THE USE OF IRELAND'S WOODLAND IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

Dr Fergus Kelly
School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
10 Burlington Rd., Dublin 4
Tel: 01 6140175 Fax: 01 6680561
Email: fkelly@celt.dias.ie

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Abstract

The main documentary evidence on the uses of woodland in medieval Ireland is provided by the Old Irish law-texts, which date from the seventh to ninth centuries AD. A text on the law of neighbourhood entitled Bretha Comaithchesa contains a list of twenty-eight trees and shrubs, divided on economic grounds into four groups of seven. The seven most important trees are described as the 'lords of the wood', and are listed as the oak, hazel, holly, yew, ash, Scots pine, and wild apple. It is of particular interest that the pine is included in this list, as it is generally held to have become extinct in Ireland in later medieval times. A ninth-century commentary on this law-text states that the pine is valued as a source of resin.

The law-texts also provide information on other uses of woodland, in particular the right of landowners to graze their livestock in wooded commonage during the summer months. There were also privately owned woods, in which trespass by livestock would incur heavy fines. As in other medieval societies, deer and wild pig were hunted or trapped in woodland, though there are no records of royal hunting preserves.

Introduction

I am most grateful to the organisers of this conference on Ireland's Native Woodland for asking me to contribute a brief account of what Old and Middle Irish texts tell us of woodland use. By far the most important of these documents are the early Irish (Brehon) law-texts, which date from between the seventh and ninth centuries AD. Luckily for posterity, the authors of these texts were accustomed to treat each topic in very considerable detail, so they provide us with a great deal of information not merely on strictly legal issues but on many aspects of early Irish economic history. The use of woodland is mentioned in various law-texts, but our main source is *Bretha Comaithchesa* 'judgements of neighbourhood', which can be dated to the eighth century. It provides a classification of the economic value of twenty-eight trees and shrubs. They are arranged in four groups of seven: the seven 'lords of the wood' (*airig fedo*), the seven 'commoners of the wood' (*aithig fhedo*), the seven 'lower divisions of the wood' (*fodla fedo*), and the seven 'bushes of the wood' (*losa fedo*) (Kelly 1976). The author does not provide us with a complete inventory of all native Irish woody plants, but his list gives a fairly comprehensive and logical classification.[1]

I deal first with the 'lords of the wood'. There is nothing surprising about the lawyer's choice of the seven most valuable trees in the wood, namely oak, hazel, holly, yew, ash, Scots pine and wild apple. A ninth-century legal commentary on *Bretha Comaithchesa* even provides us with a brief explanation as to why each of these trees is particularly esteemed. The value of the oak is said to derive from 'its acorns and its use for woodwork'. In modern times, an abundant acorn-crop (*dairmes*) is not the subject of wide general interest or even deemed worthy of comment in the newspapers. In medieval times, on the other hand, a good crop of acorns was an

[1] Native trees and shrubs missing from the list are purging buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), bird cherry (*Prunus padus*), dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), and privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*). Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and ivy (*Hedera helix*) are included in some versions of the *losa fedo* 'bushes of the wood'.

event to be recorded in the annals as it meant well fattened pig, a favourite dish at early Irish feasts. A legal commentator from about the twelfth century calculates that in a good year a single oak can provide enough acorns to fatten one pig. The oak-tree was also highly regarded for the quality of its wood – it has emerged recently that oak-wood was even exported from Ireland to provide beams and rafters for the roof of Salisbury cathedral, dated by dendrochronology to the spring of 1222. Another use of oak also frequently mentioned in legal material is the provision of bark for tanning leather. Early Irish law took a poor view of the person who cuts off the bark of an oak-tree belonging to somebody else. He must pay a fine of one ox-hide – an appropriate penalty – and must cover the wound with a mixture of smooth clay, cow-dung and fresh milk until there has been the width of two fingers' new growth on all sides, i.e. until the tree has properly recovered. This technique is clearly the equivalent of the various modern air-excluding preparations used when a tree has been damaged or pruned. While on the topic of damage to oak-trees, I should also mention a reference in an undated scrap of vellum inserted into the fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan in the Library of Trinity College Dublin. It records that 'an abundance of moths came into West Connacht so that they did not leave a leaf on an oak in the whole territory of O'Flaherty'. This is no doubt a reference to the moth *Tortrix viridana*, capable of defoliating large areas of oakwood. Finally, I should note that the texts contain no references to a distinction between *Quercus robur* and *Quercus petraea* – both are simply *dair* (also spelled *daur*).

It might seem surprising to find the relatively small hazel-tree (*coll*) included among the 'lords of the wood', but it was clearly of considerable importance in the early Irish economy: our legal commentary states that it was valued for 'its nuts and its rods'. Hazel-nuts were a highly prized element in the human diet and good nut-years were regularly recorded in the annals. For example, the Annals of Ulster record that in the year 836 there was such a heavy crop of hazel-nuts that the rivers were blocked, and a similar entry was made in 1066. Sometimes, the annals record that both the acorn-crop (*dairmess*) and the nut-crop (*cnómess*) were abundant in a particular year. Hazel-rods were widely used in the construction of fences, enclosures and house-walls. We are told in a law-text that a lord is entitled to receive a cartload of rods – presumably hazel-rods – every year from each of his clients.

The next three 'lords of the wood' are said in our legal commentary to be prized mainly for the quality of their wood. Thus, the holly-tree (*cuilenn*) was valued for providing shafts for chariots, while the yew (*ibar*) furnished the material for domestic vessels, such as bowls, mugs, etc. The ash (*uinnius*) was used to make furniture and spear-shafts. In addition, the text contains a reference – rather obscurely worded – to the use of holly-branches as winter-fodder for livestock. The feeding of the uppermost – and relatively spineless – branches of holly to cattle is known to have been practised in Kerry within living memory. Writing in the late fourteenth century, Count John de Perilhos – a Catalan pilgrim to Saint Patrick's Purgatory, Co. Donegal – states that the beasts of the area 'eat only grass instead of oats, and the leaves of the holly which they roast a little on account of the prickles which are in the leaves' (Mahaffy 1914). In early Irish legal material, there is even mention of a special hook designed for cutting holly and ivy. In this context, it should also be noted that our texts indicate that little or no hay was saved in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion (Kelly 1997). There would therefore have been a special need to procure food for livestock during harsh winters when grass-growth was held in check by low temperatures.

The sixth member of the 'lords of the wood' is of especial interest because it is a tree, which is generally held to have become extinct in Ireland in later medieval times, and to have been reintroduced around 1700 (Mitchell 1976, Forbes 1933). This is the Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), for which the well-attested Old Irish term is *ochtach*, which is used in a seventh-century gloss to explain Latin *pinus* 'pine'. Strangely, our ninth-century legal commentary makes no mention of the uses of the wood of this tree, and refers to it merely as a source of resin (*bí*). Pine-resin was used to make pitch for caulking boats, preserving wood, etc. Other literary texts from this period refer to the use of pine-trees for the masts of ships and for the construction of dwelling-houses. A Latin life of Saint Samthann describes how monastic builders spent four days in the woods of Connacht searching vainly for pines with which to build a refectory. An adequate number was eventually found through the miraculous intervention of the saint. This story suggests that a decline in the abundance of the tree was already underway around the beginning of the first millennium and fits in with the evidence of pollen-analysis.

The seventh of the 'lords of the wood' is the apple-tree (*aball*), which is stated to be of value for its fruit and its bark (*a mess ocus a rúsc*). In present times, the fruit of the wild crab-apple (*Malus sylvestris*) is not held in high esteem, except to make a tart jelly. But in the early Christian period, sources of vitamin C with the capacity to keep fresh well into the winter would have been much appreciated. Our texts tell us little about the early development of the cultivated apple in Ireland. One assumes that the early Irish would have noticed that individual apple-trees in the woods had slightly sweeter flesh or larger fruit. From as early as the ninth century we find a distinction in the texts between the wild and cultivated apple. However, it seems impossible to ascertain whether the early Irish cultivated apple derived solely from selected strains of the native apple or whether there was introduction of grafts or seeds from elsewhere. The technique of grafting apples, vines and other fruit-trees was well known to the Romans and is likely to have been witnessed by Irish monks on the Continent. As the Church is known to have been instrumental in the introduction of many food-plants to Ireland, it is probable that varieties of the cultivated apple were brought here in the early Christian period. It would be of interest to know whether any of the traditional Irish apple-varieties of more recent times – such as the Kerry Pippin, Blood of the Boyne or Irish Peach-apple – contain any genes going back to the native wild apple of Irish woodland. A name in the Irish language would indicate a variety of considerable antiquity. To my knowledge, the only variety with a distinctive Irish name is a cider-apple called the Cocagee, apparently an anglicisation of *cac a' ghé* 'goose-shit'. This seems a very strange name for an apple and I would be most grateful to hear from anyone who has seen this variety and can describe its appearance.

As we have seen, the other reason given in the legal commentary for allotting a high value to the apple-tree is its bark (*rúsc*). I have no explanation for this reference. The late Frank Mitchell made the point that the apple is a relatively small and valuable tree and that it would make no sense to damage it by stripping it of its bark (pers.comm.). However, the word *rúsc* is well-attested in the meaning 'bark, container made of bark' and seems to have no other meaning documented in the texts. John Tierney has suggested that the inner bark of the apple-tree may have been used to dye cloth yellow (pers.comm.)

Leaving the 'lords of the wood', I turn now to the seven 'commoners of the wood': alder, willow, whitethorn, rowan, birch, elm, and wild cherry (?). No distinction is made between different species of willow or birch. These are seven substantial and useful trees and damage to any of them attracts severe penalties, though considerably less than those for 'lords of the wood'. Thus the penalty-fine (*díre*) for one of the 'lords' is two milch cows and a three-year-old heifer, whereas the penalty-fine for one of the 'commoners' is only a milch cow.

Less information is provided in our sources about the uses of the 'commoners'. There are references to the use of the wood of the alder (*fern*) in the manufacture of shields, masts and tent-poles. The willow (*sail*) was employed in the construction of dwelling-houses, generally light impermanent structures. In addition, as in modern times, willow-rods were used for basket-making, wattling, tying up cattle, etc. The whitethorn (*scé*) features prominently in Irish folklore of more recent times as a tree with magical properties. In the early period, however, other trees – particularly oak, hazel, yew and rowan – have more association with the supernatural. There is little information on the use of the rowan (*cáerthann*), but it features prominently in literary sources and its beauty is widely extolled in verse. The graceful appearance of the birch (*beithe*) likewise attracted the attention of early Irish poets.

A 'commoner' of particular interest is the elm (*lem*), as the palaeobotanical evidence points to a catastophic decline in the abundance of this tree during the first millennium – Frank Mitchell puts it at about 500 AD. It is significant, therefore, that we find it included in our eighth-century tree-list. Furthermore, the word is an occasional element in place-names, such as *Lemchaill* 'elm-wood', and *Lemdruim* 'elm-hill'. It is well-known that cattle are particularly partial to elm-leaves and the Roman author Cato states that elm-leaves were routinely fed to sheep and cattle. An Irish text describes elm as 'the sustenance of cattle' and 'friend of cattle', so it is likely that the same practice was widespread in early Ireland. It may indeed have contributed to the decline of this tree, though elm-disease may also have been to blame.

The identity of the seventh tree in the 'commoners of the wood', *idath*, is uncertain. From a reference in a ninth-century poem, we know that this tree has edible berries – that is the extent of our information. I suggest that it refers to the wild cherry (*Prunus avium*), stones of which have been found at a number of excavations. The earliest archaeological evidence of the cultivated sweet cherry (*Prunus cerasus*) comes from an eleventh-century pit in Winetavern Street, Dublin. In general, this fruit belongs to the period after the Anglo-Norman invasion, and is known in Irish as *sirín* (or *silín*), a borrowing from Middle English *cherrie.*
The seven 'lower divisions of the wood' are listed as blackthorn, elder, spindle-tree, whitebeam (?), arbutus, aspen and juniper (?). The penalty-fine for damage to these trees is a yearling heifer. The blackthorn (*draigen*) is mentioned in early Irish sources mainly in the context of its sloes, which are included in legal commentary among the less prized categories of fruit. A ninth-century text makes a distinction between the wild sloe (*airne fiadain*) and the sweet sloe (*airne cumra*). This implies that some form of cultivated plum was grown in Ireland at this period, but no further details are provided. Little information is given in the texts about the elder (*trom*) or spindle-tree (*féorus*). The tree-name which I translate as whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) is *findcholl*, of which the literal meaning is 'white hazel'. But the hazel (*Corylus avellana*) already has a place among the 'lords of the wood', so the best guess seems to be that this name refers to the white undersides of the leaves of the whitebeam (Bertoldi 1927).

The most interesting tree in this group is the arbutus (*caithne*), now mainly confined to the south-west of Ireland, with a few trees around Lough Gill in Co. Sligo. In earlier times it was no doubt found at other locations near to the west coast. There is good place-name evidence of its former presence near Inchicronan, Co. Clare. In his article 'The forests of the counties of the Lower Shannon valley' Thomas Westropp records the name Derrynacaheny, which is doubtless an anglicisation of *Doire na Caithne* 'the oak-wood of the arbutus', i.e. a wood which is predominantly of oak, but with some arbutus (Westropp 1908-09). The sixth member of the 'lower divisions of the wood' is the aspen, for which the Irish term is *crithach* 'the shivering one'. The final tree in this category is *crann fir*, which has not been conclusively identified. A reference in a ninth-century poem indicates a fruit-bearing tree, perhaps juniper (*Juniperus communis*).

The seven least valued 'shrubs of the wood' have a penalty-fine of one sheep. There is considerable variation between the manuscripts, but the oldest version lists a fern and six woody shrubs: bracken, bog-myrtle, furze (gorse), bramble, heather, broom, and wild rose. A ninth-century legal glossator recognises the absurdity of imposing a fine for minor damage to such plants, and states that there is no penalty for cutting a single stem.

Conclusion

I conclude by discussing some of the uses of woodland in addition to the provision of timber, rods, firewood, nuts and fruit. The Old Irish law-texts make a distinction between privately owned woodland and woodland which is part of the commonage owned by a particular community. Any damage to private woods incurs a severe fine, except where there are special circumstances such as the need to cut rods to carry away a dead body or to gather firewood to cook a meal. In commonage, on the other hand, the people of the locality would have had the right to pick fruit, cut wood and graze their stock during the summer months. In some parts of the country, such woodland must have been very extensive and not sufficiently grazed to prevent regeneration. A ninth-century text gives the three principal wildernesses or wooded areas of Ireland as the Great Wood of Cooley in Co. Louth, the Wood of Déicsiu (probably on the slopes of Slieve Gallion, Co. Tyrone) and the Wood of Moithre in Connacht (Meyer 1906). In another ninth-century text, we find a reference to a great wood (*Fid Mór*) to the west of the Sperrin mountains (Mulchrone 1939) There has been much debate on the location of the Wood of Fochluth, mentioned in Saint Patrick's fifth-century Confession as being 'near the western sea'. The Patrician scholar Ludwig Bieler placed it near Killala in Co. Mayo, but without providing definite proof (Bieler 1979).

Our sources give us relatively little information on the ways in which woodland was managed by the early Irish. It is clear that privately owned woods would normally have been surrounded by a ditch or wall. A law-text on land-values emphasises that the worth of a wood is increased if there is access by road. A passage in the twelfth-century tale *Cath Ruis na Ríg* provides evidence of the use of the 'coppice and standards' method of wood-management, whereby a few large trees are allowed to grow to maturity while the underwood is

regularly coppiced to yield a crop of rods every decade or so. The author makes a vivid comparison between an army in which all the lesser warriors have been slain – leaving only the great champions – and an oak-wood in the middle of a plain in which all the underwood (*cáel*) has been removed, with only the great oaks remaining (Hogan 1892).

Finally, in many societies one of the principal human uses of woodland was for the hunting of game, particularly by kings and nobles. For example, the Scottish *Leges Forestarum* 'laws of the forests', which date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were designed to protect the king's hunting preserves from deer-poaching, tree-cutting and grazing by livestock. The early Irish aristocracy likewise clearly enjoyed hunting, particularly of the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and the wild pig (*Sus scrofa*), but there are no records of royal deer-forests or hunting preserves in our texts. Although chasing deer with hounds is also mentioned, the Old Irish law-texts concentrate mainly on trapping in pits or with hidden spikes. Such traps may be set in common land, but public warnings must be made as to their location so as to avoid injury to people or domestic livestock.

APPENDIX 1

List of twenty-eight trees and shrubs as arranged in the eighth-century law-text *Bretha Comaithchesa* 'judgements of neighbourhood'

Airig fedo 'lords of the wood'
Dair 'oak' (*Quercus robur, Quercus petraea*)
Coll 'hazel' (*Corylus avellana*)
Cuilenn 'holly' (*Ilex aquifolium*)
Ibar 'yew' (*Taxus baccata*)
Uinnius 'ash' (*Fraxinus excelsior*)
Ochtach 'Scots pine' (*Pinus sylvestris*)
Aball 'wild apple-tree' (*Malus pumila*)

B. **Aithig fhedo** 'commoners of the wood'
Fern 'alder' (*Alnus glutinosa*)
Sail 'willow, sally' (*Salix caprea, Salix cinerea,* etc.)
Scé 'whitethorn, hawthorn' (*Crataegus monogyna*)
Cáerthann 'rowan, mountain ash' (*Sorbus aucuparia*)
Beithe 'birch' (*Betula pubescens, Betula pendula*)
Lem 'elm' (*Ulmus glabra*)
Idath 'wild cherry (?)' (*Prunus avium*)

C. **Fodla fedo** 'lower divisions of the wood'
Draigen 'blackthorn' (*Prunus spinosa*)
Trom 'elder' (*Sambucus nigra*)
Féorus 'spindle-tree' (*Euonymus europaeus*)
Findcholl 'whitebeam (?)' (*Sorbus aria*)
Caithne 'arbutus, strawberry tree' (*Arbutus unedo*)
Crithach 'aspen' (*Populus tremula*)
Crann fir 'juniper (?)' (*Juniperus communis*)

D. **Losa Fedo** 'bushes of the wood'
Raith 'bracken' (*Pteridium aquilinum*)
Rait 'bog-myrtle' (*Myrica gale*)
Aitenn 'furze, gorse, whin' (*Ulex europaeus, Ulex gallii*)
Dris 'bramble' (*Rubus fruticosus* aggregate)
Fróech 'heather' (*Calluna vulgaris, Erica cinerea*, etc.)
Gilcach 'broom' (*Sarothamnus scoparius*)
Spín 'wild rose (?)' (*Rosa canina,* etc.)

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