EXCHANGE OF LIVESTOCK IN EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND, AD 450-1150

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Summary

Early Christian Ireland was essentially a rural society consisting of a large number of small independent political units known as tuath. "Market" exchange was generally of a peripheral and limited nature, confined primarily to exotic goods such as wines and large drinking horns which could not be obtained in Ireland. Despite the absence of a thriving market, there was still considerable movement and transfer of ownership, especially of livestock and foodstuffs, within the tuath.

Nobles and commoners continually exchanged goods, but not to obtain a more varied range of goods for consumption, as one does in a market economy. The goods exchanged were almost invariably agricultural produce and the people involved were almost invariably farmers. The goods were exchanged in order to maintain a contract institution known as clientship. The evidence indicates that the animal bones found on a rural site of the period cannot be assumed to represent the produce of the farm unit.

Key Words

Early Ireland, Livestock exchange, Clientship

Résumé

Echange de bétail dans l'Irlande chrétienne ancienne (450-1150 après J.-C.).

L'Irelande chrétienne ancienne était essentiellement rurale, composée de petites unités politiques indépendantes connues sous le nom de tuath. Le "marché" des échanges était généralement de nature périphérique et limitée, fondamentalement confiné aux prodits exotiques tels que le vin et de grandes cornes à boire qui ne pouvient pas être trouvées en Irelande. En dépit de l'absence d'un marché florissant, il existait d'importants mouvements de transfert de propriété, plus particulièrement de bétail et de denrées, à l'intérieur même des tuath.

Les nobles et les bourgeois échangeaient continuellement des biens, mais ils le faisaient pas dans le but d'acquérir une plus grande diversité de biens de consommation, comme cela se fait en économie de marché. Les biens échangés étaient presque toujours des produits agricoles et les intervenants étaient presque toujours des fermiers. Cet échange de biens avait pour but de maintenir une institution de contacts commerciaux. Cela montre que les ossements animaux issus de sites ruraux de cette période ne peuvent en aucun cas être tenus pour représentatifs de la production de l'unité d'exploitation correspondante.

Mots clés

Irlande ancienne, Echange de bétail, Relations commerciales

Introduction

Knowledge of social institutions between the fall of the Roman Empire and the high middle ages tends to be rather meagre for most of north western Europe. The exception to this is Ireland where a large and detailed body of law tracts, dating from the seventh century onwards, provide a unique description of the society of the period between the coming of Christianity in the fifth century and the Normans in the twelfth century (KELLY, 1988).

Early Irish society was a stateless society with the basic political and territorial unit consisting of the *túath*, or petty kingdom. This was an area of land owned by a tribe of common ancestry. It was ruled by a king, and its people consisted of rigid gradations of nobility, landed commoners and servile classes. Besides these were craftsmen and other specialists such as poets, clerics and jurists, many of whom were of high ranking status. It has been estimated that there were about 150 *túath* in Ireland at this time.

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The settlement pattern was strictly rural and was dominated by the dispersed farmstead, known as the ring-fort. Prior to the establishment of trading towns in the Scandinavian period, "market" exchange was generally restricted to the acquisition of exotic goods, most notably wine. In return, the literary evidence mentions the export of dogs, clothing and shoes (KENNY, 1922 : 137 : DOHERTY, 1980 : 77-78). Market exchange was, however, of very little importance within the actual *túath*, or kingdom, because virtually all of the commodities needed for everyday use were produced locally.

Despite the absence of a thriving market, there was still considerable movement and transfer of property ownership, especially of livestock and foodstuffs, within the *túath*. Nobles and commoners continually exchanged goods but not to obtain a more varied range of goods for consumption as one normally does in a market economy. The goods exchanged were almost invariably agricultural produce and the people involved always farmers. These exchanges "established and maintained personal ties between the parties which were the foundation of the Irish political and legal structure" (GERRIETS, 1981 : 172). These ties, or clientship contracts were regarded as being of the utmost importance, as may be inferred from the following statement in the "wisdom texts" : "There are three occasions when the world is in disorder : a sudden onset of plague ; the flood of war ; when verbal contracts are dissolved" (O'CORRAIN *et al.*, 1984 : 382).

Clientship

The nobility was distinguished from landed commoners by the fact that only the former could have clients. Birth was also an important consideration but it was possible for a landed commoner to join the ranks of the nobility despite his lowly birth. The status of a noble depended on the number of clients that he possessed. In "base" clientship the clients were land-holding commoners, while in "free" clientship the clients were nobles of inferior status to the lord. The institution of clientship was of fundamental importance because it preserved the hierarchical structure of Irish society and therefore ensured its stability. For the archaeozoologist its importance lies in the fact that it accommodated the widespread transfer of ownership of livestock and carcass meat.

The following discussion will deal with "base" clientship, the formal contract between a noble and a landed commoner. According to the laws, a noble of any given status required a set number of clients of, again, legally designated status (tab. 1). Therefore, a noble, in order to maintain the rank of *aire forgill* needed five clients of *mruigfer* status, six of *bóaire* and nine of *ócaire*. The laws are, of course, highly schematised and should be interpreted as idealised descriptions, whose application was, in reality, being much less rigid. The two law tracts which deal extensively with clientship are the *Críth Gablach* and the *Cáin Aigillne*. Both tracts differ in detail but the basic mechanics of the clientship contract are the same.

Ranks of landed commoner clients

Ranks of Nobility	Mruigfer	Bóaire	Ocaire
Aire Désa	1	1	3
Aire Ard	2	3	5
Aire Túise	4	5	6
Aire Forgill	5	6	9

Table 1 : The number of landed commoner clients of different status needed for nobility of different status according to the *Críth Gablach* (MAC NOICAILL, 1981 : 7).

The ability of a noble to enter into contracts was dependent on his ownership of cattle, particularly cows, as dairying rather than beef production dominated livestock husbandry. As DOHERTY (1980 : 73) noted, "it was not the size of his herd that mattered but that by giving his cattle as a fief to others he could bind other men to himself as vassals". A typical clientship contract operated as follows. Once agreement on forming the contract had been reached, the noble provided the client with an investment of livestock, the size of which depended on the legal status of the client. The noble also undertook to legally protect, and militarily defend, the property and legal rights of the client. In return the client provided the noble with a yearly return of foodstuffs. He also provided a stipulated amount of labour and military services and also undertook to entertain and feast the noble and his retinue as specified times during the year. Labour duties included help in harvesting the lord's crops and the construction of his ring-fort (KELLY, 1988, 30). The size and range of the returns again depended on the legal status of the client.

In theory, the noble or client could terminate the clientship agreement at any time, but this usually entailed heavy fines unless there was just cause or that termination was carried out by mutual agreement. The

natural length of a clientship contract seems to have been seven years, at the end of which the capital advanced became the absolute property of the client unless a new fief were accepted by the latter (O'CORRAIN, 1972 : 43), although this is debated by some (GERRIETS, 1983 : 58). A seven year period was chosen because it probably approximated to the prime lactation span of a cow. The far superior wealth of the noble ensured that it was much easier for him than the client to terminate the agreement before the end of the first seven years.

The investments and returns between a noble and individual clients of different status on the basis of the two law tracts mentioned above have been outlined by GERRIETS (1983 : 51) and KELLY (1988 : 29-38). A contract between a noble and a client of *bóaire* or *mruigfer* status, depending on the law tract used, would operate as follows. A noble makes an investment of milk cows to the client. This was calculated in terms of a value of cattle, expressed in terms of a unit of measurement known as the sét, the value of which varied. In the *Críth Gablach* the *sét* equalled four-fifths of a milk cow. The total investment given to the mruigfer, according to the same tract, consisted of 31 *séts* or approximately 24 milk cows. This seems likely to have been a four-year old cow with its first calf (KELLY, 1988 : 113), i.e. at the beginning of their life as milk producers. Investments were generally in the form of cattle but land and farming equipment were also given (KELLY, 1988 : 29). Furthermore, a landed commoner was allowed to become a client to more than one lord at a time, the only legal restriction being that the fief received from a second lord must be smaller than that of the first, and that of the third smaller than the second (KELLY, 1988 : 32).

The yearly returns paid by the clients to the lord was divided into two parts. The *bés* consisted of livestock, while the more substantial fosair consisted of an assortment of foodstuffs. The yearly *bés* paid by the rank of a *mruigfer* or *bóaire,* depending on the text used, was a cow, while calves and wethers are stipulated for clients of lower status (GERRIETS 1983 : 51). The most detailed list of the constituents of the *fosair* is outlined in the repayments of a *bóaire* in the *Cáin* which are as follows :

> *"bacon one hand thick, half a bacon, fat from the rear third of a cow, fat of an entire year old male calf, fat of an entire wether, one calf of one sack, one calf of two sacks, one calf of four sacks, one pig of nine fists long, eight sacks of malt, and sack of hardened wheat, three handfuls of candles, one cauldron of curds and butter, twenty-four loaves of bread, two handfuls of garlic, two handfuls of leeks" (GERRIETS, 1983).*

The livestock payments of the client consisted of both live animals and carcass meat. Beef payments consisted of the carcasses of both calves and cows. The latter were no doubt old beasts that had come to the end of their milk-producing days. This is reflected in the stipulation that only the rear third of the cow, i.e. the part of the carcass providing prime beef was given. Animals of different "sacks" and "fists" refer to the size and presumably the age of the animals. The carcass calf meat is stated to be of males because with the exception of a few needed for breeding and traction, most could be regarded as superfluous to the needs of a dairy herd. This is supported by the faunal evidence where the majority of adult cattle from archaeological sites of the period are invariably female (McCORMICK, 1983).

Food payments obligations by the client were not limited to the *bés* and *fosair* outlined above. In addition, the client was obliged to provide the noble and his retinue with feastings and entertainment (*cóe*). Between the beginning of the year and Shrovetide, the noble and his retinue travelled to the houses of his clients in order to enjoy this facility. The number of times that the client had to undertake the duties of *cóe* depended on the status of the client. The size of the retinue depended on the legal status of the noble. This institution must have been a great burden to the client as it is estimated that the retinue of a noble of *Aire Forgill* status could consist of eighty people (GERRIETS, 1978 : 132). One law tract records a client having to acquire meat from others in order to fulfil his *cóe* obligations (SIMMS, 1978 : 80).

There can be little doubt that the institution of base clientship was greatly to the advantage of the noble. The rather large size of the original investment was easily offset by the yearly return of foodstuffs and other produce and services. It is unlikely that he provided all the investments at the same time. He probably initially provided only part of the investment because the number of cattle that a client could accept was limited by the extent of the land he owned and the size of the herd that he already possessed. The remainder of the investment was probably drawn upon as circumstances dictated. If a client's herd declined because of disease or famine, he would have been able to restock from his investment. The investment could therefore be viewed

as an "overdraft" facility which acted as an insurance which could save the client from destitution in times of hardship. At the same time the noble was obliged to treat the client fairly and not exploit the clientship contract. If a noble was acting unfairly his clients could ultimately, though with difficulty, terminate their contracts and a decline in the number of his clients inevitably meant that the noble would undergo downward social mobility and his legal status would decline. If a noble could not arrest the flow of clients leaving him, he would inevitably lose his noble status.

Cattle-raiding

Cattle-raiding provided another mechanism for the transfer of ownership of cattle and was endemic in Early Irish society. The theft of cattle was an accepted method of increasing one's capital at the expense of one's rivals. The continual stealing and re-stealing of livestock was a form of economic competition rather than military warfare. LUCAS (1989 : 128), in an exhaustive and excellent study of the subject, concludes that "raiding was looked upon as one of the duties and privileges of the warrior's life". Even the church had to accommodate itself to this form of theft, and there is documentary evidence showing that the church received a proportion of livestock taken in cattle-raids (DOHERTY, 1980 : 75). The church, nevertheless, distanced itself from the practice by forbidding churchmen to participate in raids, the punishment being similar to that incurred for adultery (LUCAS 1989 : 132). Unethical raids are, however, occasionally recorded, and raids seem to have qualified for this status when they countervene treaties guaranteed by the church (LUCAS 1989 : 126).

Because of the importance of dairying it is not surprising that in the majority of documentary records the livestock taken are described as cows. Lucas' analysis of the quantity of cattle taken in raids demonstrates the economic devastation that could be incurred with numbers of livestock ranging from 300 in AD 985 to 6,000 in AD 1062 (LUCAS 1989 : 151). The latter must represent the wholesale devastation of the livestock of a *túath*. Raids involving smaller numbers of livestock presumably did not merit being recorded in the early annals, and it may also be assumed that where the numbers of livestock are not stated only a small number of livestock were taken. It should be noted that cattle-raiding was not only an inter-*túath* activity but also occurred between "different branches of the same tribe and, on occasion, between different members of the same kin-group and even between members of a conjugal family" (LUCAS, 1989 : 175). The general impression is that rulers undertook cattle-raids whenever the opportunity seemed favourable, but the early sources sometimes indicate that they were undertaken for specific reasons, such as revenge for slayings or insult to tribal dignity. Inevitably, however, one of the most common reasons cited is that of retaliation for earlier cattle raids.

Origins and duration of non-market livestock exchange

The texts describing the institution of clientship date for the most part to the 7th-8th centuries AD. It is, however, clear that many of the legal processes were already archaic at the time that the laws were first committed to writing. The exchange of livestock as an inherent part of the social order, however, survived in Ireland until the post-medieval period. To what degree the society reflected in the law tracts can be projected backwards before the 7th century AD is, however, a matter of debate. The single most important limiting factor to such a debate is that very few literary sources pre-date the laws. KELLY (1988 : 333-35) has recently summarised the evidence. One body of thought suggests that the laws were composed by professional lay jurists who were "trying to preserve as much as possible the traditional Irish law in the face of the encroachment of Christian ideas and organization" (KELLY, 1988 : 233). One could, indeed, quote certain aspects of the law, such as the legal function of fasting, to suggest a common Indo-European origin for Irish and Indian law. More recently, however, it has been shown that parts of Early Irish secular law is based on canon law and rather than being a reaction to the encroachment of the church they were, probably, written by clerics.

Archaeological evidence may be invoked to help clarify the problem. The society reflected in the law texts reflects a patchwork of independent tribal kingdoms with a dispersed, secular settlement pattern of isolated farmsteads. This approximates with the pattern evidenced by the many thousands of ring-forts generally attributed to the Early Christian period. Attempts to project this type of settlement back into the Iron Age have generally been unsuccessful. In a recent survey of radio-carbon dates from the pre-Christian Iron Age (WARNER *et al.*, 1990) there is only one case of a ring-

fort, i.e. a possible hearth at Raheennamadra, Co. Limerick, where the calibrated 95% date range falls before the middle of the fifth century AD. Little is known of the settlement pattern of Ireland for most of the Iron Age but the centralised society suggested by the hillforts, which in Ireland are a late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age phenomenon, is at variance with the society described in the law tracts. Finally, dairying dominated the livestock economy of the Early Christian period and faunal evidence from the earlier part of the Iron Age indicates that dairying had not yet developed (McCORMICK, 1992). There is, unfortunately, no faunal evidence available from the later part of the Iron Age so the date of the adoption of dairying is unknown. On balance, however, the archaeological evidence would not seem to support the backwards projection of this type of society to any great extent.

The importance of cattle in society, and the non-market transfer of ownership of livestock either by social contract or endemic cattle-raiding, continued in these parts of Ireland less affected by English colonisation until the beginning of the post-medieval period. Indeed, the law originally written in the seventh to eighth century continued to be used, albeit with continual modifications and decreasing relevance, until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Ironically, the dispossession of the native lords of their land made livestock possession even more important than during the Early Christian period. LUCAS (1989 : 68-124) has recently described the phenomenon of the *caoraigheacht* (anglicised to "creaght") among the Gaelic Irish during the late medieval period. The creaght comprised a chief and his great, mobile herds of cattle along with its attendants and their belongings. A seventeenth century source describes a creaght as :

"like the Tartar hordes, being a number of people, some more some less, men, women and children under the chief of the name of the family, who range about the country with their flocks or herds and all the goods they have in the world, without any settled habitation, building huts whenever they find pasture for their cattle and removing as they find occasion... they live most upon the milk of their cows" (LUCAS, 1989 : 70-1).

This social institution seems to have been particularly common during times of war and social upheaval, situations where the concept of ownership of land became, by necessity, of little importance (NICHOLLS, 1987 : 413). The use of cattle as capital for investment survived until the late medieval period where a non-money economy continued to survive among the Gaelic Irish. One sixteenth-century source notes that cows were let by lords in return for renders of butter. Productivity at the time was recorded as being as low as five gallons of butter (40 lb.). In return for the cow, the renter would have to return three and a half gallons (28 lb.) per cow but could also keep the buttermilk and the calf (NICHOLLS, 1987 : 415).

The archaeozoological implications of clientship

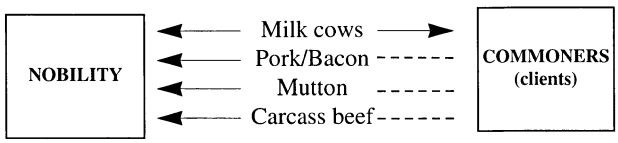

Fig. 1. : Transfer of livestock and carcass meat between the households of nobility and landed commoners in Early Christian Ireland.

The most immediate implication of clientship for the archaeozoologist is that, because of the transfer of ownership of livestock, the animal bones on Early Christian rural sites need not represent the produce of the individual farmsteads. Attempted reconstructions of past livestock economies are generally based on species distribution, age distribution and sex ratio. This, however, is only possible when it could be demonstrated or assumed that the majority or all of the faunal remains were the product of the economy of that site. The data concerning clientship indicates that this may not be the case in the context of Early Christian Irish sites. On the basis of the legal data discussed above, it can be seen that there was an export of cows from the farms of the nobles accompanied by an import of cows, calves, pigs and sheep (fig. 1). Extreme caution must therefore be exercised when interpreting the faunal remains from sites of this period.

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