The local context of Óenach Tailten

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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 coindiu Temrae secu 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 Ul 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. The central section of this text opens with the donation to Patrick’s cult of the royal dun (stronghold) of Ath 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 ConaU 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 brothers 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 Tailten and the sanctuary at Domnach Pátraic. Each of these three sites is said to have been blessed in turn by Patrick and each is promised rights of sanctuary.

The saint begins with the fort of Ráth Airthir itself. He prophesied it would be the place of the assembly for the tuatha (kingdoms) for both ordinary and extraordinary assemblies and that only one wounding would ever take place there. The circumstances of this wounding are then given: an episode involving the knifing of a warrior called Mace Bresail by descendants of Æed 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 Êladach mac Máile Odruic tigerna Creinthinnae (lord of Creithenn) while other connections can be drawn with the settlements of Slane and Knowth. References to a Meath lordship of Creithenn 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, Creithainne. The eighth-century association with Slane and
Knowth corresponds to John Colgan's seventeenth-century identification of Cremthenn with the area then known as the barony of Slane and is reflected in the placename "Crevin" witnessed in the Inquisitions of Charles I where it is associated with the parish of Drumcondra, Co. Meath. This section in the Tripartite Life is immediately followed by a connected episode in which Patrick grants sanctuary to the area of Óenach Taltain, 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 Conaül 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 mae Irgailagh, 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 Aed Sláine through his grandson Conaül and the family is identified in Ann. Tig. 633 as the Ó 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 tóir mace Conaill, presumably for tóir mace Conaing. Taken in conjunction with the other land unit entitled ó chill sair (from the church [i.e. Donaghpatrick] eastwards), it would appear that the Ó Chonaing were based in the Blackwater valley.

These two families of Síl nAedo Sláine, the Ó 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 Aed 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 Taltain in 717. He himself, his father and his son were all killed in battles with the Ó Chonaing but another son, Fergal mac Fogartach, died as rex desider 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. Aed mac Dluthaig (whence the Síl nDluthaig) is identified in Ann. Tig. 689 as the king of Fir Chul. Glosses in fifteenth-century manuscripts of Féitre Óengusso and Féitire Gormáin indicate that this kingdom included Imblech Fia(ich) and Mag nBolec, identified by John O'Donovan as the parishes of Moybolgue and Emlagh in the modern barony of Lower Kells. The Fir Chul are also closely associated with events at Tuiélén (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, Aed's son, Cú Row, died in a battle at Sliab Funaid while in alliance with the Ót Meith of the Airгла. His brother, Flann mac Aed, was himself killed in a battle at Asal (half-barony of Moyasher, Co. Westmeath) in A.U. 714. Another brother fell at Kells in A.U. 718 and in A.U. 743, Déngle mac Flainn, rt Cúl died in yet another battle with the Ó Chonaing.

Judging from the annalistic record, there were four principal branches of the Síl nAedo Sláine in the late seventh and first half of the eighth century. Of these four, the Ó 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 Ót Néill monuments such as Cormac mac Airt's settlement at Kells and the burial mound of Niall Nóigallach, thought to be at Faughan Hill, across the valley from Donaghpatrick. 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 nAedo 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 Ó Chonaing. This appears to be the implication of the reference to Tóir mace Conaigg in the Tripartite Life. Professor Byrne has suggested that these dynasts sub-
severely ousted the descendants of Máel Odar, taking over the kingship of Knowth and focussing their energies on eastern expansion. Meanwhile the rulers of Fir Chúl, whose homeland lay immediately to the north are stated to have controlled Rath Airthir by A.D. 810. (A later king of Ráth Airthir, who died in A.D. 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 nAedo Sláine hierarchy. That certainly would seem to be the implication of Patrick's blessing of the ramparts of Rath Airthir: that as long as the world lasts, they should be the place of assembly for both ordinary and extraordinary gatherings of the tuatha.

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 rig* or “king’s land” which consisted of certain lands specifically set aside for the king’s use during his reign. Two legal glosses, to be discussed in more detail below, indicate that it is the king’s duty to hold *óenagiig* on king’s land. I would suggest, therefore, that the area of Ráth Airthir, Donaghpatrick and Teltown should be seen as the *mruig rig* of the leading ruler of the Síl nAedo 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 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 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*. The author of the Tripartite uses the phrase *blat òenag 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 Chéacht*, where *blat* is a synonym for *baile in óenag* (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 *faithche* – an area of open ground surrounding important settlements. 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 *Bebhretha*, it is identified as being “as far as the sound of a bell or the crowing of a cock reaches.”

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 trees, pillar-stones and pools of water and there are legal references to the possibility of finding deer within its confines. 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 blai such as wood-blai, pool-blai or road-blai 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-blai is demarcated by the waters of a river or a lake or a pool, while a blai esbaide or blai 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 blai in this catalogue which seem most relevant to the probable location of 6enach Tailten; the first being the aitblai or rock-blai where possible markers are listed as the ail adrada (rock of adoration), ail annscuith (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 altar but an open-air Christian altar forming a boundary marker is difficult to visualise. 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. As it happens, the stone pillar at Island is inscribed with an early ogam (the immovable rock) or pool-blai (orad-structures) for the men of Connacht. This description of

6enach 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 Connal, the lieic or stones of Grup and Gar. There are also saga references to the actions of Amargin, who littered the area around Tailtiu and Ráth Airthir with stones. An entry in A.U. 831 talks of a disturbance about the forad-structures of 6enach Tailten. Unfortunately, we lack more precise topographical reference points for blai 6enaig 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 blai 6enaig Tailten as suggested by nineteenth-century writers.

The reference to forad-structures at 6enach Tailten is particularly interesting. In the eleventh or early twelfth-century compilation, Lebor na Céart or the Book of Rights, a verse refers to the fact of forad rig Airgialla for deis rig Tailtean (the forad of the king of Airgiala 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 issued a thomus co ma ruc cladem righ Airgialla co hind lámh na daill lin (the distance of it is so that the sword of the king of Airgiala may reach the tip of the cup-bearer’s hand). 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 Genemain Aeda Slàine and Cuán 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 mür Echach (the rampart of Eochu) and a further twenty for their queens on the mür of Eochu’s wife. There were also forad-structures for the men of Connacht. This description of
multiple foraid, linked to specific regional authorities, corresponds to similar evidence in a poem on Óenach Carmuin.\textsuperscript{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 sid.”\textsuperscript{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 sid 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.\textsuperscript{40}

This definition, though recently endorsed by Conor Newman\textsuperscript{41} 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 inauguration, the word normally used is cairn\textsuperscript{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 forad in the plural.\textsuperscript{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 nGiall.\textsuperscript{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 foradhá 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.\textsuperscript{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; Diligid. This reads córus Óenach i. a glanad ocus a forada do dénúm (the prescribed arrangements of an Óenach, that is, its clearing and building its forad-structures).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 forad-structures, both monumental and temporary, has already been indicated in the citations listed above.

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 la thach ind Fh) forad la taeb ind righthaige anlár (the site of the Forad to the west side of the king’s house). Elsewhere, the same text states that Tea, the wife of Erimón was buried between the Forad and the king’s house.\textsuperscript{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 righthaige anlár (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 “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).\textsuperscript{50} Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman, in Discovery Programme publications, opt instead for the earlier, Book of Leinster, anlár (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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{forad}-structure from such efforts is clearly speculative. Not only are such studies dependent on the assumption that the eighteenth-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 eighteenth-century \textit{Forad}. In a poem entitled \textit{Temair} I by its editor, Edward Gwynn, the site of Tara as a whole is called \textit{forad na rig} or \textit{Forad} of Kings.\textsuperscript{52} This is patently a symbolic title of the seat/location of the king and tells us little about the specific function of \textit{forad}. On the whole, it would seem that the name \textit{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 \textit{blat oenaig 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 \textit{mur} 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 \textit{foraid}. This description agrees with what we know of other \textit{oenach} sites which, like \textit{oenach Tailten}, are often described as being outside areas of normal habitation, made up of numerous mounds, and as sites of ancient burial places.\textsuperscript{53}

However, it is important to recognise that while \textit{blat oenaig 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 Raith 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 \textit{Annals of Ulster sub anno} 789 which indicates that it was at Raith Airthir that the relics of Patrick were dishonoured by the high-king Donnchad m. Domnaill on the occasion of an \textit{oenach}. The wording does not specify that this was \textit{oenach Tailten} but given the high status of Donnchad and the presence of Patrician relics – which are stated to have been present at \textit{oenach Tailten} in A.U. 831 – it seems a probable inference. It would thus appear that these twin sites provided the central focus, in the \textit{faithche} of which was \textit{blat oenaig Tailten}.

This coincides with the evidence of a variety of early medieval texts which indicate that an \textit{oenach} 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 \textit{dun} of a king with its \textit{faithche} at the time of an \textit{oenach}. A gloss on Heptad 61 refers to giving land to the king for the specific purpose of holding an \textit{oenach}. A \textit{Dindshenchas} poem on Loch Garman (Wexford) identifies a king's demesne as an \textit{oenach}-site where boats assemble. Perhaps most tellingly, the law-text \textit{Crith Gablach} states that it is the responsibility of the king to convene an \textit{oenach}, although only with the agreement of his \textit{tuath} 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 \textit{oenach}, revert to its original owner. A second glossator points out that giving the land to the king means that there will be no festival (\textit{fetid}) for the patron saint.\textsuperscript{54} As Charles Doherty has pointed out in his discussion of Irish \textit{oenaig}, there is frequent mention of both royal and ecclesiastical presidencies of \textit{oenach}-assemblies in our sources – as in the famous incident of AU 800 when the local king died at the \textit{cercio ferie filii Cuilinn Luscan} (the \textit{oenach} of the feast of Mac Cuilinn of Lusk).\textsuperscript{55} In the light of references such as these, it seems reasonably plausible that the location of \textit{blat oenaig Tailten} in the vicinity of both a royal fort and a church was not coincidental, and that both the ruler of Raith Airthir and his ecclesiastical counterpart at Donaghpatrick played vital roles in convening \textit{oenach 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 \textit{agon regale} or royal assembly.\textsuperscript{56} The existence of this legal evidence would also seem to strengthen the suggestion, made above on the basis of annalistic evidence, that the \textit{mruig rig} of the SI n\textsuperscript{e} AoEo Sláine probably consisted of the area surrounding Raith Airthir and Donaghpatrick and included the modern townland of Teltown.

This brings me to the question of a role of an \textit{oenach}: 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".\textsuperscript{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 pair of heavy cattle". This fits with Doherty's emphasis on the economic aspects of the Óenach. He sees what he terms earlier tribal Óenach as being the occasion of ceremonial gift-giving between kings, the acceptance of which signified 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.

It is worth considering here the time of year at which Óenach Taillen was celebrated. According to the Middle Irish text, Genemain Óeda Sláíne, it was held at Lugnasad. 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 Cúin Aicilline 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. Cúin Aicilline 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 Samhain (the late winter festival) and again at Beltain (early summer).

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 sambid or "wether of summer food". 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 rig 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." 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 Danaghair or the Siege of Damh Danaghair, 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 Neill 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 tuatha 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 Mihrarach 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.

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. Cuán Ua Lothcháin's early eleventh-century poem on Œnach Tailten praises Mael Sechnaill, amongst other things, for his generosity in distributing corn, milk and mallow. These are all items which occur in the lists of foodrenders in Cúan Aicilline, Crith Gablach, and Bretha Nemed Toisech. Furthermore, the Middle Irish poem on another Lugnasad fair, Œnach Carmuin, stresses that in addition to the foreign trade discussed by Doherty, markets (morgaid) in food and livestock also took place. This would seem a natural development if the proffering and redistribution of food renders were a normal part of Œnach-festivities.

Commentators since Doherty have emphasised other, non-mercantile, aspects of an Œnach. In his recent book, Early Irish Farming, Fergus Kelly makes a number of passing references to the holding of Œnai as 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 Œnach assemblies. In an annal entry for 811, it is stated that the community of Tallaght prevented the Œnach Tailten from being held that year connacht-ech na carpat (so that neither horse nor chariot arrived). Kelly also stresses other aspects of an Œnach 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 Œnai. 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. Neither account states explicitly that these gatherings took place during Œnach 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 Œnach; 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 Cúan Aicilline mentions the imperative for the manchaine (dependants) of a lord to accompany him to an Œnach 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 Œnach; while wooing Emer, Cú Chulainn is described as having dressed himself in his Œnach-clothes and travelled by chariot to the Œnach while Emer and her women sat at the forad of the Œnach, near to her father's dun. A late Middle Irish story, entitled simply Œnach Tailten, tells of an incident which took place during the Œnach when a woman claimed her man had 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 Œnach-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 Tlach na Coibche or "hill of contract" at Œnach Tailten should be seen as a formal recognition of such activity.

Instead, Tlach na Coibche may reflect the legal decisions which could be made at an Œnach. The introduction to a late Middle Irish tale, Genemain Aeda Sláine, states that tributes were agreed and laws were enacted at Œnach Tailten every Lugnasad. A similar idea was also put forward in relation to Œnach Carmuin, where the poet states that the participants would discuss the dues and tributes of the province. We have already encountered other incidents which took place at Œnach 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 Œnach 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 overkingship 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 Tailtiú 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 Ua 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 Ua Conchobhair kings from Connacht, Taidelbach and Ruaidri 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 Dúngaille, had been married to Mael Sechnaill and was commemorated as *rigan rig 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 Mael Sechnaill and king of Tara, and his son, Mael 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 Sil nAedo 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, Mael Ruain.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 Sil nAedo Sláine prince. The two contenders might be Cathal mac Finsnechtai, son of a seventh-century Sil nAedo Sláine king of Tara who is commemorated in the genealogies, and Cathal mac Aedo of the Fir Chul whose death is recorded, for example, another A.U. entry reads *dál tiri Áed Allán; Cathal oc Tir dá Glas* (A meeting between Áed Allán [king of Cenél nEogain] 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 öenach) in A.U. 808, might have been intending to attack öenach Tailten. Their enemy on that occasion was Aed mac Néill of the Cenél nEogain, who is identified in A.U. 811 as being a man who might be expected to celebrate öenach Tailten in this period, and who burned the border-territories of Mide in revenge for the abortive attack. Muirgus 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 banquetting hall, the king of Leinster beside him, and the king of the Connachta behind. 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. At the same time, his statement that his examination of the evidence for öenach Tailten reinforced his previous belief in a fictional sovereignty of the Tara king over other provincial monarchs 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 Cuín’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 Conchobuir, king of Connacht) and Dondchad (possibly Dondchad Mael-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 öenach 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 öenach Tailten as the parliament in embryo of a modern nation-state. 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 Noigiallach and that his kingdom encompassed huius pene insulae (almost the entire island). In a world where over-kingship depended heavily on symbolic acts of submission, as well as on military assistance and extortion of revenue, it is perfectly plausible that provincial kings may have attended öenach Tailten on occasion. The evolutionary model of early Irish kingship, which has held sway since the 1960s, has recently been subjected to important criticism 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 areas and it is a striking fact that so many of the relatively short list of annal references to öenach Tailten deal with failures to hold the assembly. One of these, in A.U. 873 states that failure to hold the öenach 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 öenach; after all, the cancellation engendered by the activities of Tallaght, some sixty years, before has already been cited.

Cuán Úa Lotchcháin’s eleventh-century poem states that five hundred öenagig had been held between the öenach of Patrick until the “dub-öenach” or Black-öenach 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. This is a modern inference though a very reasonable one; the annal entry refers to a disturbance while Donnchad was presiding at the öenach but the annalist does not use the phrase dub-öenach. It is important to note, as Gwynn pointed out, that this 927 date presumes that the figure of five hundred öenagig 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-úenach* and Máel Sechnaill's revival of the festivity, corresponds reasonably well with the annalistic evidence. The celebration of *úenach Tailtn* by Máel Sechnaill is recorded in *Chronicon Scotorum* 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 Cúan as those who celebrated *úenach Tailtn* are all, bar one, said to be descendants of Niaill Noigiallach. The exception is the legendary Connacht king, Ailill (Molt). The forty kings are subdivided into the various Úi Néill dynasties: members of the Cenél Loegaire, Cenél Cairpre, Síl nAedo Sláine, Clann Cholmáin, Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill. As Gwynn indicated in his edition, this list can be broadly correlated with the known Úi Néill kings of Tara. Since the poem is a praise-poem in favour of Máel Sechnaill, himself an Úi Néill king of Tara, and of his actions in reviving the festival, this is not particularly surprising. The fact that the local Síl nAedo Sláine kings are not given prominence is equally unproblematical, 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, Cúan'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 *úenach Tailtn* 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 Síl nAedo 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 *úenach* was to redistribute agricultural renders to one's subordinates, the presence of the Úi Néill overlord would become even more important. Disturbances, interruptions or cancellations illustrated a Tara king's weaknesses; 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

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**Dindshenchas on *úenach Carmuín***

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 at *úenach Tailtn* 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 Síl nAedo Sláine themselves, as in A.U. 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 Muirgius mac Tommaltaig of Connacht, may have found it difficult on occasion to exercise the necessary control over the Síl nAedo 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 Donnchadh 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 Síl nAedo 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 *úenach*-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' lordship 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.
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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.

REFERENCES

1. The following is an expanded version of an article published elsewhere under the title "Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater valley and the Ul 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 Seamus Mac Gabhann for offering me the opportunity of outlining my ideas in greater detail before those who know the area 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, Orlistown 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 Míbreg was a vital ingredient in the Tara kingship. The seed sown on that occasion spawned much of this paper.


5. The episodes I discuss here are in Betha Phádraic: the tripartite life of Patrick, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin 1993), pp 43-44 and (with English translation) The tripartite life of Patrick, with other documents, ed. W. Stokes (London 1887), pp 64-75.


9. For survey of prefaced dates to date, together with the outlines of a new dating scheme, see Byrne and Francis, "Two lives", p. 8.

10. John O’Donovan argued that Rith Aithirh 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 Cnocba (Knowth)" Appendix to G. Eogan, "Excavations at Knowth, county Meath 1962-1965" in R.I.A. Proc., ivi 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. Mary MacNeill, in contrast, followed William Wilde in suggesting that the large, ramparted forest 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,
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1957), pp. 354:19-306.5; “The first battle of Moytura” ed. J. Fraser in Ériu, viii (1916), p. 1-63, p. 426. Ó Cathasaigh’s identification of forad associated with a druid in a text discussing the origins of the druid in  Óenach Tailten, and the details 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, “Stíl”, p. 150; “The expulsion of the Densi” ed. K. Meyer, Y Cymmerador, x (1901), pp. 131-55, p. 151; “The expulsion of the Densi” ed. K. Meyer in Ériu, iii (1907), pp. 135-42, p. 149.174 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 Delsi in forthcoming battles with the Osraige.


55. C. Doheny, “Each aml/e ed trade in early medieaval Ireland”, in R.S.A.I. Jn., cx (1980), p. 67-89, p. 8-84. 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 Clonmacnois in a Middle Irish text, Óenach Tailten, which is discussed below. See also Gwynn, Dindgriamh IV, p. 156-182.

56. Ó Conchubhair, Patrician poets, p. 132 § 93.


58. O’Donovan, O.S. letters, Meth. p. 28 § 77.


60. L.U., p. 133: 4212.

61. Binchy, Corpus, p. 481:6-5; 482:21-2; Kelly, Farming, p. 532 § 42.


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65. Kelly, Farming, p. 318. Birch, Corpus, p. 4.3.12-19; p.223.17-26; Birch, Crith Gablach, p. 3.71-76. I am grateful to Colm Etchingham for the reference to Bretha Nemed Tuiscech.
70. Birch, Crith Gablach, p.102.
72. See above, fn. 69.
76. A.F.M. p. 414 fn. y.
82. Birch, 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, xvi (Summer 1987), pp 39-72.
85. Gwynn, Dindshenchas IV, p. 418; Birchy, "The Fair", p.120.
87. Gwynn, Dindshenchas IV, p. 158-177-88; p. 418-9; Byrne, Irish kings, pp 275-6.