

RÍOCHT NA MIDHE

Records of Meath Archaeological and Historical Society
Vol. XI 2000



The local context of *Óenach Tailten*¹

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The history of *óenach Tailten* or the "Fair of Teltown"² has traditionally been viewed as part of the story of the highkingship of Ireland. There are good reasons for this. Many of our texts refer specifically to the link between the rulers of Tara and the assembly-site at Teltown and the reference in an early poem on the Airgialla to *coimdiu Temrae sceo Tailten* (lord of Tara and Teltown) is typical of this genre.³ 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 A.D. can be illuminated by looking more specifically at the early politics of the Blackwater valley.

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.⁴ The central section of this text opens with the donation to Patrick's cult of the royal *dún* (stronghold) of Áth Truim (Trim) by the son of King Loíguire mac Néill – king of Tara and son of Niall of the Nine Hostages. This story is then followed by other encounters between the saint and the sons of Niall. For the celebration of the first Easter, Patrick is said to have come to the *baile* (place) of Teltown, where the *óenach rigdae* (royal *óenach*) took place. There he met Coirpre mac Néill who wanted to kill Patrick and who whipped members of his household in the river Séle or Blackwater. As a consequence, Coirpre was cursed by Patrick and told that his descendants would serve the sons of his brothers, that his family would never rule and that there would never be salmon in the Blackwater.

In contrast, when Patrick met Coirpre's brother Conall – known as Conall Cremthainne in some genealogies to help distinguish him from his more famous northern brother – at *sosad dú itá Domnach Pátraic indiu* (the dwelling where Donaghpatrick⁵ is today), Conall received him with great joy and was baptised. Patrick then confirmed his seed 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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*⁹:

Then Patrick came to Conall son of Niall and Conall received him with great joy and he baptised him. And he offered him his home and the whole dwelling-place and he said to him: "Make for yourself a *civitas* from this dwelling-place and I will make for myself another dwelling-place in front of (or east of?) the gates of your *civitas*". And (thus) Patrick made there the *civitas* which is today called *Domnach Pátraic* 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."¹⁰

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

The saint begins with the fort of *Ráth Airthir* itself. He prophesied it would be the place of the assembly for the *túatha* (kingdoms) for both ordinary and extraordinary assemblies and that only one wounding would ever take place there. The circumstances of this wounding are then given: an episode involving the knifing of a warrior called Macc Bresail¹¹ by descendants of Áed Sláine through his son, Máel Odar. As recently outlined by Professor Byrne, a member of this family can be identified in eighth-century documentation as Éladach mac Máile Odrae *tigerna Cremthinnae* (lord of Cremthenn) while other connections can be drawn with the settlements of Slane and Knowth.¹² References to a Meath lordship of Cremthenn occur in *A.F.M. sub annis* 867, 1029, 1030, 1036 and it seems likely that it is this unit which gives Conall mac Néill his sobriquet, Cremthainne. The eighth-century association with Slane and

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Knowth corresponds to John Colgan's seventeenth-century identification of Cremthenn with the area then known as the barony of Slane and is reflected in the placename "Crevin" witnessed in the Inquisitions of Charles I where it is associated with the parish of Drumcondra, Co. Meath.¹³

This section in the Tripartite Life is immediately followed by a connected episode in which Patrick grants sanctuary to the area of *óenach Tailten*, saying that no dead would ever be carried from that site; again, an incident which proves Patrick's power in this regard is cited. There is then a brief excursus in which two other churches are founded, one apparently at Kells – identified in other texts as a royal fort of the legendary king Cormac mac Airt.¹⁴ 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 Írgalaig, a king of Tara who died in A.U. 728, 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 Sláine through his grandson Conaing and the family is identified in *Ann. Tig.* 633 as the Uí Chonaing. Though they were clearly important in the early history of the area, the only clear identification of their patrimony lies in the fact that one of the lands given in compensation for Cináed's violation of Donaghpatrick was *tír mac Conaig*, presumably for *tír mac Conaing*.¹⁵ Taken in conjunction with the other land unit entitled *ó chill sair* (from the church [i.e. Donaghpatrick] eastwards), it would appear that the Uí Chonaing were based in the Blackwater valley.

These two families of Síl nÁedo Sláine, the Uí Chonaing and the Boyne lords of Cremthenn, are not the only prominent factions in our late seventh and eighth-century records. Also active in this period are descendants of Áed Sláine through two other sons, Diarmait and Ailill. Diarmait's family included Fogartach mac Néill who was expelled *de regno* (from the kingdom) in A.U. 714 but regained kingship in 716 and disturbed *óenach Tailten*

in 717. He himself, his father and his son were all killed in battles with the Uí Chonaing but another son, Fergal mac Fogartaig, died as *rex deiscerd Breg* (king of southern Brega) in 751. By the mid eighth century, therefore, Diarmait's descendants may have been concentrated towards the south, possibly in the area of Lagore which is explicitly associated with this family in A.U. 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 Dluthaig (whence the Síl nDluthaig) is identified in *Ann. Tig.* 689 as the king of Fir Chúl. Glosses in fifteenth-century manuscripts of *Félire Óengusso* and *Félire Gormáin* indicate that this kingdom included Imblech Fia(ich) and Mag mBolcc, identified by John O'Donovan as the parishes of Moybolgue and Emlagh in the modern barony of Lower Kells.¹⁶ The Fir Chúl are also closely associated with events at Tuilén (Dulane) immediately to the south of the barony border *sub annis* A.U. 786, A.F.M. 781, *Chron. Scot.* 872. In A.U. 711, Áed's son, Cú Roí, died in a battle at Sliab Fuait while in alliance with the Uí Méith of the Airgialla. His brother, Flann mac Áedo, was himself killed in a battle in Asal (half-barony of Moyashel, Co. Westmeath) in A.U. 714. Another brother fell at Kells in A.U. 718 and in A.U. 743, Dúngal mac Flainn, *rí Cúl* died in yet another battle with the Uí Chonaing.

Judging from the annalistic record, there were four principal branches of the Síl nÁedo Sláine in the late seventh and first half of the eighth century. Of these four, the Uí Chonaing appears to have been the most active, to have gained the highest number of victories and to have dominated the politics of Brega after the eighth century.¹⁷ Many of the battles between the four factions appear to be concentrated in the Blackwater region – an area also associated with ancestral Uí Néill monuments such as Cormac mac Airt's settlement at Kells and the burial mound of Niall Noígíallach, thought to be at Faughan Hill, across the valley from Donaghpatrick.¹⁸ This is 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 nÁedo Sláine and that as such, it was dominated in the first half of the eighth century by what was then their most successful branch, the Uí Chonaing. This appears to be the implication of the reference to *Tír mac Conaig* in the Tripartite Life. Professor Byrne has suggested that these dynasts sub-

sequently ousted the descendants of Máel Odar, taking over the kingship of Knowth and focussing their energies on eastern expansion.¹⁹ Meanwhile the rulers of Fir Chúl, whose homeland lay immediately to the north are stated to have controlled Ráth Airthir by A.U. 810. (A later king of Ráth Airthir, who died in A.U. 866, is identified as Cernachán mac Cumuscaig, names which do not allow us to identify the particular dynasty to which 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 nÁedo Sláine hierarchy. That certainly would seem to be the implication of Patrick's blessing of the ramparts of Ráth Airthir: that as long as the world lasts, they should be the place of assembly for both ordinary and extraordinary gatherings of the *túatha*.

It should be stressed that this does not necessarily mean that any dynasty controlling Ráth Airthir was in long-standing occupation of the surrounding territory. Daniel Binchy and Fergus Kelly have both drawn attention to the phenomenon of *mruig rí* or "king's land" which consisted of certain lands specifically set aside for the king's use during his reign.²⁰ Two legal glosses, to be discussed in more detail below, indicate that it is the king's duty to hold *óenaig* on king's land. I would suggest, therefore, that the area of Ráth Airthir, Donaghpatrick and Teltown should be seen as the *mruig rí* of the leading ruler of the Síl nÁedo Sláine. As such, control of the fort of Ráth Airthir and the immediately surrounding area could fluctuate between the Uí Chonaing and the Fir Chúl in the manner which appears to be implied by the sources.

The author of the Tripartite Life makes it clear that he envisaged that Patrick's saintly blessing resulted in areas of sanctuary surrounding not just the ramparts of Ráth Airthir but also the *blat* (enclosure?) where the *óenach Tailten* was held, as well as his own church of Donaghpatrick. Secular sanctuary of this kind is described in Middle Irish legal commentary as the *maigen dígona* or the precinct which surrounded high-status establishments. Any injury inflicted on someone within the bounds of the *maigen dígona* meant the assailant had to pay the owner's honour-price as well as the fine for the injury itself.²¹ Similar notions of sanctuary are mentioned in the Airgiolla poem where it is stated that one of the crimes over which their Uí Néill overlords had jurisdiction was the upsetting of an *óenach* under the over-king's protection. Another involved the violation of the

protection of one who was within the royal precinct. In *Audacht Morainn*, it is stated that a ruler could impose immunities from violence at every *óenach*.²²

The author of the Tripartite uses the phrase *blat óenaig Tailten* of the location of this area of sanctuary. This implies that the sanctuary was a discrete area within which the *óenach Tailten* took place, like many travelling fairs in Ireland today which have a traditional location in each settlement which they take up every season. *Blat* is a word which is used in association with an *óenach* on at least one other occasion; namely, a gloss on the early law tract *Bretha Déin Chécht*, where *blat* is a synonym for *baile in óenaig* (the place of the *óenach*).²³ It is a word which can mean enclosure or field but which is explained in O'Clery's glossary simply as *faithche* – an area of open ground surrounding important settlements.²⁴ The environment of the *faithche* 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 *faithche* and, in the law-text *Bechbretha*, it is identified as being "as far as the sound of a bell or the crowing of a cock reaches."²⁵

However the *faithche* was not solely an area of agricultural outhouses and infield. Other references indicate that the *faithche* could act as a habitation area for persons of lower status. In the late Old Irish text, *Longes Mac nUislenn*, the sons of Uisliu were said to have joined the household following of the king of Scotland and as a consequence, they "assumed mercenary service with him and placed their houses on the *faithche*". In the sagas, the *faithche* is depicted as an area on which visitors would congregate before being admitted to the inner buildings of a settlement. Warriors or visiting dignitaries might leave their chariots there, troops might camp there and battles might take place, youths might play their games there and the ruler of a settlement might leave his dog to defend it while he was entertaining guests inside. Despite the buildings, the fields and the animal pens, it was not exclusively a cultivated area; in it one might also find grass, trees, pillar-stones and pools of water and there are legal references to the possibility of finding deer within its confines.²⁶ Monumental crosses were also found in this area; an annal entry for *Chron. Scot.* 849 talks of a cross on the *faithche* of Slane which was broken and parts of which ended up in Teltown.

The fact that O'Clery viewed *blat* as a synonym for *faithche* implies that we should visualise *óenach Tailten* as having taken place, therefore, in an area of dispersed rural settlement sur-

rounding a central focus of high status. We can be even more specific however, since an analysis of the various types of *blat* such as wood-*blat*, pool-*blat* or road-*blat* which existed in early Ireland has survived in the law tracts. These distinctions are based on the type of boundary mark which demarcates the unit. Thus, a pool-*blat* is demarcated by the waters of a river or a lake or a pool, while a *blat esbaide* or *blat* of deficiency is marked by a hollow or boggy place or a stony valley or the track of an ancient route and so forth.

There are two particular types of *blat* in this catalogue which seem most relevant to the probable location of *óenach Tailten*; the first being the *ailblat* or rock-*blat* where possible markers are listed as the *ail adrada* (rock of adoration), *ail annscuithe* (the immovable rock) or *ail lechta* (monumental rock). The rock of adoration is particularly intriguing; the only other example of this phrase known to me is in a gloss on the legal text *Di astud Chirt ocus Dligid* where it glosses *altóir* or altar²⁷ but an open-air Christian altar forming a boundary marker is difficult to visualise.²⁸ 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.²⁹ As it happens, 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.³⁰

A second alternative as a location for *blat óenaig Tailten* might be the *gnoth-blait* or *blait* of distinction where the markers are a mound – *dumae* – or the base of a trunk – *bun omna(i)* – or the mound of a tree – *duma crainn*. The word *dumae* used here is not specific to any particular type of mound; we find it being used to describe burial mounds, mounds for public ceremonies, fairy or *side*-mounds, mounds for hunting huts and even gun emplacements in the seventeenth century.³¹

The reason I suggest that these two particular types seem the most likely candidates for *blat óenaig Tailten* is that the Middle Irish *Senchas na Relec* identifies Teltown as an ancestral graveyard for the Ulaid, while another text, the *Lebor na hUidre* version of *Aided Nath Í*, speaks of 50 hills (*cnoic*) at the site of *óenach Tailten*.³² Cúán Ua Lothcháin, in his famous early eleventh-century poem on Teltown, not only states that the

óenach took place around the grave-mound of the eponymous Tailtiu, but also that the site included

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

Other verses in the poem also refer to stone monuments and mounds; the *coirthe* or pillar of Colmán; the *carn* or stone mound of Conall, the *lieic* or stones of Grup and Gar.³³ There are also saga references to the actions of Amargin, who littered the area around Tailtiu and Ráth Airthir with stones.³⁴ An entry in *A.U.* 831 talks of a disturbance about the *forad*-structures of *óenach Tailten*. Unfortunately, we lack more precise topographical reference points for *blat óenaig Tailten* although an entry dealing with its celebration by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobuir in *A.F.M.* 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 on the lower parts of the ridge where stand the prehistoric Knockans – bulldozed in part during 1997 but currently being excavated and rebuilt – may indeed have been the site of *blat óenaig Tailten* as suggested by nineteenth-century writers.³⁵

The reference to *forad*-structures at *óenach Tailten* is particularly interesting. In the eleventh or early twelfth-century compilation, *Lebor na Cert* or the Book of Rights, a verse refers to the fact of *forad ríge Airgialla for deis ríge Tailtean* (the *forad* of the king of Airgialla at the right hand of the king of Teltown) while the prose introduction adds the details that the latter is also seated on a *forad* and *issed a thomus co ma-rua claidem ríge Airgiall co hind lámha in dáilimh* (the distance of it is so that the sword of the king of Airgialla may reach the tip of the cup-bearer's hand).³⁶ In other words the space between the two *forad*-structures is that of an outstretched arm and the length of a sword. This reference, as in the case of the annal entry for 831, refers to *forad*-structures in the plural; there are also two other references to a multiplicity of Teltown *forad*-structures in *Genemáin Áeda Sláine* and Cúán Ua Lothcháin's early eleventh-century poem. The latter is the most specific in that it indicates that there were *foraid* (Old Irish plural of *forad*) for both men and women; twenty *foraid* for the kings of Tara on what was termed *múr Echach* (the rampart of Eochu) and a further twenty for their queens on the *múr* of Eochu's wife. There were also *forad*-structures for the men of Connacht.³⁷ This description of

multiple *foraid*, linked to specific regional authorities, corresponds to similar evidence in a poem on *óenach Carmuin*.³⁸

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has written: "The Welsh *gorsedd* is etymologically a near-match for Irish *forad* and they have a somewhat similar range of meanings but *gorsedd* has in addition the Otherworld connotations of Irish *síd*."³⁹ Ó Cathasaigh is here stating that Irish *forad* does not share all the attributes of the Welsh *gorsedd* but this point appears to have been missed by Charles Doherty, who cites Ó Cathasaigh's views before putting forward a definition which attributes the functions of a *síd* to the *forad*:

Originally the *forad* was probably associated in particular with kingship. Some of them may have been prehistoric tumuli. They were regarded as the home of the gods and kings were inaugurated upon them. The king, therefore, seated upon his *forad*, was the intermediary between his people and the otherworld.⁴⁰

This definition, though recently endorsed by Conor Newman⁴¹ and by Elizabeth Fitzpatrick in her papers to the 1998 conferences on Tara and Teltown, is not substantiated by an examination of the Irish texts. Where a mound is associated with royal inaugurations, the word normally used is *carn*⁴² while the existence of a plurality of *forad*-structures on a single site (and, indeed, the association of some of them with women who were not inaugurated) has already been indicated in the citations listed above. In Maud Joynt and Eleanor Knott's list of references in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, there is one instance of druids and seers using *forad*-structures but this is in the context of overseeing the activities of troops at a battle-site and it, too, refers to *foraid* in the plural.⁴³ There is not a single instance in the texts cited in the *Dictionary* in which a *forad* is associated with inauguration and indeed, the eleventh-century *Dindgnai Temrach*, which refers to a *forad*-structure, specifically associates inauguration with the very different location of Duma na nGíall.⁴⁴ An entry in A.U. 823 refers to the burning of the *forad* of the ecclesiastical ruler of Armagh, which implies that the structure is hardly likely to have been an earthen mound, while O'Clery's Early Modern glossary simply gives the translation *foradha* .i. *ionaid suidhe* (*forad*-structures, that is places for sitting). Byrne's translation of the word as "seat" or John Carey's as "platform" are thus both much more accurate renditions of the word *forad*.⁴⁵

More importantly, there are a number of references to *forad*-

structures being specifically associated with *óenach*-festivities, including an Old Irish gloss to the legal text *Di Astud Chirt*, *Dligid*. This reads *córus óenaig* .i. *a glanad ocus a forada do denum* (the prescribed arrangements of an *óenach*, that is, its clearing and building its *forad*-structures).⁴⁶ In other words, the evidence of the vernacular texts would seem to indicate that the majority of *forad*-structures were purpose-built and intended as seating for high-status individuals at points where large gatherings might take place. Edel Bhreathnach has suggested that *óenach*-festivities are likely to have involved a variety of structures, both monumental and temporary.⁴⁷ It is not clear into which category *forad*-structures might fall, although the legal gloss referring to their building in the context of clearing *óenach*-sites might imply structures which needed fairly frequent attention. On the other hand, the existence of forty such *foraid* associated with the Tara kings and their wives, might seem to suggest that the underlying monument could be relatively permanent. (I'm assuming here that not all of the forty would have been constructed for a single occasion.)

There is one important example of what may have been a single monument bearing the name of *Forad* at Tara. This is identified in the Book of Leinster version of a Middle Irish text, *Dindgnai Temrach* or "the Heights of Tara" as *lathrach ind F(h)oraid la taeb ind rigthaige aniar* (the site of the *Forad* to the west side of the king's house). Elsewhere, the same text states that Tea, the wife of Érimón was buried between the *Forad* and the king's house.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, as is pointed out in Petrie's study, other versions of this text, from later manuscripts, state that the monument is *la taeb ind rigthaige anoir* (to the east side of the king's house). As *Dindgnai Temrach* is the key text used for identifying the monuments currently visible at Tara, this variation is crucial. George Petrie's map leaves the relationship of the two monuments ambiguous (he writes "*Forradh nó Teach Cormaic*"). R.A.S. Macalister, however, adds to the confusion in that he states (inaccurately) that all the manuscripts he has consulted use *anoir* (i.e. to the east side of the king's house).⁴⁹ In this he has been followed by Francis John Byrne, Seán P. Ó Riordáin and Leo Swan (although Swan draws attention to the discrepancies in previous accounts and provides a useful collection of the earlier plans).⁵⁰ Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman, in Discovery Programme publications, opt instead for the earlier, Book of Leinster, *aniar* (to the west side of the king's house) in their depiction of the relationship, as John O'Donovan had done

in his nineteenth-century survey of the site for the Ordnance Survey.⁵¹

All of these represent attempts by modern scholars to identify the monuments currently visible on Tara with the descriptions in the early texts and any attempt to deduce the function of the *forad*-structure from such efforts is clearly speculative. Not only are such studies dependent on the assumption that the eleventh-century description can be correlated with the surviving evidence on the ground, but the differing versions in the manuscripts make it impossible to be certain which of the two (very different) monuments involved is the eleventh-century *Forad*. In a poem entitled *Temair I* by its editor, Edward Gwynn, the site of Tara as a whole is called *forad na rí* or *Forad of Kings*.⁵² This is patently a symbolic title of the seat/location of the king and tells us little about the specific function of *forad*. On the whole, it would seem that the name *Forad*, as it is used at Tara, is likely to represent the re-naming by medieval authors of a more ancient monument and, I would argue, is less diagnostic of the function of these structures than the more specific references associated with Teltown and other sites.

When the author of the Tripartite Life talks of Patrick blessing the *blái óenaig Tailten*, therefore, it appears he was envisaging an area of rough ground demarcated by what were in all likelihood prehistoric monuments; either barrows for burial, standing stones, or mounds, both small and large. Associated with the area was also the *múr* or rampart of Eochu and that of his wife (the pair of which, one is tempted to suggest, may be the twin mounds now known as the Knockans) and other structures known as *foraid*. This description agrees with what we know of other *óenach* sites which, like *óenach Tailten*, are often described as being outside areas of normal habitation, made up of numerous mounds, and as sites of ancient burial places.⁵³

However, it is important to recognise that while *blái óenaig Tailten* was most probably an area of open ground, it lay in close proximity to two major settlements; one being that of the ecclesiastical site of Donaghpatrick, while the other was that of the prestigious royal fort of Ráth Airthir. The connections between the three are indicated, not only by the episodes in the Tripartite Life already discussed, but by an entry in the *Annals of Ulster sub anno 789* which indicates that it was at Ráth Airthir that the relics of Patrick were dishonoured by the high-king Donnchad m. Domnaill on the occasion of an *óenach*. The wording does not specify that this was *óenach Tailten* but given the high status of

Donnchad and the presence of Patrician relics – which are stated to have been present at *óenach Tailten* in A.U. 831 – it seems a probable inference. It would thus appear that these twin sites provided the central focus, in the *faithche* of which was *blái óenaig Tailten*.

This coincides with the evidence of a variety of early medieval texts which indicate that an *óenach* was convened by a king on land under his personal control. So, in Heptad 56, the seven places where combat is not allowed under Irish law include the *dún* of a king with its *faithche* at the time of an *óenach*. A gloss on Heptad 61 refers to giving land to the king for the specific purpose of holding an *óenach*. A *Dindshenchas* poem on Loch Garman (Wexford) identifies a king's demesne as an *óenach*-site where boats assemble. Perhaps most tellingly, the law-text *Críth Gablach* states that it is the responsibility of the king to convene an *óenach*, although only with the agreement of his *túath* or "kingdom". One might also note a gloss on Heptad 2, indicating that land granted to the church and given to the king for holding of an *óenach*, reverts to its original owner. A second glossator points out that giving the land to the king means that there will be no festival (*féil*) for the patron saint.⁵⁴ As Charles Doherty has pointed out in his discussion of Irish *óenaig*, there is frequent mention of both royal and ecclesiastical presidency of *óenach*-assemblies in our sources – as in the famous incident of AU 800 when the local king died at the *circio ferie filii Cuilinn Luscan* (the *óenach* of the feast of Mac Cuilinn of Lusk).⁵⁵ In the light of references such as these, it seems reasonably plausible that the location of *blái óenaig Tailten* in the vicinity of both a royal fort and a church was not coincidental, and that both the ruler of Ráth Airthir and his ecclesiastical counterpart at Donaghpatrick played vital roles in convening *óenach Tailten*. One of our earliest references to Teltown, in fact, is to its ancestral role as both a royal dwelling place and location of an *agon regale* or royal assembly.⁵⁶ The existence of this legal evidence would also seem to strengthen the suggestion, made above on the basis of annalistic evidence, that the *mruig rí* of the Sí nÁedo Sláine probably consisted of the area surrounding Ráth Airthir and Donaghpatrick and included the modern townland of Teltown.

This brings me to the question of a role of an *óenach*: what exactly was its function in the life of a medieval Irish community? The classic English translation since the days of Conall Mageoghan in 1627 and common in the mid-nineteenth-century work of Eugene O'Curry and John O'Donovan is "fair".⁵⁷

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".⁵⁸ This fits with Doherty's emphasis on the economic aspects of the *óenach*. He sees what he terms earlier tribal *óenaig* as being the occasion of ceremonial gift-giving between kings, the acceptance of which symbolised acts of political submission. However, he believes that, by the eleventh century, much of the legal and political significance of the *óenach* had dissipated and its function had become predominantly economic.⁵⁹

It is worth considering here the time of year at which *óenach Tailten* was celebrated. According to the Middle Irish text, *Genemain Áeda Sláine*, it was held at *Lugnasad*.⁶⁰ This is the festival held at the beginning of August, apparently in close conjunction with the harvest. In a Middle Irish commentary recently edited by Fergus Kelly, the value of sheep and pigs was said to increase at *Lugnasad* which was used as a marker of the age of the beast. Since the specifications for food-render in *Cáin Aicillne* make it clear that clients of a certain rank must submit animals of a certain value, it seems plausible that such renders were made in conjunction with the harvest-festival. *Cáin Aicillne* and its accompanying glosses does, in fact, specify that the age of certain bovines was reckoned up to the point when one gave the animal to one's lord in winter, while the text on the value of animals specifies that cattle-values changed at *Samuin* (the late winter festival) and again at *Beltaine* (early summer).⁶¹

Other legal texts identify a variety of summer foods which were to be given to one's lord as food-rent by a client. These included dairy produce such as fresh milk, butter and cream, a bullock for roasting, vegetables and a *molt sambíd* or "wether of summer food".⁶² Again, where a client's renders included summer food, the end of the summer seems the most plausible time for bringing them to the lord.

In a non-monetary economy, such renders had to be either eaten by the lord and his immediate entourage or redistributed by him to his followers. Thomas Charles-Edwards has argued for a two-fold division in the type of food-render given to early medieval kings: firstly, those from within his own kingdom, which would be offered on a regular basis, and which would reflect all the broad categories into which the contemporary diet was divided; secondly, those submitted by outsiders which are likely to be donated as livestock on the hoof. The latter could be acquired by Irish kings through the *crech rí* or royal cattle raid

which was a recognised way of establishing one's overlordship over other peoples. The former, Charles-Edwards suggests, may have been donated to the Irish kings through hospitality dues for "there is no evidence of a network of local royal centres to which food renders were delivered".⁶³ I would like to put forward the possibility that the role of such "local royal centres" was, in fact, fulfilled by the *óenach*-assemblies.

A text which is admittedly much later in date than the period we are discussing here, *Forbuis Damh Damhgaire* or the Siege of Damh Damhgaire, provides an insight into the way this distribution-system may have worked. The description is of Cormac mac Airt, legendary ancestral king of the Uí Néill whose fort was said to be at Kells:

Cormac received that year the tribute which was owed to him by each of the five provinces of Ireland and which consisted of 180 cows from each province. Cormac distributed these renders to the seven principal *túatha* of Tara for a plague had arisen amongst their beasts and he did not keep a single cow which he did not distribute (OR and he had always an open hand for distribution).

When Cormac had finished distributing the cattle, his steward came to him, i.e. Maine Mibriarach mac Miduath. "O Cormac, have you distributed all the cattle?" said he. "I have" said Cormac. "I do not know what to do" said the steward, "I will not be able to furnish you with the where-withal to feed the household of Tara, even for a single night, for it was on those cattle which we were relying. And the reason is that all your own flocks have succumbed." This news astonished Cormac and he said: "What were you thinking of, steward, that you did not tell me that before my hands were empty after receiving my tribute? For now I have nothing to give you and it does not please me to pressurize anyone; from the moment that the year's tributes have been given to me, I will have no other rent until the year's end."⁶⁴

It is clear that this description is part of an unusual set of circumstances brought about by plague but the general idea that a lord would redistribute his renders to his clients at the same time that he received them makes perfect sense. It seems likely that preservation of large quantities of food-stuffs at a single location over a long time would pose logistical problems to the lord, particularly in the case of milk, vegetables and dead animals.

It would seem far more sensible to move them back into circulation immediately, using the wealth generated by some to reward others and to bind them more firmly to one's cause. Cúán Ua Lothcháin's early eleventh-century poem on *óenach Tailten* praises Máel Sechnaill, amongst other things, for his generosity in distributing corn, milk and malt. These are all items which occur in the lists of food-renders in *Cáin Aicillne*, *Crith Gablach* and *Bretha Nemed Toisech*.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Middle Irish poem on another *Lugnasad* fair, *óenach Carmuin*, stresses that in addition to the foreign trade discussed by Doherty, markets (*margaid*) in food and livestock also took place.⁶⁶ This would seem a natural development if the proffering and redistribution of food renders were a normal part of *óenach*-festivities.

Commentators since Doherty have emphasised other, non-mercantile, aspects of an *óenach*. In his recent book, *Early Irish Farming*, Fergus Kelly makes a number of passing references to the holding of *óenaig* in early Ireland, emphasising in particular the horse-racing which took place there. Chariot-racing was also a feature and the lawyers were careful to stress that owners couldn't claim compensation for injuries either to or by a horse or chariot at *óenach* assemblies. In an annal entry for 811, it is stated that the community of Tallaght prevented the *óenach Tailten* from being held that year *conná-recht ech na carpat* (so that neither horse nor chariot arrived). Kelly also stresses other aspects of an *óenach* not discussed in detail by Doherty, namely the sporting contests, music, story-telling and the recitation of royal genealogies.⁶⁷

At the Tara conference in April 1998, Thomas Charles-Edwards pointed out that, on a number of occasions, ecclesiastical synods may have run concurrently with *óenaig*. Certainly, there is more than one gathering of ecclesiastics associated with Teltown, the most famous of which is probably the synod which proposed to excommunicate Columba of Iona. In another incident, in the *Vita Prima* of St. Brigid, Patrick is said to have convened an assembly of many bishops at Teltown which discussed, amongst other things, the paternity of a certain baby. The mother had accused one of the senior members of Patrick's *familia*, Bishop Brón, but when St. Brigit blessed the baby's tongue, the child announced the true father.⁶⁸ Neither account states explicitly that these gatherings took place during *óenach Tailten*, but they are certainly high-status gatherings at Teltown involving individuals from many areas of Ireland.

Implicit in this, as well as in the observations of both Doherty

and Kelly, is another important aspect of the *óenach*; that of an assembly at which people from far-flung settlements could meet and marriage alliances could be formed. A gloss on the legal tract *Cáin Aicillne* mentions the imperative for the *manchuine* (dependants) of a lord to accompany him to an *óenach* while another, recently edited by Kelly, draws attention to the need to have the roads in good condition prior to such occasions. In *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, it is stated that special clothes were worn for the duration of an *óenach*; while wooing Emer, Cú Chulainn is described as having dressed himself in his *óenach*-clothes and travelled by chariot to the *óenach* while Emer and her women sat at the *forad* of the *óenach*, near to her father's *dún*. A late Middle Irish story, entitled simply *Óenach Tailten*, tells of an incident which took place during the *óenach* when a woman claimed her man had had intercourse with another and demanded that he swear a denial under the hand of St. Ciarán 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 Coibche* or "hill of contract" at *óenach Tailten* should be seen as a formal recognition of such activity.⁶⁹

Instead, *Tulach na Coibche* may reflect the legal decisions which could be made at an *óenach*.⁷⁰ The introduction to a late Middle Irish tale, *Genemain Áeda Sláine*, states that tributes were agreed and laws were enacted at *óenach Tailten* every *Lugnasad*. 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.⁷¹ We have already encountered other incidents which took place at *óenach Tailten* and which involved seeking legal redress – namely that of the woman who accused her husband of absconding with another woman and the attempt to establish the paternity of an unclaimed child.

It is clear from this relatively short overview that an *óenach* served a multitude of possible functions. It was a recognised gathering point for a population dispersed across a rural landscape and provided a social occasion to break up the cycle of the year. It seems to have been the occasion at which certain agricultural renders were proffered to one's king and might, in turn, be gained by those in royal favour. 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 Tailten* played in the over kingship of the Uí Néill kings of Tara. The standard account of that relationship for many years has been Binchy's 1958 article, "The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara".⁷² In this, Binchy is particularly concerned to refute the statement by Eoin Mac Neill and others that *óenach Tailten* was a national assembly. Binchy therefore dismissed the claim of the poet Cuán Uá Lothcháin that, in the eyes of an early eleventh-century poet, provision was normally made for attendance at *óenach Tailten* by the kings of Leinster, Ulster, Munster and Connacht. Instead Binchy suggested that all the evidence we have is to the effect that *óenach Tailten* was summoned by the head of the Uí Néill and disturbances of the *óenach* were confined to groups from within the Uí Néill hegemony.

This seems to over-simplify the matter. Binchy noted the two twelfth-century references to the holding of *óenach Tailten* by two Uí Conchobair kings from Connacht, Toirdelbach and Ruaidrí in 1120 and 1167/8 but he dismissed them as "artificial revivals"; he did not comment, however, on the fact that in *A.F.M.* 894 (*recte* A.D. 899) Diarmait mac Cerbaill, king of Ossory is said to have celebrated *óenach Tailten*. The Ossory dynasty had been closely associated with the Clann Cholmáin kings of Tara in the previous generation: Diarmait's aunt, Flann ingen Dúngaile, had been married to Máel Sechnaill and was commemorated as *rígan ríge Temra* (queen of the king of Tara) before she died in A.U. 890. The period in which Diarmait is said to have celebrated *óenach Tailten* coincides with an entry in *Chron. Scot.* 898 recording warfare between Flann Sinna, son of Máel Sechnaill and king of Tara, and his son, Máel Ruanaid. The weakness in Clann

Cholmáin engendered by this conflict appears to have tempted the Connachta to cross the Shannon and raid western Mide in *Chron. Scot.* 899. Though the Connachta raid ended in failure, it is not impossible that Diarmait, who bore the name of a famous sixth-century Uí Néill king of Tara, was also eager to exploit Flann Sinna's difficulties and was facilitated by the local dynasts of the Síl nÁedo Sláine. At the very least, the possibility should be canvassed, given the short list of annalistic references to *óenach Tailten* and the need to weigh every scrap of evidence which has survived.

Similarly, Binchy discussed but dismissed the A.U. 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, Máel Rúain.⁷³ Nor did he accept the entry in A.U. 733 which refers to the overthrow at Teltown of Cathal mac Finguine, overking of Munster, by a Clann Cholmáin dynast of Westmeath as indicating anything other than a simple "engagement".⁷⁴ At the 1998 Teltown conference, Teresa Bolger drew attention to the fact that the A.U. annal entry does not give Cathal's patronymic and suggested that the record refers, not to the overking of Munster, but to a Síl nÁedo Sláine prince. The two contenders might be Cathal mac Fínsnechtai, son of a seventh-century Síl nÁedo Sláine king of Tara who is commemorated in the genealogies, and Cathal mac Áedo of the Fir Chúl whose death at the hands of his Síl nÁedo Sláine cousins is recorded in A.U. 737.⁷⁵ If Bolger's suggestion is accepted, the 733 episode would fit the pattern of disturbances being confined to members of the Uí Néill hegemony, as postulated by Binchy. It is impossible to be certain but on the whole, it seems to me that Cathal mac Finguine is the more likely candidate because secular dynasts, whose names are given without patronymics in A.U. in this period, tend to be figures who hold the highest political offices and whose careers are well-documented. In the same year that Cathal mac Áedo's death is recorded, for example, another A.U. entry reads *dál itir Áed Allán, Cathal oc Tír dá Glas* (A meeting between Áed Allán [king of Cenél nÉogain] and Cathal at Terryglass). In this case, it is undoubtedly Cathal mac Finguine whose actions are being recorded.

Binchy did not discuss the possibility, raised by John O'Donovan, that the alliance of Clann Cholmáin and the powerful Connacht king, Muirgius mac Tommaltaig, who mounted an

expedition "as far as Tir-in-Oenaigh" (land of the *óenach*) in A.U. 808, might have been intending to attack *óenach Tailten*.⁷⁶ Their enemy on that occasion was Áed mac Néill of the Cenél nÉogain, who is identified in A.U. 811 as being a man who might be expected to celebrate *óenach Tailten* in this period, and who burned the border-territories of Mide in revenge for the abortive attack. Muirgius is perhaps the best documented of the early Connachta kings and the context in which this raid may have taken place is possibly illustrated in the fact that two of his sons were killed by the Luigne in 810. (Peoples of this name are known both from the area of modern Meath – the barony of Lune – and from Sligo, where they gave their name to the barony of Leyney.)

Most surprising of all, Binchy's article of 1958 made no mention of the Old Irish poem on the Airgialla in which the Uí Néill overlord of Tara and Teltown is said to preside over the warriors of Ireland, the king of Munster being in the extreme south of the banqueting hall, the king of Leinster beside him, and the king of the Connachta behind.⁷⁷ An edition of this poem had been published some seven years earlier by Máirín O'Daly who credited Binchy with having made many valuable suggestions prior to publication. This odd omission may perhaps be explained by the fact that Binchy saw the disturbances recorded in the annals as the most important evidence for the presence or otherwise of other provincial kings.⁷⁸ At the same time, his statement that his examination of the evidence for *óenach Tailten* reinforced his previous belief in a fictional sovereignty of the Tara king over other provincial monarchs,⁷⁹ would seem to indicate that he was predisposed to minimise any evidence to the contrary.

One final point on this issue can be made. In addition to the monuments associated with the various provincial kings, the penultimate verse of Cuán's early eleventh-century poem refers to the absence of seven kings who might have been expected to attend. He names the various kings, though without patronymics, and two non-Uí Néill kings may be amongst them: Cathal (possibly Cathal mac Conchobair, king of Connacht) and Dondchad (possibly Dondchad Máel-na-mbó, king of the Uí Cheinselaig). The common occurrence of both these personal names, their lack of patronymics and the lack of detail in either annals or genealogies for many of the subordinate Uí Néill leaders from this period, makes it impossible to be certain about either of these suggestions but the possibility is there.

These various references, scanty though they are and often

ambiguous in import, cover a long chronological time-span and could be seen as indicating that *óenach Tailten* was a gathering of island-wide importance under the aegis of the king of Tara. Binchy was clearly justified in opposing an anachronistic nationalism which could, at its most extreme, be interpreted as depicting *óenach Tailten* as the parliament in embryo of a modern nation-state.⁸⁰ On the other hand, we have a clear seventh-century statement, in Muirchú's life of Patrick, that Tara was seen as *caput <regni> Scottorum* (the head of <the kingdom> of the Irish), that it was ruled by an *imperator* (emperor) who was descended from Niall Noígíallach and that his kingdom encompassed *huius pene insulae* (almost the entire island).⁸¹ In a world where over-kingship depended heavily on symbolic acts of submission, as well as on military assistance and extortion of revenue,⁸² it is perfectly plausible that provincial kings may have attended *óenach Tailten* on occasion. The evolutionary model of early Irish kingship, which has held sway since the 1960s, has recently been subjected to important criticism⁸³ and it may be that it is now time to look again at the "fictional" sovereignty of the early kings 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 areas⁸⁴ and it is a striking fact that so many of the relatively short list of annal references to *óenach Tailten* deal with failures to hold the assembly. One of these, in A.U. 873 states that failure to hold the *óenach* without good and sufficient cause – *sine causa iusta et digna* – was something which has 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.

Cuán Úa Lothcháin's eleventh-century poem states that five hundred *óenaig* had been held between the *óenach* of Patrick until the "*dub-óenach*" or Black-*óenach* of Donnchad. This has been identified by his modern editor, Edward Gwynn, as being the fair disrupted in A.U. 927 and in this he was followed by Daniel Binchy.⁸⁵ This is a modern inference though a very reasonable one; the annal entry refers to a disturbance while Donnchad was presiding at the *óenach* but the annalist does not use the phrase *dub-óenach*. It is important to note, as Gwynn pointed out, that this 927 date presumes that the figure of five hundred *óenaig* is something of an approximation and that Cuán

does not make any reference to the years when the annalists recorded the absence of a fair. On the other hand, the poet's identification of a seventy-nine year gap, between the *dub-óenach* and Máel Sechnaill's revival of the festivity,⁸⁶ corresponds reasonably well with the annalistic evidence. The celebration of *óenach Tailten* by Máel Sechnaill is recorded in *Chronicon Scottorum* under the year 1005 (*recte* 1007) which leaves a gap of eighty years. Given the different ways in which one might mark year's end in the Middle Ages, this seems a reasonable approximation.

The forty kings who are identified by Cúán as those who celebrated *óenaig Tailten* are all, bar one, said to be descendants of Niall Noígíallach. The exception is the legendary Connacht king, Ailill (Molt). The forty kings are subdivided into the various Uí Néill dynasties: members of the Cenél Loegaire, Cenél Cairpre, Síol nÁedo Sláine, Clann Cholmáin, Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill. As Gwynn indicated in his edition, this list can be broadly correlated with the known Uí Néill kings of Tara.⁸⁷ Since the poem is a praise-poem in favour of Máel Sechnaill, himself an Uí Néill king of Tara, and of his actions in reviving the festival, this is not particularly surprising. The fact that the local Síol nÁedo Sláine kings are not given prominence is equally unproblematic, given Máel Sechnaill's dynastic ancestry among the Clann Cholmáin who were long-standing rivals of their eastern neighbours. As propaganda, rather than factual history, Cúán's need was to produce plausible generalisations which would suit his patron, rather than a precise account of the known details concerning a festivity which he states had not been celebrated by a Tara king for some eighty years.

It might be that holding *óenach Tailten* on an annual basis was an aspiration rather than an automatic reality for the early Tara kings. As an assembly apparently held under the immediate aegis of the most powerful Síol nÁedo Sláine king of the day, possibly in association 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. If, as I have argued above, one of the primary purposes of the *óenach* was to redistribute agricultural renders to one's subordinates, the presence of the Uí Néill overlord would become even more important. Disturbances, interruptions or cancellations illustrated a Tara king's weakness; holding a successful gathering, in contrast, could bolster a new king or one weakened by defeats elsewhere. This, after all, is what is implied in the prose

Dindshenchas on *óenach Carmuin*:

For holding it the Leinstermen (were promised) corn and milk and freedom from control of any (other) province in Ireland; that they should have men, royal heroes; tender women: good cheer in every several house, every fruit like a show (?): and nets full (of fish) from waters. But if it was not held, they should have decay and early greyness and young kings.⁸⁸

Propaganda might state that all four provincial kings were present on a regular basis at *óenach Tailten* and strong Tara 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 A.U. 827, or even from the Síol nÁedo Sláine themselves, as in A.U. 717. Those Tara kings who were under threat from more junior candidates within the Uí Néill dynasties or from strong provincial kings, such as Cathal mac Finguine of Munster or Muirgius mac Tommaltaig of Connacht, may have found it difficult on occasion to exercise the necessary control over the Síol nÁedo Sláine kings, or to demand the presence of their more powerful subordinates from elsewhere on the island. Similarly, it was only powerful Tara 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, from Kells to Navan, 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 Síol nÁedo Sláine forts; one whose ramparts – massively substantial at the present day – were said to have been blessed by the saint himself. In its immediate vicinity was a church claimed to have been founded by a progenitor of the royal house, whose dimensions resembled that of Solomon's temple. In close proximity to these two settlements was an area which appears to have been demarcated by ancestral burial mounds and prehistoric stone monuments and it is here that the Uí Néill kings of Tara were wont to hold their *óenach*-assemblies. Such assemblies represented a communal treat proffered by high-kings in years when they effectively dominated Brega and every year where possible. They symbolised the Tara kings' overlordship of the fertile lands of the east midlands. During the festivities, visitors from afar would be guaranteed immunity from attack and over-kings from other parts of Ireland would accept the hospitality of the lord of Tara, thus acknowledging his suzerainty.

Óenach Tailten is thus crucial to the history of the high-kingship of Ireland but, paradoxically, I would argue, its importance lies in the limited nature of an over-king's control in an area in which regional power was concentrated in local hands.

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- The following is an expanded version of an article published elsewhere under the title "*Óenach Tailten*, the Blackwater valley and the Uí Néill kings of Tara". As it is a study concerned primarily with the regional rather than the national importance of *Óenach Tailten*, I would like to thank Séamus Mac Gabhann for offering me the opportunity of outlining my ideas in greater detail before those who know the area much better than I do. I would also like to thank Mr Vincent Garvey and Mr Robert Rooney of Oristown who so kindly introduced me to many of the sites in the districts of Teltown, Oristown and Donaghpatrick. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Colmán Etchingham, who read a number of earlier drafts, and to my D.Phil supervisor, Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards, who suggested in conversation that control over Mag mBreg was a vital ingredient in the Tara kingship. The seed sown on that occasion spawned much of this paper.
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- K. Mulchrone, "Die Abfassungszeit und Überlieferung der Vita Tripartita", in *Z.C.P.*, xvi (1927), pp 1-94; K.H. Jackson, "The date of the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick" in *Z.C.P.*, xli (1986), pp 5-45; G. Mac Eoin, "The dating of Middle Irish texts", in *Brit. Acad. Proc.*, lxviii (1982), pp 109-38; F.J. Byrne and P. Francis, "Two lives of St. Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*" in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, cxiv (1994), pp 5-117, pp 6-7. The episodes I discuss here are in *Bethu Phátraic: the tripartite life of Patrick*, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin 1939), pp 43-48 and (with English translation) *The tripartite life of Patrick, with other documents*, ed. W. Stokes (London 1887), pp 64-75.
- A.D. 1302: church de DONPATRICK (*Calendar of documents relating to Ireland, 1302-7*, ed. H.S. Sweetman and G.F. Handcock (London 1886), p. 260); A.D. 1540-1: DONAPATRYK (*Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, pp. 112-3); A.D. 1654-6: DONOUGHPATRICK (*The Civil Survey A.D. 1654-56, County of Meath*, ed. R.C. Simington (Dublin 1940), p. 296).
- Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. A. Colunga and L. Turrado (7th edition, Madrid 1975), 3 Reg 6:2 (1 Kgs 6:2).
- L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979), p. 132 §9-10, pp 166-171 § 1.
- For survey of proffered dates to date, together with the outlines of a new dating scheme, see Byrne and Francis, "Two lives", p. 8.
- John O'Donovan argued that Ráth Airthir was in the modern townland of Oristown; *O.S. letters, Meath* p. 20 § 58 and this suggestion is followed by F.J. Byrne, "Historical note on Cnogha (Knowth)" Appendix to G. Eogan, "Excavations at Knowth, county Meath 1962-1965" in *R.I.A. Proc.*, lxvi C (1968), pp 383-400, p.394; F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973), p. 87; Byrne and Francis, "Two lives", p.100. Máire MacNeill, in contrast, followed William Wilde in suggesting the large, triple-ramparted fort hidden by the trees immediately to the east of the modern church of Donaghpatrick: W. Wilde, *The beauties of the Boyne and its tributary, the Blackwater*, 3rd edition (Dublin 1949), p.130; M. MacNeill, *The festival of Lughnasa* (Oxford 1962), p.313. In this they have been followed by Micheal Herity, "Motes and mounds at royal sites in Ireland" in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, cxiii (1993), pp 127-51, pp 142-3 and Leo Swan, *Teltown: An ancient assembly site in County Meath* (Archaeology Ireland Heritage Guide No.3, Nov. 1998). O'Donovan's etymology of Oristown: *Baile Órthaidhe* from earlier **baile áirthir* is not clearly corroborated by the A.D. 1540-41 form OVERESTON (*Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, p. 114) or by A.D. 1663 ORISTOWNE (*Inq. cancell. Hib. repert: Lagenia*, Car II §3). I am grateful to Brian Ó Catháin of NUI Maynooth who brought to my attention Thomas Westropp's suggestion of a possible derivation for Oristown from *Baile (Mhic) Fheorais* (Birmingham's place): T. Westropp, "The marriages of the gods at the sanctuary of Tailltiu", *Folklore*, xxxi (1920), pp. 109-41, pp 124-5. As yet, however, I have been unable to identify any Birmingham holdings in this area. Although I argued at the Teltown conference of July 1998 (NUI Maynooth) for O'Donovan's Oristown identification, further visits to the area have convinced me of the superior merits of Wilde's and MacNeill's views.
- L. Bieler, *Four Latin lives of St. Patrick* (Dublin 1971), pp 149-50. I suggest the possible translation of Latin *prae* by "east of" on the grounds both that the Irish preposition *ar* which is likely to lie behind the author's choice can mean "in front of" and "to the east of" while the noun *airther* can mean both "front part" and "the east". *DILA* p. 241:46-69, p.365: 64-77.
- It is possible that this was a son of Bressal and grandson of Finsnecht Fledach, both of whom died in A.U. 695. If so, this would make him a rival descendant of Aed Sláine through the latter's son Dúnchad.
- Byrne and Francis, "Two lives", p. 14. Byrne once suggested that a man recorded in the Book of Ballymote as Ailillén mac Aeladaig m. Aeda Odba, of a branch of the Gailenga, was a brother of the Gormgal mac Éladaig rex Cnogba (king of Knowth) who died in A.U. 789: F.J. Byrne, "Historical note" pp 392-3. Provided the identification of Odba with Navag 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 Gormgal's family, as identified by Byrne and Francis. It would, however, mean ignoring the testimony of the Tripartite Life that Máel Odar was a son of Aed Sláine.
- J. Colgan *Trias Thaumaturgae*, ed. P. Ó Riain (reprint Blackrock 1997 of original edition published Louvain 1647), p. 184, note 9; *Inq. cancell. Hib. repert I*, Meath Car.I. § 7 (A.D. 1625) which refers to the manor of Newcastle in Crevin al. Newstone. Newstone is a townland in the parish of Drumcondra (*General alphabetical index to the townlands and towns, parishes and baronies of Ireland, Baltimore 1986*, p. 738). A number of the placenames associated with the manor in the *Inquisitions* can be identified in the vicinity of Newstone on the OS 6" townland index of Co. Meath, Sheet III.
- Senchas na relec in Lebor na Huidre; Book of the Dun Cow* ed. R.I. Best and O. Bergin (Dublin 1929) – hereafter cited as *L.U.* – p. 127: 4052 – 4056; *Fingal Rónáin and other stories*, ed. D. Greene (Dublin 1955), p. 31:555-562.
- Trip. life*, ed. Stokes, pp 73-5; Hogan, *Onomasticon*, p. 637. In the genealogies, a variant spelling of Conaing is given as Conac, showing the same modification of *ng* to hard *g* (which can equally well be spelt *c* in final syllables in Old Irish orthography); *Corpus genealogiarum. Hiberniae*, ed. M.A. O'Brien (Dublin 1962), p. 554.
- Féire Óengusna Céili Dé: the martyrology of Óengus the Culdee*, ed. W. Stokes (London 1904) p. 112, p. 248; *Féire Húi Gormáin: the martyrology of Gorman*, ed. W. Stokes (London 1895) p.70, p.266; A. F. M. *sub anno* 693 pp 296-7 fn p.
- Byrne, "Historical note", p. 390.
- P. Walsh, "Irish Ocha, Ochann" in *Ériu*, viii (1915), pp 75-7.
- Byrne, "Historical note", p. 383, pp 396-7; Byrne, *Irish kings*, p. 88, p.118; Byrne & Francis, "Two lives", p. 14.
- D.A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship* (Oxford 1970), p. 20; F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin 1997), p.403; *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* ed. D.A. Binchy (6 vols, Dublin 1979), p. 4:4; p. 39:32; p. 54:12.
- Binchy, *Corpus*, pp 1431:32 – 1432:10; *Crith Gablach* ed. D.A. Binchy (Dublin 1941), p. 83; G. Mac Niocaill, "Christian influences in early Irish law" in *Irland und Europa*:

- Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter* ed. P. Ni Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart 1984), pp 151-6, p. 155; D. Ó Corráin, "Irish vernacular law and the Old Testament" in *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission* ed. P. Ni Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart 1987), pp 284-307, pp 304-6; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 568.
22. O'Daly, "Airgiolla poem", p. 182 §31-2; F. Kelly, *Audacht Moráin* (Dublin 1976), pp 8-10 § 28.
 23. D.A. Binchy, "Bretha Déin Chécht" in *Ériu*, xx (1966), pp 1-66, p. 24 §4.
 24. *DIL* B p. 110-10-44.
 25. Kelly, *Farming*, pp 369-70.
 26. *Longes mac nUislen: the exile of the sons of Uisliu*, ed. V. Hull (New York 1949), pp 46-8 §11, §15; see also J. Carey, "The heavenly city" in *Celtica*, xviii (1986), pp 87-107, p. 88; *Mesca Ulad*, ed. J. Carmichael Watson (Dublin 1967), p. 3:53-6, pp 11: 254 - 12:269, p. 22:506-7, p. 35: 784-6, p. 36:815-6, p. 37: 831-2; *Togail Bruidne da Derga*, ed. E. Knott, (Dublin 1936), p. 15 §56, p.26 § 89; *Tochmarc Ferbe*, ed. E. Windisch in *Irische Texte III*, (Leipzig 1897), pp 445-56 p. 508:627-8; *Aided Con Culainn*, ed. A.G. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, (Dublin 1933), p. 78 §9; *Bethu Brigte*, ed. D. Ó hAodha (Dublin 1978), p.4:115-7; *A.U. sub annis* 604, 777; *Cocad Fergus*, ed. M. Dobbs in *Rev. Celt.*, xl (1923), pp 404-23, p.408 §3; *Táin Bó Cuailnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin 1967), pp 21-2:768-9, p. 24:875-7, p. 29:1068-74, p. 43:1581-2; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 274.
 27. Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 238.4-19.
 28. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, p. 138:36-7.
 29. M. Medlycott, "Standing stones in central Leinster" (unpubl. M.A. thesis, 2 vols, UCD 1989); F. McCormick, *et al.*, "A pagan-Christian transitional burial at Kiltullagh" in *Emania*, xiii (1995), pp 89-98; R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, vol. 1 (Dublin 1945), p.5.
 30. T. Charles-Edwards, "Boundaries in Irish law" in *Medieval settlement: continuity and change* ed. P.H. Sawyer (London 1976), pp 83-7; T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford 1993), pp 261-2; D. McManus, *A guide to Ogam* (Maynooth 1991), pp 163-5; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 409.
 31. *DIL* D 448:33-76. For discussion of prehistoric mounds in Irish medieval tradition, see Byrne, "Historical note" pp 383 - 387; T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The semantics of *síd*" in *Éigse*, xvii (1977-8), pp 137-55; T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The eponym of Cnogba" in *Éigse*, xxiii (1989), pp 27-38; C. Swift, "Pagan monuments and Christian legal centres in early Meath" in *Ríocht na Midhe*, ix.2 (1996), pp 1-26.
 32. *Senchas na Relec* in *L.U.* p.129: 4103-6; *Aided Nath I* in *L.U.* p. 94:2908-9.
 33. *The Metrical Dindshenchas part IV* ed. E. Gwynn, (reprint Dublin 1991 of original edition published Dublin 1924), pp 146-163.
 34. *T.B.C. (Leinster)*, pp 109-110: 3937-80.
 35. MacNeill, *Lughnasa*, pp 312-323. No detailed account of the damage done by the bulldozing is yet available in print but see *Archaeology Ireland*, xi.2 (Summer 1997), p.4. It is not clear whether the photograph in Swan, *Teltown* represents the Knockans prior to the bulldozing or post-reconstruction of the damaged area.
 36. *Lebor na Cert: the Book of Rights* ed. M. Dillon (Dublin 1982), pp 72-3, pp 76-7.
 37. *L.U.*, p.133:4217; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, p. 150:65-6; p.154:104-12.
 38. *The Metrical Dindshenchas Part III* ed. E. Gwynn (reprint Dublin 1991 of original edition published Dublin 1913), p.16:200-4; see also *The Metrical Dindshenchas Part II* ed. E. Gwynn (reprint Dublin 1991 of original edition published Dublin 1906), p.78:9-12.
 39. Ó Cathasaigh, "*Síd*", p.150.
 40. C. Doherty, "The monastic town in early medieval Ireland" in *The comparative history of urban origins in non-Roman Europe*, ed. H.B. Clarke and A. Simms (2 vols, Oxford 1985), i pp 45-75, p. 52.
 41. C. Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey* (Dublin 1997), p. 319.
 42. M. Dillon, "The inauguration of O'Connor" in *Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn* ed. J.A. Watt, J.B. Morrall & F. X. Martin (Dublin 1961), pp 186-202, p.189, p.197; *The genealogies, tribes and customs of Hy Fiachrach* ed. John O'Donovan (Dublin 1844), pp 442-4.
 43. M. Joynt & E. Knott, *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language: F* (Dublin

- 1957), pp 304:19-305:8; "The first battle of Moytura" ed. J. Frazer in *Ériu*, viii (1916), pp 1-63, p. 42:6. Ó Cathasaigh's identification of *forad* associated with a druid in a text dealing with the expulsion of the Déisi is here deemed problematical, on the grounds of the palatalised *r* in one version of the word and the generally corrupt nature of the text. See Ó Cathasaigh, "*Síd*", p.150; "The expulsion of the Dessi" ed. K. Meyer, *Y Cymmrodor*, xiv (1901), pp 101-35, p. 118 § 19; "The expulsion of the Déisi" ed. K. Meyer, *Ériu*, iii (1907), pp 135-42, p. 140:178. In any case, even if this was a reference to a *forad*, the context is not particularly otherworldly; two druids bring a gift of Gaulish food and wine to their foster-father, to trick him into prophesying, while drunk, as to the fate of the Déisi in forthcoming battles with the Osraige.
44. *The Book of Leinster formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. R.I. Best, O. Bergin & M.A. O'Brien (Dublin 1924), p. 121:3821-3823.
 45. Byrne, *Irish kings*, p. 56; J. Carey, *King of Mysteries: early Irish religious writings* (Dublin 1998), p.114, translating *The Saltair na Rann: a collection of early Middle Irish poems* ed. W. Stokes (Oxford 1883), p. 8:502.
 46. Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 916: 36-7.
 47. E. Bhreathnach, "The *tech midchúarta*: the house of the mead circuit", *Archaeology Ireland* xii.4 (Winter 1998), pp 20-22.
 48. *Bk Leinster*, p. 12:3109-13.
 49. G. Petrie, "On the history and antiquities of Tara Hill", *R. I. A. Trans.* xviii, (1839), pp 25-232, p. 128, p.137-8, p. 153 but note p. 156 where he simply opts for a western *Forad* (i.e. with the king's house to the east); R.A.S. Macalister, "Temair Breg: a study of the remains and traditions of Tara", *R.I.A. Proc.* xxxivC (1917-19), pp 231-404, pp 244-6. The Rennes copy of *Dindgnat Temrach*, (published by W. Stokes in "The prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas" *Rev. Celt.*, xv (1894), pp 272-336, pp 418-84) was the primary text used by Macalister. This has the *anotir* reading (p. 281 § 9) as does that in the facsimile of the *Book of Ballymote*, (fo.350a 7-8). However Macalister says (p. 234, p.244) he also consulted the reproduction of the Book of Leinster and this reads clearly *anotar* (fo.30a 39) as in the modern diplomatic edition, cited in the previous footnote.
 50. Byrne, *Irish kings*, p. 56; S. P. Ó Riordáin, *Tara: the monuments on the hill* (Dundalk 1954), p.14; D.L. Swan, "The hill of Tara, county Meath: the evidence of aerial photography", in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, cviii (1978), pp 51-66, pp 54-9.
 51. E. Bhreathnach, "The topography of Tara: the documentary evidence" in *Discovery Programme Reports 2* (Dublin 1995), pp 68-76, p.71; C. Newman, *Tara survey*, pp 77-86; O'Donovan, *O.S. letters, Meath*, p. 88 § 222.
 52. *The Metrical Dindshenchas part I* ed. E. Gwynn, (reprint Dublin 1991 of original edition published Dublin 1903), pp 2-5; see also Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p.194: 21; p.354:73.
 53. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p. 2: 5-12; Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, p. 15:340-3; M. Dillon, "Stories from the law-tracts" in *Ériu* xi (1932), pp 42-65, p.50.
 54. Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 50:28-30, p. 54:12-22; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p. 168; Binchy, *Crith Gablach*, p.20 § 35-6; Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 4:2-11.
 55. C. Doherty, "Exchange and trade in early medieval Ireland", in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, cx (1980), pp 67-89, pp 81-84. Ecclesiastical patronage of *óenach Tailten*, apart from the A.U. 831 entry, is also indicated in A.U. 784 and in the depiction of the role of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise in a Middle Irish text, *Óenach Tailten*, which is discussed below. See also Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, pp 156-8:153-160.
 56. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, p.132 § 9.
 57. E. Mac Neill, "Ancient Irish law: the law of status or franchise" in *R.I.A. Proc.* xxxviC (1923), pp 265-316, p. 302 fn.1; O'Donovan, *O.S. letters, Meath*, p.11 § 31.
 58. O'Donovan, *O.S. letters, Meath*, p. 28 §77.
 59. Doherty, "Exchange and trade" pp 72-6, pp 81-4.
 60. *L.U.*, p. 133: 4212.
 61. Binchy, *Corpus*, pp 481-5; p. 482:21-2; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 533 §1-2.
 62. Kelly, *Farming*, pp 458-61, pp 533-6, p. 318; Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 483:30-1; p. 779.30, p. 920.11.
 63. T. Charles-Edwards, "Early medieval kingships in the British Isles" in *The origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett (Leicester 1989), pp 28-39, esp. p.30, p.39.

64. *Forbuis Druim Damhghaire*, ed. M.L. Sjoestedt, *Rev. Celt.*, xliii (1926), pp 1-123, pp 12-3. This translation is that of Sjoestedt, translated from the French.
65. Kelly, *Farming*, p.318; Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 483:12-19; p.2230:17-20; Binchy, *Crith Gablach*, p. 3:71-76. I am grateful to Colmán Etchingham for the reference to *Bretha Nemed Toisech*.
66. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p.24:305-8.
67. Kelly, *Farming*, p. 99, p. 360, pp 458-61; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, pp 2-25.
68. *Adomnán's life of Columba* ed. M.O. Anderson (Oxford 1991), pp 184-186 § III 3; *Vita S. Brigidae* ed. Bollandists in *Acta Sanctorum : Februarii* I p.122 § V:36; S. Connolly, "Vita Prima Brigidae: Background and Historical Value" in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, cxix (1989), pp 5-49, p. 23 § 39.
69. Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 1788:1-7; Kelly, *Farming*, p. 538 § 3; *T.B.C. (Leinster)*, p.64:2357; *Tochmarc Emere* in *L.U.* p.309:10192-7; *Oenach Tailten* in *Bk Leinster* p. 1204; *Sanas Cormaic* ed. K. Meyer (Dublin 1912), p.32 § 385. See D.A. Binchy, "The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara" in *Ériu*, xviii (1958), pp 113-38, p.124.
70. Binchy, *Crith Gablach*, p.102.
71. *L.U.* p. 133:4206-14; Gwynn, *Dindshenchas III*, p.18:214-7.
72. See above, fn. 69.
73. Binchy, "The Fair", pp 117-8.
74. Binchy, "The Fair", p. 121-2.
75. O'Brien, *Corpus geneal. Hib.*, p. 161:144 c 6.
76. *A.F.M.* p. 414 fn. y.
77. O' Daly, "Airgialla poem", pp 184-5 §3-4.
78. Binchy, "The Fair", p. 117, p. 121.
79. Binchy, "The Fair", p. 113.
80. Binchy, "The Fair", p. 115.
81. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, p. 74.
82. Binchy, *Celtic kingship*, p. 31; Byrne, *Irish kings*, pp 31-3, pp 41-6; M. Gerriets, "Kingship and exchange in pre-Viking Ireland", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, xiii (Summer 1987), pp 39-72.
83. C. Etchingham, "Early medieval Irish history" in *Progress in medieval Irish studies* ed. K. McCone and K. Simms (Maynooth 1996), pp 123-153, pp 127-34.
84. C. Etchingham, *Viking raids on early Church settlements in the ninth century: a reconsideration of the annals* (Maynooth 1996); C. Swift, "Dating Irish grave-slabs: the evidence of the annals" in *From the Isles of the North - medieval art in Ireland and Britain*, ed. C. Bourke (Belfast 1996), pp 245-49, pp 247-8.
85. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, p. 418; Binchy, "The Fair", p.120.
86. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, p. 160: 189-90.
87. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas IV*, p. 158:177-88; pp 418-9; Byrne, *Irish kings*, pp 275-6.
88. Stokes, "Rennes *Dindshenchas*", pp 311-314 § 18.