

Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater Valley and the Uí Néill kings of Tara

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The history of *óenach Tailten* or the 'Fair of Teltown'¹ has traditionally been viewed as part of the story of the highkingship of Ireland. There are good reasons for this. Many of our texts refer specifically to the link between the rulers of Tara and the assembly-site at Teltown and the reference in an early poem on the Airgialla to *coimdiu Temrae sceo Tailten* (lord of Tara and Teltown) is typical of this genre.² The argument put forward here, however, is that the relationship between Teltown and the Uí Néill overlordship identified in our texts from the seventh century AD can be illuminated by looking more specifically at the early politics of the Blackwater valley. I am very pleased to be in a position to offer this paper to Professor Byrne whose student I was and to the lecturing staff of whose department I belonged in the years 1994-6.

I begin with a discussion of the evidence from the Tripartite Life of Patrick, an account of the saint probably compiled at some point prior to the early tenth century.³ The central section of this text opens with the donation to Patrick's cult of the royal *dún* (stronghold) of Áth Truim (Trim) by the son of King Loíguire mac Néill – king of Tara and son of Niall of the Nine Hostages. This story is then followed by other encounters between the saint and the sons of Niall. For the celebration of the first Easter, Patrick is said to have come to the *baile* (place) of Teltown, where the *óenach rígdæ* (royal *óenach*) took place. There he met Coirpre mac Néill who wanted to kill Patrick and who whipped members of his household in the river Séle or Blackwater. As a consequence, Coirpre was cursed by Patrick and told that his descendants would serve the sons of his brothers, that his family would never rule and that there would never be salmon in the Blackwater.

In contrast, when Patrick met Coirpre's brother Conall – known as Conall Cremthainne in some genealogies to help distinguish him from his more famous northern brother – at *sosad dú itá Domnach Pátraic indiu* (the dwelling where Donaghpatrick⁴ is today), Conall received him with

¹ For early attestations of the name, see E.G. Quin (ed.), *Dictionary of the Irish language* (Dublin, 1983) – hereafter cited as *DIL* – T 29:25-49; AD 1488-9: TALLÉN, 'The bills and statutes of the Irish Parliaments of Henry VII and Henry VIII', D.B. Quinn, (ed.), *Analecta Hibernica* 10 (1941) 84; AD 1540-1: TALLYN, *Extents of Irish monastic possessions, 1540-1541 from manuscripts in the Public Record Office*, ed. Newport B. White (Dublin 1943), pp 112-3; AD 1637: TELTON, *Inquisitionum in officio rotulorum cancellariae Hiberniae repertorium: Lagenia*, ed. J. Hardiman (Dublin, 1826), Meath Car.I. §136; AD 1836: TELTOWN/TAILLTEANN, *Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the county of Meath collected during the progress of the ordnance survey in 1836*, ed. M. O'Flanagan (Bray 1927), p. 4 §8. ² M. O'Daly, 'A poem on the Airgialla', *Ériu* 16 (1952) 179 §1. ³ K. Mulchrone, 'Die Abfassungszeit und Überlieferung der Vita Tripartita', in *ZCP* 16 (1927) 1-94; K.H. Jackson, 'The date of the Tripartite Life of St Patrick' in *ZCP* 41 (1986) 5-45; G. Mac Eoin, 'The dating of Middle Irish texts', *Brit. Acad. Proc.* 68 (1982) 109-38; F.J. Byrne and P. Francis, 'Two lives of St Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*', *RSAL Jn.* 124 (1994) 5-117 at 6-7. The episodes I discuss here are in *Bethu Phátraic: the tripartite life of Patrick*, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939), pp 43-8 and (with English translation) *The tripartite life of Patrick, with other documents*, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1887), pp 64-75. ⁴ AD 1302: church de DONPATRICK (*Calendar of documents relating*

great joy and was baptized. Patrick then confirmed his seat for eternity. As at Trim, a church was subsequently founded but the author specifies that, at Donaghpatrick, Conall himself measured out the church and that it was sixty feet long, paralleling the sixty-cubit length of Solomon's temple.⁵

These three episodes – the foundation of Trim, the cursing of Coirpre and the donation of Donaghpatrick are all taken over from earlier Patrician documents by the author of the Tripartite Life with only minor additions and omissions.⁶ The topographical context of Conall's gift is best illustrated in yet another life of Patrick, the *Vita Tertia*, the date of which has yet to be fully discussed in print.⁷ The account of the gift of Donaghpatrick in this text specifies the close connection between the church site and that of the royal site of *Ráth Airthir*.⁸

Then Patrick came to Conall son of Niall and Conall received him with great joy and he baptized him. And he offered him his home and the whole dwelling-place and he said to him: 'Make for yourself a *civitas* from this dwelling-place and I will make for myself another dwelling-place in front of (or east of?) the gates of your *civitas*'. And (thus) Patrick made there the *civitas* which is today called *Domnach Patraic* and Patrick sketched the dwelling-place for Conall with his staff; this is *Ráth Airthir*. And Patrick said to him: 'In this dwelling-place, there will be many kings and in it blood will not be shed, save only the blood of one man and you will be blessed and your rule will be powerful for eternity and the seed of your bothers will serve your seed for eternity.'⁹

The proximity of the two sites illuminates a series of connected episodes which are otherwise unique to the Tripartite Life. In these Patrick blesses in turn the royal fort of *Ráth Airthir*, the

to Ireland, 1302-7, ed. H.S. Sweetman & G.F. Handcock (London, 1886), p. 260; AD 1540-1: DONAPATRYK (*Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, pp 112-3); AD 1654-6: DONOUGHPATRICK (*The Civil Survey AD 1654-56, County of Meath*, ed. R.C. Simington (Dublin, 1940), p. 296). ⁵ *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. A. Colunga and L. Turrado (7th ed., Madrid, 1975), 3 Reg 6:2 (1 Kgs 6:2). ⁶ L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 132 §9-10, pp 166-71 §1. ⁷ For survey of proffered dates to date, together with the outlines of a new dating scheme, see Byrne and Francis, 'Two lives', 8. ⁸ John O'Donovan argued that *Ráth Airthir* was in the modern townland of Oristown; *O.S. letters, Meath*, p. 20 §58 and this suggestion is followed by F.J. Byrne, 'Historical note on Cnogba (Knowth)', Appendix to G. Eogan, 'Excavations at Knowth, county Meath 1962-1965' in *RLA Proc.* 66C (1968) 394; F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), p. 87; Byrne and Francis, 'Two lives', 100. Máire MacNeill, in contrast, followed William Wilde in suggesting the large, triple-ramparted fort hidden by the trees immediately to the east of the modern church of Donaghpatrick: W. Wilde, *The beauties of the Boyne and its tributary, the Blackwater* (3rd ed., Dublin, 1949), p. 130; M. MacNeill, *The festival of Lughnasa* (Oxford, 1962), p. 313. In this they have been followed by M. Herity, 'Motes and mounds at royal sites in Ireland' in *RSAI Jn.* 123 (1993) 142-3 and L. Swan, *Teltown: An ancient assembly site in Co. Meath* (Archaeology Ireland Heritage Guide No.3, Nov. 1998). O'Donovan's etymology of Oristown: *Baile Órthaidhe* from earlier **baile óirthir* is not clearly corroborated by the AD 1540-41 form OVERESTON (*Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, p. 114) or by AD 1663 ORISTOWNE (*Inq. cancell. Hib. repert. Lagenia*, Car II §3). I am grateful to Brian Ó Catháin of NUI Maynooth who brought to my attention Thomas Westropp's suggestion of a possible derivation for Oristown from *Baile (Mhic) Fheorais* (Birmingham's place): 'The marriages of the gods at the sanctuary of Tailltiu' in *Folklore* 31 (1920) 124-5. As yet, however, I have been unable to identify any Birmingham holdings in this area. Although I argued at the Teltown conference of July 1998 (NUI Maynooth) for O'Donovan's Oristown identification, further visits to the area have convinced me of the superior merits of Wilde and MacNeill's views. ⁹ L. Bieler (ed.), *Four Latin lives of St Patrick* (Dublin, 1971), pp 149-50. I suggest the possible translation of Latin *prae* by 'east of' on the grounds both that the Irish preposition *ar* which is likely to lie behind the author's choice can mean 'in front of' and 'to the east of' while the noun *airther* can mean both 'front part' and 'the east'. *DIL A* p. 241:46-69, p. 365: 64-77.

area of the *óenach Tailten* and the sanctuary at *Domnach Pátraic*. Each of these three sites is said to have been blessed in turn by Patrick and each is promised rights of sanctuary.

The saint begins with the fort of *Ráth Airthir* itself. He prophesied it would be the place of the assembly for the *tuatha* (kingdoms) for both ordinary and extraordinary assemblies and that only one wounding would ever take place there. The circumstances of this wounding are then given: an episode involving the knifing of a warrior called Macc Bresail¹⁰ by descendants of Áed Sláine through his son, Mael Odar. As recently outlined by Professor Byrne, a member of this family can be identified in eighth-century documentation as Éladach mac Maile Odrae *tigerna Cremthinnæ* (lord of Cremthenn) while other connections can be drawn with the settlements of Slane and Knowth.¹¹ References to a Meath lordship of Cremthenn occur in the Annals of the Four Masters *sub annis* 867, 1029, 1030, 1036 and it seems likely that it is this unit which gives Conall mac Néill his sobriquet, Cremthainne. The eighth-century association with Slane and Knowth corresponds to John Colgan's seventeenth-century identification of Cremthenn with the area then known as the barony of Slane and is reflected in the placename 'Crevin' witnessed in the Inquisitions of Charles I where it is associated with the parish of Drumcondra, Co. Meath.¹²

This section in the Tripartite Life is immediately followed by a connected episode in which Patrick grants sanctuary to the area of *óenach Tailten*, saying that no dead would ever be carried from that site; again, an incident which proves Patrick's power in this regard is cited. There is then a brief excursus in which two other churches are founded, one apparently at Kells – identified in other texts as a royal fort of the legendary king Cormac mac Airt.¹³ Patrick is then said to have returned to the Teltown area where he erected a monumental stone on a hill at Donaghpatrick at a site where a cross stood above a mill; this mill Patrick also blessed – for the good of the kingdoms for eternity. Patrick left a number of his disciples here, apparently in charge of both the mill and of the church donated by Conall and announced that anybody who violated the sanctuary associated with the stone would lose his life and kingdom.

Once more, the author takes care to include an incident which illustrates the point. Cináed macc Írgalaig, king of Tara violated the sanctuary and, despite the fact that his cousin then granted lands to Patrick in compensation, the violation was only fully atoned for with the burial of Cináed, probably at Donaghpatrick itself. Cináed and his cousin were descendants of Aéd

¹⁰ It is possible that this was a son of Bressal and grandson of Fínsnechta Fledach, both of whom died in *AU* 695. If so, this would make him a rival descendant of Áed Sláine through the latter's son Dúinthead. ¹¹ Byrne and Francis, 'Two lives', 14. Byrne once suggested that a man recorded in the Book of Ballymote as Ailillén mac Áeladaig m. Áeda Odba, a branch of the Gailenga, was a brother of the Gormgal mac Éladaig rex *Knogbái* (king of Knowth) who died in *AU* 789: F.J. Byrne, 'Historical note', 392-3. Provided the identification of Odba with Navan is correct (see E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum, locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae*, Dublin, 1910, pp 556-7), this would agree with the geographical distribution of this family, as identified by Byrne and Francis. It would, however, replace Mael Odar of the Síl nÁedo Sláine with a very different pedigree. ¹² J. Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturgae*, ed. P. Ó Riain (reprint Dublin, 1997 of original edition published Louvain, 1647), p. 184, note 9; *Inq. cancell. Hib. repert I Meath Car.I.* §7 (AD 1625) which refers to the manor of Newcastle in Crevin al. Newston. Newstone is a townland in the parish of Drumcondra (*General alphabetical index to the townlands and towns, parishes and baronies of Ireland*, Dublin, 1861; reprint Baltimore, 1986, p. 738). A number of the placenames associated with the manor in the *Inquisitions* can be identified in the vicinity of Newstone on the OS 6" townland index of Co. Meath, Sheet III. ¹³ *Senchas na relec in Lebor na Huidre: the Book of the Dun Cow*, ed. R.I. Best and O. Bergin (Dublin, 1929), p. 127: 4052-6; *Fingal Róndín and other stories*, ed. D. Greene (Dublin, 1955), p. 31:555-62.

Sláine through his grandson Conaing and the family is identified in the Annals of Tigernach 633 as the Uí Chonaing. Though they were clearly important in the early history of the area, the only clear identification of their patrimony lies in the fact that one of the lands given in compensation for Cináed's violation of Donaghpatrick was *tír mac Conaigg*, presumably for *tír mac Conaing*.¹⁴ Taken in conjunction with the other land unit entitled *ó chill sair* (from the church [i.e. Donaghpatrick] eastwards), it would appear that the Uí Chonaing were based in the Blackwater valley,

These two families of Síl nÁedo Sláine, the Uí Chonaing and the Boyne lords of Cremthenn, are not the only prominent factions in our late seventh- and eighth-century records. Also active in this period are descendants of Áed Sláine through two other sons, Diarmait and Ailill. Diarmait's family included Fogartach mac Néill who was expelled *de regno* (from the kingdom) in the Annals of Ulster 714 but regained kingship in 716 and disturbed *óenach Tailten* in 717. He himself, his father and his son were all killed in battles with the Uí Chonaing but another son, Fergal mac Fogartaig, died as *rex deiscerd Breg* (king of southern Brega) in 751. By the mid eighth century, therefore, Diarmait's descendants may have been concentrated towards the south, possibly in the area of Lagore which is explicitly associated with this family in the Annals of Ulster 785.

The topographical associations of Ailill's descendants, by contrast, appear to be north-western in the first half of the eighth century. Áed mac Dluthaigh (whence the Síl nDlúthaigh) is identified in the Annals of Tigernach 689 as the king of Fir Cul. Glosses in fifteenth-century manuscripts of *Féilire Óengusso* and *Féilire Gormain* indicate that this kingdom included Imblech Fia(ich) and Mag Bolcc, identified by John O'Donovan as the parishes of Moybolgue and Emlagh in the modern barony of Lower Kells.¹⁵ The Fir Cul are also closely associated with events at Tuilén (Dulane) immediately to the south of the barony border *sub annis* Annals of Ulster 786, Annals of the Four Masters 781, Chronicon Scotorum 872. In the Annals of Ulster 711, Áed's son Cú Roí died in a battle at Sliabh Fuait while in alliance with the Uí Meith of the Airgialla. His brother Flann mac Áedo was himself killed in a battle in Asal (half-barony of Moyashel, Co. Westmeath) in the Annals of Ulster 714. Another brother fell at Kells in the Annals of Ulster 718 and in the Annals of Ulster 743, Dúngal mac Flainn, *rí Cul* died in yet another battle with the Uí Chonaing.

Judging from the annalistic record, there were four principal branches of the Síl nÁedo Sláine in the late seventh and first half of eighth century. Of these four, the Uí Chonaing appears to have been the most active, to have gained the highest number of victories and to have dominated the politics of Brega after the eighth century.¹⁶ Many of the battles between the four factions appear to be concentrated in the Blackwater region – an area also associated with ancestral Uí Néill monuments such as Cormac mac Airt's settlement at Kells and the burial mound of Níall Noígiallaig, thought to be at Faughan Hill, across the valley from Donaghpatrick.¹⁷ This is

¹⁴ *Trip. life*, ed. Stokes, pp 73–5; Hogan, *Onomasticon*, p. 637. In the genealogies, a variant spelling of Conaing is given as Conac, showing the same modification of *ng* to hard *g* (which can equally well be spelt *c* in final syllables in Old Irish orthography), M.A. O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), p. 554. ¹⁵ *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: the martyrology of Óengus the Culdee*, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1904) p. 112, p. 248; *Féilire Húi Gormáin: the martyrology of Gorman*, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1895) p. 70, 266; *AFM s.a.* 693, pp 296–7 fn p. ¹⁶ Byrne, 'Historical note', 390. ¹⁷ P. Walsh, 'Irish Ocha, Ochann' in *Ériu* 8 (1915) 75–7.

also the area in which, according to the *Vita Tertia*, the ancestral home of Conall Cremthainne was located. I would conclude, therefore, that this area was of particular importance in the political hierarchy of the Síol nÁedo Sláine and that, as such, it was dominated in the first half of the eighth century by what was then their most successful branch, the Uí Chonaing. This appears to be the implication of the reference to *Tír macc Conaig* in the Tripartite Life. Professor Byrne has suggested that these dynasts subsequently ousted the descendants of Mael Odar, taking over the kingship of Knowth and focussing their energies on eastern expansion.¹⁸ Meanwhile the rulers of Fir Cul, whose homeland lay immediately to the north are stated to have controlled Ráth Airthir by the Annals of Ulster 810. (A later king of Ráth Airthir, who died in Annals of Ulster 866, is identified as Cernachán m. Cumuscaig, names which do not allow us to identify to which particular dynasty he belonged.) I would deduce from these fluctuations that control of Ráth Airthir and the important Patrician church of Donaghpatrick was a prize to be fought over by those scrambling to the top of the Síol nÁedo Sláine hierarchy. That certainly would seem to be the implication of Patrick's blessing of the ramparts of Ráth Airthir, that as long as the world lasts, they should be the place of assembly for both ordinary and extraordinary gatherings of the *túatha*.

The author of the Tripartite Life makes it clear that he envisaged Patrick's saintly blessing resulted in areas of sanctuary surrounding not just the ramparts of Ráth Airthir but also the *blat* (enclosure?) where the *óenach Tailten* was held as well as his own church of Donaghpatrick. Secular sanctuary of this kind is described in Middle Irish commentary as the *maigen dígona* or the precinct which surrounded high-status establishments. Any injury inflicted on someone within the bounds of the *maigen dígona* meant the assailant had to pay the owner's honour price as well as the fine for the injury itself.¹⁹ Similar notions of sanctuary are mentioned in the Airgialla poem where it is stated that one of the crimes over which their Uí Néill overlords had jurisdiction was the upsetting of an *óenach* under the over-king's protection. Another involved the violation of the protection of one who was within the royal precinct. In *Audacht Morainn*, it is stated that a ruler could impose immunities from violence at every *óenach*.²⁰

The author of the Tripartite Life uses the phrase *blat óenaig Tailten* as the location of this area of sanctuary. This implies the sanctuary was a discrete area within which the *óenach Tailten* took place, like many travelling fairs in Ireland today which have a traditional location in each settlement which they take up every season. *Blat* is a word which is used in association with an *óenach* on at least one other occasion; namely, a gloss on the early law tract *Bretha Déin Chécht*, where *blat* is a synonym for *baile in óenaig* (the place of the *óenach*).²¹ It is a word which can mean enclosure or field but which is explained in O'Clery's glossary simply as *faithche* – an area of open ground surrounding important settlements.²² The environment of the *faithche* is, as Fergus Kelly

¹⁸ Byrne, 'Historical note', 383 and 396-7; Byrne, *Irish kings*, p. 88, p. 118; Byrne & Francis, 'Two lives', 14. ¹⁹ *Corpus Iuris Hiberniae*, ed. D.A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1979), 1431:32–1432:10; *Crith Gablach*, ed. D.A. Binchy (Dublin, 1941), p. 83; G. Mac Niocaill, 'Christian influences in early Irish law' in *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, ed. P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart, 1984), pp 151-6 at 155; D. Ó Corráin, 'Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament' in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds), *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp 284-307 at 304-6; F. Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997), p. 568. ²⁰ O'Daly, 'Airgialla poem', 182 §31-2; F. Kelly, *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976), pp 8-10 §28. ²¹ D.A. Binchy, 'Bretha Déin Chécht' in *Ériu* 20 (1966) 1-66 at 24 §4.

²² *DIL* B p. 110:10-44. ²³ Kelly, *Farming*, pp 369-70.

has pointed out, the area in which the most intensive agriculture took place; there are references to sheep, bees and tilled fields within the *faithche* and in the law-text *Bechbretha*, it is identified as being 'as far as the sound of a bell or the crowing of a cock reaches'.²³

However, the *faithche* was not solely an area of agricultural outhouses and infield. Other references indicate that the *faithche* could act as a habitation area for persons of lower status. In the late Old Irish text, *Longes Mac nUislenn*, the sons of Uisliu were said to have joined the household following of the king of Scotland and as a consequence, they 'assumed mercenary service with him and placed their houses on the *faithche*'. In the sagas, the *faithche* is depicted as an area on which visitors would congregate before being admitted to the inner buildings of a settlement. Warriors or visiting dignitaries might leave their chariots there, troops might camp there and battles might take place, youths might play their games there and the ruler of a settlement might leave his dog to defend it while he was entertaining guests inside. Despite the buildings, the fields and the animal pens, it was not exclusively a cultivated area; in it one might also find grass, trees, pillar-stones and pools of water and there are legal references to the possibility of finding deer within its confines.²⁴ Monumental crosses were also found in this area; an annal entry for the *Chronicon Scotorum* 849 talks of a cross on the *faithche* of Slane which was broken and parts of which ended up in Teltown.

The fact that O'Clery viewed *blat* as a synonym for *faithche* implies that we should visualize *óenach Tailten* as having taken place, therefore, in an area of dispersed rural settlement surrounding a central focus of high status. We can be even more specific however, since an analysis of the various types of *blat* such as wood-*blat*, pool-*blat* or road-*blat* which existed in early Ireland has survived in the law tracts. These distinctions are based on the type of boundary mark which demarcate the unit. Thus, a pool-*blat* is demarcated by the waters of a river or a lake or a pool while a *blat esbaide* or *blat* of deficiency is marked by a hollow or boggy place or a stony valley or the track of an ancient route and so forth. There are two particular types of *blat* in this catalogue which seem most relevant to the probable location of *óenach Tailten*; the first being the *ail-blat* or rock-*blat* where possible markers are listed as the *ail adrada* (rock of adoration), *ail annscuithe* (the immovable rock) or *ail lechta* (monumental rock). The rock of adoration is particularly intriguing; the only other example of this phrase known to me is in a gloss on the legal text *Di astud Chirt ocus Dligid* where it glosses *altóir* or altar²⁵ but an open-air Christian altar forming a boundary marker is difficult to visualize.²⁶ Given the shape of prehistoric monuments such as portal tombs, perhaps we should imagine the title 'rocks of adoration' being given to megalithic tombs. Other possible boundary markers may also have originated in prehistory – Bronze Age standing stones as at Glencullen, Co. Dublin for example or Iron Age barrows with accompanying stone pillars as at Kiltullagh, Co. Roscommon or Island, Co. Mayo.²⁷ As it hap-

²⁴ *Longes mac nUislenn: the exile of the sons of Uisliu*, ed. V. Hull (New York, 1949), pp 46-8 §11, §15; see also J. Carey, 'The Heavenly City' in *Celtica* 18 (1986) 87-107 at 88; *Mesca Ulad*, ed. J. Carmichael Watson (Dublin, 1941), p. 3:53-6, pp 11: 254-12:269, p. 22:506-7, p. 35: 784-6, p. 36:815-6, p. 37: 831-2; *Togail Bruidne da Derga*, ed. E. Knott (Dublin, 1936), p. 15, §56, p. 26 §89; *Tochmarc Ferbe*, ed. E. Windisch in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* III.ii, (Leipzig, 1897), p. 508:627-8; *Aided Con Culainn*, ed. A.G. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories* (Dublin, 1933), p. 78 §9; *Bethu Brigte*, ed. D. Ó hAodha (Dublin, 1978), p. 4:115-7; *AU sub annis* 604, 777; *Cocad Fergus*, ed. M. Dobbs in *Rev. Celt.* 40 (1923) 404-23 at 408 §3; *Táin Bó Cuáilnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1967), pp 21-2:768-9, p. 24:875-7, p. 29:1068-74 43:1581-2; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 274. ²⁵ Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 238.4-19. ²⁶ Bieler, *Patrician texts*, p. 138:36-7. ²⁷ M. Medlycott, 'Standing stones in central Leinster' (unpubl. M.A. thesis, 2 vols, UCD 1989); F.

pens, the stone pillar at Island is inscribed with an early ogam inscription and there are a number of legal references to the use of ogam stones as marking the boundaries of land-units.²⁸

An alternative as a location for *blat óenaig Tailten* might be the *gnoth-blai* or *blat* of distinction where the markers are a mound – *dumae* – or the base of a trunk – *bun omna(i)* – or the mound of a tree – *duma crainn*. The word *dumae* used here is not specific to any particular type of mound; we find it being used to describe burial mounds, mounds for public ceremonies, fairy or *side*-mounds, mounds for hunting huts and even gun emplacements in the seventeenth-century.²⁹

The reason I suggest that these two particular types seem the most likely candidates for *blat óenaig Tailten* is that the Middle Irish *Senchas na Relec* identifies Teltown as an ancestral graveyard for the Ulaid while another text, the *Lebor na hUidre* version of *Aided Nath Í*, speaks of fifty hills (*enoic*) at the site of *óenach Tailten*.³⁰ Cúan Úa Lothcháin, in his famous poem of 1006 on Teltown not only states that the *óenach* took place around the grave-mound of the eponymous Tailtiu, but also that the site included

records from pillars over graves decked with arms ... mounds over noble foreigners and walls built over the dead of great plagues.

Other verses in the poem also refer to stone monuments and mounds; the *coirthe* or pillar of Colmán; the *carn* or stone mound of Conall, the *lieic* or stones of Grup and Gar.³¹ There are also saga-references to the actions of Amargin, who littered the area around Tailtiu and Ráth Airthir with stones.³² An entry in Annals of Ulster 831 talks of a disturbance about the *forad*-mounds of *óenach Tailten*. Unfortunately, we lack more precise topographical reference points for *blat óenaig Tailten* although an entry dealing with its celebration by Ruaidrí Uá Conchobhair in the Annals of the Four Masters 1167/68 does specify that the encampment of the participants extended from Mullach Aiti (Hill of Lloyd) to Mullach Tailten (the hill of Teltown). This may imply that the lower parts of the ridge where stand the prehistoric Knockans – bulldozed in part during 1997 but currently being excavated and rebuilt – may indeed have been the site of *blat óenaig Tailten* as suggested by nineteenth-century writers.³³

When the author of the Tripartite Life talks of Patrick blessing the *blat óenaig Tailten*, therefore, it appears he was envisaging an area of rough ground demarcated by what were in all like-

McCormick et al., 'A pagan-Christian transitional burial at Kiltullagh' in *Emania* 13 (1995) 89-98; R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, i (Dublin, 1945), p. 5. 28 T. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish law' in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval settlement: continuity and change* (London, 1976), pp 83-7; T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford, 1993), pp 261-2; D. McManus, *A guide to ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), pp 163-5; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 409. 29 *DIL* D 448:33-76. For discussion of prehistoric mounds in Irish medieval tradition, see Byrne, 'Historical note', 383-7; T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The semantics of "Sid"' in *Éigse* 17 (1977-8) 137-55; T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The eponym of Cnogba' in *Éigse* 23 (1989) 27-38; C. Swift, 'Pagan monuments and Christian legal centres in early Meath' in *Riocht na Midhe* 9:2 (1996) 1-26. 30 *Senchas na Relec* in *LU*, p. 129: 4103-6; *Aided Nath Í* in *LU*, p. 94:2908-9. 31 *The metrical Dindsenchas part IV*, ed. E. Gwynn (reprint Dublin, 1991 of original edition published Dublin, 1924), pp 146-63. 32 O'Rahilly, *Leinster Táin*, pp 109-110: 3937-80. 33 MacNeill, *Lughnasa*, pp 312-23. No detailed account of the damage done by the bulldozing is yet available in print but see *Archaeology Ireland* 11:2 (Summer 1997) 4. It is not clear whether the photograph in Swan, *Teltown* represents the Knockans prior to the bull-dozing or post-reconstruction of the damaged area.

lihood prehistoric monuments; either barrows for burial, standing stones, or small mounds. This description agrees with what we know of other *óenach* sites which, like *óenach Tailten*, are often described as being outside areas of normal habitation, made up of numerous mounds, and as sites of ancient burial places.³⁴

However, it is important to recognize that while *blat óenaig Tailten* was most probably an area of open ground, it lay in close proximity to two major settlements; one being that of the ecclesiastical site of Donaghpatrick, while the other was that of the prestigious royal fort of Ráth Airthir. The connections between the three are indicated, not only by the episodes in the Tripartite Life already discussed but by an entry in the Annals of Ulster *sub anno* 789 which indicates that it was at Ráth Airthir that the relics of Patrick were dishonoured by the high-king Donnchad m. Domnaill on the occasion of an *óenach*. The wording does not specify that this was *óenach Tailten* but given the high status of Donnchad and the presence of Patrician relics – which are stated to have been present at *óenach Tailten* in Annals of Ulster 831 – it seems a probable inference. It would thus appear that these twin sites provided the central focus, in the *faithche* of which was *blat óenaig Tailten*.

This coincides with the evidence of a variety of early medieval texts which indicate that an *óenach* was convened by a king on land under his personal control. So, in Heptad 56, the seven places where combat is not allowed under Irish law include the *dún* of a king with its *faithche* at the time of an *óenach*. A gloss on Heptad 61 refers to giving land to the king for the specific purpose of holding an *óenach*. A *Dindshenchas* poem on Loch Garman (Wexford) identifies a king's demesne as an *óenach*-site where boats assemble. Perhaps most tellingly, the law-text *Críth Gablach* states that it is the responsibility of the king to convene an *óenach* although only with the agreement of his *túath*. One might also note a gloss on Heptad 2, indicating that land granted to the church and given to the king for holding of an *óenach*, reverts to its original owner. A second glossator points out that giving the land to the king means that there will be no festival (*féil*) for the patron saint.³⁵ As Charles Doherty has pointed out in his discussion of Irish *óenaig*, there is frequent mention of both royal and ecclesiastical presidency of *óenach*-assemblies in our sources – as in the famous incident of the Annals of Ulster 800 when the local king died at the *circio ferie filii Cuilinn Luscan* (the *óenach* of the feast of Mac Cuilinn of Lusk).³⁶ In the light of references such as these, it seems reasonably plausible that the location of *blat óenaig Tailten* in the vicinity of both a royal fort and a church was not coincidental and that both the ruler of Ráth Airthir and his ecclesiastical counterpart at Donaghpatrick played vital roles in convening *óenach Tailten*. One of our earliest references to Teltown, in fact, is to its ancestral role as both a royal dwelling place and location of an *agon regale* or royal assembly.³⁷

This brings me to the question of the role of an *óenach*: what exactly was its function in the life of a medieval Irish community? The classic English translation since the days of Conall Mageoghan in 1627 and common in the mid-nineteenth-century work of Eugene O'Curry and

34 *The metrical Dindshenchas Part III*, ed. E. Gwynn (reprint Dublin, 1991 of original edition published Dublin, 1913), p. 2: 5-12; Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, p. 15:340-3; M. Dillon, 'Stories from the law-tracts' in *Ériu* 11 (1932) 42-65 at 50. 35 Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 50:28-30, p. 54:12-22; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p. 168; Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, p. 20 §35-6; Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 4:2-11. 36 C. Doherty, 'Exchange and trade in early medieval Ireland' in *RSAL Jn.* 110 (1980) 67-89 at 81-4. Ecclesiastical patronage of *óenach Tailten*, apart from references discussed in the main text, is also indicated in *AU* 831; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, pp 156-8:153-60. 37 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, p. 132 §9.

John O'Donovan is 'fair'.³⁸ O'Donovan certainly saw this as an economic institution; he refers, for example, to Nobber in Co. Meath as being in his day 'celebrated only for its one fair of heavy cattle'.³⁹ This fits with Doherty's emphasis on the economic aspects of the *óenach*. He sees what he terms earlier tribal *óenaig* as being the occasion of ceremonial gift-giving between kings, the acceptance of which symbolized acts of political submission. However, by the eleventh century, he believes that the much of the legal and political significance of the *óenach* had dissipated and that its function had become predominantly economic.

Commentators since Doherty have emphasised other aspects of an *óenach*. In his recent book, *Early Irish farming*, Fergus Kelly makes a number of passing references to the holding of *óenaig* in early Ireland, emphasising in particular the horse-racing which took place there. Chariot-racing was also a feature and the lawyers were careful to stress that owners couldn't claim compensation for injuries either to or by a horse or chariot at *óenach* assemblies. In an annal entry for 811, it is stated that the community of Tallaght prevented the *óenach Tailten* from being held that year *conna-recht ech na carpat* (so that neither horse nor chariot arrived). Kelly also stresses other aspects of an *óenach* not discussed in detail by Doherty, namely the sporting contests, music, story-telling and the recitation of royal genealogies.⁴⁰

At the Tara conference in April 1998, Thomas Charles-Edwards pointed out that, on a number of occasions, ecclesiastical synods may have run concurrently with *óenaig*. Certainly, there is more than one gathering of ecclesiastics associated with Teltown, the most famous of which is probably the synod which proposed to excommunicate Columba of Iona. In another incident, in the *Vita Prima* of St Brigid, Patrick is said to have convened an assembly of many bishops at Teltown which discussed, amongst other things, the paternity of a certain baby. The mother had accused one of the senior members of Patrick's *familia*, Bishop Brón, but when St Brigid blessed the baby's tongue, the child announced the true father.⁴¹ Neither account states explicitly that these gatherings took place during *óenach Tailten*, but they are certainly high-status gatherings at Teltown involving individuals from many areas of Ireland.

Implicit in this as well as in the observations of both Doherty and Kelly, is another important aspect of the *óenach*; that of an assembly at which people from far-flung settlements could meet and marriage alliances could be formed. A gloss on the legal tract *Cáin Aicillne* mentions the imperative for the *manchuine* of a lord to accompany him to an *óenach* while another, recently edited by Kelly, draws attention to the need to have the roads in good condition prior to such occasions. In *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, it is stated that special clothes were worn for the duration of an *óenach*; while wooing Emer, Cú Chulainn is described as having dressed himself in his *óenach*-clothes and travelled by chariot to the *óenach* while Emer and her women sat at the *forad-mound* of the *óenach* near to her father's *dún*. A late Middle Irish story entitled simply *Óenach Tailten* tells of an incident which took place during the *óenach* when a woman claimed her man had had intercourse with another and demanded that he swear a denial under the hand of St Cíaran of Clonmacnoise who was also present. It is easy to believe that the communal merry-

³⁸ E. Mac Neill, 'Ancient Irish law: the law of status or franchise' in *RIA Proc.* 36C (1923) 265-316 at 302 fn.1; *O.S. letters, Meath*, p. 11 §31. ³⁹ *O.S. letters, Meath*, p. 28 §77. ⁴⁰ Kelly, *Farming*, p. 99, p. 360, pp 458-61; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, pp 2-25. ⁴¹ *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. M.O. Anderson (Oxford, 1991), pp 184-6 §III 3; *Vita S. Brigidae*, ed. Bollandists, *Acta Sanctorum: Februarii* I p. 122 §V:36; S. Connolly, 'Vita Prima Brigatae: background and historical value' in *RSJ Jn.* 119 (1989) 23 §39.

making which obviously made up an important element of the *óenach*-celebrations facilitated the creation of marriage alliances although, as Daniel Binchy has indicated, it is not clear whether the entry in Cormac's Glossary which refers to a *Tulach na Coibche* or 'hill of contract' at *óenach Tailten* should be seen as a formal recognition of such activity.⁴²

Instead, *Tulach na Coibche* may reflect the legal decisions which could be made at an *óenach*.⁴³ The introduction to a late Middle Irish tale, *Genemain Aeda Sláne*, states that tributes and laws were enacted at *óenach Tailten* every Lúgnasad. A similar idea was also put forward in relation to *óenach Carmuin*, where the poet states that the participants would discuss the dues and tributes of the province.⁴⁴ We have already encountered other incidents which took place at *óenach Tailten* and which involved seeking legal redress – namely that of the woman who accused her husband of absconding with another woman and the attempt to establish the paternity of an unclaimed child.

It is clear from this relatively short overview that an *óenach* served a multitude of possible functions. It was a recognized gathering point for a population dispersed across a rural landscape and provided a social occasion to break up the cycle of the year. It provided communal fun in the shape of horse-racing and competitions in which warriors could show off their skills. It reinforced respect for the authority of the patrons; that of the king when his genealogy and attainments were lauded in public by the professional *flid* and that of the church when relics of the local saint were paraded. It involved conspicuous consumption of the products of an agricultural society, in particular food, drink and clothing and it probably encouraged the development of trade in luxury goods. In addition, as a gathering point for the wider community, other types of meetings could coalesce around it; a synod of visiting bishops for example or an opportunity for hearing law cases. Perhaps the simplest way in which to summarize its function is simply to state that it acted as a safety-valve through which a community could resolve any internal tensions it might have.

Identifying the function of an early medieval *óenach* is the essential starting point for any attempt to resolve what role *óenach Tailten* played in the overkingship of the Uí Néill kings of Tara. The standard account of that relationship for many years has been D.A. Binchy's 1958 article, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara'. In this, Binchy is particularly concerned to refute the statement by Eoin Mac Neill and others that *óenach Tailten* was a national assembly.⁴⁵ Binchy therefore dismissed the claim of the poet Cuán Ua Lothcháin that in his day provision was made for attendance at the *óenach* by the kings of Leinster, Ulster, Munster and Connacht. Instead Binchy suggested that all the evidence we have is to the effect that *óenach Tailten* was summoned by the head of the Uí Néill and disturbances of the *óenach* were confined to groups from within the Uí Néill hegemony.

This seems to over-simplify the matter. Binchy noted the two twelfth-century references to the holding of *óenach Tailten* by two Ua Conchobhair kings from Connacht, Toirdelbach and Ruaidrí in 1120 and 1167/8 but he dismissed them as 'artificial revivals'; he did not comment, however, on the fact that in the Annals of the Four Masters 894 (*recte* AD 899) Diarmuid mac Cerbaill, king of Ossory, celebrated *óenach Tailten*. Similarly, Binchy discussed but dismissed the

⁴² Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 1788:1-7; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 538 §3; O'Rahilly, *Leinster Táin*, p. 64:2357; *Tochmarc Emere* in *LU*, p. 309:10192-7; *Oenach Tailten* in *Bk Leinster* p. 1204; *Sanas Cormaic*, ed. K. Meyer (Dublin, 1912), p. 32 §385. See D.A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara' in *Ériu* 18 (1958) 124. ⁴³ Binchy, *Crith Gablach*, p. 102. ⁴⁴ *Genemain Aeda Sláne* in *LU*, p. 133:4206-14; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p. 18:214-7. ⁴⁵ Binchy, 'The Fair', 115-7.

Annals of Ulster 811 reference to the community of Tallaght, in the territory of the Leinstermen, who prevented the *óenach* from taking place; this, he suggested, was an anomalous incident, brought about by the border situation of Tallaght and the great prestige of its leading cleric, Mael Rúain.⁴⁶ Nor did he accept the entry in the Annals of Ulster 733 which refers to the overthrow at Teltown of Cathal m. Finguine, overking of Munster, by a Clann Cholmáin dynast of Westmeath as indicating anything other than a simple 'engagement'.⁴⁷ Binchy did not discuss the possibility raised by John O'Donovan that the alliance of Clann Cholmáin and the powerful Connacht king Muirgius mac Tommaltaig who mounted an expedition 'as far as Tir-in-Oenaigh' (land of the *óenach*) in the Annals of the Four Masters 804 (*recte* 809) might have been intending to attack *óenach Tailten*.⁴⁸ Nor did he investigate the Old Irish poem on the Airgialla in which the Uí Néill over-lord of Tara and Teltown is said to preside over the warriors of Ireland; the king of Munster being in the extreme south of the banqueting hall, the king of Leinster beside him and the king of the Connachta behind.⁴⁹ These references, scanty though they are, cover a long chronological time-span and could be seen as indicating that *óenach Tailten* was a gathering of island-wide – if not national – importance under the aegis of the king of Tara.

Recent work by Colmán Etchingham has stressed that what survives in the Irish annals provides us with only a partial and patchy account of specific areas⁵⁰ and it is a striking fact that so many of the relatively short list of annal references to *óenach Tailten* deal with failures to hold the assembly. One of these, in the Annals of Ulster 873 states that failure to hold the *óenach* without good and sufficient cause – *sine causa iusta et digna* – was something which had not been heard of since ancient times. One should note that the annalist is complaining about the lack of an explanation rather than the lack of an *óenach*; after all the cancellation engendered by the activities of Tallaght some sixty years before has already been cited.

It might be that holding *óenach Tailten* on an annual basis was an aspiration rather than an automatic reality for Tara kings. As an assembly apparently held under the immediate aegis of the most powerful Síol nÁedo Sláine king of the day, together with the leader of the ecclesiastical site of Donaghpatrick, it was crucially important as a symbol of the high-king's control over the fertile lands of the eastern midlands. Disturbances, interruptions or cancellations illustrated a king's weakness; holding a successful gathering, in contrast, could bolster a new king or one weakened by defeats elsewhere. This, after all, is what is implied in the prose *Dindshenchas* on *óenach Carmuin*:

For holding it the Leinstermen [were promised] corn and milk and freedom from control of any [other] province in Ireland; that they should have men, royal heroes; tender women: good cheer in every several house, every fruit like a show [?]: and nets full [of fish] from waters. But if it was not held, they should have decay and early greyness and young kings.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 117–18. ⁴⁷ Ibid., 121–2. ⁴⁸ *AFM*, p. 414 fn. y. ⁴⁹ O'Daly, 'Airgialla poem', 184–5 §3–4. ⁵⁰ C. Etchingham, *Viking raids on early Church settlements in the ninth century: a reconsideration of the annals* (Maynooth, 1996); C. Swift, 'Dating Irish Grave-slabs: the evidence of the annals' in C. Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North – medieval art in Ireland and Britain* (Belfast, 1996), pp 247–8. ⁵¹ W. Stokes, 'The prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', *Rev. Celt.* 15 (1894) 272–336, 418–84 at 311–14 §18.

Propaganda might state that all four provincial kings were present on a regular basis and strong kings might have been in a position to enforce this, but politically weak kings could face opposition from such relatively minor groups as the Gailenga, as happened in the Annals of Ulster 827, or even from the Síl nÁedo Sláine themselves, as in the Annals of Ulster 717. Those Tara kings who were under threat from more junior candidates within the Uí Néill dynasties or from strong provincial kings, such as Cathal mac Finguine of Munster or Muirgius mac Tommaltaig of Connacht, may have found it difficult on occasion to exercise the necessary control over the Brega kings, or to demand the presence of their more powerful subordinates from elsewhere on the island. Similarly, it was only powerful over-kings, such as Donnchad mac Domnaill, who could successfully challenge the local authority of the Patrician church as represented by Donaghpatrick.

The area of the Blackwater valley is one of the best documented regions in early medieval Ireland. Our sources depict a region which appears dominated by the most prestigious of the Síl nÁedo Sláine forts; one whose ramparts – massively substantial at the present day – were said to have been blessed by the saint himself. In its immediate vicinity was a church claimed to have been founded by a progenitor of the royal house, whose dimensions resembled that of Solomon's temple. In close proximity to these two settlements was an area which appears to have been demarcated by ancestral burial mounds and prehistoric stone monuments and it is here that the Uí Néill kings of Tara were wont to hold their assemblies. Such assemblies represented a communal treat proffered by high-kings in years when they effectively dominated Brega and every year where possible. They symbolized the Tara kings' overlordship of the fertile lands of the east midlands. During the festivities, visitors from afar would be guaranteed immunity from attack and over-kings from other parts of Ireland would accept the hospitality of the lord of Tara, thus acknowledging his suzerainty. *Óenach Tailten* is thus crucial to the history of the high-kingship of Ireland but, paradoxically, I would argue, its importance lies in the limited nature of an over-king's control in an area in which regional power was concentrated in local hands.