

To Bee or Not to Bee:

The bee in medieval Irish literature and society

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Plagiarism Declaration

I, Rhiannon Walker, hereby state that I did not commit plagiarism in writing this thesis.

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Introduction

Animals hold an important place in human history. Existing alongside us thumbing bipeds, animals were used for food, companionship, and as a moral playground.¹ It is for all three of these reasons that bees have long been a staple feature of European society and have left a deep, long-lasting impression on its cultural landscape. Since Ancient times, authors seeking to describe and make sense of the natural world gave bees a special status. They ‘emphasize[d] the special nature of bees, suggesting in different ways that they were comparable to humans.’² Among Classical authors in particular, bees were described as living in communities. The community was ruled over by a king, chosen based on his worthiness for the position, and structured by the different duties every bee was meant to carry out both within and outside of the hive.³ These bee communities also had a legal system ‘based on custom, but the king does not enforce the law’ since in this society ‘the lawbreakers punish themselves by stinging themselves to death.’⁴ The authors then based this description not only on what they knew of their own reality, but also projected their ideal society onto the civilization of bees. The bees came to represent the values and morals that the authors upheld. These early writers developed a standard treatment of bees that lasted throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Modern period.⁵ This pattern not only provided insight into the evolving use of bees and the place given to them in society, but it also provided us a manner in which to understand the society depicting the bee.

¹ Jonathan Woolfson, “The Renaissance of Bees,” *Renaissance Studies* vol. 24, no. 2, p. 282.

² Woolfson, p. 283; for example, “Aristotle calls them a ‘peculiar and extraordinary kind of animal’ comparable to humans (...) in being social and gregarious.”

³ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*. Trans. by John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), book 11, ch. 5, 10, and 17; for more information on bees by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, see ch. 4-24.

⁴ “Bee.” *The Medieval Bestiary* Online.

⁵ For more on this and examples of the use of the symbol of the bee see Woolfson’s article.

The description was adaptable and matched the cultural milieu of the authors, evolving over time and space alongside them. Much of the pre-existing research on the literary symbol of the bee is based on the extensive corpus of continental European bee literature. Comparatively little research has been done on the bee in medieval Ireland, however. Although there is no existing corpus of bee-literature, bees are mentioned in a large variety of literary sources including annals, saga literature, poetry, saints' lives, legal texts, calendars, and in placenames. What then was the medieval Irish understanding of bees and how do bees appear in medieval Ireland? What image do the writings of medieval Ireland paint of the honeybee and what purpose does this image serve?

Through a comparative literary and historicist approach, this thesis will look at the bee in medieval Irish society, and at medieval Irish society through the bee. This will be achieved by analyzing primary literary and legal sources that refer to bees, in order to determine what they tell us about beekeeping practices in medieval Ireland on the one hand, and how the portrait of the bee can be seen as a commentary on medieval Irish society on the other.

This thesis will be divided as follows: it will begin by providing a brief history of medieval Ireland before entering into a survey of the bee corpus, including both legal and literary texts; it will then analyze these texts to determine, first, what these texts say about beekeeping in medieval Ireland, and secondly, what the bee literature says about medieval Ireland and its culture. It will conclude with some final remarks on whether a pattern can be discerned in the depictions of bees in medieval Irish literature.

Chapter 1. The Society of Medieval Ireland – Bees, and Law

When looking at the history of Ireland, especially medieval Ireland, it is important to discuss the variety of sources from which this history was stitched together. Our current understanding of Irish history mainly relies on the study of archaeological remains and the written records left to us. The archeological finds and sources ranged in scope from the study of the physical landscape, focusing on both what lies above and beneath the land, to immaterial culture. The written sources, on the other hand, while much more generous in their descriptions and insights, are also much more questionable by nature. The literary sources are a broad category that encompasses genres and authors from all sectors of medieval life, from religion to medicine, and from law to saga tales. While it was undoubtedly important to question and take into account the authorship of these texts as well as the biases that shaped their writings, these written sources nevertheless were just as important as the archeological evidence. Both worked together to paint a richer and more colourful image of medieval Ireland that focused not only on the shape of society but the culture that defined it as well.⁶ However, as the focus of this thesis is the literature of medieval Ireland, the following investigation will focus on the written sources rather than delving into the archaeological record.

⁶ For further secondary readings on the history of Ireland, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); T. M. Charles-Edwards, *St Patrick and the landscape of early Christian Ireland* (Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures 10, Cambridge: ASNC, 2011); Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis litterarum Hibernensium: medieval Irish books, 3 vols* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); James P. Mallory, *Origins of the Irish* (Thames & Hudson, 2017).

1.a. Medieval Irish Society: Power and Organization

Medieval Irish society looked markedly different from today. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, Ireland was divided into five different provinces or *cóicid* in Old Irish, literally translating in English to ‘fifths’.⁷ The literature of medieval Ireland placed the province of *Ulaid* or Ulster in the northeast, *Laigin* or Leinster in the southeast, *Connachta* in the northwest, *Mumu* or Munster in the southwest, and finally *Mide* or Meath somewhat in the middle.⁸ Each province was composed of a number of tribes or *túatha* (i.e. ‘peoples’), which were then further sub-divided into smaller units of grouped dwellings called *trícha céit*.⁹ Each level of society was in turn ruled by a king whose job it was to both lead his people in times of war and to act as a judge in times of peace.¹⁰ The king also represented his people’s interests outside of the territory: apart from the king, warriors, and poets, most people in medieval Ireland would not have left the boundaries of their tribe in their lifetime.¹¹ Within the tribe, however, early Irish society was characterized by ‘the close integration of the individual in the family group or *fine* (sept).’¹² Each

⁷ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 423-424.

⁸ Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (London or Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. xiii.

⁹ Dillon, p. xiv.

¹⁰Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for advanced studies, 1988), p. 4, 17-18; there was the *rí tuathe* or king of the *tuath* and whose scope of influence extended to that of the modern-day county; the *rí cóicid* who ruled above him as the provincial king; and finally there was also a title for a king of all of Ireland, however, it likely only existed in the literature as there is no evidence that the title and accompanying position was ever held by a king in medieval Irish society nor is it often mentioned in the legal corpus.

¹¹ Bernhard Maier, *The Celts: A History from Earliest Times to Present* (Illinois: Notre-Dame University Press, 2003), p. 130.

¹² Maier, p. 130.

family group had a head or leader who was meant to represent his family in the affairs of the *túath*.¹³

The overall organization of medieval Irish society changed over time with the arrival of different peoples, cultures, and ways of life. Among the earliest and most important of these changes was the arrival of Christianity. The introduction of Christianity in Ireland is often attributed to the work of St. Patrick in roughly the fifth or sixth century, although there is evidence showing that there were already Irish Christians in the early fifth century.¹⁴ By the time of its introduction in Ireland, Christianity was a well-established and organized religion that appealed to a wide variety of people. It had a hierarchy supported by a number of institutions, but it was also associated with a number of charismatic individuals and appealed to the more popular spiritual and ascetic movements of the time. The monastic organization in Ireland is a particularly interesting blend of these different features of Christianity: while it is a structured organization of the Church, it has its roots in asceticism. Although Patrick attempted to set up the Christian bishopric system during his time in Ireland, it was ultimately the monastic organizations that became popular with the Irish. Between the sixth and ninth centuries, monasteries eclipsed the bishopric system and were built throughout the island.¹⁵

¹³ Maier, p. 130; “The leader of the *fine* was known as the *agae fine* or *cenn fine*. He was chosen on the basis of his power, social standing and personal merits.”

¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, p. 182-183; the myth of St. Patrick beginning the conversion of Ireland is not simply a modern myth, but one that began as early as the late 7th century (182-183). In reality, there is evidence of missionary trips before the arrival of Patrick, such as that of Palladius, a deacon, around 431 CE. Charles-Edwards mentions that “we know of them because they were one reason for the first known mission to a country beyond the frontier of the Western Roman Empire,” (182).

¹⁵ Maier, p. 126.

These structures were not only centers of ecclesiastical authority, but also centers of economic and political power.¹⁶ In the early medieval period, Ireland was a pre-dominantly rural society whose economy was founded on farming and animal husbandry.¹⁷ This ‘economic system [was] sustained by the inter-relationship of lord and client: the lord advances a fief of stock or land to his clients, and in return receives rent and services.’¹⁸ Family units then paid tribute to the king of their tribe, who in turn owed his higher-ups tribute and military service, and the form of this tribute would often have been the food or animal by-products grown on the farmsteads.¹⁹ Over time, some monasteries came to own large swaths of land and through these estates, the leaders of monastic communities also ‘functioned as landowners, receiving tribute and services from dependent farmers, and as patrons of learning and the arts.’²⁰ This then shows a shift in the power dynamic of society and a split in the flow of wealth in medieval Irish society: as an extensive landowner, the Church’s economy depended on the system of clientship, just as any secular lord or king, and through this became very wealthy.²¹ Through these monastic institutions, religious leaders inhabited the same place as secular rulers in the hierarchy, receiving goods and resources through both tithes and client-rent. The resources increased the power and influence that religious authority held in society so that societal authority came to be shared between the secular and religious authorities.

¹⁶ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Maier, p. 131.

¹⁸ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Maier, p. 130-131.

²⁰ Maier, p. 127.

²¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 3.

1.b. Bees in Medieval Irish Society

At the heart of both ecclesiastical and lay settlements was a concern and preoccupation with acquiring food and other products that were necessary in society. Animals, particularly those found on the farmstead, were thus important parts of medieval Irish society. Along with cows, chickens and other livestock, medieval Irish farmers kept bees in farmyards. The relationship between the bee and its products is unique and differentiates it from other animals, domesticated or wild. Unlike cows, pigs, chickens, or birds whose products either stemmed from their bodies or their bodily functions, as in the case of milk or eggs, that often then had to be turned into finished products, bees manufactured their own goods from raw materials they collect from nature.²² Bees had an intrinsic and unique economic worth that stemmed from an activity, from their ability to turn the raw materials they gather into a finished product, one they do not strictly need to be killed for.²³ The value associated with the bees in medieval Europe is comparable to that associated with an artisan: their value is inextricably linked not only to the goods they produce, but also their ability to create the goods.²⁴

Honey and wax were important products because of the broad scope of different uses they served across medieval Ireland. In addition to butter and sweet apples, honey was considered to be somewhat of a luxury food product, with some legal tracts restricting its access

²² Claire Preston, *Bee* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), p. 7; Preston says “the meat and skins of the animals we hunt and rear for food are constituent and integral to them: they cannot live without their fur or their muscles, nor can they make anything from them.”

²³ Preston, p. 7; “The honeybee, alone among animals, makes something by a kind of craft out of elements external to itself. (...) the bee’s main product, honey, is its own finished and complete manufacture, which it fabricates from gathered raw materials.”

²⁴ Though not the topic of discussion here, this places the bees somewhere between nature and culture and, as such, it may have interesting ramifications on future discussions on the cultural significance of bees.

to nobles and kings.²⁵ As a stand-alone food item, honey was not only used as a sweetening agent that preserved well even during the winter months, but it was also an important source of nutrients, vitamins, proteins, minerals, and carbohydrates.²⁶ *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, a twelfth-century Old Irish saga tale,²⁷ mentions someone using honey fresh from the comb both as a rub added to a roast during the cooking process and as a condiment the meat was dipped into when it was eaten.²⁸ *Cáin Iarraith*, an eighth-century Irish legal text on fosterage, mentioned that while all foster-children were given the same base-fare of porridge, if their father had a high status they were entitled to certain condiments to supplement the dish – the children of kings were allowed to add honey.²⁹ Honey was also an ingredient used in the manufacture of dairy products, and was the main ingredient in mead.³⁰ Made by fermenting honey with water, this alcoholic beverage is often mentioned in saga tales where it seems to have a weighty cultural significance.³¹

²⁵ Cherie N. Peters, “‘He is not entitled to Butter’: the diet of peasants and commoners in early medieval Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* vol. 115c (2015), p. 109.

²⁶ Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1998 [reprint in 2000]), p. 113; Dáibhí O Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200* (New York: Longman Group LTD, 1995), p. 106.

²⁷ This text was edited by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991), available online via <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G308002.html> (accessed Feb. 24th). Translated Kuno Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne, The Vision of MacConglinne, a Middle-Irish wonder tale. Edited with a translation, notes, and a glossary. With an introduction by Wilhelm Wollner* (London, 1892), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T308002.html> (accessed Feb. 24th).

²⁸ The passages in question are: “*iarraís olar sen-shaille & maeth bóshaille & lán-charna muilt & mil*” (Jackson, p. 23), “[MacConglinne] called for juicy old bacon, and tender corned-beef, and full-fleshed wether, and honey in the comb” (Meyer, p. 60); “*comlis in mil & in salann in cach staic iar n-urd*” (Jackson, p. 24), “he rubbed the honey and the salt into one piece after another” of meat on the spit (Meyer, p. 60-62). Later on, the text mentioned that MacConglinne, “*tummais isin mil bóí forsin teisc fhind-argair*” (Jackson, p. 24), or, “taking his knife out of his girdle, he cut a bit off the piece that was nearest to him, and dipped it in the honey that was on the aforesaid dish of white silver” (Meyer, p. 64). It should be noted that the text contains further references to honey as a food item.

²⁹ Peters, p. 92; Bronogh Ní Chonaill, “Child-Centered Law in Medieval Ireland,” in *The Empty Throne: Childhood and the Crisis of Modernity* edited by R. Davis and T. Dunn (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 2.

³⁰ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 113.

³¹ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 113.

In other respects, honey was highly regarded for its medicinal properties. *Bretha Cróilige*, an eighth-century legal text on sick-maintenance said that honey was both a condiment owed to people of high standing, and a food item that should not be given to people on sick-maintenance because it disturbed the stomach.³² RIA MS 445 (24 B 3), part of a medical compendium composed around the fifteenth century, mentions honey as an ingredient in twenty-four recipes for eye ailments.³³ Honey also occurs in medical recipes. One particular recipe, that for the king of Dál nAraidi's eye salve, the instructions called more specifically for diluted honey.³⁴ Honey is not only mentioned in cures for eye disease. Finally, a recipe for a poultice including honey can be found in the sixteenth-century manuscript TCD MS 1343. The poultice was made by mixing together dove dung, honey, and linseed oil, and was applied to the skin in order to heal erysipelas, scabies, and coldness of the joints.³⁵

Beeswax was an equally versatile commodity used to produce, among other things, candles, wax tablets, seals, and adhesives.³⁶ Wax tablets were a particularly common and important item in monastic communities: as the main centers of reading and writing in medieval Ireland, monasteries required the standard writing tools and implements which included, among other things, skins to write on, inks, and wax tablets.³⁷

³² D.A. Binchy, "Sick-Maintenance in Irish Law," *Eriu* vol. 12 (1938), p. 108; D.A. Binchy, "Bretha Croilige," *Eriu* vol. 12 (1938), p. 2, 20-21, 37.

³³ Siobhán Barrett, "The King of Dál nAraidi's Eye Salve," *Eriu* vol. 69 (2019), p. 171-172, 177.

³⁴ Barrett, p. 172; the salve is made as follows: "The king of Dál nAraidi's salve, i.e. green inner bark of ash and willow are broken and strained through a cloth, and thin honey is put on it and salt; it is brought to the boil and is put on the eye and it heals."

³⁵ Ranke de Vries, "A Short Tract on the Medicinal Uses for Animal Dung," *North American Journal for Celtic Studies* 3/2 (2019), p. 118.

³⁶ Kelly, p. 114.

³⁷ Thomas O'Loughlin, "Monasteries and Manuscripts: the transmission of Latin Learning in early Medieval Ireland," from Hiram Morgan's *Information, Media, and Power Throughout the Ages* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), p. 50-51.

Candles were another important commodity for the medieval monasteries because they provided light at times and in places where natural light was insufficient or lacking completely. Although candles could be made from other materials, like beef tallow, candles made from beeswax were the only kind deemed worthy enough to provide light during masses and on religious holidays.³⁸ Christian tradition in general held that bees were blessed by God and originated from Heaven. Both this belief and its resultant practice are referred to in the Laws of Hywel Dda, a medieval Welsh legal text.³⁹ The importance of candles was further stressed in the medieval Welsh laws, since it counted both the king and queen's candleman as part of the twenty-four court officers.⁴⁰ Wax candles were even mentioned as part of the dues owed by the lay clients to their monastic landowners.

Outside of the monasteries, archaeological evidence from Anglo-Saxon England also shows that wax was used as an ointment base in the treatment of leather and as a sealant for courseware pottery.⁴¹ While the wax candles were likely also used by those who made them, monastic or otherwise, the movement of these goods throughout society attested to their particular economic significance to the monasteries.⁴²

Although its importance starts on the farmstead, the bee's influence in society was as far-reaching as its products. From ecclesiastical to lay society and from the rich to the poor, bees played an instrumental role in the manufacture of every-day objects in medieval Ireland. The

³⁸ Eimear Chaomhanach, "The Bee, It's Keeper, and Produce in Irish and other Folk Traditions," [chaomh.pdf \(eferrit.com\)](#) p. 9.

³⁹ Chaomhanach, p.9.

⁴⁰ Dafydd Jenkins, *Hywel Dda: law texts from medieval Wales* (Llandysul: the Gomer Press, 1987, 2000), p. 27, 31.

⁴¹ Helene Price, "A Hive of Activity: realigning the figure of the bee in the mead-making network of Exeter Book Riddle 27," *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* vol. 8, no. 4, p. 454.

⁴² Ó Cróinín, p. 107.

importance of bees in medieval Ireland was confirmed by the large variety of texts available that referred to bees and their products, which will be examined in the next chapter.

1.c. Law in medieval Irish Society

When it comes to the study of medieval European [vernacular and religious] law, Ireland holds a particular interest for scholars, because it was never part of the Roman Empire. While Ireland likely encountered other legal systems through trade with Britain and the European continent, Roman law was only formally introduced in Ireland with the advent of Christianity and the adoption of canon law. That being said, Ireland had a rich and developed native legal system in place before the arrival of Christianity and canon/Roman law.⁴³ The legal professionals were traditionally closely associated with the work and profession of the poets.⁴⁴ This native legal tradition was likely taught and passed down by lawyers, from one generation to the next, through the use of maxims and alliterative verse, rather than through book learning.⁴⁵ Much like the other written texts coming out of Ireland, the practice of writing down legal material in Ireland was a consequence of the arrival of Christianity. While it is possible that this process of writing down the laws began as early as the sixth century, the most active period of Irish legal writing must have occurred between the seventh and ninth centuries since there are

⁴³ Kelly expands on this in his *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, stating that “It is clear from linguistic evidence that many of the essentials of the early Irish legal system go back at least as far as the common Celtic Period (c. 1000BC)” (231). He also mentions that “when the Christian missionaries arrived in Ireland in the 5th century they encountered a legal system which can be assumed to have developed from Celtic law with little or no outside influence” (232).

⁴⁴ Robyn Stacey, *Dark Speech: The performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), p. 58.

⁴⁵ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 232.

very few vernacular legal texts that are dated on linguistic grounds to the period before c. 700CE.⁴⁶ The legal texts that were produced during these periods were written in either Old Irish or in the church Latin.⁴⁷ They are an important part of the history of medieval Ireland because they provide us with detailed information about the intricacies of medieval Irish society. Much like the corpus of literary texts, however, the legal texts come with their own set of complications and challenges.

One of the biggest problems with the legal corpus related to the issue of authorship. When dealing with the legal texts, it is difficult to determine the extent to which they reflect a ‘pure’ native Irish legal tradition as opposed to reflecting Christian influence. There is concrete evidence linking the legal written tradition, as well as certain legal manuscripts, to the monasteries. From a textual stand-point, the ‘legal manuscripts use much the same spelling-system, script, punctuation, abbreviations, and illuminated capitals as are found in manuscripts of monastic origin.’⁴⁸ This suggests, at the very least, a religious provenance and setting for certain legal texts, if not also a religious bias and/or agenda. The strong Christian influence is also suggested by the fact that learning in medieval Ireland was closely tied to the Church and its canon law.⁴⁹ For example, there is also evidence of important legal texts being written down by

⁴⁶ Stacey, p. 177; Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 232; Kelly differs from Stacey and says that the “linguistic evidence shows that ‘the bulk of this work was done in the seventh and eighth centuries.’” Stacey dates the most active period of Irish legal writing between the seventh and ninth centuries, rather than the eighth, and also mentions that only a few vernacular texts are dated on linguistic grounds to before c.700 CE.

⁴⁷ For more information on medieval Irish law, see D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici: ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum*, 7 vols (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978); Liam Breatnach, *A companion to the Corpus iuris Hibernici*, Early Irish Law Series 5 (Dublin: DIAS, 2005); Roy Flechner, *The Hibernensis, volume 1: a study and edition*, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 232-233.

⁴⁹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 233-234.

monks in monasteries. The *Triads of Ireland*, a ninth century text, places the production of three particular legal texts, *bérlar Féne*, *Fénechas*, and *brithemnas*, at the monasteries in Cork, Cloyne, and Slane respectively.⁵⁰

That being said, there must be some vestiges of the native legal tradition in the legal texts. Ó Corrain suggested a compromise of the two in saying that ‘the law-tracts, in Latin and in the vernacular, were the work of a single class of learned men who were as well-versed in scripture as in the legal lore of their ancestors,’ and believed their laws to be a compromise between the two traditions.⁵¹ In fact, some of the vernacular legal texts show very little evidence of religious influence, which suggested that some native legal elements do exist.⁵² Many of these works have been grouped together based on their stylistic, linguistic, and thematic similarities and are considered to be the work of different schools of native law.

There were then two main schools of law in Ireland associated with the native tradition: there was a legal school in the Northern Midlands of Ireland, associated with the *Senchas Már*, and the *Bretha Nemed* school in Meath and Southern Ulster.⁵³ The *Senchas Már*, meaning ‘great tradition’, was the name of one of the most significant collections of Old Irish legal texts. The texts in the collection ranged in date from the seventh through eighth centuries, and were put together at one or many related law schools (likely before the end of the eighth century).⁵⁴ The *Senchas Már* was unique because it was the only legal compilation that ‘can be shown to represent a deliberately assembled collection of tracts (most separately authored and

⁵⁰ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 242; Stacey, p. 174.

⁵¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 233-234.

⁵² Stacey, p. 59.

⁵³ Stacey, p. 174.

⁵⁴ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 242, 245.

provenanced) that was meant to be experienced as a single lawbook.⁵⁵ By the later Old Irish period, the texts of the *Senchas Már* were arranged into a fixed order of three different sections, including such texts as *Bechbretha* and the laws of the neighbourhood and all sorts of related tracts.⁵⁶

The other important legal school was associated with the production of the *Bretha Nemed* texts, the ‘Judgements Concerning Privileged Persons’, as well as other important legal texts concerning craftsmen and poets, and so it was often characterized as a ‘poetico-legal school’.⁵⁷ While these are understood to be the two main schools that produced the vernacular legal texts of medieval Ireland, some extant legal texts do not appear to fit in stylistically with the law texts of either law school, which suggests that other law schools existed.⁵⁸

The legal texts were then composed in regional law schools, regardless of the extent to which they were affiliated with religious teachings and institution. The purpose of these schools was to instruct people in the different legal professions.⁵⁹ The pre-Norman Irish law schools were the places where the two main legal professions or figures who practiced law learned their trades. The first is the *brithem* who acted as a judge and arbitrator.⁶⁰ There were three different ranks of *brithem*, each based on the skillset and abilities of the judge. The rank dictated the

⁵⁵ Stacey, p. 178; “It is in the first half of the eighth century, side by side with the ongoing composition of individual legal tracts, that we first begin to see the production of larger collections of texts in law schools in the south and midlands of Ireland,” and it is these collections that Stacey says are often called lawbooks.

⁵⁶ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 243-244; for a full list of the texts see Kelly, p. 244.

⁵⁷ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 246; Stacey, p. 182-183; Other texts that are associated with this law school are ‘the text on status *Uraichecht Becc*, the oldest recension of *Coic Conara Fugill* ‘the five paths of judgement’, the text on accidents *bretha Etgid*, and the two *Bretha Nemed* texts’ (Kelly, p. 246).

⁵⁸ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 246.

⁵⁹ Stacey, p. 174; of these schools, Stacey also points out that “the role played by these schools in training persons destined to serve as judges and royal advisers seems likely to have inspired competition between schools, if not regions, for positions and prestige.”

⁶⁰ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 51.

brithem's honour price. The lowest rank of *brithem* had an honour-price of seven *séts* and performed on issues related to craftsmen, whereas the middle grade, with an honour-price of 10 ten *séts*, was learned in traditional law and poetry; the highest grade, worth 15 *séts*, was additionally well versed in cannon law.⁶¹ It was thought that each *túath* had its own official judge, the *brithem túaithe*, likely appointed by the king.⁶² The *brithem* was then an important figure who played a central role in the inner-workings of the *túath*: he had a close relationship to the king of the tribe and a large part of his duties would have centered around advising the king on legal matters, however, he also acted as a public judge for the tribe.⁶³ The second legal practitioner was the *aigne*, similar to a modern lawyer, whose 'job [it] was to plead the case of the client in court, and – if successful – he [was] entitled to a third of his client's award.'⁶⁴

Law was then an important and prominent feature of medieval Irish society. The texts produced during both the early and later medieval period provided a wealth of information on what went on in society and who played major and minor roles in this organization.

Having then established a small history of relevant areas of medieval Ireland, it is important to turn the attention to the literary world and examine the many different genres of texts that create an image of bees.

⁶¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 51-52; Kelly mentions that this threefold division of judges may be a particular feature of the *Nemed* schools of law because it is not really seen anywhere else. Also, in medieval Ireland, monetary value was often expressed in terms of *séts*, where each *séts* literally equated to one milk cow; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 478-485.

⁶² Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 52.

⁶³ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 52-53; the *brithem*'s income would have in large part come from his duties and work done for the king.

⁶⁴ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 54; "though the texts make a clear distinction between *aigne* and *brithem*, it is probable that both received the same basic training in the law schools."

Chapter 2: Bee References in early Irish Literature

The daily activity of the bee took place on the humble farmsteads, mighty castles, and pious monasteries dotting the medieval landscape – however, the scope of its influence stretches far beyond this singular existence. Bees garnered the imagination of poets, monks, hermits, and storytellers alike and, in so doing, lived eternally through the flowering of literature produced in medieval Ireland. This chapter seeks to reconstruct the image and history of the bee in medieval Irish society and culture through the literature of the period. It will lay out the corpus of texts that will be further analyzed in subsequent sections, by providing brief descriptions and contextualization for each text.

The corpus of texts with bee references used in this chapter includes passages from Saints' Lives and calendars (*St. Gobnat* and *St. Modmhnóc*), early Irish nature poetry (including *Cetamon cáin rée*, 'The Song of Summer', and an unnamed quatrain on bees), overtly religious/hermit nature poetry ('The Hermit's Song' and *The King and The Hermit*), annals (primarily the Annals of Ulster, but also the Annals of Inisfallen, Annals of the Four Masters, Annals of Tigernach, and the *Chronicon Scotorum*), and legal literature (*Bechbretha*).

2.a. Saints' Lives: St. Gobnat and St. Modomnóc

During the Middle Ages, a genre of religious literature, called the Saints' Lives, arose from the monastic system in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe.⁶⁵ Its purpose was to tell the stories of the lives and exploits of important religious figures, typically saints.⁶⁶ These hagiographical texts can be particularly interesting because they are often tied to the landscape: the people whose stories they regale often lived, worked, and were venerated in specific locations, whether it was the site of a founded church or a particular local landscape feature. Among the many saints native to Ireland, St. Gobnat was connected to bees in particular.

St. Gobnat, also spelled Gobnait, was the Abbess of Ballyvourney, co. Cork, and lived sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries CE.⁶⁷ Her feast day is February 11th, although some sources place her feast day on February 14th.⁶⁸ No Saint's Life has survived that is devoted specifically to her, however, tales of her presence, miracles, and wonders occurred in the folklore tradition and in various written sources, including *Féilire Óenguso*, 'The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee'.⁶⁹ Most importantly for this thesis, what has been preserved in those sources is her close association to bees. In addition to often being referred to as the patron of bees in Ireland, she was known for her extraordinary beekeeping abilities. One particular story, called *St. Gobnat*

⁶⁵ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Literature of Medieval Ireland to c. 800: St. Patrick to the Vikings," from *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, ed. by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 12.

⁶⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Catriona MacLeod, "Some Medieval Wooden Figure Sculptures in Ireland. Statues of Irish Saints," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* vol. 76 (Dec. 1946), p. 164.

⁶⁸ Dorothy Harris, "Saint Gobnat, Abbess of Ballyvourney," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* vol. 8:2 (Dec. 1938), p. 272, 273; O'Hanlon, p. 464, 467.

⁶⁹ Whitley Stokes, *The Martyrdom of Oengus the Culdee: Féilire Óenguso Céili Dé* (Internet Archive Online: Harison and Sons, 1905), <https://archive.org/stream/martyrologyoeng01stokgoog#page/n130/mode/2up>, p. 60; the entry for St. Gobnat, though it does not mention bees, goes as follows: "My Gopnat with pure/ goodness, as to God's love was/ opulent: bishop Ethchen the loveable likes to be cried to/ continually."

and her Beehive, told by John O’Hanlon in his *Lives of the Irish Saints vol. II*, shows an example of her connection to bees:

‘In the olden times, when Irish chieftains thought it justifiable to attack their neighbours, and to take away *creaghts* or cattle-spoils; an invading chief and his host made a descent, on the country around Ballyvourney. St. Gobnet came, however, to deliver her people from this scourge. She is said to have held in her hand, at the time, a square box, or beehive, full of holes, at the sides. These were so formed, that a bee flying could go in and out through them. This instrument has been called, in Gaelic, the *beachaire* i.e., "something to hold bees." It is supposed to have been soft and elastic. St. Gobnet prayed for some moments, when she saw the invader making towards her. After this, the bees flew out of their hive, and effectually stayed the ravages of the haughty chief.’⁷⁰

This tale is important because of the information it ostensibly provided about the practices and material culture of beekeeping during the Middle Ages, specifically in monasteries.⁷¹ Medieval monasteries, particularly those attributed to the Cistercians, were not only important centers of ecclesiastical power, but also played a crucial role in Ireland’s agricultural developments.⁷² These monasteries, as mentioned above, owned large portions of land that would either be rented out to tenant farmers or was used by the monks.⁷³ The Cistercian monasteries in particular ‘managed their estates through a system of self-sufficient granges, worked by a large number of lay brothers in conjunction with other monks.’⁷⁴ These granges acted as farmyards for the monasteries and were made up of a variety of buildings that served to

⁷⁰ O’Hanlon, John. *Lives of the Irish Saints: with special festivals, and the commemoration of holy persons* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1875), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/livesofirishsain02ohanuoft/page/462/mode/2up>, p. 464.

⁷¹ It is important to note that this text was likely written or recorded in the nineteenth century and O’Hanlon does not mention a medieval source for this story. That means that the story does not necessarily reflect medieval beekeeping practices, rather than the nineteenth centuries’ recollections of medieval beekeeping practices. Despite this, however, I believe it can be used to provide information regarding beekeeping in medieval Ireland, if for no other reason than showing that bees were being kept, and that St. Gobnat was associated with them.

⁷² Muiris O’Sullivan and Liam Downey, “Medieval Churches,” *Archaeology Ireland* vol. 31 no.2 (Summer 2017), p. 36.

⁷³ Maier, p. 127.

⁷⁴ O’Sullivan and Downey, p. 31.

house animals and food alike, as well as some cooking and baking rooms.⁷⁵ This showed that the monasteries not only had the land required to practice their own agricultural and animal husbandry practices, but also, through the architecture and buildings, that their land was in fact used for agricultural purposes.

In addition to St. Gobnat, St. Modomnóc was associated with bees and beekeeping. St. Modomnóc was thought to have lived around the fifth century CE in Fomoy, Cork, Ireland.⁷⁶ His story begins and ends in Ireland, where he was born and died, but between those periods, Modomnóc seemed to have lived and worked for some time at a monastery in Wales.⁷⁷ *Féilire Óenguso* places his feast day on February 13th, in other words either one day before or two days after that of St. Gobnat.⁷⁸ According to the saints' calendar, St. Modomnóc was the person who brought bees to Ireland: '*h-I curchán Mo Domnóc,/ anair tar muir n-glédenn,/ do-bert, brígach núalann, / síl m-búadach m-bech n-Erenn*' ('In a little boat, for the/ East, over the pure-coloured sea, my Domnóc brought –/ vigorous cry! – the gifted race of Ireland's bees').⁷⁹ The story went that Modomnóc, who was working as caretaker of bees at a monastery in Wales, was one day ordered to return to his native land of Ireland.⁸⁰ When he left, the swarm he had been caring for followed him from monastery to port, all the way to Ireland, where they remained.⁸¹

⁷⁵ O'Sullivan and Downey, p. 31.

⁷⁶ Chaomhanach, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Chaomhanach, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Stokes, *The Martyrdom of Oengus the Culdee: Féilire Óenguso Céli Dé*, p. 60; what is interesting is that St. Valentine, whose feast day is February 14th, is also sometimes associated with beekeeping (Preston, p. 13). While not the topic of discussion here, it is interesting and perhaps worth future research, to see whether there is a connection between bees and that particular time of year since all three saints have their feast days at around the same time in February.

⁷⁹ Stokes, *The Martyrdom of Oengus the Culdee: Féilire Óenguso Céli Dé*, p. 60.

⁸⁰ Chaomhanach, p. 2.

⁸¹ Chaomhanach, p. 2.

Despite the interesting story, there is linguistic evidence showing that beekeeping was being practiced in Ireland long before the arrival of Christianity.⁸² However, the tale of Modomnóc is important because it demonstrates that beekeeping was a standard practice in monasteries during the early Middle Ages. It also shows, though not to the extent seen in other texts, that there was an association between bees and religiosity, between bees and a higher level of understanding and awareness than was typically ascribed to creatures.

2.b. Early Irish Poetry: Anonymous Nature Poetry

Ireland had a rich poetic history that only continued to blossom with the advent of Christianity. In medieval Ireland, poetry and those who performed it were central figures in both politics and culture.⁸³ Based on legal texts, specifically *Uraicecht Becc* and *Uraicecht na Ríar*, there appeared to have seven distinct grades of professional poets (*filid*), the highest of which was the *ollam*, where the distinction between the various ranks were determined by the number of poems they could recite and the meters they could perform.⁸⁴

The importance of poetry to the peoples of medieval Ireland could then be seen in the attention given to poets in legal tracts, as well as in the high volume of poetic works left to us today. These ranged in topic from poetry of satire, praise, and blame, but among the most renowned were what may be termed Irish nature poems. As the name suggested, nature poetry

⁸² Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 109-110.

⁸³ Ó Cathasaigh, p. 19; for more information on the two legal tracts, see Liam Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar, The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1987).

⁸⁴ Ó Cathasaigh, p. 19.

describes scenes in the natural world around the author. Though this was not always the case, nature poetry could be overtly religious at times, and most of all ‘it is characteristic of these poems that in none of them do we get an elaborate or sustained description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures and images, which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skillful touches.’⁸⁵ The nature poems that will be looked at here all refer to bees or bee-products. They are anonymous and date to the early medieval period.

In the early poem *Cétamon*, dated to sometime between the eighth and ninth centuries, the Spring season, particularly the month of May is celebrated.⁸⁶ Among the various features of the month that the poet chose to praise were bees. In the fifth stanza, the author sates:⁸⁷

This poem painted a pretty image of bee-like activity – or at least what the author

Beraít beich (bec nert)

Bert bonn bochtai bláith;

Berid slabrai slíab;

Feraid saidbir sáith

Bees of little strength carry

a foot-load – flowers were reaped;

the mountain pastures take the cattle;

the ant fetches a rich sufficiency

associated with bees’ activity. It appeared to be a simple, yet effective, description of the bee leisurely getting pollen from flowers. However, the bee was not alone in this image, it was placed alongside the cattle and ants. Looking at these two, the poet established a link of necessity between the creatures and their location in the poem. The mountain pastures were made for the

⁸⁵ James Carney, “Three Old Irish Accentual Poems,” *The Royal Irish Academy* vol. 22 (1971), p. 37.

⁸⁶ Gerard Murphy, “May-Day” in *Early Irish lyrics, eighth to twelfth century*, edited by Gerard Murphy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G400052/>, p. 156.

⁸⁷ For the Old Irish vernacular poem see, Murphy, “May-Day,” in *Early Irish lyrics, eighth to twelfth century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G400052/>, p. 156; James Carney, “Three Old Irish Accentual Poems,” *The Royal Irish Academy* vol. 22 (1971), p. 45 for an English translation.

cattle to eat their fill and the nature of the ant is to fetch its “sufficiency”: in placing this in the stanza with the bees, the poet extended the idea of natural necessity to the work of the bees as well. The poem implied a necessary connection between the bee’s load and its interaction with the flowers, that the movement of the bees was not the result of independent actions but rather could be seen as a cog in a larger mechanism, a larger social network.

One thing the bee, the ant, and the cow have in common is that they are all group animals that live in communities. Bees live in hives, ants in colonies, and cows in herds. When it comes to all three of these animals, they all work for the collective good of their communities. Each of these animals could then be seen as having a necessary duty to their communities: each individual creature was born into a certain place or rank within the larger unit which ascribed to them a certain task or job that was associated with the position. Their life’s work is then the fulfillment of that duty. Their activity in nature is determined by their relationship to their respective societies. The choice of animals included with the bee in this poem was perhaps significant. They served to bring the reader’s attention to the idea that there was a pre-determined quality underlying the activity and placement of the bee.

This idea is echoed in the other poem that will be analyzed as part of the nature poetry category. This poem is unnamed and dates to the seventh or eighth century.⁸⁸ It goes as follows:

<i>Daith bech buide a húaim i n-úaim,</i>	Nimble is the yellow bee from cup to cup,
<i>ní súail a uide la gréin,</i>	he makes a great journey in the sun,

⁸⁸ Dillon, p. 153.

*fó for fuluth 'sa mag már,
dag a dagchomul 'na chéir.*⁸⁹

boldly he flits into the wide plain,
then safely joins his brethren in the hive.⁹⁰

This poem was dated to an earlier period than the first one, however, the picture it painted of the activity of bees was no less picturesque. Much like the other poem, the bee's behaviour was described as being determined, mechanical. On a larger scale, this was seen in how the bee was once again bound to the hive from which it came. Though it journeyed beyond its home, much like a boomerang it will always circle back to the hive once it completed its mission. On a much smaller scale, however, the bee flitted from flower to flower: though taken together it makes an entire journey, seen individually, the bee's movement appeared almost methodical in the poem. Taken together then, the bee in nature poetry appeared to emphasize the fact that the bee was a part of the whole. That it was best understood when seen in terms of the larger context or community from which it came. More generally, the poems showed that the bee's identity cannot be understood separately from the hive, that the bee as an individual was lost without the hive, the larger unit.

2.c. Early Irish Religious Poetry

In addition to the poems mentioned above, references to bees can also be found in hermit poetry and in poems ascribed to religious figures themselves. These poems were a form of nature poetry in that they fit with the style and subject matter of the poems mentioned above. The

⁸⁹ Wim Tigges, *An Old Irish Primer* (Stichting Uitgeverij de Keltische Draak, 2006), p. 13.

⁹⁰ Dillon, p. 153-154.

difference though is that the poems discussed below explicitly relate to religious asceticism. Christian asceticism gained popularity and momentum throughout the Middle Ages. It was a structured program of practices that focused on self-denial and self-discipline to attain a higher spiritual state and closer connection with the sacred.⁹¹ These practices usually involved, to varying degrees, the renunciation of bodily pleasures as well as worldly goods and concerns.⁹² The movement took different forms in different times and places, but in Ireland it mostly appeared in the form of the establishment of hermitages. The figure of the hermit often appeared in various literary genres: a monk or a religious person established a small dwelling for themselves in the forest and lived in isolation with only nature as their companion. The popularity of this movement in Ireland was reflected in the large quantity of literature and poems we have from these hermits. For the purpose of this thesis, two particular poems will be analyzed.

The first to be analyzed here is a tenth-century poem that described a conversation between the hermit, Marbán and his brother King Gúaire. King Gúaire appeared in the historical record as a powerful king of Connacht living in the seventh century.⁹³ He appears often and early on in literature and ‘the Life of St. Cellach represent[ed] him as a treacherous and revengeful king; but his unbounded generosity was proverbial.’⁹⁴ Marbán was Gúaire’s half-brother and he

⁹¹ Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 63 no. 4 (Winter 1995), p. 794.

⁹² Valantasis, p. 794.

⁹³ Kuno Meyer, *King and Hermit; a Colloquy between King Guaire of Aidne and his brother Marban; being an Irish poem of the tenth century* (London: 1901), URL

<https://archive.org/details/kingandhermitac00meyegoog/page/n24/mode/2up>, p. 8.

⁹⁴ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 8.

became a hermit, living outside of society.⁹⁵ The poem is basically a conversation between Gúaire and Marbán that began with Marbán realizing how old he is, how many of his fellow brothers have passed away, and explaining to Gúaire what he wanted done after he died. Gúaire then suggested that Marbán make a will and the better part of the poem was then devoted to Marbán describing this hut he had in the wilderness. The poem made a reference to bees as well as one reference each to honey and mead.

In stanza twenty, Marbán said that *‘Līne huoga, mil, mes melle,/ Dīa dotrōidh:/ ubla mildsi, mōnuinn dercui,/ dercna frōich’* (‘A clutch of eggs, honey, and delicious meat,/ God has sent it:/ Sweet apples, red whortle-berries,/ berries of the heath.’).⁹⁶ This formed a direct causal link between the production of honey and divine activity. In the twenty-second stanza, Marbán said *‘Cūach co medh collāin, condla,/ cowdal ndaith,/ durchāin donna, dristin mongu,/ mertain maith’* (‘A cup with mead of hazelnuts, blue-bells,/ quick-growing rushes,/ Dun oaklets, manes of bears,/ Goodly sweet tangle’).⁹⁷ Both of these passages are then significant because they serve to establish Marbán as a person of high status and rank in medieval Irish society. In both passages Marbán mentions food that are either reserved for or associated with people of higher status. The connection between honey, mead, and privilege has already been established earlier in this thesis, however, this may also have been the case with the reference to meat. In medieval Ireland, and particularly when it came to banquets, the portion size and quality of meat afforded to each person was based on the individual’s rank and status.⁹⁸ That Marbán then mentions that

⁹⁵ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 16 (for Old Irish), 17 (for English translation).

⁹⁷ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 16 (for Old Irish), 17 (for English translation).

⁹⁸ Peters, p. 80.

his hut had not just any cut of meat, but specifically ‘delicious meat’ can be a way of indicating his high status. The food in this poem are symbols of high status, and in Marbán’s situation, this could be high secular and religious status since he was royalty of sorts and had a high spiritual status.

Finally, in stanza twenty-five, he states ‘*Tellinn, ciárainn, certān cruinde,/ crōnān sē[i]mh:/ gigraind, cadhoin, gair rē samuin,/ se[i]nm gairuh cēir*’ (‘Swarms of bees and chafers, the little musicians of the world,/ a gentle chorus:/ Wild geese and ducks, shortly before summer’s end,/ The music of the dark torrent’).⁹⁹ The bee is not only a provider in the poem, as seen in the two earlier passages, but also a musician. The sounds they produce are symbolic of the light warmth of pure summer. The bees’ music is contrasted with that of the wild geese and ducks: while also sounds of summer, the noise of ducks and geese is indicative of summer’s end in the poem. The light and joy of the bee musicians is contrasted with the dark noise of fowl which acts as a reminder of the coming darkness of fall and winter. This comparison then works to show the good and light of the bee, how its music is associated with light and, as will be seen later in chapter four of this thesis, God. This particular poem is then significant because it not only refers to both the bees and their produce, but in doing so it also forges a link between them and the idea of the Divine.

This religious bee was also suggested in the second poem. *Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí*, commonly referred to as “Manchin’s Wish” or “The Hermit’s Song”, is a poem dating to the

⁹⁹ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 18 (for Old Irish), 19 (for English translation).

tenth century.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the other poems discussed in this thesis, it is told in the first person. The speaker is the hermit Manchin who describes the hermitage of his dreams and asked God to give him this beautiful hut in the wilderness. The overtly religious tone was set in the first stanza, where the poem began with an invocation of Christ: ‘*Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí,/a Rí suthain sen,/ bothán deirrit díthraba/ commad sí mo threb*’ (‘I wish, O Son of the living God,/ O Ancient, eternal King,/ For a hidden hut in the wilderness/ That it may be my dwelling’).¹⁰¹ The poem referred to bees in the second to last stanza: ‘*Is é trebad no gébainn,/ do-gegainn cen chleith;/ fírchainnenn chumra, cerca,/ bratáin breca, beich,*’ (‘This is the husbandry I would take,/ I would choose, and I will not hide it:/ Fragrant leek,/ Hens, salmon, trout, bees’).¹⁰² Overall, the poem or song recited by Manchin described a beautiful, idealistic scene set in wilderness. It contrasted with the previous poem because of its wishful nature: the hermitage itself did not exist, even in this literary world. Instead, it was a dream, an ideal dreamed up by a hermit and because of this it could be taken as an example of the ideal vision of a hermitage.

While they are similar, the difference between Guaire’s and Manchin’s hermitage scenes was that the former was told as a description of his old hut, while the latter was more a situation of wishful or idealistic thinking. The difference in perspective makes for an interesting comparison to see whether this impacts how their poems should be understood and analyzed. Particularly when it came to the references to bees, this seemed to suggest that the bee was held in a certain reverence. In both tenth century poems, the hermits seemed to link the bee’s activity

¹⁰⁰ Gerard Murphy, “Manchán's Wish” in *Early Irish lyrics, eighth to twelfth century*, Ed. Gerard Murphy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), online, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G400012/> (the bibliographic information).

¹⁰¹ Murphy, “Manchán's Wish”, p. 28; Susan Power Bratton, “Oaks, Wolves, and Love: Celtic Monks and Northern Forests,” *Journal of Forest History* vol. 33: 1 (Jan. 1989), p. 14.

¹⁰² Murphy, “Manchán's Wish”, p. 30; Bratton, p. 14.

in nature with God. The necessary connection between the bee and nature, the determined quality to its activity and movement, was perhaps related to its association with the divine.

2.d. The Annals

An annal can be defined as ‘the contemporary record of an event under the year of its occurrence. A series of such events, however brief or long, in chronological sequence, is what we call annals.’¹⁰³ The events recorded often bear no relation to each other and ranged in topic from celestial phenomena and the weather, to battles, and deaths of important religious and political figures.¹⁰⁴ That being said, annalistic sources could be as biased as the other forms of literature covered in this paper. When it came to the annals of Ireland, they appeared to have been recorded in the monasteries, and so were linked with the arrival of Christianity.¹⁰⁵ Many of the annals produced in medieval Ireland have been preserved until today. These include the Annals of Ulster, which covered events from the years 431-1541, the Annals of Inisfallen, the Annals of Tigernach, the Annals of the Four Masters, and the *Chronicon Scotorum*.¹⁰⁶ Among these, however, the Annals of Ulster were the most important for this thesis because they contain the largest number of records referring to bees and bee-products.

¹⁰³ O Cróinín, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ O Cróinín, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel McCarthy, “The Chronology of the Irish Annals,” *Proceedings of Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* vol. 98C no. 6 (1998), p. 204.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel McCarthy, “The Chronology and Sources of the Early Irish Annals,” *Early Medieval Europe* vol. 10:3 (November 2001), p. 323-324.

Of all the annals listed above, the Annals of Ulster is the only one that mentions bees. They appear in two separate annals, and both times the purpose of the annal is to note the deaths of large numbers of bees. While one reference for AU951 only mentioned ‘*bech-dibad*,’ (the ‘mortality of bees’), the other one in AU993 noted, ‘*dunibha mór for dainibh & cethraibh & bechaibh fo Erin uile isin bliadain-siu*’ (‘A great mortality of people, cattle, and bees throughout Ireland’).¹⁰⁷ Although these references do not provide much in terms of symbolism, they demonstrate that bees were important in medieval Ireland. For example, the loss of bees means a loss of honey, and, as honey was used as a preserving agent, also the loss of food. This could cause a famine, which in turn often triggers wide-spread diseases and epidemics. Furthermore, without honey, doctors and physicians would have been without a key medicinal ingredient that would help them treat these illnesses. The appearance of references to bee deaths then shows that the author(s) of the annals considered this to be a noteworthy event, one whose repercussions were felt throughout society.

Apart from bees, the annals are also important because they mention the different bee-products available in society. The word honey appears in one event that describes how Níall Frosach came to be named. This event is listed in many of the annals and even around the same year in all but one of the annals. For example, in 718.7, the Annals of Ulster records ‘*Pluit frois melo for Oithin Bicc. Pluit frois sanguinis super Fossam Laginarum. Inde uocatur Niall Frosach m. Fergaile, qui tunc natus est*’ (that ‘a shower of honey rained upon Othan Bec, a shower of

¹⁰⁷Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100001A/>, p. 397, 425; for Old Irish, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100001A/>, p. 396, 424.

blood upon the Foss of Laigin. Hence Niall Frosach who was born at that time is so named’).¹⁰⁸

In the same year, the Annal of Tigernach records that ‘a shower of honey pours on Othan Becc, a shower of silver on Othan Mór, a shower of blood on Ráith Laigen, and hence Niall Frasach son of Feargal is thus called, since he was then born;’¹⁰⁹ and the *Chronicon Scotorum*, mentions that ‘a shower of honey rained on Othan Bec, a shower of silver upon Othan Mór, a shower of blood upon the foss of Laigin. Hence Niall Frosach son of Fergal, who was born at that time, is so named.’¹¹⁰ The only change in dating occurs in the Annals of the Four Masters, which lists this event in the year 716: ‘Three wonderful showers fell in this year: a shower of silver on Othain Mor, a shower of honey on Othain Beag, and a shower of blood in Leinster.’¹¹¹

What remains interesting is how similar the different references are to each other. All use this image of a ‘shower of honey’. In this particular context, this can be taken to mean that the place went through a period of prosperity, likely agricultural. The shower of honey is placed alongside a shower of silver and a shower of blood. The shower of silver could be taken as economic wealth and the blood as war. In other words, the annal seems to be describing the political situation brought about by the different leaders within Leinster. While a shower of

¹⁰⁸ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 172, 173.

¹⁰⁹ Gearóid Mac Niocaill (tr.), “The Annals of Tigernach,” *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts*, online, University College Cork, URL: <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100002A>, p. 226; Whitby Stokes, “The Annals of Tigernach,” *Revue Celtique* vol. 16-18 (1895-1897), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100002/index.html>, p. 226; the Old Irish quote was “*pluit fross mela for Othain m-Bicc, fross argaid for Othain Moir, fross fhola super Fossam Laghinarum, et inde uocabatur Niall Frasach mac Feargail, quia tunc natus est.*”

¹¹⁰ Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed.) and William M. Hennessy (tr.), “Chronicon Scotorum,” *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts*, online, University College Cork. URL: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100016/>, p. 95; <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100016/>, p. 96; the Old Irish quote was ‘*pluit fross meala for Othain m-Bic, fross argaid for Othain Moir, fross fhola super fossam Lagenorum & inde uocatur Níall Frosach mac Fergaile qui tunc natus est.*’

¹¹¹ John O'Donovan (ed. and tr.), *Annala rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616*, 2nd vol., 2nd ed. (Dublin: 1856), online, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100005A/>, p. 315; <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100005A/>, p. 314; the Old Irish text said “*Trí frossa ingnathacha isin bhliadhain-si, fross airccid for Othain Móir, fross mealae for Othain m-Bicc, & fross fola h-i Laighnibh.*”

honey fell on one part, signifying a period of agricultural prosperity, a shower of blood fell on another, suggesting a period of war and famine. As will be seen further on in chapter four, this understanding of honey has to do with medieval Irish ideas of a ruler's connection to his land.

There is a second event found in the annals that refers to honey. It is only present in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of the Four Masters. AU 764 recorded that '*tri frossa do ferthain i Crich Muiredaigh i n-Inis Eugain, .i. fross do argut ghil & fros do cruithniucht & fros do mhill*' ('three showers fell in Crith Muiredaigh in Inis Eogan, i.e. a shower of pure silver, a shower of wheat, and a shower of honey').¹¹² In the Annals of the Four Masters, however, this occurred in the year 759, '*tri frossa do fhearthain h-i Crich Muiredhaigh i n-Inis Eoghain .i. fros do arccat gil, fros, do chruithneacht, & fros do mhill. Conadh doibh-sidhe ro raidheadh*' ('three showers fell in Crich Muiredhaigh, in Inis Eoghain Inishowen, namely, a shower of pure silver, a shower of wheat, and a shower of honey').¹¹³ In both cases, the annalistic entry is accompanied by a small poem that further describes the event. The version found in the Annals of the Four Masters only has the first verse and will be included in this footnote, whereas the Annals of Ulster has a full three-verse telling of the event.¹¹⁴ It goes as follows:

Tri frossa Aird Uilinne

ar gradh Neill do nim:

fros argait, fros tuirinne,

ocus fros do mhill.

Macc Fergail ba feramhail,

The three showers of Ard Uilinne

Fell from heaven for love of Niall:

A shower of silver, a shower of wheat,

And a shower of honey.

Fergal's manly son

¹¹² Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 218, 219.

¹¹³ O'Donovan, p. 362, 363.

¹¹⁴ O'Donovan, '*Tri frossa Aird Uilinne, / ar ghradh Dé do nimh / Fross argait, fros tuirinne, / agus fross do mhill*' (362); 'Three showers at Ard Uilinne, fell, / through God's love, from heaven: / A shower of silver, a shower of wheat, / and a shower of honey.' (363).

<i>oc laechraidh a gairm,</i>	Was dubbed for this among warriors:
<i>o fuair cach dia lenamhain,</i>	Since everyone came to follow them
<i>Niall Frosach a ainm.</i>	Niall of the Showers is his name.
<i>Cet n-giall as cach oen-coicedh</i>	A hundred hostages from each province
<i>ro thobaigh Niall ni;</i>	Was what Niall exacted;
<i>robo crodha in saerbaeded</i>	Daring was the noble pledge he gave(?)
<i>a tobach fo thri.¹¹⁵</i>	To exact them three times. ¹¹⁶

Apart from honey, the annals also mention candles, though in an evidently metaphorical sense. These references only appear in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of Inisfallen. The candle references are different from the honey ones in that the events they appear in were not repeated in both annals. For example, candles appear in four separate events mentioned in the Annals of Ulster:

1. UA1165.2 mentioned that ‘*Domhnall h-Ua Gilla Patraic, ri Tuaisceirt Osraighi, & Concobur h-Ua Broigthe, rí Cinn Caille & Paitin h-Ua h-Aedha, cainneal h-Ua Ceinnselaigh uile, do mharbadh do Mac Craith h-Ua Mordhai & do Laichis tria drochfhatha,*’ (‘Domnall Ua Gille-Patraic, King of the North Ossory, and Conchobar Ua Broigte, king of the Cenn-caille and Paitin Ua Aedha, the candle of all Ui-Cennselaigh, were killed by Ma[c] Craith Ua Mordhai and by Laichsi for evil causes’)¹¹⁷
2. U1171.8, ‘*Fénidh h-Ua Conghaile, cainnel gaiscidh & einigh Oirghiall, mortuus est*’ (‘Fenidh Ua Conghaile, candle of the championship and hospitality of Oirghialla, died.’)¹¹⁸
3. U1186.6, ‘*Conn h-Ua Breislen, coinnel éinigh & gaiscidh Tuaiscert Erenn, do marbadh do dreim do Chenel Eogain & Inis Eogain uile do arcain trit-sein, cenco raibe cin doibh ann,*’ (‘Conn Ua Breislen, candle of hospitality and championship of the North of Ireland, was killed by a party of the Cenel-Eogain and...’)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 218.

¹¹⁶ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 219.

¹¹⁷ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 146, 147.

¹¹⁸ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 170, 171.

¹¹⁹ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 208, 209.

4. U1201.1, ‘*Ruaidhri Mac Duinn Sleibhe, ri Uladh & cainnel gaiscidh na h-Ereinn uile, do marbadh do Ghallaibh, .i., tria mírbuilibh Poil & Petair & Patraic ro sharaigh,*’ (‘Ruaidhri Mac Duinnesleibhe [Ua Eochada], King of Ulidia and candle of the championship of all Ireland, was killed by the Foreigners, to wit, through the miracles of Paul and Peter and Patrick whom he dishonoured.’)¹²⁰

Although the Annals of Inisfallen also has four annals referring to candles, the events are different from those mentioned in the Annals of Ulster. The four entries are as follows:

1. AI1127 stated ‘*Gilla Crist Ua Mail Eoin, ardchomarba Ciarain Cl[u]ana Muc Nois, cainell enaig & derci Lethe Cuinn, in Christo quieuit,*’ (‘Gilla Críst Ua Maíl Eóin, eminent coarb of Ciarán of Cluain Moccu Nóis and candle of generosity and charity of Leth Cuinn, rested in Christ.’)¹²¹
2. AI1161 had ‘*Aed mc. Amlaib U D(h)onchada, ardri Ceneol Legari & Eoganachta Locha Lein, do marbad i teirt-Kl. Iul arai lathi mis greni, i Cetain uero ari lathi sachtmaini. Mael Sechnaill mc. Cellachain, coinell gaiscid na Desmuman, occisus est in eodem loco,*’ (‘Aed, son of Amlaíb Ua Donnchada, high-king of Cenél Laegaire and of Eóganacht Locha Léin, was slain on the third of the Kalends of July [June 28]. as regards the solar month, on Wednesday however, as regards the day of the week. Mael Sechnaill son of Cellachán, candle of the valour of Desmumu, was slain in the same place.’)¹²²
3. AI1163 had ‘*Donchad mc. Dondchada U Charthaig, cainnell enig & engnama & bági Dessmuman, do marbad a ffill la mc. Cormaic Ú Cartaig,*’ (‘Donnchad son of Donnchad Ua Carthaig, candle of generosity, prowess, and martial action of Desmumu, was treacherously slain by the son of Cormac Ua Carthaig.’)¹²³
4. AI1317 had ‘*Guerra oritur inter illos de Coganis & de Barrensibus & deuastantur & comburuntur terre Daid de Cogan per Barrenses & illos de Rupe(nsibus) a Loch Mu Choba usque Bern{folio 56d} na h-Eille. Item iterum praeda capitur ab eis super eosdem de Coganys post Purificationem in qua praeda spoliatur J. filius Galfridi & comburitur eius curia & destruitur castrum de Mog Oly,*’ (‘Warfare breaks out between some of the Cogans and the Barrys, and the lands of Dáuid de Cócán from Loch Mu-Choba to Bern na hEile are laid waste and burned by the Barrys and some of the Roches. After Candlemas a further prey is taken by them against the same Cogans; and in the course of this raid J[ohn ?], son of Godfrey, is despoiled, his court being burned, and the castle of Mag Oilig is destroyed.’)¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 234, 235.

¹²¹ For the Old Irish version, Seán Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen (MS. Rawlinson B. 503)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944), online, URL: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100004/index.html>, p. 288; for the English translation, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100004/index.html>, p. 289.

¹²² Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 294, 295.

¹²³ Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 296, 297.

¹²⁴ Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 424, 425.

Not only did the two annals use the word candle in reference to different events, but they also used it in reference to different virtues at times. Both annals seemed to use it in reference to peoples, for example, ‘the candle of the valour of Desmumu,’ and to represent certain virtues, such as hospitality and championship.¹²⁵ That being said, the Annals of Ulster uses the word exclusively for these two values while the Annals of Inisfallen refers to additional virtues such as ‘candles of generosity, prowess, and martial action’.¹²⁶ Although it could be argued that this falls under the heading of hospitality and championship, the difference between the two annals is important because it appears to qualify those more general virtues. Rather than simply stating hospitality, the Annals of Inisfallen describe what characteristics of the umbrella terms, of hospitality or championship, the person in question was a candle of.

Lastly, the Annals of Ulster mention mead in an event in the year 1107CE: ‘Cenn Corad was burned, i.e. by lightning, between the two Easters 14-21 April, with sixty vats both of mead and bragget.’¹²⁷ It is the one and only reference among all the annalistic sources to do so. Though wax must have been an important product in the medieval period, it is absent from the annals.

The annals then show that bee-products were meaningful in medieval Ireland, not only as essential items, but as symbols. Apart from the one reference to mead, the use of the words honey and candle did not refer to actual honey or candles in the events, but rather were used as descriptor words. While the annals then showed that these products were circulating around

¹²⁵ Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 294, 295.

¹²⁶ Mac Airt (ed), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 296, 297.

¹²⁷ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 547.

medieval Ireland because they would not be used as a symbol if they were not present in the everyday life, they also show the association between these goods and morality.

2.e. Legal Texts: *Bechbretha*

The longest text that deals with bees and beekeeping in medieval Ireland is undoubtedly the legal text *Bechbretha*, the ‘Judgements of bees’. *Bechbretha* is part of the *Senchas Már* tradition. It forms part of another legal text from this tradition, the *Bretha Comaithchesa* ‘laws of the neighbourhood’. The laws of the neighbourhood include a broad swath of subjects and issues, including a lengthy category of tracts dealing with land division and domestic animals. For example, it encompasses texts such as *Fidbretha* ‘tree-judgements’, *Conslechta* ‘dog-sections’, *Catslechta* ‘cat-sections’, *Bóslechta* ‘cow-sections’, and *Bechbretha* ‘bee-judgements’.¹²⁸ While not all of these texts have been preserved in their entirety, *Bechbretha* has been.

While sections of the Old Irish text can be found in many different manuscripts, the only complete version of *Bechbretha* was housed in one of the oldest Irish legal manuscripts, Trinity College Dublin MS 1316 (H.2.15A).¹²⁹ While the manuscript itself dates to the later Middle Ages, the text itself is dated approximately to the seventh century.¹³⁰ Based on a commentary

¹²⁸ For brief descriptions on each of these texts as well as other texts on the land and the neighbourhood, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 273-277; and Liam Breatnach, *A companion to the Corpus iuris Hibernici*, Early Irish Law Series 5 (Dublin: DIAS, 2005).

¹²⁹ Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly (eds.), *Bechbretha* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), p. 1; it can be found on pp. 20a19-26a7 of the manuscript.

¹³⁰ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 4, 26, 27; the text uses something called an enclitic *-ch* which is a linguistic form of Old Irish that went out of fashion by the eighth century. Kelly and Charles-Edwards remark that texts such as *Bechbretha* using this form are grouped together in a legal period between the more archaic forms but earlier than the eighth century. This combined with the fact that the tract mentions Congal Cáech, a king known to have died sometime around 637AD, suggests the text dates to a period between c.637-700CE.

written in the top margin of page fourteen, ‘the manuscript was probably written at a law-school belonging to the MacEgan family,’ though exactly at which school location is unclear.¹³¹ The first fourteen leaves of this manuscript have been written by the same scribe, about whom very little is known apart from the fact that his work was completed sometime before the year 1350.¹³² The hand of this scribe is clear and uniform and each tract on which he worked began with an illuminated, zoomorphic capital, with smaller illuminated capitals at the start of each new paragraph.¹³³ In TCD MS 1316, *Bechbretha* was separated into thirty-five sections, but in the edition used for this thesis, the translators divided it into fifty-two chapters.¹³⁴

When it comes to the contents of *Bechbretha*, the tract focuses on four different categories of problems related to bees in the medieval Irish neighbourhood. The first was that of flying trespass or *tairsce*: because the bees were prone to roaming, problems arose in the legal sphere when they collected their nectar from neighbouring property. The problem of flying-trespass was solved through a process of distribution of the hives throughout the neighbourhood, the intricacies of which are laid out in the first twenty-six sections of the tract, including the responsibilities of both hive owners and their neighbours. After this issue, the text discusses situations in which bees are involved in the injury of people. It explains when bees were at fault and in what situations they were immune to any form of punishment.

¹³¹ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 1.

¹³² Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 1; the author says “neither his name nor his dates are known, but it is clear that he worked some time before 1350, the year in which the second glossator Aed mac Aedagáin (Hugh MacEgan) autographed the bottom of pp. 36-37.”

¹³³ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 1.

The third category involved the discovery of a new hive. This section looks at what happens when a person tracked a bee from their property to its original hive. It has been subdivided into different sections based on the kind of spaces in which these hives were found. Each situation has its own set of protocols that lays out detailed instructions for not only who, exactly, should be involved in the search for the hive, but also who takes ownership of the hive once found and who is later owed what portion of the goods produced by the hive for their compliance. Though this will be discussed in further detail later on, it bears mentioning here how the protocols established in this section are important because they demonstrate how the exchange of bee-goods bound members of a community to one-another.

The final category addresses the problem of stolen bee-hives and the penalty incurred from these actions. The severity of the punishments depends on the place from which the hives are stolen, ranging from the penalty assigned to stolen household goods for the crime of stealing a hive from a courtyard or garden, all the way to the price of stealing a milk cow or oxen from a noble for the crime of stealing a hive from sacred ground.¹³⁵

Bechbretha is then the largest and most prolific text in the medieval Irish corpus to deal with bees. It provides a lot of information not only for the social history of bee-keeping in medieval Ireland, but also works as a solid base through which to examine the symbolic function of the bee in society. As there is too much information to discuss in this section, this work will be analyzed in depth in the following two chapters.

¹³⁵ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 85-87.

Chapter 3: Analysis A –Beekeeping in Medieval Ireland

The texts in this corpus of bee-literature provide a lot of information on the shape and place given to bees in medieval Irish society. This section will delve into detail about what one can conclude about the practice of beekeeping in medieval Ireland based on the corpus. Although most of the literary texts from the corpus will be mentioned here, the vast majority of the information in this section is taken from *Bechbretha*. This is simply because of the large amount of information it provides on the daily business and problems of beekeeping. This section will begin by examining the basics of where bees could be found and how they were kept, before delving into the more specific information on the problems and risks that beekeepers faced in medieval Ireland. In looking at the beehives, this section will also look at how and when bee-products were exchanged in Irish society, as well as what people were involved in this transaction.

3.a. The Basics: Bees in Society and the Wild

The literature above makes it clear that bees, honey, wax, and the plethora of products that stemmed from them, existed in medieval Ireland. Hagiographical texts often attribute this introduction of bees in Ireland to the early saints.¹³⁶ The ‘Life of St. Modomnóc’, and the note on his feast day in *Féilire Óenguso*, shows a belief that bees were brought to Ireland from Wales or Britain. However, while it could be that the monasteries introduced a much larger scale of bee-

¹³⁶ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 109.

keeping to medieval Ireland, linguistic evidence suggests that honeybees both existed and were being kept in Ireland long before the arrival of Christianity.¹³⁷ For example, ‘the Irish language has native words for ‘bee’ (*bech*), ‘honey’ (*mil*), and ‘mead’ (*mid*).’¹³⁸ This also shows that bee-products were being used in Ireland before the arrival of Christianity.

What is also clear is that they could be found both within the boundaries of medieval Irish society and beyond them. The presence of bees in the wild must be a given since they did not just appear out of nowhere on a farm in Ireland one day. In order for bees to have existed in a domesticated environment, people first needed to find a way to keep them there. Before the use of man-made hives, people in medieval Ireland would have collected wild honey from hives found in forests and other natural environments.¹³⁹ Over time, however, bee populations were relocated to more domestic environments and a process of domestication could be gleaned in the evolution of hive construction on private properties that were kept either in the nearby orchards or in the farmyards.¹⁴⁰

The existence of domestic beekeeping in medieval Irish society could be seen in the story of St. Gobnat and her Hive. When raiders arrived and threatened the town of Ballyvourney, Gobnat saved them with her beehive.¹⁴¹ She was said to have stood outside holding a soft, elastic ‘square box, or beehive, full of holes, at the sides’ to allow the bees to come and go with ease.¹⁴² The story then not only described Gobnat as holding a man-made beehive, but also provided a

¹³⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 109.

¹³⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 109.

¹³⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 110.

¹⁴⁰ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 111.

¹⁴¹ O’Hanlon, p. 464.

¹⁴² O’Hanlon, p. 464.

rather detailed description of the hive itself. As the abbess of her monastery, the description suggested that bees were not only commonplace on monastic grounds, but that they were deliberately kept within the boundaries of society. That being said, considering the late date of O'Hanlon's account of the story, the exact shape and features of Gobnat's box may not have reflected the artificial hives used by medieval beekeepers. O'Hanlon's account of the tale cannot be traced back to a medieval text and, as such, it is perhaps more reflective of nineteenth century beekeeping practices than medieval ones. Regardless of that, however, the story is important because it showed that bees were being kept in man-made hives at medieval monasteries, rather than only being found in the wild. The description of Gobnat demonstrated that some process of bee-domestication had been achieved and that bees were being kept in society by the Middle Ages.

In bringing bees and beehives into the realm of society, bee-products also became more readily available and accessible to the people of medieval Irish society. This transition was then demonstrative of how important these bee-products were in medieval Ireland. *Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí*, 'Manchin's Song', echoed this idea: in the song, the Hermit stated that the things he would take with him to set up his hermitage was 'Fragrant leek,/ Hens, salmon, trout, bees.'¹⁴³ This text demonstrates how integral bees were to the medieval diet and lifestyle, particularly for monks. Of all the creatures he would need to survive on his own in the wilderness, this monk put bees foremost among them. The fact that he mentioned bringing them with him into the wild

¹⁴³ Bratton, p. 14.

showed that, by the time of this poem, there was an established program of beekeeping in society.

Bees were important to members of society because of the products they made – the necessity of these products in society perhaps pushed them initially to bring the bees into society. However, once in society, the existence of bees in human society was not without its difficulties.

3.b. Bee Problems: flying trespass and hive distribution

One prevailing theme in *Bechbretha* is the idea of flying trespass. Within the community, animals, including bees, wander and graze the land and, in doing so, they were known to trespass onto another farmer's land. In the eyes of medieval Irish lawyers, the problem with this was that the animals were seen as taking, or rather stealing, the resources of people other than their owners. That being said, normal animal trespass was not a difficult problem to solve. Given that this was likely a frequent occurrence between people with neighbouring land, the solution required the owner of the animals to swear a fore-pledge or *tairgille*, instead of constantly fining each other for the damages wrecked by their livestock. The fore-pledge 'was given in advance by each participant to guarantee to the others that he would fence his land to a satisfactory standard and that he would pay fines for any trespasses committed by his animals across the fences he had constructed.'¹⁴⁴ When it came to bees, however, the typical fore-pledge lost its meaning and purpose: when bees trespassed onto other people's land, they did so in the air rather than on the ground. Their flying-trespass could not be fixed by a guarantee to neighbours that fences would

¹⁴⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 100.

be constructed or other structures put in place to prevent their wandering. Instead, a different type a fore-pledge was needed to ensure balance and justice in the community.

The legal tract stipulated that the bees, and their owners, were granted three years of immunity in the eyes of the law during which they are allowed to graze anywhere and on anyone's land without any serious consequences.¹⁴⁵ Starting in the fourth year, the swarms that separated from the original hive were given to the four nearest neighbouring lands.¹⁴⁶ The first swarm to separate was given to the nearest neighbour with the best produce, and the following swarms were given to the others in order of proximity and quality of produce.¹⁴⁷ This process of division saturated the neighbourhood with bees and beehives and replaced the need to swear the traditional fore-pledges. The tract explained that 'every land which obtains its due is not entitled to fore-pledge or fines, for that is the case of a few defeating many according to Irish law.'¹⁴⁸ The purpose of this system, in other words, was to put all parties involved on equal footing, once all the neighbours had bees, everyone's bees were grazing on everyone's land.¹⁴⁹ It no longer

¹⁴⁵ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁶ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁷ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 63; the text also stipulates here that during the swarming period, the neighbour who is going to receive the divided swarm has the responsibility of keeping watch over the hive to ensure that it does not escape. If it does disappear, then the neighbouring lands do get the swarm and have to wait another three years.

¹⁴⁸ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 65; the fines mentioned here are the swarms, meaning that once given a swarm equanimity has been achieved and no one is owed or entitled to any other payment for the grazing of bees on anyone's land.

¹⁴⁹ Moreover, in distributing the swarms to their neighbours, the neighbours are being provided an even better form of compensation than bee goods. Rather than paying recompense to their neighbours for having the bees roam all over their land, the original bee-owner provides them with the source of these goods. Rather than giving them individual products, the original hive owner gifts his neighbours with a hive, with the ability to produce as many products as they are able for as long as their hives survive. Since the punishment is calibrated to the severity of the crime, the higher nature of this gift, of this compensation, shows how severe flying-trespass was in medieval Irish society.

mattered *whose* bees were grazing on *whose* land, because everyone had bees and it was near impossible to distinguish between them.

3.c. Tracking Errant Hives and the Distribution of Bee-Goods

The problem of, and solution to, flying trespass then shed light on how beehives were acquired and spread throughout individual communities. As seen above, one way to acquire a beehive was through a neighbour, by living in a neighbourhood where at least one person kept bees. But how else were beehives spread throughout the communities of medieval Ireland? It appears from the legal tract that people in medieval Ireland also tracked bees that grazed on or near their property back to their hives. *Bechbretha* shed light on a number of different tracking situations. These included tracking stray swarms. Amid the various instances of tracked beehives, the legal text emphasized how often the community members were unaware of the existence and movement of the bees on their properties. For example, it was possible that a swarm split from a hive, without the owner of the hive noticing, and this swarm settled on someone else's land – in this situation it was possible that neither party was aware of the bee's existence and/or movement.¹⁵⁰

While the specifics of each situation differs in protocol, in general, the rule in such situations was that the produce of the tracked hive had to be split three ways: a third went to the holding where the swarm settled, a third to the tracker, and a third to the owner of the original

¹⁵⁰ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 73, 77-85.

hive.¹⁵¹ In cases where no one had a claim to the found swarm, i.e. on unshared and unowned land, the person who found the swarm kept it, although he still had to give a third of its produce to the local church, and a third to the chief of his kindred.¹⁵² Both of these were the typical dues commoners paid to their family and church. The final third of produce went to the tracker.¹⁵³ A very important part of this section was the meaning behind the transfer of bee-goods: the quantities and division of goods reflected the social obligations people had within their community. In the last instance given, for example, the person who found the swarm is equally obliged to the person who tracked the hive as he is to family and church. The transfer of bee-goods between these people is physical evidence of these relationships.

So far, it is clear that bees in medieval Irish society could be found both within society, being kept on domesticated land and farmsteads, as well as in the wild. When bees were within society, the ownership of beehives was one that came with a heavy burden of social responsibility to neighbours, kinsmen, and the church. It was a relationship marked by the transfer of bee goods produced by the hives. These products were considered to be important enough economically that they also constituted as fine payments for any social or legal wrongdoings committed by the bees.

¹⁵¹ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 79.

¹⁵² Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 85.

¹⁵³ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 85.

3.d. Bee injuries

Bechbretha went into a bit of detail about the process for injuries caused by the bees, suggesting that beestings happened often enough that it needed to be addressed in the legal text. In general, the punishment for beestings required the victim to swear an oath that the bee did not die in the stinging and the required the owner to give the victim an amount of honey that fitted or was proportionate to the injury.¹⁵⁴ This meant that different amounts of honey would be required depending on what the afflicted part of the body was.¹⁵⁵ The only exception to this rule occurred when the injured part of the body was the eye. In this situation, it was not one bee, but an entire hive that was destroyed as punishment.¹⁵⁶ This punishment was significant because it shows that, in situations where the eyes were harmed, the crime or injury was so severe that compensation in the form of an offering of honey was insufficient.

In the realm of medieval Irish law, the face was a very important part of the body for a king or high-ranking person because it was associated with their status. This was even seen in the word for the word for honour-price, *lóg n-enech*, which literally translated to ‘face price’.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 67.

¹⁵⁵ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 67; Ciara Crawford, *Disease and Illness in Medieval Ireland* (Maynooth: The National University of Ireland, 2011), p. 274, here the author mentions that other medical legal texts mention that the compensation owed to victims for injuries was not only based on their status but also on where the injury occurred on the body.

¹⁵⁶ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 69; the legal text says that this judgement is based on the case of Congal the one-eyed who was king at Tara until he was blinded by a bee sting in the eye. Congal then charged the person who owned the bee with the crime of his injury (71). The legal judgement passed in Congal’s situation was that the whole hive, or the multitude, was responsible for the actions of the one bee (71). And so, a hive would be chosen at random, and this would be destroyed in order to pay for the crimes of the one bee. This idea of the many being responsible for the actions of one appears in other areas of medieval Irish law (71). For example, it is the judgement passed for when a person is killed in a crowd and guilt cannot be associated with any one person, or when a carcass is found among a group of dogs, pigs, or cattle – in all these situations, the responsibility falls on the group (71).

¹⁵⁷ Crawford, p. 37.

Damage, scarring, or injury to the visible parts of the body often led to a decrease in a person's societal value, and so injuries to the face, which was an especially visible limb, were often a much more serious offence than injuries to other parts of the body.¹⁵⁸ Especially if that person was a king, a blemished face resulted in the loss of their position since a king was supposed to be unblemished.¹⁵⁹ Since the bee-sting to an eye led to a loss of livelihood, equanimity in the eyes of the law, or at least *Bechbretha*, was only achieved when the owner of the offending hive suffered an injury to his own livelihood. The destruction of one of his hives meant a serious cut to his end-of-year production of bee goods. By destroying one of his hives, a balance was met where both parties' livelihoods had been brought down.

On the other hand, if the bee died as a result of its sting, regardless of the afflicted member, *Bechbretha* saw the punishment as having been paid by the bee itself and no further compensation was required.¹⁶⁰ This showed that, to a certain extent, the bees were viewed as being responsible for their actions. Since their death was viewed as payment for the punishment, bees were viewed as having some sort of value inherent to their very being, to their very existence, rather than merely resulting from their work. It should also be noted that all of these punishments only occurred if the bees harmed people who had no intention of performing any illegal action towards them. In situations in which people intended to harm, destroy, or steal the hive, bees are legally immune for any injuries they may cause.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Crawford, p. 247-248; the author quotes a passage from a text that says ““Graver and more violent (?) is the raising [of a blemish in the face]”” (247). This text shows “that superficial injuries to the face and forehead are seen to be dangerous” (248).

¹⁵⁹ Crawford, p. 269.

¹⁶⁰ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 67.

¹⁶¹ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 67.

3.e. Theft of Beehives

In cases of theft of beehives, the severity of the act, and hence the amount of compensation owed to the owners of the hive, depended on where exactly the hive was located on the land. For instance, the theft of bees that were kept in a courtyard or garden would ‘incur equal penalty with household goods,’ while bees stolen from a green, the area around a church where you could still hear its bells, had a penalty equal to that of the theft of a nobleman’s livestock; and a beehive stolen from outside of the green brought a punishment equal to that of small livestock.¹⁶² This suggested that the legal value ascribed to bees in the medieval Irish neighbourhood was flexible.

In the description above, the value of the beehive is clearly linked to the space they inhabited, and the value of this space appears to have come in turn from the people who inhabited those spaces. The courtyards or gardens were areas close to or in the middle of domestic dwellings; they were places inhabited by people and the objects they possessed. These places were therefore both more closely linked with the idea of individual possession and easier to watch over and guard. Bees found in proximity to these households had a value placed as equal to that of inanimate objects found. However, bees stolen from beyond that, from religious grounds, or within hearing distance of a church, was a greater offence. Rather than being associated with the mundane lives of commoners and peasants, this location was associated with higher powers and figures in society. Though it was further removed from human eyes, the land within hearing distance from a church was guarded and watched over by God. The sacred nature

¹⁶² Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 85-87; the legal tract qualifies the nobleman’s livestock as a heifer or a milk cow and the small animals as little lambs, pigs, calves, or kids.

of the land was reflected in the punishment, which put the bees on the same level of not only living creatures, but ones owned by nobles. This distinction was important because not only did the bees suddenly gain life in the eyes of the law, but they also got status. *Bechbretha* then showed how the value of bees was a complicated affair that was not necessarily inherent to them but based more on external factors.

The corpus of bee literature then provides a plethora of information on bees in medieval Irish society. The various texts demonstrate that the integration of bees in human society is not without its difficulties but was necessary because of the importance the bee-goods had for society. However, the role and value of the bee in society was not only a practical affair. The literature reveals the various ways in which the bees acted as an expression of a culture's values and beliefs.

Chapter 4: Analysis B. – What does all this tell us about Medieval Irish Society?

In addition to providing information about bee-keeping practices in medieval Ireland, the corpus of bee literature also provides information about medieval Irish society. In many of the texts, the bee, and the bee-products, have a symbolic function that operate on a number of levels. First of all, the bee works within the realm of society to represent the importance of social unity in a community. Secondly, the bee acts as a mirror of the morality and social values upheld by medieval Irish society. Thirdly, the bee occupies a liminal position between society and the wild, between realms of the human and the supernatural, in its representation of the hero. Finally, the bee symbolizes God and the divine, occupying the realm of the supernatural. In all three places, the bee provides an outlet to explore the society that depicted it.

The bee functioned on the human and cosmic levels, as well as acted as a go-between. In all places, however, the bee appears to represent the good, the high and mighty. This section will delve into all four areas the image of the bee operated, it will explore what the bees tell us about both human communities and their relationship to the natural world and the supernatural beings they see it as infused with. The following analysis will begin in society and progress outward, getting further removed from society with each section.

4.a. The Bee in society: relationships within the community

Within society, the bee in medieval Irish literature is a symbol of cohesion and harmony. In discussions of medieval Irish society, the bee can represent relationships within the tribe, represent the bonds that forged communities, and the inter-personal nature of society. The bee demonstrates the different ways in which the members of medieval Irish communities are united and brought together.

For one, there were many different types of communities, or ways of categorizing society into groups, in medieval Irish law.¹⁶³ The *túath* mentioned earlier, is one, but the one that is used in *Bechbretha* is the neighbourhood. Medieval Irish law saw the neighbourhood, a group of neighbours, as ‘a consequence of kinship: men partitioned the lands of their ancestors and thus created in the distribution of their lands an expression of their kinship.’¹⁶⁴ The traditional inheritance system of dividing properties among all heirs led to the formation of communities of

¹⁶³ Charles-Edwards, p. 100.

¹⁶⁴ Charles-Edwards, p. 100; that is not to say that all neighbours were kinsmen though.

neighbours, but forming a neighbourhood was also a deliberate legal act.¹⁶⁵ The neighbourhood, or *comaitches*, is ‘a special legal regime entered into by neighbours in order to facilitate harmonious relations.’¹⁶⁶ This type of community is thus rooted in law and, as such, the rules that structured neighbourly interactions and bound the community together can be found in *Bretha Comaitchesa* or the ‘Judgements of the Neighbourhood’. This legal tract provides a model or a code of behaviour and practice that members can rely on to structure the day-to-day relationships and interactions. It then not only shows the importance of the community in medieval Ireland, but more specifically, that the whole purpose of these communities was to create harmony among groups of people.

The bee represents this importance placed on the community and shows how medieval Irish society saw individualistic thinking as harmful to the cohesion of the community. From the beginning, *Bechbretha* echoes this sentiment by placing the problem of bees squarely into the realm of individual ownership: societal problems related to beekeeping arise when only one person owns bees. The idea was that individual ownership of a beehive created tension that fractured the peace of the neighbourhood. When only one person in a community owned bees, there was no way of ensuring peace between him and his neighbours since the typical system when it came to livestock, the swearing of typical fore-pledges, did not apply to beekeeping.¹⁶⁷ The normal rules that created a harmonious community of humans and animals did not apply to beekeeping individuals. In other words, when an individual member of a neighbourhood owned

¹⁶⁵ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 32; Charles-Edwards, p. 100.

¹⁶⁶ Charles-Edwards, p. 100-101.

¹⁶⁷ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 51; this refers to very first line of the legal tract and the specific quote is ‘Most difficult among fore-pledges is a fore-pledge for bees.’

bees, the bee almost adopted a human place in society and came to be seen as a thief. The bees were seen as stealing the goods of other neighbours' properties to create the honey for their hive and only the individual owner of the hive benefitted from that.

This perception of the bee stems from how the act of pollination was understood to work in medieval Irish society, which is best exemplified in the poem *Cétamon*. It says that 'bees of little strength carry a foot-load/ – flowers were reaped.'¹⁶⁸ The poem describes the bees as carrying the pollen by the 'foot-load' which suggests that, regardless of the early Irish understandings of the whats and hows of pollination, when the process was done, the bees gather what they need from the flowers in their feet to then take it back to the hive. Much like thieves then, bees trespass onto the property of other people, take as much as they are able to carry, and bring it all back to their den. Even the imagery of the bee carrying its foot load parallels the thief in the idea of grabbing what is not strictly theirs to take. The act of gathering pollen is then viewed in the eyes of medieval Irish society as theft.

Furthermore, the poem describes this process as '*bochtai bláith*', which is translated into English as the 'flowers were reaped'.¹⁶⁹ In using the word '*bochtai*' (often translated to mean 'poverty') to describe the relationship between the flower and the bee, the poem shows that the process of pollination is also thought to create a deficiency in the flower.¹⁷⁰ This can be because the bee's activity is likened to the idea of harvesting. The bees harvest raw goods from the crops and then transform them into another good when brought back to their hives. However, because

¹⁶⁸ Carney, p. 45.

¹⁶⁹ While there are other ways of interpreting this sentence, this is the translation by James Carney: 'Bees of little strength carry/ a foot-load – flowers were reaped;' (Carney, 45). This translation can also be found in the online Old Irish Dictionary, see eDIL s.v. boingid.

¹⁷⁰ eDill, s.v. bochta.

they were harvesting from a different neighbour's property, they were essentially stealing the harvest from another property. In this problem, the bee is symbolic of the neighbour. Its movement across the bounds of its owner's property onto that of a neighbour's is regarded as the same as the person going onto the neighbour's land and taking what is not theirs to have. Bees create a deficiency in the neighbour's livelihood to make a surplus for the individual who owns them. Therefore, the individual ownership of bees created contention in medieval Irish society.

The solution to the problem of flying trespass, and the friction it caused at the group level, was to turn a beekeeping individual into a beekeeping community. *Bechbretha* laid out a program of hive distribution, requiring an individual beekeeper to distribute stray swarms throughout his neighbourhood until they became a community of beekeepers. This flooded the neighbourhood with bees and made it impossible to distinguish one person's bees from another. Since it was impossible to distinguish the individual ownership of the bees, the idea of the bees as stealing the harvest of neighbours no longer worked. For example, even in the three years that first individual beekeeper in the community had the bees all to himself, everyone allowed the bees to enter onto their property and take what they needed without faulting or harming the bees. They willingly gave of their own because they knew that they benefit from that hive. The neighbourhood then becomes a shared environment for the bees to graze, it becomes a communal land and endeavor. For instance, during the swarming season, everyone who was to receive a hive would have had to spend some time watching and guarding it to ensure the errant swarm did

not leave the hive.¹⁷¹ This created a unified, cohesive community wherein members of the community are brought together to bond and interact with each other through their bees.

The anonymity and group focus of the hive then parallels the effect that having them had on society. The bee's relationship to its hive also symbolizes what medieval Irish society saw as the ideal community. Bees give everything they have and work to produce to the hive, the larger community. They forgo any sense of individual property, keeping nothing to themselves, and instead wholly embrace the unified group identity. Each hive is a community unto itself and, perhaps as such, is an example of how communities ought to be.

Therefore, in *Bechbretha*, the bee represents the social cohesion, the individual anonymity that made a community harmonious. When the individual identity is stronger than that of the group, tension occurs. However, when the individual cogs of a clock stop fighting over the limits of their personal property and simply fulfill their purpose, they operate on another, higher level. They tell time.

4.b. The Bee as Mirror of Society: morality and social values

Apart from its operation as a symbol within medieval Irish society, the bee also acted a mirror of society's beliefs and morals. The bee's ability to reflect the values, the ideas of a social and moral good, occurred in the various annalistic sources, through the references to the bee

¹⁷¹ Kelly and Charles-Edwards, *Bechbretha*, p. 63.

products: the references to honey and candles, in particular, only makes sense when analyzed as a literary device.

For one, the connection between bees and a moral good was seen in the references to honey. In 718.7, the Annals of Ulster recorded that ‘a shower of honey rained upon Othan Bec, a shower of blood upon the Foss of Laigin. Hence Niall Frosach who was born at that time is so named.’¹⁷² A similar record is found later that century in AU 764.15: ‘Three showers fell in Crith Muiredaig in Inis Eogan, i.e. a shower of pure silver, a shower of wheat, and a shower of honey.’¹⁷³ Since the likelihood of honey raining down from the sky is rather small, the shower of honey should be regarded in a symbolic manner. The reference from AU 718 could refer to a political event, however, this seems unlikely given that Othan Bec was in co. Donegal and so far removed from Leinster.¹⁷⁴ Instead, it is probably better to take it as a comment on how these places fared at the time leading up the annal itself, a remark on their general condition and state. The shower of honey suggests that Othan Bec was blessed that year, perhaps it had a good harvest or any other kind of prosperity, while the shower of blood symbolizes the hardships suffered by Laigin, perhaps a famine or some other event that causes large numbers of deaths. It is then the comparison between the two showers that works to connote or give meaning to the symbol of honey here. The shower of honey suggests a connection with the good, victorious, or righteous.

¹⁷² Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 173.

¹⁷³ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 219.

¹⁷⁴ Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae: an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes* (Dublin, 1910), <http://research.ucc.ie/doi/locus/O>, p. 2346.

The AU 764 reference emphasizes this connection between honey and moral good even further in that the three different showers were all connected with the idea of wealth in connection with the land (and perhaps society, because of the reference to silver). This reference to the agricultural prosperity in Inis Eogan was also political in nature. In medieval Ireland, there was a native concept called *fír flathemon* or the ‘truth of the ruler’.¹⁷⁵ It was ‘a complicated concept, but at its heart lies the belief that the ruler is a sacral figure and the justice of his rule embedded in nature to such a degree that any deviation in his moral standing will directly affect the cosmic order.’¹⁷⁶ The note in AU 764 is accompanied by a poem that expanded on the three showers by saying that they ‘fell from heaven for love of Niall.’¹⁷⁷ The poem explains the political prowess of the leader in question and his ability to follow through on his pledges. In other words, the three showers, including honey, were not a record of an agricultural anomaly, but rather a testament to the fairness and the truth of the king of that part of Ireland in that year. Knowing this, both references to the shower of honey not only suggests this land was fortunate that year, but that more specifically that this prosperity is related to their leaders’ ability to bring about peace with words, to be political judges rather than military enforcers. They symbolized the king’s moral prowess and upstanding virtue. In this sense, the annalistic references to honey

¹⁷⁵ Stacey, *Dark Speech*, p. 84.

¹⁷⁶ Stacey, p. 84-85; “In origin the idea is almost certainly pre-Christian, although the enthusiasm with which such ideas were taken up and embraced by Carolingian kingship theorists among others shows that it was one that could easily be adapted to the new religious circumstances.”

¹⁷⁷ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 219 (line 2); the poem that accompanies the annal entry for 764.15 goes on to explain a particular political event that merited the association of the showers with the ruler – “The three showers of Ard Uilinne/Fell from heaven for love of Niall:/ a shower of silver, a shower of wheat,/ and a shower of honey./ Fergal’s manly son/ Was dubbed for this among warriors:/ Since everyone came to follow them/ Niall of the Showers is his name./ A hundred hostages from each province/ was what Niall exacted;/ Daring was the noble pledge he gave/ To exact them three times.”

enhanced this idea of *fír flathemon*. It symbolized the idea of good rulership and provides insight into what this may have entailed to medieval Irish society.

When it comes to the references to candles, the Annals appear to be pointing out virtues possessed by the upstanding characters or members of society. For example, AU 1165 listed a few people, including ‘Paitin Ua Aedba, the candle of all Ui-Ceinnslaigh, [who] were killed by M[a]c Craith Ua Mordhai and by Laichsi for evil causes.’¹⁷⁸ The reference to a person being a candle indicates that the person was a pillar among his people, a person who represented all the good and virtuous behaviour upheld by that community. A candle in a very real sense brings light to the world at a time when that world would otherwise, by its very nature, be dark. The candle of a community lit up society with their good and virtuous behaviour. This sense of the word candle is emphasized by the inclusion of evil in the passage. The good of Paitin, the candle of his people, is brightened by the evil characterization of those who did him in, by entering the idea of in the mention of his death, the author of this particular annal highlights the inherent good of the candle. This is further emphasized if the candle is made from beeswax since, as mentioned earlier, these were the best kinds of candles. These references to candles also show us what traits early medieval society may have valued, since the pillars are often of ‘championship and hospitality.’¹⁷⁹

These candle references bring together two key aspects of early medieval Ireland: hospitality and championship. The former ‘was a vital cultural institution in early medieval Ireland, for which every free law-abiding individual, ‘regardless of his rank or profession’, was

¹⁷⁸ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 147.

¹⁷⁹ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, p. 147, 171, 209, 235.

eligible.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, in medieval Irish saga tales, championship referred to the best warrior in a given group. The champion was a distinguished figure in the literature, which could be seen in the tradition of the *curadmír*, the Champion's portion, the practice of allowing the best warrior at a feast to have the first portion of meat.¹⁸¹ The presence and honour given to the champion showed the importance placed on a person's abilities as a warrior in medieval Ireland. The fact that these people mentioned in the annals were the candle of both of these traits suggested they were very highly regarded. Not only did they have both traits that made for a well-rounded noble figure, but they excelled at them.

The annalistic references then showed how the bee and its many products were highly regarded and associated with the idea of the good character and moral standing of those in society. The fact that they occur regularly in the annals indicates that this was not only a result of the whims of particular authors, but perhaps an internalized aspect of larger medieval Irish culture. At the very least, these examples of the bee's products in literature showed which qualities medieval Irish society upheld as examples of the good in society.

4.c. The Bee as Hero: in-between natural and supernatural

The bee as a literary symbol then operated within the limits of society as both a symbol of community and a mirror of the values and morals upheld by this community. However, the

¹⁸⁰ Peters, p. 85; for more on the idea of hospitality in medieval Ireland, see Catherine O' Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland, 900-1500* (Dublin: 2004).

¹⁸¹ B.K. Martin, "The Medieval Irish stories about Bricriu's Feast and Mac Dathó's Pig," *Parergon* vol. 10 (1992), p. 72; the motif is seen here in relation to the saga tale of Bricriu's Feast, but it is also mentioned elsewhere.

bee's activity was also associated with the space beyond the realm of society. The bee going about its activities in the wild is seen in the nature and hermit poetry of medieval Ireland. In one particular poem, though, the bee was not only described as being in the wild, but as actively travelling between society and the wilderness. This unnamed bee poem described the bee as 'mak[ing] a great journey in the sun,' and 'boldly [flitting] into the wide plain,' before 'safely join[ing] his brethren in the hive.'¹⁸² On a surface level, this stanza paints a vividly real picture of the bee simply bumbling about its business outside of society. The more interesting aspect of this poem is that the bee, who was a pillar of the good within society and whose occupation frequently pushed them into the liminal space of the wilderness, symbolizes the hero.

For one, the language used in this poem, particularly when it came to the descriptions of the bee, could be associated with heroic figures from the saga tales. The main character of this unnamed poem was a robust adventurer who journeyed from the safety of the hive into the wide-open wilderness before returning to its fellows and society. In this sense, the poem also differed from the others mentioned above in that the object of the bee's search was omitted. This suggested that it was the journey rather the end goal that was the focus of the poem, much like in stories about heroes. This idea was further reinforced by the depiction of the bee as robust rather than weak. For example, the poem described the bee as nimble, bold, and going on a 'great journey'. In the original Old Irish, *daith*, the word that the author translated as nimble, also meant 'swift, nimble, prompt, active, ready;'¹⁸³ and the word for 'great journey', *uide*, was defined as 'a journey or march,' or also as a metaphor for the 'the great journey through life to

¹⁸² Dillon, p. 153-154.

¹⁸³ eDIL s.v. 1. *daith*.

eternity.¹⁸⁴ The descriptive language used by the poet not only turned the little apian into a strong and able-bodied character, but also one who engaged in the journeys characteristic of heroes.

The bee's story essentially followed the structure of the hero's journey: it ventured beyond the confines of its community and underwent a journey (though the transformative aspect is not explicitly referred to here) where it roamed around the realm of the wilderness, before returning back to its home and society.¹⁸⁵ The bee gains something from its journey into the wilderness. Much like heroes who return to society with treasure, often in the form of a wife or cattle, the bee gains nectar and pollen in the wild. Both the bee and the hero set out on their journey outside society with a purpose, an object that guides their quest, and they return to society with their prize.

By turning the bee into a heroic figure, the poem assigned it the high-status and honoured positions typically associated with the heroes, including its relationship with both the wilderness and society. In medieval Irish society, the ability to travel into the wilderness or even simply to leave the tribe was a privilege available to very few people. It was an activity reserved to kings, poets, and warriors and puts a bit of perspective on the bee's travels. The bee's ability to travel into the wilderness, or perhaps the inability to prevent bees from travelling, is different from other animals kept on farmsteads. In almost all other instances, animals were not allowed to travel beyond the confines of the farmstead and, even if the animals wanted to wander, people

¹⁸⁴ eDIL s.v. uide.

¹⁸⁵ Scott Allison and George Goethals, "The Hero's Transformation," in *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, edited by Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 380-381.

could prevent them doing so by building enclosures. The bee's ability to wander is unique among both the animals and humans in society and it puts bees in the ranks of the few humans who can travel. The hero often appeared to sit at the crossroads between being a hallmark of the interior of society while also being closely connected to the otherworldly, supernatural realm found beyond the confines of society.

The hero's special status only existed within the cultural unit but, as a hero, he also had the ability to venture beyond the confines of the known.¹⁸⁶ It was often his travel into the unknown that made the hero so special in the eyes of society since, particularly in the realm of literature, the wilderness was where encounters with supernatural beings happened. It was in this liminal space of the literary world that the inhabitants of this world and those of the otherworld converged. This means that the bee, in completing its heroic travels into the wilderness, was also placed in a much closer position to the supernatural – in this case covering both pre-Christian supernatural creatures and the Christian God – than human beings.

The bee is then special because it symbolizes the figure and journey of the hero. The bee's ability to travel, and its place in the liminal space of the wild, connects it to the supernatural figures populating the otherworld. Additionally, as often happens with heroes, the bee ventures into this otherworld filled with the supernatural. Its affiliation with the supernatural is one thing that lifts the hero up in society's esteem and gives the bee a high standing in the

¹⁸⁶ For more information on this, see Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and heroes of the Celts* (London: Methuen, 1949), where she talks about the hero within and outside of society. While in the poem, the bee seems to be more of a hero in society, if the bee lived in the wild it might more closely resemble the hero outside society. Though not included as part of this discussion because this is not the space occupied by the bee in this poem, it might be interesting to not only examine the connection between the bee and the hero outside society, but also see what implications this connection has on the image of the bee. In other words, what symbolic function was associated with the bee outside of society and how does this relate to that of the bee in society?

realm of society. In other words, the bee has a high standing in society, but its high status does not stem from society's conference alone. As will be seen in the following section, the bee's value is also inherent, it exists without society.

4.d. The Bee as Supernatural: symbol of God

Finally, furthest away from the sphere of human society, the bee as a symbol is also associated with the supernatural and ideas of the Divine. This connection is, first of all, seen in the Old Irish word for the sound produced by bees, which is understood to have supernatural connotations. In Old Irish, the buzzing or droning noise emitted by bees is *dord*, a word which is also found in reference to many other types of noises.¹⁸⁷ The Old Irish dictionary mentions that *dord daimh* is a sound made by a stag and *dord fiansa* is a chant or refrain recited by the Fiana, the warrior band of Finn Mac Cumhaill.¹⁸⁸ While *dord* is used for sounds produced by other animals, its use for a chant begins to hint at the word's supernatural associations. This connection is made even more explicit in the *Dindsenchas*. Across the different editions of this text, the word is used to describe the sounds made by mermaids, where “the lines referring to the droning are *dord síd na sam-guba* (MD), *dord saimguba* (Rawl.) and *dord na samguba* (R.), translated by the respective editors as ‘doleful music of the fairy mounds’ (MD 4, 5), ‘burden of seamaids’ (Stokes 1892, 505) and ‘the mermaid’s melody’ (Stokes 1895, 32).”¹⁸⁹ These sounds are culturally significant because they are associated with beings of the otherworld. While it is

¹⁸⁷ eDIL s.v. 1. *dord*.

¹⁸⁸ eDIL s.v. 1. *dord*.

¹⁸⁹ Ranke de Vries, “the rosc Passage in the Recension C Dindsenchas of Port Láirge,” *Eriu* vol. 69 (2019), p. 69.

possible that *dord*, in this instance of mermaids, is not an example of a supernatural sound, but rather a mundane word used to describe the best approximation of a supernatural sound.

However, I believe the choice to use *dord* as a description of the supernatural sounds shows the word had supernatural affiliations: of all the sounds mermaids could make, and the words that could be used to describe these sounds, the author specifically chose the droning, buzzing sounds also made by bees. While *dord* can be a mundane sound, it is also one made by supernatural beings and it is a ritual noise made by the Fianna, a group that inhabited a liminal place in medieval Irish culture. Thus, *dord* brings together the ideas of music, noise and the supernatural – it shows how the word *dord* often has a religious, ritual, and supernatural understanding.

Bringing this back to the bees, the term for the sound they produce is infused with supernatural and religious meaning. This sheds light on the poem the ‘King and the Hermit’, which in the last stanza, calls ‘swarms of bees and chafers, the little musicians of the world’.¹⁹⁰ The poem then links the idea of religion, because of its provenance and the topic of the whole poem itself, to bees as musicians. Although the term ‘*dord*’ is absent from the poem, the fact that there is likely an existing connection between religion, music, and bees suggests that the bee’s music is meant to be understood in a supernatural way. This stanza suggests that the appearance of bees in nature is not only beautiful and organic, but particularly that their sound is an essential part of the sounds of summer itself. By focusing on the sense experience produced by the bees, the author suggests that this very noise is evidence of the blessed nature of this place, that bees are then instrumental to the divine harmony of the natural scene painted here.

¹⁹⁰ Meyer, *King and Hermit*, p. 18 (for Old Irish), 19 (for English translation).

The connection between bees and the divine is seen in a number of other texts mentioned in the corpus. Apart from its significance for the material culture of beekeeping, the story of ‘St. Gobnat and her Hive’ provides a glimpse into the symbolic importance of the bee, particularly its close connection with God. In this miracle story, the bees act as agents of religious protection. Gobnat prays to God for help from the raiders’ attack and one of two things happen: either the bees respond directly to her call for aid, or God responds by sending the bees. Regardless of which of these was the case, the bees are ultimately the ones who enacted the will of God by actively protecting Gobnat and her territory and attacking the raiders. This role occupied by the bee creates an image of a hierarchy of divinity wherein bees are placed as the intermediaries between the saint, already a holy figure in Christian society, and God. This is reaffirmed by the Saint herself through the fact that she brings the hive to the encounter. Gobnat must have seen the bees as closer to divinity than herself, as a more suitable conduit of the Divine will, and her belief is verified when they acted upon the Divine will. Also, the fact that the bees do not harm her (or appeared not to have harmed her) but do harm the raiders can also be seen as them recognizing her affinity with the Divine, thus elevating her position.

This connection between bees and God is further reaffirmed by the hermit in the ‘Hermit’s Song’. In this poem, the hermit lists bees among the livestock he would take with him if he were to start a hermitage.¹⁹¹ While practicality likely has much to do with that decision, there is perhaps a more symbolic meaning to this choice. For one, many of the animals listed by the hermit in that passage are associated with the ideas of God and wisdom. For example, hens

¹⁹¹ Murphy, “Manchán's Wish”, p. 30; Bratton, p. 14.

represent the maternal side of God the Father and the protective and caring attitude he has towards his creation.¹⁹² The salmon is a well-known symbol of supernatural knowledge in medieval Irish literature, particularly the Fenian cycle of literature.¹⁹³

Furthermore, through the candles produced by their wax, bees are associated with light. In Christian tradition, light is as symbolic as it is practical. It has a broad range of religious meaning and representation. From the Old testament and continuing into the New Testament, light is not only a symbol for God's presence and holiness, but it is also a primary symbol of Christ, who was "the illuminator of God to man, the 'Light of the world'".¹⁹⁴ Particularly when it comes to Christ, the symbol of light is often conveyed through the image of a candle.¹⁹⁵ In a very real sense then, candles allow us to see and move forward with our lives despite our poor eyesight, despite our natural handicap.

All of these animals mentioned in the poem are then symbols of the hermit's quest for knowledge and closeness with God. They are not only important sources of food for the hermit as he moves away from his religious community, but a symbol of the whole purpose of his hermitage.

Asceticism is built into the fabric of monastic organizations. If a person lives in a monastic community, lives according to their rigid rules, that person would be living a religious

¹⁹² Alva William Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith* (Wm B. Eerdman's Publishing, 2002), p. 6; an example of this can be seen in the New Testament, where "[God] is likened to a hen looking after her brood of chicks."

¹⁹³ Joseph Falaky Nagy, "Otter, Salmon, and Eel in Traditional Gaelic Literature," *Studia Celtica* vol. 20 (Jan. 1985), p. 127; the source mentions that salmon "serve[d] as the intermediary *par excellence* between this world and the otherworld for poets and other seekers of otherworldly knowledge." It also says that due to this special meaning, "the salmon (...) is more than just bodily nourishment," it is quite literally "'brain-food'" because eating the salmon gives people the supernatural wisdom.

¹⁹⁴ Steffler, p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ Steffler, p. 8.

life, a life that would get them closer to the sacred. The whole idea of doing this in a community of people who are also renouncing to varying degrees bodily goods and worldly pleasures, makes this path and lifestyle much easier for a person to adhere to. When separated from this community, when in the wild on a hermitage, it was perhaps much easier to succumb to the weaknesses of the body or forget the end goal of getting closer to the sacred. The hermit in the above poem probably also mentions bees to remind himself of the purpose behind the joint venture of monastic living. Bees are often viewed in the writings of many Christian authors as being closely associated with the sacred. For instance, the writings of St. Jerome and St. Augustine see bees and honey as symbols of Christ whereas those of Cyprian and Ambrose see bees as emblematic of the Virgin Mary.¹⁹⁶ Also, in the larger European tradition, the lifestyle of the bees, and the organization of the beehive, was upheld as the model for the monastic lifestyle.¹⁹⁷ The hermit's decision to take bees along with him in the poem is perhaps to have this symbol of the spirituality, of the sacred, that he is venturing away from the monastery to find. When alone and surrounded by nothing but nature, the bees are perhaps emblematic of the hermit's quest or journey to get closer to the sacred.

The bee then provides a way to further examine medieval Irish society from a symbolic point of view. The specifics of what the bee symbolizes in society are case-specific. The bee appears in a broad category of literature, encompassing many different genres, and, as such, what the bee represents or conveys depends on the context and circumstances it appears in. The bee

¹⁹⁶ Woolfson, p. 284; the link to the virgin Mary has to do with the fact that the medieval thinkers often thought that bees did not produce sexually and, as such, without sin. Because of this, bees, more so than any other animal, were associated with virtues such as chastity and virginity, and were viewed as the for the religious communities (284, 295).

¹⁹⁷ Woolfson, p. 284.

comments on social organizations, power, relationships, and belief in both secular and religious sectors of society. What stays constant throughout, however, is that the bee represents the good. In its various uses and meanings, the bee is always placed above humanity and stands for the behaviour society upheld and valued.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

The study of bees may begin on the farmstead, but it quickly crosses the boundaries of society, and turns into an analysis of human culture as a whole. There is a robust corpus of bee literature that came out of medieval Ireland, encompassing literary, legal, and medical texts of both religious and secular origins. Each of these texts shows a particular and unique image of the bee in medieval Irish society. When looked at closely, the detailed images of the bee are different in each text. That being said, when examined more generally, the texts display a number of similarities and parallels in the way they present the bee, and a pattern can be discerned among them all.

Overall, the bee symbolizes the good, it is painted as a figure who either stood for or directly brought the good. It may have wrought tension among people within the confines of the neighbourhood and brought a whole set of problems when it comes to beekeeping in society. However, it also gave the people of medieval Ireland access to honey and wax, products characterized as both essentials and luxuries, and a way to communicate their beliefs, values, and practices. For example, the movement of bee goods throughout members of neighbourhood was physical evidence of the obligations they had to each other and what connected them to each other. An analysis of the symbolism behind the image of the bee also shows how the bee

communicated ideas of religion, mythology, and society. The bee is both the good and a giver of goods – it is a symbol of the good in society and, through its activities, provided society with essential goods.

This understanding of the dual function of the image of the bee in literature provides an avenue through which to examine what was understood to comprise the good by the authors of medieval Ireland. What values and practices did they uphold, and in contrast, what behaviours did they put down? Therefore, the texts examined in this thesis, and the images they provide of bees, are important both for the history of beekeeping in medieval Ireland and for examining and analyzing medieval Irish society as a whole.

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