

INTRODUCTION

ANNALS OF ULSTER, *s.a.* 1041.1

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

CHRONICON SCOTORUM, PROLOGUE

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

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

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

Scholarship on medieval Ireland has blossomed in the last thirty years. In historiographic terms, the Irish Middle Ages has been a battleground of different perspectives, both political (e.g. nationalist, unionist, postcolonial, postpeace process) and geographical (e.g. Insular, Atlantic-archipelago, European, global comparative). The contemporary relevance of interpretations of the past in Ireland (and across the Irish diaspora) means that debates can be heated and objective. Some decisions in this volume will be controversial. For example, I have chosen to write a history of the island of Ireland rather than writing a history of an ethnic group. As a result, this book contains little about what the Irish achieved abroad (which was considerable), nor do the following chapters maintain a sharp distinction between the activities of the Gaelic Irish and the vikings¹ or English who settled in Ireland.

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

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

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

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

GEOGRAPHY

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

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

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

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

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

————— Part I —————

EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND AD 400–1100

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IRELAND IN THE FIFTH CENTURY

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

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

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

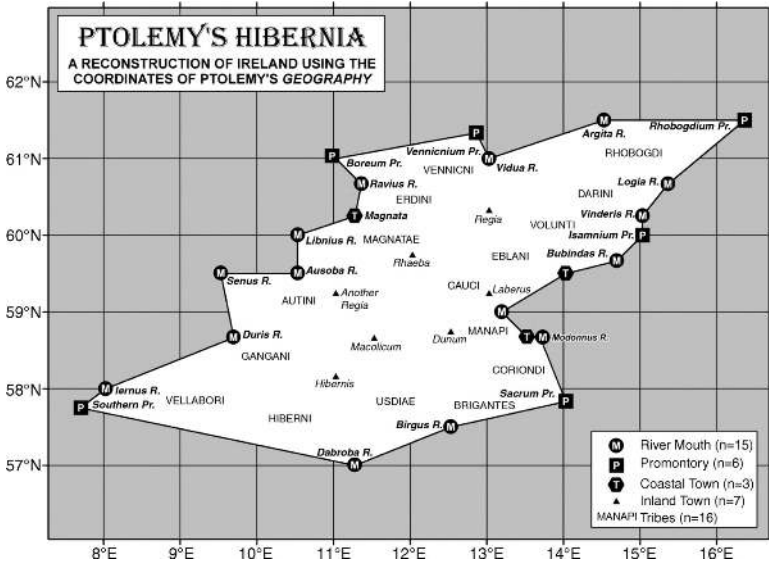


Figure 1.1 Ptolemy's map

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

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

² Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 20, cf. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 154.

³ Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 7, 147, 176.

⁴ Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 155; Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 35, 39, 129–30, 175.

outside Ireland. Pollen records drawn from a range of archaeological sites indicate that agriculture was in decline from 200 BC–AD 200.⁵ A handful of large hillforts flourished between the first century BC and the first century AD at Emain Macha (Navan fort, Co. Armagh), Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin, Co. Kildare), Cruachu (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon) and Tara (Co. Meath).⁶ Their heyday corresponded chronologically with large-scale nucleated settlements or oppida in northern Europe. While Ireland did not boast large centres of population, the emergence of royal centres suggests that a process of political centralisation was taking place. The Iron Age royal sites are often represented as pagan provincial capitals. It is difficult to surmise too much in the absence of written evidence, but what is clear is that these sites had lost much of their practical status by the fifth century. Of the sixteen population groups named on Ptolemy's map in the second century, only six of these can be identified from early medieval records. While this might reflect problems in the transmission of names, it could also reflect fundamental changes in the political structures of Late Antique Ireland. As large power centres fell out of use, big political units may have fragmented. Certainly, by the time written records emerge in the sixth century, Ireland had a plethora of 150 or more petty kingdoms or *túatha*. These kingdoms tended to be focused around agricultural land, often having a plain (Old Irish *mag*) as their central focus.

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

⁵ Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 6.

⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 146.

⁷ Edwards, 'Archaeology', p. 264.

⁸ Halpin and Newman, *Ireland*, p. 2; McCormick, 'Cows', pp. 35–6.

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

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

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

⁹ Bateson, ‘Roman material’, p. 37; Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Rance, ‘Attacotti’. It should be noted that Rance’s theory that the term ‘Attacotti’ derives from ‘aithechthuatha’ is linguistically flawed.

¹¹ Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, pp. 9–10.

¹² Ó Ríordáin, ‘Roman material in Ireland’, p. 45.

¹³ Raftery, ‘Iron Age Ireland’, p. 179.

¹⁴ Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, p. 176; Swift, *Ogam stones*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Cahill Wilson, *Late Iron Age*, pp. 35, 176.

¹⁶ Freeman, *Ireland and the classical world*, p. 105.