

## Manuscript Contexts of Early Irish Law Tracts : A Case Study on *Uraicecht Becc*

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The problem of manuscript contexts of medieval Irish texts is attracting more scholarly attention. Two conferences have been dedicated to the examination of the manuscripts *Lebor na hUidre*<sup>1</sup> and the Book of Ballymote<sup>2</sup> respectively, with an emphasis on the interaction between texts within their specific manuscript contexts. The fruit of another conference in 2011, recently published and aptly titled *Authorities and Adaptations*,<sup>3</sup> investigates the manuscript contexts of grammatical, legal, religious and narrative texts throughout the Irish tradition. The organizing principles and textual interrelationship in the Book of Leinster<sup>4</sup> have received a thorough analysis by Dagmar Schlüter.<sup>5</sup> Other celebrated studies include an investigation on Rawlinson B 502<sup>6</sup> by Edel Bhreathnach<sup>7</sup> and, from the Welsh side, an article on the White Book of Rhydderch<sup>8</sup> by Catherine McKenna.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Royal Irish Academy (RIA hereafter) MS 1229. The proceedings have been published as Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ed., *Lebor na hUidre, Codices Hibernenses Eximii 1* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> RIA MS 536.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden, eds., *Authorities and Adaptations: The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Trinity College Dublin (TCD hereafter) MS 1339.

<sup>5</sup> Dagmar Schlüter, *History or Fable? The Book of Leinster as a Document of Cultural Memory in Twelfth-Century Ireland*, Studien und Texte zur Keltologie 9 (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library (Bod. hereafter).

<sup>7</sup> Edel Bhreathnach, "The World of Medieval Irish Learning," in *Princes, Prelates and Poets in Medieval Ireland: Essays in Honour of Katharine Simms*, ed. Seán Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013): 389-405.

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 4 and MS 5.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine McKenna, "Reading with Rhydderch: Mabinogion Texts in Manuscript Context," in *Language and Power in the Celtic World: Papers from the Seventh Australian Conference of Celtic Studies*, ed. Anders

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It may seem somewhat surprising that the study in manuscript contexts has only recently received this new momentum, given that producing critical editions from manuscripts has always been a cornerstone in our discipline, and almost every student has done some description of the manuscript when editing texts. However, codicological and paleographical skills are often directed to constructing the stemma of the texts, not their context. Most editions of medieval Irish texts, following the methodologies established by textual criticism, explicitly or implicitly pursue a prototype from which all extant copies presumably descend. Whichever methodology adopted, the end product is fundamentally different from what the actual manuscript may have presented to a medieval reader: the original *mise-en-page* has been replaced by modern printing layout, and editors have to supply extra means to represent the relationship between the main text and its glosses, commentary and visual indices. And, when a text has been singled out for editing from a group or sequence of texts, the organizing principle of the group and of the codex has often become obscure.

Such editions aim more to answer how we should understand the text than how the text was perceived by the medieval readers or audience.<sup>10</sup> And we should not forget that the medieval readers were not passive recipients of information; many of them were also author, commentator, compiler and scribe who contributed to the transmission and transformation of texts.<sup>11</sup> Recent scholarship has revealed how diverse and critical are the ways in which medieval

Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2011): 205-30.

<sup>10</sup> For an insightful discussion of the roles of the readers/audience in a secondary oral environment in medieval Ireland, see Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History 33 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), chap. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Murray, "The Reworking of Old Irish Narrative Texts in the Middle Irish Period: Contexts and Motivations," in *Authorities and Adaptations: The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2014): 291-306, at 292-293.

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literati understood and treated their texts,<sup>12</sup> and manuscript contexts provide abundant clues to their intellectual backgrounds and activities that transcend the modern division of disciplines and genres. It is only in recent decades that scholars have started paying attention to the making of compilations in medieval Ireland. As observed by Edel Bhreathnach,

scholars, scribes and illuminators . . . were not simply antiquarians and not randomly choosing texts, but when compiling substantial miscellanies worked to a plan that was often dictated by their sources, the wishes of patrons or their own scholarly concerns."<sup>13</sup>

From this viewpoint, the manuscript is more than a physical carrier of texts—it is by itself an elaborate construction that conveys message about its scribes and readers through the arrangement and layout of texts.

When speaking of the manuscript context of a text, we are mainly concerned with four aspects; the first one is the social and historical background of the manuscript itself, such as the identity and affiliation of the scribe(s), the time, location and reason of making the manuscript. The second is the visual layout of the text in the manuscript, such as how it is located on a page, what visual tools have been used to indicate its structure and relationship with the neighboring texts. The third is the textual layers, such as the

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<sup>12</sup>For instance, Abigail Burnyeat, "Córugud and Compilatio in Some Manuscripts of Táin Bó Cúailnge," in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. Brian Ó Catháin and Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009): 356-74; Pádraig Ó Néill, "The Latin Colophon to the 'Táin Bó Cúailnge' in the Book of Leinster: A Critical View of Old Irish Literature," *Celtica* 23 (1999): 269-75; Erich Poppe, "Reconstructing Medieval Irish Literary Theory: The Lesson of *Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coise*," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 37 (Summer 1999): 33-54; Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism* (Cambridge: Dept. of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2008).

<sup>13</sup>Bhreathnach, "The World of Medieval Irish Learning," 60.

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accretion of glosses, commentary and indices to the main text. The last aspect, which I will focus on in this paper, is the **arrangement of texts in the manuscript**.

By examining these aspects, I propose to ask the following questions: 1) Why was the scribe dealing with this text? 2) What was the plan in compiling the manuscript? 3) What was the place of the text in the scribe's system of knowledge? 4) What did the scribe expect to convey to his reader? In what follows I will test these questions on the Old Irish law tract *Uraicecht Becc* and its derivative texts,<sup>14</sup> and see what new thoughts about this text will emerge from such an enquiry.

Before starting on *Uraicecht Becc*, however, I would like to briefly review the state of research of the manuscript contexts of early Irish law texts. The most comprehensive guidebook on this topic is Liam Breatnach's *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*,<sup>15</sup> in which he discusses the forms of manuscript representation of Old Irish text (chapter 3), citation markers, script size and page layout of the legal digests (chapter 6), the contents and dates of glosses and commentary (chapter 7), and authorship of the law texts (chapter 8). An article by Fergus Kelly<sup>16</sup> focuses upon the problem of page layouts, position and content of glosses, decoration and illustration, identity of scribes and activities of legal families. Charlene Eska has briefly described the neighboring texts of *Cáin Lánamna* in TCD MS 1316 in her critical edition, where she goes into much greater details about the manuscript history and scribal

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<sup>14</sup>For a list of such derivative texts and their nature, see Liam Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1987), 3-19. I follow Breatnach's practice of referring to them in roman numerals *UB I* to *UB X*.

<sup>15</sup>Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2005).

<sup>16</sup>Fergus Kelly, "Texts and Transmissions: The Law-Texts," in *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmissions = Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002): 230-42. That article develops from Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), chap. 10-11.

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hands.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, most copies or excerpts of *Cáin Lánamna*, the seventh tract of *Senchas Már*,<sup>18</sup> are transmitted with other tracts from that collection. While these excellent studies cover the first three aspects of the manuscript context of legal texts, research of the fourth aspect, that of the arrangement of texts in manuscript, remains largely wanted.

This, to some extent, is a forgivable lacuna. In order to interpret the significance of text arrangement in a manuscript, we have to firstly ensure that the manuscript was intentionally made as a unitary product, rather than a composite volume. By 'unitary' I mean that the manuscript was originally produced as a single entity; and by 'composite' I mean an assemblage of heterogeneous codicological units that were produced independently.<sup>19</sup> There are, of course, large tracts of grey area between the two poles of single-scribe codex with continuously copied texts and randomly bound-up fragments;<sup>20</sup> moreover, much work needs to be done to elucidate the origins of the numerous fragments in some Irish manuscripts and the relationships between them. Unfortunately, many early Irish legal texts are found in composite volumes. During the age of antiquarianism, medieval manuscripts were rescued, assembled and some arbitrarily bound

<sup>17</sup> Charlene Eska, *Cáin Lánamna: An Old Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 35-54. Also to be noted is *eadem*, "Varieties of Early Irish Legal Literature and the *Cáin Lánamna* Fragments," *Viator* 40 (2009): 1-16, where the growth of glosses and commentaries in Irish legal literature is attributed to continental influence.

<sup>18</sup> Liam Breatnach, "On the Original Extent of the 'Senchas Már,'" *Ériu* 47 (1996): 1-43.

<sup>19</sup> See Johan P. Gumbert, "Codicological Units. Towards a Terminology for the Stratigraphy of the Non-Homogeneous Codex," *Segno e Testa* 2 (2004): 17-42.

<sup>20</sup> P. R. Robinson, "The 'Booklet,' A Self Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts," *Codicologica 3: Essais Typologiques*, ed. A. Gruys and J.P. Gumbert (Leiden: Brill, 1980): 46-69; Erik Kwakkel, "Late-Medieval Text Collections: A Codicological Typology based on Single-Author Manuscripts," in *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012): 56-79.

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into volumes.<sup>21</sup> As part of a study leading to a better comprehension of the nature of medieval Irish legal manuscripts, here I give a general survey of the manuscripts Binchy consulted for *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (hereafter *CIH*).<sup>22</sup> The following description mostly depends on the information from catalogues,<sup>23</sup> but whenever possible I have also consulted the original manuscripts, microfilms, on-line images or photostats. At present it serves only as a preliminary sketch and will surely be updated by progress in the studies of individual manuscripts.

Occasionally, a single leaf of law text has been inserted into a composite manuscript, such as those found in British Library (hereafter BL) MS Egerton 90,<sup>24</sup> RIA MS 1234 (C i 2),<sup>25</sup> MS 1243

<sup>21</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "What Happened Ireland's Medieval Manuscripts?," *Peritia* 22-23 (2011-12): 191-223; also see the description of the collection of manuscripts by Edward Lhuyd in Anne O'Sullivan and William O'Sullivan, "Edward Lhuyd's Collection of Irish Manuscripts," *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1962): 57-76.

<sup>22</sup> D. A. Binchy, ed., *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 6 vols. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> In the coming sections, the information of the manuscripts and their contents, unless otherwise specified, is from these published catalogues:

**BL Cat.** = Standish H. O'Grady and Robin Flowers, eds., *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum, 1926-1952).

**Bod. Cat.** = Brian Ó Cuív, ed., *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and Oxford College libraries* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2001-2003).

**NLI Cat.** = Nessa Ní Shéaghdha and Pádraig Ó Macháin, eds., *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland*, Dublin. Fasc. i-xiii (paginated consecutively), (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967-1996).

**RIA Cat.** = Kathleen Mulchrone et al., eds., *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, Fasc. i-xxviii (paginated consecutively), (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1926-1970).

**TCD Cat.** = T. K. Abbott and E. J. Gwynn, *Catalogue of the Irish Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & co., 1921). **ISOS** = *Irish Script on Screen*, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://www.isos.dias.ie/>.

<sup>24</sup> Fol. 8 = *CIH* 1619-1623; this single folio contains a pleading concerning the Mac Namara family. The origin of this folio may be explained by the

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(23 Q 6)<sup>26</sup> and TCD MS 1308 (H 2.12).<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to determine when these folios were made and when they entered the volume. In such cases, the context is too limited for meaningful discussion. On the other hand, it is no easier to disentangle the relationships between the components of some of the most important manuscript sources of early Irish law. TCD MS 1363 (H 4.22), for instance, consists of at least sixteen sections differing in size and hand,<sup>28</sup> while we still do not know exactly how many originally independent fragments there are in TCD MS 1336 (H 3.17) and MS 1337 (H 3.18), which have undergone several bindings since the days of Edward Lhuyd till the last century. Vellum size, scribal hand and textual continuity may provide some clues; and there are also cases where an originally unitary codex has been divided and each part was later bound with other manuscripts. A well-known example is the book of Domhnall mac Aodha Uí Dhuibhdábhoireann, now preserved separately as BL MS Egerton 88, folios 1-92, RIA MS 1243 (23 Q 6), pages 33-52, and Copenhagen Kongelige Bibliotek MS 261B, folios 1-6.<sup>29</sup>

The discussion of textual arrangement is naturally only valid within a unitary codicological unit, which may at present exist as an independent codex or be bound with originally unrelated manuscripts into a composite volume. A number of such unitary fragments or complete manuscripts consist entirely of legal materials. BL MS

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fact that one of the possible early owners of Egerton 90, Tadhg Ó Rodaighe, has a Mac Namara wife. See William O'Sullivan, "The Book of Domhnall Ó Duibhdábhoireann, Provenance and Codicology," *Celtica* 23 (1999): 276-299- at 279-282.

<sup>25</sup> A tiny unnumbered folio between fol. 41 and 42 = *CIH* 2317.

<sup>26</sup> Pp. 31-2 = *CIH* 1192-1194. This is a small slip of vellum mounted on fresh vellum.

<sup>27</sup> No. 8. iii = *CIH* 2204-2208. This loose folio also contains a pleading on behalf of the Mac Mathgamain family, see D. A. Binchy, "Distraint in Irish Law," *Celtica* 10 (1973): 22-71, at 67-71. The information given in TCD Cat. p. 80 is inaccurate.

<sup>28</sup> Breatnach, *A Companion*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *CIH* 1266-1531, 1194-1234, 2233-2254 respectively. See O'Sullivan, "The Book of Domhnall Ó Duibhdábhoireann."

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Harley 432,<sup>30</sup> for example, is thoroughly legal in content. This manuscript consists of twenty folios and records continuously the first two tracts from the *Senchas Már* with extensive glosses. No folios seem to have been lost; though the law tract it records breaks off incomplete, the scribal colophon at the bottom of folio twenty indicates that the incompleteness is due to a faulty exemplar.<sup>31</sup> The textual arrangement in Harley 432 is not very significant apart from confirming the order of the first two tracts of *Senchas Már*. Comparison between a number of such sources, such as the first part of TCD MS 1433 (E 3.5)<sup>32</sup> or the first three parts of MS 1316 (H 2.15A),<sup>33</sup> nonetheless contributes to the establishment of the original content and order of the *Senchas Már*.<sup>34</sup> Neither does the second section of TCD MS 1433 (E 3.5),<sup>35</sup> which consists solely of an incomplete copy of *Bretha Étgid*, or the part of BL MS Nero A7<sup>36</sup> that contains a seemingly complete copy of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*,<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *CIH* 339-422. See Nerys Patterson, "The O'Doran Legal Family and the Sixteenth-Century Recensions of the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the 'Senchas Már,'" *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 6 (1986): 131-149 at 133, for the identities of two scribes of this manuscript.

<sup>31</sup> *A dia tabair trócaire dom anmain misi .f. agus ná tabrach [fer] in bairc masán orum agus olcas mo cairti agus nár mebruis in senabarc agus anis art labadrais mo log agus is olc linn réd égin cidh bé é.* "O God, have mercy on my soul! I am F. and let not the man of the book [i.e. the owner of the copy that I had before me; and sure I had not even studied the old codex. Dysartlawrence is my place of writing; and I am sorry for a certain thing, be that as it may]" (translation from BL Cat., vol. 1, 147).

<sup>32</sup> Pp. 1-20 = *CIH* 191-249. This part consists of fragmentary copies of some of the tracts that belong to the middle third of *Senchas Már*. See also Charlene Eska, "Four Marginalia from Trinity College, Dublin MS 1433 [E.3.5]," *Studia Celtica* 49 (2015): 115-120.

<sup>33</sup> (1) pp. 11-38 = *CIH* 423-479.22; (2) pp. 39-42, 47-66 = *CIH* 479.23-536; (3) pp.43-46 = *CIH* 537-549.18. All of these are copies of various *Senchas Már* tracts.

<sup>34</sup> Breatnach, "On the Original Extent of the 'Senchas Már,'" 1-43.

<sup>35</sup> Pp. 21-60 = *CIH* 250-337.

<sup>36</sup> Fols. 132b-157b = *CIH* 2211-2232.

<sup>37</sup> The first third of this tract has been edited in Liam Breatnach, "The First Third of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*," *Ériu* 40 (1989): 1-40.

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tell us much about the interaction of these two texts with other texts in manuscripts. On the other hand, TCD MS 1387 (H 5.15),<sup>38</sup> which includes extracts with commentary from *Findsruth Fithail*, *Fothae Bec*, *Fothae Mór* and other less well-attested law tracts, may indicate a close relationship between them, perhaps because of their thematic similarity or shared origin, or only because they were available to the scribe at the time of compilation.

It is noteworthy that copies of some law tracts tend to survive on their own in fragments. Apart from the copy in TCD MS 1433 mentioned above, copies of *Bretha Étgid* are also found in two independent sections of BL MS Egerton 90,<sup>39</sup> RIA MS 1243,<sup>40</sup> and MS 1242 (23 P 3).<sup>41</sup> In these manuscripts the copies of the *Bretha Étgid* text, all incomplete, are not written together with other texts. This may be due to the unusual length of that tract. The other extreme may be exemplified by the second part of Bod. Rawlinson B 506<sup>42</sup> and the first part of RIA MS 1243,<sup>43</sup> where late commentaries have been organized under various headings according to miscellaneous topics, thus forming legal florilegia or 'digests'.<sup>44</sup> These 'digests' cite extensively from older legal texts, and the logic by which they are arranged awaits detailed studies.

We also possess many unitary sections or whole manuscripts that incorporate both legal and non-legal materials. The above-mentioned Egerton 88, together with folios that are now bound into RIA MS

<sup>38</sup> *CIH* 2131-2191. For the content of this manuscript see Breatnach, *A Companion*, 88-89.

<sup>39</sup> (1) Fols. 9-12 = *CIH* 1623.15-1632.2; (2) fols. 13-16 = *CIH* 1632.3-1649.

<sup>40</sup> Pp. 7-30 = *CIH* 1151.3-1192.4. This fragment originally belongs together with Egerton 90, fols. 9-12, known as the book of Cairbre mac Domhnaill Uí Dheoradháin, but the order of the folios has been confused.

<sup>41</sup> Fol. 24 = *CIH* 1254.16-1260.15; fol. 25 = *CIH* 1260.16-1265. These two folios seem to be fragments from a larger gathering, the rest of which is now lost. They are written by the same scribe but belong to two versions of the tract.

<sup>42</sup> Fols. 16b-62 = *CIH* 81-190. For the content see Breatnach, *A Companion*, 13-23.

<sup>43</sup> Pp. 1-6 = *CIH* 1139-1151. For the content see Breatnach, *A Companion*, 47-50.

<sup>44</sup> For this type of legal writing see Breatnach, *A Companion*, chap. 6.

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1243 and Copenhagen MS 261B, consists predominantly of legal texts but also of substantial portions of sagas, glossary and grammatical materials. Other manuscripts mainly comprise non-legal materials. The first part of TCD MS 1432 (E 3.3)<sup>45</sup> was written by Diarmaid Ó Dubhagáin from a historian family, and TCD MS 1317 (H 2.15B)<sup>46</sup> was mainly written by Dubháilach Mac Fhir Bhisigh, antiquarian from a learned family, and his grandfather.<sup>47</sup> The Mac Fhir Bhisigh family also participated in the production of TCD MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan) and was responsible for copying a law-text in it.<sup>48</sup> National Library of Ireland (NLI hereafter) MS G 11, being a medical manuscript, nonetheless records several law tracts that are concerned with physicians and sick-maintenance, obviously for the physicians' reference in case of disputes from their trade.<sup>49</sup> These manuscripts tellingly show that law was part of the stock knowledge of the learned class, whichever specific profession they might have been engaged in.<sup>50</sup> Bod. MS Rawlinson B 502,<sup>51</sup> RIA MS 536 (Book of Ballymote), and NLI MS G 2-3<sup>52</sup> all contain a small number of law tracts among texts of other topics. In fact, MS 536 and MS G 2-3 were written by scribes who had studied with or worked under the Mac Aodhagáin school, which may explain the source of their legal texts.

<sup>45</sup> The law texts are found on pp. 16b-18a, 21b-23b = *CIH* 2336-2343. But see below for law texts in this section omitted from *CIH*.

<sup>46</sup> The law texts are found on pp. 135-156 = *CIH* 1111-1138.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, 262; Nollaig Ó Muraíle, *The Celebrated Antiquary Dubháilach Mac Fhirbhisigh* (c. 1600-1671): His Lineage, Life and Learning, Maynooth Monographs 6 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1996), 80-81.

<sup>48</sup> Cols. 920-938 = *CIH* 2318-2335.

<sup>49</sup> D. A. Binchy, "Bretha Crólige," *Ériu* 12 (1938): 1-77 at 1.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, a commentary to *Uraicecht Becc* states that the major law tracts including *Senchas Már* and *Bretha Nemed* are among the courses of a *fili*, see Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 159 and *Mittelirischen Verslehren II* = Rudolf Thurneysen, "Mittelirische Verslehren," in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch*, vol. 3, no. 1; ed. Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1891): 1-182 at 36.

<sup>51</sup> Fols. 62vb44-63va1 = *CIH* 2192-2203.

<sup>52</sup> For the law texts in these latter two manuscripts see below.

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*Uraicecht Becc* (*UB* hereafter) offers a rare chance for us to look into the position of a legal text in the knowledge system of medieval Irish learned persons, as copies of this tract are found in four of the unitary manuscripts that contain both legal and non-legal materials, in three being the only law tract in the codex. Besides the Old Irish tract itself,<sup>53</sup> extracts from *UB* and commentaries based on *UB* appear in a number of manuscripts, and the contexts in which they appear may shed sidelights on the reception and transmission of *UB*.

A cursory introduction to this law tract is pertinent at this point. *UB* focuses on the topic of statuses and entitlements of the various grades in Irish society, covering ranks of clergy, lords, poets and freemen of crafts; it also briefly discusses the basis of judgments. It is written in succinct prose, at times turning to paradigmatic exposition and axiomatic couplets, no doubt for mnemonic ends. It quotes from *Bretha Nemed*<sup>54</sup> and may have been partly modelled upon *Cóic Conara Fuigill*.<sup>55</sup> Therefore *UB* must at least postdate *Bretha Nemed*, which Breatnach has dated to between 721 and 742;<sup>56</sup> he also argues that linguistically *UB* may be even as late as the early tenth century.<sup>57</sup>

Copies of *UB*, not all of which are complete, are found in these following manuscripts, represented by sigla as employed by Breatnach.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> This has been edited and translated, although unsatisfactorily, in Eoin MacNeill, "Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature 36 (1921): 265-316 at 272-281.

<sup>54</sup> D. A. Binchy, "The Date and Provenance of Uraicecht Becc," *Ériu* 18 (1958): 44-54, at 45-46.

<sup>55</sup> P. L. Henry, "A Note on the Brehon Law Tracts of Procedure and Status, *Cóic Conara Fuigill* and *Uraicecht Becc*," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 49-50 (1997): 311-319. One of the copies of *UB*, as we will see, actually incorporates a copy of *Cóic Conara Fuigill*.

<sup>56</sup> Liam Breatnach, "Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *Bretha Nemed*," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 439-59.

<sup>57</sup> Liam Breatnach, "Law," in *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, ed. Kim McCone and Katharine Simms (Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996): 107-21, at 119.

<sup>58</sup> Breatnach, *A Companion*, 315.

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A: RIA MS 536, fols. 181ra - 187 vb, *CIH* 1590.1-1618.40.

B: TCD MS 1337, pp. 88a-111b, *CIH* 634.1-655.23.

C: TCD MS 1318, cols. 920-938, *CIH* 2318.1-2335.30.

D: NLI MS G 3, fols. 26r-45v, *CIH* 2255.1-2282.27.

E: TCD MS 1432, pp. 19a33-21b1, omitted from *CIH* but noticed in *CIH* p. xxii.

Among these, B has to be taken away from further consideration of manuscript context. This copy occupies a single section of the composite TCD MS 1337; the vellum size is smaller than the previous section and is followed by a section of half-pages. Its original context is thus obscure. Deborah Hayden<sup>59</sup> has compared the arrangements of texts in the sections that concern us in A and E, from the perspective of transmission of grammatical materials, but here I would like to look at them again from the viewpoint of legal text and to broaden the comparison with the help from other manuscripts.

As is the case with many Irish codices, A begins with *Sex Aetates Mundi* and tracts on synthetic history, including the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. The next part of the codex focuses on king-lists, genealogies and other synthetic historical works such as *Lebor Bretnach* and *Senchas Naomh nÉrend*. A few narratives about legendary kings ensue, in turn followed by *Lebar na Cert* and the *Banshenchas*. From folio 158 on, the scribe initiates a new section which is mainly devoted to the study of poetry, the texts being in the following sequence: a treatise on Irish prosody, *Lebar Ollaman*, versions of texts published as *Mittelirischen Verslehren* (*MV*) II and *MV* I, passages on lawful procedure in the poet's circuit and his

<sup>59</sup> Deborah Hayden, "Poetic Law and the Medieval Irish Linguist: Contextualizing the Vices and Virtues of Verse Composition in *Auraicept na nÉces*," *Language & History* 54, no. 1 (2011): 1-34.

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rewards for composition,<sup>60</sup> *Lebor Ogaim*,<sup>61</sup> *Auraicept na nÉces*, the *trefhocal* tract, discussions on the closing of poem (*dúnad*) and on the retinues for the seven grades of poets.<sup>62</sup> This last item no doubt derives from *UB*,<sup>63</sup> therefore, though it is separated from the next item, a copy of *UB* itself, by a blank page, the thematic connection is apparent. *UB* is then followed by the *Dindshenchas* and Irish adaptations of classical works such as *Togail Troí* and *Merugud Uilix*, before the end of the manuscript.

Columns 573-958 of C (the Yellow Book of Lecan) were written by Giolla Íosa Mór Mac Fhir Bhisigh.<sup>64</sup> It starts with several *tána*, homilies and accounts surrounding the life of St. Columb Cille, including the *Amra Coluim Chille*. Most of the texts in this unitary section are religious narratives and stories about legendary kings and poets. After these is a series of tales about Mongán and Connla, anecdotes of the poets Mac Liag and Flann mac Lonáin, and an amusing short poem on the condition of wearing a beard for champions. Then there is a copy of *UB*, the beginning of which is missing probably due to loss of folios before column 920. *UB* is followed by several tales about the important battles in Irish history and other narratives, until the manuscript concludes with *Cáin Domnaig*. The original manuscript by Mac Fhir Bhisigh does not end here, but the rest has been bound separately as NLI MS G 4, which again contains religious and saga narratives.<sup>65</sup> Although we may not

<sup>60</sup> Partly edited in Liam Breatnach, "On Satire and the Poet's Circuit," in *Unity in Diversity: Studies in Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language, Literature and History*, ed. Cathal G. Ó Háinle and Donald E. Meek (Dublin: The School of Irish, Trinity College, 2004): 25-35, at 30-32. In the following description of manuscript contents, I only add bibliographical references that are not mentioned in the published catalogues.

<sup>61</sup> For details of this part overlooked by the catalogue see Róisín McLaughlin, "Fénius Farsaid and the Alphabets," *Ériu* 59 (2009): 1-2, at 12.

<sup>62</sup> For the last two items see Hayden, "Poetic Law," 28.

<sup>63</sup> Breatnach *Uraicecht na Riar*, 19 (where it is tagged "*UB X*"); for other copies of this text and the manuscript contexts of other *UB* derivative texts see below.

<sup>64</sup> TCD Cat. 94-131.

<sup>65</sup> NLI Cat. 28-31.

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be able to recover the immediate context before *UB* in the original manuscript, the manuscript is clearly historical-literary oriented, in accordance with the hereditary art of the Mac Fhir Bhisigh family.<sup>66</sup>

NLI G 2 and G 3 (D) were originally one compilation before acquired by Edward O'Reilly.<sup>67</sup> The majority of texts are in the hand of the historian Adhamh Ó Cianáin (d. 1373).<sup>68</sup> G 2 consists mostly of genealogies, but it is noteworthy that folios 34v-35v display a marked interest in poetic and grammatical matters. Folio 34v starts with two heavily glossed poems written in the obscure style called *bélra na filed*. Then on folio 35r we find an Old Irish text listing the seven grades of poets, ecclesiastical scholars (*ecnai*), clerics and lords, most of which are extracts from *UB*.<sup>69</sup> This is followed by verses on the retinues of the seven grades of poets (*UB X*), and on the three things required of an *ollam*, extracted from a commentary to *UB*.<sup>70</sup> These are followed mainly by accounts of famous kings and saints, but on folio 49r we find again a Middle Irish poem on the gender and declension of Latin nouns, doubtless a rendering of part of Priscian's grammar.<sup>71</sup>

The copy of *UB* in D occupies a gathering of smaller folios (folios 26-45) and is by a different hand than that of the main scribe Ádhamh Ó Cianán.<sup>72</sup> The marginal note on folio 29r indicates that the scribe belongs to the Mac Aodhagáin school and wrote by the

<sup>66</sup> Ó Muraíle, *The Celebrated Antiquary*, 1-10.

<sup>67</sup> NLI Cat. 12.

<sup>68</sup> James Carney, "The Ó Cianáin Miscellany," *Ériu* 21 (1969): 122-47.

<sup>69</sup> The list of seven grades of ecclesiastical scholars (*ecnai*) is not part of *UB*, but copies of it are found in *CIH* 687.3-6 and 2101.1-13 (together with texts from *Bretha Nemed*). *Bretha Nemed* mentions *ecnai* as one class among the *sóernemed* (*CIH* 2211.3), whereas in *UB* the class of *ecnai* has been replaced by that of *Féni* 'freemen' (*CIH* 2262.20). The relationship between these two traditions merits further study.

<sup>70</sup> This is a verse version of a commentary to *UB*, which in turn is based on *Bretha Nemed*, see John Carey, "The Three Things Required of a Poet," *Ériu* 48 (1997): 41-58.

<sup>71</sup> Edited in David Greene, "A Middle Irish Poem on Latin Nouns," *Celtica* 2 (1954): 278-96.

<sup>72</sup> NLI Cat. 13.

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end of the fourteenth century,<sup>73</sup> so this gathering may have been inserted into the codex from another source at some point before it entered O'Reilly's collection. Its position within G 3 is probably accidental, but the inclusion of this gathering may still reflect a shared interest with other parts of G 3. G 3 opens with the *Banshenchas* and *MV II*, which are followed by accounts on world history, Irish genealogies and religious and secular poetry. The copy of *UB* on folios 26-45 is prefixed with a commentary on the "foundation and essence and application" (*bunad ⁊ inde ⁊ airbert*)<sup>74</sup> of *cid*, the first word of *UB*, and ventures into analysis of Latin grammar. This copy of *UB* also contains a copy of *Cóic Conara Fuigill*,<sup>75</sup> perhaps due to the systematic reference to the theory of the "paths of judgment" at the beginning of *UB*, for which the scribe feels obliged to cite *Cóic Conara Fuigill* in full to expound that theory.<sup>76</sup> After this inserted gathering, from folio 46 onwards the scribe recorded a metrical glossary, two prognostications and a series of grammatical tracts. At least within the gathering itself, *UB* is

<sup>73</sup> The comment reads: *Atamid iga fhagbail and so gu sondradhach gebe du Leath Mogha le millfidhi Gilla na Naemh og mac Aedagan [.i. mac Concobair written above] Leath Cuind da coimdhigailt gan cuntabairt ⁊ muna dearnad nar fhagbhad a n-oghredha ina inadhaib.* "We are obtaining it here specially, whoever from Leth Moga by whom Giolla na Naomh Óg Mac Aodhagáin (that is, son of Conchobhar) would have been hurt, Leth Cuind will avenge him together without hesitate, and if it was not done or it was not obtained, their heirs [will do it] in their stead" (my translation). The death of Giolla na Naomh Óg Mac Conchobhair Mhaic Aodhagáin is recorded in AFM 1399.

<sup>74</sup> These three meta-theoretical concepts can again be found among the teachings of *Auraicept na nÉces*, though perhaps not in the canonical part; see George Calder, *Auraicept na nÉces: The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1917), 54-55. They have also been applied to analyzing the word *étgid* in *Bretha Étgid* (CIH 251.4-14) and the word *senchas* in the commentary to the Introduction to *Senchas Már* (CIH 344.28-31) as well; see Paul Russell, "The Sounds of a Silence: The Growth of Cormac's Glossary," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 15 (Summer 1988): 1-30 at 23.

<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Thurneysen, "Eine neue Handschrift von *Cóic Conara Fugill*," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1933): 165-73.

<sup>76</sup> Henry, "A Note on the Brehon Law Tracts."

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associated with the poetico-grammatical learning, a fact which may be collaborated by texts in other parts of G 3.

Such connection is all the more significant in E.<sup>77</sup> E is also a composite volume, but the section that concerns us, namely pages 1-24, is a unitary manuscript mostly written by Diarmaid Ó Dubhagáin. This starts with the verse epilogue of *Sex Aetates Mundi*, after which Ó Dubhagáin's hand wrote a copy of *Auraicept na nÉces. Uraicecht na Riar*, a law text on the grades and entitlements of the poets,<sup>78</sup> ensues, then comes a poem on the retinues of the poets (*UB X*), which we have already encountered in A. Thereafter we find a commentary on the poetic grades and a tract on poets' training, another copy of which we have also met in A, before the *UB* proper. *UB* is followed by a legal text on judgment and procedure,<sup>79</sup> a poem derived from the commentary of *UB* (*UB IX*),<sup>80</sup> the *trethocall* tract, a poem on the grades of bards, extracts from *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* on the property of voice,<sup>81</sup> and other grammatical materials.

Our inquiry may be extended to texts derived from *UB*.<sup>82</sup> These texts all focus on the grades, entitlements and qualifications of the poets,<sup>83</sup> and they cite extensively from *UB* or its commentary. They constitute a vast body, some of which have already been covered in the discussion above. Of the ten texts listed by Breatnach, the first six are similar in that they all cite or comment on a certain portion of *UB* that concern the grades of *filid*, namely paragraphs 10 and 20-26, while the rest can be at best called "*UB*-inspired" or merely in keeping with the information set out in *UB* or its commentary.

<sup>77</sup> The following account of the contents of TCD MS 1432 comes from the updated catalogue published on-line on ISOS (see note 23). Also see the analysis in Hayden, "Poetic Law," 25-30.

<sup>78</sup> Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*.

<sup>79</sup> CIH 2341.8-2342.15.

<sup>80</sup> Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, appendix 7.

<sup>81</sup> CIH 2342.16-2343.21.

<sup>82</sup> Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 6-19.

<sup>83</sup> There are some later texts that address the other classes of persons and their rights and duties, but their relationship with *UB* is less direct. See Breatnach, *A Companion*, 317.



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Therefore, I will mainly focus on the first six (*UB* I-VI) here, unless another *UB*-derived text is found in the vicinity of any of them in the same manuscript.

*UB* I is found in the first section of the composite volume TCD MS 1363.<sup>84</sup> The texts in this section were copied continuously but by different scribes and probably from different periods. The section begins with a story of the making of the *Amra Coluim Chille*, and the following text is a narrative commenting on a passage from *Bretha Nemed Toisech*.<sup>85</sup> *UB* I, starting from page 4, cites paragraphs 10 and 20-26 from *UB* and supplies ample commentary.<sup>86</sup> It is followed by legal fragments and commentary on various topics. Pages 71-86 of TCD MS 1316 is a unitary fragment,<sup>87</sup> which starts with *Immacallam in dá thúarad*, followed by *UB* II, derived from both *UB* and *MV* II.<sup>88</sup> Then we find a copy of *Uraicecht na Riar*,<sup>89</sup> followed by miscellaneous materials on poets and poetry, a poem (*UB* VIII) again based on *UB*,<sup>90</sup> and a short passage on letters. National Library of Scotland Adv. MS 72.1.7 (Gaelic VII) is a unitary manuscript.<sup>91</sup> The first text there is *Cóir Anmann*, followed by *Banshenchas* and two derivative texts of *UB* (*UB* III and IV).<sup>92</sup> The rest of this manuscript contains extensive wisdom texts and the so-called 'Lecan glossary'.<sup>93</sup> RIA MS 535 (the Book of Lecan) is a magnificent collection of learning, mostly written by Giolla Íosa Mac Fhir Bhisigh.<sup>94</sup> The part

<sup>84</sup> Pp. 1-17, *UB* I at 4-9 = *CIH* 1532.18-1536.40.

<sup>85</sup> Story VII in Myles Dillon, "Stories from the Law-Tracts," *Ériu* 11 (1932): 42-65 at 46; *CIH* 1532.1-17.

<sup>86</sup> Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 7.

<sup>87</sup> TCD Cat. 91.

<sup>88</sup> *CIH* 549.19-558.25, Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 7-13.

<sup>89</sup> Breatnach, *A Companion*, 25-26.

<sup>90</sup> *CIH* 562,3-22, Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> For the hands and contents see the relevant section in Ronald Black, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland* (2011), published on-line on ISOS.

<sup>92</sup> Breatnach *Uraicecht na Riar*, 13-16, appendices 4-5.

<sup>93</sup> See Russell, "The Sounds of a Silence," 7.

<sup>94</sup> RIA Cat. 1552.

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that concerns us here, folios 145r-169r, begins with wisdom texts.<sup>95</sup> After a copy of *Immacallam in dá thúarad*,<sup>96</sup> there are the *Auracept na nÉces*, a miscellany of short texts on saints and legendary kings, some biblical genealogies and *UB* V, which is very similar to *UB* IV.<sup>97</sup> *UB* V is in turn followed by a tract on the names of the Ogam letters. TCD MS 1336, columns 710-831 seems to belong to a single codicological unit,<sup>98</sup> penned by different scribes, but the *mise-en-page* stays quite consistent. Columns 740-779 appear to be the work of a single scribe, after which there is a caesura in the volume. This section mainly comprises accounts concerning the history and genealogies of diverse kingdoms and dynasties in Ireland, the exceptions being an excerpt from *Cóir Anmann* (col. 752) and *UB* VI (cols. 778-9),<sup>99</sup> the latter also displaying metrical examples from *MV* II.

What we observe from these manuscripts is a close affiliation between *UB* and poetico-grammatical texts. In contrast, only three law tracts are found in proximity to copies of *UB* or its derivative texts in the unitary manuscripts examined above: 1) *Uraicecht na Riar*, which exclusively deals with poets and poetry; 2) *Cóic Conara Fuigill*, which serves not only as the model of part of *UB* but also as further explanation to *UB*'s pithy dictum on the basis of judgment; and 3) an extract from *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* on the properties of voice in poetic performance.<sup>100</sup> It is apparent, again, that the closeness of these law tracts to *UB* is thematically motivated, and in the cases of 1) and 3), the poetico-grammatical connotation cannot be more obvious. Moreover, in A and C, and also D if we discount the inserted *Cóic Conara Fuigill*, *UB* stands out as the only secular

<sup>95</sup> Nine folios (fols. 142-150) are now bound as TCD MS 1319, pp. 172-87 and 192-3; see RIA Cat. 1551.

<sup>96</sup> The text on fol. 150 ends incomplete, thus we do not know if any other texts come between *Immacallam* and *Auracept na nÉces*.

<sup>97</sup> Breatnach *Uraicecht na Riar*, appendix 6.

<sup>98</sup> TCD Cat. 357.

<sup>99</sup> *CIH* 2126.1-2127.5, Breatnach *Uraicecht na Riar*, 18-19.

<sup>100</sup> The Old Irish passages on E, p. 21b has not been identified, but probably these come from multiple sources. The narrative preceding *UB* I in TCD MS 1363 contains two catchwords from *Bretha Nemed Toisech* (see note 85 above).

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law tract in the whole codex. Considering how many must have been lost in the transmission of legal texts,<sup>101</sup> we cannot argue *ex silentio* that *UB* had never appeared in lawyers' handbooks or that it had not been copied with other law tracts in the lost manuscripts, but it is quite likely that the main readers of *UB* were not professional jurists, at least in the later Middle Ages when most of the manuscript witnesses were produced.

Meanwhile, in four manuscripts<sup>102</sup> *UB* or its derivatives are copied in proximity to *Uraicecht na Ríar* or *Auraicept na nÉces* or both. This implies that these three texts share close ties to each other, and form a thematic group in the course of codex compilation and text transmission. A further support to such a thematic link comes from the shared element in their titles. There is a caveat to the title of *UB* as it was headed *Aeireceap úa Colla* in E, and in another instance referred to as *Uraicecht í Colla*.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, *Uraicecht* is surely part of the title, which is a variant of *Auraicept*, both being a loanword from Latin *acceptus* plus the Irish prefix *air-*.<sup>104</sup> Latin *acceptus* in the grammatical teaching context, according to Burnyeat, denotes "assignment to be memorised by the students in preparation for recitation in class,"<sup>105</sup> and Irish *airececht/auraicept* means 'primer.' *Auraicept na nÉces*'s primary function is, summarised by Hayden, "a basic linguistic manual for aspirants to the poetic profession,"<sup>106</sup> and *Uraicecht na Ríar* encapsulates the legal matters pertaining to poets. Accordingly, Binchy thinks that *UB* might be written as "a 'short primer' of, or a 'brief introduction' to *Bretha Nemed*. It may have been used as a textbook to initiate students into the obscurities of the older language."<sup>107</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Ó Corráin, "What Happened Ireland's Medieval Manuscripts?"

<sup>102</sup> RIA MS 535, MS 536; TCD MS 1432, MS 1316.

<sup>103</sup> Breatnach, *A Companion*, 315-316.

<sup>104</sup> Anders Ahlqvist, "Old Irish airaiccecht 'Primer, etc.,'" in *Medieval Irish Law: Texts and Contexts*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 12, ed. Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2013): 221-36.

<sup>105</sup> Abigail Burnyeat, "The Early Irish Grammaticus?," *Aiste* 1 (2007): 181-217 at 192.

<sup>106</sup> Hayden, "Poetic Law," 3.

<sup>107</sup> Binchy, "The Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*," 48.

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The examination of textual arrangement across a number of manuscripts demonstrates, however, that *UB* was more likely used as a synopsis of law of status for a wide range of readers in the fields of poetry, grammar, history and other learned subjects in late medieval Ireland than as an *Institutes* to higher legal curriculum for aspirant lawyers. Certainly, in many circumstances, especially for the high-ranked literati, a learned individual can have more than one expertise, for instance in law and poetry, in exegesis and history or in all of them. But excellence in multiple disciplines must have been exceptional; elementary competency in all aspects of scholarship, while being specialised in one of them, may probably have been the usual case.<sup>108</sup> *UB* may have served as a handy manual for professionals to check their entitlements and duties.<sup>109</sup> As Neil McLeod points out, craftsmen and professionals may have tended to know the law themselves in order to set their fees (and provisions) without hiring an advocate who would share a slice of the fees for his legal advice.<sup>110</sup> *UB* draws from the more specialised tracts such as

<sup>108</sup> The judges, for instance, are required also to be learned in the details of *Auraicept na nÉces* (CIH 2103.20-22), see Ahlqvist, "Old Irish airaiccecht 'Primer, etc.,'" 233. The higher ranks of practising lawyers are said to have possessed *filedach* or the *breth filed*; see Liam Breatnach, "Lawyers in Early Ireland," in *Brehons, Serjeants and Attorneys: Studies in the History of the Irish Legal Profession*, ed. Daire Hogan and W. N. Osborough (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990): 1-13 at 7. However, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Early Mediaeval Gaelic Lawyer*, ASNC Publications 4 (Cambridge: Dept. of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 1999), 42-43, for argument for variation and specialisation in learning. Also see the chart of pre-Norman learned persons from annalistic sources in Michael Richter, "The Personnel of Learning in Early Medieval Ireland," in *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Learning and Literature = Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Bildung und Literatur*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1996): 275-308.

<sup>109</sup> Anders Ahlqvist, *The Early Irish Linguist: An Edition of the Canonical Part of the Auraicept na nÉces*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 73 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982), 13.

<sup>110</sup> Neil McLeod, "The Metalworking Tradition in Medieval Irish Law," in *Between Intrusions: Britain and Ireland between the Romans and the Normans. Papers from the 2003 Melbourne Conference*, Sydney Series in

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*Bretha Nemed* and *Cóic Conara Fuigill* but presents in a plain, paradigmatic form and employs mnemonic devices such as heptads and axiomatic couplets. Even so, in a number of manuscripts intended for readers of poetic background, only excerpts from *UB* and its commentary, especially those pertaining to the rights and duties of the poetic grades, are preserved, revealing how the interest of readers can have affected the transmission and adaptation of a text. *UB* delineates the fundamental legal framework of early Irish society and synthesises information from other law tracts, and judging from the manuscript contexts of its surviving copies, it was primarily read by non-specialists of law in post-Norman medieval Ireland.

Thus far the study of manuscript context, especially of text arrangement in codices, has been applied to one law tract. One has to bear in mind, of course, that this methodology should not be overstretched. Apart from the challenges imposed by the diverse ways composite volumes are formed, even the textual arrangement in a unitary manuscript is always subject to the availability of exemplars in a given scriptorium and the interests of individual scribes. During the binding and re-binding processes, the sequence of the quires may have been disrupted, thus concealing the original intent of the compiler, especially when the beginning of a text coincides with a new folio or a new quire. Despite these inherent difficulties, however, certain patterns do emerge from this investigation, and I am confident that the study of manuscript context will surely reveal more about how early Irish law texts were produced and perceived by the learned class.

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