Bovine Power, Human Experiences:

Performance of Class in the Socioeconomic Institutions of Early Medieval Ireland

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The *rath* of Cruacha has vanished together with Ailill the victorious; fair above the kingdoms is the majesty in the city of Clonmacnoise.

The proud fortress of Allen has perished with her boastful host; great is victorious Brigit, beautiful her crowded city.

The fortress of Emain has faded away; only its stones survive; crowded Glendalough is the Rome of the Western World.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By the fifth century, the moors of Ireland no longer echoed the sounds of conquest as the age of the great epics, of chariot-driving warriors and hill-forts, receded into collective remembrance. These old Irish sagas and legends, much like Homeric heroes, reflected historical currents of once “boastful hosts” and “proud fortresses” – an age invoked by the kings who rendered Ireland divided.[[2]](#footnote-2) After c. 500, patterns of conquest, division, and expansion, captured by the prologue of Saint Óengus’ ninth-century *Martyrology* [*Félire Óengusso*], produced an agricultural society of nearly 150 *túatha,* minor domainsor “peoples,” each “an indubitably aristocratic polity” with its own king (*rí)*.[[3]](#footnote-3)Between the arrival of Christianity in the fifth century and the development of Norse urban centers around 840, each level of old Irish society, from the kings to the commoners and the slaves, featured a class hierarchy dependent on the socioeconomic institution of clientship. Powerful kings formed courts of aristocrats and lesser kings; superior aristocrats accumulated patron-client relationships with commoners and lesser aristocrats – an overlordship expressed by the exchange of cattle, aid in combat, and the prestige of one’s retinue.[[4]](#footnote-4) Within this ranked system, constructed by elaborate legal tracts, class status shaped a person’s capacity to engage in the world, to participate in the structural features of society. Maintenance of these class divisions manipulated the imbalances of Ireland’s pastoral economy. Early Ireland’s hierarchical system refers to rank, a “perceived” construct perpetuated through expressions of prestige and ritual performance, but not to political authority, which manifests between low- and high-status groups in the everyday interactions within socioeconomic institutions.

On scattered law tracts, known collectively as brehon law, many of which remain unedited and untranslated from the original Old Irish language, the study of the social hierarchy of early medieval Ireland requires a sensitivity to the textuality of its sources. Past research into early Irish society, championed by D.A. Binchy, Eoin MacNeill, and Rudolf Thurneysen in the early twentieth century, constructed the legalist frame in which later historians explored, providing translations, collections, and interpretations of law. Access to these past scholars is primarily through Fergus Kelly’s *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Professor at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, an organization with deep ties to Binchy and MacNeill, Kelly deconstructs the legal codes of early medieval Ireland. The majority of featured law texts stem from Daniel Binchy’s untranslated collection of tracts, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici,* allowing indirect access to this valuable work. Legal sources drive the core of my research. An analysis of the laws of status, alongside a discussion on narrative sources and archeological data, illuminates the class imbalances inherent to early Ireland’s social structures.

In the 1990s, scholarship moved beyond the broad structural strokes of legalist historiography to emphasize the individual’s role in society. Kin-groups, clientship, status ranks, and a pastoral economy were not simply elements of a *túath* but interacted to fashion a sense of the early Irish self. A turn from legal sources positions narrative tales, hagiographic literature, and archeological surveys as windows into the lived experience. Modern scholars, such as Thomas Charles-Edwards and Nerys Thomas Patterson reconstruct the social structure of early medieval Ireland through comparative history and historical sociology analysis.

As the inheritor of the Binchy, MacNeill, and Thurneysen legalist tradition, Thomas Charles-Edwards’ *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, published in 1993, concerns the nature and function of kindreds steeped in early Ireland’s vernacular lawbooks. Even as *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* proclaims a detachment from legal history, Charles-Edwards admits his sources are, for the most part, predominantly legal as law-tracts provide the earliest written evidence on social relationships.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although Hiberno-Latin hagiography, genealogies, and prose tales contribute to the study, Charles-Edwards’ central fissure from established thought is an emphasis on a system of ideas: the reconstruction of relationships between principal institutions and social categories. Further sections are not so clearly a break from past paradigms, as the text concludes with a clear allegiance to the past, as “one of the aims of this book was to support” Binchy’s suggestion for a comparative study of Ireland and Wales.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* derives its merits from examinations of two institutional relationships: the capacity for social mobility and the nobility’s enactments of authority. Its comparative nature compounds this approach by demanding a thorough breakdown of each institution into distinct elements. On the former, Charles-Edwards investigates the rank of semi-free men – the *fudri* – arguing social mobility as primarily a downward process.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even for those "at the top," the cycle of food-renders and expected hospitality diminished resources, creating the conditions in which a client’s heir must also become a client, restarting the climb up the social ladder.[[8]](#footnote-8) This conclusion suggests the maintenance of class through the imbalance of Ireland's pastoral economy. Concerned with the conception of lordship, the latter examination asserts that a noble’s “very nobility requires that he be the lord of base clients [common farmers]” as the food-renders of free clients (poorer nobles) provided no economic reward.[[9]](#footnote-9) By supplementing brehon law with narrative, hagiographic, and archaeological sources, this paper expands Charles-Edwards’ conclusion on the nature of old Irish nobility. While *Early Irish Kinship* informs the thesis of class identity as a performance, in what ways, however, and to what extent, Charles-Edwards does not provide. The authority of the nobility required realization through means beyond economic superiority.

To fill this gap, Nerys Thomas Patterson’s *Cattle-lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* explores the social inequality of early Ireland through historical sociological methods. Patterson provides a novel reading of primary evidence and secondary scholarship concerning the social processes of early Ireland as the object of analysis.[[10]](#footnote-10) The survey of gender roles and the institution of marriage break free of standard spheres of analysis by emphasizing the domestic economy. In this essay, an exploration of the dynamics between the individual and the collective blends Charles-Edward’s scholarship on economic relationships with Patterson’s sociological analysis to illustrate the formation of social reality within the structure of socioeconomic institutions. Marriage, as outlined by *Cattle-lords and Clansmen*, serves as a primary institution to penetrate the restrictive relationship between the domestic life of commoners and clientship. Patterson highlights the presuppositions brought to bear on clientship and rank in the two opening sections of *Cattle-lords and Clansmen*, primarily denouncing Binchy’s assessment that rank statuses were unrealistic. Rank, argues Patterson, governed relationships in the clientship structure as it allowed lords to “maintain the network of dispersed power-nodes that protected his status.”[[11]](#footnote-11) My research maintains the realism of rank as it pertains to society, but concentrates on the concept of “power-nodes” within the lived experiences of the early Irish. To untangle the rights and duties of socioeconomic institutions, explorations of food, hospitality, and attire will extend Patterson’s focus on the social processes behind brehon law.

Foremost legal sources on the structure of early medieval Irish society are the laws of status: *Branched Purchase* [*Críth Gablach*],complied around c. 700 in Meath or Ulster; the late seventh- to early eighth-century *Little Grammar* [*Uraicecht Becc*] from Munster; and the eighth-century *Rank Sections* [*Míadṡlechtae*].[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite the patchwork of local, minor kingdoms, each distinct with localized loyalties, the canon of early Irish law functions as a unified system of norms and practices.[[13]](#footnote-13) No matter the regional origins, authorship, or school of law, the tracts employ the same Old Irish technical terms to navigate the same institutions and customs: these were the *béscnu ínse Érenn* (“the legal practice of the island of Ireland”).[[14]](#footnote-14) The substantial number of surviving manuscripts, and the breadth of their scope, frame the societal function of the jurists as identifiers of model relationships and behavior. These texts could not be ignored nor invalidated by the politics of a king, but early Irish society was explicitly inegalitarian and hierarchical.[[15]](#footnote-15) The testimony of a king or aristocrat always outweighed that of a person from a lower rank; an offense against a higher-ranked person warranted more severe punishment than the same offense against a lower-ranked person.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nearly every aspect of daily life fell under compulsory litigation: texts range from the maintenance of the elderly to regulations on bee-keeping. The authorship of the law-tracts is less explicative. Binchy proposes that lay jurists, motivated by the growing encroachment of Christian thought, wanted to preserve traditional Irish law in a written form.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Despite Binchy’s hypothesis to the contrary, the ecclesiastical influence on brehon lawyers is substantial. A more accurate understanding of their authorship being a group of learned individuals as well-versed in the customs of Ireland as in religious scripture. These laws, then, are a conscious melding of the two forces. The sevenfold division of the lay ranked hierarchy in *Branched Purchase* is analogous to the ecclesiastical ranked hierarchy, asking “whence come the divisions of orders of a *túath*? From a comparison with the orders of the Church, for every order that is in the Church, it is just that its like should be in the *túath.*”[[18]](#footnote-18) Extending beyond the secular hierarchy to incorporate religious and occupational ranks, *Little Grammar* combined the brehon and canonical legal traditions, asserting “whatever decision (or regulation) of the Church exists is founded on proof and right of Scripture…the decision of a *filí* [rank of the poet class], however, is founded on rules of law…the decision of a ruler, however, is founded on them all, on rules of law and maxims and testimonies.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This influence is also evident by the declaration of vernacular law as a natural right given to the Irish by God.[[20]](#footnote-20) The readiness of brehon lawyers to adapt to the increasing influence of Christian teachings reveals a dynamism implicit to the social structures of early Ireland. These texts formed a corpus far from stagnant;[[21]](#footnote-21) traces of transformation manifest in the plentiful glosses and commentaries etched in the margins of the manuscript.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The laws of status served as text-books for lawyers and judges to instruct in the theory of a strictly hierarchical society. Taking an opposing stance, Binchy frames *Branched Purchase* as “a theoretical construction, which although built of genuine material, bears only a very limited relation to the realities of legal life,” and Kelly holds that the complex hierarchies of rank “can only have borne a limited resemblance to reality.”[[23]](#footnote-23) To MacNeill, however, the laws of status functioned as the essential element of legal theory in a society formalized into a stratified structure.[[24]](#footnote-24) In this unequal system, an individual’s capacity to engage in the legal and social systems of early Ireland was dependent on their rank, which subdivided each social order into grades of varying rights and obligations. It is on a basis of social values, of rituals and relationships that the laws of status derived the essence of their legality, perhaps even more so than material value, suggests *Rank Sections*:

‘What is the number?’, the knowledgeable one inquired, ‘of their entitlements in the divisions of rank’. Not difficult; nine. So that one may know with what amount each of them is established with regard to their full retinue and their lesser retinue, both their reflection and they’re being refused hospitality, they’re being wounded and violation of their protection, they’re being insulted and their being dishonoured, their protection and their sanctuary, their honour-price and the fine for dishonouring them and the fine for defaming them.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Rank Sections* specifies nine ranks, while the *Little Grammar* and *Branched Purchase* denote seven, yet each text features several distinct status hierarchies dependent on the functions of the members of these hierarchies. The majority of the population fell under the “grades of the lay people” [*grád túaithe*], which split twofold into a lower- and higher-order. [[26]](#footnote-26) The laws of status refer to the lower order by several names, such as the “order of the Féni” [*grád Fhéne*]or “orders of worth” [*fodla febe*], which encompasses commoners of full legal status.[[27]](#footnote-27) The higher, or superior, order was the “order of the government” (*grád flatha*), and consisted of kings and nobles.[[28]](#footnote-28) Other hierarchies describe the grades of “people of skill” (*áes dána*): lawyers and craftsmen; the ranks within the Church; and the grades of learned poets skilled in the vernacular tradition.[[29]](#footnote-29) Kelly suggests that it is not rank but the difference between those who are “privileged” (*nemed*), and those who are not privileged, and between those who are free (*sóer*) and those who are unfree (*dóer*) that are the most important social distinctions.[[30]](#footnote-30) Of the privileged echelons include kings, lords, clerics, and poets, and of the non-privileged, free farmers and craftsmen.

Honor-price linked the abstract legal concept of social hierarchies with social reality. An individual’s rank defined an honor-price (*lóg-n-enech*, “the price of his face”), the compensation paid by a guilty party to the dishonored victim.[[31]](#footnote-31) For a “landman” (*mruigfer*), the archetypical commoner grade ascribed full legal rights,[[32]](#footnote-32) the *Branched Purchase* sets an honor-price of six *séoit* – a *sét* being equivalent to a young heifer.[[33]](#footnote-33) Comparatively, a “high noble” (*aire ardd*) held an honor-price of fifteen *séoit*, but the superior “leading noble” (*aire túise*) boasted twenty *séoit*.[[34]](#footnote-34) Honor-price not only functioned as payment but also determined an individual’s ability to enter contracts of clientship and defined the legal worth of their testimony.[[35]](#footnote-35) As urged by the ninth-century gnomic dialogue, *The Instructions of Cormac* (*Tecosca Cormaic*): “Let him be a judge of everyone according to his rank.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Poets conferred a tangible dimension to the concept of honor. In a society preoccupied with honor, poets wielded significant power, possessing the ability to damage honor-price through satire or increase it through praise. Among the lay professions, poets are the only ones afforded full rights of the “privileged,” with the highest of the occupation possessing an honor-price equivalate to a bishop and king.[[37]](#footnote-37) The duties of a poet even extended to law-enforcement. *Branched Purchase*, for example,constructs a court scene, describing a “noble of constraint’s” (*aire coisring*) pledge of obedience on the behalf of his kin to a king, ecclesiastical authority, and a poet.[[38]](#footnote-38) Yet the principal function seems to be satire. Should a kin-member fail to fulfill their obligations, the noble of constraint, as the representative of his kin, was subject to legal satire.[[39]](#footnote-39) Illegitimate satire took the form of verbal assaults: mockery, nicknames, and poems wielded a destructive edge. Irish literature warns of blisters, blemishes, or even death at the words of a poet.[[40]](#footnote-40) Thus, in the saga tale of the *Cattle-Raid of Cualnge*, composed in the seventh century, the legendary hero Cú Cuchulainn took considerable action against the poet Redg. Sent by the enemy forces, Redg ventured to obtain Cuchulainn’s spear through the threat of satire, declaring to “take away his honour unless he got the javelin.” [[41]](#footnote-41) To ignore or tolerate this slight was an offense punishable by a loss of honor-price; payment of a fine or pledge to reclaim honor were common responses.[[42]](#footnote-42) Cuchulainn, however, threw “the javelin at him [which] went right through his head.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Within the low and high orders, the laws of status assert quantitative variance between the rights and obligations of different ranks, whereas a qualitative difference, expressed by the institution of clientship, defines those between orders. Wealth was a necessary, though not sufficient, condition to propel a commoner into the aristocratic class. *Branched Purchase* is explicitly clear: “The [noble of vassals [[44]](#footnote-44)], why is he so called? Because it is in regard of his *déis* that his *dire* (honor-price) is paid. Not so the [strong farmer],it is for his cattle that *dire* is paid to him.”[[45]](#footnote-45)Clientship was, then, the defining feature of a lord, the primary distinction between the low and high orders the possession of *déis* (“clients”). These clients were dependents of a superior rank given a fief of cattle or land. For example, *Branched Purchase* specifies that a high noble (*aire ardd*) boasted twenty clients, whereas a leading noble (*aire túise*) claimed twenty-seven clients.[[46]](#footnote-46) In return, a lord derived status, food-rents, and ritual services.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Clients were not of equal value nor purpose. The law tracts distinguish two forms of the lord-client relationship, a base clientship (*dóerchéile*) and a free clientship (*sóerchéile*). Base clients, “most suited to the common freeman,” owed fixed hospitality, food rents, and military and labor services in a contract severed through steep payment.[[48]](#footnote-48) A farmer received a fief, generally of livestock or farming equipment, dependent on his rank. *Branched Purchase* asserts that a “small farmer” (*ócaire*) was due a fief of 16 heifers*,* and a “strong farmer” (*bóaire*) 30 heifers, with each rank owed their respective honor-price in a deal known as the “chattel of submission.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Of the high noble’s twenty clients, ten were of the base contract. From these ten base clients, “he is entitled to…three two-year-old steers, and five yearling heifers, every winter, with their summer-food.”[[50]](#footnote-50) In other words, base clientship required a farmer to allocate a certain portion of his labor and pasture to the maintenance of a lord’s livestock, a lord who received income without labor.

Free clients enjoyed more freedom, and often belonged to a higher status, only owing an occasional homage, personal attendance, and annual rent. An important distinction from base clientship is for both parties to end the contract without penalty. *On the Law Relating to the Fief and Profit of a Lord* [*Di Dligiud Raith ocus Somaine*] attests to this mobility, claiming that “the free-*fief* is the best of fiefs, for each party is able to return it or to stretch out a hand to his fief.”[[51]](#footnote-51) A lack of formidable constraints on the relationship may find its roots in the relatively little economic value of the partnership. Compared to the sixteen heifers of a small farmer, the three cows common to free clients harbor little risk or profit, which Patterson identifies the cause as the dependents having “adequate social resources with which to defend his status in normal confrontations.”[[52]](#footnote-52) What the lords did gain, however, were political allies. With cows allocated across a lord’s aligned regions, rival powers could not conduct raids on entire stock, and the contracts required free clients to join military expeditions.

Clientship functioned as maintenance of class through the imbalance of Ireland’s pastoral economy, and the basis of socioeconomic relations through which the aristocratic class exercised authority. Base clientship was not necessary for the survival of the farming commoners. Barring natural disasters, disease, or warfare, *Branched Purchase* makes clear that a commoner’s stock of pigs, sheep, and grain is sufficient enough.[[53]](#footnote-53) Rather the exchange of cattle operated as the steppingstones of social advancement and stability; marriages, alliances, and criminal offenses demanded payment, most often in the form of livestock.[[54]](#footnote-54) Despite the initial boon of more animals, a fief of 16 heifers, as in the case of a small farmer (*ócaire*), contained a potential for disaster. An apparent concern is the health of the livestock. Medieval cows did not calve until age four, and reached peak fertility even later at age seven.[[55]](#footnote-55) This exchange was more a transfer of burden and risk by a lord onto his dependent, a political provision that dispersed his livestock to multiple parties to safeguard against disease and raids. Yet the clients turned into more bountiful targets to brigands, disputes, and youthful nobles raiding “over the border” in tests of manhood.[[56]](#footnote-56) A failure to meet rent called upon the client to not only pay a fine of twenty heifers but restore double the rent owned; and to sever a contract under such circumstances of “contempt,” the lord was due twice the fief, twice the rent, and the payment equal to his honor-price.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Compulsory hospitality, which extended to war parties in times of conflict, fed into the eroding cycle of food-renders, land utilization, and rent – all of which enforced by the lord – to render base dependents vulnerable to debt and ruin.[[58]](#footnote-58) In the winter season, lords visited base clients accompanied by large retinues. A high noble (*aire ardd*) deserved “twenty married couples” as “his proper company on visitation from New Year’s Day till Shrovetide,” and thirty married couples as proper for a leading noble (*aire túise*).[[59]](#footnote-59) At these assemblies, the quality of food increased the threat of debt. The *Law of Base-Clientship* [*Cáin Aicillne*], a seventh- to eighth-century law tract, codifies that “if bitter or mawkish food was given to the chief” by a client aware of its quality, “restitution in lawful food, with its double, shall be paid to him, also a ‘cumbal’[[60]](#footnote-60) and honor-price.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

The structural inequalities of base client contracts produced a consistent strain on the pastoral production of small farmers, forcing deeper, generation-spanning dependencies upon the large-scale resources of wealthy Irish, setting a downward trend of social mobility. Although clientship expired at the death of a lord, the contracts made between individual partners, the gradual whittling of resources left few options for a client’s decedents other than to succumb to the same process.[[62]](#footnote-62) It is for this reason that a strong farmer loses his status: “What deprives this man of the status of *bóaire*? It is that perhaps four or five men may be in joint heirship to a *bóaire*, so that each of them cannot easily be a *bóaire.*”[[63]](#footnote-63) Rank status as a hereditary element of society placed a limit on advancement as a three-generation requirement governed movement upwards. A child of a commoner, as in the case of the strong farmer, were susceptible to becoming a semi-freeman (*fuidri*), the space between the free statuses and slavery. With birth not a guarantee of free status, the child denied sufficient inheritance faced the “doubled-edged path:”

A kinsman – by right of sharing / There comes to him by right of kinship / Only the exact inheritance of a normal freeman, / [Worth] fourteen slave-women of equal value, / The inheritance which feeds a normal freeman. / An inheritance upon the path of a double-edged sword, / In virtue of it half honour price is paid.[[64]](#footnote-64)

From the late sixth to the early seventh century, this short legal poem on kinship describes the semi-freeman, though not by name. Charles-Edwards proposes the terms “doubled-edged sword” and “half honour-price” are direct references to the semi-freemen, a claim substantiated by the *Branched Purchase*: “Double-edged is every uncertain service: it brings on to the land the “clinging” of… semi-free-ship.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Semi-freeman were landless laborers without legal capacity, yet the legal tracts give members of this status three successive generations to escape.[[66]](#footnote-66) If unsuccessful, however, a semi-freeman and his heirs succumb to the grade of a hereditary land-laborer (*senchléithe*) for perpetuity.

Commoners with double the property qualifications of a strong farmer could lend livestock to clients, and therefore, in principle, join the aristocracy.[[67]](#footnote-67) It was only their descendants, however, that received the full benefits of the higher-order and gain full aristocratic honor-price. *Branched Purchase* ascribes the title of *fer fothlai,* or “man of withdrawal,” to a person between statuses – a lord of the lower order that “withdraws somewhat from the position of [strong farmer] in order to lend capital to clients.”[[68]](#footnote-68) To receive full aristocratic privileges, *Branched Purchase* requires men of intermediary status, like the lowest-ranked aristocrat, the noble of vassals (*aire déso*), to be “the son of a noble and the grandson of a noble.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Like the descent in status, the three-generation requirement controlled advancement. *Rank Sections* features a similar qualification: a noble of vassals is “a man who preserves the vassalry of father and grandfather as he finds it before him.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The transient nature of the ranks, especially the semi-freemen and the men of withdrawal, stresses the pervasiveness of social mobility in early medieval Ireland.

Permeable divisions between the early Irish social structure necessitated intangible conditions of rank. Both political authority and rank were forms of communication through which the early Irish exercised power.[[71]](#footnote-71) Political authority, however, featured an interplay between honor-price and clientship captured in a language of economic and legal dominance, a language accessible by wealthy commoners. Its arena was the everyday interactions between a lord and client, between a lord and a semi-freeman. In contrast, rank belonged to the constructs and categories of the laws of status. Formalized actions and language exclusive to the aristocracy manifested in performative, ritualistic symbols of rank within the systems of an unequal hierarchy. To act outside the ideological contours of a rank warranted judgment. Labor reduced a king’s honor-price to that of a commoner, for example, and the law delivered the same punishment for traveling without a retinue.[[72]](#footnote-72) It is an issue of moral quality befitting of the station, as neither material possession nor skill were sufficient requirements. Rather status required a nobility of spirit constructed on the principles of “merit and integrity and purity,” as outlined by the *Little Grammar*.[[73]](#footnote-73) A person’s form and worthiness must match his honor-price. A dialogue between Cuchulainn and a charioteer reveals that a “warrior is not entitled to his honour-price if he is without arms; and it is the coward’s law that he deserves in that way.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Status denoted the potential to fulfill the functions and duties of a rank. Specific actions, such as “deeming” labor, satire, and the possession of weapons, received responses carved by intangible principles of character. Elements of social exchange were thus employed to reaffirm the commoner’s inferior status outside of the law-tracts and the weeds of contracts.

Food functioned as one of the elite’s principal tools to fabricate the boundaries of the rank-status hierarchy. Hospitality’s role in society extended beyond the demands of contracts. It was a central cultural institution accessible to every free individual, “ regardless of his rank or profession.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Large portions of *Branched Purchase* feature extensive explorations of the dietary entitlements of each grade and status during social visits. A strong farmer’s food-provisions consisted of milk, corn, butter on Sundays, salted venison, seaweed, onions, and salt; the lowest-ranked commoner, the “man between two houses” (*fer midboth*), received milk and cheese.[[76]](#footnote-76) *Branched Purchase* specifically denies this rank the right to request butter by virtue of his grade, a refusal not found in higher grades of commoners. Notes in the *Martyrology of Óengus* highlight a typical meal, as St. Columbia requests a soup of “nettle-broth without butter or milk” to replicate a dish belonging to a commoner woman.[[77]](#footnote-77) Another tale of St. Columbia, found in Adomnán’s *Life of Columbia*, stresses the importance of wild animals in the commoner’s diet. Columba blessed a stake for a commoner who hurt “neither man nor any cattle,” but would instead kill “only wild animals, and also fish.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Set “in an out-of-the-way part of the district, frequented by wild creatures,” the commoner boasted a mass of venison and wild meat until the take was destroyed, leaving him destitute and poor once again.[[79]](#footnote-79)

As the grades progressed additional side dishes became available. *Branched Purchase* grants the same fare of the man between two houses to the small farmer but with an added twelve-inch mug of sour milk and a “full-sized [loaf]” (*bairgen*) or “two [loaves] of a woman’s baking.”[[80]](#footnote-80) According to the *Law of Base-Clientship*, the loaves of bread were as thick as “a man’s little finger,” nearly twelve inches in circumference, and made of oats or barley.[[81]](#footnote-81) Archeological evidence suggests that barley and oats were the most popular grains cultivated in early medieval Ireland; wheat and rye, on the other hand, required rich soil and were therefore considered luxuries.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Restrictions on foodstuffs of luxury status illustrated the relative prestige assigned to commoners and aristocrats. Meat from domesticated livestock belonged to the aristocracy and the highest grades of commoners, though the laws of status allocated only salted meat to the latter, suggesting fresh meat was exclusive to aristocrats.[[83]](#footnote-83) Food-renders further differentiate between the types of lords in Irish society, based on the entitlements assigned to a commoner lord and an aristocrat. A man of withdrawal, the rank given to the commoner who amassed enough wealth to begin lending, received renders of butter, seeds, and livestock, and not the ale and salted and fresh meat entitled to the aristocratic lords.[[84]](#footnote-84) This distinction emphasizes the disparity between the ranks; commoners, no matter the wealth or position in the clientship dynamic, could not enjoy the same privileges afforded to the higher order.

Feasts transformed the regulation of the lower-order’s diet into a visual performance. In social gatherings, not only was the consumption of meat indicative of status, but a particular cut correlated with a person’s rank. In the *Book of Leinster* (c. 1160), a surviving image of “The Seating of the House of the Mead-Circuit” (*Suidigud Tigi Midchúarda*) captures this principle, depicting the arrangement of a king’s household around a banqueting hall. Grade and status governed a person’s position relative to the king and the quality of their serving of meat.[[85]](#footnote-85) Research conducted by Finbar McCormick reveals that cuts high on the back of a cow belonged to higher grades; a tenderloin went to a king, a rump steak to a queen, and the coccyx to the royal doorkeepers.[[86]](#footnote-86) After a day’s work on the farm, the difference between ranks might not have been significant, but in public gatherings, like a feast, the publicization of an individual’s social status promised material gain.

The color of garments aided in expressions of rank. Early Irish literature ascribed dun-colored garments to the lower order. *The Vision of Mac Conglinne* (*Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*), a twelfth-century narrative, associates consumers of “small breads” with a “dun-colored soft cloak.”[[87]](#footnote-87) A satire from a century prior wields dun-colored clothing to mock their target: “He is confused: it is no shame. / He has begun to age calmly (and) quickly. / The hands of a thief…, / a sallow ploughman, a dun-coloured tunic.”[[88]](#footnote-88) This gray-brown color stood in stark contrast to the two colors attributed to aristocrats and kings, red and blue. The eighth-century law tract *Law of Fosterage-Fee* (*Cáin Íarraith*) specifies that the sons of kings deserved garments of purple, blue, or scarlet.[[89]](#footnote-89) The children of aristocrats received clothes of red, green, or brown which, combined with the colors of royalty, comprised the colors used to describe garments in the *Cattle-raid of Cualnge*, as the status of warriors could “only be determined by the quality and color of their costumes.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Clothes and color served as symbols of status, a form of short-hand communication that instantly transmitted an individual’s rank.

In early medieval Irish society, expressions of political authority and ranked status were separate, though related, methods of affirming the hierarchies of society. Political authority manifested in the interactions of clientship. Honor-price governed the relationship between a lord and client, defining responsibilities and an individual’s legal capacity. Although the divisions of society within the laws of status may be hyperbolic, these social categories possessed concrete materialization, as the number of clients, a person’s honor-price, and rents and dues were comprehensible manifestations of authority. Imbalances within the systems of these relationships, in the contracts between low and high order, set the trend of social mobility downwards, functioning as maintenance of class divisions. These divisions, however, were not always apparent in the everyday lives of the early Irish. Early Ireland’s hierarchical system refers to rank as a “perceived” construct perpetuated through expressions of prestige and ritual performance. Regulations of food diets, expectations of duty, and appearances in social gatherings framed the illusory construct of rank within the bounds of lived experiences.

Appendix A

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table A1: Commoner Grades in Status-texts from Highest to Lowest | | |
| ***Branched Purchase*** | ***Little Grammar*** | ***Rank Sections*** |
| *aire coisring* | *bóaire túise* | *Ógflaithem* |
| *fer fothlai* | *Bóaire túise* | *lethflaithem* |
| *mruigfer* | *bóaire tanaise* | *flaithem* |
| *bóaire febsa* | *mruigfer* | *bóaire tanaisel* |
| *aithech ara threba a deich* | *fer midboth* | *bóaire túisel* |
| *ócaire* | *gairid* | *tánaise bóaire* |
| first *fer midboth*  second *fer midboth* | *flescach* | *úaithne* |
|  | *inol* | *seirthid* |

Appendix B

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table B1: Aristocratic Grades in Status-texts from Highest to Lowest | | |
| ***Branched Purchase*** | ***Little Grammar*** | ***Rank Sections*** |
| *Rí bunaid cech cinn* | *Ollam úas rígaib* | *Tríath* |
| *Rí buiden* | *Rí ruirech* | *Rí ríg* |
| *Rí benn* | *Rí oentúaithe* | *Rí túaithe* |
| *Tánaise ríg* | *Aire forgaill* | *Aire ard* |
| *Aire forgaill* | *Aire ard* | *Aire túise* |
| *Aire túise* | *Aire túise* | *Aire déso* |
| *Aire ard* | *Aire échta* | *Aire fine* |
| *Aire échta* | *Aire déso* |  |
| *Aire déso* |  |  |

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22. The institution of sick-maintenance, for example, which demanded the perpetrator nurse his victim back to health, diluted into a single payment based on the victim’s rank: “Sick-maintenance does not exist to-day, in this time, but only the payment of his worthy means to everyone according to his dignity, including physician’s hire and linen and food provisions and the price of the disfigurement, injury, or defect; but there is a common due for every order of the orders of the *túath* in the law of sick-maintenance.” *Críth Gablach*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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35. Note that the *Little Grammar* uses *eneclann* to refer to honor price. See *Uraicecht Becc*, 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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42. Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 138; [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
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44. In *Branched Purchase,* the *aire désso* is the lowest grade of the noble social order while the *bóaire* equates to the average commoner. See Appendix A for a table comparing the commoner ranks across the *Branched Purchase*, *Little Grammar*, and *Rank Sections*. See Appendix B for a table comparing the aristocratic ranks. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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60. “Female slave,” more often spelled *cumal* -- a unit of value equal generally ascribed to the ranks of kings. See Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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