

THE EARLY HISTORY OF KNOWTH

Catherine Swift, with contributions by Francis John Byrne

1.1 Introduction: Mag mBreg and the emergence of political power in the Boyne Valley

In the second quarter of the second century AD, the Egyptian mathematician Ptolemy collected together geographical data from Western Europe with which to investigate the calculation of latitude and longitude. These data included names of rivers, identifications of various peoples and locations of a small number of settlements in Ireland (see Plate I.I). We do not know how Ptolemy acquired this material nor, indeed, who collected it in the first place; although some have suggested that it may have been derived from foreign merchants visiting Ireland while others have argued that it may have come from Roman navy commanders investigating the shores of Britain in the late first century AD.¹ Whoever it may have been, they have provided the modern world with what is by far the earliest depiction of Ireland's political geography.

Among fifteen river names cited, Ptolemy's data included the name of the river Boyne: Βουονινδα *'Buvinda'*. T.F. O'Rahilly suggested that this may be a version of the Celtic name form: **Bou-vinda* or 'cow-white'. To the north of the Boyne, Ptolemy indicates the presence of the people known as the Ουολουντιοι *'Voluntii'* (whom O'Rahilly equated with the early medieval *Ulaid* of the east coast of Ulster), while to the south of these were a group known as the Εβλανιοι *'Eblani'*.² No settlements are depicted close to the Boyne. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests human activity around the Neolithic passage grave cemetery at approximately this period, and there is also evidence of reasonably strong cultural influences from Britain in the form of new types of grave at Knowth and the deposition of Roman coins and other contemporary material outside the entrance of Newgrange. It is possible—although of course unprovable—that the existence of these phenomena in the vicinity of the passage tomb cemetery bespeaks the presence of some form of local authority, which was prepared to welcome these new influences from abroad.³

After Ptolemy, we have no documents that would allow a scholarly investigation of royal power in the Boyne valley until the second half of the seventh century AD. Moreover, the descriptive texts that

Plate II—Map of Ireland from Ptolemy, 2nd century, [*Cosmographia*], Rome, Petrus de Turre, 1490, *Prima Europe Tabula* (detail). © Royal Irish Academy.



survive from that date are almost all retrospective in nature, seeking to provide the reader with what the seventh-century writers thought had happened in the region over the previous 200 years. As non-contemporary accounts, it is difficult to have faith in their historical accuracy; on the other hand, they do provide us with the only source with which we might attempt to fill the void. The job of the historian in this instance would seem to require the careful probing of these seventh-century texts, with the aim of identifying areas the authors felt were important while retaining a degree of scepticism about how far back in time that importance may have extended.

According to Adomnán's seventh-century *Life*, St Columba explicitly recognised the political role of a man known as Áed Sláine, whose epithet indicates that he came from Slane:

My son, you must take heed lest by reason of the sin of parricide you lose the prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of all Ireland, predestined for you by God. For if ever you commit that sin, you will enjoy not the whole kingdom of your father but only some part of it, in your own tribe and for but a short time.⁴

According to Adomnán, Áed's father had been Diarmait mac Cerbaill, whom Adomnán identifies explicitly elsewhere as someone 'who had been ordained, by God's will, as the ruler of all Ireland'.⁵

Given the status accorded to Áed by Adomnán, it is interesting to note that propagandists for another and rival saint, this time Patrick, also emphasised the importance of Slane at approximately the same time. In Muirchú's narrative, Patrick celebrated the first Easter in Ireland at a place called *Fertae Fer Féic* 'the Burial-Mound of the men of Fíacc'.⁶ In the course of this Easter celebration, Patrick lit a fire that could be seen from far and wide and that was interpreted by the druids of the high-king of Tara as a symbol of a new kingdom, which would spread over the whole country and reign for all eternity. In consequence, the high-king, Loíguire mac Néill, rushed to *Fertae Fer Féic*, together with a retinue of 27 chariots 'yoked according to the tradition of their gods'. He also brought his two most powerful druids to challenge the interloper. The druids advised that the troop should stop outside the area of the fire and make Patrick come to them. This they did, but, says Muirchú:

There was one man who did not wish to obey the dictates of the druids and that was Erc son of Daig whose relics are now worshipped in the prestigious settlement which is called Slane; he rose up and Patrick blessed him and he believed in Eternal God.⁷

The word used for 'prestigious settlement' in this extract from Muirchú is the Latin term *civitas*, which is often translated as 'city'. It is noteworthy that this, relatively rare, word is also used by our seventh-century sources to denote the royal site of Tara.⁸ Given the existence of Áed 'of Slane', it seems reasonable to propose that Slane was considered to be the centre not just of religious, but also of royal power, in this period.

It is probable that Bishop Erc was also linked to churches south of the Boyne in the seventh century. Writing in the third quarter of the seventh century, a man named Tírechán, who had spent time as a pupil of Bishop Ultán of Ardbraccan, drew up a defence of Patrick's pre-eminence in Ireland, bringing together a number of different accounts of church settlements founded by the saint. One such text reference is to the 'church of *Cernae* in which Erc is buried who died in the great plague'.⁹ This church was located in an area famed in early Irish literature as a site of a *síd* or otherworld mound, and it may have been in the locality of the modern townlands of Carnes East and Carnes West, in the parish of Duleek, Co. Meath. A Middle-Irish poem

of much later date adds the fascinating detail that Áed of Slane, together with many of his descendants, was also buried in *Cernae*.¹⁰

The seventh-century Patrician texts describe the strongest authority in the region as being that of Tara, 'the head (place) of the Irish'. There, 'the emperor of the non-Romans' was said to have his settlement; and there kings, military leaders and the aristocracy would gather. The ruler who is credited with this power was Loíguire, and either he, or more likely his father Níall, was the 'root of the family who held the kingship of almost the whole island'.¹¹ Such a description is very close to that of Adomnán in describing Áed of Slane's father as holding the 'prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of all Ireland'. A list of the kings of Tara, which was created after the eleventh-century reign of Brian Borúma, presents Áed of Slane as one of two joint kings of Tara, while a genealogy—inserted as an inter-linear note into the fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Annals of Ulster*—identifies Áed of Slane as the 'son of Diarmait Derg, son of Fergus Cerrbél, son of Conall Cremthainne, son of Níall'.¹²

These latter sources are clearly much later than the seventh-century texts we have been discussing, which themselves, as already noted, are not contemporary with the characters and events they describe. The identification of Áed's great-grandfather as Conall Cremthainne, however, does seem to indicate the possibility of a long-standing connection with the Slane area. 'The lord of Cremthenn' is mentioned in an eighth-century text as someone who sold a horse to Colmán of the Britons. Colmán, in turn, is identified in the annals as an ecclesiastical leader of Slane, who died in 751.¹³

Researches undertaken by the seventeenth-century scholar John Colgan led him to argue that *Cremthenn* represented the seventeenth-century barony of Slane, and some confirmation of his hypothesis is found in the fact that the place name 'Crevin' is listed in seventeenth-century inquisitions in the vicinity of the modern Meath parish of Drumcondra.¹⁴ This parish is some twelve miles north of Slane and, by piecing evidence of different periods together in this way, one can put forward the suggestion that the early lordship of Cremthenn was located in the immediate vicinity of Slane. Our seventh-century sources associate Conall (Cremthainne), son of Níall, with another location: namely the great church of Patrick in the Blackwater valley that, today, is known as Donaghpatrick. According to Tírechán, this was once Conall's home; later authors add the detail that Conall subsequently received from St Patrick a new dwelling place, known as *Rath Airthir*, in the immediate vicinity. This may be the extremely large mound with multiple defences that can be found in the woods across the road from the modern church at Donaghpatrick.¹⁵ If this can be tied to the evidence for an association with Slane, we appear to be talking of a lordship that extended over the Boyne and Blackwater valleys.

References such as these indicate locations that may have formed part of a king's area of jurisdiction, but they cannot tell us what other

places may have been included. This deficiency is highlighted when one comes to discuss another geographical unit prominent in our early sources: namely the territory of Mag mBreg or, in Latin, *Campus Breg*. As discussed below, this unit was certainly associated with the descendants of Áed of Slane in the tenth century; it remains a moot point whether it was entirely under their control in the seventh century or even earlier. Mag mBreg can be translated as the 'cleared land of the hills', and it appears to refer to an open landscape that is not heavily wooded.¹⁶ This area is defined by the seventh-century Muirchú as lying south of the land controlled by the Conaille (based in the Cooley peninsula in modern Co. Louth), and he further defines it as 'the greatest plain', within which Tara is located. It was reached by sailing to the mouth of the Boyne, from where one travelled on foot.¹⁷

Interestingly, our seventh-century authors do not appear to visualise the river Boyne itself as a boundary of Mag mBreg. Bishop Tírechán, who had been at one point a pupil of Ultán of Ardraccan, includes within his writings a list of eight Patrician cult sites from Mag mBreg. Given its distinctive features, this list may have been incorporated into his *Collectanea* from an earlier source.¹⁸ Any attempt to map the relevant churches from this list onto the local landscape is a fraught exercise, because unless the names of the churches concerned survived into later periods, we have no way of tracing their exact whereabouts. Quite apart from the fact that ecclesiastical settlements recorded in the mid-seventh century or earlier may simply have died out, many Irish place names in the counties of Meath and Dublin were replaced by ones incorporating either Scandinavian or Anglo-Norman elements.

The first name on the list of Mag mBreg churches, however, is the best attested of the eight. In Tírechán's text this is identified as *Primum, in Culmine*, and Ludwig Bieler, Tírechán's editor, assumed that this was the ablative of a Latin word, *culmen*, meaning 'height'. Bieler thus translated the phrase simply as 'firstly, on the hilltop', with the church being otherwise unnamed. This seems rather unlikely, especially as we have an attested place name, *Culmine*, attached to an estate of St Mary's Abbey on the north of the Liffey described in an Anglo-Norman charter predating 1186. Such a name would represent a perfectly normal derivation of two Irish elements, *cúl* 'back' or 'rear', and *mín* 'arable land'. From later medieval and early modern attestations, this Cúl Míne estate is most probably represented by Coolmine in the parish of Clonsilla, Co. Dublin, situated on a ridge immediately to the south of the Tolka river. The third church on Tírechán's list is described as being *in cacuminibus Aisse* 'on the hills of Ais'. This is a place that Medb's army passed as it travelled from Connacht to the Cooley peninsula at the beginning of the Táin. In the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, a poem on Sliabh Fuait, or the Fews in Armagh, refers to *Ard Asse* 'the height of Ais', from which great views could be obtained over Louth and Armagh. In early fourteenth-century sources there are references to a manor of Ays, located to the south-west of Dundalk on

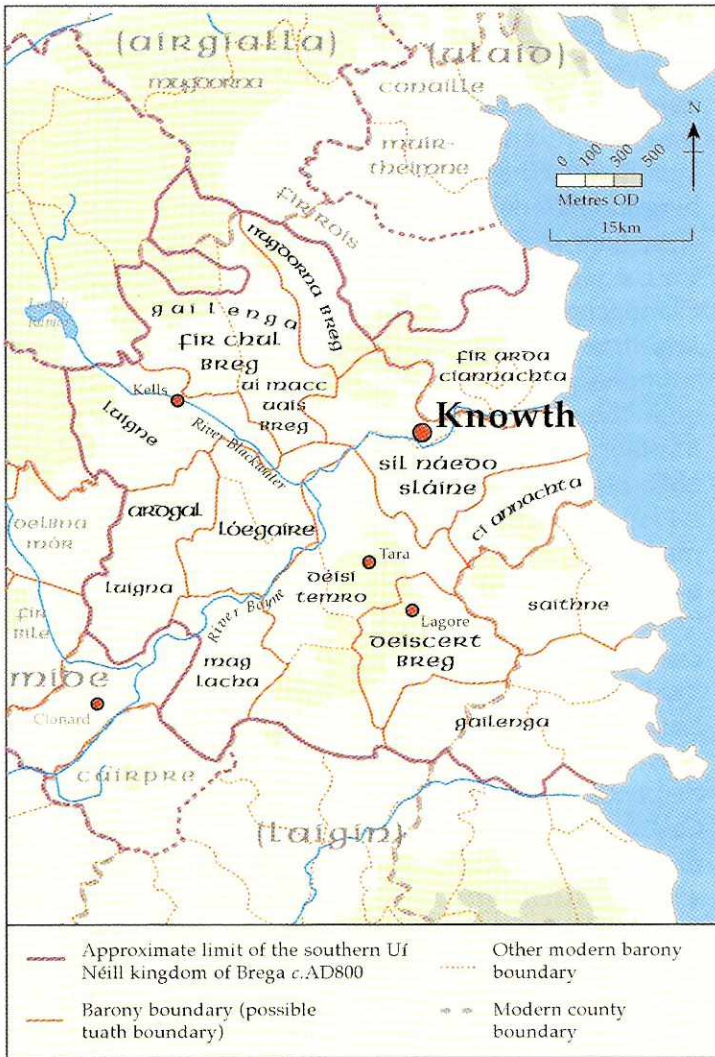
the modern road to Carrickmacross; but this seems very far north to be part of Mag mBreg. Furthermore, the modern place name of Mount Ash, which incorporates the name of the manor, is but a small drumlin, whereas *Tírechán* specifies 'hills' in the plural. Instead, I would suggest that the place being referred to by *Tírechán* is Mullaghash in south Louth, *mullach* being another word for hill. This is the northernmost peak in a range of hills immediately to the north of Collon. If this identification is accepted, *Tírechán*'s list of church sites implies that Mag mBreg extended from the Tolka in the south as far as a tributary of the river Dee to the north and ignored important east–west waterways, such as the Boyne, the Nanny or the Delvin rivers.

Tírechán does not provide us with a clear indication of how far Mag mBreg extended to the west. It is possible that one of the churches in his Mag mBreg list is Donaghmore, the medieval ecclesiastical site with a round tower on the road between Slane and Navan, but the evidence is not conclusive. If Donaghmore was one of the churches on *Tírechán*'s list, it would seem probable that the lordship of Cremthenn was contained within the borders of Mag mBreg. However, an eighth-century text on the foundation of Trim specifies that *Áth Truimm* 'the ford of Trim', was located within Mag mBreg in a kingdom controlled by the descendants of Níall's son Loíguire.¹⁹ This makes it clear that the upper reaches of the Boyne were also within Mag mBreg and that the 'cleared land of the hills' contained more than one early Uí Néill kingdom. Given that it does not appear to have been clearly bounded by major water courses or obvious geographical features, it seems likely that the territory of Mag mBreg, or at least the kingdom of Brega on which it was based, probably fluctuated over time, depending on the political power of its rulers. Fortunately, this is perhaps the best attested part of Ireland in our pre-Norman sources, and careful investigation of the many early place names that are mentioned as being within its borders, together with an appreciation of their date, may allow us to detect such fluctuations in the future. Work has begun on this process, but it is a long-term task that will involve discussion and debate over many years.²⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, the title Mag mBreg should be understood as referring to an amorphous and poorly defined area that probably contained most of modern Co. Meath as well as some parts of north-east Co. Dublin and south Co. Louth. Fig. 1.1 represents one of the most recent attempts to proffer a cartographical depiction of its extent *c.* AD 800.

1.2 The pre-tenth-century kings of Knowth

In 1968 Francis John Byrne published a study of the references to Knowth in Middle-Irish literature and of the historical information available in the annals on its early kings.²¹ That study still stands as the most important discussion of the topic, and the historical development that he traced is still accepted by younger scholars today.²² Byrne

Fig. 1.1—Map of overkingdom of Brega, related petty kingdoms and neighbouring kingdoms (after Stout, 2002); reproduced by permission.



identified Knowth as the residence of the kings of north Brega from at least the ninth century, when the annals note the death of Cernach mac Congalaig, *rex Cnodbai* 'king of Knowth', in 818. This kingship represented a branch of the seventh-century group mentioned in Section 1.1 above: the *Síl nÁedo Sláine*, who took their name from their ancestor Áed of Slane and who dominate our records for the kingship of Tara in the seventh century. With only brief interruptions, Áed's immediate descendants continued to enjoy the status of kings of Tara until the death of Cináed mac Írgalaig in 728.²³ There is no geographical specification for the location of these early kings, but a Middle-Irish poem on *Brug na Bóinne* (the Neolithic passage tomb cemetery on the Boyne encompassing Dowth, Knowth and Newgrange and represented in the following sections of this book using the later spelling 'Brugh na

Bóinne'), identifies one of the monuments within the complex as the 'tomb of the horse of king Cináed'.²⁴

Even before the loss of the kingship of Tara, however, the Síl nÁedo Sláine was riven with internal feuds. These were between the families who subsequently became associated with the crannóg of Lagore, outside Dunshaughlin, on the one hand, and with Knowth on the other.²⁵ Byrne identifies the final split between the two as occurring in 688 at the battle of Imlech Pích, when Niall mac Cernaig defeated his cousin, Congalach mac Conaing. On the losing side in that battle were Dub dá Inber, king of Fir Ardda Ciannachta,²⁶ and Uarchride ua Osseni of the Conaille.²⁷ The area controlled by the Fir Ardda Ciannachta is normally associated with the barony of Ferrard in Co. Louth, while the Conaille controlled the territory of the Cooley peninsula and parts of central Louth (see Fig. 1.1 above). The presence of both these kings in the army of Congalach mac Conaing is strong implicit evidence that his particular branch of the Síl nÁedo Sláine was already closely associated with lands north of the Boyne.

According to the Middle-Irish *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, one result of the battle of Imlech Pích was the subjection of the Ciannachta to foreign overlordship. Byrne has interpreted this statement as implying that the descendants of Congalach mac Conaing subsequently took over most of the territory of their allies and set up 'the very successful kingdom of North Brega'.²⁸ In an article published in 1913, Eoin Mac Neill, the father of modern historical studies of early Ireland, drew attention to the fact that the genealogical evidence for Congalach's descendants shows that they were frequently called kings of the Ciannachta by the Irish annalists.²⁹ This habit amongst the annalists is first attested in the death-notice of Conaing mac Amalgado 'Conaing son of Amalgaid', who died in 742. Unfortunately, the sequence in the annals differs slightly at this point from the evidence for the family in the later genealogies and Middle-Irish poems. The genealogical lists in the twelfth-century manuscripts refer simply to Conaing mac Amalgado, whose son is called Congalach and his grandson Cellach.³⁰ According to a Middle-Irish genealogical poem entitled *Síl Áeda Sláine na sleg* and attributed to the poet Flann Mainistrech, who died in 1056,³¹ Conaing Crach 'Conaing the Rough' was killed after a ten-year rule over Mag mBreg, the kingdom of Brega. He was followed by an Indrechtach mac Dúngalaig 'Indrechtach son of Dúngalach', who in turn was killed by a Dúngal son of Amalgaid. This Dúngal is given the epithet *Cnogbai* 'of Knowth'.³² Amalgamating Flann's eleventh-century evidence with the twelfth-century genealogies would lead one to suggest that Dúngal was closely associated with the prehistoric mound of Knowth, while his brother, the Síl nÁedo Sláine dynast Conaing Crach, was in turn the man identified in the annals as king of the Ciannachta.

The record in the annals is slightly different from that in the genealogical sources. After the death of Conaing mac Amalgado in 742, the *Annals of Ulster* list an Indrechtach 'descendant of Conaing', who died in 748 as 'king of the Ciannachta', and a Dúngal 'descendant

of Conaing', who died in 759. This Dúngal is clearly the same man as the eleventh-century poet associates with Knowth, since both are said to have died at a battle in Armagh. However, no royal title is given to Dúngal by the annalist and he is not identified as the son of Amalgaid. Therefore, while it seems reasonable to suggest that by the mid-eighth century, kings of Knowth were seen as belonging to the same family as the rulers of the Ciannachta, it is impossible to be absolutely categorical. All we can say is that Cináed mac Írgalaig, a Síil nÁedo Sláine dynast who had died thirty years earlier in 728, was also remembered as having close connections with the Boyne valley cemetery on the opposite side of the Boyne from Ciannachta territory. This earlier dynast was not, however, recorded as king of the Ciannachta.³³

The possibility of very early connections between Knowth and the Síil nÁedo Sláine dynasts becomes important when considering the first king of Knowth to be attested in the annals: Gormgal mac Éládaig, who died in 789 *in clericatu* 'as a cleric'.³⁴ In 1968 Byrne suggested that this man was likely to be a brother of Ailellén mac Áeládaig, recorded in the pedigree of the Uí Áeda Odba, a branch of the Gailenga. In an article published almost 30 years later, Byrne put forward an alternative view: that Gormgal's father was Éládach mac Maíle Odrae, *tigernae Cremthinnae* 'lord of Cremthenn'.³⁵ Máel Odar is identified in *Bethu Phátraic* as a son of Áed of Slane, which would make Éládach an unlikely grandson of Áed, in that he would have to have died nearly 150 years after his grandfather's death.³⁶ It may be, however, that the genealogy has been foreshortened in a manner that is reasonably common amongst Irish genealogical records.

Certainly an association with *Cremthenn* implies not only a link with the ancestor of the Síil nÁedo Sláine, Conall Cremthainne, but can also be understood as a reference to the area in the immediate vicinity of Knowth: *Cremthenn*, as discussed in Section 1.1, appears to be located in the vicinity of modern Slane. Byrne's second identification for Gormgal thus associates him clearly with the pre-existing evidence for a strong Síil nÁedo Sláine presence north of the Boyne, at least from the mid-seventh century. Furthermore, as Byrne himself points out, there is an interesting coincidence of date in that the year of Gormgal's death also saw the death of Fedach, ecclesiastical leader of Louth, Slane and Duleek. The last of these churches is identified in a later seventh-century text as being located within Ciannachta lands.³⁷ Byrne comments: 'Fedach mac Cormaic Sláine's acquisition of Duleek at some date before 789 may likewise reflect the take-over of Ciannachta territory by the Knowth dynasty'.³⁸ In other words, of the two possible alternative dynasties—the Gailenga or the Síil nÁedo Sláine—who may have ruled Knowth in the eighth century, the latter seems the more plausible. Thus, the Síil nÁedo Sláine should be seen not merely as kings of Knowth, but also in all probability as overlords of the local Ciannachta population.

Whatever about the status of Gormgal, the next death-notice of a king of Knowth, Cernach mac Congalaig, who died in 818, clearly refers to a member of the Síil nÁedo Sláine.³⁹ His association with

Knowth is underlined in the eleventh-century genealogical poem *Síl Áeda Sláine na sleg*, which states that he was killed by his relative 'in the house of Knowth'.⁴⁰ According to the poem, Flann son of Congalach ruled for 26 years before dying at Monasterboice; and he was succeeded by Cernach, descendant of Congalach, who ruled for six years, and eventually by Cummascach, descendant of Congalach, who died at Duleek after a mere two years. In contrast, the *Annals of Ulster* record Cernach as *Cernach mac Congalaig rex Cnodbai* 'son of Congalach and king of Knowth', who died in 812, and identify the other two rulers as brothers rather than members of subsequent generations. Flann mac Congalaig is recorded as dying in 812 as king of the Ciannachta, while another apparent brother, Cummascach mac Congalaig, died in 839 also bearing the title *rex Ciannachtai*.⁴¹ Moreover, it was this Cummascach who defeated the Fir Ardda Ciannachta in battle in 822, while his son, Cináed mac Cummascaig, died as *rí Ardde Ciannachtae* 'king of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta' in 828.⁴² Clearly, therefore, by the first years of the ninth century, contemporary annalists viewed the rulership of Knowth as being intimately entwined with some degree of authority over the Ciannachta and the Fir Ardda Ciannachta as well as with membership of the important Sí nÁedo Sláine dynasty. The later poems and genealogies, while differing in detail, are following the same tradition.

Under the year 822, the *Annals of Ulster* refer both to a Cummascach son of Congalach, who defeated the Fir Ardda Ciannachta, and to a Cummascach son of Túathal, who was killed as king of Ard Ciannachta.⁴³ In his genealogical tables in Appendix 1.1 below, Byrne interprets the Cináed son of Cummascach who died in 828 as grandson of Túathal⁴⁴ rather than grandson of Congalach; but I would prefer to see the 822 references as two separate entries concerning a single ruler, one of which has been corrupted in our surviving sources. While Cummascach son of Túathal is undoubtedly the *lectio difficilior* (and as such, historians would tend to favour its retention), it seems to me at least as plausible to think of Cummascach and Cináed as being part of a three-generation Sí nÁedo Sláine family who appear to have controlled both Knowth and the Ciannachta. The alternative is to postulate that between 822 and 828, control of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta (if not of Knowth) was wrested away from the Sí nÁedo Sláine and held for a short period by an upstart branch of the Ciannachta. If this were the case, it is surprising that these men are said to have been killed not by their dispossessed Sí nÁedo Sláine rivals, but by an otherwise unknown Murchad (Cummascach, in 822) and by Viking raiders (Cináed, in 828).

In favour of this last interpretation, of course, it has to be said that it is relatively easy to conceive of Middle-Irish historians tidying up a fragmentary record for Knowth and its surrounding territory as part of their general approach to the creation of a national history of Ireland. Instead of the region being controlled by rival and often obscure dynasties for short periods before being overthrown by others, who are almost equally unknown to us today, it fits much better with Middle-Irish syncretic tendencies that rulership of the area would be consistently

depicted as under the control of a branch of the powerful Uí Néill kings of Tara.⁴⁵ While this particular branch of Síol nÁedo Sláine is depicted in our sources as failing to gain the highest prize of the kingship of Tara itself between the time of Cináed mac Írgalaig (who died in 728) and Congalach mac Maíle Mithig in the mid-tenth century, it remains the case that the Áed of Slane's descendants are by far the best attested of any Irish royal family from the eastern midlands in the pre-Norman era.

The close fraternal links between the rulers of Knowth, the Ciannachta and the Fir Ardda Ciannachta that seem to exist at the beginning of the ninth century may carry resonances of the situation of less clearly attested kings of earlier times. Gormgal mac Éládaig, who died in 789, may have been a member of the Gailenga, but he is equally plausibly understood as being one of the Síol nÁedo Sláine lords of Cremthenn. That kingship appears to have been located in the vicinity of Slane but may also have had powers of overlordship over the Ciannachta and the Fir Ardda Ciannachta, because, in the same year as Gormgal's death, an ecclesiastical leader of Slane is also associated with the Ciannachta church of Duleek as well as with the church of Louth. We do not know about the client kingdoms that may have been under the control of the Knowth king Dúngal, who died in 759, or those of the earlier eighth-century Síol nÁedo Sláine king Cináed mac Írgalaig. Like their successors, however, these too appear to have been members of the Síol nÁedo Sláine; but at the end of the day, as dispassionate historians, we must admit that our genealogical evidence for all these early kings is late and possibly suspect, and it is unlikely that we will ever be sure of the correct answer.

Textual references to royal habitation at Knowth from the mid-eighth century put the archaeological evidence for early-medieval settlement on the site in context. The material that is perhaps the most relevant to these pre tenth-century kings are the scholastic ogham inscriptions found on the orthostats of the western passage tomb at Knowth. These inscriptions are difficult to date and their purpose is obscure, but they imply the existence of literate individuals in and around Knowth in the Early Christian period.⁴⁶

1.3 The family of Flannacán

Towards the end of the ninth century and in the first three-quarters of the tenth, one particular family is closely associated with the site of Knowth in the contemporary sources. The father of this family was Flannacán mac Cellaig, who was killed by Vikings in 896.⁴⁷ At the time of his death he was identified as *rex Breg* 'king of Brega', an important kingdom in the eastern midlands that was, as noted above, roughly co-terminous with the modern county of Meath, but which also included parts of north Dublin and south Louth.⁴⁸ Flannacán appears to have been considered a powerful figure by the Irish annalists since, unusually, the deeds of not one or two, but at least six, of his sons were recorded.⁴⁹ Admittedly, the records are sequential, indicating that the

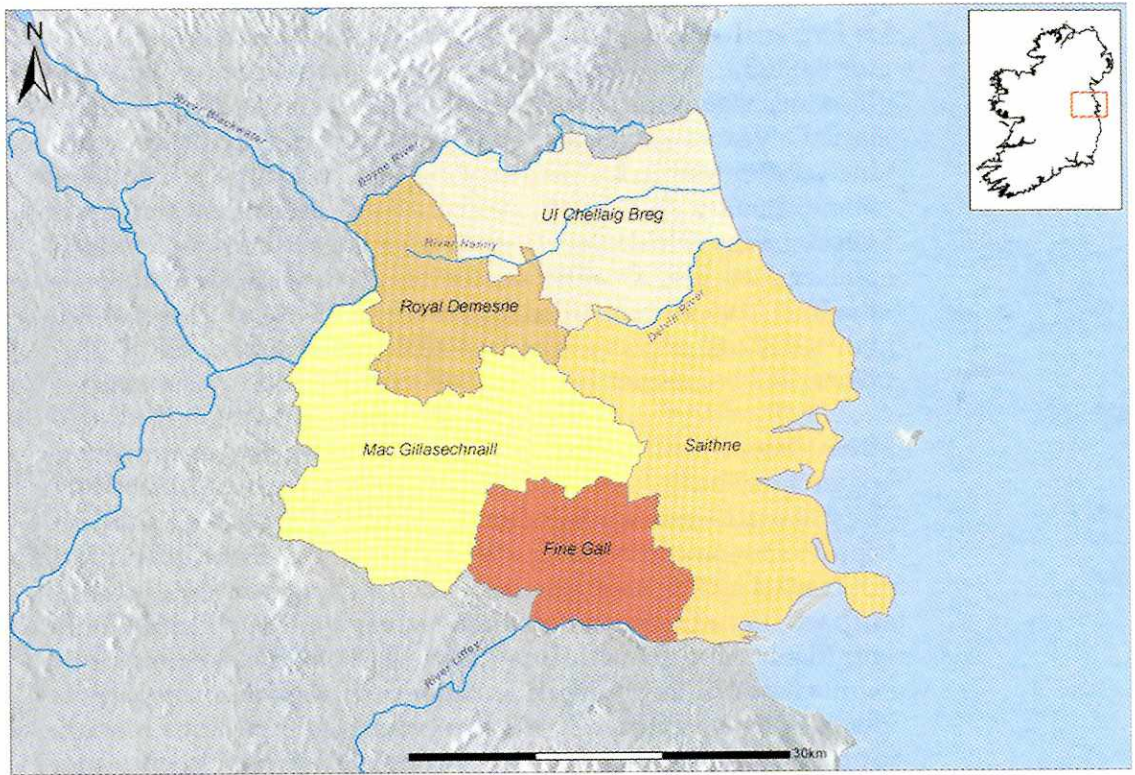
various sons, in turn, aimed to be their father's successor; but in the rough and tumble of Irish politics, each fell in his turn.

Thus, in 873, even before his father had died, Cellach mac Flannacáin beheaded the king of Conaille Muirtheimne in modern Louth, while in 895 he himself was killed by Fogartach mac Tolairg of the *Clann Cernaig Sotail* 'Family of Cernach the Proud' in south Brega.⁵⁰ In 893 Cellach's brother Congalach died, apparently of disease; and in 896 another brother, Cináed, was killed. All three of these brothers are entitled *rígdonna Breg* 'eligible for the kingship of Brega', in their respective death-notice.⁵¹ In the year after his father's death, Máel Finnia mac Flannacáin won victories against the Ulaid and the Dál nAraide, the two most powerful over-kingdoms of north-east Ulster. Five years later, in 902, he and the men of Brega made an alliance with a Kildare dynast called Cerball mac Muirecáin, and they successfully attacked the Viking *longport* of Dublin, causing 'the heathens' to be driven from Ireland. In the following year, however, Máel Finnia, apparently regretting his warrior life, died as a *religiosus laicus* or an *áth-láech*—a man who had retired to a church to live out his life according to Christian principles.⁵²

Because of Máel Finnia's religious conversion, his half-brother Máel Mithig may have taken up the leadership of the family even before his brother died. Máel Mithig's first record occurs in 903, when he seems to have been acting under the aegis of the then current and very powerful king of Ireland, Flann Sinna, the son of Máel Sechnaill. Flann, as his epithet *Sinna* 'Shannon' suggests, was closely linked to the Shannon basin and he belonged to the dynastic group known as the Clann Cholmáin of Westmeath.⁵³ The alliance appears to have been consolidated through a union between Máel Mithig and Flann Sinna's daughter, Lígach,⁵⁴ and in 913 Máel Mithig together with Flann Sinna's son won a victory over an alliance consisting of the king of south Brega, the Leinstermen and a man who was a remote cousin of Máel Mithig himself and who subsequently died as king of Brega in 925, Lorcán mac Dondchada.⁵⁵ The king of south Brega, Fogartach mac Tolairg, was the same man who had killed Máel Mithig's brother in 895. There is a hint that this particular fight may have had its origins in an attempt by Máel Mithig to impose his nephew as king of Lagore,⁵⁶ but if so, that attempt failed in 908 when his nephew was killed by the same Fogartach mac Tolairg. In other words, the group of Flannacáin's sons may be the best recorded of the contemporary Brega dynasties, but clearly there was strong enmity between themselves and other families within Mag mBreg. (See Fig. 1.2 for a map proposing the location of the kingdom of south Brega and its associated sub-kingdoms.)

The first identification of Flannacáin's family with the site of Knowth is in 918, when his son Máel Mithig, *rí Cnoghbhai* 'king of Knowth', 'went to the heathens with a view to defending northern Brega *a muin gente*'. It is not clear who the enemies of north Brega were in this context. The Irish *a muin gente* is ambiguous, and while one editor translates the relevant phrase as 'by the aid of the heathens' (thus

Fig. 1.2—Map of South Brega (Deiscert Breg) and associated petty kingdoms (after Bhreathnach, 1999b); reproduced by permission of the Discovery Programme.



leaving the enemies un-named), other editors translate the phrase as ‘from the heathens’, implying that Máel Mithig was making an alliance with one group of Vikings because of attacks by another.⁵⁷ These Vikings are not identified further, but, given that there was warfare between Níall Glúndub of the Cenél nEógain and the Norse leader Sitriuc of Dublin in the same year, it may be that at least one Viking group came from Dublin. This suggestion is based only on the possibility that the Dublin forces moved northwards through Brega to fight Níall, whose core territory lay in the western half of Ulster.

In any event, the annalist specifies that the alliance availed the Irish king nothing. Such a sardonic comment is unusual: most alliances between Irish and Viking leaders are simply reported factually without comment. It may be that it was his family’s part in expelling the Dubliners in 902 that caused the annalist to note Máel Mithig’s political *volte-face*. On the other hand, an annal entry for 917 states that Níall Glúndub had led an army of the *H Neill in Deiscirt* 7 *in Tuaiscirt* ‘the Uí Néill of the south and the north’ to Munster, and it seems reasonably likely that Máel Mithig was a participant on this occasion. If this is true, then Máel Mithig had gone on to support Sitriuc of Dublin against a man whose army he had joined the previous year, and a man, moreover, who was his own first cousin. The *Banshenchus* records that Máel Mithig’s mother, Eithne, one of Flannacán’s wives, was a sister of Níall Glúndub.⁵⁸

In any event, Máel Mithig's dalliance with Viking allies was apparently a brief one, because in the following year, 919, Máel Mithig took part in a battle between Níall Glúndub and 'the heathens' led by Sitriuc at Dublin. It appears that Máel Mithig had returned to join Níall's army for the fight, which is characterised as one between heathens and Irish. If so, this means that his alliance with some subset of the Vikings barely lasted a year. To judge from the list of the dead, by the time of his last battle Máel Mithig had re-joined his wife's family, the family of Flann Sinna, along with kings from south Brega, in supporting the northern forces of the Ulaid, the Airgialla and the Cenél nEógain, led by his maternal uncle.⁵⁹ The outcome for this alliance was disastrous. Seven of the Irish leaders were killed, including Níall Glúndub and Máel Mithig himself, along with 'many other nobles', and the newly re-established Norse Dubliners were left to consolidate their control of the eastern port.

Following this defeat, Flannacán's immediate family disappeared from the record for approximately ten years. Power appears to have passed to Lorcán mac Dondchada, the man whom Máel Mithig had fought in 913 and who died in old age as king of Brega in 925. Lorcán appears to have been succeeded by Flann, the son of Máel Finnia and thus Máel Mithig's nephew, who died as king of Brega fighting the Uí Echach (Coba) of Down in 932. The previous year, Der Fáil, daughter of Máel Finnia mac Flannacáin, had died as queen of Tara.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, her husband's name is not given, so while it seems likely she was married to the then ruling king of Tara, Donnchad, the son of Flann Sinna, as Byrne's genealogy indicates, this cannot be stated categorically. (If she had married Donnchad, she would have been continuing a sequence of close links between the families of Flannacán's descendants and those of Flann Sinna.) At least one branch of Flannacán's descendants, meanwhile, would seem to have continued to reside at Knowth, because in 935, the 'cave of Cnogba', that is, Knowth, was attacked by the Vikings of Dublin in a campaign that also targeted the crannóg of Lagore.

For the first 30 years of the tenth century, therefore, it appears that the leaders of Flannacán's family were in a long-term alliance with the family of Flann Sinna. That alliance manifested itself through joint military excursions and by intermarriage and, for the most part, appears to have been hostile to the presence of Vikings at Dublin. Throughout this period, to judge from annal entries in 918 and 935, at least one branch of the family, the group associated with Flannacán's son Máel Mithig, was closely associated with Knowth.

1.3.1 Land under direct control of Flannacán's family

There is no specific area of land that is described as having been under the control of Flannacán or his various sons, apart from the fact that many of them were, in turn, either *rí Breg* 'king of Brega' or *rígdonna Breg* 'worthy of being king of Brega'. It is notable, however, that in 922 the annalist notes the death of Máel Póil, scholar and bishop of the SílnÁedo Sláine. As noted above, this is a genealogical title describing the

descendants of the sixth-century king Áed Sláine 'Áed of Slane', whose land is specifically described in the Middle-Irish text *Genemuin Áeda Sláine* as *Bregmag* or *Mag mBreg*, the 'cleared land of hills' or 'the cleared land of (the kingdom of) Brega'. The men living in this land are identified in *Genemuin Áeda Sláine* as the *Fir Breg* 'Men of Brega'.⁶¹

In other words, Máel Póil's title in 922 can be understood as being a direct parallel to that given to a man who died in 966: Dub-dá-Boirenn, 'learned/pre-eminent bishop of Mag mBreg and successor of Buite (of Monasterboice). . .'.⁶² As a bishop, Máel Póil's area of jurisdiction appears to have corresponded to the kingdom of Brega controlled by Flannacán and his sons Máel Finnia and Máel Mithig. This is in line with conclusions drawn by Colmán Etchingham in his detailed studies of pre-Norman Irish bishoprics, in which he emphasised the extent to which these ecclesiastical areas of authority paralleled the secular units in which they were located.⁶³

In the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Annals of Roscrea*, Máel Póil is identified not only as bishop of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine*, but as abbot of *Int Ednén*.⁶⁴ This rather obscure site is also mentioned in 907, in relation to Fergal, 'bishop of Finnabair Abae and superior of *Int Ednén*'. Hogan identifies Finnabair Abae as Fennor, immediately to the south of Slane, and it is presumably on this basis that he suggests that *Int Ednén* is 'near Duleek'.⁶⁵ Etchingham, on the other hand, suggests the townland of Inan, about four miles north of Clonard, which was the centre of the cult of Saint Finnian.⁶⁶ Clonard was traditionally one of the favoured churches of the *Clann Cholmáin*, the group of dynasties to which Flann Sinna's family belonged. It was not a particular favourite of Flann Sinna's or his immediate family, as they appear rather to have supported the church of Clonmacnoise, where they erected high-crosses, built a great church and created a private mausoleum for the men and women of their family.⁶⁷ In the days of Flann Sinna's father, Máel Sechnaill, however, the bishop of Clonard was apparently the most important cleric within the *Clann Cholmáin* kingdom,⁶⁸ and the holder of the title was a man called Suairlech, who was also linked to *Int Ednén*. A subsequent bishop who died in 926, Bishop Colmán, was entitled legal scholar and superior of both Clonard and Clonmacnoise, and his titles show the on-going support for the Meath church by the dynastic heirs of Flann Sinna. Indeed, *Chronicon Scotorum* notes the death in 922 of Flann's grandson, Donnchad mac Domnaill, who was *rígdonna Temrach* 'worthy of being king of Tara' but was also the tanist-abbot of Clonard. It would appear, therefore, that the connection of bishop Máel Póil of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* with *Int Ednén* is, in fact, the ecclesiastical reflection of the political alliances between Máel Mithig of Knowth and Flann Sinna that have been described above.

Another perspective on the area under the immediate authority of Máel Mithig comes from an ecclesiastical death-notice in 922 for a man who is described as chief counsellor and advisor of the men of all Brega:

Cernach son of Flann, *princeps* of Lann Léire and steward of the community of Armagh, from *Belach Dúin* to the sea and from the (river) Boyne to *Casán*, head of counsel and chief interrogator of the men of all Brega.⁶⁹

According to Hogan, *Casán* may be the old name of the Glyde river, which runs east-west across modern Louth from Tallanstown to Castlebellingham before entering the sea at Annagassan. Between this river and the Boyne is the site of *Lann Léire*, which was probably in the immediate vicinity of Dunleer (*Dún Léire*), some three miles north of Monasterboice.⁷⁰ These identifications would suggest that Máel Mithig may have controlled the area in south Louth that, in the Norman period, became the barony of Ferrard.⁷¹ The name of this barony is normally associated with the people known as Fir Ardda Ciannachta and, as discussed above, the early ninth-century ancestors of Máel Mithig as king of Knowth appear also to have controlled the title of king of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta.⁷²

A third area under the immediate control of the Knowth-based family of Flannacán and his sons may be indicated in yet another series of episcopal titles, this time associated with Duleek. This church is documented in our historical sources from the late seventh century, and at least one royal dynast had died there: Cummascach grandson of Congalach.⁷³ This same man is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* as Congalach's son rather than his grandson, and thus as the brother of Cernach mac Congalaig, the man who died as king of Knowth in 818. Cummascach himself, as discussed in Section 1.2 above, is probably to be identified as a *Síl nÁedo Sláine* king controlling Ciannachta territory both in 824 and at his death in 839.

In the first third of the tenth century, no fewer than three bishops are given death-notice linking them to Duleek. The legal scholar Colmán is identified as bishop of Duleek and Lusk in 907; Finchar, another legal scholar, is named as bishop of Duleek in 920; and in 929 Túathal mac Oenacáin was identified as legal scholar, bishop of Duleek and Lusk and *moer muinnteri Patraicc ó sleibh fadh* 'maer of Patrick's community south of the mountain'.⁷⁴ In the *Annals of Inisfallen*, Túathal is also entitled *suí-epscoep Lethe Cuind* the 'learned bishop of Conn's Half'. The title of *moer* was translated by Kathleen Hughes as 'steward', and she understood it to refer to officials who collected tribute or revenue for the church of Armagh. Etchingham has suggested that, in addition, the office may have involved the administration of justice in a specified geographical area, or within a group of churches linked together by common adherence to a particular saint's cult.⁷⁵

In understanding Túathal's role as *maer*, it may be worth considering his predecessor in the role, Muiredach mac Domnaill, who died a mere five years before Túathal himself:

Muiredach mac Domnaill, *tanist*-abbot of Armagh and chief *maer* of the southern Uí Néill and successor of Buite mac Bronaigh (of

Monasterboice), head of counsel of the men of all Brega, both laymen and clerics, departed this life on the fifth day before the Kalends of December [27 Nov.].⁷⁶

In a variant of his death-notice, Muiredach was also entitled *maer muintire Pátraic ó Sleibh Fuait co Laigniu* 'maer of the community of Patrick from the Fewes mountains to the Leinstermen'. 'Head of counsel of the men of all Brega' is a title that had been used of Cernach mac Flainn in 922. He had been based in the vicinity of Dunleer, while Monasterboice, the location with which Muiredach was linked, was only three miles south of Dunleer. 'The southern Uí Néill' was a description used for part of Níall Glúndub's forces in 917, when it appears to refer to the presence of the two close allies—the kings of Knowth and the family of Flann Sinna—in his army. The northern border of Leinster in this period was the Liffey and Rye rivers. Taking all these indications together, therefore, it would seem that Túathal mac Oenacáin's role as 'maer of Patrick's family south of the mountain' in 929 probably involved some form of jurisdiction on behalf of Armagh over the area of the kingdom of Brega.

This makes his alternative title of bishop of Duleek and Lusk particularly interesting. Since the late seventh century, Duleek had been associated with the territory of the Ciannachta, while the sequence of leaders of Lusk in the annals can be linked to a genealogy of the Ciannachta in the twelfth-century manuscript *Rawlinson B.502*.⁷⁷ Moreover, just as in the case of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta, the title of 'king of the Ciannachta' is one that was linked to the ancestors of Máel Mithig and Flannacán. The connection between the Ciannachta and the early tenth-century rulers of Knowth and Brega is further illustrated by the ecclesiastical links between Duleek and Lusk—both Ciannachta houses—and the men of Brega outlined above.

In short, whereas no specific land units are linked to the rulers of Knowth in the sources, the ecclesiastical evidence makes it probable that the early tenth-century rulers of Knowth controlled the kingdoms of both the Ciannachta and the Fir Ardda Ciannachta, as it appears their ancestors had done for some time. Given the details provided by Muiredach's death-notice as 'head of counsel for the men of all Brega', this means that the tenth-century Knowth rulers probably ruled a kingdom that, at its widest extent, stretched from the Fewes mountains to the Liffey valley.

1.4 Congalach Mac Maíle Mithig

Congalach is perhaps the most famous man to be identified with a royal kingdom at Knowth, for his name was included in the list of kings of Tara or high-kings of Ireland. His association with Knowth derives from a genealogy of the Síol nÁedo Sláine in the twelfth-century manuscript the *Book of Leinster*, and in a second copy of the same text in the fourteenth-century *Book of Ballymote*.⁷⁸ There he is

called *Congalach Cnogba* 'Congalach of Knowth', as well as son of Máel Mithig. It is on this basis that he is entitled Congalach Cnogba mac Maíle Mithig in the secondary literature.⁷⁹

In the years after Máel Mithig's death in 919, leadership of Flannacán's descendants appears to have passed to his nephew, Flann mac Maíle Finnia, who died in 932.⁸⁰ In the Middle-Irish poem *Síl Aeda Sláine na sleg*, on the leaders of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine*, there is also reference to a son of Máel Mithig who is identified as *Áed in Broga*⁸¹ 'Áed of Brug na Bóinne', the bend of the Boyne within which lie the great prehistoric cemetery of the Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange passage tombs.⁸² The only possible reference to this man in the annals, and that not a certain one, is the death of Áed son of Máel Mithig, who died on pilgrimage in 965.⁸³ We are thus unable to detect what role Áed may have played in the politics of the eastern midlands; or, indeed, whether he was an ecclesiastic rather than a political leader. His name does imply, however, that he was closely associated with the immediate hinterland of Knowth.

A single entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters* mentions yet another descendant of Flannacán:

A battle was gained by the Leinstermen over the forces of the North, i.e. over the people of the son of Níall where many fell with Diarmait, son of Máel Muire, son of Flannacán and Cellach son of Cumuscach of the men of Brega and numbers of others.⁸⁴

It seems likely that the name Máel Muire represents a mis-transcription by the seventeenth-century compilers of an original Máel Finnia or Máel Mithig, rather than an otherwise unattested son for Flannacán.⁸⁵ Since Máel Mithig's mother had been a sister of Níall's and Máel Mithig himself had been an ally of his uncle, it seems most likely that this is a reference to Máel Mithig, as it is the norm in annal entries such as this to specify the people killed on the losing side. In that case, therefore, in addition to Áed of Brug na Bóinne, Máel Mithig had another son named Diarmait. It begins to appear that after the death of Flann mac Maíle Finnia in 932, power reverted back to the younger branch of Flannacán's descendants through Máel Mithig.

In 939 Donnchad, the son of Flann Sinna, attacked Brega and, specifically, the church of Finnabair Abae, which he plundered and where a priest was killed. This was the church that had been linked to the church of Int Ednén in 907, while Int Ednén, in turn, was the home church of the bishop Máel Póil, who ruled as bishop of Brega in the reign of Máel Mithig. It was argued above that Máel Póil's appointment could be seen as the ecclesiastical equivalent of the alliance between Máel Mithig and Flann Sinna. It must be asked, therefore, whether the attack by Flann Sinna's son on Finnabair Abae was, in fact, an attack on the current leaders of Brega. It is fair to suggest that Donnchad had actually married into the family of Máel Finnia rather than Máel Mithig, because the death in 931 of Der Fáil, daughter of Máel Finnia and queen of Tara, has already been noted.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the year before Donnchad's attack on Brega in 938 saw a pared-down version of

the north-south Uí Néill alliance against the Dublin Vikings, in which Muirchertach, the son of Níall Glúndub, allied himself with Donnchad in order to attack Dublin. Unlike the situation in 917 and 919, however, when the king of Brega fought alongside the family of Flann Sinna in the army of the northern Níall Glúndub, no reference is made to Brega's participation in the events of 938. On the contrary, the *Annals of the Four Masters* quote what appear to be contemporary satires directed against Muirchertach by Congalach of Knowth, and vice versa:

Congalach son of Máel Mithig said:

‘Muirchertach, above all the men of Ireland, has not seized upon place or prey
Although he has been burning our corn and gorging on our bread’.

Muirchertach replied:

‘Congalach of fertile Brega is like a mute or stammering man
Out of his head no muttering is understood but what is like the bubbling of boiling meat’.⁸⁷

Chronologically, this is the earliest year in which mention is made of Congalach mac Maíle Mithig, although it seems relatively clear that these entries, as extracts from satirical verses, are late insertions into an annalistic record, which consists mainly of battles and death-notices. Those who included the satires may, therefore, have misplaced them in their chronology of Congalach's career. If these verses do reflect contemporary events, they would seem to indicate that Congalach, as a third son of Máel Mithig, had already attained some political importance by 938. They would also seem to bespeak bad relations between Congalach and his northern relatives, the sons of Níall Glúndub.

It is in this context, perhaps, that we should understand the first annalistic entry to record a deed of Congalach mac Maíle Mithig. In 939 Congalach is recorded as defeating the Gailenga Móra and Becca at Áth dá Loarc, where many fell and up to a hundred were slain.⁸⁸ Áth dá Loarc ‘ford of two (river) forks’ is identified in notes to the *Féilire Óengusso* as being close to Kells.⁸⁹ No mention is made here of any pretensions that Congalach may have had to the kingship of Knowth and Brega, through his father Máel Mithig, or indeed to his relationships with the northern Cenél nEógain or to the family of Flann Sinna. It is just possible, of course, that the location of the battle is of significance here, for Kells appears to have been a favoured church of Donnchad, the son of Flann Sinna; and in 904 the Clann Cholmáin king had been based there. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate whether Congalach was fighting for or against Donnchad in this particular battle, particularly since it is the norm for annal entries to list the most powerful leaders on each side. Donnchad's absence may, therefore, imply that the son of Flann Sinna

was not in fact involved and that the battle between Congalach and the Gailenga was merely a fight between two relatively minor powers in the eastern midlands. In that case, the entry should be understood to signify ongoing attempts by Congalach to build up his support base in order to strengthen his claim to the kingship of Brega.

Enmity between Donnchad and whoever was ruling Brega is implied by events in 940, when Donnchad made a second foray into Brega and plundered the church of Lann Léire. As with his raid on Finnabair Abae the year before, this attack was apparently on a major Brega church of considerable political importance: we have already seen that in 922 Cernach son of Flann, who was based at Lann Léire, died as chief counsel of the men of Brega. The sources are not explicit, but it seems most likely that Donnchad's adversaries on this occasion were the rulers of Knowth, whether Áed of Brug na Bóinne or his brother, Congalach son of Máel Mithig. It would seem, therefore, that at this stage of his career, Congalach was certainly at odds with Donnchad son of Flann Sinna and may also have fallen out with his northern relative Muirchertach mac Néill. In 941, however, Muirchertach, the Cenél nEógain king and son of Níall Glúndub, once more made his way south, this time as far as the south coast at Waterford. According to the entry in the *Annals of Ulster*, en-route he attacked the kingdom of the Clann Cholmáin in Mide; *Chronicon Scotorum* and the *Annals of the Four Masters* attest that his army was accompanied by the men of Brega.⁹⁰ This supports the indications in the annal entries from 939, whereby there appears to have been a split between Donnchad, as the ruler of Clann Cholmáin, and whoever was ruling in Brega. On the other hand, an alliance between Congalach and Muirchertach is certainly at odds with the satirical comments inserted into the annal entry of 938 and reproduced above.

It is clear that there was at least one rival branch to Congalach and his brothers in Brega, since in 942 Congalach is recorded as killing two sons of Loracán mac Dunchada, the man who had died as king of Brega in 925.⁹¹ The following year, in 943, Muirchertach was killed by the Viking leader Blácair mac Gothfrith (Blákr Guðrøðsson) of Dublin in a battle in northern Louth; and in the year immediately following, Congalach mac Maíle Mithig and Braen mac Maíle Mordai, king of Laigin, plundered Dublin, taking 'valuables and treasure and much booty'. Other annals suggest that they killed over 400 Vikings and that the Irish burnt houses, fences and ships and took the fort (*dún*), while women and children were carried off into slavery.⁹²

Braen was king of the Leinster dynasty known as the Uí Fáeláin, which had long been based in north Kildare around the site of Naas. Two years prior to the notice of his alliance with Congalach, he had attacked Clann Cholmáin; though this may have been as much a part of the traditional patterns of conflict within Leinster itself as it was a possible precursor to Braen's link with Congalach.⁹³ In any case, 944, the year of Congalach and Braen's raid on Dublin saw the death both of Donnchad and his son Conn, resulting in the

virtual disappearance of the immediate descendants of Flann Sinna in our sources. This reversal is aptly summarised by the *Chronicon Scotorum* annalist, who remarked simply: 'In this year, Congalach mac Maile Mithig reigned'.⁹⁴

A perhaps surprising result of this rise to national prominence by Congalach is that we next see him in alliance with a new king of Dublin, one Amlaíb 'Cúarán' mac Sitriuc (Óláfr *kváran* Sygtryggsson).⁹⁵ It was, after all, a mere two years earlier that Congalach together with the king of Naas had mounted a major raid on Viking Dublin. The Knowth king's change of allegiance is reflected in the annal entry for 945 noting that Congalach in conjunction with Amlaíb killed a band of Donegal men who had suddenly appeared in the area of Conaille in Louth.⁹⁶ As indicated previously, Conaille was a region that, while apparently not under Congalach's control as king of Knowth, was certainly close to his backyard (see Fig. 1.1). Congalach's uncle had been killed within the Conaille kingdom in 891. What the Donegal men were doing in Louth in 945 is difficult to ascertain, but it is generally assumed that they were attempting to profit from the recent demise of both Muirchertach, son of Níall Glúndub and king of the Cenél nEógain, and Donnchad, son of Flann Sinna and king of the Clann Cholmáin.⁹⁷ If that was their aim, it misfired: Congalach not only defeated the 'band' (*drem*) of Donegal warriors, but later the same year took the hostages of Connacht, the major provincial kingdom on the southern borders of Donegal.⁹⁸

Within two years, the Donegal men were back, under their ruler Ruaidrí ua Canannáin, and this time they were attacking the very heart of Congalach's kingdom as ruler of Knowth: the ecclesiastical site of Slane. Alfred Smyth has drawn attention to the fact that during the reign of Congalach, Slane suddenly becomes much more visible in the annals than it had been for the previous hundred years. This is not to say that Slane had not long been an important ecclesiastical site: its founder, Erc, was remembered as the first man to recognise Patrick at Tara; it was identified in the ninth-century *Triads* as one of the three great legal centres of Ireland; and in the mid- to late ninth century, it was identified as the scene of a bishopric.⁹⁹ As noted in Section 1.2 above, Slane's area of ecclesiastical authority may also have closely mirrored that of the eighth-century SílnÁedo Sláine kings of Knowth.

In the mid-tenth century the evidence for Slane is ambiguous: in 937 and 948 the leader of Slane is termed a *princeps*—a Latin word meaning pre-eminent one or ruler; and in 956 the death of an *airchinnech* of Slane is noted.¹⁰⁰ The title *princeps* in the Irish annals is normally used as an equivalent of the Irish word *airchinnech*, and its primary meaning is as a lay manager of a church's estates and tenantry; but the use of the word in ecclesiastical law shows that it can also be used of abbots or even of bishops.¹⁰¹ In early Irish law, however, any church that had once been the site of a bishopric retained the status of an episcopal church, even if there was no current occupant of the episcopal throne.¹⁰² Slane was thus clearly an important church within the

immediate area of Congalach's centre at Knowth; as indeed was the nearby settlement of Duleek, which had also been the location of a bishopric and whose mid-tenth-century rulers were also entitled *princeps* and *airchinnech*.¹⁰³ In attacking Slane in 947, therefore, Ruaidrí and his Donegal followers were clearly striking at Congalach's heartland.

On this occasion they appear to have been relatively successful. The defence was mounted by Congalach and Amlaíb Cúarán together, but the annalist notes that many of the Dublin Vikings were drowned or killed. In the immediate aftermath, an entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters* states that Congalach again sacked Dublin.¹⁰⁴ Was there a falling out of the two allies over events at Slane? Did the Dublin Vikings run away, and was that how they were drowned? Our sources do not tell us, but by the following year, 948, Amlaíb had abandoned Dublin for York and was replaced by Blácair; the *princeps* of Slane was captured and killed by Vikings; and Congalach had killed Blácair mac Gothfrith, together with many others, by means of some guile or treachery (*celg*).¹⁰⁵ We cannot be sure of the order of these events: the sequence in the *Annals of Ulster*, if it is chronological, suggests that Congalach killed Blácair first and the capture of the Slane ecclesiastic by irate Dubliners occurred subsequently; but whatever the order, it is very tempting to view this antagonism between Congalach and Blácair as being tied to their mutual attempt to defend Slane against the Donegal king the previous year.

Whatever the cause, the Dubliners were back in Slane within three years, and this time their attack is described in some detail. They burnt the round tower that functioned as a *cloicthech* 'bell-house' for the settlement, and this is hardly coincidental—the area of an ecclesiastical settlement's sanctuary was reckoned in Irish law to stretch 'as far as the sound of its bell shall reach'; thus, by destroying the bell tower, the Dubliners immediately diminished the authority that Slane could exercise over the surrounding area. We also learn that the bell tower contained the holy staff or *bachall* of Saint Erc, the founding saint, as well as the best of the (hand) bells. This particular entry is key to George Petrie's interpretation that the Irish round towers functioned as places of refuge, for it also states that the *fer léigend* 'man of learning'—the man who was the chief scholar attached to the ecclesiastical settlement—was burnt to death on this occasion, as were many others.¹⁰⁶

Despite these attacks by the Dubliners on one of the most prestigious churches in the hinterland of Knowth, Congalach does not appear to have stayed close to home during these years, but instead ranged far and wide across Ireland. In 949, for example, he was active in the border regions of eastern Ulster, attacking the Uí Méith and Fernmag (Farney in Co. Monaghan); while in 950 he was attacking western Munster and killing two sons of Cennétig mac Lorcáin, the leader of the newly emerging power of Dál Cais and father of the famous Brian Bóruma or Brian Boru.¹⁰⁷ In the following year, 951 (the year of Cennétig's death), Congalach apparently repeated his

attacks on the south, and the *Annals of the Four Masters* specify that on this occasion, he was deploying the *mór chobhlach Leithe Cuinn* 'great fleet of the northern half of Ireland'. He brought the fleet onto Lough Derg, attacked various islands on the lake and took hostages of the Munster men. His actions apparently provoked Cellachán Caisil, king of Munster, into raiding up the River Shannon and attacking the churches of Clonfert, Clonmacnoise and Gallen. Clearly, attacks on churches in the mid-tenth century were not, as Lucas long ago noted, limited to Vikings. Irish leaders, too, sought to gain political power through attacks on the major churches of their opponents.¹⁰⁸ It would appear from Congalach's use of a fleet identified as belonging to the whole of *Leth Cuinn* that the king of Knowth was by this stage recognised as the most powerful ruler north of the Dublin/Galway line. Using literary evidence, we can deduce that the assembly of large Irish fleets was closely tied to patterns of clientship among the more powerful royal leaders. Such clients would be called together by their patron; their ships would be distinguished by banners and standards proclaiming their native kingdoms; and, after victories, the king would sub-divide the booty between himself and his ship commanders.¹⁰⁹

Congalach's growth to pre-eminent power was facilitated by the death of the Donegal leader, Ruaidrí ua Canannáin, in 950, after an apparent attack on the combined powers of Mide (territory of the Clann Cholmáin), Brega and, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, the 'foreigners'. The most likely candidate for leadership of the combined Mide/Brega force that opposed Ruaidrí is Congalach himself. In corroboration of this deduction is the fact that the *Annals of the Four Masters* record a specific attack by Ruaidrí on Brega in which, so it is said, 'he reduced Congalach to great straits', and this was preceded by a quite separate defeat that Ruaidrí inflicted on Congalach in the territory of the Fir Rois in north Louth and Monaghan.¹¹⁰ An alliance between Brega and Mide corresponds to the long-standing association between the son of Flann Sinna and Congalach's father, Máel Mithig, except that on this occasion it is Brega and the Knowth dynasty that, despite their recent defeats by Ruaidrí, appear to be the stronger of the two southern Uí Néill powers.

Accounts of the battle refer to the death of one Ímar (Ívarr), 'tanist of the foreigners', and to the escape of Gothfrith mac Sitriuc (Guðrøðr Sygtryggsson); and, according to *Chronicon Scotorum*, Congalach was the ultimate victor. According to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, on the other hand, the battle was primarily between Ruaidrí and the foreigners of Dublin, and it was the Donegal men who won. These discrepancies have led to much discussion by historians,¹¹¹ but from the point of view of the power of the Knowth kingdom, the key fact is that Ruaidrí's death in the battle left the way clear for Congalach to be acknowledged as supreme leader of the northern half of Ireland. Given Congalach's apparent murder of Blácair by treachery in 948, and the attacks on Slane by Dublin Vikings in 947, 948 and 950, however, the

notion—witnessed exclusively in the *Annals of Ulster*—that Congalach's army of combined Brega and Mide forces in 950 also contained a substantial force of Dublin Vikings is difficult to comprehend. If Dubliners were indeed fighting in the Knowth king's army, the most likely solution to this contradiction is that there was more than one faction present amongst the Dublin Vikings at this period, and that they had differing political allegiances.¹¹²

Continued Dublin aggression against the midlands is witnessed in an extensive attack by Gothfrith mac Sitriuc in 951, in which he attacked Kells, Donaghpatrick, Ardraccan, Dulane, Kilskeer and possibly Castlekieran. It appears that the Dubliners based themselves in Kells and plundered the Blackwater valley, and their booty is said to have consisted of 3000 or more men, cattle, horses, gold and silver. It is not clear what the situation was in the 950s, but twenty years later there is evidence that this region consisted of a single kingdom. In 969 Máel Finnen mac Uchtan is given a death-notice as bishop of Kells and *comarb* 'ecclesiastical heir' to Ultán of Ardraccan¹¹³ and Cairnech of Dulane. Since, as noted above, the area under a bishop's jurisdiction normally paralleled secular units, it is reasonable to suggest that the raid of 951 may have been on a unified, if minor, kingdom. One suggested possibility is that this kingdom may be that of the Gailenga, whose genealogies located at least one dynasty in the Blackwater valley (see Fig. 1.1).¹¹⁴

It is not absolutely clear whether this area of west Meath was under Congalach's direct control at this stage. It may be remembered that Congalach began his career fighting the Gailenga in the vicinity of Kells in 939, and it could be of relevance that a man named Laidgnén mac Congalaig, *tighearna Gaileang* 'leader of the Gailenga', died in 949, killed by the Fir Cúl of northwest Meath.¹¹⁵ It must be acknowledged that Congalach was not an uncommon name amongst the various dynasts of Meath, but it is just possible that this entry refers to a son of Congalach mac Maíle Mithig himself. Insertion of allies into the ruling dynasties of subordinate kingdoms is a well-known ploy of rather later Irish kings¹¹⁶. Possible instances of the same approach have already been noted: when Máel Mithig may have attempted to insert his nephew into the kingship of Lagore in 908 and, rather more plausibly, when Cummascach mac Congalaig appointed his son Cináed as king of the defeated Fir Ardda Ciannachta between 822 and 828.

It must be remembered that 951 is the same year that Congalach Cnogba was able to deploy a fleet drawn from the whole of the northern half of Ireland. If the Knowth king was indeed the immediate ruler of the Blackwater valley at this point, then in attacking Kells and its vicinity, Gothfrith was mounting yet another Dublin attack on the Knowth ruler. Such an interpretation would coincide with the views of Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain. They have argued that the Middle-Irish 'life', *Betha Adamnáin*, was probably written in Kells in the years immediately following Congalach's own death in 956. Furthermore, they interpret hostile references to a king of Tara in that

text as coded references to Congalach himself.¹¹⁷ Since the episode in question includes the granting of what the hagiographer considers as limited freedoms to Columba's church, such an interpretation carries with it the implication that Congalach was seen as being at least an effective (if disliked) overlord of Kells and the Blackwater valley.

An entry in *Chronicon Scotorum* for the year 951 puts the hagiographer's complaint into perspective. According to the author of *Betha Adomnáin*, the members of the community of Columba were entitled to immunity because of the royal ancestry of their founding saint. Instead, the king of Tara was only prepared to offer them freedom for their lands, equivalent to that possessed by Patrick, Finnian and Ciarán. We have already seen that the cult of Patrick was a particularly strong one in early tenth-century Brega, and that it was local adherents of his cult based around Dunleer and Monasterboice who appear to have held pre-eminent authority within Congalach's kingdom. At the same time, Ciarán's site at Clonmacnoise had been the recipient of extensive royal patronage in the early years of the tenth century from Flann Sinna of the Clann Cholmáin and his immediate descendants. The *Chronicon Scotorum* entry gives some idea as to the mid-tenth-century status of Finnian's chief church in Clonard, when it states that 'Congalach mac Maíle Mithig granted freedom to the ecclesiastical settlement of Clonard'. A gloss in the *Annals of the Four Masters* explains this freedom as 'no king or lord having claim of *coindem* upon it'.¹¹⁸ *Coindem*, often anglicised 'coigny', was the right to demand hospitality from your subordinates, and Kathleen Hughes has drawn attention to a similar exemption that was offered to Clonmacnoise in the Middle-Irish *Cath Cairn Conaill*.¹¹⁹

The context of Congalach's offer of freedom to Clonard should be seen in the light of Clonard's pre-existing importance as one of the pre-eminent churches of the Clann Cholmáin. It has been noted before that in the mid-ninth century, the ecclesiastical leader of Clonard, one Suairlech, was the chief cleric of Mide; that in the mid-920s there is mention of a Bishop Colmán who held jurisdiction both in Clonmacnoise and Clonard; and that, at the same time, Flann Sinna's grandson died as *tanist*-abbot in 922. There was also a tenth-century link with Brega, in that Máel Póil, the bishop of Brega who died in 922, was also associated with Int Ednén. In offering freedom to Clonard in 951, therefore, Congalach was making a very political gesture of support for a prestigious Clann Cholmáin church.

This political context is underlined in a poem by the eleventh-century poet Flann Mainistrech, entitled *Mide magen clainne Cuind*.¹²⁰ This poem details the sequence of kings of Mide and states that after the death of Donnchad mac Flainn in 944, there were two short-lived kings of Mide—Donnchad's son Óengus and a Donnchad son of Domnall, apparently Donnchad mac Flainn's nephew. The dates given in the poem coincide approximately with the death-notice of the latter in the annals under the year 950: 'Donnchad son of Domnall, king of Mide, was killed by his kinsmen'.¹²¹ According to Flann

Mainistrech, the killer was Fergal mac Óengussa the *flaith got* 'stammering lord'. Fergal then succeeded Domnall as king of Mide for three months, until 'Congalach expelled him from Clonard of the choirs'.¹²² This alerts us to the possibility that Congalach's granting of the freedom of Clonard in 951 is directly related to his killing of a Clann Cholmáin dynast within the ecclesiastical site. One should also note that other annals tell us that in 950 the armies of Mide and Brega were apparently united under Congalach's leadership, and that in 951 Congalach was able to put a fleet drawn from all of the northern half of Ireland onto the Shannon at Loch Derg. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that by 951 Congalach enjoyed effective authority over the territories of the Clann Cholmáin as well as over the specific ecclesiastical sites of Clonard and Kells.

In 953 another territory under the authority of Congalach is mentioned, when Innerge son of Mochan, lord of the Ciannachta, was slain in Connacht while on service with the army of the Knowth king. We have already seen the ecclesiastical evidence that suggests that the Ciannachta of Duleek and Lusk were part of the kingdom of Brega in the early part of the tenth century, and this entry confirms their secular allegiance to Congalach. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, another subordinate king who also died on this Connacht expedition was Aléne, king of the Mugdorna Maigen in Monaghan as well as ruler over the Mugdorna of Brega.¹²³ Finally, we know that on the occasion of Congalach's death in 956, two other members of his slain retinue were Aed son of Aichid, king of Tethbae, and Cormac son of Cathalán of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta.¹²⁴ We have seen that the Fir Ardda Ciannachta formed part of the eastern over-kingdom that the Knowth king had inherited from his ancestors, and which seems to have extended, if not from the Fewes mountains to the river Liffey, than at least from the river Glyde to the Tolka. Tethbae, on the other hand, is located in modern-day Longford and Westmeath, and the presence of its king in Congalach's army appears to indicate the creation of a much wider overkingdom that stretched, in a phrase that is found scattered through the annals from the ninth century, 'from the Shannon to the sea'.¹²⁵ That extended overlordship resulted in the allegiance of subordinate kings such as the king of Tethbae as military allies, and it involved some form of direct authority over churches outside Congalach's original heartland, such as Clonard and possibly Kells.

Other indications of Congalach's power base and influence in the northern half of Ireland by the mid 950s can be deduced by looking at his two wives. In the *Banshenchus*, Congalach's son Domnall is identified as the son of Deichter, who was the daughter of Beollán mac Ciarmaic, the king of southern Brega.¹²⁶ This man is also identified as the king of Lagore in his death-notice of 969 but is not otherwise attested in the annalistic record.¹²⁷ Edel Bhreathnach has drawn attention to positive descriptions of the Viking settlers in poems by Cináed ua hArtacáin, a poet who was contemporary with Beollán and who may, indeed, have been a member of his extended family. She suggests

that this positive portrayal may reflect a political alliance between Beollán and the Scandinavians of Dublin.¹²⁸ Such an alliance, if it existed, would seem to be at odds with the interests of his son-in-law, Congalach, who spent most of his career at war with the Dubliners, apart from a brief period between 945 and 947. On the other hand, there is no record of any conflict between Congalach and south Brega, which implies that relations probably remained cordial between the two kings.

In 953 the death of another wife of Congalach is noted in the annals, and she is identified as Eithne, the daughter of Fergal. In the equivalent entry from the *Annals of the Four Masters*, she is identified as *banríoghan Ereann* 'queen of Ireland', by virtue of her position as wife of Congalach.¹²⁹ The Fergal in question is most likely the Fergal son of Domnall and nephew of Níall Glúndub who is identified in both eleventh- and twelfth-century genealogies as *rí Ailig* 'king of Grianán Ailich' (located just outside Derry), which was the ceremonial centre of the Cenél nEógain kingdom. In other words, Congalach, whose grandmother was a sister of Níall Glúndub, chose as his wife a great-niece of Níall.

Since the days of Congalach's grandmother, however, the ruling dynasty of the Cenél nEógain had split into two separate and warring factions. In 933 Fergal mac Domnaill and his Viking nephew Sigfrith defeated his cousin Muirchertach son of Níall Glúndub, and this began the segmentation of the dynasty into two branches, the leaders of which were later termed the Mac Lochlainn (descended from Fergal) and the Ua Néill.¹³⁰ It has been noted above that while Máel Mithig fought in the army of Níall Glúndub and his mother was Níall Glúndub's sister, Congalach appears to have had poor relations with Níall's son Muirchertach. Extracts from two satires incorporated into the *Annals of the Four Masters*, by Muirchertach on Congalach and by Congalach on Muirchertach, are both deeply derogatory in tone. There is a tradition that the armies of Brega accompanied Muirchertach in his raid to Waterford in 941, but this could perhaps be explained by noting that the men from Brega are mentioned specifically in relation to an attack on Mide. (Congalach may have been prepared to negotiate the provision of a contingent to Muirchertach's army in the interests of weakening his western neighbours and rivals.) In any event, the fact that Congalach is said to have married a wife whose father, Fergal, was at war with Muirchertach suggests that the satires provide a true flavour of the antagonism between the two men.

These links between the kings of Knowth and the Cenél nEógain, then, may help to provide the backdrop for events in 954. In that year, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, it is said that Domnall ua Néill plundered Brega with the 'consent' (*a haontaidh*) of the foreigners.¹³¹ This Domnall was the son of Muirchertach mac Néill of the Cenél nEógain, and after Congalach's death he became the leading figure in the high-kingship of Ireland. In leading this raid of 954, therefore, Domnall would seem to be not only attacking a powerful king some

years his elder, but also, and very specifically, one who had allied himself with Domnall's cousins and rivals. Another interesting feature of this attack is that it was mounted in conjunction with the 'foreigners' and through their 'consent'. Colmán Etchingham suggests that the foreigners in question were the Scandinavians of Dublin, and that the alliance was cemented by the marriage of Domnall ua Néill's sister, Dúnlaith, to Amlaíb Cúarán of Dublin.¹³² We have seen that at least one group of Dublin Vikings had a long-standing antagonism to Congalach, apparently stretching back to their mutual attempt to defend Slane against Ruaidrí ua Canannáin in 947. The alliance suggests that Domnall saw the need to attack Congalach as his most important priority; not merely by launching raids on Brega itself, but also in doing so in long-term alliance with Brega's most important enemy on its southern borders.

It was these Viking enemies from Dublin who were to kill Congalach in 956. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, Congalach, identified as the king of Ireland, was murdered by the Vikings of Dublin and by the Leinstermen at Tech Giurinn, which, according to the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, was located 'at the Liffe side'. According to *Chronicon Scotorum*, the list of the dead included one Matudán mac Áedo maic Maíle Mithig, and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* make it clear that this man was the king's nephew.¹³³ Here, then, is confirmation of the existence of Congalach's brother: the shadowy Áed in Broga whose epithet associates him with the prehistoric cemetery in the bend of the Boyne. The existence of Áed's son in Congalach's retinue in 956 provides an indication that Congalach retained a link with Knowth throughout his career as king of Ireland.

An extended account of Congalach's death is given in the *Annals of the Four Masters*:

A hosting by Congalach son of Máel Mithig, king of Ireland, into Leinster and after he had plundered Leinster and held the fair of (Mag) Liffe for three days, information was sent from Leinster to the foreigners of Dublin and *Ambhlaobh mac Gofradha*,¹³⁴ lord of the foreigners, with his foreigners, went and laid a battle-ambush for Congalach by means of which deceit he was taken with his chieftains at Tigh-Gighrainn. The following were they who were slain there: Congalach himself, Matudán son of Áed son of Máel Mithig, Áed son of Aitide, lord of Tethbae; Cormac son of Cathalan, lord of Fir Ardda and a great many others along with them.¹³⁵

The fair of (Mag) Liffe may be, as John O'Donovan suggested, the same as the *óenach Colmáin* of 942, which had been attended by the then king of Leinster, Faelán mac Muireadaig.¹³⁶ According to a genealogical tract on the Ua Fidgente, the *óenach Colmáin* was held within Mag Liffe. (Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested that this was also the *óenach* of Colmán Ela of Lynally in Offaly, but *Lann Ela* (Lynally) is southwest of Tullamore, firmly in the Uí Néill territory of

Fir Chell, and it seems unlikely that it could have been classified as belonging within the boundaries of Mag Liffe). It is unclear, therefore, where exactly this fair was, but it obviously hosted important royal figures. It seems most plausible to see Congalach's presence at the fair, therefore, as an attempt to exert political control at an important ceremonial assembly of the northern Leinstermen.¹³⁷

The king of Leinster at this point was one Túathal mac Augairí, a powerful king with an over-kingdom based in central Leinster, stretching in an east-west band across from Wicklow and south Kildare into Laois and Offaly. Túathal had been an ally of the Dublin Vikings and their leader Amlaíb Cúarán in 953 when they had mounted a joint raid on two churches in west Wexford, Inis Teimle and Inis Ulad.¹³⁸ This appears to have been an attack on the major overkingdom of south Leinster, controlled by the Uí Cheinnselaig of Wexford and long-standing enemies of the Kildare kings.¹³⁹ There is no evidence that Congalach had attacked Túathal, or indeed any of the Leinster kings, before this; and, indeed, in 942 he had been an ally of Túathal's predecessor as king of Leinster in an attack on Dublin.¹⁴⁰ Congalach's presence at *óenach Liffe* appears, therefore, to have been a new departure for him. It may be that it was his success in elevating the long-standing alliance between Brega and Mide into a more substantial form of overlordship over such border settlements as Clonard that gave the Knowth king the power to seek to expand his overkingdom into Kildare and Offaly.

If that was his reasoning, it was a bad miscalculation. The fact that Congalach held the fair after a period spent plundering Leinster suggests that he felt he had sufficiently cowed his opposition into submission, because a major purpose of an *óenach* was to ratify allegiances and agreements about overlordship and rents.¹⁴¹ The fact that the illustrious dead among his retinue comprised only his nephew from the Boyne valley, a king from Louth and a king from Longford, however, implies rather that he had not succeeded in making close allies south of the Rye-Liffey border. Furthermore, the man whose honour he had impugned by wasting his territory and holding his royal fair as king of Leinster, Túathal mac Augairí, was the ally of Amlaíb Cúarán of Dublin: a man linked by marriage to the Cenél nEógain Domnall, the attacker of Brega in 954. In the early 940s Amlaíb had also been an ally of Congalach himself, but that allegiance had apparently broken down by 947 and Dublin Vikings had been involved in attacks on Congalach's heartland of Slane in 947, 948 and 950. The upshot appears to have involved a degree of skulduggery by Túathal or his allies, since the annalist uses the word *celg*—meaning 'deceit' or 'treachery'—to describe Congalach's subsequent murder. In the context of *óenach Liffe*, this is most easily understood as the breaking of their newly-taken oaths of support. Since messages had to be sent to Dublin, Amlaíb himself was presumably not present at the fair, and on the whole, it seems most likely that the Leinstermen were simply enlisting the aid of a well-established enemy of the Knowth king.

After his death, Congalach was apparently brought to Monasterboice for burial.¹⁴² A tradition of royal burial of the kings of Knowth at that church was apparently of long standing: the poem *Síl Áeda Sláne na sleg* refers to the burial of a much earlier king, Flann mac Congalaig, who was also interred in Monasterboice. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, this man, who died in 812, enjoyed the title 'king of the Ciannachta'; but given his patronymic, it seems relatively certain that he was a brother of Cernach mac Congalaig who died as *rex Cnodbai* 'king of Knowth' in 818.¹⁴³ We have seen above that during the reign of Congalach Cnogba's immediate predecessors, the ruler of Monasterboice in 924, one Muiredach mac Domnaill, was recognised as chief *maer* of the southern Uí Néill and head of counsel of the men of all Brega.¹⁴⁴ In 935 Máel Brigte died as *princeps* of Monasterboice, and in the same year, a son of Máel Brigte died as *princeps* of Duleek, another important ecclesiastical site that was the seat of one of the bishoprics of early tenth-century Brega. In 966, a mere ten years after Congalach's death, the annalists record a death-notice for Dub-da Boirenn, 'learned/pre-eminent bishop of Mag mBreg'.¹⁴⁵ It seems reasonable to conclude that Congalach's choice of burial place is an indication that Monasterboice continued to enjoy high status during his own reign and that it may, in fact, have been considered as the most important church within the over-kingdom of the rulers of Knowth.

Congalach's reign as king of Ireland was identified by the seventeenth-century redactors of the *Annals of the Four Masters* as being twelve years long. A Middle-Irish verse ascribed to a named poet, Áed ua Raithnén, corroborates this reign length and links the beginning of Congalach's rule as king of Ireland to his sacking of Dublin with Braen mac Máele Mordai in 944. This, according to the poet, had the result that 'he brought the foreigners out of Ireland'.¹⁴⁶ This may in some fashion refer to the replacement of Blácaire as ruler of Dublin with Amlaíb Cúarán, a Dublin leader who was, at least up until 947, an ally of Congalach's. Alternatively, the phrase may simply refer to actions taken at the sacking of the town, when, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, the women, children and non-combatants of Dublin were given into slavery; the members of the Viking garrison were killed, drowned, burnt and captured; and the remnants fled in a few ships to Dalkey.¹⁴⁷

It is certainly clear that Dublin and his relations with the city played a crucial part in Congalach's career. As king of Knowth, Congalach had inherited from his immediate forebears an eastern over-kingdom, which, if we can judge by ecclesiastical obits, stretched from the Fewes mountains to the Liffey. This over-kingdom (see Fig. 1.1 above) included within its boundaries the territory of the Ciannachta (which included the settlements of Duleek and Lusk) and the Fir Ardda Ciannachta (north of the Boyne). Congalach had also inherited a long-standing link with the Cenél nEógain of Derry and Tyrone, which had been represented over the previous two generations by both marriage and military alliances; but by his day, the

Cenél nEógain had split into two warring factions and Congalach was forced to choose between them. Another alliance, this time between the rulers of Knowth and the Clann Cholmáin leaders of Westmeath, had been active in the early years of the tenth century but appears to have collapsed by the mid 930s. Before the sacking of Dublin, Congalach's record in the annals is limited to interactions with relatively minor leaders of Meath and Westmeath, such as his battle with the Gailenga in 939 and his murder of the sons of a previous Brega king in 942. He also may have been part of a Cenél nEógain army, which in 941 attacked the Clann Cholmáin kingdom of Mide. After the sacking of Dublin in 944, Congalach's activities range over a much greater geographical area: in 945 he took hostages from Connacht, in 949 he was fighting in Monaghan and in 950 he was attacking west Munster and the kings of Clare and had a fleet on Loch Derg that succeeded in taking hostages from Munster. He may also have sacked Dublin a second time in 947, and in 948 he killed Blácair through treachery.

The work of the annalists provides us with a record only of battles and military alliances, but we know from other sources that royal power is closely linked in early Ireland to a ruler's ability to reward his followers with rich gifts.¹⁴⁸ The sacking of Dublin did not merely provide Congalach with a high-status victory against a foreign foe; it gave him 'valuables and treasure and spoil', as well as the profits from the mass enslavement of Dublin's women, children and non-combatants. Given the way in which early medieval kingship worked, that wealth was not necessarily transported to Knowth, but could have been funnelled through the hands of the two leaders of the Dublin expedition to their followers. The Viking sword found at Ballinderry crannóg may have been the result of an opportunistic theft, or a spot of well-placed enterprise by a local Irish lord; alternatively, the sword may have been given to the local lord as a bribe or wages by his Irish over-lord, to persuade him to fight in his army. Through the sacking of Dublin, Congalach may have gained the wealth that enabled him to create an army that could operate on a national scale. It also gave him the resources with which to hire or bully ships from the whole of the northern half of Ireland and put the resultant fleet on Loch Derg.

Throughout his career, however, the nucleus of Congalach's power-base remained an eastern-midland one. The minor kings identified in his army in 953 were members of the Mugdorna of Monaghan and the Ciannachta of north Dublin and east Meath.¹⁴⁹ The members of his retinue who died at his side in 956 were his nephew from Brugh na Bóinne, a king from Longford and a leader of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta of south Louth. Congalach may have inserted a son into the ruling dynasty of the Gailenga in north-west Meath, and it has been argued that at some point in his reign he exercised effective, if unwanted, overlordship of Kells. He certainly is credited with giving the important ecclesiastical settlement of Clonard freedom from taxation in 951, and this appears to have accompanied his eviction of the

Clann Cholmáin king of Mide from his throne. He also married into the ruling dynasty of south Brega and, overall, he appears to have had considerable authority over the whole of the eastern midlands, 'from the Shannon to the sea'. The limitations of his effective power beyond this eastern enclave are obvious.

From 947 on, Congalach appears to have fallen out with Amlaíb Cúarán, king of Dublin, and for at least the following three years he was subject to attacks on his heartland by Dublin Vikings under the leadership of either Blácair mac Gothfrith or Gothfrith mac Sitriuc. If Congalach did indeed control Kells, his control was successfully superseded by the Dubliners in 951 when they took over 3000 men captive, and secured booty of cows, horses, gold and silver. On Congalach's northern border, enemies could find allies in central Louth in 945. There is no record of any attack led by Congalach into the strong kingdoms of north-east Ulster and, until the year he died, his armies never appear to have ventured south of the Liffey. When he did so, he won only short-term acceptance before being set upon and murdered. Even the long-term alliance with the Cenél nEógain of Derry and Tyrone failed him in his last years, with the rise to power of the rival branch under Domnall ua Néill, who attacked Congalach in his heartland in 954.

Finally, his career ended, as it had begun, at Dublin. In the course of his twelve years' reign, the Knowth king had attained a status that had not been enjoyed by his family for nearly 300 years. Paradoxically, however, it seems unlikely that Congalach could have obtained the rank of king of Ireland if it had not been for the solid foundation provided by the reigns of his grandfather Flannacán and his father Máel Mithig in establishing a firm control over the kingship of Brega. Throughout his career, it was Congalach's power over the eastern midlands that gave him the opportunities to range further afield. It should also be said that the strongest dynasties of the previous generations, the families of Flann Sinna and Níall Glúndub, faltered just as Congalach was coming to power. At the end of the day, however, the key element in making Congalach king of Ireland, and the one that finally dispossessed him, was the presence of Scandinavian Dublin on his south-eastern border.

1.5 Congalach's heir as king of Knowth: Domnall mac Congalaig

Congalach left at least two sons, although their immediate fate in the years after 956 was largely unrecorded. They were, however, recognised as potential successors to their father's status as king of Ireland, because in 964, Muirchertach mac Congalaig, was described by the annalist as *rigdomna Temrach* 'worthy of attaining the kingship of Tara'. This availed him little, unfortunately, since this entry in 964, the only reference for Muirchertach in the annals, records his death at the hands of his brother, Domnall mac Congalaig.¹⁵⁰

Two years later, Domnall mac Congalaig is given the title *rí Brega* 'king of Brega' in the *Annals of Ulster*, but in *Chronicon Scotorum* he was identified as *rí Cnogba* 'king of Knowth'.¹⁵¹ This coincides with the description of him in the poem *Síl Áeda Sláne na sleg as cuilén cáem Chnogba* 'fair pup of Knowth'; and in *Baile in Scáil*, he was termed *foránach Cnogbai* 'very splendid one of Knowth'. In the poem on the kings of Ulster, *Cland Ollamhain uaisle Eamlma*, Domnall is also described as *Domnall ó Chnodba caoimh* 'Domnall from fair Knowth'.¹⁵² These epithets would imply that, to an even greater extent than his father Congalach, Domnall was felt to be particularly closely associated with a settlement around the prehistoric site at Knowth.¹⁵³ The reason for both of these annal entries relating to Domnall in 966 is his killing of Fergal ua Ruairc, identified by a gloss in *Chronicon Scotorum* as king of Connacht and the 'Nebuchadnezzar of the Gael'. This Fergal appears to have been a strong provincial king, who is recorded as killing the heir of the Cenél nEógain in 959, devastating the kingdom of Mide in 960 and defeating the Dál Cais of Clare in 963.¹⁵⁴ In 965 Connacht was raided by Domnall ua Néill, king of the Cenél nEógain and king of Tara since Congalach's death, and hostages were taken from Ua Ruairc.¹⁵⁵ It is not clear from the entries whether the Connacht king's death the following year came about as a consequence of his raids on Domnall mac Congalaig's territories or of Domnall's raids on Connacht lands; but the calibre of his opponent is a sure signal that Domnall was still perceived as very much a player on the national stage. (It has been noted above that Congalach, his father, took hostages from Connacht on more than one occasion.) It does appear that Fergal's death at Domnall's hands was politically motivated since, according to the Cottonian annals, Fergal was not only killed, but mutilated.¹⁵⁶

It may be that during this period Domnall also became involved in the politics of north Leinster, because in 964 the female head of Kildare abbey died and was apparently replaced by Domnall's sister, Muirenn daughter of Congalach.¹⁵⁷ Since the abbacy of Kildare was controlled by the Uí Dunchada, one of the three major dynasties operating in north Leinster, it appears that Domnall was seeking to make an alliance with rivals to the family of Túathal mac Augairí, who had betrayed his father. The alliance is all the more pointed in that in the same year of 964, Kildare was plundered by 'foreigners', presumably from Dublin. In installing his sister as abbess of Kildare, therefore, Domnall was creating an important ally for the Knowth kings, who might help them against enemies in north Leinster and Dublin.

If that was his intention the manoeuvre failed. In 967 Cerball mac Lorcaín, a man who was 'worthy of being king of Leinster' and a member of the ruling dynasty of Kildare, mounted an attack on the ecclesiastical settlement in conjunction with Amlaíb of Dublin. In that attack, the leader of Kildare, one Muiredach mac Fáeláin, an uncle of Cerball's and himself also an eligible claimant to the kingship of Leinster, was slain. Domnall mac Congalaig retaliated by

killing Cerball, although, in a doublet of the entry recording Cerball's death, the *Annals of the Four Masters* suggest that the killing came about as a consequence of an attack on Brega by a mixed force of the foreigners of Dublin and the Leinstermen.¹⁵⁸ In the ensuing battle, Cerball was wounded and subsequently died. If this represents a true record, therefore, Cerball's death did not come about because of an attempt by Domnall to defend his sister and her allies in Kildare. On the contrary, it appears that the success of Cerball mac Lorcáin and Amlaíb in killing the Kildare ruler prompted them to attack the Knowth king in his homeland of Brega. Once again, therefore, Brega was under attack from the Dubliners. As noted in Section 1.3, this is simply repeating the earlier pattern of Dublin attacks on the rulers of the Knowth over-kingdom.

In 970, and possibly in 969, an alliance of Dubliners and Leinstermen attacked once more; this time the area of Kells, which may, as noted above, have been under Congalach's overlordship. The raid of 969 is unique to the *Annals of the Four Masters* and describes how Kells was plundered by the Dubliners in alliance with Murchad mac Finn, king of Leinster. Murchad is a member of the third Kildare dynasty, belonging neither to the family of Cerball mac Lorcáin nor to that of Túathal mac Augairí. In their zeal to attack Brega, the Dublin Vikings were clearly prepared to ring the changes among the various local Kildare kings. On this occasion, however, the combined army is said to have been overtaken by Domnall ua Néill, king of Ireland and of the Cenél Eógain, and was defeated. The raid of 970 is better attested—occurring in three sets of annals—and was led by Amlaíb Cúarán. According to the *Annals of the Four Masters* and *Chronicon Scotorum*, Kells was plundered by Amlaíb, who gained many cows. He lost numerous people in the attack but eventually gained a victory over the 'Uí Néill' at *Ard-Maelchon*, identified by O'Donovan as Ardmulchan, on the river Boyne.¹⁵⁹ It is not clear who the Uí Néill might be, as this seems a completely anachronistic title at this period, but perhaps the most likely candidate is Domnall ua Néill, Cenél nEógain high king of Ireland. It is just possible, however, given his father's apparent pretensions as overlord of Kells, that the defeat was of Domnall mac Congalaig himself.

By the end of 970, it is apparent that Amlaíb was definitely involved in an attack on Domnall ua Néill, while Domnall mac Congalaig had seemingly reversed the long-standing antagonism between his family and Amlaíb Cúarán and had become his ally. In fact, the annalists list Congalach's son in primary position in their account of this attack, suggesting, perhaps, that he rather than Amlaíb was seen as the leader of the alliance.¹⁶⁰ The battle was located at *Cell Móna*, identified by Hogan as either Kilmona, in the parish of Rahugh of Westmeath, or perhaps Kilmoone parish in the barony of Skreen.¹⁶¹ Domnall ua Néill was defeated, and among the dead were three east Ulster kings: Ardgar mac Matudáin, over-king of the Ulaid or east

Ulster hegemony; Donnacan mac Maíle Muire, king of the Airgialla of Armagh; and Cináed mac Crongaille, king of the Conaille of central Louth. The Louth kingdom had certainly harboured enemies of the Knowth kings in the past,¹⁶² and if the battle did indeed take place in Meath, it seems reasonable to assume that it was an attempt by Domnall ua Néill to undermine a potential rival to the high-kingship of Ireland in Domnall mac Congalaig.

On the other hand, Etchingham draws attention to the fact that the Dubliners, under Amlaíb, might have had an interest in undermining the Cenél nEógain high-king, as he had led an attack on central Leinster two years previously, in which he had taken a great number of cows and plundered the foreigners and the Leinstermen for two months. This attack, coupled with Amlaíb's losses during his raid on Kells in 970, may have led to a situation in which both the Knowth king and the Dublin leadership became interested in a defensive alliance against a Cenél nEógain aggressor. Certainly there seems to have been some intention to build a reasonably long-term pact, since Domnall married Amlaíb's daughter, Ragnailt (Ragnhildr).¹⁶³ Other indications that the battle of *Cill Móna* was an attack on the territory of the Knowth kings are two raids on eastern-midland churches in the same year, 970. The high-king of Ireland plundered the church of Monasterboice, in which Congalach mac Maíle Mithig was buried, and the church at *Lann Léire* some three miles to the north, where the chief advisor of Brega had died in 922. An idea of the economic importance of these sites is the statement that during the raid, 350 people were burnt in a single building. At the same time, the churches of Louth and Dromiskin were attacked by Murchad, the king of Ailech and son of Domnall ua Néill. Dromiskin is identified in the notes to *Felíre Óengusso* as being within the territory of the Conaille, whose king had died in the battle of *Cill Móna*; so it seems as if the Knowth leadership may have profited from that victory to expand a degree of control into the land of its neighbours.

The following year, the Cenél nEógain king is described as being driven from Mide by the Clann Cholmáin. The *Annals of the Four Masters* describe this eviction as the driving of the high king 'from Mide northwards across the Fews mountains'.¹⁶⁴ These details are interesting, since Clann Cholmáin as a descriptive term is rare in the annals,¹⁶⁵ and in order to cross the Fews mountains from the core Clann Cholmáin territory of Westmeath, it would be normal to cross through the territories of the kings of Knowth. It is, however, quite clear that it was the Westmeath leadership that led the eviction, because the upshot was a return by the high king when he plundered their forts and churches, erecting a *longphort* or camp in every *túath* of Mide, from the Shannon to Castlekieran outside Kells.¹⁶⁶ It must be remembered, however, that Domnall's father, Congalach mac Maíle Mithig, had exercised overlordship of the ecclesiastical site of Clonard in 951 and had killed the then king of Westmeath, Fergal

mac Óengussa. According to the poem *Mide magen clainne Cuind*, Congalach's son Domnall also killed a Westmeath king, and this is confirmed by an entry in *Chronicon Scotorum* in 972. The killing took place at *Druim Criaich* 'Drumcree' in the parish of Kilcummy, in the barony of Delvin, Co. Meath.¹⁶⁷ This location may explain the description of Domnall in *Baile in Scáil* as 'occupier of the chief seat of [Delbna] Assail' and 'troop-owner of Uisnech'.¹⁶⁸ It may be, therefore, that when the men of Westmeath evicted the high king, they were doing so at the behest of the powerful Knowth king and that the eviction should be seen as part of an ongoing battle between the two Domnalls: the northern Domnall ua Neill, who was the high king, and Domnall mac Congalaig of Knowth.

A link between Mide and Brega, or between Meath and Westmeath, had operated for most of the tenth century, with supreme power over the combined unit shifting between the family of Flann Sinna and the kings of Knowth. An entry in *Chronicon Scotorum* indicates that whatever authority Domnall mac Congalaig may have enjoyed, it was not accepted by all; the entry refers to a victory over Domnall by Donnchad Finn, brother of the Westmeath king killed at Drumcree. In that battle, two of the slain were Congalach mac Laidgnén of the Gailenga and Cathal mac Flannacán.¹⁶⁹ If the suggestion made above is accepted—that the slain mentioned in the annals are normally associated with the defeated—this would imply that the possible link between Congalach and the Gailenga during his reign may have continued into the reign of his son and successor.

One final indication of Domnall's power is given for the year 972, when Fogartach mac Néill ua Tolaig was killed 'through deceit'. This man was of a ruling family of south Brega that had been antagonistic to the rulers of Knowth in the generation of Domnall's grandfather, Máel Mithig.¹⁷⁰ Their fortunes are not recorded in the intervening years, and it is impossible to tell whether they had been successfully subsumed within the over-kingdom ruled by Congalach and Domnall. However, they do occur in the list of Síol nÁedo Sláine genealogies, where the family is identified as members of the Clann Cernaig Sotail, and Edel Bhreathnach has drawn attention to contemporary records of their lands by the poet Cináed ua hArtacáin, himself identified as a member of the dynasty. According to these records, the Clann Cernaig Sotail were located around Tara and the hill of Skreen and may have enjoyed close relationships with the Scandinavians of Dublin.¹⁷¹

It seems clear from the details of Domnall mac Congalaig's career that even though he did not reach the status of high-king of Ireland, as his father had done, the over-kingdom under his control does not appear to have been much diminished in size during his rule. Like his father, he seems to have exercised a considerable degree of control within the neighbouring over-kingdom of what is now Westmeath, and the Gailenga appears to have been one of his client kingdoms. Domnall also appears to have controlled the churches of the Fir Ardda Ciannachta in south Louth and may also have extended his influence

northwards, into the territories of the Conaille—at least for a short period in 970. Like his father too, he fought Connacht and Leinster kings; but in Domnall's case, at least one of these inter-provincial battles was due to an incursion into Brega, rather than an expansionist invasion on the part of the Knowth king.

Unlike his father, however, Domnall appears to have been a reasonably close ally of the Scandinavians of Dublin for most of his career. Amlaíb does appear to have allied himself with Domnall's Leinster enemies in the late 960s, but he fought alongside Domnall in the battle of *Cill Móna* in 970, possibly under the Knowth king's leadership. We know, too, that Domnall married Amlaíb's daughter. This alliance may have been forced on both parties by attacks made by the high-king, Domnall ua Néill; and, fundamentally, the crucial distinction between Domnall and his father Congalach appears to have been that the son was faced by a powerful and antagonistic Cenél nEógain king of Ireland. It was this fact that meant that when Domnall died in 976, his death-notice recorded that he was *rigdomna Érenn* 'worthy of being king of Ireland', yet he never rose beyond the status of a powerful king of Brega.¹⁷²

1.6 Conclusion: Congalach's grandsons

In the following generations, the descendants of Congalach gradually fall out of the record, apparently due to the growth in power by the Westmeath leader, Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill. One element in this slow disappearance of Congalach's family is that we have no clear indications that these later generations were based in Knowth, although it seems a reasonable presumption that at least some of them were.

Domnall mac Congalaig died in 976, and within the year his son Congalach, who, like his father was 'worthy of being king of Ireland', had been killed by Amlaíb of Dublin. The record noting Congalach's death states that Amlaíb also killed Muirchertach, the son of Domnall ua Néill, although whether both murders happened simultaneously and whether the two victims were allies is not clear. In any event, Amlaíb appears to have taken advantage of the relative weakness of the Knowth dynasty following Domnall's death to further minimize any threat it might pose to his own leadership of Dublin. The poem *Síl Áeda Sláne na sleg* speaks of two successors to Domnall mac Congalaig: one, Dondchad, who was killed by the Clann Cholmáin, and another, Muirchertach, who ruled for two years and was killed by Máel Sechnaill himself. Muirchertach died in 995 according to the *Annals of Ulster*, while Donnchad is listed in the Uí Chellaig genealogies.¹⁷³

By the time of the battle of Tara in 980, strong leadership in the midlands had passed to Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, king of Westmeath and already identified as king of Ireland and king of Tara by some annalists.¹⁷⁴ In this battle, in which the Scandinavians of Dublin were famously defeated, the descendants of Congalach are

not listed. Among the dead, however, one finds the king of Gailenga and the king of Mugdorna Maigen of Monaghan, who are said to have died in the 'counter-slaying' (*frithguin*).¹⁷⁵ This term means that both kings were on the winning side, namely in the army of Máel Sechnaill; and it is noteworthy that the battle at Tara was subsequently followed by an attack on Dublin by Máel Sechnaill, which, among other things, resulted in the 'freedom of the Uí Néill from the Shannon to the sea without tribute or exaction'. This formulation strongly suggests that Máel Sechnaill was now considered to be the key political authority within the combined unit of Mide and Brega. In any event, it is clear that the Gailenga and the Mugdorna Maigen, whose leaders had been loyal to the Knowth kings in the 940s and the 950s and even, in the case of the Gailenga, in the early 970s, had switched allegiances to the Clann Cholmáin king of Mide by the 980s. It seems as if this loss of client-kings provoked antagonism between Máel Sechnaill and the descendants of Congalach mac Maíle Mithig. In 993, for example, Máel Sechnaill killed the king of the Luigne¹⁷⁶ in Donaghpatrick in the valley of the Blackwater, which suggests that he had some degree of authority in that ecclesiastical settlement. In a revenge attack of 995, Donaghpatrick was plundered by a combined force of Dubliners and Muirchertach ua Congalaig, suggesting that the weakened Knowth kings were now turning to their awkward Scandinavian neighbours in attempts to diminish Máel Sechnaill's growing power. The annalist suggests that the raid was successful, but the death of Muirchertach ua Congalaig within the month would have nullified any gains the Knowth leadership may have achieved.¹⁷⁷

By 996 the descendants of Congalach had sunk so far as to be listed only in third place in a raid on the valley of the Newry river.¹⁷⁸ The first two kingdoms to be listed are the Conaille, long-term enemies of the Knowth kings, and the Mugdorna. In any case, the raid was a failure, in that the raiders were defeated by a son of the Cenél nEógain king Domnall ua Néill, and the king of the Conaille was killed along with approximately 200 others. In the same year, another descendant of Congalach is said to have been killed: Muirchertach Beg ua Congalaig.¹⁷⁹ The last known descendant of Congalach to be mentioned is Donnchad mac Dondchada, who is said to have died in 1017, 'killed by his own people'.¹⁸⁰ He is the last figure to be mentioned in the genealogies of the Uí Cellaig (the descendants of Flannacán mac Cellaig), but Byrne has drawn attention to twelfth-century members of the family who are attested in the annals and in the charters written into the *Book of Kells*.¹⁸¹ With the growth of political power of the Ua Ruairc of Bréifne in this period and the extension of the Ua Ruairc overlordship into Meath, the power of the Knowth dynasty appears to have much declined by that stage; and the presence of Irish kings at Knowth seems to have finally come to an end by the mid-twelfth century, with the probable gift of Knowth by Tigernán Ua Ruairc to the Cistercian monastery of Mellifont.¹⁸²
