In this essay, I wish to address what Liam Breatnach has called ‘the striking contrast between the wealth of praise poems from the post-Norman period in Ireland and the paucity of such poems surviving from the pre-Norman period’. Breatnach himself cautiously suggests that ‘as for the question of survival of early praise poems, it is hardly one that can be addressed in isolation from that of Early Irish writing as a whole’. Doubtless he is wise to draw our attention to the need to avoid considering the poetry in isolation from other forms of literature, but there is a danger that in stressing the poor survival of manuscripts produced in Ireland from before the twelfth century he is perhaps failing to distinguish, clearly enough, the manuscripts themselves from works of the Old or Middle Irish period preserved in them. In what follows, I wish to approach this problem from an altogether different angle. While not denying that praise poetry, for secular patrons and honorands, may have been composed in the Old Irish period, and certainly was, to some extent, in the Middle Irish, I would like to take my lead from James Carney’s misgivings about Caerwyn Williams’ willingness to conflate evidence drawn from Norse, Anglo-Saxon and above all, of course, Welsh sources in producing an image of The court poet in medieval Ireland.

In what follows, it will be argued that one factor, doubtless among many, contributing to the paucity of secular praise poems composed for living honorands surviving from early Ireland was that the social and physical conditions of the period did not lend themselves to the production of such works. It will be argued that the retained court poet, if we can term him such, was largely absent from royal households in the Old Irish period and only gradually began to emerge in the course of the Middle Irish period. Indeed, it might be argued that the emergence of such figures in the literary and social landscape went hand in hand with the transformations of Irish rulers from kings to warlords that our own honorand, Katharine Simms, has done so much to elucidate. For a panegyric tradition to flourish, both an appropriate audience and an appropriate venue must present themselves. We must, therefore, turn our attention to the king’s household and the king’s house.

1 Liam Breatnach, ‘Satire, praise and the early Irish poet’, Ériu, 56 (2006), 63–84 at 63.
2 Ibid., 82.
3 The significance of this distinction should become clear in what follows.
Williams’ synthetic construct of a court poet is perhaps best encapsulated in his description of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*:

Like the ollav, the *pencerdd* and the skald, the *scop* had at court an important post which he might lose to another, or leave to take up a similar post elsewhere. His primary function was to compose and sing to the accompaniment of his harp songs which would spread the fame of his royal patron. He could also sing songs which celebrated the mighty deeds of ancient heroes: indeed, his mind was full of the traditional and heroic lore which he needed as court genealogist and historian.  

What I would like to question here is Williams’ assertion that composing and singing ‘songs which would spread the fame of his royal patron’ was the ‘primary function’ of the early Irish poet. In the commentary to his edition of *Uraicecht na ríar*, Breatnach adverts to a variety of passages in the legal corpus that suggest that in the Old Irish period the ollam was ‘rather an official of the túath’ than ‘an official appointee of the king’. This important observation gives weight to the unease expressed by David Dumville when considering the history of Gaelic poetry, which arises, he argues from the fact that the received scholarly history of medieval Gaelic literature has for more than a century insisted on the essential continuity of the public and political role of the poet from a remote Celtic antiquity. That has rested above all on arguments from the vocabulary of poets and poetry in the Celtic languages, and their etymological analysis using the techniques of comparative Indo-European philology, which have created a picture of the imagined forebear in Celtic prehistory of the later medieval Gaelic public poet, the court poet as he is commonly known.

Archaeology and historical studies have increasingly emphasized the dynamic nature of medieval Irish society and it is to this area that we must now turn to investigate the context of performance in the Old Irish period. If poets performed panegyrics to living secular patrons, where did they do this and who was there to listen to their performance?

The great public sites of early medieval Ireland were open-air venues, the sites of inaugurations and *óenaig*. What strikes the visitor to royal residence sites is how cramped they appear. For me, this was brought home most forcefully on a visit to the twin Clann Cholmáin sites at Dún na Scíath and Cró–inis on Lough

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Ennell. From the ninth to the eleventh century, these were among the most favoured residences of some of the most powerful kings in Ireland. Recent reanalysis of the archaeological evidence from another Clann Cholmáin royal site, at Uisnech, by Roseanne Schot, allows us to have a greater understanding of the spatial layout of such a royal residence at Rathnew. This is a bivallate ringfort made up of two conjoined enclosures, a larger one to the east (with an internal diameter of 65m) and a smaller to the west (enclosing an area of approximately 37 by 30m).8 Most significant for our present purposes is the largest building found within the ringfort, the so-called ‘Eastern House’, apparently in use between the eighth and the eleventh century, at a conservative estimate, with the possibility of extending this period at either end of the span. This building was modified, with additional small chambers added, in the course of its lifetime, but its earliest, largest and principal chamber enclosed a 'sub-rectangular space with maximum dimensions of approximately 6.7m east–west by 6m north–south'.9 This gives an overall floor area of about 40.2m². When we compare this with the well-known seventh-century Anglo-Saxon royal hall from Yeavering, in Northumberland, which comes in with a clear floor area in the main chamber of 226m², we have to concede that we are looking at two buildings with very different functions.

It cannot be emphasized strongly enough at this point, however, that what concerns me here is not the relative wealth or power of the kings of Clann Cholmáin and those of the Bernicians. The former may well have been able to muster as many or more fighting men. What is under scrutiny here is the social use of space in the practice of kingship. When we think of the royal feasting hall in the Germanic-speaking world, the archetype in literary terms is probably Heorot, the hall of the Danish King Hrothgar in the poem Beowulf. The historical prototype for this hall has, apparently, now been identified and excavated at Lejre in Denmark, and it has a floor space of over 550m².10 Lejre is remarkable, even in Scandinavia, but it is nonetheless the case that for much of what we might consider the Old Irish period, which also coincides with the heyday of the ringfort (c.600 to 900), royal residences in Germanic-speaking Europe were considerably larger than those in Ireland.

In Anglo-Saxon England in the period up to about 600, the average house was 10 to 12m long and about 5m in breadth, giving a floor area of 50 to 60m². Large halls, like that found at Yeavering, emerge in the decades around 600 and, in the course of the seventh century, houses less than 6m in length but of the same proportions (and thus with less than 18m² of floor space) also became increasingly common.11 This clearly reflects a quite dramatic, if somewhat

9 Ibid., 60.
11 Helena Hamerow, Early medieval settlements: the archaeology of rural communities
gradual, change in social structure, widening the gap between kings and their people. In Ireland, the average floor area of excavated houses from the early medieval period is in the region of 45m², slightly smaller than the normal early Anglo-Saxon examples, but perhaps not appreciably so, since their very roundness may have made the use of space more flexible. At the time Chris Lynn made his survey of early medieval houses, the largest round house to have been identified was that excavated by John Bradley at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. This early medieval phase of the crannog had a secure post quem date, supplied by dendrochronology, of 748. The larger of the two houses found on the platform had an internal diameter of 10m, giving it an area of about 78m². When compared to the Anglo-Saxon evidence, this is still, however massive for Ireland, on a scale nearer to that of the average early house than it is to a hall like Yeavering, which has almost twice the floor space and was situated in a complex with multiple other relatively substantial buildings.

The impression that we gain from archaeology, that even the largest houses in the Old Irish period were considerably less capacious than their Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian equivalents, finds support in the textual evidence. The starting place is, inevitably, Crith Gablach:

§45. What is the due (córus) enclosure of a king (dún rí) who is always in residence at the head of his people (tíath)? Seven-score feet of proper (inraic) feet are the measure of his dún on every side; seven feet are the thickness of its earthwork (talmatha); and twelve feet its depth (domnae). It is then that he is a rí, when [earth-]works of vassalage (dréchtai gíallnai) surround him. What is the drécht gíallnai? Twelve feet are the breadth of its opening and its depth and its measure towards the dún; thirty feet are its measure outwardly. There are clergy (cléirig) for making the prayers of his house: a wagon of charcoal, a wagon of rushes, for every man [of them?]. The lord (flaith) who has taken the clerical-staff (bachall) is not entitled to have his dún made, but only his house; his house [measures] thirty-seven feet, there are seventeen beds in a royal house.

in North-west Europe, 400–900 (Oxford, 2002), pp 46–8. C.J. Lynn, ‘Houses in rural Ireland, AD300–1000’, Ulster Journal of Archaeology, 3rd ser., 57 (1994), 81–94. For a more recent and very useful discussion, see Aidan O’Sullivan, ‘Early medieval houses in Ireland: social identity and dwelling spaces’, Peritia, 20 (2008), 225–56. John Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, County Meath’, JRSAI, 121 (1991), 5–26. Ibid., 13–16. The translations of this text used below are from a slightly modernized rewording of Eoin MacNeill’s translation from ‘Ancient Irish Law: the Law of Status or Franchise’, PRIA, 36C (1921–4 [1923]), 265–316, collated with editorial comment and corrections from D.A. Binchy’s edition of the text (Dublin, 1941), by James Fraser of the University of Edinburgh. James Fraser prepared this presentation of Crith Gablach as an aid for teaching history students and has been good enough to share it with me. It is with his permission that I reproduce sections of it here. The footnotes within the quotations are his. As Binchy, Crith Gablach, 38, observed, the drécht gíallnai must relate back to the labour (drécht)
As Aidan O’Sullivan has pointed out, the proportion given here for the king’s house, 37 feet, is almost exactly the diameter of the house found on the Moynagh Lough crannog and, indeed, Edel Bhreathnach has concluded that this crannog is very likely to be Loch Dé Mundech, a royal site of the Mugdorna.17

Crith Gablach also gives us a description of the social arrangements within the royal house:

§46. How is the house of a king (tech ríg) arranged? The rí’s hirelings (amuis) on the south. Question: What amuis are proper (coir) for a rí? A man freed (sóeras) from blood (crú) [that is, being killed], a man freed from the branch (gabul) [that is, lynching], a man freed from captivity (cimbidecht), a man freed from service (fognum), from base-cottership (dóerbothus), from base-tenancy (dóerfuidrius); he does not keep a man saved from battle (róe), lest he betray him or slay him from feelings of grievance (sóeth) or patriotism (condalbae). What number of amuis is proper (coir) for a rí? Four, to wit, a frontman (rigthid)18 and a rearguard (seirthith)19 and two side-men (tóebthaid), these are their names; it is these that are (coir) to be in the south side of a rí’s house, to accompany him from house into field, from field into house. A man of pledge for vassals (fer gill gíallnai) next to these inward. What is this man’s dignity (míad)? A man who has land of seven cumala, who stands over their séoit in regard to lord (flaith) and church (andón) and common law (cúrus Féne).20 Next to him inward, messengers (techta); next to these guest-companies (dáama); poets (éicis) next to these; harpers (cruitti) next, pipers (cuislennaig), horn-players (cornairi), jugglers (clessamnaig) in the south-east. On the other side, in the north, a man-at-arms (fénnid), a warrior (fergniae) to guard the door: each of them having his spear in front of him always against chaos (cumascc) of the ale-house (cuirmthech). Next to these inward, the free clients (sóerchéli) of the lord (flaith) – these are the folk who are company (coímthecht) to a rí; hostages (géill) next to these, the judge (brithem) next to these; his wife or his brithem next to him;21 the rí next. Forfeited hostages (géill díthma) in fetters in the north-east.

At first glance, this looks like a very crowded house, but it may be that the large number of ‘entertainers’ includes interchangeable or alternate categories, not all of whom would be present at any one time. The internal circumferences of the

performed by the base-client (céle gíallnai) for his lord (§9). 17 O’Sullivan, ‘Early medieval houses’ at 245, Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Topographical note: Moynagh Lough, Nobber, Co Meath’, Ríochta na Midhe, 9/4 (1998), 16–19. 18 Literally ‘forearm’. 19 Literally ‘heel’. 20 Binchy, Críth Gablach, 38, supposed that the meaning of this description of the fer gill gíallnai is that he was responsible for ensuring that the king’s base-clients discharged their obligations to lord, church and common law, and pledged his entire property as security. 21 Binchy, Críth Gablach, 38, suspected that ‘or his brithem’ was a mistake, though he
house at the wall was less than 32 m and so this limits the number of people who could sit around in a circle, particularly when we consider that furnishing and storage probably restricted access to the wall itself and that the circumference of the social space would have been considerably smaller. If the back wall was a metre behind people’s backs, the circumference of the social circle would be only 25 m around. Bearing in mind that the doorway and other features may have prevented the seating from encompassing a full circle, then we are probably looking at a building with a capacity for seating only about twenty-five adults. What I would like to focus on now is what one might term the military retinue, which is often represented as the principal audience for court poetry in Germanic and Welsh literature. Here we have the fénnid, the fergniae and possibly the amuis, whose status, whether principally guards or man-servants, is ambiguous. This gives us a maximum of six retained household warriors, four of whom have decidedly base origins.

This brings me to the central thesis of my argument: before the Viking Age, early Irish kings did not retain war-bands and thus the social context that led to the existence of retained court poets in some other medieval societies did not exist. Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* has a number of stories that illustrate the practice of young men of good birth seeking out service as members of kings’ military retinues. Most famously, he talks of Oswine, king of the Deiri (c.642–51), to whom ‘noblemen from almost every kingdom flocked to serve him as retainers (*ad eius ministerium*)’.22 It seems to have been expected that young men would join the king’s retinue for a few years in their teens and early twenties and that, having survived, they would be given land to hold of the king and become something more like the sóerchéli of Irish legal texts.23 As young men, however, ‘the comitatus ate and slept in the hall at the king’s expense. It was at feasts in the great hall that the pledges of loyalty were made and gifts in the form of weapons and other items of a warrior’s equipment were handed over’.24

The absence of the comitatus, the retained hearth-troop, marks a significant difference between Old Irish society and the world of Beowulf and Bede. To some extent, this analysis occupies some of the same territory travelled by Daniel Binchy in his seminal O’Donnell Lectures delivered in Oxford in 1968,25 though I would not agree with Patrick Wormald’s caricature of Binchy’s Irish king as a

‘priestly vegetable’. Frazer and Dumezil appear too frequently, perhaps, for many modern tastes in Binchy’s essay, but here was a great deal more to it than that and his kings engaged in military activity and diplomacy on behalf of the *túath*. More recently, in Wormald’s *festschrift*, Thomas Charles-Edwards has also reemphasized these aspects both of Binchy’s analysis and of further evidence for the practice of dynamic and at times aggressive kingship in the Old Irish period. It seems clear, however, that when Irish kings led armies across the frontier it was the *slógad* of their *sóerchéli* that provided the backbone of their armies. Even in the legendary Ulster Cycle, the warriors who surround King Conchobar are married men who live at home, not *iuuenes* sleeping on his mead-benches; even the ever youthful Cú Chulainn.

*Iuuenes* are not absent from early Ireland, of course, but they fulfil a very different role as members of *fianna* living outside of, or at least on the edge of, ordered society. *Crith Gablach* does make provision for a single *fénnid* (*a fían* member) in the king’s household, but we should perhaps imagine him as a veteran of *fiannaigecht* who was not yet ready to settle down. Among the Anglo-Saxon sources, there is only one passage that seems to suggest the existence of an institution parallel to that of the Irish *fían*. This is the account of the youth of St Guthlac, which appears in the *Life* of the saint written by Felix sometime between 721 and 740. Guthlac’s youth can be dated quite closely, since he was apparently both born and received into religion at the age of twenty-four in the reign of Æðelræd of Mercia who reigned from 675 to 704. This allows us to locate the first twenty-four years of Guthlac’s life within a twenty-nine-year window. We are told that at the age of about fifteen he ‘remembered the valiant deeds of heroes of old, and as though awaking from sleep, he changed his disposition and gathering bands of followers (*adgregatis satellitum turmis*) took up arms’. We are told that he ‘gathered together companions (*sociis*) from various races (*diversarum gentium*) and all directions (*undique*)’ and ‘amassed great booty’. After nine years, he obtained his vocation and told ‘his companions (*comitantibus*) to choose another leader (*ducem alium*) for their expedition (*itineris*)’.

This information (that the band of warriors were to choose their own leader as a replacement for Guthlac) is very suggestive, as indeed is the account of his gathering of socii initially, that his is a freelance troop of warriors living by predation rather than a retinue attached to a landed lord or king. It seems likely that Guthlac’s role was that of the Irish rigfennid in an Anglo-Saxon reflex of a fian.

Guthlac’s father is described as belonging to the Mercian stirps and as being descended from Icel, the eponymous founder of the Mercian dynasty.36 This dynasty is notable in providing the clearest evidence from Anglo-Saxon England that the kind of predatory segmentation we associate with Irish dynastic expansion was present in the early phases of English history.37 The first well-attested Mercian king, Penda (d. c.656), was said by Bede to have placed his son Peada as king over the Middle Angles (the people occupying the western drainage of the Fens).38 Eleventh-century sources claim that the king ruling in the English-controlled areas between the Wye and the Severn in the mid-seventh century, Merewalh, was also a son of Penda.39 Guthlac’s own father, Penwalh, was said to dwell in the land of the Middle Angles and to have great wealth and more than one hall (aula) and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he held some form of kingship there.40 Bearing in mind Charles-Edwards’ suggestion that, on their appearance in the Midland kingdoms of Ireland, the Connachta rigdamnai Coirpre and Fiachu may have been ‘acting as leaders of Fíanna rather than as the kings of peoples’,41 we might imagine that the arrival of Icling rulers in various territories in the English Midlands resulted from a similar process. We have seen that among the Anglo-Saxons the great hall made its first appearance in the decades around 600, about the same time as princely burials appeared, so we might speculate that before this transformation took hold across the country the military organization of the Saxons may have been closer to that which we can see in our Old Irish evidence. The rise of the great hall, and the culture that went with it, might be seen, in some ways, as a reflection of the domestication of the fian by kings.

If the idea of a royal military household, such as the Old English hirede or Welsh teulu, can be seen, to some extent, as a coming together of the rigthech and the fian, we should, perhaps, also look at a third institution in Old Irish society that fulfilled some of its functions. An institution with which no student of early Irish literature can be unfamiliar is that of the ‘hostel’, as it is conventionally

iter. 36 VG, §§1 and 2. 37 The multiplicity of contemporary members of the West-Saxon dynasty bearing the title ‘king’ before the 680s might suggest something similar in that part of the country but our sources do not allow us to identify their geographical distribution. 38 HE, III.21. 39 Margaret Gelling, The west midlands in the early Middle Ages (London, 1992), pp 80–3. 40 VG, §§1 and 11. While it is common for Anglo-Saxon hagiography to draw attention to the identity of nuns as the daughters of kings, no male monastic saints are explicitly stated to be the sons of kings. This may have more to do with the sensibilities of the hagiographers than the origins of their subjects. 41 Early Christian Ireland, p. 468.
translated, in Old Irish *bruiden*. These are the venues for encounters of groups of warriors from different communities that begin with uneasy cordiality but inevitably break down into extreme violence. In Anglo-Saxon literature, such encounters tend to take place in the context of the royal hall; one thinks immediately of the falling out of the Danes and Frisians in Finn Folcwalsa’s hall at Finnsburgh, or the falling out of the Danes and Heathobards at Ingeld’s court predicted by the eponymous hero of *Beowulf*. In the Irish literature, it is notable that the *bruiden* is not presided over by the king but by a proprietor bearing the title *briugu*. His status is described in the legal text *Uraicecht Becc.*

A hospitaller (*briugu*) is of the same status as a lord (*flaith*) if he have twice as much again as every grade of land and tillage on account of his lineage and the excess renders of lordship. He is not a hospitaller (*brigu*) who is not hundredfold (*cétach*). He does not exclude any condition (of person). He does not refuse any company. He does not reckon it against anyone, however often he come. He is a hospitaller (*briugu*) in that. He has the same honour-price as the king of a petty kingdom (*tuath*). The superior hospitaller (*briugu leitech*), he has twice as much property, possesses an immovable cauldron, [and there are] three highways by him.

What is notable here is that the *briugu* has the same honour-price as a king, a distinction he shares with the bishop and the *ollam*. This may suggest that he too, like the *ollam*, was originally an ‘official of the *tuath*’. As Simms has shown, by the later Middle Ages, the term *briugu* (or rather its early modern form *brughaidh*) seems to have become almost synonymous with *biatach* (‘someone who provides food-rent’) and lost the very specific sense that it had in the law codes, and it seems likely that the institution described in the earlier period was no longer present in Irish society. If in the earlier period the *briugu* was a unique individual within the *tuath* paralleled in status with the king, the bishop and the *ollam*, then we should probably see him as the provider of a communal venue for feasting, entertainment and performance, a role played by the royal hall in Anglo-Saxon society from the seventh century onward. If the *bruiden* provided a potential venue for much of the activity of the *filid*, then it might go some way towards explaining the absence of panegyric as a major part of his repertoire.

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42 The *locus classicus* of this trope is Secl Mucce Meic Dathó, edited by Rudolf Thurneysen (Dublin, 1935), but a *bruiden* is also the principal setting for Togail Bruiden Da Dega, ed. Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1936) and Bruiden Da Choca, ed. Whitley Stokes, RC, 21 (1900), 149–65, 312–27 and 389–402. 43 For the Finnsburgh episode, see J.R.R. Tolkien, Finn and Hengest: the fragment and the episode, ed. A. Bliss (London, 1982); for Heathobards and Danes, see Beowulf, ll 2020–69. 44 The translation is that of Kim McConen his paper ‘Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair: hounds, heroes and hospitallers in early Irish myth and story’, Ériu, 35 (1984), 1–30. The text can be found in CIH, 1608. 45 To reprise Liam Breatnach’s phrase, cited above. 46 Katharine Simms, ‘Guesting and feasting in Gaelic Ireland’, *JRSAI*, 108 (1978), 67–100 at 71–3.
One difficulty with this interpretation of the *bruiden* is the absence of archaeological evidence for large halls in early medieval Ireland, outlined above. If, however, the arguments laid out so far allow us to detach the concept of a ‘feasting hall’ from that of a ‘lordly residence’, several possibilities present themselves. Firstly, if the *bruiden* was not primarily a domestic residence it need not have been as substantial as some other buildings and may even have been temporary or semi-permanent in structure. Secondly, even if it were a substantial timber-framed building, if it was not located within a ringfort or on a crannog, but on an unenclosed site, then examples may have avoided detection and investigation by modern archaeology. Identifying structures from unenclosed sites has proved a perennial problem in Ireland, where modern agricultural practice does not lend itself to the identification of crop-marks through aerial photography.

To summarize the argument so far, I have attempted to make a case that at least one factor affecting the paucity of surviving praise poetry from before 1200 and particularly from the Old Irish period may be that the social context which produced analogous poetic traditions, such as Old Norse skaldic verse or the poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd* in Wales, that is to say the feasting hall in which the king or other great lord retained a standing body of warrior *iuuenes*, was not present in early Ireland. Let us now look back at James Carney’s catalogue of early poetry and see how compatible what survives is with this interpretation.47

The Leinster poems that Carney would place earliest in the sequence are of dynastic and genealogical concern and seem to focus on glorifying the descendants of Cathair Már, the apical figure of the Laigin dynasties.48 There is no particular focus on an individual king and none of the hectoring demands that usually accompany the full-blown panegyric and so these poems may well have been a part of the repertoire of a poet performing for a public audience, that of the *túath*, or in this case the *coíced*, the province, as a whole. A similar public audience can be imagined for the surviving poems of Luccreth moccu Chíara, whose *floruit* Carney placed in the decades around 600, but which must have been in the second half of the seventh century if we accept his authorship of *Cú-Cen-Máthair*, which celebrates the descent from Adam of a Munster overking whose predecessor died in 662 and whose own *obit* is noticed under the year 665.49 As a Scottish historian, *Cú-Cen-Mathair* immediately puts me in mind of the Gaelic poem allegedly recited at the inauguration of Alexander III in 1249 that also traced the king’s descent back to Adam.50 The pedigree in the Munster poem has been demonstrated to be dependent upon the ordering of nations found in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*.51 This dependence on Latin learning...
might suggest that Luccreth moccu Chíara was either in the clerical grades or at least had access to an ecclesiastical education. He has been identified with the Luccrad son of Áine in the Ciarraige pedigrees, who is said there to have had no issue and to have had ‘his dwelling place on the south side of the church of Cluain’.52 This last phrase presumably refers to his grave being in the sunny half of the churchyard.53 If this is so, then, together with childlessness and the knowledge of Isidore, this strongly supports the idea that Luccrith moccu Chíara was an ecclesiastic.54

Two earlier poets also display their connections with the church. The author of Amra Choluimb Chille, identified as Dallán Forgaill, makes many references to ecclesiastical texts and personalities that it is hard to account for unless we see him as having had at least some elements of an ecclesiastical education.55 Stanza eight of this poem names an Áed, plausibly as the commissioner of the poem, and there seems to be some consensus that this is the Cenél Conaill dynast Aed mac Ainmerech, whose death is recorded as having occurred in the year after Colum Cille’s.56 This identification has principally been used to argue that the Amra is indeed an immediate response to the death of the saint.57

The second early poet with ecclesiastical connections is Colmán mac Lénéni, whom Carney treats in some detail in his 1971 paper on ‘accentual poems’.58 Carney’s optimism about our ability to fix on the chronology of Colmán’s career reflects the age in which he was writing; we must be a little more circumspect. His death is recorded in AT s.a. 604. Colmán is celebrated as the founder of Cloyne and thus there may be an institutional connection between him and Luccrith. In the historical tract ‘Conall Corc and the Corcu Luígde’, Colmán is described as one of the three ex-soldiers of Ireland and the foundation of Cloyne is ascribed to the Munster king Coirpre mac Crimthain.59 In the relatively late Vita Prima Sancti Brendani, Colmán’s conversion to religion is attributed to Brendan of Clonfert but there is no particular reason to regard this as an early tradition.60 Coirpre’s death is noted in AT s.a. 579 and Brendan’s in AU, AT and CS, s.a. 577.6. Brendan’s foundation of Clonfert is placed at AU 558.3. Were we to take these chronological markers at face value, it would give us a relatively close foundation date for Cloyne between 558 and 570. However, it is not at all clear that we should take them seriously, although two poems attributed to Colmán do have potential ‘historical tags’. One is a fragment of a lament for Áed
Sláine, who died in 604, and thus must date from Colmán’s time as abbot of Cloyne, if the attribution stands. The other, known by its first line as Luin oc elab, mentions a Domnall who compares favourably to kings (ríg oc Domnall). Thurneysen identified this Domnall with Domnall mac Æeda, the son of that Æed mac Ainmerech whom we met in connection with the Amra. To Carney, it ‘seems likely’ that the Domnall in question is the joint-king of Tara in 565, Domnall mac Maic Ercae, on the grounds that Domnall mac Æeda did not become king of Tara until 628. If this identification, and the attribution of the poem to Colmán, were correct, then it would pre-date the lament for Æed Sláine by nearly forty years and would probably be a product, it is argued, of Colmán’s pre-monastic career. Weight is given to this assumption by the final line of the poem, colg oc mo chaolg-se, ‘sword next to my sword’, reminding us of the claim in ‘Conall Corc and the Corcu Luigde’ that Colmán was an ex-soldier. There are problems here though. The line itself may have been the source of the belief that Colmán had been a soldier. The line might be metaphorical – we need think only of St Patrick’s lorica. All in all, neither the identification of the Domnall nor the content of the poem is enough to assure that this is definitely not an ecclesiastical product and it may well be that the evidence for the date of the verses on Æed Sláine is the best guide to Colmán’s floruit as a poet.

The evidence presented here, then, suggests that these early poems addressed to kings were produced by churchman and were not panegyric in character. Churchmen of course looked to kings for patronage, protection and endowments, and it may be that it was the incorporation of some of the filid into the ecclesiastical grades that first encouraged poets to look to kings as patrons rather than as colleagues in the running of the túath. Did secular ‘hall culture’ appear in Ireland towards the end of the Old Irish period or in the course of the Middle Irish? The archaeological record has yet to reveal great halls of this period, but a number of clues in the archaeological record might incline us to imagine that it will before too long. One is the well-known change of the predominant house design from circular to rectangular, which more-or-less coincides with the period of transition from Old to Middle Irish around AD900. The motivation for this change has been much discussed, but no consensus has as yet emerged. One possible explanation is that while the rectangular houses identified so far are not much larger than their round predecessors, they may be a product of elite emulation and that elsewhere, particularly as kings began to interact with, and adopt aspects of, Scandinavian culture, royal halls were taking on a new form and function. In such new spaces, new social practices, growing organically out of those that had been developing over the previous centuries, may have emerged and we may have begun to see the emergence of the retained court poet.