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THE 'ANNALS OF ULSTER', 912–1100

The 'Annals of Ulster' have long been recognised as one of the most important sets of Irish annals, yet it is surprising how little research has been published on the sources of this chronicle's tenth- and eleventh-century sections. This is perhaps because, as Aubrey Gwynn, stated, 'That the Annals of Ulster, down to the end of the twelfth century, are derived from an ancient Book of Ard Macha is so plain that no scholar has ever questioned this conclusion.'¹ Such pronouncements may be correct, but they should be confirmed by proper studies, as is the case with other comparable sources. The intention of this chapter is to undertake such an analysis, focussed on identifying the sources of AU from 912 to 1100, and to consider the issue of the relationship of this part of AU to the section up to 911, which contains the last annal displaying a very close correspondence with the Clonmacnoise group. Also relevant to this issue are some items in the section from 912 to 1060 which are found with virtually identical vocabulary in AU and the Clonmacnoise group. However, these items will be discussed in chapter 4, so they will generally be excluded from the analysis in this chapter, as well as from chapters two and three on the Clonmacnoise-group texts. This approach enables a clearer comparison of these items in relation to the rest of the chronicles in which they survive, in terms of their style and the evidence they provide for locating chronicles' sources. A list of these items can be found in appendix 2.

Identifying the chronicle sources of the 'Annals of Ulster'

In the absence of contemporary manuscripts of Irish chronicles with helpful notes telling us who wrote the text and where, the process of identifying the context of a chronicle has to be based on indications from the text itself. Fortunately, in the case of AU, the near identical ALC indicates that AU has been altered very little after their common source, so alterations during transmission are unlikely to have been substantial. In reality, identifying the scribes who wrote an anonymous chronicle like AU is not usually possible, but the place or area of composition might be discernible. The main potential methods of identifying where chronicles were written are to find local details which would have been of limited interest and which indicate an unusual knowledge of events, to study the number of items concerned with a particular people or places, or to analyse the

¹ Gwynn, 'Cathal mac Maghnusa and the Annals of Ulster. II', 372. This follows the statement on the same page that 'From the eighth century onwards the items in the Annals of Ulster reveal the existence of some ancient Book, presumably kept and added to in the Patrician abbey of Ard-Macha', which supports the view that he considered the tenth- and eleventh-century sections of AU to have derived from Armagh.

style of the Irish annals to see how this changes over time, and whether detailed items about various areas are found in different phraseology.

Most scholars would agree that detailed items concerning a place or area, especially with information that would have been of little interest elsewhere, indicate that a chronicle is likely to have been written in that place.² However, there are difficulties in determining what information would have been only of local interest, partly because our perceptions have been influenced by the chronicle accounts themselves, and so could provide us with circular arguments. However, when these difficulties are taken into consideration it should still be possible to locate chronicling centres if there are a sufficient number of detailed items.

Another, albeit crude, indicator of a chronicling centre is the existence of a large number of items concerning that place and its inhabitants. This was used by David Dumville to indicate that CS and AT were both kept at Clonmacnoise in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³ Alfred Smyth also argued that an ecclesiastical chronicling centre should have a complete set of obits for its ecclesiastical leaders, with the result that a number of places were discounted by him as centres of chronicling on this basis.⁴ The main reason why using the number of certain items as evidence is such a crude indicator is that textual transmission can radically alter the proportions of different types of items, especially if the text has been copied by someone with very different interests. An obvious example of this is AI, which lacks many items found in other chronicles, but retained those concerning Munster. If only AI were relied upon, the number of items might be used to indicate that the 'Chronicle of Ireland' items were written in Munster, a conclusion which is contradicted by the evidence of both AU and the Clonmacnoise group.

In light of the possibility of later textual omission, Alfred Smyth's stipulation of a continuous surviving record of obits should be regarded as too strict, overly reducing the number of chronicle centres. This is supported by the evidence of manuscript A (the 'Parker Chronicle') of the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', which was first produced in the late ninth century, being periodically updated thereafter.⁵ It is generally recognised, based on palaeographical evidence, that the section from 973 to 1001 of this text was written at Winchester early in the eleventh century.⁶ There are very few items from 973 to 1001 in this manuscript, indicating that a relatively contemporary chronicle does not always have a full record, and might not even mention the ecclesiastical leader of the centre in which it was written.⁷ Taking these difficulties into consideration, aggregates of items can nevertheless be significant, especially when combined with other evidence.

² See Bannerman, *Studies*, 11–13, 18–20; Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles*, 122; Smyth, 'The earliest', 30.

³ Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles*, 157–64.

⁴ Smyth, 'The earliest', 16–18, 23 (where the theory of a chronicle at Clonard before 740 is dismissed on this basis), 30.

⁵ The Parker Chronicle (ed. Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Vol. 3. MS A*, xxi–xlii).

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxvii–xxxviii, xci, xciii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76–9. There are only items at 973, 975, 978, 983, 984, 993, 994, and 1001. It could be argued that the low number of items in ASC MS A in this period is a result of the chronicle being updated at least twenty-eight years after 973. Another example of a chronicle with few items is *Annales Cambriae* (ed. and trans. Dumville, *Annales Cambriae, A.D. 682–954*), which was based on a chronicle kept at St David's from the late eighth century (see Hughes, *Celtic Britain*, 68–9, 73–4).

The 'Annals of Ulster'

Stylistic analysis is a hitherto largely unexplored method for identifying the sources of the Irish chronicles. The general style of items in the Irish chronicles before the twelfth century is, like many other early medieval annalistic chronicles, brief, with simple syntactical sentence structures, a lack of highly descriptive or emotive language, and a very restricted range and repetitive use of vocabulary.⁸ As Cecily Clark noted with regard to the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', such a style was not due to a restricted vocabulary on the part of the chroniclers or a desire for simplicity, because the phraseology was highly artificial.⁹ If different centres kept chronicles using a wide range of vocabulary and phrases, then it should be possible to use vocabulary to locate the source chronicles for a number of items and determine whether these were dependent on the 'Chronicle of Ireland', especially as there are usually many items per annal. As Colmán Etchingham has made apparent through a study of the Irish annals in relation to the issue of Viking raids, the contents and style of the chronicles changed over time as a result of scribal preference or fashion, so annalists also made innovations as well as adhering to some extent to a common style of chronicling.¹⁰ While it cannot be ruled out that two independent chroniclers at different centres could have used the same vocabulary, it is likely that the two texts would display at least some differences in interests which would be reflected in the surviving Irish annals. It is also possible that the items could have been re-written at a later date, but this can sometimes be identified through a comparison with other related texts. Overall, then, while such a stylistic analysis is not infallible, it can be used profitably in conjunction with other evidence.

Detailed items in AU 912–1100

As has been stated above, detailed items can be used to establish potential centres of chronicling in an annalistic text, but it is not always obvious what indicates a special interest in and knowledge of the subject. In the following study, dated events, statements of periods of time, reign-lengths, and ages at death have been included, but references to the place of death have not, because, although they do indicate a greater interest, they could merely reflect the importance of the people or places in the item, rather than the use of a local source. Items with details about geography and buildings have been included if they were not simply vague references (for instance just *damliac*, 'stone church') which could be due to a chronicle's style. Unusual items, such as those concerning ecclesiastics going on *cúairt*, 'a circuit', and those concerning changes in kingships and ecclesiastical office, have also been included. References to miracles by saints have

⁸ The general trend in the tenth- and eleventh-century sections of the Irish annals is for items to become lengthier and more descriptive over time. However, even in the late eleventh century, when some events are described in more varied prose, most items in AU, AT, CS, and AI are highly formulaic. For the style of the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', see Cecily Clark, 'The narrative mode', 215–35. See Hughes, *Celtic Britain*, 67–100, for a discussion of the Welsh *Annales Cambriae*.

⁹ Clark, 'The narrative mode', 218. The reasons for the adoption of such a style are difficult to identify. Clark's argument that it derives from the briefness of notes in the margins of Easter tables is highly plausible, but this does not explain the maintenance of such a style after annals were kept separately from Easter tables.

¹⁰ Etchingham, *Viking Raids*, 10–14, 40–6, 56–7.

been included, even though these could sometimes be later additions, because they might demonstrate a local interest. Many secular items have been excluded where the event would have been of interest to many areas of Ireland or their level of detail was not unusual, potentially being created by the chronicler from general knowledge, rather than deriving from a local account. Finally, as has been mentioned above, items which may have been or were definitely from the same source as corresponding items in the Clonmacnoise group have not been included.

When the detailed items in AU are compiled, it becomes apparent that the two main areas of interest are Armagh and the area of Conaille and Brega (modern counties Louth, Meath and Dublin north of the river Liffey). The interest in Armagh is evident throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. A number of items concerning events at Armagh or involving Armagh ecclesiasts are dated,¹¹ ages are given,¹² births are included (retrospectively),¹³ changes in personnel are mentioned,¹⁴ and details are given when Armagh is burned,¹⁵ plundered,¹⁶ or a fight occurs there or in the local vicinity.¹⁷ Other items describe the placing of gold on the altar of Armagh by Brían mac Cennétig (AU 1005.7), a plague in Armagh (AU 1012.1), a miracle in Armagh (AU 1033.9) and the burial of a king of Cenél nEógain in a royal mausoleum in Armagh (AU 1064.7). This is clear evidence for the recording of events at Armagh throughout the period, although it is noticeable that only five of these events occur before 986, one being the item on the birth of Máel Muire (AU 963.3) which was probably written after his succession to the coarbship (the position of *comarbae* (plural *comarbai*) 'heir', to the saint, which is anglicised as 'coarb') in 1001 (AU 1001.1).¹⁸ There are also items concerning the activities of the *comarbai* of Patrick outside Armagh, usually on circuits in Munster or Cenél nEógain.¹⁹ Four of these are found before 986, but they could have been of interest to other centres in the Patrician *paruchia*, as well as Armagh.

Probably related to the Armagh connection is an interest in the Columban *paruchia* discernible in three detailed items concerned with Iona and the coarbship of Columba, since two of these deal with Dub dá Léithe, *comarbae* of Patrick. One of these items (AU 989.7) explains that he became *comarbae* of Columba 'by the counsel of the men of Ireland and Alba' (*a comurle fer nErenn 7 Alban*), and another is his obit in AU 998.2. The third item (AU 986.3) describes the plundering of Iona by the Danes on Christmas night, a date that could easily have been memorised. However, it forms part of a short series of items concerned

¹¹ AU 916.8, 921.8, 986.1, 1038.4, 1074.3, 1088.1, 1089.7, 1092.7.

¹² AU 915.4, 998.2, 1005.4.

¹³ AU 963.3, 1047.2, 1080.3.

¹⁴ AU 989.7 (for the succession of the *comarbae*, 'heir', of Patrick to the coarbship of Columba), 1001.7, 1032.8, 1046.5, 1049.6, 1099.5.

¹⁵ AU 916.8, 996.1, 1074.3, 1091.2, 1092.7.

¹⁶ AU 916.8, 996.1, 1074.3, 1091.2, 1092.7.

¹⁷ AU 986.1, 1009.3, 1021.3, 1038.4, 1060.1, 1080.7. AU 1020.3 states that a king of Mugdorna, killed by Uí Macc Úais Breg, reigned for one day and the previous king, mentioned beforehand, is stated to have been killed by Fir Rois, both peoples that are from southern Airgialla or Brega; therefore these details could have come from a record kept in Conaille or Brega, as well as Armagh.

¹⁸ AU 915.4, 916.8, 921.8, 943.2, 963.3.

¹⁹ AU 913.8, 947.2, 960.4, 973.5, 993.8, 1006.4, 1012.3, 1013.1, 1021.5, 1050.5, 1068.2, 1092.6, 1094.6.

with Iona and the activities of the Danes in Dál Riata, the Isle of Man and Derry (Daire Calcaig) from 986 to 990, some of which may have come from Iona. These could have been included after Dub dá Léithe became *comarbae* of Columba in 989.²⁰ Overall, the detailed items connected with Armagh make it possible that a chronicle was being kept there in the tenth and eleventh centuries, although the evidence is weaker before the 980s.

In the first half of the tenth century there are also many detailed items about ecclesiastical and secular affairs in Brega and Conaille, which could indicate that a chronicle was kept there during this period. AU 913.2, which describes the killing of the king of Conaille, includes the statement that this event was nine months after a previous event, in which the *princeps* ('leader, head of a church') of Druim Inasclainn (modern Dromiskin in County Louth) and the *rigdomna* ('someone worthy to be king') of Conaille were murdered.²¹ This earlier event is also found in AU 912.4. Such repetition and the reference to the time interval are very rare in the Irish chronicles; it indicates that these events of relatively local significance were important to the chronicler, who probably read the earlier item before writing the latter. The interest in Conaille is followed up in the next annal, since in AU 914.2 the next king of Conaille is stated to have died 'in the fourth month of his reign' (*quarto mense regni sui*). Reign-lengths are unusual features of items in this period, mainly being reserved for powerful Uí Néill kings, rather than minor kings, so they indicate a special interest in the king in question.

The interest in Conaille and Brega is also indicated by three items in the 920s which give very detailed titles for people associated with Armagh but acting as steward (*máer*) further south in Conaille and Brega:

AU 922.1: *Mael Poil m. Ailella sui 7 epscop Sil Aedha Slane, Tadg m. Faelain ri H. Cennselaig, Cernach m. Flainn princeps Lainne Lére 7 moer muinntiri Aird Macha o Beluch Duin co muir 7 o Boainn co Cossan, cenn comuirle 7 adchomairc fer mBreg n-uile, – omnes moriuntur.*²²

AU 924.5: *Muiredach m. Domnaill, tanuse abad Aird Macha 7 ardmaer Oa Neill in Deiscirt 7 comurba Buiti m. Bronaigh, cenn adcomairc fer mBreg n-uile ocaibh cleirchibh, quinto die Kalendarum Decimbrium uita descessit.*²³

AU 929.1: *Tuathal m. Oenacain, scripa 7 episcopus Doim Liac 7 Lusca 7 moer muinnteri Patraicc o Sleibh fadhes, heu immatura etáte, quiéuit.*²⁴

The great detail in these items contrasts with most of the other ecclesiastical obits in the 920s; even the obit of Máel Brigte mac Tornáin (AU 927.1) has merely

²⁰ AU 986.2, 986.3, 987.1, 987.3, 989.4, 989.5, 990.1. The reference in AU 987.3 to the slaughter 'upon the Danes who plundered Iona' (*forsna Danaraibh ro oirg I*) indicates that the plundering of Iona was viewed as particularly significant.

²¹ For a discussion of these events and the history of Conaille, see Thornton, *Kings, Chronologies, and Genealogies*, 216–26. For the translations of *princeps* and *rigdomna* see Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, II, 8, 9.

²² 'Mael Póil son of Ailill, scholar and bishop of the descendants of Áed Sláine, Tadc son of Fáelán, king of Uí Chennselaig, Cernach son of Flann, superior of Lann Léire and steward of the community of Ard Macha from Belach Dúin to the sea and from Bóinn to Cossán, and chief counsellor and consultant of the men of all Brega – all die.'

²³ 'Muiredach son of Domnall, tanist-abbot of Ard Macha, and chief steward of the southern Uí Néill, and successor of Buite son of Bronach, chief counsellor of the men of all Brega, both laymen and clerics, departed this life on the fifth day before the Kalends of December [27 Nov].'

²⁴ 'Tuathal son of Óenacáin, scribe and bishop of Dam Liacc and Lusca, and steward of Patrick's community south of the Mountain, rested, alas, at an immature age.'

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