

Kildare

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Brigid, Patrick, and the Kings of Kildare, A.D. 640-850

CATHERINE SWIFT

*Imthús Laigen dolottursaidhe i Cruachan Claonta, dáigh ní maidh for
Laighniú da ndearnat a comairle ann, - gurob tiusad dochum an
chatha. Lottur iar sain co Dinn Canaim (asaidhe do chum an chatha).
Comrancuttur tra isin maidin ar na marach na catha cechtardha, naoi
mile do Laighnibh mile ar fichit immorro do Leith Cuinn. As crúaidh
- as feochair vacuiredh an cathsa leith for leth - ra ghabh cach na
chomraicibh ann. Ra ba dimór rá innisi comrama na laoch Laigen
- laoch Leithe Cuinn. As bert go ffacas Brighid ós cionn Laigen; ad ches
dno Colum Cille ós cinn Ua Néill.*

As for the Leinstermen, they went to the Crockaun of Clane (for the Leinstermen used not to be defeated if they held their council there) and then came to the battle. Afterwards they went to Duncannon.¹ The following morning, the troops of both sides came together; nine thousand of the Leinstermen and twenty-one thousand of the Northern Half of Ireland. The battle was waged strongly and fiercely on both sides and everyone took part in the fighting there. The contests between the Leinster warriors and the warriors of the Northern Half would be excessive to relate. It is said that Brigit was seen over the heads of the Leinstermen; Columcille, moreover, was seen over the heads of the Uí Néill (=leaders of the Northern Half).²

All over the world, the word Kildare is associated with St Brigit, but few have considered the relationship between her church and the peoples who lived in its vicinity. Even modern scholars, living and working in county Kildare, have taken it for granted that everyone resident in the region owed allegiance to Brigit and took her as their patron saint.³ There has been little consideration of how big such a region might have been, whether it comprised the immediate vicinity of Kildare town, extended to roughly the area of the modern county or whether, as the above quote might suggest, it included the entire province of Leinster. Approaching the history of Kildare from this perspective, the issue of

patronage takes central stage: who were the kings who decided to support Brigit's settlement, why did they do so and were there alternatives open to them? Consideration of these questions forms the focus of the following paper.

General context: Clonmacnoise and the patronage of the Clann Cholmáin

A number of recent studies of early Irish church settlements have stressed the importance of royal patronage in promoting the cult of individual saints. In her study of the cult of Columba, for example, Máire Herbert pointed to the evidence that Domnall mac Murchada, king of Tara from 743 to 763, chose to support the cult of Columcille, promulgating the law of Colm Cille in 753 and subsequently being buried in the Columban site of Durrow in county Offaly.⁴ In a paper on Clonmacnoise, Ragnall Ó Floinn drew attention to the patronage of that church by Domnall's great-grandson, a hundred years later. Not only was Máel-Sechnaill buried at the Shannon site in 862, so too was his wife, his son and his two daughters. The family was also responsible for the erection of two of the high crosses at Clonmacnoise with an inscription commemorating Máel-Sechnaill on the South Cross while his son Flann 'of the Shannon' (*Flann Sinna*) erected the Cross of the Scriptures. In addition, Flann was also involved in the erection of the stone church at Clonmacnoise which has been identified with the first phase of the present cathedral.⁵

In other words, it is not enough to assume that the rulers of the locality in which a church is found are automatically going to patronise that church. Domnall and his descendants Máel-Sechnaill and Flann were all members of the single ruling dynasty of Clann Cholmáin. Their kingdom varied in extent over time but in Máel-Sechnaill's day it is defined in the annals as stretching from the Shannon to the sea.⁶ It was known in the pre-Norman period as the kingdom of *Mide*, a name which was given later to the two counties of Meath and Westmeath. Obviously, within an area of such size, there was a large number of churches all of which might potentially receive royal patronage.

In fact, it is possible that Domnall's decision to patronise Durrow was disputed by members of his immediate family. In 764, the year after Domnall died, the annals record the battle of Argamain between the communities of Clonmacnoise and Durrow, each of whom was supported by one of Domnall's family: his son Diarmait supported Durrow while his grandson Bresal mac Murchada supported Clonmacnoise. Although Bresal and Clonmacnoise won on that occasion, Bresal's father Murchad died the following year while the Durrow-supporting branches of the family were subsequently able to deploy troops supplied by Durrow in a battle with the men of Munster in 776. Similarly, in 900, a royal meeting between Flann 'of the Shannon' and the king of Connacht at Athlone ended with the Connacht king submitting to Flann 'under the protection of the people of (St.) Ciarán (of Clonmacnoise)'.⁷ Clearly royal patronage of ecclesiastical sites not only resulted in material objects such as high crosses and church buildings and the provision of royal burial sites; it could also, on occasion, produce political and military allies for ruling kings.

It seems likely that periods of extensive patronage such as that exercised at Durrow by Domnall and his sons or by Máel-Sechnaill and Flann at Clonmacnoise had an impact on the careers of the clerics who rose to prominence at those sites. Unfortunately, no Irish ecclesiastical site has a complete record of the death-notices of its personnel⁸ which can make it difficult to identify those who held office during the reigns of these kings. Thus, we have no record of a Durrow churchman who owed his career to the patronage of Domnall and his sons; such a man may well have existed but our sources are not sufficiently detailed for us to identify him. In the case of Clonmacnoise, however, we do have the example of Colmán mac Ailella who is credited with being jointly responsible, together with king Flann, for the erection of the stone church of Clonmacnoise in 909. In his death-notice he is identified as a member of the *Conaille Muirethemne* of county Louth who became *princeps* of Clonmacnoise and Clonard (according to one set of annals) and as *ab* of Clonard and Clonmacnoise, bishop and doctor of wisdom in another.⁹ While his origins were not local to the kingdom of Mide or to the Clonmacnoise region, his title as *princeps* or *ab* of Clonard as well as Clonmacnoise clearly indicates that he had benefited from Flann's political patronage. Clonard, like Durrow and Clonmacnoise itself, was another of the major churches of the Clann Cholmáin and one which had been the centre for royal conferences in Máel-Sechnaill's reign.¹⁰ To be leader of both Clonard and Clonmacnoise simultaneously is equivalent to stating that Colmán was the highest-ranking churchman in Flann's kingdom.

For some unknown reason, our record of bishops at Clonmacnoise begins fairly late in the history of the settlement¹¹. It may be significant, in fact that the sequence of what appear to be contemporary references begins in the reign of Flann himself. Episcopal churches were recognised as the highest-ranking churches in Irish law¹² and it is possible that Clonmacnoise only acquired a bishopric as a consequence of Flann's patronage. Tuadcar died as bishop in 889, followed by Máelodor in 890 and Cairpre Cam who died in 904. This last figure is credited with having been visited by the spirit of Máel-Sechnaill who pleaded with him to intercede with God on his behalf because he had failed to confess before his death; in return, Máel-Sechnaill's ghost is said to have pointed out to the bishop a treasure which he had captured from the Norse.¹³ Then there are two other bishops with death dates in 920 and 922. If Colmán mac Ailella also acquired the title of bishop, as suggested by one version of his death notice, it would seem that he did not acquire that title until after 922. Alternatively, it is just possible that there was more than one bishop attached to major settlements such as Clonmacnoise for a Viking raid on Louth in 840 captured bishops (in the plural), as well as priests and scholars.

It is worth examining the specific cases of Clann Cholmáin patronage of Durrow and Clonmacnoise in some detail as an illustration of the multi-faceted relationship which could exist between church patron and ecclesiastical settlement. These examples provide an important corrective to the widely held

view that royal patronage of churches simply resulted in the insertion of younger sons or 'discard segments' of the lineage into ecclesiastical office. This is not to deny such things happened; as long ago as 1857 William Reeves drew attention to the fact that the sequence of early leaders of Iona were nearly all members of the Cenél Conaill, the dynasty to which Colm Cille himself had belonged.¹⁴ In the modern era, Donnchadh Ó Corráin has stated as a general principle that the great hereditary ecclesiastical families were usually discard segments of royal lineages, pushed out of the political struggle and forced to reprise themselves in the church.¹⁵ What the case-study of Clonmacnoise shows, in contrast, is that churchmen who did not belong to the local secular dynasty could still be elevated to important power within the kingdom by royal patronage. To limit our notions of royal/church interaction to the idea that the church merely provided refuges for unsuccessful younger sons of the reigning dynasty is to allow the genealogical sources to overly influence our understanding of early Irish society.

Kildare, 640-700

Unfortunately, the sources for the history of Kildare are nothing like as detailed as those for Clonmacnoise. For example, we have no contemporary record of St Brigit herself or of the initial stages of her settlement and we cannot even be sure in what period she lived although it is generally assumed that the later legends of her life, associating her with St Patrick, imply a fifth century date if she ever existed. Since the early twentieth century, some authors have argued that in fact she may in origin have been a pagan goddess who was given the veneer of a Christian saint, in opposition to the view that she was a real holy woman around whom mythological legends later gathered.¹⁶ More specifically, R.A.S. Macalister has argued that Brigit was the leader of a college of priestesses devoted to a pagan fire-cult at the site of a sacred oak who persuaded her community to adopt the new religion while Kathleen Hughes has suggested that the Christian site of Kildare replaced an earlier pagan sanctuary on the slopes of Knockaulin.¹⁷

In the absence of contemporary sources, these ideas represent mere speculation. The earliest source on Kildare and the life of Brigit was written at some point around the mid to late seventh-century by a man known as Cogitosus.¹⁸ Much of the life consists of a series of miracles performed by Brigit but in the preface, her cult is said to draw people from every region of Ireland and that she built her monastery on the plains of *Campus Liffi*. Her church is identified as the head of almost all the Irish churches and the pinnacle which surpasses all Irish monasteries while its area of jurisdiction is said to extend over the whole land of Ireland, from sea to sea. It is ruled by Conlaed as the supreme bishop otherwise known as the *archiepiscopus Hibernensium episcoporum* or archbishop of the bishops of Ireland as well as by Brigit, the abbess to whom all Irish abbesses defer. In the final chapter Cogitosus strengthens these references with a statement that the large basilica of Kildare contained the

tombs of Brigit and the *archiepiscopus* Conlaed at Kildare. The various titles accorded him implies that Conlaed was recognised as the most important bishop of the region, even if he did not necessarily hold the title of archbishop in the sense that we understand it today.¹⁹ Cogitosus goes on to describe the church of Kildare as a vast and metropolitan city, in which the treasure of kings was kept secure and as a place to which people from all the regions of Ireland would flock.²⁰

To identify the kingdom which contained a church with such grandiose claims, we must turn to an approximate contemporary of Cogitosus, Bishop Tírechán of Killala Bay in north Mayo.²¹ In his account of Patrick's cult, Tírechán states that Loíguire mac Néill, king of Tara identified his ancestral enemy as being the son of Dúnlán in Maistiú in *Campus Liffi*. Elsewhere, Tírechán indicates that he is using *campus* as his translation of the Irish word *mag* meaning an area of unwooded land. Moreover, in his references to other *campi* within Ireland, it is quite clear that he uses the term as a synonym for the territorial extent of a kingdom.²² *Campus Liffi* or Mag Liffi is, therefore, a kingdom centred on the area of unwooded land which took its name from the river valley of the Liffey. Clearly however, it was thought to extend beyond the immediate vicinity of the river if Kildare was also included within its orbit. In the same way, a vernacular tale, *Scela Mucce Meic Dathó*, indicates that the area of Maistiú was to the south of Kildare and while we do not know its boundaries, a focus within it is represented by the modern placename of Mullaghmast or the *mullach* (hill) of Maistiú, immediately to the west of Ballitore.²³ For Tírechán and Cogitosus, therefore, the kingdom of Mag Liffi associated with Dúnlán's son and with St Brigit is an area which extended over much of the central and southern regions of the modern county of Kildare.

This contemporary evidence for a large Kildare kingdom ruled by the descendants of Dúnlán led the scholars Kuno Meyer and Felim Ó Briain to place great emphasis on the evidence of later genealogies concerning a man named Áed Dub mac Colmáin.²⁴ In the annals, Áed is credited with being both *ab* and bishop of Kildare when he died in 639. More importantly, he is commemorated in the Leinster genealogies as *rig-epscoip Cilli Dara - Lagen uli* (royal bishop of Kildare and all Laigin) the territory normally associated with the area covered by the modern province of Leinster. These genealogies are probably tenth-century in date and thus this is not a contemporary description but for Meyer and Ó Briain, the important connection is that the king of the Laigin in 628 is recorded as Fáelán mac Colmáin, Áed Dub's brother and member of the Uí Dunlainge dynasty. In the next generation, Bishop Áed's nephew, Óengus, sixth in descent from Dúnlán, is also identified in the genealogies as the *ab* of Kildare as is Brandub mac Fiachrach, also sixth in descent from Dúnlán but descended from a different side of the family.

In other words, we have contemporary seventh-century evidence that Brigit's church at Kildare was situated within the kingdom of Dúnlán's son while the rather later genealogies suggest that at least three individuals from amongst

Dúnlang's descendants were leaders of Brigit's church in the mid and latter half of the seventh century. The title of at least one of these individuals implies that his jurisdiction stretched throughout Leinster. This is rather less than the area attributed to Brigit's jurisdiction which Cogitosus claimed extended over the whole land of Ireland but we must remember that he was clearly writing as a propagandist for Kildare and he may have been embellishing its status for effect. In short, the reality may have been that Cogitosus was writing in somewhat overblown terms about the episcopal leader of Kildare at a point when that position was occupied by members of the local dynasty who ruled the area of Mag Liffi and who also claimed the status of kings of Leinster.

An alternative explanation, proposed by Kim McCone, is that in Cogitosus's day, Kildare's authority may have extended far beyond the provincial boundaries of Leinster. McCone believes that Cogitosus was claiming for Kildare all churches which carry placenames of what he terms 'the generally early *Cell Brigte* and *Tobar Brigte* type' existing throughout Ireland.²⁷ This idea is apparently grounded in a belief that the area of Kildare's jurisdiction was self-generated by the religious themselves who set about founding and naming churches with the specific aim of creating a federation of settlements under the authority of the bishop of Kildare. Such an arrangement would be unique in the early Christian church where the writ of a bishop's authority was designed to broadly mirror the secular unit in which the episcopal church was found.²⁸ In addition, McCone's interpretation suffers from the major drawback that detailed study of *cell* as a placename element by Deirdre Flanagan shows that it was being used in new coinages as late as the twelfth century when it was used, for example, to describe St Mary's Abbey (*Cell Muire Artha Cliath*) which was founded in 1138.²⁹ Similarly, the formulation *topar Brigte* or well of Brigit is still used today of holy wells throughout the country. Given this longevity for both terms and the fact that Brigit was a popular saint throughout Irish history, it seems somewhat dubious to assume that all *Cell* or *Topar Brigte* placenames refer to churches extant in Cogitosus's day.

Whatever size we assume Kildare's area of jurisdiction to have been in Cogitosus's day, it is important to note that his claim to ecclesiastical domination of Mag Liffi itself was disputed. The Kildare writer's approximate contemporary, Bishop Tirechán, not only lists other churches within the local area of Mag Liffi who owed allegiance to Patrick rather than to Brigit, but he also links these to the sons of Dúnlang:

He went out to Mag Liffi and he placed there a church and he ordained Auxilius, Patrick's boy, an exorcist and Iserminus and Mac Tãil in Kilcullen. He ordained Fiacc the Fair in Sleaty (county Laois) and he baptized the sons of Dúnlang and left by the Gowran Route.³⁰

In later Patrician tradition, the most important of these churchmen appear to have been Fiacc the Fair. In *Bethu Phátraic*, an early tenth-century compilation

which includes, among other elements, an extended treatment of Tirechán's text, Fiacc is ordained bishop by Patrick and specifically given the title of bishop of Leinster.³¹ It is impossible to know for certain whether Tirechán's reference to Fiacc's ordination refers to episcopal ordination but it is significant that the Mayo bishop links the reference to Fiacc with the baptism of the sons of Dúnlang.

It might be thought that baptism is a normal adjunct to church foundation but in fact Tirechán uses this motif relatively rarely and then only in fairly precise circumstances. It occurs, for example, in his account of Patrick at Tara, the great ceremonial centre of the Uí Néill over-kingdom where Patrick is said to have baptised many thousands of men. When Patrick is said to have visited the centre of the Uí Briúin over-kingdom at Dumae Selcae, he baptised the sons of Brion. At Cruachain, the ceremonial centre of the Connachta over-kingdom, an extensive description of the baptism of Loíguire mac Néill's two daughters is provided and their burial in a local monument described. Finally, in northern Mayo, at the assembly site of *Foirrgea* – plural of the word *forrach* – Tirechán refers to the baptism and burial of a mother and child on the hill.³² In other words, in Tirechán's idiom, reference to baptism is a coded reference to the main assembly area of a particular kingdom and it is probably not without significance that, in addition to claiming that Sleaty was their baptismal site, he also locates the residence of the sons of Dúnlang with the near-by area of Maistiú rather than any area further north. Strengthening these associations between church and secular power is the account in the *Additamenta* of Sleaty's close proximity to another *forrach* site where legal assemblies concerning boundary division took place.³³ In short, Tirechán's association of the baptism of the sons of Dúnlang with Fiacc the Fair and Sleaty is making a claim for Patrician precedence within Mag Liffi: Brigit's settlement may be ruled by Dúnlang's descendants but, according to Tirechán, the dynasty was resident in Maistiú, well to the south of Kildare while their initial conversion took place at Sleaty under Patrick's auspices. In a world where the antiquity of a church was one of the elements which garnered prestige,³⁴ such a claim represented a direct rebuttal of Cogitosus's claims for Kildare's pre-eminence within Mag Liffi. There is contemporary evidence for a close connection between Sleaty and the Patrician cult towards the end of the seventh century. In his life of Patrick, Muirchú identifies Fiacc as a renowned bishop whose relics were worshipped in Sleaty while a short paragraph incorporated into the *Additamenta* runs:

Bishop Áed was in Sleaty. He went to Armagh. He brought his *audacht* to Segéne of Armagh. Segéne returned the *audacht* to Áed and Áed made a grant of his *audacht* and his kin-group and his church to Patrick till Doom. Áed left the *audacht* with Conchad. Conchad goes to Armagh and Fland Feblae gave his church to him and took him himself as abbot.

The dates of these individuals are known. Áed of Sleaty died as an anchorite in 700; Segéne was a bishop of Armagh who died in 688 while Fland Feblae as abbot of Armagh died in 715. A bishop Conchad who is not associated with any specific location, died in 692. It is not exactly clear what an *audacht* is although it is thought to be related to Latin *edictum* - the word used in Late Latin to refer to episcopal proclamations.¹⁷ What Áed's *audacht* may have been is, therefore, unknown but it is absolutely clear that in addition to his *audacht*, he donated his kin-group and his church (presumably the settlement of Sleaty) to Patrick.

In 1928, Eoin MacNeill pointed out that both Fiacc and Áed were members of the Uí Bairrche; and he suggested this was also the area where the eighth-century *Additamenta* locate the early mission of St Iserninus.¹⁸ In fact, the genealogies of the Uí Bairrche also list the other churchmen whom Tírechán associates with Mag Liffi for Mac Táiil is also identified as a member of that population group while the church of Auxilius at *Cell Auxilli* or Killashee, was under their control.¹⁹ In short, while Tírechán identifies Mag Liffi with the sons of Dúnlán and states that it was Patrick himself who baptised the dynasty, the various individuals whom he lists as adherents of Patrick's cult are members of a different dynastic group. That group, the Uí Bairrche, may have been the *cenél* or kindred which Bishop Áed donated to Patrick since both he himself and the ecclesiastics whom Tírechán lists are all either Uí Bairrche or identified with churches under Uí Bairrche control.

Judging by the format of his description, Tírechán locates these Uí Bairrche churches within the boundaries of Mag Liffi and this is confirmed by the fact that Killeullen is on the Liffey itself while Killashee lies only a couple of miles to the east of it. Sleaty, on the River Barrow in the modern county of Laois, may seem somewhat far to the south-west to be included in Mag Liffi but in fact, *Bethu Phátraic* specifically states that Patrick met the boys of the Loichsi (the people who gave their name to Laois) in western Mag Liffi, confirming that the region extended at least as far as the Kildare county boundaries and possibly beyond.²⁰ *Bethu Phátraic* also confirms that Sleaty was on Uí Bairrche lands for it states that Fiacc, as one of five brothers, received his father's fifth ridge (*immaire*) and it was on this the ecclesiastical settlement of Sleaty was built. His father's name is given as Macc Ercae while his siblings are named as Oengus, Ailill Mór, Conall and Etarscél, confirming the evidence for the Clann Mac Ercae as a branch of the Uí Bairrche in the genealogies.²¹

In short, in the second half of the seventh century Cogitosus was claiming that the bishop of Kildare was *archiepiscopus* of all the bishops of Ireland and that Kildare, in Mag Liffi, was the head of almost all churches in Ireland. These far-reaching claims have been understood as reflecting the secular power of the sons of Dúnlán for members of that dynasty were among the leaders of Kildare during this period and royal treasure was stated to have been stored in the church settlement. At the same time, another group of churches, also within Mag Liffi, were supporting the claims of Patrick whose proponents

claimed that he, too, had almost all the whole island of Ireland within his area of jurisdiction.²² This second group of churches were controlled by members of the Uí Bairrche and appear to have pledged their allegiance to Bishop Segéne of Armagh some time before 688. Within a few years of that ceremony, at least one Patrician clergyman, Bishop Tírechán of Mayo, was seeking to claim that the principal site amongst these Uí Bairrche churches was also the location for the baptism and thus the conversion of the sons of Dúnlán.

It is worth noting that in an early poem on Leinster kings, an Uí Bairrche ancestor named Muiredach Snithe is identified as having been a king of Leinster who controlled all Ireland.²³ Another indication of their prestige lies in the fact that Cellach Cualann who died as king of Leinster in 715, was married to an Uí Bairrche queen.²⁴ Clearly, therefore, it was envisaged in the seventh century that the Uí Bairrche were potential contenders for control of Leinster although such claims are not reflected in our early annals which focus instead on the north Leinster kingdoms of the Uí Máil and the Uí Dunlinge and the southern Leinster kingdom of Uí Chennselaig. Áed's pledging of the Uí Bairrche churches to Patrick's cult thus represented a political shift of major proportions and one which directly flouted the claims of Kildare.

Patrician claims to the support of dynasties and churchmen in the south-east are reiterated in yet another text from the Book of Armagh dossier. This was a statement of Armagh's claims to precedence within Ireland known as the *Liber Angeli* or the Book of the Angel. The exact date of the document is disputed but because it, like Tírechán himself, claims that Patrick had been awarded almost the whole island of Ireland as his area of jurisdiction, many have argued that it must either be contemporary with or precede the Mayo bishop.²⁵ Unlike Tírechán, however, who states that Patrick could claim almost the whole of Ireland as his area of jurisdiction, the *Liber Angeli* indicates that Patrick insisted on sharing the island:

My holy Lord, I foresee through the Holy Spirit that certain elect individuals in this island through the ineffable goodness of your mercy... who moreover seem to need some district of their own to facilitate necessary service for their churches and monasteries after me. Therefore I ought perfectly and justly to share with the perfect religious of Ireland the abundance indisputably given to me by God so that I and they, we may enjoy in peace the riches of God's bounty.

This generosity is then qualified: Patrick was prepared to share if, in return, he was granted prestige and taxes:

Am I not content to be the apostolic scholar and chief leader of all the peoples of the Irish, especially as I retain my own tax rightly to be rendered and this is given to me by the Most High as a truly fitting due over the free churches of the *provinciae* of this island and

this law will be decreed likewise to all monasteries of cenobites without any doubt in favour of the ruler of Armagh for ever.

Finally a specific instance of this arrangement is cited:

Between holy Patrick and Brigit, pillars of the Irish, there existed so great a friendship that they were of one heart and mind. Christ worked many miracles through him and her. The holy man then said to the Christian virgin: 'Oh my Brigit, your area of jurisdiction will be reckoned to be in your *provincia* in your *monarchia* but in the eastern and western part, it will be in my overlordship.

Kim McCone has argued that this represents a guarantee that Kildare's interests in the province of Leinster were not to be eroded.²⁶ This is to ignore the obvious difficulty posed by the expression 'in the eastern and western part' - what land is envisaged as lying to the east of Leinster? Liam Breatnach has suggested that we should see the phrase as a reflection of the Irish expression *tair oen tair* which, while literally meaning 'in the east and west, can also imply everywhere'.²⁷ If this were true, Patrick's words could be seen as this a reiteration of the key idea already outlined: Patrick had been given the whole island of Ireland but is prepared to offer Brigit her *provincia* in her *monarchia*.

Given the evidence for Uí Bairrche churches which supported Patrick immediately to the east of Kildare (in Kilcullen and Killashee) and to the south (at Sleaty), it seems equally possible that this is a precise reflection of political realities in the later seventh century. Kildare with its Uí Dunlinge leadership could claim as her area of jurisdiction an area defined as her *provincia* but in the larger unit of the *monarchia*, there was room also for dynasties and churches who supported Patrick's rule.

This poses the question - what exactly are the areas represented by the term *provincia* or indeed *monarchia*. The Latin word *provincia* has been defined by Irish canonists as being a unit ruled by an over-king with three subordinate under-kings.²⁸ This same definition is used in the Irish vernacular or Brehon law text *Uraicecht Becc* to refer to the kingdom ruled by a *ri ruirech* or over-king and in the accompanying Middle Irish commentary, it is stated that five of such kings are under the control of a *ri coicid* or provincial king.²⁹ As an example of such a unit, one can look at the seventh-century writer, Adomnán, who uses the word *provincia* of the Ind Airthír, located in eastern Armagh.³⁰ In other words, although we use the word province to refer to the units Leinster or Munster today, the Latin word *provincia* from which it derives, can mean a much smaller unit in early Ireland.

In relation to Mag Liffi, two dynasties are contemporaneously identified within its borders in our seventh-century sources the Uí Bairrche and the Uí Dunlinge. While the evidence is not conclusive, it seems plausible to hypothesise that Mag Liffi, which we know extended at a minimum from

Killashee to Sleaty and from Kildare to Mullaghmast, may have been considered as a *provincia*. In other words, the final paragraph of *Liber Angeli* may be suggesting an arrangement in which Armagh leaders agree that Brigit's authority will be supreme in Mag Liffi. Such an arrangement would seem to accord with Cogitosus's claims for Kildare in that it left Brigit's church unchallenged within the kingdom of the Uí Dunlinge. On the other hand, viewing *provincia* as denoting Mag Liffi explicitly contradicts Tirechán's claims for the Uí Bairrche churches within that kingdom. It may be, therefore that the *audacht* of Bishop Áed in the second half of the seventh century resulted in a change of attitude by the Armagh leadership and an abandonment of the provisions of the *Liber Angeli*.

Again, if Mag Liffi represented Brigit's *provincia*, what does the other unit, Brigit's *monarchia* signify? The Latin phrase used in the *Liber Angeli* is *apud monarchiam tuam* where *monarchia* is equivalent to the English words 'monarchy', 'dominion' or 'absolute rule'.³¹ Concerning the use of the word *apud* elsewhere in the Patrician documentation, McCone has argued that it should not be seen as simply bearing its classical meaning 'with' or 'near' but rather should be viewed as a synonym for the Irish preposition *la*. This preposition, too, can mean 'with', 'near' or 'belonging to' but it is also frequently used of localities and populations group with the sense 'in' or 'among'. In other words, there are two possible alternatives: one is to translate the phrase as 'Oh my Brigit, your area of jurisdiction will be reckoned to be in your province under your absolute rule' but alternatively, it could also be translated as 'Oh my Brigit, your area of jurisdiction will be in your province within your dominion'.³² In other words, *monarchia* can be understood either in an abstract sense or as a specific kingdom. In reality, the first interpretation renders *monarchia* almost meaningless 'your area of rule is under your absolute rule'; if, however, we understand it in a concrete sense, accepting that the province in question is Mag Liffi, an obvious candidate for the *monarchia* would be the provincial kingdom of the Laigin, normally translated as Leinster. We know that in the first half of the seventh century, the Uí Dunlinge king, Faclán mac Colmáin was recorded as king of the Laigin in the Irish annals and that, at the end of the seventh century, his grandson, Bran claimed the same title.³³ In the interim, however, the annals also record as kings of the Laigin: Cremthann m. Aedo of the Uí Máil, Crundmael mac Ronáin of the Uí Chennselaig and Fiannamail mac Máel Tuile of the Uí Máil whose power bases appear to have been in counties Wicklow and Dublin (in the case of the Uí Máil) and county Wexford (in the case of the Uí Chennselaig).³⁴ Kings from these dynasties thus represented different *provinciae* who could yet claim the title of king of Laigin or overarching *monarchia*.

Unfortunately, Bishop Tirechán's account of seventh-century churches in the south-east makes no specific reference to Patrician churches which may have been dominated by these kings. In fact, he only identifies one other church in the territory of the Laigin apart from those which he associates with the Uí Bairrche:

And (Patrick) proceeded to the boundaries of the Laigin, to Druim hUrchaille and he placed there the House of Martyrs, as it is now called. It is situated on the great road in the valley and Patrick's stone is there on the road. He went out to Mag Liffi....

Today Druim hUrchaille is the tiny parish of Dunmurraghill about half way between Kilcock and Clane. The references to both the House of Martyrs and the stone of Patrick imply, however, that it was an important site in the seventh century. Other stones or rocks of Patrick to which Tirechán makes reference are found at the major assembly sites of Uisnech and Cashel associated with the powerful overkingdoms of the midlands and Munster respectively. There is also a stone of Patrick on the coastal promontory site of Dunseverick on which Patrick is said to have sat when consecrating his fosterling. Bishop Olcán, Dunseverick (in county Antrim) was subject to a special foray by Queen Medb in the *Táin* and Tirechán describes it as the chief church east of the Bush river. In other words, the location of a stone of Patrick at Dunmurraghill implies the existence of both a major church and a major secular site in its vicinity.

Similarly, the *Liber Angeli* specifies that one of the reasons why Armagh could claim precedence over all churches and monasteries of the Irish was because it possesses relics of the martyrs Peter, Paul, Stephen, Laurence and others whose relics were located in a shrine which should be visited every Sunday. Muirchú in his life of Patrick refers to the burial mound of the martyrs on lower ground next to Armagh. Finally, a stray paragraph in the Book of Armagh links possession of the martyrs' relics with the pre-eminence of the church of Baslick in the leading Connacht kingdom of Mag nÁi as a church where the ruling dynasty was buried and which could be ruled by sons of Connacht kings.¹⁷ Patrick is also said to have given relics of the martyrs to Olcán at Dunseverick and a fifth 'House of Martyrs' is located in Mag Roigne of the kingdom of Ossory although no details are given.¹⁸ In short, ownership of relics of martyrs in the Patrician material indicates an extremely high-status church with jurisdiction over a wide area.

Perhaps because Tirechán is writing after the arrangement of the *Liber Angeli* had been superseded by Áed's *andacht*, one cannot trace clear evidence in his writing of Patrician churches within the area of the *monarchia* of Laigin to the east and west of the *prvincia* of Mag Liffi. On the other hand, it is surely worthy of note that he not only identifies Dunmurraghill lying to the north-east of Kildare as a 'House of Martyrs' but also states that Patrick founded a similar 'House of Martyrs' in Ossory after leaving Mag Liffi by the Gowran Route. It seems likely that the distribution of the relics of martyrs represented one method by which Armagh promoted its connections with dynasties and kingdoms from other parts of the country. We know that such gifts were a feature of church-state relations in Europe at this time: martyrs' relics were given by Pope Gregory to the ruler of Burgundy and from Pope Vitalian to the king of Northumbria. Daibhí Ó Croínín has drawn attention to another

Patrician church with relics of Peter and Paul which is mentioned in the early *Calendar of Willibrord*.¹⁹ If Ó Croínín is right in suggesting that the Willibrord reference is to Drumlease, it is surely of significance that that site, too, is identifiable as the chief church of the secular kingdom of the Calraige.²⁰

Ossory is not well documented in the seventh century and apart from a single entry referring to the killing of an Ossory king by the Laigin in 659, there is little to indicate whether or not they were seen as contenders for the title of provincial king of Leinster. An indication that they were seen as important players on a national stage is, however, provided in the seventh-century life of Columba which states that the king of Tara kept the Ossory king hostage and Columba himself foretold his fate.²¹

If this provides a reasonably plausible candidate for the dynasty which ruled the area in which Patrick founded the Kilkenny 'House of Martyrs', identifying the dynasty which controlled the kingdom in which Druim hUrchaille was located is much more problematic. In the absence of clear contemporary indications, one can only speculate but I would put forward the possibility that it may have been a branch of the Uí Garrchon. Alfred Smyth has stressed the extent to which the Uí Garrchon are linked to traditions of Patrick's arrival in Ireland, both in Muirchú's seventh-century life of Patrick and in the later compilation, *Bethu Phádraic*.²² These concentrate on the region by the coast associated with the hinterland of Arklow but in an incident described in *Bethu Phádraic*, a man named Cilline is said to have welcomed Patrick when a coastal Uí Garrchon king refused him hospitality. In return, Patrick blessed Cilline's son Marcán and identified him as the best of the Uí Garrchon.²³ Marcán and Cilline both turn up in a genealogy of the Uí Garrchon, as does an individual named Domnall m. Flaithniad whose death is recorded at Cloncurry in 783. This was not the Cloncurry parish, west of Kilcock on the N4 but rather Cloncurry parish in the barony of East Offaly by the Grand Canal, west of the hill of Allen and some ten miles south-west of Dunmurraghill.²⁴ Interestingly, this man Domnall is given the title king of Uí Failge, indicating his western connections, but it is clear from both the annals and the Uí Failge king-list that he was an interloper, interrupting a sequence of two generations of brothers who controlled that kingdom.²⁵

At least one early Uí Garrchon ancestor of Domnall mac Flaithniad and Marcán mac Cilline is also said to have claimed the kingship of the Laigin. Fraech mac Findchad is described as king of the Laigin in an annal entry under the year 495 where he is said to have died in the second battle of Granairt, fighting against the Uí Dunlinge.²⁶ Fifth-century annals are not taken to be contemporary records but Smyth has argued that this character should be identified with the figure of Findchad m. Garrchon in the genealogies who is listed five generations earlier before Cilline and whom Smyth sees as spearheading Laigin resistance to early Uí Néill incursions into north Kildare. He also draws attention to Price's identification of an obsolete place-name *Cellugarrchon* in the barony of Talbotstown as evidence that the Uí Garrchon

had, at some point in their history, held lands on the Kildare side of the Wicklow mountains.⁴¹ In short, while the main branch of the Uí Garrchon appears to have been located further to the east in south Wicklow, the fragmentary indications outlined here may imply the existence of another Uí Garrchon kingdom in north Kildare in an earlier era.

Interestingly, there are traces of another early Patrician site from the same area of north Kildare as Dunmurraghill and Cloncurry although it is not discussed by Tírechán. The Mayo bishop does, however, refer to its patron saint, Erc, describing him as the first man to rise up in honour of Patrick when he entered the house of the high-king of Tara and the first man to be baptised at Tara itself. Both these details are pointers to the esteem in which Erc's memory was held at the time Tírechán was writing. The same man is recorded by Tírechán's contemporary, Muirchú, as Erc son of Daig and Muirchú adds the further detail that Erc's relics were worshipped at Slane.⁴² In the *Annals of the Four Masters*, however, there is an obit for Erc under the year 512 when Erc is titled as bishop of Lilcach and *Fertae Fer Féic*, the mound of the men of Fiacc in Meath where Patrick is said to have celebrated the first Easter.⁴³ Lilcach has been identified as a genitive form of a name which today is represented by the parish of Lullymore, west of Robertstown and immediately to the north of Cloncurry where Domnall mac Flaithniat died. Like Druimm hUrchaille itself, there are only a small number of death-notice for the site in the annals and both these Patrician churches appear to have fallen out of the record. This may be because the putative seventh-century Uí Garrchon kingdom in this area of north Kildare appears to have been conquered by the Uí Dunlinge by the end of the eighth century.⁴⁴

Drawing these various strands together, the main source for seventh-century Kildare on which scholars have concentrated has been Cogitosus's life of Brigit. That text states that Kildare, as Brigit's settlement in Mag Liffi, was pre-eminent in Ireland with an area of jurisdiction which stretched from sea to sea. For most of the twentieth century scholars have accepted the argument that these grandiose claims should be seen as reflecting the political ambitions of the Uí Dunlinge who are identified by Cogitosus's contemporary, the Patrician writer Tírechán, as the rulers of Mag Liffi and by the annalists as claimants to the kingship of the Laigin. They may also, although this evidence is not contemporary, have provided seventh-century bishops of Kildare itself.

Tírechán does not, however, make any reference to Kildare and the church which he associates with the Uí Dunlinge is that of Sleaty, just over the border in county Laois but within the territorial limits of Mag Liffi. It is here that Tírechán states that the Uí Dunlinge dynasty was first converted and baptised by Patrick. The importance of Sleaty is further emphasised in that all the churches which he lists as having been located in Mag Liffi are, like Sleaty itself, manned by Uí Bairrche churchmen or located on Uí Bairrche lands. Tírechán's statements in this regard appear to be due to an agreement, arrived at some point prior to 688, in which Áed of Sleaty pledged the allegiance of his people

and his church to Bishop Segéne of Armagh. Tírechán appears to be using Áed's edict to put forward the proposition that Patrick, rather than Brigit, should be seen as chief saint within the Uí Dunlinge kingdom. Again, contradicting Cogitosus's claim that royal treasure was kept in Kildare, it is probably significant that Tírechán located the sons of Dúnlán in the southern Kildare region of Maistiú rather than according them a more central location within Mag Liffi.

In addition, Tírechán also provides us with traces of the arrangement which existed prior to Áed's proclamation. This arrangement is described in the final paragraph of the *Liber Angeli*, a text which shares with Tírechán the claim that Patrick's area of jurisdiction should properly be seen as the whole island of Ireland. In the *Liber Angeli*, however, Patrick is said to have decided to grant parts of the island to other saints and their churches, in return for a tax to be paid to Patrick's site at Armagh. One such saint was Brigit who is defined as a close friend of Patrick's and her church is declared to be pre-eminent within her *provincia* in her *monarchia* but that to the east and west of this, Patrick will rule. Reflecting this arrangement is Tírechán's statement that lying to the north-east of Mag Liffi was the major site of Dunmurraghill which contained relics of the martyrs. He also refers briefly to another such church in Ossory, lying between Mag Liffi and Cashel to the west, which contained similar relics. We know that gifts of such relics were made by popes to kings in the seventh century and the existence of a kingdom in north Kildare around Dunmurraghill is suggested by a legend detailing how Patrick had blessed the local ruler of a branch of the Uí Garrchon. This dynasty, like the Uí Dunlinge, had pretensions to controlling the kingship of Leinster. There is also a single obit connecting the near-by site of Lullymore with the Patrician bishop Erc, a man of great status in seventh-century accounts of Patrick's cult. Prior to Áed's gift of his people to Armagh, therefore, the Patrician leaders appear to have agreed that Mag Liffi was solely under Brigit's control and concentrated their claims on two of the other major kingdoms in the area.

Kildare, 700-830

As Alfred Smyth has pointed out, the coverage of Kildare and of Leinster affairs in the annals increases from the mid eighth century and it grows again in the last third of the eighth century.⁴⁵ This increase makes it easier to study Kildare and its political patrons towards the end of the eighth and into the early ninth century, particularly as we also have a fragmentary ninth-century life of Brigit known as *Bethu Brigte*. Closely related to this text are sections of another life, known as the *Vita Prima*. The dates of the latter are disputed but its description of Mag Liffi and Kildare politics make an eighth-century date seem the most likely.⁴⁶

Because of this concentration of evidence for the later period, I propose ignoring the simple death-notice of churchmen in Kildare which characterise the earlier eighth-century annals and to fast-forward to the obit of bishop Tuathchar Ua Ferdálaig. In the annals, this man is recorded under the year

834, as bishop and legal scholar of Kildare but in the genealogies, he is recorded as Túathchar, 'royal bishop of Leinster' (*rig-epscoṗ Laigen*) - the same title as had been accorded to Áed Dub two hundred years earlier. As in the seventh century, the association of Kildare with the whole of Leinster appears to be due to the political affiliation between Kildare and the Uí Dunlainge for a gloss in *Bethu Brigte* names the king of Leinster as Dúnlang while the *Vita Prima* identifies the king as having his settlement in Mag Liffi itself. In contrast to our evidence for the seventh century, however, when they appear to control the whole of Mag Liffi by the eighth and early ninth century the Uí Dunlainge had split into a number of mutually warring factions.

The Leinster king at the time of Túathchar's death was either Dúnlang's descendant, Cellach mac Brain who died in the same year or a short-lived successor. As Leinster king, Cellach seems a somewhat unlikely patron of Túathchar since he is recorded in 833 as defeating the community of Kildare in their own settlement and killing many of them. This is the only action we know of in which Cellach took part for he had a fairly short reign, taking over the kingdom of Leinster from Muiredach mac Ruadrach in 829. On the other hand, we do know that in the year he acceded to the throne, the annalists recorded the death of an *ab* of Kildare named Aedh mac Cellaigh and it is possible that this man was our Cellach's son. He had been preceded as *ab* by a Muiredach m. Cellaigh who died in either 823 or 824 and by yet another brother, Faelan m. Cellaigh who died in 804. In other words, despite the fact that a Cellach who was king of Leinster fought Kildare in 833, three men who may have been Cellach's sons were leaders of Kildare during the whole of the first third of the ninth century. Thus, Túathchar may have got his title of 'royal bishop of Leinster' some time before Cellach fell out with the leaders of Brigit's cult and attacked Kildare itself.

There is an obvious problem here in that, if these brothers were all sons of a Cellach who died in 833 and the first died as a mature man holding office in 804, Cellach must have been fairly ancient when he tottered onto the throne. It is more likely that these three brothers, as Francis John Byrne has suggested, are in fact the sons of another Cellach who was also both king of Leinster and descendant of Dúnlang and who died in 776. This Cellach's son, Fínsnechta, became king of Leinster, in his turn and during his reign, the annalists record the placing of the relics of Conlaed, the man described by Cogitosus as *archiepiscopus* of Kildare, into a gold and silver shrine. This development reminds one of the material gifts given by the kings of the Clann Cholmáin to Clonmacnois. Fínsnechta himself subsequently died at Kildare in 808, apparently while suffering from piles. This would mean that when he lay dying, he was being cared for at a church which was currently being ruled by his brother. In short, in these years, around the turn of the ninth century, we can detect at least two rival families who sought to control the kingdom of Leinster. One, whose progenitor died as king of Leinster in 776, produced three brothers who each ruled Kildare in turn while their sibling also became king of Leinster

and died at Kildare itself. The opposing dynasty is represented by a king who had attacked Kildare and killed many at the settlement.

The genealogies make it clear that these two families were different branches of the Uí Dunlainge but the rivalry between the two is vividly illustrated by the fact that Fínsnechta, as leader of the pro-Kildare family, killed the father of the anti-Kildare Cellach, (a man named Bran) together with his queen, in 795, apparently by burning them to death. This event took place at Cell Chúile Duma, which has been identified with Coole townland, in the parish of Abbeyleix. This location may be significant given that a ninth-century poem identifies one of Bran's descendants, not only as someone to whom Mag Liffi belonged but also as ruler of the Slievemargy hills as well as with the rich lands of Maistiú in south Kildare. This kingdom is identified as the kingdom of western Mag Liffi in the death notice of Bran's grandson in 848 and in that of another of his descendants in 884. It is worth noting that the modern barony of Slievemargy contains the parishes of Sleaty and Killeshin, suggesting that this Uí Dunlainge kingdom had taken over some of the earlier territories controlled by the Uí Bairrche.

In contrast, the dynasty of the pro-Kildare Cellach appears to have been located within the area around Kildare itself. Cellach's father Dúnchad, was killed at the battle of Áilinne in 728 and in 770, while Cellach was still king, the forces of the king of Tara attacked him at *Ráith Áilinne*. Both of these titles refer to the hill-fort of Knockaulin, approximately ten miles to the east of Brigit's church. A connection between the two sites is indicated in the introduction to a martyrology written around 800 which reads 'Áilenn's proud hillfort has perished with its warlike hosts; great is victorious Brigit, fair is her multitudinous settlement'.

This would seem to suggest that the royal dynasty of Fínsnechta, whose siblings were ruling at Kildare around 800, may even have settled in Brigit's settlement after the attack on Knockaulin. Less explicitly, the *Vita Prima* refers to a 'city' of the Laigin king in Mag Liffi whose king had a perennial feud with the Uí Néill while the genealogies describe Knockaulin by the same term: *civitas regalis* or royal city. Furthermore, a more detailed Middle Irish account of another episode in the *Vita Prima* states that Brigit was responsible for feeding one of the men who built the ramparts of Knockaulin.

A Kildare base might explain the long-standing animosity between Fínsnechta's family and the Uí Failgi. In *Bethu Brigte*, Brigit's father is identified as owning land in the two *mag*s of Uí Failgi while he and Brigit's brothers are also identified with Mag Liffi. This immediately suggests that *Bethu Brigte* was identifying the saint's family with the area west of Kildare itself for the Uí Failgi gave their names not only to Offaly but also to the modern baronies of East and West Offaly in modern Kildare. Indeed a Tudor map published by Smyth indicates the existence of a *Túath Dá Maige* (Tovmoy) as lying between the Figile and Slate rivers, immediately west of Rathangan, ancestral fort of the Uí Failoi kins.

In the later eighth century, the *Uí Failgí* are depicted as enemies of Fínsnechta's dynasty in central Kildare. In 770, Fínsnechta's father Cellach fought and killed the king of *Uí Failgí* and his brother, for example.²⁷ In 803 Fínsnechta then arranged for his followers to kill off the new king of *Uí Failgí*, the nephew of the man his father had killed. Nor was Fínsnechta's family the only ones to come into conflict with the *Uí Failgí* for in 782, in a battle which took place on the Curragh between Bran (of western Mag Liffí) and Ruaidrí, the king of *Uí Failgí* died at the hands of an *Uí Cennselaig* leader from Wexford. Since a brother of this *Uí Cennselaig* leader had been in alliance with Ruaidrí two years before, it seems likely that the *Uí Failgí* were present on the Curragh as allies of Bran. This makes perfect sense in that Bran's family were not themselves interested in patronising Kildare but as antagonists of Fínsnechta, an alliance with the *Uí Failgí*, who also had claims on Kildare and who were located in Fínsnechta's backyard could only be of benefit to them.

If Fínsnechta's family was actually resident in Brigit's settlement at Kildare itself at the beginning of the ninth century, this makes the statement that Bishop Túathchar of Kildare was 'royal bishop of Leinster' when he died in 834 all the more intriguing. After Fínsnechta's death in 808, the annals suggest that control of the kingship of Leinster passed from his pro-Kildare family to the anti-Kildare family of Bran and Cellach. In 814, for example, the various contenders from all over Leinster fought amongst themselves but victory went to the sons of Bran. In 818, Muiredach son of Bran died as 'one of the two kings of Leinster' and in the same year, following an invasion by the king of Tara, Leinster was divided between two grandsons of Bran. We see no trace of these kings in subsequent years but they appear to have been fairly weak, for in 819 the king of Tara laid the area from Bray to Glendalough waste. During this period, when the anti-Kildare dynasty of western Mag Liffí dominated the kingship of Leinster, the genealogies record yet another royal bishop of Leinster whose name is Flann mac Nuadat of the *Dál Cormaic*. He is specifically not recorded as bishop of Kildare nor does he appear in the annals but by comparing his place in the genealogies with other members of his family whose death dates we know, we can deduce that he died around about 800. We have no information concerning the site of his church but his people, the *Dál Cormaic*, are identified by the genealogists as controlling a ford in Maistiú, one of the territories controlled by Bran's family. Another ecclesiastical member of the *Dál Cormaic*, Mael-Máedoc mac Diarmata, who died in 917, is described as leader of Killeslin and bishop of Leinster in the same year that Bran's descendant died as king of Leinster. In other words, in the first two decades of the ninth century, it appears that whereas Fínsnechta clearly patronised Kildare, his rivals for the throne of Leinster were promoting some other church, possibly Killeslin, and making a local churchmen from their own kingdom royal bishop of Leinster.

However, the most important character in Leinster politics during this period does not appear to have been the various sons of Bran but rather the

king of Tara. The man who held this title between 797 until 819 was a northerner of the *Cenél nEógain*, from counties Tyrone and Derry. His involvement with Leinster preceded Fínsnechta's death for he is said to have invaded Leinster as early as 804 when Fínsnechta submitted to him and gave him hostages. This did Fínsnechta little good since the following year, Áed was back and on that occasion he is said to have divided Leinster between a son of Bran and a third dynasty, represented by Muiredach son of Ruaidrí. This did not last: Fínsnechta resumed his throne in 806 but Áed returned in 808 when the Leinstermen defeated him by the banks of the Liffey.²⁸ Ten years later Áed again divided Leinster between two grandsons of Bran. As king of Tara, Áed thus saw himself as king-maker in Leinster, playing one contender off against the other and snubbing the claims of the previous strong king's family, that of Fínsnechta himself.

As bishop of Kildare and royal bishop of Leinster, Túathchar was also a northerner, of the *Uí Echach Cobo* of eastern County Down. Colmán Etchingham has stated that his appointment 'signifies continuing Brigidine influence outside Leinster in the ninth century'.²⁹ I would suggest the possibility of a more profane explanation; that Túathchar's title may reflect Áed's influence as an overbearing king of Tara who intervened in Leinster politics. There is no explicit reference to Áed's links with the *Uí Echach Cobo* but there was a long-standing enmity between themselves and the *Ulaid*³⁰ and Áed invaded the *Ulaid* in 809. On the principle that my enemy's enemy is my friend, this may indicate that Áed and the *Uí Echach Cobo* were allies or at least not antagonistic to one another. Since Túathchar was bishop of Kildare as well as of Leinster, this might suggest that he was appointed during the reign of Fínsnechta, the Leinster king whose family supported Brigit's church. It is also possible, however, that he gained office in the confused years after Fínsnechta's death, when the northern Áed, as king of Tara, continued to interfere in Leinster affairs and when Fínsnechta's brothers (who presumably still hoped to regain the kingship of Leinster for their family) still ruled at Kildare. In that context, Áed, who ignored the family's claims to kingship in 805 and who was interested in a weak and divided Leinster, might well have offered a sop to their interests by appointing a royal bishop for their settlement while making sure that that bishop was a man who had no local contacts and who came from a family of northern allies of Áed himself.

The men whom Áed chose to favour in 805 as kings of Leinster was the son of Bran (whose family had been rulers of Leinster prior to Fínsnechta) and Muiredach son of Ruaidrí. The latter is not recorded for another twenty years when he re-appears, fighting with the southern *Laigin* in 827 and he is recorded as sole king of *Laigin* at his death in 829. His family, too, were a branch of the *Uí Dunlinge* and rivalry between themselves and the Kildare family is recorded as far back as 728 when Muiredach's grandfather, Fáelán, had fought and killed Fínsnechta's grandfather, Dúnchad, at Knockaulin. They were also rivals with the dynasty of western Mag Liffí since in 782, Muiredach's

father, Ruaidrí fought and defeated Bran in a battle which is said to have taken place on the Curragh, in the immediate vicinity of Kildare.

There is no evidence that this battle site indicated the home of Muiredach's family. Apart from the strong links between Fínsnechta's dynasty and the area between Kildare and Knockaulin, there is also a death notice of Muiredach's brother, Diarmait as king of eastern Mag Liffi in 832 and in 863. Muirecán son of Diarmait, is identified as the king of Naas and eastern Liffi. A later descendant is also termed king of eastern Mag Liffi in 917. This dynasty appears to have been weaker than the other two Uí Dunlinge dynasties in that their eighth-century progenitor died young and they themselves did not acquire the kingship of Leinster except for a brief period in 805 and again in the 820s. It may be that this weakness was due to the relatively recent conquest of their ninth-century kingdom for an otherwise unknown dynast. Túathal mac Domnaill, died as king of eastern Mag Liffi in 816. At least some part of this region is defined in the *Vita Prima* as lying to the east of the river Liffey in an area containing the sites of Killashee and Kilcullen. In the seventh century these sites had been held by the Uí Bairrche and the implication is that this third Uí Dunlinge power-block had conquered some of the northern reaches of Uí Bairrche land in the early ninth century.

It is not difficult to deduce the church favoured, according to *Bethu Phátraic*, by this new dynasty controlling eastern Mag Liffi:

Thereafter Patrick went to Naas. The site of his church is on the area of open ground surrounding the fort, to the east of the road and to the north of the fort is his well. There he baptised Dúnlán's two sons, Ailill and Illand and there he baptised the two daughters of Ailill, Mogain and Fedelm and their father offered to God and to Patrick their consecrated virginity. And Patrick blessed the veil on their heads.

This represents a ninth-century up-dating of Tírechán's seventh-century claim that the baptism of the sons of Dúnlán took place at the Uí Bairrche church of Sleaty. In the case of Naas, however, the association between Patrick's church and the fort of the ruling dynasty is made absolutely explicit. The next episode in *Bethu Phátraic* corroborates the relationship in that Patrick is described as summoning the steward of the fort of Naas but the steward pretended to be asleep. When they went to waken him, he proved to be dead. Clearly from the point of view of *Bethu Phátraic*'s author, Patrick and his clergymen had the authority to demand the services of the fort's secular personnel.

Interestingly, however, Patrick's church at Naas is not given a name and there is no reference to the men who might have staffed the establishment, as is the norm. It is possible, therefore, that this 'church' was in fact a legendary invention by the propagandists for the cult of Patrick. Clearly there was a long-standing association with Patrick in the area as the church of Killashee, to the

south of Naas, is identified as a Patrician church by Tírechán in the seventh century sources. The patron saint of that church was Auxilius, whom Tírechán calls Patrick's boy and he is said by both Tírechán and Muirchú to have been one of the initial missionaries who accompanied Patrick from Gaul.¹⁰ The author of the *Bethu Phátraic* tales on Naas appears to be trying to tie this long-standing support for Patrick's cult in the immediate area to the new reality of the ninth-century Uí Dunlinge kingdom of eastern Mag Liffi. The relatively weak nature of this claim is, perhaps, indicated by the story in *Vita Prima* which tells of a good man in eastern Mag Liffi who offered Brigit and her nuns a render of grain.¹¹

In contrast to the lack of specifications for the church of Naas, *Bethu Phátraic* places great emphasis on the contemporary support for Patrick by the Uí Ercáin. A daughter of the dynasty, Brig, daughter of Fergnae mac Cobthaig, warned Patrick of an attack planned on him by the men of Laois and in return Patrick blessed the Uí Ercáin, saying they would never lack warriors or ordained clergymen, nor would they ever be ruled by a foreign king or steward. He then stated that the meat-renders offered to the king of Leinster should be shared with the Uí Ercáin ruler and that they had Patrick's measure of dry grain and Patrick's *forraich* or site where borders were determined. They were also to enjoy wealth and perpetual progeny. The author of *Bethu Phátraic* completes this description by stating that from the time of Patrick, the Uí Ercáin also decided their borders for themselves.¹²

Today the hill on which Patrick proclaimed these rights is called *An Fhorraich Mór* or Narraghmore, a parish to the north-west of Athy and only a few miles north of Mullaghmast or the area of Maistiú. The men of Laois, who had planned the attack on Patrick, are identified first with the region of western Liffi and secondly with Moone which the author of *Bethu Phátraic* describes as being affiliated to St Columba. They were said to have been condemned by the saint so that they would have neither king nor bishop, that they would be ruled by foreigners and they should never cease to have persecution and complaints. The implication of these descriptions would appear to be that the area under Uí Ercáin control was seen by the author of *Bethu Phátraic* as independent while that of Laois-controlled Moone was considered to be under foreign control. Given their location in western Mag Liffi, that foreign control is undoubtedly the Uí Dunlinge kingdom whose rulers are described as kings of western Mag Liffi in the ninth-century annals. Indeed, a possible context for the affiliation of Moone to Columba's cult may lie in the fact that Bran's wife Eithne, who was killed by Fínsnechta along with her husband in 795, was a daughter of Domnall of Mide, the man who, as noted in the beginning of this paper, was a fervent supporter of the Columban church of Durrow.

The association of the Uí Ercáin with Patrick suggests that while the author of *Bethu Phátraic* described them as independent, they are being portrayed implicitly as allies of the Uí Dunlinge dynasty of eastern Mag Liffi. They may also have been settled around Naas as well as their key site of Narraghmore.

The Uí Ercáin were a branch of the Fothairt, descended from Eochaid Fúath nAirt whom Cogitosus had identified in his life as the ancestor of Brigit.¹⁴ A gloss on a poem in the Book of Leinster identifies Cobthach, grandfather of the woman who rescued Patrick, as the king of the Fothairt of Naas while both the annals and the genealogies refer to a related group known as the Fothairt of eastern Mag Liffi.¹⁵ However such support as this dynasty offered to Patrick should be set against the fact that, between 855 and 885, the Uí Ercáin also provided the ruling abbess at Kildare. In reality, therefore, the ninth-century Uí Ercáin supported Brigit as well as Patrick.

In conclusion, there is evidence for three separate and warring dynasties of Uí Dunlinge who are traceable in our sources for late eighth and early ninth-century Kildare. One of these is represented by the family of Bran who controlled areas in south-west Kildare and neighbouring county Laois. This kingdom was known as western Mag Liffi. After Bran's death as king of Leinster in 795, his descendants also managed to retain it for much of the initial quarter of the ninth century but they appear to have been relatively weak kings. During this period, they supported at least one local man as bishop of all Leinster and the churches which they patronised may have been Killeshin and possibly (via Laois intermediaries) Moone.

The second family was closely associated with Kildare and the neighbouring hill-fort of Knockaulin. The strong man of this branch was Fínsnechta who became king of Leinster after murdering Bran in 795 and whose three brothers all ruled in Kildare for much of this period. He himself donated a shrine of gold and silver to Kildare and subsequently died there. He may have been responsible for appointing a bishop of Kildare who was entitled royal bishop of Leinster in 834 but it seems equally likely that this man, a northerner from County Down, was in fact appointed by the northern king of Tara who had a policy of dividing and weakening the authority of the Leinster dynasts.

The third family is described by the annalists as kings of Naas and eastern Mag Liffi. Their leader is one of the men appointed as joint-kings of Tara by the king of Tara in 805 but he only really emerges as a forceful king of Leinster in the mid 820s. In fact, it appears that the dynasty may only have imposed themselves as kings of eastern Mag Liffi under this leader. The author of *Bethu Phátraic* identifies the family as important supporters of Patrick, whose church was located in the immediate vicinity of their fort and who is said to have demanded instance obedience to his orders. In fact, however, no details supporting the reality of such a church are provided and the local church which is given prominence in *Bethu Phátraic* is linked to an independent branch of the Fothairt. The assembly place of that branch was Narraghmore and they are described as local judges with a specific responsibility for collecting renders owed to Patrick. In return for this service, they are said to have been given a share of the meat renders offered to the king of Leinster. Their portrayal in *Bethu Phátraic* should, however, be set against the fact that at roughly the same time, the Uí Ercáin were providing an abbess for Brigit's settlement.

Kildare, 820s-850

In 829, Muiredach of the Naas dynasty died as king of Leinster. Control initially passed back to western Mag Liffi in the person of Cellach, the man who attacked Kildare in 833. In 835, however, after Cellach had died, a new king of Tara, Niall Caille son of Áed, replicated his father's actions in 805 and appointed a new king of Leinster. This time, however, the northern dynast retracted the snub dealt Kildare by his father in 805 and placed Bran mac Faelán, Fínsnechta's grandson, on the throne. Bran also seems to have shared his kingship with an uncle for a son of Fínsnechta, Riacán, is recorded as one of the two kings of Leinster at his death in 837.¹⁶ At the same time, control of the assets of Brigit's church was also in the hands of the family for in 852, Airtrí mac Faeláin died as *airchinnech* of Kildare, a title which explicitly refers to his role as lay-administrator of the settlement. This man is either the son of the leader of Kildare who died in 804 or alternatively, a grandson of Fínsnechta himself and this would make him either the brother or the uncle of Bran as king of Leinster.¹⁷ Thus the close relationship between Kildare, Fínsnechta's family and the royal throne of Leinster which had been in operation at the beginning of the ninth century, appears to have been resumed in the mid 830s.

This might help to explain the account of an event which took place in 836. In that year, a wooden church in Kildare was seized from the congregation of Patrick led by Forannán, leader of Armagh. This attack was not undertaken by any of the Leinster dynasties but instead by Feidlimid mac Crimthann, king of Munster, who apparently seized the church 'with battle and weapons' and disrespectfully placed the churchmen in fetters.

As with the attack on Kildare by Cellach in 833, this appears to represent a political act. In this case the protagonist was a Munster king who wished to attack the combined might of the ecclesiastical and secular power represented by the family of Fínsnechta. As Munster king Feidlimid had form in this regard for he had done something similar in Clonmacnoise and Durrow in 833 when he had killed members of each community and burnt their lands. The context for those attacks appears to have been his on-going fight with the Clann Cholmáin kings whose territory he had attacked with a combined Leinster and Munster army in 831.

Of course, according to the annalist, the focus of Feidlimid's 836 attack was not Kildare churchmen or Fínsnechta's descendants per se but rather a prestigious leader of Armagh together with people who are recorded as 'Patrick's congregation'. This is, on the face of it, somewhat surprising for Feidlimid had long been in alliance with Armagh and had proclaimed the Law of Patrick in his own kingdom of Munster in 823.¹⁸ This was an era when Armagh leaders were particularly active in promoting themselves as heads of the Irish church throughout of the country. In 825, for example, the Law of Patrick was proclaimed in Connacht and in 831, the *mindu* or venerated objects of Patrick were present at the Uí Néill assembly site of Teltown. In 836, while Forannán was being treated disrespectfully in Kildare, another Armagh

leader, Diarmait, was in Connacht with the 'Patrick's law and *uesilla*'.¹⁰⁰ In 845, Forannán, who seems to have been somewhat unlucky, was captured by Vikings apparently in Munster 'with his *minda* (venerated objects) and his community' and was brought to Limerick but by the following year he had returned from the lands of Munster with the *minda* intact. Presumably the Vikings had simply held him as a hostage and were happy to release him once a payment had been made.

The purpose of such touring is generally understood to represent the ninth-century equivalent of the seventh-century arrangements described in *Liber Angeli*, where Patrick is said to have given up his ownership of the entire island of Ireland in return for acknowledgement of his status and the payment of a tax. We have noted that *Bethu Phátraic* describes in detail the wealth and prosperity of the Uí Ercáin as judges with responsibility for collecting Patrick's grain. Indeed, the ninth-century leaders of the Columban churches were also promoting their cult in this fashion for the annalists record the movement of *minda* of Colm Cille to Scotland in 829, their return in 831 and another journey in 849.

As leader of Armagh, therefore, Forannán may have been in Leinster collecting the tribute gathered by the Uí Ercáin or even to visit the rival Uí Dunlinge dynasty of Naas who were also portrayed in *Bethu Phátraic* as patrons of Patrick's cult. On the other hand, he may have had a more directly political aim in visiting Kildare, so closely tied to the contemporary king of Leinster. Leaders of Armagh were not immune from the political forces and the patronage which operated on the lives of lesser clerics and one might note, for example, the dishonouring of Eógan Manistrech in 831 by the Clann Cholmáin king of Tara, Conchobor mac Donnchada. On that occasion, Eógan lost his horses and his followers but matters seem to have been more amicable between the two men at some stage since Eógan is recorded at his death as *ab* of both Armagh and Clonard. The latter, as we have seen, was one of the chief churches of the Clann Cholmáin.

Forannán himself did not have a firm control of Armagh, Eógan's immediate successor was Diarmait, whom Forannán replaced as abbot in 835, the year before he was attacked at Kildare. Diarmait continued to play a prominent role, touring with Patrick's law and *vesilla* in Connacht while Forannán was in Leinster and replacing him altogether as leader in 839. Both men visited Munster with the law of Patrick in 842 although Forannán was captured there in 845 and Diarmait resumed control of the abbacy in 848. Both himself and Forannán died in 852 and both were commemorated as two heirs of Patrick. Diarmait, like his predecessor, Eógan may have enjoyed the patronage of the Clann Cholmáin for he was appointed under a Clann Cholmáin king of Tara and he was present with Patrick's congregation along with the leader of Clonard at a royal conference involving Clann Cholmáin and Ulaid kings which took place at Armagh in 851. Forannán, in contrast, was a man who, at the time of his visit to Kildare, had only just ousted Diarmait as Armagh leader.

Presumably, therefore, he wouldn't have enjoyed the same patronage and he may well have been in Kildare seeking political support from the Leinster king. Diarmait's tour of Connacht at the same time may have had similar aims.

Given his difficulties with Diarmait, as a possible beneficiary of Clann Cholmáin patronage, it is likely that Forannán came to Kildare conscious that the dynasty of western Mag Liffi, major rivals of Fínsnechtá's family, were also closely tied to the Clann Cholmáin. Bran's wife, as we have seen, was a daughter of Domnall of Mide and while Bran's father was king of Leinster in 756, Domnall had enjoyed the use of Leinster troops in his army. When Bran himself controlled Leinster, Domnall's son Donnchad was able to attack Munster with Leinster troops. In 770, moreover, Donnchad attacked Fínsnechtá's father, Cellach at Knockaulin while in 780, he also attacked the king of eastern Life.

Long-standing opposition to the Clann Cholmáin by the rulers of Brigit's settlement is indicated in a story from *Vita Prima* which tells how Brigit was visited by the wife of Conall mac Néill's son, asking the saint to bless her as she was childless. Initially, Brigit refused to do so because 'the sons of kings are serpents and sons of blood and sons of death apart from a few who were chosen by God.' In the end, the saint prophesied that 'there will be offspring but it will be offspring that sheds blood and will be an accursed stock and will not hold sway for many years'. The significance of these comments lies in the fact that Conall mac Néill was the ancestor of both the Clann Cholmáin and the Síol nÁedo Sláine. In the seventh and early eighth centuries, the Síol nÁedo Sláine had dominated the kingship of Tara and it was only in the reign of Domnall that the Clann Cholmáin acquired the title. In other words, in this episode, Brigit is described as condemning an ancestor of the Clann Cholmáin, eighth-century allies of the western Mag Liffi kingdom. This political perspective tallies with another story in the *Vita Prima* when Saint Brigit agreed to grant perpetual victory to a Leinster king who had a perennial feud with the Uí Néill.¹⁰¹ In short, Forannán may have had good reason to believe that the leadership of Kildare would support him in a conflict with a rival candidate for leadership of Armagh who seems to have enjoyed Clann Cholmáin patronage.

Cordial relations between Patrick and Brigit are a noteworthy feature of both *Bethu Brigte* and *Vita Prima*. In both texts, for example, Brigit is said to have chosen to visit Patrick in Mag mBreg in county Meath in order that he would bless her. While there, she miraculously saved a member of Patrick's household from being falsely accused of debauching a nun although Brigit carefully acknowledged the authority of Patrick before doing so.¹⁰² In the *Vita Prima* (which is a much longer text than the fragmentary *Bethu Brigte*), Brigit and Patrick were both offered hospitality by St Lassar (although Brigit provided the food). Brigit also accompanied Patrick to the north of Ireland and on that trip Patrick interpreted Brigit's dream for her while Brigit, under Patrick's instructions, created a shroud for him and performed various miracles.¹⁰³ It would appear that the proponents of Brigit's cult were happy to endorse the

pre-eminence of Patrick although it is noteworthy that these instances of Brigit's acknowledgement of Patrick's authority all take place outside Leinster. Within the Leinster boundaries, in contrast, no mention is made of Patrick and Brigit, at least implicitly, reigns unchallenged.

It is in this context that one might consider the career of Orthanach, bishop of Kildare who died in 840. We do not know what his background was but he has been identified with the poet Orthanach Ua Caelláma¹⁰ and he is credited with authorship of three surviving poems: *Slán seis a Brigit co mbúaid*, *Masú de chlaind Ehdach airid* and *A chóicid chéim Chairpri chruaid*. The first of these is a lengthy discussion of the glories of the ancient royal settlement on Knockaulin, now abandoned, its warriors, bards, and noble women, and the floods of wine, silver and gold necklets from France which used to characterise its banqueting halls. The beginning of the poem is addressed to Brigit who is addressed as the female lord accompanied by companies of hosts and it is then stated that while she now controls Mag Liffi, others had controlled the land before her. The final two verses are once again addressed to Brigit, whose fame surpasses that of the kings: she has everlasting lordship with the king apart from the land in which her cemetery exists. It is difficult to understand precisely what the exception of Brigit's cemetery signifies but the other elements in the description would appear to accord with the political situation of the later 830s when both the king of Leinster and the men in charge of the material assets of Brigit's church belonged to Fínsnechta's family.¹¹ Orthanach's choice of subject matter, in fact, suggests that he was closely tied to the current ruling family who dominated both Kildare and the kingship of Leinster and he was probably the subject of their patronage.

The two other poems by the Kildare bishop also deal with the glories of the ancestral Leinster kings and the battles which they won¹² but in the poem *Masú de chlaind Ehdach airid* Orthanach also makes a brief reference to the specific interests of Kildare vis à vis Armagh. He sums up a list of the prehistoric kings of Leinster with a verse indicating that the lords of Leinster had fallen asleep and their forts were waste, reiterating as a generality the statement made in the first poem, that Knockaulin lay empty. In this poem, however, he contrasts this with the situation of the saints: *Pátraic is bÉirind hi fós / Brigit óas bÉirind andess*. Patrick over Ireland in his own part, Brigit over Ireland in the south.¹³

This is not a reiteration of the provisions of the seventh-century *Liber Angeli* which states that Patrick retained rulership to the east and west of Brigit's province. On the contrary, Orthanach appears to be claiming the whole of the southern half of Ireland in a manner reminiscent of Cogitosus's seventh-century statements that Kildare's area of jurisdiction stretched from sea to sea. Those claims should be seen against the backdrop of Brigit's subordination to Patrick in the contemporary hagiography produced by Kildare and the presence of Forannán of Armagh at Kildare in 836. It is suggested here that Forannán was not merely touring to promote the cult of Patrick but was actively seeking the

help of Fínsnechta's dynasty in his on-going rivalry with a fellow Armagh cleric who may have enjoyed the patronage of the Clann Cholmáin kings. The leadership of Kildare, whose main rivals for the throne of Leinster, was the dynasty of western Mag Liffi were long-standing allies of Clann Cholmáin, was able to profit from this situation to promote the independence of Kildare. They may have been prepared to support Forannán as abbot and leader of a cult which claimed overlordship over the Irish church but in their own kingdom of Leinster, it was Brigit who was to enjoy everlasting lordship.

Conclusions

In the saga account of the battle of Allen of 722 quoted at the beginning of this paper, Brigit is identified as the patron saint of the whole of Leinster. The purpose of this paper has been to challenge the scholarly assumption that such unanimous support was, in fact, ever afforded Kildare. No one dynasty dominated the kingship of Leinster in the early middle ages and this had an impact on the various churches which were patronised by the ruling families. Allied to the internal politics of the south-east, there were also the ambitions of Armagh which sought to persuade local dynasties to support the cult of Patrick.

In the seventh century, Cogitosus made extravagant claims stating that the archbishop of Kildare was pre-eminent over other Irish bishops. He was able to do so because his church was currently being supported by the local dynasty who ruled Mag Liffi, the descendants of Dunlang or the Uí Dunlinge. Churches outside Mag Liffi, to the west in Ossory and to the east, at Dunmurraghill also appear to have been supported by their local kings for they held relics of the martyrs of the type given by powerful churchmen to kings in the seventh century. There is no conclusive evidence to prove it but both these kingdoms may have provided rivals to challenge the Uí Dunlinge as kings of Leinster. It is certain, however, that their churches were not supporters of Brigit's cult but rather were affiliated to Patrick. The active search for political patrons by Armagh in this period is illustrated by the fact that, as soon as Áed of Slerry transferred the allegiance of his Uí Bairrche churches in Mag Liffi to the northern saint, Patrician propagandists began to claim that these had been patronised by the founders of the Uí Dunlinge dynasty, in direct opposition to Kildare.

Sources for early Leinster history increase substantially in the later eighth and ninth century. By that period, the Uí Dunlinge control of Mag Liffi has broken into three separate and warring kingdoms. Of these three, one provides clear evidence for patronage of Brigit's settlement in Kildare, providing a number of the leaders of Brigit's church, building gold and silver shrines for its use and burying its leaders within the church precincts. These kings appear to have lived in the immediate vicinity of the church for they are associated either with Kildare itself or with Knockaulin.

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In contrast, their strongest rivals for control of the kingdom of Leinster appear to have had no interest in patronising Kildare. This family ruled the area known as western Mag Liffi, centred in the south of the modern country of Kildare and the neighbouring area of eastern Laois. Their favoured churches are not explicitly identified in our sources but may have included Killeshin, a few miles to the east of Sleaty and Moone. The two latter churches are implicitly identified as being under the ninth-century overlordship of western Mag Liffi while Killeshin was patronised by their kings in the tenth century. Indeed, it is possible that the affiliation of Moone to the cult of Colm Cille may even be due to the influence of the royal queen whose Clann Cholmáin father is known to have been a strong supporter of the Columbans in his own kingdom.

A third branch of the Uí Dunlinge was a kingdom of eastern Mag Liffi, associated with the fort of Naas although it appears that they may only have established their control over this area as late as the early ninth century. Propagandists for Armagh state that these new rulers favoured Patrick although no corroboratory evidence supporting this claim exists. It is clear, however, that their kingdom included the church of Killashee which had been affiliated to Patrick's cult in the seventh century and it may be that the propagandists were writing with the aim of encouraging possible patronage rather than that such patronage had already been offered to them. The relative weakness of the propagandists' position, however, is illustrated by the fact that the longest description of Patrick's current supporters in *Bethu Phádraic* is attached to the independent Fothairt group known as the Uí Ercáin. This group, while identified as judges, also appear to have acted as stewards collecting agrarian renders for Armagh although their relative independence is shown by the fact that they were also prepared to patronise Kildare, supplying the latter church with a mid ninth-century abbess.

Whatever the reality behind the support of the Naas dynasty for Patrick's cult, the fact that they did not control the kingdom of Leinster in the 830s meant that the leaders of Armagh were primarily interested in attracting the patronage of those that did. The kings who enjoyed the title of 'king of the Laigin' (or Leinstermen) in this period were those who were most closely tied to Brigit's settlement. It was they who provided hospitality for an Armagh leader who, together with Patrick's congregation, visited the site in 836. He may simply have been seeking adherence to Patrick's claims to over-lordship of the Irish church, a position which, judging by texts produced by Brigit's supporters, Kildare may well have been prepared to endorse. It seems likely, however, that he was also seeking political support against his enemies in Armagh. Since those enemies were part of a network of allies which included the dynasty of western Mag Liffi, the Kildare rulers were probably happy to oblige. At the same time, however, in the poems written by the resident bishop of Kildare, they made it clear that Patrick might dominate *i fos* but that in their eyes, Brigit was the sole patron of the south.

It is often said that early Ireland was a violent and blood-thirsty place where unending warfare produced a constant kaleidoscope of short-lived kings. Early

Irish churchmen, in contrast, are credited with more peaceful pursuits, pursuing scholarship and religious values and building up the economic power of their settlements. Both images are stereotypes and they leave out of consideration a major force which operated throughout Irish history, the importance of political alliances and patronage. Kings needed allies, both amongst other kings but also amongst the ecclesiastics who could supply them with troops and taxes as well as prayers. Similarly, the career of many churchmen could depend on the support of their royal patrons and their ability to garner the donations which allowed craftsmen to create beautiful shrines of gold and silver or magnificently carved high crosses. Our understanding of early Irish history can only be enhanced by examining the characters depicted in our sources, not merely as individuals but also as members of kin-groups, rooted in the Irish landscape, whose enmities and alliances provide an essential backdrop to events. Unanimity has never been a characteristic of Irish history and while Brigit's settlement at Kildare may have been the most prestigious of the churches in Mag Liffi, it was never without potential rivals for that position.

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6. *St. Margaret goes seaward in* B. 837, 850; AFM 818. See also AFM 965 where Mide is defined as *á nÍ Sionnain na Bealach uDúin*.
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8. C. Swift, 'Dating Irish grave-slabs: the evidence of the annals' in C. Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North* (Bellast, 1995), pp. 24-8.
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10. In 859, Clonard was the scene of negotiations between Míal-Sechnaill, the important Ossory king and Norse ally Cerball mac Dúnlínge, and the king of Munster. This meeting was also attended by Fethgna, successor of St Patrick at Armagh and Suairlech as head of Clonard. See also Suairlech's death notice in 870 where he was identified as bishop, ascetic and *ab* of Clonard as well as best doctor of religion in all Ireland.
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71. AU 834, 835.
72. See AFM under the years 821 (death of Muiredach m. Cellaigh, *ab Cella Derna*) and 822 (death of Muiredach m. Cellaigh, *ab Cellaibh*). For discussion of this man and his brothers, see F.J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), p. 160; D. O'Corrain, 'Annals of the Four Masters 823-4' in *Peritia* 13 (1999), p. 104; C. Echlingham, 'Kildare before the Normans: an episcopal and conventual see' in *K.A.S.J.*, 19, 1 (2000-1), pp. 10-11. Eilim O'Brien, 'The hagiography of Leinster', 455 suggests that the Muinenn, abbess of Kildare who died in 831, was the sister of these men but the basis for his identification is not given.
73. AU 800.
74. This dynasty is often referred to in the secondary literature as the Uí Fhionnghada, named after Fionnecra's grandfather, Dunchad, but this nomenclature is not used in eighth or ninth-century sources.
75. AU 795; R.L. Best *et al.*, *The Book of Leinster*, I, p. 182; Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedélicum*, p. 186.
76. Brian's descendants are known as the Uí Muiredaig after his father, Muiredach, who died in 770 and the poem is addressed to an otherwise unknown Aed mac Thormata, descendant of Muiredach. See W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (Cambridge, 1903), ii p. 294.
77. W. Stokes (ed), *Féile Óenguso Cú De* (London, 1905), p. 25.
78. For arguments that there may have been royal residences on ecclesiastical sites from the seventh century, see R. Graham, 'Early medieval Ireland: settlement as an indicator of economic and social transformation c.500-1100' in R. Graham and L.L. Proulx (eds), *An historical geography of Ireland* (London, 1993), pp. 23, 26-36.
79. Connolly, *Vita Prima*, pp. 40-4, 45; O'Brien, *Corpus*, p. 20; O'LeAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, p. 47.
80. O'LeAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, pp. 2, 5.
81. A.P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster: towards an historical geography of early Irish civilisation, AD 500-1600* (Dublin, 1982), fromispiece, p. 68; O'Brien, *Corpus*, p. 58.
82. AU 776; O'Brien, *Corpus*, pp. 59, 83; Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, I, p. 187.
83. O'Brien, *Corpus*, pp. 28, 34; Echlingham, *Church organisation*, p. 182.
84. AU 917, AFM 915; E. Bhreathnach, 'Killesnoo - an Irish monastery survived' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 35-7.
85. AU 808.
86. Dobbs, 'Descendants of Ir', p. 76; O'Brien, *Corpus*, pp. 324, 326; Echlingham, 'Kildare', p. 10.
87. Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, I, 193; AU 801, 819.
88. This progenitor was Faclán, son of Muirchad who died in 738. From him, the secondary literature often refer to this dynasty as the Uí Facláin. Again, however, this title does not appear in the primary sources of the eighth and ninth centuries.
89. AU 863, 917; Connolly, *Vita Prima*, p. 43.
90. *Míchlronc. Bethu Phádraic*, p. 112.
91. Bidel, *Patriarcal acts*, pp. 76, 126-8, 163.
92. Connolly, *Vita Prima*, p. 43.
93. *Míchlronc. Bethu Phádraic*, p. 116.
94. Connolly & Picard, 'Cognitiois', p. 13; O'Brien, *Corpus*, p. 83; Echlingham, 'Kildare', pp. 17-18.
95. O'Brien *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, I, 223; AFM 897.
96. AU 885; Echlingham, 'Kildare', pp. 17-19.
97. AFM 837, AU 847.
98. O'Brien, *Corpus*, p. 14; Byrne, *Irish Kings*, p. 289.
99. AU 823.
100. In Classical Latin this word could mean either standards, banners or, by extension, troops while in late antique Latin it could be used of a cross. The translators of the Annals of Ulster opt to translate it by the English word 'insignia'.
101. Connolly, *Vita Prima*, pp. 31, 41.
102. O'LeAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, pp. 90-1; Connolly, *Vita Prima*, pp. 22-3.
103. Connolly, *Vita Prima*, pp. 24, 28-31.
104. Echlingham, 'Kildare', 11; Byrne, *Irish Kings*, p. 156.
105. K. Mevra, *Hail Brigit: an old Irish poem on the Hill of Killybeggs* (Killybeggs and Dublin, 1912), pp. 12-13, 18-19.
106. K. Meyer, 'Missa de Brigit Leobach' and 'in Zetschrift für celtische Philologie' 9 (1917), pp. 107-13; M.C. Daly, 'A chonrad chionn Chierpas clonaid in Eipe' 10 (1961-3), pp. 177-97.
107. Here I follow the translation of Echlingham, 'Kildare', who also points out (fn. 22) that *h* literally means 'here' or 'at home'. It may be mistaken to attach too much significance to O'LeAodha's choice of this word, however, since it seems in part determined by the need to rhyme with *andae*.