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*Municipal Registers in Late Medieval Ireland:
Constitutional Culture and Colonial Power*

The conquest of parts of Ireland by the English in the late twelfth century brought with it the establishment of urban governments on the English model (with chartered liberties, mayors, other urban officials, and assemblies of citizens). As part of this process, English settlers (often migrating from English towns such as Bristol) established themselves as burgesses of Irish towns; indeed, it was common practice for Irish towns to forbid the Gaelic (or ‘native’ Irish) from becoming burgesses at all. By the fifteenth century, the descendants of twelfth-century English settlers (here, called the ‘Anglo-Irish’) continued to rule Irish towns, but found themselves in a challenging position. English monarchs and nobles were devoting less time and effort to maintaining English rule in late medieval Ireland, the Anglo-Irish were under threat from Gaelic chieftains, and many Irish towns (previously strongholds of English power) were receiving an influx of Gaelic migrants. Residents of the English mainland increasingly distrusted the Anglo-Irish, fearing that they had adopted Gaelic customs and could no longer be trusted to maintain English military interests in Ireland. In England itself, parliament and towns like Bristol passed legislation to discourage both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic residents of Ireland from migrating to or trading in England.

It was also in the fifteenth century—this period of great uncertainty for the Anglo-Irish urban elite—that we begin to gain a better idea of how municipal assemblies in Ireland functioned and the types of matters with which they concerned themselves. While surviving records for the twelfth to fourteenth centuries from Irish towns typically contain the customs, charters, or treaties of a town, accounts of civic activity pertaining to the mid-fifteenth century instead focus on business transacted before assemblies of citizens and the ordinances they passed. Some of these registers of assembly proceedings containing fifteenth-century material survive only in late fifteenth- or sixteenth-century copies (e.g., Waterford), but the Dublin assembly rolls (with entries beginning in 1447) are clearly contemporary. For all Irish municipal records, however, the transition from more miscellaneous civic records to accounts of assembly proceedings in the mid-fifteenth century was accompanied by a shift from Latin to English as the language of record. In both these aspects (assembly proceedings replacing more miscellaneous civic registers, English replacing Latin), Irish towns were in step with their counterparts in England. The 1420s to 1460s was exactly the period in which several English towns (e.g., Hull, York, Sandwich) began to keep accounts of assembly or council deliberations and in which English replaced Latin as the language of urban recordkeeping. That Irish and English municipal records should continue to follow the same patterns in the fifteenth century is striking, since during this period contact between English merchants and the Anglo-Irish was decreasing and the contact that did occur was often antagonistic.

So why was it in the fifteenth century that Irish civic governments began keeping registers of assembly deliberations and recording them in the English language? I shall argue that one of the main functions of records of urban assembly deliberations in Ireland were to serve as a means by which Anglo-Irish urban elites highlighted their cultural ‘Englishness’ during a period when those living in the imperial mainland of England often questioned their credentials in this regard. The process of keeping records in the English language that mirrored fashions in English urban recordkeeping was a way for municipal officeholders in Ireland to reinforce their own identity as defenders of English rule in the colony. Urban recordkeeping in late medieval Ireland was not merely a practical tool, but was connected closely to the Anglo-Irish

community's sense of their own history. I shall also consider the extent to which the function of Irish urban assembly registers as tools for the policing and assertion of cultural boundaries ended up excluding other types of civic business from appearing in the written record.