A.N. (1970); Jarvie, Grant (1991); Hutchinson, Roger (1989); Macdonald, Alexander (1922).

Art Ó Maolfabhail has written extensively on the history of the modern game of hurling in Ireland.[8] His book, while focusing on the later more tangible evidence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, grants the game of hurling a firm place in early Irish society as far back as the Iron Age. He suggests that"...by retracing steps, the origins of hurling in general have been pushed back to prehistoric Europe. This is further back than even the most extravagant claims have heretofore ventured."[9] While tempting and certainly appealing, this is both rash and utterly lacking in support from the available evidence. The modern game of hurling has been used as a deliberate and effective political symbol of Gaelic society from as far back as the seventeenth century. Early Ireland seems to have had, quite naturally, manifold field-games, each with its own equipment, strategy and participants. An historical hindrance in the examination of these games has been the tendency to identify each and every one of these references as evidence for hurling. An explication of the terms and allusions to early Irish field-games from the early sources precludes this.

1.1 Terminology:

The richest and most informative passages found in early Irish literature concerning field-games are found in the epic saga *Táin Bó Cuailgne* concerning the hero Cú Chulainn. Excerpts in the present discussion are taken from two recensions of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* text. The first, preserved in its Old Irish form, is found in the early twelfth-century manuscript *Leabhar na hUidre*, the "Book of the Dun Cow". The second, composed in Middle Irish though based on an Old Irish exemplar, is found in the slightly younger, late twelfth-century manuscript *Lebor Laignech*, "Book

[8] Ó Maolfabhail, Art (1973)
[9] Ó Maolfabhail, Art (1973) p 3. No evidence is given.

of Leinster".[10] *Leabhar na hUidre*, henceforth LU, is the terser less ornamented text, and *Lebor Laignech*, henceforth LL, typically the more descriptive and flowery.

Both versions of *Táin Bó Cuailgne* recount that in setting out on his journey to the playing field at Emain, the young Cú Chulainn takes his wooden shield, his toy javelin, his playing-stick and his ball. The two accounts proceed as follows:

> LU *Téit ass íarom 7 a scíath slissen laiss 7 a bunsach 7 a lorg áne 7 a líat[h]ráit.*
>
> He went off then with his wooden shield and his toy javelin, his hurley and his ball.[11]
>
> LL *Gebid a chammán créduma 7 a líathróit n-argdide, 7 gebid a chlettíni díburgthi, 7 gebid a bunsaig mbaísi mbunloscthi.*
>
> He took his hurley-stick of bronze and his silver ball; he took his little javelin for casting and his toy spear with its end sharpened by fire.[12]

Lorg áne, or literally 'driving-stick', is used to describe the playing-stick throughout the more succinct version in LU. O'Rahilly translates the term 'hurley'. The corresponding passage in LL uses the term *cammán créduma*. O'Rahilly translates "bronze hurley". *Cammán* indeed survives in Modern Irish as the word for 'hurley'. The term is comprised of the adjective *cam*, 'bent or crooked', with the diminutive suffix *án*. Its literal translation is therefore 'little bent thing'.[13]

In the LU *Táin* Cú Chulainn amuses himself along his journey to Emain by throwing his spear into the air and catching it by its tip before it reaches the ground. In the corresponding episode in LL Cú Chulainn skilfully strikes the ball with his *cammán* so that it flies a great distance. He then throws his *cammán* after it, once again striking the ball and driving it a distance equal to the first. To complete his trick

---

[10] For the date and provenance of the texts see O'Rahilly, Cecile (1976) pp vii-xxiii.
[11] O'Rahilly, Cecile (1967), henceforth *Táin* LU, ll 415-6; transl. p 136.
[12] O'Rahilly, Cecile (1976), henceforth *Táin* LL, ll 758-60; transl. p 158. In LU O'Rahilly translates *bundsach* 'toy javelin', in LL 'little javelin'. The *bundsach* is used infrequently outside the *Táin*. Militarily it seems to have been used infrequently, if at all. For a discussion, see Harbison, Peter (1976) pp 274-5.

he tosses his toy javelin and runs after all three, catching each before it hits the ground.[14] The descriptions are clearly examples of the frequent hyperbole applied to Cú Chulainn's dexterity and skill. In this case they are designed to foreshadow his impending success on the playing-field, and, by extension, on the battle-field. Most important to the current examination, however, is the semantic pairing of *lorg áne* and *cammán*. Also important in both texts is the consistent double-billing of the playing-stick with the term *líathróit*, 'ball'. Additionally, details in the description of Cú Chulainn's play reveal a tentative implication that the use of the *cammán* or *lorg áne* was primarily to keep a ball aloft in play, rather than on the ground.

On reaching the playing field at Emain, Cú Chulainn attempts to join a group of gathered boys at their game. In both versions of the texts Cú Chulainn does not receive from the boys the standard bond of protection needed to participate in their game.[15] This bond represents a legal exemption from liability for injuries both delivered and sustained in play. Such liability is supported by evidence from the law tracts, mainly concerning children's games and the appropriate equipment involved.[16] Cú Chulainn, not familiar with the bond, promptly joins the boys. He is met with immediate resistance:

> LU *Focherdat dano a líathroite uli fair-seom 7 nos gaib-seom cech óenlíathróit ina ucht. Focherdat dano a trí cóectu lorg ána fair. Araclich-som conach ráncatar hé, 7 gabais airbir díib fria aiss.*
>
> Then they threw all their balls at him and he caught them, every single ball, against his breast. Then they threw their thrice fifty hurling-clubs at him. He warded them off so that they did not touch him, and he took a load of them on his back.[17]

---

[13] See DIL-C, p 64.5-29
[14] *Táin* LL, ll. 761-6; transl. pp 158-9.
[15] *Táin* LL, ll. 774-80; transl. p 159. *Táin* LU, ll 418-20; transl. p 136.
[16] See *e.g.* CIH 9.20ff; 945.22;1203.10. Liability for injuries in children's games and the implications involved is discussed below, in section 5. See also chapter 7.
[17] *Táin* LU, ll 423-7; transl. p 137.

LL *Tarlaicset a trí coíctu cammán ar ammus a chendmullaig in meicc. Turcbaid-sium a óenluirg n-ániusa 7 díc[h]uris na trí coícait lorg. Tarlaicat dano dó na trí coícait líathróiti ar ammus in meic bic.*

They cast their thrice fifty hurley-sticks at the boy's head. He lifted up his single plaything stick and warded off the thrice fifty sticks. Then they cast the thrice fifty balls at the little boy.[18]

In the LU text the boys throw their 150 playing-sticks (*lorg áne*) at Cú Chulainn. In the LL text the boys' playing-sticks are again deemed *cammán*, while Cú Chulainn's corresponding stick is termed *óenluirg n-ániusa*, literally 'single play-thing stick'. The inconsistency of the terms here, though a common characteristic of the saga-literature is problematic in identifying both the equipment and the specific game. Cú Chulainn's *óenlorg áne* is likely the same object as the *cammán*, though given a different name both for variety and to further distinguish the young hero from the boys. Alternatively, it may indicate a subtle difference between the equipment used by fostered youths, which the gathered boys undoubtedly were, and the equipment of an unfostered youth, such as Cú Chulainn.

Cú Chulainn employs his *lorg áne* in various activities elsewhere in the *Táin*. In an episode from LU, twenty-seven men attack him. Casting stones and using his *lorg áne* he kills nine of them, forcing the others to flee.[19] In a further passage from LU, Cú Chulainn chances upon a man carrying his brother on his back. Cú Chulainn refuses to help the man carry his burden, prompting the man to attack him. After a brief scuffle, Cú Chulainn employs his *lorg áne* to lop off the man's head. The hero then proceeds to drive (*imáin*) the head in front of him 'like a ball across the plain'.[20]

The term *cammán*, as discussed, translates literally 'little bent thing'. Any playing-stick used to propel and guide an object with relative control is most effective

[18] *Táin* LL, ll 781-4; transl. p 159.
[19] *Táin* LU, ll 534-5; transl. p 140.
[20] *Ibid.*, ll. 501-2; transl. p 139.

when the surface area used for contact is enlarged and set at an angle to the stick itself. Modern sports such as field-hockey, ice-hockey, polo and indeed hurling support this. The etymology of the *cammán* is direct testimony both to its form and function. The earliest physical representation of what appears to be a *cammán* is found on a fifteenth-century graveslab from Clonca, Inishowen in Co. Donegal.[21] The slab was made for Mánas mac Mhoireasdain of Iona and although characteristic of a west Scottish design, may have been created in Ireland.[22] The slab depicts a Scottish sword, typical of a style of the late medieval period, alongside a long, thin playing-stick with a curved end. Just above the tip of the stick is a ball. The images suggest Mánas was known as both a superior soldier and sportsman. The late provenance of the graveslab, however, may reflect Norman and/or English influence.



Illustration 21

The *cammán* is mentioned in Middle Irish commentary to the law tract *Cáin Iarraith*. Listing the appropriate playthings a boy should possess upon the age of fosterage, the son of a king is to have a *cammán* ornamented with silver, while the son of a lord is expected to have a *cammán* ornamented with bronze;

> *...7 airget aru faighnibh 7 credumu aru cumanaibh, 7 sdan aru faignighib o sin imach 7 umhu aru cumanaibh.*
>
> ...and silver upon their (sons of a king) scabbards and bronze upon their playing-sticks, and tin upon their (sons of a lord) scabbards in the same way and copper upon their playing-sticks.[23]

---

[21] See illus. 21.

[22] The Irish inscription and northern Irish surname (modern mac Mhuireasáin) engraved on the slab further advocate Irish provenance. It has been suggested that the stone may have been used as ballast on a ship sailing to from western Scotland to Ireland. There is no evidence to support this. For a discussion of the graveslab and its inscription, see Macalister, R.A.S. (1949) pp 116-17., plate 48. See also Lamont, W.D. (1968) pp 24-8, where similar stones are discussed.

[23] CIH 1759.17-18. Translation is my own.

The silver and bronze may well be embellishments to correspond with similar descriptions in the text. Whether or not the allusion to brass and bronze rings is accurate, the reference to the *cammán* as a customary possession of a foster-son points to its popular use. Structurally the rings may have strengthened the base and boss of the stick or supported a joint which created the bend. Alternatively, they may have been used solely for decoration.

An additional reference to the *cammán* in the legal material is found in a fragment from the law tract *Mellbretha*, concerning field-games and the degrees of liability, based on age, from injuries sustained while participating. Concerning play with sticks and balls, the text states that if a boy comes upon or takes a *cammán* or *lúbóc*, which is not his own and it is later found with him, there is no retributive punishment and the article itself stands as restitution.

> *Aith*gin *i .c.cin na .c.aoisi ioc*ait *sin; masa lubog no coman tallust ł dotarrust*ar, *7 tarrus iatt fein aig*e, *geibe greim aithghina iatt fein.*
>
> Restitution of the first offence of the first age is paid; if it be a *lúbóc* or *cammán* which is found or taken, and they are found there with him, that which is taken stands as restitution.[24]

In other words, the return of the *cammán* cancels out any offence or penalty. This suggests that such items were valuable and that players were responsible for their own equipment. More important to the discussion of the terms related to field-games, however, is the linguistic apposition of the terms *cammán* and *lúbóc*.

Lúbóc seems to be a compound of the simple noun *lúb* and the adjective *óc*. *Óc*, 'young, youthful', is also used as a substantive to denote a young man or warrior.[25] *Lúb* has a variety of meanings, its most basic being any type of ring, circle or hoop. It is used to describe the link of a chain or a curl of hair. More abstractly it sometimes

---

[24] CIH 1340.10-11. Translation is my own.
[25] See DIL, O-86.35-87.5

denotes circular reasoning or even duplicity or deceit.[26] In every sense of the word, however, circularity is implied, whether in the physical descriptions of loops and rings or in the more abstract senses mentioned. The terms *lúb* and *óc* seem to therefore denote some type of hoop, ring or circle associated with young men. According to the context of the passage it is furthermore some type of sporting equipment. This said, *lúb* as both the simple term and that within the compound *lúbóc*, is repeatedly and I believe wrongly translated 'hurley' in the early sources. This is most likely the result of its consistent pairing with the word *liathroit*, or 'ball'.[27]

Lúb is once again found alongside *cammán* and *liathroit* in the law tract *Cetharslicht Athgabála*. The text, concerning children's playthings (*essrechta*), states that any such items may not be distrained;

> *IM ESSRECHTA MACCRU*[1,2] Concerning the playthings of boys.
>
> [1] *na hi rouaisi gatus serg dona macaib beca .i. camana 7 liathroiti 7 luboca, ł cait, uair | ir ar .iii. aithgin na cat.*
>
> the noble things which take the illness from small boys, i.e., playing-sticks and balls and *lúbóca*, or cats, because it is after three days restitution for the cats."
>
> [2] a *nai*thgin *ar ain.* their restitution after one day.[28]

The *lúbóc* is undoubtedly a piece of equipment distinct from the *cammán* in both form and function. Based on the linguistic evidence it is reasonable and in fact likely that the *lúb* was simply a circular object through which a ball was played. There is no need to stretch the semantics of *lúb* to equate it with *cammán*, *lorg áne* or indeed any other playing-stick. The apposition in which the terms are regularly found is easily explained in the same way objects in modern field-games are described, *e.g.*,

---

[26] *Ibid.*, L-228.31-66.
[27] See e.g., Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 149; Sayers, William (1992) p 112.
[28] CIH 373.25 (Brit. Lib. MS Harley 432) Translations are my own. It should be noted that a corresponding passage from TCD manuscript H.3.18 does not list the *cammán*, *liathroit* and *lúbóc*, naming only the cat and lap dog as examples of children's playthings not to be distrained.

basketball and hoop, football and goal, baseball and glove. Likewise, there are no grounds to render the common pairing of *lúb* and *líathróit* as 'hurling'. Games described as such must be more simply and accurately understood by their individual terms, in this case 'hoop and ball' or 'ring and ball'. According to the Middle Irish *Duanaire Finn*, the young hero Finn was accomplished in three games played with the *lúb* (*trí cluithe luibe*). The characteristic uncertainty of the term *lúb* leads Eoin MacNeill to translate the passage 'three cunning games'.[29] Clearly, however, the reference is to either three distinct games played with the *lúb* or a series of three matches of the same *lúb*-game. The text further indicates that the games were part of Finn's instruction at Tailtiu, and, predictably, that he excelled in each. A substantially later reference, from the musings of the great seventeenth-century writer Geoffrey Keating, suggests that the game played with the *lúb* and *liathroit* in fact continued its distinction from *immáin*, the 'driving-game' as late as the seventeenth century. He states;

> The foolish conceited young men of today, however, do not consider the quirks of fate when they are enjoying themselves and leading a wild life, playing ball (*ag déanamh cluiche lúibe agus liathróide*), shooting, playing darts and arrows, and contending and hurling (*ag iomáin*), drinking and playing, swearing and babbling.[30]

Keating's differentiation between the game played with the *lúb* and *líathróit* and the game of 'driving' suggests not only their independence but also a continuum from as early as the Old Irish period.

2. Equipment and Settings:

The most common materials mentioned for the equipment of field-games are unfortunately also the most unlikely. References in the saga-literature most often

[29] MacNeill, Eoin (1908) p 134.
[30] Bergin, Osborn (1931) p 19.

suggest playing-sticks and balls of gold, silver and bronze. A Middle Irish tale from the *Book of Leinster* describes the character Crimthann receiving a stipend of fifty bronze playing-sticks and balls (*cammán creduma co lliathroitib credumaib*). Interestingly, he also receives fifteen *fidchell* boards, twenty *brandub* boards and the 'leadership in youthful sports' of all the Leinstermen.[31] In the LL text of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn carries a bronze *cammán* (*chammán créduma*) and a silver ball (*líathróit n-argdide*).[32] The obvious exaggeration found in the saga-literature is perhaps partially resolved by the more realistic description in *Cáin Iarraith* where brass and bronze seems to merely decorate the playing-sticks rather than actually comprising them.

The most likely and certainly the most abundant material for the playing-sticks is wood. Presumably nearly any type of wood might have been used as little more than a rod with a slight bend is needed. Native trees such as the hazel, yew and willow are likely choices as well as branches and trunks of more hardy bush and scrub such as furze. Modern hurleys and baseball bats are made primarily of ash, both for its strength and the straightness of its grain. Based on parallel requirements, ash was likely a favoured choice for the early playing-stick. According to *Bretha Comaithchesa*, a law tract concerned mainly with farming, the ash is one of the 'seven nobles of the wood'. According to the text, the wood of the ash is preferred because it is most suitable for the 'half-material of a weapon' (*letharadh airm*), i.e. the spear shaft or handle.[33] The strengths and attributes of a spear's shaft would be the same as those required for a playing-stick. The paramilitary nature of the stick and ball games may have added further natural parallels for its selection.

---

[31] "*Tuc dano do Chrimthannán .l. cammán creduma co lliathroitib credumaib 7 .xu. fidchella dercaigthi la fichit brandub brecboirdnech & maccaemnacht cirt choicid Lagen.*" Best, R.I., Osborn Bergin, *et al*, ll. 7283-85. The use of *co* here to link *cammán* with *líathróit* certainly suggests the two are to be used in conjunction with each other.

[32] LL, ll. 758-9.

[33] CIH 202.26. See Kelly, Fergus (1997), p 383.

Evidence for the material of balls is burdened with similar embellishments. A curious practice of creating playing balls out of the brains of slain opponents is a regular feature of the saga-literature. In the Middle Irish *Aided Conchobuir* the practice is clearly defined.

> *Ba bēs d'Ultaib ind inbaid sin cach curaid nomarbdais ar galaib ōenfir nogatta a n-inchind assa cendaib 7 commesct*[h]*a āel airthib co ndēnad līathrōite crūade díb. Ocus intan nobītis i n-immarbāig nō chomramaib dobertis dōib co mbītis inna lāmaib.*
>
> At that time it was a custom with the men of Ulster to take the brains out of the head of every warrior whom they slew in single combat, and to mix lime with them so that they were made into hard balls. And whenever they were in contention or at comparison of trophies, these were brought to them, so that they had them in their hands. [34]

In a scene from the Middle Irish *Siege of Howth*, a text also found in the *Book of Leinster*, a woman is asked to carry away with her the severed head of her husband. When she replies that she can not, she is told to "...take out its brain therefrom...and ply a sword upon it, and bear the brain with thee, and mix lime therewith and make a ball (*liathroit*) therefrom."[35] In the *Táin* Cú Chulainn uses his famed weapon *deil cliss* on a young adversary to remove "...a portion of brain equal to the iron ball"(*fón n-ubull n-athlegtha n-íarnaide*).[36] Interestingly, in this passage *ubull* is used while in the two previous the word for ball is *líathróit*. *Ubull*, the standard term for apple, is used by extension in references to balls and spheres. References to *ubull* as a ball, however, are relatively infrequent and, as here, usually describe objects outside the activities of play and entertainment.[37] References to balls used in sport and games are almost exclusively confined to *líathróit*.[38]

---

[34] Meyer, Kuno (1906b) pp 4-5. See also Best, R.I., Osborn Bergin *et al.* (1954-83) Vol. 2, p 458.
[35] Stokes, Whitley (1887) p 64.
[36] *Táin* LL, ll 1102-3. transl. p 168. The description is found in the LL text only. Interestingly, as seen, the majority of references to the practice is found in LL texts.
[37] DIL, U-46.81-6.
[38] *Ibid.*, L-148.63-82;

As for specific substances of the ball used in play, it is likely materials such as wood, leather and hair were most commonly used. Balls crafted mainly of woven cow hair were used in Ireland up until the nineteenth century. The items were often considered gifts of favour from women to men.[39] The survival of the balls and their continued use into the modern period suggests their quality and longevity rival even current materials such as plastic and rubber. The inherent craftsmanship and practicality suggest a long standing tradition.

The setting for field-games is clearer. Several references in the legal material allude to games held on the principal or neighbouring greens of a fort or enclosure. A passage from the law tract *Bretha Étgid* states that anyone who causes damage or injury from striking a ball on the green of a chief-enclosure (*faiche primcathrac*h) is exempt as all such open lawns (*urlann*) are free.[40] A similar miscellaneous tract adds that compensation must be paid for destruction done by small boys in driving balls (*ac imain na liathroiti*) outside the green (*sechtarfaiche*).[41] The passage also declares that an individual is exempt for damage to any object or structure upon the green in so far as he is engaged in appropriate activity upon the green.[42] The tract concludes with a lengthy discussion concerning the liability for balls landing outside the confines of the green. Considerations include the necessary retrieval of the ball; permission to enter private property; permission to open any fence or gap in order to retrieve the ball; and care that any such barrier is once again secured. Finally, half-liability is incurred for any damage done to land or property in retrieving the ball outside the green.[43]

---

[39] The National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, has recently presented an exhibition of such specimens. For an illustration of recent finds, with accompanying caption see Wallace, Patrick (2000) p 106. See also O'Maolfabhail, Art (1973) pp 97-8.
[40] CIH 280.33-6.
[41] *Ibid.*, 1579.7-8.
[42] *Ibid.*, 280.36-9.
[43] *Ibid.*, 281.1-14.

The law tract *Do Astud Chirt 7 Dligid* lists an established fair-green as one of the inherent rights of a territory, free and due every individual.[44] A later glossator suggests that both games (*cluithi*) and horseracing (*graithfne*) are expected on the green.[45] The parameters of a green are also illustrated in a legal passage from the *Heptads* concerning the rightful ownership of unclaimed property. The green is described as the four fields adjacent to the chief residence. [46] An addendum is added that if there are not four adjacent fields, whatever landscape is adjacent is considered part of the natural green.[47] The text goes on to offer a slightly less precise measurement of a green, stating the green is the land which can be encompassed as far as the sound of a bell is heard. It further states that the land which is grazed beyond the first four fields constitutes 'beyond the green'(*sechtarfaithche*).[48]

Free and open greens seem to have received a fair degree of upkeep. The maintenance of a fairgreen 'in the time of games' (*cartad oenaigh .i. in aimsir cluithi*) is dictated by the law tract *Cetharslicht Athgabála.*[49] An amusing insight on the trimming of the grass is offered in the late-Middle Irish tale *Aided Fergusa.* In a rather circuitous though colourful description of a dwarf, the text states,

> *...do roiched fér séta slím glas na faitche co a glún ocus co remar a sliasta do.*
>
> ...the close cropped grass of the green was so long that it reached to his knee, aye, to the thick of his thigh."[50]

---

[44] *Ibid.,* 241.27. The Old Irish main text uses the terms *aenach aititan,* 'a recognised fair'. As the law tract concerns the legal interests of tangible, material objects, it is assumed the grounds of the fair are meant.

[45] *Ibid.,* 242.5-6. Greens and courses for horseracing have been discussed in chapter 3. above.

[46] *Ibid.*, 57.7-14.

[47] *Ibid.,* 57.15-6.

[48] *Sechtarfaithche* 'outside the green', is well attested, for examples, see DIL, S-136.34-7. It is the term used in relation to the proper retrieval of balls, discussed above. The law text *Bechbretha,* 'bee judgements', uses the term in several discussions concerning lawful locations of bee hives and injuries from inclusive swarms. See Charles-Edwards, Thomas and Fergus Kelly (1983) pp 82, 86.

[49] CIH 888.10. A similar passage is found at CIH 368.33-4. The glossator states that the maintenance must be done immediately before the opening of the fair. He further states that if the work is left by one brother to another, the brother who completes the work is to be compensated.

[50] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 240; transl. p 272.

While certainly lacking specific dimensions, the description implies the well-recognised shortness and upkeep of the grass upon a green.

Playing fields mentioned in the saga-literature are often described as neighbouring the royal residence. This supports the passage from the *Heptads*, above, which explains the green as an area encompassing the four fields adjacent to the chief residence. In the Middle Irish *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* the king of Ireland holds a contest of 'mutual driving' (*iomáin chumórtuis*) on the lawn at Tara.[51] Similarly, in the Middle Irish *Macgnimartha Find*, Finn reaches the green of a stronghold (*faithche duin*) on the Liffey plain, where he joins a group of boys at a driving game (*comimain*).[52]

Two separate terms, *faithche* and *cluichemag*, or 'sports field', are used for the boys' playing-field at Emain in the LL text of the *Táin*. The text in LU uses the term *cluichemag* as well as the more basic phrase *maig in chluiche*.[53] In the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Midir keeps a playing-field (*cluichemag*) for fifty boys of the *sídh*-mounds.[54] Later in the tale the parameters of such a playing field are suggested when the character Elcmar receives compensatory land. The land, he is told, is particularly opportune as he could would be able to watch the gathered youths at play. The land in question is identified as Cleitech, along with 'the three lands around it' (*cusna tri trib fil ime*).[55] This once again supports the identification of a playing field as a chief lawn and the lawns directly adjacent to it.

Evidence from the saga-literature suggests that assemblies and fairs were often the settings for field-games. In the passage from *Tochmarc Étaíne*, discussed above, Ailill is also granted compensatory land, described as twelve plains for games

---

[51] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) p 13.
[52] Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 183.
[53] *Táin* LU, l. 471.
[54] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) p 143-5.

(*cluiche*), assemblies (*ceiti*) and gatherings (*dala*).[56] References for field-games at the fairs further suggest that spectators were often present. In *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*" a 'driving contest' (*iomáin chumórtais*) is arranged at a fair (*áonaigh*) convened by the king of Ireland.[57] The participating sides seem to have been particularly numerous as "...there was no one sitting in the assembly that day save the king, Fionn and Diarmaid."[58] Specific areas for spectators is suggested in a Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem on the fair at Tailtiu. In a description of the nobility and virtue of the fair, the poem states that at Tailtiu men do not enter the seating area of the women, nor women the seating area of the men.[59] *Forad*, the term used for 'seating' is widely attested as an area for spectators at fairs.[60]

Evidence for spectators at field-games is found outside of contests at assemblies and fairs. In the *Táin*, Conchobor divides his day into thirds, spending the first third watching the 'feat-games' (*chless cluchi*) and 'drivings' (*immánae*) of the boys on the green.[61] In the late-Middle Irish *Acallamh na Senorach* a game of 'driving' (*imain*) is arranged and won by Aedh, son of the king of Connacht, who tells Patrick that his mother and father are among those gathered to watch the match.[62] Evidence for spectators at field-sports is also offered in the legal material. A passage from the law tract *Bretha Étgid* lists several circumstances in which onlookers are to be compensated for injuries sustained while watching the play.[63]

---

[55] *Ibid.*, p 147.
[56] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) pp 147-51.
[57] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) p 13.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 11, p 151.
[60] DIL, F-304.25-65.
[61] *Táin* LL, l. 744; transl. p 158.
[62] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 181; transl. p 204.
[63] This passage is discussed in detail in section 5, below.

A final setting for play, that of strands, is found in the early-Modern Irish composition *Cath Finntrága.*[64] The text describes impressive and highly skilful play with *caman* and *liathroid* upon the sands of Finntragha (modern Ventry, co. Kerry).[65] The strands in the north-west of Ireland, as well as many of the Scottish coasts, have been and continue to be the sites of both formal and informal athletic contests, particularly those requiring expansive areas, such as stick and ball games. While strands are not specifically mentioned as playing grounds elsewhere in the early sources, it is difficult to imagine their highly suitable physical features were not exploited as venues for various activities and field-sports.

3. Strategy and Layout.

The greatest difficulty in an understanding of the field-games of early Ireland lies in the nature of the treatment of the sources. While the term *immáin* reveals little more than the implication of driving or impelling, translators throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have repeatedly rendered any reference to *immáin* as 'hurling'. This is both inaccurate and misleading. Through equally arbitrary justification references to *lorg áne* and *cammán* have been commonly translated 'hurley'. As seen, references to objects bearing little or no connection to the modern game, such as *lúb*, have also been manipulated to conform to a context of hurling. What is known of the actual game *immain* is insufficient to identify it as a predecessor to modern hurling or even to suggest a definite continuum of the game from early Ireland to the present day. A critical examination of the evidence reveals several different field-sports, including ones both similar and distinct from hurling.

---

[64] Meyer, Kuno (1885) p 21.
[65] A fifteenth-century reference is found in *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe.* See Ó Donnchadha, J. Lambert (1931) p 68, ll 91-2.

The term *immáin* is used extensively in the saga-literature for a type of game played on a green, usually with a ball and playing-stick. The game is played most frequently by boys. Interestingly, fairs and assemblies seem to be the exclusive setting when men rather than boys play the game. As far as I am aware, the legal material mentions *immáin* only once in a context of field-games or entertainment.[66] The term is, however, well-attested in the laws in a more general meaning, that of driving or herding domestic animals. Such references pertain mainly to the manifold legal concerns of injury, death and theft when driving domestic stock such as cattle and pigs. The connection to domestic herding, however, could be more than merely shared terminology. There is a natural development from the shepherd's crook to the playing-stick. There is equally a natural development of games in pastures, meadows and other landscapes suitable to stick and ball games. The modern term hockey derives from the Old French *hocquet*, or 'shepherd's staff'. Similarly, lacrosse, the French term for a game played by north-eastern Native American tribes, takes its name from the shepherd's staff (*le crosse*) which doubled as playing-stick. Employing, or in fact replicating the shepherd's staff in stick and ball games is both a natural and universal consequence of both implement and surroundings.

Immáin is used to describe the game the boys are playing in the LL text of the *Táin*, while in the terser LU text the boys are engaged simply in *áin líathróti*, 'ball-driving'.[67] When Cú Chulainn joins the boys in the version in LL, he catches the ball between his two shins and, while numerous opponents attempt to knock it free, he carries the ball away from them and across the goal (*dar brúch mbáire*).[68] This suggests that goal was a line or border which must be crossed, rather than an upright structure or hole. As Cú Chulainn is described as carrying the ball between his shins,

[66] CIH 945.20-2 ≈ 1347.32. This passage is discussed further, below. See appendices 1,2.
[67] *Táin* LL, l. 833; transl. p 160. *Táin* LU, l. 552; transl. p 140.

the ball was likely not handled or played with the hands. Naturally, it is both difficult and dangerous to attempt to glean evidence from obvious literary embellishments. This said, a modicum of reality can certainly be assumed. A sufficient amount of any tale or account must be comprehensible to the intended audience, particularly details ineffectual to the overall theme. [69]

In the *Táin* Cú Chulainn approaches the boys' playing field but little is said of the actual game. In attempting to join the play Cú Chulainn is attacked, each of the opposing boys throwing his ball and *lorg áne* at the young hero. Cú Chulainn wards off the attack and pursues the boys across the playing field and directly into the path of Conchobor, who, interestingly, is seated beside the field engaged in a game of *fidchell*.[70] Cú Chulainn is informed by Conchobor of his misdemeanour in not obtaining the customary bond of protection. After hearing this, the young hero promptly and lawfully joins the boys for a proper match. Nothing is said of the second encounter, though the boys who are injured in the initial scrape are said to be helped to their feet by their foster-parents, apparently gathered as spectators to watch the play.[71]

The most informative passage from the saga-literature on the strategy of *immáin* is found in a further episode within the *Táin*. Once again concerning the boys gathered for play on Conchobor's playing field, the game itself is termed *cluchi puill*, or 'the hole-game'. The game is identified specifically as one which is played on the green at Emain.[72] The game is described as follows;

---

[68] *Táin* LL, l. 773; transl p 159.
[69] Describing Scottish folktales concerning *camanachd* as played in medieval Scotland, Muirne Caimbeul writes, "...it [*camanachd*] must have been regarded as normal practice because, although the action is described, this is done in such a way as to highlight the skill of the player and not to introduce the game to an audience unacquainted with it, as is so often the case in later literature." (1970) p 9. This is equally applicable to the early Irish evidence.
[70] *Táin* LU, ll 435-8; transl. p 137.
[71] *Ibid.*, ll 455-6; transl. p 137.
[72] *Ibid.*, l. 834. transl. p 160.

Luid Conchobor arin faidchi co n-acca ní ba ingnad leiss: trí coícait mac 'sindara chind dind faithchi 7 óenmac barin chind aile di. Dobered in t-óenmac búaid mbáire 7 immána óna trí coíctaib maccáem. Tráth ba cluchi puill dóib—cluichi puill fogníthi for faithchi na Emna—ocus tráth ba laó-som díburgun 7 ba lesium imdegail, congeibed na trí coícait liathróit fri poll immuich 7 ní roiched ní secha 'sin poll. Tráth ba léo-som imdegail 7 ba laesium díburgun, no chuired na trí coícait liathróit' sin poll can imroll.

Conchobor went to the playing field and saw something that astonished him: thrice fifty boys at one end off the field and a single boy at the other end, and the single boy winning victory in taking the goal and in hurling from the thrice fifty youths. When they played the hole-game—a game which was played on the green of Emain—and when it was their turn to cast the ball and his to defend, he would catch the thrice fifty balls outside the hole and none would go past him into the hole. When it was their turn to keep goal and his to hurl, he would put the thrice fifty balls unerringly into the hole.[73]

Rather curiously, this passage has been used as evidence for the Irish invention of golf.[74] In spite of this, the description contains valuable specifics which help to differentiate the 'hole-game' from similar field-games. In this case the goal is described as a hole guarded by a defender against balls either driven (*immáin*) or thrown (*díburgun*) therein. Comparatively, in Cú Chulainn's previous encounter with the boys, he is described carrying a ball across a goal (*dar brúch mbáire*) while his opponents try to knock the ball free.

The scene further suggests that each boy plays his own ball, and that the game's final tally is rendered by the total of all balls scored, rather than a tally of how many times a single ball is scored by the group. This implies that each player supplied his own stick and ball. As previously discussed, the passage from the law tract *Cáin Iarraith* relates foster-children were indeed expected to be supplied with a playing-stick upon the appropriate age of fosterage.[75]

The corresponding scene in the text of LU differs slightly;

Adell Conchobor laiss íarom a cluchemag… Co n-accai íarom Coin

---

[73] *Táin* LL, ll. 832-8. transl. p 160.
[74] See, *e.g.*, Ó Maolfabhail, Art (1973) p 82; MacDonald, Alexander (1922) p 32.
[75] CIH 1759.17

Culaind oc áin líathróti frisna trí cóectu mac, 7 birt a ráena forru. In tan ba háin phuill dognítis, no línad-som in poll día líathrótib 7 ní chumcaitis in meic a ersclaige. In tan batir héseom ule dobidctis in poll, arachliched-som a oenur conná téged cid óenlíathróit ind.

Conchobor visited the playing-field then… There he saw Cú Chulainn playing ball against thrice fifty boys, and defeating them. When they were engaged in driving (*háin*) the ball into the hole, he would fill the hole with his balls and the boys would not be able to ward him off. When it was they who were throwing (*dobidctis*) at the hole, he by himself would ward them off so that not even a single ball would go into it.[76]

In this passage the term *áin*, the verbal stem of *immáin*, is used of Cú Chulainn's attempts at striking the ball into the hole. The boys, by contrast, seem to throw the ball into the hole, though this may be an simply attempt at verbal variety.

In both versions of the *Táin* Conchobor watches Cú Chulainn's defeat of the boys, prompting him to invite the young hero to a nearby banquet. In both texts Cú Chulainn replies that he will follow after he has given the boys their fill of play (*doíthanaig cluchi*).[77] This is perhaps a reference to a series of matches, for example an opportunity for the loser to challenge the winner, or a best of three series, etc. As seen, the reference to 'three *lúb* games' (*trí cluithe luibe*) in *Duanaire Finn* may represent a series of three matches. Horse races are occasionally organised in threes, while the boardgame *fidchell* is frequently played in sets of two games, where each player is allowed to be both attacker and defender.[78] The latter method would be particularly appropriate in the 'hole-game' where one side must defend the goal while another attacks.

The 'hole-game' finds further support in a passage from the law tract *Bretha Étgid*.[79] The theme of the passage concerns the liability for injuries sustained in play. The titular items include balls (*liathroide)*, sticks (*lorg*), holes (*poll*) and pits (*log*).

---

[76] *Táin* LU, ll 553-6; transl. p 141.
[77] *Táin* LL, ll 850, 852; LU *Táin*, "*Nimda sat*[h]*ech dom c*[h]*luchi béos.*", l. 565.
[78] For horse races, see discussion in chapter 3. For *fidchell*, see chapter 5.

The bulk of the text deals with the nature of the participants rather than the equipment and hazards. Contingencies include the age and number of the participants, as well as whether or not the activity is considered legitimate to the nature of the game. Considerations are also made for spectators injured while watching the games.

The first sentence of the passage is the most informative regarding the activity and settings of the games. It states;

> *...islan lim donti buailes in liathroid da luirg o poll na himana co log na grifidi , no o log na grifidi co log na comrainne, no in poll a mbi curuigi in locc a mbi.*
>
> Immune is he who strikes the ball with his stick from the driving-hole to the *grifid*-pit (place?), or from the *grifid*-pit to the place of division, or [in striking it] from the hole in which it is until it reaches the place in which it is.[80]

Admittedly cryptic, the passage suggests a playing field with particular and recognised areas, such as the 'place of division' (*log na comrainne*), the *grifid*-pit and the hole from which the ball is struck. *Comrann* is well attested in the sense of a dividing or partition line or area and seems to indicate a boundary or tactical field-line, such as half-field etc.[81] *Grifid* is otherwise unattested and therefore little help in determining field layout. Judging from its use in the passage, it appears as a likely target for the defender of a goal, or perhaps an area which is deemed out of play, or an area which forfeits further offensive play of a ball struck there. Unfortunately little can be interpreted in terms of strategy other than the implication that the specific areas on the field and in the game were particularly prone to activity resulting in injury.

A slightly different version of the passage is found as a fragment in the legal manuscript Egerton 88.[82] Interestingly, the passage is preceded by several other

---

[79] CIH 945.20-40; 1347.32-40. See appendix 1 . See also the discussion on injuries in field-games in section 5, below.
[80] CIH 945.20-2. Translation is my own.
[81] DIL, C,-408.3-25.
[82] CIH 1347.32-40. See appendix 2.

fragments, including a version of *Mellbretha*,[83] a fragment concerning onlookers witnessing illegal acts,[84] as well as one concerning offences at assemblies and injuries incurred in play.[85] The version of the text in Egerton 88 states,

> *...islan donti imaighus no imainus in liathroit o poll na grimhfiti co loc na comhranda .i. oc didin in puill airan .l. isin baile i mbidis.*
>
> Immune is he who drives [the ball] around or drives the ball from the *grifid*-hole to the place of division, i.e. in defending the hole from the ball in the goal in which they were.[86]

In this case the specific strategy seems clearer. There is a hole which much be defended from balls being placed within it. Participants are free from liability for injuries they cause in driving around (*immaighus*) the hole or in driving (*imainus*) balls from the area. This condition seems to indicate that play outside of this area is not protected by the same legal liability and that participants engaged in play beyond this area are likewise not immune from legal redress.[87]

Further evidence for the skills needed in stick and ball games is hinted at in *Cath Finntrága*. While the actual composition of the text is later than the pre-Norman focus of this study, the tale itself endeavours to describe a much earlier period. The descriptions offer at the very least images which reflect an understanding temporally closer than our own. The most informative passage in the text concerns a foreigner's impressive skills with club and ball. Such skills, as the story relates, had previously only been equalled by the likes of Cú Chulainn and the mythical Lug. The text states;

> Thereupon the foreigner doffed his battle-dress, and donned a splendid elegant dress, and took a club and ball (*do gabh caman 7 liathroid*) and beat the ball (*ro bhuail an liathroid*) from the west of the strand to the east, and he caught it in his right hand before it descended, and he put it

---

[83] A tract concerning injuries in games. See Binchy, D.A. (1968); CIH 1338.5-1344.42 (version E in Binchy's edition).
[84] CIH 1332.13-1335.33; 1335.34-1337.3; 1337.4-1338.4.
[85] CIH 1345.1-1347.31.
[86] *Ibid.*, 1347.32-4. Translation is my own.
[87] The legal considerations in the fragment can be found in the discussion on injuries in field-games, below.

> on his foot the second time and he sprang in his rushing from the west of the strand to the east, and he threw the ball from one foot onto the other, without touching it with the hand, and without its touching the ground, and he put it on his knee the third time and ran to the other end of the strand and then put it from one knee on to the other, without throwing it on the ground. Then he threw it on his shoulder and made a rush like the March wind from one end of the strand to the other, and then sent the ball from one shoulder to the other, without touching it with the hand, and without throwing it on the ground, and he challenged all the fiann to perform that trick.[88]

The most noticeable and deliberate aspect of the foreigner's skill is that the ball does not touch the ground. This reference to the style of play which emphasises keeping the ball aloft supports the lasting and rather strongly held opinion that the sport of hurling in Ireland has a history going as far back as the sagas themselves, and probably further.[89] Unfortunately, as has been outlined, the argument is both unsupported and circular.

The duration or completion of a typical field-game is unclear. There is no evidence concerning what in fact determined a completed game or match, although a curious disparity is found in evidence relating to the term used for goals (*báire*). In the LL version of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn successfully carries the ball over the goal (*dar brúach mbáire*), prompting the boys to attack him.[90] Such a response suggests that the game concluded after the first side was able to score a goal. Later in the same episode, Conchobor watches Cú Chulainn "...winning victory in taking the goal" (*búaid mbáire*).[91] A confusing reference is found in the *Acallamh*, where the son of the king of Leinster reports that he takes seven *cluiche* from his young opponents. Following the customary meaning of the term, *cluiche* would here represents games won,

---

[88] Meyer, Kuno (1885), p 21.
[89] See, *e.g.*, Ó Maolfabhail, Art (1973) pp 2-3; J.A. Watt in Cosgrove, Art (1987) p 389fn.
[90] LL *Táin*, l. 773.
[91] *Ibid.*, l. 833; transl. p 160.

suggesting that a game concluded after a single goal. O'Grady, however, translates *cluiche* 'goals', suggesting that the tally of the single game included Aedh's seven.[92] A similarly ambiguous passage is found in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, where a 'driving contest' (*iomáin chomórtuis*) lasts an agonising three days and nights as neither side is able to score a single goal (*aon-bháire*) against the other.[93] Earlier in the same tale, however, Diarmaid joins a driving contest and is said to have 'won the goal' (*do chuiris an báire*) three times that day.[94] This may be a reference to a tally of goals or perhaps a reference to victory in each of three matches. A tally of scores is certainly the reckoning used in a game of *imáin* from a passage in the *Acallamh*. The young Aedh mac Muiredach, son of the king of Connacht, scores six goals in the match, without assistance from his peers (*gan nech dá chuid*[iugad]).[95] Later he is described as nearly dying from wounds received on the field.[96]

4. Participants:

The question as to who most likely participated in the field-games of early Ireland represents the most unambiguous aspect of the examination. Expectedly, young boys comprise the clearest and largest group of participants. This is supported throughout both the saga-literature and the legal sources. Young heroes such as Finn and Cú Chulainn represent the archetype of the skilled and athletic youth. As seen, Cú Chulainn is able to single-handedly and repeatedly defeat the 150 boys gathered on the playing field at Emain, while his skill with the *lorg áne* is described elsewhere in more martial pursuits. Likewise, Finn excels in various contests and athletic events, often heavily outnumbered by his rival peers. The equally heroic Mael Dún is said to

[92] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) text p 181; transl. p 204.
[93] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) p 53.
[94] *Ibid.*, p 13.
[95] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 120; transl. p 130.

best his opponents in all his play (*cluiche*), including throwing balls (*imarchor liathráite*), running (*rith*), and putting stones (*cur liac*).[97]

Less heroic boys also play a part in the field-games of the saga-literature. In *Tochmarc Étaíne* Midir, echoing Conchobor in *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, keeps a playing-field (*cluichemag*) on which he watches 150 youths in their daily games (*cluichi*).[98] Interestingly, 150 girls are also mentioned as gathered on the playing-field.[99] In *The Voyage of the Húi Corra* three fiendish sons collapse with exhaustion after heated contests of 'charging' (*amhsa*) and 'driving' (*iomanna*).[100] In the *Acallamh* Aedh mac Muiredach arranges a game of *immáin* amongst his fellow youths of Connacht.[101] In the tale *Mac Dá Cherda 7 Cummaine Foda*, one hundred youths are gathered on the playing field (*faithche*) for a game of 'ball-driving' (*ain liathroidi*).[102]

Evidence from the legal material supports the saga-literature in portraying field-games as the particular pursuit of young boys . The reference from *Cáin Iarraith* regarding a foster-son's *cammán* confirms that stick and ball games were a common and expected activity of children throughout their period of fosterage. This is supported in a passage from the *Heptads* which lists the bloodshed of boys' games as one of seven immune and lawful bloodsheds.[103] The inclusion of the blood shed in children's games among more adult concerns such as blood shed in battle, blood shed by a physician, and blood shed by a jealous wife, confirms both the popularity and the expected violence of the activity.

---

[96] *Ibid.*

[97] Stokes, Whitley (1888-9) p 455.

[98] Bergin, O. and R.I. Best (1938) pp 143-7.

[99] *Ibid.*, p 142. '*...tri .l.a ingin d'inginaib thiri Erenn.*' Girls are infrequently mentioned taking part in field-games. For a similar passage, see van Hamel, A.G. (1933) p 23, §10 where a girl on a playing-field (*cluichemag*) is described as the best of the 'daughters of Ireland'. The description matches that of Cú Chuilainn's skills and talents as enumerated in the *Táin*.

[100] Stokes, Whitley (1893) p 29. Stokes translates *iomanna* as 'hurling'. The language of the text is Early Modern Irish though it is likely based on an eleventh century original.

[101] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 120; transl. p 130.

[102] O'Keefe, J.G. (1911) p 29.

Tales from the saga-literature reveal an interesting and recurrent theme concerning boys on the playing field. In several texts one of the young participants, usually the central character of the tale, is goaded and questioned by his onfield rivals as to the legitimacy of his birth and parentage. In *Tochmarc Étaíne* the young Aengus clashes with Triath, a leader of the game, after Triath suggests Midir is not Aengus's true father.[104] A similar passage is found in *The Voyage of Mael Dúin*, where a jealous opponent challenges Mael Duin, "...whose clan and kindred no one knows, to vanquish us in every game."[105] A further parallel is found in a ninth-century Latin text offering a pseudo-history of the Britons. In a passage concerning the origins of Scotland, the boy Britto, unwittingly fulfils a prophecy by accidentally killing his father while engaged in a game on the playing field.[106]

More than simply the pursuit of young boys, field-games, as discussed, were also a common entertainment at assemblies and fairs. References from the saga-literature suggest such games were arranged and played exclusively by men rather than boys. In a passage from *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, Diarmaid grabs the nearest *cammán* and scores a splendid hat-trick at an assembly held by the king of Ireland. [107] In the detailed passage from *Cath Finntrága* the skilled foreigner performs his manifold feats on a strand, described earlier as the shores of white sand where men "assemble for fairs (*aenaighi*) and gatherings (*oireachtais*) wherever they were not fighting."[108]

---

[103] CIH 9.19-33. For a discussion of the passage, see section 5, below.
[104] Bergin, O and R.I. Best (1938) pp 143-5.
[105] Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 457.
[106] Morris, John (1980) p 19. A further Latin example can be found in a passage from Nennius' *History of the Britons*, where boys playing ball (*pilæ ludum*) taunt an onfield rival as to his illegitimate birth. See Wade-Evans, A.W. (1938) p 63. For discussion of the role of the theme of illegitimacy in the early literature, see also McCone, Kim (1990) pp 215-6.
[107] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) p 13.
[108] Meyer, Kuno (1885) pp 4, 21.

As seen in the saga-literature, in texts such as the *Táin*, field-games were not limited to earthly participants. Numerous references to such pursuits are found in highly mythical and pagan contexts. Games and especially field-games were clearly seen as a favourite pastime of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Lug, mythical king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, is attributed with having introduced to Ireland the boardgame *fidchell*, the horsewhip, the fair and the ball (*liathroit*).[109] In a story within the *Acallamh*, Cailte travels to the Height of the Boys, described as the spot the youth of the Tuatha Dé Danann used to engage in *immain*.[110] Later in the *Acallamh* Cailte is informed that every year three ravens from the north descend on the boys of the Tuatha Dé Danann while they are 'driving' (*oc imáinn*), and proceed to carry off three players.[111] In the Middle Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* Ruad and a group of twenty-seven others challenge the Tuatha Dé Danann to a particularly heated game of *immáin*. An equal number of the Tuatha Dé Danann agree to play and the match ends only after the majority of players fall from broken bones from blows to the arms and legs.[112]

Perhaps as a response to this particularly pagan relationship with games, *immáin* and similar field-games are mentioned frequently in religious contexts. In the Middle Irish *Life of Maedoc of Ferns* a boy fresh from the playing field, where he had been 'playing and driving' (*ag denam cluiche 7 coimhiomáin*), is chosen as Maedoc's successor after he had opened the gate for the saint and closed it behind him.[113] In a slightly alarming episode from the *Life of Saint Féchín of Fore*, Féchín is disturbed at his prayers by the noise of children playing, literally 'driving' (*og imain*), on the nearby green. Féchín promptly solves his frustrations, telling the boys, "I permit you

---

[109] Best, R.I. *et al.*, (1954-83) p. 36, l. 1147. "*Lug mac Céin meic Déin Checht meic Erairc meic Néit. Is é cetaranic fidchill 7 liathroit 7 echlaisc 7 oenach i nHerind.*"
[110] Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) l.6900, p 192; transl. p 257. Stokes translates *immáin* 'hockey'.
[111] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 221; transl. p 250. O'Grady translates *oc imáinn*, 'goaling'.
[112] Fraser, J. (1916) p 29.

to go and be drowned in the lake, and your souls will be free to ascend to heaven."[114] The inclusion of this episode among Féchín's more saintly activities may point to a concerted and rather negative opinion by the clergy of such frivolity and sport. In the Irish version of the Life of Gregory, a translation from Latin made in the late fifteenth century, the young Gregory strikes a playmate on the shin with his *cammán* while 'playing and hurling' (*ag deanamh cluiche agus iomana*).[115] The reference here is comparatively late and is clearly a deliberate substitution the translator makes to add national flavour to the tale. Colum Cille is also remembered in connection with the sporting sphere. In a reference from the *Betha Coluim Cille* the saint demands reciprocity for a boy killed by a blow from a *cammán* while involved in a game of *imain*.[116] The text, however, was composed by Manus O'Donnell in the sixteenth century and the reference to *imain* is likely an enhancement to depict and authenticate an earlier context.

A final reference to games in a religious context is found in *Mac Dá Cherda 7 Cummaine Foda*.[117] Here, Moronoc, a fool, returns from a game of 'ball-driving' (*ain liathroidi*), bringing with him fifty playing clubs into the house. After leaning them against the door he stumbles, forcing the door shut, clipping the heads off the fifty clubs. Interestingly, the term used for the clubs is *bachall*, the standard term for the clerical staff or crozier. As far as I am aware, this is the only attestation to *bachall* used to denote a playing-stick. The duality in the use here of *bachall* for playing-club seems deliberate and likely represents a specific emphasis by the author to meld religious and secular aspects into the tale. Moronoc's companion is Cummaine Foda,

---

[113] Plummer, Charles (1922) Vol 1, p 244; transl. Vol 2, p 236.
[114] Stokes, Whitley p 349. The text is found in a fourteenth-century manuscript though the tale itself may be older.
[115] Falconer, Sheila (1958) p 77. See also her notes at p 88.
[116] O'Kelleher, A. and G. Schoepperle (1918) pp 178-9.
[117] O'Keefe, J.G. (1911) p 29.

typically described as sage and archbishop of Munster. Interestingly, earlier in the tale Cummaine Foda is described as Ireland's *segund*, the term for an athletic champion.[118]

5. Injuries:

As seen, the saga-literature frequently portrays field-games as the setting for quarrels and disputes, as well as death. The earliest encounters of the heroes Cú Chulainn and Finn involve clashes on the playing-fields. In *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* a 'driving contest' (*iomáin chumórtuis*) is arranged by two women attempting to settle an argument as to whose husband is the better player (*a fear féin d'iománaighe*).[119] As seen, injuries by unsuspectingly predestined characters such as Mael Duin and Aengus are also the result of onfield taunts to their suggested illegitimacy.[120] In *Tochmarc Étaíne* Midir attempts to break up a fight between boys on the playing-field and subsequently loses an eye.[121] In two separate tales within *Acallamh* skilled players collapse to their deaths out of exhaustion from strenuous play. Typically both are sons of kings, Aedh, son of Eochaid Lethderg of Leinster and Aedh, son of Muiredach Finnachta, king of Connacht.[122] Similarly, in *Cath Maige Tuired* the match between the sons of Mil and the Tuatha Dé Danann is forfeited as bruises and broken bones leave the players "...outstretched on the turf".[123]

References to injuries account for the bulk of the evidence concerning field-games in the early legal material. Several fragmentary and miscellaneous texts deal specifically with injuries incurred in such games, while more general texts, such as

[118] *Ibid.*, p 42.
[119] Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa (1967) p 51.
[120] Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 457; Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) pp 143-5.
[121] Bergin, Osborn and R.I. Best (1938) pp 147.
[122] O'Grady, Standish-Hayes (1892) p 120, transl. p 130; p 181, transl. p 204.
[123] Fraser, J. (1916) p 29.

the *Heptads*, offer extensive gloss and commentary. [124] The law tract *Mellbretha* lists several competitive activities and games, classifying each according to its status of legal immunity. Two terms related to field-games are included in the text, *lúb* and *líathróit*. D.A. Binchy, presumably because of the close proximity of the terms, suggests they might taken together and translated as a 'hurling match'.[125] The implications of the double-billing of the terms has been previously discussed. Interestingly, both terms are included among those activities which are wholly immune from prosecution and liability.

The law tract *Bretha Étgid*, contains extensive evidence concerning offences committed and injuries sustained in various games (*cluiche*).[126] The lone example in the legal material of the individual term *immáin*, as applied to field-games, appears in this tract. The subject of the text concerns injuries in relation to games by both equipment and ground hazards. Contextually, *immáin* appears intended as either the principle activity or at least one of the most common activities in which injuries and offences from these items occur.[127]

Commentary to the passage in *Bretha Étgid* discusses injuries by and to participants of three age groups: seven to twelve years of age, representing the age of fosterage; twelve to seventeen years of age, representing adolescence and conceivably inclusion in the controversial group, the *fiana*; and seventeen years and older, representing adulthood. These three age groups correspond to three grades of games, ranked according to both the severity of the potential injury and the age of the participant. The three grades are usually termed as follows: *ruidles*-games, appropriate to children; *fían*-games, appropriate to adolescents; and *col*-games,

---

[124] *e.g.* CIH 1332.13-1335.33; 1335.34-1337.3; 1337.4-1338.4.
[125] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 151. Binchy bases his suggestion on the "...frequent expression '*cluiche lúibe 7 liathróide*'".
[126] See appendix .

appropriate to adults. These grades are found in several individual texts and represent apparently well recognised divisions.[128] The terms *fían-cluiche* and *col-cluiche* are found throughout the legal material, describing such activities as dog-fights, capsizing boats and jugglers' feats.[129] They are wrongly translated 'fair-play' and foul-play', respectively.

The initial statement of the *Bretha Étgid* passage, also the sole remnant of the Old Irish main text, purports to discuss sporting items such as balls and clubs. Unfortunately only the sentence directly following the main text concerns itself with the equipment and strategy of the game. The subsequent extensive commentary discusses the contingencies of the penalties, the participants and the nature of the injuries.

The text states that children are immune in their *ruidles*-games[130] until they reach an age where they are responsible to pay a penalty-share for their *ropach*. *Ropach*, generally denoting an injury or wound, seems to have a specific connotation when used with games. Neil MacLeod suggests that the term *ropach* is used, "...when the intention of the attacker matches the injury actually inflicted."[131] The sense here seems to indicate that intentional wounding must be accounted for even in the otherwise immune *ruidles*-games, if the perpetrator has reached a culpable age. The text continues, stating that children are likewise immune in their *fían*-games until they reach the age for which they are responsible for a penalty of restitution. As *fían*-games represent both older participants and a higher inherent danger, the penalty is levied through restitution, rather than a share of a fine. Several subsequent stipulations

---

[127] CIH 945.21.
[128] The grades can be found at CIH 1347.32-40; 945.20-40; 1339.30-1341.7; 1589. This is discussed in chapter 7. See appendices 1-3.
[129] See *e.g.*, CIH 937.30ff (dog-fights); 272.7ff (boats); 288.7ff (jugglers).

are also outlined, mainly concerning whether the activity was legitimate to the game and whether or not the wound was a result of deliberate or accidental contact. It should be mentioned that similar considerations are also provided for the 'onlooker' (*sellach*), so long as he is able to prevent injuries to him.[132] Additionally, the distinction is made whether the individual who is wounded is profitable (*torbach*) or an idler (*esbach*).[133]

The third grade of games, the *col*-, or 'unlawful'-games,[134] is not discussed in this version of the text, though it is mentioned at the end of an independent fragment from *Bretha Étgid*, found in the manuscript Egerton 88.[135] The reference concerns the condition whereby the guilty party must pay one-half of the penalty of sick-maintenance, or one-quarter honour-price in case of death. These penalties concern the injuries inflicted by children once they have reached the age of punitive liability, in most cases seven years of age. As such they reflect penalties which are comparatively lenient.[136]

Additional though prolix commentary concerning injuries in games is offered elsewhere in the citation from Egerton 88. In one such passage, the heading claims to concentrate on 'children's *lúb*-games', though no individual game or piece of equipment is ever addressed.[137] The extensive commentary instead deals with the manifold contingencies of penalties from injuries in games. The text once again

---

[130] *Ruidles*, generally a term for 'suitable' or 'appropriate', is often used in a legal sense to denote something which is wholly immune or exempt from liability. As such it is often used to describe children's games overall. The term is discussed in chapter 7.

[131] MacLeod, Neil (1998) p 352.

[132] This is a common stipulation for spectators and witnesses. The *sellach* is often legally exempt or liable depending on whether or not he is able to prevent the injury or crime. See appendix 3. See also *e.g.*, CIH 404.7-405.16; 977.39. For a discussion of the *sellach*, see Kelly, Fergus (1988), pp 154-7.

[133] *e.g.*, CIH 945.29.

[134] The general meaning of *col*, when used adjectivally, is 'illicit, unlawful, blameful'. See DIL,C-321.55-81.

[135] CIH 1347.32-40. Reference at l. 40.

[136] *cf.* CIH 1340.18-19, where adults must pay one-half honour-price and restitution if the injury was inadvertant, full-honour-price and full restitution if the injury was intentional.

[137] CIH 1339.30.

distinguishes three age-groups and three types of game. Continuing the triadic pattern, the text attempts to list three offences for each appropriate age and type of game, though sometimes doubles the list to six offences, and sometimes stops at just one. Forms of punishment in this version include the standard penalties of honour-price, restitution and sick-maintenance, as well as the introduction of a penalty of fasting for children who have committed injury in the first age, i.e. up to seven years.

Throughout the commentary a concerted effort is observed in distinguishing and separating the appropriate ages and games. The result is often a convoluted though strikingly consistent account.[138] In one example, the text stresses that *ruidles*-games are not appropriate for sensible adults, as *col*-games are not appropriate for children, and, accordingly, that children's *ruidles*-games correspond to the *fian*-games of sensible adults.[139] The emphasis of the latter being that *ruidles*-games are the games with the highest immunity and most lenient penalties for children while *fian*-games offer the highest immunity and lowest penalties for adults. The text also accounts for repeat offenders, who scale a progressive ladder of punishment appropriate to their age, the number of offences and nature of the crime. It is therefore possible for an individual to pay penalties of an older age group if his crimes are recurrent.[140]

Further evidence for injuries in field-games is offered in a heptad concerning seven bloodsheds which warrant neither penalty nor sick-maintenance. The last in the list of seven is described as the blood shed by a boy in lawful games.[141] Once again the text is concerned mainly with the age of the participant and the nature of the

---

[138] In his commentary on the legal text *Mellbretha*, D.A. Binchy criticizes such verbosity, suggesting that the commentators have, "simply taken over the old technical terms and put them to work in a different environment." (1968) p 150. The consistency of the terms in the various legal texts argues against this.

[139] *Ibid.*, 1341.3-5.

[140] *Ibid.*, 1340.36-1341.2.

game, while considerations are made as to whether or not the injured individual is profitable or idle. The prevalence and detail of legal commentary on injuries is an obvious result of the popularity of the games themselves. While the laws offer few hints as to specific rules or strategy, their detail establishes the games as both common and familiar in contemporary society. References to games in the saga-literature support the legal material by offering linguistic parallels and consistency in terminology. Embellishments and exaggeration are easily dismissed as literary license, leaving a framework of terms, equipment and hints as to the manner, method and settings in which the games were played.

[141] *Ibid.* 9.19-33. The commentary closely resembles that in Egerton 88 fo. 28b, found at CIH 1339.30ff.

Chapter 7 Children's Entertainments

Background:

What is learned regarding children in early Ireland is largely dependent upon evidence from the legal material. As can be expected, the laws are not highly concerned with the legal status of children.[1] Apart from *Cáin Iarraith*, a text concerning fosterage and *Maccslechta*, a text concerning the issues of inheritance by children, the laws are relatively silent on the legal capacity of the child.[2] It can be safely assumed that the child was the property and responsibility of the parents, with slightly different implication when the child was placed in fosterage. Generally speaking, children under the age of fourteen held few legal rights. The laws differ as to the legal position of boys between the ages of fourteen and twenty. For these ages issues of inheritance, liability for injury or crime, and honour-price are the major discrepancies among the various legal texts. Generally, however, a boy of fourteen or older was amenable and culpable as an adult after he had acquired land or had received an inheritance through the death of his father.

Further contingencies regarding the legal status of children are defined by the status or position of the natural father. This is best represented in *Cáin Iarraith* where variation is found in a foster-son's requirements of dress, toys and equipment, all in accordance to his father's rank.[3] Similarly, the penalties and levels of sick-maintenance for injuries to children are most often determined by the status of the

---

[1] For discussions on the legal capacity and responsibility of children, see Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 81-92.

[2] *Cáin Iarraith* is found at CIH 1759.6-1770.14; the majority of *Maccslechta* is lost, though glossed quotations are found at CIH 107.9-110.13, 1296.17-1301.16, and 1546.26-1550.14. For summaries, see Kelly, Fergus (1988) pp 86-91, 102-3.

[3] CIH 1759.16-33. As seen in chapter 6, the son of high nobility receives a *camán* with brass rings.

victim's father. Finally, the culpability for injuries and crimes by children are usually borne by the natural father, or the foster-father when he is seen to be at fault.

1.1. Games:

The most comprehensive and topical evidence for the games and entertainments of children and adolescents in early Ireland is found in two early legal texts, *Cáin Iarraith*, mentioned above, and *Mellbretha*, often translated 'sports-judgements'.[4] Remarkably, the *Mellbretha* text was discovered in 1968 as a vellum scrap used to form the cover of a composite manuscript. Unfortunately, as the vellum was cut to form part of the cover, the text survives as a fragment.[5] D.A. Binchy, who edited and translated the text shortly after its discovery, writes that the fragment, "... all too brief though it is, gives us the continuous text of part of an old tract which we have hitherto known only from a few disjointed quotations embedded in a voluminous (and largely irrelevant) commentary."[6] What remains of the fragment of *Mellbretha* is a law tract concerning the liability and culpability for injuries in the course of various play and games. The tract begins, as is often the case, with a short pseudo-historical prologue and proceeds to discuss specific games and their relative degrees of responsibility should injury occur. The text lists the following categories and games, given here with the editor's translation:

> *It é inso ruidilsi cluiche .i. lúb, liathróit, corthe críche, tochailt trebán, lém, snám, sraenán, brandub, fidchell, buanbach, folach mígan, immarchor uanán, ardchless co n-ublaib; it saera in so uili cen othrus cen fiachu. Ataat and-som fiancluichi aili ata saini sretha: bocluasc (?) 7 echréim (?) 7 cor cloiche 7 dréim 7 léim 7 díbirciud...*
>
> The following are the games with total immunity: hurley, ball, 'boundary pillar', 'excavating small dwellings' (building sand-castles?), jumping,

[4] For the element *mell* see DIL, M-96.1-10. An etymological account of the title is discussed in the *Mellbretha* text itself, as well as in Binchy's edition and translation (1968), pp 144-5.
[5] O'Sullivan, Anne and William O'Sullivan (1968) p 140-1.
[6] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 144.

> swimming, wrestling (?), b., f. and b. (three board games), hide-and-seek, carrying..., juggling in the air with balls; all these are immune and involve neither sick-maintenance nor penalties. There are other types of competitive (?) games whose arrangements (rules?) are different:...-swinging, horse-riding, putting the weight, climbing, leaping, and pelting...[7]

As seen, the text begins with a discussion of the *ruidles*-games. The term *ruidles*, literally 'proper' or 'suitable', is used as an adjective or substantive to signify the particular properties or characteristics of a given concept.[8] In relation to games the term is customarily applied to those activities with the most lenient penalties and the smallest degree of inherent danger. As such the term is most often associated children's games.[9] It is likely the term was originally used as a general qualifier describing games proper or suitable for children, developing only later into the fixed and proper name of the classification.[10]

The first two terms listed in the passage, *lúb* and *liathróit*, have been previously discussed in detail in chapter 6, concerning field-games and sports. *Lúb*, a 'ring' or 'hoop', is mentioned elsewhere in the legal material and is often associated with the *liathróit*, 'ball', in texts throughout the source material. Commentary to a separate fragmentary version of *Mellbretha* is introduced with the Old Irish heading, 'These are here the appropriate *lúb*-games' (*It e and so rodilsi cluithe lub*).[11] Unfortunately, the extensive commentary is concerned solely with penalties and remuneration, revealing nothing as to individual games, strategy or equipment. The *lúb* is mentioned frequently in the early sources and may indeed have been a sporting

---

[7] *Ibid.*, pp 149-50. Each of the activities in this list is discussed below. In several cases variant translations, interpretations and suggestions are offered.

[8] See DIL, R-116.34-62.

[9] *Ruidles*-games are further discussed concerning injuries in games in section 2, below.

[10] I have refrained from translating *ruidles* in the compound as its definition corresponds to its development as the specific classification of children's games. An English equivalent is therefore lacking.

[11] CIH 1339.30. This passage is translated in appendix 3.

instrument common enough to represent its own particular category of games (*cluithe lub*), undoubtedly field-sports.[12]

Corthe criche, the next *ruidles*-game in the *Mellbretha* text, is translated by Binchy as 'boundary pillar'. The two terms are well attested in their respective meanings. Binchy's translation therefore seems the most likely interpretation. While it is impossible to know the details of the particular game, it seems to represent a comparatively safe one, again a children's game, and one in which a standing structure presumably acted as a boundary or limit.[13] The next activity appears in the manuscript as *tochtailt trebán.* Binchy restores the phrase to *tochailt trebán* and translates 'excavating small dwellings', suggesting that building sand castles is intended.[14] While the restoration to *tochailt* 'digging, excavating' is likely, *trebán* is uncertain. Presumably a diminutive, its relationship to *treb*, 'house, farm, holding', is suspect due to the fact that while *treb* is a well-attested term, there are no attestations to a corresponding diminutive, i.e., 'little house' etc.[15] *Trebán* is elsewhere attested as 'trickle' or 'streamlet'.[16] An alternative translation is thus 'digging little streams'. In context this seems more likely than building sand castles and is conceivably a reference to the threat to both child and land when interfering with water courses. The activity is perhaps alluded to in the eighth-century Old Irish *Gospel of Saint Thomas* when a young Jesus is described as building walls of clay around twelve small pools. A local boy halts Jesus' progress by allowing several small streams to pour out the sides of the walls, destroying the enclosures. Far from forgiving, Jesus curses the boy for destroying his play-thing (*cáine*), upon which the boy collapses and dies. That the

[12] See chapter 6.
[13] While *crích* can also refer to a 'culmination' or 'end', it is best attested as 'boundary'. The pairing with *coirthe* is irregular, though perhaps due to the customary alliteration in names of children's games.
[14] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 151.
[15] DIL, T-280.69-281.25.
[16] *Ibid.*, T-282.54-6.

pools were constructed as an amusement is portrayed through the tale's rather laconic assertion "...it would have been better for him if he had not destroyed the play-thing of the King's son." [17]

The next three pursuits in the *Mellbretha* text are relatively straightforward. Leaping (*lém*) and swimming (*snám*) are mentioned frequently in the saga-literature as skills young warriors and heroes possess. The young Mael Dúin is said to have outdone all his peers in a list of various pursuits, including leaping (*léim*). [18] Interestingly, in a short passage in the Middle Irish *Lebor na Cert* the 'foreigners' of Dublin are praised for their supremacy in swimming (*buaid snáma*).[19] In a list found in the *Táin* Cú Chulainn is said to possess many dextrous and athletic talents, one of which is described as the gift of swimming (*buaid snáma*).[20] In the Middle Irish "Boyish Exploits of Finn", Finn and his friends enjoy swimming and diving in the waters of a nearby lake. A passage from the law tract *Cáin Iarraith* provides the most substantial evidence for swimming, declaring that foster-sons must be taught to swim, though only if a body of water is reasonably close to the residence.

> *IS ann ata in snamh in tan ata usque insnamhadh a feran*n *a athar no a senathar no aite...7 munu fuil usque insnamha, is slan.*
>
> It is there the swimming is [to be taught], when there is water suitable for swimming in the territory of the father or grandfather or foster-father...and if there is not water which is suitable for swimming, he is exempt. [21]

The next *ruidles*-game, *sraenan*, translated 'wrestling', is undoubtedly connected with the verb *sráinid*, though it is perhaps more accurately rendered 'pulling' or 'overthrowing'. Wrestling is well attested in the sources, though generally deemed *imthrascad*, literally 'mutual pulling'. *Imthrascad* is mentioned several times

---

[17] Carney, James (1964) pp 91-3.
[18] Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 455.
[19] Dillon, Myles (1962) p 118, l. 1749.
[20] *Táin* LL, l. 550; transl. p 152.

in the *Táin*, representing another of Cú Chulainn's boyhood talents.[22] Cú Chulainn is further described as a champion at *imdirech*, a game which seems to have involved stripping an opponent of certain pieces of clothing.[23] As an amusement *imdirech* is unattested outside of the *Táin*. *Sraenan* in the *Mellbretha* text is likely a reference to the universal game of pulling an opponent over a line, or simply pulling him to the ground. This is indeed a form of wrestling, though the specific term *sraenan* seems to warrant a more specific translation. The relatively non-violent activity of mere 'pulling' is again appropriate to the *ruidles*-games and to the age of the boys involved. Alternatively, *sraenan* may represent a regional variant of *imthrascad*.

The next three activities in the *ruidles*-list refer to boardgames. As seen in chapter 5, *fidchell*, *brandub* and *buanbach* are mentioned frequently throughout the early sources. In commentary to his translation of *Mellbretha*, Binchy suggests the notion of small boys engaging in the three boardgames, which "...are invariably played by kings and heroes", is "ludicrous".[24] This reaction is indeed surprising as *Cáin Iarraith* directly states that foster-sons must be instructed in the art of *fidchell* and *brandub*.[25] As fosterage in Ireland began at an early age and lasted until the child reached his mid-to late-teens, it is likely instruction in *fidchell* also began at an early age, and that the instruction was at least in part a type of military training. While the saga-literature does in fact portray heroes and kings as common participants, the heroes are often young heroes, fresh out of fosterage.[26] An example of this occurs in "The Boyish Exploits of Finn", where Finn is called to play *fidchell* against the king, whom he bests in seven consecutive games. His superior play prompts the king to ask

---

[21] CIH 1761.26-30. Translation is my own.
[22] *Táin* LU, ll 556-7; transl. p 140. *Táin* LL, ll 838-41; transl. p 161.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 150.
[25] CIH 1760.32-4.

the young boy's identification and by whom he was taught his craft.[27] Instruction in such boardgames was quite clearly a part of a child's fosterage and military training. The inclusion of the boardgames in the *Mellbretha* text is likewise to be expected and far from 'ludicrous'. The classification of the boardgames as *ruidles*-games seems due to both their frequency among young children as well as the lack of inherent danger.

The next three activities in *Mellbretha* are problematic. Regarding *folach migán,* little can be added to the suggested translation of 'hide-and-seek'. As Binchy discusses in his commentary, *folach* survives in several dialects of Modern Irish as the first element in names for 'hide-and-seek'.[28] *Mígan* is otherwise unattested, though ostensibly a diminutive. In addition to 'hiding' or 'covering' *folach* also means 'supporting, carrying, bearing' etc. The phrase may therefore refer to carrying the *migán.* The next entry in the list, *immarchor uanán*, suggests the carrying or in fact tossing of another diminutive, the *uanán.* Binchy suggests *úanan* is the diminutive of either 'foam' (*úan*) or 'lamb' (*úan*). Either is plausible in the notion of a harmless game. Interestingly, in a fragment from the law tract *Do Astud Chirt 7 Dliged*, *immarchor* is glossed by the term *imbert*. *Imbert*, the verbal noun of *imm-beir*, has several meanings, one of which is 'game', or indeed 'playing a game'. If a game is in fact meant in this example, the gloss suggests that *immarchor* was a common enough element in the name of games to developed into the meaning of a game in general, or perhaps more simply play itself. Judging from the *ruidles-cluiche* list, carrying and tossing seem to have been standard elements of games, whether in actual practice or simply in name.

---

[26] See *e.g.*, *Táin* LL, l 550; transl. p 152. Meyer, Kuno (1892c) pp 374-5; Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 457; Best, R.I. (1907) pp 162-3.
[27] Meyer, Kuno (1904) p 184.
[28] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 151.

The final activity in the group of *ruidles*-games, *ardchless co n-ublaib,* translates literally 'high-feats with balls'. This clearly refers to juggling, an entertainment discussed in chapter 2. Professional jugglers are mentioned frequently in the early source material and juggling was undoubtedly a casual amusement as well as a trained skill. Unless conducted with hazardous objects the inherent dangers are negligible. As such the activity is appropriate to *ruidles*-games and likely common among children.

Following its discussion of *ruidles*-games, the *Mellbretha* text progresses to a discussion of several activities which are considered *fian*-games. These games, as evidenced by numerous attestations outside *Mellbretha*, are inherently more dangerous and consistently apply to older participants, particularly adolescents.[29] The first activity, *bocluasc*, is likely a compound of *boc* 'male goat' and *luasc* 'swinging' or 'swaying'.[30] If these are indeed the elements of the compound, *bocluasc* could involve some type of chasing or capturing of a goat. *Fian*-games involve higher degrees of danger and potential injury. The elevated danger of the activity was perhaps a result of the sharp hooves and horns of the animal. Alternatively, it may have involved role-playing, perhaps mimicking the swinging and butting of heads of sparring male goats. It should be noted that in this case, as well as in the case of *immarchor úanán*, the subject elements of activities' names, i.e. *boc* and *úan*, are both terms which are elsewhere used to describe members of society who are mentally deficient. *Úan* is widely accepted as the source of the terms *ónna, óinmit,* and *óin*, generally described as common idiots or fools. *Boc* appears in the term *boicmell*,

[29] See *e.g.* CIH 9.19ff; 266.9f; 280.21; 937.30ff, etc. *Fian* undoubtedly shares its name and classification with the adolescent war-band. For a detailed discussion of the *fiana*, see McCone, Kim (1990) pp 203-29.

[30] See DIL, B-128.70-80; L-225.30-41.

found in a text describing twelve different fools and how they are classified.[31] Unfortunately, there is no additional evidence to support a possible relationship between the animals, the games and the names of fools. The connection may in fact be coincidence.

The next term in the *Mellbretha* text is found in the manuscript fragment as *eichdreim*. Binchy restores the term to *echreim* and translates 'horseriding'. *Dreim* is well attested in the early sources as any type of climbing or ascending and the activity intended may well have been some type of competition involving the mounting of horses. Alternatively, the activity may have involved the breaking of young or untamed horses by attempting to mount them. References in the source material to horse riding and particularly racing are usually termed *imrimm ech*.[32] The law tract *Cáin Iarraith* uses this phrase when it states that a child must be given a proper riding horse and instruction 'in the time of riding' (*eachuib i naimsir imrime*). The subsequent commentary later qualifies that the horse should be provided for the child after he reaches seven years of age.[33] Children of all ages certainly rode horses in early Ireland. The term as attested in the *Mellbretha* text, however, need not necessarily be restored to reflect this. The inclusion of such an activity among the *fian*-games suggests actions more inherently dangerous than basic riding. Horse-mounting and horse taming seem more appropriate here, and require no restoration of the text.

Cor cloiche, the next *fian*-game in the *Mellbretha* list is literally 'casting a stone'. This rather rudimentary activity is likely akin to the Highland game of putting the stone and, accordingly, the modern shot-put. In the list of his various childhood athletic achievements, the hero Mael Dúin is once again said to have outdone all his

[31] Fools and mental incompetents are discussed in chapter 2, above..
[32] See DIL, I-169.41-60. For a discussion, see chapter 3.

peers in various activities, including the casting of stones (*cor liac*).[34] The inherent dangers in such an activity are patent. Throwing, particularly of spears and stones, is often mentioned in relation to events at assemblies and fairs. The Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem for Tailtiu states a that 'throw at random' (*geiss di urchur ná geib greim*) is forbidden during its famous fair.[35] That stone-throwing was important in paramilitary training finds support in the twelfth-century commentary of Giraldus Cambrensis. In describing the various characteristics and pursuits of the native Irish, he declares;

> They are quicker and more expert than any other people in throwing, when everything else fails, stones as missiles, and such stones do great damage to the enemy in an engagement.[36]

As is customary, it is difficult to determine whether Giraldus's commentary on the 'skill' indicates his admiration or in fact his disdain.

The next term *dreim*, as seen with *echdreim*, indicates climbing or ascending. In this case *dreim* presumably refers to natural structures such as cliffs, trees, rock-faces, etc. In commentary regarding blemishes and wounds to foster-sons, *Cáin Iarraith* states that the foster-father must return the fosterage-fee and pay half-honour price if a child dies accidentally under his care. The examples given for such an occurrence include if the child drowns in a lake or climbs a cliff and falls to his death (*ma fo aill no dreim no loch foscert*).[37]

The next *Mellbretha* activity, *léim*, is perhaps the most indeterminate in the list. Also included in the list of *ruidles*-games, *léim* clearly denotes a type of leaping or jumping. As Binchy remarks, it is difficult to imagine any type of jumping or

---

[33] CIH 1761.3. The passage is part of the main text.
[34] Stokes, Whitley (1888) p 455.
[35] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, pp 154-5. The term used here, *airchor*, derives from the verb *ar-cuirethar*
[36] O'Meara, John J. (1951) p 101.
[37] CIH 1767.22-3.

leaping which is inherently more dangerous than another, particularly to a third party.[38] Extended meanings of the term *léim* include 'attacking' though only in the select contexts. All attestations to this meaning occur outside the legal material.[39] If in fact simple leaping is meant, I presume either a competition is intended, or perhaps any type of general leaping that causes serious injury, perhaps leaping from heights or across gaps, including that which occurs outside games or sport.

The final *fían-cluiche* activity, as the text at this point cuts off, is *díbirciud*, the verbal noun of *do-bidci*, best translated simply as 'throwing' or 'casting', or possibly 'shooting'. There may well have been a qualifying element following the term, describing a particular type of throwing or perhaps the object thrown. The inherent danger of intentional as well as indiscriminate throwing of objects is clear. That the term is found in the *fían*-games suggests that some type of object or competition is present, and that injury was potential though perhaps not serious. The term itself is found throughout the source material in various contexts and conditions.[40] Interestingly, a thirteenth-century praise poem intimates a likely possibility of *díbirciud* in the form of sport and game. In 'showering' the poem's subject with acclaim, the author compares each piece of praise to an arrow cast (variously, *diobragadh*, *diobruigim*, *diobraigthe*) from a bow. The poet continues the metaphor, telling both subject and audience to stand very still and remain silent, so that both archer and arrows find their target without harm. The example implies a game where the intention is to miss the object, rather than hit it, suggestive of circus type knife-throwing and the exploits of William Tell.[41] It is perhaps the activity mentioned in the

---

[38] Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 152.
[39] See DIL, L-86.85-87.32.
[40] See DIL, D-70.71-71.15.
[41] The poem, found in RIA MS 490 p. 161i , is entitled 'Congaibh ro/m th'aighidh a Aodh'. I owe the reference and translation (pers. comm.) to Dr. Katharine Simms.

Mellbretha text. As the text is fragmentary, however, the nature of the 'throwing' must remain uncertain.

Though the *Mellbretha* fragment is incomplete, an additional fragment, this one found in the legal manuscript Egerton 88, is positively identified as belonging to the *Mellbretha* text and lists the third classification of games, the *col-cluiche*.

> *Ataitt ceithre colc[h]luichi la Feinee: uatha[d] fri hilar 7 crosdiubrucud 7 tāithe tuilche 7 bundsach i n-airecht.*
>
> There are four guilty-games with the Feine: a few among many and cross-throwing and contending on a hill (?) and a javelin into an assembly.[42]

Binchy translates the *col-cluiche* 'guilty-games' though they are perhaps better rendered the 'unlawful-games'. There is little evidence to suspect that a game in the traditional sense is meant in each case. The intention of the classification seems rather to address general activities in which serious injury may occur, whether or not occurring in sport or game. As evident from the examples, each activity is designated *col* or 'unlawful' as it contains some element of unfairness or imbalance.

The first example in the list is unequivocal, literally 'few against many'. Any game which pits uneven sides against one another is unfair. When extended to more aggressive games with older participants, such games are inherently dangerous. A fitting example of such a game is described in the Middle Irish *Muintir Finn*, where the requisite for becoming a member of the *fiana* is described thus;

> *ní gabtha fer díb fós co nderntái latharlog mór co roiched fillidh a uathróigi. ocus no chuirthe ann é ocus a sciath les ocus fad láime do chronn chuill. ocus nónbar laech iar sin chuigi co nái sleguib leo ocus deich nimuiri atturru co ndibruidigís i nóinfecht é. ocus dá ngontai thairis sin é ní gabtai a bfianoigecht.*
>
> No man was taken [into the *fiana*] till in the ground a large hole had been made (such as to reach the fold of his belt) and he put into it with his shield and a forearm's length of a hazel stick. Then must nine warriors, having nine spears, with a ten furrow's width betwixt them

[42] Text found at CIH 1344.5f. Translation is my own. *Cf.* translation by Binchy, D.A. (1968) p 150. My translation of *táithe* as 'contending' is explained below.

and him, assail him and in concert let fly at him. If past that guard of his he were hurt then, he was not received into Fianship.[43]

The activity of the passage fittingly describes the unfair advantage of uneven sides, though in a context of proving a warrior's worth. Additionally, the passage includes a further reference to 'throwing' (*dibruidigís*) in a context of games, seen in the list of *fian*-games and the basis of the subsequent activity in the *col*-game list.

The next activity enumerated in the Egerton fragment combines *díbirciud*, 'throwing', with the Latin borrowing *cros*-.[44] This seems to denote any type of illicit throwing, especially that which goes against an accepted bearing, i.e. throwing where the ball is not expected to be thrown, against or contrary to the direction intended. The danger involved is clear.

The next *col*-game, *táithe tuilche*, Binchy tentatively translates 'hiding on a hill'. Hiding is a relatively innocent activity, unless done so in the form of an ambush. The extension of an ambush on a hill would indeed add further danger, if in fact this is what is intended. The terms as they appear in the manuscript however are doubtful and present several possibilities. *Tuige thuilche* is a common legal phrase meaning literally the 'covering of a hill'. The phrase is most often used in the sense of an assembly.[45] When followed by the preposition *fri* the phrase is generally rendered 'contention' or 'disputing'. If this phrase indeed corresponds to the *táithe tuilche* of *Mellbretha*, the frequency of its usage may have developed into the name of the activity itself, used without the preposition *fri*. 'Contending on a hill' is certainly unfair as one side is presumably higher than another. Such an unfair advantage is contrary to the nature of any game. An activity similar to the popular childhood contest of 'king of the mountain' or 'king of the castle' is a likely candidate, though the

[43] O'Grady, Standish Hayes (1892) p 92; transl. p 95.
[44] For *cros*-, see GOI p 575. Also DIL, C-548.51-549.53.
[45] DIL, T-377.75-378.4. See also MacLeod, Neil (1998) p 355.

col-status suggests a more violent pursuit, suitable for adults. As discussed, 'hiding on a hill' is perhaps too innocuous of an activity to be included among 'unlawful'-games. While 'contending on a hill' offers a more likely possibility, the terms remain uncertain.

The final activity in the list of *col*-games, *bundsach i nairecht*, is clear, though seemingly bizarre. The *bundsach* is generally a rod or staff. It is frequently mentioned in reference to children's playthings and as such is most often translated 'toy-javelin'.[46] Cú Chulainn's *bundsach* in the *Táin* is perhaps the best known example, though the term itself is well attested.[47] *Bretha Crólige*, a law tract concerning sick-maintenance, lists the *tres bundsach*, apparently a fight or battle with the rods, as an activity which must not take place in the house of the invalid.[48] The phrase occurs as a gloss on a statement that neither cries of victory nor shouting in games were to be allowed in the house, implying that the game was both disruptive and loud. *Airecht*, the second element of the phrase, denotes a general assembly or 'court'. The term survives in Modern Irish (*oireachtas*) as a lawful assembly or festival. *Mellbretha*'s activity, literally 'javelin into an assembly' seems both hazardous and peculiar. If in fact the activity refers to a game, it is tempting to suggest that the *airecht* in this case is a group of participants assembled for sport. This is improbable, however, as *airecht* is specifically used for a formal, often legal assembly.[49] Other words exist for general masses or assemblies and if a simple group was meant, a more appropriate term would certainly have been used. As it stands, the situation seems to involve a staff or rod used, brought or thrown into the legal assembly, perhaps out of contention or antagonism at the proceedings. As with the previous activities, its designation as a

---

[46] See DIL, B-244.60-245.16.
[47] See *e.g. Táin* LU, ll. 415, 578; *Táin* LL, l. 760. For examples outside the *Táin*, see DIL, B-244.84-245.16. For its use as a weapon, see Harbison, Peter (1976) pp 274-5.
[48] Binchy, D.A. (1938) p 49, §61.

col-game appears a result of a legal classification, rather than its currency as a legitimate game. The appellation itself is also perhaps merely a figurative title, describing a game involving rods and/or crowds.

The prevailing features of the 'unlawful games' therefore seem to clarify the term *col-cluiche* as referring to dangerous and unfair actions, not necessarily having any association with games. The reference to throwing in *crosdibirciud* is the only term which suggests play of any kind, though the nature of the throwing is certainly far from certain. It is doubtful whether children would have been involved in any of the *col*-games. This is clarified in legal commentary from the version of *Mellbretha* in the Egerton manuscript where *col*-games are specifically identified as inappropriate for children in the same way that *ruidles*-games are inappropriate for sensible adults.[50]

2. Injuries in Games:[51]

While the laws are generally quiet concerning the strategy and equipment of games, they are surprisingly consistent in their treatment of injuries sustained in games, particularly in relation to *ruidles*- and *fian*-games. Several legal texts specify penalties and liabilities for both types of games. As discussed, *ruidles*-games generally designate children's games. Regarding offences in children's games, commentary from the *Mellbretha* text states that children are punished in three ways; a beating (*cúrad*), a beating plus fasting (*beth cen biad*), and fasting plus restitution (*aithgen*).[52] Following a general legal principle the punishments intensify each time the child errs, rather than according to the severity of the crime. The subject of criminality or habitual offence features frequently in the early laws, perhaps best

---

[49] See DIL, A-195.8-79.
[50] CIH 1341.3-5. See appendix 3.
[51] The following discussion focuses on evidence provided in several legal passages. The passages are provided and translated in appendices 1-4.

summarised in the statement from *Senbríathra Fíthail*, 'death is better than habitual crime' (*ferr bás bithbiníu*).[53] The deterrence of future offences in games seems to have been at least as important as addressing the implications of those already committed.

Extensive commentary in a passage from *Bretha Étgid* discusses injuries by and to participants of three age groups: seven to twelve years of age, representing the early stage of fosterage; twelve to seventeen years of age, representing the later stage of fosterage, adolescence and conceivably inclusion in the *fían*; and seventeen years and older, representing adulthood. [54] These three age groups further correspond to three grades of games, ranked according to both the severity of the potential injury and the age of the participant. The three grades are usually classified by the well-recognised divisions of *ruidles*-games, *fían*-games and *col*-games, discussed above.[55] The terms *fían-cluiche* and *col-cluiche* are found elsewhere in the legal material concerning adults, describing legal categories in activities such as dog-fights, capsizing boats and jugglers' feats.[56] In modern translations they are often rendered 'fair-play' and foul-play', respectively. This disregards available evidence and simplifies an otherwise well-defined distinction based on age and inherent danger.

As discussed, while purporting to discuss implications of various games the extensive commentary in the *Mellbretha* text from Egerton 88 centres around the manifold contingencies of penalties from injuries in the games. The text distinguishes three age-groups and three types of game. Continuing the triadic pattern, the text further attempts to list three offences for each appropriate age and type of game. In some cases the text doubles its list to include six offences, in other cases it stops at

---

[52] CIH 1340.15

[53] Smith, Roland (1928) p 27. Animals are frequently described as *bithbinche*, ' habitually vicious'. Owners of such animals, particularly dogs and livestock are usually liable only when the animal has not been proclaimed as such. For examples, see CIH 1578.33-6; 266.28-43; 73.26-7; See DIL, B-108.71-109.22.

[54] CIH 945.20-40. See appendix 1.

only one. Throughout this text and the additional commentaries a concerted effort is observed in distinguishing and separating the appropriate ages and games. As with corresponding legal passages, the result is often a convoluted though strikingly consistent account.[57]

As previously discussed, a passage from *Bretha Étgid* stresses that *ruidles*-games are not appropriate for sensible adults, as *col*-games are not appropriate for children. Accordingly, the text goes on to state that children's *ruidles*-games correspond to the *fían*-games of sensible adults.[58] The latter assertion emphasises that *ruidles*-games are the games with the highest immunity and most lenient penalties for children while *fían*-games offer the highest immunity and lowest penalties for adults. The text also accounts for repeat offenders, who scale a progressive ladder of punishment according to three factors; their age, the number of offence and the nature of the crime. Consistent with the legal standard in regard to habitual offence, the text declares that an individual is to pay penalties of an older age group if his crimes are recurrent.[59]

Further evidence for injuries in field-sports is offered in commentary to a legal Heptad. The Heptad is concerned with seven lawful bloodsheds which warrant neither penalty nor sick-maintenance. The last in the list of seven is described as the blood shed by a boy in lawful games (*fuil mic a cain cluithe*).[60] Once again the commentary to the Heptad is concerned mainly with the age of the participant and the nature of the game. Considerations are also made as to whether or not the injured individual's

---

[55] See *e.g.*, CIH 1347.32-40; 945.20-40; 1339.30-1341.7; 1589.
[56] CIH 937.30ff (dog-fights); 272.7ff (boats); 288.7ff (jugglers).
[57] In his commentary to *Mellbretha* Binchy criticizes such verbosity, suggesting that the commentators have, "...simply taken over the old technical terms and put them to work in a different environment." (1968) p 150. The consistency of the terms in the various legal texts, however, argues against this.
[58] CIH 1341.3-5.
[59] CIH 1340.36-1341.2.This is again the principal of *bithbinche*, or criminality.
[60] *Ibid.*, 9.19-33. The passage is Old Irish main text. The commentary closely resembles that in Egerton 88 fo. 28b, found at CIH 1339.30ff.

presence was authorised. This consideration also appears in the commentary in *Bretha Étgid* concerning an injured party whose presence is either legitimate (*torbach*) or unnecessary (*esbach*).[61] The precise legal distinction between the *torbach* and the *esbach* is unclear. The distinction may signify simply whether or not the injured party is actively participating in the game. Alternatively it may concern whether or not he has petitioned legal immunity for his play. Legal immunity and protection for participation in play is apparently the stipulation Cú Chulainn does not fulfil when he is denied protection from the boys on the playing-field at Emain Macha, described in the *Táin*.[62] Perhaps most importantly, the inclusion in the Heptad of the blood shed in children's games among more adult concerns such as blood shed in battle, blood shed by a physician, and blood shed by a jealous wife, attests to the frequency and the potential violence of such activity.[63]

3. Toys and pet animals:

Beyond games, sport and their respective injuries, several passages in the laws describe the legal considerations of children's toys. Commentary to the law tract *Di Cetharslicht Athgabála* describes the rightful period in which children's toys may be distrained. The passage states that *essrechta*, described as 'the noble things which take the sickness away from children' (*na hi rouaisi gatus serg dona macaib*), may be distrained for one day only.[64] The commentary provides examples of such playthings, citing playing-sticks (*camana*), balls (*liathroiti*) and hoops (*luboca*). Interestingly, an

---

[61] See appendix 1.
[62] *Táin* LU, ll. 418-20; transl. p 136. *Táin* LL, ll. 774-80; transl. p 159. The passage is discussed in chapter 6.
[63] It should be noted that additional evidence is available for injuries in games. Unfortunately, however, beyond precise stipulations and minutiae of penalties little is revealed as to the nature or strategy of the individual games, or if in fact games are intended.
[64] CIH 373.25; 888.40.

exception is made for small dogs and cats (*catena no oircce*). These articles must be restored after three days.

References to pet animals are relatively common in the legal material, though not exclusively associated with children. The term e*ssrechta* generally denotes anything which is literally 'outside the law'.[65] The legal principle behind the term asserts that those outside the proscribed community have no legal accountability and therefore no legal protection or redress. As livestock and farm animals were most often fully accountable for their offences and trespasses, it must be assumed that the use of the term *essrechta* for pet animals distinguishes them as immune from similar prosecution.[66] Alternatively, their presence in a household may have been allowed only when consented to at the host's own risk. It is likely that pet animals were trained as such and presented little legal risk. Guard dogs, attack dogs, stray dogs, foraging dogs and racing dogs are all attested in the early laws and legally accountable.[67] The pet dog, and as likely the pet cat, were doubtless small and indoor pets, harmless enough to warrant legal immunity. A passage from *Bretha Étgid* hints at the vulnerability of the house pet, stating that a muzzle must be placed on any dog which habitually attacks animals such as birds, lambs and 'pet animals of the house' (*eisrechtaib in tighe*).[68]

A passage from the *Heptads* lists pet animals (*eisrechta*) as one of seven pledges which are both difficult and unprofitable.[69] The accompanying gloss lists dogs (*coin*) and small cats (*cait becc*) as examples, though only until they are capable

---

[65] See DIL, E-100.63-101.20. Stokes, Whitley (1904) p 327.
[66] *Essrechta* are most often referred to as pet animals, though not exclusively.
[67] For a discussion of the various types of dogs and their legal implications, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 114-21. See also Breatnach, Liam (1996) pp 18-20.
[68] CIH 313.1-3 ≈ 1389.12-14.
[69] CIH 35.19-21

of deeds (*co ngabait gnimradh*).[70] Young animals were presumably suitable for children until they were old enough to perform more useful functions such as hunting, guarding, mousing etc. The entry for *essrecht* in *O'Davoren's Glossary* lists three pet animals as: the lapdog (*oircne*), glossed as 'short'; the *sporan*, glossed as 'long'; and the pet dog (*messán*) as typical examples of such 'precious toy-animals'.[71] *Sporan* is well attested as a 'purse' or 'pouch'. The pet may in fact have received its nickname from being kept in such a purse.

Lap-dogs (*oirce*, diminutive *oircne*) are the most well attested pet animals. The *Triads* list the lap-dog as one of the three principle entertainers at a gathering.[72] A fragmentary legal passage on the rightful ownership of dogs states that the lap-dog (*oircce*) is proper to a hospitaler, a queen, a doctor and a *cruitire*.[73] Lap-dogs are principally associated with women, particularly, as in the previous case, with those of high status. In one such description from an Old Irish legal gloss the lap-dog (*orca*) is used to keep fairies away from a woman while she is giving birth. Additionally, the gloss declares that if the dog is killed while the woman is in labour, the guilty party must pay not only the appropriate compensation for the animal, but also provide a priest to recite from scripture for her throughout the labour.[74] The law tract *Críth Gablach* states that the *aire tuise*, or 'freeman of precedence', is not to be reproached for his pets, whether greyhounds for racing (*mílchú la echraid*) or lap-dogs for his wife (*orcae lia ben*).[75] In a Middle Irish *dindsenchas* poem the mythical Boand's pet dog (*messán*) is so loyal as to die shortly after she herself perishes.[76] In a similar tale,

---

[70] CIH 35.30.
[71] Stokes, Whitley (1904) p 326. Stokes finds this possibility unlikely though offers no alternative suggestions. *Ibid.*, p 327. *Cf. baircne*, below.
[72] Meyer, Kuno (1906a) §241.
[73] CIH 2128.26.34; 1268.16-7.
[74] CIH 806.33-807.10. See Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 120-1.
[75] CG, l. 408, p 16.
[76] Gwynn, E.J. (1903-35) Vol. 10, p 33.

also from the *dindsenchas*, the daughter of the king of Leinster is kidnapped, whereupon she dies of shame. Her lapdog promptly follows suit.[77]

While *essrechta* may have been exempt from legal redress, the lap-dog, according to an imaginative entry in *Sanais Cormac*, was introduced to Ireland under different circumstances.[78] The entry, found under the lap-dog's name 'Mug-éime', states that Cairbre Musc, son of Conaire, king of Ireland, travels to Cornwall to visit a friend who owns a beautiful lap-dog (*orca*). With him Cairbre brings a decorated and valuable knife with a silver and gold adorned handle. Coveting the handsome lap-dog, Cairbre rubs his knife with grease and fat to tempt the pet. When the lap-dog proceeds to gnaw and chew the handle, Cairbre demands compensation. As the story relates, the law in Britain at the time stated "every animal for his crime".[79] As such Cairbre is awarded the lap-dog as payment for the damaged knife. Upon reaching Ireland the lap-dog gives birth to several pups, each quickly claimed by neighbouring kings.

While cats in general are well attested in the early sources, references to the cat as solely a pet animal are relatively infrequent. As previously discussed, kittens are considered the toys of children until they are old enough to perform a more useful function, presumably mousing. The Old Irish poem *Pangur Ban* relates the affection and compassion of a monk for his cat, who acts as pet, companion and trusty mouser.[80] The term *baircne* is applied to cats in several passages from the legal material. Fergus Kelly suggests *baircne* is a diminutive of *bárc* 'vessel, container', and suggests that this particular cat was probably kept inside the house, in a special

[77] Stokes, Whitley (1894) pp 310-1.
[78] Meyer, Kuno (1911b) pp 111-2.
[79] The principle is stated in several Irish legal texts and seems more likely an Irish principle. See *e.g.* CIH 449.11-19, Kelly, Fergus (1988) p 354. For a discussion, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 148-9, 156.
[80] Murphy, Gerard (1956) pp 1-2.

basket or hamper.[81] This is reminiscent of the dog associated with the *sporan*, or 'purse'.

Interestingly, pigs are also frequently included in descriptions of pet animals. Again, women seem to have been the customary owners of such pets. The law tract *Cáin Lánamna* states that the pet pig (*orc peta*) is a pet proper to women.[82] According to *Bretha Comaithchesa*, a legal text concerning 'judgements of neighbourhood', pet pigs seem to have been slightly troublesome. The trespass of pet pigs is addressed specifically, especially those who break through doors.[83] Elsewhere, the damages, trespasses and sheer annoyance of pet pigs 'who follow everyone' (*orccpeta muc tiagdae i ndiaidh caich*) are discussed.[84]

Lastly, pet birds of various types are also mentioned in the early sources. A Middle Irish poem laments the loss of a pet goose, pointing out to the pet's mistress that her grief is both exaggerated and a typical of women to their pets.[85] Pet cranes (*peta cuirre*) seem also to have been relatively common.[86] A miscellaneous Old Irish legal fragment states that a penalty of five *séts* must be paid for the killing of a pet crane (*corr*), the same penalty as the killing of a pet dog or cat.[87] Elsewhere, the trespass of cranes (*corr*) is discussed in relation to whether or not they are pets (*pettai oiss eisrechta*).[88] Lastly, in a whimsical description from the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* a man's eye is said to sink so far into its socket that even a pet crane (*petta cuirre*) would be unable to pick it out.[89]

---

[81] Kelly, Fergus (1997) p 122, fn 142.
[82] CIH 509.18.
[83] CIH 194.22; 72.18.
[84] CIH 891.23-4.
[85] Murphy, Gerard (1956) p 88.
[86] For a discussion of how cranes and herons are treated in general in the early Irish legal material, see Kelly, Fergus (1997) pp 124-9.
[87] CIH 1043.1.
[88] CIH 571.9.
[89] Meyer, Kuno (1892a) pp 50-1.

It can be safely assumed that various other pet animals were kept in early Irish society, as a result of both specific and extenuating circumstances. Runts of litters, animals sickly at birth and animals requiring similar special care are the likeliest examples. Farming dominated early Irish society, as such domestic animals were primary to everyday life. The rather surprising extent of legal evidence for pet animals typifies both their place and prevalence. Their value as companion and pastime is clear.

Conclusions

I will begin by stating that in certain examples and respects it may appear that this examination errs on the side of criticism and unnecessary pedantry. If so, this is a reaction to an investigation of the secondary sources. As discussed in several chapters, particularly concerning field-sports and musical instruments, inaccurate translations and appraisals have had considerable impact on the historicity of particular games, objects and amusements. A strict adherence to extant evidence and attested terminology is therefore necessary for a critical examination. Translations of the remote past are a product of the immediate past, which in many cases, and certainly in several here, is riddled with objective whether unconscious or implied. I have attempted to treat the sources with scrutiny and unbiased judgement, with no other intention than preventing historical tradition and cultural sentiment from affecting research.

A particularly bountiful approach for the modern social historian is one which examines, compares and contrasts all available resources. This approach is especially successful in respect to early Ireland. The legal material provides wholesale and reliable evidence that entertainment was planned, initiated, participated in and enjoyed by all members of society. The extensive commentary on injuries to person and property further indicates the widespread application and familiarity of the various entertainments. Legislation and legal consideration would hardly be administered to unfamiliar or isolated activities. The value, importance and occasion of various entertainments are also indicated by the laws. Horse-racing was an integral part of the early fair. The proper maintenance and care of racing greens was a formal legal sanction, as were the stipulations of a public sporting-field. The laws reveal that

musicians and other entertainers were not only professional but also, according to the specific text, either semi- or fully-independent. They are likewise described in the saga-literature as either itinerant or permanently attached to a patron. Legal evidence on field-sports, games and toys also offers a valuable window onto the otherwise terse discussion of children in early Irish society.

By contrast, the saga-literature reveals independent though surprisingly consistent themes within its descriptions of entertainment and play. As expected, nobility and the warrior classes are the chief participants in most accounts, though it is not unreasonable to apply the games, sport and amusement of the legendary figures to members of society as a whole. References to the ability of young heroes in pursuits such as field-sports, boardgames and horse-racing compliment legal commentary on liability for injuries and damages involved in similar pursuits. Entertainers found in what are otherwise embellished and outlandish descriptions of feasts and banquets provide substantiation for otherwise bare attestations to their counterparts found in the laws.

Archaeology and artefactual evidence in many cases substantiates otherwise cursory allusions in the written material. As seen with horse equipment, references in the saga-literature to the decoration of horses, chariots and trappings find material support in extant bridles. Comparatively, depictions of musical instruments on votive objects and high-crosses provide useful evidence in the reckoning of the evolution of individual instruments, as seen with the *crott*. Additionally, artefactual finds such as the various gameboards of the Viking Age indicate the possibility of both foreign influence and the aggregation of similar aspects within independent cultures.

While this examination is intended to represent a comprehensive inquiry into entertainment in early Ireland, many topics and avenues of research are yet to be

discussed. As stated, the limited timeframe is intended merely to pre-date what is perhaps the most influential event in Ireland's history. Many of the entertainments and amusements discussed enjoy a continuum well into the medieval and, in some cases, the modern period, experiencing little or no change. This is a fruitful area of research. By contrast, the supplantation of *fidchell* by chess, in both object and name, in the post-Norman period epitomises the changes experienced in Irish society in the medieval period.

Additionally, the role and concerted use of 'native' entertainments in the political sphere offers manifold opportunities for further research. The organisation, implementation and popularity of the field-game hurling in the early nineteenth century has received considerable attention by scholars though scant scepticism has been given to the 'ancient' origins applied to the game by its revivalist patrons. Similarly, the contemporary though seemingly independent development and subsequent evolution of the two most popular stringed instruments of early Irish society deserves critical inquiry. While individual instruments are well accounted for, little attention has been paid to the disappearance of the *timpán* and the arrival of the *cláirsech* sometime in the medieval or late-medieval period. The evolution of the *feis* and *oenach* into the modern period offer further potential fields of inquiry.

A handful of topics initially intended for this examination have been omitted. Hunting and hawking in early Ireland is well-attested, in both its pragmatic and recreational forms. The evidence for hawking, and to a lesser degree hunting, is considerably more frequent and detailed in the post-Norman period. Gambling, particularly on animal fights and dog-racing is also well-attested for Ireland in the mid- to late-medieval period, as are the fights and races themselves. These topics have been excluded as the majority of evidence is found outside the established timeframe.

Additionally, it was also my initial intention to further discuss the distinctions between the professional and congenital fool. The implications of such an investigations are manifold. The modern world holds countless examples of those suffering from either partial or total mental illness. Many descriptions in the legal material, such as the frenzied behaviour of the *dásachtach* or the peculiarity of the 'fool whose every ninth word requires verification' are potentially identified through comparisons to modern mental illnesses.

In summation, entertainment was clearly well-represented in early Irish society. The source material provides ample evidence for the forms, names, subjects, themes and participants of early Irish entertainment. While many questions remain unanswered, the individual entertainments and amusements discussed provide valuable insight into the society which enjoyed them.

Guide to Appendices

The following appendices are translations of Old and Middle Irish legal passages regarding games, sports, sporting equipment and their respective injuries and penalties. Translations are based on the diplomatic edition of each text, compiled, revised and edited by D.A. Binchy in his six volume *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (CIH).

Following Binchy's classification, text in capital letters represents Old Irish main text, while text in lower case represents Middle Irish gloss and commentary. Accordingly, standard and italicised type represents manuscript text and textual expansion, respectively. Texts are identified at the top of each appendix by location in CIH, by location in original manuscript and by textual title.

While every attempt has been made to translate terms according to their specific, general and contextual meaning, several terms, due to both legal and linguistic considerations, have no parallels in English. In these cases I have provided explanation and commentary in corresponding footnotes. Details, background information and relevant discussion of the texts are found in chapter 7.

Appendix 1

CIH 945.20-40 H.3.18 p. 412 *Bretha Étgid*

BLA LIATHROIDE LORG 7 POLL 7 LOG .i. islan lim donti buailes in liathroid da luirg o poll na himana co log na grifidi, no o log na grifidi co log na comrainne, no in poll a mbi curuigi in locc a mbi. Islan dona macaib beca ruidilsi a cluiche co roicad fodal do dire 'na robach. slan doib a fiancluichi co roicad aithgin 'na robach; ar nic aithgena ina robach cidh icaid ina fiancluichi? Sechtmad thrasa co bas i nespach. sechtmad othrusa 7 cudrumus .uiii.maid lethdire na cneide i torba sech esba, s̄ gurub a nothrus doformastar; .iiii. uii.mad naithgena i cechtar de iar mbas, cid a torbach cid a nesbach. Na .iiii. uii.maid-sin fuil acad, tri .uii.maid ar scath dire and 7 .uii.maid ar scath naithgena i nesba darbo tol é ł i nesba donarbo tol, ł in torbach romarbad and Masa esba darbo tol, .uii.mad dire do dul re lar ar scath tola comcluiche, .uii.mad dire 7 .uii.mad naithgena for fer laime, .uii.mad dire for lucht medoncluiche, trian cota cach fir cotnicfadh dib a toirmesc do beth for sellach cenmotha cuit fir laime Mas esba donarbo tol ł torbach domarbad and, .uii.mad co leth do dire 7 .uii.mad naithgena for fer laime, .uii.mad co leth do dire for lucht medon in cluiche, trian cotha cach fir coticfadh a toirmesc for sellach cenmotha cuit fir laime Ar níc doib fogal do dire 'na robdach, cidh icfait ina ruidles cluithe? An cudruma roícsad ina fiancluiche o chíanaib iar níc doib aithgena ina robhach, gurab ed icait ina ruidles cluiche innossa iar níc doib foghal do dire ina robdhach No dō chena co tistais do ruidles chluiche for a fiancluiche iad 7 comadh fiancluiche doib cach cluiche.

Translation: CIH 945.20-40

Exemption of the ball, in respect of club and hole and place. i.e., Immune in my opinion is he who strikes the ball with his club from the driving-hole to the *grifid*-place[1], or from the *grifid*-place to the place of division,[2] or the hole from which it is until it reaches the place in which it is. Immune for the small boys properly their games until they pay penalty-share for their *robach.*[3] They are immune in their *fian*-games until they pay restitution for their *robach*. Regarding payment of restitution for their *robach*, what is paid in their *fian*-games? 1/7th sick-maintenance until death, in the case of a person guilty of illegitimate acts, but only so far as the sick-maintenance is increased; 4/7^{ths} restitution in every case after death, whether from a person of legitimate acts or from a person of illegitimate acts. Those 4/7^{ths} which are with you, 3/7^{ths} (are reckoned) in lieu of penalty there and 1/7th in lieu of restitution in the case of illegitimate activity which was wilful or in the case of illegitimate activity which was not wilful or the death of the person of legitimate activity there. If it be illegitimate activity which was wilful, 1/7th penalty becomes void under the pretext of multitudinous ("teeming") contests. 1/7th penalty and 1/7th restitution from the perpetrator , 1/7th penalty from participants in the midst of the game, 1/3rd as far as each man can prevent his (own) injury from them (is to be reckoned) from the culpable onlooker, except for the share (of penalty) from the perpetrator. If it be

---

[1] *Grifid* is otherwise unattested. I am unable to offer a suggestion as to the specific nature of the term or its relationship to the game.

[2] *Comrann* is well attested in the sense of 'division', 'dividing line', and 'partition'. See DIL, C-408.3-26. The sense here seems to indicate a dividing line or area on the field such as half-line or perhaps a boundary line.

[3] Following MacLeod's suggestion that *robach* "...is used when the intention of the attacker matches the injury actually inflicted." See MacLeod, Neil (1998), p 352. *Robach* appears at the end of a similar passage at CIH 1347.39, where it is grouped with *fian*-games and *col*-games. *Robach*, judging from this

illegitimate activity which was not wilful or a person of legitimate acts was killed there, 1/14th penalty from participants in the midst of the game, 1/3rd as far as each man can prevent his (own) injury from them (is to be reckoned) from the culpable onlooker, except for the share (of penalty) from the perpetrator. Regarding payment of the share of the penalty for the *robach*, what is paid in the *ruidles*-games? The equivalent which they have paid for their *fían*-games just mentioned, regarding payment of restitution for their *robach*, so that it may be this which they pay for their *ruidles*-games now, regarding payment of the share of penalty for their *robach*.

example, may have had an extended association with injuries in games, perhaps injuries from illicit behaviour.

Appendix 2

CIH 1347.32-40 Eg. 88 fo 30b. Misc. Old Irish text

BLA LIATHROT LORG .P. 7 .L. .i. isl*an* donti imaighus no imainus in liathrot o poll na g*r*imhfiti co loc na comhranda .i. oc didin in puill airan .l. isin baile i mbidis; slan doib i ruidhilse cl*uich*i 7 i fiancl*uich*i do denum umna deth nanman*na* rop*a*c dona m*a*caib b*e*cai am*al* cint*a* rob; sl*an* doib i ruidilsi cl*uich*i co roicait fog*ail* do dire ina rob*a*c, 7 o iocf*a*t is for a fiancl*uich*i dotiagait ina ruidilsi cl*uich*i dia tios as; 7 o iocf*a*t, is ochtm*ad* .o. co bas 7 ai*thgin* i mbas a fiancl*uich*i 7 ina rop*a*c; is leth.o. uadha co bas 7 .4.reimhe d*i*re i mbas, cid fiancl*uich*i cid rop*a*ch cid colcl*uich*i.

Translation: CIH 1347.32-40

Exemption of balls, club, hole and place. i.e., Immune is he who drives or hurls the ball from the *grifid*-hole to the place of division, i.e. (he is) defending the hole from the ball (while he is?) in the goal in which they were[4]; immune for them their proper-games and doing their *fian*-games in the same way as the ten types of *robach*[5] by the children (are to be treated) the same as the injuries by livestock; immune for them their proper-games until the share of penalty they pay for their *robach*, and when they pay it is for their *fian*-games which have become their proper-games, when he has

[4] The plural *mbidis* is difficult to reconcile. It is possibly a mistake for *mbi* as in CIH 945.23, where it refers to the ball.

[5] This is seemingly a reference to ten recognised types of *robach*. The comparison to the offences by livestock suggests that the ten types were applied comprehensively and not particularly to games.

come out of it[6]; and when they will pay it, it is 1/8th sick-maintenance up to death and restitution for death from a *fian*-game and for their *robach*.; ½ sick-maintenance from him until death and ¼ penalty in death, whether *fian*-games or *robach* or guilty-games.

[6] The singular *dia tios* is out of place here. The passage at CIH 945.39 has the plural *co tistais*. A plural verb is preferred, i.e. 'when they come out of it', referring to when the children 'come out of' or progress from their *ruidles*-games to their more dangerous and heavier penalised *fian*-games.

Appendix 3

CIH 1339.30-1341.16. Eg. 88 fos.28b-d *Mellbretha*

IT E AND SO RODILSI CLUITHE LUB. Slan dona macaib bega i ruidilsi cl*uich*i co roicait foghail do dir*e* ina rob*ac*hl sl*an* doib a fiancl*uich*i co roicait ai*thgin* ina rob*ac*h; iar níc doib ai*thgena* ina rob*ach cid iocait i*na fiancluithe? .7.m*ad* othrusa co bas i nesbach, .7.m*ad* 7 cut*r*umus t.7.m*aid* lethdire na cn*eid*e co bas i torb*ac*h s*e*c esb*ac*h $\overline{s}$ curb a nothrus doformustar; cet*r*i .7.m*ad* ai*thgena* iar mbas i cechtar de, cidh i torb*ac*h cid i nesb*ac*h.Iar níoc doib fog*la* do dire ina rob*ac*h cid iocait ina ruidles cluith*i*? na ran*n*a roradhsimar roi*m*ainn o chianaib ina fiancl*uich*e iar nioc doib aith*gena* ina rob*ach* curb eth iocait inois ina ruidles cl*uich*i iar noic doib fog*la* do dir*e* ina rob*ach*. ł dō chena co tiosdaois i ruidhles cl*uich*i doib fori fiancl*uich*i, 7 cuma fi*an*cl*uich*i doib ca*c*h cl*uich*i donedis, 7 com*mad* mic i naois ioc*a* lethdir*i* i leth re naithrib iatt, 7 co mbeth i nesb*a* i leth re hesba i nath*ar* im cet*r*i .7.*mad* .o. (othrus) co bas i nesbach, ceithreime dirí 7 .o. (othrus) comlan co bas i torb*ac*h s*e*c easb*ac*h, ceit*r*eimhe coirp*dir*e re taob ai*thgen*a iar mbas i cechtar de, cidh i torbach cidh i nesb*ac*h.

Tri himcomadhais aoisi aithfeghur dona m*a*caib beca, 7 naoi *nim*comadhais cinadh, 7 .6. cinadh imasech. t*r*i i*m*comadhais aoise .i. t*r* haoise eim-coi*m*sith*ar* dona m*a*caib b*e*ca .i. 7. mbl*iadn*a 7 da bl*iadain* .x. 7 .7. mbl*iadna* .x. Naoi aois, t*r*i cina na .c.aoisi .i. a chúra, 7 a beth ce*n* biad la cura, 7 ai*thgin*.

A chúra i .c.ci*n* na .c.aoise, i*n* aois otha si*n* im*a*c ar son beth ci*n* .b. la cu*r*a rodiol fei*n* a cinadh.

Aithg*in* i .c.ci*n* na .c.aoise ioc*ait* sin; masa lubog no coman tallust ł dotarrust*ar*, 7 tarrus iatt fein aig*e*, geibe greim aithghina iatt fein.

Mana dearna cin .ii. co ceann da bl*iadna* .x., lethfiach la aithg*in* ł fiach rob*aig*; ótha in da bl*iadna* .x. coruic*i* i .uii. .x. iocc*aid* aide e-ssidhe; dam*a* gait dogní rob*a* lanfiach uadha, 7 ao ic-sin dia aide.

Tri cinadh na .c.aoise: a chura, 7 beth con biadh la cur*ad*, 7 aithg*in*.

Tri cinadh na haoisi medonai: beth cen biadh la cura, 7 aithg*in*, 7 letdir*e* la hai*thgin*.

Tri cinad na haoisi deidhinaighi: ai*thgin*, 7 lethpenalty la haithg*in*, 7 landir*e* la hai*thgin*.

.6. cinadh imas*e*c: t*r*i cinadh cona tomaith*em* cona nde*n*um, 7 t*r*i cinad gan a (cona) tomaith*em* gan a ndenu*m*; .i. in .c.cin cona to*m*aith*em* cona ndenum .i. i*n* .c.aois ar son curtha, 7 in cin doroindi in*n*te ar son beth can biadh la curth*a*. ai*thgin* i .c.cin na haoisi medon*aige*, lethdire la hai*thgin* a .c.cin n (na) haoisi deigi*n*aighi. 7 is e-sin ma doeirn*ea* (?) ai*thgin* iar treas cin letdir*i* (?).

Tri cinadh cona tomaith*em* can a ndenum: da nderna cin isin .c.aois, roba cura, 7 ni dearn*a*; 7 da nderna cin isisin aois medon*aig*, rob*a* beth cen biadh la curad, 7 ni dern*a*; 7 da nderna cin isin aois d*eidenaig*, rob*a* ai*thgin*, 7 ni dern*a*; 7 is follus as-sin o iocfait mic bega ai*thgi*n, ł o tiucfus aois ioc*a* aithg*en*a doib, cona dét aois i nairem cinedh doib.

Tri tomaith*im* cinadh in mic cen a denum .i. ina .c.cin, a cura, 7 beth cein biadh la cura isin .c.ais, 7 ai*thgin* isin aois deighina .i. o da bl*iadnaib* .x. im*ac*. 7 ni feghth*ar* .x.b*ir* it*er* a rob*ac*h 7 a ngait co da bl*iadain* .x.

Inan*n* a ngait 7 i rob*ac*h co ceann da bl*iadna* .x., 7 otha sin is ann .x. b*er*ait: g*ac* uail is ai*thgin* i rubach is lethdire la haithg*in* a ngait, 7 g*ac* uail is lethdir*e* la

hai*thgin* i rob*a*ch is l*an* ndir*i* i ngait. uair is mo do codhnetaighe leis .g. (gait) do denum ina rob*a*ch, 7 eolus a fol*aid* (?) aige ina dega.

ISin .u.id cin rosoich landire fair isin .c.aois, 7 isin cet*r*uma cin isin aois medona, 7 isin tres cin isin aois deighina ma rob*a*ch, ma .g. (gait) isin dara cinad. IN tan diní aoncin ł da cin isin aois taoisi, ai*thgin* fair isin aois medona; is lehtdir*e* fair iar sin, cid isin aois medona deighi*naig* mad rob*a*ch, mad .g. (gait) isin aois d*edenaig* iar nioc ai*thgen*a ar dus tre rob*a*ch. in tan na dein aoncin it*ir* co ndein isi*n* aois d*edenaig*, ai*thgin* fair mad robach, lethdire fair (marginal correction? ł ai*thgin*) mad .g. (gait) uair ni roith dir*e*, is taois*e*c do ai*thgin* .d. (d'ic?)

Noch*an* uil ruidhles cl*uich*i do codhn*a*c, 7 noch*an*, uil colcl*uich*i do macaib bega; ruidl*es* cl*uich*i na mac mb*e*c is fiancl*uich*i do codn*a*c. 7 fiancl*uich*i na m*a*c mb*e*c is colcl*uich*i do codn*a*ca. Inan*n* ruidles cl*uich*e na m*a*c mb*e*c 7 a fi*an*cl*uich*i ó icfait ai*thgin* t*r*e comr*ai*tedh, uair is mo do codhnetaighe leis gait do do deunum na robach, 7 eolus a fol*aid* aig*e*.

1341.8-16 (next folio) AITH*GIN* O THSUIDHE CO CEN*N* .7. MBL*IADNAE* .X. .i. curad i t*r*oscad .i. c.cin isi*n* aois-sin; munub .c.cin, is letdire la hai*thgin* isin aois-sin Mad iar .7. mbl*ianaib* .x., is lanfiach fair, cid e a .c.cin cincob é .i. cin tainisi iar .7. mbl*iadna*i 7 (omit?) is cu*m*a 7[7] in tres cin co .7. mbl*iadna*.

IS é airad is ecodn*a*c in m*a*c 7 is e re in alt*r*am*a* 7 (omit?) is conuicc*i* ita in aois deighin*a*c. 7 tocaithem aoisi co tocaithemh aoncinadh in cach aois gan a denumh fuil ar t*r*i haoisaib-sin roradsium do*n*a m*a*caib bega. 7 is as-sin is follus o icf*a*t mic .b. (beca) ai*thgin*, ł o tiocfus aois ioc*a* ai*thgin*a doib, cona tet aois nairemh c*in*a doibh.

[7] Binchy suggests this is to be omitted.

CIH 1341.8-16 (continuation of above)

MA 'DEIRR*E*(?) AI*THGIN* IAR TRES CIN .i. iar ndeide[8] LETHDIRE CO CEN*N* .7. MBL*IADNAE* .X. .i. madia naithrighe ł madia nairge cin do denum isi*n* aois medonadh a haithl*e* cinad na .c.aoisi, ai*thgin* air in*n*; ai*thgin* air isin tres cinadh doní ł isi*n* ci*n*a doní isin aois deighinaidh, uair is é in tres cin do é; 7 aoncin doroin*n*e i ng*a*c aois do*n*a t*r*i haoisaib-sin, 7 in .c.aois dib ar son churth*a*, uair tocaithem aoisi co tocaithem aoncinadh i ng*a*c aois gan a ndenum uil an*n* sin; 7 rob*a*ch doroin*n*e se isi*n* aois deidhine an*n* sin, uair dam*ad* gaitt rob*ad* lanfiach .i. .c.cin an*n* sin isin aois-sin; munub .c.cin, is lethdir*e* la hai*thgin* isin aois .c.na; madh iar .7. mbliadhna .x., is l*an*fiach fair cidh é a .c.cin; ai*thgin* iarsin da bl*iadna* .x. ina .c.cinadh, cidbe cin madh é a .c.cin; mad he al*a*cin, is leth man (=manib) gui*n*, lanfiach isin ní adha ísin. Ai*thgin* otha iní adh (=adha) isin, otha in da bl*iadna* .x., ina .c.cin coruicc*i* .7. mbl*iadna* (supply .x.), uair isi (=is si) in aois deidhin*a*c, 7 tocaithemh aoisi co tocaithe*m* cinadh i ng*a*c aois cein (=cen) a dhenu*m* uil arna t*r*i haoisaib-sin roradhsima*r* dona m*a*caib bec*a*; 7 is as-sin is foll*us* o icfuit mic beca ai*thgin*, ł o thiucfus aos ioc*a* ai*thgen*a doib, cona tét aois i naire*m* cina doib do g*r*es. Na mic beca medon*a*ca deidhin*a*ca, cidh ina dó doroith medon*a*ca taois*e*ca, cidh lán ina medon*a*ca, isl*an* (? =is slan?) i ng*a*c ae.

[8] Gloss written under *'cin leth'* of text.

Translation: CIH 1339.30-1341.16

THESE ARE HERE THE APPROPRIATE *LÚB* GAMES. Immune for the small boys their appropriate games until they pay penalty-share for their *robach*; immune for them their *fian*-games until they pay restitution for their *robach*. After[9] their payment of restitution in their *robach* what do they for their *fian*-games? 1/7th sick-maintenance up to death in the case of an unauthorised person, 1/7th and the equivalent 1/7th of the half-penalty of the wound up to death in the case of an authorised person as well as an unauthorised person,[10] unless the sick-maintenance be increased; 4/7ths restitution after death in each case, whether it be an authorised person or an unauthorised person. After payment from them of the penalty-share in their *robach*, what do they pay in their *ruidles*-games? The part which we have mentioned above just now in their *fian*-games, after payment from them of restitution in their *robach* until [that which?] they pay now in their *ruidles*-games, after payment from them of the penalty-share of their *robach.* Or from the wounds until they become their appropriate-games from them for their *fian*-games, and the same for their *fian*-games from them for every game which is played, and the same for a son in the age of paying half-penalty in the matter of the paternal relatives and until it is in idleness regarding (because of) idleness in the father there(?) .4/7^{ths} sick-maintenance until death in the case of an unauthorised person, ¼ penalty and full sick-maintenance up to death in the case of an authorised person in addition (to what is paid in the case

[9] The sense of '*iar*' here and in the following examples seems to indicate a repeat offence, i.e., an individual has committed a subsequent and similar offence while remaining in the same age group.

[10] *Torbach* in this case denotes a participant or onlooker whose presence is lawful and appropriate to the activity. This is opposed to the *esbach*, whose presence is unwarranted and unsolicited. I have translated the terms 'authorised person' and 'unauthorised person', respectively.

of) the unauthorised person., ¼ body-fine as well as restitution after death in each case, whether it be an authorised person or an unauthorised person.

Three applicable ages are considered for the children, and nine applicable offences, and six offences, consecutively. Three applicable ages, i.e. three ages 'swiftly arranged'[11] for the children, i.e. (after) seven years and (after) twelve years and (after)seventeen years. Nine applicable offences, i.e. nine offences are arranged there, i.e. three offences in each age, three offences of the first age, i.e. his beating, and being without food along with beating, and restitution.

His beating (is levied) for the first offence of the first age, from this age onwards it is replaced by being without food along with beating, they themselves replace their crimes.

Restitution in the first offence of the first age is paid; if it be a hoop or playing-stick which he took or came upon, and they themselves were found with him, they themselves are duly given in restitution.

If he did not commit a second offence up to the end of twelve years, half-penalty with restitution or *robach*-penalty;[12] from twelve years to 17 years his foster-father pays; if it be theft which he commits, it was full-penalty due from him, and his payment [is paid] by the foster-father.

Three offences of the first age: his beating; being without food along with beating; and restitution.[13]

Three offences of the middle age: being without food along with beating; restitution; and half-penalty along with restitution.

---

[11] *Eim-coimsithar* is an etymological gloss. '*Eim-*' is frequently used to gloss *im-*.

[12] This seems to indicate that if a child commits a second offence just as he approaches the second age group, i.e. twelve and over, he pays the penalty for the first offence of the second age group, rather than the penalty for the second offence of the first age group.

[13] The penalties in the following age groups are levied successively, i.e. the first penalty is levied for the first offence, the second penalty for the second offence, etc.

Three offences of the last age: restitution; half-penalty along with restitution; full-penalty with restitution.

Six offences in turn: three offences which are threatened and which are carried out,[14] and three offences which are threatened and are not carried out, i.e. the first offence with its threat and its act, i.e. the first age [the punishment is levied] through beating, and the offence that is committed in it, by way of being without food along with punishment. Restitution in the first offence of the middle age, half-penalty with restitution in the first offence of the last age and it is this if he pays, restitution in addition to half-penalty of the third offence.

Three offences which are threatened and not carried out: if he committed an offence in the first age, and he did not do it; and if he committed an offence in the middle age, he was to be without food along with beating, and he did not do it; and if he committed an offence in the last age, it was restitution, and he did not do it. And it is manifest from this when the small children pay restitution, or when the age of paying restitution comes to them, so that the age was not subject for reckoning offences to them.

Three threatened offences of the child without being carried out, i.e. in his first offence, his beating, and being without food along with beating in the first age, and restitution in the last age, i.e. from twelve years onwards and there is no lawful difference between his *robach* and his theft until twelve years.

In like manner his theft and his *robach* until the end of twelve years, and after this they differ: every place there is restitution in *robach* it is half-penalty along with restitution in the case of theft, and every place there is half-penalty along with restitution in the case of *robach* there is full-penalty in the case of theft, because there

[14] This is similar to the classification of *robach*-offences, i.e. the intention and potential of the offence matches the offence itself.

is more responsibility in theft than in *robach* and he has knowledge of its [the stolen item] hiding.[15]

In the fifth offence it reaches full-penalty for him in the first age, and in the fourth offence in the middle-age, and in the third offence in the final age if it be *robach*, if it be theft in the second offence. When he commits a single or two offences in the first age, restitution from him in the middle-age; it is half-penalty from him after this, whether it be in the middle-age or the last age if it be *robach*, if it be theft in the last age after paying restitution firstly through *robach*. When he has not committed a single offence at all until he commits (an offence) in the last age, restitution from him if it be *robach*, half-penalty from him or restitution[16] if it be theft because he has not paid a penalty, restitution is prior for him regarding payment.

Ruidles-games are not for sensible adults and *col*-games are not for small children; the *ruidles*-game of the small children is the (i.e. corresponds to) *fian*-game for a sensible adult and a *fian*-game of the small child is a *col*-game for a sensible adult. In the same way the *ruidles*-games of the small child and his *fian*-game when restitution is paid through intention, because the intention is greater in theft than in *robach*, and he has knowledge of its (stolen item) hiding place.

Translation: CIH 1341.8-16 (continuation of above)

Restitution from this point on until the end of seventeen years. i.e. punishment through fasting[17], i.e. in the first offence of this age; if it is not a first offence, it is half-penalty along with restitution in this age. If (he is) after seventeen years, it is full-penalty for him, whether it be his first offence or not, i.e. a second offence after seventeen years is equivalent and in the third offence until seven years.

---

[15] This stipulation is further evidence that a principle feature of *robach*-offences is inadvertence.

[16] 'ł ai*thgin*' added in margin. Binchy suggests this is added as a correction.

That is the period of the legal incompetence of the child and it is the period of fosterage and it is up to this that the last age is. And fulfilling the age until the fulfilling of a single offence in each age without their carrying out which is for these three ages we have already mentioned for the small children and it is manifest from this when small children pay restitution or when they will reach the age of payments of restitution from them, until they become the age for reckoning offences from them.

[17] '*.i. curad i troscad*' is a marginal entry.

Appendix 4

CIH 1347.23-5. Eg. 88, fo.30a. Citation from Old Irish text

DO CUMDEGHA IN CL*UICH*I .i. do cumaib didin in cl*uich*i fo*r*na seallacha bid i fiad*nais*e in cl*uich*i; 7 seall*ach* nom*aid* in lethe si*n* ł .uiii.ma .x. in lai*n*, 7 esb*ach* darb*a* toil in cl*uich*i rom*ar*b*ad* an*n*; t*r*ian cot*a* g*a*c f*ir* conicf*ad* a thairmesc.

Translation:

CONCERNING SECURITY IN GAMES i.e., forming protection[18] of games for the spectators who are in the presence of the games; and a spectator of a nine day period of this half or eighteen days,[19] and the unauthorised person who is willingly at the games has been killed there; one-third (honour-price) as far as every man who may be able to prevent it.

[18] *Cumaib didin* is an etymological gloss on the otherwise unattested *cumdegha*. *Cummaid* regularly glosses *com-* compounds. Some type of 'security' or 'protection' is presumably meant.
[19] The construction here is unclear to me.

Works Cited

Primary Sources[1]

Anderson, A.O. and M.A. 1961 *Adomnan's Life of Columba*. Edinburgh.

Atkinson, Robert 1887 *Passions and Homilies from the Leabhar Breac*. Todd Lecture Series 2. Dublin.

Bergin, Osborne 1921-3(b) "A Poem by Domhnall mac Dáire" *Ériu* 9, pp 160-74.
1931 *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bhías: The Three Shafts of Death*. Dublin.

Bergin, Osborne and R.I. Best 1938 "*Tochmarc Étáine*" *Ériu* 12, pp 137-96.

Berry, H.F. 1907 *Statutes and Ordinances and Acts of the Parliament of Ireland: King John to Henry V*. Dublin.

Best, R.I. 1907 "The Adventures of Art Son of Conn" *Ériu* 3, pp 149-73.
1910 "The Settling of the Manor of Tara" *Ériu* 4, pp 121-72.
1952 "Some Irish Charms" *Ériu* 16, pp 27-32.

Best, R.I. and Osborne Bergin 1929 *Lebor na hUidre, Book of the Dun Cow*. Dublin.

Best, R.I., and Osborne Bergin, M.A. O'Brien, and A. O'Sullivan. 1954-83 *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, 6 Vols. Dublin.

Binchy, D.A. 1938 "*Bretha Crólige*" *Ériu* 12, pp 1-77.
1941 (repr.1970) *Críth Gablach* Medieval and Modern Irish Series Vol. 11. Dublin.
1963a *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series 18. Dublin.
1963b *The Old-Irish Penitential*, in *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. Ludwig Bieler. Dublin. pp 258-83.
1966 "*Bretha Déin Checht*" *Ériu* 20, pp 1-66.
1968 "*Mellbretha*" *Celtica* 8, pp 144-54.
1973 "A Text on the Forms of Distraint" *Celtica* 10, pp 72-86.
1978 *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 6 Vols. Dublin.

Breatnach, Liam 1981 "Cauldron of Poesy" *Ériu* 32, pp 45-93.
1987 *Uraicecht na Ríar*. Early Irish Law Series, vol. 2. Dublin.

Byrne, Mary and Myles Dillon 1933 *Táin Bó Fraích*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series 5. Dublin.

[1] Several authors are attributed with more than one work in a given year, designated by subsequent alphabetised reckoning. In several cases succeeding entries are found in the bibliography citing secondary sources, starting on p 337, below.

1937 "Táin Bó Fraích" (transl. based on above) *Études Celtique* 2, pp 1-27.

Calder, George 1907 *Imtheachta Aeniasa: The Irish Aenied.* Irish Texts Society 6. Dublin.
1917 *Auraicept na n-Eces; The Scholar's Primer.* Edinburgh.
1922 *Togail na Tebe; The Thebiad of Statius.* Cambridge.

Carney, James 1964 *The Poems of Blathmac Son of Cú Brettan* Irish Texts Society Vol. 47. Dublin.
1971 "Three Old-Irish Accentual Poems" *Ériu* 22, pp 23-81.

Charles-Edwards, Thomas and Fergus Kelly (eds.) 1983 *Bechbretha: an Old-Irish Law Tract on Bee-Keeping* Early Irish Law Series 1. Dublin.

Dillon, Myles 1932 "Stories from the Law Tracts" *Ériu* 11, pp 42-65.
1949 "The Trinity College Text of *Serglige Con Culainn*" *Scottish Gaelic Studies* vol. 6, pt. 2. pp 139-75.
1951 "The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn" *Scottish Gaelic Studies* vol.7, pt 1. pp 47-88.
1953 *Serglige Con Chulaind* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 14. Dublin.
1962 (ed.) *Lebor na Cert: the Book of Rights.* Irish Texts Society Vol. 46. Dublin.

Dimock, James 1867 *Giraldus Cambrensis*; *Opera. Topographia Hibernica et Expugnatio Hibernica.* London.
1868 *Giraldus Cambrenis*; *Opera.* Vol. 6. London.

Dobbs, M.E. 1930 "*Altromh Tighi da Medar*" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 18, pp 189-230.

Duncan, Lillian 1932 "*Altram Tige Dá Medar*" *Ériu* 11, pp 184-225.

Evans, J.G. 1906 *The Black Book of Carmarthen.* London.

Fraser, J.P. 1916 "The First Battle of Moytura" *Ériu* 8, pp 1-63.

Fraser, J.P. Grosjean and J.G. O'Keefe 1931-4 *Irish Texts Vols. I-V*, London.

Freeman, A. Martin 1944 *Annála Connacht. Annals of Connacht, A.D. 1224-1544.* Dublin.

Gilbert, John T. 1874-84 *Facsimiles of National Monuments of Ireland, Selected and Edited Under the Direction of the Right Hon. Edward Sullivan.* 4 vols. Dublin.

Gray, Elizabeth 1982 *Cath Maige Tuired: the Second Battle of Mag Tuired.* Irish Texts Society 52. Dublin.

Greene, David 1955 *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories.* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 16. Dublin.

Gwynn, E.J. 1903-35 *Metrical Dindsenchas*, 5 Vols. Todd Lecture Series 8-12. Dublin.
1904 "The Burning of Finn's House" *Ériu* 1, pp 13-37.
1914 "An Irish Penitential" *Ériu* 7, pp 121-95.
1942 "An Old-Irish tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets", *Ériu* 13, pp 1-60, 220-36.

Gwynn, E.J. and W.J. Purton 1911-2 "The Monastery of Tallaght" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29C, pp 115-79.

Gwynn, Lucius 1914 "Cináed Úa Hartacáin's Poem on Brugh na Bóinne" *Ériu* 7, pp 210-38.

Heist, William W. 1965 *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*. Brussels.

Hennessy, William H. 1866 *Chronicum Scorotum; A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from the Earliest Times to AD 1135.*. London.
1871 *Annals of Loch Cé; A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 1014 to AD 1590.* London.
1889 *Mesca Ulad; or the Intoxication of the Ulidians*. Todd Lecture Series 1. Dublin.

Hennessy, William H. and D.H. Kelly 1875 *The Book of Fenagh*. Dublin.

Hennessy, William H. and Bartholomew MacCarthy 1887-1901 *Annala Uladh: Annals of Ulster. A Chronicle of Irish Affairs*. 4 vols. Dublin.

Hogan, Edmund 1892 *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*. Todd Lecture Series 4, Dublin.
1910 (repr.1993) *Onomasticon Goedelicum*. Dublin.

Hull, Vernam 1949 *Loinges Mac N-Uislenn; The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*. New York
1966 "*Cáin Domnaig*" *Ériu* 20, pp 151-77.
1968 "*Nóinded Ulad*:The Debility of the Ulidians" *Celtica* 8, pp 1-42.

Jackson, Kenneth M. 1938 *Cath Maige Leana*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series 9. Dublin.

Jenkins, Dafydd 1986 *Hywel Dda: The Law*. Dyfed.

Kelly, Fergus 1978 *Audacht Morainn*. Dublin.

Knott, Eleanor 1911 "*Filidh Éreann Go Haointeach*" *Ériu* 5, pp 50-69.
1916 "The Flight of the Earls" *Ériu* 8, pp191-4.
1922 (transl. 1926) *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*. Irish Texts Society 22-3. Dublin.
1936 *Togail Bruidne da Derga*. Dublin.

Lehmann, Ruth 1964 *Fled Dúin na nGéd* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 21. Dublin.
1969 "The Banquet of the Fort of the Geese" *Lochlann* 4.

Lewis, Henry 1942 *Brut Dingestow*. Cardiff.

MacAirt, Seán 1951 *Annals of Inisfallen*. Dublin.
1956 "Lexigraphical Notes" *Celtica* 3 pp 270f.

MacAirt, Seán and Gearóid MacNiocail 1983 *The Annals of Ulster: to A.D. 1131*. Dublin.

Macalister, R.A.S. 1938-56 *Lebor Gabála Érenn: the Book of the Taking of Ireland* pts. 1-5 Irish Texts Society vols. 34, 35, 39, 41, 44. Dublin.
1949 *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*. Dublin.

MacCarthy, B. 1892 *Codex Palatino-Vaticanus, No. 830*. Todd Lecture Series 3. Dublin.
1893 *Annala Uladh. Annals of Ulster: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs A.D. 431-1131: 1155-1541*; Vol 2, *A.D. 1057-1131: 1155-1378*. Dublin.

MacGiolla Léith, Caoimhín 1993 *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach; The Violent Deaths of the Children of Uisneach*. Irish Texts Society 5. Dublin.

McKenna, Lambert 1938 *Dioghlium Dána*. Dublin.
1947 *The Book of Magauran*. Dublin.

MacNeill, Eoin 1908 *Duanaire Finn*. Irish Texts Society 7. Dublin.

MacSweeney, Patrick 1904 *Caitréim Congail Cláiringnig*. Irish Texts Society 5. London.

Marstrander, Carl 1911 "The New Battle of Mag Rath" *Eriu* 5, pp 226-47.

Meid, Wolfgang 1967 *Táin Bó Fraích*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series 22. Dublin

Meyer, Kuno 1881 "The Youthful Exploits of Finn", Letter to *The Academy*, August 13, 1881. *The Academy* 20, p 122.
1881-3 "*Macgnimartha Find*" *Revue Celtique* 5, pp 195-204.
1883-5(b) "The Combat of Cúchulaind with Senbecc Grandson of Ebrecc from Segais" *Revue Celtique* 6, pp 182-4.
1885 *Cath Finntrága* Medieval and Modern Series, vol. 1, pt 4. Oxford.
1892(a) *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: the Vision of MacConglinne, a Middle-Irish Wonder Tale*. London.
1892(b) "*Scél Baili Binnbérlaig*" *Revue Celtique* 13, pp 220-7.
1892(c) "*Fingal Ronáin*" *Revue Celtique* 13, pp 378-97.
1894 *Hibernica Minora: Being an Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter*. Oxford.
1895 *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, To the Land of the Living*. London.

1897 "Finn and Grainne" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 1, pp 458-61.
1898 "The Wooing of Emer", in Hull, Eleanor (ed.) *The Cu Chulinn Saga in Irish Literature*, London. pp 55-84.
1904 "The Boyish Exploits of Finn" *Ériu* 1, pp 180-90.
1906(a) *The Triads of Ireland* Todd Lecture Series 13. Dublin.
1906(b) *The Death Tales of the Ulster Heroes* Todd Lecture Series 14, Dublin.
1909 *Tecosca Cormac* Todd Lecture Series 15. Dublin.
1910 *Fianaigecht* Todd Lecture Series 16. Dublin.
1911(b) *Sanais Cormac: an Old-Irish Glossary Compiled by Cormac Úa Cuilenáin. Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 4. pp 1-128. Dublin.
1911(c) *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin : Life of Colmán son of Luachan.* Todd Lecture Series 17. Dublin.
1912 *Hail Brigit: An Old-Irish Poem on the Hill of Allen.* Dublin.

Mulchrone, Kathleen 1933 *Caithréim Cellaig.* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 4. Dublin.
1939 *Bethu Phátraic. The Tripartite Life of Patrick.* Dublin.

Murphy, Denis 1896 *The Annals of Clonmacnoise. Translated into English A.D. 1627 by Conell Mageoghagan.* Dublin. (repr. 1993 Llannerch, Wales.)

Murphy, Gerard 1933 *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Finn,* Vol 2. Irish Texts Society 28. London
1933 *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Finn,* Vol. 3. Irish Texts Society 33. Dublin.
1941 *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Finn,* Vol. 4. Irish Texts Society 34. Dublin.

Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa 1967 *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* Irish Texts Society 48. Dublin.

O'Brien, M.A. 1962 *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae.* Dublin.

Ó Cuiv, Brian 1983 "A Poem for Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchubhair" *Ériu* 34, pp 157-74.

O'Daly, Máirín 1962(a) "*Mesce Chúanach*" *Ériu* 19, pp 75-80.
1962(b) "*Lānellach Tigi Rīch 7 Ruirech*" *Ériu* 19, pp 81-6.
1975 *Cath Maige Mucrama.* Irish Texts Society 50. Dublin.

O' Dhonnchadha, J. Lampert 1931 *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe.* Irish Manuscripts Commission. Dublin.

O' Donovan, John 1842 *The Banquet of Dun na-nGedh and the Battle of Magh Rath.* Dublin.
1847 *Book of Rights* Dublin.
1848-51 *Annála ríoghachta Éireann: annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the four masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616,* 7 vols. Dublin.

O'Grady, Standish Hayes 1892 *Silva Gadelica*, 2 vols. (ed. and transl.) London.

O'Keeffe, J.G. 1911 "Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda" *Ériu* 5, pp 18-44.
1913 *Buile Suibne; Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt*. Irish Texts Society 12. London.

O'Kelleher, A. and Gertrud Schoepperle 1918 *Betha Coluim Chille: Life of Columcille*. Illinois.

O'Meara, John J. 1962 (repr) *Giraldus Cambrensis: The History and Topography of Ireland*. Portlaoise.

O'Neill, Joseph 1905 "*Cath Boinde*" *Ériu* 2, pp 173-85.

O'Rahilly, Cecile 1962 *Cath Finntrága* Medieval and Modern Irish Series, 20, Dublin.
1967 *Táin Bó Cuailgne from the Book of Leinster*. Dublin.
1976 *Táin Bó Cuailgne, Recension I*. Dublin.

O'Rahilly, Thomas F. 1927 *Measgra Dánta*. Dublin.

O'Riain, Padraig 1978 *Cath Almaine*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series 25. Dublin.

Plummer, Charles. 1910 *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols. Oxford.
1922 *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, 2 vols. Oxford.

Radner, Joan 1978 *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*. Dublin.

Shaw, Francis 1934 *Aisling Oengusso*. Dublin.

Thorpe, Lewis 1978 *The Journey through Wales and the Desciption of Wales*. Harmondsworth.

Stokes, Whitley 1860 *Irish Glosses*: *A Medieval Tract on Latin Declension*. The Irish Archaeologogical and Celtic Society. Dublin.
1862 *Three Irish Glossaries*. London
1883 *Saltair na Rann*. Oxford.
1886 "Find and the Phantoms", *Revue Celtique* 7, pp 289-307.
1888 "The Siege of Howth" *Revue Celtique* 8, pp 47-64.
1888-9 "The Voyage of Mael Dúin" *Revue Celtique* 9 (1888), pp 447-95; *Revue Celtique* 10 (1889) , pp 50-95.
1891(a) "The Second Battle of Moytura" *Revue Celtique* 12, pp 52 -130.
1891(b) "The Life of St. *Féchín* of Fore" *Revue Celtique* 12, pp 318-53.
1892 "The Battle of Mag Mucrime" *Revue Celtique* 13, pp 426-74.
1893(a) "The Voyage of the Húi Corra" *Revue Celtique* 14, pp 22-69.
1893(b) "The Violent Deaths of Goll and Garb" *Revue Celtique* 14, 396-449.
1894 "The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindsenchas*" *Revue Celtique* 15, pp 272-336, 418-84.

1895-7 "The Annals of Tigernach" *Revue Celtique* 16, pp 374-419; 17, pp 6-33, 116-263, 337-420; 18, pp 9-58, 150-303, 374-91.
1897 "*Cóir Anmann*: Fitness of Names" in Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) 3:2, pp 285-444.
1899 "The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*" *Revue Celtique* 20, pp 30-55, 132-83, 248-89, 400-37.
1900(a) "O'Mulconry's Glossary" *Archiv für Celtische Lexicographie* 1, pp 232-324, 473-81.
1900(b) "Da Choca's Hostel" *Revue Celtique* 21, pp 149-65.
1900 (c) *Acallamh na Senórach. Irische Texte* 4.1. Leipzig.
1901 "The Destruction of Dind Ríg" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 3, pp 1-14
1902 *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga; The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel.* Dublin.
1903 "The Battle of Allen" *Revue Celtique* 24, pp 41-70.
1904(a) "O'Davoren's Glossary" in *Archiv für Celtisce Lexicographie* 2, Halle.
1904(b) "Songs of Buchet's House" *Revue Celtique* 25, pp 18-39.
1909 *In Cath Catharda: the Civil War of the Romans.* Irish Texts Series 4. Leipzig.

Stokes, Whitley and John Strachan 1901-3 (eds) *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus.* Cambridge.

Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (eds) 1884-1909 *Irische Texte mit Übersetzung und Wörterbuch* Vols. 1-4. Leipzig.

Thurneysen, Rudolf 1933 "Die Flöte von Mac Díochoeme" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19, pp 117-24.
1935 *Scela Mucce Meic Dathó.* Medieval and Modern Irish Texts Series 6. Dublin.
1936(a) "*Cáin Lánamna*" in *Studies in Early Irish Law*, ed. D.A. Binchy. Dublin, pp 1-80.
Todd, J.H. 1848 *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius.* Dublin.
1867 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Galllaibh; The war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill.* London.

van Hamel, A.G. 1933 (ed.) *Compert Chon Chulainn and Other Stories* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 3. Dublin.

Wade-Evans, A.W. 1938 *Nennuis' History of the Britons.* London.

Watson, J. Carmichael 1941 *Mesca Ulad.* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 13. Dublin.

Windish, Ernst 1884 "*Fled Bricrend 7 Loinges mac n-Dúil Dermait*" in Stokes, Whitley and Ernst Windisch (1884-1909) Vol. 2.1, pp 164-217.

Works Cited

Secondary Sources

Allen, J. Romilly 1903 *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland. A classified, illustrated, descriptive list of the monuments, with an analysis of their symbolism and ornamentation.* 2 Vols. Edinburgh.

Armstrong, E.C.R. 1921 "Some Irish Antiquities of Unknown Use" *Antiquities Journal* 2, pp 6-12.

Bannerman, John 1991 "*Clársach* and the *Clársair*" *Scottish Studies* 30. pp 1-17.

Bell, R.C. 1960 *Board and Table Games from Many Civilisations*. London.

Bergin, Osborne 1921-3(a) "Metrica" *Ériu* 9, pp 77-84.

Bergin, Osborne and Carl Marstrander 1912 *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer by some of his friends and pupils on the occasion of his appointment to the chair of Celtic philology in the University of Berlin*. London.

Best, R.I. and Rudolf Thurneysen 1931 *Ancient Laws of Ireland. Senchas Már. Facsimile of the oldest fragments from MS H.2.15 in the library of Trinity College*. Dublin.

Biddle, Martin 1990 *Object and Economy in medieval Winchester : Artefacts from Medieval Winchester*. Oxford.

Binchy, Daniel A. 1936 (ed.) *Studies in Early Irish Law*. Dublin
1940 "*Aimser Chue*", in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill*. ed. Ryan, John. Dublin. pp 18-22.
1943 "The Linguistic and Historical Value of the Irish Law Tracts" *Proceedings of the British Academy* 29, pp 195-227.
1958(a) "The Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*" *Ériu* 18, pp 44-54.
1958(b) "The Fair of Tailtiu and Feast of Tara" *Ériu* 18, pp 113-38.

Bradley, John (ed.) 1988 *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland: Studies Presented to F.X. Martin*. Kilkenny.

Breatnach, Liam 1983 "*Varia* IV" *Ériu* 34, pp 194-5.
1996 "On the Glossing of Early Irish law-texts, Fragmentary Texts, and some Aspects of the Laws Relating to Dogs" in *Celtica Helsingiensia: Proceedings from a Symposium on Celtic Studies*. ed. Ahlqvist, Anders, *et al*. Helsinki.

Bromwich, Rachel 1997 "The Triads of the Horses" in Davies, Sioned and Neys Ann

Jones (eds.) *The Horse in Celtic Cultures: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*. pp 102-20.

Bruford, Alan 1990 "Song and Recitation in Early Ireland" *Celtica* 21, pp 61-74.

Buckley, Anne 1978 "'What was the *Tiompán*?' A Problem in Ethnohistorical Organology. Evidence in Irish Literature" *Jahrbuch für Musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde* 9, pp 53-88.
1988 "Musical Instruments from Medieval Dublin: A Preliminary Survey", in *The Archaeology of Early Music Cultures*. eds. Ellen Hickmanand David W. Hughes. Bonn
1990 "Musical Instruments in Ireland: Ninth -Fourteenth Centuries", in *Musicology in Ireland*. Irish Musical Studies 1, eds. Gerald Gillen and Harry White. Dublin.
1995 "Music as Symbolic Sound in Medieval Irish Society" in *Music and Irish Cultural History*. Irish Musical Studies 3, eds Gerald Gillen and Harry White. Dublin.

Byrne, Francis John 1973 *Irish Kings and High Kings*. London.

Byrne, Francis John and P. Francis 1994 "Two Lives of St. Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*" *Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland Journal* 124, pp 5-117.

Caimbeal, Maurice A.N. 1970 "Scottish *Camanachd*: A study of the traditional, historical and cultural background with an outline of the modern organisation." Post-graduate thesis, Celtic Department, University of Aberdeen.

Cameron, Alexander 1894 *Reliquiae Celticae*. 2 Vols. Inverness.

Carney, James 1967 *Medieval Irish Lyrics*. Portlaoise.
1979 *Studies in Irish Literature and History*. Dublin.

Carson, R.A.G and Claire O'Kelly 1977 "A Catalogue of the Roman Coins from Newgrange, County Meath." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 77C, pp 35-56.

Charles-Edwards, Thomas 1980 "The *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*" *Studia Hibernica* 20, pp 141-62.
1995 "Language and Society among the Insular Celts" in Green, Miranda (ed.) *The Celtic World*, pp 703-36.
2000 *Early Christian Ireland*. Cambridge.

Clarke, D.V. 1970 "Bone Dice and the Scottish Iron Age" *The Prehistoric Society Proceedings*, pp 214-32.

Coad, J.C. and A.D. Streeten 1979 "Excavations at Castle Acre Castle, Norfolk 1972-7" *Archaeological Journal* 139, pp 138-301.

Cosgrove, Art 1987 *A New History of Ireland*, Vol. II. Oxford

Crowe, J. O'Beirne 1872-3 "The Vision of Cathair Mor, King of Leinster, and afterwards monarch of Ireland, foreboding the origin of Loch Garman" *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquities of Ireland* , pp 26-49.

Davies, Sioned 1997 "Horses in the Mabinogion", in Davies, Sioned and Neys Ann Jones (eds.) *The Horse in Celtic Cultures: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*. pp 121-40.

Davies, Sioned and Nerys Ann Jones (eds.) 1997 *The Horse in Celtic Culture*. Cardiff.

Dillon, Myles 1953-5 "A Note on the Texts of *'Cath Maige Rath'* Preserved in the *Yellow* Book of Lecan" Eigse 7, pp 199-201.
1958 "On the Date and Authorship of the *Book of Rights*" *Celtica* 4, pp 239ff.
1970 "The Semantic History of Irish *gal*, 'valour, steam'. in International Congress of Linguistics (ed.) , *Actes du X^e Congrès International des Linguistes*. Bucarest.

Doherty, Charles 1991 "The Cult of St. Patrick and the Politics of Armagh in the seventh Century" in *Ireland and Northern France, AD 600-850*. ed. Jean-Michel Picard. pp 53-94.

Donnelly, Séan 1988 "Irish *Cranngal 'Cran'* - A Pipers Technical Term" *Celtica* 20, pp 132-40.

Dooley, Ann and Harry Roe 1999 *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: Acallam na Senórach*. Oxford.

Duffy, Seán 1997 *Ireland in the Middle Ages*. Dublin.

Eogan, George 1967-8 "Excavations at Knowth, Co. Meath 1962-5" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 66C, pp 299-400.
1974 "Excavations at Knowth" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 74C, pp 11-112.

Evans, D. Ellis (ed.) 1986 *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford 1983*. Oxford.

Falconer, Sheila 1958 "Irish Translation of the Gregory Legend" *Celtica* 4, pp 52-95

Fiske, Willard 1905 *Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic Literature*. Florence.

Frazer, J.G. 1921 *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*, Vol 1. London.

Gardiner, E.N. 1930 *Athletics in the Ancient World*. Oxford.

Green, Miranda 1995 (ed.) *The Celtic World*. London.

Greene, David 1972 "The Chariot as Described in Irish Literature", in Thomas, Charles, *The Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province*. pp 59-73.

Guyonvarc'h, Christian J. 1973 *Dictionnaire Etymologique du Breton Ancien, Moyen et Moderne: Origine et Histoire des Mots*. Rennes.

Gwynn, Aubrey 1955 *The Writings of Bishop Patrick, 1074-1084*. Dublin.

Harbison, Peter 1971 "The Old Irish 'Chariot'" *Antiquity* 45, pp 171-4.
1976 "Native Arms and Armour in Medieval Gaelic Literature" *The Irish Sword* 12, pp 173-99, 270-84.
1992 *High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey*, 3 vols. Bonn.

Harrison, Alan 1989 *The Irish Trickster*. Worcester.

Hawkes, C.F.C. 1940 "Notes: A Sporting or mythological relief-mould from Roman Britain" *Antiquaries Journal* 20, pp 497-9. Plate 91.

Hemon, Roparz 1959-79 *Geriadur Istorel Ar Brezhoneg: Dictionnaire Historique du Breton*. Rennes.

Hencken, H. O'Neill 1935-7 "Ballinderry Crannóg No. 1" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 43C, pp 103-240.
1942 "Ballinderry Crannóg 2" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 47C, pp 1-76.
1950-1 "Lagore Crannóg: An Irish Royal Residence of the 7th-10th Centuries A.D." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 53C. pp 1-248.

Herbert, Máire 1989 "The Preface to *Amra Coluim Cille*" in Ó Corráin, Donnchadh *et al.* (eds.) *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*. pp 67-75.

Hildebrand, Emil 1903 *Sveriges Historia intill Tjugonde Seklet*. Stockholm.

Hughson, Irene 1997 "Horses in the Early Historic Period: Evidence from the Pictish Sculptured Stones", in Davies, Sioned and Neys Ann Jones (eds.) *The Horse in Celtic Cultures: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*. pp 23-42.

Hull, Vernam 1962-4 "Notes on Irish Texts" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 29 pp 183-6.

Hurley, Maurice 1982 "Wooden Artifacts from the Excavation of the Medieval City of Cork", in ed. S. McGrail *Woodworking Techniques Before AD 1500*. pp 301-11.

Hurley, Maurice F., Orla M.B. Scully and Sarah W.J. McCutcheon 1992 *Late Viking Age and Medieval Waterford: Excavations 1986-1992*. Dublin.

Hutchinson, Roger 1989 *Camanachd!; The Story of Shinty*. Edinburgh.

Jarvie, Grant 1991 *Highland Games: The Making of the Myth*. Edinburgh.

Johnson, Ruth 1999 "Ballinderry Crannóg No. 1: A Reinterpretation" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 43C. pp 23-71.

Jones, Gwyn and Thomas Jones 1949 *The Mabinogion*. London.

Kavanagh, Rhoda 1988 "The Horse in Viking Ireland" in Bradley, John (ed.) *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland: Studies Presented to F.X. Martin*.pp 89-121.

Kelly, Fergus 1986 "*Varia* III" *Ériu* 37, pp 185-6.
1988 (repr. 1991) *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Dublin.
1990 "Old Irish *círmaire*" *Celtica* 21, pp 231-3.
1997 *Early Irish Farming*. Dublin.

Kelly, Patricia 1997 "The Earliest Words for 'Horse' in the Celtic Languages", in Davies, Sioned and Neys Ann Jones (eds.) *The Horse in Celtic Cultures: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*. pp 43-63.

Klein, Ernest 1966 *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. 2 Vols. Amsterdam.

Koch, John T. and John Carey 1995 *The Celtic Heroic Age*. Massachusettes.

Lamont, W.D. 1968 *Ancient and Medieval Sculptured Stones of Islay*. Edinburgh.

Lang, James 1988 *Viking-Age Decorated Wood*. Dublin.

Lewis, Frank 1941 "Gwerin Ffristial a Thawlbwrdd" *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*.

Loth, J. 1920-1 "Etymologiques et Lexicographiques" *Revue Celtique* 38, pp 296-314.

Lynn, C.J. 1985-6 "Lagore, County Meath and Ballinderry No. I, County Westmeath Crannogs: Some Possible Structural Reinterpretations" *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 3, pp 69-73.

McCone, Kim 1990 "*Fírinne 7 Torthúlacht*" *Léachtái Cholm Cille* 11, pp 139-41.
1990 *Pagan Past and Christian Present*. Maynooth Monographs 3. Maynooth.

MacDonald, Alexander 1922 "Shinty; Historical and Traditional" *Gaelic Society of Inverness* 30, pp 27-56.

MacGregor, A. 1985 *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn*. London.

McKinnon, Donald 1905-6 "The Glenmason Manuscript" *Celtic Review* 3, pp 10-25, 114-37, 198-215, 294-317.

MacLeod, Neil 1995 *Early Irish Contract Law*. Sydney.
1998 *Irish Jurist* 33, pp

McManus, Damian 1997 *A Guide to Ogam*. Maynooth Monographs 4. Maynooth.

MacNeill, Eoin 1923 "Ancient Irish Law: the Law of Status or Franchise" *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 36C, pp 265-316.
1932 "De Origine Scoticae Linguae" *Ériu* 11, pp 112-29.

MacNeill, Máire 1962 *The Festival of Lughnasa. A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest.* Dublin.

MacWhite, Eóin 1935 "Early Irish Board Games" *Éigse* 5, pp 25-35.

Mann, J.E. 1982 *Early Medieval Finds from Flaxengate*. London.

Meehan, Brendan 1994 *The Book of Kells*. London.

Megaw, J.V.S. 1990 "Bone-whistles and Related Objects" in Biddle, M. *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester* pp 718-23.

Meyer, Kuno 1883-5(a) "Irish Miscellanies" *Revue Celtique* 6, pp 162-92.
1903 "Mitteilungen aus Irischen Handschriften" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 4, pp 31
1911(a) *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*. Dublin.

Morris, John 1980 *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals*. London.

Müller, Eduard 1876-8 "Two Irish Tales" *Revue Celtique* 3, pp 342-60.

Murphy, Gerard 1956 *Early Irish Lyrics, Eighth to Twelfth Century*. Oxford.
1961 *Early Irish Metrics*. Dublin.

Murray, H.J.R. 1913 *A History of Chess*. Oxford.
1957 A History of Board-games Other than Chess. Oxford.

National Museum of Ireland 1970 "National Museum of Ireland: Archaeologogical Acquisitions in the Year 1967" (compiled by Joseph Raftery) *Journal of the Royal Socciety of Antiquaries of Ireland*. pp 145-66.
1973 *Viking and Medieval Dublin: National Museum excavations, 1962-1973*. Dublin.

Ní Chatháin, Próinséas. 1991 "Traces of the Cult of the Horse in Early Irish Sources" *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 19, pp 123-131.

Nic Ghiollamhaith, Aoife 1981 "Dynastic warfare and Historical Writing in Northern Munster." *Cambridge Medieval Studies* 2, pp 73-92.

Nicolaysen, Nicolay 1971 *The Viking Ship Discovered at Gokstad in Norway*. transl. by Thomas Krag. Farnborough.

O'Brien, M.A. 1956 "Etymologies and Notes" *Celtica* 3, pp 168-84.

Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás 1977 *The Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt*. Dublin.

Ó Corráin, Donnchadh 1972 *Ireland Before the Normans*. Dublin.

1978(a) "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland" in Moody, T.W. (ed.) *Nationality and the Pursuit of National Independence*. Belfast.. pp 1-35.

1978(b) "Women in Early Irish Society" in MacCurtain, M. and D. Ó Corráin *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*. Dublin. pp 1-13.

Ó Corráin, Donnchadh, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone 1989 (eds.) *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*. Maynooth.

Ó Cuiv, Brian 1985 "Fragments of Irish Medieval Treatises on Horses" *Celtica* 17, pp 111-22.

O'Curry, Eugene 1873 *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*. Vol. 3 Dublin.

O'Donoghue, Tadhg 1921-3 "Advice to a Prince" *Ériu* 9, pp 43-54.

O' Donovan, John 1849 "Gilla Brigde MacConmide" in *Miscellany of the Celtic Society*. Dublin.

1868 *Sanas Cormaic: Cormac's Glossary*. (translation based on edition by Stokes, 1862) Calcutta.

Ó Duibhir, Siomon 1988 "Music of the Late Bronze Age in Ireland" *Archaeology Ireland* 2, pp 135-6.

Ogilvy, J.D.A. "*Mimi, Scurrae, Histriones*: Entertainers of the Early Middle Ages" *Speculum* 38, pp 603-19.

O'Grady, Standish Hayes 1926 *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Library*. London.

O'Keefe, J.G. 1912 "A Portrait", in Bergin, Osborne and Carl Marstrander *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer by some of his friends and pupils on the occasion of his appointment to the chair of Celtic philology in the University of Berlin*. pp 242-9.

Ó Maolfabhail, Art 1973 *Camán: 2,000 Years of Hurling in Ireland*. Dundalk.

O'Rahilly, Cecile 1966 "*Marcach* = 'messenger'?" *Celtica* 7, p 32.

O'Rahilly, Thomas F. 1912-13 "Review of *Ceitherneach Uí Dhomnaill*, by Henry Morris (Dublin, 1912)", in *Gadelica* 1, O'Rahilly, Thomas (ed.) pp 204-8.
1922 *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs*. Dublin.
1938 "Notes, Mainly Etymological" *Ériu* 12, pp 149-52.
1946 *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Dublin.

Ó Sheadha, M. 1947 "*Stair an Síle-na-gig*" in *Féilscríbhinn Torna*, edited by S. Pender. Cork.

O'Sullivan, Aidan 1998 "Warriors, Legends and Heroes - the Archaeology of Hurling" *Archaeology Ireland* 12, pp 31-4.

O'Sullivan, Anne 1968 "Verses on Honorific Portions", in *Celtic Studies, Essays in Memory of Angus Matheson*. London.

O'Sullivan, Anne and William O'Sullivan 1968 "A Legal Fragment" *Celtica* 8, pp 140-3.

Owen, Aneurin 1841 *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales*. London.

Pedersen, Holger 1909-13 *Vergleichende Grammatik der Keltischen Sprachen*. 2 vols. Göttingen.

Peterson, William 1963 *The Dialogues of Publius Cornelius Tacitus*. London.

Petrie, George 1839 "On the History and the Antiquities of Tara Hill" *Antiquities* 3, *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 8, pp 25-232.

Piggott, Stuart 1983 *The Earliest Wheeled Transport* London.
1986 "Horse and Chariot: The Price of Prestige" in Evans, D.Ellis (ed.) pp 25-30.

Pokorny, Julius 1959 *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Bern.

Purcell, Emer 1995 "A Reconsideration of the Ballinderry Game-Board" unpublished M-Phil. thesis. Department of Archaeology. University College Dublin.

Raftery, Barry 1974 "A Decorated Iron Age Horsebit Fragment from Ireland" *PRIA* 74C, pp 1-10.
1987 "Ancient Trackways in Corlea Bog, County Longford", *Archaeology Ireland* 1:2, pp 60-4.
1991 "Horse and Cart in Iron Age Ireland" *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 19, pp 49-71.

Raftery, Joseph 1963 "National Museum of Ireland Acquisitions in the Year 1961" *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 93, pp 115-34.

Rimmer, Joan 1969 (repr. 1984) *The Irish Harp: Cláirseach na hÉireann*. Cork.

Russell, Paul 1988 "The Growth of Cormac's Glossary" *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 15, pp 1-30.
1990 *Celtic Word Formation. The Velar Suffixes*. Dublin.
1998 "Laws, Glossaries and Legal Glossaries in Early Ireland" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 51, pp 85-115.

Sadie, Stanley 1986 (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. 3 Vols. London.

Sayers, William 1981 "*Varia* IV" *Ériu* 32, pp 163-7.
1991 " Textual Notes on Descriptions of the Old Irish Chariot and Team" *Studia Japonica* 4, pp15- 35.
1992 "Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland" *Aethlon* 10:1, pp 105-23.

Simms, Katharine 1998 "The Contents of Late Commentary on the Brehon Law Tracts" *Ériu* 49, pp 23-40.

Simpson, W.G. 1972 "A Gaming Board of the Ballinderry-Type from Knockanboy, Derrykeighan, Co. Antrim" *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 35, pp 63-4.

Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise 1926 "La Siège de Druim Damhghaire" *Revue Celtique* 43, pp 1-123.

Small, J. 1883 *The Image of Irelande*. Edinburgh.

Smith, Roland 1928 "The *Senbriathra Fithail* and Related Texts" *Revue Celtique* 45, pp 1-92
1932 "The Advice to Doidin" *Ériu* 11, pp 66-85.

Smyth, Alfred 1982 *Celtic Leinster*. Dublin.

Stead, I.M. 1965 "The Celtic Chariot" *Antiquity* 39, pp 259-66.

Swift, Catherine 1999 "*Óenach Tailten*, the blackwater Vealley and the Uí Néill Kings of Tara" in Smythe, Alfred P. (ed) *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology*, pp 109-120.

Thomas, Charles 1972 (ed) *The Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province*. Council of British Archaeology Research Report 9.

Thomas, R.J. *et al.* (ed.) 1950- *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*. Caerdydd.

Thurneysen, Rudolph 1921 *Die Irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum Siebzehnten Jahrhundert.* Halle.
1936(b) "Allerlei Keltisches" *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 20, pp 368-74.
1946 (repr. 1993) *A Grammar of Old Irish* Translated from the German by D.A. Binchy and Osborn Bergin (1961) Dublin.

Vendryes, Joseph 1902 *De Hibernicis Vocabulis quae a Latina Lingua Originem Duxerunt.* Paris.
1914 "Etymologies" *Revue Celtique* 35, pp 85-91.
1949-51 "Review of *Críth Gablach*" *Études Celtiques* 5, pp 423-4.
1953 *Airne Fíngéin* Medieval and Modern Irish Series 15. Dublin.

Vendryes, Joseph, E. Bachellery and P.-Y. Lambert 1959- *Lexique Étymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien.* Dublin and Paris.

Waddell, John 1990 *The Prehistorical Archaeology of Ireland.* Galway

Walsh, Claire 1997 *Archaeological Excavations at Patrick, Nicholas and Winetavern Streets, Dublin.* Dublin.

Warner, R.B. 1985-6 "The Date of the Start of Lagore" *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 3, pp 75-7.

Waterman, D.M. 1969 "An Early Medieval Horn form the River Erne" *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 32, pp 101-4.

Watkins, Calvert 1963 "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse" *Celtica* 6, pp 194-249.
1985 (ed.) *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots.* Boston.

Young, S. 1983 "The Game-Pieces from Sutton Hoo" in Bruce-Mitford, B. *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, Vol. 3 London.

Zimmer, Heinrich 1886 "Keltische Studien" *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Sprachforschung* 30, pp 78-80.