Students of medieval Ireland are blessed with a substantial corpus of surviving written material from numerous genres. By far the largest portion of that corpus is filled with works that commemorate Ireland’s saints. Although this category can include anecdotes, martyrlogies, genealogies, eulogies and the like, of particular importance here are the biographies of Irish holy men and women. Extant in more than one hundred Latin vitae concerning some sixty individuals, and in roughly fifty vernacular bethada (sg. betha, bethu) that honor perhaps fifteen persons many of who also possess vitae, these Lives span the Irish Middle Ages from the seventh through the fourteenth century. Of equal importance to the hagiographical evidence and in a body nearly as significant in size is Ireland’s collection of medieval legal texts. Comprising both Latin canon law and vernacular treatises of more secular emphasis, these works largely date to the earlier centuries of the period; ecclesiastical codes began to appear in the sixth and seventh centuries, while the Old Irish laws were codified especially in the seventh through ninth centuries. Thus, the legal voices of church and state evolved nearly concurrently and, unsurprisingly, often parallel each other in focus and intent.


It is not only the ecclesiastical and secular laws that are so intertwined, however. As Kim McConé has noted, the mass of written evidence surviving from the Irish Middle Ages “was undoubtedly produced either in monasteries or by people who had received an essentially monastic education.”

Though McConé’s emphasis was on the parallels between biblical models and the literary motifs and legal structures of early Ireland, a similar observation may also be made of the relationship between the Lives of Irish saints and the law codes of the society that produced them. Indeed, Ireland’s hagiographers sought to paint their sanctified subjects as ideal Irish Christians, leaders of the faith whose authority and prestige stemmed in part from the proper application of Irish law. As the saints navigate the Ireland envisioned in their Lives, they not only abide by, but also define and prosecute, the tenets of both canon and vernacular legal tracts.

One of the many expressions of the interactions between hagiographical saint and historical Irish law can be found at the nexus provided by medicine, though here the concern is not with the diagnosis and treatment of health problems by physicians of the human body. Instead, it is through the miracles associated with a holy Irishperson that medical issues enter the story. Of particular importance are instances in which these miracles result in the imposition or alleviation of illness or injury, the granting or removal of senses like sight, and the affliction or relief of physical impediment. At this intersection of medicine, law, and miracle, the saint stands forth as a hagiographical law enforcer whose wonder-workings identify him or her as a doctor both of the individual soul and of the entire Irish body Christian. An analysis of this crossroads as it is embodied in the saint, then, illuminates aspects of all three elements of medieval Irish sanctity and society.

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6 For more information on the place of medieval law in Ireland’s hagiography and its resulting influence on the image of Irish holiness, see: “Vengeance is Mine: Saintly Retribution in Medieval Ireland,” in *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion, and Feud*, ed. Susanna Throop and Paul Hyams (Burlington and Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 5–50; further work is also to be found in “Holy Body, Wholly Other: Sanctity and Society in the Lives of Irish Saints,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 2010), currently under revision for publication.