

CHAPTER TWO

*Early Irish priests and their areas of ministry
AD 700-900**Catherine Swift*

Sometime before the year 725 AD, when Charles Martel was beginning to put together the series of European conquests which resulted eventually in the Carolingian empire, and the Venerable Bede was working away in the tranquillity of the library at Jarrow, a great compilation of church law was put together by two churchmen from either end of the Gaelic-speaking world. Their names were Ruben of Dair-inis (on the river Blackwater, north-west of Youghal) and Cú Chuimne of Iona (at the central crossing point of the Hebridean sea-lanes). Their massive work consisted of 67 books arranged according to topic, beginning with a discussion of the clerical grades of bishop, priest and deacon and following this with consideration of issues such as fasting, prayers, rules of burial and less obviously Christian topics such as kingship, lot-casting, rules of inheritance, hospitality, leadership of barbarians and curses. Each book was divided into short paragraphs (entitled chapters), consisting of quotations or paraphrases of a variety of sources including both the Old and New Testament, the writings of early church fathers such as Augustine or Jerome and canon laws taken from various church synods held in the Middle East, Africa and France.

Some of the quotations in these various chapters are attributed to an 'Irish synod' but, unfortunately, no further details are given. We cannot tell, therefore, how many 'Irish synods' were involved, nor where they were held and we have no idea of the particular circumstances which caused them to be called. We do know, however, from a story in one of the early Lives of St Brigid, that at least some synods were held at the communal festivities known as *óenaig*. These were seasonal assemblies or fairs at which tenants offered up their animals and foodstuffs as rent; horsemen, chariot-drivers and sporting enthusiasts came together to run races and play games; kings and lords fought over

the minutiae of political alliances; poets and musicians recited their latest compositions; merchants traded foreign goods and young men sought wives.¹ The deliberations of the churchmen, therefore, were but one strand in the complex web of negotiations and contracts which bound together early Irish society.

One quotation from an 'Irish synod' is listed in the second book of the collection, entitled *On presbyters and priests*. Chapter 25 deals with correct punishment to be meted out to priests who are absent from their churches:

An Irish synod decrees that a priest should refrain from being away from (his) church for a whole day; if for two days, he must do penance for seven days on bread and water; if however a dead man should be brought to the church and he is absent, he must do penance for he owes compensation to the dead man. *Same source*: If he should be absent one Sunday from church he does penance for twenty days on bread and water; if absent for two or three, he should be removed from the honour of his grade.²

This is a relatively rare example of concern about a priest's ministry in this particular source. The other twenty-six chapters in the book concern the nature of the priest's role, their Old Testament precursors, the nature of sacrifice, the rituals of ordination and (by far the greatest area of concern with ten separate chapters), the rules governing clerical income. The emphasis on the dead in the quotation above is further reflected in the fact that another three chapters deal with the inner meaning of the last rites, the entitlement of a priest to a mortuary due and the fact that this is capped at a maximum of one milch cow. There is also an interesting chapter (again attributed to an Irish synod) on the nature of the church's sacramental role:

An Irish synod: Now the Church offers in many kinds to the Lord, first through it, in itself, secondly through commemoration of Jesus Christ, who says 'Do this in memory of me' and thirdly through the souls of the dead.³

1. Catherine Swift, 'Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater valley and the Uí Néill kings of Tara' in *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*, ed. A. P. Smyth (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2000), 116-118.

2. Hermann Wasserschleben, *Die Irische Kanonensammlung* (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1966), 19.

3. Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 14-15, (59).

Priestly concern for the dead in this early period of Irish Christianity should be understood in the light of contemporary social norms, for recent research has begun to reveal the limited extent of church authority over burial at this time. Archaeological excavation has made it clear that not everybody was buried in Christian graveyards and has indicated how some much older monuments, of pre-Christian date, continued to be used on occasion. In Knoxspark in Sligo, for example, two cairns containing Iron Age cremations were surrounded by some hundred extended inhumations with heads orientated to the west. At least one of these burials was dated by the excavator to between the eighth and tenth centuries AD.⁴ At Ballymacaward in Donegal five slab-lined graves of the fifth century AD were inserted into a cairn of prehistoric date while other inhumations, in unprotected graves, were inserted into the same monument in the seventh century AD.⁵ Working from textual sources, Elizabeth O'Brien has argued that the practice of Christian burial around churches was still only making gradual headway in Ireland during the eighth and ninth centuries against a more widespread system of kin-based secular cemeteries.⁶ In such a context, it makes sense that the eighth-century canon lawyers would stress the particular value attached to Christian burial and emphasise the concern felt by church authorities and their continuing prayers for the dead.

In yet a third chapter from *On presbyters and priests*, the distinction is drawn between the sacramental role of priests and bishops and emphasis is laid on their mutual roles in celebrating the Eucharist and in preaching. Here the authority cited is the sixth-century Spanish churchman Isidore of Seville whose work was held in particularly high esteem by the Irish church. J. N. Hillgarth has pointed out that while *De officiis* and *Sententiae* are the most frequently cited of Isidore's works, *Quaestiones*, *Epistola*

4. Charles Mount, 'The promontory fort, inhumation cemetery and sub-rectangular enclosure at Knoxspark, Co.Sligo', *A celebration of Sligo: first essays for the Sligo Field Club*, ed. M. A. Timoney (Carrick-on-Shannon: Sligo Field Club 2002), 103-116.

5. Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Ballymacaward', *Excavations 1998*, ed. I. Bennett (Dublin: Wordwell Press, 2000), 26-7

6. Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Pagan and Christian burial in Ireland during the first millennium AD: continuity and change', *The early church in Wales and the West*, eds N. Edwards & A. Lane (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992), 130-7.

ad Massonam, Chronica and the *Etymologiae* are all quoted at some stage by Ruben and Cú Chuimne.⁷

Isidore says about priests: The management of the ministry of God is entrusted to them just as indeed to bishops. For they preside over the church of Christ and in arranging of the divine body and blood, they are partners with bishops, just as in the apostolic doctrine and in the office of preaching; only the higher authority required for the ordination and consecration of priests is reserved etc ... (sic).⁸

The evidence for the duties and functions of priests and their role in Irish society is not limited to *On presbyters and priests* but can also be found scattered through other books within the collection. In Book 21, for example, *On judgement*, a priest is identified as a suitable person to be a judge, along with fourteen other social categories including a bishop, a king, a legal scholar, a kinsman (on issues concerning his own kin), a craftsman (on matters pertaining to his own craft), the old, the poor and the wise.⁹ This incidental material dealing with the social role of priests is widely scattered throughout the work, however, and full consideration of it will probably have to be deferred until the forthcoming edition and translation of the entirety of Ruben and Cú Chuimne's compilation by Roy Flechner.

The text which provides the closest parallels to *On presbyters and priests* is a law tract written in Old Irish entitled *Ríagal Phátraic*. It is also of approximately similar date, having been dated to the eighth century on the basis of its language. There are slightly different variants in the different manuscripts but I quote here the translations offered in the most recent discussion of its pastoral provisions:

He selects a surety on their behalf from the *manaig* of each church which is his responsibility with respect to a proper stipend, comprising the price of baptism, the due of communion and of chanting the requiem of all the *manaig*, both the living and the dead and Mass every Sunday and every chief solemnity and every chief festival and celebration of each canonical hour and singing the three fifties [i.e. the psalms]

7. J. N. Hillgarth, 'Visigothic Spain and Ireland in the seventh century,' *Peritia* 3 (1984), 9, fn 4.

8. Wasserscheben, 'Kanonensammlung,' 13 (§ 4).

9. Wasserscheben, 'Kanonensammlung,' 62-3 (§ 2).

every canonical hour unless instruction or spiritual direction i.e. unction and baptism prevent him.¹⁰

The exact definition of the *manaig* is, as discussed elsewhere in this volume, at the root of current debates about the extent to which all Irish people were practising Christians at this stage.¹¹ Whatever the size of the congregation, this extract makes it clear that a priest might have responsibility for more than one church ('the *manaig* of each church which is his responsibility'.) For these churches, weekly celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays in addition to Masses on feast-days was considered the norm. This extract also redresses the balance left missing from the quotations already considered in that it includes baptism as one of the key duties of the priest. Provisions in early Irish penitentials also make it clear that baptism was considered a key duty of the clergy – if a child died without having been baptised and the fault lay with the cleric involved, he must do penance on bread and water for six months (if he was not of the same locality) or a year (if he was).¹²

Requiring the priest to recite the entirety of the Psalms every canonical hour (as is the literal meaning of the Irish in *Riagal Phátraic*) is rather more difficult to envisage. Our sources specify that between six and eight canonical hours were celebrated in any twenty-four hour period.¹³ The Rule of Monks (*Regula Monachorum*) attributed to St Columbanus has a lengthy discussion of the number of psalms which it was reasonable to ask a religious community to perform and specifies that shorter summer nights require a smaller number otherwise 'it causes not so much weariness as exhaustion'.¹⁴ Though the Latin is difficult to understand precisely, the rule appears to be 75 psalms or half

10. Colmán Etchingham, *Church organization in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Laigin Press, 1999), 253-4, translating Daniel Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 2130:23-8.

11. See Liam Irwin, 'The Irish Parish in Historical Perspective', in this volume.

12. Ludwig Bieler (ed), *The Irish Penitentials, Scriptorum Latini Hiberniae*, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 92 § 48, 116 § 33, 224 § 11.2

13. *Dictionary of the Irish Language T* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76), 275 (henceforth DIL).

14. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera Scriptorum Latini Hiberniae 2* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1954) 128-133.

the Psalter on Saturday and Sunday nights between November and January with 36 psalms on other nights of the week. These decrease to 36 psalms on weekend nights around the time of the summer equinox and 24 on other nights. Even this seems something of a tall order. At the very most, it seems unlikely that a priest would be required to do more than recite the entire 150 psalms in any given 24-hour period and indeed, it may be more plausible to visualise him chanting a much smaller number.

In a provision that seems remarkably relevant to modern-day Ireland, the author of *Riagal Phátraic* goes on to consider the problems posed by a possible lack of available clergy:

If indeed, it be on account of the scarcity of ordained men in the communities, [it is proper?] that there be three churches or four in the cure of each ordained man, provided that he can offer communion and baptism for the souls of all and Mass on solemn days and feast-days on their altars.¹⁵

The word translated here as 'cure' is *cubus* – literally the 'conscience' of the priest and the word identified as the neutral-sounding 'communities' is *tuatha*, often translated as kingdoms or (in older translations) as tribes. Here it seems to be being used as a general word for secular society as a whole. As I understand this provision, the idea is that the three or four churches must be geographically close in order to allow the priest to travel from one to another and still celebrate Sunday Mass in each. Colmán Etchingham, in contrast, understands this to imply that 'Mass and communion – and perhaps pastoral services in general – would not necessarily be offered every Sunday but on a priestly visitation at the time of the great feast-days'.¹⁶

Etchingham's interpretation seems to me to be at odds with the stipulation in the Latin canon laws discussed above, namely that a priest who was missing from his church on Sunday must do penance for twenty days and that, if it happened on a regular basis, he should be demoted from his status as priest. This could hardly be articulated as a general rule if Mass was only celebrated irregularly at the great feast-days. It is also counter-intuitive – since the priest must still get to all four, he could hardly offer Mass on feast-days unless the churches were within easy reach

15. Etchingham, *Church organization*, 254, translating *Binchy Corpus*, 2130:28-31

16. Etchingham, *Church organization*, 254.

of one another. The only way in which Etchingam's model would work would be if the priest was only offering Mass in one church per single 'great feast-day'. Such a severely limited system of pastoral care is nowhere attested in our sources and seems to be incompatible with the rules concerning baptism and burial mentioned above which require a priest to be easily available to the laity at short notice.

It is clear from *Ríagal Phátraic* itself that within the confines of a single *tuath*-kingdom, there would be a number of different churches within contemporary use:

Any church, of the small churches of the *tuath* as well as the great churches, in which there is an ordained man, owes the stipend of his order i.e. a house and a precinct [?] and a bed and clothing and food which may suffice him without exemption, without neglect of anything that is in the power of the church i.e. a bushel of corn with its condiment and a milch cow every quarter and food at the festivals.¹⁷

The duty here is from the church authorities to the individual priest. Ruben and Cú Chuimne cite Old Testament precedent to the effect that, just as Aaron was given his vestments by Moses and others, so too should the necessities required by an Irish priest be provided by his *princeps* or church superior.¹⁸ This word *princeps* is somewhat ambiguous as its literal meaning 'leader' does not specify whether we are talking about episcopal or monastic superiors and it can, in fact, be used of both, particularly in their role as governors and controllers of economic resources.¹⁹ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that, just as with the contemporary Frankish and Anglo-Saxon churches, the authority to appoint priests could fluctuate between the two different systems of authority, depending on the relative status and power attached to each in a specific area.²⁰

17. Etchingam, *Church organization*, 252-3 translating Binchy, *Corpus*, 2130: 19-23

18. Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 15 (§ 11). I am grateful to Dr Jessie Rogers for identifying the source of this statement as Exodus 28:esp vv 1-3.

19. Etchingam, *Church organization*, 50-59

20. *Les Canons des conciles mérovingiens (VI-VII siècles)*, ed. J. Gaudemet & B. Basdevant, *Sources Chrétiennes* 353 (Paris 1989), I 113, 219, 271; John Steane, *The archaeology of medieval England and Wales* (University of Georgia Press 1985), 82.

Previous discussion of this paragraph has concentrated on the precise nature of the great churches (*móreclais*) and here I would agree with Richard Sharpe that the most likely explanation is that this phrase refers to the larger ecclesiastical settlements which in many (most?) cases would be monasteries or have a monastic component.²¹ I would understand this rule to state that a priest, whether or not he was living within a community of professed religious, is always entitled to the wage proper to his status. That wage appears to be allocated to him from the tithes of the faithful rendered to the church authorities (and subsequently transmitted to the individual cleric) but it also would seem to have included items such as the mortuary due paid directly by the bereaved to the man officiating at the burial.

The key point for the discussion here, however, is that both the small churches (*mineclais*) and the great churches (*móreclais*) are given in the plural whereas *tuath* is used in the singular. In other words, the author of *Riagal Phátraic* would appear to be describing a norm in which there would be a number of priests operating at any one time within a single *tuath*. There is nothing problematic, therefore, in assuming that the three or four churches which might represent the responsibility of one individual would all have been located within the boundaries of a single *tuath*-kingdom.

If a *móreclais* should be considered as a large ecclesiastical community, what then was a *mineclais* or small church? The seventh-century Bishop Tírechán from north Mayo, who wrote a retrospective account of journeys by St Patrick across Ireland, makes it clear that many churches in his day were headed by secular clergy of various grades. In his account of the saint's activities in the region of modern-day Roscommon, for example, Tírechán identified churches where Patrick was thought to have left bishops, others where he left priests, still others deacons and even, in more remote and poorer districts, *barbari* (barbarians) without any clerical grade at all.²² As a general rule, Tírechán's

21. Richard Sharpe, 'Some problems concerning the organization of the church in early medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 260. For examples of monastic establishments attached to episcopal settlements, see C. Etchingam 'The idea of monastic austerity in early Ireland', *Luxury and austerity* ed. J. Hill & C. Lennon (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), 14-29

22. Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 138 (§19), 140 (§20, §23) 140 (§ 27) 144 (§28, 29).

arrangement appears to list one church per individual community or region while the status of the cleric left behind reflects the political power of the community in which he was based – large over-kingdoms had episcopal or even arch-episcopal churches while smaller kingdoms had churches headed by priests or deacons.²³

Since Tírechán is only concerned to identify churches associated with the cult of Patrick, we cannot assume from his account that he is visualising a system whereby there is only one functioning church per region. In fact, he makes it clear that this is not the case for in some of his summary accounts of Patrick's activities, he lists multiple foundations associated with a single district: 'From Mag Tochuir, he [Patrick] came to Dul Ocheni and built seven churches there.'²⁴

The most detailed account of an individual church settlement in this work is that of Tírechán's own church by the western banks of the River Moy. He describes this as *aeclessia magna Patricii*, 'the great church of Patrick' and identifies it as the location of 'the wood of Fochloth' from which the call had gone forth to persuade the saint to leave his family and take up his Christian mission in Ireland. It was also the location of Patrick's celebration of his second Easter in Ireland and indeed, the focus of Tírechán's entire work is the description of Patrick's travels from the *aeclessia magna Patricii* of Meath²⁵ where Patrick converted the Uí Néill rulers of Tara to the *aeclessia magna Patricii* of north Mayo.

Tírechán's description of the site, though short, makes it clear that it was composed of a number of different elements. It held the relics of the first bishop appointed by Patrick, St Mucneus, as well as the 'seven books of law' donated to Mucneus at the time of his ordination. This was the Heptateuch or the first seven books of the Old Testament used by Irish canonists as their primary source of inspiration and it seems that Tírechán's church also functioned as a centre for legal learning and a clerical court.

There were also satellite churches in the near vicinity including *Cell Róe Mór* where Patrick fought with pagan druids and

23. A detailed discussion of the evidence for this proposition is put forward in my D Phil thesis: Catherine Swift, *The social and ecclesiastical background to the treatment of the Connachta in Tírechán's seventh-century Collectanea* (Oxford 1994)

24. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, (§48)

25. Now Donaghpatrick between Kells and Navan.

which later became the church of Macc Ercae, the place of two female saints which later became *Cell Forglan* and what Tírechán describes as an 'earthen church' (possibly originally a prehistoric monument) on the ceremonial assembly site of the local rulers. In addition, Tírechán specifies that there was another church owned by the community, on a peninsula guarding the crossing of the Moy at Bartragh and a free-standing cross which seems to have been the focus of a major cemetery. These various sites were located in a scattered penumbra around the episcopal church proper and analysis of the evidence for their placenames suggests that they occupied some ten square miles.²⁶

It is clear that in cases of settlements headed by bishops and over-bishops, churchmen with various roles were, at the very least, closely associated with the church claiming episcopal authority. Tírechán does not specify whether, in the case of his own settlement, these subordinate churches were manned by secular or monastic clergy and we should, perhaps, envisage a mixed community involving both. The church associated with the female saints should probably be understood as an establishment for female religious for Ruben and Cú Chuimne specify that such communities were under the direct control of the local bishop.²⁷ Equally, however, the distinctive nature of the placenames associated with each individual would imply that their homes and churches were dispersed across a wider landscape rather than existing in nucleated proximity to a central church.²⁸

Thus the domestic arrangements of Tírechán's own episcopal establishment conforms to the specification in *Ríagal Phátraic* that each priest is entitled to his house (*tech*) and precinct or yard (*airlise*).²⁹ In terms of domestic arrangements, then, it appears that the early Irish secular clergy normally lived apart as individuals rather than, as in Merovingian France or early

26. Swift, *Connachta*, 317-340.

27. Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung* 114 (§14).

28. Catherine Swift, 'Forts and fields: a study of monastic towns in seventh and eighth-century Ireland', *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 9 (1998), 105-126.

29. *Airlise* is identified in Ó Clery's Irish glossary (DIL A 226) as a synonym for *garrdha*, a loan from Old Norse *gard*. This has been identified by Patrick Wallace as the word for the house plot (with vegetable gardens) surrounding individual dwellings in Hiberno-Norse cities. Patrick Wallace, 'Garrda and airbeada: the plot thickens in Viking Dublin', *Seanchas*, ed. A. P. Smyth (Dublin: Four Courts 2000), 261-3.

Rome, as members of an episcopal household. Rules concerning a priest's right to labour from his congregation also stress the separate nature of his establishment: e.g. a standard's day ploughing each year and its seed and corn-land as well as a half measure of clothing – was due to each *fer gráid* (ordained man – literally man of rank) from members of his congregation.³⁰ The title *fer gráid* here comes from the usage of Pope Gregory the Great who, in his work *The Book of Pastoral Rule* written c. 590, identifies priests with the Latin word *ordo* or rank.³¹

An interesting insight into the problems that such a dispersed clergy might pose to church authorities is indicated in the First Synod of St Patrick which decreed that a British cleric should not be allowed minister without some form of letter granting permission 'even though he lives amongst the lay population'. Elsewhere in the same text, this is elevated into a general rule – no *clericus vagus* 'wandering cleric' should be allowed to settle amongst lay people.³² At the same time, it is clear that in reality priests did in fact, operate independently to a great extent – for other rules from the same source state:

If a priest has built a church, he shall not offer the holy sacrifice in it before he has his bishop (*pontifex*) come to consecrate it for so it is proper.

If a newcomer joins a community, he shall not baptise or offer the holy sacrifice or consecrate or build a church until he receives permission from the bishop (*episcopus*). One who looks to laymen for permission shall be a stranger.

Any cleric who is a newcomer in a bishop's community is not allowed to baptise or to offer the holy sacrifice or to perform any functions; if he does not abide by this, he shall be excommunicated.³³

It is an oft repeated precept in legal scholarship that if a law is passed on a frequent basis, it implies not only that the authorities want to enforce it but also that they are having trouble in so doing. The fact that this rule is repeated three times within the

30. Binchy, *Corpus*, 2130:31-3.

31. Bruno Judic, *Grégoire le Grand: Règle Pastorale Tome I* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1992), 68. Gregory is quoted in *On presbyters and priests*, *Wasserschleben, Kanonensammlung* 13 (§5).

32. Bieler, *Penitentials* 54 (§3), 58 (§33).

33. Bieler, *Penitentials* 56 (§23), 58 (§24), (§27).

single text of the First Synod is a clear pointer to the fact that priests enjoyed a good deal of *de facto* independence from episcopal authority. The word translated by Bieler as 'community' is the Latin *plebs* or people and this has generally been held to be the equivalent of the vernacular *tuath* or kingdom.³⁴ It seems clear from these provisions that the priests, while under the jurisdiction and authority of their bishops, lived apart from them and within the lay community, just as Irish priests and secular clergy do today. This goes some way to explaining the concern, expressed in two different penitentials, that a *clericus plebis* (churchman of the *tuath*) should not be mourned with *bardigium/bardicatio* – two Latin loan words which appear to be calques on the native Irish word *bairdne* – or bardic poems. Anyone reciting such poems to mark the death of a priest is condemned by the canonists to twenty days fasting on bread and water. While this looks harsh, it is in fact less than half the penalty for mourning a lay person in the same way – which implies that the authors felt it reasonable, though reprehensible, that the local priest would be honoured by his congregation in this manner.³⁵

In short, examining the different sources from the seventh and eighth centuries, one must infer that the *mineclais* or small churches of *Ríagal Phátraic* were those of the secular clergy, living apart from other professed religious or episcopal authorities, amongst the ordinary people of the *tuath*. It seems logical therefore, that the three or four churches which might be on the conscience of an ordained man would, in many instances, belong to this category. What remains to be explored is the precise size of the individual *tuatha* and what this might imply for the extent of pastoral provision in early Ireland.

Uraicecht Becc is a legal text which, like the others considered here, has been dated to the eighth century although the most recent commentator, Liam Breathnach, suggests a rather wider dating range, extending from the eighth up to the early tenth century.³⁶ In this, the king of a single *tuath* is identified as one who has access

34. Kathleen Hughes, *The church in early Irish society* (London: Methuen, 1966), 50; Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 138, 143; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, 134-142.

35. Bieler, *Penitentials*, 162 (§ 28), 230 (§6.4).

36. Liam Breathnach, *A companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 2005), 316.

to an army of seven hundred warriors, and subsequent commentators have added the gloss that this figure represents the sum total of the king's clients.³⁷ If one assumes that the bulk of these warriors are likely to have had wives and families, we are left with a *tuath*-population in the region of 1400 adults. If we include the possibility that the warriors may have had adult children who were not themselves clients and the various categories of unfree adult who were not entitled to be clients and who are classified under various headings as *fuidir*, *mug*, *sen-cléithe* or in the case of females, *cumal* and *ancilla*, we end up with rough approximations of 2000 to 3000 adults within the average *tuath*. This is probably a grossly minimalist figure, assuming as it does that all free males who were blacksmiths, chariot-builders, poets, lawyers, historians and merchants were also available and qualified to hold arms. Still, even given all the necessary caveats, it is an interesting figure to bear in mind when trying to evaluate *Ríagal Phátraic's* provision that there might be a number of both *mineclais* and *móreclais* within the borders of a single *tuath*.

This is an approach which seeks to define a *tuath* in terms of its population size but it gives us little idea of the actual geographical extent of a *tuath*, especially as it seems clear that early medieval Irish settlements and cleared land were surrounded by large quantities of unoccupied land consisting of bogs, woods and mountain-tops.³⁸ The common approach to identifying the actual acreage of individual *tuatha* has been to examine later administrative units such as modern baronies, their Anglo-Norman predecessors, and medieval rural deaneries. Many of these units incorporate early medieval population names which has led scholars to suggest that they represent the territories occupied by those populations in the pre-Viking period. The problem with this approach is that continuity of placename does not necessarily mean continuity of administrative unit or consistency in boundaries over time. This problem is compounded by the fact that in many parts of Ireland our first detailed account of land units and their acreage stems from seventeenth-century maps and surveys. This can make it difficult to assess the precise relationship between the recent unit and their medieval predecessors. In fact, detailed local studies in regions where we do have

37. Binchy, *Corpus* 1602:4ff.

38. Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, Early Irish Law series Vol iv (Dublin 1997), 406-8.

sources to investigate have made it clear that the boundaries have indeed changed over time as land reclamation and improvements have altered the local landscape.³⁹

Another problem has been to identify precisely the exact correlation between a *tuath* and a particular population group. Most early Irish kingdoms are named after ancestor figures as in the case of the Cenél Conaill (the kindred of Conall), otherwise known as Tír Chonaill (the land of Conall) in modern Donegal or the Cenél Eógain/Tír Eoghain of Tyrone. Others are named after areas of cleared land such as Mag mBreg or Brega in Meath and north Dublin or Mag nAí in Roscommon. Rarely, if ever, are these kingdoms called *tuatha* in our early medieval sources. Instead *tuath* is a word which is generally limited to the general regulations and social descriptions found in law codes. This introduces yet another element of uncertainty into our attempt to delimit early medieval *tuatha* on the ground.

Modern placenames which include the word *tuath* include the parish of Tuosist in Co Kerry (Túath Ó Síosta), Touaghty parish in Co Mayo (Túath Aitheachta) or Tuogh and Tuogh-cluggin parishes in Co Limerick.⁴⁰ These parishes cover 39,340 acres, 3,067 acres, 6,518 acres and 2,093 acres respectively. Such a degree of variation, even allowing for differences in land quality, would seem to suggest that here we are dealing with the survival of a *tuath* placename into modern times rather than an ancient unit which has survived intact from the early medieval period.

It might be more reasonable to look at the use of *tuath* during the period of the Anglo-Norman colonisation where the evidence is much closer in date to the pre-Viking era considered here. In the charters and inquisitions of the thirteenth century, the spelling is often Latinised as *theodum*, *theudum*, *theode* and others but it is later rendered in local placenames by spellings such as Toghe (in Limerick) or Tovo- (in Co Offaly). Paul MacCotter

39. See, for example, C. A. Empey, 'The cantreds of medieval Tipperary', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* 13 (1971), 22-9; *ibid.*, 'The cantreds of the medieval county of Kilkenny', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 101 (1970), 28-34.

40. Deirdre & Laurence Flanagan, *Irish placenames* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 158; Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1993), 651; *General Alphabetical Index to the townlands, towns, parishes and baronies of Ireland* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing 1986), 956.

suggests that in Tipperary and Kilkenny, the *theodum* is largely replaced by the Anglo-Norman economic unit known as the manor while in Limerick, many manors were smaller and appear to be based on half-*theoda*.⁴¹

Canon Empey, in a number of detailed studies of the first phases of Anglo-Norman colonisation, has approached the matter differently. Working on the same material from Tipperary and Limerick as used by MacCotter, C. A. Empey has suggested that the Norman cantreds coincided with the rural deaneries as well as reflecting 'the boundaries of the great "capital" manors'.⁴² Thus, for example the cantred of Elyocarroll was equivalent to the manor of Dunkerrin (with some 100,000 acres) and the cantred of Eliogarty was another way of describing the manor of Thurles, with a roughly comparable area.

In the case of the manor of Thurles, we have a charter by Theobald Walter compiled c. 1192. Within this unit, Theobald refers to a number of *theodums* including the *theodum* of Kenelfenelgille, the *theodum* in which Thurles itself was situated and another *theodum* of Corketeny. These various *theoda* holdings all became subordinate fiefs belonging to Theobald's tenants within the cantred. Each of these, in their turn, was the equivalent of a medieval parish of the Norman period. Again one should note that in these the word *theodum* occurs frequently. A charter of Radulf le Bret from 1190-1200, for example, grants the tithes of the parish of Cooleagh in south-east Tipperary to the Hospital of St John the Baptist in Dublin and this church is stated to be the equivalent of *teudum de Oros*. Similarly c. 1200, Simon de Leminster granted the tithes of the *theodum* called Kenel Rathonere to the Hospital while Mannasserus Arsic included the tithes of the *theodum* called Gortcorki.⁴³ In terms of size, these could be relatively small – Cooleagh, for example is a mere 2,557 acres.

In some parts of Offaly on the borders of the Anglicised

41. Paul MacCotter, *Medieval Ireland: territorial, political and economic divisions* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 21-2.

42. C.A. Empey, 'The Norman period 1185-1500', *Tipperary: history and society* ed. W. Nolan (Dublin: Geography Publications 1985), 73; *ibid.*, 'The settlement of the kingdom of Limerick', *England and Ireland in the later middle ages*, ed. J. Lydon (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1981) 2.

43. Mark Hennessey, 'Parochial organisation in medieval Tipperary', *Tipperary History and Society*, ed. W. Nolan & T. McGrath (Geography publications) 62-3.

areas, the area identified as a *tuath* could be much larger. A Tudor map of 1563 depicting the lands of Brian Ua Conchobuir identifies *Tovogeishel* which has been identified by Alfred Smyth as an early *tuath* kingdom. This, however, is only attested in the pre-Norman era by the name *Mag Géisille*.⁴⁴ In the 1302 taxation lists which provide us with the best coverage of the later medieval church within Ireland, this unit appears to be represented by the Deanery of Oppaly (=Offaly) which incorporates six churches within its borders. Of these, the church of 'Gesel' and its associated Vicarage are identified as the richest. The modern civil parish of Geashill is identified in the Townland Index of 1851 as containing 43,309 acres and as being divided between the two baronies of Geashill (with 30,874 acres) and Upper Phillipstown. In this instance, therefore, what is recorded in the Tudor period as a *tuath* corresponds to a medieval rural deanery and a single modern (civil) parish.

We have seen, in the case of the Tipperary churches, that the tithes from these parishes were granted by their Anglo-Norman rulers to external church bodies. This pattern represents the norm: a charter of c. 1195-1200, for example, indicates that the tenant, one Thomas de Hereford, donated all the tithes to the abbey of St Thomas in Dublin. The tithes of the *theodum* of Thurles, similarly, were donated to the church of Abingdon in Oxfordshire. Empey argues that this wholesale attribution of tithe-income to newly founded establishments of Anglo-Norman origin, indicates that the pre-Norman *tuath*, underlying the later *theodum* / manor, did not have a parish structure of its own and that this was an innovation of the Normans themselves. The ecclesiastical unit corresponding to the cantred as a whole was the rural deanery, in the charge of a rural dean or archdeacon and Empey further notes that these men are always given Norman names in the sources, indicating yet another innovation in church organisation established by the in-comers.⁴⁵

Whatever about the rural deaneries, the argument concerning the tithes is not entirely convincing. We have seen above that in the early period, tithes were paid to the local *principes* of the church, be they episcopal or monastic. To say that the Anglo-Norman lords in places like Tipperary had chosen new ecclesi-

44. Alfred Smyth, *Celtic Leinster* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press 1982), 70-71, 75.

45. Empey, *Tipperary*, 85.

astical foundations to be the beneficiaries of the tithe income from their estates is not the same as saying there was no such thing as tithes or parishes in the preceding era. The old *tuath* kingdoms may have, in many instances, been the equivalent of the secular manors in the newly founded colony but the people who governed the latter and who benefitted from their agricultural surpluses were invariably the Norman settlers. It is not unreasonable that in terms of ecclesiastical organisation, a similar transfer of assets from pre-existing units to newly established authorities and ecclesiastical foundations may also have taken place.

Indeed, as Mark Hennessey points out, the normal pattern of the eleventh and twelfth centuries throughout western Europe was that lay patrons were in a position to grant the tithes to a priest of their choice, subject to episcopal agreement and/or that of the monastic house to which the authority to appoint a local priest had been granted.⁴⁶ We do not know for certain whether this was also the case in Ireland in earlier periods but the reference quoted above to priests (illegally) seeking the permission of local laymen to build churches make it seem likely. Fragments of the eighth-century law text *Córus Bésgnai* also refer to the *eclais fine griain* (church of the land-owner's family) where, according to the associated commentary, the owner of the land on which the church stood had rights to select successors to the *apdaine*. The latter is normally translated as abbacy but can also mean any form of ecclesiastical ruling office.⁴⁷

Certainly, in parts of Ireland which were not conquered by the Anglo-Normans, we see clear remnants of the older systems by which local tithes were paid directly to the ecclesiastical superior. In describing the system in Gaelic Ulster, Kenneth Nicholls quotes Bishop George Montgomery, writing in 1609:

The Byshop of Clogher hath beside his lands the fourth part of all tythes throughout his Dyoces, which is called *quarta episcopalis*. The Byshops of Derry and Rapho have the third part and it is called *tertia episcopalis*.

The rest of the tythes are devyded between the Parson and Vicar. In Clougher the Parson hath two fourth parts, the Vicar hath one. In Derry and Rapho the Parson and Vicar

46. Mark Hennessey, 'Parochial organisation', 62.

47. Binchy, *Corpus*, 1821:20-1, DIL A 363.

have each of them one third part ... The Vicars are tyed to perpetuall residence and service of the cure and beside their portion of tythes, have the benefit of all oblations and other small dueties at burials and christenings to themselves alone for attendance of the service ... The parsonages and vicarages through all these Dyocesess have byn ever collated by the Bishops of these Sees without contradiction or challenge of any person.⁴⁸

This structure is identical to that described in the eighteenth-century Latin canon laws, down to the fact that the person attending services for the dead receive a mortuary fee directly while their main income, although based on tithes, comes to them from their ecclesiastical superiors. What we see in 17th century Ulster, therefore, is the direct successor of the early medieval system as described by our original authorities, Ruben and Cú Chuimne.

In the province of Tuam and that part of Killaloe diocese west of the Shannon, however, there appears to be somewhat different and, at first sight, rather more confused arrangements. To quote Nicholls:

On the one hand, we may find the rectories of a number of parishes united as a single benefice, often bearing a territorial name rather than that of a church, on the other hand, we hear of two rectories in a single church and of distinct rectories 'in lay fee' and 'in ecclesiastical fee' within one church.⁴⁹

As an example of the unification of rectories, Nicholls cites, amongst others, the unit known by the territorial name of Okassyn or Ogashin. This name reproduces the name of one particular group of descendants from Brian Boru's family who were known in Irish as the Uí Caisin and were based around Quin in the modern baronies of Upper and Lower Tulla in Co Clare. In this particular example, by the time of the seventeenth century Visitations, the unit comprised eight separate parishes. It was a benefice held 'in lay fee' and the right to appoint the priest or rector was held by the O'Brien king of Thomond. They

48. *Ordnance Survey of the County of Londonderry I Parish of Templemore* (1837), 50 quoted by K. W. Nicholls, 'Rectory, vicarage and parish in the western Irish dioceses', *In Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 101 (1971), 54-5

49. Nicholls, 'Rectory', 53.

should be noted that the exact location of his settlement is no longer known.)⁵³

It is interesting that the great western rectories, incorporating numerous parishes, often coincide with the local rural deanery and indeed, were often known by the same name.⁵⁴ In the colonised areas, these deaneries usually coincided with the Anglo-Norman cantreds which themselves, as we have seen, were often made up of a number of early medieval *tuatha* or *theoda*. In terms of size, however, the eastern rural deaneries were often considerably smaller than those of the west – compare the 175,000 acres of Okassyn with the 100,000 odd acres of individual cantreds and manors within Anglo-Norman Tipperary.

The rural dean was essentially an officer of the bishop whose duties included supervision of the local clergy, upkeep of local churches and the holding of monthly chapters in which the bishop's mandates could be conveyed to his subordinates.⁵⁵ The point at which this office developed in Ireland is not clear and requires further research but it is worth noting Katherine Simms' point that there seems to be a steady growth of episcopal power between the synod of Rathbreasail in 1111 and the early thirteenth century and that this increase in political importance led to the transfer of all unassigned church lands to the diocesan bishops.⁵⁶ Given Empey's argument that the early deans in the conquered areas all have Norman names, it seems likely that this particular official was introduced into Irish church structures during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

A separate strand in the organisation of the later medieval parochial system were the establishments located on church lands. The normal pattern was that these formed separate parishes where the tithes were divided up between the resident vicar (the man who in most cases was the actual minister living locally) and the 'rector' who, in this case, was normally a member of a cathedral chapter. Where this type of parish church was

53. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 158 §45; Swift, *Connachta*, 340-343.

54. Nicholls, *Rectory*, 59.

55. C. A. Empey, 'The Anglo-Norman diocese of Ossory', *A worthy foundation: the cathedral church of St Canice 1285-1985*, eds. S. Barry, C. A. Empey & J. Bradley (Kilkenny: Dolmen 1985), 18.

56. Katherine Simms, 'Frontiers in the Irish church – regional and cultural', *Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland: essays presented to J. F. Lydon* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995), 184-7.

found within a large parcel of land owned by the local bishop, these parishes were often termed 'cross lands' or 'in the crosses' and could be run entirely separately from the local secular administration. In some cases in the west, however, these 'rectories in ecclesiastical fee' were made up of individual townlands, scattered through the normal parish structure in which case the cathedral authorities would be granted the relevant proportion of the parish tithe.⁵⁷ Examination of sixteenth and seventeenth century land surveys such as the *Compossicion Book of Connaught* or the *Books of Survey and Distribution* make it clear just how much land eventually ended up under such church control.⁵⁸ What is unusual about this system is that the vicar's stipend is not a sub-set of that owing to the rector as was the case in, for example, medieval England where it was the rector who appointed the vicar as his local representative.⁵⁹ In Ireland, the rector's share of the local tithe could be allocated to a quite different person or institution without any direct link to the vicar.

Again, the evidence is that these elements in the ecclesiastical administrative system were well established prior to the establishment of the Anglo-Norman colony. The seventh-century Bishop Tírechán tells the story of one particularly large estate which was granted to the church by a local king:

The said [Bishop] Assicus took refuge in the region north of Slíab Líacc and stayed for seven years in a retreat which is called Rochuil west of Slíab Líacc and his monks searched for him and found him in the mountain valleys with his metal-work and his monks took him forcibly with them and he died in their company in the solitude of the mountains and they buried him in Ráith Cungi in Mag Sereth and the king gave him and his monks after his death, grazing for a hundred cows with their calves and for twenty oxen, as an offering for ever.⁶⁰

57. Empey, *Tipperary*, 75-6; Nicholls, *Rectory*, 57.

58. A. M. Freeman, *The Compossicion Booke of Conaught*, (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1936); *Books of Survey and Distribution*, ed. R. C. Simington Vols 1-IV (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission 1949-1967)

59. John R. Moorman, *Church life in England in the thirteenth century* (Cambridge: University Press 1955)

60. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 14 § 22. The fact that the bishop was attended by monks shows that the Irish had adopted the idea initiated by St Augustine and promoted by Pope Gregory, that a bishop should live

An indication of the worth of this grant is provided by an account of the Anglo-Norman manor of Inch, north-west of Thurles in 1303:

The jurors say on their oath that there is at Inch a certain castle standing on a motte surrounded by a broken-down palisade, the greater part of which lies prostrate. And there are in the same manor a new hall, an old wooden chapel and other rooms (kitchen, larder fish-house...) There are 360 acres of arable land in demesne ... of which four score and two acres are usually held by [Irish] betaghs and farmers. There are ten acres of meadow ... there are sixty acres of pasture without wood or bog ... on which the lord can maintain twenty cows, forty pigs and 100 sheep besides 200 sheep on the demesne.⁶¹

It is clear from the pre-Norman charters that land-grants would normally include all the elements required for a (largely) self-sufficient agricultural estate: an eighth-century estate purchased by the nun Cummen included, for example, land 'in wood, plain and meadow, with its enclosure and its herb-garden.'⁶² The grant to Bishop Assicus probably, therefore, included wood and arable land as well as the pasture required for the cattle and it may even have been rather larger than the manor of Inch. Such an estate would, in all likelihood, have had a considerable human population whose pastoral care, therefore, would be directly controlled by the church without the intervention of lay authorities.⁶³

Smaller units could also be donated to the church as is indicated indeed by the estate of Cummen. The charter describing this grant is written into the front of the small gospel book known as the *Book of Armagh* and the value of the land is given as seventeen ounces of silver, together with a silver vessel and a gold necklace. Seventeen ounces of silver was seen as the equiv-

with a community of monks in order to safeguard his spiritual well-being. See B. Colgrave & R. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), I 27.

61. Empey, *Tipperary*, 80

62. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 175.

63. This again bears on the vexed question of church tenantry or *manaig* – in the model proposed by Etchingham, pastoral provision in early Ireland was limited to the inhabitants of such church lands but this is disputed by scholars such as Sharpe and Ó Corráin. See Liam Irwin, 'The Irish Parish in Historical Perspective'.

64. Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, 58.

alent of seventeen milch cows⁶⁴ so this donation would appear to be considerably less than that given to Bishop Assicus.

Eleventh-century Clonmacnoise provides us with an example of estates given to clerical families attached to the great ecclesiastical centres. According to an entry for 1031 in the *Annals of the Four Masters* an estate called Ísel Ciaráin was linked to the name of Conn na mBocht, 'the person responsible for the Céli Dé and the anchorites at Clonmacnoise'. In the next generation, Conn's descendants were said to be resident on the land and were being taxed by the local king even though they continued to be officials of Clonmacnoise. By 1089, however, the family had purchased the rights to the land from the local king and the leaders of Clonmacnoise who, at this stage, certainly included bishops.⁶⁵ Here, therefore, we have an example of an estate whose owners were officials attached to a centre with episcopal authority just as Nicholls describes for the rectories 'in ecclesiastical fee'. Interestingly, a Middle Irish Life of St Ciarán refers to the particular estate of Ísel and states that the people living on it included *uasalsacairt* (noble priests), *cléirig* (clerics) and *bráithre* (brothers).⁶⁶

References to the Céli Dé at Armagh include a single reference of AD 921 and they then disappear from the historical record until the later fourteenth century when they reappear as a separate and distinct community within the body of regular canons attached to the cathedral. Their head appears to have been particularly important in the chanting of the liturgy: the head acting as precentor while the rest of the community of 'Colidei' performing the office of vicars in the choir. There were six of these men in total (one prior and five brethren) and they held various lands including the rectories of Aghaloo (Tyrone) and Carnteel (Tyrone) and the vicarages of Tynan (Armagh), Kilmore (Armagh), and Drumcree (Armagh). At the Dissolution,

64. Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, 58.

65. For discussion of this material, see Catherine Swift, 'Sculptors and their customers: a study of Clonmacnoise grave-slabs' *Clonmacnoise Studies* 2 (Dublin: Dúchas 2003), 116-7. For bishops of Clonmacnoise, see Annette Kehnel, *Clonmacnois – the church and lands of St Ciaráin* (Münster: Vita regularis – Ordnungen und Deutungen religiösen Lebens im Mittelalter 8, 1997), 34-5, 268-73.

66. Whitley Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1890), 119, 128-9.

they were found to control seven townlands within the parish of Lisnadill (Armagh) as well as seven rectories and their associated vicarages. It is not explicitly recorded in our surviving data but it seems reasonable to conclude that these rights to tithes and appointment of local priests and vicars are a survival from a pre-Norman situation such as is recorded for Clonmacnoise. Comparable studies of the Céli Dé from Scotland, where the records cover the eleventh and twelfth centuries, would appear to bear this conclusion out.⁶⁷

What then are the conclusions to be drawn concerning the early history of priests and their areas of pastoral ministry in Ireland? The first and perhaps the most important is that evidence for the exercise of pastoral care must be drawn from the entire range of sources for the Middle Ages. Irish church history has suffered considerably from the long-standing academic tradition that one is either an early medievalist (generally working in the National University) or a later medievalist (dominated by scholars from the University of Dublin.) This dichotomy has been breaking down in recent years but we are still burdened with its legacy. We therefore have the extraordinary situation whereby early medievalists look at pastoral care through the lens of early canon law while later medievalists look at it through manorial extents, state documents, papal registers and the diocesan records. The former write in generalised and universal terms about a 'system' – the latter comment primarily on the particular, based on localised examples.

It seems clear, even from this brief overview, that this bipartite approach has masked the considerable degree of overlap between the evidence from pre-Norman and post-Norman Ireland. This has been strengthened by widespread acceptance of the idea that parochial structures were introduced into Ireland only with the arrival of the Normans. Where the source for this interpretation is specified, it is normally found to be based on a particular article by Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven on the parishes of Skreen, published in 1964.⁶⁸ When evaluating her conclusion, one must bear in mind that while a superb scholar in many ways, Otway-Ruthven was very much a product of the bi-polar university structures described above. In her book, *A history of*

67. William Reeves, *The Culdees of the British Isles* (Dublin: Gill, 1864), 6-58.

68. A. J. Otway-Ruthven, 'Parochial development in the rural deanery of Skreen', *Journal of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 94 (1964), 111-22.

medieval Ireland she explicitly acknowledges her lack of knowledge of 'Gaelic' Ireland and thanks Dr Kathleen Hughes for providing her with a basic introduction to pre-Norman Irish society.⁶⁹

It is reasonable to conclude that just as with other parts of Western Europe, the Irish parochial system, in terms of a systematised and tightly controlled administration of the entire landmass of a particular country or state, is a product of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁷⁰ It is not, however, reasonable to state that there was no system of pastoral care or of local priestly ministry before that date. On the contrary, what can be observed in the evidence from the western and northern parts of Ireland is that the system of parishes in operation there in the later middle ages is the direct inheritance of pre-Norman structures, going back to the seventh and eighth centuries.

Identifiable within this early system are local churches manned by a local cleric resident in the wider community. These men had responsibility for baptism and performance of the last rites (including burial) and also for the celebration of Sunday Mass and for preaching. Their income came in part from their superiors within the church hierarchy (who, in turn, would be drawing on tithes donated by the laity) and in part in specific fees and labour dues proffered directly by their congregations. They could and did build churches without seeking permission but they could not celebrate Mass there until the buildings had been consecrated by the local bishop. Within the limits imposed by the necessity for Sunday Mass, they could find themselves with three or four churches 'on their conscience' but these would, in all likelihood, have been located relatively close to one another.

Using the later medieval evidence as our guide, it seems probable that the right to appointment as minister to these local churches could lie with either the local landowner or king or with the church authorities (both episcopal and, on occasion, monastic). In all cases, however, the local bishop would have ultimate rights over who eventually got the job and the incumbent

69. A. J. Otway-Ruthven, *A history of medieval Ireland* (London: Routledge 1968) – foreword.

70. See for example, *Minsters and Parish churches: the local church in transition 950-1200*, ed. John Blair (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988); *Pastoral care before the Parish*, eds. J. Blair and R. Sharpe (Leicester: University Press, 1992).

would owe first loyalty to him as his direct superior. In the later period, we see clear evidence that in many cases the priests would have vicars who would act as their local representatives – it is not clear whether this is also true of earlier times although the fact that Bishop Tírechán refers to churches headed by deacons would make such a suggestion plausible. Again, in the later period, we see an intermediary rank of cleric between bishop and priest known as rural deans – there is no evidence for this particular group in the early canons and it seems likely that this was an innovation established in an era of increased episcopal control during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Finally, we can also detect that some of the churches served by the local priests were located within much larger estates of church land and in such instances we can see that a portion of the tithes collected went to pay for the upkeep of the ecclesiastical personnel attached to the bigger churches.

There seems to be no clear standard involved in determining the size of territory which was served by these priests although *Riagal Phátraic* make it clear that there could be a number of such churches within a single *tuath* or kingdom. Unfortunately the exact size of such kingdoms is still a matter for research but modern units incorporating the placename element *tuath* can range from 40,000 acres to 2,500. Parishes first noted in Anglo-Norman documentation (and therefore mainly found in the south and east of the country) are often at the smaller end of this range.

A key element in interpreting the territorial extent under the local churches will be the rural deaneries, although detailed research into the precise function and origin of these units has still be undertaken. It appears that they are the most important unit in constructing the individual manors of the early Norman conquest and, as such, they appear to be of the order of 100,000 acres. The rural deaneries of the west are rather larger, possibly because the land was, on the whole, less good and the population more widely scattered. While it is impossible as yet for this author to date the development of the rural dean as an office, it does seem likely to belong to the period of episcopal reforms in the twelfth century, and the kingdoms which the rural deaneries seem to reflect appear, on the whole, to be ones which represent post eleventh-century creations. It is, therefore, difficult to be certain to what degree these deaneries may be the *tuatha* de-

scribed in our early medieval canons. Like the seventh and eighth century administrative units, however, the deaneries did include a number of churches within their borders and, in the absence of more clear-cut evidence, they appear to be the best candidates currently available for the territories which are described in *Ríagal Phátraic*. If this provisional conclusion is accepted, we are led to the conclusion that the basic structure and organisation of a national system of pastoral provision had been put together by the eighth century and was well-established in both eastern and western parts of the country by the time the rural deaneries were created. In this, as in many aspects of church history, the Irish appear to have been well to the fore within Western Europe.