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T. M. CHARLES-EDWARDS



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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Ireland in the seventh century: a tour*

In the 640s, Agilbert, a Frank who was to end his days as bishop of Paris, lived for some years as a student in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> His visit is striking because in 640 the Franks were still the most powerful people in Western Europe, while Ireland was considered to lie at the end of the world. Yet he was only the first of several foreign visitors to Ireland to be mentioned by the Northumbrian English historian Bede.<sup>2</sup>

Agilbert's journey to Ireland was a consequence of an earlier journey in the reverse direction, from Ireland to Francia: a pilgrimage by a Leinsterman, Columbanus. This pilgrimage, or *peregrinatio*, was not a pilgrimage in the sense of a visit to some shrine, such as to the Holy Places in Palestine, or to the tomb of St Peter in Rome or to St James of Compostela; it was not a journey to a holy place where prayers were said and the pilgrim then returned home.<sup>3</sup> Such pilgrimages were common in the early Middle Ages, but Columbanus' was not one of them. His was a journey with no return, a journey not to a shrine, but away from family and native land. The result was the foundation of three monasteries in northern Burgundy: Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine.<sup>4</sup> From these bases Columbanus gained the position of the pre-eminent holy man of the Merovingian kings and their aristocracy in the early seventh century – an uncomfortable and controversial holy man, it is true, but

<sup>1</sup> Bede, *HE* iii.7.

<sup>2</sup> Other named persons who spent some time in Ireland include Æthelhun (Edilhun), Æthelwine (Ediluni) (*HE* iii.27), Chad (iv.3), probably Cedd (seems to know Irish, iii.25), Ecgberht (iii.27 etc.), Hygbald (iv.3), Tuda (iii.26), Wiltberht (v.9), Willibrord (v.10) and the two Hewalds (*ibid.*).

<sup>3</sup> K. Hughes, 'The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 11 (1960), 143–51, repr. in her *Church and Society in Ireland AD –*, ed. D. N. Dumville, Variorum Reprints (London, 1987), no. xiv; A. Angenendt, 'Die irische Peregrinatio und ihre Auswirkung auf dem Kontinent vor dem Jahre 800', in Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa*, 52–79; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *Peregrinatio*', *Celtica*, 11 (1976), 43–59.

<sup>4</sup> Jonas, *Vita S. Columbani*, i.6 and 10, ed. B. Krusch, *Jonae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1905), pp. 163, 169–70.

indisputably holy.<sup>5</sup> Frankish bishops might be alarmed at the times at which he celebrated the movable feasts of the Church, but some of them sought him as their ‘soul-friend’ nonetheless.<sup>6</sup>

Agilbert was buried in the crypt at Jouarre, near Paris, a monastery which had been founded by one of the most influential families to give their support to Columbanus.<sup>7</sup> This Frankish nobleman’s journey to Ireland is thus clear evidence that the links between Ireland and Francia created by Columbanus’ *peregrinatio* had not been broken. Another *peregrinatio*, within a few years of Agilbert’s voyage to Ireland, brought Aidan to Northumbria from Iona, a small island off the western tip of another, larger, island, Mull in the Inner Hebrides.<sup>8</sup> The repercussions of Aidan’s mission were to bring Englishmen to Ireland in considerable numbers, both for study and for the monastic life. Bede distinguishes those going for the sake of study, who visited the houses of Irish teachers, from those whose purpose was training in the monastic life;<sup>9</sup> both received what, in modern terms, would be called their maintenance free; the students also had their teaching free.<sup>10</sup> Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, wrote *c.* 675 of boatloads of Englishmen going to Ireland to study.<sup>11</sup> For much of the seventh century, therefore, Ireland was not just a pimple upon the outer skin of the known world, as the Irishman Cummián described his native island in 632 or 633;<sup>12</sup> it was the resort of students anxious for advancement in the Christian Latin learning common to Western Europe, and also of young monks eager to gain knowledge of the monastic training which had produced Columbanus and Aidan.

It so happens, by a fortunate accident, that we can have some notion of the Ireland visited by Aldhelm’s boatloads of Englishmen. About 690 Bishop Tírechán wrote a book whose purpose was to defend the

<sup>5</sup> I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, — (London, 1994), pp. 184–9; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 63–73.

<sup>6</sup> Columbanus, *Epistolae* i. 6 (ed. and tr. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* ii, Dublin, 1957, pp. 8–9).

<sup>7</sup> Marquise de Maillé, *Les Cryptes de Jouarre* (Paris, 1971); J. Hubert, J. Porscher and W. F. Volbach, *Europe in the Dark Ages* (London, 1969), pp. 64–78. <sup>8</sup> Bede, *HE* iii.5. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.27.

<sup>10</sup> This was not true for the natives: *CIH* 592.12–13 (*Berrad Airechta*, § 14; German tr. by R. Thurneysen, *Die Bürgerschaft im irischen Recht*, *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Berlin, 1928, no. 2, p. 8; Engl. tr. by R. C. Stacey in T. Charles-Edwards *et al.*, *Lawyers and Laymen*, Cardiff, 1986, p. 212).

<sup>11</sup> Aldhelm, *Epistolae* v (ed. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, MGH AA xv, Berlin, 1919, p. 492; tr. M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, Ipswich, 1979, p. 163).

<sup>12</sup> Cummián, *De Controversia Paschali*, ed. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cummián’s Letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi* (Toronto, 1988), p. 72 (line 110).

territorial authority of the community of Patrick, headed by his heirs, the bishops of Armagh, and to cement their alliance with the leading dynasty in the Irish midlands.<sup>13</sup> The framework of the book is a circular journey supposed to have been made by St Patrick himself around the northern half of Ireland, beginning on the east coast a few miles north of Dublin, travelling west across the great midland plain, over the River Shannon into Connaught, north into Donegal, round the northern coast to Co. Antrim, and then southwards again back to the midlands.<sup>14</sup> Such a circuit was an expression of lordship, ecclesiastical as much as secular. The Patrick portrayed by Tírechán is undoubtedly very different from the fifth-century original, but the story as he told it is very instructive about the mental as well as the political map of seventh-century Ireland. Patrick's journey implied that the political power of kings was subject to a higher power, that of the holy man and his heirs. Tírechán's Patrick is thus a political activist: each ancestor of a dynasty powerful in the late seventh century received a blessing that was claimed to be the foundation of that dynasty's greatness; each ancestor of a dynasty once powerful but by then declining was subject to the holy man's anger, and a curse which led inexorably to the collapse of its fortunes. Tírechán's primary concern was with the allegiance due from churches to the heir of Patrick, the bishop of Armagh, but this concern was inseparable from the attitude of kings. Too many of them were 'deserters and arch-robbers', who 'hate the jurisdiction of Patrick, because they have taken away that which was his, and they fear that, if the heir of Patrick were to investigate his rights of jurisdiction, he could vindicate for himself almost the whole island as his domain'.<sup>15</sup> Tírechán's book was just such an investigation into the rights of the heir of Patrick; it was his duty to search for the *paruchia Patricii*, by which he meant the rights of ecclesiastical lordship over churches claimed by the bishop of Armagh. His account of Patrick's circuit around the northern half of Ireland embodied the results of his investigation. As a conse-

<sup>13</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea*, pp. 124–63; for the date, see the Appendix to chap. 10. Note that the texts ed. Bieler, pp. 122–4 [II 1–4] and 164–6 [III 2–8] do not appear to have been part of Tírechán's original text; for strong arguments in favour of seeing Tírechán as a promoter of the interests of two principal churches associated with Patrick, Donaghpatrick in Co. Meath and Domnach Mór in Co. Mayo, and also of Síl nÁeda Sláne, see C. Swift, 'Tírechán's Motives in Compiling the *Collectanea*: An Alternative Interpretation', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), 53–82.

<sup>14</sup> As a very brief appendage ( *nito circulo*, 'after the circuit had been completed'), there is also an account of a journey *via* Leinster to Cashel in Munster, *Collectanea*, 51. The significance of this story is appreciated and countered by the eighth-century Life of Ailbe, c. 29 (ed. Heist, *Vitae*, p. 125).

<sup>15</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 18.

quence, Tírechán, a native of north-west Connaught, also offers us an exceptionally detailed understanding of the ecclesiastical and political geography of the northern half of Ireland at the end of the seventh century.<sup>16</sup>

It is also particularly fortunate that others were to supplement the work of Tírechán. His text is contained in the Book of Armagh, a small manuscript written by three scribes for the heir of Patrick, Torbach, in 807.<sup>17</sup> The book contains the New Testament, Sulpicius Severus' Life of St Martin, an abbreviated version of Patrick's own works and a corpus of later material about St Patrick or Armagh. This consists of a Life by Muirchú, the *Collectanea* by Tírechán, the Book of the Angel, various documents known as the *Additamenta*, 'things added', and the so-called *Notulae* or 'brief notes'. These *Notulae* are written in a cursive script on two pages of the manuscript.<sup>18</sup> They are highly abbreviated: a word is often represented only by its first letter. As a consequence they would be unintelligible to us were it not that they often correspond closely with a later version of Patrick's journeys around Ireland, that contained in the Tripartite Life of St Patrick.<sup>19</sup>

In its present form, the Tripartite Life is the result of successive minor revisions and translations, in more than one stage; but the *Notulae* and the later Latin lives of Patrick make it virtually certain that there was an earlier version no later than *c.* 800.<sup>20</sup> The common original text lying behind two of the later Lives of St Patrick has been dated to the eighth century, and a possible author identified: Colmán 'of the Britons', who

<sup>16</sup> The value of Tírechán's evidence for Connaught has been well shown in an unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis by Catherine Swift, 'The Social and Ecclesiastical Background to Tírechán's Seventh-Century *Collectanea*' (1993[1994]). For the context and value of the *Collectanea*, see also C. Doherty, 'The Cult of St Patrick and the Politics of Armagh in the Seventh Century', in J.-M. Picard (ed.), *Ireland and Northern France AD —* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 55–65.

<sup>17</sup> R. Sharpe, 'Palaeographical Considerations in the Study of the Patrician Documents in the Book of Armagh', *Scriptorium*, 36 (1982), 3–28; *Liber Ardmachanus: the Book of Armagh*, ed. J. Gwynn (Dublin, 1913).

<sup>18</sup> See the facsimile edn by E. J. Gwynn, *Book of Armagh: the Patrician Documents*, Irish Manuscripts Commission, Facsimiles in Collotype of Irish manuscripts, iii (Dublin, 1937); the *Notulae* are ed. L. Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 180–2. Their function has been disputed: see K. Mulchrone, 'What are the Armagh *Notulae*?', *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 140–4; Bieler, 'The *Notulae* in the Book of Armagh', *Scriptorium*, 8 (1954), 89–97; K. Mulchrone, 'Ferdornach and the Armagh *Notulae*', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), 160–3.

<sup>19</sup> *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939: [VT<sup>2</sup>]); vol. 1 was the only one ever published. Some material from two detached leaves was edited by K. Mulchrone, *Galway Archaeological and Historical Society Journal*, 20 (1942), 39–53. There is a translation in the earlier edition by W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, 2 vols., Rolls Series (London, 1887).

<sup>20</sup> The conclusions of Bieler, 'The *Notulae* in the Book of Armagh', are to be preferred to those of Mulchrone, 'What are the Armagh *Notulae*?' and 'Ferdornach and the Armagh *Notulae*'.

died in 751.<sup>21</sup> This lost Life was probably a generation earlier than the text to which the *Notulae* refer. The latter was certainly not identical with the Tripartite Life. This is not just because the earlier text was probably largely in Latin while the Tripartite Life is mainly in Irish: the latter's claims to churches in Leinster, for example, are more moderate than are those of the *Notulae*. Where, however, the *Notulae* corroborate the Tripartite Life, we have a version of Patrick's journeys no later than *c.* 800 to set alongside Tírechán's text, roughly a hundred years earlier. The function of the *Notulae* was, then, to provide an index to a late eighth-century Latin Life of Patrick, which is no longer extant but is closely reflected in the Tripartite Life.

The earliest recension of the Tripartite Life itself has been dated to the early ninth century.<sup>22</sup> The combination of these Patrician texts – Tírechán *c.* 690, the *Notulae c.* 800, and the Tripartite Life of the ninth century – is one of the main foundations of early Irish history. They offer successive pictures of the ecclesiastical and political geography of Ireland, which are substantially, though far from completely, updated in each version.<sup>23</sup> A simplified diagram showing the development of the written material about St Patrick is as follows (fig. 1.1).

Up to 800 most texts are likely to have been in Latin, although some of the *Addimenta* are in Irish. The tenth-century text of the Tripartite Life still has some Latin passages and each successive version may have shifted more into Irish, since the language is not homogeneous in date.<sup>24</sup>

Tírechán's Patrick entered many kingdoms but only explicitly recognised one contemporary as king: Lóegaire mac Néill, king of Tara. Yet modern historians maintain that, in Tírechán's day, there were more than a hundred small kingdoms in Ireland.<sup>25</sup> For a small kingdom of this type, they have employed the Old Irish word *túath* 'people'. Large units such as provinces – Leinster and Munster would be examples – were

<sup>21</sup> F. J. Byrne and P. Francis, 'Two Lives of Saint Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*', *JRSAL*, 124 (1994), 14–15; note the dating of the *Vita Secunda* to the early ninth century (p. 9), of the *Vita Tertia* to the last quarter of the eighth (p. 8) and of the *Vita Quarta* to the ninth century (p. 10).

<sup>22</sup> Byrne and Francis, 'Two Lives of Saint Patrick', p. 7, following Bieler, 'Bethu Phátraic: Versuch einer Grundlegung des Verhältnisses der irischen Patriciusviten zu den lateinischen', *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Jahrgang* , So. 10 (1974), 266–71 (repr. as no. xiv in L. Bieler, *Studies on the Life and Legend of St Patrick*, ed. R. Sharpe, London, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Tírechán ignores Cenél nÉogain, but that dynasty is given a central place in the *Notulae*, no. 9, and in the Tripartite Life, *VT*<sup>2</sup> 1755–1805.

<sup>24</sup> This is the conclusion of K. H. Jackson, 'The Date of the Tripartite Life of St Patrick', *ZCP*, 41 (1986), 5–45.

<sup>25</sup> F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), p. 7: 'probably no less than 150 kings in the country at any given date between the fifth and twelfth centuries'.

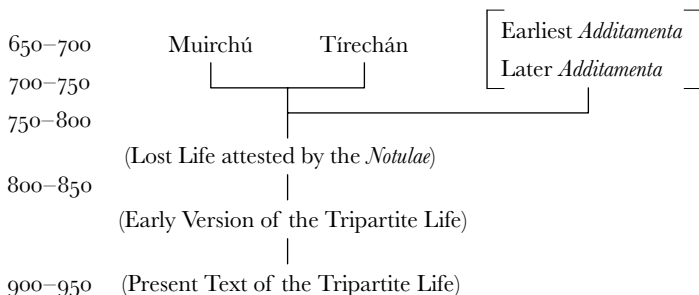


Fig. 1.1. Development of the Patrician texts

composed of numerous *túatha*. For the laws, some of which were contemporaneous with Tírechán, a standard *túath* had a king, a church, a poet and an ecclesiastical scholar.<sup>26</sup> Yet, while Tírechán mentions many dynasties, he refrains from conferring the title of king on any of them except for the king of Tara. There is an apparent contradiction between his political geography, in which the landscape is divided into numerous small districts, to some of which he assigns dynasties, and his political theory, according to which Ireland is dominated by a single monarchy.

A full exploration of this paradox will occupy several chapters of this book. At the outset, however, it can be said without qualification that most of the small territories mentioned by Tírechán were kingdoms, for the obits of their kings are recorded in the annals. Small kingdoms often had a clear topographical rationale: their territories tended to coincide with *maige*, Latin *campi*, areas of well-cultivated land. A *mag* or *campus* was contrasted with mountain, bog or woodland. In other European countries, such a district would usually be a subordinate unit of government rather than a kingdom. In Ireland, these small kingdoms were indeed politically subordinate, but the subordination was of one king to another rather than of a local officer, such as a sheriff or count, to the king.

The resilience of small-scale kingship in Ireland is not solely explained by the topography of the country. It was also a consequence of the means used to maintain the cohesion of the great dynasties – those that supplied overkings who were the lords of several client-kings,

<sup>26</sup> *CIH* 1123.32; 2225.7. That the *túath* should, if possible, have a bishop is suggested by *CIH* 234.4–5; *Riagail Phátraic* speaks of a ‘chief bishop of a *túath*’ and claims that a *túath* without a bishop loses ‘the entitlement of its faith’, *CIH* 2129.6–10 = ‘The Rule of Patrick’, ed. and tr. J. G. O’Keeffe, *Ériu*, 1 (1904), 218 (text), 221 (translation). Minor peoples, however, may well not have had a bishop.

rulers of small kingdoms. Royal dynasties were segmentary, in that they had a single stem but several branches. The unity of such dynasties was often fragile: while they needed to preserve some cohesion in the face of rivals, the kingship, or overkingship, was the object of contention between the branches. To mitigate the divisive effects of competition for supremacy, it was standard practice to attempt to advance the interests of several branches, not just the one in current possession of the overkingship.<sup>27</sup> One way to achieve this end was to allow that the head of a subordinate branch of a dynasty might be a king, even if only a client-king. The pressure was thus to multiply minor kingships in order to maintain internal dynastic support for the major kings.

As lesser branches of great dynasties held on to royal status as long as they could, so also did lesser dynasties. Even if the struggle to remain royal proved impossible, there were other ways of retaining high rank that were also calculated to maintain the separate identity of the *túath*. Several churches were controlled by formerly royal kindreds. A great church and a great saint could offer a powerful focus of unity, capable of helping to sustain a widely scattered people. The people called the Fothairt had one small kingdom in the far south-eastern corner of Leinster (including the modern port of Rosslare), another in the centre, in the east of Co. Carlow, but also lesser branches, apparently sub-royal, in the far north-west of the province and close to Kildare; yet others constituted kindreds attached to further Leinster churches such as Cell Auxilli (Killashee close to Naas).<sup>28</sup> All considered their great saint, Brigit, to be their patron.

The unity between different *túath*-kingdoms is sometimes presented as if it were solely a matter of a personal tie of clientship between a client-king and his overlord. As the example of the Fothairt shows, however, things were more complicated. There were dispersed peoples as well as segmented dynasties linking different kingdoms; there were also treaties of alliance, some of which appear to have endured over long periods. Moreover special occasions encouraged wider travel, such as the 'fairs', general assemblies that were partly for serious business (political, ecclesiastical and judicial), partly for entertainment, such as horse-races, or

<sup>27</sup> An example is Cenél nÉogain: T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Early Medieval Kingships in the British Isles', in S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1989), pp. 34–6.

<sup>28</sup> *CGH* i.80–6; Cell Auxilli is at 126 a 2; Domnach Mór, *ibid.*, may be the Domnach Mór Maige Luadat just to the east of Maynooth; another branch, Uí Báetáin, were settled close to Maistiú, the seat of kingship of the Uí Dúnlainge in the seventh century (*ibid.*, i.84, 126 a 41); the Uí Chúiluib were 'of Kildare', *ibid.*, i.86. Some were even outside Leinster, such as 'the Fothairt Imchláir at Armagh' (*ibid.*, i.82).



the great feasts of the major saints.<sup>29</sup> A principal perquisite of the overking was to have a ‘circuit’ by which he enjoyed the hospitality of his clients, and the overking was accompanied by a household; a poet also had a circuit by which he might praise several patrons. The churchman, too, like the poet and other ‘people of art’, had the ability to travel from one kingdom to another, retaining his social standing in each. Provinces, such as Leinster and Munster, were not, therefore, just fragile pyramids of royal clientship, kept in being only by personal agreements between kings. They were long-enduring entities fortified by a great accumulation of common loyalties, common traditions and common conceptions of the shape of their world. The stories told by Tírechán and the Tripartite Life sought to shape these loyalties, traditions and conceptions in a Patrician mould.

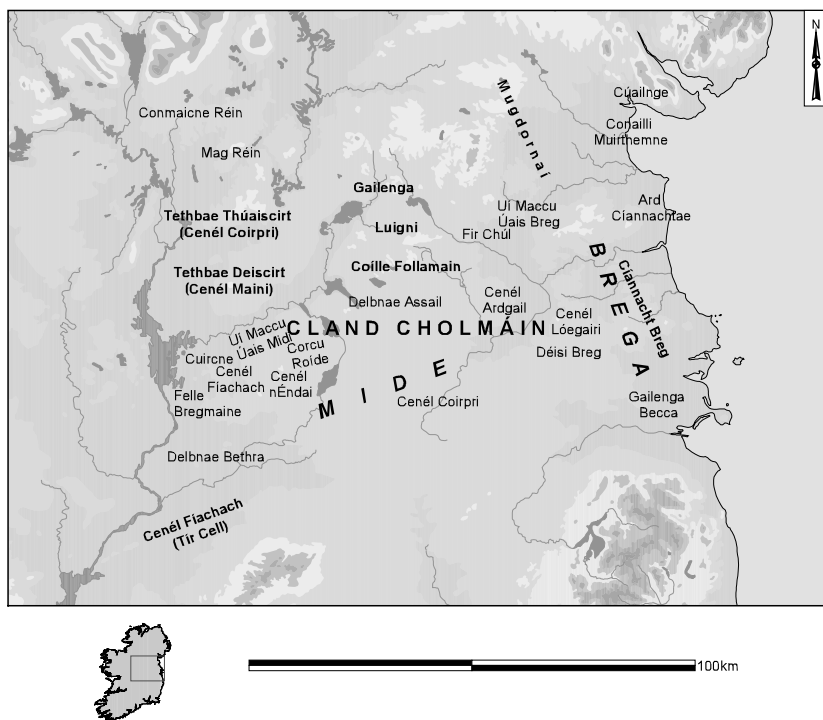
(1) THE LANDS OF THE SOUTHERN UÍ NÉILL

Book I of Tírechán’s *Collectanea* is devoted to ‘the lands of the descendants of Níall’ stretching from the eastern coast north of Dublin to the River Shannon, thus including the northern part of Co. Dublin, the north-west of Co. Offaly and the whole of the modern counties of Meath, Westmeath and Longford. Although he gave more space to his native province of Connaught, the lands of the Uí Néill were the centre of his Ireland and the seat of what he regarded as the chief royal power in the island. It contained the provinces of Brega in the east, Mide (the ‘Middle Country’) in the centre and Tethbae between the Shannon and the Inny. Brega runs from the River Liffey at Dublin, north over the River Boyne ending in the low hills south of Louth. It includes some of the driest and richest agricultural land in Ireland. Along the lower Boyne were the great neolithic passage-graves of Dowth, Knowth and Newgrange at the centre of one of the most densely settled districts of prehistoric and early medieval Ireland. The old passage-tombs were no concern of Tírechán’s, but one of them was to become the ‘seat of kingship’ of one branch of the Uí Néill in the eighth century.<sup>30</sup> Its neighbour, Newgrange, was one of the principal mythological sites of Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cogitosus, *Vita Brigidae*, tr. S. Connolly and J. M. Picard, *JRSAL*, 117 (1987), Pref. and c. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Knowth (N 996 735); *VT*<sup>2</sup> calls such sites *riúsúide* ‘royal seat’ (745) or *súide atha* ‘a ruler’s seat’ (1736–7). On this site see G. Eogan, ‘Excavations at Knowth, Co. Meath, 1962–1965’, *PRLA*, 66 c, no. 4 (1968), 299–400, which includes, pp. 383–400, F. J. Byrne, ‘Historical Note on Cnogba (Knowth)’.

<sup>31</sup> *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, ed. E. J. Gwynn, ii, Todd Lecture Ser., ix (Dublin, 1906), pp. 10–25; *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ed. O. Bergin and R. I. Best, *Ériu*, 12 (1934–8), pp. 137–93, §§ 1, 7–9 etc.



Map 1. The kingdoms of the southern Uí Néill

Near the mouth of the Boyne was the port, Inber Colpthai, which served much of Brega.<sup>32</sup> Muirchú's Life of Patrick brings the saint south on a coastal voyage from Co. Down to land at the *portus* at Inber Colpthai.<sup>33</sup> The foundation story of the church of Trim, further up the Boyne, was written early in the eighth century;<sup>34</sup> it brings Lommán in his ship from Patrick's landing-place in the estuary of the Boyne as far as Trim: the port at the mouth of the Boyne is conceived as being the nodal point of river traffic. The Boyne and the Liffey are like two short-handled scythes: the handle takes one inland westwards from the coast, but soon the blade swings southwards. The Boyne is thus the great river of the plain of Brega, while the Liffey drained *Mag Li*, the plain of

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Colp (grid ref.: o 12 34); recent excavations have revealed part of what may be a large cemetery. <sup>33</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, i.14 (ed. Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, p. 84).

<sup>34</sup> F. J. Byrne, 'A Note on Trim and Sletty', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 316–18. The text is *Additamenta*, cc. 1–4 (ed. and tr. Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 166–71).

Liffey, the most prosperous district of Leinster and, from Tírechán's time, the seat of the most bitter enemies of the Uí Néill, the Uí Dúnlainge.<sup>35</sup> Within the scythe blade of the Boyne lies another prehistoric site treated in our period as a seat of kingship, Tara.<sup>36</sup> Muirchú, in his *Life of Patrick*, portrayed Tara as the Babylon of pagan Ireland and Lóegaire – son of the Níall who gave his name to the Uí Néill – as its Nebuchadnezzar. In Tara, Lóegaire was said to have had his palace, which was the centre of the plain of Brega, 'an exceptionally great plain, where was the greatest kingdom among these peoples [of the Irish] and the head of all paganism and idolatry'.<sup>37</sup>

In the seventh century, Tara retained a significance as an ancient seat of kingship, but kings did not normally reside there. There was a simple reason why an ancient site, not normally inhabited by kings, should have been the pre-eminent royal seat of the Uí Néill and even of Ireland. The local Brega branch of the Uí Néill may have been, in Tírechán's day, the most powerful Uí Néill dynasty; but it did not have a monopoly on power either over the Uí Néill kingdoms or over those other kingdoms, not of the Uí Néill, which acknowledged Uí Néill supremacy. Sometimes, therefore, the supreme king among the Uí Néill was not from Brega. Since Tara was recognised as the highest seat of kingship, an Uí Néill king from outside Brega might have a royal seat within 'the exceptionally large plain of Brega', yet, at the same time, the local Uí Néill ruler could retain his seat of kingship. In Tírechán's time, this more local seat of kingship for Brega was further north, at Ráith Airthir (Oristown), in the valley of the Boyne's principal tributary, the Blackwater, and close to the site of the royal assemblies of the king of Tara at Tailtiu (Teltown).<sup>38</sup>

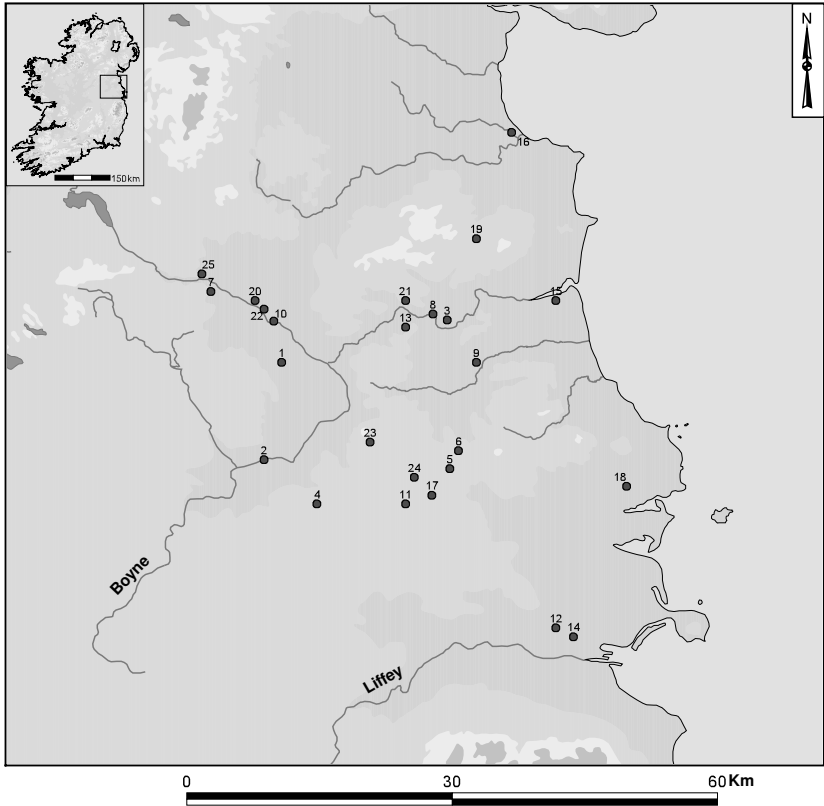
Near to Ráith Airthir and Tailtiu lay one of the earliest churches to be named after Patrick, Domnach Pátraic, and Tírechán made full use of the contiguity of the three sites, royal and ecclesiastical. A central element in the Patrician legend by the late seventh century was a confrontation between Patrick and Lóegaire, the king of Tara, surrounded by his druids.<sup>39</sup> The confrontation supposedly took place on the night of Easter, with Patrick beginning the ceremonies of the Easter vigil on the Hill of Slane by the Boyne; he thus challenged the pagan festival being

<sup>35</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 12. *Lífe* (Liffey) was originally the name of the district, Ruirthech ('Stampeding') being the old name of the River Liffey.

<sup>36</sup> See below, chap. 11. The grid ref. is N 91 59. <sup>37</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, i.13.

<sup>38</sup> Oristown is N 79 75, Teltown N 80 74; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 9–10; the point of 10 is better brought out by VT<sup>2</sup> 743–66.

<sup>39</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, i.13–21; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 8; *CIH* 527–8.



- |                                     |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Ard Breccáin / Ardbraccan         | 14 Glas Noiden / Glasnevin         |
| 2 Áth Truim / Trim                  | 15 Inber Colpthai                  |
| 3 Sid in Broga / Newgrange          | 16 Lind Dúachaill / Annagassan     |
| 4 Calatruim / Galtrim               | 17 Loch nGabor / Lagore            |
| 5 Cell Fhoibrig / Kilbrew           | 18 Lusca / Lusk                    |
| 6 Cell Moinni/ Kilmoon              | 19 Mainister Búiti / Monasterboice |
| 7 Cenandus / Kells                  | 20 Ráith Airthir / Oristown        |
| 8 Cnogbae / Knowth                  | 21 Sláne / Slane                   |
| 9 Dom Liacc / Duleek                | 22 Taitiu / Teltown                |
| 10 Domnach Pátraic / Donaghpatrick  | 23 Temair / Tara                   |
| 11 Domnach Sechnaill / Dunshaughlin | 24 Treóit / Trevet                 |
| 12 Findglas / Finglas               | 25 Tuién / Dulane                  |
| 13 Findubair Abae / Fennoir         |                                    |

Map 2. Brega

celebrated by Lóegaire and his druids further south at Tara. Tírechán's Patrick, however, was remarkably mobile during this Easter. He began it on the Hill of Slane, went south to Tara during the night, and then north again on Easter Sunday to Tailtiu and Domnach Pátraic. This one liturgical ceremony was to be the means by which a pagan king's power was brought to nothing and his druids publicly defeated; it was also to be the means by which a Christian seat of kingship was to be sanctified. Tara was the arena for the defeat of paganism, Tailtiu and Ráith Airthir for Patrick's validation of a Christian dynasty.

There is a further twist, however, to Tírechán's story. Lóegaire was an appropriate pagan king of Tara to set against the Christian missionary Patrick, because his descendants were, by the seventh century, no more than the ruling dynasty of a small kingdom around Trim.<sup>40</sup> Tailtiu, on the other hand, lay within the principal kingdom of the Uí Néill. Tírechán describes Tailtiu as a place 'where there is accustomed to be a royal assembly'. This assembly was apparently an annual event: in 873, 876 and 878, the Annals of Ulster note with surprise that it was not held in those years. Although Tailtiu's fame was as the site of the annual fair and assembly (Tírechán's *agon*), it also had a church, and could be used as the site of a synod.<sup>41</sup> Patrick, as presented in Tírechán's version of his legend, is thus skilful in a policy of divide and rule: he takes two royal sites bound up with the kingship of the Uí Néill and likewise two branches of the dynasty; Patrick defeats one and exalts the other.

The stories Tírechán tells about the responses of the sons of Níall to Patrick's preaching correspond far too well with the political standing of their descendants in Tírechán's own lifetime for there to be any serious chance that they were a truthful account of events in the fifth century.<sup>42</sup> Cenél Lógairi, 'the kindred of Lóegaire', was, therefore, one lineage whose merely local power was remorselessly publicised by Patrician hagiographers. Because Lóegaire was both the common ancestor of the lineage and the person who gave it his name, his actions were naturally considered to be the direct cause of the fortunes of his descendants.

<sup>40</sup> Trim was not linked to Armagh until early in the eighth century, and by then the legend was firmly established: Byrne, 'A Note on Trim and Sletty', 316–18.

<sup>41</sup> AU 723.5; Adomnán, *VSC* iii. 3; *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, ed. J. Colgan, *Triadis Thaumaturgae . . . Acta* (Louvain, 1647), p. 531, tr. S. Connolly, *JRSAL*, 119 (1989), c. 39; *Bethu Brigte*, ed. D. Ó hAodha (Dublin, 1978), c. 40 (p. 14, tr. p. 31).

<sup>42</sup> D. A. Binchy, 'Patrick and his Biographers: Ancient and Modern', *Studia Hibernica*, 2 (1962), 58–68.

Another Uí Néill lineage to be given the same harsh treatment was Cenél Coirpri, ‘the kindred of Coirpre’. In Tírechán’s time, the kindred of Coirpre was the most powerful of the Uí Néill dynasties to have been excluded from the kingship of Tara. Separate territories ruled by Cenél Coirpri are attested on the borders of Kildare and Meath, in the northern part of Co. Longford around Granard, and in Co. Sligo.<sup>43</sup> Professor Byrne has observed that the geographical range of these territories and the hostile interest shown by hagiographers strongly suggest that Cenél Coirpri had held a predominant position among the Uí Néill in the earliest phases of their expansion.<sup>44</sup> Tírechán, however, was not afraid to have Patrick call Coirpre *inimicus Dei*, ‘the enemy of God’. The supposed reason for this opprobrious epithet was Patrick’s excursion northwards on Easter Sunday.

When Patrick came to Tailtiu on Easter Sunday in the fifth year of the reign of Lóegaire son of Níall,<sup>45</sup> he met Lóegaire’s brother Coirpre.<sup>46</sup> Coirpre had intended to kill Patrick and had some of the saint’s servants flogged in the Blackwater to compel them to identify Patrick. His reward was the standard dynastic prophecy for a rejected king: ‘Thy seed shall serve the seed of thy brothers and there will be no king of thy seed for ever.’ This prophecy may seem a little odd if one reflects that there were to be three territories ruled by Cenél Coirpri. The point, however, is defined by the place: at the end of the seventh century Tailtiu was the royal assembly of all the Uí Néill, and the kingship in question was therefore the kingship of Tara, ‘the greatest kingdom among these peoples’.<sup>47</sup> The point is driven home by Tírechán by means of a contrast he makes between Coirpre and another son of Níall, Conall:

<sup>43</sup> Cell Chúaca, Kilcock, n 88 39, was within Coirpre Uí Chiardai according to *Fél.*<sup>2</sup>, Notes, 8 January; cf. Carbury, Co. Kildare, n 69 34, but the epithet ‘Uí Chiardai’, may be an error since it is applied to northern Tethbae, *Fél.*<sup>2</sup> Notes, 31 Jan. (unless the one dynasty ruled both territories); cf. AU 954.5. Coirpre Mór is Coirpre Dromma Clíab (Drumcliff, Co. Sligo), *Fél.*<sup>2</sup> Notes, 12 June. The annals give frequent obits of kings of Cenél Coirpri in the seventh and eighth centuries, but not in the ninth: in the Annals of Ulster the only obit after 813 and before the end of the Chronicle of Ireland, nearly a century later in 911, is for a king of Cenél Coirpri Móir in 873. It is possible that up to the middle of the eighth century the dispersed lands of Cenél Coirpri were ruled as a single kingdom; kings of Cenél Coirpri were active in Co. Sligo, AU 707.2, 762.5, and in Northern Tethbae: see 742.11 (reading ‘Iugulatio Aeda rig Ceniuil Choirpri’ with AT) and 752.14. The first clear evidence of separate kingdoms is in AU (AT) 752.9, the obit of Conaing *nepos* Duib Dúin, described as king of Coirpre Tethbae (for Conaing’s ancestor, Dub Dúin, see AU 671.3). Even after 752, those described simply as kings of Cenél Coirpri (784.2; 813.5) may have been overkings of all three territories. The tendency of Cenél Coirpri to fragment dynastically, just as it had fragmented territorially, may have been a consequence of the decline of the Cenél Conaill, Cenél Coirpri’s powerful ally, from 734.

<sup>44</sup> Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, pp. 90–1.

<sup>45</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, i.13.

But then he came to Conall son of Níall, to his house which he built in the place where today stands the Great Church of Patrick, and he [Conall] received him with great joy, and he [Patrick] baptised him and confirmed his throne for ever, and he said to him: 'The seed of your brothers will serve your seed for ever. And you ought to show mercy to my heirs after me for ever, both your sons and the sons of your sons [by paying] a perpetual due to my faithful sons.'

He [Conall] measured out with his own feet a church of sixty feet for Patrick's God, and Patrick said: 'If this church is ever encroached upon, you will not have a long and stable reign.'

'The Great Church of Patrick' was, then, a former royal site, granted to Patrick by the king himself, who confirmed his grant in the regular manner by measuring the limits of the church. The feet of the king defined the church of Patrick's God. Ráith Airthir nearby, the principal seat of the kings of Brega in Tírechán's day, was for the hagiographer the secondary site, chosen because the earlier one had been vacated to make room for Patrick's God. And because Patrick's God had been thus honoured, Patrick put his full authority behind the claims of Conall's descendants to the kingship of Tara, the old pagan site some fifteen miles to the south.<sup>48</sup>

Tírechán's Patrick was not, in fact, always a good political prophet; and for that very reason the *Collectanea* are an excellent political source. He shows which royal authority men considered to be the strongest in the late seventh century, although their expectations were to be disappointed. Tírechán makes no division between the lines of descent from Conall son of Níall. He writes as if they were a single coherent lineage. Yet already, by 600, a feud was developing between two branches. It would first define the separate and opposed loyalties of kinsmen, so that they became two distinct lineages: Síol nÁeda Sláne, 'the Seed of Áed Sláne', and Cland Cholmáin, 'the Children of Colmán'. Áed Sláne's descendants would have much the better of things in the seventh century, and it was their predominance in which Tírechán had absolute confidence, for it was they who were the kings of Brega and it was their royal seat which was at Ráith Airthir. Early in the eighth century, however, they began a bitter feud among themselves and so gave Cland

<sup>48</sup> A similar concern with the relationship between Coirpre mac Néill and his brother Conall is shown by the *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, ed. Colgan, c. 65, tr. Connolly, c. 64; but it is much more even-handed and is combined, in c. 64 (ed. Colgan) / c. 62 (tr. Connolly), with an expression of repugnance for the principal rulers of the southern Uí Néill, descendants of Conall: 'it will be offspring that sheds blood and will be an accursed stock and will hold sway for many years' (Connolly's suggestion that a 'not' may have been omitted is wrong: the Uí Néill were indeed to hold sway for many years).

Cholmáin its chance. No one writing fifty years after Tírechán could have had his serene faith in the kings of Brega.

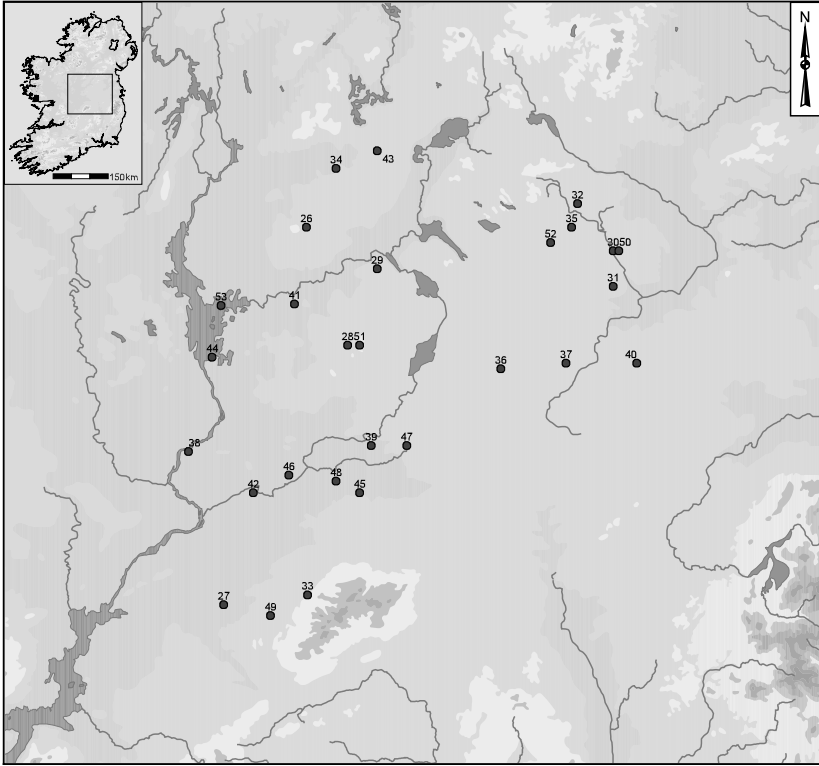
When Tírechán's Patrick went west into Meath, away from the Boyne valley, he left behind him for a while the high politics and the confrontations with kings which had marked his time in Brega. Instead of 'the exceptionally great plain of Brega', he now went from one small plain to another: Mag nEchredd, Mag Taidcni, Mag nEchnach, Mag Singite, Mag mBile, Mag Teloch. The political geography of most of Ireland was defined by such small plains (not all are now identifiable). It should therefore be explained that the words translated 'plain', Irish *mag* and its Latin counterpart *campus*, were used for areas of agricultural land as opposed to mountain, forest and bog. The *mag* may be an island of dense settlement in the midst of thinly settled and less cultivated land (in the midlands, normally bog). Often the *mag* was the natural elementary unit of Irish politics and formed the territory of a distinct people, *túath*. This was almost certainly true of two, at least, of these plains in Meath: Mag mBili is probably the territory of the people known as Fir Bili, 'Men of a Sacred Tree', and Mag Teloch of those known as Fir Thelach, 'Men of Hillocks'.<sup>49</sup> In both these cases the identity of a people derives from the territory. Occasionally, a *túath* occupied more than one *mag*: among the Uí Fhailgi of north-west Leinster there was a *Túath Dá Maige*, 'People of Two Plains'; on the Sligo border of Co. Leitrim there was a people known as Callraige Tremaige, 'the Callrige of Three Plains'.

Patrick's journey across Meath resembled the letter *s*. At first, Tírechán takes him west, perhaps along the Slige Assail, 'Assal Road', so called because it went west from Tara to Delbnae Assail (around the modern town of Delvin in Westmeath)<sup>50</sup> and Mag nAssail (a district including part of Mullingar and much of the land near Lough Ennell). Patrick went no further west on that line than Mag Singite (an area probably including

<sup>49</sup> Fir Bili gave its name to the later barony of Farbill, Fir Thelach to that of Fartullagh: Fr P. Walsh, *The Placenames of Westmeath* (Dublin, 1957), pp. 161–5, 371. The barony of Farbill (< Fir Bile) is coextensive with the parish of Killucan. Mag mBili (the territory of the Fir Bili) included the early monastery of Clúain Fota Báetáin Aba (N 53 44), *Fél.*<sup>2</sup>, Notes, 11 Feb. (p. 72), which was the church of Óengus mac Tipraiti (*ob.* 746, AU), author of a hymn in honour of St Martin of Tours: Kenney, *Sources*, no. 99; M. Lapidge and R. Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature* – (Dublin, 1985), no. 589. To judge by the later barony of Fartullagh (< Fir Thelach), Tírechán's Mag Teloch may have stretched from Mullingar in the north to Tyrrellspass in the south. Walsh, *Placenames of Westmeath*, p. 180, identifies the place mentioned by Tírechán, the church in *Capite Carmelli in Campo Teloch*, with the church of Kilbride, N 44 44, on the edge of Dunboden Park.

<sup>50</sup> Delvin < Delbnae is at N 60 62; cf. Walsh, *Placenames of Westmeath*, pp. 368–9.





0 40 80 Kilometers

- |                                       |                                    |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 26. Ardachad / Ardagh                 | 40. Dún Cúair / Rathcore           |
| 27. Birra / Birr                      | 41. Forгнаide / Forgney            |
| 28. Cell Áir / Killare                | 42. Gaillinne / Gallen             |
| 29. Cell Bicsige / Kilbixy            | 43. Gránairet / Granard            |
| 30. Cell Bile / ?                     | 44. Inis Aingin / Hare Island      |
| 31. Cell Delga / Kildalkey            | 45. Lann Elo / Lynally             |
| 32. Cell Scire / Kilskeer(y)          | 46. Liath Mancháin / Lemanaghan    |
| 33. Cenn Etig / Kinnitty              | 47. Ráith Aeda maic Bricc / Rahugh |
| 34. Clúain Brónaig / Clonbroney       | 48. Raithen / Rahan                |
| 35. Clúain Crema / Clonmellon         | 49. Saiger / Seirkieran            |
| 36. Clúain Fota Báetáin Aba / Clonfad | 50. Tlachtga / Hill of Ward        |
| 37. Clúain Iraird / Clonard           | 51. Uisnech                        |
| 38. Clúain moccu Nóis / Clonmacnois   | 52. Clúain Ernáin / Clonarney      |
| 39. Dairmag / Durrow                  | 53. Inis Bó Finde / Inchbofin      |

Map 3. Mide and Tethbae

Tevrin, halfway between Delvin and Mullingar), but turned south-east to Mag mBili (the district around Killucan), then west again to Mag Teloch on the south-east side of Lough Ennell.<sup>51</sup> This kingdom was closely associated with St Brigit of Kildare: the *Vita Prima* of that saint and her Irish Life, *Bethu Brigitte*, have a story implying that it was served by eighteen churches.<sup>52</sup> Finally he came to Uisnech of Meath, the traditional umbilical centre of ‘the Middle Land’, Mide, and thus the midmost point of Ireland.<sup>53</sup>

The most interesting details of this journey from Tara to Uisnech come in the *Notulae* and in the Tripartite Life, and thus belong to the late eighth-century Life. Tírechán gives the full name of only one church, Cell Bile, among Patrick’s foundations on this part of the circuit, and even then he immediately goes on to say that it belongs to the community of Cell Scíre.<sup>54</sup> Cell Bile is the first of several churches said by Tírechán to have been taken from Patrick by other religious communities. The name, Cell Bile, means ‘church of sacred trees’, just as Mag mBili, further south-west, is ‘plain of a sacred tree’. Whereas Boniface wasted no time in cutting down the sacred tree of the Saxons, the missionaries who converted Ireland took no such liberties.<sup>55</sup> As late as the eleventh century, a particularly offensive tactic in warfare was to cut down the enemies’ sacred tree.<sup>56</sup> No one is recorded in the pre-Viking annals as having committed so outrageous an act. The continuing reverence for sacred trees is indicated by the names Mag mBili and Fir Bili: the kingdom and the people were identified by the tree which probably marked the place of their assembly. Cell Bile, ‘church of sacred trees’, exemplified, therefore, the stratagem of converting places so as to convert people – converting the sacred sites of a pagan people to Christian use in the process of converting them.

Tírechán admits that Cell Bile belonged to Cell Scíre, a church

<sup>51</sup> Tevrin (or Turin) is at n 54 58, a townland in the parish of Rathconnell and the barony of Moyashel. See *VT*<sup>2</sup> 849 (and cf. *Notulae* 19): ‘Temair Singite la Firu Assail’; Walsh, *Placenames of Westmeath*, pp. 45 n., 243.

<sup>52</sup> *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, c. 21, tr. Connolly, c. 23; *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, c. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Walsh, *Placenames of Westmeath*, pp. 343–6; n 29 48. Bieler’s text needs repunctuating to make geographical sense (as it is, it implies that Uisnech was in *Campus Teloch*). It should read: ‘. . . sub manibus Filii Caille. In Huisniuch Midi mansit iuxta Petram Coithrigi . . .’ In the mythological tale *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ed. and tr. Bergin and Best, § 5, Uisnech was the home of Eochaid Ollathair, the Dagda or ‘Good God’.

<sup>54</sup> Cell Scíre > Kilskeer(y) at n 66 71, south-west of Kells.

<sup>55</sup> Willibald, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, 6, ed. W. Levison, *Vitae Bonifatii*, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1905), p. 31; tr. C. H. Talbot, *Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954), pp. 45–6. Cf. A. T. Lucas, ‘The Sacred Trees of Ireland’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 68 (1963), 16–54.

<sup>56</sup> AI 982.4; 1051.4; 1089.3; 111.6; AT 982.

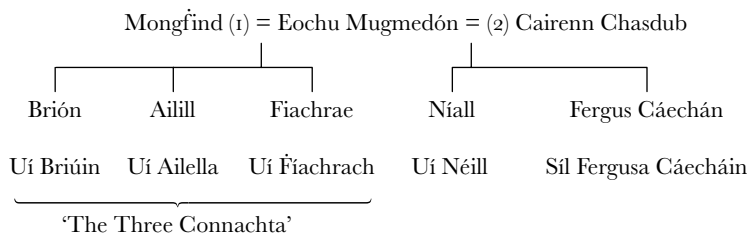


Fig. 1.2. Síil Fergusa Cáecháin

mentioned in the genealogies as the property of an obscure collateral branch of the Uí Néill, excluded from royal power but hanging on to high ecclesiastical status, Síil Fergusa Cáecháin, ‘the Seed of Fergus Cáechán’. This church provides a good introduction to the devices of the early Irish genealogist.<sup>57</sup>

Eochu Mugmedón was the common ancestor of the Uí Néill and the three leading dynasties of the Connachta (> Connacht, Connaught); the latter were known, therefore, as ‘the Three Connachta’. The division between the Connachta and the Uí Néill is marked by the different mothers: half-brothers were natural rivals for the kingship and this relationship thus provided an entirely intelligible explanation of the separate identities of their descendants.

Níall’s full brother, Fergus, has a *forainm*, ‘extra name’, Cáechán, ‘the little one-eyed person’. *Cáech*, ‘having sight in only one eye’, ‘squinting’, appears in a legal tract as a physical blemish capable of excluding someone from the kingship.<sup>58</sup> The use of derisive nicknames in competing for succession to the kingship is exemplified in a story told by the Tripartite Life about the ruling dynasty of Tírechán’s native kingdom, the Uí Amolngada of North Mayo:<sup>59</sup>

Patrick then went across the River Moy into the land of the Uí Amolngada. The twelve sons of Amolngid (son of Fiachrae son of Eochu) came to meet him, Óengus, Fergus, Fedelmid, Stooping Éndae, Éndae ‘Bare-Back’, Corbmac, Coirpre, Echu Díainim, Echu ‘One-Ear’, Éogan Coir, Dubchonall, Ailill ‘Pot-Face’. The sons of Amolngid were disputing about the kingship. There were twenty-four kindreds (that is, old kindreds)<sup>60</sup> in the land. They refused to

<sup>57</sup> *CGH* i.132, 133 (138 a 42, 139 b 47).

<sup>58</sup> *Bechbretha*, ed. T. M. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly (Dublin, 1983), §§ 31–2. (Similarly for the Sassanians, Procopius, *Wars*, i. xi. 4.) <sup>59</sup> *VT*<sup>2</sup> 1449–59.

<sup>60</sup> It is unclear what this means, but for a suggestion see below, p. 549.

accept as their king a man with a *forainm*. Óengus therefore put *foranmann* on his brothers. This Óengus was the proudest of the sons of Amolngid. They submitted the dispute to the judgement of Lóegaire son of Niall son of Echu, king of Tara, and of his brother, that is Éogan son of Niall.<sup>61</sup>

If a *forainm* could be made to stick – and here a friendly poet acting as satirist could work wonders – the person's reputation would be fatally besmeared. Just this, apparently, was deemed to have happened to Fergus Cáechán. Unlike the fortunate Echu Diainim, 'Echu without Blemish', among the sons of Amolngid, but like his brothers, Stooping Éndae, Éndae Bare-Back and Ailill Pot-Face, Fergus the One-Eyed was kept from a royal throne by a satirical epithet, whether true or false. The lasting effects of his exclusion were emphasised by the alternative name for his descendants, Uí Cháecháin, 'the Descendants of the One-Eyed', alongside Sílf Fergusa Cáecháin, 'the Seed of Fergus the One-Eyed'.

By the end of the eighth century Armagh had more definite interests in the churches of Meath than in Tírechán's time and was in clear competition with more powerful rivals than Cell Scíre. The greatest churches of the midlands were Clonmacnois, a great monastery in a minor kingdom, Delbnae Bethra, situated on the east bank of the Shannon about eight miles south of Athlone,<sup>62</sup> and also Clonard, near the frontier between Leinster and Meath.<sup>63</sup> Caill Húallech (probably in Delbnae Assail), the church of Lonán mac Senaig, was acquired by Clonmacnois and then given to Clonard in exchange for two churches, Cell Lothair in Brega and Clúain Alad Deirg further west.<sup>64</sup> Imlech Sescainn, on the east shore of Lough Ennell, was also acquired by Clonmacnois.<sup>65</sup> Maigen in Mag nAssail was lost by the neglect of the heirs of Patrick and passed into the possession of the community of Columba.<sup>66</sup> The kings of Meath in the eighth century avoided committing themselves to any one great church. Although they favoured Durrow, one of Columba's monasteries, and probably gave the land for the foundation of Kells early in the ninth century, they also promoted Clonard and patronised Clonmacnois.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>61</sup> The inclusion of Éogan son of Niall alongside Lóegaire shows that the story in its present form dates from after *c.* 740, by which time it was clear that Cenél nÉogain had supplanted Cenél Conaill as the leading dynasty among the Northern Uí Néill: see below, pp. 572–4.

<sup>62</sup> N 00 30. <sup>63</sup> N 65 45.

<sup>64</sup> VT<sup>2</sup> 837; *Notulae*, 24; cf. links with Cassán of VT<sup>2</sup> 819; Patrick was still in Delbnae by l. 842; Clonmacnois and Clonard were linked in the person of the *secundus abbas* in CS 838.

<sup>65</sup> VT<sup>2</sup> 846–8; *Notulae*, 19. <sup>66</sup> VT<sup>2</sup> 865–6; *Notulae*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 64–7, 68–9; AU 764.6 records a battle between two members of Cland Cholmáin after the death of Domnall mac Murchada; one contendant was associated with the community of Durrow, the other with the community of Clonmacnois. For Clonard cf. AU 851.6; 859.3.

The strongest claims of Armagh seem to have been in Delbnae Assail, the district around the modern Delvin. The Tripartite Life tells a pleasant story, the personal names of which are confirmed by the *Notulae*.<sup>68</sup> Patrick was on one of his three visits to Rome when he met six young clerics ‘with their books in their girdles’. Patrick offered them leather from his cloak to make book-satchels. They accepted, and asked Patrick, ‘When we part, where shall we go?’ To which Patrick replied, ‘Wherever you settle, put your book-satchel on the ground, and where the ground swallows it up, there shall you be.’ The prophecy, remarks the Life, was fulfilled. ‘That was the Bréifnech of Patrick in Clúain Ernáin, which was subsequently adorned with gold and *ndruine*.’<sup>69</sup> The Tripartite Life lists the clerics and their churches:<sup>70</sup>

The following, however, were the six: the priest Lugach in Cell Airthir; the priest Columb in Clúain Ernáin, and Meldán of Clúain Crema, and Lugaid mac Eirc in Fordruim, and the priest Cassán in the great church of Mag nEchnach; five holy men they were, of Patrick’s community in Delbnae Assail, and five meals are due to Patrick from them. The sixth was the elder Cíarán of Saiger.

The story illustrates the claims of great upon dependent churches. What it says literally is that ‘Patrick has five tables with them’, in other words, when the heir of Patrick visits, he is entitled to a night’s hospitality, he and his company, from each of the five churches.<sup>71</sup>

This was probably a relatively light and honourable due, consistent with the claim made by Tírechán and the Book of the Angel (*c.* 686), that Armagh allowed its subject churches to retain free status.<sup>72</sup> An even lighter due is claimed in the Tripartite Life from Nendrum in Strangford Lough:

When Patrick was on the road he saw a gentle young warrior herding pigs. His name was Mo Chae. Patrick preached to him, baptised him, tonsured him, and gave him a Gospel Book and the things necessary for the Mass. And on another

<sup>68</sup> *VT*<sup>2</sup> 805–21; *Notulae*, 21–4.

<sup>69</sup> On *ndruine* see J. P. Mallory, ‘Silver in the Ulster Cycle of Tales’, in D. Ellis Evans, J. G. Griffiths and E. M. Jope (eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*, Oxford, (Oxford, 1986), pp. 35–8.

<sup>70</sup> *VT*<sup>2</sup> 816–21; Clúain Crema was Clonmellon (Clúain Meldáin); Clúain Ernáin is identified by Walsh, *Placenames of Westmeath*, pp. 368–9, with Clonarney (a parish and townland in the barony of Delvin, N 613 653); cf. L. Swan, ‘The Early Christian Ecclesiastical Sites of Co. Westmeath’, in J. Bradley (ed.), *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland* (Kilkenny, 1988), 3–31, at pp. 11–12. Bieler’s identification of Fordruim with Fardruim in the parish of Killeagham (i.e. N 08 39) is topographically impossible, since the latter cannot have been in Delbnae Assail.

<sup>71</sup> Since the heir of Patrick would certainly have been accompanied, *mias* (< Lat. *mensa*) probably means ‘table’ rather than ‘dish’.

<sup>72</sup> *Liber Angeli*, §§ 13, 21; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 25 (on Tamnach), 33 (on Imgóe Már Cérrigi).