

## Chivalry, Saracens and the *chansons de geste* of Brian Boru

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For a generation of early Irish historians, the concept of commemoration has long been bound up with a lengthy and somewhat bilious article by D.A. Binchy, summing up his reactions to the celebrations of St Patrick in 1961.<sup>1</sup> The strength of that work is almost entirely negative: Binchy cleared away a considerable amount of historiographical brushwood by exposing the extent to which wishful thinking, later legends and a strong element of ‘group-think’ had filled in the voids in our fifth-century Irish evidence. His own interpretative efforts were perhaps rather less convincing and have not stood the test of time in the same way, but his forceful articulation of the principle of using contemporary rather than retrospective evidence still defines the field of Patrician studies today.

Brian Boru is perhaps the only other medieval Irish figure who plays a similar role to Patrick as an icon of modern Irish identity and almost every school child in the Republic will, at some stage, have a history lesson on the battle of Clontarf. A study of contemporary school textbooks, however, indicates the extent to which the story, as depicted there, remains rooted in the nationalist and Catholic traditions of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century but this is probably a reflection of the relative lack of attention which modern historians have paid to Brian until recently. That situation has now changed and, hopefully, changed utterly. The important monographs by Benjamin Hudson, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Clare Downham and Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail as well as articles by scholars such as the late Ailbhe MacShamhráin, Denis Casey and Lenore Fischer,<sup>2</sup> all preceded the actual commemorative year

1 D.A. Binchy, ‘Patrick and his biographers: ancient and modern’, *Studia Hibernica*, 2 (1962), 7–173. 2 Benjamin Hudson, *Viking pirates and Christian princes: dynasty, religion and empire in the North Atlantic* (Oxford, 2005); Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland’s greatest king?* (Stroud, 2006); Clare Downham, *Viking kings of Britain and Ireland: the dynasty of Ivarr to AD1014* (Edinburgh, 2007); Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, *Cath Cluana Tarbh. The battle of Clontarf*, Irish Texts Society (London, 2011); Ailbhe MacShamhráin, ‘The battle of Glenn Máma, Dublin’ in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin II* (Dublin, 2000), pp 53–64; idem, ‘Brian Bóruma, Armagh, and the high-kingship’, *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, 20:2 (2005), 1–21; Denis Casey, ‘Historical and literary representations of Brian Boru’s burial in Armagh’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 50 (2010), 29–44; idem, ‘A reconsideration of the authorship and transmission of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*’, *PRIA*, 113 C (2011), 139–69; Lenore Fischer, ‘Two poets and the legend of Brian Bórainmhe’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 49

but these have now been supplemented by two books devoted specifically to the battle and its context: Seán Duffy's *Brian Boru and the battle of Clontarf* published by Gill and MacMillan and Darren McGettigan's *The battle of Clontarf – Good Friday 1014* published by Four Courts Press. A series of web resources has been created by TCD, UCD and Mary Immaculate College; an international conference was held, the National Museum of Ireland mounted a very successful exhibition, the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent* both published newspaper inserts on the battle, the Royal Irish Academy held a lecture series and TG4 produced an excellent two-part documentary. Local historians in Killaloe, Clontarf, Cashel, Armagh and elsewhere have all explored at considerable length the topic of Brian's reign and its importance in Ireland's history. Now, as the country gears up for what politicians, if not medievalists, feel are still more crucial celebrations, it is clear that the 2014 commemorative year opened up many questions for debate and that many new studies can be expected in the years ahead. Like Daniel Binchy in 1962, the lived experience of 2014 has encouraged scholars to ponder, not just the recent work on the subject but also the historiographical traditions and importance of the field as a whole.

One interesting aspect of 2014 was the relative lack of curiosity displayed about the man who did more than any other to elevate the battle of Clontarf in our modern consciousness.<sup>3</sup> That is James Henthorn Todd, editor and translator of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, or the 'War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill', the lengthy and epic account of Brian's struggles with foreign invaders and Irish enemies, culminating with the detailed narrative of the battle itself.<sup>4</sup> Todd concluded his long introduction to the edition by stating that his object was to identify every place mentioned in the work and to give the genealogies of the Irish and Scandinavian leaders involved, and continued:

The Editor cannot but regret that this tract, so full of the feelings of clanship, and of the consequent partisanship of the time, disfigured also by considerable interpolations and by a bombastic style in the worst taste, should have been selected as the first specimen of an Irish Chronicle presented to the public under the sanction of the Master of the Rolls. His own wish and recommendation to His Honor was, that the purely historical chronicles, such as the Annals of Tighernach, the Annals of Ulster or the Annals of Loch Cé should have been first

(2009), 91–109; *eadem*, 'How Dublin remembered the battle of Clontarf' in Seán Duffy, *Medieval Dublin XIII* (Dublin, 2013), pp 70–80. <sup>3</sup> See however, Patricia McKee Hanna, "A lively and precise intellect": James Henthorn Todd, his family, and sane antiquarians in Ireland and Scotland (1827–1869)' in Paddy Lyons, John Miller and Willy Maley (eds), *Romantic Ireland from Tone to Gonne: fresh perspectives on nineteenth-century Ireland* (Newcastle, 2013), pp 142–60. <sup>4</sup> J.H. Todd (ed. and trans.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: the war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (London, 1867) [hereafter CGG].

undertaken ... Until these and other original sources of history are made accessible, it is vain to expect any sober or trustworthy history of Ireland; the old romantic notions of a golden age, so attractive to some minds, must continue to prevail; and there will still be firm believers in ‘the glories of Brian the brave,’ the lady who walked through Ireland unmolested in her gold and jewels, and the chivalrous feats of Finn Mac Cumhaill and his Fenians.<sup>5</sup>

Todd was an avowed member of what Damien Murray has termed the ‘Ascendency’ group of nineteenth-century Irish historians and antiquarians based in Dublin and he followed the above statement by lauding the work of the Ordnance Survey Topographical Department, the lynch-pin of the ‘Ascendency’ group, in transforming attitudes to early Irish history.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Todd singles out George Petrie, John O’Donovan and Eugene O’Curry for their involvement in his edition:

To Petrie, and to the two distinguished men just named – all three now alas lost to us – the Editor is deeply indebted for invaluable assistance in translating and editing the present work. By Mr O’Curry the original MSS. were transcribed for collation, and a rough translation of the text prepared. From these transcripts the Editor carefully collected the various readings, which will be found in the notes under the text; and corrected the translations to the best of his judgment, having in every instance the opinion and advice of Dr O’Donovan and Mr O’Curry upon all difficulties. The whole text of the work, to p. 217, with the translation, was in this way gone over and printed before those great masters of the ancient language and history of Ireland were called to their everlasting rest. From Dr O’Donovan especially the Editor received a large amount of information, communicated in the shape of notes upon the narrative. From these notes invaluable aid was derived in the identification of the topographical names, and in the Irish genealogical researches.<sup>7</sup>

This series of remarks indicate that, for Todd, the primary importance of his text lay in its historical information. He believed the *Cogadh* was a primary source for the period: ‘The author mentions no event later than the battle of Clontarf, AD1014, and was probably a contemporary and follower, as he certainly was a strong partisan, of King Brian Borumha, who fell in that battle.’<sup>8</sup> He reiterated this view subsequently: ‘its author was either himself an eye-witness of the battle of Clontarf, or else compiled his narrative from the testimony of eye-witnesses.’<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> CGG, cci–ccii. <sup>6</sup> Damien Murray, *Romanticism, nationalism and Irish antiquarian societies, 1840–1880* (Maynooth, 2000). <sup>7</sup> CGG, pp cciii–cciv. <sup>8</sup> CGG, p. xii. <sup>9</sup> Todd *Cogadh*, p. xxv.

This editorial attitude continues to influence modern political historians. In his book, Seán Duffy wrote, for example:

It is often said that the *Cogadh* was written a century or more after the great battle ... The reason this matters is that there were still veterans of Clontarf alive fifty years after the battle, and there were yet more people alive who had lived through the cataclysmic years of Brian's high-kingship; and a text written by someone who had information supplied by such people is something of enormous value. Of course it must be taken with a pinch of salt, where its author forgets he is a historian and becomes a political propagandist (or we forget that he is primarily the latter and not a historian in the modern sense).<sup>10</sup>

Political propaganda, rather than contemporary accuracy, has been the main focus provided by those belonging to what one might term the 'Cork' school of analysis of the *Cogadh* text. They follow the lead given by Donnchadh Ó Corráin's brief synopsis in 1972: 'the heroic biography of Brian Bórama written in the twelfth century in support of the pretensions of his descendants'.<sup>11</sup> Anthony Candon, for example, has described the work as 'a tract of political propaganda ... very much a paradigm for the career of the greatest of Brian's descendant, Muirchertach mac Tairdelbaig meic Taidc meic Brian'.<sup>12</sup> Máire Ní Mhaonaigh is characteristically careful in her summation but is clearly influenced by the same paradigm: 'It is as a work of propaganda that the *Cogadh* must be read and as a tract written about a hundred years after the events it purports to describe. Its author drew on existing annals, including local records not preserved elsewhere: thus authentic information forms part of its core'.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent investigation of the *Cogadh* as propaganda has been by Denis Casey who largely agrees with the scholarly consensus but has suggested that at least one recension of the text may have been put together by supporters of Donnchad mac Briain, rather than the descendants of his half-brother Tadc and that the manuscript tradition, as it survives, has been reworked to favour the former's descendants.<sup>14</sup> A third alternative to categorizing the *Cogadh* was put forward as long ago as 1938 by the Limerick historian Father John Ryan: for him it was 'not a simple record of events but a romantic tale in which heroes shine and villains play their sinister parts and dramatic events are invented or exaggerated'.<sup>15</sup> Lenore Fischer, whose work to date has concentrated on the later Brian material, has also highlighted the narrative choices

<sup>10</sup> Seán Duffy, *Brian Boru and the battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2013), p. 198. <sup>11</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 78. <sup>12</sup> Anthony Candon, 'Muirchertach Ua Briain, politics and naval activity in the Irish Sea' in Gearóid Mac Niocaill and Patrick Wallace (eds), *Keimelia: studies in medieval archaeology and history in memory of Tom Delaney* (Galway, 1989), p. 397. <sup>13</sup> Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru*, p. 13. <sup>14</sup> Casey 'A reconsideration', 157–8. <sup>15</sup> John Ryan, 'The battle of Clontarf', *JRSAL*, 68

made by subsequent authors in their approach to accounts of both Brian's reign and the battle of Clontarf. However, there has been no real following of Ryan's lead in commenting on the romantic aspects of the *Cogadh* itself. This is somewhat surprising when one considers its context in Irish literary tradition for the *Cogadh* is only one amongst a number of Middle Irish tales of military adventures and set-piece battles. The most famous of these is undoubtedly the Book of Leinster recension of *Táin Bó Cúailgne* but one might also consider *Cath Ruis na Ríg* ('The battle of Ros na Ríg'), *Cath Bóinde* ('Battle of Boyne') and *Cath Muige Tuired* (Battle of Moytirra).<sup>16</sup> In fact, in the Middle Irish tale lists from the Book of Leinster, there are sixteen different saga titles listed, beginning with the classificatory term *Cath* or battle. (It should be noted, however, that *Cogadh* is not one of the terms used in these classifications.) There are also Irish translations and adaptations of international tales such as *In Cath Catharda* ('The civil war (of the Romans)') which are similarly devoted to set-piece battles. Scholars of Old Irish language and literature have been viewing aspects of the *Cogadh* within this paradigm for some time but this has yet to impact dramatically on our historical analyses.<sup>17</sup>

What Todd termed 'clanship' and what today is perhaps more widely known by terms such as 'dynastic chronicling' is also known in a Middle Irish context, most notably in the *Fragmentary annals of Ireland*. The editor of that text describes the relevant entries as 'elaborate pseudo-historical narratives resembling one another in style, theme and moral stance'.<sup>18</sup> She expands on this in her description of what she terms the Osraige Chronicle:

Some of the same narrative patterns occur in both the earlier and the later chronicle stories in FA and also in the stories in the Egerton 1782 *Mionnmála* that are not found in the existing Fragmentary Annals. In accounts of slaying, for instance, unjust or impious kings are cut down by accounts of churls; hated rivals are tricked into coming without bodyguards to meetings where they are murdered; the leaders of enemy tribes are invited to conferences where they are ambushed and slain. Battles seem inevitably to be prefaced by noble and pious speeches by the righteous and by overconfident or impious declarations by the enemy leaders. Women play prominent and decisive roles in many of the stories.<sup>19</sup>

(1938), 1–50, at p. 3. <sup>16</sup> Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailgne from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1970); Edmund Hogan, *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Boinn*, Todd Lecture Series 4 (Dublin, 1892); Joseph O'Neill, 'Cath Bóinde', *Ériu*, 2 (1905), 173–85; Elizabeth Grey, *Cath Maige Tuired: the second battle of Mag Tuired*, Irish Texts Society 52 (Kildare, 1982). <sup>17</sup> Erich Poppe (ed.), *The Irish Aeneid: The classical epic from an Irish perspective*, Irish Texts Society, Subsidiary Series, 3 (London, 1995); Brent Miles, *Heroic saga and classical saga in medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 142. <sup>18</sup> *FAI*, p. xix. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

This last comment seems particularly relevant when evaluating the depiction of Queen Gormlaith in the *Cogadh*. The *Cogadh* credits the Leinster woman with instigating the battle of Clontarf by provoking her brother into rebellion against Brian through a speech designed to elevate his sense of pride in his own lineage:

*ro bai ica cursacad, ocus ic a gresacht a brathar, daig ba holc le morgrani ocus dairisini ocus docra do denum do neoch, ocus in ní nar faematar a athair na senathair, do fémad dó, ocus asbert go sirfead a mac ara mhac in ni cetna.<sup>20</sup>*

Todd's translation lays stress on the political overtones of her speech:

[The queen] began to reproach and incite her brother because she thought it ill that he should yield service and vassalage, and suffer oppression from anyone or yield that which his father or grandfather never yielded; and she said that his [Brian's] son would require the same thing from his son.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the *Dictionary of the Irish language*, which postdates the edition of the *Cogadh* by over a hundred years, allows for a translation of the key terms in far more emotive terms than the technical and legal connotations of Todd's 'service and vassalage'. We could thus translate the relevant passage as follows:

She was chastising her brother and goading him for she thought that it was evil, a loathsome serfdom, that he should suffer oppression from anyone or that he should yield to him [Brian] that which his father or his grandfather had not yielded and she said his [Brian's] son would demand the same thing from his [own] son.

*Dairsine* or serfdom (Todd's 'vassalage') is an abstract noun describing the state of being *doir* or unfree and was something which could be suffered by both individual clients and by collective entities.<sup>22</sup> In the *Cogadh*, it can be contrasted with the state of *sairdechta* or *sairide*, a state of collective freedom linked to major assembly sites at both Cashel and Tara. The Dál Cais were said to be responsible for guarding this crucial aspect of Munster's independence:

*Ciniud sin donach dlegar cis no cain no tobach no geill no ediri no irradas, deneouch isin domun riamh, in trath nach biad Eriu accufein, acht atitiu nama ocus cosc fogla ocus socraidi sluaig fri cosnum sairdachta Caisil fri Leith Cuinn.<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>20</sup> CGG, p. 142, §LXXXI. <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143. <sup>22</sup> Marilyn Gerriets, 'Economy and society: clientship according to the early Irish laws', *Cambridge [Cambrian] Medieval Celtic Studies*, 6 (Winter, 1983), 43–61. <sup>23</sup> CGG, pp 54–5, §XLI.

The *ciniud* here is Dál Cais whom Todd characterized as a tribe in his translation:

This is a tribe from whom it was never lawful to levy rent or tribute or pledge or hostage or fostership fee by any one in the world ever so long as Ireland was not theirs but they were bound to give recognition and to check aggression and supply numerous forces to maintain the *sairdechta* of Cashel against Leth Cuinn.

In his 1935 book, *Early Irish law and institutions*, Eoin MacNeill famously objected to the use by Orpen and Joyce of the word tribe to describe the Irish political unit of the *túath*.<sup>24</sup> His call for precise definitions of ‘sept’ and ‘clan’ has yet to be answered and it is therefore not surprising that no debate has taken place as to the precise connotations of the *ciniud* in Irish political nomenclature.<sup>25</sup> The *Dictionary of the Irish language* defines the word as ‘the state of being born in’ and ‘usually in concrete meaning, offspring, children descendants as well as the older tribe, race’.<sup>26</sup> (The English translations in the *Dictionary* are often drawn from pre-existing editions of texts rather than being new formulations by the compilers.) The Scots Gaelic equivalent, *cinneadh*, is defined in *Dwelly’s Gaelic dictionary* as being ‘clan, tribe, surname, relations, kin, kindred’, a *fear-cinnidh* being translated as ‘clansman’.<sup>27</sup> Viewing Dál Cais as an early medieval equivalent of a Scottish Highland ‘clan’ rather than a Victorian ‘tribe’ reiterates Todd’s own emphasis on ‘clanship’ as a key feature of the *Cogadh*, but the problems involved in translating *ciniud* accurately are worth noting as a marker of the work that has still to be done in accurately defining Irish political structures at the end of the first millennium.

Alternative translations of the above quotation would also render *aititu nama* as ‘recognition of enemies’ and *cosc fogla* as ‘punishing plundering’, options which add increased emphasis to the military role played by Dál Cais in defending the *sairdachta* of Cashel. Involvement in such duties and a similar concern with freedom recurs in the *Cogadh*’s account of the collective decision of Dál Cais to make war with enemies from overseas:

*arbertadar uli imorro, eter sen ocus oc, ba fearr leo bas ocus éc ocus aeded is imchim do agbail iccosnum sairi anatar da ocus a ceneoil, no fodmachtain forrana ocus formait allmarach no crich no a ferand do dilsegud doib*

Then they all answered, both old and young, that they preferred meeting death and destruction and annihilation and violence in defending the freedom (*saire*) of their patrimony (*anatar da*) and of their race (*cenél*)

<sup>24</sup> Eoin MacNeill, *Early Irish law and institutions* (London, 1935), p. 8. <sup>25</sup> The most detailed study available (but one which focusses on earlier evidence and does not analyse the terms sept or *ciniud*) is Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford, 1993). <sup>26</sup> *Dictionary of the Irish language*, RIA (Dublin), C 194.51. <sup>27</sup> *Faclair Gaidhlig gu Bearla le Dealbhan: Dwelly’s Illustrated Gaelic to English dictionary* Ninth Edition (Glasgow,

rather than submit to the tyranny and oppression of the pirates nor abandon their country and their lands to them.<sup>28</sup>

Todd chose to translate *cenél* as race but, today, historians would prefer kindred or dynasty, thus changing the focus from the national to the particular. This fits with the word *crích* which means both territory and boundary and is used of smaller units than the island as a whole. Thus, while Todd apparently viewed this noble resolution as a determination to defend Ireland in its entirety, it can be argued that the original *Cogadh* authors were more concerned, in this particular passage, with the particular defence of the Dál Cais homelands and the area of north Munster now known as Thomond.

It is certain that, in the *Cogadh*, the *sairdacht* of Cashel is viewed as something entirely separate from the *sairdacht* of Tara, which is depicted as the sole concern of the northerners of Leth Cuinn. In a description which seems to represent chivalry at its most quixotic, Brian is said to have mounted a great expedition to Tara from Leth Moga or southern Ireland, sending messengers to Máel Sechnaill, demanding hostages or battle. Máel Sechnaill, however, requested a *cairde* (treaty) for a month to bring together the men of Leth Cuinn in a *comthinoil* (joint assembly) and that was granted *can crech can inred, can airgni, gan fogail can forloscud* ('without plunder or ravage, without destruction or trespass or burning') while Brian remained peaceably encamped in the locality, calmly watching Máel Sechnaill's efforts to build a coalition of his enemies. Máel Sechnaill sent an *ollam Ulad* – a master-poet of the Ulaid – to the kings of Ailech, Ulaid and Connacht requesting them to come and fight for the *sairdacht Temrach* – the freedom of Tara. He threatened that if they did not join with him, he would submit and give hostages to Brian since *nir ba nairi dosom can Temraig da cosnum oldas do clannaib Neill ocus do saerclannaib Lethi Cuind archena* ('it was not more disgraceful for him than it was for the families of Niall and for the free families of Leth Cuinn not to fight for Tara').<sup>29</sup> Áed Ua Neill gave his request short shrift:

*In tan bai Temair accosom .i. ic Cenel Eogain, ra cosainset a shairi ocus inti  
ica miad da cosnad a sairi, ocus asbert nach tibred a anmain I cend catha co  
lamaib Dalcais do cosnam rigi do neoch ele'*

When they, namely the Cenél nEogain, had Tara, they defended its freedom and whoever possesses it, let him defend its freedom' and he said 'that he would not risk his life in battle against Dál Cais, in defence of sovereignty (*rige*) for any other man.'<sup>30</sup>

1977) p. 195. <sup>28</sup> CGG, pp 68–9, §XLVIII. <sup>29</sup> CGG, p. 120, §LXXII (this is my translation rather than Todd's which reads: 'it was not more disgraceful for him not to contend for the freedom of Temhair than it was for the Clann Neill and all the other clans of Leth Cuinn as well.'). <sup>30</sup> CGG, pp 126–7, §LXXIV.



Despite this refusal, Áed did however agree to bring the Cenél nEógain into assembly and ask them to make a collective decision, pointing out to them that Máel Sechnaill had followed the poet to Áed's house and was prepared to offer the Ailech king hostages if he would *cosain Temhraig duit féin* ('defend Tara yourself'). This, so the *Cogadh* authors indicate in their subsequent paraphrase, was seen as offering the Cenél nEógain *flaithemnas* (sovereignty).<sup>31</sup> However their assembly was unconvinced of the value of this offer, given the calibre of Dál Cais as warriors and so they decided instead that they would only fight Brian if half the men of Mide and the lands of Tara were to be given to them *amail ro bad comduthaig doib* ('so that these would become part of their native inheritance').

This demand made Máel Sechnaill extremely angry and he left Ulster and returned home where, following consultation with the Clann Cholmáin (the term used for his own followers), it was decided to submit to Brian. He set out with 240 horses to Brian's *puball* or tent (in his Tara encampment, apparently) *can cor can comarci acht eneach Briain féin ocus Dal Cais* ('without guarantee or protection, apart from the honour of Brian himself and the Dál Cais'). Brian's reaction acknowledged the trust that this implied: 'Since you have come to us thus, a treaty will be given to you for a year, without hostage or pledge being asked of you (*can giall can etiri diarraid ort*)'.<sup>32</sup> The only stipulation was that he would agree not to join with the Ulster kings if Brian went seeking battle from them. Máel Sechnaill then helpfully suggested that since he himself had submitted, Brian should return home rather than going north and, since the Munstermen had almost no provisions left, they agreed. The whole tone of this account is one of dignity and respect proffered by the two men to one another and in this it is not unlike the parade of civilities and mutual support exchanged between Cú Chulainn and his foster brother, Fer Diad, during their deadly duel in *Táin Bó Cúailgne*.<sup>33</sup> Brian then acknowledged Máel Sechnaill's submission by bestowing 240 warhorses on him but the latter's men refused to bring the horses with them as they did not want to be seen as horse-boys. Máel Sechnaill then gave them all to Brian's son Murchad, who gave<sup>34</sup> *a lam in a laim in la sin* ('his hand into his hand on that day'). This was done *daig is é sin oen rigdomna do eraib Erend nach rab I coracus ac Maelseclaind remi sin* ('For he was the only one worthy of kingship from the men of Ireland who was not in alliance with Máel Sechnaill before that').<sup>35</sup>

This is one of the most specific narrative accounts of military allegiances and the symbolic gestures underpinning them in medieval Irish literature. Certain elements, such as the *cairde* or treaty, the *enech* or honour-price of the

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp 128–9. <sup>32</sup> CGG, p. 130–31, §LXXV. <sup>33</sup> O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, pp 71–100, 211–34. <sup>34</sup> Todd translates this as a perfect tense 'had given' but the perfect is used as a narrative tense in Middle Irish and indeed Máel Sechnaill's act of giving is also in the perfect, so 'gave' would seem to fit the context better. <sup>35</sup> CGG, p. 132, §LXXV.

king, the giving of hostages or the entering into a superior's house as a sign of submission, are well known from legal and annalistic sources elsewhere. Nowhere else, however, are we given such clear insights outlining the political connotations of such acts for contemporaries. Particularly striking is the heavy emphasis on collective decision-making by king and *tinól* (assembly) acting in conjunction before the symbolic gesture is made. Brian as an individual is therefore not given total authority but instead is actively described as a man operating within the constraints imposed both by the expressed wishes of his assembled followers and by a noble and chivalric code which allowed Máel Sechnaill to seek allies under Brian's nose and which safeguarded him even as a man without legal protection. The revolving gifts of the horses: from Máel Sechnaill to Brian, from Brian to Máel Sechnaill, from Máel Sechnaill to Murchad, leaves a strong impression of polite graciousness but the final upshot was that Máel Sechnaill handed them over to Dál Cais. This is important as the gift of animals is clearly identified as a mark of submission to higher authority in the extensive series of Dál Cais poems collected together in the late eleventh-century *Lebor na Cert*.<sup>36</sup>

Given this emphasis on personal honour and reputation, as well as the somewhat grandiose concepts of political liberty attached to Cashel and Tara, we are left to wonder: is this an accurate account of real historical processes or is it simply a dramatic story of heroes and villains acting out their relationships in a manner designed to appeal to a storyteller's audience? Do we imagine that chivalric forbearance, such as Brian shows here, was typical of royal encounters? Was there in the eleventh and early twelfth century a real willingness to fight to defend the liberty of ancestral sites from external overlordship? Or should we, perhaps, be reading the *Cogadh* more critically as a text produced in a culturally mixed milieu which owed as much to new and evolving concepts of political and ethnic identity as it did to ancestral Irish ideologies of kingship and governance?

One of the problems for those who interpret the *Cogadh* as political propaganda is the fact that Murchad is the obvious hero among Brian's sons: he plays a far larger role than Tadc, ancestor of Brian's twelfth-century successor Muirchertach (who does not appear at all) or Donnchad whose importance in the surviving manuscript tradition has been recently stressed by Denis Casey. Murchad, in contrast to his half-brothers, is visible in all the incidents leading up to Clontarf; capturing the Leinster king in a yew tree at the battle of Glenn Máma, playing *fidchell* and exchanging insults to reinforce Gormlaith's mischief-making in Cenn Corad and receiving Máel Sechnaill's horses. In the battle itself, he plays the role of ultimate military hero:

<sup>36</sup> Myles Dillon (ed.), *Lebor na Cert*, Irish Texts Society 46 (Kildare, 1962).

To return to Murchad son of Brian the royal champion. He grasped his two valiant strong swords, viz. a sword in his right hand and a sword in his left for he was the last man in Ireland who had equal skill in striking with his right and with his left hand. He was the last man who had true valour in Ireland. It was he that swore the word of a true champion, that he would not retreat one foot before the whole of the human race (*ciniud doenna uli*) for any reason whatsoever but this alone that he might die of his wounds. He was the last man in Ireland who was a match for a hundred. He was the last man who killed a hundred in one day.<sup>37</sup>

This is only the beginning of a lengthy panegyric on Murchad which continues for another fifty-one lines in Todd's edition. He is described as the Hector of Ireland, the equivalent to Samson of the Hebrews, a second Hercules and as Lug Lámfhata as well as being a furious ox, a powerful lioness defending her cubs, and a raging torrent. It was he who breached the opposing forces, not once but on three separate occasions and he was followed by champions of his own *tellach* or household, made up of 140 sons of kings, each the leader of a *triocha cét* (the land of three thousand men) in their own right. It is Murchad who fights the foreign leaders of the expeditionary forces at Clontarf beginning with the Orkney *jarl*:

It was then that Murchad perceived Siucraid son of Lotar, Earl of Insi Orc, in the midst of the battalion of the Dál Cais, slaughtering and mutilating them; and his fury among them was that of a robber upon a plain; and neither pointed nor any kind of edged weapon could harm him; and there was no strength that yielded not, nor thickness that became not thin. Then Murchad made a violent rush at him, and dealt him a fierce, powerful, crushing blow from the valiant, death-dealing, active right hand, in the direction of his neck and the fastenings of the foreign hateful helmet that was on his head, so that he cut the buttons, and the fastenings, and the clasps, and the buckles that were fastening the helmet; and he brought the sword of the graceful left hand to hew and maim him after the helmet had fallen backwards from him; and he cut his neck, and felled that brave hero with two tremendous, well-aimed blows, in that manner.<sup>38</sup>

He then tackled the son of the king of Lochlainn:

Then came the heroic valiant ... warrior, the son of Ebric, son of the king of Lochlainn,<sup>39</sup> into the bosom and the centre of the Dál Cais ... [and he

<sup>37</sup> CGG, pp 186–7, §CVII. <sup>38</sup> CGG, pp 194–5, §CXI. <sup>39</sup> The current debate concerning the location of Lochlainn, be it Norway or Scotland, relates to the earlier tenth-

and Murchad] fought a stout furious bloody crimson combat ... And the sword of Murchad at that time was inlaid with ornament and the inlaying that was in it melted with the excessive heat of the striking ... He perceived that and cast the sword from him and he laid hold of the top of the foreigner's head and pulled his coat of mail over his head forward and they fought a wrestling combat. Then Murchad put the foreigner down under him by the force of wrestling and then he caught the foreigner's own sword and thrust it into the ribs of the foreigner's breast until it reached the ground through him three times. The foreigner then drew his knife and with it gave Murchad such a cut that the whole of his entrails were cut out and they fell to the ground before him. Then did shiverings and faintings descend on Murchad and he had not the power to move so that they fell by each other there, the foreigner and Murchad. But at the same time Murchad cut off the foreigner's head.<sup>40</sup>

Despite losing his entrails, Murchad managed to survive until sunrise the following day, in order, so it seems, to have time to prepare himself for a Christian death in which he received absolution and communion, expressed contrition and made a will. This episode is then immediately followed by the famous account of Brian overlooking the battlefield while at prayer, in which the success of the Dál Cais attack is recounted in terms of Murchad's banner (*mergi*),<sup>41</sup> first standing proud surrounded by many other Dál Cais banners, then alone, having passed through the enemy troops and finally, lying prone and fallen on the battlefield.

Murchad's heroic nature was shared by his son Tairdelbach who is identified in the *Cogadh as a mac in rigdomna a aisi [is] ferr bai in nErind*.<sup>42</sup> *Rigdomna* is a particularly Irish concept and is used of the pool of potential heirs who were qualified in the eyes of their contemporaries to be considered as potential candidates to inherit the kingship. Todd's translation as 'the best crown prince of his time in Erin' gives Tairdelbach a rather more elevated status as an already acknowledged heir to the Dál Cais throne; this would seem to overstate the political importance of a boy whose father was still in the prime of life and whose grandfather was still king. The subsequent description emphasizes the many attributes of this youthful member of the ruling Dál Cais dynasty who died so heroically at Clontarf:

century references: it is generally accepted that, by the twelfth century, the word refers to the Scandinavian world although the precise location is still debated. See Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Literary Lochlann' in Wilson McLeod, James E. Fraser and Anja Gunderloch (eds), *Cànan & Cultar/ Language and Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp 25–37; Colmán Etchingham, 'The location of historical Laithlinn/Lochla(i)nn: Scotland or Scandinavia?' in Mícheál Ó Flaithearta (ed.) *Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica* (Uppsala, 2007); Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Vikings in Ireland and Scotland in the ninth century', *Peritia*, 12 (1998), 296–339. 40 CGG, pp 194–7, §CXII. 41 The word used for the banner, *mergi*, is a clear adoption of the Norse term *merki*.

It was then that Toirdelbach, the son of Murchad, son of Brian went after the foreigners into the sea, when the rushing tide wave struck him a blow against the weir of Cluain-Tarbh and so was he drowned, with a foreigner under him and a foreigner in his right hand, and a foreigner in his left and a stake of the weir through him. There was not of his age a person of greater generosity or munificence than he in Erin (*duni bad ferr eneach no engnam in Erind*) and there was not a more promising heir of the kingdom (*ocus ni rabi adbur rig bad ferr.*) For he inherited the munificence of his father and royal dignity (*ridacht*) of his grandfather; and he had not completed more than fifteen years at that time. He was also one of the three men who had killed most on that day.<sup>43</sup>

Again, a more circumspect translation of the phrase *adbar rig* today would be 'candidate to be king' or 'material of a king', rather than 'promising heir'. Clearly the *Cogadh's* author(s) admired the military prowess of Murchad and his son and felt that this qualified them both to be recognized as outstandingly worthy to be kings. This has implications for the interpretation of the *Cogadh* as political propaganda since, as already indicated, they died at Clontarf and their particular dynastic line died out as a consequence. Todd's translation may have added to the over-emphasis on their importance in comparison to the other sons of Brian but their prominent and heroic roles in the narrative demand that this be taken into consideration when reflecting on the purposes of the *Cogadh* in the minds of its creators.

If the combined roles of Murchad and Tairdelbach be interpreted solely in terms of political interests, it may be that their memory was of particular concern to those who were interested in the Connacht alliances of Dál Cais. Murchad's mother was Mór daughter of Éidegán/Édend Ua Cléirich of the Uí Fhiachrach Aidne, a people based around Kilmacduagh. In the Annals of Ulster under 945, her father's obit describes him as king of the western Connachta but the *Banshenchus* describes him rather as king of the south Connachta, a title which the Annals of Inisfallen use of the family in 923. Of Mór's other sons with Brian, Flann and Conchobar had both apparently died by the time of Clontarf.<sup>44</sup> The Connacht overking, Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, was a military ally of Brian's great-grandson Muirchertach before the latter died in 1119 and he went on to replace Muirchertach as the most important Irish leader south of Ulster until his death in 1156. It does not seem implausible that a Dál Cais writer, working in such a context and recounting the tale of Brian's success against a rebellion of Leinstermen and Dubliners, might have chosen to emphasize the military importance of Brian's son and grandson with Connacht backgrounds rather than the offspring of Brian's

<sup>42</sup> CGG, p. 168, §XCV. <sup>43</sup> CGG, p. 193, §CX. <sup>44</sup> Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru*, pp 30–2; M.A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), p. 238.

wives from eastern Ireland. If, however, the *Cogadh* text is considered primarily as a narrative, rather than as a historical or political tract, it is worth looking at possible parallels for other works in this genre. Ó Corráin has pointed to the similarities in *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* as a dramatic retelling of the key events in the life of a historically attested Eóganacht dynast of the generation before Brian.<sup>45</sup> Of course, in an internationalized world of military mercenaries for hire, Irish authors would also have become acquainted with the narrative structures and interests from the wider area of north-western Europe as a whole. Ní Mhaonaigh, for example, has recently interrogated an older suggestion that the *Cogadh* text is modelled on Asser's Life of Alfred of Wessex. However, she concludes that while both are royal biographies and both are influenced by the prescriptive genre known as *Speculum Principum* (Mirror of Princes), 'it seems unlikely that any real significance can be accorded the broad similarities in approach and subject matter'.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, no-one (to my knowledge) has looked at the chronologically closer description of King Knútr in the eleventh-century *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, a text commissioned by a royal queen of Norman origin. In this Latin account of a Scandinavian king of England, we find close similarities with the *Cogadh*'s famous description of Brian's achievements as a Christian king in Ireland. In Todd's translation that runs as follows:

After the banishment of the foreigners out of all Eirinn and after Eirenn was reduced to a state of peace, a lone woman came from Torach, in the north of Erinn to Cliodhna, in the south of Erinn, carrying a ring of gold on a horse-rod and she was neither robed nor insulted ... By him were erected also noble churches in Eirinn and their sanctuaries. He sent professors and masters to teach wisdom and knowledge and to buy books beyond the sea and the great ocean ... many works, also, and repairs were made by him. By him were erected the church of Cell Dálua and the church of Inis Cealtra and the bell tower of Tuam Greine and many other works in like manner. By him were made bridges and causeways and high roads. By him were strengthened also the duns and fastnesses and islands and celebrated royal forts of Mumhain ... He continued in this way prosperously, peaceful, giving banquets, hospitable, just-judging; wealthily, venerated; chastely and with devotion and with law and with rules among the clergy; with prowess and with valour; with honour and with renown among the laity ...<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil: history or propaganda', *Ériu*, 25 (1974), 1–64. <sup>46</sup> Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, "'Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship' revisited: Alfred, Æthelred and Brian Bórama Compared' in John Bradley et al. (eds), *Dublin in the medieval world: studies in honour of Howard B. Clarke* (Dublin, 2009), pp 83–97. <sup>47</sup> CGG, pp 139–41, §LXXX.

The equivalent description in the *Encomium* reads:

when King Knútr first obtained the absolute rule of the Danes, he was Emperor of five kingdoms, for he had established claim to the rule of Denmark, England, Wales, Scotland and Norway. He indeed became a friend and intimate of churchmen, to such a degree that he seemed to bishops to be a brother bishop for his maintenance of proper religion, to monks also, not a secular but a monk for the temperance of his life of most humble devotion. He diligently defended wards and widows, he supported orphans and strangers, he suppressed unjust laws and those who applied them, he exalted and cherished justice and equity, he built and dignified churches, he loaded priests and the clergy with dignities, he enjoined peace and unanimity upon his people.<sup>48</sup>

Since the days of Aubrey Gwynn, it has often been suggested that the Roman pilgrimages of Brian's son, stepson, and son-in-law, Donnchad mac Briain, Sitriuc mac Amlaíb/Sigytryggr Silkiskeggi Olafsson, and Echmarcach mac Ragnail in 1028 and 1064 might owe something to the example set by Knútr who made his own journey c. 1027.<sup>49</sup> In Europe as a whole, aristocratic church-building, too, was a widespread phenomenon in the eleventh century, leading one contemporary to make the oft-quoted observation: 'one would have said that the world itself was casting aside its old age and clothing itself anew in a white mantle of churches'.<sup>50</sup> A similar sentiment is expressed in the life of Gruffudd ap Cynan, the mid twelfth-century Cambro-Norse lord who spent much of his life in Dublin and who 'made Gwynedd to glitter with lime-washed churches like a firmament with stars'.<sup>51</sup> It is surely relevant to our understanding of the *Cogadh*, however, that Brian is not only being described as interested in acquiring and disseminating foreign books but also in terms which show him engaging in similar cultural activities to those referenced in the dynastic biographies of Scandinavian kings of Britain.

Queen Emma, who commissioned the *Encomium*, was the daughter of Richard I of Normandy and her marriages to Æthelred and to Knútr should be seen in the context of the alliances between the courts of England and Normandy from 991, which are such a marked feature of eleventh-century history. The *Encomium* author was himself a member of the community of either the abbey of St Bertin or Saint-Omer and he tells us that he was selected

48 Alistair Campbell (ed.), *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (Cambridge, 1998), pp 35–7, §19.

49 Aubrey Gwynn, 'Ireland and the Continent in the eleventh century', *HIS*, 8 (1953), 193–216; H.B. Clarke, 'King Sitriuc Silkenbeard: a great survivor' in H.B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson (eds) *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond* (Dublin, 2015), pp 253–67, at p. 263.

50 The quotation is from Radulfus Glauber, *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, quoted by Richard Fletcher, *The conversion of Europe from paganism to Christianity 371–1386 AD* (London, 1998), p. 473. 51 Arthur Jones, *The history of Gruffydd ap Cynan* (Manchester, 1910), pp 154–5.

by the queen to write a work in praise of herself and her family. His work, written in a learned late Latin, is entitled by him a *memoria rerum gestarum, rerum inquam tuo tuorumque honori attinentium* ('a record of deeds which touch upon the honour of you and your connections').<sup>52</sup>

The phrase *memoria rerum gestarum* suggests that this churchman's account owes something to the contemporary vernacular French *chansons de geste*. These were substantial works, celebrating with greater or lesser historical accuracy the heroic careers of long-dead figures such as the Emperor Charlemagne, and as a literary genre they are known from the late eleventh century.<sup>53</sup> The content of such tales and the type of men who composed them are described in the late eleventh- or early twelfth-century *Chançon de Willame*:

It is perhaps the minstrel that he keeps; in all of France none sings as well as he, nor in a fight strikes blows so bold and keen. He can recite the songs of all the deeds that Clovis did, the first king who believed in God our Lord to rule in France the sweet; and of his son, Flovent, the fighter fierce, who waived his right to all of France's fiefs. He sings of all the worthy kings there've been right up to King Pepin and his fair Queen; he sings of Charles, of Roland and the peers of Girart of Vienne and all his breed who were his ancestors and family. And he himself is very brave indeed ... Because of this, his wonderful minstrelsy and winning deeds in countless battles' heat, your noble lord has brought him from the field.<sup>54</sup>

This description reminds one of Diarmait Mac Murchada's latimer who provided the information which led to *La Geste des Engleis en Yrlande* (otherwise known as *The Song of Dermot and the Earl*), apparently in the last decade of the twelfth century.<sup>55</sup> Similar men are known from the early Anglo-Norman colony in Thomond: the son of Gilbert the *latimer* donated rent money from his properties to the cathedral of St Mary in Limerick in the first decades of the thirteenth century. Whether or not such men existed a hundred years earlier, in the days of Muirchertach Ua Briain, is only a matter of speculation but it is known that his court circle included both Norman-speaking aristocrats and Norman-trained churchmen who may well have read historical texts such as the *Encomium* and whose Continental teachers were patrons of the genre:

These early chants were also welcomed, accommodated and nourished by the Church, which fostered their development along the pilgrimage

<sup>52</sup> Campbell (ed.), *Encomium*, pp 4–5. <sup>53</sup> Susan Kay, 'Chansons de Geste' in Peter France (ed.), *The new Oxford companion to literature in French* (Oxford, 1995), pp 147–9, at p. 147. <sup>54</sup> M.A.H. Newth, *Heroes of the French epic: translations from the chansons de geste* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp 81–2. <sup>55</sup> Evelyn Mullally (ed.), *La geste des Engleis en Yrlande* (Dublin, 2002), pp 27–31; see J.F. O'Doherty, 'Historical criticism of *The song of Dermot and*



routes to important shrines, such as that of St James at Compostella in north-western Spain. Reworkings of the old chants and original songs were subsequently written down by *trouvères* (poets, usually of good birth and education) and presented by *jongleurs* who sang or recited them to the accompaniment of a *vièle*, a forerunner of the viol, in private halls, public places and even within the precincts of the Church.<sup>56</sup>

The Norman aristocrats linked to the Uí Briain were represented most prominently by Muirchertach's son-in-law, Arnulf de Montgomery, brother of the earl of Shrewsbury who, from a base in the upper Severn had overrun Ceredigion, conquered Dyfed and had created a lordship of Pembroke which he had left to Arnulf's charge.<sup>57</sup> The Montgomerys were prominent in rebellion against Henry I of England in the early years of the latter's reign and the alliance between Montgomery and Muirchertach was sufficiently important to provoke Henry into placing an embargo on trade between Ireland and England, with particular consequences for Muirchertach's trading towns of Waterford and Dublin. To help resolve this problem, Muirchertach asked the Norman cleric and archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm of Bec, to intercede on his behalf, indicating the existence of a relationship of trust between them. In 1096, Anselm consecrated a Winchester-trained churchman, Mael Ísu Ua hAinmire, as the first bishop of Waterford.<sup>58</sup> Closer to home was the appointment of Bishop Gille of Limerick, the local focus of economic power at the heart of Muirchertach's kingdom of Thomond. We know that Gille had been to Rouen prior to his elevation as bishop and although we are unaware of the circumstances of his consecration, those foreign links which Gille enjoyed and which we can trace subsequently are with royal and episcopal circles in England.<sup>59</sup>

Specific references to Normans in the *Cogadh* are relatively few although Patrick Wadden has recently highlighted a number of explicit and implicit references to Norman involvement in the battle of Clontarf.<sup>60</sup> Those references that exist are complimentary. In a long rhetorical account of Dál Cais, for example, the Normans are listed as the premier standard of comparison for courageous warriors:

These [Dál Cais] were a tribe worthy of being compared with the sons of Miledh, for kingliness and great renown, for energy and dignity, and

*the earl*, *IHS*, 1 (1939), 4–20. 56 Newth, *Heroes of the French Epic*, p. vii. 57 William Rees, *An historical atlas of Wales from early to modern times* (London, 1951), p. 27. 58 Seán Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1997), pp 44–6; Marie Therese Flanagan, 'High-kings with opposition, 1072–1166' in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, vol 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), 899–933, p. 911. 59 Walter Fröhlich (ed.), *Letters of St Anselm III* (Kalamazoo, 1994), p. 205, §429; Marie Therese Flanagan, *The transformation of the Irish church in the twelfth century*, *Studies in Celtic History* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp 49–54, 75–83. 60 Patrick Wadden, 'The Normans and the Irish

martial prowess. They were the Franks of ancient Fodhla (*Frainc na Fofla fofndairdi*), in intelligence and pure valour; the comely, beautiful, noble, ever-victorious sons of Israel of Erin, for virtue, for generosity, for dignity, for truth, and for worth; the strong, tearing, brave lions of the Gaedhil, for valour and bold deeds; the terrible, nimble wolfhounds of victorious Banba, for strength and for firmness; the graceful, symmetrical hawks of mild Europe, against whom neither battle, nor battle-field, nor conflict, nor combat was ever before, nor then was, maintained.

Similar animal imagery of lions and bulls is also used of the premier hero of the *Cogadh*, Brian's son Murchad, and it is perhaps significant that such animals – lions, bulls, birds and dragons – are also listed as ornamenting the Scandinavian ships of Knútr's father, Sveinn Tjúguskegg, in the *Encomium*.<sup>61</sup> More interestingly, a verse incorporated into the *Cogadh* as part of Brian's death elegy states *ba hoirderc isin domain toir imairchor Briain hi Francaib* ('illustrious in the eastern world was the conduct of Brian among the Franks'). The verse is only found in one manuscript but Ní Mhaonaigh suggests it may well have been original to the composition.<sup>62</sup> Franks are, of course, an anachronistic entity in the eleventh and twelfth century but perhaps because of the popularity of Charlemagne in the *chanson de geste* tradition, *les Francs de France* is a common nomenclature in such texts and contemporary Irish sources refer to Normans active in Britain as *Frainc*.<sup>63</sup>

Examining Brian's biography in the *Cogadh* side by side with eleventh- or early twelfth-century French compositions makes for intriguing reading. Brian's elderly status at Clontarf, as a king at the end of his career, is not in doubt, but then Charlemagne is said to be over 200 years old in the *Chanson de Roland* and the marquis of Orange, hero of the *Chançon de Willame* claims to be over 350. 'I am too old for warfare and too weak!', he declares just as Brian, despite holding a council of war on the eve of the battle and observing the massing troops with a commander's eye, spends the day apart from the younger men doing the actual fighting, sitting on a cushion and reading the psalms of King David.<sup>64</sup> The military equipment used by the heroes in these texts shows a similar interest in coats of mail, helmets and spears in general as well as in specific detail. The French authors used terms such as *halbers*, *hauberks*, while the Irish used *luireacha* (based on the older Latin term *lorica*).<sup>65</sup>

Sea world in the era of the battle of Clontarf' in Vicky McAlister (ed.), *Space and settlement in medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2015), pp 15–33, esp. p. 19. 61 Campbell (ed.), *Encomium*, pp 12–13, pp 20–21. 62 Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Poetic authority in Middle Irish narrative: a case study' in Elizabeth Boyle and David Hayden (eds), *Authorities and adaptations: the reworking and transmission of textual sources in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2014), pp 263–90, at pp 269–73. 63 Wadden, 'Normans and the Irish Sea world', p. 19. 64 CGG, pp 154, 196–203. 65 Andrew Halpin, *Weapons and warfare in Viking and medieval Dublin*, Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962–81, Ser B. 9 (Dublin, 2008), pp 18–21, 31; Jacqueline Borsje, 'Celtic spells and counterspells' in Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (eds), *Understanding*

Swords used in the *Chanson de Roland* are described as *espees as punz d'dor neielez* ('swords with pommels of gold and niello'),<sup>66</sup> very similar to Murchad's sword with the inlaid ornament which melted into his hand in the *Cogadh*, to Fer Diad's sword with the gold pommel and guards of red-gold in *Táin Bó Cúailgne* and to the Scandinavian swords with elaborately decorated hilts and pommels (Petersen Types D, H and K) found in archaeological deposits within Ireland.<sup>67</sup>

Another strong similarity lies in the conduct of the warriors on the battlefield, for much of the action takes place in one-to-one combat, preceded by ritualized insults. In the *Chanson de Roland*, for example, warriors are said to have attacked the enemy with verbal challenges prior to engaging:

Marsilla's nephew (Aelroth was his name) rides well out in advance of all the host, goes shouting words of insult to our French: 'French villains, you shall fight with us today, for he who should protect you has betrayed you ...'. When Roland hears this, God! Is he enraged! He spurs his horse and lets him run all out and goes to strike the count with all his force; he breaks his shield and lays his hauberk open and pierces through his chest and cracks the bones and cuts the spine completely from the back and with his lance casts out his mortal soul.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, at Clontarf, the *mormaer* of Alba, Domnall mac Eimin, challenged the son of the king of Lochlainn to leave the shelter provided by his companions and fight him:

First then were drawn up there Domnall, son of Eimin, *mormaer* of Alban [Scotland] on Brian's side and Plait, son of the king of Lochlainn [Norway] brave champion of the foreigners ... Then Plait came forth from the battalion of the men in armour and said three times 'Faras Domnall?', that is, 'Where is Donnall?'. Domnall answered and said, 'Here you reptile'. They fought then ... and they fell by each other and the way that they fell was with the sword of each through the heart of the other with the hair of each in the clenched hand of the other. And the combat of that pair was the first of the battle.<sup>69</sup>

A feature of the battles in both the *Cogadh* and in the *chansons de geste* was, hardly surprisingly, imagery evoking the bloody nature of the encounters and

*Celtic religion: revisiting the pagan past* (Cardiff, 2015), pp 9–50, at pp 18–21. 66 Raoul Mortier (ed.), *Les textes de la Chanson de Roland I (Manuscrit d'Oxford)* (Paris, 1940), §LIV, 1,684. 67 O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, p. 90, ll.3259–60; S.H. Harrison and Ragnall Ó Floinn (eds), *Viking graves and grave-goods in Ireland*, Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962–81, Ser B.11 (Dublin, 2014), pp 76–80, 83, 86. 68 Robert Harrison (trans.), *The Song of Roland* (London, 1970), pp 88–9. 69 CGG, pp 190–91, §CIX. 70 Ibid., pp 182–3,

the heaps of the slain. In the *Cogadh*, Máel Sechnaill is said to have commented that ‘we were so covered with the drops of gory blood, our heads as well as our faces and our clothes, carried by the force of the sharp cold wind which passed over them to us ... Our spears over our heads had become clogged and bound with long locks of hair ...’<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in the *Chanson de Roland*, the defeat was marked *tant hanste I ad e fraite e sanglente, tant gunfanun rumpu e tan enseigne* (‘the number of lances broken and bloody, so many banners and colours in tatters’).

As already noted, one of the signifiers used for the end of the battle of Clontarf was the fallen banner of Murchad. Another was the incoming tide which cut off escape and drowned the slain:

An awful rout was made of the foreigners and of the Laigin so that they fled simultaneously and they shouted their cries for mercy and made yells of defeat and retreat and running but they could only fly to the sea because they had no other place to retreat to seeing they were cut off between it and the head of Dubhgall’s Bridge ... and the foreigners were drowned in great numbers in the sea and they lay in heaps and in hundreds, confounded after parting with their bodily senses.<sup>71</sup>

The defeated Moors in the *Chançon de Willame* also attempted to escape by sea but failed to do so:

The pagans cried: ‘We must have lost all sense to tarry here and face a certain death! Men, let us flee to reach the sea again where all our boats are moored in readiness!’ But Renewart had changed their trim so well that none of them were ready – all were wrecks! The pagans fled and still he slaughtered them – before he’d done two thousand Moors lay dead ...<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps another significant parallel can be found in the non-Christian nature of the enemy. While it is true that the Scandinavian world was in the process of conversion at the time of Clontarf, this was not true by the time the *Cogadh* came to be written. And yet author(s) of the *Cogadh* not only refer(s) to *Findgeinti* and *Dubgeinti* of the early tenth century, they also describe the ancestral enemies of Dál Cais as *genti gorma gusmara* (‘black grim Gentiles’) and the enemy forces at Clontarf as, among other adjectives, *gaill*, *gormglasa*, *gentlidi* (‘blue-grey foreigners’ – a reference to their armour?) and pagans.<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting, of course, that while the adjective *gaill* continues to be a common term for the enemy throughout the lengthy account of the battle, *gentlidi* is not. It may be, therefore, that this usage is simply a conservative one,

§CIII. 71 CGG, pp 190–91. 72 Newth, *Heroes of the French epic*, p. 136. 73 CGG, pp 68, 158.

reflecting the *Cogadh's* use of earlier annalistic material.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, not only is there the extensive use of the adjective pagan in the *chanson de geste* tradition, as can be seen in the quotations cited to date, but also the terms Saracen or Moor can be used in such texts to refer to enemy troops of any ethnic origin. Both Patrick Lajoie and Elizabeth Ridel, for example, have drawn attention to northern French texts such as *Gormont et Isebart* and the *Chanson d'Aiquin* where the term Saracen is used to describe sea-borne enemies who land on the northern coasts of France. These scholars have interpreted such stories as referring ultimately to Scandinavian rather than Muslim enemies and have suggested that the word Saracen became an accepted formula for any foreign or non-Christian foe.<sup>75</sup> In *Gormont et Isebart* in fact, such sea-borne enemies include an *Ireis* working for the *soi-disant* Saracen army. The pagans involved eventually abandoned the fight resulting in a flight by Moors, who are explicitly identified as being synonymous with *ces d'Irlande* or people from Ireland:

all the Moors gave way at length, worn out with pain and strain and stress ... they turned in flight to flee the French who raced and chased right after them; without their boats, at anchor left when they'd arrived upon their quest ... As startled deer dart over moorland those Irish [rogues] fled over shore-land (*Si cum li cers se fuit la lande, si s'enfuirent ces d'Irlande*); in hot pursuit on rapid horses rode Louis and his loyal forces.<sup>76</sup>

One of the effects of 2014 and its celebration at the beginning of a 'decade of commemoration' geared to examining the early days of the Irish State, was to highlight the extent of the debt that the Brian of our modern schools and stories owes to nineteenth-century nationalism. In her paper to the conference held in Trinity, for example, Meidbhín Ní Úrdail stressed how Brian's Christian attributes and his desire to rid Ireland of foreign foes came ever more into focus in both English and Irish renditions of the day and how contemporary icons such as crucifixes were added to his armoury in this period. Clearly the pagan nature of the Vikings was not one such addition but perhaps the emphasis which we have chosen to lay on their non-Christian origins has blinded us to the relative infrequency of the term in the *Cogadh* itself. In evaluating the reality of the term for eleventh- and twelfth-century contemporaries, it is informative to note that, from a Continental perspective

<sup>74</sup> Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib and the annals: a comparison', *Ériu*, 47 (1996), 101–26. <sup>75</sup> Patrice Lajoie, 'Les Vikings et la chanson de geste *Gormont et Isebart* (vers 1130). Histoire ou légende?' in Elisabeth Ridel (ed.), *Les Vikings dans l'empire Franc: impact, héritage, imaginaire* (Caen, 2014), pp 104–8; Elisabeth Ridel, 'Lex Vikings en Bretagne et la Chanson d'Aiquin (fin XII<sup>e</sup>–début XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: réalités et imaginaires)', *ibid.*, 109–18. <sup>76</sup> Alphonse Bayot (ed.), *Gormont et Isebart* (Paris, 1914), p. 20; Newth, *Heroes of the French epic*, pp 26–7.

at least, people coming from Ireland (perhaps, most likely, the Viking colonies there), could also be termed pagan.

In his recent paper on Norman involvement in the Irish Sea region in the eleventh century, Patrick Wadden has emphasized the statements by contemporaries that the ducal house of Normandy claimed some role, even if only that of peaceful mediator, in the affairs of the Irish. Such traffic could, as he has indicated, flow in both directions. Recent work by Seán Duffy has also emphasized the foreign context in which Clontarf took place and how northern mercenaries, amassed to fight in England may have found themselves available to work for the Dubliners in their rebellion against the aged Brian because of the sudden death of Sveinn Tjúguskegg.<sup>77</sup> If the hired soldiers could move rapidly across various kingdoms in search of employment, the same is also true, by the time of Brian's great-grandson, for the churchmen; the higher-ranking clerics of the later eleventh and earlier twelfth century such as Anselm of Bec, Máel Ísu of Waterford or Gille of Limerick were decidedly international in their training, their career structures and in the scope of their writings and their readership. It seems misguided to hold, therefore, as James Henthorn Todd did in 1867, that the *Cogadh* was created in a spirit of partisan and bombastic clanship, standing separate and apart from the literary cross-currents of the international milieu in which Thomond rulers and their churchmen operated so successfully. Eleventh-century literature in northwest Europe was composed in Latin, Norman French, Norse and English; the Irish operated in at least three of these languages on a quasi-regular basis and it can be argued that the format and concerns of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* reflect their knowledgeable engagement, from a position of perceived equality, with that wider cultural world.

<sup>77</sup> Duffy, *Brian Boru*, pp 242–8.