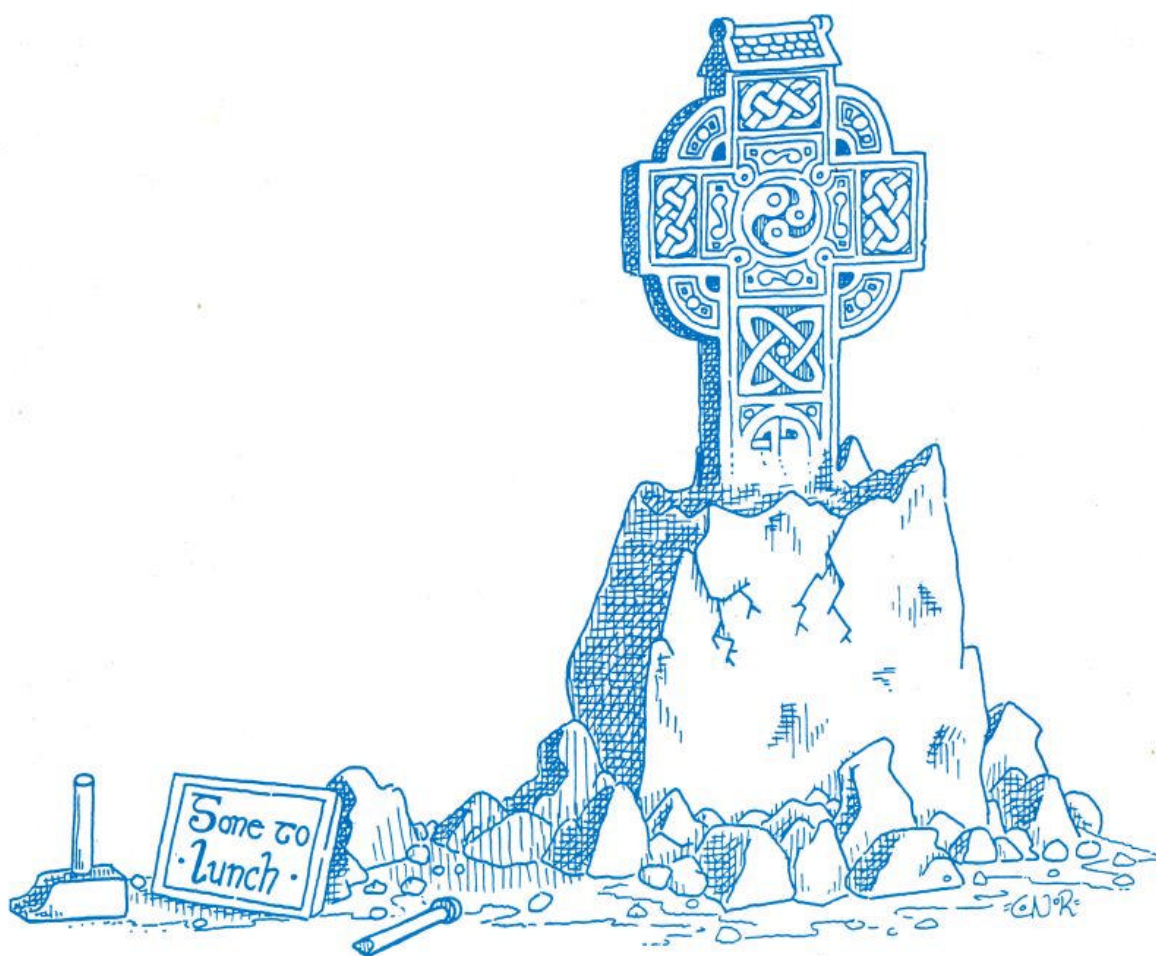


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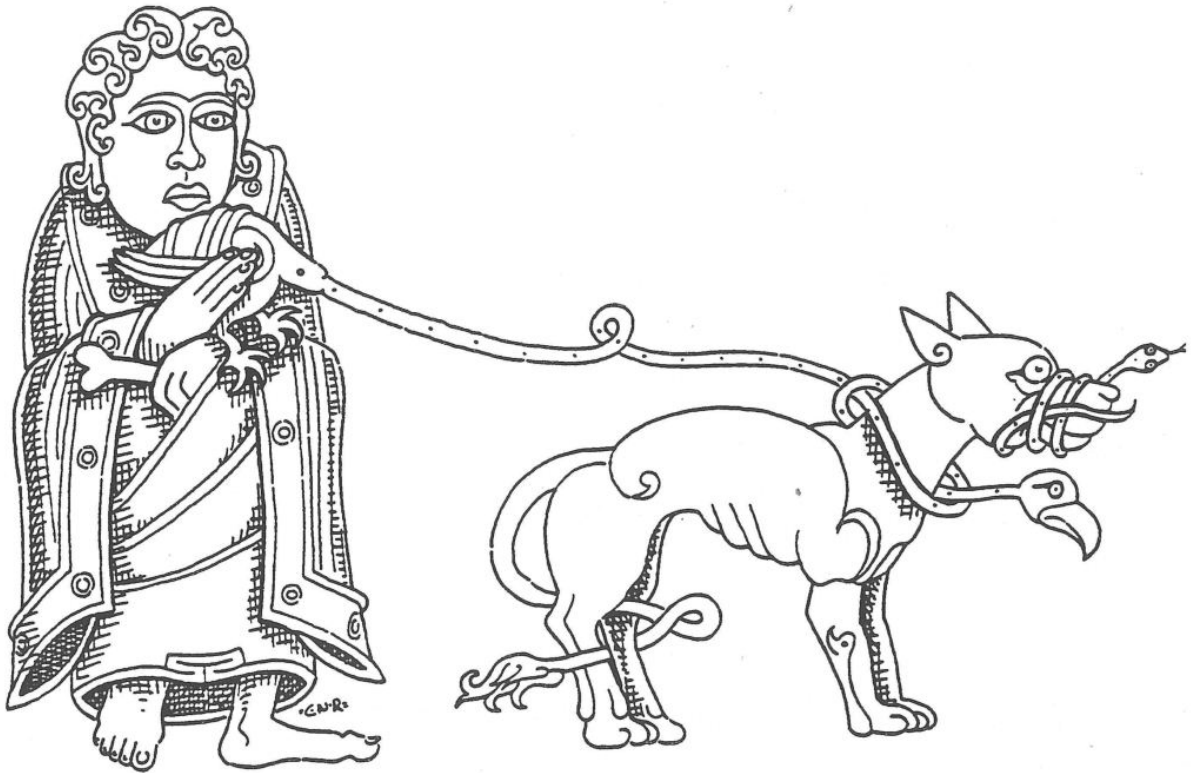
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EDITED BY

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

We hope that this, the fourth volume of *Trowel*, will further consolidate the future of the journal. To that end editors and contributors are needed if *Trowel* is to reappear. Since 1988 the editors and contributors to *Trowel* have shown that a small budget and circulation is no impediment to quality publishing, and we feel that the same should hold for other publications in Irish archaeology.

Is it time to look again at the feasibility of publishing a journal along the lines of the now defunct Irish Archaeological Review? It seems unfortunate that there has been such a large amount of research carried out in U.C.D., and the other universities where archaeology is a subject, and yet a very small proportion of this research has been published, even partially (refer to the List of Theses in the Department of Archaeology, U.C.D. in this volume). Surely a way can be found to publish the more substantive results of original research? It is strange that at a time when the process of publication is being redefined, in terms of cost and production skills needed, *Trowel* being a prime example, the wider opportunities for archaeological publication seem to be decreasing.

The format of *Trowel* has changed this year and we have introduced many of the recommendations of the Council for British Archaeology's Signposts for Archaeological Publication. We hope that this format will remain the standard one for future volumes of *Trowel*. This is our contribution to standardisation in Irish archaeology!

At present *Trowel* volumes I and III are out of print, however, due to demand a reprint of *Trowel* III is planned for the near future. It is hoped this will increase availability and extend circulation.

It is our pleasure to thank a number of people without whom *Trowel* IV would never have seen the light of day. Drs Gabriel Cooney and Eoin Grogan and Ms. Fin O'Carroll of the Irish Stone Axe Project were extremely generous in allowing us use their facilities in U.C.D., the Director and staff of the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit also gave much appreciated assistance. We would also like to thank Ms Sinéad Crofts, the Auditor of the U.C.D. Archaeological Society for her support, while Mr Conor McHale ensured that, yet again, *Trowel* has the prettiest, wittiest and most original artwork of any archaeological publication in Ireland!!

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A “Square Earthen Church of Clay” In Seventh-Century Mayo

Cathy Swift

“The study of the past obviously includes material and written sources where both are available but each branch, written source or material, is a different and separate study with its own data, methods, objects and conclusions. The study of the past will benefit as the two sub-disciplines develop their own studies because then, in any historical period, there are two independent sources. The study of the past will lose if the two disciplines which could prove independent evidence join in an interlocking form of circular argument, each making out a case by reference to the other” (Reece 1984, 113).

This paper sets out to explore the historical context behind the description of a Mayo church which is to be found in a 7th century tract, claiming to deal with the last miraculous deeds of St. Patrick’s life. It is hoped that this will prove helpful in constructing archaeological models about church form, in Ireland during this period.¹

The tract in which the description is found is known to modern scholarship as Tirechan’s *Collectanea* and is available in a recent edition by Bieler (1979, 124-163). The single exemplar which survives is found in the 9th century Book of Armagh where it forms part of a collection of Patrician lore, collected into the front of a small devotional handbook intended for use by the Abbot of Armagh (Sharpe 1982, 5). By that date the text had apparently been copied on a number of occasions, indeed, it may only survive in a mutilated state in the manuscript (Bury 1902, 268; Gwynn, J, 1913, lviii; Mac Neill 1928a, 14, 18; 1928b 94-95; Kelly, in Bieler 1979, 244-5; Sharpe 1982, 14-18; Picard 1985, 80).

Tirechan was writing about Patrick’s activities long after the saint was dead, when little was known about Patrick himself but when his cult was active and, apparently, prestigious. Tirechan states that, if he wanted to, Patrick’s heir could claim

“...almost the whole island as his domain because God gave him the whole island with its people through an angel of the Lord...All the primitive churches are his... [in consequence]...it is not permitted to swear against him, or overswear him, or swear concerning him and it is not permitted to draw lots with him...”

(Bieler 1979, 138-9).

Tirechan was writing as a propagandist for Patrick’s cult and his words are presumably to be read as an expression of the cult’s ambitions rather than necessarily representing concrete achievements. That Tirechan felt in a position to claim such wide-ranging powers is in itself, however, an important indication of the status of the Patrician clerics.

Despite the use of the word *mirabilia* [miraculous deeds], to describe Patrick’s activities (Bieler 1979, 126-7), he performs few miracles in the *Collectanea*. He opens a grave and speaks to the dead (Bieler 1979, 154-5), he blesses a river and curses another (Bieler 1979, 160-1) and on three occasions he defeats druidical magic through prayer (Bieler 1979, 130-1, 138-9, 156-7). There is also an account of fiery sparks emanating from the saint’s mouth and alighting on those of other individuals (Bieler 1979, 162-3). On the whole, however, Tirechan’s Patrick appears to be a remarkably pragmatic individual, with little of the shaman about him. The major emphasis in the text is on Patrick’s role as a church founder

and descriptions of his foundations, together with notes on their subsequent history, take up roughly two-thirds of the surviving tract.

One such foundation is that associated with the site of “...*Foirrgea filiorum Amolngid...*” (Foirrgea of the sons of Amalgaid)². Bieler’s translation of the relevant passage runs as follows:

“And behold, Patrick proceeded to the land [ager] which is called Foirrgea of the Sons of Amolngid to divide it between the sons of Amolngid and he made there a square earthen church of clay, because no timber was near. And they brought to him a sick woman who was pregnant, and he baptised the son in his mother’s womb (the woman’s liquid served as the son’s baptismal water) and they buried her on the hill of the church above and the holy man’s seat is beside the church to the present day.”

(Bieler 1979, 158-9).

According to Tirechan, one of the sons of Amalgaid came from “...*the western plagæ [districts] in campus Domnon [Mag Domnon] and the Wood of Fochloth...*” (Bieler 1979, 134; author’s translation). Tirechan also states that the sons of Amalgaid, as a group had their “...*regiones propria...*” [own region(s)] “...*across the river Moy...*” and he implies that they held authority “...*all over Mag Domnon..*” (Bieler 1979, 156-7).

Campus Domnon or Mag Domnon, as a placename, is found in a number of Early Medieval texts. Adomnan, for example, declares that Cormac mac Lethan came from that *regio* [district] beyond the river Moy which was known as Eirros Domno (Anderson 1991, 30-1). The author of the *Táin Bó Flidais* identifies a warrior-race known as the *Gamanrad a hIrrus Domnand* (Best & Bergin 1929, 57). In *Fled Bricrend*, Urros Domnand is one of a number of places visited by Cii Chulainn (Best & Bergin 1929, 257). Irrus occurs as a placename in the Annals of Connacht under the years A.D. 1242 and A.D. 1273, a name which becomes Errish in the 16th century *Compossicion of Conought* and eventually modern Erris, now used to describe the barony west of Tirawley (Freeman 1936, 96, 102; 1944, 76-7, 160-1). Since the two 7th century authorities link Domnon with the Moy while two pre-9th century texts identify the area with Erris, one is led to the conclusion that the term probably embraced both regions in Tirechan’s day and that the territory of the sons of Amalgaid stretched beyond that of the modern barony which bears their name Tirawley (land of the Ui Amalgaid 1) to Erris and the north-west Atlantic coastline.

Bieler’s translation of the foundation-story of Foirrgea ignores an ambiguity in the original Latin: he assumes that the division is that of Foirrgea itself. It is equally possible that Foirrgea is merely the scene for the division of Amalgaid’s lands which had been decreed by Loiguire at Tara in an earlier episode:

“...Loiguire and Patrick passed judgement that they should divide their inheritance into seven parts...”

(Bieler 1979, 134-5)

Such a division by sons of their father’s lands was a normal preliminary to inheritance, the vernacular laws explain that a man’s property was divided amongst his offspring by the youngest and each, beginning with the eldest, then took his choice (Binchy 1979, 1289.2; Kelly 1988, 102-5). The story represents Tirechan’s interpretation of the political background to the control, in the 7th century, of Mag Domnon by a number of families who claimed

descent from a single progenitor, Amalgaid. Writing as a Patrician cleric, he represents this ancestral division as having taken place under the auspices of St. Patrick.

The early law tract *Cetharslicht Athgabdlá* states that three noble tribes passed a judgement at a *dál criche* [territorial meeting] and divided Ireland between them (Binchy 1979, 356: 5-6; Hancock et al. 1865-1901, i, 79). Elsewhere, later commentators identify a *dál* with an *oenach* [popular assembly], a ritual gathering which took place at fixed sites of ceremonial importance (Bannerman 1974, 166; Hancock et al. 1865-1901, v, 396). In Connacht, the most famous of these sites was Cruachu, modern Rathcroghan, (Best & O'Brien 1929, 268), but a number of others are witnessed in the documentary sources (Hogan 1910, 558-9). If a *dál criche* was the scene of both discussions about territorial divisions and *oenach* assemblies it implies the sites where such divisions were promulgated were of considerable prestige. This is also implied by the 10th century translation of Tirechan's text into Irish, which replaces the story of the division of a land at Foirrgea with the statement that the seven leaders of the Uí Amalgaid were converted there:

[Patrick] "...went into Forrach mace nAmalgodo and Amalgaid's seven sons believed in him, together with Énda and the king..."

(Stokes 1887, 84-5; Mulchrone 1939,49-50).

This conclusion can be supported by the name Foirrgea/Forrach itself, for this placename element is closely associated with prestigious sites in other Patrician documents. In the 8th century *Additamenta*, for example, it is used to describe the site of Domnach Féic, the church which Patrician apologists claimed as the central church of the Uí Cheinselaig kingdom (southern Leinster) at this period (Bieler 1979,176-7). In an episode found solely in the *Vita Tripartita*, Patrick replaces the area of *atribalbile* [sacred tree] with a site known as Forrach Patraic (Stokes 1887, 188-9; Mulchrone 1939, 114). It seems likely, therefore, that Tirechan's "...square earthen church..." at Foirrgea was located on a site considered to be of some ritual or political importance to the kings of the Uí Amalgaid in his day.

The description of the church has been used by scholars attempting to identify early forms of church architecture in Ireland (Henry 1940, 49; Hamlin 1984, 118; Lynn 1978, 38). Those who have compared this description with archaeological remains have suggested a structure built of turf sods. Only one such building and that apparently a domestic one is known from an excavated site. The structure was found in Rath III at Dunsilly, Co. Antrim and is described as:

"...a 7m square sod-walled house built against the inner edge of the bank. Probably lined by a wooden bench but it had no internal hearth or posts..."

(McNeill1976,6).

Dr C J Lynn has suggested(*pers comm.*) that it seems unlikely that such a building could have stood for any length of time as an independent structure. It remains to be seen whether we should imagine a sod-built church as being a feature of 7th century Ireland.

Tirechan himself indicates that buildings of this type were not considered the norm when he explains that the reason for its construction at Foirrgea was due to its location: "...because no timber was near...". The inherent implausibility of this statement has not been stressed by other scholars. However, it is worth noting that the site is listed in the same paragraph as, and immediately after the description of two churches "...in the Wood of Fochloth..". This is not obvious in Bieler's edition but is apparent in the facsimile edition of the Patrician documents from the *Book of Armagh* (Gwynn, E, 1940, 14v). It is true that Patrick travelled (the verb is

perexire) from the sites “...in the Wood of Fochloth...” to Foirrgea but the onomastic evidence suggests that it is unlikely that he travelled far. Foirrgea is probably to be associated with the 17th century townlands of Farry and Mullafarry, immediately to the south-west of the churches in the Wood of Fochloth (Simington 1956, 190). In conjunction with the evidence of the 10th century *Vita Tripartita*, these can be identified as the “...*æclesia magna patricii...*” [great church of Patrick], “...*Cros Patraicc...*” [Cross of Patrick] and “...*Cell Forglan...*” (Stokes 1887, 130-7; Mulchrone 1939, 81-4).

Furthermore, we have early accounts of wood being borne over great distances. For instance, when the monks of Iona were building their long ships they imported their wood from the mainland, in the form of *dolotæ* [dressed timbers] which they floated behind their ships. On a second occasion, wood was floated down the “...*flumen Sale...*” [river Sale] (Anderson 1991, 174-5). In an undated life of St Samthann, who died in A.D. 739, carpenters travelled from Cluain Bronaig (in modern Longford, close to Ardagh) to the lands of the Connachta in order to find *ligna* [posts] of pinewood which they transported home in carts drawn by oxen (Plummer 1910, ii 257).

We have evidence, therefore, that suggests that Foirrgea was an important site in the territory of the Uí Amalgaid. It was situated immediately to the south of the Wood of Fochloth and, on onomastic evidence, was less than three miles from the estuary of the Moy, the most important river in north-west Connacht, navigable up-river of Foirrgea (Greer 1986, 154). And on this site of ritual and political importance we have a church built of clay, a most unusual building material considering the proximity of the Wood of Fochloth.

It is interesting to compare the site of Foirrgea with the other earthen church mentioned by Tirechan: the “...*earthen church...*” located by the royal *fertæ* [burial mounds] of Loiguire’s two daughters on the ceremonial site of Cruachu (Bieler 1979, 142-5). The burial of these two girls is particularly interesting as it is explicitly linked with a pagan ritual:

“...*they buried them beside the well of Clibach and they made a round ditch after the manner of a ferta(e) because this is what the heathen Irish used to do...*”

(Bieler 1979, 144-5).

A number of parallels concerning the histories of both sites can be noted. Firstly, the lack of personnel associated with either church is an unusual feature of Tirechan’s work; he is normally careful to stress St Patrick’s links with the ancestors of the 7th century clerical families, who controlled his foundations. Secondly, at both sites female burials are recorded as having taken place: Loiguire’s two daughters at Cruachu and the unnamed female at Foirrgea. Therefore, both earthen churches are associated with female graves, at important centres.

The example from Foirrgea is further associated with a feature known as Patrick’s *sedes*, a type of monument which Tirechan also locates at the “...*halls of the sons of Brion...*” at Dumae Selcae (Bieler 1979, 145-6). *Sedes* would appear to be a translation of the Irish *forad* [seat], a platform associated with the holding of *óenach* assemblies. From a number of early sources, the compilers of the Dictionary of Irish Language identify a *forad* as follows:

“*A mound or platform, probably in most cases of earth, used as a seat or stand for spectators but also as a post of outlook; it varied in size and shape, being often large enough to accommodate a number of persons but sometimes apparently intended for only one; it may in some special cases have been circular; at the great interprovincial assemblies each king had a special forad and there seems to*

have been a forad set apart for women. There was sometimes a forad in or close to a chief's dún."

(Joynt & Knott 1957,304)

The seating platforms at the interprovincial games were places of great importance for it was only those ceremonies which took place in full view of the spectators which received ratification from the tuath [tribe]. It was a mark of the great honour in which the Airgialla were held by the Uí Neill kings, for example, that the *forad* of Airgialla kings was said to be situated on the right hand of the king of Tara (Dillon 1962, 76-7). The evidence for Foirrgea, therefore, is not only that the earthen church was located at an important site belonging to the Uí Amalgaid federation but also that it was associated with the most prestigious part of that site. The evidence for Foirrgea, therefore, is not only that the earthen church was located at an important site belonging to the Uí Amalgaid federation but also that it was associated with the most prestigious part of that site. Such a location for a sod-built church associated with the burial of an unknown female demands explanation.

One possible answer might lie in the nature of the activities which took place at the ceremonial sites. There is late evidence that both Dumae Selcae and Cruachu functioned as inauguration centres for the kings of the Uí Briuin and the Connachta respectively (Duignan 1934, 103; Best & O'Brien 1957,461). As has been noted, the division of the patrimony of the sons of Amalgaid and the 10th century location of the conversion of the Uí Amalgaid at Foirrgea, both suggest that it, too, had a prestigious and possibly royal function.

Adomnán, in his 7th century biography of St. Columba, describes the identification of Aedanmac Gabrán as a future king of Dál Riata with the statement that Columba laid his hand over the king's head and "...ordinans, benedixit..." [he ordained and blessed him] (Anderson 1991, 188-9).

The vernacular legends of roughly similar date, on the other hand, linked the choice of a king with prophecies which took place at a *feis* [feast]. This could be of varying forms, in both *Togáil Bruidne Da Derga* and *Óenét Emire*, the *tarb-fheis* consisted of a ceremony in which a druid ate the meat and broth of a bull and then lay down to sleep and dream of the future king (Knott 1936, 4; Dillon 1953, 9). In a text known as *De Shíl Chonairi Móir*, which survives in three recensions of the 15th century, the future king of Tara is the only man able to drive a chariot between two closely placed stones and rub his wheel against the stone penis of the Lía Fál:

"There were two flag-stones in Tara: 'Blocc' and 'Bluigne'; when they accepted a man, they would open before him until the chariot went through. And Fdl was there, the 'stone penis' at the head of the chariot course (?); when a man should have the kingship of Tara, it screeched against his chariot-axle, so that all might hear. But the two stones 'Blocc' and 'Bluigne' would not open before one who should not hold the sovereignty of Tara and their usual position was such, that one's hand could only pass sideways between them; also he who was to hold Tara's kingship, the Fál would not screech against his axle."

(Gwynn, L, 1912,134,139)

References to these stones are also found in the 12th century *Book of Leinster* and in the *Dindshenchus* of Tara, dating to roughly the same period (Best *et al.* 1954,122; Gwynn, E, 1903,20; 1935,3-114).

The overt sexual symbolism of this account is reflected by other tales such as *Tochmarc Emíre* where the ceremony is described as *ban-fheisrige* and is marked by a great feast (Van Hamel 1933, 41). Just as a *tarb-feis* is a ‘bull feis’, *ban-fheis* is literally a ‘woman feis’ a term which, in Old Irish (prior to the 9th century), could be used to translate the Latin *nuptiæ* [wedding] (Stokes & Strachan 1903, ii 38). In a much later *ban-fheis*, deliberately designed as an antiquarian ceremony by a pretender to the kingship of Connacht in 1310, some of the action took place at night:

“And when Fedlimid mac Aedameic Eogain had married the Province of Connacht this foster-father waited upon him during the night in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books; and this was the most splendid kingship marriage (banaisrige) ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day.”

(Freeman 1944, 221-2).

The twin elements of feasting and sleeping which appear to be a feature of both ceremonies, are encapsulated by the word *feis*, a word which, as MacCana (1955-6, 86) pointed out, can be translated by either activity. The actions of the two daughters of Loiguire, whom Tirechan associates with the earthen “...*church*...” at Cruachu, are described in the same terminology as that of the dreamer in the *tarb-feis*; like him they taste food, see their future (connubial) lord and fall asleep:

“And they demanded to see the face of Christ, and the holy man said to them: ‘Unless you taste death you cannot see the face of Christ, and unless you receive the sacrament’. And they answered: ‘Give us the sacraments so that we may see the Son, our bridegroom’, and they received the Eucharist of God and fell asleep in death.”

(Bieler 1979, 144-5).

In Tirechan’s account, the daughters have apparently just emerged from their period of fosterage for they are accompanied by their fosterers, the druids Caplit and Mael, and yet act independently of them (Bieler 1979, 142-5; Kelly 1988, 86-90). The description in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* appears to symbolise the breaking of the hymen. It may be, therefore, that the normal female protagonist in a *ban-fheis* was thought to have been a virgin.

The parallels between the various accounts lead one to infer that the story of the two daughters may represent a Christianised version of a *ban-fheis*. In its pagan form, this appears to have involved sleeping with a young girl and dreaming of the new king. In the next generation, the Irish compilers of ecclesiastical law stressed the need to abandon the pagan *feis*, to turn to Christian methods of inauguration and to condemn the use of auguries and divination (Wasserschleben 1885, 76, 230-2). The *Collectanea* account of the two maidens may represent an earlier stage in the fight against the *feis* when the Church still acknowledged the pagan ritual but clothed it in a Christian guise.

Using this model, one might suggest that the earthen buildings associated with females at the ceremonial centres of both Cruachu and Foirrgea, may once have had a role to play in the *ban-fheis* ceremonies. Some sort of shelter for the seer where he might have ritual intercourse with a virgin and then sleep is a possibility. In the early version of *Cath Maige Tuired*, the poet of the Tuatha De came visiting the king of the Fomorians:

“Once upon a time the poet [file] came a-guesting to the Bres’s house, even Corpre son of Etain, poet of the Tuatha Dé. He entered a cabin narrow,

black, dark wherein there was neither fire nor furniture nor bed. Three small cakes and they dry were brought to him on a little dish. On the morrow he arose and he was not thankful. As he went across the garth[les] he said: 'Without food quickly on a dish; without a cow's milk whereon a calf grows: without a man's abode under the gloom(?) of night: without paying a company of storytellers, let that be Bres' condition.'"

(Stokes 1891, 70-1)

The poet slept in a small dark place within the king's fort and as a result of this experience, he prophesied the future fate of the king. The straightforward interpretation of this text is that the poet is merely disgruntled with the lack of royal hospitality; on one night, however, not the coincidence of poet/seer sleeping in a small, dark place and prophecy. It is conceivable that this is a literary reflection of the type of shelter provided for the seers in feis ceremonies.

This is one possible model for the interpretation of Tirechan's "...square earthen church...". It fits with what we know of Christian attitudes to pagan sites in this period; Pope Gregory the Great, whose works were apparently much studied in 7th century Ireland, wrote careful instructions to the Anglo-Saxon missionaries that they were to convert pagan temples to Christian use (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 106-9; Walsh & Ó Cróinín 1988, 82-3). On the other hand, it may be that this interpretation strays too far from the explicit evidence in Tirechan's text. The interaction between literary references and the study of material culture is, as yet, under-developed in medieval Irish studies and it is quite possible that the suggestions put forward here will have to be abandoned at some future date.

The mere fact that one can construct such a model, however, is a useful reminder to the archaeologist. Even seemingly straightforward descriptions in Early Medieval documents need to be evaluated carefully before incorporating such evidence into archaeological interpretations. The documentary sources which survive from the Early Medieval period represent the activities and thoughts of a very small part of the population, engaged in a luxury activity, for motives which are almost invariably obscure. The reliability of such sources and the extent to which they can be used in archaeology without resulting in "...an inter-locking form of circular argument..." remain a point for discussion.

Acknowledgements:

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Notes:

1. Because of considerations of space, all quotations are given in English translation. However, the references are to both the editions of the original texts and to the translations.
2. The Irish words in Tirechan's text are written in a 7th century orthography (Kelly, in Bieler 1979, 242). This is earlier than the majority of Old Irish texts and the spelling is consequently different from that found in later manuscripts such as the *Vita Tripartita*. I have chosen here to use the forms of proper and tribal names provided by O'Brien (1962) although this, on occasion, differs from that provided by Bieler.

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