76 Ibid.
77 'Saga of Fergus mac Léti', ed. Binchy, § 1, p. 37, trans. p. 39.
78 *Auraicept*, ed. Ahlqvist, §§ 1–2.
79 The patronymic is only in the Latin in *ECMW*, nos. 70, 84, 127, 298, 308, 390.
80 Ibid., no. 142.
81 *Auraicept*, ed. Ahlqvist, § 7, 1.
82 T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society', pp. 715–18, 735.
83 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones*, no. 86, ed. Morin, p. 353; and the trenchant words of Gregory of Tours's mother in Gregory of Tours, *Libri de Virtutibus*, I. Praef., ed. Krusch, pp. 585–6.
84 Columbanus, *Ep*. 5, § 11 in *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. Walker, p. 48.
85 Contreni, 'Irish contribution', pp. 79–80.

4

Orality, literacy and genealogy in early medieval Ireland and Wales

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For historians of early medieval Ireland and Wales the genealogical sources, along with the chronicles, constitute the primary means of reconstructing dynasties, and thereby of understanding the transmission of power and analysing power structures.[1] Given this evident importance, it is regrettable that for many scholars genealogies have, in the words of John Kelleher, 'all the charm of an obsolete telephone directory from some small, remote capital'.[2] One of the most striking features of early medieval Celtic genealogies – especially those from Ireland – is the very quantity involved.[3] It has been suggested, for instance, that this large volume of genealogy is a reflection of earlier 'barbarian', that is pagan and pre-literate, practices.[4] Such an interpretation could be supported by references to the isolated examples of oral rendition of genealogies in the historical period along with a sideways glance at the Gaulish druids. Indeed, James Carney argued that some of the so-called 'archaic' Leinster genealogical poems were composed in the middle of the fifth century or even earlier, and urged that references to pagan gods should be considered 'with utmost seriousness'.[5] However, such an approach is no longer in vogue in Celtic studies, and scholars have increasingly argued that the early medieval Celts were in tune with developments in contemporary Europe rather than simply regurgitating elements of a pre-Christian, Indo-European past.[6] Thus, the extant genealogies betray a significant biblical and Classical – and therefore literary – influence and were the product of what has been termed (for Ireland) 'a mandarin caste' of literate, aristocratically minded and hereditary clergy, working for the most part in monasteries but concerned directly with (and often related closely to) their secular cousins.[7] Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the archaic poems were not only revised, but also composed, in the early Christian context of the seventh century.[8] The situation for Wales is comparable: the earliest surviving genealogical

sources reflect clear biblical and Classical influences, and the earliest extant collection was probably drawn up at St David's, under the watchful eye of Owain ap Hywel, king of Dyfed (d. 988).[9] Furthermore, attempts to identify pagan gods in the early medieval Welsh pedigrees have not always fared well.[10] Consequently, we must surely take the literate and Christian context of the Irish and Welsh genealogies as understood.

Of course, we are only able to discuss these early medieval Celtic genealogies precisely because they have been preserved in successive manuscript copies. The earliest extant Irish genealogical collections (the Book of Leinster and Rawlinson MS B.502) date from the twelfth century, but some material therein may have been composed four or five centuries earlier; while for Wales, the earliest collection, composed in the middle of the tenth century, is preserved in London, British Library, MS Harley 3859, a (probably) continental manuscript of *c.*1100. All other genealogical sources survive in manuscripts from the late medieval or early modern periods. Therefore, it is not always possible to be absolutely certain of the layout and structure of the underlying genealogical material, though some general comments can be ventured. For example, both the Welsh and Irish tracts are linguistic, not diagrammatic, in their representation of genealogical relationships.[11] Layout on the page often depended upon the type of genealogical information being conveyed. On the one hand, in the Irish codices, linear retrograde patrilines of the form *Donnchad m. Aeda m. Congaile m. Néill* are often set out as series of columns with one (sometimes two) names per line. On the other hand, sections outlining segmentary genealogical relationships (entitled *míniugud senchasa* or *craeb coibnessa*) employed the standard two-columnar format of the manuscripts.[12] The scribes sought to follow this layout whenever the texts were suitable, though it was not always possible to do so. However, the fact that these genealogies were written down does not exclude the possibility of oral transmission as well. For example, Gerald of Wales (writing in the late twelfth century) stated that while the Welsh bards 'kept accurate copies of the genealogies of these princes in their old manuscripts . . . they would also recite them from memory'.[13] Similarly, elements of oral transmission have been detected among the Irish genealogies.[14] These points should be borne in mind when analysing the effects of the oral and literary media on genealogical sources.

In this chapter, I shall briefly review the orality–literacy debate as it

has come to bear upon the cultivation of genealogy in general and upon the early medieval Celtic material in particular, before proceeding to consider both the structural and functional effects of the literary medium upon these genealogies. The functional effects will be divided into two themes in which students of literacy have taken a particular interest and for which genealogy has some importance: namely, literacy and power, and literacy and history.[15] It should be stressed that the patterns and themes discussed are not regarded as simply the result of literacy alone (the so-called 'autonomous' model); rather, the use of that medium may have facilitated the development of those patterns within the specific context of early medieval Irish and Welsh political structures, kinship and genealogy.[16]

ORALITY–LITERACY

The relationship of genealogies to the orality–literacy debate is important for Celtic studies, not only because Celticists have benefited from comparative work on oral genealogies when analysing those generated in early medieval Ireland and Wales, but also because genealogies and origin-legends were often central to the development of the debate among anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s. The thrust of this debate may be summarized as follows: oral genealogies tend to be more 'fluid' than their written counterparts, and thereby can be manipulated more effectively in order to represent changes in political or social structures. In the two most oft-cited African case-studies, of the Tiv and the Gonja, anthropologists demonstrated that the native genealogies which had been related orally were significantly different from those recorded earlier in the century by British colonial administrators and preserved in official documents, and these differences were seen to relate directly to the changes in tribal structures during the intervening years.[17] The oral genealogies functioned as 'charters' for prevailing political and social structures by means of a process termed *structural amnesia* or 'the homeostatic process of forgetting': elements of the genealogy no longer relevant or necessary would be collectively forgotten and new elements could be silently incorporated. This, it was argued, was possible only because no formally recorded version of the genealogy had been kept by the tribe which could contradict the revised account. Thus, literacy is anathema to this process: 'To prefer one genealogy throughout time is to make

rigid a charter which, if it is to work, must remain fluid – and to a certain extent is also to make rigid a fluid social structure.'[18]

However, a number of qualifications and criticisms have been raised against this 'oralist' interpretation of genealogical manipulation, regarding both the general principles involved and genealogies in particular. For example, we are no longer encouraged to regard orality and literacy as two mutually exclusive and opposing positions, but rather as points of a continuum or spectrum.[19] Societies are not necessarily exclusively oral or literate in their modes of communication, nor need societies exist in total isolation from one another. Thus, scholars have come to realize that the 'traditions' of pre-literate societies can be affected significantly by contact with literate ones: elements of the written tradition are seen to 'feed back' into the oral milieu.[20] Jack Goody has gone so far as to suggest that the practice of drawing up lists (of which genealogies constitute a specific type) should be linked *causally* to the advent of literacy, even if individual lists are drawn up orally: 'While I do not see the making of tables, lists and formulae as originating entirely with the coming of writing, I would maintain that the shift from utterance to text led to significant developments of a sort that might be loosely referred to as a change in consciousness and which in part arose from the great extension of formal operations to a graphic kind.'[21] Now clearly this is not to suggest that genealogical lists should be found *only* in literate societies, since we have direct evidence to the contrary; but it has been argued that when genealogies are kept in oral societies (especially longer genealogies) it is likely that some form of feedback is to be suspected.[22]

We need therefore to re-define the distinction between oral and written genealogies. Of course, whatever the original inspiration for the development and continued transmission of genealogies in a pre-literate society, the point still remains that as long as these genealogies are not written down – at least by members of the relevant society – then their relative fluidity is guaranteed. However, it can be demonstrated that this oral–literate distinction regarding the function of genealogies as social and political charters is not wholly accurate: written genealogies (by the very fact of being written down) are *not* necessarily doomed to be less fluid as means of representing political and social structures. For example, the fact that Celticists, as well as historians in other literate contexts such as ancient Greece and biblical Israel, have compared written genealogies with those studied by

anthropologists, identified similar patterns, and thereby achieved a greater understanding of the written text, demonstrates that the distinction is not absolute.[23] Evidence for comparable genealogical manipulation has also been presented by anthropologists for contemporary literate and quasi-literate contexts.[24] Furthermore, scholars have stressed that oral transmission is not as automatically fluid as the extreme 'oralist' position would have us believe.[25]

Some examples from early medieval Wales and Ireland should suffice to illustrate these contentions. Here, one must distinguish between what appears to have been the genealogy at the time of composition and what is extant in our manuscript sources: it is often possible to be certain that a genealogy has undergone change only if more than one version has been preserved, or if later genealogists/ scribes have drawn attention to alternative lines of descent. This is the phenomenon which I term *genealogical schizophrenia*: that is, where a dynasty appears to claim more than one origin or, in effect, more than one genealogical 'personality'. This schizophrenia may be more apparent than real: apparent to the medieval scribe and modern historian, but not necessarily to the earlier dynast whose pedigree is under scrutiny. Manipulation of written genealogies can take a number of forms. On the one hand, it is possible to find instances of complete alteration of a genealogy to accommodate significant political changes: this, in effect, would differ very little from the 'amnesia' of oral genealogies. On the other hand, it is possible to identify a process of *augmentation* – characteristic, I shall argue, of written genealogies in particular – whereby political change is expressed by means of additions to an existing genealogical scheme rather than its complete re-composition.

A good example of genealogical manipulation is represented by the different versions of the royal genealogy of early medieval Dyfed.[26] According to the Old Irish text 'The Expulsion of the Déisi', the kings of eighth-century Dyfed were the descendants of Irish immigrants.[27] The Harleian and later genealogies, however, derive the dynasty from Macsen Wledig (Magnus Maximus).[28] Here we have two entirely different lines of descent requiring resolution. I would argue that the Irish version is the earlier (though not necessarily wholly accurate) account, because the use of Magnus Maximus (regarded, in medieval Welsh pseudo-history, as the last representative of Roman power in Britain) would suit the political aspirations of Owain ap Hywel (d. 988), whose father's rule had extended over a

large part of Wales and whose mother was of the Dimetian royal line. The overall scheme of the Harleian genealogies was to prove that the Second Dynasty, and especially Owain, was the legitimate successor of pre-Roman, Roman and post-Roman rule over the Britons. It is worth stressing that, in this example of complete genealogical change in a written context, part of the evidence stands outside the main corpus of Welsh genealogical manuscripts. In the later manuscripts, the scribes appear to have sought to reconcile the different accounts by creating hybrid pedigrees. The implication seems to be that the literate context for the composition and initial transmission of these genealogies posed no obstacle to the manipulation of them for political ends, but that the resulting variant accounts could pose problems for later genealogists divorced from these immediate circumstances.

The Irish example of genealogical schizophrenia is the genealogy of the ruling line of Conaille Muirtheimne (in modern Co. Louth).[29] In this case the extant manuscripts (the early modern Book of Lecan and Book of Ballymote) cite these variant lines of descent, all of which sought to connect the dynasty of the Conaille to the neighbouring kingdoms of the Ulaid. There are three main stems which diverge at the person of Conall Anglonnach (eponymous ancestor of the Conaille): one associates them with the Uí Echach Coba and Dál nAraide; the second with the Dál Fiatach; and the third with 'pre-historic' figures mentioned in the Ulster-Cycle tales. The schizophrenia may be explained synchronically or diachronically. The overkingship of the Ulaid had alternated between the Dál nAraide and the Dál Fiatach until late in the tenth century; thereafter it was monopolized by the latter. The variants in the genealogy may therefore represent attempts to account for this periodic change in overlord. Alternatively, the Conaille may have earlier claimed affiliation with the neighbouring Uí Echach Coba (and thence the Dál nAraide), only to find it necessary to shift allegiance to the more powerful Dál Fiatach from the 970s onwards. Either way, literacy was no impediment to genealogical change.

These two examples demonstrate that the written genealogies of early medieval Ireland and Wales could exhibit a significant degree of fluidity, comparable to that characteristic of their oral counterparts. The examples chosen involve not mere adaptation or extension, but wholesale alteration of the relevant part of the genealogy in order to reflect changes in political aspirations or circumstances. One *could*

argue that the survival of the different versions is proof of the relative rigidity of these written genealogies; but, at least in the Welsh cases, the variants are only preserved (in the first instance) outside the *extant* manuscript tradition. Anyway, the existence of these variants does *not* appear to have prevented the manipulation in the first place.

SIZE AND AUGMENTATION

The redaction of genealogies also has implications for their overall structure and in particular their size: this is one of the factors underlying what might be termed the 'propensity for augmentation', a characteristic of written genealogies which facilitates their manipulation.[30] The most obvious structural implication of literacy for genealogy is that (vellum permitting) it enables theoretically unlimited extension of an individual pedigree or of the corpus as a whole. By contrast, as we have seen, oral genealogies are self-regulating and (with certain notable exceptions, such as those from Polynesia) relatively short. This is partly because there is no need for the retention of unnecessary elements (such as extinct segments or distant generations) and partly no doubt because human memory has its limitations. In oral societies, royal genealogies will often tend to be longer than those of the subject lineages (though these latter may be more segmentary).[31] Non-royal genealogies may, as a whole, be relatively complex, but individual knowledge will often be restricted to no more than four, five or six generations above *ego*.[32] These levels may correspond to the extent of the minimal kindred-group (like the early Irish *derbfine* or *gelfine*) through which the individual's interaction with other members of society is defined. Also, it is worth stressing that in some cases where oral genealogies longer than those discussed here are encountered, anthropologists suspect either feedback from literate contact or generation by a semi-literate society.

Obviously, such limitations are not presented by the written medium. Here the Irish material in particular comes into its own. For example, estimates of the total number of different entries given in the index to O'Brien's *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, vol. 1, stand at about 12,000, and this by no means represents the whole corpus.[33] Individual pedigrees can be very long: for example, the pedigree of the mid-eleventh-century kings of Osraige covers over 100 generations to Noah, and the segmentary genealogies of even quite minor kingdoms can contain the names of as many as three or four hundred

different individuals. The degree of segmentation can be very large, again surely beyond the scope of an oral genealogist, however competent. Indeed, even the literate Irish genealogists found it necessary to draw up short tracts summarizing the segmentation by naming the main apical ancestors and the major groups descended from them.[34]

As we have seen earlier, the written medium need not be (and was not) an impediment to the manipulation of genealogies along the lines usually associated more with their oral counterparts. However, this (theoretically) unlimited size of written genealogies facilitated another type of manipulation which I term the 'propensity for augmentation', whereby genealogies would be added to or 'augmented' (rather than silently altered) in order to reflect concomitant political change. This process accounts for the supposed rigidity of written genealogies (as identified by the oralist interpretation) by employing the structural advantage (in terms of size) of the written medium. Augmentation can take a number of forms: horizontal (that is segmentary), vertical (the grafting of one pedigree onto another), or often a combination of the two. The end product is a 'layered' genealogy which has in effect evolved over more than one stage: old lineages have not been discarded but newly emerged ones have been incorporated. The genealogical position of the new political circumstances is represented not as a wholly new phenomenon, which in political reality it may well be, but as a continuation or extension of the earlier genealogy.

Horizontal augmentation, at its crudest, entails the very common tendency for the offspring of (say) an important ancestor-figure to grow, as, for example, new lineages or kingdoms are brought into closer political association with that ancestor's descendants. Such a pattern *can* be found among oral genealogies, except that extinct lineages will, in that case, be eventually forgotten. Take, for example, the sons of Cunedda Wledig (ancestor of the main dynasties of Gwynedd): these sons can be shown to be eponymous ancestors of various north Welsh kingdoms in the early Middle Ages.[35] In the *Historia Brittonum* they are said to number eight (no names are given). In the Harleian genealogies the figure has nudged up to nine (and names and pedigrees are given); this is followed in the Jesus College collection, which adds two daughters for good measure; while in the later medieval and early modern codices the number of sons named is up to twelve or thirteen and the daughters (through a scribal error) to three. The possible total progeny of sixteen is thus

double that of the earliest account. Another notable Welsh example of filial augmentation is that of Brychan Brycheiniog, whose offspring numbered about thirty in our oldest surviving accounts and increased to about fifty in the later manuscripts (here the number of daughters remains relatively stable and the sons double).[36] Similar Irish cases can be found of maximal-lineage founders with large progenies which tended to grow in size over time: Niall Noígiallach of the Uí Néill, Cathaír Mór of the Laigin, Ailill Ólom of the Eoganachta and other Munster groups, and so on. And of course, perhaps the best-known example from Munster is that of the Dál Cais. Originally derived from one of the subject Déisi groups in Munster, the Dál Cais came to challenge and replace the Eoganachta in the overkingship of the province during the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Their genealogy was altered accordingly: they rendered their eponymous ancestor Cormac Cass as son of Ailill Ólom and thereby placed themselves on a parallel or equal genealogical footing to the Eoganachta. The Dál Cais validated their changed political fortunes by augmenting (not replacing) the existing genealogical scheme.

Such a propensity for augmentation is, I would argue, characteristic in particular of written genealogies: admittedly some of the elements can be found in oral examples, but it is the combination of factors associated with the written form (namely, a theoretically unlimited size and a pre-existing written model) which makes augmentation so common among literate genealogical traditions.

I have so far been concerned more with the structural implications of orality and literacy for genealogies, and (to an extent) with providing a defence of written genealogy. I would like to proceed now to a consideration of the functional implications of literacy for genealogy (naturally taking on board the main themes discussed already). In particular, I shall concentrate on genealogy in terms, first, of literacy and power, and second, of literacy and history.

LITERACY AND POWER

It has become fashionable in recent decades to discuss literacy in terms of the exercise of power and government, that is, of the extent to which the development of the written medium of communication has been employed to achieve, maintain and regulate the position of particular social, political or religious élites.[37] This is inevitably important for genealogies which have a special role in the wielding of

power, whether in the validation of an individual ruler's or dynasty's position, or, more subtly, of the regulation of relationships between rulers and the ruled.

At the most fundamental level, the use of an appropriate genealogy to validate an individual king's position as king would differ little between the oral and written media. But literacy does offer some new possibilities in this regard. Take, for example, the earliest 'literate' genealogies that survive: epigraphic genealogies from the ancient Near and Middle East. Analysis of these pedigrees has suggested that those over three generations in length were inscribed during periods of political instability or imperialistic expansion.[38] The famous trilingual inscription of Darius I at Behistun concludes his pedigree with the statement: 'From long ago our family have been kings . . . eight of my family previously exercised kingship. I am the ninth.'[39] It is no doubt significant that this inscription was erected after a power struggle with an alleged pretender and that it served to reinforce Darius' (probably) tenuous position in the immediate aftermath. In such cases the genealogy is used monumentally: the ruler has a point to make, and does so in a visible manner (requiring much economic and human effort) as a testimony to his own power.[40] Literacy has facilitated the process.

Compare this with the pedigree of Cyngen ap Cadell of Powys (d. 854/5) on the so-called Pillar of Elisse.[41] Cyngen claimed to have erected the inscription in memory of his great-grandfather Elisse ap Gwylog, who, we are told, had recovered the 'inheritance' of Powys from the English. This stress on the English is significant here, since it appears that during Cyngen's reign (808–54) they, and especially the Mercians, made important incursions into Wales at the expense of Powys. In 816 the English are said to have invaded as far as Snowdonia and Rhufoniog. In 821, Cenwulf of Mercia was (according to Geoffrey Gaimar) at Basingwerk when he died, and in the following year the English destroyed Degannwy and took Powys into their power. Finally, the Welsh are said to have submitted to Ecgbert of Wessex in 828/830. Under such circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that Cyngen would wish to emphasize earlier Powysian successes against the English and, by means of his epigraphic pedigree, to connect himself directly to their perpetrator. The kingdom may also have faced pressure from the west, from the emerging Second Dynasty of Gwynedd. The inscribing of the pillar must, given its contents, be understood in the light of these contemporary events. The written

genealogy was used monumentally in order to support the position of the dynasty and of Cyngen in particular.

This example illustrates one of the uses of written genealogies in terms of power in the abstract. Literacy also has implications for the practical exercise of power expressed through genealogical relationships, especially for the relative status and reciprocal relationships between dynasties. The Irish genealogies are especially significant in this regard; and here genealogy must not be taken in isolation, but used in conjunction with other texts such as those outlining the reciprocal dues of overking and sub-kings (the *frithfolaid* tracts and *Lebor na Cert*) and the long lists of categories of peoples/kingdoms: *aithechthuatha* ('vassal peoples'), *saerclanna* ('free kindreds'), *daer-clanna* ('unfree kindreds'), *fortuatha* ('outside peoples') and so on. The basic principle involved may be summarized as follows: the greater the genealogical distance between the dynasty of a given sub-kingdom and the macro-dynasty which exercised the overkingship, the lower the relative status of that minor dynasty. This could have significant implications for the client-king in terms of the services, dues and tribute he owed to his provincial overking.[42] For example, in the twelfth-century *Lebor na Cert* (Book of Rights) there is a clear distinction between those groups which paid tribute to the overking and those which did not: analysis of these groups genealogically reveals that the non-tribute payers were those whose ruling dynasties were regarded as genealogically part of or closely related to the appropriate provincial macro-dynasty (the Eoganachta, the Uí Néill, the Ulaid, the Connachta).[43] Those whose genealogy placed them beyond the relevant point (whether this entailed extra-provincial origin or not) were liable to pay tribute. Of course, the scheme was not always applied rigidly: for instance, there were certain Eoganachta who were considered among the 'unfree' *clanna* of Cashel,[44] but the general pattern does usually hold. There is something of 'the chicken and the egg' about this: groups could strive for a less onerous situation and would *perforce* have their genealogy altered accordingly. This may explain some of the cases where the number of sons of the main dynastic founder was augmented over time.

LITERACY AND HISTORY

Anthropologists have argued that literacy facilitates the development of what has been termed 'true' or 'objective' history in that, first, the

existence of a written account of the past, independent of the writer and reader, is thought to distance the past from the present (unlike in oral accounts); and second, the existence of written accounts permits the comparison of different versions.[45] Of course, this is not to suggest that the committing to writing of an account of the past *ipso facto* guarantees its accuracy and objectivity, but (to quote Ruth Finnegan) this would allow at least for 'the possibility of a detached and self-conscious check on the truth of historical accounts'.[46] Genealogy is important in this regard, since it is in itself concerned with the past as directly connected to and affecting the present, and because many early examples of historical and pseudo-historical writing have a genealogical flavour. However, it should be reiterated that the redaction of genealogies does not ensure their accuracy, nor does it necessarily impose a single standard version.

These points are reflected in the following passage, which possibly once introduced a version of the Irish genealogies:

> The foolish Irish nation, forgetful of its history, boasts of incredible or completely fabulous deeds, since it has been careless about *committing to writing* any of its achievements. Therefore, I propose to *write down* the genealogies of the Irish race: firstly, the race of Éber, secondly the race of Éremón, thirdly the race of Ír, and fourthly the race of Lugaid mac Ítha.[47]

Similar ideas can be found in other medieval genealogical sources, such as the Icelandic *Landnámabók*.[48] In the Irish example quoted, genealogy is an integral aspect of 'national' history. Furthermore, in both the Irish and Icelandic cases, the act of committing the genealogies to writing is regarded as a means of demonstrating the 'truth' of that history, whether to counter the excessive claims of natives or the denigrating criticisms of foreigners. This is not merely a medieval topos, but reflects the important function of literacy for the development of genealogy and history.

For both the early medieval Irish and Welsh, the tracing of national origins and genealogical history was inevitably linked to Latin literacy, since the very channel for the introduction of the literary medium – namely, Christianity – brought with it a whole series of biblical, Classical and patristic teachings concerning the origins of peoples. Any self-respecting Christian people would naturally seek to find their particular niche within the overall scheme, and the early medieval Celts were not alone in tracing their origins to one of the

sons of Noah as given in the Table of Nations.[49] Furthermore, this was not simply a matter of crudely grafting some pagan or pre-literate genealogical scheme on to that of Book 10 of Genesis. In the case of the Irish, the development of the famous tripartite Milesian scheme – which, as the passage quoted above illustrates, pervades all the genealogies – can be derived in part from Latin Christian learning (probably in the seventh century) and has been described by Donnchadh Ó Corráin as 'one of the most transparent literary inventions'.[50] The early medieval Welsh fare no better: the earliest extant account is to be found in the *Historia Brittonum* and derives the Britons from the Trojan Brutus – an equally literate invention. The scheme up to biblical levels draws on various sources, including the so-called 'Frankish Table of Nations' (in fact, probably composed in Ostrogothic Italy or Byzantium in the early sixth century) and Isidore's *Etymologiae*, as well as some Irish material. This scheme no doubt inspired Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century account of British origins which in turn 'fed back' into the native genealogies.[51] Even the earlier Welsh genealogies betray the Christian and Latin literate context of their composition: the kings of Powys sought to associate themselves with St Germanus and Magnus Maximus (on the Pillar of Elisse); and in the Harleian genealogies the important ancestor Beli Magnus (Beli Mawr) is probably to be derived not from a pagan Celtic god as some have suggested, but, through the *Historia Brittonum*, from a Briton mentioned by Orosius and (ultimately) Suetonius.[52] Thus it can be seen that use of the written word not only enabled the early medieval Irish and Welsh to speculate as to their history and genealogical origins within a wider framework (however inaccurate and unhistorical this may seem to us today), but also provided the very means by which they did so.

Literate historical enquiry also had structural implications for the genealogies of early medieval Ireland and Wales. It is necessary to distinguish between the genealogies as they have been preserved (as part of often vast genealogical collections copied into later manuscripts) and as they may have existed at the time of composition (for instance, as shorter tracts on individual dynastic groups drawn up at the local monastery). The extant manuscripts often contain more than one version of a genealogy. Indeed, Ó Corráin has termed the manuscripts 'work-books (or rather copies of them) . . . from which the learned classes met the needs of their patrons'.[53] These Irish genealogists in particular were careful to keep record of variant lines of

descent in the genealogies, employing such formulae as *ut alii dicunt* ('as others say'). I have already mentioned the three, very different, ancestries of the Conaille Muirtheimne given in the same tract. Such practices could sometimes be on a larger scale. For example, an eighth-century tract on the Déisi Muman concludes with what appears to be an appendix covering much the same ground as the main tract but with significant differences (additional names, alternative lines of descent and so on).[54] On occasion, the genealogists were not so careful. The section on the Déisi in the fourteenth-century Book of Lecan sought to synthesize this tract with later (and in places very different) genealogies of the Déisi: the result is an often very confusing hybrid which can only be understood if the separate strands are distinguished. I have suggested that a similar process occurred for the Welsh example of Dyfed, where the later genealogists sought to harmonize the divergent ancestries by incorporating names from one into the other. In such cases, the original (if divergent) versions can possibly be understood when analysed in terms of ninth- and tenth-century politics; but these later hybrids often serve only to confuse modern historians just as they confused their medieval predecessors! However, in both cases – either variant citation or hybrid – the underlying motive would seem to be a desire to identify the truer genealogy.

I have attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which literacy determined the character of the genealogical sources from early medieval Ireland and Wales. While we must revise the now-dated distinction between orality and literacy as mutually exclusive modes of communication, and thereby re-define our understanding of oral versus written genealogies, it is evident that the use of writing did have significant consequences for genealogy, both structurally and functionally. For example, the literary form, by facilitating the growth in quantity of genealogy, produced a means of manipulation (here termed 'augmentation') less suited to the oral medium. Thus, we return to the alleged 'barbarian' pre-literate origin of the Celtic practice of maintaining a large number of long genealogies noted in the first paragraph. If my arguments regarding the correspondence of literacy and volume are accepted, then these long genealogies did not have a pre-literate origin and the explanation for their length must be sought elsewhere – for instance, in the segmentary nature of dynastic succession. Functionally, the written form affected the two aspects of

genealogy in which Celtic historians are most interested: its connection to the exercise of power; and the manner in which it described the past. Any attempt to understand the early medieval Irish and Welsh genealogies must therefore take the implications of literacy into account.

NOTES

1 This chapter will concentrate on Ireland and Wales before *c.* 1100, but it should be borne in mind that other medieval Celtic-speaking areas produced genealogical material, though in smaller amounts. See the chapters in this volume by Broun and Tonnerre.
2 Kelleher was referring specifically to the *Irish* genealogies: 'Irish genealogies', 138.
3 Dumville, 'Kingship', pp. 76–7.
4 Genicot, *Généalogies*, pp. 14, 16–17. For similar arguments for Old English genealogies, see Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies'.
5 Carney, 'Archaic Irish verse', pp. 39, 50.
6 McCone, *Pagan Past*.
7 Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish churches', pp. 330–1; *idem*, 'Historical need', pp. 142–3; *idem*, 'Legend', pp. 26–7. For further thoughts on this concept of the 'mandarin caste', see Charles-Edwards, above, pp. 70–4.
8 Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends', pp. 56–68.
9 *EWGT*, pp. 9–13; Phillimore, '*Annales Cambriae*'.
10 See, for example, the case of Beli Mawr given on p. 95.
11 On non-Celtic diagrammatic genealogies, see Klapisch-Zuber, 'Genesis'.
12 Modern editions of Irish genealogies maintain this distinction by giving the pedigrees as two columns of names but the segmentary genealogies as ordinary narrative across the whole page: see *CGH*.
13 *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. Brewer *et al.*, vol. 6, p. 168.
14 For example, Nicholls, 'Mac Coghlans', 445.
15 Much of what follows is a reduced version of Thornton, 'Power', ch. 1.
16 See, for example, Street, *Literacy*.
17 Bohannen, 'Genealogical charter'; Goody and Watt, 'Consequences'.
18 Bohannen, 'Genealogical charter', 314.
19 The literature here is vast. See, for example, Finnegan, *Literacy*, p. 175; Goody, *Domestication*, pp. 80–2; Havelock, 'Oral–literate equation', p. 11.
20 Henige, *Oral Historiography*, pp. 81–7; Finnegan, *Literacy*, pp. 117–20.
21 Goody, *Domestication*, p. 75; note also Ong, *Orality*, pp. 99–101.
22 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, p. 178; Henige, 'Disease of writing', pp. 240–61; Henige, 'Truths yet unborn?'
23 Dumville, 'Kingship'; Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends'; R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition*; Wilson, *Genealogy*.
24 For example, I. M. Lewis, 'Literacy'; Gough, 'Literacy'; Freedman, *Chinese Lineage*.

25 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, pp. 120–3.

26 Thornton, 'Power', pp. 79–93; also Thornton, *Kings*, ch. 3.

27 For the texts, see Meyer, 'Expulsion of the Dessi'; *idem*, 'Expulsion of the Déssi'; Pender, 'Two unpublished versions'.

28 *EWGT*, pp. 9–10, 45–6, 106.

29 On the Conaille, see Thornton, *Kings*, ch. 4. For their genealogies, see *Book of Ballymote*, ed. Atkinson, p. 152d19; *Book of Lecan*, ed. Mulchrone, fo. 115rc18; also note *CGH*, p. 327.

30 See Thornton, 'Power', pp. 11–12.

31 Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study*, p. 153.

32 Thornton, 'Power', pp. 6–8; Henige, *Chronology*, p. 27.

33 Ó Cuív, Review of *CGH*, 330; Byrne, 'Senchas', 139; Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends', pp. 55–6.

34 *CGH*, pp. 137–8, 153, 358.

35 Miller, 'Foundation-legend'.

36 Compare the lists given in *EWGT*, pp. 14–19, 42–4, 81–4.

37 This was no doubt inspired in no small part by Clanchy, *From Memory*. See also Bowman and Woolf (eds.), *Literacy*; Lerer, *Literacy*; Goody, *Logic*; Pattison, *On Literacy*.

38 Wilson, *Genealogy*, pp. 58–72.

39 Benedict and von Voigtlander, 'Bisitun inscription'.

40 Bowman and Woolf (eds.), *Literacy*, pp. 8–9.

41 *EWGT*, pp. 1–3. For recent discussions of Powysian politics in this period, see Sims-Williams, 'Historical need', and Thornton, 'Power', pp. 66–78.

42 T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Early medieval kingships', pp. 38–9.

43 *Lebor na Cert*, ed. Dillon.

44 See the list in Royal Irish Academy, MS 1234 (Stowe C.i.2), fo. 40r.

45 Goody and Watt, 'Consequences', p. 67; Finnegan, *Literacy*, p. 19; Clanchy, 'Remembering', 176. For some general considerations, see Ong, 'Writing', pp. 36–45.

46 Finnegan, *Literacy*, p. 21.

47 This passage is based on *CGH*, p. 192 with emendations and translation by Byrne, 'Senchas', 137. (My italics.)

48 See the passage quoted in *Book of Settlements*, trans. Pálsson and Edwards, p. 6; the text occurs in the *Þórðarbók*-recension. Byrne, 'Senchas' compared the Irish passage with the 'Nennian' preface to the *Historia Brittonum* and Gregory of Tours's introduction to his Books of Histories.

49 For discussion of some examples, see Thornton, 'Power', pp. 34–49.

50 Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends', pp. 64–5.

51 On this, see Thornton, 'Neglected genealogy'.

52 Zimmer, *Nennius*, pp. 272–3; Rhys, *Lectures*, pp. 37, 89–91; *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ed. Bromwich, pp. 75, 282. For fuller discussion, see Thornton, 'Power', pp. 110–11.

53 Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', p. 142.

54 Thornton, *Kings*, ch. 3.

Charter-writing and its uses in early medieval Celtic societies

WENDY DAVIES

Just as looking at one occurrence of a word gives you only a snapshot from its full semantic range, so reading the text of a single charter transmits but one moment from a network of relationships:[1] one charter is never going to reveal everything (or even the most important things) about the people and places it mentions in that moment. But it can tell you something about the moment, and the greater the number of texts, the greater our chances of insight into distant worlds.

To use charters like this is to use them – quite justifiably – as records. Indeed, at one level charters are no more than records of the transfer of property rights. But charters were more than mere records: they were also signs, like other types of medieval written text, and in the early Middle Ages they had several uses. If we take some care (and remember the limitations) we can begin to 'read the signs' and proceed from sign to function; thus, multiplying our insights, we can approach the 'diverse uses' of writing in early medieval societies.

In considering charter-writing and its uses, I am going to range across some of the texts I have studied in the past twenty years, and do so in a discursive way. I am not therefore going to focus much on detail, nor am I going to say much about charter form. I *am*, however, going to do my best to concentrate on 'uses'.

EASTERN BRITTANY

Let me start with charter-writing in eastern Brittany in the late eighth and ninth centuries. Communities in this area at this period must be viewed as Celtic societies, since their vernacular language, and a very high proportion of personal and place nomenclature, are linguistically Celtic. There are, however, differences between these