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

Catherine Swift

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

area of the Óenach Táilean and the sanctuary at Domnach Patraic. Each of these three sites is said to have been blessed in turn by Patrick and each is promised rights of sanctuary.

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

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

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

10 It is possible that this was a son of Bresail and grandson of Finsnecht Fleach, both of whom died in AU 695. If so, this would make him a rival descendant of Óed Slaine through the latter’s son Dunchad. 11 Byrne and Francis, ‘Two lives’, 14. Byrne once suggested that a man recorded in the Book of Ballymote as Ailillm mac Áedagh m. Áeda Odha, a branch of the Gailenga, was a brother of the Gormgal mac Éadaigh rex Cnorbhaí (king of Knowth) who died in AU 789; E.J. Byrne, ‘Historical note’, 392-3. Provided the identification of Odha with Navan is correct (see E. Hogan, Onomasticon Goedelicum, locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae, Dublin, 1910, pp 556-7), this would agree with the geographical distribution of this family, as identified by Byrne and Francis. It would, however, replace Mael Odar of the Sil nÁed Slaine with a very different pedigree. 12 J. Colgan, Trias Thummaturgae, ed. P. O’Riain (reprint Dublin, 1997 of original edition published Louvain, 1647), p. 184, note 9; Íng. cancell. Hib. repert I Meath Car. I. 57 (AD 1625) which refers to the manor of Newcastle in Crevin al. Newton. Newcastle is a townland in the parish of Drumcondra (General alphabetical index to the townlands and towns, parishes and baronies of Ireland, Dublin, 1865; reprint Baltimore, 1886, p. 738). A number of the placenames associated with the manor in the Inquisitions can be identified in the vicinity of Newcastle on the OS 6" townland index of Co. Meath, Sheet III. 13 Seanchas na trleac in Lebor na hUidre: the Book of the Dun Cow, ed. R.I. Best and O. Bergin (Dublin, 1929), p. 127: 4052-6; Fingal Rónán and other stories, ed. D. Greene (Dublin, 1955), p. 31:555-62.
Sláine through his grandson Conaing and the family is identified in the Annals of Tigernach 633 as the Úi Chonaing. Though they were clearly important in the early history of the area, the only clear identification of their patrimony lies in the fact that one of the lands given in compensation for Cináed's violation of Donaghpatrick was tür mac Conaiga, presumably for tür mac Conaing. Taken in conjunction with the other land unit entitled ò chill sair (from the church [i.e. Donaghpatrick] eastwards), it would appear that the Úi Chonaing were based in the Blackwater valley.

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

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

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

14 Trip. life, ed. Stokes, pp 73-5; Hogan, Onomasticon, p. 617. In the genealogies, a variant spelling of Conaing is given as Conac, showing the same modification of ng to hard g (which can equally well be spelt c in final syllables in Old Irish orthography), M.A. O'Brien, Corpus genealogarum Hiberniae (Dublin, 1962), p. 534. 15 Félire Óengusso Céili Dé: the martyrology of Óengus the Culde, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1904) p. 112, p. 248; Félire Húi Gormain: the martyrology of Gorman, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1895) p. 70, 266; AFM 5.s.a. 693, pp 296-7 fn p. 16 Byrne, 'Historical note', 390. 17 P. Walsh, 'Irish Ocha, Ochann' in Ériu 8 (1918) 75-7.
also the area in which, according to the *Vita Tertia*, the ancestral home of Conall Cremthainne was located. I would conclude, therefore, that this area was of particular importance in the political hierarchy of the Síl nÁedó Sláine and that, as such, it was dominated in the first half of the eighth century by what was then their most successful branch, the Úi Chonaing. This appears to be the implication of the reference to *Tir macC Conadóg* in the Tripartite Life. Professor Byrne has suggested that these dynasts subsequently ousted the descendants of Mael Odar, taking over the kingship of Knowth and focussing their energies on eastern expansion. Meanwhile the rulers of Fir Cúl, whose homeland lay immediately to the north are stated to have controlled Ráth Airthir by the Annals of Ulster 810. (A later king of Ráth Airthir, who died in Annals of Ulster 866, is identified as Cernachán m. Cumuscaig, names which do not allow us to identify to which particular dynasty he belonged.) I would deduce from these fluctuations that control of Ráth Airthir and the important Patrician church of Donaghpatrick was a prize to be fought over by those scrambling to the top of the Síl nÁedó Sláine hierarchy. That certainly would seem to be the implication of Patrick's blessing of the ramparts of Ráth Airthir, that as long as the world lasts, they should be the place of assembly for both ordinary and extraordinary gatherings of the *túatha*.

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

An alternative as a location for \textit{blat öenaig Tailten} might be the gnoth-blait or \textit{blat} of distinction where the markers are a mound – \textit{dumae} – or the base of a trunk – \textit{bun omna(i)} – or the mound of a tree – \textit{duma crainn}. The word \textit{dumae} used here is not specific to any particular type of mound; we find it being used to describe burial mounds, mounds for public ceremonies, fairy or \textit{side}-mounds, mounds for hunting huts and even gun emplacements in the seventeenth-century.\textsuperscript{39}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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